

Oulton Park 19th May

A report by John Bevan

Oulton Park is set in the beautiful rolling countryside of Cheshire and is in the grounds of an old estate, Oulton Hall. During the second world war it was used as an American army camp, and famously staged an exhibition boxing match by GI and boxer Joe Louis. It is the only circuit apart from Mallory Park to run around a lake! There are three configurations, although the International circuit, the longest at 2.69 miles is the most interesting to us, being the home to the Gold Cup, and to the Morgan Challenge.

Oulton Park held its first race on the 8th of August 1953, when the Mid-Cheshire car Club organised a race meeting, the main event being a Formula Two race won by Tony Rolt in a Connaught A-type. Over the succeeding years Oulton has seen sports cars, Formula one, two and three cars use the circuit, and still hosts British touring cars each year.

The outright lap record is a mind-boggling 1 minute 24.68 seconds at an average speed of 117.91 mph, set by Gareth Rees in a Formula 3000 Reynard single-seater. The lap record for Class A Morgan Plus 8s is still held by Rick Lloyd, with a lap he set in 2007, at an average speed of 87.41 mph, in 1 minute 50.9 seconds. Bets were on the record falling this year with the weather looking good and Keith Ahlers looking to taking his hundredth Morgan Challenge win. The Class B record, held by Andrew Thompson, set in a Roadster Lightweight, with a lap time of 1 minute 55.6 seconds (83.8 mph) was also up for grabs with Andrew being out in his ARV6 rather than the Lightweight.

I must admit that after last year when I drove the Roadster to Oulton in the rain, qualified in the rain, raced on a greasy track and then drove home in the rain I was a little down on the Cheshire venue. Luckily this year the weather was perfect, with sun on the Friday and Saturday of the race weekend. Since we were sharing the meet with VSCC this was lucky, as their cars offer even less weather protection than Morgans. Oulton in the sun is wonderful, and the track considerably less scary than in the wet!

Qualifying put Keith on pole, Roger second and Andrew Thompson in third. With several of the Morgan fraternity away in Pau, Tony Lees opting to pilot his Cognac Special in two races and leave the "Flying Banana" at home, and several drivers opting to save their cars for Spa there was a small starting grid of 17, which got even smaller when John Milbank withdrew with mechanical woes (to car not driver!)

The standing start saw Keith, Roger and Andrew get a good get-away, but half way round the first lap Keith's wheel-bearing failed, causing consternation and an early withdrawal for him, luckily with car intact. Andrew then took a commanding lead, which he held to the end, thus taking his first outright win. Further down the field, Phill Thomas, on strong form this year took an excellent fourth place, with James Sumner and Jack Bellinger taking advantage of Tony Hirst and Craig Hamilton-Smith's coming together to pip them into fifth and sixth. It was good to see the Clubsports battling throughout the race, and to see a third of the new cars out in the hands of Richard Thorne. It was also encouraging to see three very different Class E cars out in the hands of Messrs Dearnley, House and Bevan.

With Keith's wheel bearing the Class A record still stands as it is, and the Class B record also stands, with Mr Thompson having eased off having acquired a significant lead.

The Class E Classic Tracks 4/4 Sport Competition I was driving this year in only its second race with me seemed to take to Oulton, and I had a great drive home with little or no traffic, since apparently a couple were getting married in Windsor and 22 men were kicking a ball around at Wembley.

Class Winners:

A Roger Whiteside

G Andrew Thompson

J Phill Thomas

R Tim Parsons

C Chris Springall

D James Sumner

E Malcolm Dearnley

S Tony Hirst

We now look forward to the next Morgan Challenge outing at Spa on the weekend of the 23rd/24th June- have fun ladies and gentlemen!