

Chop chop! Our man arrives in style

by David Morgan

BY HAPPY coincidence, I managed to arrive in real style at the most important motor industry showcase of the year.

I was booked to fly down to Birmingham to attend the annual Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders press test day at the Millbrook Motor Industry

Proving Ground in distant Bedfordshire last Wednesday.

And fly I did – but not as I had originally planned.

Thanks to my good friend Chic Henderson, who owns HG Helicopters, I covered the 525.2-mile journey in sublime luxury – deeply ensconced in his million-pound-plus seven-seat, leather-trimmed Bell LongRanger 206L4, callsign G-GANG.

It was virtually a door-to-door service from Chic's new Inverness and Nairn Heliport at Grigorhill on the eastern outskirts of Nairn right to the main gate of the motor industry's most secretive testing facility.

It was quite a coup. My arrival certainly impressed my motor industry contacts (and wound up some of my car hack colleagues) when we swooped in and settled on the helipad.

As one of my slightly green colleagues commented: "When we saw the helicopter land, we thought it was somebody important – and then you got out. What a disappointment!"

Thanks, chaps!

Chic, his chief pilot Andrew McConachie from Ballindalloch, and quality and safety manager Nick van der Meer had already planned a business flight to Sandy, just 14 miles to the east.

For me it was a very happy coincidence that saved a six-hour trip by car, plane and taxi from Forres to Millbrook.

Even stopping off to refuel first at Chic's Knock Castle Hotel in Crieff and again at Sandtoft Airfield near

Doncaster, we covered the 500-plus miles at a steady 120mph in just three hours and 50 minutes – about half the time of my planned journey.

On the way we enjoyed the beauty of the Cairngorms and Highland Perthshire, and had a bird's eye view of almost the length of the UK from no more than 3,000 feet. It was brilliant.

Chic knew where I was going – he's no stranger to Millbrook. The car enthusiast and former Mitsubishi and Vauxhall main dealer told me: "I remember picking up my Astra Challenge rally car at Millbrook in 1986 when I was in the trade."

This time on his visit he was not so much gaining a new performance car as losing a 10½-stone motoring editor – not a bad deal when you think about it!

My two days at the SMMT event went well – I spent quite a lot of time fielding searching questions about my "friend in high places" and being ribbed when I tried to pass off the helicopter as my own.

HG Helicopters owns three Nairn-based machines that



The HG Helicopters trio taking a break with the LongRanger 206L4 at Sandtoft near Doncaster (from left): chief pilot Andrew McConachie, owner and pilot Chic Henderson, and quality and safety manager Nick van der Meer.

are available for charter. Chief pilot Andrew also trains private pilots to fly rotary wing aircraft.

It's an impressive and growing business that covers Scotland and is a real boost for Highland business. Not only does it put Nairn on the map as the north's only independent heliport, but also it operates meticulously-maintained helicopters including the LongRanger 206L4.

Powered by a 650hp Rolls Royce Allison turbojet, it was bought new by Chic two years ago and is a luxuriously equipped seven-seater complete with a full leather

interior that cost an extra £40,000.

Believe me, even after having driven some of the world's finest cars, it's the only way to travel to a motor show!

Oh, and if you're interested, the return was not quite as glamorous. I had to make it back to Moray by car to Birmingham (90 minutes), by air via Flybe to Abredeen (four-and-a-half hours including a two-hour delay) and by car to Forres (two hours).

I should have waited for Chic and Co – I'd have been home in less than half the time!



Final destination. The Millbrook Proving Ground with the grass helipad (centre, foreground) and the high-speed banked bowl test track just visible at the top of the picture.

Allan tastes ups and Duns of rallying

A SCOTTISH Rally Championship crew from Inverness are licking their wounds this week after mechanical failure forced them to pull out of an event at Duns on the first stage.

It was a frustrating experience for the driver, Macrae & Dick Mazda dealer principal Allan Smith, and his navigator – Highland Audi salesman Ian Macivor – who had made an otherwise perfect start to the championship season.

"It was a bit disappointing," Allan said, "but that's rallying. The problem's not all that serious and we'll have the transmission rebuilt in plenty of time for the next round of the championship on June 26."

Allan (38) and his experienced co-driver Ian had made a flying start to the Hankook MSA Scottish Rally Championship with their Group N Ford Focus ST.

Earlier this year they were first in class at both the Snowman Rally at Inverness and at the Granite City Rally in Aberdeen.

But the Duns non-finish has dropped them into second place in Group N, with Borders driver Peter Stewart in his Fiesta creeping ahead.

"Our only other rally was the Galloway when we finished second in class, but that was a non-championship event," Allan said.

The gearbox blow-up happened moments after the Highland pair blasted off the line in the Jim Clark Rally at Duns.

The event, held in memory

of the Scottish Formula 1 world champion who was killed during an F2 race at Germany's Hockenheim circuit when his car hit a tree, was celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

For Allan and Ian, the anniversary was probably the only aspect worth celebrating as their event ended midway

through stage one when a shaft in the gearbox broke as Allan changed up to fifth gear at around 100mph.

After coasting to a halt, all they could do was think about the long journey home and the loss of valuable points towards their championship goal.

"After the high of securing support from Williamson

Group to let me continue rallying, I really wanted to return home with a win for them," Allan told *motorsnorth*.

"I am still gutted – the car was going really well. The amount of grip tarmac tyres give you is amazing, and we were already catching the car in front when we lost drive.

"We can't afford any more non-finishes, and I have to win the class on the next two rounds to have any chance of winning the whole thing. It'll be flat out from here on in.

"It was a hard way to end an event we'd both been looking forward to," Allan added, "but it's now a case of fix it and press on."

The 180bhp Focus ST two-litre dates back to 2001 but has only been equipped for rallying since last year.

Allan and Ian are sponsored by Inverness-based Williamson Food Service, with some technical assistance from Macrae & Dick.

"This is our first full season with the car," Allan added.

"I've had previous rally experience as a co-driver but have moved over to driving, and Ian is very experienced as a navigator with 25 years under his belt."

The Inverness car salesman crew plan to complete the 2010 Scottish Rally Championship and, after the Scottish Rally at the end of this month, they are looking forward to the Speyside Stages event in Moray in August.

After a hard day's work selling cars, rallying is hardly the most obvious way to relax – but both are wed to the sport.

Better still, Allan's wife Karen understands the pull of the sport and he also receives a lot of support from children Adam (12), Georgia (10) and Sam (8).

"It's quite a commitment," he said, "but I love it.

"The switch to driving puts a whole new complexion on the sport for me – but at least I know I have one of the best and most experienced co-drivers by my side."

But what about the car? Surely it should be a Mazda3?

Well, in an ideal world the Mazda dealer principal might well be piloting a Mazda3 rally car, but in his defence Allan was general sales manager for Ford at Macrae & Dick for seven years before being promoted into the top slot at its Mazda franchise.

OK, you're forgiven!



Rally driver Allan Smith (left), with sponsors Mark Williamson (second left) and Gary Williamson (right) flanking navigator Ian Macivor. Photo: Daniel Matheson