

A green Bentley Speed Six 1930 Le Mans warhorse is shown from a front-quarter perspective, driving on a dirt road that stretches into the distance. The road is flanked by lush green fields and a line of trees in the background under a cloudy sky. The car's dashboard, featuring numerous round gauges, and its large front wheel are visible in the foreground.

GREAT BRITON

Few Bentley team cars have such a formidable pedigree as the legendary 'Old Number 3', says **James Elliott** as he gets to grips with the Speed Six 1930 Le Mans warhorse

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**





From main: you can only get in from the passenger side; interlopers all, bar the Bentley, which looks spot-on at Blenheim; Davis and Dunfee at La Sarthe



Imperious, that's the word. It is the preview day for the Salon Privé concours, which this year takes place at Blenheim Palace. A selection of cars likely to attend has been put on display in the historic venue's magnificent Great Court. This stunning group ranges from Porsche 904 to supercars with tongue-twister names, but one of them stands out above all others... literally. Tall, long and broad-shouldered, this magnificent pre-war machine dwarves the more modern fare and does so also in its demeanour. It towers over them not solely with the lofty arrogance of its physique, but with an innate sense of domineering nobility. The aristocrat Bentley just looks at home at Blenheim.

That is something Jamie Spencer-Churchill can relate to. On inspecting the cars invading his courtyard, the 12th Duke of Marlborough makes a beeline for the Bentley. Clearly an enthusiast, he knows exactly what it is and asks if he could ride in it, returning 20 minutes later, beaming.

He is right to be impressed. Bentley was already the Lord of Le Mans by the time this car was built and the run of domineering results on

the then-rough 10-mile course spoke louder than any jibes about lorries. With Duff coming fifth in the inaugural 1923 race driving a tentatively Bentley-supported 3 Litre, victories followed in 1924 (Clement and Duff, 3 Litre), 1927 (Benjafield/Davis, 3 Litre), 1928 (Barnato/Rubin, 4½) and 1929 (Barnato/Birkin, Speed Six).

But for 1930, WO wanted to ratchet it up yet another level. With the sole intention of dominating the Double Twelve at Brooklands and the 24 Hours at Le Mans, a pair of team Speed Sixes was built to join Old Number One. They had 11ft wheelbases and were fitted with four-seater (as was dictated by the French rules) Vanden Plas coachwork and readied for competition by detuning the brakes for longevity, being fettled to 200bhp and given extra shock absorbers.

Old Number 3 – GF 8511 – made its debut in the Double Twelve in May, where it came second to its sister car in the hands of SCH 'Sammy' Davis and Clive Dunfee. For Le Mans in June it was assigned to the same pairing as the Bentley team plotted furiously to overcome the threat from the supercharged Mercedes-Benz of Rudolf Caracciola and Christian Werner.



From top: Speed Six rides well on massive 6.00 x 21 Michelines; diver's helmet-style lamps on huge fuel tank; Davis battled on with splinters in his eyes after a stone smashed his goggles – note the terrible surface



As expected, Caracciola went off hard in the SS, making Davis' task of relentlessly pushing the German ace to destruction all the more difficult. Despite a stone smashing through his goggles – not only ruining visibility, but also leaving him with agonising splinters in his eyes – Davis heroically stayed out until the planned handover after 20 laps. He must have wondered why he bothered when Dunfee almost immediately planted chassis HM2869 in the Pontlieue sandbank having got it all wrong at the vicious, now long-gone, hairpin. The drivers manfully battled for hours in turn to dig out the stricken Bentley – one report describing Davis' efforts thus: 'By the light of a torch held between his teeth, the driver effectively empties the sea with a coffee spoon.' But it was all to no avail because when the car was finally exposed, the twisted front axle also became evident. Old Number 3's race was run.

It was even more of a shame because the other two team cars came in first and second, with Barnato and Kidston atop the podium, after wearing out the German challenger before mid-race. This one-two from Le Mans' smallest ever grid of just 17 cars, including entrant Hon Dorothy Paget's two non-finisher Blowers, proved to

'DOMINEERING RESULTS ON THE ROUGH COURSE SPOKE LOUDER THAN JIBES ABOUT LORRIES'

be Bentley's last hurrah at La Sarthe. The marque withdrew on a winning note and with more than a hint of triumphalism, not to return until the Speed Eight appeared in 2001.

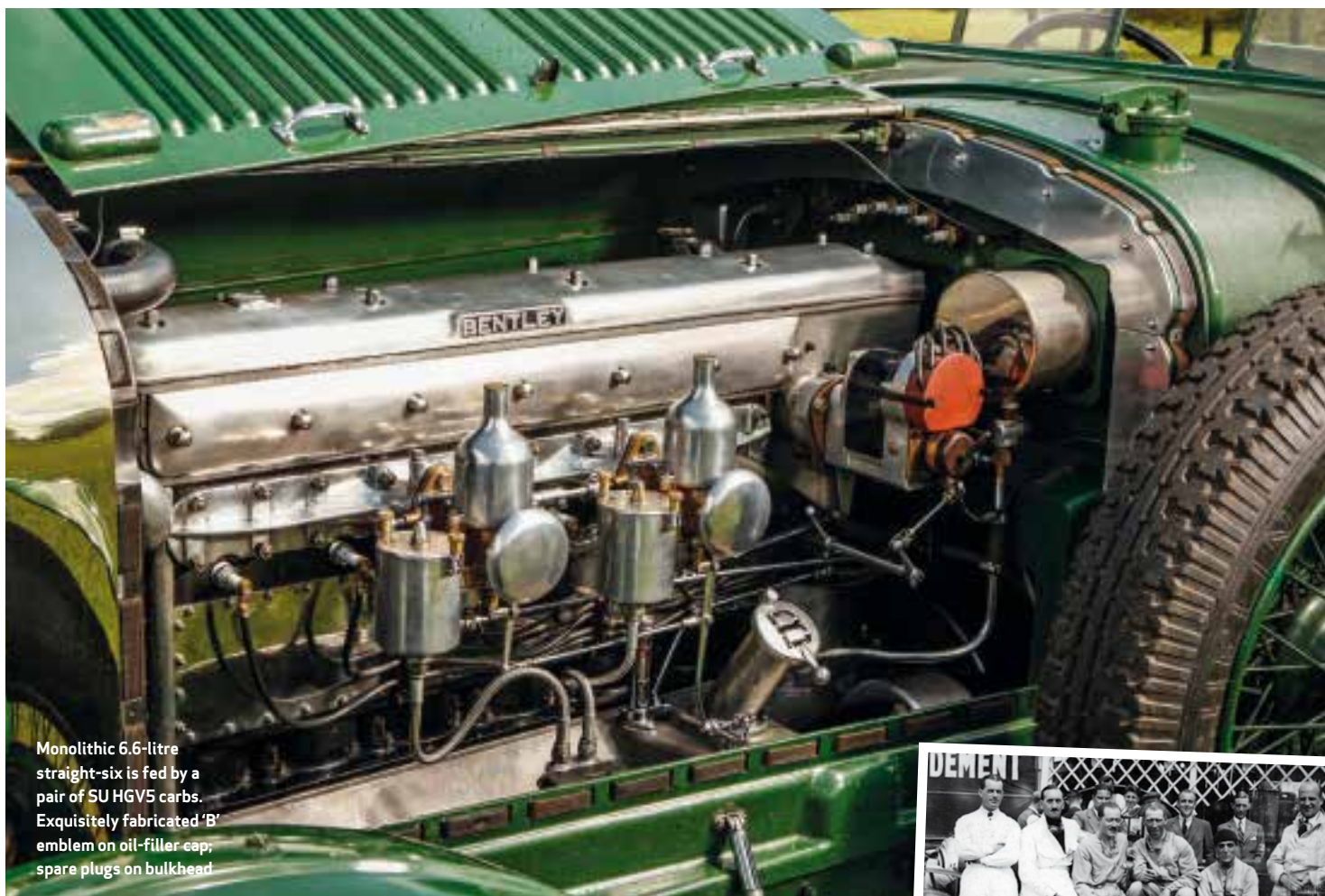
That was not the end for Old Number 3, however, which, with the addition of full weather gear, was driven by Sir Henry 'Tim' Birkin in the 1931 Double Twelve, leading early, but retiring before 11 am and resulting in an engine rebuild.

After that, for a Bentley team car, GF 8511's history is remarkably straightforward. One Jack Barclay invoice even shows it being sold to HJ Thomas of the Bristol Aeroplane Co in October '32, for the princely sum of £750. Thomas modified it to resemble a road car before it was sold to Philip Crowther a year later who charmingly paid '£750... and my Monza Hispano Suiza'.

After a succession of well-documented owners, modifications and even an engine swap, in the mid-'80s Old Number 3 wound up with David Vine who reunited it with its original engine and returned it to its Le Mans guise. Vine sold HM2869 in 1995 and, in 2000, Old Number 3 was bought from Switzerland by collector Peter Neumark (with the help of Lukas Hüni) and has remained in his family ever since.

There have been a couple of changes mechanically, with Graham Moss fettling the gearbox, while the original-fit Bentley & Draper friction-disc dampers are said to transform the handling. Apart from that, it's had plenty of use. Neumark has undertaken many endurance rallies and reliability trials in Old Number 3, but one adventure in particular stands out: "The nicest thing was taking it to the United States in 2009, the Bentley year at Pebble Beach. The whole experience was phenomenal. We shipped it to Seattle and drove the 1200 miles down to California. My sister lives out there and had a problem with her

ADVERTISEMENT



Monolithic 6.6-litre straight-six is fed by a pair of SU HGVS carbs. Exquisitely fabricated 'B' emblem on oil-filler cap; spare plugs on bulkhead

modern, so we just used the Bentley instead. Then we took it to a local car wash, parked it on the lawn and came third in class at the concours.”

The picture is emerging of something rather more usable than its reputation suggests, but that could merely be down to Neumark's familiarity with Old Number 3 after three Flying Scotsman rallies and, naturally, a trip to Le Mans.

Today, the Speed Six has a towering presence, wearing its Le Mans number with pride. Visually there is nothing whatsoever that is delicate about this car, but that is not necessarily a bad thing. It has a brutal lantern-jawed machismo that is enrapturing, a beautiful functionalism that wears WO's purpose on its sleeve. All 'wet' or exposed parts are wrapped or covered, that big fuel tank sits at a comfortable fast-filling height, everything is oversized and understressed in order to not only last 24 hours on rough French roads, but also to do so at an average of 75mph. As long as someone doesn't beach it on their first lap.

Clamber aboard via the passenger door and inside it is more of the same. Settle into the individual bucket and it is actually very comfortable. Once you are ensconced it does not feel like the big car that it appears, and everything is the same mixture of accessible and unbreakable. With a slight hint of menace. The two lamp switches, plus the coil and mag items, look to have come straight off a period living-room wall, and the dials – frisbee sized and black for the main ones – are just those you need to know the important stuff. How fast am I going, how much am I stressing the engine in the process, and is something seriously amiss with the cooling, the charging or the oil pressure? And, of course, is it time for tea?

Davis' racing lines

After an apprenticeship at Daimler, Londoner SCH 'Sammy' Davis (second from right) became a motoring journalist, primarily for The Autocar, and later began a prolific racing career including many Brooklands victories and a win at Le Mans in 1927 with Dr Benjafield in a Bentley 3 Litre.

This is his personal account of driving Old Number 3 at Le Mans in 1930: 'Of all the twenty-four hour races at Le Mans which the Bentley Works team took part that of 1930 entailed the solution of the most difficult strategic problems.

'For one thing, the entry was smaller than before. Which made the "world of racing" consider the team ought to win, always awkward to face. Secondly, there were two Bentley teams, the Works cars being supplemented by three supercharged machines as a semi-private entry. But they were a new type not fully under works control, not sufficiently tested and hampered by a lack of money for the preparation work.

'Obviously the works strategy was to tackle the Mercedes driven by Caracciola and Werner and to hope that the supercharged machines would finish since their real entrant would not want them to be used solely to destroy rivals to the main team. And this was no light task.

'Why Mercedes had entered a single car instead of a team no-one could understand.

'So number 3 was given the task of making the German control think our cars were faster than theirs. It helped, too, that a French friend, acting as "intelligence", had learnt that the Germans did not want their car's supercharger used more than was essential. Well the result was magnificent.



Number 3 was kept right on the Mercedes by using maximum revs down the straight and taking important corners fast so as to seem capable of overtaking the German car whenever necessary.

'We even acted a little, drumming carelessly with the fingers of one hand on the side of the car when Caracciola was seen to be using his mirror. Number 3 seemed to enter into the spirit of the game, handled beautifully, and appeared to have that extra speed. It was racing at its best. When the drivers changed, the situation was fine for us.

'But poor Dunfee went into a big sandbank and number 3 could not be dug out single handed as the rules ordered. Clement promptly brought 4 onto the Mercedes' tail and the battle continued. You could hear its supercharger being used more and more. And on the 83rd lap... there was the white car at the side of the road, its bonnet up, leaving number 4 to win with number 2 second. All this may seem to disregard the subsequent battle with the other rivals, the big, fast Stutzes, the 3-litre Talbots and the rest. But this is the story of one great fight not of the great race.

'Note that our strategy was sound even if the opposition had been underestimated and the team's task was harder than we had thought.

'None of the supercharged Bentleys finished, one dropping out on its first lap in fact.

'That is how things go in racing so that in the end it is tactics which make strategy successful.'

The handbrake sprouts outside the car, the gear-lever comes through the floor to the driver's right, while a block of roughly hewn wood extends from the clutch pedal and the brake pedal is bent crudely around the steering column. It all sounds quite agricultural when put like that, but equally there is a kind of magnificence about it, a portrait of purpose-driven engineering mixed with this car's delectable patina. While we all applaud the ambition and gusto of other manufacturers, trying to make brilliant and complex engineering last 24 hours, almost always in vain, isn't it so much easier and equally admirable to just build the car to get the job done?

And this is it. Pump the fuel, flick the switches, mix the potion on the steering wheel-mounted levers. Push the button, listen to a brief moment of churn, then the twin SUs do their work and the imposing 'six' bursts into life. With its single-overhead cam driven from the crank by rods and eccentric gears, the guttural exhaust note of the 6597cc unit soon smooths, but without ever losing its volume. Slip the Bentley, surprisingly easily, into first and you are propelled forward on an avalanche of torque. That well of power



From top: Davis heroically completed 22 laps, only for Dunfee to bury the car in the sand at the tricky Pontlieue Hairpin; Bentley wears its famous number 3 with pride and feels in its element at Blenheim



From top: the steering is surprisingly light, but it's hard work in tight corners; starting mixture, throttle and ignition timing on hub; handling transformed by remanufactured Bentley & Draper friction dampers



seems to peak as low as 3500rpm, but its enormous tractability will allow you to take it from walking pace to Le Mans speed in top.

It needs some adjustment to take grasp of the Speed Six because, despite the all-action view down the purposeful bonnet and the way that it seems to shrink, you are still sitting a long way off the ground. The empty roads of the estate are perfect for the Bentley – perhaps a little narrow – but otherwise like stepping back in time and ideal for demonstrating the Speed Six's imperviousness to road conditions, the car simply crushing all imperfections and riding high above any obstacles. Aim it down a long, arrow-straight track and gun it, work your way up the 'box and such is the shape of the car and the high driving position that you feel as if you are on a runway executing take-off in a Bristol Bulldog.

So detached is the driver from the road, in fact, that, even with the tops of those tall Michelin 6.00 x 21 tyres reaching way above the Plimsoll line, no feeling can bridge the gap between road and rider, especially with the seat absorbing most of the sensations that do get through.


At the end of the straight you discover first that those huge finned drums need big inputs even with Dewandre assistance, and that while the steering is surprisingly light, direct and easy at pace, given a tight corner, when it loads up, it takes all your reserves of heft to bully it round.

All the stats – semi-elliptic springs all round, apparent mismatch of track and wheelbase (56in vs 140in) and a high centre of gravity – suggest that its handling will be challenging, but Old

'YOU CHANGE DOWN WITH PATIENCE, AND BY ACCEPTING THAT IT'S ON THE CAR'S TERMS'

Number 3 is benign up to surprisingly high speeds. Even then, nothing so dramatic happens that can't be overcome with hard work and faith.

Then there's the notorious gearchange. Actually, it slices up the D-type 'box easily, though it prefers slower more deliberate actions, but just when you start to wonder where it got its reputation, you try to go back down. Several times I had to stop completely and start again from first before I was happy to downshift in public without the embarrassment of bird-scarer-volume crunching. With patience, and the acceptance that you change down on the car's terms rather than your own, it does come, but it isn't easy.

As for speed, of course it is rapid, gathering pace with a relentless, unquenchable thirst until you chicken out. Treat it brutally and it even feels quick off the line, but that must be deceptive. Weighing in at two tons, even with an increased compression ratio of 6.1:1 and being gunned by the Bentley Boys, the more sprightly racers left it at the start at Le Mans. But then, such a race is all about 24 hours, not the first lap, and the purpose-built Speed Six can maintain such extraordinary, flowing momentum that you can picture it shooting past everything else looking as if it was written in italics. Imperiously, even. 

Thanks to Rebecca Prytherch, CMC: www.classic-motor-cars.co.uk; Clare Hay; Blenheim Palace; Salon Privé: www.salonpriveconcours.com

James Elliott

MISFIRE



On pages 6 and 7 of the January 1999 issue of *Classic & Sports Car*, there is a page and a half report on the recent International Classic Motor Show at the NEC in Birmingham. With the headline ‘Record crowds visit C&SC show’, you might be lulled into thinking that little has changed from then until now, but look more closely and you will see a small panel at the bottom left of the page under the headline ‘Club Personality of 1998’. In the picture are Ron and Thelma Smith, a pair of Jensen Owners’ Club stalwarts, struggling to hold aloft a rather impressive (for which read ‘ginormous’) replica Nürburgring clock and with a winner’s cheque for £500 tucked away somewhere or other.

This was the ground zero of the C&SC Club Awards. Hastily conceived and even more rapidly arranged, the awards (sorry, award) were (was) something the editorial team had fought long and hard for when the more budgetarily minded members of the magazine’s pay-masters were rather more sceptical about the need for them. Despite words such as “revenue” and “return” being dropped into our regular arguments about it, we didn’t let up and they were finally persuaded to dip a toe in the water with a single award, presented from a covered milk crate as the show closed, in front of a thronging crowd of at least 10 people (including us) each cradling a beer that we had handed out from the crate shortly before.

This amateurish (though I prefer to think ‘grassroots’) performance doesn’t read like much of an event, I admit, but such was the atmosphere, the feelgood factor and the direct connection with the clubs that we so admire that we knew we were on to a good thing.

One club secretary, who had narrowly missed out on the prize herself, sidled up at the end and said: “You have no idea how much it means that you are recognising us and putting something back. It makes all the difference; you’re proper enthusiasts.”

We could have asked for no more touching accolade and, lo and behold, come the next show we had



‘This event still makes me nervous because this is the most important group for C&SC to doff its cap to’



From top: packed house, 2014; MC Throttle; chuffed first winners Ron and Thelma Smith

no trouble persuading the cheque-signing division to fund a far more lavish production in the NEC’s Salamander Suite. In year two (which we officially called year one due to the step-change in scale), there were 15 trophies and a proper ceremony for which 1998’s microphone man Simon Taylor was roped in to be our professional compère. It’s worth noting that at that time Simon was earning heady amounts of cash for after-dinner speaking, but he refused to take a penny for this because of his respect for the work of the classic car clubs. And, 16 years later, without missing a show, he still never has.

Since 1999 (or 1998 if you want to be pedantic), it has become a fixture on our calendar. Some awards have come and gone, the venue for the ceremony has changed regularly, as has the efficiency with which we have distributed alcohol and done everything else, and as has the sponsor. We are delighted to currently boast Lancaster Insurance’s generous support.

This year, as a slick ceremony that couldn’t be further removed from our 1998 effort got underway, film cameras rolling and flashbulbs popping, palpable tension as 400 club reps nervously awaited the results, a rush of favourite memories from previous years’ events started whirring through my mind. The posh ones and our most ramshackle efforts equally fondly recalled, but that very first year when Ron Smith won still most prominent. We have come so far

in so many ways, yet the soul of the awards is unchanged. I even felt a little swell of pride that I work for a company that is decent enough to cast aside commercial imperatives simply to do the right thing every now and again [*nice pay review groundwork – Ed*].

Oddly, this is still the event I attend that makes me most nervous. Not because the audience is especially hostile (well, not until they haven’t won anything at least), but because to my mind this is the most important group for C&SC to doff its collective cap to. After all, there will always be a classic car industry, but without these tireless and dedicated clubs there might not be a classic car hobby.



FROM PAST TO PRESENT



This summer, a long-lost hillclimb contest is set to return. **James Elliott** raids the archives before looking ahead to Chateau Impney's overdue revival

PHOTOGRAPHY CHATEAU IMPNEY HILL CLIMB CLUB

After a decade of reverberating to the sound of fierce competition, one of the most lauded speed venues in the UK once again fell silent more than 40 years ago. Admittedly, it was less the short, narrow, uneven course that competitors and spectators waxed so lyrically about, and more the stunning scenery with 110 acres of spectacular parkland towered over by a Louis XIII-style manor. After the debut event at Chateau Impney in 1957, *Autosport* was moved to declare it 'easily the most picturesque of this country's sprint and hillclimb venues'.

It became increasingly popular, introduced Formula Junior to its classes and was resurfaced in 1960. During its brief life, it hosted the cream of the British hillclimb scene – though technically it was a 550-yard sprint at that stage – with the likes of Sydney Allard, Patsy Burt, Daniel Richmond, Tony Marsh, Phil Scragg, Alec Poole, John Handley, Ralph Broad and Rivers Fletcher all having a crack at the course.

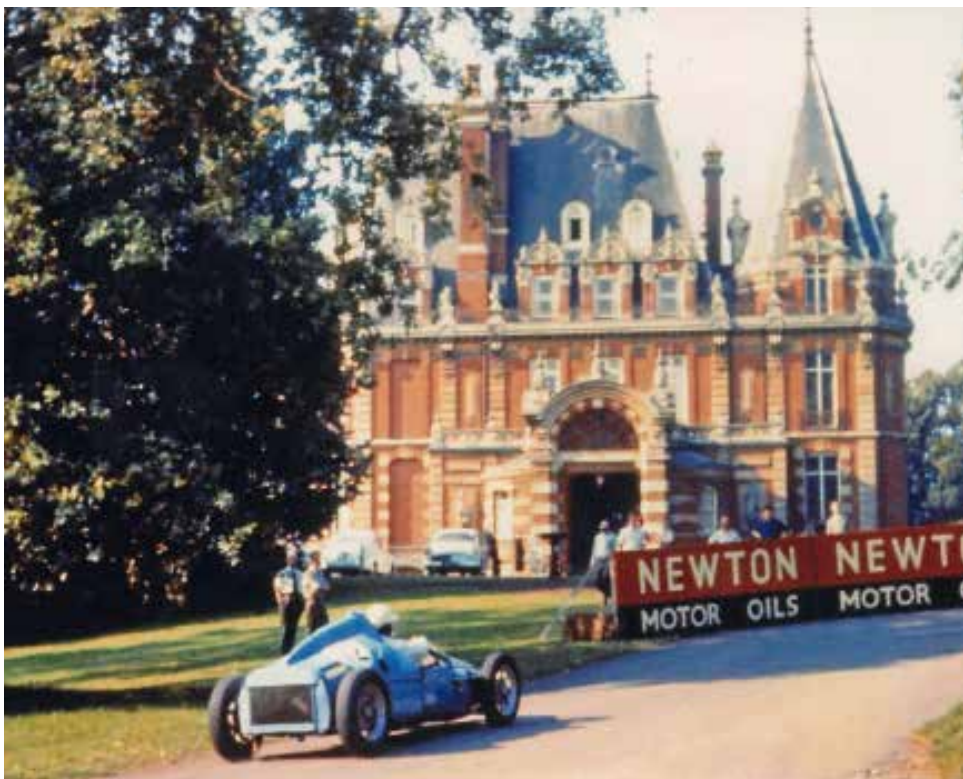
So short was it that in a decade of operation, the best time of just under 25 secs set by Cooper-mounted David Good in 1957 had been lowered to only 22.07 secs (Tony Griffiths, BRM P48) by the time of the final event in 1968.

This was pretty much the same time as the Chateau itself started to spiral into a gradual decline. The hotel's fall from grace was a

world away from the origins of the magnificent building and estate. Sited just outside of Droitwich, it was the brainchild of local industrialist John Corbett, who ordered the construction of a grand chateau in the renaissance style to impress his French-Irish wife. Completed in 1875, it served as a private residence until 1925 when it was sold and turned into a prestigious hotel. During the 1960s, it was even a thriving music venue and hosted festivals in the grounds.

After decades of neglect, the hotel is now having fresh life breathed into it. The new owners – themselves steeped in historic motorsport – are also reviving Chateau Impney as a competition facility, adding to the roster of famous nearby sites such as Loton Park, Prescott and Shelsley Walsh.

The entry list already includes some superb machinery, much of it – such as the HWM-Jaguar, Caesar Special and ERA R4D – having competed at the Chateau in period. It has also proven a magnet for specials, with Spider, Rip Special (a four-wheeled Morgan three-wheeler!) and a host of GNs already signed up. Add to that a wealth of 1950s sports cars such as Jaguar C- and D-type, pre-war racers from eight ERAs to Alfa 8C and Monza, plus an entire class dedicated to aero-engined monsters and it seems to be shaping up very nicely indeed.



Far left: the Bugatti Type 46 of WH Bloomfield on the beaded edge in 1962. Left: Reg Phillips in the famous Fairley Special. Below: JIG Watts in his Berkeley at the second Chateau Impney meeting



But it is not just cars that are making a return. John Moody, president of the Midlands Automobile Club, which runs Shelsley Walsh, is one of many who competed at Chateau Impney and is excited about the prospect of its comeback.

"I competed there a few times in my Mini Cooper," he remembers, "and we used to enjoy ourselves hugely; it was an interesting course and a very relaxed atmosphere. Hillclimbing has got a lot more technical and commercial but it has retained its amateur ethos and remains highly accessible for spectators, who can get close to the cars and talk to the drivers."

"More hillclimb venues have closed in the past 30 years than have opened, so the fact that one is going to open – or re-open – is thoroughly beneficial. A bit of extra variety, a different venue: it will be a load of fun."

Moody is not alone. When the new owners announced their plans to revive the site using a challenging course that is nearly twice the length of the original, the response was phenomenal. Along with the details and pictures that were unearthed by Guy Loveridge – who is writing a book about the event's history to be launched during its 11-12 July revival – the organisers have been flooded with anecdotes and photographs of its previous incarnation.

So, before Chateau Impney roars back into action, here is a selection of images, many being seen for the first time, showing it in its heyday.



Clockwise, from above: MG Dawse waits on the startline in his Formula Two Cooper, 1959; Tim Greer attacks the course in the Attenborough; the Bugatti Owners' Club's AB Griffiths driving his MGA Coupé hard in '58

David Good 1961 BRITISH HILLCLIMB CHAMPION

"Because I don't have a right forearm, I was never allowed a racing licence and the best I could get was a licence to take part in straight-line sprints and then hillclimbs. When I got to the latter I was determined to be top of the class. I'm a fairly competitive person – that may have something to do with the fact that I've only got one arm!"

"I started in about 1955 and within six years had become national champion. I held the inaugural course record at Chateau Impney driving a MKVIII Cooper with a JAP V-twin. It was very short compared with other courses, especially international ones where we were doing 15 miles instead of 500 yards. The bridge also caused a few problems but it was a very picturesque site that was popular with the public."

"My first impression of Chateau Impney re-opening is that it's wonderful. I think it's probably one of the best venues that I know of and the facilities are second to none. With the longer course and the more attractive cars, I think it will be much more popular now with enthusiasts."

Shirley Monro

500 RACER

"My father had a blue AC Ace Bristol that he ran at Chateau Impney. I was about 11 years old when I saw it race there; I was at boarding school not far away so went there on an exeat day and watched him rush around. It clearly rubbed off on me!

"It was such a thrill when the Spollons mentioned that they were going to start it up again. When I mentioned that my father competed there and showed them a photograph, they were amazed.

"I am going to be entered in a Cooper 500 MkIV that was once owned by Stirling Moss. I bought the car in 1990, but I can assure you I didn't know that it was owned by Moss then. To drive a course that my father raced on all those years ago when I was so small, it's going to be thrilling but emotional for me – the memory of it is so sharp. The sad thing is that he's not there to see it, but I'm sure he'll be helping me get round those corners. The whole weekend will be very special!"



Donald Monro competed at Chateau Impney in 1960 aboard his AC Ace Bristol. Being there inspired daughter Shirley into motorsport and she will compete in July



Clockwise, from above: PW Hughes was one of many Cooper campaigners, as was Patsy Burt – shown coming over the tricky bridge in 1959; a Miss I Robinson in her Turner at the second meeting

Tony Griffiths

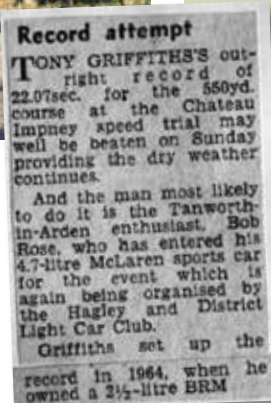
IMPNEY COURSE RECORD HOLDER (22.07 SECS)

"It was great fun to take part at Chateau Impney in the 1950s and '60s. It was a friendly atmosphere and a go-ahead club. I owned a series of sports cars and eventually had the ex-Graham Hill BRM P48 in which I broke the record. It was a short event in terms of distance so therefore it was very competitive. I was fairly young and it was quite a feather in my cap; my name became known in hillclimbing circles because of that win. I was very surprised

actually, because the other competitors were much more professional and better than me.

"It's good to have it back – it complements Shelsley Walsh and Prescott, so you've got three good hillclimbs that are all fairly close to Birmingham. I think it will encourage spectators to come.

"The BRM would be ideally suited to this extended course, but would I enter now? I'm in my late-70s and I think my reaction time has slowed, so no!"





Left: JB Welton's Cooper in 1959. The final corner had a fearsome reputation because if you got it wrong you were engulfed in laurel bushes. Below: Rob Beck launches his Jaguar XK150 in 1960



Warwick Banks

1964 EUROPEAN TOURING CAR CHAMPION

"I think that it was only twice that I competed at Chateau Impney in period – in 1960 in a BMW 328 and the following year in a Lotus Eleven. I can't honestly remember how I did, and I am not sure that the results sheets still exist for those years. I don't think that I excelled on those days, though I did meet a very delectable girlfriend.

"My thoughts on the course back then were that it was short and uninteresting, but the last corner was dominated by a big laurel bush that was ready to catch anyone who made a mistake.

"I went to an excellent dinner celebrating the Chateau's motorsport past in December 2013, which is when it was announced that the event is to be brought back.

"I think that is a good idea and if they can make the course longer it would be better. It's nice to see it revived because I had happy memories of Chateau Impney and still call in there when I am going past.

"As to whether I will come along to the event in July, or even compete there, it's possible, but it is a long way from me now!"

Red tape, money – and determination

Only a few years ago, the prospect of Chateau Impney staging a comeback looked highly unlikely. Languishing in receivership and ripe for restoration, the once-sumptuous hotel seemed to be in terminal decline. In 2012, however, it was bought by the Greyfort group. In turn, that is owned by the Spollon family, which has links to historic motorsport – and especially the VSCC – going back generations via custodianship of everything from ERAs to the Triangle Special.

With Rod Spollon at the helm, the family has ploughed millions into the complex and, because of its credentials, reintroducing competition to the site was inevitable, if no cakewalk. Spollon says: "My grandparents spectated here in the 1950s so we were always aware of its history and keen to bring it back to life. It sounds easy – and I even kidded myself at one stage that we might be able to run something in 2014 – but it is an incredibly complex and costly process."

As well as setting up a team to run the event (headed by clerk of the course John Felix), Spollon needed to secure planning permission, build and resurface the new, extended course, gain MSA approval, form an MSA-approved club (the Chateau Impney Hill Climb Club) and acquire a course licence. And that's just the start. Once the family decided to go the whole hog, all manner of infrastructure changes were required.

"You don't get any special dispensation because the venue held events back in the 1960s, and the whole process was far more arduous and costly than I thought it would be," adds Spollon. "The main consideration

was the new course – while we wanted to celebrate the heritage, we also needed to challenge the drivers. What has made it easier is that the local classic community and businesses have rallied round and there has been enormous positivity from all sides."

With support from neighbouring venues, car clubs, C&SC, H&H Auctions and insurer Footman James, Spollon is now confident that he can deliver a great motoring festival to the Midlands. There will be 200 cars taking to the hill in 19 classes on 11-12 July, plus a classic car auction, more than 100 trade stands, a concours competition, 20 independent food providers, an open paddock, three screens lining the course and free grandstand seating for 2000 people.

As well as the normal entry tickets, which start at £20, there are also VIP packages that include extras such as access to the Chateau. There is a 10% discount on all online sales until 30 June. See www.chateauimpneyhillclimb.com

