



To Monte (and back)

RICHARD JENNER and **TONY SMITH** decide to grab a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity and enter the 100th Anniversary Classique to Monte Carlo. Their chariot of choice was an RV8.

In 1926, the Monte Carlo Rallye had John O'Groats (JOG) as one of the start points for the first time. There was only one JOG starter, the Right Honourable Victor Bruce with William Brunell driving an AC 2 litre tourer. Bruce went on to win the event, the first British driver to do so. About 18 months ago, my friend Tony Smith heard that Douglas Anderson of the Ecosse Rally Drivers' Club (ERDC) was asking the Automobile Club de Monaco for a JOG start in 2026, and as well as the Historique (a regularity 'concentration' rally in older cars starting from several locations), there would be a 100th Anniversary Classique event that would be more of a touring ensemble for pre-1980 cars starting only at JOG. Tony and I discussed entering, but which car would we take as we had

four eligible MGs between us? Douglas then told Tony that his 1993 RV8 would be acceptable because it was an MGB derivative, and the decision was made.

So then we started to think about car preparation. Tony's RV8 had languished unloved for several years in a lock-up until Tony rescued it. K17 MGR is one of only two surviving pre-production cars and differs from production models in that the factory commissioned a specialist to fit hydraulic power steering; this cost over £2000 and was judged too expensive to offer on a car already costing over £25,000 in 1993.

To recommission the car, Tony had it resprayed (it is Oxford Blue), had a new hood fitted, had the windscreen surround replaced with a fibreglass one (fortunately Clive Wheatley of

MGV8 Parts is an old friend), had the woodwork replaced, had new Spax shockers fitted and the seats refaced. Subsequently the front brakes and radiator have been replaced and the car has had regular servicing, so it was a very sound starting point.

Most of what needed to be added was to comply with French law – first aid kit, high viz vests for occupants to be kept in the car, breathalysers, warning triangle, spare bulbs, UK sticker, headlight deflectors etc. The most expensive item was a set of correctly marked snow tyres which are a legal requirement on some Alpine roads in winter – Tony bought All Season Michelin Cross-Climate 2s – and a pair of snow socks for the driven wheels.

There was some initial confusion over a Crit'Air sticker for French emission zones as we were told to apply for one, but then discovered that only cars with a Euro2 or better rating can have the sticker – basically, if you



have any sort of classic you have to avoid the Crit'Air zones or risk a hefty fine. As a result, one leg of the Classique had to be modified to avoid a zone, and those driving home had to check their routes carefully. One rally requirement that almost escaped our attention was to have battery terminal covers. Tony fitted a pair, and fortunately took a photo as the battery was buried under all our gear in the hood well – the photo was sufficient for scrutineering.

Then the ERDC brought forward its annual Arrochar Alps and Col de Ruisg rallies from January 2026 to December 2025 and we decided to enter the RV8 as a shakedown. Tony had bought a new Garmin SatNav and I turned up to navigate with a clipboard, map and a clip-on LED reading light with a variable yellow output. Tony surprised me by asking me to drive the Arrochar part, which would be in daylight. This was my first proper drive of an RV8 and we

could have picked an easier day – rain, drizzle, mist, standing water and two axle-deep 'puddles.' On the other hand, it was the work-up we needed.

I was very conscious that the RV8 was a B derivative. The interior has the same dimensions, but even less room due to some very well-padded seats and a large central console. The steering wheel is offset to the left, the gear change has a long throw (but is very positive) and the handbrake sticks up a lot even when off as there is no room for it between the seat base and the console. The minor controls are quite modern though, and the intermittent wiper was a real bonus.

The exhaust note from the 3.9-litre V8 is totally infectious and the torque is prodigious – I had to resist the temptation to change down all the time. The steering has great feel (but

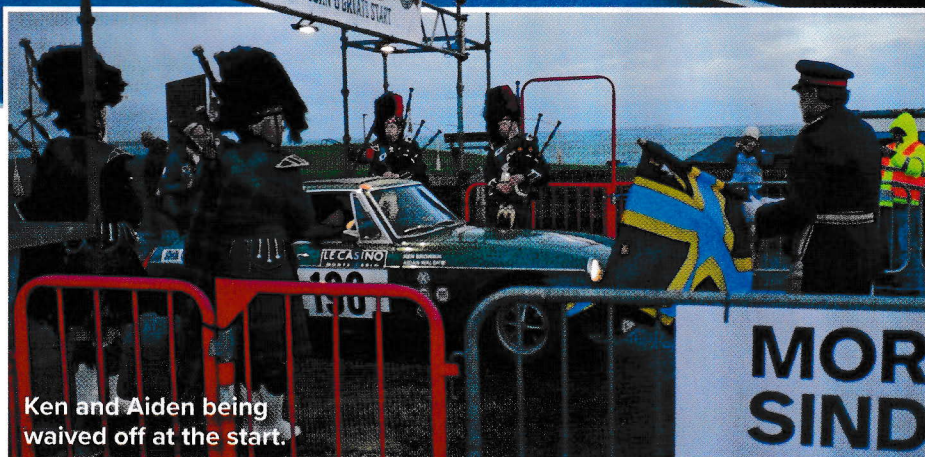
a very poor lock) and it was easy to place the car, although the rudimentary suspension gives a jiggling ride and 60mph feels quite fast even if the engine is only turning over at 2000rpm. Anyway, we arrived in one piece at Arrochar and Tony only suggested that I slowed down once!

We swapped over for the night section, and this was when we discovered that the headlights were not good enough with the righthand light badly misaligned. Subsequently new Night Breaker bulbs were fitted with cleaned headlight lenses, the beams re-set and LED auxiliary driving lights fitted, angled to illuminate the road edges. (These also made useful DRLs.) New wiper arms and blades were fitted too, and the car was given a full service. A spare fuel pump and a 'fan' belt were added to the spares and tools in the boot. Now the car was ready for the Monte, but were we?

My preparation focused on four areas. First, I searched out and booked accommodation for the nights not covered by the event organisers, including the return trip. This was quite simple online, and for the most part we used Ibis hotels. I also booked the ferry. Secondly, I refreshed on the driving rules in the Netherlands, Belgium and France; I was pleased I did this as I discovered the Dutch had introduced daylight speed restrictions on their motorways since I had lived there and there were now differing speed limits in Belgium for minor roads in Flanders and Wallonia!

My third task was to sort out packing of clothing. Space in the RV8 was very limited and we needed to take 11 days' worth of clothing (no chance for laundry) to cover sub-zero temperatures and milder (hopefully) weather at our destination. We also needed to have an outfit for the black-tie dinner at the Automobile Club de Monaco. But most of the boot space in the RV8 is taken up by a large spare wheel. We debated leaving this at home. After all, most new cars these days do not come with a spare and I've not carried one in my Midget for over a year (I have an instant inflation kit). However, psychologically you feel the need to carry a spare if the car came with one. We were also a little concerned about the state of the roads in France, especially in the alpine areas, but we needn't have been – French road surfaces are so much better than in the UK with no potholes and no patches.

In the end, the smart outfits and shoes went in the boot along with Tony's small rucksack and our two



Ken and Aiden being waved off at the start.



Deer on patrol at Kingshouse.

I also added distances in miles to the route descriptions as the odometer in the RV8 is in miles of course. Tony had bought the optional A3 route atlas which highlighted the route and had some large-scale maps for some of the towns; this was a useful addition, though not without a few errors.

Tony travelled the 185 miles from his home in East Kilbride to mine on the Black Isle on 27th January to be repositioned for the scrutineering the following day at Keiss, north of Wick. Ironically, he had the worst weather and the most snow of the whole rally near Dalwhinnie on the A9. We cleaned the car (a waste of time!) and on the 28th set off on the 105 mile drive up the A9 and A99 to Keiss where we needed to present ourselves by 1200 hours. We made our first fuel stop at Wick (no E5 98 RON available in Wick these days) and were in good time for scrutineering, which was in two parts. First our paperwork was checked, (we needed to show the V5C, evidence of insurance for both drivers and our driving licences too) and we were given route cards and the Tulip book (UK part only); secondly, the car was inspected in the local garage and we fixed our set of stickers.

It was a raw day with a chilling wind off the North Sea, so after a brief chat with friends we headed off for our pre-event accommodation at a fellow Highland MG Owner's Aurora B&B near Thurso. Our host, Richard Penman, very kindly took us to and from the pre-event dinner at the Seaview at JOG. The dinner was a lively affair attended by the Lord Lieutenant of Caithness, the Right Honourable John Archibald

small holdalls, and my small rucksack went in the hood well together with a small camera bag. All the paperwork and navigation items lived in the passenger footwell, and the snow socks went behind the passenger's seat. I found compression bags invaluable for making the most of the very limited bag space.

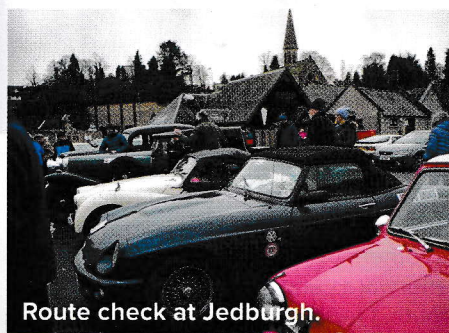
Lastly, I tried to get ahead with the navigation. We didn't get the full UK routes (two legs) until sign-on, but we had the bare bones including the route checks and passage controls in advance, and it looked likely that we would be on roads we knew well. At

sign-on we were given a Tulip book for the UK which was useful for keeping track of distances to go. I made up a document of all the postcodes and addresses for known points and used these in the SatNav.

For legs three to six we had route descriptions in Excel prepared by Oliver Tomlins, and I transposed these onto an AA map covering the whole route at 12.6 miles to the inch – while this didn't have sufficient detail for accurate navigation, it did give a good sense of where we were relative to the rest of the country which you couldn't get from a large scale (1:250,000) atlas.



In Parc Ferme assembled for the start.



Route check at Jedburgh.

In York for the passage control.



Sinclair, Viscount Thurso of Ulbster, plus PC and M Claude Plasseraud from the Automobile Club de Monaco.

The next morning, we were on the road at 7am as we needed to be in the Parc Fermé by 0745. It was dark, damp and very windy! We attended the drivers' briefing at 0800, received some route updates and got the first stamp on our route card. At 0830, the Lord Lieutenant in full regalia flagged off the first car as dawn was breaking.

The five Historique competitors were started first. This included ERDC chairman Ken Brown with co-driver Aidan Walsh in Ken's MGB GT. Then the 34 cars in the Classique followed, with us as the last car. We had been asked to be the 'closing car,' although with cars diving off for fuel and coffee stops we were not the last car on the route for long. We did halt a few times to make sure that stopped cars were coping and there were a few minor breakdowns before we had even reached Inverness, but happily none of these was an MG (there were six other MGs in the Classique). In the end our main role was to collect the timing sheets for the Historique competitors until we arrived at Hull. Last to start at

JOG were seven cars from local clubs doing a heritage run as far as Stirling.

We had an uneventful drive, stopping for a passage control in Inverness and a route check at the Kingshouse Hotel in Glencoe where the resident red deer were policing the parking. The last passage control before the overnight accommodation at North Queensferry was at Stirling Castle. This was quite an event with thousands of spectators, live entertainment and outside catering. The event had received a lot of local publicity, and Ken and Tony had visited several schools in the lead-up with their cars which over 300 children had seen; pleasingly, one young girl recognized Tony's car in the crowded parking area.

The cars were re-started using a ramp which proved to have a break-over angle that was a bit too much for some cars (the Frogeye was caught by its exhaust and had to back off for

repairs) and we decided not to risk the RV8. A little before our dinner table time of 2000 hours, we were checked in at North Queensferry having covered 320 miles.

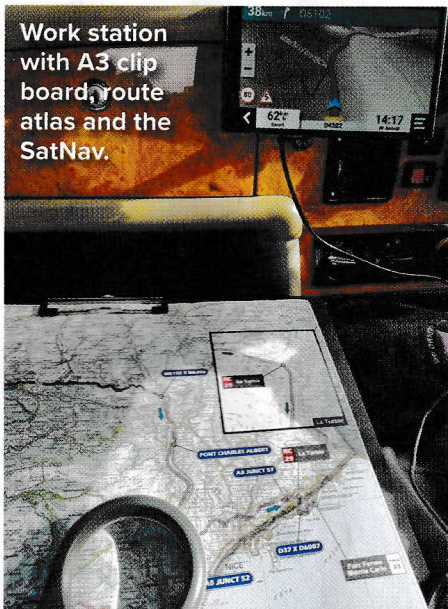
Leg 2 was straightforward. The route was nearly the full length of the A68, then a bit of A1M before a passage control in the centre of York followed by a run to the Hull ferry. We had some misgivings about the Edinburgh ring road on a Friday morning so had an early start, but it was the clearest I have seen it. Consequently we were one of the first cars to arrive at the route check at Jedburgh Abbey where we were greeted by local car club members.

As we headed southwards, the skies blackened and the visibility over Carters Bar in rain and some sleet was pretty poor. Our next route check was Pierce Bridge, and then we had an unpleasant dash down the A1M in heavy spray. The A59 took us into York easily enough for our passage control at the York Eye. Here we snapped the oldest car in the Classique, a 1934 Lagonda M45 Tourer driven by James Mann and Richard Watton. Incredibly, James's grandfather had completed

'At 08.30 the Lord Lieutenant in full regalia flagged off the first car as dawn was breaking'



The 1934 Lagonda.



Work station with A3 clip board, route atlas and the SatNav.



The snow plough was hard to spot from the righthand seat.

the rally in this car 90 years ago!

The last part to the Hull ferry was straightforward and we were boarded on the *Pride of Rotterdam*. The ferry was very smart, and despite Force 6 winds we had a smooth overnight crossing following an excellent dinner and arrived at Rotterdam on time – where it was wet again! So far, we had covered 563 miles from JOG and had a planned 940 left to go before reaching Monte Carlo.

Leg 3 was from Rotterdam to Rheims, starting with motorway until southeast of Brussels. We were expecting a slow passage through passport control because of the new requirements of the ETIAS, but the Koninklijke Marechaussee were exceptionally disorganised as four lanes of traffic tried to merge into one passport booth lane. Apparently the fingerprint machine was not working, and once we reached the booth we were through in seconds – unfortunately the queue thus far had taken us an hour and a half. Matters were not improved by the total closure of the A15 as a result of a major shunt, so we crawled through the various diversions taking care not to be routed into the centre of Rotterdam. Eventually we cleared the incident and had a trouble-free drive southwards, bypassing Antwerp, Brussels and Namur with no delays.

We turned off for Dinant and the first route check at the Hotel Pont-a-Lesse Castle which we found without trouble. Here we swapped drivers with Tony taking the controls. Our rally almost ended minutes later as we exited the check on a winding uphill single track road and a small van came round a blind corner at breakneck speed. Tony only avoided a head-on collision by



On the finishing ramp.

taking to the grass. We then hit a road closure so had to divert off the route briefly, trying to pass the information to others via WhatsApp. Not long afterwards and not quite back on the route, I missed a turn, but was able to rectify matters by taking to some 'white roads' on the map and using the sun (which was out for a change). The white roads turned out to be unmetalled farm tracks, but were fine if taken slowly. The rest of the run to Rheims passed uneventfully and we were pleased to find our hotel after 295 miles.



The first route check on the continent at Pont-a-Lesse.



‘The route became ever more scenic, and I made a note of several places I’d like to visit again’

Rheims was where we said goodbye to the Historique cars as they went through scrutineering for a late start. Our drive was to Bourg-en-Bresse, and we soon came across a major error in the optional A3 route atlas which put us on a section of péage when in fact the route description had us going on a more direct D road. Lesson learnt – when in doubt, follow the route description! The various route checks were now in the form of answers to clues. We had a break at the route check in Bar-sur-Aube where we had to count the number of trees in front of the Mairie. Soon after, we passed the memorial to de Gaulle close to his home in Colombey-les-Deux-Églises.

The route became more and more scenic, and I made a note of several places I would like to visit again. We crossed the Saône at Gray and continued southwards through Dole. After a lot more ‘D’ road miles we entered Bourg-en-Bresse looking for the passage control at the Best Western. We saw signs to the hotel, followed the SatNav into a pedestrianized area and to a closed road (the cathedral was being renovated and the scaffolding had

reduced the road to a pathway). After five more orbits with the SatNav going mental about us driving the wrong way down a one-way street (we weren’t), I suggested we stopped by the church and I walked the last 100 metres to get the card stamped. We then found our hotel without any fuss and joined Jim and Henrietta Simpson (who were driving a 1969 Mini Cooper S) for dinner in the local pizzeria.

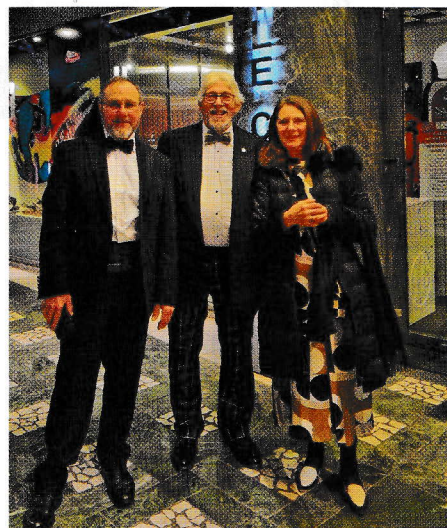
Leg 5, the drive to Gap, was the most scenic in my opinion. We went briefly off-piste to find petrol as we weren’t sure what we would find on the route. Tony reckons the RV8 has an effective tank capacity of 10 gallons, less if it’s pointing uphill as the tank blows back. We normally filled up once the gauge was between a ¼ and ½ full and we had no problem finding 98 RON fuel in France.

The D158 from La Frette southwards was the first taste of some proper wiggles. We were in need of sustenance, but were not sure what we could find open on a Monday. Fortunately, Le Pergros in Varacieux came up trumps. I felt sorry for the waitress as it was her first day and she had to contend with two foreigners, one speaking Franglais and the other Glaswegian. Nevertheless we had an excellent tart and coffee.

The next stage was the Spectacular Combe Laval Balcony Road as we headed to Die. We started to see snow on the verges, but the road surface was dry and clear and the temperatures well above freezing. The road was spectacular. We then drove the Col de Rousset via the tunnel.

As we approached Gap, the WhatsApp started to get busy. Apparently the restaurant in the main hotel wasn’t open, so arrangements were being made to sort out the route cards elsewhere. As time was getting on, we decided to go directly to our hotel then sort the cards out in the morning. I’d booked us somewhere on the edge of town and it was clearly somewhere that had seen better days, but the restaurant was open and had a choice of five main courses on the menu (always a good sign).

Our last leg was relatively short, a nominal 160 miles from Gap to Monte. We had been warned about roadworks entering Sisteron and told not to go into the old town



Richard, Tony and Henrietta Simpson outside ready for the gala dinner.

under any circumstances. We headed along the Route Napoleon to a stop in the market square in St-Andre-les-Alpes. There were some great views again, but the message came via WhatsApp that we needed to assemble by 1430 hours in a car park at La Turbie for a convoy into Monte Carlo; this meant we had to get a wiggle on. Due to a bit of miscommunication, we missed our motorway junction off the A8 but fortunately still made the car park on time and took our place as the last car in the convoy. While the convoy idea seemed good at the time, we were soon separated at various junctions and were pleased to re-insert ourselves halfway into the convoy as we approached the finish. Jim Simpson kindly took the photo of us on the finish ramp.

We had a well-needed rest day after the finish and enjoyed being tourists before preparing for the black-tie gala dinner in the Automobile Club. This was a splendid affair, and we were presented with our finishers’ medals and also thanked for collecting the Historique paperwork while in the UK.

The next day we started for home, a mere 1246 miles to East Kilbride. Looking back, this was probably a once in a lifetime experience for us both. We saw some fantastic scenery, had some great cuisine and made new friends, while the RV8 served us very well and prompted a lot of interest. Our thanks go to June and Douglas Anderson and to Oliver Tomlins and the Automobile Club de Monaco for making it all possible.

