

RALLY 1275 GT

A SPECIAL

Not only has this ex-RAC Rally 1275 GT got Works connections, it's the sixth off the production line, making it the oldest surviving production example.



Words **Martyn Morgan Jones** Photography **Gerard Hughes**

Conceived in 1967, well before the formation of British Leyland, the Mini Clubman had a very shaky start in 1969 and was perceived by many to be a move too far. Purists didn't approve of the new body style, and the press wasn't exactly enamoured. Yet the rationale behind its introduction was very sound. There was a need to move the Mini upmarket and, because there were plans afoot to fit different/larger engines (this never actually materialised), a need for more space in the engine bay. Plus, the Clubman was designed with future crash legislation in mind – and to make a tidy profit! The new Clubman certainly divided opinion,

particularly the range-topping 1275 GT, the car that was billed as the replacement for the 998 Cooper but ultimately would supersede the legendary Cooper S. That was a mistake; despite British Leyland's best intentions, the GT just couldn't hope to fill the void that would be left with the demise of the S in 1971. As an S replacement, the 1275 GT has to be judged a failure. But, as a stand-alone sporting model in its own right, it can be counted a success. It was cheap to insure, frugal, nippy, could nudge 90mph, and was quite refined. It was also pretty effective on the race circuits, as Richard Longman proved on his way to winning the British Saloon Car Championship in 1978 and 1979. And, although

ALBREED

TECH SPEC

BODY 1969 1275 GT all-steel shell, repainted Aquamarine with reproduction period graphics.

ENGINE 1293cc, fully-balanced and lightened, Duplex timing chain, S head, 649 camshaft, S radiator with expansion bottle and Special Tuning 13-row oil cooler kit, Longman split 45 DCOE Weber carburettors, LCB manifold and twin-box exhaust system.

TRANSMISSION Straight-cut, close-ratio four-speed, Orange clutch.

SUSPENSION Dry with Armstrong dampers.

BRAKES 7.5-inch S front discs, Canadian 'export' tandem master cylinder, standard rear drums, Mintex competition pads and linings, fly-off handbrake.

WHEELS AND TYRES 4.5x10-inch Minilite magnesium-alloy wheels with 165/70x10 Dunlop SP Super tyres.

INTERIOR Period Paddy Hopkirk co-driver recliner and driver's bucket seats, rear ST rollcage, full rally dash and instrumentation, and fresh air heater.



SOH 956H took part in both the 1971 and 1972 RAC International Rallies.

SPECIAL TUNING



"The 1275 GT was cheap to insure, frugal, nippy, could nudge 90mph and was quite refined..."

RALLY 1275 GT

Returning the car to its period livery wasn't easy. Ade had to study period black and white photos and guess the right sizes.



"Special Tuning fitted the rear 'cage, full rally dash and did the bulk of the Group 2 rally preparation..."



Special Tuning installed a full rally dash and instruments in for the 1971 RAC Rally.



Right: SOH 956H with Lucas wiring guru Stan Chalmers and former Special Tuning Manager Basil Wales.



An H-reg GT of any kind is rare, but this is the oldest survivor.

RALLY 1275 GT

the 1275 GT didn't have a regular 'Works' competition rally history, a good number of cars did venture onto the rally stages, including this one, SOH 956H, which is a very special example.

Until it recently changed hands, this fabulous and very distinctive car belonged to Ade Wildsmith. Since he purchased it in 1985, Ade has been more than its owner; he's been the car's custodian, and has invested a huge amount of time researching and verifying its history and provenance. He's also taken it to numerous shows and rallied it too. But he's not blinkered. In fact, he's acutely aware that the Clubman divides opinion.

"It's a bit of a Marmite thing. Some people like the Clubman, some people hate it. Personally, I've always held a candle for them, especially the 1275 GT," admits Ade. "I even built a Clubman rally replica for historic rallying and did the Coronation Rally in it in 1984. Then, early in 1985, this one entered my life. After leaving work in Brigg one morning, I picked up a copy of *Motoring News* and spotted the advert for SOH, which was for sale in Grimsby. Without any hesitation, I headed over and went from having a replica to owning a 1275 GT that had a Works history."

A keen rally competitor, Ade did a number of rallies in the car during 1985, even managing a slight inversion on one event. It survived, albeit in need of a few new panels. "I always intended to get back out in it again," continues Ade. "But events kind of overtook me. It was this, plus the fact that it began to dawn on me how unique this car was, which made me decide to retire it from competition and use it as a show car. Although the 1275 GT will never achieve the status of a Cooper S, it has a lot going for it. This one is particularly special and has a lot of kudos."

Given the Works

As already alluded to, Ade has undertaken considerable research – research that started following a chance meeting with Ian Giles on the 1985 Coronation Rally. "Ian, who won the Coronation in his Lotus Cortina, ran across to me and told me that he used to own my car and still had a large picture of it above his desk in his office. Ian then went on to ask me if I knew that it had done the RAC Rally."

Ade didn't. This was something of an epiphany and thus began a journey of discovery. Ade was amazed to find out that SOH 956H is car number six off the production line, and just so happens to be

the oldest surviving production 1275 GT on the planet. The previous five no longer exist. And there's more. It's also the very first 1275 GT to have been road-tested, as Ade elaborates: "Autocar did the very first road test using this car. Then, a year later, they did a back-to-back test pitting a standard 1275 GT against SOH 956H which, by then, had been modified by Special Tuning. But Autocar didn't appear to realise that it was the very car they had tested a year before in standard tune!"

During its brief tenure in the hands of Special Tuning, SOH 956H was given a serious makeover. In brief, the engine was bored to 1293cc, complete with a big-valve head, 649 cam and LCB manifold. Competition displacers were fitted front and rear and it was also kitted out with straight-cut, close-ratio gears and a 3.9 diff.

However, press cars tend to be kept for a short period and by 1971, this hard-worked car was coming to the end of its time with Special Tuning. There was a good chance that it might have been sold on and lost to history, but fortunately Phil Cooper stepped in and gave it a new lease of life.

Cooper, who ran a large BL dealership in Leeds, had a close association with Abingdon and the Works team, and had bought and driven a number of ex-Works Cooper S rally cars, including RJB 326F which was an unused Group 6 car. A very capable driver, he finished sixth on the 1968 RAC Rally in RJB. He also used the car on the 1969 RAC, although a major accident led to it being re-shelled. His next Mini was the 1970 World Cup Rally 1275 GT, XJB 308H, but due to homologation issues with its Group 6 bodywork, he couldn't use it on international events. So he approached Special Tuning to see if they could help. They could, as Ade tells:

"For the 1971 RAC Rally, Special Tuning not only lent him SOH 956H, they fitted the rear 'cage, ran the brake lines inside the car, installed a full rally dash and instrumentation and did the bulk of the Group 2 rally preparation. Cooper then fitted it with his Longman-prepared five-port, 1293 thick-flange S engine. Regrettably, he didn't finish the event. The 1971 RAC was notable for its extreme weather conditions and crippling blizzards. Nevertheless, the adverse weather didn't bring SOH 956H up short, it failed due to a blown head gasket."

Lathams (a major BL dealership based in Leicester) subsequently bought the car from Special Tuning, converted it to dry suspension and loaned it to Dave Lucas, a local rally champion, who used it for a



Eddie Plant putting the GT through its paces at Hemswell Airfield, Lincolnshire, during the late '70s.



Eddie (left) with recent owner Ade.



RALLY 1275 GT



Ade originally purchased the car from Eddie in early 1985.



54 MINI

number of club rallies. The car was later loaned to Cooper for the 1972 RAC. Cooper fitted the 1293 S engine from XJB 308H (which he still owns), and he converted it to wet suspension using XJB's displacers and subframes. Unfortunately, something must have gone awry during the suspension swap as, on special stage eight (Clocaenog), SOH 956H spat out its offside rear wheel; drum brake, and radius arm. It subsequently exited the stage on three wheels and was promptly retired! The damage inflicted by the departing rear suspension is still evident.

The car was returned to Latham's with dry suspension and the Special Tuning 1275 GT engine. In 1973 it was purchased by Peter Sharpe who lived in Sheshed. The car doesn't appear to have been used a great deal and was sold, a year later, to Ian Giles, who broke it for parts. In 1975, the rolling shell, the Special Tuning engine, and the magnesium Minilites were bought by Eddie Plant. Eddie then went on to successfully campaign the car for a decade.

True Blue

Apart from the car's rally and Special Tuning history, and the fact that it's the oldest surviving production 1275 GT, the real attraction is its authenticity. The bodywork still bears evidence to its various brushes with the scenery and the interior is not just patinated, it bears the hallmarks of hard use. The parts and equipment are almost all original too. Special Tuning installed a taller Austin/Morris 1100/1300

gear lever and this is still fitted. The rally dash, another Special Tuning fitment, is battered, the instrumentation is aged, and some of the labelling is delightfully rustic.

Talking of rustic, beneath the rubber matting lurks the crumbling remains of the original asbestos-laden underfelt. Good for originality – not as good for one's health, as Ade appreciates. Yet, it's all part of this car's link with the past – and it's all the better for it. SOH 956H is dripping with originality and Ade has gone to enormous lengths to keep it so. But he's only human, and he's made one or two mistakes along the way.

"I repainted the car back in 1986," recalls Ade. "Unfortunately, I painted it the wrong colour! The logbook said Aquamarine, but the car actually left Longbridge painted Aqua. I repainted it Aquamarine, which is two shades lighter. Funnily enough, the car has been the wrong colour for much longer than it was painted its original colour! This all adds to its story of course. In fact, Basil Wales spotted the car at Beaulieu and he came up to talk to me. He hadn't seen it since Special Tuning sold it to Latham's in 1972, but he still noticed that it was the wrong colour. Incredible!"

As well as being two shades lighter than it should be, SOH 956H is also wearing the wrong seats. "After the car's inversion in 1985, one of the Special Tuning bucket seats separated from its mounting frame," says Ade. "So in the quest for safety, I binned both seats and replaced them with Paddy Hopkirk buckets. I really should have kept the originals though!"

EDDIE PLANT - TEN YEARS WITH SOH 956H

"I bought SOH 956H from Ian Giles in 1975," remembers Eddie. "It was in Motoring News and advertised by Minibits in Weston super Mare, which was run by Ian Giles. The advert said ex-Works. I was rallying a Mini at the time and SOH 956H looked to be a really good car. I drove down on the Friday; paid Ian the deposit, and then borrowed a van, drove down on the Saturday and picked it up. I bought it as a rolling shell and had to negotiate separately for the engine, which is the engine that's still in the car. I seem to remember paying £750 for the shell. I wanted the heated windscreen, which Ian had removed, but I didn't have enough pound notes left!"

I built the car up and rallied it in the East Midlands and in the north of England. Some were club rallies; I also did a good number of national rallies such as the Dukeries. I contested tarmac and gravel events - I preferred the gravel. My best result was third in class, which was a regular occurrence. I

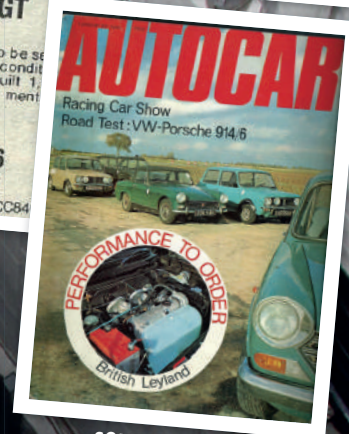
was always up against a couple of guys who had more money than me and used top-notch engine builders. That's my excuse anyway!

The car was a joy to drive. There wasn't so much power that it became uncontrollable and it had terrific handling. And, compared to everything else I'd had previously, it was exceptionally well built and very strong. It was reliable too. I loved driving it.

Then, after ten years of use, family and work commitments intervened and I put it up for sale. The first person to contact me was Adrian. He said whatever you do, don't sell it before I get there. Adrian had come off night shift and I was still in my pyjamas when he arrived! I have very happy memories of SOH 956H, very happy memories indeed."

Eddie throwing up the dust in 1984, a year before Ade took ownership.

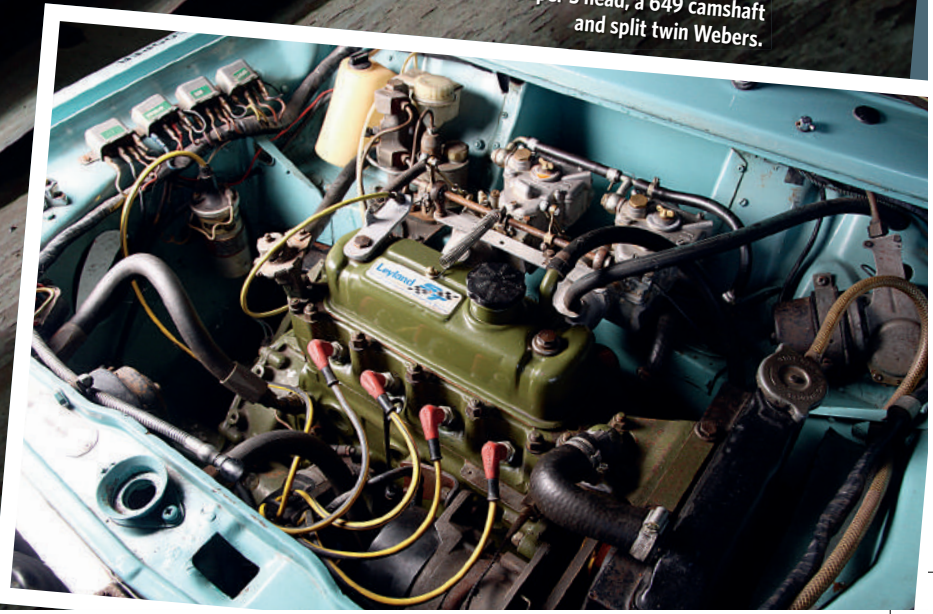
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SOH enjoyed much press coverage in the hands of BL and Special Tuning.



"Apart from the rally and Special Tuning history, the real attraction is its authenticity..."



Below: 1293cc motor has been fully balanced, and features a Cooper S head, a 649 camshaft and split twin Webers.

RALLY 1275 GT

There have been other changes too. Special Tuning went to town on this car. For example, it had a twin-loom electrical system where each switch has two circuits and two positions. "In the event of one circuit failing, you'd just flick the switch to its second position and, hey presto, power would be restored," explains Ade. "It was a bit complex though and I've since returned it to a much simpler single loom."

Ade has also returned the car to its period livery. This has been done exceptionally well, especially as all the work was undertaken not only pre-computers, but well before the advent of the internet. "When I bought the car, most of the original decals had been removed," mentions Ade. "But following my chance meeting with Ian Giles, which was when I realised that the car had some history, I began spending a huge amount of time trawling through magazine articles and reports, looking for evidence of its original decals. This started in 1986. Because all the photographs were black and white, colour-matching was rather difficult and I also had to guesstimate the size. However, I did it to the best of my ability and think they've come out really well and look authentic."


The engine, which was modified to full Group 2 spec in 1969 by Special Tuning, is authentic. It features the original production block and is complete with five-port S head, and 649 cam. During Eddie Plant's tenure it was rebuilt and bored to 1380cc by Howley Racing. The Longman split Webers, the perfect period finishing touch, were added by Ade. Fuel is supplied via one double-ended SU fuel pump (two were used originally) and it's filtered through a Lucas CAV diesel filter. Cooling is courtesy of an S radiator (with expansion bottle) and the original oil cooler kit, complete with ST MGB oil pipes.

Even the Dural sumpguard is original, as are the Magnesium Minilites and the complete braking system. Special Tuning fitted Cooper S 7.5-inch front discs, a tandem master cylinder, standard rear drums, and a fly-off handbrake. On paper this system sounds good, but in practice it's not really up to it. "The tandem master cylinder gives a poor pedal and the limited fluid capacity tends to lead to boiling," says Ade. "Phil Cooper complained of this and it's something I also experienced. The standard single master cylinder S system is much better."

A New Chapter

"In 2012, my wonderful fiancée Rachael presented me with a beautiful daughter," enthuses Ade. "This has been life changing and it was the excuse I needed to break my long tenure with this remarkable car."

It has been a long tenure, 28 years in fact, during which time Ade's cared for SOH 956H supremely well, taken it to numerous shows and done wonders for the 1275 GT cause. Indeed, he has become a major part of this fascinating car's story, one that has just begun a new chapter.

"The car has just been bought by Simon Drew of The Mini Works in Edinburgh," says Ade. "Simon's been looking for an ex-Works Mini for his own use and I was happy in the knowledge it was passing into safe hands. He intends to continue the work to return it to the full 1972 RAC Rally specification that I started back in 1985." We look forward to seeing the project continue. 

Thanks to:

Ade thanks "Gary Dixon of Vauxcare, Ian Chamberlain Motorsport for the help and photo location, and the many people and friends who have been part of this journey."

SOH has recently been purchased by Simon Drew of The Mini Works in Edinburgh.



Interior remains largely faithful to the car's Special Tuning days, aside from the Paddy Hopkirk buckets.



Double-ended SU fuel pump sits above the filter.

