

Cooper Car Club Feature Article.

“To Chimay or not to Chimay.”

By Peter Jackson. July 2002

A personal view of a continental weekend from the “Cooper Cockpit Commentator”
Peter Jackson, unashamedly Cooper biased as usual.

Chimay; famous for strong beers brewed in an ancient abbey by Trappiste Monks is a small Belgian town south of Brussels just a few miles from the French border.

It is this year also celebrating 75 years of motor racing in and around the town itself.

“Le Grand Prix des Frontieres” was run specifically for Formula Juniors from 1961 to 1963; the previous year FJ were class participants alongside F2s.

The course then consisted of a combination of town streets and country roads taking in a few hamlets along the way and was about 6.5 miles all told.

In 1960 John Love in a Lola Mk2 was the first Junior home, 8th overall after over an hours hard racing behind a solitary Porsche and the 6 leading Coopers comprising T41, T43 & T45 F2s. Lewis got it from Flockhart and Bianchi with Liekens in a T52 BMC the only Cooper Junior to finish.

By 1961 Love had transferred to Ken Tyrrell’s works Cooper team and he won the final this time in a T56 just ahead of team mate Tony Maggs who bagged the fastest lap. These two made a winning pair in FJ becoming known as the Tyrrell Twins.

In the final classification 6 Coopers finished, all T56s except for Liekens’s T52

1962 saw another Cooper win but this time by Jo Rosinski in the new T59 as the “twins” did not enter. However the writing was on the wall for Cooper because Crevits in a Lotus put up the sharpest lap. It must have been a tough race though because there were 12 retirements and only 10 finishers amongst whom was Chamberlain in his T56 BMC and the faithful Liekens some laps down.

Coopers were fading by 1963 although Franck in the latest T67 and Bouharde in his rather earlier T56 were 3rd & 4th respectively. Timmer’s T56 BMC took 7th but poor Liekens, who had upgraded to a T67, still finished last again. Maglia took a pole to flag victory in his Lotus and he annexed the quickest lap into the bargain. Fini !

However all that was 40 odd years ago and the course these days does not go quite as far into town as previously and some of the hamlets are no longer visited but it still makes for a challenging 2.7 mile circuit.

Tony and I arrived mid afternoon on Friday via motorway from Calais to Cambrai (tolls 7.2e) then N43 to Hirson where we turned northeast for Chimay.

Altogether a singularly straightforward route on almost deserted roads.

We found the paddock liberally populated with Juniors and parked up next to Clive Wilson, out with his superb Lola Mk2. Fred Boothby also chose to leave his Lotus 20 at this location as he was camping in a far pavilion well away from the hideously loud and totally unnecessary Tannoy music. This was much reduced the next day.

Our organiser Barry Sidery-Smith had proposed some out of town Gites and several of our crowd took this option. By all accounts they were particularly good. For our part Tony and I put up at the Motel in town as did Len Selby & Mike.

Slightly seedy but clean and spacious, it was run by an old chap with one eye, and his crippled wife both of whom could have stepped straight out of a Dickens novel.

The circuit put on a buffet and music for Saturday night, which was well attended but Tony and I elected to dine in town at the same “Le Tallien” restaurant in the Grand Place that we had tried the previous evening. Some memorable dishes were Eel and Rabbit Stew and we also sampled the range of 3 Trappiste beers.

Identified by the distinctive colour of the bottle label; the lightest “Brown Stuff” comes in at a miserable 7%

followed by the “White Stuff” at 8% and rounded off by the “Blue Stuff” at a staggering (literally) 9%. Session beers these are not!

Saturday afternoon was for qualifying sessions & Sunday was race day and there were 16 Juniors plus Reg Hargrave’s Keift 500 for the grid.

Present also was Tim Bishop with his “deek” Sauter, a Stanguellini and a rather threadbare Mk3 Cooper 500. Because of last minute changes to licence requirements Tim and his daughter confined themselves to the several open demonstrations as did the Stanguellini.

The Cooper didn’t get much further than the paddock unfortunately.

These demonstrations were not speed restricted and we were treated to the inspiring sights and sounds of several Bugattis. There was a 1923 Brescia hammering round on its bicycle sized wheels and beaded edge tyres, a wire wheeled Type 37 & a Type 35.

Amongst others joining in were a gorgeous 1929 Amilcar and a stunning 250F Maser.

Demonstrations apart, we got a huge amount of track time for our money. Two half hour qualifying sessions and two 8 lap races. There was also a grand parade, which took in the complete original circuit but as this was necessarily going to be at a quite pedestrian pace none of the Juniors volunteered for it.

Anyway, I will take you round a lap. Make a mental picture of a tall rectangle and you will have a very rough idea but it’s much more exciting than that might sound. Remember that for the rest of the year all the route is ordinary public roads complete with white lines, hatching, studs, drain covers and adverse cambers to say nothing of the general detritus of agricultural activities dribbling from the muck spreaders etc.

Past the pits to your right with admin buildings behind, this straight road is fairly broad and slightly up hill. I was into top just by the pit exit and keeping left before braking hard & down to second for the first 90 right which is called “Bouchez” and is an ordinary country road T junction when at its day job.

There now follows an extremely long dead straight road. It must be over a mile, not very wide with Armco & tyres just a foot or so from each side of the tarmac.

However there are two chicanes (only on race days) to negotiate on the way.

The first was near enough for me not to be able to quite get top gear but really buzzing in third. It is a fairly friendly chicane off to the left, fast in having come down to second gear just on the turn in. A very short squirt and fast out again.

Up now to top gear back on the long straight before the next chicane which is off to the right this time. This one though is far from friendly. Very fast in, needing just a nifty joggle right & left, most of the braking can be done in the chicane itself. Which is just as well because the exit is extremely narrow and sharper than 90 on both the left and right required to get you out onto the road again. There is no run off (for that matter there is no run off anywhere actually) and I was over geared in second here.

In race1 Robin Longdon -Lola 5A, Mike Hibberd -Lotus 20 & Mark Woodhouse Lotus 22 all came whistling past me just at this chicane entry with hardly a fag paper between them. I kept well out on the left and then I nipped smartly in right behind Mark to follow them all through. Mark said afterwards that he had had a heart stopping moment at that point as he couldn’t be certain that I had seen all three cars and might turn in across his bows.

Out on the straight once again, quickly up to third and prepare for the hairiest corner on the course. Before you get there the road swings slightly right, climbs a rise and suddenly, completely unsuspected, you arrive at another T junction!

The general plan is to make a right here but judging by the little patch of stones, straight ahead the farmer has long since abandoned this part of his cabbage field to errant racing cars careering straight on in a cloud of tyre smoke. Just to give an indication of this very point Mike Hibberd went off here on the first lap of the first qualifying period. And this is



Pic Right Len Selby at Speed.

also true:- back in the paddock afterwards his excuse was that somebody had removed the road signs so he didn't know where the corner was!!! I have to say though that he actually was quite right about this.

The previous evening most of us had been door handling our road cars round the course, avoiding the tractors and 2CVs, and sure enough there were road signs aplenty. Not so on practice morning though as poor old Mike found out to his huge embarrassment. I however took comfort from this "off" "by the master. There was hope for the likes of me after all.

You have to make this corner much tighter than 90 because remaining in second gear the next chicane follows immediately. This one is to the left, quite short and is fast in & out pushing you fully over onto the right hand side on the exit. However, not far along here a more main road blends in from the left. Road Traffic on our route would ordinarily give way, so there is much 'whitelining', hatching and a camber for us to cross at an angle here at "Beauchamp" whilst making a bend to the right. All this makes my car very unsettled and I had to lift a bit through here. Large trees are overhanging on both sides by this point and as you get washed out towards the left it seems a very dark and daunting tunnel to race through. Although now well over on the left edge of the track the exit of the next bend, another right, is quite out of view obscured by high Armco and the trees. It is also quite rough and slightly down hill so I for one was not flat out down here.

When you can see clear ahead again, in the distance is "Vidal" where the marker boards herald the last chicane, again to the left. This one is offset a bit deeper than all the previous ones and has a fast entry but is short & sharp on the exit. Because you emerge at full bore from the trees at this point and the approach is downhill it is easy to overdo things here. Venerable "Smok'in" Selby straightlined this once in his T56 and slalomed the cones very neatly.

However, having scrambled out of here there is a fast blind continuing downhill with a slight left kink and then the slight right kink "Maladre" before topping the brow to look straight into the town ahead. This is the ancient start/finish area and the old control building on the right is gently crumbling away looking sadly forlorn and forgotten. I thought that this last section from the chicane to right down here facing the town was very satisfying to drive hard and it also sounded marvellous; wonderful open exhaust notes loudly reverberating back from Armco & concrete at every gear change.

With the town in your sights it's time to sort out the best line for the last corner.

Normally a wide crossroads with plenty of lines and hatching "Porte de Mons" presents itself now as a big swinging 90 righthander dipping in deep on the apex to carry good speed onto the finish line and then a thrash off up to "Bouchez" again.

I found increasing confidence, in trail braking and turning in earlier than at first seemed prudent, to take advantage of the dip and early power out but avoiding sliding up to the high crown of this road and over the other side. I caught sight in my mirrors of poor Bernard Brock in his Elva having a phenomenal avoidance here and I think it cost him about half an inch of tyre rubber judging by the smoke.

So that's what it was like to drive a lap in my old T56. It should know the way by itself though because the first owner Robert Bouharde raced it here in 1962 & 1963.

A former connection was also Claude Bourgoigne with us in his Lotus 27 this year.

Racing an F3 Lotus here in 1969 against Emmo and other luminaries he beat the lot.

He nearly did it again the following year coming home 3rd behind David Purley and James Hunt only 0.3secs behind them after 50mins duelling.

Even closer in 1971 our man Claude bagged 2nd spot, Purley winning again.

That's impressive by any standards; a fine hat trick of getting the top three places against such adversaries as future F1 world champions and the exceptional Purley.

As far as our two races were concerned they both went to Robin Longdon but he had to work mighty hard for them. He tore over the line with Mike and Mark only inches behind and they had raced as close as this all the way apparently; wonderful close racing, Formula Junior at its fast & furious best. Coopers fielded 3 cars, all T56s:-

Simon Armer impressed again with a fine drive in his T56 and after getting his eye in during the first qualifying he was 4th behind the leading trio every time after that. What a shame then, that on the last lap of the last race with another certain 4th in the bag his gear selection failed. With a box full of neutrals he coasted gently onto the no-mans land island in the last chicane there to be greeted by the gallic shrugs and long chins of the marshals. Len Selby brought his very 'pukka' T56 home midfield having struggled with an intransigent fuel pump the whole weekend.

There was one other non finisher, Claude Bourgoigne unfortunately. He charged a bank (good trick this! my bank usually charges me) and deranged the front offside suspension during the second qualifying session, so missed the races on Sunday.

Our second race finished about 4.30 and word went round that the circuit was offering free beer to drivers & crew. Instant result - empty paddock and bursting beer tent.

All drivers were given a nice large presentation bottle of the "Brown Stuff" and a commemorative plaque and pretty much unlimited beer on tap for all.

Following this, all the Junior mob assembled at the 'Robinery' for drivers to receive a Millers Trophy and some apposite words from Barry Sidery-Smith together with a cap each from State of Art designer label company of Belgium presented by their director.

After farewells in the queue waiting to exit between events most of us dispersed across the Belgian & French countryside on a gloriously warm sunny evening having thoroughly enjoyed our weekend. Tony and I retraced our easy route home and unloaded the Cooper as quietly as possible (my God, my winch is noisy at 3am)

Next race for me may well be some way off as I have discovered a split cylinder.

My story is that that is why I was bog last in every session, and I am sticking to it.!