

CLASSIC DRIVER

AMOC 'John Wyer Tribute' at the famous Hotel de France, 10 June 2011



As the champagne flowed during lunch in La Chartre-sur-le-Loir, so did the stories of the legendary team manager John Wyer. Known as 'Death Ray' (for his famous glare), the formidable Englishman guided works teams from Aston Martin, Ford and Porsche to extraordinary success over a 21-year period until his semi-retirement at the end of 1971.

The Hotel de France, a 50-minute drive from the Le Mans circuit, was discovered by Wyer in early 1953 and became his team's base for the 24-hour race for as long as he remained actively involved in motor racing. During that period, the cars would be tended in the courtyard, and driven to and from the circuit on the public road for practice and race.

Incredibly, this practice was maintained up to and including the 1970 event when the orange-suited Gulf mechanics drove the three Stuttgart-owned, blue and orange Porsche 917s to the circuit on the road for the very last time.

So it was appropriate that the Aston Martin Owners Club (AMOC), under David Wright's painstaking (I'm sure Wyer would have approved) direction, chose the Hotel de France on the Friday before [the 2011 Le Mans 24 Hours](#) to celebrate the life of John Wyer, 40 years having passed since he relinquished day-to-day running of the team to John Horsman. Several personalities who knew Wyer, and had suffered his notorious never-suffer-fools-gladly, 'Death Ray' temper were present.

□ Sir Stirling Moss on fine form

□ Derek Bell, Master of Ceremonies

□ Michael Salmon, *Salmon* to John Wyer

Five-times Le Mans winner Derek Bell, who first drove for Wyer in 1971, was Master of Ceremonies and, first-up, introduced a now [recently retired Sir Stirling Moss](#). Moss was the star driver of the Aston team on and off in the late-Fifties and recounted the story of the 1959 Nürburgring 1000km.

"I never thought I'd hear myself say it," the great man told the appreciative audience assembled after lunch, "but in 1959 I offered to cover the costs of a DBR1 to be entered at the 'Ring, should we not win."

He was as good as his word, though, winning one of his greatest races, and then going on to break the Ferrari 250 Testa Rossa opposition at Le Mans just a few weeks later, which enabled Salvadori/Shelby to earn the British company's first and only victory.

Veteran privateer Michael Salmon (always called '*Salmon*' in the Italian style, for some reason, by Wyer) recalled his experiences of running DB4 GT Zagato '22 XKX'. Having decided that a Ferrari 250 GT SWB was

becoming “too common”, Jaguar stalwart Salmon had purchased a Zagato with the intention of running it in the new GT Championship.

□ David Wright makes the presentation to Sylvia Pasteau

□ Astons in the square in front of the hotel

□ Harley Cluxton: fond memories of Wyer

He soon came to the conclusion that the new car was deficient in the going, stopping and cornering departments. *Salmon* took the issue up with Wyer, now the company's General Manager, who offered to let his race mechanics “have a look at it”. The result was an altogether different car which enabled the talented Englishman to finish fourth overall at Spa, right in ‘SWB country’. All for the sum of £280.

Could this figure be correct, he asked? “We are never wrong,” came the reply from the laconic Wyer, black hair Brylcreemed and parted with millimetre precision, wreathed in cigar smoke and sitting behind an imposing desk, calmly stating that “this IS Aston Martin...”

In later years, Wyer was to run Ford Advanced Vehicles, and then the Gulf-sponsored JW Automotive GT40, Mirage and works-supported Porsche 917 teams. As a young driver, Derek Bell had to watch his step but, despite destroying the unloved Mirage-Weslake V12 in a testing accident at Silverstone right in front of JW (“I saw it all, Bell” – before calmly driving off in his Shelby Mustang), soon became a lynchpin of the team, driving the 917s in 1971, the Mirage DFVs in 1972-73 and winning Le Mans with Jacky Ickx in the Gulf GR8 in 1975.

This, strictly speaking, was outside Wyer's time as active head of the team, but such was his respect for Wyer that Harley Cluxton, who'd purchased the Gulf GR8 programme in March 1976, was present at La Chartre to give his reminiscences of the man, most often a passionate, informed spectator in the pit garage.

Journalist Simon Taylor explained the terror of approaching Wyer as a cub reporter for Autosport in the late 60s, while JW Automotive parts supremo, Maitland Cook, told of the perils of asking for a pay rise: “I wish you all the very best in your new position, Cook...” – outside the company, that is.



In all, it was a wonderful event with some side-splitting and sometimes unrepeatable (such as why the amorously inclined Peter Gethin was passed over in favour of Derek Bell) anecdotes enjoyed by a capacity audience which included David Richards, Chairman and chief executive of Prodrive and current Chairman, Aston Martin, and many stalwarts of Le Mans and the AMOC such as Brian Joscelyne.

The meeting concluded with a presentation to Sylvia Pasteau (daughter-in-law of Noel Pasteau who ran the hotel in Wyer's day) of a picture of the hotel with a Wyer-era DBR Aston parked in front. This generous donation was made possible by long-serving member of the AMOC David Holland.

By way of symmetry, in the courtyard of the Hotel de France that afternoon sat Aston Martin DBR1/2, the actual car which had won the 1959 Le Mans 24 Hours.

And mid-afternoon, once proceedings had broken up, there was only one way the almond green car was going to return to the circuit for the next day's Le Mans Legend historic race: on the public road, of course.

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