

From Airpower to Horsepower...

a brief pre racing history of Snetterton by Andy Pratt

The history of the racetrack we are enjoying today starts back in the dark days of wartime Britain. The year is 1942, and at a cost of £950,000 Taylor-Woodrow Ltd constructed Snetterton Heath airfield for the RAF. But the RAF were not to move into their new home, this honour went to the United States 8th Army Airforce 'The Mighty Eighth'.

On June 3rd 1943 the sound of B-26 medium bombers was heard in the area, the first of the 'Yanks' had arrived in the skies over Snetterton. This first Group were not to stay long before moving to a newer home at Boxted in Essex.

So on June 12th 1943, the "Queen of the skies", the Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress, replaced the sights and sound of the B-26s; the 96th Bomb Group, 8th AF had arrived. Consisting of the 337th, 338th, 339th, and 413th Bomber Squadrons the 96th Bomb Group was to remain until December of 1945. During their time at the base the 96th flew 321 combat missions whilst losing 189 aircraft in action, the second highest loses in the whole of the 8th AF. The last combat mission was flown from here on 21st April 1945.

After the 'Yanks went home' the airfield fell into disuse until the early 50's when it started its new life as the racing circuit we have today. So while we are here this weekend please spare a thought to the Memory Of Those Who Gave Their Lives In The Cause Of Freedom.

St. Andrew's church in nearby village of Quidenham has a beautiful stained glass window donated by the men of the 96th Bomb Group.

The History of Snetterton – or how it all came about!

Towards the end of the 1951 season the AMOC's Eastern Area representative, Oliver Sear, attended a meeting of the Competitions Committee to place a most interesting proposition before that august body. At the time they had no inkling of what was in the wind, and at the same time they were extremely anxious to know of some place which the Club could virtually call its own as far as running racing events was concerned. Earlier in the year they had had to cancel a proposed hill climb because 'a promised venue did not materialise', and the outlook for the future was not very bright, with Silverstone in a state of flux. It was with considerable pleasure, not to say surprise to the Committee that Oliver placed before them a plan, including an airfield circuit in Norfolk. The map of the airfield showed that here was a venue with great possibilities, added to which was the fact that this airfield was one of the last Bomber fields to be constructed and had never been used, making the runways and perimeter track ideal for motor racing. Oliver who, with a partner, was engaged in negotiations to purchase this site, offered it to the AMOC on most generous terms. The Committee were pressed to put on a full-scale Race Meeting in the autumn, but all agreed that time was much too short for anything as ambitious as that, so compromised and arranged the Sprint Meeting, which was such a resounding success. This Meeting was run largely to obtain the views of drivers on the suitability of the proposed circuit for racing as opposed to sprints, and George Abecassis, Ken Wharton, Ron Willis, Dennis Poore and other expressed the opinion that the AMOC had a real winner, thus justifying Oliver's hopes, and helping us to make up their minds that this was the place for the Club.

Do not think for one moment that the Committee were not worried by the situation of Snetterton. They argued for hours as to whether the place was too isolated, too far from London, and too far from the North to attract sufficient members and the

general public to make it worth-while. A quiet study of the map showed that it was, in fact, better placed for the North than Silverstone and was just 90 miles from London, at the same time being served by excellent main roads. They therefore took advantage of Oliver's offer to let the AMOC have the first choice of dates for 1952, and arranged three meetings, two of which took place, and the third being cancelled, due to reasons very much beyond their control!

The closed invitation Spring Meeting, held in May, was one of a few wet days, but in spite of this it was a very interesting day which is now something in the nature of ancient history. One race is worth recalling. This was the Formula Libre event which, run in pouring rain, gave a thrilling battle between Duncan Hamilton and Tony Rolt. Hamilton, in the faster Largo Talbot, would build up a lead over the ERA-Delage, only to lose it through an excess of wheel spin and a number of excursions into the wheat fields! Tony Rolt got home first chased by Hamilton with rear wheels still spinning.

So the AMOC was then firmly established and plans went ahead for what was to be the most successful meeting held at Snetterton so far. The Members' Meeting in September had been described as the most 'open' closed Meeting ever held. In fact every driver/entrant was a member of the Club, which just goes to show that even in those early days the Club had something to offer to the purely racing boys.

The original idea was to have a quiet meeting so that Aston owning members could try their hand at racing in a 'happy family' atmosphere. The difficulty about this was that such a meeting would have very little public appeal, and it would therefore have meant a considerable loss of revenue to the owners of the circuit. As they were getting the track and all facilities on such generous terms, it was only fair that the sponsors should have some return in the form of public attendance. They therefore

arranged the highly exciting and interesting Meeting, which was the most successful, from the sponsor's point of view, which has so far been held. In fact, it was believed they actually made quite a nice little profit.

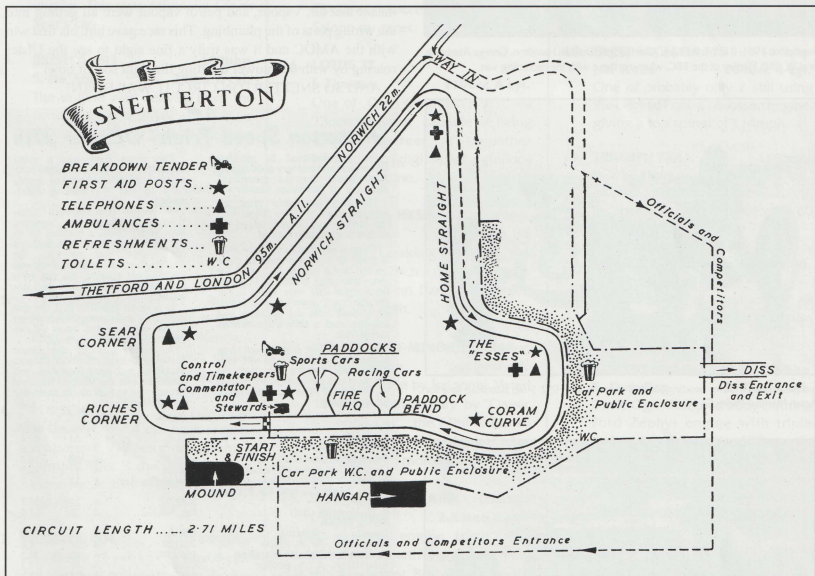
The programme started with something new, as far as the AMOC were concerned, in the shape of a half-hour reliability trial. This was to attract the new boys and give our novice members a taste of what the real thing could be like. No crash-hats, goggles or medical certificates were needed, and the entry was divided into four groups, which had to maintain average speeds of 37.8, 43.2, 48.6 and 54 mph respectively. This was not as easy as it sounds, as the drivers had to take into account the standing lap and the two minute compulsory pit stop. The mathematics involved caused a deal of head scratching and, judging by some of the results, some very funny answers!

A Le Mans start was used for this event and all the 'pits' were marked by coloured flags, thus lending something of authentic atmosphere to the proceedings. Some remarkable acrobatics were seen as the starting flag fell, and if you have ever tried to get into an Ulster in a hurry you will understand why, in some cases, the wrong things seemed to get switched on! Seriously,

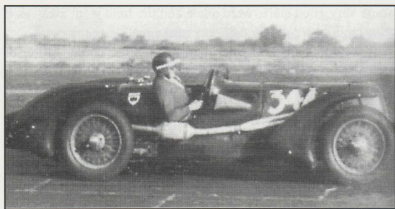
some very good starts were made and the field went away as if they really were off for 24 hours of the real thing.

A welcome sight was the return of Gregor Grant, Editor of *Autosport*, to circuit motoring in Ernie Stapleton's Spa Special. Gregor soon got rid of Ernie's tail – the tail of the car, we mean! – and motored round with an air-cooled fuel tank. We feel that this could mean acceleration of the kind much favoured by *Punch* artist, Brockbank, but think it more likely that someone forgot to knot the string! W. T. Smith, driving his Jowett Jupiter, had obviously worked things out pretty carefully, as he finished only 3 seconds out.

A highly exciting affair was the race for Aston Martins of 2 litres and over. Berwyn Baxter, the winner of the St John Horsfall Memorial Race, had to be content with second place behind Peter Stewart in the well-known ex-Seaman, ex-Folland 2 litre 'Red Dragon'. This car had been brought to its present highly efficient condition by hours of progressive work and careful maintenance. Added to this, Peter was undoubtedly one of the Club's best drivers, and, being a most delightful person as well, he received a well deserved ovation on scoring a most popular win. It was particularly fitting that Peter should have had this success at Snetterton as on a previous occasion he was robbed of



The original Snetterton was 2.71 miles long and in the fullness of time became the fastest circuit in England outstripping even Silverstone. The circuit basically followed the perimeter track of the old airfield: from the start in front of the pits the track ran to the first right hander which was, and still is, a double apex corner called Riches (after the above named gentleman) then continued roughly northwards to Sear a ninety degree right which led to a left flick which was never named. Now came the Norwich Straight which was just on a mile long and so named because one was travelling parallel to the main A11 trunk road towards Norfolk's County Town: at the end of the Norwich Straight came The Hairpin which was very nearly a 360 degree right onto the Home Straight leading to The Esses which ran left and right. There followed a short (very short!) straight then came the daunting, apparently never-ending Coram Curve which has caught out many of the unwary down the years: a relatively gentle left led back to the pits straight and the start/finish line.



Gregor Grant, Editor of Autosport, in the Spa Special, then owned by Ernie Stapleton, competing in the half-hour reliability trial.



Snetterton 1951: (l to r) John Wyer (Chief Judge), Duncan Hamilton, George Abecassis and W. (Bill) Hartley of the BBC, who was there with the recording van.



Ivor Robertson's Ulster heading for 2nd place in the 1952 5-lap handicap race for Aston Martins. Photo Guy Griffiths.



Tony Rolt in the ERA Delage special on his way to victory in the 10-lap Formula Libre Race at the AMOC Spring Meeting in 1952. Photo Autosport.

first place through being badly balked on the start line by the car in front.

This race saw the first appearance of D.B.2 in a DB II, or in other words, David Brown Junr driving VMF 37, and very well he performed until things became somewhat disconnected inside. Once again George Abecassis was the scratch man. Driving Stephen Fitch's DB II, he proceeded to demonstrate first how easy it all was, when you do it properly, and in spite of a heavy handicap (such is the price of fame) George looked like getting in the first two for a change. It was certainly too good to last and, of course, the Abecassis Gremlin was on duty and had been gnawing through the throttle linkage all the time. The result was that George's first inkling of trouble showed itself in astronomical revs, when changing down. The throttle had jammed open and from then on he had to drive on the ignition switch. Just you try it! In spite of this George's passage through the Esses was delightful to watch and very, very fast.

The 10 Lap Handicap for 11/2 (Litre) Astons for the H. Elwell-Smith Trophy brought another hitherto recalcitrant Aston into the limelight. This was R. F. McNab Meredith's supercharged Ulster, which had, in the past, suffered from "The Vapours", a Victorian malady very popular amongst genteel young ladies. This was caused by wrong positioning of the fuel pumps, which meant that air, vapour, and petrol vapour were all getting into the wrong parts of the plumbing. This race gave him his first win with the AMOC and it was truly a fine sight to see the Ulster roaring by with the blower emitting the right sort of howl."

AND SO SNETTERTON CIRCUIT WAS BORN!

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Snetterton Speed Trials - October 27th

We are indebted to member Oliver Sear and our very good friend, John Wyatt, for the sensational discovery of Snetterton Heath.

The very impressive prize list was the work of John Wyatt and the circuit was loaned to us by both the gentlemen named.

There is no doubt that Snetterton is going to have a permanent place on the motor racing map, and for those who think it difficult to get to, we suggest that they think again, for the road approaches are first class, both from the Midlands and London, and a little extra mileage means little.

Opinions of the circuit from some of the top ranking drivers who supported our meeting are that the course is one of the most interesting yet discovered—the race times speak for themselves.

The event itself was a great success and we thank all those who acted as officials and worked doubly hard to run the meeting short-staffed.

The new Tom Stewart Time-keeping Team worked wonders, with Harry Wallace proving to be the hero of the day; John Bolster's commentary was superb; the Berthon-Bentley Padlock set-up was frighteningly efficient; the flag boys worked eight solid hours and unrelieved.

It is to be regretted that too few A.M.O.C. members took advantage of the meeting, and many of our regular helpers were missing.

A commentary of the event, featuring George Abecassis, Duncan Hamilton and Betty Stapleton, was broadcast over the Midland Regional programme at 6.20 on the same day by Bill Hartly. D.C.

Results and Times

		Mins.	m.p.h.
F.T.D.			
K. Wharton	E.R.A.	3 56	82.4
D. Poore (2nd)	Alfa	3 57	82.0
Duncan Hamilton (3rd)	H.W.M.	4 08	78.2
C. A. Booker (4th) (1097 cc.)	Cooper	4 11	77.5
R. Merrick (5th) (1132 cc.)	Cooper-Nor-Jap	4 12	77.1
Fastest Sports Car (and 6th F.T.D.)			
R. C. Willis	B.M.W.	4 20	74.7
F. H. Howarth (2nd)	Jag. XK120	4 20	74.6
Formula 1			
Wharton	E.R.A.	3 56	82.4
W. B. Black	XK120	4 31	71.8
Formula 2			
Duncan Hamilton	H.W.M.	4 08	78.2
Formula 3			
C. A. Booker	Cooper	4 11	77.5
D. Parker	J.B.S.	4 26	73.1
Sports Cars			
Over 3,000 cc.	F. H. Howarth	4 20	74.6
2001-3000 cc.	M. Morris Goodall	4 43	68.7
1501-2000 cc.	R. C. Willis	4 20	74.7
1101-1500 cc.	F. C. Davis	4 32	71.4
Fastest Lady Driver			
Mrs. B. Stapleton	A.M. (Spa Special)	4 55	65.9
Fastest Vintage Aston Martin			
P. Sims	International	5 29	59.3
Fastest Pre-War Aston Martin			
R. Jacobs	A.M. Spa Special	4 41	69.1
Fastest Post-War Aston Martin			
M. Morris Goodall	D.B.2	4 43	68.7