

True Grassroots Motor Sport

by Roy Dowding

What do you do with a 1998 Nissan Micra 1.3GX that has been in the family since new and is no longer really needed? It had faithfully and reliably served for years as my daily commuter and weekend-chores runabout, passing in turn thereafter to both my daughter and son as their respective first cars until they bought 'grown-up' cars – their words, not mine! On one thing we were all agreed. It was worth very little, and if sold would almost inevitably end up as a pizza-delivery hack, or worse. That we could not bear to contemplate. Of course, back then the current £2000 scrappage scheme wasn't an option!

My birthday present from the family in 2005 had been a course at the Harewood Speed Hillclimb Driving School, which was a hoot! So much so that my son Jon eagerly followed the year after. From that, we developed an interest as spectators in Speed Hillclimbing and Sprinting and it dawned on us that the Micra was eligible for the road-going 1400cc class, but would it be capable? Attendance with it at the Harewood Advanced Driving School course the following year confirmed that the car would at least stay on the 'black stuff' and could be great fun. So its fate was settled!

The fact that it would need to be driven back and forth to the various circuits, and still having the odd domestic use such as carting 'stuff' to the local recycling centre, would limit to a degree the permitted modifications we could make to the Micra for its new role in competition. During that autumn/winter of 2006, the engine's breathing was improved by installing a K&N air induction system and, the exhaust system in need of renewal anyway, the size of the pipe was increased from 1.5" to 1.75" with a straight-through silencer. The mere 74 bhp could at least now be utilised to the full. These simple and inexpensive alterations enabled the 0-60 time to decrease by 2 seconds and the car could now easily exceed 100 mph. A Sabelt safety harness and reasonably-priced wider tyres from the MSA List 1A completed the preparations for the 2007 season.

During the winter of 2007/8, the suspension was both lowered and stiffened cheaply and simply by fitting Spax coil springs in place of the standard Nissan items. By reducing roll, this shaved off another second or two from our previous times but mostly prevents the car wearing out its door handles quicker than the tyres!

Sometimes Last but not Least!

With our first two years of competitive motor sport now behind us, how have we fared? Well, as the subtitle suggests, we haven't won anything yet, pipped in our class by other entrants with specialised cars affording considerably more power on tap. We did, however, confound our fellow competitors, the Driving School tutors and seasoned marshals, who reckoned the Micra would never crack 80 seconds for the Harewood course. From mid-season in 2007, the former shopping trolley was regularly 2 seconds or more below this 'bogey' while Jon, who is a tad quicker here than I am, has recently achieved several runs at just 76 seconds.

In the PPC (2007) and SBD (2008/9) Speed Sprint series, at courses as varied as Silverstone Stowe, Lydden Hill, Curborough, MIRA, Bentwaters and Castle Combe, the Micra has acquitted itself a little better, frequently seriously worrying, even beating, some theoretically-superior machines at the meetings. That it ended up first in its class in the PPC Championship should be cause for us to grin, but it was usually the only official entrant in its class. It looked good on the Results Table though!

Our endeavours to date have proved that you can experience all the thrills of participating in motor sport on a 'shoestring' budget, using what might seem an unlikely vehicle and, most important of all, have a thoroughly enjoyable time. The number of fans, other drivers and marshals who regularly wish us well at events is very encouraging and who knows, we may even persuade newcomers, who might have otherwise thought they didn't have an appropriate car, to take up hillclimbing and sprinting.

And there are positively no thoughts of taking advantage of that scrappage scheme – we're having too much fun!