

## My day at Palmersport Bedford Autodrome.

By Tony Carwithen



It's always nice to win something especially when you didn't even know you were in the draw in the first place! That was the case when I received a call from George Copeland earlier in the year telling me I'd won the star prize in the Marshals Club membership renewal draw.

"Great" I said "what is it?"

"A full corporate trackday at Bedford Autodrome courtesy of Jonathan Palmer/MSVR/Palmersport" was the answer. Not an offer I could possibly turn down.

Well the big day arrived and off I went- I'd heard many good things about the setup down there and I wasn't to be disappointed. After signing on (and a driving licence check) the day started off with a hearty full English breakfast, followed by a mandatory introduction/ safety briefing. All participants are grouped into teams of about 15/20 people. Some attending as individuals but most as corporate guests, but everyone mixing in well within the groups. It's pot luck as to what you get to play with first, but our group started with the Porsche 911 and Renault Clio's.

First for me was the Porsche 911 JP3. I found it pretty easy to drive in fact (driving fast was another matter!)

With upshifts looking after themselves and only downshift (via a paddle change) and braking to worry about. Biggest problem I found (and throughout the rest of the day) was knowing where I was on an unfamiliar Circuit. The Autodrome has in fact 4 different Circuits for use on the variety of cars available so you have to be a quick learner to know which way the next corner goes. With its very nature of being an airfield circuit, there are very few landmarks or reference points. Although things are helped with corner boards, brake boards and turn in and clipping point cones and in most cases instructors telling you where you should be.



The Renault Clio Cup Racer with front wheel drive, I thought would be a little more familiar to me, but was in fact probably the hardest for me - due to the fact I kept moving my hands round the steering wheel and losing the paddle shift changes!

A slight change of pace followed when we moved over to the Caterham pursuit area and Off road course. The Caterham pursuit is basically a very simple Autotest course where you compete against the clock, and a fellow team member on a mirror image course. I'll admit to a spin on my first of 3 runs with the tail happy motors, although I did keep my foot in and managed to bring it all the way round again.

A complete contrast to the high speed stuff was the off road course in the Land Rover Defender. Very impressive was the fact that you would climb a 45 degree incline and back down the other side without a touch on the throttle - quite a weird sensation.



Onto then what was for many the highlight of the day and the run in the Formula Jaguar single seater. After a couple of laps behind a Course car to show you round - off on your own you went. After having an instructor at your side for the earlier cars you really were on your own for this. I have to admit now that I've changed my opinion somewhat regarding drivers and blue flags. While there is so much else going on, when I saw the blue flag, it was very difficult (for me anyway) to concentrate on the driving, braking and cornering and trying to find a space to let the other car through. It's difficult to tell how well or otherwise you're doing without someone beside you, however at the end of the day, you are presented with a data printout of your best lap showing speed, throttle, gears etc set

against a "reference" lap set by one of the instructors. Modesty (embarrassment really) forbids me from letting on how I did. Suffice it say staying "our" side of the barrier is probably a good choice!

From the sublime to the - errr - different then with a session in the Karts. I really had forgotten how heavy and boneshakingly awkward they were to drive.

Back to reality then with a run in the Palmer Jaguar JP1 2 seater sports car. I still can't believe how deep you can run into corners, brake, then plant the power down and get the speed out. My lap times probably showed my complete lack of confidence in this. Although all the time the instructors are egging you on once they have a feel for what your capabilities are.



With the morning session over it was back for a cooked lunch where after being able to compare notes and times with a few others we were soon back out for the afternoon activities.

First up this time was the mighty BMW M5 GTP. Again a paddle shift box and plenty of power under your right foot and a good length of circuit to get the maximum potential.



The Circuit activities concluded for us with the Caterham Superlights. At last back to a "standard" gearbox that I recognised! At the start of the day in the briefing, you are told to "stay between the white lines and keep off the kerbing" but as the day wears on you find how far you can push these limits. Shall we say some of the instructors encourage you to be very "economical" with the black bits. The Caterhams respond great to this in their own tail happy way. Thankfully we had a gloriously warm day for our outing. Not sure I would have been so sure in the wet. Never having done too much "oversteer" cornering.

All too soon the day was over and back to the Hospitality Unit for tea and snacks and a presentation to the best drivers of the day in the individual categories, and the team with the best results. The trip home seemed remarkably slow!

To summarise the day:-

Favourite Car - The BMW - so much muscle. The in-car video you're supplied with on a memory stick afterwards showed my top speed for this one at 110mph - Faster than I managed in the single seater (although on a different Circuit)

Most fun Car - The Caterham Superlight.

Most difficult Car - The Clio. Couldn't get the hang of that gear change, but still managed to lap a second and a half quicker than the Porsche!

Squeaky Bum moment - When the instructor in the Jag 2 seater decided it would be best for me to straight line one of the chicanes to let a faster car through - I was driving, but he was steering !!

As with all things connected with Jonathan Palmer, the presentation, organisation and facilities were superb.

My thanks to Jonathan Palmer, Palmersport and of course the British Motorsport Marshals Club, for giving me the opportunity for such a great day out I would probably never otherwise have experienced.

**Tony Carwithen**