

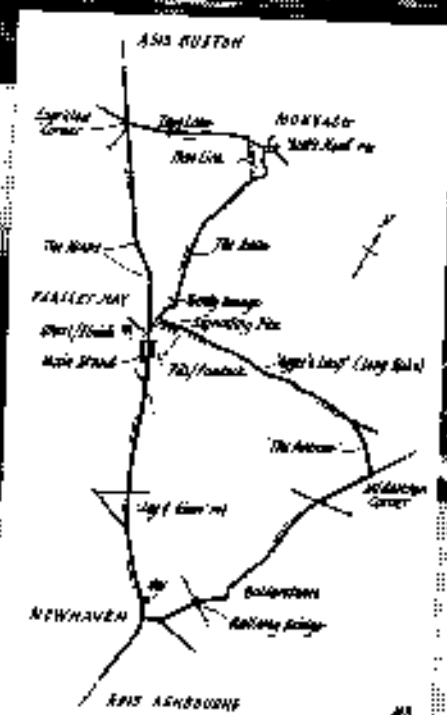
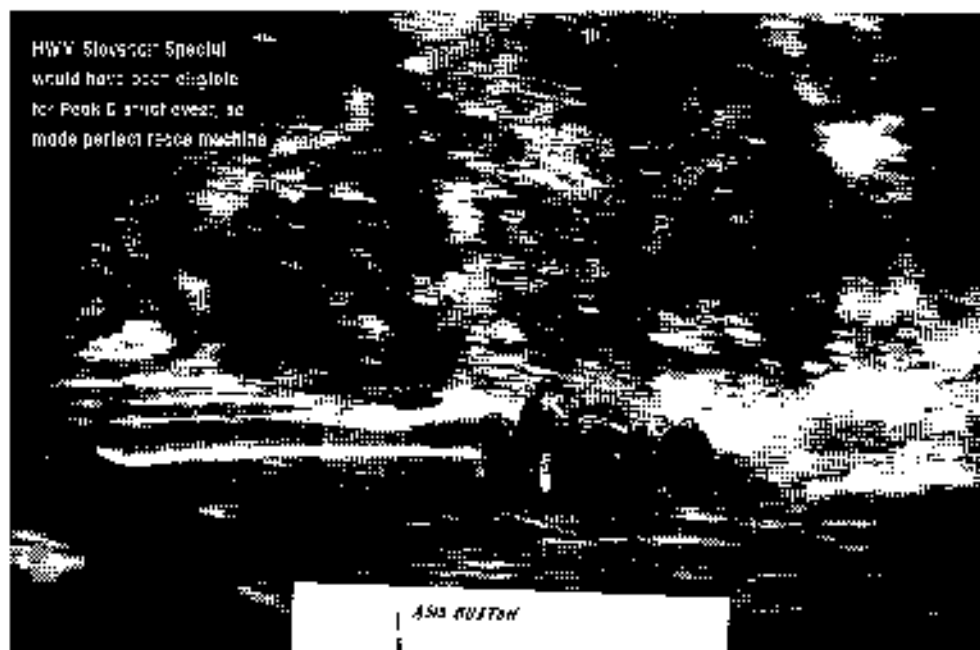
Imagine Jaguar D-types, Ferrari Verzas, Aston Martin DBR1s and 300S Maseratis fighting it out over a fast, narrow road circuit looping over high hills. A circuit almost as long as the old Nürburgring, with every sort of corner and hazard from stone walls and off-camber curves to a narrow bridge under a railway. A circuit in England, on the Queen's Highway.

Since the sport began, races have been run on closed public roads in Europe, and in Ireland and the Isle of Man. But it has never been legally possible in mainland Britain. Until World War II donated a slew of decommissioned RAF airfields up and down the country, we Brits were only able to enjoy proper circuit racing at Brooklands and, from the mid-1930s, at Donington and Croft. Post-war, some of those airfields turned into places like Silverstone, Goodwood and Snetterton, as well as many other now forgotten venues from Ibsley to Brough, Davulstone to Charterhall. In time further tracks were created on private ground, like the parks of Oulton, Mallory and Cadwell (though the latter had been used by motorcycles since the 1950s).

Then in November 1984 Birmingham City Council decided to sanction its own version of Monaco, and forwarded a Road Race Bill to Parliament. Remarkably, it was approved five months later, and duly received the Royal Assent. The Formula 5000 Birmingham Superprix, run each year around the city centre between 1986 and 1989, is a whole story on its own: a signal achievement by a small band of determined enthusiasts working doggedly to surmount every obstacle and ensure the event took place. In the half-century safety-ridden 21st century, it is unlikely to take place again.

However, few people know that there was a serious effort in the 1950s to get approval for a road road circuit running through the Peak District National Park in Derbyshire. Exactly who initiated this scheme seems lost in the mists of time, but Derby's most famous motor-racing resident Reg Parcell, a member of the works Aston Martin team and soon to be its manager, was certainly a prime mover. So was works MV and Moto-Guzzi rider and TT winner Bill Lucas, who also lived locally.

The proposed layout, shaped like a rough figure of eight, was extremely ambitious, totalling around 12 miles. The start/finish pits and main grandstand were to be centred around the banks of Parsley Hay. Nearby was a tiny



country railway station; today the Cromford and High Peak Railway is long dismantled, but in those pre-Beeching days special trains

could have been laid out, bringing spectators to within a few minute walk of the paddock.

In early 1955 the Derbyshire County Council decided to back the scheme, and drafted a Bill which, if approved by Parliament, would allow them to close the roads and hold motor-races on a fixed number of days each year. They submitted their plans to officials in the Ministry of Transport, and also proposed detailed arrangements for diverting normal traffic on race weekends. Parcell himself completed several high speed laps in his Aston Martin DB2/4 road car, some with Lucas as passenger, and they pronounced the track ideal for both a serious long distance sports car event and for motorcycle road racing.

Meanwhile, a new Road Traffic Bill was on its way through the House of Lords. Although the bill dealt primarily with mundane matters



of safety and vehicle regulation, Lord Brabazon – himself a former racing driver, winner of the 1907 Circuit des Ardennes on a Mitsuoka – stood up to

propose an Amendment to the Bill which would give the Minister of Transport powers to sanction the closure of public roads, where and when appropriate, for the purposes of motor racing. "Here in Great Britain," quoth his lordship, "we have the second-largest motor industry in the world. In motor racing, Jaguar have developed disc brakes and Mercedes Benz have developed fuel injection. We may even, in the future, see such innovations on everyday road cars. The Government should be prepared to do something to help this great industry, which has pulled us out of so many difficulties through the lean times. There might be clamour against closing the roads, but it would only be for two or three days in a year. Recently, on a main road drive by night, I was held up for 45 minutes by the Queen Hunt, and nobody said anything at all in expostulation."

DERBYSHIRE ROAD RACE

Lord Howe, 1931 Le Mans winner and president of the BRDC, spoke in eloquent support of the value of minor sport and the huge draw of road races on the continent of Europe. The Amendment was also backed by Lord Trenchard, the chairman of the AA, and by Lord Sutherland, himself a keen amateur racer. Only one backbench peer, Lord Moynie, spoke against it, grumbling that when racing took place near his house in Ireland "the quiet of the countryside was spoiled by a deafening and appalling noise that can be heard for many miles." Ironically Lord Moynie's first wife, Diana Mordaunt, later married Oswald Mosley, and their son Max went on to play a not inconsiderable role in the organisation of international motor sport.

But the Paymaster-General, Lord Selkirk, told the debate that the correct procedure for closure of public roads for a motor-racing event would be by way of a Private Bill. "If due provisions are made for the public to be properly safeguarded and local traffic is reasonably undisturbed, it might well find Parliamentary approval. I will readily give an assurance that the Ministry would not automatically oppose such a Private Bill." Given this assurance, Baroness withdrew her Amendment.

This all sounded most encouraging. But by the time the Lords again debated the matter three months later, the world had changed. Six weeks before, during the Le Mans 24 Hours, Lance Macklin's Austin-Healey 100S swerved to avoid Mike Hawthorn's pitting Jaguar D-type, and Pierre Levegh's Mercedes 300SLR ran up the back of the Healey and was catapulted into a crowded spectator enclosure. In all 84 people died, and over 120 were injured. Lurid newspaper headlines around the world called for all motor racing to be banned forthwith. In Switzerland that was actually done, while it was suspended in France and elsewhere. In the second debate Lord Howe did his best to suggest the Parsley Hay proposal, but it was almost universally opposed, most speakers now agreeing that the proper place for a motor-race was on a private track. Several of their lordships displayed little understanding of minor sport in the patronising view of one, "all cars that

race are prototypes, and all the technical experience gained makes not one jot of difference to the modest little motorcar that is bought by a Bill Jones or a Peter Robinson."

In theory there was still nothing to stop the Derbyshire County Council presenting a Private Bill, but two months later came another tragedy, this time on a track very close in character to the Peak District proposal. The Dundrod circuit in Northern Ireland, on 7.4 miles of fast, narrow country roads outside Belfast, was once again the scene of the Tourist Trophy, a World Sports Car Championship round that attracted all the top names. Unwisely, the organisers had accepted an entry from an inexperienced French amateur, Vicome Henri de Barry, in an apparently standard pale-blue Mercedes 300SL coupé. He was quick on the straights but slow through the corners, and right from the start a queue of smaller capacity cars with more expert drivers built up behind him.

On the downhill switchback from Deer Leap to Coochrinstown on the second lap Ken Wharton, in a works Le Mans Replica Frazer Nash incongruously wearing a Mistral fibreglass body, tried to squeeze past the Gullwing but failed. Then Jim Mayers got alongside de Barry, but at over 130mph on the


narrow road his bob-tail Cooper struck the concrete parapet of a house at the side of the roadway, and the car disintegrated. Mayers was flung out into the road along with the nearly full fuel tank, which burst into flames. Wheel in wheel behind him were Peter Jopp's Lotus-MG and the works Connaught of 20-year-old rising star Bill Smith. As Jopp told me years later: "Bill and I found ourselves driving side by side into an opaque curtain of smoke. I was lucky: I came out the other side, my arms saved by the fire as my car cocooned along the

bank. Bill wasn't so lucky: he went straight into Jim Mayers' wreckage." Both Mayers and Smith were killed instantly. Wharton went off the road, his car also on fire, and was dragged injured from the remains of the Frazer Nash which was completely burnt out. Jim Russell's Cooper, Friedrich Krenschmann's Porsche and Lance Macklin's Healey 100S also crashed avoiding the pile-up.

Jopp helped marshals manhandle his Lotus away from the fire and into a field, and then walked into a nearby farmyard. "Do you want a priest?" asked the shocked farmer. "No," replied Peter wearily, "just a lift back to the pits." The stewards had de Barry black-flagged and pulled out of the race for banking. A few laps later Richard Mainwaring died when his works Elva tumbled over in the last left at Torrington and buried out while he was trapped underneath. Macklin, having been innocently involved in the tragedies at both Le Mans and Dundrod, never raced again, of de Barry nothing more was ever heard.

Not surprisingly, the events in France and Ireland effectively spelt the end of the Derbyshire road circuit. Local enthusiasts switched their attention to trying to get Donington revived - which, as it turned out, would not begin to happen until Tom Wheatcroft's eventual purchase in 1971.

By now, 55 years on, the roads are still silent. I dug up the few contemporary references that are available - the project received surprisingly little coverage at the time - and was greatly helped in my researches by arch-enthusiast and former Rolls-Royce car designer Merric Bourne, who surveyed the course in detail and produced the fine map on page 93. My own period sports racer, the 1930 ex-Stirling Moss HWM offset F2 car which metamorphosed in 1956 into the V8 Chevy-powered Stovebolt Special, would have been eligible had the race ever taken place, and was obviously just the thing to sample it. So, soon after dawn on a clear morning last summer, the Stovebolt and I left London for the 160-mile dash to the Peak District National Park.

Coming along the A515 from Ashbourne, I joined the proposed circuit at the village of Newhaven. This would have been the start of the main straight, which is called a Melsarnie, beating four miles. The road rises quite steeply, with undulating blind humps, and by modern standards is not very wide. It's the busy main route from Derby to Macclesfield and is now controlled by a 50mph limit, which the Stovebolt and I did our best to observe. But during a race it would be a magnificent flat out climb, blasting past the circuit's start-line, pits and main grandstands halfway along. About a mile before the end of the straight, by which time the fastest cars would have been doing over 180mph, the road reaches its highest point, and on that brow there's the first of two wicked flicks, left then right - Derbyshire's answer to the Massa Kink. On a dry road a D-type on the limit might have needed a slight left brace in the wet, or moving off line to lap a slower car. It would have been a real test of skill and courage. 



"On the brow are two wicked flicks, left then right Derbyshire's answer to the Massa Kink"



Then, with the handle of Sparklow coming up on the left, it's maximum braking and second gear for the sharp right off the A515 and onto the B5055. This is Tagg Lane, which curves downhill towards Lathkill Dale. Back on the gears into top before more hard braking for a sharp downhill right into the planned new section of road, which would have been laid across a couple of fields to skirt around the village of Monyash. Now we are climbing again through sweeping fast curves between dry stone walls, briefly taking top to breast the brow along The Rake, and down the other side with the A515 coming into view again. But just before reaching it, after a resting hand, a right junction left brings the track along the back of where the paddock would have been: here there could be signalling pits, where boards would be easier to read than at high speed on the straight. Next comes a fast, treacherous back section, never straight, never level, much of it under overhanging trees, mainly in 1st rattle third gear stuff with the hellow of the HWM's V6 echoing off lush grassy banks. A blind cross-roads near Youlgreave village is a dead stop for us, but the racers would have scabbled through it in second,



"It could have given the UK a wonderful road race, to rank with the European classics"

then back up to third and maybe top again before diving down to a tight left. After an uphill right, there's a unique hazard. It's where the CHPR railway line ran over the road and, although the line is long gone, the bridge remains. If the lush verges each side were cut back it would be wide enough for two cars of the period – barely. With a last right-hander the circuit briefly joins the A5012 from Matlock, before a steepen right brings us back onto the A515 again, and the start of that long, long uphill straight.

I did six laps of this awe-inspiring layout, around 72 miles, before stopping at the Bull's

Head pub in Monyash for refreshment and a quiet think about it all. Outside the pub the locals admired the HWM; but none of them had ever heard of the proposal, more than half a century before, for the Parsley Hay Peak District road race circuit.

There's no doubt that the track would have been very fast, normally very dangerous, and fraught with all sorts of organisational problems: not least how to control and protect spectators over so long a lap – although that's been managed pretty well down the years around the 37 miles of the Isle of Man's wonderful motorcycle TT course. And, while there was only sparse

local population to be inconvenienced, my researches show there was already student opposition to the proposal from local farmers, ramblers and countryside groups making use of this area of natural beauty.

But used just one weekend a year, with the standards of organisation and marshalling by which our major clubs were famous, this could have given the UK a wonderful road race, to rank with the best of the European classics. Without the Le Mans and Dunroed accidents it might, just might, have happened in the mid 1950s. It certainly wouldn't happen now. **EM**