

With Shawzin in the Mille Miglia

It's with a whole heap of humility that I begin to write about the Mille Miglia. The epic Italian road race, staged from the twenties to the fifties, was enveloped in triumph and tragedy. But for British motor sport it will forever be epitomised by the events of the first day of May, 1955. Stirling Moss's legendary drive in the 300SLR (1,000 miles in 10h 7min 48sec) and the dramatic report in "Motor Sport" by his navigator Denis Jenkinson – surely the greatest piece of motor sport journalism ever – make my own involvement a few years later insignificant in comparison. Our tyre tracks over the Italian roads and my words on these pages belong to a different world, and must be read with that understanding. However, there it is, in the record books: 1961 Mille Miglia, Shawzin/Makin, second in class, 33rd overall. But record books seldom tell the whole story, do they?

I first saw Barry Shawzin, though I did not know it was he; on the opening night of the 1960 RAC Rally. His yellow Sprite was in a ditch, nose down, tail up, and he was jumping up and down trying to remove it, single handed. He was a giant of a man with a jet

and ten spectators. The race over 1,000 miles of closed Italian roads would never take place again, but the Automobile Club of Brescia were now running it as a rally and Barry had entered his Sebring Sprite.

Well, I'd done a lot of UK rallying and a fair bit of Continental

Revard, Col de Turini and, best of all, the incredible 30k dash through the Verdon gorges from St Clair to Pont de Soleils). All of that went rather well for a couple of Continental virgins. The Sprite (WYT381, by then a startling electric blue) ran faultlessly and we came back with a respectable fourth place in a class headed by other Sebring Sprites, driven by Tony Gold and John Sprinzel.

The Sebring Sprite was a delightfully elegant small GT car (affectionately known at the time as "a froggy with discs") and WYT381 was one of 12 prepared by John Sprinzel during 1960 under the auspices of the Donald Healey Motor Co at 64 Grosvenor Street. It was beautifully appointed, but at 995cc it was somewhat short of the oomph required for mountain climbing with 20 stones of Shawzin aboard*.

Importantly, another Sprite in the Tulip was driven by two Italians from Brescia: we became firm friends and they were thrilled that we were

which I could write up my pace notes every evening.

And so it came about. They provided us with a base for our recce days and a typewriter for the evenings – albeit hidden away in the back of the chemist's shop where I laboured long into the night, amidst the flasks and carboys, transcribing from the tapes recorded on a portable recorder – pretty high tech, actually, for those days.

The event was still to be 1,000 miles or thereabouts, but concentrated entirely towards the top half of the "real" route. We were to start and finish in Brescia, go south as far as Florence with several crossings of the Apennines along the way and then up to Bolzano. But 750 miles was to be on open roads at a sedate 50kph (at least that was the theory) with the event being decided over the nine closed sections totalling the other 250 miles.

Most of these sections were open for recce (albeit in normal traffic) and they ranged from the relatively simple 12km



Young Makin, Mille Miglia documentation and Shawzin's Tulip Rally papers

black beard and when the headlights of our semi-works Mini caught him in full jump, my driver (John Whitmore) and I burst into hoots – most unfairly of course. No doubt we looked equally comic as we retrieved our Mini from various off-road excursions as the event unfurled.

A few weeks later, at the start of 1961, the phone rang, and it was Barry. "I hear you were with Whitmore. Well if you were mad enough to go with him then you must be mad enough to come with me. I want to do the Mille Miglia."

The Mille Miglia? Me? Moss's 1955 victory had been overshadowed in 1957 when "Fon" de Portago's Ferrari crashed into the crowd a few kilometres from the finish at Guidizzolo, north of Mantua, killing himself, his navigator

motoring, but no Continental events. I don't think Barry had done that much of either. He was a rumbustious, larger than life character in every sense, an actor by profession who had, I fancy, come into a wodge of money and plunged into motor sport. He was to die of cancer in 1968, but even today on the internet there are hundreds of references to his acting career. For years he was in the West End as Mr Paravacini in *The Mousetrap*.

Over large steaks and fortified by red wine we convinced ourselves that we should give it a go, but for a pipe opener Barry had entered The Tulip, a comparatively sedate affair. It would take us from Noordwijk to Monte Carlo and back, with some fabulous special stages (Spa Francorchamps, Ballon d'Alsace, Chamrousse, Mont



Shawzin in WYT in the 1961 RAC Rally – he didn't finish

going to brave the Mille Miglia. Of course, we must stay with them, even during the days beforehand when we were planning to recce. And of course they would find a typewriter on

Abetone to the treacherous Futa-Raticosa between Florence and Bologna. In his epic drive Moss had wanted to complete the 108km (60m) in an hour but had failed by a minute.

Now the stage was to be only 64 of the 108km (as it turned out, the fastest time was to be by a Ferrari 250GT in a fraction under 45 minutes; head to head with Moss on the section he'd have ended around eight miles behind, on some of the most tortuous mountain roads in Europe).

Slowly during the week beforehand my notes came together but it was tough going, navigating and dictating all day and transcribing all evening. Soon we were both wishing we'd built in some R & R time, but on the Thursday we still had to recce the Futa-Raticosa (Friday would be scrutineering ahead of the 0500 start on the Saturday morning).

Our recce day on these notorious passes between Florence and Bologna was something of a nightmare. The section was so very much longer than any of the others and soon after midday the batteries for the recorder, including all my spares, ran out. We had to use a chunk of the afternoon driving back down to Florence to search for replacements. Back up in the mountains again, we ground on towards dusk – only for disaster mark two: "Uphill past 2km sign – flat – con r flat but straight away l..." and the rest would be silence. We'd run through all our reserves of tape. I jotted some notes from here on, but I knew they could not compare with the complete notes for the other sections. What would this cost us, tackling the end of the Futa-Raticosa blind?

For a few hours the next morning, amidst the chaos of scrutineering in the middle of Brescia, it seemed it wasn't going to matter. The Sprite (and dozens of other entries) were not properly homologated or insured, insisted the officials. So began the wrangling, with all the drama of an Italian opera (buffa, I suppose). But Barry's acting pedigree paid off. In truth, it wasn't a fair fight: with his massive frame and booming voice, deployed with genial good humour, there was only ever going to be one winner. Others (including the only other all-British entrant, Pat Moss, seeking to track her brother's footsteps in an ex-

works Austin Healey 3000) gave up and went home. Of the 129 entrants only 86 started; 61 were to finish.

So when start time came at 0500 the next morning we



Makin's medal

were the only Brits left, though Stuart Turner, later a doyen in the Ford motor sport hierarchy, was navigating a 220SE for John Manassis. I'm glad he was, for his subsequent report in *Motoring News* has been a constant crib for me in groping back in my memory almost 50 years to write this piece. We left Brescia at 0525 sedately (50kph average, remember?) but the majority blasted off wearing crash hats, and this was to set the pattern. In Italian eyes it was the race as ever and crowds urged us on at every corner. In towns we had a job to keep up with the motorcycle policemen leading us through.

Before the mountains there was a great taster – a special stage at Monza. The Italian circuit in the Royal park was, of course, a holy among holies to us. We'd only seen grainy black and white film of it but had pored over Jenk's epic reports of events there over the years. Just to walk the track was like stepping out at Lord's or St Andrews. Twenty-five laps were scheduled, but, much to my seething disgust, after an exploratory lap I was turfed out of the car and Barry had to go it alone.

He reeled off the laps with some circumspection – it was his biggest track test to date, and we'd agreed it would be just too stupid to go for broke and break something at this stage. He pulled out a useful lead over the only other entrant in our class, a nifty little Renault Gordini with a five-speed gearbox driven by a couple of Frenchmen.

Barry said afterwards that in

the opening laps he'd been trailing up to the corners on the over-run but then got the hang of taking the car right to the corners before nudging the brakes (or not) and put in some much quicker laps. Others weren't as cautious and a succession of spins and other incidents (one car ran out of petrol mid-test) made it a very lively and amusing morning.

For the afternoon and evening we were quickly into the wonderful Apennines, surely some of the most joyous motoring in Europe. The Gordini was certainly nippy and was being driven with great verve and we had a great time scampering over the special stages with them. In a straight line they were just a bit quicker but our recce and the pace notes did mean we had a better idea of what lay ahead. The weather was mixed but the scenery was just wonderful, and the crowds' enthusiasm undampened. As Jenkinson had found with Moss six years earlier, they were

hard right downhill to con l v dodgy 90...."

"Con r vvvvvdodgy hairpin round round house shrine on left !!!!! then flicking left flat up to bend sign..."

The road sections in between times came as something of a relief: I marvelled to think how Jenks had kept up with his pace notes for ten hours at three times the speed.

Now, with darkness, the drizzle intensified as we worked our way out of Florence on the S65 towards the ascent of the Futa. The stage started at Cafaggiolo and the 64km that night were the toughest of the event. My notes were already spattered with exclamation marks from the daytime recce but the rain and the dark made it even more treacherous. It was tough to know whether to keep to six tenths and stay safe or risk seven or eight tenths and maybe go slithering into the low parapets that bounded much of the road. (These days, of course, there's a motorway



Sebring Sprite WYT 381 – now awaiting restoration

enormously helpful because they were often concentrated on the tricky sections. "Crowd thicker, watch out!" I'd cry.

Over the Cisa, the Cerreto and the Abetone we went, doffing hats to Ferrari in Modena on the way. Quotes from my notes:

"Con r v fast then tightens to nearly 90 fast but tricky !! then imed flicks con l long long long tightens adverse camber flicking round to r..."

"Past houses flat for 400yd ending in right and left: brake before 5km sign as awkward roadworks just after ridge then

parallel to these passes but on rainy days in heavy winds its high altitude curves are almost as unnerving.)

Over the top of the Futa we went, and on up the Raticosa – and then came the moment when the pace notes ran out. With quite a way still to go, the Gordini slipped past us with a cheeky twitch of its tail and Barry came down to little more than touring speed for the remaining kilometres to the finish at Pianoro just before Bologna.

What we didn't discover until afterwards was that the

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Gordini team had been feeling that we had the edge over them, so they'd borrowed some pace notes for the Futa-Raticosa from their compatriots in the Citroën equipe. The tables were well and truly turned: they had complete notes and we were without.

It was a long run now through the early hours to the Northern mountain stages around Bolzano, well away from the traditional Mille Miglia route. The class may have been lost (by three minutes or so in the end), but there was still a great day's driving ahead and we settled in to enjoy it. The final run from Barghe down the

S237 and into Brescia was just stunning and as we then had to go round and do it again it was a double treat.

The closing kilometres into the town were absolutely flat and dead straight. Batting through the waving crowds we really could believe, not for the first time over the two days, that we had been in the historic race itself. The car had been superb throughout and though we'd made a mess of our class we'd stayed on the road and ended up 33rd overall which we thought was highly creditable for a little GT car. Most importantly, with the recce days and the event itself we'd

enjoyed a week of the most spectacular and superb motor-ing, in the country where the heart and soul of motor sport beat for ever.

Through the magic of the internet, and with particular help from Martin Ingall and then Andrew Forster of Archers Garage in the West Midlands, I've tracked down WYT381. She's now owned by a great Sprite enthusiast, Neville Wilson Jones, in Hawarden, near Chester. When Neville bought her from a scrap dealer for £100 in the mid-seventies, she had been dumped in a mews in London, sadly neglected. Restoration has moved

forward slowly since then, and Neville would love to see her back on the road once more – but poor health makes it unlikely he can see the project through. So if anyone with a spark for Sprite restoration wants to take it over, contact Neville on nwjones@qtt-ltd.fsbusiness.co.uk or me – makin@johnmakin.demon.co.uk
John Makin

*To head off members/friends who feel impelled to comment that 15-16 stones of Makin probably didn't help much either, I'll point out that in those days I was a mere sliver of my present self, tipping the scales at no more than 10 or 11 stones.