

ROLT OF THE VSCC

by Julian Ghosh



A rare photograph of Tom Rolt on the start line at the first ever Prescott meeting, a year after Tom first discovered the venue. He is driving his Phoenix Special (a supercharged Bugatti Brescia engine and GN chassis) Photo: BOC Archive

Success or achievement early in life is nowadays typified by obsessive sporting stars, such as Formula One drivers. However, at the beginning of the last century it was much more the norm. An obvious example being Isebard Kingdom Brunel; so imagine a young VSCC member 80 years ago, having obtained a driving license to then go blasting about in The Cotswolds in his GN.

The appeal of The Cotswolds has certainly not diminished in the past 80 years, so if you lived in Stanley Pontlage, visiting friends at Prescott House, in said GN, which was not far enough away to consume too much petrol, would have been an exciting pursuit. Bear in mind that the approach to the house would have originally accommodated little more than Lord Ellenborough's

Victorian Brougham with active suspension in the form of a swiveling fore carriage !

'Pardon' is by any means a corner requiring exacting judgment but in the early thirties was a real hairpin, so the combination of the loose surface and the GN's solid back axle contrived to diminish it's acuteness. Discretion is not



The approach to 'Orchard' as Tom Rolt would have found it back in the 1930s.

Photo: BOC Archive

a commodity that I can recall in abundance at an early age ,so presumably the prospect of encountering the owners descending the hill at the same time was the kind of thing that might have inspired Gerard Hoffnung's address to The Oxford Union, especially since the undergrowth was dense and impenetrable !

Passion is a far more powerful fuel than any BioEthanol or some such, so when Prescott House Estate was sold to The Gloucestershire Dairy Company in 1936, exercise of the GN was threatened, so prompt action was needed, since it appeared that an asset stripping operation of the property was likely. The challenge has to be addressed, so after the last Shelsley meeting in 1936, our hero leads a small procession of motoring hierarchy to Prescott to assess the possibility of purchasing the estate for use as a prime motor sport venue.

The likes of Sam Clutton, Forrest Lycett and Tim Carson looked favorably on the prospect but had to concede that the VSCC, then 2 years old, could not contemplate the purchase of The Prescott Estate. Sam fortunately prevailed upon Col Eric Giles of The Bugatti Owners Club visit

the venue and a deal was struck whereby The VSCC was conceded the right to hold one event each year in return for divulging it's location to the Bugatti Owners Club.

Well, who was that man? Listed in the 1936/37 typed membership list is one Tom Rolt owning a 1902 Humber and 1924 Alvis 12/50. He competed in our very first Prescott in 1938 in The Phoenix Special, (a GN with a Brescia Bugatti engine). His address quoted is the well known 'Phoenix Inn' at Hartley Wintney, where he had commenced a motor trading business with John Passini.

A founding member of The VSCC, he later became a distinguished engineer and championed many causes, including The Inland Waterways, The Talylyn Railway, The Newcomen Society, The Association for Industrial archaeology and The Iron Bridge Gorge Museum.

This weekend we celebrate his the centenary of his birth and it is with some significance that we dedicate a corner in to his memory at the top of Prescott and offer due deference to Sonia his widow.



Ben Thompson driving his Fafnir exits the corner that is from Sunday 8 August to be known as 'Rolt' corner.

Photo: Phil Johnson