

My great learning experience at Bodiam

Saturday 19 October 1963

We left Longfield in Kent at some ungodly hour in a Ford Thames panel van towing a trailer with a red Lotus 7 perched on it. Our hopes were high as we headed for Bodiam to compete in the annual Bodiam hill climb event.

It was typical October weather, but unusually it wasn't raining; just threatening it! On arrival at the Pits, which from memory (47 years ago), was a large car park of what I think was a pub. There was a hive of activity with race cars of all shapes, sizes and colours, spread across the car park.

Once we had offloaded our cargo, we waited in line for scrutineering where our car was checked over from back to front with only one defect found, "for rectification at some time in the future", (this defect turned out to provide a defining moment).

So up to the start line we went in order to walk the course before attempting a run at it in the race car. The course was much narrower than expected with little room for error. The surface was advertised as being recently resurfaced tarmac, unfortunately the description was optimistic in the extreme because it wasn't tarmac it was loose gravel spread over tar which was also inconsistent over the whole 670 yard run up the hill.

The time had arrived to make the first run so with heart pumping I edged to the start line and on the signal I took off tentatively but purposefully and made it to the top unscathed and posted a time that was in the first 5 best times; so I felt pretty good. I hadn't taken any chances and was particularly careful of the little hump back bridge which could easily assist in getting you airborne thereby ensuring your wheels were not in contact with the road when attempting to negotiate the left hand turn that followed.

The second run began as the first, but with greater mental intensity with the aim of increasing my speed in a couple of places where I had been tentative in the previous run unfortunately the humped back bridge lay in wait and launched me into the flight position from which I continued straight on through a makeshift fence into a field. Oops!

Unperturbed, but with my pride sadly bruised and battered I returned to the pits for repairs. The exhaust was damaged and my friendly unpaid mechanic read a very colourful riot act to me. The damaged exhaust system had a profound detrimental effect on the performance of the car which from then on ran like a dog.

But nineteen years old, lacking fear, I was immortal so I headed to the start line for my last run at the hill. This time I made it over the hump back bridge with wheels firmly on the ground I negotiated the left hander with an air of competence and good speed.

I finally got to the corner named "The Bend" which was a sweeping right hander with steep banks either side. It was at "The Bend" that I totally lost it and rolled the little red Lotus.

I realised something was amiss when the car was upside down and I was trapped under it with the engine still running in the inverted position. I tried to find the ignition key in this disoriented situation, but the engine stopped before I could cut it. I realised my arm had been injured because it no longer followed instructions so I tried to push the car off me using my legs, but to no avail.

This is the part where having realised I hadn't killed myself I thought how lucky I was and there was plenty of help around so all would be well.

The scrutineers had pointed out a defect which now took over the situation with the "unsecured battery" igniting the fuel which was leaking from the petrol tank and I saw this wave of fiery fuel flowing towards me and I had nowhere to go!

I then heard the pitter patter of feet and a half dozen Marshalls arrived with muscle and extinguishers they extracted me and smothered the fire.

Good old St John Ambulance Service then cut my shirt off to expose a crushed arm; it had apparently hit the ground a few milliseconds before a Lotus 7 landed on top of it.





We took off in the ambulance which was dark blue and rang its bell while we headed for East Sussex Infirmary at a relatively lively pace. The hospital examined me and did its best to patch me up and send me on my way.

Important lessons learned; I was definitely not immortal; motor racing is dangerous and in those days it was **very** dangerous. No seat belts, no roll over bar and racetracks that were just as dangerous for spectators as they were for the competitors. It was a great learning experience and I hope that at least one person other than I can remember the events of that day.

Mike Shade

31 March 2010