ROAD RACING IN AUSTRALIA- THE AUSTRALIAN GRAND PRIX

Bob King

The Early Days

Car racing on public roads has been accepted by the general public as a spectator sport with the arrival in Australia of Formula One racing through the streets of the city of Adelaide. Most readers will be unaware, however, of the long history of road racing in Australia.

The motor car is now 100 years old. It did not take long for motor racing as such to begin, the first recognised race being from Paris to Rouen in 1894. (1) This was followed by many great inter-city races including epics such as Paris-Berlin in 1901, and Paris-Vienna in 1902. In the early years of the century motor races proliferated and in 1906 the major race in France was called a ‘Grand Prix’ for the first time. It was run on public roads outside the township of Le Mans - today’s Le Mans 24 hour Race uses some of the same roads. By and large, Grand Prix racing in Europe has continued to be held on public roads, none more famous than the streets of Monte Carlo.

Figure 1  Captain Arthur Waite’s Austin 7 winning the first AGP at Phillip Island in 1928.
The pioneer racing motorists in Australia were more involved with inter-city trials and record breaking than with racing on road circuits. It was not until 1928 that true road racing came to Australia when a group of Melbourne enthusiasts introduced European style racing with the first Australian Grand Prix (AGP) at Phillip Island. (Figure 1). Since then there have been 50 more AGPs; most of these have been held on public roads. The AGP is now the world’s third oldest continually contested national Grand Prix.

Motor racing has always had a rather fragile relationship with the authorities and the inter-city records - often of dubious legality - did nothing to improve this lack of understanding. Therefore, to close public roads for racing, there had to be justification at an official level. As we shall see, many of the AGPs were run in conjunction with a major State celebration, or were used to promote regional tourism.

Phillip Island

Phillip Island in Westernport Bay was the venue for the first eight AGPs, after which the race took on a migratory nature. It is clear that the Island was not chosen because of its accessibility from the population centres of Melbourne. The 1929 AGP programme advised:

To reach this enchanting Island...one leaves Flinders Street Station by rail for Stony Point, (45 miles), whence the trip across the stretch of water separating it from the mainland is made in a fast, ferry steamer in 30 minutes.

To go by road, one had an even longer journey on poor road surfaces to San Remo on the east side of Western Port Bay, from where one could cross to the Island by punt. It may have been this very isolation that enabled road racing to begin here, free from protest from city dwellers. At the time, Phillip Island was being advertised as a tourist attraction and no doubt motor racing

Figure 2 Map of the Phillip Island racetrack from the 1929 AGP official programme.
was seen as a means of promoting the Island in much the same way as the AGP is now being used by the Government of South Australia. Tourist advertisements in the AGP programmes compared Phillip Island with Long Island, New York, and the Isle of Wight. Indeed the Cowes Hotel is named the ‘Isle of Wight.’

Having chosen their track, just one kilometre outside the township of Cowes and incorporating part of its main street, the race committee was confronted with the problem of measuring the oblong circuit. The solution was ingenious. WH Scott, treasurer of the organising club and presumably chosen because of his numeracy, drove a horse and cart around the six-and-a-half mile circuit. The circumference of one wheel was accurately measured and a piece of rubber fastened to it. With each revolution of the wheel the piece of rubber struck the driver’s boot, enabling the distance to be calculated. A subsequent survey showed this measurement to be surprisingly accurate.

It also fell to Scott to name the corners, after a hair-raising trip around the track as a passenger in a Grand Prix Bugatti - one of the leading racing cars of its day. (Figure 2). The 1931 AGP programme included an account of the naming of the corners:

Whatever happened on that trip in the Bugatti has never been told, and never will, suffice to say that both men returned speechless and that one of them wore a startled expression. During a lull in the proceedings, refreshments being available, we drank success to the venture and, in responding to the toast, Mr. Scott replied on behalf of posterity, and during the course of his remarks said that this gathering reminded him of Young & Jacksons in Melbourne. There was no occasion to submit another name for that corner. In recounting his trip around the track, he said the next corner was a really nice one, as gentle as a country maid; in fact, it reminded him of a wench nicknamed Gentle Anne. That settled number two. Passing along, he came to a cutting which reminded him of a gap into space over the rise he perceived a narrow slit,

Figure 3 ‘The major hazard was dust’ as encountered by an MG and a Bugatti at Phillip Island in 1933
which looked like trying to get through a needle’s eye. A smart run down over the devil’s slide to the next, reminded him of his favourite nightmare, which was that of falling into Hell. That settled the name for number three corner. Then, along the next road, was a bridge which he thought would never be successfully negotiated, but, being happily effected, caused him to heave a sigh, thus naming it the Bridge of Sighs. After which, the last corner was taken peacefully, and reminded him of peace after torment. Thus it received the name of Heaven. So vivid and lucid was the description that no further suggested names were put forward. (3)

For eight consecutive years the drivers contested the Australian Grand Prix over 200 miles on this track. To those used to seeing modern racing cars on ultra-smooth tracks, surrounded by protective catch fencing, it is hard to visualise racing 60 years ago. These roads were narrow, rough and tree-lined, but the major hazard was dust, so dense that drivers at times only had the tops of the trees to guide them. (Figure 3). The top speed of the fastest Bugattis and MGs was well over 100 miles per hour and the average speed for the 200 mile race was about 70 mph, including stops for tyres, fuel and repairs. Immense concentration and effort was required to control these hard-sprung cars over the pot-holed roads for almost three hours , and it is small wonder that these contests drew large crowds to the Island. The Grand Prix at Phillip Island was won on one occasion each by Austin, Riley, MG and Singer and for four glorious years in succession by Bugattis (1929-1932). The event was front page news in the daily newspapers, and the winning drivers household names.

With increasing speed of the cars and amidst disenchantment of the residents, the time had come for the AGP to leave Phillip Island, never to return. The original track exists today and, apart from a bitumen surface, is little changed from half a century ago. The corners, as named by W H Scott, are commemorated by bronze plaques erected by some of the pre-war drivers who meet annually at the track to reminisce about past glories.
The Grand Prix moves on

In 1936, a century of European settlement in South Australia led to a wide range of festivities in that State. The South Australian Centenary Committee organised not only a motor car reliability trial, but also South Australia's first road race. This was held 50 miles south of Adelaide, on the Fleurieu Peninsula, only a few miles from the mouth of the River Murray. The circuit was mapped out, using existing roads between Port Elliot and Victor Harbour, and passed through those towns. State laws had to be amended to allow the race to be run (as was also the case for the first Formula One Grand Prix in Adelaide in 1985). The race, held on Boxing Day 1936, was known as the South Australian Centenary Grand Prix, but is now accepted as an Australian Grand Prix. The winner over 240 non-stop miles was the same MG, driven by Les Murphy, who had won the last Phillip Island Grand Prix. South Australia was to see many more road races on a variety of tracks.

The move to New South Wales for the 1938 Grand Prix was particularly significant, as it was the first use of the now famous Mount Panorama circuit at Bathurst. The road up the Bald Hills to Mount Panorama had been built to attract tourists to its spectacular views across the western plains (Figure 4) and again racing was seen as an excellent way to publicise this tourist attraction. What a spectacular road racing circuit the Mount Panorama track is! Like Phillip Island, it has a Hell corner leading to a climb up from the plains, then follows high speed curves across the top of the mountain and a plunge down through 'the Esses' and onto the mile-long Conrod Straight, so named because of the number of motors destroyed by the high speeds reached on this downhill run, (more than 130 mph, 50 years ago!).

This first Grand Prix at Bathurst was a victory for the British, the winner being a 23-year old English gentleman, Peter Whitehead, in his ERA (English Racing Automobile). The AGP was to return to Bathurst in 1947 (the first post-War AGP), 1952 and 1958. Of the many road circuits to host the

Figure 5 'Lamp posts with exiguous protection' at Phillip Island 1929.
The AGP, the Mount Panorama circuit is the only one still in use. The Bathurst 1000km race for touring cars uses exactly the same layout; only the road surface has changed.

For 1939 the AGP returned to South Australia and another spectacular road circuit at Lobethal, a town nestling in the Adelaide Hills. This track had all the classical ingredients of the more famous European road circuits, such as the Sarthe circuit at Le Mans, which hosted the very first Grand Prix. The circuit, measuring almost nine miles, was long enough to allow for a good variety of terrain and curves, with the road swooping and diving through the hills. Other features included a wooden bridge across the Onkaparinga River (in the middle of an S-bend) and a rush along the main street of Lobethal. On one tight corner, those going too fast were provided with an escape road - the gates to the local woollen mill were left open. As with many of the AGP road circuits, one can still drive around the Lobethal circuit.

Grand Prix by rotation

The long hiatus in motor racing caused by World War Two meant that many pre-war regulars were not in the line-up for the 1947 race at Bathurst. At least one of the cars had succumbed to the war also: the engine from Australia's fastest car, an Alfa Romeo, had been returned to Italy for reconditioning in 1939. It was never seen again, its aluminium castings presumably being melted down to help make Fiat fighter planes. From 1947 to 1962, it was decided that the AGP should be rotated through the States (not including Tasmania), creating a need for new tracks. One of the legacies of the war was the number of disused air-strips dotting the countryside. It was not only Australian motoring enthusiasts who saw these as excellent venues for motor racing - to this day the British Grand Prix is run every second year on a World War Two fighter field at Silverstone.

The airfield races were not truly 'road races,' although the use of perimeter tracks at the air-

Figure 6 Whiteford and Jones lap a Cooper around Albert Park's wonderful tree-lined roads in 1953
bases gave the tracks a natural feel, when compared with the more sterile, purpose-built, modern raceways. Being aerodromes, they tended to be flat and uninteresting; contemporary photographs were more likely to show Nissen Huts in the background than the local pub, which was much favoured as background on the true road circuits.

After Bathurst in 1947, the Grand Prix circuits turned to the oldest operational RAAF base in Australia, at Point Cook, Victoria, using its concrete runways and dispersal roads to make up the track. Point Cook was chosen only after the organisers had failed in an attempt to hold a race on the Mornington Peninsula, near Arthur’s Seat. Benalla, too, had been considered, as the first mainland road race (Phillip Island being an island) had been held there in 1936. Curiously, the 1936 track had incorporated part of the Hume Highway - something which certainly was not feasible in 1948. The Point Cook race, held on a fiercely hot Australia Day holiday, saw many cars retiring through over-heating, and drivers succumbing to heat exhaustion. The Point Cook RAAF base remains operational today, but has not been used again for motor racing.

When it was Queensland’s turn to host the AGP in 1949, the organisers found themselves in a similar position to the Victorians the previous year. They came up with a similar solution, using the runways and taxi-ways of a disused Liberator base at Leyburn, in the Darling Downs.

The first post-war motor race in Australia had been the West Australian Victory Grand Prix held in April, 1946, at the still active air-base at Caversham. The AGP visited the now disused Caversham Air-Base in 1957 and again in 1962, the last year the race was held at an aerodrome.

Two other air-bases hosted AGPs; the one-time bomber field at Lowood, Queensland in 1960, and Mallala, South Australia in 1961. Motor racing continues today at Mallala, the only surviving air-base racetrack.

After the airfields of 1948 and 1949, the drivers must have been pleased to return to the Adelaide Hills for the 1950 AGP held at Nuriootpa, in the soon-to-be-famous Barossa Valley. This was a return to the classic road racing formula with bridges, blind brows and blasts through the main streets of towns. The race was held to coincide with the Barossa Valley Vintage Festival, conforming to the tradition of the AGP being used to promote tourism. Practice at Nuriootpa, intended for 6 a.m., had to be delayed while Festival stragglers were cleared from the streets.

The Grand Prix rotated back to Western Australia in 1951, on this occasion coinciding with the Commonwealth Jubilee celebrations. More than just a road race, this race at Narrogin was a true ‘round the houses’ race, using the streets of this southern country town. As well as the usual hazards of road racing, such as lamp-posts with exiguous protection by sand bags or straw bales (Figure 5), drivers also had to avoid street kerbs waiting to damage the wheel of the errant car.

The difficulties of getting to Western Australia from the eastern states at that time should be noted: in the 1950s the transcontinental adventure to Western Australia was at least as exciting as the road races the East Coast teams set out to contest. More than 30 years later, it is easy to forget that the unsealed, dusty Nullarbor crossing was considered difficult for the major trials of the mid-50s - yet the 1951 AGP competitors did not simply trailer their racing cars across, but sometimes even drove them. (4)

1953 saw the Grand Prix in Victoria again, at one of the greatest venues of them all - the wonderful tree-lined roads around Melbourne’s Albert Park Lake, almost in the city itself. It had been proposed to hold the 1934 Victorian Centenary Grand Prix at Albert Park, but, despite successful tests with racing cars, a public outcry caused the race to return to Phillip Island. In 1953 the situation was different. Motor sport was going through a period of great popularity, owing to the highly successful ‘Redex’ round-Australia trials, which made many of the Grand Prix drivers’ names familiar to the general public.

In this setting, permission was granted for the use of Albert Park, and the popularity of the sport ensuring large crowds, variously quoted as 50,000 or 70,000 people. The enthusiastic crowd was amply rewarded with a memorable race fought out at the front by two of Victoria’s motor racing heroes. Doug Whiteford, the eventual winner of this and three other Grand Prix, and Stan Jones, the father of world champion driver, Alan Jones (Figure 6). It was particularly memorable for this writer watching his first motor race as a teenager - this exciting contest ensured a life-time addiction to the sport.
In 1954, the race was held again on a traditional road circuit - outside Southport on Queensland’s Gold Coast, as part of a promotion of that area. The State Government had to amend laws to allow racing on public roads. (Were such laws responsible for the use of airfields as circuits? In the post-war period these would have been largely self-governing and outside governmental strictures.) The circuit at Southport, just across the Nerang River from Surfers’ Paradise, was sealed with tar for the occasion. It consisted of 5.7 miles of narrow roads through scrubby bush country.

In the words of competitor, Alec Mildren, a future winner of the AGP: ‘that circuit was bloody dangerous... in retrospect.’ Stan Jones had an horrendous high-speed crash into trees, due to a mechanical failure in his famous Maybach Special, but was not seriously hurt. The popular winner was Melbourne’s Lex Davison.

As the cars became faster and the racing more professional, the days of the old-fashioned tree-lined road circuits were numbered, and 1955 saw the first use of a purpose-built racing circuit at Port Wakefield, South Australia. Happily, the classic road race did not disappear with this first intrusion of modern-style closed circuit racing. There were four more AGPs in the classic mould - two of these being returns to the wonderful roads of Albert Park and Bathurst. The other two races were held on what may have been the most exciting track of all - Longford, a 4.5 mile road circuit near Perth in northern Tasmania. Tasmania had waited a long time to host its first Grand Prix and did not disappoint with this high speed track through farming land and the township of Longford. Lex Davison crashed on a corner outside the Country Club Hotel. Officials were initially unable to find him, but he was soon located in the bar of the hotel, where he was enjoying a nerve-steadying brandy. The two races in Longford in 1959 and 1965 were made possible only because of strong local and State Government support.

Except for these final flings of road racing, subsequent AGPs were run on sterile racetracks like Sandown and Calder Park, where they could be more easily packaged by business interests for television.

It is clear that support from Governments and private organisations has been very influential in determining the venue for AGPs. Most readers will be aware of the strong support from the Government of South Australia, which led to a return of ‘road racing’ with the inaugural Formula One Australian Grand Prix through the streets of Adelaide in 1985. But this street racing should not be confused with the heroic contests of old, held on often dusty, always exciting, tree-lined public roads.

References

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