

## Our Pre-War Motoring Scene

By Derek Stuart-Findlay

# THE CAPE-RAND-CAPE ROUND-THE-UNION RELIABILITY TRIALS

One of the most enthusiastic members of the Metropolitan Motor Cycle and Car Club (the Mets) during the early 1930s was a keen rally driver, Dick Slabber. In 1934 he proposed to the club that a really ambitious event should be organized for the following Easter weekend, a timed reliability trial for standard production cars from the Cape to the Rand and back. Considering the appalling condition of the national roads at the time, the initial reaction he received from club members was derisive. They knew that over Easter weather patterns in the then four provinces of South Africa were extremely variable, and conditions would represent a supreme test of the stamina and abilities of rally drivers and their cars. But Slabber's persistence paid off and eventually his idea was given the go-ahead. He was not to know that over the next six years the Cape-Rand-Cape rally would grow into a major Round-the-Union event attracting intense international interest.

The first of these rallies was held over Easter 1935, the 1 950-mile route incorporated hidden controls and followed the national road to the Rand via Bloemfontein, with a rest-stop in Johannesburg. The entry list consisted of six vehicles in the Light Car Class (to 1 500 cc), and twenty in the Heavy Car Class. The cars left the Grand Parade on



*The Citroën team for the 1938 Trial. Alf Tavaros seated on the left hand car, Shorty Baines standing front right*

the Thursday afternoon, aiming to return on the Monday. Weather conditions were reasonable and the overall winner with an impressive nil points lost was the well-known racing driver from East London, Buller Meyer, driving a Graham. Sharing second place were Capetonians Andre du Toit in a Chevrolet and racing driver Mario Mazzacurati in an Auburn. Coming in joint fifth was Cape Town-based engineer Dave McKnight in a Chevrolet; a year later McKnight was to be commissioned to design and build the racing circuit at

Pollsmoor, the venue for the first Grosvenor Grand Prix. Racing driver Francis (Steve) Chiappini won the Light Car Trophy in a Riley Nine. Slabber would have won the Light Car Class in a Hillman Minx, but disqualified himself when he found that two of the controls were in conflict with the regulations.

Weather conditions for the 1936 trial were horrific. The route to the north had been lengthened to incorporate Oudtshoorn and Graaff-Reinet, with Kimberley and De Aar included on the return leg. Numbers were down on the previous year, with an entry of eighteen, seven light and eleven heavy cars. Included were H. (Fireworks) Pheiffer in a Ford 10 tourer, Jack Bleiman in an Austin Seven, H.C. Nolte in a Plymouth, and Buller Meyer in an Oldsmobile. Only 13 cars made it back to the Cape within the allotted time and press reports were descriptive; 'Smashing across the South African veld through rain-storms, thunderstorms and cloud-bursts, these cars braved flooded dongas, swollen rivers and washed-out roads to make the Cape-Rand-Cape trial one of the epics of motoring history'.

Dick Slabber stormed to victory in the Light Car Class in his Hillman Minx, with Dave McKnight in his Chevrolet victorious in the Heavy Car category. British and American car manufacturers, intrigued by this competition in tough African conditions, became extremely interested in the performance of their vehicles. Buller Meyer took no further part in the Cape-Rand-Cape rallies but on New Year's Day 1938 went on to win the 4th South African Grand Prix at East London in his Riley.

It appears that the 1937 competition was the first to be dubbed the 'Round-the-Union' trial, although the course was the same as the year before, through the Cape, Orange Free State and the Transvaal. 21 cars entered, this time both Jack Bleiman and Dick Slabber were driving Hillmans in the Light Car Class, together with Harold Kernick and a 17-year-old Stanley Reed in a DKW sports. In the Heavy Class H.C. Nolte entered a Plymouth, the Farber brothers, James and E.E. (Boy), a Graham Crusader, and Dave McKnight a 3.2-litre Hillman Hawk. Fireworks Pheiffer wrecked



*Dave McKnight, right, and his Chevrolet, winner in 1936*



*The Hillman team in 1937. Dick Slabber and his Minx on the left, Dave McKnight and his Hawk in the centre*

his car in a culvert outside Oudtshoorn, but fortunately was not injured. 15 cars made it back to Cape Town, including Kernick and Reed in the DKW, which had suffered a number of punctures. Dick Slabber was again victorious in the Light Car Class, while Dave McKnight won the Heavy Car section. Carson Motors, the Cape agents for the Rootes Group, must have been ecstatic at the performance of the Hillmans.

The 1938 trial proved to be the granddaddy of them all. It had been decided to include the fourth province, Natal, into the competition, with cars starting simultaneously from Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban on a 2 512-mile clockwise course which included major sections through the Transkei. A particularly tricky section off the Robinson Pass near Mossel Bay included 14 gates in as many miles. A record entry had been secured, with 30 starting from the Cape, 16 from Johannesburg and 10 from Durban. International status was achieved when three

German drivers, H. Rischowski, G. Steidle and P. Wiese entered a team of Adler Juniors in the Johannesburg contingent. Wiese's observer was Pat McDonnell, who a week before had taken the Rand-Cape-Rand record in an Adler. The international group was boosted by a Dane, H. Andersen, who started from the Cape in a Hudson Terraplane.

Included in the Cape Light Car contingent was Dick Slabber in his trusty Hillman, 'Battling' Jack Bleiman in a Hillman Special, an extraordinary stripped-down Minx with no windscreen or hood and a plywood back, and Harold Kernick and Stanley Reed in their DKW sports. New entrants were P. Dormehl and Mario's tall mechanic, Arigo 'Mad' Govoni, in a tiny 570 cc Fiat Topolino. In the Heavy Car Class Dave McKnight had entered a Humber Snipe and Fireworks Pheiffer a Ford V8. The Farber brothers had entered a Willys, Bowyer's Garage, the Citroën agents, had entered two Light Fifteens driven by Alf

Tavaros and H. (Shorty) Baines, while the Hudson agents V.L. Brink had entered a strong team of Terraplanes driven by Andre du Toit, H.C. Nolte and C. Curtis.

Ferocious weather in the Transkei had turned clay roads into a morass, and the Durban contingent was immediately in trouble. A Hudson bogged down across a road near Kokstad, blocking the following six cars; the competitors, up to their knees in mud, took an hour to push it out of the way. One of the German drivers, Rischowski, crashed near Port Shepstone at a damaged causeway. The bad weather then set in across the country. 'Battling' Jack Bleiman regretted having removed the roof of his car as he found it almost impossible to drive in the shocking conditions, and lost his way six times. Dave McKnight smashed the sump of his Humber



*Jack Bleiman and his Hillman Special, 1938*



*P. Dormehl, left, and Arigo Govoni, right, with their Fiat Topolino, 1938*

near Johannesburg, Dick Slabber withdrew with a seized differential and Kernick and Reed retired in the Transkei. Sonny du Toit was leading the Johannesburg contingent in a Standard Flying Twelve, but all of them hit appalling weather on their final leg across the Karoo, and none made it through on time. Du Toit was so incensed by the experience that he immediately set off round the course for a second time! A hero of the trial was the tiny Fiat Topolino, ➡



*Derek Stuart-Findlay is awarded the Honiball Trophy by Bridget Evans for the most meritorious contribution(s) to The Chronicle*



*The winning Hudson team in 1938. Andre du Toit, left, C. Curtis, centre, H.C. Nolte, right*



*The Tavaros Citroën tourer, 1939*



*'Dr Ouch' and his winning DKW, 1939*

which arrived back at the Cape only four minutes late after the strapping 'Mad' Govoni had threatened "If the car won't pull through the Transkei mud then I'll carry it through!" The Citroën team also made it back intact, but the team winners were the impressive Hudsons driven by du Toit, Nolte and Curtis.

Realizing that the 1938 route had been too much of a strain on drivers and cars, for 1939 the Mets omitted the Transkei section but added a

'Kalahari Route' through Kuruman, Prieska and Calvinia for a total distance of 2 380 miles. Only eleven competitors entered, eight from Cape Town and three from Johannesburg, including the indomitable Sonny du Toit in a 1500 cc Fiat. Alf Tavaros had entered a Citroën tourer and had a terrifying experience when he skidded on the Hontini Pass near Knysna and ended up with two wheels teetering over an abyss. The van Zyl brothers, who were following in a Chevrolet,

stopped to pull him back on to the road, but with the time lost both cars had to retire. The winner of the Light Car Class was a local doctor and DKW driver who drove under the pseudonym 'Dr Ouch', and the Heavy Car category was taken by the indefatigable H.C. Nolte in his Hudson.

It is almost incredible that just a few members of the Mets, a relatively small motor club, were able to champion and stage these world-class events, the annual

Round-the-Union Trials. The club's chief motivator was certainly not forgotten, his name earned considerable respect in the post-war era after Dick Slabber Motors had become a prominent landmark on the Main Road at Diep Rivier.

*Acknowledgements to a motoring scrapbook compiled by Harry Fivaz, the route planner for the 1939 event, Cape Argus extracts Easter 1935 to 1939 and Albert Massyn. 🚗*

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