

MERCEDES AT LYON – APRIL 2014



Early in a Formula 1 World Championship season in which the revamped Mercedes-Benz team hold a distinct advantage, and team drivers Lewis Hamilton and Nico Rosberg seem set for an entire string of 1-2 race wins, the German brand is plainly riding high.



Against this background at the end of April a contingent from Daimler-Benz Classic invited a select group of International pressmen to Lyon in France, to experience and to celebrate the centenary of the Mercedes marque's 1-2-3 victory in what was arguably 'The Greatest Grand Prix of All' – the 1914 *Grand Prix de l'ACF*.



Three of the 1914 4.5-litre 4-cylinder single-overhead camshaft Mercedes GP cars were brought back to the historic former Grand Prix circuit – a 23.3-mile loop of now busy public roads. The loop extends from the southern suburbs of Lyon city at Les Sept Chemins, running south through a series of gradually descending open curves to the small industrial town of Givors on the River Gier.



There the course turned westward to blast down the narrow canyon streets of the old town, before bursting into the open-country defile of the winding Gier valley. This very testing section continually swerves left, right, left with the river down to the left and steep-rising woodland to the right, often with tall and

forbidding exposed rock faces right on the roadside awaiting any over-ambitious or unlucky driver.



At La Madeleine the road met a junction where the course slammed hairpin right, then left and soared high onto an elevated plateau. And up there for no fewer than seven miles the Grand Prix course's return leg runs virtually arrow-straight – pulsatingly fast, full throttle, blind brow and dip followed by blind brow and dip. In French patois of the period a fairground roller-coaster was nicknamed after *Les Montagnes Russe* – more or less 'the Russian steppes' – and this is what they called this stretch of superfast roadway – covered by the Mercedes and Peugeot GP cars of that long-gone year at 115-120mph...

The straight ended in a steep-cut scarp slope, the roadway slamming 90-right and diving down through a tight left-hand hairpin, then down to another sharp right – a mile-straight and the acute, bottom-gear hairpin at Les Sept Chemins, before a brief rush past the grandstands and pits, and away into another 23-mile lap...



The three cars which Mercedes assembled at Lyon this April were headed by American collector George Wingard's No '28' machine – British-owned for decades past by collector Philip Mann – and which is Lautenschlager's winning mount.



The Collier/Revs Institute example is the ex-Louis Vischer team spare and reconnaissance car which features in some of the company's contemporary photographs as race No '41bis'.



And then there was the Daimler-Benz Museum's own Lyon-style Grand Prix car, which was actually assembled from surviving 1914 programme components after World War 1, in 1919. It was sold then to a private owner before being bought back by the Stuttgart company, and revised with four-wheel brakes for Lautenschlager to drive in the 1922 Targa Florio road race in northern Sicily. The car was re-deployed in 1924 as part of Mercedes' Targa Florio-winning team, reserved for test and training purposes. During its return journey home, the then-new team manager Alfred Neubauer delivered it to Rome where it was loaned to the Italian Count Giovanni Bonmartini, who promptly drove it to victory in the Corsa della Merluzza hill-climb. Ten years after its parts were first built, the factory's Museum car finally scored a win

While a vital section of the old GP course roadway at Les Sept Chemins is now one-way – inevitably against the race direction of 1914 – we were still able to run the cars on a considerable section of the Montagnes Russe, and down through the hairpins above Sept Chemins. The tight left-hander there was nicknamed in period *Piège du Mort* – 'The Deathtrap'.

I can tell you, there's nothing quite so attention grabbing as when the enthusiastic company driver of your modern 300-horsepower 4-wheel-drive Mercedes Coupe cranes around and announces loudly "Gentlemen – here we are about to enter der Death Curve!"

But Mercedes-Benz Classic based its press operation in a delightful and friendly little motor racing-themed café named *Les Stands*, just short of where the gigantic 4,000-seat grandstand was erected for the 1914 race. And there the press were given the chance to experience what the riding mechanics with winner Lautenschlager and his contemporary team-mate drivers 100 years before had had to endure for over seven action-packed hours...

Few enthusiasts – much less the general public – now recall the name of Hans Rieger as a Grand Prix winner. But he was Christian Lautenschlager's riding mechanic in No '28' on July 4, 1914.



I must confess to allowing Merc's finest to dress me in a (too-tight) pair of white overalls, a linen flying helmet and Dick Dastardly goggles to play Hans Rieger in the Collier/Revs Mercedes to specialist restorer Eddie Berrisford's equally be-whiskered Lautenschlager.

While Eddie expertly clacked the sharp-barking Mercedes up through its four-speed gearbox two things became clear. The first is that this muscular machine has immense mid-range torque, and accelerates most impressively. The second is that on a modern road surface it rides most comfortably, with a well-damped magic carpet ride. It also, evidently, is light and agile, very responsive to its steering – which in period it would have needed to be along the winding bottom circuit leg along the valley of the sinuous river Gier.



So you might think the riding mechanic was just there for the seven-hour ride, plus pit stop duties or the unwonted on-circuit emergency? No way. He had to work for his living. You're jammed there in the bayonet-fit seat, shoulder-to-shoulder with the arm-flailing driver. The most comfortable place to put your right arm is across the ledge behind him. And that's where your primary duty lies.



Glance right and there's an angled pressure gauge fronting a village pump. To maintain fuel flow it's your job to watch the gauge. Should its needle flick left below 1Kg/sq.cm. you tug at the pump handle like an exasperated Dutchman at a

slot machine. Once the needle reads above 1Kg, relax, crane right round and act as the driver's rearview mirror (he has none) to warn of Georges Boillot's advancing Peugeot – or in this case of Le Mans-winner and x-F1 driver Jochen Mass's evil grin in the chasing Mercedes-Benz Museum car.



Then Eddie – sorry, Lautenschlager - elbows you in the ribs and nods towards the floor. There's a round button between your feet. As pre-arranged you give it two firm strokes, no more. That squirts extra oil to the camshaft and engine top end. We bound on for another mile or two, over blind brow – long straight road stretching ahead – another blind brow – then the top of the esses, and the long view over the Sept Chemins plain to Lyons beyond – check the pressure gauge, tug the pump, glance back for any challenge, two dabs with the right foot, enjoy the view, check the gauge, tug the pump...

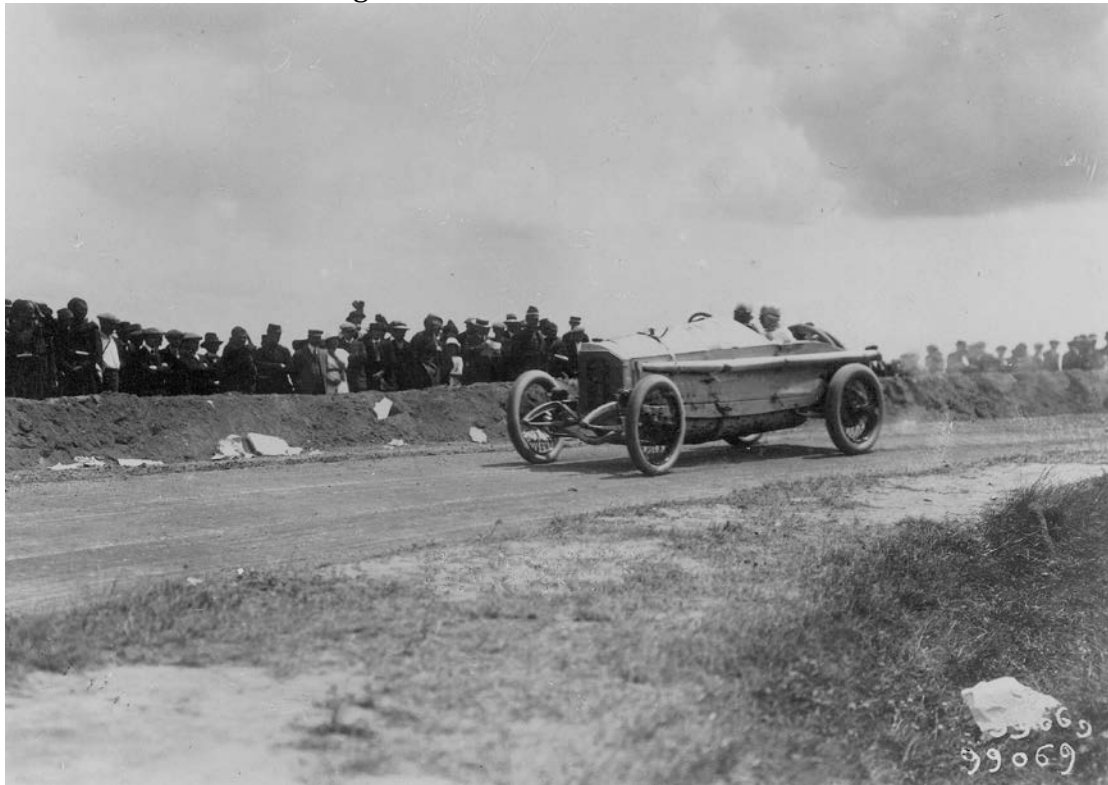


And the riding mechanic had to flick down the lettered brass lap-counter tabs on the dash panel to track race progress. And in a cubby hole there were clean spare goggles for his driver, to be handed over when the intrepid pilot demanded. And there was a drinking flask to keep them both hydrated during their seven-hour charge under the broiling summer sun...



And apart from a wire-mesh hinge-up stone guard ahead of the driver the riding mechanic had no windscreen, no protection beyond the scuttle bodywork itself to send the 120mph airstream over his head. And from the fantastic contemporary newsreel movie which Classic ran repeatedly on the TV screen at

Les Stands the cars were running constantly amid tumbling plumes of dust, grit and stones – and billowing clouds of oil smoke...

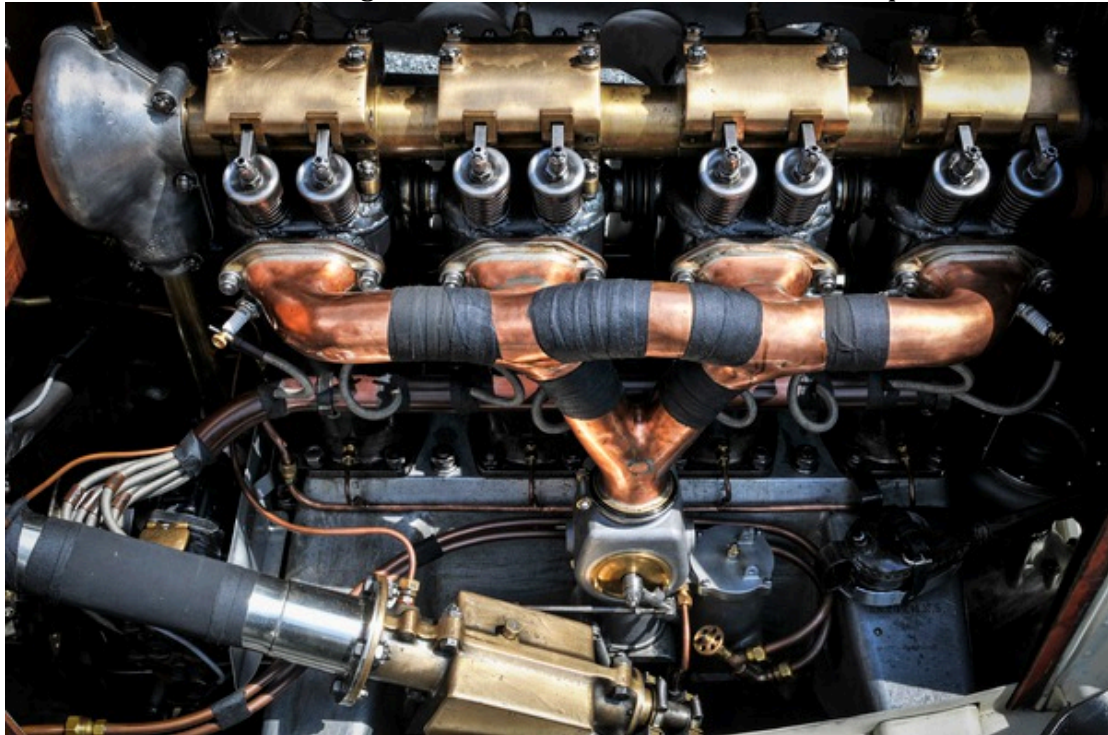


Let's hear it for the riding mechanics of old – unsung heroes, indeed.



We parked the cars in the little-changed *Place de la Poste* at Brignais village, just minutes north of Sept Chemins where scrutineering and pre-race photographs were taken of the competing cars 100 years ago and – amazingly to my mind –

Mercedes had brought with them many artefacts from the original event, including engineer Sailer's course-recce notes – very reminiscent of Denis Jenkinson's famous Mille Miglia '55 notebook – and engineer Vischer's January 26, 1914, hand-written original assessment of circuit and race requirements.



In part his spidery hand reads: *"Each superfluous kilogramme on the car obviously has to be reduced, we have to factor in air escape..."* – aerodynamics – *"...considering the relatively small performance of the engine and the high speeds... In the descents the engine can reach 2,800-3,000 rpm and it has to withstand these engine speeds for shorter time spans, thereby increasing the speed up to 170-180km/h. If this is achieved, the prospect of victory is there, given a skilled handling of the car."*



One hundred years ago, this 4th of July, Mercedes-Benz did just that – finishing first, second...and third in the greatest Grand Prix of all. **ENDS**