

THE STRATOS PHENOMENON

On several occasions over the last five years it has been suggested that I should write a review of how I became involved and my experiences in the “Stratos Scene” and more recently, the background to our attempt to re-create the Group 5 Silhouette. Well, for those who want to read about it, here goes with part one.



It all started at the 1989 Stoneleigh Kit Car Show and my first meeting with Steve Greenwood.

Initially what struck me was his enthusiasm and the readily evident engineering ability. Certainly not the Stratos as at that time he did not have a complete Corse to display, only a chassis. The finished article I was to view for the first time during the summer of the same year.

Therefore, my introduction to the Stratos is probably fairly unique in that its background was unknown to me. Viewing it for the first time from a totally new perspective (without, I might add, its Group 4 kit) which was not clouded by the aura of its history. Being brought up “in the sticks” as it was commonly known, a small isolated village in Leicestershire was not the background to generate an interest in motorsport of any form. As the years passed and television began to take over from the “Pathe News” at cinemas, such names as Stirling Moss and Graham Hill started to become household names. Then Roger Clark, he being the “local lad done good”. But rallying? What on earth was that all about?

How does one put into words their initial reaction to a man-made creation that, on first acquaintance, makes such a lasting impression that it grows to dominate the direction one’s life takes from that point on? Even now, I find it difficult to find words that convey my innermost thoughts for what became, I suppose, an obsession, both for the shape (design) and subsequently a wish to continue the “Stratos Story” where Lancia had left off.

Within six months not only had I ordered two kits from Steve but also convinced him that we ought to go rallying in 1990; in the process buying his demo Corse (UDN 683V) to convert to a rally spec car.

After several rallies and hillclimbs which included four British Clubman Rally Championship events, such as the Malcolm Wilson and the Woodpecker (the most memorable being Kevin Furber, at that time contracted to Peugeot for the 205 series, in third place with UDN 683V on the Silver Stages in Bowland Forest before engine failure) we retired from the series due to lack of reliability of the Lancia Twin Cam. It was forever dropping valves.

During this period I also helped out as a Southern agent for the Corse and found customers for six kits.

Over the next few months my own Corse was completed, but, lo and behold, experienced the usual problem in November 1990 of a dropped valve. We had by then decided that the only way forward would be with an Alfa 164 3 litre unit. We did locate one from an insurance write-off, but at the £5,500 asking price it was totally out of the question.

In 1991, engineless UDN 683V was destroyed in a garage fire.

Fast forward three years.

In the August of 1994 I became joint owner of a fairly large garage which was, I suppose, the motivation to extract the Corse from storage; locate an Alfa 3litre engine/box; convert my "road car" into rally spec and go rallying in 1995. This time entering the Southern Tarmac Championship Series, with a local (Poole) rally driver, Julian Yelling.

No record was kept of the results, though my over-riding memory is a desire to move on to circuit racing for which I thought the Corse would be ideal. I suppose in a way this was an extension to the competition challenge I had subconsciously set myself for the Corse.

Therefore towards the end of 1995 I sent Julian on an Ards course at Castle Combe to obtain his circuit licence, having already approached Tony Soper who was the co-ordinator of what was then the Italian Intermarque Championship for a trial outing. Initially two races at Castle Combe in the September followed by a race at Donington two weeks later.

With no previous circuit racing experience and the Corse still like a rally car "on stilts", Julian came 7th in the first race and 5th in the second, behind Ferraris which dominated the series at that time. At Donington, the last race of the year, the Corse led at the end of the first lap, having overtaken three cars between the start and the first corner, Redgate. Finished 3rd.

It is fair to say that the outcome convinced me this was the way to go for the future.

The following year (1996) Tony Soper was now the driver in what had by then become the Auto Italia Championship. As he became confident with the different driving style required by the Corse Tony dominated the series though, as I was never been one for keeping records, the actual number of wins escapes me. The over-riding memories are of Tony's thrilling battles with Ferraris.

During this year, even though the grids were over 20 cars for every race, there was not always sufficient competition for us, so I started looking for the next step up – the British GT Championship. Being wise after the event this was actually **TWO** steps up and probably a step too far at the time.

Our first race in the Privilege GT (1 hour, 2 driver, semi-endurance races) was September 1996 followed by the full season in 1997. During this year we never finished last in any race, won the GT3 class at Oulton Park and only suffered one non-finish. This being after an engine blow up during qualifying at Brand's Hatch; an engine re-build and change overnight saw us racing next day then, to the annoyance of Chris Snowdon who was driving at the time, black flagged after 45 minutes due to oil leakage onto the exhaust wrapping, the officials being rather concerned about the smoke trail behind our car!

It was in November 1997 that the decision was made to create the Group 5 Silhouette to run in this series, though force of circumstances meant that we did race again in 2000 with the old car, much modified aerodynamically into the GTO, with similar results as in 1997 and the added bonus of twice getting place prize money.

Part Two – Evolution

I first became aware of the Group 5 Stratos soon after meeting Steve, it being on his list of “want to do” for the future. But it was just a name to me then, there being no other information available at that time.

During the Hennessy Racing Team end of season review in November 1997 to analyse the year's results in the British GT, the decision was made to try to re-create the original Lancia circuit racer. Our main reason being that the GT3 technical regulations stipulated that no major modifications could be made to the engine, its induction system or silhouette. Therefore, as we were giving away at least 100bhp to our nearest competitor and in most cases over 200, drastic action was required if we were to become more competitive in the series.

Maybe it should be pointed out that the top cars in the GTs at that time were the likes of the 1996 Le Mans winning GT1 Porsche, McLaren F1 and Lister Storm.

It so happened that the previous year I had purchased from Hugh at CAE a part built Corse I, with AP Racing 330mm discs and callipers. This was to become the basis of our new car. The strength of the basic chassis we had already proven and could see no reason why it should not be capable of handling at least 450bhp with ease, whilst still maintaining the inherent torsional stiffness designed into it.

But where do you start with virtually no information to go on?

Trawling the specialist bookshops and finding one by Nigel Trow (the recognised authority on the history of Lancia) in which there is a black and white side view of a Group 5, but no descriptive info. was the starting point. However the big stroke of luck came a few weeks later in finding a 1/24 scale model (made in Japan).

The body of my "spare" Corse was cut up to create the initial moulds and eighteen months later, in July 1999 the car was unveiled at the Brooklands Auto Italia day.

I should point out that only two of these cars were ever created; one in Alitalia colours and the other with the Marlboro Chevron. The Marlboro was destroyed in a turbo related fire soon after its creation and the Alitalia disappeared from sight when the programme was canned after the death of Mike Parkes in 1977. Subsequently the Alitalia re-surfaced for sale by a museum in Japan during the early months of 1999. In a Classic and Sportscar advertisement, the asking price being the equivalent of £300,000.

What apparently happened is that it went to Japan in 1977 for a FIA Group 5 World Sportscar Race, stayed there when the project was killed off and ended up residing in the museum for 22 years. So explaining how the model we obtained came into being.

We started making preparations during the winter of 1999/2000 to re-enter the British GT in 2000 with our new car in what would now be know as The PowerTour, re-locating to an Oulton Park base as part of our new operational programme.

THEN THE BLOW FELL

Without any warning the "Powers that be" decided to discontinue the top GT1 category, adding a new lower one, which was to be called GTO, still with limited engine modifications permitted to what are basically "off the shelf" and road legal cars, though now allowing some aerodynamic aids.

That is how we ended up running the old Corse in 2000, upgraded though to the GTO class.

Since then our Group 5 Silhouette has languished in a sort of limbo, though I am still of the opinion that given the opportunity to run in the 2000 British GT Championship, it would have been a different story.

It may seem now to have been rather over ambitious in creating a specification for National Competition with potential for further development into a front running candidate at a higher level, but I am still confident that we have only scratched the surface of that potential.

The reader may find it difficult to comprehend how anyone could invest so much money, which is probably close to six figures by now, on an ambition (obsession?) to do better than main stream manufacturers, especially when the odds are likely to be stacked against success.

Unfortunately development can be rather expensive in motorsport, as we have found out the hard way.

Development has continued at a much lower pace since 2000, highlighting some problems that were all engine or clutch related, though the engine failures seem to have been resolved. But, as no real target opportunity is currently in the offing, high level racing being the area from which the source of funds to continue the work would normally be generated, any budget allocated to the project at this time has to be very limited. Though I should add there is a small glimmer of hope in that the car has been given the green light to enter the Britcar Endurance Racing series, the profile of which is rising and could become the major UK GT Championship of the future.

However, the knowledge and experience gained has demonstrated to us how not to try and make advancements with our project in the future.

Finally, I believe that one of my personal objectives of our racing activities was achieved.

To upset some of the Big Boys by joining them on their patch with a low budget (relative to the size of theirs) team racing a "home built" car.