



Classic and Sportscar - August 1982

D ROAD TO LE MANS by Simon Taylor

Simon Taylor recaptures the spirit of the fifties by driving an Ecurie Ecosse Lynx D-type replica to Le Mans.



No other motor race has captured the public imagination so comprehensively for so long as the Le Mans 24 Hours - and if you doubt the truth of that statement you have only to travel down by road from one of the French channel ports towards the Sarthe during the week of the race. You will find yourself sharing your route with classic and sportscars of every age, value and description, piled high with tents, hampers, blankets and other necessities for the long vigil; hordes of enthusiasts in vans, buses, caravans and heavily-laden estate cars; clusters of

motorcyclists travelling light (one we spoke to makes the trek each year both to Le Mans and to the Bol d'Or 24-hour motorcycle race, no longer at Montlhéry of course but at Paul Ricard); and a variety of humble French saloons betrayed by no more than Vingt-Quatre Heures stickers and expressions of eager anticipation on their occupants' faces.

This year Le Mans was even more special. Everyone was conscious of the 50th anniversary, and of their own memories of the Jaguar days, or the Bentley days, or the Matra days, or the GT40 days. Inevitably the Automobile Club de l'Ouest planned a pre-race parade of past winners, but it was really thanks to the efforts of Mike Bowler of Pace Petroleum and Dennis Miller-Williams of Rolls-Royce, plus Pirelli, Moët et Chandon and others, that there was a magnificent turnout of the actual cars, or replicas of the actual cars, that had scored the 15 British victories.

Most of them had travelled down in convoy, and all were lined up in echelon in front of the pits at noon on Saturday before doing several laps. Sadly, other countries were far less well represented: France herself has won Le Mans 12 times but, apart from the delightful 1923 Chenard et Walcker from the Le Mans museum-winner of the first race-it was left to Richard Pilkington to fly the French flag with his thunderous Talbot-Lago, originally rebuilt from an ex-Rosier sports-racer and now in correct cycle-winged form à la 1950 winner.

There were five appropriate Bentleys (two of their five wins were with 3-litres, one with a 4 1/2-litre and two with Speed Sixes). Alain de Cadenet's BRG Alfa Romeo evoked the Italian marque's three consecutive wins in the thirties, and the red 1935-winning M45R Lagonda was there. Luigi Chinetti, who won Le Mans at his first attempt in 1932 (and took part in every race from then until 1953, winning again in 1934 and 1949), was at Le Mans to watch his North American Racing Team Ferraris run, as they have virtually every year since 1958. And, as the parade included a Ferrari 166MM like the winning car he shared with Lord Selsdon in 1949, of course he drove it. Why, when Ferrari have won Le Mans nine times, was this the only example in the parade?

Then, in correct chronological order, came the Talbot-Lago (Louis Rosier shared the winning car in 1950 with his son Jean-Louis, but was so nervous in the pits that he called him in after three laps and did the rest of the race himself); a correct pair of C-type Jaguars, split by a road-going 300SL to recall the 1952 Mercedes-Benz win; a 1956 D-type (2 CPG, Duncan Hamilton's final car); the 1957 Ecurie Ecosse winning D-type; and the 1959 Aston Martin DBR1 winner, plus a DB3S for good measure. The last three came from Victor Gauntlett's stable, as did some of the Bentleys, including his magnificent Speed Six which he drove in the parade himself.

Three GT40s, all in Gulf colours, represented the four consecutive Ford wins by a 7-litre Mk 2, a 7-litre Mk 4, and GT40 chassis 1075, which won two years running to give Pedro Rodriguez his only Le Mans win and Jacky Ickx the first of, so far, six. Astonishingly the ACO failed to organise a Renault A442, like the 1968 winner, nor was there a Matra to acknowledge the blue cars' three consecutive wins. It would have been nice to see Henri Pescarolo, who drove on all three occasions and was present to start his 16th Le Mans, do some laps in the Matra from the Le Mans museum.

However, the Porsche museum produced a short-tail 917, the 1970 Dickie Attwood winner; the 1977 936 winner, which Jurgen Barth, one of its drivers on that occasion, took round; and last year's 936-81, which Jacky Ickx himself parked in the line-up but left for someone else to drive in the parade.

The party included a strange gatecrasher in the shape of an English-registered AC Ace-Zephyr, a car with no Le Mans history at all. Its driver joined on the end of the line of cars, disobeyed the rules by passing several of the parading cars at speed, and eventually ended up in the catch fencing, leaving the long-suffering organisers with some more work to do before the race.



To get myself into the correct mood for this year's race, it seemed necessary to borrow a car which would both evoke the correct historical atmosphere and also provide really exhilarating transport to the circuit. Victor Gauntlett came to the rescue splendidly with another item from his mouth-watering collection: a recently-completed Lynx replica D-type, made to be as outwardly close as possible to XKD 606, the Ecurie Ecosse car which, 25 years ago almost to the day, had scored Jaguar's fifth and final victory at Le Mans.





Thus it was a long-nose car with full-width screen, in the correct Ecurie Ecosse blue, with the St Andrew's Cross badges on the flanks; but, like all Lynxes, it used E-type suspension front and rear as opposed to the D-type's rigid rear axle and torsion bars. As on every Lynx I have seen, the standard of workmanship was simply superb, with the voluptuous lines of the original faithfully reproduced, down to the last rivet. The neat bonnet catches and flush-mounted leather straps, the headrest with its upward-sweeping tailfin and faired-in fuel filler, the bonnet louvres, the rigid tonneau and that assymetric bulge over the engine - none of it could be faulted. As an ultimate test I parked it beside the ex-Duncan Hamilton D-type at Le Mans: everything was exactly right. Looking at craftsmanship of this level, you realise why the Lynx is so expensive.

Of course, original D-types didn't have full interior trim and carpeting: Victor's Lynx was as beautifully finished inside as out, but the upholstery, while more luxurious than the original, didn't look in any way out of period. On the crackle-black facia were matching speedometer and rev-counter in the XKSS positions - the D-types usually only had a rev-counter - but there was an authentic drilled-spoke, wood-rim steering wheel, and the traditional D-type horn button which could be operated with your right knee if you had your hands rather full at the time.

The engine in this car was straight 3.8 E-type, wearing Webbers, and harnessed to a recent all-synchro gearbox and what turned out to be a pretty high back axle ratio, as 2750rpm was equivalent to a genuine 100mph. The correct alloy disc wheels wore modern Avon radials, and the side exhaust system was quiet enough to avoid being really anti-social while retaining that lovely hard Jaguar bark when the throttle is floored. (In fact XKD 606 used tailpipes at Le Mans, but side exhausts for shorter races).

My first blast down to catch the boat at Southampton on a beautiful summer evening was enough to demonstrate that the Lynx was a delightful road car. A production D-type weighed 17cwt dry, and there's no reason why a Lynx should be much heavier, so the performance was shattering, with that evergreen twin-cam straight six delivering a great rush of musical power. Victor's car only had 800 miles on the clock when I took it over, and the engine had been fully rebuilt, so I kept to conservative rev limits . . . but it would rush up to 130mph very quickly! Later, howling down the Mulsanne Straight on Friday afternoon in the rain, among the Deux Chevaux and the camions, it just wanted to keep on accelerating, and I could easily believe how Malcolm Sayer's aerodynamics had given the works cars a top speed on this same stretch of road of just short of 180mph 27 years ago.



The steering was a delight - light, precise, and with lots of information travelling back to the wheel. On its narrow wheels (by modern standards), on smooth roads the power could be fed in hard and balanced by unwinding a bit of lock - very satisfying to do and always predictable and controllable. The brakes, however, took a bit of getting used to: they were the standard discs but with no servo, so they needed a massive prod, and needed to be good and warm to give confidence.

On the way down through Northern France we diverted to Rouen, and visited the famous circuit just south of the city. Once the home of the French Grand Prix, it is still used for national Formula 3 events and, like Le Mans, most of it is on accessible public roads. We spent a happy hour or so blasting round in the Lynx: the famous fast, sweeping curves downhill from the start line were a little awe-inspiring with traffic coming the other way, but the notorious Nouveau Monde hairpin at the bottom, still with its cobbled surface, and then the blast back up the hill with a sharp cambered left-hander, were wonderful in the Lynx. In the end a car-load of gendarmes arrived and we thought it prudent to stop, but they insisted on examining not our driving licences but the Lynx in enthusiastic detail.



The D-type's first Le Mans, the 1954 race when Rolt and Hamilton lost to the 4.9-litre Ferrari of Gonzales by less than 2 mins, was dreadfully wet: in our six days with the Lynx we were very lucky with the weather, for it only rained when we were on the open road, and provided you keep the speed above about 90mph you don't get very wet. In a traffic jam, of course, it would have been

different! In every other way the Lynx proved to be an entirely sensible road car, and in the many hold-ups it had to endure around the town of Le Mans during race week it never got hot or bothered.

Replicas of any great car will always produce mixed reactions. Abortions like Beetle-powered "Bugattis" can have no merit whatever; at the other end of the scale, modern recreations of historic cars which may then be raced, and sold, as the real thing will always produce bitter argument. But something like the Lynx is the very best sort of replica. It doesn't claim to be anything other than what it is: an externally faithful and beautifully made copy of a great car, using more easily available and more modern engine, gearbox, suspension and tyres without in any way departing from the spirit of the original. Driving it to Le Mans and back was a memorable experience: if I had the money I'd have two Lynx replicas, a D-type and a C-type. Victor Gauntlett has. . .