

# MORGANS

## AT CASTLE COMBE

Castle Combe Circuit archivist Pete Stowe looks at some Morgan race history



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Jeff Sparrowe in JUO177, October 1950

**M**organs have a very special place in the history of Castle Combe circuit, as it was a Morgan that won the first ever car race at the circuit when it opened on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1950.

Castle Combe was one of the many race circuits that sprang up in the UK in the 1940s and 50s using redundant wartime airfields – and is one of the few that still survive today. Back in 1950 the local Bristol Motor-Cycle & Light Car Club began racing at the former pilot training base near Castle Combe in north-west Wiltshire, using the 1.84 mile perimeter track laid down by the RAF in 1943.

That first car race, a five lapper for 1100cc sports cars, was won by Jeff Sparrowe in his Morgan at a 62.5 mph average, ahead of Arthur Mallock's Austin-Ford special. The twelve car entry included MGs, a Riley, an HRG, and one other Morgan, the 1098cc car of M Luckman. A few minutes later Sparrowe was out again in the next race, for 1500cc sports cars, and this time finished second to Gerry Ruddock's HRG.

With that first, closed, meeting having been a success, in October a bigger, national, event was held. In front of an estimated 12,000 crowd Sparrowe again featured, running third to the Frazer-Nash's of Stirling Moss and Tony Crook in the 2-litre sports car race before retiring late on. Sparrowe put in regular appearances over the next few seasons, in March and May 1951 collecting two seconds and a third place, but having to give best to Mike Hawthorn in his rapid Riley's. Then at the 1952 Easter Saturday meeting he won the 1200cc class in the six lap 1.5 litre sports car race.

Another Morgan to appear in 1951 was Peter Hughes' "Le Mans" 4/4, CAB652, and in April 1955 EM

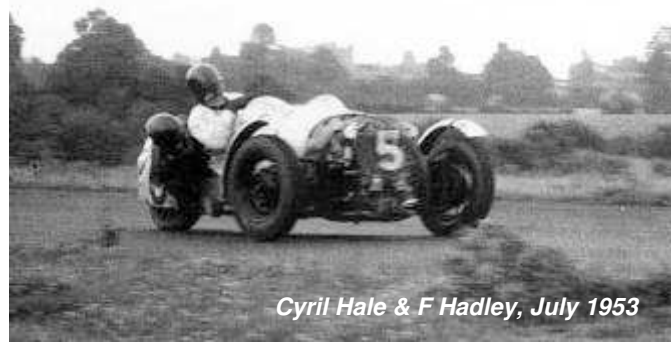
Rogers' 1971cc Morgan was third in the 1500-2000cc class in the 30 lap, 55 mile, sports car race. In a different branch of motor sport, Castle Combe featured as a special test venue on the first night of the five-day International RAC Rally of GB in March 1953, with Peter Morgan (Plus 4) recording best time in the sports car category.



© Simon Lewis Transport Books

Peter Hughes in CAB652, May 1951

It wasn't just four-wheeled Morgans that appeared in those early years though, as Cyril Hale (with passenger F Hadley) was a regular competitor in the sidecar and three-wheeler races at the motorcycle meetings, although unable to match the quicker 'bike combinations.



*Cyril Hale & F Hadley, July 1953*

Car race meetings were run for six seasons at Castle Combe through the early '50s, culminating with an International Formula One race in October 1955, won by Harry Schell in the Vanwall. Then the repercussions from the Le Mans disaster earlier that year hit the venue. Enhanced safety provisions were needed that the small Bristol club couldn't afford, and car racing came to a halt, although motor-cycle racing would continue. Following a six-year hiatus, the BRSCC then funded the necessary safety improvements and car racing began again in 1962.



*BARC Sprint, October 1963*

The circuit re-opening meeting on 9<sup>th</sup> June featured just one Morgan, John McKechnie's 997cc Team Cedar 4/4, in the last race of the day, for GT cars up to 1300cc. McKechnie came in third overall behind a pair of Lotus Elites and won the one-litre class.

From the '60s onwards Morgans have frequently appeared at Castle Combe. In the '60s and '70s Brian Jenkins and Ray Meredith (Plus 4s) were among those successful in production sports races, while Bill Wykeham scored the first 'Combe race win for a Plus 8 in 1978, followed up by Charles Morgan in 1979.

Prior to the mid-1970s the circuit had operated on short term planning permissions, but after Howard and Pat Strawford took over control in 1976 the track's future was eventually secured when they finally achieved permanent permission in 1981. A major feature of racing at Castle Combe over the following years has been the local circuit championships, with the Special GT (now Sports & GT) championship being introduced in 1982. Champion in the over 2500cc class for the first three years was Tom Hinds and his Plus 8.

In 1985 the Morgan Challenge, in its first year, visited Castle Combe on 28<sup>th</sup> September, with Graham Bryant's Core Lion Developments putting up a silver rose bowl for the winner of the race. Bryant placed second in the first race of the afternoon, for road-going sports cars, in his Plus 8, then led the first four laps of the Challenge race before retiring. The final six laps featured a dice between the Plus 8s of Bob Stuart and Tony Morgan-Tipp, which Stuart just edged by 0.4 sec. Third, and first 4-cylinder car home, was Barrie Taylor's 4/4, ahead of Leigh Sebba and Mary Lindsay (Plus 8's) and Richard Bourne (Plus 4).



*J. McLay, June 1964*

*© Ted Walker Ferret Fotografics*

Bryant did manage to take the trophy the following year, despite being among the quicker runners starting from the back of the grid with self-imposed handicaps, the championship having already been decided. In 1987 he was out of luck again though, running out of fuel on the last lap while leading.



*Tom Hinds, August 1982*

During the '80s and '90s, in addition to the Morgan Challenge events, Malcolm Paul, Steve Cole, Bruce Stapleton and Richard Thorne, all in



**Morgan Challenge.**  
Castle Combe  
race winners

- 1985 Bob Stuart
- 1986 Grahame Bryant
- 1987 Tony Morgan-Tipp
- 1993 Graham Walker
- 1994 Klaus Nesbach
- 1997 Peter Garland
- 1999 Rick Lloyd
- 2000 Keith Ahlers
- 2001 Keith Ahlers
- 2007 Rick Lloyd
- 2008 Rick Lloyd
- 2009 Tony Lees
- 2010 Keith Ahlers
- 2011 Keith Ahlers
- 2012 Keith Ahlers

Plus 8s, were among those successful in production and historic sportscar races.

The circuit layout had remained unchanged for nearly 50 years, but for 1999 two chicanes were introduced, increasing the track length to 1.85 miles. Rick Lloyd was the first Morgan race winner on the new layout in the Challenge race that April, taking the spot when erstwhile leader Peter Garland suffered tyre problems and spun at the end of the penultimate lap.

From 2001 to 2005 the circuit hosted some of its most important meetings in three decades, featuring rounds of the British GT Championship. The June 2002 race provided a great result for Morgan. Although a late entry, having completed 18 hours of Le Mans the previous weekend, the Aero 8 of Steve Hyde and Richard Stanton finished the one hour race sixth overall, and fourth in the GTO class. Aero 8 entries in the following three years were less successful however, the best result being Keith Ahlers and Aaron Scott in 2004 (10<sup>th</sup> overall and 4<sup>th</sup> in class in the first race), while in the second race Ahlers suffered a tyre blow out at Quarry when running second in class, the pair eventually finishing, but well down.



Peter Garland, April 1997

Pete Stowe  
April 2013

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Richard Stanton/Steve Hyde Aero 8, June 2002



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