

Stranger than fiction

The life stories of Sports 2000 and Doctor Who are curiously similar. BEN ANDERSON takes the TARDIS and travels through time

Today I have become the motorsport equivalent of Doctor Who. There may be no Daleks or spacecraft police boxes in sight, but I am set to embark on a bit of Snetterton-based time travel in a TARDIS that looks very much like a Sports 2000 racing car.

This category has enjoyed 13 years of resurgence under the guidance of Sports 2000 super-fan and competitor Colin Feyerabend, who saved it from the brink of annihilation in the '90s and carefully nursed it back to health.

Two-litre club sports prototype racing is now amongst the most popular in the country once again,

with both Pinto and Duratec splits regularly enjoying full grids.

The series' rebirth has crept up like a cat burglar on the club-racing world. It didn't bitch and moan during the bad times (circa 1993), but nor did it start hollering from the rooftops when the good times came back.

The same cannot be said for Doctor Who, which has embarked on a similar journey through life, death and rebirth, but can't now go five minutes without giving an interview in the *Radio Times* or airing a repeat on BBC Three...

Renewed manufacturer interest in S2000 during the past decade, coupled with competitive pricing and strong

leadership from the Sports 2000 Racing Car Club, means it is now right back on the club racing radar – and making an ever-more visible blip.

As the category is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore, we decided to convene a special track test to find out what all the fuss is about – and members of the SRCC were only too happy to oblige.

Their generosity means AUTOSPORT has five cars to sample, each providing a different snapshot of Sports 2000 history, stretching back over 32 years. That's a lot of time travel to fit into one day, but the good Doctor is raring and ready to go.



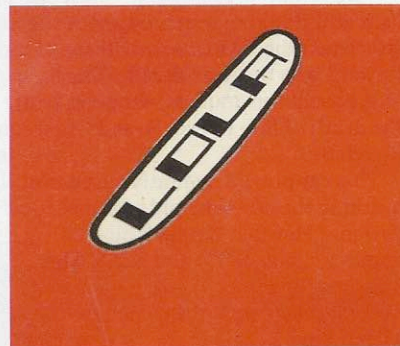
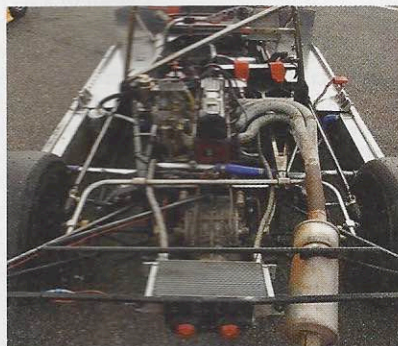
Lola dominated the first years of S2000 racing



TECH SPEC

Engine: Ford Pinto
Power: 130bhp
Weight: 500kg (15kg of ballast)
Tyres: Yokohama slicks
 6" front, 8" rear

LOLA T492



Our journey begins, appropriately, with one of the oldest cars in Sports 2000: the Lola T492. This car succeeded the original Lola S2000 design, the T490, which locked out the podium in the first ever Sports 2000 race at Oulton Park, in April 1977.

Veteran Lola designer Bob Marston, who also penned the T490, derived the T492 from Lola's T290 Group 6 sportscar. It first appeared for 1978 and quickly began to establish itself as the car to have in the category. A promising fourth on its debut in round one at Silverstone (with Nick Adams) presaged Frank Sytner's maiden triumph for the car at Thruxton a week later. Before long, the T492 was winning races in numerous hands.

When you take to the track in one it's easy to see why this car was so popular. The handling is beautifully neutral and predictable; its slides are progressive and subtle, and the car wills you to be aggressive.

The Lola is mechanically soft, aerodynamically basic, and doesn't

possess the strongest engine. Its brakes are spongier than a jam sandwich and the Hewland gearbox is prone to the odd childish tantrum, but none of this seems to matter when you're driving it.

Like a loveable old relative, you can forgive this car its 30-year-old foibles because it's an absolute joy to be around. The handling is exquisite, and I'm having so much fun manhandling this thing around the circuit that it has to run out of fuel in order to stop me!

Objectively, this shouldn't be the best car – and in all honesty, time and technological progress have left it behind. But sometimes objectivity is for the birds. Just as some fans of Doctor Who will always choose William Hartnell over David Tennant, regardless of progress in acting skill and production value, so some S2000 fans will always choose the Lola over any subsequent racers.

Call it wearing rose-tinted spectacles if you want, but there are times when emotion and romance cannot be ignored. This is one such moment.



S2000 gathering spans 32 years of series history



MARCH 81S

TECH SPEC

Engine: Ford Pinto
Power: 130bhp
Weight: 525kg
Tyres: Yokohama slicks
 6" front, 8" rear

I am still thinking wistfully about the '70s when the TARDIS thrusts us forward into the next decade. The early '80s brought us mullets, shoulder pads, the death of Bob Marley – and the March 81S.

This car proved instantly successful, breaking the stranglehold of ace designer Howden Ganley's all-dominant Tiga SC80 and SC81. The 81S propelled Kurt Thiim to victory at Silverstone in early 1981, the first for March Engineering in the category, and ended what had previously been a Tiga whitewash. However, Thiim's triumph muted the Tiga's roar only briefly and Ganley's design remained the car to beat despite March's best efforts.

The March has a much stiffer and more responsive gearbox, with no slack, no play and a very impressive feel. If changing gear in the Lola was like waving a pencil in the Royal Albert Hall, shifting through the March's box is like performing keyhole surgery. The biggest difference between the two, however, is the braking. The March possesses a four-pot Lockie system with Hawk pads, as opposed to the Lola's Girling/Mintex combination, and the difference is night and day. This makes slowing down for Russell and the second part of the Esses less exciting, but inspires more confidence.

The March is a little more refined than the Lola, but is heavier and

somehow less heart-warming. It's a good car, but doesn't evoke the same emotions when I get behind the wheel.

Just as I'm wondering how I'm going to let the 81S down gently it develops a problem with its rev counter, so I pull into the pits to avoid the risk of over-stressing the engine.

Car preparer Peter Richardson tells me not to worry and says the engines in both cars are running well within their limits. Apparently, the Lola once had the same engine for nine years and only got a fresh one because the owners thought it ought to be done! Rather like several regenerations of Doctor Who, sometimes change is just for change's sake...



No matter how old your car, there's a place for it





SHRIKE P16

TECH SPEC

Engine: Ford Pinto
Power: 130bhp
Weight: 500kg
Tyres: Yokohama slicks
6" front, 8" rear

Although it couldn't have known it at the time, the Shrike arguably represented the beginning of the end for the first era of S2000.

The brainchild of former BRM designer Richard Owen, the P16's predecessors (the Aquila and the P15) claimed three titles in four seasons during the mid-'80s. Owen's Aquila took the S2000 title at its first attempt in 1983, thanks to the driving exploits of Mike O'Brien, before Sean Walker and Ian Flux pedalled the P15 to back-to-back titles in 1985 and '86.

Suddenly everyone wanted to race a Shrike – good news for the manufacturer, but not for the formula. It had become dominated by manufacturer-backed entries and pro-drivers, and began to lose sight of the independent club racer for whom it had

first been devised.

Just as Doctor Who soldiered on, amid tumbling viewing figures, until the controller of BBC1 pulled the plug in 1989, so Sports 2000 struggled through until it lost independence in 1992 and became a class within the 750 Motor Club's Formula 1300.

Perhaps appropriately, I cannot fit easily in the P16. The car's regular driver, Andy Mathew, is a short man, so mating my gangly six-foot frame to this example is like trying to make a chocolate pudding with a bunch of bananas. My arms are far too straight and my legs are braced against the steering wheel, which makes the P16 impossible to drive properly. However, I do manage to complete enough laps to notice how much stronger the engine is in this car compared to its

historic cousins. The chassis is also stiffer, faster and has far greater potential. I can really feel the Shrike's aero package, which is slung low to the ground and is thus very susceptible to ride-height changes, sucking the car to the track through Coram and Riches.

So long as you stay away from the bumps it has great high-speed stability and phenomenal grip, despite the skinny six-inch front and eight-inch rear tyres doing their best to hold the car back.

For every silver lining there is a cloud, however, and the P16's is its brake-biasing valve. This is set to alter the pressure in the system as you apply the brakes and is supposed to help pivot the car around the nose in slow corners to mitigate against the long Shrike's poor turning circle.

To the unsuspecting pilot however, all this does is make the car incredibly nervous under braking. A first hard press of the pedal sends the tail light and the car slewing towards the barriers at the end of the Revett straight. When you don't fit the car correctly, that sort of behaviour doesn't inspire confidence.

Richardson tells me the team struggles to understand how Mathew manages to handle the car at all, but it has been enormously successful in his hands (claiming one win and fourth in the 2009 Pinto championship), so it must be a half-decent piece of kit. Unfortunately on this occasion, I'll just have to take his word for it.

Anderson found P16 cockpit a little too cosy



THE MAN BEHIND THE S2000 REVIVAL

COLIN FEYERABEND is to the modern era of Sports 2000 what Jesus of Nazareth was to Christianity: its central figure.

After enjoying a solid start in the late '70s, and a boom during the early-to-mid '80s, support for Sports 2000 racing dwindled. Numbers fell to such an extent that S2000 became a class within the 750 Motor Club's Formula 1300 in 1992, and by 1993 Feyerabend stood as the category's sole remaining competitor.

"Its heyday was in the early '80s when it had a support race on the F1 bill at Silverstone," remembers Feyerabend. "But it started to become a manufacturer showcase and the driving standards became non-existent.

"The works cars had pro drivers like Ian Taylor, Ian Flux and Sean Walker, and they were nothing like the customer cars.

"Sports 2000 lost its roots – people were throwing lots of money at it, and a combination of these things sent it into decline."

Feyerabend joined the fold in 1989 and within three years Sports 2000 was dead as an independent series. He remained loyal to the cause through its darkest days, and numbers slowly

returned to such respectable levels that the 750MC renamed F1300 'Clubsports 2000' in 1997.

When Radical sportscars arrived into Clubsports, Feyerabend fell out with the 750MC and decided to go it alone. He formed the Sports 2000 Racing Car Club and struck a deal with the British Racing and Sports Car Club to run three pilot races in 1998, "to see whether there was any interest in running a series." The races were held at Cadwell Park, Donington and Brands Hatch, and each achieved full grids.

"I used my contacts to get lots of cars over from the US and we achieved very strong grids – the 2000 season in particular was a big year," adds Feyerabend. "But at the same time I knew we had to get a new engine because you can't rely on 30-year-old cars for the future."

Feyerabend introduced the Ford Duratec engine for 2002 and manufacturers such as Carbir, Gunn and Van Diemen drew up new cars. Since then Sports 2000 Duratec has gone from strength to strength. The likes of Juno, March, Lola and Ray have all penned new machines and competitor numbers have remained strong throughout.

Meanwhile, the series' original Pinto-engined

class has continued to flourish under Feyerabend's guidance. He even finds time to race his own Lola T90/90 in the category's historic class.

"The key to its success is that any manufacturer, big or small, can build a competitive car," he says. "And anyone with talent can win; anyone with just a big chequebook can't.

"The series has got to be appealing to competitors: equal and affordable. There's got to be plenty of scope for ingenuity, without massive cost.

"Anything we get we put back into the formula. I've got a good team around me that share my philosophy of benevolent dictatorship.

"Everything we do is for the back half of the grid, because if you look after the back half, the front half will take care of itself."



The master: Feyerabend is the saviour of the category

GUNN TS-6



TECH SPEC

Engine: Ford Duratec
Power: 200bhp
Weight: 515kg (15kg of ballast)
Tyres: Yokohama slicks
6" front, 8" rear

The Gunn TS-6 thrusts us forward into Sports 2000's brave new Duratec era, and the regeneration of the category throughout the past decade.

Feyerabend introduced the Duratec engine in 2002 to encourage the building of new cars and secure the category's long-term future.

Manufacturers Carbir, Gunn and Van Diemen got in on the act early and the Duratec's success has encouraged newer car builders, such as MCR and Juno, into the category. Meanwhile, the likes of Lola, and more recently March (courtesy of March Racing Academy's Alan Hudd), have come back in from the cold with new models.

Just as Doctor Who burst back onto our screens in 2005 with a young cast and slicker production values, so the

Gunn TS-6 and its rivals represent a more modern face of Sports 2000 – bigger machines, better technology and more power.

This TS-6 is one of the earlier Duratec designs and should really have been left behind by the championship's newer cars. But reigning Sports 2000 Duratec champion Mike Jenvey has heavily developed it over the past two-and-a-half seasons, culminating in last year's title glory.

Jenvey is known for his engineering nous, but nothing could ready me for the sheer brilliance of this car. It is stiff enough to withstand high cornering loads, but also supple enough to ride the roughest kerbs. It produces enough downforce to stick like glue in the fast corners, but is agile and nimble enough

Simple cockpit layout masks awesome potential



to dart quickly through the slow stuff. The engine is strong, the car possesses excellent traction, and is efficient, light and powerful enough to be rapid in a straight line. It is almost a perfect contradiction in terms.

Jenvey's TS-6 is a labour of love and the results are truly stunning – this is easily the best handling car I have driven to date, from any category. It does absolutely anything asked of it with zero fuss; I expect it would probably stretch to a perfect triple summersault if I asked nicely enough.

In just 12 laps, without pushing particularly hard, my pace is good enough to put me fourth on last summer's Snetterton Duratec grid. A one-armed monkey could drive this car quickly. It is simply incredible.



TECH SPEC

Engine: Ford Duratec
Power: 200bhp
Weight: 535kg
Tyres: Yokohama slicks
6" front, 8" rear

MCR symbolises modern face of S2000 Duratec

MCR

Clive Hayes and Cindy Pearce's Pembrokeshire-based MCR concern is the newest manufacturer in the championship (although Alan Hudd's new March 09R, launched recently at AUTOSPORT International, is now the newest car).

The MCR is a very modern-looking, VdeV-like machine – symbolic of the brave new Duratec world and its forward-looking ethos – which aims to place people onto the higher rungs of the sportscar racing ladder.

The MCR's original architect is

Brazilian designer Luiz Fernando Cruz and the car first appeared in S2000 in 2005, driven to modest success by Matt Manderson.

When Manderson ran out of time and money to develop the car he sold it to Hayes and Pearce, who re-launched the design at AUTOSPORT International in 2008 under the MCR Race Cars Limited banner.

Since then, the car has undergone steady development and there are now several appearing regularly on the Duratec grid. An MCR propelled Chris

Yarwood to best-of-the-rest (behind the Mike Jenvey/Rik Johnson show) in the 2009 title race, while ex-Formula Vee racer Patrick Sherrington rounded out the top six in a similar car.

Because of Cruz's original Supersport V8 philosophy (he designed the car to race in three-hour Brazilian enduros), the MCR is built to last rather than sprint. It is not as refined as Jenvey's Gunn, but that's like saying Barack Obama is less deserving of the Nobel Peace Prize than Mahatma Gandhi – you're always going to be fighting a losing battle.

The MCR feels heavier and its engine less responsive than the Gunn's, but the car is still fun to drive – well balanced and comfortable. The sequential gearbox (not yet present on Jenvey's machine) is super smooth, and I feel I could pound around for a week in this thing and never tire.

Just as the BBC brought in Scottish acting star David Tennant to help revitalise the re-launched Doctor Who in the '00s, so cars like the MCR have been critical in maintaining momentum in the newest era of Sports 2000. They give it a modern and dynamic look that has helped usher in a whole new generation of fans and kept John Webb's original dream of affordable two-litre sportscar racing alive and well in the 21st Century. ☼



Our thanks to John Mealing and Peter Richardson at Mark Stuart Racing; Andy Mathew; Mike Jenvey; Clive Hayes and Cindy Pearce at MCR Race Cars Ltd; and to Snetterton Circuit for their assistance with this track test.