

Motorsport article June 1971

They make racing cars: "Lenham"

This month's article really should be headed "They Make Racing Cars and quite a lot of other things as well", for the Lenham Motor Company, and their associated company the Lenham-Hurst Racing Organisation Ltd., have various interests in and around the motor racing and sports car scene. You will find Lenham just off the main A20 road on the way to Dover, at a sleepy little Kentish village called Harrietsham. Business might take you there to buy one of their sports/racing or Formula Ford cars, a glass-fibre body for your racing Sprite or Midget, a hardtop for a range of sports cars; or even to have your racing car prepared.

The Lenham Motor Company, run by two partners David Miall-Smith and Julian Booty, used to be a couple of miles down the road at a place called Lenham where, as well as running a service station, they did a considerable amount of glass-fibre work and also renovated vintage cars. The vintage side of the business has now given way to the building of racing cars which started some three years ago coinciding, more or less, with the move to Harrietsham.

The first racing car built by Lenham was a closed sports car for club GT racing, built as a development vehicle for a proposed future road-going GT, as a publicity venture for Lenham, "but", say the partners "mainly for enjoyment". The space-frame chassis design was by a chap who had a workshop next door, by the name of Peter Coleman, who has been involved with all their projects, while the partners designed the attractive body. Coleman, himself, raced the car with some success at minor club level.

At the end of the season it was decided to strip the car, modify the chassis and suspension, and rebuild it with new bodywork but retaining the same almost standard twin-cam engine. Now called the P69, the car was exhibited at the London Racing Car Show, mainly to publicise other Lenham glass-fibre products, but several enquiries for replicas were received. These had to be politely turned down due to pressure of work, but at least it set everyone at Lenham thinking about building racing cars on a more professional basis. Meanwhile, the car was raced by former Rootes works driver Ray Calcutt with good effect, despite the relatively lower-powered twin-cam engine which was at least brought up to racing specification. Calcutt held the class record at Brands Hatch for some time, and won his class in the STP GT Championship. Towards the end of the year the car was revised with open bodywork.

At this time an old friend, Roger Hurst, who had various local interests, became involved with the running of the car, and also raced it with some success. It was decided to form the Lenham-Hurst Racing Organisation, with the object of building and developing racing cars under the name Lenham. This firm immediately took over another local based company, Auto Speed Developments which, under the direction of former Alan Fraser mechanic Roger Coltham, was gaining a good reputation for single-seater racing car preparation. This is still so today, although Miall-Smith and Booty are no longer directors of Lenham-Hurst, and the race preparation side of the business will soon be moving into new premises in nearby Ashford, although both companies will continue to be closely associated.

Early in 1970 the Lenham P70 was sold to French driver, Francis Krusch, who ran it successfully in French club races and hill-climbs, and his efforts have thereby brought Lenham orders for two further cars. These are now in the hands of French owners, while one or two other potential customers are thinking of buying similar cars. Another 1970 project was a Formula F100 based on the P70, and this was built for Kent driver Rob Schroeder, who had at one time showed great speed in a racing Jaguar "E"-type. Everyone soon became very disillusioned with the Formula, and by mid-season Schroeder had gone back to strawberry farming, and the car has subsequently been converted to P70 specification, fitted with a 1,150-c.c. engine and sold. A project to develop a twin-rotor Wankel engine for competition work also proved to be an unsuccessful idea.

All this meant that work on the new Lenham GT car, the P71, was not started until late in 1970; the design being commissioned by Roger Hurst. His specification was for a lightweight, 3-litre prototype to contest major sports-car events. An ex-works 1967 3-litre Repco V8 engine was purchased along with a Hewland FG300 gearbox, and a glass-fibre reinforced space-frame car of relatively straight-forward design was constructed. This has been clothed in an attractive body coloured in a startling shade of green, and was scheduled to run for the first time at the BOAC 1000, driven by Calcutt and Hurst. Unfortunately non-availability of bag fuel tanks and drive shafts prevented the car from running, but it was tested for the first time a week later, and may well have raced by the time you read this.

Lenham admit that their main bread and butter is still glass-fibre work, they still produce plenty of hardtops and so on, the bodies for the Arkley SS and several other similar cars, but are now hoping to expand their race car construction activities.

Naturally they would consider building replicas of the Repco-engined car, but also hope for some more orders for the P70. There are two other projects under way as well. One is for Formula Ford, for close by another firm started marketing such a car, also designed by Coleman, called the Hamlen. Lenham have now taken over this project, rearranged the syllables, and have modified the prototype car considerably for a chap called Chris Alford to drive. The hope is that several orders will be forthcoming.

There is also another project which stems from France, to build a road-going version of the P70, but with a GT body, for use on non-rough rallies, and particularly the Tour de France. When we visited Lenham the first of three such cars was in the build stage. On a purely non-competition basis the Lenham lads were also working on a kit car which could be built using the parts of a Renault R8, in rather the same way as one builds a Mini Jem or GTM.

Whilst Lenham are still on the fringe of race car manufacturing, they do produce a much larger proportion of the whole than most firms. Naturally the bodies are produced on the premises, but so are the chassis, and Lenham have their own castings made locally as well. Apart from those engaged on the glass-fibre work, about five people are presently employed on building racing cars (this includes Lenham-Hurst workers), while Australian racing driver John Gilmeister can usually be prevailed upon to do much of the fetching and carrying, and will also be involved in testing the Lenham-Repco.

Lenham proudly point out that they will be the only British firm contesting the Manufacturers' Sports Car Championship with a car over 2-litres, and one wishes them luck with their endeavours. It will also be interesting to see if Lenham racing cars become a household

name on British circuits, or whether the firm returns to building the occasional racing car for fun, whilst concentrating on the stock-in-trade of glass-fibre products and, for that matter, selling second-hand sports cars.—A. R. M.