

British Car Personalities

Earl Howe, the Grand Old Man of Motor Racing

by Bob Vitrikas



Earl Howe relaxing at Brooklands in 1936, wearing his trademark cap.
Notice the British Racing Drivers Club (BRDC) patch on his racing overalls
and the belt to keep his kidneys in place on the notoriously bumpy Brooklands circuit!
(Photo courtesy of *The Autocar*)

Commodore, The Right Honourable, Francis Richard Henry Penn Curzon, 5th Earl of Howe, Order of the British Empire, a knight of the realm, and member of the House of Commons and the House of Lords, was born in Mayfair London on 1 May 1884. Born to wealth and title, a member of the House of Lords by appointment elected to a seat in the House of Commons, he chose to abandon his political career and go racing full time with the greats of the period between the 'Great Wars'. I consider this to be the 'Golden Age of Racing' when drivers risked their lives every time they got behind the wheel with little to no safety equipment on the car or on them as they battled for national pride!

Educated at Eaton and Oxford, Howe followed Curzon family tradition serving as Commander Viscount Curzon in the Royal Navy during World War I, including the ill-fated battle of Gallipoli on the shores of what is now Turkey. Post World War I he won a seat in the House of Commons but decided to cut his political career short when the lure of racing demanded his full attention. Not surprising considering his habit of driving one of his two Fiat 500s to the Parliament wearing his bright blue racing colors!

During these early days of road racing, the Irish expanded the available racing circuits by hosting the Irish Tourist Trophy race at Newtownards, also known as the Ards Circuit. The inaugural race was held in 1928 and this is where Earl Howe participated in his first race at the ripe old age of 44 (not a typo!). And what a course to debut on! The Ards Circuit was a 13.67 miles long, run on rural (read narrow and very dangerous!) roads. Total distance was 405 miles. The crowd was estimated at between 250,000 to 500,000! Howe's race ended when his Bugatti Type 43's fuel tank ruptured, but not after he averaged 70 mph on the challenging and dangerous circuit.

Howe had quite an extensive collection of cars to chose from including some of the greatest racers of the time from France, Italy, Germany and of course England. However, he considered the British race cars inferior to those of Italy and France. In the early days of his racing career, he favored the continental marques over British steeds. Howe was converted by MG's racing successes in the early 1930s and switched his allegiance to British brands driving six-cylinder MGs and ERAs to good effect.



Howe's racing fleet in 1932 included two Delages, two Bugattis, one Alfa Romeo one Mercedes Benz and a Commer transporter to haul them to and from races. Photo courtesy of *The Autocar*.

Road racing in England meant racing at Brooklands, a multi-purpose automobile racing circuit and testing ground combined with an aircraft manufacturing site and airport. Opened in 1907, Brooklands was built at vast expense to serve as an incubator for British automobile and aircraft development and testing. Howe competed at Brooklands many times, suffering an horrific crash, which thankfully he survived, while fighting with Prince Bira of Thailand for pole position in 1937. Howe was undeterred and returned the following year setting a personal best lap of 107 mph on the notoriously bumpy and downright hair raising circuit. Howe also won England's Donnington Park Grand Prix in 1933 driving a Bugatti. World War II put an end to racing at Brooklands and effectively ended Earl Howe's racing career.

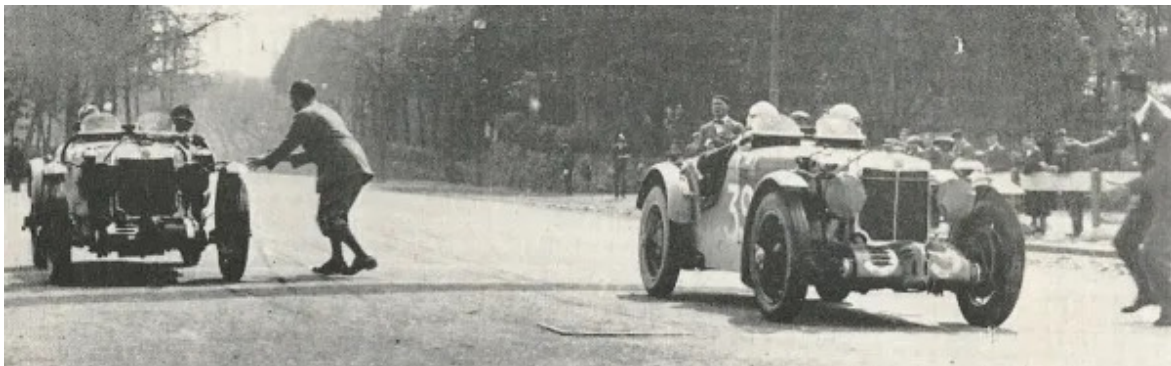
Howe was perhaps best known for his racing exploits outside the British Isles. Beginning in 1929, he was a regular at Le Mans competing six times between 1929 and 1935. He captured a class win 1930 and won overall in 1931 co-driving an Alfa Romeo with Sir Henry "Tim" Birkin of "Bentley Boys" fame. Full credit to the hard working mechanics who rebuilt the engine overnight, delivering the car for the race at the crack of dawn. Howe also captured a class win in 1930.



In this victory photo, Lord Howe is on the right and 'Tim' Birkin on the left as they celebrate their victory in the 1931 24 Hours of Le Mans race. Birkin looks a bit nonplussed by it all. I wonder why? Photo courtesy of *The Autocar*.

Howe became good friends with the “Bentley Boys” especially ‘Benjy’ Benjafield who founded the prestigious British Racing Driver’s Club in 1928. Howe was the second President of the BRDC and served in this position from 1929 until his death in 1964. In his honor the BRDC established the Earl Howe Trophy which was awarded annually to the highest placed British driver in the Indianapolis 500, or to the British driver who has established the most meritorious performance of the year in North America. The trophy has evolved over time and is now tied to the Goodwood Members’ Meeting race.

Howe’s other European exploits included winning the Grand Prix de Dieppe in a 1.5 litre Delage. Sadly the Delage was written off in a crash during the 1933 Monza Italy race. Happily Howe was not injured! Turning to British marques, Howe persuaded MG to build a racer to compete with Alfa Romeo and Maserati in the 1,100 cc class and thus the all-conquering MG K3 was born. Their first big international test would be the 1933 Italian Mille Miglia, a thousand mile race run over tortuous rural Italian roads. Howe was so confident in the capabilities of the MG that he paid for their entrance fees and the cost of transporting the cars to Italy. MG entered a team of three K3s to contest the race. Howe and H.C. ‘Hugh’ Hamilton co-drove their MG K3 to second place in class, finishing just 90 seconds behind the class winning MG driven by MG record breaker George Eyston and Count ‘Johnny’ Lurani. MG also won the coveted *Gran Premio Brescia* team award, the first time a non-Italian team won this award. Leading the race in 1935, Howe crashed out of the race ending his Mille Miglia entries.



At the Bologna checkpoint, Birkin and Rubin’s MG K3 is on the left and Howe and Hamilton’s is on the right. Birkin and Rubin played the role of ‘rabbit’ going full tilt until their engine expired leaving the other two MG K3s to lead the class home with a one-two finish! Photo courtesy of the MG Car Club.

Further afield, Howe competed in South Africa, coming eighth in the inaugural South African Grand Prix held on 30 January 1937 on the newly constructed track north of Johannesburg. In an interesting footnote to the history of this race, Howe met a young South African student while sailing to this race and married her in December 1937. His second wife, Miss Joyce Mary McLean, was just 23 years old. Howe was 52 years old. Ahem. Perhaps in celebration, Howe won the 1938 South Africa Grosvenor Grand Prix which was held on January 15, 1938 in Cape Town. In tribute to this great British driver’s legacy, the Johannesburg circuit was named the ‘Lord Howe Circuit’. The fact

that Howe's father, the Earl of Athlone, was Governor-General of South Africa from 1923-1931 may have influenced the naming.

In addition to his many European victories, Howe was crowned British motor racing champion five times, especially impressive considering he was 44 years old when he started racing in earnest. Howe took eleven podium finishes in major races held between 1933 and 1939. World War II forced his retirement from racing at age 55! His last race was the Junior Car Club (JCC) International Trophy held in May 1939 at Brooklands. Howe drove a British car, an English Racing Automobiles (ERA) but an unfortunate misjudgment in torrential rain led to his crashing out of the race.

During World War II Commodore The Earl Howe was called back to active duty with the Royal Navy where he served for the duration of the conflict.



Commodore Howe on the right confers with his son, Lieutenant Edward Curzon, on board the battleship HMS Howe during WWII. The HMS Howe, a King George V-class battleship was laid down on 1 June 1937 and launched on 9 April 1940. Originally named the *Beatty*, her name was changed in honor of Admiral of the Fleet Richard Howe who served admirably (see what I did there?) from 1740-1799 in five major conflicts including the American Revolution.

A man of many talents whose passion for racing and talent as a driver, drove him to the very top of his chosen profession. When his driving days were over following WWII, Howe's talent as an organizer and leader resulted in his establishing the 500 cc formula race class which produced British driving greats such as Stirling Moss. I believe many would agree his lasting legacy is leading the BRDC from 1929-1964 and after WWII, he was instrumental in founding the British Grand Prix race at Silverstone. Well done sir!

Addendum: If you would like to own a piece of Earl Howe's personal history, my South African friend Norm Ewing is selling two arm bands that belonged to Earl Howe which he wore at the 1934 British Empire Trophy race and the 1936 J.C.C. International Trophy race. If you are interested, please email Norm at mgeewing@mweb.co.za



The 1934 driver armband was worn by Earl Howe, June 23, at the 1934 British Empire Trophy race held at Brooklands. Howe drove his T59 Bugatti which sadly came to an end as documented by the State Library, Queensland, Australia taken from an article in *The Evening News*, Monday 25 June 1934.

"Howe crashed at a bend. His car (Bugatti) turned round twice and ran backward through a fence, which was smashed. Howe, however, was uninjured."

Earl Howe has four wheels off the ground on the notoriously bumpy Brooklands circuit as he fiercely competes for the 1934 British Empire Trophy race victory. The 1933 Mille Miglia winning MG driver George Eyston won this race driving an MG K3. Photo courtesy of *The Autocar*.

