

IAM SKILLS DAY AT THRUXTON

'If a man waves a red flag and points at you, stop! There's an aircraft in distress, and it takes priority.' So said the safety marshal at the briefing one Monday afternoon in early April. About 25 of us were gathered, including Derek Higgs and me from Exeter and Torbay Advanced Motorists (ETAM), at Thruxton Circuit in Hampshire for an IAM Skills Day. The 2.5 mile track goes around the outside of what is a functioning aerodrome. No jumbo jets mind, just lots of light aircraft and helicopters, and none were in distress that day, clearly not distracted by the wide selection of cars going round the track.

For me, this was an eagerly awaited treat. Lewis Hamilton I was not, although I was driving a Mercedes, even if only an SLK, but there the similarity ended! And no, I didn't find out how fast it would really go, for this was a skills day, not a track day, and there is a difference. We were there to learn some of the basic race track skills of braking, cornering and acceleration, but in an environment unconstrained by oncoming traffic, and with a wide expanse of smooth tarmac, any bit of which we could use, as long as we kept going clockwise!

We soon learned there were places on the track which were much better to be in than others, although there is a degree of discretion as to the most appropriate line, and my instructor encouraged me to try variations. Different coloured cones guided our decisions: finish braking by the red one, the yellow one marks the apex of the corner, green is to aim for as you exit it. And yes, IPSCGA really is relevant. Some of the **Information** you would normally take in is lacking on a race track: no lines of trees, lampposts or buildings to suggest where the road is going. So you need to learn the track, especially with regard to what comes after this particular bend, or you won't get your **Position** right. Sometimes you need to take what seems a counter-intuitive position on the first bend, or you will be completely unable to position correctly for the one immediately following. So, as ever, it was important to get the **Speed** right before the bend.

On my early laps, Gary, my instructor was giving lots of guidance until I got the hang of this. It was reassuring though, because pushing the car faster round bends than I would do on the public highway might have made me wonder about the ability of my car to stay off the grass! I was, however, most impressed by it, despite making it do what at first appeared ludicrously tight turns for the speed. Only once did the tyres scream, and then only briefly, and the car never lost its composure.

My car is an automatic, so being in the right **Gear** was mostly not a problem. In Sports mode it holds onto gears to higher revs, and only when I was becoming more accomplished did I really need to nudge the gear down so as to get more instant **Acceleration** out of the bend. Putting your foot down to carry you out of the bend and over to the green cone you were aiming for was a very pleasurable sensation.

Coming round the end of the runway the track slopes down in a long gentle curve, and this would be the fastest part of the circuit, but to hone our skills, the organisers had inserted two chicanes, marked by cones. So despite 3 litres under the bonnet, I didn't get to more than 90mph before extremely rapid braking was necessary, bringing the car in a wonderfully straight line alongside the first of the cones. Again, I was delighted at the way the car did exactly what it was asked. I found I could take the cones very tightly with the car going exactly where it was pointed.

The final, permanent, chicane just before the grandstands, was another one where the obvious line for the first bend would leave you completely out of position for the second half of the sequence. It took me a few laps to crack this one, but I got there.

Each instructor was assigned two drivers, and we would each go out for about a quarter of an hour or so, then come in for a rest while the other one went out. This gave both cars and drivers a chance to cool down, and an opportunity to reflect on what we had just learned. My car seemed to take it all in its stride, perhaps I wasn't driving it hard enough! But I found the breaks useful, as driving the circuit required a very high level of concentration, so spreading the sessions out over a period of nearly 3 hours suited me well. The weather was fine and sunny, and the importance of hydration was emphasised, so plenty of water, tea and coffee was available. Research has shown that driving dehydrated can slow your reactions as much as being at the drink:drive limit.

The breaks between drives also gave a chance to talk to other drivers and guests. Drivers are welcome to bring a guest, they might even sign up for an advanced driver course! The friend I took reassured me that he thoroughly enjoyed the experience from the sidelines, and was able to take a number of photographs. A professional photographer, Kelly Dowling, was also there to capture the moment, in fact many moments!

Most vehicles seemed to take the corners well, the bigger difference was in the acceleration out of them, reflecting differing power levels and power to weight ratios. But this was not a race, rather an opportunity to improve your driving skills, and to understand better the capabilities of your vehicle. At the end of the afternoon, Gary, my instructor, assured me of the distinct improvement made, and I could tell the difference from lap one. I was much faster, and smoother, and whereas to start with he was talking me through most of the manoeuvres, by the end of the day he was almost silent, and I don't think he was asleep!

Much thanks to the IAM organisers and the IAM volunteer instructors. Volunteers do tend to be the happiest people, and there were lots of smiles on the drivers' faces too!

Graham Fry