

Meet the committee – Merv the Treasurer

I'll try to keep this shorter than Worth's epic last month! My first interest in motorsport came about watching events on a small black & white TV in the 1960s; car racing & cross-country point to points on MoD land were much more interesting than football, etc. A school summer holiday job provided the wherewithal to purchase a 250cc BSA motorcycle that took me everywhere, including a trip to Bradford in the middle of winter for a university interview. The sandwich part of the proposed electronics course fell through when the firm failed. I thus had a career change before I'd even started one, when I successfully applied for a trainee accountant job at the county council.

Two wheels was still my priority back then (1968) and I would be off to places like Brands Hatch (they had an end of season event run on the short circuit in the opposite direction to normal) or Mallory Park (they ran a big race which all top names rode at, just after the Isle of Man TT races). In those days you could freely wander around the paddock amongst the likes of Mike Hailwood, Giacomo Agostini, Phil Read, Bill Ivy, etc., marvelling at the technology at that time – six-cylinder 250cc Hondas, etc.

Then I read about a long-distance trial in January that would be finishing on the seafront at Weymouth, the Exeter Trial, no less. Spectating at Meerhay I thought, I could do that, no more mileage than some of the runs I do now. I joined the



MCC and entered my first event in January 1970 on the long-suffering road bike.

Exeter Trial 1972

Retirement at Fingle Bridge on Dartmoor was the result, so a trials version of the 250cc BSA was acquired ready for next year. Reliability was never a strong

point, but the occasional trophy was won. I joined the local bike club (which now helps with the bike part of the Hardy and where Margaret Sibley was club secretary), and bought a Bultaco one-day trials bike. These trials were much more difficult, so I went back to the MCC events.

The accountancy training was by way of day release at Southampton, over a period of four years, and a fellow trainee was Ian Morton, who was already a Woolbridge member and had a newish Mini 1275GT. He was entering 12-cars, but needed a navigator (familiar story!) and I thought maybe I could try reading the maps. If I can find my way around MCC events on a bike, it should be OK sitting in a car with a map. That's how I came to join Woolbridge in 1973, we won best novice on our first event, and I'm still navigating nearly 50 years on.

Still into bikes more than cars, the BSA was replaced by a shiny new Honda XL250, the 1000 mile running-in period finished as I rode home from the 1973 Edinburgh Trial. Much improved reliability as one would expect, but not as good handling as the BSA. I did win the bike class with it on the 1974 Exeter, cleaning all the sections & fastest on the tests.

Passing the accountancy exams gave a good pay increase, and I bought an Imp Sport road car, soon pressed into service on WMC trials & autotests. In 1976, we ran our first Wiscombe hillclimb, and again I thought, I could do that ... so I entered my first speed event. Trying to fit in bike and car events became a bit difficult, one year I rode in the Exeter Friday night – Saturday morning, grabbed a



few hours sleep & navigated a night road rally with Ian Saturday night-Sunday morning! I was a lot younger then.

Ian & me in his Mini Cooper, Colonial Rally 1975, run by West Hants & Dorset?

In the late 1970s, the competition car was a 998 Stiletto variant of the Imp

and the road car a Dolomite to trailer it around. The Dolomite was soon traded in for a Cortina Estate as a tow car and the Stiletto swapped for a much modified 998 Imp Special Saloon. I was still entering bike and car events, one Easter I managed to do the Lands' End Trial on the bike and the then traditional Tregrehan & Whitecross events in Cornwall. This was achieved with the help of Harold Sibley, who towed my bike down to Cornwall with his trials Escort, while I towed the Imp down to leave at the B&B. Meeting up in the right places at the right times all done without the help of mobile phones, satnavs, etc.

The Imp served me well and I won the 1982 Sprint Leaders title with it, although it was a close-run thing. The Maguire & other spaceframe Imps were starting to appear, weighing much less than my car. I needed a point or two at the final event which was the straight-line sprint along the seafront at Weston-Super-Mare, but there were enough of these lightweight cars to suggest I would struggle. However, one of them didn't turn up, letting me score the necessary points to take the title.

For 1983, in addition to taking over as club treasurer from Ian Morton, I purchased an ex-circuit Maguire Imp, threw away all the circuit oil-cooling & fire-extinguisher gear, and put in a small radiator and my 998cc engine. The Jack Knight dog-gearbox took some getting used to, but I soon learned to leave mechanical sympathy at home; the more brutal you were, the better the gear-changes. Continuing to fit in multiple events in a weekend, this Easter didn't find me in Cornwall for once because I was at Strathclyde Park near Glasgow on Saturday, Harewood on Sunday and Loton Park on Easter Monday. A drive-shaft broke on the startline on my last run at Loton; lucky it didn't happen on the first run in Scotland, because it was supposed to be an unbreakable VW cv-joint in place of the Imp doughnut, and I didn't have any spares. Thinking that circuit cars didn't do as many standing-starts as a speed event car, I reverted to doughnuts, preferring an easily replaceable weak link in the transmission.

The car had an 850cc engine when I bought it, and for 1984 I had this stretched to 1120cc by Ray Payne at Hartwells in Bournemouth to replace the 998. Unfortunately, I was behind the trend again because cars with BDH engines (1300cc versions of the Ford BDA) were appearing, producing some 40bhp more than the Imps' 130bhp, even when running on methanol. I could still take on these cars on the twistier courses, but at Gurston I tried a bit too hard and rolled the car into the cornfield. Fortunately, it was near the end of the season so I didn't miss too many meetings and spent the winter rebuilding it.

The early events of 1985 were spent sorting the rebuilt car, including for the first time having all the suspension angles and corner weights sorted. That made a huge difference and the car was much better to drive. I was concentrating on sprints this year, and took runner-up spot in the Leaders championship. I was still into bikes though, now running a Honda CX500 V-twin road bike. In 1986, the MCC ran an 85th anniversary event from John O'Groats to Lands' End, and the CX500 was entered in that, completing just over 2000 miles in 5 days. That was pretty much the end of my two-wheel days and progression up the ladder at work meant that time off for long weekends was becoming more difficult.

Entering Doune for example usually meant leaving home Friday afternoon, grabbing some sleep in the car in a layby off the A74, two nights B&B and drive home on Monday.

Moving on to 1990, I had one last go at the hillclimb Leaders championship, but had started navigating in rallies again with Loop Lang in his Lotus Elan. I missed the June Shelsley for a rally but won my class at all the other rounds. Three of us tied on maximum points, and the missed event cost me as I didn't have a count-back score. Still, runner-up was OK for a season when I hadn't really thought about the championship until too late in the season. This was also my last year of serious speed events, because the special saloon class was being deleted and we'd have to run with sports libre. The car was split and sold, the chassis reappearing in Northern Ireland some 20-odd years later. Loop and I were quite successful and several rally trophies from that time are in the cabinet. We had some outright wins, even on a night event like the Ilfracombe Rally when the few historic cars were tagged on to the back of a modern road event.

My involvement with speed events was now limited to the occasional event when Paul Channon needed a hand with the AC Cobra, either going with him or driving one of his demonstrators with the competition wheels. Incidentally, some research by June Irvine, former club secretary, discovered that the Cobra has changed hands a few times since Paul sold it, one of the owners being Christian Horner, boss of the Red Bull F1 team. It is now repainted blue, but hasn't to anyone's knowledge seen active service in motorsport events, sadly becoming more of an investment tool. Nobody got to drive the Cobra, but I did get a drive in Paul's ex-works MGA Twin-cam when he needed a navigator for the Regis Rally. His navigators usually drove to & from the events and did the special tests.



All was going well and we were running well up the top ten, until we got to the final test on Tangmere airfield. I missed a cone & the wrong test penalty dropped us out of the top ten.

Monte Carlo Historique with Clive Edwards, 2000

I'd been navigating in 12-cars and the then fairly new sport of historic rallies, when Clive Edwards asked me if I'd like to navigate for him in some of the European events in his Lancia Fulvia. The first one was six days around the Pyrenees in 1996, then the Tulip rally in 1997 and the first Monte Carlo Historique in January 1998. We did the Monte again in 1999 and 2000 as well, but those events were really taking off and costs spiralling. I was now navigating for Keith Grant in his Volvo Amazon in our 12-cars and various HRCR events, a partnership still going strong now.

Fast forward to 2010 and retirement came round after 42 years with the county council, progressing from trainee to chief accountant. I thought I'd like to do some speed events again, not seriously this time though, so some of the pension lump sum was used to buy the MX5 I still have now after almost eleven years of ownership. In my time, it has completed 34,000 miles and 100 events, a mix of



sprints, hillclimbs, autosolos and even grass autotests.

Sprinting at Lydden, 2013

My other main hobby, curtailed like motorsport for now by the coronavirus, is travelling. Since retiring I've been to all sorts of places from Alaska &

Australia to the Galapagos Islands, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone and New Zealand.

I support a few heritage organisations, from preserved steam railways to the Fleet Air Arm Museum at Yeovilton and the BBMF, anything with engines & wheels (or wings) basically. In my spare time, I've been secretary of the meeting or entry taker for numerous club events, and also taken on the role of finance director of Wiscombe Ltd., the company behind the hillclimb and become a WIMP. The old saying from retired people, that they don't know how they ever found the time to go to work, is very, very true!

So, there I am, the wrong side of 71 years old, still participating and still club treasurer after 38 years!

Merv Brake