



**Lombard**

**LONDON SYDNEY MARATHON**

**51**

# MOTORSPORT LEGENDS

London to Sydney is usually completed by 747. Unless you're Francis Tuthill that is, then you'd, naturally, choose a 911.

At the back of Francis Tuthill's yard there's an old VW Beetle that's as rotten as a pear. It wears sponsorship stickers and is fitted with a roll-cage. In 1977 Tuthill and his friend Anthony Showell competed in that year's epic London-to-Sydney rally in this decrepit old Bug. They carried so many spares that the car weighed twice as much as a standard Beetle.

Six years later the pair were back in action again on the 1983 event. This time, however, they were equipped with a rather more serious piece of machinery. "We'd built a 911 using a 1966 short-wheelbase chassis and a 2.7-litre engine that was made very much for reliability and to be driveable. What we didn't do was carry a huge amount of spares. I'd learnt my lesson from the Beetle. Weight is bad news all round, so we took with us a couple of suspension arms and some dampers – just the bare minimum. The more weight you carry, the stronger you have to make the car and that in turn adds more weight. And then bits are more

likely to break and it's a vicious circle."

The rally started from Chelsea Harbour and headed straight to a couple of stages in England before heading to the Continent. "We had a puncture on one of them, which was no bad thing really because it calmed me down a bit. We did stages in Ypres and then headed down to Turkey, where they had a stage called the Backtrack, which was exactly that. You did it in one direction and then turned around and did it in reverse.

"Anthony drove the first direction and then I did the return leg. We were close to taking the lead and I drove like hell, nearly coming off the road a couple of times. But by the end of the stage we were in the lead. Anthony suggested that I drive from then on. On a long-distance marathon like the London-to-Sydney it's absolutely essential that the two of you get on really well. If you don't it's a disaster. Anthony and I have been best friends since school. He's a very good driver, just not quite as experienced as I was. It was very magnanimous of him to sacrifice driving

the stages, especially as I could have easily stuffed the car myself.

"India was incredibly hot. Temperatures in the car reached 60°C and we were drinking water almost non-stop. We had some cold water in a Thermos which we saved up for the end of the day because the main supply heated up as soon as we put it in the car. Tragically, one of the competitors died of heatstroke. Anthony got food poisoning, which wasn't much fun for him.

"Being first on the road in India was a huge advantage because there weren't many facilities in the towns and villages that we stopped in. No one had service crews and you had to do your own maintenance, so if you arrived late the facilities would have been taken by the first cars to arrive.

"All the cars were flown from the east coast of India to Perth in a massive Antonov transport plane while we had an extremely entertaining flight on an Uzbekistan Airways airliner. By this stage it had dawned on us that we were very much in control of the event.

It had also become apparent that I'd made a big mistake in using standard road ratios in the gearbox. So I rang my wife Annie and had her fly out to Australia with a close-ratio gearset in her hand baggage. I fitted the gears overnight in the same Perth garage that I'd worked in when I was 20."

The new ratios propelled Tuthill and Showell into another gear, so to speak. Where they had been taking seconds out of competitors, they were now taking minutes. "I'd never led a big event before," says Tuthill, "so asked Andrew Cowan [winner of the original event in 1968]. He told me to control the pace.

"The last part of the rally, in the Snowy mountains, was one of the most challenging. There was a lot of snow and ice and we didn't have the ideal tyres. We were slipping and sliding everywhere, terrified that we'd go off the road. But we didn't, and won the rally. I couldn't believe it. It was a fun event, but everyone took the actual competition very seriously. It was one of the last really gruelling long-distance events." ○

