

This is part 2 of a re-print of a very interesting article about past Club Member Dick Davidson, who passed away earlier this year. Barbara van Heuckelum, who was the Magazine Editor at that time, wrote the article for Dick, which was printed in three parts, in the December 2013, March and June 2014 magazines. Dick was very reluctant to talk about his life but Barbara finally convinced him by offering to write it for him if he told her his stories. In her view it needed to be shared.

Didn't meet Bruce McLaren until he came back at the end of 1959 for the January 1960 NZ Grand Prix at Ardmore.

He had just become the youngest man, at 22, to win a Grand Prix, winning the United States Grand Prix at Sebring International Raceway by six-tenths of a second. This was the first and only time the race was held at that circuit, which was actually the home of the '12 Hours of Sebring' endurance races.

Bruce was driving a Cooper T51 for the Cooper team. Jack Brabham was driving one for them too. This was the race where Jack ran out of fuel on the home straight and got out and pushed his car across the line into fourth place which won him his first World Championship.

So Bruce was famous, and an absolute hero in my eyes. I was that shy I couldn't even speak to him, even though he was only about five years older than me. He was like a God to me and I worshipped him; - still do.

I hung around like a bad smell and polished cars, polished spanners, and did anything he needed, just to be nearer to him and learn everything I could. Then I got friendly with Colin Beanland, a friend of his. That helped me later on when Bruce started to produce his own cars. Bruce designed Coopers. He still called them Coopers because he was under contract to them, but they weren't really because they were McLaren cars. He designed them and made two of everything so he had two cars basically.

He used to put one together in England, then test it and ship it over; then the other was partly made up to check it, marked, taken apart, packaged and flown over, which was quite unusual in those days.

Colin had had two years in Europe with Bruce. He opened the first Speedshop in New Zealand, in Karangahape Road, and it was his job to assemble the cars that were flown over. I worked my weekends for free helping Colin to do this. To work on Grand Prix cars as seventeen year old was a mind blowing experience. From there it just evolved that I became part of the race team. I worked with Bruce's mechanics for the New Zealand section of the Tasman Series. I gave up my summer holidays to travel with them.

I thought all my birthdays had come at once. We moved the cars on trailers back then and I used to drive one of the towing cars. I also did some engine work on the Coventry Climax engines in between races. I was in seventh heaven as I met and mixed with even more of my heroes, Stirling Moss, Jack Brabham, Graham Hill and the rest.

One year Bruce damaged two cars at Pukekohe and I stayed back in Auckland and worked heaps of overtime to rebuild one of the engines. Then, when it was ready Les and I actually loaded it into the 3.8 Jag boot, and drove down to Levin to catch up with the team, who were already there.

When we went on the Desert Road, - this is in the 60's, - we were going down there that quick that the road didn't look wide enough, the tarseal strip, you know. Les was like a racing driver when the season came around. He got all wound up. I loved going fast, but that day he scared the pants off me. We used to do some stupid things.

Being involved in the Tasman Series was great fun. I made many friends and gained a huge amount of experience. The other mechanics and I got up to mischief too.

The year after Timmy Mayer got killed Phil Hill from England came out. He had just won the World Championship in a Ferrari and he still had the Ferrari jacket that was presented to him.

We used to flog it off him and go and try and pick up girls downtown in Christchurch. Strangely none of them believed that we were Phil Hill. He wanted to buy my 1935 Austin 10, just because it had wire wheels!

I bugged that car up trying to be a racing driver. All of us mechanics fancied ourselves as drivers and took the opportunity whenever we could to show off our skills to each other. We used to do the Bombay hill climb and all that sort of thing.

One year the team was practising at Pukekohe and one of the English race mechanics, Harry Pearce, needed a ride home so I went out in my car and I bought him back. That is when I stuffed the car, by showing off and pushing it too hard. It was an Austin 7 after all.

I was cured of any thoughts of being a racing driver very quickly one day when Bruce took me in the 3.8 litre Jaguar for half a dozen laps around Pukekohe. He kept leaning over and saying, "Why are you trying to bend the floor?" He was coming to a hairpin and he wasn't applying the brakes!

I was very uncomfortable and realised that being a racing driver wasn't for me after all. There are many dedicated and very competent racing drivers but they don't have that special gift that makes them stand out. Bruce had that gift and I will always be grateful for the experiences that I had working with him.

Those Formula One cars we used in the Tasman series were like E Types really. If you turned the seat around so that the motor would be in the back, that's really what a Formula one car was, with a sub frame bolted up to hold the damn thing in. The technology then wasn't what it is today.

The braking and everything. That is what is so scary about today. The downforce generated. They reckon, and it is true, that a modern Formula One car could drive upside down. It is ridiculous really. They reckon that the wind frontal area is the equivalent to that of a Kenwood truck.

Now if you work that out and they are getting to 300 k's in 5 seconds and they come back to 100 k's it takes them 3 seconds. So what does that do to you? They have to bring in regulations because at one stage at Spa, they were blacking out on one of the corners, just for a second, but still. Their bodies just can't handle it, and certainly not their brains.

After doing several of the Tasman Series and while I was still in my apprenticeship, it had been arranged that I would go over to England to work for Jack Brabham for twelve months, until Bruce was ready, and then I would move over to his Formula One team and work and travel with him.

In those days if you were under 21 your parents had to sign a form so you could get your passport. My father being the person he was said, "You have to complete your apprenticeship, and if the New Zealand Apprenticeship Authority won't recognise the time you are working in England then you can't go." They wouldn't, and he didn't sign it.

There I was, with a job that mechanics the world over would fight for. All I had to do was pay my fare, everything else, accommodation and transport etc. was provided and organised. The opportunity to work with the best drivers and mechanics in the world. I thought my world was made. But my father's decision meant I couldn't go.

All those guys that worked for those teams are rich now. The experience that I would have gained would have far outweighed finishing off my apprenticeship, which I could have done when I came back anyway. I didn't speak to my father for several years after that.....

At the end of part one I had just had to give up the opportunity of going to UK to join Bruce McLaren's Formula One race team and working with the best mechanics and drivers in the world. I was only 19 and my father wouldn't sign my passport application. My disappointment was soul destroying, to say the least, but continuing to work at McLaren's garage and be in the company of the many friends I had made helped. As did of course the guidance and support of my wonderful boss Les McLaren.

I still saw Bruce when he came to New Zealand and I remained part of his team while they did the NZ leg of the Tasman Series. These occasions were the highlight of my year.

And yes, after a few years, I did start speaking to my father again.

I stayed with Les McLaren for 11 or 12 years all told. The Tasman series had dropped off. The last time I was with Bruce was when he came out with the BRM's. It was a mutual favour between BRM and Bruce McLaren, and they signed him on. He wasn't initially coming to the 1968 Tasman series, because at that stage it was a struggle to find the time. He was getting his own Formula One team up and running in the UK and also very involved with the Can Am series.

By that time I had met Lynn and things had started to change in my life. Up till then anything to do with cars had been my main focus. I decided to move to Waterlea Autos in Mangere to work for Doug and Kevin Lamb. I had become friends with Kevin and he had offered me a job as his performance mechanic. I did ordinary mechanical work as well, of course, but my main job was working on the engines of Rod Coppin's cars. The first one being his late 60's Mustang that he bought from Pete Geegan.

This was the car that Pete had won the Australian Saloon Car Championship in. Rod went over there and did a few laps in it and he bought it. Then they put locks on the ties that came up through the bonnet so they could prove that no one had touched it since he'd driven it. I don't know why he bothered because it had had the guts raced out of it. It was a sad motorcar really. It had had its life expectancy for what it was doing, you know. In hindsight it was a bad buy because it had been worked so hard, but Rod wanted it and had it shipped over so he could re-build it.

He would have been better to have bought a new one and had it modified; but anyway I spent the next two or three years on that car.

I also worked on 'Goldmist' which was the top hydroplane in New Zealand at that stage. Kevin Lamb drove it and I did the work on the motor. It was a 327 small block V8. So that was where I started to learn about V8's really; the 280 Mustang and the 327 Corvette in 'Gold Mist', and we successfully blew the Stone Brothers' dyno up testing it. In the early days, Stone Brothers had a workshop with a dyno in it out in Otahuhu, I think it was. It was one of only two in the country at that stage. I had just finished building the boat motor and we took it out on the back of Lambs' ute to put it on the dyno; - (and that is where I met Roly Levis because we had just lifted Roly Levis's little Coventry Climax engine off the dyno) - and then we bolted this pink V8 that was going in the boat into it. (We couldn't get the colour that we wanted for the motor so we painted it pink). We bolted that on and tested it and in the process blew Stone's Dyno up. All the water hoses and a lot more besides blew off and flew straight out of the louvre windows out the back, smashing them on the way. He told us to pack it up and take it away. We got 420 horsepower and the dyno couldn't go much higher, well it couldn't even go that high really, which is why it blew up, it just couldn't take it. So he wasn't very happy with us; but we thought it was a hell of a joke at the time.

We won the premier cups for boat racing in NZ with that boat and Rod Coppins' Mustang was quite successful really, for what it was. As I say it was a very tired motorcar and we



Dick working on the twin engines from an off shore power boat at the workshop in Chadwick Road

rebuilt the engine for as much as he was prepared to pay, you know, and it should really have been thrown out so we could start again. At the time you lack the knowledge and resources, well we had the resources, because you could get anything that you needed at a price; but we should have said to him pull it out and we'll start again and he would have got what he wanted.

Whereas we patched and we re-designed, - it was good learning for me because we made up our own stud girdles and goodness knows what. When it went it was actually quicker than Paul Fahey's Mustang which was a

later model with a bigger engine and Rod could blow him off the track no sweat at all. So we were quite proud of that.

(To be continued as Part 3 in December magazine)