

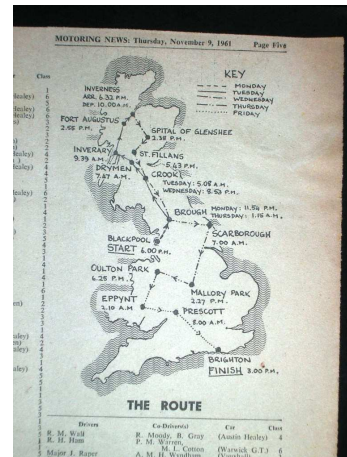
Skodas in the Stages

BAC Motor Club members on the 1961 RAC Rally

The 1961 RAC International Rally of Great Britain was the first to use Forestry Commission tracks for the majority of the stages. The six-day event, with a 2116 mile route through England, Scotland and Wales, and no main road sections, included 24 special stages comprising approximately 200 miles, and organiser Jack Kemsley hoped that these would be "as tough and as testing as those in any other European Rally".

The Rally started from Blackpool on Monday evening, 13th November, reaching Inverness on Tuesday evening, where there was a 16 hour overnight halt. From Inverness on Wednesday morning there then followed 54 hours of motoring, with only two one-hour breaks, before reaching Brighton on Friday evening. A final test on Madeira Drive on Saturday rounded off the event.

The Skoda Manufacturers Team entry on that Rally was run by former Grand Prix driver, Bristolian Horace Gould, then the West of England Skoda agent, and was said to be the first appearance of the Skoda marque on a British International rally. The three car team included four BAC Motor Club members: club chairman Norman Kell with Bram Dunster of Weston MC, Mike Manning (then club Competition Secretary) and Clive Edwards, and Geoff Sheppard navigating for Gilbert Best of the Bristol MC&LCC. Manning/Edwards and Kell/Dunster both completed the event, in 56th and 71st positions of the 81 finishers, but Sheppard's car was retired on the first night.



Following the event Norman Kell provided the following account which appeared in the December 1961 issue of the Club magazine Backfire:



THE TENTH R.A.C. RALLY - CAR No. 135 by N.Kell

This rally really began at a Motor Show cocktail party, when Horace Gould (the West of England Skoda agent) invited me to lead a team to be entered by him (in collaboration with the Skoda works) as the official works team. The next five weeks were more strenuous than the actual event. The first job was to decide on the team of three crews; Mike Manning, with his experience of rallying in his own Skoda, was an obvious choice, and he teamed up with Clive Edwards who had done the event in 1960. Geoff Sheppard was persuaded to co-drive with. Gilbert Best, an experienced international rallyist (and winner of our Cross Trophy in 1960). Since the rally was supposed to be a "driver's event," I was glad to find that Bram Dunster, of Clevedon, was prepared to share my own car; last Easter, I helped him to knock his Dauphine about on the Land's End Trial, so this was an opportunity to repay the compliment. From the Land's End, I knew that he'd be prepared to carry the car to Brighton by the door handles if necessary, and that whatever happened; we'd be in for a few laughs.

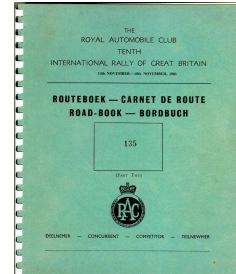


We entered as standard series production cars, but the Skoda's 1089 c.c. was not a happy capacity in a class of 1001 to 1600 c.c., which included the Sunbeams and Volvos, which would be 30 m.p.h. faster. Consequently, we decided that our primary target would be the Manufacturer's Team Awards, as we decided that the Skoda's ruggedness would stand up well to the 200 miles of special sections, and would give us a better chance than most of qualifying as finishers (this meant one hour's maximum permitted lateness).

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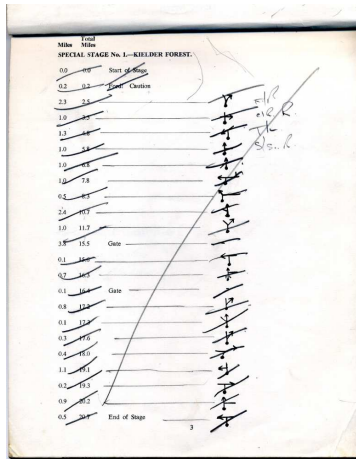
The soundness of these tactics is shown by the fact that Mike and I finished 22nd and 24th in our class of 44, and that there were only 81 finishers from the 169 entries. Unfortunately, Gilbert Best got too excited on the first night, and I understand that he over-revved it in first gear and pieces of the crankshaft pulley vanished into the night. Had this car matched the performance of the other two, we should have been second to the Sunbeam team. This place went to the M.G.'s, of which one was being hauled out of Staindale Forest on a crane when we passed! Which goes to show that persistence pays, since none of the other twelve teams qualified and the third place award went begging.

The event itself was much as we expected; the road sections were certainly no worse than many restricted rallies. This was apparent on the first night, when gearbox troubles put us 23 minutes late only 20 miles after the Blackpool start, but we were able to regain scheduled time by Brough, 130 miles later. In our haste, however, I bounced the car off a large boulder with such a thump that I expected to find my co-driver vanished down the hillside with his half of the car. Amazingly enough, there was only the slightest indentation in the valance from the front wheel arch to the door pillar.



The gearbox trouble was due to a derangement of the normally excellent column change mechanism, following an excursion into a farmyard; we emerged backwards, only to find that I couldn't shed reverse gear until we'd stripped the lid off and prised out the selector.

The Service Crew met us with the Skoda van next morning at Inverary, and some effective adjustments made the next section less of a strain. Until then, we had removed the lid five times, running with the floor tunnel off, a leaking exhaust system, and wide open windows.



En route, we experienced the first Special Stages on Forestry Commission tracks. Most of these were indescribably rough, and were littered with all kinds of debris - - from deformed motor cars to buckled wheels and a couple of suit-cases, presumably disgorged from earlier cars with ill-fitting boot lids. A hectic 35 minutes at Inverness the next morning was spent with the Skoda Service Crew in shimming the gear selector, reassembling the change mechanism, repairing the leaky exhaust system, greasing the front suspension and refuelling, before we embarked on the next Special Stages, in Culbin and Monaghty Forests. These were the worst, strewn with boulders and logs dislodged from stacks by earlier cars, which had also left very deep ruts. Our 8½" ground clearance helped, and we used the ruts to corner at speeds which would otherwise have seen us vanishing sideways into the woods. This was followed by a rapid tour of Tomintoul, Balmoral, Braemar and Pitlochry, finishing at Brough early on the Thursday.

Some tight navigation sections followed, with time controls at 6 to 8 minute intervals. Early on, I was glad that reverse gear was working again, as I dropped the front end into a rockery, but was able to drive off, thanks to the good brakes and traction and the large wheels of the Skoda. Another two feet, and Bram and I wouldn't have been on speaking terms - - there was a lake at the bottom of the rockery. Bram eventually became car-sick from so much map-reading, so we changed places and he threw me about until I suffered the same fate. But we ate a good breakfast at Scarborough while the Service Crew looked at the car. They had only to make a token brake adjustment, which was phenomenal after 1500 miles; most other cars were having new linings by then.

Special Stages in Sherwood Forest and at Mallory Park were followed by Oulton Park, where the stage was 4 laps (11.5 miles) in 10 minutes, in the dark. As we were early (in order to have as much time in hand for the Welsh section as possible), I found myself on the circuit with the early numbers, who were really trying! I'd memorised the circuit, but knew that it would take a lap or two to sort things out, and was going to keep out of trouble. The big snag was choosing the apex of a corner, because of the ill-defined edges in the dark. All went well until Esso Bend, a right hand hairpin, where I found myself pushing the apex further round the bend until I couldn't hold it any longer, and was astonished to find myself rapidly reaching the top of the banking, with a lot of corner still left!

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I was even more astonished when lights appeared over my left shoulder, accompanied by a noise like corrugated iron being thrown down a cliff. I was sure something had disintegrated and that the bits were catching me up, but it was odd that the lights still pointed the same way. It was Harper's Sunbeam, exhaust pipe adrift at the manifold, on his way to clock the fastest time (10 m. 30 s.). Fortunately, he had only one lap left, and I didn't see him again.

The Welsh section was as tough as we expected, but we were mentally prepared for it, and left Oulton with an air of grim determination. Many crews were getting lost, and we were encouraged to find that most of the cars we did see had early numbers. Unfortunately, I contrived to use 10 gallons of fuel in 156 miles of mountain tracks, and we had to navigate off route to knock up the nearest peasant with a petrol pump. An order for 10 gallons shouted through the bedroom window was sufficiently attractive at 3 a.m. to get the pump working, but we had to show our money first!

The Special Stage on the Eppynt artillery range was very tricky, and we understood why after seeing the frost on the trees and the clay tracks at Radnor. Then followed a particularly exciting excursion over a skew bridge downhill to a T-junction, where we arrived facing the right way, as it happened. I was tempted to descend more slowly after that, but felt that things might get worse, and this was no time to ease off. I found this to be right, because the run to Prescott was the tightest of the rally -- or any other rally as far as I'm concerned - and I appreciated the fantastic road holding of the Skoda on its Duraband tyres.

It must have been a bit trying for Bram, but he just strapped himself in a bit tighter and wore his knees a bit straighter. His only comment was that we seemed to go faster every time it got slippery; this was true, as I had to wait for a dry bit to slow it down again.

At Prescott Bram was saved the pain of the timed climb, for no passengers were carried on any of the speed tests. At the hairpin, I was delighted to find that I was maintaining wheelspin coming out of the corner, as this could be used to put the car sideways for the right-hander which follows. But I found the car steering normally, and realised that it was clutch spin. I managed to miss both the vertical hillside and the drop over the edge, and ended up round the corner, facing the hillside, and had to reverse away in order to point the car towards Brighton again.

After this, it was only fair that Bram should see if he could tip it up on the Esplanade in the final test on the Saturday. I thought at one- time that the door handles might suffer gravel rash, but the roof never seemed in danger.

Little did we know that the mechanical link to the brake master cylinder had been clobbered somewhere en route. A mile after starting out for home on the Sunday, it fell off. Apart from this, the car was going as well as ever, without a single rattle, creak or groan anywhere.

Norman Kell



Norman Kell and Skoda 1MHW at Filton after the event

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Five decades later Mike Manning provided his recollections of the event in the April 2017 issue of Backfire:

“I wonder if anyone will remember Horace Gould who among other things had a Maserati GP car and was known as ‘The Pampas Bull of the West Country’. He had the Skoda dealership in Kellaway Avenue and said that if anyone in the Club would buy a Skoda Octavia he would support them in serious rallying. I and a chap called Norman Kell did just that. Horace sponsored Norman, I and another chap in the 1961 RAC Rally. I remember that I was No. 169 out of 169 entrants!

That particular RAC was the very first 'special stages' RAC. I really had no idea what that meant but my navigator and I set off and got to the first stage which was in the Kielder Forest. It turned out to be the greatest fun! Somewhere in Scotland I side-swiped a rock and put a big dent in the offside near wing. A little further on I turned down a narrow road which turned out to be a dead end but I lost all the brakes and only managed to stop by squeezing up against a bank. Horace had sent a back-up crew round with us and we found that a split pin had come out of the linkage and managed to get going again.

On the final day we had a long run down the country to the finish at Brighton. That would not have been too bad had my navigator not been taken ill. We didn't want to give up so we carried on, but I remember driving for 36 hours with only one break. That break was at Prescott hill climb and in the paddock Horace had laid on a panel beating crew who beat out the dent in the wing, filled it, rubbed it down and sprayed it in one hour flat! Since the third member of our team had given up early on this was the only publicity that poor old Horace got out of the whole event!. We finished a creditable 56th (I think) rather better than Norman who finished 81st. [*note: actually 71st*]

We both did several trials in our Octavias. On one I managed to roll mine over which rather spoilt the roof. We had the Skoda agent in the back and he thought it was hilarious!”

Norman Kell with 1MHW and Mike Manning with 5MHY pictured on the 1962 MCC Exeter Trial



The Results

10th RAC International Rally of Great Britain, 13th – 18th November 1961, 158 starters, 81 finishers. The three Skodas were entered in Class 2 - 1001 to 1600cc, Touring, which had 44 entries.

1st overall: Erik Carlsson/John Brown (SAAB), 89 marks lost.

3rd overall and 1st in class 2: Peter Harper/Ian Hall (Sunbeam Rapier), 150 marks lost.

56th overall and 22nd in class 2: Mike Manning/Clive Edwards #169 Skoda Octavia (5 MHY), 638 marks lost.

71st overall and 24th in class 2: Norman Kell/Bram Dunster #135 Skoda (1 MHW), 927 marks lost

Retired (Day 1): Gilbert Best/Geoff Sheppard #92 Skoda Octavia.

In a post event letter to Mr. Kopecny at Skoda in Prague, Horace Gould noted that the retirement was “*due to a faulty crankshaft pulley (this became detached from its driving hub we assess from either faulty assembly or metal fatigue) having run only approximately 100 miles in the Rally.*”

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The Support team

To support the three team cars Horace Gould provided a Skoda service van with two mechanics to follow the rally route. Spares carried included cylinder head, radiator, dynamo, starter, distributor and many other parts, which had been taken from a new car in stock, as they were not available from the Skoda importer. Afterwards, being unused, these were re-assembled to the new car.

The Cars

1961 Skoda Octavias.

Front-engine, rear-wheel drive, two-door saloon.

Independent front suspension, rear swinging half-axles & transverse leaf spring. Drum brakes on all four wheels.

Worm & nut steering, 3.5 turns at full lock. Turning circle 34.77 ft.

Engine: 1089cc water cooled.

Gearbox: 4 forward speeds & reverse, with steering column mounted shift. Syncromesh on 2nd, 3rd & 4th gears.

6.6 gallon fuel tank.

Gross weight (fully loaded) 2844lb.

*Pete Stowe
October 2020*