

The 1968 Daily Express London to Sydney Marathon

Part 1 by

Bill Price, (ex-B.M.C. Competition Dept).

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Introduction

The BMC Competitions Department used Austin Westminster cars as service 'barges'. When BMC introduced the Vanden Plas 4 litre R, sales of the model were not good, resulting in a large stock of unsold cars. BMC Sales Dept suggested to Competitions Manager Stuart Turner that we should try out some of these cars as support vehicles, which would be good publicity for the model. So in 1966 the Department acquired two cars followed by a third the following year. (These were chassis VRS3-6575 painted Chalk Blue with Blue trim, reg: JBL496D, chassis VRS3-6956 painted Carlton Grey with Red trim, reg: JBL492D and chassis VRS3-5707 painted Carlton Grey with Red trim, reg: NBL128E. Chassis 6575 & 6576 were manufactured in March 1966 and chassis 5707 in September 1965 and registered in July 1967 ! Ed.)

I think the mechanics were horrified when they realised that these cars were fitted with automatic transmission (in 1966 auto boxes were not a rally thing !!). However, after the first rally with the Vanden Plas most of them were converted – they found the 3 speed box could be used more or less like a manual box, particularly when crossing Alpine passes with all the hairpins and gradients.

So in 1968 next on the agenda for the Department was the London Sydney Marathon. This was advertised as the longest motor rally so far. The route from London to Sydney totalled 10,000 miles, initially passing through France, Italy, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, West Pakistan to Bombay in India. Secondly, at Bombay the competitors embarked on the P&O liner Chusan for the trip to Freemantle, Western Australia.

The route across Australia from Perth to Sydney passed through such places as Marvel Loch, Moralana Creek, Mingary, Hindmarsh Station and Nowra, a distance of 3000 miles.

The Abingdon based BMC Competitions Department prepared five BLMC 1800 saloons for this marathon, four 'works' entrees and the fifth car crewed by three Red Arrows pilots and sponsored by Evan Cook Ltd.

It was decided that owing to the long distances involved between possible service points, a 'sweeper' car would follow the route from Turkey to Bombay manned by Abingdon personnel. I was asked to crew a Vanden Plas 4 litre R with Bob Whittington, one of our most experienced mechanics. The car was to standard specification with the exception of the following modifications/equipment:

- Sump shield
- Roof Rack (to carry spare wheel, welding bottles & Hydrolastic pump)
- Minilite magnesium wheels
- Dunlop Weathermaster tyres
- Competition brake pads/linings
- Spare 4 gallon Dunlop Jerribags (flexible petrol containers)
- 1800 Spares kit in boot & in roof rack box
- One 1800 rally wheel/tyre on boot lid

Our job was to travel to Sivas in Turkey accompanied by a second Vanden Plas service vehicle, dropping off spares kits on route. At Sivas we would carry out a recce of the two special timed sections to Erzincan. The rally organisers offered a choice of two routes and we would make notes of road conditions (for our own cars) on both routes. Once our cars had passed through on the rally we would leave after the last team car and 'sweep' to Bombay. I kept a diary of our journey:

Friday 15th November - Abingdon to Southampton

Late afternoon, accompanied by Eddie Burnell and Frank Rudman in second Vanden Plas service car with 2-wheel luggage trailer, depart Abingdon, drive to Southampton to catch overnight ferry to Le Havre. Travelling with us was Stuart Jackson who would travel to Turin and bring back an Austin 1800 recce car which had been left there by one of our rally crews.

Saturday 16th November - Le Havre to Tournay

Depart French Customs at 08.00 hrs and drive to Paris. Find BL Dealer in Versailles to drop off box of spares for our mechanic who would arrive by air. Carry on South and find Hotel Terminus at Tournay for the night. Very cold night with frost and some snow.

Sunday 17th November - Tournay to Turin

Leave hotel at 08.00 hrs in the snow for Turin, via Chamonix and Monte Blanc tunnel. No snow on road after Chamonix, no problems, arriving AGIP

Motel in good time. Go to airport to locate Austin 1800 race car and return with car to motel for night halt.

Monday 18th November - Turin to Trieste

Breakfast, check over 1800, unload spares kit to leave at Motel which will be site of rally control. See Stuart off with 1800 and depart on fast Autostrada to Trieste. Arrive Trieste at 17.30hrs and locate rooms at Minimare Hotel on coast road.

Tuesday 19th November - Trieste to Belgrade

Depart early, arriving border with Yugoslavia soon after breakfast. Short delay while Customs stamp Carnet. Now a very wet journey through flooded countryside via Ljubljana and Zagreb onto Autoput. Lunch stop at roadside restaurant. Shortly after leaving the lunch stop, trouble. The trailer loses a wheel which is retrieved by a friendly local following in his Mercedes. Repairs soon completed arriving at Belgrade in the rain. Found an inexpensive Tourist Hotel (more like a hostel) for the night.



Bill Price and two Princess's, Fuel stop in Belgrade.

Wednesday 20th November - Belgrade to Sofia

After an early start we continued to Nis and stopped for lunch at Pirot. Then a slight hitch! Passing through a small town we failed to notice a sign beside the road indicating *No Photography!* We had stopped at a level crossing and got

out our cameras thinking there may be a good shot of a steam locomotive. Suddenly a soldier ran up to the car pointing a rifle at us, indicating that we should hand over our cameras. Almost immediately a 'civvy' police car arrived and indicated that we should turn round and follow them. After turning round we stopped at the building on our left which we then realised was an army barracks. One of the policemen went in and came out with an army officer, who got in the police car. We then followed in convoy down a labyrinth of dirty side streets stopping in front of a private house, which had a small gatehouse inside the wall. In my car we had a SARBE (search and rescue beacon) which we had been asked to carry to Turkey by the Red Arrows crew. We thought if the police find it we will be in serious trouble. All we could think of doing was remove it from the glove-box and hide it under the sleeping bags in the rear footwell. Our passports were taken and we found ourselves in an office on the first floor. After a few minutes a civilian in a smart light grey suit came in and sat behind the desk. In fluent English he asked us why we were taking photos in a restricted area. He seemed satisfied with our explanation and then said "Gentlemen, if you give us the films from your cameras you may go. If not, you will be detained for one week, one month, who knows?" We handed over our films with our friend saying finally that going through Bulgaria we should be much more careful because we could be detained for a long time if caught taking photos! We were allowed to proceed, assuming the car had not been searched as the SARBE was untouched. Phew!!! We continued our journey without delay to the Yugoslavia/Bulgaria border, arriving in Sofia early evening, booking into the Balkan Hotel (where I had stayed on the 1964 Liege rally). As was usual, no bath plugs in the hotel but we had come prepared.



Trailer repairs in Yugoslavia

Thursday 21st November - Sofia to Istanbul

Turkey next – leave hotel at 08.30 hrs, still raining, arrive Bulgarian border with Turkey at 12.00hrs. Delay at Customs where we had to unload some of our spares for inspection and stamping of Carnet. Clocks on 1 hour. On to Istanbul arriving Hotel Cinar at 20.15 hrs. This Hotel was to be another rally Control. Abingdon now 2050 miles behind!

Friday 22nd November - Istanbul

Business in Istanbul today. Contact Anadolu Makine, the BMC Agent who would assist our service team. The boss Mr Sedat was most pleased to see us and took care of the trailer which we would leave in Istanbul. Lunch with Mr Sedat.

Saturday 23rd November - Istanbul

Today checked over the Vanden Plas and repaired the Halda tripmeter which had stopped working. Lunch with Mr Sedat and Mr. Yenna (BMC) who took us to see the Grand Bazaar and to a typical Turkish tea house. Evening meal in Hotel Cinar enlivened by resident belly dancer.



L to R; Eddie Burnell, Bob Whittington & Frank Rudman enjoying tea in Istanbul

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Sunday 24th November - Istanbul to Ankara

Depart in heavy rain to catch the Feri Bot (car ferry) over the Bosphorus. The first bridge across was not completed until



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1973. The outline of mosques and spires through the driving rain made us feel we were now really going into Asia, a long way from home. Mid

Bosphorus Queue

morning we were obliged to stop on the Bolu Pass when our temperature gauge went off the clock and steam appeared from under the bonnet. Removal of a jammed thermostat cured the problem. Now quite foggy but a greater hazard were Turkish truck drivers who only knew one place to drive, and that was in the middle of the road! We saw the results of numerous serious accidents, the debris usually left on the carriageway. Evening saw us arrive in the rather drab city of Ankara



Overheating on Bolu Pass

(altitude 3,000 ft.) A night at the Balin Hotel was enlivened by consumption of some local brandy in the roof top bar!



Refuelling in Ankara

Monday 25th November - Ankara to Sivas

Early start again, and it was unusual for 'Fast Eddie' (Burnell) not to be behind the wheel of the other service car. Eddie was heard to say "I think you had better drive this morning Frank", maybe something to do with the brandy! Overcast with heavy rain leaving Ankara. The original overheating was found to be caused by a pin-hole in the expansion tank but this was soldered while we had a roadside snack meal. Before we left Abingdon, Bob had fitted a bracket, capable of holding three Heinz snack meal cans, on the chassis alongside the exhaust manifold. This was kept stocked so we could always rely on an instant snack meal. There was little traffic now as we moved further East, and then 40 kms from Sivas the tarmac ended and we were on a muddy, gravel but smooth road, with frequent pot-holes. Sivas was a dirty, muddy town (altitude 7,500 ft) where we booked into the Hotel Kosk at 17.00 hrs. There were two army Land-Rovers parked outside, early rally service arrivals. Next day Frank and Eddie would stay in Sivas while we did the recce.



The Southern Route!

Tuesday 26th November - Sivas to Erzincan Recce

We left early in the morning (Bob Whittington and myself) deciding to follow the southern of the optional routes first. Very smooth and muddy gravel surface for 140 kms, then floods and a bridge under construction from rough logs. Guided across the bridge by Bob over a raging torrent missing large holes and then another rickety bridge to a section covered with large rocks, some of which required manhandling aside. A new section of road was not on our route notes but we soon found the correct road up a muddy hill, over a bridge, through a village.



Bridge under construction!

Within ¼ mile we became stuck in the mud, and decided we would have to return the way we had come (frustrating, as we estimated we were only 9 kms



Stuck!

from joining the Northern road). As we dug the mud from our wheels, a Ferguson tractor came up the road and stopped. The driver, by sign language, offered us a tow for about £5, and with that, his mate ran off down the hill, to return with a chain over his shoulder. We hitched up and off we went, but for only about 200 yards before the tractor stopped with wheel spin. The driver indicated that there was an alternative route over the fields, which we decided to risk. He turned round and then towed us in reverse until we came to a gap in the bank. Hitching up again, and we were soon off over the fields, across country, through a village of mainly mud huts, and soon with a gang of children hanging on our rear bumper for a ride!

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Saved!

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Wednesday 27th November - Sivas to Erzincan

Early this morning we left Sivas taking Frank with us to assist at Erzincan arriving there at about 13.00 hrs. Had an omelette and cup of tea at local café and then found the BP Station where we would set up our service point. The first rally cars did not arrive until 22.00 hrs and apart from routine servicing the only 1800 in trouble was Tony Fall. He had been sprayed with stones by an overtaking Australian competitor which had broken several spot lamps, which we



Northern route

replaced. (We found out that after all our efforts, the organisers cancelled the southern route option). Frank joined the BMC Turkey van for a lift back to Sivas, and at 23.10 hrs we departed along the rally route to start our 'sweeper' operation - next stop Bombay!

Thursday 28th November - Erzincan to Iran Border

To start with we were in convoy with some of the late rally runners as the gravel road became rougher. It was a very dark night and then it started to snow (no cats eyes on this road!). The route continued to climb and as it started to get light, dawn was spectacular as the sky became an unreal yellow/orange colour. Without warning we were back on to tarmac (bliss) with only 140 kms to do to the border.

Friday 29th November - Iran to Afghanistan Border

Clocks on 1½ hours. Arrived at the impressive Customs post at 07.15 hrs surprised to see some rally cars still there, including a Ford Falcon retired with broken gearbox.



In Iran

Our Carnet was quickly stamped and we were through the archway into Iran, to meet up with two of our mechanics, Brian Moylan and Tommy Eales, who had been servicing there. They had flown to Teheran and hired a car (Dodge Dart) to get to the border. We left in convoy for Teheran with first stop Tabriz for fuel where we found the Australian ladies crew in a Morris 1100 filling up. Had a quick snack and then continued to Teheran arriving at the Phillips factory at 22.00 hrs. The main control was at the factory with a large parking area and eating facilities laid on. A number of rally cars were still there including the 1100. We spoke to the ladies, who were having a leisurely meal, and suggested that they really should get going to avoid losing more time. We had a quick meal and left the control, now with Tommy Eales on board the Vanden Plas making us a 3 man crew. Within three hours we were onto the

desert road, a very rough gravel, often washboard, surface for mile after relentless mile! With hindsight we realised that an increase in ground clearance would have been a benefit as we found it necessary to cut our speed to about 30 mph to avoid wrecking the car. Dawn broke to a clear blue sky, occasional villages and grazing camels, but we plodded on! Cracks appeared in the body, both the bonnet retaining pins sheared off and the welding cylinders started to come adrift from the roof rack. At about 10.20 hrs we came into a village to find the girls in the Morris 1100 stopped, with a distinct lean to the offside, suggesting collapsed suspension; the offside Hydrolastic pipe had fractured. Difficult to repair but Bob and Tommy bridged the gap



Repairing the 1100

with heavy duty neoprene but within 10 kms this burst. A permanent repair was then carried out using a section of 1800 oil cooler hose (which lasted to Sydney). Two Austrians in a Chevrolet Sports coupe stopped to watch the proceedings, an unlikely car to see on these roads! We now pressed on through Mashad and at about 18.00 hrs briefly onto tarmac again. This was interspersed with treacherous gullies and wash-aways which slowed our progress. We arrived at the Iran/Afghanistan border at midnight, wondering if the control officials were still awake. The border officials seemed to expect us and in 10 minutes we had our carnet stamped and were on our way across the 12 kms of no-mans land to the Afghanistan border, getting through again in about 10 minutes.

Saturday 30th November – Afghanistan Border to Kabul

Fuel was our next problem, as we knew we could not continue without a fill up, and thought we might have to wait till dawn. However, at Herat at 02.00 hrs we came upon a closed, darkened filling station. Looking through the window with a torch we saw some bundles on the floor, which turned out to be persons sleeping. Banging on the window and producing a handful of US dollars did the trick and we were soon filled up. The road was now an incredible smooth, straight, concrete two-lane highway stretching into the distance. Apparently this road had been built with joint Russian and American aid. At 08.00 hrs we stopped for a quick brew-up being joined briefly by the Morris 1100 who had got behind us, somehow! We could now cruise at high speed and at 09.15 hrs stopped to fill from our 4 gallon jerry bags (170 kms to next fuel at Kandahar) and sample the snack meal cans again. We were in the middle of an apparently uninhabited spectacular landscape of sand and mountain ranges. As we finished our snack in this incredibly quiet place, we gradually became aware of a buzzing noise coming up behind us. We soon realised it was a vehicle and as the blazing headlamps came into view we could see it was the 1100 again. Despite waving and shouting and being the only living beings around and with a car, the 1100 sped past with the driver staring ahead as if in a trance, the other two crew obviously asleep; scary! About 30 kms from Kandahar, we came across an Alfa Romeo rally car (4 man crew) parked at the end of two black lines on the tarmac; their diff had seized. Tom and Bob helped them remove the pinion flange and we were soon on the move. The petrol queue at Kandahar was long but the friendly locals



Kandahar fuel queue

ushered us to the front and US dollars did the trick again. The fast road continued to Kabul, arriving at the Spinzar Hotel at approx. 16.15 hours.

Sunday 1st December – Kabul to Pakistan/India Border

At Kabul we met Peter Browning and our service team including chief mechanic Doug Watts. They advised us that the Khyber Pass would be closed for the night (although kept open for the rally) and as we could not get there before dark, Peter suggested we had a meal and a few hours sleep. Reveille at 03.00hrs with a cup of tea and we were on the road again. We took the Lataban Road to Sarobi and Jalalabad arriving Khyber at 07.45 hrs, where the very efficient Customs at Torkham stamped our carnet and we paid the toll of 1 rupee per person and 4 rupees for the car. We now had the excitement of driving over the Khyber Pass complete with very broken tarmac and potholes but very little traffic. At the Pakistan/India border we were soon through but no money change facilities were open.



Torkham border

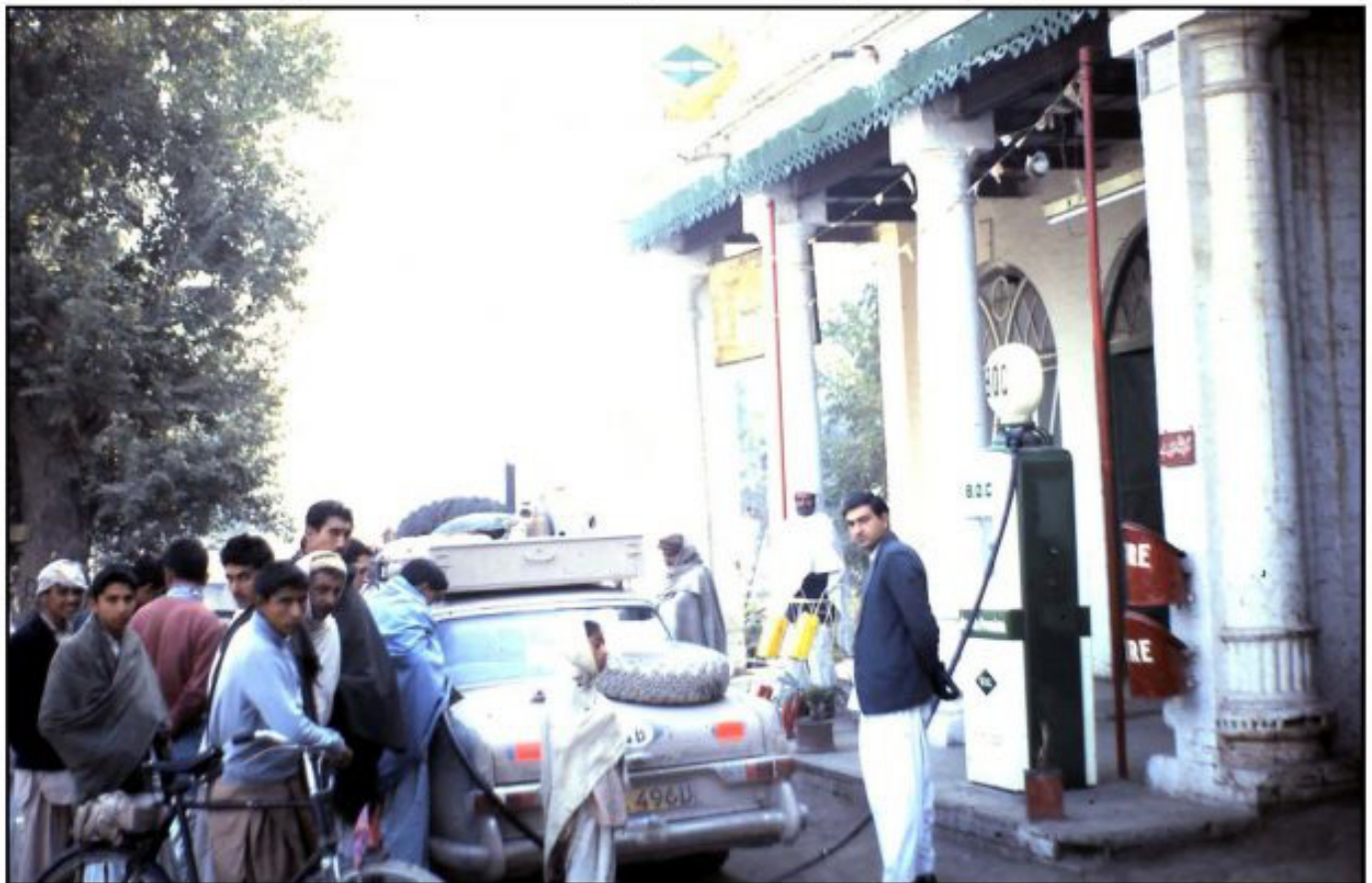
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Monday 2nd December - Pakistan/India Border to Agra

Money was a problem as we could not obtain rupees in England. We refuelled at the Caltex station and on asking about money exchange, we were directed to the house of the local bank manager. It was now about 22.00hrs. and although his charming family invited us in for tea, they could not help with currency. A phone call to the manager of the local tourist office resulted in his prompt arrival at the house with 100 dollars worth of rupees. What service! Reluctantly leaving the hospitality of the bank manager, we pressed on towards Delhi, calling at the Ranjit Hotel to see if our colleague Brian Moylan was still there. He had already left for his next flight so we carried on towards Agra, the driving now very difficult with many lorries, bicycles, people and animals on



Refuelling in Pakistan

the road, mostly unlit. Some of the lorries were festooned with multi-coloured 'Christmas Tree' lamps, anything from yellow to purple making it difficult, when seen from a distance, to know which direction they were travelling. The lorries and buses all hogged the centre of the road and we had several near misses. When daylight came it was just as bad, with the three lane road (two outside dirt lanes and a central tarmac lane) consisting of an apparent central suicide strip! We resorted to driving with headlamps on main beam and hazard lights flashing in the middle lane, playing a game of 'chicken' which normally cleared a path! It was still dark when we arrived at Agra.



Suicide strip !

Tuesday 3rd December - Agra to Bombay

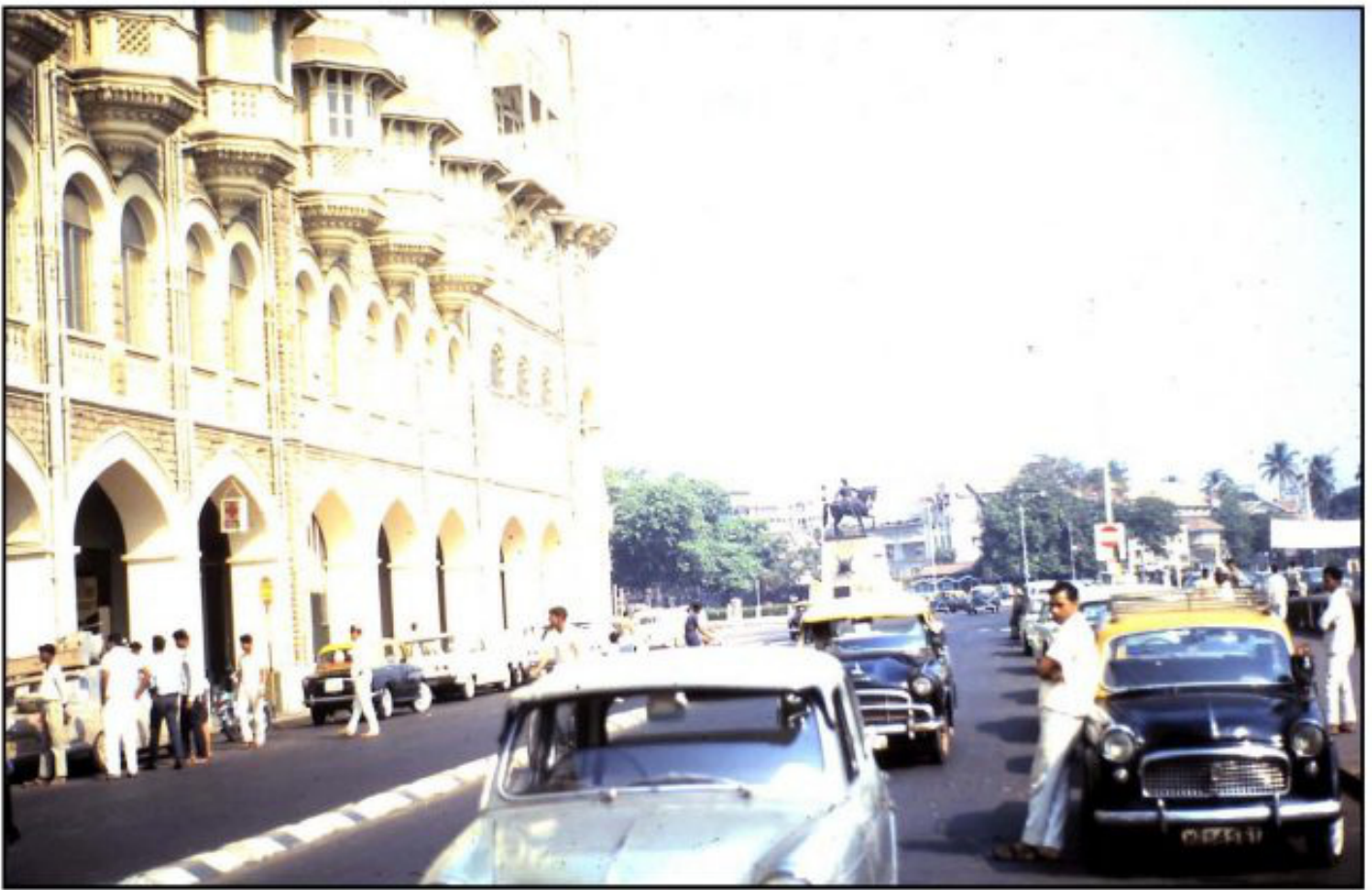
We passed through Agra at 06.00 hrs. but as it was still dark, there was no chance of glimpsing the Taj Mahal, which was a shame. Stopped for breakfast (Heinz tins again) beside some palm trees, glad for a rest. We were all very tired despite frequent driver changes and Bombay just could not come quick enough. At about 11.00 hrs. we came upon a crowd looking at a crashed rally Cortina, but the local policeman assured us the crew were safe in hospital, not badly hurt. Stopping for petrol was an adventure as we became submerged in a sea of friendly people, all wanting to say hello and look at this foreign trio, in a foreign car. The roads were awful, rough broken tarmac, potholes, but worst of all the huge numbers of people, bicycles, scooters, bullock carts and



Breakfast in India above, refuelling below!

animals. Just 100 miles to go now, the road having become quite hilly, very hot, humid and dusty. It was midnight when we reached the outskirts of Bombay, and we were shocked at the reality of the hundreds of people sleeping on the pavements, reminding us of the conditions which local people had to endure daily. It was with some relief that we found the Taj Mahal hotel





Taj-Mahal Hotel above, Princess at Bombay Agent below

where the BMC team were staying and to find that all of our team cars had arrived safely. We were “knackered” and had frequent driver changes during the last few hours – I did not sleep much as I did not want to miss anything during this adventure!



Our recce notes had been excellent and we had made no serious navigational errors. We were on our own as far as communications were concerned, as mobile phones did not exist and we did not have two-way radios. We had averaged approx. 800 miles a day, which considering road conditions and border crossings etc. was reasonable with a heavily laden car with limited ground clearance. We had one puncture in Turkey, otherwise the Vanden Plas was trouble free; we would have made better speed with an 1800 with rally prepared suspension and chassis, but happily none of our cars needed us! (One of the 1800's broke a suspension arm in Iran but it was welded locally). When the Vanden Plas was returned to Abingdon it was scrapped !

Note: For the record, our cars finished as follows:

Paddy Hopkirk/Tony Nash/Alec Poole – 2nd overall

Rauno Aaltonen/Henry Liddon/Paul Easter – 5th overall

Terry Kingsley/Peter Evans/Derek Bell - 19th overall (Red Arrows pilots)

Evan Green/Jack Murray/George Shepherd - 21st overall (Australian crew)

Tony Fall/Mike Wood/Brian Culcheth- 23rd overall

Manufacturers Team Prize – 2nd

Bill Price

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Bill for the copy and photographs published in the last 4 editions of *Carriagecraft*, which I hope you have found as interesting as I have. It was back in March 2010 that I received the following email from Bill;

Hello Bryan, I was with BMC Competitions Dept. and drove a 4 litre R from Abingdon to Bombay as a 'sweep car' on the 1968 London Sydney Marathon. A friend wants to produce a model of this car complete with roof rack etc. but is not sure of the colour. The car I drove was, what I would loosely call, 'battleship grey'. I wonder if you could help with the actual colour name for this 1966 car. Regards Bill Price

From the information that Bill was to give me I was able to trace the cars in the Vanden Plas build records. A reminder that these cars were:-

Chassis VRS3-6575, Chalk Blue with Blue trim, Reg JBL496D

Chassis VRS3-6576, Carlton Grey with Red trim, Reg JBL492D

Chassis VRS3-5707, Carlton Grey with Red trim, Reg NBL128E.

Bryan Peebles