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1. Jaguar XK120 fhc, Triumph TR3A, *Classic Cars* AC Ace-Bristol and Austin-Healey 3000 pause at Lake Maggiore for the first coffee stop

2. Austin-Healey 3000 MkIII of Pierre and Alex Maneint heads for joint top spot

3. Even first-timers quickly get to grips with roadbook's ball-and-arrow diagrams

4. Clive Richardson drove this Alfa Romeo Montreal from the UK to the Swiss event as part of a European tour

5. AC's rasping two-litre Bristol straight-six fires it past Lake Como

6. Joint winners William Mayer and Stephanie Barrat thread their TR3A through Bellagio

7. Alloy-bodied ex-Dick Protheroe Jaguar XK120 roadster at the Lugano finish

8. Formidable communication skills – and luck – lead to blindfold reversing success



MAKING TIME

FOR LATTES, LUNCH AND LAKESIDE LAUGHS

We entered the 2011 Lonville Classic rally round Swiss and Italian lakes in a borrowed AC Ace, and actually did rather well. But, as you'll see, that's not really the point of this enjoyably unique event

WORDS MIKE GOODBUN ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHY N DREW, CONFETTERIADILAVENO.COM

➤ As it says on page five of the Lonville Classic roadbook: 'Bribing is totally acceptable and, if done well, encouraged' – so Morgan Plus 8 driver Graham Lee gets in early with an Eric Clapton T-shirt for Dutch organiser and 'Slowhand' fan Joost Vreeswijk during the opening night's drinks reception overlooking Lake Lugano in Switzerland. The Lonville Classic isn't your typical classic car rally, and that's not the last item of clothing gifted in the course of the event – but that's another story.

What started as a plan for a classic car meeting near Lake Como ended up as the first three-day Lonville Classic in 2009 – the title stemming from the exclusive all-Swiss watch company originally founded in 1873 and revived by Proteus Jaguar C-type replica owner Vreeswijk and friends in 2007. Like the watches, which are produced in small batches, the event is deliberately kept small: this September's rally is capped at 24 entries.

But that doesn't mean it's only for the super-wealthy or that you need a multi-million-pound classic to take part. Fun, friendships, and good times are high on this intimate event's agenda, with making time for long lunches and fine dinners as important as enjoying the region's best driving roads.

It's a message that everyone here seems to get, with a refreshing lack of rivalry or seriousness. The advice continues: 'Don't joke with the Swiss police, ever.' And: 'Only joke with the Italian police if you are female and good looking.' A good job, then, that Mrs G is on navigating duty.

We've secured the use of a local 1957 AC Ace-Bristol for the 250-mile three-day event, which loops round lakes Maggiore, Como and Lugano for a mix of timed regularity rally routes, light-hearted driving tests, observational challenges and creative trials.

The AC, painted in Swiss national racing colours and with a cut-down windscreen, looks seriously purposeful as we line-up for the 8am start from Villa Sassa – and sounds it too, the two-litre straight-six rasping crisply

through twin side-exit exhausts as it's warmed through.

We're in good company, with the Ace joining 15 other British classics, plus an Alfa Romeo Montreal and Porsche 356 in the 18-car field. Six of the cars have been driven from the UK, including the V8 Alfa, while other crews have come from all over Europe.

That journey has brought its share of problems for some before the start, particularly Jaguars. Neil Hadfield's pale-blue 1949 alloy-bodied XK120 roadster, an ex-Dick Protheroe race car nicknamed 'Ancient Egyptian', will join in on day two after developing fuelling problems through France on its way to Switzerland. The Jaguar collector is first to take the wheel of Vreeswijk's MG RV8 back-up car instead, but he'll hand it to fellow XK120 driver Mark Humphries (whose son Matthew, Morgan's chief designer, is also on the rally in his all-black 4/4 Sport) for day two, when the dark green coupé's reluctance to start becomes refusal, even after much determined pushing.

Fuelled by the promise of coffee, croissants and cakes at a breakfast stop 24.2 miles away, we're sent into the hills around Lugano. Having been given a start time we make no attempt to work out when we're supposed to arrive at Porto Valtravaglia on the shore of Lake Maggiore – even though it's staring at us on every page: with a target average speed of 24.2mph we need to be there in exactly an hour. I've never driven the Ace before, my wife Amanda has never read the ball-and-arrow markings in a Tulip-style roadbook before, and we're here for fun, not competition, so timing is the least of our priorities. We certainly wouldn't expect to be among the leaders if we *were* taking it seriously, anyway.

Nosing out on to Via Tesserete I get to feel the Ace's basic responses for the first time. There's a little notchiness from the cam-and-peg steering around the straight-ahead, the body panels shimmy over gratings and speed bumps, and the stone-cold drum brakes screech until their linings warm up, but it feels superbly prepared and the perfect choice for an event like this.

As we thread our way through the residential outskirts of Lugano the sounds from those side-pipes are intoxicating: pops and crackles off the throttle, a strident blare when on it. With a racy cam profile fitted in this 100D-based engine the throttle response is spitty and fluffy between 2000-3000rpm, but from 3500rpm the Bristol's howl rips the air apart. This is going to be a great three days.

The independently-sprung and Michelin X radial-shod Ace is a joy to handle – its unthreatening nature and intuitive responses mean the initial tension that comes with the responsibility of borrowing someone else's car soon dissipates.

Unwittingly, I find myself blipping the throttle up and down through the four-speed Bristol gearbox in response to the engine's minimal flywheel mass, which sees revs dropping-off in an instant, and to overcome that hole in the power delivery. Despite its cranked-back lever the gearbox itself has a delightfully crisp mechanical precision and seems to appreciate the gesture too. It has synchromesh rings on the top three ratios, but they're not infallible during the frequent rapid changes that the 'box encourages.

There's a brief pause at Bombinasco to test crews' artistic skills, copying a mural from a roadside chapel. Most take the literal approach, apart from XK120 driver Humphries whose interpretation of the angelic scene is rude enough to net him the event's Top Humour award.

Little do we know it yet, but we complete the opening section in second place overall – and then jointly win the first driving test, which is reversing blindfold. With no sense of direction or speed behind a masculinity-challenging pink eye mask it's all down to the navigator to guide the driver between the two cones and finish with the rear tyres parked equidistantly between them. Just 10mm separates us and the 1987 Jaguar XJ12 of Nico Deltgen and Schiszl Mivida from Luxembourg.

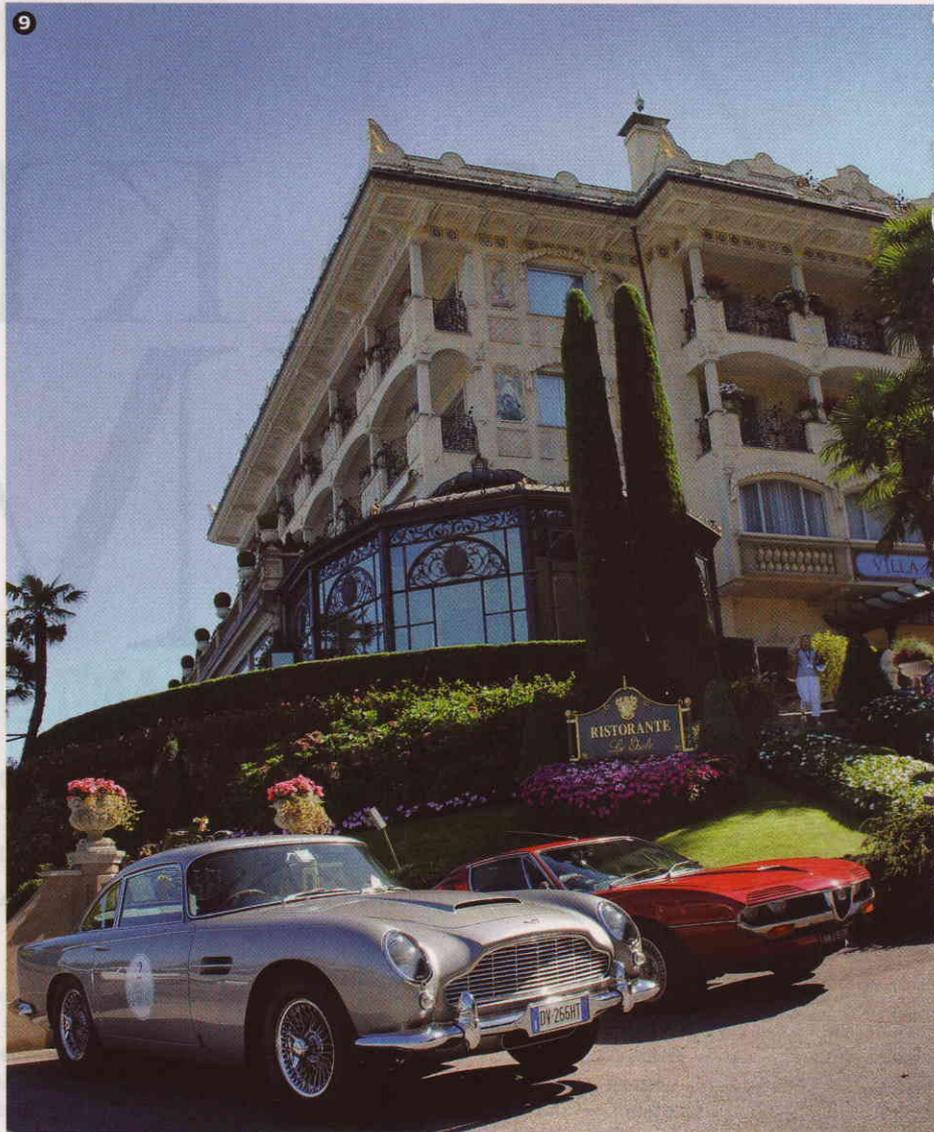
After a short run to Laveno we board the ferry across the lake to Intra and skirt the western shore of Lake Maggiore to Stresa for a fine three-course lunch at the extravagantly decorated five-star Villa e Palazzo Aminta, named after the wife of Italian Navy Admiral Francesco Capece. The admiral bought the villa, which has stunning views up the length of the lake and past the tiny island of Isola Bella, in 1918, counting Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw among his guests. In the Sixties it was frequented by Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton during their first marriage.

After a lunch of seared scallops, duck breast with caramelised peaches, and pear and chocolate dessert, our flukey early form isn't repeated and the trip meter decides to work intermittently, but we still end up mid-field, keeping alive organiser Vreeswijk's hopes of seeing the colourful AC on the Guy Allen-penned poster for the 2012 Lonville Classic – the winner's privilege.

Dinner is on the terrace of the Michelin-starred Ristorante Santabbondio in Lugano, where tales of the day are candidly shared in anticipation of tomorrow's destination: Lake Como.

Assuming everyone has settled into the rhythm of the event, target average speeds are up: to 27mph for the first run to Lenno. That's tougher than it sounds when you have town traffic, hairpin bends and border crossings to contend with, though the latter seem always to be a cheery wave-through that renders our hurried fumbling for passports redundant. It must be the car.

Crossing the Lago di Como by ferry from Griante Cadenabbia for a coffee stop at the exquisite Grand



9. Marco Colombo's sublime Aston Martin DB5 looks right at home outside Villa Aminta

10. Deserted roads are a delightful feature of this 250-mile event

11. MGC GT and Jaguar XJ12 S3 driven from Luxembourg

12. Organiser Joost Vreeswijk in alloy Proteus Jaguar C-type

13. All smiles for *Classic Cars* Mike and Amanda Goodbun

14. AC Ace kitted for action

15. William Mayer's beautifully restored Triumph TR3A

Hotel Villa Serbelloni in Bellagio, we land in the heart of the lake's three ears – with the snow-capped Alps shrouded in mist at the end of its northerly spar.

Again, we don't know it, but we've placed third on that section and are encouraged to keep the pace up as we head towards lunch at Il Gatto Nero in the hills above Cernobbio. Confidence clearly building, we opt for the longer, more challenging, 37-mile timed 'mountain' route to a control point at Villa Geno in Como rather than the untimed 19-mile lakeside option.

Our finest hour comes that afternoon after a thrilling blast through twisting, wooded hillsides bathed in golden sunshine. Or rather our finest four minutes, because that's the time we're given to complete a kilometre-long section of road without stopping.

For once we pay attention to the clock, although I set off far too quickly. Spotting the finish through the trees, we inch down the hill towards the time control, Bristol engine phutting on tick-over, drum brakes screeching, until stopping right on the line, right on time. First place!

Over dinner at the Lugano vineyard of Moncucchetto we discover we finished day one third overall. We haven't been timing ourselves properly and are more stunned than the rest of the room, which probably expects a little English reserve and professional down-playing from us.

An air of friendly competition is creeping in now and we're pleased to hear that the leaders are the Triumph TR3A of William Mayer/Stephanie Barrat and the Austin-Healey 3000 MkIII of Pierre and Alex Maneint.

Day three's action around Lake Lugano starts a little later, a little slower, and ends with lunch and a car show



13

15



12



CHOOSE YOUR AC ACE POWER

AC engine, 1954-63

Number built 223

Chassis numbers AE or AEX

Values £90,000-150,000

John Weller-designed 1991cc overhead-cam straight-six has an alloy block and is reliable, but its 100mm stroke limits its willingness to rev, giving 85-105bhp @ 4500-5000rpm. Four-speed Moss gearbox is light at the lever but slow-acting, as in period Jaguars, and there's no synchromesh on first. A handful had bespoke AC 'boxes with Triumph internals.

Bristol engine, 1956-63

Number built 463

Chassis numbers BE or BEX

Values £120,000-200,000

BMW-derived 1971cc overhead-valve straight-six is more revvy than AC's and more powerful: 120-130bhp @ 5750-6000rpm. Close-ratio Bristol gearbox is slick and well-matched, but no synchromesh on first either. New alloy cylinderheads and iron blocks are now available from IN Racing (www.inracing.co.uk). Disc brakes became an option on Ace-Bristols too.

Ford engine, 1961-63

Number built 37

Chassis numbers RS or RSX

Values £140,000-210,000

With Bristol engines in short supply, Ruddspeed and AC installed the cheap, tuneable, if not quite so tough, 2553cc Ford Zephyr overhead-valve straight-six in the subtly re-nosed Ace 2.6, mated to the Moss 'box. Five stages of tune from 120-170bhp @ 5000-5800rpm offered beyond the standard 85bhp @ 4400rpm, often with alloy Raymond Mays 'head.

at the Palazzo dei Congressi in the city centre – after 40 miles, a painting task and a watch dating challenge.

Our luck-driven form finally runs out when we finish more-or-less last on two of the three trials. We're too early everywhere. I blame over-enthusiasm in extracting grins from our time with the AC, which is rapidly nearing its end. Well, if you had one last day with this AC Ace you wouldn't want to average just 18.6mph, would you?

The final score is based on a combination of timing, correct answers, and the organisers' assessment of each team's style and enthusiasm. We're placed fifth, which means we don't make the poster, though the Ace's sheer prettiness had somehow convinced other crews that we were a shoo-in for the win.

The TR and 'Healey crews deservedly share the spoils, while Vreeswijk comments: 'Your painting skills [an abstract rendition of the AC's bonnet badge and nose stripe] did not compensate much, so on Sunday I kind of took your fantastic AC off the poster. You know, if you had come third I would have put three cars on the poster!'

How much better could we have done if we'd been trying? It really doesn't matter. Finishing higher up the leaderboard wouldn't have affected our enjoyment of the rally or the friendships made. The Lonville Classic perfectly illustrates how every event is the product of its organiser's personality, and if you share the passions and motivations of Vreeswijk and Co – as all of 2011's participants did – you really should make a date to join their wonderful little party by the lakes. ☺

Thanks to: Joost and Chiara Vreeswijk; Luigi Carlini; Hagerty (0844 824 1134, www.hagertyinsurance.co.uk). The 2012 Lonville Classic takes place on September 21-23, cost £1100 per head approx including hotel and meals (emailregister@lonville.com)

1957 AC ACE-BRISTOL

Engine 1971cc, in-line six-cylinder, ohv, three Solex 32 PB 16 downdraft carburetors **Power and torque** 120bhp @ 6000rpm; 120lb ft @ 4250rpm **Transmission** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Cam-and-peg steering box **Suspension** Front and rear: independent, lower wishbones, upper transverse leaf spring, telescopic dampers **Brakes** Drums front and rear **Weight** 835kg (1840lb) **Performance** Top speed: 120mph (est); 0-60mph: 8sec (est) **Fuel consumption** 18-27mpg **Cost new** £2100 (approx) **Value now** £175,000 (est)