

CLASSIC DRIVER

1980s motoring excess, there really were fewer rules back then

Lead

A deregulated city, high-powered supercars and stories of racing around the M25. The late 1980s were a time when British yuppies felt that anything was possible.



When you imagine a piece of tarmac that loops around until it reconnects with itself, you automatically think of a racetrack, but on 29 October 1986, when Margaret Thatcher officially opened the M25, I'm sure that thought couldn't have been further from her mind. However the yuppies working hard and playing hard in the City of London knew exactly what the M25 was: a 117-mile racetrack.



Steeped in mythical stories, everyone has heard of meets that would happen late at night, but to this day, finding anyone to come forward and discuss the truth of these rumours, which have long spiralled around internet forums, has been high-on impossible. At that time I was just seven years old, and my brother would tell me stories of secret races being planned on motorways, like the 'Severn Bridge Club' who'd leave from London, with the first one to return bearing a stamped bridge receipt declared the winner. Posters of the Ferrari Testarossa, Lamborghini Countach and Porsche 911 Turbo all adorned my wall.



My only personal point of reference were the Carrera Sport track days that used to happen at Goodwood circuit on Bank Holiday weekends. They were organised by Mike Pullen from Carrera Sport, a Lamborghini specialist based in West Sussex.



First, let's talk about those mythical 'races' around the M25. I have been told of a gentleman who lapped the motorway in around 45 minutes one evening in a Porsche 911 GT2. As far as I'm aware, this would stand as the 'lap record', but there's no place for this kind of effort in modern times, so instead of trying to beat it, let's look back at those storied early days of the M25.



It opened just two days after the 'Big Bang', when the City of London was deregulated, instantly turning it into a financial capital to rival New York. The electrification of trading leapfrogged London ahead of its European rivals and the international banks came flocking. The good times were rolling and the feeling of the moment was that anything was possible.



Our first port of call is a copy of The Times from Saturday 2 July 1988. A very young Boris Johnson reports on the story of a proposed race titled 'The First London Cannonball Run'. The reality is that by the time young Boris had cottoned on, the times had already changed. Almost exactly a year after the M25 opened, Black Monday happened and values were wiped off both cars and juicy City bonuses.



Going back to 1986 and '87, things were far more under the radar. Very few people in the City knew about these goings-on, as the circle was kept very tight. I talked to 10 people who worked in the City during the late '80s and only two had heard of them. The rumours and stories quickly spread around the car community, though. Back then, there was only one service station on the M25, at South Mimms. An obvious start and finish point, with a breather at the tollbooth for the Dartford tunnel – you just had to choose your lane wisely!



Some people will tell you it was a 'first one back' event, but talking to people who were there gives the impression it was more often than not a timed event, with anything under an hour being a badge of honour among colleagues. To achieve that, you'd need to average 117mph, and anyone who's ever watched their average speed on a long journey will know exactly how hard it is to keep it high. At a time when the country's prevailing mood was invincibility, it's easy to imagine these young bloods getting their highs from flat-out drives around the M25 on hot summer evenings.



Working in the city in the mid-'80s, your first bonus would most likely be followed by a trip to the Alan Day Volkswagen dealership to get yourself a Golf GTI 16-valve. Alan Day was one of the few dealers in the City and the Golf GTI was the first step on the automotive ladder for the baby banker. From there, it was on to a Porsche 911 before stepping up to the Italian exotics.



During 1988 and '89, small adverts appeared in the Enfield Gazette for the 'M25 Club'. The City stories had filtered down to general car enthusiasts, who were starting to try it out themselves.



Talking to a few friends over dinner, the stories start to roll out: "I did it flat-out in a tuned 3.0-litre Capri in the late '80s," said one. "But we just timed ourselves, it wasn't a race as such".



Another piped up: "I had the first Escort Cosworth in the UK, and on the day it was delivered, I took it straight out to do a lap with friends as fast as i could". By now, though, it was the early '90s and the speed camera had arrived. In 1991, the first camera was installed on the M40 and recorded 400 offences in its first 40 minutes of operation. The days of illegal high-speed runs were mostly over.



That's where the Carrera Sport trackdays come into it. Those who'd bought the dip or ferreted their bonus money away were still rolling around in supercars and a trackday was the perfect place to use their toy.



As a child visiting Goodwood regularly, I was aware of the etiquette with trackdays and sprints, but one hot August Bank Holiday, I can remember all hell breaking loose. Goodwood was far more relaxed back then; the circuit was nothing but the decayed remains of its 1960s glory days, yet to be transformed by the Duke of Richmond into a global hub for historic motorsports.



The day started off very well behaved. I can remember counting 11 Lamborghini Countaches, the place was packed and word had got around that if you headed up to Goodwood, you'd see some seriously exotic cars. Shortly after lunch in the searing heat, a Ferrari 308 GT4 spun out at the chicane and crashed in to the tyre wall. On impact, the rear numberplate had fallen off to reveal a different numberplate underneath, there were some interesting characters around!



One guy had let his friend out in his brand-new Lamborghini Diablo; he pranged it, and the friendly gesture quickly turned heated. By this point, the queueing system had also gone out of the window; people were just driving past the queue and straight out on to the track. All hell had truly broken loose. It was great fun to watch as a youngster, unaware of the dangers but fully enthralled by the excitement of this hot summer day.



The excess and disregard for safety shown by the young and wealthy in the '80s and '90s continues to fascinate me to this day. There's no way any of this could take place now, and anyone who forgets that quickly gets shut down.

Gallery

