



Twice runner-up in the Northern Ireland Hillclimb Championship, Michael Beattie will tackle Cairn Castle in his new Jedi this year

DRIVE IT - CAIRNCASTLE

With all hillclimbs in Northern Ireland run on closed public roads, Speedscene's Ulster correspondent MICHAEL BEATTIE takes us up the longest and fastest of them all

This is a particularly long Drive-It feature. But with good reason, for the hill in question is, at 1.7 miles, the longest in the UK by quite some way. Cairn Castle, the tiny hamlet that gives the venue its name, is 5 miles northwest of the ferry port of Larne, so mainlanders could arrive on the early boat, have a day's sport, and return to the Scottish coast on the same evening!

The record for this smooth, fast and flowing hill stands in the mid-60s, to a 2-litre racing car, and with top speeds for these 4-pots in the 135mph bracket, don't try it if you hate going fast. As with all the CARSPORT NI Championship venues it is a closed public road, used only once a year, so everyday traffic can alter its nature from one year to the next. The 'climb first ran in the early 1960s when the hill was just 1 mile in length, John Pringle's F1Cooper-Climax being the car to beat. The late '60s saw it fall from use, to be revived by the Larne Motor Club in the mid '70s with the fast top section added. The road is transformed for competition day, with road sweeping, hedge and grass trimming carried out by the DoE in the preceding week, the timing wire being laid the night before the event and the various straw bales, banners and flag posts being installed by the Club on the day. These pictures were taken at the end of June, some eight weeks before its mid-August date, so with these preparatory works still to be done, please excuse the course's 'fuzzy' edges!

The start, as at most Ulster venues, is beside a fixed feature (in this case a gateway) for easy identification should road resurfacing be carried out. The total climb is around 570 ft, quite gradual considering the length of road involved, and fortunate for those of us with only a 4-speed Hewland. With the 255bhp Vision in racing car trim that I ran at Cairn Castle last year, I used a 76mph first gear which needed plenty to get away without bogging down.

You blast off up the 100 yard straight to the first right-hander, which curves gently before tightening. It's nearly flat out, but a lift settles the car on cold tyres and ensures you don't get off line for the long left which follows. Taking second gear on the exit of the right you take the racing line for the left, which is taken flat. The car drifts to the outside, where you let it stay, as the track curves to the right. Snatching third opposite the lane on the left, hold the car tight to the right-hand bank but watch out for a bump half way round, which can upset the back end. The third gear I was using was good for 122mph, and you're well up the rev band for the fast approaching kink left. I'm told by those with the bottle, such as hill record holder Robert Woodside Jr, that this kink is flat - I have a mid-life crisis and lift... (mind you the marshal, who stands on the inside verge, took a step back so it must have looked good!).

A slight right leads to another kink left; turn-in with a wee lift of the loud pedal and hold a tight exit to gain the correct entry to the following long right-hander. This is the lead-in to Cottage. I back off and, for the first time in half a mile, press the middle pedal, keeping the car in to the right hand verge and dropping back to first for the deceptively tight left. Cottage is still pretty quick though, at around 60 mph, and lensman Geddes is usually on for some good snaps on the inside - drifting 911s and stone walls, all very photogenic. The bend is well over 90 degrees, so stay wide on the approach before diving to the inside, holding a nice drift, pleasing the snappers and producing a slingshot on to the following series of curves.

The road sidles right, but you get back up to third and let the car run out to the left as you approach the Junction. There used to be a large hump here where the road from the left joined, but this was removed three years ago when 80% of the hill was resurfaced to its current near perfect state, which allows a wide approach. With both hands on the wheel - you

won't change down again for another 0.7 miles - this right/left sequence sorts the men from the boys. Foot hard against the bulkhead, start to turn in just at the junction, and smoothly guide the car to the right-hand bank. The left that follows is double-apex; clip the first and hold just left of centre for the second.

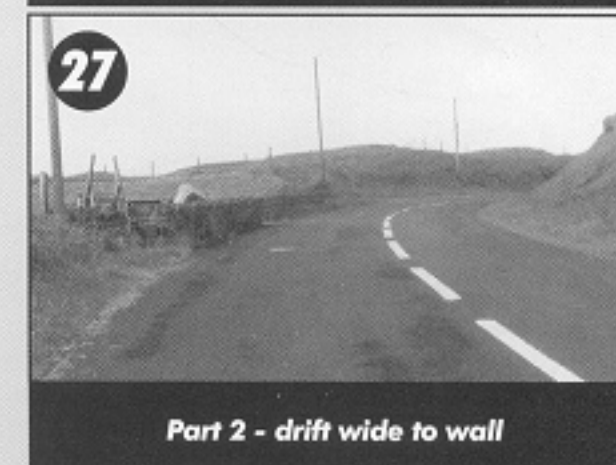
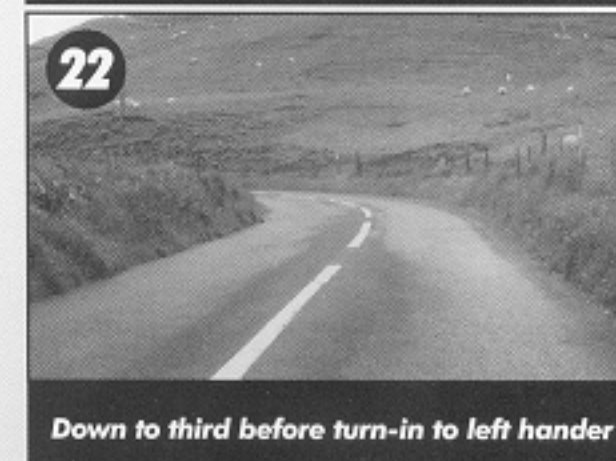
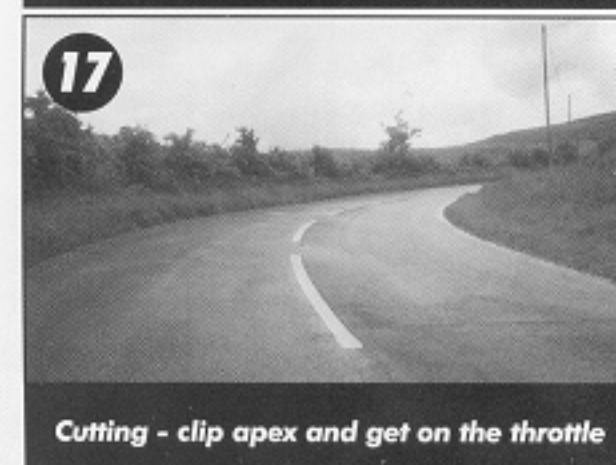
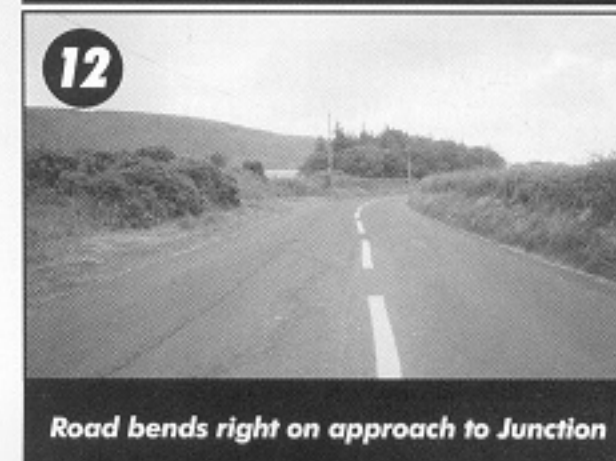
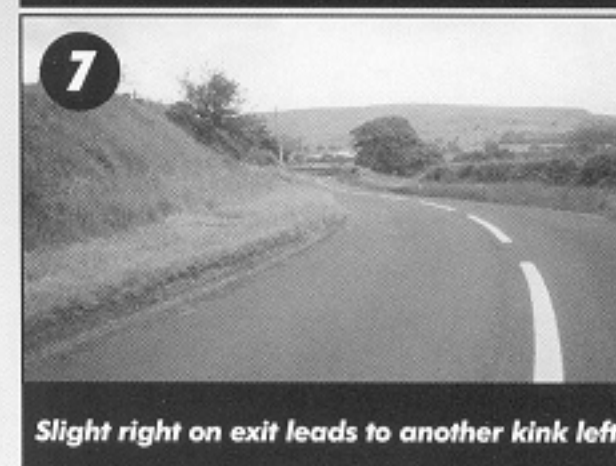
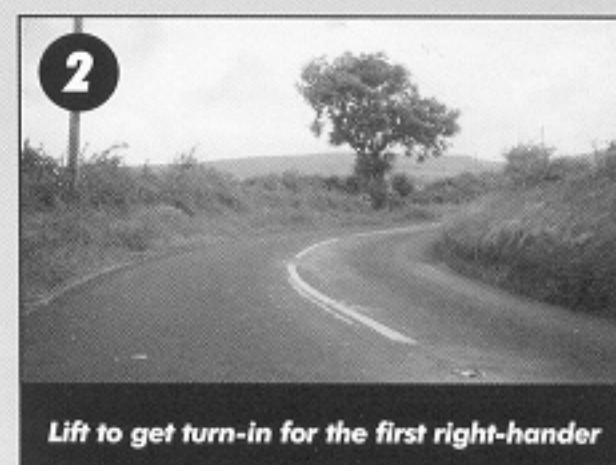
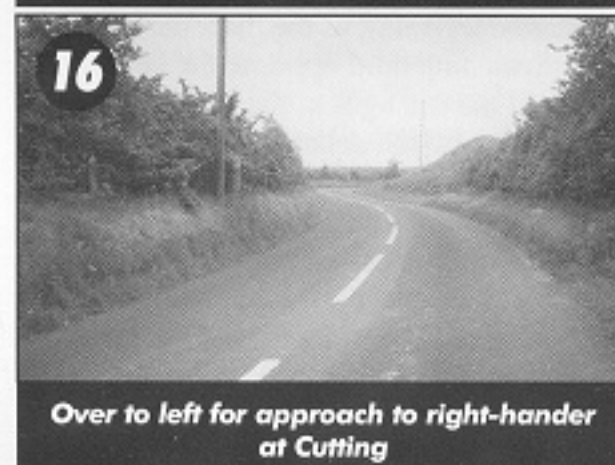
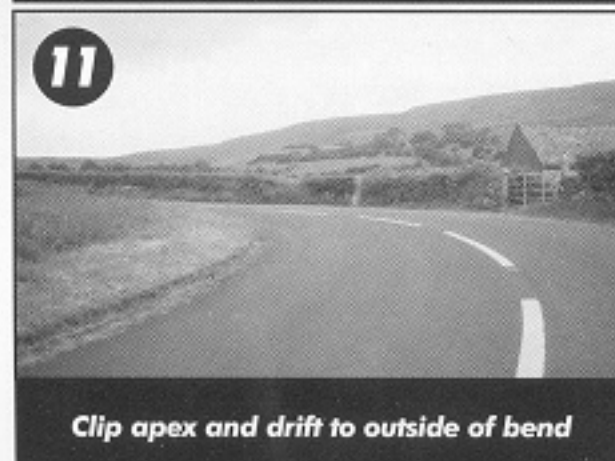
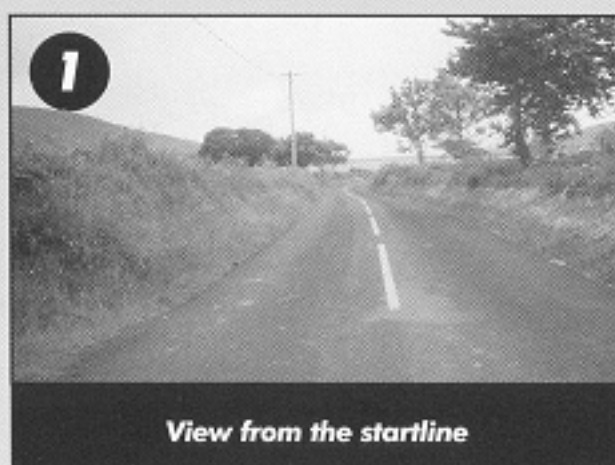
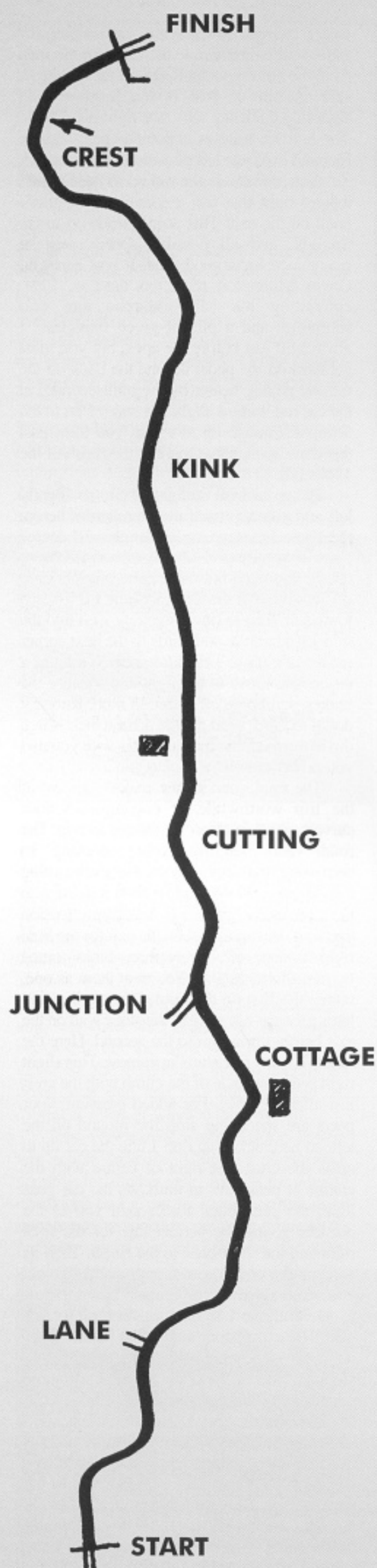
You are now in the run up to the Cutting, a long right that has a seemingly magnetic bank on the exit. This corner leads on to the Straight, and all possible speed must be maintained for a good time. It was here that Gavin Millington tried too hard in 1994, converting his Mini Marcos into two subframes and a pile of green fibreglass! I always lift just before the apex, but you must get hard on the pedal despite the bank on the outside getting nearer by the millisecond. Let the car run wide, a slight left and it's on to the Straight. Change up to top as you flash past the stone cottage that marked the finish of the 1960s hill.

Being an Irish straight, it curves slightly left and you approach maximum revs before the Kink. Drystone walls line this 30 degree right - I usually give myself a good talking to on the approach but once again a confidence lift sees me exit the Kink wishing I'd listened to myself. You're now travelling well into the mid 130s and the 400 yards to the next corner passes in a flash. This left-hander is a bit of a tester. You move to the right and squeeze the brakes, scrubbing off about 35 mph. Knock it down to third, head for the apex which is in a dip in the road, but the camber is with you and you power out on the racing line.

The final quarter-mile makes the rest of the trip worthwhile. It encompasses four curves, which in effect are treated as two. The road veers slightly right, seeming to narrowing the approach to the forthcoming left. This bend looks tighter than it is, so with the accelerator cable on maximum tension you turn in keeping left on the exit for the final right-handers; effectively three kinks joined by two short straights. You treat them as one, taking the first on the normal racing line and letting the car run wide to the stone wall on the exit before turning in to the second. Here the Alton Towers ride starts in earnest. This slight right is the pinnacle of the climb with the crest just after the apex. For added pressure, your peers are spectating atop the mound on the left, so no chickening out! I line the car up to cross the crest just right of centre with the engine at peak revs in third. As the car goes light, the centrifugal forces pull you to the outside, giving the perfect line for the final right and the short blast to the finish. Then it's hard on the brakes into the top paddock, and you've conquered 'The Cairn'.

1.7 miles in 1.15 minutes - not bad for a 2-litre. The expression 'adrenaline junkie' takes on a new meaning and I'm usually still talking gibberish for about 15 minutes (some say I haven't stopped yet....)

Cairn Castle is Ulster's fastest and smoothest hill, the track surface is as good as most on the mainland and you can do it in a day. In 1998, Larne Motor Club will host the ANICC circus on August 15, while in 1999 the date will move to early July. If you're interested in something different, give me a ring on 01232 703505 or call Clerk of the Course Robert Kelly on 01232 862166





3

Move right to take racing line for long left-hander



4

Let the car drift to right-hand bank



5

Hold tight to the right-hand bank - watch out for bump!



8

Hold in tight to get line for following right



9

Lead-in to Cottage - hold tight to right-hand bank



10

Cottage - keep right, drop two gears and turn in late



13

Junction - keep left and turn in as road comes in on left



14

Clip post on right before turning in to double-apex left



15

Clip first left apex - let car run to centre of road



18

Let car run wide, round left-hand bank and on to the straight



19

Old finish by cottage - into top before road goes left



20

Take racing line through the kink and try to keep on the throttle!



23

Clip apex and hope!



24

Final left. Take flat - looks tighter than it is



25

Wide approach to final right-hand complex



28

Apex to cross crest just right of centre



29

Car drifts left, ready to line up for apex on last right-hander



30

Short blast to the finish