

# Curragh History Archives



## Motor Racing

**The Curragh**

**(1947 - 1954)**

**By Oliver McCrossan**

*The Curragh known throughout the world as the home of Irish horse racing, could also boast of having no less than two motor racing circuits in the late 1940s and early fifties. Known as the Short' circuit and the 'big' circuit, both played host to great entries and attracted huge crowds. The Short' circuit was first used in 1947 and catered for both car and motorcycle events. It was used until the late fifties, whereas the 'big' circuit was the venue for the famous International Wakefield Trophy car races which were held annually from 1949 to 1954.*

## JULY 1947

The first ever event was held on the 'short' circuit in July 1947 and catered for three races each for cars and motorcycles. The start and finish line was on the road from the present Rugby Club, down to Donnelly's Hollow while a sharp left brought the competitors back to Lumville Cross, where they turned left again for the Curragh, while at the Rugby Club a further sharp left brought them back to the start and finish line, a lap distance of 1.7 miles. My older brother brought me along and he was given strict instructions to keep me well back from 'this dangerous sport'. We took up a good vantage point, to await the start. We looked down the list of entries and discovered that we had a local man to cheer on in the motorcycle race. Paddy Brennan, better known as *Battler*, was down to ride a 350 BSA. Among the list of Officials were some other familiar names. Jack Lewis, proprietor of the Wesleyan Home was a Steward of the meeting. Col. Sean Collins-Powell was listed as a Judge and Corndt. Michael McInerney was Chief Medical Officer



**Charlie Norton in the Jirano, a Jaguar engine Car**

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The cars and motorcycles each had two heats and a final. The cars had the honour of getting the event under way and when they roared past us on the first lap I was jumping with excitement. The sound of the high powered engines, the smell of the high octane racing fuel, the exciting spectacle of the cars racing side by side on the narrow roads captivated me and I became an instant motor racing fan. The motorcycles were also very exciting to watch and we cheered on our local *Battler*, as he roared past. For the final race of the day, 10 cars took their places on the grid and at the drop of the flag they roared off towards Donnelly's Hollow with a smell of burning rubber. They were around again in about a minute and a half, all still tightly bunched together, the excitement building up as the faster cars tried to overtake. I watched in honor as German driver Dorndorf in a BMW touched wheels with the Aston-Martin of Geoff McCrea as he attempted to pass on the hill down to Donnelly's Hollow. The BMW hit the bank and somersaulted into the air and landed upside down on the track. It continued to slide for quite a distance before coming to rest. I thought the driver must surely be dead, but miraculously his injuries were not too serious. The Army Medical Services were quickly on the scene and poor Dorndorf was driven to hospital at a much reduced speed in an old Bedford Army ambulance.

## THE WAKEFIELD TROPHY

Racing was back again on the 'short' circuit in 1948. The quality of the entries had improved in the space of a year as more competitors turned out. A new name appeared on the programme at the August meeting, that of Joe Kelly. His car was called an IRA special. I hasten to add that the initials stood for Irish Racing Automobile. It was built at his Red Cow garage in Clondalkin. Over the next few years Joe continued to build further IRA specials. He was one of the most successful Irish drivers, always very exciting to watch. 1949 was a big year for motor racing on the Curragh, not only were there three meetings on the 'short' circuit, but the first of the Wakefield Trophy Meetings was held in September on the 'big' circuit. The April meeting was marred by a fatal accident which claimed the life of Dublin driver George Cox. I arrived at the circuit just before practice and took up my position at Lumville Corner.



**Gillie Tyer in the Supermotor BMW (1953)**

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There was a slight hump on the road near to the entrance to the Pitch and Putt Course, which obscured the view of the competitors. As the first bunch of cars approached this section, I saw to my honor a little boy running across the track. The first car to crest the hump was the MG of George Cox. On seeing the boy he braked violently. The car skidded and mounted a garden bank and overturned, blocking the road, with the driver trapped inside. The next car was unable to avoid crashing into the wreckage, though Cox managed to creep out from his damaged MG. His only concern was for the boy and only after being assured that he had not even touched him, did he consent to be taken to hospital. Few people realised that his injuries were so serious and it came as a great shock when we learned that he died later that night in the nearby Drogheda Memorial Hospital.

At the June meeting the lap record was broken by Joe Kelly, this time driving a Maserati. This was the first purpose-built racing car to race at the Curragh. Up until then the entries consisted mostly of MGs and home or garage built 'specials'. I had become a great fan of Joe and he certainly gave the crowds a demonstration of high speed racing that day. The record which he set that day was to remain unbroken until 1954, when Joe again shattered it by almost 10mph, this time in a Ferrari Sports car.

In September the 'big' circuit was used for the first time. This course was 4.5 miles long, and had the start and finish on the main Newbridge-Kildare road near Ballymany. The cars raced towards Kildare on a straight stretch for over a mile before reaching the notorious Hairpin, where they turned left for the Camp. A series of sharp corners brought them down to the bottom road, past the swimming baths, with a sharp left after O'Donnell's Shop, up the hill past the postoffice and on down to a double left hander at Ballymany to complete the lap. Preparations for this event were evident for weeks beforehand. The Army Corps of Engineers erected a huge Grandstand at the Start and finish line. This was constructed from sections of Bailey Bridge. Two smaller stands were erected at Ballymany and at the Kildare Hairpin. The scene opposite the main stand was very colourful. Each driver had his own counter at the roadside with his name and make of car painted overhead.

This served as a great source of advance publicity for the event, with the result that there was an estimated attendance of 30,000 at the first meeting.

The standard of facilities around the circuit was equal to that of any track in England at that time, with the added bonus for spectators that admission to the trackside was free. Only those who wished to view from the comfort of the grandstands or one of the seated enclosures had to pay. All this was made possible by the tremendous effort of the Army Authorities whose organisational skills were available for the asking. Miles of rope barriers were put in place on both sides of the road to keep spectators at a safe distance. A public address system was in operation at all the good vantage points. Field telephones were installed at the corners furthest from the start and finish area to alert emergency service. Army personnel were on duty to marshal the crowds. Dozens of Army motorcycle riders also patrolled the Plains to ensure that the flocks of sheep were kept well back.

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When the overseas competitors arrived on the Wednesday for the weekend racing they were given free garage facilities down at Hare Park, behind Sandes Home and the drivers and team members were afforded the hospitality of some of the Officers Messes. Small wonder then that many of the competitors like Roy Salvadori, Duncan Hamilton, Peter Whitehead, Anthony Powys-Lybbe and many more returned annually for The Wakefield Trophy and were loud in their praise of the hospitality shown to them at the Curragh.



**Jack Walton, Cooper Bristol**

## 1949-50

As the drivers took up their positions for the feature race in 1949, in cars with exotic sounding names like Maserati, ERA, Ferrari, Sunbeam and Alfa Romeo, a steady drizzle was falling. At the drop of the flag ten powerful cars hurtled like projectiles towards the dreaded Kildare Hairpin. The first car to reach it was Peter Walker's ERA. His wheels locked on the slippery surface. He was followed closely by the Maserati of Roy Salvadori who had to brake hard to avoid the ERA. The third car to arrive was the Alta of Gordon Watson who slammed into the back of the Maserati. Both cars burst into flames, but with little regard for his own safety, Salvadori stood up in the blazing car and steered it past the crowded enclosure and stands. Then with his overalls ablaze he leaped from the flaming car. He rolled himself on the grass and extinguished the flames. His Maserati careered down the escape road eventually coming to rest near Colgan's Cut where it burned itself out. To this day I still have a small souvenir piece of molten metal from that car! The race was won by Anthony Powys-Lybbe in an Alfa Romeo. This was the first of many successes for him at the Curragh.

Race meetings continued to be held on a regular basis at the 'short' circuit during 1950. The quality of the entries improved tremendously. Joe Flynn, driving a little MG, however always managed to beat the handicapper and became a regular winner. He also had the distinction of winning the first race on this circuit as well as the first O'Boyle Trophy on the 'big' circuit. Another interesting entry was that of Redmond Gallagher, MD of Urney Chocolates, who competed regularly in a little Motorcycle engined car called a Leprechaun, in which he put up fastest time of the day at the June meeting. Wakefield Trophy time came around again in September and another successful meeting was held. Our old friend Joe Kelly was all set to win after working his way up through the field, but was passed by Duncan Hamilton on the very last corner and was beaten by less than a car's length.

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**Anthony Powys-Lybbe, 2.9 Monoposto Alfa Romeo (1953)**

## STIRLING MOSS

1951 will be remembered as the year that Stirling Moss won the Wakefield Trophy. He was only 22 years of age but even then he was in a class apart and well on his way to fame. He also set a new lap record that day. Over the next three years the regular 'short' circuit meetings were held and the entries became so big that the car and motor-cycle events each had their separate race days. Faster cars such as the XK120 Jaguars competed regularly. Excellent entries turned out annually for the 'big' circuit, which continued to attract huge crowds. Speeds of over 145 mph were recorded on the main straight by the Jaguars of Kelly, Hamilton and Whitehead.

1954 promised to be a great year for motor sport on the Curragh, with regular meetings scheduled for the 'short' circuit and the first ever Motorcycle meeting to be held on the 'big' circuit as part of An *Tostal* and of course the Wakefield Trophy in August. The motorcycle meeting for An *Tostal* was held on May 1, attracting a good cross-channel entry. It was held under appalling weather conditions and I really felt sorry for the riders battling against high winds and rain. This was the only motor-cycle meeting ever held on the 'big' circuit.

Thirty-eight cars lined up for the start of the Wakefield Trophy in August. They were sent away in groups according to handicap. The fastest bunch, consisting of the Jaguars of Hamilton and Titterington and the Cooper. Jag of Whitehead, were most impressive as they surged away together, leaving the smell of burning rubber hanging over the start-line. At the half-way distance this fast group were rapidly coming up onto the leader board as they worked their way through the field. Then disaster struck, Joe Quinn from Derry, driving a V/8 engined Special, touched wheels with another car that he was overtaking on the approach to Ballymany corner. Quinn's car left the road and the bonnet shot up and obscured his view as he careered towards the tightly packed spectator enclosure. A young soldier who was acting as a crowd marshal and a spectator were killed instantly when they were knocked to the ground by the car as it crashed through the rope barrier. Several other spectators were injured. Poor Quinn lost his life as the rope became entangled around his neck. I was watching from across the road but only witnessed the final moments as the car came slowly to a halt with the driver's body hanging grotesquely from the cockpit. The accident happened about twenty minutes before the finish and spectators only a few hundred yards away were unaware of the tragedy as the race continued. The Army Medical services attended to the injured at the scene and the more seriously injured were rushed to the nearby Drogheda Memorial Hospital.

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The Scratch race for the Wakefield Trophy was won by Peter Whitehead in the Cooper-Jaguar, with Kelly and Hamilton in their Jaguars tying for second place. Redmond Gallagher in a Gordini was the winner of the Handicap race for the O'Boyle Trophy. As I walked away from the track that evening, I took a last long look at the colourful scene. Somehow I knew that I was seeing for the last time the Curragh 'big' circuit decked out for its annual role as a race track.

## END OF AN ERA

Three weeks later racing was back again on the 'short' circuit with a meeting for cars and motorcycles. This was probably the best ever meeting on this course. No less than five Jaguars were entered as well as a Frazer-Nash driven by Dickie Odum, from Portlaoise, who had the distinction of winning the handicap race, thus earning a place in history for himself as the driver who won the last ever race on this course. Man of the meeting was undoubtedly Joe Kelly driving a three-litre Ferrari. Lap after lap he thrilled the huge crowd as he smashed his own record which had remained unbroken since 1949. At one part of the course, near Donnelly's Hollow, his Ferrari became airborne for several yards after hitting a bump on the road. On this exciting note the final curtain came down, to bring to an end the thrilling spectacle of car racing at the Curragh. Speeds had increased dramatically over the previous couple of years, so the organisers, fearing for the safety of both drivers and spectators, decided to call it a day. However, motor cycle racing continued annually there until 1960, with one final meeting in October 1967, an event which had to be abandoned after the third race due to bad weather conditions. The end a chapter in Irish motor racing history was finally closed.

**By Oliver McCrossan**