

THE IRISH TO THE RESCUE!

Gordon Bennett was in a right pickle. The 2nd of the runs named after himself, aka the III Coupe Internationale, held in 1902, had been won in France, by Selwyn F Edge, the famous British racing driver. This meant that the hosting of the next event, in 1903, fell to the British – but there was a problem. In fact, there were several problems.

But firstly, who was Gordon Bennett? GB Junior, to give him his full title, was the son of GB Senior, a Scot who had emigrated to The Big Apple and had started up the New York Herald Tribune. Unlike his taciturn Scottish father, GB Junior was an outgoing type, always up for a bit of self-promotion. He sponsored the Gordon Bennett Cup in ballooning; organised the ill-fated USS Jeannette expedition to the North Pole; and was responsible for sending a man out into the wilds of Africa to look for another man, which ended, happily it has to be said, with the rather comical query of one to the other, “Dr Livingstone, I presume?” Yes, it was Henry Morton Stanley who uttered those immortal words – and Gordon Bennett had fully financed the rescue mission.

But let's rewind a bit, to the beginning of motoring, to see how GB Jr got himself involved. The first petrol-driven car was a three-wheeler made by Carl Benz in 1885. To be honest, it was more of a tricycle than a car. But that didn't stop Carl's wife, Bertha, from taking it on a 184km round trip in 1888, from Mannheim to Pforzheim, to prove the value of these mechanical contraptions. She had to do a few running repairs en route and organise her own fuel stops at various pharmacies (no garages back then, remember!) and should have put an end once and for all to the notion that women are no good at mechanical things – would a man have had a hat-pin about his person to use to unblock a fuel line? Doubtful. Or a garter to wrap around a faulty HT lead? Unlikely.

This was the catalyst needed to get motoring on its feet. Within a few short years, cars had developed out of all recognition to that early Benz, with its single cylinder, solid tyres, and exposed flywheel. By adding extra cylinders, engines became bigger and bigger, and, ergo, cars got faster and faster. And, naturally, people wanted to compete with each other to see who was the fastest. It's a man (and, occasionally, a girl) thing. Needless to remark, Gordon Bennett found himself caught up in the excitement, and, in 1899, awarded the Automobile Club de France with a trophy to be presented every year to the winner of a race named after him. So far, so good.

Unfortunately, although engines had got more powerful and reliable, the same couldn't be said for the rest of the car. Brakes and steering just hadn't kept up with developments. It was still considered dangerous to have brakes fitted to front wheels, so they weren't. Direct steering by tiller had, it is true, been replaced by steering wheels in the majority of cases, but self-centring, never mind power assistance, was still a dream. When we look at racing cars in the early part of the 20th century, those bespoke behemoths, with their minimal bodywork, questionable handling, and outrageously powerful engines, were, literally, accidents waiting to happen. And happen they did.

The 1901 Paris – Bordeaux Race, run on open roads, resulted in the deaths of eight onlookers. We can't blame those unfortunate people, either; most of those cars were going faster than anything anyone had ever seen before, faster even than express locomotives; and people's reactions just weren't quick enough. The casualty tally of the Paris – Madrid Race was even worse, resulting in its being cancelled at Bordeaux. This was despite France being at the forefront of motor car development at the time, and had enthusiastically embraced motor racing, seeing it as a valuable showcase in which to display its latest mechanical accomplishments to the world.

So now, in 1902, Gordon Bennett was in a fix. His beloved race was to be transferred from automobile-loving France to automobile-hating Britain, where, it has to be remembered, the notorious Red Flag Law had only been repealed six years previously. Things weren't looking good.

GB contacted his friend, John Scott Montagu, MP for the New Forest, and a passionate petrol-head, as we say nowadays. This same J S Montagu was, in time, to pass on his petrol-soaked genes to his son, Edward, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, who opened the National Motor Museum in due course. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. He was also responsible for persuading his secretary, Eleanor Thornton, to pose for the sculptor Charles Sykes, to produce one of the most memorable pieces of automobilia today – she was the model for the Spirit of Ecstasy, to be seen, billowing folds a-fluttering, on the prow of every post-1911 Rolls Royce (much to Henry Royce's disapproval of such frippery, it is reliably reported!) Sadly, JSM was unable to persuade his fellow parliamentarians to permit such a reckless show of speed on mainland British roads.

But wait – was there any part of the Empire where such entrenched attitudes didn't prevail? Indeed there was, and right next door – Ireland! As a mainly agricultural society where the horse still ruled supreme, and with a total count of fifty cars (yes, fifty!) over the whole island, the people of Ireland were virtual strangers to this new fangled mode of transport, and were found to be far more kindly disposed to any new and exciting motoring venture.

Approval was sought and obtained; a 90-mile figure-of-eight closed course was laid out going through the towns and villages of Counties Kildare, Carlow, and Laois; and, on the 2nd of July 1903, with the help of hundreds of police and marshals, a claimed one million spectators (most of whom had never even seen an ordinary motor car before) were treated to the sounds, smells, and sheer speed of these magnificent machines, driven by the drivers of the day, Henri Farman, Rene de Knyff, Fernand Gabriel, Selwyn Edge, and Camille Jenatzy, who won the 3rd Gordon Bennett Race, aka the IV Coupe Internationale, at an average speed of 49.22 mph. It was the first race ever to be held on closed public roads. As an aside, Selwyn Edge, unfortunately, was disqualified for availing of a push-start; however, he made up for it a short time later by winning the powerboat championships in Cork Harbour.

As can be seen from the above, the 3rd Gordon Bennett was the race which saved motor racing for posterity. The combination of closed public roads along with strict policing and marshalling made a potentially dangerous pursuit relatively safe, and ensured continuity at a critical period, giving time for brake, steering, and other roadholding technology to catch up with engine advancements, at least until Brooklands – the first purpose-built banked motor circuit in the world – was opened up in 1907, where, perhaps, they didn't matter as much any more!

The Committee of the Historic Racing Car Association has decided that it is time to emulate these brave men in their fantastic machines. Let the highways and byeways of Kildare, Carlow, and Laois reverberate once more to the sounds and smells of veteran and vintage machines as they wend their way along the actual roads and lanes which were used in the Race which set the standard for all future Grand Prix events. It is proposed to hold a commemorative Reliability Trial on the weekend of the 2nd of July 2022, open to any machine, two- three-, or four-wheeled, manufactured up to and including 1939. This, it is felt, would be more in keeping with the spirit of the original Gordon Bennett IV Coupe Internationale.

A memorable and enjoyable weekend is guaranteed, even for those not particularly interested in motor racing. The three counties in which the event is to be held are part of Ireland's Ancient East, and are an absolute treasure trove of historical sites – see separate list for things to see and do in the area.

We look forward to seeing you there.

