

TRACK TEST

CAVALIER GOES BACK INTO BATTLE

Nineteen years after he raced a Vauxhall Cavalier to the brink of the 1992 BTCC title, *JOHN CLELAND* gets back behind the wheel of his old warhorse





JC donned Aussie overalls (left) for Combe outing

S.M.C. PHOTOGRAPHY

Cleland leads Rouse's Toyota, Knockhill 1992



LAT

I don't normally do this kind of thing. It sounds like a cliché, but I really don't. You see, I get a lot of phone calls from people claiming to have one of my old Vauxhall touring cars and asking if I want to come and drive it. Bunch of timewasters usually.

But this one is a bit different. Jim Pocklington is an ex-BTCC racer himself, having most recently campaigned a BMW 320i in the 2007 championship, so I know he's the real deal. And when I'm invited to come to the annual Total Vauxhall get-together at Castle Combe and drive the Cavalier I raced in 1992, I don't have to think very long, or hard, about dusting down my overalls and helmet.

Driving the 400 miles from my home in southern Scotland down to the Wiltshire countryside, my mind turns itself back to 19 years ago and *that* incident. You know the one – me and Steve Soper at Silverstone.

And when I arrive in the paddock, it's as if I'm right back there, waiting to climb inside the car on that now infamous September afternoon as the old thing stands there in front of me, the brilliant white paint job dazzling against a backdrop of grey and drizzle.

From the outside it looks right in every way: the gold wheels, the old-style griffin, and even the sponsors' logos are perfect. In fact, I can't detect any visual differences at all from back when I last drove it.

You can tell by the look on Jim's face just how proud he is of the restoration job he and his boys have done. I decide to have a bit of a dig, just for a laugh. There are a couple of 'Phillips Car Stereo' stickers on the car, and I tell Jim he's made a mistake and that 'Phillips' has two 'l's rather than one. His response is pretty heated as he collars his sticker man. I manage to keep a straight face throughout, and don't have the heart to tell him I'm joking. Sorry pal, I couldn't resist.

It's not just on the outside where the detail has been replicated to the nth degree either. The interior is the same, and exactly how I remember it; a very simple dashboard, with all the knobs and switches that I need and none of the overcomplicated electronic stuff that would appear on later generations of Super Tourer. Back when Dave Cook Engineering ran the Cavaliers (from 1990-93) the car wasn't developed much, but it didn't need to be either, due to the rules that were in place and the way people interpreted them.

"All that's missing are the period overalls. Unfortunately I'm a tad larger than I used to be, so they stayed in the attic"

Dave's boys did swap the normal doors for aluminium ones in order to take some weight out, but that's about as far as it went during the era. It was only when Alfa Romeo came in with all their money and wings (in 1994) that the rest of the championship responded and there was suddenly an upturn in serious engineering. You had to do it just to be competitive, let alone win.

I feel as if I can close my eyes and still find the right switches as every one of them is positioned perfectly. That's not all. I haven't had a special seat made for me or anything, but for a wee Scotsman like me it fits like a glove. I can reach everything I need with ease – pedals included – and can see all around me. It was only a couple of years later, when Vauxhall started running the Vectra in the BTCC, that the seat position was moved so low you could barely see over the dash.

All that's missing are the period overalls. Unfortunately I'm a tad larger than I used to be, so that set had to stay in the attic. Instead I've got the suit I used at the 2004 Bathurst 1000. My helmet does feature an old AUTOSPORT logo though, so I do look a tiny bit retro.

I switch it on and that unmistakable sound rings out of the two-litre, 16-valve powerplant, which Swindon [Vauxhall's long-term engine partner] managed to prise about 285bhp out of. I'll swear that I could identify that engine noise

anywhere, even if I had my back turned. It wasn't the most powerful engine in the world – certainly not compared to what I'd been used to in Thundersaloons in the 1980s – but compared to the other cars in the BTCC like the BMW and the Toyota, it was one of the best.

Time for my first run, which comes on wet tyres as the dampness has yet to clear from the track surface. I drive slowly down the pitlane and onto the circuit. Instantly it hits me; I haven't been to Castle Combe since 1988, and the chicanes have been put in since then, so I'll have to learn it first before trying anything clever.

This particular car is Cavalier GSi chassis number one – as a number of guys from Dave Cook's lot have verified – and it has an interesting background. When Vauxhall started its transition from the Astra, which was run under the old BTCC class system, to the Super Touring Cavalier, it experimented with all of the different drivetrains, and this one was a rear-wheel-drive car to begin with, ▶

◀ and was raced by Bob Berridge with a BMW differential, but had been converted to the conventional front-wheel-drive layout in time for '92.

That layout always gave me and Jeff Allam, my team-mate that season, a lot of confidence in the car, as it tended to be beautifully balanced, no matter what the conditions were like. The car was absolutely mega in the wet. You could soften it up and drive it with maximum confidence – it never did anything unexpected. During my exploratory laps there is nothing untowards and just a very predictable handling characteristic, although with the track drying quickly I have to be a bit careful just to make sure I don't end up in the barriers, which seem closer to the edge of the track than most UK circuits.

The handling always used to be great in the dry too, and I'm delighted to find out that it still is once the wets are replaced with slicks soon after. Combe has a lot of fast corners, and it's pretty bumpy as well, so it's a bit like Thruxton, where you'd often drift the car through the bends.

That drifting was as a result of the way those early Super Tourers gripped the track. There was a pretty equal balance from front to rear, and the handling was always very good as a result. It

meant that the cars were much more like what would now be termed as production racing saloons than touring cars, but that's what the formula was back then, and I loved it, especially after having an underpowered Astra in my title-winning year.

When the rules changed in 1995 we all suddenly had splitters on the front and wings on the rear. It completely changed the balance of all the cars.

With the '92 car, the secret to driving this car quickly and consistently was to get heat into the rear tyres as quickly as you possibly could, and this comes back to me straight away after a lairy moment or two on my first lap out of the pits on slicks. It makes the first lap or two a bit of a battle, on a circuit that is filled with a bunch of guys on a track day – and with a range of machinery that varies hugely in terms of speed – but back in the day, from a standing start and with 20 other cars around you, it was fantastic.

Type BTCC 1992 into YouTube and you'll see exactly what I mean. There's a great shot I remember of all the cars coming round one of the big bends at Thruxton and all drifting as one. It was wonderful. If you didn't get the heat in though, the car would bite, as I found out at Oulton Park that year.

Comparing this to the '95 car, the only Cavalier to get the wing treatment before being replaced by the Vectra the following year, is like comparing night and day. The front splitter generated tons of grip, so the front end really stuck to the track. But the rear wing was about as useful as tits on a boar. You could adjust it all you wanted, but it never made much difference. Actually, you could affect the downforce level a lot more by playing with the rear side windows and winding them down a bit.

The net result was that the rear was always dancing around, so it was very tricky to drive. Remember when I drove the '95 car that Mike Newton now owns at the Goodwood Festival of Speed a couple of years ago? Tricky rear end, cold tyres, and I clobbered the hay bales at the bottom of the hill.

The '92 machine, probably because it was designed from the ground up not to have wings or anything, has a beautiful balance, and it doesn't take me too long to rediscover this at Combe.

Within 15 minutes, and with Jim's permission, I'm really going for it,

monsterring kerbs and allowing the car to drift all over the place, the Yokohama rubber giving a good amount of grip considering the conditions, and the power-steering – which

some of the rival cars didn't have – is a massive bonus.

The gearchange is smooth and the low mounting of the lever – which my hand just falls onto by its own accord – provides a lot of comfort and probably limits fluffed shifts quite a bit. The six-speed manual box never skips a beat. Just a lovely piece of kit.

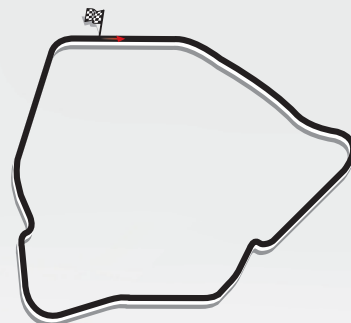
Corner after corner it becomes more and more the car in which I won the opening two races of the '92 season, and added another later in the year at Brands Hatch. Unlike the Cosworths that a lot of the touring car guys had raced prior to Super Touring, you don't use the power to push the car round the bends, because you'd understeer all over the place if you did that. Instead you brake to get on the apex and then just let the car take you through the next bit of the bend.

Once up to speed I have an absolute blast, and I only fail to give it 100 per cent because I don't want to see Jim's face if I stack it into the tyres.

All too soon the run is over and I come back to the pits, half-expecting to see Dave Cook standing there! Just 20 laps was not enough for me and I'd love to have another go, perhaps in a classic race, in the future. I'll have to make sure Jim didn't take the sticker joke badly. ❧

TRACK MAP

Castle Combe in Wiltshire is one of a number of UK tracks that evolved on the site of an old RAF base following the end of World War Two. It opened for racing in 1950, and its 1.9-mile layout did not change until the introduction of two chicanes in 1999 for safety reasons (but not before a 130mph average lap was set in an ex-F1 Tyrrell). It has established itself as one of the country's top venues for club motorsport.



“There's a great shot of all the cars drifting as one around a big bend at Thruxton. It was wonderful”



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THE RIVALS

BMW 318is



The BMWs were officially entered as 318is machines, but the two-litre Super Touring rules made them 320s in all but name. Rear-wheel drive, mated to the same Yokohama rubber used by Vauxhall, allowed the car to win six times. Tim Harvey (pictured) famously won the title at Silverstone when Vic Lee Racing team-mate Steve Soper collided with Cleland, while a second works-backed team was run by Prodrive with Tim Sugden and Alain Menu driving until the Swiss injured himself falling off a quad bike.

TOYOTA CARINA



Prepped by Andy Rouse Engineering, the Carina's engine churned out 300bhp, making it the most powerful in the BTCC. Without power-steering or ABS (unlike most rivals), it was tricky to drive, but ironically gave more control to drivers Rouse and Will Hoy. Hoy had an outside shot at the '92 title at the finale, but he needed to win. In the end, it was team-mate Rouse who did the deed, taking his 60th and final BTCC victory before splitting with Toyota and running Ford's factory effort in '93.

TECH SPEC

Engine 1998cc, four-cylinder 16v Swindon-prepared unit
Power 285bhp at 8500rpm
Gearbox Xtrac six-speed manual
Body Standard Cavalier chassis
Tyres Yokohama T sticks
Differential XTracZF
Miscellaneous ABS & power-steering included

Swindon powered Cavalier



Before 2-litre got complex



Driving seat gave good view



Pocklington has done faithful restoration job