

THE DRIVE FOR NEW RECRUITS

Autosport took to the wheel to find out about Motorsport UK's StreetCar initiative

STEFAN MACKLEY



First 12 Car Rally was an experience for Mackley in a standard road-going Mini Cooper



Autosport's Mackley tells Willshire where it all went wrong

"This form of motorsport can provide the buzz of being on a racing circuit but at a fraction of the cost"

Brown is able to expertly decipher throughout the evening.

To ensure competitors go a specific way, between each TC are marker signs on the side of the road with two letters, and missing any of them incurs a single 'fail', while competitors are also penalised for arriving too early or late to a time control. The crew with the fewest fails wins, followed by the least time penalties incurred. While this is my first event, many of the other competitors have years of experience, including 1986 Motorsport UK Asphalt Rally champion and 2004 Le Mans 24 Hours finisher Ian Donaldson. His entry showcases the appeal of club-level events like this even for those who have competed at a much higher level, and alongside navigator John Upham – returning after 20 years – they turn out to be our main rivals in the novice class.

Despite our shaky start we're going well as we weave our way through country lanes, with Brown giving incredibly accurate corner-by-corner directions from only a 1/85 map. I slowly find a rhythm – gearbox 'maladies' aside.

To my shock, we're the first crew to arrive at TC five and, with only one fail, we're the outright leaders, eight minutes clear of the next crew! It's easy to see why people become hooked on this form of motorsport, which at times can still provide the adrenaline buzz of being on an actual racing circuit but at a fraction of the cost.

Other disciplines on offer from clubs as part of the StreetCar initiative, including autotests and autosolos, allow teenagers as young as 14 – the future lifeblood of the sport – to take the wheel in a controlled environment.

"The idea of StreetCar is using a car that mum and dad use to do an autotest, an autosolo or a 12 Car, and I think that's great because that's the area that we need to pitch," says Rob Willshire, chairman of BMC. "That's the bottom of the triangle, that's where you need to bring the people in, so things like treasure hunts, 12 Cars, gymkhana, it's a lot easier for newcomers to take part."

But as just important as having fun is ensuring that the event is conducted in a safe manner, while also respecting other road >>

"Reverse?!? Sh*t! First? First!" In complete darkness and somewhere along a B-road on the outskirts of Basingstoke, it's been a shaky start to this writer's first exploits on a 12 Car Rally: only minutes into the event a three-point turn is being attempted after missing the required junction. Not helping is the maddening gearbox layout of the borrowed 2011 Mini Cooper I'm at the wheel of, which has reverse and first gear next to each other and means selecting the wrong gear becomes an unwelcome and frequent theme throughout the evening.

More important, and certainly on a more positive note, is that I'm competing in the event in a standard road-going vehicle, which is at the heart of governing body Motorsport UK's StreetCar initiative. The concept was launched in the middle of 2022 and has grown steadily over the past 18 months, with more than

50 affiliated clubs joining the scheme at the start of this year and more signing up. Events range from a 12 Car Rally – held for up to 12 crews on public roads – to autotests and autosolos, enjoyed in an enclosed environment around a small, designated course, as well as speed events, treasure hunts, gymkhanas and more.

"When we launched it, we didn't really know how big the uptake would be and whether it was going to be a marginal success or a storm of people coming into the sport," says Motorsport UK CEO Hugh Chambers.

"One thing that I think was crucial was that we created a StreetCar charter for clubs, and in order for a club to become a StreetCar club it had to sign up to the charter and make sure it had certain things in place. Principally around welcoming newcomers, so if somebody does get in touch and says, 'I'd love to do a 12 Car Rally', there's somebody who's going to assist them and walk

them through the process and welcome them in."

All of which brings me to the Basingstoke Motor Club and its Pumpkin 12 Car Rally last month. Having applied for a free RS Clubman licence through the Motorsport UK website, paid £20 for additional insurance specifically for the event and with no entry fee for any of the competitors, I'm good to go.

The premise of a 12 Car Rally is relatively simple. Twelve driver/navigators – in my case experienced club member Jeff Brown, who has been with BMC since its inception in the 1980s – have been given envelopes corresponding to the number of timed controls on this particular 70-mile route. Each one offers clues for the route to the next one, but can only be opened one at a time and having arrived at the previous TC. The clues themselves take various forms from numbers to markings that resemble something more akin to hieroglyphs that thankfully



Using a 1/85 map,
Brown plots out the
route to the next TC

OLLIEREAD

users and those who live in the area. On this event a quiet zone has been put in place on a four-mile section of the course, predominantly through villages, and where a Motorsport UK steward operates. In essence, it's to make sure that all competitors obey the speed limit, and cars are required to run in a high gear to avoid unnecessary noise. The clerk of the event is positioned at one of the many junctions to ensure that competitors come to a complete stop before proceeding.

“In the club we always mention we need to protect our map,” adds Willshire. “If we don't put checks in to control people's speed and abide by the regulations, then what happens is that areas become black spots that we're not allowed to drive through, so then that becomes harder and harder to put an event on.

“We need to keep other road users safe, be that pedestrians,

“The event has been an experience, the most surprising element of which is that I'm exhausted”



StreetCar also includes
events like autosolos

cars, vans, trucks – especially in the dark. We need to ensure the event is run safely and we always try to make sure that we put time controls in safe places.

“I think the regulations we've got in place with Motorsport UK fit that. The average speed limit on events is 30mph, and that keeps the speed down considering on the country lanes you're going a bit quick. It's all about fun at the end of the day.”

I find “going a bit quick” to be an understatement when on the narrow country lanes. Although it's signposted as the national speed limit, achieving that is not for the faint-hearted, with blind turns, undulations and the harrowing prospect of another vehicle coming the other way. Not only that, but your peripheral vision is working overtime in the darkness, looking out for the boards at the side of the road, taking some of the much-needed focus away from what's actually ahead.

Perhaps inevitably, fatigue, along with harder-to-plot routes, means our surprising lead soon slips away over the final two legs. Seeing water in the middle of the road, I take the decision to turn around, with Donaldson/Upham (Renault Clio 182) immediately behind doing the same – and while we continue to ignore the inevitable markers down that path, our rivals approach from the other side. The final leg proves even more costly as we miss several more marker boards, which leaves us with a total of seven fails, just one behind Donaldson/Upham, but second in class and fifth overall. More telling is that we rack up only six minutes of late penalties, the same as the winning crew of Chris Pratt/Glynn Hayward (Clio 197), showing the importance of patience over outright speed.

The event has been an experience, the most surprising element of which is that I'm exhausted after two hours and 20 minutes of driving, with almost no respite other than stopping at each TC, sometimes for no more than a minute.

But the event has provided an evening of entertainment and excitement among a welcoming group of enthusiasts, and all at the wheel of a standard road-going vehicle that, despite a slightly muddier exterior than when I started, was no worse for wear – the exact purpose of the StreetCar initiative. Just make sure to pick a car with a decent gearbox! 🙌