



Gabriel in action with her Camero in 1972.



PHOTO: ESLE CRAWFORD



Gabriel and Kevin Flanagan on the 1994 Circuit.

An Appreciation: Gabriel König

BY PLUM TYNDALL

Gabriel König, the name she always used when referring to her motorsporting activities, was a reminder of the privileged days of the sport. She was indeed a privileged person as the 'lady of the manor' of magnificent Beaulieu House, Ireland's oldest unfortified house which overlooks the River Boyne on the coastal side of Drogheda.

Quite extraordinarily the Beaulieu Estate, which has been in her family since 1650, has been handed down for all those years through the female line of the family, which probably had a lot to do with Gabriel's confident, decisive and strong personality.

Her assessments of her fellow competitors were blunt and entertaining, Gabriel did not suffer fools gladly, but she truly loved her motorsport and liked to be taken seriously as a very competitive driver in a male dominated sport, which indeed she was.

My first acquaintance with Gabriel and her then husband Mark König was in South Kensington mews. While working as a trainee architect in the big smoke, I passed an entrance and to my amazement I spied a racing Lotus Elan being pushed out onto the cobbled

courtyard by a young and well-attired couple.

My obsession with the sport overtook my inhibitions and I introduced myself to Mr and Mrs König, while admiring Mrs. König's beauty as much as her husband's gleaming racer.

Gabriel had already been racing an Elite and the Elan for a number of years when I bumped into them in 1964. The Lotus, which she shared with her husband, was by then in full race trim and they had driven it in the 1000km at the daunting Nurburgring in Germany.

By 1966 Gabriel had won her first race in a Roger Nathan prepared Hillman Imp, but her big successes came in Mod Sports, where she was spotted by the late John Britton and installed in one of his very swift MG Midgets in 1968.

Racing in Ireland was confined to Kirkistown, the annual road races at Phoenix Park and Dunboyne at that time. Gabriel's ambitions were more international, so she had never raced at home.

Her 1968 season was sensational, 15 class wins and nine lap records and when the Britton Midget was further modified in 1969 with a 1340cc engine, Gabriel had an outright win at Fashborough in

Germany and she took the little MG into 18th place overall out of 80 starters on the famed Italian road circuit at Mugello.

She also experienced another road-racing classic that year, the Targa Floria in Sicily, where she shared the drive with her husband Mark in his self designed Nomad BRM, but a puncture put paid to a result on that occasion.

There was a major setback in 1970 when a front upright broke on the Formula Ford that she was driving at Interlagos near San Paulo in Brazil, but by the following year she was sharing a Chevrolet Camero with another famous female driver, Marie Claude Beaumont, at the Spa 24 hour race.

Gabriel acquired that Camero and brought it to Ireland in 1972 where she won the Group 1 races at Phoenix Park, Mondello, Bishopscourt and Kirkistown.

It was during that visit that I got to meet her again, and she was a very good person to get to know especially at Phoenix Park, where her mother would produce a lavish picnic basket complete with smoked salmon and copious quantities of very good wine!

At the end of the 1972 season Gabriel shipped the Camero to the Caribbean for the BOAC Team Speedbird races in Guyana and Barbados. There she was joined over the years by such Irish racing luminaries as Alex Poole, Derek McMahon and Eddie Jordan.

As is often the case in the Caribbean the racing weekends were mainly a means of filling in the periods between the rum parties and it was in this highly charged social atmosphere that Gabriel met her second husband Phillip DeFreitas.

Phillip was a local racer and his family were the Vauxhall dealers in Guyana. That Vauxhall connection led to the purchase of a Blydenstein prepared 2.3 Lotus engined Viva from Des Donnelly who had successfully raced the sister car to Gerry Marshall's 'old nail' Frenza in Ireland. Gabriel raced this car in Guyana and it now resides in the small motor museum at Beaulieu House.

It was through her Caribbean connections that I next met up with Gabriel. As the founder of Formula Friendly, the class for middle-aged menopausal men that I dreamed up in the mid 90s, I had arranged a dinner following one of our leisurely Mondello outings. These après-race gatherings had gained quite a reputation and Gabriel thought it might be fun to bring along two of her friends from Barbados, Andrew and Winona Phillips.

It creates quite a lasting impression the first time you meet a white person who speaks with a black Bajan accent. So when Andrew rang me some months later requesting me to recruit 'a hot Irish driver in a hot rally car, who had no preference for drinking milk', I immediately recognised the voice and thanks to Gabriel that was the start of my long rally association with Barbados.

There have been many adventures since, not least our trip to Tour de France Auto in 1997 when we and the RPM cameras accompanied Gabriel and her Vauxhall GT. Sadly that outing came to a premature end when Gabriel T-boned a very irate Frenchman in an immaculate MGA on the very first test of the five-day event.

"Total brake failure!" said our forlorn heroine as she tried to disguise her desperate disappointment on what should have been a highlight in her distinguished motorsporting career.

Gabriel, like so many who struggle to maintain the inheritance of running a place like Beaulieu House, had status but very little available cash. She had many lofty friends but she was always a very down to earth person. Her breeding may have placed her in a different world to most of us but the lady of Beaulieu seemed to enjoy being downsized by me and she was quite prepared to bunk down in the 'Slum on the Hill', our old gaff in Lisburn, or a fairly shoddy B&B if the company talked cars and the bottles were open. She even confessed to me at times that she felt that her west-Brit public school accent was an impediment when in the company of many of her racing colleagues.

When she returned to manage Beaulieu on her mother's death, she continued to compete in rallies and races in her Hillman Imp, Vauxhall GT and A40 Farina. This may read like the pastime of a privileged person, but believe me Gabriel had to do it all on the cheap and if it wasn't for her final partner, Malcolm Clarke, who helped her to run the house and her cars, it would not have been possible.

Gabriel's daughter Cara now takes over Beaulieu, so that intriguing female heritage continues, however the motorsport connection with the great house will end as Cara's interests lie in the arts, not the art of covering ground at great speed on four wheels, or often on three in Gabriel's case!

Now that Gabriel has left us she will be sorely missed. Characters and friends like her are not made anymore, and motorsport and I will miss her dreadfully.