

The BRISTOL MOTOR CYCLE CLUB RELIABILITY TRIALS

of

1913 and 1914

The Bristol Motor Cycle Club (later to become the Bristol Motor Cycle & Light Car Club), was founded on 29th November 1911 and quickly began organising competitive events. Its first major event, just five months after its formation, was an open speed hillclimb, for motor-cycles only, at Chew Hill, Chew Magna, in April 1912. During that year the club also ran a number of long-distance trials for its motor-cycling members. The following year they organised what would be their first major trial, and also the first major trial to be held in the Bristol area, a one-day event which included observed sections climbing some of the most demanding roads in the Mendip hills to the south of the city.

19th April 1913

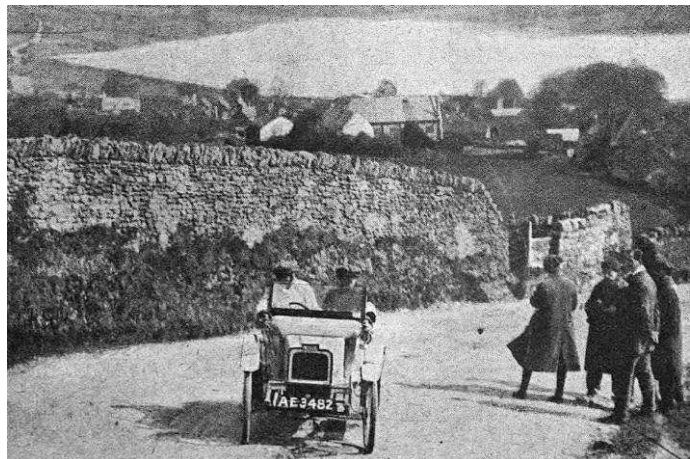
The event was held on Saturday 19th April, run under an Auto Cycle Union open permit, and was one of just twelve events supported that year by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT). It attracted top riders from across the country; in all 75 entries were received, including 14 sidecars, and also four cycle-cars: Henry Morgan's three-wheeled Morgan Runabout, JW Griffiths (7 hp Swift), W Cooper (Humberette) and AV Hartnell (8 hp Arden).

The course was 147.5 miles long, starting and finishing at the Queen's Hotel* in Queen's Road, Clifton, with a lunch stop in Bath. The 70-mile morning section went via Whitchurch, Cheddar, Westbury-sub-Mendip and Wells to Bath, including Dundry, Blagdon and Draycott hills. In the afternoon there were a couple of loops through Keynsham and Bath which took in Weston Lane, Brassknocker Hill, Little Hop Pole Hill (Limpley Stoke), Hassage Hill and Hods Hill, before ending with a sting in the tail at Vale Street in Totterdown, Bristol. To gain a Gold award it was necessary to complete the course non-stop, and also be within five minutes of the time schedule at four secret checks.

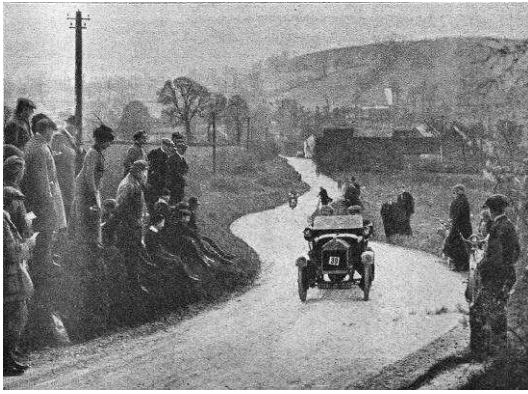
The early morning scene at the start was portrayed by a local reporter: *"The Queen's Hotel, which is the club's headquarters, was the centre of a busy throng of officials, and the quiet of the early hour was being perpetually disturbed by the various noises from different makes of engines of arriving motor-cycles. By seven o'clock the starting place, which was outside the Queen's Hotel, assumed a very business-like aspect, there being at that time quite forty machines present, every one of which had its full complement of all those mysterious items which go to make up the equipment of a motor-cyclist on a long journey bent. The garb of some of the competitors was, to say the least, striking, and in some instances bore a remarkable resemblance to that of a pilot in the early days of aviation."* First to leave the start at 8 am was John Chater Lea on his 8hp Chater Lea and sidecar, with solo riders following 30 seconds apart, and sidecar combinations at two-minute intervals.

Draycott hill in the morning proved to be the undoing of many, over 50% of the field (47) failing to get up at all, and only 14 went clean. Approximately a mile long, on the road between Cheddar and Westbury-sub-Mendip, the section was described: *"The gradient of this is not very great, being about 1 in 6, but the surface was atrocious, strewn with masses of loose flints, in some places about 6 inches deep. As a matter of fact, although a main road, it looked like a dried-up watercourse."*

AV Hartnell in the Arden on Blagdon Hill.



* The Queen's Hotel later became a Debenhams, and then Habitat, store, and is now Beacon House, part of the University of Bristol.



JW Griffiths' Swift on Lansdown Hill

Although in the morning the weather had been dull and threatening, after lunch it turned dry and bright, and the road surfaces were much better. The final hill, Vale Street, included the steepest gradient at 1 in 2.4, and attracted a crowd of around 1000 spectators to see the fun. Morgan in the three-wheeler "came up the hill at a fine pace, but he took the corner too close in. However he just managed to get up, his back wheel spinning round furiously" and Griffiths in the Swift light car climbed over the 1 in 2.4 "as if it wasn't there". While many climbed it successfully some had to be pushed

up, and one or two riders fell off. In all, 23 failed here.

In the evening the results and awards were announced at a smoking concert at the Crown and Dove Hotel in Rupert Street. Three riders won Golds: P Phillips, WB Gibb, and Frank Whitworth, all on Douglas machines. Gibb also won a Cup and 5 guineas for the best performance by a trade entrant, while the trophy for best performance by a private entrant went to TBG Vale (Triumph) along with 15 guineas prize money. The Douglas team of five riders won the trade team prize, with only one stop and a total error of 890 seconds at the secret check. Frank Whitworth (Douglas) made the best performance regarding time at the secret checks on the non-stop section.

Of the light cars JW Griffiths in the Swift gained a Silver medal, completing a non-stop run, but was more than five minutes out on the time-checks, and so missed out on a Gold. Henry Morgan also completed the course, but had stopped on Draycott, as did the Arden. Cooper had universal joint trouble on his Humberette cyclecar, and didn't even reach Draycott.

With the exception of Draycott hill, the trade press considered the course to have been excellent from every point of view.

Awards

Best performance, private owner (Trophy and 15 guineas) – TBG Vale (3½ hp Triumph)
Best performance, trade entrant (Cup and 5 guineas) – W B Gibb (2¾ hp Douglas)
Best solo machine performance, private owner (Cup and 5 guineas) – RW George (2¾ hp Douglas)
Best solo machine not exceeding 350cc, private owner (Cup and 5 guineas) – WJ Milton (2¾ hp Douglas)
Best performance, sidecar, tricar or cycle-car (non-trade) (Cup and 5 guineas) – WH Shaw (5-6 hp AJS & sidecar)
Trade Team Prize (Cup and 5 guineas) – Douglas team
Gold medals – P Phillips (2¾ hp Douglas), W B Gibb (2¾ hp Douglas), FF Whitworth (2¾ hp Douglas)
Also, Silver medals to 28 competitors

Officials - Clerks of the course: Messrs. Davies, Mathews and Kickham; Secretary of the meeting: Philip Grout; Chief marshals: Messrs. Gates and Clark; Starter: Mr Alec Ross; Timekeeper: A. E. Deacon.
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Route

Morning – 70 miles.

From the Queen's Hotel, Clifton, via Whitchurch, Bishopsworth, up Dundry Hill, on to Chew Stoke and Butcombe, up Blagdon Hill, and on to Churchill and Cheddar. Between Cheddar and Westbury-sub-Mendip Draycott Hill was included, this being approximately a mile long, with one portion with a gradient of about one in six, absolutely all loose stones for a distance of about 70 yards, then about a mile and a half of grass track, with some ugly ruts and cross-ditches. Then the road led by comparatively easy stages to Wells, Castle of Comfort Inn, West Harptree, Temple Cloud, Corston, and Bath, where there was a lunch stop, with competitors' machines housed in the Bristol Tramways and Carriage Company's garage near the Midland Station.

Afternoon – 77.5 miles.

The afternoon run was from Bath, up Weston Lane, Bridgegate, Keynsham, Newton St.Loe, Crossways Inn, Wellow, with a nasty hill, Norton St. Philip, Viaduct, up Brass Knocker Hill, Bath (Sydney Gardens), Viaduct, Freshford, up Little Hop Pole Hill, Farleigh, Wellow, Cross Keys Inn, and Hods Hill, then on to Newton St. Loe, Keynsham, Brislington, and Totterdown. Leaving the Bath Road, turning at right-angles up Park Street, Totterdown, then half-way up that street, taking a right angle turn and climbing Vale Street, then to the finish at the Queen's Hotel, Clifton.

18th April 1914

After the success of the 1913 event, the following year another was planned, for Saturday 18th April, again starting and finishing at the Queen's Hotel in Bristol, with a lunch stop in Bath. The route was a similar length of approximately 145 miles, going via Dundry Hill, Wells, Cheddar, Winford, Pensford and Keynsham to the lunch halt in Bath. The afternoon route led via Weston Lane to Lansdown, then to Castle Combe, Old Sodbury, Keynsham, Pensford and on to the infamous Vale Street in Totterdown. A short run then followed via Dundry and Long Ashton to the gates of the Ashton Court estate for a concluding quarter-mile speed test. Observed sections were at Dundry Hill, Ebbor Rocks, Draycott, Stockwood Hill, Vale Street, Dundry Hairpin and Ashton Hill. A 20 mph average schedule had to be maintained, and there was also a ¼ mile slow test at Burrington Combe, and an acceleration test at Lansdown.

The total entry of 55 was down on the previous year (only 47 would actually start), but the number of light cars and cyclecars had increased to nine. This was diminished by one on Friday morning when T West badly damaged his Morgan in a trial attempt on Vale Street. West had a steel-studded tyre on the single rear-wheel and *"in taking the bend back-wheel slip set in, with the result that the machine slid backwards down the 1 in 2.44 portion with the back wheel merrily spinning. Luckily Mr West escaped with a shaking, but the Morgan was too damaged to compete."*

Of the remaining light cars, W Cooper returned with his Humberette, joined by Martin Anderson's similar car. Other newcomers were Willie Douglas in the locally built 10hp Douglas cyclecar, CR Cook (10hp AC), Bill Oates (11hp Lagonda), HC Smith (8hp Ranger), GGC Pigott (10hp Morris Oxford) and an 8hp Morgan entered by Henry Morgan. Differing accounts have the driver of the Morgan as H. Oliver or Mr. Spencer.

Unlike the previous year the weather was perfect, with *"a cool breeze tempering the heat of a somewhat fierce sun."* The morning run of 74 miles got underway at 8 am, and the first observed section at Dundry Hill, *"a series of bad bends with a poor surface,"* caused few problems, although the Morris Oxford stopped half-way up. At Burrington Combe the AC, Lagonda and Douglas managed to do well under 5 mph in the ¼ mile, slightly up hill, slow-running test. Next came a new hill at Ebbor Rocks – extremely twisty, with *"cart ruts a foot deep in places"*, and *"patches of large unrolled loose stones"*. Although very difficult, of the light cars, again only Pigott's Morris Oxford failed here.

Draycott, the bane of so many in 1913 with its *"indescribably rough surface"*, although better than previously, was *"still in places nothing but loose stones"*, and again stopped many riders. The two Humberettes, the AC, and the Morgan, all made successful climbs, but Bill Oates' Lagonda *"failed with spinning back wheels, but much power in hand"*. The Douglas and the Morris Oxford were also brought to a standstill, and the Ranger shed a driving chain.

The route was quite convoluted, with one stretch of road being covered three times, and although the way had been carefully arrowed, several competitors went off course on the run to Bath for the lunch halt. Among these was Cooper in his Humberette, who fell so far behind time that he officially retired. He did though appear again later in the afternoon to attempt the Vale Street test.

The afternoon run of 71 miles began with an acceleration test on Lansdown, the Morgan being the quickest of the light cars. Vale Street once again attracted a large crowd of spectators, and again caused problems for many, with 13 failures. Cooper, re-appearing in his Humberette, and having failed it last year, this time made *"a brilliant ascent"*. Anderson in the other Humberette, Oates' Lagonda and the Morgan, which had by now lost both front mudguards, also climbed very well. Cook in the AC also completed the climb, albeit with some wheelspin, but both the Douglas and the Ranger failed. The Morris Oxford had retired earlier in the afternoon.



Martin Anderson's Humberette on Vale Street

The final observed hills followed, at Dundry Hairpin, where *“the surface more resembled a ploughed field than a highway”*, and Ashton Hill, before the finale, a speed test in the grounds of Ashton Court. The ¼ mile course began with a flying start at the estate gates, and at the end there was a deceptive left-hand curve which took some negotiating at speed. Fastest of the cars was the Morgan, albeit not without drama, being unable to keep to the road at the bend and running *“for about a furlong [220 yards] or so along rough grass land, including the crossing of a ditch”*.

Overall, there had been 17 non-stop runs, including two of the cars, Cook in the AC and Anderson's Humberette. The Morgan, after getting through non-stop to within half a mile of the finish, then lost ten marks through having to stop and change a sooted plug.

In addition to performances on the observed hills and tests, and keeping to the time schedule, the intricate marking system also took into account efficient silencing, and the cleanliness and condition of the machines at the finish. The Douglas gained full marks for condition, but no machines gained full marks for silence! 100 points were needed to gain a 2nd Class (bronze) award, and 130 for a 1st Class (silver), with gold medals for the best in each class who had qualified for a silver. When the awards were worked out at the Queen's Hotel, the best performance overall was by Hugh Gibson on a solo 2½ hp Clyno with 146 points, receiving the Philip Grout Silver cup along with his gold medal. Best of the light cars was the Morgan, on 129 – just missing out on a gold medal owing to the last minute plug fouling - while Bill Oates in the Lagonda (103 points) and Willie Douglas (100 points) also won bronze.

While the club was congratulated on a successful event, there was some dissatisfaction over the roughness of some of the hills, with some competitors complaining of new tyres being absolutely ruined.

Awards

Best performance (Philip Grout Silver cup and gold medal) – Hugh Gibson (2½ Clyno) – 146 marks
Best performance, private owner (Douglas Brothers Silver cup and silver medal) – EH Littledale (Ariel)
Best solo performance (Rudge Whitworth Silver cup and silver medal) – A Gilby (3½ Sunbeam)
Best performance by a private owner with passenger machine (BSA Co. special prize and gold medal) – RE Guest (7 hp Matchless and sidecar)
Gold medals – HG Dixon (3½ hp James), WB Gibb (2¾ Douglas), Frank Smith (5-6 Clyno and sidecar), HA Pritchard (4hp BSA and sidecar)
Also, Silver medals to 2 competitors, and Bronze medals to 11 competitors, including H Oliver (8 hp Morgan cyclecar), WH Oates (11hp Lagonda) and WW Douglas (10hp Douglas cyclecar).

Officials - Clerks of the course: F. J. Cox, P. Mathews and J. King; Secretary of the meeting: Rev. P. W. Bischoff; Chief marshal: Mr J. Cates; Starter: Mr Alec Ross; Timekeepers: F. T. Bidlake (RAC and ACU), A. E. Deacon (RAC and ACU), and S. V. Vincent (Bath MCC).
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In the morning competitors were guided out through the city by about 20 lads from the 1 st Bristol Cadet Battalion at road junctions indicating the way with arrows, another 30 performed the same task in the afternoon.
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Route

Morning 74 miles.

Queens Hotel, Bedminster, Bishopsworth, and up Dundry Hill (observed hill). On joining main road, follow to Langford railway level crossing, and turn to Burrington Combe for a slow test (quarter mile). Then to Wells and Cheddar, up Ebbor Rocks (observed hill), down long winding hill to Rodney Stoke, and then up Draycott Hill (observed hill); beyond hill turn and descend Cheddar Gorge, thence to Shipham Gorge, Barrow Reservoirs, Winford, Chew Magna, Pensford Hill, Publow Hill, Keynsham, and to Bath for the lunch stop.

Afternoon 71 miles.

From Bath, along Weston Lane and Lansdown Lane for the acceleration test; then Lansdown Hill (observed hill), Toghill, and Marshfield, Ford, Castle Combe, Old Sodbury, Toghill Cross Roads, Bridgegate, Keynsham, Stockwood Hill (observed hill), Whitchurch, Pensford, Chew Magna, on to Bath road, Bristol; then up Park Street and Vale Street (observed hill), back to Whitchurch and Bishopsworth, and up Dundry hairpin (observed hill). After Winford, Long Ashton, Ashton Hill (observed hill), to Ashton Court gates, the (flying) start of the quarter-mile speed test. Then to the finish at the Queen's Hotel, Clifton

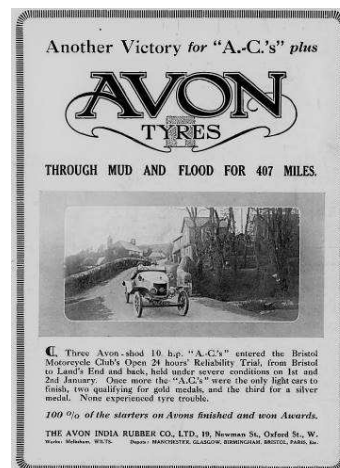
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While it might have been expected that the April trial would now become established as an annual event, the declaration of war in July 1914 ended any such hopes. It wasn't, however, the final Open trial for the Bristol club before the country was totally engulfed by the war. At the end of November an 18-hour long distance trial was run over Exmoor and Dartmoor. At 9 pm on Friday 27th November twenty-three competitors, including three light cars, set off from Bristol en-route for Porlock, Barnstaple, Launceston, Tavistock, Exeter, Dorchester, Shaftesbury, Bath, and then back to Bristol. After 320 miles of rain, mud, hills and fog the first to arrive at the finish was the 10hp sporting AC of A Ludlow Clayton. Just two minutes over his due time, Clayton gained a silver medal, bettered only by the solo 3½ hp Brough motorcycle of George Brough who won gold. Of the two other light cars, Douglas Hawkes (8 hp Victor) lost the way and went off route in Devon, and C Hooper's 10hp Douglas retired with a broken radius rod.

Although the SMMT now disapproved of competitions taking place, the Club went ahead with an even longer Open trial in the new year. Club Captain Frank Wasley arranged a 24-hour, 407-mile, event from Bristol to Lands End via Exeter and Bodmin, and then, after a 1½ hour halt, back to Bristol via Tavistock and Ashburton. Twenty-five competitors, including eight cyclecars and light cars, left Bristol at 6 pm on New Year's Day. With some extremely bad roads and very rough weather including sleet showers on the return leg, conditions favoured the four-wheelers, although TT motor-cyclist Eddie Kickham achieved a gold medal, arriving at each check within the five-minute time allowance. Among the cars, only the trio of 10hp ACs successfully completed the event, PHA (Philip) Matthews and F Cox both winning gold medals, while M King, having been delayed by an HT wire failure, was awarded a silver. C Hooper's Douglas again broke a radius rod, putting the rear brakes out of action and it then collided with Douglas Hawkes' Victor. Hawkes managed to reach Lands End, but failed to arrive in Tavistock on the return leg. The GN of G Finch was very late at Lands End, having got lost at Penzance, while both Morgans retired in Cornwall, P Stone with tyre trouble, and RS Wreford-Brown with a broken chain.



Although that was the final Open event run by the Bristol club, further members' events were organised during the first half of 1915 before operations were suspended for the duration of the war, and the club was not revived until April 1919.

Sources

Results, routes and other event details obtained from The Cyclecar, The Light Car, The Light Car & Cyclecar, The Auto Motor Journal, Motor Cycling, Western Daily Press, Wells Journal, Clifton Society, and Bristol Times & Mirror reports.

Pete Stowe
February 2021

Westcountry Motorsport History

Website <https://bpmc.org.uk/petestowe/wmh.htm>

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