

Past Masters - Alick Kerr

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First in an occasional series...

Susan Boyle might have shot to fame overnight courtesy of a wee video posted on YouTube, but another talented Scot who has been quietly working away for much longer at his craft is finally starting to reap the rewards. It's sometimes hard to forget that Alick Kerr isn't seventeen any more, because it seems as if it was only yesterday that the youngster from Bothwell near Hamilton took to the forests for the first time behind the wheel of a 205 Challenge car. But the seventeen year-old schoolboy in a Peugeot is now a twenty year-old foundry engineer behind the wheel of a Subaru Impreza, a driver well on his way to becoming one of the most accomplished and professional competitors in Scotland.

Whilst the headlines after the Jim Clark Reivers Rally were dominated by the battle between David Bogie and Euan Thorburn, two equally skilled and polished young drivers, the feats of Alick Kerr were just as impressive. On his first outing on tar in the ex-Bob Grant Subaru Impreza, and with Steven Brown on the notes in place of regular navigator Drew Sturrock, Alick's plan had been quite simply to get the car to the end of the rally in one piece. The car didn't even have tarmac brakes fitted, because it looked like Alick's team were going to have to sit out the rally due to a lack of asphalt gear until former Group N star Alistair Tough came to their aid with a set of tarmac wheels.

Kerr didn't just finish, though. Yes, a quick glance at the final classification, where he finished in the mid-teens, might carry the hallmarks of a steady drive, but it only tells half the story. A close encounter with a bank on the third test knocked a bolt loose from the hub and restricted the car to 40mph for the remainder of the stage, costing the former Ford Rallye Academy member over two minutes. For the rest of the day Alick and Steven were on a mission, stopping the clocks third fastest on one test and posting a string of top-ten stage times. Had it not been for the loose bolt, co-driver Brown reckons they would have been seventh overall. No mean feat in itself, but bear in mind that many of those who finished ahead of the white Impreza had (a) been warmed up by rallying for the previous two days on the other Jim Clark events and (b) competed for more than one event in their cars.

The previous round up in Aberdeen showed Alick has just as much four-wheel drive potential on gravel, setting some strong times on his very first outing in the car on the Granite City Rally. And if there is some sort of freak climatic event before the Scottish Rally and Britain enters a mini Ice Age, then it's possible that the Kerr car could win the remaining four SRC rounds – on the season-opening snowbound Snowman, Alick posted the fastest stage time outright on the opening stage in a Fiesta ST, set third fastest on another run, and then crawled to eleventh outright with one driveshaft.

Having said that, the blistering times this year should come as no surprise after a closer look at the Kerr rallying CV. Back in 2006, a vintage year for the 205 Ecosse Challenge, a band of marauding Borderers were grabbing all the attention, with Messrs Pearson, Thorburn, Brydon and Robertson alternating between the trophies and the trees. But just behind them, and more often than not equalling their pace on the stages, young Kerr was quietly doing the business. In fact, he held onto the championship lead until the penultimate round, losing out by the narrowest of margins to Robbie Pearson. And then, in 2007 Alick became the inaugural 1.9 Challenge champion, a combination of excellent driving and equally flawless car preparation bringing the team the 1900 title and taking them to within millimetres of the Scottish Junior crown – and also picking up the John Easson Scholarship in the process. A less than fruitful move to the Fiesta Sporting Trophy followed in 2008, and whilst the Kerr Motorsport team couldn't compete with the ridiculous sums of money some of the series frontrunners were throwing at their cars, Alick still managed to spend most of the year trading times with fellow Scot Stevie Brown and scored some impressive results when reliability permitted.

Undoubtedly a key factor in Alick's steady progress has been his father and team principal Donald Kerr. Having started out in karting, the Kerrs came to rallying without the family background that supported many of Alick's rivals, however everyone in the Challenge was astounded at the pace with which Kerr senior learned the ins and outs of stage rallying. It wasn't just the immaculately turned-out cars that made people sit up and take notice, though – alickkerr.com was one of the first websites set up by a junior rally driver in Scotland, and press releases complete with photos and sponsor logos were issued with clockwork precision since the very first event. It's this kind of whole driver development that both the Scottish Rally Championship and the 205 Ecosse Challenge are starting to push now, and any youngster trying to figure out how to go about the stuff off the stages could do a lot worse than look at the Kerr example.

As with any aspiring professional driver today, there are simply too many unknowns to be able to predict how far Alick Kerr will be able to go in the sport. But if being a 'professional' driver means paying as much attention to preparing the car in-between events, promoting oneself as a sportsperson and striking the perfect balance between raw speed and consistency, then Alick Kerr is definitely one of the top 'professional' rally drivers in Scotland.

