



DRIVE IT!



LOTON PARK

Adam Fleetwood has earned two consecutive British Championship titles in his meteoric hillclimb career in the Nicholson McLaren XB powered Gould. Alongside these, he's scored an unprecedented number of hill records. Hardly surprisingly, one of these is on his home hill at Loton Park, where he reset the outright mark on three occasions during the 2004 season. Who better, then, to give us the inside line on just how to climb Hagley & DLCC's challenging Shropshire hill?

Eight years have passed now since I made my first appearance at Loton Park.

In 1997, my father Roger and I drove my cousin's ex. Ford Fiesta Challenge circuit car there on a strictly 'bend it - mend it!' basis. We competed throughout the year solely at Hagley and District Light Car Club events at Loton Park. We'd been bitten by the bug - hooked on the friendly, yet highly competitive sport that is Speed Hill Climbing.

I've been fortunate to have driven three types of cars at Loton. After the Fiesta came the 1100 OMS-Kawasaki and last, but not least, the mighty Gould GR55. All giving me lots of experience of the 1475 yard hill.

No matter what car you drive at Loton Park, the key to a quick time is to attack it. You simply can't afford to relax. If at any time you feel remotely comfortable during your run then you simply aren't trying hard enough. I'm a firm believer that if you've just accomplished your personal best time and think you can't go any faster, then the track has beaten you. There is always more time to take off, you just have to find it.

At the start line as you're waiting for the green light to go, your tyres should be warm and free from stones and damp leaves. At this point you should have already decided where to brake into the first corner, Hall Bend. Starting as far over to the left as possible, you need to pick the smoothest, straightest line towards Hall. The grip is fairly good, so give it plenty of revs before you drop the clutch. Once you've left the line there are two key factors to deal with; the right-hand kink and the hump that leads you to Hall Corner.

This hump and kink can catch you out if you're in a high powered rear-wheel-drive car, as the back end can easily step out and pitch you straight into the undergrowth. Providing it's dry and fairly warm I'm able to keep full throttle from the start to the first corner, even with 650bhp. This did, however, take several attempts!

Also, approaching Hall it's important not to be over-optimistic and leave your braking really late, because if you do that you're going to get massive understeer which will probably send you up the right-hand bank on the exit - trust me, I've done it! Brake late and hard, but not all at the last minute. This will allow you a smooth entry to position the car really tight on the inside of Hall, which will enable a full throttle sling-shot out towards Loggerheads, another challenging lefthander.

Hall Corner and Loggerheads are crucial; here you can make up, or lose, a lot of time early on in the climb. Loggerheads is a fast, sweeping left-hand corner that doesn't really have an apex, however it tightens up at the last minute. Keeping in the centre of the road is wise as this will allow the car to move around as you're pushing, feathering the throttle, getting understeer and

oversteer.

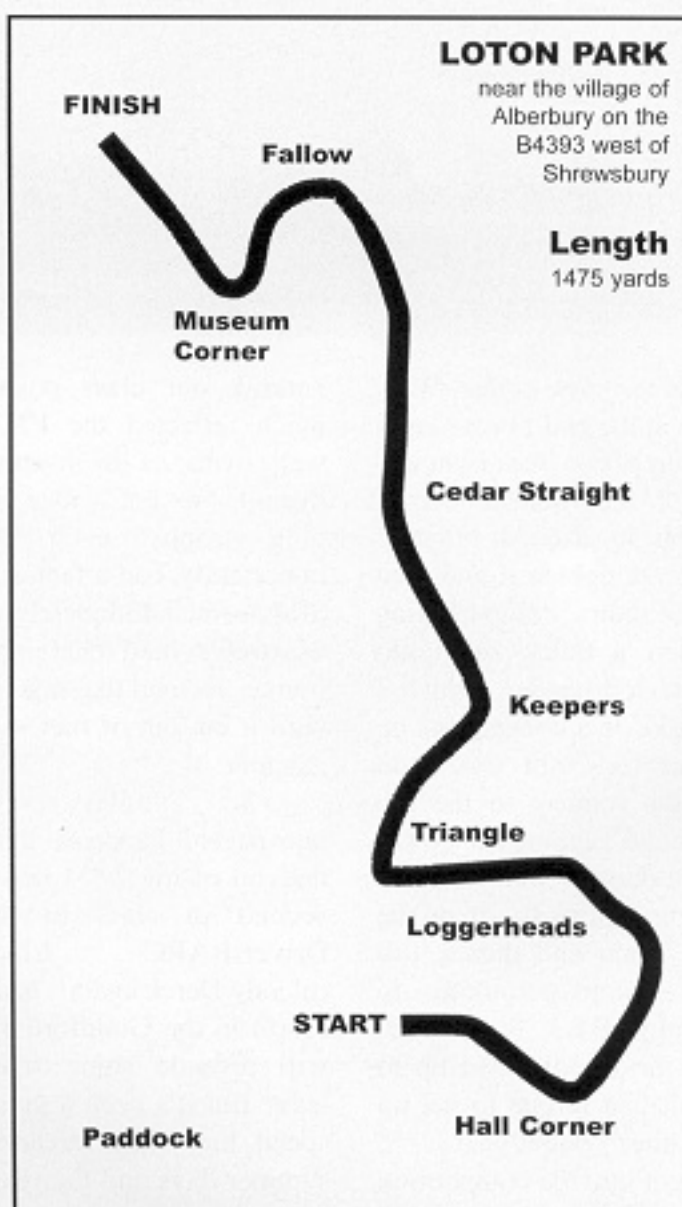
On the exit of Loggerheads, at Fletcher's Dellow, there's a rumble strip on the left before it opens up into the long straight to Triangle. You need to take this entire rumble strip so that the left front wheel is almost on the grass. On many occasions (sometimes on purpose!) I've taken a good foot the other side of the rumble strip so that the centre of the car is almost over the apex of the corner. Not wise if you want to avoid muddy tyres... Watch Trevor Willis here, he's always exciting out of Fletcher's.

You'll now be heading downhill very quickly to Triangle. In the Gould I approach 110mph before having to brake very hard for this difficult right-hander. Position the car to left to enable you to get the smoothest line, again don't try and brake too late, as a good sling-shot out of Triangle will be crucial. Using the entire curb on the right, and without too much understeer, you'll get a good exit. Cars tend to push on round the off-camber Triangle, so sometimes it pays just to slow the car down that little bit extra to enable you to get that good exit.

Once out of Triangle you have a short, full throttle straight to the corners at Keepers or, as I like to call it, the Esses; a right then an immediate left. You need to drive this almost in a straight line using the entire kerb on the right before brushing the grass bank on the left. A good exit with full throttle will drive you very quickly up Cedar Straight, a 'straight' which is not for the faint-hearted!

Every car will be very different up here; the faster the car is, the harder it becomes. In the Gould I can approach 136 mph before I reach the approach to Fallow. But before I get there I have a moment which can only be described as 'breath holding' and 'muscle clenching'. All this because of the so-called 'straight's' fast right/left kink. It's crucial to position the car to left on the approach to Cedar kink, this will make the car less unsettled as the left and right also have different cambers which can easily unsettle the car. Once through Cedar kink you then continue your fast approach to the 90 left at Fallow.

At the end of Cedar Straight there is also a left kink, which is blind and has caught out nearly every driver - including me! Your approach is fast and the car goes very light at the rear. The car is likely to go straight off into the undergrowth if you get it wrong, so it's important that you don't touch the brakes until the car is settled and in a straight line. Theoretically, you'll need to brake very hard and to position the car to the right, to enable you to drive round Fallow with the smoothest line possible. In the Gould I don't have time to do this; my approach is very fast and I only seem to get the chance to keep the car on the road and in a straight line under braking! I tend to take more kerb than most, on the grass most of the time as otherwise I would tend to slide off the track



on the exit of Fallow. Taking so much kerb allows me to maintain quite a lot of speed on the exit, where there is brilliant grip. The camber goes the right way and helps launch the car up towards the blind Museum Corner.

Museum is tricky and the apex to this right-hander is blind - it looks like you're about to drive off the end of the world on your approach. All your braking and gear changing should be done before you turn in. When do you turn in? This is a source of much discussion amongst competitors. As the apex is blind, you only see the corner when you're on it! In theory you need to turn right the moment you reach the blind crest, this should keep you on track and in a good position.

Museum is a long, right-hand corner and it seems to take forever before you can get the power down. In most cars you'll get quite a lot of understeer, which you need to keep to a minimum, otherwise you'll be late on the power

for the exit. A good exit will give you a strong drive to the finish. Museum eventually opens up and the track starts to go left over a slight crest, the car goes light, which tends to light up the driving wheels - this, I like!

Through the finish line I come off the throttle, the V8 pops and bangs and I can gather my thoughts, coasting round to the right before eventually meeting up with my fellow competitors in the collecting area. Go slowly though, as deer tend to block your path just around the corner. A horn or a water pistol could come in useful here!

Once you've parked up and caught your breath, you've time for a chat and to watch the remaining drivers in your batch come hurtling over the crest into Fallow. Some make it, some don't - like all of Loton Park, it's a great spectacle.



1 Start as far left as possible and pick the straightest line to Hall



2 The hump and kink can catch you out



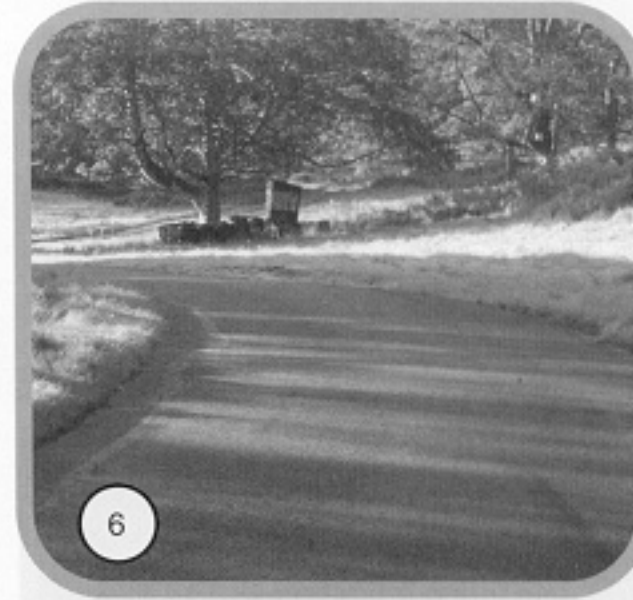
3 Don't leave your braking too late for Hall - or beware understeer!



4 Keep tight on the inside to get a good sling-shot to Loggerheads



5 Loggerheads doesn't really have an apex



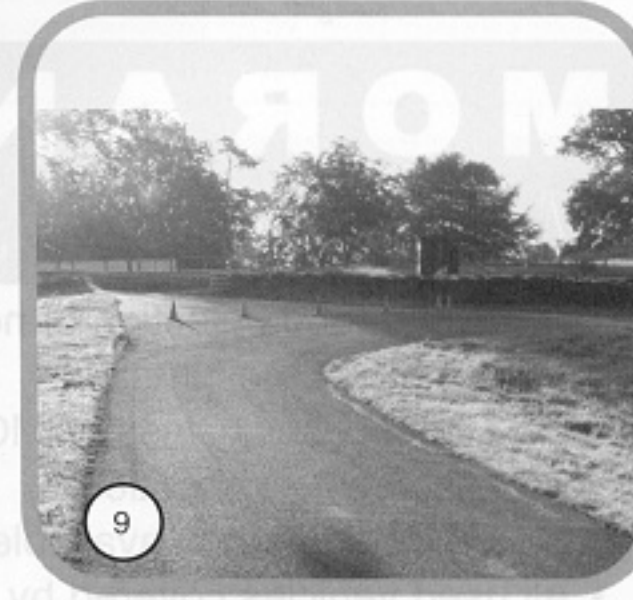
6 Keeping to the centre of the road is wise



7 You need to take a good bit of the rumble strip at Fletcher's



8 You're now heading downhill very quickly to Triangle



9 Position the car well to the left, don't brake too late



Use all the kerb for a good exit



The short, full throttle straight to Keepers



You need to drive Keepers almost in a straight line



A good exit on full throttle will drive you quickly up Cedar Straight



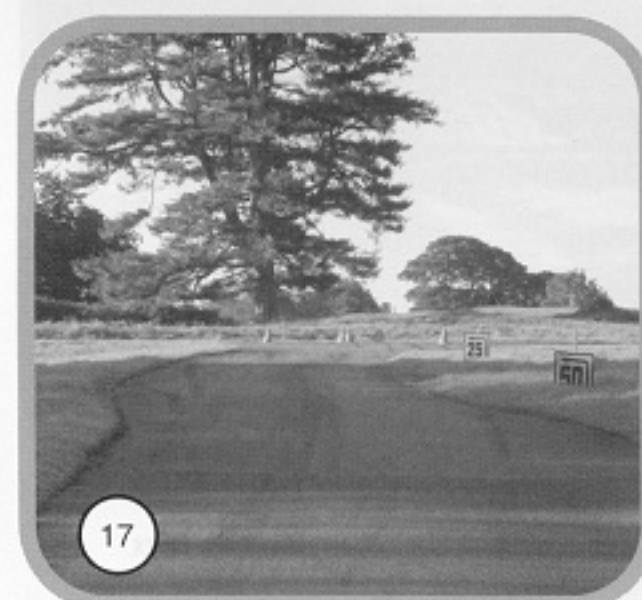
It's crucial to position the car on the left before the kink



Once through the kink you can continue your fast approach to Fallow



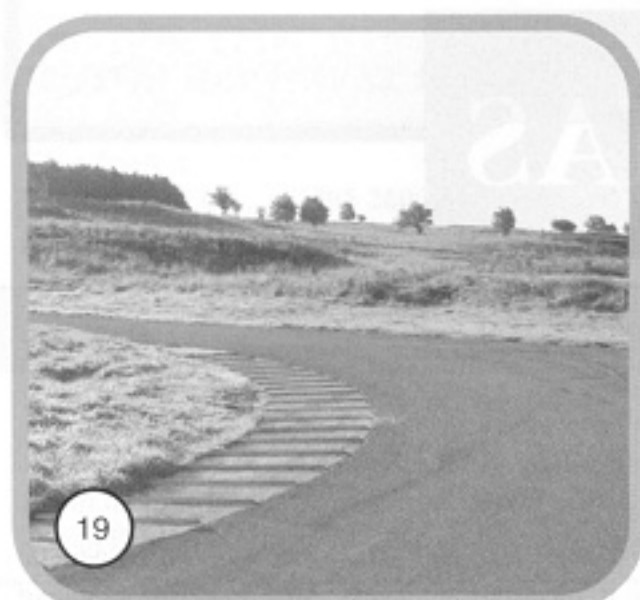
There's also a left kink before the end of the straight



You'll need to brake hard for Fallow...



...and position the car on the right



19

I tend to take more kerb than most - there's brilliant grip out of Fallow



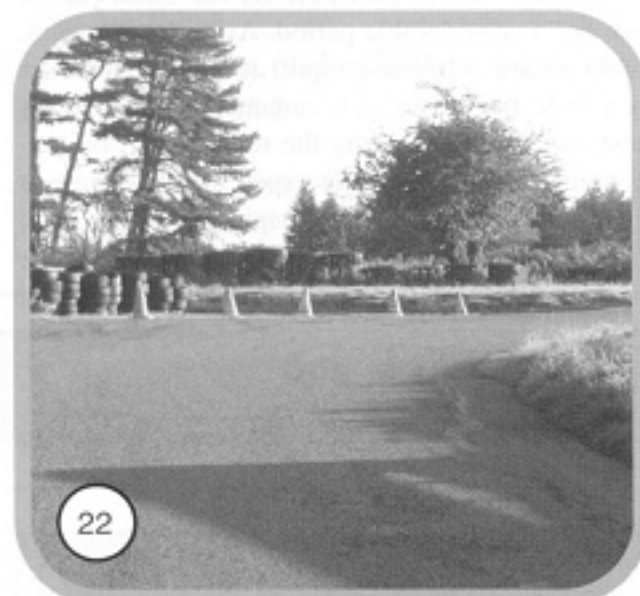
20

The camber helps launch the car towards Museum



21

Museum is tricky and the apex is blind



22

In theory you need to turn right at the blind crest



23

Museum is a long right-hander



24

A good exit will give you a strong drive to the finish



25

The track opens up and goes left over a slight crest



26

Through the finish and off the throttle at last!