

NEWS

He lived in the fast lane

THE history books reveal only one Grand Prix victory for Thomas Maldwyn Pryce, the Ruthin-born Formula One driver who emerged in 1974 as one of the greatest talents ever to drive a racing car.

Pryce, the gentle, shy, but supremely talented son of a policeman, blazed a trail which culminated in a three-year spell with the Shadow Formula One team and a selection of stunning performances. His other-worldly speed in a racing car meant Pryce became one of the most sought-after drivers of the era, until his freak death at the 1977 South African Grand Prix, aged just 27.

Motor racing journalist, David Tremayne, who named his son, also an up-and-coming racer, after Tom, confirms Pryce's talent.

He said, "His style was very much suited to the cars he raced in the seventies – powerful, light single seaters that could be slid around on their big slick tyres.

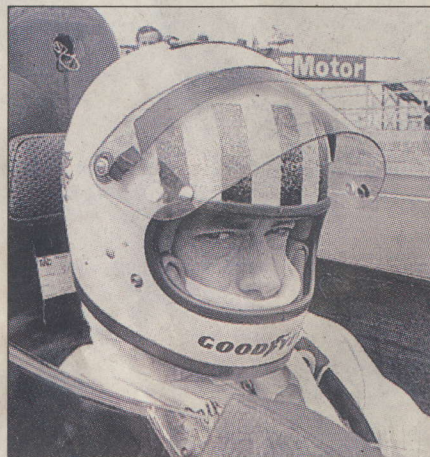
The story behind Pryce's extraordinary career can be found back in North Wales, where his parents still live – in the small village of Gellifor, just outside Ruthin.

After saving to compete at a racing school, he became star pupil, earning a Formula Ford racing car. Tom competed in the Formula Ford races that were part of the Daily Express Crusader Series, clinching the series at Silverstone in 1970 and winning a Lola T200 racing car.

Jack Pryce, his jovial father, remembers the path to stardom his unassuming son took.

"He then got a job down at Brands as a mechanic earning £15 a week and went into lodgings where all the racing drivers were. He worked as a mechanic and raced as well. In one of his first races (in the Lola) he was chasing someone and over did it, bent the car good and proper and had to get it straightened out. He'd never

Tom Pryce lived as Wales' fastest man and the nation's only Formula One driver. He died too young. **James W Roberts** reports



TIME CHECK Wife Nella keeps times for Tom Pryce, left, on practice day of the Silverstone Grand Prix

about Tom was his down-to-earth, friendly persona in a world dominated by money, competition and the ever-present spectre of death.

"Tom had no enemies. He was reserved until people knew him," says Tremayne, "but he had a great sense of humour and was popular throughout the paddock. There was nothing not to like."

With his humble background, and young wife Nella – whom he was afraid to tell of his dangerous profession on meeting her – Pryce was an everyman's driver.

Pryce scored his first world championship points at the German Grand Prix of 1975, and with his plain white racing overalls simply adorned with his name and blood group, the affable Welshman was unaffected by the cut-throat business of Formula One.

"The mechanics and Tom were great pals," says Jack. "He'd be working with them and getting covered in oil, and Alan Rees used to say 'what are you doing muck-

"The two drivers Tom most resembled were Jochen Rindt and Ronnie Peterson, so you can see he was in the best possible company – they were the megastars of their day and he shared their unworldly brand of car control."

Pryce also shared a tragic legacy with Rindt and Peterson. Austrian Rindt posthumously became world champion in 1970, perishing at Monza, Italy, while Swede and fellow Lotus pilot Peterson, on the cusp of becoming world champion, died at the same circuit eight years later.

Tremayne adds, "In the wet he was unbeatable, and should have won the 1976 Japanese Grand Prix, run in treacherous conditions, but for engine failure."

Fellow Formula One correspondent and friend of Pryce, Alan Henry, underlines the Welshman's talent. "Running second in the 1976 Japanese Grand Prix was just sensational. Fourth at the 1976 Dutch Grand Prix from third on the grid was great as well."

worked on a racing car before, so he didn't really know about how to get it fixed."

Just two days before his fatal accident, Tom commented on his 1970 success in a typically humble way in the book *Get Yourself Into Formula Ford*.

"The officials told me I'd have to come back the following day for the official presentation, which would be made by Sir Max Aitken and Jackie Stewart. I was more terrified at the prospect of having to meet them and face the crowds than I'd been before my race.

"I wasn't very good at public functions in those days – and, for that matter, I'm still not very much at home at any formal affair."

Tom scaled the motor sport ladder rapidly, moving into Formula Three, the short-lived F100 Sportscar Series and by 1973 Tom competed in Formula Two.

Jack refers to his son by his middle name, Mal, and fondly explains the turning point in his short but stunning career.

Aided by property developer Chris Meek, who chose Tom to drive for his Formula Two car, Meek then helped fund Tom's foray into Formula One with the small Token team.

"Chris Meek and a few others decided to build an F1 car in a small garage in West London and they wanted to enter in the International Trophy at Silverstone.

"The team were so tired after working day and night to build the car that Mal had to thump the lorry driver all the way to the circuit because he kept falling asleep!"

His Grand Prix debut proper occurred in Belgium where he qualified the underpowered Token an excellent 20th – then came Monaco. The ultra-challenging circuit and scene of his broken leg in Formula Three, when he was hit by a fellow competitor and thrown through a shop window, became the backdrop for a turn around in fortunes. After being refused entry to the Formula One race due to

lack of experience, Pryce was offered a drive in the supporting Formula Three race.

Tremayne observes in his book *Racers Apart* that the shy Welshman dominated the race "in a style rarely seen in the highly competitive formula". He remained modest, "When I'd won, all I thought is we had some money to go to the Token. I never dreamed there'd be so much fuss."

Jack gleefully remembers the watershed moment.

"Lack of experience meant Mal couldn't race, so Tony Vlassopulo gave one of his March F3s and Mal wasn't sure whether to race, but he did and he won the heat and won the final by 19 seconds and that was it – there were four Formula One teams after him."

Tom's stunning performance caught the eye of Shadow team boss Alan Rees, and Tom signed for the team, debuting at the Dutch Grand Prix in 1974. Jack confirms his son's staggering talent, re-

membering Tom's challenging of Ferrari's superstar driver Nikki Lauda and using his unfancied Shadow to put the fear into Ferrari boss Enzo Ferrari, the 'Old Man' of Formula One.

"He opted for Shadow because he knew Alan Rees, a fellow Welshman, and then a year later he was on the front row at Monaco in F1. He was quicker than Lauda and the Old Man said to Lauda 'Tom's faster than you, what are you going to do about it?' and Lauda went and got pole."

Lauda later admitted he did something he should never have done. To beat Pryce, the three-time world champion went beyond his limits.

"From the time he started in Formula Ford," continues Jack, "it only took him three years and eight months to get into Formula One so he adapted very quickly."

And that rapid progress confirms Pryce's unparalleled talent. But one of the most striking things

ing around with him, you're a Formula One driver!"

"He was gentle, a man who remained unspoiled despite his new environment," adds Tremayne in *Racers Apart*, "and admitted there were times when he'd far rather be away from the commercialism of the sport, back with Nella in the converted oast house they had bought in Kent. It boasted only two trophies – one the size of a silver egg cup he won at the Race of Champions, the other was won at a gymkhana by Nella when she was 13."

Nella married Tom when she was 19, by 22 she would be a widow. She never remarried.

With Shadow, Tom turned in some great performances, one being his performance at the 1975 Race of Champions at "Tom's circuit" Brands Hatch.

Tremayne remembers, "In damp conditions Tom put the car on pole a whole second ahead of fancied coming-man Jody Scheckter. Tom fluffed his start



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Tuesday, 4 January 2005

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Hunt only for an overheating engine ending his race.

After promising qualifying sessions in Argentina and Brazil scuppered by mechanical gremlins, then came that fateful day, March 5, 1977. Pryce headed to Kyalami in South Africa. He set the fastest time in a wet practice session, a second ahead of that year's champion Lauda – the race however brought different and tragic consequences.

Jack recalls, "He wanted to hook up a radio link in the race at South Africa to find out the Wales, England rugby score – I think they announced his accident at the Arms Park during the game."

After qualifying 15th, Tom made a poor start and had to fight through the field, making tremendous progress until lap 21 when Pryce's Shadow team-mate, Renzo Zorzi, stopped opposite the pits with an innocuous fire.

Seeing the fire, two marshals inexplicably charged across the track just as Pryce was tucked up behind competitor Hans Stuck's slipstream. In a flash, at 170mph, Tom's car struck Jason Van Vuuren – the 19-year-old marshal lugging the fire extinguisher – Pryce had nowhere to go, the wedge-shaped Shadow hit Van Vuuren throwing him skyward, his fire extinguisher smashing Pryce in the face – his stricken car continuing up the pit straight with the Welshman dead at the wheel.

Alan Henry recalls the tragic moment, "I was standing at Crowthorne Corner and Tom's wrecked car ended up at my feet. Every motor racing journalist

and Jody walked into a huge lead in cold conditions, but Tom soon fought through to second and caught Scheckter. He was poised to pounce when the engine in Jody's Tyrrell exploded.

"After that he cruised to a dominant 31-second victory and set fastest lap. Tom lived down the road in West Kingsdown, and he had made his reputation at Brands, so he received a terrific ovation from the spectators."

On foreign soil Pryce turned in some stunning drives, displaying courage, tenacity and was typically unfazed by the experience.

"As I climb into the big intercontinental jets," Pryce said in *Get Yourself Into Formula Ford*, "I often look back on the days when getting to a race meeting was something I did on my own, with my tow-car, trailer and a pack of self-made sandwiches. And getting home at the end was a

TOM PRYCE - CV

Thomas Maldwyn Price

Born: June 11, 1948

Died: March 5, 1977

Grand Prix starts: 4

Pole positions: 1

1970: Won Daily Express competition and wins Formula Ford Lola T200

1971: Winner, Formula 100 Series, works for Royale

1972: Raced and won in Formula Super Vee

Won Brands Hatch Formula Three Race for Royale in March. Broke leg

in accident at Monaco.

1973: Continued in Formula Atlantic with Royale. Finished second in Formula Two Rondel at Norisring, Germany

1974: Raced Formula 2 Chevron for Bob Harper, pole position in Austria, won Monaco F3 support race in Ippokampos Racing March 743. Raced Formula One Token RJ02 at Daily Express International Trophy at Silverstone. Makes Grand Prix debut with the Token at the Belgian Grand Prix. Signs for the

Shadow racing team.

1975: Won Race of Champions at Brands Hatch in Shadow DN5; takes pole position for the British Grand Prix at Silverstone; third in Austrian Grand Prix; fourth in German Grand Prix.

1976: Third in Brazilian Grand Prix; Fourth in British and Dutch Grand Prix.

1977: Fails to finish in first two races of the year. Killed on lap 21 of the South African Grand Prix at Kyalami.

matter of draining the petrol from the tank of the racer into the tow-car."

The 1975 German Grand Prix at the notorious Nurburgring circuit revealed every ounce of Pryce's courage and talent. A loose fuel

cap meant Pryce had to negotiate the notorious 14-mile circuit with a cockpit full of fuel.

"He was running second and he took the straps off thinking he could lift himself out of the fuel which burnt his skin," reveals Jack

with a smile. "As he was breaking he was coming out of the car!"

The gutsy performance earned him fourth place and the Jo Siffert award, revealing his talent in the face of adversity.

By the end of 1975 Tom was

earning big money as well as garnering interest from the front-running Lotus team.

"There was a deal suggested to swap Peterson for Pryce in early 1975," says Henry. "Certainly, if Tom had gone to Lotus he might have won the 1978 title which (eventual Lotus driver) Mario Andretti claimed."

Pryce remained with Shadow, a trait of his loyalty - Tremayne affirms this. "He got a bit frustrated at Shadow, especially when the cars were crap in 1976, but unlike mercurial team-mate, Jean Pierre Jarier, he never gave up."

As well as third at Brazil and a brace of fourth places, the 1976 season saw a stunning drive at the Japanese Grand Prix.

Fellow Brit James Hunt seized the limelight, dramatically taking the World Championship from Ferrari's Nikki Lauda in monsoon conditions, but Pryce almost beat

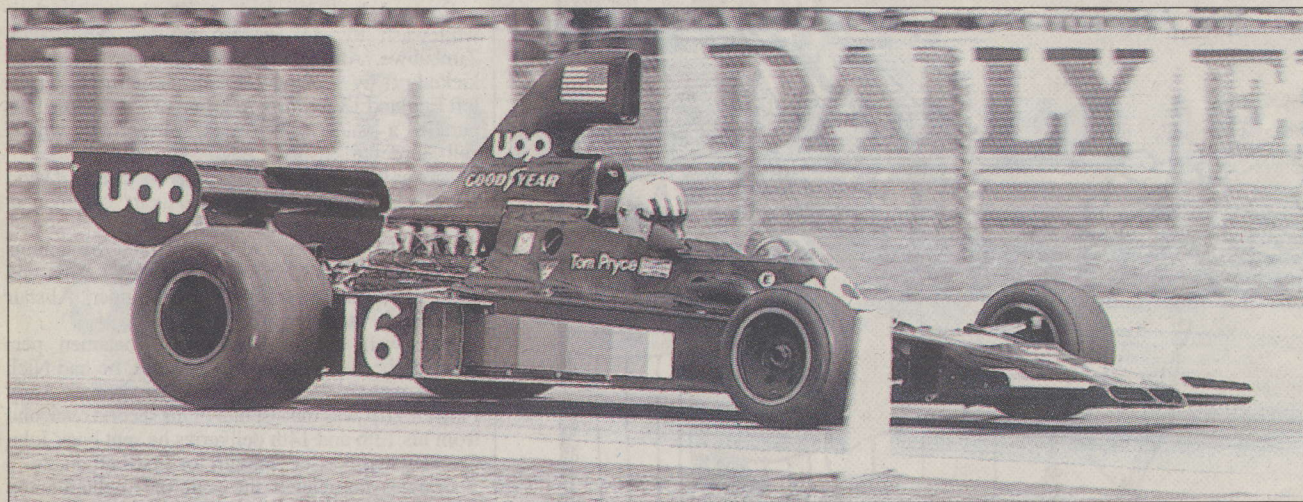
a day when the circus left town. Tom's death and Ronnie's (Peterson) the following year hardened me.

"Before Tom died it was all good fun; young men together having a happy time. Tom's death helped me gain a perspective of the sport. But a cruel one."

Tremayne reflected on the bizarre moment that cost motor racing one of its brightest talents and Wales' a certain world champion. "Personally I was shattered, and so was a sport that held Tom in immense regard and saw him as a potential champion.

"The nature of his death was also so sad, a moment's inattention and two young lives lost. Such a tragic waste."

Tom is buried at Otford in Kent. His parents' home in Denbighshire hosts the memories of a man who showed speed, skill and grace to become one of the world's fastest men, and one of Wales' most sorely-missed heroes.



GREAT TALENT

Tom Pryce at Silverstone in July 1975, driving his Shadow DN5 car during practice for round 10 of the Grand Prix World Championship

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