

The 2018 Pre-war Minor Network 'Pacesetters' Rally



The view from the roof of the Thorpe Abbots control tower (Kate Martin)

The year 2018 is the Minor's 90th anniversary as well as that of its close cousin, the MG 'M' Type Midget. Both the Minor and Midget led the way for their respective businesses in being their first small cars, something with which both companies remained synonymous throughout their existence. The theme for this year's Network rally was to be that important anniversary and it was totally fitting that the rally was to take place at the end of the first week in June, as it was in that same week, 90 years earlier, that *The Autocar* had first published images of the new Morris Minor.

This year the rally was to take place on and around the Suffolk - Norfolk border, with rally headquarters based at the 100th Bomb Group Museum, located on the former USAAF airfield at Thorpe Abbots, Norfolk. A total of 29 cars were booked to take part with 27 making it to the start including three MG Midgets and a solitary Wolseley Hornet, a record entry for the event.

Over the course of the last nine years the three-day rally format has largely stuck to the same well-tested formula, loosely comprising three or four social

gatherings, two tours and the rally dinner; while Sunday afternoons have been left free to enable participants to see something of the locale for themselves. Little was to change for 2018.

The Swan Inn in the Suffolk village of Hoxne was chosen as the venue for our first get-together on the evening of Friday 8th June. The landlord had sectioned off a portion of his car park for us and we rapidly filled the available space with a host of cars and their occupants. As indicated in the photo the pub car park temporarily resembled a market place as people exchanged car parts and caught-up with old friends, while telling of their adventures on their way to Suffolk while travelling from all over the country and beyond.



Swan Inn Car Park, Hoxne, Suffolk - Friday evening

There were plenty of tales to be told, including Martin Gregory's differential failure just a few hundred yards away from his hotel in Scole while Toby and Linda Sears related how they took a break for coffee during their epic 220-mile trip from Lymington, atop Ivinghoe Beacon, the highest point in the Chiltern Hills. Mike and Sue Jones had an unexpected encounter with a badger on their way to the rally when it decided to run from cover and head-butt the passenger door of their Semi-Sports. Fortunately, no damage was done to the car, its occupants or the badger who left an impression of its snout on the car's fabric covering. Rally returnee Halbe Tjpekema from the Hague drove his beautifully restored 1929 Fabric Saloon to the rally, albeit he covered less miles than both the Sears and the Martins', as a Stena Line ferry transported car and driver across the North Sea divide.

As the Network's rallies have grown, finding suitable venues has become increasingly difficult. The management at The Swan allocated their sizeable and dedicated restaurant to our party and although they engaged extra staff for the night found it difficult to cater for 60 hungry people on top of their regular trade, this despite rally attendees booking well in advance and groups eating at various times throughout the evening. However, I'm sure that no one left the inn hungry!

Saturday is traditionally the day allocated for the rally's 'long' tour. This invariably means an early start if the tour is to be completed comfortably. As a result, there were a few bleary-eyed rallyists at 8-30 AM when we assembled at Thorpe Abbots before the start of our trip across 'High Suffolk'. Once again, the weather was kind to us and although the sun hadn't yet made an appearance it was threatening to

burn through the low cloud. The air was still and the sound from almost sixty voices along with that emanating from our cars must have been quite a shock for the hares, partridges and skylarks inhabiting the wide-open spaces of the adjoining former airfield. Kate Martin was once again charged with capturing the official rally photograph through the (wide angle) lens of her trusty Nikon SLR. This entailed scaling the stairs to the flat roof of the airfield's control tower to ensure all would be included in this important image and memento. One of the resulting photos can be seen above.



A glimpse of magnificent Monks Hall

The first 20 miles of the Saturday tour took us through a section of glorious Suffolk countryside bordering the River Waveney, although its waters were only glimpsed from time to time. The lane-side verges were sprinkled with scarlet and white from the countless poppies and Michaelmas daisies and thankfully the sun shone brightly to make it a perfect early morning drive. The morning run wasn't without incident as Eric Mouser, who was attempting the impossible by driving and navigating the route alone, missed a critical turn and spent the rest of the day chasing the main pack of tourists across the north-eastern part of the county.

St. Peter's Hall was our first stopping point, selected for its fabulous moated Tudor hall and restaurant, alongside of which sits the world-famous St. Peter's Brewery. The venue had opened early for us and fresh coffee and confections had been prepared by Jill Hall and her staff, most of which was rapidly consumed on the hall's moat-side terrace in glorious June sunshine. The venue's courtyard car park was another magnificent sight, crammed full of gleaming pre-war motor vehicles and slightly crumpled, mainly post-war personnel.



St. Peter's Hall - the morning coffee stop

The next stage of the tour was the longest of the day with almost 30 miles to be covered before our pre-planned lunch stop in Thornham Magna. There was an optional halt en-route at the church of St. Mary in Huntingfield, a break which many crews decided to take. This medieval church, updated by the Victorians has an amazing painted ceiling, the work of Mrs Mildred Holland (a former vicar's wife) who created the artwork over a seven-year period between 1859 and 1866 by laying on her back, suspended forty feet from the floor, ala Michelangelo and his exploits in the Sistine Chapel. The photo here hardly does it justice.



A small cross-section of the roof of St Mary's Church, Huntingfield

From Huntingfield the tour headed westward towards Thorndon and Thornham where a crossing of the busy A140 (Ipswich-Norwich) road was necessary. By now the sun had decided to take a rest although this didn't deter the majority of participants who consumed their packed lunches al fresco style. The morning had been almost incident and traffic free with just a single digit from the editorial Semi-Sports parting company with the front number plate, this hardly being worthy of note - although if anyone does spot a polished aluminium number '1' on the road anywhere in Suffolk please let me know!

Having over indulged at both St. Peter's Hall and the Forge Café in Thornham, those who had ordered cream teas at our afternoon stop in the newly refurbished community pub The Crosskeys in Redgrave, needed to work hard in the meantime to generate an appetite. Unfortunately, only 23 tour miles separated the two venues, so some took the opportunity for a brisk walk around Wyken vineyard and to explore its shop before more artery blocking consumption took place just a few miles further on. The pub had not skimped on ingredients and the sight of what was on offer was too much for me but didn't seem to deter others. Eight months ago, this pub was a run-down shell and had been placed on the market by its owner. The locals, having saved the village shop, decided that they could also do the same for the only remaining pub in the village. After an appeal, the £300,000 required to purchase the pub outright was quickly raised and work commenced on its renovation just before last Christmas. All the required work was completed by unpaid volunteers and the village now has a superb and so far, very successful going-concern.

After hauling themselves away from the pub's bars and gardens many rallyists took the opportunity to return to their hotels and b&b's for a period of rest and recuperation prior to the evening's planned revelries at the rally dinner in Bressingham. Others completed the remaining 13 miles of the circular tour, finishing up back at Thorpe Abbots where their milometers will have informed them that they had covered just over 80 miles since they had initially passed through those same museum's gates earlier that day.



Rally Guests of Honour - Alister & Molly Reid (Kate Martin)

The Chequers Inn at Bressingham is run by Michael and Hazel Knox-Johnson, Michael being the brother of Robin, the intrepid 'around the world' sailor. The inn was closed to other customers on the evening of 9th June and 56 of us were seated across the venue. Alister and Molly Reid were our guests of honour, Alister being an inaugural Network member when he joined our fledgling forum in May 2008. Alister is a former guardsman and constable and at 83, still stands an erect 6'4" in height. He owned a Minor for many years, but it was just too small for him and he sold it several years ago. Despite this he refused to go away and stayed on to impart his wisdom (he has owned pre-war cars since the early fifties) and to generously provide many of us with desperately needed spare parts from time to time. His late-night, 'post dram' forum contributions are legendary, occasionally controversial and invariably humorous.



Harry Edwards Trophy winner - Halbe Tjepkema with his 1929 Minor Fabric saloon (photo Kate Martin)

The rally dinner is also the chosen occasion for the presentation of the club awards and this year was to be no exception. After an excellent hot buffet meal our regular M.C., Ken Martin announced the winners. The club's premier award remains the Harry Edward's Trophy which was presented to the Network by former Network member Clive Hall following Harry's untimely death in 2010. This year the award went to Halbe Tjepkema for his meticulous restoration of his 1929 Minor Fabric Saloon, a car he recovered from a Bungay barn and then proceeded to rebuild over a ten-year period.

Ken then presented Dan Brockway with the Brian Maeers Claret Jug for his unstinting enthusiasm and concerted efforts in attempting to bring both of his Minors to a roadworthy state. Halbe was then called upon again to accept the LAT

Plate on behalf of fellow Dutchman Arie Roest, this for his winning entry in the Network's 2017 Photograph of the Year competition. Arie's superb photo shows his Jarvis Hornet Special off to great effect high in the Swiss alps with snow-capped peaks as a backdrop. Two new awards were donated by member's Martin Gregory and Toby Sears. 'The Gregory Award' was established to provide tangible recognition for the rallyist who had driven the greatest distance in his/her Minor, Midget or Hornet to attend the rally, while Toby's award entitled 'Weekend Break' was to go to the first unfortunate rallyist to terminally break-down over the rally weekend - so an award all of us are desperate **not** to win! It must be recorded that both awards are craftsman built by their donors and really are works of art. Coincidentally, ironically and perhaps conspiratorially Martin Gregory was the first winner of the 'Weekend Break' award and Toby Sears took home the 'Gregory Award' - make of that what you may! If we continue to collect awards at this rate, within a couple of years the after-dinner presentations will take longer than the dinner proper!



Three award winners: Dan Brockway with Janie Maeers: Martin Gregory and Toby Sears (right)

Unlike Saturday morning when the sun shone, Sunday started out dull, grey and overcast but then progressively got better as the day wore on. Once again, we assembled on the tarmac in front of the Thorpe Abbots control tower before setting off on the comparatively short 28-mile sprint to the coast, in this case to the RSPB's visitor centre and reserve at Minsmere. It seems that for the most part our cars ran well that day as all those who started out arrived in the Minsmere car park. Caution was required over the last mile or so as it would have been quite possible for those in open cars to have misplaced a passenger or two due to the severity of the sleeping policeman humps on the reserve's approach road. By now, the sun was shining brightly such that when entering the deeply shaded woodland surrounding the reserve, eyes required a period of adjustment before all became clear once more. Just as this re-adjustment was taking place Philip Butland (who was taking photographs by the roadside) unleashed the flash on his camera

requiring eyes to make a second hasty adjustment to avoid further passenger ejections as blinded drivers sped over the next sleeping policeman.



Arrivals at Minsmere - Messrs. Yates, Miles and Durston(s). Note Sports Coupe headlamp.

Many had lunch at the reserve and walked around its perimeter, catching glimpses of Avocet and Bittern from the hides in the scrapes and marshes. Others took off to Dunwich, Southwold and Aldeburgh to sample the delights of the seaside while a further sizeable group headed back to Thorpe Abbots.

This third group were keen to test their cars on a section of the former airfield's perimeter track, having been granted permission to do so by the landowner, Sir Rupert Mann. This was not to be the first time that pre-war Minors had used this over half-mile strip of concrete as an earlier Network rally in 2010 and the 'Minor versus Seven' challenge in 2015 had also made use of this historic stretch, which 75 years earlier had carried the weight of Boeing B17 Fortresses leaving and returning from missions over war-torn Europe.

What occurred on Sunday afternoon was far removed from those horrors as rallyists swapped cars and enjoyed using them without the constraints of the Road Traffic Act. Two of the tourers had both been fitted with 'special' engines by their owners and it was clear to see that they were appreciably quicker than those with standard units under their bonnets. The airfield remained open to us until 4:00 PM

after which there was time to allow brakes and radiators to cool before setting off for the Swan Inn, once again where the final rally gathering took place.



Sizing up the opposition - Preparing for play on the airfield.

These farewell gatherings are usually low-key affairs as those involved are already thinking about packing and journeys home, but not on this occasion as the revelries went on long into the evening.



Janie Maeers and John Paternoster at play on the airfield!

From comments received since the rally weekend, our formula appears to have worked once again - at least I sincerely hope it did. This was my ninth and final rally as an organiser, the baton being handed on to Ken Martin for 2019. I'm very much looking forward to simply enjoying a rally without any of the encumbrances associated with its administration. My thanks goes to Ken for taking on the task and a huge 'Thank-you' to all who have aided and abetted me over the last decade. Chris Lambert-June 2018