

THE ICE QUEEN

Nancy Mitchell, whose highly successful driving career reached its peak in the late Fifties, talks to Wilson McComb

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 bandbox 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 mite 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.

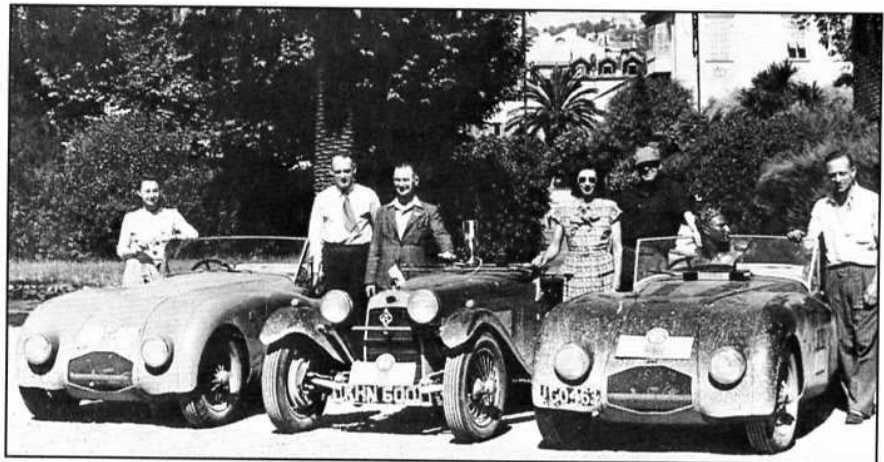
Within a few years, such was her reputation that Sheila Van Damm remembers* being very surprised when Mitch offered to go as Number 3 in a works Sunbeam-Talbot entered in the 1952 Monte Carlo Rally for “Bill” Wisdom and herself. “With three-quarters of the rally behind us . . . it began to snow. In no 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.” Soon after, on sheet ice, the Sunbeam-Talbot again shot off the road. Again Nancy regained the route, and immediately started driving as fast as before — at which point, Sheila admits, she screamed at her to slow down, adding dramatically



Above, Nancy Mitchell photographed recently at the wheel of her VW Golf which she still drives with the verve that made her a rally star in the Fifties



Above, 1948 Alpine rally HRG 1500 team: Nancy and Douglas Mitchell (left) with team leader John Gott/Jock Gillespie (right) in Aerodynamic cars, Jack and Mary Richmond



Unusually, Nancy Mitchell's new works Ford Zephyr did not figure in the results for the 1954 Monte; seen here (right) with 'Bill' Wisdom and Joan Johns at the finish

that she, Van Damm, was “too young to die”. After fully sixteen hours at the wheel in these 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 ½ second at the finish. She took a Jowett 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-entered Sunbeam-Talbot with Dr Denise Kelleher. 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



Above, ‘Mitch’ and Anne Hall in 1956 with the works MGA, registered MBL 867, which was one of four British cars to finish that year’s Liege-Rome-Liege



Nancy in the works Cooper 1100 about to set new ladies record at the International Prescott Hillclimb in 1954

“Pat Faichney sat beside me the whole of that race, and tried to feed me from time to time. I bit her, poor girl . . .”

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 Appleyard’s Jaguar Mark VII, was Dutchman Maurice Gatsonides’ works Ford Zephyr, and shortly afterwards Mitch had a letter from Gatso inviting her to join the Ford works team for the Tulip Rally. Partnered again by Joyce Leavens in VVW 458, the works Zephyr that was to become a faithful friend that season, she won the Coupe des Dames and Gatso won outright, while Ford took the team prize — but they were disqualified because the scrutineers said an extra hole in the front grille made the oil-filter into an oil-cooler. “I got flung out of the Tulip *twice!* In 1956 I won the Ladies again *and* won my class — don’t think I’ve ever driven better in all my life — with a works Magnette. Then when we went through scrutineering they disqualified us. The bloody car was aluminium. But the Rootes Group, you know, they cheated all the time. I know because I drove the things. They were homologated for overdrive on top gear, but for the Alpine they had a thing under the dash, you pulled it and you got overdrive in *all* gears. They’d never have won a Coupe des Alpes without it.”

Perhaps this helped Sheila Van Damm to beat Mitch for the Ladies’ Award in the 1953 Alpine, when Mitch was again driving VVW 458 — and Gatso went over the edge on the Gavia Pass, which did his Zephyr no good at all. In September, Mitch shared a works Cooper 1100 with Stirling Moss for the Prescott international meeting. “Mossy got it set up for him because he was also driving it at Crystal Palace, so it was all wrong for me.” Not *very* wrong, though, for her best run was in 51.78 secs to win the Ladies while he did 46.48 secs, second FTD to Michael Christie. In October, just before going to the Lisbon Rally with VVW 458, Mitch fell and broke her nose. She had a plaster applied but went right ahead and won the Ladies’ Award for the second year running. Sheila Van Damm spun her Sunbeam-Talbot in the final round-the-houses test at Estoril, and thus lost the Championship.

For the 1954 Monte — her fourth — Mitch had a new Zephyr Six, XNO 498, but the Ford team were nowhere in the results. In the RAC Rally they won the team prize, the Harrisons driving a Zephyr, while the Reece cousins drove an Anglia and Mitch shared another Anglia with Peter Reece’s wife, Doreen (who was with Mitch on a recce for the 1956 Monte when the news came through that Peter had been killed in a road accident). Mitch had no luck again with the Zephyr on the Tulip Rally, and switched to an Austin-Healey 100 with Susan Hindmarsh for the

Alpine. In thick snow she was chasing Tommy Wisdom on the Umbrail Pass when he hit a snowbank — and she hit Tommy’s DB2 Aston Martin.

After the Alpine, Mitch drove another works Zephyr in her first Liege-Rome-Liege — that incredible 3,200-mile event which lasted four days and four nights, virtually non-stop. The weather was appalling that year, with snow followed by floods and mud-slides, but she and Joyce Leavens were among the 33 crews — just one-third of the entry — who reached the finish. In all, Mitch was to do the Liege marathon four times, and every time she finished; it was a superb record in the toughest event of the rally calendar. To finish the 1954 season, she drove a works Cooper again at Prescott to set a new ladies’ record with a splendid 41.07 secs climb, then won the ladies’ award in the London Rally, driving Peter Reece’s Morgan Plus Four, and was runner-up for the same award in the MCC Redex Rally with her own TR2.

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 taking that job, indeed, Wharton lost his place in the Jaguar racing team, for Jaguar and Daimler 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 Lyon/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 five 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 5 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. I bit her, poor girl . . .”

Naturally they won the Ladies’ Award, for the Sunbeam Rapier that finished two places 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 demo lap in MGA, return to London Airport in MGA and fly back to Amsterdam; Sunday morning at 8am, 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 Liege-Rome-Liege, 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, by the time 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 Liege-Rome-Liege, 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 — *never* 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 Magnette 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, Garrad asked Mitch to join four other women — Sheila Van Damm, Françoise Clarke, Mary Handley Page and Tish Ozanne — 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

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Championship points (awarded only if at least three all-female crews took part). Mitch agreed, but things began to go wrong before the team had even left England, for her inexperienced co-driver, nicknamed "Fanny" by the others, arrived at Dover without her passport. As Marcus Chambers later wrote†, "This was not exactly the right way to start as co-driver to Nancy Mitchell, who likes efficiency in all departments and especially in her co-drivers... I felt in my bones the expedition was not going to be a success." Mitch, too, remembered the incident when I mentioned it to her. "The silly bitch — fancy doing a thing like that! And why I took the trouble to book hotel beds for her during the rally, I can't imagine; God knows, she never slept in her *own* bed."

The climax came when, during the rally, Marcus just happened to meet Annie Soisbault, the works Triumph driver. She had turned up to watch some of the sections, having first ensured, by withdrawing her own entry, that Pat would be denied Championship points.

Returning to Rootes, Mitch drove a Sunbeam Rapier in the East African Safari

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." She was dead right about that.

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