

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, famed botanist and conservationist **David Bellamy** told of his possibly surprising history with, and great love for, cars and motoring, a passion for motorsport and his ownership of a Lotus Seven. Many of his motoring exploits, in particular one with the Seven, few of us could match... the whole story was originally told in the RAC members' magazine 'Road and Car' back in 1985: it's a very entertaining read. Thanks to **David Mirylees** for bringing this to our attention.

## MOST KNOW THE NAME AND THE FACE BUT FEW WILL KNOW THIS LIFE OF A REAL CAR ENTHUSIAST

OF ALL THE vehicles I have owned, I owe the Austin A35 a great debt. When I was carrying out research on peat bogs, which gave me my basic knowledge of ecology, that van took me all over Europe—up to the borders of Russia, and from the south of France to the west of Ireland. I could never, at the time, have been able to visit all those sites any other way. And eventually it helped me get my PhD and become a world authority on peat bogs and peat lands. Cars give people enormous mobility, get them into the country and help them appreciate it more.

*From his early days as a racing marshal at Brands Hatch, his travels have led him into encounters with all sorts of vehicles, from oil survey transport on the Arctic ice cap to bulldozers in Tasmania.*

*The bulldozers were to build a hydro-electric scheme and Bellamy spent his 50th birthday in jail for trying to stop them.*

Of course, motor vehicles are very much a two-edged sword—they do contribute to acid rain and other pollutants. But I don't think acid rain is as very wicked as it is made out to be. Obviously we must control it—it is doing terrible damage to ancient monuments and stained glass windows, as well as trees—but it has pointed out a problem that I think is much more serious. Foresters, especially in Scandinavia, but all over Europe, are planting and harvesting coniferous trees, taking perhaps three crops, then not putting anything back in their place. Any farmer knows that he has to put lime on the land in their place to achieve the best results—the same applies to a greater degree with forests.

When I was young, it was much easier to travel a road in cheap vehicle. I am sorry for young people today who do not have the same chance to share the enjoyment that my generation took for granted through using an old

motorcycle or car bought for just a few pounds, or sometimes for even a few shillings, and driving out into the countryside. One could often find an abandoned car or motorcycle in a shed, a barn or even a back garden which is where I discovered my first motorcycle, 1913 500cc Douglas Flat Twin. I was born in 1933 and I must have been 11, with the Second World War still on, when I found the machine which had been mouldering away for years.

By the time I was plugged into studying for O-levels, I wanted four wheels, and I was also becoming excited about 750cc motor racing. I bought or borrowed all the books I could about motor racing and was fascinated that, before the war, such tiny cars had racing around Brookland at 100 mph.

Our family did not own a car, but a girl-friend's Dad ran a Vauxhall, and a number of us learned to drive on that which was quite good fun for us. Then we saved up £32.10.0 (*For the younger reader, that's £32.50. Ed.*)—which was quite a lot of money—for we had seen an advertisement in *Exchange & Mart* for a 1932 Austin 7.

We planned to strip the car, modify the engine and then race it, but first we had to get it home from East Finchley to where we were then living in Cheam. The car would not run, but one of our group persuaded his father—a Detective Chief Inspector at Scotland Yard, to tow us back.

Everything went well until the Inspector stopped at the traffic lights, but our brakes weren't as good as his and we kept going on slowly towards the back of his car. We managed to clear it, but in doing so we were headed towards a very surprised queue of people at the bus stop.

We didn't hit any of them, fortunately—but two big policemen on the pavement saw this and started to walk towards us with a sort of

'Ere, 'ere, what's all this then?' attitude. Luckily the Inspector had his police identity card with him and so they gave us a push and we went on our way in fine style.

We couldn't park the Austin in the street and, since our front gate was too narrow to drive it through, we took the car round the back and enlisted the help of the entire school rugby team to try to lift it over the fence. They couldn't. It was too heavy. We had to demolish the fence, and just then Dad came home. I don't think he liked our motor car much.

I was reminded of all this some time ago when *The Sunday Times* took me back to my old house and there, behind the garden shed, was wedged the Austin's old number plate.

My next car was a French Salmson, a two-seater with a pointed tail, that I bought from Jack Bond in Tooting for £22—all the money I had at the time. As an example of the sort of prices that were asked for cars then, Jack Bond offered me a v12 Hispano Suiza with a full trailer-load of spares for £125. That car would now be cheap at £100,000 (*and 'now' was twenty-five years ago. Ed.*).

The Salmson had a twin-overhead-cam 1100cc engine and the make was very successful in racing. Mine had been crashed and rebuilt with a British body, painted in 'British Racing Green'.

By then I was at Ewell Technical College and, when the car was running, would drive back and forth to work in it. This was very hairy because the handbrake was not very efficient and, if I was baulked on a hill, the car ran backwards.

I had left school with eleven O-levels and my father, who was a pharmacist, wanted me to become a doctor. For this I need four A-levels, which had to be passed at the same time. I passed botany and zoology seven times and then achieved physics five times and finally chemistry. >

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## A life amongst cars

When I left school, I took all sorts of odd jobs, from inspecting drains to painting white lines on roads. Finally, I worked in the laboratory at Ewell County Technical College as a 'lab boy'. This was a glorious time for me in one respect. There was always alcohol and benzine and other laboratory chemical spirit being thrown away, which I could use in my car instead of petrol. We used to go down the road popping and banging like the clappers.

The two lecturers told me I had a brain and should use it to do something more ambitious. This made me think—and I thought a lot more when I met a student, Rosemary Froy, and decided she was the girl I was going to marry.

While we were both studying at Ewell, I once asked Rosemary to help me start the Salmson. 'Right,' I told her when I was bending over the engine, 'push the starter button now.' I happened to have one hand on the mag-dyno (something which is not seen very often these days—a combination of a magneto to generate the high-tension current for the sparking plugs and a dynamo to charge the battery). As the engine spun, the spark was so strong that it literally threw me flat on my back. That was the sort of power those magnetos used to put out.

A friend's uncle owned a big garage near Chelmsford. He loved cars and generously used to lend us the most exotic vehicles, such as a boat-decked Red Label Bentley.

'Uncle Bernie' was a huge man, a professional wrestler in his spare time. I remember once seeing him kick away the jack from underneath a vintage Bentley and support it while others worked under the car.

My friend's brother went off to Sandhurst and left us his Jowett Light Seven. The Jowett company was unusually individualistic in its advertising: one slogan declared the car possessed *The pull of an elephant and the appetite of a canary*. Another claimed *With spurs, would climb trees*. Certainly, the car possessed amazing torque and even with about fourteen people inside, it would still climb what seemed to be virtually a vertical surface.

It had a cracked engine block however, and since we could not afford to have this properly welded, we encased it in concrete. This made the engine glow red with heat and, as we feared it might catch fire, we rerouted the petrol pipe. One night we were up on Box Hill in Surrey, watching the glow-worms, and we took in it turns to drive the Jowett up and

down the hill just to see its engine glow bright red, like a mechanical glow-worm.

Then I had an Austin A10, which taught me a lot about mechanics for I had to fit a new set of big ends. This was followed by a little two-seater Morris bought for £27.15.0 in Balham. It had a overhead camshaft engine with the camshaft driven up through a vertical dynamo. The steering, as I recall, worked through a worm gear and the the drop arm was held by a nut which was kept tight by a nail. You had to get get underneath the car to bang the nail back from time to time, or you would lose all steering. I kept a little packet of nails until I had saved enough to buy another arm and nut.

I went on to take my PhD at Bedford College and bought, as my first research vehicle, a second-hand van that still had *Lyons Mint Chocs* painted on it. I then bought my first Austin A35—in which, incidentally, I had my first crash.

Larger-than-life botanist Bellamy once had a Lotus Seven; his son Rufus was even taken home from hospital in it as a newborn baby! Nearly two decades on, father and son sampled this later Caterham.



**AND ABOUT BELLAMY**  
 Bellamy sets the scene for our summer  
 James Leasor about his lifelong interest  
 in for the countryside—and how he  
 le down at the bottom of the garden

ROAD AND CAR, 1985

I was driving an important visitor from Poland, one of their top geographers. We were near Wem, in Shropshire, and I drove around a corner when a baby calf straight out in front of me through a hole in a wall. To avoid it, I chucked the car into the ditch upside down.

It was very funny, because this guy with me

could speak very little English, and the first person to come along after our accident was a Polish ex-prisoner-of-war. They sat down at the side of the road together, talking away, and left me with a wrecked motor car upside down in a ditch. The calf was unhurt. I took the car to the garage in Wem and we were back on the road in two days.

When I became a university lecturer at Durham I bought a 1932 two-seater Sunbeam from a man in Redcar. This was a beautiful old thing with a radiator made of German Silver (*A copper-nickel-zinc alloy. Ed.*) and large headlights. But it just wasn't reliable enough for me and I hadn't enough money to spend on it; as a university don in 1960, I was only earning £750 a year. I part-exchanged it for another Austin A35, and then I had a whole series of vans because they were as good as estate cars.

A humble van started David his drive to ec countryside. "Of all the vehicles owned, I owe the debt. When I was research on peat gave me my basic ecology, that van t Europe—up to t Russia, and from France to the w could never at been able to vis any other way. it helped me t become a we peat bogs and give people t get them into help them ar From his racing marsh his travels t encounters vehicles—fr part on the bulldozers bulldozers electric ac spent his 5 trying to s "Of cou very muc they do and othe think ac as it is m we mus terrible ments a as we pointe think Forest

a lot of time for was the Lotus Super Seven which I built from a kit. This must have been about 19 years ago (*Mid-sixties. Ed.*), because I drove in it to collect my wife and our son Rufus from hospital when he was born.

The ward sister was astonished when she realized that I was going to carry home a newly-born baby in a car that had no doors and only the most rudimentary of weather equipment, but we wrapped him up warmly.

I ran the car for about two years and only sold it because Rufus was growing too large. There was barely enough room for two people in it, let alone three. With the Super Seven still being made by Caterham Cars, I recently had the chance to drive one again.

I've also owned a Renault 5 van, a couple of Datsun shooting brakes, and VW Caravanette – all good cars – and now a couple of old 4-wheel-drive Subarus. The car I drive most is a 2-litre Sierra station wagon. In some ways I'm rather beholden to Ford because they support my Conservation Foundation.

Actually the industry is doing a lot for conservation and I wanted to show that they are working together. Ford have given us a lot of money for conservation projects which we can give to help small projects; in a way, it's easier to raise a million pounds to save a rain forest than, say, £2000 to save the bottom of a field or a tree.

I do an immense mileage, so having a 2-litre car means I can do that quite comfortably; but a larger engine could be wasteful, so conservation-wise I think I have the right solution.

On the back of that car I had painted the words *Engineered with conservation in mind*. I want to get that word – conservation – into everyone's mind. ■

*The text above is from a story 'Out and about with Bellamy' originally appearing in 'Road and Car' in the summer of 1985 in an interview with James Leasor.*

*Many of you will have grown up seeing David Bellamy on television. He remains an interesting although, now, rather controversial environmentalist with strong views on the climate change debate. His recent writings are worth seeking out if only to gain a different perspective to that gained from the more-commonly cited rhetoric on the subject. You may well disagree with him, but many do not.*

## Members' discounts on Slalom and Drift days

Caterham Cars are offering Club members a 20% discount on their Slalom and Drift days which brings the prices down to £155 for Slalom (full day) or £180 for Drifting (full day) – great opportunities to have a day of really exuberant Seven-driving, without the wear-and-tear on your own car and tyres! What more could you ask for?

Check out Caterham's website for dates, and

details – and some video showing you what the events are all about; just good fun, essentially... [www.caterham.co.uk](http://www.caterham.co.uk) Bookings should be made with **Emma at Caterham South**, on 01883 333700, quoting your Club membership number.

There's also a special offer of 10% off Circuit Experience courses – prices then being £405 for full day and £225 for a half day course.



Drive it like you stole it... hoon around the cones on a slalom course or just cast adrift.

### A competitive streak?

If you have a more competitive nature and want to pit your skills on the Slalom against other drivers in a more formal way, Caterham Cars have announced a Slalom competition again this year – in conjunction with Autoglym and Pistonheads – in the style of last year's Club Challenge.

There are a numbers of qualifying events at a variety of venues such as Silverstone and Brands Hatch, with drivers using Sevens set up of this kind of driving – cars and event being based, again, on the popular Caterham CDX format.

The top three in each event automatically qualify for the Finale event. There are gifts for all the finalists, with the winner receiving a package of prizes: a full professional valet-treatment for your car by Autoglym; a chance to join the Pistonheads editorial team for a group car test; the use of a Seven for the weekend and an invitation to Caterham's end-of-season Awards ceremony (plus, of course, eternal notoriety and a good dose of bragging rights!).

The Autoglym Pistonheads Caterham Challenge (phew!) is not subject to the member's special offer detailed above; cost

is £195 per driver. The first rounds take place later this month, but see Caterham website for more information or contact as above.

### Caterham R300 race series

This year's series for Superlight R300s – backed by Caterham and BookaTrack – is looking forward to a great year. 32 regular competitors assure healthy grids with four previous champions and many race winners and it's attracting successful drivers from other series such as the MegaGrads and the R400s, Roadsports and the Graduates classes.

The R300 racecars use 175bhp Duratec engines and run on treaded tyres. It's a fearfully competitive series and the racing is very close. Clearly, many competitors see this a great value for fast, close racing.

If you haven't watched Sevens racing before, it can be quite breathtaking; they really give one-make racing a good name for a change!

The championship begins at Silverstone's Easter meeting, but there are other series to follow too, such as the various Graduates classes and all provide great entertainment.