

# LOOSE FILLINGS

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## NEW ZEALAND'S BIG-TWIN PIONEERS

by David McKinney

A Cooper twin first raced in New Zealand in 1951, and was joined by two more in 1952. In those years, and for a year or two afterwards, two of them could match the best of New Zealand's racing fleet – the ex-Nuvolari P3 Alfa Romeo and a couple of hot V8 Specials. But only in lap-times. In reliability terms the Coopers' chains and gearboxes rarely proved able to last the distances of the biggest races.

The third big-twin import had its engine replaced by a 500 after just one appearance. Other twins came and went over the next few years, becoming steadily less competitive as more modern GP and sports machinery was imported. But as in other countries, the Cooper twins dominated New Zealand hillclimbing from their first appearance, until the start of the 1970s.

Hec McLean, a Christchurch enthusiast who had raced MGs, was the first New Zealander to try a twin in the back of a Cooper. He had acquired the early car raced by Northern Irish immigrant Billy Lee to such good effect in the 1950 NZ Grand Prix and, after a couple of outings early the following season with the 500 JAP in place, installed an 1100 twin of the same manufacture.

**Left: we have never had a cover-girl let alone two before, and couldn't resist this photo sent in by JMW enthusiast Tony Scanlon who is selling his car in our classifieds. The photo is understood to be a publicity shot for a nineteen-fifties Fishermens Bend race meeting. JMW builder John Wynn is on the left; the girls are Channel 7 dancers Jenny Alexander (in the car) and Robin Farquar. Photographer unknown.**





The handicappers were wise to the potential of a Cooper-JAP 1100. For the NZ Championship road race at Mairehau, they set McLean to start 1min50sec behind the fastest V8 special and only 10sec ahead of Les Moore in the ex-Nuvolari Alfa. The Cooper was a non-starter, however, and an early retirement in the Ohakea Trophy, after dropping out of second place in the NZ Championship beach race at Oreti in Southland, an event as important in those days as the big road races. At Wigram the car was, for reasons lost to history, driven by McLean's associate Ron Symonds, but was never in the hunt and retired once more.

There was, however, a second Cooper-JAP 1100 at Wigram, Australian John Nind with his newly-acquired Mk4 (10/48/50). His first try-out had been in a local Christchurch standing quarter-mile sprint the week before, in which he made FTD. In spite of suffering from 'flu, and in pouring rain, Nind qualified fifth-fastest at Wigram.

The V8 specials went into the first two places at the start of the race, also wet, but Nind was next. He took the lead on the first corner, but the V8s motored past again on the straight. The Australian was still in third place as the opening lap approached its completion, but he went off into the haybales, damaging the suspension too badly to continue.

The next twin to appear was when another Wellington driver, English immigrant Arnold Stafford, wheeled out the ex-Eric Winterbottom Vincent 1000 for a Wellington quarter-mile sprint, setting FTD from a standing start but blowing the engine in the flying runs. Thereafter he ran the car with a 500 JAP.

Bob Gibbons had dominated 1951 hillclimbs in the Wellington area at the wheel of a Jaguar XK120, and for the following season Jack Shelly of Independent Motors, the local Jaguar agents, bought him a brand new Mk5 Cooper (Mk5-L8-51) complete with JAP 1100. Just days off the boat, the car made its debut in a hillclimb at Plimmerton on 16 February, where stiff opposition was expected from Australian Tom Sulman in his Maserati 4CM, winner of the NZ Hillclimb Championship the previous year. After some trouble getting the Cooper to fire, 34-year-old Gibbons set a time of 30.1sec, three full seconds under the record. Sulman, second fastest, could manage only 32.3sec.

A week later came the Lady Wigram Trophy race, the glamour event of the year. It was preceded by two heats, in the first of which Gibbons, worried about oiling up on the line, elected to be push-started. It nevertheless took him only three laps to

catch and pass Sulman and lead the race. Not only did the little blue Cooper win, but it established a new lap record of 1min 33sec (82.02mph, 132.0km/h).

McLean had retired in the South Island Championship Beach Race at the Brighton venue in Christchurch, but was second in the NZ title event at Oreti, and in the NZ Championship sprint in South Canterbury. He was in the other heat at Wigram and, inspired by Gibbons's performance, was soon battling out the lead with a V8 special.

His attempt to pass it on the outside of one of the corners resulted in a spin, but he was soon challenging for the lead again, and this time succeeded in getting ahead. But it was all too much, and on the second-to-last lap the maroon Cooper stopped on the back straight with broken gear-selectors.

Although no-one had bettered Gibbons' lap-time, he chose not to start from the pole position he had earned, but instead to be push-started from the back-row again. McLean, his car repaired, was alongside.

The South Island car was an early retirement with a broken chain, and Gibbons went out with an overheating

engine after he had got up to fourth place in the early laps. He was a late withdrawal from the Ohakea Trophy on 1 March and McLean, after losing two laps in the pits early on, retired with another broken chain after completing 8 laps.

Both cars failed in their heat at Wigram in 1953, McLean breaking yet another chain and Gibbons suffering fuel-starvation problems – after equalling his lap record. Both were allowed to start the Trophy race, from the back, but Gibbons was soon out with a melted piston, and poor McLean made no fewer than three stops to replace broken chains, eventually being classified eighth.

In an effort to overcome these problems, McLean fitted a JAP 500 for Ohakea, but was put out by a collision with another car. Gibbons carried on to place third, in spite of being jammed in top gear since just after the start, and was beaten on scratch only by Ron Roycroft in the P3 Alfa Romeo. Both

**Below: Alan Freeman at Ardmore in the ex-Peter Collins lightweight Mk4.  
Bottom: Bob Gibbons' Mk5, Inset: on tow.**

