

Eagle's Rock is on the scenic North Ulster Coast, just west of the holiday resort of Castlerock, and each July the Coleraine MC host their round of the CarSport Hillclimb Championship at this most northerly of Northern Ireland's hillclimb venues.

The hill is approached along the Coast Road that passes Castlerock, the appropriately named Downhill, and Benone. When you reach Northern Ireland Railway's Benone Halt, turn left over the tracks, and take the meandering country road that leads to the hill. The coastal plain is on your right, with Magilligan Point and the hills of Donegal in the distance. To your left is the escarpment that runs all the way from here via that other Northern venue, Benbradagh, to the Sperrin Mountains. Immediately ahead of you is the 370metre outcrop of Binevenagh (Bin-ev-na), and that's the mountain we're going to scale today!

You reach a small crossroads which brings you into the Paddock area, and the road from the left is the return from the top of the hill. Go a further 400 yds and you will find a white line on the road, just by the gable of a stone barn. You are now at the startline of Eagle's Rock hillclimb - the finish is 1.2 miles away, and 630 ft above you.

The hill has 20mph hairpins and 120mph straights. It runs from hedged farmland to deep forest and then open mountainside, and it has some demon crests that need perfect track position to keep you out of the scenery. As you will know, the CARSPORT NI series takes place on closed roads, converted for the day. This will have two effects on this particular Drive It feature. Firstly, the length of road involved would take half the magazine if it were covered in the photographic detail normally associated with these articles. Secondly, because it is a public road, general wear and tear, along with land development, alter the nature of the course from year to year. So forgive me if I miss a few of the bumps! These details are based on driving the 255bhp Vision sports libre machine that I ran in 1997, running a Hewland FT200 in 4 speed mode. The gears are evenly spread from a 63mph first to a 125mph top gear - none of this 'cross box' trickery!

The Eagle's Rock startline is adjacent to a stone barn, and with the timing gear in place the centre of the road is the only option. The track has a noticeable slope, so I give it around 7000rpm and dump the clutch. The coarse nature of the tarmac gives excellent grip and you shoot off towards the slight right that leads to the first major corner, a long 90 left. Snatching second gear you adopt the traditional racing line, feathering the throttle to give the still cold fronts a chance, although the corner eases in radius towards the exit.

A short straight then leads to a deceptively sharp right which tightens mid-way through. I usually drop back to first to get the slingshot out to the following left hander. Changing up to second you can take this flat, but my right foot always seems to yell 'No way!' We now have about 50yds to get down to 20mph to negotiate the very acute lefthand hairpin, which in real life is a road junction. Getting as far over to the right as possible, I aim for the end of the grass bank on the outside. The stone wall in the picture appeared in 1997, and while it didn't alter the actual track it sure looks harder than the grass verge it replaced. Late braking is not recommended as the track is dusty and actually starts to crest slightly, leading to overshoots. Turn in late, having selected first, and drop the clutch on the apex - but be careful that you don't get the back to break too far as the bank on the outside is unforgiving to errant wheels and suspension.

So far, the hill has climbed little, but now the gradient increases noticeably and in the remaining 0.9 miles you'll climb 550 ft. Blast over the following crest going up the box once more and move over to the left. The road goes slight right, but stay left as you hit the sudden rise that leads to the righthander at Waterworks. The approach is steep and the car digs in to the bumpstops before it's time to lift off over the 45 right - our version of East Brae! Once again I turn in late and make sure I finish all my turning before I crest the rise. The car leaps to the left and the waiting straw bales, but it has to be dragged back to the right for the next crucial series of kinks. These lead on to a long straight and hence all possible speed must be maintained.

The first 30 left is narrow and you really have to be 'on the pipe' to get it flat. Once again I usually opt for caution and change up just before the apex, but the following right must be flat to get a time. There is a long lead-in to this kink, but you must wait for the gateway on the inside as your apex. The road is slightly adverse camber and the hedgerow on the left seems to want to drag you in, but keep your foot down as you hit the 350yd straight.

Into top, check your instruments, take a breath and weld your right foot to the bulkhead. You take the crest flat and the road starts to go easy left into the forest. Your eyes just have time to get accustomed to the gloom, then it's time to stab the middle pedal and snick down to third for the kink left that is 50yds in. Make sure you keep it neat as next comes a small bridge, which gets the car light, followed by a long climbing right. I lift for the bridge and give it half throttle through the right.

Next is another brow, the approach to Hell's Hole. It's not a hellish as in days of yore before deforestation removed the surrounding trees, but must still be treated with care. I move right of centre, brake just before the crest, change down to 2nd and turn in to the left over another small bridge, keeping tight to the inside for the line on the important exit right. Apply the power in the middle of the bridge and turn in to the right hander. Again it's a long bend and the car drifts left towards the salt box. Now it's 400yds straight to the finish, and it's a steep climb. Third and fourth are taken in sequence, crossing the line at 8800 before heading for the return roads, giving the RUC officers a bit of a show on the way. Just as well they left the radar at home!

The Eagle's Rock track record is still held by Jackie Harris in his 2-litre Ralt-BDG RT1. It stands at an amazing 62.61sec, and with some of the minor revisions and the few extra bumps it could well stand the test of time for a few years to come!



As readers will know from our recent 'Drive it - Cairncastle' feature, Ulster public road hillclimbs are among the longest and most demanding in the sport. MICHAEL BEATTIE - second overall in last year's NI Hillclimb series driving his Vision-Vauxhall - returns to guide us up another of these challenging venues

Gus Geddes



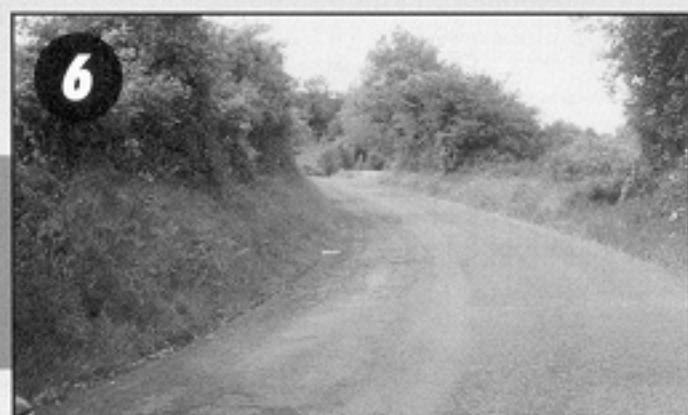
1
The start - plenty of grip so 7000 rpm off the line (in the Vision-Vauxhall) and flat through slight right



2
Long 90 left - feather the throttle to give still cold front tyres a chance



3
Short straight leads to sharp right



6
50 yards remain to haul off speed to around 20mph



7
Get to right and aim for the end of the grass bank - late braking not recommended!



10
Up through the 'box, stay left as you hit the rise to Waterworks

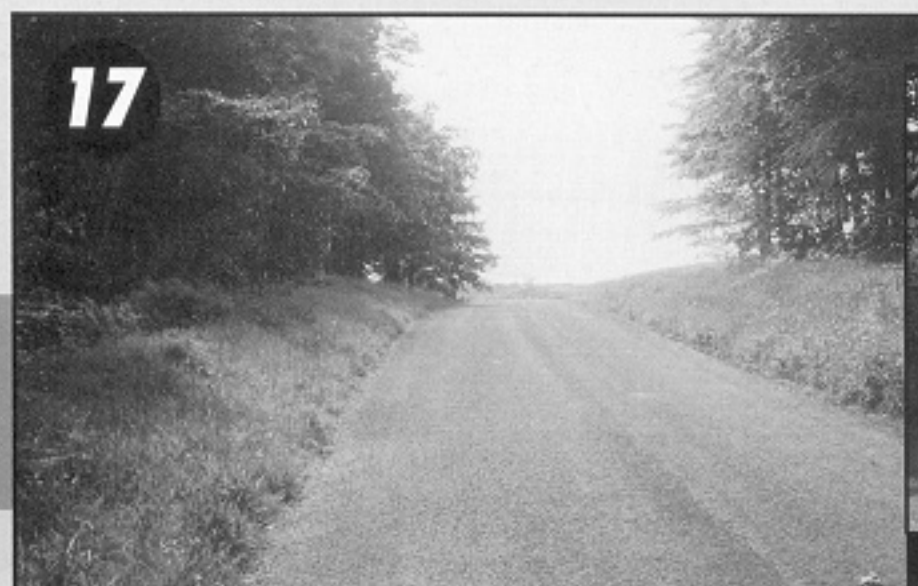
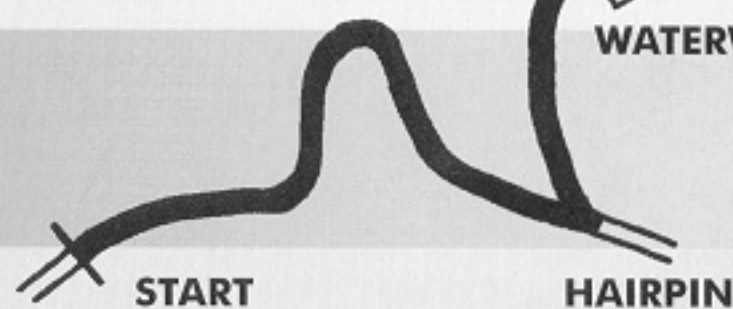


11
Waterworks - our version of East Brae! Turn in late, but finish turning before crest



DRIVE IT

Eagle's Rock



17
Move to right of centre and brake just before crest for left-hander at Hell's Hole



18
Down to second and turn in left, keep to inside line



19
Power on in middle of in to long right

4

Bend tightens midway - I change down to get slingshot out

5

Exit leads up to left kink before acute left-hand hairpin

8

Change down to first, turn in late and drop clutch on apex...

9

Don't slide too wide - the bank is unforgiving

12

Drag car back to right and maintain all possible speed through narrow left, change up before apex

13

Slightly adverse right kink must be flat to get a time - wait for gateway on inside as apex

14

The straight - top gear. Have a break and a Kit-Kat and weld your right foot to the bulkhead

15

Into the forest - stab the middle pedal and down to third for the left kink 50 yards in

16

Keep it neat - lift for small bridge which gets the car light before long, climbing right on half throttle

20

Drift left towards salt box before steep 400 yard straight to the finish line

21

The finish. Jackie Harris got there in just over the minute...

eptively

FINISH

LL'S HOLE

IDGE

+