



There is a first time for everything!

Driving an MG V8 on the track at speed is an experience many V8 enthusiasts may dream of from time to time but few get round to trying. But it is both easy and safe at a well run MGoT track day as Nic Houslip found as a novice on the track.

On Sunday afternoon June 12th 2011 the RV8 is ready; everything has been checked, tightened, topped up and packed in. But now I'm beginning to feel nervous, because having reached the age of 67, I'm not that used to being a novice, but here I am about to set off for deepest Wiltshire in the pouring rain to spend an evening with a business colleague about 15 miles from Castle Combe, where I am to have my first ever attempt at driving fast on a race track. Am I nervous? You bet I am.

Thoughts keep running thorough my head, what will it be like, will I make a mess of it, what happens if I go the wrong way or have an excursion into the grass? Having had a discussion with 'er indoors, I decided that I did not want anyone I knew to be there in case I screwed up, so reluctantly, she had to stay home.

Come the morning of the 13th, Oh thank God, it's not raining! Having experienced a few back end twitches on the road on the way down, I was relieved that my first attempt would probably be in the dry. As I pulled into the circuit I could see a varied selection of MGs with people fettling and doing all the little things we all do when we are nervous. First things first, a cuppa and a bacon bap in the clubhouse seemed a good idea.

After chatting to a few friendly people, we got around to the important stuff, the sign on, the briefing, dispensing of armbands and the noise test [the RV8 passed] but it is more difficult than you think to hold the engine at a constant 4,500 rpm; it's not something you do every day, so practicing it might have been a good idea.

Steve B, my Track Day Buddy, appointed by the MGs on Track committee (of which he is a member) was there to help and it was a great comfort to have him as a mentor to guide me through the process. Steve was also kind enough to take me round first as a passenger in his car.

My initial impressions? Aaagh! which way do we go? Where are the bends, what is the right line, what is the next bend? It is daunting, the track seems so big and so wide, and what's more you can use all of it if you want or need to, but you wonder how will I ever get all this sorted out? Unsurprisingly Steve knew how to do so and pretty soon we were going round the circuit at speeds faster than I thought possible, approaching bends fast and braking much too late, even though Steve wasn't really going that fast. I did find that the brake pedal on my side of the car was of no use whatsoever! No matter how hard I pressed, it didn't change the speed we were travelling one little bit, so I relaxed and let Steve get on with it. It was a great demonstration and almost immediately I knew I could do it.

So now it is my turn, I arrive at the track entrance at the beginning of the session, pretty near the end of the line, and after

forever, but eventually get to the blue cone marking the apex and can accelerate away along Farm straight and suddenly here I am at the Esses, which I don't do very well as I don't use the track correctly and then struggle through. The rest of it is a bit of blur, especially as some of the other drivers are now appearing in my mirror but I remember that they are all gentlemen and will not harry me in corners because I've got my "N" sticker on the back, No! N for Novice, not for Nic! Having let them past I then start to follow them to watch their lines and soon found that I can actually go a lot faster than I thought, and after having negotiated Old Paddock, Hammerdown, Bobbies, Westbury and Dean. I'm soon leaving Camp and can see other guys accelerating away to the start line so I follow them and note that I'm doing about 75 mph after leaving Folly and on towards Avon rise. I'm beginning to get the hang of this and I like it.

Now I have an appointment with Barry Evans, my instructor. Barry introduces himself and gives me a mixture of pep talk and warnings but seems to understand how nervous I am. "Now" says Barry, "I shall take hold of the wheel at times during our laps, which you may find disconcerting, but don't worry" It is disconcerting; but it soon becomes clear that not only does Barry know every inch of the course, he also knows exactly what my car will do and what I might do. As we proceed I get a string of useful information and a gentle tug on the wheel to make sure I'm using all the track, right

going down the pit lane, suddenly I'm on my own, everyone else is disappearing into the distance! Only one thing to do, I've got 3.9 Litres and 190 BHP, so I must use it. Having been advised about the approach to Quarry corner and that you must be absolutely sure you have done braking before the suspension goes light at the top of Avon rise, I turn in to the left, brake a little more and then to the right for Quarry, a very long right hander that seems to go on



down to the last inch before the grass and a restraining tug to stop me turning in too early. With almost continuous calls for "more power" and "don't brake yet", I become aware that I am much faster as we go round for 5 more laps, then all too soon the Chequered flag is being waved and after one more lap, a little slower this time to allow things to cool down a little, we come in.

A quick visit to the clubhouse for a drink and then it is my turn to go out again. This time I'm still apprehensive and the much talked about butterflies begin to manifest themselves, but as I go down the pit lane and open the throttle I forget all about them and start to get on with it. I let a few faster men past, some of the little cars are so fast and seem like slot racing cars as they flick first this way then that into and through Chicanes, but the next thrill comes when I find that I can really give it some Wellie as I go past the starting grid and build up speed through the long right-hander Folly. I find to my surprise that the

speedometer is now approaching the magic ton as I start to brake for the end of Avon rise and the entrance to Quarry. Subsequent laps enable me to become better at it, just like the other entrants and I don't think I held up too many people, although I must confess to enjoying being able to out accelerate many other better handling cars because I had the power to do so.

The superb organisation, marshalling, marking out of the track with cones placed to indicate the correct braking, turn in and apex points all combined to make a most exhilarating day out. Everyone in the MGs on Track team gets a great big vote of thanks for the time and effort they put in to make this a special day for me.

I would like to repeat, for the benefit of every novice and most of the subjects of the YouTube videos, what Barry told me after we were finished. A car is most stable when it is going in a straight line, not accelerating and not braking, so the more time you spend doing that, the safer

you are and the faster you will get round. If you make sudden changes to speed, by braking or accelerating, the tyres are under greater stress and will lose their grip and you will lose time. You cannot deny the laws of physics, even if you have four wheel drive, so learn to drive smoothly and you will be quicker. You will also be much less hard on the driveline, engine, brakes and suspension and save a lot of money of fuel. A short lesson on heel and toeing ensued, which helped a lot with braking into corners.

Until I can get to do it again I will relive the experience over and over. I have already reserved a place at Stowe in August and as soon as Castle Combe is open for the September I will reserve my place, because I'm hooked.

Photos: top, my instructor points to the apex and the line I need to take. Below, a memorable photo with my RV8 leading the pack! – although more like holding up all the faster people!

