

THE  TIMES

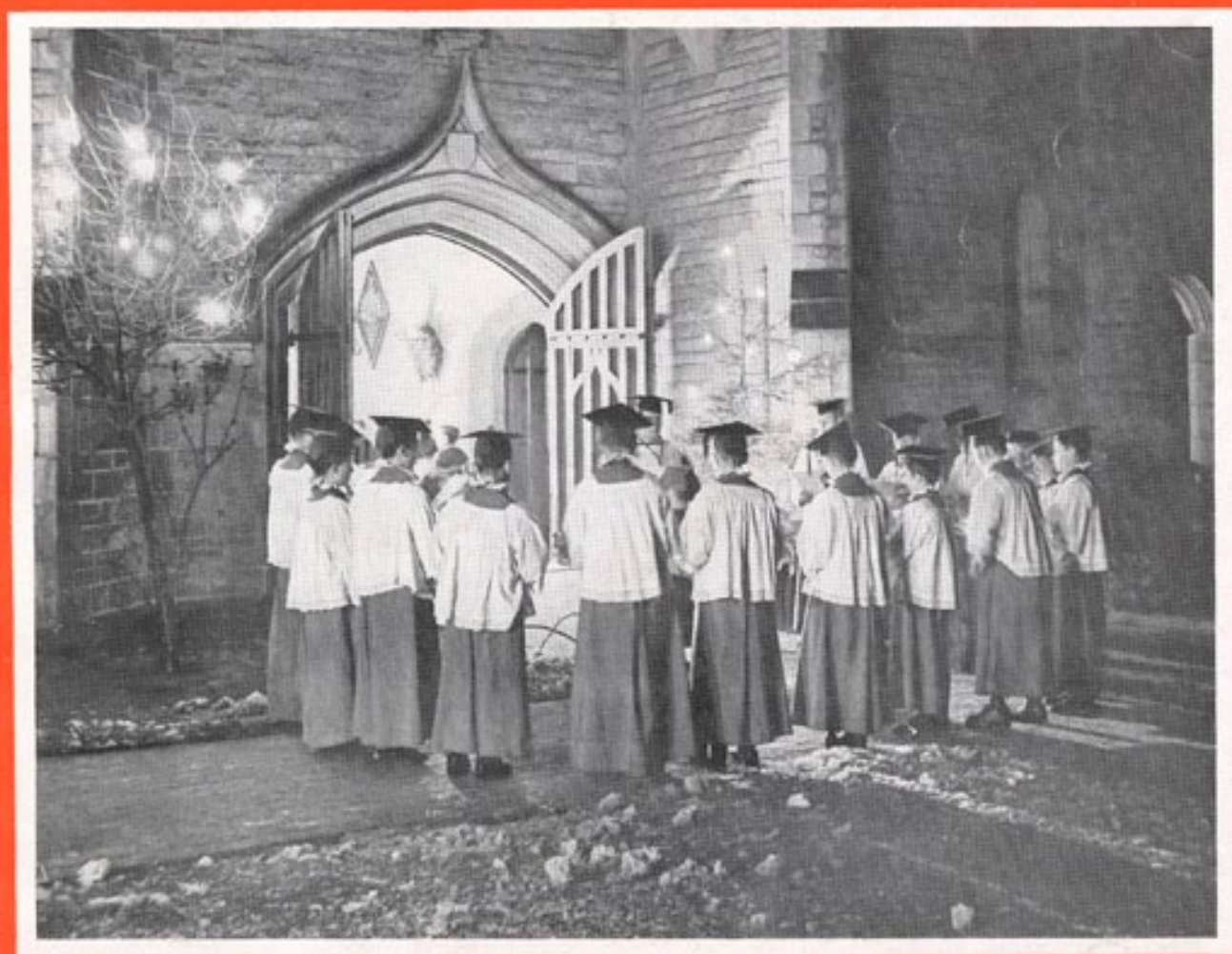
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THE CAROL SINGERS—BOYS OF HERITAGE CRAFT SCHOOL, CHAILEY, SUSSEX

Travellers' Tales

IT HAS BEEN suggested that an account of my experiences in this year's Alpine Rally would make a "Traveller's Tale" and at the same time explain how motor rallies, which have become so popular since the war, are run.

There are two great international motor rallies, the Alpine in the summer and the Monte Carlo in the winter, with more than the difference in season to distinguish them.

In the Monte Carlo Rally the competitors set off from various starting points in Europe and are called upon to travel a route of some 2,000 miles at an average speed of 31 m.p.h., including all stops for fuel and food. This means living in the car for nearly three days and nights and, as the routes consist of main roads throughout, the

rally is more a test of personal stamina than of the car. On the easier sections it is possible to get enough time in hand to have proper meals and a shave, but dozing in the back of a car is no substitute for real sleep, and fatigue steadily builds up as the rally proceeds. What gives the Monte Carlo Rally its adventurous appeal is the possibility of encountering snow storms and icy roads which do, of course, call for good handling qualities in a car as well as driving skill. Even with a crew of three, taking it in turns to drive, navigate, and sleep, everyone is pretty weary by the time the journey is completed—assuming that you finish the course, which is by no means certain.

The Alpine Rally, on the other hand, consists of a series of very long daytime runs with a night's rest between them (except for the first stage, which includes a night section). Although it demands a good deal of personal endurance, this rally is a much greater test of the car, because the 2,000-mile route includes many mountain passes—over 30 are climbed and descended in the five days—and the hardest driving is required in order to keep up the proper average speed. A large part of the course is covered in the lower gears, which are used not only for climbing but to save the brakes coming down the passes, while the springs are given a tremendous pounding by the speed at which the roughest surfaces have to be taken.

In previous years I have covered the Alpine Rally by pushing ahead of the competitors—keeping to the main roads and avoiding some of the passes—in order to get to the night's stopping places before they arrive. This year I was invited to ride in one of the competing cars, which meant that I would have to carry out the duties of navigator, time-keeper and reserve driver, as well as collecting material for a daily story. In the Aston Martin entered by my colleague of the *Daily Herald*, Tommy Wisdom, who is a racing motorist of considerable repute, I could not have chosen a finer car to travel in nor a finer driver.

Shortly before midnight on July 11 we awaited our turn to enter the closed car park on the quayside at Marseilles. Our car had been left in the park after it had been examined by the officials earlier that day to ensure that it was a standard model.

Five minutes before we were due to begin the rally we were allowed to enter the park, stow our gear,

start the car and move up to the starting line. It was an exciting scene, with glaring arc lights for the television cameras and a vast crowd of spectators. Then the route card was handed to me through the window and we were waved on. My job at that moment (as it was on leaving every control) was to make sure that the trip indicator on the speedometer had been set to zero, to check my chronometers (three in a wooden box) with the official clock, and to set two of the chronometers working from 12 o'clock—the third being used as a normal clock. Why 12 o'clock? Because the route card stated the total time—say two hours 45 minutes—we were allowed in which to reach the next control, and by starting the clocks at 12 o'clock I was able to judge how we were getting on more easily. My next job was to work out the actual time we were due to arrive at the next control, which was done by adding the hours and minutes shown on the route card to our starting time. The organizers cunningly avoid telling you the actual time you are due at the next control, leaving you to work this out for yourself—with all the consequences of losing marks for being too early or too late if you make a mistake. This gives rise to frequent panics on the navigator's part when he is about to have the route card stamped by the timekeeper's clock (which registers the time) at the controls, and whenever possible I got Wisdom to check my figures before having the card stamped.

ALPINE MOTOR RALLY

The hazards of a 2,000 mile route
through many mountain passes

BY HAROLD NOCKOLDS
The Motoring Correspondent of
The Times



The Aston Martin ascending one of the 30-odd mountain passes traversed in the rally. At this height patches of snow still linger in sheltered places in spite of the intense July sunshine.

The average speed for cars in our class was nearly 37 m.p.h., which meant that we had to travel just over nine miles every quarter of an hour in order to keep on schedule. Accordingly my next job was to keep an eye on the trip recorder and tell Wisdom every quarter of an hour how many minutes we had in hand or in arrears. In addition, I had to trace our route on maps through France, Italy, Austria, Switzerland, back into Italy, and to the finish at Cannes, so that we did not waste any time deciding which way to go at crossroads and turnings. I also had to work out when we ought to stop for petrol, bearing in mind that we should not have time to do this without endangering our average speed on certain sections where the controls were close together. Finally, I had to have approximately the right amount of money ready at each petrol station—in French, Italian, Austrian, or Swiss currency—so that no time was lost in waiting for change. An incidental job on the passes was to sound the horn in the Continental manner at every blind corner—Wisdom's hands being fully occupied with the steering wheel and gear lever.

We had barely started from Marseilles before I

was considerably put out by finding the electric torch would not work. I had taken the precaution of getting a spare battery, but I had neglected to bring a spare torch, with the result that I had to do the best I could by the dim light illuminating the instruments. Fortunately the night route was easy to follow over fast main roads through Aix-en-Provence and Gap to Guillestre, where we arrived with nearly half an hour in hand just as dawn was breaking.

At Guillestre we carried out the procedure which marked the end of every stage during the rally and the beginning of the next. My job was to stand beside the timekeeper's clock at the side of the road and wait for the exact moment to arrive when the route card could be stamped without loss of marks for being too early or too late. (You are allowed a "tolerance" of two minutes each side of the correct minute, but it is usual to make sure of losing no marks by being "bang on" your time.) Meanwhile Wisdom moved the car up alongside and put the speedometer trip indicator back to zero. I would then have the card stamped, nip smartly into the car, and away we would go—with myself settling down to the routine of speed and distance calculations which I have already described. On this occasion not a second could be wasted, because there was only a short distance to go to the next control and the Col d'Izoard had to be climbed and descended on the way, making our average speed of 37 m.p.h. an extremely difficult task.

The Col d'Izoard is a narrow road which is not normally used by motor traffic—it was built as a military road—and it is considered by experienced rallyists as the most frightening of all the passes in the rally. In the higher reaches the road runs along the face of a vast, steeply sloping scree without any wall or marking posts on the outer side. The whole district is bleak and devoid of vegetation. Altogether it is a disturbing initiation for anyone who has not taken part in the rally before. Although I was fully occupied in trying to do my sums while the car was rocking from side to side round endless corners, leaving me little time to contemplate the hideous precipices and chasms we were skirting as fast as Wisdom could drive, I found myself feeling slightly sick. Before we reached the top I decided that I was being altogether too tense. Becoming a determined fatalist, I did not give this aspect of the rally another thought for the rest of the trip. Returning to my chronometers, I realized that this section was going to be what rallyists call extremely "tight." We raced up to the control at Mont Genevre with my chronometer registering the exact minute we were due to clock in.

Taking it quietly after this all-out run, Wisdom handed over the wheel to me so that he could doze and refresh himself for the tasks ahead. Dropping down to the plains of Northern Italy, we passed through Turin

and took the *autostrada* to the racing track at Monza, where each car was timed over one kilometre from a standing start. The heat was intense, and we were allowed a rest of two hours in which to have lunch (a ham roll and Coco-cola) followed by a sleep in the shade of some trees. On the road once more we headed for Bolzano and the most difficult part of the day's run—the Pordoi and Falzarego passes leading to the finishing control at Cortina d'Ampezzo. It was on this last section that we unhappily lost 40 marks through being four minutes late. This was not the fault of the Aston Martin nor of Wisdom—I can only think that I failed in my duty of keeping him completely *au fait* with our position. Having travelled 607 miles since leaving Marseilles, we left the Aston Martin in the *parc fermé* and went to our hotel.

The next day's run was perhaps the most exciting in the whole rally. A course of 189 miles, bringing the competitors back to Cortina, was closed to all other traffic for an Italian road race, the Coppa Dolomiti, and the rally cars were sent round this course before the race started. Our average speed was raised to 41 m.p.h. and the run began with a timed ascent of the Falzarego pass. In these racing conditions it is "safe" to use the full width of the road, going round left-hand corners on the "wrong" side, as there is no danger of meeting another car coming towards you. (In point of fact Wisdom did collide head-on with an American car which had strayed on to the circuit during the 1950 rally, injuring himself and his wife, who was accompanying him.) During our climb up the Falzarego we fell behind schedule, as indeed did everyone, but later on we dropped down to straight main roads where the speedometer needle sometimes crept past the 100 m.p.h. mark. It was exciting to approach a town at this speed along a road lined with spectators, braking and swinging through a large square before a vast crowd. Then it started to rain, and the speed of the Aston Martin was mercifully reduced. The roads of Northern Italy are terrifyingly slippery in the rain, and a British driver, used to non-skid roads at home, can easily find himself in uncontrollable skids. This did in fact happen on that day, and the British contingent lost several of its members when their cars crashed into walls, signposts, and other hard objects. For all Wisdom's experience—he has twice won his class in the Mille Miglia—we ourselves nearly came to grief on a sharp right-hand bend with a building beyond on which was written in large letters the word "ADAGIO." Wisdom had just said something about "I suppose this is where the dancing girls come from," when the front wheels ceased to grip the road and we slid straight on into a wall—much to the joy of a row of small boys who were sitting on top and obviously waiting for victims. When we tried to move backwards we found that the front mudguard was bent into the tyre, but some blows with a hammer soon released it. We finished that day with five minutes in hand, after



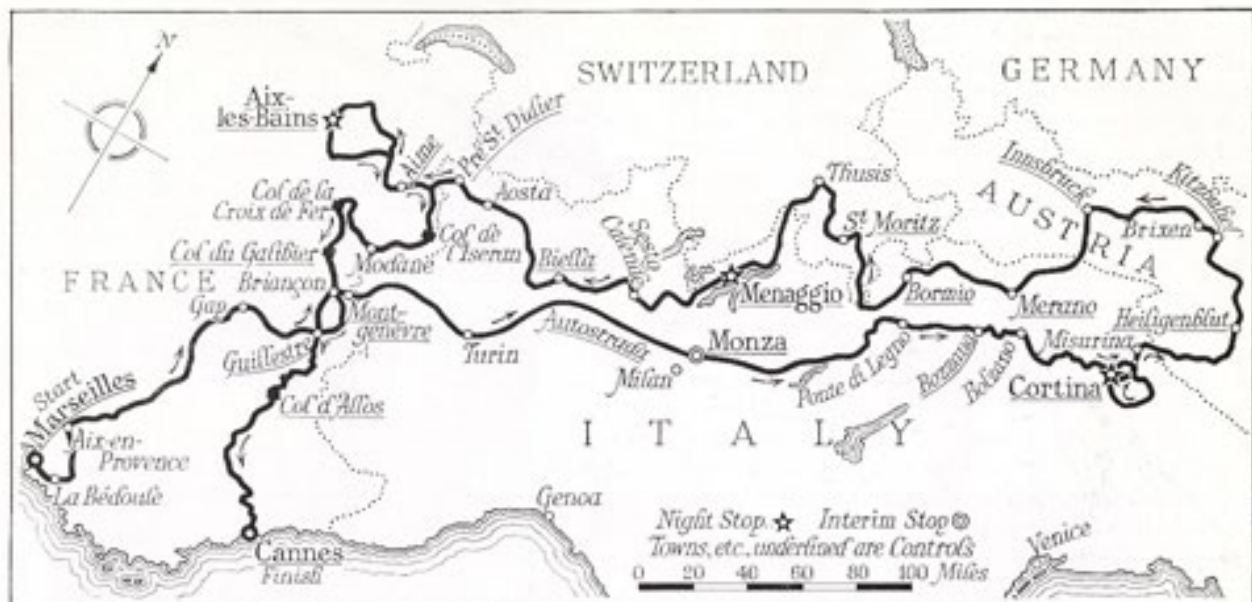
At the frontiers everything was done to expedite the passage of the cars competing in the Alpine Rally. The photograph shows the Italian frontier on the Petit St. Bernard pass.



The Aston Martin and its crew on arrival at Cannes, the finishing point of the rally.



The end of the rally. The Aston Martin stops with its wheels astride the white line on completing the test of acceleration, braking, and manoeuvrability at Cannes.



This map shows the tortuous route of 2,000 miles through the mountains of Southern Europe which had to be completed in five days at an average speed of 37 m.p.h.

passing through one of the heaviest rain storms I have ever experienced.

The next day's run, from Cortina to Menaggio on Lake Como, was 500 miles in length and included a timed ascent of the 9,000-ft. Stelvio pass (where the Aston Martin won its class) and the passage of the Monte Giovo, Bernina, Julier, and Splügen passes. We collected our car from the closed park shortly after 6 o'clock in the morning and were hard at it every moment of the day till we reached Menaggio at a quarter to nine that night. We had only a few minutes in hand at the most at each control, and our food that day consisted of one ham roll apiece. But we had not lost any more marks. The hotel at Menaggio was unable to cope with the inrush of tired and dusty rally drivers; so having collected some information we adjourned to a workman's café to write our stories over a glass of beer while the hotel staff got things organized. At 10 o'clock I was telephoning my story to Printing House Square. Before I left London I had arranged to be called at the various places I was staying at during the rally; this arrangement worked perfectly and the paper carried a story of the rally every day.

The time had now come for us to think seriously about our tyres. At the speeds we were driving on rough mountain roads it was impossible to complete the rally with one set of tyres without running the risk of punctures causing us to lose marks. And so in addition to two spare wheels we had two new covers stowed in the space behind our seats. We decided to change the rear wheels during the course of the day's run, choosing a place when we had sufficient time in hand. This turned out to be Biella, where we worked like fury to change the wheels as well as

to refuel the car. For my part I have never sweated so much before, and I was thankful we still had time in hand to gulp down a Coca-cola before we set off again.

This day's run of 307 miles to Aix-les-Bains was regarded as an easy day by the organizers, but it included one very tight section of 42 miles from Pré St. Didier over the Petit St. Bernard pass to Aime, where our 37 m.p.h. average would obviously be hard to achieve. When I had the card stamped and leapt towards the car I found Wisdom in despair because the self-starter would not work. I pushed the car backwards down the road, but the engine would not turn. The next step was to see whether the starter could be freed by turning the shaft with a spanner, but by the time this had been done and the engine was working again we were 15 minutes behind our proper starting time. As we rushed round the continual hairpin bends of the pass we had 19 miles to go and 20 minutes in which to get there and the position was much the same as we went down the other side. Somehow—I can never understand quite how it was done—we hurtled into the town of Aime and had the card stamped without loss of marks—but we were into the second minute of our "tolerance."

When we left the Aston Martin in the closed car park at Aix-les-Bains that night we took with us the two used wheels which had been changed at Biella and the two new covers, carrying them (an idea suggested by my wife) on a broomstick we had in the car. These were given to a garage to be fitted during the evening, so that we should have two spare wheels with new tyres for the last day's run.

It is characteristic of the Alpine Rally that the last day is the most difficult of all—440 miles from Aix-les-Bains to Cannes with a series of mountain

passes taken in close succession with hardly any opportunity for a breather. The day began badly with a grating noise under the car. This grew progressively worse until there was a loud crash and the exhaust pipe was trailing along the ground, having broken at the rear end of the silencer. We jacked the car up and I produced some wire, which Wisdom discovered was too fragile for the job, so I set out to find some more in the hamlet where we had stopped. I helped myself to a strand of thickish wire from a garden fence, but this turned out to be too thick. So we lashed the exhaust pipe together with some cord as a temporary repair until we could reach a garage. Just before we found the garage the whole silencer broke loose and clattered along the road behind us. I luckily remembered to take a piece of rag with me when I went to retrieve it, because it was more than somewhat hot. The French mechanics quickly removed the tail end of the pipe, and we set off once more with an open exhaust which deafened us in the coupé body of the Aston Martin. By now we were hot and dirty, and Wisdom remarked that there might just be time for a quick drink at the top of the Iseran pass, the next control, provided I had a few francs

handy. It was then that I found my wallet was not in the proper pocket of my bush shirt, and I felt convinced I must have left it at the garage. After some moments of frenzy I found I was sitting on it.

At the next refuelling stop we changed the front wheels, as the tyres were getting dangerously smooth. The penalty for finishing with a faulty exhaust system was five marks, and to avoid this we would have to make up sufficient time to get the pipe re-fitted at a garage. This we failed to do, although we arrived at Cannes with ten minutes in hand. The last part of that run was a torment of heat, noise, and thirst. Although we had lost 45 marks and failed to win one of the coveted Alpine cups awarded to those who finished without penalization, we had made the fastest time in our class in most of the speed tests—and above all we had completed the rally. There was some satisfaction in this because of the 95 cars that set out from Marseilles, only 23 reached Cannes. Even then the rally was not quite over, for we had to undergo a test of braking, acceleration, and manoeuvring on the front at Cannes before we could leave our gallant car in the *parc fermé* for the last time for its final examination.