

McLaren M23/9, 1976

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How would you like to take a close look at and experience James Hunt's 1976 McLaren M23.....well, I just have and after about nine months of waiting it finally came to pass.

The story began with a desire to convert a Tamiya 1974 McLaren M23 into the 1976 car driven by Jochen Mass and James Hunt. More recently I acquired an Edai Grip 1/8 scale version of the car and the need for superdetailing was really obvious and possible, if only one could get direct hands-on access to the actual car. Having discovered that the Donnington example was in fact long since returned to the owner and having wasted several months of time and correspondence (a mix up over chassis numbers), I was at last on the trail via the McLaren PR and marketing department. Stewart Wingham put me in touch with a former works manager Leo Wybrott, a New-Zealander who later went to work for Xtrac, the F1 gear people in Berkshire. Leo had salvaged a written-off M23 from a race accident at Interlagos 1977 where the unfortunate Mass crashed the car, the wreck later being destroyed by Patrick Depailler's errant Tyrrell. Most of the original tub remained and after repairing this and replacing the body panels, Leo returned the specification to that of 1976, even securing the services of an original Cosworth DFV of that year. Some of the satin-black finished (Kephos) radius rods and other suspension parts were painted with a relatively gloss black paint and the car was shod with very hard shiny Goodyear show-tyres. The car was otherwise faithfully completed as a James Hunt car, the 1976 World Champion having driven the car to victory in the two non-world championship races that year. While history records that Mass raced M23/9 exclusively during 1976 and the first two races of 1977, Leo asserts that it was M23/9 that Hunt drove to victory twice in Britain in that glorious 1976 season.

M23/9 started life as a new car for the 1974 World Champion, Emerson Fittipaldi who took the car to its debut win in the Argentine GP in 1975. Throughout that season Emerson used M23/9, winning twice at Buenos Aires and Silverstone, until Monza where M23/10 was made available. I remember vividly watching the rain-soaked Race of Champions in '75 with eyes only for Fittipaldi. Back in the paddock, I was in time for the frustrated Brazilian to return in throttle-blipping mood as he made his way through the throng before unleashing his disillusionment on an unwary Teddy Mayer before stepping-up into the Motor Home and firmly shutting the door. After qualifying on the back-row and finishing a poor fifth in cold wet race conditions in a car with unsuccessful front suspension modifications, I can understand why. This was M23/4 unfortunately and had it been M23/9 the full-circle story would have been perfect.

Leo and friends (including ex Jim Clark mechanic, Dale Porteus) and I assembled from various parts of the country at the museum where the owner opened up early to reveal the staggering sight of the fluorescent Daglo orange and white M23 amongst a large number of visibly less glamorous sports road cars.

The car was gently manoeuvred round many awkward corners and other famous cars until it was brought out into glorious sunshine. The tyre pressures were checked and air added where necessary. The airbox, nosecone and cockpit-surround were then removed to reveal what I'd really come to see. In order to assist me in my quest to build a 1/12 scale 1976 M23 and super-detail the 1/8th scale version, I needed that which no book could provide - hands on gathering of photographic evidence of the detail and component colours, drawings of the plumbing and wiring, measurements of lengths, widths, thicknesses, diameters etc. I worked around my generous hosts who methodically checked over the car's systems, removed and cleaned plugs, added oil and fuel, cleaned every nook and cranny before cleaning and polishing the bodywork.

The electrics were Leo's first concern and a small dry cell battery was placed in a recess in front of the dashboard on the right and then connected up to the wiring loom. In reply to one of my questions, Leo can be heard to assert on the video I recorded, "...this is as genuine an M23 as you'll ever see" having been rebuilt in 1977 to '76 spec with the rear suspension of the time, the car had the white forward brake ducts used when the car was raced by Hunt, Willans seat harness from the year before, worn by Fittipaldi, Hunt and Mass, Hunt's personal seat and gearlever, the pale grey stove enamel paint applied to the whole chassis and inside the cockpit during '75 and continued into 1976, the original plastic side skirts, the scrutineers ticket applied in Argentina, an original DFV etc.

The power from the little battery got the electric fuel pump gently whirring while for the next hour an extension lead taking power from the mains via a 3-pin plug (yes, a 3-pin plug!) custom-fitted into the underside of the ignition box (a McLaren trick) supplied the water jacket heater set into the DFV's casing to pre-warm the water around the engine. Later, after numerous photos and measurements had been taken, the fuel pressure was up, and it was time to start the engine. The mains power was disconnected and six drops of oil into the starting line was all it needed for the air starter system to be able to turn the engine over, Leo proclaimed. It took alot more tries than this and after several failed attempts the gathering pushed M23/9 up the carpark slope and down again in gear to get all parts forced to move again. Now a bump-start was called for and what a nostalgic joy and pleasure it was to see such a marvellous classic F1 car started up again. The clutch was dipped and brakes applied before reaching the bottom and Leo sat in the car as the Cosworth music began to roar. Leo's son pushed the jack in under the rear wing pillar and Dale leant all his weight on it to raise the rear of the car. Leo really got going now and drove through the gears one by one to test the gearbox and spend time getting the engine pressures and temperatures up.

Something amongst the music wasn't quite right and after a few moments of discussion, Dale was dispatched to adjust the timing on the metering unit in the exposed Vee; that done and after a few more minutes of indulgence on Leo's part, the experience was brought to an end with a characteristic few moments of throttle blipping before an abrupt cessation of sound. I had been darting around the car catching as much of this privilege as possible, trying not to get too close to the spinning rear tyres or hot exhausts whilst watching the blur of the universal joints for instance.

Next came a seat fitting! Leo kindly obliged my request to sit in the car and in a few moments under guidance, I slipped into the chassis like an old pro, supporting my weight on the sidepods and twisting my feet to feed my legs under the dashboard over the fire extinguisher area. Every part of my body seemed to touch the chassis sides all the way to my lower legs, so close and ideal was the fit, with my feet on the pedals, just right! A final seatbelt fitting by Leo and then hands on wheel and a few memorable photos followed.

All too soon the time to pack-up came and whilst final polishing of the bodywork took place, Leo and Dale packed away jacks, air cylinders, and a myriad of smaller items and tools into a genuine mid 70's McLaren wooden box with the familiar stencilled name in red on the sides. The car was then pushed back into its pride of place in the museum.

I, being found out as a vet, was asked to do one last job, clip the claws of Leo's dog Rabbit and those of the museum owner's dog too. That done, before returning home, we all retired to a local pub for a bite to eat and a drink over stories from Leo and Dale of life in the pit lane in the 70's and 60's respectively. Who amongst us wouldn't appreciate recollections of Barcelona '69, Monza '70, the 1968 season at Lotus and tales of arranging chassis numbers of damaged and raceworthy McLaren's from the men who were there.