

Jack Sears

1930 - 2016



Club Vice President Jack Sears, the winner of the inaugural British Touring Car Championship, has died at the age of 86. Erudite, eloquent and elegant, Jack was one of Britain's most talented and versatile racers during the 1950s and early '60s. Always smartly dressed and scrupulously polite, with his mellow voice, he was universally known as 'Gentleman Jack'.



Jack Sears won the 1958 BTCC title, then known as the British Saloon Car Championship, by beating Tommy Sopwith in a head-to-head shoot-out. After the final race of the championship at Brands Hatch, Jack and Tommy had each won their class nine times, Jack in his lightened Austin Westminster A105 and Tommy in a 3.4 litre Jaguar Mk1 and they were tied on points. To resolve the tie, two identical rally-prepared Riley 1.5's were provided for a pair of 5-lap races with the tying drivers exchanging cars

after the first race. Tommy won the first race by 1.0 seconds and Jack won the second rain-lashed race by 1.6 seconds, and he liked to say that he therefore won the championship by just 0.6 of a second. Jack took a second British saloon racing crown in 1963, this time battling for wins in Ford Cortinas and the mighty seven-litre Ford Galaxie. At SCCON's 50th Anniversary Dinner Dance at the Assembly House in Norwich, Jack gave a speech in which he described how, during his first race in the big American Ford at Silverstone, he'd made an indifferent start but used its immense power to take the lead along the Hangar Straight. He then had to decide how much he dared trust the Ford's mediocre brakes when he got to Stowe Corner! They were obviously good enough and Jack won the race. It was Sears' success with that car that ended Jaguar's run as the benchmark saloon racing tin-top.

Born into a well-to-do family, his grandfather had trained as a cobbler and developed his business into a mass-production enterprise that absorbed the Freeman Hardy Willis nationwide chain of shoe shops. Jack's father Stanley Sears had raced at Brooklands and had entered the RAC Rally several times in the 1930's in Bentley and Rolls Royce cars. Jack shared his Dad's passion for cars from an early age and he first competed in 1950 in Veteran Car Club rallies, then in 1951 he entered the 6-day-long Daily Express National Motor Rally in his supercharged MGTC. This was a huge event with 450 cars entered and Jack finished third in his class. He made his motor racing debut in the same MG at a British Automobile Racing Club Members' Meeting at Goodwood.



Jack joined the Sporting Car Club of Norfolk in 1954, competing in our club's Ten Test Rally on 23-24th October that year. He finished 8th overall and won his class in a Jaguar XK120 fixed head coupe. Jack was navigated on this event by his wife Cicely with their dachshund Max as a passenger.

Through the 1950's Jack raced, rallied and sprinted often, excelling in his father's 1914 TT Sunbeam, but he sprang to prominence driving Brian Lister's sports cars made in Cambridge. He raced single-seaters twice, finishing third in a Formula 2 Cooper at Crystal Palace in 1960.

As well as his touring car successes, Sears was a top GT driver. He drove AC Cobras for John Willment, winning the final Autosport 3 Hour Race at Snetterton in 1964 with the team's new coupe in very difficult driving conditions. Having made his debut in the

Le Mans 24 Hour Race in 1960 sharing a works Austin-Healey 3000 with Peter Riley, Jack's first international race in a Ferrari was at Le Mans in 1963. He and Mike Salmon he finished a class-winning fifth overall in their Ferrari 330 LMB. As a (Ford-contracted) Shelby American team driver he won the big GT class again in 1965, driving an A.C. Cobra Daytona Coupe with the American Dick Thompson.

Sears gained notoriety for exceeding 180mph on the M1 an A.C. Cobra Coupe while testing prior to the 1964 Le Mans race. The run took place at early dawn when the M1 was empty of other traffic and wasn't illegal because there was no motorway speed limit at the time but it still caused quite a scandal when the national daily papers ran the story. That test run has sometimes, erroneously, been cited as the cause of the subsequent 70mph speed limit but Jack always refuted this as the new law wasn't enacted until two years later.

Jack Sears raced works Lotus Cortinas in 1965, winning the Nurburgring 6 Hour race with his pal Sir John Whitmore, but he retired from motor sport following an enormous testing accident in a Lotus 40 sports car at Silverstone in September that year. He was fortunate to survive and his recovery took a year, by which time Jack had resolved to concentrate on farming in Norfolk and on the administrative side of motor racing.

Still enthusiastic about motor sport, Jack undertook a full reconnaissance for the route of the 1968 London-to-Sydney Marathon car rally and soon afterwards he became a member of both the Race and Competitions Committees of the RAC and sat on the Council of the British Racing Drivers Club. He was also a director of Silverstone Motor Racing Circuit, with keen interest in ensuring the commercial success of Silverstone.

In later years Jack appeared at many motoring events including SCCON's 60th anniversary celebrations at Kimberley Hall that he described as "a joy for me to meet so many old SCCON friends" and he has been a regular at the start of our Midsummer Classic Car Runs.



The Sporting Car Club of Norfolk sends its sincere condolences to Jack's wife Diana and to all his family, and his many friends and colleagues.

Peter Riddle