

## 2006 London to Brighton Veteran Car Run

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Ever since I saw the film 'Genevieve' as a child my fascination for the annual London to Brighton Veteran Car Run has never ceased. Held since 1896 to celebrate the passing by Parliament of The Light Locomotives Act allowing motor-cars to be run on English roads at speeds not exceeding 14 mph, the event attracts almost 500 pre-1905 entries.

In 2001 I couldn't believe my luck, Haynes Motor Museum offered me their 1900 Clement to drive in the event. I fantasised for weeks before, imagining myself reaching the finish at Madeira Drive, Brighton to loud applause after enduring an adventurous drive, through heavy London traffic, scenic country roads and hills, waving to the crowds as the 2 ¼ hp de Dion powered Clement chugged majestically along. My dream ended to my utter dismay as we came to an abrupt stop half way up Streatham Hill, not many miles from the start, with a split crankcase.

I've tried not to give up hope that I would have another opportunity, but after five years my optimism started to waver.

A recent conversation with vintage car enthusiast, Michael Hallowes revealed that he had recently imported a 1904 Oldsmobile Curved Dash Runabout from the USA and wasn't quite sure whether a veteran would be suitable for his stable, preferring later cars producing a bit more oomph than a 7 hp. vehicle. The deciding factor was the test he applies to any car he purchases – whether it would get to the pub up the hill from his house in a Cotswold village. The Oldsmobile failed, not because it wasn't capable of mounting the rise, although that hasn't been proven, but the differential gears stripped their teeth just yards from his house.

An invitation to a pub lunch and a viewing of the veteran resulted in me arriving home complete with the back axle and mangled gears and a decision to sell my 400 bhp single seater racing car and take on a 7hp 1904 Oldsmobile. The contrast couldn't be greater, but then I've been agonising for sometime about a change. My co-driver from the London to Sydney Marathon and Carrera Sudamericana, Trevor Hulks was somewhat surprised at my actions particularly as I gave him the task of rebuilding the back axle to perfection. Ten days later the axle was reunited with the rest of the vehicle, brought home complete, ready to preen for the London to Brighton Run and to make and fit my special adaptations to enable me to drive. But as often happens with mechanical objects, things very rarely go to plan.

I'm not sure what I was expecting from this 102 year old antique. I'd heard the foot tapping 1905 popular song 'In My Merry Oldsmobile' and I'd envisaged the single cylinder Olds would roll happily along the road with its slow revving engine beating in time with the rhythm of the song. But I was disappointed – this Olds ran rough and unevenly, would not pick up speed, would not stay in the highest of its two gears and its brakes were virtually non-existent. Like its new owner it was not feeling merry.

Unlike modern sophisticated vehicles the mechanical simplicity of early horseless carriages can enable problems to be easily detected. My trusty co-driver Trevor discovered the carburettor float full of fuel, the ignition timing inconsistent, the transmission linings made of a variety of materials, none of which were providing the necessary drive and the brakes lined with thin brass sheet, rendering them ineffective.

After much effort, man-hours and days, the correct transmission linings are fitted, carburettor float repaired, brake linings changed, ignition timing reset and the Olds seems transformed.

After all the time consuming mechanical activity and just days from the start of the London to Brighton Run, there has been no time for my adaptations to be finished and that exercise is proving more complicated than expected.

I wanted some practice beforehand to familiarise myself to the tiller steering and the high seating position as well as to any individual quirks the Olds may be hiding.

However, the day before the event I decided that I would be in the driver's seat for the start in Hyde Park at 7.07 a.m., come what may.

It certainly was an impressive sight at dawn on that Sunday – 438 pre-1905 veteran cars lined up along the Serpentine in Hyde Park ready for the flag to be dropped to signal the start of the 2006 London to Brighton Veteran Car Run. As the sun rose the sky gave a hint that the weather would be kind and provide a cloudless day. I felt privileged that I would have another opportunity to participate in this prestigious event but this time hopefully arriving at the finish at Brighton. My newly acquired 1904 Oldsmobile Curved Dash Runabout looked comfortable amongst its contemporaries.

Our prospects of arriving at the start, let alone the finish, appeared less attainable just two hours earlier when the fire alarm went off at 5.30 am at the hotel where we were staying. All the guests were quickly evacuated without luggage. My anxiety levels soared knowing that all my warm, waterproof and windproof clothing, necessary for November outdoor motoring, was still in the fourth floor hotel room, but worst of all, the Olds was trapped in the car-park under the hotel. Expecting to witness plumes of smoke and flames as we rushed down the fire-escape while the fire brigade went about their business, it was such a relief to learn that the fire alarm was triggered by fumes from one of the veteran cars starting up in the basement car park.

The oldest cars were the first to leave at 7.07 am, Car No 1, the 1895 2 cylinder Peugeot belonging to the Louwman Collection of Holland, followed by Brian Kenway's 2 cylinder Whitney steam car. It was our turn at 7.59 a.m. when the flag was dropped and in the company of a batch of ten other 1904 veterans we set out on our epic journey, the first for my American Olds. As we left Hyde Park I was amazed at the sea of spectators braving the chilly morning, enthusiastically waving and cheering every entrant as they passed by. My co-driver Trevor was soon caught up in the carnival atmosphere, waving to everyone as we wound our way down Constitution Hill crossing the Thames over Westminster Bridge. So far the Olds hadn't missed a beat and the driver was starting to get the hang of its veteran characteristics but there was still a long way to go and I daren't start thinking of Madeira Drive so soon.

Approaching Brixton Hill I wondered when I should change down to the lowest gear but to our amazement the Olds loped up in its higher gear until meeting a traffic jam near the top. The further I drove this 102 year old antique the more I became impressed with its mechanical agility. Traffic jams were more an annoyance to the driver than to the vehicle. In what seemed a short time we had arrived in Croydon but I still would not allow myself to think of the sea-front at Brighton.

Delayed by traffic jams along the way we eventually reached the official coffee stop in Crawley just after 11 a.m. and the Olds had not missed a beat. Relieved to be out of the suburban areas I visualised nice undulating country roads through Sussex where the Olds could show her stuff but I hadn't reckoned on the amount of modern traffic vying with the veterans for the limited road space. The traffic build-up and delays on some hills seemed to be greater than London suburbia and some of the veterans struggled as they crawled up the inclines but there were always enthusiasts and marshals ready to push.

Just as I allowed myself the luxury of visualising the finish line the Olds started to struggle on one of the steep hills. The new transmission linings had bedded in and were slipping and needed adjusting but with Brighton so near we pressed on — my marathon rally mentality had come to the fore.

Checking in at the last official stop at Preston Park meant that we were now official finishers but there were still a few miles to negotiate through dense traffic before arriving at Madeira Drive. With Brighton Pier in sight and two traffic lights remaining the Olds came to an abrupt stop.

Trevor tried to start it but there was no response - my dream, I thought, had come to an end, unfulfilled. "Have a look in the fuel tank," I shouted in desperation. Sure enough it was empty. Fellow participant Martin Bodenham in a 1904 Crestmobile came to our rescue with fuel. My 1904 Oldsmobile sprung into life again and reached the finish line for the first time in its 102 year history just after 2 p.m.

The Brighton Run was one of the most enjoyable motoring events I have participated in. Spectators lined almost the entire 60 mile route waving and shouting encouragement. It would be difficult not to get caught up in the party atmosphere. Long may it continue.