

After a very short break between the end of the 2024 season and the annual awards ceremony earlier in January, it was great to be back in the Service Area at Brands Hatch for the MGJ Engineering Stages and the start of the 2025 season. From an ACSMC point of view, there were a total of nine competitors in attendance. What is more, the buzz of activity at the event made it even more of a pleasure, despite the cold temperatures. Plus, it was not as icy as last year!



Following SS1, new ACSMC Competitors Dean Grimes and his co-driver Mark Admans were having issues with their Ford Fiesta R5. The clutch was slipping and they had a spin. Dean said 'it is really annoying as the clutch has only been used once. We could not run last year due to a noise issue, so this is not looking like a lucky event for us!' Thankfully, after SS2, the report was rather happier, with the clutch sorted they were over 35 seconds faster and climbing the leader board and "hoping to move back up over the next couple of stages." SS3 was then unkind too, as they became stuck in the chicane after two cars hit each other. Then, another car hit a load of cones and broke the front bumper. So that stage dropped them back a little, but SS4 was better by 23 seconds and they then continued to improve during the afternoon, finally managing 8th in Class, 13th overall.



Returning to the Championship for his second year is Joseph Duffy in his Lotus Elise. He had a "tidy first stage. This is the first time with the new gearbox so I was hitting the limiter a lot and even managed to use 5th gear for the first time. There is plenty of grip though and good acceleration." After SS2 was 10 seconds faster and "going well" an old niggle turned up in SS3. On arrival in Service, the query was that a possible problem with low voltage was happening again. At this event last year, I was dismayed to see him pushing it across the Service In Control at the end of SS1! After SS2, the problem seemed sorted, but by SS5 it was clear that the alternator was not giving any charge at all and so his crew were having to charge the battery between every stage. This meant that they were hoping to get through to the end, whilst also hoping that it was not too dark, as they may not have enough battery power for the lights..... At the end of SS6, they were leading the Class and "hoping for a strong position if we can finish!" Thankfully, the light held, as did the battery. Moving back to this year and the hope this time was that it was just a display problem and that they could just keep an eye on it. It must have been just that, as they did claim 2nd in Class, together with 12th overall, making them the top ACSMC Competitor at this event.



Joining the ACSMC Championship in 2025 are Russell Davies and Richard Suter from Wales in their Darrian GTR+. They watched an R5 spin off of the line in the first stage, so Russell took no risks and was happy to report “no spinning!” The mechanics were dropping the tyre pressure at the first Service to improve grip. Russell explained that “this is my first time here for 10 years. Last time I was in an Astra. I am still learning the car” and he went on to tell me after SS4, “with one slow stage then one quick. That is what this rally is all about. I am looking forward to the season in the car”. Unfortunately, rallying is also about reliability and this event was to see them fail to finish due to retiring on the very last stage.



After taking second in Class in the 2024 Championship and the Class win in the Championship in 2023, Nigel and Catherine Brain return for a third season with us in their Mazda MX-5, now with a 2500cc engine under the bonnet. “Taking it steady to begin with”, Nigel said after SS1. “There are lots of parts of cars on the stage, as well as plenty of water where people have hit barriers.” He continued in this way “enjoying the new engine, but keeping the revs to 6,500 for now.” Before lunch he added that he was “keeping away from the chaos. There are lots of cars spinning and it is still slippery in places.” This method helped to take them to 8th in Class, 26th overall.



Scott and Darren Stutchbury also return after taking Class honours in 2024 in their Renault Clio RS3. “The first lap was slippery, but OK after that” said Scott with a big smile! After SS4 they were “going well and enjoying it. We thought that we had picked up a penalty, but it has been cancelled.” They brought it home 8th in Class, 30th overall.



Pete Wilkins and Caroline Brampton have competed in this Championship for some time now and were enjoying the stages in their BMW M3. Because of the mud on the way to the stage start, the tyres were cold and dirty and so it was difficult. The third stage was a little longer, but Pete said “was it? That went by in a flash!” The tyres were working once cleaned up though and took them to 11th in Class, 46th overall.



Also long-time Competitors in the Regional Championship, Dave Hockaday and Steve Frost were back at Brands Hatch in their Volkswagen Golf GTi. Dave agreed with Pete Wilkins that the “start was slippery, but it was then really good on the next laps.” The second stage “seemed to be over too quickly! We caught Jon Bray in his MG whilst he was on his first lap, but that did not slow us down.” Dave had a sheepish grin after the next stage though. “We had a bit of a tank slapper and thought that we had got away with it, but then just caught the front right wing and the rear corner. We are still doing OK though.” I asked him if he just wanted to check that it was slippery and he grinned a little more. Unfortunately, this event has been unkind to them in the past and continued to be so, as they were disqualified after SS6 for driving in the wrong direction. I have not heard their story about this yet, but am sure that there is one!



As mentioned above, Jon Bray was competing in his MG ZR 140. After SS4 he was “enjoying the event and took a few seconds out of my time then. The new engine is going well.” He had a solid day and continued to climb the leaderboard, winning his Class and 39th overall.



The last of the ACSMC Competitors, by number only, was Freddie Death in his Renault. Freddie has been competing in Autosolos, but mostly in first gear! He is now ready to move up to Stage Rallying. Talking after his very first stage, he said “I enjoyed it and am getting used to the car.” The learning and steady progress continued in the second stage and after the third he was “enjoying it. I was a bit slow after the stage change, but it is going well.” It certainly was as he finished 17th in Class, 53rd overall.



In a day which seemed to see quite a few struggling, George Sherman and Neil Colman were having dramas right at the start, pushing their Ford Fiesta Rally2 to Service Out, but this seemed to be sorted and they went on to finish the day. Six cars failed to make it through the morning stages in total. Alfie Threlfall was having an issue with his Honda Civic Type R EP3 dropping to low power in corners. At first, this seemed to be down to a kinked fuel line, but the problem persisted through the second stage. After SS4 though it seemed to be resolved as they had “two good stages now”.

For the second year in a row, Michael Igoe & Will Atkins dominated in their Citroën C3 Rally2, leading from lights to finish and winning all the stages except the second, which Barry Harris and Tom Hutchings won in their Darran T90 GTR+ by just 1 second!. The final margin was only 19 seconds, as they were both kept honest by the chasing cars, but victory was theirs.



My congratulations to all of the Competitors that took part at the MGJ Brands Hatch Stages

If you have stories that you would like added to this Newsletter, please do let me know.

Next round is at Bovington on the 1st & 2nd March.

Mark.

Mark Baulch.

Rally Championship Coordinator

ACSMC