

IT'S DÉJA VU ALL OVER AGAIN

Irish rally driver Rosemary Smith was one of many rallying superstars reunited for a celebration of the Circuit of Ireland – and Mark Dixon rode shotgun in her works Hillman Imp

Photography Mark Dixon Archive photography Esler Crawford





THIS IS DÉJA VU IN MORE senses than one. Literally, because we are here in Kerry, Ireland, for the Circuit Déja Vu – a celebration of the country's greatest-ever rally, the Circuit of Ireland. And metaphorically, because I'm sitting beside Irish rallying legend Rosemary Smith in her works Hillman Imp, 22 years after we last rallied together.

She hasn't changed a bit. Still glamorous, still drawing the (mostly male) rally fans to her like moths to a flame at the age of – well, we wouldn't be so rude, but Rosemary began her rallying career some 56 years ago – and still as witty and sharp of tongue as ever. And still a bloody good driver, as I'm about to be reminded.

Not that today's run is going to be a competitive one (although you try telling that to a bunch of professional rally drivers – our fellow entrants

include Jimmy McRae, Russell Brookes, Adrian Boyd and Paddy Hopkirk, to name just a few). No, this is purely a fun run: a Sunday tour of some of the special stages that made the Circuit of Ireland one of the most fearsome events on the international rallying calendar.

The Circuit is still held today, in name at least, but it's a pale shadow of its former self and is a 'circuit' in name only, being restricted to a short route in the north. It lasts just a couple of days and features 130 miles of special stages that are flat-out and against the clock. Back in Rosemary's day, there were 500 stage miles in an 1100-mile marathon that encompassed the whole island. This was a tough event.

'I think I did it eight times, maybe more,' muses Rosemary in her lilting Irish brogue as we wait for the off, outside Killarney's Malton Hotel. 'There were 63 special stages and it was day and night,

day and night – it was really hard going. But we loved it. People would flock here from the north, from Dublin and Limerick, just to be part of it. Killarney was *buzzing*. You couldn't get a hotel room for love nor money – it was just incredible.'

Some of the Circuit's most picturesque stages were held in the stunning scenery of County Kerry, and Rosemary's little Hillman Imp will be perfect for the narrow and twisty roads that thread alongside lakes and over mountains. She was lucky enough to be able to buy back one of her original Rootes works team cars, EDU 710C, in 2003, after it was discovered by Imp specialist Clark Dawson dismantled in a haybarn on a Hampshire farm. 'The owner also kept horses, and pinned to a wall of the barn behind all the horse-show rosettes were some original tax discs, which helped persuade the DVLA to reallocate its original number,' says Rosemary.

Not that the Imp would have been her first choice of rally car. Back in the 1960s, Rosemary's striking good looks were a mixed blessing. They helped her get publicity but they also meant that she was allocated to drive the 'girl's car' rather than Rootes' more macho offerings. All those PR glamour-puss shots still mean that Rosemary is most associated with her Rootes days but, as the profile on page 144 shows, they were just one element in a long and varied career.

In later years, with the upsurge in historic rallying, she was able to get behind the wheel of the Sunbeam Tiger that she'd always coveted, and it was a works Tiger that we shared 22 years ago on the Classic Marathon. Afterwards I wrote: 'Rosemary grips the wheel in her soft leather driving gloves and throws this heavy machine from corner to corner as if it were a Mini, snatching gearchanges and stamping on the pedals in her



Clockwise from left
Spectators throng Molls' Gap on the 1980 Circuit as a Chevette HSR powers out of the tight uphill corner; yes, that really is Jim Clark being fed chips by Rosemary on the 1966 RAC Rally; Robin McKinney flings his TR2 around a 1950s Circuit of Ireland autotest.



immaculate white trainers. It's a roller-coaster ride and I'm loving every minute of it.' And yes, I really did write 'roller-coaster ride.' Sorry about that.

There'll be no such hooning today. We're under strict instructions from event organiser Dr Beatty Crawford – who has done an amazing job in pulling together rallyists past and present for this Circuit Déja Vu reunion – to take it easy. So we relax, exchange a lot of banter and some rude remarks about fellow road-users, and make a half-hearted attempt to complete the roadbook quiz that Beatty has set to make our Sunday drive a little more challenging.

Maintaining a decent average in the Imp is quite a challenge in itself, mind you, as it was in period. Its body's tiny dimensions are ideal for narrow Irish roads; its engine's tiny dimensions less so for steep Irish mountain passes. And we have a few of those to negotiate on today's run, which starts and

finishes in Killarney, and takes in some of the famous Ring of Kerry – the original 'ring road', except that it encircles mountains rather than a city – as well as dipping briefly into County Cork. Along the way we'll traverse some of the Circuit of Ireland's most scenic stages, not to mention every kind of weather imaginable. Not so much four seasons in one day; more like within an hour.

Ireland has a rich tradition of motor sport and the first competitive events were held in 1903. The Circuit of Ireland debuted in 1936 and quickly developed into a mixture of speed, navigation, endurance – and autotests. The chap in the red TR2 (pictured above), Robin McKinney, was obviously pretty good at those because he won the Circuit in 1955 and '56, but when he became clerk of the course in 1963 he dropped these 'Mickey Mouse' tests. From here on, the emphasis would be on speed and special stages.

Clockwise from below
 'Four seasons in one hour' – note
 the hail on the Imp's bonnet as it
 crests the Healy Pass in bright
 sunshine; Rosemary and Octane's
 Mark Dixon enjoying the craic;
 there's time for a Guinness or two
 with the locals in a rural pub.



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From the 1970s onwards, the Circuit attracted all the big names from overseas, who took on the local heroes such as Cahal Curley, Billy Coleman and, in later years, Bertie Fisher. There were plenty of Brits, not least Roger Clark, and a whole clutch of Scandinavian 'names': Hannu Mikkola, Markku Alén, Stig Blomqvist, Pentti Airikkala. Anyone who was anyone did the Circuit.

The contrast between Rosemary's little Imp and mighty supercars such as the 1980s Porsche 911 or Lancia 037 (see next page) could not be greater, and yet the roads they're contesting have hardly changed to this day. They're still just as narrow and just as twisty – and just as steep. As we start climbing the spectacular Tim Healy Pass, pictured left, with the Imp's 998cc engine revving its little heart out, Rosemary utters one of her father's favourite sayings: 'Now we'll have to push the boat uphill!' Like so much in Ireland, it doesn't make sense, and yet it does.

The Tim Healy Pass, named after a former Governor-General, was built in the 1840s-50s and is reputedly the only true lacet (switchback



mountain road) in Ireland. It's the jewel in the crown of special stages for which Killarney and West Cork were famous. These counties were natural rallying country because they were rugged and sparsely populated, which meant fewer difficulties with road closures. Not that the locals generally mind; rallying brings a touch of excitement to rural life, which seems to be welcomed rather than resented. And, because Ireland is a comparatively small country – amazingly, the population is a lot less today than it was in the 1840s – it has a close-knit feel in which local heroes are recognised wherever they go.

A little while after the Healy Pass, Rosemary and I pull up at a remote pub in search of a cup of coffee. A handful of locals – pictured with Rosemary, above – are propping up the bar. Every one of them knows who the blonde in the green hoodie is and, although the pub isn't serving food, Rosemary turns on the charm and soon the pub landlady is rustling up a couple of plates of sandwiches for these unexpected guests.

Suitably fortified, it's with slight reluctance that we pour ourselves back into the Imp's rally seats and set off on the final leg back to Killarney. I'd like to ask Rosemary about her best-ever result



Above Group B came to the Circuit of Ireland during the 1980s, in the form of spectacular machines such as the Lancia 037 driven by Pentti Airikkala on the 1983 event; sadly, he later crashed out.

on the Circuit of Ireland, 1968, when she came third overall. I'd like to – but my questioning is fruitless, because Rosemary has the most appalling memory for events and results.

'I haven't a clue!' she cheerfully admits. 'What car was I driving?' An Imp, inevitably. 'Ah, then I can't have been that bad, can I?'

Indeed she can't. Entry lists for the Circuit usually ran into the hundreds, and on the 1968 event Rosemary placed third after Roger Clark in a Twin-Cam Escort and Adrian Boyd in a Mini-Cooper S. When I did the Classic Marathon with Rosemary in 1994, one of our fellow Tiger drivers shared with me his recollections of being a rally photographer in the '60s. 'You'd see this car come hurtling up through the forest, often having set fastest time on the stage, and out would step this incredibly elegant, incredibly beautiful woman. The effect was absolutely devastating.'

So, instead of reminiscing about days long ago, Rosemary tells me a story about a recent encounter with a BMW driver who got on the wrong side of her by not using his indicators. When they pulled up at some traffic lights '...I told him his car must be faulty. "What do you mean, faulty, it's brand new!" When I mentioned the lack of indicators, he got all huffy and, as soon as the lights changed, he floored the accelerator – and promptly shot backwards into the car behind him!'

Driving courtesies are important to Rosemary. Since 1999 she's been an active campaigner to encourage safer driving among youngsters, helping train them on private land before they're old enough to get a driving licence. Having tried in vain to get Government support, she set up an academy herself and now runs three or four schools a week. 'Having been driving all my life, I felt it was time to give something back.'

Safe doesn't have to mean slow, though. You don't become successful in motor sport by hanging around, and Rosemary's default switch setting is definitely 'on' rather than 'off'. Shortly after we rejoin the main road to Killarney, a Porsche 911 flashes past; we have no idea whether it's on the Déjà Vu or not, but either way we're going to have a damn good attempt at keeping up with it. The red zone on the prominent revcounter sitting on top of the dash begins at 7700rpm, and Ms Smith is making full use of the sector below that, hands lightly but decisively resting at ten-to-two and, I note, encased in soft leather driving gloves.

According to Clark Dawson, who found and rebuilt Rosemary's car, the rally Imps were effectively in showroom spec and had maybe 65bhp at the flywheel. While the Imp's relative lack of go was frustrating in period, it's clear that Rosemary has a lot of affection for the car that she drove more than any other. Interviewed by Tony

Dron many years ago, she recalled: 'You had to be light on the controls to get the best from the Imp... You could not chuck it around: you had to set it up for a corner, get it turned in with the tail out and then go. Understeer had to be avoided. Although we had rear wheels coming off the team cars and the production cars did have reliability problems, it was a sturdy little car at heart.'

Tony also extracted my favourite Rosemary quote, when asked whether she'd driven with male navigators as well as her more usual females: 'A few, but when I put them in ditches they screamed their heads off.'

Thing is, I've never felt anything less than safe in Rosemary's hands. Today has been less of a roller-coaster ride and more of a trundle down memory lane but I'd happily get in a rally car with her tomorrow and go for a blast. From the adulation that's shone from the faces of all the rally fans we've met along the way, I'm far from being alone in having that thought.

THANKS TO Dr Beatty Crawford, Esler Crawford, Alan 'Plum' Tyndall and all on the Circuit Déjà Vu; and to Declan Murphy at Fáilte Ireland, the Irish Tourist Office. A similar event to celebrate the Targa Florio will be held from 29 October to 5 November: visit www.rpm-motorsport.com/holidays/targa-florio-dejavu-2016.php.