





SOPER'S SUPER TOURER

Steve Soper's Spa and Macau winning 320i has emerged from hibernation and now takes pride of place in the National Motoring Museum's motorsport section

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In 2011 the car was recommissioned and then reunited with Steve Soper, who remembers the car fondly. For its run at Goodwood it was given the appropriate number – 320 – which it still displays today



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At the tail end of March a newly created motorsport section within the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu in Hampshire was opened to the public. Ribbon-cutting honours were shared by Sir Stirling Moss and Murray Walker, Mr Motor Racing ably assisted by The Voice of Motor Racing. Among a highly delectable selection of competition cars chosen to showcase both 'Grand Prix Greats' and 'Road, Race and Rally', the chief interest for BMW lovers is the actual Super Touring 320i taken to victory at both Spa and Macau whilst chiefly driven by Steve Soper. At Spa in 1995 he shared with Peter Kox and 'Smoking' Jo Winkelhock. The pairing of Soper and Kox returned in 1996 with Marc Duez, but managed 'only' a second place to the sister car driven by Müller, Burgstaller and Tassin, but at Macau for the Guia race the next year Steve took victory solo, beating Michael Krumm and Charles Kwan, also in a 320i, to the top step of the podium.

Although we are only talking about 20 years ago, it already seems astonishing that the same car was a front line factory competition car for more than two seasons, and yet that is exactly the case with this much celebrated BMW. At Spa, and for that season, the car ran as a Fina/Bastos sponsored car, but as with all BMWs running at Macau all the way up to 2006 and Andy Priaulx's third World Touring Car Championship securing run, the title sponsorship was A.S. Watsons, the retail arm of Hutchison Whampoa.

So, how come this car has ended up in Beaulieu

having emerged from a private collection and not from the bowels of BMW Classic's Munich HQ? That is quite some story! The car had barely cooled down after its race winning run back in 1997 when the sponsors held a presentation event for the drivers and team members over in Macau from Germany and the UK. At that event the drivers and team management were thanked and all spoke of their gratitude to their hosts. As a spontaneous gesture, the car itself was given to Watson's CEO Ian F Wade (a gesture reflecting the BMW dominance of the Guia race during the Super Touring era – of the 18 podiums available under those rules, BMW secured seven of them – more than any other manufacturer). The car was then shipped to the UK to join a significant private collection of motor cars. Over the years it had been commented upon and noted as part of that collection but, largely, forgotten about by enthusiasts.

Anyone who was interested simply presumed that it has passed into private hands, or been messed about with or even crashed and written off as is the destiny of so many former racing cars. But this car sat quietly, exactly as it had crossed the finishing line in Macau. It even had competition fuel in the tank still! All would have remained moribund and slowly aging until 2011 when the Goodwood Festival of Speed decided to mark the Super Touring era with a dedicated class at The Festival of Speed. The car was immediately in line for a call up and contact was made with Noel Butler of NCB Autocraft in Solihull.

He decided the job was not for him but recommended Tom Shepherd of GTS Motorsport as it was already running a similar Super Tourer 320i in historic racing. Tom came to the car's home and collected it, taking the drive back down to think about what was needed. "Bearing in mind that the car was completely as last raced we were conscious that whatever we did to it had to be sympathetic to its history," Tom told us. "I decided therefore to concentrate on bringing the car back to life slowly and with the emphasis on safety. We knew instantly, for example, that the tyres were the very ones it won Macau on! Given Steve Soper was going to be driving at Goodwood, we did not think that 14 year old racing rubber would go down well at all – so that was the first thing on the list!"

Once the car was safely in the GTS workshops, Tom and his team were able to get into the depths and quickly produced a short job sheet. "Basically, we needed to strip the engine, which is a full-on works 318 2.0-litre with double injectors and then deal with the fuel system that still contained the hi-octane brew that had been used at Macau! This had turned to jelly so we were forced to strip out the fuel lines and the tank, replacing with new only where completely necessary and reusing parts once we had stripped, cleaned and reassembled them.

"In all truth, this car was as good as gold. That's the advantage of an ex-works car – when it's properly built to start with, it makes my job a lot easier down the line!" The hardest task was taking the engine

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Aside from a few modern safety additions the car is completely original and just as it was when it came off the racetrack in 1997. It ran in this configuration for two seasons and was successful at both Spa and Macau



apart and making completely certain that every component had been checked and re-checked. A few calls to BMW itself helped with this as, naturally, it is a pretty specialised lump. Whilst GTS was perfectly happy that it had the skills and ability to do the job in-house, it was reassuring to the company to have BMW Classic stood at its shoulder or at least on the other end of the phone to reassure the team that everything was being done correctly!

Tom again: “Realistically, there was nothing that we had not tackled before, but in this exact context we had to ensure that every box was ticked and every i and t dotted and crossed! The only real surprise for me was when I realised that the car had two identities! We soon worked out it was a Fina/Bastos car as well as the Macau winner and that *really* focused us in.” The car was tested shortly before Goodwood Festival of Speed in July 2011 and given a clean bill of health. It was delivered safely to the Cathedral Paddock there and when Steve Soper walked up to the car for his first practice run on the Friday morning he commented: “It was genuinely like stepping back in time. I’d not set eyes on the car, let alone driven it, since Macau in 1997 and both visually and dynamically nothing had changed. The seat, the controls, the read-outs and the all-important ‘feel’ of the car were exactly as I remembered them.”

Steve was driving two different cars at the Festival of Speed in 2011, the Watson’s car and an official BMW entry. Sadly, due to unforeseen mechanical maladies, the BMW entrant was unable to complete

the full programme and so Steve used the Watson’s car to ascend the hill twice each day on Saturday and Sunday. “This car is important. Not just to BMW and motorsport, but also to me personally,” Steve told me at Goodwood. “Taking wins at Spa and then Macau in the exact same car is pretty remarkable. Spa is a team effort, of course, but Macau is just down to the driver to deliver out on the track. This car mastered both of those disciplines. It helped my CV massively and cemented my relationship with BMW – leading to my Team BMW Le Mans outing and my best-placed finish there of fourth in 1999. A really good car, with very few, if any vices. This car made Macau one of my absolute favourite circuits to race on.”

After Goodwood in 2011 the car, still carrying not just its Macau finishing livery but also its most appropriate Goodwood running number of 320, was returned to the collection in which it has lived for so much of its life since 1997. It has been turned over regularly, but not run on a track since.

In November 2014 it was suggested to the owner that he might like to let the greater world of car enthusiasts see the machine again and, whilst he was not keen to allow it to race in the revived Super Touring class, he was more than happy to let the car travel to Beaulieu and become part of the new motorsport exhibit. The car now sits in the main hall of the National Motor Museum, currently between a Bugatti Veyron and a Ford RS200. It looks in amazing, though race-used, condition and is still a genuine time warp as the pictures of the interior show. The

labelling is just as it was; even the Lufthansa Cargo label hangs from the rear view mirror and the key-ring is its Bastos/Fina one, issued by BMW when it released the car in 1995 – it even still has its spare key on that ring!

This highly important and hugely successful 320i Super Touring car will be on display at the National Motor Museum in Beaulieu until Easter 2016 at least. It sits proudly alongside some of the greatest machines from history, not just of motorsport, but of motoring itself, opposite the ‘Period Garage’ feature and, if the opening reception is anything to go by, it will be attracting a great deal of attention during its time in display.

The key, as identified by museum director Doug Hill is that “the Super Touring cars look exactly like road cars. Visitors can identify with them far more easily than with, say, a V16 BRM or a Lotus 49! It takes nothing away from Grand Prix winners or endurance racers, they have their well-earned laurel wreaths, but this BMW especially gives the illusion of ‘could have been me’ or perhaps more accurately ‘could have been my/our/dad’s car’. We are so pleased to have this fantastic car here with us and hope many visitors will enjoy seeing it over the next 18 months or so that it is on display with us.” ●

Many thanks to:

Doug Hill and Heather Reid from Beaulieu
Steve Soper, Tom Shepherd and Stuart Weir
Dave Warburton and Ian Wade



The car now resides in the National Motoring Museum and it's in good company. Amusingly, the car still has its original BMW keys and tags and Lufthansa cargo label. Left: This is how the car would have looked in its previous Fina/Bastos livery from 1995. The car pictured isn't actually Soper's car though, this is the third placed Spa 24 Hour car from 1994 driven by Jean-Michel Martin, Patrick Slaus and Altfried Heger