



RALLY GOOD FUN

This month, whatever the weather, enthusiasts will climb into their classic cars and navigate their way from Land's End to John O' Groats in **one of Britain's great motoring adventures**

Words **Malcolm McKay**

What possesses grown men and women to get into cars that are up to 75 years old,

some without heaters and even without a roof, in the middle of winter, and drive them through the night in rain, snow, fog and all that the British weather can throw at them, from end to end of the country? And not just end to end – they take in some very tough loops into Wales, the Pennines and the Scottish mountains along the way, hardly stopping as they drive half the first night and all of the third.

You might think this is a sport for the young and foolish, but not a bit of it: many competitors are well into their seventies. LeJog, shorthand for Land's End to John O' Groats, is Britain's last great adventure: exhausting, infuriating, uncomfortable, but ultimately exhilarating when – if – you finish.

I've done it myself, in a Sixties Rochdale Olympic. We battled through ice and snow until we reached the far northeast of Scotland in the middle of the final night. Our dynamo brushes had worn out and the headlights were getting dimmer and dimmer. We finally halted, miles from anywhere.

I dismantled the dynamo, put tape between the brushes and springs, taped a torch to the bonnet and coasted downhill. We managed another five miles. We slept in sleeping bags, almost freezing to death, before we got a tow next morning. We were the last car in at John O' Groats, but the thrill of making it against the odds made it worth every moment of hardship.

'I sometimes wonder why we do it,' laughs Bob McClean, 62, from Cumbria. But he and his wife, Sue, 55, share a passion for rallying. 'We've been doing it since the Seventies. I'd restored our 1962 Rover 100 in the Nineties when Sue saw an article about the LeJog Reliability Trial – all-night navigation, long distance... It sounded great. I finished' ▶

Are we nearly there yet?

Bob and Sue McClean in their 1962 Rover 100 on the home stretch approaching John O' Groats



I think we should have turned off earlier: Bob and Sue McClean at Tissington Ford, Derbyshire, on day two and (opposite) at the finish with events director Peter Nedin (on the left)



'Do we argue? Yes, definitely - she tells me what I'm doing wrong, then I do what I'm told! Usually when we go wrong it's because I'm not listening as much as I should...'

For those who want to get a non-competitive feel for the event, and without the extra challenges of the tests, there is the option of the Classic Car Tour, following the same route.



◆ Tackling the Classic Car Tour for the first time this year are Stuart and Louise Wagg (above) who are doing it as a 50th birthday present to themselves.

'We'd done classic car runs for charity in our Ford Anglia, then one day Louise said, "Wouldn't it be nice to have a rally car?"' said Stuart.

'That was it: I bought a Mini on eBay and rebuilt it. We've done one-day rallies and navigation courses, but never anything like this. Our main ambition for this year is simply to get to the end! If that goes well, maybe we'll have a go at the Reliability Trial in the future.'

◁ preparing the car only two weeks before the event, but we completed the rally and we got the bug. The Rover is comfortable and carries all the spares we might need. It's not quick or easy to manoeuvre, but reliability is the key.

'It's hard work and can be really challenging - you have to stay on your toes all the time to achieve a Gold medal. You need to keep your energy level up and make sure you're concentrating. You have to pace yourself: often backing off is the best policy. Sue and I work as a team - I do all the serious driving and she does the serious navigation. But she drives for the easy 'link'

sections on main roads, so I can shut my eyes for an hour or two. Do we argue? Yes, definitely - she tells me what I'm doing wrong, then I do what I'm told! Usually, when we go wrong it's because I'm not listening as much as I should...

'One of the attractions is the camaraderie: if you see someone stopped, you try to help. We've made real friends along the way. And the organisers are outstanding - nothing fazes them, even when we had about two feet of snow last year. We do hit things occasionally: the Rover turns into a two-ton sledge on ice, and we knocked down half the parapet of a bridge in Wales once -

which cost us £250 to pay for repairs, but we've now finished 10 LeJogs. We've had a couple of breakdowns, but we've only needed the event's breakdown service once - I can usually repair it myself.'

Historic Endurance Rallying Events (HERO), the organisers, seek out the most obscure, steep and twisting country lanes, with hidden junctions to find in the dark. On some stretches competitors need to average an exact set speed for mile after mile - always under 30mph, but still a challenge on unknown roads in the dark. There are Special Tests, complex routes around cones and buildings on private land, army

proving grounds or car parks, which must be driven as fast as you can. To win the ultimate Gold medal, you need to reach the required standard everywhere, whatever the state of the weather, the car and your own tiredness. It's an incredible challenge, which has attracted 124 people this year.

For Richard Jeffcoate and Jim May from Kent, just getting to the start and back from the finish will add more than another 1,000 miles to the 1,550 covered on the event.

'It's an adventure,' says Richard who will tackle the Reliability Trial for the first time this December. 'If you mention it to anyone who's

done it they go, "Ooh, wow..." It's legendary. LeJog sounds like a jolly stroll, but the reality is very different: it really gets the adrenalin flowing, wondering, "Are we going to get there? What's that noise?"

'I see people riding bicycles from Land's End to John O' Groats, which takes so long it must be awful, but the thought of doing it in an old car in the middle of the night, in winter, is thoroughly exciting! Our car is a 1937 Riley Special. It's a real Mr Toad-type car. It has a hood, but no doors, so it's a bit of a struggle to get in and out... but we hope the constant blast of freezing cold air will keep us awake. We can't wait! ◆



HERO's LeJog Reliability Trial and Classic Car Tour are open only to cars built before 1984.

◆ They start at 8am from Land's End (above) on Saturday, December 10.

◆ And they finish at John O' Groats at 9:30am on the following Tuesday.

◆ In between, look out for the cars at Cardiff Gate Services on the M4 around 5pm on Saturday, leaving the White House Hotel by Telford racecourse at 9am on Sunday, arriving at Gosforth Marriott Hotel around 8pm on Sunday and leaving there at 8am on Monday.

◆ For other spectator points, visit heroevents.eu.

Snow problem

Hazardous driving conditions in 2010 only added to the fun for the drivers who tackled the course in classic Maseratis, Austin Healeys and Minis

