Austin Counties Car Club Rally 2026

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Kim Henson reports on a superb event, held this year in Essex…

(All words and photographs © Kim Henson).

For a very long time the Austin Counties Car Club, which caters for enthusiasts of Austin models produced between 1939 and the mid-1950s, has had the enviable and well-deserved reputation of being a friendly, welcoming organisation, with their annual rallies reflecting this ethos.

At the outset, for those who may be wondering about the vehicles covered by the Club's broad 'umbrella', I should explain that these include…
…the 8, 10, 12 and 16hp models, the four door A40 Devon, two door A40 Dorset, A40 Somerset, A70s Hampshire and Hereford, and the A90 Atlantic, including all drophead and

commercial derivatives of these model lines.
It matters not whether members have their vehicles on the road or not, or if the Austins are in ‘concours’ condition, rough-looking or somewhere in between, or indeed represent ‘work in progress’! All these vehicles and their owners are welcome.
The Club was given its name after the post-war models named after counties in the south-west of England. For further information about the Club, or to join, please go to: https://www.austincounties.org.uk/

The 2026 Annual Rally of the Club, the main get-together each year for members to meet, drive their cars, ‘talk Austins’, meet new friends and renew existing friendships, was held in Essex over the long weekend from Friday 17th to Sunday 19th July, with some attendees arriving on the Thursday (16th) and/or staying until the following Monday (20th). The base for the event was the Essex Golf and Country Club at Earls Colne, near Colchester (www.theessexgolfandcountryclub.com). This is located on the Earls Colne Airfield, which itself has a fascinating history, having been built as a vital wartime aerodrome in 1942 during World War II and used by both the British and American air forces. It had to provide accommodation for 2,750 personnel… There’s much detailed information about it here… https://miscellavia.com/earls-colne-airfield-history-1943-to-2024/

Despite heatwave conditions, Austins arrived in numbers at the Essex Golf and Country Club, and by the morning of Friday 17th July some sizeable areas of the car park were occupied by these Longbridge-built vehicles.


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Buses galore

On Friday 17th July, the first day of the Counties Club Rally, attendees could choose between taking their own vehicle or travelling on a wonderful ex-London Transport RTL double decker bus, to the recently-opened (in April 2026) ‘Zero2 Bus Museum’, in Great Yeldham.



The amazing collection includes approximately 60 buses dating from between 1932 and 1988, and with most of them having been saved from oblivion and painstakingly restored; about 40 of these are accommodated in the main exhibition area. A further 20 or so buses are under restoration in the extensive workshops.

In addition to the buses on display are three main exhibitions; ‘Restoration’, ‘Destinations’ and ‘Ticketing’.

The Counties Club members spent several hours at the museum (which includes a café and ice cream shop) and they were full of praise for the way in which the superb museum has been set up, also the clever and ‘accessible’ manner in which the vehicles are displayed. It should also be mentioned that in addition to the full-size buses and many historical bus transport-related artefacts, there are approximately 10,000 models displayed in purpose-

built cases. The majority of these were donated by the late Alan Moore, who started collecting them in 1975.

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For further information about the museum please go to: https://www.zero2busmuseum.com/

During the day, attendees were delighted to have the chance to enjoy a second ride on a classic double decker, in this case a 1970 open-top Daimler Fleetline that took its enthusiastic passengers from the museum on a scenic journey through the sun-bathed Essex/Suffolk countryside, with its pretty villages and rolling farmland.



The Daimler Fleetline resting at the Roughacre Brewery in Clare.

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The destination was the attractive village of Clare (just over the county border in Suffolk), and specifically the Roughacre Brewery, where some of the fabulous beers produced there were sampled and much enjoyed by the Austin rallygoers, with packs of the bottled beers being taken away in greater quantities for later consumption!

In a clever link-up the Zero2 bus museum and Roughacre brewery work together, notably

giving museum visitors the chance to travel to and from the brewery on a double decker, from the top of which the nearby scenery can be fully enjoyed.

For more information please go to: https://roughacre.com/

For many of those who travelled on the classic buses on this occasion, memories were rekindled and everyone marvelled at the sheer character of the vehicles, including the high quality interior fittings and the unique engine and transmission sounds produced by each type.

On returning to the rally base, participants enjoyed an impromptu autojumble in the car park, with several members having brought along Austin spares, tools and accessories no longer needed, selling them from the boots of their vehicles. Buyers (including me!) seemed delighted with their purchases.



The Friday evening was the occasion for much chatting and catching up while a meal was enjoyed.

Another day, another bus…



On the Saturday, another very hot day, a different wonderful classic double decker bus arrived at the Essex Golf and Country Club, this time a 1962 Guy (with ‘Lowbridge’ type bodywork) from the Canvey Island Transport Museum, a charitable organisation based in a bus depot built in 1934.
For further information about the museum, please go to:
https://canveyislandtransportmuseum.co.uk/

Again there was the option available to ride on the bus or for participants to drive their own vehicles.
Again this bus brought back happy memories of the 1960s for many Counties Club passengers. It is worth mentioning that the ‘Lowbridge’ bodies were constructed with a ‘sunken’ walkway along the right-hand side of the upper deck, with very wide ‘four abreast’ seats to the left-hand side. As their name implies, these vehicles were built so that the buses could pass safely under relatively low bridges.

The first destination was the East Anglian Railway Museum at the Chappel and Wakes Colne Station. The photo below, taken through an upper deck window of the Guy double decker, shows the nearby magnificent Chappel Viaduct, completed in 1849 by the Eastern Union Railway, which eventually was absorbed into the Great Eastern Railway.



With the Counties Club cars (and the bus) lined up in the car park, together with a collection of locally-based modern classics, rallygoers spent a couple of hours touring the extensive displays. These included magnificent preserved carriages (some dating back to the late 19th Century) and artefacts from the heyday of the railways, as well as rooms within the 1891 station building, set up to show how they would have looked in decades long gone.



The wooden carriage in the centre of this shot was built in the 1880s.

There were also beautifully detailed miniature railway layouts, and the fascinating workshops, accessible to visitors and where great work is being done by volunteers to keep the engines (steam and diesel) and rolling stock in working condition.
Again this visit was much enjoyed by the Austin rally attendees.



Vehicles lined up at the Chappel Railway. The car in the foreground is a beautiful Crossley, built in Manchester.

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For further information about the museum, please go to: https://earm.co.uk/

Tea for two (or more!)



The next stop was at the Tiptree Tea Rooms (in this case based in Tiptree, but these days there are several more around Essex, operated by the famous jam makers Wilkins and Sons Ltd.).

Here a delicious ‘jam and cream’ tea was enjoyed by the Austin rally participants, who were treated to the very special ‘Little Scarlet Strawberry Preserve’ to go with the cream on their scones. All I spoke to agreed this was just wonderful!

A tour of the jam-making museum and shop on the same premises was next on the agenda, before the return journey was made to the Essex Golf and Country Club, in readiness for evening drinks and a three course meal.



I should add that, due to a serious accident on one of the main roads en route to the tea rooms, the bus driver had to take to an alternative route via narrow country lanes, negotiating low-hanging trees, tight bends and many drivers seemingly oblivious to the large green bus trying to squeeze past their chosen positions taken up in the middle of the road. Full marks to our bus driver and conductor, both of whom kept calm and coped magnificently (and who received a spontaneous round of applause from their passengers on arrival at the Tiptree tea rooms, to thank them for their efforts).
Tiptree Tea Rooms: https://tiptreetearooms.com/

Evening meal

While the evening's dinner was enjoyed, the diners were treated to an ingenious 'whodunnit' murder mystery game, to establish who (among many possible murderers) finished off an imaginary Austin dealer.
This caused much hilarity for many as the various options were explored… Needless to say, there was also much chatter about matters Austin among those present.



'Whodunnit?'

Sunday’s rally day at the Layer Marney Tower

A road run was undertaken on the Sunday (19th) from the Essex Golf and Country Club to the Layer Marney Tower, the origins of which date back 500 years. (For more information please go to: https://www.layermarneytower.co.uk/)

The vehicles were parked on the grass area in front of the building, with many additional Counties Club members arriving just for the day.
The very interesting array of vehicles on display included a contingent of Austin Sevens from the Essex Austin Seven Club, an early (1963) Morris 1100, a very rare A40 Dorset (effectively a two door version of the four door Devon, which sold in much greater numbers), a very early ‘AS3’ model A30 from 1953 (with a unique bootlid set-up not used on post-1953 cars) and a terrific line-up of A90 Atlantics.

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823 FXM



A very rare early A30 (AS3). This 1953 example has internal cantilever type boot hinges.



Three Hampshires (two saloons flanking a pick-up) at Layer Marney Tower.

In addition to looking around the vehicles and chatting with fellow owners and enthusiasts, the rallygoers were able to enter the Tower and climb to the top, taking in far-reaching views across the Essex countryside. (Note: The building was intended to have a quadrangle added, but this did not materialise).

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Not to be missed was a tour of the rooms within the Tower (and accessed from the stairway to the top), including one containing a fantastic collection of beautifully detailed historic dolls houses, dating back over about 300 years.



The vehicles, in their respective categories, were judged informally by fellow owners, and at the end of the afternoon the results were announced.
Of particular note was the ‘Long Distance’ award for a Club member, Michael Walker, who lives in Los Angeles where he runs an A40 Devon pick-up. He had made a special trip to England to attend the rally, as he did in 2025 too.



Michael being presented with his Long Distance award by Club President Chris Tallents.

Club Chairman Alastair While thanked attendees for coming and, especially, all those responsible for doing such a brilliant job in organising the event.

At the end of the Sunday some members stayed on for a convivial meal in Coggeshall, while others had to make their various ways homeward.

Persistence pays off!

Some enthusiasts put in monumental efforts to get their long-dormant classic vehicles roadworthy and back on the road to be driven and enjoyed again.
An exceptional case in this regard is Richard Hughes, who rescued a very rare A70 Hampshire pick-up that had been out of use since last taxed in June 1969, and against all odds he restored the vehicle to road-going order to drive it to the Counties Club Rally, held this year in the vehicle's home county of Essex (and just a few miles from where the vehicle once operated).
Richard's vehicle won the award for the best commercial but he was even more delighted to be able to drive it to and from the event.
In order to do this he had to overcome many obstacles, and it is fair to say that even during the rally there were some technical difficulties that arose, but Richard didn't give up and he tells me that on the way home the Austin ran better than ever it has since he has put it back on the road. Well done Richard!



The amazing A70 Hampshire pick-up restored by Richard Hughes.



The original signwriting was discovered by Richard when restoring the vehicle to road-going condition.It has been preserved.



Richard is still smiling after herculean efforts on his A70 Hampshire pick-up.

...and another thing...

It would not be truthful to say that all the vehicles in attendance ran perfectly for the event. Indeed this year a number of engine problems arose, notably with ignition and fuel-related difficulties bringing vehicles to an unscheduled halt. Perhaps these issues were caused, or not helped, by the very high temperatures endured at the start of the weekend.
However, in every case those unfortunate enough to suffer from vehicle breakdowns/running issues were helped/given moral support by many knowledgeable fellow Club members, some of whom went to considerable lengths to help others in need… How wonderful that is! I know that the owners of the vehicles concerned (including Richard, with his A70 Hampshire pick-up) are very grateful for, and appreciative of, the assistance received.

VERDICT

I have to declare an interest as I have been a member of the Austin Counties Club for many years and have always enjoyed their events; this one was no exception.
Sadly for 'technical reasons' I was unable to take my own 'Counties' car (1954 A40 Somerset) to the rally this year but was made very welcome despite arriving (as some other members were also obliged to do) in a 'modern'.

In my opinion, and all rallygoers I spoke to agreed, this was an exceptionally well-organised, happy event that gave so many treats to participants in terms of fascinating visits, the opportunity to ride on classic buses, and of course to be able to enjoy the great company of fellow members and friends.
Grateful thanks to the main organisers Sue Doré and Mark O'Kearney and everyone else involved; a superb job very well done, and much appreciated.

Kim Henson, 20th July 2026

The Austin Counties Car Club:

For further information about the Club, or to join, please go to:
https://www.austincounties.org.uk/