

## **In Memory of Ken Mitchell**

BARC (NW) Committee Member: 1973 – 1990, BARC (NW) Chairman: 1984 - 1990

It is with great sadness that I am writing this article following the news that Ken Mitchell, past Chairman of the centre passed away recently.

Ken joined the North Western Centre committee in 1973 when it was under the strong leadership of Jock Sinclair who had been in the chair since 1959. The centre was very active in those days organising and being involved in race meetings at Oulton Park, autotests, sprints, kart meetings and manning a stage on the RAC Rally (as it was known in those days). In addition to its competitive activities the Centre had an thriving social life with film evenings (pre video times!) and two formal evening events, the Real Night Out, though it was not known as that back then and a joint marshals thank you dinner with our friends in the Yorkshire Centre that took place at the Stirk House Hotel in Gisburn.

During the first half of his time on the committee Ken took over the role of Secretary of the Meeting from, if my memory serves me correctly, Arthur Keane. At this time the Centre was concentrating on organising race meetings as the demand for the other events was waning and the resources on the committee was insufficient to professionally run these events. When Jock Sinclair decided to retire from the Chair in 1984 the obvious candidate to take over was Ken who had by that time acquired the necessary Clerk of Course licence to take the reins at Oulton Park on race day. It is worth remembering that in the 80's we ran about four club meetings each year and alternated with our friends at the BRSCC (NW Centre) in organising the Good Friday meeting which was one of Oulton's major meetings of the year running Thundersports and the British Touring Car Championship. It was because of the professionalism, experience of the committee and the leadership of Ken that we were allowed to run this prestigious meeting by HQ. It should be noted that when Ken took over the role of Chairman his wife Sandra had been persuaded to join the committee and she took over the role of Secretary - the dinner time conversations must have been interesting!

Ken was not a Chairman who wanted to continue as we had in the past, he saw that things were moving fast in the Motor Racing world and his view was that we, as a Centre, had to move with the times. Luckily Jock's legacy was a strong, enthusiastic and experienced committee so Ken had a great starting point.

The first thing Ken suggested was the introduction of computers to help in the administration of the four or five race meetings we organised each year. Having been Secretary of the Meeting for several years he fully understood the significant amount of work that was involved, massively more than these days. I had taken over that role and was totally behind him with the idea. I remember scouring Liverpool with Ken for a good deal on Amstrad PCW 8256 computers. Once sourced we bought 3 machines for myself, Ken and if my memory serves me correctly Dave & Margaret Simpson who sorted out the marshalling. They were a great success and saved a massive amount of time particularly with allowing a much better handle on the entries and removal of the writing of up to three address labels for each driver. By 1987 they were being used for the championship, even if only to keep track on the points (very early spreadsheet). By the time Ken decided to retire in 1990 the computers were also running a database and the organising of the Championship had moved from paper to the computer which led the way around that time to using a database to organise all race entries rather than a simple spreadsheet. At the same time the computers had been put to good use on the marshalling side and Dave and Margaret were saving considerable time organising the marshalling. The only issue was that HQ quickly realised how useful they were and decided that 3 machines was too many for us to have and took one away from us, don't think we ever did get paid for that lost machine. As an aside this Centre was the first part of BARC to use both computers and laptops at a race meeting to produce results and other documentation.

As I have mentioned when Ken took over the chair our competitive events were solely centred on Oulton Park. Ken quickly realised that this did not make good 'business' sense as, although we prided ourselves on running professional race meetings, we were afraid that the Foulston's who ran what is now MSV could pull the plug. He saw an opportunity to bring racing back to what had been our home circuit in the 1950's, Aintree. It is worth remembering that in the 50's and 60's the BARC and in particular the North Western Centre ran the British Grand Prix at Aintree. Ken led discussions with the management at Aintree with the intention of bringing racing back to the circuit. As with all that Ken set out to do the task was done with consummate professionalism and the proposal was fully costed and definitely would have been successful throughout the 90's though perhaps with increasing noise legislation would have had a shorter lifespan than originally planned. However, after putting the proposal to Thruxton the general view was that it did not fit in with future policy of the club and the idea was unfortunately shelved.

With Ken's experience in racing and rallying both competing and organising he developed, with the committee, a couple of organisational improvements which became standard in World Championship Rallying and Formula 1.

The first was the use of post numbers on special stage junctions in rallying. This came about when the NW Centre was asked to run an RAC Rally stage (Greystoke Forest – now owned by Malcolm Wilson's M-Sport and used for testing their WRC cars) after it had been cancelled the previous year when the lack of supervision made it unsafe. The Centre quickly realised that the stage would have to be heavily marshalled, using our experience from racing, and decided that the junction's should be numbered so that it was easy to identify the marshal's positions and ensure they parked in the right places! The stage was run very successfully with no incidents and as a result the next year the RAC adopted the system for the whole rally.

The second came about when warm up laps were introduced to circuit racing and there was a need to find a system of ensuring that the race starter knew when all the cars were safely in position and the back of the grid was complete. The Centre officials decided to have marshals (and often even officials were roped in) alongside each grid row with marker boards on a stick (crude but effective). When each row was ready the relevant stick was raised and when all sticks were raised a marshal with a green flag waved it from the back of the grid to signal all was set to go to the starter. This became the norm in all forms of racing including Formula 1. So when you hear those words by the commentator, 'Green Flag, Green Flag' remember it was introduced first by the BARC (NW Centre)!

When Ken resigned from the committee in 1990 he left the Centre in excellent health, a new team of race officials had been pulled together and were able to continue the good work put in by Jock Sinclair before him. In fact five of the committee in 1990 are still on board today, myself, Margaret Simpson, Colin Whitter and Ray Sumner who started at same time Ken retired. Additionally Jeffrey Haworth was on the committee then and only retired at our last meeting. These members actually still form the core of the organising team, continuing the excellent work put in by Ken.

Ken's interests in racing and rallying did not stop when he retired. Graeme, his son, has told me that Ken went back to his rallying roots and with Graeme was involved with Epynt Motor Club in mid-Wales and had been part of their Rally GB stage team

since about 2000. Ken deferred the offer of a more senior stage role to Graeme about 9 odd years ago. Ken had taken a bit of step back again last year as he felt he couldn't manage the full week in the forest but still couldn't help himself and came out to help Graeme on the recce day. The picture was taken at the start of the Aberhissant stage in October on last year's Rally GB – his last motorsport event. This photograph even has one of Ken's post numbers he devised all those years ago!

The thanks of the committee, officials, marshals and competitors go to Ken for laying many of the ground rules we follow today - thank you Ken, you will be missed.

John Leck

*Hon Competitions Secretary*

*NW Sports Saloon Championship Co-ordinator*