

## Don't just drive it, drive it hard

A day at a racing circuit is the perfect place to exercise your classic car.

By Paul Hudson

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### Alfa Romeo 1750 GTV

Every year it's the same ritual. I must use my GTV more, savouring the sheer difference that driving an old car demands and that few modern cars can provide. It's a burning desire that often remains unfulfilled. This year was going to be different.



Photo: Ken Carrington

So, as usual, the poor Alfa sat forlorn in the garage awaiting attention. Prolonged (more than two days) fine weather finally persuaded me to see what state it was in after nearly six months of hibernation – I'm ashamed to admit that it hadn't turned a wheel since the MSA Classic run in the sun last October.

After fitting a long-overdue new battery, it grudgingly fired in a reassuringly short time and, after briefly running on three cylinders, it cleared and a glorious Alfa twin-cam rasp filled the air.

An exploratory drive around the block to check that everything still worked was a breeze, with no untoward squeaks or rattles. After so long away from the driving seat, a two-minute test turned into an hour's drive.

But this isn't enough to blow away the cobwebs from either car or driver. Enter Classic Alfa, purveyor of everything for 105-series Alfa Romeos (coupés, saloons, Spiders and even V8-engined Montreals) as well as earlier 750- and 101-series cars, which had scheduled its annual trackday at Goodwood in early April. That's more like it.

A call to Classic Alfa owner Richard Norris procured an entry, which promised maximum track time at the ultra-fast circuit for a very reasonable £185 plus VAT (£212.75). Not only are you getting to extend your pride and joy in safety, you're also following in the wheeltracks of some of the great names from the circuit's heyday in the Fifties and Sixties, including Sir Stirling Moss, Graham Hill, Jim Clark et al. The circuit – unchanged since those halcyon days – also hosts the great and the good of current motorsport at the annual Revival.

Despite the early start and atrocious Easter weather, the chance to drive as hard and as fast as I liked spurred us towards the former Battle of Britain airfield near the West Sussex coast. As we drove into the paddock it became immediately clear that very many drivers take their trackdays extremely seriously. Extensively – and no doubt expensively – prepared cars arrived on trailers, despite being road legal, while a smattering of Giulia GTA racers and seriously modified road cars made my almost standard GTV look extremely tame.

The circuit looked treacherous after persistent overnight rain, but before we could try it there was the driver briefing, essential to ensure everyone's safety and that understandable enthusiasm doesn't overcome the general idea of having fun. The main rule is overtaking on the left, and only on the straights. With the speeds involved, even in a standard road car, participants are left in no doubt that breaking the rules will result in a black flag and a dressing down. Persistent offenders are invited to leave.

Goodwood also operates an "invitation to overtake" rule. Faster cars should not overtake unless it's clear the driver in front has seen them and moved well over to the right.

As promised, the format of 10 cars on the circuit at any time provided plenty of action – in all, the circuit was open for seven hours. Each session lasts between 10 and 12 minutes, which is sufficient for about five laps, including the all-important cooling down circuit to reduce the chance of brake problems.

Discretion being the better part of valour, my first few sessions were sighting laps. This involved staying out of the way of the fast-from-the-off racers and recalling that the unforgiving earth bank on the outside of the circuit ended the career of Stirling Moss. Even at relatively slow speed, you know that any mistake is likely to be punished by a big accident, exacerbated by the narrow strip of sopping grass between track and banking.

Which is why I chose to spin exiting the chicane. I blame the tyres, of course, but fortunately my graceful pirouette off the tarmac didn't damage the car, although I was mortified that the session had to be stopped to enable me to return to the paddock.

A fellow participant insisted on adjusting the tyre pressures on my car, which were way out despite having been set that morning. An imbalance of one or two PSI makes no difference on the road, but circuit driving makes such settings critical. Sustained high speeds means that slightly higher than standard pressures are recommended – my car certainly behaved better as a result, even more so when the track dried.

That's the only problem with trackdays, they make a competent and rapid road car feel inadequate. As well as the need for grippier tyres, the gearing is too short, the handling too roly-poly. Worst of all is the brakes. Mine are fine for road use but, after repeated heavy applications at Madgwick, St Mary's and Woodcote corners, the pedal felt spongy by mid-afternoon, with an occasional judder. The standard seats and belts also failed to hold me in place and I developed a stiff neck.

This is going to get expensive... beefier brakes are currently top of my shopping list. Then maybe further lowered suspension, with stiffer springs, new dampers and thicker anti-roll bars. A bucket seat with racing harness. That would necessitate some sort of roll cage, which would have the added benefit of stiffening the bodyshell.

Or I could simply enjoy the Alfa on the public highway, as the craftsmen of Milan intended. See you out on the road.

Classic Alfa, [www.classicalfa.com](http://www.classicalfa.com); 020 8679 0707