John Gott once described how HRG asked him to form a team of private owners and to captain them in the 1948 Alpine Rally. Visiting the Tolworth factory a little later, he met a couple in full Ascot rig — "a lady who looked like Dresden china and a man who looked like a Moss Bros advertisement" — and admits to being horrified when told they were to be in his team.

This bonhomie pair were Nancy and Douglas Mitchell, who had no experience of Continental rallying and had never, indeed, so much as driven on the wrong side of the road. But when the time came they showed great promise and real determination, nursing a sick car through to the finish a bare minute before disqualification and thus helping HRG to win the first-ever Alpine team prize won by a British entry. Within the next decade Gott was to be outdriven many times by the Dresden lady, who won the European Women's Championship in 1956 and 1957 as a member of the BMC works team — captained again by John Gott.

Undoubtedly the best in her day, "Mitch" never lost her cool elegance which, allied to outstanding ability on slippery roads, earned her the title of "Ice Queen". Much in demand by manufacturers, she drove works-entered or works-supported cars of more than a dozen makes, including Alvis, Austin-Healey, Cooper, Daimler, Ford, Hillman, HRG, Jowett, MG, Morgan, Morris, Riley, Standard, Sunbeam and Triumph. And although best-known as a rally competitor she also drove in races, speed hillclimbs and trials.

Mitch and her husband (she called him Mitch, too, which was a mistake confusing at times) entered for two more Alpines without matching their initial success. Changing from an Aerodynamic 1500 to a conventional HRG for 1949, they blew a head-gasket, and in 1950 they non-started because of illness in the family. But the bug had bitten deep, and Mitch would even do a Continental event alone if her husband couldn't get away. Eventually the hardworking HRG simply broke in two during a rally, "it was held together by the brake-cables," she recalls.

Within a few years, such was her reputation that Sheila Van Damn remembers* being very surprised when Mitch offered to go as Number 3 in a works Sunbeam-Talbot entered in the 1952 Monte Carlo Rally for "Bill" Wisdom and herself. "With three-quarters of the rally behind us... it began to snow. In no time at all we were in the middle of a blizzard, I realised I was too inexperienced to cope with these conditions, so I suggested that Nancy and Bill should take over. By superb driving Nancy got us to Clermont Ferrand on time, but the worst was still to come... I marvelled at her skill and courage, and wondered how long it could go on."

Shortly afterwards the car did teeter on the edge of a sheer drop, but the thick snow stopped it in time, so they pushed it back on the road and continued. "Still Nancy drove. She had been behind the wheel for almost ten hours without a break and nothing would move her from it now; her stamina was fantastic."

Above, 1948 Alpine rally HRG 1500 team: Nancy and Douglas Mitchell (left) with team leader John Gott; Jack Gillespie (right) in Aerodynamic cars, Jack and Mary Richmond"
that she, Van Damm, was "too young to die." After fully sixteen hours at the wheel in such conditions, Nancy curled up in the back for a one-hour cat-nap, then took over again and drove all the way to the finish.

That same year, Mitch found herself matched against John Gott, both in HRGs, at a Silverstone club meeting. Gott, who was nobody's fool, warned her solemnly not to exceed a certain rpm limit — which he of course ignored, beating her by 1/10 second at the finish. She took a bow.

Javelin on the Lisbon Rally with Joyce Leavens (sister of O'Hara Moore) as co-driver, and they won the Coupe des Dames. In the 1952 Alpine — the rally that gave the Sunbeam Alpine its name — Rootes had a stupendous team that included Moss, Hawthorn, John Fitch, Leslie Johnson and manager Norman Garrad himself, but Mitch was sharing a privately-owned Sunbeam-Talbot with Dr Denise Kellner. Near Castellane, only 50 miles from the finish, they were holding third place in their class, the only remaining contenders for the ladies' award, when the offside front stub axle broke.

For the 1953 Monte, Mitch shared a works Alvis with Dorothy Stanley-Turner and Georgie Fotheringham-Parker, all three wearing very fetching ski outfits coloured to match the car. But the Alvis didn't get them there in time to qualify for the final timed section. The outright winner, beating Appleby's Jaguar Mark VII, was Dutchman Maurice Gatsoside's works Ford Zephyr, and shortly afterwards Mitch had a letter from Gatsos inviting her to join the Ford works team for the Tulip Rally. Partnered again by Joyce Leavens in VW 458, the works Zephyr was to be a friendly car that season, she won the Coupe des Dames and Gatsos won outright, while Ford took the team prize — but they were disqualified because the scrutineers said an extra hole in the engine had been made to give an overdrive feature.

In 1954, Mitch changed horses yet again for 1955, driving the Daimler Conquest Century in rallies and races — an unlikely choice, perhaps (Sheila Van Damm won the Championship for the second year running) but she liked them. "They were the most fabulous cars; they handled well, and you could select your next gear before engaging it, which was very handy on places like the Stelvio Pass. And dear old Ken Wharton was my team manager." By that time, indeed, Wharton lost his place in the Jaguar racing team, for Daimler and Jaguar were rivals then.

The big breakthrough for Nancy Mitchell came the following year when she joined the BMC works team, managed by Marcus Chambers. Starting with the Monte and the RAC, neither of them very successful, she won the Coupe des Dames in the London/Charbonnières Rally, being the only woman to finish in what proved another very tough event. Far, far tougher, however, was the Mille Miglia, run in such dreadful weather that drivers were killed (one of them, John Heath) and sixteen injured. BMC had entered two steel-bodied MGAs with long-range tanks, oil coolers and high-ratio axles. Having only twin aero screens, the crews were soaked through and so fatigued that they had to be lifted out of the cars at the finish. Mitch drove the entire 1,000 miles single-handed, never getting out of the car, and came third in her class, only 3 mins behind Peter Scott-Russell's car. "Pat Faichney sat beside me the whole of that race, and tried to feed me from time to time. But her, poor girl..."

Naturally they won the Ladies' Award, for the Sunbeam Rapier that finished in second place ahead of their MGA was driven mainly by Peter Harper, though entered in Sheila Van Damm's name. Marcus Chambers then discovered that Norman Garrad, brilliant publicity man that he was, had arranged for Sheila to do a demonstration lap in the Rapier at the following Saturday's big Daily Express meeting at Silverstone. Clearly, he couldn't let Rootes pull that one on BMC, so Nancy's revised post-Mille Miglia schedule read like this: Wednesday, arrive...
home from Italy; Thursday, catch night
boat to Holland; Friday check in for start
of Tulip Rally; Saturday, from Amsterdam
to London Airport by scheduled flight,
to Silverstone by private helicopter for de
mog in MGA, return to London Airport
in MGA and fly back to Amsterdam; Sunday
morning at Sam, start Tulip Rally in works
Magnette. After all this, it was a bit
exasperating to win the Ladies only to be
disqualified.

Well pleased with the way the MGA was
shaping up, Marcus entered five of them
for the 1956 Alpine, crewed by Gott/
Brooks, Sears/Best, Milne/Johns,
Shepherd/Williamson, and Mitch with Pat
Faichney. The girls beat all the others to
come 15th overall out of 34 finishers.

More than that, they completed the rally
without a single penalty point, thus
winning one of the coveted Coupe des
Alpes; they were only the third women's
crew to do so in the history of the event.

For the Liège-Rome-Liège, four works
MGAs were entered, Mitch driving her
faithful Mille Miglia car, MBL 867, but this
time with Anne Hall as co-driver. It was
among the four British cars to finish
three MGAs and a TR3.

After such a splendid season, it was a
shame that Mitch had to wait so long for the
FIA to confirm that she had won the
Ladies' European Touring Championship
for 1956. Indeed, the delay was such that
they actually did so it was obvious that she was going to
win the 1957 title as well, having again
driven brilliantly for BMC. Her most
successful events had been the Lyon/
Charbonnières, in which she and Doreen
Reece were not only the best ladies but
made the best British performance, and
the Liège-Rome-Liège, in which she and
Joan Johns were the first Britishers ever
to win the Coupe des Dames. Oddly
enough, in this second BMC year she also
drove a works TR3 on the Mille Miglia, but
lost it on a level crossing just before
Pescara and rammed a straw-bale which,
unluckily, was done up with wire that
punctured the radiator. "They were the
worst possible cars you could drive —
ever went where you pointed them. I
liked my MGA — but the old HRG was my
all-time favourite."

By 1958 it was obvious that Pat Moss
would soon displace Mitch as the top
woman driver in the BMC team: Nancy's
Magnetette did not finish the Monte, and in
the RAC Rally her Riley 1.5 went through a
wall near Darlington, landed in a tree, then
went end-for-end down a 50ft slope. In the
Alpine she and Anne Hall finished 15th
overall in their works Austin-Healey —
but Pat Moss and Ann Wisdom finished
fourth in theirs.

Early in 1959, Carrad asked Mitch to
join four other women — Sheila Von
Damm, Françoise Clarke, Mary Handley
Page and Tish O’azine — in a 22-day,
25,000-kilometre endurance test on
Belgian pavé with a Hillman Minx. During
the run, Mitch flew back to spend a few
hours with her daughter, who was in the
process of making her a grandmother.

At the end of the same year, Marcus asked
her to rejoin the BMC team and drive a
Mini on the Iberian Rally in Portugal,
backing up Pat Moss's attempt to gain
Rally at Easter the following year. The
team included Harper, Adams, Jopp and
Hopkirk, all with local drivers; Mitch's co-
driver was the wife of Peter Harper's co-
driver — and she was not impressed!

Finally, having started her international
career with the 1948 Alpine, she ended it
with the 1960 event, in which she came
second to Pat Moss and Ann Wisdom for
the Coupe des Dames. Announcing her
retirement after this, she commented: "I
never mind finishing second to those girls.
A lot of men will do the same — and will
continue to do so for some time."

About to become a great-grandmother
for the third time, Mitch is still as elegant
as ever and thinks nothing of driving two or
three hundred miles a day in her
Volkswagen Golf, registered OMO 700.
"Marcus gave me that number on an MGA
about thirty years ago. It's been on several
MGs, including an MGB (I didn't like that
at all), and two 911 Porsches.

"They called me the Ice Queen, you
know. I could drive on ice like nobody
else. But then I used to ride every day —
Pat Moss did too — and I think if you have
hands for a horse, you've got hands for a
motor car."

* in No Excuses, published by Putnam and

Co

+ in Seven Year Twitch, published by G. T.
Foulis and Co

Mille Miglia 1956; 'Mitch' and Pat Faichney — 3rd in class, 1st Ladies

Nancy and Sunbeam Rapier in the 1960 E African Safari Rally, one of the most gruelling on the calendar