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## Chequered Flag Stratos



### Graham Warner

Graham Warner was founder and Managing Director of 'The Chequered Flag' Garage in London, and had been involved in Motor Sport for many years. No mean driver in his own right, he turned to management in the 1960's fielding cars for the likes of Ickx, Gethin, Hill, Clark and Stewart. His ambition had always been Formula One, but when he arrived on the scene he found it not to his taste – Formula One was becoming a closed shop, and there was no longer room for privateers. Disillusioned, he began to take an interest in the 'Loose surface' racing, more so as he was thrilled with exploits of Waldegaard's Porsche; then the sight of the Marlboro Stratos in 1975 finally decided him. In that year's RAC Rally Waldegaard suffered problems with a broken driveshaft which cost him substantial time. He then drove his Stratos at the limit, winning stage after stage in the loose and blind, thrilling the crowds and providing a fantastic spectacle. Though he was eventually disqualified for various infringements, Waldegaard's flamboyant drive in his somewhat truncated Stratos hogged the headlines. Warner was bitten. 'The Flag' were going rallying; and they were going to do it with a Stratos.

The decision was made easier by the fact that Warner knew racing inside out. In the 1960's he had driven Lotuses, Alfas, and Elvas with some success, and his garage had modified many production Lotuses for racing. Among these was the famous 'LOV 1' which was driven by Mike Spence and Jackie Stewart. The Stratos seemed like something from another planet and was already romping away with races; furthermore, the car was an excellent promotional vehicle for his newly-acquired Lancia franchise.

### The Chequered Flag Stratos Cars

But there were problems. There were no other such cars running in the UK, and it was evident that even works versions were clearly a handful to run, never mind drive. Unless they were set up correctly the cars could be troublesome; and the only people with the know-how to set them up correctly were the factory. The general consensus was that the project was unworkable. What's more Lancia didn't appear overly interested, and after six weeks of protracted negotiating wouldn't even give him a loan car to see out that season. Attitudes like this merely served to goad the indomitable Warner, who simply went out and purchased Pinto's crashed team car, chassis number 1513, registered TO L52902 straight after the 1975 Monte Carlo Rally. But it didn't last long and Warner was back at Lancia's door – only to be again rebuffed. At this point he began to scour the world for ex-rally cars which could be rebuilt, and finally he found one. Originally registered TO L80932 (Chassis 1637) it was the ex-works car that had been used to reconnoitre the 1975 and '76 Safari Rallies, and had actually participated in the '75 event in the hands of Vic Preston Junior. Lancia assured Warner it was OK, but when The Flag went to collect the car, they found it literally worn out. Warner had been sold a dog, and he wasn't exactly thrilled. It was perhaps at this early stage that relations between the Flag and Lancia began to cool. Sitting in the back yard of an Indian's farm it looked a sorry state.

But not to worry. Warner's staff set to work, beginning with a new bulkhead, then slowly replacing everything that needed renewing. Spares were something of a problem. When they could be sourced, they were horrendously expensive; a rear strut for example costing £500. With Lancia pursuing their 'not really interested' policy, Warner's men struggled. The difficulties revolved round Lancia's ambivalent attitude to privateers. They felt that a privately run car would be trouble and would reflect badly on the firm. At one point they allegedly tried to get Lancia Alperton involved, and intimated that they would be held responsible for any bad PR. A lot of this appeared to stem from Cesare Fiorio himself; but this line of thought seemed to be of no consequence when it came to supporting cars for friends, or someone in a position to do Lancia a favour. Bernard Darniche seemed to have no problem with support for his Chardonnet sponsored Stratos, in fact over his career he won 33 rallies in a Stratos; more than any factory driver. This 'one rule for you; one rule for me' was highly frustrating, especially as Lancia seemed to be liberally helping privateer drivers in Germany, France and Poland. There were tales of the Lancia Rally Team phones being engaged for up to eight hours a day; failing that they simply weren't there at all – when Lancia went rallying the whole department packed their bags and followed the team bus. Nevertheless the Chequered Flag persisted and after an investment rumoured to be in excess of £30,000 the car was ready, and was entered in the Mintex Rally of the Dales.

### What Happened

It's in the nature of Motor Sport to throw up surprises; but few would have predicted the outcome of the 1976 Mintex. Ford Escorts filled the first eight places in the seeding, and most observers saw the Rally as a straight fight between the Escorts themselves. The protagonist most likely to win was Roger Clark in his Cossack sponsored car. It was merely a case of which Escorts came second, third, fourth and fifth. But it didn't work out that way. Surprises? They were never ending.

Steve Smith set the scene on the very first stage by driving his Escort into the sea at Scarborough. Next Clark himself rolled out of the rally in an unprecedented fashion, then Jimmy McRae jumped into the woods; probably in surprise at seeing Britain's top rally crew spectating rather than competing. When another Escort dropped out, everyone stood up. This was extraordinary drama, and it looked like something special was going to happen.

It did. Throughout all this no-one had noticed a London garage owner and amateur driver called Andy Dawson, who in the Chequered Flag Stratos was calmly, almost casually thrashing the pants off everybody, setting fastest time on every stage except one. It was the team's first victory; the only non-works win (apart from Cahal Curley, another Chequered Flag driver) on a National since 1971. After eleven months of graft, breakdowns and accidents the Chequered Flag had savoured the taste of success and were hungry for more. The effects of this win resounded through the motoring world; it put The Chequered Flag on the map, and forced Ford to sit up and think. It wasn't so much the fact that the car had won, what worried them was the manner in which it won; and it wasn't even a 'proper' works car, just a rebuilt discard which was already worn out when Warner had found it. The Chequered Flag milked it for all it was worth, and despite their difficulties were determined to give Ford more of the same.



However, success proved elusive. The car was unreliable, and without works interest would remain so. Warner couldn't always get the parts he needed and had to scour the world to find them. Often they were unavailable, and this meant the team had to refurbish or repair components that they would much rather have replaced. It virtually ensured that the car would be less reliable than its rivals, yet the team had high hopes. But success didn't come in Aberdeen where Dawson made an unplanned excursion; nor did it come at the Cheltenham Festival Rally where Pond seemed to be in control of things, then put it fifteen feet up a tree. The severity of the accident shocked onlookers, and it was a testament to the car's strength that no-one was seriously hurt. Shell Oil used the shattered monocoque as the basis of an advert. The accident seemed to bar the car from being entered in the Circuit of Eire, but Graham Warner's team rebuilt it in three weeks (the final touches were applied in their Dublin hotel car park) and it was ready for Per Inge Walfridsson to take a well-earned fourth place.

This result gave the team heart, and they entered the Welsh Rally believing they could make a mark. They did, but not in the manner they were expecting. Walfridsson was going well, but (as has since been ascertained) a spectator took a 'souvenir' in the form of a marker. Thus at the Brechfa stage, for the second year running, Walfridsson found himself heading for an accident. Frantically trying to scrub off speed from well over 100mph, he clipped the bank and the luckless car went into the air. As it touched down for the first time, a filler cap flipped up, and fuel from the recently filled tanks vortexed into the engine, creating a huge ball of flame. It came to rest upside down, a burning inferno. Spectators rushed to help, and Clark sportingly gave up precious time to ensure that the occupants were safe. As it was, both driver and co-driver had been pulled clear, but Graham Warner had just said 'goodbye' to his Stratos; well over £30,000 of his cash had also gone up in smoke.

End of story? Anyone else would have given up in horror, but Warner saw it simply as another inconvenience. Shrugging his shoulders and thankful no-one was hurt, he simply had the car rebuilt from top to bottom, with his quietly spoken head mechanic, New Zealander Don Fenwick overseeing the work. By now the project owed Warner some £120,000 – serious money if one multiplies up to today's level, and an astonishing investment from a privateer. Lancia were still being unhelpful, but by the end of the year, the Chequered Flag was ready to race again. In the 1977 Ulster Rally, driven by Billy Coleman the car (now registered OYU 363 R) finished 7<sup>th</sup> overall, despite alternator problems, and jamming in third gear. From now on the Chequered Flag story is one of frustration. The car often failed or dropped out of rallies due to mechanical problems; even when the cars finished it was often after huge difficulties and the bravery of the drivers. This state of affairs continued for two seasons, until in the end Warner called it a day. Oddly, the car was often lent out to Motoring Magazines, and Warner seemed unperturbed at the thought of his investment being handed over to a pair of scribes; it certainly wouldn't happen today, but as ever Warner simply shrugged his broad shoulders and left them to it.

In November 1978, as the works cars were being retired (new regulations had made them less competitive) Andy Dawson drove it to a last victory at the Rallysprint at Donington. Its hard to follow the careers of the Chequered Flag cars, as they often changed liveries (sometimes from race to race), occasionally changed numberplates, and at least once never turned up having been entered then scratched due to mechanical problems. Perhaps someone in the LMC can furnish us with a list of the races the cars entered and the results. However (and we apologise for any errors and omissions) the main rallies appear to be as follows:

### Rally Results

Year	Event	Driver	Result
1975	Circuit of Ireland	Cahal Curhley	Retired
	Ypres	Cahal Curhley	Retired
	Castrol Aberystwyth	Tony Pond	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	Scottish	Per-Ing Walfridsson	Retired
	RAC	Per-Ing Walfridsson	Retired
1976	Tour of Dean	Andy Dawson	24 <sup>th</sup>
	Mintex Rally	Andy Dawson	1 <sup>st</sup>
	Granite City	Andy Dawson	Crashed
	Cheltenham Festival	Tony Pond	Crashed
	Tour of Epynt	Tom Pryce	Crashed
	Circuit of Ireland	Per-Ing Walfridsson	4 <sup>th</sup>
	Welsh Rally Walfridsson	Per-Ing Walfridsson	Crashed
1977	Shellsport Dean	Billy Coleman	8 <sup>th</sup>
	Firestone Rally	Billy Coleman	3 <sup>rd</sup>
	Welsh rally	Billy Coleman	Crashed
	Circuit of Ireland	Billy Coleman	2 <sup>nd</sup>
	Ypres	Billy Coleman	4 <sup>th</sup>
	Ulster Rally	Billy Coleman	7 <sup>th</sup>
	Galway International	Billy Coleman	4 <sup>th</sup>
	Donegal Rally	Billy Coleman	1 <sup>st</sup>
	Cyprus Rally	Billy Coleman	Retired
1978	Four Regions Rally	Billy Coleman	Retired
	Texaco Rallysprint	Andy Dawson	1 <sup>st</sup>
1980	Manx	Andy Dawson	4 <sup>th</sup>
1981	Cork	Russell Brookes	4 <sup>th</sup>

### In Summary

A lot of people describe The Chequered Flag Stratos cars as a glorious failure, and in one sense they may be right. Despite promising much, they never delivered consistently; but this wasn't the fault of Graham Warner or his team. Rather it was due to non-co-operation from Lancia, who showed little interest in what was happening in the UK. Even the 'Farewell to the Stratos' event at Donington in December 1978 which marked the car's retirement from competition was (despite their promising to send two cars and drivers) ignored by the Italians. In fact the whole of Lancia's policy at this time was in turmoil. Late in 1976 Waldegaard (having disobeyed team orders at San Remo and overtaken Munari) had left them in a huff to join Ford, and though Lancia won the Championship the team was riven by jealousies and political machinations, eventually

being forcibly merged with the Fiat team. Consumed by their own internal machinations, it was small wonder that they had scant regard for what was happening in England.

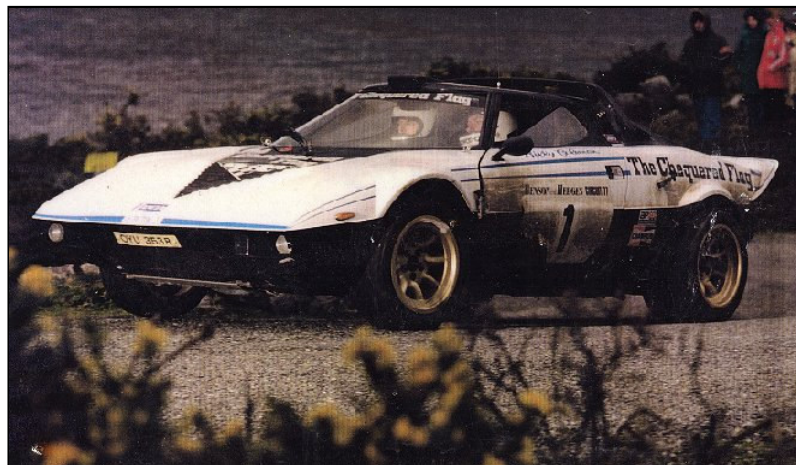
The difference between the Chequered Flag car, and a works prepared car were highlighted by Andy Dawson at the aforementioned 'Farewell' rally. Despite Lancia ignoring the event, several 'works' cars were present. Invited to have a go, Dawson (used to having things rattle, fall off and show general signs of wear and tear) was taken aback to find a tight, powerful car which was considerably better, faster and had more traction than his previous rides. The inference was clear.

But to call the project a failure is perhaps missing the point. After a fashion, it was money well spent. The cars bought the Chequered Flag acres of publicity, and it was all of the right kind. Journalists and spectators were delighted to see a Stratos racing in England and everyone loves a gutsy underdog, which without factory support, is how most classified The Flag. The cars took The Flag into a different league, and helped to forge the Garage's reputation for selling, and dealing in Europe's finest sports cars. All the agencies held by the group benefited. Warner was regarded as a hero, but in a way he didn't really care. For him the important thing was that he had tasted success, and had an awful of fun while he was about it. It was a short lived, brilliant, colourful and brave incursion by Graham Warner and his team, and it left a lot of people with some very vivid memories, but the question will always remain: 'What could they have achieved with factory backing?'

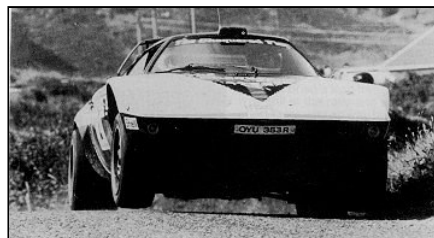
Graham Warner's Chequered Flag went on to have a successful Lancia franchise, they also dealt at various times with Triumph, Scimitar, Jaguar, Ferrari, Maserati, and Lotus. In addition, the Garage maintained a reputation for selling used classics, all in superb condition; sometimes these were rarities like racing Jaguars and Ferraris. All in all the garage is fondly remembered by many. Although Graham has long retired, the garage is still running today, one of London's landmarks as you leave the M4 and join the North Circular at Chiswick. It is however no longer the Chequered Flag. The garage that bought so much colour to the mid-1970's rally scene is now an MG-Rover dealership.

### Billy Coleman

A farmer from Millstreet (Cork) Coleman made his mark in 1969 driving a home-built 'Escortina' in that year's Circuit of Ireland. The car was on the verge of being thrown out by scrutineers who felt it was dangerous, but Billy drove it with great verve; in fact it lasted him another three seasons, during which he threw down a challenge to the likes of Roger Clark. Always good for a quip, he was a man's man, often seen in clubs and pubs; but he could drive, and he proved it in Porsche's, Renault Alpines, Cortinas, Escorts and whatever came his way. The press loved him, and dubbed him 'Billy the Kid' the Irish loved him even more when he wrested the RAC title out of England and became Rally Champion in 1974. Graham Warner knew and liked Coleman, and was impressed by his mechanical sensitivity. Moreover, Coleman came highly recommended by another Irish hero Cahal Curley, who had already driven for Warner several times.



In sharp contrast to other drivers who had wrecked, banged, rolled and burnt their way through the Rally series, Coleman had a reputation for bringing his cars home in one piece. Warner felt that he might understand the temperamental Stratos, and it was with this in mind that he invited him to drive for the Chequered Flag. Legend has it that Coleman took an age to answer the phone when Warner called: he was in the fields threshing wheat on his 180-acre smallholding. In testing Coleman liked the car and felt that it had huge potential, but it was evident to him that it needed some sorting. Despite this he finished a creditable 7th in the Ulster Rally (a race that many felt was more punishing than the RAC), and then in 1977 won the Donegal Rally in front of his adoring fans. Billy's career took off after this, and he drove for a number of teams most notably Ford and Opel. He distinguished himself in many rallies (often beating the Finns in the notorious 'Rally of the Lakes') and finished third one year in the European Rally Championship.



Latterly Billy has become more reclusive, mainly because he craved peace and quiet; complaining of fans calling him in the middle of the night, but he is still regarded as a hero and remains in great demand. At times he occasionally drives competitively, albeit mainly for his own pleasure. His brother (once part of his pit crew) now runs a Fiat Agency in County Cork.

Irish Stratos fanatic Kevin McDaid has produced a superbly detailed 'Flag' Stratos model ([www.rally-models.com](http://www.rally-models.com)) in the correct livery for the 1976-77 season. Each has been signed and authenticated by Billy Coleman.

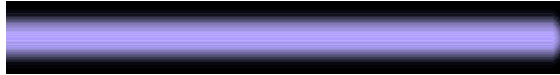
In 2003, RPM Motorsport produced a video dedicated to the rally career of Billy Coleman. This video, entitled Tarmac Titan Billy Coleman, includes footage of the Chequered Flag Stratos never seen before, and is an excellent insight to the life and

times of Billy Coleman and irish rallying. (www.rpmmotorsport.com)



(Compiled by Jack Roman - Lancia Motor Club)

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