



Brooklands was no cream puff of a track; but then, cream puffs didn't race on it.

THE HEROIC JOKE THAT WAS BROOKLAND'S

By Dennis May

Home of the "brute force and damn nonsense" school of racing the Weybridge track may have been called a joke by some — but the men and cars it bred were no laughing matter.

By any dispassionate judgement, Brooklands stank. In *Full Throttle*, the autobiography he published in 1932, a year before his death, Sir Henry (Tim) Birkin wrote: "I think it is without exception the most out of date, inadequate and dangerous track in the world... Meetings at Brooklands can only be considered as a joke, if jokes can be combined with such attendant perils... I say frankly that it could not have existed more than a season in America or on the continent". Birkin was the fastest Brooklands lapper up to the time he was gathered to his forefathers, so he knew what he was talking about.

Yet there were, of course, impressive credit entries in the ledger. Brooklands, opened for racing and record breaking in the summer of 1907, gave Britain the first hard surface motor speedway in the world. When the Indianapolis project got underway its sponsors consulted the Brooklands oracle on construction and layout (though it admittedly doesn't appear that they took whatever advice was tendered). Fastest winning speed in the Brooklands 500 Miles Pace, run annually from 1929 to '36, was more than 4 miles per hour above the contemporary Indy record. Brooklands was the only closed circuit in history where the Land Speed Record was broken. The Thompson and Taylor workshops at Brooklands built the Napier Railton that holds the L.S.R. to this day, and before that had run up the series of *Blue Birds* that scored Malcolm Campbell his last five land records. It was a Clerk of the Course at the English track, the peppery and autocratic Colonel Lindsay Lloyd, who originally formulated the engine displacement gradings that were adopted internationally for class demarcations.

More important still, though, was the role Brooklands played in cradling and weaning great and characterful drivers—men like Edge, Zborowski, Hornstead, Lambert, Eldridge, Campbell, Don, Segrave, Campbell, Thomas, Cobb, Eyston, Mays, Seaman, Dixon, Straight, Bira; yes, and Birkin too, for if this dapper baronet saw the place as nothing better than a sour joke, it was provedly a source of laughs he couldn't leave alone.

The golden age of Brooklands, a track of a scientific merit that was often questioned, is particularly identified with a breed of cars owing little to science and much to what Count Lou Zborowski aptly described as brute force and bloody ignorance. Zborowski, the most flamboyant figure of a picturesque era, could use words like these with impunity because he was himself the master sucker for huge and brutal automobiles. Founder member of his famous herd was of course the original Chitty-Bang-Bang, consisting of a chain driven Mercedes chassis powered by a 24 litre Maybach engine out of a WW1 Gotha bomber. This car, which became known as Chitty I to distinguish it from two lineal descendants, won its fastest Brooklands race with only three wheels revolving. A hundred yards short of the finish line, one back tire had come off the rim, entangling itself with the wheel and locking it solid. Another time, during tryouts late in 1922, the loss of a tire at speed on the Brooklands banking threw Chitty into a spin that continued for quite a way after the

Brooklands from the air. Entire secondary road crossing kidney-shaped grounds and crossing main road at right comprised the Campbell Circuit. The Mountain Circuit consisted of the wide straight and the wide-road section to its right. The tricky Outer Circuit is self-evident, with aircraft plant at bottom left.



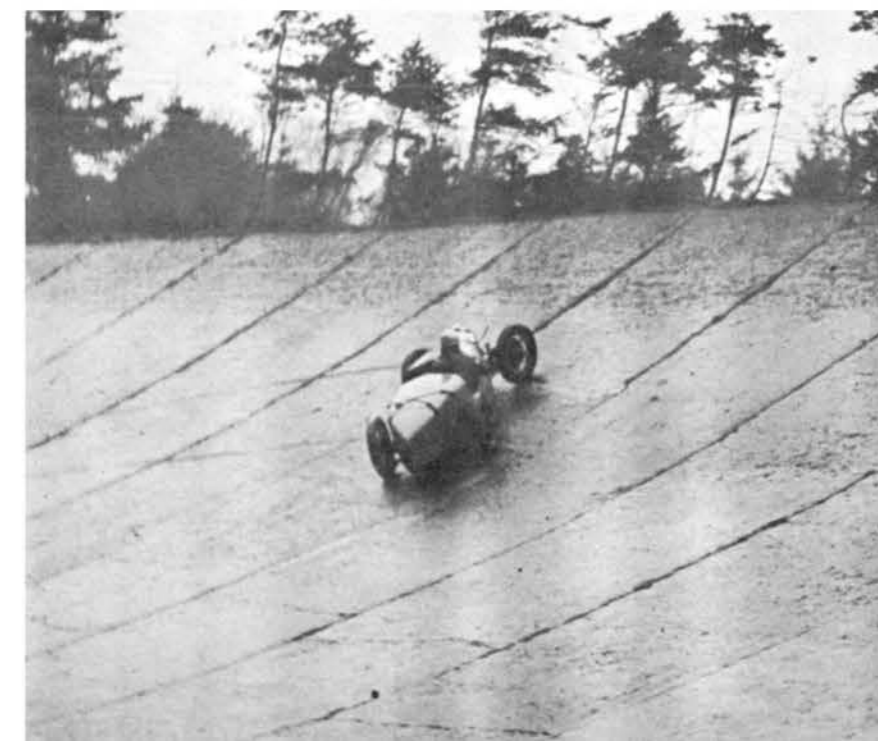
car went clear through a timekeepers' hut at the trackside, hacking two fingers from the hand of an official who had ill-advisedly ducked in there for sanctuary.

With individual cylinder capacities of around 4 litres, and devoid of a starter motor, Chitty was a mean proposition to fire up. Zborowski beat the problem by adapting a junked airplane axle shaft to make a five-foot extension for the starting crank, and he had a team of helpers all heave simultaneously, standing shoulder to shoulder. Once, when he was temporarily short on crank slaves, the Maybach fired back and flipped three fullgrown men several feet into the air.

All three Chitties were dual purpose

cars, used impartially for racing and international touring, and carried full four-passenger bodies. Chitty II had a 19 litre Benz engine and number three a 14.7 litre Mercedes. Fourth and last in the line of Count Lou's ferrous mastodons was the Higham Special, housing the largest engine that ever was raced at Brooklands—a 27.1 litre Liberty V12. Zborowski sold the Higham to Parry Thomas, who christened it Babs. It killed Thomas in 1927 during a Land Speed bid at Pendine, Wales. The count, too, like his father before him, lost his life at the wheel of a racing car, in the 1924 Italian Grand Prix at Monza. He had once raced at Indianapolis, with a Bugatti, but hadn't gone the distance.

Car and driver make an impromptu pirouette on wet bankings of Mountain Circuit, picking up too much speed after leaving the level Finishing Straight.



But it wasn't so much the speed of the Chitties that earned Zborowski his unique place in Brooklands folklore. In fact, compared with other track monsters of an earlier era, they weren't particularly fast. The Zborowski legend was the product of his fantastic personality and the entourage and trappings he affected. At Brooklands and elsewhere in public he was always accompanied by a household brigade of rich young roustabouts and equivalently numerous dames of a shape and beauty that practically stupefied the beholder. The male members, Lou included, wore a distinctive uniform consisting of black shirts and checkered caps of a design that was visible the length of the Finishing Straight. A man of great wealth, Zborowski bought himself a new racing car as unconcernedly, and a good deal more frequently, than most people buy a toothbrush; his stable, in addition to the heavy iron, usually included examples of the latest and fastest G.P. types. He was much addicted to practical jokes and the story is told of an elaborate prank he used to pull on house guests at his place at Higham, in Kent. He would invite them to make a closeup inspection of a beautiful bed of pinks in the garden; then, when they were bent double in appreciative sniffing postures, he'd tread on a switch connected with a buried bomb and blow the whole bed caves high.

Prototype of the giant cars that made Brooklands history was *Mephistopheles*, the 10 litre F.I.A.T. (four cylinders, 190 by 160 millimeters), that Felice Nazzaro brought over from Italy in 1908. With it that year he set a sensational lap record at over 121 miles per hour, a mark that withstood all attacks until 1922. Later, *Mephistopheles* was owned and driven in turn by two English trackmen, Captain John Duff and beefy, taciturn, bespectacled Ernest Eldridge. It was with Duff at the wheel, during a race in 1922, that the back pair of siamesed cylinders erupted from the crank case and tore the hood off the car, momentarily blacking out the driver's



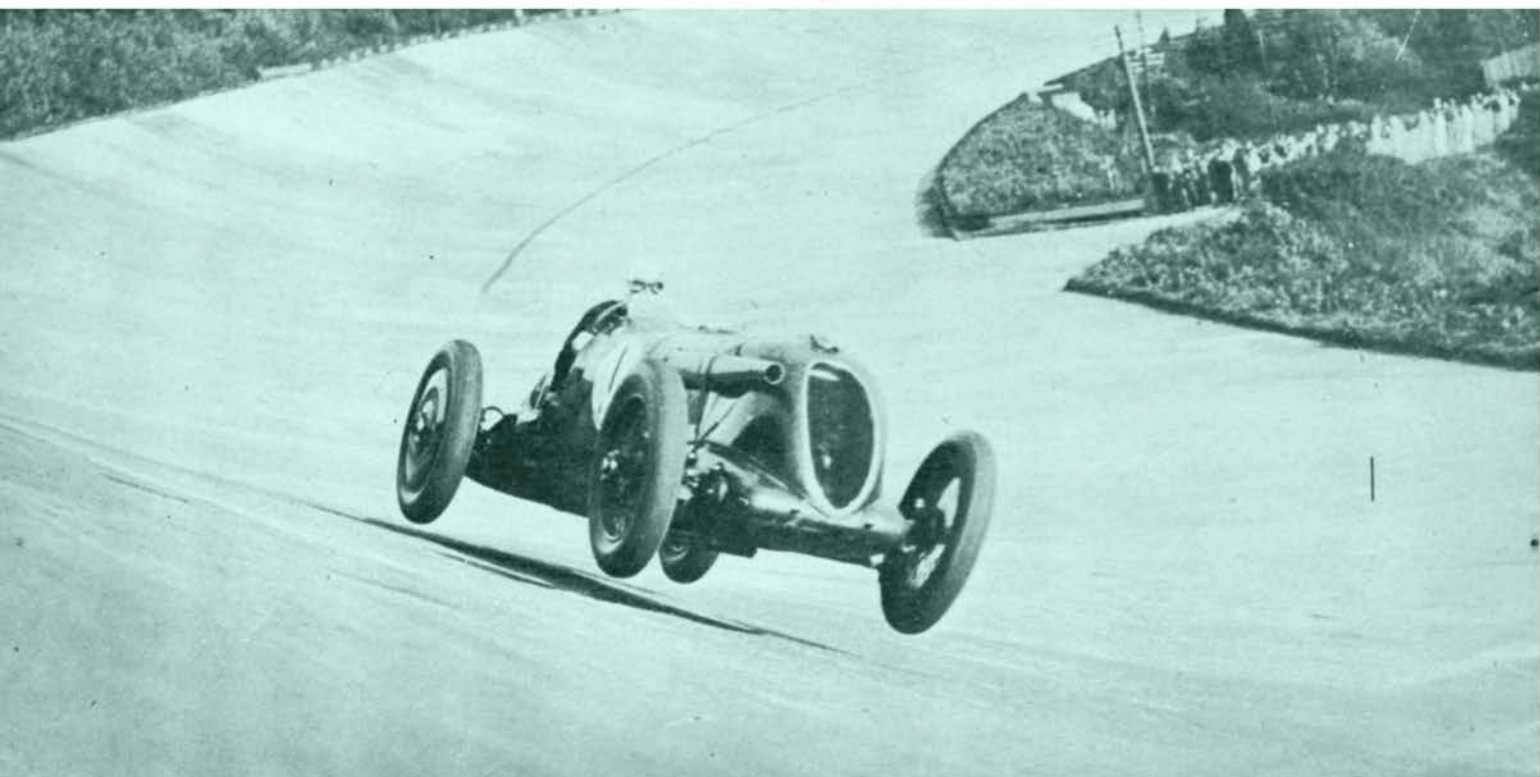
The man and the car that made the fastest lap speed—John Cobb and the Napier Railton: 143.44 mph.

Oliver Bertram, Cobb's chief Outer Circuit lap rival, jumps Barnato Hassan Spl. off the Big Bump.

view of the landscape and the adjacent competition. Eldridge disposed of the effete 10 litre engine and installed a 27 litre aircraft mill; in this modified form *Meph* raised the Brooklands lap record to 124.33 mph and, at Arpajon, France, set up the last L.S.R. ever to be taken on a road, 145.9.

Another of the track's leading muscle men was "Cupid" Hornsted, the Benz tamer. From a Benz of a mere 15 litres, Hornsted graduated in 1913 to a 21½ litre baby of the same make. Porting on this one was so cavernous that it was reputedly possible to stick your hand and forearm up the flues to check whether the exhaust valves were seating properly. Hornsted, incidentally, could testify that Brooklands stank, literally as well as metaphorically. A feature of the track precincts, on the infield neighboring the longer of the two bankings, was a sewage farm. In 1914, during an attempt on the one hour record, "Cupid's" 200 hp Benz threw a tire and went into a *valse triste* at over 100 mph with a locked rear wheel, finally diving off the concrete and into the sewage department. But Hornsted never did ruffle easily. On another occasion, at the finish of a race on his smaller Benz, he had pulled into the Paddock and made no comment on the fact that the branch of a tree was jammed into his hood cowling. There was only one way to pick up such a souvenir and that was by running the outer wheels over the top edge of the banking. Among those who ever did so, few lived to race again.

From the inauguration of Brooklands in 1907 until the early 20s, only one circuit—the full perimeter track—was in use. To distinguish it from the various synthetic road courses that were later operated, this main lap became known as the Outer Circuit. Shaped like a lopsided pear, it measured 2.767 miles around and was a hundred feet wide. The two banked curves, known as the Home and Byfleet Bankings, struck radii of 1000 and 1500 feet respectively and had an average height of 27½



feet; the top lands were too steep to climb on foot without runner's spikes. The Railway Straight, taking its name from the railroad embankment flanking it, was half a mile long and the fastest section of the track; highest speed ever timed over it, going one way, was 151 mph by John Cobb with his single engine Napier Railton in 1935. At the end of the straight, Cobb would be doing over 160. In 1922 and '24, the Railway Straight was the stage—traversed both ways, of course—for the only Land Speed Records ever set on a closed circuit: 129.17 mph by Guinness (Sunbeam) and 129.73 by Parry Thomas (Leyland Thomas).

Worst feature of the Outer Circuit was an ingrowing curve forming the shorter of the two legs between the bankings. This section was not only unbanked but also, on the line the faster machinery had to take, blind for most of its length, due to the protrusion of Vickers' aircraft factory into the bulge. At speeds anywhere above

the main *piste* and crashed, killing his riding mechanic.

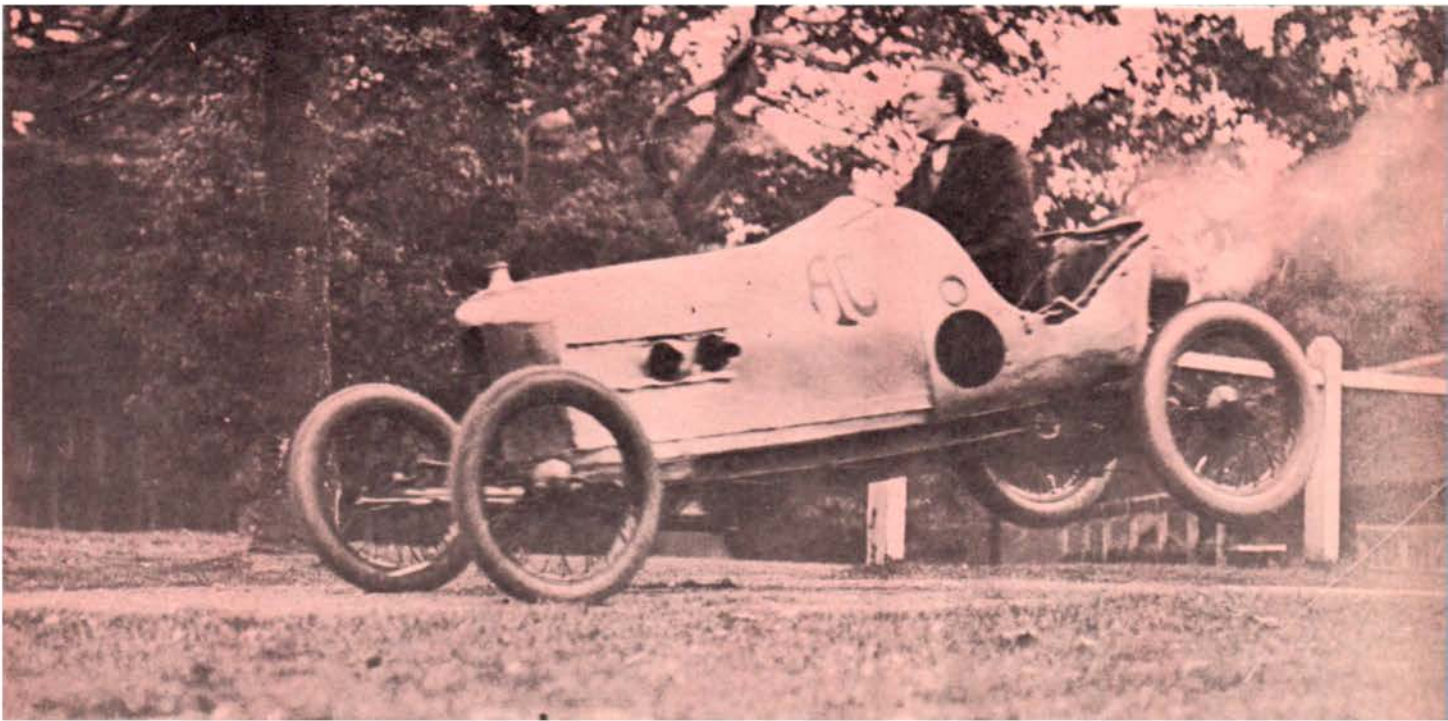
At two points, one on each banking, the track was spanned by bridges. Bert Denly, Captain George Eyston's henchman and co-breaker of innumerable records on MGs and Rileys, claimed to be the only man who'd passed under these bridges on two, three, four and no wheels. As a former motorcycle race star, he had ridden bikes beneath them, both solo and with sidecar, countless times. Eyston's iron, of course, had carried him under the girders as often again. And finally, just to make a record of it, he'd occasionally suffered himself to be flown under them.

The track itself spanned a bridge, too, being stilted on tall ferroconcrete columns where it crossed the River Wey, close to the end of the Home Banking. The high-point of this viaduct formed the antisocial switchback called the Big Bump, where cars weighing over two tons would take off into thin air and leave a seventy-foot

was quite something to see.

Partly because the Brooklands authorities seldom if ever disbursed anything so sordid as starting money, full Grand Prix cars of the stimulating 750 kg. and blown 3 litre types were never seen at the track. An interesting homebrew based on the latter formula did, however, put up a prodigious Outer Circuit performance in 1939. This was the ambitious Multi Union, with a leftover 2.9 Alfa Romeo straight-eight engine built into a chassis of original design, the whole thing clothed in a well faired body reminiscent of contemporary Mercedes practice. During a race, meaning he had other cars on the track to pick his way through, its driver, Chris Staniland, lapped at 142.3 mph, a decimal more than 2 per hour slower than the record standing to Cobb's 3 litre Napier Railton. The M.U., moreover, was only hitting on seven cylinders at the time.

Staniland, chief test pilot for the Fairey aircraft company, was one of the track's



Brooklands Test Hill saw many records broken, as well as many cars, such as this AC of the '20's. The hill was steep, severe, and crested sharply. Take a look at the right front wheel, already in the process of collapsing.

130 mph (last word in the lap record argument was Cobb's 143.44) the bend past Vickers' backdoor was forcedly taken on the limit of adhesion, with tires distorting, chassis warping and the driver working away at the wheel with all his strength.

As can be seen from an aerial photo, the infield was sliced by an internal straight-away that left the perimeter opposite the Vickers plant and rejoined it at right angles near the end of the Home Banking. This stretch, known as the Finishing Straight, was, as the name implies, used for finishes; but the practice was discontinued as cars started to outgrow their brakes. A hint that they'd done so was dropped when a driver, after crossing the finish line, failed to make the sharp turn onto

gap in their wheeltracks. The term "rain date" never had a place in the Brooklands glossaries, and ill-coordinated landings after the big Bump on wet concrete, with the car pointing one way and the front wheels another, were the cause of more than one wreck.

One of the few physical features of Brooklands that today, eighteen years after the demise of the track itself, is still as good as new, is the Test Hill. This, with its maximum gradient of 1 in 4, clambers up the western slope of the eminence known as the Mountain, of which more later. Final record for the hill, timed from a standing start, was only 32.44 mph; but at a terminal velocity of maybe sixty-five the spectacle of a car shooting the summit and zooming a good five feet into the air

more colorful figures. He once had the memorable adventure of falling out of a plane he was testing, and then, before he could get his chute open, falling right back into the open cockpit, a hundred feet lower down. His life ended when a Fairey he was piloting failed to pull out of a full power dive.

Brooklands, sited on the outskirts of the Surrey townlet of Weybridge, about seventeen miles south-west of London, was built at his private expense by Hugh Fortesque Locke-King. This public spirited squireen was an Edwardian motoring enthusiast whose European travels had taken him to such flourishing centers of automobile sport as Brescia. Burned by Italian jeers at Britain's feeble and amateurish efforts to get a toehold in the game, and figuring

that Parliament was never likely to follow continental precedent and allow racing on public highways, he resolved to sink a slice of his considerable fortune in the construction of a concrete speedway. Brooklands, taking its name from the Locke-King mansion, in whose grounds it was laid out, was the result. The job cost around a million dollars, employed 2000 laborers — working, in that pre-bulldozer age, with picks and shovels, horses and carts — and took about seven months to complete. The man who designed it, one Colonel Capel Holden, admitted at the time he knew no way of estimating its lap speed potential. Locke-King himself had the thing so vaguely figured in his mind that on misreading one of the dimensions on Holden's blueprints he contentedly visualised the bankings as being 27½ inches high, instead of 27½ feet. He also had the idea the banks would be convex rather than concave.

Aside from its re-entrant bulge and the Big Bump, Brooklands suffered from the start from a surface that at best was a long way short of perfect, and at worst so rough it would shake the tobacco out of the cigarettes in your pocket. The wavelets were partly inbuilt and they partly resulted from a sustained hammering the concrete took when S. F. Edge, head of the Napier company, was ill-advisedly allowed to prove his cars could average a mile per minute for 24 hours straight, before the surface had finally hardened. From this premature punishment in the spring of 1907, the big slabs never really recovered.

Edge, a man of striking appearance and personality, with black bushy brows, gimlet eyes and a penchant for throwing out challenges and wagers with fine abandon, had none of Holden's inhibitions in predicting the track's safe limit of speed. After his 24 hour marathon he told a magazine interviewer that to drive around Brooklands at 100 miles per hour would be to invite the most terrible disasters. As Nazaro proved the very next year with his 121.77 mph lap record, Edge was no prophet.

If Brooklands stank in the nostrils of some of those who raced and made their names there, that was nothing to the aversion felt for it by its respectable, wealthy and peace loving neighbors. Their hate, originated right back at the construction stage by an encamped cohort of "fightin', drinkin', cussin', chicken-stealin' navvies," persisted in varying degrees of heat throughout the active life of the course. Its upshot was a series of court actions, one of which, secured a ruling forbidding round-the-clock record runs by either cars or motorcycles. The last of these grinds, made in 1922, was a single handed cycle ride by the toughest and most fearless woman who ever circled Brooklands, Gwenda Jansen. Many years later, after her remarriage to another Brooklands celebrity, Douglas Hawkes, she set an all-time womens' lap record at 135.93 mph, driving a 2 litre front-drive Derby Miller. This was one of the few American or half-way American cars to leave an important mark on Brooklands history.

It was in 1924 that another legal fight resulted in silencers of minutely specified measurements and design becoming com-

pulsory at the Weybridge track. These "official receivers", as they were known in the pompous terminology of the antinoise edict, not only robbed sensitive engines of dearly boughten bhp but also promoted unreliability through local overheating in the exhaust valve region. Their introduction coincided closely with the opening of Montlhéry Autodrome, near Paris, where, of course, there was no nonsense about mufflers. Consequently the new ruling started a considerable drift to Montlhéry among serious minded recordmen.

The contrast between Brooklands and Indianapolis, as far as the general pattern of racing activity was concerned, could hardly have been greater. Typical Brooklands meetings, of which about seven per season were staged by the resident Brooklands Automobile Racing Club, comprised eight or ten races, most of them handicaps over distances varying from about 9 to 24 miles. More than half the cars in an average B.A.R.C. roundup were just warmed up roadsters with their fenders and lamps deleted. Probably 90 percent of drivers were purely amateurs, and even stars of the caliber of Cobb, Campbell, Don, Segrave and Mays drew most of their income from sources unconnected with speedwork. Although the handicapping was usually of a high order, and sometimes positively clairvoyant, it has to be admitted that the general run of B.A.R.C. handicap races were by no means a heartstopping spectacle. Located as the track was, within forty minutes train journey of London, or say an hour by road, a belief persisted that the place only needed the touch of a Barnum to transform it into a gigantic moneyspinner. The point was never proved because no Barnum materialised, and the established authorities had about as much idea of showmanship as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Their slogan, "The Right Crowd and No Crowding", was eloquent of their thinking on public relations. If they couldn't claim the place was exactly popular, at least they could sound a note of snob appeal by implying that socially superior persons frequented it. As a matter of fact, for what it was worth, they did, particularly in the role of competitors. Practically every title in the book, most of them recurring, appeared in Brooklands fields at one time or another—counts, viscounts, knights, baronets, barons, earls, dukes, princes. Once, even English royalty put pen to entry blank; the then Duke of York, later to wear the crown as George VI, entered one of his chauffeurs for a motorcycle event in a combined cars and motorcycles meet during 1922. So how much righter could a crowd get?

Locke-King's primary aim in building Brooklands had been to provide Britain's automobile constructors with a forcing ground for technical development. In the track's first phase, from 1907 until the start of WW1, there was an encouraging response to this opportunity, such marques as Napier, Vauxhall, Talbot, Sunbeam and Austin regularly contesting races with factory sponsored cars. Again in the middle '20s the industry made use of the track, both by way of its race and record breaking facilities and for testing and proving, though on a diminishing scale. But between about 1930 and the shutdown in '39,

Austin was almost the only passenger car producer to continue to give Brooklands the warm shoulder. One international Class H record set at Weybridge in 1936 by the twin-ohc Austin Seven stands unbroken to this day. Tragically and ironically, this car's gifted designer, Tom Murray Jamieson, was killed at the trackside in the capacity of a spectator when a Delage and a Darracq tangled and charged off the Finishing Straight during the 1938 International Trophy.

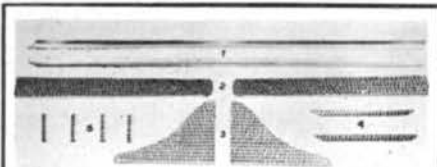
The Brooklands tradition—again pointing a contrast with Indianapolis — owed nothing to any particular classic; or rather, it acquired its tradition piecemeal from a whole slew of races that had little in common and were liable to change their individual characters in mid series. For instance, the 200-Miles Race was routed over the regular Outer Circuit from 1921 until 1924, then switched to a pitch simulating road conditions by the use of *chicanes*, and finally made a one-year stand on the best imitation of a road course ever seen at Brooklands—the Campbell Circuit. In between times, the "200" quit Brooklands altogether and was run at Donington Park, a hundred miles away. Similar discontinuity, though not so extreme, marked the British Racing Drivers' Club's "500", the only British race with any basis for comparison with Indianapolis; this lived its checkered life out on the Outer Circuit, but at the ninth time of running it, in 1937, the B.R.D.C. cut the distance from 500 miles to 500 kilometers, in the vain hope of boosting the race's puny boxoffice pull. It didn't so they ditched the date for good.

The British Grand Prix series, which presently alternates between Silverstone and Aintree, was inaugurated in 1926 on an artificial road circuit at Brooklands; but in the track's tradition of races with a short life but not necessarily a merry one, it folded up after a couple of years, thereafter snoring the decades away, a Rip Van Winkle of the international calendar, until 1948.

To overseas motor sportsmen, who never saw Brooklands and aren't likely to set foot among its ruins, there is ample scope for confusion in the multiplicity of circuits the place gave birth to. This is a tale which, if unfolded in detail, would not only hog much valuable newsprint but also likely compound the confusion. To make a long story short, then, it suffices to say that in addition to the big *piste de vitesse* itself, there were two permanent courses with pretensions to road circuit status. Their claim to this standing rested on the fact that they featured veritable unbanked corners; but, as parts of them were borrowed from the 100-foot-wide Outer Circuit, and both included banked turns as well, their "road" character was hardly more than skin deep.

The first, known as the Mountain Circuit, came into operation in 1930 and was bounded by the Finishing Straight and the short section of the Outer Circuit bracketed between the two ends of this straight. It measured 1.7 miles per lap and took its name, with spurious grandeur, from a grassy hillock that it enclosed. The other established "road" course was the 2.267

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ART CENTER SCHOOL

Brooklands

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mile Campbell Circuit, called after Sir Malcolm in honor of his Land Speed Record exploits and inaugurated in 1937. Its construction entailed the first laying of virgin concrete since the birth of Brooklands thirty years earlier; it was in fact unique insofar as it involved visible additions to the ground plan, notably a meandering section across the infield, rather than just traversing old terrain in a few novel directions. Raymond Mays and his E.R.A.s, in 1½ and 2 litre sizes respectively, hold the Mountain and Campbell Circuit records in perpetuity—84.31 mph for the former, 77.79 for the latter.

Starting as far back as 1925, when the Junior Car Club first enlivened their "200" itinerary with *chicanes*, all manner of composite circuits were used at Brooklands. These figured in the International Trophy, the British Empire Trophy, the Six Hours Race, the Double Twelve for sports cars (English pattern Le Mans, with an overnight layoff to soothe the savage breasts of Weybridge's noise-hating populace), the sports-car Thousand Miles of 1932, and, as already recalled, the two interwar British Grands Prix.

Most Brooklands races of long distance or duration were run on handicap and open to cars of any displacement, from 750's clear to plane-engined monsters like Cobb's 23 litre Napier Railton. This naturally aggravated the inbuilt hazards of the track. It also stung Tim Birkin after his big Bentley had trundled in vain pursuit of Abingdon's triumphant Midgets in the Double Twelve one year, to protest in print against the "scuttling kindergarten" of MGs. Nice phrase.

Although Holden, limited as he was by the shape and contours of the tract of marshy woodland at his disposal, wasn't able to design the main circuit in a way that enabled cars to take a hands-off course onto and off the bankings, the bankings themselves were the product of a calculated interrelation between radius and superelevation. The point is illustrated by an odd adventure that once befell Robin Jackson, a well known Brooklands luminary who played an important technical part in the development of the engine and blower that gave Goldie Gardner his sensational 200 mph with 1100 cc in 1939. As a track driver Jackson graduated on Morgan three-wheelers, and in the course of long distance record breaking one time back in 1929 his trike's steering suddenly failed. This happened on the Home Banking, around behind the knoll masquerading as a Mountain. It was, however, high enough to obscure the banking from anyone watching circuitry from the Paddock on the infield. Finding his Mog's steering

wheel twirling uselessly in his hands, Robin stepped overboard without even taking time to cut the throttle, which, being of the hand lever and cased cable type, wasn't self closing. Down in the Paddock his mechanics and lapscofers had no inkling anything was wrong until the Morgan came into view as usual on emerging from behind the Mountain. At that, only one thing was wrong—the trike, still at its appointed height on the banking, and still maintaining its set speed, was driverless.

It continued this way over the lower lands of the Big Bump and only started running out of kingdom towards the end of the Railway Straight, where it poked a hubcap into the pleats of the corrugated fence bordering the outfield and looped four self-annihilating flips.

Malcolm Campbell, who started racing at Weybridge in 1911 and was still pounding the concrete as late as '36, amassed perhaps the bulkiest Brooklands dossier on record. Makes he drove there included Star, Lorraine Dietrich, Itala, Darracq, Charron, Talbot, Peugeot, Gregoire, Delage, Chrysler, Mors, Austro Daimler, Ballot, Schneider, Mercedes, F.I.A.T., Bugatti, Renault, Sunbeam, MG, and Riley. But in spite of the limelight beamed on him by his many and courageous Land Speed feats, the Right Crowd never came to idolize Campbell as they did Parry Thomas, Tim Birkin and Whitney Straight. His minor successes at the track were innumerable, and, in addition, he won the "200" twice running in a Bugatti, placed second in the first British G.P. (Bug again), and set class records for the Mountain Circuit with a Sunbeam and a big blown Mercedes. In his younger days (pre-Captain, pre-kighthood), he had a reputation for remarkable resourcefulness and skill at a racing car wheel. This flair he demonstrated on a still remembered occasion in 1912; a Darracq he was driving in a Brooklands race—actually the car that had won the 1906 Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island—hit one of the railroad ties bounding the Finishing Straight and shattered both its front wheels. Lurching along on the hubs, it then smashed down sixty feet of iron railings, standing about five feet high. With extraordinary coolness and the strength of athletic youth, Campbell got the Darracq back on the map and crossed the finish line right side up, to place fifth.

In the 30s, when Brooklands passed out of the private possession of the Lockes-Kings, a company styled Brooklands Estates Ltd became its proprietors. Campbell was a director of this venture and his was one of the decisive votes in the 1946 negotiations that finally sounded the knell

of the place as a race track. Amid bitter but vain recriminations from the many speed fans to whom the proverbial stink of Brooklands was sweet aroma, the Estates company sold out to Vickers-Armstrongs Ltd. Amen. Finis.

Last July 6th, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening meeting, over a thousand old-timers foregathered alongside the partly obliterated Railway Straight to sigh and reminisce while Lord Brabazon, who had driven in the track's very first race and flown from its famous airfield in the infancy of aviation, unveiled a simple memorial to Britain's creche of speed sport. Presumably on the grounds that Brooklands still survives as a hub of the nation's aircraft industry, these ceremonies were classified as a Golden Jubilee. But, as m'lord so aptly remarked in his dedicatory address, most of his hearers felt they were there to consecrate a tomb.

Brooklands, with all its faults, fathered two generations of drivers whose like we shall be lucky ever to see again. There was Parry Thomas, the Welsh hermit who made his home inside the track perimeter and outstripped all rivals with seven Outer Circuit lap records in a single season. Debonair De Hane Segrave, who finally killed himself in an attempt on the water speed record and was a three-time breaker of the L.S.R., served his apprenticeship at Brooklands and uniquely won three 200 Miles Races there. Kaye Don, who had the curious distinction of inadvertently bombing his own RAF station in France during WWI, and was later convicted of manslaughter following the death of his riding mechanic in an Isle of Man crash, succeeded Thomas as record lapper on the difficult and dangerous piste. Massive, selfeffacing John Cobb, who was killed, like Segrave, reaching for the water speed crown, ranked as a household name at Brooklands from 1925 until the second world war, writing his own epitaph in numerals with an all-time lap record at 143.44 miles per hour. Whitney Straight, almost the only American of the interwars period who etched his name on the tablets of British racing fame, learned his craft at Weybridge and trampled all competition underfoot around the Mountain Course. Dick Seaman, the first Englishman to win a place on the Mercedes team, corps elite of grand Prix racing, rose from diffident tyrohood to champion's rank to the accompaniment of the Right Crowd's polite handclaps. Little B. Bira, the yellow-skinned blueblood from Bangkok, first dipped his toe in the pool on the Mountain Circuit, afterwards copping a unique hat-trick of Gold Star championships.

Probably Birkin was right, and in America or on the European continent a cock-eyed saucer like Brooklands wouldn't have survived public opinion more than one season. But Locke-King and Capel Holden weren't building a track for damn Yankees or irreverent continentals. The Brooklands they created was as English as Stone Henge, and with the exception of a few itchy iconoclasts like Birkin, rest his soul, Englishmen accepted it in much the same spirit of uncritical detachment they observe towards Stone Henge.

Dennis May.

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