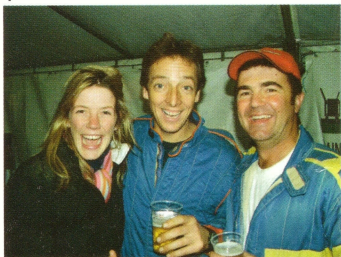


Congratulations Alex - Rally driving champion

Alex Cole, of Coles Automotive in Edburton, is the first Englishman to become Champion de France Rallye Tout Terrain. At the final rally of the year in Normandy, a third overall secured the 2006 title

'Champion de France'. 2006 has been the first year when Alex has been able to compete in his 3 litre BMW powered 4WD Rivet in all 8 rounds of the

Championship. A disastrous first rally in April in the south of France saw him finish down the positions. However, aside from one other event where a mechanical breakage put an early halt to his race, 2006 year has seen him with a first, 2 seconds and 3 third places at all other rallies which take place throughout France. With an average field of 90 vehicles and an attrition rate of 50% or more at most rallies – finishing with top 3 positions in 6 rallies is quite an achievement. The cars raced are mostly French designed 4wd space frame buggies with Rivets, Fouquets and Phil's cars being the most common. Classes exist for standard & modified 4WD vehicles along with 2 WD buggies. Alex raced with navigators Dan Williams from Henfield and Laura Ford.



Desert Challenge

You may remember the incredible story we published in BN5 last year of mechanic Alex Cole's experiences in the prestigious Dakar Rally. Well, he was back again in 2007 but this time as navigator...

In 2006 I was lucky enough to be asked to be the head mechanic for Ivar Tollefsen in his Land Rover Bowler for the Dakar rally. I had an amazing but demanding experience and Ivar finished 16th overall – the first Norwegian to ever cross the finishing line.

I thought nothing more about the Dakar deciding that if I was to be asked again to mechanic I would probably decline, as it had meant 4 weeks away from work. Then, last July Ivar phoned. 'Alex, I have asked everyone and everyone says that you are the man for the job – I want you to navigate in the 2007 Dakar for my son, Nick. You can teach him how to drive at the same time'. I began to mutter about costs – 'No, I will pay for everything, I will not pay you but I will pay all your expenses.' That really was an offer I couldn't refuse.

January 2007 saw 250 bikes, 187 cars and 88 trucks compete in the 29th Dakar rally, with competitors from 42 countries. I flew out to

sympathy for the mechanics of the Land Rover, a few times we were stuck out in the desert for hours because of a broken shaft or differential. If we happened to be carrying a spare I was able to get the vehicle going relatively quickly, but other times we were not so lucky. Once we were stuck in the desert overnight waiting for the T4 truck to arrive with the differential. We finally made it back to the bivouac 30 minutes before leaving for the next day's stage!

Although the odds were stacked against us, we did manage to finish – this was some achievement as nearly half the vehicles failed to complete the journey. We were placed 80th

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Portugal on January 2nd to meet the rest of the Bowler team and Nick, Ivar's 19-year-old son, who had only one other rally under his belt. I am an experienced off road rally driver (Alex is the current Champion of France Rallye Tout Terrain) but my navigational skills were not quite up to scratch, so a few quick lessons from Quin Evans, Ivar's long term navigator, got me up to pace. This year's Dakar was not to rely so heavily on the GPS system, but to use good old fashioned and familiar pace notes.

The two-week rally passed very quickly, Nick was seriously inexperienced and had little

in a field of 187 starting cars. My navigational skills had improved as the days went by! Compared to last year when as mechanic I hardly slept, having to drive during the day and repair the Land Rover through the night, the 2007 Dakar Rally seemed relatively easy!

I feel very privileged to have experienced the rally from both the mechanics and the competitors' point of view, and my dream would be to actually drive the Dakar one day. But with costs at 2.5 million euros for a VW works drive for the three week rally, I guess this dream is a long way out of reach.

Alex Cole