



## *American Hillclimbs at Hay Hill*

For a couple of years in the late 1930s, and then again in the early 1950s, the grassy slopes of Hay Hill, about a mile south-west of the cathedral city of Wells, Somerset, were the venue for "American" hillclimbs organised by the Shepton Mallet & District Motor-cycle and Light Car Club. Whereas in a traditional hillclimb the challenge was to be the quickest to get to the top of the course, in these events, where the gradient at its steepest was 1 in 1 ½, the additional challenge was to be able to reach the top at all!

In the summer of 1938 William Payne of Lower Burcott Farm generously placed Hay Hill and adjoining fields at the disposal of the Shepton Mallet club free of cost, and the first hillclimb there was on Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August. It was for motorcycles only, running in pairs on a knockout basis through heats, quarter- and semi-finals, to a deciding final for each class.

The course, all on grass, was dead straight and quite bumpy, especially in the steepest part, and approximately 150 to 160 yards long. The start was on the level, followed by about 40 yards of flat surface before competitors had to negotiate a steep bank, cutting through two broken hedges of the orchard – the "jumps" here prevented competitors building up too much speed from the start. Then, onto the slope of the hill, the next 120 yards had an average gradient of 1 in 2, increasing at the top to the maximum of 1 in 1 ½ .

The event proper started at 2.30 in the afternoon, and a good crowd of 1200 paid for admission, although numerous others avoided payment by breaking down fences or trespassing onto nearby fields to watch. A camera from British Pathe was also present, to film some of the action for a short newsreel item that would later be shown in cinemas around the country <sup>1</sup>.

Despite all the bumps and jumps, there were no spills in the event itself, and very few of the riders failed to reach the top. The Hay Hill Cup for making fastest time went to AR (Bob) Foster who recorded 12.8 sec in the 'unlimited' semi-final, although he then placed second to R Webb in the final. The 350 final was won by FG Phillpotts, and the 'fastest riders' final by J Difazio.

With this first event being a success, the Shepton club immediately looked at the possibility of opening up the event to cars in addition to motorcycles, and two weeks later they returned to the venue to attempt what appeared impossible – to climb Hay Hill with a motor car.

On Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> August Bristolian Alf Morrish brought along his MG Magnette, in normal touring trim, the only preparation before attempting the climb being to fit competition tyres. The Wells Journal reported: *"The first few attempts were by no means successful, as the car leapt into the air when taking the jumps, causing the car to considerably reduce its speed. It also set up wheelspins at the point where the gradient is greater than 1 in 2."* Lowering the tyre pressures, and with William Payne and S Beacham of the Shepton club in the back as ballast, Morrish then made his next attempt which he *"took at an amazing pace, with the car leaping in the air over irregular surfaces. To the delight of those present, the car and its occupants safely reached the top..."*

### **1939 – Cars now included**

Having proved that cars could also conquer the hill, the following year's event, on Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> August, duly included classes for cars and motorcycles. A crowd of around 2000 was attracted, with a new car park arranged at bottom of the hill facing the course, but, with a single entrance queues built up and some did not get in until an hour after the advertised start time.

There was an excellent entry of motorcycles once more, including TT rider Bob Foster, and 20 entries in the car classes, where local drivers such as Cyril Butler with his Butler Special were joined by members of the MG Car Club and the North West London Motor Club.

There was speculation if any of the unsupercharged (up to 1500cc) class cars would be able to reach the top of the hill and in the event only trials expert Philip Flower actually completed the climb in his MG.

In the unlimited class JES (John) Jones, D Murkett and WJ "Dickie" Green took turns at the wheel of a 1292cc supercharged MG, Murkett and Green tying for third place, behind DW Price's Ford V8 and the powerful V12 Allard Special of Martin Soames, who stormed up in a time of 17.4 sec, albeit four seconds slower than the fastest of the motor-cycles, R. Stanier's Rudge,

13 August 1939 results:

Unsupercharged cars upto 1500cc:

1 - PS Flower (MG), 2 - MH Lawson (HRG Meadows), 3 - DW Pritchard (MG)

Supercharged & unlimited cars:

1 - MS Soames (V12 Allard) 17.4 sec, 2 - DW Price (Ford V8), 3= D Murkett (MG) & WJ Green (MG)

### **The 1950s**

With the unwelcome intervention of the Second World War, twelve years would pass before the Shepton Mallet club were able to recommence events at Hay Hill. The first post war event, on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> Sept 1951, was put together fairly quickly, being organised and held within a month from obtaining permission to run it; as previously Clerk of the Course and Secretary of the Meeting was Victor Keeling of Shepton Mallet. It was for motorcycles only, using the same course as before, as was the next meeting, on 13<sup>th</sup> July 1952.

The Club had encountered many difficulties trying to include cars once more, however they eventually obtained a closed to club permit from the RAC for their second event of 1952, on Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> August.

Car entries included two from Frome garage owner Wally Cuff, with his "Hells Hammers V" Iota 500 and "Cuff Special", the 1172 Ford specials of Captain JG Searle, EW Pike (EPS) and IDL "Tiny" Lewis, B Fitzwater's Riley Special, Ashley Cleave's famous Morris Ten Special, and MGs for Horace Gould and "Tiny" Lewis. In many cases, where eligible, these were entered in more than one class, having two timed runs in each, rather than running in pairs on a knockout basis as the motor-cycles did<sup>2</sup>.

CM Seward who ran in each of the three car classes in his "Freakin" special had a very successful time, achieving a 1<sup>st</sup>, a 2<sup>nd</sup>, and a 3<sup>rd</sup> in class. Fastest car climb of the day, though, was hill specialist Alf Morrish, with 19.6 sec in his supercharged MG, also winning two of the three classes. Quickest of the motorcycles, winning the Hay Hill Trophy, was Jimmy Alves, of Glastonbury, recording 11 sec on his Triumph.

31<sup>st</sup> August 1952 results:

Cars upto 1300cc unsupercharged (11 entries)

1 - CM Seward (Freakin 1099cc) 22.4 sec; 2 - WC Cuff (Cuff Special); 3 - EA Jauncey (Marden 1172cc)

Cars up to 1500cc (10 entries)

1 - AW Morrish (MG 939cc s/c); 2 - EA Jauncey (Marden 1172cc); 3 - CM Seward (Freakin 1099cc)

Cars unlimited cc (7 entries)

1 - AW Morrish (MG 939cc s/c); 2 - CM Seward (Freakin 1099cc); 3 - H Sinclair-Sweeney ("Jacquie" 1442cc s/c)

In 1953 the July 19<sup>th</sup> meeting was again just for motorcycles, but the second meeting, on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August, also included cars, and the fine weather attracted a crowd of three to four thousand. Jimmy Alves repeated his previous year's motorcycle success, again recording a time of 11 seconds to win the Hay Hill Trophy.

Only ten car entries were received this year, including Wally Cuff with his 500cc and 1100cc Cuff Specials, the latter also being driven by R Ashley. Owing to the greasy nature of the grass none of them actually succeeded in reaching the top of the hill, but Cuff in his 500 special managed to better Alf Morrish and his MG. Later in the afternoon, after the advertised programme had been completed, the cars had another run and this time two drivers did succeed in getting to the top.

30<sup>th</sup> August 1953 results:

1 - W Cuff (Cuff 500 Special); 2 - AW Morrish (MG 939cc s/c); 3 - Bob Harris (Allard)<sup>3</sup>

A further Hay hillclimb was scheduled for Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1954, however on the preceding Friday an announcement by the Shepton Mallet club appeared in the local newspaper cancelling the event "*owing to circumstances beyond their control*".

With the 1953 event being the last, in all there were just six hillclimbs run at Hay Hill, two pre-war and four post war, and only just three of those involved cars:

1939 – Martin Soames (Allard) 17.4s (hill record)

1952 – Alf Morrish (MG) 19.6s

1953 – Wally Cuff (Cuff 500)

and the outright hill record of 11.0 secs stands to motor-cyclist Jimmy Alves, set in 1951 <sup>4</sup>.

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Notes:

1. The 30 second British Pathe film (Id.977.04) from 1938 may be viewed at:

<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/hill-climb-at-wells-somerset>

2. The 31 August 1952 program shows that cars had two timed runs in each class in contrast to the motor-cycles running on a knockout basis. It is reasonable to assume that this had also applied in the pre-war event.

3. This was probably Barnstaple builder Bob Harris in his Allard J1 'Appleton Special' JHY613.

4. No times were given in reports of the July 1952 event, so it is assumed that the previous record hadn't been bettered.

5. An additional entry pencilled onto the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1953 program was for a "LRJ 1172cc".

Hay hill summit Location:
Coordinates: 51.1986 N 2.6775 W

### Sources

Wells Journal, Shepton Mallet Journal, Central Somerset Gazette, [www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com)

Pete Stowe 2021

Westcountry Motorsport History

Website <https://bpmc.org.uk/petestowe/wmh.htm>

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