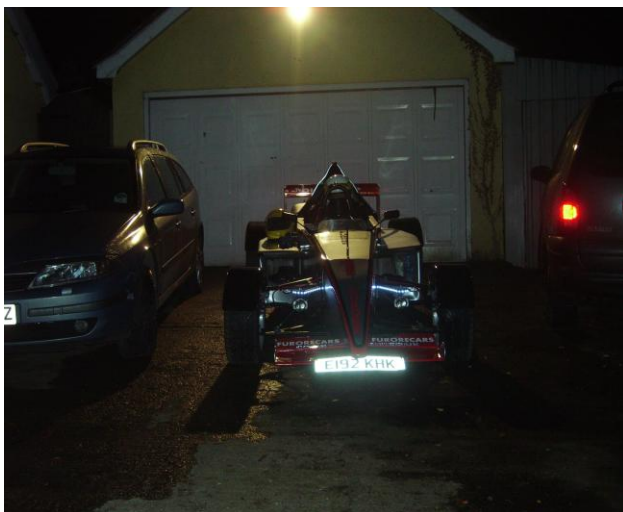


Le Mans & back in “F1” car (with passenger & camping gear!)

It's 1:53 am, I'm lying in bed, & I'm wide awake. There are a couple of reasons for this; one is that I am looking forward with excitement & anticipation to the events of the next few days & the adrenaline has definitely been pumping round my veins; the other is that I can hear rain on the skylight window & that is exactly what I did not want to hear! In just a couple of hours the planning & work that's gone on for the last few weeks will come to fruition – or not.

To put you in the picture, I am the designer/manufacturer of a somewhat unusual kitcar, it's called the Furore Formula One & it is unique being the only modern looking F1 lookalike (please note it is **NOT** a replica of anything) & it's a two seater, placing the passenger behind the driver in a tandem seating arrangement. When I suggested to friends & family that I was thinking of taking the car to Le Mans to see the 24 hour race they looked at me as though the one marble I had left (they obviously recognize the fact that I am barking mad to have come up with such a concept in the first place!) had finally gone the way of all the others! When I mentioned I was taking a passenger & camping gear people just made soothing sounds obviously not wanting to upset the strange mad person. There was also the minor detail that this was the prototype vehicle which had done just 127 miles in total, around 60 of which were on the road the others on a short trackday, so to say it wasn't exactly tried & tested would be a bit of an understatement.



Fast forward to 3:00 am, I haven't had any more sleep, but it's now time to make our final preparations & leave. It's stopped raining! 3:30 am, time for a last pic of the car, get in, do up the belts & we're off, we're meeting friends in another kit car at the Thurrock services just a short drive away. 4:00 am, we're at the services donning our wet weather gear whilst sheltering under the canopy at the filling station because it's started raining again, our friends are nowhere to be found but a couple of phone calls elicits the fact that they have a brake problem & are still up at the M11, they don't think they will make the ferry in time & tell us to go on & we'll meet up in France. 4:10 am & we're going through the Dartford toll, at least we don't have to pay for

it at that time of day – there had to be some advantage to getting up at stupid o'clock. Strangely, we're not getting wet, providing we maintain a decent speed - not a problem at that time of the morning – the rain goes straight over us & the only bit that gets wet is our visors, I'm able to stay down behind the flyscreen because the wind keeps it sufficiently clear of rain. An uneventful drive, other than people taking pictures of us on the motorway, sees us rolling onto Dover docks at around quarter past five & there the carnival atmosphere begins.

Dover docks is not usually the most interesting place to be, however today is a little different. All sorts of different vehicles are lined up ready for embarkation, from a Transit van with the orange & blue gulf stripes, to a classic Rolls, to Porsches, Ferraris & a glut of TVRs. People are obviously looking out for new arrivals & within seconds of stopping we have a small crowd round the car – it stopped raining on the way down & they are all wearing shorts & T shirts, we are a little over dressed in all our wet weather clothing. Most common question being thrown at us after “what is it?” is “where's the camping gear?”. Unlike several Lotus 7 clones we can see with luggage strapped onto roll bars etc. none of ours is on show, the tent is behind the drivers seat along with my squashy bag, we have a sleeping bag in each sidepod, my passenger, Gary, has his bag inside the left hand sidepod, we're sitting on our bed rolls & Gary has a rucksack on his lap with stuff for immediate needs such as money, tickets & passports. We also have a few other bits & bobs such as brollies (in case we're caught in the rain in heavy traffic!) tucked down the sides of the seats.

Just a couple of minutes later our thunder is well & truly stolen as a Porsche pulls in complete with the green stripes used by the German Police, the Polizei lettering, flashing blue lights & siren going – we had the strangest feeling that this was not entirely legal. By the time we were in France the lights had mysteriously disappeared although we did see the car about at Le Mans with them in place – they were apparently running a “charm offensive” of smiling & waving at the Gendarmes, who are not known for their sense of humour, but apparently took it in good heart.

Shortly after this we started boarding the ferry, which was quite uneventful & were soon tucking into a hearty “Full English” – after all we weren’t too sure just what we’d be living on for the next few days, one thing we certainly hadn’t brought with us being a stove or any eating utensils.

If boarding the ferry was uneventful, then disembarkation certainly wasn’t. No sooner had we got back down to the car decks & way before they had any chance of opening the bow doors than everyone started hitting the horn button. Mine is only a motorbike item (saves weight!) but we nevertheless joined in with a pathetic



“beep beep”. Shortly after the horns the engines started revving, the TVR’s particularly making a wonderful burble on the overrun, this at least was something we could join in with on an equal footing. We were soon disembarking, & this was something else which others who had obviously done many times before & were well prepared for. Stereos were being played at high volume, with “The Dam Busters Theme”, “Ride of the Valkyries”, & the theme from “The Great Escape”; quite what the French must make of this each year is beyond me.

I had switched the Acewell dash to KPH for the European part of the journey to save having to convert from MPH all the time. The weather this side of the channel wasn’t as good as it had been back in Blighty so we were back in our “wetsuits” as we left Calais behind us. Watching all these amazing cars wending their way down the Autoroute is a truly fantastic sight & we were constantly overtaking, or being overtaken by any one of hundreds of interesting vehicles (I was being very careful with regard to the speed limit having been warned how hot the French Police can be on speeders – not only do they have heavy on the spot fines, but if you’re a long way over the limit they can impound your vehicle! As my car is somewhat conspicuous I felt that discretion was the better part of valour here & kept my foot off the gas). We were making good progress down the autoroute & stopped a couple of times for fuel & something to eat. Each services you stop at is like it’s own little car show & we spoke to dozens of people from all over Europe – Belgium, Holland, Germany obviously France & there were three guys who’d driven down from Denmark in Corvettes – now that must have been an interesting fuel bill. At the second stop my phone rang, it was our friends with the other kitcar, I answered it asking where they were, fully expecting that they would now be in France & catching us up; sadly this was not the case, they told us they would not be coming: why? Because their car had burst into flames on the M20, they had been able to get out of it OK but the car had gone up like a torch along with all their belongings, camping gear, passports & money, all that was left was a burnt out chassis, engine & gearbox. We were absolutely gutted for them, & not entirely unselfishly as this was the first time we’d ever been & they were the ones who’d originally organized & booked the trip & actually knew what to do where to go etc. Fortunately we had at least packed all our own gear so we had everything we needed with us, but we felt absolutely awful just thinking about what they’d lost.

Nevertheless we had no alternative but to continue & less than an hour later, thanks to the dreadful map we'd been given for the campsite & their equally useless local signage we were rolling up outside the main entrance to the circuit. This unfortunately was not where we were meant to be & the traffic was absolutely rammed, virtually stationary, the weather had been gradually warming up as we headed down & was now baking, we'd fortunately long got out of our wet weather gear, but were still somewhat overdressed for the temperature. The temp gauge on the Acewell was now up at around 87 degrees & I was very happy to hear the fan cut in. We weren't exactly helping the traffic situation as people leaving the circuit kept jumping in front of the car to stop us for photos, everyone seemed to love the car & we got massive attention everywhere we went.



We eventually rolled into our campsite, unpacked, put the tent up & went up to the "Speed Chills" enclosure which our camping arrangement gave us entry to. Speed Chills have their own private campsite, part of the larger Beausejour site on which we were camped all of which is actually inside the perimeter of the circuit & we had paid a little extra to have access to this area which guaranteed we would have food, drink & entertainment available. I have to say that for anyone with a kitcar & therefore limited luggage



space this is an ideal arrangement as they do a good breakfast, you can easily pick up a snack almost wherever you are around lunchtime & you know you're going to be able to have a decent evening meal with wine, beer, cider or non-alcoholic drinks without having to drive miles, queue for ages or get ripped off. The entertainment wasn't something we were particularly bothered about but the "Speed Chills Girls" who help out at the Creation - Judd Team (who are sponsored by Speed Chills) were always around in the evenings & were very easy on the eye! Now seemed like a good time to try out their beer & food which was

most welcome.

I was absolutely chuffed with the way the car had performed, it had been faultless all the way down & had returned around 35mpg just to put the icing on the cake, & I was singing it's praises to anyone who'd listen. They say "pride comes before a fall", how very true. We decided as we hadn't a clue where anything was locally we'd take a gentle run out for a bit of a reccy, didn't even bother with helmets as I was intending to keep the speed under 40 – 50 & we both had protective glasses. As we were leaving the campsite road, which was very rutted, I was avoiding another car from the opposite direction, a large patch of very unwelcoming mud & a bunch of pedestrians wandering in the road obviously intent on suicide & simply didn't see this enormous pothole, the front wheel must have just skimmed the edge of it, never felt a thing, & then the nearside rear wheel dropped straight into it & stopped us dead in our tracks – we can only have been doing around 6 – 8 MPH, but the deceleration was virtually instantaneous & as we bounced clear

of the pothole I heard an ominous sharp crack. We drove on carefully out of the campsite, but as soon as we accelerated on the tarmac road it was obvious something was badly wrong, the rear end was squirming horribly just as though there was no traction & it really didn't help that there were crowds of people at the roadside yelling to "give it some" which I had no intention of doing. We finally managed to pull up in a quieter sideroad to investigate & found that one of the suspension eyelet bushes had split where it joins the rear wishbone, we were aware that these were very thin, something which had already been amended to a more substantial part for production, but that was not a great deal of help at that moment. It was a simple enough job to fix but was going to need a welder. We managed to limp the car back to our tent & got the tools out, we had to borrow a jack as we weren't carrying one (as we don't carry a spare, just tyre mousse there didn't seem much point in a jack) but within seconds of starting work on the car we had a "pit crew" of probably 20 all offering help, tools etc. The offending part was swiftly removed & a guy with a V8 Dax very kindly offered to run me into Arnage village tomorrow, Friday, morning to see if we could find a local welder, I was quite determined the car was **NOT** going home on a trailer.

We returned to the Speed Chills enclosure for a beer or two to drown our sorrows & wended our way back to the tent via the Porsche Curves which were less than 10 minutes away. Watching the cars practice in the dark is completely awesome, they are carrying tremendous speed into the corner & you can watch the brake discs glowing bright orange, followed in some cases by the turbo glowing behind the carbonfibre bodywork as the power goes back on. The campsites at Le Mans are yet another amazing site, less than 200 yards from where we had our tent there was a Ferrari 599, a 430, two Lambourghinis (Diablo & Countach), two Audi R8's & a beautiful classic Mustang in the Gulf colours which just seem to pop up everywhere. What I found so strange about this is that you have people with a £200,000 car but a £50 tent – there are no class barriers whatsoever, everybody just mucks in together & has a great time. You will also see £150,000 motorhomes parked next to a rusty Fiat – it simply is not what you would expect at all. We weren't due to get much sleep that night, everyone seemed to be beered up & going for it, there were loud rowdy parties, fireworks including the horrendously loud firecrackers being set off, people driving round the campsite with a guy in a chair on the roof of a car, another being dragged along behind a car on a sledge; you name it, it was happening right up to around 3 am which considering the lack of sleep the previous night was really not helpful. Things had finally quietened down a little when around 4 am some moron decided to start using our block of tents as a racetrack, now I know we all like to drive fast, it's fun chucking a car sideways, but around a bunch of tents where people are lying down with the only protection between the car & them being a bit of canvas, that takes a particular kind of idiocy, fortunately he gave up after 3 or 4 laps or I dread to think of the likely outcome.

The next morning we struggled bleary eyed up to breakfast – the world did start to look slightly better after a coffee & a sausage & bacon butty. I then hopped into the V8 Dax (with straight through exhausts this was not going to help my headache!) & we blatted off towards Arnage village. The first port of call didn't have the equipment (though I did learn the French for welding – it's soudre for those that want to know) & they helpfully directed us to someone who had. This was a big truck repair shop, which may seem a strange place to get a kitcar part fixed, but welding is welding whatever it's on. They couldn't have been more helpful & just 10 Euros lighter we were on our way back to camp with the repaired wishbone – the welding wasn't something I would have been proud of but at least the job they'd done was strong if not pretty. Just 20 minutes later & we had returned the jack & were rolling back out of the campsite in the Furore – phew what a relief! We were now on high pothole alert, but there was only the one really bad one & we knew *exactly* where that was now! Before we had even reached our least favourite pothole we were at a standstill again, however for a more pleasant reason this time, we were stopped by an American TV station for an on the spot interview! I've no idea if it ever went out nor on what channel if it did, but it certainly boosted our morale, it's really not something you could claim happens every day.

Friday at Le Mans is known as "Mad Friday" for reasons which would gradually become apparent & we'd read about a "meet" out at Mulsanne organized by someone from Pistoneads which we knew was open to all. On Friday they open some of the local roads back up (much of the circuit is on public road) & we were able to drive the length of the Mulsanne straight. Now I had always had a theory that Le Mans drivers were really not all that good, has beens who couldn't handle F1, drivers whose careers were now on that downhill slope to retirement. Oh Boy! Did I have to rethink that one! Straight is most certainly something which the Mulsanne is not, ok nowadays they've put two chicanes in (which you don't get to drive through)

to slow things up a bit, but they are still hitting around 200 MPH down there. When the Porsche 917 was in its heyday, before the chicanes went in, one was clocked at 257 MPH: as I've said, it's not straight, there are a couple of nasty kinks in it & the road also undulates quite significantly, it also has houses, lamp posts & telephone poles, but right near the end of the straight there is a truly evil right hander that is more of a corner than a kink. We had to be very careful with our speed as Mad Friday is well known Gendarme armed with speedgun territory, but after the evil right hander you come very quickly to a roundabout where the race cars deviate off onto manmade circuit but you can circle the roundabout & drive back up Mulsanne, well I knew they couldn't possibly have had time to setup a speed trap so we accelerated flat out from the roundabout up to the aforementioned kink (now travelling in the opposite direction to the race). I'm not going to say how quick we went through there, but I commented to Gary that I certainly wouldn't have wanted to be going a lot quicker without being able to work up to it gradually & they would have been travelling at getting on for double our speed I now firmly believe that Le Mans drivers (good ones anyway) are Gods & obviously have gonads the size of footballs. To even try to imagine driving that "straight" at that speed, & then add, in the dark, in the rain, with cars doing probably 2/3rds your speed getting in the way, is something I really struggle with, so Le Mans – **Respect!**

Anyway we wended our way back up Mulsanne looking for this meet & not really knowing where we were going, the traffic slowed to a crawl & we eventually saw why, they were picking individual cars they

fancied for a "car wash", well we were bound to get picked weren't we, fortunately it didn't actually involve any water, but about a dozen guys in white overalls with sponges stuck on descended on us & the car being what it is they decided we needed more than a wash! We had two guys at the rear wheel pretending



to change it, another was clearing imaginary debris from the sidepod whilst one wiped my imaginary visor (we'd come out without helmets) & someone



else was down at the front asking if I'd like another turn of front wing. They then shouted "watch the lights" which were two guys with table tennis bats, currently all red; the top two were flipped over to amber & then the bottom two flipped to green, I was a little hesitant to really give it some following our recent travails, but gave it some revs & lit the rear tyres up a little much to the crowds satisfaction! We drove a little further up then turned round & parked up near where all the action was taking place, yet again there were cars of all sorts including a couple of Allegros (yes, apparently there are still at least two left) one of which had gull wing doors!!

We stayed around this area for a while & whilst chatting to others there discovered that this was not the meet we were aiming at after all, that was apparently at the other end of the Mulsanne straight in Mulsanne village itself. Things here were now starting to get a little out of hand, people were standing further & further out in the road, the crowd was getting ever larger & people were baying for burnouts etc. It all got very silly when a guy with a hired Twingo decided to sit there with the handbrake on & the front wheels spinning until the whole road was obliterated with smoke, you literally could not see from one side to the other. It was fairly obvious a tyre was going to go pop shortly or possibly something much worse.



We decided to move down to the other meet which we had read was intended to be a much more civilized & laid back affair &, the centrepiece was to be the French A1 GP car which I'm guessing must be worth a few bob; for those not familiar with it the A1 GP cars compete in a sort of "World Cup" of motorsport with identical cars entered from countries all around the world. We knew the event was open to all, but you would only be allowed to park up in the town square if your car was of interest, if you turned up in a 1.8 Mondeo you would be parked down a backstreet. So, now armed with fresh directions we set off for Mulsanne village, on arriving we found some large yellow signs in French which with my limited translation skills I deduced to be where we were going. As we headed down a little side road we could see the road ahead was closed off, but



before we were anywhere near there the barriers were already being pulled back & we were being waved through. A French lady who I assumed was part of the organizing team was waving us to come on through & round the corner we came into the town square, where she showed us to park, would you believe, slap bang next to the A1 GP car. I was proud as punch to have my car displayed next to such an awesome bit of kit, but had to admit they definitely had

a little more rubber on the road than I had!



We had been there barely a couple of minutes when there was a bit of a kerfuffle & what pulls in opposite us, about 30 feet across the square? Only the Le Mans winning Bentley which won in both 1929 & 1930! I



I believe the car is known as “Old No.1” & is a bit like Triggs broom in that it’s been crashed & rebuilt several times during its life, so just how much remains of the actual original it must be hard to say. The car has recently had a “nut & bolt” restoration job done by the Bentley factory themselves (who own the car) & had been brought down & driven there by them – they had also brought along the latest Bentley convertible, which I have to say we found a lot less interesting. Old No. 1 however was a positive work of art from the immaculate engine bay to the beautifully engineered filler cap – which I don’t think would fare too well at an IVA test. There was a free drink at a local bar waiting for us just out of the Town Square so we ambled down there for a while returning a little later to see what else had turned up.



The answer was loads of exotica plus some lovely classics & several kits of various descriptions.

The GT 40 is not a kit it's one of the new ones manufactured by Ford, hence actually a Ford GT for those who want to get picky about a name. Along with the Ferrari 599 next to it I guess they must be worth best part of half a million quid.



be parked there, but having discovered the lunacy that was going on at our end of the campsite they kindly agreed we could – they were impressed with the car & the number of pictures being taken of it & commented that whilst people were taking pics of my car they were also photographing the Speed Chills area so good advertising for them. The pits is quite a long walk from the Beausejour campsite – if you've not been to Le Mans before this is one of the things you soon realize, with a lap length of nearly 8 & 1/2 miles it's quite a distance to anywhere & when you drive the Mulsanne straight it simply goes on forever. The whole thing is nothing like going to a "normal" circuit like Brands or Silverstone, where everything is within relatively easy reach. It took about 35 minutes brisk walk to get up to the pits & the weather was now very hot & sunny so we were cooking by the time we got there. We duly arrived at the Creation - Judd pit & showed our passes for admittance – there were hundreds of people hanging over the barriers for a better look, but we were ushered straight in by the Speed Chills crew & were soon introduced to the team owner, Mike Jankowski. We had full access to the pit & he answered all our questions regarding costs, life of parts etc. Their car is in the same class as the Audis & Peugeots (the hot favourites to win), their budget for the Le Mans weekend was around £300,000, apparently Audi & Peugeot spend around £12 million each, just for that one race, so not a very level playing field & no surprise that the Creation is not currently a front runner. Nevertheless as you can see from the pic this is an absolutely state of the art carbon fibre wind tunnel tested monocoque which is certainly no slouch. It was a truly fantastic experience to be right up close to the car & in the thick of the activity going on all around. Once we had our fill of taking in everything on offer at the Creation pit we were able to view the other cars around just as the pitwalk was being closed down, so the crowd was about at its thinnest & we were able to make the most of it & see most of the other major combatants. We eventually wandered back down to camp for a bite to eat & a bevy: there was entertainment going on, fireworks being let off & Chinese lanterns being made & launched all over the place, but all we could talk about was everything that had happened & what we'd seen, it had been a truly amazing day. It was unfortunately all a bit much for some people & I was quite sure I didn't want this

It was now time to head back to the campsite. We had discovered that part of the package with Speed Chills was that during the pit walkabout, which was open all Friday afternoon into the evening, we could get a special insiders tour of the Creation Judd pit. This seemed an opportunity too good to miss – we'd almost decided not to do the pitwalk, knowing it would be absolutely heaving with people, but once we'd booked a time for our visit to the Creation - Judd pit it seemed a lot more appealing. We returned to the campsite & parked up within the Speed Chills area, we weren't really supposed to



guy's head (see pic) the next morning – some people are just plain cruel to drunks, the game here appeared



to be to see what could be balanced on him without disturbing him, we didn't want to know what the stain on the shirt was! Last job was to put the car to "bed" under it's tarpaulin, just in case of rain overnight, but moreso to keep the dust out of the cockpit area as it was parked right next to the (very dusty) access road, people were still taking pictures of it through the fence & with the tarpaulin cover on! We must have been tired because despite possibly even more noise than the previous night

we were both soon sound asleep.

Next morning dawned somewhat overcast & we even had a few spots of rain, but this soon cleared up & the day just got hotter & hotter from there on in. We were able to take a fairly leisurely breakfast as we weren't desperately interested in the support races, more the main event, but we knew it was going to take an hour or so to walk up to the Dunlop Esses the area we wanted to watch from & we wanted to drop in at the museum on the way. We walked back up past the pits where we'd had our superb experience at Creation - Judd & soon found our way to the museum – this is actually outside the circuit, but it's no problem to get your tickets scanned to go out & come back in later.



Once inside the museum building we decided we really hadn't the time to do justice to all the exhibits, so did it the "Locost" way by observing what we could without actually paying for admission, & bought ourselves an ice cream instead as it was, by now, very hot indeed.



There was actually quite a bit to see without going round the full exhibition, including the Audi & Bentley Le Mans winners & several of the Porsches, there was also a funny little Renault which I'd not seen an example of anywhere before, looked a bit like a Morris Minor, there didn't appear to be any explanation of what it's part in the exhibition was.

We left the museum & continued our meandering up as far as the Tertre Rouge corner at the start of the Mulsanne straight, we tried various vantage points along the way watching the support races & chose to work our way back to the Dunlop Esses to watch the start of the race. It seemed an age, but eventually things were underway & we watched the snake of cars appear from under the Dunlop bridge & come down the hill towards us on their warm up laps, I'd not realized just how many cars are entered, I guess this is



another effect of having the very long lap, you can have more cars on the circuit, they just kept on coming & coming, from the Diesel Peugeots & Audis at the front through the Lola Astons & cars like the Creation Judd, through to the Corvettes & then finally the slower Porsches & Ferraris bringing up the tail end. We then had to stand under the baking sun for another 20 minutes or so for the actual race proper. As the

hour approached 3:00 pm the tension was gradually building & building, it surprised me that for such a long race there is so much tension before the start, but it was almost tangible. Finally as the second hand advanced the commentators' voice (in French of course) rose to an ear splitting pitch & then finally they were away. We could watch the actual start on a giant TV screen almost opposite (another reason for choosing this spot to watch from), would the Peugeots get away first or would Audi get the jump on them? We soon had the answer as once again the cars streamed under the bridge & down the hill, it was Peugeot

leading from Audi, a pattern that was destined to be the story of the race. It wasn't long before there was drama though as one of the leading Peugeots had a puncture just as it left the pits & had to complete a lap (8 miles plus remember) on the flat tire; by the time the car had reached the pits it had completely destroyed the whole of the rear bodywork & done substantial damage to items like the turbo & various suspension components which necessitated a very lengthy pitstop. We watched from our existing vantage point for a couple of hours or so then slowly worked our way back towards the Ford chicanes, watching from various points along the way, then around 6 o'clock headed back to Speed Chills to collect the car. We had discovered from various conversations with people (everyone is friendly & chatty, it's a real party or holiday atmosphere) that some of the roads are open to allow you access around the circuit at various points & had decided we would run out to Arnage corner to view from there during the evening. I had brought the satnav with me though hadn't had time to sort a power supply & mounting for it so Gary had it in the back of the car & gave me instructions over the intercom (the intercoms we were using by the way are an item by Scala & cost around £130 the pair, they are wireless & have their own onboard Li-ion batteries which give around 7 hours of actual talk time – given that you are silent for a fair portion of driving they lasted the entire trip on one charge, they are quite audible at speeds up to & well over the legal limit & were absolutely brilliant – we would have literally been lost without them). As it happened we really didn't need the satnav as shortly after leaving the campsite we realised we were following a coach full of race fans & they also seemed to be following signs to Arnage. We parked for free in well organized public parking only 300 – 400 yards walk away from the circuit entrance. In the car park was a car which I



felt very much typified the spirit of Le Mans, it was an old Alfa Romeo, but painted in the pale blue & orange Gulf colours which you just see everywhere around Le Mans, the paintwork had obviously been done some time ago, not just for this Le Mans weekend, but perhaps one in the dim & distant past – it just seemed “right” in a strange sort of way. We joined the crowds of spectators along an embankment adjacent to the track, you are very close to the action here; it was just getting to dusk & the cars were all very loud & spectacular as they accelerated out of Indianapolis & braked hard into Arnage which is a tight & narrow right hander. Although the crowds

are quite substantial, there is a fluid motion of people constantly coming & going, so you can nearly always find a decent spot to spectate from. We were able to work our way along to Indianapolis & then back down to Arnage corner itself. It was getting somewhat dark by now so we decided to head back to the campsite. We were still constantly having to dodge people leaping into the road to take pictures of the car, & after a couple of wrong turnings due to still having the satnav set to go to Arnage rather than back to camp (whoops!!!) we found ourselves in Arnage Village itself – we discovered later that there is yet another meet up which goes on in the evening in the village where many modern & classic sportscars gather. We were creeping slowly down the High Street, admiring many of the beautiful cars pulled up on the roadside & had just come to a stop next to an exquisite GT40, again in Gulf colours & absolutely immaculate when we were spotted as we moved off by a couple of the many people who were sitting at roadside bars & restaurants have an evening meal & a drink, first a couple of arms were pointing & then within around 20 seconds from 2 bars on opposite sides of the street everyone was standing up at their tables & cheering & applauding us as we drove off down the road – I have to say it was a very proud moment for me & made all of the (many, many) trials & tribulations of bringing this car from the drawing board into the marketplace worth every minute of hard work it had taken. We ambled back to camp with a very warm feeling inside telling one another it really couldn't get any better.

We had just arrived & were taking the tarpaulin out of the sidepod ready to cover the car up for the night when we heard two female voices squealing “don’t cover it up, don’t cover it up!” we turned to find two of the (very attractive) Speed Chills girls running up to us “would you mind if we had our photo taken with the car” they said . Gary & I looked at one another – stuff like this just doesn’t happen in real life does it? “Of course you can have your picture with the car” we chorused – “Ohhh! Err! Would you mind if we sat in it?” mind??? I nearly tripped over my camera lens! So the girls jumped into the car & while Gary took



their picture for them with their camera, I took some with mine for our “trip album”. Now, come on, tell me you’ve had a similar experience with your LSIR! We chatted with them for a while & almost missed dinner as they stopped serving at 11pm. Having filled our bellies with food & drink, we decided a wander out to the Porsche Curves again would be a worthwhile end to the day & hence we eventually wended our way back to our tent at around 1am unfortunately sans Speed Chills girls, but, Hey, you can’t have everything!





Sunday morning was again somewhat overcast & we ambled up to get a sausage & bacon butty for breakfast & to watch the live coverage on tv within the canteen area. The beer bottle pyramids had grown overnight into mountains, I would hasten to add the one pictured had nothing to do with us. There had been some considerable attrition within the race overnight & the field was distinctly depleted

including a couple of very major shunts, one of which could have been particularly nasty, but the driver was fortunate enough to suffer nothing more than cuts & bruises. Peugeot had tightened their grip on the race, now having several laps separating their 2 cars at the head of the field & a further couple of laps down to the Audi in third place. The Lola Astons had put up a sterling performance to pull their lead car up to 4th place & top placed petrol engine car.

By the time we'd had breakfast the day was brightening up nicely & soon turned out to be another scorcher. We decided to leave the car under its cover for the day & to walk up to view from the area in front of the grandstands on the pit straight for the finish as we knew they opened up the track to allow spectator access



at the end. There are several spots you can watch from along the way, so we explored any we hadn't found previously – the sun was now absolutely scorching down, but we managed to find ourselves a nice shady spot tucked out of the way to sit on some kerbstones & have an ice cream in the shade., before continuing on to the pit straight grandstands. We thought this would probably be a very popular place indeed, but were pleasantly surprised when we got there to find that there were plenty of reasonable places to stand & watch the finish still available. This

seemed to be the case for pretty much the whole weekend; even though they reputedly get 200,000 + spectators during the 24 hours & the run up to it, it just seems that there is enough area with it being such a large circuit for everyone to spread out around the place so you're never too crammed in, & with people moving from place to place all the time new places are always coming free. We managed to find a good spot almost opposite the Creation - Judd pit which seemed fitting having had our excellent visit there on the Friday. They, unfortunately had been dogged with problems almost from the start, eventually traced to a cracked carbonfibre splitter underneath the car which was distorting when under extreme pressure & making the car handle peculiarly through the high speed corners &, horror of horrors on the Mulsanne straight itself – not something I would have fancied driving in that condition! With around 20 to 30 minutes left to run nearly all the cars were coming into the pits to make their final stops – most of these were relatively leisurely as most battles had been decided by this point, but we were still nicely placed to watch all the action. There was more drama to follow as the lead Peugeot suddenly slowed significantly, had it picked up a puncture? Was there some other problem? No, as any seasoned Le Mans goer will tell you this is quite normal, they had just slowed up to allow their sister car, which was several laps down, to catch up for the formation finish which always grabs the headlines, soon several others were also slowing to wait for their team mates so they would be able to cross the line formed up for maximum visual impact. By around 3:40 pm we already knew who had won as it was now impossible for the second place car to complete sufficient laps to take the lead even if the leader stopped right there.



As soon as the last pit stops were over the pits are stripped bare, everything which isn't permanently fixed is removed & placed behind the roller shutter doors which are then firmly shut – apparently there is a problem at the end with souvenir hunters! Even the signboards above the garages are taken down & tucked away. As the minute hand ticked its way up to 4:00 pm the crowd drew silent & the cars slowed to a snails pace on the last lap – no one wants to cross the line 2 seconds before 4 o'clock & have to do another lap unnecessarily, this didn't stop one of the backmarker Porsches crossing the line with about 5 seconds to go, whether in error or because they had another car on the same lap in front of them which they could still have taken a place from we never knew (we did have a little commentary in English, but it was few & far between & my schoolboy French certainly couldn't keep up with their commentary).

As soon as the Peugeot came into sight exiting the Ford Chicanes the whole place absolutely erupted, anyone would have thought it was a French car winning a French race or something! People were singing, dancing, shouting & screaming, kissing & hugging one another amidst a cacophony of engines air horns & people. There was then what seemed an interminable wait before they would open the gates to allow spectators onto the track & over to the pits. People were really getting quite annoyed; they did finally calm down when the Porsche which had crossed the line with about 5 seconds to go reappeared after about a 5 minute lap & everyone realised that allowing 10's of thousands of spectators onto the track prior to that time might have been a little foolhardy to say the least. Finally the gates onto the track were opened &

everyone poured forward to get into the narrow entrances, by pure fluke we had stood almost directly behind one of the gates so were ideally placed to be one of the first (few thousand!) onto the track. It was a bit of a scrum & we finished up jumping over the wall onto the steps, but finally made it out onto the track. It was amazing to be able to walk around where the cars had been hurtling past just a few moments ago. We were able to get over to the pits, now all firmly



closed up with the exception of the Peugeot pit – they had just won remember – which was absolutely heaving. We watched the various presentations up on the podium, of which there were several as there are four separate classes & awards for 1st to 3rd in each, & then gradually wormed our way into the crowd in front of the Peugeot garage; none of the drivers seemed to be about, but we took some pics of the trophy & Gary tried a fuel rig for size- don't think it



would fit my filler cap!

One of the drivers of the winning Peugeot was Sebastian Bourdais & there were a group of 8 French supporters with B, O, U, R, D, A, I, S emblazoned on their T shirts, a French guy standing right by us asked them if he could take a picture with his son standing with them, one of them immediately whipped off his T shirt & put it on the lad who then stood with the rest of the group for the pic – as he was so much smaller it now read BOURDaIS, but nevertheless I'm sure will make a nice



memento for their family. This again typified the spirit of Le Mans for me, everyone seems happy to go the extra mile to help someone else enjoy their day a bit more – shame there's not a bit more of that in the world today.



As everything wound down around us we decided it was time to head back to camp once again. As we wandered back past the many camp sites huddled within the circuit complex we were met with a most bizarre sight: inside one of the campsites someone had brought a complete 3 piece suite with them!!! Now I've heard of home comforts, but this was ridiculous, what they were going to do if it rained I have no idea! On all of the campsites the beer mountains were still growing, some were more like beer Everests by now & some people had spelled slogans in their walls using different coloured bottles. Unfortunately most of those wouldn't bear repeating here, but they were nevertheless generally quite amusing. It was with a slight air of depression

that we arrived back at the campsite to start getting everything together so we would be ready to set off early in the morning. We had a 3:30pm ferry to catch at Calais & the ferry company had already advised that the 4:30pm was fully booked so we really couldn't afford to be late. There were obviously a great many from the campsite who had ferries booked that night as by about 5 o'clock the campsite was like a ghost town, we kept expecting to see tumbleweed blowing down the road!. Once our basic packing was sorted & we felt sufficiently organized we made our now familiar trudge up to the Speed Chills enclosure for our evening meal & some good 'ole Normandy cider. We'd not been there very long when there was a bit of a commotion (I was going to say furore, but thought better of it!) & we looked around & who has appeared on our campsite? Why none other than Tiff Needell! He was friendly & chatty & may just possibly have had a bevy or two – there were certainly a bevy of young ladies anxious to make his acquaintance – those Speed Chills girls never treated us like that! Tiff was around for quite a while until I think he became fed up with posing for photographs & being asked for autographs, I made sure I'd got him to sign one of my business cards for me before he disappeared though!



We were soon back at the tent & now things were a bit quieter we had a really good nights sleep, which with a long drive the next day was all to the good. We had allowed an extra half hour on the journey time so in the morning we would be able to drive around all of the parts of the circuit that are public roads –

which is all of the circuit except for the chicanes on the Mulsanne straight, the Porsche Curves & the section of the circuit which goes through the Dunlop Curves & the pit straight & this was just what we did, it was quite fantastic to be able to see exactly what the drivers had been experiencing & quite a shock when we came up to Arnage & discovered it is not just a corner but is in fact a “T” junction & now the “Stop” sign had been refitted it sat proudly next to a section of green & white “crocodile tooth” kerbing, which I assume remains there all year.

Having completed our “circuit inspection” it was time for us to set off back to Blighty – so I pointed the nose in the direction of Calais & off we went. We stopped to brim the tank after about ½ an hour which I hoped would mean just one more fuel stop on the way back up the country, we also took the opportunity to don our wet weather gear as the sky was distinctly threatening & we’d already had a few spots of rain.

No sooner had we left the garage than the heavens opened – this was not rain, not just any rain, this was Marks & Spencers rain & then some! It absolutely slung it down in torrents – even Noah would have struggled with it; we spotted a couple of very sad looking Sevens, one guy was still dressed in T shirt & shorts though he looked like he’d just jumped out of a swimming pool! He’d stopped underneath a motorway bridge to try to put his roof up, but the bridge offered virtually no protection as the rain was almost horizontal & it looked as though the wind would at any moment rip the roof clean off the car before he could even erect it – the second Seven we passed a few miles up the road, we were down to around 50 miles an hour as I simply couldn’t see where I was going, but he was going even slower. The two occupants were wearing ordinary clothing & woolly hats & they were totally drenched – we had at least got the protection of crash helmets & biker suits, but I was by now sitting in around an inch of water even though the bottom of the seat is drilled. We had another minor problem in that it had never occurred to me that the distributor cap (remember those!) on the Toyota engine sat directly behind the two air intakes on the offside & every time we drove through the spray from large trucks the engine was lapsing onto 3 & sometimes 2 cylinders, it was coming back intermittently onto 4 cylinders once we had a clear stretch of road & by playing with different revs & throttle loadings I was able to nurse it along. We saw many bikers stopped under bridges trying to take shelter, it really was like driving through a lake in a monsoon, but I saw little point in stopping as without proper shelter like a petrol station canopy we weren’t going to be able to clear the distributor cap of water & providing it kept coming back onto 4 cylinders it wouldn’t be doing any damage with bore washing or similar.

The downpour went on for about 2 hours then finally reduced to nothing more than a few spots & I could actually get some speed back on & try to catch up some lost time with the engine now singing on all 4 pots – well it was until we joined the back of a short queue for the motorway tolls at which point it lapsed onto 2 cylinders & I frantically tried to persuade it to stay running as we crept forward in the toll queue. Meanwhile a passenger in a Ferrari 599 jumped out & started taking pictures of us – bizarre or what, he gets out of a £200,000+ car to take pictures of one worth a little less (wish it was just a little less!) which is barely still capable of running! It kept going on 2 cylinders until we’d almost reached the front of the toll queue at which point it gave a finally expiring cough splutter & backfire & stopped. I cranked it a couple of times but it obviously wasn’t going to play ball so we jumped out & pushed it up to the toll booth & paid our toll, we were of course on the far left hand side of the tolls & the parking area was on the right, so I popped the hazards on & much to the hilarity of the whole toll queue we pushed the car across 6 lanes of traffic into the parking area, where we had to push it straight past the nose of the local Gendarmes car with three of them looking intently on – they didn’t seem to see the funny side!

We whipped the engine cover off, removed the distributor cap & poured, yes, poured, about 1/8 of a teacup of water out of the cap – how on earth the thing had still been running at all I have absolutely no idea – a



wipe out with some dry tissue, quick squirt of WD40 & she started up first time; needless to say the distributor now has an aluminium shield to protect it from the elements, but that was at least partially why I'd wanted to do the Le Mans run, to show up any faults such as this. The weather was really quite warm now & we were able to dispense with the wet weather gear for the latter part of the journey. The rest of the run up to Calais was uneventful apart from missing an exit at Rouen that cost us about 40 minutes, I'd been using rather more throttle than normal trying to catch some time up wherever possible & had to have a brief "splash & dash" as we arrived in Calais to ensure we didn't run out of fuel on the ramp up to the ferry – might

have been a little embarrassing to say the least. One good thing about the torrential rain we'd driven through was that the car was now cleaner than it had been for the whole trip, though I'd have to say it's not a car wash I'd want to repeat – definitely preferred the one on the Mulsanne straight!

We had all the usual questions about the car & all the usual looks indicating that we obviously couldn't have driven the car all that way & obviously couldn't have all the camping gear in there & so on – just imagine the expressions on these peoples faces when, as we completed the crossing from Calais back to Dover we trotted down the stairs to return to the car deck carrying two cases of wine!!! We then proceeded to do a little repacking of the sidepods & much to everyones incredulity all of the wine bottles disappeared & we repacked the sidepods with the tools, sleeping bags etc. It did mean that the right hand sidepod which houses the radiator was going to suffer some slightly impeded airflow, but as the car had actually been running too cool the whole time we'd been away, even in the boiling heat when we'd arrived at Le Mans I didn't think this was likely to cause any problem. We were feeling very smug until just as I was about to get back in the car I realised we'd left one odd bottle standing on the sidepod! Whoops!!! – there was no time for any more repacking so it just went in down the side of Garys' seat & off we went. As we were exiting the ferry & bumping over the ramps, we had to laugh at a Ferrari next to us that was absolutely creeping over the speed bumps obviously scared stiff of ripping his front spoiler off – I'd raised the ride height by an inch in preparation for the trip & had no problems whatsoever with ground clearance. A brief stop for fuel in Dover & then back up to the M25 & through the Dartford tunnel. The tunnel was absolutely brilliant, it may be only a little 1.6, 4 pot engine but it revs to around 8,000 rpm & the sounds echoing around the tunnel as I accelerated were wonderful. As we left the tunnel it's just 20 minutes to home & I was feeling quite euphoric, unfortunately the weather had to have one last blast at us & we rocketed into the services at Stanford Le Hope to shelter under the petrol canopy whilst we donned the wet weather gear yet again., & then it was a quick dash up the road to home where I reversed the car up the drive for our last

picture of our victorious return.



It had been a truly memorable trip, I would recommend going to Le Mans to absolutely anybody, but particularly if you have a vehicle which is a little out of the ordinary, whether it be a classic, a kitcar, one-off special, hot rod or whatever. It has to be said that "Mad Friday" can get a little out of hand & that you take your chances with some of the "Chav" elements that seem intent on spoiling things for the rest of us – there does seem to be an element of jealousy particularly toward the more expensive cars, but this is just one tiny "fly in the ointment" of what is otherwise the most fantastic spectacle, a

moving car show across several hundred miles of France with a 24 race thrown in for good measure. I'm told the Le Mans Classic is also a total blast, so perhaps that warrants investigation too. I shall almost certainly be going back again next year – hopefully with a few of my customers bringing their cars too, a mobile “grid” traveling down the motorway should provide a good spectacle to add to all the rest!