

A history of motorsport in Qld Part 1

By Malcolm Spiden

Whilst reading about the formation and some early activities of the MG Car Club of Queensland, I found articles about many motor sport events and venues prior to 1954. At first these reports were just interesting but then curiosity took over and I found myself wanting to find some history of the beginning of motor sport in Queensland.

After many hours searching available copies of the local journals and newspapers of the eras held in the State Library, an outline of some of the history of motor sport began to form. Given the enormity of transcribing a complete history, this article will focus on the major events in the South East corner or possibly just the Brisbane area. Certainly all categories of motor sport (racing and speed events; trials and rallies; club events; and MG National Meetings) deserve their history to be told.

Once the task of finding dates of events then any reports of events was completed, the next task was that of the exact location where an event may have been held. This was sometimes difficult as the instructions published often only advised people to travel to a particular 'tram terminus and then follow the arrows to the event'. In these instances it was necessary to refer to any period maps available in the John Oxley Library. The large list of references at the end of this article is only to advise the source of information.

At the turn of last century when motor vehicles were first used in Queensland, the road conditions were such that main roads outside the inner city were more or less bush tracks. Roads outside the Brisbane central city area, South Brisbane and Fortitude Valley were "abysmal muddy sloughs in summer and dust holes for the rest of the year". Bullock and horse teams used these roads to take their products to the nearest railhead.¹ It was in January 1927 that the Mayor of Brisbane Alderman William Jolly on a trip to Sydney said that he 'became more enthusiastic about the advantages of bitumen on roads as it preserved the road, better to drive on and kept the dust down'.² The majority of, if not all, motoring events were held on unsealed (i.e. dirt) surfaces until after 1945.

The Brisbane Traffic Act 1905 set speed limits at 8 miles per hour (mph) in the inner city streets, 12 mph in the city limits in the city of Brisbane and of South Brisbane with a 15 mph outside the city limits. Local authorities would set their own limits e.g. Cleveland imposed an 8 mph on their roads, Toombul Shire had 6 mph along Sandgate Road, Southport enacted a 10 mph limit on roads in their shire. It can be argued that these authorities used the motorist as a cash cow as there were many reports of both over zealous law enforcement officers eager to impose speeding fines, and Local Councils imposing hefty charges upon motorists to use their vehicular ferries. Bridges over many rivers, including the Pacific Highway, were many years away.³ The Main Roads Act 1920-1923 regulated speeds at 12 mph in the city limits as well as outside on curves, over bridges, through townships or where vision was restricted, and 25 mph outside these areas where there was unrestricted vision of 1000 feet.⁴ These limits would remain in force until 1940.⁵

Longhurst accredits the first motoring contest as occurring on 5 July 1905 as a wager of £5 between a Mr P. Clark of the AMP Society and Mr C.T. Hourn of the Singer Sewing Machine Company that either could drive from Maryborough to Gympie in under 5 hours. The time taken was 4 hours 45 minutes. The roads conditions, especially the latter part, were described as “scarcely fit for a horseman to travel on, much less for a motor car.”⁶

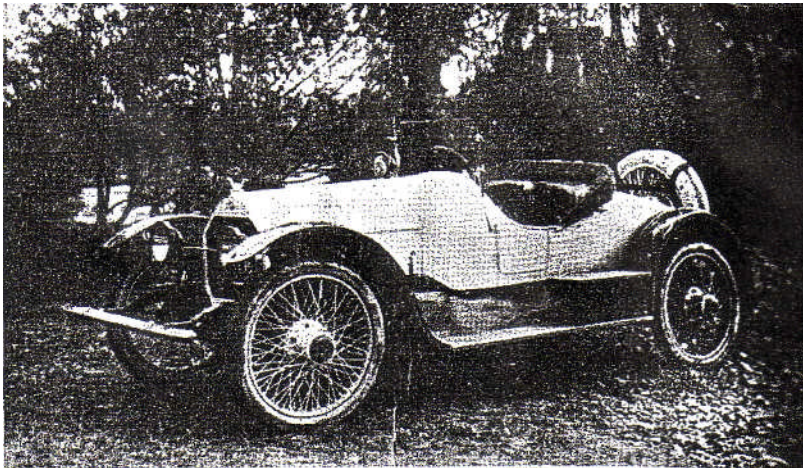
Southern motoring clubs had begun to provide sporting events such as a motor meeting at Aspendale Park Victoria on 31 January 1903, the Dunlop Reliability Trial between Melbourne and Sydney in November 1905, a hill climb in Coojee Sydney in August 1906, a motor racing carnival at Sydney’s Victoria Park Racecourse on 2 May 1908.⁷ Even the local motor cycle club in Brisbane had been proactive in organising events with one held on the Woolloongabba bicycle track in the Brisbane Cricket Grounds with their focus being both social and competitive.⁸ Thus taking their lead from other clubs, the first organized motor event was the motor gymkhana held on 30 May 1908 by the Automobile Club of Queensland (ACQ, and was to become the RACQ) which had to this time organised mainly social runs, with the “introduction of driving tests, speed judging, petrol consumption events etc quietly confined to the back shelf.”⁹ On 27 September 1913 the ACQ organised a petrol consumption contest with another again on 4 July 1914 from Woolloongabba railway yard via Hemmant to Wynnum then Manly and return.¹⁰ Until marque car clubs and sporting car clubs were established or dealerships undertook to conduct events, most competitive events reported in the media up to 1938 were those held by the RACQ.

The first organised speed event for motor cars in Queensland was the hill climb at Hamilton on 17 April 1915, the one and only event held at this venue. The start was in Cooksley Street alongside the fence to the Albion Park Paceway up to the corner of Queens and Toorak Roads. To record each car’s time, officials at both start and finish line had line of sight and as each car crossed the finish an official waved a flag to alert the timekeepers at the start line. Overall results were determined by a formula in which each car’s horsepower was multiplied by the time in seconds and divided by the tare weight in pounds. The ACQ would use this formula for their future events. These were also the days when competing vehicles carried passengers (to increase the weight handicap formula of the car), and drivers wore suits, ties and hats when competing.

There were two classes, class A for ACQ members only (12 competitors) and class B open to all motorists (18 competitors). Boyd Edkins, a Vauxhall dealer in Sydney, set the fastest time of 36.8 seconds in his 30.84 hp Vauxhall; however, given the formula, C.J. Munro (23.64 hp Vauxhall) won the day. Permission from the local authority would not have been difficult to obtain as motor sporting events (motor gymkhanas on 10 October 1914, 26 January 1916, 4 March 1916 and as a petrol consumption contest on 19 August 1916) were being used to raise donations for the fighting funds during World War I. Edkins had written to the ACQ requesting his prize money be donated to the Belgian Fund, and suggested the course be lengthened to about a mile.¹¹

Subsequent major hill climb events were held at One Tree Hill (in the Mt Coot Tha Reserve), then at Mt Gravatt, and later at Whites Hill, all dirt surfaces. The first event at One Tree Hill was on 27 May 1916 with the start near the bridge at Simpsons Pocket and Gordons Farm below the gates into the reserve with the finish at the Summit.¹² For the timing system, a field telephone system was laid to connect the start and finish line

officials. As cars crossed the start line, a quick ring of the bell would advise the timekeepers and a similar function as the cars crossed the finish line some 1.6 miles later.¹³ Fastest time of the 14 starters, 2 min 43.4 s, was recorded by Fred Eager in his Overland (handicap formula of 1.650); however, with the formula, Boyd Edkins (Vauxhall, in 2 min 56.2 with a 1.280 handicap) won the day. With petrol then becoming in short supply the second event at this venue was not held until 15 June 1918 when Fred Eager won in a record time of 2 mins 4.8 seconds to claim the ACQ Championship Cup.



*Fred Eager's 1912 Overland, "Whitey".
(Photo from 'The Steering Wheel' of 1st Oct 1918 supplied by Richard Croston.)*

The length of the course was reduced to about 1.25 miles after 1920 following an accident near the gates.¹⁴ This venue was used until 1923 and then again from 1927 to 1929. Photographs of the top three at that meeting, Eager (Overland affectionately named Whitey), Jack Walsh (Studebaker) and Edkins (Vauxhall) show the development of competing cars from heavy touring bodies with windscreens stationed in upright positions, lights, mudguards etc to cars modified with special sporting bodies and stripped of non essentials e.g. lights, mudguards, windscreens.

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References

- 1 Longhurst, Robert, 'A Road Well Travelled, RACQ First 100 Years'. Playright Publications, Sydney, 2006, p22.
- 2 The Queensland Motorist, Vol 1 No 10, January 1927, p33.
- 3 Longhurst, p57.
- 4 The Queensland Motorist Vol 2 No 5 August 1927 p29.
- 5 Longhurst, p104.
- 6 Longhurst, p32.
- 7 Longhurst, p33.
- 8 Longhurst, p38.
- 9 Longhurst, p58.
- 10 Truth Sunday, 5 July 1914, p2.
- 11 The Steering Wheel, Vol 1 No 8, May 1915, p5.
- 12 The Brisbane Courier, 29 May 1916, p3.
- 13 The Steering Wheel, Vol 4 No 9, July 1918, p29.
- 14 The Steering Wheel, Vol 10 No 1, Nov 1923, p57.