

# TRACK TEST

British Touring Car Championship star **Andrew Jordan** steps back in time



A damp track greeted Andrew Jordan for his maiden run in a BTCC Renault



Sophisticated aerodynamics keep the Renault Laguna planted to the track



# JORDAN TRIES HIS SUPER TOURING ICON



## TECH SPEC

### 1999 Renault Laguna Super Tourer

**Model:** Renault Laguna

**Length:** 4508mm

**Width:** 1752mm

**Height:** 1433mm

**Wheelbase:** 2670mm

**Weight:** 975kg

**Engine:** in-line four cylinder DOHC 16-valve, iron block and alloy head

**Engine management:** Williams-Sodemo-Magneti Marelli developed systems

**Mounting:** transverse

**Capacity:** 1998cc

**Transmission:** Williams-Hewland developed six-speed sequential plus reverse

**Suspension:** Williams Penske developed shocks, Eibach springs

**Front:** MacPherson strut, coil springs, gas-filled dampers, anti-rollbar

**Rear:** Trailing arm, torsion bars, coil springs, gas-filled dampers, anti-rollbar

**Brakes:** AP Racing ventilated discs, twin six-piston calipers front, four-pot calipers rear, water cooled

**Wheels and tyres:**

8.3in x 19in, OZ lightweight wheels, Michelin racing tyres (in period)





Jordan and Goodwood favourite Anthony Reid compare notes

**I**t was perfect for a young chap: all I needed to keep out of my parents' hair for a few hours was a PlayStation and a copy of TOCA 2 Touring Cars.

I can remember it now – why was it always that bloody Jason Plato that had me off? I soon became pretty familiar with the dark green Nescafé Blend 37 Renault Laguna that Plato and reigning champion Alain Menu drove in 1998. Usually, it was getting in to my side door at the most inappropriate of moments.

Everyone harks back to the late-1990s as the greatest period in the BTCC's history and those are the cars that a lot of people grew up with. The television interest was becoming huge and the series was just growing and growing. Super Touring seemed to be riding the crest of a pretty big wave.

When the bosses at Goodwood asked me to go to the West Sussex track in early December and try out a Super Touring car for some promotional filming it was doing, I knew it would be a dream. Now I would get to handle one for real. There will be a demonstration at the Goodwood Members' Meeting in March and they needed someone to help out with the driving for promotional activities.

To cap it all, I was to drive a 1999 Renault Laguna, now belonging to

Simon Garrad. How things had gone full circle – and how I wished Plato had been there for me to get one back on him. Simon probably thought it was a good job that he wasn't...

Now, of course, I am pretty used to the inside of a Next Generation Touring Car, the type of machine we have been using in the BTCC for the last five seasons now.

I know what a top-level tin-top should look like from the inside, but I was blown away sitting in the Laguna. The amount of carbon, everywhere around the cabin space, was remarkable. You could tell no expense had been spared in the build of this car but, then again, I guess that is what you would expect. Back in those days, when you had all the manufacturers, teams like Williams and big name drivers in the British Touring Car Championship, money was no object. The Renault, from the inside, had the signature style of something that has had a lot of money spent on it.

Although it was immaculate, I felt that it still wasn't as user friendly as my NGTC car once you slip in to the driver's seat. The gearshift was a little too far away for me and the switches were all very low down in the console and not that easy to reach. I guess that is to drop as much weight as possible to the lowest point that they could in the car – even the tiniest of fractions help

out with making the centre of gravity as low as possible – but I think that my Pirtek Racing Ford Focus is more comfortable for me.

I had been lined up for a run in a Super Touring car in a previous test but the car went wrong so I didn't get to do any proper laps. When I turned up at Goodwood, guess what? It was raining!

I didn't let that bother me and we popped on some wet Hoosier tyres and away I went. The first thing that struck me was the noise from the beautiful engine. The Super Touring cars were out-and-out racing cars and they sounded like they were: a normally aspirated car always sounds better than a turbocharged one and it puts a big grin on your face. Even at tick over, it has a certain sound that makes you aware that the engine is just ready to get on with it. It wants to be thrashed.

Getting on to the track, I was really impressed with the acceleration. I expected it to not be as impressive as my turbocharged car, and it is true that the modern cars have more torque because of the turbo. But this was still plentiful, and it surprised me. It wanted to be revved.

Using the throttle was something I quickly worked out was pretty key in this car. It needs to be within a certain rev range and it doesn't have the torque of the modern car to rescue it. Because it was wet, I was short-shifting but I had

to be careful: do that too early, and I would lose all momentum. It was all about the momentum in these cars, and that was pretty obvious from the way the car was demanding to be driven.

What also surprised me about the car was, even in the wet, it was easy to feel the aerodynamics in the faster corners. Even though it was damp for my run, you could feel the chassis sticking to the road – a lot. On a dry track, the grip would have been phenomenal. I suppose that the cars would move around a bit on the absolute limit on a dry track, but you would have to be right on the ragged edge.

The handling was good too. The dampers were developed by Williams and that shows: you can ride the kerbs nicely and it doesn't upset the attitude of the car. Again, that is a credit to the amount of research and development that went into the cars in the day.

Another impressive thing was the braking capacity. The car is about 250kg lighter than the NGTCs that we use today. You can feel that straight away. Even though I was having to be careful on the anchors because of the weather, it was pretty clear that the AP system was very effective. The Super Tourers weigh in at around 975kg and that means they were easier to chuck around the track. The cars are certainly nimble and you can feel that.

As much as people do refer back to the

Super Touring era as the high point of the BTCC, sometimes there wasn't that much overtaking, and you have to put that down to the highly sophisticated aerodynamics that you have on a car that has been painstakingly designed with no limit on the budgets.

When you get the cars on the very ragged edge, which I wasn't really able to do on a wet track at Goodwood and in some else's car, then you could imagine that rinsing the last few tenths out of them would have been tough. The cars would move around a bit, I would think, and when you had the quality of drivers that you had, gaining any kind of advantage would have been tough.

I am not going to say that the cars are harder to drive, because you only get to know how tough the car is when you are on the very limit and when you are in a racing situation. But they are refined bits of kit, that is for sure.

The NGTC cars that we use today have their own tricks and it takes a great deal to get the very most from them.

It was great to have a taster of another era and to get an insight into the cars that I remember from my youth. They are pure-bred racers that have been developed with a no-expenses-spared ethos, but the tricks of tin-top racing are just as edgy today. ■

## Renault's swansong after seven highly successful seasons in the BTCC

The writing was on the wall for Renault in the British Touring Car Championship on 1999. With budgets spiraling across the category, manufacturers were beginning to question the reasons they were involved. Renault was one of those firms and, halfway through the season, the French firm decided to withdraw.

Maybe that decision had been made easier by a relatively poor start to the season. The 1997 champion and Renault talisman Alain Menu had jumped ship to Ford, which promoted Jason Plato to team leader in only his third year in the BTCC, while Frenchman Jean-Christophe Boullion was drafted in to the team as back-up.

It started well for Plato, with two

podiums in the opening rounds at Thruxton and then a win at the next meeting at Silverstone, but things went down hill from there.

Along with Menu went the 1998 Laguna's designer Mark Ellis, and the team did well to try and galvanise itself despite that loss. The chassis was tweaked – helped by consultant and ex-F1 guru Enrique Scalabrini – and it was, according to *MN's* season review, still the best on the grid.

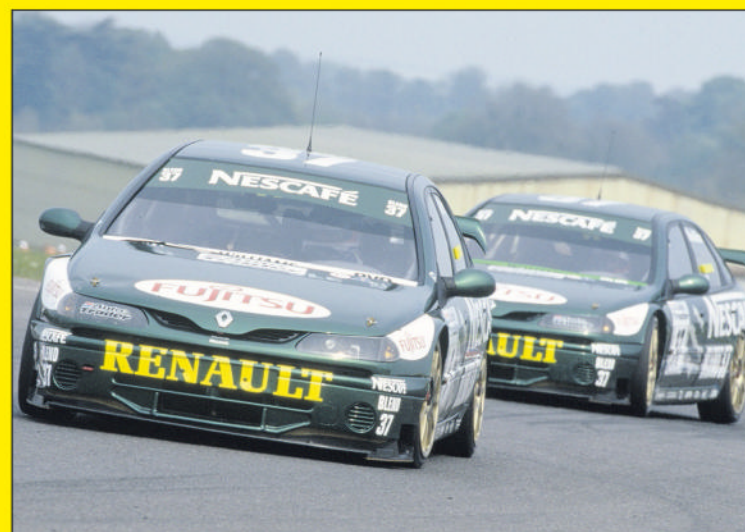
Despite the excellent underpinnings, the major drawback for the team – as well as fighting off the spectre of the impending axe as Renault announced halfway through the year that the programme would come to a close – was

the lack of straightline speed.

"I remember the last meeting of the season at Silverstone well," says Plato. "In the first race, I had an electrical failure on the grid and they had to push me in to the pits. And then, in the last race, Menu went off and speared back on to the track into the side of me, breaking the rollcage. It was my final race with Williams. What a sad way to finish."

Ultimately, Plato finished fifth in the points, while Boullion was 10th. It marked an underwhelming end to Renault's seven-year association with the BTCC, which had started with the Renault 19 in 1993. It collected 38 race wins and a drivers' and a teams' championship.

Matt James



Plato banked two podiums in the first rounds of the year at Thruxton