

DRIVE IT



PRESCOTT HILLCLIMB

Established in 'Long Course' form in 1960, there's a lot of driving packed into the Bugatti Owners' Club's 1127 yard hill. Supersports record-holder ALAN THOMPSON describes the way he tackles the twisting Gloucestershire climb in a Mallock.

The Mallock battles between Alan Thompson and Martin Groves on the Midland hills are a highlight not only of the ultra-competitive Supersports class, but of meetings as a whole. Although Groves holds the Loton record, Thompson once again relieved Martin of his Prescott standard in September and, after this article was written, went on to set the first ever Shelsley sub-29 in a Supersports car. After finally demolishing David Grace's long-standing Gurston Down record for the category in May, Alan was offered a drive in David's Gould-Ralt-DFR at Curborough, finishing third overall on his V8 debut and just 0.3sec behind winner Roy Lane.

The original 'Drive it' I'd been asked to write was on Shelsley Walsh. Sturmz had played his trump card from the start, telling me a certain Mr Groves would be writing up Prescott! Lucky fellow (or words to that effect), I thought. He's got more corners to write about than me. How on earth was I going to pad out an article on a track that took only half a minute (or 28 seconds if you're lucky) to climb? We were at the September Prescott at the time but, as luck would have it, that very afternoon I was able to shave a few hundredths off 'Grovesy's' old record and the job of writing the Prescott 'Drive it' was down to me....

Before I start I must confess that what follows may bear more than passing resemblance (as far as I can remember it) to what I was taught by Roy and Russ when I took my mum's shopping car to the Prescott Drivers' School a couple of years ago. The theory is exactly the same in a Mallock - except you just do it a bit quicker - though I must stress that any variations to the official School technique are entirely my own!

Startline approach and positioning at Prescott is critical. Try to get as far over to the left as possible with the car pointing straight at the marshals' hut under the bridge. Don't worry about crossing the line with your front wheels - it's easier for the startline marshals to roll you backwards than forwards which also knocks the brakes off, perhaps allowing a slightly faster start.

Once settled in the car (perhaps glancing into the marshals' hut to see how the Grand Prix's progressing on their TV!), I select second gear in the Mallock and slowly bring the revs up to 6500 before releasing the clutch and flooring the throttle. If it's wet, I've watched everyone else off the line and try to do what seems to work best - usually straddling the tyre marks and gently feeding in the throttle until the back starts to grip.

Still aiming at that far marshals' hut I take third as the shift light comes on and position the car a foot or two right of centre on the road. If you're too far left you'll have to lift off or go off, as Orchard's long right-hander tightens up. I take fourth gear perhaps 1000 revs earlier than normal so I've got two hands on the wheel, keeping my right foot buried - with a slight feather if the front starts to push. I'm not exactly sure where Orchard's apex is as it all happens quite fast and reference points are vague - if you can see them you're not trying hard enough! I just rely on a gut feeling and if I'm right I end up drifting over to the very edge of the road on the right after crossing the patch of new tarmac.

Keeping my foot buried in fourth, I bring the car over to the left for the approach to Ettores - a very difficult corner where correct approach and entry is imperative. At the School, cones are placed on the right to physically prevent you from turning in early. Ettores is a corner that will see the impatient driver end up understeering into the gravel or with a huge 'tankslapper' on the exit.

I try to brake and change down to second gear at the last possible moment that allows complete control, remembering the approach is very steep and you slow rapidly. Trying to keep about 6ft from the inside kerb I gradually turn in, reducing this to zero approximately where the last pole is in the picture (bear in mind it's not there during an actual competition!). All the way round I'm riding the clutch, blipping the throttle to stop the engine bogging on exit. I find if I drive round the corner I end up pushing wide, whereas dropping the clutch in second helps to bring the back round on the exit for the run down to Pardon. Avoiding the left-hand kerb on the kink, I take third and come over as far as I dare to the right, leaving the braking for Pardon as late as possible and taking second at the same time, turning hard into the uphill left-hand hairpin with clutch out to maintain free-wheeling speed and prevent engine braking. Apexing about where the concrete kerb ends, I drop the clutch and floor the throttle, allowing the car to drift as close as it wants to the bank below the marshals' hut (perhaps the only point where you notice anything on the side of the track) before taking third around Jackie's Gateway and heading for the Esses.

If it's dry, this right/left/right/left complex is an incredibly quick sequence of kerb-hopping bends within a blur of trees - if it's wet it should be treated with caution as any error means you'll probably have a less than pristine car to put back into the trailer. Better to be safe than sorry and have a car left for the following weekend.

As before, try not to apex the first right-hander too soon, keeping about 2ft wide for the initial turn-in for the blind approach. After a lift, or even a dab of the brakes, brush the bank on the right and aim for the beginning of the left-hand kerb with your right foot buried to the floor, clattering from the left kerb to the right and straight-lining it all the way.

Just as the car settles from coming down off the kerbs, a quick lift before gently throwing it into the last left-hander with a late apex - keeping it in third or taking second depending how fast the Esses was negotiated. Firm pressure on the throttle should see the car drift over to the right-hand kerb as you power up the hill into Semicircle, a quick and daunting corner where you think that if you were to fall off, you'd disappear off into the distant Cotswolds.

Bear in mind that, like Orchard, Semicircle dries fast and as conditions improve after a spell of rain it can be quicker than you think. Still in third, aiming approximately at the end of the Armco, power up to the corner and dab the brakes as a good run through the Esses means you're now carrying a lot of speed. Gently flick the car in using the road camber and just hook the inside front wheel on the kerb, feeding the power in as soon as possible. The camber drops away on the exit and makes the car drift wide, but in the Mallock you can get away with keeping your right foot buried in third, with the shift light just flashing on before crossing the line.

After all that excitement you're faced with the long, lonely drive back down the return road to find out what your time was - and there you have it; a rough guide to Prescott hillclimb from within a Mallock. But no matter how good (or otherwise) the advice on how to drive any particular course, the only way to really learn it is to drive it yourself.

Straight-line it over the left and right kerbs

18

...and aim for the beginning of the left-hand kerb with right foot buried (in a Mallock, at least!)

17

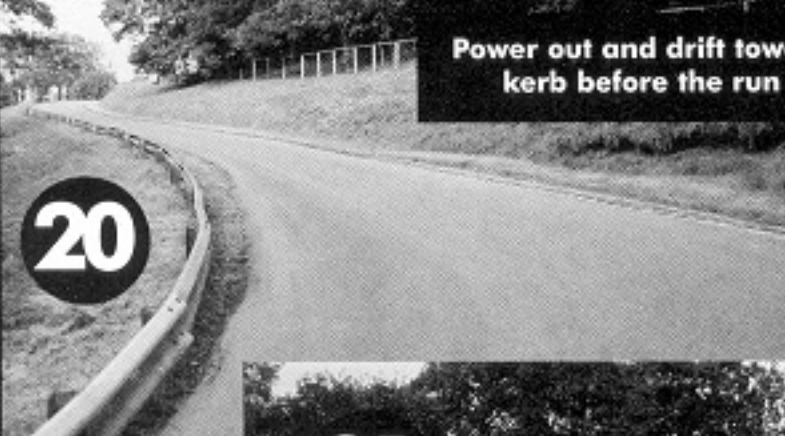
Brush the bank on the right...

16

A quick lift before the last left-hander

19

Power out and drift towards the right-hand kerb before the run up to Semicircle



20



21

Aim for the end of the armco and dab the brakes...

Still in third, use the road camber and ignore the view over the Cotswolds



22

Hook the inside front wheel over the kerb



23

Feed the power in on the exit-the car will drift wide as the camber drops away



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FINISH

THE ESSES

ETTORE'S BEND

SEMICIRCLE

ORCHARD CORN

BRIDGE

START

25

Keep the right foot buried over the line-you should be geared to hold on without a time-wasting change up



Blind entry to the first right-hander - try not to apex too soon

15

Exiting the kink, the approach to the Esses is in sight

14

Third gear by Jackie's Gateway

13

12

Drop the clutch in second and hold for the run to the kerb on the end kink.

8

Apexing where the kerb ends, I drop the clutch and floor the throttle, allowing the car to drift close to the bank below the marshals' hut

Drop the pole in the end of the run (not there on!)

9

I turn in with the clutch out to prevent engine braking

11

Up to Pardon...

...I get as far to the right as I dare and brake as late as possible

10

5

... which tightens up. Reference points are indeterminate

4

3

Still aiming for the marshals' hut, place the car a foot or two right of centre. Take fourth early, to keep both hands on the wheel for the long left...

The car should drift to the edge of the road on the right

2

DOWN
PIN

The Start. Get as far over to the left as possible and aim for the marshals hut (marked by the arrow).

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