

## The Liège Rally—Part Two

This article, by Andrew Bodman, first appeared in the Historic Rally Car Register Northants and Bedfordshire Area Newsletter—October 2020. It has been reprinted by kind permission of Andrew.

*The only Mini ever to finish the Liège Rally was a works built Morris Cooper S in '64 crewed by John Wadsworth and Mike Wood. Although John and Mike were already friends, both being from the town of Burnley, it was the first time they had been teamed together as a factory BMC crew. They both had useful experience of the Liège having contested the rally in '63 in separate cars.*

*In 2005 Mike wrote about their exploits on this event in a book called "A Mini and The Last Liège". This article is based entirely on Mike's book and endeavours to pick out some of the main points of their event.*

*When Mike first received a call from Stuart Turner to say he would be doing the Liège with John, Stuart advised that the service team would not be carrying any spares for the Cooper S, nor many tyres. Stuart also indicated the Mini crew were not expected to finish!*

*John was also requested to help out on the event recce. He accompanied Don Barrow, Tony Ambrose and Rauno Aaltonen during different parts of the reconnaissance work. The experience and knowledge that John gained during these trips was to be most useful during the rally.*

*John and Mike flew to Liège a few days before the start, while BMC brought out their Mini Cooper S along with three Healey 3000s and two MGBs. John and Mike stayed in the same hotel as the rest of the BMC team, which was the Grand Hotel Moderne, in the centre of Liège. Bed and breakfast for three nights in a twin room (prior to the start) cost just £15.7.1.*



**John and Mike in their Mini in the middle of the main street in Spa prior to their three abreast start at approximately 11:00 pm. Note the central white line under the Cooper S. To the left of the Mini is the Gordon King/Graham Marlow Cortina GT while the car on the right side has not been identified**



**John Wadsworth (left) and Mike Wood after scrutineering, which had taken place at the civilised time of 11:00 on the morning of the start day**

In '64, the event ran from Tuesday to Saturday rather than Wednesday to Sunday.

Scrutineering

went without incident. Mike was glad to have BMC's route instructions which had been prepared

by Tony Ambrose and Henry Liddon. These were very useful as the organisers did not provide a Tulip road book. Another valuable document was the BMC team instruction book. This primarily covered service point information, but also included other details such as hotel

bookings, telephone numbers for rally HQ and so on. Stuart Turner indicated that, as the rally was virtually a road race, service points would in many cases be simply a “pit stop”; there would not be time for anything more extensive.

As explained in part one of this article, the maximum permitted lateness for crews varied during the event. It started at one hour at Spa and had been increased in steps until there was three hours’ maximum lateness for competitors by the time they reached Bled in Yugoslavia. Much later in the rally it would be wound back so that the maximum permitted lateness became one hour again.

The first major issue that John and Mike encountered on the event, other than dropping time (mostly small amounts) at several controls, was on the section from Novi to Zagreb (Yugoslavia). An official issued a piece of paper which indicated that the official route was blocked and that they should divert via a list of five place names. Finding the correct roads was difficult—Mike said serious map reading was required—and the diversion added approximately 70 km to the section.



**On the Passo di Xomo in Italy, the poor road surface is visible, although much worse surfaces lay ahead in Yugoslavia**

Then at the Belgrade control they were issued with another route change. Mike’s map reading took them through the middle of a coal mining complex (at shift changeover time!). They were eventually able to rejoin the original rally route having covered an additional 85 km. No additional time allowance had been notified for either diversion.

The weather had been hot and dry which created dusty conditions. So, watermelons being handed out to crews as they crossed the border into Bulgaria were most welcome and helped combat some of the feelings of dehydration.

With all the hammering the sumpguard had received on the rough roads, the front securing bolts had broken and the guard was dragging on the ground. This limited the Cooper S’s speed on the tarmac roads to the halfway point in Sofia.

By now John and Mike were running 2hrs and 20 mins late with a maximum lateness of 3 hrs permitted here. Much of this lateness was a result of the two official diversions. How would they complete the second half of the rally with only 40 mins remaining of their maximum lateness? The task appeared to be hopeless. Retiring now would be an attractive option with a hotel room available to address their mounting exhaustion. Having considered this, they thought it best to continue, but would seek the advice of the service crew.



The section from Perast to Stolac was expected to be one of the toughest and not at all well suited to Minis with a high ridge in the middle of the "road". During the recce, John estimated that they would probably drop 30 mins on this section; in fact, they lost 47 mins. John and Mike now only had a 34 min lateness buffer before exclusion.

The next section was to Split, set at an average speed of 75 kph, which saw 28 mins being lost; the crew were now only 6 mins from exclusion. Shortly before arriving at Split, John and Mike started hearing a clicking noise from one of the constant velocity joints. There was a refuel performed by the BMC service crew (of Doug Watts and Roy Brocklehurst) at Split but no time for any work on the Mini.

The next point on the official route instructions was a passage control in Bribir. When John and Mike reached this village there was no sign of a control outside the post office where it should have been. After they had been up and down the main street a couple of times they decided they could not afford to waste any more time looking for the control. But this was nonetheless a worry; would they be disqualified because they had not received the required rubber stamp?

They made up 6 mins on the way to the next time control at Obravak, which gave them a 12 mins buffer before exclusion. By now they needed new tyres and were desperately low on petrol. Brian Moylan was running the BMC emergency service point immediately after the control and he had been on his own in this village for two days and one night. He was able to supply one new tyre (fitted to a wheel) and refuel the Mini.



**Approaching a control in Lindau, Germany with Mike driving. The sump guard is still held up by the nylon towrope which had been fitted in Sofia.**

The next control was in Novi and it was after this point that the maximum permitted lateness started to be wound back, by 15 mins initially. However, John and Mike made up 15 minutes on the way to Novi, so they now had a buffer of 12 mins before exclusion. The organisers continued to wind back the maximum lateness allowance by 15 mins at most of the subsequent controls. By the time crews entered Italy one hour of maximum lateness had been wound back by the organisers.

The service crew had switched the Cooper S from Weathermaster tyres to SPs during the course of two service points. John and Mike continued to run with only a small buffer away from maximum lateness. They stopped at petrol stations a couple of times to top up just in case a service crew was missing. However, all the BMC service points were manned.

By the control at Bagolino, all of the additional lateness that had been granted during the event (with the exception of the additional two hours granted at Sofia to reflect route diversions) had now been wound back, just as the organisers had originally planned. So, competitors now had the original one hour of maximum permitted lateness plus the unplanned additional two hours issued at Sofia.

The classic group of Italian passes came next: Croce Domini, Vivione, Gavia and Stelvio most of which were unsurfaced and the Gavia was considered to be dangerous with its lack of protection from significant drops. John tried to treat the driveshafts with some caution as the clicking noises were getting worse.



**A view of the Stelvio Pass (2,757 metres) from near the summit. The eastern side has 48 hairpins on its descent to Trafoi. It is surfaced, unlike many other Italian passes at that time.**

After the Vivione pass, there was a neutralised section with a minimum time allowance of one hour. This provided an opportunity to give the Cooper S a more thorough checkover than it had received for a long time. John and Mike had a chance to have some food and drink. BMC service was available after the Stelvio pass close to the control at Trafoi. Although Stuart had said before the event that the service crews would not be carrying any spares for the Mini, it transpired that Pete Bartram had put two new constant velocity joints in his BMC service barge. These were the only Cooper S parts he had packed! The road section to the next control (Passo di Resia) was too tight to change the driveshaft joints here, so it was decided to change them at some point after that control, which was on the long haul to Spa.



**A driveshaft joint would go no further! The Mini was tipped on its side to give the two BMC service crews better access to fit replacements**

**Mike (with glasses) and John (white shirt) look on while the Mechanics replace driveshaft joints (right)**

Two service barges followed the Mini over the Passo di Resia, and then to another control at Lindau. Soon afterwards one of the constant velocity joints finally failed completely. The car was brought to a halt by the edge of a road in a small town and was tipped onto its side to provide better access. The sumpguard was removed and both driveshaft joints were changed in about 30 to 40 minutes. This was followed by a dash to reach the next control in New Ulm. Mike then bought many bottles of Coca-Cola to address their dehydration.



Now it should have been an easy run northwards along the German autobahn. It was going just fine until they reached a major tailback caused by an accident. There was nothing much they could do other than wait in frustration. After a while an ambulance approached from behind followed by a police car, driving through a gap created between the slow and fast lanes. John tucked in behind the police car which helped for some distance. Eventually the police stopped and remonstrated with the crew for following their car. John switched to the hard shoulder and slowly drove along that to get past the hold up.

And so to the final control at Spa which they reached at 5.45 in the evening. There to meet them was a broadly smiling Maurice Garot (clerk of the course) who presented each crew member with a garland and a bottle of champagne. Straight away Mike spoke to Maurice about a subject he was dreading: the missing passage control at Bribir and the consequent lack of control stamp.

It is appropriate to quote Mike's words: "His answer to this was fantastic and typical of this sporting gentleman, whose club, at that time, ran one of the most professional events on the motor sporting calendar. He apologised to us saying the control officials at Bribir had left early as they did not expect anyone to be running so late. Had this been the Monte Carlo rally, there would have been hours of written queries." What a relief; no penalty for John and Mike concerning the Bribir passage control.

Their total time penalty was 5 hrs 53 mins placing them 20th overall. If you are wondering how this was possible when the maximum lateness during the rally had been 5 hrs (after Sofia) then it should be remembered it was possible to make up time (but not penalties).

John Sprinzel/Mike Donegan in their Ford Cortina GT had greater time penalties (6 hrs 27 mins) and were running further behind the Cooper S on the road. Virtually all the remaining competitors drove in convoy to the ceremonial finish in Liège although John Sprinzel classified 21st was too far behind to be included.



**Exhausted but glad to reach the finish in Spa. Mike with a bottle of Champagne and garland and John with garland to the right of the Mini. Maurice Garot (with glasses), clerk of the course, is at the far right of the photo.**

So, success for BMC with Rauno Aaltonen/Tony Ambrose taking outright victory in their Healey 3000 and a Mini finishing the Liège for the first time ever. The latter achievement pleased team manager Stuart Turner almost as much as the second outright win for the Healey 3000 on this event.

Mike Wood's book "A Mini and The Last Liège" has just been reprinted and copies are available by contacting him at 5 Lamb Row, Sabden, Clitheroe, Lancs, BB7 9DX and supplying him with a cheque for a very modest £9 (which includes UK postage). This book contains far more detail of their fascinating exploits than I have been able to include. Mike's phone number is 01282 771563.

AB comment—Tony Ambrose was a particularly deserving winner as this was his fifth consecutive attempt at the Liège having previously also codriven for Peter Riley and David Seigle-Morris in Healey 3000s. He had finished 6th overall with David in '61 and had been very well placed (sometimes leading) in the other years before misfortune struck. Rauno and Tony's total penalty in the winning Healey 3000 was 57 minutes.

Andrew Bodman