

2026 CLEE HILLS TRIAL by Simon Lewis (Class 90)

This was the comeback event for my Suzuki X-90, the much campaigned 'Monkey', which has been off the road since breaking its crown wheel on the Kyrle Trial in 2023. Rampant rust then prevented it obtaining an MOT as soon as the new CWP had been fitted and much welding and other sundry restorative work followed over the next two or more years. But at long last there he was, at THE SQUIRREL, starting last car but once on the road and like his driver, raring to go! In the passenger seat was my long-time friend and rally navigator Ian Beale. Is it really 35 years since we first competed together? Yes, it is! Blimey...

OS1 HARTON WOOD had a long, long queue and yet it seemed everyone was getting through this one OK. Certainly, no one was backing out, which was promising.... By the time we got our turn I must say that statistic seemed quite impressive as the section was deeply rutted, muddy and certainly slippery enough to cause problems. Not that it did, even on the regulation 15psi tyres for this one, but it wasn't a cake walk.

SPECIAL TEST 1 (and only...) COATES followed, laid out in a very nice farmyard with a big old farmhouse and large old wooden barns. It also had a good smooth surface upon which to perform the familiar sequence of stopping astride Line B, reversing and then stopping astride Line C. I didn't push it as you can lose more than you gain on these if you get it wrong or hit a marker. And in any case, an X-90 with full ballast, is not exactly quick off the mark or very nimble. But 15.8 secs seemed OK. We saw some class 8s coming into the farmyard from the opposite direction, the COATES WOOD section I managed to clean last time I did the event, but class 90 was sent direct to OS 4 LONGVILLE and missed it out. Longville involved a fairly long wait as the Volvo 340 of West, Wright & Nicholson had got itself stuck part way up and needed to be helped back down. I like Longville, the sharp left-hand hairpin and the steep climb up to the completely blind lip at the finish are short but quite satisfying. And we cleaned it. So, I like it even more now!

Another short run, this time along the Edge and down to the railway line. Over the bridge was OS 5 EASTHOPE 1, on which I have about a 50-50 success rate, and this time it spoiled the clean sheet. By the time we arrived, as almost last car on the road, the mud was deeper and the ruts more entrenched than previous years. After a long wait for a Dave Malin's Ford Pop to get its engine restarted (which seemed to be a recurring problem all day) we had a pretty decent go and yet still ground to a halt at 8. It was catching everyone at this point. The reverse of shame followed...

After OS 6 IPPIKINS ROCK and its slightly daunting emergence back onto the road at the summit, I somehow messed up the tyre pressures, and we waddled along to Much Wenlock on what turned out to be 25 in one rear and 15 in the other! Monkey wallowing like a beached whale was no fun. And I won't do that again! I remember we first encountered OS 7 HARLEY BANK as a link road after Jenny Wind (not used this year) and I'll be honest it's not much of a challenge when used as a section, although it is picturesque, as is the lengthy exit path heading back towards the Much Wenlock road. We encountered some intrigued walkers at the end as we re-pressured the tyres, and they asked a lot of questions and were fascinated by the diversity of the cars they had seen pass through.

Monkey was going well: temperatures normal, no smoke, and we progressed back along the B4378 Craven Arms road for what felt like quite a long way to line up in a sizeable queue for three conjoined new hills HILLSIDE 1, 2 and 3. At this point the different routes splitting up the classes had seemingly all joined back together and we found ourselves running in the midfield among the numerous older class 2 cars. Everyone waited on the roadside, having let their tyres down and then news came through at all three sections here were cancelled as 'impassible', so the whole carpark set to pumping their tyres up again and headed off to OS 12 ABDON LIBERTY suddenly aware that the event was almost over. And it was only early afternoon. I have tackled this section before but this time it was much muddier and the ruts much deeper. The queue was lengthy as everyone was backing out, which was not the work of a moment, and after all that we didn't get very far anyway, a paltry 11. But that turned out to be pretty well par for the course anyway.

A circuitous route round the lanes and through some vivid red mud washed out of the neighbouring fields, got us to OS 13 OAK DINGLE. This was actually only our 7th section of the day and the last. This hill was another total mud bath, and we followed one of the Model A Fords up, which got stuck. We got in the ruts and eventually grounded out the diff, juddering to a halt on 7. However, Nigel Williams, our class opposition, wisely stayed out of them and recorded a superb 2! That left him well ahead on points with a well-deserved class 90 victory. I had time to get the tyres properly reinflated for the run to the finish and Ian was able to watch several other cars attempt the section and report back that they got a lot further up the hill than we managed...which was depressing! The route back to the finish ran through some nice little hamlets but Monkey had now developed a small intermittent misfire at low revs, which was a bit annoying after going so well early on, but at least we had no punctures or mechanical issues that needed attention.

I am not often deflated after completing an event, but after signing off at THE SQUIRREL around 3pm I found I was in this case. I fully appreciate the struggles the organisers must have had with sorting out a workable route, given the weather and other factors in recent weeks, but it was such a truncated day and sections like HUNGERFORD STEPS were sorely missed. Hopefully circumstances will be more favourable next year and allow the Clee to regain its substance. It was the very first trial I entered, back in 2019, with my then 12-year-old daughter as passenger. As you can imagine it holds a very special place in my heart.