

FEATURE

Photos: Iain Nicolson



A Formula Libre field negotiates the esses

INGLISTON

– A CIRCUIT LIKE NO OTHER

Many circuits have been lost to history, but none were like Ingliston in Edinburgh. Some 55 years on from its opening race, **Graham Keilloh** looks back



A packed grandstand is poised for the saloon final

Many motorsport enthusiasts can recall in detail their first meeting. To my shame, my recollection has got vague over time. I know that it was in the mid-to-late 1980s and I was aged around eight. I was fortunate enough to live within easy reach of two circuits, Knockhill and Ingliston. Though this is part of the problem, as I do not recall which I visited first. I do however remember the difference in my reaction to them.

To this then-young Formula 1 obsessive, Knockhill seemed conspicuously bare. My reaction to Ingliston was in stark contrast. 'Ah,' I thought, 'there's a large grandstand, and lots of buildings and the like crammed in. It's just like an F1 circuit.'

And it is gratifying to know I'm not alone in this sort of reaction. Iain Nicolson, who visited Ingliston for

the first time in 1966 aged nine, thought similar. "I just thought they [circuits] were all like that!," he tells Motorsport News. "Once I started reading the magazines, about Silverstone, Brands Hatch, Snetterton, Oulton Park, I just assumed that they were at least as good and probably better than Ingliston, you know down south, the big smoke and all that! But it was only in later years when I visited some of these tracks that I realised how special Ingliston really was."

Ingliston – pronounced 'ingle-ston' – was a 1.03-mile circuit situated on Edinburgh's outskirts next to the airport. We are now 55 years on from its first race meeting, and as the opening anecdotes indicate, the venue certainly stood apart.

Rather than the usual airfield or parkland venue, Ingliston instead was in the grounds of the Royal Highland & Agricultural Society, then-as-now venue of the Royal Highland Show, Scotland's largest outdoor event.

And this brought many benefits to Ingliston the racing circuit.

"For those days in the mid '60s the

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A BMW race starts - led by a certain Barry Sheene!

facilities were fantastic,” notes Scottish Motor Racing Club president Hugh McCaig, who ran Ingliston for a decade. “There were good loos, restaurants and canteens etc, the MacRobert Pavilion, it really was a class place.” Another feature far from the norm, even today, was that Ingliston had a covered paddock, using a roofed structure there for the show’s livestock.

“It was only in later years that I realised that they really were quite unique to Ingliston,” adds Nicolson, who became a long-time Ingliston spectator and occasional racer and now has a website gathering Ingliston memories. “My first visit to Snetterton I thought ‘my God, there’s nothing here!’”

For 1965 it was clear that the Scottish motorsport venue at Charterhall airfield in the Borders was not getting a renewed licence from the governing body, the RAC. A replacement host was rapidly sought, and a plan for a new track at Polkemmet, about halfway between Edinburgh and Glasgow, was developed; the famous John Hugenoltz even completing a design. But then the Ingliston option came into view thanks to Ian Scott-Watson, who as well as being SMRC’s secretary – and the man who launched Jim Clark’s career – was also a Highland Society member. In another stroke of luck, the society had also decided to asphalt its showground’s roads after rain during the previous show turned the place into a quagmire.

McCaig notes there also was another crucial element. “Jim Clark [as] a

farmer, and of course his status, had the clout to persuade the Highland Society to build a racing circuit there.”

With the society duly convinced, John Romanes – a long-time racing man who had returned to Edinburgh to run the family chemical business – took the reins, chairing the company that would run the circuit and convincing Lombard North Central to put money up.

The track opened in 1965; a loop added in ’68 brought it up to its 1.03 miles. “Literally from day one, everyone thought it was great stuff,” explains journalist and historian Graham Gauld, who later ran the circuit alongside McCaig. “There was a lot of activity, there was a lot of fun, we could never have seen that kind of development at Charterhall because Charterhall, in a sense, was too remote.”

The track in itself also did much to set the place apart – it was rapid but compact and claustrophobic, with barriers, and spectators, close to hand. Saloon racer Doug Niven recalls:

“Ingliston was a very demanding circuit, it was a bit like Monaco. You couldn’t afford to go off at all and that’s when I noticed it when you went down to somewhere like Silverstone or Rufforth or some of these old airfields down south, people would be all over the place but you were tidy but only because you were trained to be tidy.”

Three-time Indianapolis 500 winner Dario Franchitti raced there in his Formula Vauxhall Junior days, and also remembers the track with affection. “I thought it was the most amazing place,

I loved it so much. Every time I fly out of Edinburgh and I see it from the left-hand-side window of the plane, I get a little pang of nostalgia. It was wonderful. Even in Vauxhall Junior, it was very tough. My favourite part was always the esses, which were flat out in a Vauxhall Junior car.

“I used to go there in the late 1970s and they had that huge grandstand all the way around the arena section and if you look at pictures from back then, it was full up. Loads of people went to watch there – even for club races.”

McCaig can attest, based on an early experience after, with Gauld, taking over for 1982. “The first meeting was a Marlboro [Challenge] meeting that we ran, we had something like 12,000 people through the gate. It was just ‘wow’. John Webb who ran Brands Hatch at that time came up to me and said ‘Autosport says that you had 12,000 people through the gate, I don’t think you lot can count!’ I said ‘I don’t really care what you think...’”

Grids were strong too, with saloon races – all varied machinery and colourful characters – particularly popular. Formula Ford races had big turnouts also. “A lot of the sport was local and the races were geared towards the cars that were available locally,” Gauld notes. Many competitors attended from Ireland and the north of England too. And in perhaps the circuit’s zenith the BTCC-forerunner British Saloon Car Championship held a round here on three occasions in the 1970s.

There also were frequent Formula Libre races, whose eclectic mix often included recent F1 cars gone into private hands. “Where else could you go a club event and have two-year-old Formula 1 cars racing?,” Franchitti asks. “It was a wicked place to watch racing.”

“You could get to it by bus,” adds Gauld. “It was much easier for people in Edinburgh to look out the window on Sunday morning and say ‘oh it’s a quite a nice morning let’s go to Ingliston’, rather than ‘oh will we go away up to Knockhill’, even though it wasn’t all that far away, but it was the getting into the car, going across the Forth Road Bridge and getting up to Knockhill and so on and knowing that if the weather changed you were going to get wet.”

Even with all this success though Ingliston, in McCaig’s words, financially “was barely washing its face”. Using the Highland Society’s showground had a major drawback – barriers had to be dismantled then reassembled around the Highland Show.

“It was always very difficult and it was an expensive thing to do,” Gauld notes. “We had to take the barriers up and put them down again twice a season and we only had six race meetings per season, and it doesn’t take long to work out logistics. If you have 100 competitors in a race each paying X entry fees, the entry fees were not frantically high, you soon ran out of money.”

And though there were barriers on much of the track’s outside, there

wasn’t necessarily much to stop drivers hitting various infield hazards. “If you tried hard enough there, you could hit the trees,” Franchitti recalls. “It was pretty hairy, and there were some pretty big accidents there.” Niven, notoriously, once landed his V8 Escort on the top of a toilet block that was situated sub-optimally – and surely uniquely – next to the back straight. A McLaren M26 – driven by, no relation as far as we know, Iain McLaren – once vaulted the barrier and landed in a spectator area.

Given everything, therefore, it was just as well that, for most of its existence, Ingliston was in good hands. “John Romanes really put his own money into it,” Niven says of Ingliston’s first and long-serving custodian.

“He did it for the love of that, the connection with Jim Clark and everything else,” Gauld concurs: “John Romanes was the perfect person to run Ingliston. A very hard businessman. But generous, and loved motor racing.”

McCaig adds: “He was very much a motivator of the whole thing, really kept it going. I thought he was wonderful, quite a character.

“I’ll never forget when John Cleland [raced there]. I’d started as a marshal in my school holidays. Old Bill Cleland [John’s father] had bought John an ex-Red Rose Racing Chevron, ex-John Lepp car. And John went off going through the esses and took three corners off the bloody car. Bill was not happy and nobody would go near him but John Romanes went up to him and said ‘mmm, pretty mess this Bill’; ‘aye



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Formula Vee cars in 1967 await the start amid the unique circuit



A fine array of machinery on a Formula Libre dummy grid in 1980

yes it's not good at all'; 'it'll cost you a few quid to get that sorted?'; 'oh aye aye, bloody hell, we should never have done this today'; 'well to make it worse I'll need £30 for the barriers!'"

McCaig, taking over four years after Romanes stepped aside, similarly went beyond the call of duty. "[My business was] a quarrying and mining company," McCaig notes. "If I didn't have that behind us to be able to use the facilities that we had there between machines and manpower it [Ingliston] wouldn't have been able to run. I could manage to pull people off jobs and get them to put barriers up etc and help and bring office staff to man ticket sales and handle the paperwork etc."

Gauld adds: "Some, shall we say, older people, we got much more deeply involved in these things than people now, and so we cared a lot more. We all threw everything into it."

The location's drawbacks went further. "[Knockhill] had space, it had the freedom to expand and to develop," Gauld continues. "We couldn't do anything else at Ingliston. The Highland Show was the important thing, Ingliston wasn't that important."

Other problems coalesced. The grandstand, following football disasters such as the 1985 Bradford fire, was deemed unsafe and shut. Nearby Knockhill had been open since 1975 and as noted had nothing like Ingliston's restrictions.

"A lot of drivers were going over the kerbs and cutting up the grass," Gauld adds, "[the Highland Society] used to send us quite enormous bills for replacing the grass and all that kind of thing. Also the RAC were getting tighter and tighter [on safety], virtually every year for the last few years we operated we were having a spend money on 'oh yes can you move that barrier to there, can you do this and do that'."

Then the Highland Society received a better offer than McCaig's to run the franchise, from Scottish Formula Ford champion and regular Ingliston racer Tom Brown. "He had aspirations do great things," McCaig says. "I think he

lasted two seasons and the whole thing folded. I think he found that he'd offered the Highland Society more than was viable and discovered that the thing wasn't making money and he didn't have the resources behind him. And that was it."

Ingliston's final meeting was in 1994. "My own feeling was that in the latter years Ingliston just began to fade away," Gauld adds. "It needed a new impetus."

Still, the venue's place in history should not be underestimated. "Ingliston was the saviour of Scottish motor racing, end of story," Gauld says. "If it hadn't been for Ingliston there would have been no Knockhill."

Might racing return to Ingliston? The track is still there, albeit with a mini-roundabout added and the new grandstand sited, in someone's wisdom, covering half the width of the start-finish area. Supercar driving experiences are held there using part of the circuit. Also a weekend revival event was run a couple of times in the 2010s but that also has faded away. "[The organiser] just did not have the contacts or the wherewithal to put content into it," McCaig reckons, "and the expense of the whole thing, what the Highland Society wanted for rental..."

A faint pulse however remains. "SMRC made an approach to Royal Highland Society just to try and do something a couple of years ago," McCaig confirms, "but they are very difficult to deal with. And they wanted a financial arrangement that just made the whole thing unviable."

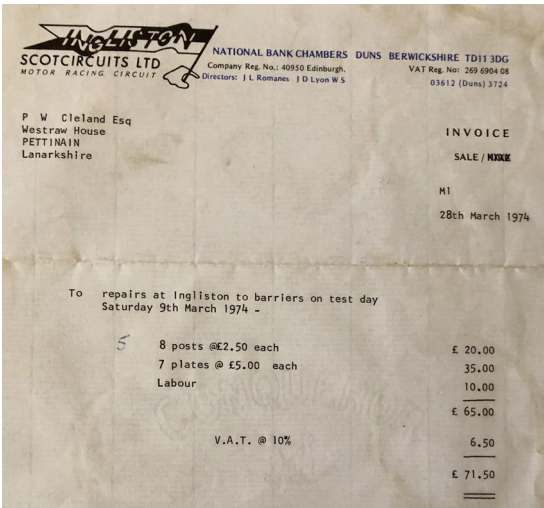
"There was certainly scope to extend the circuit within the grounds that the Highland Society had, [using] the car parking areas. [That] could have made a fabulous circuit. But it required capital to be able to be put into it and without a proper agreement with the Highland Society it was not possible. If you could get a viable agreement with the Highland Society I would, perhaps not being too optimistic, say that yeah motor racing could return to Ingliston. But it would need enthusiasm from all parties and not just one!" ■



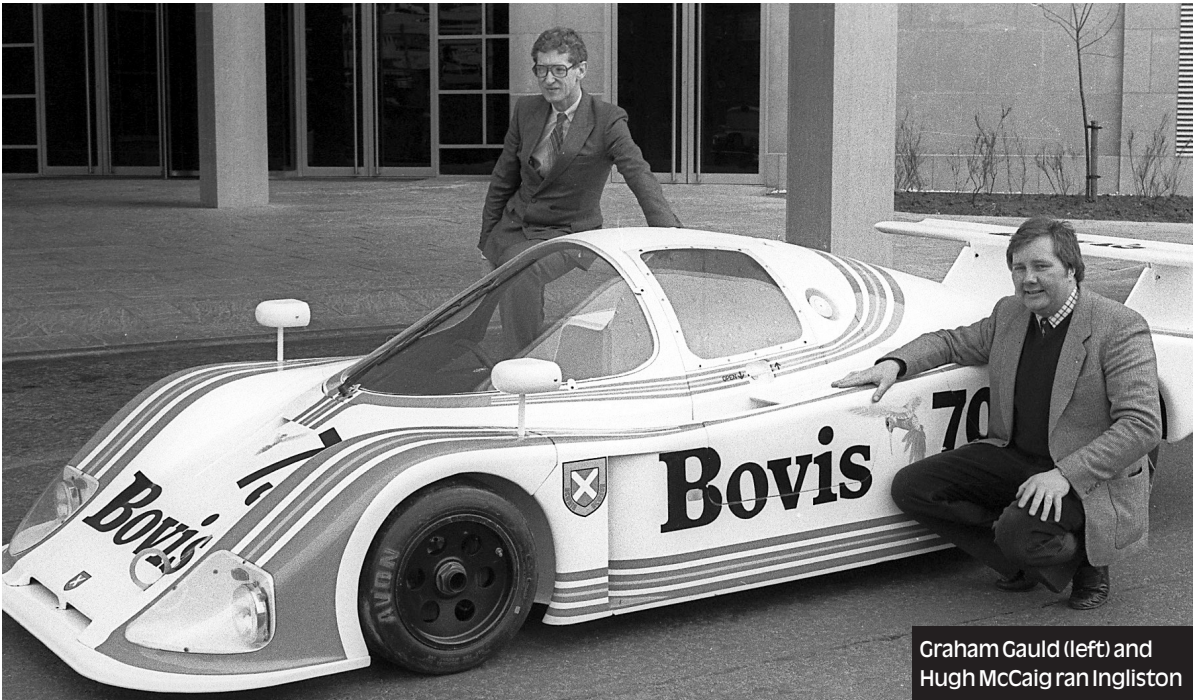
This McLaren M26 cleared the barriers



John Romanes: Ingliston's long-serving custodian



The actual bill for John Cleland's barrier repairs



Graham Gauld (left) and Hugh McCaig ran Ingliston



Ingliston attracted the British Saloon Car contest