



# *The Racing Reverend*

The cut and thrust of car racing may seem at odds with life as a rural vicar in northeast Hampshire, but for the Reverend Simon Butler it's a match made in heaven

WORDS: Jeremy Blackmore ♦ PHOTOS: RLR MSport





A go-karting enthusiast since his childhood growing up in Oakley, Simon now looks after 12 churches around Odiham and combines his ministry with trips to some of the world's most iconic racetracks, from Silverstone to Monza, the 'Temple of Speed'.

For the 2022 season Simon, 42, has undergone a baptism of fire taking on the challenge of top-flight international sportscar racing in the Le Mans Cup. In a switch from a decade racing historic classic cars, it's seen him swop mahogany and rev counters for carbon fibre and LCD screens.

It's all part of a plan that should see him on the grid for next year's 24 Hours of Le Mans, the world's oldest active endurance racing event, held annually in northwest France.

Reflecting on this unlikely journey, Simon says: 'From as young as I can remember, I've loved cars. As a child, I used to watch Formula One and loved the thrill of racing. Competing in go-karting as a young teenager cemented my love of it. It became a bug I've never been able to quite shake off.

'I've always enjoyed the mechanical and engineering side of racing cars, but also, the thrill of competition.

'There's also a sense of taking something to the edge of its performance and having to somehow hold it on that knife-edge of being in control. That's always been a really big part.'



From go-karts to international sportscar racing, Simon is hoping to take on Le Mans next year

It was a parishioner – a collector of historic cars in Simon's previous parish in Ashted in Surrey – who first asked over a drink in a pub one evening, if he would be willing to race his vehicles.

'I said a very immediate, yes! Racing historics has been brilliant because they're amazing machines to drive fast. They don't have any of the modern things to help you drive them. They're a much purer sort of car and a lot more difficult to drive than modern racing cars.

'It's been great to be a part of for the last decade. I've enjoyed every minute of it. There's so much camaraderie and laughter. I've forged long-term friendships and engaged in some wonderful wheel-to-wheel racing. Even those times when the car hasn't quite done as it should, have been enjoyable, which in all honesty was a little too often.'

The cars all came with a lot of history. Simon felt very aware that he was adding another chapter to the storybook of each vehicle. The first he drove was a 1951 C-Type Jaguar, one of only 47 in the world. Each car was very different in character but from a similar era of motorsport – the days when racing was chivalrous, and the risk was high.

The high-calibre historic racing scene is headlined by huge events such as the Goodwood Revival

and Silverstone Classic, each attracting more than 100,000 spectators. However, it was world-famous 24 Hours of Le Mans that finally tempted Simon away from racing vintage cars, a race that remained firmly on his bucket list and dubbed 'the greatest motorsport event in the world'.

So, this year he has joined former Championship-winning team RLR MSport in the Le Mans Cup as part of a two-year project to get up to speed in contemporary prototype cars before competing in the 24 Hours of Le Mans in 2023 or 2024.

'It's quite unlike any other race. It's a unique challenge. For most drivers, it's on their list of races they would really like to do. The nice thing with Le Mans is that as an amateur driver, you can do it. Quite a large chunk of the grid are amateur drivers. So, it's an accessible way to race with the very best sports car drivers in the world.'

His journey towards that iconic event began at the Autodromo Nazionale Monza in early July where he competed in a Ligier in his maiden Michelin Le Mans Cup race.

It was a step-up in every sense. Professional teams run highly sophisticated, jaw-droppingly fast cars for elite drivers, each paired with an experienced amateur. Powered by five litre V8 Nissan ▶

**ABOVE AND RIGHT:** Simon is working with RLR MSport to realise his dream of racing at Le Mans







*‘There are two parts of me. Some people see them as an unusual combination’*

**ABOVE:** Simon has gone from racing vintage cars to those that can reach speeds of 300kmph

racing engines, they can reach 300kmph in a straight line. Wide slick tyres and lots of downforce mean they can pull 2G in the corners.

Says Simon: ‘In one sense, modern racing cars are a lot easier to drive than old racing cars, because they’re purpose-designed, and they have lots of grip. They have gearboxes that are very easy to operate and are very reliable. They don’t need nursing in the same way that an old car does. So, on one level, they’re much more straightforward. The challenge is that the speeds are so much higher. You have to learn to trust the car. So, there’s a little bit of a mindset shift.

‘The level of competitiveness is extraordinarily high. Half the grid are professionals, either well-established or up-and-coming young professionals and the amateur drivers are all very experienced, and very quick.’

Simon next competes at Belgium’s Circuit de Spa-Francorchamps in mid-September with a further outing

in Portugal in mid-October; then the team will begin the new year competing in the 24 Hours of Daytona event in Florida.

In his 17th year as a vicar Simon counts himself fortunate to be able to continue his two careers alongside each other.

‘I’ve been quite blessed in being able to enjoy motorsport as a serious hobby, but ultimately as a hobby. It’s always dovetailed alongside my church work and there’s not too much in the way of clashes.

‘There are two parts of me. Some people see them as an unusual combination. I suppose they are, but both those things are an expression of who I am, and for me fit quite comfortably alongside each other.

‘The majority of my parishioners are quite happy that I have other interests. The challenge of being a vicar is that often you can become quite two-dimensional because it’s such an absorbing role and your world can narrow into nothing beyond the parish boundary. So, maybe this helps to keep my perspective

a bit broader. I think most really enjoy that.’

In between his work in the parish and time with the family at their home in Upton Grey, Simon’s diary is full with regular gym sessions and time on a simulator, re-learning circuits he hasn’t visited in years and getting comfortable with the feel of a modern prototype racing car. He is grateful to the team at RLR M Sport and the backing of Basingstoke-based companies Asset Advantage and SonicWall who are all supporting him on the journey to Le Mans.

Also cheering him on are wife Hannah and their three daughters. ‘My oldest two daughters don’t have any particular interest in racing cars at all, although they like to come and watch.

‘My youngest daughter absolutely loves racing cars. We took them all to Le Mans this year and we just couldn’t prise my youngest daughter away from the track. She just wanted to spend all her time in the garage with the cars and loved it.’ 🐷