

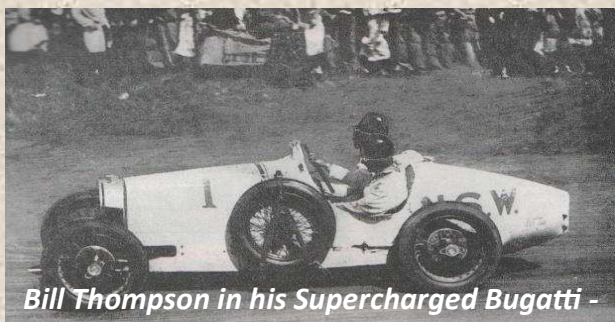
'GROC's Second Trilogy' (In Monthly Episodes) - Part 3

By Geoffrey O'Connell

Continued from July mag - Part 2)

On Sunday the 4th September Peter Whitehead attempted to better the Australian Land Speed record at the 90 Mile Beach at Woodside near Yarram (some 137 miles/220kms east and south of Melbourne). It was recorded that about 6,000 people transported by some 2,000 vehicles attended the event. The effort was thwarted by strong south-easterly winds that halted the usual low water tide and hampered the ability of the ERA to navigate solid sand. The waves tore off the car's mechanisms for cooling the brakes and partially flooded the crankcase with sea water. It is worth noting that Whitehead recorded 118.8 mph in one direction

but to gain the record a contestant must race back in the reverse direction. Thus, a William 'Bill' Bethel Thompson (1906-1945) kept the title he gained in 1934 in his supercharged 37A Bugatti (straight 4, sohc, 1496cc engine) with an average speed of 112.5 mph. Next was a Saturday 1st October race meeting at the Aspendale Park Speedway, Melbourne held by the Light Car Club



Bill Thompson in his Supercharged Bugatti -

of Australia. The gravel surfaced course was 1 mile/1.6km long and was some 18 miles/29kms south-east of Melbourne CBD, close by today's Regents Park. The 10 lap Invitation Race was won by Peter Whitehead in his ERA, during which he established a lap record for the track.

It was reported he won two other events on that day. Five weeks later, in Sydney, on Saturday the 5th November, the Parramatta Grand Prix was scheduled. That was to take place around the 1.1-mile/1.77kms long circuit in Parramatta Park which ran round the Old Government House and Dairy Cottage * overlooking and on the west side of the Parramatta River. The event, organised by NSW Light Car Club and Empire Speedways, was to consist of three off 20 mile/32kms Heats and a 50 mile/80½kms Final Race.

During practice Whitehead allegedly smote a track-edging sandbag wall but more concerning was that another competitor ran his car into a trackside tree, supposedly due to faulty steering. In Practice Whitehead was the fastest competitor. Late on Friday the 4th November, the evening prior to the race, the Commissioner of Police, one William John MacKay, announced he was cancelling the event.

**The Old Government House, constructed between 1799 and 1816, is the oldest surviving public building in Australia. The Dairy, built in 1798, is one of the oldest colonial sites.*

There was an uproar from all and sundry, but the police maintained their position, declaring that the difficult bends of the circuit would be far too dangerous for both competitors and the viewing public. A resubmission by the organisers and no less than the local Mayor for the following weekend with added safety barriers was similarly rejected. So that was the end of that.

Incidentally, it was not until 1952 that a motor racing event was held there again, and the track closed at the end of 1955.

The last of Peter Whitehead's pre-war Australian events was a Land Speed Record attempt at Seven Mile Beach, Gerringong, NSW. That is a coastal area some 137 miles/221kms north-east of Canberra.

On the Friday the 11th November Peter made yet another attempt on the Australian Land Speed Record, which failed because the engine of his ERA R10B incurred a broken piston whilst he was travelling at a 132mph.

For 1939, en route to England, he stopped off at South Africa with his ERA.

There were four ERAs from Great Britain, the others being driven by Earl Howe, Peter Aitken and Roy Hesketh. The 5th South African Voiturette Grand Prix (18 laps of the 11 mile/17 ¾km circuit, totalling 199 miles/320km) was held on Monday the 2nd January 1939, at the then unsealed Prince George Circuit, East London, on the south-east coast. He retired with a broken piston. That was followed by the Grosvenor Voiturette Grand Prix (45 laps of the 4½ miles/7¼ kms circuit totalling 202 miles/325kms) at Cape Town on Saturday the 14th January where he again incurred a broken piston.

Peter returned to England in time to enter the Junior Car Club (JCC) International Trophy meeting (60 laps totalling 202 miles/325km) at Brooklands on the 6th May. Unfortunately, he had to retire after 33 laps with engine problems.

On the 10th May 1939 the Hon. Secretary of the British Motor Racing Fund stated that Mr Humphrey Cook, founder and sponsor of E.R.A. Ltd., had announced that his Works at Bourne, Lincolnshire, was to close on the 26th May after which E.R.A. Ltd. would cease to trade. Towards the end of 1945 Humphrey decided to re-establish E.R.A. Ltd. A workshop was located by a Percy Pugh in his hometown of Dunstable, Bedfordshire.

The address was Half Moon Hill, London Road (which is the A5). Pugh had been Humphrey's racing car mechanic since the 1920s.

There were some further six English race meetings for Peter Whitehead, after which WW2 lasted for six years causing a cessation of motor racing and many other leisure pastimes. During the wartime most sources state that he was an RAF pilot, which I doubt if for no other reason than it has never been suggested he was a pilot.

Moreover, several sources refer to him finishing the war as a Major in the Royal Armoured Corps, serving in Italy and the Middle East. The latter seems to me far more likely.

On the 19th May 1946 Peter Whitehead resumed motor racing – well hill climbing – at the BOC Hill Climb at Prescott driving R10B in which he achieved a second place.

Towards the end of June it was apparent that Peter was going to purchase ERA G.P.1. * (also labelled the E-Type).

The car's first competition event at the hands of Peter was at the Circuit of Turin, Italy on the 1st September. The 58-lap race was of 174 miles/280kms in length. He had to retire on lap 32 with either a gearbox or a supercharger problem.

Take your pick! The last 1946 ERA official appearance was that of Peter Whitehead's R10B in an exhibition of racing cars held in the W M Couper Ltd. showroom at St Albans, Herts, during the Christmas holiday period.

In 1947 Peter raced at such venues as: Jersey; Spa-Francorchamps, Belgium; Rheims and Lyons, France; and Lausanne, Switzerland. Probably the most significant personal event of that year was that prior to the July Grand Prix de la Marne at Rheims, France, Peter Whitehead sold ERA GP1 to Reg Parnell.

On the 27th February 1948, Peter Whitehead was to fly from Croydon Airport ** to Milan via a refuelling stop-over at Lyon-Bron Airport on a Miles M.65 Gemini Mk 1A aircraft. The pilot was Wing Commander W.H. Wetton and the co-pilot Mrs Patricia Beverley. She was very experienced, having flown for the Air Transport Auxiliary during WW2. From Croydon Airport there were three passengers, one of whom was 'our man'. Soon after take-off the aeroplane crashed into some suburban gardens close by Wallington, Surrey. Very sadly Patricia Beverley was killed, whilst the pilot and three passengers were badly injured. The impairment to Peter Whitehead was such that he was unable to motor race that year. That bad! *** The reason Whitehead was flying to Milan was so that he could arrange the purchase of a supercharged Ferrari 125 F1 (V12, sohc on each bank of cylinders, 1497cc engine) directly from Ferrari S.p.A.

**The history of GP1 dates to 1938 when it was announced that a new Grand Prix ERA was to be launched. GP1 was a Works car, the construction of which commenced in that year. It has been reported that the gentleman responsible for the draftsmanship was Peter Berthon and that he was allegedly greatly influenced by the Grand Prix W154 made by Mercedes-Benz. GP1 was fitted with a 1488cc engine for Voiturette events and first saw the light of the racing circuit on 6th May 1939 at the JCC International Trophy event held at Brooklands. It was a non-starter as it was in two successive meetings. The fourth event, held on Sunday the 16th July, was the Albi Grand Prix, France. In Heat 1 the driver Arthur Dobson crashed into some straw bales on or about lap 13 which accident split the fuel tank causing him and the car to retire. GP1 remained in Works ownership until 1946. During WW2 it was stored in a barn in Derbyshire, England, which may well have belonged to Reg Parnell.*

***Croydon Airport was the international airport of Great Britain until post WW2 and was the predecessor to London Heathrow Airport. It was some 11 miles/17.7kms from Central London.*

****I must admit I have had to take somewhat of a 'leap in the dark' in respect of that incident. There is no question that Peter Whitehead was badly injured in an aircraft crash at Croydon Airport in 1948 and that the injuries were such that he could not motor race that year. My interpretation of the detail of the accident is based on an authoritative report of a Croydon Airport crash that year which fitted the meagre accounts available of the event*

That was not to mean that 1948 was an entirely wasted year. Oh no. That year ERA R10B received the benefit of some major modifications which included attention to the rear axle including the fitting of what were described as 'Mays type' torque arms and having telescopic shock absorbers fitted all round.

On the 3rd May Humphrey Cook resigned from the board of directors of E.R.A. Ltd. About September Peter Whitehead and Peter Walker * repurchased GP1 from Reg Parnell and that was despite the racing car shedding a con-rod during an airfield test run!

The delayed Ferrari 125 F1 (#10C) purchase took place in 1949 and Peter Whitehead became the first privateer to buy a F1 Ferrari from Enzo Ferrari. Non and World Championship Formula One races in which Peter competed included the: San Remo GP; Richmond Trophy, Goodwood (the sole race that year in which he competed with R10B, rather than the Ferrari); Jersey Road Race, St Helier; British Grand Prix at Silverstone at which he and co-driver Dudley Folland came eighth; Belgian GP at Spa-Francorchamps where he recorded a fourth; Swiss GP at Bremgarten at which he came ninth; French GP at Reims, which I shall from here on refer to as Rheims, chalking up a 3rd place; Zandvoort GP, Holland; Lausanne GP, Switzerland; Italian GP, Monza where he had to retire on the 9th lap with an engine problem; and the Czechoslovakian GP, Brno held on the 25th September.

The latter was officially titled 'I Velka cena Ceskoslovenska' as you would! Racing 20 laps of the 11 mile/18kms course, Peter Whitehead recorded a win, becoming the first Englishman since THE Dick Seaman to win a major international motor race outside of Great Britain.

For 1950 Peter's chosen racing car was the Ferrari 125 F1, that is apart from that year's 24 hours of Le Mans at which his selected vehicle was a Jaguar XK120S (straight 6, dohc, 3,441cc engine), where the suffix 'S' indicates that the car is fitted with special equipment including a C Type cylinder head.

That year's venues included the: Richmond Cup, Goodwood on the 10th April; San Remo GP; Monaco GP at which he DNS; and the 24 hours of Le Mans, Circuit de la Sarthe, France. At the latter he and co-driver John Marshall came 15th driving a left-hand drive, fixed head coupe, Jaguar XK120S. That go-faster machine was probably chassis number 679001.

**I am not sure if Peter Walker contributed to the repurchase price*



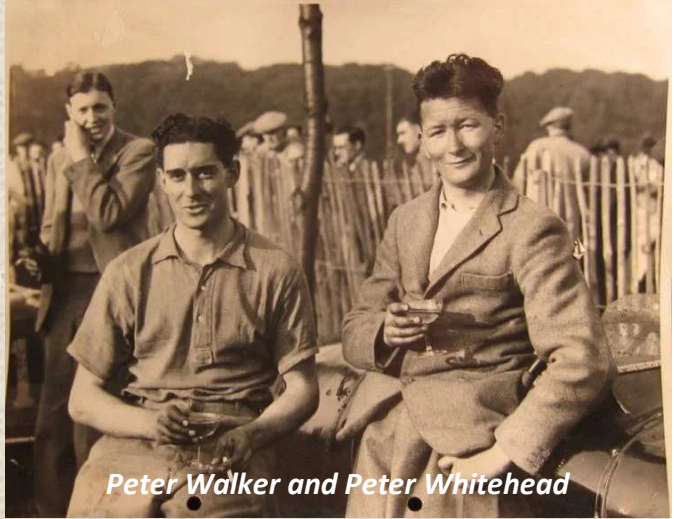
Dick Seaman with Alfa Romeo Tipo C-8C-35

After Le Mans, competition included the: French GP, Rheims-Gueux on the 2nd July where Peter recorded a 3rd place, the winner being a certain Juan Fangio; Jersey Road Race; Dutch GP, Zandvoort; Ulster Trophy Race; BRDC International Trophy, Silverstone; Italian GP, Monza, on the 3rd September where he managed a 7th place; Tourist Trophy, Dundrod, County Antrim, where he recorded a second place driving a Jaguar XK120; and the Goodwood International Formula Libre Handicap 2 at which he gained a 3rd place driving R10B. At the end of 1950 he sold F125 F1 (#10C) and

purchased another new, long wheelbase F125 F1 (#0114) – *'plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose'*!

It is worth mentioning that 1951 was the year in which Peter's some 8 years younger half-brother Alfred Graham * commenced motor car racing, driving ERA R10B. I believe that was on the 26th March in the Chichester Cup, Goodwood, where he came sixth. That year's competition events for Peter included the: San Remo GP; Bordeaux GP; Swiss GP, Bern, on the 27th May at which he retired

after 36 laps; and the Ulster Trophy, Dundrod Circuit, Dundrod, Lisburn. That year's 24 hours of Le Mans took place on the 23rd/24th June and on that epic occasion Peter Whitehead and Peter Walker won the event driving a Jaguar XK-120C. On the 1st July it was the: French GP at Rheims where he had to retire on lap 1 with an engine fault; British GP, Silverstone, 14th July, in which he came 9th in a Ferrari Type 375



Peter Walker and Peter Whitehead



Peter Whitehead

(V12, sohc per bank, 4494cc engine) for G. A. Vandervell, the car run by Tony Vandervell; Pescara GP, Italy; Bari GP, Italy; Italian GP, Monza, 16th September, where he retired on lap 1 with engine problems;

**Alfred Graham Whitehead was Peter's half-brother as Peter's mother married the brother of Peter's father after the latter's demise. Puzzled? Read that sentence again – very slowly and then perhaps partake of a glass or three of wine.*

and the Bristol MC & LCC Meeting at Castle Coombe, 16th October, driving R10B where he was 3rd in the 1500cc Racing Car Race and 2nd in the Formula Libre event.

Apart from motor racing, the year 1952 was distinguished by two events. That year Peter Whitehead purchased an Alta F2 (straight 4, 1970cc engine) which led to the employment of a spanner-man, one Alf Francis (1918-1983). He was born in the then Free City of Danzig, which had affiliations to Poland, and was named Alphons (Alfons) Frantisek Kowaleski (Kowalewski). Reportedly he was the son of a Garage proprietor. At the outbreak of WW2, he may have fled to Portugal and then by sea to Liverpool, England.

On the other hand it may be that after the destruction of Warsaw he fled to France from which, once overrun by the Germans, he was evacuated to Great Britain. He joined the Polish 1st Armoured Division which served in the battle of Normandy in August 1944 and then on via the English Channel coast to Germany. Post WW2 he became a British national and changed his name to Alf Francis. In 1948 he became a racing car mechanic with HWM (Hersham and Walton Motors). Some years later he received a letter from Geoffrey Taylor of Alta Cars suggesting Alf might like to join Peter Whitehead to look after his newly purchased Alta F2 (F2/5). Alf followed up the suggestion and was interviewed by Peter in the bar of The White Hart, just across the Lower Road from Motorwork Ltd., Chalfont St Peter.

Alf considered Peter Whitehead *'as one of the gentlemen in motor racing as well as a first-rate driver'*. He joined Whitehead in January 1952. At the end of that year Alf left him to join Ray Martin Motors at Mitcham, a decision Peter Whitehead accepted with good grace - as he would. Alf Francis's fame in the motor racing world was mainly due to his becoming the mechanic to a certain Stirling Moss followed by being the chief mechanic at the Rob Walker Racing Team.



Stirling Moss in the C Type

That year Peter Whitehead competed in the: Syracuse GP, Scilly, Italy; Valentino GP, Valentino Park, Turin, Italy; Richmond Trophy, Goodwood; Ibsley GP, Ringwood, England; BRDC International Trophy, Silverstone; and the Albigeois GP, Albi, France. The 24 hours of Le Mans was held on the 14th/15th June at which Peter Whitehead and co-driver Ian Stewart had to retire their Jaguar C-Type (straight 6, dohc, 3442cc engine) with a head gasket fault after 2 hours.

Grumpy Geoffrey

Continued as part 4 in September Magazine