

A lap of the TT course as seen by John Shand

Many stories have been written about a lap of the TT course -braking points, gearing, landmarks, sights and smells, things to look out for -the whole bit. This one is true and also more like how it really is.

At the TT there is so much to do that one tends to eat only when the body screams out for food and or water. Last night, I grabbed a quick curry to satisfy the nutrient needs and for breakfast this morning a cold mince pie of dubious origins. Funny how the TT makes one eat stuff you would not touch the other 50 weeks of the year. 5am practice preparing bikes and getting ready again for the afternoon session also puts sleep on the back burner for a couple of weeks. So today is a "normal" day at the pits--half awake, a rumbling guts and plenty to do.

Halfway through the session the Clerk of the Course approaches and casually mentions would I like to go around in the "Roads Open" car as a passenger. "Sure thing" I said. I flashed back to an old movie film I had seen years before of the Duke of Edinburgh doing this in an open sports car and waving the royal wave to the fans so it all looked rather jolly. For me a chance to cruise around and maybe even catch up on some sleep.

We climbed into the latest T4 Volvo with all the bells and whistles. The nice driver, an ex TT rider, cruised out of the pits to the St Ninian's crossroads at the top of Bray Hill by means of an access route. It was a nice sunny morning and warm inside the car so I dozed off while we waited. Next a Marshall knocked on the window and passed in a piece of paper giving us "permission to proceed" and the road barrier in front of the car was removed.

Ten seconds later we were doing 130mph down the hill and attempting to break the wheelie record at Ago's Leap!

Shit--what a wake up call! Couldn't focus the eyes as they were now driven back into the sockets and soon trying to pop out of them as we braked for Quarter Bridge. This is not what they told me back in the pits. The next few minutes were a fuzzy blur as we drifted the car through Union Mills and onto some fast bits like the Highlander.

Now I am wide awake and in full panic mode. adrenaline is squirted from a heartbeat fast approaching valve bounce. This is no joy ride, this is for real. Are we doing a qualification time for the Senior?

I figure all this out as we apex at Ballacraigne and clip the straw bales on the exit as the tyres, by now up to the racing temperature, howl and scream doing their best to control 260 horsepower from an engine on full turbo boost. I knew there were some wobbly bits coming up soon in the Laurel Bank, Glen Helen section and I finally got around to listening to what the driver was yelling at me. He had been trying to yell some sort of a conversation since the start but listening was not on my list of priorities. He explained that on this part of the track he can go faster than the bikes because he can get a driving wheel closer to the stone walls. I didn't want to hear that--those walls are hard and thick. He waved to the Manx Radio guys at Glen Helen, so as he slowed down and slewed around the left hander I took the chance to start up my end of a conversation.

"Keep your bloody hands on the wheel" I bet they didn't treat the Duke like this. Now we are out in semi-open country after Cronk-Y-Voddy and things are flashing by pretty fast. I know we are going to soon be at Barregarrow. I also know that everything on a bike bottoms out here and this car is going to spill its guts out all over the road when the sump hits the deck. I brace myself for the moment. Fear is now my master and I consider ripping out the keys and swallowing them. Can't reach them though, they are on the other side of the steering pillar for me. He backs off at the last moment and we get through OK. bastard, he had me worried. We switched glances and he smiled to himself. Soon he settled into fierce concentration.

Oh shit, he is going to make a full speed pass through Kirk Michael village. Tricky on a bike and millimetre accurate required in a car. I feel a twinge in the sphincter muscle and also an involuntary passing of water at the front, yet my mouth is totally devoid of this liquid. You have probably had this feeling at least once in your lives.

We must make a good entrance in the right hander before the village. He got it right so I decide to leave my eyes open a bit longer, to find the door handle if nothing else. Soon we are out to Rhencullen and at Bishopscourt I ponder on the thought of what will happen at Ballaugh Bridge. This jump should be on a motocross track not the TT. I have seen front wheel landings, rear wheel landings, cross ups, cock ups, the whole bit here. I reach out and grab anything in arm reach. The only person I have ever seen that does Ballaugh right every time is Joey but he ain't driving this Swedish steel. CLUNK!

My head slams into the roof and my chin gets driven into my chest. The guy before me in the car must have been 20 stone and I am not half that so I didn't take up all the slack in the seat belt. I think I have broken my top denture and I figure the car roof has a lump in it now. Secretly I hope so, they should not have asked me to do this.

The "anything" I grabbed before the leap turned out to be the driver's testicles so we were both in pain as we sped by the houses towards Quarry Bends. Now the score was getting more even in the contest between us as to who could be the most uncomfortable bugger in this car. Quarry Bends are fast and they say if you get it right you slingshot onto Sulby straight and this can be the fastest part of the track these days. We slingshot. We hit the rev limiter and the speedo is round to zero again as we wave to Gwen. She will go home now, her job is done for the day.

There is time to sort of relax here--strange feeling. These brief seconds give me time to reflect on the fact that last night's curry has spent quite some time now fighting with the gastric juices and who was the winner I pondered. Tremendous gas pressure had built up that could not have been measured by the vehicles turbo boost gauge. The driver's and my opinion of when to hit the brakes for the right angle at Sulby Bridge were at variance by 100 yards or so. He hit the pedal at the same time the pressure relief valve blew out in my body. Instantly the cab was filled with chemicals that would have won the Gulf War for either side. Paint fell off the metalwork. Visibility dropped to a serious level and the vehicles air conditioning system reached critical mass. Passing wind can be a good thing but my timing was all wrong. We almost spun out but the road was just wide enough.

"The brakes are burning up" yelled the driver as he wound down the window. "Smells like it" I yelled back, lying through my broken teeth. The score is about even now. We tuck in by the railings at Ginger Hall and I wonder if the car has flush fitting door handles or do we go back and get them later. My body reacts again. Conversation drops as we make progress to Parliament Square and the driver makes tentative stabs at the stop pedal when the air density alters in any way.

We make the right hander here at a more gentle pace and its possible to give a cheery wave to the guys in the Swan Hotel as we pass by. I feel like the Duke. We see the guys in the commentary box at Ramsey Hairpin and the radio is flicked on. We hear that there is a dent in the roof above my head and the right rear door handle is swinging in the breeze. We both note its not our car. Now we are on the mountain. It's fast, faster than they say. The car is low flying and both the rev counter and the speedo needles are in the end zone. My end is in the needle zone. The Veranda is my favourite part of the circuit and he gets it right. I wave to the sheep but they dont even look up so the sign is a two fingered one instead. I am told to look out ahead. It seems that the thrill seekers who go to the TT wait for the "Roads Open" car on the mountain and chase it to the Creg. There is an official race going on in front of the car and a private one takes place behind it. Only at the TT !!!

Now I make the biggest mistake of my entire life. Well apart from the time I told this girl that her mother and her sister were a lot better at-- no we haven't time for that story. I ask the driver if the bikes ever catch him. The atmosphere became electric. His knuckles became white on the wood rim wheel. "One did" He growled "1986". We flashed by the waiting group of hopefuls, their engines warmed up and ready to rock and roll. The Volvo was reading 150mph so we got a 150 yard jump on the bunch in an instant. I looked back to see the chase was on!

My legs were getting cramp from the lack of seat belt support and where they join at the top was becoming the opposite as the muscle here was loosing the fight over bowel control created by abject terror and fear. This morning's cold mince pie was in full battle cry with the last of the curry. Vision was not 100% and my mouth was dry as a chip. Pain spread across my abdomen. The driver was absolutely determined that the disgrace of being passed by a bike 18 years earlier would not be repeated so he was oblivious to my even being there. I was in crisis both ends now. I knew Windy Corner was really going to live up to its name this time. He hit the brake pedal and:- well guess the rest.

The driver, blinking away the tears from his eyes screamed out at the top of his voice to no one on particular "Those fucking brakes again". We brushed by the gravel trap there by millimetres. I looked back to the chasers. We never gave them one inch to the bikes. Not one inch! I groaned and held my aching belly. I looked out the window and remember thinking that if this bastard throws this car off the road we will have to catch the Sea Cat back to Douglas such was the speed we were going. The Irish Sea glinted below us. I felt seasick just looking at it.

My underwear was only cotton and I needed blotting paper. At last we swooped down past Kate's to the Creg, the unofficial race over and the boys pulled up for an ale and to talk the bullshit of how they made up ground on us - Liars. We raced on towards Brandish, the driver well pleased and some colour returned to his face. All the colour in mine had long gone as I wound down the window. Brandish is a left hander so as I had my head out the window at the ton, the curry and mince pie mixture acted like paint remover on the car doors and rear guard panel. The decal on the side now read ---eests. Again I noted the car was not mine.

"Whats wrong" yelled the pilot. "Just seeing if the door handle is still there" I now lied through half a set of teeth, the other half was now bouncing up the road at Hillberry and into the spectators there. I managed a salute as we passed Governors Bridge. I figured the Duke would have done that too cos that's where the Governor lives and I am trying now to sum up some sort of dignity as we are getting real near the pits and it's time to compose myself.

We stop at last. I literally slide out of my seat and do my best to stand erect but I know that really I look like a dog shagging a cricket ball so, doubled up in pain, I am. I crack a half smile to my driver with half a denture missing and tell him in a splutter how I enjoyed it so terribly much. His wife shows up and wipes the piecrust fragments from his face that I had blown there and gives me an understanding nod. He is told the time was less than 22 minutes and that's real good for a road car apparently. He gives the keys to the waiting mechanic and tells him the vehicle is running strong but to get the brakes looked at.

I slouch off to the Hailwood Center because there is a toilet there and I can spend some time alone in my misery. There is a queue. I get there eventually. There is no paper. I look down on the floor and see of all things, a Volvo owners handbook that must have flown out of its holder in the car and landed in my jacket that I had on my lap so the driver couldn't see the wet spot there. There is a use after all for a Volvo owners handbook.

Now I am a little older and can look back on the occasion with a smile and tell my friends I have done a lap of the TT circuit in less than 22 minutes. They admire me when I say it. I dont tell them I was only a passenger. It spoils the image. Now I have a bald spot the same size as the roof dent. My hair is grey from thinking about it late at night. I wear glasses and my sense of smell has left me. I got new dentures as I could not find the old ones later that night. I break out in a cold sweat every time I pass a curry house. I faint when I see a mince pie in a shop window. Worst of all is that I live in Sweden now, and every time I go for a ride in a Volvo I cannot help myself from farting.