

# OUR 1950s MOTORING SCENE

## KILLARNEY - THE EARLY DAYS

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

**H**ow did the evocative title Killarney, a name that epitomizes the beauty of rural Ireland, become the name of the Cape's top racing circuit? In the early 1920s Ben Broder bought a smallholding on the side of the Koeberg Road, the main route to the north, he built a country inn on the site and named it the Killarney Hotel after his family's home town in south-west Ireland. It was well positioned to cater for travellers taking a rest at the nearby Potsdam outspan before tackling the long hill north of the Diep Rivier. Two decades later the Divisional Council bypassed the road to Malmesbury opposite the outspan, and a section of the old road was secured in March 1947 by the AARC for a motoring competition. Acceleration and driving tests were held on a rising .75-mile stretch with a sharp right-hand bend heading off to an abrupt end in the bush, these were repeated during the following year. In 1949 the AARC changed venues and held speed trials on a half-mile course laid out on the Beach Road at the Strand; club members competed in cars that ranged from Lt-Commander Peter Attwood's 3-litre Sunbeam Special to a tiny 578 cc Fiat Topolino.

1950 was a year of feverish



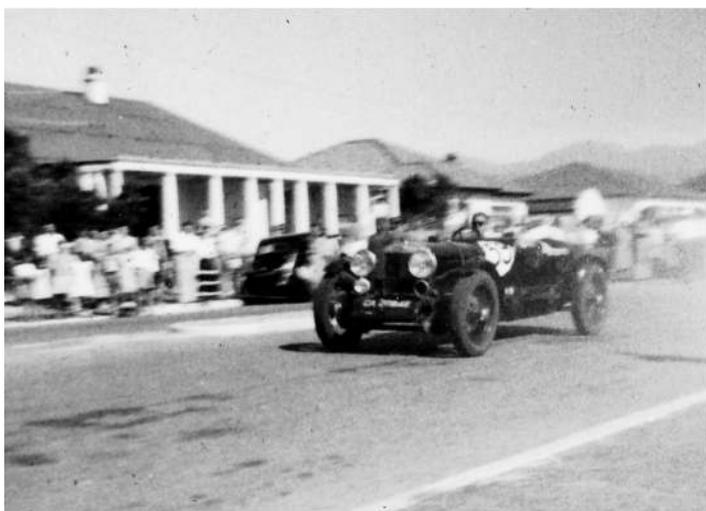
*Bill Jennings in his first Riley Special leads the pack around Tower Hill Bend, 1952*

activity by the Cape car clubs in an effort to replace the dangerous Paarden Eiland circuit with suitable racing venues. The AARC negotiated with the City Council to close off a public road at Gunner's Circle and the CPMCC arranged to use an airfield at Eerste Rivier. In September that year the smallest of the Cape's car clubs, the Metropolitan Motor Cycle and Car Club (Mets), announced a more permanent

solution, the club had bought 54 morgen (46 ha) of the Potsdam outspan land from the Divisional Council for a nominal sum, on the condition that it developed a motor race track. The Mets had, since 1926, held racing events at the Noordhoek Pan, but use of the venue had been limited by flooding during the winter months.

The Mets named the new venue Killarney after the nearby hotel,

but before construction could commence acres of Port Jackson wattle had to be cleared. The first course laid out was a mere 0.65 miles in length, it extended the AARC's right-hand bend in to the bush, which then looped back to form a triangular raceway incorporating a tight hairpin, the remains of which can still be seen in the spectator area near the Malmesbury Corner. The opening race was

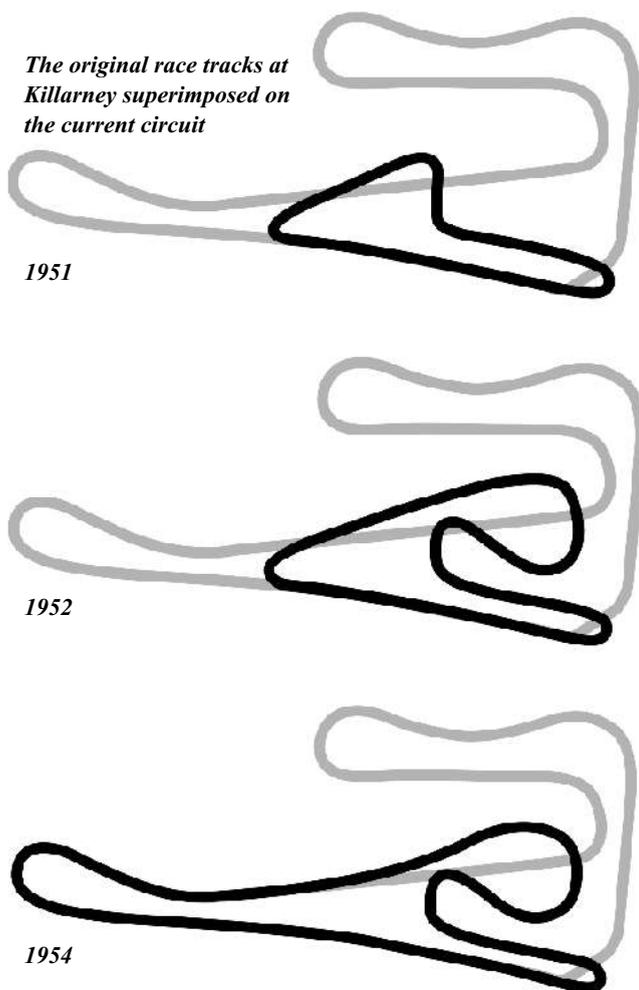


*Peter Attwood's Sunbeam Special at the Strand Speed Trials, November 1949*



*Enthusiastic spectators at the Noordhoek Pan races, 1947*

*The original race tracks at Killarney superimposed on the current circuit*



1951

1952

1954

held in September 1951 and was staged in a counter-clockwise direction. Safety arrangements were basic but the Medical Officer and Vice-president of the club, Dr Alexander Stewart, kept a watchful eye on the competitors, while his young son Alex acted as marshal and timekeeping runner. During 1952 an additional loop was added on to the Diep Rivier side of the track which created two exciting

new corners, Tower Hill Bend and the Big Sweep, and extended the length of the circuit to 1.15 miles. Tower Hill Bend has survived as part of the current infrastructure, it incorporates the stretch of tarmac that circumnavigates the clubhouse from the subway to the infield area. With the development conditions met, transfer was taken of the site.

Races featured both motorcycle and sports car competitions. In

1953 Raymond Rieder won two events in Tex Kingon's 5.2-litre Indianapolis Studebaker, the car that had been raced successfully in the 1936 Kimberley 100 by Dougie van Riet. By then Cecil Knipe had bought Peter Attwood's Sunbeam Special, and in one of his first outings came third in a seven-lap handicap race behind two MGs. He was asked why he had changed down at the apex of a corner - his reply was that he had been trying to get into the appropriate gear from halfway down the straight! Edgar Hoal was always in contention in his potent 2.5-litre Riley sports, as was Bill Jennings in his rear-engined Riley, the first of his famous specials.

In November 1954 further extensions were undertaken at the Cape Town end of the track, lengthening it to 1.67 miles (2.69 km). The start/finish line was sited close to its present location and races continued to be held in a counter-clockwise direction for the next five and a half years. Danie Joubert raced a 350cc BSA and a 500cc Norton, while Pat Brown raced his Lancia against the Studebaker, MG, Consul and Frewen Specials driven by Chris Andrews, Donald Philp, Roy Humphries and Walter Frewen.

The chairman of the Mets was a forthright character, Tex Kingon, who was a partner in the Sea Point Motor Works with Raymond Rieder. In addition to his Indianapolis Studebaker, Kingon had acquired the 6-cylinder 6C34 Maserati in which Mario Mazzacurati had competed in the pre-war

SAGP series. Built in 1934 it was one of only five similar cars, one of which had been raced by Tazio Nuvolari who pronounced that it was the most demanding car he had ever driven. Tragically, the car lived up to its name while Kingon was racing it in July 1955 as part of the Cape contingent in the 5th East London Winter Handicap on the Esplanade 'round the houses' circuit. The track was dangerous, it had few safety features but plenty of hazards; he was fatally injured when he lost control and hit a kerb, the car somersaulted and rolled down a bank. Team member Don Matthews, who was racing the ex-Roddy Turner Austin A40 Special, had stopped at the pits opposite, he immediately gave up racing and left his car in East London to be sold. In shock, the Cape clubs set up the Tex Kingon Racing Committee in his memory, and Vic Procter was elected to replace him as chairman of the Mets.

The East London circuit claimed at least four lives and Edgar Hoal was fortunate not to be the fifth. During the 1956 season he had equipped his Riley with the front suspension and brakes from the Austin A70 which author Richard Pape had driven from North Cape to South Cape. Shortly afterwards Hoal had a serious accident on the Esplanade when his Riley overturned and caught fire, he was rescued by marshals but spent some time in hospital and retired from racing.

After selling his Sunbeam Special, Cecil Knipe had bought Gordon Lindsay's Montmorency, by then equipped with a 1172 cc Ford engine. Knipe, seeking better performance from a light but rigid chassis, cut most of the body off a rear-engined Renault 750 and installed the Ford unit in a front-engined layout; it certainly created a unique racing machine!

Within a year Peter Small in his BMC Special was taking on Vic Procter in his 1100 cc Kieft-Climax, and Roger McCleery was racing his 199 cc Triumph in the Killarney motorcycle races. The overall lap record for the 1.67 mile circuit was taken in March 1957 by the then six times world motor cycle racing champion, the English rider Geoff Duke, when he secured a lap time of 1 min 27 sec on his 500cc Gilera.



*The damaged Maserati after Tex Kingon's (above) fatal accident*



*Cecil Knipe racing the Sunbeam Special and the converted Renault 750*

In December 1958 the 19-year-old British champion Mike Hailwood reduced this lap record by a second on a 500cc Norton, Hailwood had virtually started his racing career at the track earlier that year.

Killarney was the venue for one of the earliest launches of the South African-designed Dart sports car. In February 1958, during their second outing, Bob van Niekerk's black

and Willie Meisner's red prototypes came third and fourth, these impressive new performers created a significant impact on the local racing scene. Within a few months Nigel Payne, racing with the Wolman Motors Borgward Isabella team, was dicing with Bill Jennings in Bill Thompson's Black Volvo 444. After Jennings had built his third special, the Jennings Porsche single-seater,



*Geoff Duke and his Gilera at Killarney*



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# BENTLEY

Payne took over the Volvo and made it his own.

But the track at Killarney had reached its limits, it could not attract major events in the Motor Racing Championships calendar like the False Bay 100 at Gunner's Circle or the Van Riebeeck Trophy at the Eerste Rivier speedway. In 1959 the club committee decided to build a new circuit to the standard necessary to accommodate the single-seater 1.5-litre Formula 1 cars of the time. A loan of £20 000 was negotiated from the Divisional Council and Edgar Hoal, a roads engineer by profession, was instructed to design a new circuit. He was assisted by architect Denis Joubert, who built an impressive

scale model of the layout to be submitted with the plans.

The project was approved and a challenging new era was about to begin.

*Acknowledgements to Killarney,  
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Nigel Payne, Alex Stewart,  
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and Lorenzo Lakay. 🏍️*