**The Bournemouth Winter Rally 1997**

**Rogers Ramblings**

Well! 1997, the scene was set after all the previous months discussions and promises about cars, teams, sponsors, etc., the first round of the Mintex Series was here. Rick Smith and his team had prepared the battle ground in the South of England forests for the first round, the 1997 Bournemouth Winter Rally and a cracker was in store. The entry was surely the finest seen in the UK for many years and, to quote a well-known journalist, probably the best in Europe at national level. The Organisers had obtained the use of the Winter Gardens for use 3 times as a stage, following the theory of taking the rally to the people not the people to the rally. Tables were to be difficult to reserve at Harry Ramsdens for lunch as the rally passed the window. The spectators were able to see the rally virtually all day, this coupled with an amusing and informative commentary from Robin Bradford kept many thousands of spectators entertained for the day.

New cars and new faces were amongst the record 160 registrations taken at Bournemouth. 1996 Mintex Champion Chris Mellors was now acting as team manager for his Mellors Elliot outfit, with two 555 registered Subaru Imprezas for Brian Lyall and Peter Vassallo, and his 1996 championship steed was now in the hands of Sandy Dalgarno. Local entrepreneur Marcus Dodd was looking quietly confident with his Group A Ford Escort Cosworth, which had been rebuilt over the close season and was 'my winner' of the Concours d'Elegance at scrutineering. Geoff Smith had also been hard at work with the paint gun, the ex Wilson built Escort now resplendent in Priority Airfreight colours, he was also sampling Group A power and brakes for the first time and looking forward to a good season. One of the wild cards was Roger Davies who had done a last minute deal with Chris Mellors to run the 1996 Priority Group N Escort, it was to be Roger's first taste of 4WD and Cosworth power, all eyes were to be on the F2 expert during the day.

Many cars were still being completed during the days before the event, and the 'red eyes' in evidence showed all the hard work. New cars for Phil Morgan, Adam Kent, and Steve Petch promised much, and the Series welcomed the Derek Warwick supported N2 Honda of Miles Jude from Jersey, who now makes another 'Overseas' crew, coupled with our Isle of Man and Irish contingent a complete sweep of the offshore islands. The Series welcomed the very professional presence of Richie Holfeld and Ian Grindrod in the Co-ordsport entered Steve Hill Motorsport run EVO 3. Richie was another looking forward to a good season and will add to the expected fireworks in Group N this year.

Musical chairs for Co-Drivers was in evidence: Steve Hill with Julia Rabbett, Richard Skinner with Roger Davies, Group N Champion Co-Driver Jim Kitson with Steve Smith (despite knowing each other and living close to each other it seems this pairing had never done an event together), Clive Jenkins was out with Adam Kent in the potent-sounding little 106. John Bennie returned to the Subaru of Brian Lyall and much was expected of this pairing also.

A welcome addition to the Series for 1997 was the stand of Mintex Series clothing suppliers Exilla who are to provide us with polo shirts, sweaters, hats, and two types of rally jacket, all of very high quality and attractive designs. Details were in each registration pack but if you need more information contact Clive Jones on **01597 822884** to discuss your requirements. A substantial discount for registered contenders is available and garments can be personalised with your sponsors' and team names. All garments ordered will be delivered free of charge to the next event, so get your orders in **now**.

The day dawned cold but dry and as the cars headed for the start ramp for the 8 am start early drama was to unfold with Steve Hendy snapping a clutch control arm between the holding control and the ramp, sadly a clear winner of the contest for first retirement. The battle for first stage honours went to Brian Lyall 1 sec clear of new Series contender Stephen Harron; next were the pursuing pack of Munro, Price, Wetton, Perrott, Worswick, Burton, Tough et al. Just 5 seconds covering the top 10 crews - game on!

Off to the MOD complex for more tarmac stages. After 3 stages Lyall headed the field by 11 seconds from Munro who was determined to show in the forthcoming forest stages that there is life in the Metro yet. The glorious looking, but sadly sounding, 306R4 of Andy Burton had unfortunately attracted the attention of the MOD Noise Inspector, however, the engine cried enough on SS7 and so back to the drawing board for this exciting project. (The engine was inspected by Mike Garton when stripped and found to conform to the 2.5 Litre regulations totally - thus silencing all those who had implied fictitious BHP figures for these 2.5 engines) - back to the rally, Stage 4 saw Lyall's lead down to 2 seconds, however the crew reported that the \*\*\*\*\*\* light on the dashboard had come on and sadly no further part in the proceedings for the Subaru crew, but he made his point. Munro now had a clear lead of 24 seconds over a settling-in Steve Hill.

Marcus Dodd (ever one to shy from publicity!) managed a spin in front of the TV cameras and his own Sunseeker banner on Stage 1, again! On Stage 4 he did the job properly, with a roll in front of the cameras again, and also his father who was spectating on the corner; the damage was comprehensive, but to panels only, and he continued, complaining of the handling.

Engine and transmission failures abounded, with John Price, John Roberts, Innes Marlow in the O/Survey sponsored Escort, Ian Gwynne, Julian Reynolds, Gwynne Thomas, Allister Tough, Simon Redhead, Chris Birkbeck and Drew Gallacher all departing for an early bath with mechanical maladies. Geoff Smith also retired the Priority Escort with front diff failure on SS8, however, nobody told the spectating Smith family who were busy mistakenly cheering on Roger Davies in the similar liveried Group N Escort whilst Geoff had adjourned to the bar.

Roger Davies was having a battle royal with Steve Petch, the Subaru driver having an early advantage over Davies, who was wisely taking time to settle in to his new mount. However, as the day progressed Davies crept to a small margin over Petch finally finishing 16 seconds clear at the end of the day and 9th O/A with Petch 10th and Richie Holfeld keeping a watching eye at 12th.

Formula 2 was proving to be Dave Weston's domain with most of the other fancied crews having problems, the Aberdeen crew having purchased their old Nova back to contest the Series this year. Going well in the category early on was Peter Thornton, who slipped off the road without damage on SS5. Phil Morgan was on the pace also in his new 306, despite overheating and a few niggling problems which cost him time, sadly it all ended in tears after removing a corner on a tight hairpin in SS17, however he felt the potential of the car was good and looked forward to the rest of the season. Charlie Exton and Suzie Emilliani in the giant-killing N2 Honda described the rally as "and went the day badly" with all sorts of niggling troubles ending in retirement after just 4 stages.

Back at the front of the field, the little change on the leader board did not relate to the close battle that was raging there. Steve Hill was struggling with a mysterious misfire and failed to make any headway on the flying Metro of Munro. Steve Smith in 3rd place was keeping a watchful eye on the ever-closing Murray Grierson, the gap between these two being just 7 seconds at the finish. Marcus Dodd in the battered Escort, having solved his handling problem by fitting a new rear damper, set some top times to haul himself back to fifth place. Ian Plummer, the Sunseeker Motorsport preparation man, had already located a new shell and was not planning any time off in the weeks before the Granite!

So, all to play for on the next round with Raymond Munro taking maximum points, a non-finish for Brian Lyall, Stephen Harron, Roger Duckworth, Geoff Smith and Drew Gallacher. Roger Davies leading Group N, and Dave Weston leading F2. What betting on a clean sweep for Scottish-registered contenders on Granite? Messieurs Dodd, Duckworth, Smith and Harron will be out to return the compliment to the marauding Scots who plundered south of the border.

The winner of the free entry to the Bournemouth Winter Rally sponsored by Clive Fane of Milton Keynes based Abbeygate Properties was Manxman Peter Christian, who was rewarded for his long trip with the return of his entry fee. The free draw for Granite City will be sponsored by Brian Lyall's Anderson Cars Motor Group, and the draw will take place at the prizegiving. The Series is very grateful to those sponsors who are generously supporting this new initiative. Hands up all you wealthy lot with Sky TV who saw the excellent report - Andy Marriott did us proud with a full hour of coverage on the Saturday following the Winter Rally. Andy has a wonderful commentating manner, this actually makes you feel as if the event is happening as you are watching. Splendid viewing, coupled with the local television, BBC South and Southern featured AMTV footage, and Border, BBC North West and BBC Scotland also featured the event in Monday news programmes - all at prime time. A good start to the 1997 season's coverage; thanks to all who supported AMTV to enable the footage to be gathered.