THE BRIAN STONEBRIDGE TROPHY TRIAL STORY

By

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The Stonebridge Story 1964–1984

The Stonebridge story was, of course, triggered by Brian Stonebridge's death in 1959. As he was the leading light in the Matchless Club, it was quickly decided that the club should run a memorial event in his name. However, as the Salop Club had already moved fast to establish the "Stonebridge Memorial Scramble" at Hawkstone Park, our club decided instead to run a memorial trial.

At that time, the club had never organised a trial – all its activities had been scrambles. It was therefore decided that the trial would need to be at least O.T.C. status, which meant we first had to run three R.I. probationary trials. These were monitored by South Midland Centre stewards, and after receiving glowing reports, the three R.I. trials proved very successful. Thus, the "Stonebridge" was born in October 1964.

Once the decision to run the trial had been made, the next step was to choose a suitable location. As the Centaur Club ran the Centaur Trial in and around the Duxford area, south of Cambridge, it became clear that the best selection of green lanes and roads for our event lay around the Bourn area. We spent many hours studying Ordnance Survey maps for possible routes, backed up by countless exploratory trips out in the area.

Quite early on we made contact with Mr. Alex Witherow (James's father) at the Cuckoo Pens, Elsworth. Alex was extremely helpful and introduced us to many of his neighbouring farming friends. Before long we had put together a route which would start and finish at the Old Lolworth Transport Café (now derelict at Bar Hill), owned by Mr. George Wolley.

The route passed through Lolworth, past the riding stables (where we had a few problems with the owner), then through Childerley Hall parkland, where we were granted full use, and on to Bourn Airfield. From there it ran around the back of Bourn village and down into Caldecote on John Clark's land – John would go on to become a great supporter of the club's trial activities. From his land we followed the old railway into Porter's Way, past "Oliver Cromwell's Hole," across the old A14 at Red Gate into Geoff Roll's (David's father) farm at Longstowe. The route then continued along the old A14 into the back of Caxton village, through "the Moats," across the A14 again, and on to Monkfield (now the centre of Cambourne). From there it crossed St. Neots Road, through Knapwell (Thoroughfare Lane), over to the Elsworth scrambles course, and into the Cuckoo Pens at Elsworth. The longest section of road work ran from Elsworth to the Fen Drayton pits, which hosted the final group of sections, before returning along the old A604 to Lolworth for the finish.

Approval was required from Cambridgeshire County Council, specifically the Rights of Way Officer, Mr. Steve Lucas. He became a good friend over the years and was always very helpful in the running of the trials. We, in turn, provided him with feedback on the condition of the bridleways and other rights of way we used.

To set up the trial, we would meet at George Wolley's café at 6 a.m. on the Saturday morning, starting the day with one of George's famous monster breakfasts – they would keep you going all day! We split into two groups: one for section marking and one for route marking. In the early years, George would lend us his Series 1 Land Rover breakdown truck to get around the course. Others relied on bikes and vans. George later donated the Land Rover to the club, which we used for several years, exclusively for the Stonebridge. We eventually passed it on to the Childerley Hall Estate as a farm runabout. For a number of years, John Wakefield did an excellent job of borrowing 4WD vehicles for the course – ranging from Eastern European models to big American 4x4s.

As you can imagine, there were plenty of hairy – and funny – moments with these off-roaders. The most memorable vehicle was the incredible Puch Haflinger. One of the funniest incidents occurred when Wally Haughton slid off the Series 1 Land Rover bench seat straight into a fairly deep mud hole on one of the farm tracks. On more than one occasion we managed to get the vehicles hopelessly stuck in deep mud during wet years, with plenty of "fun" involved in getting them out again.

The last job on the Saturday evening, after dark, was to go out and put up the road section route boards at the end of each off-road section, as we were not permitted to mark the routes along the roads themselves.

Determined to take a professional approach to event organisation, we manufactured all our own section and road-marking equipment. These were screen-printed in Keith Collier's workshop at Oakington in the weeks leading up to the event each year.

One of the most rewarding aspects of running the Stonebridge was the fantastic relationship that Dave (our last chairman) and I built up with the landowners – what a wonderful group of people they were.

Probably the most notable of the early Stonebridge years was 1969, when the event was incorporated into the South Midland Centre Team Trial. With 179 solo entries and 15 teams, the course was at its most extensive, involving 26 landowners. The last riders had to be escorted back by car to the finish, long after dark.

After clearing up the trial, the Sunday evening would see the frantic efforts of the results team to collate and print the results. There would be up to 4 caller/typist pairs, each pair in a separate room, typing the stencils for the duplicator, the copies were then printed, folded and stuffed in envelopes. These were then taken to the main Cambridge post office to catch the last post. We made every effort to get the results to riders on the Monday morning.

The last job of the day was to ring Norman Bainbridge from our local call box, with the results for the MCN.

By Edgar Stearn

The Stonebridge 1984 2019

I (Guy Stanley) came to Abington Park Farm in 1980, running the farm for a civil engineering company. Naturally, I joined the local Matchless Trials Club and, with some encouragement, started running a trial on the farm—the Valentine Trial. As I got to know my neighbours, I began extending the length of the event onto their land.

In 1984, the club lost the land surrounding Bourn Airfield, which had been found and started by Edgar Stearn in the early 60s for the Brian Stonebridge Trophy Trial, the club's premier event. Edgar was understandably upset and asked me if I could possibly extend the Valentine course and let him use it for the Stonebridge event. This we did, and from memory we started at Abington Park Farm for a couple of years. I continued lengthening the lap, eventually reaching Hadstock, where I gained permission to start the event on the old wartime bomber base runway next to the hangars. This was thanks to Dalgety Spillers (agricultural traders), who had grain drying and storage facilities in the hangars, and Mr Kemp, who owned the surrounding land.

Dalgety later sold up, and two of the old runways were dug up, so I moved the start to where it is today—thanks to the Kemp family. That period coincided with the best years: a 16-mile lap involving about 12 landowners.

Returning briefly to farming—I was an inaugural member of Camgrain, and the new manager there used to race a BSA in short-circuit events. I asked him if we could start from Camgrain, which was a good secure site. It was approved, giving us some different routing and sections. In between all this, we gained new land at Hinxton (a perennial favourite) and at Rectory Farm, where the Valentine is held, plus the Bourne Bridge venue (now lost when a pension company bought the land and cancelled all previous arrangements as national policy).

All this was courtesy of private farmers I had met professionally over the years, who were happy for us to indulge in our sport so long as we behaved ourselves. So don't knock the farmer—he's one of the backbones of our society and, as far as the Matchless Club is concerned, the saviour of our sport.

Returning to the Stonebridge, this happy state of affairs continued for some time, with plenty of scope for variations of the course and section choice. Things became more difficult with the introduction of stricter controls on set-aside land and rules about what you could and could not do, plus stewardship schemes, SSSIs, and more "big brother" behaviour. These led to restrictions around crops and necessary route changes, which may not always have made sense, but we had to abide by them—and still do.

Things were stable for a while: still 16 miles, but we lost Haird's Pit at Chesterford (it was filled in as planned). That meant we were going a long way for very few sections, so part of the route was doubled up—still 40 sections, but to my mind it wasn't quite the same. Still, the trial maintained its popularity, so we weren't far out.

Regrettably, this didn't last long due to a fatality at Camgrain, where a lorry malfunctioned and killed a Camgrain employee. There were inquiries, safety reviews, and disputes over rights of way through the premises, which led to acrimony all round. We were not directly involved, but questions were raised, and it was felt best that we leave. No recriminations, but it meant the loss of a good start venue and some useful sections that could be doubled up or reversed, easing observer demand.

So we moved back to Hadstock with Mark Goddard, son-in-law of Mr Kemp, who had first let us use the land up there some 40 years ago. That remains the start to this day. It also made sense to use the old single-lap format, though with the loss of Camgrain, the earlier loss of Chesterford Pit, and some rationalisation, the lap is now 12 miles. None the worse for it, as demonstrated by the fact the entry was full within 48 hours of opening this year.

That's a potted history of Abington Park Farm's involvement with the Valentine and Stonebridge over the last 45 years. Precise dates are left out because I'm not sure of them—I threw all my old diaries away when I retired from farming and moved to Mildenhall, joined the Castle Colchester Club, and now find myself Clerk of the Course for the Phil King National Normandale Series.

When I came to Cambridge from Shropshire, I had a BSA C15 in a Sprite frame and a Tiger Cub, which lived in various frames over the years. I also had custody of an old ex-Brian Stonebridge rigid 500cc "bitsa" (BSA, Matchless, Royal Enfield)—gloriously called The Massed Albert. One gentleman helped me rebuild the gearbox for the Massed Albert and, by coincidence, he was the Rights of Way Officer at Essex County Council. Needless to say, the permit went straight through.

All this was before helmets were compulsory, before monoshock suspension, radial tyres, "stop allowed" rules, disc brakes, and the Oriental invasion—different days indeed. It is quite amusing and thought-provoking to look back and realise that we've had a trial there for around 45 years. I must also state that I am no longer involved—it is in very good next-generation hands and likely to stay in the calendar for a while yet.

Recollecting various years and periods, probably the best layout was when we started at Camgrain. The lap was so long (thanks to tiny fuel tanks) that we made the course into a figure-of-eight. You left Camgrain after about four sections and travelled up to Catley Park—the "waisted" part of the figure-eight—where you could refuel. Then you rode a loop of three groups: the Quarry, John McLaren's Reservoir, and James Hamilton's. Returning to refuel, you then set off on the second loop with the Clunch Pit, Haird's Pit, followed by a long slog—almost enduro-style—to sections near the present start at Hadstock. Then down the gulley (the present second group), back to refuel, top up if needed, and finally take your can back to Camgrain for the last sections. Quite an achievement, both from a farming-friendly and footpath-tolerant point of view. There was also a pit stop at the

Fox pub to replenish fluids, I recall on one of the few occasions that I rode the Bourn course, being in there with John Lee. Apparently the back marker had to extract competitors who overstayed, very low on lubricant I presume.

I've not mentioned many names, for the simple reason there are too many to list—those departed, those forgotten, and everyone else still present. You all know who you are: observers, landowners, working-party volunteers, and us poor fools who spent freezing evenings up at the farm repairing, cleaning, and preparing all the equipment.

It wouldn't have happened without you. I thank you all.

By Guy Stanley

The Stonebridge Story 2019–present day

After being involved with the section working parties for many years, I progressed to helping Edgar and Guy with the route. This was mainly due to Edgar having knee surgery. I worked alongside and shadowed Edgar and Guy for many years, acting as assistant clerk of the course to gain the knowledge I needed. This was a good opportunity for me to meet the landowners with Edgar and to gain their trust, as the event had been run by the same team for so many years.

During these years, the route stayed mainly the same with just slight variations. The trial started and finished at Camgrain, essentially forming a figure of eight and riding some of the sections twice. This carried on for a few years until Edgar and Guy retired, and I took over as full clerk of the course in 2019.

Around this time, I teamed up with Dale Williams. With some new members and renewed enthusiasm, we decided to return the event to a single lap with each section ridden once only. This also coincided with an unfortunate accident at Camgrain, which forced us to move the start and finish.

So, we moved back to Hadstock Airfield and managed to negotiate a return to a single lap of around 36 to 38 sections, and this still remains the format we run today.

With the course now not changing too much year to year, most of the hard work lies in keeping the route clear and handling the admin paperwork. Dale and I spend months in advance ticking the boxes, filling out risk assessments, and attending Zoom meetings to keep all the local authorities happy. This becomes harder every year and is probably the biggest threat to our trial.

We still have great relationships with our landowners, and I continue to visit them all personally. In recent years, we have donated to charities of their choice, trying to support more local causes.

With so much history behind it, the Brian Stonebridge Trial still remains the biggest trial in the South Midland Centre. Over the last few years, it has become oversubscribed within hours rather than days, which is a great testament to the effort everyone puts into this special event.

The Brian Stonebridge Trial has always been a team effort and has only continued for so long thanks to the support of our loyal landowners, committee, and riders.

Long may this continue.

By Nick Wilford