



South London Branch British Horological Institute

Newsletter No. 565 APRIL 2026

Branch No 25. Founded 1978

*Meetings are held on the 1st Thursday of each month
At The White Hart Barn (Godstone Village Hall)
Godstone Surrey RH9 8DT at 7.30 p.m. for 8 p.m.*

"Daylight saving time, a monstrosity in timekeeping." — **Harry S. Truman**

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NEXT MEETING 2nd April 2026 Mr Stephen Dutfield “Evans of Birmingham Turret Clocks”.

Most of us when we hear the name Evans of Birmingham think of the skeleton clocks ie. the Scott Memorial and the Detent escapement clock, made by William Frederick Evans. But in the book *“The Industries of Birmingham”* it has a whole page devoted to the Soho Clock Factory owned by Evans and son. It reports that every description of clock is manufactured here, “the lathes and wheel cutting machines driven by steam power”. Few of us have seen the turret clocks manufactured by this important 19th century clock making business.

Steve Dutfield longed to work in horology from around the age of 3 and joined the Antiquarian Horology Society in 1977 at the age of 11. He was the youngest member of the turret clock group, becoming their secretary. His working life started in the music business in the late 80s, and he moved

Continued

into broadcasting starting in commercial radio in his native South Wales, working 22 years in television presentation for BBC Wales finishing up as a senior announcer/director and leaving in March of 2021. In his mid-50s, determined to add some substance to his lifelong hobby, he now works as a field service engineer for the Cumbria Clock Company, and likes to say “it took me 40 years to get the job I wanted to do when I left school.”

Duncan Greig.

**LAST MONTH'S MEETING
AGM +
The Peking to Paris Car Rally
Riding the Phantom Through 7 Time Zones
By Richard Jeffcoate and Steve Kiss**

Chairman's Report

2025 has been another busy and successful year for us. We have sadly lost a number of our long-standing members over the course of the year however we have also added some new ones and have therefore maintained our membership numbers at around 150 people which is consistent with previous years. Our monthly meetings in the White Hart Barn continue to be popular and we have slowly but surely increased our attendance from around 38 people to 42!

We didn't hold an open day during 2025 at the Soper Hall in Caterham, however we were invited by Sid Lines to take over the running and management of the Kent Show horological display which is held in early July. This was the first time that the South London Branch attended this three day show under our own banner and we plan to build upon our display for 2026 which is fast approaching.

The main event that occurred during the year was of course the install and unveiling of the Thwaites and Reed clock that has been a long standing project within our branch. The clock has been lovingly restored to its former glory by a dedicated team of branch volunteers in our workshop. All necessary planning permissions and technical details were addressed and the clock was installed on the Soper Hall in September last year. After some electrical work was completed the unveiling took place just before Christmas to a crowd of onlookers.

As chairman of the branch I would like to personally thank everyone who was involved in the restoration and installation of the clock. Many, many people had a hand in this project and it wouldn't have been possible without all the time and money that was donated to the project.

Regarding the committee, we continue to maintain a strong and dedicated team of branch members who work incredibly hard to keep things running smoothly, and enable events and initiatives such as the clock restoration project to occur. This year James Marten will be stepping down as Vice Chairman after a very long tenure. I would like to thank him for all of his efforts over the years, even as Chairman himself in the past. I am happy to say that he will remain a committee member but will be taking a reduced role. I would like to welcome Peter Rendle into the Vice Chairman position and also John Summers will be joining us as a committee member.

I would now just like to say a big thank you to all of our members. Thank you for attending our meetings and participating in the other events that we put on during the year. I look forward to another successful year ahead!

Trevor Keast (Chairman)

The Peking to Paris Car Rally:

Riding the Phantom Through 7 Time Zones

By Richard Jeffcoate and Steve Kiss.

In late spring of 2023, two BHI SL club members—Richard Jeffcoate and Steve Kiss—set out to retrace one of motoring’s most romantic and brutal endurance challenges: the Peking to Paris Rally. What follows is an account of their experience, from the historical origins of the event to their mechanical battles, cultural encounters, and the emotional high of rolling into Paris that made the journey an unforgettable experience.

Origins and Historical Context

The idea of driving from Peking to Paris traces back to 1907 and an advertisement placed in the Paris newspaper *Le Matin* on 31 January 1907. At a time when roads were rare and most transport was horse (or camel!) drawn, a handful of intrepid teams and manufacturers accepted the challenge. The entrants consisted of Prince Borghese in a 7 litre Itala, the colourful Charles Goddard in a Spyker, two De Dions and a Contal cycle car. These early participants faced extraordinary logistics—shipping cars to Beijing, establishing fuel dumps across the Gobi, and navigating largely uncharted tracks with little reference points other than following the lines of telegraph poles. Prince Borghese completed the route to arrive in Paris on 10 August 1907, with Goddard placed second followed by the De Dions. The 3 wheeled Contal struggled from the outset dealing often with 2 track roads and finally giving out in the Gobi desert, its crew fortunately rescued by local tribesmen.

Modern Revival and Choosing the Car

The event returned in modern times (first allowed politically in the 1990s), and Richard and Steve, inspired by long-standing interest and a casual handshake over beers at The Bell Inn in December 2022, committed to the 2025 rally. Steve found their transport at auction – a 1930 Rolls Royce Phantom 2 drophead. An enormous, powerful machine that looked built for Park Lane more than the

Gobi Desert. The car was sent for a comprehensive restoration: Lyme Regis for the rebuilding of a seized engine and worn gearbox, and Derby to renew body panels and heavy doors with antiquated window mechanisms. Over more than a year the engine was rebuilt, body panels re-formed, and a stock of spares gathered—though not, as it turned out, every part they later needed.

Preparing for China: Logistics, Licensing, and Learning

Before departure the car had to be shipped east, stripped of fuel and fluids to comply with shipping regulations. On arrival in Beijing there was a fresh list of administrative and practical hurdles: registering the car in China, securing a local driving license, and obtaining vehicle clearance documents to present to the many police checkpoints—effectively a “get-out-of-jail” explanatory sheet that affirmed rally permissions in lieu of fluent Mandarin.

Communication and payments required modern workarounds. Richard and Steve used translation apps extensively; and while not perfect were an indispensable bridge. Financial transactions relied on Alipay. Foreign bank cards would not work in many places, so participants had to load funds into local accounts and trust digital systems previously unfamiliar to them. They also needed multi-country eSIM connectivity; their first eSIM covered China only, so more flexible roaming plans were essential to stay online across borders.

Navigation was another major learning curve. The rally supplied Garmin units and pre-loaded route traces but mastering the navigation—and the route books and simplified map books—took concentrated practice during the days before the event started. The rally format deliberately staggers departures one minute apart, so each team must be self-sufficient and precise.

The Route: Scope and Daily Grind

The rally covered roughly 10,000 miles over around 37 days on the road. The long legs were dominated by China, Kazakhstan and Turkey, with subsequent legs through the Caucasus and into Europe—Romania, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland and on to

France. The daily reality was relentless: long runs of 300–400 miles, interspersed with regularity sections where maintaining an allotted average speed to the second was the challenge. Regularities could be 20 km sections requiring strict timing averages; even small delays (a horse crossing, a herd, or local activity) meant time penalties and the stress of doubling efforts to make up the averaged time.

Mechanical Trials and Mid-Rally Crisis

Despite careful preparation, the car suffered multiple failures early on. A wiring fault under the dash emerged quickly and was resolved, but a more severe issue developed with the petrol pumps. The team had repositioned these close to a firewall backing on to the exhaust —the heat and ambient 40°C temperature caused them to fail after several days. Without spare pumps and new pipework immediately on hand, the team faced a decision: limp on or effect a logistical solution.

There was little choice but the latter. The car was loaded onto a low-loader and transported forward by road while parts and personnel were flown to Urumqi. Steve tasked a Romanian employee to carry the necessary parts in hand baggage to Beijing, an agent forwarded components, and eventually car, parts and crew were reunited in Urumqi for a two-day, high-temperature rebuild in a hotel car park. With reinstalled fuel pumps and other parts the car was back on the road, but the seven-day non race shuttle effectively removed them from competitive contention.

Across China: Desert, Communities, and Infrastructural Contrasts

The landscape from eastern to western China varied dramatically: population-dense, electric-vehicle-dominated Beijing; arid Gobi stretches with telegraph-line navigation echoes of 1907; pastoral highlands with spectacular mountain campsites and deeply hospitable local communities. The rally camps were assembled each night by large local crews—complete with catering, hot water showers and bars—often in remarkably remote, beautiful locations. From blistering daytime heat, temperatures dropped

sharply at night. At the stops, local villagers, shepherd families and children eagerly interacted with the competitors; the team shared small gifts which were warmly appreciated. Infrastructure observations were striking. Western China displayed large-scale photovoltaic farms and extensive wind turbine installations, reflecting major investment in renewable power. Yet in many areas utilitarian, gas-driven prosperity dominated a stark landscape, particularly in places like Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan, the Caspian and the Caucasus: Dust, Damage and Variety

Kazakhstan provided long, unforgiving, dusty transits with utilitarian development focused on gas. A stretch of leisure time near a tourist water park near the Caspian Sea offered a rare, restorative break. Cars were transported across the Caspian Sea by ship while drivers flew to rendezvous. The heavy dust and rugged driving conditions inflicted wear across all car categories: of the 4 modern 911s in the rally, 3 needed engine rebuilds in Baku due to dust-related ring wear. The team's pre-war Phantom amassed structural damage as rocks and rough surfaces took their toll on body mounts, axles and external fittings – even the Spirit of Ecstasy mascot suffered metal fatigue, snapping off at the feet and requiring repair. Maintenance was relentless: a daily routine of twelve spark plugs to clean, and check oil levels and grease points daily, with frequent improvisation to keep the car running.

Cultural Moments and Characters

The rally was as much about people as motors. Encounters ranged from the charming and inquisitive children in remote camps, to grand welcome receptions with mayors and dancing groups in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan. One unforgettable character was the very tall (7 foot!) local woman, who was a spirited host at a hotel reception. Competitors themselves were a colourful mix: a former model with mink coat that doubled as a sleeping bag; long haired, tattooed Americans in a zebra painted car; and a wide international spread—Australians, Belgians, Americans, French, Swiss and Italians. The social nights—such as a Hungarian vineyard dinner hosted by Steve with a group of fellow competitors —provided camaraderie, wine tasting and a break from the road.

Navigation, Timing and Rallycraft

On the road the organisers provided route traces loaded into navigation units, printed route books and maps for course orientation. For precise regularities, teams used stopwatches—electronic and analogue; many competitors preferred analogue wind-up watches for their foolproof, simple readability when trying to hit the exact second at a timing point. Garmin traces with pre-loaded routes were crucial when entering dense urban areas to avoid chaos and make the nightly rendezvous.

Vehicle Choices: Tradeoffs and Reflections

The oldest vehicle that participated was a 1916 14 ½ litre La France – spectacular, though impractical and often needed to utilise motorways to cover distance. Richard and Steve chose a characterful and well engineered pre-war machine for the trip. Richard was keen if doing the journey that the car was open top. It was magnificent but ultimately a challenge for competitive stages: the car was heavy, not inherently fast in regularities or on race tracks, but it offered the joy of open-air driving and priceless photo opportunities. Richard reflected they would consider a different choice for any future competitive attempt—something like a Ford Escort for agility, easier maintenance, and speed in regularity sections. Conversely, the Toyota Hilux example (a 1984 model owned by one entrant) demonstrated that a simple, well-prepared modern workhorse could be near-indestructible with minimal intervention—the crew never needed to work on it once throughout the whole trip!

Crossing Borders and Administrative Realities

Crossing national frontiers proved the rally's logistical complexity: visas, customs, police checks and localised rules (e.g., petrol cards and restricted service access) required local contacts and diplomatic tact. While each crew was expected to be capable of basic self help, the organizers' team, HERO (Historic Endurance Rallying) supplied professional roaming mechanics and medical teams, and tows if necessary. This hybrid approach balanced independence with organiser support across a multi-thousand-mile course.

Arrival in Europe and the Emotional Finish

After traversing Turkey, Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary—and a tense, careful passage across Alpine regions where brakes and clutch issues made mountain descents precarious—the team entered France and ultimately Paris. Of the 80 entrants, 60-65 made it to Paris, with the balance trailered or retiring. A police escort for the final leg and a grand hotel ball in Paris provided a suitably cinematic conclusion: family reunions, celebrations and a finale befitting the historic route. The car, battered and repaired, made it to the finish. Steve then drove the car back to the UK, booking it in for a complete rebuild back in Lyme Regis/Derby, including repair of instruments that had shorted and additional welded repairs.

Practical Takeaways and Lessons Learned

Preparation is necessary but not sufficient: Even with thorough preparation and spares, unexpected failures (fuel pumps, heat exposure, dust ingress) can derail competitive ambitions. Contingency logistics—quick parts dispatch, local agent networks and flexible travel—are essential.- Choose the right tool for the job: An open-top period car provides a romantic and sensory experience, but for competitive aspirations a lighter, faster, easier -to-service car increases chances of podiums.- Local systems and logistics matter: Payment systems (Alipay), connectivity (multi-country eSIMs), licensing, and the culture of enforcement (cameras and structured policing) shape daily life on the road.- Maintenance discipline wins: Daily checks—spark plugs, oil, grease nipples and more—make the difference between finishing and being stranded.- The organisers' support model works: Professional mechanics, medical teams, and meticulous route organization by HERO were decisive in keeping many teams moving.

Reflections and Personal Notes

Richard and Steve cherished the experience. Despite the mid-rally evacuation to Urumqi that voided their claim for the podium, the trip delivered extraordinary memories: remote camps under spectacular skies, warm local hospitality, the camaraderie of fellow competitors, and the sheer joy of seeing the route's variety—from Beijing's electric cars and silent streets to Kazakhstan's endless dust to the glorious approach into Paris. They both intend to continue rallying, though in future shorter events with a more competitive focus. They plan to compete again in Scotland in a month's time, in a different vehicle (a pre-war Hudson Terraplane) better suited to the terrain and intended objectives.

In closing, the Peking to Paris Rally remains a crucible of endurance, logistics and human spirit. It is not for those on a budget – but what goes with that is some of the hotels and places they stayed were really quite spectacular! For club members considering a future rally, the story is instructive and inspiring: meticulous preparation, robust contingency planning, and a healthy appetite for improvisation will provide the best chance to enjoy the adventure and, perhaps, cross the finish line in style.

John Summers



ANNUAL PROGRAMME

I have attached/enclosed the annual programme for 2026, with a few exceptions it is complete and we must thank Duncan for all his hard work.

Update on February Talk

William Sunderland:

“Clockmaker and Collector Extraordinaire”

William produced a book detailing a lot of the clocks mentioned in his talk and I have had enquiries about how to obtain this. It has 192 pages lavishly illustrated, traditionally produced on a Heidelberg press and stitch bound. All monies from the sales will go to the **MS Society**.

If you want a copy please email me electricwilliam@gmail.com and I will send you the details.

NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS

The contributions for 2026 are coming in steadily with more than 80% already paid. If you received a renewal form with this newsletter please complete and return to me with payment.

I have posted membership cards to those who have paid.

If you received a renewal notice but have paid please contact me and I will adjust my records.

FREE ADVERTISING FOR BRANCH MEMBERS

If you wish to place an advert in our newsletter , contact Bill :-
01543 506195 or electricwilliam@gmail.com

If you are wondering about this service, it is usually very successful with both items advertised last month sold !

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