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*Lunch with* Hugh Dibley







LUNCH WITH

# Hugh Dibley

*He was part of the 1960s jet-set, rubbing shoulders with Clark, Moss and Stewart before becoming a manufacturer. Despite all that, he only ever regarded racing as a hobby*

WRITER Colin Goodwin

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iverside, California, 1964. A psychologist is at the *Los Angeles Times* Grand Prix, interviewing racing drivers as part of a research project into what makes top sports people tick. From Europe there's a healthy contingent that includes Jack Brabham, Bruce McLaren, Jim Clark, John Surtees and this month's lunch guest, Hugh Dibley. "We were given a pile of paper with dozens of questions on them which we were to answer," says Dibley. "Daft questions like 'Would you like to go to a new restaurant or experience sexual excitement?' Well, I didn't give a toss about fancy restaurants."

He's not much fussed about posh eating today, either. We are in the Kensington branch of Côte Bistro at his suggestion. The menu looks good and it's just a short walk from Dibley's long established London address near the original Coys showroom. Dibley is my sort of lunch companion: no faffing over the menu for hours. He chooses mushroom soup followed by cod goujons with a house white to slosh it down.

But back to Riverside and the results of that survey into the workings of the racing driver's mind. "It was interesting," says Dibley, "because all of the other blokes who were quizzed came out as aggressive and very focused; the results of my test [I think it was the Myers-Briggs test that had just come out] said that I was not aggressive and had a lot of sympathy towards my fellow man."

A lack of aggression is not ideal in a racing driver but I would imagine that the hundred or so passengers sitting in the back of a BOAC Boeing 707 with Hugh Palliser Kingsley Dibley at the controls would be relieved to hear that their pilot was not an aggressive type and was by nature concerned for the safety and wellbeing of his fellow men. It's an interesting combination, racing driver and airline pilot. Particularly since Dibley's racing was conducted at a high level in very distinguished company. So how do you combine two disciplines? Where does the interesting Hugh Dibley story start?

"With the Royal Navy. My father was an engineering Admiral who wound up running Devonport dockyard. I was born in Hong Kong in 1937 but we moved about a lot during my early life before settling in Lee-on-Solent, in a house that was literally yards from ☐

Dibley drove the Howmet TX in several races, including the 1968 BOAC 500 at Brands Hatch



the threshold of runway 36 at the airfield that was the Fleet Air Arm's base. Seafires, Sea Furies, Mosquitoes and Sea Hornets would constantly come over our house and, not surprisingly, as a youngster I was mesmerised.

"My father had always wanted to be a farmer and when he retired bought a smallholding and, like a lot of people who grew up on farms, I learnt to drive hammering up and down our long drive and in the fields. I loved everything mechanical and was always taking things to bits and putting them back together again. One weekend dad took the family to Goodwood for what was the first meeting at the newly opened circuit in 1948. That sparked the racing interest and, since Goodwood was cycling distance from home, I went often with mates. I remember seeing the Aston that caught fire in the pits.

"Farnborough was a rather longer ride but I used to go by bicycle to the airshow. As far as a career I had no doubt, I wanted to be a pilot. The RAF was offering three-year commissions at the time but for the son of an admiral, the great-great-grandson of one of Nelson's man-of-war captains [and sponsor of Captain Cook], joining any service other than the navy was out of the question. Even my big sister had been a officer Wren during the war.

"You joined the navy at 15 and went to Dartmouth, but you didn't start your flying career until you were 21 years old and at 15 that seemed a lifetime away so I stayed at school and then joined the Navy as a national serviceman. I'd been very worried about not being accepted as a pilot but that went okay. However, it all went wrong when Duncan Sandys [minister of defence] put in his cuts and flying training was curtailed. To cut a long story short, an admiral I met said 'Why don't you join BOAC?' He'd just been across the Atlantic with the airline and told me that working for them looked like fun. So I joined in 1958 and did my training at Hamble."

No sign of motor racing yet, but young Dibley had equipped himself with a Riley Nine that he'd bought while doing his basic Navy flying training at Syreton, near Nottingham. "It didn't cost much and I used to drive it everywhere like a lunatic. Clearly I was going to kill myself, but since I was still very much a motor racing fan, and wasn't going to experience the adrenaline rush of flying a jet fighter off an aircraft carrier deck, I decided to buy an AC Aceca that I'd seen for sale and to try my hand at racing. I did every discipline at every opportunity, taking part in club races, hillclimbs and anything else I could find."

In 1960 Dibley moved up a gear and joined the popular and frenetic world of Formula Junior. Lotus would be the logical place to go for a top-flight car but Dibley chose to spend his money at Lola, a marque that featured strongly in his later career. "Lola was very much a small family company whereas by then Lotus was a big business. I figured, and I was right, that I'd get a more focused service from smaller Lola."

Like Formula Ford later in the decade, Formula Junior was crammed

full of drivers aiming to make their mark and progress up through the ranks. Drivers like Richard Attwood and Trevor Taylor. Dibley must have been a strange interloper: a youngster who had a passion for his day job and no desire to leave it for full-time motor racing. "Stirling Moss said 'You Formula Junior blokes come into a corner five abreast and all want to come out of the corner in the lead. We Grand Prix drivers are much more civilised.' And rather more professional. I used to leave my car on its trailer at the Heathrow crew car park and then return after a couple of weeks away, in Australia or somewhere, knock the rust off it and go racing."

DIBLEY STAYED IN FORMULA JUNIOR FOR THREE YEARS BEFORE moving to sports cars in 1964. "I bought a new Brabham BT8 from Jack Brabham and took it to Goodwood in April for a test. The bloody thing was undriveable, very unstable. Jack happened to be there and so I got him to have a go. He did one lap and came back in. He peered at the dampers but didn't say a word. A few weeks later I took it to Silverstone for another go and Stirling was there so I got him to drive it. 'It's undriveable,' he said, 'get Bruce [McLaren] or Jack to sort it out'.

"While I was at Silverstone I had a go in Stirling's Porsche 904. Wish I hadn't: I put a wheel on the grass at Stowe and flew off into the bank and wrote the thing off. Stirling was ever so good to me over the years. I can't remember, but I think I met him first through his secretary Val Pirie. Possibly at the Steering Wheel Club in Mayfair. I used to run errands for him like collecting shirts from New York. He was seeing a lovely girl called Shirlee Adams, who was an American Airlines stewardess, and Stirling used to ask me to look her up in New York when I was there. She eventually married Henry Fonda. Funny, I recently paid £200 to have my photograph taken with Jane Fonda so that I could ask after Shirlee. She just said 'She's fine' and that was it."

The BT8's cure came from Brabham employee Len Wimhurst. "Len put 13in wheels on the car and a spoiler, made from a piece of tin or something, on the back. Anyway, that transformed the car. I took it to Brands Hatch for the Guards Trophy and came ninth."

A good result for a hobbyist racer but more was to come in July. Dibley entered the Brabham for the sports car support race at the British Grand Prix also at Brands. This is 1964, remember, when the top men were called racing drivers, not Formula 1 drivers, because they drove all types of cars for a living. The entry list was peppered with top names, among them Jackie Stewart, Denny Hulme, Roy Salvadori and Frank Gardner. Dibley won.

"Slight caveat there," explains Dibley, "Denny was second but his BT8 had a 2.0-litre engine and mine had a 2.5-litre lump in it. Jackie [Stewart] was driving the Tojeiro Jaguar, which was a dreadful thing from which it was impossible to see anything. I was trying to lap him in the race and it took a while to get past, but Denny was 10sec behind so I

## Hugh Dibley

### A career in pictures



1964

Dibley aboard his Brabham BT8 during the British GP meeting at Brands Hatch. He won, from Denny Hulme and Roy Salvadori



1966

The remains of Tony Sargeant's Lola T70, which Dibley had been driving in the Mont-Tremblant Can-Am fixture. He escaped serious injury



1968

Dibley was part of the crew that flew the Howmet - plus gold bullion! - to the UK for the BOAC 500. He and Dick Thompson shared the car



*"I used to pay Stirling £30 a week, of which he gave £15 to the mechanic. I was able to get myself to the foreign races for free, through work"*

was okay. After the race Jackie came up to me to apologise for holding me up. A class act, very thoughtful then and now. Tony Brooks was doing post-race interviews for some reason and came up to me and said 'That was a great result, I presume you'll now be wanting to progress your career upwards?'

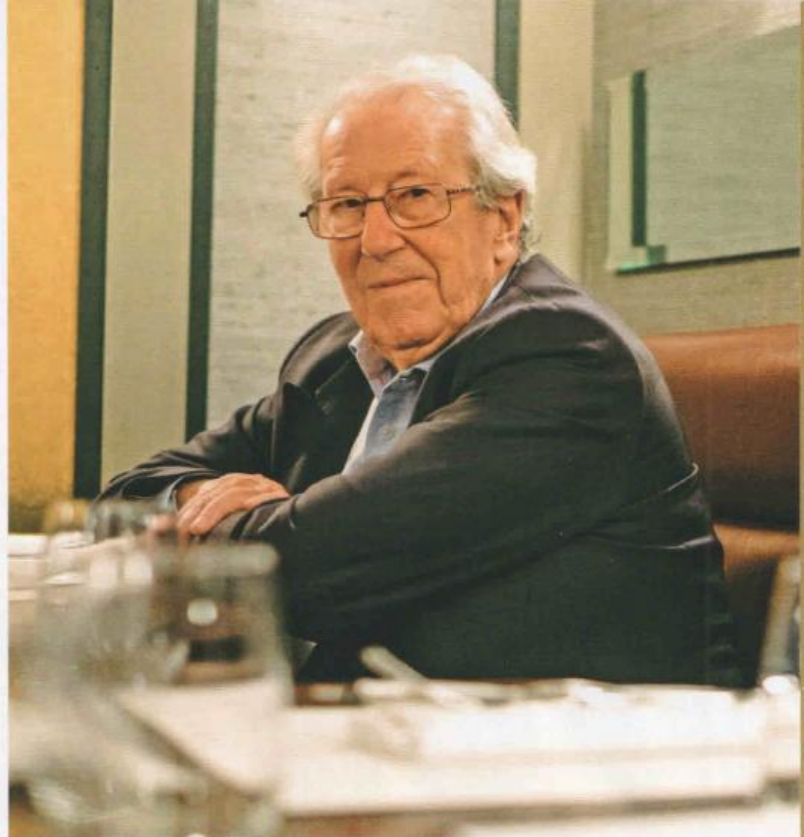
"I replied, 'No, not really' - I think Brooks was a bit taken aback and just said 'Oh'."

Dibley's entrant for the Brands race was the Stirling Moss Auto Racing Team. "I used to pay Stirling £30 a week, of which he gave £15 to the mechanic. I might have given him a bit more at the end of the season. He didn't pay me and I was able to get myself to the foreign races for free, through work."

I was talking to Richard Attwood about Dibley recently and the first thing he commented on was Dibley's somewhat exotic race calendar. For example, in '64 he also took the BT8 to Nassau for the Bahamas Speed Week. "Made a right cock-up of that," he says. "Left the line in the wrong gear, which didn't impress Stirling." We started our lunch at Riverside with Dibley and his rivals having their heads examined by a shrink. Again Dibley was in the Brabham and, as usual, under the SMART banner.

"I qualified really well and Frank [Gardner] said 'I bet the bastard's still got that 2.5 engine in it'." He hadn't. Class win and eighth overall against a field of Devonshire cream quality - pretty good for a part-timer. "Flying dictated what I could do. I lived in a permanent anxious state, fretting about getting back from a trip in time for a race. I had to chat up the girls in the scheduling office: there was no computerised rostering system in those days. I used to go on trips because they fitted in with a race - that wasn't popular with the other pilots. When I was starting to get better known one of the bosses, a chap called Noel Peacock, called me into his office to grill me as to whether I was fiddling the roster. I was deemed clean."


For 1965 Dibley upgraded to a Lola T70. "Tommy Atkins was going to run the car, but sadly he passed away so I took it on and Stirling ran it



for me." One of the first races that Dibley and his new Lola contested was at Mont-Tremblant (also known as St Jovite), Canada, a venue that the Can-Am championship would visit when that iconic series kicked off the following year.

"I certainly didn't fulfil my potential at that meeting. I was running third in the second heat; Jimmy Clark and Bruce McLaren had both broken down. Trouble is, my engine was running hot and I was worried about joining them and was driving like an old woman. With three laps to go the engine was still running fine so I decide to pull my finger out. Surtees was leading in his T70, I doubt I'd have caught him, but I gave it a shot. I was having a lot of trouble with a few backmarkers and one nudged me off the track when I went past. I should have been more aggressive and blasted past him earlier. Anyway, I went off backwards at some lick and hit a tree. I clambered out and, since I was so hot, lay down on my back next to the car. I was furious with myself and was cursing out loud my stupidity.

"A flag marshal came up and said to me: 'Pity, you were going so well,' then Murray Wallace, who was running the race and who was a mate of mine [and coincidentally an Air Canada pilot], arrived. The marshal said 'I think he's delirious, his language is shocking.' Murray replied 'No, he always talks like that'."

Free flights enabled Dibley to compete internationally, but he still 



1968

The Dibley/Mike de Udy Lola T70 chases the Gerhard Mitter/Rolf Stommelen Porsche 907 during the Sebring 12 Hours. Both cars retired



1969

By the end of the Sixties Dibley had started to rein in his racing activities, in order to devote his attention more fully to his day job with BOAC





## Lunch with Hugh Dibley



had to get the car to races. "I tried to get BOAC to fly the Lola to the Mont-Tremblant race, but the management said that was possible so long as the car was broken down into pieces, none of which could weigh more than 100kg. Well that wasn't going to work because the bloody engine block weighed more than that." Closer to home, there was another cracking result at Brands Hatch in the 1966 British Eagles Trophy Grand Prix support race for sports cars. "I won the race in the T70. It was a cracker: Jacky Ickx came up behind me and thought 'It's only Dibley, I'll blast past him' but outbraked himself and ended up fifth. Chris Amon was third and Brian Redman fourth. After the race Bruce McLaren said 'We only put Chris [Amon] into the race so that he could clean up and bloody Dibley goes and wins it'."

As previously mentioned, 1966 heralded the inaugural year of the Canadian American Challenge Cup. Can-Am was a good earner with big entry fees and a big pot at the end. "I used to kid myself that I broke even in my racing," says Dibley, "but probably not. It was a combination of start money, my pilot's salary and a bit of family cash. The trouble was, I could never commit to a full series like Can-Am as it was impossible to fit all the races around my day job. Never, even after a good win, did I ever consider packing up flying. BOAC was considered a great airline to work for. It would be different today."

Dibley did have one outing in the Can-Am series in '66, with a spectacular result but not quite in the right way. "It was back at Mont-Tremblant, where there was a big crest taken at very high speed.

Paul Hawkins in his Lola took off and had a massive accident, though thankfully he walked away. I said to him 'You shouldn't have gone flying, you haven't got a pilot's licence.' The joke backfired on me in a big way. Unlike Hawkins's T70, mine had a small front spoiler and felt all right over the crest when I tried it with a bit of a lift. Bit squirrely, but not too bad. Anyway, next lap I come up to the crest flat out. Suddenly I'm faced with a view that is reassuring in a Boeing 707 but extremely disconcerting in a racing car. I knew the landing would be nasty so I tucked myself down - as far as the belts would allow - into the passenger side. I did a massive end-over-end and watched my legs flailing about. Then it went quiet. 'Thank Christ that's over' I thought, and put my head back up. More sky: I was airborne again. This time it's a barrel roll, and eventually I finished up in one piece in a rather bent chassis. A few yards away, the car's Chevrolet V8 was sitting upside down on a tree stump."

Sometime in 1966 Dibley bumped into Jim Clark at Heathrow, the Scot on his way to New York. "Oh, if I'd known you were flying there today I'd have got you to fly me", Jimmy said to me, 'but I'm going TWA.' I told him he was a bastard and asked why he wasn't flying BOAC. I did a bit of checking and discovered that, in the racing world, only Reg Parnell flew with us; the rest used US airlines. When I got home I wrote to the BOAC chairman Sir Guy Guthrie, saying that it was a shame that our entire racing community wasn't using us. I got a very nice reply."

Dibley is rather too modest to suggest, if it were true, that this letter





The day job. Left, Dibley (Camaro) chases Frank Gardner's Falcon at Oulton Park in '67.

*"The car came to the UK in a BOAC freighter, which I was flying as crew. The other cargo was 36 tons of gold bullion, spread along the hold's floor and on top of which we parked the Howmet"*

was the catalyst for the airline's sponsorship of the now legendary Brands Hatch sports car races. I can't believe that it didn't at least get someone thinking. Regardless, 1967 was the first year of the BOAC 500. For once Dibley wasn't Lola-mounted. Instead he shared David Piper's Ferrari 250LM with Roy Pierpoint. If you go onto YouTube you'll find a wonderful BOAC-produced publicity film of the race that starts with Dibley stepping off an airliner and climbing aboard his AC Cobra and driving to Brands Hatch for the race. There's race coverage, too. Dibley and Pierpoint won their class with the LM.

WITH HIS FLYING CAREER SEVERELY LIMITING HIS RACING outings, it is rather a surprise to hear that in the summer of 1967 Dibley embarked upon an enterprise that would completely gobble up his spare time. He started a racing car manufacturing company called, using his second christian name, Palliser Racing Designs Ltd. "I must have been mad. Len Wimhurst, who had sorted out my BT8, had left Brabham and told me that he thought he could build a perfectly good racing car himself. So I got him to build a single-seater which I then put on pole at a club race at Castle Combe. The next year we made some Formula B cars and these were sold in America by Bob Winkelmann, elder brother of well-known team owner Roy. Bob had been at BOAC as a traffic officer and was a good salesman. We sold loads of cars in the US, including lots of Formula Fords. Our FFs did particularly well and in 1970 our cars won the Townsend Thoresen and Guards Formula Ford

titles. It all came tumbling down after Bob cancelled an order for 20 cars because his customer in Texas had gone bust." *Motor Sport's* previous meeting with Dibley was at Palliser's Clapham, London, works in 1970 where the proprietor was found with his head in the new Boeing 747's operating handbook mugging up to transfer to the new Jumbo Jet.

Meanwhile, the racing continued. And in 1968 in a particularly fascinating car, one quite suited to a jet aircraft pilot. That car was the Howmet TX turbine. "A driver called Ray Heppenstall got an old McKee sports car chassis and put a Continental gas turbine [designed for a helicopter] in it. Through the BRSCC's Nick Syrett, BOAC had asked me to do some PR in the US for that year's BOAC 500, to drum up some entries, and one of these was Heppenstall's Howmet turbine. Nick got me a drive in it, so I went to Sebring for a go. Heppenstall wanted to drive it himself, of course. I was quicker than him, especially after he'd spun it in a cloud of dust. It broke down in the Sebring 12 Hours, in which I was driving a T70 coupé with Mike de Udy. Or I was until the engine broke.

"The car came to the UK in a BOAC freighter, which I was flying as crew. The other cargo was 36 tons of gold bullion which was spread out along the hold's floor and on top of which we parked the Howmet. Heppenstall's eyes were on stalks when he saw the bullion and he said 'Forget the car, let's hijack the gold.'

"It was an odd car to drive. The dashboard had 707 instruments for the engine, so I was familiar with them, but the driving technique was





different from a conventional car. A helicopter turbine has a lot of lag so you had to brake with your left foot and get on the throttle before you needed the power. A bleed valve - they called it a wastegate - had been fitted so that the turbine compressor would keep spinning at speed. The equivalent of approach idle in an airliner. You kept about half-throttle on and then floored it when you wanted full power. It had a massive loud pedal, a big slab of aluminium, typically American."

Dibley shared the car at the BOAC 500 with American Dr Dick Thompson, a New York dentist who like Dibley juggled a day job with motor racing at an international level. "Talk about an aggressive driver," says Dibley. "Dick put the Howmet into the bank at Brands Hatch. He claimed the wastegate had stuck. Anyway, the car was repaired and we took it up to Oulton Park the next weekend where I put it on the front row next to Brian Redman's Lola T70. I was lying third in the race, but when I had to pit for more fuel it wouldn't fire up again because the starter motor wiring had burnt out."

### *Hugh Dibley* career in brief

**Born** 23/4/1937, Hong Kong  
**1959** Began racing with AC Aceca  
**1960-63** Formula Junior, Lola **1964**  
Brabham BT8-Climax; winner of  
British GP support race, Brands  
Hatch **1965-66** Lola T70; winner of  
British GP support race and second  
in Wills Trophy, Croft, in '66  
**1967** various sports cars; drove T70  
on the Targa Florio; Chevrolet  
Camaro in British Saloon Car  
Championship **1968** Only Le Mans  
start, Howmet TX; DNF **Early 1970s**  
Began to wind down racing career

earlier in the summer. Early on in the race, around 6.00pm, I had a wobble going into Mulsanne corner and then an even bigger one at Indianapolis so I came into the pits.

A wheel bearing had failed. The mechanics fitted a new upright and, as they were putting it on, I thought, 'I hope they're putting on the right

one.' I didn't say anything because they'd have hit a driver if he started poking his nose in. I wish I had because that's exactly what they'd done. It meant that the wheel spindle had the wrong thread for that side and that the single nut would try to unscrew itself. Even with it lockwired it wasn't worth the risk, because you don't want a wheel coming off at Le Mans. During the race I'd been trading lap times with Dick with him doing a 3.59 then me doing a 3.58 and then him going a second faster. I eventually beat his time and he went off the road at Indianapolis. Because we'd spent so much time in the pits taking the suspension on and off, we were disqualified."

DIBLEY HAD OTHER ONE-OFF DRIVES AT CLASSIC EVENTS, including the 1967 Targa Florio at which he shared a T70 with Jackie Epstein. Hardly an ideal machine for the Targa, the big Lola's gearbox failed on the second lap. "By the late Sixties I'd met my second [late] wife Marianne," explains Dibley. "My first marriage to Doris, who went on to marry Charles Saatchi, didn't go too well. She used to complain that I never paid her any attention because of the racing and flying, so one day I offered to give up the driving. 'Oh no', she said, 'I don't want to be married to an airline pilot.' She liked the glamour of motor racing and would go to a race if she thought I would win it. When she got to the track she would complain that I ignored her."

"Marianne was amazing. She used to go in and sort out Palliser. She'd say that I should 'Open a window and chuck everything out. It's pretty bad when you're here but when you go away it's even more of a shambles.' She was really good about the racing but, as a Swede, she was very upset when Jo Bonnier was killed at Le Mans in 1972. I was doing very little driving by then, but every time I was due to race she was in pieces with nerves. By 1973 I'd pretty much given up and had turned my attention to the subject of fuel saving and noise reduction in the airline business."

For a man who only considered motor racing as a hobby, Hugh Dibley had a huge amount of success. He raced against, and was friends with, many of the great names of the '60s. Most of the time he ran with them, sometimes he beat them. He's modest about his success and is far more effusive about the fun he had and the spirit of competition. He slipped out of motor racing as quietly as he had slipped in, leaving the name Dibley on the results sheets of many great races alongside very great names. Usually near the top of the list; sometimes heading them. ☐