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## Rallying Around the Clock

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Fame, well sort of. Re the article and photo in November's Classic Bike covering the 1963 National Road Rally, the author of the piece pays particular attention to the rider at the front of the queue noting that he's on an off-road machine on knobbly tyres, upswept exhaust with a front light 'you wouldn't want to be riding at night with'. It just so happens it was me! 62 years after the event I get to see this particular photo for the first time. There's a surprise.



The photo was taken on closed roads at Police Headquarters at Hendon where riders, having ridden almost 600 miles at that stage in 24 hours, took a special test comprising, from memory, something like a mile averaging 22.5mph with the speedo blanked off, to establish the various class award winners. There were of course no Google maps or sat navs to help/cheat. I still have my route card with all the checkpoint stamps.

In '63, I was 26, single and yet to meet my future wife. I was a member of the Kingston and District Club which had a strong contingent of trials riders. I rode a new 650SS Norton and with my then girlfriend had got into road trials, two-up. We were already acting as Observers in Southern Centre trials events and Marshalls at BMCC road racing events. We entered what we thought was a night time road trial only to find it was what was then known as semi-sporting, and included off road sections. Off road, in the dark on road tyres two-up was challenging. We finished in one piece but my girlfriend went off the idea of repeating it, whereas I wanted to do more but not risk wrecking my pristine Norton in the process. That's when in very early '63 the bike in the photo entered the frame. I'd already got an entry for the National Rally on the Norton and when girlfriend said she didn't fancy it, I switched my entry to the AJS.

The AJS was a 1957 16MC model bought from Comerfords. Like most used trials bikes it had had a fairly hard life. With the help of a handbook, a mate, and past experience with my first bike, a '38 Panther 350, bald tyres, handchange, worn out chain and little in the way of brakes, I got it sorted and it became my everyday transport.

On a good day it allegedly made 18 bhp and on trials gearing started to struggle at anything over 55 MPH. But it didn't have lights. The solution was to bungee my Ever-Ready bike lights on front and back. Having tested the arrangement to establish how long double cell batteries would last, the downside was that the vibration blew the bulbs quite frequently. The answer, carry spares. After the Rally I added a clip-on direct lighting system.

It was obvious that to cover the 600 miles I wasn't going to be taking long rest breaks and would be using minor roads wherever possible. Many hours were spent poring over Ordnance Survey sheets to get to the requisite number of checkpoints and the magic 600 miles. The route was transcribed onto A5 pieces of paper, carefully numbered, covering the route between up to three checkpoints carried in an ex Army mapcase plus a small map of the UK for emergencies.

For the Rally I borrowed a mate's Bantam dualseat in preference to the rubber Dunlop saddle to give me a bit more room to move about, bungeed on, with spare inner tubes and bike pump, long tyre levers taped to the frame tubes, a small container of oil plus petrol, a basic tool kit plus wire and insulating tape. My other 'spares' included a couple of jam sandwiches, Mars bars and a small bottle of water, plus loo roll!

The weather forecast for the Rally weekend was sunshine and showers. I was clad in my wax cotton

Belstaff Trialsmaster, Lewis leather boots with seaboot socks, a yet to catch on 'new fangled' Bell helmet with a clip-on peak, goggles, short 'scrambler' gloves and for the fashion conscious, the obligatory silk scarf covering the lower part of the face.

Thus prepared, what could possibly go wrong? Not a lot really. There were about 650 entrants nationally starting from all over the country but all finishing in Battersea Park. Leaving the start in Epsom at 11am the rain started about an hour later and lasted until I got down to the West country. Thereafter it cleared up. My route planning worked; I found the checkpoints and by evening riding toward the East coast on a very very minor road I arrived at a T junction too quickly, locked up the back wheel on a loose surface and put the bike in a deep ditch. The bike had looped the loop but was undamaged and I'd gone over the top. Oh joy! I clambered out of the ditch but the bike was handlebar deep in it. I walked in both directions to see if I could ride out at any point without success, but on returning to the bike found a couple on a summer evening stroll wondering why this motorcycle was in a ditch. With a bit of a struggle the three of us managed to extricate it, but the lady's summer dress was oil stained as a result. I subsequently paid for its dry cleaning.

During the night, heading East I stopped under a street light in a small village to check my route plan and suddenly heard a voice asking what was I doing; the local policeman. We did the licence and insurance thing and I was informed that my bike lights were illegal and I should park up and wait for sunrise before I rode on. We had a fairly lively discussion about this but I managed to convince him that I was on an ACU approved rally (true) and that my bike had been inspected by qualified scrutineers, had met all legal requirements (possibly) and was thus fit to start. Can't quite remember what his exact words were but the gist was, on your way.

As I got toward the east coast and fen country, thick mist and sea fret significantly reduced visibility and my forward progress. Rolling into another checkpoint I met a Velo Venom rider, found he was going much the same way and asked if he'd mind if I tailed him. His response, looking at my bike was, OK mate, but I'm not slowing down for you. What followed was a hair raising ride across the Fens trying to maintain sight of his tail light. If it suddenly disappeared I took it as forewarning of either a right or left turn, but at least I knew what to expect.

Sunrise around 4am heralded the start of the final stretch, first to Hendon and the finish at Battersea Park.

I clocked in at exactly 10am, so 23 hours on the road and 605 miles. Not bad for a 350cc trials bike making 18bhp. About 70% of the entry made it. When I got home the bike got a wash down, fuelled up and took me to work the following day, which prompts the question; do we really need 100+ BHP bikes and all the technical wizardry today?

Just over two years ago I thought about doing the rally again. These days it's spread over two days with an obligatory 8 hour recovery break and it's now a 500 mile event. Most entrants, I'm told, now do a loop on the first day, retire to their bed at home overnight, restart from where they finished the night before and ride direct to the finish. On modern bikes with Google maps and sat nav, where's the challenge in that?

