



## ***500s – Formulated in Filton in '45***

**On the evening of December 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945, around 100 members of the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club, with a few invited experts and guests, crowded into the Company's conference room at Filton to discuss proposals for a new racing car formula for the "impecunious enthusiast".**

**The outcome – a draft 'National 500cc Racing Car Formula'.**

**So began 70 years of 500s.**

The December 1945 meeting was the culmination of around twelve months of discussion among motorsport enthusiasts in Bristol, however their underlying interest led back several years more. When possible during the World War Two years enthusiasts looked forward to the time when the sport could resume, and considered ways by which the 'ordinary working man' might be able to go 'proper' motor racing, a big change from pre-war days when it was generally the preserve of the very wealthy. Various ideas were aired in the motoring press, such as 'The Motor' and 'Motor Sport', that was still being published, and were no doubt also discussed by devotees around the country. The huge Bristol Aeroplane Company factory in Filton numbered many such enthusiasts among its workforce, where native Bristolians had been joined by like-minded individuals from further afield. By late 1944, with the war's end in sight, they formed a new club, the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club - for Company employees only – in preparation for a resumption of motorsport.

With several successful special builders (such as Walter Watkins and Jan Breyer) among their number, and enthused by guest speaker John Bolster's discourse on 'Specials' at a Club meeting in October '45, the time was ripe for action. Particularly as amongst them was RD 'Dick' Caesar.

A prolific special builder himself (over a dozen pre-war) Dick Caesar was a keen proponent of low cost racing for fun. With a few friends, in the late 1930s he had created a racing club for cheap home-built specials on a grass track at his home in Clapton-in-Gordano, north Somerset. Known as CAPA – derived from the initials of the five founder members' names: **C**aesar, **F**ranklin **C**oombs, **A**drian **B**utler, **R**D 'Bobby' **P**rice, and **K**eith **A**ldridge – this provided an excellent background to post-war ambitions to create something suitable for proper sealed surface tracks.

Caesar had in October 1944 initially proposed a 'Cadet' class using stock Ford 10 or similar engines. Elsewhere Kenneth Neve, for one, had been proposing a 500cc-engined formula. A key episode occurred in the winter of 1944/45 when Jan Breyer, publicity secretary of the new BACMSC, brought Caesar and Neve together. Breyer and Neve were old friends, and when Neve visited Bristol on business Breyer arranged for him to meet Caesar, along with other local men Pat McCormick and Eric Storey, with Joe Fry also turning up. After a beneficial exchange of ideas, Caesar was persuaded that a 500 class was the way forward, and then worked on the scheme behind the scenes over the next few months.

Anxious to get something definite done, and with the idea "*If you want something done, go ahead and do it yourself*", the BACMSC committee took the initiative and duly organised a meeting to discuss the future of 500cc car racing for 10<sup>th</sup> December 1945. That night, in an atmosphere of "*sheer enthusiasm*", over 100 bodies crowded into the Main Conference Room of

the BAC's headquarters building Filton House (now headquarters of Airbus UK and known as Pegasus House) at the top of Filton hill. With limited space, there was just room for representatives of a few local clubs to join the Club members, plus a panel of experts invited along to provide technical guidance.



*Photo taken at the BACMSC meeting to discuss 500cc car racing on 10 December 1945. Seated (L to R), the experts: Sydney Horstmann, Roland Cross, Dick Caesar, Sammy Davis and George Hack. Standing (L to R), the organisers: Eric Storey, John Siddall, Jack Harding, George Bowen and Mike Nedham.*

The panel comprised George Hack, formerly chief of the Rudge motorcycle racing department, and then working in the BAC Engines Department, and Bath based engineers Roland Cross, of rotary valve fame, and suspension specialist Sydney Horstmann. And of course Dick Caesar.

Chairing the session was former Bentley man, Autocar's Sports Editor Sammy Davis, who opened the evening by emphasizing that Grand Prix cars built at fantastic expense were not essential to provide sport. *"Real sport and real racing could be had with 500 c.c. cars costing under £100 to build and cheap to run. Such cars, properly built and capable of 80 to 90 m.p.h. would need exact limits to bind the design. It was up to the Meeting to decide what it wanted."*

Following on, Caesar showed his films of pre-war CAPA racing to illustrate the possibilities, then, following a prepared agenda, the audience was asked to express its wishes, to which the panel of experts responded with advice.

In brief the conclusions of the meeting were:

Types of Racing: All types of racing would be included, particularly circuit racing as well as a special class for 500 c.c. jobs at the usual sprints and hill climbs.

Types of Circuit: 500 c.c. class races are almost certain to run at the big tracks as well as any suitable circuits that can be found or made, including hard grass as at C.A.P.A.

Scratch Racing: To be aimed at where possible.

Cost of Cars: By personal toil and cunning the special builders thought the outlay could be kept to £40 - £80 but Mr. Hack thought a professionally built job would cost at least £180.

Engines: Not more than two cylinders. Superchargers barred (to keep down cost).

Fuel Regulations: Considerable controversy over this. In the end, there was a tendency in favour of pump petrol (again, to keep cost down).

Fuel Tanks: To be limited to two gallons.

Weight of Cars: Mr. Hack and Mr. Caesar thought this should be around 450 lb.

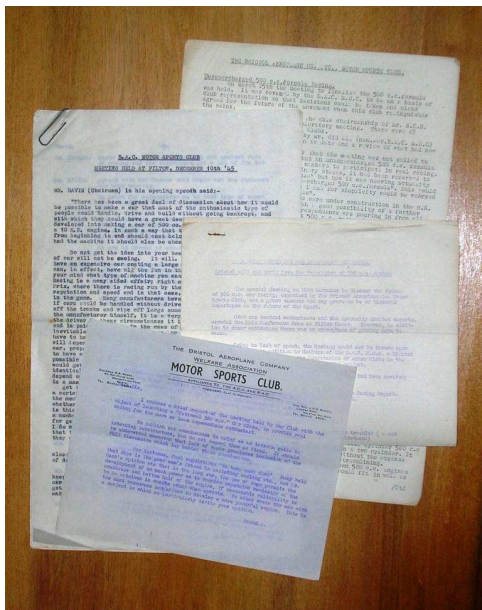
Scrutineering: Rigid and impartial scrutineering is essential.

Gear Boxes: Optional, motor-cycle types would be suitable.

Body Work: Optional.

Towards the end of the meeting, the audience were asked who would be prepared to build cars. With around 30 people saying they would, the scheme was deemed viable.

Following this successful meeting, the conclusions were published and widely circulated as an interim guide to potential builders.



### March 1946 - Finalising the Formula

The next significant event came the following Spring, when the BACMSC convened a further meeting at Filton to finalise the formula and also agree plans for its future administration, for it was abundantly clear that the BAC, or any other, club should not act as the governing body. On 25<sup>th</sup> March 1946, 47 people, representing eleven clubs, assembled at the Anchor Hotel next to the BAC factory for this second meeting, chaired as before by Sammy Davis.

John Siddall opened by reporting progress to date – stating that there were 80 cars under construction in the UK, 30 of them in Bristol – and reviewing what now had to be done. Although originally referred to as the “National 500cc Formula”, as it was now nearing reality the full title was to be revised to become the “Unsupercharged 500cc Formula”.

With the initial proposals having generated a wide and enthusiastic response, there were hopes for some races towards the end of the season, although some thought perhaps that was looking a little too far ahead, and the first events for such untried cars were more likely to be in hillclimbs and sprints.

Several of the original technical conclusions from the previous December were revisited, contributors including Jan Breyer, Jack Harding, Keith Gough and Robin Jackson, and after a constructive debate several amendments were agreed:

Engine: Any number of cylinders would now be permitted, rather than the limit of two, this largely as a result of continental representations. Superchargers were still barred.

Fuel: Choice would now be unrestricted, with tank capacity reduced from two gallons to just one.

Weight: A minimum weight limit of 500 lbs wet (oil and full fuel tank) was agreed, with considerations of safety of construction and a desire to inhibit use of ultra light (and expensive) materials.

Brakes: To be compulsory on all four wheels, with a separately controlled handbrake on one pair.

A fireproof bulkhead was agreed essential, but after a hot debate a majority were against crash helmets being obligatory.

With the technical points of the formula now settled, the meeting went on to consider its future administration. Pat McCormick made it clear that the BACMSC *"who had so far borne both the organisational and financial burden of founding the class, could continue this no longer."* The formation of a non-territorial 500cc club to act as a governing body was recommended, with delegates from clubs interested in the movement. John Siddall summed up, saying that the Bristol Steering Committee would approach all interested clubs on the subject, before convening an inaugural meeting.

While the "80 cars under construction" that Siddall reported in March had perhaps included some over-optimistic would-be builders, cars *were* already being built, with the Strang and Tiger Kitten making their debuts at Prescott hillclimb in May.

With the new formula successfully devised, on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1946 the new National club was officially launched in Bristol, its officials including many of the pioneering Bristol individuals involved in its creation. The expectation was for there to be sufficient cars to allow races to be held the following year.

*The Bristol Evening World newspaper of 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1946 announces the launch of the 500 Club.*

The circular issued after the 10th December meeting had opened with the heading *"REAL MOTOR RACING FOR THE IMPECUNIOUS ENTHUSIAST Bristol well and truly lays the Foundation of 500 c.c. Racing"*

continuing: *"The special Meeting on 10<sup>th</sup> December to discuss the future of 500 c.c. car racing, organised by The Bristol Aeroplane Co. Motor Sports Club, was a great success and may prove to be of historic importance to the future of the Sport."*

Over seventy years later we may safely endorse those remarks, and in recent years the Bristol Pegasus Motor Club (successor to the BACMSC) has commemorated the creation of the 500cc formula by awarding the historic Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club Challenge Trophy to the winner of the 500s race at the Castle Combe Autumn Classic meeting.

*Pete Stowe 2017*