Sunday Drives: Charlie March and the Goodwood hillclimb

27/06/2021 Porsche Cayman GT4 racer and heir to the Goodwood empire Charlie March takes us on a short, sharp blast through his own backyard in the latest part of the Porsche Newsroom's Sunday Drives series.

Where

West Sussex, UK

Length

1.9 kilometres

Type

A fast and demanding hillclimb across motorsport's most famous lawn.

The approach to the private side of Goodwood House is a little like finding Harry Potter's Platform 9¾ at King's Cross Station. All around are sights familiar to anyone who has ever been to the Goodwood Festival of Speed, or even watched it on the television. There's the long sweeping drive. There's the vast and immaculate lawn where the supercars sit during the week of the event. There's the mansion with its balcony and copper-roofed towers. But, tucked out of sight and round the corner is a discreet pair of unmarked electric gates, which you suspect will disappear behind you as soon as you've passed through.

In the time it takes to park up, a butler in half morning dress has glided into view behind the Duke of Richmond's Rolls-Royce. Introducing himself as Monty, he ushers you through the exquisitely decorated and surprisingly un-stately part of what is, after all, a family home. Albeit a home with old masters fit for a national museum hanging on the wall. Monty offers a cup of tea ("Builder's or Earl Grey?") and shows you into the garden where a table has been laid in anticipation of your arrival. With the sort of raised eyebrow only possessed by the very finest of his profession, Monty encourages the gardener who is noisily mowing the lawn to find somewhere else to be, then disappears. A few minutes later he is replaced by Charlie March, heir to the Goodwood Estate and recent convert to Porsche Motorsport.

In a first for the Porsche Newsroom's Sunday Drive series, March, the eldest son of the Duke of Richmond and, so, more formally known as the Earl of March and Kinrara, has chosen a route that does

not even require him to leave the grounds of the family home. But when the family home plays host to the annual Festival of Speed, and its historic hillclimb, why would you?

One of the most famous asphalt tracks in motorsport

He begins by explaining what it is like to have one of the most famous stretches of sporting asphalt for his own driveway: “It should be weirder than it is,” says the 26-year-old Oxford graduate, “but when there's nothing out there, no hay bales or supercars, it's just a road. I don't always feel an urge to drive it very fast either, and nor do I feel awed by it – until the Festival of Speed when it suddenly becomes absolutely terrifying again!”

The Goodwood hillclimb is the centrepiece of the Festival of Speed, with a huge variety of road and race cars of all types and ages taking part in a concerted 1.86-kilometre sprint to the top. Each year witnesses an astonishing display of engineering and driving skill as modern and historic Formula One and LMP cars share the narrow ribbon of sweeping, climbing tarmac with road and rallying exotica, some of which is along for the ride while others are zeroed in on a new record time. The crown currently rests with ex-Porsche factory driver Romain Dumas, who reached the top in 39.90 seconds in 2019 aboard the all-electric Volkswagen ID.R.

The hill is hard to drive

March himself has no ambitions to trouble Dumas for the title, especially while under the auspices of his equally car-obsessed (and 911 GT2 RS-owning) father: “Despite being just a road, the hill is still surprisingly dangerous and hard to drive,” he says. “My dad was coming down it when he was about 16 and had a big crash, so he's always quite wary of us misbehaving on it. I've driven it fast, but never in anger, and I have to be even more careful during the festival because there are very few things more embarrassing than crashing on your own drive in front of thousands of people.”

A family photo reveals that the first time a young Charles March found himself behind the wheel was as an infant, on his father's knee inside the cockpit of an early Alfa Romeo Grand Prix car. He learned to drive at around 13 years of age, on the rally stages in the grounds of Goodwood House that have since become such a popular part of the annual summer event. And he mastered the art of car control, or at least tried to, using a cast off from Goodwood's own race track.

“There was an old course car from the Motor Circuit, a 1990s BMW M3 that was falling apart and going to be scrapped,” March says. “So we kept it and I used to slide it around in the fields. Until the time I had to stop for a moment and forgot to put the handbrake on. The car rolled down the whole hill, smashed through a couple of fences, and that was the end of that. Dad caught me red-handed trying to quickly rebuild the fence!”

Today, March's racing endeavours have been dialled up a few notches as he competes in a Porsche 718

Cayman GT4 Clubsport. He's one of the regular drivers in the in 2021 Porsche Visit Cayman Islands Sprint Challenge GB, which is run as a feeder series for Carrera Cup as part of the Porsche Motorsport Pyramid. "I started racing in the Historic Racing Drivers Club in an Austin A35 to get my National A licence, which meant I could race the Goodwood Revival. And that was the only racing I'd done until September of last year when I made the decision to race a Porsche."

The 718 Cayman GT4 Clubsport as a racing car

"The Cayman is a proper racing car, but approachable in terms of both difficulty and cost. There are 16 races in the season, and the driving is very competitive, so I can learn a lot. And the car itself, while being really fast, has a lot of driver aids so there's more room for error than in Carrera Cup. So it seemed like a good place to start, with the opportunity to move into other Porsche series in the future."

Looking ahead, March hopes to continue racing while he prepares to take over the reins at Goodwood from his father. "It's a big responsibility," he admits. "From a family perspective I don't want to be the one who messes it all up after so long, but it's not just about family now. It's about all our employees and members and the people who buy tickets each year. We play an important part in their lives, which is something we're really proud of, but it puts the pressure on. For some people this is the most important place in the world and making sure that stays the case is quite daunting. But it's exciting too."

At the time of writing, the event is set to run from 8-11 July thanks to a special dispensation from the UK government. The central theme is 'The Maestros - Motorsport's Great All-Rounders', tickets are on sale now and the event will be available to view via live stream.

Further details about the Porsche Visit Cayman Islands Sprint Challenge GB are available on this website.

Sunday Drives

With travel restrictions limiting the opportunities for road-trips, Porsche Newsroom's new Sunday Drives series sets out to quench readers' thirst for adventure by discovering the world's most beautiful driving roads through the eyes of Porsche people around the globe.

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