

# BEGINNERS GUIDE TO CIRCUIT DRIVING

By Matt Deakin and Tony Pashley

Although the huge undersubscription of our Silverstone track day last year seemed to be a serious bodyblow to the future of our circuit activities, it has been interesting, and encouraging to have heard, of late lots of questions about circuit driving and just what goes on at the much-talked-of-but-seldom-explained Track Day.

## What then, is this addictive side of Seven ownership all about?

The very purpose of the Lotus Seven was to be road car during the week and clubman's racer at the weekend. Although motor racing is supposedly more accessible to more people than ever before, the time and money required, the perceived risk to personal safety and the brutally competitive attitude prevalent today keep most of us from getting involved. Driving quickly on a race track in something vaguely resembling a racing car, without those kinds of pressures, is what our track days are all about. They are strictly non-competitive. The idea is to have several sessions driving around the track at your own pace, learning about the circuit, your car and your driving and most importantly being safe and enjoying yourself. They are also good social events with a great camaraderie.

## What to expect.

Under the guardianship of RMA our Club track days are very well organised and managed with a firm but discreet hand. You should not be put off by thoughts of all sorts of unruly behaviour on the track: this just isn't tolerated. Despite what you may hear from some quarters, these are still 'our events' and are good value. RMA lay on more facilities than we could ever have managed ourselves; there is proper marshalling and usually an array of experienced and well know race drivers on hand to offer tuition, advice and encouragement or a few laps as a passenger. A thorough briefing is given so you'll know how the day will proceed. Where possible, there is a slow familiarisation or convoy run or chauffeured laps at the start of the day to show you the circuit.

Participants are divided into three groups broadly on the basis of experience: Red, Blue and Green, as you will have seen on the application forms in Low Flying. Each group has the track to itself for its sessions. As a beginner, you'll be in a group (Green) where the speeds are generally lower, overtaking is restricted to one side and not in corners or braking areas and any sort of aggressive driving is a no-no. You'll be out on the circuit for about twenty minutes at a time, which is quite enough, believe me. In all, you would probably get between two and two-and-a-half hours on the circuit (which is rather more than a Grand Prix...).

Sessions are started, in orderly fashion, from the pitlane (no racing starts!) and a simplified flag system is used for safety. In the event of an incident, such as a spinner stopping in a dodgy spot, or oil on the road or some other hazard, the session may be stopped (with red flags) while it's sorted out. The marshals are pretty sharp and don't leave you exposed to unnecessary danger.

## A Typical Lotus Seven Club Track Day

With all the excitement, the concentration and the fresh air, it can be quite a tiring day; so get a good night's sleep before and you'll enjoy it all the more. Time flies on these days so get there in good time as there is plenty to do. For an RMA-run day, you will receive an

instruction pack before the event. Let's assume the briefing is scheduled for 9am; things generally run pretty slickly after that so you should allow enough time to do the following before the briefing:

- Relax a little after your journey, you want to be alert and comfortable for the rest of the day.
- Take all the loose bits and pieces out of the car; toolkits; vacuum flasks, cans of oil or fuel, tyre pumps; cuddly toys, mobile phones; spare whatsnames (and whatever else we lug around in our Sevens): you want none of this rattling in the cockpit or in the boot either.
- Make sure your spare wheel is securely fastened to the car; or remove it altogether if you prefer.
- Check your wheelnuts, tyres and pressures. Some people raise their tyre pressures a bit for the track to make the tyre more stable on the rim. About 5 psi above normal is common in dry conditions - don't go mad though, changes to tyre pressure are quite noticeable on a Seven. See how your first session at modest pace goes before you start worrying about fiddling too much or adjusting the dampers (if you have that facility). Your first time out will be an experience enough so keep the car familiar for a while.
- Check that you have fuel in the car: running out on the circuit would be embarrassing and might cause a considerable delay. Check the oil level: your engine's going to be working hard.
- Clean the windscreen and clean and adjust the mirrors. You might want to readjust them later, as your needs may not be the same as on the road.
- Sign on. There will be enough people around who know what to do. Don't be afraid to introduce yourself or ask questions. When you sign on, you get a timetable if you haven't already received one beforehand, and a variety of labels to stick on your car, including a number, a coloured sticker indicating the group you're allocated to (as a beginner, you'll be in Green) and a sticker for the rear to remind drivers behind which side they are allowed to overtake on (the left).





After the briefing, which you must attend, there may be time for familiarisation laps or sometimes chauffeured drives by an instructor or a well-known racer. Your timetable will tell you the times of your sessions. You join the track from the pit lane so there's no problem joining the session late, but since you paid for them you may as well be ready in good time. It's a good idea to warm the car up before you go out and it takes a few minutes to get comfy in the car and get your crash helmet on and fastened. Each session will be ended with a chequered flag: very theatrical, I know, but it's the only time most of us will see one waved at us. You can come in before then if you want to. Some people share a car for the day: if you do, and are in the same group, I suggest it's more practical, and more satisfying to do whole sessions each and not change drivers halfway through. Everything stops for lunch.

### Your Car

You certainly do not need to have the very latest specification car with all the bells and whistles and heavily uprated engine. Some of the people having the most fun have fairly basic cars, and you can have a huge amount of enjoyment before you reach the limit of your equipment. You will see a few very highly developed Sevens with fancy suspension mods, very powerful engines and ludicrously soft tyres. Don't be put off: their drivers are having no more fun than you are. It should be pointed out that while the average Seven will probably run rings around the average road car, the gap between that and a quick, well set up and well driven Seven can be as big again. Don't get disheartened by the sight and pace of the latter: their drivers have been at it quite a while and they may have spent a fortune. The day is as much yours as it is theirs.

Naturally, you should give your car a thorough check-over before you take it onto a racetrack. This is your responsibility. Make sure that all systems are working properly and that everything that's meant to be tight is. The build manual gives some guidelines on checking your car over before you race it and this is all good advice. Things that I would do include:

- Check security of suspension components (Build manual gives torque settings - don't risk overtightening things "just to be on the safe side").
- Check security of steering, the column clamp (behind the pedal box) and for play in the rack or steering control arms. Check also that you don't have excessive play in the wheel bearings.
- Make sure the brakes work; that you have life left in the pads; check the fluid level and for any leaks.
- Check the throttle mechanism and the cable (at both ends).
- Check the condition of your wheels and tyres. Make sure you haven't lost any weights or gained any cuts or splits in the tyres. Check the wheelnuts.
- Check all the things you might normally check before going on a long journey.

If only as a matter of common decency, you **MUST** take steps to prevent your engine from pumping oil onto the road. This usually means arranging for the overflow pipe to discharge into a catch tank of at least one litre capacity. Particularly with crossflows, you will be surprised how much oil your hitherto well-behaved engine spews out once you start to drive it really hard. So before you start, check that your filter is wound on properly and the catch tank is empty. On one occasion we saw a car (not dissimilar in concept to a Seven; begins with W) fitted with a cheap, floppy supermarket lemonade bottle, held on with sticky tape, doing service as a catch tank: when it filled up with hot oil it became so wobbly that it burst as soon as anyone looked at it. Get the proper, rigid bottle. Caterham have them, with mounting bracket, and they cost less than £12 or about £20 if you run a Vauxhall (I'm not sure why they're different).

If you're a bit fazed by all this, I'm sure any of the recognised Seven specialists (see Low Flying) would be able to help or offer advice. If you can't afford that, round up some help at your Area meeting.

### THINGS TO TAKE WITH YOU:

**Any documents you've had from the organiser. May include an Indemnity form, which you have to sign.**

**Club membership card, crash helmet, spare engine oil (just in case).**

**A can of petrol: this isn't guaranteed to be available at the circuit, but there are filling stations reasonably nearby. Most people fill up on the way to the circuit. Keep an eye on your fuel level during the day: it's easy to forget amid all the excitement.**

**Any tools you think you may need. Something to clean your screen and generally clean-up with.**

**(If you have any problems with your car you usually find someone who knows what to do and people are generally happy to lend tools and spares - but don't continually rely on other people's kit or you get a bad reputation).**

**I don't think it's a good idea to have a huge bunch of keys swinging about in the ignition - if this is your normal practice, separate the ignition key for your circuit driving.**

**Something comfy and unrestrictive to wear while you're driving; and something comfy to wear whilst you're hanging around, chatting, spectating and so on. I'm not hot on meteorology, so you'll have to dress yourselves. You may spend a long time out of doors though.**

**There is normally food and drink available in some shape or form.**

### Reliability

You will be driving carefully and well within yourself, so you shouldn't be bending your car. If you make sure it's well maintained there's no reason to think it will let you down either. If you do have some mechanical problem, you'll find plenty of people only too happy to help you. You should have a few tools at least, just so you



don't look completely ill-prepared! Incidentally, the vast majority of people drive their cars to the circuit - comparatively few have the luxury of trailers and tow cars. Last year, some of the preparation outfits who contest the Caterham race series attended with demonstrators, race drivers and back-up crews who have proved to be very friendly and helpful.

### Safety

This is the most important issue of all, but don't be put off by it: it's mostly common sense. Apart from making sure your car works as it should do, you'll need a crash helmet: one that fits you properly. If you borrow one, make sure it doesn't flop about on your head. If you choose to purchase one, don't buy one you haven't tried on. An uncomfortable or badly fitting crash helmet is both a misery and a menace. The dealer should know the procedure for choosing a best fit. If you're planning to do RAC sanctioned competitions, including next year's planned Club sprints, your helmet must have an RAC approval label.

In the last five or six years I have only known of one car-to-car accident and that was at modest speed and resulted in only a broken rear wing. The small number of heavy accidents in recent years, resulting in substantial car damage have mainly involved experienced drivers who have been pressing on pretty hard.

From this year, you must fit at least the 'FIA' type roll-over bar (about £180) which is taller and stronger than the standard one (but still fits under the hood on a de-dion car), and you should have a fire extinguisher on board (hand-held type will do, you may then be able to help someone else). I've never heard of anyone having a fire at one of our events but that's no reason for us to be complacent.

You are also advised to fit a harness-type seat belt. This is a recommendation I would strongly urge you to heed, otherwise you'll not be in control of the car: you'll be using all your limbs and the steering wheel to brace yourself in the cockpit. 4-point harnesses are about £90; 6-point, a little more. See what others are using and check them out for fit and comfort. If you get one, spend some time adjusting it properly so that it's comfy. On the track, you need it really tight to do any good: I know Monsieur Alesi likes his belts slack, but I reckon he's been on the Beef anyway. (Maybe that's why he's always bumping into things).

You, and any passenger, must have arms and legs covered-up whilst on the circuit: no shorts or T-shirts! If you want to do this sort of thing regularly, there are other bits and pieces you might think about, but find out whether you like it first. There's some thoughts on this elsewhere in this article.

### Behaviour on the Track

The important thing is to drive within your capabilities. No one is going to pressure you to go faster than you want; so long as you use your mirrors and show consideration to other drivers, you'll win far more respect by taking it steady and enjoying your day out than desperately trying to match the pace of the more experienced drivers and getting yourself in a panic. On the whole you'll find that

everyone's happy to see you dipping your toe in the water and going home with a grin on your face, your car in one piece. Just take it easy, find out where the track goes and get the feel of your car in new surroundings. Check your mirrors before you go out, USE THEM OFTEN and let quicker cars go by. There's no shame or loss of honour in backing off the throttle for a second to let someone by safely. Remember: we're not racing. If you come up to overtake someone else, don't take it for granted they've seen you: be cautious and don't leave yourself with an impossible task at the following corner. If in doubt, don't risk it; and don't get so engrossed that you forget to watch your mirrors. I would say the foregoing should be remembered by everybody, not just first-timers.

On Seven Club days, the track will be marked with suggested braking and turning-in points and apexes and so on. These are a very good guide to finding your way round: some may not seem logical to you at first, for example some of the turn-in points will seem very late on first acquaintance - but the guys who set them out know what they're doing.

Elsewhere in this article you will find some comments on other circuit driving days (other than our Club days, that is). These will generally not be Sevens-only days and may not be "grouped" by experience or performance. They may or may not be as scrupulously well-administered - but be careful and keep awake and you should be OK.

Remember that other types of car will have different performance characteristics - they'll be quick and slow in different places to you. Most other cars will be bigger and heavier and take much longer to brake than you. They can be much more of a handful in the corners and their drivers may not be used to watching for very small cars zooming up behind them. Give them room, they've got a whole different set of problems to deal with. Drivers of bigger, more expensive cars tend to have a greater feeling of security and in my experience don't use their mirrors very much; but Seven drivers aren't always Saints either! That all said, driving amongst other types of car is good fun and usually shows what a damn good car a Seven is. Just remember how small and relatively vulnerable you are, and that a seemingly unpromising car in capable hands might be a lot quicker than you.

### OTHER OPTIONS:

The comments here largely concern our own track events. There are many opportunities to drive on circuits outside of the Club's activities. We've both attended some of RMA's other events and those run by Wheeltorque and all have been excellent. I think it's still possible to do a one-off RMA event: this works out costlier but you are almost guaranteed a great day out. These are obviously mixed car days, and sometimes feature very serious machinery, but can cater well for beginners too. The Wheeltorque events have the added element of foreign travel and a sort of holiday atmosphere too. Other clubs and organisations run track days with varying degrees of efficiency and back up. Some are fine, but use your discretion and stick to those that come with personal recommendations.



For those in the South, Goodwood is an interesting prospect for novices. Because it doesn't currently have a full racing licence, only five cars are allowed at a time, so you can sometimes be out five laps (12 miles) without seeing another car. The circuit is exceptionally fast, quicker even than Thruxton, and about 15% faster than the Silverstone GP circuit. Despite this apparent unsuitability for Sevens it is tremendous fun - apart from the long straights there are the fast, challenging corners sadly missing from modern tracks and on mixed car days, Sevens acquit themselves well there. There are other club's events all through the year at Goodwood and they often welcome 'outsiders' to swell their numbers. Some events are better organised and better value than others.

Just use your discretion about who you're dealing with and assess the general driving standards before you let rip. Goodwood normally have a list of what's on during the year. Or ask around. The Surrey Area has an enthusiastic track driving contingent, largely brought up on driving days at Goodwood.

#### OTHER THINGS YOU MAY HEAR MENTIONED:

There are various bits of racing derived kit that you may hear talked about or recommended. You might want to think about these in the longer term if you become smitten by circuit driving, but are not essential for a kick-off. Here are a few of the things that you'll see or hear of:

**CUT-OFF SWITCH OR 'MASTER SWITCH'** This is a device which allows the car's entire electrical system to be disconnected from the battery. Typically has a large, red plastic 'key' on the outside of the car or sometimes on the dash. It's intended purpose is to enable the car's electrics to be switched off if the driver is incapable of doing so by himself. Gloomy thought, but a nice touch on a Seven.

**EXTRA THROTTLE SPRINGS** Caterham supply a kit to double-up the springs on a twin-Weber setup; a belt and braces affair to discourage the throttle from getting stuck open if anything breaks. The springs inside the carbs should cope in most circumstances, but this is a cheap upgrade for a bit of peace-of-mind.

**FLUSH PETROL-FILLER CAP** Looks the bees-knees and won't get knocked off in an accident but not strictly necessary for our purposes.

**STICKY TYRES** Don't even think about spending loads of money until you've got a bit more experience. You can have loads of fun, learn a great deal and go pretty damn quick before you NEED to progress to fancy tyres. If you have the cash to spare, see what sizes and compounds others are using. The most rewarding benefits come from driveability and 'feel' not out and out slick-like grip. The wear rates can be alarming and expensive.

**FLAMEPROOF OVERALLS** Nice ones aren't cheap, so be sure you're really keen. Most people, I think, don't wear them; if you want to, you won't look out of place. If you want to buy some at

some stage, they're often cheaper near the end of the racing season or at the racing car shows.

**FLAMEPROOF UNDIES** How far do you want to take this business? You'll have to make your own choices from here on. A Nomex balaclava though, might not be as over-the-top as it seems: it's a reasonably cheap way of keeping the inside of your costly new helmet clean and fresh.

**DRIVING GLOVES AND BOOTS** Again, it's up to you. Comfort is paramount here. Proper racing boots are useful because they have no unnecessary width and if you're very tall the design of the sole and heel is worth a good chunk of extra leg room. Not cheap (around £70) and don't last too long if you wear them out of the car. They are however, by far the best thing for driving in.

**HONEYCOMB TANK PROTECTION; HONEYCOMB FLOOR KITS; BAG TANKS ETC.** Very nice; but if you're seriously into this sort of kit, then this article is maybe not meant for you.

**BIG BRAKE KITS; STRAIGHT-CUT DOG BOXES; HIGH-RATIO STEERING RACKS; DRY SUMP KITS; ANYTHING ELSE THAT'S HIDEOUSLY EXPENSIVE** All way, way outside the scope of this article and largely unnecessary and unattainable for most of us. Get out there and enjoy yourself. Spend your money on opportunities to drive the thing, not on finding reasons to keep it off the road.

#### Spectating and Passengering

You don't have to be entered as a driver to come along to a track day. If you want to come along to watch you'll be welcome and normally you'll be able to sign-on as a 'passenger' for the day if you wish, at a cost of £10, and you should find plenty of people willing to take you out for a ride. You will, of course, need a crash helmet for that as well. RMA can loan you one on the day for £5, plus a modest returnable deposit. If you're unsure about the whole deal then this can be a very good way of seeing what goes on. These are good social occasions too, so an exploratory fact-finding mission combined with a look at the circuit from the passenger seat can be a good, inexpensive day out. But be warned: it's tremendous fun and once you've seen it you'll be itching to have a go yourself!





### More Homework?

If you think you want to chat to someone or ask some more questions before you go along, to drive or otherwise, you can phone us (numbers included elsewhere) or any of 'The Team' could put you in touch with someone else. Please don't bombard RMA with endless questions - they're not in the business of racecar preparation or 24 hour driver counselling. There are plenty of Club members to look after you.



### What Next?

Hopefully that's given you a bit of an insight and some encouragement to come along and have a look. The idea of it may be intimidating but reality isn't. Approach it sensibly, take it steady and enjoy yourself! We look forward to seeing you.

### Contacts:

Matt Deakin - 01737 763330

Tony Pashley - 0181 771 3704

Your local area organiser (numbers in Low Flying) probably knows who the regular track day types are in your neck of the woods.

Matt and Tony are not connected with RMA or the organisation of any track days - they're just frequent track users and happy to help you if they can. Other members have expressed a willingness to help out too and look after newcomers if desired.



### AUTHORS' CREDENTIALS (OR LACK OF!):

**Tony** has taken part in about thirty track days at nine venues over the last four or five years and made a cautious start at sprinting last season. Has had a few lurid spins and a touch of gravel-rash in his time but hit nothing more robust than a cone. Has, so far, always taken the car home in one piece.

**Matt** is rather more experienced, having done countless track days at some eighteen-odd circuits in Britain and around Europe. Matt gives a fine display of how well you can go, and how much fun you can have, in a fundamentally standard but well set-up 1700 SuperSprint.



### MY FIRST TIME

By **Tony Pashley**. I can well remember the time when I first went along to have a look at a Club circuit day at Goodwood, not knowing a great deal about my car or how to drive it and rather wary of what I would find. After a quarter of a century of attending race meetings as a spectator (and sometimes as hanger-on with a Formula Ford team), I knew what circuits were all about but I was still expecting an intimidating atmosphere for a novice with one Summer's Sevens under his belt. But how wrong I was: I think this was the moment I realised what a great Club ours is. By no means was everyone a gung-ho, would-be racer with an all-singing, high-spec car; there was a relaxed, nice-to-meet-you sort of atmosphere and those who appeared to be old hands seemed eager to let newcomers share in their enjoyment. Having found someone to take me out as a passenger I soon realised that this was something I had to try for myself. This particular day was wet; wet like a Japanese Grand Prix. Several drivers had gone home early (or not turned up) which left some spaces, so I managed to negotiate a session of lappery in the afternoon. Some of the more experienced members told me what not to do and out I went. The terrible weather was quite useful because it made me very cautious, but after five laps I was hooked. That Winter I did an HPC Introductory Course (which included a few track sessions as well as skidpan and roadcraft) and ever since I've done as many track days as time and funds allow. **Tony**.