

The Clansmen go rallying

Taking on the Historic Rally Festival & Challenger Stages Rally

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Already rally prepared and complete with an FIA Historic Rally Passport as well as a Motorsport UK Stage Rally Passport, I have owned my Clan Crusader for just over a year. I had bought it with the intention to use it for hillclimbs and sprints in the main, sharing the driving with my dad, Geoff Gibson, who used to extensively rally Imps in the '70s.

Growing up in the world of club motorsport, most weekends I would find myself at a hillclimb, sprint or rally. Some of my best memories as a teenager were of the Tour of Cornwall Rally in the early '90s. Mixing it among a field of national contenders of the RACMSA Asphalt Rally Championship would be around 20 Metro 6R4s and local legends such as Roger Hearn and Mike Tregonning in Darrians. Added to this was the giant-killing performances of Mark and Rob Lane in a Clan Crusader.

I guess it's no surprise then, that 30 years later I have ended up with both a Darrian and a Clan Crusader rally car. The Darrian is still as competitive today as it was 30 years ago (mine is over 30 years old now), securing 4th overall at TSH stages in May and an outright win at the Wildlife Stages in June.

The use of the Darrian had somewhat eclipsed actually getting out in the Clan. However, the engine in the Darrian decided to eat itself on the Bovington stages in August, so it was time to turn my attention to the Clan while a new engine was being built for the Darrian.

Sadly a great friend and local motorsport legend, Will Frost, was killed in a motorbike accident in August. The funeral attracted hundreds of people and around 50 motorsport cars followed the funeral procession. So it was to be, the Clan's first public appearance, a rather sad event, but yet a fantastic celebration of Will's Life – it was fitting.

Several things became apparent from this trip. Firstly the Clan was not running right at all. Barely able to idle and running on three cylinders unless it was on cam. The pulley on the alternator is necessarily big – but the charge light would not go out until the car was revved to 4k! The electric fan on the radiator had seized, and on a blistering hot August day, the car was getting hot and the fan motor started smoking.

Not being an expert in Imp engines, a friend and I tried to tinker with the carbs. There was an open vacuum pipe, which with my limited knowledge I thought ought to be blocked, but doing so saw the idle speed increase to 4k. The first carb didn't appear to be doing anything and checking the compression I found it was low on cylinders one and two. I must stress here, I am not a mechanic; I design hospitals for a living. Everything I do mechanically is usually the first time I have done it, so please don't judge me! I put a plea out for help on Facebook – I received a lot of helpful advice from a friendly Imp community, but also lots of conflicting diagnosis – two individuals, Tim Sears and Andy Jones, even offered to help while they were on holiday in Cornwall (where I am based). In the end, a trip to a local motorsport specialist, Alvin Powell, who rallied Clans and Imps

in the '70s and was hailed a carburettor tuning guru, was organised. Alvin didn't want the car off the trailer as that would admit defeat! Fair play to Alvin, he had the carbs balanced and the car running beautifully within 20 minutes. The car was transformed. I also

sourced and replaced the electric fan, so all was good.

Historic Rally Festival

Earlier in the year I had put an entry in for the Historic Rally Festival based at Weston Park, running from 30th September to 1st October. The Historic Rally Festival is the only multi-venue Motorsport UK permitted demonstration rally in the UK. A rally in everything bar the actual stage timing, cars have to be both period correct and fully legal to compete in a stage rally event. All arrival controls, road book, safety and scrutineering is exactly the same. Also competing was Hugh Chambers Motorsport UK Chief Executive.

Dad had agreed to be my navigator for the event. After a full nut-and-bolt check of the car by a good friend Mark Clayton at Blowing House Garage, we set off on the six-hour journey to Weston Park.

The event was really well organised. Weston is a fantastic venue and the weather was glorious on arrival. We spent the evening in the company of rally legends Stig Blomqvist, Louise Aitkin Walker and Clan Crusader ambassador and motorsport media celebrity Paul Woodford.

The morning of the event was somewhat wet, with the weather looking to worsen over the two days. We were Car 2 (it was reverse seeding!) and we headed out of service for the first stage at Hatton Grange. A slight issue with the tulip diagrams meant we and all the other competitors had a bit of an extended tour around the countryside, but we eventually made it to the stage start.

The stages were picturesque, the crowds of spectators had arrived and we were on the start line



Father and son team, Dan and Geoff Gibson, Historic Rally Festival, Weston Park
All photos: www.rallygallery.com

Weston Park night stages: "The biggest problem was the steaming up of the windows and having candles for headlights!"



ready to go – a quick chat and selfie with Paul and an interview by Louise Aitkin Walker and we were ready for the flag to drop.

We found out, pretty much straight away that the Clan was too low for the broken tarmac and speedbumps that formed the stages at Hatton. A lot of

banging, crashing and crunching from under the car meant we decided to back off a fair bit – after all it was a demonstration event – nothing to be gained by damaging the car. As we finished the stage and moved to the road section, the first issue we encountered was the need to remove helmets. This was tricky with a HANS device on and being in a Clan. Then the question of where do you put the helmets?! It made driving the road sections interesting. Next we had to drive over a very big speed bump to leave the venue. Most cars would not have noticed this, but the Clan got beached and scraped the entire underside, which was thankfully well guarded. This we had to repeat this four more times and I was beginning to wonder if we should continue.

After the service halt back at Weston Park, the evening and night stages were to be held there with the iconic water splash. Light pod fitted, we set about tackling these stages in the dusk and dark. It was much smoother at this venue and the Clan was much happier. Predictably the water-



Clan's pointed nose scooped up a spectacular bow-wave at the Weston Park watersplash!

splash led to electrical gremlins despite the liberal use of WD40 and a latex glove over the distributor cap, but the Clan kept on going and would eventually clear. The biggest problem we were having was the steaming up of the windows and having candles for headlights. It was fine with the spots on, but almost zero visibility with them off. The demister (an aftermarket unit) was making lots of encouraging noises, but zero air was coming out! Nonetheless, it all made for part of the experience.

The next day was all focused around Weston Park and so we were happy to keep going. The weather was now awful with a consequently reduced number of committed fans spectating. The marshals at the watersplash had decided to fill it up by leaving a large agricultural hosepipe on full-bore overnight. For us, as the second car through, it was very deep and the Clan created the most unusual bow-wave, unlike any other car!

It was more of the same for the rest of the event, but towards the end, the competitor access to the stages (via three fields) had succumbed to the weather was un-drivable – this did lead to a short spell where the mud had covered the entire engine bay in the Clan leading to the car just stopping dead in the middle of said field. I jumped out of the car and with the help of my dad's handkerchief cleaned the mud off the ignition leads and she fired back into life. It was at this point, though, that the organisers called time and cancelled the remaining stages.

It was a fantastic event, and I was chuffed that my dad, myself and the 50-year-old Clan had made it through the two days unscathed! I even got to meet a childhood hero Stig Blomqvist and got him to sign my *Motoring News* baseball cap from the '80s!

After the long journey home, my enthusiasm for what the Clan could achieve was heightened and when I got home, I put in an entry for the Challenger Stages Rally at Bovington Army Camp in Dorset – which was to be held just three weeks later on Sunday 22nd October...

Challenger Stages Rally

Due to work commitments, two weeks flew by with little attention paid to the Clan. This meant that it would be a case of classic last-minute motorsport prep. Added to this, the human petri dishes that are my teenage daughters, had given me a potentially life-threatening case of man flu. While my wife made an appointment with Dignitas on my behalf, I set off for a Monday evening of nut-and-bolt checking of the car, once again carried out by Mark Clayton at Blowing House Garage.



Challenger Stages: touch and go with wheel nut and spacer issues

We took the opportunity to raise the front dampers up quite a bit and stiffen both front and rear (it turned out they were set at the softest setting). The car was remarkably unscathed from the last event. The first problem was one of the front studs was spinning in the hub, and I still had the wheel and nut on. The stud was a Vauxhall Viva item and, perhaps unsurprisingly, I was having no luck sourcing a replacement stud. So I set about putting pressure on the wheel rim and trying to spin the nut off. This took a fair amount (and some hours) of persuading, but it did come off. A small weld of the stud to the hub sorted that issue. The next problem I faced was that I run Revolution wheels with sleeve nuts. I was running 9" wheels on the rear, but I wouldn't be allowed to run these in the 1400cc class, so had to swap to 7". The sleeve nuts were too long for the smaller wheels – no problem I thought I will buy some new shorter ones...

I found out that the wheels I have use 5/8" sleeve and a 7/16" thread and needed to be an inch long. These were harder to source and buy than a unicorn with two horns. I was informed by Revolution that these nuts no longer existed and I would have to buy ones that were 30mm long, with a wider 11/16" sleeve. This meant modifying all 16 nuts and washers and drilling out all the wheels to take the larger sleeves.

It was now Friday and the rally was on Sunday. With another late night garage session of drilling, cutting and grinding, we went to fit the 7" wheels, only to find they were flat against the inner arch. A plea to competitors and friends, resulted in Tim Sears (who was again coming to Cornwall on holiday) meeting me *en route* with some spacers. Equally at the event, a huge number of offers of support came forward with fellow Darrian competitors Russ Davies having another set to try. By Saturday afternoon, I was at Bovington, the car was scrutineered, passed noise test (just) and spacers had been fitted. We were ready to go.

Seeded car 67 out of 70 was a nice place to be. In the Darrian I am usually seeded in the top five, so you have to be on your game first thing. It meant we had an hour longer than usual before we needed to be out. The weather was cold but glorious. Frankie Hillman who often sits with me in the Darrian was on co-driver duties for the day and we set out to have fun.

Stage 1, we settled in to have a laugh and learn how to drive the car competitively. It took a bit of getting used to, with the combination of long gearing and a cam that needs a lot of revs to work, there was clearly a knack to keep it on cam as much as possible.

Stage 2, we upped the ante, pushing on a bit more and getting within touching distance of the class leader, beating other cars in the class and only one second behind the Ford Puma Super 1400 leading the class. The Clan was handling like it was on rails.

More of the same in stage 3 and 4 saw us setting 2nd fastest times in our class, but at the end of the stage we were suffering total brake loss coming over the stop line from overheating brakes. At the service stop we replaced the front wheels to try to suck the heat out of the hubs and discs, but service was limited to 15-20 minutes.

Stage 5, a much longer stage than the previous four at over ten miles long. All was going well until about a mile from the end of the stage. At the end of a long straight and into a 90° left – flat in fourth at 115mph – I touched the brakes and my foot went to the floor. I apologised to my co-driver for what might be about to happen, as a concrete wall seemed to be rapidly approaching. I pulled the handbrake, bashed down through the

gears, flicked the car and we made it round the bend. It was one of the scariest situations I have ever been in. We had to limp back to service in first gear with no brakes – unfortunately taking out a chicane which I could not stop for, doing some damage to the front end of the car. At service we took stock, removed the wheels and bled the brakes. A bit of pedal came back.

Frankie and I had a chat and decided to go again on Stage 6. It would be a repeat of Stage 5 but at a greatly reduced pace, and we would see how we got on. We set off but now we were a *minute* off the pace, not a second. Nonetheless, with any hopes of winning the class long gone, we set about simply having fun and enjoying rallying a 50-year-old Clan Crusader.

The lunch break gave us a bit more time to cool the brakes and in the afternoon we enjoyed our rallying and tried to give the marshals and spectators a show. For brief spell, the rain came down, just to spice everything up a bit, but this just provided more enjoyment for us!

We finished the day 48th overall and 3rd in class. The car was such fun to drive competitively. Without realising it at the time, the result in the Clan had also appeared (provisionally and to be confirmed) to have given me enough points to win the ASWMC Rally Championship, which I had started in the Darrian.

All round, it has been a fantastic year of club motorsport in two amazing Imp-derived cars. A new engine will be going in the Darrian over the winter, but there will be more Clan adventures to report in the future.

If you would like to see some in-car footage, have a look at www.youtube.com/@GibsonMsport.

