

# The trail blazers



Shale and pace: a packed crowd takes in the action at Eastbourne in 1955

By Steve Havelock

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**This weekend marks the 50th anniversary of stock car racing in Britain, as Steve Havelock reports**

Fifty years ago, on Good Friday, April 16, 1954, more than 30,000 people brought London's Old Kent Road to a standstill as they tried to cram into the tiny New Cross Stadium to witness the UK's first stock car race. Even the local railway station put up notices warning passengers not to alight because they wouldn't be able to get in. Such was the success of this inaugural meeting that it sparked a golden era of stock car racing in this country.

The event was staged by a flamboyant, naturalised Australian motorcycle speedway promoter by the name of "**Digger**" **Pugh**, who had witnessed the spectacle in America and France and decided to introduce it to England, placing an advert in the London evening newspapers saying: "Stock Car Drivers Wanted." Fifty years later, I tracked down some of those people who replied to that advert and took part in that first meeting.

Among those who answered Digger's call was surgeon's daughter Tanya Crouch, an attractive, rebellious thrill-seeker who charged around the countryside in a vintage Bentley and earned her living by dynamiting tree stumps out of the ground. She went on to become one of the country's top drivers and a huge crowd-puller with her no-nonsense approach. Now in her eighties, she told me: "I saw the piece in the newspaper and rang Digger. He said, 'I want a lady driver. Can you get a car ready in time?'"

With friends' help, she prepared a pre-war Ford Model 40 and was at the first official practice session at New Cross on March 17. She added: "When I tried stock car racing, I thought, 'This is for me.' It was just up my street. I liked to be different. I loved driving fast and it kept me out of trouble."

At New Cross, she met and clicked with 25-year-old John Goody, who had also brought along a Ford Model 40, and the pair soon teamed up to become full-time professional stock car drivers sponsored by Picture Post magazine. John told me: "I saw Digger's advert and was immediately interested. I had lived in the States for two years and saw a couple of stock car races over there and identified the Ford Model 40, which I used all the time I raced, as the best car to convert for that sort of thing."

"By coincidence, Tanya was in the same model but the people with her at the time didn't appreciate what a good choice of vehicle it was. I had been in the Army in Austria and it was my job to go up into the mountains in the winter, so I had a lot of experience driving on snow. Until that first test, I had not driven on a track but I found my experience of driving on snow helped a lot and I took to racing on shale tracks quite well."

Extrovert London car dealer **Pete Tucker**, who specialised in American cars (and still does), was also intrigued and recalled his first meeting with Digger. "I turned into his drive and saw a 1935 Ford V8 painted yellow with a No 5 written on it. When I saw that car, something took over me. He told me all about the racing in America and showed me pictures. I went back to my place and I had a 1935 Ford on the lot, so I turned it into a stock car. I went to the first day of practice and met **Tanya Crouch, John Goody, Freddie Parsons** and quite a few others. I saw all these brightly coloured cars and as soon as I got out on to the track, I thought, 'What a sport this is! Unbelievable!'"

Parsons was 21 at the time and fresh out of the Army. "You didn't really have a chance to go motor racing if you came from a working-class family; it was too expensive," he said, "but I was a driving instructor in the Army and had a background in cars so it appealed straight away. I hunted around and found a 1935 Hudson straight-eight that had a dent in the rear wing so I got it for £15. I went down to New Cross, met some of the other drivers and did some practice, complete with all the glass, upholstery and everything. I went home and had to turn it into a stock car, so I stripped it out and fitted a roll bar."

**Jackie Voss**, who was a Babycham salesman at the time and is now 81, told me: "I used to race motorbikes on the sand but had never done any car events. I saw Digger's

advert and went along to New Cross on practice day out of curiosity, but got bitten by the bug and just knew I had to be part of it. On the way home that night, I drove past a secondhand car lot that had some American cars on the forecourt. I went in and spoke to the boss and asked if he would sponsor me as a stock car driver and give me a car.

"He said, 'Why should I?' I told him that I was an experienced driver and had raced for a number of years in America with considerable success. I said he could paint his name on the car and that it would be in all the newspapers and on television. He agreed and let me have a Chrysler Wimbledon, which a couple of friends prepared for me."

Race day arrived, with the first race due to kick off at 7.45 in the evening. Half of Fleet Street was in attendance, as was ex-grand prix driver and president of the British Racing Drivers' Club, Lord Howe. Commentary was provided by well-known motoring journalist **John Bolster** and television announcer **McDonald Hobley**.

As Pete Tucker recalled: "We arrived at New Cross at about 12 o'clock and all these people were pouring into the place, even then. When I pulled into the pits, I had never seen anything like it. All these brightly coloured machines with the French Team cars, all white, lined up on one side. The pits weren't roped off so the crowd was pressing around even though the boys were still working on the cars.

"By about 6 o'clock, maybe even before that, no one else could get in. I had never done any form of motorsport before that, but when I took to the track for my first race, the crowd cheered and clapped us as if we had just won the World Cup. Digger put on a real good show. He was about four foot high, wore a Hawaiian shirt and used to run around like a blue-arsed fly, but he ran that show with an iron fist. He was flash, flamboyant, call him what you like, but he was an out-and-out showman."

**Freddie Parsons** also went out to race for the first time in his life in race two, the first heat having been won by a Frenchman. "I felt fantastic," he recalled. "I went out on to the track but didn't know what to expect. There were 15 or 16 cars lined up. They had a pace car that led us away and when you start rolling you are bumper to bumper and two abreast. The roar of the engine increases, the dust starts to fly up and you go faster and faster and then the race starts. You are driving only six inches from the car in front and the fact that you are under floodlights makes it even more exciting. The crowd went absolutely ballistic. After a few laps, I had no idea what position I was in. I was just hanging on in there and then I saw someone waving a chequered flag at me. I thought, 'It must be for the chap behind,' so I decided to do an extra lap. That was a big mistake because I came around a corner and there was a car right across the track in front of me and I smashed into it and put myself out of the rest of the meeting."

Freddie had indeed won and in doing so became the first Englishman to win a stock car race in the UK. Tanya Crouch was doing well before she broke her gearbox and Jackie Voss was unluckier still. He said: "I only went about 20 yards in the race when someone pushed me from behind and I went into the fence. I woke up in hospital and couldn't move my head. I had two great big heavy sandbags either side of it to keep it still and

they said, 'We think you may have broken your neck.' Well, I hadn't, but it was at least three weeks before I could turn my head. It didn't put me off, though, and I couldn't wait to have another go." Jackie became the chairman of the British Stock Car Drivers Association and helped form the sport's first board of control in 1959.

Two more sell-out events took place at New Cross before Digger moved to the larger Harringay Stadium. Such was the early success of stock car racing that Digger banded together a group of the best drivers, hired other venues throughout the land and took his "Barnstormers" on tour. Within months of that first meeting, Tanya Crouch, John Goody, Pete Tucker and Freddie "The Mad Parson", as he became known, were racing five or six times a week and earning hundreds of pounds at a time when the average weekly wage was about £8. Jackie Voss kept his day job but raced at weekends. He said: "I could earn a month's pay in one good night's racing. I told my boss, hoping for a pay rise, but he just shrugged and said, 'It's your neck!' "

John Goody, who was the first Englishman to win a grand final in the UK, summed up those heady times. "There was a tremendous friendship among all the drivers and they were from all walks of life. There were some tremendous characters. Tanya and I teamed up and within three months of that first meeting we were travelling all over the country and were racing seven nights a week. Tanya was totally fearless and I've seen other drivers pull off the track to get out of her way. We were paid £15 just to turn up. The top prize of the evening would be about £100, but any number of weeks I was earning £1,000. In today's money, it brings you almost up to Formula One levels. It was very intense, but we had two very good years out of it. It was one of the most exciting periods of my life."

Other promoters soon got in on the act and within 12 months more than 80 stadia, mostly dog tracks, hosted races. At that time, everyone wanted to be a stock car racer. After just two years, there were so many venues, promoters and drivers that standards were diluted. Prize money dwindled to peanuts and the crowds lost interest, as did many of the professional drivers, who could no longer earn a living. John, Tanya and Freddie all threw in the towel. Freddie regrettably explained: "The sport started to dumb down and the public got bored."

Digger Pugh also bowed out and put his showmanship skills to good use in the circus and film industries before passing away in 1969, aged 67. Stock car racing survived and continues in many guises, but it has yet to regain the popularity it enjoyed during those heady few years in the mid-1950s.