

Tracey Morley grew up supporting motor sport and has spent the last twelve years running, and building a future for, Croft Circuit. A long-time devotee of the venue, John Aston, met with Tracey in the manager's office.

MEETING THE MANAGER

I'D JUST TAKEN my A Levels when I first visited Croft circuit; I was marshalling at the International Formula 3 meeting and was enthralled—James Hunt, Niki Lauda, Carlos Pace and the whole travelling circus of one-litre Formula 3 in 1970. There was a 66-car entry for the F3 race: two heats and a final! Some of the old days really were that good—British F3 managed a dire thirteen cars at its first meeting in 2012. The 1-litre screamer F3s indulged in masses of overtaking and slipstreaming—how could the seventeen-year-old me not have been utterly smitten?

The following few years involved more marshalling and a cornucopia of racing memories: from Tony Dean's mighty Chevron B24 F5000 car annihilating Sevens and U2s in Formula Libre races (which traditionally closed the day's events) to watching the thundering March 707 Can Am car battle the Interseries round with Chris Craft's McLaren M8C DFV (*That's right, a Can Am car with an F1 engine.* ED) and—oh yes—a Porsche 917. Tony Dean, by the way, was a Castleford secondhand car dealer and the only Yorkshireman ever to have won a Can Am round—driving his gorgeous Porsche 908. His career ended badly though with a spell in jail for cigar smuggling in his race transporter!

Fast forward thirty-odd years and your correspondent was there to see Kimi Raikkonen and one Lewis Hamilton win in Formula Renault and Jenson Button make a very underwhelming impression in his Formula 3 visit—he crashed at Hawthorn. So Croft and I go back a long way and since its renaissance in the mid 90s, I have rarely missed a race weekend. It is only twenty minutes from home and I've been there in snow and hail, thunder and heatwaves watching everything from McLaren F1s and Dodge Vipers in GT races, BTCC bumping and grinding and the wonderful potpourri of British Club Racing. Quite a few track days too—including my track debut in

the nineties, where I went from pathetically nervous to totally invigorated in the space of two laps...

But Croft has not always been in the news for good reasons; the 2009 High Court Injunction cast a very long shadow and so I wanted to find out more about this BARC venue and its plans for the future. I talked to the Circuit Manager, Tracey Morley, on a wet and wild April morning. Her office offers just the best view of the circuit—even better than from the spectator banking which lines much of the track. Tracey's office is dominated by a screen with a live feed from the noise monitoring equipment she needs to stay legal, and as a lone Chevron GR8's race-tuned Duratec barked its way down through the gears into Clervaux bend the screen's trace showed the little sports racer was a lot quieter than some Sevens I've heard...

and this is what Tracey and I talked about:

How did you get here, Tracey?

My first visit was back in 1997—I applied for a job as an Accounts Clerk here and I ended up working for the then Managing Director, Jimmy Wilson-Petch; shortly afterwards I found myself Operations Manager, and then became Circuit Manager in 2000.

I'd worked for a mobile phone company



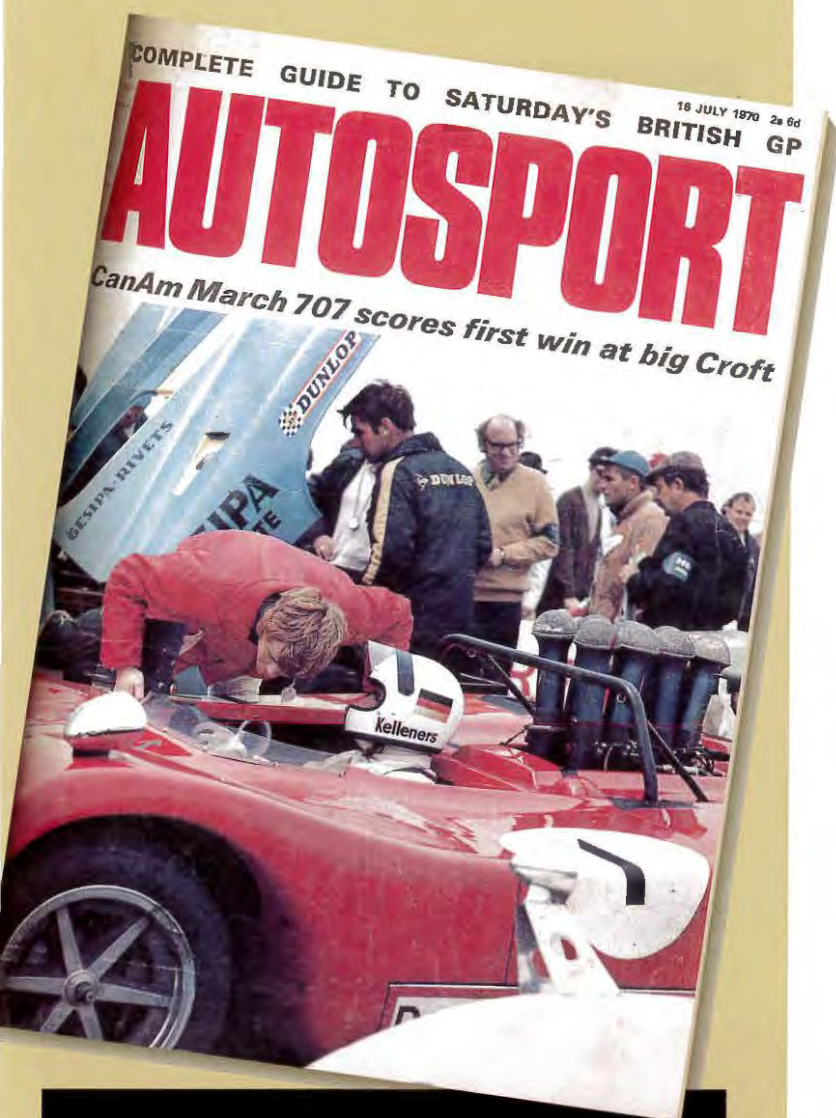
before, run a petrol station too, but my family always had an interest in motor sport—we travelled across the country watching touring car and Formula 3 meetings especially. And yes, it is incredibly hard work running a race circuit, but I just love it.

Croft hosts a wide variety of events – rallies, rallycross, trackdays, as well as two- and four-wheel race meetings. Which are your favourites?

I guess probably it would be the BTCC—it is very much our showpiece event and if the weather is right we get a huge crowd. Planning for the touring cars starts as early as January for our June meeting. And logistically it is a huge challenge: we need more security staff, more loos, more catering, because we might have twenty-odd thousand race-goers to look after. There is a massive amount of infrastructure work to do for this type of meeting and if all goes well (and so far it has) there is a huge feeling of satisfaction at the end of the weekend. And after a BTCC meeting, managing small-scale club meetings is easy—two weeks start to finish, no problem!

Right: Croft original – programme from John's first visit to the circuit, an event which made a lasting impression. Note the dual pricing...

Above right: Back in the days before the all-consuming 'eff-one' dominated the media, a club meeting could make the cover of the weeklies as this Croft event did; ok, it wasn't exactly a clubbie, but this issue of *Autosport* included the preview to the Grand Prix. Helmut Kelleners' monstrously wide 7.6-litre March (seen here in front of Neuhaus's Porsche 917) won the Interserie race and future GP winner Carlos Pace won the F3 final after the otherwise-dominant works Lotus driver, Dave Walker, crashed out of the lead.



Because I'm an anorak, I attend most events here but I'm struck by how few spectators some race meetings attract – does this worry you Tracey?

Of course—it's a constant concern. We can always rely on the hardcore enthusiasts to turn out in all weathers but the more casual fan tends to have very high expectations about the facilities we can offer. We know things are inexpensive—£12 for grown-ups and kids are free—but a lot of people are used to the sort of experience a modern football stadium can offer (and remember we have a lot of football fans here in the North East) and a two-mile long race circuit can't compete with that sort of facility.

But we have very good PR people and the MSA is working hard with schools to attract more young people into the sport; remember that series like Ginetta Juniors are relatively affordable and you can race one at fourteen. And we work very hard with the local community—we encourage our local schools to come to race meetings, meet the drivers and see the cars close up in the paddock.

We regularly liaise with various local authorities and we actively encourage community groups to talk to us; for example, if they have an event they would like to put on at the circuit we will always see if we can help. We are keen to talk to car clubs about their plans as well.

Like the Lotus Seven Club?

Exactly. For example, if you wanted to organise a group of Seven owners to attend a meeting, put on a bit of a display we can certainly offer you a good discount on race tickets, because you can help us by showing off your cars.

Give us some notice and we can probably even include you in the publicity for the event. And if we've time we can even do a track parade on the Sunday morning (*You're on. JPA*).

I bet you've done more health and safety risk assessments than I've had hot dinners; am I right?

(rolls eyes) Sadly yes. It is a really big part of every Circuit Manager's job to ensure that everybody—whether marshal, spectators or racer—has a safe day. It's not always just the obvious stuff like debris fencing and run off areas either; I need to check out things like grandstand seating, signage and car parks.

Times have changed, sadly, and it means that we are no longer allowed to permit spectators on the inside of the track at Tower, for example.

(*Tower is one of Croft's main overtaking spots—and a fantastic, if terrifying, place to watch it was too. Standing less than ten yards from a full field of TVR Tuscan's battling over the same piece of tarmac at 130mph was adrenalin overload. JPA.*)

We have a good safety record—some injuries are inevitable, especially in bike races, where sadly we have had two fatalities since I became Manager. I don't mind admitting that I have to be very brave to watch the start of a bike race. →

I loved watching Formula 3 and GT meetings here. Any chance of luring them back?

I wish! But I'm afraid that (series organiser) Stephane Ratel concentrates on MotorSport Vision tracks like Oulton Park and Snetterton as well as overseas races at Spa and Monza. It's my all time favourite race series and I really do miss them coming here. It was the best opportunity to see the guys who were going to make it into F1—and the drivers all loved the circuit too.

The Nostalgia Weekend has been a real success for you. Whose idea was it?

Mine! I'd thought about events like Goodwood, the Silverstone Classic and the Oulton Gold Cup and whilst we absolutely cannot compete with them by putting on exactly the same type of event I was confident we could do our own historic festival for the North East. The Historic Sports Car Club have been extremely supportive – and their competitors love the event (including Lotus Seven Club racer Dick Dixon in his Lotus 61 Formula Ford. JPA).

We try to put on a real welcome for them as well as a big show for the public. We are confident that the 2012 event will have been bigger and better than ever—we had a lot of interest from classic car clubs, military vehicle owners and we've even booked a Spitfire to give us an air display (Croft was a WW2 bomber base for RCAF Lancasters and Halifaxes—look carefully and you can still see the air raid shelter behind the chicane. JPA).

Croft Circuit



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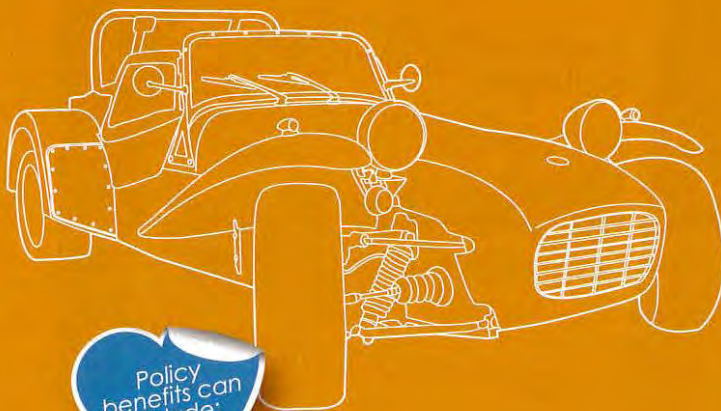
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Is Croft's location a help or a hindrance?

Well, it shouldn't be a hindrance! Look, we might be in North Yorkshire but we are only two or three hours up the A1 for many drivers and spectators. But it can be really hard work convincing people—even the Yorkshire press!—about how accessible we are: we are only ten minutes from the A1 itself.

So what should first-time visitors expect?

A fast, flowing circuit with excellent viewing and friendly locals. We really pride ourselves on looking after the environment of the track as well. A lot of people, particularly some of the people who objected to the circuit, think that race tracks are not environmentally friendly places, but they couldn't be more wrong. The original circuit owner was massively keen on preserving the natural features of the circuit—we have a lot of woodland which we manage carefully and the birdlife is fantastic (*I agree—it is the best place for skylarks I've ever been and at my last visit the woodland near Tower Bend was alive with the sound of chiff chaff and willow warblers. JPA—aka Bill Oddie!*).

Early in the morning, we often see deer and bares running over the infield. They are less welcome during meetings themselves however... We really take our environmental responsibility very seriously; we pride ourselves on keeping the circuit looking well and fitting into its environment.

Football sometimes gets spectator problems—but I don't think motor racing does. Do you agree?

Absolutely—the only incident we've ever had was when some worse-for-wear BTCC spectators staged an impromptu race through the paddock with some golf buggies they had, er... borrowed. It was daft but good natured and they surrendered to our security team!

What is your typical working day, Tracey?

I get here at 8am and I leave when I'm finished. My record for working non-stop is 23 days and I've never had a day off sick. Our routine on race days is to check the circuit,

double-check all spectator facilities and then I deal with whatever comes up—barriers that have to be rebuilt after accidents, spectators being taken ill, blocked toilets, you name it. My job is not all glamour!

Trackdays—you've had to reduce these because of the court case?

Sadly yes. We only have forty 'noisy' days a year and we have to share this out between two- and four-wheeled races, rallycross and rallies. At the moment we have seven days reserved for trackdays with companies like BookaTrack and Javelin. I wish we could do more—trackdays were a big part of our income before the 2009 Injunction.

Talking of which... the court case involved a small group of protestors obtaining an injunction against the circuit which drastically reduced the number of events it could hold. It must have been a really difficult time for you.

It certainly was, although the heartening thing was just how much support we got from the public. Ironically, two of the complainants have now moved so we don't know what the future will hold for us, but our fingers are crossed that we can improve things. I still think that we were very unfairly dealt with and the Injunction had a massive effect on the local economy—I lost five staff and so now it is just me, one other full-timer and some part-time staff.

The local B&Bs took a hit and the local petrol station suffered a major loss of income. So I don't mind saying that I feel we were very hard done by, but I will say that the BARC, who own Croft, have been extremely supportive—we had a lot of plans to improve the circuit which had to be shelved because of the Injunction but BARC have stuck with us.

Racing drivers—can you reveal the real truth to our readers?

My experience with drivers is nearly all positive. The BTCC guys are especially good at getting involved with the public, whilst club racers really just tend to turn up, work on their cars, race them and then go home! But some drivers have really stood out: Takuma Sato was one driver who really made an impression

(*he did on me too—I have never seen anybody attack Croft more aggressively. JPA*). He held the outright lap record for years but he could be just a little wild. He took three Formula 3 cars out in one incident at Sunny and that was just in testing... On that occasion I had to lock Takuma in my car to keep him safe from the other drivers, but he was seriously quick.

Danica Patrick raced here in Formula Ford and had a huge accident at Barcroft—fortunately just after we'd got RECTICEL barriers which Danica was convinced saved her from serious injury. The late Dan Wheldon raced here too: he was just a lovely guy and I enjoyed following his career in Indycars. We've only had one really bad experience with a driver: he shall be nameless, but his C-type Jaguar replica crashed heavily at Clervaux and whilst being pulled back to the paddock by our recovery tractor the Jaguar driver failed to apply the brakes. He hit the tractor hard and caused a lot of damage to his car—entirely his fault but the car's owner (the driver's father) behaved appallingly, blaming the marshals for his son's mistake and causing a major scene. I had to have him removed from the circuit. He threatened me with all sorts of things—but none ever materialised. He's not been invited back...

Plans for the future?

More of the same I hope. I love my job here, I'm very involved with ARDS and we want to keep on doing this for a long time into the future. I'd love to get another Rallycross Grand Prix here but it is difficult as we rely on the top European teams to attend and they all want expenses! We want to develop the whole visitor experience, we want make the Nostalgia Meeting even more of a 'must see' event and generally we want to keep our public happy—it's what we are here for.

Tracey—many thanks for talking to Lowflying.

Croft holds a full calendar of events; check out www.croftcircuit.co.uk or contact me for details (my wife thinks I live at Croft... JPA)