

LUNCH WITH A LEGEND - Part 1 of 2

By John Wilson, submitted by Club Member John Allen

Introduction:

John Allen's own story is also interesting. He left Aussie as a young man, with no money, and heard of a job going in London in an advertising firm. He knew nothing about that, so found a whole lot of advertisements in Aussie magazines (I think he got them in the Aussie embassy) cut them out and made up a scrap book for the interview. He went in trembling to meet the top man. There were racing pictures on the wall, so they just talked about racing, he got the job, then asked for an advance because he had no money for food. The boss liked his cheekiness, and got him into motor racing. He was doing well, even nearly beating Emerson Fittipaldi but had a bad accident and had to give up the racing because of his injuries.

It has always seemed to me that the magic of the name Jaguar reflects a whole kaleidoscope of talents who dedicated themselves to its success. By contrast, Ferrari was so dominated by Enzo Ferrari that one almost forgets who worked with him and who else but Porsche is Porsche?

However, the Jaguar personality was born in a melding of abilities, lead brilliantly yet no less dominantly by William Lyons.

No other car company's personality is so much a partnership of so many engineers, drivers, managers, representatives, mechanics and yes, customers - all sharing in the glory. Perhaps this is why we love the marque; when we drive a Jaguar, we are part of the family, whereas to drive a Ferrari or a Porsche is to be tolerated by the manufacturer.

In the last few years some of those who were vital to the pre and post war Jaguar glory days have slipped quietly away. Before them, was a small, internationally insignificant manufacturer. After them, was Jaguar, one of the world's great automotive icons. Luckily, many of those with stories to tell are still with us, articulate and fascinating.

A lifetime ago I was a small boy growing up half a world away in Australia, impatiently waiting for news of British motor racing. In the 1950's there was no TV and not even the smallest paragraph in the newspapers. The only window to that world of legends was through the pages of Autocar and Motor magazines, which arrived months late through the uncertainties of sea mail.

I can still remember many of the photographs which inspired me to one day sail to England to race myself. One was of a handsome, perfectly groomed man with the widest smile sitting in the most beautiful car I had even seen: Major A.P.R. Rolt in the works C-type Jaguar.

Cut forward half a century and friends introduced me to Stuart Rolt at luncheon in a tiny Oxfordshire village, just around the corner from Silverstone. Stuart is not only a delightful companion, a lethal tennis player and a driver of some note, but turned out to be Tony Rolt's son. "Is he still alive?" I asked. "God, yes." laughed Stuart, "82 and going strong. Would you like to meet him?"



Major A.P.R. Rolt

which was delivered to the family home because he was too young to legally drive on the roads.

Tony chuckled. "I lost my license when I was seventeen which meant that I should have automatically lost my racing license as well. Luckily, Lord Howe was in charge of motor racing and arranged that I should keep it."

"How did you get to meetings?" asked Stuart and his brother in chorus, surprised, probably never having heard the story before. "Friends drove me around the country to meetings." came the answer as the eyes twinkled.

"And what was your first race?" I asked, picturing a club sprint or a hill climb up the drive of a local manor. "The twenty four hours at Spa" was the astonishing reply. On perhaps the most dangerous track in the world the eighteen year old Tony Rolt drove a Triumph Southern Cross purchased new from Donald Healy who worked for Triumph at the time, and came 4th in class. Not a bad start to a career.

Stuart had no need to ask twice. To me Tony Rolt was the epitome of the great gentlemen amateurs, the men who provided much of the driving talent for Jaguar's seminal 1950s Le Mans victories. This was also the transition stage of post-war motor racing when the newly emerging professionals like Moss and Hawthorn, shared the cockpit with adventurers who were in racing for fun and excitement alone.

A week later I arrived at Stuart and Debbie Rolt's house for lunch with a child-hood hero. I know this sounds silly for a man of my age, but I was as nervous as a schoolboy when a tall immaculate man, still with the same wide smile that leapt from those pages years ago, walked a little stiffly into the room, shook my hand and introduced me to his wife Lois.

Tony Rolt was educated at Eton, a school not noted for its talented engineers and was the apple of his mother's and sisters' eyes. As a teenager, he was given his first racing car



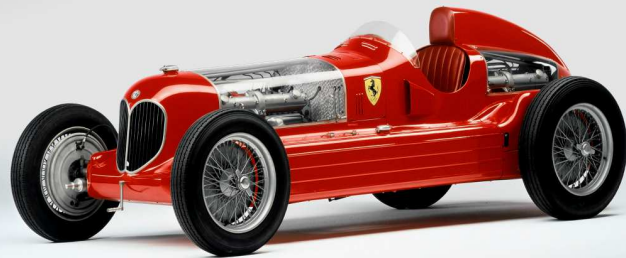
Triumph Southern Cross

The Triumph was followed by a huge step up in class in 'Remus', the ex-Prince Bira 'B' type ERA in which Tony won the British Empire Trophy race at Donnington Park averaging over 75 miles per hour. He was just 19.

After the war he raced the ex-Bimatore Alfa, Italy's twin-engined

answer to the prewar German GP cars which had been reduced to one engine and christened the Aitken Alfa, it was severely underpowered but Tony wrestled it to 7th on the grid at the 1949 RAC Silverstone GP.

Bimatore Alfa



Then began a long association and a lifelong friendship with Rob Walker which started with Rob's Delage, fitted with an ERA motor when the original destroyed itself, then an ERA and later in the 50's, the lovely Connaught's in which he had great success in Formula 2 and Formula Libre events.

"The Connaught's were wonderful cars to drive, beautifully built with excellent handling, but just not enough power to challenge people like Ferrari.

They were probably my favourite." said Tony. If the Connaught was his favourite single-seater, Oulton Park was his favourite circuit. "I was involved in setting the circuit up and won the first race there."

Meanwhile the Jaguar factory had won Le Mans in 1951 with the stunning new C-type and Lofty England's keen eyes had no doubt been watching young Major Rolt's drive for Donald Healy into 6th place in that same race, following his 4th place in the previous year.

Equally, Tony's keen eyes had been watching Jaguar and he haunted Lofty for a drive. Eventually it was hinted that if he turned up at Dundrod in Ireland where the C-types were entered in the TT and the circumstances were right, he may just have a chance. A wink was as good as a nod and arriving at his own expense he was awarded the grand position of reserve driver.



Prince Bira "B" type ERA

Cunning Lofty had obviously worked out a strategy to keep an up and coming talent happy without upsetting his established stars. Then half way through the race, the moment of truth came when the works driver Leslie Johnson retired ill and Tony leapt into the cockpit. Dundrod was lethally narrow with cars hurtling between the hedgerows and the earth banks of the 7.4 miles of undulating Irish country roads (so dangerous that after 3 drivers were killed on one day in 1955 it was abandoned).

However the reserve driver seized his chance by the throat and roared out onto the daunting track, shattering the lap record and lifting the car from 7th to finish 4th after Moss and Walker also in C-types in 1st and 2nd positions.

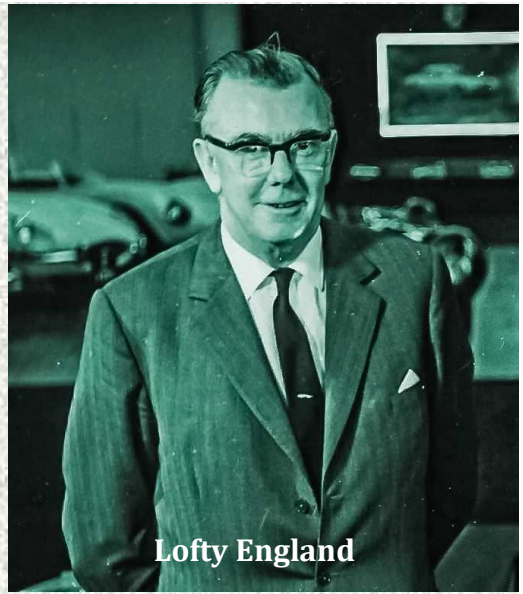
This stellar performance secured him a regular place in the team which meant that next year he would be driving for Jaguar at Le Mans.

“They asked me who I’d like as a co-driver, I answered ‘Duncan Hamilton’.”

“Duncan Hamilton!” they said, “Isn’t he wild?”

“I replied that Duncan was wild, but not in other people’s cars.”

This was the beginning of the Jaguar team of A.P.R Rolt/J. Duncan Hamilton, Jaguar’s most consistent pairing through the C and D type era at a time when William Lyons warned drivers that “...contracts are awarded annually only...”. In spite of this stricture, the two amigos remained an automatic signing for four seasons until Tony retired. Duncan’s departure came in 1956 when Lofty fired him for disobedience for going too fast and breaking the lap-record while winning at Rheims!”



“What was Lofty England really like?” I asked. “A good chap...very strict” came the smiling reply.

Jaguar’s professional, even ruthless, approach to winning came from the top, the late Andrew Whyte related that for the 1955 season, William Lyons wrote to the driver and farmer Peter Walker, who with Peter Whitehead had given Jaguar its first Le Mans win in 1951.

John Wilson (Pt 2 in July Mag)