

Analysing and reflecting upon Mike Hawthorn's tragic fatal accident in the factory Mk1 3.4l, on 22nd January 1959

By Andy Bryant

There is no doubt Mike was a very accomplished driver of saloon cars, sports cars-sport-racing cars like the D-Type and Formula 1 cars— like the Ferrari he won the world championship in, in 1958, beating Sir Stirling Moss by one point.

He was on the Guildford by-pass that day—the A3, travelling to meet Duncan Hamilton. Ahead, he saw Rob Walker's Mercedes 300SL—(The gull wing model), and he drove hard and fast to beat Rob, the driver, and of course, to allow Jaguar to beat Mercedes.

Rob was an eye witness to what followed.

At high speed, Mike's car shot past the Mercedes, but did not slow down for the next corner. Rob could hear the Jaguar's engine roaring, before the back suddenly lost grip, and the Mk 1 3.4l slid, out of control across the road, hitting an oncoming truck.

Bouncing off this, it shot back across the correct lane, and hit a tree, at very high speed, on the left hand sill and door. Mike was killed instantly.

Wide, and hopefully wise consultation on this fatal accident has revealed the following considerations:

1. **Tyres:** Jaguar had fitted the car with some experimental Dunlop "Duraband" tyres, which were known to lose grip suddenly.
This may have caught Mike out.
2. **Throttle linkage:** Prior to the accident, "The Motor" magazine sampled the Mk 1 and found the accelerator, throttle linkage "sticky".
3. **Power:** Mike's car was highly modified - with a triple carb manifold fitted by his garage, the "Tourist Trophy" business in Farnham, and some 225 BHP.
This modification may have created a "sticky" linkage to the accelerator.
4. **Speed:** Mike would no doubt have used all the acceleration, and speed in perhaps third, top and O/D gears to pass the very quick Walker Mercedes.
5. **Narrow rear track and inherent forward weight balance of the Mk 1:**

It is thought that Mike's Mk 1 had wider wire wheel rims—to compensate—but nothing could offset the very nose heavy weight bias of the Mk1 and Mk 2 models.

Under hard racing or breaking, these cars were known to be "skittish" and could very easily when under abrupt heavy breaking, lose rear end adhesion, and execute an embarrassing 360°, in seconds.

No matter how good a driver was, you became a mere passenger - and observer.

I know this from experience.

Peter Blank and I raced Mk1 2.4 and 3.4 modified Jaguars for many years, always aware of their many limitations.

Peter and I both agree - on this day, Hawthorn was going too fast, just too fast for the conditions.

References and sources of information:

- A - Biography on Mike Hawthorn - Chris Nixon's "Mon Ami Mate"
- B - Nigel Webb - Curator of Hawthorn's cars - albeit replica's, D-Type, Mk 7, including the BRG 3.4l Mk 1.
881 V.D.U similar and identical to Mike's car, Motor Sport Feb 2019 (Doug Nye and Robert Ladbrook)
- C - An account from a former Browns Lane factory employee - who assembled D-Types. He said "Lofty England ordered that the wreck must be brought in and closely inspected part by part." And that "It was nearly cut in half". Also he added "It was fitted with the experimental Dunlop tyres". These, he said "Were to be Dunlop's answer to Pirelli tyres."

Andy



A replica of Mike Hawthorn's Mk 1, 881 V.D.U (3.4l) in British Racing Green on wire wheels, complete with Hawthorns grille badges - mounted on the separate badge bar