



# Top marques for man from Farmura

There were, I suppose, three attractions in the offing as I prepared to visit Jonathan Harmer early in August. First, I had been cooped up too long and it was a day when the sky was filled with fluffy clouds and the sun shone – a day too good to stay tied to the keyboard of my faithful Apple Mac. Second, I was to drive to the village of Egerton, through a delicious part of the south described as England's Garden and into the very heart of Kent's hop country – where the most delectable beer in the world is brewed. Third, a positive magnet, I was to meet a man who shared my passion for motor sport, a fellow enthusiast who raced vintage MGs and who was just as likely to while away the time showing proper concern for such things as camshaft profiles, carburettor jet settings, and the right line to take through Becketts – with 7000 rpm protesting and a horde of MG 'T' racers snapping at one's tail lights!

Of one thing the reader may be sure, though Jonathan Harmer is a 'play-hard' sort of fellow, enjoying, as his motoring trophies reveal, his 'on the limit' racing with the MG Car Club, he is without doubt also a 'work-hard' sort as well, which is why I didn't get all my own way with the interview. Truth is Jonathan was eager to tell me of the Farmura connection,



It's life in the fast lane for Farmura's Jonathan Harmer, as DAVID WHITE reports

while I was pressing him into revealing something more dashing, perhaps some racing scoop. I'll put this down to his sporting modesty, telling myself meanwhile not to forget my journalistic *raison d'être*, which is firmly embedded in turf. That stated, I suspect that something in the air of Egerton generates motor sport mania, for in a village of less than one thousand souls there's a fellow who races Bugatti's; a classic car restoration buff; a Ford Rally Cross champion; the youngest ever Mini

Cross champion, a kid of just 16... and there's Jonathan, who is simply potty about MGs and crazy enough to race them – I tend to like that in a subject.

Born and raised in Egerton, where for over 50 years his father farmed apples and strawberries, Jonathan, 44, recalled driving his first car – an Austin Ruby that cost £8 – when he was just eight years old! He and his brother used to take a hose and saturate the grass around the orchards in order to practice hand-brake turns – he grins when remembering how relaxed his father was about such high spirited activities, grimaces on recollecting his returning home on one fateful occasion, after a lengthy absence at school, to discover that the trusty Ruby, stripped down like a 'racer' of course, had been buried in a quarry – part of a tidying up plan for the farmyard! He could, he swears, take me to within ten feet of the burial plot.

Though with Farmura for some 15 years, seven as managing director, Jonathan did not immediately follow in the family business, rather he became a 'travel bug' after finishing school, setting off (with full parental blessing, let it be known) to 'see the world' – a trip that took him to South Africa and later to Rhodesia where, but for the changes that were taking

place politically, he well might have remained, for he fell in love with the grandeur of it all, describing Rhodesia as 'near to paradise.' In the event he stayed for a year, working variously as salesman and Land Rover delivery driver, before returning to England to take a place at university and later to live in London and work at being 'something in the City', in his case broking insurance.

Meanwhile farming of all varieties was in a state of flux, and changes were being thrust upon the community. Jonathan's father saw the 'writing on the wall', perhaps a good deal earlier than most, and sold the farm's land (a very shrewd move, as it turned out), at the same time acquired the business that is Farmura Limited. History will show that Jonathan's father was one of the first to successfully farm using both organics and synthetics - integrated management as it is now known - believing that one couldn't just keep on throwing chemical fertiliser down, and proving on his own acres, often to the incredulity and disbelief of officialdom, that such natural organic products did work - and work very well indeed.

Moving on apace, Jonathan credits Jim Arthur with bringing Farmura to the greenkeeping fraternity. Jim was advising in Scotland, at Turnberry as it happened, offering his expertise and guidance in order that the course might be returned to former glories and thus gain Open Championship status on the R&A rota. He discovered the Turnberry head greenkeeper using Farmura, sold at that time mainly to farms and market gardens, finding also that it worked minor miracles on the fine links turf, helping to keep *Poa annua* at bay. Further, he found that such organics were increasingly favoured by the more progressive greenkeepers in S.W. Scotland. Contact with Jonathan's father ensured that Farmura products were trialled in greater depth for golf course use, packaged and labelled specifically for such specialised applications, and the rest, as they say, is history.

I asked Jonathan why he thought 'first division' greenkeepers were Farmura's greatest allies, why the championship course managers were so well sold on the efficacy of Farmura liquid organics.

"I think first it's because they want to have the very best," he replied, "they seek always to improve. Second, they know about soil bacteria, they ask questions and bounce knowledge off each other. Finally, they are perhaps more patient, for you can't apply Farmura just once and expect miracles - its application must form part of a properly designed and calculated management programme. I liken it to the motor racing world, if I go to a hill climb and find a driver who is several seconds quicker than me, I'm the first to ask what pressures he's running, what adjustments I should make, what I might do to make me go faster. Yet you may find two golf courses side by side, one is splendid and the other isn't - and the fellow

isn't interested in learning how to make it better, I find that extraordinary." "And is it changing?", I queried. "Yes, I think there is a wind of change, greenkeepers generally are becoming more aware, keener to learn, to educate themselves, but there are still far too many who look for nothing more than a 'quick fix' and have yet to enter the regime of 'balanced management' "

I ask a leading question: "Does Farmura come under the heading of 'mystery and magic'?" - "No, the theory of organics is perfectly logical, it has been well researched and is well documented, so there's nothing mysterious about it, but if you don't understand it, and you've been brought up on the white-hot scientific bumph about NPK, then of course it is." "Do you then dismiss the NPK regime", I



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ask, getting a quick-fire retort: "No, I don't, I think it has its place, but it's no more important than good cultural technique. An idea we've been developing recently - let's call it the triangle, with cultural maintenance, organics and synthetics - shows the greenkeeper in the middle orchestrating all three. You can't take any one of those out and say 'that's the answer', and of course one of the problems in greenkeeping is the quest for a magic technique, a miracle potion. I don't think there's a single magic product - it's 80% hard work (for the greenkeeper) and 10% product application, but if you use the right products in a properly balanced management system you will get results - no doubt about it."

For Farmura this means continuing down the road of being innovators, of being environmentally friendly, of ensuring that everything in the range hangs together with logic. The company was first to introduce liquid iron into Britain, first to import the Australian Turf Iron,

first with liquid organics; and first to put together a range of liquid super concentrates, and though at the time these innovations were thought of as commercially 'dicey', they are not only accepted but indeed thought of now as vital tools in balanced management. Currently Farmura is spreading the 'gospel', along with Milliken and other trade sponsors, with the new BIGGA training video 'Setting the Standard', a film that emphasises quality and professionalism.

The stock question now: "what makes Jonathan Harmer tick?". "Well, I knew you'd ask me, and you know about my racing MGs, but I suppose I could summarise my particular 'tick' by including the happy life I lead with my wife Lynette and daughters Charlotte and Louisa-Jane, I enjoy family life enormously, though developing innovative businesses is also good fun. You're swimming against the tide until the tide changes, but when you start these ideas off there's never a shake of the hand or an offer of congratulations - no one has ever said 'great, you've made life easier'. Sure, we're in business and that must mean making some profit, but it started off as a philosophical approach in a way, we're not hit and run merchants, and I can go back to any of our clients with a very clear conscience, we're ethical. I'll even admit there have been some, though not many, who have said 'Jonathan, this just isn't working', but mostly this has been because they haven't really understood why they are using the products - the fact is, organics take time to work. We live in an instant society: you're hungry, you eat a big Mac, you want a result *now* - remember when glyphates came out and the complaints that came because people were used to weedkillers that wiped out overnight - now it takes three weeks. Nobody likes that, we all want it now, can't or won't wait - the problem is that nobody has told Mother Nature. Organics are longer term products that must form part of good management. Those who think they can go from bare earth to beautiful greens in a few weeks are fooling themselves, but the industry has, I believe, often sold 'snake oil' products on that basis."

Determined to finish with a nifty tale about MGs, I learned that Jonathan started racing about ten years ago, though he's always been an MG fanatic and has never owned any other marque for sporting purposes. Listening to his description of that first race was hilarious: joining forces with two other 'nutters', they'd gone to Silverstone with MG TDs and ended up at the back of the grid, firmly believing the timekeeper had made a mistake! It was pouring buckets and Jonathan couldn't see much further than his bonnet, nevertheless it was foot to the floor - until car after car flew past, lapping him and his companions! First blood, as they say, to the quick guys, second to the guy who puts everything down to experience - always learning, every inch, along life's race track.