John Burbidge – King of Thruxton
(1935 – 2008)

By Gary Oxley (with the help of a very fine article by Martin Payne, and personally talking with the late John Burbidge and his son Steven).

John Burbidge ... Modsports 3.8 E-type FHC

John was born in Paignton, Devon in 1935 and the family moved to Andover in Hampshire a year later to buy a local bakery and post office. When old enough John’s first job in the business was delivering the bread with his father whilst his grandfather, Harold worked in the bakery. Even at this early age John was already maintaining the electric bread vans they used and was using his metal work skills to make the bakery metal tables which are still used today. In 1967 he took over the business and built it up steadily until he retired in 1996, handing the business over to his son Steven where it still thrives today.

Anyone who has known me long enough, will know I am Jaguar mad, but I’m also into Jaguars that have been modified to go faster than they really were designed to !! (Hence my CJM Risca MKII, Gran Turismo E-type and my GO MODEL 1998 Rob Beere E-type). I really love Jaguars that still won races many years after they were supposed to. This was mainly down to the Modsports and Thunder Saloons era from the very late 1960’s to 1982. Guys like John Burbidge who I am featuring here, along with drivers: Tony Williams (Risca Garages), John ‘Plastic’ Pearson in his outrageous XK’s (Reg: I AM 31 on his later XK140), John Quick in his E-type (Reg: WOO 11), John Harper E-type, Brian Abbott XK, and others like Phil Bennett, Fred Cliffe, Brian Murphy, John Oxborough, Alan Leeson and Guy Beddington. Guy won the first ever race for a V12 engine with his E-type. I have a fascination for these guys who threw away all the Jaguar body parts which were lovingly placed there by Browns Lane to look nice, for one purpose ... speed. So in the bin went silly things like chrome bumpers, grilles, extra seats, interiors, one too many wiper arms and anything else that would save weight. Then the wheel arches grew to stupendous proportions to accommodate the very wide and super slick sticky tyres, vents and body bulges grew from every surface and sometimes even bodies were thrown away to be replaced with fibreglass !!! (John ‘Plastic’ Pearson) ... great stuff but I know you won’t all agree !!
Sadly, late in 2007 just after I was in touch with John Burbidge, he became ill and very soon after he lost his fight with cancer aged 73 in February 2008 (R.I.P. John). I had spoken with John on the telephone and he kindly sent me the three colour photos below of himself with his very quick dark Blue with Orange nose band E-type (the other photos are from my collection, and some with kind permission of Steve his son from John's service).

John stands proudly with his E-type

This photo shows a clear shot of the JA PEARCE Magnesium Alloys.
What the back markers saw in their mirrors before John blasted past!

Note in the photos above the two large bonnet bulges either side of the one Malcolm Sayer put there!!, John told me he was generating so much heat that these vents helped extract this without cooking the engine bay. The heat through these humps must have instantly improved what Browns Lane never sorted out, misting up of the E-type windscreens!! (I have had first-hand knowledge of this with my 3.8 fixedhead, the first five miles you are driving blind - Gary). Just look at those subtle rear brake cooling vents just behind the doors, following the curve of the body and full depth of the door, just wide enough to pull cool air in but not too wide to cause drag (see Castle Combe photo below), these John said cooled the rear in-board brakes and rear tyres. The two small elongated vents either side of the bonnet nose opening were connected to large pipes, these rammed air to the front brakes to help cooling and stop what E-types suffered from during races ... brake fade. Note too the two giant flexi-pipes inside the cockpit in the back, these sucked out hot air from the rear in-board brakes and out of the rear side windows, these also helped reduce the heat inside the car which would have barbequed John mid-race!!.

Some people may dismiss these Modsports guys as either vandals because of what they did to Jaguars, or just frustrated racers who couldn’t afford to race proper racing cars. Well don’t be fooled, these guys were very clever and some of their ideas to make these old girls go quick and not grenade themselves, was brilliant (just remember, try winning any race in a car today which had left the production line some 10-15 years previous ... these guys were bloody good, trust me). Just look at one of the photos below in this article, it shows John holding off two single-seat racing cars (one is tucked right up behind the E-type trying to get a tow!!) with their ‘power to weight ratio’ and nimble handling these surely should be in front of the E-type, but with over 300bhp and those wide slicks with the compound of 'sticky toffee' it wasn’t the case!! Note the photo later...
in this article of the car from the rear where John is accepting the cup for yet another win, the E-type has no rear bumpers or standard tail lights which would have caused unnecessary weight and drag ... just two small brake lights were added where the number plate should be. Only the windscreen glass and chrome was kept, all the remaining glass and surrounding chrome (apart from roof gutters) was replaced with Perspex, the side windows were in two-pieces, overlapping with various round vent holes for cooling or more pipes, see some of the photos showing pipes to cool the driver down just behind the screen pillar, John even set the wipers parked vertically on the screen to cause less drag !!

To John’s friends he was known simply as ‘JB’ and to the people who knew him race locally he was known as the ‘King of Thruxton’. He liked Thruxton so much he built a lodge on the hill over looking the circuit which he knew every inch and bump of !!. In some of the photos you will see the name DELLTUNE on the Orange nose, this tuning garage was owned by Tony Shaw who already raced E-types before John got started. John at the time had a road going E-type Roadster and took it in for a service at Tony’s Dell Tune premises which was in Andover, whilst in, the E-type had the head gas-flowed and tweaked. They became good friends and whilst having a pint Tony invited John to see him race which he did, watching him win a few races in his E-type then inviting him to a Castle Combe Test Day. Tony first took John round in his own roadster which by now had had more work done to it by Tony with stiffer torsion bar and a much harder rear end, with John as passenger Tony screamed round with tyres rubbing in the wheel arches until the E's brakes were no more. Then Tony took John out in his sorted Modsports 3.8 fixedhead and the difference was fantastic, John was hooked. But instead of his own E-type he surprisingly bought a very rapid Ted Martin tuned 1900 Ford Anglia which proved to have deadly under-steer and the noise this thing made was unbearable inside the car. Tony took the car into his Dell Tune Garage and ironed out a lot of the cars problems and John started to learn his trade with a fifth place at Thruxton in 1968. A great story was when John came into the pits after the fifth place and pulled up in front of his wife, he switched the Anglia off and asked ... ‘What do you think of that dearest?’.... her reply .... ‘Have you thought of Morris Dancing?!’ was the answer John wasn’t wanting!

It wasn’t long before Tony had worked his magic on the Anglia’s evil handling which soon saw John gain fourth, then third then at the televised ten lap race at Castle Combe, he was chased all the way home by a big-bore Mini before the throttle cable broke on the last lap after John had led the whole race. He was devastated and a few races later he wrote the Anglia off at the Thruxton chicane qualifying, the crash red-flagged the session until they could drag John out of the car. In 1969 John bought a very early E-type fhc (860081) from a chap in the Midlands and as soon as it was at the Dell Tune Garage he started ripping out every piece of the lovely interior, fitting roll cages and JA Pearce Magnesium alloy race wheels. These were shod with 10” intermediate tyres at first (these grew), the wheel arches were widened with fat alloy arches, everything was done quickly to be ready in a weeks time for the ‘Echo One Hundred mile race’ at Thruxton. John came second, fittingly behind Tony of Dell Tune in his very sorted E-type, more work carried on with the car, shaving the head as far as they dare, 10:1 compression, stubby six branch Janspeed exhaust exiting just under the passenger door, 4.2 head, tulip valves, sandcast 45DCO3 carbs, 4.2 box, short axle, harder front suspension, firm back end, better servo (dare I say, Rover) to vented discs, and a lightened flywheel and crank. By 1970 John was starting to win with the E now running on even wider Firestone genuine F1 tyres. John got these superb tyres on the cheap after the F1 teams had used them lightly for testing and as they were probably destined for the bin, John moved in !!. Some of the tyres even came with famous racing drivers names like Graham Hill still chalked on the tyre wall !!. JB was now building in confidence and was quite happy to not grab pole, watch battles ahead grow and pounce when cars tangled or fell by the way during the heat of those long 100 milers.
John Quick’s clutch grenades itself trying to out qualify JB at Castle Combe in 1971.

John dives down the inside of John Chatham in his mighty MGB, dare I say it’s tyres are fatter than JB’s?

1971 was to be his best year when the Modsports scene was sponsored and came under the banner of Chevron Oil Championships. This attracted top drivers of the day and cars like AC Cobras, mighty tuned TVR’s, Elan’s and more E-types battled it out. JB’s back tyres had now grown to 15” wide slicks which meant the arches had to grow too !!. He now had a new challenger, John ‘Plastic’ Pearson in his super-quick XK, JB said this XK was a tremendous piece of kit (One of ‘Plastics’ XK’s had a Lola back end, I suspect the later 140, this XK140 still holds the record for the fastest XK ever in the world - Gary).
The two Photos above show John 'Plastic' Pearson in his awesome XK's. Photo 1 shows his first, a Drophead 120 with everything including the soft-top roof made from fibreglass. Photo 2 was his second XK, his mighty XK140 which was the fastest XK in the world.

The first race of the 1971 season though went to John Quick (great name) in his Westlake tuned 3.8 E-type (Reg: WOO 11), this surprised him and the battle was on, he was determined to beat Quick at the next round at Castle Combe. JB set pole by two seconds and in the process Quick blew his clutch trying to set a similar time in qualifying, throughout the season there was only ever two points separating JB and Plastic Pearson’s XK with some mighty battles on the track but there was never any contact or silly games you see in Touring Car racing today, it was just the best man and car won each time. Other battles in 71 were from John Harper in his ‘Forward Engineering’ tuned E-type Roadster, one was at a very hot day at Thruxton where Harper and JB diced for the full 42 laps, JB led from flag to flag with Harper’s E glued to his tailgate, JB guzzling a litre of Orange juice through his helmet straw in the process !! No matter what Harper did he couldn’t get past the wide back end of JB’s E, this became a problem when a certain budding F1 Star David Purley complained after a race, he eventually got past JB in his very quick and sorted Porsche but wasn’t happy how wide the car was. JB simply told him calmly ... ‘you’ve got to go around the outside’ !! By the end of the 1971 season JB clinched the championship by two points and had come to the notice of major car racing teams such as Mazda and BMW. When he came in the pits in the Mazda he was surprised they even changed the tyres, this was a luxury to him having to make a set last him usually, but the Mazda was unreliable and a better offer came in with a big ‘one chance’ with the BMW team but as JB put it ... their wally BMW mechanic took the car out on circuit and stuffed it, as he lay on the track with a broken leg JB said if I could have got to him I’d have jumped on his head !! ... dream over. By
1972 victories carried on and he had been nick-named the 'King Of Thruxton' and this summed up JB in his by now well sorted Fixedhead E-type that started life as chassis 81, a road going early flat floor E-type.

Boy were those back tyres getting wide, too wide for Mr. Purley obviously !!, surely the Firestone sticker should have read : WIDE LOAD.

Anyone old enough will probably remember Grandstand, a TV Sports programme on a Saturday afternoon (Dickie Davis where are you now?), they televised the last race of the season at Thruxton in the pouring down rain. The commentator that day was a certain racing legend, Graham Hill. JB had carved out a 28 second lead over a chasing Cobra and due to an incorrect pit board signal backed off as he dodged the puddles thinking he was about to cross the line, only to have the fright of his life as the Cobra nearly passed him with still another lap to go, he sped up and just held off Shaun Jackson in his steroid pumped Cobra.
By 1973 JB was a well sorted racing driver progressing to Chief race instructor at Thruxton and he was even picking and choosing the races he wanted to race in with many wins where first place meant holidays for two in exotic destinations instead of a little cash and a cup !!. Around this time Modsports were seeing some very strange but aggressive creations like a Ford Anglia with XK engine that wiped the floor with all the E-types apart from JB who had a massive tussle but still won both races that day. It was a ‘Grandstand thing’ to take a celebrity around the circuit in the winning car, JB took Norrie Paramour a dance band leader round sat on a cushion, he commented to JB … ‘you drive this car like a good musician’. His next victory he took round BBC Disc Jockey David Jacobs …. Jacobs shouted ‘How fast can this go?’ , ‘About 160’ JB said. Jacobs
shouted ‘I can do that in my Aston on the M1’, this was like a red rag to a bull .... JB put the boot in taking Church corner sideways at 130mph and up to 160 before the chicane with marshals stepping out to wave victory flags having to then dive for cover, Jacobs hung on the roll-cage for dear life and never said a word after that .... JB said later with a chuckle .... I bet that prat will never forget that !!, even Mike Tyson would be shaking taking Church flat.

So in those few quick years JB became a king with 41 wins from 70 starts, quite a fabulous record by any racing driver’s stats. He was a modest man who took on board a few wise words from the greats. From Fangio .... ‘A little less brake, a little more accelerator’. From Graham Hill .... ‘The man who out concentrates you will win’. Best of all from his friend and fellow racer Richard Longman .... ‘I’d run over my grandmother to make up a place !!’. Martin Payne who interviewed JB said this .... ‘I realised that not only was JB a damn fine racer, he was a winner, in the wet or dry, driving by the seat of his pants, looking ahead - who cared about the rear view mirror.’

John turned again to his other passions, fast bikes and later offshore Power Boats as well as still running a Bakery. He lost the sight in one eye whilst racing one of his motorbikes at Enduro 1975 Chalkpit Hills, Tidworth

John can be seen lent on his first racing car, his 1900 Anglia talking with his life-long Tony Shaw from Dell Tune.
Although I (Gary) feel sad to have contacted John so near to his life ending, I did get the chance to chat with a fascinating guy and without doubt I must THANK Martin Payne, who interviewed John at length which helped this article greatly (and which I would have dearly like to do), and to Steve for his help too.

R.I.P. John and I hope you are up there on a giant Cloud with the likes of Duncan Hamilton and Ron Flockhart, because you need remembering as a great Jaguar racer who NEVER got the recognition you truly deserved.

Weeks before John passed away Steven got John involved with a Motorsport Forum where John posted some photos and talked with people who remembered those great Modsports days.

Here is one of their joint posts ......

"We have been posting on here together, my father and I, all in the cause of keeping him interested in his last weeks. He was my hero, a true and real man. We have had a wonderful few weeks together in his last days, many many friends have passed by and said their goodbyes. He is in many books, and many hearts. He leaves a great BIG family, all with lots of stories. 41 Wins from 70 starts, Winner of THE CLEARWAYS TROPHY 3 times, CHEVERON OIL CHAMPION 1971, Winner of the GRANDSTAND TELEVISION TROPHY, THRUXTON 100 miler, also KNOWN as THE KING OF THRUXTON with many battles with great friends Gerry Marshall, Tony Shaw, Norman Cuthbert, SCARPINO and many others. Long term travelling companion to Richard Longman of LONGMAN RACING, over the last 10 years. Castle Combe being his favourite circuit, I watched many a race stood on top of a GREEN DOUBLE DECKER BUS, parked by the scrutineering bay, races that drew massive crowds in the early 1970’s. Also I have hung onto the inside of very noisy race cars on his lap of honour at nearly every circuit in the country."

Cheers, Steve Burbidge (son)
John’s family business still goes from strength to strength in the expert hands of his son Steven, see their website here ..... www.burbidges.co.uk

P.S. .... Just two stories I found on forums which summed up those mad mod days with blokes as bonkers as they come !!!.

POST ONE ... My memories centre on the Tuesday night practice sessions at Aintree, I was always sent to marshall at Beachers out. This was just before the long back straight but there was a public footpath crossing the track!, this was closed for races but not Tuesday nights. I not only had to flag marshal but act as a lolipop man!. When you had Norman Dickson in his March 772P you had to think quickly. Could I get the public across before he got here?.

POST TWO ... Another race George "Welly" Potter brought his 7.2ltr Skoda down. I was on Marshall duty and one of his mates decides to join us at the post, "who’s that I asked" It’s George Potter" came the reply, "bugger we’ve forgotten the oil flags" I said, ... He wasn't impressed.

(7.2 Litre Skoda, see what I mean .... bonkers ... Gary)

Article and pictures courtesy of Gary Oxley

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