

MSCC Speed Championship
Gurston Down
Sunday 23rd June 2008

I used to spectate at Gurston Down many years ago, when I was a student at the Art College in Salisbury. I drooled over souped up Minis, MGBs, Frog-eyed Sprites, and all the other cars that boy racers used to drool over. Most weekends I could be found up by Ashes bend, dreaming of what the future might see me driving.

And here we are, some 40 years on, and the same cars are still competing! And now, I am a competitor, not a spectator, I even pay an entry fee, instead of flashing a hand-made Press pass at the gate. Yet still, the drive over the downs into Salisbury, the first sighting of the 404 foot cathedral spire brings back happy memories of carefree student days, carefree student daze even. Well, it was the sixties. And I had hair then.

And it was always sunny all summer, with proper snow in winter then. And here I was, in the middle of June, pitching my tent in a field with the drizzle drizzling down, soaking every sinew, Midsummer nights spent at Stonehenge with the other hippies dancing around the sarsons but a fading memory. And the drizzle was to continue all night, casting gloom and doom for the following day.

Sunday however, brought blue skies and sunshine, and a track that looked as if it might dry out. All the cars now in the paddock, roofs off, sidescreens off, windscreens off even! Phil Tisdall and I had walked the course the previous evening, convincing ourselves that Tim Ayre's tip "Don't brake into Carousel, just lift off" was workable. We were going to join the ranks of those with air beneath our tyres at Deers Leap. We had already broken bogey!

This weekend we had an impressive entry list, and yes, the new competitors, including a couple of slips-of-lasses, Lizzie Stephens and Anne Benischek, who we could patronise, smile condescendingly at them, boosting their ladydrivership with a cheery "Don't worry love, you'll improve, you'll get faster, just give it a season or two" After all, it was only their second event, they were no danger to us blokes.

Who am I trying to kid? These girls are good, though I hate to admit it! And fast too! And they have taught we seasoned campaigners a lesson, and the lesson is: "Don't mess with us, we mean business. We are girl racers. And we are here to win."

Jim Mountain, first time out in his very smart looking 4/4, Peter Turner, first event in his recently acquired Plus 4, and Peter Mountain with his own car back, along with other newbies and old stagers hinted that we were going to be in for a good day.

No mishaps on first practice, but we all found the start exceedingly slippery. The start is downhill, and with a bit of confidence, the first few bends can be taken flat out. Most times were 7 to 10 seconds over bogey, but as the day progressed, and the track warmed in the June sunshine, all the times were tumbling, at one time, aforementioned Anne was faster than Andy, her other half, and Lizzie was only one and a half seconds slower than her dad John, and he wasn't hanging around either!

There is always a good spectator crowd at Gurston, and the marshals are a good, friendly bunch too. The ice cream van arrived eventually around lunchtime. Sighs of relief from the Smith camp. The only mishap of the day was John Bevan in a vain attempt to make his car cheaper on the ferries by

shortening it. An impressive black eleven on the track pointed out his route onwards to the straw bale wall, for which I think he owes the farmer a pint.

Results: as expected, local hero Tim Ayres coaxed his car to a 1 second under bogey to take the honours, (but he'd also been competing the day before on a damper track, no sour grapes here) closely followed by John Stephens, oh how I hate that guy, in second, and a very impressive third place for Peter Turner, a mere tenth of a second over bogey. The first 12 places were separated by just 3 seconds, which just shows what a thrilling time we all had. Even those in lower rankings should be absolutely proud of their achievements for the day. The most praise should be poured onto the newcomers in the arena, notably, and in no particular order, Andy Miller, Bill Hiscock, Jonathan Edwards, Dave Leach, and of course, Lizzie Stephens and Anne Benischek. Names to watch out for in the future: the very near future!

Richard Smith