



PLUS C'EST BIZARRE, MIEUX C'EST! (THE QUIRKIER, THE BETTER!)

Words and Photographs: Chris Tarling
Event: Vintage Revival Monthéry

Cresting Avenue Georges Boillot, the road that threads its way steeply up from the N20/N104 junction, I am slightly thrown by the brilliant white building that stands to my right, just where I expect to see the backside of the banking. It takes *me* a few moments more to realise that this is the backside of the banking, where the supporting structure has been panelled in to create storage and workshop space. Its height, accentuated by its brightness against the blue sky, is both surprising and quite daunting.





Pictured Here: Gorgeous original 'agent' sign on the Ancetromobile stand. Below: Lots of bicycles in attendance. This streamlined affair is about to head out onto the track. Opposite Top: Part of a fabulous array of vintage motorcycles. Below: The incredible 1919 Leyat Helico, an early form of lightweight and low drag transport.





Pictured Here: Jim Edwards for all the world looking like a 'Wacky Races' escapee aboard his unique 1913 Bramble cyclecar. Fitted with a 500cc 1908 JAP engine, a bamboo chassis and belt drive! Below: Team Jarrott and their 'Olympic Cup'



I am here, at the site of the Autodrome de Linas-Montlhéry, for the seventh running of the Vintage Revival Montlhéry; this year celebrating the centenary of the circuit. It's my first time here, finally fulfilling another one of those 'must go there one day' abstract pledges. It is early on Friday afternoon; the event will not start until tomorrow but I want to sign-on and have an opportunity to wander the paddock and get my bearings. Outside the track entrance is chaotic with gaggles of camera-toting enthusiasts awaiting the arrival of 'les entrants'. Some have even set up camp.

I use the pedestrian tunnel next to the entrants' tunnel at the south-eastern side of the oval. The tunnel passes below the banking so I walk downhill through a cool cathedral of concrete to gain access to the infield; there is a sharp, short rise back up to the paddock level where the event set up is in its later stages. This isn't a large event by any stretch and so the paddock area is quite compact. A collection of white peaked tents denotes the main exhibitor and entrant spaces; alongside these is an area for 'autojumble' stands. Through the afternoon the paddock sees the steady accretion of all manner of vintage vehicles, people, and obscure parts on the traders' trestle tables. Here and there are clubs, and some traders, setting up imaginative dioramas that evoke the vintage era. Despite the fact that many entrants are still to arrive there is already a mind boggling array of motorcycles, bicycles and all manner of automobiles. Some of the engineering solutions and ideas are truly extraordinary, reflecting their origin in the pioneering years of automobile development.

I start to reflect on why Montlhéry is important, and indeed France itself. Why should we care about the circuit and its history? Certainly France led the world in automobile

development (and production) in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. If Germany can be considered the inventor of the motor car then it was the French who, with their natural flair for publicity, exploited the promotional potential of motor racing. If Germany's focus was on engine development, France's focus was on how best to traverse its road network. In the late 19th century France had the best roads in the world; a wide, open road system driven by the size of the country and a legacy of both Napoleon and the Romans. Culturally there was a growing demand for personal mobility, aided by the popularity of bicycles which established a taste for the twin thrills of freedom and speed. For entrepreneurs the excellent road system, which meant that motorised vehicles would not be confined solely to towns, made it possible to make the essential entrepreneurial leap to imagine a market for the early vehicles. France was also enjoying something of a technical and economic resurgence following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870. Seeing themselves very much as trendsetters the French showed enormous appetite for everything new, advanced or extravagant. Inexorably France became the first home of the world's automobile industry, with its epicentre in Paris.

But how to develop knowledge of the product in a sufficient number of potential buyers? Advertising channels in the form of newspapers, journals and billboards abounded. And then how to ensure that your product is the one strongly featured? Forge strong links with the publishers. It was not enough to place advertisements; demonstrations of the capabilities of the vehicles were needed. Races and competitions were the answer! And so automobile racing started in France. The first true 'race', organised by Comte Albert de Dion, was from Paris to Bordeaux, and

back again (1178km!) in 1895.

That same year saw the formation of the Automobile Club de France, created to foster automobile development and regulate future competitions. It was the first such club in the world.

But the intercity road races prove extremely dangerous and the government bans such 'open road' competitions in 1903. Fearing a ban on all road racing, in 1907 the Automobile Club de France begins to explore a permanent race venue in France. A key argument is that without such a facility that can also be used for testing and development the French automobile industry will fall behind the rest of the world. Other countries already have their purpose-built circuits. No practical progress is made before the intervention of the Great War, but no sooner have hostilities ceased than a permanent autodrome again becomes a hot topic.

In 1923 construction begins on the autodrome Miramas, designed by Paul Bablot and situated near Marseille. It is far removed from most of the emerging manufacturers and the largest population centres in France, and struggles to find its audience. This year, 1923, is also the point at which the history of the Autodrome de Linas-Montlhéry begins.

Located roughly 25km south west of Paris in the Île-de-France region, the circuit was the passion project of one Alexandre Lamblin, an inventor, industrialist with a successful business manufacturing aviation radiators, and owner of a newspaper 'L'Aero Sport'. At a meeting with his colleagues at the newspaper in 1923 some discussion of autodromes, and sports in general, takes place. In particular his editor, Raymond Jamin, puts forward interesting ideas and M. Lamblin is sufficiently excited by the

discussion to announce that he is 'going to build an autodrome!'

This was a truly audacious move. On the face of it this seems a curious project for a man who did not hold motorsport truly close to his heart. His vision was to ultimately create a 'Parc National des Sports', leading with the circuit but incorporating cycling, golf, tennis, an athletics training camp and an aerodrome on the site. Perhaps he saw himself as uniquely placed to answer France's call for an autodrome, and the location close to Paris was an inspired choice. Incredibly he committed his entire personal fortune to the project, some three million francs, though the autodrome would swallow roughly ten times that figure before completion.

Raymond Jamin, who has completed formal training as an engineer, is charged with designing the circuit and given one month to complete his task. With the aim of producing the fastest track in the world he designs, in broad terms, an oval consisting of two short 180m straights linking two huge banked concave turns. The steepest part of the banking (a mere 49.5 degrees!) is designed for a 240km/h 'hands off' speed, meaning that at this speed a vehicle will naturally follow the curve without steering input. The top of the banking is almost ten and a half metres higher than its lowest point, which doesn't sound a huge amount, but when you're at the bottom looking up....

Construction began on the plateau St Europe in February 1924 with extensive deforestation works. The site today remains closely bordered by woodland, especially on its northern and western sides, and indeed a large proportion of the oval infield is still woodland. The actual construction work began around 15th March and yet the first lap of the completed track is made by a cyclecar

Pictured Here: 1930 Hotchkiss AM80 returning to the paddock after a plateau 'Ycar' demonstration.



Pictured Here: From the control tower – a view of the collecting area. Centre Left: 1926 Antony La Punaise, driven by Nicolas Geslot. Below Left: Lots of vintage motorcycles to marvel at in the paddock. Bottom Right: Team Jarrott's Olympic Cup gets underway.



in early September. Two and half thousand, almost exclusively foreign, workers have toiled to complete the works in a scant 6 months!

It is one of the first tracks to be fashioned in concrete. A clever form of prefabrication is used for the banked sections which are effectively independent of each other, with expansion joints every 35m. These sections are supported by a network of concrete posts with a 3.5m spacing and a lattice work of concrete beams. Jamin wants the track surface to be the best in existence

To achieve this the whole surface of the track is coated with a cement screed which is then hand worked by trowel, and an early form of bush hammer to put small pits in the surface to aid tyre adhesion. Some 26000 tonnes of materials have been transported to the site to complete the construction.

The track is immediately embraced by those wishing to break or set records. As such it has several advantages: it is the world's fastest track, being lit by electric light it is suitable for round the clock running and it has none of the noise or running restrictions of Brooklands, which force cars to use power sapping silencers and forbids night time running. Alexandre Lamblin enjoys his time in the spotlight, but he knows that the track as it stands is not suitable for a premier event like the French Grand Prix, which he he must attract for the track to flourish. Following discussions with the Automobile Club de France construction starts in January 1925 on a road circuit extension. In July 1925 the French Grand Prix takes place on the newly extended track which has been finished using the new 'cold asphalt' process.

Back in Britain, in October of 1924 The 'Brooklands Gazette' carries a rather alarmist editorial 'The Threat to Brooklands' fearing 'the prestige of Brooklands...is seriously threatened,

if it is not already lost'. 'Our Brooklands to be Ousted by the French One'. The source of this concern? Twofold; firstly that local noise complaints at Brooklands will lead to mandated power-sapping exhaust silencers, and secondly that a senior representative of Montlhéry is actively campaigning amongst the leading British manufactures of sporting and racing cars for them to make full use of the French venue, which has no restrictions. Night time running at Brooklands was banned soon after its opening in 1907. With no British Grand Prix as such Brooklands has enjoyed its status as the premier venue for record setting. Rather than a shot at Montlhéry this article seems intent on stirring up support in Britain to combat the latest threat to Brooklands.

Sadly after this bright start the autodrome's star fades and by January 1928 the track is bankrupt; whilst the premier events at the track have drawn in spectators the lesser races have not and the track has quickly become unprofitable. Given the US stock market crisis of 1929 and its impact around the world there is not the appetite or freedom to invest in the autodrome. The bankruptcy brings Alexandre's involvement with the autodrome to an end and crucially means that the track is now in public ownership. This is actually something of a saving grace as now the interest in it by the major automobile manufacturers for development testing takes off; Citroen quickly establishes a permanent testing presence. With a reputation for stubbornness it would appear the M. Lamblin was something of a hurdle to be overcome in this regard.

Yet the circuit itself is truly a marvel. In its centenary it looks fantastic, and is still complete whilst only a shadow of Brooklands remains. It is very easy to picture what those original race

meetings were like. Sitting on a plateau at a height of roughly 162m the site has a commanding view of the surrounding countryside; it is quite the bucolic view with its abundance of trees. There is also little in the view to root it in the present day. Whilst it has been broadly in continuous use, the war years notwithstanding, 80 years of continuous use as a crucible of records and racing came to a close in 2004 when it hosted its very last race, the 1000km de Paris.

During those 80 years the track was most notable for the speed and distance records that were set on its concrete; I would not like to hazard a guess at just how many records the circuit can lay claim to, set with bicycles, motorcycles and les automobiles. Its star event in its early years was the French Grand Prix, hosted in 1925, 1927, 1931 and 1933-37. (Incidentally the 1931 event lasted 10 hours!) After the war this blue riband event made its home elsewhere. In 1933 Citroen bought the circuit; racing and record setting continued whilst the inventive manufacturer used the facility to develop its road cars. Then in 1946 UTAC took over the management of the site, finally converting this to full ownership in 1973 – and where it remains to this day. UTAC also owns the Millbrook test facility in the UK.

I'm back at the track bright and early on Saturday morning for the first day of the Vintage Revival Montlhéry; it is bright and sunny, and expected to be very warm. As its name suggests the event is a celebration of the golden years of racing and record setting. It would be easy to assume that the audience would be small, specialist, singular. That this is so patently not the case shows how warmly the French and us Brits, not to mention the Dutch, Germans, Belgians et al have embraced its spirit, its very essence. Of course there are groups of male enthusiasts here but there are lots of families of all generations,

from children to grand parents, and couples young and old. Everyone looks so relaxed and happy. Many have made the effort to dress in period clothing but here is not the gloss of, say, a Goodwood. This feels much more heartfelt, more authentic, more passionate, more 'I do this to please myself' rather than 'look at me'. I don't intend this to be unfair; I love Goodwood and marvel at the show it creates, but this is different, less artfully managed. It is much less of a 'show'.

Jean-Frédéric 'Freddie' Frot very kindly spares time to chat with me. He has been involved with the planning and running of the VRM from before the start. 'The original idea comes from Jacques Protherat, who was a stalwart of the vintage car scene in France, and the self-appointed president of the 'Syndicat Cyclecariste'; a club with no rules, no members list and no subscription that Jacques created. All the 'members' had cheap, small cars and its life relied on a strong friendship between them. He also had very good connections with the VSCC in England. He was a very, very quirky guy and either you belonged, you had the right mentality, or you didn't. In 1998 he decided that he had had enough of the vintage movement slowly dying. So he came up with the idea of a meeting at Montlhéry. He took it upon himself to invite as many friends as he could saying 'I've booked the circuit for such a day. I'm making something called the Vintage Montlhéry and if you can, bring your car. We'll go to the track and fool around for a weekend.' Well of course for many of us it appealed. And the ambience was absolutely fantastic. Everybody voluntarily brought the quirkiest car he had. The quirkiest the better! There was a lot of stuff wrong with it but nobody cared. We were together. We were at Montlhéry, probably the most historic track in the world. So he said 'ok we do this another year'. Sadly he was found, after the second or



Pictured Here: A Bugatti receives some pre-demo fettling.



Pictured Opposite: There's a place for young and old. Picture Opposite Below: The view from the top of the control tower. Pictured Here: Les Motos negotiating the final chicane.



Pictured Here: Lee Thomas passing the grandstand in his 1927 Amilcar C6 Sports.
 Centre Left: Some of les motos need a helping hand to get going.
 Bottom Left: Many participants, and spectators, donned fabulous period clothing.
 Bottom Right: Pateau A heading out onto the 'road' section of the track.



third year, to have a neurological disease that meant he could neither speak nor write. Yet he managed to arrange three more events before he died suddenly in 2002. And that was it, the thing died with him.'

'But in 2010 Vincent Chambon thought 'well why can't I do one?' So 2011 was the first Vintage Revival Monthéry. He did exactly like Jacques – 'bring anything you've got and we'll organise you into classes'. Vincent is an exceptional organiser. He's got a fantastic flair for things that are going to be needed and for organising the volunteers. And he also probably does 90% of the work himself! And the event was a great success.'

'So this is the seventh and last (!) one. COVID actually gave us a great opportunity. We had to cancel in 2021 and then we realised that to get back on track we needed to look at 2024, which is the centenary year. How appropriate – let's go for that. So we started two years ago to collect cars. We wanted something that was Monthéry, so the vast majority of the cars that you see here have run at Monthéry. Truly Monthéry cars.'

'I always say going through the tunnel is a time warp. You don't realise it but when you come out on the other side and you hear the cars practicing and passing over your head you've been transported to 1924. And you can feel it. You look at the banking and see an old Alvis, an old Bentley or whatever, and you think if I was colourblind I could be in a Pathé news reel.'

For both the French and British audience there is one car here that is perhaps one of the most famous of all the Monthéry record setters. With incredible support from Longstone Tyres the Brooklands team of Allan Winn and David Morrison have brought John Cobb's Napier-Railton here. Incredibly popular it delights all who see it run and picks up the well-deserved

'car of the show' award. The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when I see it at speed on the banking, its polished aluminium bodywork glinting in the sun, and with nothing but blue sky above the banking.

Allan Winn has been driving the Napier-Railton for 21 years and in that time has racked up more seat time than anyone else, John Cobb included. 'It's really, really special to be able to bring the car here because not only is it the centenary of Monthéry, which we regard as our sister track, but it's also 90 years since Freddie Dixon crashed the car here. We've been showing visitors Sammy Davis' own pictures of the aftermath of the crash. The 11 world records that it set over '33 and '34 are just the icing on the cake. So this is the premium Monthéry car! Lapping here in top gear at 100 mph is amazing. You can sit two thirds of the way up the banking with no steering input at all.'

Over the two days of the event there are 4 planned opportunities to drive the car on track. David Morrison is the first to take the wheel. 'Absolutely amazing. It's fantastic. It's the first time I have driven here and to be out on a proper banked circuit, especially a historic banked circuit like this, it's just amazing. The car feels at home here. Such a comfortable car to drive. Some of the smaller cars complain as it's a bit rough but the Napier just soaked everything up. It's a chance to get into top gear as well, which is really where the car belongs. As it starts getting faster you can feel the whole car change and just settle into what it's doing. It's very forgiving too with no dramas, even when I went into turns a bit too quick.'

'The car has genuine history here. There is an incredible diversity of cars here, and bikes, and some things that are hard to classify. There are some really weird creations here, but weird in a

good way. We've been speaking to people non-stop and the Napier-Railton has been so well received. I've been surprised by how many people have thanked us for bringing the car across, which is fantastic. And here you get to see it run properly, on the banking.'

That the Napier-Railton is here at all is thanks to Dougal Cawley; he of Longstone Tyres. Freddie Frot relates the story. 'Allan is talking to me about how they don't have the funds to be able to bring the Napier. But it's the centenary and he's really annoyed about that. He really wanted to see the car one more time on the banking. All of a sudden, I was absolutely dumbfounded, he says 'you know if we could find the right sponsor I would let him drive the car'. Really Allan?! 'Oh yes.' And you've got the power to convince Brooklands? He says 'you have my word'. So I get to Vincent and Dougal is there and he is saying 'guys, do you need a bit of something for sponsoring?' And Vincent is telling him 'oh, yes, yes, we could do with a bit more money.' And Dougal asks 'what can you offer me?' Of course I said what about driving the Napier? Bing!! I mean it's that kind of look, you know, like it's an event. And that's how lucky we are.'

I'm very interested to know how Dougal's drive in the car has gone on Saturday. It's his very first drive in the car, so how did he feel? 'Intimidated, terrified, all those things. It's very different to Piglet. The main thing is I wanted to bring it back unbroken. I didn't want to be parking a smouldering wreck here after a quarter of an hour driving, after it has survived 90 years. So I wanted to bring it back in one piece, that was my main mindset. Changing gear, changing up gear is lovely – do it just like a big vintage car and just wait for it nicely. Changing down gear is always a bit...you just get a better when you know the car.

So you can read the revs better and slip into gear nicer. Did a few downward gear changes that I'd like to have been a bit less crunchy to be honest, but they were alright. So I coasted around quite a few corners in second. All the out-lap stuff around the back I was very cautious and gentle. And then when I come to the banking, it all comes together at about a thousand revs. Below a thousand revs it's all jerky kangarooing, you know, it's like driving a kangaroo. But then when you get more than a thousand revs, it suddenly comes smooth. When I was there coming out to the banking for the first fast lap, I was like, alright, let's just let it open up a bit, you know. So I gently fed the power in and it increased by 800 revs. Well, that's like another 50, 60 miles an hour and it happened in a split second. And next thing I know, is that I am coming up to the chicane and there's a wedgie Citroen now there, which is staggeringly slow. And the cars that I'd seen that seemed to be going quite quickly, they suddenly got held up by the Citroen coming into the chicane. So there were a pile of them around there in the chicane, and I just thought, well, to go down there would be a brake test. And then to merge in there with that lot's probably unnecessary as well. So I just stayed in the Napier-Railton's natural habitat in the outer circuit. I stayed there and whizzed past the chicane. I was probably going really fast. And you do notice the acceleration, but because it only increases by 800 revs, it doesn't sound dramatically louder, and the engine just gets smoother and nicer. The car handles phenomenally on there. I've been right up there in Piglet where you're bouncing all over the pace, but in this thing it just drives round it. What a fabulous piece of engineering all those years ago, I mean, it makes sense. Superbly engineered to do the job. When it was up there it was fab. You do think if I wanted



to stop in the hurry, it might be a bit tricky. It's only got rear brakes. Front wheel brakes are for sissies aren't they?

'What an ace team from Brooklands though, fantastic. And these guys here, what an epic event! Longstone Tyres sponsor this tent (that the Napier is occupying in the paddock) and also transport of the Napier here. When I came in after driving it, it was like this massive feeling of relief. It was epic but I brought it back in one piece. In Piglet I can get in the outer circuit, you know. But it's quite tricky with two in the car. So what you can do is you can come out of the chicane onto the banking and just aim straight at it, and get up top and come back down. That's the way of getting in the outer circuit. But otherwise, you need to be well over 100 miles an hour, which Piglet will do. But it's not that easy to get that kind of speed up, especially with two people in it.'

If the sleek polished aluminium form of the Napier-Railton sits at the advanced end of the spectrum of the cars here, then Team Jarrott occupies the other end, at the very genesis of motorsport. Taking their name from Charles Jarrott, who was nothing if not a motor racing pioneer, they are the self-styled racing team of the De Dion Bouton Club UK.

In the late 19th century the Count de Dion has been heavily involved in automobile manufacture, initially with large steam vehicles for commercial applications. He works hard to miniaturise these but soon realises that the way forward is an internal combustion engine building on the success of Karl Benz et al. In the early 1890s the company develops a small air cooled single cylinder engine with half a horsepower. This represents a significant technical leap as the engine operates at 1500rpm – a hitherto unheard

of speed, and requiring a totally different type of ignition system than the Daimler engine of the time. He fitted this engine between the rear wheels of a tricycle and offered it to the public late in 1895; it immediately became a huge sales success.

What is perhaps largely forgotten is that motor racing in Britain first develops on cycle tracks with these incredibly popular tricycles, with the very first one in late 1897. Nick Pellett, founder of the De Dion Bouton Club UK explains. 'By 1900 they'd been racing the tricycles all over Britain, something like 100 races. They were the stars of the day. There had been nothing like it in Britain. It was a sensation. So racing in Britain doesn't start with four wheel cars. It actually doesn't start on motorcycles, because motorcycles were very dangerous, very primitive.'

Something I was very surprised to learn from Nick is that motor racing was a part of the second Olympics of the modern era, held in Paris in 1900. France took the opportunity to showcase its technical prowess to an eager world and ran an International Exhibition lasting five months and overlapping the period of the Olympics itself. For the Olympics a race over 1446km from the outskirts of Paris to Limoges took place which included all forms of automobiles. The event was a huge success for de Dion Bouton. Of the 53 starters 22 were tricycles, all of which were either made by De Dion Bouton, or used their engines. The first and third places went to Renaults powered by De Dion Bouton engines, but their tricycles triumphed with 6 out of the 7 class finishers.

'When Paris was awarded the 2024 Olympics I thought, well, we've got to bring this to Paris and teach the French some history. But the Olympic committee didn't want to know, and neither did



Pictured Here: The Napier-Railton heads out onto the track for one of its demonstration runs. Centre Left: Hopefully she's not too young to remember these laps of the circuit. Below Right: The glorious 1907 Fiat F2 6 130HP.





Pictured Here: Now that's pretty cool!



the Automobile Club de France. But I know Freddie and Vincent, and about three or four years ago I came to an agreement that we would do this here (at Montlhéry). So we came up with the concept of the Olympic Cup, which would allow us to demonstrate that history on an oval circuit in front of the stands, so everyone can see it. Plus we also came to an agreement that they can go around the whole of the track. They'll be exhausted by Sunday! They were the only group allowed to use the whole banked oval.

Nick has brought together an incredible collection of machines, some 20 that will take to the track. They all look in very fine fettle and the club is rewarded for its efforts with the 'Best Club' award on Sunday.

There is no racing here; it is a spectacle, not sport. Vehicles head out in classes throughout the weekend to complete their allocated demonstration laps; the programme will go through four complete cycles. In total there are ten 'plateaux' representing various categories of cars with typically 35 vehicles in each. By far the largest plateau is for the 'motos course & sport' with 47 participants. Most of the vehicles are from the 20s and 30s; the oldest are among the Edwardian cars and the tricycles.

With the absence of the tension of competition it feels very relaxed. Quirky nostalgia abounds. A rare opportunity to see automobiles, et les motos et velos, dating from the circuit's heyday circulating on the banking. Wandering around the paddock area in the hot sun is a delight. Long-gone marques at every turn. Berliet, Antony, Piccard-Pictet, George Irat, Bedelia and Phebus to pick a few random names from what is a very long list. Everybody is eager to talk, to tell their story. And access to the machines is, almost, totally unrestricted. The one exception to this is the Audi stand. Glaringly it seems that

Audi didn't get the memo on accessibility, and their vehicles are the only ones to be secured behind barriers, lest the public get too close and sully the shiny machines. It's a shame and totally out of the character of the event.

A very hot and sticky Saturday gives way to a slightly fresher Sunday morning. There is a threat of afternoon thunderstorms today, but the shade provided by the broken cloud is welcome after Saturday's sunshine. I am greeted by the sound of engines and the tangy aroma of Castrol-R. Once again I'm back in 1924.

One of the most popular groupings of cars is Plateau "Ycar" which contains the record breaking machines, such as the Napier-Railton. It's a big group with some 35 entrants. Renault has brought along two of its record breaking cars, both resplendent in French blue. These are the Renault 40CV Records 1926 and the Renault Nervasport Records 1934, and are hugely popular with the French attendees. At the Edwardian end of this plateau is the stunning Fiat 130HP that was driven to victory in the 1907 French Grand Prix; much too early a history for Montlhéry but it's quite a sight out on the banking. Also amongst the Edwardians are perennial crowd pleasers Duncan Pittaway driving (what else?) the Beast of Turin, and Mark Walker in his Darracq 200HP. They have both, in concert with other Edwardians, driven all the way here from the UK, and will make the return trip too. What a sight (and sound!) they must have made!

A press pass is always a privilege, no matter what the event. It's my work but nevertheless I always feel very honoured, very lucky. I recognise that it allows me to experience events in a unique way, one that is denied to the ticket buying public. This is particularly true at Montlhéry as I find I can access a part of the banking away from the public areas. This allows me to stand

at the base of a section of full height banking, though at a safe remove on a concrete apron. It towers above me. From here I can photograph, and experience, the cars going past at speed. It is an incredible sight. Some cars come past on the very outer circuit, feet away from the banking's upper edge. Tilted at an angle of almost 50 degrees and with nothing but sky above them, they hug the concrete. Part of me just wants to stand and stare in wonder, but fortunately I remember why I'm here and look for interesting angles. I particularly like shooting 'wide' so that the scale of the banking is revealed along with the sky. Part of my time at this point coincides with Plateau "Year's time on track. Looking around me there are next to no trappings of modern life and I realise that this is as authentic as it gets. I am as close to the experience of the 1920s and 30s as it is possible to be.

After I've been photographing for a while I look behind me and see an enormous dark storm cloud. It's still a little distance away but looks like the circuit is in its track. There have been ominous, menacing, towering cumulonimbus clouds skirting us all day, but this looks like it might bring a fair bit of rain. I realise that I'm also getting close to an arranged interview time so I walk back towards the pits. This turns out to be a good decision. Whilst we don't actually get more than a few spots of rain the storm cloud brings biblical flashes of lightning and peals of thunder as it grazes the eastern edge of the plateau. I meet up with my interviewee, Freddie Frot, and we retire to the end of the pit lane to talk. Not five minutes into our conversation there is a sound that I have never heard before. It is clearly a lightning strike which seems to have extraordinarily high noise volume but no duration at all. Freddie and I look at each and say, almost as one, 'that's right here'. The control

tower is next to us and we see people quickly coming down off the roof looking very cowed. The tannoy has fallen silent; the electricity supply has failed. Our first thought is that the lightning has struck the control tower but as Freddie's radio crackles into life there is news that it has hit the infield. The site ambulances scramble to attend to three people who have not directly been hit but have been knocked to the ground by the strike. Thankfully they are okay.

But the organisers cannot guarantee the safety of the public at this point and sadly decide that the event must finish early.

What of this being the last one? Freddie Frot is guarded about the future. 'Unfortunately the size of the event has grown, which is what we wanted. It's a success, you know, you can't really fight it. Uh...I mean that we three guys are, you know, retired old farts. The other one has got his own business to run. We haven't got enough time to push one more. There's still things we can do better. So we're going to pass it over to somebody else. The Vintage Revival might survive, you know. But it will be with a lot more help from another company, group, team, association, whatever. We are talking to interested parties. There's a chance that if anything was to go ahead there will be a 2026 version. It's still possible.'

I sincerely hope it does. My regret is that I haven't come to Montlhéry before now. It has a truly unique appeal. It's a very charismatic place and easy to fall under its spell. My hope is that a team with the same passion will take it to their heart and carry it on without diluting its appeal. A bientôt!

For more information visit
<https://www.sceniccartours.com/monthlery-vintage-revival>

