

# Quick Bite



It's strange how we often feel that the "grass is greener on the other side of the fence".

There are quite a few who spend most of their working lives building and preparing rallycars who can admit in private that they have often harboured ambitions in the past to be working at the top end, 'glam' side of motorsport, wishing they had seen a chance to be a Formula One designer, or technician. No harm in dreaming. Rushing round the world at someone else's expense, seeing the driver snatch the chequered flag because of the way you helped screw down the nuts and bolts (or should that be super-glue these days), oh, what a life.

It's interesting therefore that there are some in Formula One who harbour ambitions to be involved in a more hands-on way, in a world where there is less pressure, zero commercialism, where the ethos is all about mucking in and helping one another... in the way that Graham Rood, while working for David Sutton's rally team, could wander up to the other end of a lay-by and chat away to mates working on a rival Subaru, even to the point of giving a bit of advice. Not that there is no camaraderie in Formula One, what with all that flying around the world, living out of a suitcase, the parties afterwards... there simply must be a bit of camaraderie to this jet-set existence.

What do Formula One boffins do in their spare time, if they have any? Surely not mess about with motor cars, that's for sure.

Er, there are some notable exceptions. Adrian Newey, designer in chief at McLaren, and formerly with Williams, decided that what he needed to re-charge the batteries was a spot of Historic Rallying, so decided to learn all about the dark art of road timing by attending the first ever Rally School for navigators. I had organised this for 40 or so at the Rose and Crown pub in Tonbridge High Street, back in 1989. Adrian pitched up, having booked a room overlooking the courtyard at the back, away from the noise of the main street, and was an attentive student, taking part in a timed run

round the lanes to Five Oak Green and back to the bar, completing his first timed test with no loss of penalties.

One of the lecturers was Robert Ellis, who decided that having a Formula One geek amongst us would mean we should all have to get up extra early on the Sunday morning to watch a Grand Prix on the far side of the world, and so organised the bar to allow us to use the facilities, and the television, at five in the morning. All of us duly flocked down to the telly, well in time for an extra-early breakfast. All except Newey. Oh no, he is not going on a rally training weekend to get up early to watch bloody Formula One! He snoozed on. When he finally descended the stairs, he was asked why he didn't want to see how the car he had designed in the wind-tunnel only weeks before actually performed. "I'm not here to work, I'm here to enjoy myself," was the perfectly reasonable answer.

More recently, someone who has helped Schumacher to World Championship wins in his early days when at Benetton was Robin Grant, who recently suddenly died, aged 60. He was working at Renault's Formula One factory north of Oxford, but for extra excitement in his spare time, loved playing around with a ratty, down-at-heel Vintage Bentley. He raced with the VSCC, and took part in the Peking to Paris last year.

We all remember the tall, gaunt and lanky, scruffily dressed Robin Grant as someone who would do anything for anyone, and always seemed to know the answer to the most pressing of mechanical problems. He carried a tube of glue no bigger than a tube of Colgate toothpaste which he reckoned would stick together the two broken ends of a Bentley crankshaft, so, knowing that weight saving is all important in a long distance rallycar, carried just an adjustable spanner, a hammer, a screwdriver, and his tube of space-age glue - "Don't ask what it is, it's very expensive and you can't get it unless you are in the space industry." We all got some, for free, because all of us had radiators that split open (not enough flexible rubber mountings) or some other malady of a vital part dragging on the ground. Rear axles, diffs, all sorts, were fixed by Robin in the middle of Mongolia. Without his

glue and his know-how, there would be vintage rallycars littered all across this vast wilderness.

The funeral was held in Bisley, a tiny village you won't have heard of, north of Stroud in Gloucestershire. They say "this is where time stands still" when describing places, which is usually rubbish, but here, it really is timeless. I expected the local newsagent to tell me Laurie Lee is up the pub, still working on his book of short stories, *Cider With Rosie*. Having arrived too early, I called in at the village shop to buy a paper, and on the way out bumped into an elderly gent on the step, wearing - you won't believe this but I'll give it to you anyway - Plus Fours, thick woollen socks, with little red flashes of ribbon under the garter at the top of the socks, which were tucked into heavily worn brown shoes, buffed dull from countless coats of Dubbin. Maybe this was the Laurie Lee, or maybe it's just how they all dress in this quiet, forgotten corner of the Cotswolds.

The pub was soon heaving with all sorts of motoring folk from the world of the VSCC, and the Peking to Paris. The vegetable soup, I can report, was tasteless gruel, of the texture of porridge, the chips were also totally lacking in flavour, but the doorsteps of

thick brown sandwiches of honey-roasted ham seemed to hit the spot, and Fred Multon, Paul Carter, Vincent Fairclough, Chris Claridge Ware and Roy Williams made light work of this pile.

The church was standing room only, over 200 packing into a tiny church of a tiny village. The funeral was interesting in that for once, Robin Grant, who has spent

most of his life rushing from one point to another, suddenly found himself surrounded by family and mates with all the time in the world. Nobody was going to rush anything, including someone who had flown in from Australia specially to be here, and who astonished us all by stepping up to give an account of his friendship by pulling out of an inside pocket no less than 20 pages of typed up notes.

Surely, he is not going to stand and read that lot, I wondered, but, yes, oh ye of no patience, we are going to listen. In fact, we were enraptured. As so often happens at sad times like this, we learn and appreciate things we never knew.

We all loved the story of how, in his thirties, Robin decided he would do his bit for fellow mankind with a job in Africa,

helping an aid project distribute malaria vaccine. It meant getting to the middle of Ethiopia. So, Robin decides the only route is to drive there, as that way you have some wheels to use when you arrive.

A car was chosen, a Morris Minor. This was driven through Egypt without any fuss or bother, but having got to the edge of the desert and bordering the Sudan, suddenly the road becomes a track, and then no track at all, nothing but sand. But a railway chuffs down the side of the Nile, so Robin easily finds some sleepers and planks and has the Minor pushed and shoved onto a flat bed. Sleeping accommodation in steerage class is sitting up in the Morris Minor, with fine panoramic views of the desert of Sudan. All is well with the world and the car and driver are carried southwards.

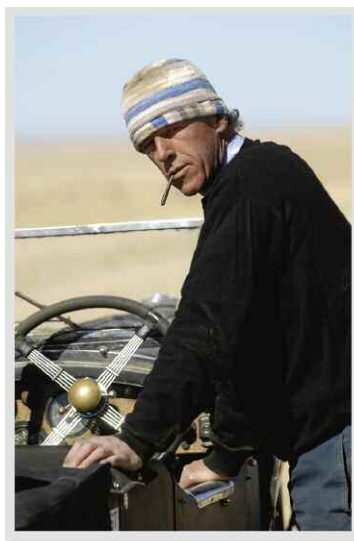
The next day, there is a sudden halt, and a big cloud of steam up front. The train has given up the struggle. A big crowd of natives surround the engine, wondering what to do. Up strolls Robin Grant. He peers along the side of the steam train, and decides that what will restore progress for all, is merely a new hose. So, he strolls back to the Minor at the rear of the train, lifts up the bonnet, removes a radiator hose, goes back to the steam train, fixes the engine, waves to the Chief Stoker to chuck on more logs, and soon they are on their way again, all down to a bloke who knows that when stuck in a desert, you either have to be prepared to sit there for eternity, or fix the bloody problem.

Arriving in Addis Ababa, terminal end, he strolls up to the engine, removes his Morris Minor hose, lifts the bonnet of the most reliable car ever made by the British Motor Corporation, and continues with his journey.

Robin Grant's last words to me on the finish ramp in Paris at the end of the Peking to Paris was "I gave it all I had from St. Petersburg on... those sections in Estonia were simply fantastic, I'd set my sights on winning the VSCC trophy, and now wish I had gone faster in Mongolia." Robin, you would have probably bust the car, and besides, we all know you kept stopping to help people with your amazing super glue.

He failed to get his hands on that trophy after 40 days of determined driving by a mere three minutes.

Driving back home across the width of the Cotswolds I couldn't help thinking that Robin's death brings it home to all of us how short life can be - and how it's down to each and everyone of us to treat every new day as a bonus, and get out there and live it like Robin. You might never have known Robin Grant, but had you been in the pub in Bisley that day, you will have regretted not having experienced a drive alongside him.



Robin Grant...

...by Gerard Brown