

500 Owners Association Circuit Racing Championship - Round 1
VSCC Meeting, April 14th 2019
Silverstone, Northamptonshire

As has become tradition, the 2019 racing season kicked off at Silverstone under the VSCC's Formula Vintage banner. Despite the fairly late start, the weather was bitterly cold, but at least we had the use of a pit garage.

Nineteen entries were received, another promising start, even if John Greenwood was forced to scratch. And of these an impressive number were debutants or rarely seen racers. Finn Mackintosh was transferring from the hills with the ex-Ashman Cooper Mk XI. Simon Evans was back in the pretty ex-Riley JP, with Andrew Turner on spanner duties, and Malcolm Wishart was another season 2 teturnee with the ex-James Holland Mk VIII – Simon Frost on hand for this car (and most of the rest of the field...). Also of note were Mike Wood's Iota-based CB2, Simon Dedman back with the rapid Waye, Andy Raynor with the Vic Proctor Kieft CK54, while Chris Wilson had upgraded from Mackson to Ian Phillips Cooper Mk IX/X.

Regulars such as Mike Fowler, George Shackleton, Xavier Kingsland and John Chisholm were in their regular mounts. JB Jones had elected to run his Cooper Mk IX, now with bodywork stripped back to bare metal. There's a story to be told here, as it is more weld than original metal.

Two particular welcomes should be extended to Mike Doodeman, making his UK debut with the Larkens, and Richard Kelly and team who had taken on the Whitfill Special. Often seen in the Paddock, but rarely on track, Rudi Ernst had finally passed the temperamental little roadster on to someone who could give it the attention it needs.

Another pleasant sighting was the re-assembled Angle-Iron Special. As scary as it sounds, this Rudge-engined special was constructed for the 500s little brother, the 250 Formula that ran about 1955-1962 as an attempt to get back to the original 500 Club ideal of impecunious racing. The car will be running at Wiscombe Park, and the OA could well offer a home to the handful of other surviving cars, such as the Birsays.

Qualifying:

Xavier had most helpfully arranged a pit lane start for both qualifying and race, saving us the need to motor (or worse, walk) halfway round the circuit to Assembly. This also had the benefit that pretty much every car made it onto the track, even as many proved exceptionally reluctant to fire up properly.

Mike Fowler was quickest to clear the Winter cobwebs and was on it from the start. Although times were generally on the slow side (presumably because of the cold track) Mike was the most committed through Copse, lap after lap, taking pole by a comfortable second. George was more circumspect, particularly after feeling the Norton tightening up a bit. Another second or so back, all running mighty impressively, were John Chisholm in the Arnott, Chris Wilson's Cooper and Simon's Waye. Missing were Xavier and Stuart Wright, both only able to put in a handful of laps.

It was only at the end of the session that it seemed something was amiss. As usual there was a parade of cars parked up or towed back, but as pilots ran through their excuses, they all told variations on the same theme – "it went bang." Post-session stripdowns revealed a sequence of burnt or seized pistons – both JAP and Norton.

Jan Nycz offered the best theory. Although the session was mid-morning, it was still pretty cold, after a very cold night (by racing season standards). The monograde Castrol R would have been very thick in the sump or tank, and some engines may have struggled to fling oil from the crankshaft onto the bottom of the piston. In some cases this would lead to a piston heating up (and expanding) faster than the barrel, especially when combined with a very chilly headwind from Copse to Becketts keeping the barrel unduly cool, and that might have led to the piston pinching, or fully seizing for the

unlucky. There was also talk of some JAP pistons, like their owners, being a bit thin on top. With the same conditions, these were prone to burning.

Although this was not the coldest event ever (some old hands remember snow at Mallory Park), and the theory may not quite be right, there is a lesson for all competitors to learn. Although it was considerably warmer come race time, only Andrew Turner took the precaution of warming the oil on a primus stove before pouring it into the tank of Simon's JP just before lining up. If the temperature is in single figures, this seems to be a wise precaution. This seems to apply as much to Norton Johnnies as it does to the JAP brigade, the latter not having the same flexibility when it comes to warming up their motors.

The upshot was quite a lot of fettling, even by 500 standards. Xavier and David Kingsland set about the Staride, but were unable to make repairs. Chris Wilson's Norton had the same fate, despite Simon Frost's help. Simon then set about changing the JAP in Malcolm's Cooper. Chaz Reynolds' Kieft and Simon Evans' JP also suffered failures, but all sixteen survivors would be ready (just about) for race start.

Funniest story goes to team Kelly. The little car is actually fitted with a kickstart, running under the driver's knees to the Triumph engine. Those who have pushed might presume this is a great advance. but that ignores the fact that, never mind the cold weather, several generations of bikers had learned the hard way that Triumphs don't like kickstarts. After crippling a couple of team mates with "Triumph knee", they soon learnt the first lesson of 500 racing – blag help! They borrowed a roller starter and bullied the engine into firing. Richard at least made it onto track, if not completing his mandatory laps.

Race:

Race start was again to be from pit lane, and after much messing about (your reporter remains convinced it was a conspiracy to wind him up as he tried to organise the cars), most cars were neatly aligned on a Le Mans style grid ready to go. They got away in good order for the formation lap, except for Malcolm's Cooper, which had chosen to refuse to fire up. Credit to Simon Frost again, for refusing to accept that choice, and bullying the motor into some sort of action (credit also to the marshal who, having declared pit exit closed, turned a blind eye as the apple green car stuttered by). Malcolm exited pit lane about twenty second before the pack arrived at the line, the car still stuttering and not sounding like it would make the lap. But everyone was rewarded when she finally cleared her throat and ran strongly to the end.

Mike got the jump from the start, leading into Copse, but George was soon back on his tail and past for a lead that he wouldn't give up. George was much more committed for the first few laps than in practice (it was notable that his times were the same in both sessions, most everyone else were 2-3 seconds slower in the race). He opened the gap by a second or more each time through until easing off at around half distance.

Mike was left in a secure second place, but Stuart Wright finally showed up, passing John Chisholm and Simon Dedman on the opening lap for third, still close enough to Mike for an attack to be likely. But trouble quickly struck. Through the fast Copse corner the car stuttered and almost stopped – clearly some form of fuel starvation, or "leaning off". As fuel returned on the straight, the car picked back up and he set back after the Arnott and Waye, but fourth time through the same thing happened and this time he pulled over just before Becketts to retire, the "leaning off" theory correct with another melted piston.

Behind these three we had more good drives. Finn remained in touching distance of this pair with JB in close contact, then a small gap to Simon Hewes (running very well) and Andy Raynor getting to grips with the Kieft. A ten second gap had opened to Kerry's Trenberth, who was followed by Mike Wood. Mike drove the first couple of laps like a Sunday drive before deciding that Kerry was not disappearing from view and maybe he could have a go at this racing lark. Sure enough he closed in, and made his move on the run towards Brooklands at the end of the Wellington Straight.

His first ever overtake! That went fine, but the excitement got the better of him and he overcooked it into the corner. The car spun, even popping up onto two wheels for a moment, stalled and he was out. But hold onto the positives' Mike, you are now a racing driver!

Kerry wasn't quite so impressed. Faced with the CB2 pointing all ways, he wisely chose a detour off track, but this changed to gravel and the car beached itself.

Mike Doodeman and Richard Kelly were also in close company in the two 'oddball' cars. Unfortunately, before they could settle into a fight, Mike slowed at the yellow flags for Stuart's stationary Cooper, his JAP motor decided that was the end of the race and just stopped. Richard carried on alone until about lap 5, when the car began making the most ungodly noises. It sounded like the undertray was dragging on the floor (it wasn't), along with several other undertrays. Whatever the problem, he ran on to the finish, perhaps tippy-toeing around Becketts too cautiously, gaining his and the car's first chequered flag. He and his team should take pride in that, and we will see how they develop through the season.

So by various means the field had been reduced by a quarter in the course of just a lap and a half. After a final push by Mike the lead pair were settled and six or seven seconds further back John Chisholm seemed to have the better of the Wayne. This was the drive of the race because, while the Arnott never really looks fast, it was really motoring, and holding Mike just in sight on merit. Running cleanly and reliably, this allowed us to see the John Chisholm who is so much faster in his Gemini FJunior.

As John's confidence rose, so Simon could not keep up with the Wayne. But this should also not distract from another fine drive. A relatively cautious JB was coming up behind, overhauling another impressive debutant Finn, but spun off at Becketts at the sixth time of asking. Finn returned to fifth place but was dropping away from the lead four. He couldn't ease up, as he had Simon Hewes and Andy Raynor (recovering from a cautious start) not too far behind. Andy passed Simon on Lap 4, but could not catch Finn's Cooper.

Behind them was now quite a gap, as Simon Evans had lost his two targets – Mike and Kerry. He brought the car home just a lap down and running well, not bad at all for another debutant. It bears repeating that the JP is a very pretty car on-track, and another very welcome addition.

Chaz's Kieft was still not right, but would also make the finish, two laps down. Malcolm Wishart's car, having grudgingly agreed to take part, still sounded uncomfortable. It was making the harsh Gatling gun rattattat-tat that normally means the exhaust has fallen off (it hadn't, and perhaps the timing was off), but it too was surprisingly fleet. He not only made the flag, but was able to catch and pass Chaz for ninth place.

George, though had an easy victory, his sixth in a row. He collected the Jim Russell Trophy, in memory of our recently departed friend. Hopefully we can get some of the fly boys like Steve Jones to give George a proper run for his money. Mike was a happy camper although he too had a fairly quiet race, but John Chisholm was over the moon with his race, and somewhat confused that an Arnott had made the podium. Stuart aside, none of the starters had expensive problems, and all the finishers had good reason to be happy, whether with their performance, the experience gained, or just getting the car home.

Despite the cold (oh to be a week later with the sunniest Easter) this was a super start to the new season. Many new faces appeared, so let's see the old hands back for May. With such a short season this year, you need to get your finger out.

Richard Hodges.