

Turn back time

"Better than the car at Gaydon." That was the general consensus when Paddy Hopkirk laid his eyes on Graham McConnell's replica 1964 Monte Carlo Rally winning car. Located in the County Down countryside, the Mini enthusiast has spent more than 12 months building this car into an almost exact replica of '33 EJB'...



In fact, Hopkirk was so impressed by the car that he has agreed to drive it at February's Paddy Hopkirk Gala, where he will head a cavalcade of Minis and other period cars from Stormont to Belfast City Hall and on to the Titanic area.

And being the proud owner of this beauty, Graham McConnell will navigate for Paddy.

"I'd heard about Paddy's Gala coming up and decided it would be nice to build a replica of his Monte Carlo winning Mini," McConnell told Pacenotes. "There were no other exact replicas about. There is another one in Germany - I think it is ORX 55 - but it isn't just totally correct. So I thought it would be nice to have a car that is virtually identical to the original."

"The more I thought about it, the more bits I gathered up," he added, "but it was very difficult to get photographs of the actual car. Eventually I managed to find a few photos and started from there."

Graham's garage was already occupied by another Mini, so to make room for his new project, he moved his prized possession to a friend's house to give him some work space.



“That gave me enough room to work at the 33 EJB replica, McConnell explained. “I sourced a 1963 donor car, totally stripped it out, worked my way through it and completely rebuilt it with help from my friend, Alan McClelland, for the heavy work.”

“The engine that came with the donor car was a 1275cc, but I had a 1071 block so we built it up as a complete, brand new engine and put it into the car. It was basically just balanced, lightened and had bigger carbs. It's just about run-in now. There's quite a bark off it. The 1071 is good fun - it's a good, revvy engine.”

“The hardest part was trying to get all the bits together,” he admitted. “Parts were hard to come by. We gathered up a few through eBay and from the likes of Mervyn Johnston and Tom Lawlor.”

A mammoth amount of work was put into building an almost exact replica of Hopkirk's Monte Carlo winning car, but McConnell admits that there are a couple of minor differences.

“The light on the roof is very slightly forward compared to the original,” he revealed. “I was intending to put a roll cage in as I considered running the car at something like the Cultra Hillclimb. Those plans might have changed now but had the light been that little bit further back, putting a cage in wouldn't be possible. Although there's no cage in the car at the moment, it's still an option.”

“The passenger seat in the original car was a recliner but you can't get those any more,” he added. “Other than that, the car is pretty much the same as Paddy's original car.”

And while the car adorns the 33 EJB registration number for the purposes of fulfilling its role at the Paddy Hopkirk replica, its actual registration is 33 BBL, which interestingly is also a 'works' number.

Graham's attention to detail has been second to none, even down to having an original wood Les Lester steering wheel as well as a spare wheel wrapped with a snow tyre stored in the Mini's compact boot, not to mention those vital headlamp washers and a heater as per Paddy's Monte winning car.

“Because of what the Monte is and what it can throw at you, the emphasis was seeing out of the car,” Graham said. “So that's why the car has headlamp washers and a blower to keep the screen clear. It was the first actual car with a half-heated window.”



“The 1964 Monte started from Russia and luckily for Paddy, there wasn't a lot of hard snow or frost. Had the weather been different, that could have finished it for him as Minis are quite difficult to see out of once they get in those sorts of conditions.”

Towards the end of Graham's 33 EJB replica build, he had to speed up those final touches as the car was in hot demand. With the Paddy Hopkirk Gala looming, organisers wanted his car to attend various press launches.

“Things happened very quickly in the end to try and get it finished,” McConnell admitted. “The organisers of the Paddy Hopkirk Gala wanted the car to go to press gatherings to publicise what was going to happen at the Gala. So we've done a lot of shows with it as well as other bits and pieces.”

Graham: The Mini Enthusiast

As you can probably tell, Graham is a huge Mini enthusiast. He has been the proud owner of a number of special Minis over the years and it was a passion that started back when he worked for Thompson-Reids.

“When I was working there, I started working on the Q cars,



which were all Cooper S Minis,” he explained. “Later, Roger Cree, who was my boss, wanted to build a rally car for Thompson-Reids. He knew I had a wrecked Cooper S, which had been struck very hard on the side. I had just finished building a Riley Elf as a rally car. So I ended up using the Mini as a base and we built it into Thompson-Reids' rally car.”

“That's where my passion for Minis started, although saying that, I worked for a guy called Denis Kinghan before I was in Thompson-Reids. He had a few race cars and I spent two years working on his new Crossle 16F. I met other guys such as Mervyn Rowles, who had a 1963 1071cc Mini. I worked at that car with Mervyn. It was a green and white Mini. I went to Kirkistown with him and I suppose that's where my biggest passion came from - actually getting to drive them around a race circuit.”

Eventually, Graham purchased his own cars and entered a number of sprints, hillclimbs as well as some rallies. He and a friend, John MacDonald, entered their first event in a Riley Elf. As it transpired, John was unable to make the event but he managed to find a replacement navigator in the form of a Scottish minister's son who lived in Bangor. The event turned out to be a scream - literally!

“John couldn't make it so he found this other guy who was Scottish,” Graham explained. “He was a minister's son, and he lived at the corner of Manse Road in Bangor. I picked him up and headed to Rostrevor Forest for the rally. It was on the loose and about three miles into the first stage, he started to scream! He screamed harder and harder and harder, ‘I want out, I want out! So I stopped the car in the middle of the stage and he got out. To this day, I've never seen him since!’”

It wasn't the best start to Graham's competition career but that failed to deter him and he went on to contest many events, mostly in Minis. His last competition car was particularly special and was something similar to what is known as a Maguire Mini today.

“A guy called Joey Green knew I was interested in Minis and he invited me over to his garage to show me a car that he had,” McConnell explained. “She was like a Maguire as it would be today - she was spaceframed with bolted on fibreglass panels. It looked like a Mini and went like a Mini. It had a very quick 1000cc engine and was running 13" wheels with Ford brakes. It was very, very quick.”

Graham bought the Mini and went on to have quite a lot of



success with it. But a fellow competitor's tragic accident at the Spelga Hillclimb brought his exploits to an end.

“The car had a complete lift-off fibreglass front,” Graham said. “Nobody had ever seen anything like it before. It was quite spectacular and very, very lightweight.”

“My crew weren't with me that day and it wasn't until I had left the start line that I realised I hadn't put the bonnet on correctly,”

“My crew weren't with me that day and it wasn't until I had left the start line that I realised I hadn't put the bonnet on correctly,” he explained. “The throttle linkage wouldn't come back so she just stuck wide open. I had to switch her on and off to get her to slow down. Anyway, when I came to the last corner, I was doing so much speed I couldn't flick her off so I went through the last corner flat.”



IN MY GARAGE

WORDS :: JONATHAN MACDONALD // IMAGES :: JOHN O'NEILL



"Neville Johnston was running behind me and he came over to talk to me afterwards. He had never done the hillclimb before, and asked what way I took the final corner. I told him what had happened and that I had no option but to take it flat out."

"My next run was fine and I had full throttle control. When I arrived back, I went down to watch Neville but he didn't make it. He landed almost at my feet, upside-down, after hitting the dam at what I reckon was about 110mph. I was first at the car but he was gone. What really annoyed me was all of the people starting to rush in and fight each other to see Neville dead in the car. That's what really finished my competition days."

Graham later entered some navigation events as a navigator, sitting with the likes of Colin Menary in the Circuit of Ireland, Galway and Donegal rallies. After that, he walked away from the sport and instead became more interested in boating. That was until nine years ago when he started to become interested in Minis again. He ended up spending three years building another show-winning Mini, which he refers to as 'LVL', before building this even more astonishing Paddy Hopkirk 33 EJB

Now that the car is complete, Graham is looking forward to seeing Paddy get behind the wheel of his pride and joy at the Paddy Hopkirk Gala

replica.

Now that the car is complete, Graham is looking forward to seeing Paddy get behind the wheel of his pride and joy at the Paddy Hopkirk Gala. Paddy will head a cavalcade of Minis and other period cars on Saturday 22 February when he leaves Stormont and drives to Belfast City Hall before arriving at the Titanic Quarter.

It will be a truly stunning tribute to Paddy's 1964 Monte Carlo Rally victory, and there is literally no better car in the world to head the cavalcade than Graham McConnell's replica. It really is better than the original car at Gaydon



PACENOTES

RALLY MAGAZINE