

LUNCH WITH A LEGEND - Part 2 of 2

By John Wilson, submitted by Club Member John Allen

Explaining why Walker was being replaced Lyons wrote: "Racing costs us several hundred thousand pounds a year, we cannot afford to be sentimental about it. It is your hobby, but it is a very serious business to us."

"Did you know William Lyons?" I asked. "Oh yes," said Tony, I met him many times. He was a businessman, a very clever businessman - I called him 'Sir'."

Here I thought was a glimpse into the personality that made William Lyons such an effective leader of perhaps the greatest engineering team the British motor industry has ever seen. Major Tony Rolt MC ex- Rifle Brigade, serial escaper from German prison camps, Colditz escape plotter, brilliant racing driver and a product of society's upper echelon had probably never taken a backward step in his life, yet he was quite happy to acknowledge that at Jaguar, Lyons was 'Sir'.

For 1952 Moss had convinced Lyons that the new Mercedes Benz 300SL coupes, which he had raced against in the Mille Miglia, would be a major threat to Jaguar at Le Mans.

"The factory panicked and produced the streamlined version of the C type," remembered Tony, "they got the cooling wrong and they all overheated. We were the last out early in the race. In 1953 however we got it right and Duncan and I won."

What he didn't say, was that in the 1953 race they were lined up against practically every contemporary grand prix driver and entries from every major European sports car manufacturer and that they were the first to win the race at an average of over 100 miles per hour. Or, that when the leading Moss/Walker car struck fuel problems, Tony coolly upped the pace 5 seconds a lap to overtake Ferrari's star team of Villoresi/Ascari and dominate the race.

Nor, that he and Duncan were jointly awarded the Malcolm Campbell Memorial Trophy and the ERA Club Trophy, nor that their victory and Ian Appleyard's in the Monte Carlo Rally were the reasons for Jaguar Cars Ltd being presented with the Ferodo Trophy for "outstanding British contribution to the sport of motor racing".

The following year the brilliant D-type replaced the C and the Rolt/Hamilton car finished a nail-bitingly close 2nd at the Sarthe circuit after an epic battle with the Gonzalez and Trintignant Ferrari, when blocked fuel filters caused a series of pit stops that cost them the race by just 2.5 miles.

And what was it like in those cars on what was then still a primitive circuit?

"The C-type was a good car, but the D was far better. Down the Mulsanne straight, the C-types were good for around 150 miles an hour and the D-types would do over 170."

"What were the lights like at night?" Stuart asked. Tony simply grinned and shook his head at the memory. We got the picture.

This brought us to the danger and the dreadful toll of drivers in the fifties and sixties.

We agreed that as motor racing has become much safer it has become a different sport.



Jaguar C-Type

We reflected on today's wide run-off areas, the amazingly safe chassis construction and the end of such character challenging features as the old Woodcote corner at Silverstone, now emasculated by a series of go-cart wobble woggles in front of the corporate boxes.

Perhaps the tolerance of the era can be explained by the fact that many of its drivers had come from

the experience of war, when dangers which would be totally unacceptable today were an everyday part of their life.

Duncan Hamilton had been a Fleet Air Arm pilot launching himself off carriers in piston engined aircraft (and probably even more dangerous, trying to land on them again). The young then Lt Rolt had been incarcerated in Colditz Castle after seven escapes from lesser German prison camps and there conceived perhaps the most audacious and famous escape plan of the war; the glider built secretly in the Castle's roof. Interestingly, although he was happy to face the dangers of his time, his engineering background still makes him feel that some cars in the sixties were far too fragile and that some drivers were ill served by their designers.



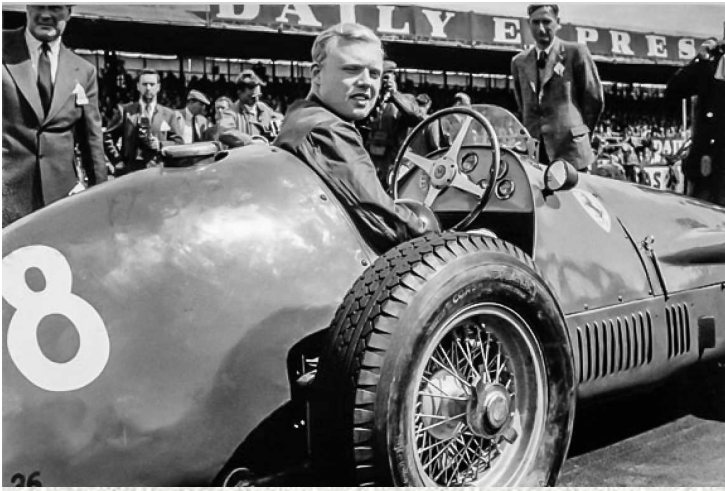
Jaguar D-Type

This talk of danger led us inevitably, to Le Mans 1955 and the terrible accident when Levegh's SLR Mercedes ploughed into the crowd.

"I was coming up behind and saw it all. The pit straight was very narrow - it felt about as wide as this room with the pits just part of the road - you'd have mechanics lying under cars with their feet sticking out inches from cars racing past. There was no pit road, you just pulled up at your pit.

Hawthorn was heading into the Jaguar pits. He passed the slower Austin Healy of Lance Macklin on Macklin's left and pulled across to the right - the side the pits were on - Macklin pulled out to the left and Levegh who was coming up fast, crashed into him.

The Mercedes was made from magnesium and just exploded into a ball of flame, the engine and gearbox flew through the crowd, killing over eighty people.



Mike Hawthorn

Mike was in a terrible state, well, he thought he was responsible. He wasn't, it was a racing accident, it was no-one's fault. Anyway Lois sat with him in the caravan at the back of the pits, trying to calm him down."

"I did bring him to his senses." said Lois.

"How?"

"I hit him!"

Lois's therapy may not be current psychiatric practice, but it worked.

"He got back in the car and drove to the end." said Tony "He drove very well too."

"What was Mike Hawthorn like?"

"He was a lively chap, but I always thought he had a physical problem... there was something wrong somewhere...when he was well he'd drive terrifically fast, other times..."

The A.P.R Rolt/J.D. Hamilton D-type retired in that sad 1955 Le Mans race with a gearbox oil leak after running into 2nd place and A.P.R Rolt himself retired later that season after fulfilling his commitments to Rob Walker with the Connaught. It was the end of a career that spanned some of racing's most dangerous years, yet he had never had a single injury.

"Did the accident make you decide to retire?"

"No, it was just that It was time. I was developing the Ferguson four wheel drive system for Harry Ferguson and he wanted me to do it full time."

It was Tony Rolt the engineer who started a remarkably successful transmission engineering business, FF Developments, which produced innovative four wheel drive systems, gearboxes and differentials for amongst others, two generations of rally cars. FF Developments was sold by the Rolt family to Ricardo Group in 1994, but Tony and Stuart were delighted when in 2000 Audi came first, second and third at Le Mans using Ricardo gearboxes.

Two hours of food, wine and conversation had passed in minutes and I still had a thousand questions unasked of this modest man, but it was time to leave.

As I said my goodbyes, Stuart pointed to an early post-war drawing on the wall. It was the young Tony Rolt in an ERA dicing furiously with a Maserati, drafted in the unmistakable hand of F. Gordon Crosby.

My memory gave a little jolt, perhaps I had seen that drawing in the Autocar as well, all those years ago...

EPILOGUE

I was recently chatting to an official at a UK international circuit and asked him how he found many of the highly-funded modern racing drivers. "Some are good chaps," he said, "but some others are preening prats." One gets the feeling that a preening prat would never have made it into a team run by Lofty England and William Lyons and no-one could be farther from that description than Tony Rolt, who is still almost embarrassed to talk about himself and his achievements.

He was undoubtedly one of the very greatest long-distance drivers, but how fast was he? I looked up his record and discovered that it was no wonder he had been described as: "the brightest young talent of a generation of prewar amateurs."

Occasionally, Rolt the amateur, had the measure of Moss the ultimate professional, such as the time he persuaded Lofty to lend him a drum braked C-type for a 5 lap race at Goodwood.

Moss had a disc braked car, but Tony had worked out that unlike discs which needed warming, the drum brakes would work from the first corner and wouldn't fade in such a short race.

He beat the team's number one by .6 of a second! Then there are other clues such as the fact that he actually averaged 100mph in a C-type for the first 400 miles of the 1953 Mille Miglia before the car gave up and retired, or that he was always listed as Driver 1 in the Rolt/Hamilton car on the official factory personnel directories for Le Mans. The more you look, the more you delve into history, the more you realise that Tony Rolt was very quick indeed.

Perhaps it is in his final single seater years that one gets the full insight into his sheer pace. We have already recorded his win in the British Empire Trophy when he was 19, then after the war, he drove Rob Walker's Connaughts in the British Grands Prix of '53 and '55.

In both races he was the fastest British driver/car combination on the grid, think of the famous British names you know from the era and unless they were in a works European car (it's a very short list: Hawthorn in '53, Moss and Hawthorn in '55), they were behind Tony Rolt. Indeed in his last race GP in '55, in the underpowered Connaught, he was a mere 1.2 seconds slower than Hawthorn and Trintignant in works Ferraris.

One can only conclude that Jaguar not only had superb cars in the C and D types but they also had the ability to spot the best British drivers to race them.

Lofty England may have been strict, but he certainly knew talent when he saw it and Major Tony Rolt, war hero, racing driver and English gentleman, was one of Lofty's major talents - an indelible part of the fabric of the Jaguar legend.

I am indebted to Tony Rolt and his family for making these memories possible and for the writings of Paul Skilliter and the late Andrew Whyte for filling in some of the many chapters of a remarkable life.

John Wilson