

## In at the Start Nigel Allen



My story starts back in 1950 when as an eighteen year old student studying Dentistry I lived with my parents and two brothers in a large house at Muswell Hill North London. As a hobby my brother Michael and I had put together a very well equipped workshop with up to the minute set up of hoist and sliding gantry, pit, welding gear, lathe, valve grinder, small tools, benches and all the other paraphernalia that back up a complete car workshop. We used this to buy and refurbish old cars and then sell them on to make a bit of money, being entirely self taught.

One day a young man stopped at the garage where we were at work and introduced himself as Colin Chapman. To cut a very long story short by the time he had left that afternoon he had persuaded us and we had agreed that together we would design, build and race a new make of car the Lotus!

Together we built and raced the legendary Austin Lotus Mark 3 based on the Seven Fifty Club formula using all Austin 7 parts. This was so successful that it was a class leader and often competed in the 1500cc class where it usually came either first or second to the Connaught's. The reader should be aware that at this time all racing was on old ex airforce perimeter track club circuits. Cars were either pre war sports cars or home made specials tuned by their owners racing on standard tyres with the drivers wearing motor cycle crash helmets and usually driving with open necked shirts, trousers and plimsolls.

Tracks were lined with old oil drums and straw bales, and if you were unlucky to hit a drum which had not had a hole punched into it this would be filled with rain water. Marshalls were largely untrained, learning on the job, being other car club members, with no special equipment except a fire extinguisher and a few signalling flags.

In spite of this it was all enormous fun as you could build your own car, tune and race it with success for a very modest sum. As a result of our activities the Lotus name gradually became well known for the design and performance of this little car included some very advanced features for the day including front swing axle suspension, the desiamensing of the little Austin 7 engine inlet manifold system and a fully oil pressurised three bearing crankshaft.

We went on to make the Lotus Mark 4 trials car for Mike Lawson partner with Alfred Moss, Stirlings father, of Moss and Lawson motor car sales fame.

Benefiting from the intense development work that had gone into the little Mark 3 Colin designed the Mark 6 Lotus for the 1500cc class with a Ford Consul engine and the first fully space frame tubular chassis, again with swing axle front suspension, solid Ford back axle and many other features. On its first appearance at Silverstone Lofty England, Jaguar's chief spent a long time looking at the car, and the next year saw the introduction of the 'D' type with space frame chassis!

Devotees of motor racing of this time will need no reminder of the success of this Lotus design which later appeared with many engines, mainly the Ford 1172 side valve unit which eventually formed one of the strongest classes in club racing

even to this day and which later went on to become the Lotus 7 and later the Caterham 7 series up to the present time!

I could write pages devoted to this period in motor racing development as we did not realise that we were in fact making history in that eventually all racing cars up to the present day would be made with light weight space frames until the advent of carbon fibre and other exotic technology. However I must get on with this story and its relevance to my love of the Mercedes marque. By this time we had formed the Lotus Engineering Company with Colin and Michael as main partners. I should explain that work was divided between the three of us as follows: Michael did all engine work, tuning and modifications. I, Nigel, did all chassis work, welding, brazing and suspension fabrications, and Colin was in charge of general design and bodywork. After the Lotus 6 we moved onto the Mark 8.

At this time my brother decided to part with Colin who was still working at British Aluminium full time, whilst Michael was full time Lotus Engineering and bearing the full brunt of day to day problems whilst I as a full time dental student only worked at nights and weekends.

The Lotus Mark 8 was the first fully designed aerodynamic bodied car with bodywork designed by Frank Costin, Mike Costin's older brother. Mike had joined Colin at the start of 1953 to carry on after my brother Michael left. I qualified as a dentist in 1955 and had to start to earn a living. Mike later formed Cosworth Engineering with Keith Duckworth, but that is another great story.

In the event the Mark 8 was designed to use the 1250cc MG engine and Colin and I decided that we would each race in the class with this new design. Mine was simple with again swing axle front suspension and solid rear end but I undertook to once again desiamese the engine inlet tracts to improve performance and fitted a pair of the new twin choke sidedraft Solex carburettors. In full race tune this car was capable of 125 mph. Colin's car was more advanced with De Dion rear end and a lighter gauge body shell and hence a better performance.

We now come to the main point in this story. We obtained an invitation for entry to the sports car racing at the Nurburgring circuit prior to the Grand Prix, for both cars under the Team Lotus banner for this meeting on 1st August 1954. Our efforts over the previous three years had not gone unnoticed in the motor racing hierarchy so this was a big feather in our caps. In addition the entry attracted STARTING MONEY! Readers should be aware that up to this time everything we did had to be financed personally, in my case from my indulgent father and whatever money we could earn doing up cars for sale and so this was a major advance and we decided to give it our best shot.

I drove my open car together with my fiancée Pauline, on the road to the Eifel mountain circuit through heavy overnight rain

with no hood! At one point the rain was so heavy that we were forced to stop and both shelter under a ground sheet until the rain abated.

In those days the full circuit was not the present watered down version but was a full 14 miles round for each lap with over 140 corners and a lap time as far as I remember for sports cars of around twelve minutes.

By comparison with UK circuits Nurburgring was impressive. Each competitor had their own lock up pit/ garage with power and light! The main circuit included banked corners and long very wide straights at the start/finish. The start ran off into a 360 degree turn so that the cars then came back past the pits, at full bore again, the two tracks separated by a narrow barrier where spectators and competitors could watch. On either side of these straights were large grandstands seating thousands of spectators.

We had been joined by Danny Margulies in another Lotus Mk 8 and all three Lotus cars went out to practice and I had the misfortune to have an engine failure when a valve head broke off at full speed and after rattling around inside the cylinder head it then punched its way through the top of the piston and down into the sump. The reader might image what this involved. With no starting money disaster loomed big time. Frantic calls were made to the staff at Lotus headquarters at Tottenham Lane North London and a standard cylinder head, conrod and piston were located. Packed up and put on a plane they duly arrived at the local airport in Germany. But how to get there to pick them up?

Our saviour was a young German, a member of the Porsche entourage with two full gold covered upper canine teeth and a duelling scar, and who offered to drive me to the airport to collect the parts. On the way he was determined to show me how good his car was and succeeded to spinning it twice on the damp cobbled streets in the Eifel mountain villages we passed through before arriving safely at the airport. However consternation reigned when customs refused to release the parts without duty being paid. I had no money, no language skills and to this day I do not know how he managed to get them to release the parts without payment but I am eternally grateful to him for his help.

In those days we had two practice days before the actual race and the engine failure was on the first day. All competitors had the use of the Shell and Esso workshop wagons which were fully equipped and had very helpful staff. Once back at the pits I immediately began to strip the engine. The spare MG cylinder head was of course standard in every respect so my special desiamased inlet manifold would not only not fit but also did not align with the standard ports or attachment bolts. I managed to remove the conrod big end bearing cap from the bottom of the sump and to fit a new piston and rod from above. Fortunately the piston and big end journal were of standard size so no great fitting was required or indeed could have been done in the time

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available. This work was done without removing the engine involving much on your back effort! Fitting the cylinder head was a far greater problem. Eventually I managed to get it to roughly fit the manifold with much filing and then hand drilled the head with a pistol drill to take my special manifold studs and retapped the head by hand to take the retaining bolts. Nothing lined up properly but it ran and we could start. A gasket was made by hand. By this time I had been without sleep for nearly 48 hours coupled with the long drive to the circuit and was completely knackered.

I think the organisers had been closely watching this poor English idiot's efforts with increasing alarm, to make the starting grid on time and came forward with the suggestion that they would offer double starting money if I would let one of their regular circuit drivers, who knew the circuit well, to race the car as otherwise they did not feel I was in a fit state to take on the 14 mile laps without incident. Doubtless they were also keen for one of their own drivers to experience first hand the performance of this new British car marque! Reluctant though I was to relinquish a drive on this famous circuit I eventually saw the wisdom of their advice since they were moving to prevent my driving at all in this state, and so Erwin Bauer was to drive the car in my place.

In the race he was in fact doing well and as I recall was lying in fourth place when he came past the pit waving the gearshift lever in his hand. Without being able to change gear he limped to finish. Ironically this was the only part of the car I had not secured with a locking tag and in fact what happened was that the retaining screwed collar gradually came undone so releasing the shift lever. He of course could not fit it back whilst driving and so came to an end all our efforts. However we had started and obtained double starting money.

I now come to the memorable part of this story. As competitors we were able to mingle with the Grand Prix teams at close hand to see the new Mercedes W196, see



*The Mark 6 in the paddock at Silverstone. Hazel and Colin Chapman are standing behind the car which is about to leave the paddock to race with Nigel Allen at the wheel.*

them go out to practice and be involved with the personalities of the day. The sight of the new streamlined shape was quite awe inspiring and its sharp vibrant exhaust sound quite deafening. Quite unique was the sight of Herr Neubauer head of Mercedes racing complete, and never without his hat, giving team directions and everyone running in all directions to do his bidding!

At the start of the main event we were able to be right on the start line. I can remember even now the noise and excitement of the cars starting up and revving up to a crescendo, leaving the starting line and disappearing into the 360 degree turn in a cloud of pungent blue smoke, with the fragrant smell of Castrol R drifting across the track, then round the turn and then coming back past the start. The ground literally shook and the noise from thousands of excited German spectators on their feet, was ear deafening and an experience that can never be repeated. Silence then ensued for ten minutes whilst onlookers watched the cars progress on a huge illuminated circuit map, with commentary from huge loudspeakers in the stands, before the leading cars hurtled into sight after the first lap.

As Tim Imrie's article describes, the race was quite an easy win for Manuel Fangio, who was such a quiet personality, driving with such precision even to the extent of overtaking on the Karrusel which to the unlightened is the one corner on the old track where the surface was inclined at 45 degrees. Once on this the driver was suddenly subjected to far increased 'G' forces and where the track was quite narrow. In spite of this he managed to overtake slower cars at this point!

The attached photograph of the Mark 8 Lotus raced on that occasion was taken the last time I drove the car at Brands Hatch in 1955. It was at this meeting that I had a monumental dice with the Emperor Special driven by David Blakely who it might be remembered was shot and killed by Ruth Ellis the last woman to be hanged in Great Britain. Such is how history is made.

After I qualified as a Dental Surgeon in 1955 and with my marriage looming it seemed to be a good time to get on with the more serious side of life and I sold the Lotus.

Over the years that have since elapsed it is remarkable that those hand built cars still survive today 50 years later. The Mark 3 has been rebuilt and regularly attends Lotus memorial meetings. My original Mark 6 prototype XML 6 has recently been rebuilt by the present owner Graham Nearn, until recently chairman of Caterham Cars, and he has currently lent it to the museum at Gaydon. The Mark 8 again recently rebuilt is also on the present scene with a new owner and is expected to attend events this year.

My wife and I survived all the racing experiences together and are now approaching our Golden Wedding Anniversary.