

Recollection from Greg Lilley

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I had just turned 18 when in 1967 I bought my Brabham BT15 - F3/6/65 - from Tony Dean, who in turn got it from Rodney Bloor of Sports Motors. John Cardwell occasionally worked at Sports Motors and I subsequently learned from him that my car was one of a handful which took part in the Argentine Temporada series; he had driven it there. It was a standard production BT15, with a sidedraft Cosworth MAE.

I got no family help or financing with the car - rather the opposite - and the only factor helping me run it, apart from my brother, was that we owned a petrol station with a full service bay which was otherwise unused.

It may seem ambitious for a kid to launch off into F3 like this, but I wanted a pure racing car - not a clubmans or a saloon - and figured the less bodywork and appendages, the easier the maintenance and repair. Besides, at the time - before Formula Ford - these cars were becoming affordable. I paid £1550 for mine, which for comparison's sake was about the cost of a new Lotus Elan.

I borrowed - OK stole - a van from my father's building company, fitted it with ramps and went racing. Often I would load the van using the lift in the garage, and go alone to the circuit knowing I'd have to recruit help to reload the race car in the van. Money was so short I'd drain the race car tank to fill the van for the trip home. In those days entry fees (typically £10) were refunded if you made the start, so that became a rolling fund as far as I was concerned. Incidentally this refunding policy led to people bringing some desperate patch-ups to the grid after accidents in practice



Tony Dean won a race at Rufforth in the car in late 1966; I bought it in January 1967 and my first meeting was at Cadwell on March 5th. I was a distant last in both my events.

The programme from that day shows a fascinating entry list.

My next meeting was at Silverstone, where I qualified near the back. A split clutch pipe sidelined me in the race. I simply didn't know about clutchless gear changes. I remember in an early lap going into Maggotts in a cluster of cars, only to see an explosion of cars ahead of me in all directions - there had obviously been some contact - and then finding myself alone for a lap or two. Then the train of cars slipstreaming each other caught up.

You hear lots today about the 'classic slipstreaming battles' in 60s F3.

Well, lap times were often close - I finished in midfield once at Oulton and was 100 yards behind the winner - but most slipstream battles were at Silverstone purely because it had such long straights. People were coming into to the paddock afterwards showing 11,500 rpm on the tacho recorder - if they forgot to reset it so no-one knew.

Everywhere else you just huddled up with the others rather than get lonely. And for my part at least, following or joining people through corners was a way of learning how to do it all.



I paid £8 and did a day's testing - entirely alone - at Cadwell, and at my next Cadwell meeting on April 16th Tony Dean set pace for me in practice. I qualified 3rd behind him and Ben Moore. (As you may know, both their sons are involved in racing today). Early in the race I was cheeky enough to think I might pass one or both of them.

Some way back in 4th place was an Australian - I think his name was George Cayley, or Claydon - a former mechanic for Chris Lambert, who was then making a name for himself and had moved up to F2.

Cadwell was an interesting place back then. It had no Armco. There was a brick railway bridge spanning the esses, a farm after the hairpin, and an unfenced pond on the outside of Barn - into which Peter Fattorini launched his BT18 in practice; it failed to float.

There was a children's playground on the infield behind the suicide alley which acted as the pits. Scrutineering was done in a wooden shed and the cafe was a ramshackle shanty perched on a hillside. It served great tea and toast.

A quick lap at Cadwell was - and of course still is - a commitment. Then the record stood at 1.42+; my best was a high 1.43.

In the first race I was pushed off at Charlies; Cayley (?) had been getting pace from we leaders until he tried to pass me on the inside of the false second apex at Charlies. His outside front wheel somehow clipped my inside rear. I ran into the clay bank - (no Armco: and of course we had no seatbelts or extinguishers, while our overalls were patently combustible) - tearing off all the left suspension, breaking some chassis tubes and puncturing the fuel tank.

He was killed racing two weeks later, in a car-contact incident.

I was left with a very bent racing car and no money. In the first of several visits, I took the bare frame down to Arch Motors in Huntingdon. (The bill for a rejig, repair and repaint of the spaceframe was £17).

Later my brother and I visited the Brabham works to collect the other parts. We arrived at midnight, coincidentally with Dietrich Minter, there for a seat fitting in his F2 car.

Ron Tauranac personally looked after us and I can't believe his patience in dealing with a couple of dimwit kids at that time of night. He painstakingly talked us through the procedure for assembling the rear upright, while we blinked uncomprehendingly. The bill at Brabham's - for a whole left hand suspension and a rear upright casting - was £60.

Subsequently Alan Rees of Brabham was very helpful in giving advice on the phone.

Cosworth Engineering were always friendly, especially after a conversation in which it emerged Keith Duckworth knew my home town. Once after a routine check of the engine internals, I called them for advice and to order gaskets or something minor.

Keith Duckworth said I should replace all the bolts in the lower end of the engine. I was dumbstruck. He said is money tight? I said no it's non-existent. The bolts arrived, free, with the other bits.

I didn't finish rebuilding the car until June. There followed a scratch at Brands - faulty steering from the shunt - and then a run of events, mostly at Oulton and Mallory. I didn't like Brands and have never been back.

That year I did 32 starts and had 27 finishes, with two shunts, a split clutch pipe and two fuel pump failures. I learned it was wise to use two Bendix (now Facet) pumps in tandem, because one alone can always let you down. Make that will always let you down.

At Mallory in July I qualified third in teeming rain. Ahead of me were two local heroes, names writ large on their bodywork: Steve Thompson and Bev Bond. At the drivers' briefing we were sternly cautioned to be careful as the meeting was unexpectedly to be televised.

We were told the prize money would be doubled. (Another £5: what can we squander it on?)

I suggested to the school pal helping me that if I hung back in third and stayed out of trouble, we'd inherit a win on telly, and another giddy £5, when the local heroes inevitably had each other off: so let's make sure everything is tightened up shall we?

He sheared an oil pump stud and I couldn't start. The skies cleared, the race was run in radiant TV friendly sunshine - and the local heroes had each other off....

I was back in the garage next day, wondering how the hell you got a sheared stud out of an engine block, when there was a knock on the door. It was the Snap-On agent. In his hand was their newest product - a stud extractor set. I still own it.

Later the same day a pal dropped in; he and his father ran another garage nearby. They were moving to Cornwall: he asked if I wanted to buy his Lotus Elite Climax for £200.

I said I didn't have £200. There followed the most terrifying road test of my life, in the course of which I decided the differential was trying to join us in the cabin. I repeated that I didn't have £200. He immediately dropped the price to £100. I still didn't buy it.

A man with a Ginetta G4 stopped in one day; he wanted £80 for it so he could catch the train back to London - that way he might arrive. I didn't buy the G4 either.

By now, via some Oulton events and a mutual acquaintance, I knew Ken Crook, who was running a BT18 in club events. He in turn knew Mo Nunn, who had a Lotus 41.

The 41 was developed from the 22. It was out of favour and you could buy one for much less than any Brabham. But it had a slimmer profile and the frame was actually stiffer than the Lotus 35 monocoque. (Which was a bag of rubbish). What let the 41 down was that the radius arms and wishbones were just too thin and flimsy, while Lotus being bad payers were given poor components - unmatched springs, unbalanced dampers - by suppliers. In addition they had done virtually no development on the car.

Mo Nunn had dealt with all this, effectively re-engineering his 41 into a very quick car, while he was a capable driver. I recall him passing me at Druids - in qualifying at Oulton - so sideways I could read his race number. I thought I was about to witness The Accident of All Time, but he gathered it all up and carried on. He eventually sold the 41 back to Lotus, who renamed it the 41X. It became the basis for the successful 59. You can see this lineage in Lotus cars of that period: essentially the same front lower wishbone was used on the 7, 12, 14 (Elite), 22, 41, 51, 59 and 61. It was a parts-bin design basis unmatched until Reynard.

In those days Oulton had no more Armco than Cadwell. In some ways that wasn't such a bad thing; as any motorcyclist will agree. If you missed the trees you at least spun into a field, instead of ripping off all your suspension against a barrier and being bounced back into the path of the next car along....

The spectators were allowed to get much nearer to the action too.

Still it was a daunting place to go quickly in; the outside of Old Hall was lined with railway sleepers, and with an understeering car it took a fair bit of commitment to brake late enough to go into them if you got no power on turn in - as with a faulty bloody Bendix fuel pump....

The outside of Cascades had a copse of trees and a bumpy grass verge.

There were no chicanes between Shell Hairpin and Knicker Brook, which then was a simple right-hand curve. In a 1-litre F3 it was absolutely flat, the car sliding a bit. Clay Hill was a blur and you arrived at Druids with some urgency. A friend of mine was a fire marshal at Clay Hill, and said he'd never forget seeing me pass him flat out backwards under the Dunlop Bridge after spinning while avoiding someone. So here's being cocky and 18: I put on some lock and dabbed the brakes at the hilltop - and the car spun back on course again, just in time to watch Mo Nunn pass me through Druids.

The cricket pitch remained in the infield, and there were lots of leftovers from the US Army using it as a camp in WW2. (For Patton's birthday they set up a boxing ring where Knicker now is, and Joe Louis gave demonstration bouts).

The paddock was grass, uneven, patchy and lethal if it rained. I loved it. The toilets would have merited a Greenpeace dinghy all their own. I once used the urinal next to Jim Clark. When in the 90s they restored the place I was dismayed: I would have bought those urinals.

I booked Oulton for private testing one Saturday, for £8. Nobody warned the people cutting down trees along the Avenue. They were great, let me carry on as long as I slowed round their area, and helped me reload the car into the van.

It struck me that copying Mo Nunn might be the path to take for the next season; get a cheap 41, work on it and fit one of the expensive (I think they cost £700) new screamer engines I kept seeing go past me.

But by now I'd got to know Frank Williams. At the time he sold parts and traded road and race cars from a flat in Pinner Road, Harrow. Or was it Harrow Road, Pinner?

I got some bits from him - a battery, a fuel pump, rims, whatever - and each time he would put the parts on a train to Manchester and I'd send payment by return. In the early days he had a business partner who shortly afterwards died; I'm embarrassed not to recall his name because he was a really likeable person.

I visited Frank Williams' place on occasion, once or twice sleeping on the couch. By mid 1967 he had virtually taken over Brabham's spares distribution and after-sales, and had occupied all the lockup garages along the railway line behind his flat, by dint of bribery.

In those days you got start money for European street races and so there was always a floating population of racing vagrants around the place; lots of nationalities, drifting back for spares and repairs between events.

('They live like gypsies, Greg,' said Frank, 'some even sleep in tents').

There were also always tons of cars, from road Mustangs and old Lotus 22s to a Surtees Lola T70 with an Aston Martin engine which had just grenaded itself at Le Mans. Frank gazed idly out of the window at it and offered it to me for £2000, trailer and all. Tony Trimmer was one of his mechanics. One month he couldn't pay Tony so gave him his Patek Phillipe watch instead. Trimmer was bemoaning the stupidity of customers one evening in the kitchen, making a sandwich amid a pile of MAE parts. He said the dimwits didn't even check, for example, that with the throttle pedal fully down the throttle butterfly was fully open. I nodded agreement, thinking I'll check that when I get back. Sure enough.....

As the European season wound to an end, all the wandering F3 cars came back and Frank had a full-time business doing the upgrades and rebuilds. A big step was in converting Brabham's to BT21B spec. Everybody who had been away wanted one, but by then I had run here with the Chevrons and Titans and knew they were quicker. They were simply too expensive for me. Formula Ford was just around the corner, but it seemed a backward step to me; and anyway in the first years you couldn't modify your F3 to F Ford, so that avenue was cut off.

So I agreed to sell my BT15 to Frank, and buy a BT21B.

Meanwhile I seemed to be returning to my earlier promise and doing some decent lap times. However, in that one year a lot of the relatively dated machinery - Lotus 20s and 22s - and the lesser stuff such as ageing Coopers and Lola's, had already fallen by the wayside, and I and my '65 Brabham found ourselves in some pretty ambitious company. The screamer engines facilitated wider tyres: rim widths went from a typical 7"/9" to 8"/10", and new sticky Firestones replaced our hard Dunlop's. The works Titans and Chevrons began to form a class of their own.

Nevertheless, at a late-season Oulton international your local boy done good. This was some big deal meeting with lots of hype. I was told Ronnie Peterson was in the event, all the way from Sweden - and he's quick. And he's in a works Tecno. And they've got a short track and wide wheelbase, just for handling in traffic. And his Swedish mate Reine Wissell is here too and he's quick. And they've got clean overalls.

They both were delayed by mechanical issues and after - I think - 20 laps I got a remote 5th, lapped by the works Titans and Harry Stiller's Brabham BT23, an F2 car modified to F3 spec which I had earlier seen overtaking me at speed on the grass at the side of the starting grid - shortly before the flag dropped for the start.

My last meeting that year was back at Cadwell in October. For some reason the car understeered off at Charlies; cold tyres, too much speed and cockpit embolism probably.

The chassis was tweaked and the body needed a new nose section, so it was back to Huntingdon overnight again. (Every time in a Vauxhall Viva van for heavens sake). It then went to Frank Williams, who sold it to Fred Opert in America.

Other cars I drove that year were: A Lotus 30 at Silverstone - it was for sale for £700; a Lotus 23 at Mallory and Cadwell; and a 1-litre 6-speed F2 Cooper at Oulton.

Bob Owen was an Oulton regular, secretary of the Aston Martin Owners Club, and neighbour of my schoolpal. He offered me his Aston DB4GT Zagato for £1100 and his DB3S for £1900, in a divorce sale. I suggested to my father they might be good investments; after all the DB3S might be collectable like a Green Label Bentley one day.

No chance.

So you can imagine the reaction when I also suggested we buy the Supermarine Spitfire our local Air Training Corps was using as a gate guardian; I'd heard £1000 would buy it.

Instead it was used as a prop in the Battle of Britain film, and now belongs, in full flying condition, to Alain de Cadenet. Turns out it was a prime, low use, Spitfire Mk5. You can now see it at Duxford.

(In 1970 I was offered an Elva BMW 160GT for £700. One of four built, it had run at Le Mans and was for sale, after a full restoration, by the rebuilder. It had belonged to 'some American who went missing in Vietnam'. Later I learned he was Sean Flynn).

The entire Titan car operation went up for sale at the end of 1967, for £10,000 cash. This would buy the team cars, the prototype Formula Fords, several engines, and a pile of chassis frames, bodies and parts, together with the intellectual rights. At the time everyone used the same procedure: Arch make the frame, Specialised Mouldings make the bodywork, you put it together, slap in a bought-in engine and double the cost to produce the selling price. A similar arrangement still works for some manufacturers today.

My father and I went for a look, at Titan's old premises by the Kings Head pub in Highgate, but it went no further. I believe Frank Williams bought the project, and sold 60-odd cars to America in 1968.

Much later I bought a Lotus 7 from a lad who worked for Titan. He remembered everyone shaking in their shoes when Ben Moore - actually a really nice fellow who was always helpful to me - came down from Hull with some heavy-looking mates to pay £3000 in cash for a hastily-assembled Titan 3A to replace the one he'd just destroyed.

Saying that about Ben Moore prompts me to add that Tony Dean and Frank Williams were also always very straight, helpful and fair in all their dealings with me.

At the Racing Car Show in January 1968 I met Peter Gaydon, who had been doing well in a Chevron F3. When I asked him if he was happy with the car's performance he said yes and he was amazed to discover at the end of a good year the chassis was twisted 1" from an early-season accident.

Frank Costin was at that show, with a tiny spaceframe single seater project car. It used an interesting 3-dimensional floor triangulation layout. I'm sure it found its' way into F4 later.

I fell away from racing as my family's businesses went into decline, and apart from restoring an occasional Elite Climax took no interest in motor sport for a while. In fact I took up mountaineering and skiing, married an American girl and went to live in California.

One day in 1983 out of the blue my wife gave me a copy of AutoWeek - America's Motorsport News. In it, advertised by chassis number, was Brabham BT15 F3/6/65.

It was offered for sale in Rye, Connecticut by an Englishman, Mike Gue, a 60s stalwart who was running people in events over there and had been garaging my old car for its' owner, who would simply hire Lime Rock from time to time and have a blast round on his own.

I went to look at the car.

It was just as I last saw it, and still bore signs of my own work. It was for sale for just \$5000, but there was no chance of buying it as my second daughter was due to be born that month.

I also crossed paths with a couple of Titan Mk3s; one was for sale in Chesterfield, for £700 when it was eligible for F4 - say around 1971. Another was in Patrick Jamin's workshops at the Nogaro circuit in 1994 when I visited.

I still think 1-litre F3 was the best club racing class ever, notwithstanding its' origins as an international formula, and I believe it was prematurely killed off in favour of Formula Ford, in this country at least. Many of the vaunted savings and economies of Formula Ford over F3 were more notional than real, and the early FF cars were dogs. Look at any early FF - be it a Crossle, Merlyn, Alexis - whatever - and you're looking at the suspension layout of a Brabham BT18. With a less favourable weight distribution, a lump of an engine, and in those days road tyres. No, thanks.

Meanwhile moving F3 up to 1.5 litres was the kiss of death, because everyone fitted Lotus twincam engines which were just hopelessly unreliable. I don't believe F3 came back into its' own again until the 2-litre Toyota era.

As for today, anyone involved in historic 1-litre F3 has my respect and appreciation, for keeping the little buggers going and for keeping the dream alive.

Greg Lilley