

Dirty Deeds on the Black Stump no, you don't need a modified rally car to join in the fun!

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Isn't it ironic that most classic car events these days don't have two of the most defining features of the classic rallies of the '60s and '70s Dirt and Darkness?

Those of us old enough and lucky enough to have got our start in motorsport back then, can tell you that rallies (and Car Trials as they were more commonly called) were almost exclusively held from dusk to dawn on gravel roads and forestry tracks. And apart from a very few privileged stars in sponsored cars, you 'run what you brung', which you drove to and from the event and hoped that it would still be in a fit state to drive to work on Monday!

Both of us welcome any opportunity to participate in events that provide to chance to relive real classic rallying. Such events are few and far between these days. While the ever-energetic members of the Historic Rally Association have kept the flame alive with a healthy calendar of dirt rallies in Victoria, such events were an extinct species in NSW until the irrepressible Dave Johnson and a small band of like-minded enthusiasts formed the Historic Rally Club of NSW & ACT a couple of years ago to rekindle interest in 'real' Classic Rallying North of the Murray.

When the format for the 2019 Black Stump Tour of the Central West was announced we knew we had to be part of it this time. For 2019 Dave Johnson and Clerk of Course, Arthur Evans, had ramped up the ambitiousness with a 3-day program on the gravel roads and forests around Parkes involving 3 separate, optional events:

The Road Runner – Closed Road Tests of short timed special stages and khanacross events in State Forests and private property.

The Barry Ferguson Classic – a navigation event (with Masters and Elementary levels) on gravel roads and forestry tracks using maps from the '50s & '60s.

The Return of the Night Owl – a night navigation event resurrecting the iconic Night Owl events that Arthur Evans used to run North of Sydney.

The choice of events was entirely optional – you could choose to run in all 3 or just one or two. Each event was scored as an individual event in its own right tripling the degree of difficulty for the event organisers but fortuitously opening up a way we could compete.

Without a dedicated gravel rally car at our disposal, neither of us wanted to subject any of our classics to the timed closed road forestry stages of the Road Runner event. But Ian was more than happy to run his lovely 1955 Peugeot 203 in BFC and Night Owl navigation events – after all, the old girl had successfully competed in two Re-Runs of the 1953 RedEx Trial and the Rerun of the Ampol Round Australia Trial, so a 3-day event should be a doddle.

So off we went on the 700km drive from Melbourne to the start in Parkes in a pristine 65 year-old piece of French quirkiness with no sumpguard, no driving lights, standard lever-arm shocks and just set of period correct Michelin X skinny tyres to take on rocks and mud of the 1400km Black Stump route to compete against a field of specialized historic rally cars.

Registration that evening revealed just who and what we were up against. In terms of numbers, the field was (like the 2 previous HRC events) very disappointing. However in terms of the quality of the cars and the calibre of the crews, this was truly a Classic event.

Bob Watson, 1970 Australian Rally Champion and multiple Victorian Rally Champion was there in a replica of his 1969 Victorian Championship winning Renault 16TS. His navigator was Phil Bernadou, the director of Australia's premier classic rally event The Classic Outback trial.

Victorian Doug Fernie brought along his recently completed SAAB 96 replica of the car Simo Lampinen drove to victory in the 1000 Lakes Rally. Greg & Liz Newton had their London to Cape Town Holden Commodore. And a couple of young Tasmanian blokes (who we later found out are the current Tasmanian 2WD Rally Champions!) drove a very tidy 1998 Mitsubishi Mirage up from Tassie just to get a taste of what rallying used to be like!

All in all the Victorian crews just outnumbered the NSW crews, with a crew each from Qld and Tasmania.

Day 1.

Any hope of an easy introduction to the rally was dashed by the distances to be covered on Day 1 – 400km of BFC navigation in daylight followed by another 200km of tricky night navigation on The Night Owl.

In this rally, most via points and controls are pre-plotted and marked on the official maps. Plotting the course is usually straightforward following the correct route, especially at the via points, is not necessarily so.

The opening Touring section to Peak Hill gave us the first taste of using the photocopied maps that required calculation of their scale based on grid-line spacing - no scales provided. A few turns came earlier than expected for those trying to “wing it”. Then the 1st proper BFC navigation stage was the source of lots of confusion for navigators as this required the use of instructions and maps provided to them separately at the start, not the use of the instructions in the

bound Road Book. This was an event with lots of paper for navigators to juggle! For those who did do this section as intended, it was the first taste of the many road re-alignments that have occurred since the 1955 official maps were surveyed.

Some great long stretches of gravel shire road on the way to Cowal State Forest W of Narromine allowed the old Pug to stretch its legs while keeping us alert to erratic behaviour of the many roos we were to encounter throughout the event.

Having elected not to do the Road Runner, we can't tell you much about what the quick guys encountered in the first of the two Closed Road Tests in the Cowal State Forest. However the crews we spoke to all commented on how narrow, tight and rough the stages were as confirmed by the collection of busted side mirrors on many of the cars!

These first Closed Road Tests also gave the first indication of just how fast those two young Tassie blokes (Stephen Turner and Mitch Newton) were in their first 'blind' rally without pace notes!

After a terrific lunch catered by the local CWA (gotta love those scones!) at the Narromine Golf Clubhouse, it was back to the Cowal State Forest for another two Closed Road Tests followed by some tricky BFC navigation to the dinner break at the Peak Hill Services Club before the Night Owl start. Now you know we love our Chinese food (the only option at the Club) but Beef in Black Bean Sauce and Combination Chow Mein really does seem a bizarre meal choice before heading off into the darkness for 200kms of navigation and closed road tests on tracks in the middle of nowhere especially with the threat of rain looking to turn the dust into mud!

The Night Owl

Run as a optional leg of the Black Stump (Two Divisions, plus a BFC Navigation section in the Back Yamma State Forest as well as a 5km Road Runner closed road stage, it started in Peak Hill and finished in Parkes - a little over 200km in total length (if you didn't add 50km or so backtracking at various spots). The start was a little before nightfall, but essentially the whole Leg was conducted after dark. Photocopied maps (1955 again) were on A3 size - the larger size much appreciated by older eyes that struggle in low light.

Typical of our Night Owl nightmare was a section in the Back Yamma State Forest (near Forbes). There was a mostly unmapped 9km BFC section through the forest traversing two via points (from specific approaches) and entry to the control on an unmapped road from nowhere in pitch darkness.

By that time a less than favourable recollection of the Rallying in the "Good 'ol Days" had well and truly set in mental and physical exhaustion. There's a great line from a novel (fictional) about the last flight of Amelia Earhart "the worst combination, a pilot who doesn't care where they a going and a navigator who doesn't care how they get there" (or words to that effect). It wasn't quite like that, but at 11:30 that night our enthusiasm was definitely lacking.

We finally reached the end control over 5 hours after the start of the night section, which in turn was about 15 hours after we left in the morning. A long day for these old fellas!

Day 2.

Again a Parkes start, half an hour later than on Day 1 (to help make up for the previous late night). About 430km in total. In spite of the frustrations of the previous night we were surprised to learn that we'd finished 5th in The Night Owl and were currently running 4th in the Barry Ferguson Classic.

Touring and BFC navigation took us through places with unlikely names like Brolgan, Bogan Gate, Nelungaloo, Gunningbland, Monomie, Yarrabandai and Ootha.

We're not likely to forget Bogan Gate in a hurry - six via points and plenty of old roads, including a wander through paddocks on the outskirts of Bogan Gate, a completely new (minor) road out of Bogan Gate, and some wonderfully "period" roads beside the railway line for about 5 or 6km into control.

The Road Runner crews had a Khanacross and Closed Road Test in the Murda State Forest before heading to a nearby property 'Elswick' where the Kiacatoo and Condoblin CWA had set-up lunch in a paddock

As we were not doing the Khanacross sections after lunch, we were the first to leave lunch - those who remained apparently had a huge storm which caused the CAMS stewards to stop the scheduled Khanacross stages.

As 1st car on the road we were the first to arrive at the East Cooksey Plains State Forest BFC navigation section where our rally almost came to a premature end!

The forest section started with some very slippery tracks (well, slippery on Michelin X's) - the rain storms had hit here and lots of very close junctions with many choices of route at all points. The final turn on the route chart was very difficult to see (despite some bunting) and quite a few overshot it. We went about 200m - a little further than most (we suspect) - through some giant washaways. They were clearly visible as we drove in, nearly invisible on the way out. We dropped into one and got well and truly stranded with the bodywork hung up on the edge. Jacking and lots of hole filling with rocks and logs got us out after 40 minutes, but ominously no cars passed by - on the incorrect or correct roads! As it turns out it was probably just that we were well in front of the field still. After extracting ourselves we found our way to control (via the intended route).

As we got back to Parkes it began to rain, and it seemed to rain for most of the night, with some very heavy downpours. A lot of mud dropped off the car overnight!

Day 3

About 380km in total with the added pressure of learning that we'd climbed to 3rd place in the BFC!

A fine morning after the rain of the night before. On the road it was obvious how patchy the rain had been. Some dry areas, but some very wet paddocks and a few road dips through creeks that had a fair bit of water laying across the road.

The Road Runner competitors got to do a Closed Road test in the Blowclear State Forest followed by a number of BFC navigation sections through the Gunningbland and Curra State Forests. The route instructions for the section in the Curra State Forest said to follow "almost completely on unmapped tracks". A hard to see track about three quarters of the way through meant a number of us (ourselves, Mifsud Stanza and Upton Datsun 1600 that we know of) almost launched ourselves over a crest and into a dam!

Lunch at Peak Hill Primary School, provided by the P&C. Another excellent lunch in preparation for what we fully expected to be one of Dave Johnson's diabolical 'stings in the tail' for the last sections.

The Road Runner entrants finished their event with 3 Closed Road Events in the South Strahorn State Forest before an easy route charted Transport stage lulled us into a false sense of security for the following BFC navigation through the Wombin State Forest.

Into the forest, two VRC's at unmapped junctions (specified by a bearing and a distance from the start) and a bunch of "false" VRC's to avoid. Perhaps 4km of wandering in the forest to find these points. Lots of plotting on paper to try to retain some idea of your position on the ground.

Having successfully negotiated the forest we thought we were home and hosed all we had to do was follow unmapped roads into control in a specified direction using the shortest mapped route (of course!). Easy except that in the 65 years since the map was drawn someone had plonked a bloody great open-cut mine between the unmapped road and the mapped road we needed to find! Our hopes of a podium finish disappeared as we drove round and round as we became fully-fledged members of the Farkarwee Tribe! That's Rallying Just like in the old days.

The presentation dinner that night was BBQ put on by the organisers in the Camper's Kitchen of the officials' caravan park. We reckon it was a noisier, funnier, happier Presentation than any we've been to in those ritzy clubs! (just ask the un-named happy official who was still sending text messages at 1.30am).

While we would have loved to have had a suitable car for the Road Runner closed road sections, our 5th place in both the Night Owl and the Barry Ferguson Classic in a lovely 65 year-old standard Peugeot proves that you can join in the fun of the Black Stump in any reasonably reliable car.