

# Barbon Hill Climb

## Timekeeping in the early days.

Memories of the start of the Barbon Hill Climb from Alan Smith, almost from day 1!

.....

I'm not aware of when the practice commenced, it was probably pre-war – long before I was of an age when motor sport was thought of. I joined the Westmorland Motor Club after leaving the forces in 1948, I was aware the club operated an awards points system, in which competitors of club events – be it in sporting trials, scrambles or grass tracks, even treasure hunts! gained points, and at the year end the competitor who had won the most points was awarded the title of Club Captain.

In 1959 I had just bought a brand new all aluminium engined Matchless trials bike, and on it, quite quickly, won many of the points available, so much so that I had the title of Captain in 1950 and 51, and with the title went the pleasure (or otherwise) of sitting in at the monthly club committee meetings, held at the time at the Duke of Cumberland pub in Kendal.

Early in 1950 – Barbon was being discussed, I suspect Jim Lafone, the then club president, was responsible for this, as it was known that Jim was friendly with Lord Shuttleworth at Barbon Manor, and it eventually came to pass that the club would run a 'test' hill climb on the manor drive in August, it was to be WMC members only and to cater for cars and bikes.

Not many people know this, but the start of that event was to be on the bridge over the river at the bottom of the hill, and the finish was to be exactly as it is today, albeit that the course was some 150 yards longer than at present.

The timekeeping was interesting. Club members, 'Kefty' Watson and George Grisedale, would be the timekeepers, and Percy Duff would be the starter, Percy would stand almost 100 yards up from the start, just round the first uphill right hand bend, yet just in sight of the start line. The timekeepers would raise a white flag to indicate they were ready, Percy would then raise his to indicate to the competitor that he was under starters orders, and when he dropped his flag the timekeepers each started a stop watch and the rider/driver commenced his run, - very simple!

The evening was August 24<sup>th</sup> 1950, FTD went to a bike at 55 2/5<sup>th</sup> Secs, the car class went to Peter Holyoake at 87 1/5<sup>th</sup> secs. (Interesting to note that since 1960, there has always been a car and a bike event at Barbon, and the club event in 1950 is the only year that a bike has gone up Barbon faster than a car!)

The event was a success, and the next stage was to contact the RAC for a course inspection, suggestions and certification. The RAC inspectors arrived and straight away suggested the start to be where it is today, the reasoning being that competitors could be going too fast into today's first bend, which could be dangerous, also that Armco to be placed in front of the first bend trees – I can well remember the struggles we had in getting the Armco in place due to the tree roots, it took a couple of weekends!

The next item was the hairpin, they required a set of railings on the 'inside' of the hairpin, in case a car should spin, drive off and hit the tree. (It is interesting to note that when the course was inspected again for inclusion in the Hill Climb Championship series the early 1960's, their only recommendation was that the railings should be removed!).

Apart from the above, the road edges required trimming back to widen the course, and a few holes required tarmac treatment, but by and large we had a Hill Climb venue.

The first official Barbon, was in May 1951, and because of my involvement with the electrical trade I was given the job of laying the timing cable from start to finish. From somewhere – someone had obtained a number of ex WD small cable drums – 50 yards each, which plugged in to each other, and by routing the cable through a convenient drain under the road near the finish and another part way up the straight just before the hairpin we managed the task using 10 drums (500 yards).

The timing equipment was not my problem. The club had a piece of equipment, I was told by Percy Duff, that had been made in the 1930's (if my memory is correct) by a gentleman by the name of Lewis Handley, who had a shoe repair business in Stramongate, Kendal. (I remember this shop when at the Senior Boys school during the war), I think it was painted green. However it appears that Lewis had made the device to operate a stop watch for the club before the war and was now being resuscitated. It comprised of a piece of floor board, which had a brass rod anchored to a swivel mount at one end of the board, with a large spring which pulled the bar on to the stop watch when an electrical solenoid, (which looked as if it came from a large door bell!) pulled out a pin which held the rod in place, the rod then descended, from a signal from the start line and started the watch – the watch being stopped manually by the timekeeper at the finish, difficult to explain but it worked.

So by connecting this device to the cable, all we had to do was to activate it by the movement of a car.

I was given the task of being in charge of the start line, and my instructions were to drive in a couple of 2" x 2" stakes, at either side of the start line, then mount a ex WD morse key on the back side of the nearside stake, and run a length of wool across the road from the other stake, through a hole in the morse key stake, and tie the thread to the knob on the key! The idea being, when the car started it pulled in the contacts of the morse key which pulled out the pin holding the spring on the timing equipment, and the stop watch – started. All I had to do was to put a new piece of wool on for each car!.The watch being stopped by hand at the finish.

Surprisingly enough the event went well, we had a large crowd and we looked forward to next year, I again had the same job, but this year I 'improved' the start system, instead of a piece of thread I used a length of string, the type we used to find on sugar bags, and on the other side of the start area connected the string to a piece of 'Dunlop Spring' (younger readers will not know of this material, if interested speak to a 1950's trials rider), actually it's a rubber band! (made from cutting up an inner tube!) the idea being was that the car would pull the string – which was only a couple of inches above the road, initiate the contact and we waited for the next car, the string had to be replaced every five or six cars , but it was easier than the wool system.

1953 saw the third Barbon, entries were up and we were bringing in competitors from near and far, I was given the same job, but this time another 'improvement', I reasoned that the bulk of the work was replacing the string or wool, so instead I invested in a length of Bowden inner throttle wire, obtained from my local motorcycle dealer – this turned out to be the winner – placed an inch or so above the front wheels – it pulled in the key contacts, it didn't stretch and it lasted well.....About half an hour from the start, the cable 'bounced' as the car ran over it, and caught on some part beneath, and being a length of Bowden – did not break, it pulled out both stakes and they followed the car the whole of the hill together with the first 50 yard length of timing cable, - the car got a time – but the event had a hold up for a little while. Fortunately during the winter I had been experimenting with a flat contact plate to place under the front wheel, this had been untried, but was all I could do to keep the event running, but even this had a drawback, - in 1953 I'd never heard of front wheel drive cars, I soon found out when the first French car appeared on the start line and I got the starting pad wrapped around my neck!

As the event was now a permanent fixture, the club decided to invest in a new commercial piece of timing equipment. By now my periods of being 'Captain' had expired (1950/51), and now had no direct knowledge of committee decisions, I learned however that it had been decided to purchase equipment from a firm I have never heard of previously or since, called 'Camera Cuss Ltd.',

This unit was beautifully made; it was built in to a polished rosewood box that would delight any sideboard of a country house! It measured about 6" wide at the front, 8/9" deep, and around 8" high, The top could be removed in one piece which allowed access to the terminals and a stop watch face, all the watch actuator pieces were out of view below the top panel which was in black traffolyte material engraved with all the necessary instructions, the whole thing operated from an Ever Ready 45 volt dry battery which was contained in the base, all in all, quite a well made piece of equipment.

However it had a problem, after being used for a couple of hours the watch failed, fortunately spare watches were on hand which saved the day. This continued for a few years after the purchase, and was becoming a problem, I was asked to have a look at it, and the only thing I could discover was that the 'hammer' effect of the actuator on the watch was simply physically damaging the watch, and there was no way of adjusting its strength.

In 1954, I started a Public Address business, primarily to serve the scrambles and grass track events, which, in those years were almost every weekend somewhere or other in the Northern Centre, and I took no direct part in the running of a Barbon event, but away from events I was quietly designing something more up to date for timekeeping. The first venture was a system similar to the 'Camera Cuss' timer, but with a microscopic adjustment on the actuator to prevent watch damage. This turned out to be quite successful and was used frequently at Autocross events which were very popular at the time. At Barbon, the original 'Camera Cuss' was still in use, but whenever the watch broke down, we now wheeled out my modified version, which kept the event on track until the end of the day. The first time it was used officially was for the first motorcycle hill climb in 1960 – where a well known photograph of 'Kefty' Watson in the timekeepers shelter is seen officially using my first timer for the first time.

Barbon was now being a well known event, and was being viewed as a possible venue to be included in the National Hill Climb Championship. Prior to the event the RAC vetted the venue, and apart from having to remove the railings from the inside of the hairpin and trimming back the track edges, everything was more or less OK. I unfortunately had a problem, from 1957 I had a large 3ft diameter analogue clock face operating from the PA van showing the time to the public at the finish – and it had been attached to the railings, it was too big to erect elsewhere. (It is now somewhere in the Lakeland Motor Museum).

With championship events on the cards, now was the time to get rid of mechanical stop watches, and I commenced designing a series of electronic timers, and at the first National event a gentleman by the name of George Hall who was the chairman of the RAC timing committee came to check both the timekeepers and the equipment. As a result of this George queried as to who had designed the equipment and asked if he could be supplied with some similar devices for use with the his timekeeping organisation in Malvern

It is now history - during the 1970's almost all the major events in the country, including the Channel Isles and Scotland used timing equipment which first saw the light of day at Barbon. More than 60 sets were made in this period, and now – over 40 years later, almost all of these units are still in use.

1979 saw the first digital clock in use at a hill climb. Designed in our workshop in Lancaster and had its first outing at Barbon. There are now over 60 digital clocks all over the country in the hands of timekeepers, even a set of timers and spectator displays were sent to the Royal Palace in Jordan! Later printers were added to the devices available, again first used at Barbon

For many years I'd been pestering the WMC committee about having a permanent cable laid between the start and finish of the hill. Since the early days requirements had been relatively simple, but as the event progressed better communications were necessary. To help in this, I installed a 10 line automatic telephone exchange in the PA van, and from the early 1970's we had phone contact between the paddock, start line, 1<sup>st</sup> corner, PA van and top paddock, all automatic with dial phones.

Of course all these things need wires, add to the phone requirements, we need a pair of wires for the timing, another pair to drive the PA in the paddock and start area, links to the 'office' for results, and in later days a couple of pairs for video links. To fill this requirement I obtained 2 x 250 yard drums of 12 pair communication cable, each of these drums were quite heavy and laying it for each event and rewinding it at the end of the day was time consuming, not to forget the joining of 24 wires in the middle of the field. We used to do this on the Friday afternoon prior to the event, and on one particular year a local sheep decided to sleep adjacent the cable and nibbled through all of the 24 cores, there was quite a panic on the Saturday when we had no communications!

In 2000 I returned from a holiday in Australia, and shortly after returning home the phone rang and Brian Whittaker advised that a contractor would be at Barbon to lay an underground cable this morning. I cannot say I was best pleased at the news, although delighted at a cable was at last to be installed, I was not in the least happy to go this morning, having lost a nights sleep and jet lag as well, and as a now 72 year old, was not feeling up to it.

Arriving at Barbon the contractor was on site, together with an engineer from BT, he was there to ensure we would not cut the underground phone line to the Manor. The drum of cable was there and when I asked what the length was, no one knew! so I asked the BT man if he had the instrument with him which could measure cable lengths and distances from faults, fortunately he had, so he measured the cable on the drum and announced it to be exactly 500 yards.

I then asked the contractor which route he was to use, he advised it would be around the outside of the hairpin (in the field) and as straight as possible to the start line. To which I advised that the cable was not long enough, as 500 yards is just long enough if one goes through the land drains near the finish and on the long straight, the drum was some 60 yards short! I never found out who had ordered the cable and arranged the contractor, I thought at the time that it might have been a good idea to have consulted someone who had been using cables on the site for the almost the last 50 years!

Anyway we laid the cable that day amongst hailstones/snow/howling wind and rain, and I had just returned from two months in glorious sunshine in Australia! The drum length petered out just after the hairpin, the contractor brought a length later in the week to make up the deficit and I made a waterproof underground joint on the Sunday.

The contractor had brought with him three plastic boxes which looked like something you would use for a stop tap, about 6" square, with a plastic lid, these were suppose to be for the cable terminations, but as the cable was armoured it required a space of 18" dia minimum, to coil round the inside of a cable end housing, what he had brought were completely unsuitable, So later I purchased some pre-cast concrete manholes about 24"x 18", cut some 2" thick paving slabs to the correct size for the covers, and went to Barbon a week later and dug the holes, placed the concrete bases within, fitted the covers and painted them green, my timekeeper pal from Scotland - Jim Reid, got hold of some ex BT dome shaped pole joint boxes in which I fitted 24 gold plated terminals and these reside inside the manholes, and for the last 14 years have served Barbon Hill Climb well.

But all was not yet over, within a week of fitting the manholes, and a few weeks before the 2000 May event I went to Barbon to do a check that everything was ok only to find that cows had literally

smashed all the manhole lids, the hoof marks were plainly visible on the fragments. This was a problem, what was strong enough to withstand an enraged cow?

I made a wooden mould, with a centre portion that would fit the inside of the manholes, the centre thickness being in the order of 3 inches thick, then fitted a number of steel bars and filled the remaining space with concrete, we now have three steel reinforced cow proof concrete manhole covers, although having said that, gashes of the present covers indicate that they have had another go at them, but failed. They've been OK for the last 14 years.

I have this mould and think it might be a good idea if it was added to the 'Barbon' kit, which I believe is kept somewhere on site – or was, it may be required again in years to come.

The years pass one by one, and regrettably younger club members no longer seem interested in helping to man large events, and for some years help has been forthcoming from other well known clubs in the North West, so much so that the Westmorland Motor Club is no longer the keeper of the Barbon Hill Climb, and the event is now known as Barbon Hill Climb Ltd., and run by a number of Northern clubs.

Timekeeping is keeping abreast of the times, gone are the pieces of floor board and stop watches, we now see computers for results, multi channel timers all capable of timing to thousandths of seconds, telephones have been surpassed by 2 way radios, we have video links both from the start line to the commentator at the top of the hill, and a return link from the finish line down to the timekeepers now operating on the start line, digital clocks to keep all up to date with the times, we give MPH speeds on the straight before the hairpin, - all very modern – but having been closely associated with the event for over 60 years I'm not so sure that the event runs any better with all the modern trappings than it did in 1951.

Finally, at the last Barbon Bike event in 2010, the Westmorland club president – the late Percy Duff O.B.E, was drinking his usual hot chocolate in the timing van on the start line, and said he had been thinking of the old days, and as far as he could remember, he and I were the only two people left who were involved in the early days of the event, I have to admit I cannot remember any others, I wonder if there are some of the older members still lurking in the shadows whom we never see?

The event was 60 years old in May 2011, I wonder what the next 50 years will bring?

Compiled by Alan Smith,  
Written February 26, 2014,  
Barbon Timekeeper, 1960/2017