

A Weekend in France for the Over 45s

Final Part: The Race is On! - Alastair Pugh

No one who is competing at Le Mans can approach the circuit, they say, without a certain tingling of the spine. Mine positively rattled. After all, we were homing in on Dreamland. Driving into the Legends Race paddock was to be welcomed by race-organizer Duncan Wiltshire, Ray's son, into a rare and eclectic mixture of 1949-1964 Le Mans cars: C-Types, D-Types, Astons, Ferraris, Maseratis, Lotii, Osca, DB, Monopole, Cooper, Porsche, Jupiter and others, amongst them a number of past Le Mans outright and class winners and past Le Mans drivers. Just about all of the drivers, it was said, were more than 45 years old. Stirling Moss is 72 and David Piper, the eventual outright winner in his Ferrari 250 LM, is 70. Despite the parity of ages I felt just like a small boy on his first day at senior school.



The Legends Race was international, but in keeping with the notion that Le Mans is really a British race in France, about 90% of the drivers were British. A surprising inclusion was David Laing's 1936 2-litre Aston Martin which raced in 1949, looking splendidly vintage amongst all the post-war cars. Three Frazer Nashes

were entered: Ian Nuthall's Sebring, Charles Joice's Le Mans Coupé, to be driven by Stephen Curtis and, parked next to it, our 1951 Le Mans Replica, which had previously been owned by Charles' father. Tragically, he was killed racing the car at Silverstone.

Next morning we slept in until 5am, all except Julia, who every morning insisted on rising 15 minutes earlier (in this case 3.45am UK time) to turn out looking bandbox on every occasion. Our early rising proved to be far too early for the 7.30 departure from the circuit for scrutineering. So we stayed in our modern car and slept. When one of us woke there were just three minutes to go before a long line of cars trailed off behind a police motorcycle escort - which had thoroughly entered into the spirit of the occasion and were driving everywhere flat out - for the journey to the Cathedral Square in the centre of Le Mans. Show-off time. Lots of revs in low gears and as much noise as possible - and it's not only 'Nashmen who are natural hooligans!

Actual scrutineering was a somewhat cursory check on conformity with regulations. We were given our race numbers. I was proud to wear 26, the number worn by the Culpan/Aldington High Speed 'Nash (Chassis 100/008) which was placed third overall at Le Mans in 1949. Sir Stirling made a chauvinistic speech about the iniquities of the Euro and of French scrutineering and the Mayor stood us drinks in the café. Then it was time to return to the circuit. Tony rushed over to say that the modern 328 had screwed up its immobiliser and

Stephen Curtis on camera.

Photo by Gordon England

wouldn't start. All the equipment was in the back, so I grabbed the toolbox, but had by then missed the escort, so in a car numbered up and ready to race, joined the queues of traffic for the circuit. The BMW was towed away and its electronics dismantled. Tony and Julia just made it for practice at 6.30pm.

For me it had been a day of increasing trepidation. From early morning there had been many hours to contemplate driving a borrowed car of unknown performance and handling on a long circuit, which I had never seen, even though after frequent practice I could replicate the circuit diagram sight unseen. By the time we lined up at Maison Blanche my nerves



were thoroughly a-jangle, though it was a comfort to hear Moss's comment that, though he had driven many hundreds of laps at Le Mans, the circuit had changed so much that he was anxious about familiarising himself with it again.

"we had a 'Nash race all of our own"

Time to go. I set off in company with Stephen Curtis in the 'Nash Coupé. He had driven at Le Mans before and I followed him - up through the right-hander, wiggle through the Dunlop Esses, down to the Terre Rouge bends and Terre Rouge corner and on to the Mulsanne straight. The rev. limiter was cutting in at about 5,000 rpm - much too soon. Essential to watch for the 200 and

100 metre marker boards for the two chicanes - the entry isn't too clear. Through Mulsanne - hard braking and second gear. Indianapolis, Arnage, Porsche bends, Nissan Curves, flat out down the short straight to the complex Ford bends before the tight left and right of Maison Blanche. Up the finishing straight, roaring past those imposing tribunes. Hey! I'm enjoying this. The 'Nash is wonderful - handles beautifully. Lifts its offside rear wheel on right-hand corners, but not so much as the 328. For half an hour we had a 'Nash race all of our own with never more than a few yards separating Stephen from me. I thought I had probably got the measure of the Coupé. Need more revs though.

How were we doing? I never even saw Ian Nuthall in the Sebring, who was not in our class, nor the Kieft Bristol, which was. Both cars left us well behind. Also the two 'Nashes trailed behind the highly attractive little Oscar, so at the end of practice I was lying fourth in the class. In half an hour from new boy I had moved up to the fourth form at least!

That gave us Friday for the Pit Straight parade and some fettling time. I started up determined to re-set the electronic limiter to *much* higher revs, but after 30 seconds the engine cut dead. We fiddled about with fuel, plugs, coil and everything else but all seemed in order. When there seemed nothing else to think of and serious apprehension was setting in we disconnected the rev. limiter. The engine re-started at once. That was our second electronic failure of the trip (the third came on Tony's car when we reached home). Instead of a sophisticated electronic rev limiter we reverted to a no-cost strip of red plastic tape stuck on the instrument dial at 5,500 rpm. Very effective!

Saturday, June 16, 2001. The Sarthe Circuit, Le Mans. Race day. Running

Excitement mounts - Alastair 'wears in' his car like a new shoe.

Photo by Gordon England

across the track day. Three weeks earlier in France, Marketta and I had found a quiet country road across which to practice Le Mans starts. Kind, but nothing if not practical, after my ungainly attempts at running, her verdict was clear: "If I were you I should walk". I talked to Peter Chapman. He had no advice except to agree that "if your car is on one side of a circuit and you are on the other and your race is about to start, you won't even remember you can't run!"

"Then we were running ..."

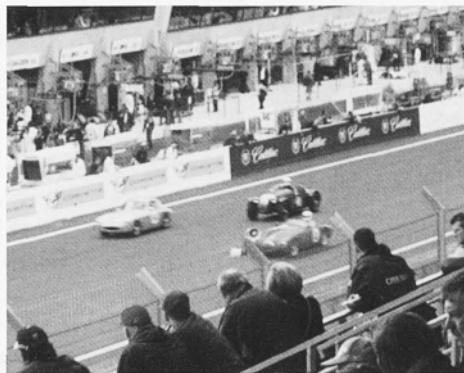
We formed up, 61 of us, in designated locations in the paddock for what seemed like hours while a late practice for the 24-hour race continued. It rained a little. Then we were released through Maison Blanche to line up, in order of practice time, in traditional diagonal formation in front of the pit wall. Somewhere a flag must have been raised and dropped, but it couldn't be seen. Then we were running...

I can't remember crossing the circuit, only being clumsy entering the car. The 'Nash was not the last car away and up the pit straight we went towards the mass of cars ahead, though by now it was as congested as the M25 on a Friday afternoon. But this was just the start of the 8.5-mile warming-up lap and the Le Mans start only a demonstration which, however, ensured the whole entry was thoroughly out of practice-time order. At Maison Blanche the marshals tried to get us into two lines and in race order for a rolling start. There was confusion. It was a mess. The safety car wouldn't wait. The race was on.

A car in the left lane stalled. I was on the right. That gave me a marvellous start, overhauling the Oscar and putting me alongside an AC Bristol. We dived down through Tertre Rouge and entered the first segment of the Mulsanne straight together. The AC and Oscar were

alongside, out-accelerating the 'Nash. Contact breaker flutter was doing what the rev. limiter couldn't and keeping me to 5,500 revs. I caught up again on braking and overtook both cars past Indianapolis, led them up the pit straight but then, desperate to keep ahead, entered the Dunlop Esses too fast. All got horribly out of shape and the 'Nash was across the shelving curbstones and sideways onto the grass, sorting itself out but letting the AC and Oscar through.

For the next lap I just held them, making up distance lost on the straights through the sweeping Porsche and Ford curves, which the 'Nash really seemed to like, and on braking, but it was flat-out stuff and they were edging ahead. Later our private



Battling it out down the start/finish straight.

Photo courtesy of Alastair Pugh

party was disrupted by the faster cars, lights blazing, hammering down towards Mulsanne to lap us with a speed differential of perhaps 40 miles an hour, though the 'Nash was briefly touching 115mph down the Mulsanne straight. Pulling off-line for the faster cars has quite a destabilising effect on a car swinging through the rhythms of Le Mans' successive bends and curves.

Suddenly, there was an unpleasant distraction. The bonnet strap flipped over the aeroscreen and smacked down into the cockpit, pulling open the tonneau and allowing the bonnet to lift against the auxiliary straps. Afterwards I heard the strap had been dangling below the car for

at least a couple of laps. Thankfully it flew into the cockpit before I was called in.

“at the pinnacle of an impossible waking dream”

It started to rain quite heavily at the bottom of the circuit. As we rounded the tight corner at Mulsanne the red and yellow striped oil flags came out. Casualties appeared by the roadside. I started to reflect on the importance of finishing. It was doubtful if I could catch, let alone overtake, the Oscar. The AC Bristol was in another class and I was comfortably ahead of all the other cars in my own class, except the Kieft, which was presumably miles ahead. Then the Oscar spun off! The pressure was eased, but as the race went on the track became increasingly slippery. The straights seemed to get shorter and the corners tighter. Braking required increasing pedal pressure but the 'Nash was happy and on gorgeous song and I was at the pinnacle



Alastair Pugh takes the chequered flag at Le Mans 2001

Photo courtesy of Alastair Pugh

of an impossible waking dream. All of a sudden, improbably soon, it was over. There was the finish line, the tribunes, the spectating crowds and the chequered flag. And then all around the long circuit marshals were waving their flags and everyone was cheering and clapping the Legend cars. It was the Sarthe Circuit at Le Mans. It was the day of the 24-hour race. I had raced a 'Nash at Le Mans and finished. And my eyes were wet at the sheer exquisite joy of it all.