

TASMANIAN MOTORSPORT HALL OF FAME

GEOFF SMEDLEY (Inducted 2013)

Geoff Smedley was a well respected Tasmanian racing driver in the 1950s and 1960s, but it was his mechanical and engineering abilities which earned him an international reputation. His first involvement in motorsport, came in the 1950s, when he designed and built a Vincent-powered copy of a Cooper race car, which was the first of many cars designed and built by Geoff. The body was made of fibreglass – one of the first in Australia - and the car was reputedly the last motorcycle-engined racecar to run in an Australian Grand Prix, at Longford, in 1957. In the late 1950s Geoff campaigned an MG TC Special at Tasmanian circuits and hillclimbs and also ran a couple of early Triumph TRs with mixed success.

One of Geoff's better-known cars was the Le Mans Jaguar, which came into being after a syndicate of four purchased a damaged XK120 Jaguar from an insurance company and Geoff built a space-frame chassis and aluminium body with cycle-type mudguards. The Jaguar was campaigned by mainly by Geoff and Allan Cohen of Le Mans Motors, from which it took its name, and was clocked at 142mph (227 km/hr) on Tannery Straight at Longford. In 1959 Geoff was approached by the late Austin "Aussie" Miller, who owned and raced a 1957 Cooper Climax at the time, to build a car capable of taking the Australian land speed record. A 400HP Corvette engine was grafted into the fragile car and coupled to a modified Citroen gearbox, with a Perspex streamliner bubble built over the driver.

In 1962 at Bakers Beach, near Devonport (Tas.) it set a new Australian land speed record average speed over two runs of 164mph (262 km/hr), breaking the existing record by 6mph (10 km/hr). Later that year, Geoff was employed full-time by the late John Youl to prepare his 2.2 litre Cooper Climax and later his ex-Jack Brabham Type 55 Cooper, which was raced in the Gold Star and Tasman Series, with considerable success.

Geoff designed and built twin magnetos for the Climax engine's ignition system, which was considered at the time to be a world-first.

When John Youl retired from racing, Geoff was then contracted by Total Oil in Sydney to prepare their team of cars, a Repco Brabham and a Lotus 19, to be driven by Frank Matich.

Geoff moved to Sydney, but later returned to Tasmania in 1967.

In 1968 he was called to work on Leo Geoghegan's Lotus 39, fitted with a Repco V8, which ran in the last Longford race conducted in the wet in 1968.

Later that year Geoff was contracted to Mr P.H. Wong, of Newton Racing in Singapore, to run a team of cars which included the ex-Mildren Bartlett 2.7 litre Brabham Climax, a Lotus 47 and three Mini Cooper Ss.

In 1972 Geoff retired from a hectic life in the fast lane and began his own tuning business in Launceston, which evolved into a restoration of historic and important cars.

In 1988 he started the National Automobile Museum of Tasmania and was involved with the museum project for 10 years.

Geoff also competed in six consecutive Targa Tasmania events, in a variety of cars, including a Ferrari, and was awarded a number of Targa plates, including gold.

Geoff Smedley is a man of immense knowledge and skills and is a mostly forgotten and unsung hero to younger Tasmanian motorsports followers and has assisted countless people with engineering advice over many decades.

(Profile by Ellis French)