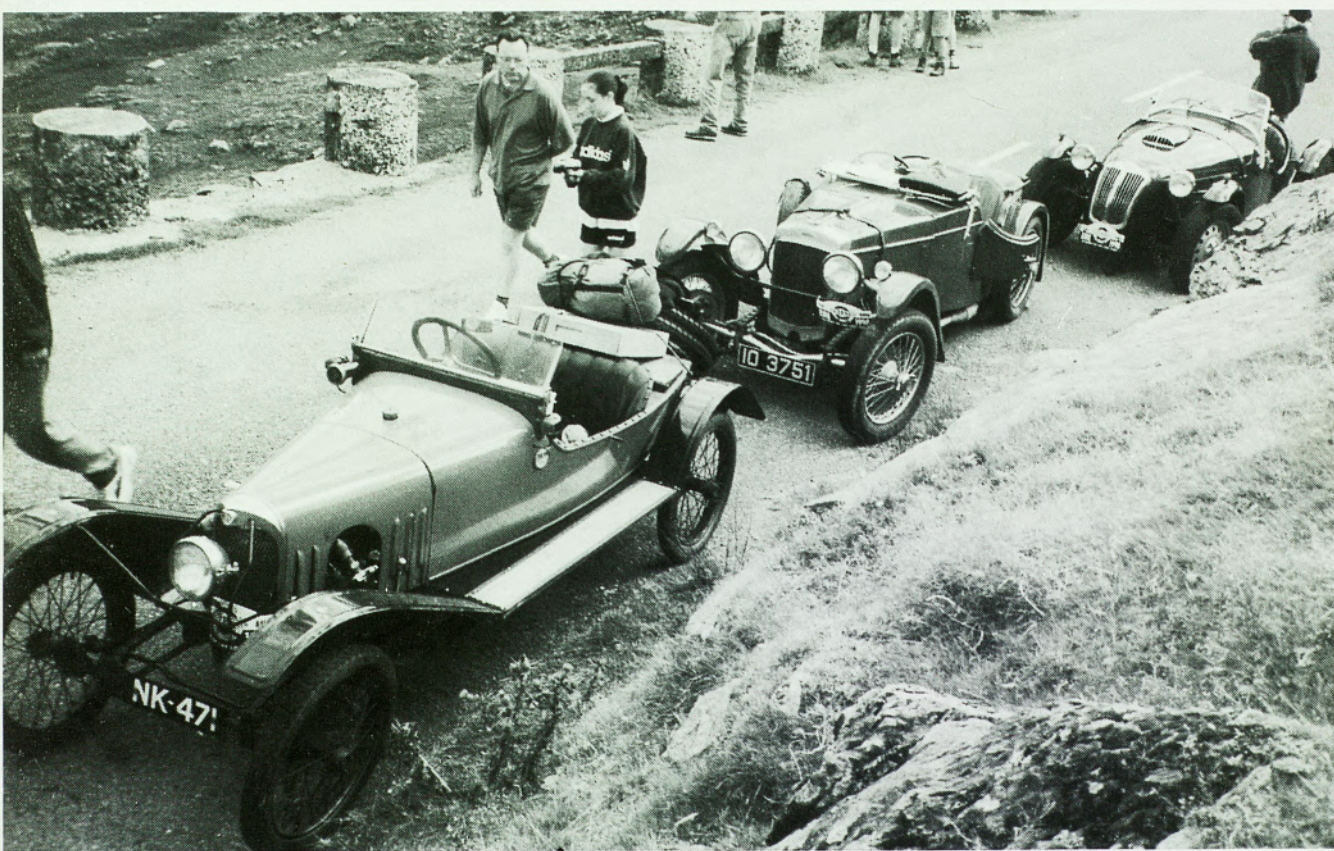




# THE CHAIN GANG GAZETTE



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## The 1998 Mille Miglia

*by David Leigh*

Mille Miglia! Two words that trip off the tongue with the greatest of ease! They also conjure up in the mind of the vintage motorist pictures of screaming Italian enthusiasts, and red cars, LOTS of red cars! Its funny but some years ago I drove the GN Beetle at a Nash picnic. If you haven't driven a seriously fast chain drive Frazer Nash on the road you come away not only with brown underwear but a tremendous feeling of exhilaration. From that moment on there was only one car for such an event!

So at a suitable moment I raised the subject with Jon Giles, who not being a man to contemplate such a decision long, gave an instant reply in the affirmative! If I would get the entry, he would be there with the Beetle. Word of our proposed caper soon got around. "Don't be ridiculous, you'll never get an entry in the Beetle", was heard, the Registrar was particularly cited!. We would not be dissuaded.

So a suitably 'embellished' history was prepared for the car along with a change of name to less (or more!) confuse the Italians! Anything called Beetle (which happened also to be a nickname I had as a child) may have alarming VW connotations to a non-believer. Also how do you explain that a GN car which went out of production in 1925 should be eligible for an event for cars built between 1927 and 1957.

So we settled on Frazer Nash 'Capa' and 1928. Not total invention as the Beetle's history can be traced back to Capa racing in the 1920s (and Capa just happened to have a nice Italian ring to it!). The entry and historical schpiel in Italian was duly despatched along with as much brown nosing as we could muster between us and the Giles family (and that's considerable!), and in March we received the great news that our lire cheque had bounced but that we did have an entry!

So the planning process started. Jon was very insistent that we drove down unsupported and back. This meant, for those who know the car a very limited pack; tools, no spare wheel but tubes and levers, a mag and head gasket. Personal belongings were

limited to one saddle bag each strapped over the scuttle and to be discarded in Brescia before the event started in earnest.

The next problem was how do you get a 6ft 3" Leigh behind the wheel of a car designed for a 5ft midget (sorry I meant Giles!) Those people who have known me a long time may recall my other school boy nickname of 'flippers'! It can be very flattering to have a nickname after some features of ones body but unfortunately my feet at size 12 were too big to miss. So after some fettling and discussion a smaller brake pedal was fitted (brakes being for girlies), the clutch pedal moved and finally a thinner seat cushion. This last meant that a corset became necessary as GN rear springs were already pretty limiting. The result however was very satisfactory and even Jon agreed it gave him more room.

Now the Mille Miglia is not a race (really!) but does have a fairly complicated timing set-up, which needs a multiplicity of countdown stopwatches, the mind of Professor Calculus, more sets of eyes than Medusa and more hands than the Oxford rowing Eight. Not being in anyway equipped for this, we set about doing our best.

It was decided that Jon as owner and therefore having the best knowledge of the car should be the principle driver and that I having a bent towards navigation should be timekeeper and route planner. The best non motorway route was decided as Le Shuttle, Amiens, Troyes, Dijon (overnight stop), then Dole to Geneva via the mountains, then through the Mont Blanc tunnel descending to Aosta then bypassing Milan to the south and so to Brescia. This was a fairly ambitious two day plan but we were sure the Beetle would be fine. Incidentally I was telling my 98 year old Great Aunt about the proposed venture to which she replied 'How on earth are you going to get everything in Spider!' I told her that a thousand yards was more Spider's style as opposed to a thousand miles.

So were we going to compete, I mean go for gold? You bet we were. However, when we told people of our plan the reply was that

scotched by the authorities long before you get to Rome. "Oh", they said, "and the Italians cheat like hell so forget sticking to the rules". We heeded the advice though disbelieving and, equipping ourselves with every gismo available (legal and illegal!) we set out in winning frame of mind.

Now the round trip was going to be 2600 miles and with the Beetle's tank holding only about 5 gallons, a single stop fuel strategy was clearly out of the question! More like a constant-stop fuel strategy! Two hours and fuel would be the norm. (I think when we got home we had nearly 40 fuel Visa receipts between us. We set off from Dorinda Thirby's house in London with myself clutching a flask of Ribena having had a bout of food poisoning the day before. I was rough. But soon the Beetle in its own inimitable fashion (ably assisted by the corset) had my mind firmly off the subject of my gut.

The weather was fantastic and the car roared along in true AC powered aplomb. We saw a convoy of Bentleys. (What is the collective noun for Bentleys? A Hooray? or perhaps a Berk?) We thought it showed good sport that they were driving but later discovered this was only a skeleton crew and they had put them on the train in Paris on some pretext that this was what had been done in the Twenties. So after a remarkably sensible drive by Jon and myself we arrived at Dijon.

We started early on the Tuesday morning and after a greasing of chains, checking of oil and water we set off. We had applied plenty of Factor 18, and those who have been on long hot hauls behind aeroscreens will know how filthy you get, and quickly as all the dust, oil, and rubber stick to your face. A good tip, grit your teeth to stop the flies! There then followed an excellent thrash through the mountains to Geneva then up to the Mont Blanc Tunnel and into

Italy. It was hot as we arrived at Aosta and sat and had our first pasta of the trip. Then on down towards Milan and eventually after many petrol and not so many beer stops we arrived at the Hotel Master at Brescia, our base for the event.

We decided that we owed ourselves a lie-in on Wednesday morning which was our rest and fettling day. There was no apparent fettling to do other than discard the saddlebags and rationalise the kit for the Mille Miglia section of the trip. The only repetitive fault other than the use of limited quantities of water was the ammeter kept coming loose. These Giles cars are just so unreliable!!

As we cleaned (yes, I did say clean!) the Beetle we were approached by some American competitors who informed us that there was a petrol strike in Italy and there was "no gas till Friday!" Help! This was Wednesday and we hardly had enough in the tank to take us to scrutineering. It was a good job the strike hadn't started the day before as we may have spent four days in Aosta and missed the event! All was well in the end, however. Only in Italy could you have a national strike where arrangements have been made for a rally of old crocks to break it. We found the official Brescia station, were gassed up and back at the hotel before the Americans had decided it was worth getting the cars off the trailers!



**The cool British racing driver and his cup of tea, overwhelmed by the Maserati, Ferrari and OSCA in the background! - photo by David Leigh**



The rest of the day was spent calibrating our timing equipment and measuring the cars ability to cover 100 meters, the measured distance in to most of the events controls. 15 seconds seemed about right with me counting Jon down to the point where he should cross a rubber timing strip. "Three..... two..... one..... now"! We rounded off the day with a drive up to Lake Garda, a swim and some beers.

Thursday. This is scrutineering and the start that night. It was raining but we made an early start so as to not get caught up with the 400 competitors due to turn up. We were soon in the queue, and after being robbed 30 quid each at gunpoint by an Italian doctor for an 'Italian Competition licence' we were, as at many VSCC meetings, playing that famous game of 'Hunt the Scrutineer'. Now Terry Rodgers, Philip Selwyn Smith, if you are reading this, I will never say anything rude again about VSCC scrutineers. We were expecting an easy deal from one of the very enthusiastic Italians thronging the piazza, but for some reason best know to the organisers they had selected a German to do the job. "Papers for the car!" he barked in that tone familiar to many WW2 movies. Jon handed over the FIVA passport. "I want to see the chassis number!" Jon gulped. I offered "Frazer Nash rarely ever marked the chassis, mine (Spider's) is marked on top of the chassis but under the front N/S road spring. You have to get the front axle off to see it." He insisted "I have to see it! How do I know it is not a replica?" Jon gulped again! "Consider my reputation" said the scrutineer, "what would you do in my position?" We told him! Then to our amazement he said " You have time to remove the axle" and walked off! Giles family to the rescue, Jon thought he knew where it was and after removing the valence of the N/S of the bonnet, the number was clearly visible. The scrutineer was semi-happy by the time we found him again. He was asking the same question to an unhappy looking Jochen Mass who was driving the Moss/Jenks works Mercedes SLR. We hoped Mercedes were able to comply! We were also pleased he didn't notice the number on the chassis was not the same as the number on the dash-board plate, which would have confused him further.(...actually it confused me!...)

We also met the other Nashes namely the Ainscough Nurgurg (unblown) driven by Bill's sons William and Richard, and Sir Antony Pilkingtons 1948 Competition two-seater (the fore-runner of the High Speed and Le Mans Replicas). His passenger had also been struck down similarly to myself by what is today known in polite medical circles as 'Intestinal Hurry!'. Unfortunately Antony felt unable to leave him in Brescia and do the event with some Italian beauty picked from the crowd, as we suggested. The young Ainscoughs had not driven the Nurburg before (I think ever) and father had offered them the chance of a lifetime. They grasped the opportunity with both hands! Unfortunately lost time for mechanical derangements meant they had eventually to retire, but good form shown.

We meanwhile, well, did we have a good time? After a wet start, enthusiastic garage owners giving us free wine and bacon sandwiches in the middle of the night, fantastic receptions by screaming crowds everywhere especially at Verona in the Roman Arena we made it to bed on Thursday night in Ferrara.

Cappaccinoed up we drove on Friday morning, Ravenna, San Marino blasting on up hill in the traffic, Assissi where we drove through the old city at high speed on pedestrian walkways. It was here we met VSCC member Branislav Sudjic driving his Bugatti with Nashman passenger William Hall, (son of Derek). Their event was to end on the Saturday afternoon being run off the road by a local at one of the kamikaze junctions being policed by Italian officials waving Yellow flags. The Italian organisation was fantastic, but dogged by unpredictable locals and more problematic, the hangers-on on the route. There were the unofficial hangers-on, who came from all over Europe in their Westfields, Caterhams and on their bikes, dicing with the competitors and in our case holding us up (mostly Germans and Dutch). Then there were the Official hangers-on. These were the support cars which were meant to travel on a different but parallel route. Again the Germans particularly flouted the rules. It was with one such Frankfurt registered Volvo 440 that we got into a mega chase. The rules for support cars were quite simple, 'Let the competitors through'. But

would this German guy get out of the way? He just put his foot down as we sped up another fabulous winding pass. Unfortunately he had obviously never been followed by an enthusiastic Giles driving a fast GN. Jon set the Beetle on the back bumper of the Volvo and the German couldn't shake him off, what ever he tried. He got the fright of his life when we passed through a crowd of about 100 enthusiastic Italians at the top without us slowing down, then he swerved off to the right and braked hard. As we sped past I looked round at him. He was white as a sheet and transfixed to the wheel. He had had the fright of his life.

Each town was recorded in the log book by a 'STAMPA!' These included the Mille Miglia logo and the town's name. Neither of us will own up to being the one who suggested to one official that our foreheads were stamped! But soon we were doing really well with a multicoloured route card developing in indelible ink over our faces. The crowd loved it!

After a good lunch (during which time we saw the German Scrutineer taking a further look at the car (perhaps he was still wondering if it was a replica!) we pressed on towards Rome passing through the snowline near Leonessa. Here the two sections had been cancelled because of the road conditions, (obviously not used to the hardened VSCC members!).

As we headed towards Rome I had my first chance to drive, and immediately broke a chain enjoying myself too much with the two Mille Miglia Alfa Romeo 8Cs, whose drivers seemed to like thundering along like Jon and I. At Rome we took a wrong direction, and in turning round in a darkened car park obviously disturbed the local hookers pick-up spot. They must have thought their boat had



**A cheerful Giles, and the young Ainscoughs**

**- photo by David Leigh**

come in! We left in a hurry.

After a short night at the hotel Jolly (Giles couldn't be persuaded into the bar after dinner, but then he had done the lion's share of the driving...) we were just leaving when a set of half time results caught our attention. Pleased with our performance and confident of being at least in the top 25 cars we scanned down the list only to find to our horror that we were lying 181st! We were a bit deflated as we considered we had hardly put a foot wrong since the start. Never mind, as the old Mille Miglia adage goes, 'He who leads at Rome cannot win the Mille Miglia!' With this in mind we recapochinnoed ourselves, carried out the daily checks to the Beetle and pushed our way down to the start through the ranks of expensive motors waiting for the off and at least one highly excited official.

The leg back to Brescia was more of the same. The roar of the crowds, particularly on the Futa and Raticosa passes was incredible, especially when we met up with and eventually overtook all the Bentleys and the works BMW 328 team, one of the drivers proving very difficult to overtake. He turned out to be BMW's Touring car championship works driver! The Germans drove vigorously, the German Bentleys putting up much more of a fight than the British ones. How times have changed.



The overtaking of the works Mercedes SSKs was particularly satisfying. We spotted them first emerging from a woodline into which we were just now passing. We had tangled with them before but found them very aggressive. As we came out of the wood, they were about half a mile ahead, descending to a major road junction. To our delight we appeared not to have been spotted. As they slowed through the junction and started off up the main road, Giles struck! Descending to the junction on the opposite side of the road, he rounded the bollards the wrong way, and out accelerated the entire dumbfounded column of Panzers - oops! sorry, cars!

Another particularly memorable thrash on a mountain section saw us following an Italian Policeman on a motorbike who kept shifting from buttock to buttock as he was clearly in some discomfort! This made him instantly recognisable on the latter stages of the event. I wondered how he might feel after 1000 miles in a GN! We chased him up a pass being pursued by some more annoyed competitors whose noses had been put out of joint by being passed by Beetle. The road suddenly entered a tunnel where there was considerable roadworks causing chaos in both directions. Constable Shufflebottom wound his bike through the gaps in the cars and trucks, followed by Beetle and several other competitors. As the gap got narrower one by one the larger cars gave up the chase except for an Aston who persisted right up Beetles proverbial! Finally the gap narrowed to an extent that we had to drive half under the side of a stationary articulated truck's trailer. This finally proved too much for the Aston and we left them in the dark of the tunnel.

After a roadside beer we pressed on with the darkness drawing in. The crowds became greater again as we neared Modena and then Mantova. Finally after another thrash with a Bavarian 8 litre Bentley, we passed through the last special stage and entered Brescia in the pouring rain near 10 PM to a surprise greeting at the finish by the smiling face of Chris Chilcott, anxious to know the whereabouts of the Sudjic/Hall Bugatti.

We were exhausted. After another short night (Saturday), we packed up the car in the morning with all our worldly possessions (or those that we could fit in the

Beetle, the rest being taken back to the UK on another competitors trailer). Prize giving was all in Italian though it quickly became obvious that mainly Italians had won, (as we had been told they would.)

The final lunch was excellent, and by amazing Mille Miglia organisation, we all received fully bound copies of the results. We were please to find that we had recovered our overnight 181st position to finish 93rd overall, and 7th in our class. With one exception the first 29 places were taken up by Italians! However we offer you our own interpretation of the Giles/Leigh/Beetle performance in various classes.

Most cars overtaken.

Most noise in restaurants and bars.

Best spectator value.

Most overtaking of the course car!

Only car to be personally flagged down by Dr Franchi, Director of the Mille Miglia (we thought he was just waving!)

Above all, in the spirit of the Nash section and the VSCC and any sensible fun loving vintage motorist, special award for what must have been the only car to be driven to and from the event(a fact missed out in the VSCC bulletin's article on the event in the last issue). Also it is great credit to Giles engineering that we never laid a spanner on the car from beginning to end (actually we did have to tighten up the ammeter a couple of times).

Luck did not shine on the young Ainscoughs who retired but had clearly had a great time, or the Pilkington Competition two-seater, whose passenger was still indisposed.

The journey home was uneventful. Beetle did begin to lose a little water, but what do you expect if you thrash an AC for two and a half thousand miles. Sufficient to say we left Brescia at around 2.30 PM and were back in Dijon without motorways in 8 hours, having lots of fun in the mountains with all sorts of moderns, including having to make one emergency stop in an ice storm! Dijon to home seemed effortless the next day.

The Mille Miglia is a great event, I would recommend it to anyone. Don't be put off by thinking you have a car that will not be accepted. The Italians just like noisy old cars, driven enthusiastically. If they happen to be red, so much the better.

**Extracts from 'Directory of Historic Racing Cars by DSJ (1987)**

**Original** - Almost impossible to find anything in this category. It would have had to have been put in store the moment it was completed. Possibly the Trossi- Monaco special in the Biscaretti Museum comes as close to an original racing car as it is possible to get.

The 'old-car industry' frequently uses degrees of originality, such as 'nearly original', 'almost original', even 'completely original', but all such descriptions are meaningless as they cannot be quantified. A racing car that has only had a new set of tyres and a change of sparking plugs since it was completed is no longer 'original'. Many components have remained 'original', such as gearboxes, cylinder heads, axles and so on, and reproduction parts are made to 'original drawings' and 'original material specification', but this does not make them 'original' parts, nor does a complete car built from such components qualify as 'original', regardless of what the constructor or owner might think. Such a car is nothing more than a 'reproduction' or 'facsimile'.



**A wonderful shot of Giles, Leigh and Beetle in the 1998 Retro Mille Miglia - photo by Ag Archimede**

**Genuine** - This is a much more practical description for an old or historic car and can be applied to most racing cars that have had active and continuous lives, with no 'occasions' when they disappeared into limbo or changed their character in any way. Most E.R.A.s come into this category as they have been raced continuously which has meant the replacement of numerous components as they wore out, but the car itself has never been lost from view, nor has its basic character or purpose been altered over the years. Even such a well-known E.R.A. as 'Romulus' is not 'original' as it has been repainted, re-upholstered, new tyres have been fitted, and new components have been used to rebuild the engine, but it is unquestionably 'Genuine'...

**Re-construction** - This can stem from a single original component, or a collection of components from a variety of cars, but usually there is very little left of the original racing car, except its history and its character. From these small particles a complete new car is built, its only connection being a few components and the last-known pile of rust left over when decomposition set in.