

Green light for bid to get Donington back on track

Co-operative venture sees MAN firms reach £10m



The start of the European Grand Prix at Donington Park in 1993 which saw one of the greatest opening laps in Formula One history

A West Midlands company is being charged with bringing the former Grand Prix venue Donington Park back to its former glory. **Graeme Brown** speaks to the new men in charge of the lease about what is needed to get the dilapidated venue back on track.

The new leaseholders of the world famous Donington Park circuit are confident their latest venture will be a profitable one – but it is set to be a bumpy ride.

Bromsgrove family business Adroit has taken over the iconic race track and aims to restore it to its glory days.

But a return to grace will require millions of pounds of investment after previous leaseholder Donington Ventures' bid to bring the British Grand Prix to the venue failed and left it facing uncertain

times, with a track covered in holes and communications systems in a dilapidated condition.

Adroit operations director Steve Watton said there was an enormous amount of good will for the operation, as Donington has hosted some memorable moments in the history of motorsport, not least the 1993 European Grand Prix, where Ayrton Senna won after a memorable drive in the rain.

He believes there are many opportunities to create revenue streams from the investment – but admitted bringing grand prix racing back to the circuit was not part of the plan.

He said: "The leaseholder had arranged a 17-year deal with Bernie Ecclestone to run the grand prix at Donington Park but of course the facility had to change considerably to enable that.

"It was the onset of this which ended up in the circuit being in the state it is now."

Mr Watton said the notion of winning back the grand prix contract was not in the group's business plan.

He added: "That is not the plan. For a start Silverstone has a contract for 17 years and we are sure they will do a good job and do British motorsport proud."

Donington Park, in Leicestershire, has been part of the fabric of British motor racing for 80 years but in recent times it found itself mired in operational and financial turmoil.

The euphoria of being awarded the British Grand Prix ahead of Silverstone was swiftly followed by the reality of delivering on massive intentions and promises amid the simultaneous financial downturn.

David Broome, managing director of construction and property group Adroit, said that upheaval had taken its toll on the 650-acre site, owned by Kevin Wheatcroft.

Mr Broome said: "It is a big task

and nobody is under any illusions about that. We intend to bring the site back up to world class standard. Much of it will require a total overhaul from the track itself to the medical centre, hospitality suites, phone, radio and PA systems, IT systems, CCTV and general ground work.

"There is no magic wand, but through a calm, cautious, credible and sensible approach we know we have the experience, expertise and commitment to bring the glory years back to Donington."

As well as the run-down race track, Adroit, which employs 200 workers and has a turnover of £16 million, has taken over the operational, pit and spectating facilities.

The lease also includes exhibition facilities, the Donington Grand Prix Collection, the world's largest collection of GP cars and drivers' crash helmets, and

the Norton motorbike factory. Mr Watton said the first aim of the group was to get the circuit in shape to allow a British Touring Car Championship event on September 22 to take place and achieve the all-important FIA grade two licence, which has been lost.

The first phase of work – which is set to start straight away – will cost between £1 million and £2 million, with all of the finances coming from the Adroit Group.

He said: "The first plan is to get in there and get to a position where cars can race. It lost its licence and the track has been dug up in 14 or 15 places and the communication system is wrecked.

"All of the communications systems – the PA, timing lapses and phones – everything that has to be in place has been damaged. The gravel traps have been dug up – there are a lot of problems.

"The bridge wasn't really put on properly. They did some temporary repairs, but just to repair that properly is going to cost nearly £400,000."

"They were following a process to re-reading the track for a complete rebuild and that didn't happen, which is how we ended up buying the lease. We are very happy to buy it whatever the state."

Mr Watton was a successful club racing driver for more than 20 years, but he said this was a business venture, not a labour of love.

He said: "We are looking at developing all the areas across the 650-acre site, which will generate new revenue streams."

He said: "Donington Park is one of Britain's big three alongside Silverstone and Brands Hatch. It has the most fantastic heritage stretching back as far as the 1930s and it has become one of Europe's great motorcycle racing venues.

"This is going to be a dynamic new era but we want to preserve and celebrate such rich heritage."

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Steve Watton

A group of Midland manufacturing firms which work together to win more business have seen their total income from the venture pass the £10 million mark.

MAN, which comprises 10 mechanical, electrical and electronic engineering firms, saw its joint income creep into seven figures ahead of its fifth anniversary.

The group says its co-operation has helped to create in excess of 100 jobs, most of which have been achieved against a major downturn in the industry.

The companies – Alucast, Barkley Plastics, Brandauer, FW Cables, Westley Engineering, Chemical Etchings, Excalibur Engineering, PP Electrical Systems, Note UK and Wrekin Circuits – will be among hundreds of firms taking part in the Subcon 2010 manufacturing exhibition at the NEC from June 8-10.

Group chairman David Spears, managing director of Birmingham-based Brandauer, said the milestone was evidence the group's co-operation was paying off.

He added: "There is nothing like MAN anywhere in the world and this is giving us a great competitive advantage over other domestic and international rivals.

"We have ten complementary manufacturers working together to offer our customers unparalleled access to technical services, engineering best practice and supply chain management.

"There is no competition, all our members share similar values and we all have one common aim – to make the West Midlands the centre of manufacturing excellence."

MAN was originally established as part of an Advantage West Midlands and Accelerate-backed automotive initiative, but has evolved into a self-sustainable group with a combined company turnover of £60 million and a workforce of 600 people.

Its contracts have come from a diverse range of sectors including automotive, aerospace, electronics, medical and white goods, and there is a concerted effort now to break into rail and low carbon technologies.

MAN will be introducing a new brand, promotional material and website at Subcon 2010.

Head of marketing Chris Brown, owner of Telford-based Excalibur Engineering, believes the time is right to attack the marketplace.

He said: "The evolution of the brand reflects where we have come as an organisation and epitomises our core values of being a modern, world class manufacturing group capable of taking on any job in the world.

"It will be officially unveiled at Subcon 2010 in the NEC and will govern all of our marketing activities, including the Farnborough Air Show in July."