

Preston Rally, 3rd/4th December 2016

Local lad Stefan Taylor followed in his father's footsteps in Suffolk and Norfolk taking victory on Chelmsford MC's famously challenging event, with former long-term Clerk of the Course and twice previous winner Adrian Gladwin navigating their Proton Coupe.

Three-time victor Dave Taylor, the winning driver's dad and good friend of the navigator, himself event CoC for four years in the 1980's – who at that time devised the popular format of this rally – and driving the Closing Car this year, was possibly the happiest man of all at the finish! Very proud!

The night was unusually mild and the route relatively dry for the thirty-eighth running of this notoriously wet and muddy rally which, coincidentally, saw thirty-eight of the fifty-four starters making the finish. Yet again Brian Jaggs, in his tenth year as CoC, Bob Blows and their dedicated team made a monumental effort to deliver another superb night-long event with a lengthy, tough, almost entirely off-road route comprising twenty-one sections, although unfortunately 'Wretham' had to be cancelled.

The winners certainly didn't have it all their own way, possibly benefiting slightly from running a little down the order to take an early lead before suffering severe visibility problems on section four, 'Kentford', one of the very few wet and muddy parts of the route, thus the top seeds, four-time winning driver Owen Turner as usual in an MG ZR navigated this year by the highly capable Rob Henchoz, who were of course setting competitive times anyway, took the lead – just – and held it for much the rally. The fight was close, the two front-runners trading times and even being precisely level at the first rest halt, the gap between them generally varying from ten to thirty seconds as the rally progressed, until Taylor/Gladwin slipped-up slightly on section seventeen, 'Sparrow Hall', leaving Turner/Henchoz fifty-seven seconds to the good at the following, second, rest halt. But the leaders had to settle for third in the end, receiving an inexplicably high penalty at 'Ingham' the nineteenth section and then suffering a time consuming puncture on the final section 'Summerpit'.

With three section wins to their credit, the experienced, ever-competitive Paul Sharp and Paul Barrett (yet another former CoC on this event!), fought all the way up to finish second in their Rover following a disastrous first section 'Mildenhall', and despite later getting stuck, luckily for them on the cancelled section, and consequently running perilously late.

Old hand Keith Lane and his son Martin were on superb form in a Ford KA achieving a well deserved fourth overall and best SE class position despite no less than three punctures! Rounding off the top five with a seemingly steady run were Derbyshire crew Richard Oxley and Andrew Lowe in their Proton Compact. The Ford Puma of Dave Smoley and Charles Thompson took a popular win in the Novice class and 19th O/A.

Matlock MC crew Sion Matthews and Gary Evans ran extremely well on their first Preston (which is quite something!), their Astra lying in the top three from the start until, sadly, the gearbox broke on 'Larkshall', section thirteen.

For one driving his second ever rally, it was a magnificent performance from Taylor. Without exception, all competitors appreciated the colossal effort of the organisers and outstandingly good marshals, and thoroughly enjoyed this remarkable, unique event.

- 1 Stefan Taylor / Adrian Gladwin 00:14:32
- 2 Paul Sharp / Paul Barrett 00:17:44
- 3 Owen Turner / Rob Henchoz 00:19:15
- 4 Keith Lane / Martin Lane 00:21:24
- 5 Richard Oxley / Andrew Lowe 00:22:08