



Somerset Automobile Club

Hillclimbs 1905 - 1913

Puriton – Buncombe – Wraxall - Shipham

In the summer of 1904 a number of enthusiastic motorists in the county of Somerset formed a motor club, with one of their aims being to encourage the use of mechanically propelled vehicles. Twelve months later, with membership now totalling 91, the Somerset Automobile Club embarked on their first speed competition, a hillclimb for club members arranged for that September.

The first ever speed competition in the UK for motor vehicles had only taken place six years earlier, and not only would this be a pioneering event for the Club, it would also be the first to take place in the West Country. It would also be the first of a series of annual Club hillclimbs that would be run at various locations across the county in the years leading up to the First World War.

1905 and 1906 – Puriton Hill

23 September 1905

The venue chosen for the first event, on Saturday 23rd September, was Puriton Hill, three miles north of Bridgwater on the road leading eastwards from the Puriton Inn, just south of Puriton village itself. The course was 880 yards long, beginning with an easy rise, gradually increasing to finish steeply with a gradient of 1 in 11 over the last 300 yards. As the road would still be open to the public, it not being a main road, and not having any side turnings, would allow the event to be conducted *“without inconvenience from general road traffic”*.

An entry of 36 cars, representing 16 different marques, was spread over seven classes divided according to the cars' chassis price. Each car was allowed three runs, with the quickest time to count for awards (silver medals). *“Large numbers”* of spectators were reported to have watched the event and would have been able to view the whole course from start to finish. The weather on the day was described as dull but *“exceedingly favourable”*, and the road condition such that the cars raised little dust. That the hill provided a stiff test for cars of the time was shown by one car failing to complete the climb at all.

Quickest time of all was recorded by H Beauchamp on a 30/40hp Daimler, in 52 seconds, while other noteworthy climbs were made by FKJ Tucker [*car unknown*] in 57 sec., CP Parker (10hp Beeston Humber) and Alfred Armitage, who won Class 3 on a 12hp Bridgwater. Several of the new Bridgwater cars, which Harry Carver's company had begun making earlier that year in the nearby town, took part in the event, with Club Secretary Armitage also appearing in a 24hp model, as did Philip Cary Elwes, while Mrs Chester Master drove a 12/14hp.

Results:

- Class 1 - Cars costing complete 150 guineas or less, to carry two passengers
1, JW Aspinwall, 5hp Oldsmobile, 2m 14s.
- Class 2 – Cars costing complete 200 guineas or less, to carry two passengers
1, JW Aspinwall, 5hp Oldsmobile, 2m 14s.
- Class 3 – Cars the chassis price of which is £300 or less, to carry four passengers
1, A Armitage, 12hp Bridgwater, 1m 48¹/₅ s.
- Class 4 – Cars the chassis price of which is £400 or less, to carry four passengers
1, TR Benson, 12hp Lanchester, 1m 52s.
- Class 5 – Cars the chassis price of which is £500 or less, to carry four passengers
1, CP Parker, 16hp Beeston Humber, 1m 13²/₅ s.

Class 6 - Cars the chassis price of which is £600 or less, to carry four passengers

- 1, CP Parker, 16hp Beeston Humber, 1m 13²/₅ s.
- 2, A Armitage, 24hp Bridgwater.

Class 7 - Cars the chassis price of which over £600

- 1, H Beauchamp, 30hp Daimler, 52s.
- 2, FKJ Tucker, 57s.

30 June 1906

With their first hillclimb considered to be "*a big success*", the Club returned to the same Puriton course the following year, on Saturday 30th June, for their next event. Entries this time, however, were not so great, and were split into five classes divided, as before, by chassis price. Two awards were on offer per class, with classifications being calculated by a formula taking into account weight, total piston area and the time to complete the climb. Additionally, a special prize was awarded for the car making the fastest run, this being won by Owen Bayldon on a 22hp Minerva; Bayldon also achieved the best score on formula.

Results on formula:

- Owen H. Bayldon, 22hp Minerva, 83 points
- C. E. Burnell, 10-12hp Argyll, 72
- Reginald B. Graves-Knyfton, 10-12hp Argyll, 71
- Wallace A. Taylor, 10-12hp Humber, 64
- Philip F. Cary Elwes, 21-30hp Bridgwater, 63
- C. H. Dawe, 12hp Wolselev, 59
- R. Orme, 8-10hp Humber, 58
- John W. Aspinall, 14hp Minerva, 57
- Frank Wills, 12hp Clement, 52
- Mrs. O. H. Bayldon, 5½ hp Baby Peugeot, 46
- Alfred Armitage, 10hp Bridgwater, 44
- H. E. S. Viner, 6hp Pick, 43
- W. J. Hippisley, 8-10hp Humber, 39

In addition to this closed to club event, on 21 July 1906 the Somerset AC also organised an open hillclimb at Longleat House in Wiltshire, in conjunction with the meeting of the Motor Union of Great Britain and Ireland being held in Bath.

While a hillclimb had quickly become established as an annual event for the Club, the following year the venue was moved to the Quantock hills. So far as is currently known, no further events for cars were held on Puriton Hill, although in 1920 and 1921 it was used by the Bridgwater Motorcycle Club for some motorcycle-only hillclimbs.

1907 - Buncombe Hill

6 July 1907

For their 1907 event the Club moved west, to Buncombe Hill in the Quantocks, about six miles south-west of Bridgwater. Running through woods on the Elmore to Kingston St. Mary road, Buncombe was said to be one of the steepest hills in West Somerset, with an average gradient of 1 in 8. A 747-yard stretch of the road was used, with the surface said to be "*in very fair condition, except in one or two spots*" where the course was "*somewhat greasy*" where overhanging trees had prevented the road drying from the previous night's rain.

The event was run in bright sunshine over 3½ hours on the afternoon of Saturday 6th July, and was watched by a "*considerable number of people*", with police assisting in keeping the hill clear.

Each car had two runs, and fastest time of the day, 60 seconds, was recorded by CP Parker's 24/40hp Weigel, while John Aspinall's Rover clocked 1m 31²/₅ sec. The Weigel, built by Daniel Weigel in London, also claimed first overall on index. Others of note among the awards included Blake's steam-powered Turner-Miesse; the Taunton-built C.C.C of Alfred Armitage, and Bristol Motor Company proprietor William Appleton in one of his 16/20hp Bristol cars.

Results:

Class 1 - Cars complete, £250 or less, to carry two passengers

1, F. Blackmore, 9-10hp Swift (prize: silver cup, value £3 3s).

2, Dr. H. S. Balance, 6hp De Dion.

(note: an alternative report placed HJ Blackmore's 7hp Swift 2nd in class 1)

Class 1a - Cars complete, £300 or less, to carry two or four passengers

1, W. Appleton, 15hp Ford (silver cup, value £3 3s).

2, H. L. Blake, 10-12hp Turner Miesse

Class 2 - Chassis price, £300 or less, to carry four passengers

1, Rev. W. P. Strange, 12-14hp Singer (prize: piece of plate presented by RB Graves-Knyfton (Hon. Secretary).

2, W. H. Stone, 12-14hp Singer (silver medal).

3, A. A. Bailey. 10-12hp Argyll (bronze medal).

(note: The Autocar reported that in this class Bailey lodged a protest, which was to be considered by the Club committee; the outcome is unknown)

Class 3 - Chassis price, £400 or less, to carry four passengers

1, J. W. Aspinall. 16-20hp Rover (silver cup).

2, A. Armitage, 18-22hp C.C.C. (silver medal).

3, R. Graves-Knyfton, 14-16hp Argyll (bronze medal).

Class 4 - Chassis price, £500 or less, to carry four passengers

1, J. W. Aspinall, 16-20hp Rover; (prize: piece of plate presented by Club President J. Jackson-Barstow)

2, W. M. Appleton, 16-20hp Bristol (silver medal).

3, C. H. Dawe, 18-24hp Austin (bronze medal).

Classes 5 and 6 combined - Chassis price, about £600, to carry four passengers

1, C. P. Parker, 24-40hp Weigel (silver cup), 60s.

2, L. Allen, 30-40hp Daimler (silver medal), 61 3/5s

3, F. Wills, 24-40hp Weigel (bronze medal) 61 4/5s

For the following year the event's location changed again, but in 1912 the club initially announced a return to Buncombe Hill. However, a late switch was made to Wraxall hill, the Club now considering that Buncombe was "*unsuitable to anything but low speeds*".

Although it's thought that no further car events were run up Buncombe Hill, in the immediate pre-war years, and again in the early 1920s, the Taunton Motor Cycling Club staged speed 'climbs on the hill, but without any cars (apart from an occasional 3-wheeler Morgan running in the sidecar class).

1908 - Wraxall Hill

25 July 1908

For the 1908 edition of their now annual summer event, the Club moved to East Somerset, choosing the hill (gradient approximately 1 in 8) running northwards on the Fosse Way (now the A37) out of the village of Wraxall, about five miles to the south of Shepton Mallet.

Fastest time of the day, Saturday 25th July, was recorded by Gerald Lysaght's 35/45hp Daimler, and class winners, on formula, were: G. H. Temple (9hp Riley); K. J. H. Wilkinson (15hp Humber); W. G. Tilley (20hp Humber); J. W. Aspinall (16/20hp Rover); G. S. Lysaght (35/45hp Daimler).

The following year's event was cancelled through lack of entries (the intended venue is unknown), and in 1910 yet another new location was selected, although the Club would return to Wraxall in 1912.

1910 and 1911 - Shipham Hill

The 1910 and 1911 events were held in the Mendips, at Shipham Hill on the Axbridge to Shipham road, approximately two miles north of Axbridge.

21 July 1910

Unusually, in 1910 the event was run on a Thursday afternoon, on 21st July. Quickest over the approximately one-mile course was Arthur E Johnson, driving the Vauxhall of Ralph Price, in 2m 1³/₅ sec, just one fifth of a second ahead of the next fastest car, a 40/50hp Darracq (2m 1⁴/₅ sec.)

Class Results on Formula:

Single Cylinder Cars

- 1, J. W. Aspinall, 12hp Sizaire and Naudin (3m 6⁴/₅ s)
- 2, Captain Graves-Knyfton (driver Frank Sharman), 12hp Sizaire and Naudin
- 3, E. Burnell (driver A. Seaton), 6hp Wolseley.

Two Cylinder Cars

- 1, Dr. Porteous, Renault
- 2, Dr. Temple, 9hp. Riley
- 3, Dr. Pineo, 10-12hp Swift.

Four or More Cylinder Cars

- 1, L.R. Price (driver A.E. Johnson), Vauxhall
- 2, A. Bailey (driver G. Martin), Bell
- 3, H. J. Blackmore, Miesse.

1 July 1911

The following year's event, run in perfect weather conditions, mustered 20 cars, with the fastest times over the one-mile course being significantly quicker than in 1910. Quickest of all was 25-year-old George Gwyer, who recorded 1m 26¹/₅ sec. in a 24hp Darracq, while best overall on index was Ralph Price's two-year-old 20hp Vauxhall.

Fastest times on the day:

- 1, G. W. S. Gwyer, 24hp Darracq
- 2, G. W. S. Gwyer, 6-cylinder Darracq.
- 3, A. A. Baily, 20hp Calthorpe.

Gwyer's Darracq won the Grand Challenge Bowl for making fastest time in Class 3, and also the special prize presented by J. J. Barstow for making fastest time of the meeting, although this was only presented after a protest against his Darracq had been considered.



Results on index:

Class 1 (one-cylinder cars)

- 1, RB Graves-Knyfton, Sizaire (2m 50s); 2, AW Metcalfe, Rover (6m 37¹/₅ s).

Class 2

- 1, CB Hillyar, Alldays (2m 55⁴/₅ s); 2, HB Porteous, Renault (5m 10s); 3, R Calvert, Riley (4m 6²/₅ s); 4, ED Pineo, Swift (3m 37²/₅ s); 5, RHF Routh, Alldays (5m 14¹/₅ s).

Class 3 (four or more cylinders)

- 1, LR Price, Vauxhall (2m 0²/₅ s); 2, RB Graves-Knyfton, Singer (2m 21²/₅ s); 3, AA Baily, Talbot (2m 27s); 4, GWS Gwyer, Calthorpe (2m 42¹/₅ s); 5, AA Baily, Calthorpe (1m 57³/₅ s); 6, GWS Gwyer, Darracq (1m 26¹/₅ s); 7, R Bath, Argyll (3m 4¹/₅ s); 8, HJ Blackmore, Miesse (2m 11²/₅ s); 9, WP Paddon, Vulcan (2m 33²/₅ s); 10, RB Graves-Knyfton, Argyll (3m 22.3s); 11, GWS Gwyer, Darracq (1m 53²/₅ s); 12, FJ Tucker, Deasy (2m 9s).

1912 and 1913 - Wraxall Hill

27 July 1912

Although it had originally been the intention to return to Buncombe Hill in 1912, the event on Saturday 27th July was switched to the hill at Wraxall last used in 1908. The event had always been one solely for members of the Somerset club, rather than being an 'Open' meeting*. Perhaps in light of the previous year's protest against one of Gwyer's Darracqs, an additional rule was introduced this time, stating that "*entries will not accepted from members engaged in the manufacture or sale of the car entered by them*", although adding that a special 'Trade' class could be added if there was sufficient interest.

As fastest time of the day was again recorded by George Gwyer, whose Bristol firm of J.S. Willway & Sons were Darracq agents, he had presumably entered in a trade class. Sadly, a year later, Gwyer would lose his life in a road accident in one of his Darracqs.

First overall on Formula was A. E. Taylor, with a Fafnir.

Class winners on formula: R.B. Graves-Knyfton, Sizaire-Naudin; C. B. Hillyar, Alldays; A. E. Taylor, Fafnir; Miss H. Garnett, 40/50hp Rolls-Royce. Also among the award winners was William Vaughan-Jenkins, Arrol-Johnston (3rd on formula, Class 3)

*In addition to their closed to club event, in June 1912 the Somerset AC were also involved, jointly with the Bristol & Gloucester AC, in organising an Open hillclimb at Upper Weston, Bath.

29 June 1913

What would be the eighth, and last, of the Somerset AC's series of club hillclimbs took place at Wraxall on Sunday 29th June, Miss Laura Starkey winning on handicap (and also in class) on her 12/16hp Sunbeam. Other class winners included Dr. Porteous (8hp Renault). Just a few weeks later the First World War would begin.

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Somerset Automobile Club Hill Climb overall winners

		F.T.D		Formula	
1905	Puriton	H. Beauchamp	Daimler 30/40hp	-	
1906	Puriton	Owen Bayldon	Minerva 22hp	Owen Bayldon	Minerva 22hp
1907	Buncombe	CP Parker	Weigel 24/40hp	CP Parker	Weigel 24/40hp
1908	Wraxall	Gerald Lysaght	Daimler 35/45hp	*	
1909		<i>Event cancelled</i>			
1910	Shipham	Ralph Price (Driver- Arthur Johnson)	Vauxhall	*	
1911	Shipham	George Gwyer	Darracq 24hp	Ralph Price	Vauxhall 20hp
1912	Wraxall	George Gwyer	Darracq	A. E. Taylor	Fafnir
1913	Wraxall	*		Laura Starkey	Sunbeam 12/16hp

* winner not currently known

Post-War

When motor sport could be resumed following the First World War, the Somerset AC chose to focus on general motoring matters rather than competition events, and did not restart their club hillclimbs. (Although an event was proposed at Wraxall in 1923 it doesn't appear to have been followed through)

25 April 1923 Wraxall hill - Wells & District Motor Club

Although after the war the Somerset club didn't run any further hillclimbs, like the hills at Puriton and Buncombe, Wraxall hill was also the scene of further events, as in 1920 the newly formed Wells and District Motor Club began using it for motorcycle hillclimbs. Initially restricted to 'bikes only, their event on Wednesday afternoon, 25th April 1923 also included a Trade class for light cars.

Results: 1, FW Thomas (A.B.C.); 2, FW Cox (Amilcar); 3, LD Borrodaile (Amilcar).

Hill Locations

	Coordinates	
Puriton Hill	51.1655 N	2.9756 W
Buncombe Hill	51.0867 N	3.1341 W
Wraxall Hill	51.1273 N	2.5692 W
Shipham Hill	51.2950 N	2.7883 W

Sources

Autocar, Automotor Journal, Bath Chronicle, Taunton Courier, Wells Journal, West Somerset Free Press, Western Gazette, Western Daily Press.

Sprint – Speed Hillclimbs and Speed Trials in Britain: 1899-1925, TR Nicholson (David & Charles, 1969)

The 'Bridgwater' Motor Car, Rod Fitzhugh
(via <https://www.bridgwatermuseum.org.uk/bridgwatermotorcar.htm>)

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March 2021*

Westcountry Motorsport History

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

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