

AUTOMOBILE CLUB OF GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND

1900 ONE THOUSAND MILE TRIAL

The West Country, 23-25 April

April 1900 marked the first time a competitive motorsport event was seen in the west country when, on the 23rd of that month, St. George's Day, the city of Bristol was host to the 1000-mile round Britain Reliability Trial at the end of its first day. Indeed, this three-week long event really marked the beginning of motorsport in the UK.

Back at the dawn of the 20th century motor cars were rare in Britain, these new vehicles being enjoyed by relatively few, well-off, individuals. And a large part of the populace was not too appreciative of these wealthy joyriders speeding around, kicking up great dustclouds and running down livestock. With usual means of travel and transport then being by either horse or railway, those with established interests in bloodstock or the railways were also concerned that this new form of transport, only legalised four years earlier in 1896, would pose a threat to their investments.

To help the fledgling British motor industry publicly demonstrate that motors were desirable and legitimate vehicles, and not just rich boys' toys, Claude Johnson, Secretary of the Automobile Club (the forerunner of the RAC), conceived a 1000-mile trial over some of the most demanding roads of England and Scotland, with exhibitions of the competing vehicles in the major towns and cities visited en-route. Such an event would not only demonstrate the reliability and performance of the motors, but also allow people, many of whom would not even have seen a car before, a close-up view of these vehicles. The Trial, from London to Edinburgh and back, was scheduled over three weeks from 23rd April to 12th May.

Motoring enthusiasts and the budding motor industry accepted this challenge, 83 entries being received. A mix of trade entries with 'professional' drivers, and private individuals, this encompassed a wide variety of vehicles, petrol and steam powered, from one-person motor tricycles to large family wagonettes, and even a Daimler bus; from voituresses to 12HP giants such as Charles Rolls' Panhard, the fastest car in the country at that time. Looking down the entry list only the name of Peugeot remains unchanged today as a car maker, but other names, such as Benz, Napier, Daimler (one such driven by JD Siddeley), and Wolseley (driven by Herbert Austin) are still familiar. Ernest Pitman, of the Bath publishing family, on a 6HP Daimler was the only entrant from the west-country (although Rolls' family home near Monmouth was only six miles from the county border with Gloucestershire). There was one lady entrant, Mrs. Louise Bazalgette in a 3HP Benz Ideal, while some Frenchmen added a continental flavour.

While the accent may have been on reliability rather than speed, there was after all a maximum legal limit of 12 mph then in force (and the Trial regulations denied drawing any advantage from exceeding this speed, or 8 mph through towns and villages), the overall event did include a number of optional timed tests, such as hillclimbs in the Lake District and Scotland, and a 1-mile speed trial at Welbeck Park in Nottinghamshire - the first outright speed competitions in the UK.

Bristol, however, was just to be the staging post at the end of the first day's 118.5 mile run along the old coaching road (the A4) from London, where the first car departed from Hyde Park Corner at 7 am. After a lunch stop at Marlborough the route led through Calne, Chippenham and down Box Hill. By the time cars reached Bath heavy rain had fallen, making progress over the greasy tramlines and soaked set-paved streets of the town particularly difficult.

*Charles Rolls' Panhard and SF Edge's Napier
having arrived at Bath*



Following a stop in Bath¹ for tea, the route led on through Salford and Keynsham, with cars nominally scheduled to reach Bristol at 6.40 pm, where the inward control was manned by Messrs. CD Edbrooke and TD Willard. The Bristol organising committee² had provided a sting in the tail for the first day however, as before reaching their final stopping place, the Rifle Drill Hall*, competitors had to tackle the stiff climb up Park Street.

First to arrive in Bristol, just after 4pm – over 2½ hours ahead of schedule, was Charles Rolls' Panhard, just one minute ahead of Selwyn Edge driving Edward Kennard's 8hp Napier, with another early arrival being John Scott Montagu in his 12hp Daimler. Many took the hill with ease, in front of large crowds on College Green and Park Street itself, but some of the low-powered single- or twin-cylinder cars just struggled up in first gear, helped by their dismounted passengers pushing at the rear, while a few had to go round by Colston Street and Park Row to avoid the climb.

The Bristol Times & Mirror reporter recorded that *"with so many engines driven by petroleum spirit there was a noticeable odour, but it was not strong enough to be entirely disagreeable. The motors generally seemed to be under splendid control, and the ease with which the steering apparatus worked was generally remarked upon by the spectators."* One vehicle perhaps not so under control had been the Simms 'Motor Wheel', a front-wheel-drive tricycle, steered through the rear wheel, which, having already skidded and overturned on the tramlines in Bath, repeated that exercise in Brislington, and turned up in a *"most dilapidated condition"*, although the driver was unhurt and finished within his time allowance. The cars had to negotiate some road works at the lower end of Queens Road where the Bristol Tramways Company had their lines up, leaving just enough room to get through and park up in the Drill Hall, where Messrs. W Kemp, J Broadrib, and Dr. ED Bernard were in charge. There they could all be viewed by the public between 6.30 and 11pm (admission 2 shillings), although the stragglers, beset by various difficulties, were still arriving until shortly after midnight.

While a few had dropped out en-route, most had eventually arrived safely, and but for the enforced 12 mph average it was reckoned that three times that speed could have easily been achieved by the more powerful cars. The Bristol Times & Mirror noted: *"A trip from London to Bristol in a day demonstrated well the capabilities of motor vehicles to fit between an express train and driving behind relays of good horses."*



Next morning, Tuesday, cars were taken out of the hall, to have the dust of the previous day's run cleaned off, and *"Queens Road, Park Street, and other thoroughfares were full of bustle, the cars were whisking about in all directions"* - the first signs of traffic congestion in the city, perhaps?

Back inside the Hall, the cars were once more on display to the public (noon to 6pm, one shilling; 6pm to 10pm, sixpence, with the proceeds going to the Lord Mayor's Boer War fund) with a good crowd taking the opportunity to inspect them and listen to explanations from the owners and drivers and, in the evening, also listen to the band of Gloucestershire Regiment 'City of Bristol' Battalion.

The exhibition in the Bristol Rifle Drill Hall

On a grey and cold Wednesday morning the cars filed out of the Drill Hall ten minutes before the due start time of 7am for the 92.5-mile run to Birmingham. A large gathering of spectators was on hand to see them off, in order of their arrival on Monday, the route leading up Whiteladies Road, Redland Park Road, Clyde Road, Zetland Road and Gloucester Road to Horfield Barracks and the Bristol outward control. Leaving there at 30 second intervals, they continued via Almondsbury and Thornbury Station (control: Messrs. Stewart Irwin and William

* The rear hall of the Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery was built on the site of the Rifle Drill Hall in 1930.

Sindry) and on to Gloucester, where the first car arrived at the Cattle Market for a 50-minute breakfast halt shortly after 9am.

Commenting on the run from Bristol, Scott-Montagu told the Gloucester Citizen's representative that there had been "a tremendous amount of dust", and that "near Bristol, and passing through Thornbury, the surface of the roads had been very bad and bumpy", but "to the best of his knowledge no horse had been seriously frightened"! As elsewhere, passage of the event had created great interest. The reporter for the Cheltenham Examiner, with little previous experience of motor-cars, had travelled on one of the support vehicles from Bristol, and reflecting on the journey later wrote: "Never in the windings of the road did we pass out of view of sight-seers. At every field-gate, finger-post, and turning were knots of people discussing the 'new-fangled contraptions' passing before them. Many had made preparations for a long stay, bringing camp-stools and lunch with them."



From Gloucester there was a short run to Cheltenham for the lunch stop, with the first car, Rolls' Panhard, arriving at the Lansdown Castle control over 1½ hours ahead of the day's schedule. Cars then proceeded into the centre of Cheltenham, where around 2000 people congregated around the Winter Garden. There the cars were on display for three hours, with Mayor's War Relief Fund profiting from the one shilling admission charged to the public.

The scene outside Cheltenham Winter Garden

At 2.30 preparations began for the onward journey to Birmingham, via Tewkesbury and Worcester. Thirty minutes later the procession of 58 remaining vehicles was led through the Promenade, lined with hundreds of spectators, by one of the Cheltenham organising committee³, Dr. Fernald, on his motor-tricycle, and on to the outward control on the Tewkesbury road.

Three weeks later, having travelled via Birmingham, Manchester, Carlisle, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Leeds, Sheffield and Nottingham, 49 of the original 65 starters arrived back in London to be officially classified as finishers, with private entrant Charles Stuart Rolls in his Panhard receiving the Gold Medal award. Ernest Pitman completed the event with no reported mishaps, and received a Silver Medal. Overall, the event was judged to be a great success, putting motoring and the motor industry on the map in the UK.

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¹ Bath inward control: Messrs. HW Frampton, William Ware. Bath outward control: Messrs. John Wills, WH Davis.

² Bristol Organising Committee: Dr. Stewart Irwin, Dr. Bernard, Messrs. CH Tucker, GL West, C Kenyon Townsend, SG Turner, T Holmes, JH Dunn, RH Tucker, AEG Way, R Howard, CD Dowson, CT Coulsting, CM Trotman, M Ridler, CR Edbrooke, RW Wickham, HJ Spear; Hon. Secretary WM Appleton.

³ Cheltenham Organising Committee: FM Bostock (Secretary), Dr HP Fernald (treasurer), DR Abbott, Messrs. C Wright, W Watts, SB Dix, A Meats, Courteen, Morgan, Clark, F Norman, FJ Bennett, Stephenson Peach. Honorary timekeepers: Dr Abbott, Messrs. W Turner, WW Whittard, EE Bick, T Gordon, W Hughes, GH Rudge, PB Loveridge

*Pete Stowe
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Sources

Autocar, Automotor Journal, Bristol Mercury, Bristol Times & Mirror, Western Daily Press, Gloucester Chronicle, Gloucestershire Echo, Gloucester Citizen, Cheltenham Examiner.

Westcountry Motorsport History

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