

LANCE MACKLIN

Works Driver 1949-1952



ONLY HERE FOR THE BEER! Lance stops briefly to refresh the parts other beers can't reach as his friend Charles Lewis hands him a glass at Spa in 1949. Louis Klemantaski recorded the evidence.

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“Leaving Astons was probably the worst mistake of my life.”

I was asked to drive for Aston Martin at Le Mans in 1949, but there was a bi-annual cup left over from before the war which Astons had won a number of times, so it was important to them to win it again if they could at this, the first post-war Le Mans. They gathered together various drivers who were qualified and they were given the drives. I practiced and was reserve for the race, but I didn't take part. In my opinion, the only driver who really had a go was the Frenchman, Pierre Marechal, but unfortunately he crashed and was killed.

As a result, I took his place in the team for the Spa 24 Hours Race, coming 5th in a 2-litre, four-cylinder DB2 with Nick Haines. Leslie Johnson and Charles Brackenbury had a 2½-litre Lagonda-engined car and they finished 3rd. The cars were fitted with large fuel tanks, capable of giving us five or six hours without re-fuelling, so it was decided to put me into the car at around 10 or 11 am on the Sunday so I could go right through until the end, at four in the afternoon. I did this, but it was a very hot day and very tiring. The temperature inside the Aston was unbelievable and I felt completely dehydrated.

A friend of mine, Charles Lewis, was at a roadside café on the Masta Straight and every time I went by he'd hold up a glass of cool lager. After a few laps of this, I made frantic signals to let him know that I wanted a beer the next time round, and as I pulled in he ran to the car and handed me a glass. I grabbed it and shot off into the race again. Funnily enough, Astons never picked this up – they weren't timing every lap and no questions were asked. Louis Klemantaski happened to be walking up the course at the time and took the photograph you see here. He sent me one at Christmas, saying, “What's it worth not to send a copy to Astons?”!

At Le Mans in 1950 I was due to drive with Dudley Folland, but at the last minute his family objected and he withdrew. John Wyer was now our Team Manager and he asked if there was anyone I'd like to drive with, although by that time most drivers were already committed. One I'd always admired as a press-on type was George Abecassis, so I rang him and asked if he'd like to drive for Astons at Le Mans and of course he said he would.

This was the first race for the DB2 registered as VMF 64 (destined to become the most famous racing Aston of all), and by about ten o'clock on the Sunday morning we were lying second on Index – the thing that carried the real prize-money – behind a little Monopole-Panhard. I'd only handed over to George a couple of hours before, but I was the fastest of our drivers and John asked if I would go in again and drive until the end. We had enough fuel to carry us through and without another pit stop we might just beat the Monopole on Index. Naturally, I agreed.

At the start of the race, when we'd been leading on Index, practically every lap there'd be a 'Go Slow' signal hanging out for me as I passed the pits. I didn't see any point in going any slower than I was – the Aston was not being stressed as I was just driving at what felt a very comfortable speed. But by about two o'clock on the Sunday afternoon I was pretty tired, not having had any sleep all night, and the car was pretty clapped, too – the shock absorbers were completely gone and the brakes nearly so. Now we were equal first on Index and it didn't require much of an effort to beat the Monopole, so I started getting nothing but 'Go Faster' signals every lap! But I couldn't go any faster, being a very tired driver in a very tired car, and we ended up equal first on Index and fifth overall.

Before the race David Brown – very proud of his latest cars – had driven VMF 64 out to the circuit, and now he said he'd like to drive it back to the hotel, just to see how it felt. "OK, I'll come with you," I said, "but be careful because the brakes are dodgy and the shock absorbers aren't too good, either." And of course, he was absolutely shattered – he couldn't believe that the lovely motor car he had driven to the circuit 24 hours earlier had almost been reduced to a wreck on wheels!

I drove VMF 64 again in the Tourist Trophy and was quite a lot faster than the other Aston drivers in practice, but I made a bad start in the pouring rain and both Reg Parnell and George Abecassis got away ahead of me. I caught them up and tried everything I could to overtake them, but they wouldn't give way. Eventually, in trying to pass them I overshot and had to take to the escape road. I finally finished third in class.

Then came the 24-Hour record attempt at Montlhéry. I wasn't very happy about it as I didn't find driving around and round this bumpy little bowl very enjoyable. There was no particular skill attached to it – it was more or less a flat-out drive. I think the Aston had a maximum of about 118 mph and we were lapping at around 103-104 mph.

In the evening it started to get misty, and having read as a child about Rosemeyer driving in the fog at the Nürburgring, and going no slower in the fog than in the clear, I told myself that this was just a straight-forward drive round a bowl, so I shouldn't have to worry too much about the fog. I pressed on, and suddenly came off the banking and hit a wall of fog with absolutely no visibility at all! For a moment I kept my foot down, thinking I'd come out of it, but when I didn't I panicked and braked hard, fearing I might go over the banking. I did one more lap and the same thing happened. The next time round John Wyer called me in. He'd heard the squeal of tyres and had been quite worried, thinking I'd gone off the road. The fog put an end to our attempt and we were lucky it did, for when the car was stripped down later it was found that an alloy cross-member at the front of the car had fractured virtually the whole way through. In another half hour or so it would have broken altogether and the suspension would have collapsed!

I also drove an Aston Martin in the 1950 Targa Florio, but as a private entrant. In Monte Carlo for the Rally that year I met a very old Italian prince called Raimundo Lanza, who owned an enormous estate in Sicily. Knowing I drove for Aston Martin he asked if there was any chance of my getting a car for the Targa. He offered a bit of starting money and invited me to be his guest all the time I was there. Astons were busy preparing for the coming season and couldn't spare a car, but David Brown had replaced his DB2 (the works development car, built in 1949) with a more recent model, so I bought the 'old' model (registered UMC 262) from him.

I took it to the Weber factory in Bologna and had three, twin-choke Webers fitted. They had it for about a week and did the job free of charge. Mine was the first Aston ever to be fitted with Webers and the difference in performance was absolutely astounding, so much so that I entered the Coppa Inter-Europa at Monza where I came second, behind a much faster Alfa Romeo. From Monza I drove the car down to Naples, put it on a ship and crossed to Sicily.

Arriving early in the morning, I was told that the ship wouldn't be unloaded until later in the day, so I decided to take a Drotchki (a horse-drawn cab) and try and find Raimundo Lanza's house. Lanza's instructions were simply to hail a Drotchki and say, "Villa Trabia, Palermo." I did this and off we went. Eventually we arrived at some enormous, wrought iron gates, and the driver refused to take me any further. "The last time I went in there," he said, "about a week ago – I nearly got myself and my horse killed by all those lunatics driving racing cars about the place." Lanza had his own little private circuit in the grounds of his villa. Nuvolari was there, and Sommer and Ascari – all the top drivers – and every day they used to run their own little practice sessions round the park. The Drotchki driver had no intention of going in again.

For me (and my Italian passenger) the race started at about three in the morning, and we set off a minute behind Ascari in a Ferrari. I thought I'd rather have him a minute in front than a minute behind, as the race was a thousand miles round Sicily, so there was no hope of learning it properly, and the Italians were obviously likely to know it better than I.

It was pitch dark, pouring with rain and the road was shiny and slippery – the conditions were really unpleasant. I suppose I'd been going for about two hours (it was just beginning to get light) when I saw the rear lights of a car in front. Eventually I came up behind it, and as we were going through a slow corner I saw that it was Ascari in the Ferrari! I was amazed, and realised that I had only to sit behind him the rest of the way and I'd won the Targa Florio! I stayed with him for another hour or so without too much trouble, but then we came to a long stretch which wound its way up into the mountains, and he managed to get in front of a little Fiat Special just before a series of hairpin bends. The Fiat driver seemed to make a point of keeping me behind him, and so Ascari gradually pulled away and disappeared.

I thought, 'I've caught him once – I'll do it again if I press on a bit.' It was quite light now, but still pouring with rain. I got past the Fiat and was now going down the other side of the mountain where the road appeared to go through a fast, right hand



WHEN FELTHAM couldn't spare a car for the 1950 Targa Florio, Lance bought David Brown's personal DB2 and entered that. First he had it fitted with Weber carburettors and entered it for the Coppa Inter-Europa at Monza (above) where it came 2nd. He crashed in the Targa.

bend. I could see it going up the next mountain, so I thought it was pretty well flat out and went howling into this right-hander at about 90 mph. Then, to my utter horror, I saw that the road turned sharp right, up the hill and round a hairpin bend to the left, before crossing a great big ravine. There was no hope of stopping so I decided to go straight off the road and not try to get round the corner at all.

The car dropped two or three hundred feet and finally ended up with an enormous crash, half upside down. I was more or less knocked unconscious for a few minutes and came round to find petrol pouring all over me! I managed to get out and drag my Italian passenger out, too. We had been very lucky, landing in a concrete ditch along the top of a railway cutting, put there to catch falling rocks and boulders. Immediately the other side of this ditch was a vertical drop of about another 100 feet onto the railway line!

For the 1951 Le Mans, John Wyer paired me with Eric Thompson and I was rather upset that he'd given me this unknown. I think he'd driven in one or two sports car races, but that was all, and I wasn't very happy when I was told he was going to be my co-driver. Then I was informed that we were going to be driving VMF 64 again, not one of the two lightweight DB2s that has been specially built due to the slow development of the DB3. I wasn't too pleased about that, either, and altogether felt that I was at quite a disadvantage. Well, the 'unknown' Mr Thompson turned out to be a fabulous driver, very fast very and consistent, and old VMF 64 seemed to take on a new lease of life – we beat both the lightweights and finished third overall!

I did all the testing of the new DB3, which was designed by Professor Eberhorst. We did a lot of work at MIRA (which was not very good for testing) and I was slightly disappointed with the handling, having expected an awful lot from this new car. The DB2 handled so well and had such fantastic roadholding that I thought the new one must be that much better. In fact I didn't think it was better – if anything it seemed to be a retrograde step, but maybe this was just in the initial stages.

After quite a lot of testing we did get it to handle better and I finally raced it in the TT at Dundrod, in 1951. They had a handicap system there and Stirling was the favourite with the C-type Jaguar. I suppose I was second favourite with the Aston, but it was an unknown quantity as far as the organisers were concerned, so they didn't know quite how to handicap it.

During the first part of the race I think I was gaining slightly on Stirling and certainly we had a good chance of winning. But, unfortunately – and it seems an extraordinary thing to say – I think someone forgot to tighten up the sump bolts on the DB3. They'd taken the sump off the night before the race, cleaned it out, put it back on and put in fresh oil. In the race we lost

all the oil from the sump and ran the bearings, but before this made itself apparent the exhaust pipe came adrift. I stopped to have it fixed and it was only when the mechanics found they couldn't fix it that they discovered that the bearings were gone, too. The car was retired 'due to the exhaust falling off', but nobody was told about the bearings.

I didn't drive an Aston again until the May Silverstone meeting in 1952, when they entered four cars for the Sports Car Race. I was considerably faster than everyone else in practice, but at the Le Mans start I jumped in, pressed the starter and nothing happened. I finally got away, about half-a-minute after everybody else, but I still managed to get up to 4th overall.

The Monaco GP that year was for Sports Cars, and Astons sent three DB3s for Parnell, Collins and myself. All the cars were equipped with the new, 2.9-litre engine for the first time and we arrived with high hopes, feeling that we really had a good chance. In practice, even using just 6,000 rpm, I was not very far behind the Ferraris, and I felt that by using peak revs we could do very well.



LANCE LOOKS ROUND in astonishment at the goings-on at Ste Devote as Hume tries to start his Allard after the multiple crash which began when Reg Parnell's DB3 threw a rod and spun on its own oil. Minus one shoe, Reg (right) hobbles over to give assistance. Hidden behind the Allard is Manson's Gordini.

However, in the race the cars ran very hot and each threw a rod at some stage – mine about three-quarters of the way through and Peter's just before the end. He managed to stop just before the finishing line and then drove it across when the flag came down. Reg, of course, had that extraordinary crash when his broken rod threw all his oil onto the circuit at Ste Devote. I was in front of him at the time, so when I came round the accident had already happened, but more was to follow! I saw the oil fairly quickly and as I drove inside it I noticed Reg jumping out of the Aston. Next time round, to my astonishment, there were three or four other cars involved, and I had a fleeting vision of Stirling leaving his C-type and taking off up the grandstand at high speed!

At Le Mans I shared a DB3 with Peter Collins, and we got to third place behind the Mercedes 300SLs with only about three hours to go. We both knew that the situation was very dicey because Astons were having serious trouble with the back axles. They'd moved the rear brakes inboard, where they generated so much heat that the oil in the axle was practically turning to water. After practice Peter and I arranged with the mechanics to slacken off the rear brakes, having decided to drive as much as possible without braking and to do what was necessary with the front brakes only. This paid off, as we managed to keep going until about mid-day on the Sunday. I handed over to Peter for the last stint and I must say, I was very happy to get out of the car, as the back axle on the Parnell/Thompson DB3 had seized very early on in the race and it's not nice to know that it might lock up on you as you're going down Mulsanne at 130-140 mph!

Peter went off again, but was back after five or six laps and although the mechanics worked very hard on what was a very hot rear axle, there was nothing they could do, and the Aston was retired. It was a real shame, because we would have finished third.

That was my last race for Astons, as the following season I joined Bristol. Looking back, leaving Astons was probably the worst mistake of my life. I was probably their Number One driver at that time, but I left for reasons that were purely financial – Astons were very mean with their drivers in those days. For example: I wanted to get Stirling Moss onto the team – we were driving together for HWM, so I knew how quick he was and thought we'd make a good pair at Astons. He wanted to join and asked if I could arrange an interview with John Wyer, so one day I drove him down to Feltham, introduced him to John and left them to it.

I sat in the car outside and, after about half-an-hour, Stirling came out looking very red in the face. "My God!", he said, "what a ridiculous thing – I've never heard such nonsense in my life. They offered me fifty pounds a year as a retainer!"

So I said, "Well, yes – that's what I get."

"You must be out of your bloody mind." he said. "Do you realise, Bill Lyons gave me £1000 after I won the TT?"

So Stirling didn't join Astons. He did later on, of course, but by that time he was so good and they wanted him badly, so they were prepared to offer him more money. But their attitude at the time was, "You're lucky to be in the best sports car racing team in the country. If you don't want to drive for us, there are hundreds who do!"

3. See Notes.

LAST RACE FOR LANCE with the Aston Martin team was at Le Mans in 1952. He and Peter Collins were in third place with only a couple of hours to go when they were forced out.

