

The Gnoo Blas Motor Racing Circuit Orange, NSW



By David Neely (NSW)

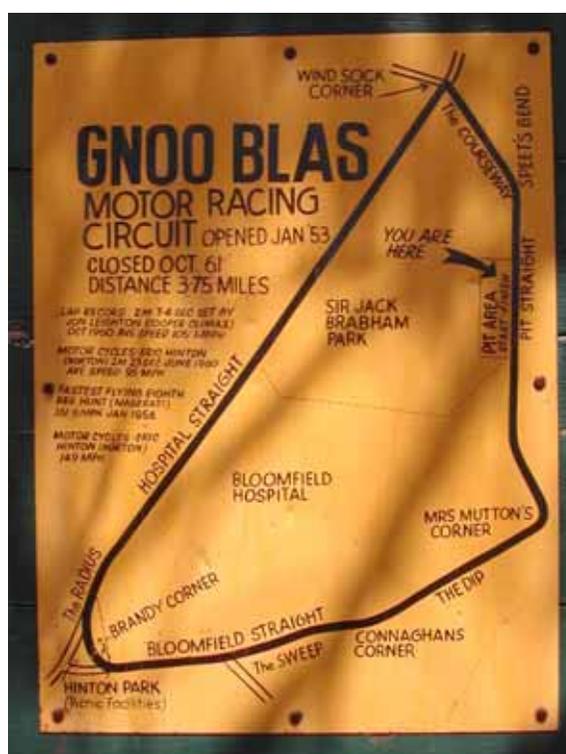
Orange was the venue for an intriguing chapter in the annals of Australian motor racing history in the 1950s. It wrested dominance of road racing from the Mount Panorama circuit at Bathurst and the first meeting was run on 26 January 1953. While this is of general interest, as Orange will be the location for the 2006 Western Gold Federal Rally, some fascinating connections with Club members are also to be found in the glory days of this road racing circuit. But before coming to that, let's take a look back at the circuit and that inaugural meeting.

The Gnoo Blas circuit was set out on a roughly triangular loop of public roads, south of the town. The lap distance was approximately 3.75 miles (6.04 kms). The main straight, Total Straight, (shown as Hospital Straight at the site of the circuit today) was 1.5 miles (2.4 kms) long and the fastest cars could reach speeds in excess of 160 mph (257.5 kmp) along it. Wind Sock Corner, at the end of Total Straight was 110 degrees – 20 degrees greater than a right angle – and severely tested the brakes and road holding of the competing cars. Not only that, but Mrs Mutton's Corner and Brandy Corner were also tricky to negotiate. Racing was clockwise.

At the first meeting in 1953, it quickly became clear that very fast lap speeds would be par for the course, particularly with a main straight, almost two miles long. The

action began in practice when two cars broke vital engine components. It was said at the time that this caused, "a much more sober approach to the question of maximum engine speeds". In the races proper, drama after drama unfolded. In the 'Gnoo-blas (sic) Handicap, for Open and Closed Cars', the 2½ litre Riley of K. Jones crashed at very high speed when a back tyre blew out. The car rolled over and over across the bitumen track and was wrecked, but fortunately Jones was unharmed. Tom Sulman, in a Maserati 4C, was struck in the face

Above: Looking down the former Pit Straight as it is today. Below: Information and the layout of the circuit is provided at the former site of the start/finish line.



by a flying stone in the 'Major Mitchell Handicap'. He was able to continue and finish but later required stitches for the cut. Eleven starters left the line in the 'Edward Hargreaves Handicap', which was of only five laps duration. But during the third lap five cars crashed at high speed, three of them being involved in the one mishap. All of the three were badly damaged but none of the drivers were seriously injured. Brydon's MG ran out of petrol and pulled up, Bland's Riley ran right over the top of it and Munday's Ford Special hit the Riley and finished up off the track amongst some trees. Brydon's wrist was broken but the other drivers were unhurt. The other two cars each left the road separately without damage or injury. What a beginning! The word spread and 7,000 spectators turned up to the next meeting at Easter 1953. The popularity of the circuit continued to climb and 30,000 spectators lined the circuit for the January 1955 meeting – though perhaps the appearance of Prince Bira of Siam [Prince Birabongse Bhanudej (1914-1985)] with his Maserati, in which he had just won the New Zealand Grand Prix, was a special drawcard.

By 1959 Jack Brabham held the lap record in his Cooper Climax when he averaged 102.4 mph (164.8 kmp). In those days this established Gnoo Blas as the fastest road racing circuit in Australia. It closed in 1961, after the mounting requirements of the Speedway Act made it impractical to continue.

So, what are the connections between members of the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia and Gnoo Blas? There are at least two. Reg Hunt won the 1956 South Pacific Motor Racing Championship at an average of 96 mph (154.5 kpm). He joined the Victoria Branch of the Club in 1957 with 1910 Silver Ghost, 1425, which Ian Irwin (ACT) now looks after for John Kennedy (UK). Though when he won the 1956 Championship he was in a Maserati! Incredibly, Reg Hunt established the circuit's 'Fastest Flying Eighth' at 161.8 mph (260.39 kmp) in January 1956.

The South Pacific Motor Racing Championship was the 'Gold Star Event', run over 27 laps; it covered more than 100 gruelling miles. On the grid for the 1959 race was Paul Samuels at the wheel of an MGA. Paul had founded the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club in 1956, but was by now pursuing his passion for motor racing. Recently, I asked Paul about the race and he recalled, "I finished it!!! I forget where, but to last the distance on a 100 miler at Orange was really something!!!". A fantastic achievement indeed. So, when you are at the Federal Rally, or next in Orange, take a drive around the former Gnoo Blas circuit, which is beautifully preserved, and wonder at the feats of Reg Hunt, Paul Samuels and others from that particular golden age of motor racing.

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RROCA Club members who raced at the Gnoo Blas circuit.

Above is Reg Hunt who won the 1955 Argus Cup in his Maserati at Albert Park, Melbourne. Pictured here before the race, with his father who raced at Brooklands, England.

Right is Paul Samuels, who founded the RROCA in 1956. Pictured here with his 1955 Bentley R-type Continental, BC70D, at Eden, NSW on the Dawn Patrol III in 2005.



Gnoo Blas was a local Aboriginal description for nearby Mt Canobolas. Gnoo Blas means 'twin shoulders' or 'twin peaks'. Gnoo Blas, which later became Canobolas, was taken from an original map of Orange and district drawn by explorer Major Thomas Mitchell in the 1840s. The extinct volcano of Mt Canobolas rises to 1395 metres, the highest point between the Blue Mountains and Perth.

