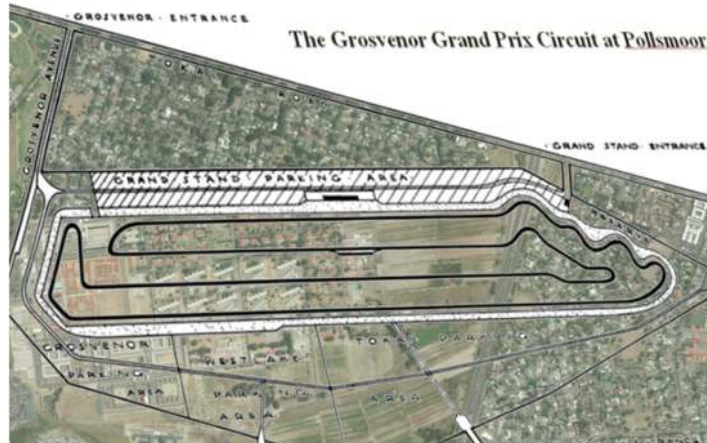


# THE GROSVENOR GRAND PRIX AT POLLSMOOR

by André Loubser

HOW many people living in the Constantia Valley know there was once a motor racing circuit at Pollsmoor - in the grounds of today's prison complex? That was indeed the case and Grands Prix took place on that circuit in 1937, 1938 and 1939. This year, January 16 marks the 81st anniversary of the first event.

These Grands Prix were the brainchild of the British millionaire and tycoon, Mr AO Edwards, owner of the Grosvenor House Hotel in Park Lane, London. AO, as he was known to his friends, had extended his business interests to South Africa and founded Grosvenor Motors (a Ford dealership) in Cape Town, Dominion Motors in East London and a finance company, The Union Dominion Trust, also in Cape Town. His property portfolio included six blocks of flats in Sea Point and factories around the Cape Peninsula. It was from his Cape



Left: *The 7.56km circuit consisted of four parallel straights, bound at each end by a series of tight bends.*



*The financier was AO Edwards, owner of Grosvenor House Hotel, London.*

Town headquarters at Union House in Victoria Street that those pre-war Grands Prix were planned.

Edwards appointed two local men to plan the circuit and to organise the event - Frank Robb and Dave McKnight. Frank Robb, employed by the Union Dominion Trust, was general manager and legal adviser while Dave McKnight, a former City Council roads engineer, who had become Edwards' property supervisor, was given the task of designing the circuit and liaising with the contractor, Owen Wells-Jones.

A great deal of time was spent identifying a suitable location but eventually an area at Steenberg seemed to fulfil all the criteria. Pollsmoor is named after Hendrik van der Poll who owned the original farm that stretched from Main Road Steenberg to the beginning of Ou Kaapse Weg. Over time the farm had been sub-divided and Edwards eventually acquired the portion on which the circuit was constructed.

Within a week of receiving the go-ahead, Wells-Jones and a team of 500 men moved in with a fleet of graders and trucks, and soon the sand dunes, wattle and

pinetrees were removed. Some 25 000 tons of stones of uniform size were laid to form the base of the circuit, and covered by 7 600m<sup>3</sup> of gravel. Steam rollers operated for days to prepare a level circuit that would take cars reaching speeds up to 300km/h and finally it was asphalted. A grandstand capable of seating 1 700 spectators was constructed close to where Forest Avenue is now located. On the west side the track ended about 100m from today's main prison entrance on Steenberg Road; on the east side it ended about 100m from Lente Street. The bends on the west side

were known as Dead Man's Heel, Dead Man's Toe and Bullnose and on the west side Snake's Head and Mac's Waggle.

McKnight and Wells-Jones' masterpiece was constructed in less than six months a monumental effort that pleased Mr Edwards no end. The 7.56km circuit consisted of four parallel straights, bound at each end by a series of tight bends (see plan). At least 100 000 spectators could be accommodated and the car parks could house almost as many cars as were registered in Cape Town at that time.



*As can be seen from this aerial view, the circuit traversed the space where houses were subsequently built in Milton Road, East Lite Way, Idalia Road, Apollo Road, Jupiter Road, Orion Road, Mercury Street and almost to Venus Street. Strange to think that 81 years ago, racing cars sped through today's sitting rooms!*

*With all systems go, 19 entries were received, nine from overseas and ten South Africans, for the first-ever Grosvenor Grand Prix on January 16, 1937. They were:*

1.	GAnderson	(South Africa)	747cc	Austin
2.	FN Clayton	(South Africa)	746cc	MG
3.	S Chiappini	(South Africa)	1 089cc	Riley
4.	D van Riet	(South Africa)	747cc	Austin
5.	ME Bothner	(South Africa)	1 500cc	Bugatti
6.	VC Berrange	(South Africa)	1 089cc	Riley
7.	RO Hesketh	(South Africa)	748cc	MG
8.	Mrs K Petre	(Great Britain)	1 486cc	Riley
9.	WH Roderick	(South Africa)	1 500cc	Alfa Romeo
10.	C Paul	(Great Britain)	1 486cc	Riley
11.	R Rohr	(South Africa)	2 000cc	Bugatti
12.	P Fairfield	(Great Britain)	1 486cc	ERA
13.	Earl Howe	(Great Britain)	1 500cc	ERA
14.	M Hooper	(South Africa)	3 300cc	Bugatti
15.	P Taruffi	(Italy)	3 000cc	Maserati
16.	'Dr Mario'	(South Africa)	3 700cc	Maserati
17.	H Reusch	(Switzerland)	3 800cc	Alfa Romeo
18.	E von Delius	(Germany)	6 005cc	Auto Union
19.	B Rosemeyer	(Germany)	6 005cc	Auto Union

Following the Depression of 1929, the four German car manufacturers, Audi, DKW, Horch and Wanderer, were still struggling. It was suggested that the four should merge and in 1932 the Auto Union was formed with Baron Klaus von Oertzen appointed managing director. He was responsible for the four-ringed logo to symbolise the merger, with Audi - today the only survivor. In 1951, the Baron brought the VW Beetle to South Africa with production commencing in August in Uitenhage.

In 1934, Hitler saw Grand Prix racing as a marketing exercise for his Third Reich, to establish German supremacy on the race tracks of the world. Mercedes-Benz was awarded 500 000 reichsmarks for that purpose. With the Auto Union group in place Baron von Oertzen, Professor Ferdinand Porsche and racing driver Hans Stuck approached Hitler with the suggestion that a second team would make sense. After initial hesitation, Hitler agreed the funding should be shared jointly between the two companies and Professor Porsche was commissioned to design the new Auto Union racing car. Mercedes-Benz was incensed at the decision but from 1934 to 1939 the two German teams, known as the Silver Arrows, dominated Grand Prix racing with British, French and Italian cars occasionally having a slice of the action.

An energetic Englishman, Edward Farmer Garrett (Brud) Bishop, who worked for East London's Daily Despatch, was the moving spirit behind South Africa's first Grand Prix at East London in 1934, followed by four more in 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939.



**Baroness and Baron von Oertzen with English driver, Kay Petre, at the third South African Grand Prix held at East London on January 1, 1937.**

**The Baron was responsible for bringing the Auto Unions to South Africa and in post-war years he introduced the Volkswagen Beetle to South Africa.**

In 1936, Bishop met Baron von Oertzen at a cocktail party and suggested the Auto Unions be brought out to compete in the SA Grand Prix at East London on January 1, 1937, and in the Grosvenor Grand Prix in Cape Town on January 16. In Bishop's view, as the DKW brand had been launched in South Africa, the appearance of the mighty Auto Unions would be a slick marketing exercise. His suggestion proved prophetic - after the races, sales of the two-stroke DKWs soared.



**Elie Rosemeyer, Ernst von Delius and Bernd Rosemeyer before the start of the Grosvenor Grand Prix.**

The Auto Union works drivers were Bernd Rosemeyer, 1936 European Champion, and Ernst von Delius. Rosemeyer was married to Elie Beinhorn, then Germany's top airwoman, who flew her husband to South Africa in her Dornier Taifun. The handsome and glamorous couple were greatly admired by their South African hosts.



**Before the start of the race, Dr Mario a character of note in his 3.7-litre Maserati.**

A character of note was Italian immigrant, Dr Mario Massacuratti, generally known as Dr Mario. A civil engineer, he built the pier in Hout Bay harbour; he also owned the Eagle Racing Stable on the corner of Main Street and Military Road, Retreat, today a BP service station. Dr Mario imported five racing cars - two Bugattis, two Maseratis and an Alfa Romeo and offered 'racing tuition by experts'. Four of these cars were entered in the Grand Prix - his own Maserati, an Alfa Romeo for Roderick, and Bugattis for Bothner and Rohr.

However, back to race day. For various mechanical reasons there

were four scratchings (Anderson, Berrange, Hooper and Rohr), leaving 15 cars to come under starter's orders. Race day dawned fine but gusty as the cars lined up to do battle over a distance of 335.5km (the equivalent of Cape Town to Albertinia) and 45 laps.

Handicap races were popular at the time. With fields consisting of small to powerful cars the organisers determined lap times during practice and then set the cars off at intervals so that in theory all the cars would cross the line at the same time which, of course, didn't happen.



First away at 14:30 was Neville Clayton's MG (pictured above), followed by the rest of the field at pre-determined intervals.

Scratchman Bernd Rosemeyer waited 39 minutes and 40 seconds before he howled off the line in hot pursuit in his six-litre, V16 supercharged projectile.



**National insignia were used to start competitors in the handicap race so it was a Swastika that despatched Von Delius (18) and Rosemeyer (19).**

Drivers were flagged off with their national flags and the two Auto Unions were despatched by a flag bearing the Swastika at that time simply viewed as the flag of Germany without its negative post-war connotations.

The 32 000 spectators were in awe as the mighty Auto Unions streaked around the circuit at speeds up to 290km/h along the straights not far short of today's Formula One speeds.



In the meantime, the intrepid Dougie van Riet had taken the lead in his famous little Austin and Dr Mario's Maserati had retired with cooling problems. By the 34th lap Van Riet lost the lead to Earl Howe and the order was Von Delius, Chiappini, Fairfield, Petre, Reusch and Rosemeyer. A number of pits stops followed for mechanical repairs and tyre changes. In one pit stop, Rosemeyer's car was refuelled and wheels changed in 41 seconds.



**The inspired winner, Ernst von Delius, thrashed around the circuit in his 16-cylinder Auto Union to win the first Grosvenor Grand Prix on January 16, 1937.**



**A rear tyre on Hans Reusch's Alfa Romeo blew halfway through the race.**

When Von Delius passed Earl Howe on the way to victory, Rosemeyer was a short distance behind, driving like a man possessed. With one lap to go he was rapidly catching the British aristocrat in his ERA (English Racing Automobiles) and managed to snatch second place by a mere 10 seconds. Von Delius had covered the course in two hours 31 minutes and 39 seconds

In the end, only seven cars completed the race and order was Von Delius, Rosemeyer, Earl Howe, Pat Fairfield, Hans Reusch, Kay Petre and Dougie van Riet, the first South African home. Von Delius won £750, the Grosvenor floating trophy and a replica.

As a race, the first Grosvenor Grand Prix was a spectacular success; as a financial venture, it was a dismal failure. Edwards had spent £70 000 but only £12 000 had been taken in entrance fees. The caterers also suffered heavy losses

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