

DRIVE FEATURE

GEORGE DRYDEN SPENDS THE MORNING AT DONINGTON PARK RACE



FAVOURITE: This 1957 Ferrari 500 comes in the colour best known to the tifosi the world over – red

What



ROADSTER: Tom Wheatcroft takes the 1914 Locomobile for a spin

The greatest dilemma most of us are likely to face is deciding which suit to wear to work in the morning.

"I'm not sure how fast I was going, but I thought I'd better keep it at five and a half revs so I didn't get told off."

Tom Wheatcroft

If you're Tom Wheatcroft, however, life is far more complicated, particularly when it comes to deciding which car, out of more than a hundred, you're going to take for a spin.

As the owner of the world's biggest collection of Formula One vehicles, it's a scenario which you just have to endure.

True to character, it's a cross which Tom bears impeccably.

It's one of the sunniest days we've had in weeks and the last of Leicestershire's action heroes has decided to take a few of his prized possessions for a spin around Donington Park Race Circuit – the same circuit he nursed back from dereliction after buying it in 1970.

Ready for the off, among others, is a Lancia D50, complete with fuel tank on the outside, a rare rear-engined 1950 Vanwall and one of Tom's favourites, the 1957 Ferrari 500, apparently the most successful Grand Prix car of all time, winning 10 out of its first 12 races.

On arrival, our host is nowhere to be seen, but out in the paddock, a group of men are huddled eagerly around a minuscule racing car which doesn't look like it would fit a child in it, let alone a grown adult.

TWIN-CAM

I'm reliably informed it's a 1936 twin-cam Austin Seven, with all of 750cc, but capable of a top speed of 130mph, nevertheless.

Today is a red letter day, not just because this is the first time the vehicle will have been driven since it competed at Crystal Palace in 1939, but because it's the first time Clive Hadley has set eyes on it since his father, Bert, was positioned behind the steering wheel.

"Dad won a lot of races in it and actually competed at this very track before the war. I think he even won a race here," explained Clive, who has travelled all the way from Devon to share this momentous occasion.

"I'd love to have a go in it, but looking at the size of the seat, I don't think I'd get in it. They used to call my dad the Pocket Rocket – now I can see why," he said with a smile.

It's been a painstaking labour of love for Selby-based restorer Keith Taylor, who stripped the vehicle to pieces and took two years to get it in fine running order, wading through reams of information on the vehicle

and tracking down some of its original parts, which had gone missing.

As we walk through to the pit lane, Tom cruises in on what, to the untrained eye, looks like the hybrid result of Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and a pre-war fire engine, otherwise known as a 1914 Locomobile, complete with a varnished hardwood steering wheel, footplate, spokes and a brass horn in full working order.

With only 34,000 miles on the clock, it's been restored by father/son duo Rick and Rob Hall, of Hall & Hall, Folkingham, in Lincolnshire, after Tom bought it in Australia while attending an agricultural machinery sale.

Backed by an intimate understanding of every vehicle in the collection, Tom is so much more than a wealthy collector of cars, knowing every nuance of every car in the collection.

Next up is a lime green 2.5l 1959 BRM (British Racing Motors) P25, previously driven by the likes of Stirling Moss and Hans Herman, whose major accident in it is retold photographically in the museum.

Tom passes the pit lane as a green blur, powered by the characteristic gusto which belies his 82 years.

Coming to a halt, he says: "I'm not sure how fast I was going, but I thought I'd better keep it at five and a half revs so I didn't get told off." (I'm reliably informed he would easily have cleared 100mph.)

Thankfully, Tom slows things down considerably when he takes me for a couple of laps in the Locomobile. The journey is surprisingly smooth, even though we're going at a fair rate of knots around the very bends graced by some of motorsports greatest names over the years.

Tom says he's now just waiting for 26 vehicles to complete the collection, but ever the businessman, he remains sensibly tight-lipped as to their identities.

Quite clearly, he has no intention of parting company with his cars. "They can go when I've gone," he says.

But seeing his son, Kevin, in the P25, it looks as if he's as hooked on motorsport as his father. And who can blame him?

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DRIVE FEATURE

a collection!

"I'd love to have a go in it, but looking at the size of the seat, I don't think I'd get in it. They used to call my dad the Pocket Rocket - now I can see why."

Clive Hadley - whose father raced the 1936 twin-cam Austin Seven



IN ACTION: The 1936 twin-cam Austin Seven tears along the start-finish straight and Clive looks over the car his father once piloted

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