

Minis to Ireland 19th- 26th September 2013

By Richard and Katherine Siddle



This was our third *Minis To* event, as we progress from *virgins to done it before*s, but are not yet able to say *veterans* compared to many others. This transpired to be the first official club event to Ireland for a week of fun and escapades, driving through the Emerald Isle, experiencing some of the famous Circuit of Ireland Rally stages from the 1960s when Mini Coopers won back to back consecutive victories between 1964 to 1967.

The Circuit of Ireland Rally originated as the Ulster Motor Rally in 1931, became the Circuit of Ireland Trial in 1936, and was renamed the Circuit of Ireland Rally in 1956 and became the most well-known sporting event in Ireland. In its heyday this was one of the toughest marathons of the international rally scene covering every province of Ireland. It was one of the great driver and car challenges that attracted the world's best, to come and have a go at winning; an amazing spectacle with local heroes competing with and challenging the world champions. In the Cooper nostalgia years, the rally was won in 1964 by Ronnie McCartney in his privately entered Mini Cooper, by Paddy Hopkirk in 1965 in CRX 89B and 1967 in GRX 5D and by Tony Fall in 1966 in DJB 92B.

Day 1 - Destination Arklow

Teams travelled from far and wide to get to Arklow, from northern Scotland, all corners of England, Wales, Northern Ireland and even Guernsey.

We began at Thaxted, Essex but en-route, somewhere on the M25, we encountered a few problems. A common tale, but we had only just finished putting the car back together the previous weekend after an

engine rebuild and upgrade to S brakes. Obviously we'd had all summer to do this, but work and family meant leaving it to the last minute, or that's my excuse. Our rescuer was Darrell at D.C. Minis. Darrell could not have been more friendly and helpful and with infinite patience he solved the problem and got us back on the road. However, the 2.30 pm crossing at Fishguard was now unreachable. After a few phone calls, Stenaline helpfully transferred our ticket without charge to an alternative 8.30pm crossing from Holyhead to Dublin. We arrived at our very comfortable hotel in Arklow at 1:30 am. It had been a long and eventful day since our 6am start.

Day 2 - Arklow to Letterkenny

It was good to catch up with lots of friendly and familiar faces at breakfast. Activity in the car park was a familiar scene, like bees to honey, the ritual of lifted Mini bonnets was attracting groups of drivers bending over to ponder the whys and wherefores. With eager anticipation the cars left the car park of the hotel at Arklow in 1 minute intervals, as directed by Emma Wyllie, to avoid Mini congestion. To add an additional competitive component, each team needed to answer a series of questions en-route with an overall winner to be awarded at the end of the week. There was no gentle start, we were straight into what would become a familiar juggling act of navigating, tourist photography and attempting to answer questions, and for those without a Halda Tripmaster, the navigators had the additional task of working out mileages matched to the standard milometer. (Next time Richard we get a gadget for this!).

Each team travelled at their own pace and the cars began to group up into varying categories of speed, faster cars working their way through the group as we reached the famous Aghavannagh Circuit of Ireland Stage. Seeing some of the Cooper rally cars at speed is one of those visual delights of which you can't get enough and so rarely see. This is what we came for. It was incredible to think we actually had one of the Circuit of Ireland winning cars on the trip, thanks to Peter Moss for bringing the Tony Fall 1966 winning car DJB 92B.

A few miles later we reached Sally Gap, which crosses the Wicklow Mountains. It is an unbelievable strip of road that covers ground with no attempt to flatten out the underlying rocks and bumps! Another opportunity to see some of the period Coopers in action on this famous stage. What a thrilling start to the day.

At lunch we sat with friends Glen and Amanda Fisher driving their immaculate Mk I S, Robert and Lesley Young, in their Mk I Works replica





rally car (but Robert, you need a longer diff), and Mervyn Thompson and Walter Simpson from Northern Ireland driving their original MK3 S. We all felt very lucky to be travelling through such spectacular countryside in the sunshine and Annie and Laurence Gandar certainly took full advantage of the sunny days in their stunning new MINI Cooper S Roadster.

On the first of our two night stay in the fantastic hotel at Letterkenny, we had a quick well-earned Guinness in the bar then we all dined together, compared anecdotes from the day and had fun into the evening. On this particular night special mention should be made of Peter Barratt for attempting to join a large group of conga dancing elderly ladies in the adjoining dining room, he was lucky to escape with his life. But I'll always remember it as the night the bar went wild when Peter bought a round of drinks.... he was clearly traumatised.

Day 3 - Round trip, Letterkenny to Letterkenny

Peter Moss in DJB was having electrical problems, but some expert diagnosis from Simon Drew and David Dyson identified the faulty part. Then by coincidence a current WRC local driver was passing and insisted on helping Peter locate a replacement part. Another story for the bar and another great example of the team spirit on these events.

A road used in the Donegal rally took led us up into very isolated countryside. This was Glenties, another special stage used on the Circuit in 1965. Ian Wright had borrowed his daughter's Cooper (...just

popping out to the shops, or something like that?) and was promoting the virtues of newly fitted Minitastic coil springs over the lively Irish roads, certainly one to consider. A little later we found ourselves behind Steve Burkinshaw and Cliff Porter in Steve's beautiful Surf Blue 1965 Cooper S. A little spirited driving later we observed a surf blue sideways moment on a damp bend and an accompanying whiff of rear tyre smoke. Now, was that Cliff's navigation or Sideways Steve getting carried away?

The route entered Glenveagh National Park, another section where the charismatic red and white rally cars of Simon Drew and David Dyson, James and Sadie Palmer and Ben and Patricia Webb came into their own, pursuing the mountain stage driving their cars as they were intended to be driven. Such a fantastic sight, it's impossible to grow tired of seeing these amazing cars in a flash of red and white against the backdrop of these famous stages. Later that morning, on one particular corner we spotted some interesting tyre marks on a grassy ledge, apparently there had been a little Italian Job like moment with the back end of the car teetering over the verge! 'Hang on lads I've got a great idea'. No harm done. More après stage banter in the bar later revealed this to have been quite a popular activity with rumoured individual moments from Simon, James and Ben checking out the verges and collecting some undergrowth on their very own nature trail. Great fun, rally cars at their best! We descended towards the coast and began the Doocharry stage, then passed golden beaches and rocky headlands as we turned onto the very glamorous sounding Atlantic Drive which led on to another Circuit stage, Fanad Head. What an excellent day.



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We arrived back at the hotel to find that Maurice and Pat Ogier had noticed the head gasket on their beautifully original 1071S was starting to fail early in the day. Not to be deterred, Maurice returned to the hotel and proceeded to change the head gasket himself in the hotel car park! Wow, Spirit of the Event award?

That evening we enjoyed another top-notch dinner and after a few pints of Guinness, or glasses of wine, the banter was flowing again. It's quite funny what you learn about your *Minis To* friends, for example Glenn confessed to a regular ritual of reading **CooperWorld** in the bath, and then proceeded to lobby Terence and Linda to produce a special water proof copy.

Day 4 - Letterkenny to Connamara

More inspiring countryside and quiet roads and a little surreal moment early in the day when we came round a corner to see somebody's cow standing on the road grazing the verge. It looked rather indifferent at the stream of Minis as we went past. The route skirted the edge of beautiful Westport Bay but Richard's attention was as much on the sight of John Littman's 1964 Cooper S CRX 90B, which won the Tulip Rally and Alpine Rally in 1964, driven by Paddy Hopkirk in the RAC and Don and Earle Morley in the 1965 Monte. It is a pleasure when you see such significant cars at a show or in museum, but to actually follow one of these historic cars on classic rally stages, seeing them in action, is a pure delight. Long may it continue.

The route led us over the scenic Doo Lough Pass and on to Leenaun. Ray Cunningham joined us from the Galway Mini Centre in his immaculately prepared rally car, and kindly brought some needed spares. Much to the great amusement of the lady 'NAGS' (navigators and girlfriends) this was to be another classic moment of Mini bonnet up and an immediate gathering of drivers bending over, heads under the bonnet talking tuning specs. NAGS stood back in amusement to admire, compare and contrast the drivers' rears.

We arrived at the Renvyle Hotel in good time to explore. The hotel is situated right on the edge of Renvyle Point and has stunning views across the coastline and the Atlantic. Many of us enjoyed a walk, one or two had a run and David even went for a swim in the sea! The hotel was a real luxury, in a truly stunning location, with friendly staff, excellent food and service. We drank, we ate, we chatted and drank some more into the small hours, it had been another fantastic day.

Day 5 - Connamara to Rosscarbery

A delicious breakfast and an earlier start as the longest journey of the trip lay ahead of us and it was important to catch the 2pm ferry across the River Shannon. John and Deborah Simister in their amazingly



engineered 1959 supercharged Mini Minor only just made it out of the hotel grounds before their car needed attention but, luckily, Steve Burkinshaw came to the rescue with a spare fuel pump.

Early in the day the route took us to the Alcock and Brown Memorial at Clifden, a monument commemorating the first non-stop transatlantic flight in 1919. We stopped for a few mins to admire the stunning views out to sea and imagine this historic moment. Further en-route a town that particularly amused us was Oughterard. One shop we spotted called Tom Tucker's Tackle (a shop selling fishing accessories...) and next door, Tom Tucker's Tyres. Any more alternative shop names for this budding franchise? Once over the Shannon we tackled the Borlin,

a famous Circuit Stage which took us over the Cahá Pass. Sadly the weather had changed but there were hairpin bends to enjoy and rocky overhangs to avoid. You have to drive these tiny mountain roads to truly appreciate the ultimate challenge that made these stages the toughest marathons on the international rally scene.

That evening at our hotel in Rosscarbery, we spent the twilight discovering people's nicknames. You couldn't make this stuff up, very funny, some are printable, some not; two club members with alter egos 'Dolly' and 'Sharon', 'Windy-blow-off', 'Lelly', 'Peter the Purse', 'Fish', 'John 180, father of Toby 20' and our personal favourite from Cliff in reference to his esteemed driver Steve, 'Mute'.

Day 6 - Rosscarbery to Rosscarbery

A magnificent day out as we quickly hit Lough Allua and then Fuhiry, both Circuit of Ireland stages. We found ourselves in convoy with Tony and Angela Jones, Walter and Mervyn and Rob and Wendy Sharman in their well-used and much loved 145 thousand mile Cooper; these cars really do go on forever. There were stunning views from the top of Moll's Gap but the peace was regularly interspersed with the sound of Cooper engines tackling the mighty climb! This is a famous and another beautiful stage of the Circuit of Ireland and is still used today. A very narrow coastal road turned out to be Killmacalogue Harbour Stage which is still used in the Rally of the Lakes and runs past the door of our fabulous lunch stop, Teddy O'Sullivan's, in Lauragh where we enjoyed fresh mussels sitting outside in the warm sunshine.

After lunch we headed for the much anticipated Healy Pass, and it did not let us down. The drivers loved the series of thrilling switchback bends and the views were magnificent. We descended into villages of brightly painted cottages and sped, carefully, around tight bends hemmed in between rocky outcrops and towards two other special stages on this headland, Cod's Head and Ardroom.

We were joined for dinner by Billy Mulqueen and Tina and Nick Daniels. Billy gave us a very warm welcome to Ireland on behalf of the Irish Mini Owners Club and introduced us to Tina whose father, Jack Daniels, was responsible for putting into operation the ideas of Alec Issigonis. She brought with her some fascinating original technical documents, previously unseen photographs and interesting memorabilia for us to look at. We thank them for joining us.

Day 7 - Rosscarbery to Wexford

The beginning of the day took us along roads that hugged the scenic west coast all the way to beautiful Kinsale, originally a medieval fishing port and one of the most picturesque towns in the south. Some teams stopped to sample the cafes and take in the sights. As a group of us were leaving, chaos ensued when the majority of navigators took their eyes off the map to enjoy the sight of sailing boats and colourful cottages. We missed the sign for the Spanish fort, which was built in 1677 in order to protect the harbour from being used by the French or Spanish. Then like a scene from Strictly, there was instant choreography with eight mid-road parallel u-turns, the throng of Coopers were soon back on track and heading towards Wexford. We skirted Cork and Waterford and arrived mid- afternoon at the Ferrycarrig hotel, Wexford.



We enjoyed a delicious last supper and some after dinner jovialities from Peter Barratt. Robert Young thanked the Wyllie family for organising such a fabulous week. The clever duo who won the quiz was Colin Woodage and Keith Barnes who managed to answer every single question correctly! They won the lovely Route Master trophy.

The Final Day - Wexford to Rosslare

Peter and Lynn Barratt had a last minute emergency but Simon Drew kindly came to the rescue with a spare starter motor to ensure AJJ made the scheduled ferry after a speedy drive to the port. Other teams headed further north taking an alternative ferry to Scotland.

All good things come to an end. These events are truly unforgettable road trips, jam packed from morning to night, discovering roads you would never otherwise encounter. An opportunity to be reacquainted with your MINI, Rover, Mini Cooper or Special, driving them as they were intended. Many thanks to Hugh, Jan and Emma Wylie and also to Robert and Lesley Young and Peter Moss for all the hard work behind the scenes to make this possible for everyone to enjoy. Last but not least, thanks to Kevin Donovan for driving the service van and keeping everyone going.

Here's looking forward to *Minis to Monte* in September 2014. Can't wait!

Richard and Katherine Siddle

Photos taken by Clive Brooks, Tiny Coughlan, Jenny Elvidge, Karl Evans, Andy Shadforth, David Sumner, Laura Wood and Robert Young.