

# A TASTE FOR MOTORSPORT

If your club is looking to entice new members and grow its numbers, you are motorsport fan looking to get into the action, a Taster event could be just the ticket by Will Gray

Taster events are an underused tool on the UK's motorsport scene, with unique permits that help clubs to overcome some of the barriers to entry that can stop newcomers trying out the sport or a new discipline within it.

Many clubs grow their membership through natural progression, with existing members drawing in friends and relations or new members attracted by word of mouth. Even then, however, turning this influx into membership can be tough.

Taster permits are designed to make it easy to run entry-level grassroots Clubman events that are fully open to members of the public and non-club participants, without the need for them to sign up and commit.

Motorsport UK Competitions and Clubs Manager Simon Fowler explains: "Taster Events have been around for the last 10 years but are hidden in the regulations and unless you go to bed with our good book you may not be aware of them!"

Taster permits cover a wide range of disciplines including 12 Car Rallies, Navigational Scatters and Navigational Rallies; Sporting Trials and Car Trials; AutoSOLOs, Autotests and Production Car Autotests (PCAs); Untimed and Tyro Cross Country Trials; Classic Reliability Trials and Veteran Car Runs.

Fowler adds: "For many, the thought of joining a 'club' is a massive barrier and people today want to 'pay and play'. Taster events allow them to do just that. They really need to be run and promoted by clubs every year."

## Removing the barriers

The South Hams Motor Club is one of a number of clubs to have run their first Taster events this year. An Autotest, held in January, it was the most successful and most well attended Autotest the club has ever run.

"The Taster approach appealed to us greatly because it meant we could attract people from outside the club and let them experience what we have to offer," says the club's grassroots coordinator Shaun Layland.

"So many people messaged and called me asking 'do I need a club membership?' and because it was a Taster Event, I was able to say 'no, all you need is a car and a free RS Clubman license'. It allowed us to open it up to so many people."

Layland says the event attracted a wide range of people, including track day enthusiasts and spectators who wanted to have a go themselves, most of which had never participated competitively or been in a motor club environment before.

The club runs a wide range of events through the season, including 12 cars, Road Rallies, Autotests, AutoSOLOs, Stage Rallies and even has plans for a Targa, but Layland believes an Autotest is the perfect format for a Taster Event.

"If you go into something like a Stage Rally, Navigation or Road Rally, there is a lot more complexity," he says. "An Autotest takes all that pressure away. It is super cheap, fun, quick, and allows people to get a taste for it. It builds the bug."

Alwoodley Motor Club is another that has recently run its first taster, again an Autotest, and organiser Steve Morten was encouraged by what he saw. "We used it a bit like a practice day, so anyone could come and try things out.

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“It worked well. You talk to a lot of people, and you say ‘Autotesting’, and they haven’t a clue. Then you say, ‘driving forward and backwards in a car park’ and they don’t realise how quick we actually do it – until they see it for real.”

### Drawing the crowds

The Farnborough District Motor Club (FDMC) has been running Tasters for the last six to eight years. One of the larger clubs in the South of England and a former ‘Club of the Year’ winner, it has had some impressive success.

It typically uses its Taster permits to take things outside the box, teaming up with other motorsport clubs and events in its area to run sideshows to major motorsport attractions.

“Typically, we don’t put on a taster event discretely on our own, because we would have to do a lot of marketing to get people there,” says FDMC Competition Secretary and former Chairman Simon Taylor.

“We piggyback on bigger events because your target audience is already there. You just need to decide where your market is. We go to Shere Hillclimb, the British Motor Show, and Brooklands. At Shere Hillclimb, for example, we will be busy all day long, cycling through maybe 50 to 70 people.

“If there are people who are enthusiastic about motorsport going to watch an event and they see club motorsport going on while they are there, they often go ‘crikey, I could do that.’ That is the sort of strategy we use.

“For example, if there was a race meeting at Thruxton it would be a good idea for a club to run an Autotest in the corner of the car park. Not in the far corner, so it is out of the way, but somewhere with a high footfall.”

South Hams used a similar tactic, but ran its AutoSOLO taster at its biggest event of the year, a testing day, with the aim of capitalising on the large audience already in attendance.



A Taster Event can be a new way to enjoy your classic car

“That event is always oversubscribed, so by allowing it to be a Taster Event rather than an in-club event, people can come and do an Autotest on the Taster permit without worrying about the extra cost of a club membership.

“I would recommend this approach to any club. If you do a big social barbecue every year, for example, just run an Autotest alongside; or do a treasure hunt with an Autotest at the end. It’s the perfect way to get people involved.”

Alwoodley, meanwhile, took a different approach with a stand-alone event, and Morten explains: “We are more looking at people already interested in Autotests and promote via local clubs. That is who we are trying to get to.”

### How to succeed

One of the keys to a successful Taster Event, as would be expected, is creating a welcoming atmosphere, and making people feel as comfortable as possible, whether it is their first time in a car, or they are using it to test new techniques.

Taster permits for PCAs also open the door to passenger rides, which can be an excellent first approach, and Taylor says: “We can give them a ride, or they can drive, and we can passenger with them and help them go the right way.

“Generally, if someone is nervous about doing it, they are not going to get in the car or even get in the queue to start with. If they do need some encouragement, we just tell them to scream if they want to go faster!”

Sometimes it can be surprising what can give first timers the biggest thrill. A person might look at a Nissan Micra going around a car park and think ‘hmm, not sure about that’ but once they have experienced it, it is a different matter.

“That is a good analogy,” says Taylor. “We had a guy come to Brooklands once and he went out in a BMW with someone that does rallying and can drift it very easily and it was very exciting for him.

“Then he went for passenger ride with another person in a Micra, and when he stepped out, he went ‘my gosh, I could do this’ and two weeks later he went and bought himself a Micra. That is what we are appealing to.

“In fact, we had somebody come once who did not even have a ride or drive, they just saw what was going on, spoke with a driver and said, ‘I want to do this’ and they took their car and entered an event the following weekend.”

Taylor’s tips to running a successful Taster event include selecting the right club members to take part – “quality drivers, not showboaters” – and involving young members and female members to help reach the widest demographic.



## How a Taster Event tempted me into motorsport

I like cars and I had been aware of the club but didn’t know much about them. I had been thinking of getting a kit car and in late 2019 I went to Brooklands with a mate. We saw this demonstration going on – sign-up for a ride to go racing around this mini-Gymkhana set-up. I thought it looked pretty cool, so I went over to have a look. There were a couple of cars that caught my eye, one of which was a Sylva kit car, so I got chatting to some of the drivers. There was a 19-year-old lad there by the name of Charlie, who is reasonably well known in grassroots motorsport and social media. I signed up for a ride, and he took me out in his brother’s BMW 318. I remember him saying ‘sorry, I haven’t driven this car for a while so I might not be any good’ and he absolutely made the thing dance, it was hilarious!

I thought ‘that’s great fun’ and I started chatting more to them afterwards. I could not believe how young but talented some of the drivers were. I thought ‘that’s good, it obviously appeals to lots of ages’, and I was also struck by how family orientated it was – including lots of dads and daughters, which caught my eye because my daughter had just been born. I got talking to a guy called Brian who had a Micra, and he took me out in that. I realised how quick and how much fun it was, and the clincher was he told me the price. He said he bought the car and put some suspension on it for about £700 and it is £40-50 per AutoSOLO; the Micra was his daily driver too. My jaw dropped. You think of motorsport being inaccessible, and I thought ‘Wow, this is totally affordable.’



Mike bought a Micra for £400



The whole kit car thing dropped out of my mind, and I thought ‘hang on, you can’t drive like this on the road, this is a way I could build on my interest in driving.’ I had lost my mum earlier in that year and it made me realise life is all about experiences and memories. So, after that motorsport day, I went along to the club’s ‘Autumn Antics’ event, which is a forward-facing Production Car Autotest, and what caught my eye that hadn’t at Brooklands was there were 14- and 15-year-olds, driving with their parents, and I could completely see my kids getting into it as well. I think I saw the first five cars go out and went ‘I’m in!’

I signed up to the club there and then and within about an hour I was on Autotrader seeing what I could get. Four or five months later, I was on Facebook Marketplace and bought a 1996 Nissan Micra 1.3 for about £400 and I got involved from that summer onwards. At the start you are all quite excited, but then you go ‘actually, this is a bit nerve wracking.’ I had never done this before, so I decided to try to get some experience and did some driver training. It was about the price of a track day and very accessible. That built my confidence, and I went and did my first event, back at Brooklands. I haven’t looked back since.

Mike Smith, FDMC member

FDMC also works with other clubs to help run its events and brought in assistance from far and wide – including Basingstoke, Bognor, and Kent – for its Taster at the British Motor Show last year.

Running a safe event is also important and for a PCA that includes having a suitable runoff area, ensuring any children taking part are over 1.35m high, signing disclaimers and insisting on long sleeves being worn in the car.

One important thing to bear in mind, however, is to know your venue and manage expectations accordingly – something that caused an issue for South Hams at its inaugural event.

“We had so many people that we planned for four tests but could only do three because of the time curfew on the venue,” says Layland. “As a keen competitor it can be disheartening to lose a test because there is so many people.

“It is a nice problem to have, but in future we would probably limit the numbers a little bit, but that comes from experience. You do not know the maximum that would work comfortably until you have done an event.”

### Keep it simple

Often one of the toughest challenges in running an event is spreading the word. Piggybacking on another event can help, but valuable time should still be spent ensuring an awareness of the event across as many channels as possible.

“Publicise it as much as you can, wherever you can,” says Layland. “I promoted it across social media platforms, various motor club platforms, and predominantly it was myself pushing and creating the content and posting it out there.

*Tasters are open to all types of cars and drivers*



“Facebook was the biggest help because I was able to put it in the local spotted pages or local car enthusiasts’ groups and we certainly gained a lot of people through doing that.”

On the event itself, it is crucial to keep it simple – and that is an important aspect to consider when planning a Taster Event, whether the attendance is made up of complete rookies or drivers who are experienced in the discipline.

Morten, with his friend Phil Chapman, set up the Autotesting UK Facebook page to learn what people want from that type of event and he says: “We found out a lot of people find the tests too difficult to remember.”

This is something that also became apparent on the Alwoodley Taster Event, and Morten added: “We put our normal two tests on and just let everyone have a go and if they wanted to just try out just one manoeuvre they could do.

“In future, it would be good to do something with championship manoeuvres in, but not as complicated. We would set up one easier test for people to have a go at and in the other area have different manoeuvres that you could just practice.”

South Hams took a simpler approach at its event, borrowing a method from the set up of a traditional AutoSOLO to help those who were unfamiliar with course recognition to have a go without the fear of going in the wrong direction.

“We put some smaller cones on their side, so participants just had to go to the correct side of the cone,” says Layland. “It was simplified, but not too much. We also did it all forwards because that allowed us to add some juniors.”



*The Nissan Micra is a popular first-car for new competitors*

Layland also recommends keeping the paperwork down if you want to attract more people to take part. “Simplify it and don’t make the entry system complicated,” he explained. “It just makes the whole day a lot easier.

“We used a simple entry form that people filled in on the day and we encouraged them to do the license before, although they could fill it out on the day, and we would help them complete it online. No pressure beforehand, no pressure on the day.”

Most people want lots of information, so developing a Q&A sheet of probable questions and sourcing the answers ahead of the event is a good plan, as it can help the club show its professionalism and that in turn inspires confidence.

### The end goal

For most clubs, the result of a successful Taster Event is more member sign-ups and Layland says South Hams certainly ticked that box, gaining “a lot of members” through its first attempt.

“A lot of the people who decided to join up on the day have since gone on to do other Autotests,” he says. “They are now part of the club and take part in the social aspect and are gaining experience in different disciplines.”

It does not always work that way, however, and while those who choose the piggyback route may reach out to a higher footfall, it is possible they may find a lower return in overall sign-ups.

Taylor believes that simply getting people involved is an important start, however, and explains: “I was told once by a former Motorsport UK chairman that you need to connect with people three times before they get engaged.

“We run Tasters as ‘awareness sessions’ and do not actually sign-up members on the day. We need to know they will

come back another day, so the outcome is to then invite potential members to our next event.

“If we put on a Taster Event and people have a go, even if we don’t see them again, we’ve connected with them once,” he adds. “Next time they might see us on TV or in a magazine. Then they will go ‘gosh, this is everywhere; I really need to join up.’

“I think around 10 per cent of our club membership must know us because they saw us at the Shere Hillclimb, for example, because we go there every year and do those types of events.”

While many of those who Taylor encounters at a Taster event see the positive opportunities, he says that the two familiar barriers that often come up are cost and location.

“People who say ‘oh, it’s too expensive’ need to get that out of their head, because it is not,” he says. “And when people say ‘oh, I don’t live near here’ we explain that there are clubs all over the country.

“We say to them, ‘that’s okay, you might not live here but where do you come from?’ and then I can then tell them what their local club is and suggest they get in touch. We just need to know the other clubs that we can help.

“I think every club could benefit from running a Taster session, but people should also think about what events the club is running in the near future that they can invite people to from the Taster Event.

“We are not precious about which club people join, they just need to join a club and get involved in motorsport and start having fun, be that racing, helping others to prepare cars, mend cars, officiate, marshal.”