

## SPORTRAIT No. 7

# JOCK HORSFALL

## Maker of Aston Martin History



**I**F I were one of those saccharine daddies whose idea of a good time was buying the quickest and costliest Grand Prix car available and then getting somebody else to drive it (I say *was* and not *is* because such benefactors are about as common these days as boogie on the Third Programme), I would probably settle for St. John Ratcliffe Stewart Horsfall, of Dunwich, in the county of Suffolk, known mostly as Jock, or occasionally Jack. Reasons as follows:—

(i) In only one meeting out of eleven since he started racing Aston Martins in 1934 has his Aston failed to score a win or a second place. (ii) His unquestioned knowledge of automobile engineering (with the exception of the 1938 T.T. he has always prepared his Astons himself) was self-taught the hard, practical way. (iii) Two of the shrewdest, most practical men in the business, Claude Hill, Aston Martin's designer, and Fred Dixon, have shown confidence in him. Jock recently and voluntarily ceased to be the former's personal lieutenant, and retains the greatest respect for Hill, while Fred, back in '39, put him to a job you couldn't have subpoena'd many a

brave man to tackle, viz., the Outer Circuit testing of Remus (R.5B), Tony Rolt's B-type E.R.A. (iv) Although no ascetic, Jock always keeps his webs on the ground for the duration of any racing undertaking... at such times you can have your blondes and your malted waters; and (v) notwithstanding the evidence of his lap times for any circuit he traverses—and they usually are faster than the second fastest in his class—his tiller technique is so unspectacular that in ninety-nine out of a hundred action photographs he appears to be cornering wholly without benefit of Ackermann.

### Early Days

Jock graduated to four wheels, in the form of a five-year-old International Aston, in 1934, having earlier been a consistent winner on the motor cycle grass tracks of the eastern counties. The graduation did not pass entirely unnoticed because, as chance would have it, the International kept station throughout the J.C.C.'s "Rush Hour" at Brooklands with a Le Mans Aston, three years younger than

the Horsfall machine and driven by one Happy Woods from the Feltham factory. Virtually tying at the top of their class, both won special awards.

On that occasion, and again in a five-lap Donington race the following year, another Le Mans model, contrary to all the laws of reason and decorum, failed to hold the veteran International. And so the frustrated owner, Denis Campbell, propositioned Jock to this effect: "I am about to purchase the latest Ulster type, and just to make sure it goes faster than that old string bag of yours I will bribe you to tune it."

Horsfall-prepared, Campbell-driven, the Ulster car was a member of the winning team in the 1936 Relay Race, and ran second the same year in the Leinster Trophy.

Came 1937 and a believe-it-or-not episode at Le Mans, where Jock was mothering a Ford Ten shared by Joan Richmond and the late Kenneth Billeen. About half a mile short of the pits at one juncture the Ford fizzled out with drowned ignition. Joan, who had been driving, hot-footed to her pit and reported. Jock sprinted to the car, de-hydrated it *and drove it in*, to be greeted by horrified Now-you've-done-its from the two drivers, who smelt disqualification a kilometre off. "Not on your life," he soothed. "If we all run round in circles and mix ourselves up a bit they'll never know who's who." And neither they did, despite the fact that Jock doesn't in the least resemble Joan Richmond, and, anyway, wears a moustache.

In 1938, the year he bought Dick Wilkins' black Speed Model Aston, Jock couldn't put a foot wrong, incurring a minimum of demurrage in winning an Easter handicap on the Brooklands road course, a Whitsun Outer Circuit race and then the Leinster Trophy, plus the cup for the fast-

est lap by an unblown car at Tallaght—76.89 m.p.h.

Earlier appeals to the Aston Martin company to back him officially in the 1938 Donington T.T. had been unavailing, but the Leinster *coup* precipitated a last-minute outbreak of nods and becks and wreathed smiles, and back him they did, although Director Sutherland's large heart misgave him when the final entry list revealed that Jock would wage lone battle against six Frazer Nash-B.M.W.s, three of which came direct from Munich with the Führer's blessing and attendant cohorts of works mechanics.

Space famine forbids reiteration of the gallant T.T. story; suffice to recall that after oil pipe breakages, together with brake failure on Dick Seaman's car, put paid to the F.N.-B.M.W.s' chances, the solitary Aston won the 2-litre race (tying exactly for fastest Class E lap with Fane's and Seaman's 328s (2 min 43 sec), and finished second on general classification behind Louis Gerard's 3-litre Delage. How near Jock had come to winning the Trophy itself was seen when the scrutineers milked Gerard's tank at the finish and couldn't get enough petrol out to clean a necktie.

To put the whole T.T. picture in proper perspective one must mention that at the drop of the flag the Aston's engine gave a momentary whoof, stalled and threw the starter pinion out of mesh. And in the eternity while the motor spun uselessly the whole field except one car went by.

### Red Rag Tactics

Later in the race, after Seaman's brakes had been doctored, the Germans gave a remarkable object lesson in tactics by holding him back at the pits and so timing his release that he rejoined the fray fifty yards ahead—and thus tantalizingly in view—of Horsfall. The red rag worked, too, for Jock, who hadn't the speed of the B.M.W. on the straights, subsequently passed Dick twice on McLean's Corner (repeat *on*) and once on Red Gate.

At another stage, Bira, who had lost every gear except top, found himself unable to make a standing start at the foot of the considerable hill in the McLean's neighbourhood, so about-faced and doodled back a few furlongs to get a rush at it. Jock, coming round a swerve and meeting up face to face with the Siamese, confesses that he could have been C.K.D. with a feather.

When the Rolt-Dixon-Horsfall cabal was formed, along towards the end of 1938, the reason why to date nobody had raced an E.R.A. on the Outer Circuit was that the B-type was known to exhibit about as much stability as a hot-water bag on that course. Remus proved no exception, until Fred Dixon boxed in the frame

from front to back, softened the springs, hog-tied the front axle with radius cables and cancelled the differential, whereupon Jock won two third places on the saucer and repeatedly lapped at 130; then Hitler handed round the band-parts and bang went any chance of doing something official about Lord Howe's Class F lap record—127.05 m.p.h. with the Delage.

On one occasion at the track—this was after Fred had got the weevils out of the E.R.A.—Remus' steering quite suddenly started behaving in a fashion that didn't even make nonsense; the car bee-lined off the Byfleet to the apex of the Fork, spoke-shaved the pits, went straight to the top of the banking and graffitized [scrawled a message on!—Ed.] the sleepers by the Pratt's hoarding (all this at 135 plus), wooshed to the bottom, counter-wooshed to the top and dangled a wheel over the edge, tucking the tuft of foliage between rim and tyre for proof, and finished up broadside in the region of the Members' Bridge. Somebody had fitted a pair of wheels on the front which, intended compulsorily for the back, had the rims offset in such a way that steering geometry was totally extinct.

### Grey at Three

Today, at thirty-eight, Jock's hair is flecked with grey, and it would be natural, though wrong, to suppose that the flecking started that afternoon a decade ago: actually it began at the age of three... "because Nannie worries me so," as he used to explain to puzzled elders.

Apart from Brooklands, Jock's essays on the E.R.A. were practically confined to practising with sufficient vigour to get Rolt a front-rank starting place in road races. The 1939 Empire Trophy, which Tony won brilliantly, was a case in point.

As a change from his two peacetime ploys—partnering one of his brothers in a retreading business, and stock-brokerage—Jock spent the war in War Office Intelligence, and could (but mustn't) a tale unfold on that account.

His post-war exploits will be too fresh in readers' memories to need detailed reiteration. In short:—

1946: (i) Bought 1,000 c.c. Vincent-H.R.D. motor cycle, made fastest bike time in Filton airfield speed trials, second f.t.d. overall (to Bob Gerard's E.R.A.). (ii) Took the black Aston to the Belgian G.P., Bois de Cambres, won 2-litre race, beating Leslie Johnson (Frazer Nash-B.M.W.) to the Seaman Trophy.

1947: Started rebuilding his two Astons (the old Wilkins car and a silver-coloured Speed Model which he had bought from Rolt, and still owns) in readiness for Formula B and Continental sports car races.

1948: (i) Made fastest unblown time

Maestro salutes maestri. Two-handed congratulations from Louis Chiron to Horsfall (left) and Johnson after the 1948 Spa victory. Note wiper for the screen, specified by Horsfall; short-sighted and astigmatic, he wears spectacles in rain, optical goggles in shine. Prefers rain. Always wears a crash hat, which is his mother's wish.

at Luton Hoo in the silver job, persuading it to yield 125 b.h.p. on dope. (ii) Shared with Leslie Johnson the new coil-sprung Aston's victory at Spa, after getting about three weeks' sleep ration (in common with all the other Feltham personnel engaged) in the nine weeks it took to design and build that wonder machine.

The E.R.A. Trophy, Rex Hayes' masterpiece of craftsmanship, which the B.R.D.C. awarded jointly to Horsfall and Johnson for the best British performance in 1948 racing abroad, has a proud place among the former's souvenirs at Cliff House, Dunwich, where Jock resides with his mother, one of his five brothers, who is called Brother, just to distinguish) and Brother's engaging wife. Jock himself is the seventh child of a seventh child, a fact, he vaguely suspects, which means something; he wonders what.

### Inherited Courage

The courage of Jock Horsfall, which those who know him are never likely to question, is certainly hereditary. His mother has encouraged his racing aspirations from the start. In Cliff House there hangs an illuminated tribute from the Southwold lifeboatmen to her heroism in rescuing a drowning man from the waves which pound the cliff beyond her lawn. She did that at the age of sixty, while convalescent and under orders to avoid the smallest exertion.

The hamlet of Dunwich—a church, a pub and a handful of houses—is, of course, that almost fabulous place which the encroaching sea has reduced over the centuries from a teeming town with thirty-seven churches and a population to match. At night, legend says, you may hear the bells of those submerged churches pealing a phantom carillon. Cliff House, a mile from the next habitation, stands eighty yards from the cliff's crumbling brink.

