

London Sydney Marathon 2004

Contributed by Joy Rainey
Monday, 18 June 2007
Last Updated Thursday, 03 January 2008

When the brochure announcing the London to Sydney Marathon 2004 arrived, only a quick glance was sufficient to convince me that my participation was a foregone conclusion.

Perhaps I was ready for a new challenge - a change of motor sport discipline - something different to speed hill-climbing, the sport I have been involved with since the mid seventies. Rather than exercise all my concentration for short distances up Shelsley Walsh or Prescott, my favourite venues, the thought of leaving London and driving nearly 10,000 miles through exotic places, finally arriving in Sydney thirty days later, re-awakened my adventurous spirit.

If I were to take part in such a challenging motoring event what type of vehicle should be considered and what criteria does one use to make this crucial decision? Jaguar, Porsche, Ford Escort, even a Hillman Hunter similar to the 1968 winner of the first London to Sydney Marathon, spring to mind as Trevor Hulks my co-driver and I considered our options. The final choice – a Morris Minor. It’s a good sturdy small car, quite robust, mechanically simple and should be easy to repair, if necessary, in any remote, far away place. But more importantly it’s an affordable car and shouldn’t cause any grief for my bank manager.

We were expecting to travel far and wide before a Minor in reasonable condition was found - one that had not been repaired over and over again with welded implants as happens so often to enable the owner to get through a MOT for as little expense as possible. But luck came our way in the form of a two door 1970 Morris Minor 1000, advertised in the local newspaper for £500 and only two miles away.

After a thorough check over, by crawling underneath and examining every panel it became apparent that this Minor had been fairly well cared for. The front mudguards had been recently replaced but were lacking a final coat of paint. The spring hangers at some point in the past had been renewed and the undertray at least hadn’t been welded in small sections. Rust was developing on areas of the bodywork and we came to the conclusion that the car was indeed just ready for a major rebuild before it deteriorated any further – ideal for our project.

With the new acquisition sitting in the driveway waiting for its makeover, the reality of the situation started to cause me sleepless nights. There was the US \$36,000 entry fee to raise before we could consider any start on the restoration of the Minor – that amount would definitely provoke a headache for my bank manager. Sponsorship seemed to be the only means that would enable me to fill in the entry form.

Months were spent in the pursuit of sponsorship. It definitely wasn’t my forte. Then an acquaintance said to me, “It’s a business venture. You’re not asking for a handout. You are going to promote the Company who sponsor you, aren’t you?”

“Of course,” I responded.

But his final statement really made things clear to me.

“How do you think the Formula 1 teams would manage without sponsorship? The motor sport industry would fold without the lucrative sponsorship deals.

Feeling more confident, with a new attitude, I was delighted when Guy Ainsley, the Marketing Director of Inchcape plc telephoned to say that Autobyte, one of the group’s subsidiary companies would be our major sponsor for the Marathon. I filled in the entry form and posted it immediately.

A whole year until the 5th June 2004 start of the marathon seemed ample time to completely restore and prepare the Minor for its trip of a lifetime but when the first mudguards and sills were removed to reveal some nasty rusted out holes I began to realise that the task ahead would be more time-consuming than first anticipated.

Although the car had been fairly well cared for with underseal in obvious places, when we started delving into less accessible areas, the contrast was stark. Some crucial brackets and seams in the wheel arches and under the sills had disappeared altogether. The overall condition was repairable but Trevor’s enthusiasm for cutting out and welding in new pieces started to wane.

One of the advantages for choosing a common car is that a number of specialist parts dealers are located in many parts of the UK and some carry a stock of every replacement panel. Phoning around to check on prices I was surprised when one dealer mentioned he had an original ‘new’ body shell and might be tempted to sell it. Stored for well over thirty years, and although covered in surface rust, it had never been used. As it is a similar age to the old car there would be no problems with any eligibility regulations.

After one viewing we decided that by installing all the rebuilt suspension, engine, gearbox, back axle and every component onto a new body shell would make the project more desirable. In a short time the body shell was at its new

home awaiting its transformation.

With the body problems solved it was time to consider the mechanics. To enable us to maintain reasonable average speeds we decided to install a 1,275 c.c. A Series engine. A good example, originally from a Marina van, was found in a local breaker's yard for £50 and when dismantled revealed very little wear. The engine rebuild turned out to be routine, fitting new bearings, pistons and bigger valves. We opted for a lower compression ration of 8:1 just in case we encountered lower octane petrol during the marathon. Valve seats and bigger valves were fitted to enable the engine to run on unleaded fuel. The new camshaft was profiled to give slightly more power but one that would not require the engine to be revved a lot. A smaller flywheel was fitted and the Minor backplate was used and modified to suit the cylinder block of the bigger engine. Instead of using a single row timing chain a duplex version was chosen which should not wear out so quickly and upset the valve timing.

The components were balanced and assembled and new water, oil pumps and alternator fitted. After the single SU carburettor was completely rebuilt and fitted, the engine was placed on the shelf waiting for the rest of the car to be completed.

The gearbox, originally from a MG Midget with closer gear ratios than a Morris Minor, was found to be in reasonably good condition, however, the first gear ratio was showing signs of wear and we replaced it with a new gear, bearings, gaskets, and plungers.

Trevor dismantled and cleaned the back axle ready to assemble with all new bits. He decided to check the casing in the lathe and was dismayed to find that it was bent. To the naked eye it looked fine but once rotated between centres it was obvious that it must have been in an accident at sometime. Two more back axles that we acquired seemed to be suffering from the same problem. Some time was spent trying to locate more Morris Minor back axles. One of the Morris Minor specialists fortunately had a supply and after Trevor had dismantled three more axles, at last, he discovered a casing that was not bent. After all the time wasted, it almost felt like winning a prize.

Morris Minors are renowned for brake fade when under intense use. As much of the London to Sydney marathon route takes us over twisty and demanding mountainous roads we need to be assured that the car will have superior stopping power whenever required, without any hiccups. Discs on the front offered a likely solution and once again the Marina provided the parts. The only modification required: altering the spacing of the wheel studs to match the Minor wheels.

Telescopic shock absorbers we chose, rather than the standard push pull lever type, to help the Minor withstand the expected rough road conditions.

Making the mountings for the shock absorbers was involved, requiring several designs before Trevor was satisfied. On the rear it was necessary to provide a secure fixing under the floor but without reinforcement was not rigid enough. Finally Trevor made a bridge that went across the boot floor and then securely bolted into new bushes that had been welded into the box section.

The front needed some experimentation before the designer was satisfied that the mountings were strong enough due to the limited space available and the need to incorporate mountings for an anti-roll bar. The end result is stronger mountings both front and rear.

In case the fuel becomes contaminated during the Marathon, a second tank (from a mini-traveller), with its own separate fuel pump, is mounted in the boot area above the original tank. The two fuel pumps, equipped with an independent fuel filter are all situated in the rear boot area; their location to help guard against fuel vaporisation while travelling in hot climates.

Once the modifications were finalised and made, the body shell was sand-blasted to remove the surface rust and old primer then electro-coated and finally painted. The Henley blue colour I chose (and I think it looks fantastic) is not an original Morris Minor colour but I hope my actions will not have me ex-communicated from the Morris Minor Owners' Club.

Once the doors were hung, windows, head lining and roll-over bar fitted onto the body shell, soundproofing glued inside the panels, the back axle, engine and gearbox were finally installed.

The Minor is fitted out entirely with stainless steel braided flexible brake and fuel hosing, routed internally through box sections wherever possible, to protect from flying stones and possible grounding.

Other precautionary measures taken include a sturdy sump guard and an exhaust system mounted higher than normal with the silencer mounted parallel to the back bumper bar.

Wiring the car proved to be no simple chore. With extra gauges, more fuses than standard, different layout of the fuel system, two speed wiper motor and reverse light, the first task was to design a completely new wiring diagram followed by a careful and systematic wiring procedure.

Eventually, months over schedule, well over budget, and only weeks before the start of the Marathon, the day arrived when the Minor emerged from the workshop finished and ready for its first test drive, a two mile journey to the local garage for its MOT. And it passed with flying colours – the mechanic commenting that it was the cleanest floor pan he had ever seen.

It was rather nerve wracking driving the Minor for the first time after the best part of a year totally committed to its rebuild. I kept imagining that strange noises were coming from every component but after a few miles I realised that I must be suffering from a severe dose of post restoration anxiety syndrome.

In reality, although at this stage only driven at slow speeds to run-in the engine, the Minor appears to be noticeably more torquey than the original 1,098 c.c. engine even with a small throttle opening.

The brake pedal needs a firm pressure but stops in a positive manner, which makes me feel more confident about hurtling down narrow mountain roads.

The steering initially has a slight lack of sensitivity due possibly to the chunky treaded Avon van tyres, but on turning into corners responds very nicely without the usual Minor understeer.

The ride is quite firm with minimum roll when cornering– the telescopic shock absorbers contributing to a feel reminiscent of a 1950's sports car.

We need to cover a few thousand miles yet before the start of the Marathon, to be assured that every component is functioning perfectly and to carry out any necessary fine tuning, but I am confident that this Morris Minor will pull up in front of the Sydney Opera House on 4th July, intact, after completing its epic journey.

{mospagebreak title=The Event}

A number of Morris Minor enthusiasts arrived to wave us off, at the start of the London to Sydney Marathon 2004. I hoped I would not let them down and that my 1970 Morris Minor would arrive intact at its Sydney destination, nearly 10,000 miles and 30 days later.

Most of the roads and scenery during the first week of the Marathon were breath taking through villages and up and down spectacular steep mountain passes in France, Italy and Greece. The pace every day was demanding and we quickly learnt why the event is called a marathon.

Every day began with an early start and a drive to the off-road stages managed by the local car clubs of each area. And what a variety of demanding stages we experienced, from unmade steep mountain climbs and descents to long, undulating and fast curvy tarmac sections, but all with one element in common – they were all usually rough. The Minor coped reasonably well with the majority of the regularities but when the sections became steep climbs without any long stretches, we could not reach the set average speed, let alone maintain it. A timed regularity is all about exercising skill in maintaining the average speed that is given at the start of each stage. First gear was too low and second gear too high and we could only crawl up the inclines steadily in first and I found that I was driving on the limit, to no avail.

On our long daily treks on the open roads, the Minor was in its element, the more I drove in such contrasting conditions, the more I became impressed with its handling characteristics and robustness. Winding our way up mountain roads from Igoumenitsa to Thessaloniki in Southern Greece on day 9 we were pacing David Miller's MGB for hours. I was surprised that the MGB was not clearing out from us as we overtook lorries and heavy traffic. The way the Minor was pulling up the hills in third and top gear, impressed me. Then suddenly, as the Minor started to coast down the mountain descents, the engine cut out, but under load the problem stopped. Driving into Thessaloniki for the night's stop the characteristics worsened - the engine kept cutting out and would barely run – the SU carburettor was flooding. Trevor dismantled the carburettor and could not find anything wrong but he decided to reassemble the unit with a new float. The problem continued, the following morning. On further investigation Trevor found that the float jammed against the side of the float chamber when it was at its lower end of travel, causing the carburettor to flood. Fortunately, the dimensions of the second spare float were just sufficiently different to clear, although the appearance was the same. By the time the problem was sorted we had missed the competitive stages and pressed on with the long drive to the night's stop at Alexandroupoli. Unfortunately, we received maximum penalties, which could not be made up.

The mountain routes through France, Italy and Greece provided some of the most spectacular scenery imaginable and into Turkey to Gallipoli where a little extra time was built into the day's programme to allow us to visit the memorial sites. But it did seem strange, travelling through country after country and not interacting with local people, except at service stations during our fuel stops and brief greetings at the start of the stages, with local car club members. At first I thought it a wasted opportunity not to visit interesting historical sites when we were so near but in a short time I had adapted to marathon mentality and the only site that dominated my thoughts was the Sydney Opera House, not because of its architectural individuality, but simply as the destination we were aiming for.

The official start of the Indian sector was just near the airport at Cochin in southern India. Arriving in the Morris Minor to be flagged off a sea of people engulfed her – she had become the star of the event in India. People kept asking “What model of Morris?” “What bhp?” “What year?”

The 150 kms drive to the first stages in the tea plantations of the Munnar mountain region was an adventure in itself. The roads became flooded during a heavy tropical downpour and it was difficult to follow our route. Most of the roads were rough, some with enormous potholes. Our instructions stated, only to drive over areas of the road we could see, but that was nigh impossible after the rains had filled up the holes. Some of the potholes we bumped into brought tears into my eyes as the suspension bottomed.

It takes some time to accustom oneself to the Indian style of driving. Road rules appear to be ignored at every level. Driving is on the left hand side of the road, but to many, the choice is optional!! You have to be ready to run off the road when confronted with an overtaking bus or truck while turning a corner. Motor cyclists, cyclists, pedestrians, in fact, drivers of any type of motorised or unmotorised device enter on to any road, major or minor, on either side, without looking. By the time we had arrived at the time control before the start of the first stage three and half hours later, I felt as though I had already driven a demanding stage.

The enthusiasts of Spitfire Motorsports organised a variety of stages with contrasting conditions for the London to Sydney Marathon participants. Winding up the side of a mountain and down again, for 30 kms. through the tea plantations, the scenery was spectacular, but the road was narrow, broken up and the Minor could not reach the average speed set by the organisers. These conditions and speed were more suited to the 4 X 4's, yet some of the drivers in that category were experiencing difficulty with the conditions.

After we left Coimbatore, the gravel rally stages were run at a wind farm round the wind turbines and were more in keeping with the gravel stages we were expecting in Australia, then our final stage in India near Mysore, was my favourite, a fairly fast hillclimb with sweeping corners on tarmac with not too many potholes.

The programme was shortened in India with the final stages near Ooty cancelled. We all had to return to Cochin for an extra day to clean our cars to ensure that they passed the stringent quarantine conditions to enter into Australia. The cars and teams were originally flying into Alice Springs for one day of rest before the first stage of the Australian sector. But the night before the start of the Marathon in London Nick Brittan informed all competitors that if any car did not pass the test by the two Australian Quarantine Inspectors in India, it would not be permitted to fly from India into Alice Springs as there is no quarantine cleaning facility there. For this reason, the cars, and teams were to be offloaded in Darwin, where suitable facilities were available. To get the cars to Alice Springs, over 900 miles south of Darwin, in one day became the responsibility of the teams as well as their expense. The Morris Minor passed its cleanliness test in India, but was one of the few participants of the Clowes Cup, (the regularity section) who received the green sticker. Several days passed before the competitive regularity stages could be recommenced as the inspection process did not finish until over a day later, forcing some competitors to drive through the night, missing out the Alice Springs to Uluru section, to catch up the rally in Coober Pedy.

Covering so many miles in a day in some of the most inhospitable parts of Australia, over some of the most tortuous roads imaginable soon concentrates the mind. The driver needs to concentrate one hundred per cent, with out any lapse, or a deep rut or rock might be missed. The Birdville Track in north-west South Australia, originally used to drive cattle south from the centre, provided two of the most demanding days of the whole rally. Leaving Coober Pedy, the opal mining town, before sunrise, we headed north. Instead of the moonscape type of scenery in the desert areas we found miles and miles of beautiful greenery and yellow desert flowers. It was hard to imagine that this was the area that had claimed so many explorer's lives in the past. Passing Lake Eyre, where Donald Campbell attempted the Land Speed Record in 1964 we could see water rippling in the distance, where usually acres and acres of dry salt is visible. Just three weeks before it had rained heavily, the first time for four years, and before that, in 1975. The scenery was strangely beautiful, but eerie with no animals, birds, insects, humans or houses.

The rain had caused bog holes on the gravel road – some had dried, leaving deep ruts, which were hard to see until it was too late. The Minor's suspension took a pounding that day until we arrived at our desert camp at Mungarannie, at sunset.

The next morning, Day 25 of the rally, the daily road book described the 800 kms. day as “an easy driving day” yet all of the cars in the classic car class experienced problems, except the Minor (it must have been luck). The MGB's suspension collapsed, south of Birdsville, the two Volvos shredded tyres on the tortuous road travelling east after Birdsville, the Ford Escort rolled two and a half times and was lifted back on to its wheels and continued on, slowly. The gravel road with rocks as big as grapefruit and sharp razorlike edges, was ploughed into high ridges by the previous traffic. The Minor's sump guard was continually pounded with rocks jamming under it. The driver needed to take extreme care not to allow the wheels to catch on one of the ridges causing the car to snake and possibly roll over. It was the most frightening road I've ever driven on. As the sun started to set the changing light made shadows in the ruts and it became more difficult to judge a path to take. We were still miles from the night camp but we knew there was an asphalt road and I was trying to reach that point before nightfall.

Just as the light faded we came to the T junction and the single-track asphalt road. Still 117 kms. before the night stop, but at least the surface was smooth. An hour and a half later, like an oasis in the distance, we could see the lights of the camp. Sighs of relief that we had arrived with the Minor, and ourselves, unscathed.

The next day as we progressed eastwards towards the Pacific coast, suddenly trees appeared and grass and sadly, dead kangaroos every hundred yards or so, the victims of road kill. We were back in civilisation – with road trains, the occasional car and house. I then had to adapt to traffic again.

The roads for the rest of the Marathon were in good condition but the competitive stages seemed to get tougher each day and I started to question my sanity of putting the Minor through such car breaking conditions. I expected rough roads but I started to believe that the gullies, rocks, sand, deep ruts, fords and creek beds the Minor banged and bottomed over, were more suited to the 4 X 4's.

Day 30, the last day of the marathon and just 500 kms to Sydney. I'd heard stories of previous marathons when mechanical problems forced competitors to withdraw and not reach the destination. I kept hearing imaginary mechanical sounds. Was the back axle getting noisier? Will something break on the suspension? Will the engine blow up? Such tension all day!

Just 30 kms north of Sydney, I noticed three Morris Minor in the rear view mirror – they had been waiting to escort our Minor into Sydney. Several kilometres later the engine suddenly cut out and I was forced to stop. Only 28 kms from Sydney, flanked by our escorts and stopped on the side of the road, I immediately thought that this Minor would never see the Opera House. Trevor immediately lifted the bonnet, finding no visible problem, but pushed the fuses into place and suddenly she sprang into life. The final 28 kilometres turned out to be the most tension filled drive I have ever experienced. Then suddenly, over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and there was the Opera House. We had made it. The first Morris Minor to be driven from London to Sydney – 16,000 kilometres in 30 days – and she arrived all intact – no dents (apart from the sump guard) and the engine still sounding as sweet as ever and not even one puncture.

After parking the car I stepped back to take in the view – the Morris Minor parked with the Sydney Opera House in the background. I couldn't believe we had made it after two years of planning and preparing the car. I felt overwhelmed.

Some cars did not finish. Many made it, looking somewhat battered. The classic car class was won by John and Jill Tallis in the Volvo 120 and the Minor finished fourth in class.

I am indebted to a number of people who contributed to my participation in the London to Sydney Marathon and particularly Trevor Hulks, my co-driver. For the past year he has meticulously restored and prepared the Morris Minor to such a high standard that it hardly missed a beat throughout the entire 16,000 kms. and traversed some of the roughest roads imaginable. Without a reliable and well-prepared car, the end result may have been very much different.