

CLASSIC DRIVER

Goodwood Glory the Prodrive Way

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Imagine spending some time alongside Paddy Hopkirk in a Mini Cooper rally car, then accompanying John Surtees testing a Lola T70 - pretty good, eh? Well, I've been doing the modern equivalent recently, courtesy of Prodrive, and it proved a truly memorable day out... one that is available to highly select groups of well-heeled enthusiasts, too.

I had been invited to join one of the company's bespoke '**Prodrive at Goodwood**' days at the beautiful West Sussex circuit. All events can be tailored to suit the client but this one, held broadly under the '**Aston Martin Sports Car Experience**' banner, involved cars made famous by the Banbury-based motorsport company *par excellence*: the **Group N Subaru Impreza**, **Aston Martin V8 Vantage** in **N24** and **Prodrive-modified** forms and, straight from the **FIA GT3 Championship**, the devastating **DBRS9**.

The programme started with coffee and pastries at the **Jackie Stewart Pavilion** at the circuit. Suitably fortified, guests were then split into groups for the day's activities. I headed for the hills (well, **the** hill, actually, as it's right by the Festival's famous course) to sample life in the co-driver's seat of a **Group N Subaru**.



Before we get on to the high-octane stuff, let me offer a pastoral comment: is there a finer setting than the Sussex Downs, and the **Goodwood Estate** in particular? Access to the **Goodwood Festival's Rally Stage** is via the main drive past **Goodwood House**, so, from circuit to 'forest' it's all Elgar and Jane Austen, without a modern building, or any visible monstrosity, in sight.

Geoff Jones is the man in the rally car. And I soon realise he is literally **the man**, as he bounces the 4wd car along the dry-but-greasy forest track. The grip is unbelievable, with the car springing cat-like from standstill into a useful stride that sees trees, chalky banks and gullies flashing past the windows.

I was sort of expecting this (having passengered in the [Prodrive Aston Martin Rally GT](#) the year before last) and enjoyed every minute of it. Jones is a very useful driver - and a pleasant chap, to boot - and, via the intercom, explains how the car is being set up for each corner and what he's going to do to the poor thing next. It's an awesome - and slightly humbling - experience.



Oh, and there's a Scandinavian-style 'yump'. I liked that – even if I wasn't expecting it... Thanks, Geoff.

You can also hone your own rallying driving skills on a slalom course set out in a nearby field using one of the Prodrive-prepared **Subaru Impreza STis**. I didn't have time for this but it is, apparently, one of the most popular parts of the day.





After lunch – taken at **The Kennels**, and very good, too – it's time for a return to the circuit. Prodrive has a team of instructors to guide the 'Goodwood novice' around the quick, and deceptively difficult, flowing course. The cars on hand include a **V8 Vantage N24** and the **Prodrive V8 Vantage**.

This is a car we rated [when we drove it last year](#) and, for 2008, there's a brand-new metallic grey example to play with. The Prodrive modifications include an extra 45bhp over standard, two-position dampers, and the option of switching the exhaust valve on or off at will. There are also front and rear spoilers in carbonfibre, as well as wider (at the rear) 'DBR9-type' lightweight alloy wheels. Very sexy.







The instructors make light of the multi-apex corners, and the small cars certainly get a move on round the famous track. As always with circuit driving, smoothness is everything, and the professionals get the very best out of the cars, encouraging both novices and experienced track day drivers alike to carry the speed from one sweeping bend to another.

But soon there's another car out on the circuit. The familiar rumbling crackle of the V8s gives way to a turbine-like roar: the mechanics have prepared his car and one of Britain's top professional racing drivers, **Anthony Reid**, is warming up the **DBRS9**. Lappery soon makes way for laptoppers, as the car is checked in the pits for temperatures and error messages. With everything deemed OK in the racing car (and having been suited- and helmeted-up), I'm inserted into the passenger seat for a few laps with Reid.

Having been softened up at the hands of Jones-the-wheel earlier in the day, Reid well and truly finishes the job off. This 600bhp car is so, so quick, and the quietly spoken Scotsman is so fast, that the laps seem to reel off in an instant. It cranks up to a fair old speed down the straight, but it's under braking (not an awful lot...) and in the corners that it defies description. It's not scary - quite the reverse - it's just, well, a total demolition job done on the circuit by one of the most professional teams out there.



Follow that. Well, you couldn't really, and it was a thoughtful SW that steered the Editorial BMW homewards. It's true to say that I have had my fair share of excitement over the years, but having all of this in one day tops most.

For 'money-can't-buy' enjoyment this is up there with the best. But that's not quite correct, money **can** buy a day at Goodwood like I had: you'll just have to be very nice to your corporate events manager, or talk to the **Prodrive Performance Centre** team yourself.

You'll enjoy the experience, whichever way you do it.

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