

London to Brighton Run 2007

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As the sun rose over the Serpentine last Sunday heralding the promise of a glorious day almost 500 pre-1905 horseless carriages lined up ready for the start of the annual London to Brighton Veteran Car Run, every participant hopeful that they would have the privilege of arriving at Madeira Drive some hours later and preferably before the 4.30 pm deadline. Groups of 15 cars were flagged away from the Hyde Park start at 2 minute intervals starting at 7.01am. With the second largest entry of cars in the 111 year history of the event it was an hour and a half before the last batch left, participants waving to the appreciative spectators.

The celebrations had started the day before with 140 of the entered cars on display in Regent Street for the International Concours. To add to the atmosphere the participants were dressed in period costume to the delight of the tens of thousands of visitors. Seven trophies were awarded at the end of the event, including the best American entry going to Paul Noon for his well-restored 1902 Westfield and the Peoples Choice award, as voted by the visitors to the Regent Street event, awarded to John Brydon's 1896 Salveson Steam Open Cart for the second year running.

It was a rush to get my 1904 Oldsmobile Curved Dash Runabout to the London start. Although it underwent some restoration in the States, when a new car is acquired, in this case a 103 year old vehicle, you can never be confident that all the components have been thoroughly checked. Last year during the Run I found the tiller steering fairly heavy and tended to want to follow the camber of the road. By the time we had arrived in Brighton my left arm felt as though it had been arm wrestling all day. The intention was to investigate the problem during the warmer months but with other cars in the stable that need care and attention, the incentive to pull a car to bits was put aside. An attendance at a recent Oldsmobile technical seminar given by Gary Hoonsbeen, world renowned Curved Dash expert over from the States provided the necessary incentive to get on with the job.

Expecting routine kingpin and wheel-bearing replacement we were dismayed to find both the steering tiller and its attached shaft cracked. The stub axles were also bent and showed signs of previous attempts at straightening. As with most 103 year old vehicles spare parts need to be manufactured which, kept Trevor busy machining bits from solid bar as well as preparing a pattern to have new stub axles cast. Two weeks before the Brighton Run the stub axles arrived from the foundry but turned out to be faulty. One week before the Brighton Run we are still waiting for the replacements. A few days before the Run they were delivered and Trevor managed the machining with enough time in hand for a few test runs and some minor adjustments. We set out confident that this 103 year old vehicle would make it to Brighton for the second time in its life but there is always a nagging doubt in the back of my mind, this time compounded by the number of participating cars we passed in London parked at the side of the road in the early stages of the Run with the drivers either busy with spanners or looking totally dejected.

It was a year since I had been in my Olds but I couldn't help being impressed by the way it loped up hills in top gear overtaking many of the other marques, however if it gets caught behind a slower vehicle and loses speed and it is necessary to change down to its only other gear it crawls up the hill and it is difficult to regain the momentum.

Along the route in Sussex villages every pub seemed to be overflowing onto the pavements with partying crowds, pint in one hand and waving to us with the other. Residents were well set up in their front gardens, enjoying the unseasonable warm weather, picnic tables full of food and bottles and some offering us refreshments as the horseless carriages passed by.

We managed to get to the Madeira Drive finish by just before 2 p.m. after a couple of stops for fuel and brake and carburetor adjustments along the way.

All of the Oldsmobile finishers were greeted by Debbie Stephens, great granddaughter of the Oldsmobile founder R E Olds who presented us with a souvenir booklet about her great grandfather and his innovations. Debbie is so impressed with the event that she is intending to bring her 1903 Oldsmobile from Ohio for next year's event.

Of the 478 starters 421 made it to Brighton. The first car to reach the finish line on Madeira Drive went to the 1902 Panhard et Levassor of Stephen Battye who completed the 60-mile route in just over 3-hours. The oldest car in the event, an 1895 Peugeot owned by Evert Louwman of The Netherlands arrived almost nine hours after the start and some were still arriving as the sun set over Brighton Pier.