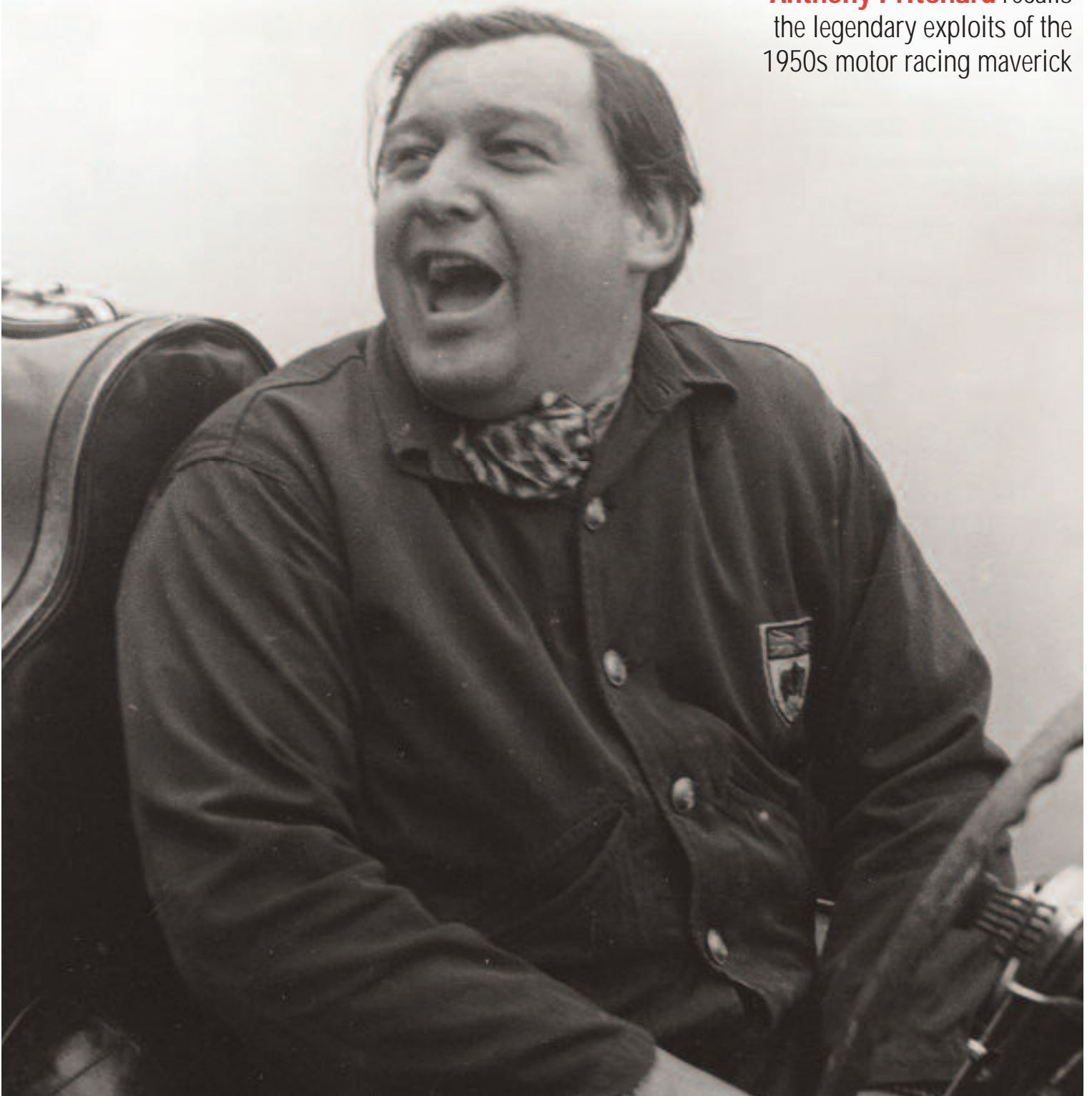


The racing career of **Duncan Hamilton**

Anthony Pritchard recalls
the legendary exploits of the
1950s motor racing maverick



At Le Mans in June, 1953, the works disc-braked C-type Jaguar shared by Duncan Hamilton and Tony Rolt took the chequered flag at 4pm on the Sunday to win the 24-hour race. They did so by a margin of 28 miles from another works C-type driven by Stirling Moss and Peter Walker, and with the other Jaguar team car in fourth place. It was greatest racing success achieved by Hamilton and Rolt and it was Jaguar's greatest, too. Hamilton and Rolt drove together at Le Mans six times, twice with Nash-Healeys and four times with Jaguars. They were a very contrasting pair: Hamilton was outspoken, exuberant, full of humour and panache, a lover of alcohol, and with a tendency to exaggerate, while Rolt was a more serious, thinking man, much more restrained, and a skilled and able engineer who worked on Harry Ferguson's four-wheel-drive project.

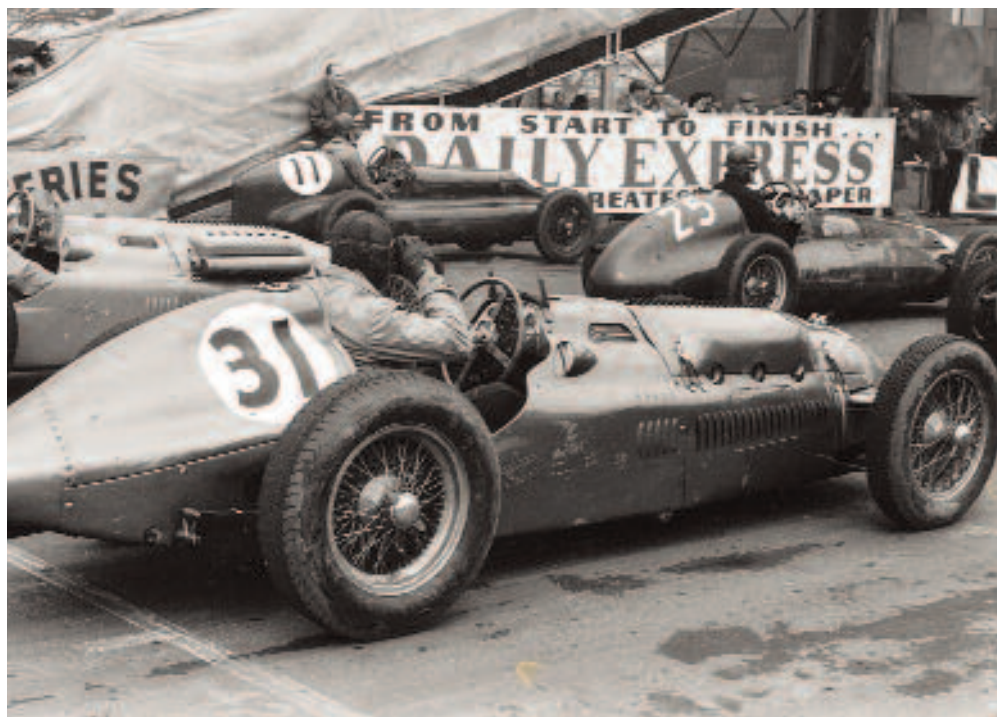
James Duncan Hamilton was born in Cork, Ireland, in April, 1920. The family moved to England when he was six and he was brought up in west London. During the Second World War he served in the Fleet Air Arm and afterwards worked as a salesman for Henlys, at one time the biggest distributor of Jaguar cars. Later he ran his own very successful car dealership in Bagshot, specialising in second-hand Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars.

In early post-war days he raced a blown R-type MG and a Bugatti Type 35B before moving on to a Maserati for the 1948 season. In 1951 he acquired a French Talbot-Lago Grand Prix car which had previously been raced by Belgian driver 'Johnny' Claes, but Duncan's real successes were to come in sports car racing.

In 1950 Tony Rolt was asked by Donald Healey to drive the works 3.8-litre Nash-Healey at Le Mans. Rolt, in turn, suggested that his co-driver should be Hamilton. The Nash-Healey combined a British chassis with an American engine built in Kenosha, Wisconsin. It was not a particularly fast car, but this one was a pre-production prototype rather than an out-and-out sports racer. They drove a good, steady race to finish fourth overall behind two French 4.5-litre Talbots and a 5.4-litre Cadillac-powered Allard.

Rolt and Hamilton drove again at Le Mans in 1951, but their Nash-Healey now had a fixed-head body with a hatch in the roof. They drove this into sixth place. It was the year of Jaguar's first Le Mans victory, when Peters Whitehead and Walker drove the new C-type to a spectacular win.

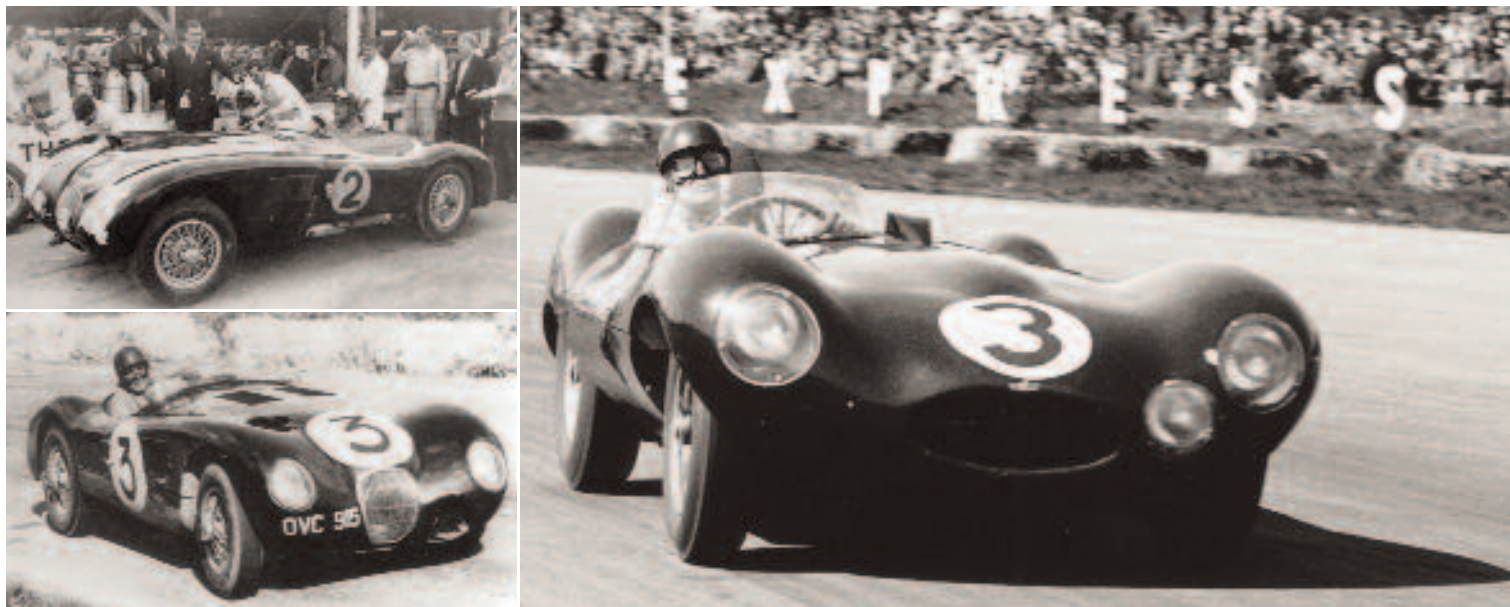
Meanwhile, Duncan had bought a Jaguar XK 120 roadster that he stripped and tuned for racing, and this was to lead to much more important sports car drives in 1952. Both he and Rolt became members of the works Jaguar team and, in addition, Hamilton took delivery of the first production C-type, chassis XKC 004. His first race was the British Empire Trophy, held over a distance of 200 miles on the bumpy,



Opposite Duncan Hamilton, seated at the wheel of his Talbot-Lago at the International Trophy meeting at Silverstone in May, 1951, seems to be enjoying a great joke (Guy Griffiths)

Top Another view of Duncan at the wheel of his Talbot-Lago on the starting grid at the 1951 International Trophy. The cars had lined up for the final and were just about to start when the heavens opened. The track was flooded and the works Alfa Romeos were slowed by their superchargers sucking in rainwater. When the race was stopped after six laps, Reg Parnell with the Ferrari Thin Wall Special was leading the field and Hamilton was in second place with the Talbot (Guy Griffiths)

Above The performance of the works Jaguars at Le Mans in 1953 was matchless, and the team took first, second and fourth places. Here, early in the race, Moss leads Hamilton with the winning car. Moss's car was delayed by an engine misfire, causing him and co-driver Peter Walker to drop back to second place



Top left In the pits at the 1953 Goodwood Nine Hours race, 'Lofty' England warns Hamilton that one of the C-type's front wheels is still on the jack. Oil surge problems resulted in bearing failure and the car's retirement. Of the three-car team, only the works C-type driven by Peter Whitehead/Ian Stewart finished, in third place behind two works DB3S Aston Martins **Bottom left** Duncan raced his C-type very actively in 1954 and scored a string of racing successes. Here he is seen at Hedemora in Sweden in May. He ran in the category for modified sports cars and finished third behind Casimiro de Oliveira, a Portuguese driver at the wheel of a 4.1-litre Ferrari, and George Abecassis in an HWM-Jaguar **Above right** Jaguar entered three 1954 D-types in the Sports Car race at the International Trophy meeting at Silverstone in May, 1955. This is Duncan Hamilton at the wheel of chassis number XKD 406. Previously Hawthorn/Walters had driven it to a win in the Sebring 12 Hours race. Duncan drove the car into fifth place and he subsequently acquired it to race on his own account in typically swashbuckling style

tortuous Douglas road circuit in the Isle of Man. He was in second place when the A-bracket in the rear suspension broke.

After the car had been repaired he drove back to Bagshot, accompanied by stockbroker friend Tim Seccombe. Weather conditions were atrocious, with heavy rain and poor visibility, but Duncan's press-on driving resulted, or so he told friends, in five summonses, including one for being timed at 102mph in a built-up 30mph area and one for dangerous driving. Duncan employed a good barrister, most of the charges were dropped, and he escaped with a fine of 40 shillings (£2) for passing traffic lights at red. Episodes like this were not uncommon in Duncan's life.

Some years later he was stopped by the police quite early one morning and they considered he was driving under the influence of drink. Duncan freely admitted he had drunk six pink gins for breakfast, but claimed this was his usual consumption. This was long before the breathalyser, and motorists whom the police thought to be drunk had to undergo a series of tests: walking a straight line, picking up coins lying on a table and so on. Duncan passed the tests with flying colours and that was the end of the matter. Incidentally, a few years before his death, Duncan assured the writer that the story was true.

Le Mans in 1952 was a complete disaster for Jaguar, as all three C-types retired early in the race. They had special long noses and tails, intended to improve speed in the face of Mercedes-Benz 300 SL opposition. They were inadequately tested, however, and the smaller radiators fitted to these cars overheated in practice. Two of them, including that driven by Rolt and Hamilton, were hastily fitted with standard radiators that caused unsightly bulges in the bonnet, but it was all too late. Early in the race, the Rolt/Hamilton car was pushed away with water running out of the exhaust pipe.

Duncan's private C-type had been at Le Mans and afterwards was transported to Porto where he drove it in a sports car race, but he retired because of mechanical problems. Back in England he drove this car in a 100-mile race at Boreham and, after a slow start, finished second to Stirling Moss with the C-type jointly owned by journalist Tom Wisdom and Bill Cannell, the Jaguar distributor in Brighton. Later in August, Duncan and Tony shared a works C-type in the Goodwood Nine Hours race. In the seventh hour the left rear wheel detached itself; the cause was hub failure, not disassociated from Duncan's very hard driving, and Jaguar made a modification to strengthen the hubs.

The works would have run in the Tourist Trophy at Dundrod, but the race was cancelled and so Duncan ran his own car in the Wakefield Trophy on the Curragh circuit in Eire. In practice he broke the lap record with a speed of 85.08mph, but his race was soon over. A slower car crossed his line, the C-type caught a front wheel in a gully, breaking the steering, and Duncan then hit the corner of a wall broadside on. The chassis was completely wrecked and, as he had not insured the car, Duncan faced a big repair bill at the factory. When this sort of thing happened Jaguars were normally very generous, bills being kept to a minimum.

Hamilton's first appearance for the works team in 1953 was in the Production Sports Car race at the May Silverstone meeting, driving his own car. Moss had crashed his C-type in practice and, not surprisingly, was off-form in the race, which was dominated by Mike Hawthorn and Tom Cole with 4.1-litre Ferraris. The Jaguars were suffering from brake fade, and Duncan only lasted until lap four when he retired with sparking plug trouble.

After the débâcle at Le Mans in 1952, the following year Jaguar entered a team of three new cars equipped with Dunlop disc brakes, Weber carburettors, aircraft-type rubber-bag

fuel tanks and very thin-gauge lightweight bodies – so thin that if a mechanic put a hefty spanner on the panelling, it left an impression. These C-types had been thoroughly tested, superbly prepared and, despite an exceptionally strong entry from Alfa Romeo, Ferrari, Cunningham and Lancia, they completely dominated the race.

There was a hiccup in practice, because both the Rolt/Hamilton car bearing the race number 18 and the team spare car also bearing the number 18, used by reserve driver Norman Dewis to put in some practice laps, appeared in the pits at the same time. The officials noted this, as it was a clear breach of the regulations. There are two versions of what happened next.

According to 'Lofty' England, the Jaguar team manager, the incident happened on the Thursday; he spent most of Friday sorting this out with the officials and it was resolved by payment of a fairly modest fine. Duncan's version is much more flamboyant. The incident occurred on the Friday and he and Rolt were told that they would be disqualified. William Lyons protested this and asked for a special enquiry which would be held on the Saturday morning.

Hamilton and Rolt were convinced that the disqualification would be upheld and so, in Duncan's words, there followed 'a night of steady imbibing.' They went for a coffee in the morning and were sitting in the restaurant when William Lyons arrived in a Jaguar Mark VII and told them that he had paid a fine of 25,000 francs and the pair had been reinstated in the race.

It was 10am, they had not slept and they spent the next six hours before the 4pm start trying to sober up by taking hot baths and drinking black coffee. Duncan still felt unfit to race, so he ordered a double brandy and immediately felt better. Tony, according to Duncan, did the same. The story is very much in accord with Duncan's exuberant personality, but, sadly, England's version is correct and, in



telling the tale, Duncan – how can one put it? – was somewhat ‘carried away.’

Moss/Walker led at the end of the first hour, but their car was delayed by a partially blocked petrol filter, and this allowed Rolt/Hamilton to move up into the lead. Apart from a short spell at the end of the seventh hour, when the 4.5-litre Ferrari of Ascari/Villoresi led, they stayed in front for the remaining 23 hours of this race.

The opposition simply crumbled away in the face of Jaguar speed and consistency. All the Alfa Romeos, Aston Martins and Lancias, and two of the Ferraris, retired. Rolt and Hamilton drove superbly, swiftly and steadily. Keeping to the strict lap times that England had laid down, they scored a brilliant victory. It was one of especial significance in Coronation year.

Duncan and his wife, Angela, went directly from Le Mans to Porto, where he was to drive his C-type in the sports car Portuguese Grand Prix. He took the lead at the start, but was passed by a 4.1-litre Ferrari with a rather incompetent local driver at the wheel. On only the next lap the two cars collided and Duncan shot off the circuit, demolishing an electricity pylon. The C-type was a near write-off and Duncan had been badly cut by bits of the Perspex aero-screen that had broken off. He had fractured nine ribs, torn his mouth and tongue and suffered a fractured jaw.

By August Duncan was racing again, and he shared Peter Whitehead's private C-type in the Pescara 12 Hours race in Italy. The race started in intense heat at noon, and heat haze badly affected visibility. They ran well and were up with the leaders until a collision with a cow resulted in a broken chassis cross-member that seriously compromised the steering.

Duncan co-drove works C-types with Tony Rolt in two other races in 1953. In the Goodwood Nine Hours race the Jaguars had led easily, but they were badly affected by oil surge and both Rolt/Hamilton and Moss/Walker retired because of bearing failure. The surviving team car, driven by Whitehead/Stewart, took third place.

The works C-types made their last appearance in 1953 in the Tourist Trophy at Dundrod. The race was a straight battle between Jaguar and Aston Martin, but with the odds very much in favour of Feltham. On this circuit the two marques were very closely matched on lap

times, but the race was a handicap event and the three-litre DB3S Aston Martins had one lap fewer to cover than the 3.4-litre C-types.

Furthermore, although both teams suffered exceptional tyre wear on the recently resurfaced, very abrasive Dundrod circuit, the Aston Martins were slightly lighter on tyres, averaging about 60 miles on a set of Avons to the 50 of the Dunlops on the Jaguars. The latter were also plagued by gearbox problems and, when Rolt retired after five laps, Duncan was left without a drive. He had achieved the peak of his career by winning at Le Mans in 1953, but Jaguar was about to embark on a new era of racing with the D-type and Duncan was to turn in some very remarkable, fast drives with works and private cars.

For 1954 Hamilton bought from the works XKC 038, the disc-braked C-type built as a possible entry in the Carrera Panamericana Mexico road race, but with a heavier body than those fitted to the Le Mans cars. He turned in some very respectable performances and started the season well by winning his heat of the British Empire Trophy at Oulton Park. He went on to finish fourth in the handicap final, in the face of strong opposition from Ecurie Ecosse with the 1953 Le Mans C-types.

He followed this up with a win in the *Coupe du Paris* at Montlhéry circuit; he then took third place at Hedemora in Sweden and won the first race ever held on the new Aintree circuit. Then it was Le Mans and the début of the new and sensationally quick Jaguar D-types, distinguished by their single tail-fins. The most serious opposition came from Ferrari, who had entered a team of monstrous 4.9-litre Tipo 375 Plus cars. There was a stark contrast between Ferrari brute power and Jaguar aerodynamic sophistication and disc brakes.

As usual Rolt and Hamilton co-drove and they came very close to winning the race with their D-type. It was a miserable race with prolonged rain and a very slippery track, but, even so, the Ferrari of Froilán Gonzalez and Maurice Trintignant led the race from start to finish.

All three works Jaguars were delayed by engine misfires that were traced to blocked fuel filters and these were to cost Rolt/Hamilton the race. The D-type of Moss/Walker retired because of brake problems that caused Moss to take to

In 1956 Duncan was still racing his 1954 ex-works D-type, chassis number XKC 402. Here he is seen at the wheel of this car in the sports car race at the 1956 British Grand Prix meeting. The D-type was outpaced by faster, newer cars and he was delayed by a pit stop to repair a broken throttle spring. He resumed the race and finished in 10th place

the escape road at the end of the Mulsanne Straight and, although Peter Whitehead/Ken Wharton held second place at one stage, they retired after gearbox trouble, the engine giving up under the strain of running in top gear only. By the end of the 12th hour Rolt/Hamilton were in second place and they were to stay there for the remainder of the race.

Of the persistent rain Hamilton wrote, ‘There were times when my cockpit seemed half-full of water. I suffered cramp in my left leg and I was very wet and cold.’ During the night hours Hamilton and Rolt pushed hard and, despite the deplorable weather, they were on the same lap as the leading Ferrari.

On the Sunday morning they came close to disaster and, again in Duncan's words: ‘At 10.15am... a Talbot drove across Tony's bows, forcing him to take to the sand at the roadside. The car was damaged and Tony came into the pits. When he set off again we were a lap and 33sec behind the Ferrari.’ In the heavy rain Trintignant brought the Ferrari into the pits to refuel and for Gonzalez to take over. The car refused to fire up because of a flooded magneto and the mechanics swarmed over the big Ferrari.

Only two mechanics were permitted to work on a car, but there were at least five working on the 375 Plus. It was eventually fired up by a mechanic operating the starter motor from under the bonnet, while the bulky Gonzalez sat hunched in the driver's seat. In all, the stop cost the Ferrari 7½ minutes and at least two regulations had been breached.

Rolt was driving in goggles and could barely see anything in the torrential rain that was now inundating the circuit. Hamilton, wearing a visor, took over, and he set off after the Ferrari, eventually finishing 2½ miles behind.

After the race, representatives of the organising club, the Automobile Club de l'Ouest, came to the Jaguar pit, urging team-manager England to lodge a protest against the

Ferrari. England referred this to William Lyons who declined to protest and said, "No, if we can't win the race on the road, we won't win it at all." It was still a magnificent result for Jaguar and one with which both Hamilton and Rolt were well pleased.

Hamilton never won Le Mans again, but he was still to achieve some excellent and controversial results. A couple of weeks later Jaguar fielded three D-types in the high-speed Reims 12 Hours race. The race was won by Whitehead/Walker, but Rolt/Hamilton had led for much of the race and took second place, despite Jean Behra in a Gordini shunting their D-type under braking for Thillois.

The Jaguar's bodywork was crumpled, and the back axle got noisier and noisier – a bent sub-frame member had punctured the differential casing and they were lucky to finish the race. Rolt/Hamilton next drove a D-type again in the Tourist Trophy at Dundrod, but retired because of loss of oil pressure.

Duncan was a member of the works team again in 1955, but he had also bought OKV 1, his second-place car from Le Mans. He took it to North Africa early in 1955 and, after retiring at Agadir in Morocco because of gearbox trouble, raced at Dakar in Sénégal and took third place behind two Ferraris.

Dakar was a very fast circuit with lap speeds of a little over 120mph, and some years later Duncan claimed that the D-type attained 200mph on the straight. Unfortunately, no D-type has reached that speed, but Duncan was probably achieving around 180mph. It was a quiet year for Duncan in works D-types, but he had a very active season with his private car and enjoyed success after success in British meetings, as well as winning two races at Montlhéry and finishing third at Porto.

Duncan drove one of the 1954 cars for the works at the May Silverstone meeting, finishing fifth, and then he and Rolt shared one of the new 'long-nose' cars at Le Mans. They were never in the initial battle for the lead and, although they held second place for a couple of hours on the Sunday morning, they retired during the night hours after their car lost the use of first and second gears.

Tony Rolt retired from racing at the end of 1955, so a great partnership broke up. Jaguar made a joint entry with Cunningham of four D-types in the 1956 Sebring 12 Hours race and Duncan co-drive with Ivor Bueb; they retired with seized brakes caused by overheating. It was not a Jaguar race and Ferraris took the first two places ahead of the private D-type of Sweikert/Ensley.

On Easter Monday at Goodwood there was one of the very few fatalities with D-types. Duncan owned a number of D-type chassis including XKD 510, and he entered this for young driver Tony Dennis. The car flipped at high speed and Dennis was killed. It has often been said that this accident occurred because Dennis mistakenly selected first gear. Bob Berry, who raced Jack Broadhead's ex-works D-type during the years 1955-57, says that was an almost impossible mistake to make.

In May, Duncan won the *Coupe de Paris* at Montlhéry with his D-type and returned to England to drive one of the new 2.4 saloons to



Duncan's last season of racing was in 1958. Here he is seen in the British Empire Trophy at Silverstone on the first lap of the heat for cars over 2000cc. He heads the Aston Martin DBR2s of Tony Brooks and Stirling Moss, the Aston Martin DB3S of John Dalton and the Lister-Jaguar of Peter Whitehead. Duncan drove valiantly to finish sixth in his heat and fourth in the final

third place in the Touring Car race at Silverstone. He took a second place at Chimay in Belgium with his own car and was then due to co-drive a works car with Paul Frère in the Nürburgring 1000km race. However, Frère crashed their car in practice and so a replacement was driven over from Coventry. After only five laps Frère retired this car because of gearbox trouble and so there was no drive for Duncan.

Duncan then drove for the works Jaguar team for the last time in the Reims 12 Hours at the beginning of July. In the ordinary way Le Mans would have been the next race, but it had been postponed to the end of July because of alterations to the circuit following the 1955 disaster. There was a very small entry at Reims and the three D-types completely dominated the race. Hamilton was partnered by Bueb and they won the race, only for Hamilton to be sacked from the team because of a breach of team orders.

In the closing stages of the race the D-types held the first three places in the order Frère/Hawthorn, Hamilton/Bueb and Titterington/Fairman, and the drivers were signalled to hold station. Instead of complying with team orders, Hamilton speeded up, set a new lap record and took the lead from Frère. When he stopped at the end of the race, Duncan said to team manager 'Lofty' England, "I suppose I'm in trouble?" England's response was brief and to the point, "Not really. There won't be any trouble because you're not going to drive for us again."

It was good that England had the authority and strength of will to make this decision. Only too often Duncan had behaved like an overgrown schoolboy and the point needed to be made clearly and firmly that companies such as Jaguar raced for business reasons, not fun, in a serious effort to boost the sale of their production cars.

Hamilton tried to make light of his dismissal with a number of excuses of a specious nature, but the reality was that he had 'tried it on' and had not got away with it. While it was true that he was taken into the Ferrari team, it was for three races only: Le Mans, the sports car Swedish Grand Prix and a sports car race at Monza.

Jaguar withdrew from racing at the end of

1956, but Duncan continued to race D-types. He bought one of the 1956 team cars and this was works-prepared with a 3.8-litre engine for Le Mans. While his relations with 'Lofty' England remained good, Duncan did of course have to pay for preparation work at Coventry.

At Le Mans his co-driver was the 'Kansas City Flash', Masten Gregory. They had problems with the lights, and a fractured exhaust burnt away the floor of the cockpit. A new floor was bolted in and they finished sixth after a drive that should have brought a much better result.

From 1958 there was a three-litre capacity in the World Sports Car Championship, so Duncan had his long-nose D-type fitted with a three-litre engine at the factory. Ivor Bueb co-drove at Le Mans and, although the three-litre version of the D-type engine had a very poor reliability record, Duncan and Ivor performed magnificently. They led at the end of the eighth hour and then held a consistent second place, with prospects of catching and passing the leading Ferrari.

Heavy rain started to fall at around midday on the Sunday and visibility was bad. In these poor conditions Hamilton came upon a French 745cc DB-Panhard that had stopped in the middle of the track. He tried to take evasive action, but put a wheel on the grass and the D-type span into a bank and overturned over a ditch.

Hamilton had to be rescued from the ditch, and was lucky to escape with bad bruising. He had recovered sufficiently to drive in the Tourist Trophy at Goodwood in September, and formally announced his retirement from racing in April, 1959.

Hamilton's autobiography, *Touch Wood!*, was first published in 1960 and remains in print in a revised edition. It is probably the most humorous motor racing biography ever written, although factual accuracy is not a strong point. Throughout, Duncan pays tribute to his wife, Angela, who was long-suffering, tolerant of his antics, but never lost her poise. The writer knew her and held her in great respect. Duncan died at his home at Sherbourne in Dorset on 13th May, 1994. His son, Adrian, is a dealer in old cars.