

It's almost like the good old days with Minis once again turning heads on the biggest rallying event in the world. Mike Askew joined six brave Mini crews on the '95 RAC

Mud and Guts



There's something not quite right about people who want to take part in the RAC Rally. Put simply it's one of the greatest tests of man and machine there is. Four days of gruelling special stages – seriously restricted service time and desperately short overnight halts make the RAC Rally the ultimate goal for every rally driver. Last year, we followed the fortunes of the Group N (showroom spec class) Mini of Dave Johnson and John Flynn in a bid to finish their first RAC in a Mini. Sadly their event finished early on the third day when the diff expired in Hafren, Wales. The retirement made the duo even more determined to complete the event this year, and after a season of competing in the British Open Rally Championship, they arrived in Chester better prepared and far more confident of making the finish. This year saw six Minis start the rally, all of which we document. The rally marked the end of a terrific season for the Mini Sport team who won Class A5 in the British Open Rally Championship with Daniel Harper and Les Reger. The duo started well winning their class on the opening round, the Vauxhall Rally of Wales. From then, the team never really looked back, going on to win their class on the Pirelli and Scottish rallies. The only real disappointment was a spectacular roll on the all-tarmac Manx rally in September which marked the teams only retirement in '95. All

through the season, the team constantly developed parts and carried out their own form of research and development. As part of their prize for winning the class in the Championship, Daniel and Les were given a free entry onto the RAC Rally – the icing on the cake to a terrific season. For Dave Johnson and John Flynn, this year's season has been just as successful in the other Mini Sport car. Piloting their GpN Cooper, the duo found themselves in a highly competitive class all season – often running head-to-head against cars with a 50bhp performance advantage. Despite this, the pair finished the British Open Championship second overall in Class N1 – and in perfect shape to tackle the RAC Rally. Once again *MiniWorld's* role was to act as a chase car for Dave and John. This year however, the rules regarding servicing and repairing of the cars were tightened – meaning that although we could meet the car as it came out of the stage, only the crew of the rally car were allowed to carry out any repairs. If we were to lay a hand on the car or even pass Dave or John a tool or part it would be deemed as illegal servicing and they would be disqualified. However, the crew were allowed to help themselves to any tools or parts that may have been in our chase car. Complicated.

DAY1 CHESTER-LEEDS

The first day of the RAC Rally is always one of the trickiest. Not because it has the most mileage or the technically demanding stages, Sunday is the day of spectator stages, held in the grounds of country houses and industrial areas. The stages are short, twisty and under scrutiny of the thousands of spectators who cram the venues – eager for a fleeting glance of their rally heroes. For the Minis, running

some way down the field, the problem is often not the stages themselves but the traffic on the road sections linking them. For the non-initiated rally followers, all competing cars have a very strict time schedule (known as road time) imposed on them in between the finish and the start of stages. If a car goes over this allocated amount of time, the crew are given a time penalty. With the sheer volume of spectator traffic on the opening day of the rally, getting to stages on time can get tricky. Thankfully, Dave and John made the first time control at Tatton Park with time to spare and we heard with some relief on the shortwave radio a few minutes later that they had cleared the stage without any problems. A 40 mile road section took us to Chatsworth House where a five mile stage lay in wait for Dave and John. At the following Service





● Car 184: ● David Johnson/John Flynn
● Sponsors: Mini Sport, Sanwa Trading, MiniWorld

The second half of the Mini Sport RAC Rally effort, the duo started the event determined to make amends for last year's non-finish. With a car that Dave felt was "100% better than last year's" the signs looked good. A switch from Colway to Dunlop rubber provided the crew with more confidence of a finish – along with the nearby Mini Sport service barge. Once again in a hotly contested class with a collection of more powerful Suzuki Swifts and Peugeot 205 Rallies, progress in the class was always going to be tricky.

● Car 148: GpA Mini Cooper 1.3i ● Keith Bird/Tony Graham ● Sponsors: Mini Spares Centre, Sanwa Trading, British Aerospace, Merriman Ltd, Philip Dowse Interiors, K&J Bird.

The first stage on Sunday was to be Keith's first drive of the car which was originally built for Timo Makinen's ill-fated 1994 Monte Carlo Rally challenge. Following the car's year-long hibernation in the showroom of Mini Spares Centre London, it underwent an extensive engine rebuild by Mike Barrett of MBE Race engines in preparation for the RAC. Keith, more used to handling a 4WD Metro 6R4, is also the proud owner of a historic rally-prepared 1965 Cooper S in which he scooped a class victory on the 1993 Britannia Rally.



DAY 2: LEEDS-CHESTER

Halt in Chesterfield, the crew reported no problems and after a thorough spanner check, they went on their way to Clumber Park.

Following Clumber were two Super Special stages at Donington Park race circuit, with a service break in the paddock area immediately after. By now it was dark and the temperatures were beginning to drop as the rally headed towards a 2.65 mile test at Rother Valley before completing the day's sport with a stage on the outskirts of Leeds.

At the end of the first day there were no retirements from the Mini ranks although Keith Bird was suffering a few teething problems in the Monte Mini. An untraceable electrical problem left him without any panel lights while a sheared exhaust manifold stud meant a poor seal from the manifold to the exhaust which was causing a power loss.

The 6.00am start felt more like 2.00am as the crew collected the car from Parc Ferme and headed out towards the forests. Most competitors regard the second day of the RAC as the start of the real rally as it's the crews' first taste of the forests. The first stage of the day in Hamsterley proved to be a rude awakening for two of the Mini crews. First to suffer problems were Daniel and Les in the Mini Sport GpA car. A broken fan belt was the first of Daniel's problems. After a mid-stage stop to replace the errant belt, Daniel suddenly found the car jammed in first gear. The gearstick appeared to work fine but no amount of levering would disengage first. He crawled to the end of the stage with a top speed of 45mph. At first Daniel suspected that the linkage roll-pin had dropped out or even that the gearstick had broken. Unfortunately a quick

inspection after the car cleared the stage revealed a far worse scenario. The link pin on the selector inside the gearbox casing had sheared. As service time was limited to just 20 minutes and the service area itself over 30 miles away there was nothing that could be done. Daniel and Les were out.

Trevor Godwin also stuck problems in Hamsterley. A very heavy landing deranged the front end of his car, breaking the front subframe mounts and playing havoc with the steering and suspension. Despite the damage, Trevor and David coaxed the car to the end of the stage.

A brief service halt allowed a limited amount of fettling to take place before the crews tackled the longest stage of the event, a 36 mile test through Pundershaw. The stage nearly proved to be the last for Keith Bird, who was now the leading GpA

Cooper. A miscalculation about 12 miles into the stage left the Mini Spares-backed car stranded in a ditch. Keith then endured an agonising wait as enough spectators and marshals were gathered to put the car back onto the road. Sadly though, Pundershaw was Keith's final stage on this year's RAC. As he lined up to start the 12th stage, a Hardy Spicer joint let go and signalled the end of his brave challenge. Luck hadn't been with Keith since the first stage and it was a great disappointment to him and co-driver Tony Graham that they had to retire from the prestigious event.

The demise of Messrs Harper and Bird left the GpN car of Dave and John at the head of the Mini pack. Fortunately the car seemed to be running like clockwork – requiring only the most routine of spanner checks at the service halts.



- Car 189: ● Trevor Godwin/David Wyer
- Sponsors: Horiba Instruments, Les Plantagenets Restaurant

Following their successful completion of last year's event and an excellent season in the Mintex National Championship, Trevor and David had to put in some late nights leading up to the event trying to get the car completed in time. A good reliability record during the past season made the Coventry-based team confident of a good finish on the rally. Enjoyed a taste of the World Rally Championship earlier in the season when they competed in the 1000 Lakes Rally in Finland, finishing a superb 2nd in class and 42nd overall.



DAY 3: CHESTER-CHESTER

Day three took the surviving crews to mid-Wales for seven more stages covering 106 miles. Again Dave and John's car was running without fault although Dave noticed a handling problem as the day wore on. Mike Plant was also suffering problems in his GpN car – gear selection trouble hampering the progress of the Corgi-sponsored Mini in Dyfnant. The following stage saw

Mike's twin brother Robert run into trouble when his Viking Tyres-backed effort drowned its electrics. Fortunately though it got going again without too much time loss.

Trevor Godwin was also having problems in his Horbiba-backed GpA car. The Coventry-based driver had a bottom shock absorber bolt shear – a fault which was hastily repaired. Just to rub salt into the wound, he had a rear wheel bearing collapse on the same side which made the handling somewhat interesting. Dave and John finished the day with the GpN car beginning to show signs of wear. The front upper damper mounting detached itself from the inner wing and needed welding back into place at the final service halt.



DAY 4: CHESTER-CHESTER

With four Minis still running from the six that started the event, the final day was always going to be a steady affair. Seven more stages in north Wales were in store for the surviving crews, with the GpN car of Dave and John starting just one place ahead of Trevor Godwin.

Dave was still complaining about the handling of the car claiming that the car was "all over the place" on the stages. A quick inspection the day before had revealed loose steering arm bolts which had been tightened. However, the woolly steering behaviour persisted and Dave continued to take things steadily. Trevor Godwin and the Plant brothers were also going well with Michael's gearbox showing no sign of getting any worse. A puncture in Stage 25 Penmachno South slowed Dave and John, but that was nothing compared

to the problems that were to strike Robert Plant's Viking Tyres Cooper. A very heavy landing directly onto a huge rock smashed through the sumpguard and took the corner off the gearbox casing. At the end of the stage, there was no oil left in the engine and Robert's rally was run.

Following the final service halt at Brenig, there were just two more stages to run. With only three Minis surviving, all the drivers, navigators and service crews were praying for good luck and a clean run through the 15 miles of stages remaining. There were huge amounts of spectators lining the route of the final two Clocaenog tests, staying on after cheering Colin McRae through to victory well over an hour before. The atmosphere was terrific as the three Minis sailed through the tests without any further problems, Dave and Trevor both commenting that the



● Car 147: GpA Mini Cooper 1.3i ● Daniel Harper/Les Reger ● Sponsors: Mini Sport, Sanwa Trading, MBE, MiniWorld

After a season which saw Daniel and Les clinch the overall class victory in the British Open Championship, the duo were confident of a good result on the RAC. Backed by the might and copious spares lorry of Mini Sport, the team started the event as favourites to lead the six Minis home. Despite this being the crew's first attempt at the RAC, they had covered many of the stages during their Open Championship season.



final stage, at least to them, had definitely been the best of the whole Rally!

On arrival at the Chester finish, there was a big (probably record) crowd waiting to welcome home the three remaining Minis and mark the end of yet another gruelling, but fantastic, event. Dave and John were the first to cross the ramp in the Mini Sport GpN car, ahead of the GpA car of Trevor and David, who in turn led home Michael and Marina in the GpN Corgi Classics example.

And so another RAC Rally was over – the 115th in total to be precise. As tough as ever but still hugely enjoyable for all involved. Despite the overwhelming fatigue, brought on by little or no sleep, there was still enough energy for the crews to return to the hotel for a few well-earned beers, promising to be back again next year for another go.



● Car 199: GpA Mini Cooper 1.3i ● Robert Plant/Jason Austin ● Sponsors: Viking Tyres, RPE Motorsport

A weary-looking Robert Plant the day before the rally was testament to how many late nights were needed to get the two cars ready for the event. Looking resplendent in their Corgi and Viking liveries respectively, the second half of the RPE Motorsport assault on the RAC used the car entered in last years RAC and Monte Carlo rallies. "It's a bit tired now!" claimed Robert who didn't envisage using the same car on subsequent events. Hoped to repeat his successful completion of last year's event.

● Car 193: ● GpN Mini Cooper 1.3i Michael Plant/Marina Francks ● Sponsors: Corgi Classics, RPE Motorsport, Viking Tyres

One half of the ever-enthusiastic Plant twins effort, the emphasis was, as always, on an entertaining rally and a finish. The team were supported for the rally by model makers Corgi, who made a limited edition model of the car in its full rally trim. Keen for a finish after a mechanically-troubled season in the British Open Championship. Included in the back-up team was former BMC Special Tuning boss Basil Wales, who contributed some handy tips from his days dealing with the Works Minis.

