

Nicky Grist Rally

This was only my second rally of the year and the first one was three months ago which felt like forever. It was also my second rally with Lucie Gutteridge in the co-drivers seat. The partnership had worked very well on the Rallynuts/Severn Valley with us finishing second in class and being first in class of the Welsh Championship contenders.

The Nicky Grist was an excellent rally last year for Peter Littlefield and me with us getting faster all day and only missing a fastest class stage time on the second last stage by less than a second.

I was hoping for, even expecting a good result on this event but I needed to push from the start.

If I refer to corner number in this report I use 1-9 with 1=10 degrees, 2=20 degrees and so on.

Stage 1 – Llyn Login 1

I really have a problem with this stage. It has been run exactly the same for the past few years and always as SS1 and I have always made a mistake losing between 5 and 15 seconds which is never a great start to a rally. The stage is very open, no trees and few bushes but lots of blind crests, some with jumps. For a week or so leading up to the event I watched last years in-car video listening to Peters notes many times, at least 20. I wasn't trying to memorise that stage but to make sure I believed every note so I would have more commitment over the crests.

We set off uphill to a 4 left over crest then further uphill to a 4 right over crest on a huge jump which I always choose not to jump on. There have been a lot of broken cars here in the past so to me it is just not worth it. We continued the stage taking the blind crests and corners with more confidence than normal. The stage was set up exactly as always which helped. I had one bogie straw bale which I have overshot the last two years and had to use reverse gear which is expensive on time especially with a sequential box, but we got round it this time OK. On a short tarmac section we had a 9 left round bale and with a real rookie mistake of pulling the handbrake with my foot still on the brakes managed to put the rear wheels off the road which slowed us a bit. At the end of the stage there is always an open area to cross then a hairpin right round bale onto tarmac then about 40 metres to the yellow finish warning boards. The call on the notes this year was exactly the same but the bale was in a different position, closer to the yellow board so my line was off and we went wide round the bale, just onto the grass and completely took out the yellow board. Sorry to the finish crew and competitors immediately following me. It had been a good stage being 9 seconds faster than my fastest run the previous year helped by a great job by Lucie on the notes.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxwG7DK3g4U&ab_channel=AlanDesbois



Stage 2 – Monument 1

This is always a fantastic stage and I know it fairly well. It ran exactly the same route but in the opposite direction to last year. It was on this stage last year that Peter and I had a really good time and got a really good time. The stage starts downhill for quite a way and round a 2 left which should be flat but I lifted for some reason then straight to a long 6 left. A lot of the roads and corners I remember as we are approaching. We were coming down a short hill to a 8 or 9 right (can't remember) and Lucie called slippery braking, twice. I still braked too late and we ran wide but probably only lost a few seconds. I was told off at the finish. There is a jump on this stage which isn't too big as it is uphill a couple of hundred metres after a hairpin. Last year it was a huge jump as it was after a flat section and downhill. Lucie was egging me on to go fast over the jump. We just got air which kept her



happy. The in-car showed that I was pulling almost 8000 rpm all the way up the hill to the jump. Why didn't I change up? No idea as we would have been quicker. The stage went really well but for some reason I kept letting the engine hit the limiter before I noticed. This doesn't help our stage time and probably isn't too good for the engine. I need to sort this out and the plan is to relocate the shift change light so it is in better view. We were also a bit too sideways in a lot of places with Lucie saying at service that she was looking out of the side window at times.

At the end of the event the times for this stage were scrubbed for all competitors because the time on either the start or finish clock (can't remember) wandered off by 5 seconds during the running of the stage. Personally I think this is a strange decision and not good for us as I think we had a really good run through here.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=w_QJcZTD_YQ&t=205s&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

Stage 3 – Halfway 1

There was a short delay before Halfway which was run completely differently this year. It started on a main Epynt tarmac road for about 30 metres then hairpin left onto a minor road still of tarmac. It was twisty and a bit slippery then on to gravel again twisty then down a bumpy section then steepish uphill with an arrowed junction 90 right on the crest. Lucie was very insistent that I turned on the crest. The track then went into the trees. The first real forest stage of the rally so far. The tracks were a bit damp in places under the trees but not really enough to slow us down then we came to 8 or 9 right on a proper



slippery bit of road and there was no way the car was going to slow down and off we went. The car left the road backwards and the back end went down a deep ditch but the front wheels just about stayed on the road. While this was happening I noticed that there were a lot of spectators up on the bank on the inside of the corner and thought that we should be OK as they would be able to push us out. I dropped down to 1st gear and gave it everything hoping it would come out and blow me it did. We lost less than 10 seconds. This was a deep and wide ditch with very deep mud and we found out later that many cars had been off here including most of the Land Rover Challenge cars. A lot of Halfway is not so familiar to me but we continued pushing hard. Towards the finish I recognised the section we were on from last year and I had watched on video quite a lot and pushed harder up the hill on the tracks that weaved between the trees. Shortley after we went through last years start location in the opposite direction nearly hitting a huge rock with the backend on a 9 right round bale in the process. Then we were on the tarmac flat out and then left back onto gravel into a section that I am sure I have never done competitively before and half a mile or so later we were through the finish.

In the run to the stop line Lucie said that she had been repeating a few things as I seemed to be going off and doing my own thing at times.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=TRizhTGzVSU&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

Stage 4 - Bowlsey 1 (Crychan)

Crychan became my favourite stage last year. The route was so quick and flowing and I loved it. This year (of course) it was completely different. I still set off with a positive attitude which always helps. The first half of the stage was reasonably technical but we were mostly neat and tidy. The second half opened out a bit so we picked up the speed. Lucie was pushing me through the fast corners which is good as I have always and I mean always backed off a bit through the really quick stuff. It is a combination of lack of confidence in the car, my ability and the notes. From when it was built the front end of the 306 had



always understeered on fast or slow corner exits which is not a great confidence builder. A combination of changing to Pirelli tyres several years ago and then in 2021 finding the right settings for the adjustable front struts at a half day test session at the Phil Price rally School have almost completely cured this handling anomaly. Problem is after 21 years of driving around the problem (backing off) it is difficult for me to have the confidence to change. It was an enjoyable stage but not as much fun as last year.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=61fqinQX6rE&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

Service

We had a 22 mile run back to service which was on the Rugby field in Builth Wells which all went fine.

At service Denise was all set up ready to go. Denise was our only service crew as she has been on the previous two Nicky Grist rallies as well. We can do this because the event publishes recovery points for each stage where any cars recovered from that stage will be taken by the recovery crews. So if the worse happens Denise can go to the recovery point, pick me up then we return to Builth, pick up the trailer and go and get the car. Simple.

Denise jacked the car up and removed all four wheels while Lucie had something to eat and I chatted to friends. On inspection the rear tyres were very worn and certainly would not last another 4 stages. These tyres had also been on the back for 44 Miles of the Severn Valley rally too. The fronts which has also been used on Severn Valley were very good. My usual plan is to put the fronts on the rear and two new tyres on the front but I had a couple of tyres that had only done the very wet Wydean last year on the front and were in excellent condition so they went on the back and 2 brand new tyres went on the front. I know we would be able to push just as hard in the afternoon. While Denise was putting the tyres back on I checked the engine oil which was fractionally down. I topped it up and it maybe took half a cup full. Before the winter engine refresh I was putting over half a litre at service. A quick sandwich for me and a visit to the facilities and we were ready to go again. Denise did a last-minute windscreen clean removing what seemed like hundreds of dead flies and the mornings dust and we were off. Where did 50 minutes go?

Stage 5 – Llyn Login 2

Off to Llyn Login again and my least favourite stage but a little less so now. I had to turn the lights on in some under some trees on the road section out of Builth. I forgot to turn them off for most of the afternoon which spoilt a couple of photos. I managed to put the rear wheels off the road exactly the same on the 9 left round bale although not for the same reason as on SS1 but by just going a bit too hot into the corner. I took the right line this time into the last corner round the bale and missed the now replaced yellow finish warning board. We had a decent run through the stage but were less than a second faster. It's a shame as I would have liked to be a few seconds quicker than the morning.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=DbyVL4xnoTo&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

Stage 6 – Monument 2

Another positive approach to Monument and another push. Lucie called the slippery braking on the right hander again but this time added "this one, this one" and pointed. This seemed to do the trick and I got round OK this time. We had a really good run through again with Lucie egging me on again to go fast over the jump which I did. The engine hit the limiter a few times again. What is it about this stage, it didn't happen on the other stages. After the event a photographer left a comment on a photo he had put up on Facebook saying that we had been really sideways and sprayed him and a few others with stones and saying it would be interesting to see the in-car. It was in fun not a complaint. So I cut out the section of the video and sent it to the photographer. The sideways on the left hander and then the right really looked nothing at all on the in-car. I didn't remember it. The strange thing about it was that on the in-car it looked almost as if I had done it on purpose.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODNsavYyG-M&ab_channel=AlanDesbois



Stage 7 - Halfway 2

No holdups this time and a better handbrake turn round the first hairpin. The roads had dried out quite a lot and I didn't really have to think about the roads being slippery. We went round the corner with ditch before I even realised, we were there. It was nowhere near as slippery. Lucie had remembered the corner towards the end of the stage as I was told to "watch the ***** rock" so I did as I was told and watched it as we went past safely. I had managed to put the front right wheel into a bit of a hole on a left hander which made me yelp as the steering wheel was nearly wrenched out of my hands. We talked about it on the run into the stop line but otherwise thought nothing about it.

YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=qlpgGuaTCL8&t=457s&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

Stage 8 - Bowlsey 2 (Crychan)

It was less than a mile and mostly on gravel roads to SS8 so we kept our helmets on this time which made getting ready for SS8 a bit easier. The car felt good and we just had one stage to go. I needed to keep up the same pace which had felt comfortably quick but safe all day. At just about four minutes into the stage the car did a slight understeer on a 9 left and I had to back off. Something wasn't right. I thought I had a puncture. I tried to carry on at a normal pace but the understeer was getting worse. The tyre must have still had air in and was going soft. I couldn't think of anywhere this could have happened. I had forgotten about the bump on SS7. Lucie and I had a few words and we decided to try and make it to the finish. Driving was getting more difficult and more dangerous at the speed I was trying to go. I backed off a bit but it was still getting worse. I was keeping an eye on the mirror for the next car to catch me which they did so I pulled over and let him past. The steering wheel was now half a turn out and I was having to hang on tight to keep the car in a straight line. The rim was running in the completely deflated tyre now. We could smell the hot rubber and hear it banging the car now and again. Finally we got to the finish. The tyre was in two pieces but all still on the rim. We had driven for five minutes on tyre and amazingly the wheel except for a small dent is undamaged. A testament to the standard Subaru wheels I use and to the Pirelli tyre. We had lost 90 seconds and spoilt our day. Lucie was being very positive and was happy we had made it to the finish of the stage but I was gutted. We were very lucky. There is no way I should have driven all that way on a flat. I should have stopped and changed it but we got away with it. I fitted the spare and the car was 100% again so we set off of the 22 mile run back to Bwlth and the finish.



YouTube - www.youtube.com/watch?v=jksNbxYj5M&ab_channel=AlanDesbois

The Finish

I had to keep up a decent pace on the way back to make up the time lost changing the wheel which I hadn't done very quickly. We overtook a few other competitors who were very good letting us pass but eventually we came up behind traffic and had to settle down and do their speed. We arrived back at the finish in good time and then into service. Lucie's mum and grandad were waiting with Denise. Of course they didn't know why we had been 90 seconds slower on SS8 than we were on SS4. Denise then told us that we had been 1st in class and 55th overall after stage 7. This was good news and bad news. I knew we had been going well all day and was very pleased that we were 1st in class with just one stage to go. But it made the puncture worse. We had dropped to 4th in class and 70rd overall.

I wandered round the service area and had a chat to 3rd in class crew Michael Jenkins and 1st in class Martin Walters too but the crew that came 2nd Ben Cree must have already left which was a shame as I have never spoken to them. Had a chat a shook hands with Chris Ingram who won the event overall. He was with Michael Jenkins who he seems to know quite well.

Back to Denise and the others. Denise had cleared up almost everything and we just had to get the club easy-up down and in the car. Said our goodbyes to Lucie and family and then we phoned and booked a meal in the Indian then we were off to load the car on the trailer and go back to the B&B.

Summary

It had been a great rally but not a great day due to the late puncture. The stages were brilliant as always and the organisation excellent. Lucie had been spot on with the notes all day. Lucie had done seven rallies since I did the Severn Valley with her including Epynt, Isle of Man and Donegal and it showed in her note calling. I thought I drove the best I had for quite a few years too.

Not getting a class win was very disappointing for me. It would have been my first class win since the Wyedean 2014 with Denise.

Next event, the Woodpecker in September. Based in Newtown with stages in Ceri, two in Hafren and Sweet Lamb. Service is in Sweet Lamb with clear view of at least one of the stages so a bit more interesting for the service crew.

