

Legend Fires Northwest Stages 2008 – Steve Noble/Tony King

The boys(?) are back!

This was to be Steve's first event for nearly a year (following his retirement with a broken gearbox at Weeton and subsequent illness) and Tony's first event since Monteberg 2004 (which ended upside down in a Belgium field).

Although Steve's car had been largely untouched since last year, he and Stephen Turner put a lot of effort before the event getting the car ready.

Friday morning didn't start too well for me with a puncture on my road car; I hoped it wasn't an omen for things to come. By the time I got to Steve's house, the rally car was already loaded on the trailer and ready to go. After a lengthy refuelling stop – diesel for the van, petrol for the jerry cans and, finally, petrol for the car – and lots of exercise for Steve's credit card, we set off up the motorway for Blackpool, arriving nice & early at Pontins.

After we'd unloaded the car, polished (to remove the green growth!) and stickered it, the first signs of trouble appeared – an ominous puddle of oil on the sump guard. The trip to scrutineering was interesting; we were laying more smoke than a World War 2 naval destroyer.

Steve managed to organise scrutineering and a quick sound check outside in the main car park (it must be nice to have friends in high places) as we didn't want to leave pools of oil in the nice clean service bays at Moorland Motors. Then while Steve got a bulk purchase discount on some fresh oil (and more exercise for his credit card), I extended our thanks to the workshop staff for the loan of some tools and for their help in cleaning up our mess.

Back in the service area Steve thought that, following its lengthy layoff, the engine might have a stuck piston ring and this was allowing the oil to flow back through the intake system. Oil smoke coming out of the air filter was certainly disturbing but Steve reckoned that bypassing one of the vacuum hoses would minimise the oil use and allow us to run.

Saturday morning dawned bright but very cold; thankfully with a start number of 90 we didn't have to start too early. As we drove down to the stage arrival on the Prom, we were optimistic for although the car was still smoking it seemed to be running okay.

Unfortunately following a serious accident requiring medical assistance (although the crew were later released from hospital), the first two stages on the prom were cancelled. We drove slowly through part of the stage, passing Stuart Deeley's stranded Lotus, and then on to stage three – the new venue at Hill House. Before the stage we stopped and topped up with oil, just to be sure.

The first half of the stage went quite well but as we came to the split, the oil pressure dropped, the water temperature shot up and the car started to struggle. Apologies to Steve for the slight confusion at the split (which way? ermh ah right no LEFT!) but I was watching the gauges as well as the road book. We carried on and even overtook a car but before the end of the stage, the engine cried enough and started making ominous noises so we made a quick shortcut to the finish and parked up outside the stage. Apologies for the confusion to the finish crew who weren't sure where we'd come from!

As Steve & I walked back towards Stephen & Paul in the management car, we could see from the puddles and spots of oil on the road that the car had been continuing to lose oil throughout the road section.

While Steve & Stephen drove back to Pontins to collect the service van and trailer, Paul & I watched some of stage 4. The Hill House stage had some quick bits along the riverbank and

around the lagoon followed by twisty sections on the roads around where the buildings had been. This area was quite dusty and, combined with the kerbs, caused problems for quite a few cars.

With the car loaded back onto the trailer, we returned to Pontins via Weeton (for some more spectating) to avoid the traffic problems on the prom.

Back in the service area, lots of people were interested in what had happened and commiserated with us on our early exit. It was certainly nice to be back in the rally community and I was amazed at how many people Steve knew. By the end of the event, he'd already sourced a replacement engine which he's hoping to have shortly after the Malcolm Wilson Stages.

Later it was into the Queen Vic for some beer and quiet reflection; I know Steve was disappointed and felt that he'd let me down but even with the best preparation these things happen and it's all part of the rally experience. Obviously, I was disappointed but I certainly don't feel that it was Steve's fault.

The event organisers are to be congratulated on a well organised event; even with the delays following the accident on the first stage and then unforeseen problems on some of the road sections, the event seemed to run quite smoothly.

Many thanks to Steve for letting me sit in the hot seat (hopefully, if there's a next time, it'll last longer), Stephen & Paul for their service duties and Kayleigh & Denise for their support and smiles.

Finally, rumours that Steve & I have now been nicknamed Smoky & the Bandit are exaggerated.