

## ***CROFT HILLCLIMB 2017 - "The debutants had a ball"!***

**Reigning NI Hillclimb Champion Chris Houston launched his title defence in the best possible way by winning the opening 2017 ANICC Millers Oils Hillclimb Championship round at Croft, Holywood last Saturday.**

Debuting his stunning, newly acquired, OMS CF08 Houston set a first run time of 36.12secs that wouldn't be bettered all day. Initially it looked as if young Richard McGimpsey in the family's self-built RMG/Busa would spoil the champion's party when he posted a 36.29secs reply to Houston's first attempt, but a sharp rain shower towards the end of the second Official Run meant no-one would improve on their first runs, although their attempts provided much sideways entertainment before the road dried again. Ballymena's George Stevenson completed the podium in his Jedi Mk6 with a Class 14 winning time of 37.78secs. As ever, a couple of local hillclimbers' fastest saloons got in amongst the single-seaters. After posting an exact same time as Stevenson in the first run, multiple Saloon Champion Rudi Gage (Maguire Mini) had to settle for fourth O/A as the former had a better 2<sup>nd</sup> Fastest time. Saintfields' Ivan McCullough was 6/10ths behind Gage in his brutal Nissan GTR to be Saloon Runner-Up in 6th, with John Donnelly's Reynard the meat in the 5<sup>th</sup> place Saloon sandwich just 0.02secs behind the Stevenson/Gage tie. Killaughey's Mark Francis claimed 7<sup>th</sup> and the Class 9 win in his raucous Escort Cosworth, edging out Seamus Morris (Darrian T90), the Class 11 winner by 0.03secs. Neil Dugan again made the long trip from Castleblayney to finish 9<sup>th</sup> this time in his Peugeot 205RWD just 0.11secs adrift of Morris as Newtownards' Thomas Purdy completed the Top 10 in 39.40secs in the ODCars Mk2 Escort.

The Thoroughbred Sports Car Clubs' 28<sup>th</sup> edition of Croft attracted a capacity entry of 80 cars ensuring plenty of battles throughout the 18 Classes that comprise a NI Championship field, although mechanical maladies resulted in only 76 successfully completing the day. Those maladies before and during the event left William Heaney ("Pensioner Puma"), Gardiner McIlwaine (Westfield), James Perry (Caterham), Paul Hamill (Tiger Suzuki) and Rudi Gage on their own to take the Classes 1, 4, 5, 7 & 8 awards, respectively. The increasingly popular Class 2 for Over 1700cc Production Cars had 18 protagonists but saw the usual top suspects, winner Adrian Mulholland (Escort Mk2) and 3rd place Tom Lawther (Rover SD1), split by former Vintage Class winner Michael Clarke in a Lotus Elise, the three covered by just 0.06secs. Barry Griffin led home an all-Subaru podium to take the Production 4WD Cars Class 3, from Philip Cardy and Croft debutant Lee Burke. Gordon Fogarty (Fiat X1/9) blitzed the Modified Production Class 6 by taking a quarter of a second off his existing Record to leave the new mark at 39.87secs. A close scrap between the Minis of Gary Milligan and William Hutton for the minor Class placing, was resolved in the former's favour by 0.6secs. Gerard O'Connell was another to debut a new, for 2017, car at Croft trailing home some one and a quarter seconds adrift of the squabbling Francis and Dugan, as he acclimatised to his new Class 9 steed. The perennial Alan Roddy (Saxo KC) won the small Rally Car Class 10 by less than 0.2secs from another Croft first-timer, 'Sprinter' Alan Cassells (Peugeot 106) the pair over two seconds clear of the shared Escort RS of Stephen and Norman Harvey third and fourth. Raymond Spence (Escort Mk2) completed the Class 11 podium for the large Rally Cars, some three and a quarter seconds behind the flying Morris and Purdy battle. McCullough was a second and a half clear of Michael White (Subaru Legacy) and Oliver Cormican (Evo) in the 'Big Banger' 4WD Class 12, with the latter pair just 0.35secs apart. Despite dipping under the 'magic' 40 second barrier, for Croft, and taking the Small Single-Seater Racing Cars Class 14 final podium spot, Brendan Flynn (OMS PR) was over two and a half seconds behind top five finishers Stevenson and Donnelly. Houston and McGimpsey were the only runners in the top Class 15 for single-seater racing cars. The increasingly popular Historics Class 16 for Pre-74 cars is split between Road-Going and Non Road-Going. Young Jack Brien (MG Midget Atlantis) took 16A by 0.2secs from the experienced Gerry McGarrity (Mini Cooper) with his second run of 42.75secs as his father Simon (MG Midget) was half a second behind the Mini man. Former NI and Irish Hillclimb Champion Robert McGimpsey continues to develop his Turner Ford sports car and took a comfortable 1.2secs 16B victory from the Mk1 Escorts of Alan Jardine and reigning Historics Champion Stephen Strain.

There was a wonderful turn-out of eight cars for the Non-Championship Vintage Class 17, ranging from Class winner Michael Taylor's MG TA racer to the sedate Invicta NC four-seat Tourer of John Keatley. UVCC CompSecretary Alan Clarke (Riley Special) was runner-up here five seconds adrift of Taylor and one ahead of the glorious Curtis aero-engined DeDion of their Club President, Leslie Murray.

Amongst the dozen Croft first-timers, two teenagers from local motorsport families made their hillclimb debuts. Sixteen-year-old Ben McKee from Ballyblack, Newtownards is already an experienced Junior and added the outright TSCC 2016 Saloon Cup to the TSCC Junior titles he has already won. He follows in the wheeltracks of his Grandmother, Father and older Brother. On this occasion he shared the MX5 he usually navigates, with his dad – TSCC CompSecretary Wallace McKee – and acquitted himself very well by not just getting under the 50secs mark but posted a 48.98 on his first run. Vintage Class runner Patrick Johnson from Holywood shared his father Dermot's beautiful 1929 Samson GS8 achieving a very creditable 5<sup>th</sup> in Class in a time of 58.94secs, just over two behind his dad and 3/10ths ahead of his cousin Angus' Bugatti. In his forebearers, Patrick can boast a Great-Grandfather who competed at Croft in the 1930s and won the 1950 Circuit of Ireland Rally. Two historically notables on the 2017 Entry list were 1991 Croft Champion Neil White, then in a Modus F3 car and now in a BMW 3C, and Tony Hamilton (Porsche 968) contesting his 30<sup>th</sup> consecutive Croft, the 1988 event being his first hillclimb.

The now customary slick organisation by the TSCC Hillclimb Team meant that competitors were given the opportunity of a sixth run at the tricky 980yd course, thus ensuring that everyone got two Practice and two Official Timed runs in dry conditions at the beginning and end of the day. On behalf of TSCC and all the Hillclimb Championship competitors, Club Secretary John Gardner thanks the residents of Ballymenoch Road, Creighton's Green Road and the staff, parents and pupils of the Rudolf Steiner School for their continued co-operation and support that allows this very popular event to run annually. Thanks are also extended to all the marshals and officials.