

Tunbridge Wells Motor Club

John Mew

In at the Best Time



John Mew – His Motor Racing Story.

“I reckon I was in at the best time”



In 1944, on my sixteenth birthday, I purchased a 1933, 500cc Matchless Motorbike for £5 and volunteered as a dispatch rider for the Defense Services. I was still at school at the time although no pupils were allowed such things as motorbikes. However, because I was now in the Services they could hardly prevent me. My work involved taking messages around the area often in the dark with my headlamps blanked due to the 'black out' restriction. I could see no more than a small pool of light 10 feet in front of the bike. I came off that bike more times than I can remember and my mother was always complaining of me tearing my trousers as I slid along the road. I was not allowed to use the bike for private travel because of the petrol restriction and so used lighter fuel as a rather expensive solution to this problem. They ended the war after 11 months and I was always rather upset that I did not get a war service medal, which was restricted to those who had served a full year or more.

In 1945 I purchased a 1934 Lagonda 16/80 with a 1600cc Meadows (I think) engine. I got it for £10 because the oil pump drive had sheared, the chrome had all gone and the engine needed a complete re-build. This took me a year of my spare time, during which time I manufactured my own Oxy-acetylene equipment from different sized copper tubes, an old acetylene lamp and a cylinder of oxygen from my father's dental practice. I collected the acetylene in a football bladder, which sat in a cardboard box with a heavy weight on top of it. In actual fact this Heath Robinson arrangement worked quite well. I also made up a spray paint gun from a similar arrangement of copper tubes with which I painted the entire car. The compressed air came from a foot pump put into a capped off oil drum. I hate to think how near this drum was to disintegration when the pressures reached 20-30lb psi. I also replaced the fabric body and can remember heating it

with an electric fire hung from the ceiling in order to stretch the material. I had the chrome work re-done and in the end it looked surprisingly good. Good enough anyway to sell for £275 which was a fortune to me in those days.

“Inspired by this I decided to build my own sports car from scratch.”

Inspired by this I decided to build my own sports car from scratch. Fortunately I was able to get hold of an independent front suspension unit, which were not common in those days, and a specially built De Dion rear axle, even less common. I spent the next 18 months building an ash frame from scratch, beating the body-work to shape from old aluminum bus panels, including quite complex doors with side screens. Basics such as the brake and clutch pedals all had to be manufactured from wrought iron bar and plate. I managed to get hold of a V-8, four and a half litre high-cam Ford Mercury engine from an ex army

tank. I fitted high compression heads, high lift camshafts and added a couple of large Webbers. I hate to think how much power it was delivering to such a light vehicle but the car stood still with the wheels going round if you were not careful with the clutch! Unfortunately, the brakes were not as good as the engine and the shock absorbers were woefully inadequate.

Circa 1950 I organised the first ever speed trial at Brands Hatch on behalf of the Tunbridge Well Motor Club. This was a great success and was continued for many years, giving the Club quite a good profile. My ‘special’ took the fastest lap of the day, it was just a question of keeping it on the track.

I started motor racing proper in 1958 with an ex Wickens Cooper JAP Mark VIII, 500cc Formula 3. This was a very successful little car and great fun to drive. By 1959 I was in good form and actually made a profit over the year from a series of wins, which as you would know is no easy thing in motor racing. I broke even the following year and then ordered a Lola for 1960. However, Eric Broadbent (I may have got his name wrong) was slow on delivery and I decided to switch to a





Lotus 18 fitted with 1000cc Cosworth Ford Engine, which was one of the first rear engined Formula Junior cars ever made. Colin's design was way ahead of its time and again I found it easy to win races. Unfortunately everybody else started buying them including the works teams which puts the stakes up somewhat.

I competed the car successfully that year, gaining several pots and having one memorable escape from imminent disaster at Silverstone, when Peter Warr, and another well known driver whose name I have forgotten, and myself, were only 1/10th sec apart from each other on the front row of the grid. We all shot off, each determined to be first round the circuit. On arriving at Paddock Bend I was second with Peter just ahead of me. However, he left his braking far too late and span right in front of me, I must have been doing 80 mph at the time and



can remember him spinning towards the pits and then suddenly shooting sideways just in front of me. I'm sure I missed him by no more than an inch as he whipped by, finishing in the outer barrier.

I owned a Peerless at the time, a limited production car built on a Triumph TR 2 frame with a De Dion rear axle and a souped-up 2000cc engine. It performed well and I did a few sports car races with it but these never equaled the thrill of single seat racing when a touch of another car's wheel is disaster. I can remember one particular event at Brands in the pouring rain. The works boys were there and I was in the third row of the grid. We took off with a great deal of slithering and sliding and I can remember going round Paddock with a car on either side of me being unable to see those in front because of the spray. Arriving at Druids I couldn't see the braking point and lifted my foot a trifle early, only to see the car on either side nudge forward. Still unable to see I left my braking even later and managed to gain another place without actually touching anyone which was a miracle as none of us could really see the other. Moments like this are the climax of motor racing.

In actual fact I found I usually did best in the rain. I was probably down on power slightly from the works cars but this tended to even out in the wet as they could not always use the power they had. I remember another race at Silverstone when it started to rain heavily soon after the start of the race. I was about fifth on the grid and the circuit was soon like an ice rink. I eased right back only to see the blurred image of a car in my rear view



mirror. By then I had begun to get the feel of the conditions and my irritation at someone catching me up got the better of me. I can remember sliding round the circuit taking the bends to within an inch of the grass. I shudder now to think of the consequence of going two inches further out as there were only a few feet of grass before the bank. Anyway he disappeared from view and as several of the others had spun off the circuit altogether, I finished in the money.

The following year I bought a Lotus 20 and a new Cosworth engine upgraded to 1100cc. This also proved very successful and in 1961/2 I competed all over Europe. The international scene was great fun, traveling around in lorries and camper vans, getting to know all the other drivers as well as the camp followers whose only objective seemed to be to date a driver. You might be interested in this little snippet of one event.

In 1961 I took part in the Formula 3 Grand Prix at the Monza circuit in Italy. There were 90 entries but only 30 places on the grid to be decided by lap times. We managed to get the last position on the grid for the final and were the

only private British entry, racing against the works teams. The race was to be started by Fangio himself.

It is a very high-speed circuit and during the interval we had changed rear axle ratios. We were in the pits, just putting the lid back on the gear box as the 15-minute siren sounded and were about to push the car out onto the grid when my mechanic dropped a bolt into the bottom of the gearbox. We all stood horrified until I had a bright idea. I recruited 4 strong Italian marshals who

“We removed the battery and the petrol tank and turned the car upside down and shook it until the bolt fell out”

were standing nearby. We removed the battery and the petrol tank and turned the car upside down and shook it until the bolt fell out with the oil into a suitably placed bowl. You can imagine the affect this had on the expectant Italian crowd packing the grandstands.



The mad English shaking their car upside-down just before the race, they went mad!

Immediately after the start there was a huge pile up on the full speed right hand bend called the Curva Granda, which knocked out several of the works boys, although fortunately no one was seriously hurt. Partly due to this we were able to get into the prize money and felt rather pleased with ourselves. After the race Fangio insisted on meeting me and it was one of the proudest moment of my life, although he could not speak a word of English!!

That Christmas the BRSCC asked me if I would play the part of Father Christmas at Brands Hatch. I entered into the part and not only wore the appropriate costume over my crash helmet, but fitted a paper mache pair of reindeer horns on the bonnet and a barrel of brandy mounted over the engine. These needless to say were removed after the initial celebration lap. I performed this role for the next three years.

By 1963 the fun of driving all over Europe had dimmed slightly and I did

not compete outside the UK but remember one particularly exciting event at Brands. I had poll position but in a moment of absentmindedness forgot to engage a gear. Needless to say the field shot past me and I went off in hot pursuit. I think drove better on that day

“It rolled six times between hitting the bank and its final resting place”

than I can ever remember although I did have a few near misses as I wound my way through the back markers. It was a 25-lap race and by lap 20 I was back in 4th position. However, Lionel Brookes the race leader was well ahead of me and I continued in hot pursuit. I was not aware of it at the time but I had twice broken the Formula 1 lap record in the process of this hectic chase and the crowd was on tenterhooks. At the start of the 25th lap I was 50 yards behind Lionel and at the finish half a car's length. Needless to say I found it one of the most stimulating races of my life.

The following year we upgraded the car to Lotus 22 and I purchased a 1500cc Formula 1 twin-cam Climax from BRM. It was their spare engine and cost me a bomb but this enabled us to upgrade the car to Formula 1. We negotiated an entry for the British Formula 1 Grand Prix, which that year was to be held at Brands. Tragically while practicing at Silverstone a few weeks before the Grand Prix the throttle jammed wide open on Abbey Curve. This gave me a few worrying moments during which I had to de-clutch. Unfortunately the revs shot up, a situation that the Climax engine did not cope with well and the valves got tangled up with the pistons. I did not have the



time (or the cash) to repair it before the Grand Prix and missed out on one of the big opportunities of my life.

I had always treated motor racing as a fun pastime rather than a serious career and was also competing quite seriously on the international yacht racing circuit on alternate week-ends. In 1964 I got married and felt I needed a few more cc's to compensate for my increasing maturity. I bought one of the rare two litre Coventry Climax engines, which had previously powered Tony Marsh's Hill Climb Championship car. It was a beautiful engine and although I was now in the Formula Libre Class I was still able to compete successfully. Over the next few years I limited my racing to occasional national and club events but in 1968 had a few rather exciting moments at Snetterton.

I had missed practice due to my rev counter cable breaking. Fortunately I knew the circuit well and the race officials who I knew well, gave me permission to start in the race, but needless to say put me at the back of the grid. Once again I had to work my way up through the field, only on this

occasion on a less familiar circuit and without any previous practice. I overcooked it on the 'S's' but fortunately a local photographer took pictures. Picture No.4 is taken with the car balanced on my crash helmet. It rolled 6 times between hitting the bank and its final resting place but the initial impact trapped my legs and prevented me from being flung out of the car. I was unconscious as they cut me out but came too soon afterwards but judging by the split in my crash helmet it must have been a near thing!!

Racing cars were much less safe in those days and during the ten years that I was racing more or less seriously about half my friends wrote themselves off either partially or totally. I had had several near misses and it became obvious that even if one was careful which I was not particularly, the law of averages would catch up with you in the end. By then my wife was expecting the first of our three children and I felt it time to take off the racing gloves and put on the sailing gloves.



A spot of bother at Snetterton 1967. Racing cars were much less safe in those days. Half of John's friends 'wrote themselves off' in the time he was racing.

In this crash helmet splitting accident John rolled six times. The initial impact trapping his legs preventing him being flung clear.

