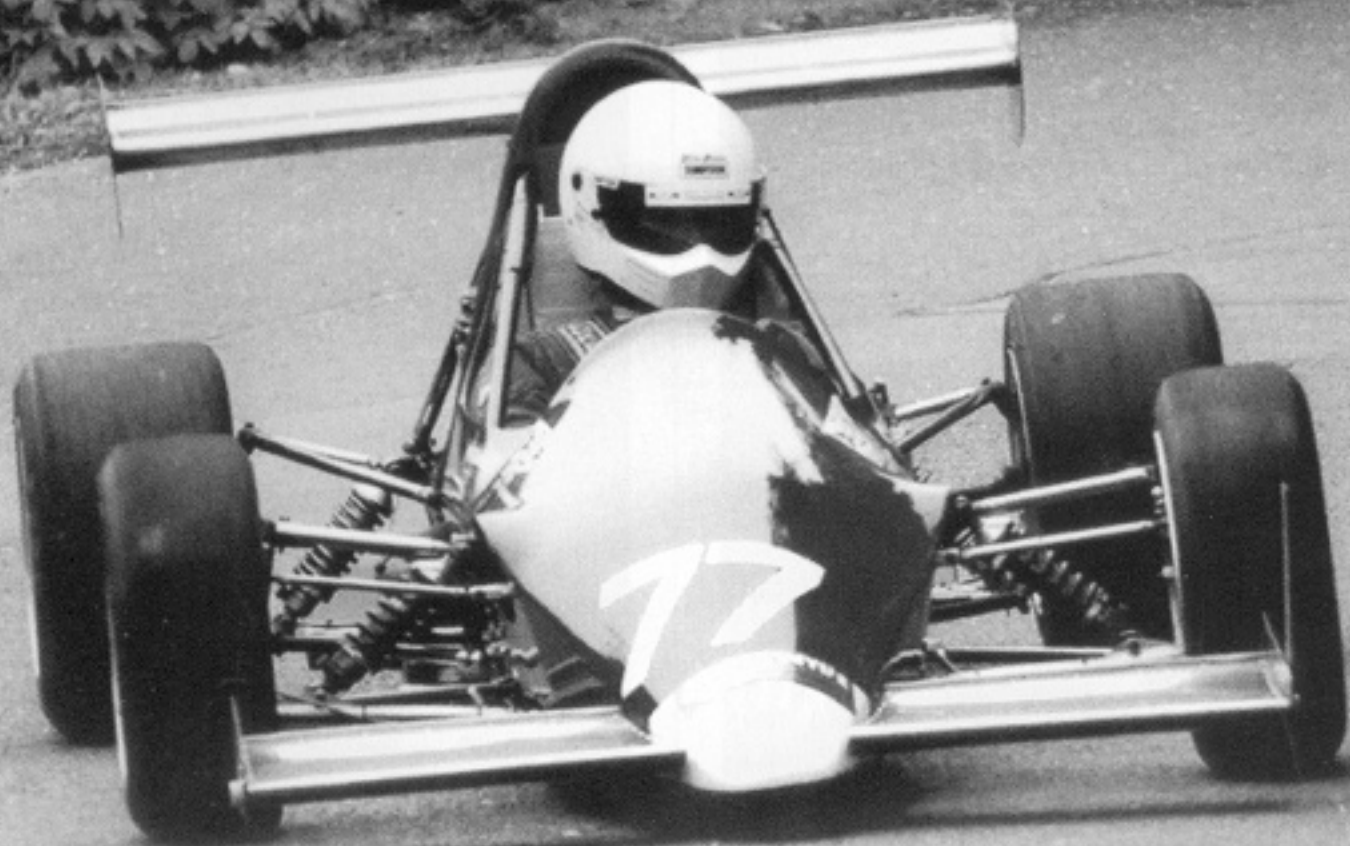


Drive it **CRAIGANTLET**

Speedscene's Ulster correspondent MICHAEL BEATTIE takes us up Northern Ireland's British Championship hillclimb. A public road, of course...



One of the original five hills in the 1947 British Hillclimb Championship, Craigantlet can trace its history back to the early twenties when the Ulster Automobile Club first used the Ballymiscaw Road course. Later it formed part of the Ards TT festival, attracting 'works' entries on the weekend preceding the TT itself.

Being a public road course, the track has evolved as the suburbs of Belfast have reached out and surrounded it over the decades. 1883 yards in length, the original course started down at the Bridge some 300 yards before the current start line. For the first year of the British series this was cropped to 1833 yards to provide a longer stopping zone at the finish.

The names of the first eight track record holders are commemorated by the names of the corners at Craigantlet. The dash off the original startline led to four tight, interlinked turns; Cathie, Howe, Hall and Hadley. Then a long straight with a slight kink in the middle was followed by the fast 90 left at Allard, where another 'straight' (which, like Loton's Cedar variety, isn't really) then delivered the driver to the long righthander at Pringle and the finish beyond.

So the course remained until the late 1960s, when a DoE road scheme turned what had been a track going directly up the hillside into a main road. This joined the old track at Cathie to the final curve at Pringle, and as well as bisecting the straight just before the kink and introducing the notorious and unique Mays Cross, it also reprofiled Pringle into a two apex bend. By the late '80s the

paddock had moved to this new link road as housing developments encroached upon the bottom of the hill. Then the start was moved up the road a hundred yards or so and finally, in 1990, the lower start had to be abandoned, and with it the run up to and around Cathie, which had produced lurid understeering slides and demon braking marks on the 100 mph approach. So the current track layout of 1500 yards was established with the new start at the exit of Cathie.

A few years later, the Men from the Ministry struck again. The main road was resurfaced, producing a second bump at the Cross and making it unsafe to take at full chat. To slow the cars down a chicane was introduced, and with the help of the competitors this has been refined to its current format - an unwanted but necessary evil which still sees the quick cars 'lifting their skirts' as they shoot over the Crossroads.

This public road course is, as such, a living animal with each year producing a slightly different amount of grip and the odd bump or dip. There is a quarry further along the Ballymiscaw road and some of the heavily laden lorries prefer to use the old, twisty road that forms the course instead of the steeper, more direct route of the new road, producing their own wear and tear on the otherwise little used surface. So don't expect this Drive It to produce a blow by blow account of the road conditions. 'It wasn't like that the last time I was 'ere guv, 'onest!'

The hill can be split into two main sections; the Start to Mays Cross, and from there to the finish. The first half is pure fun, the road is wide enough for a car to be drifted

about and the speeds are not in the 'gor-blimey' league. For reference, my 1370cc GSXR powered Jedi uses only the top four gears in the box, these being good for 73, 95, 113 and 130 mph.

Approaching the start in the dry I position the car on the left of the road, but here the drop-off in camber is quite severe and in the wet I feel that the 'flatter' right hand side is better. On the signal, dump the clutch and off we go. Its only 40 or 50 yards to the first right hander, Howe, and on cold tyres it is advisable to brake early and make sure you get the front turned in, as the run can too easily be ruined with a trip out onto the marbles. I hug the wall on the inside and feed the power in as I exit the turn, being careful as the camber drops away as you leave on the racing line - too much power can produce a time-wasting wobble.

Up into second and I move across the straight to the right hand side for the approach to the devious Hall. This is a 120 left, which has a gradual turn-in before suddenly turning sharp 90 left. The trick is to stay wide on the approach and don't get suckered into the early apex. There's usually a few marks in the bank on the outside to prove that some people never learn! Back down to first, guide it in to clip the apex under the bank and then really stand on the power and get up into second. The camber works in your favour and you can powerslide out of Hall and up the short curving link to Hadley, it's real hooligan territory.

At Hadley the road again turns gently, this time to the right, before tightening. There used to be lots of derring-do here, as in the

Co-ordinators' conference - 'Drive It' author Beattie (right) checks out the temporary chicane with Speed Championships' Tony Fletcher



old days this led onto the all-important straight, but with the new Chicane only 100 yards hence, nowadays the pressure is eased. So again, a late turn-in, change down and then feed in the power to get a nice drift on so that the spectators at Mays Cross are suitably impressed. You always know when you get it right, as Frazer Madder takes a step back from his flag post at the Chicane!

Out of Hadley and I prefer to short shift up into second; you might just make it to the Chicane in first, but I feel the comfort of a downshift in the braking zone gives a smoother entry to this three-turn complex. The entry is on the left of the road, and it is 45 right, 90 left, 45 right, exiting on the left of the road again. My sprinting experience tells me that you're not braking for the first element of a chicane but rather the second, which in this case is 11 yards further on. So with that in mind, pick your braking point and try to straight-line the first 45 right as much as possible. Tweak it left as you come off the brakes and push the loud pedal as you thread it round the third element. The Jedi usually gets a bit sideways on the exit, as you're cresting the brow where the side road dips to cross the main highway. Get it straight as you cross the second bump over the camber on the Main Road and change up the gears through the crossroads and onto the Straight.

Second, third and fourth appear as you hurtle towards the 3/2/1 boards at Allard. This upper part of the track has recently been resurfaced and is in excellent condition. The grip level is high, so pick your point, stand on the anchors, snick it down two gears and feed the car into the left hander. Allard is a quick corner and the bend eases towards the exit. I clip the inside bank about halfway through the corner and already have the throttle well towards the bulkhead.

The following Wharton Straight has (as we mentioned) a few curves in it, slightly to the left, but they pose no problem to the car so change back up to top. Now it's time to earn your keep.

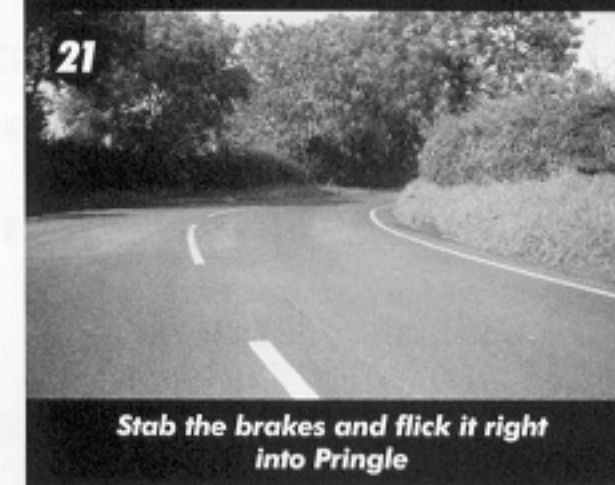
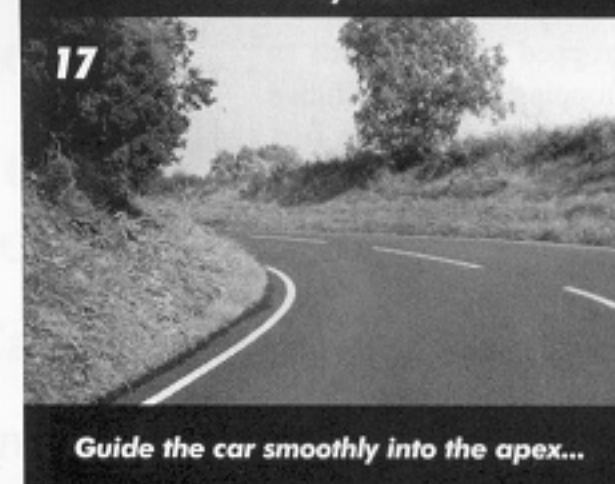
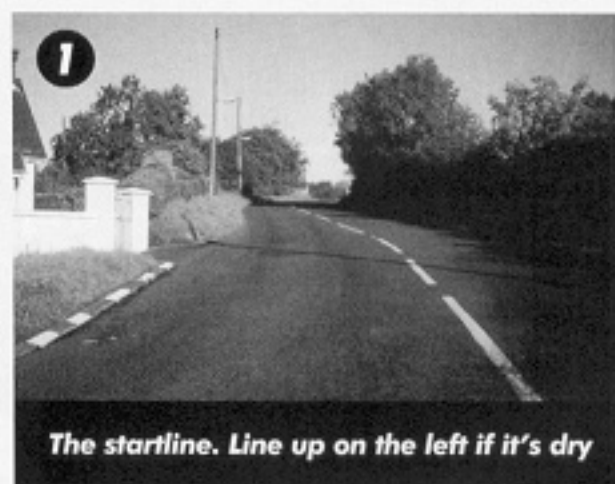
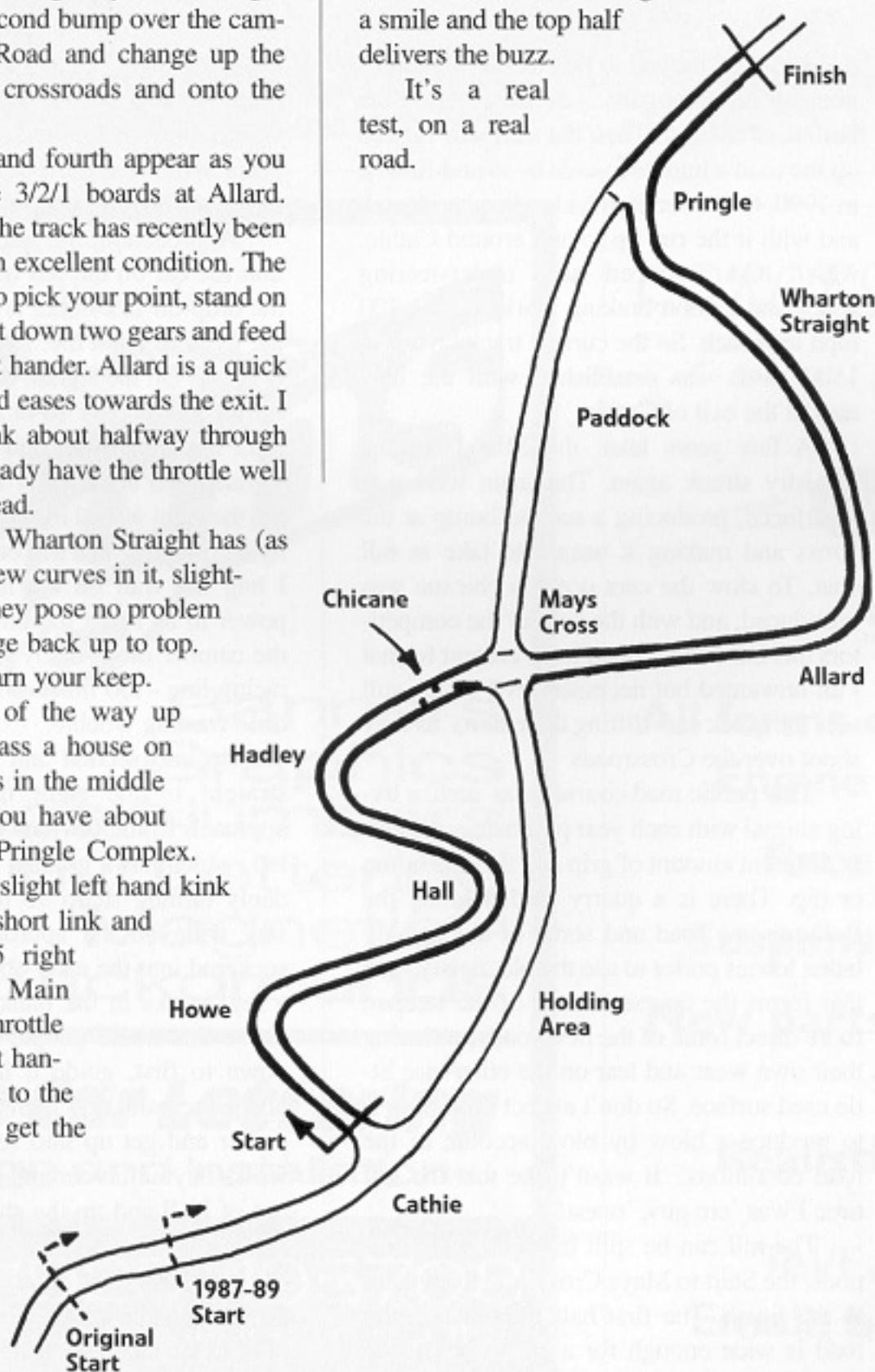
Threequarters of the way up the straight you pass a house on the right, the car is in the middle of the road and you have about 100 yards to the Pringle Complex. This consists of a slight left hand kink into a 45 right, a short link and then the final 45 right back onto the Main Road. Keep the throttle buried past the left hander and keep tight to the bank, in order to get the best possible line

for the following right. A sharp stab at the middle pedal, knock it down one gear and flick it into the first right. I take an early apex as, if you are going quick enough, the car drifts out towards the bushes on the left. There's a slight bump out there, and you know that if you are scaring yourself you're on the right line.

Already hard on the throttle, steer the car towards the painted inside kerb of the final right. It's not important to clip this as the Main Road is wide and some people choose to take a constant radius in an attempt to keep up the momentum. I'm a great believer in the 'shortest route between two points' theory, so I try to get as close to the kerb as I can. As you hit the main drag there is only 100 yards to go to the finish. David 'Large Spheres' Grace is pulling 135 mph here, so you are across the line in an instant. There's quite a long slowing down strip past where previous runners are parked, so join the throng of fellow twitchers and brag about how fast you took the last corner.

Craigantlet is totally unlike any Mainland venue. It's fast and wide enough to make you have to choose a line, the bottom half brings a smile and the top half delivers the buzz.

It's a real test, on a real road.





2
Into Howe. Hug the wall on the right



6
...head for the apex...



10
...on the power and drift wide



14
Make sure you keep it straight over the cambered main road



18
...on the power on the exit. Let the car drift wide



22
Let the car run out wide - and feel the bump!



3
Let the car run wide on the exit - but watch the camber change



7
...and exit on full power (and full lock?!)



11
Now the chicane - straight-line the first right...



15
The long straight to Allard



19
The Wharton 'Straight' is a flat out left



23
Choose your line out of Pringle - but keep off the right-hand kerb!



4
Move across to the right for Hall



8
Into Hadley - again stay wide...



12
...flick it left...



16
Keep it wide on the right for the Allard approach



20
Approach Pringle tight to left, but still on the power



24
Flat to the finish (by the gate on the left (arrowed))