

The Mo-Hud

Knockoff



Newsletter of the Mohawk-Hudson Region, Sports Car Club of America **April 1st, 2021**

Mohawk Hudson Region Friends of the Fairthorpe Annual Tea and Shenanigans Report 56th Anniversary



Fairthorpe Revisited

~ Greg Rickes, Friend of the Fairthorpe Emeritus

Wherein we explore the quirky connection between Mohawk-Hudson Region and an obscure British car maker

The 1950s were something of a golden age for the British sports car. While Triumph, MG, and Austin-Healey were producing moderately priced two-seaters in volume, a cottage industry sprung up producing nimble alternatives. The theme was familiar: steel space frame, mass-produced drivetrain, fiberglass coachwork. Elva was the best known, with its Courier. Also enjoying some widespread notoriety was the Turner.

Less recognized was a line of cars commissioned by former Air Marshal Donald Bennett, produced from a small facility at Chalfont, St. Peter, Buckinghamshire. The marque was known as Fairthorpe. Among the models produced were the Atomata, a diminutive coupe that weighed in at a scant 880 pounds, powered by a air-cooled two-cylinder engine that produced 35 horsepower and claimed 50 miles-per-gallon. Better known was a sports car called the Electron.

Electron, II ...

The top-of-the-line Electron was powered by an 1100cc overhead cam engine produced by Climax of Coventry. This was the same engine deployed in successful sports-racing cars produced by Colin Chapman at Lotus, and Eric Broadley at Lola. It's diminutive twin, the Electron Minor, utilized the same chassis & body but employed production-based powerplants from Triumph, starting with a 948cc version and eventually evolving to the 1147cc Spitfire. Both models were lightweights, the Electron Minor claiming just 945 pounds.



Period sales brochure touting Electrons ... and the Zeta drag-racer (!)

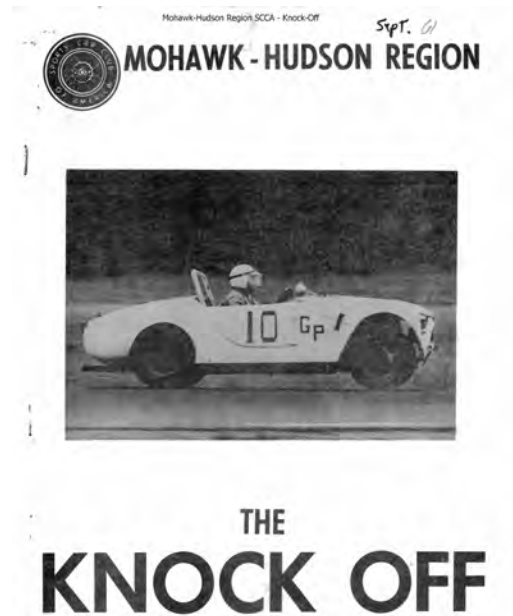
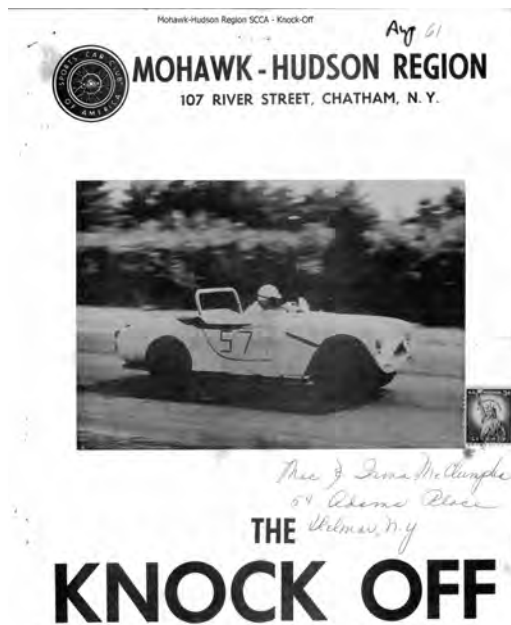
Quite how the Fairthorpe found its way to the Capital District is lost in the annals of time. We do know that Bob Martin was at the center of it. He had two buildings, at 55 and 325 Delaware Avenue in Delmar, that constituted "Bob Martin Auto Sales" (Our Business is Built on Integrity, Good Service and Adequate Parts"). A full page ad in The Knock-Off of 1959 advertised "Sales-Distributors and Dealers-Service" for "The Swedish Marvel, the SAAB93B", "Tempo and Viking Station Wagons, Buses, and Trucks" and "Fairthorpe....True Sports Car".

It didn't take long for the Fairthorpe to join the racing action. "Uncle Cigars", as Martin was known, entered two cars at Watkins Glen in the summer of 1959. Ray Gaul finished sixth amongst a field of "hot" Alfa Romeo Veloces in the team's Electron, and Dick Young was a commendable second in H Production in the Electron Minor. Martin himself meanwhile put in appearances at various MoHud events to promote the brand.

By 1960 Schenectady's Bob Wallace and Ned McGurn from Vermont had joined the ranks of local Fairthorpe racers. It's unclear whether these were the original Fairthorpe racing cars passed on to new owners, or additional sales by Martin. New Fairthorpes started as \$2195 and Martin offered discounts for "drivers of rallies and races", further enticing with a Climax powered Electron set up for SCCA Production car racing marked down from \$3295 to \$1995. Attesting to the all-around nature of the Fairthorpe Young and McGurn also finished 1-2 in "Sports Car, wheelbase less than 85 inches" class at the season-ending gymkhana at Westgate Plaza.

Electron, III ...

Fairthorpe featured prominently on the cover of the Knock-Off in 1961, first with the Electron Minor on Bob Wallace for the August issue, and then the September issued introduced Gene Birdsey, who acquired the Wallace car and would have a recurring role in the MoHud Fairthorpe connection.



1962 started off with none other than Roly Heacox joining the ranks of Fairthorpe owners and beginning his campaign with a January visit to the Pittsfield Ice Trials. Roly and his machine appeared at events throughout the summer. Missing in action though was any further mention of Bob Martin Auto Sales.

By 1963 Gene Birdsey seemed to be the sole standard bearer for Fairthorpe. While not a front-runner Gene's enthusiasm knew no bounds, venturing as far afield as not only Thompson Connecticut but also the temporary circuit set up at Dunkirk New York. Gene had a bare-bones racing effort, he didn't have a trailer, the Fairthorpe got to these far-flung adventures on a tow-bar behind a station wagon.

Bob Claffie recalls one memorable evening: "Way back when I was a real novice to wrenching and new to MoHud, too. Somehow I ended up helping Gene prep the Fairthorpe for an upcoming race. First thing I did was to strip some kind of fitting and I was scared s**tless as this was a Friday night for a Saturday race. Would you believe Gene says "don't worry about it, happens all the time". We all carried on as though nothing bad happened and got the job done. Certainly was a big deal for me as I remember it well more than fifty years later".

Electron, IV ...

In the KnockOff, Gene Birdsey took some time to describe what it was like behind the wheel:

"Lime Rock was made for cars like my Fairthorpe (What else is like a Fairthorpe?) It is just barely a flat-out course, with the exception of the hook (i.e. Big Bend), providing the track surface is in good condition and you have the right line. If you're having a bad day it becomes evident right away because you run out or road real quick. Lime Rock has enough variety to be interesting and because most of it is a top speed track it gives you the feeling you are getting the most out of the old machine. No long straights that you can't use or sweeping turns where you only need half the track. I have lots of fun once I get started on the track. On the negative Saturday only is for the birds. Practice sessions are too short as are the races. The atmosphere isn't as friendly as it is out west. These are the only reasons I don't race there more often. The course itself is great"

There was some surprising news in the January 1964 issue of the Knock-Off. Regional Executive Mickey LeVan advertised a competition-prepared 1959 Fairthorpe, minus engine and transmission and the added notation "would make good special or drag machine". The asking price was \$150. Exactly where Mickey got this car is a mystery; he'd been racing a Triumph Spitfire. The March KO had a hastily-scrawled "SOLD" penciled over the ad, but no details ever appeared regarding the buyer. Adding further confusion a profile of Gene Birdsey indicated he'd sold his Fairthorpe and was thinking about a Formula Vee. Had the saga of the Fairthorpe seemed to have reach its conclusion?

But wait, what's this? At Lime Rock's 1965 season-opener who should appear but Birdsey and his now E Production Fairthorpe. Sellers remorse, or was the sale just wishful thinking? After some early season mechanical issues Gene got on the podium at the annual Watkins Glen 100 with a third place finish, showing there was still some life left in the fiberglass flyer. In fact it would be a banner year for Gene, as he'd finish second in the E Production standings in the Area 11 (roughly what we'd now call the NYSRRC Series) championship.

In the midst of this perhaps there was a growing sense of an uncertain future for the plucky British sportster. An enclave emerged within the region committed to aiding and abetting all things Fairthorpe. Enter "Friends Of The Fairthorpe". Membership in this esteemed company could be secured for the princely sum of 50 cents, which entitled the bearer to a spot in the cheering section, as well as any off-track shenanigans the group would to admit to.



Electron, V ...

In spite of his success in 1965 perhaps Gene Birdsey could see the handwriting on the wall. With his new responsibilities as MoHud Regional Executive and the region's first event at Lime Rock (a Drivers' School scheduled for mid April), here's what appeared in the January 1966 edition of the Knock-Off

1959 Fairthorpe E Production. Fastest Fairthorpe in the East (maybe in the United States)... Fully profigied (as per Triumph competition book). Spitfire engine including polished rods. Competition clutch. Zero hours on engine rebuild. Sway bar. Brake system with Mintex competition linings. New wheel bearing. Handles like a Modified. Some street equipment. Economical racing. Good for a beginner or a gymkhana car. Tow bar. Good condition. Body excellent. \$600 firm

Clifton Park's Bob Birk found the sale pitch irresistible, and embarked on joining the ranks of MoHud's illustrious Fairthorpe fraternity. Birk and Fairthorpe successfully maneuvered through the April Drivers' School, though there was a brief moment of drama with some smoke and fire. Friends of The Fairthorpe were ecstatic. But as they say, the best laid plans..... that 1966 Lime Rock school may well have been the last SCCA event ever entered by a Fairthorpe. Nothing more was heard regarding the fate of Birk's racing endeavors, and by the following year he no longer appeared on the regions' membership roster.



Bob Birk's Fairthorpe at Tech and at Speed

The absence of Fairthorpe from actual competition did not deter The Friends of The Fairthorpe from their Annual Tea, or a few shenanigans, including setting up a clandestine checkpoint on the route of an Empire Motor Sports Club rallye, wherein each entry dutifully stopped and was handed a piece of a puzzle.

When assembled at the finish it spelled out the message "This Hoax Has Been Perpetrated by Friends of The Fairthorpe".



Electron,VI ...

Then, alarms! SCCA proposed dropping the Fairthorpe from Production classes after 1970. Specs to be shredded...



The Friends of The Fairthorpe rose to the occasion with an impassioned plea:

It has recently come to our attention that the SCCA Competition Board and the Car Classification Committee are recommending that the Fairthorpe Electron Minor be dropped from the list of Production Sports Cars and removed from the 1971 edition of the Production Car Specifications (making it ineligible to compete in SCCA racing events)

We find insufficient basis for this arbitrary action and do vigorously protest against it. There are presently at least two of these splendid vehicles owned by members of the Mohawk-Hudson Region who have received great moral support in their efforts to successfully campaign these cars. Almost in anticipation of this present crisis The Friends of The Fairthorpe was established in 1965 as an organization formulated for the sole purpose of protecting and promoting the Fairthorpe.

The absence of the Fairthorpe from competition in FIA races, (SCCA) National races, Regional races, and Drivers Schools during the past couple of years should in no way infer its demise. It stands as the epitome of club racing, deterred not in the least by its classic suspension, interesting aerodynamics, underpowered and overworked engine, and consistent unreliability. Its friends do not intend to stand idly by as it is shoved aside to make way for progress in SCCA racing.

The solidarity of this organization is such that it will not hesitate for an instant to use the various modern methods to make you acutely aware of this demand. Would you care for the adverse publicity generated by a group of loyal (SCCA) members burning their Tech. Inspection Forms in front of the club office in Westport (Connecticut) or an around-the-clock vigil reading from the red-covered GCR? However we have sufficient confidence that justice will prevail, and are attaching some Honorary Memberships.

LONG LIVE THE FAIRTHORPE

The SCCA has long had a reputation as being a stodgy, humorless, bureaucracy, but the reply from Jim Patterson, Director of Club Racing, was the very soul of wit and wisdom.

>>

SPORTS CAR CLUB OF AMERICA, INC.
Club Office: Post Office Box 791
Westport, Connecticut 06880

March 26, 1970

To: THE FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE
From: Jim Patterson, Director of Club Racing
Subject: Fairthorpe Electron Minor

Ladies and Gentlemen,

As a new and concerned member of the FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE, let it be known that I will make every effort to ensure that the goals of the FOF are presented in their proper light to the Car Classification Committee and the Competition Board.

FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE will be interested that the receipt of the honorary membership in the FOF was particularly appreciated by Tracy Bird. As I handed him his card, tears swelled his eyes and he produced a well-worn copy of the January-February issue of SPORTS CAR. It fell open to page 21, revealing the results of the November 17, 1957 Riverside F + G Production race which announced to the world that A. Tracy Bird, III, had placed third in GP in a FAIRTHORPE! The complete irony was not apparent until Tracy confessed that he viewed the bestowing of Honorary Membership in the FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE as belated recognition of what he considers to be the high point of his racing career: to be the only driver in the history of racing to finish a race in a Fairthorpe! The FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE have found a champion in Bird! (Historians noting Mr. Bird's past efforts in saving 3-liter D Modified should not be discouraged).

A possible solution to the crisis facing the FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE does, you will be pleased to hear, seem to be evident. Since the activities of the FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE center around the Mohawk-Hudson Region, it is entirely possible that the Competition Board could proceed with the deletion of the Fairthorpe Electron Minor from the Production Category for all Regions except Mohawk-Hudson! A special class, restricted to Fairthorpe Electron Minors could be established and races would be run only on permanent road courses within the geographic bounds of the Mohawk-Hudson Region. The fact that there are no such courses is irrelevant since examples of the marque have been absent from competition for several years. The plan would seem to have tremendous merit since the competition stature of the Fairthorpe would be maintained and the class would offer (for the first time) really cheap racing and the FRIENDS OF THE FAIRTHORPE would still have an excuse for the Annual Fairthorpe Tea.

Your comments are earnestly solicited.

Sincerely,
James D. Patterson, Director of Club Racing, SCCA

Electron, VIII ...

But Patterson's letter wasn't quite the last word on Fairthorpes in MoHud. The all-but-forgotten Roly Heacox car actually sat in a barn on Roly's property in Berne until the day in the mid 70s when the barn burned down, taking his Fairthorpe with it. Thereafter the fiberglass flyer from across the water was all but forgotten.

Then came a fateful day in 1981. Somehow I got wind of a two-seater with a rollbar sitting behind a radiator shop in Balston Spa. Expecting to find a Bugeye Sprite or maybe even an MGA my jaw dropped when I beheld a FAIRTHORPE. It appeared to be the same car as seen in the Friends of the Fairthorpe group photo of 1966. For having been neglected for the better part of fifteen years it was in amazingly good shape. The engine was missing but the fiberglass was none the worse for wear, and when I opened the boot (trunk) the full-size street windscreen was amazingly intact. A quick offer of \$300 and the car was on my trailer.

While I had grand plans for the Fairthorpe, fatherhood was looming and cash in hand was more pressing than dreams deferred. Within a year I sold the car to a fellow from Massachusetts whose name I've long since forgotten. I never heard from him again.

A chance conversation with Clark Nicholls in the Lime Rock paddock during the Season of Quarantine rekindled my curiosity, leading me to a Facebook group devoted to the rare marque. I posted a few photos of the local Fairthorpes and was struck speechless to learn that a car bearing an uncanny resemblance to the Birdsey/Birk car had just emerged from storage in New Hampshire.

An exchange of photos with Clarke Taylor at Historic Motor Sports confirmed the car's identity, it was the long lost Fairthorpe that had so many friends. The car was part an estate sale Clarke was managing. The red Fairthorpe had been unchanged since it left my garage nearly forty years ago. The car will undergo a restoration to running condition, though a return to competition is highly unlikely. While many of the original Friends have sadly left our company, it seems only right and fitting to reinstate the Friends of the Fairthorpe Annual Tea. Long Live The Fairthorpe indeed!

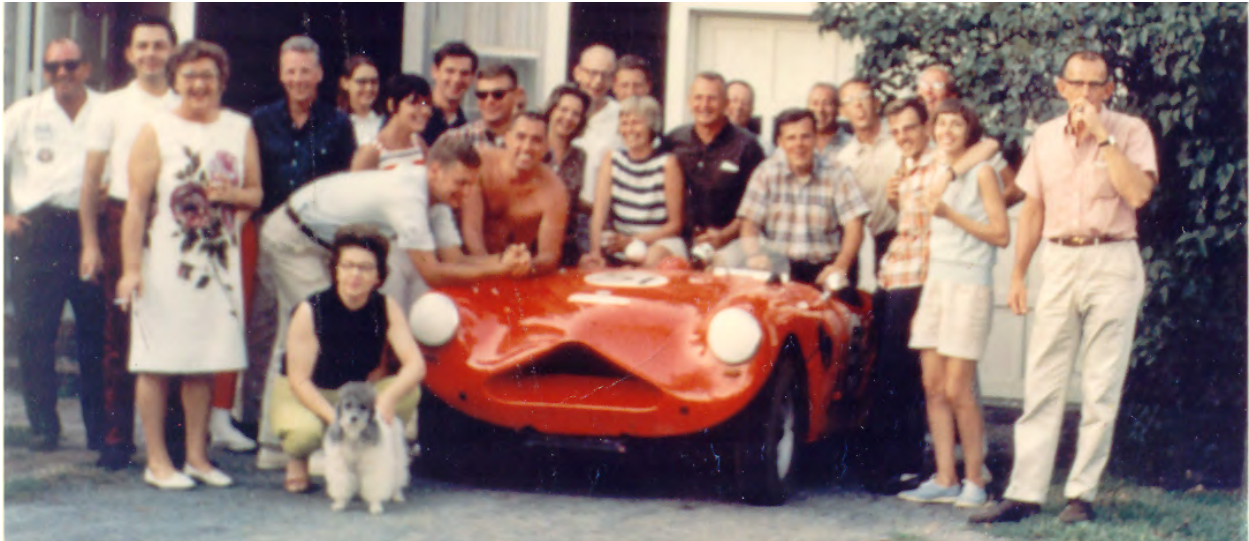


1981



2021

Electron: p.s.



Turnout for an Early FotF Annual Tea



In what my high school English teacher might call the denouement of the Fairthorpe story, Clark Taylor, who's doing the restoration, finally found the chassis plate ID under the front frame rail, hidden by several coats of paint.

Friends Of The Fairthorpe will be happy to hear this is chassis #9906, shipped to Bob Martin Auto Sales on December 2, 1958. Whether that makes it a late '58 or early '59 is still up for discussion.

~ Greg

Electron: p.p.s.

In yet another example of "good things come to those who wait," the Fairthorpe Electron and Electron Minor are now eligible for running in the Vintage Sports Car Club's "Through the 1970s Production Sports Cars" classes.

Pictured below is a Minor run by Richard Campbell, based downstate.



And finally, from the KO editorial offices...

The annual April 1st edition of the KnockOff usually channels the spirits of "Count" Eliot Zborowski who died on April 1st in 1903 when his Mercedes crashed at the La Turbie hill climb above present day Monaco, and Hugh Troy of Ithaca, New York, whose gentle pranks in the 1950s are fondly recalled.

However Greg's Fairthorpe – MoHud connection makes the case that *whimsey* and *shenanigans* also serve the traditions of April 1st.

But lest you think we've forgotten those traditions, here's a pic from what would have been a long story on Jim Bucci's new racer, designed by his cousin John the inventor (not be confused with his cousin Clemar the Sicilian racer), had we not featured the Fairthorpe saga. And we've saved some stuff for next year...



The Annual Coloring Page
You can have your Fairthorpe in any color you want!

