

WHAT IS A CLASSIC TRIAL?



Firstly, the point has to be made that Classic Trials are not just for Classic Cars although many do take part. Classic Trials are for all sorts of cars and motorbikes. What is "Classic" about Classic Trials is the format of the events. In the early days of motoring the adjective that appeared in front of the word trial was 'reliability' and manufacturers were keen to prove the reliability of their products by undertaking long runs with observers in the cars to establish that the vehicle could complete the course within the time schedule and without the vehicle coming to an involuntary halt. As time moved on, cars became mechanically more reliable and the organisers of these trials took to siting their controls at the bottom of notoriously steep hills to challenge the underpowered machines of the day to ascend the hill from a standing start. It was then a short step to making the competitors attempt unsurfaced hills where the mud and rocks might defeat the driver's attempts to maintain forward motion. From this concept the trial as it is known today has evolved.

Today's Classic Trial reflects the style that was prevalent in the 1930s when works teams from Ford, Austin, Singer, MG and others battled it out for advertising honours over long distances and the steep muddy slopes of the country. The route is used primarily to get from one slope to the next and the timing is used mainly to keep the whole event on some sort of schedule rather than as a way of penalising competitors. Many of the Observed Sections, which is the name given to the muddy slopes on which one's performance is 'observed' are the same ones which were used at that time and are still as capable of challenging modern vehicles as they were then.

Most modern classic trials cover 70 to 100 miles on the roads between the Observed Sections. There are usually 12 to 18 Sections on each event with a variety of different surfaces to test the driver's skills. The events are scored by markers at the side of the section, numbered from 12 at the bottom down to 1 at the top. Marks are scored by getting the front wheels past the marker, so that if the car stops between the 3 and the 4 marker, 3 points are scored. At the end of the day the driver with the lowest score is the winner. Sometimes sections will include a Stop & Restart Test. If you remember the trauma of the hill start when you were learning to drive, this gives you some idea of this test, but now you are asked to do the same on a 1-in-4 hill on thick mud or greasy rock, without the car rolling back so much as an inch. In addition there is usually a tie deciding speed test to resolve competition between drivers who have scored the same number of penalties. Every year there are between 25 and 30 of these trials, each organised by one of the 23 member clubs that comprise The Association of Classic Trials Clubs (ACTC). Numbers are normally limited to between 60 and 100 competitors.

In addition to the 'One Day' events are the three Motor Cycling Club (MCC) Classics. The basic format is similar but with a number of significant differences: the penalties are not graded from 12 to 1, each Section is either "cleaned" or "failed"; the road mileage may be anything up to 450 miles with several sections to be tackled at night, the events being run over Friday nights and Saturdays with a typical starting time being midnight and an expected finish of 5.00pm the following day. Whereas most 'One Day' trials have a history of less than fifty years, the MCC Classics date back to before the First World War and are still run over substantially the same routes. Awards are based on a simple system of a 'Gold' for climbing all the hills, a 'Silver' for failing just one, and a 'Bronze' for failing two. Those gaining a 'Gold' in all three events in a season receive a 'Triple' - the triallists ultimate award.



Classic Trials are one of the friendliest forms of motor sport. As sponsorship and financial gain are non-existent there tends to be only the best form of rivalry between competitors and it is very common to find a crew working on a car with the assistance of someone with whom they are directly competing. All the trials that are run have a tremendous sense of history, and one of the main appeals of the sport is that it can be competitive on whatever level you prefer. Because the events are run over the same, or at least predominantly similar, courses every year, the driver who does not aspire to outright victory can indulge in his or her own private battle rather in the manner of reducing one's golf handicap. "I didn't climb this one last year.... I can never get round that corner... I climbed that one for the first time this year...." All the Observed Sections have names which makes them easy to identify in the bar afterwards and to follow the sense of history. Books on Pre-War motorsport talk with fascination about Simms and Beggars Roost and Nailsworth Ladder, all of which are still stopping cars today.

*Above left: Paul Bartleman, Escort, on Allez Oop in the 2000 Cleve Hills Trial. Photo - Roger MacDonald.
Above right: Tony Rothin, Cannon, on Merves Swerve in the 2002 Cotswold Clouds Trial. Photo - Pat Toulmin.*