

Day Three – Russell to Auckland – 337 Km

What goes up, must come down and today, the third leg of the New Zealand Classic, saw the rally turn about in the quaint town of Russell, population 720. Amongst the painted shutter board buildings, laid out across the beachfront it felt like a little piece of paradise and I'm sure many of us were sad to leave. But leave we did, to begin the first part of the journey to the bottom most tip of this beautiful country.

The sport began in earnest, and picked up where yesterdays adventure had left off, with a toboggan of a run across smooth as silk asphalt, bathed in early morning sunshine. Tarmac is of course at a premium around these parts, and the first regularity of the day plunged the cars once more onto unsealed roads that wound there way up through more rainforest. Dust plumes rose into the air and the sunlight, already struggling to penetrate the thick vegetation of the forest, was almost blocked out completely, save for the odd beam that reflected and glinted off of the particles that were heavy in the air.

Not much had changed in the standings overnight, except for perhaps Bob Holroyd plummeting down the standings like a burst Zeppelin. Bob is usually on the spanners at these events, and had enjoyed a decent day one at the wheel. The rumours have it though, that having secured himself a 'factory' drive for this rally, he had been positively lording it around the sweep crews who quite naturally took offence, and had swapped the pages of the road book around to bring him down a peg or two. Bob, if you're reading this, you should know that rule one of rallying is always look after the sweeps...

Back to the serious business of rallying though and first out of the traps today were the Volvo's, attacking the first parts of the road with gusto. The Bentleys, our scout vehicles for the first couple of days now found themselves relegated to mid-pack, and the worst of the dust. Pulmonary disease withstanding, Bill Holroyd and daughter Olivia had stormed up the leader board on day two and certainly looked in their element out on the road today. It will remain to be seen whether being mired in mid pack has affected their progress today, but even if it has it is well worth remembering that the competition is still very much in its infancy, many miles are still to be covered.

The rainforests were left behind as the morning drew on, but before the afternoon arrived there was time for one of the event highlights so far as the route took the competitors down part of the Waipu Caves stage of the World Rally Championship. It is easy to see why this stage was one of Colin McRae's favourites, a slick rollercoaster of gravel that dipped and rose as the contours of the land decreed. For those brave enough, the regularity speed could be maintained throughout and the reward for hooking everything cleanly was a smile as wide as 90-mile beach. Of course, none of our party were completing it at the pace that the stars of the world championship would be, but the route was amazing none the less and hints broadly at what can be expected as the rally tackles more WRC stages over the coming weeks.

Whilst speeds were kept very much under control on the public roads, this morning also saw the first chance for the speed demons amongst the group to let loose as the events first test took place at the Whangarei karting circuit. The test pilots will not have many opportunities to strut their stuff during the NZ Classic, so much rubber was deposited as those that think they can drive, tried hard to prove the fact. It may have worked as well, as news of their daring had clearly leaked into the land of the celebrity, as I am certain that I saw a certain Noel Edmunds waving like a lunatic from the side of the road as our caravan of classics passed by. I couldn't be entirely sure, but somewhere in amongst the fine mane of hair he was sporting there were some recognisable features.

You can keep your television hosts and go-kart tracks though, as for me it is the adventure of the open road that calls most keenly, a road that I will be looking forward to departing on tomorrow morning as we all seek to escape the sprawl of Auckland one final time. The more remote regions await and with them, hopefully, we will find the places that make us all feel the most alive.

Syd Stelvio.