

# Meet The Committee

## Worth Birkill

### Chief Marshal

So how did I end up joining Woolbridge Motor Club? It is in fact all down to that Win Percy chap. You know, the man that ended up rather good at driving and was paid to do it whilst the rest of us have had to pay for the pleasure. In the sixties, Win lived in Tolpuddle and was good friends with my brother Mark as we also had a house there at one time. Win was already in the club, so it was natural for Mark to join as well as another brother, Andrew. Mark started navigating and Andrew started driving so rally cars were always around the place and thus my interest grew. So, at the age of 12, in 1968, when the London Sydney rally was on, I had pictures of the cars, the route and anything else I could find up on my bedroom wall and couldn't wait for Thursdays to come when the Motoring News would arrive and I would avidly catch up with positions and also reading the reports on the back page of a Motoring News championship event or a local event. But what really hooked me into rallying was when I was about 14, I think it was Adrian Patten who visited the house in Puddletown one evening to see Mark bringing his Mk1 Escort. Somehow, I wheedled my way into the back as off we went to Puddletown forest for a play as this was back in the days of no locked forest gates. The noise, the classic smell of hot mud on the exhaust and the sheer thrill of going sideways had me hooked and still has to this day. Another memorable trip with Mark in a Midget was to mid Wales to go to the Abergwesyn road also known as the Devil's Staircase to make what would be described today as Pace Notes. This 20 mile piece of road was used on many Welsh road rallies and being back in the days of targa timing (don't get me started on the good old days!) it could be timed at any average an organiser wished. We then went onto the start of, I think, of the Cilwendig rally which then was one of the best Motoring News championship events of it's day. The start was in Newcastle Emllyn and there were hundreds of spectators milling around and the excitement was 19 palpable. The top drivers being the likes of Mick Briant etc. were, of course, my heroes of the time so I was in seventh heaven. We obviously then returned to the Devils Staircase to spectate but with so many spectators already, it was hard to find a spot to park safely. Mark & Andrew did the RAC rally in 1968 and 1969 in their Mini back in the days when there were over 80 Special stages and the events lasted five days including two nights out of bed. When the service crew and other cars arrived at the Puddletown house prior to departure, I was so so wanting to go with them. I had to wait until the International Welsh rally when I was eighteen before I could go with Mark and a previous WMC member, Vince Fullwood, as the service crew to brother Andrew who had our own Robin Maclachlan in the other seat. It was a full 36 hours on the road, starting in Cardiff, up to Corwen in north Wales and back again via stages over Epynt. Some chap called Roger Clark won in his Cossack liveried RS1800. To this day, I miss the roadside servicing in the dark. A long line of service vehicles with the sound of generators, flood lights, the smell of bacon sandwiches and the likes of Clark and Mikkola in Escorts flying by you on their way to the next stage. So, I joined Woolbridge when I was 18 in 1974 and I had to build my first car. Mark and Andrew had a whole raft of mini parts and engines. Andrew built the engine, Adrian Patten painted a shell that was going spare and I was soon on the road in it doing road rallies. A shame it was stolen and set on fire so the next one was a blue Cooper S, again used for road rallies and even just the one single venue stage event through the Croyden Forest near Minehead. I vowed that day never to do another stage event

in a Mini. These forests near Minehead ended up being rather special to me. Somewhere about 1980 I somehow ended up doing my first stint on the committee for a number of years and I note Messrs Fancy, Rolls and Pook are still in attendance. Being into road rallies, I organised the Echo Dragon Rally still in the good old targa timing days with about 180 miles of Devon lanes. Road rallies were starting to get well out of hand by then and the RACMSA visited myself and Vic Fancy with a haul of photos collected by the police showing various chunks out of banks and a couple of junctions with rather large black lines to them. I was happy to point out that none went over the Give Way markings. As now, 30mph was the fastest average speed you can set as an organiser using the public roads and I was also asked what average I had set. The RACMSA knew all about targa timing and as every other organiser would have 20 said – 30mph your honour! It was only a few years later that they banned this timing system and all clocks had to be set to BBC time. I do believe that Percy chap also took to the lanes again with brother Mark navigating in a Datsun of some variety. In about 1984 I then moved onto co-driving for Pete King (a Bournemouth MC member) in his Mk2 RS2000 and did all the local events. This was soon to be replaced by a Lotus Sunbeam which I have to say was a lovely car. This car actually gave me the only time I have ever thought my time was up. Pete had a few dollars and for tarmac a set of slicks, intermediates and wets We were doing a single venue tarmac event at Avon Park near Bournemouth and the weather was a bit changeable. The car was up on axle stands as we thought it was going to rain and we were running third on the road. It was cloudy but we went for slicks, dashed to the stage start and just as we were being counted down, car 1 had gone off and the stage was stopped and there we stayed for 15 minutes and just as we were getting going again the heavens opened. Half way up a long straight, the tarmac changed from a nice grey colour to shiny black and the back end started to drift away to my side. All I could see was a row of 1 metre cubes of concrete which we were getting closer and closer to and at a speed which was far too high if we hit them sideways on. Pete somehow did the save of the day, but I went all quite for the rest of the stage and he asked me at the end if I was OK. We were both a bit shook up to say the least. For some unfathomable reason, the Sunbeam was swapped for an Audi Quattro which was incredibly fast, left hand drive, completely unreliable and an accident waiting to happen. Thankfully it never did, but I was always very happy when it broke. In the late eighties I spent a whole £2500 on a bit of a scruffy Mk 2 Escort with a 2 litre pinto engine in it so I could drive on the stages. At the time, I was working at Loders Garage in Dorchester and so had access to a cheap respray and use of the workshop in order to prepare the car and being able to borrow a trailer and tow vehicle which just made life so easy. We mainly did the ASWMC rounds which included trips to the Wydean and Bridgnorth Stages in Wales. Events over Salisbury Plain and three or four forest events in the SW a year (read zero for these now). The Somerset Stages near Minehead became my favourite event as it was in April and often coincided with my birthday. Far too many memorable parties were had and, on a few occasions, I probably shouldn't have been anywhere near a car! 21 My 'if only' and nearly 'claim to fame' result was on the 1990 SW Stages and it was a BTRDA Championship event using the Haldon Forests and the M5 services as the service park. As Adrian Patten once said, there are only two types of rallying, one at night and one on the loose. This had both as it didn't start until it was dark and having done road rallies, I was not worried. I was out with club member Pete Gill and we were flying along nicely holding a highly unexpected 9 th o/a. The problem was that we were eating tyres and having already used four rear ones, two more were needed so a trip to the tyre fitter was made. However, it took him a littler longer to fit them and we ended up booking out of service two minutes late. Bugger! Two minutes added to our stage times which I see dropped us to 24 th. A great shame and I think I sulked for a month. My final drive on a stage event came thanks to Vic Fancy in his then recently built 1600cc crossflow Mk2 Escort. It was built from a shell that had never been near a forest and handled so so much better than mine and a nice class result was the reward, again on the Somerset Stages. I still don't know why he took a spare steering wheel with him to the event

though! For some reason I can't remember, I sold my Escort and bought another Mini with all the 'S' bits on it so I could try a bit of historic regularity rallying as the club was by then running The Channon Tour of Dorset organised by Bob Blackstock and it was a round of the HRCR championship. Robin Cardale said he would navigate and we went in at the deep end as I suggested we do the Illuminations Rally which I told Robin took place in Wales. Being the plonker I was, I was wrong as it was actually based in Morecambe, a bit further 'oop north'. To cut a long story short, I ended up changing the head gasket on the Friday night, in the drizzle, in the cold and under the street lights on the sea front. The only amusing thing was that it seemed the whole of Geordieland were having a weekend in Morecambe and at 2am they piled out of the night clubs all going: "Why aye man, that's a nice mini!". The men were all gone with the wind and the girls were teetering around on high heels and short skirts! In those days, many HRCR events would do tests and regularity during the day and a 100-mile road rally during the night, a few hours sleep and then more tests. We, unfortunately retired during the night with alternator trouble. We had the pleasure of winning the Channon Tour about four times, even organised it once and did events in Wales, East Anglia and the South west. In about 2000, Robin retired as he was suffering from migraines and bouncing around in a noisy Mini had lost it's fun. I was therefore looking for a good new navigator and happened upon a certain Dave Harris and we just clicked. We both 22 have the same desire to win, but when it all goes wrong, just a shrug of the shoulders and off to the bar for a party. He likes partying even more than me! Our first event was the HRCR Welsh Retro which spent all day on Epynt doing tests and regularity on the tarmac and gravel roads including the surrounding forests. There then followed a couple of hours off and then a 200-mile full on road rally, again using Epynt, which ended just as the sun came up. The Mini bounced its way from lock to lock and guess what? We actually won! I had decided to do the HRCR championship that year as many of the events (unlike now) were southern based and another win was the Targa Rusticana who our own Cliff England helped to organise together with two other extremely good organisers. The Targa was always beautifully organised. Dave is also no mean driver himself and has a Mk! RS2000 in his garage and it was soon pressed into service for me to drive when the mini was out of action. Thus, began my now long history of 'arrive & drive'. We were always near the top of the results and I ended up second in the HRCR championship. In about 2003, I lost it again by a solitary point all due to my stupid mistake. The last round was the Illuminations up in Morecambe again and Dave couldn't make it so I enrolled our own Robin Maclachlan as navigator – so no pressure on him then. We had a scare when on the night section, one of my nice new Spax adjustable shock absorbers broke on the back. We managed to remove it in a neutral section so no time lost. With no shocker, if the back of the car leaves the ground, the suspension trumpet falls out and then end of story. We still had the infamous Wrynose and Hardknott Passes to go so with some rather leary handling at times not helped by these roads being steep, bumpy and full of hairpins. We survived the night and went back to the B&B for a few hours sleep. The B&B was a lovely example of Art Deco on Morecambe seafront complete with a very old bull dog that had the habit of loudly farting at every opportunity (I lie not). This was, I have to say, rather disconcerting at the breakfast table! I managed to locate another shocker and popped it on and so with just a few tests left I was in the pound seat for the championship. Then for some unfathomable reason, I managed to get us a 'wrong test' as I managed to go the wrong side of a cone or something which was in those days a big penalty. The end result was dropping a place to the eventual champion. Such is life I suppose. Car swapping continued as Dave took my mini to do the Ypres Poppy Rally as I couldn't do it. He subsequently brought it back with cracked discs, but gave me a nice new shiny Brantz trip meter in recompense. Dave has a friend Jon Prior, only known as JP who likes a bit of rallying but freely admits he is not a 'driver'.<sup>23</sup> However, what he is, is a builder of fine rally cars and has a certain OCD about perfection when he does it. Dave & JP decided they were going to do the Costa Brava Rally based in Lloret De Mar in Spain. I wasn't keen as the mini engine needed rebuilding and cash

was a tad short at that time. JP to the rescue, if I paid for the new block etc, he would send it to his favourite engine builder and pay the rest. How could I say no? Dave & JP collected the mini and the next time I saw it was at Goodwood where all the GB cars were going to be loaded onto transporters for the trip to Spain. By then, the mini had been JP-erised: i.e. all the wiring tidied up, various bits powder coated and 101 other little jobs done. JP at the time was building an extremely nice Mk1 Escort BDG and his OCD was again to the forefront as it was just 'exquisite' in every aspect. We all got to thrash it around Donnington Park and oh what a lovely car to drive. Then, in 2005 I decided to have a go at Endurance rallying which was, I have to say, the most enjoyable rallying I have ever done. The concept was invented by the late Philip Young who was the founder of such events as The Classic Marathon and Peking to Paris historic rallies. The idea was max. 1400cc, no engine or gearbox mods, no lsd. Suspension and brake linings were free and a control tyre was also specified. The events were made up of anything up to 110 test miles which had an allowed average of 40mph and a night road section. To achieve this average, passage controls were stopped at and junctions etc artificially tightened. The cars being fairly standard that meant that those with the deepest pockets couldn't buy success. Another £2500 later I had a nice little 8-Valve Corsa Sri which was ready to go. Deja vu then came into play as on the first event in Wales, the alternator went AWOL on the night section, just as it had in the mini all those years before. Events were generally more southerly based so a good selection were done and usually a top ten finish and even a fair number of top five positions. One highlight was doing the 2006 Lombard Revival, organised by Philip Young, which started in York on Thursday afternoon and finished in Blackpool on Sunday afternoon with about 260 miles of tests which took the form of stately homes and all the well-known northern forests such as Dalby, Ae, Kielder and many more. Service crews weren't allowed, but the bigger events would have a team of mechanics at all the halts who could work miracles on getting a car back to health. We only needed them once when the sump guard mounting started to come adrift from the chassis rail so a quick bit of welding sorted the problem. There was an entry 24 of 120 cars and I thought we could get into the top ten, but it was not to be due to, yet again, I put my 'stupid driver head' on. We were running a nice 12th ish when I was caught out on a downhill very muddy slalom. When braking, I managed to lock the front wheels and even with my foot on the clutch and trying to cadence brake, we serenely sailed at a whole 20 mph into the biggest bush I have ever seen. I was waiting for the thud when we hit the trunk, but nothing, we just slowly stopped with the bush completely covering the car. If my name was Mark Hoppe, I would probably have been able to gently rock it back and forth and slowly climb out of said bush. But as my name isn't Hoppe, Dave had to curse and swear and do the pushing and shoving until we eventually regained the road. When we went in, I honestly thought we were out, as they say in cricket. We lost about five minutes and dropped down the order, but all was not over. We kept on going and the last test was along the seafront in Blackpool and we were in my hoped for 10th place with just this test to go. I then got my stupid head out again and tried to handbrake it round the hairpin instead of just driving it. The result being I had to do an embarrassing little reverse (Dave was hooting with laughter) which dropped us a few precious seconds and we ended up 11th overall and John Haugland of Skoda fame nabbed my richly deserved (well I thought so) 10th overall. All that was left was the party! Another highlight was a little nearer home being The Great Bustard Endurance Rally organised by Salisbury & Shaftesbury car Club. Stating at 2pm on Saturday and finishing at 5am Sunday morning. 110 miles of tests through Worthy Farm, (the Glastonbury Festival site), Stourhead Woods including St Alfred's Tower and many more farm track venues. A happy 3rd o/a was had but not until a late scare a few miles from the end. The last hurrah was back through Worthy Farm run as a Time Control section and I managed to slightly understeer off into a field which I hadn't realised was so muddy. This time my name was Hoppe and I managed to convince the car to keep going. Endurance events unfortunately died a death as there were just not enough good navigators who could cope with the night sections and the events were

starting to get too expensive. Then, in 2013, I swapped seats again, now that was stupid. From being a sack of spuds in a stage car to actually having to read a map and the like. It all came about by accident. One of Dave's sons then 16 wanted to have a go in the lefthand seat, so the Corsa was duly delivered to Dave in Ledbury (the event was just down the road) for him to drive, so I did 'deliver and marshal'. Said son on 25 the evening before had a better offer so I was drafted in to navigate at late notice. All was going swimmingly, Dave a bit too leary at times so a 'steady tiger' came from my side until the head gasket decided to blow, so a somewhat earlier party than planned took place. Amends were made next time on the Exmoor endurance back in the old stamping ground of the Somerset stages forests. Dave again drove the Corsa and I was shown how to properly get up the Porlock Toll road and I was most chuffed to get us through the forests on 1:25000 maps during the night section with the result of 3rd o/a. Doing regularity rallies is still a challenge to me as the HRCR events will have numerous speed changes at the same time as 'plot & bash' and at the end of the day my brain does actually hurt due to all the calculations going on. All the top navigators are all somewhat younger than me and their accuracy is a world away from mine. I have much enjoyed the Rally of the Tests, being a HERO event and are not as hard on the old grey matter as it is all pre-plot and shorter regularities from the Thursday evening prologue to the finish on Sunday afternoon. I did once manage to get 6th o/a on an HRCR event, but I have to admit it was because it was in the south and only two of the 'hot shot' navigators turned up! Somewhere down the line I ended up being Chief Marshal for the Great Bustard Rally so couldn't compete but that didn't mean the Corsa was left in the garage. Oh no, it was dragged out for JP to drive and Dave to navigate. It was a wet old night and I always thought JP would get caught out in the dark in the Stourhead Woods. But no, it returned in one piece. The fun he had, made JP decide to build a MGZR to Endurance spec. JP being JP, it was built to the highest standard and was, and is, a superb car. It was named Mabel for some unknown reason and was always intended for the three of us to use. Unfortunately, by the time Mabel was built, Endurance rallying had come to its painful end and now Targa rallying is on the up. Here, it is basically all tests but they have to be run at a 30mph average which therefore entails more 'manoeuvres' through cones etc. The concept was again invented by Philip Young and it was in effect the final nail in the coffin for the Endurance type of event. Cars must conform to 'road rally' rules so most cars have slips and a maximum of 2 litres so not such a level playing field. Events range from single venues such as old airfields to forests. It came to pass that the first targa for Mabel was to be the Exmoor, again back in my favourite Somerset forests including Porlock toll road. JP was in the left-hand seat and I drove. Dave's eldest son, Harry, was driving the Corsa with Dave navigating and he did the dirty on me knowing my uselessness going up Porlock. He did a crafty change of seats for this and promptly took 9secs out of me. Dave, 26 of course, wound this into me at the lunch halt saying how could I be so slow compared to Harry driving Porlock for the first time on his first rally as well... Mutter, mutter from me and a 'steady tiger' from JP after a leary moment on the next run up said toll road. Dave did come clean at the finish though. A very pleasing 6th o/a was the result. In 2012, Vic Fancy hung me upside down in his workshop until I agreed to be the Woolbridge speed Chief Marshal. I said I would do it for three years and somehow, I am now in my 10th year of doing it. Myself, Dave & JP continue to drive each other's cars and it now seems to be: "which car shall we use?" and then who is going to be in which seat, but either way, it has been, and still is, a great deal of fun doing this rallying lark in all its different forms. I no longer feel it is strange to be thrashing someone else's car while they are sat in the other seat and now, I am used to the opposite. So, thanks to Win for introducing Mark to the club. However, my bank balance doesn't thank you as much! I should also thank you for being the first person to crash one of my father's company cars. It made it all the easier when me and my brothers also did it. Brother Andrew even manged two in one day! Now, should I tell the story about Win and the company car? Why not, sorry Win. Mark had trained as a chef and was working for the Union Castle Line which had ships going from

Southampton to Cape Town. Win was to take Mark to the ship and drop him off using father's company car being a Zodiac or Zepher. There they were, trundling down the docks with train lines set in the tarmac. It was a great shame that the tarmac stopped and sleepers started which Win managed to launch the car onto with the immediate result of somewhat bent front suspension. So, at about 2am, a call was made home but father suggested that Win stay on the boat overnight and he would collect him in the morning. This is where the admission was made that they had two girls with them, and so poor old father had to drive a Mini Countryman from Puddletown to Southampton to collect them all and deliver them to their homes. Win, at the time, was an apprentice at the Tolpuddle garage and was provided with the parts but had to fit them himself as penance. And that's my story. Worth Birkill