

ABOSPEED'S FRENCH FORAY.

As normal, preparations for our annual trip to Le Touquet commenced about a fortnight before we were due to leave for the ferry. But this time there was an added complication. Not only was the car not ready nor the van checked and packed but I didn't have any seats because they were away for recertification and hadn't found their way home yet nor did I have a navigator to put into one of them. Of the guys that normally have a go at trying to keep me on the straight and narrow, Alan Ross had decided to book himself on a falling-down-the-side-of-a-snowy-mountain-on-a-pair-of-sticks holiday on the same weekend as the rally. Andy Bull was committed to an exhibition with his work. Tom Hynd couldn't get time from his work due to others being on holiday at the same time. There seemed to be a trend going here. My friend in Pas de Calais, Pascal, had offered to navigate a while back if I couldn't find anyone from this locale but when I contacted him he had just been promoted at work and his shift duties would not allow him to get the required time off. A shame really because doing a 3 day tarmac event completely on French pace notes would have been a challenge. And we did have a bit of history : we completed 3 stages of a gravel rally in Auxerre which resulted in me being banned from entering Chablis territory for 3 years, but that's another story.....

Now getting a little bit panicky, there being less than 5 days left until we had to get all the kit down to Rosyth for the ferry, Tom put the word out on the UK rally forums and Pascal did the same across the water. Next day I got a call from a young Yorkshire lad, Michael Calvert, keen to do the event. He had all the right qualifications : Nat A licence, full HANS kit (obligatory in France this year), available holiday allowance, a reasonable grasp of French and a complete ignorance of my reputation. Brief pleasantries were exchanged and travel plans agreed and the deal was done.

So, as is customary, we got the car finished and the van loaded late into the evening prior to our departure date. The journey itself and the settling in to the gîte we hire for the week was uneventful, having done it 14 times before (our first Le Touquet was in 1994). Due to various circumstances only my mum (camp boss), her neighbour and friend Avril (assistant camp boss) and myself went over in the first wave. This worked quite well because it gave me a chance to get the DVD of the stages from the organisers and set about finding my existing pace notes for familiar stages and writing initial notes for any new ones. This would prove quite crucial because Michael was only going to be able to get

over there on the Wednesday, half way through the first day of the 2 day recce period so we would not have time for anything other than just getting out there and checking the notes. Fortunately about 75% of the stages were ones that I knew well, probably well enough to be able to drive them without any notes. Memo to self - don't tell Michael that, for some reason navigators don't like to hear that sort of thing from their driver ! When I picked up the DVD from the rally office I had explained my predicament to the organisers and asked them if they would allow me to recce alone in the morning. I could see the C of C trying to work out how I was going to read notes and drive before he agreed that that would be okay.

I picked the 3 stages that I knew intimately to run round solo on the Wednesday morning and met the incoming crew at the Autoroute toll beside Le Touquet around 2 pm. There wasn't a lot of time for niceties and Michael was thrown in at the deep end as we went straight out to start checking the rest of the stages we were allowed to do that day. Six of the stages were going to be run at night so we quickly ran round them once in daylight, grabbed a bite to eat and then went back to see how many we could get through in the dark before time was up.

My loyal and faithful team had not mentioned to Michael about my track record with recce cars, probably more through forgetfulness than respect for their driver, but I thank them for the oversight nonetheless. I hire a car in France for recce for 2 reasons. Firstly, since my car is LHD it gets me into synch with the controls, better idea of lines of sight etc. Secondly, I have this knack of breaking them. Usually it's nothing that some T-cut, glue or ti-wraps wont sort but it can go very badly wrong : as far as total write off. In a sort of proud way I'm glad to say I maintained my 100% record. Crest, 50, turn 90 left onto main road just wasn't going to happen once the ABS activated. There was a small, shallow ditch bordering the field we were aiming for which I didn't want to get stuck in so I just had to power into the field. Fortunately it was quite smooth once we had got over the bump into it and managed to drive round and find a suitable exit point. It was like déjà vu all over again. Experience told me that when I got back onto the tar I should go out for a look to see what was missing and / or what was running out from underneath. They make Mito's quite strong down at the old Alfa factory. Remarkably all the plastic was still there, all the lights were still there and all the fluids remained inside their relevant housings - result. I would have some digging of mud out from the front spoiler / air scoop and 20 minutes

with a bucket & sponge but I could live with that. I think I am now into double figures with the number of accidents I've had due to ABS thinking it can slow down a car quicker than I can. Very annoyingly most of them weren't even a problem until the ABS kicked in and stopped decelerating the car. The man who owns the hire car office is the president of the local classic car club and is well aware of what I use his cars for but he still seems happy to see me each year, I've never really figured that one out.

10 pm arrived, time to call it a night and head for "home" and some well earned food and a beer. We still had the notes to sort out for Thursday's recce but they were relatively straightforward. It was still nearly 2 am before we got some shut eye. Fortunately Mum is an early riser and the smell of baguette and bacon at 7 am did the trick better than any alarm clock. A quick breakfast and we were out at the first stage for it opening at 8. There were only three stages to recce, one of them I knew well and we only needed to do 2 of the 3 allowable passes on it to agree that the notes were fine. The other 2 stages were very close together and we managed the full 3 runs through them both in a couple of hours. So we made it back to the house in time for lunch. After we'd eaten, the service crew, Andy Tong, Gary Campbell, Pete Stark and myself went out to the garage to put the final touches to the car in preparation for scrutineering and left Michael to start writing up his notes. Up until this point I had not had my normal enthusiasm for the event. Because of the lack of preparation time and the uncertainty of having a navigator I had resigned myself to the possibility that I might not make the start line and to cushion that blow I had tried not to get overly hyped up, even although this was the rally's 50th anniversary and a lot of local people were expecting me to be there as well as the organisers. But now all that was forgotten and we had a show to put on.

The most stressful time on a French rally (other than arguing with stewards & officials about the legality of sandals) is documentation and scrutineering. I have yet to go to a French event and find signing on where it says it'll be in the regs. The local competitors have no problem getting there, it must be some kind of Gallic "force". Then, when you do manage to find the right place the French bureaucracy machine kicks in. "Administration" (from entering the signing on room to pre-event parc ferme) is run on a time card. You clock in on your given documentation arrival time, have a passage time for paperwork, road time to scrutineering, and entry time to the holding park. Correct documentation is paramount going through signing on, right down

to all the photocopies of the relevant items. Having survived that ordeal, scrutineering isn't any easier. The actual car is of very little interest to a French scroot. Certificates & labels, that's their forte. Car homologation, cage homologation, log book, helmet, overalls, gloves, HANS, socks, seats, harnesses, extinguisher bi-annual certification. There's no time left to check that the car is actually bolted together properly. Once I got pulled up on the 4 branch exhaust manifold until I explained to them that they had passed it on the previous 8 times it had been presented to them and every other Gp A 205 was running the same manifold. After a little huddled discussion of the assembled scrutineers I just got my homologation papers handed back to me, a "verified" sticker applied to the driver's door and ushered from the premises. This time I had a very easy passage through scrutineering. I reckon it was because of my secret weapon. Originally, when I thought that my friend Pascal was going to be navigating, I had bought small flags for the side of the car, the ones on a stick that you jam in your back door windows. A Saltire and a Tricolour. That I was entering into the spirit of their 50th anniversary event possibly gave me an easier time than usual.

The event ran over three days : Friday night, a full Saturday and Sunday morning. A 2.5km single venue style super special round the beach promenade car parks started off the proceedings, first car at 1900. We were seeded 108 so it was going to be close to 9 o'clock before we got our go. "Seeded" is possibly a bit of a misnomer : with the exception of the top 20 or so all the entries are graded by vehicle spec rather than driver talent or previous results. So A8s lead A7s then N4s will mix with A6s followed by N3s etc down to the lowly 1300 cars. So despite finishing in the high 40s to high 50s in every running of the Le Touquet that I've finished I've never had a "seeding" under 100. There isn't even a section on the entry form to put in previous results. It certainly prevents organisers getting grief from competitors about their start number !

The car park surface is horrendously rough with some huge pot holes that are half-heartedly filled in the day before the event by French local council workers - I think you get the picture. 10 cars in to the stage and all the in-fill is now uniformly redistributed across the whole track. The potential for severe tyre / suspension / steering damage is high so I treat it with the contempt it deserves. If the organisers had the foresight to figure in a 5 - 10 minute service after that stage then you would give it a bit of a go,

knowing that if you did puncture then you would be able to fit fresh tyres to go out on the main loop of stages. But every running of the super special was immediately after service and followed by at least three proper stages out in the countryside. And any servicing outside the service park carried the penalty of instant exclusion from the rally.

The first proper stage ran on roads I knew well but was a patchwork quilt of three different stages from previous years. Consequently during the recce poor Michael had to try and join together 6 or 7 different sections of previous notes from 4 different pace note books. But it gave us a good "bedding in" stage. He knew that I knew the stage so I didn't have to hang on his every instruction and he could get a feel for the pace of the 205 (he usually sits in more rapid 4WD machinery) and my driving "style" - before any of you get any comments in ! The stage was very wet and we did have one or two moments early on until I got a better feel for the grip available but the rest of the stage went well and we nearly caught the car in front by the end of the stage.

The rain continued into stage 3 but again it was one that I knew well. Until, that was, we came up to what was usually a wee slot round a triangle in a village. The triangle was there last year and it was there on the recce DVD supplied by the organisers but on the night, in the dark there were a couple of bales across the entrance. We had lost a second or two slowing for the slot left into the non existent road but no great shakes. The rest of the stage went well and Michael and I had got into a good rhythm. Again we nearly caught the 106 that had gone in ahead of us.

Stage 4 was the last of the leg, a classic Le Touquet stage with a slightly different start from usual for about 1 km. This is one of my favourite stages of the event but it is normally run in daylight. This would be its first night running for quite a few years. It has a bit of everything : tight, twisty, technical single track roads, fast flowing single tracks that get a bit slippery in the rain and you have to know which bits have some grip and the others where there is next to none and some long, fast bits of B class road where you can get it really wound up and practise your braking distances and bravery. It also has a severe jump in the village where my friend Pascal lives, right at the front door of his dad's house : a real recipe for disaster because you're always tempted to put on a bit more of a show than common sense would dictate because of the audience. Running in this direction is harder because where you land off the jump is right on the crest of the main road,

running perpendicular to the rally route and if you get it wrong you're probably going to put the engine and box through the bonnet. Run the other way is fine, the main road acts as a pre-launch ramp for the main jump at the bridge and can be taken flat if you remember to take your brave pills at the start line.

I was happy with a fine, steady run without any major dramas for the first leg and was even happier to get the car into parc ferme so we could get back to the gîte for some well earned food and some kip. A quick check of the on-line results showed we had gained 40 places during the night from our start number of 108 and allowed us to have a good idea of our start time in the morning and hence the time to set alarms for to get some breakfast in.

I'm convinced that at least one of the organisers at some point in years gone by stood on a spider as a black cat ran across his path forcing him to pass under a ladder and knock a mirror over in the process because the weather is never kind to the rally weekend. This year was typical : lovely clear skies and we even had 20° showing on the thermometer one afternoon during the week and then, come Friday afternoon the clouds start rolling in and the temperature starts dropping. Saturday started off dry but the forecast was for increasing rain during the day so we decided on inters all round for the first leg of the day. It was a good enough choice because when we got out to the first stage the surface itself was dry but because of the amount of rain that had fallen during the night all the big cars that were cutting the corners were dragging very wet mud out of the verges and onto the road which meant that you really had no choice but to follow their lines, when you could see in advance where the corner went. One such corner caught me out early on in the first stage of the morning. I followed the line through but there was a bit more mud than I thought and it was a lot slipperier than I gave it credit for and we had a nice big slide to play with. Just as I got it all back together again the next note was " crest at the sign, braking over 100 to downhill 90 right ". Ever the hero, I left the braking too late and the back end broke away sending us spinning round the corner, now running backwards down the far verge, rattling along the hedge. Watching through my door mirror I managed to get it back onto the road, fire the engine back up and a couple of shunts got us heading back off down the stage. One nice chap managed to capture all this for posterity on video and that can be found at http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xcqkij_auto or you put in " Touquet 2010 crash " in the

Dailymotion search window. The French use that site in preference to Youtube. I gave the car a wee shake going along the road to check that all the bits were still on it and, happy enough, carried on apace. There was a fair bit of the next few kilometres that became very slippery when wet but with a bit of care we got through them without issue. A little further on there was a ford to negotiate. I had got out of the car on the recce to give it a good look over because last year there was no water in it prior to the event but when we got to it for real they had opened the flood gates and there was a good foot of water in it, which you only saw about a car's length from the drop into it! The 205 engine bay has been made very water tight, we've never had a drowning in 19 years of competing in it so the ford was attacked with maximum prejudice. 50 feet beyond it there's a crossroads left, 100, hairpin right, 100, hairpin right and then back down to the crossroads for another 90 left onto the main road again. It's a lovely wee section, all the sweeter when you get it absolutely perfect, a real crowd pleaser. There's always a bunch of spectators right at the ford with their slicker suits on and, very peculiarly, cameras. After a mile or so of very fast sweeping 2 lane road the stage turns onto twisty single track for another mile before finishing off with a mile of gravel road which can get very interesting on tarmac tyres. A quick survey of the car after the stage revealed mostly cosmetic damage, and a couple of wheels filled with mud which would explain the bad juddering on the high speed bits. A bit of twig from the verge aided in the removal of the offending wheel balance intrusion and we carried on to stage 6.

This was a new stage last year so I was not too familiar with it but the notes were working well and things were fine until a small crest that I hadn't picked up on during the recce which had a T left onto the main road just after it. I immediately recognised it as the same place we had planted the recce car in the field but, even though we were going considerably faster than during the recce I didn't have the hindrance of ABS to not slow me down and I managed to pull up before reaching the actual field and one quick shunt and we were on our way again. Later in this stage is a mile and a half section I call the Charterhall Road : it's very twisty, very, very rough and the verges are very soft so the big cars drag heaps of mud onto the tar and it becomes incredibly slippery. This year was no different and it was a real struggle just trying to keep the car out of the fields. It was obvious by the multitude of interesting tyre tracks that many competitors hadn't managed to be quite so fortunate. There were no stranded cars but a lot of them must have had an interesting ride down that road. The

last 2 miles of this stage is a gravel road, reasonably straight for the main part but it has a couple of jumps along it and there were a lot of spectators there last year, hoping for a bit of excitement. This year was no different and that always tends to prevent you from erring on the side of caution, even at the end of the section where it gets a bit narrower and twistier, but if you keep on the clean line there is grip to be found.

At the following service halt in Le Touquet the guys spotted an oil leak. Investigation revealed it to be gear oil, seemingly coming from the bell housing. We didn't have time at this service to do too much about it and decided that if we got back to the next service without any other problems we would pull the box and investigate further. Hopefully it was just the input seal and there is a spare one of those carried in the van. Once the box is out it's 2 minutes to change it. Nothing else seemed to require any attention so we just spanner checked and made sure the tyres were fine for another loop of the stages. It would appear that we had got off reasonably lightly with our indiscretions of the morning.

Leaving service we then had another toodle around the super special which, by now, was getting incredibly rough and pot-holed before going back out to the countryside for a loop of 3 stages. The first of those was the longest in the rally at 27 km. A classic Le Touquet stage and one of my favourites. Well 2 of my favourites actually because they had linked up 2 usual stages to make up one long one and with the exception of the kilometre or so of link road I had driven the remainder many times. About 3 km into the stage the route goes downhill into a village and just after a blind left hand bend you turn 90 left into a wee gravel triangle through a farmyard and back out onto the road again. To get it just right you need a tweak of the handbrake as you come out of the left hander to line you up for the gravel bit. And that's exactly what I did, only to be confronted by barrier tape blocking off the gravel road. Once again in between making the DVD of the stages and the setting up the stages the route had been changed and our lack of time to go through the road book prior to the event had bitten us on the arse again. As it turned out it was a fortuitous oversight because the chicane that was just 50 metres beyond the farm road gave us our next issue. Despite arriving at the chicane a lot slower than what we would have done without the impromptu tea break the car under steered badly on the way out and we gave the last bale a hefty thump, enough to knock it over! I knew I'd damaged the L/H corner

of the car but the bonnet didn't look too badly bent so I hoped that the radiator and wiring had survived. About ½ a mile further on the engine started to draw up. I quickly diagnosed that the likely candidate was the electric fuel pump : the shunt must have damaged a wire or blown the fuse. We were in a bad place, half way round a tightening 60 right, invisible to following cars. And we had lost 15 seconds or so fumbling around at the chicane and another 10 to 15 coasting round this corner. I kept pumping the throttle to burn the last of the fuel out of the Webers and get as far off the road as possible. I presumed that the wiring fault must lie in the damaged corner so that is where I started working whilst Michael went back round the corner to warn the following cars. Fiddling with the wiring brought the cooling fan on so I was sure the pump fault must lie around there as well until I realised that it was wired through the ignition. I went to the auxiliary fuse box but couldn't remember how or where I'd routed the wiring. The only thing I was sure of was that the wires dropped down through the boot floor into the waterproof housing for the pump so I went to check the back end and work forward from there. Eureka, the sudden shunt had dislodged the block connector for the pump - pushing it back together again had the desired result of a clicking sound under the floor. There was now a marshal on the outside of the corner with a yellow flag, warning the oncoming cars and I managed to get his attention and he, in turn, signalled to Michael to look back (he was still walking away with the warning triangle since we now thought that our rally had come to a close) and I waved to him to get back in.

Once we'd got belted back up and ready to go I noticed the marshal waving his flag furiously so I reckoned there must be a car approaching so I got ready to tuck in right behind it as it passed. That was the fourth car to pass whilst we were stationary - that was going to make a dent in our overall position. It was a Suzuki super 1600 that passed us so I hoped to hang onto his tail for a wee while and that would get me back into the swing again since I was now both flustered and annoyed. That plan didn't work too well because within a mile we had reeled him in and he had to ease over to let us past ! At least he did it where there were plenty of spectators who proceeded to show their appreciation. The next couple of miles of this stage has locations where I have visited the scenery on the odd occasion so I had to concentrate to make sure I didn't give the Suzuki the opportunity to get back past. His extra power allowed him to close a bit on the straights but he was shit at braking and cornering so we managed to eke out a lead as the stage went on but he was never too far away we were less than ¼ mile

apart by the flying finish after another 15 km or so. In some of the twistier bits of the stage I had felt the brakes starting to fade but they came back by the finish of the stage. It's safe to say that I certainly broke sweat through that stage but it was really good fun, car, driver & navigator completely in tune.

The next 2 stages were a repeat of the first two of the day. I actually paid heed to Michael's call of "braking over 100 for 90 right" this time to avoid a repeat of our spin in the morning - the reason for the note being there in the first place. Our second dooking through the ford didn't go quite so smoothly because the car jumped out of gear on the 90 left after it and that upset my rhythm for the following 2 or 3 corners. Towards the end of the stage I felt the clutch starting to slip so I just eased off the power a little to make sure we got out of the stage and could effect a temporary repair for the last one before our next service. There just happened to be a handy can of solvent cleaner sitting on a pavement on the next road section which I picked up and whilst waiting in the queue for the next stage I set about emptying it into the bell housing to try and get rid of as much of the oil on the clutch as possible to give us a chance of making it to service. I had already spoken to the service crew and got them fired up to prepare for a full gearbox and clutch change when we got back to the service park. The flushing of the bell housing had done the trick and the clutch had some bite back again. Even so, I knew it wasn't going to last forever so again I didn't try to push the clutch to the limit through the stage and we emerged out the other end without any dramas. There was a regroup in Le Touquet prior to going into service and while we were hanging about waiting for our exit time we got talking to some of the other competitors. I found a sort of French version of me. Wiry hair, bearded and just enjoying the hell out of rallying. He was keen to show me his car so I wandered over with him and was pleasantly surprised to see that it was as unusual as he was. It was a 309 GTi, nothing particularly strange in that except that it was in full gravel trim, right down to the ride height and knobbles ! Since the event I've checked out Youtube & Dailymotion for videos of the event and he features on several of them, driving in a very Roy Maclennan style. Oh, did I mention that he had already rolled the 309 earlier on that morning ? His service crew had gone to a local scrappy and procured a new windscreen and they were going to be fitting it at service. It was quite refreshing to meet a French crew with that attitude. Normally all they have to is slide off onto a smooth verge to give up, jump out the car, gesticulate and shrug shoulders a lot, shout at

any spectators or marshals in the vicinity and sit on the bank in a huff. But here was someone with a more British attitude to his rallying : if it still goes, drive the nuts off it.

To help the guys at service I had started taking what bits I could off the car whilst waiting in the line for the regroup. Air box, battery clamp, splash guards, speedo cable etc. We were going to be a bit tight for time because it normally takes us about 30 minutes to do a full change but there was a bit of body damage that would hinder access to a couple of bolts and there was only half of the usual crew there. Pete had never been near a Peugeot box change before. But everything was laid out across our pitch that we would need so as soon as the car came to rest they got after it. Knowing exactly what was required for the job I just hovered about passing the relevant person the relevant tool or part as it was required until the box and clutch lay on the deck. The clutch was fine, just covered in oil so Gary set about washing it with petrol and throwing it back on. The box, on the other hand, had a big crack around the diff housing so it definitely wasn't going back in. The Group A mounting was changed over to the spare box and they set about putting it back whilst I dug out the other driveshafts that were needed for it. We were getting desperately close to our 40 minute time limit and we had the lamp pod to put on because the last couple of stages would be done in the dark so there were a few, non vital, parts left off and we jumped back into the car and made a hasty-ish dash for the time control. We had dropped a few minutes but checking the results at the end of the day we didn't get any penalties for them. In the 15 years or so that I've been doing foreign events I have yet to work out what latenesses you are allowed, penalty free or otherwise. I just work on the principle that if you needed to drop time to get vital work done then you take any penalty you receive and if you run out of allowable time somebody will stand in front of you and shake a finger at you. Other than that you just keep driving.

The last leg of the day comprised of the super special and then a re-run of all three stages of the last loop. The first one of those was the long one, where we had had our fuel pump problem first time through. As we sat on the start line we looked at the sky - it was jet black over in the direction that we were headed. We had a few spots of rain for the first couple of miles and I managed to negotiate the offending chicane from the morning run without any problem and as we

carried on the road got wetter and wetter. We had run all day on soft intermediates, absolutely the right tyre up to this point and even now there wasn't enough standing water to give them any trouble. Until about half way into the stage. Within the space of 2 miles it went from a few spots of rain to complete and utter monsoon, worse than any Hollywood stunt rain you've ever seen. Double speed wipers weren't even making an impression on the screen and the road surface was completely awash with clay laden water. Half throttle in third gear was easily enough to induce wheel spin and braking was just a lottery. At some points the road was exactly the same colour as the fields next to it and you could only figure out where to go by the grass verge peeking out through the water. On downhill stretches you were racing the water down to the next corner. And then it got worse ! The density of the rain dropped the visibility down to about 100 yards, the water was running out of field entrances and side roads in torrents and trying to find grip was just a joke. The water displaced by the front wheels was coming over the front of the car, clearing the lamp pod and getting blown back onto the windscreen and it was opaque brown in colour, further hampering visibility. Then, a mile or so from the end of the stage, unbelievably, it got even worse ! What we really needed was a Brantz calibrated in knots, change the steering wheel for a tiller and swap the front wheel for rudders. Hand out the fish costumes and an extra ration of rum for the men.

4 miles down the road, at the next stage start, there was no rain. This time through the ford wasn't very good. One of the bits that hadn't made it back onto the car after the box change was the splash guards for the engine bay and the amount and force of the water from the now swollen ford got its way all the way up to the ignition. We coughed and spluttered our way for the next 100 yards or so until it cleared enough to carry on. The engine misfired another few times through the stage but by the time we got to the end it seemed to have cleared itself but I decided just to keep the engine running for the rest of the leg so as not to give it a chance to cool down and start condensing water around the ignition. Unfortunately the last stage of the day had been held up by an accident and there were about 15 cars ahead of us waiting for it to be cleared before they could start so I had no option but to switch it off. The start was on quite a steep hill so I reckoned that if it was reluctant to start there would be enough of a slope to get it bump started if need be. As it turned out an Escort Cosworth had made an awfully bad mess of itself in the narrow gravel section just at the end of the stage and the road was blocked. They were trying to

get it moved to the side enough to let cars pass but there was an added complication of the fire and Gendarme services being involved as well. After about half an hour we were told that the stage would be run non-competitively and we would be going through on minute intervals at reduced speed, they call it a liaison passage. In a way that turned out to be quite fortuitous because as we were about half way through the HID lamp pod decided it had had enough rain for one day and all 4 bulbs promptly extinguished, leaving me with one working headlight. That would have been quite an exciting moment if we had been at speed. I tried switching them off for a minute or so to reset them but that didn't work and I tried leaving them switched on but that didn't work either. Once again I was very happy to see the parc ferme after what had been a very trying day. And I could definitely hear a plate of hot food and a cold beer calling my name from the house.

Sunday morning parc ferme. From cold, pump the throttle 2 or 3 times and turn the key and it starts. Has done every time for the last 19 years. Except this morning. Another couple of pumps, turn the key - nothing. That's the lowest my heart has sunk on a rally for as long as I can remember. Third time lucky? Our survey said I sat and thought for a minute : the amount of water we went through on the Saturday must have finally got into the ignition. I wasn't sure how because there is a waterproof cover over the distributor which has never let us down before and the coil is open to the air and fitted to the engine so even if you switch it off damp it dries out as the engine cools. And the plug leads themselves are a watertight seal in the head. But it was most definitely an ignition problem. I was going to have to try and dry it out to get the engine started. In case you didn't know it is not permitted to work on the car in parc ferme. But the marshal was busy ushering the queue at the exit hut and was sufficiently far away from us to allow me to have a quick go under the bonnet. We picked our moment to whip the bonnet up and I got the snot rag working frantically around the coil and leads, pulled back the distributor cap cover and went round those leads and pulled each of the plug caps off for a check. Everything was dry which was not a good sign. The cap is screwed on and apart from not having time to get it off to check inside I didn't have the right length of screwdriver required for the job in the car. And the marshal was now beating a hasty path in our direction. Unfortunately his English was good enough to inform me of what I already knew and we had to shut the bonnet. I got a hold of Andy on the radio before we started pushing so that he would be ready for us when we got out of the control.

Another couple of willing bodies gave us a hand to get the car along to the exit control and shove us out onto the street.

Towing the car away from the control would not have been a good idea : external assistance and all that. But if he pushed us then we could say that he was just following us very, very closely ! The engine was still dead and refused to even give a hint that it might suddenly burst into life so we got shoved to the service in control, or at least as close as was possible without being too blatant. Unfortunately it was uphill for the last 20 or 30 yards and Michael and I had to push it up to the control box. I am definitely too old for that shit. Never mind the car, I thought I was going to expire before we got to service : I could hear the countdown to the heart attack coming. We got our time from the marshal, shoved the car out of the control zone and Andy had the tow rope ready and whizzed us along to the van to start the diagnosis. The inside of the cap was bone dry but we couldn't get a spark anywhere from the HT so it had to be the coil. They plugged on a new one and it still wouldn't fire but we did now have a spark so I reckoned I'd flooded it trying to start it whilst being pushed. Sure enough, when we pulled the plugs they were sodden with fuel. Dried and refitted and a quick word to the car to play the game and it fired. It took a minute to clear all the excess fuel from the system but we were back in the game. A "spirited" drive through the service park got us to the main control for the start of the leg bang on our minute so taking another couple of years off my life was worth it.

I knew the road section out to the first stage so that let Michael get a chance to get all his paperwork in order since he had been instrumental in most of the shoving and hadn't had time to get settled in and get the road book and notes all sorted out. I nipped on a bit to the first stage so that I would have a few minutes just have a quick check under the bonnet, set the tyre pressures and compose myself in readiness for stage 15 - La Calotterie. This stage has been in all but one of the 14 rallies I've been to here in one form or another. The actual road through La Calotterie itself is not particularly difficult. It is quite narrow and twisty and does need concentration and if it was out in the countryside with the other stages would be a good technical stage you could post a good time on if you were on the ball. But it sits in the flood plain of the Canche river that flows into the Channel at Le Touquet. What that means is there are huge ditches running along both sides of the road for the majority of the stage. Over the years I have seen cars submerged in the waters of these

ditches. Indeed I have been very close to joining them on a few occasions. Basically, there is no margin for error. If you slide off the road you can consider yourself very fortunate if you manage to recover and get going again. 5 mph too fast into a corner or a patch of mud can be the difference between hero and zero. And it was raining. From the start the stage ran almost 2 full loops before splitting off for the second "half" of the route which took in about a mile of main 2 lane road before dropping back down to a final mile of single track down in the basin again. Unfortunately we got in behind a car at the start of our second loop and this is not the stage for the red mist to come out. It was hard to curb the enthusiasm and just settle for reeling him in slowly. Another reason for that is that because the stage is so narrow and sinuous it is unlikely that the car will find anywhere wide enough to pull over to let you pass when you do get to his bumper until the split. To be fair he didn't hold us up too much and he did manage to let us past just before the split by pulling in to somebody's driveway. Whilst behind him I found out that the washer wiring had stopped working and the mud thrown up by the car in front was now smeared all over the screen and there wasn't quite enough rain to act as a substitute so I had to find cleaner patches to peer through until we got out the stage and I managed a quick fix that would do us for the remainder of the morning.

Stage 16 was another "loopy" one. It was run identical to last year but it was a new stage for 2009 so I was familiar with it and we had done the full 3 recce runs through it. Last year we did a loop and a half and it was done in the dark. Obviously this time it was daylight and we did 2 and a half loops before splitting off. Or at least they did 2 and a half on the recce DVD !! I got Michael to double check the road book before we went into the stage just to be sure since my previous 2 assumptions from the DVD had proved to be wrong. We had a while to wait for our start so I quietly checked the cars on the stage to see how many times they passed before disappearing. Definitely 2 and a half. Most of the stage was 2 lane road so I didn't foresee any problems with baulking and as it turned out it wasn't an issue at all. Michael did notice something as we drew up to the stop line. The Subaru that had started behind us was just leaving the control and it hadn't passed us on the stage. It was 2 and a half loops, wasn't it ? Talking to the navigator at the queue for the next stage he was adamant that they had done the right number of loops. Had we done 2 or 3 ? I went back to the 205 and checked the Brantz against the road book and we were 0.1 km out on

the distance between the 2 controls so we were right and they had missed out a loop.

The last proper stage. It was a patchwork quilt of bits of the same stage in various directions from 3 or 4 years. I had noted one particularly bad bit : a series of downhill bends on very smooth tarmac. It was still quite wet on the surface so these could be slippery, especially if the big cars had dragged the mud out of the verges. I didn't pay enough attention to the notes as we approached them and went into a 90 right way too fast and the back broke away under braking. Opposite lock and power stopped us disappearing into the scenery but we were now heading into the ditch on the inside of the corner. It was deep enough that we probably wouldn't get out of it if I planted it in there. We ran along on full power and full lock for about 50 feet, half in the ditch and half on the road. With the standard box on the car now I didn't have the benefit of an LSD to help with the predicament and it looked as if it could all be over. But perseverance prevailed and it popped back out onto the road. There was a huge dollop of luck involved in that but I wasn't complaining. We were lucky but we seemed to have had a lucky rally. Yes, we'd had some bad problems but we had conquered them and were still here fighting. The last run through the super special was pretty much a formality but I just took it a bit easy to ensure we didn't have any 11th hour disasters in the potholes and bales that littered the last 3 km of the rally. Final control, a big sigh and a hearty hand shake. There's a few folk that would tell you that I can be a bit of a handful to keep on the straight and narrow at times but Michael was well up to it. In fact the whole crew did a sterling job over the long weekend to make sure that the obstacles in our way were overcome. I realise from the recounting of our event it may be hard to believe but one of my main goals for this event was to finish. There were times when that mantra deserted me and things went a little awry but I most certainly wanted to be crossing that final podium to say that I'd finished the 50th anniversary Rallye du Touquet. Over the years I'd had some big accidents and many crushing class wins so I had nothing to prove on the event but I had to make it to the end and, as a team, that's exactly what we achieved. Hopefully we entertained along the way, because we enjoyed it. There were times on this year's event, whilst battling mechanical gremlins and unimaginable weather and road conditions, I did wonder what the hell we were doing here but once over the finish line it was an exhilarating feeling, more than worth the effort. Every inch a character building event. Our trials and tribulations cost us time but we still managed to win our class - FA5, but we

just missed out on halving our seeding (108) by finishing 58th overall. The 4 minutes lost with the fuel pump mid-stage did the damage.

All that remained was our 5 minutes of fame on the finish podium and, being Le Touquet's only Scottish son I had one more duty to perform. For the line up to the final time control and podium they route us through the town, ending up along the main street down to the beach area. Whilst in the queue I have to get changed into the kilt. This usually just involves stripping off and donning kilt and team T shirt. This usually draws a small crowd who, once they see the kilt going on, want their photo taken beside me and the car. This helps to pass the time on the crawl down to the beach. This year several folk who had obviously been out spectating came up to me to thank me for being part of the 50th anniversary event and entertaining them out on the stages. We always get appreciated for making the trek from Scotland for their event and my driving style seems to go down a storm with them but this year there were more people than usual coming to talk with me. But now I had to try and figure out what to say to the crowd when we got to the podium and met the speaker, Dominique.

Dominique is quite a character. As kind and helpful as the day is long and a rally nut. But quite scary. He's been following me on rallies for many years : more because he was travelling across France spectating on rallies that I just happened to be competing on, but it was still spooky the way he would just appear, at a parc ferme or a stage start in the heart of the French countryside, from absolutely nowhere. With a camera. About 5 years ago, when he was still married, he came to Scotland with his family to do an historical tour. I had organised their accommodation in Stonehaven for the Deeside leg of their trip. The following year when I went back to Le Touquet I was given the grand tour of the photo album of their holiday. At a rough guess I would say 250 - 300 photographs ! He is no longer married. Two years ago the Abospeed team were invited to his house in Boulogne for lunch whilst we were over there for the rally. The majority of the team managed to get sick notes and left my mum, her pal and me to go. We got to meet Dominique's new girlfriend at lunch, her name - Dominique. Oh and my mum hadn't seen the photos of his Scottish tour so Earlier that same year we were at Langres, a couple of hours south of Paris, to do a gravel rally. Guess who was there. And in the pre-event parc ferme we were partaking of a complimentary glass of wine when he caught up with us and started introducing me to everyone he could get

his hands on. The final result of this was that I have a photograph of Dominique, myself, the head of Michelin competition France and the president of the FFSA, Nicolas Deschaux. A true character.

It is now customary that when we win our class I have to talk to the crowd at the finish in a sort of question and answer session and because my French is quite passable this gets a warm reception. The final part of the chat is the speaker explaining the mystery of what a Scotsman wears under his kilt. You can see where this is going. So I have to get up on the winner's step and confirm to the assembled masses all they have been told. On the occasions that there's been 2 Scots in the car we both get the kilts on and the crowd get a 2 for 1 bargain but no amount of persuasion would convince Michael that getting the kilt on was in the small print in the contract that he didn't sign. It must be an English thing.

I love doing this rally. The roads are very similar to what we have here in the North East. It's just like doing a closed road tarmac rally in Deeside except there are no dykes and very few strainer posts to wipe your car out if you get it a little bit wrong. The event is impeccably run with serious, professional marshalling and enthusiastic spectators. If the weather is dry the grip from the roads is fantastic, if it's wet the French drivers are at a disadvantage because most of their championship events are further south and later in the year so our Scottish training really comes to the fore. You get two sessions of night stages. And this year's route was just under 250 km (150 miles) of stages for about £700. And if you win your class you get your entry fee back (and 2nd & 3rd in classes of 5 or more get a percentage back). Why wouldn't you do it ? If there's any of you out there that are tempted I can assure you that you wouldn't be disappointed if you took the plunge and put an entry in for next year.

Finally, it just leaves me to thank all those without whom our finish and class win would definitely not have happened.

Ina Cameron team sponsor, camp boss and so much more.

Avril Buist assistant camp boss.

Andy Tong, Gary Campbell and Pete Stark the 3 guys that managed to keep the car together despite my best efforts to the contrary. Another

event finish and class win that wouldn't have happened without their dedication & expertise (not to mention subterfuge).

Michael Calvert a huge thanks for standing in at the shortest of notices, fitting in almost seamlessly with the team and doing a damn fine job in the hot seat.

