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# Tarmac cowboys : an ethnographic study of the cultural world of boy racers

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# **The Tarmac Cowboys: an Ethnographic Study of the Cultural World of Boy Racers**

**by**

**Zannagh Hatton**

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth  
in partial fulfilment for the degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

School of Law and Social Science,  
Faculty of Social Science and Business

May 2007

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# **The Tarmac Cowboys: An Ethnographic Study of the Cultural World of Boy Racers**

**By**

**Zannagh Hatton**

## **Abstract**

Through my varying degrees of engagement with the street car culture which existed around the area where I lived in Cornwall, I had become aware of the extent to which cars played an important role and represented the norm of daily discourse, entered into by others, and particularly young men. Yet as one of the dominant forms of mobility, the car appears to have been a neglected topic within sociology, cultural studies and related disciplines. Furthermore, I was unable to find a great deal of academic literature on the combined subjects of young men and motorcars, and in particular how consumption of the car and car related activities are used by some young men to express self-definition. This ethnographic study which has examined the cultural world of boy racers aged between 17 and 24 years is the result of my enquiry.

My research will provide a detailed picture of how young working class men have used ownership of their cars to define who they are, and the sort of life they lead, something that other strains of social enquiry have largely ignored. It will also examine how boy racers have utilised consumption of the car and car-related practices as social capital within their own lived experiences and have used car ownership not only for mobility, but rather as a medium through which they have been able to acquire through performance with their cars, status, self-realisation, and an 'appropriate' masculine identity, something which they perceived has been denied them through other means.

# LIST OF CONTENTS

<b>Contents:</b>	<b>Page Number</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Author's Declaration</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>15</b>
Motoring Miscreants	<b>15</b>
<b>Chapter 2: The Literature Review</b>	<b>30</b>
Introduction	<b>30</b>
The Significance of Age	<b>34</b>
Habitation of the Car as 'Private Space'	<b>37</b>
The Car as a Building Block of Self-definition	<b>41</b>
Notions of Working Class Masculinity	<b>44</b>
Creating a Masculine Image through Consumption of the Car and Car-related Practices	<b>49</b>
Cultural Capital	<b>53</b>
Boy Racers: Another Youth Subculture?	<b>55</b>
Speed and Risk-taking	<b>60</b>
Summary	<b>62</b>
<b>Chapter 3: The Research Methodology</b>	<b>66</b>
Choosing Ethnography	<b>66</b>
Identifying Appropriate Research Participants	<b>75</b>
Entering the Field	<b>79</b>
Increasing the Number of Research Participants	<b>83</b>
Participant Observation	<b>87</b>
"Insiders" and "Outsiders"	<b>96</b>
Ethical Considerations	<b>99</b>
The Importance of Reflexivity	<b>106</b>
Summary	<b>108</b>
<b>Chapter 4: Life in Cornwall</b>	<b>110</b>
Introduction	<b>110</b>
Employment and Unemployment in Cornwall	<b>113</b>
Mobility Within Cornwall	<b>122</b>
The Population Distribution in Cornwall	<b>125</b>
Work as a Central Source of Identity for the Men in my Study	<b>127</b>
Education and Training as Sites of Struggle	<b>136</b>
Summary	<b>142</b>

<b>Chapter</b>	<b>Page Number</b>
<b>Chapter 5: Constructing and Maintaining the Image of a Boy Racer</b>	<b>146</b>
Introduction	148
Initiation into Adult and Masculine Behaviours of Working Class Culture	149
Who are you, what are you, and what can I sell you?	155
Local Networks and Group Identity	168
Summary	178
<b>Chapter 6: Performance</b>	<b>182</b>
Having the Means for Moddin	181
A Ceaseless Challenge	194
The Meets	203
Where You Live Reflects How You Live	207
Summary	214
<b>Chapter 7: Masculinity, Risk and Relationships</b>	<b>217</b>
Growing Old is Mandatory, Growing Up is Optional	217
Exploring Relationships	227
The Perceived Role of a Girlfriend	232
Managing Tension Within the Groups	236
A Socially Constructed 'Family'	240
Summary	248
<b>Chapter 8: Conclusions</b>	<b>253</b>
Introduction	253
More than a Mode of Transport	257
Performative Exhibitionism and Risk	261
Establishing Male Identities and Ties of Friendship in a Changing Climate	263
Postscript	271
<b>Appendices:</b>	<b>272</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>284</b>

## **List of Tables**

<b>Table</b>	<b>Page Number</b>
--------------	--------------------

### **Table 1:**

Unemployment Rates Data from the Office of National Statistics (NOMIS)	<b>118</b>
---	------------

### **Table 2:**

Findings from the Basic Skills Agency (2000)	<b>141</b>
--	------------

### **Table 3:**

Driver Behaviour Believed to Contribute to Road Traffic Accidents (Cornwall County Council Road Traffic Accident Statistics Report, 2004)	<b>225</b>
---	------------

## List of Illustrations

Illustrations	Page Number
Figure 1: Headlines from the Western Morning News, March 2006	16
Figure 2: Road Safety campaign, 'For My Girlfriend'	26
Figure 3: Early Poster advertising Michelin Tyres	43
Figure 4: A standard saloon car modified to appear more aggressive	52
Figure 5: Redefining public space and demonstrating a 'burnout'	68
Figure 6: Hundreds of boy racers and cruisers converge at an evening meet	76
Figure 7: Police presence at a meet	77
Figure 8: Saturday morning 'hanging out' at the garage	83
Figure 9: Map of Cornwall	86
Figure 10: Awaiting action in a multi-story car park	90
Figure 11: Late night cruise along Torquay sea front	92
Figure 12: The inevitable result of some risky driving practices	104
Figure 13: Map of Cornwall showing the District Council areas	111
Figure 14: Newlyn, showing the harbour	113
Figure 15: South Crofty Mine depicted after its closure in 1998	115
Figure 16: How it used to be. Richard O'Brian and Steve Powers at work at South Crofty Mine	120
Figure 17: Map of Cornwall showing strategic transport networks in 2004	124
Figure 18: Bikers protest at Wheal Maid Valley	151
Figure 19: Home grown motocross champions	151
Figure 20: Southwestcruisin, the boy racers and cruisers website	156
Figure 21: Imagination	157
Figure 22: Auto-suppliers advertising on a cruisers website	158
Figure 23: Celtic Cruisers car window stickers	158
Figure 24: A popular example of body graphics	159
Figure 25: Demonstrating a 'wheelie'	162
Figure 26: Creating the spectacular at Saltash during a night time meet	163
Figure 27: Redline magazine feature	164
Figure 28: A reader's view of Max Power magazine	165
Figure 29: Models at the 2005 Max Power show, Birmingham NEC	166
Figure 30: A 'muscle' car	168
Figure 31: Punishment	175
Figure 32: An example of 'Bling'	184
Figure 33: Dan perfecting 'drift' on a roundabout	185
Figure 34: Showing the latest gadgetry	188
Figure 35: Work in progress	190
Figure 36: Audience participation	191
Figure 37: Demonstrating 'doughnuts'	192
Figure 38: Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, October 2004	195
Figure 39: Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, January 2004	197
Figure 40: Letter from the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary	199
Figure 41: Copy of Police Warning Notice	201
Figure 42: Late night cruise arriving in Bristol	202
Figure 43: Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, June 2004	204
Figure 44: Late night meet in a multi-story car park	206

<b>Figure 45:</b> Tyre marks showing the results of manoeuvres in the multi-story car park	<b>207</b>
<b>Figure 46:</b> Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, October 2004	<b>209</b>
<b>Figure 47:</b> Story from BBC News, 15 March 2005	<b>211</b>
<b>Figure 48:</b> Car crash headlines in the West Briton Newspaper, 2 <sup>nd</sup> November, 2005	<b>222</b>

## Acknowledgements



“We are here; that last drive before sunrise and the glistening highway, kissed by the first shower of rain. We are that breeze that blows through open windows carrying the smell of rain on warm tarmac. We are the thrill, the speed of three hundred and eighty break horsepower up Treleigh highway whilst other people sleep. We are that freedom and we are not far away and we *will* see you again..... but not yet”.

This work is primarily dedicated to the memories of; Steven Roberts, David Hunter and Richard (Ritchie) Penrose (the FUBAR Posse), Tudor Evans (“T”), Duncan Willis, Bobby Marshall, Ben Waters, Peter Mayho, Peter Duckworth, Shaun James and Shaun Richards. However, I am deeply indebted to *all* the young men who gave so much of themselves and their time to the research; many of them sometimes unwittingly, especially Dominic, Shaun, Ben, Jez, Shane, Gordon, Ian, Nixon, Marvin, Joseph and Dan. I am particularly grateful to Professor Malcolm Williams who encouraged me to enter the field of research for without him I doubt that I would be here today. Gratitude is also extended to my long suffering children who have had to regard the back of my head inclined towards a computer for what my daughter Zelga argues has been a lifetime. Thanks must go to Dr Kevin Meethan who I have tried not to bother too often on the road to completion, but whose patience I am sure I have tested on occasions to the limit and to Dr Steven Miles who provided the initial spark.

## **Author's Declaration**

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award without prior agreement of the Graduate Committee.

A programme of advanced study was undertaken which included a postgraduate MSc in Social Research and supervised research appointments relating to the content of this degree.

Relevant conferences were regularly attended at which work was often presented; appropriate institutions were visited for consultation purposes and papers have been successfully prepared for publication.

### **Publications:**

Hatton Z. and Williams M. (2001) *Measuring Hard and Soft Options and Distance Travelled: A review of the lifespan of a trailblazer Sure Start project: Final Report for the National Sure Start Foundation, Prime Ministers Office*

Hatton Z. (2005) 'The Tarmac Cowboys' in *Gatsobyter: The Culture of the Street Car*, Plan9 and Arts Council England Publication

Hatton Z. and Davies C. (2005) *Examining the Need for Speed: The Independent*, 22 May, 2005

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21<sup>st</sup> May- 4<sup>th</sup> June 2005 *Gatsobyter and the Culture of the Street Car*, the Broadmead Centre, Bristol

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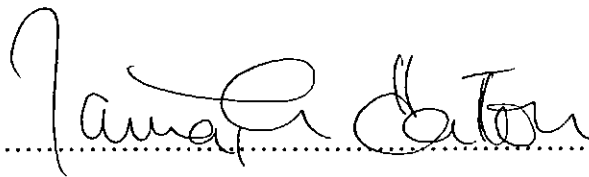
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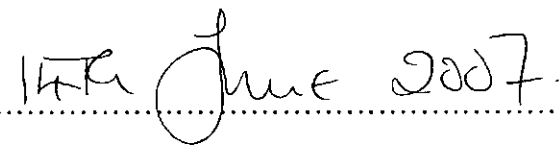
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Signed.....

Date.....

## Glossary of Terms

### A

**Alloys** (or 'Alleys' being the usual pronunciation) – This refers to alloy wheels which are fitted to improve the car's appearance. Most boy racers spend an incredible amount of money on alloy wheels (also known as **Rims**) which can cost in excess of £1,000 a set. Purchasers have to ensure that of the many designs available, they avoid the three spoke design which is regarded as untrendy. It is fashionable to show as much of the brake disc as possible. Here the young men pursue the trend of adding coloured brake callipers.

**Amplifier(s)** – Boy racers opt for extra amplification for their in-car music systems. These can be rated as high as 1200 watts.

### B

**Bad Boy Bonnets** – Boy racers spend time and effort modifying their car's bonnets. To achieve the Bad Boy image they cut the front of their bonnets in such a way that the bonnet is slanted over the headlights which in turn give the car the appearance of a frown.

**Barry Boy** – Used as a derogatory term to describe someone who has badly modified his car.

**Beamer** – Boy racer slang description of a BMW car.

**Big Bore** – Term to describe a large exhaust; can also be used to describe the dimensions of such, as in Big Bore 8 (as in 8 inches in diameter).

**Blow-** Slang for smoking Cannabis, see also **Green**.

**Bollocks** – Common slang for something which is bad and not to be confused with the Dog's Bollocks which indicates that something is admirable.

**Body Kit** – These include front and rear bumpers, side skirts and spoilers. The latter are usually attached to the rear of a car and are often oversized in the belief that 'the bigger the better'. The items are usually made of fibreglass and plastic.

**Boom-boom Box** – See also **Sub Woofer**. These are speakers which are designed to play the bass range of sounds from an in-car music system.

**Bonnet Vents** – Originally designed to increase the air flow to the engines on rally cars boy racers now add these into their car bonnets to make the car look good.

**Burnouts** – Produced when the car driver performs a wheel-spin whilst the handbrake is engaged, this results in additional strain on the engine and a lot of smoke from the tyres. The engines can often blow up or the drivers crash into something. It appears to be regarded as a spectator sport at cruises or 'meets'.

## C

**Cavvie** – Boy racer slang for Vauxhall Cavalier.

**Copper(s)** – Slang for police personnel (usually referring to uniformed police).

**Cossie** – Boy racer slang for Ford Cosworth.

**Clear lenses** – The replacement of the coloured lenses positioned on the rear of cars with clear lenses.

**Cruiser** – Young men (and some young women), who attend cruises to show off their modified cars.

## D

**Debadging** – Many boy racers remove all tell-tale indicators of their car's origins in order to achieve smooth uncluttered lines or so they can replace them with the type of badges or insignia they prefer.

**De-locking** – As above, boy racers prefer their cars to attain a smooth appearance so remove all locks from their cars and opt for the 'key-less' entry. Many of them also advocate that this is a security measure, as there are no locks then for potential thieves to lever in order to break into the car and steal its contents.

**Doughnuts** – The driver continues to drive around in tight circles in an effort to make the car behave unpredictably. The manoeuvre is so named because one set of wheels spin around the other set of wheels when carried out properly. This leaves a circular tyre mark on the road surface. The activity has to be carried out in reverse by front wheel drive cars and rear wheel drive cars do it facing forwards for best effect.

**Dump Valves** – This is a device many boy racers fit to their cars in order to achieve a whooshing sound when they change gear. Many of these noise-producing devices are proper dump valves for cars with turbos attached and are designed to reduce pressure on the engine.

## E

**Evo** – Slang used to describe a Mitsubishi Evolution.

## F

**Fester** – Slang used to describe a Ford Fiesta.

**Filth** – Slang term used occasionally to describe members of the constabulary.

**Flamer Kits** – These can be fitted to exhausts and ignites excess fuel escaping from the exhaust which in turn exhibits flames.

## **G**

**Gatso** – Refers to the speed cameras in the UK.

**Green**- Slang for smoking Cannabis; see also **Blow**.

## **H**

**Handbrake Turn** – This is produced when a driver engages the handbrake of his vehicle and turns the steering wheel in the direction of the turn, resulting in a fast turn. The manoeuvre has a degree of technical complexity.

## **I**

**Ice** – In-car-entertainment. This is a global term for the technology many boy racers install in their cars. It can include in-car music systems with graphic equalisers, DVD players and in some cases small televisions. It can also include speed camera radar detectors.

## **L**

**Lowerin** – Abbreviated term for lowering the car. This is when the boy racers take out the existing springs and replace them with shorter ones resulting in the car being lower to the ground. This is usually combined with the addition of wide and flared body kits which creates a low, squat menacing appearance. Often a major flaw is that the car is lowered inches from the ground and thus its progress is often impeded where there are significant flaws in the road surfaces or there are speed bumps in the road.

## **M**

**Meets** – These are the gatherings of boy racers and those who subscribe to the street car culture. They occur during evenings and weekends when the young men 'park up' with their cars and engage in conversation, admire one another's cars, dispense advice and share experiences. The 'meets' occur in public car parks, industrial estates, fast food chains like McDonald's and KFC and in some out of town foodstore car parks before the security barriers (if such exist) are put in place.

**Moddin** – Abbreviation of modification. These are the changes boy racers and those who subscribe to the street car genre make to their cars. They do so for a number of reasons including, to signify difference from (and similarity to) others, to improve the vehicle's appearance, sound, performance and road handling. Many also carry out modifications because they perceive that such embellishments can turn the car into a one-off, an original.

## N

**Naff** – Slang for something which is considered to be tacky and in bad taste. It is also used as a dismissive term i.e. Naff Off.

**Neons** – Some boy racers fit coloured neon lights under the sills of their cars giving them a surreal appearance at night. These are often one of the significant features which appear on cars which star in many of the boy racer cult car films like *The Fast and the Furious*, *2Fast2Furious*, and *Gone in 60 Seconds*.

## O

**Onion** – Slang used to describe a modified Ford Orion.

## P

**Posse** – Word used to describe a particular cohort of boy racers for example the Staples Posse (those who gather in the car park adjoining the office supplier Staples) or the Mackie D's Posse (those who gather in the car parks of McDonald's food outlets).

**Pug** – Slang used to describe Peugeot cars.

**Pukka** – Slang for something which is regarded as good, of original design or of quality.

## R

**Rice** – Slang for modified cars of East Asian origin, usually Japanese.

**Rims** – Another description of car wheels; see also **Alloys**.

## S

**Scally** – a derogatory term often aimed at young drivers who just hang around the town centres in their cheaper poorly modified cars. Scallies is the plural.

**Scort** – Slang used to describe a Ford Escort.

**Shed** – A badly modified car or merely what boy racers perceive to be a 'bad' car.

**Sound-Off** – An event which usually takes place at a cruise, where boy racers compete against one another to see who has the loudest in-car stereo system.

**Sports Mesh** – or what is affectionately referred to as chicken wire, used on radiator grills and on front bumper Ventages.

**Stereo** – Often the subject of considerable amounts of the boy racers' disposable income is invested in an in-car stereo system. Usually rated at around 300-400 watts they come with Graphical Spectrum Equaliser displays on them which provide visual displays as colours rise and fall with the music. The boy racers' are generally avid collectors of stereo systems,

eagerly awaiting the introduction of the next newest 'must have' version, each more expensive than the last.

**Sub-woofers** – These are speakers designed to play the bass range of sounds. These items are usually located in the boot of the boy racers' cars more often than not in a especially constructed 'Sub Box'. The whole unit takes up the majority of storage space in the boot thus rendering it useless for anything else. These speakers are often accompanied in the car, usually the rear parcel shelf, by 6 X 9's which are so named after their dimensions (6 X 9 inches).

**Scuubies or Subies** – Slang for Subaru cars; usually the Imprezza.

## **T**

**T-bone** – Description of when one car is driven head on into the side of another car, at speed, and the ensuing impact forms the shape of both vehicles into a T.

**Trolley** – Slang for a bad car, used similarly to 'Shed'.

**Town Boys** – Slang for those who hang around the town and city centres in their cars, similar use as **Scally**.

**Tweeters** – These can be used in conjunction with the in-car stereo system to boost the treble range of the sounds systems but are rarely used because the majority of boy racers prefer bass sounds.

**Twocers** or **Twockies** – Slang for young men (for it is mainly young men), who are prosecuted for Taking and Driving Away or Taking Without Consent. The 'taking' refers to vehicles which do not belong to them.

## **W**

**Wheel-spin** – This occurs when a driver presses hard on the accelerator whilst flexing the clutch quickly, causing the tyres to make a screeching sound and leaves black tyre marks on the road surface.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

#### **Motoring Miscreants**

This is an ethnographical study of the car-based cultural practices of a group of young men who, at the time of my research, had been labelled by some sectors of society as dangerous or as accidents waiting to happen. Some media have attributed to such young men an umbrella term which is simply 'Boy Racers' (see Mills (2000), Spinney (2000) and White, (2000). This title appears to be used as an all embracing description of any young man, usually under the age of 25, who drives a particular make and model of car in a particular fashion or 'with attitude' and who accompanies such outings with loud music with a predominately bass beat.

This music was the trademark or anthem of boy racers and the sound of the bass was the quintessential signature of those who subscribed to street car culture. The thumping bass signified a certain youthful insubordination, the very sound of undisciplined youth, and its presence had the ability to turn the interior of the young men's cars into dynamic, cultural, social spaces. As a cultural form, music was integral to the creation and evolution of the boy racers cultural biographies and Lincoln (2005), describes this as providing a 'soundtrack' to their social lives. You heard them, even felt the vibration of the bass before you saw them. The sound of the big bore exhaust systems revved for maximum impact and the music signalled many things, sensuality, the infinite play of desire and pleasure of the cars and assertive masculinity. They used their choice of music to create a specific type of atmosphere, one that could be spontaneous, of the moment yet inter-changeable according to their mood. Within their cars the dynamics created by the music was controlled by the young driver, dependent upon their age, their mood, the time of day and who else was occupying their space. As they

drove through the towns with their stereos playing at full decibels and their windows open, the boundaries of public and private space became blurred and many of them used their music to set the mood or tone for the night ahead. The tone however could be too much to bear for some local residents as can be seen in Figure 1 (below).

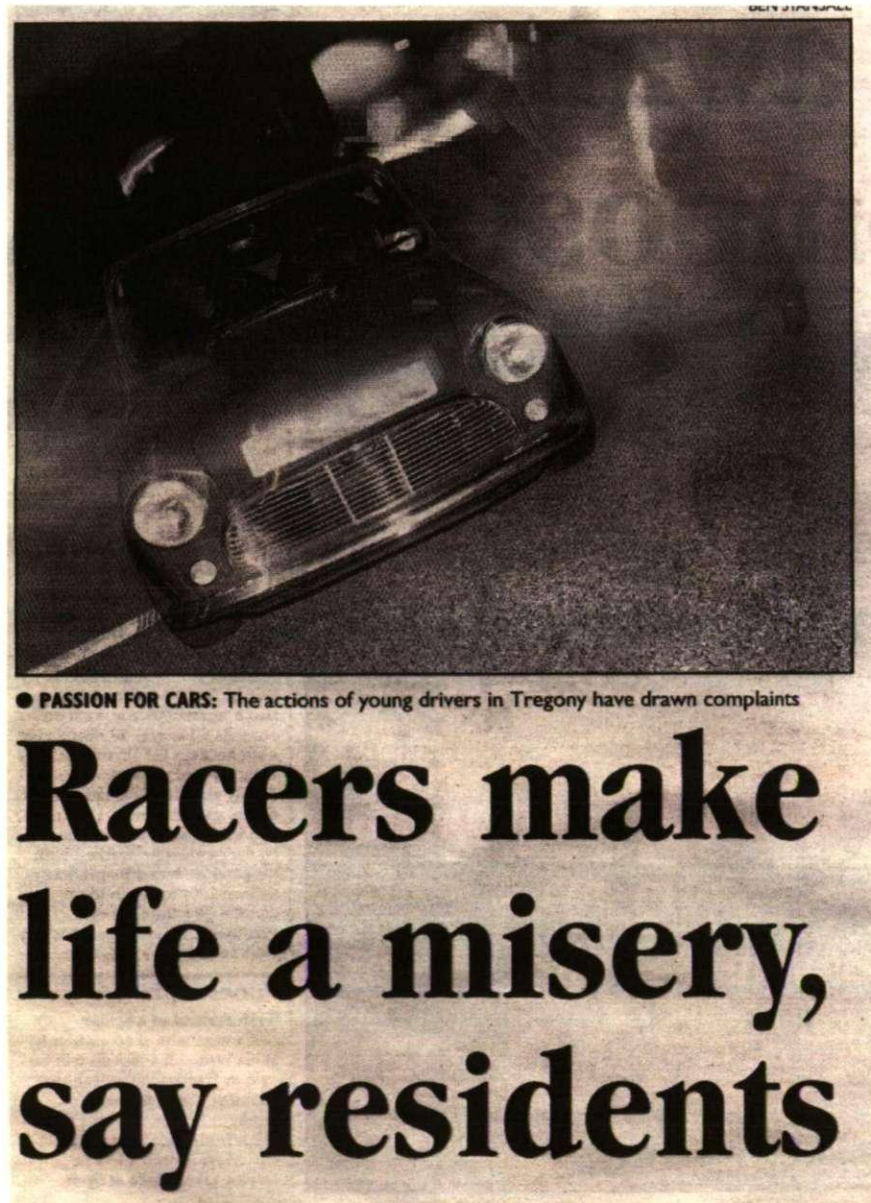


Figure 1: Headlines from the Western Morning News, March, 2006

The boy racers' chosen venues for display were spaces which were potentially risky including public car parks, industrial estates and construction sites. The way they had invaded these

public and private domains, reclaiming and redefining them as their own, their performative displays of driving skills and daring, their occasional challenges to authority and the camaraderie they displayed, had set them apart from other young male car drivers. In some ways these young men had come to represent the cowboys of the 21<sup>st</sup> century who rode into town, not on American bred 'Quarter Horses', but in highly modified cars which challenged the senses and stirred the emotions, and for me, they are 'The Tarmac Cowboys'.

In many respects, the boy racers upon whom this research is based, have been imagined, positioned and regulated in different stages of their young adult lives and subsequently in different public spaces, inside and outside their own villages and towns. This 'regulation' may have been through what many of them had come to regard as repetitive acts and regulatory regimes, more often than not orchestrated by local authorities or penalistic legislation. Many of them too had come to believe that these had been destined primarily as a means by which they were prevented from enjoying contact with others who shared the same interest in cars and modification.

As I began to assess aspects of the literature surrounding the contemporary cultural world of boy racers, I found that it represented a largely uncharted history. Popular and academic understandings of the term 'Boy Racer' were far from clear cut, although as a heuristic device it had been given a niche within the context of the criminal justice system, along with Joy Riding and Taking and Driving Away (TDA). In Chapter two, I will assess the literature pertinent to this group of young men; boy racers aged between 17 and 24 and discuss the most common themes which emerged during my research. These included the age of my research participants, and the expressive factors involved in the boy racer genre, such as the symbolism and consumption of the car, and the argument that particular problems have been faced by

working class youth because of their class positioning, lack of power and authority. This recurred throughout my research as the majority of my participants considered themselves to be working class and many of their beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, were acted out during their performative exhibitionism.

In addition to these themes, I will discuss how many of the activities within and around their cars and car-related activities, often represented their quest for an appropriately configured masculine identity. Much of this surrounded the young men's perception of what it was to be a 'real man' and involved performative demonstrations of skill and daring, and accompanying speed and risk-taking in their cars, which contributed to their image. Other significant themes were their close ties of friendship and how their 'meets', or the places where they gathered, allowed them to reconstruct a family network and often represented the 'repair shop' of what was wrong in their lives.

In its time the car has evoked a range of human responses, including the extent to which it has been objectified as a thing of wonder by those who design and manufacture it. Others however, including many of my participants, have perceived it as a perfect welding of technology and art, a medium which provides opportunities for social liberation or unequivocal private space for personal reflection and seclusion. The car has also facilitated opportunities for personal freedom by providing a means by which boy racers as drivers or passengers have been able to travel from A to B for work, education or social purposes when *they* wanted to as opposed to being reliant on others. For the majority of young men in my study, the car represented a blank canvas through which they had achieved individual fulfilment through expending time and energy modifying and creating their 'perfect car', imbuing it with a set of values and characteristics aligned to a particular gender role.

Nonetheless I will also introduce the discussion which I continue in Chapters 5 and 6 that for others the car represents a dangerous foible which, in the wrong hands, has become a weapon of destruction causing death and injury to anyone who underestimates, exploits or abuses its power.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the methodology used for the research. By choosing ethnography I have adopted Harris and Johnson's (2001), approach which provides a portrait of people, through a narrative which examines and discusses their culture, beliefs and behaviours. I acknowledge that when I began my research, there was little, if any existing sociological research on the subject of young males and cars or even that which surrounded the relationships men may have had with their cars. There was however, a small amount of psychological research in the area and I was particularly grateful at the initial stages of my investigation, to Marsh and Collett's (1986) work which aided my understanding of men's relationships with cars.

Ethnography has been one of the driving forces for qualitative research and is largely based upon fieldwork which relies upon the researcher becoming enmeshed in the day to day activities, as far as possible, of those under study. Ethnographic research includes observation and participant observation and this was to be my starting point at a local garage where I was a regular client, because it was also the type of garage where boy racers worked and regularly 'hung out'. Ethnographic research also employs other types of data collection including interviews, descriptions and excerpts from documents, all of which I have used.

It was my belief that trying to enter the world of boy racers and attempting to conduct interviews from 'cold' would have been quite impractical and in Chapter 3 I show how I

entered their personal and private worlds in order to see what Goffman (1964), termed their 'backstage' performances. Furthermore, I will discuss the aspects and the benefits of gaining the cooperation of an appropriate 'Gatekeeper' to many of the different cohorts or 'posses' of boy racers and how this facilitated access to areas of their private and personal lives, including those of their families, something which I would not have otherwise achieved to the same degree, had I adopted a more formal approach. Ultimately however, I will show how I became an opportunist, utilising my experience of cars and car mechanics and local knowledge to take advantage of each potential contact with what was in effect a 'closed group'.

Reflexivity although being in currency since the 1960's and associated with the traditions of anthropology, was, along with ethical considerations, an important factor of my research, and in Chapter 3, I introduce Bourdieu's (1984) theories surrounding reflexive practice and discuss the value of regularly reflecting on events and conversations in order to provide and gain clarification or to give and receive reassurance. Thus reflexivity became an essential pre-requisite at each stage as my research progressed. It helped me maintain objectivity and flexibility without losing the ability to be sensitive and responsive to the ever changing emotional landscape of those caught up in the world of boy racers.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the geographic area in which my research took place and discuss how the practicalities associated with car ownership and the ability to drive had almost become a prerequisite for those who participated in my research. Many parts of the area are devoid of regular and reliable public transport, and thus the need for independent travel was seen to be paramount among boy racers particularly when the location of their homes played a significant role in how they were able to develop and maintain relationships with peers. Social as well as geographical isolation can lead to a poor or distinct lack of social skills, and any ensuing

suppressed emotions could be contributory in leading some of my participants to be on the periphery of daily interactions which are able to take place in a more accessible society. Thus many of the young men I had encountered during my research, had found it difficult to function emotionally and socially outside their own group which was made up more often than not by others like them.

In many cases, the geographical location of their homes had indeed 'forced' young men like these to socialise with peers who lived close by, simply because there was nobody else of similar age living within an accessible distance. If they had not socialised with one another they would have remained in a state of isolation communicating only with adults, or very young siblings and being reliant upon this level of human contact or television, radio and newspapers and magazines for their entertainment. Living in such rural environs and having to rely upon siblings and others in similar circumstances for various levels of social interaction led, in many cases, to an extended *de facto* 'family'. Although not being of blood ties, these nonetheless fulfilled all other aspects of family which may have accounted for the tight relationships amongst the young men who had grown up under these circumstances and I explore this in more depth in Chapter 7.

Within Chapter 4, I describe life in Cornwall and draw attention to the county's scenic landscape which has provided the inspiration for many artists and writers. I illustrate the extent to which the county attracts many thousands of visitors, including those who seek a change of a more permanent lifestyle. At the same time however, I acknowledge that behind the picture postcard prettiness, there are incidences of abject poverty, economic and social deprivation which is experienced by 10 areas across Cornwall, which have featured in the Indices of Deprivation (2000), by virtue of them falling within the 1,000 worst wards in the

whole of England. I introduce the significance of the gradual decline of the agriculture, horticulture, fishing, mining and associated industries which have provided the types of employment undertaken by many of the families of my participants, and in particular their male relatives, and discuss the opportunities for employment and the levels of unemployment within Cornwall during the period of my research, and in particular how this has had an impact on the nature of the work which was available to the young men who participated in my research.

To address issues like low wages, low levels of service provision in sparsely populated areas and the perceived general lack of skills and employment opportunities within its potential workforce, Cornwall has sought many types of investment and planning. As a result much of the investment has come from the South West Regional Development Agency (SWERDA) and many Cornish businesses have benefited from investment of European Union Objective One funding. Nonetheless I was to discover that employment opportunities were limited for those who had little in the way of qualifications and experience, and during my research it became clear that there were more people seeking employment than there were jobs available. This was particularly pertinent where traditional types of employment which had supported many men in the past, were gradually diminishing, forcing many men of employable age to look outside these industries, for the type of work which was conducive to their particular skills and experiences. This had implications for men's identities and sense of self, of how they regarded themselves as men and in turn also had implications for how their sons' came to regard their fathers (where such existed) as appropriate role models.

Seeking to attain appropriate qualifications at school, college and beyond appeared to be for many of my participants a constant site of struggle. Whilst many of them were prepared to

acknowledge that in order to succeed in getting a job or Modern Apprenticeship they needed to achieve at least the minimum requirements of Grades C and above in GCSE Maths and English, they were also willing to argue that it was 'less cool' to be regarded as a 'swot' at school, preferring, irrespective of individual ability, to play the role of class clown or *agent provocateur* in order to fit in with their group of peers. Within this chapter, the attitudes of my participants and their families towards educational attainment and study are discussed. This particularly relates to the way education was regarded by the older generation as a route out of poverty and associated social exclusion, whereas for many of my younger participants it was regarded as another pressure upon them and one which they were often prepared to circumnavigate in favour of more imaginative solutions to their perceived problems.

In Chapter 5, I will discuss the main qualifications or qualities the young men required to be accepted as part of the boy racer genre, and elaborate on their initiation into the adult and masculine behaviours of working class culture. I draw upon their anecdotal recollections of days spent in the company of fathers, uncles or older siblings, in order to introduce how these experiences had provided the foundations for reaffirming and directing the young men towards traditionally regarded social roles, more generally assigned to 'home-making women' and 'breadwinning men'. I also begin to introduce the 'real' world of the boy racers and start to discuss the *rites de passage*, the ceremonies and rituals which accompanied the changes in my participants' status from interested bystanders, to car drivers (not necessarily owners), to boy racers. In doing so I draw attention to the varying degrees of changes in status and social identity, including risk, and how the tensions within the group were managed and behaviours policed. Furthermore, I introduce David and Brannon's (1996) theory which surrounds the way some men seek to enforce a social conformity to masculine roles as a means to maintain power and control within situations.

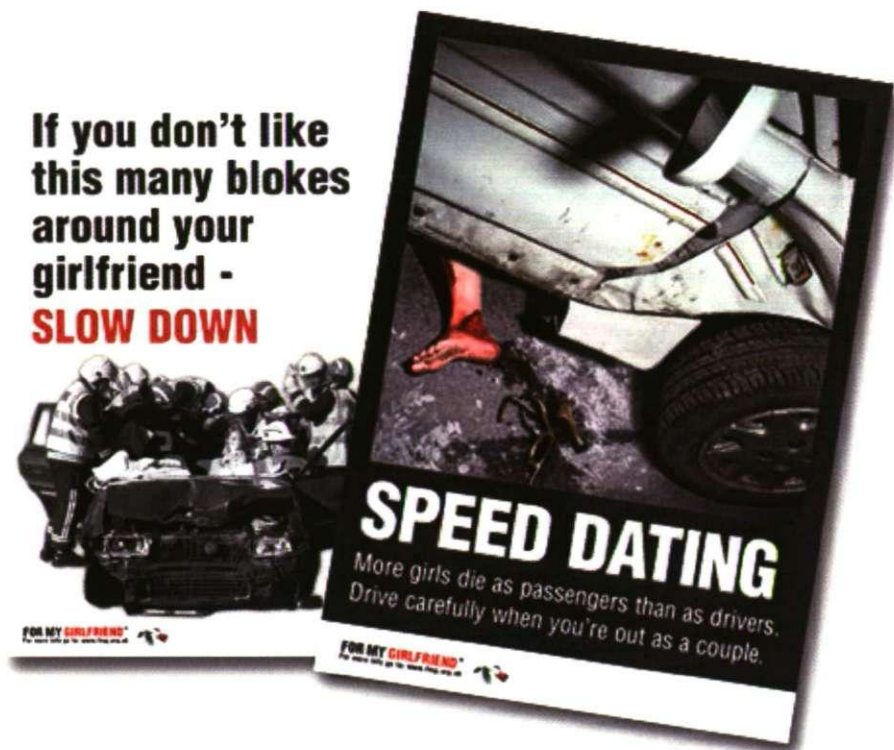
In the absence of the type of club which requires a formal application for membership, I explore the extent to which boy racers had used a variety of ways to communicate with one another, either through web sites dedicated to the boy racer and cruise scene or through particular types of motoring enthusiasts' magazines. I discuss the type of accessories they purchased for their cars including body styling and graphics and show how they had used these resources to signify difference (and similarity) in terms of the local networks they affiliated with, as well as group identity; or to use their parlance, local 'posse'.

In Chapter 6, I examine the economic circumstances of the boy racers and why they invested the majority of their disposable income (often beyond their means) in their cars and car accessories. I will discuss some of their more expensive pieces of modification, including the addition of in-car entertainment such as televisions, DVD players and electronic games together with some of the personal sacrifices they had made in order to acquire these and their expensive, powerful cars. I also explore their performative activities and show how the car became instrumental in allowing them to demonstrate power, mastery and control, all of which they perceived to be appropriate masculine characteristics.

I will discuss how many of these performative activities provided a ceaseless challenge to the young men and the local authorities, including the police and why such endeavours have increasingly featured in media headlines. Within this section I introduce the argument that some of the attention the police had focused upon boy racers may have been based upon a number of factors. These included the perceived age of the driver, the make and model of the car they drove, the locations they were seen in, and the number of other similar vehicles there at the time, rather than the witnessing of any wrongdoing, or in response to reports of performative behaviours.

Well documented accounts of boy racers exploits within the media have described them in turn as ‘challenging’, ‘rebellious’ or ‘accidents waiting to happen’. These have been reinforced by headlines such as those which appeared on a BBC news website on 18 October, 2005 and suggested that following a police blitz on a boy racers meet, ‘...a combination of inexperienced drivers and unsafe cars have police predicting it is only a matter of time before the vehicles caused serious accidents or deaths’. The account went on to suggest that, ‘As for the young male drivers...they are an accident waiting to happen’ ([www.news.bbc.co.uk](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk)).

Undoubtedly everyone is at some point, capable of dangerous or irresponsible, risky driving practices, but the dangerous driving behaviours of some young male drivers have occasionally resulted in the deaths of their passengers including female passengers, often the girlfriends of the drivers. To try to address this and make young male drivers more aware of the possible outcomes, a Government Road Safety campaign entitled ‘For My Girlfriend’ appeared in February to coincide with St Valentine’s day and is shown in Figure 2 (below). This campaign was to be repeated in 2006 and there was an expressed intention to continue to reproduce it every year at this time.



**FOR MY GIRLFRIEND™ - HIGHLIGHTING THE DANGERS OF DRIVING TOO FAST**

Figure 2: Road safety campaign, 'For My Girlfriend'

Many reports on boy racers activities have tended to overlook other dimensions the young men attached to their gatherings, something they referred to as their 'meets'. Within my research I will argue that these meets provided what I refer to as the 'repair shops' for what was wrong, or of concern in their young lives, whilst at the same time they offered the young men opportunities to showcase their specialist skills and develop knowledge about mechanical or fabrication skills often through a reciprocal exchange. I am able to give a flavour of what occurred at meets, often using the narratives of the boy racers themselves to illuminate particular points. I also discuss the alternative types of facilities which were available to young people within the geographical area under discussion, in terms of more formal or organised recreational or leisure facilities, clubs and associations, and why the majority of my respondents had rejected them in favour of pursuing their own car-related interests.

In Chapter 7, I pursue Campbell's (1993) theory that some of the richest encoded masculine fantasies surround elements of speed, control, risk and daring. I also discuss how in my chosen

role of researcher, I was faced with the dilemma that unless I was to take an active part in the boy racers performative world, I would be unable to 'live' or experience their fantasies of speed, control and risk and simply reporting second-hand experiences would lose some of the 'raw' vibe. At first, jumping into a proffered car, the thought used to cross my mind that in less than a few minutes we could be encased in metal and wrapped around a tree or a lamp post. Yet this became my 'edgework', my chance to experience first hand the thrills (and spills) as the young men engaged in the sort of performative, risky practices and speed with which the description 'Boy Racer' was synonymous.

Discussing when loss of control is no longer 'controlled' I introduce official statistics which indicate that the majority of road traffic accidents were caused by speed and poor judgement as the primary factors, with disregard for poor weather conditions almost on a par. This chapter will show how gender too and the types of vehicle driven were also likely to play a significant role in the speed and manner in which vehicles were propelled. Young men, whose ages correspond with the age range of my participants, had been cited by official sources as those most likely to combine speed and risk whilst driving their modified cars. In this chapter I address issues surrounding my participants' attitudes to car maintenance and safety features, and the extent to which many of them had attached a greater importance to achieving the desired appearance and performance from their cars, than perhaps they had attributed to ensuring they were safe as well as speedy.

As I mentioned in earlier passages, the existence of a *de facto* extended family had been a significant factor to emerge during my research. In this chapter I am able to describe this construction, its hierarchy and the way emotional support was provided and accepted by group members. The chapter does much to highlight the relationships boy racers had with each other,

their families and with potential girlfriends. It revealed differences between their public persona and the one which was revealed to family and close friends. I discuss their close ties of friendship and how these relationships were policed and jealously guarded. I will also discuss how the general employment background for the boy racer, where one existed, was more often than not an active recreation of their fathers' career path, irrespective of whether the father was a constant resident within the family home or a shadowy figure on the periphery of an often fragmented and unstable household.

I will continue previous discussions which arose in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 relating to the extent to which some families of the boy racers were endeavouring to break a cycle of social, material and economic deprivation. I will discuss how this often required opportunities to broaden existing social networks, access to good quality education and ultimately gainful employment and where, in some cases, the role of main breadwinner was undertaken by a woman. I will describe how the dynamics of the familial households had been changed by women's perceived new and autonomous role and how the ensuing tensions which had arisen, were often the result of unequal power relations between the two genders. I will also briefly discuss how my own work and domestic status was sometimes questioned by my participants' families.

In Chapter 8, the final chapter, I bring together the boy racers lived experiences and how they had used consumption of the car and car based activities to express what they perceived to be appropriate working-class masculine identities. I reiterate earlier discussions surrounding the barriers and challenges which faced these young men and their families in Cornwall and provide an insight into how the boy racers bonds of friendships with like-minded individuals had served as protective factors against a range of insecurities and disasters which had befallen

them. When I set out to create through research, a literary picture of the cultural world of the boy racers I underestimated the complexity of the task. To develop or come close to understanding many aspects of their behaviour and the way they lived their lives and sought to live their lives under a very public and media driven gaze I had to delve deep into the multidisciplinary nature of my professional life and was grateful for the support and guidance of a number of people who often helped me make sense out of the nonsensical, not least of all the boy racers themselves. It is my hope that the amount of information my research seems to have generated through my journey into the paradoxical world of the boy racers, will stimulate interest in this under researched field and may encourage others to explore.

## Chapter 2

### The Literature Review

#### Introduction

Miller (2001) acknowledges through his work on *Driven Societies* that in Trinidad, cars were far more integral to identity and daily life than he had been aware of in the UK. Certainly my own experiences as a car owner who lived in a relatively isolated area where public transport was irregular, infrequent and often expensive, the car featured as an integral part of my daily life. Through my varying degrees of engagement with the street car culture which existed around where I lived, I was aware of the extent to which cars played an important role, representing the norm of daily discourse, entered into by others, and particularly young men. As my research began, I could find however little academic literature on the combined subjects of men and motorcars and in particular how consumption of the car and car related activities were used as a means through which *young* men could express self-definition. There was nonetheless a substantial coverage of the topic written and discussed within the various dimensions of media, examples of which I have included in chapters 6 and 7. Conversely within this chapter, the aim is to assess aspects of academic literature which I did find to be pertinent to the cultural world of boy racers including risk, the symbolism, habitation and consumption of cars, and perceptions of working-class masculinity.

The motorcar prior to the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries had been constructed in media discourses as being almost exclusively for the use of men (Coward, 2005). This was diluted somewhat during the 1950s when cars were designed for family

use and became used by men *and* women. However men's discursive relationship with their cars according to Wajcman,

'Mirrors their relationship with technology more generally and amounts to a compensatory claim to symbolic power by men who might be deemed to be social failures and actually exist in a social and cultural context where they have little power at all' (1993: 144).

Certainly for the majority of young men within my study, the lack of autonomy in their personal and working lives and the risk of being social failures concerned them, and I discuss this further in Chapters 4 and 5. By using their cars as mediums to 'say' something about them and for them, their actions were consistent with McCracken's (1988) theory that individuals are able to transfer the symbolic meanings of material goods to themselves at micro level, by a number of varying social practices. He says that 'One of the ways that individuals satisfy the freedom and fulfil the responsibility of self-definition is through the systematic appropriation of the meaningful properties of goods,' (1988:90). Many advertisements show cars and motorbikes as metaphors for freedom, they are major routes for 'escape attempts' (Cohen and Taylor, 1992). For the less well off like many of my respondents, they were also symbols of defiance and escape from what Graves-Brown describes as 'social marginalisation and disadvantage' (1997: 14). Haug (1986) suggests that like other mass-produced commodities, cars are designed and marketed to invoke emotional states such as desire and excitement to attract people to purchase them, whilst Lupton (1999) feels that we use cars to construct and express our subjectivity and have a tendency to anthropomorphize them.

According to Featherstone (1990), there has been an upsurge of academic interest in recent years in the movement and mobility in social life, yet when I began my research I found that as one of the dominant forms of mobility, the car, had been a neglected topic within sociology, cultural studies and related disciplines. There were three notable exceptions.

The first was Gartman (2004) who suggests that over time there has been a shift in the way the car has been constructed as a consumer object. He identifies distinct phases; 1900-1925 when cars operated as upper-class status symbols in elaborate distinction games (see also Bourdieu, 1984); followed by the era of mass consumption, 1925-1960, and the production of the simple functional car. From 1960 onwards the car has been viewed as part of a fragmented series of subcultures in which customisation, flexible specialisation become significant for individualisation and a range of new types of vehicles emerge including 'muscle' cars, 'performance' cars and 'youth-orientated' cars which are consistent with the type of vehicles sought by the young men upon whom my research is based. The second was work by Marsh and Collett (1986) which I found useful in relation to identity because they examined in some detail the psycho-social relationship between men and cars. Their findings which showed how some men used motor vehicles as a useful medium to express a sense of personal identity were consistent with my own research. The third exception was the work of other theorists such as Barthes (1957) who suggests that cars are both used and consumed in image and Urry (2000) who recognised how cars have achieved a high visibility in the social landscape and cultural imagery over the last century.

These contributions seek to highlight that the existing academic output surrounding the subject of boy racers and the relationship between men and motorcars is limited. This is surprising when consideration is given to the fact that some 1 billion cars traversed the world's roadway networks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Volti, 1996). What does exist however, is diverse, with one of the liveliest areas of academic research surrounding the production of, and the social history of the car in the United States. This has been documented by Scharff (1991) and Foster (2003) and followed by a more recent comparative study of cars and their nations of origin by Koshar (2004). This large body of research on the American and European automotive history rarely examines the car as a cultural process, but appears to treat it instead as a design artefact, a technological entity or a commodity with specific,

usually negative, 'externalities'. I find that these externalities are often preoccupied with safety feature design, the ability of cars to cause death and destruction, and the extent to which an increase in the numbers of vehicles on the road raises the levels of pollutants in the atmosphere, none of which is afforded a great deal of interest by boy racers as my research discovered.

Miller's (2001) work is helpful as his analysis of cars identifies how they can be used to express fragmented and subversive subcultural identities and he seeks to validate this through a collection of ethnographic studies of automobiles. Although the majority of these studies do not allow me to draw parallels with my own research, one particular study within his collection comes quite close to mine insofar as it recognises how young working class males modify their cars to signify difference. Carried out by O'Dell (2001), this study refers to the Raggare or greasers, young working class Swedish males who concentrate their attention and efforts on the restoration and driving of large chromed-up and modified American cars of the 50's and 60's. Whilst O'Dell is inclined to pursue the argument that working class youths adopt these cars specifically to mark their difference from, and express contempt for, the standards of 'good taste' enforced by the Swedish middle classes who define American cars as vulgar, pretentious and hedonistic, my own research does not reveal that boy racers adopt their cars for entirely the same reasons. They are more likely to use their modification skills to express difference from others who may drive a similar make and model of vehicle or merely difference from other young male drivers who do not subscribe to the boy racer culture. Nonetheless I am able to draw parallels with O'Dell's suggestion that the Raggare are regarded by the rest of mainstream society as subversive and their cars and car-related practices are seen as, 'symbols of danger and moral decline', for this view is also levelled at those who have been labelled boy racers (2001: 72).

Throughout O'Dell's work there is a curious omission to any reference to the American Hot Rodders which is an area addressed in some detail by Moorhouse (1991) and in which he makes it clear that in common with the Raggare, the American Hot Rodders are largely working class youth who seek to assert their difference from mainstream American car users through highly modifying and altering their cars. Like the Raggare in Sweden and the Hot Rodders in America, through the appearance of their cars and their driving practices the boy racers have become the subject of moral panics and fears which are reinforced through a series of media headlines. What becomes evident here is although the specific cultural expressions between the Hot Rodders, Raggare and boy racers may be different; the meanings attached to the things they do are the same, namely freedom, escape, difference.

### **The Significance of Age**

Given the amount of media attention ascribed to their exploits, it would appear that young males are consistently attributed greater notoriety than young females, particularly in acts of rule breaking and spectacular behaviour. Campbell (1993) has suggested that young males in particular are the more dominant, and thus the more interesting of the genders. She particularly singles out for attention, those who encompass the age group of my participants, young men who are on the verge of adulthood. Campbell recognises that as young men construct their notions of what it is to be a man in modern society, the loss of males from many families has contributed to an over-aggressive notion of masculinity in some young men. Furthermore she believes that in their attempts to create what they perceive to be desirable masculine characteristics for themselves, many may turn to media icons for their role models, which in the case of some of my participants, were actors from such cult movies as *The Fast and the Furious* and *2Fast 2Furious*. In terms of my respondents, I would agree with Campbell's (1993) suggestion that young men are the

more interesting of the genders; a belief which manifested as I observed my respondent's engaging in a series of often paradoxical portrayals of what being 'real men' entailed for them. Informing how they undertook these differing roles depended upon many factors, some of which had mixed messages attached. These included the expectation often demonstrated by their respective mothers and occasionally their girlfriends (where such existed), that they should 'be a real man', or for example 'big boys don't cry' or in the case of dubious or risky behaviour, that 'boys will be boys'. Yet by the same token it was anticipated that the young men should adopt a nurturing and caring role (particularly within their homes), and that they should be willing to accept responsibility for maintaining the household and younger siblings in the absence of a male breadwinner and I discuss this further in Chapter 7. Nurturing and caring are characteristics more associated with the female gender and thus were strangely at odds with the boy racers pursuit of a tougher more working class masculine image. In many instances this together with the lack of appropriate male role models within their own families or wider social circles had paved the way for role confusion and at times many young men appeared to lack a place to fit. This was particularly evident from the younger respondents whose occasional emotional neediness appeared incongruent with their actual age and their sometimes aggressive portrayal of working class masculinity.

Youth has been recognised as a period when young people are preoccupied with a quest for identity. Rhona and Robert Rapoport for example suggest that during the 1970s '...young people explored their environments, looked for new ones, sampled new experiences, all in an attempt to crystallise their personal identities, underpinning a transition to independence' (1975: 57). The need for independence presents an overriding issue in maturational development. It heralds the opportunity to create and develop aspects of an identity completely separate to that which has been attributed by others, including notions of your social and economic status, where you reside and family characteristics. However,

evidence suggests that the way people develop and change in early adulthood may be more sociologically influenced than psychologically due to a series of major transitions and conflicts as opposed to mere maturation (see Sheehy, 1996). Undoubtedly age has a crucial bearing upon status and identity when it determines whether and what sort of employment can be gained and even what sort of leisure activities we are able to participate in.

Unemployment amongst young males of working age is high and academically young males tend to do less well in school, commit more crime and their suicide rates are high in comparison with females of the same age (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). Furthermore, their under-performance in a whole range of social areas has made many of them potentially poor value as partners for young women, and economically problematic for society as they progress from failure to failure (O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). My participants were predominately from the 17 to 24 age group and there is no doubt that age was a powerful social marker and had impacted on the way these young men had been able to live their lives, gain employment, access credit, find supported housing or access education and training. Social and political legislation often ensures that young people go through the same kind of experiences at the same time, simply because they have reached a particular age, as opposed to when they have reached the appropriate levels of emotional and physical maturation. It is usually around the ages of 16 to 17 years that many young people leave school and embark upon higher education or vocational courses at college and this may, on occasions, necessitate moving away from home and ensuing separation from family and friends; something which can for many young people, be regarded as a critical life event.

Studies of young people or youth, has long been a category for academic analysis and has been discussed by many theorists (see Blake 1985, Cohen 1997, Thornton, 1998, Dicks 2005, and Madison 2005). Youth and risk often forms the basis of such academic enquiry,

with youth in particular represented as being problematic, disaffected, deficient or deviant, and this critique was particularly pertinent during the 1970s (see Hall and Jefferson, 1976, McRobbie, 1978 and Willis 1977). In common with Hebdige (1998), many of these authors argue that consumption-based subcultures of disaffected British working class youth and their often cobbled together styles represents a serious disruption to the cultural codes which underlie a hierarchical society, yet much of this work pays minimal attention to the economic and social conditions in which the young people live. The 1980s saw a decline in the research area relating to youth and subcultures due to what Griffin perceives to be, 'The rise of the New Right, post-modern critiques of ethnographic research and cuts in social science research funding, especially for radical youth research' (2004: 153).

The 1990s however, have seen something of a resurgence of radical youth research, and another large body of research has examined in some depth youth culture, masculinities and consumer culture, and in particular the way young people use consumption to construct their identities. This has been addressed in abundance throughout the 1990's by a number of theorists including, Dittmar (1998), Bauman (1992), Featherstone (1990), Giddens (1991), Lury (1997) and Miles (1998) and more recently by Hayward, (2002), Presdee (2000) and Peterson (2004). Yet there is little evidence to reveal significant academic research which has combined all of the above in order to examine how certain young men use consumption of the car and car related practices to 'say something about themselves' and my research endeavours to fill this void. During my research I found that one of the environments where the boy racers appeared to feel most secure and vociferous was in their cars.

### **Habitation of the Car as 'Private Space'**

One of the themes that pervade the discourses surrounding the benefits of car ownership is that of the freedom it accords its owner and the privatised aural space it provides through

which its occupants can reclaim time away from the restrictions of their day. Since it was first mass-produced by Henry Ford, the car has been symbolised and conceived as a means of escape, and car ownership is regarded as being very important in the lives of most people in most Western European societies (Graves-Brown, 1997). Cars represent much more than a mere means of transport, they are a way of maintaining freedom of movement and freedom of choice in where and how we work or take our leisure (Urry, 2004). They are also status symbols, expressing image, style and wealth (Royal Automobile Association Report, 2001). In America this is particularly evident because the American emphasis on car design sought to ensure from the early 1950s onwards, that the car driver was as Miller suggests,

‘...looking as though one was in control of the situation and appearing as though one had the power and technological gadgetry to make the best of every situation. Driving a car which looked expensive was important because when one was otherwise an anonymous face in the crowd, looks meant everything’ (2001: 111-112).

In America as in the United Kingdom whereby the motorcar (or American automobile) had once been a status symbol reserved for the well-to-do, this no longer applies simply because the car itself as a commodity tends to depreciate rapidly in economic value, making it easier for youths to purchase either as a relatively new model vehicle or as a slightly older ‘but with potential’ version, when economic realities force concessions upon the young man’s dreams. This particular theme raises the psycho-social element associated with consumption and many sociologists and social psychologists argue that the acquisition of consumer goods, including cars, becomes a significant element in the construction and maintenance of an individual’s self-identity; the attainment of social status and an attempt to make them feel better about themselves (see Dittmar, 1998; Elliot, 1994; Friese and Koenig, 1993; and McCracken, 1988). In complete contrast to mainstream consumer research, the symbolic consumption perspective proposes that

consumers not only consume *actual* products, but also, or even instead of, consume the symbolic meanings of those products. As Dittmar has suggested, in addition to the functional and use-related benefits they offer, ‘...material possessions are used to express and communicate personal and social aspects of identity’ (1998:15). Certainly for their part, cars are admirably placed to make public statements about their owners as well as provide them with another form of private space.

I would argue that this perception of ‘private space’ within our cars is not quite as private as we would like to imagine and explore this in Chapter 3. Baudrillard however, draws on the theme of our desire for private space in almost any situation when he suggests that, ‘...to each his own bubble, that is the law today’ (1993: 185). Thus as we enter the privatised entity we call our car, we become physically cocooned in what can be the last private space in an overwhelmingly public world, a bubble in which we are in control, where we are all powerful and have the freedom to give free rein to our imagination. Nonetheless Baudrillard’s bubble is a fragile one, for most bubbles are transparent, and the space of the car is both one to look out from and to be looked in to. The car therefore is simultaneously private and public and as the boy racers and their passengers lose themselves in the pleasure of habitation they also become increasingly aware of the stares and curiosity of others.

How they responded to outside curiosity was varied, it depended upon their mood, the level of their imagination or whether they were travelling alone or with others. It could also depend upon the type of music they played for as Locktev says,

‘Who can resist keeping tuned to ‘Born to Be Wild’ whilst racing down the interstate. Crankin’ it up. Firin’ up a cigarette. Rollin’ down the windows. Exceedin’ the speed limit...Dreamin’ of automotive decadence’ (1993: 206).

Music as Locktev suggests, stirs the emotions and fuels the imagination, and undoubtedly material possessions can be used as props in allowing many people to live out their fantasies, because according to Davidson, we currently occupy '...a world in which it is our products that tell our stories for us' (1992:15). Freud theorises that the themes which appear in most people's fantasies are connected with power, success and sex, which he believed are the things most often denied to people or which they would prefer to enjoy in some other form. As he says, '...Unsatisfied wishes are the driving power behind fantasies; every separate fantasy contains the fulfilment of a wish and improves on unsatisfactory reality' (Freud cited in Marsh and Collett, 1986: 114). Often a smart or powerful car may be regarded as a symbol of the levels of success (and power) enjoyed by its owner, it is thus the natural candidate for a fantasy symbol of success. It is also a means to an end in as much as ownership of such a vehicle also proclaims to the world around us that we are indeed powerful and successful even if in reality we are not. Marsh and Collett (1986) suggests that the underlying motive for imagining oneself in a better car is so that we can pretend to be a different person from our real self and Conrad King carries this theme a little further in suggesting that, 'Once in their car people mistakenly think the interior of their car is as private as their own home, so they will act in a more uninhibited manner' (2003: 3).

Jacobson becomes a little more graphic when he describes this private space we seek from our cars as,

'...the nearest we get to a lavatory at the bottom of the garden, where people once went to have a little time for themselves. Thus does the motor car perpetuate itself. The worse it gets on the roads, the more we seek the solace of our vehicle' (2000: 187).

Jacobson's metaphor of the garden lavatory is instructive because he uses it as a means to describe occupancy of the car as a private, traditional space. Yet he further ponders that for

some people 'traditionally the lavatory was a place of silence where one retreated to be alone with one's thoughts' (2000: 187). Car habitation though, is often far from a silent retreat, when it becomes infused with multiple sounds admittedly sometimes mediated through choice; the stereo or engine noise, talking with fellow travellers and all manner of things which dulls external sound. Automobile habitation can permit a transformation to occur where car drivers are able to control the social mix and activity within their cars, just as homeowners control those visiting their home. Urry describes this state of affairs as being 'Like a home from home, a place to perform business, romance, family, friendship, crime and so on' (2004: 16-17). This description concurs with my research and riding with the boy racers, or just hanging out with them in their vehicles. For such activities revealed that in many cases their cars were indeed venues where they appeared to be most at ease, and likely to reveal the true nature of themselves and their lives.

### **The Car as a Building Block of Self-definition**

Miles (1998) has suggested that the consumption of specific resources can potentially play an important role in who we are and how we construct our social lives and indeed to aspire to become a boy racer, arguably took more than the mere acquisition of a car, it involved a set of processes which potentially signalled to others the level of the individual's self-definitional attainment. For many of the boy racers, the image they wished others to have of them was considered important. Thus if they did not possess the correct image in the first place, they had to adopt a change, and did this through the vehicles they drove, something akin to Marsh and Collett's suggestion that if '...you are lacking in self-image, one way of making up for it is to drive a particular car which redefines you' (1986:11).

Dittmar (1998) supports this theory and suggests that some individuals may use consumption to create a symbolic identity for themselves in order to compensate for

perceived inadequacies in certain dimensions of their self-concept, and to this effect the motor car is admirably positioned as a medium through which to do this. If, for example, a man does not particularly feel masculine enough he may feel that by displaying a widely recognised and accepted masculine symbol, such as driving a fast performance car or piloting a powerful motorbike, he can compensate for this by using these objects to tell both himself and his audience that he is indeed 'masculine'. The boy racers had found that for them, one way of doing this was through modification and accessorising which are themes that I discuss in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Self-image created by the acquisition of a particular make and model of cars and the symbolism associated with cars generally has featured prominently in the advertising and marketing of automobiles and car accessories since the 1920s. The early posters for Michelin Tyres for example, rarely focused in any direct way upon the tyres they advertised, but rather the preponderance was towards women with exposed breasts. The tyres, one inflated and one deflated, appeared to play a secondary role in the picture. This style according to Marsh and Collett (1986) was Classic and the message distinctly sexual. European manufacturers at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century vied with each other to associate their products with the most elegant and sensual female forms that the poster artists could conjure up and the example shown in Figure 3 (below), is typical of the era.



Figure 3: Early poster advertising Michelin Tyres

Whilst modern representations of cars and car accessories may be slightly more graphic and less subtle, the messages they convey are substantially the same because they pay attention to the same anatomical comparisons, which due to the evolution of the shape and style of cars, seem to be inescapable. When we drive a car it responds to our physical movements and becomes an amplified part of our body, we become ‘enhanced humans’ (Grey and Mentor, 1995: 223). As a result, the car tends to be thought of as a part of oneself, both psychically and physically. The boy racers through their processes of car modification have sought to emphasise the more masculine qualities and characteristics such as strength, power and aggression. This process of imbuing certain masculine

characteristics in motor vehicles is not new, because throughout its history, the meaning of the motorcar has been contextualised by its strong cultural and discursive link with men and manifestations of masculinity (Gartman, 1994). Yet very little has been written about the way men use consumption of the motor car and its associated practices, as a means to say something about themselves and I believe that my research will help to fill this void.

## **Notions of Working Class Masculinity**

Connell suggests that 'Masculinity does not exist as an ontological given, but comes into being as people act' (2003: 337). Perhaps another way of saying this is that masculinity is brought into existence through performance. In research, men and masculinity have become a large field and many studies have produced insight into the processes by which certain types of employment are constructed as masculine spheres of activity, and how transformations of some of these industries have consequences for both men and masculinities (see Campbell and Bell, 2000; Brandth and Haugen 1995; Liepins 1998; Little 2002 and Saugeres 2002). Connell in particular, offers a sociologically appealing concept of what may be described as 'hegemonic masculinity' and in pointing out the existence of hierarchies of masculinities, he reflects upon the model of hegemonic masculinity stating that 'Within any particular society, or sector of society, certain masculinities are more dominant and idealised than others', (2003: 150). This was very pertinent to the boy racers. Many of them came from family backgrounds where physical strength and fortitude were much sought after characteristics and the majority of them could no longer expect to practice their masculinity locally in the image of their fathers and grandfathers through mining, china clay production and the heavy industries associated with these, or in fishing and agriculture, all of which were once the mainstays of the Cornish economy. By being involved in the daily operation of large and powerful machines such as those found within any of the aforementioned industries, it was possible

to demonstrate ideals of macho masculinity, of a type that Brandth and Haugen describes as 'Big, hard and powerful' (1995: 379). Certainly men's physical strength and mechanical skills were employed in using such machines, activities which Brandth and Haugen further describes as those which are 'Powerful, signalling virility and bodily strength' (1995: 156). However this type of masculine identity is threatened when the ability for this performance is arrested. Thus with fewer opportunities to demonstrate evidence of the latter characteristics through the type of employment undertaken by their male relatives, one way the young men from my research, had sought to demonstrate what they perceived to be *their* power and virility and evidence of their mechanical skills, was through the modding of their cars and associated performative driving either alone or with peers.

The closed cultural circle of the peer group has become increasingly recognised as a key area of influence in the making of masculinity (see Adler and Adler 1998; Connell 2003; and Mac an Ghaill 1994). These are the places where men get their information about how they are supposed to be and how they are supposed to act. There are constant pressures on individuals to perform and behave to expected group norms. Thus, although the construction of an appropriate form of masculine identity is regarded as a personal accomplishment, masculinities have an existence beyond the individual and are, primarily, a collective enterprise (Connell, 2003). This collective enterprise is very evident from the various cohorts of boy racers from my research and also from those of Vaaranen's (2004) ethnographic study of the subculture of young male street racers in Helsinki. It is possible to draw many parallels between my own research and that of Vaaranen, particularly in relation to the social, cultural and academic backgrounds of the young men involved, their economic circumstances and their camaraderie. However, whilst Vaaranen only briefly examines these areas, my own study endeavours to provide a more detailed account in an attempt to show how social, familial and economic backgrounds are influential in the young men's choice or creation of identity through ownership of, or association with the

car. Both Vaaranen and I are able to identify the car-orientated masculinity which emerges from our respective research as something which involves communication between the young men through manual skills and horsepower. However the brash behaviours and the primary concern with street racing displayed by Vaaranen's respondents were slightly at odds with the less competitive behaviours of my own participants. Nonetheless another common factor between the studies was the respective young men's search for status, and the realisation that it was not something that was given, but rather was the outcome of intricate manoeuvres and negotiations. This was then sustained through performance, more often than not with cars, sometimes on a daily, if not weekly basis.

Many of these performances were based upon the latest cult car movie which they had seen. Both groups displayed a keen interest in films such as *The Fast* and *The Furious* and *2Fast2 Furious*, from which many ideas for car modification and performance were adopted. The cinema portrayal through films such as these shows the young male motorists as the speedsters, the risk takers, the glamorous and masculine portrayal; the heroes and quite possibly it is representations such as these which influence the alternative type of discourse surrounding young men and cars. Yet as Vaaranen's work, and my own to a certain extent shows, it is from such portrayals that the boy racers often take their role models.

Despite the lack of academic output which brings together young men, masculinities, identity and consumption of cars and car-related practices at the very minimum, a significant amount of relevant research has been undertaken in relation to young men and motor bikes. These include Cohen's classic work surrounding the creation of the Folk Devil; the Mods and Rockers in the 60's and 70's (1973), Paul Willis (1978) study of the motorcycle culture and Hebdige's (1998) study of the scooter. All these have been particularly important to my own research, most significantly Willis's work due to the

similarities in the customisation processes the young men undertook to achieve maximum visual impact with their machines. Furthermore, Willis's research recorded the relationships the young men had with their machines which were not merely functional or instrumental ones, but such that allowed them to display a particular set of values associated with working-class masculinity.

Some sociological studies of youth have traditionally tended to focus on the melodramatic and the masculine, and masculinity could be described as the discursive product of a continual process of male identity, constructed in accordance with men's social and cultural environment (see Connell, 1995). Masculinity is therefore not in essence a state which men 'have', but something that men 'do'. In Cornwall, due to the precarious nature of 'real men's work' previously gained through heavy industry, mining and construction, men have often been forced through lack of choice, to immobilise their masculinity often through periods of unemployment or as occupational transients, working their way through an unsatisfying occupational landscape of what they may deem inappropriate careers for men. Traditionally, identities within society have been determined largely by the work that people do. We are aware that the first question asked in many situations of primary social encounters is "What do you do?" by which what is really meant is "What is your job?" Ulrich Beck describes this process when he says,

'Nowhere, perhaps, is the meaning of waged labour for people's lives in the industrial world so clear as in the situation where two strangers meet and ask each other 'what are you?'. They do not answer with their hobby 'pigeon fancier', or with their religious identity, 'Catholic', or with reference to ideals of beauty.....but with all the certainty in the world with their occupation...If we know our interlocutor's occupation then we think that we know him or her. The occupation serves as a mutual identification pattern, with the help of which we can assess their personal needs and abilities as well as their economic and social position' (1992: 21).

With fewer available opportunities to work in the more traditional trades, many men in Cornwall have found that the only occupations available to them were those not

traditionally associated with working class men. These jobs included home-maker, retail or shop work, the hospitality service and caring industries. Such an unfamiliar, (and in some cases, unwelcome) situation made many feel vulnerable because as Connell suggests,

‘Vulnerability comes from the very situation that allows men to define masculinity through labour. Heavy manual labour calls for strength, endurance, a degree of insensitivity and toughness and group solidarity. Emphasising the masculinity of industrial labour has been both a means of survival, in exploiting class relations and as a means of asserting superiority over women’ (1995: 55).

Studies by sociologists like Connell have argued that there is a need to examine masculinities, rather than to assume there is but a single version of masculinity. Research by Christian Haywood and Mac an Ghaill (1996) suggest that different versions of masculinity are developed by young men depending upon their position in a familial, academic or work-based hierarchy. More recent examinations of emerging masculinities have recognised that traditional perceptions of masculinity are changing (see Townsend 2000; Thompson, 2000; Cleaver, 2001 and Peterson, 2004). Cleaver suggests that young people’s perceptions have moved from traditional notions of what masculinity and femininity mean and see anatomy as the main difference but then focus on behaviour and acknowledge that boys are still expected to be strong, unemotional and tough. Cleaver further suggests that changing ideas about men’s roles, the varying cultural conceptions of masculinity and the need to challenge dominant perceptions of ‘what it is to be a man’ have brought about a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Cleaver, *ibid*).

Why this should be is wide-ranging, although it is possible that changes in the economy, social structures and household composition, which was a feature of my own research findings, suggests that many of the young men whose lives I interrogated lived in homes where long-term male unemployment had changed their fathers’ previous roles and

identities as breadwinners. Furthermore the greater absorption of the young men's mothers into the labour market, often out of necessity, had changed their fathers' roles as economic agents and individuals and in many cases served to undermine hegemonic masculinities within the household, something I discuss in Chapters 4 and 7.

### **Creating a Masculine Image through Consumption of the Car and Car-related Practices**

Some men tend to define themselves by what they do and their employment or the types of hobbies they pursue. Some men experience strain about gender conditioning and gender socialisation and Levant (1995) suggest that as a result of this conditioning and socialisation many males become 'alexithymic' or unable to put emotions into words, and become separated from ways of being in the type of relationships that are conducive to establishing closeness and intimacy. Thus they look to appropriate interests and hobbies outside the home in which they can invest their time and their emotions. Although Levant's research is largely based upon clinical work with boys and men, I can draw parallels with the findings of my own research, particularly taking into account the attachments the young men had developed towards their cars and the apparent disinterest or difficulties they showed in forming emotional attachments with girls which I discuss in Chapter 7.

Notions of masculinity tend to come with an emphasis upon certain macho values such as physical strength, courage and toughness (see Peterson, 2004; Groombridge, 1988 and Gilbert and Constantine, 2005) and this is particularly pertinent to the way the boy racers had become socialised into believing their masculinity should be displayed which I discuss in Chapters 4-7. Yet few men realise how dysfunctional some notions of typical male behaviour really are, such as drinking alcohol to excess, causing minor vandalism, being

loud and boisterous and occasionally acting in a physically and verbally aggressive way towards one another, in terms of mock fights; and start to challenge the notions of what being a 'real man' is all about. However, this is less likely to come from older males who are on the whole more secured about who they are, but is frequently explored in the behaviours of the younger men who took part in this study, particularly in relation to the way they modified their cars, their aggressive driving styles and their propensity towards risk-taking.

Fast cars combined with an aggressive style of driving and predominance towards risk-taking, and published road traffic accident statistics makes it easy to surmise that young male car drivers are in many instances, accidents waiting to happen. The American sociologist, Lebergott (1999), however, chooses to ignore the social and environmental dysfunction that can be associated with car driving and ownership, he ignores the injuries and death which are caused through driver or vehicle malfunction, and he dismisses the frustrations experienced by interminable traffic jams or lengthy journeys to work, to school or to the shops. For him, the motor car epitomises the freedom private consumers may have in order that they can go where and when they please. Nonetheless it is clearly the way in which motor car drivers *go where and when they please* and the problems which arise as a result of the *going* that gives rise for concern especially when it relates to the way *young* male drivers conduct themselves.

The boy racers appeared to spend an inordinate amount of time working on their cars, contriving to make the appearance more aggressive and the performance more powerful, which I discuss further in Chapter 5. Belk (1999) has argued that spending a lot of time working with or on certain objects (especially things like cars), we can attribute to them vital elements of our identity, and in many cases they become as if physical extensions of our bodies. In a similar way, the anthropologist Levy-Bruhl (2000) has noted that in some

cultures, everyday objects like ornaments, clothes and tools become literally incorporated in the self. How we use consumption of articles to infer something about our identities could suggest that our car's mechanical failures are equivalent to the neurotic symptoms we are capable of displaying, for example its fits and starts could be likened to neurotic twitches. McClelland (1951) suggests that external objects are more likely to be regarded as part of the self when an individual controls them and thus it follows that the greater control a person can exert over an object the more closely that object should be linked with self.

McClelland's suggestion may be true in respect of the often extended periods of time the boy racers spent on modifying and embellishing their vehicles, imbuing them with characteristics which they felt were appropriately masculine, but more often than not attributed to their cars a female persona. Furthermore when their car's mechanical functioning periodically gave cause for concern, this episodic malaise appeared to transfer to the young car owners a down turn in their emotions and they became anxious, fitful and introverted as they sought solutions to the problem through consultation with peers or through their vehicle's diagnostic materials.

In many ways the car is ideally positioned to provide a bridge between the consumer as both communicator and identity seeker (see Gabriel and Lang, 1998). This is evident from the way the boy racers often used their cars in the same way that a woman may use certain items as accessories or may wear a certain style of clothes or favourite item which makes her feel better about herself. If the young man was experiencing discontent in certain areas of his life over which he felt he had no control or was going to meet friends, he prepared, washed and polished his car in such a way that it was almost as if when he stepped inside it, he was donning a freshly laundered shirt and pristine pair of denim jeans to go 'out on the town'. If he wanted to make a favourable impression, he did not cover himself in

expensive deodorant and aftershave but would add a new accessory to his car, install a new music system or more powerful amplifier. In Chapter 5, I discuss this and further consider how some young men often over compensated for what they perceived to be shortcomings in their lives. These shortcomings included not having a decent job, enough money, smart clothes or being good looking enough, things which they compensate through having highly modified cars or installing top of the range music systems. Furthermore they used these mediums to showcase their practical talents and abilities rather than dwelling on their perceived shortcomings or lack of physical attributes.

The sociologist Mort (1996) has demonstrated a particular interest in the consumption habits of young men and more essentially in the way they use certain articles of consumption through which to create what they perceived to be an appropriately masculine image. This is confirmed by the attempts at a wider aggressive body styling for some of the cars owned by my respondents, an example of which is shown in Figure 4 (below) and the loud exhaust systems which have been installed together with up-rated engines which growl menacingly when placed under pressure and ‘tells’ an onlooker that the driver of such a stylised vehicle was indeed masculine, powerful and potentially aggressive.



**Figure 4: A standard saloon car modified to appear more aggressive. Note the lowered suspension, wide bodywork and meshed ventages**

It could be argued that sociologists of consumption have rarely looked at the practical context in which consumers consume and what this means for their individual identities, particularly in relation to consumption of the motor car. Furby refers to consumption of material possessions as 'Enhancers of social power and status, or as a means of self-expression, individuation and individuality' (1978: 60). Yet I would argue that beyond its utilitarian functions, the motor car has come to carry considerable symbolic significance for its owner or driver. The theorist O.B. Hardison, goes some way to acknowledge this and notes that cars, '...are status symbols, coming of age symbols, symbols of virility and symbols of independence' (1989:11). This is something with which my own research findings concur and a sentiment which is echoed by Dichter who suggests that, 'there is little doubt that the modern car is a powerful symbol, because it is an extension of one's personality' (1960:28). However not only can it appear as an extension of one's personality, the car also provides a visual record of its owner's ability, creativity and skill to maintain an often eye catching, functional vehicle. This increases their personal status over those less accomplished in vehicle maintenance and modification.

## **Cultural Capital**

Bourdieu (1984) classifies cultural capital as a means to create distinction that involves knowledge and ideas. It is also defined by Putman as 'features of social life-networks, norms and trust – that enable participants to act together more efficiently to pursue shared objectives' (1994: 72). In the case of the young men from my research, the status and power they acquired from their cars and car-related practices, was exercised in their individual and collective knowledge and ability to design and construct what they desired using whatever materials were to hand, often transforming the meaning or use of objects through unconventional arrangements of unrelated things.

Miles (1998) has suggested that Willis (1977) over exaggerates the freedoms young people have to make choices and acquire resources. Yet through my research I can draw parallels with the way Willis examines how young people use the resources available to them, and how they creatively fashion their experiences, identity and expression of style. His work acknowledges that young people are very adept at developing their own styles adopting or rejecting the symbolic resources provided by the various industries and his earlier accounts have come to represent one of the first attempts to actually address the experiential nature of consumption. Clearly for the boy racer in terms of personal image and reputation, it was important to be associated with the correct vehicle and Bauman asserts that through the help of carefully selected purchases people may become anything they may wish, as long as they believe it is worth becoming that person or object.

‘The various models for what I can make of myself are all on the market. They come complete with all the bits and pieces needed to assemble them and with point- by -point instructions on how to put them together. Even when the admen offer us single specific products, they are on the whole shown to us against a clearly portrayed background of the life-style to which they (so it suggests) naturally belong’ (1997: 205).

Careful selection suggests that for some, all sense of risks and all potential social *faux pas* are negated. This is confirmed through the way car manufacturers and producers of car accessories advertise their resources set against a particular background or theme which infers a particular lifestyle.

Many of my participants were not content to save up until they could legitimately purchase the object of their desire and preferred to pool their skills and knowledge to create the items using what resources they had to provide instant gratification. Such an activity was also a way in which they could showcase their proficiency to others and use it to celebrate difference from those who did not possess the same level of practical ability. Having these particular skills gave them a certain feeling of superiority over those who were often in better economic circumstances but less skilful, which I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6. Many

of the boy racers from my study appeared to go to great lengths to set themselves apart, by signifying difference from other young male car owners who drove similar makes and models of cars. These differences were usually signalled by their performative demonstrations of driving skills and daring, their risk taking and the way they accessorised and modified their cars. On occasions they gathered in large groups of up to 50 and more vehicles at their meets and cruises, redefining areas of public space for their own purposes in a manner reminiscent of the subcultures of for example mods or rockers.

### **Boy Racers: another Youth Subculture?**

In keeping with the youthful image associated with the era of mods and rockers, the ages of my participants ranged broadly from 17 to 24 years. The subject of age is an aspect of stratification which has frequently been afforded a great attention by psychologists but not necessarily by sociologists (Abbott, 1998). However, one area which has received considerable attention from sociologists has been youth subcultures. In general terms 'youth' tends to conjure up images of pre and immediate post adolescence. The age range of respondents for this particular research would then appear to be consistent within the dictionary definition of youth. Conjoining youth with culture to produce 'youth culture' is somewhat more complex. The label of 'deviance' regularly appears in association with the noun 'youth' and the adjective 'sub' as in subculture tends to suggest inferiority and in effect can be seen as a means to demonise youth; something which is perpetuated in media descriptions almost on a daily basis for one reason or another. The post-war period in Britain has seen many examples of youth cultures which are differentiated by style: Teddy Boys, Mods, Rockers, Skinheads, Punks, Hippies, Ravers, Rappers, Chavs and now potentially boy racers, cruisers and joy riders.

The period prior to starting work and adult life has been seen as leading to the development of a range of youth cultures in the twentieth century with sociologists such as Eisenstadt (1966) providing a functionalist analysis of this development, seeing youth culture as society and young people's way of dealing with an extended period of time when adult status was denied them. However a problem with this viewpoint is that it appears to neglect class differences between young people which could make their experiences of life very different. Through the decades since Albert Cohen's (1955) sociological study of the culture of youth gangs in Chicago, subcultures have been regarded in the main as a working class pursuit. Cohen subscribed to the view that working class youth use the gang as a means whereby they can react against and adjust to a dominant middle-class society which discriminate against them because of their lower-class position. Thus the boy racers 'status frustration' was made visible through their noisy cars, loud music and a particularly aggressive re-styling of the cars they drove. However it may be a little unfair to position youth subcultures in Britain with the subcultural gang existence in America as researched by Cohen, because American subcultures are arguably not typically sites of resistance. Whilst they may have their badges, trademarks or 'colours' to signify allegiance to a particular group (see Allen, 2004) there is a tendency for American subcultures to be alternatively business enterprises and communities of identity, whose basis is formed on racial and ethnic identities, territory and neighbourhood such as the gangs and youth subcultures of Harlem and China Town (Allen, 2004).

To some extent sociological analysis of youth culture (or cultures) has adopted the view of young people as a problematic category in that it has focused upon *spectacular* youth cultures (see Cohen, S. 1973, Coggans and McKellar, 1995, Hall and Jefferson, 1976, Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, and Hebdige, 1998). These are the cultures which construct themselves as spectacles in such a way that they are both *meant* and *want* to be seen, looked at and judged by others as different. Critical to this spectacularity is the adoption of

a particular style often sought through a shared mode of dress, a blend of tastes in music, clothes and even body language, the use of recreational drugs or alcohol. The young men who became part of my research had many of these things in common including a ownership of similar styles of motor car together with their own unwritten, yet widely accepted codes of conduct which I discuss in Chapter 5.

Some cultural studies which are pertinent to my research, (see Gabriel and Lang, 1998; Bengry-Howell, 2004; Miles, 1998; Connell, 2003 and Willis, 1978) regard the relation of subculture to consumer culture as part of a project of using the materials at hand (objects, symbols, time) to make sense of and practically deal with the very contradictory social situations that youth find itself in. Thus boy racers have gone some way to identify the contradictions and hypocrisy associated with police *Construction and Use* regulations which impose laws relating to what can or cannot be done in terms of what they describe as modding or altering a cars performance and appearance, and the car accessory market which provides the resources through which to carry out some extreme modifications which are clearly at odds with the legal requirements imposed through statutory regulations. Whilst much of the boy racer's acquisition of the latter denigrates the former, the very activities of their subculture (if that is what it is) on the one hand seeks to legitimate the cultural hegemony by their existence, whilst on the other the very elements of their subculture have been adopted by large corporate industries commodified and turned into consumer objects, such as graphics, slogans with provocative messages, personal and car accessories.

If boy racers *have* created a subculture, then it should also be seen in terms of its non-verbal character, rooted in their choice of music, their personal image, their cars, mode of dress and their stance on life. Willis (1978) argues through his account of the expressive style of a male motorbike culture, that most minority cultures do *not* use verbal codes and

are therefore opaque to conventional sociology and state institutions such as the police and the media. However it could be suggested that it is the very characteristics of the modified motorcar, through appearance and noise, or the driving behaviour exhibited by some young male drivers that give rise to media headlines such as '*Police Disperse 200 Boy Racers after Run to Sun*' (see for example Western Morning News May, 2003). Suddenly the opaque becomes both transparent and spectacular and thus any young male seen driving a particular style of car can be immediately targeted and labelled as subscribing to the boy racer culture.

The majority of youth cultures which have been the subject of sociological debate over the years appear to be made up of young people from working class backgrounds and youth / adolescence has been the focus of concern amongst academic and policy-makers throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and especially over the past 20 years (see Cohen 1997; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Roche and Tucker 1996, and Wyn and White 1996). Much of previous research rests on the assertion that the life experiences of young people in modern industrial societies have changed significantly and they have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). This includes fundamental shifts in transitions from education systems to labour markets for young people and extended periods of semi-dependency as they face delayed and disrupted transitions from home to independence; something which is more often than not reliant upon whether or not they can afford to house and support themselves independently; a situation which is common amongst many of my respondents who yearn for independence and potentially a home of their own but are curtailed from achieving this through lack of money and the opportunity to earn a realistic wage.

Previous research provided on the one hand by sociologists such as Stanley Cohen (1973), Phil Cohen (1997) and the Birmingham School of Contemporary Cultural Studies, and

through works such as *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976) by Hall and Jefferson, has found 'working class' to be a common factor in spectacular youth cultures. This raises the question as to why there would appear to be a greater prevalence of working-class youth than middle class ones pursuing this alternative, something that is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6. These arguments suggest that there are certain problems faced by working class youth because of their class position that are intensified by their young age. They tend to lack power and authority, have few material resources and cannot necessarily expect rewarding employment and their adult life does not hold out much hope for them, all of which is substantiated by my own research and discussed in relation to the boy racers education and employment opportunities in Chapter 4. Under these circumstances, the adoption of a subcultural style offers other rewards in terms of status and approval, an identity and a place in the world circumscribed by fellow participants, and a sense of being in control of at least some part of your life. The adoption of a youth culture of this kind can therefore be considered as a *symbolic* resistance to society's definition of working class life. It is symbolic because it takes over conventional images such as in the case of this particular research, a young man owning and driving a particular type of motor car, and imbuing it with new and unusual and perhaps surprising meaning(s) or using an expensive make and model or particular type of car to signify status and wealth.

Through the preceding discussions it could be assumed that the qualities and qualifications necessary for being regarded as part of a youth subculture includes being a youth; being predominately male; being of working class background; fulfilling the 'spectacular' through individual and collective actions where there is both an *intention* and *need* to be regarded by others, sharing with small groups of like-minded people modes of dress; tastes in music, clothes; leisure pursuits and a replication of body language and mannerisms, and displaying resistance to what may be perceived to be rules imposed by the dominant ruling classes. With this in mind, it would be fair to suggest that boy racers may indeed be

regarded as a youth subculture, and one of the possible attractions membership or association with youth subcultures can hold, is that of risk.

## **Speed and Risk-taking**

The life experiences of young people in today's society are significantly different to the experiences of young people over the last two if not three decades, something which Furlong and Cartmel confirm by saying that, 'Young people in contemporary industrial societies have to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents... irrespective of social background or gender' (1997: 1). The contemporary German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that we now live in a risk society and that contemporary industrial societies have undergone considerable change in recent years. Beck argues that what is of great significance in society today is the increasing degree of risk which technology brings to our daily lives. To this effect the car, one of the greatest feats of engineering readily available to man, is easily placed to present a daily risk to anyone who may come into contact with it; albeit as pedestrian, driver or passenger, and I discuss the extent of the boy racers risky practices in Chapter 7.

For many young people the onset of car ownership may be regarded as conferring or suggesting dimensions of citizenship and status which had been previously blocked by age, low economic position or geographical isolation. It may also be seen as offering a compensatory prestige against all these. For most however, the simple act of obtaining a drivers licence symbolises a coming of age, a point whereby you enter adulthood (Marsh and Collett 1986). At what stage however, do some of these young vehicle owners find themselves being singled out for media and statutory attention and what actions or characteristics do they manifest which lead others to imbue them with the title boy racer? Carrabine and Longhurst (1999), draw attention to the fact that what they perceive to be

the more socially deprived and deviant sections of today's youth, are more likely to negotiate consumption of the motor car through the acts of theft and joy-riding; activities which the media attribute to boy racers' and places them in an arena which is essentially the preserve of young men and inevitably leads to proclamations that the 'Youth of today is out of control' (Jones, 1999: 42). Perhaps one could argue that boy racers' have come to regard the car rather like some people regard alcohol; they are both ideal vehicles for transforming behaviour in what is locally experienced as quite a radical 'flip' from a highly normative order to what would be regarded, again locally, as a highly transgressive disorder. This has resulted in what Garvey observes to be 'A particular genre of dangerous or 'deviant' driving [which becomes] a clear equivalent to 'drunkenness' in their repertoire of their forms of practice' (2001: 23).

Using the car to transform behaviour, although potentially regarded as an act of deviancy when the behaviour is accompanied by risky practices or dangerous driving, may be the preserve of those who have more of a predilection towards risk taking than others, yet there is a notion that a sensation seeking personality has also been related to a diverse group of observed behavioural differences (see Blaszczynski, Wilson and McConaghy, 1986). Social influence can act as a powerful constraint on rule breaking behaviour but conversely it can also encourage it, and when certain types of young men get together with certain types of vehicles the likelihood of risk taking increases. As an example of this, a foundation report created by the Automobile Association suggests that,

'Typically 'safe' drivers had regular girlfriends, while 'unsafe' ones spent more time with male friends. This turns out to be a key factor because separate studies have shown that young men drive more slowly when carrying older adults or girlfriends as passengers and faster when the others in the car are other young men' (Johnstone, September, 1998).

Each time boy racers' engaged in performative activities there was a significant gamble attached. The risk was often two-fold; the level of success of their intended action, against something going wrong with their performance. The thrill gained, was not always through competition with one another, but more so from the arousal they gained from the actual experience and I describe this in Chapters 5 and 7. Brown's (1986) arousal theory of gambling suggests that most gamblers lead an insufficiently stimulating life so that they use the gambling opportunities to increase arousal levels to a more pleasurable level and repeatedly seek the experience. It may be possible that the boy racers' flagrant disregard for road traffic laws and social conventions or the arbitrary and agreed uniformities that co-ordinate the behaviour of individuals within a particular social system, was used to the same effect. Conventional transgressions of law or overt breaches of social etiquette are all accompanied by elements of risk. Sometimes the very notion of choice itself is volatile, how much risk should we undertake now or should we defer to another and more appropriate time? Why do we find it necessary to take risks in the first place? For some individuals there is a propensity to seek novel, varied or complex sensations or experiences and thus they display a willingness to take risks for risks sake which is certainly true of some of my younger participants.

A study by Breen (1998) has shown that impulsivity is another reason why risks are taken. Impulsivity is significantly related to the gambling phenomena of 'chasing' which describes the experience of gamblers who, when losing, continue to gamble as a means to 'get even'. The more money or resources lost, the more intense becomes the chase (Lesieur, 1993). In the same way, boy racers used power and the continual quest for increased speed from their cars through a variety of modifications and up-rating of engines in order to become the best at achieving the fastest time in strip-racing (or time trials), or the fastest individual to blow tyres during burn-out competitions. For it is through such

activities that they were most likely to gain recognition in the hierarchical pecking order of their peer group.

## Summary

The subject of youth has inevitably been the focus of concern amongst academics and policy makers throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and whilst many of the discourses relate to youth and youth 'problems' inevitably at various stages there are also rationales concerning a moral panic involving young people which could be deemed to be fashionable at the time. Each decade seems to bring with it its own crisis involving youth, and boy racers have become one of the more recent manifestations, having many of the characteristics associated with other youth subcultures. To this effect the very nature of being a young man in charge of a car would appear to be associated with controversy and risk. Alternatively, there is the potential to argue that the *rites de passage*, the maturational process whereby teenage boys approach manhood, inevitably brings with it delinquency, disenchantment, confusion and rebellion. It is this particular period or critical life event which could initiate the desire in many to assert their masculinity through the appearance, power and performance of the car.

Notions of masculinity was an ever present theme to emerge from my research and tended to predominate towards certain macho values such as physical strength, courage and toughness which has been discussed by a number of theorists including Peterson (2004), Groombridge (1988) and Gilbert and Constantine (2005). In addition, Beck (1992) suggests that identities within society are largely determined by the work that people do, and similarly Connell (2003) believes that for men in particular, working in the type of employment which relies on physical strength, endurance, and a display of toughness can be regarded as a means of survival, as exploitation of class relations and as a means of

asserting superiority. Yet where Beck and Connell refer to 'work' and 'employment', it would be fair to suggest that they are referring to *paid* employment and I would argue that there is a tension surrounding this work / identity relationship, particularly in terms of my own research participants and this theme is explored in more depth in Chapters 4-7.

I also pointed out that Miller (2001) has acknowledged that cars can be both integral to identity and daily life and other theorists such as Barthes (1957) have suggested that cars are both used and consumed in image, and Urry (2000) recognised the extent to which they have achieved a high visibility in the social landscape and cultural imagery over the last century. Whilst Featherstone (1990), has suggested that there has been an upsurge of academic interest in recent years in the movement and mobility in social life, I would argue that one of the dominant forms of mobility, the car, has been a neglected topic within sociology, cultural studies and related disciplines. Where discussions pertaining to the car have existed, they have reflected upon the perception that it was almost exclusively for the use of men, certainly until the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries. Furthermore, the results of these often varied explorations have tended to reflect a juxtaposition of different explanations drawn by different commentators with little attempt to sort them out or bring consistency to them, and I believe that my research has been more successful at capturing the essence of men's relationship with their cars and in particular how they use them as an essential ingredient in the structure of identity-making.

When I began my research, I could find very little in the way of academic literature which discussed men's association with the car and particularly young men's consumption of the car, the type of performative car-related practices they engaged with or how they used their cars as a medium for communication and for personal self-definition. Furthermore, there was hardly any reference to boy racers apart from within a criminological context. There was however a significant amount of psychological research available, particularly

which examined the symbolic consumption perspective associated with consumption of the car, which is relevant to some aspects of my own research and is discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6.

The psycho-social element associated with consumption or the acquisition of consumer goods, including cars, is undoubtedly significant in the construction and maintenance of self-identity, social status and an attempt to feel better about oneself (see in particular Dittmar 1998, and Friese and Koenig 1993). The symbolic consumption perspective proposes that consumers not only consume *actual* products, but also, or even instead of, consume the symbolic meanings of those products. Indeed material possessions express and communicate personal and social aspects of identity and certainly for their part, cars are admirably placed to make public statements about their owners as well as provide them with another form of private space which I address in some detail within Chapters 6 and 7.

We try to attain private space in almost any situation (see Baudrillard 1993), and the car was well positioned to provide the boy racers with a 'room of their own'. Within it they could be reclusive, conduct their private business and socialise with friends. Friendships and belonging to a particular cohort of boy racers were important to my participants, and it was not always easy for me to access these sites. In the next chapter I will discuss my negotiations with various cohorts of boy racers for acceptance into their personal, private and public space, my chosen methodology for this research, and my ensuing 'edgework'. This included travelling with them in their cars, and for a time becoming an accepted part of their world.

## Chapter 3

### The Research Methodology

#### Choosing Ethnography

Historically ethnography has been one of the driving forces for qualitative social science. It is based upon fieldwork which inevitably involves the collection of complex data from multiple sources, an appreciation of context, and a lengthy engagement with research informants which, in this particular case, has been in excess of three years. Harris and Johnson refer to ethnography as meaning 'A portrait of people...a written description of a particular culture, the customs, beliefs and behaviour' (2000: 12). My research is designed to paint a portrait of the lived experiences of the boy racers in Cornwall. It uncovers them as they see themselves, the eponymous heroes of street car culture and exposes, in some detail, their beliefs and behaviours. It also recounts the extent to which the geographical positioning of their homes has an impact on their young lives and that of their families.

Whilst it is acknowledged that many of the research methods I have already described are also used outside ethnographical research, what distinguishes their use in ethnography is utilisation towards meeting the characteristic aims and approach of ethnography. There are many criticisms of the ethnographic style of research and through his 1992 publication Martin Hammersley asked *What's Wrong with Ethnography* not least of all because it can be regarded as non-scientific, or in other words, it fails to meet the criteria of the natural sciences. It is also regarded critically because of the way the role of the researcher is viewed. The natural science model for example does not permit the researcher to become a variable in the experiment, yet ethnographers are not detached from the research, but rather are themselves often part of the study, or perhaps by the nature of their presence, could influence the study.

Coffey (1999) argues that researchers should be aware of how fieldwork research and ethnographic writing construct, reproduce and implicate selves, relationships and personal identities. I soon became aware of the extent to which my own pre-lived experience around cars and young men was likely to inform my approach to my participants. I was also aware how my attitude changes whilst involved in some of the activities carried out by the young men, could become part of the data; most pertinently whilst witnessing the impact of social and economic deprivation, witnessing or being part of high risk, performative displays and of coping with the emotional responses to fatalities involving some young men who had been participating in my research.

Seeking a methodology or selecting the most appropriate tools through which to gain insight into the cultural world of boy racers, was not simply selecting a particular tried and tested means of qualitative exploration, rather it was more to do with being reflexive, utilising a mosaic of methods which characterised ethnography as a style of research, and being prepared to be pragmatic and adaptable. It also required an acknowledgment that the entire exercise was going to be both labour intensive and time consuming if I was to gain the rich data I required to complete the research and make it meaningful. Accessing primary data was gained through observation and participant observation, semi-structured interviews and conversations with young men involved in the boy racer scene. The real promise of my methods lay in their ability to reveal aspects of the social experiences and interactions of those under study which would otherwise have been hidden from both the researcher or a lay person's view of social life. Likewise participant observation and observation allowed me to see and experience first hand through what Goffman (1964) describes as 'backstage performances', seeing the young men who took part in this research in their natural settings, and with their help, trying to make sense of their individual realities. By becoming an accepted part of their day to day activities I also became a part of their lives which extended my level of access to their cars, their homes;

the occasional involuntary engagement with the police and into the Accident and Emergency departments of local hospitals. From a research perspective, this level of exposure provided me with a privileged insight into their private domains but brought with it contentious elements surrounding confidentiality and ethical considerations and the risk of becoming personally involved in their problems and dramas. To this effect it was important for me to retain as much detachment as possible to prevent the research becoming clouded by emotional and or personal involvement with individuals.

As noted in Chapter 2, when I began my research there was little sociological research on the subject of the relationship between men and their cars, or indeed male consumption of the car and car-related practices and thus I felt that the only way I could develop an understanding of this, was to gain experience at first hand. Furthermore, I was interested in the encounters on the streets between boy racers, ordinary citizens, motorists and authority figures such as the police and it was my belief that occurrences such as these, together with the apparent redefining of public space, and the encouragement of informal social control over a given area by the boy racers such as through their meets or cruises, could only be witnessed and experienced *in situ*, see Figure 5 (below).



**Figure 5: Redefining public space and demonstrating a ‘burn-out’**

To become part of the spectacular scene like that shown above, I rejected many of the more structured research techniques as being unable to penetrate to where the action was much in the same way as Goffman had ‘Mistrusted them as likely to provide unreliable

guidelines as to actual behaviour' (Goffman, cited in Hammersley, 2000: 185). Thus with dialogue often the backbone of ethnography, my prior understanding or depth of knowledge about car culture and practical mechanics, as well as my familiarity with 'street car speak', the terminology used by boy racers, strengthened my position as a potential, if not initially peripheral, interested party. I believed that the key to my research being successful, was to cultivate an aura of trust with my participants, which would involve accompanying them at their meets, or cruises or whilst they engaged in performative and often illegal activities.

The illegality of some of their activities often raised ethical concerns and I was to decide early on in my research where the borders of legitimacy lay in terms of whether I was likely to be condoning the commission of a crime under certain circumstances, or even aiding and abetting, by virtue of my presence. Nonetheless, one of the most important considerations was to protect my participants' identities and this was particularly pertinent due to their occasional disenfranchisement with the police and other local authority figures. Protecting, or trying to protect them from harm was another issue because it was not possible to be with them on a 24 hour a day basis, and I was painfully aware of their risky driving behaviours on several occasions, none more so than when some of the young men I had associated with during my research period, subsequently died as a result of their involvement in road traffic accidents.

The boy racers public notoriety which manifested through media reports often portrayed them as disaffected youths, who displayed poor or dangerous driving behaviours and disregard for other road users. These behaviours set them apart from the majority of young and law-abiding, male car drivers and, if detected and processed through the judicial system, some boy racers found themselves in receipt of punitive measures including Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs) issued by the police and imposed by local

magistrates. With this knowledge, I could have attended magistrates' courts and followed court transcripts where young men were processed through the judicial system for offences involving motor vehicles. However I felt that this approach would be time consuming and relatively unproductive because the number of young men, or boy racers who were caught for misdemeanours involving traffic violations were likely to represent a small minority of those who subscribed to the street car culture.

My initial investigation discovered that many of the boy racers 'hung out' in large 'closed' groups which for the purpose of my research, I have regarded as hard-to-reach. I have accorded them this title because they were regarded as marginal people, or those who Turner (2005) describes as 'edgemen'; those who strive with passionate sincerity to enter into the mainstream society in which they live, but frequently end up on the periphery, unwelcome, and who in turn, become the unwelcoming. If I was to be successful in recording the minutiae and rich tapestry of the daily lives of the boy racers, employing ethnographic methods would I believe, give me the means to tap into the public and private domains of the boy racers in a way that other methods would not.

Ethnographic methods are a means of tapping into local points of view and community 'funds of knowledge' or as a means of identifying significant categories of human experiences in a way which is 'up close and personal' (Moll and Grenberg, 1990). Typical ethnographic research employs three kinds of data collection: interviews, observation, and documents. This in turn produces three kinds of data; quotations, descriptions, and excerpts of documents, resulting in a narrative description. This narrative often includes charts, diagrams and photographs that help to 'tell the story', and beyond the range of qualitative methodologies of interviews, observation and participant observation, I have employed other techniques including photography, archival research of newspapers and media transcripts. I have also collected material samples such as documentation relating to car-

related activities and practices associated with the boy racer and street car culture and obtained biographical histories from the young men, their family members and friends. To this effect I have used documents and extracts from local Cornish and West Country newspapers including Figures 1, 38-39, 43 and 46 as sources of references which highlight various points of view on the subjects of boy racers and cruisers. Such techniques have enriched the data in many subject areas and has been previously employed by Hammersley (1990), Madison (2005), Pink (2001), Banks (2001) and Rose (2001).

To enrich the enquiry process of my research I adopted a 'mosaic' approach, much in the same way as Clarke (2001) did in his extensive work with children and young people. In doing so I have emphasised the importance of using a range of tools which are flexible and allowed me to adapt and change elements of my approach to fit in with a particular context, environment or cohort of those under study. I also attach importance to reflexivity appreciating the value of retrospective reflection, mulling over, thinking back, evaluating and recapturing experiences. This process allowed me to continually critically assess the strengths and design of my research approach and make adjustments where necessary. It also highlighted my need to stress the contextual nature of my participants' accounts and descriptions' making it as much their story as it was my own and I discuss reflexivity in more detail within this chapter and again in Chapter 7.

As relationships with my participants developed in stages, moving from suspicion and mistrust, to a stage of facilitated contact, to a stage of meaningful connection, I was invited into many of their homes to meet with their family members. Usually introduced as "A mate", or "The bird whose writing about us", or as "So and so's friend", I was able to use this informal engagement to extract through conversations and observation, rich data about the young men's behaviours within their homes and how they engaged in day to day

activities and conversations with their families and friends. Furthermore these opportunities allowed me to gather in-depth information about the familial and domestic structure within their respective families; for example where the young men were positioned in terms of age in the event of other offspring, whether both parents were resident within the household, the type of employment they were engaged in, their socio-economic backgrounds and the geographical positioning of their homes and work environments. I routinely collated and analysed this information using deconstruction of conversations and accordingly categorised common emerging themes which helped to inform the structure of my research.

My initial group of participants were young men who worked as mechanics in local garages, who in turn identified other informants who were representative of my subject interest. The essence and appeal of immersing myself in the ensuing field-work was that it would provide a challenging and unique experience. Central would be observation and participant observation; these being the most effective way of understanding in depth the ways in which the young boy racers saw the world and interacted with it. At micro-ethnographic level my ability to identify the relevant community of young men was strengthened by my prior understanding of car culture and practical mechanics and the ability to use the language or technical jargon of their world. Furthermore, I felt that taking an ethnographic approach would be more likely to provide the answers, allowing me to virtually live alongside the young men, taking part in their daily lives and delving into the complexities and subtleties, beliefs and values which informed their existence. Ultimately I saw the key to successful research was to be there, to cultivate an aura of trust with my research participants and to be available to observe, to follow up and to take advantage of the chance event, of which there were many. In short, I became an opportunist who not only shared as intimately as possible the lives and activities of my participants, but through my 'insider's view' I not only saw what was happening but also

was able to 'feel' what it was like to be part of their world. In relation to participant observation, I felt that any opportunity for prolonged participation in the daily lives or lived experiences of the boy racers on an individual and group basis, albeit not necessarily through membership of the group, would facilitate opportunities for me to empathise with the norms, values and behaviours of those I was researching. I would to an extent become my own research instrument, developing a social relationship with group members, and emerging from the completed research able to provide a more positive picture of their lives.

To a certain extent my field work replicated that of other ethnographers and focused upon 'edgework' as defined by several writers in Ferrell and Hamm's (1998) collection of published articles. My own 'edgework' accentuated the value gained by sharing first hand the experiences of those under study, describing their activities, whilst acknowledging personal risk and using each opportunity whilst in the company of the boy racers to become immersed in, and part of the immediacy of each and every activity, including occasional transgressions of the law such as traffic misdemeanours, street racing and petty crime. I was able to take inspiration from Hammersley's (1990) perspective that creativity can be one of the core characteristics of good qualitative research and to this effect I felt that I was more *likely* to achieve *quality* by drawing fully on my personal and cultural resources. These included a father and other male family members involved in cars and motor sport, my own interest in modified cars, and working life spent as a journalist and more recently working on rehabilitation programmes with young male offenders involved in petty crime, including those involving cars, as opposed to following a set of laid-down procedures which may suffocate, limit or prevent the uninhibited richness of data which I hoped to extract from those who participated in this research.

The data collection methods I chose to use were combined flexibly to achieve the aims and approach which distinguishes ethnography as a style of research. When used as a method, ethnography typically refers to fieldwork (alternatively, participant observation), conducted by a single investigator who 'lives with and lives like' those who are studied, usually for a year or more (Van Maanen, 1983). The extent to which it is possible for a researcher to become a full participant depends partly upon the nature of the setting or participants being observed. I had two children to look after, a full-time job, plus a collection of animals which required attention none of which fitted easily into the occasional chaotic lifestyle of the boy racers who, if not working, spent time with one another at all hours of the day and night. Rearranging my schedule to accommodate theirs was easier than expecting them to negotiate changes in their own lives to suit me, even though many of them were unemployed. I felt that if I failed to fit in with them, any subsequent requests I may make for changes would have been met with resistance, particularly as they seemed to be very set in their existing routines. To this effect my full participation with them usually happened at weekends, during my occasional days off and during my annual leave periods.

As my research progressed and my relationship became more secure with the boy racers they became adept at seeking me out at home in the evenings, using my computer to search the internet for car parts, insurance quotes or to contact one of the websites devoted to boy racers. This was useful insofar as I was able to observe first hand that many of the cars and car accessories they consumed were considered special by their owners, in ways which were not merely for the articles financial value or sentimental value, but for reasons which were expressed in terms of what the possession was likely to 'tell' others about its owner. Occasions like these became almost commonplace when I would return from work to find Nixon, Shaun, Mattie and Jez or others, parked in my driveway awaiting my return with the excuse that they "needed to have a look at summat on the net". Friday nights were

favourite because this coincided with the day Autotrader became available in the shops and as Jez said, “Why part wiv a couple or three quid when you can see summat in a bigger format an get a cuppa coffee thrown in for free round a mate’s crib”. From these visits the young men in the absence of having internet access at home, were using their relationship with me to gain access to the internet, nonetheless it was reciprocal arrangement, insofar as I was learning about their culture through these visits. These reciprocal arrangements were never questioned by either the young men or I. However, although I accepted these arrangements as contributory to our ‘normal’ meetings, periods of reflexivity allowed me to constantly review my position in order to ensure that my research was not being compromised and I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 7.

## **Identifying Appropriate Research Participants**

Within my research I have attributed pseudonyms to the majority of my research participants; the exception to this is where the young men wished me to use their actual names. Their rational for this was simply that it would be disingenuous to call them by another name when they actually liked the idea of being written about. Nonetheless another objection for refusing a pseudonym was simply that they did not approve of the alternative I had given them, which in one instance, was because they perceived it to be a “poofers name”. Irrespective of the names I have used within my research, all my participants may be perceived for the purpose of this research, to have the characteristics and qualities which identified them as boy racers. However the identification and access to potential participants was not without problem, for unlike other significant groups such as Hells Angels, Goths, Punks, Mods and Rockers, a young man aged between seventeen and twenty four separated from what effectively was a badge or symbol of identification such as his car, was not always immediately recognisable as a boy racer.

My research revealed in due course that boy racers ‘played’ on two quite different ‘stages’. On the street alone, they had encounters with friends, relatives and work colleagues whereas in the evenings or at weekends they met work colleagues, friends and relatives as a ‘group’. Action or behaviour on the street was largely instrumental (albeit that it had many symbolic overtones) whereas talk in the group was almost exclusively expressive. What the individual boy racers did in their group meetings, and occasionally in their private conversations with me was to engage in talk, which was the kind of talk that *made sense* of experience. Put crudely the causal direction was the opposite of what was often imagined: street experiences influenced boy racer talk. The meets or places where they got together to talk included the fast food chain McDonald’s car parks, the isolated industrial estates, the larger food chains car parks such as Morrisons (formerly Safeway), Asda, Tesco or Sainsbury’s. These became the venues or their ‘repair shop’ of their daily existence like that in Figure 6 (below). They became the places where otherwise isolated young men went to re-affirm their collective understanding of their role, and the strand of society they policed. To this effect the methods I chose to collect information for this research had to be flexible, and I needed to be insightful and sensitive to the needs of individuals as well as groups.



Figure 6: Hundreds of boy racers and cruisers converge at an evening meet

My close proximity to the boy racers revealed the considerable time they spent handling, comparing, discussing their cars and any newly acquired accessories or modifications. As such these gestures did much to signify their attempts to claim from those inanimate objects their symbolic properties, such as inferred status, taste and power and the type of messages they perceived ownership of such items would convey to others. For example representing or signifying monetary value, inferred status and power to others, and was revealed through comments such as this from Jake and Mattie, “Our motors and the stuff in ‘em like the music systems and stuff like that are the most valuable and expensive stuff we owns”. Whereas the ensuing comments from Jack demonstrated what he perceived to be enhanced independence, autonomy, freedom and self-expression for others to see.

“Yeah well nobody took no notice of me car before so I added graphics, some mean body kit, lowered the suspension and added a set of Alloys, just makin’ it like what you see in them magazines like Max Power, it sounds kinda mean as well. It’s like well, Jackie Boy’s commin’ and he’s some cool dude in his mean machine”.

Setting themselves up to attract attention has ensured that many of the boy racers were targets for police attention; see Figure 7 (below). Although much of this was gained through their performative practices or though the type of vehicle they drove, some had convictions for motoring offences or offences relating to property, to motor vehicles or public order offences. They were then overtly suspicious of anyone who appeared as an outsider, showing more than a passing interest in themselves or their vehicles.



**Figure 7: Police presence at a meet**

The world of the boy racer was therefore closed to those who did not share similar characteristics, interests and behaviours. It was quintessentially a world which showed a bias towards men and some male pursuits. To this effect the idea of a female gaining open access to their public, personal and often very private domains with the intention of placing them under scrutiny for the purpose of research would be under normal circumstances, quite daunting. It was highly unlikely that I, as a female researcher, could simply gain access to potential participants by donning the guise of boy racer because I was neither a boy, nor of the applicable age group. Furthermore I did not drive a vehicle consistent with those from the boy racer culture.

Locating the places where they gathered or selecting potential research participants to communicate with, was initially never to be a simple case of acquiring a schedule of forthcoming meeting places or events, or even negotiating access to groups or individuals through a gatekeeper such as a club chairperson or secretary. Neither was striking up a conversation with a likely looking candidate in a public car park with the hope that *he* may be *the one* to open up a rich line of enquiry and provide me with unlimited access to potential participants. My main task therefore, became one of trying to outwit their natural defence mechanisms and negotiate a way through the minefield of social defences they employ to prevent outsiders from accessing the inner realities of their lives. To select prolonged participant observation seemed to be the most appropriate, but not the sole method of achieving these ends and despite perhaps my perceived disadvantage of gender, age and lack of an appropriate vehicle prohibiting normal access to potential participants, the fact that I had been raised in a climate of motor sport and had more than a minimal grasp of understanding the mechanical functioning of a car's engine, equipped me with an advantage. I thus became an opportunist, which necessitated enterprise and innovation, and an ability to detect or manipulate an opportunity to engage with or construct a situation which would allow me to engage at differing levels with potential research participants.

Nonetheless being an opportunist was accompanied by self-imposed guidelines which I used to 'police' my enthusiasm for data gathering. One of these ensured that for my research to be effective, non-threatening for the participants and meaningful for us both, I had to be sure that the research would take place in what was for the boys, naturally occurring settings. Another of my self-policing activities ensured that I used methods which were most likely to capture the social meanings and ordinary activities of the boy racers, whilst involving me as the researcher, participating directly in their settings although not always in their activities. I felt that this approach would allow me to collect data in a systematic manner without imposing any external influence upon the participants within my study. The capture of events with such social meanings has been referred to by Clifford Geertz (1972) as gaining 'thick descriptions' or in other words 'telling it like it is' or, revealing 'insider knowledge' (Geertz cited in Miller et al, 2003: 99-100). However, here arose the concern as to the extent to which the participants were likely to modify their behaviour in the presence of someone they knew was engaged in research. Becker (1963), suggests that people under observation will not keep up an act of pretence or present an alternative behaviour for long because the activities they are engaged in are often more important to them, than the fact that an outsider is present. In time I felt that my appearances were becoming so commonplace that the young men I was studying had ceased to regard me as a potential threat, disruption or focus of curiosity and my immersion in such fieldwork would ultimately contribute to the degree of knowledge which is lacking in an academic environment.

## **Entering the Field**

My initial exploration for participants and situations began with a chance encounter at a garage which specialised in the sale of car body modifications, wheels and tyres which were much sought after by boy racers. My presence there was a bona fide visit to replace

the tyres on my Cherokee Jeep which coincided with the lunch-break for the younger mechanics. During this period one of the mechanics had brought his car into the workshop to show off a new bodykit which he had recently fitted onto his de-badged car and to further negotiate the purchase of a new set of wheels with the garage owner. I had been ushered towards a seat in the corner of the workshop, given a rather grimy mug of black coffee and told to remain there until the tyres on my vehicle had been replaced.

The 'seat' I had been offered was a red leather double rear seat from an old car, fashioned into a settee. The posters on the walls of the workshop were of scantily clad females captured by camera in unlikely poses with various car parts, and of large American 'muscle cars' and grinning young men in baseball caps. New and used vehicle parts adorned other spaces on the walls and boxes of chrome and steel wheels languished alongside a wide range of car exhaust systems filling every available space possible. The reading materials clearly positioned for occupants of the settee to read spilled from a battered cardboard crate and consisted of popular car magazines such as *Revs*, *Red-line*, *Auto Trader* and *Max Power*. Some pages had clearly been ripped out and those which remained, their curled edges, creased appearance and traces of oily fingerprints across the pages indicated the level of attention they had received from ardent readers keen to see the latest commodities on the car scene, and perhaps even compare prices to those displayed within this garage.

I drank the coffee, its black bitterness a shock against my throat and its scalding temperature was a stark contrast to the coldness of the workshop; this was to be the first of many occasions spent in cold cramped conditions curled up on a car seat and one in a succession of unpalatable drinks which were to sustain me over the coming months. I listened to the conversation amongst those present in the workshop, the talk amongst the young men and the garage owner revealed that the set of wheels under debate would

actually be worth more than the vehicle, and further discussion revealed that the stereo fitted in the car was also worth more than the vehicle, yet both were considered essential ingredients in the pursuit of getting noticed and gaining respect from peers.

Although perhaps to an individual detached from the boy racer culture, this embellished Renault sitting before me was no beauty and on the surface was unlikely to turn heads in the street in the same way that one which had cost a hundred times more, its young owner had found a way of making a personal statement through the work he had carried out on his car and although the statement was fashioned by economic necessity, using his fabrication skills as opposed to buying 'off the shelf' components, it clearly gave him a sense of pride and announced to everyone that he was indeed the owner of a 'hot machine'.

Despite being located mere feet away from the four young men I was aware of the content of their conversation, yet to them I was quite invisible and they chatted amiably to one another discussing the events of the previous weekend, the illegal cruise they had attended, a colleague's recent accident, the speed cameras they had tried to outrun, the forthcoming court appearance of one of them and the upgrades and modifications they intended to carry out on their respective vehicles in the near future. During a lull in their conversation I gave voice to an observation surrounding the modification to the vehicle on display in front of me. Four pairs of horrified eyes turned towards me and an uneasy silence fell. They looked me up and down, their eyes raked my appearance for a clue through which they could categorise me in terms of interested bystander, nosey female or insignificant 'other', and glanced at each other for support. None was seemingly forthcoming, their raised eyebrows and the occasional curled lip of disapproval were aimed solely in my direction. Feeling some discomfort under this unveiled mixture of disapproval and curiosity I felt that this was an ideal moment to attempt to reveal the only qualifications I felt I had which may gain me access to their world and once again I became an opportunist.

I left my seat and walked towards the car they were standing by, glancing around the car I commented, "K & N filter, Powerflow exhaust," and whilst continuing my walk around the car I gestured, "16 inch Lenso RSS alloys, customised badboy bonnet, de-handled, de-locked, de-trimmed, terminator front bumper and sideskirts, smoothed boot. You could do with Mark 3 mirrors and how about Lexus rear clusters to finish off the smoothed boot".

I was momentarily faced with a dilemma, silently asking myself what I should do now. Should I return to my seat and act as if this was quite usual behaviour or should I stand and wait to see how they responded? Opting for the first choice in order to give them space, and me time, I returned to my seat and sat down. Again four pairs of eyes regarded me nervously and the boys glanced at one another silently, the one who appeared to be the owner of the car took a step towards me with the others falling in behind him. Fiddling nervously with the steel watch which was too big for his skinny wrist and hung down across the back of his hand, but nonetheless was undoubtedly a 'real' man's time piece, he inclined his head firstly at the car and then back in my direction, "Okay, it's de-badged, de-trimmed and so what is it if you know that much?" he asked. "It's a Renault" I replied. They all looked at me disdainfully, the owner rolling his eyes upwards and sniffing. "All right" I responded, "It is, or rather it was, a Clio". A furious debate ensued amongst them as to "How come she knows so much" yet no-one sought to ask me, and once again my perceived invisibility descended as they returned to their respective tasks. A few more minutes elapsed and the garage owner appeared to inform me that my own vehicle was ready for collection. As I went to the rear of the garage to collect it, the young mechanics from the earlier conversation slouched casually in front of it, hands in pockets, kicking the ground aimlessly, nonchalantly chewing gum or smoking and refraining from making eye contact with me yet effectively blocking my access to the vehicle. The one closest to me momentarily allowed his eyes to meet mine as I pushed past him, he reddened slightly and hastily averted his gaze "Are you the filth (police)?" one asked. Reassuring them that I

had no connection to the police they visibly relaxed. Various questions emerged from them each demonstrating a curiosity surrounding my apparent level of knowledge which I attempted to answer in terms which would satisfy them, whilst at the same time using the opportunity to explain to them my proposed research and enquire as to how best I could elicit their help. There was initially a jocular response but in the main they displayed a willingness to become involved and contribute towards the research, but were also hesitant as to the extent they were prepared to familiarise me about their activities, in their full entirety. A succession of further planned meetings took place at the garage (see Figure 8, below), together with a number of casual encounters in other locations and there ensued three months of interactions at differing levels with the same cohort of young men, the purposes of which was to establish a veil of mutual trust and to assess the feasibility of such relationships and their suitability for research purposes.



**Figure 8: Saturday morning, 'Hanging out' at the garage**

### **Increasing the Number of Research Participants**

From the developing relationships with the four young mechanics I had met, I chose to use those relationships to provide access to other key informants using the snowball system of sampling. I felt that amongst the benefits were its potential to allow me to uncover aspects

of the social experiences of boy racers which were often hidden from view or far removed from, for example, a lay person's experiences of social life. Furthermore, this provided an ascending methodology which would allow me to work upwards by first locating those on the ground (the boy racers), which I needed in order to gain knowledge on a variety of social contexts surrounding this group of young men. In time, I felt that this type of activity would allow me to attain more comprehensive data on a subject which has been in receipt of little attention from sociologists to date, which was in direct contrast to the over-exposure this group had received from the Criminal Justice system and the media. In general terms, my technique could simply be defined as a method for finding research participants where, 'One subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on' (Vogt, 1992: 2).

This method has a number of advantages for sampling hard-to-reach populations and deprived populations, including those perceived to be suffering social stigmatisation. It is also regarded in research as a useful method in accessing the young, male and unemployed and the criminal fraternity and has been used successfully by Avico et al, (1998); Caplan (1997) and Sudman and Freeman, (1998). Many of the young men involved in my research felt that they had become stigmatised or singled out for occasionally unwarranted attention by the authorities simply due to the type of car they were driving. Likewise many of them arguably lived in deprived populations or families where unemployment had dogged their lives and occasional employment had been undertaken through economic necessity rather than through personal choice. The very nature of identifying potential respondents who were then used to refer on to other potential respondents allowed me to access what were very often vulnerable and impenetrable social groups of young men. As a method it could also be placed within a wider set of link-tracing methodologies which sought to take advantage of the social networks of the identified participants and were then used to provide me with an ever expanding set of potential participants which Berg describes as

‘...a process based upon the assumption that a bond or link exists between the initial sample and others in the same target population, allowing a series of referrals to be made within a circle of acquaintance,” (Berg, 1988: 8).

An early example of using this sampling technique to good effect is Patrick’s (1973) study of a Glasgow gang which utilised initial contacts to generate contexts and encounters that were used to study the gang dynamic. Although it is unusual to hear of groups of boy racers being referred to as gangs, much in the same way Hells Angels were not described as gangs but more as ‘Chapters’; the way certain groups of boy racers appeared and behaved as a cohesive band of young men, led me to draw certain comparisons with the characteristics of the ‘gang’ in as much as there were still issues of male dominance and power where individuals within the groups competed for status to prove their manliness through displays of bravado, daring and driving skills.

Studies by Spergel and Curry (1992) and Ball and Curry (1995) into the construction of the gang shows that there is usually some identifiable form of leadership, membership criteria and organisational structure which they affirm is present with gangs but not apparent in most British youth cultures. I would argue that there was a structure of similar ilk within certain groups of boy racers albeit of a more loose and variable structure which perhaps did not depend upon the face to face interaction with, or an obligation to other members such as that which may be found in a gang. The snowball technique has been used to great effect in other studies of other hard-to-reach groups (see Avico et al, 1998; Caplan 1997; McNamara, 1994; Sudman and Freeman, 1998).

Unlike the majority of gangs which are generally located in urban areas, boy racers’ meets or cruises invariably involved driving considerable distances to access them. On the map shown in Figure 9 (below) Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly appear geographically vast and remote from Devon and accounts for approximately 1,300 square miles. The map also

helps to convey an idea of the distance travelled by the young men from my research, for example from Penzance to Saltash represents a distance of approximately 90 miles in one direction and an hour and a half drive at the minimum. Cruises to Exeter were well in excess of 100 miles, in one direction.



Figure 9: Map of Cornwall (source: [www.intocornwall.com](http://www.intocornwall.com))

Membership of what may be regarded as an exclusive club had ‘condensed’ the geographic area above and by subscribing to such websites as South West Cruisers or Celtic Cruisers ([www.southwestcruisin.co.uk](http://www.southwestcruisin.co.uk) and [www.celtic-cruise.co.uk](http://www.celtic-cruise.co.uk)); sites dedicated to young car owners or enthusiasts in the South West, boy racers had been able to exchange information with others across the geographic area via internet access. Undoubtedly before such a facility, boy racers within the Bodmin area at the far North of Cornwall, would be unlikely to know any similar young men from Penzance in the far West of the County. Through the use of the South West Cruisers and Celtic Cruisers web sites the geographical distance no longer prohibited interaction between groups and friendships developed ‘on line’ through chat room forums. This medium for communication removed the need for the social niceties which usually paved the way for more meaningful conversations when individuals

found themselves in close physical proximity to strangers during a social event. Following these web site contributions over a period of time offered readers a scripted visual account of the re-building or modification of someone's car often including a photographic record of the process. Other users of the web site followed progress and added their comments on line. These websites served another purpose, one which allowed the young men (and to a lesser degree girls), to learn about planned cruises including the largely illegal gatherings of often hundreds of young men and their cars. The following is typical of such an entry giving one young man's account from his perspective, following attendance at the Guildford Cruise which took place on 1<sup>st</sup> August, 2004.

'Quite a lot of police presence, they were also quite active, pulling at random anyone with a modified car. Note this was ONLY modified cars, for example a standard civic went past, driven by an old guy with one light fully out. The policewoman took a look, noticed no mods and did nothing. She was not in any other way busy....that's discrimination for you eh? Loads of cars and people but none of the shmcc lot that I know. A lot of Supra's though – about 5 at one stage which was nice to see. Cheers for now, James'. ([www.isitaboat.co.uk/cruises/guildford](http://www.isitaboat.co.uk/cruises/guildford)).

The young man's apparent concern that the police were selecting drivers of modified cars for special attention, whilst seemingly ignoring the more standardised models, was a theme which pervaded the majority of web sites. It particularly highlighted the dual role participants played in research, that of the observed AND the observers.

## **Participant Observation**

A feature of ethnography is the concept of the research process being inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses (Genzuk, 2003). This way the focus of my research surrounding the contemporary cultural world of boy racers was narrowed and sharpened and as the research proceeded it enabled the development of descriptions and explanations over the course of my enquiries. Building

trust and rapport at the entry stage was essential because it could have been easy to forget that I as the researcher-observer was also being observed and evaluated by the young men under study. In terms of the field-work, I initially decided to assign myself to one particular group of boy racers consisting of twenty regular individuals and their respective 'hangers on'. These included those not quite old enough to hold driving licences, others who held licences but were temporarily suspended from driving, and those who were enthusiasts but did not own a car, including siblings of the boy racers. It was not practical to assign myself to more than the one group because it would be too large a number with which to build up a relationship. I also selected my key-participants wisely, drawing on the wisdom of their informed perspectives, but maintaining awareness that their perspectives were often limited.

Over a period of three years I got to know different cohorts of boy racers across the county and beyond, and ultimately well over two hundred and fifty young men became regular participants in the research project but the closest relationships were retained with the original twenty and as a series of fatalities fractured the close, almost familial structure of the group, the relationships between us became bound by tragedy as well as research. Within the first 6 months of my research a keen participant known to us all as "T" was killed in a car accident. Over the ensuing years many other young men with whom I had spent a great deal of time in pursuit of my research, also died, one through suicide but all the others as drivers or passengers in fatal car accidents. Here it became difficult to separate the moments when I assumed the role of ethnographer and when I resumed the role of simply being 'me'. Nonetheless, I was aware that consciousness of the social and physical proximities was obviously an essential quality for successful ethnography (Fetterman, 1991). More importantly I could not dismiss or abandon this awareness when I stepped out of the research role, for 'this sense of awareness becomes instinctive' and as

such it stood me in good stead and helped me retain objectivity, irrespective of the often indescribably difficult circumstances (Roth, 1962: 284).

Initially my fieldwork was routine, getting to know the individuals involved and where they stood in the unofficial hierarchal position within the group. Much of the routine involved riding in a car with one or two of the boy racers during weekends or evening drives or cruises. As familiarity with them grew, rides became more regular and they would phone me to tell me they were going to such and such a venue or would unexpectedly call for me en route. It would rarely be the same driver, and for the first few weeks I appeared to be allowed in about 15 different vehicles, with each driver quizzing me about the type of 'drive' I had experienced with his predecessor, in terms of time spent, quality of drive and level of buzz or excitement provided by the experience. It was almost as if they were using the information I provided about the experiences of my last 'ride' as a yardstick against which to measure their own performance. Eventually Nathan, one of the drivers, who was also one of the mechanics I had first approached, appeared to assume the role of my mentor much in the same vein as 'Doc' from Whytes research into *Street Corner Society* (1955). I could never be under any illusions in the early stages of investigation, that it was anything other than through an ensuing and close relationship with him that afforded me a credibility and acceptance by the other boy racers both during and after my research.

From the outset of this type of fieldwork I had to accustom myself to the public world of the boy racer which was seemingly to see and be seen. The way they drove and the appearance and sound of their cars attracted interest from pedestrians and other road users on the open road, at a junction, roundabout or traffic lights. In the beginning I began to feel that everyone was looking at me too, as I was part of this curiosity and at times felt considerable discomfort but gradually, instead of avoiding eye contact, I, like my

companions, began to return stares, forcing people to look away. I began to find that the fieldwork associated with my research became a highly individual experience. The meshing of fieldwork procedures with my own capabilities, and the situational variation which came with the boy racers activities and different personalities, indeed made it personal to me. As a result my field notes contained a record of my own experiences, thoughts and feelings following each research activity. The strength and weakness of the methods I employed to gather information using notes, tape recordings and my camera depended upon my skills, discipline and perspective at the time.

It was necessary for me to be as involved as possible, experiencing the observed setting fully, nonetheless it was also important that I should visually fit in with the group and so there was never any agonising decision as to what to wear on such occasions, for it was a simple uniform such as they all wore, comprising T-shirts or sweatshirts and jeans, baseball cap and trainers. I found that almost all the young men who took part in my research became far animated, gregarious and garrulous within the four steel and glass walls of their vehicles and being invited to accompany them on a cruise or merely out 'posing' had all the hallmarks and formality of being invited to a prestigious event where certain protocols had to be followed, even to dress code and behaviour.

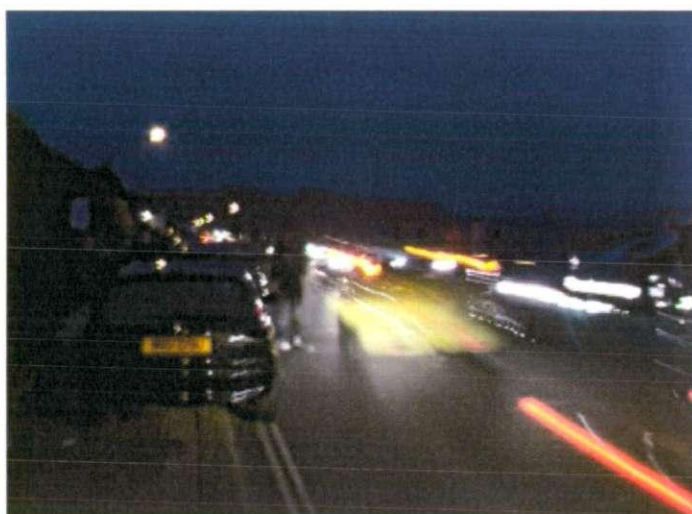


**Figure 10: Awaiting action in a multi-story car park**

Initially I was content just to be a passenger, observing, listening and soaking up the atmosphere; more often than not consigned to the back seat surrounded by what they termed my 'gear' consisting of note book, a supply of pens, tape recorder, spare batteries and tapes, films and camera, loose change, chewing gum and extra sweatshirt (not always for my own use). During any performative activities I found it necessary to brace a foot on either side of the car, with the hope that the soles of my boots were clean. This was a position which I had found held me both steady and vertical should the driver decide to execute a quick horizontal exit from a car park or indulge his passion for drift (sliding the car sideways), doughnuts, 360s and other performative activities which I address in more detail in Chapters 5, 6 and 7. On other occasions, I quickly combined the art of deep breathing with a constant supply of strong mints to relieve the frequent nausea which developed with the undulating movement of the car; the experience of which I could only liken to a frenetic fairground ride. Camera use was frequent, but in the initial stages of my research, several of the young men enthusiastically placed themselves and their cars in slightly artificial poses, ignoring my request for a more natural record of their activities. Whilst many of the ensuing 'posed' pictures have been used to illustrate particular activities within this research, I found that those which have had the greatest impact were taken whilst the young men were oblivious to the cameras presence, being fully engaged with what they were doing at the time, like many of those shown in Chapters 5 and 7.

Whilst making the decision to spend time and to work with one particular cohort of boy racers, I also decided to accompany them on as many runs as possible, such as late evening often from 7pm to 3am and at weekends where action is practically guaranteed. I wanted to observe the general behaviour and did not want to find that I was being given a performance which would be constructed especially for my benefit or that particular venues were being selected because of particular problems or characteristics. As time progressed and almost three years after my research had begun, I found that the nature of

the runs or cruises were changing in-so-far as some of my companions were accessing the internet more often, and the journeys or runs we went on were becoming longer and geographically more remote and it became nothing to drive, sometimes in convoys of up to a hundred vehicles, in excess of 200 miles in one night to join in with another cruise. One common meeting place during the summer months was the sea front at Torquay which usually represented a 198 miles round trip for many of the young men. It was quite usual to see some of their passengers raising cameras through open sun roofs or hanging out of cars travelling at speed just taking photographs of other cruisers and the array of passing lights; an example of which is shown in Figure 11 (below).



**Figure 11: Late night cruise along Torquay sea front**

The attraction for some drivers travelling these type of distances, was simply that there would be media coverage present offering the chance for their car to appear in magazines including *Red Line* or *Max Power* or be televised for inclusion in a motoring programme, all of which would elevate their personal standing within their particular group and have implications for their levels of self-esteem. The knowledge I gained about the purpose of the cruises and about what was going on in their lives, and in the lives of their friends, was often through observing or listening to the young men whilst being carried as a passenger within a vehicle usually en-route to somewhere or otherwise just ‘parked-up’. Their

conversations were conducted in a relaxed style and quite often unless I contributed to the conversation, the young men appeared oblivious to my presence. On occasions when I introduced my own line of questions the order and response was not always strictly adhered to by the participants, and making notes became difficult, the text usually littered by my form of shorthand and graphics attempting to show where topics had crossed, merged or merely been ignored in favour of the young men's own agendas. Sometimes they might have initiated the discussions and thus provided a more promising line of enquiry to be followed, or they might have pre-empted my intended order of questioning. The wording of my questions to them was not particularly important but presented areas for discussion, with opportunities for clarification on both sides. The rapport that developed was important in helping to elicit more in-depth information, by encouraging the young men to feel both safe and confident.

These interviews and conversations could last between thirty minutes to four hours; the longer periods more common if we were travelling long distances, but the typical duration was two hours and the majority were subsequently taped and transcribed and an example may be found in the appendix. Tape recording of interviews or conversations is useful for capturing each participant's mood or strength of feeling on the issues raised and presents the opportunity for the researcher to maintain good eye contact with individual speakers. I did not however like to rely totally on tape recordings for collecting information, because there was a danger that valuable non-verbal behaviour may be ignored, and there was an enormous amount of rich non-verbal communication between these young men. They often used gestures regularly accompanied by half smoked cigarettes or tools, to punctuate conversations or substitute words where they lacked the appropriate language skills to convey their feelings about particular issues. Their hands in constant motion conducting the orchestra of their thoughts, their baton a cigarette or spanner, it did not matter, they jabbed, often viciously punching the air. They also used a variety of facial expressions to

convey a range of emotions, many of which revealed far more about what they were experiencing, than the words they were prepared to use; something which was so evident in times of sadness, despair or outrage.

Breakwell (1990) maintains that it is useful to note points where non-verbal communication is strong; this can help to clarify whether what participants are actually saying, correlates with what they are feeling and to this end many of my meetings were accompanied by detailed notes which were added in the appropriate places to the transcribed conversations. Many of the young men in my research were not particularly skilled in the art of conversation and often appeared to have problems selecting appropriate words to describe what they were feeling and thus gaps in sentence construction were often filled not only by expressive gestures but by body language. This was particularly evident following a tragedy such as a road traffic accident which involved some of their colleagues, and when they felt unable to outwardly share or express their emotions; it also became evident if they were challenged for example by uniformed police personnel or a member of the public when they were more likely to respond noisily and aggressively with physical gestures replacing words or sentences. This behaviour became more significant when there was a group, each one seeking confirmation, approval and support from peers within the group whereas on a one-to-one basis it was less pronounced but the experiences were internalised only to manifest at a later time through erratic driving, driving at excessive speed or though playing their car stereos at full decibels.

Taking notes or recording observational data in ethnographic research would be done at the time of conversations or interviews but if this was not possible, then these field notes had to be written up as soon as possible after the events had taken place. One of the problems with this was the recall of events and the sequence of events, and I found that if there was too great a time lapse between the end of the observed activity and the writing up period,

the quality of the field notes deteriorated. Initially I discovered that many of the participants became less garrulous at the sight of a note book and my coping strategy was then to write on any piece of paper available. A decision of what to write had to be made at the beginning, because there was a temptation to try to record virtually everything and then decide at a later date what was relevant and what was not. To this effect I was more or less forced to record the concrete, the detailed and the contextual of each interaction and activity but nonetheless adopted the tact that it was best to have as much information as I could physically record and mentally absorb.

I became adept at writing on odd scraps of paper, including paper bags, in particular McDonald's carrier bags which many of the young men obtained during their regular visits for food and drink. Other materials used were receipts for purchases such as fuel, old envelopes and the margins of newspapers and magazines, the inside of chocolate bar wrappers, railway timetables and even across the back of my hand. Seemingly to see me writing thus was a lot less threatening to participants than the notebook entries appeared to pose. Securing these odd scraps of paper was a meticulous exercise and at the end of each piece of fieldwork all these would be collated and secured in a series of separate envelopes in a large crate with details of the activity, its location, date and those present at the activity. As my research matured I began to maintain a reflexive research diary in the form of a large notebook which I kept in my vehicle in which I recorded any relevant activities planned or impromptu, *immediately* after the event which was an addition to the note-taking on oddments of paper. I had to be constantly vigilant to remove this book whenever my own vehicle was unattended for any length of time or entered a garage for either an annual service, MOT or any remedial work, for there was the concern that there may be issues of confidentiality surrounding the contents of this book which may have a serious effect on both the research and the researched if the security of the book was breached.

## **‘Insiders’ and ‘Outsiders’**

Gaining access to and becoming part of a group which had in its midst a collection of boy racers was one thing, yet for me to acquire data which was to be sufficiently rich and meaningful, gaining access and being *accepted* by the group was far more important. A significant component of the young men’s identities appeared to be potentially derived from their membership of a certain cohort of boy racers and membership of that cohort helped them to evaluate their own beliefs and activities by comparing them to those of others. The shared norms and values of a particular group set up a symbolic frontier between the acceptable and the unacceptable, what belongs and what does not or was regarded as the other, between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’, ‘us’ and ‘them’. Such shared perceptions facilitated the binding or bonding together of all members of one group of boy racers into what Benedict Anderson (1983 ) and more recently Stuart Hall describe as one ‘*Imagined Community*’ (2000: 258), which automatically sends into symbolic exile everyone else who was perceived to be in some way different.

‘Within-group’ relationships were very intense and certainly during my research period there was always a great deal of energy and haste expounded in helping other members of their group on a range of matters, practical and emotional. Advice liberally dispensed and any assistance dealt with in a very practical ‘hands on’ and ‘can do’ manner. Mobile phones were in constant use, either ringing or texting and at weekends or during the evenings the young men were always in a hurry and on their way somewhere to ‘Help a mate’. Relationships within the in-groups I perceived to be warm, suffused with mutual respect, sympathy and support and the occasional squabbles appeared to be little more than a temporary mishap. In-group favouritism and out-group discrimination seemed very robust and was very evident amongst boy racers when they openly denigrated other young male car drivers who drove makes and models similar to those owned by the in-group but

unadulterated by graphics, body styling and expensive accessories. However their derision was not reserved for their peers alone for they appeared openly critical of anyone irrespective of gender, who did not comply with their particular lifestyle or 'uniform'. Such criticisms formed the basis for many conversations between them as they sought to create their own stereotype for drivers of differing makes and models of vehicles and I expand on this in Chapter 5.

From the beginning of my research it would have been easy for the young men to regard me as an outsider and part of the 'out-group' particularly 'whilst I shared neither their youth or gender and neither did my own vehicle qualify as a boy racers car. Indeed it was possible that they did not initially consider me at all, however I believed that I had three qualities which they would be willing to buy into. One was the fact that I was genuinely interested in them and their activities and openly willing to share my time with them in their cars and their lifestyle. The second was the fact that I had a working knowledge about cars and car components and came with a history associated with being part of the local car racing scene, all of which they were subsequently willing to exploit. The third quality which was something I had not really considered but was something which slowly evolved and that was my 'novelty' factor. For them I became a 'possession', something to boast about to their friends or rivals. Ultimately however, it was the second quality of car knowledge and knowledge about the racing scene which was to give me unequivocally 'insider status'. The first quality of interest in them, a willingness to share their activities and spend unconditional time with them was the quality which was to become the most sustaining. This gave me the greatest and most durable insight into their personal and private domains, thus exposing me to all their 'backstage' performances which they gave openly, devoid of self-consciousness, embarrassment or mistrust.

Being somewhat enthusiastically received by the boy racers and welcomed into almost every aspect of their daily lives, it afforded me a level of unequivocal exposure which I believed would provide me with unsurpassable rich data for my research. With the research lasting over a period of five years, it would be reasonable to suggest that some form of relationship between me as the researcher, and the boy racers as the researched, would develop during that time. Inevitably as the end of the study period increasingly narrowed, issues surrounding the exiting process included how best to extricate myself from my daily interactions with the young men in a sensitive manner. I appreciated that due to the very nature of the fact that our lives had become not so much enmeshed by virtue of the research, the inevitable and shared interest in cars and performance, but also through what I regarded as our mutual loss of companions through tragic circumstances, it was never going to be a means of simply thanking them for their contributions and saying farewell. With mobile phones and texting being the medium of their communication with one another there was a mutual expectation on both sides that this would continue as a method for keeping the channels of communication open between us. To this effect at least ten of the original cohort of boy racers continued to use texts as the main form of communication until my research was completed. When it had reached the final draft prior to submission, they expressed a wish to see it in its book form as opposed to previous sights of copious notes and typed sheets. To maintain communication and to ensure that contact was not just one-way and always from them, I continued to occasionally 'hang out' at a 'meet' or accompanied them on cruises, or visited their places of work and in turn they still called at my house 'when passing' and enquired when a second volume will be researched.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In rare cases it was difficult to articulate my motivation in terms of this ethnographic research because not all the young men I came into contact with understood my intentions,

or indeed appeared as if they wanted to understand. The majority however, contributed openly whereas those who did not wish to curiously remained interested bystanders on the periphery of my involvement with their peers, occasionally contributing in a self-conscious way. As I mentioned in Chapter 1 and again earlier within this chapter, I appeared to be acknowledged as being part of the 'social scenery' because of my prior association with the local cruise and stock car scene and thus I was regarded as non-threatening and potentially novel. Yet when necessary, rather than providing an appropriate explanation of my work in the form of what Gans describes as a 'Sales pitch', I was open and honest from the start which minimized the pressure of the scientific gaze on individuals and shifted semantically to the group in general (1968: 310).

There are a range of moral codes and guidelines that affect how research is conducted by sociologists and social researchers, including the need to ensure that all participants or potential participants give their consent voluntarily rather than feel they are being coerced into taking part. In their role as participants I had to ensure that the young men were aware that they could withdraw from the research at any time and could also ask me to withdraw any information they may have given me. This was done with all participants on an individual *and* group basis at the initial meeting and periodically throughout the research as a form of reminder. From the outset of my research I provided a verbal clear and accurate account covering all aspects of the research, including its aims and methodologies for all the boy racers who required this detail. Acknowledging that some of the participants required explanations in simplistic terms I avoided academic terminology or where it was being used made extra efforts to clarify what it meant. At each stage of the research I made it common practice to feed back to participants the results of any field notes taken during any shared activities, and the contents of any conversations I had entered into with them which I had recorded and subsequently transcribed. They were aware of the context in which the information such as this was being used and indeed these exercises were

beneficial allowing both sides to raise and answer queries or elaborate on a particular issue which interested one or other of us. The social interactions which took place through such moments of exchange further cemented our relationships and I found that as time progressed I was being regarded as confident for some of their innermost secrets, fears, concerns and for some of their dubious scams.

One of the most important considerations in this research was the protection of my participants' identities. This was particularly pertinent due to their occasional disenfranchisement with authority figures such as the police or local authorities. Adhering to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality was therefore imperative and as I discussed earlier in this chapter, the names used throughout the research are pseudonyms unless some individuals specified they wanted to be acknowledged by their real names. Likewise the vehicles that appear in any photographs used to illustrate particular activities or vehicle characteristics have, where possible, had registration number plates obliterated or removed but in some cases the young men have been happy (and proud) for their registration plates to remain visible.

Closely aligned to anonymity and confidentiality in terms of importance, was protecting my participants and also any innocent bystander from harm. This was a significant preoccupation for me, particularly where there was risk taking or performative behaviours involving cars. My other concerns were individuals revealing to me often complex and sensitive personal issues. These included details about family income, poor educational attainment and dysfunctional family life history, including domestic violence; all themes which had the potential to make them feel exposed. Systematically yet sensitively and discreetly I occasionally followed through observations I had made in relation to an individual's non-verbal behaviours or body cues, during exchanges with peers, family members and others.

My often in-depth approach occasionally forced some of my respondents to face elements of their personal and familial history which normally went unaddressed (for example experiences of domestic violence in one particular case). When this did occur the results were often at odds with the individual's self-image and the portrayal of the self-assured recalcitrant youth was momentarily replaced by a needy, vulnerable, confused and angry young man. In instances where personal agony was revealed, it was common practice to put in additional efforts to ensure the wellbeing of the respondent was being met which ranged from a telephone call to a series of meetings away from peers and family members. Where the admission of personal agony was poignant, I found myself moving into altered emotional terrain, experiencing a degree of inner conflict between my role as researcher and my status as a mother. Responding as the latter was likely to be detrimental to the overall quality and extent of the data I was gathering, and to this effect I had to remain objective, albeit on occasions with difficulty.

Encounters between myself and the boy racers which were initially constructed for research purposes, continued to exist as informal relationships well into, and beyond the initial research period. These relationships were often conducted without continued overt reference to my research. Therefore the issue of consent posed considerable ethical problems, particularly with the young men forgetting my role was primarily that of a researcher, and that their role was as the researched. They would regularly talk openly amongst themselves allowing me to overhear their conversations, and in these situations I often had to consider what the relationship between us all really was. In some respects it could be regarded as public civility whilst in others it may have been regarded as private trust and the nature or content of the conversations was private and or confidential.

The problems of openness and exposure were particularly important in terms of overhearing incidences of illegality or the promise of illegality or of some intensely

personal issue. Similar to Tucker's (2001), 'Two-person dilemma theory' the options open to me were simply that reporting what I had learned from the conversations through my written notes I risked being shut out from the intimacies of my present coexistence with the boy racers and deprived of further confidences. I could have introduced delaying tactics thus biding my time until the relationships I had with the young men were more established, with the hope that the strength of our relationship would be such that I could declare my intention to record what they had said in my thesis, and thus hope to gain their permission to use the information I had gathered from my observations. Alternatively, I could maintain my silence about what I had overheard indefinitely. All these options involved some level of compromise, either ethically or in terms of the access I was allowed or the potential quality and usefulness of any data that emerged from such exposures. I cannot deny that the potential of gaining the level of personal information about the young men's backstage performances, their private and personal domains was enormously appealing for it would aid a greater depth of understanding about their world. Similarly meeting up with the young men in what were sincerely social occasions was often recorded as part of my field notes. These notes were subsequently written in a more formal configuration and shown to the relevant participants who then 'policed' my work accordingly. Although I believed this to be the most ethical way forward it was not without difficulties, for having seen their 'world' described in print they would then occasionally demonstrate another agenda which was one of dramatisation and sensation-seeking whereby they would want to exaggerate what I had written for maximum effect, and I would have to restrain their desire for fiction and sensationalism.

Having been party to some of the activities of the boy racers over a period of approximately one month, I became concerned that some of the activities and behaviours were so extreme that perhaps they were being orchestrated and almost stage-managed for my benefit and as a consequence many of the young men were, through such risk-taking,

putting themselves and potentially other road users at risk. To address this I asked six of the original cohort, to keep a diary of their boy racer activities over a period of approximately one week. These details I subsequently collated and compared activities to those which were undertaken when I was present. Below shows an example of a page from one such diary which once transcribed reads as,

**“(College Day)**

9-4.30 in workshops. Crap Day. CRAP DAY. Daz come over after work tonight. He's gonna go Twilite. Clubbin clubbin clubbin. Shaun an me cruising. Ben commin to go Truro 2. Nag nag NAG old mans on my case again FUCK FUCK FUCK no pleasing him. Goin to Shauns out of the way. His mums on his case as he's been home all day. We go to Doms see his Renault gonna get alloys. Don't everybody know that [drawn a picture of a wheel]. Inds Est Tonight 11pm about 100 motors there gone Saltash. Fat Bastard there bought RS for 20 quid- 360's SMOKIN tarmac BURNIN Revved it till he blew it FUKIN BRILL. Pushed it in the hedge and torched it. Yeah man. 135k's tonight (Police everywhere). Got home 3am. Fuckin Shelby took the wrong line on A30 by McDonald's flipped on the [word deleted] brakes and Flipped over – took out the front wheel. We woz all lined up on grass verge tryin' to help” (Joe).

~~College Day~~  
9-4.30 in workshops. Crap Day. ~~CRAP DAY~~  
Daz come over after work tonight. He's gonna go Twilite. Clubbin clubbin clubbin clubbin. Shaun an me cruising. Ben coming 2 - go Truro 2. Nag nag NAG old mans on my case again ~~FUCK - FUCK - FUCK~~ no pleasing him. Goin to Shauns out of the way. His mums on his case as he's been home all day. We go to Doms see his Renault - gonna get alloys. Yeah a bloke judged on the size of his alloys. Don't everybody know that? ~~Ind Est tonight~~ 11pm about 100 motors there. Gone Saltash. Fat Bastard there bought RS for 20 quid - 360's SMOKIN tarmac BURNIN Revved it till he blew it - FUKIN BRILL Pushed it in the hedge and torched it. ~~135k's tonight~~ Police everywhere. Got home 3am. Fuckin Shelby took the wrong line on A30 by McDonald's flipped on the ~~bad~~ brakes and Flipped over - took out the front wheel. We woz all lined up on grass verge tryin to help

The description of the activities recorded within the text, showed little difference from those events I had been party too and to this effect I had to conclude that in the main the

young men were not in any apparent way, modifying their behaviour for my benefit. Furthermore, I had to accept that on occasions they did engage in dangerous or risky practices with cars occasionally with disastrous results. Often the aftermath of some mishap was simply disastrous for their vehicles and the young drivers had walked away unscathed. In the early stages of my research Nixon and Jez would delight in showing me a wrecked vehicle which would leave me wondering how anyone had escaped unhurt but then they would reveal that it was 'a banger'; one which they had driven until it had blown up or ceased to function and then had simply 'T-boned' it with another vehicle; which was to drive into the side of the (now empty) vehicle at speed affecting a result as that shown in Figure 12 (below). The reason for this activity was simply that it "was done for a larf; nowt more and nowt less."



**Figure 12: The inevitable result of some risky driving practices**

In addition to concerns about my mere presence being sufficient to encourage a catalogue of risky practices, there were a number of other issues which could be overlooked in terms of using participant observation as a method. One may catapult me as researcher, unwittingly into the role of 'going native' if my participant observation was likely to be carried out over several months, or even years in duration with the results being me, the

researcher abandoning the position of analyst in favour of identification with the young men under study. A mode of avoidance would be to adopt the role of the '*complete observer*' (Junker, 1960; Searle, 1998; 222). This would involve me as the researcher, observing the boy racers in such a way to avoid any form of social interaction with them, however this introduces the problem of ethnocentrism whereby by not interacting with the young men under study, I could not get at their meanings and so this imposed an alien framework of understanding on the situations I would be likely to find myself observing. Punch believes the complete observer role to be little more than, '...fiction because he or she [the researcher] is always part of the situation and because distancing oneself from the role you play may destroy precisely what one wishes to observe' (1993: 186).

Another concern in relation to my own research was having to decide for myself where the border of legitimacy lay in terms of whether I was condoning the commission of a crime under certain circumstances or even aiding and abetting a crime by virtue of my presence such as through '*Guilty observation*' a term ascribed to Adler and Adler (1987). If I was to be part of their daily lives to a certain extent then it would be difficult to extricate myself from some of their more dubious activities without appearing to them that I was judging them or disapproving of what they were engaged in. In terms of being with them whilst they carried out performative activities in their cars including street racing or having 'sound-off' competitions where they tested their car's music systems to the limits in a quest for supremacy in music system ownership, I felt comfortable enough to be part of those activities despite knowing that there were likely to be transgressions of the law. There was also a degree of risk of equal injury or ultimately death in the event that a manoeuvre or road race went wrong yet how was I to gain the physical, emotional and psychological experiences they felt unless I too became party to those same activities? At the same time I was aware that there were occasions whereby one or more may engage in petty theft or act as 'look out' in the commissioning of such a crime. To this effect I was

explicit from the outset that whilst I was accompanying them I would not *knowingly* be complicit in such activities and asked them to respect this. Although there was a unified assent from the young men, this did not prevent them discussing any such endeavours in front of me and at times of reflexivity I wondered if they were testing what they perceived to be my loyalty to them, the lengths I, as a researcher, was prepared to go to get a complete picture of their life experiences for my research or simply to test my ability to be a law abiding citizen.

### **The Importance of Reflexivity**

Reflexivity played an important part in this research because I feel that the methodology employed to collect the data itself required a critical attitude towards the information being collected. Furthermore, being reflexive was important to recognise the possible influence my presence may have had on the participants; the location of the settings; the sensitivity of any topic or behaviour occurring; the power relations within the field under scrutiny and the social interactions between myself as the researcher and the boy racers and their associates. In this way the data achieved from this research is *situated* rather than *presented* by what van Maanen calls a 'process of immaculate perception' (1983: 261).

The term 'reflexivity' has been in currency since the 1960s and builds on the social anthropological traditions first accorded recognition by the Chicago School (see Hammersley, 1990; Atkinson, 1990; Brewer, 2000). Reflexivity has been accorded a number of interpretations emanating from differing theorists including Bourdieu who maintained that, 'Reflexive practice will help to free intellectuals from their illusions and first of all from the illusion that they do not have any, especially about themselves' (1984: 95). Bourdieu's comments are quite pertinent because I found it important to be reflexive about conversations I had had with some participants, in order to arrive at distinctions not

necessarily about what they had *said*, or any illusions I might possess about my understanding of what they had said, but more about what they actually *meant* and to gain clarification about their statements. Much of the latter surrounded some of the young men using colloquial expressions and sayings which I was unfamiliar with or using terms with which I was familiar, but in a different context. I found that the everyday language and actions of the boy racers could not be thoroughly understood without being situated within the social context in which they were performed or uttered. Much of the language they used tended to conceal from the uninitiated, complex, situationally specific meanings, thus opportunities for researcher reflexivity also gave rise to the need for occasional clarification of meaning(s) on both sides. To this effect, it is not just the relationship between the researcher and the researched which should be subjected to reflexivity, but also deeper reflections on class and cultural affiliation which need to be considered.

Despite several different interpretations reflexivity has become closely connected with what has been deemed by Miller and Brewer (2003) as the crisis facing ethnography, where reflexivity is seen as both the problem and the solution to ethnography's difficulties. The 'problem' part is that ethnographers are part of the social world they study and do not collect uncontaminated data whilst the 'solution' is that they should situate the data by reflecting on how their presence and other contingencies helped to create the data. To acknowledge this, I describe and record a situated account of my actions together with the recorded observed behaviours, interactions and activities of the boy racers as they occur, so by reflecting on events as part of the research process, I am able to afford an account which has to be intelligible and meaningful to others.

## Summary

In the world of the boy racers there is no one fixed definition of an event or an object, for meaning to them is seen more often than not, in relation to social context. Many of the individuals who contributed towards this research, on occasions articulated differing concepts of what was 'real' to them and to this effect it is not possible for me to produce knowledge claims through this research of a single reality, for reality often takes on a fluidity with many interpretations. Instead it has been necessary for me to not only engage with these young men but also to reflect with them upon the processes by which conclusions surrounding 'reality' are reached and on occasions display these argumentative procedures in ways which can be reconstructed.

Ethnography is not just about observation and participant observation, it attempts to provide a contextual explanation of such observations. In this chapter, I have discussed both the practice and the theories surrounding the data gathering undertaken in this research. It has touched in particular upon the emotional element through which some young men display the need to feel part of a cohesive group, and this part of the research aligns itself firmly with Bauman's (1992), suggestion that being a member of an in-group facilitates opportunities to develop the ideal relationships and a sense of belonging which may be lacking within the boy racers' own existing familial or social circumstances. I also discuss my own experiences and any perceived (or real) difficulties in locating and contacting boy racers, many of whom can be described as hard-to-reach.

Throughout my research adopting a reflexive research practice has been an essential pre-requisite at each stage, but never more so than when tragedy struck any of my young respondents or when they became embroiled in hostile encounters with authoritarian figures; local authorities and the police. Ultimately it has been important for me to

maintain objectivity, be flexible, sensitive and responsive to the ever changing circumstances of the research and the needs of the participants. In doing so I am able to draw parallels with Birch's (1998) experiences whereby he felt that the more he progressed into the writing up the more he progressed into his personal, private space and became more aware of his own sociological identity. Thus in ethnographical studies such as 'The Tarmac Cowboys' I would argue that in addition to providing new information about a previously unknown group of young men, the research also represents an inner journey of self-discovery for its author.

In the next chapter I examine the spatial and economic factors of the geographic area in which the boy racers who participated in this research lived, worked and spent their leisure time. I discuss the high levels of rural deprivation, how work has been regarded as the central source of identification for many men and how poor academic attainment, a lack of qualifications and skills have in many cases contributed to, or led to poor economic circumstances, poverty of ambition and a general lack of opportunity for young men of working age. I also discuss the demise of employment in what have been traditionally male dominated environments such as mining, the china clay industries and construction and how the more service orientated and lower paid seasonal work opportunities provide alternatives. I will also discuss the impact of male unemployment and the rise of women in the labour market as it affects the families of my participants.

## Chapter 4

### Life in Cornwall

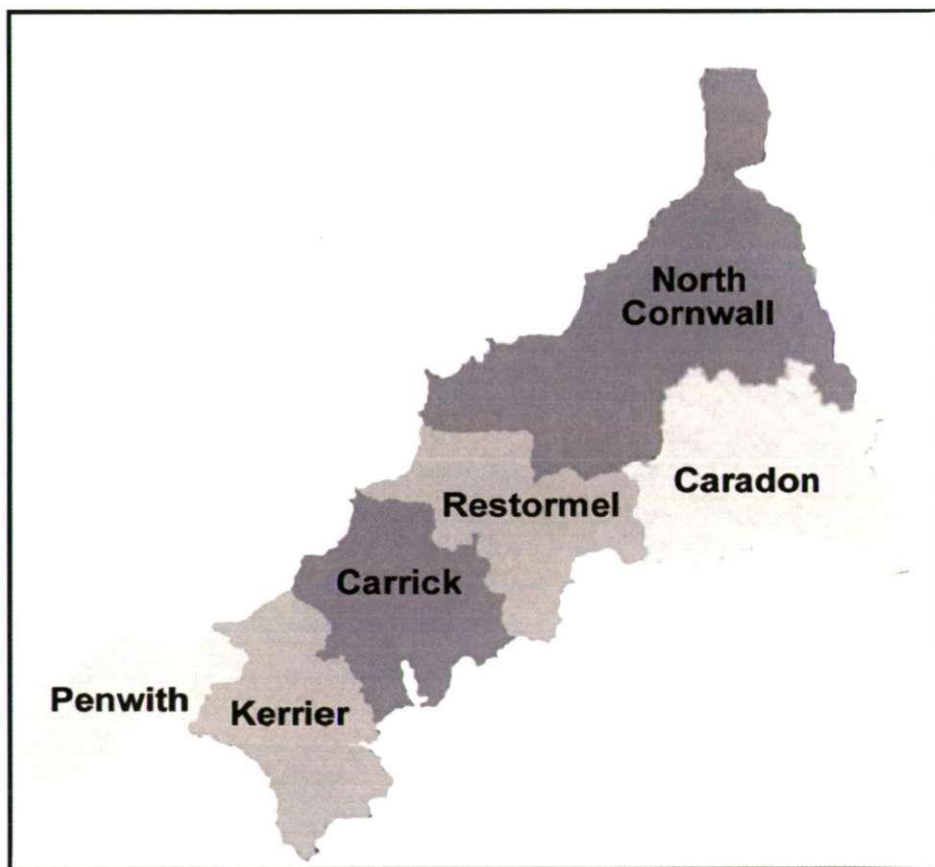
#### Introduction

As I mentioned in Chapter 1, the geographic area in which you live clearly has a significant role to play in terms of how you are able to live your life, gain credible levels of qualifications and work skills, which in turn may give you access to a well paid job, credibility in your local community and a fulfilling social life. To understand the particular constraints which the boy racers were experiencing at the time of my research, it is important to discuss the characteristics of the county in which this research was based and how these characteristics had impacted upon the lives of the young men and their families who lived and worked there.

When I was invited into the homes of some of my respondents' families and had the opportunity to talk to them about *their* lives, a topic of conversation which frequently arose, particularly from some of the older family members, related to culture and tradition. Many of them believed that Cornwall had largely maintained its own identity through traditions and culture, which may be due in part to the determination of some of its indigenous population who had tried to preserve their heritage. Some of these cultures and traditions were connected to mining, engineering and heavy industry and associated trades which I discuss further on within this chapter. Another factor however, which may also have contributed to the county's distinctive character, is its relative isolation from the rest of the country and its distinctive peninsular form, long indented coastline and granite moorlands. Despite a steady increase in structural expansion through housing stock, industrial site developments and new road infrastructures, Cornwall has remained essentially rural in character. Much of the countryside and varied coastline of high landscape value has been designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and there

are also approximately 3,175 acres of derelict land. Much of this has been used by local people for a range of leisure and competitive purposes such as off-roading with 4X4 vehicles and motorbikes, horse riding, trail-biking and walking (Kerrier District Local Plan, 2002). The relevance of this derelict land to the boy racers and many of their male family members, I discuss in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Despite its vast historical riches, in terms of economic wealth, the conditions of poverty, deprivation and social exclusion have been very closely linked to many people living in certain districts within Cornwall and the map of the various districts are shown in Figure 13 (below).



**Figure 13: Map of Cornwall showing the District Council areas**

The Report of the Rural Advocate 2006, released by the newly independent Commission for Rural Communities (CRC), has calculated that around 20% of families within the county lived under the Government's benchmark for poverty; which at the time of my

research was £15,000 a year ([www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk](http://www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk)). Furthermore, the districts of Kerrier and Penwith (see Figure 13, above), areas from which many of my respondents and their families lived and worked, were singled out as being among the worst districts in the whole of England. Ten Cornish wards, all predominantly urban (except Marazion), and all in West Cornwall, were in the worst 1000 wards of England. These regions represented some of the most scenically spectacular in Cornwall, had received World Heritage status, and were often depicted in the media through pictures of long sandy beaches, rugged moorland, Neolithic circles, disused mine stacks (evidence of its mining heritage), quaint coves and harbours and picturesque cottages; and more often than not, as a location for holidays; all of which belie to a certain extent the abject poverty experienced by many who lived there.

Many visitors are attracted to the spectacular coastal scenery and fine beaches in Cornwall and at the peak of the season in 2006 there were over 270,000 tourists. Whilst this influx served to increase the all year population by 50%, visitor expenditure represented some £980 million a year (Cornwall County Council Economic Development and Regeneration Plan, 2003-2008). The seasonal influx of visitors had a far reaching effect upon the County's character and life during the summer. It enabled many services to be provided which would not otherwise be viable but the pressure of numbers created problems such as traffic congestion, pressure on services and environmental damage. The County Council Report, *Tourism in Cornwall* (2005), suggested that in 2002/03 alone, 88.6% of the visitors had travelled by car, 5.4% by coach, 4.2% by train and 2.9% by air and other modes.

Cornwall had long been a haven for artists and writers particularly in areas such as Penwith with St Ives as famous for those who found the inspiration for their work and life there, as it is for its Tate Gallery, beaches and scenery. Newlyn became the focus of British art during the mid 1880's when many of its artists emerged at the forefront of Britain's

response to the contemporary French developments in painting. The usual picture postcard image many people have of Cornwall, and one which was often featured in media portrayals is similar to that shown in Figure 14 (below), but often belies the poverty, deprivation and lack of opportunities which lie beneath the pretty façade (see Meethan, 2002).



**Figure 14: Newlyn, showing the harbour.**

## **Employment and Unemployment in Cornwall**

Sustained economic growth is central to Cornwall's future prosperity and wellbeing and tourism has come to represent a key strand of sustainable development. Indeed it has become one of the County's major industries, however it is predominately seasonal, and employment connected with the tourist industry provides relatively low rates of pay. In terms of sources of employment in Cornwall generally, there has been a considerable decline in the labour requirements of the traditional farming and fishing industries, and its metalliferous mining industry collapsed in the latter part of the nineteenth century, depriving Cornwall of one of its principal sources of income and employment. By the 1960's only two working mines had been left and the last mine, South Crofty (see Figure

15, below), was closed in 1998. Despite this enormous loss to the workforce, records show that up to 1991 the economically active population had increased from 173,400 to 209,100 and significantly nearly three quarters of this increase had been due to females in the workplace because activity rates for men had dropped from 89% to a little over 85% (see Payton, 2002).

This would be consistent with the loss of predominately male orientated employment in the mines and allied industries, and the increase of women in tourist and service industries and in part-time employment opportunities (Cornwall County Council Structure Plan, 2000). However the growth in an economically active population may also be due in part to immigration and Burgess (2006) reported that in general in 2005 there had been a noticeable increase in the number of people moving from urban areas to rural areas. However he also noted that, 'the only group of people travelling in the other direction (i.e. rural to urban) are the younger age groups, specifically the under 25s' (2006: 4). Certainly in terms of the relevance of this to my own participants, it had emerged through conversations with them, that few had contemplated leaving the county to seek work in other areas of the country. The main reasons given for this, was lack of qualifications together with a degree of anxiety about leaving existing social and familial support systems and is an area I discuss in more detail later on within this chapter.



**Figure 15: South Crofty Mine depicted after its closure in 1998.**

South Crofty mine seen above occupies land between Redruth and Camborne and had a significant role as one of the main sources of employment for generations of men (and some women) within the area. It was the last working mine to close in Cornwall in 1998 and the impact of job losses affected not only those directly employed as miners or ‘above ground’ workers, but also impacted on many local businesses which had benefited from mining activities such as heavy industry, haulage, garages and shops. Such was the strength of local feeling and loss by those affected by the closure, within the following days some writing had emerged on the perimeter wall which read, “Cornish Boys Are Fishermen and Cornish Boys Are Miners Too. When the Fish and Tin Has Gone, What Are the Cornish Boys to Do?” Whilst the author of this had remained anonymous, the declaration epitomised the demise of Cornwall’s traditional industries; ones which had provided the sources of occupation for many of my respondents’ male family members.

Information regarding the number of people of work age in employment in this particular area of Cornwall had demonstrated a fluctuation in the length of their engagement in paid employment. This may have been due to the fact that many people obtained summer jobs which formed their only employment for the year, and regularly returned to the same employer year upon year drifting in and out of employment on a regular cyclical basis (Cornwall County Council, 2000). However, this temporary seasonal employment may have disguised the truer nature of long term employment in Cornwall and be more symptomatic of a lack of longer term employment opportunities. Cornwall consistently has the largest population of part-time workers of any local authority in the country and whilst many people worked on a part-time basis, did so through choice, it would seem reasonable to suggest that it was equally likely that others were doing so due to the restricted opportunities for full-time employment.

This situation would seem particularly true of the type of employment sought and entered into by the young men who participated in my research; namely the various aspects of the motor trade including garages, specialist car body stylists, car accessory retailers and scrap metal dealerships which often had more applicants than there were jobs available. A survey carried out by Jobcentre Plus aimed at employers within the motor industries in Cornwall and designed to identify the number of applications they received for any job vacancies they advertised, revealed that there were approximately 60 applications from young men seeking one advertised vacancy or apprenticeship (Jobcentre Plus, 2000). The age of my research participants was also significant because statistics taken from the Labour Force survey of 2000 showed that 24% of unemployment claimants in Cornwall were young men aged between 16 and 24; less than 6% of whom had been registered as unemployed for more than one year, whilst 18% had registered as unemployed for more than 6 months, many of whom may not have worked since a summer job the previous year. The boy racers taking part in my research had spoken of the demoralising effects of seeking, yet failing to

attain, long-term employment, particularly if they had followed specific educational paths towards obtaining employment in certain areas, only to have their efforts thwarted through lack of opportunities. Many had found their efforts or ambitions frustrated during the early stage of seeking appropriate training. I found confirmation of this through a conversation following a chance meeting with the course manager for motor engineering at Cornwall College. He suggested that it was usual to receive over 200 applications from young men applying for Motor Engineering Courses (MOTEC), for only 60 available places.

The lack of employment and training opportunities for young people living in Cornwall has affected not only those seeking training or jobs within the motor and allied industries, but all those in their late teens and early twenties. Research carried out by the Local Intelligence Network Cornwall (LINK), an organisation which provides research information, support and advice to businesses in the County, had revealed that there had been an increasing out-migration of this age group, which it mainly attributed to limited employment and educational opportunities (LINK, 2000). Although, the recent opening of the Combined Universities in Cornwall and the Knowledge Spa should go some way to reverse this trend in terms of educational provision, it will only meet the needs of those seeking a university level education; something which may be beyond the means or ability of some young people, or indeed of little interest to them when economic necessity determines that paid employment was to be their first priority.

Burgess (2006) has reported that the average earnings in Cornwall were extremely low and each year the County came at, or near to the bottom, of the league table of counties and the gap was widening leaving wage earners in Cornwall even more badly off. Low wages have made home ownership difficult, certainly in terms of young first-time buyers. Data from HM Land Registry 2004 which corresponded with the period of my research has showed that the average price for a house in Cornwall was just below £190,000, whereas in

England and Wales where generally salaries were higher, it was £175, 401. The report also suggests that most families spend approximately 60% of their income on mortgage repayments. The average level of earnings in Cornwall during my research showed that male adult workers, working full-time earned £336 a week, 31% below Great Britain, whereas women were earning £223 a week, 21% below the Great Britain average, (New Earnings Survey, 2003). Information derived from claimant count figure's show that the unemployment rate for Cornwall is above the regional and averages but the main issue for employment in 2004-5 in Cornwall would appear to have been between the jobs available, and the skills of those still unemployed or not working (LINK, 2004). However, the claimant count employment figures show only part of the overall picture of economic activity, because many of the claimants are in receipt of incapacity benefit and the Office of National Statistics (ONS) benefits data suggest that that these may be regarded as 'hidden unemployment' and thus in itself likely to be an underestimate of those who could potentially work with support and direction (ONS, 2004). Table 1 (below) shows resident based figures for 2004-5 and included the total number of male and female claimants registered at Employment Services offices. The percentage of claimants in Cornwall was higher than Devon but less than national figures. The South West for the same period was 1.4%.

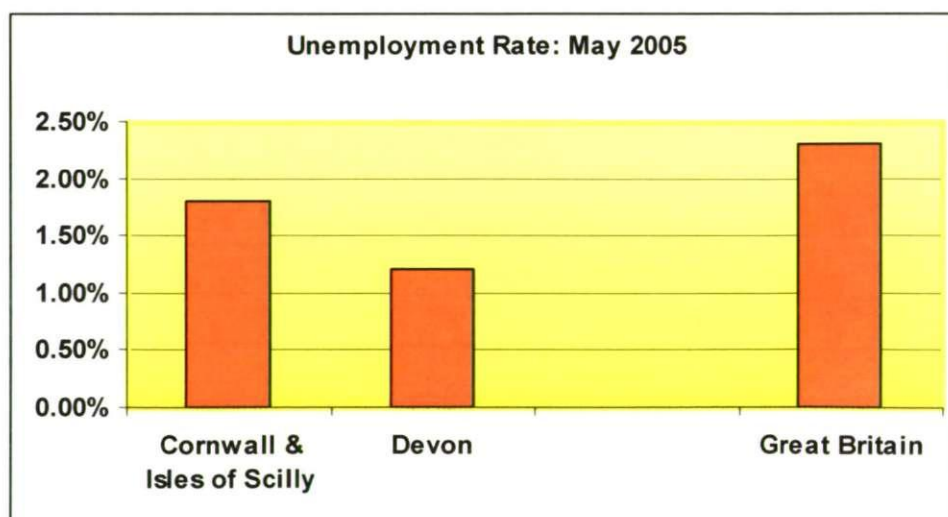


Table 1: Unemployment Rates. Data from the Office of National Statistics (NOMIS)

Cornwall has over the last 20 years, undergone enormous changes in what was deemed to be traditional employment for men, (and to a lesser degree women) and whilst the gap between local and national rates of pay for men has tended to widen in recent years, there has been some improvement for women. The Cornish economy has suffered due to the demise in the quest for and production of metalliferous materials, a reduction in agriculture and fish processing and also from a lack of local value added processes with regard to many of its remaining raw materials being processed elsewhere before final consumption. As an example, between 1988 and the late 1990's, there had been a 9% reduction in the total agricultural labour force in Cornwall and net farm incomes of many types of farming enterprises had fallen by more than 50% with the worst affected sector, lowland livestock farms, suffering an 85% fall ([www.cornwall.gov.uk](http://www.cornwall.gov.uk)). Some of my respondents came from farming families whose lifestyles had changed since being forced through economic circumstances to seek a reduction in the amount of live and dead stock, namely farm machinery, and in some cases by the sale of small parcels of land in order to reduce overheads and rising debts. Many families had been forced to diversify often turning redundant farm buildings into holiday accommodation, small rural business enterprises or farm shops or otherwise seeking employment outside of agriculture, often with limited success due to a mismatch of their skills with the type of employment available to them.

In the county's main towns, unemployment had mostly been caused by the virtual collapse of manufacturing and to a lesser degree declines in manual and public sector jobs. As my research progressed, and through talking to the families of my research participants, it had been revealed that many of the young men's fathers were second or even third generation miners, farmers or fishermen. Tradition it would seem had dictated for these men that it was to be an accepted part of youthful ambition if one's father was a miner, worked in heavy industry, was a fisherman or worked in agriculture then this was sufficient qualification needed for a son to follow suit (see Figure 16 below). With such industries

either ceasing altogether, gradually being reduced or phased out of the county's economy, it became thus necessary for its younger workforce to learn new skills which would support them in the small yet competitive employment market if they wished to remain living and working within the county. One way through which they may have been able to find the opportunity to do this, had arisen from Cornwall being attributed Objective One status; which is the highest priority designation for European Union aid and aimed at reducing social and economic inequalities. The introduction of Objective One in Cornwall has seen the types of investment and planning which were intended to address many of the above factors, and Objective One had put Cornwall on a par with Merseyside and the North East of England as a deprived area.



**Figure 16: How it used to be: Richard O'Brian and Steve Powers at work at South Crofty Mine**

Low household incomes ultimately affect health, educational achievement, housing and access to services and information, and wellbeing has been clearly linked to a number of characteristics like poverty, deprivation and social exclusion. The Cornwall County Council Structure Plan (2000) revealed that many people in Cornwall experienced these problems with a range of factors that contributed to them including:

- The nature of employment in the county
- Economic activity.
- Low wages, particularly in key sectors of the traditional economy.
- Lack of job security, under-employment, casual and seasonal employment.
- Low levels of service provision in sparsely populated areas.
- Lack of skills.
- Information deprivation.

Historically and in many respects Cornwall has been good at creating and replacing lost jobs in traditional industries with new jobs, particularly within the service sector. As an example, between 1961 and 1991, 55,000 new jobs were created but within this period the population grew by over 37% most of which was attributable to working age in-migration (Williams and Champion, 1998). Cornwall has also been shown to have had the highest level of business failure in Britain, so whilst the record of job creation had been excellent this has been offset by job losses and those who were in employment found their earnings to be less than £17,000 per annum which placed them within the construct of disadvantage (New Earners Survey, 2005: ONS 2005). The creation of more and better paid job opportunities has not been easy due to the difficulties in attracting investment simply because of the county's geographical isolation and its remoteness in terms of efficient telecommunications, business communications at UK and international levels, and the vagaries of its available road, rail and sea links.

## **Mobility within Cornwall**

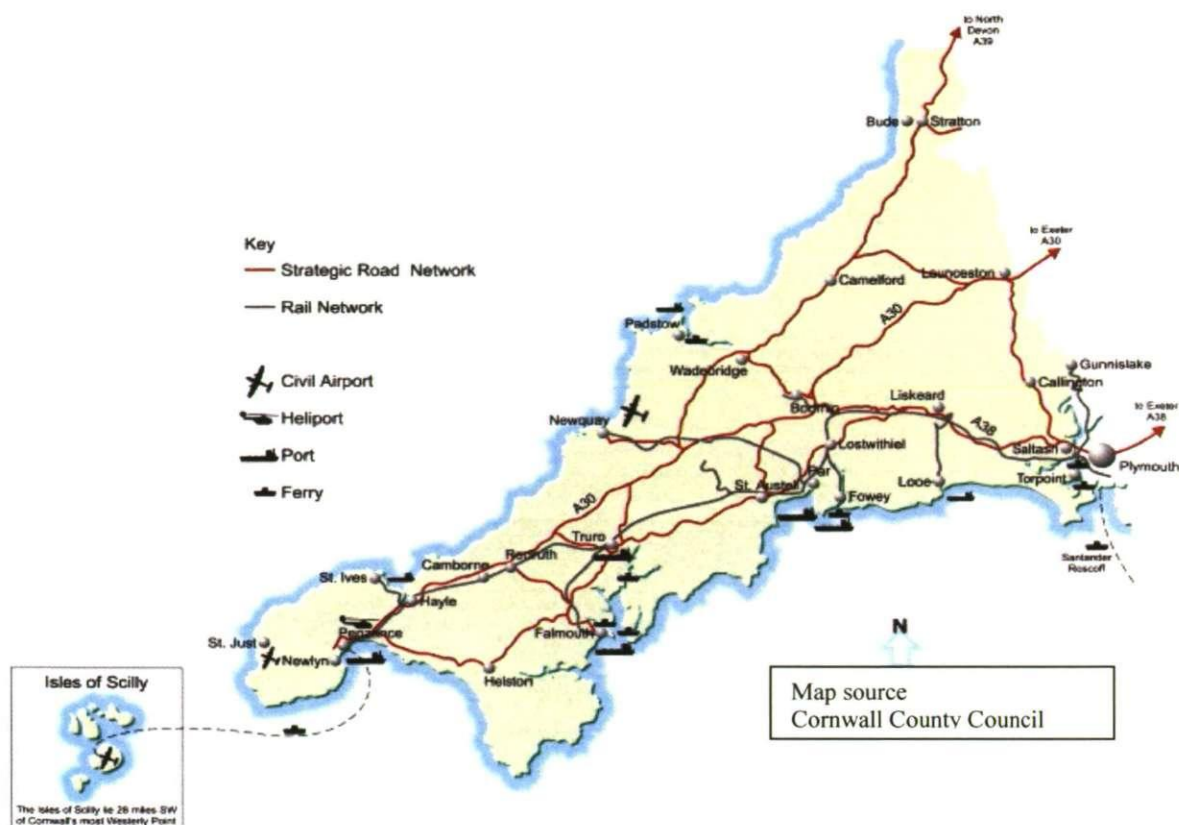
In a rural area, transport is an essential cost rather than an optional one and the need for, and the necessity to be able to regularly access a reliable form of mechanised transport, reduces a family's income still further. In many areas within Cornwall local services have been declining and accessing services or travelling to find employment in other areas has become difficult for non car owners. Just over a decade ago in 1991, 75.5% of households within the County had at least one car whilst nationally only 67.7% had at least one car. This illustrates the dependence of Cornish residents on having a car available in a county where the population is relatively scattered and public transport was not always a viable option. After an allowance has been made for Cornwall's rural make-up, car ownership has been somewhat below the national average and also of significance is that the average age of cars in Cornwall is amongst the highest in England, with at least 34% being over 10 years old. This is compared with only 23% nationally. In the year 2000, approximately 259,000 cars were registered in Cornwall which showed an increase of 18% from 1990. With the average age of a car being 10 years, this may suggest that whilst many people were not able to run any car at all, others coped with an older vehicle, probably spending an exceptionally large proportion of their income on the costs associated with merely maintaining it in a roadworthy condition. This differed slightly from the boy racers whose financial investment in their cars was usually aimed at their vehicles appearance, performance and the type, quantity and quality of accessories they could adhere to them which I discuss in Chapter 5 and 6.

An enquiry into rural transport services cited in the Countryside Agency 2003 Annual Report showed that in the year 2003, approximately one third of villages or hamlets within the West Country had no bus service, and families often spent one quarter of their income on motoring costs. In some of the more remote rural areas community and voluntary

transport plays a vital, if not somewhat erratic link to the towns and villages; it is erratic by virtue of the fact that it relies upon the availability and goodwill of volunteers. The public bus services which were available were largely operated by First Western National and a further network of less intensive routes run by a number of smaller operators many of whom focused on transportation for schools and colleges. Around 15,000 pupils were transported each school day to schools and colleges across the County (Cornwall County Council, 2004).

For people who wished to travel by bus or coach out of the county for the purposes of work or study, there were daily coach services operated by National Express from Cornwall and there were also regular train networks from the County but these had severe cost implications for families on low incomes as well as the considerable time involved in travelling long distances. As an example travelling from West Penwith by coach or train to Plymouth was over two hours duration, Exeter and Bristol in excess of three and four respectively, representing daily travel times to and from the county of in excess of four hours at the minimum and up to eight hours at the maximum; these times were also susceptible to fluctuating weather and travel conditions.

The predominant pattern of travel to work journeys has been from the rural areas into the towns, from parts of south-east Cornwall to Plymouth and from much of mid and West Cornwall to Truro which may be seen on the strategic transport network which is shown in Figure 17 (below).



**Figure 17: Map of Cornwall showing strategic transport networks in 2004**

Research carried out in 2002 by the Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research, suggests that for many families public transport is not an option. Furthermore, even if public transport were available it is neither reliable, nor accessible nor affordable. For the older teenagers like some of my respondents who were still at college and travelled regularly as part of their course, or as part of a weekly day release scheme from work, the bus routes and times of operation were not always conducive to the commencement of lecture or workshop times. The viability and affordability of paying for bus and taxi fares from an Education Maintenance Allowance (E.M.A), a means tested grant, sometimes up to the maximum of £30 per week and something that the majority claimed, was not always practicable.

In addition to travelling by bus the other models of transport which enabled residents within the County to get from A to B, included eight estuarial ferry crossings which operated year-round. These comprised of two services across the River Tamar (one vehicular, one pedestrian), two across the River Fowey (one vehicular, one pedestrian), three across the River Fal (one vehicular and two pedestrian) and one pedestrian service across the River Camel. A sea ferry operated from Penzance to the Isles of Scilly, and provided a vital link between the Isles and mainland Cornwall. Many of these however were reliant on appropriate weather conditions and two of my respondents who lived at Polruan near Fowey often missed school or college during the winter months because the pedestrian service from Polruan to Fowey was unable to function due to inclement weather, there were no buses available and neither had parents who had access to a car. Other respondents who lived on the Roseland peninsular often had to make the long journey to work or college in Falmouth by road when the King Harry ferry was likewise unavailable or out of commission due to its annual re-fit and service.

## **The Population Distribution in Cornwall**

The difficulties of terrain and communication within Cornwall has not favoured the growth of urban centres and only 31% of the population lived in towns of over 10,000 inhabitants, compared with four-fifths in England and Wales (Cornwall County Council Research and Information Services, 2004). There are nine such towns: Penzance, Camborne and Redruth (the latter two jointly with intervening communities, comprised the largest urbanised area in Cornwall), Falmouth, Truro, Newquay, St Austell (which had the largest local catchment area of any Cornish town), Bodmin and Saltash, all of these, apart from the last two, lay in the centre and far west of the county. The majority of my participants came from the Camborne and Redruth areas, and the second highest numbers were from the Penzance area. The remainder were almost equally distributed amongst the other six towns.

Records have shown that within the last twenty years, occupancy of the eastern part of the county had grown faster than the west and according to statistics, the population density of the four western districts ranged from 202 to 185 persons per square kilometre whereas in the north of the county density was further reduced to 68 persons per square kilometre (Cornwall County Council, 2005). A fifth of the general population in Cornwall lived in villages of between 1,000 and 2,000 and just over a quarter lived in the larger villages and smaller towns with populations between 2,000 and 10,000. The majority of my participants came from the tiny hamlets on the outskirts of the larger villages, few actually lived in the towns regarding them more as places for leisure purposes; places to be seen and to see and also as locations for work or in some cases college. Although there was no single centre which dominated, Truro had developed as a sub-regional centre since the 1970's especially in terms of administration, shopping and office based employment, whereas at the other end of the scale, a little over a fifth of the population lived and worked in rural areas and smaller settlements of less than 1,000. Many Truro town centre retailers had large car parks which were ideal venues for boy racers to meet during evenings and weekends. Such locations provided them with a facility where they could showcase their car modifications and driving prowess to a wider audience, something that the more isolated, out-of-town industrial parks like those in the Redruth, Camborne and Bodmin areas lacked.

The present composition of Cornwall's population has been considerably influenced by past migration. For nearly a century, from the 1860's to the 1950's Cornwall had experienced an almost continuous net loss of population but this trend has been reversed and the county has experienced a rate of population growth which has at times been faster than national trends. In 1991 Cornwall ranked third, falling close behind Cambridge and Buckinghamshire in terms of population growth, however during the 1990's growth slowed significantly (4%) and is now only a little more than the national average (Cornwall County Council, 2004). Nonetheless, the South West is currently regarded as the fastest

growing region largely due to inward migration and the Restormel and North Cornwall districts are among the fastest growing within the South West (State of the Cornish Environment, Baseline Edition, 2002).

Whilst the increase in Cornwall's population may be due entirely to migration; partly because of the age structure of the population, there have been more deaths than births in the county every year. An above average proportion of the population has been in the retirement age group and two thirds of net gains in the population has tended to be among working age people and their children. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) 2001 Census provided a total population figure for Cornwall of 499,114 which showed an increase of just over 19% between 1951 and 2001. However the Census also demonstrated a decline in the younger age groups (0-39) and especially those of the age group of my participants (17-24), whereas the largest group has been represented by the 40-54 age groups (ONS, 2001 National Census).

### **Work as a Central Source of Identity for the Men in My Study**

According to Sinfield (1999) work is often regarded as a central source of identity for men but less so for women, who allegedly often find that domestic life offers them a sense of identity and purpose. In terms of becoming unemployed and how the status affects young men, Willis (1977) suggests that,

‘...unemployment and ensuing financial hardship can prevent many young men from enjoying a normal social life and since they do not have the opportunity to experience work, they cannot experience the sense of identity that work provides’ (1977: 249).

Where geographical areas have been decimated by high levels of unemployment, many young men had found that the prospect of long term employment of an ‘appropriately masculine’ nature very limited or non existent. Traditional male skill based work in heavy

industry, associated construction, mining, fishing and china clay production had disappeared only to be replaced by light to medium industry and small scale manufacturing commonly found in the vast industrial estates on the outskirts of Bodmin, Redruth, Liskeard and Saltash. Small scale light industries with niche marketing such as bespoke wrought ironwork, candle-making, handcrafted furniture and staircases were becoming features in some of the rural villages, often arising out of redundant farm buildings and run by craftspeople catering to a niche market. Many of the larger industries had automated production lines including the plastics industry such as Contico; a large factory based outside Redruth which made boxes or through some of the larger food processing factories like Roche Foods based just outside Bodmin. Ginsters was a similar industry which produced pasties and other consumables in the east of the County, and in most of these factories the production-line workforces were predominately women.

Where you live in Cornwall can play an important role in how accessible you are to potential work. Many of my participants had spoken about the absence of work near to their homes resulting in the fact that many had been forced to seek work opportunities many miles from their homes. A significant 'by-product' of this arrangement had been that the social networks and ties of friendship developed through the workplace had been, through geography, forced to remain there. This was mainly due to the relatively poor wages and ensuing economic constraints, together with the distances between workplace and home making it difficult to socialise regularly. The entirety of this tended to suggest that where opportunities for employment within Cornwall was limited and there were no longer any clearly defined or gendered roles to assume in the workplace, men, and pertinent to my research, young men, had been forced to disassociate themselves from the problems within the labour market, such as poor opportunities for employment or a lack of qualifications. In doing so, they had deflected their interests, achievements and aspirations into leisure pursuits including association with the car and car related practices, seeking

new ways of creating a symbolic masculine identity for themselves through these means. Their ensuing leisure and occasional illegal or delinquent acts thus provided them with a collective solution to their problems and with the means by which to reassure themselves (and others) that they were indeed 'real men'.

The traditional types of employment for men in Cornwall which I have already discussed in this chapter, such as fishing, farming, mining or working in one of the allied heavy industries, including construction, had often relied upon characteristics like physical strength and fortitude, the ability to be able to endure working in often dirty, cramped environments for long periods of time and the qualifications or experience to maintain, drive or manoeuvre heavy industrial equipment, rather than academic or technological abilities. Within the current employment market however, there have been few opportunities where the skills of such a specialised workforce were able to be utilised apart from within the construction, heavy engineering and motor industries. To this effect many men who had lost their main source of employment, have had to adapt or pursue another career path often involving re-training and utilising opportunities provide by the creation of training or employment in Objective One European Union funded projects. This may also be true for many young men who had been raised with an expectation that they too would follow their male relatives into the types of employment which were now obsolete.

As my research developed, conversations with the boy racers' and their families revealed that historically many families may have seen sons automatically follow their fathers' career path into one of the declining industries mentioned above. This was particularly evident in the Truro, Camborne and Redruth areas which were particularly badly affected by the closure of Wheal Jane and South Crofty mines and the reduction of surface industries which relied upon the mines for their business. With opportunities for employment disappearing and new employment being scarce, the immediate result often

saw direct competition in the job market between fathers and sons and uncles and nephews with a belief that employer preference extended to youth and appropriate qualifications, as opposed to maturity, and inappropriate qualifications. To some degree this meant that there was a pervasive unease amongst some families, and many young men who participated in my research spoke of finding that their fathers' roles within their family structures suddenly changed. Many attributed this to their fathers' unemployment and their mothers' having to find employment within the retail, service and caring industries thus finding themselves in the roles of main breadwinners after many years functioning as wives and mothers. This appeared to herald in the young men's view, a weakening of collectivist traditions whereby their fathers' were now taking over more domestic responsibilities including child-rearing and in doing so had become 'less of a man'.

This perceived emasculation process is confirmed by a number of the boy racers' fathers and other male relatives when I asked them about the periods when they had become unemployed. They described how prior to becoming unemployed, much of the self-esteem they possessed had been derived from their reputation outside the home, earned usually through the nature of their employment or their profession. Those who had worked for example in the mining industry, often sought their leisure time in the company of workmates through working men's clubs or through one of the many associated male voice choirs, or brass bands which each of the larger mines in Cornwall used to have, or through a mutual interest in the preservation of traditional steam engines and old vehicles associated with agriculture from bygone days. Nigel's father told me that he devoted all his spare time to refurbishing an old Massey Ferguson tractor with a complete set of working implements which he had restored or fabricated using the skills he had learned as a miner working on the surface and maintaining the heavy machinery which supported the workforce underground. Once he had become unemployed and the prospect of re-employment was limited, as an escape from his domestic duties he not only used the skills

he possessed to support his own interest in mechanics but was keen to encourage his son by assisting him in tasks such as car and motorcycle repairs, transferring skills in a practical way, conscious that DIY made economic sense within his family. He like many other of my respondents' male relatives spoke of the enjoyment they got from meeting up with male friends, going for a pint of beer (or several) and having a game of darts in their local pubs as often as economics and freedom from domestic chores would allow. The warmth and camaraderie that they shared emanated through the descriptions of the 'laddish' behaviours they engaged in during their weekly meetings; the mixture of drinking, brawling, bravado, sexual posturing and social misbehaving which happened through their social networks and developed over time.

The male relatives of the boy racers who engaged in my research and who lived in the Camborne and Redruth areas, often mentioned as part of their leisure pursuits, an annual attendance at Traction Engine rallies, many of them as members of the local Trevithick Society, so named after the Cornish Engineer, Richard Trevithick, born in 1771. Here I was able to draw parallels with Trevithick and some of the male family members of the boy racers, because Trevithick too was a miner who worked with his father at Wheal Treasury mine, and at an early age revealed an aptitude for engineering and generally tinkering with engines in his leisure time. This led to a number of inventions and the name Trevithick soon became synonymous with the development of the steam engine.

The recreational activity described by Nigel's father and others like him, highlights that when some men find themselves unemployed and opportunities for finding new employment scarce, there is a tendency for them to look outside the family for the status and meaning of their masculinity. My research reveals through conversations with families that in difficult times particularly when unemployment was significantly high, marital or common law relationships had broken down resulting in family fragmentation, separation

and ensuing divorce. Nationally, nine out of ten men leave the familial home to become non-resident with only approximately fifty percent of these retaining any regular contact with their children, and only one father in twenty obtaining full custody of a child in any subsequent divorce action (see Clarke 2000). This is consistent with my own findings because the father figure from the families of those who participated in my research was often missing or rejected, and the ensuing vagaries of familial fragmentation often resulted in feelings of insecurity, not only in economic terms; having to struggle to live on perhaps a mother's income, but also in terms of how to behave in an appropriately masculine manner consistent with the expectations of peers and those of the resident parent.

Certainly at a local level in the western part of Cornwall there has been a steady decline of the two parent family. Changes within the long evolution of social and family relationships are not unusual and the decline of the traditional nuclear family and the rise in the number of families headed by women create the very antithesis of the patriarchal family. Since 1999 many Social Inclusion programmes, such as Sure Start, On Track and the Positive Futures projects have sprung up across Cornwall and are designed primarily to reduce the levels of social and economic marginalisation experienced by families. Research shows that at least 25% of the families identified through each of the social inclusion programmes are single status headed by a woman (see Hatton & Williams 2001). The 2001 Census confirms that across Penwith alone there were 1639 such lone parent households (Office for National Statistics, 2001). If this is extended to the wider population of Cornwall this figure is likely to be considerably higher.

Difficulties can undoubtedly arise in what might have become a female led household, where a young man finds himself in a situation devoid of appropriate male role models. Tolson (1997) however, argues that some male children develop closer emotional ties to their mothers because the mothers represent the constant in their lives, paying close

attention to them and nurturing them since birth. However the cultural pressure for young men to prove themselves according to the identity-laced messages passed through generations such as 'boys don't cry' and 'boys will be boys' brings a new set of difficulties as the young men struggle with the competing expectations of masculine behaviour in the private and social spheres of their lives. In such cases where fatherhood was not in itself as visible as motherhood, the boy racers spoke of constructing their own roles as men, using fragments of their own previous experiences combined with their knowledge surrounding the social inferences of what it is to be a real man and using depictions of their male heroes from such cinematographic productions like *Gone in 60 Seconds*, and *The Fast and the Furious*. The results being that in many cases they were adopting masculine values associated with competitiveness, physical strength, risk-taking, personal ambition and emotional restraint.

Tolson (1997) too, attributes much of this latter behaviour to how the capitalist system affects how men develop their identities. He argues that the system of capitalism creates a social relations structure which people have to learn to work through in order to survive and the set of behaviours that men adopt to survive in the system are those they consider to be 'masculine'. Although the behaviours may differ according to socio-economic status and the group pressures associated with that status, Tolson further argues that working class men are more likely to be dominant at home and adopt a more aggressive, violent persona because of their need to compensate for the powerlessness they feel at work or indeed where they may be unemployed. Whilst this may undoubtedly be the case within the homes of some of my young male respondents, it was not perpetuated within the households where women were the central figures, and there was little evidence of a resident father.

Situations where the father figure was no longer as significant nor even perhaps as accessible as before, may present an element of role confusion for many young men who found that they were being supported in a household managed by a woman. It could represent a threat to masculinity when the young man found himself perhaps through unemployment, forced into a passive and non contributory role within the household. In fact as Clare suggests,

‘A man was what he did at work. But if a man does nothing, or that which previously defined him is removed, he is, to all intents and purposes, no longer a man’ (2000: 90).

For many of my participants, their natural father had passed out of their daily lives, beyond even being regarded as a shadowy figure playing a walk-on role in the portrait of family life. Neither was he on hand in the background to talk ‘Bloke talk’ with, or do activities of a masculine nature. Sometimes it appeared as if this type of male role model had been airbrushed right out of the family picture leaving a void of male companionship in the young men’s lives from their early teenage years or in some cases, before. This in itself led to some young men experiencing occasional bouts of confusion and depression which is highlighted by Seb thus,

“I used to go round me mate Leon’s and hang out wiv ‘im, you know. They woz a proper family like, his Mum used ter work down Tesco’s and he’s got a couple a’ brat sisters but his Old Man would always hang out like and offer us beer and go Banger racin’ wiv us; well he’s drive us there and he was all matey like wiv Leon and then I’d come home and me Old Girl would get on to me like, as I’d shut mesel’ in me room. Leon’s family [laughs and looks away] well, [long pause] I know it sounds daft like, but they was like the Waltons. You know that family from the telly. Leon’s Old Man, well he’s cool. Leon dunno how lucky ‘e is. I dunno where my Old Man is. He never come near Mother or me since he left”.

There was wistfulness and almost longing for something similar in his own life in the way Seb described visits to his friend Leon's home. Yet in relating his story to me I was aware that there were moments when he tried hard to display bravado; blustering, sneering and mocking the reference to the fictional family, the Walton's in a 'laddish' way. His response indicated that he regarded emotional displays as essentially feminine, which, if seen in a man was decidedly not masculine and was thus despised for its connotations of weakness and dependency. Yet it was evident from his attempts to underplay what I understood to be slight envy of Leon's close family ties that his bluster and laddishness were little more than a veneer to cover his more fundamental feelings of loss or abandonment.

Seb's discomfort at trying to disguise perhaps his real feelings about his own family situation and the absence of a father figure in his own life were consistent with Clare's (2000) suggestion that men do not find it merely difficult to express their feelings of isolation and articulate their feelings of frustration or to ask for help, but they are regarded as more isolated, psychologically and socially, with fewer closer personal support mechanisms than women. For Clare, the 'real man' is purportedly renowned for his ability and inclination to be often stoned, drunken, risk taking and sexually daring. Furthermore he argues that men appear terrified of the prospect that they may have to reveal that they can be, and often are, depressed, dependent and in need of help. Yet to do this, to articulate the inner most thoughts and fears would signify to others an element of weakness and thus the man would be open to ridicule for not being appropriately masculine in behaviour. It was apparent from the way some of my participants had spoken about their relationships with their own fathers, that physical or verbal demonstrations of affection were significantly absent and conversations about personal problems were areas to be avoided. Ellis highlighted this by telling me,

"I always kind of looked up to him, always respected me old man, but he was never one to show any emotion unless he was livid about summat. I don't think

he ever expressed himself in a sort of affectionate way in front of me or the rest of us. He's a typical man. You wouldn't go and talk to him about any problems you were having at school or work or with somebody, it just wasn't his scene".

Ellis's description reflected one which was echoed by many of my participants and their families, which appeared to be a need to conform to the ideal of the 'tried and tested man'. Any man or adolescent boy who behaved in a way other than that, which was consistent with a working class image of masculinity, ran the risk of being held up with derision and scorn. For many of my participants, learning how to mask emotions and insecurities and to adopt the kind of image consistent with that described above began at school or college.

### **Education and Training as Sites of Struggle**

Succeeding in the education system was a constant site of struggle for many of my respondents. Those who sought to work hard and achieve, were often derided by peers as 'swots', regarded as 'girly' or not particularly masculine, preferring good grades to the occasional misbehaving in class or 'bunking off' from school. James discussed how he often went out of his way to get detention from his class tutors, preferring the attention and notoriety he got from being regarded as 'naughty' as opposed to being good, "When I was a kid I was less likely to get picked on or beaten up by my mates if I was one of them as opposed to trying to please my parents by doing well at school".

The suggestion here appears to be that being highly regarded by peers was considered to be of more importance than being highly thought of by teachers or family members. Yet many of my respondents equally found that their limited experiences of traditional family support had restricted their ability to develop the learning processes in the same way that others more fortunate had done so. Inevitably then, for those who left school with few qualifications and did not pursue college courses or university degrees, they were less likely to find the type of employment which provided benefits and paid good wages which

in turn could support them in their lifestyle and leisure choices. This is highlighted by research cited by The Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research (2003), which suggests that as the workplace continues to become more technologically advanced, the employer demand for workers with literacy and numeracy skills has increased.

Education and the levels of training and achievement of qualifications are critical to the performance of businesses and the economy but indicators show that Cornwall reflects national trends with girls out-performing boys at five stages within the education system. The differences are notable from the early stages of Key Stage 1, 2 and 3 through to GCSE and A /AS level. At the early Key Stages assessment period the differences are particularly marked for English (reading / writing / spelling) whilst differences for mathematics and the science subjects are smaller. Cornwall has been found to be amongst the best performing local education authorities in England for GCSE examination results with 51.1% of pupils achieving 5 GCSE's at grades A to C compared with the figure for England as a whole which was 46.3% (Cornwall County Council Education Authority statistics 2003). Following post-compulsory education between 1999 and 2000, 76.5% of young people in Cornwall chose to stay on in education and this 'staying on' rate is considerably higher than of Devon the adjacent county, but may reflect the fact that staying on at school was a preferred option to being unemployed and forced to exist on Social Security welfare benefits. There was also a marked difference between males and females remaining within education, with 67.5% males compared to 76.7% of females. In contrast however more males than females entered employment and training (19.1% males compared to 12.6% females) but significantly more males than females were registered as unemployed.

When people live or work in low resource environments, or move in social circles which are unable to provide the right level of stimuli, their ability to develop healthy levels of self-esteem, personal, social and work skills suffer. These negative experiences which can

lead to low self-esteem may stem from education itself, or rather the lack of appropriate educational opportunities which have left many, and particularly young people, and significantly young males, struggling to meet the norms in terms of acceptable levels of literacy and numeracy expected within the workplace. Wells states that,

‘We know from many earlier studies that adults with poor literacy and numeracy are also likely to experience a range of social disadvantage...Reading seems to have a protective effect, underlining the importance of raising standards of literacy and numeracy which will make real progress in overcoming the obstacles to social integration’ (Basic Skills Agency Annual Report, 2002:2).

Competition for work has been particularly high in Cornwall and it has been more difficult for those who could only provide manual skills who, according to research are the manual classes who are over represented amongst the indigenous Cornish population (Williams and Champion, 1998). The lack of academic qualifications or specific training can undoubtedly act as inhibitors to employment and employers are increasingly valuing basic skills and favour employees who demonstrate evidence of education and training beyond school (Basic Skills Agency, 2003).

Some of the young men from my research told me that they had been at one time or another socially excluded from school at the age of fifteen. Although the majority admitted that their exclusion was due mainly to their engagement in anti-social behaviour, bullying, violence and persistent absences, they also spoke of what they described as their ‘learning difficulties’. Some of them described receiving a formal diagnosis of Dyslexia whilst others spoke simply of ‘having difficulties’ which when pressed for more information about these ‘difficulties’, described similar characteristics experienced by those with the formal diagnosis. This condition is an apparent stumbling block which affects progression through school, particularly with boys and research carried out by the national Dyslexia

Institute (2002) shows that three times as many boys than girls have at some stage during education, received additional teaching because of their difficulties. Shane, Joe, Duncan and Shaun in particular described when their apparent inability to grasp what was perceived to be basic numeracy and literacy skills was often tragically mistaken for disinterest or idleness.

“We would all pretend we hadn’t heard the question or was looking outta the window, or hadn’t done our homework, you know the sort of excuses, the dog ate it miss, or I left it on the bus. We was always in detention or made to stand in the corridor. We could’ve said we didn’t understand like, if you know what I mean, but it was kinda easier to be ‘Jack the lad’ as you know that’s what they was thinking of you, so might just act up like. It was okay as yer mates would think you was givin’ a good show, not really dumb like but, hard like you didn’t really give a fuck all the same”.

To admit to not understanding could be interpreted as a sign of weakness by peers and any displays of weakness could be considered as ‘non-masculine’. Nonetheless the obvious problems caused by dyslexia, or as my participants might describe it as ‘learning difficulties’, and the perceived lack of recognition of the symptoms, together with the failure to understand the wider implications of being labelled ‘thick’, is derogatory at any stage in life. Yet to be labelled with any derogatory term at an age when image and reputation is considered important can be a handicap, or in some cases once thus labelled, and with no obvious chance to redress the balance, the easier option would seem to be to respond and behave in a manner consistent with such labelling as discussed by Shane, Joe, Duncan and Shaun, above.

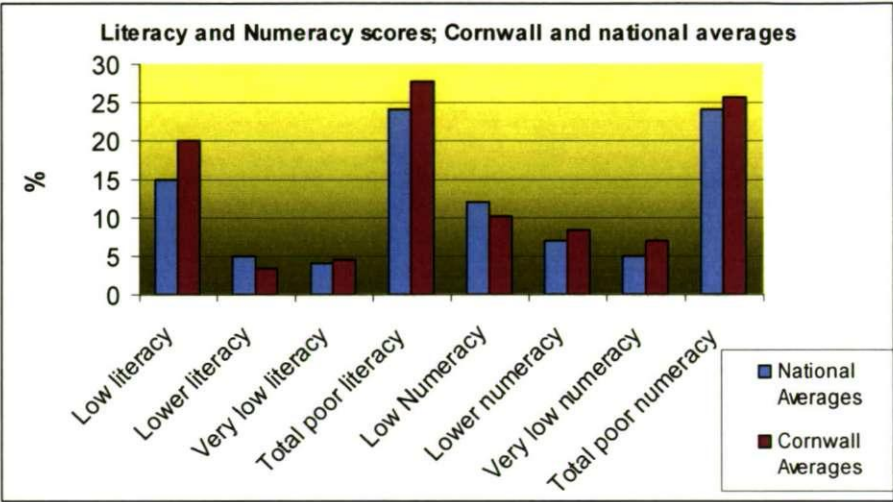
The boy racers who identified themselves (and others) as experiencing the problems thus described also spoke of enjoying their motor engineering, construction or plumbing courses and doing very well in the practical applications but failing dismally in the academic or writing-up stages which involved assimilating their portfolio of evidence towards their National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs). They also spoke unanimously of

being suddenly rendered invisible at this point, by some of their tutors who had previously welcomed their prowess in practical activities, and being discarded in favour of their more able fellow students. With a lack of interest or assistance forthcoming some of the young men felt it easier to acquiesce and embrace their perceived invisibility and drop out of college. What was striking about my participants' recollections of school and college life (where appropriate), was their similarity to numerous other descriptions of working class educational experiences which have been published over the last few decades (see for example Wilson, 1996; Ball and Curry 1995; Brown et al, 1995; Riseborough, 1993; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; O'Donnell and Sharpe, 2000).

Poor levels of ability in numeracy and literacy can have a limiting effect on people irrespective of age, in terms of their confidence, self-esteem and their ability to communicate, giving and receiving information in its written form. Furthermore, the locally differentiated working class culture from which the majority of my participants came from, displays certain cultural pre-dispositions towards education which appeared in turn to be moulded by the local schools own systems of educational differentiation and labelling. Research carried out in Cornwall by the Basic Skills Agency (2000), designed to ascertain the literacy and numeracy attainment levels of the population aged between 16 and 60 years has identified 3 levels of need which it describes as:

- 'Low' – Respondents who are regarded as on the borderline of functional literacy and numeracy and could attain the national standards in literacy and numeracy with relatively limited coursework or assistance.
- 'Lower' – Respondents who have limited literacy and numeracy skills and would need directed assistance in order to reach the national standards. They would be expected to have difficulties in coping with at least some of the everyday literacy and numeracy requirements they encounter.
- 'Very low' – Respondents who have severe literacy and numeracy problems and would need intensive assistance to reach national standards.

The overall findings from the Basic Skills survey are only predicted, but the following as shown in Table 2 (below) nonetheless indicates how Cornwall compares with national levels for literacy and numeracy.



**Table 2: Findings from the Basic Skills Agency (2000)**

As shown in the chart above, there are distinct differences in attainment levels in literacy and numeracy which indicated that the number of individuals with low to very low literacy and numeracy in Cornwall, were in all instances higher than the national average, at the time of the Basic Skills Agency research. This was consistent with the findings of Cornwall County Council’s Education Authority study (2004), which suggested that although educational performance by school pupils within Cornwall was good, skill levels amongst the existing workforce lagged behind regional and national averages with a high proportion of employees having low, or no, formal qualifications.

The discovery and discussion of the subcultures which have developed amongst young people within the education system has been a staple of educational ethnography for many years (O’Donnell and Sharpe, 2000). They have recognised that young people are more likely to experience unemployment than older age groups. Furthermore young men are more likely to be unemployed than young women and take longer to find suitable jobs.

Clearly education has come to play a more important part in the successful integration of young men in the labour market more so now than ever before. The decline of traditional industries within Cornwall which were once the preserve of men, have been overtaken by jobs in the service sector of a kind that had been traditionally the preserve of women, particularly retail, personal care and catering.

In common with the rest of the UK entry to a first job is no longer the straightforward transition from school at the age of sixteen (or younger), like it used to be for the parents of my informants. Apprenticeships and other routes into well paid manual work now generally require GCSE qualifications which they did not in the past and there remain limited opportunities for employment in Cornwall. Many employers, who used to recruit young people without qualifications, now require some evidence of application and commitment and use qualifications as an indicator of this. To this effect those aged between sixteen and nineteen may often have to move in complex patterns between full-time study, part-time work, part-time study, vocational training, full-time work and unemployment which was demonstrated in the life, education and work patterns described by many of my participants.

## **Summary**

Opportunities within the county of Cornwall are limited for those who have little in the way of qualifications and experience and there are more people seeking employment than there are jobs available. Where employment opportunities do exist, these tend to be production-line type work and packaging in factories and small light industry, retail and the service and hospitality industries with many of the latter relying on part-time seasonal, casual labour. The tourist industry has provided opportunity for often cyclical labour which is reliant upon the holiday season and the type of employment opportunities which tend to

favour women. Traditional forms of employment such as mining, fishing, agriculture and those emanating from the China Clay industries which supported many male employees during past decades have gradually diminished, fading into Cornwall's heritage. Thus men have to look outside these industries for their work and in some cases opportunities are limited, and within many households the traditional male breadwinner roles have been taken over by women. This in turn has had implications for men's identities and sense of self...of how they regard themselves as men. In turn this also has implications for how sons regard fathers (where such exist), as appropriate (and appropriately male) role models.

The need to be mobile, to be able to travel sometimes considerable distances to and from work within the county (and sometimes externally) is often an essential requirement to finding and keeping a job. With public transport being infrequent and unreliable and even in some areas due to the vast geographic spread of the county, quite inaccessible, car ownership or personal mobility in some mechanised form has never before been as necessary as it is today. The average age of a family car in Cornwall is ten years old and the cost in maintaining such a vehicle in a roadworthy condition is quite demanding, yet purchasing a newer model is often prohibited by the low income upon which a high percentage of families exist. Equally accessing public transport even if it is infrequent and unreliable, may be the only mode of getting not only to work but also to college, and funding travel from an EMA grant or through a part-time job may be for some, economically impossible.

Undoubtedly receiving a good education and succeeding at school and college is regarded by many families as a route out of poverty and associated social exclusion. Thus the pressure to do well has been experienced by many of the young male participants from this research. Often however, their experiences of school due to poverty of ambition, poor educational ability or believing that there was little point in trying to attain qualifications

because of the poor employment opportunities available to them, has left many with negative views of school and college. For those young men who are academically bright, or at least have the ability to 'get their heads down' making concerted efforts towards academic progress, this often has to be balanced against strong informal pressure from peers less talented or with less inclination towards learning. 'Saving face' in front of a peer group is often considered to be more important than striving for good grades, and peer influence is clearly significant in terms of those who 'skived off' from college. How they occupied their time whilst 'skiving' reveals that much of it was spent hanging around local garages or with older family members engaged in mechanical repairs. Many of my participants speak uncomplainingly of engaging in informal learning in these impromptu workplace situations. Getting dirty and grimy is regarded as 'real men's' work. Furthermore, talking 'Bloke talk', finding an identity through working with, or hanging around those who worked with cars, also fulfils other dimensions in their lives. One of these allows a demonstration of their cultural capital and expands their creativity via their practical skills which are being put to good use whilst another enhances their chances of mobility by being able to get around in some of the vehicles they can repair and buy quite cheaply. For the majority however, life without transportation represents a life without freedom.

Within this chapter I have described the County of Cornwall, in particular its size, the limitations of its public transport network and in particular how a lack of mobility can impact in a variety of ways upon families who live in often isolated rural areas. In doing this I have highlighted how access to a car is regarded as an essential resource for my participants, not only to access services, including training and work but also to allow them opportunities for social interaction. I have discussed how poor opportunities for employment, particularly for those who have few academic qualifications and indeed the limited opportunities for employment, was endemic in Cornwall during the period of my

research, and had placed many of my respondents and their families in poor economic circumstances.

Where employment opportunities have existed they are often believed to be more appropriate for women such as those within the caring or service industries. Others are far removed from the type of manual labour which once allowed men to demonstrate what they perceived to be characteristics of working class masculinity; the physical strength, endurance and often ensuing dirt and grime, sweat and scarification's of labour, which were experienced by the majority of my participants' fathers and other older male relatives. Where such exist, they are likely to be within the construction, haulage and garage industries, but even these have limited capacity to take on inexperienced workers. Many of my participants being unable to find paid employment, or who were in low paid jobs, have sought another medium through which to demonstrate their masculinity, and have turned to their cars and car related activities to do so. In doing this, and in many ways, they are replicating the characteristics demonstrated by their fathers and other male relatives, in order to show others that they too are 'real' men. To reinforce this perception many of them too have engaged in risky practices with their cars, demonstrating skills, power, control and mastery. In the next chapter I will discuss this in more detail and look at the credentials which they view as necessary for becoming a boy racer. I will also explore the importance they attach to their social networks, their strong ties of friendship and the ensuing 'brotherhood' which has developed in some cohorts of boy racers, which has led to an alternative (and in some cases, preferable), *de facto* family structure.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Constructing and Maintaining the Image of a Boy Racer**

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter I outlined the broader social and economic framework describing the county in which my participants and their families live. In this chapter I introduce the cultural processes which set the scene for how my participants became boy racers and worked hard to maintain their identities as such. I include the extent to which they used performative and risky activities to raise their individual profiles within their respective peer groups. I also discuss the extent to which resources including specialist websites, motoring magazines and car accessory retailers had influenced my participants' choice or mode of modification, stimulated their imaginations and in many cases served (and created) unrequited needs. Age, status and identity were very important to boy racers and many of them energetically pursued what they regarded as an appropriately masculine identity, conscious of the inferences others might draw from their endeavours.

As my research unfolded, it revealed that it was the younger men aged under 20 who were more likely to have worked tirelessly to arrive at a level within the hierarchical structure of their own group, in which they felt comfortable. They were more likely to engage in risky practices to attain status and acceptability amongst peers, something which is addressed in more detail in Chapter 6. The age at which certain boy racer traits such as excessive risk taking and performative displays of driving skills and manoeuvrability seemed to diminish, occurred when the young men reached approximately 24 years of age. For the majority of my participants who had attained this age, it represented a time which heralded more personal and familial responsibilities through for example fatherhood or having to ensure responsibility for rent, a mortgage or partner. By this age too many of the boy racers were

able to afford more expensive, prestigious cars which they regarded as symbols or reflections of their social and economic status and were content for the symbols to 'speak' of their success for them.

The necessary qualities or qualifications required to become a boy racer appeared to fall into two distinct arenas, the introduction of, or association with someone who was already part of the local boy racer scene which Joseph describes as, "Through me mates or me older brother, just hangin' out with them to begin with an' then gettin' a set of wheels [car] of me own". The second arena required using personal ownership of a particular make and model of car, or taking advantage of a car owning friend and researching the locations where regular gatherings of young car owners appeared to take place. It was then simply a matter of just going along, becoming an opportunist and ingratiating yourself with any boy racers who happened along. Billy-Joe did this, saying, "Yeah you just go and park up. Check out what's about. Have a natter and check out the gear".

The most common entry however, appeared to be the first described above. It did not require formal 'references', however, irrespective of the blood relationship or familial ties between young men, becoming part of a group of boy racers was not without a degree of initiation. While they could act as appropriate and acceptable referees, older siblings and other group members still expected exhibitions of performative driving skills and the ability of would-be boy racers to demonstrate their prowess behind the wheel of a car by using it as an instrument to achieve what on the surface looked like the unachievable. Good driving skills and technical abilities especially those which could tune an engine to accelerate quickly as opposed to being able to sustain speed over a longer period of time, along with the talents and ingenuity to modify a car's appearance, functioned as desirable skills within the boy racer fraternity. Likewise the ability to negotiate the best price for a range of accessories or the ability to fabricate accessories which were out of the price

range for many were regarded as worthwhile credentials and a combination of all the former did much to increase status levels within the group.

Those who attempted to gain acceptance using the second route, were also expected to demonstrate their prowess, but there was less likelihood that even succeeding to impress with their driving skills and innovative ways of making their vehicle achieve the unachievable, would guarantee acceptance. Occasionally some of these young men, driven by a desire to be accepted, indulged in a series of delinquent practices such as overt traffic violations which led to engagement with the police and which could serve as indicators of status based upon reputation, daring and risk, practices or qualities which legitimate society does not acknowledge, and for their part neither did the majority of boy racers.

For younger male siblings it seemed to be common practice to become embroiled in the activities of older brothers and their friends as the family garage, front driveway or the street become popular venues to 'hang out' during light summer evenings or at weekends where inevitably the main attraction is a car and a few creative ideas. Tristan told me that it was "Amazin' what you can do wiv a box of bits an' an empty wallet". Although a high proportion of my respondents still lived at home with both parents, it would appear through our conversations, that the majority lived with their mother and siblings. Many of the boys had early childhood memories of spending time with fathers, uncles, cousins or older siblings in the family garage tinkering with engines. The majority of the fathers of my respondents were usually employed (where employment status was known) as truck drivers, workers in the construction industry or through the varying aspects of the garage and car accessory trade.

Clearly through conversations it was apparent that for the majority even though their father did not share the familial home at the time of my research enquiry, his company and that of

other male relatives was significant to their early upbringing. Furthermore the activities and behaviours surrounding contact with these male relatives were significant in moulding the behaviours and practices of the boy racers today in relation to their cars. Duncan recalled conversations at home with his father or those which took place amongst his father's friends were, "...always about mechanical stuff with a vocabulary which never went much beyond spark plugs, manifolds and camshafts".

### **Initiation into Adult and Masculine Behaviours of Working Class Culture**

The anecdotal recollections of childhood memories from my participants described an environment of grime, of constant exposure to grease, oil and mud and where clothes were worn and torn in the company of those with similar interests and passions. Many recalled periods particularly during weekends, when fathers would facilitate opportunities for father-to-son and father-to-male friend or work colleague camaraderie and what many of the boy racers referred to as "bloke talk". This discourse was a manifestation of the process of collective reflection between men, where they rehearsed and disseminated a different way of narrating their own experiences, engaging in talk surrounding their work, sexual innuendo which invariably accompanied sexist jokes. These occasions appeared to have served as a means by which they initiated the younger men into their adult male world, and represented a time and space where the contours of working class masculinity, could be reaffirmed and directed towards the 'traditional' social roles, particularly those assigned to home-making women and breadwinning men. This talk was important in the processes that allowed them to define their masculine identity and work pride, and in the processes that constantly affirmed and reaffirmed what these men found central and important. The anecdotal stories they shared with one another provided a series of condensed cultural

stories which occasionally exposed the positions of specific actors in their community, something which Davies calls 'A framework for identification' (1993: 151).

These gatherings and the subsequent activities such assemblies produced had provided opportunities for the young men to practise their mechanical and driving skills on trials bikes, often made serviceable by their adult relatives. These were the critical sites within which the meanings of working class manhood were contested, produced and perpetuated. Older children or young teenagers were at liberty to ride, often unsupervised by adults, across the local terrain of disused mine workings, old tram trails and farm tracks. These tracks were in the main disused giant arsenic works which dominated the landscape around the villages where many of the boy racers lived. Here hardly anything grew in the ground. There were wide areas of bare soil and grit denuded of plant life, making it ideal terrain for the young men to practice their craft on or in vehicles, many of which they had worked on in tandem with older relatives and peers.

Nonetheless in recent years a number of residents living in close proximity to these sites had protested to the local district council about the activities of the bikers. The council in turn had made several attempts to restrict public access to the old mine workings which resulted in a massive organised protest attended by several hundred bikers of all ages together with a few horse riders who were less affected (see Figure 18, below). This revealed the strength of feeling surrounding access to these trails and forced the council to rethink their policies.



Figure 18: Bikers Protest at Wheal Maid valley

Ironically within the immediate Camborne and Redruth areas, upon which the majority of this research had been focused, there were many home grown young men who from the ages of 4 and 5, had, or continued to do so as teenagers, successfully represent their county at national and international level in various motor sports. I would argue that without this earlier riding and driving experiences across the often inhospitable landscape described earlier, their indisputable skills would be less pronounced. An account of the successes of two such young men was produced in the West Briton newspaper (see November 2<sup>nd</sup> 2006) and appears in Figure 19 (below).



Figure 19: Home grown motocross champions

Learning to ride or drive a motorised vehicle across these rough terrains described above, was not the only activity the young men from my research had engaged in as older children and teenagers. Indeed in many instances it was not all about the fun and freedom of riding or driving a vehicle of choice. Duncan describes how lessons about basic safety and motorcycle maintenance were usually learned the hard way often devoid of sympathy, but accompanied by what many of my respondents describe as 'tough love'.

"If you broke the bloody thing, the old man would clip you round the ear and show you just the once how to fix it. We didn't have no helmets to begin with so if you fell off it was no good screeching as you'd get called a girl and find an even harder clip from the Old Man waiting for you which would've made you screech louder".

As I described in Chapter 2 the values of toughness, strength and independence which appear to be indoctrinated into the young men from an apparent early age are consistent with the results of Paul Willis's study *Learning to Labour* in which a particular group of young men perceived that their cultural identity was centrally formed by what they saw as the adult and masculine behaviours of working class culture. 'Toughness, masculinity, being able to stick up for yourself and having a laff are central to the way labouring men come to terms with repetitive, but often hard work,' (Willis 1977: 355). This was replicated by the young men subscribing to the boy racer and street car culture and their use of purely social ties were maintained by extensive socialising with workmates; activities which were crucial through the ensuing conversations such as workplace gossip which were actually central in maintaining extremely large and occupationally valuable networks. Certainly being behind the wheel of a truck for up to 8 hours a day, following a routine on a production line in a factory which seldom varied, much in the same way working in the repair shop of a garage, brought a degree of monotony which could only be alleviated by the camaraderie of those in similar positions (the having a 'laff'), the

occasional bouts of overt (and covert) insubordination aimed at service or transport managers and petty pilfering. As Shaun said,

“Yeah we was often getting bits for this an that from me dad’s work. And if he didn’t have it then one of his mates would get it where he worked. You know the sort of thing...summat falls in yer pocket or you stick it in yer boot when nobody’s lookin”.

The sometimes excessive periods of time the young men spent working on their own or friend’s motorcycles and then advancing these labours to their own, and in particular their first cars, it would appear that these material objects became ensconced in the young men’s identities. This could be because of the closeness of their relationships with them, which combined with the memories of freedom and power such ownership brought to the young owners, thus heightened their emotional and physical attachment to them. To this effect it was important that I recognised the value of the young men’s emotional labour because it appeared to be an element which passes largely unrecorded elsewhere and has been completely overlooked in the more punitive discourses which surround boy racers and those of the street car culture. Many anecdotal stories emerged from the boy racers, based upon early childhood and teenage experiences of motorbike and car ownership with the material objects often being attributed a female gender and a set of characteristics and emotions more associated with humans or animals. Jimmy in particular became quite animated and emotional when talking about his first motorbike,

“Cor you should a seen her go, she was summat else and real pretty to look at. You wouldn’t believe when me dad brought her home as a scrapper that she’d clean up so well. Me brother Joseph had her when I got me first car but I still goes out in the garage and says hello girl how you doin today? And me Old Man goes in the house to mother and says he’s out there talking to that fuckin bike again”.

Often from observation of their activities and listening to the young men as they carried out routine maintenance or cleaned their vehicles, evidence of their relationships with their

cars became more pronounced. Once whilst spending time with Chris, it became apparent after an hour or so had passed and he had resisted all my offers to ‘help’, that he was oblivious to my presence. I experienced myself somewhat uncomfortably in the role of the voyeur as I observed him caress the body work and whisper endearments as he went about the business of repair, refinement or glossing. There was something intimate about the one-sided conversation; it was as if the inanimate piece of rubber and steel had become a living and breathing female upon whom the young man was bestowing gifts in a valiant attempt to woo her but without any expectations of reciprocation. I had witnessed this type of behaviour before such as on occasions when the young men had been parted from their cars for any length of time; for example if the vehicle had undergone a period in a garage for repair, MOT or servicing. Then, upon collection they could be seen ‘reclaiming’ their cars by touching them or rearranging the accessories within them. Chris continued lavishing his undivided attention on the Vauxhall Corsa before him,

“Ere girlie see what I bought yer today [patting the car’s roof gently, whilst pulling an bottle of expensive car body wax from a Halford’s plastic bag] yer’ll be some sexy beast once I’ve put a coat of this on yer, an’ I got yer this [extracted an air freshener from the plastic bag] an now just coz you’re a good girl I’ve treated us both to one of these” [he again plunges his hand into the carrier bag and extracts a CD, ‘Anthems of Trance’]”.

Breaking into his reverie I enquired as to whether he had a girlfriend, or if indeed he had did he buy her gifts, he jumped slightly as if he had forgotten my presence even though I was only feet from him. He coloured slightly,

“Nah I ain’t got one of they, they only be a nuisance. Why are yer offerin’ coz I tell you now I can’t afford you and I can’t share me mates with you”? He smirked in my direction and shook his head. “Who was the last female you bought a gift for then”? I enquired, “Me Mum, it was for her birthday and I went to the garage for petrol and got her a bunch of flowers, oh and a box of they chocolates she likes, Galaxy or summat”.

He continued to busy himself, flourishing an array of cloths and shaking a large bottle of Auto Glym, the cleaning product most used by the boy racers, and vigorously applied a coat of polish to the car's bodywork possibly hoping that I would not notice the pinkness of his face which had spread to his ears.

### **Who are you, where are you and what can I sell you?**

Whilst it was rare for boy racers to work on their respective cars in isolation, it was difficult to ascertain what medium apart from their mobile phones, they used to seek other like minded individuals with whom they could meet up, exchange ideas and facilitate opportunities through which they could carry out the type of performative driving manoeuvres which tested individual's competencies and skills. There was no exclusive club for which there was a formal application process for membership in the way that there may have been to a local district motoring club, rifle club or athletics or fitness club. Yet despite the growing manifestation of websites such as the one shown in Figure 20 below, there was nothing readily available with a step-by-step instruction of how to become a boy racer. However these websites were often highly sophisticated, employing interactive opportunities for those who access them, together with video clips of cruises and other areas of interest which are ideal if one has the right equipment to access the display.

# South West

[www.southwestcruisin.co.uk](http://www.southwestcruisin.co.uk)

# Cruisin

*your local*

- Navigation -

## Events & Cruises Coming up.

- **Announcement - Please Read -** - 19/02/06
- **Sticky: SWC PHOTOSHOOT - Discussion** - 28/09/06
- **Sticky: Photo Shoot Day** - 15/03/06
- **Sticky: 2006 shows** - 06/02/06
- **Sticky: NEW web site that hosts all my VIDEOS!** - 03/02/06
- **yes yes it's back!!! YEOVIL CRUISE!!!!!!** - 15/10/06
- **SWC Rolling Road Day** - 18/10/06
- **Bass Boys Presents** - 14/10/06
- **Burnin' Bournemouth 26th November** - 12/10/06
- **Paignton seafront 25th November 8.30pm** - 12/10/06

- **Went to AP motors today** - 15/10/06
- **Jet boots** - 15/10/06
- **clio kave** - 15/10/06
- **Oil** - 15/10/06
- **\*\* NOW £400\*\*** - 15/10/06
- **Escortmad** - 15/10/06
- **a few pics from yesterday** - 15/10/06
- **peugeot 205 qti** - 15/10/06
- **orange supra \*\*updated pictures\*\*** - 15/10/06
- **my driving test!** - 15/10/06
- **rwd rear engined c20xe nova doing d...** - 14/10/06
- **Perfect Couple** - 14/10/06

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Figure 20: Southwestcruisin, the boy racers and cruisers website

Some accessed websites like the one shown above to find out 'where the action was'; something they could buy into on evenings and at weekends. Whilst many of my participants had access to a computer, not all had access to the internet. Thus they congregated in the houses of those who had both computer and internet access, an activity which included visiting me at home on regular occasions to access my computer. Such visits involved them filling my driveway with their cars and emptying the contents of my cupboards and fridge in their pursuit of snacks to fuel the hours spent at the computer. Their internet use allowed me to see how they also used the sites to source materials for their modifications and to seek advice from fellow enthusiasts on a range of mechanical or bodywork issues. Their efforts may not have always been entirely successful, but when the car modifiers got it right, and exercised a little restraint in their undertakings, the results of their tinkering and spray-painting was hugely impressive. They were often encouraged to give full rein to their imagination and creativity through notices on the enthusiast websites such as south west cruising shown in Figure 21 (below).



Figure 21: Imagination

Traditionally modders have been forced to look through the classified sections of motoring magazines in their hunt for new and unusual wheels, spoilers, air dams and even completed project cars, but now a number of central on-line 'show-grounds' exist through which to market cars to likeminded enthusiasts and where avid buyers can scan the sites for parts and accessories. Boy racers or potential boy racers are not the only ones using such websites. Once again with commercial gain in sight many businesses associated with the

automotive industry such as Mill Auto Supplies (see Figure 22) are quick to insert advertisements through which they hope to attract new business and many of the young men I associated with through this research, had personal accounts with Mill Autos either as a result of seeing their advertisements or through the recommendations of peers.



Figure 22: Auto-suppliers advertising on a cruisers website

The creators of such websites which captured the attention (and interest) of the boy racer culture, have also embraced the potential such a resource represents for commercial gain. In the case of another website primarily dedicated to boy racers and cruisers, the website owner had created stickers which could be adhered to car bodywork or windows advertising their website, an example of which can be seen in Figure 23 (below). The open display of such a 'badge' minimised the need for introductions or information about how far you had travelled or where you lived, for insider knowledge about Celtic cruises revealed your affiliation to the south west moddin scene.

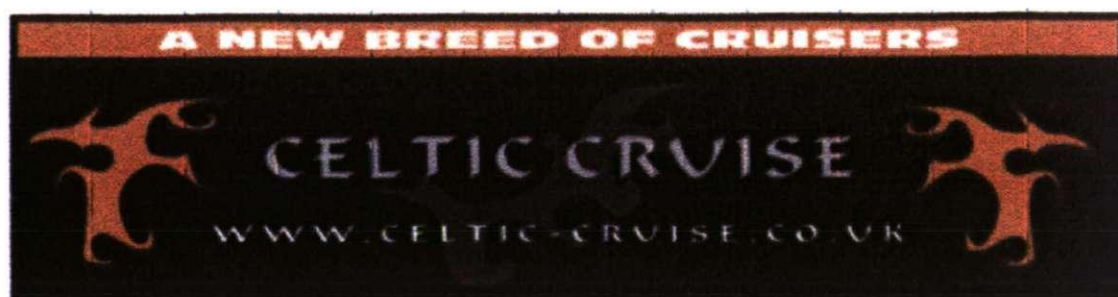


Figure 23: Celtic Cruisers car window stickers

Occasionally these displayed graphics gave extra information about the young car owner such as where their reading interests lay, for example Max Power window stickers, or the

way occasional free gifts accompanying such magazines were displayed in the form of seat belt sheathes, tax disc holders and so on. These examples of material objects also communicated information to others about the personal qualities of their owners in terms of they were, for instance, artistic (from the way they used and displayed graphics), or conventional (had resisted the unusual modifications and embellishments) or were adventurous and spirited by displaying outrageous modifications and controversial messages which included, amongst many, 'Drive it like you stole it' and 'Been there, wrecked that'.

Displaying such information also helped to signify difference much in the same way that the various 'Chapters' of Hells Angels or the ethnic and neighbourhood gangs in America have their badges, trademarks or 'colours' to signify affiliation and allegiance to a particular group (Allen, 2004). Likewise the overt display of certain well known product names either on items of clothing or on the vehicles themselves could also be used as a way to signify status amongst the young men (see Friedman, 1994). Figure 24 (below) demonstrates how some boy racers decorated their cars using a range of body panel graphics to show to others their taste in for example, music systems. Such activity could also infer to others the extent of their investment, because ownership of some particular products suggested a higher economic status or taste.



**Figure 24: A popular example of body graphics**

The display of Sony, Kenwood or Ice graphics emblazoned in large adhesive window strips or bodywork stickers (such as those displayed above), suggest that the owner of such a car had invested in expensive sound systems and top quality modifications, using the very best resources money could buy. Indeed in some instances the music systems were of greater monetary value than the vehicle itself. However, the display of such graphics was not always a reliable indication that such resources existed within the car. Many of the boy racers who had less disposable income to invest in accessories, displayed the advertiser's insignia, but had a cheaper version of the 'real thing' within their cars. When I queried this they always spoke of saving for an upgrade, whereas the young men who had invested their income in the more expensive equipment openly displayed it for all to see, a gesture which often drew admiring or envious attention from peers within the group and could be regarded as conspicuous but vicarious consumption.

Some young men seemed to cultivate their cars to the degree that one felt that the transformation of the car body was their expression of the male physical form more generally. This is illuminated by Sawyer's journalistic and slightly fetishist account of cars at a weekend meet, and one car in particular which began life as a Ford.

'The wheels were snug to their pink rims, which flowed silkily into the wings, the doors, the side skirts, which skimmed the ground. The lines were fluid; everything about the car was smoothed and rounded, scooped in, curved out. The wing mirrors hugged and flexed to their doors. No sharp angles, no nips and tucks. No superfluous chroming or plastic. Inside.....where the back seat should have been, were two of the biggest built-in Car speakers I have ever seen....The bass started shaking my loose change and this was over the sound of the engine, which was revving and booming like Concorde with a cough' (1999: 31-32).

Shopping, purchasing new accessories or the materials for modifications for their cars was often an all consuming activity for the boy racers, irrespective of their economic circumstances. Many were usually saving up for something, with contributions from

salaries, welfare benefits or handouts from relatives for birthdays and Christmas or would use their creativity to fabricate something as cheaply as possible. On the way to creating a particular image through his car, the boy racer embarked upon a personal journey of discovery which was regularly signposted by advertisements and instructions steering him towards making certain purchases in order to achieve the desired 'look'. Any car he purchased initially passed through a thorough depersonalisation process whereby all evidence of previous ownership was removed as far as possible, resulting in a blank canvas upon which he could create an image of his choosing. Car modification and the purchasing of the essential ingredients to modify or accessorise was time consuming and subjected to individual and group deliberation. Some of the boy racers subverted the manufacturers' original specifications and removed the things that immediately belie a car's make and model of origin, by removing external badges and insignia and changing the interior livery. More often than not their justification for such practices was simply that they disagreed with the original design and felt that the vehicle's appearance was enhanced by the removal of such embellishments. Moreover they regarded their work as providing a talking point for onlookers as they tried to determine what make and model of vehicle stood before them and the modifications were often so extreme that all forms of its previous identity had been removed.

Economic deprivation seemingly was not always prohibitive in terms of boy racers acquiring the building blocks of identity, neither did their lack of mobility prevent them from acquiring a more expressive and dramatic look for their cars. The majority of them had access to advertising materials through television, magazines and films and the desire to recreate a particular look for their cars was often fuelled by what they saw portrayed through such media. They seemed easily seduced by advertisements for accessories or engine performance enhancing materials which promised the purchaser positive and desirable benefits, which shows that advertising is not only about production but also about

seduction (Baudrillard, 1998). If they were unable to purchase the items they desired, they relied upon individual or collective skills to reproduce the look and used what materials they could afford or had to hand. The way they created and transformed their vehicles usually involved welding, and fabricating metal, carrying out intricate wiring and the restructuring of car bodyshells, all of which were perceived to be predominately (though not exclusively) very masculine activities.

The wealthier amongst them were able to purchase an expensive vehicle and ‘off the shelf’ modifications, either carrying out the work themselves or paying specialist garages. In many cases this gave them an elevated status within the group and those with greater access to money were able to differentiate themselves by virtue of possession which in turn provided them with a hegemonic status over those less able to spend. The way young men who were *less* economically blessed responded to this situation, was by successfully transcending this hegemonic status by becoming the centre of attention at meets or cruise gatherings where they engaged in performative displays using their driving skills, devil-may-care attitudes and knowledge of their vehicles to create spectacular and often dangerous manoeuvres such as that featured in Figures 25 and 26 (below). In most cases these young men were from the 17 to 19 age group, unemployed or at college and keen to actively engage with the boy racer scene.



**Figure 25: Demonstrating a ‘wheelie’**

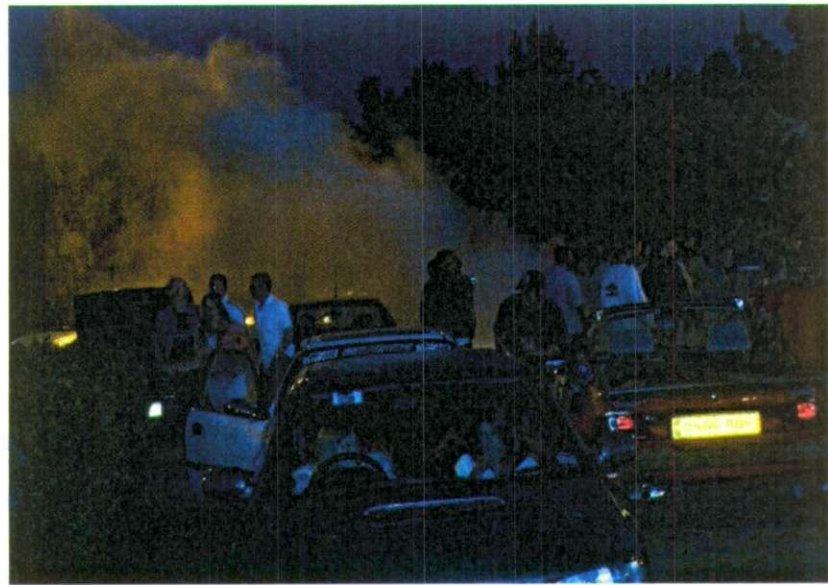


Figure 26: Creating the spectacular at Saltash during a night time meet

Whilst my observation had revealed that peer influence played a significant role in the purchasing process and the final presentation of modified vehicles, undoubtedly manufacturers and purveyors of car modification kits and accessories also had a role to play. This contributed to a wider image where specialist industries were geared up to provide car accessories and modification kits which were widely advertised against specific backgrounds or lifestyles and the whole process fed off the young men's insecurities. In addition many advertisers operated on an assumption that sexualised meanings accompanying nude or semi nude young women were a guaranteed means to attract attention and part the boy racers from their money. In truth, the young men may well have been attracted to such advertising methods but it would take more than a nude or semi nude woman to part them from their hard earned cash. For them the simplicity of a straightforward transaction of a brand new item was often dismissed in favour of the 'chase', the torturous bargaining and bartering processes they engaged in to acquire the items they desired at a knock down price. This colourful engagement provided them with the thrill of the chase and the quiet satisfaction of victory over their opponent in an often cannily 'fought' contest, the subject of which provided the currency of conversations for many weeks after the event. Skills such as these were highly regarded amongst the boy

racer fraternity and any quest for 'new gear' usually involved a contribution from one who was known to have such skills, an act highlighted by Shane,

"I always gets Dan to go wiv me if I'm needin' summat for the motor. Its worth it for a packet of fags or bit of blow. He's in the trade like, so he knows wot summat's worth and he's got a way of talking and he does this, 'How much for cash mate' line, even if its in a shop. I can't remember the last time he didn't manage to get a couple of quid knocked off summat we wanted".

The boy racers shopped for materials for their modifications and upgrades by ordering on-line and by purchasing items through specialist motoring magazines, visiting motoring exhibitions and motoring accessory stores like Halfords, Motor World or main dealerships. Today it appears common practice to switch on the television and receive messages about what is currently regarded as being 'in' or 'out' of fashion and the hard 'in-your-face' type of sales pitch creates need, making many recipients of such messages feel that their lives could be enhanced by the purchase of such a resource or lifestyle. One only has to read advertisements in newspapers or magazines, or to merely give casual attention to the gargantuan advertising hoardings on public view which acquaint the reader with information about the very latest products designed to improve various aspects of their professional, personal or social life. This is occasionally reinforced by an interview with an enthusiastic consumer such as the young man featured in Redline Magazine in Figure 27 (below).

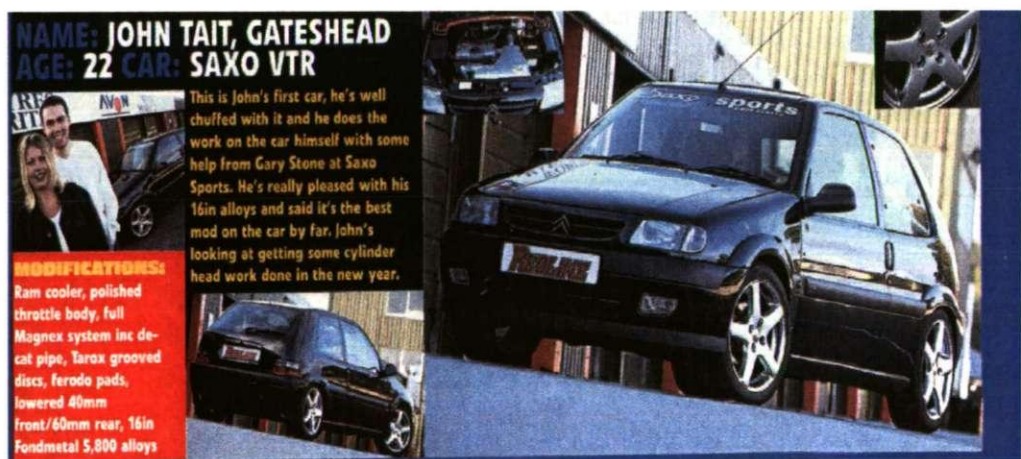


Figure 27: Redline Magazine feature

These glossy car magazines like Redline are popular with boy racers and are viewed as a “good read”, although my observation led me to believe that not a great deal of reading was undertaken by my participants, rather a greater appreciation was extended to pictures and short articles describing ‘real’ experiences. A review of Max Power submitted by a reader who called himself ‘Sinbad’ and shown in Figure 28 (below), goes some way to confirming this by suggesting that the advice and ideas for modification, plus articles describing in words and pictures the modifications other young men had carried out, are popular.

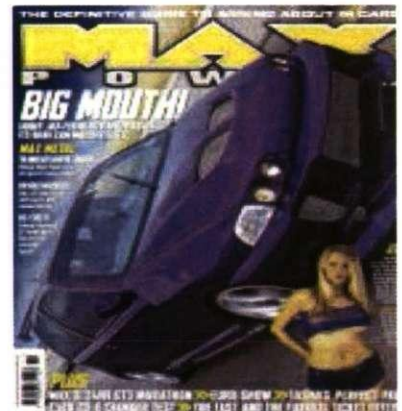
**Great for Boy Racers and serious modifiers alike**

Review of Max Power by sinbad182

**Advantages:** plenty of info, many pics of top cars, lots of advice of mods to do.

**Disadvantages:** too many adverts, some minging girls modelling in it.

...modified cars who all recommended Max Power to get ideas and advice of what to do to my car, and to see what other people have done to their cars. After buying it for the first time, I was hooked by the whole car tweaking scene. The beauty of this publication is the fact it has a little something for everyone. It has plenty of information on tuning and styling top end performance cars like Saxo VTR's etc



**Figure 28: A reader's review of Max Power magazine**

According to ‘Revved Up’, a television documentary which reviewed differing makes and models of cars, 99% of car modifiers were male which is consistent with my own research, and whilst there was often an obvious presence of females at cruises, their rare appearances and lack of contributions were common features at meets. However many of them did feature within the pages of particular car magazines including Max Power (ITV.com February, 2003). During my research I rarely encountered a female engaging in the sort of automobile performative exhibitionism enjoyed by the boy racers, yet a few of the females I met, drove modified cars. When I made enquiries about the modifications carried out on these cars, I was told that the vehicles had either been purchased already modded or had been modded by a male partner or male relative. In many cases the small number of young females who did subscribe to the cruiser set, either as drivers or passengers, appeared

content to hang around on the periphery of any action, just watching. However the young women who took their modified cars to such motoring events drew open derision from some of their male counterparts and were often viewed by the boy racers as predatory as Shaun explains.

“Cruise girls, Girl racers? Nah. Look at the colour, look at yer wheels. Look at yer interior. That’s about it. They don’t know no more. It’s all about hangin’ fluffy animals from yer interior mirror, slapping on yer lippie and showing yer tits”.

This view was perpetuated throughout some of the more hard core car magazines such as *Fast Car* and could be criticised for objectifying willing females to the extent that those who were regularly photographed at car festivals and promotional events were semi-clothed much as Shaun describes (see Figure 29 below).



**Figure 29: Models at the Max Power Show, Birmingham NEC**

Very few of the boy racers from my research appeared enamoured with the idea that any of *their* girlfriends, where these existed, would be likely to, as Ian said “Get their jugs out” and indeed viewed the young women who participated in such events as those pictured above as “slappers”.

Despite the introduction of erotica and use of the female form to sell motoring manufacturers products, albeit cars or accessories, there was little if anything remotely feminine about the appearance of modern performance or 'Muscle' cars, and the attempts many boy racers made to modify the external appearance, ensured that such cars took on an even more macho appearance than their original design intended. Pleck (1995) suggests that some males experience negative social feedback and internalise negative self-judgements which can result in low self esteem, and that their attempt to attain particular masculine characteristics, consistent with their ideal are seldom if ever fully realised. Many of my participants although striving to accrue the characteristics of being 'real men' through fighting, swearing, sexual posturing and being confrontational, often fell short of attaining the type of macho image they desired. Instead they turned to their cars not only using them as a medium for performative exhibitionism and demonstrations of risk, skill and daring but also to make significant alterations to their car's structure and change its mechanisms for propulsion. In many cases they had upgraded the existing engine's size often replacing a 1000 cc in the smaller cars with a 1380cc and a 1600cc to a 2.5cc in medium cars to a 3.5 litre and beyond in the larger more powerful vehicles and in extreme cases add nitrous oxide for added speed.

In their quest to show others that they were indeed masculine, external objects such as these modified cars became clear illustrations of what they perceived to be appropriately masculine characteristics and this is highlighted in Figure 30 (below). Such physiological attributes like a thick set stature was represented by a lowered or 'decked' suspension with wide flared wheel arches, tattoos on the arms or torso appear as car body graphics, a deep manly voice was replicated through the loud guttural engine noise, whilst physical self-extensions such as arms and legs or indeed the penis were defined by sports wheels, low profile tyres and significantly increased dimensions of exhaust tail pipe. The extent of the young man's libido was seemingly demonstrated by the size of his car's engine power.

Such perceptions were reinforced in a conversation with Jez who, whilst recounting his conversation with Nixon, told me that,

“Yeah well ee’s so fuckin short an puny that he’s got to stick a 6 inch pipe on to make up for what ee’s lacking in the trouser department. I woulda thought a ten inch woulda bin better, but is little legs wouldn’t cope [laughs loudly]”. “Ee’s gotta make out ee’s a man through is car like, I mean ter say there aint much macho about im, he ain’t what you’d say a manly bloke, so is car gotta make up for it [more laughter].



Figure 30: A ‘muscle’ car

## Local Networks and Group Identity

Much of the work the boy racers carried out on their cars was also an attempt to engage in categorical differentiation from other owners of similar makes and models of cars, or merely putting their personal ‘stamp’ on a vehicle which readily identified it as their own creation. Many of them did this through embracing the opportunities to possess and use various insignia to exaggerate similarities and differences between them as individuals and between their various groups or geographically spread cohorts whilst at the same time *minimising* differences between individuals within their own group. This was often through necessity to be able to address individuals who shared the same interests, makes and models of car, but who came from very diverse socio-economic backgrounds.

Identification albeit self identity or group identity was an essential part of being able to categorise and thus respond appropriately to those around you, boy racers were often attributed by others, a collective identity or name from their main source of meets. For example those who congregate in McDonald's car park within the Camborne and Redruth area were referred to by boy racers from other areas as the Mackie D's boys. Those who liaised on the promenade at Penzance were known as the Wharfesiders, taking their name from the Wharfeside car park in which they meet, or a cohort from Truro who regularly met in the car park of the large stationery and office equipment retailer, Staples were known simply as the Staples Posse.

A group of young men who fell mainly into the upper age group (22-24 years), who constantly chopped and changed their cars using a series of credit companies to finance the purchases were simply known as the 'Finance Boys' but appeared to be ill regarded by the rest of the group because they rarely carried out modifications themselves, preferring to buy ready modded cars or pay for professional moddin. Others were merely identified by their association with such organisations as the Celtic cruisers or the South West cruisers and were recognised by the official badges they displayed on their cars which they had acquired from the sites as a form of insignia. However when several dozen or even several hundred boy racers from throughout Cornwall set out in convoy to cruises across county borders to Devon, Somerset and beyond, they portrayed a unified front and were known as the 'Cornish lot'.

On an individual level, many of the boy racers did not consider themselves labelled as part of the Mackie D's or Staples posse and so on. In conversations however, they often identified each other through the make, model or description of the car they drive, or a title ascribed them due to the nature of their employment or where they lived or their physical appearances. Those who lived in the more urban areas and spent a lot of their leisure time

driving around the town centres playing their music loudly were 'Town Boys' a term usually uttered with derision by the cruisers or the boy racers who were the stalwarts of the more established cohorts. Thus there was Town Boy ...followed by a description of the car such as 'Big Bumper Bill', 'Turbo Dave' and 'RS Turbo Ross'. Examples of others were Nathan who was referred to affectionately as 'Rat Boy' due to his small stature, long face and pointed features. Whereas a young man aged approximately 24 years of age who was approaching 24 stone in weight and of truculent nature was referred to less endearingly as 'Fat Bastard', but from my experience this was never to his face. Two brothers with a gap of 3 years separating their ages were known simply as 'Big G' and 'Baby G', even though both were over 6 feet in height and weighed at least 16 stone apiece.

Being on the periphery of conversations in the beginning of my research, I quickly became aware that many of the conversations that went on during the various meets were carried out using a form of code which often anonymised individuals. Initially I was unsure whether this was carried out because of my presence and because the group members were still in the process of "sussing me out", to use their term. However, in due course because of the natural way the conversations flowed, I came to the conclusion that my presence was incidental and that there was possibly another reason for this. To a certain extent the form of coded speech they used perpetuated the differences between the 'in group' and the significant 'others' those outside the group, and although conversations and body cues were often emotionally laden and derogatory attributes were applied to those outside their social circle, most noticeably flattering qualities were applied to those within. Although this form of stereotyping helped to preserve the in-groups beliefs about themselves and their collective value systems I believe that it was also used as a means of protecting the identity of those under discussion or protecting the listener from possible harm.

Many of the young men with whom I associated during my research, owned, had previously owned, or driven BMW's. It appeared customary for boy racers to aspire at some point in their acquisition of various cars, to own a 'beamer' or BMW. Such a car was regarded as the consummate in German engineering and was associated with style, power and status. Nonetheless such a vehicle was relatively expensive to purchase, costly to run and insure and even more so to maintain, due to the fact that it was being constantly 'put under load' or made to perform manoeuvres under pressure. Joe, Ian, Wes, Shaun and Jake were often found in a huddle, piled into one or another's 'Beamer' and discussing in hushed whispers, the latest spare parts or accessories which they had bought from a character of dubious antecedence and credentials known as 'Dodgy Dave'. I was often party to such whispered conversations and became enthralled by the narratives which flowed following a visit to Dodgy Dave. Not least of all because many of the young men involved in the trip went through a de-briefing process with their peers, which appeared to be an intense process accompanied by a great deal of posturing and self-reported acts of assured bravado usually prefixed with the statements, "Ere listen up" and "Ere, I'll tell ee summat, I woz some man". One day I asked whether it would be possible for me to accompany one or more on a subsequent visit. The request was met by much shaking of heads, frowning and an obvious withdrawal away from me in order that my request could be given due consideration by the whole group. After what seemed an interminable age of hushed debate I was informed that it would be too dangerous for me to accompany them and it would be in my own interest to "stay away". I wondered as to the nature of the potential inferred level of danger and asked for elaboration. My request was met by a shrug "You ask too many questions than is good for yer" was the response from Joe. I asked for qualification of the potential level of 'danger' in order that I could make up my own mind but it quickly became evident that it was not necessarily my own wellbeing this particular group of young men was concerned about, but was more for theirs. If this was the reality of the situation then the intense de-briefing they appeared to go through may represent

something more fundamental insofar as they were expressing relief to have returned unscathed.

Clearly asking Dodgy Dave for permission to take me along on their next visit was inconceivable and it would appear that this was to be part of the boy racers private domain to which access was being refused to me. At this point I had to decide how much value a visit to Dodgy Dave would contribute to my research. From the conversations I had witnessed, it appeared that he lived in an isolated area and occupied two converted coaches and a number of outbuildings. He did not live alone but had a number of other men there with him and several Rottweiler dogs. Through conversations I also found that motor parts and whole vehicles were not the only things he dealt with and he may have been engaged in the drugs trade as well. An ethical consideration here was not only protecting myself from harm but ensuring that my research participants were protected from harm too. Certainly none of the young men in this cohort engaged in drug taking or substance abuse to my knowledge, indeed they were all very scathing of those who drink and drive but perhaps less so of those who smoke a bit of 'green', 'blow' or 'skunk' (Cannabis) in moderation. Nonetheless for all their moral high ground they were prepared to use this individual as a source for spare parts and accessories for their cars irrespective of the potential risks involved, but it was acknowledged that this was an area of their existence from which I was being excluded.

Taking risks or willing to take risks, affected the status of young men within the group and to appear 'hard' or a 'real man' gaining the reputation through hard living, risk taking, fighting and so on was thought to be preferable than being regarded as 'gay', 'girly', a 'wimp', or 'wanker' being the terms usually levelled at someone who did not demonstrate desirable qualities of masculinity. 'Losing your bottle' or 'bottling out' by avoiding visits to Dodgy Dave would bring with it suspicions and comments about their masculinity and

without exception, irrespective of personal fears or concerns, visits would be undertaken, for any punishment meted out by Dodgy Dave and his companions would be far less a personal burden to bear than losing face in front of any of their fellow boy racers. Indeed to have suffered any level of personal indignity or worse at the hands of such a man would be regarded as added kudos and bring with it an elevated standing within the group.

Successful (or even unsuccessful) interactions with individuals like Dodgy Dave could be seen and celebrated as examples of masculine behaviour which included bravery, daring and cunning. Yet there is a strange and unwritten code of conduct which pervades the boy racer culture; one which allows parallels to be drawn with gangs such as the Hells Angels. Despite a high proportion of the young men who took part in my research admitting to being guilty of breaking the law through minor infringements of the Road Traffic Laws, Petty Theft or Public Order Offences, very few, if any of them, could be maligned for breaking their own unwritten moral codes. During conversations with all the young men who took part in my research I repeatedly asked them about their various transgressions (if any) of the law. The questions I asked related to offences carried out knowingly, even deliberately through driving or car-related practices, including performative demonstrations in public places. The results of my questions show that there are more young men who admit breaking the law knowingly, than those who state they had done so unwittingly. The admissions were given largely by respondents in groups and thus I am aware that there was a degree of competition between them to increase the level of their 'Bad Boy' image in the presence of peers, and thus many of the responses may have been subject to a degree of exaggeration, nonetheless having driven and ridden with them and seen first hand their driving and modding practices, it leads me to believe that what they told me reasonably reflects their actions.

If the boy racers were seemingly prepared to adopt a casual approach to statutory laws, I wondered how, or even if, they policed behaviours within their own groups. My observations revealed that such internal policing was undertaken by all group members where possible, and very rarely was anything undertaken in maverick fashion. In the event of transgressions happening within their group which was regarded by their standards as unlawful, or breaking their own unwritten rules, such as showing disrespect, or engaging in theft or deliberate damage to a peer's vehicle or property it was likely that the offending party would be 'sent to Coventry' and eventually alienated from all group activities until they were forced out to the periphery and eventually disappeared. Thereafter if their name was mentioned it was usually in a derisory fashion and after a short period of time it was as if they had never existed within the group.

In other perhaps more extreme cases, for example where the 'offence' came from someone outside of their group, or from another 'posse', the honour of one cohort of boy racers may be redeemed through retribution against another cohort from another area within the county, or indeed from out of the county if it is deemed to be 'appropriate'. During the period covered by my research I was aware of this happening on just one occasion. This was manifested when members of the Truro (Staples) cohort seeking to overcome what they perceived as a misdemeanour perpetrated by a member of the Camborne Redruth (Mackie D's) group, started what is termed a 'turf war' by straying onto another's 'territory' and smashing the alleged perpetrator's car with baseball bats. It would be logical to assume that given the young men's affection for their cars, the deliberate act of smashing up a car would be deemed an act of punishment and something initially quite distasteful. Nonetheless, taking this to its natural conclusion, such an act against the car, would carry less of a penalty than if they had applied the same process to its owner, something which would then be regarded as Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH) and carry a

significantly more substantial penalty such as a fine, imprisonment and, or even Community Service Order and the inevitable stigma of a conviction.

Explosive situations with boy racers involving arguments, damage and or violence were rare and inter-group fighting with serious intent and consequences almost unheard of. Conflict and retribution however, were combinations which could happen between groups or differing factions of boy racers but were little more than minor skirmishes compared to the highly publicised conflicts between Mods and Rockers in the 1960's. Nonetheless the damage certain individuals with baseball bats meted out to the car belonging to one of the Mackie D's group (see Figure 31 below), was warning enough to those who dared to break the rules.



**Figure 31: Punishment**

Following this incident I had several questions. Were the baseball bats carried as accessories in the luggage compartments of the vehicles as a form of protection or were they purchased especially rather as weapons of destruction? No-one appeared to know the answer or were prepared to speak about it. Why the car alone was the recipient of such a level of violence yet its young owner despite being present, remained untouched and neither were the police involved. All of this was a puzzle to me so I asked the question why, but Ali was the only one willing to go some way to provide me with answer.

“Dunno why they did it, it weren’t none of my fuckin business but summat went wrong up there [Truro] at the last meet and G was gobby and dissed some blokes fuckin car, an then this bloke was forced off the tarmac when they was strip racing so they come lookin for im. They wasn’t going to touch him like as that wouldn’t have achieved nothing but to smash up his car well that woulda hurt him real bad and caused him mega inconvenience. No Filth [Police] was involved we don’t bother them with stuff like that as we settle it amongst ourselves. We spend most of our time running from the fuckin Filth so we don’t wanna go lookin for em”.

Despite occurrences such as those described above, conflict within a group rarely extended beyond petty squabbles. To steal or misappropriate items from another member within your own group was unthinkable, yet to steal or misappropriate goods from a third party (such as a motor accessory store) on behalf of a fellow member was regarded as ‘acceptable’ and could be readily justified because, as Grif assured me, “They can afford the occasional loss; the prices they charge is extortionate. Anyway they got insurance to cover ’em against people nickin’ off of ‘em”. Rather than viewing such acts as theft for the sake of it, or appropriating goods to satisfy need, it could be that theft from large corporations was another way through which young men rendered impotent through lack of opportunities for regular employment, and the usual means through which to access normal levels of enjoyment, could take a swipe at what they regarded as the dominant or controlling mechanisms which governed their life and the lives of others in the same position. This was highlighted by a joint visit to a motor accessory store.

Rarely did boy racers shop for accessories or car parts alone neither did they go to car, or car accessory exhibitions alone. Their mode of ‘shopping’ became a social activity much in the same way they perused car magazines; one craning over another’s shoulder in an attempt to engage in a commentary about its contents. On a visit to a car accessory retail outlet, I accompanied Grif, Shaun, Mattie and Joe. The purpose of the visit was for Joe to purchase car body wax. We entered the shop, the boys fanning out as if on manoeuvres on an army exercise and leaving me behind. The shampoo, car waxes and accompanying

cleaning paraphernalia were well displayed, its location signposted by a five feet square hoarding suspended from the ceiling. Grif, Shaun, Mattie and Joe emerged from the aisles selling a multiplicity of car accessories and tools. I indicated that the source of their visit was three aisles back. Three pairs of eyes looked at me questioningly. I nodded in the direction of the car wax, "Back there" I said. They looked at me uncomprehendingly and headed off towards the in-car music systems located in the opposite direction. I walked along in their wake and eavesdropped as they denigrated or extolled the virtues of varying in-car entertainment systems, twiddling knobs and pressing buttons at will, whilst ignoring the presence of the store salesmen trying to engage them in a sales pitch. Twenty minutes later they headed off in step, silently gliding towards the display of alloy and chrome rims, or wheels.

Here they became more animated, touching the wheel surfaces, caressing, commentating on the finish and texture, and even occasionally included me in the conversation. "Do you see anything you like?" I enquired. "Yeah, lots but we can get 'em cheaper elsewhere", Mattie replied. Our progress had suddenly speeded up as they weaved their way through the aisles onward past shelves of tools, engine oils and towards car accessories. We paused briefly in front of a display of in-car air fresheners, one or two of the items were removed from their displays and the young men passed them between one another, scrutinising each item carefully. I was partially aware that some items had not been returned to the shelf and later it was revealed that they had shoplifted three of the items.

Moving deliberately away and through the shop all four of them had stopped abruptly in front of a locked cabinet housing anodised and coloured braided hose kits, windscreen washer covers, gear knobs and foot pedal covers. "Ere 'ave yer seen they hoses, fucking cheap or what?" Joe exclaimed. We changed direction towards spray paints and onward towards polish and shampoo selecting a large container of expensive car wax and headed

towards the check out. "Got any money on yer?" Joe enquired of me, "Yes thank you" I replied. "Well lend us a couple of quid as I'm a bit short" he said. I handed over two coins and made it clear that I had an expectation to have the money back. He nodded, but I did not hold out too much hope for reimbursement, neither would I have wished to pursue him for it, because of the time he and his companions were happy to invest in my research, it seemed to me that I was getting the better deal. Could such behaviours however, be construed as payment for taking part in my research, and was such behaviour an ongoing situation between the young men and myself? Whilst I address this ethical issue in Chapter 3, certainly in relation to two or three of my participants, I feel that we had unconsciously fallen into what felt at times like an extended family unit, where I was the parent and they were the offspring looking to me to fulfil any shortcomings, albeit access to the internet or the odd bit of loose change to make up the discrepancy in a purchase. However in terms of this being regarded as payment for their research input, I would argue that such actions were rare and were representative of an empathetic gesture on my part, and as such was unlikely to affect the validity and quality of my research.

## **Summary**

Gaining membership through having older siblings already involved in the boy racer and street car genre or generally 'hanging out' at the various meets was the usual selection process for would-be boy racers. It also involved a range of initiation activities. These extended beyond having an acceptable make and model of car, to the acquisition of a number of other highly essential credentials. These included the ability to demonstrate daring, prowess and driving skills sufficient to undertake a number of performative manoeuvres in and with their cars, and of a sufficient level to impress peers. Observation, participant observation, interviews and group discussions revealed identifying factors at three levels; the individual level, the family level and the wider social contextual social

setting which seemed to enable these young men in my study to seek a more masculine identity than the prevailing norms, often as the result of being socialised into a particular type of masculinity by older male relatives.

From my conversations with my participants and from what many of their parents, particularly their mothers had told me when I visited their homes, the majority of my participants had come from a heavily male influenced background. Dismissive, sometimes callous attitudes to women together with an exaggerated concept of what it is to be a 'real man' often included a propensity to use violence or aggressive posturing in minor altercations with others; evidence of a prevailing hegemonic masculinity found in low and lower middle income settings. Values of toughness, strength and independence were taught to the young men from an early age. Many were developed through learning to ride and maintain motorcycles from as early as ages 5 or 6 and in some cases, progressing to larger motor vehicles such as tractors, and other heavy agricultural or construction plant machinery associated with their fathers or other male relative's employment. Thus the boy racers relationships with machines were developed early and the majority had spent their teenage years in the company of older siblings and peers, stripping down and rebuilding cars and car engines, turning the vehicles into what many describe as their "Pride and Joy," (Jakie, Daz, Joe, 'T' and Dom).

This early socialising with cars or motorbikes as the central theme which brought the young men together not only offered opportunities to perpetuate their perceived notions of masculinity, but may account for the fact that it was rare to find boy racers working in isolation. They preferred instead, to engage in a range of reciprocal exchange of skills with others within their group and if there were occasions when skills were unable to be reciprocated, they bartered articles in exchange for labour or for other items. It was not unusual to see them barter a set of rims (or alloy wheels) for a Peco stainless steel exhaust,

or an hour or so spent working on a car in exchange for a video player, DVD player or in-car stereo system. This was particularly evident when economic circumstances were poor.

A lack of money was a constant source of concern for many of my participants, but more so for those who had been unsuccessful at college and were generally devoid of full-time paid employment. In many ways these young men seemed to lack a place to fit, and thus they had gravitated towards others similarly situated, and together were vocal and visible through their cars and car-related practices. Furthermore, they had arrived at their own peculiar and sometimes controversial ways of maintaining effective social control within their groups, and the ways in which they policed the behaviours of members and those from other cohorts or other geographical areas.

Violence against the person or property, and in this case cars, was rare for many of the older boy racers from the 22 – 24 age group appeared to have developed greater abilities to reflect on their past, to connect past and present, and to identify the costs of the prevailing version of masculinity that surrounded them. Where they may have been a victim, either on a physical level or through wilful destruction or damage to their car, or have witnessed, or even to enacted violence against others, they were able to openly reflect on the costs of their actions and to appropriately express pain or remorse in a way which was missing from those from the younger age category, 17-21.

Throughout my research, age was significant in determining how the boy racers viewed their lives and were able to relate them to me. In contrast with their older peers, those from the 17-21 age groups in the main did not seem to be able to construct a coherent life narrative of themselves without reflecting on their life struggles, setbacks and tragedies; attaching large elements of drama and sensationalism to the narrative. However this may have been their way of expressing the exuberance of youth. It may have also reflected their

developmental immaturity because many of them appeared naïve, innocent and vulnerable, incapable of making rational or mature judgements, responding instead in an irrational and emotional manner. By the same token, if they were unable to behave rationally, their transgressions of the law, instead of being regarded as high spirits, or the exuberance of youth, were constituted as a unique threat to wider social order and their behaviours, their noisy cars, erratic driving and performative activities in public spaces have been condemned through the media. Their scripts then became the context for authoritarian figures and groups to espouse scientific ideological and political agendas, and whose open condemnation and solutions preoccupy and guide the unfolding public panics surrounding boy racers which I discuss in Chapters 6 and 7.

Within the next chapter I explore in some depth the extent to which many of the young men involved in my research were prepared to go without new clothes, cigarettes, alcohol and socialising in order to create the right image with their cars, and to gain the level of respect and attention they craved. I describe the way boy racers modified and drove their cars in performance, as a means to express not only their skills at handling a vehicle in performative activities, but to rise up the boy racer hierarchal ladder. I discuss what happened during their meets and their confrontations with the police and thus I hope to provide a flavour of the young men's additional thrill and excitement as they took rebellious action against a system in which everything had to be paid for in one form or another. This includes how they used their performative behaviours to display albeit a temporary victory of cunning and strategic planning over those who sought to constrain what was perhaps merely the exuberance of youth.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Performance**

#### **Having the Means for Moddin**

For the boy racer irrespective of his economic status, cars, engines, car accessories, displays of driving prowess and skill and what he regarded as appropriately masculine behaviour were the central domains of meaning within his culture. In terms of this research the cost of performance was not simply about financial outlay and the individual purchasing power available to my participants, it embraced such things as loss of face in front of peers and loss of status. How my participants managed to support what could be regarded as an expensive hobby varied considerably between individuals. A few of them appeared to have access to a greater disposable income through working in the motor industry as mechanics, body work specialists, in car accessory outlets, being indulged by wealthier parents, or were in well paid employment outside of the motor industry, but possessed an inherent interest in modified cars. Others were often unemployed, between jobs, or in partial education through college courses with day-release schemes in place corresponding to apprenticeships in local garages or small motor dealerships. These young men financed their purchasing power with small jobs or what they described as “homers”, work carried out on other people’s cars at their homes for cash-in-hand.

The nature of employer for those of my participants who were in paid work appeared to account for large differences in salary, for example a 22 year old who was qualified to BTEC National Higher Diploma stage, served at least two years of apprenticeship and was employed by a large company with main dealership status, told me that he earned approximately £18,000 per annum. He was supported by the company in terms of being

encouraged to pursue professional development and increased accreditation through training in varying aspects of the product upon which he worked. Others spoke about having the same type of qualifications but had employers who provided opportunities for them to increase their basic salaries through a variety of bonus schemes. These often amounted to the volume of cars they repaired or serviced during a week, so their individual reward, in terms of additional monies in their monthly wage packet was based upon their output. Others among my participants of the same age who had not have achieved the National Diploma, but had served a recognised apprenticeship at a small local independent garage (not part of a national recognised chain or main dealership), were taking home a salary in the region of £12,000 a year. Those who worked unqualified in small ‘back street’ garages admitted that their earning potential barely extended above the national minimum wage which was £5.20 per hour at the time of my research. Some of my participants came from low income families, often fragmented by an absentee parent (usually the father) and whilst they remained living within the familial home they were expected to contribute towards family living expenses. Many admitted that this expectation placed economic pressure and responsibility for their family members upon them, and many of my younger participants were openly resentful of this situation.

Where finance was not a pressing issue the more affluent boy racers generally subscribed to newer and more prestigious cars. These often included BMWs, Subaru Imprezas and Mitsubishi Evos (Evolutions) and the models from the more expensive end of the Japanese and Asian market, known as ‘Rice Cars’. Others drove the smaller but still expensive ‘Hot Hatches’ from the sporty Peugeot and Renault range which had the type of external styling and range of stereo equipment that spoke to the onlooker of heavy investment. In Chapter 5 I discussed how they used various media to gain information and ideas for modification and my research revealed that many had displayed a preference for highly visible accessories like neon and strobe lighting and considerable use of chrome, often described

as “Bling”. The amount of bling was evidence of its driver’s status; the more bling exhibited, the more successful he was and Figure 32 (below) is a good example. Although not all of my participants were able, or even wished to subscribe to this level of consumption, their main aim was to stand out from the crowd, to create impact wherever they went and in doing so often attempted some modifications which were to totally surpass the car’s original design.



Figure 32: An example of ‘Bling’

Dean whilst reflecting upon the extent of his investment in terms of time and money spent preparing his vehicle thus making it stand out from the crowd, explained why many young men like him invested so much in their cars.

“We build cars coz we wanna be noticed, these guys wanna look good. These cars, well they’re canvasses on which we can create images of speed and beauty even if it’s a myth, like it ain’t real. We know it ain’t real but to the punters out there it looks like we got fast cars with muscle. These blokes you see with the Astra and the six grand stereo, they’re the street heroes. You notice some of us ain’t got no rear view mirror? Well its coz we never look back. Sometimes you don’t even look at yer speedo as you can feel how fast you’re going. Its great man, its more than just a hobby moddin our cars, it’s a sense of identity. These cars are our babies. Car culture crosses all kindsa boundaries, into racing cars, fixing cars, being around cars. It’s cheaper and better than girls”.

Dean's explanation went some way towards clarifying why so many boy racers gathered at the varying meets and cruises and highlighted the extent to which they possessed a preoccupation not only with image; the way in which others perceived them through the appearance of their cars, but also how they were perceived as individuals by peers through the demonstratable qualities they possessed. To see them sitting in their cars or engaging with peers at their various meets gave nothing away about their personal lives, their family histories, their aspirations and concerns, or the practical skills and abilities they had painstakingly 'trained' for. These skills allowed them to propel their cars through a series of torturous manoeuvres and they spent a considerable amount of time perfecting these performative skills, sometimes alone and sometimes in the company of others who painstakingly gave instructions on how to achieve the ultimate result; often repeating the same manoeuvre again and again until perfection had been achieved. Occasionally the performance was videoed on a mobile telephone and played back at a meet to the critical gaze of peers, or sent to an absent friend's mobile phone to be viewed in private and discussed at a future date. The example seen in Figure 33 (below) is a frame downloaded from a short video performance from a mobile phone.



Figure 33: Dan perfecting 'drift' on a roundabout

Later, at an industrial estate (such as that in Figure 33, above) or a public car park, the young men's new skills were demonstrated to a wider audience and the ensuing accolades duly received and acknowledged were seen as reward enough for their endeavours. During these demonstrations I noticed that feedback from peers was most valued when the giver was male. Such occasions rarely encouraged verbal contributions from females, either as members of the 'audience' or as potential contenders for these demonstrations of driving skill and manoeuvrability which is something I discuss in more detail in Chapter 7.

This level of performative exhibitionism aside, many of my participants simply went along to the meets and cruises to showcase their cars to other moddin enthusiasts, whilst others were filled with the hope that they could be spotted by a photographic scout from one of the prestigious car magazines who frequented gatherings of modders or cruisers. Preparations for such events were thorough, yet some of the young men decided at the last minute not to take their cars simply because they perceived them to be lacking something in terms of spectacularity or performance and the ability to impress a potential audience. As Will told me,

"You just gotta do it, make it stand out. Its gotta be done. Its disconcerting pulling up at traffic lights to find 5 pairs of eyes starin' at yer, but they do more an' stare when they see's yer pull away. It's all about flexin', winding [showing off] and havin' a good time. You gotta show people wot you've achieved, as that's the only fuckin' chance some of us gotta do it. We ain't exactly thick but then we ain't wearing suits either. It's about respect, it's about bein' wiv me mates".

Despite being preoccupied with their car's appearance and possibly from Will's comments, their own too, many of my respondents were equally concerned with the amount of power their vehicle's engine could produce and its potential to become even more powerful with a little bit of work, a great deal of imagination and innovation. This appeared to lie mainly with the pursuit of status; to be the owner of a powerful machine

which had out raced many of its counterparts within a district did much to raise its young owners profile amongst his peers.

“I’ve stuck in a turbocharger to double the horses [horsepower] and me mates stuck Noz [Nitrous Oxide] in his”. Did he use it? “Yeah he sure did. It gave him whiplash” [respondent Will, laughs uproariously].

Clearly not all the boy racers had been able to carry out a full range of modifications to their cars, although modification was always a high priority. This varied from up-rating engines in order to increase power and speed, to the provision of body kit and lowering springs or a new stereo system. Where a small number of respondents stated that it was not their immediate intention to carry out modifications, the reasons for this were equally distributed between, the car had already been modified or that modification was beyond their current economic means. Any planned enhancements and modifications extended in part to the type of music system onboard the car. The boy racers often used their in-car music systems as all pervasive, all consuming mediums which when played at maximum decibels, enveloped you as a fellow traveller and provided a soundtrack or shield to the external world, or set the scene for activities yet to come. Often the noise was deafening both inside and outside of the car but undeterred by my protestations on one occasion Will suggested, “The only limit to the level of satisfaction you get from your stereo is the size of yer wallet and how much pain yer ears can take”.

It would appear that for the ambitious and the wealthier boy racers, in-car entertainment and electronic gadgetry was a whole scene of its own with many cars being equipped with small television sets, DVD players, electronic games accessed through computer screens, multi-disc changers, and scanners or laser gun detectors for detecting mobile laser speed traps such as those gadgets shown in Figure 34 (below).



**Figure 34: Showing the latest gadgetry**

Seeking possession of such expensive modifications meant that the young car owner was often likely to deprive himself of other things, making sacrifices in other dimensions of his life as a means to ensure he could still be part of the boy racer scene. This was apparent from Daniel's description of his friend.

"Big G, he's taken out two bank loans to buy two cars, both way beyond his means, he's only working for basic wage in a fucking scrap yard, I mean what sort of wanker is he? He can't even afford to run the fucking car, so he barely exists all week, has given up fags and booze, just so he can afford to do the weekend meets".

At the other end of the investment scale was Daz aged 20 who estimated that with assistance from parents and other benefactors, he had spent about £15,000 on a car he called 'Pinky'. He told me that in selling Pinky on the open market he would be lucky to get £5,000 for the car despite all the investment, including time he had committed to this project. I asked him if the boy racer and street car culture for him was ultimately all about finance and who had the greatest amount of disposable income to spend on producing a car.

"Nah, it ain't about the money in the end mate. It's all about respect...getting respect from yer mates is main priority see. Getting respect from people yer don't even know when they see's yer performin and see's

yer skill'. That's what it's all about. An' what do I get from it all? Well I gets a buzz, from it an' everyone's lookin at yer...bleedin great mate that's what it is".

Daz was possibly an exception in terms of how much money was available to invest in a car. The majority of my participants worked from a limited income, and any work was carried out according to their budget. To this effect many accessories had been either purchased second hand, 'acquired' from dubious sources, fabricated using pictures in car accessory magazines as a pattern, or through bartering materials or an exchange of skills. Many told me that they had obtained ideas for modification from the magazines they read and got friends to help them with their ideas. For those just setting out, the extent of their investment may have been considerably less than that of young men like Daz, and they were also younger, closer to seventeen than in their twenties. The makes and models of vehicles they drove differed too and their initial outlay in terms of purchasing their cars, only amounted to a few hundred pounds, certainly less than one thousand. A smattering of Vauxhall Novas, Volkswagen Golfs, less prestigious Peugeot saloons, and a collection of Ford models were the most commonly featured and at the most basic level the modifications were a set of alloy wheels, an oversized exhaust system a number of graphics indicating the vehicle was fitted with a Kenwood (or similar prestigious make) music system, speakers and subwoofers. There were often attempts to produce unusual paintwork with iridescent or pearlescent hues and some of the more adventurous modifications were likely to have been carried out by the young driver themselves either through buying second hand accessories or cannibalising from other vehicles and subsequently making such items fit their own. 'T' for example, showed a degree of pride in his efforts,

"Did all the work meself. You don't know how rewarding it is to stand back havin' worked yer bollocks off for four hours creating this [gestures to encompass the partly primed body kit adhering to his car]. Puttin' it in a

garage and lettin' somebody else do it and payin' a fortune. Nah it's not the same".

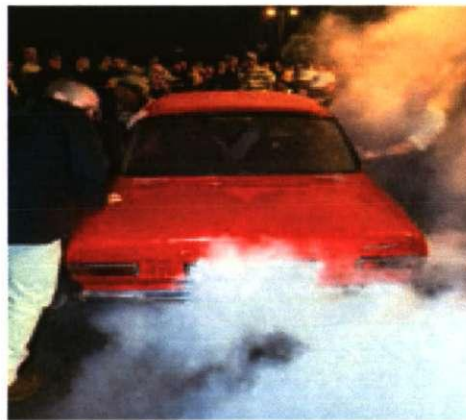
Young men like 'T' who had yet to reach a state of completeness with their cars, initially gathered on the periphery at meets away from what they regarded as the more prestigious cars. Such a gesture could be an acknowledgement that their vehicles, although functional and undergoing a measured transformation in terms of modification rather like the vehicle shown in Figure 35 (below), were limited by investment and thus not worthy of being part of the more spectacular scene.



**Figure 35: Work in progress**

Nonetheless young men like 'T' although choosing to position themselves on the periphery at meets, were not passive bystanders content to allow those with the more flash cars to hog the limelight. Rather they used their intimate knowledge of their vehicles to give a performance, something spectacular (and occasionally dangerous) gaining an elevated status from peers that such action brought. These activities which Daz, 'T' and others like them got involved in, often took place in multi-story car parks late at night in larger cities like Truro, but more often than not in Plymouth where there was likely to be greater audience participation, together with the risk of attracting police attention. This increased the aura of excitement and anticipation which pervaded such events. Here many

of the young men engaged in strip racing, driving at speed between two fixed points, burnouts and other performative behaviours. Not only did such activities hold immense visual impact but the ensuing friction between the car tyres and the road surface assaulted the senses in every way through sight, sound, touch, and smell and often taste when the atmosphere became polluted by smoke and fuel. At times like this I found that it was impossible to be immune from the excitement which radiated from Jez, Ian, Daz, Ali, Nathan or in fact any number of others; it was compelling. Lights flashed and bounced off a series of windscreens in a kaleidoscope of colours as the young men red-lined their rev counters conveying a flavour of what Haywood has described as ‘this controlled loss of control’ (1998: 311). Audience participation although not sought by the drivers, was willingly offered by the spectators or street car groupies who stepped up to sit or lean on a vehicle, in an attempt to prevent it moving forward whilst wheels spun and tyres smoked, which Figure 36 (below) clearly highlights.



**Figure 36: Audience participation**

Often the inevitable happened, one or more tyres exploded due to the friction. In extreme cases the engine would blow up. The three frames in Figure 37 (below), graphically reveal a young driver as he demonstrated his prowess at ‘doughnuts’, an activity achieved when the car was propelled at speed in a circle, whilst maintaining the same steering lock. Such an activity was characterised by the smoking tyres and smell of burning rubber and clutch.

Note the young driver's gesture of acknowledgement of the crowd's appreciation of his performance.



**Figure 37: Demonstrating 'doughnuts'**

During some of these demonstrations the surface of the road or car park eroded as the asphalt melted, disintegrating under such pressure. Other activities included 180s achieved by driving at speed to a fixed point (usually a wall), applying the handbrake to effect a handbrake turn, or merely turning the steering wheel rapidly and braking whereupon the car swerved and faced the direction it had just come from. The performative 360s followed a similar pattern, but instead of merely facing the direction the vehicle had come from, it spun so fast that it returned to the direction it headed in the first place. Occasionally, high on a rush of adrenalin and motivated by competitive spirit, there were discrepancies in calculations in terms of distance and speed. Instead of successfully completing the manoeuvre, the cars careered into the wall and whilst injuries to drivers or bystanders were rare, I noted that damage to cars and bruised egos were plentiful in comparison.

During the period embraced by my research such adventures were fairly infrequent, and rarely involved cars which had been in receipt of large investments of labour and expense. Rather other vehicles acquired inexpensively (or acquired for free), were used for the sole purpose of carrying out one or more of these performative displays. Here the emphasis was

always on performance and performative skills, rather than modding. On occasions when the engine had blown up or all the tyres had exploded, the performance had been accompanied by cheering and shouts of encouragement. It culminated in roars of applause from bystanders as well as other boy racers, at the point when the car finally succumbed to the pressure under which it had been placed. Although rare, such displays were viewed as “top fun” by young men like Moses who told me that he viewed them as an enlivening experience,

“Yeah it’s all a bit tame with the blokes’ wiv a lot a dosh to spend on their motors poncing about. You need summat to liven things up. Fat Bastard he’s been commin wiv summat he’s got hold of, usually a RS or summat [Ford RS Turbo] and he’s just revved and blown it. It was great. You should a seen it smoking. Fucking top fun! A few of the blokes just pushed it into the hedge when they’d done and torched it before they left”.

A healthy disposable income, access to a car and the skills to ‘perform’ were clearly significant in determining the levels at which these young men were able to engage in the more spectacular component of the ‘meets’, although these were not the only determinants. A few of my participants spoke of feeling excluded from regularly attending boy racer activities like the cruises, simply because they had to budget for fuel or had to pay for essential things for their cars like MOT tests and insurance premiums. Nonetheless from my observations, a high proportion of them were happy just going along and ‘hanging out’ at the meets where spectacular exhibitions or performance were not necessarily the main attractions. Here the boy racers appeared equally content listening to music, admiring one another’s vehicles, swapping accessories, advice and anecdotes and where the only ‘performance’ of the night was the display of blustering and jostling as they verbally tried to out do each other with tales of daring and bravado.

## **A Ceaseless Challenge**

Irrespective of their economic wealth or social status, a common factor for many boy racers was the fact that they regarded themselves as being on the periphery of their communities by virtue of their motoring activities and car-related practices. Many had been discouraged by local authority legislation and a high profile police presence from entering certain public areas during particular hours of the day or night and whilst they did not appear to be unduly challenged by these prohibitions, they often spoke of being picked on or singled out for special attention. Their rationale for this observation was simply that they were being targeted because of their youthfulness and gender and the extent of modification(s) they had carried out on their cars; thus in their view it made even the most innocent of activity oppressively scrutinised.

To illustrate this level of scrutiny many of my participants described their meets which took place at the Wharfside in Penzance. This was a large waterside car park on the periphery of Penzance town centre, in the far west of the county, which was a popular venue for late night meets for boy racers and those who subscribed to the street car culture. It was also a popular meeting place for bikers and skateboarders. The presence of these groups had become an established subject of controversy between residents, local police and the boy racers. The description of police intervention into the continued presence of these groups, and more especially boy racers, was often subject to local media attention and the extract from the West Briton newspaper in Figure 38 (below), was typical of the type of reports that appeared in local newspapers.

## Boy racers' crackdown in Penzance

POLICE in Penzance are mounting a crackdown on so-called "boy racers" putting lives at risk in the town's centre.

The Wharfside has become popular with a hardcore of drivers responsible for scores of complaints from residents who are fed up with their behaviour.

And now police will be adopting a high visibility, zero tolerance stance on the regular offenders responsible for breaking speed limits, carrying out reckless manoeuvres, such as hand brake turns and "doughnuts", and causing a noise nuisance by over-revving their engines.

Acting Sergeant Tom Patrick, of Penzance Police, said: "In the past we have taken a fairly relaxed attitude to the problem, giving out verbal warnings."

But now we are taking a much harder line. As well as issuing fixed penalty notices we will also be delving more deeply into the paperwork of these vehicles.

"So for example if a car is insured as a 1.3 litre engine we will be making sure modifications haven't been carried out without informing their insurers."

As part of the operation officers from the traffic unit will also be carrying out speed checks and representatives from the Department of Transport will be inspecting vehicles to ensure they are roadworthy.

The operation began on October 1 and runs until November 1.

Many of the those responsible for causing the problems are not from Penzance, but are coming from towns such as Redruth, Camborne and St Ives to congregate sometimes as many as 40 at a time in the early hours.

Acting Sergeant Patrick said: "It seems to be the same faces time and again who are breaking the law."

"But it is only a minority causing problems that tar all the others with the same brush."

And following the Police Reform Act 2002, the so called "boy racers" risk their cars being confiscated on the spot if they are deemed to be a danger to themselves or members of the public.

Figure 38: Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, October, 2004

Such behaviours described above although offering opportunities for boy racers to prove their worth in front of peers, were clearly regarded as delinquent by those outside the boy racer culture. In common with Fiske's *Consumer-Guerrillas* who he described as, 'Sneering, jeering and shouting...despoiling the landscape of capital with graffiti, rubbish and noise...they steal or shoplift and challenge ceaselessly' (1987: 14), the majority of boy racers through their car related practices could equally present a picture of rebellious young men whose tactics when faced with obstruction were extended into action.

The boy racers tight relationships on an individual level, and the cohesive nature of their group relationships, gave them an additional boost of confidence when they occasionally

attempted to engage with the police and local authorities. During my research I noticed that such acts of engagement on the young men's part was largely confrontational or in appeasement following minor skirmishes, traffic violations or public order issues. Quite often they did themselves little favour by driving through the towns with the car windows down and singing loudly in tune with what they regarded as their theme tune,

*'Bad Boys, Bad Boys what you gonna do?  
What you gonna do when we come for you?  
Bad Boys, Bad Boys what you gonna do?  
What you gonna do when we come drivin' through?'*

This type of behaviour contributed towards the sort of negative attention they found themselves in receipt of through the media and local talk. However as an attempt to conform to the expectations of mainstream and statutory divisions of the society in which they lived, they had attempted to negotiate meetings with the police and district or town council officials in order to gain permission to hold legal gatherings (meets or cruises) in public areas and thus make certain behaviours currently being outlawed as unacceptable by statutory bodies, into something which was mutually acceptable to all parties. The nature of this type of action is described by Douglas and Ney (1998) who suggest that knowledge of injustices that are believed to cause conflict can prove more fruitful as a basis for conflict resolution. They further suggest that far from rubbishing or ignoring such efforts for engagement, success for resolution could only be arrived at by, 'Supporting those who understand the nature of the gap that has to be bridged', and by 'supporting those who command the cultural resources to do something about it' (1998: 110).

Nonetheless even whilst engaging in the act of seeking resolution, sharp contrasts start to emerge in the way the media classifies these young male drivers as either 'Boy Racers' or 'Cruisers'. Even some of the young men themselves appeared unsure into which category

they fitted, which gave rise to divisions in a previously reasonable and cohesive group which is discussed in Figure 39 (below).

# Hounded car cruisers: We're not 'boy racers'

A GROWING band of young custom car enthusiasts fed up with being hounded by the authorities descended on Truro in a bid to prove they are law abiding.

Around 60 drivers of cars adorned with body kits, alloy wheels and neon lights flocked to the city's Garras Wharf car park for the 'cruise' on Friday night.

The cruisers say they have had enough of being 'tarded with the same brush' as 'boy racers' who tear around Truro causing misery to residents. This group's members say they just want to meet to admire each other's cars and socialise.

The cruise, which finished at around midnight, was one of a series being staged across the region by car modifying club and website Celtic Cruise, which organises meetings via the internet.

Youngsters, police and car park owners Carrick District Council say the event, which attracted youngsters from as far as Worcester, passed off peacefully.

Organiser Darren Fletcher, aged 29, of Plymouth, said: "There was a pretty good turnout. People came from all over."

"We want to raise the profile of the website, because people should know that we are not all trouble and we caused no nuisance whatsoever."

Valerie Treadwell, of custom car firm Konzeptz, travelled to Truro from Collington in her Subaru Impreza, which she and her partner have spent £8,000 customising.

She said: "You get these boy racers who buy cheap cars and they just race them around all over the place. But when you spend £8,000 on a car you don't want to rag it around."

Nathan Harvey, aged 19, of Cam-



● Cruise organiser Darren Fletcher (left), aka "Mondeo Man", of Plymouth, with his modified Ford Mondeo at Garras Wharf car park. The white Subaru belongs to custom car fan Valerie Treadwell, of Collington. Pictures by Cameracraft

TRURO car parks have become meeting places for "car cruisers" - or custom car enthusiasts - who insist they are not the "boy racers" causing misery to city residents. Reporter Mark Binnerley went along on Friday night to meet the youngsters who say the authorities have got the wrong end of the stick.

fyng) cars for about a year. He owns a K-reg Ford Escort with a body kit illuminated by neon strip lights.

"People don't seem to distinguish between modified cars and people who break the law. It seems that if you do have a modified car that you speed and you mess about on the roads. I get randomly checked by the police at least once a week," he said.

Alex Ailman, aged 18, travelled to

because he is "passionate" about modified cars.

Celtic Cruise website was set up by 18-year-old Matthew Doe to bring together law abiding custom car fans. It now has 240 members.

"We set up the site because we were tired of all the people doing burn-outs at cruises. We wanted to start our own group," he said.

The cruisers were angered back in November when police blocked them in at Garras Wharf car park and inspected all the cars, while a Carrick car parks officer handed out £25 parking tickets.

Four traffic police patrol cars and officers observed Friday's event from Staples car park nearby.

A source from Carrick Council's car parks department said a patrol officer attended the cruise to ensure parking regulations were being obeyed.

bought tickets but some had to be advised to park within the marked bays. The leaders of the event were quite responsible and they quietened down some of the mouthy ones.

"We've got no problems with their parking in the car park's bays to meet and chat. But it's when they start doing stunts that we get concerned, not only for their safety but the general public's as well."

The source added that some "boy racers" had cost tax payers "many thousands of pounds" by causing damage to car parks in Truro.

He said a £5,000 "ram proof" barrier at the entrance to Moorfield car park basement had had a section removed by vandals, costing an estimated £1,500.

A barrier has been installed at Bosawen Park tennis courts to stop


Figure 39: Extract from The West Briton Newspaper, January 2004

In media reports like this there was often an element of slippage between the terms 'Boy Racer' and 'Cruiser' or indeed in some cases 'Joy Riders'. Whilst all three terms had a largely uncharted history, and popular and academic understandings of the terms were often far from clear-cut, 'Joy Riding' at least had been defined by the Criminal Justice system, in terms of vehicles being stolen for short-term and instrumental use, or as O'Connell describes as, 'Driven performatively attracting high speed police chases and other forms of driving indulged in by young males' (2005: 455). During my research, whilst high speed police chases involving boy racers or cruisers were unusual, they did occasionally happen if a boy racer decided to attempt what they termed a 'Fly-by'. This

occurred when a decision had been made to uprate a car's performance to the extent that its young owner believed that it could out-perform all other road legal saloon cars. Having tested it out and established an advantage in speed over peers, the boy racer usually in the early hours of the morning, actively sought out a police traffic vehicle and goaded its occupants into pursuit. The ensuing chase became central to the boy racer's quest for status and great kudos could be gained from such activity, particularly if the police car although in hot pursuit was ineffective in apprehending the young driver.

Not all engagements however were fuelled by such dramas, and many cruise organisers often actively sought to engage with the local police by inviting them to attend their meets prior to a drive. In many cases when I accompanied my participants on cruises, there was a noticeable police presence but these usually took the form of a 'stand off' where police personnel observed proceedings from police vehicles situated on the periphery of the cruise. Rarely did I observe any attempt made by the police to interact with the young men (or even *vice versa*, apart from the organisers). Shown in Figure 40 (below) is evidence which indicated at one event the police recorded the details from vehicle registration plates on cars in the vicinity of the meet. This had allowed them to check the registration information with records held by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) and thus obtain information about the vehicle's registered keeper, (although this was not necessarily the same person as the vehicle's owner). Having carried out this exercise, many of us who had attended this particular meet received a letter from the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary.

SF615



**DEVON & CORNWALL  
CONSTABULARY**

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Devon & Cornwall Constabulary

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Your ref:	Date: <b>11 February 2004</b>	Telephone:	Direct Dialling:
My ref: <b>51905/lp</b>	Please ask for:	Extension:	Fax:

**Dear**

A vehicle registered in your name has in recent months been checked by Police at an incident involving a gathering of a number of vehicles in a residential area of Truro.


The phenomena commonly known as "car cruises" or "boy-racing" is one which attracts Police attention. The number of such incidents in the Truro area is increasing. The number of complaints from members of the public on the subject also is increasing.

Whilst the Police have no intention of stopping law abiding motorists going about their lawful business in compliance with Road Traffic Legislation; the Police at Truro will deal with individuals who persistently flout the legislation and drive in such a manner as to be a nuisance to other road users and residents, or whereby the manner of the driving is dangerous or inconsiderate.

I would ask that if you do attend such gatherings that you be aware of the enclosed notice. If you do not attend such events please ignore the contents of this letter if you wish.

Yours sincerely,

PP : Sector Inspector  
Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Basic Command Unit

  
 INVESTOR IN PEOPLE


  
 awarded for excellence

Figure 40: Letter from the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary

The police in identifying the type of car I had driven to the meet as a 'Hot Hatch' and one which was the usual mode of transport associated with boy racers, had undoubtedly for the purposes of categorisation that night, believed me to be a boy racer. Over the period of my research I was to receive a further 3 such notices, yet when I had observed cruises or meets in my Cherokee Jeep which is a robust 4X4 off-roading vehicle and more associated with towing and agricultural pursuits, there was no evidence to suggest the police had bothered to record my presence. This suggests to me that many police officers had a tendency to

pre-select boy racers for identification and labelling, primarily on the basis of what the young men were seen driving, their location at the time, and the number of vehicles involved, not necessarily based upon any evidence of performative driving displays.

Many of the boy racers participating in my research had received such letters and advisory notices informing them of the penalties and consequences of association with such gatherings. Several of them represented the upper age limit of my participants around 22 to 24 and they had become fed up with what they regarded as constant hounding. As a result many had diversified into other leisure activities such as off-roading' 4X4's and trail motorbikes. Dan describes his decision to diversify away from his boy racer activities into trail biking as a means to an end.

"Well it wasn't no pleasure goin' out anymore as they was always hounding you. If you went into the town for fish an' chips they would be behind you giving you all that [demonstrates a series of hand gestures; some obscene]. Then if there was more 'an a couple of you...well they'd be followin' you like, all over the fuckin' place. One night, yeah...we fucking drove to Penzance an' then back to Truro just to see if they followed, an' the buggers did for a while. Ain't got nothin' better to do but harass fucking motorists. No wonder they can't catch no fuckin' nonces. Least out on yer bike they can't get anywhere near you and the bikes can piss all over 'em if they was to try".

During my research period Dan like me, and many of the other young men who participated in my research, had received in addition to the formal letter shown earlier, an attachment which included a number of advisory notices or warnings which informed us of a range of penalties we could receive and a copy is shown in Figure 41 (below). These included arrest and potential imprisonment, disqualification from driving, the seizing of our vehicles and accessories, including scanners, mobile telephones, many of which we carried within our cars, and 'other equipment' which was not detailed.

## DEVON & CORNWALL CONSTABULARY

### NOTICE

#### TAKE NOTE;

Devon & Cornwall Constabulary and in particular the police responsible for Truro and the surrounding communities are committed to upholding the law and maintaining the peace on behalf of all the residents of, and visitors to the area. In order to make the roads and public places safer for anyone using them; and to ensure that the drivers and vehicles are appropriately qualified and equipped; Truro police will apply and enforce relevant road traffic legislation.

You should be aware that our intention is to consistently apply an enforcement policy that is both appropriate and in proportionate to the needs of the community's well being.

We will act in a positive and proactive fashion to respond to any incidents which breach current road traffic legislation.

We will take all reasonable steps to prevent such events in the Truro area. This includes:

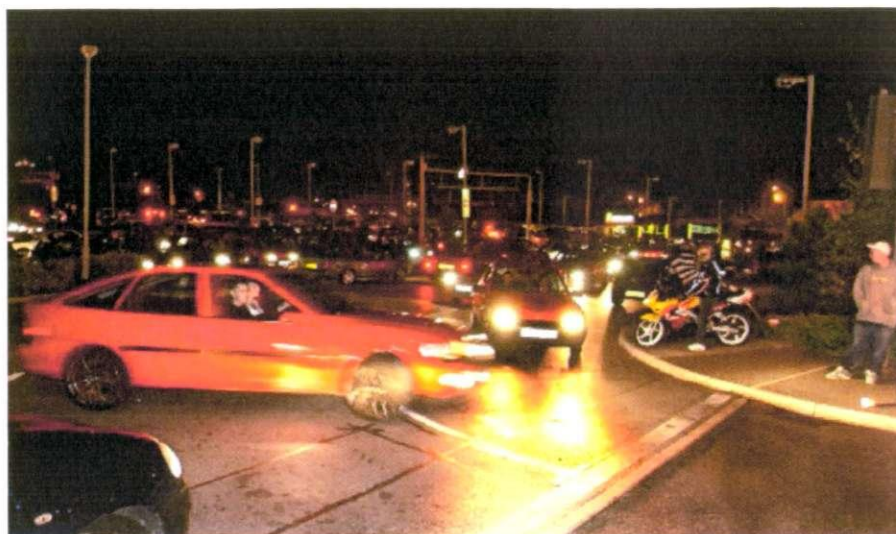
- Arresting those causing or conspiring to cause a public nuisance. This is a serious offence that can bring with it a term of imprisonment.
- Seizing those vehicles, under Section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002, which are used to cause a public nuisance or endangering the public.
- Seizing scanners, mobile phones and other equipment as evidence of an offence under powers such as those provided under sec 19 Police & Criminal Evidence Act.
- Upon conviction we will request the Court to exercise their power to make a forfeiture or destruction order in respect of the evidence we have seized and retained. This is in addition to the powers which the Court has to disqualify persons from driving. This means that as well as your driving licence, your car, other property and your liberty could be at risk.
- This document may be referred to during the administration of this process.

Truro Sector Inspector  
Devon & Cornwall Constabulary, Tregolls Road, Truro, Cornwall, TR1 1PY  
08452 777444

Figure 41: Copy of a Police Warning Notice

My observational experiences of how the police engaged with the boy racers had been varied, with some more prolonged than others. The quality of the engagement very much depended upon the personality and characteristics of the police personnel involved at the time, and the situations they were in. In the main however, I found that the police were generally intolerant, on occasions confrontational and often unrelenting in their quest to disperse any gatherings of what they perceived to be boy racers. This was particularly apparent when the gatherings took place in public car parks. In response, many of the young male drivers attending the meets became antagonistic towards the police almost

challenging them into taking action. Yet where meets or cruises were devoid of police presence, the young men's behaviour was much calmer and less performative. In fact performance *per se* was much less common than media reports indicate.



**Figure 42: Late night cruise arriving in Bristol**

During the latter period of my research whilst accompanying some of my participants on an organised cruise to Bristol (Figure 42), I witnessed heated exchanges between some of the young men and the police. It began when a small number of boy racers had parked in a McDonald's car park on the outskirts of Exeter, consuming a meal they had purchased earlier, but had selected to eat in their cars as opposed to the restaurant. The group was approached by a marked police traffic car being driven aggressively across the parking area by its driver. Arriving in front of the group, the officer got out of his car, and approached the boy racers closest to him. Addressing Shane who was sitting in the drivers seat, and without any preamble he uttered the words "Where you lot from?" Shane and others replied "Cornwall", to which the response was "Fuck off back to Cornwall; we don't want your kind here". Rather taken aback by this unprovoked comment Shane held up his meal and informed the officer that he had as much right as any other person also parked there, to be in the car park.

Jimmy who was sitting in the passenger seat in the car, in which I was sitting, made a comment which was inaudible but the officer's reaction was simply to become enraged and yell that the next time he saw them he hoped it would be in body-bags. He returned to his car uttering a warning that he would return in half an hour and they had "better be gone... or else." In the belief that they had been selected for attention based upon the cosmetic appearance of their cars, and the fact that there were several of them stationary in one location, the young men eventually left the car park. Their behaviour upon exiting the car park was very performative almost in a manner consistent with the label they felt had been unconsciously (or consciously) attributed to them by the officer, that of young male delinquents with cars.

## **The Meets**

These types of *en masse* gatherings of young men and their cars had created something of a moral panic. Notices which appeared in the local weekly press such as those in Figures 38 and 39 were commonplace and often sat cheek by jowl amidst news reports documenting the demise of the local fishing, mining and agricultural industries. The West Briton newspaper for example, which is a weekly periodical encompassing news from the whole of Cornwall, documented its concern that those described as boy racers had taken to congregating in a local car park at evenings and weekends (Figure 43). The reported problems mentioned a selection of issues which included noise from car stereos, loud talking and laughing, squealing from tyres and engine noise and an increased amount of rubbish distributed within the periphery of the car park. Yet adjacent to the same car park is a well frequented fish and chip shop and busy Chinese take-away and a public house. In this particular edition and on the same page, lesser editorial space appeared to be given to anxious residents in Redruth who expressed concerns about their children picking up discarded hypodermic syringes in a nearby play park and the increase in dog fouling in the same park.

## Boy racer problems

**COUNCILLORS in Redruth are to urge the town's police inspector to tackle the problem of "boy racers" congregating in Flowerpot Chapel car park at evenings and weekends.**

**At a meeting on Monday it was agreed Inspector Mike Treglown should be contacted over the matter following an increase in boy racer incidents.**

Figure 43: Extract from the West Briton Newspaper, June, 2004

Such articles as that shown above, tended to reinforce the perceived nuisance element of boy racers and some local authorities and out of town retail stores like Asda, B&Q, Morrisons (formerly Safeway) and Tesco, have adopted preventative measures through the installation of barriers across the entrance to their car parks which they close and secure at night. In implementing these measures they have effectively reduced the boy racers repertoire of 'playgrounds', yet they have underestimated the excitement and challenge such installations have brought. Far from presenting a minor inconvenience, these physical barriers which had been imposed to curtail undesirable nocturnal behaviours or activities, have provided a challenge. They presented an obstacle to be overcome, the liberation of a venue where atmosphere could be created and where anything could happen. A place where there was an existential freeing of the self to an uncertainty which for the boy racers seemed to be 'new' or 'different' every time.

Accessing these prohibited areas opened the way to adventure where possibility constituted a kind of grounded aesthetics of risk and risk-taking in which risk was esteemed. The unexpected adventures which followed might be trivial, a bet or wager against whose car is quickest between two fixed points, or which of them has the best music system in 'sound off' competitions. On the other hand the events created a frisson, a heightened atmosphere of possibility where they or peers could be stopped by the police or local authorities intervening in what they were doing. It was almost like some of the young men wanted to invent through

their activities with their cars and car related practices, their own trials by performance in uncertain situations. The nature of the risks they took, the way they structured these risks, the way they dealt with them, indicated components of young masculinity which was perhaps denied to them in other dimensions of their daily lives.

As an example of this, I discovered that locked barriers at the entrance to a multi-story car park proved no deterrent for one group who travelled 100 miles in one evening to attend a large meet, only to find access to the sea front had been restricted by a police presence. Undeterred, a breakaway group led by those familiar with the area, unlawfully removed the barrier to a multi-story car park thus enabling access to all those who wished to join in. Within approximately 40 minutes all floors of the multi-story car park were filled with revellers (Figure 44). The atmosphere was electric and heavy with expectation; almost carnival-like with music being played at full decibels from the majority of cars. Many of which were equipped with sophisticated and expensive music systems and the rhythms they played became fused into one. A few girls danced in groups, swaying to the beat and the young men lounged on and in their cars chewing gum or smoking and exchanging views on the proceedings of the night so far and on their respective vehicles. Ideas for modification were exchanged and cars admired.

From a lower floor the tuneful babble became a roar as two cars raced against one another, competing for supremacy over a short distance. The roars of the watching crowd drowned any mechanical noise and competition to race the winner was fierce. Those who had arrived merely to watch, with no previous notion of competition in mind, were egged on by companions with comments like "Get on in there mate...you know that you wanna really" or "You aint gonna let a weasel like he show us up". Many succumbing to peer pressure entered the fray, and potential dangers were minimised by careful planning of 'the course' and a number of bystanders acted as 'stewards' to ensure spectators were kept at a safe distance.

When all competitive activities had ceased, all that was left as evidence of performance were the scarifications on the surface of the car park seen in Figure 45.



**Figure 44: Late night meet in a multi-story car park**

Despite their clear enjoyment of the evening and the careful organisation, I asked Shane how the boy racers justified the initial act of vandalism which effected entry to the venue, and his response surprised me as he couched it in terms of safety, regarding the heightened levels of care and consideration demonstrated by those engaged in the performative displays in a confined area because the only participants and bystanders were people like themselves.

“In ‘ere you can’t get up much speed, the revving makes it seem faster what with all the noise an’ that so you take more care and no-one’s gonna get hurt, or not hurt bad and the cars ain’t gonna get too much damage. You might blow a head [gasket] or summat but the energy is contained. We rules out the variables, nobody’s here who aint caught up in the Boy Racer or Cruiser scene. If we was out in the town somewhere there’s always a chance somebody’s gonna get caught up in it, and somebody who ain’t one of us lot”.

This aside, I would argue that the dismantling of the car park barrier and ensuing illegal entry into prohibited premises, had been carried out in a manner equitable to a true guerrilla infiltration into enemy territory. It afforded those concerned an additional thrill and excitement of being able to take rebellious action against a system in which everything has to be paid for in one form or another, and when their tactics were successfully accomplished it marked a temporary victory of cunning and strategic planning over the local authorities, their surveillance resources and apparatus; in fact, over all agents of social discipline and repression.



**Figure 45:** Tyre marks showing the results of manoeuvres in the multi-story car park

## **Where You Live Reflects How You Live**


The boy racers justified their use of open spaces, including private and public car parks, by suggesting that in order for them all to get together to show off their cars, admire each others cars and talk about their car related practices and activities there was no alternative but to meet in large car parks or other such designated spaces. Many too suggested that cars were their hobby, their main interest and leisure pursuit yet they were given few opportunities for sharing this with a wider audience apart from a few “mates who hung out at each others houses” and cluttered cul-de-sacs or limited driveways with vehicles. They argued that government initiatives (such as On Track and Sure Start) which aimed to promote and encourage social inclusion for young people in deprived areas, sought to provide outside play areas and leisure opportunities and activities for younger children and

families with younger children but ignored the needs of the older teens unless it was through the provision of church run youth clubs and youth organisations, which was something that few, if any of the boy racers were prepared to buy into.

Throughout Cornwall, and particularly in the Camborne and Redruth areas, there have been numerous consultations carried out by district, town and county councils as well as other youth initiatives in order to give young people the opportunity to express their views about what concerned them and what could be done to facilitate better opportunities for them to spend their leisure time. These surveys were aimed mainly at the 13 to 19 year olds and thus the 17 to 19 year olds from my research were eligible to participate. With the onset of the facility of Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), the local town councils were particularly anxious to engage with young people in order to find a solution to current problems and reduce the need for statutory intervention. Nonetheless at least 12 of my participants suggested that they had been in receipt of ASBOs and knew of others similarly situated. The majority of these argued that they had been given them for simply hanging around in groups in public places, playing their music, talking and generally “having a laff”.

Apart from church run youth clubs, after school clubs and various exercise or self-defence clubs specialising in Tai Kwan Do, karate or one of the popular derivatives, my participants argued that there was little on offer for young people, particularly in the Camborne Redruth areas. The West Briton newspaper on 14 October 2004 (Figure 46) reported on a recent consultation which had attracted a large response from young people. The article pointed out that young people had contributed towards a similar consultation exercise a few years prior to this and despite assurances given by the commissioning bodies at the time, any hopes and aspirations had come to nothing. In commissioning and carrying out such a survey, young people contributed a range of views and highlighted

what they perceived to be voids in existing youth services provision. Generally it appeared that young people were not interested in joining church run youth clubs, and would prefer a choice and a say in what was to be made available to them.



**West Briton**  
**OPINION**

## Listen to town's young people

THE fact that so many young people attended the public meeting in Camborne to try to find ways of countering the anti-social behaviour that is blighting the town was hugely encouraging.

Several spoke and made the valid point that the vast majority of them are perfectly well behaved and that the trouble is caused by just a small number.

They also pointed out that for teenagers not interested in joining church youth clubs, there is little to do in Camborne – and the town has 3,000 young people.

A similar public meeting was held a few years ago but all the hopes then came to nothing. The same thing must not happen this time.

A commitment was given by a number of civic leaders, including local MP Candy Atherton, to do all they can to improve facilities and a further public meeting is to be held in the spring to report on progress.

That alone should ensure that everyone gets moving but the wishes of the town's young people must be taken into account.

It's no good providing facilities that they don't want and won't use; much better to get them involved from the start.

A number of suggestions were made and, hopefully, these will also be followed up and, perhaps, the fact that drunkenness and vandalism in the town, which is intimidating many elderly residents, has been highlighted will deter those responsible.

Figure 46: Extract From the West Briton Newspaper, October, 2004.

Very few of my research participants appeared willing to admit to attending a youth club, and often articulated horror at being involved in anything so 'gay'. Many who lived in the rural areas in tiny hamlets which consisted of two or three houses, or even in the larger villages whose populations were less than 1,000 inhabitants, had no designated area where they could meet with others and village halls (where such existed) were often given over to Saturday evening Bingo sessions, weekly whist-drives or Women's Institute (WI) meetings, or were venues for the annual flower shows. Occasionally small concessions to the needs of young people in these remote villages were made, and a dart board and a table

football or portable pool table facility had been installed in the corner of one of these public rooms much as it had been in the village near my own home and the hamlets surrounding it. Nonetheless these facilities only appeared to be available when it was possible to find an appropriate and willing adult to supervise proceedings. More recent and larger investments gaining popularity were the refurbishment of play-parks with swings, slides and roundabouts and the installation of skateboard parks which were destined to be used by younger children and teens. Certainly very few of my research participants agreed that they were willing to engage with these types of leisure provision, feeling that the activities did not match their individual or collective interests and needs or were age-appropriate. Dan suggested that location played a large part in the extent of his ability to socialise with friends or gain access to entertainment.

“It’s where you live dictates how you live. See if I’m stuck out livin’ in the sticks as I am sometimes with me old man when me wheels are knackered or I can’t afford to go out, I don’t consider that I lives well as I don’t see nobody and nobody comes to see me as the old buggers a grumpy bastard and don’t encourage nobody to the house. No wonder me old dear left him. There’s nowt for us older ‘un’s to do save go to the pub an’ I can’t afford to do that too often. I don’t do flower arrangin’ or play bingo” [laughs].

Differences have been revealed in terms of the nature, type, regularity and accessibility of entertainment provision for young people in Cornwall and those who occupy urban spaces were often more fortunate than those like Dan, who lived in impoverished rurality. Following the 2004 consultation exercise and public meeting held in Camborne and described in Figure 46, many local agencies and businesses under the auspices of the Camborne Town Partnership, combined to develop a community plan to provide somewhere for young people to go in the evenings, and thus reduce community concerns about any ensuing anti-social behaviours. In 2005, the partnership’s identified target group appeared to be younger teenagers and those who perhaps were inclined to head for the town centre, seeking entertainment during school holiday periods. The nature of the provision of structured entertainment or ‘occupation’ provided by the Town Partnership

reflected themes which fell outside of the range of interests of my participants and had greater appeal for the younger age groups. An exception to this was an initiative which involved informal mechanics courses which required no obvious contractual commitment from the young people but like many other initiatives its sustainability depended upon the attractiveness of its content and the personalities of those running it. Although limited in terms of the appeal it held for the majority of my research participants who came from that particular geographic area, the wider initiative was regarded in a positive light by the local authorities and is highlighted in Figure 47 (below).

**BBC NEWS**  
**Town sees anti-social problem cut**  
**A Cornwall town says it has seen a reduction in the number of anti-social incidents by young people.**  

New football sessions and a coffee bar in Camborne have had a "noticeable" impact on behaviour, local police said. Camborne Mayor John Pope said he was "delighted" the activities were having an effect and he hoped to offer young people more things to do in the future. The Camborne Town Partnership has been now set up to continue to occupy youngsters and keep them off streets. The activities, which attract up to 50 teenagers a week, had already cut complaints, Neighbourhood Beat Sergeant Dave Ainslie said, comparing the last school half-term period to the one before Christmas last year. He said: "Last half-term there was a significantly lower number of reports made to the police about youngsters misbehaving." I'm not saying that crime disappeared, it didn't. But we were getting fewer incidents repeated." Town Mayor John Pope said there were fewer youngsters hanging around on street corners causing trouble. He said: "There's no-one in the town square in the evenings except on the odd occasion, but there have been a lots less complaints about youngsters. "If we can get something for the youngsters to do for the whole week, and give them a choice then I'd be delighted."

  
**New skills**  

Rick Watts is project manager of Real Base in Camborne, an organisation which takes troubled youngsters and tries to teach them new skills, ranging from car mechanics to hairdressing. The project has joined the new partnership and will also be now opening in the evenings. Mr Watts said: "The sort of problems we were getting from young people in the town were mainly through boredom."We now hope for two evenings a week we can engage them and encourage them in the sessions we have."

Figure 47: Story from BBC News, 15 March, 2005

In terms of young men such as my research participants and others who subscribed to the street car culture, the real issue seemed to be an apparent failure to recognise the needs of

the older groups like themselves, who felt that football practice, coffee bars, the type of mechanics courses offered together with hairdressing opportunities lacked appeal. These young men actively avoided joining in the type of activities which were organised by voluntary or community groups where they felt disempowered, and preferred the type of facilities where they retained control of the structure and proceedings, much as they did with their meets and cruises. Thus they were unwilling to subscribe to 'appropriate' activities and venues which had been orchestrated into meaningful practices by official bodies. This was not new because in 1976, Europe's first motor project was established in London. Its purpose was to wean 'Joy Riders' and young male automobile offenders off their habit. Managed by an ex-drugs counsellor, the centre enabled young offenders to work on old cars and compete with them in the legitimised speed of banger racing. It was believed that this facilitated opportunities for the young men to work out their aggression or frustration that might otherwise be exorcised in stealing cars. Whilst debates have since ensued surrounding the effectiveness of such initiatives including the reduction in the offence of Joy Riding or Taking and Driving Away (TDA), the young men who took part in the initiative suggested that organised banger racing was a poor substitute for Joy Riding. Henderson suggests that the very nature of such organised projects fails to challenge the 'underlying power of masculinism lying behind the offending behaviour' (1994: 23).

In Cornwall a similar initiative called 'Real Base' used a car mechanic training programme to deliver job search, support and guidance to jobless young people, it helped with interview techniques, produced a CV, provided work experience placements and introductions to potential employers. It also recruited young people, mainly young males, from the age of 13 suffering low self-esteem, and who were experiencing or likely to experience social isolation. It maintained that such a project turned these young men away from engaging in criminal activities. At the time of my research the project had formed

part of the Camborne Town Partnership, although its client group came from a wider geographical area. Dave went to Real Base initially to see what was on offer, and soon showed a keen interest in mechanics. He attended the project regularly and upon reflection, thought that it had helped him stay out of trouble. Following in the footsteps of the 1976 London motor project, but almost 3 decades later, young men like Dave who attended Real Base also worked on a variety of cars, entering them in banger races around the county and honed their combative driving skills under relatively controlled conditions. Dave had enjoyed his time on the project and said that being associated with "Real Base has given me back my confidence and self-esteem. I have managed to stay out of trouble and can see a brighter future for myself and it's great".

Whilst initiatives like Real Base provided opportunities for young men to get together to work on cars, either their own or those provided by the project, had clearly worked for young men like Dave, it held little appeal for the majority of boy racers. This may simply be because they were organised by either a voluntary or statutory body which the boy racers regarded as the significant 'other', whilst they regarded themselves and their peers as 'specialists'; young men who enjoyed stretching the parameters of good or bad taste in terms of their cars aesthetics and risky driving practices. The highly ritualised and spectacular performance of the young men who careered around Blackbird Leys, in Oxford in their cars during the 1990's seemed to support the latter interpretation and Presdee situates young men like these within the context of,

'A carnival of crime involving the celebration of doing 'wrong', taking pleasure from potential dangers (physical and legal), and the creation of a 'topsy-turvy' world through the acquisition of showy cars.....their activities are seen in the context of socially and geographically marginal spaces' (2000: 180).

## Summary

Almost everything to do with cars, engines, car accessories, displays of driving prowess and skill were central domains of meaning within the boy racers culture. More so than the average young male car driver, the boy racers were more likely to use their cars to demonstrate driving skills, prowess, and success in life, to experience high levels of excitement in order to project an ideal self-image to others, and undertake risk-taking injudicious behaviours. Much of their performative behaviours emanated from the younger age group, the 17 to 22 year olds, which was often in contrast with those who fell into the 22 to 24 age group. Generally the older group appeared to be more at ease with who they were as men. Furthermore this group often held relatively well paid positions and had a greater disposable income. They displayed their success through more expensive vehicles or more expensive accessories and were ascribed status by those without either. These young men went to meets and on cruises to be seen and to see rather than to engage in performative activities or risk-taking as a means by which to accomplish hegemonic masculinity. Nonetheless the performative behaviours of boy racers also had particular connections to masculinity, because socialisation with other like-minded young males provided them with a greater belief in their ability to handle risk. The sometimes anarchic and often spontaneous behaviours they engaged in were often in response to the label which they perceived had been attached to them by the police, local authorities and the media. However as I discovered not all recipients of police warning notices were boy racers.

Some boy racers expressed their level of need in relation to their car-based practices and the desire to have a voice in any decision-making process which could have addressed the provision of leisure facilities for young people in Cornwall. They highlighted areas of disused land, old mineral tramways and abandoned airfields as being ideal for hosting their

cars and car related practices and thus reducing the likelihood of attracting ASBOs and other penalties. The closest they have got to achieving their ideal has been through locally organised banger racing or stockcar racing which were organised events, more often than not run as seasonal businesses by local entrepreneurs and the nature of the event was inconsistent with the aspirations and lifestyles of the boy racers or cruisers. Instead they have had to rely upon the annual events such as the 'Run to the Sun' at Newquay, the 'Mini Run', Cornish 'Custom Car' Show and sundry organised car related events which ultimately had no place in the heart and mind of a boy racer and received little more than a derisory sniff or a cursory glance from them. In the main the young men expressed a belief that in order to follow their particular interests and hobbies in a manner unregulated by external influences they were given little alternative, and thus were being *forced* to seek other venues, resulting in the redefining of public space in an ever increasingly policed and recorded arena.

It would be easy for me to dismiss the sets of challenging, rebellious or redefining behaviours by boy racers as being marginal or inconsequential, for this is precisely what the strategies of hegemony would dictate much in the manner that occupying forces have dismissed acts of resistance and vandalism as being little more than the product of a few trouble makers. Gabriel and Lang (1998) view such sets of behaviours as acts or potent signs of nihilistic disaffection yet as my research has led me to discover, the notoriety gained at local level through media and local authority attention and the publicised punitive rewards for any ensuing transgression of the law, seemingly reinforces the iconic allure of being a boy racer, and has given them a visibility which they lacked in other dimensions of their lives.

In modern society an increasing number of individuals are taking part in high-risk activities. One only has to look at various advertisements in the media to note the

popularity of some extreme sports. Many boy racers from my study were in pursuit of the edge, the sort of buzz they achieved whilst performing risky manoeuvres including speeding. It could be argued that many of them did this because it provided them with rare opportunities to unambiguously link survival or success to individual skill (see Lyng, 1990).

In the next chapter I will explore the concepts and consequences of risk involving young men and their cars, and the significance of age and gender in terms of risky practices with cars. I will discuss how Automobile Association and Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) data contributed to my argument that younger male novice drivers are affected by peer pressure when driving, and often respond to the encouragement of peers to display poor driving skills and, by complying, attain a kind of hegemonic masculinity within their group. I will further discuss how attempts by the police and local authorities to curtail speed and erratic driving behaviour on the public highways, were forcing many boy racers into town centre car parks and out-of-town industrial estates, which for my research participants, signified playgrounds that provided them with levels of adventure and possibility, where they could overthrow, ignore or transcend conventions and normally approved patterns of behaviour and activity that by definition, were restrictive and boring.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Masculinity, Risk and Relationships**

#### **Growing Old is Mandatory, Growing up is Optional**

In Chapter 2 I discussed that in the boy racers pursuit of self-definition or in the staging of an appropriate masculine image, such activity could sometimes involve them utilising a number of 'props'. Campbell goes some way to supporting this by suggesting that many young male drivers buy into the 'richly encoded masculine fantasies about speed, control and the car' (1993: 264). She is however, sceptical of Cohen's (1955) theory regarding the 'sex-role anxieties' that surrounds young males undergoing a crisis of masculinity, and prefers to argue that performative activities with cars, particularly joy riding, has been able to reveal a form of masculinity which has proved all too appealing for many young men. I am perhaps less sceptical of Cohen's theory due to what had emerged from my own research in terms of where the young men of my research 'placed' themselves within their familial and social settings, something that I have discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. Nonetheless I would agree with Campbell insofar as the car had provided an admirable medium through which my own participants had been able to some extent, 'live their fantasies', particularly in terms of power and control, particular elements which were perhaps lacking in other dimensions of their young lives.

Drawing on Connell (2003) and Lyng (1990), Groombridge (1998) has developed a link between edgework and masculinity to draw parallels between bad driving and risky performative behaviours with cars. Thus I would argue that the performative and risky practices engaged in by the boy racers, offered many of them an outlet through which to 'do' traditional masculinity, and in doing so provided them with the means through which to seek self-actualisation in an over-controlled, and yet at the same time highly unstable manner. In

a similar vein Hayward (2002) has developed the work of Katz (2000) and argues that in the increasingly precarious world of late modern society, many individuals are seeking to construct identities for themselves by engaging in practices (including criminal ones), that involve a 'controlled loss of control' (2002: 311-12). Government statistics have gone some way to confirming the risk element which is produced when young males of a certain age get behind the wheel of a car.

As I discussed in Chapter 3 many reports indicate that in terms of a propensity towards risk-taking, more young men aged between 17 and 24 are considered by, and processed through the criminal justice system, than any other group, and particularly in relation to road traffic accidents. Certainly this has been supported by the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional affairs (1999), who reported that young male drivers were less responsible and less safe drivers and more inclined to take risks. It also reported that far more men were involved in road traffic accidents than women, indicating too that men drove consistently faster than women. Official road traffic accident reports have often cited speed and poor judgement as the primary factors in accidents, as well as drivers disregard for poor weather conditions. I had discussed in Chapter 4 how many of my participants had spoken about the geographic isolation of their home locations, and the need to drive some considerable distance in order to access a social life or to get to work or college. They had reported their frustrations caused often by not allowing enough time to get to their chosen destination, or the delays they had encountered in the narrow country lanes, when they had become delayed by slower moving vehicles or other rural obstructions. Their response to this regularly resulted in higher levels of risk taking and increased speeds. As 'T' explained,

" Well have yer any idea how fuckin' frustratin it is if yer in a hurry like, an' get stuck behind some shit chucker travelling along towed by a hulking girt tractor ten stories high, going about 2 miles an hour and covering yer car; yer pride an' joy in mud and crap. Yer see a gap an' yer know he aint gonna pull in ter let yer pass as he can't fuckin' see yer, so yer takes it and hit the pedals an' go fer it".

'T's attitude may have been representative of male drivers generally, because research undertaken by the Department of Transport (2003), has shown that one in every six males behave more aggressively when behind the wheel of a car. Furthermore, the presence of inhibitors such as obstructions and speed restrictions actively encourage them to try to beat the system, and more often than not, the motivational factor will be the element of risk. However it is not possible to disregard the fact that not only external stimuli such as road conditions or a desire to overcome obstructions in the quickest possible time can influence the propensity to speed, because other considerations such as the and the social influences of others, the drivers internal stimuli, mood and enjoyment of speeding together with a desire to impress peer groups, are additional influential factors, particularly with boy racers.

With this variety of stimuli is possible to understand how the stability and predictability of the past, present and future can easily be eroded when the young men concerned were susceptible to the influence of peer pressure, the need to impress, to be noticed and recognised for their skill and daring. Inevitably these performative car-based activities like driving too fast or risk-taking have provided many of the boy racers momentary escapism from what they perceived to be their disempowered and disenfranchised existences. An example of this was described by 'T' in the days leading up to his death when he told me about his propensity towards excessive speed and risk taking,

"I reckon that growin' old is mandatory, but growin' up is optional. You only got one chance to live yer life and I live my life 60 seconds at a time. For those few seconds I'm free, it's just me and my car. No worries about me job, or rather not havin' one, no worries about how I'm gonna pay me rent, or about rows with the girlfriend, me mum or me tutors".

This attitude towards risk and escapism was a view held by many boy racers and could in many ways be regarded as being consistent with their rather romanticised vision that the idea of a short but intense and risk-taking life, was more attractive than the alternative one they

saw their older male relatives and friends parents leading. Having sufficient leisure time was paramount in their lives and they existed for evenings and weekends when there was almost an air of irresponsibility that pervaded with the accompanying notion that bad things such as accidents 'happened to other people'. Furthermore, by carrying out regular maintenance and doing all the work on their cars themselves, or with friends, and constantly improving their driving skills during the meets they held a belief that they were somehow invincible, and that they alone, were in control of their destiny.

Some of the risks they appeared to take were concerned with driving too fast for the road or weather conditions. Interestingly throughout the duration of my research their own capability or driving experience, was hardly ever brought to question, unless involved in an accident, or whilst comparing their ability and performance with peers. Many of my respondents considered that they drove at speed some of the time but explained that their use of speed largely depended upon their emotional state at the time, whereas others preferred simply to cruise around the urban areas to see and to be seen. Perhaps worryingly those respondents who agreed that they always took risks; the risks being in the main speed, were largely from the 17 to 22 age group, something which is relatively consistent with the Department of Transport Accident Report (2003). Within this report there has been the suggestion that excessive speed was a contributory factor to all accidents between 1999 and 2003, ranking as the 7<sup>th</sup> most often cited of 54 contributory factors. Furthermore the report suggests that excessive speed was the most often recorded contributory factor for fatal accidents. Where excessive speed was believed to be a contributory factor the report suggests that the proportion of accidents to which excessive speed contributed is highest for accidents precipitated by young male drivers aged 17 to 19.

My respondents who fell in this 17-19 age group, often had the least disposable income available to ensure that their cars had well maintained safety features, yet for many of them

safety was a secondary consideration to appearance and sound. In-car safety features like up-rated brakes, reinforced side-impact panels and airbags, together with regular mechanical maintenance were the redeeming features which had kept many of them safe from fatalities. However many of these features were expensive and did not contribute to the appearance of the car and where appearance was all consuming many of the young men placed achievement of a desired image above their own welfare. As Daz explained, "You gotta have the stuff to make it look fast even if it ain't really. Safety features don't sell cars, but the look does in our world".

Clearly excessive speed, careless, thoughtless or reckless driving behaviour predominate as contributory factors in motor vehicle accidents involving young men. In many cases merely getting into a car and driving away can be one of the most risky activities they are ever likely to undertake. The subsequent reporting of the boy racers escapades in Cornwall through local newspaper articles had revealed that the main focus was a concern with the way they carried out what was perceived as 'noisy, dangerous manoeuvres' in public spaces. Other concerns regarded the extent to which these young men were redefining areas of public space in order to hang around in groups, playing their music systems loudly, engaging in performative practices with their cars and potentially violating local by-laws, public order acts, road traffic acts and Department of Transport regulations, something I discussed in Chapters 3 and 6. Whilst many of these reports have tended to focus upon the boy racers performative activities; the carefully choreographed manoeuvres of man and machine in confined spaces, it also emphasised the excessive risk factors often associated with what the writers of such articles perceived to be the young men's recklessness, speed and the escalating level of accidents which befell them on the open road. Many of them ending up as media headlines like those reported in Figure 48 (below).



Figure 48: Car Crash Headlines, The West Briton Newspaper, 3 November, 2005

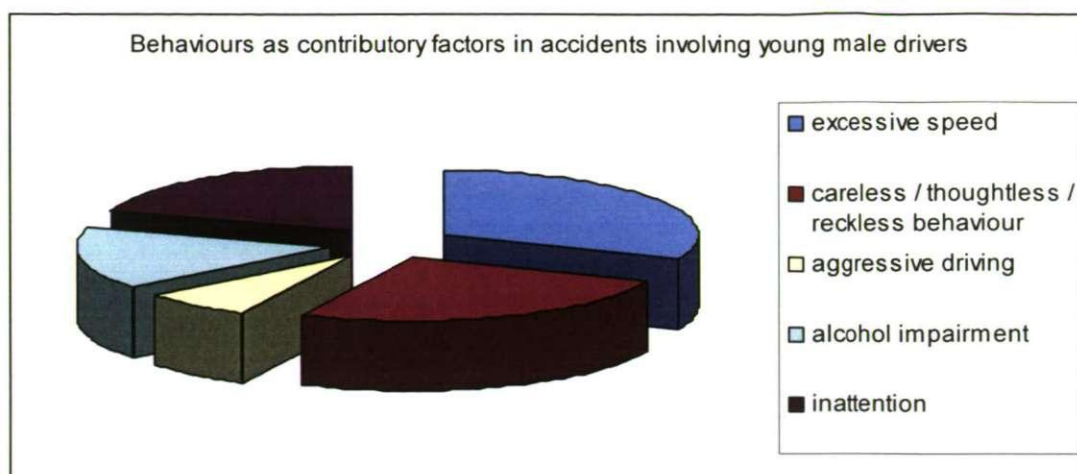
Traits associated with thrill-seeking, sensation-seeking, risk-taking behaviour patterns have been characterised by a sense of time, urgency, competitiveness, ambition and alertness and found to be most prominent amongst those who prefer to drive at higher speeds (McKenna et al, 1998). Yet my research has revealed that racing cars at speed against one another was not necessarily the main focus for boy racers when they met, indeed racing against one another on a stretch of road was more often than not an impromptu affair, culminating in one driving alongside another on a stretch of road and exhibiting a set of behaviours which incited the other to increase speed. When this occurred, the young men concerned were more likely to be motivated by internal pressures (risk, enjoyment and so on) and external pressures (peer pressure, wish to impress, or clear road ahead) to exceed limits.

With the intention to reduce the number of road traffic accidents and particularly those which have often resulted in headlines like those above (Figure 48), the Police Reform Act was introduced in 2002. This Act gave the police new powers to deal more forcefully with those they regarded as flaunting road traffic legislation. Section 59 of the act in particular, affects the perceived activities of boy racers; for not only has it allowed the police to seize vehicles they considered to be involved in nuisance behaviours, but combined with section 19 of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, a number of other items including scanners, mobile phones and other equipment are able to be offered as evidence of an offence. As I revealed in Chapter 6, if the alleged perpetrator was likely to be convicted of any of the above, the police were at liberty to ask the court to exercise its power to make a forfeiture or destruction order in relation to the vehicle as well as potential disqualification from driving. The alternative was to offer the offender a supervised driving course, however failure to attend, or failure to successfully complete the course, attracted the same penalty; disqualification. In total, the threat to those who hoped to gain thrills from driving recklessly, driving too fast or playing their music too loudly or even parking with others in a public place and thus redefining public space was quite significant, because as well as being deprived of their driving licence and other property, their liberty too was at risk. Yet as my research has shown, for many of the boy racers, these activities were considered to be worth the risk.

Undoubtedly there is an acknowledged association between age and risky driving behaviours and practices, with official indicators showing that fewer accidents involving motor vehicles have occurred as the age of the driver increases. This suggests that older drivers, and particularly men, are more responsible in their attitudes to driving and are less inclined to engage in risky driving practices and excessive speeding. This view has been confirmed by a report produced by the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs in 1999. The content of the report has suggested that generally, young drivers were less

responsible in their attitudes, and thus less safe as drivers. Examples included young male drivers who drove faster and closer to the car in front, overtook more riskily, pulled out into shorter gaps and enjoyed speed and sensation seeking. The concern was not that these drivers did not have the skills to drive safely; more that they chose not to use these skills. The report further suggested that younger male novice drivers, aged 17 to 20, were reportedly affected by peer pressure when driving, were encouraged by friends to display poor driving skills and, by complying, the young drivers attained a kind of cult status within their peer group.

Certainly the published evidence, upon which I have drawn throughout my research, indicates that the propensity for accidents has remained the principle domain of men and those who fall within the age range covered by my research. As an example of this, 18% of 17-19 year olds and 32% of 20-24 year olds were considered to be most at risk (DTI 2003: *Driver Casualties by Gender*). This too has been confirmed at a local level, with data compiled by Cornwall County Council largely confirming that road traffic casualties in line with national statistics and categorised as 'Casualties by Age Group', have been young men from the 17 to 24 years age group. However, the report suggested that these numbers were likely to diminish as age increased. The nature of road traffic accidents these young men were most likely to be involved in, had also been categorised by the local authorities into those which had behaviours which were considered to be contributory factors in the accident and are shown in Table 3 (below).



**Table 3 Driver behaviours believed to contribute to road traffic accidents (Cornwall County Council, Road Traffic Accident Statistics Report, 2004)**

At the time of my research many initiatives had been put in place by the local authorities in Cornwall as a means to force drivers to reduce speed, particularly in built-up areas where visible speed restriction signs on the roadside had largely been ineffective. Traffic calming interventions carried out in some areas by the Highways Department such as speed humps, were regarded by my participants as minor irritants. Wayne found the presence of traffic calming *extremely* irritating, “They’re trying to slow you down all the time. All these speed humps are wrecking my suspension”. Yet such attempts to curtail speed and erratic driving behaviour are not new. In 1992 in the UK, the police had introduced a new weapon against speeding which was the speed camera, fixed camera or ‘Gatso’, and now such cameras are commonplace along stretches of the highway, not only in built-up areas but also along dual carriageways. At the time of my research there were no motorways in Cornwall, the nearest being the M5 in Devon, nonetheless there were a number of dual carriageways and it appeared through my occasional conversations with the boy racers about these cameras that they all knew the location of any cameras and regularly conveyed and updated such information on one of their many boy racer or cruise websites.

With their knowledge about the location of speed cameras and the inconvenience they attached to their presence, much of the boy racers speeding or 'street racing' had been carried out on the rural roads or short dual carriageways surrounding the towns and villages where they lived. As an example, Treleigh 'raceway' a short stretch of dual carriageway outside Redruth had for many years provided a site for impromptu races and performative exhibitionism on the large roundabouts which juxtapose another stretch of single carriageway. Official statistics from the Department of Transport (Accidents by Road Report, 2003) has suggested that road traffic accidents of all levels of seriousness take place mainly on rural highways and where excessive speed is present. Furthermore this was deemed to be considerably higher in rural areas than in urban areas. Certainly in terms of my own research, the wrecked cars and scarred limbs exhibited by Dom, Jez, Shaun and Joe were testimony to this theory.

Experiencing injury as a result of what could be described as deleterious behaviours and traffic violations resulting in accidents, appeared to give these young men a common bond and strengthened their existing friendships. Nonetheless in terms of lessons learned, their respective adverse experiences did not appear to have had any enduring impact on their subsequent driving practices. I would argue however, that this was perhaps bravado, or their superficial attempts to disguise or minimise their real feelings in the face of potential criticism or derision from peers. To display reticence or anxiety could be deemed as a sign of weakness and thus they could appear to be less of a man. Yet this front stage behaviour which predominated at the performative end of their actions was often in contrast to their interactions or backstage performances which I had observed in situ within their family settings and on a one-to-one basis within their cars. Indeed their relationships were often paradoxical and they appeared to behave in different ways according to their respective audience.

## Exploring Relationships

I would suggest that much of the boy racers behaviour both with peers and with others was based upon their lived experiences, or perceptions of the male and female role, much of which I had observed whilst visiting many of my participants at home. Perhaps somewhat controversially, Cohen (1955) has identified the mother as the most important agent of socialisation within the family, due to something he justified as the increased 'togetherness' of mothers and their children owing to a 'Father's absence in a remote workplace' (1955: 461). This was consistent with some of the families of my participants, who had absentee fathers, either for work reasons or as the result of marital disharmony. Cohen further theorised that boys who had initially identified more strongly with the 'feminine', were more likely to later assert their masculinity, via actions they perceived to be far removed from feminine 'goodness', including that of anti-social behaviour, and other masculine-affirming roles which was evident from a high proportion of boy racers.

Nonetheless some of my young participants, who lived in households with one parent which was predominantly their mother, had spoken of a role often being forced upon them, or one which they had unconsciously assumed which had been masculine-affirming in another sense. That was one of parental responsibility for younger children in the absence of their working mother as she assumed the role of main breadwinner for the family. An example of this was Jakie who had told me that in his case it had included disciplining younger siblings, taking them to and from school and extending occasional assistance in domestic chores such as shopping and washing up. The 'assumed' role he said was more often than not a conscious assumption primed by his mother who led any instructions with the preface, "Now that you are the man of the house..."

During my research although I was able to visit several of my participants at home, not all the domestic settings into which I was invited contained parents. A few of the young men lived with grandparents whilst others lived in lodgings or supported accommodation run by housing associations. One young man however at the time of my research, had no obvious parental support for himself and certainly no extended family to call upon. In common with Jakie and aged 22, he spoke of having been in the assumed parental role since the age of 10, taking responsibility for his younger siblings, across a range of tasks from disciplining, to cooking and ensuring they went to school on a daily basis, responsibilities which were often to the detriment of his own schooling and development as a young adolescent. He suggested too, that his 'parenting' role was also directed at his mother as he coped with her inability to function effectively due to her alcohol and drug addiction. From what he told me, there appeared to have been an absence of familial support or any form of Social Service intervention, because his family difficulties had been carefully hidden from public gaze. People from outside of his family had failed to pick up on any cues such as his absences from school and obvious tiredness. Gordon's 'backstage' performance was one of a courteous, polite thoughtful and quietly spoken young man, who displayed many traits normally considered to be feminine, emotionality, intimacy, nurturing and caring. His 'front stage' imagery however, was carefully contrived to present a picture of a self-possessed, assured, 'hard man' of thick set muscular build, with shaven head and a pugnacious expression, together with a range of highly visible tattoos and occasional skirmishes with the police all of which was consistent with Cohen's (1955) theory I described earlier.

Familial ideology is in certain senses extremely efficient at reproducing gender relations, yet the unequal power relations between the two genders suggest that in some areas patriarchy is very much alive and existing as strongly now as it did in previous generations, despite the perceived increase in female autonomy. I saw examples of this is when I visited some of my

participants at home, when it became clear that the father or man of the house if in employment, was regarded as the main breadwinner and there was a robust demarcation of the public and private worlds of the family. The young men's mothers and female siblings appeared to be mainly responsible for nurturing roles, through maintaining the home, childcare, cooking, cleaning, tidying and shopping, whereas the males within the family contributed to domestic life through financial contributions and domestic DIY, which was in many instances, the limit of their actions.

Through this example of domestic realism I found that when some of the boy racers mothers had spoken to me and described their attempts to make some space for relaxation for themselves, they had often related the extent to which symbolic elements, mainly television played a part in this. This was particularly pertinent amongst families who lived in isolated farmsteads or hamlets with few near neighbours and few opportunities for social interaction with other adults outside of their immediate family. Some suggested that their viewing throughout the day was sporadic and involved only partial attention as they fitted domestic chores, nurturing children and preparing and serving the evening meal around their favourite programmes. These seemed to be mainly soap operas and 'reality TV' programmes. Others suggested that the television and the radio provided a constant background noise and thus were perceived as providing companionship as opposed to a demand for their attention. During such conversations, the men of the household (including older sons) chided them in a semi-humorous manner about their viewing habits and suggested that they viewed some of the soap opera characters as 'members' of their own family.

When I had the opportunity to speak to the mothers away from the hearing and sight of their husbands and older children, some had spoken of their aspirations to engage in an activity

away from the house, albeit developing a hobby or taking on a part-time job. Nonetheless, such dreams of doing something different did not cease when the women lacked the context, or perhaps the economic means to see their aspirations through to their natural conclusion. Their imaginations refused to give up and sometimes functioned in surprising and unlikely ways. When they spoke of their respective day dreams, it was clear that they had worked and reworked their own imaginative cultural script. For example Deborah spoke of her wish to be a secretary or a receptionist where she could dress smartly for work and feel valued as a member of a team as opposed to "Wearing jeans and 'T' shirts all day and treated like a skivvy by these damn men". Mary would have liked to work in a local restaurant,

"Imagine that being surrounded by different kinds of food that people actually want to eat, instead of the same thing, plain food day in day out, which is all they will eat, and being paid for waiting on people whereas here [gesturing about her home], I do it for free and for little gratitude".

At times during this research it was difficult to comprehend where I was being positioned in relation to where the young men thought that I 'stood' as a female. Clearly from their attitudes towards me they did not see me as someone involved in cleaning, tidying or in activities involving food which were the characteristics they associated with their mothers and other female members of their households, neither was I objectified as a sexual being to bear the brunt of personal comments or associated ribald remarks in the same manner as they treated their occasional girlfriends. They appeared to consider the work that I did to be at another level, beyond that which they had had any experience, which in turn appeared to imbue me with an elevated status beyond that of the domestic realm. Yet due to my interest in cars and the level of attention I attributed to the boy racers themselves, their attitude towards me was one that ranged from mild amusement and tolerance to an occasional rebuff when they felt I had over stepped the mark in my questioning, to a deference meted out in much the same way that they gave to some of their peers. Notably as they became

more comfortable with my presence, it became obvious that I also had a utilitarian value which gradually manifested in terms of 'what I could do for them' based upon the skills they perceived that I possessed and which I have discussed in Chapter 3.

If I found it difficult to comprehend where I was being positioned by my young research participants, the reactions emanating from some of their families whom I met during the research, was clearly a potential site of conflict and confusion. I would suggest that the gendered responses to my role very much reflect the gendered divisions which appear to exist and are perpetuated within these families. The mothers of the young men in response to the explanation of my involvement with their seventeen to nineteen year old sons were simply that;

"That's a funny job for a woman my dear, you'd be better off in an office with those qualifications".

"You're not his [Jakie] usual sort of person he hangs around with, I can't see what you would be interested in him for he's done nothing much wiv 'is life".

"No wonder you're not married my dear, nor will you be unless you settle down. You mustn't start giving my son ideas above his station or he'll begin to think its normal for girls to have a job what keeps them out of the house. Why he'd need to buy a dishwasher as he's never washed a dish in his life nor wouldn't know how to. Bloody hell, he'd be round here all the time for his meals too, if he had a wife what worked".

And,

"I don't think its right working full-time like that when you've got a family, they can't ever see you".

The reactions from their daughters; the sisters of the boy racers, displayed a more measured interest which evoked questions about my research, university life, the benefits of higher education and the amount of work required to get there. However, they often

concluded that they would be unable to consider furthering their education, due to the necessity to earn money to contribute to the family income *and* as a means to provide immediate gratification through the purchase of clothes and jewellery, CDs DVDs and make-up. In contrast, there was an almost conspiratorial role adopted by their fathers, in so far as they treated me as their equal but showed an overt belief that I would be complicit in their attempts to play down the importance of the roles their wives or partners and daughters played in the domestic sphere. There also appeared to be an expectation on their part that I would also be complicit in their occasional 'put down' in relation to their partner's cognitive abilities or their physical appearance, which created a feeling of discomfiture on my part and evoked a great deal of mirth at my embarrassment from the menfolk.

### **The Perceived Role of a Girlfriend**

Set against this background into which the young boy racer had been socialised it should be no surprise to note that any young woman who was visible during impromptu get-togethers or more formalised meets, was often commissioned to carry out domestic duties associated with fetching food and beverages or tidying away; especially if the meet was at McDonald's. This role did not appear to unduly bother the young women, more often than not they were content to hang around on the periphery, smoking, occasionally drinking alcohol from a bottle or can that someone had brought with them. They also used these opportunities to talk, or have heart to heart exchanges and light hearted gossip with other young women and such interactions seemed to provide an antidote to their rather secondary roles of decorative accessories. Certainly personal boyfriend-girlfriend relationships between the boy racers and the young women appeared to be brief in duration and further appeared to lack emotional commitment on the part of the young men. Indeed

girlfriends were often regarded as short-term investments by the younger group (17-22 year olds), and in describing his opinion of girls generally, Shane told me that,

“They’ m okay if you know what I mean, they come in useful for one or two things [winks knowingly and leers, whilst elbowing me in the ribs and blows smoke in my face] but they aren’t going to start making demands on me time as me mates are what’s important. Girls, they always want attention and want you to take ‘em places, buy ‘em stuff an’ that. Okay I’ll buy ‘em summat if it makes them happy but its gotta be worth it for me [winks again]. But most of me income goes on me car so they moan as I can’t waste money on them. I can’t abide it when they starts whinging an’ crying and getting all that stuff. Yuk! It makes me wanna puke, an’ they’re always, always in the fucking way an’ they can’t never talk about nothin’ but what they see on the telly, hair, nails and make-up ‘Busted’ and McFly’ or any other poncy, gay pop idol who’s flavour of the month”.

Shane’s observations replicated many others I had overheard whilst listening to conversations between boy racers. Through these I had often been aware of the occasional reference being made to individual young women’s abilities to perform a variety of sexual acts. These conversations were often articulated in a detached manner or alternatively accompanied by excessive mirth and physical exchanges between the lads such as elbowing one another in the ribs, slapping of thighs and playful punches. Rarely did there appear to be any attempt to engage with the young women, or to gain an opinion from them, on the same intellectual level which they employed with one another. I sought to question the boy racers to ascertain what they perceived the role of these young women who appeared at the meets to be, and was assured by the majority of respondents that the activities of cleaning, tidying and those involving food, “...is women’s work” and that demonstrations of general camaraderie, mechanical knowledge and driving skills were the main preserve of men.

Exchanges of humorous and semi-serious bantering and sexual posturing amongst the young men often included the casting of derisory remarks about one another’s girlfriends’

physical characteristics, their reputation or their ability to function as intelligent beings, with none seemingly taking offence at even the most inflammatory remarks. Such behaviour whether unconscious or conscious not only provided opportunities for the young men to create a reputation for being a 'Jack the Lad' character who displayed little empathy towards the needs of a potential girlfriend, but it further emphasised the divisions the boy racers actively created and maintained between themselves and any significant 'others' and the intense way they 'policed' these divisions

On one occasion I asked Shane, who was usually the most forthcoming on the subject of girlfriends, what he perceived as being desirable characteristics for an girlfriend, he told me that,

"Well hers gotta be pretty half decent to look at although personality is more important, I'd like her to have a couple a brain cells to rub along with and her'd need to know one end of a wrench from t'other, oh and someone who was up for a larf and who wouldn't judge me or me mates'. [I was interested in the way he used the term 'judge' and asked for elaboration], 'Judge, well I mean they way they look down their noses at yer for being covered in oil or just dirt, for havin' it in me ears and face, an' hair. For not doing what they thinks is a proper job, calling me an' me mates Grease Monkeys, like, well its demeaning innit. They compare us to what they see's on the telly, and try an' tell us how to dress and what to wear an' that, I mean it's like being bleedin' at home with me mother always at me. Nag, nag, nag it's what they do best".

This view appeared to be consistent with the general consensus of opinion amongst the younger men, whereas the duration of relationships with girlfriends amongst the older age group appeared to be slightly longer and more stable. Here there was more evidence of mutual respect and consideration, although the common theme shared across the whole age range, was the belief that girlfriends were to be kept separate from the activities shared with male friends, which were jealously guarded. The attitudes and expectations of the young women were also markedly different, dependent upon whether they fell into the 15 to 18 year age category or were over 18. Noticeable amongst the younger age group was their preoccupation with the superficial aspects of their relationships, which suggested that

this was not the one-way process the young men believed them to be, but rather the young women were exploiting their relationships for personal gain, or were extracting something from the association, as the following comments show.

“Yeah I only goes out wiv ‘im as he’s got a cool set of wheels [modified car] all me mates is dead jealous when they see me out wiv ‘im. I like to drive through the towns and for ‘im to go real slow and wiv the music turned up an’ all the windows down” (respondent aged 16).

“Ohhh he’s so cute and me mates reckon he’s sex on legs. I bin wiv ‘im for about, well let me think, it must be all of 3 weeks now. It’s real serious as I’ve never bin wiv anyone for that long. He don’t take me out when he’s wiv is mates, but that’s okay as I don’t like the fast drivin’ an’ all that carry on” (respondent aged 14).

“Nah, we wouldn’t go out with no-one who didn’t either look good or had a nice set of wheels, I mean a girls got a reputation to maintain. Anyway we mostly go with the cruisers; those others never got no money to spend as they blow it on their cars. If you wanna have a good time you’d be better off with the Finance boys” (respondent aged 18).

The implication that many of the young women were just used by the boy racers as sexual playthings with little or no regard towards their emotional wellbeing, suggested that these young men regarded them in an instrumental way and were overtly coercive towards these young women, encouraging them to behave like this. Equally the young women also used their situations as girlfriends in an instrumental way which was illustrated by some of their earlier comments. Much of the young men’s behaviours portrayed them as emotional illiterates with self-deluding ideas of independence and deep ambivalence between attraction and antagonism towards women. Through this it is possible to argue that male socialisation serves men’s own interests, and the way the young boy racers talked about their girlfriends with peers, transformed the young women from autonomous beings to mere playthings who were at the mercy of the moods and needs of their current boyfriend. However another viewpoint could be that for some of the young men, the physical element to any interaction with one of these girls, like having sex, can itself become a bottleneck for

undigested and unexpressed emotion and frustrations which clustered around their daily lives. To this effect, unlike their performative driving, excessive speed and car related practices which were outlawed by society, the isolated sexual encounters they had with the young women who sought their company had come to represent the only socially permitted area for uncircumscribed expressions of male emotion and vulnerability.

## **Managing Tension within the Groups**

Whilst many of the young men from my research would perhaps deny any suggestion that they were be in any part vulnerable, there is no doubt that historically social and physical power has provided men with a license to resolve conflict and contradiction by force, either physical or verbal. It was on this level that a potentially alarming extremism occasionally appeared and was associated with maintaining divisions and protecting the boy racer culture from what they perceived as criticism or derision levelled against them as a group or individually. The boy racers when at meets, or just hanging out in public places, closely watched the performances of others and commented upon what they saw. Many of my participants spoke about those they knew who created an external persona, one which was unmatched by their skills; they talked about what they could do or owned, but the talk was not matched by what they produced or their practical performances. They were not what they portrayed themselves to be. Over time the boy racers had built up individual repertoires of who they believed was genuine and who was not and they attached possibilities or reasons for such behaviours.

Sometimes they were dismissive of anyone acting out a role and suggested that the person concerned should be discouraged from participating in any further interactions with them. Whilst on other occasions they may have suggested that the perpetrator of such actions was of value and worth retaining within their circle, solely for the purposes of entertainment. In

rare instances when they perceived that they were being personally criticised or a member of their group was being maligned, they appeared to be faced with a dilemma; should they have retaliated forcefully and should this have been verbal or physical with real fighting being the final arbitration? For many of the younger ones, it appeared from their general demeanour that it was not easy to judge the line where giving someone the chance to retract or walk away became undignified appeasement, for they were so keen to be accepted and to be regarded as equals by the remainder of the group, that any wrong decision could have cost them their position in the hierarchy and a loss of face and general embarrassment.

As an example of this, during an informal meet taking place outside a McDonald's, the female companion of one young man uttered an opinion on a topic the group had previously discussed. It was noticeable that she had been initially ignored by all, subsequently grunted an acknowledgement but then when she responded she was taken to task in an uncharacteristically brutal way for what one of them had believed to be her attempt to criticise a male companion.

"You don't fucking talk like that about my mate, you fucking bitch. He's my mate and you just mind your own fucking business".

This was an aggressive stance taken by Joe accompanied by many hand gestures waved in the air, punctuating sentences, or filling gaps when the extent of his vocabulary prevented him in finding an appropriate word, all conducted whilst he was positioned inches from her and his face contorted with rage. There was an immediate air of anticipation and all conversations around us ceased. The fracas as it unfolded seemed to heighten my sense of reality by removing me from its conventions, the usual capacity of watching events unfold was lost; there was no past, no future only an all consuming present. The radical transformation of a harmonious evening was instant and the possibility of further

pleasantries gone as soon as they had been thought about. The intense and consuming absorption of events momentarily made it difficult to record the usual issues such as what had really started it, did it really matter that much and who had come out unscathed. Whether this exchange had been carried out for affect, and Joe had felt compelled to defend his mate, or more importantly to defend his own honour and standing within the group, I was unable to judge, but the exchange further emphasised the differences they sought to enforce in gender roles and the perceived subservient role of any female who sought recognition.

What surprised me here, in terms of the young woman's response to this energetic and threatening tirade, was the apparent quiet acquiescence that this was an accepted part of the routine exchanges with anyone not regarded as being part of the 'in-group' (such as in this case, the young woman), and thus it was accepted as inevitable. Exchanges like these whilst I was present were few, although there was an intimation through conversations with the groups that similar altercations did occur from time to time, and in this instance the words uttered although with inferred hostility, never extended to an act of physical aggression although such was the level of vehemence of response that at the time I was not sure that an assault was unlikely, and subsequent reflexivity led me to wonder whether things may have been different if another male had been involved, as opposed to the young woman, and what my reaction would have been if an assault had occurred.

As I discussed in Chapter 3, being reflexively sensitive was an essential requirement for me to exercise during these rare and uncomfortable interludes, and I often had to consider where and how to interject, if at all. It posed a dilemma for me because a mistake at this point could have undermined any opportunity I had to further my research or gain greater understanding of the personal and private worlds of the boy racers. If I had interjected it may well have defused the situation, whilst on the other it may have sought to escalate it.

However a failure to act or intervene would have been regrettable if the young woman had been physically assaulted. Entry into these semi-private zones thus were attempted with care and I usually took my cues not so much from what the boy racers were saying, but more from their body language or non-verbal language and posturing.

Sensitivity and awareness on my part had to be extended beyond my observations of the presence of verbal haranguing within the groups; it also had to be sensitive to the physical cues the young men gave in terms of positioning of their private space. Posture in terms of the territorialisation of specific spatial zones like the meets or within the boy racers cars could clearly verge on the defensive, the confrontational or a combination of both. Assertion of their private territory occasionally worked through what Sommer (1994) describes as their 'offensive display' or 'avoidance'. How this worked in practical terms was creatively stage managed by the young men, particularly in their cars as they dispersed magazines, mobile phones, wallets and sweatshirts across the interior, occupying every available seat, even though there was only one driver or one driver and one passenger attached to the car. This act of scene setting or stage management, was little more than a territorial display for the benefit of others (including myself), who may have otherwise intruded into their private space when interruption was unwelcome. This happened to me once during the early stages of the research when I was keen to receive exposure to all the boy racers activities and to soak up the atmosphere at each meet that I was taken to. On this occasion my initial reaction was one of discomfort and embarrassment through being excluded by those who had previously been so open with me. I was nonetheless relieved however, that they did not adopt their usual verbal rebuff of "Fuck off", which was their most common form of defence.

When I seized an opportune moment days later to question why the young men concerned had felt it necessary to exclude me from their conversation, I was told that "Mattie had

been beaten up by 'is ole man', and thus they had felt it necessary to protect him from what they perceived would be an intrusive line of questioning that I was likely to adopt and therefore cause him more angst. I agreed that they were probably right, but nonetheless my feeling of discomfort remained for some little while afterwards. Whilst being reflexive about my reaction, I realise that in addition to the discomfort, I was disappointed that they felt unable to trust me enough to share Mattie's experience. Furthermore it left me with a dilemma. I was now aware of Mattie's attack and thus there was the likelihood that I would treat him differently in any future contact, becoming more considerate or solicitous towards him and thus it would become apparent that his act of confiding in others had been fractured. Although I acknowledged that it was important for me to treat him as usual, I was aware that in my subsequent dealings with him (and others like him) I *was* silently examining him and his demeanour for evidence of distress or assault, often in such minute detail that I could easily have missed cues in relation to other aspects of the group's interactions.

### **A Socially Constructed 'Family'**

When I began this research it was in the belief that my own lived experiences should be left on the periphery to avoid them clouding my interpretation of, and any ensuing reporting of the lived experiences of the boy racers day to day existence. Furthermore personal condemnation of some of their activities and exchanges without an apparent understanding would reveal the limitations of me as an observer or participant in, or of, their interactions and sets of behaviours. Such considerations became magnified on occasions when I was struck by this over-riding importance of being able to acknowledge, 'read' and record the value of the young men's non-verbal cues or body language, for they occasionally revealed a glimpse of their lived experiences within a private or domestic situation, normally shielded from the outside world, such as the experiences of a young

man living with domestic violence, and as such how these experiences impacted on his behaviours within the group.

An example of this manifested during a simple squabble between Ali and his then girlfriend who had arrived uninvited to a regular meet. During the heated exchange of words I became aware that Leon, who was considerably shorter in stature than those arguing, had moved from my side and had placed himself between the warring factions. It was an unconscious gesture and no words were exchanged, the argument ceased, the young woman walked away and normal conversation was resumed. It was at this point I could recognise from my own lived experiences the actions of someone exposed to a situation where verbal and or physical abuse was prevalent, and Leon's actions were reminiscent of situations I had found myself in as a young child and because of this I was able to recognise the signs. During further meetings I was aware that I had begun to observe Leon's behaviour more closely during arguments, and saw that he played the role of the peacemaker or the mediator when communication between peers were breaking down, rarely involving himself in the heated exchanges. At this point in my research I was faced by a dilemma, for by focusing, although not exclusively upon Leon, rather like in the earlier situation with Mattie, I was in danger of becoming oblivious to other interactions and behaviours within the group.

To address this I adopted a pragmatic approach and began to study the various cohorts of young men in terms of their individual, public and private behaviours or performances to see what this would 'tell' me not only about them, but also about their positions within their groups. From this approach it was been possible to see that in addition to the hierarchical structure within the group, based upon car ownership and ability to carry out performative tasks with cars, the individual members played an additional role with an assumed or given responsibility that was also apparent within many a conventional family

existence. Was this then for many of the young men, an unconscious recreation of their personal histories, the reclamation of a period from their childhoods where there were significant male adults who impacted on their development as young men? I believe that it was, for each cohort of boy racers appeared to possess the qualities and characteristics more likely to be found within a family construct, where the male members of the family served specific roles in contributing towards a young man's upbringing, his maturation and ability to socialise effectively in wider society.

Each cohort of boy racers appeared to have the equivalent of Leon, the mediator and peacemaker, the 19 year old who was more worldly wise and accountable than many of his peers. There was also a father figure, usually from within the 22 – 24 age groups who had fulfilled some degree of formal educational training and was in a secure job with the prospect of further advancement within the company. Individuals with these types of characteristics were present in almost all the different cohorts or posses of boy racers I had been involved with during my research. Common features central to the 'father-like' figure were that he was likely to drive a more expensive car than the rest, but would have carried out the majority of modifications himself. He would have probably owned at least three other cars prior to the current model, and would have been involved in at least one significant accident. The young man playing this role would usually know the locations of forthcoming cruises and would take a leading role in organising trips to events like the Max Power show at the NEC, ensuring that any hired car would be large enough to carry the group. He would also be the most likely to be singled out in the quest for valued advice and opinion, but it did not necessarily follow that he would be the most accomplished and able to demonstrate skill and competence in performative displays. This role was often reserved for the 'Uncles', young men who generally came from the 23-24 age group and who were in all manner of skilled and unskilled occupations within the automobile industry and whose abilities to carry out performative displays were unrivalled. These were

the teachers, the ones who imbued the ‘fathers’ and the younger members (‘children’) with mechanical expertise, enhanced driving techniques and were often a source of badly needed car parts and accessories. The young men in this role had been at one time or other, the risk takers, the attention grabbers and provided the role models for the younger men who aspired to be boy racers.

Whilst adopting the role of observer, at occasional gatherings of boy racers it was apparent that within some of the closer knit groups of boy racers, the young men were very open in their display of warmth and affection towards one another. Such displays were usually tempered so that any gesture was unlikely to be misinterpreted, regarded as ‘gay’ and thus rebuffed with ensuing embarrassment displayed on both sides. Instead there was much evidence of what may be regarded as displays of more acceptable ‘masculine affection’ such as physical displays of horse-play, the general manhandling of one another, by thumping each other on the back, nudging and general jostling around in a non-threatening context, and occasionally ‘lounging’ on one another as they shared secrets and swapped indiscretions.

The terminology they used in referring to one another was affectionate without being overtly so, and terms like “dick head”, “dick brains” and “daft wanker” or “daft bastard” far from being insulting could have been likened to the equivalent of ‘my dear’. These like the facial expressions and warm tones in their voices as they relayed anecdotal stories or mockingly express exasperation about individual members of their group, was often a ‘front stage performance’, belying the depth of their true feelings. As an example and in describing a bottle of wine given as a gift, Dom says of the recipient,

“Aw you shoulda seen his face dear of him, he don’t drink wine as a rule and you could tell it was like paint stripper but he managed to swallow a glass, and his eyes was watering. [Laughs uproariously] But he seemed

pleased that I'd brung him summat. Aw bless 'im dear of him, he don't get a lot give to 'im 'an he's some dear boy".

For the boy racers, sociability appeared to be central to their enjoyment of cars and car-related practices but the term 'family' entered into virtually all their attempts to describe their gatherings. As Duncan observed,

"We're just all together as much time as we can. It's like one big family. We go out all the time when we can meet up usually three or four times a week, sometimes more, and always at weekends. We're like good mates, always chatting on the phone an' stuff, an' I feel if I goes a day or two without any contact well, it's like me right arm's been chopped off. It just don't seem normal like. We talks to each other about all sort of stuff, worries and like, you know what I mean. I don't hardly speak at home and its more like they lot [inclines his head towards half a dozen young men gathered around him] is me real family".

As Duncan implied, becoming part of the boy racer culture did not happen in isolation and those who subscribed to the boy racer way of spending leisure time did so in the company of others. Indeed as I discussed in Chapter 5, it was exceedingly rare to see one on his own unless he was going too and from his place of work or his home. Even travelling to college was often undertaken with several passengers. Rarely did one see or hear about them working on their cars in isolation unless it is to carry out simply maintenance or the regular weekly cleaning and even that became a social event, with the owner carrying out the cleaning tasks whilst his mates stood on the sidelines chewing gum, smoking cigarettes or merely standing hands in pockets silently 'supervising' proceedings. Why this should be was not easily quantifiable. To some degree it was as if through engagement with friends and work colleagues, or those with similar interests they were attempting to recreate or recapture significant parts of, and particularly the camaraderie of being amongst the men of their childhood especially if there was an absence of a resident father or older male relatives in their current lives. When I sought to question this, the responses I got were

varied but showed predominance towards the subject of belonging and family. Joe told me that for him,

“It’s like a family thing. When you are back at the meet its like you are with family. If I gotta go somewhere I usually have me mates wiv me, its company and we like, have a laff an all that. We keep each other outta trouble, on the other hand if we see trouble cummin our way then there’s enough of us to sort it”.

There was also an inference that the young men expected to gain much from the solidarity of belonging to a cohesive group made up of individuals who in the main shared the same interests, as well as similar characteristics in social history and family background. Affection for their cars and cars in general united the young men in my study, but stronger bonds of brotherhood appeared firmly based upon their social and family history and in some cases unhappy experiences at school. The relationships they formed within their groups allowed them to both provide and receive support of an emotional and practical nature, and provided outlets for previously suppressed emotions and poor social skills outside their own group. Friendships and communication between boy racers were important and although the level or bonds of friendship tended to fluctuate according to their moods, demands upon their time and other commitments, seeing one another or communicating by telephone was constant. The majority of my respondents had spoken of seeing friends almost every day and of communicating with each other by telephone at least once a day.

Some of the young men were more socially inclined and gregarious than others, and spent all their leisure time in and out of one another’s houses and texting and telephoning one another continuously even between cars. Despite being exceedingly popular members of one group two brothers rarely visited others in their homes; instead everyone went to see them. After several months I became curious as to why this was so I asked the one who

seemed to visit them most, why neither Dave nor Joe ever visited any of them at home. Having met both of the young men on many occasions I was surprised at Dom's response.

"They got no social graces like, and don't really know how to behave in front of people they don't know". I looked at him questioningly and waited hoping for clarification for the "lack of social grace" comment. He continued, "Well they're terrified they might be asked to eat or summat whilst they was there and then would have trouble with knowing about to use a knife and fork if they was offered summat fancy or if it would be okay if they'd use just a fork like and stuff like that. Then they'd be afraid somebody would ask 'em summat they didn't know the answer of and then they'd be shown up. They're more Yee Haa... ya know?"

I found the explanation quite puzzling; not least of all the reference "Yee Haa" which I later found out was a term likening its recipient to a Hillbilly. I was keen to know what their type of family environment was, which had clearly thrown the young men concerned into such a predicament and uncertainty, to the extent that they had felt ill-equipped to venture into the homes of their friends. An opportunity to visit them whilst accompanying Dom was provided in due course. Upon arrival the family clearly recognised Dom but did not appear too disconcerted by the presence of a stranger. I recognised Dave, Joe's older brother and discerned the older man and woman to be their parents. Joe appeared and waved us along a small passageway into another room. I apologised for our presence and for the interruption to their meal and they indicated that this was not a problem. The room to which we had been ushered, Joe explained was his and Dave's. I was struck by the amount of spare car parts which were lying around including the major part of an engine which was clearly 'works in progress' balanced across a low table. The room was sparsely furnished and any form of seating would have to be shared with something mechanical or possibly feathered as another door from the room led outside, and seemed to be wedged in the open position by a pair of work boots.

Joe and Dom chatted amicably together about the day's events in their respective jobs and we were joined by Dave who looked slightly embarrassed by my presence and apologised for the mess. I replied nonchalantly that there was no need for apologies and the three of them discussed the engine before us and ignored me. It would have been technically impossible for me to make notes or record any of their conversation, because there was no room for me to write, and I felt that to produce a tape recorder would have been unproductive and potentially prohibitive to the flow of conversation, so I merely observed and listened. After a while it became apparent that Dom's visit was not unusual, in fact he was obviously a regular visitor but on this occasion seemed intent upon purchasing something from this range of spare parts before me. Dom delved into his wallet and brought out a handful of cash which he handed to Dave who in turn retrieved an enormous roll of paper money from a coat casually strewn on the floor covering a pile of car magazines which temporarily functioned as a coffee table. Money and goods exchanged hands and we left. Here was a paradox between the way the two young men lived, the poverty and unkemptness of their surroundings and the obvious expense of their cars. I enquired as to the value of both Joe and Dave's cars and if they were bought on finance and why have such expensive cars, yet live in such an environment? Dom replied:

"Finance? Nah don't be fucking daft. They paid cash for 'em. Ten grand for the Evo and twelve grand for the Beamer and then they've both paid a few grand each in buying accessories and having stuff done. It aint their house to worry nothin' about doing stuff to it, and although they contributes to food and that an' a bit of DIY now an' again, they aint fussed about no home comfort, I mean ter say they don't spend much time in the house anyway. All they're interested in is their cars".

In contrast with what may be regarded by some as the disabling poverty of Joe and Dave's domestic circumstances, this had been offset by their public displays of wealth through their consumption of expensive cars. However this was not just evidence of compensatory prestige and moreover these were not *just* expensive cars, but the very makes and models whose extensive modifications had special significance as a counter culture, as signs of

insubordination, power and mastery. These attributed to their owners, unequivocal status over those less fortunate, less inclined or less able to consume to the same level and reinforces my early discussion about the symbolism of cars in Chapter 5.

## **Summary**

Within this chapter I have discussed the boy racers ability to attract media headlines and it has been easy to make an assumption that the young men who subscribed to the boy racer culture have demonstrated an inclination to drive everywhere at excessive speed, crashing into things with little regard for themselves and other road users. Yet moving from conjecture to fact, research carried out by the DTI and others has determined that a number of characteristics are present when analysing contributory factors in road traffic accidents. One of these has been the relatively young age of road traffic accident perpetrators, and all my participants were at the time of my research aged between 17-24 years of age. DTI statistics have also cited age to be the largest factor affecting the relative speed of the drivers. Used pejoratively, 'Boy Racer' would appear to have become a term which suggests that through their cars and car related practices some young men have adopted a lifestyle or mode through which they spent their leisure time, in ways that they had become antagonistic to authority and a more conventional existence. Yet given recent research findings surrounding road traffic accident statistics it would be difficult to find a less provocative title. To this effect legislative changes have been implemented as a means to address and control the behaviours of this group of young men. Nonetheless the sense of release, adventure and possibility the boy racers regularly experienced from their behaviours and activities, was partly about the symbolic creativity of overthrowing, ignoring or transcending conventions and normally approved patterns of behaviour and activity. For they have come to regard many of these as, by definition, restrictive and boring.

Undoubtedly for some people, speed in a motor vehicle can appear attractive and desirable; it arouses passions and enhances mobility. However from another perspective it kills and injures, causes environmental pollution and noise. This paradox has caused tensions to run high and in some areas, and for some people such as police and local authorities, a solution or compromise with the youthful racers, had so far remained elusive. From conversations with my participants, driving too fast for the circumstances and breaching speed limits were likely to be regarded as minor infractions, rather than serious crimes such as violence and theft. It was the belief of many of my participants that not so much social stigma was attached to driving offences (apart from drink driving), as were attached to other offences.

Throughout my research the majority of my respondents displayed an intrinsic enjoyment of fast driving which could be regarded as risk compensation, whereby they needed to seek out risk in everything that they did. Whilst manufacturers in many cases have sought to reduce the levels of actual or perceived risks by carrying out vehicle modifications such as installing side impact bars, seat belts, driver airbags, some boy racers appeared to have compensated for the safer design features by increasing risk in other ways. These have included driving too fast or too close to the vehicle in front, or carrying out performative displays in unsafe environments. Engaging in such activities may simply have been because many of the young men believed they had few other possibilities and little appeal for 'safe adventures', which said as much about the conventional possibilities their environments offered them, as it did about the risky and occasionally antisocial ones they pursued.

As my research progressed it revealed not only the thrills and spills associated with speed, performance and risky practices with cars, and the occasional confrontations with authority figures and breaches of legislation, but there also emerged evidence of the extraordinary bonds of friendship between the young men. The extent of these friendships was

demonstrated at their meets and was exhibited through affectionate exchanges in the guise of robust horseplay, general camaraderie and the emergence of what I will describe as a 'brotherhood'. These young men shared the same interests, similar characteristics in terms of social status and family background and for a period of a number of years their boy racer friendships had superseded all other relationships. In effect many of the young men had recreated for themselves through this brotherhood, a *de facto* family, one which was of their own making, not one into which they had biologically 'arrived'.

In addition to describing the friendships which existed and flourished between the young men who took part in my research, I have discussed how such friendships were jealously guarded and the extent to which the young women, who attached themselves to various cohorts of boy racers or cruisers, were generally discouraged from taking part in male to male interactions, particularly during meets. I have also examined the way the young men's level of socialisation with women often appeared to serve their own interests, by transforming the females from autonomous beings to domestic help and to sexual playthings at the mercy of their moods and particular needs at the time. Nonetheless I have also acknowledged that the young women had also become adept at using their associations with boy racers to fulfil their own needs, in one way or another.

There is an assumption that by constructing a situation of your own making, you as an individual, are able to retain a degree of control over what happens within that situation. Many of my participants as a result of incidences within their lives, such as unhappy experiences at school, troubled childhoods and reduced opportunities within the employment market, felt that they had little, if any control over what had happened to them. Furthermore they believed that they were unable to flourish as well as perhaps they ought, or were under-supported or under-stimulated by their family environment. Many of them also shared a social history and occasionally blood ties, and the friendships which

they had developed with peers outside of their family environments had been initially fuelled by a mutual interest in cars, car mechanics and car performance. Over time these had deepened into relationships with reciprocal support both on a practical and emotional level. The range of personalities and ages has revealed the extent to which many of the young men had unconsciously adopted a particular role within their group which ranged from wise sage to adolescent tearaway.

During the period of my research, I had observed the extent to which the young men's cars had become places where they could exchange confidences, swap indiscretions, or receive advice and support. These meetings permitted them to share experiences worries and trade skills and knowledge with one another and the support networks, and levels of mutual trust and respect which emerged were very strong. The nature or characteristics surrounding some of the advice they sought, was unlikely to form the basis of conversations to be endured with family members, particularly those surrounding health queries and relationship problems. These were more typical of their 'backstage performances' whilst their 'front stage' performances were revealed through ownership of flash cars and expensive accessories and were often in stark contrast to their home circumstances.

Preoccupied with image there was a belief amongst the young men that their cars were indicators of their personal wealth and status and the way they drove them demonstrated to others, the level of skill and daring associated with a particular type of working class masculinity. This had become the image they could control and it appeared that the majority of their disposable income was spent on the construction and maintenance of such an image.

In the final chapter I will revisit the boy racers lived experiences of car consumption and discuss how they used consumption of the car and car-based activities to establish what

they perceived to be appropriate male identities in an ever changing climate. I will address what I perceived to be some of the barriers and challenges facing the young men as they tried to maintain an image of traditional working-class masculinity. This in turn has revealed an insight into their emotional insecurities as they adhered to deeply imbedded social norms of what it was to be a 'real' man. The chapter will discuss one of the most valuable resources these young adults had, which was their bonds of friendship with others who subscribed to the boy racer culture and I will show that in many cases this bond had served as a protective factor against their insecurities, further protecting them against feelings of worthlessness, loneliness and isolation.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusions**

#### **Introduction**

This research has focused upon a group of young men who had been attributed by the media and others, the title of 'boy racers' because of their behaviour with, in and around their often highly modified cars. However as my research into the cultural world of boy racers unfolded, it revealed that for the majority, 'racing' had accounted for a minimal part of their activities, whereas the physical acts of car modification, talking about cars and engaging in small performative activities in contained areas such as car parks, or just hanging out with like minded young men had been their primary interests. The research has also determined particularly in Chapters 5-6 that the car has been far more amenable to personalisation and social appropriation than perhaps it had previously been credited for, something boy racers and the designers and manufacturers of car accessories have identified and in the case of the latter, also exploited.

The motor car has long been a neglected topic within sociology, cultural studies and related disciplines, apart from a lively area of academic research which has examined the production and social history of the car in the United States of America (see Koshar 2004). When I began my research I was struck by this lack of academic literature, which I found surprising given the attention mainstream disciplines like sociology and psychology have devoted to other examples of material culture including film, clothes and fashion. However I found that in addition to studies surrounding Fordism and the history of cars in the United States, there was

a substantial amount of information in the UK but this was preoccupied with the presentation of car production and design, and of the consequences of automobiles in terms of statistics and universal traits, such as its involvement in accidents, and its contribution to pollution, some of which I have discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. Research surrounding the relationship men develop with their motor cars however was limited. To this effect I feel that this ethnography of the cultural world of boy racers has provided a more detailed picture of these relationships, particularly in terms of how young working class men have used ownership of their cars to define who they are, and the sort of life they lead, something that other strains of social enquiry have largely ignored. In Chapter 5, I have explored McCracken's (1988) theory in relation to the boy racers practices of modding which revealed the extent to which the young men had been able to transfer the symbolic meanings of the car to themselves at micro level.

If, as I have suggested, the motor car has been a neglected topic within academic studies, youth on the other hand, and particularly young working class men like the majority of my participants, have long been a category for academic analysis, and this has been discussed by many theorists including Blake (1985), Cohen (1955), Connell (2003), and Dicks (2005). There is no doubt that age as a powerful social marker in our society had impacted on the way the young men in my research had been able to live their lives, never more so than when they had reached the age whereby they could legally ride a motorbike or drive a car on the public highways. The acquisition of such a vehicle and the ability to ride or drive it had offered the majority of them a passport to freedom and I discuss this in Chapter 4. However as I point out in Chapter 5, a car represented more than mode of transport to my participants for they were able to use them as props which in many instances allowed them to both create and live out their fantasies.

As my research into the boy racer culture developed, the main themes which emerged were those of age, risk, the symbolism, habitation and consumption of the car, the importance the young men attached to close ties of friendship, and their perceptions of working-class masculinity. These were not themes which I addressed in isolation, but rather I have interlinked them throughout my research, with one informing how the other had been responsible for the boy racers views of and experiences of life. In relation to men and masculinity, this in particular has become a large field for academic exploration, and many studies have produced insight into the processes by which certain types of employment have been constructed as masculine spheres of activity, and how transformations of some of these industries have consequences for both men *and* masculinities. In Chapter 4, I discussed how this had become significant for the majority of boy racers and their male family members who took part in my research, because in terms of available work for men of employment age in Cornwall, the last twenty years had revealed a considerable decline in the labour requirements of traditional farming, fishing, china clay production and the metalliferous mining industries.

Many of the characteristics associated with these types of employment, had allowed the men who worked within them, to demonstrate what they perceived to be characteristics of working class masculinity. This had included often arduous manual labour, and the demands of physical strength, endurance and the ensuing dirt and grime, sweat and scarifications associated with such endeavours. At the time of my research however, the only opportunities which existed where working class men could still demonstrate these characteristics of working class masculinity, were more likely to be found within the construction, haulage and garage industries, but even those had limited capacity to take on inexperienced or unqualified workers which was a situation many of my participants were in.

Where many of the boy racers had been unable to find paid employment, or who were in low paid jobs, they had sought another medium through which to demonstrate *their* masculinity and social status, and had turned to their cars and car related activities to do so. In doing this, and in many ways through the dirt and grime associated with working on their cars, they were replicating the characteristics demonstrated by their fathers and other male relatives, as a means to show others that they too were 'real' *and* working class men. Dittmar (1998) has suggested that some individuals use consumption to create a symbolic identity for themselves in order to compensate for perceived inadequacies in certain dimensions of their self-concept. Certainly as I have discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, this was true of the boy racers approach to modifying or moddin their cars in ways which revealed as much about them as men, as it had enabled them to demonstrate evidence of their practical competencies with car mechanics and body styling.

In this way the cars they owned had acted as both communicators and mediums for them as identity seekers. They had enabled the boy racers to successfully mislead, encourage or parry curiosity about them as individuals, in terms of their social or economic status, and also to circumnavigate the first query in many primary social encounters, such as 'What do you do?' or 'What is your job?' by allowing the appearance of their modified cars to 'tell their stories' for them. Whilst many theorists have tackled this subject relating to how consumers use material goods in a variety of ways, it appeared from my initial literature search that there was a distinct lack of available academic discourse surrounding the way young men consumed the car and car related practices. To this effect I feel that my investigation has gone some way towards contributing to this little known area of research and may encourage further exploration

## **More Than a Mode of Transport**

Sociologists of consumption have rarely looked at the practical context in which consumers consume and what this means for their individual identities, particularly in relation to consumption of the motor car. Yet as I discuss in Chapter 2, theorists including Furby, have referred to consumption of material possessions as 'Enhancers of social power and status, or as a means of self-expression, individuation and individuality' (1978: 60). Certainly as my research developed it became apparent that the car and car accessory consumption habits of the boy racers were one thing, but the way they had used the items they acquired either having purchased or obtained them for nothing, was quite another, particularly in terms of what they believed the purchase or modification 'said' about them. In Chapters 5-7, I have discussed how they had worked on their cars, modified them, improved the cars performance and handling ability, and gained knowledge about the vehicle and its idiosyncrasies. In doing so I have been able to take this one stage further, exploring and describing the capacity the young men had, to develop relationships with, and emotional attachments to their cars, whilst imbuing them with human characteristics.

This was most evident when the boy racers cars had experienced mechanical malfunction, and their moods were affected by this episodic malaise, and they usually displayed a down turn in emotions, and became anxious, fitful and introverted, replicating the fits and starts displayed by for example a faulty engine. I would argue that this has established the humanity of the car, as my research recorded the narratives of the boy racers when they described their cars as both corresponding to and symbolic of the human form and emotions. Yet this aspect has not been addressed in the same depth by other areas of social enquiry, but has to a lesser extent in psychology, for example through the work of Marsh and Collett (1986).

Throughout my research it had been apparent that many of the boy racers had spent extended periods of time working on their cars, and in doing so as I have described above, had also imbued their cars with a variety of personality traits. They had usually attributed them a female gender and occasionally a name, and had lavished gifts and attention upon them, much as they might have done in the process of wooing the human focus of their desire. Yet their reference to the various modifications they had carried out on their cars had been overtly male and often with accompanying sexual overtones. They often compared their mechanical and bodystyling modifications on their cars with what may be regarded as essentially masculine characteristics such as strength, power, aggression and control (demonstrated by a powerful engine), and a lowered squat appearance (of the type demonstrated by a power lifter) and an adherence of body styling graphics (tattoos) which is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. This has rarely been addressed elsewhere but is something used prolifically by the media and especially in advertising which I discussed in Chapter 5.

This process of imbuing motor vehicles with certain masculine characteristics is not new, but certainly learning more about how men develop relationships with their cars is. My research has shown that through the extensive periods of time the boy racers spent working on their cars and the amount of money they invested in accessorising and modifying them, many had come to regard the cars as an extension of themselves, both psychologically and physically and I explored this in Chapter 5. Certainly whilst riding and driving with them and observing them as they handled a variety of vehicles, it was easy to see how the cars responded to the boy racers physical movements particularly when they leaned and swayed, moving their bodies rhythmically in tune with the cars twisting and turning motions along the highway, or whilst engaged in demonstrations of skills and daring. It was as if through such actions the cars had become an amplified part of their bodies, and thus the boy racers had become, as

Grey and Mentor suggest, 'enhanced humans' (1995: 223). This was particularly important as part of the investigative process whereby I not only observed the boy racers activities with their cars, but also experienced the same sensations they experienced. This had revealed aspects of their social experiences and interactions which would otherwise have remained hidden, and although there have been many criticisms of this ethnographic style of research, not least of all because it has been regarded as non-scientific, or failing to meet the criteria of the natural sciences (see Hammersley 1992), I would argue that adopting any other approach, would have failed to capture the richness of data my own research had been successful in doing.

Cars like all other technologies are phenomena that both produce social relations and are themselves constituted in and through social relations. Through observation, participant observation and conversations with my participants, it was possible to see how the boy racers cars were conceptualised by their young owners as more than modes of transport. Rather they were used to construct and express the young men's subjectivity and identity in a manner consistent with their belief that their cars could both 'say' something *about* them and *for* them. The particular makes and models of cars my participants owned and drove, influenced their everyday lived experiences by producing commonly understood aesthetic codes which acted as a 'language' which they actively used in exclusionary as well as inclusionary ways and many of which formed the ideological basis for identification with certain individuals and social networks across a wide geographical area in Cornwall (and beyond).

The cars owned by my respondents indeed represented much more than modes of transport. They included far more than that which I have described above, and a significant element which could be easily usurped by focusing on the more creative, spectacular and performative

aspects of the car, and the possibilities of freedom that car ownership had provided my respondents, was that car ownership had provided many of them with a 'room of their own', which perhaps in many cases, was lacking in their home environment. The way that many of my respondents regarded their car as indeed a room of their own, has a value insofar as it contributes to the developing area of mobility studies. Car ownership and the mobility that such a status facilitated had for the majority of my respondents, reduced or brought to an end their sometimes enforced social and geographical isolation. If funds for fuel permitted it, and the young men were unhappy with their neighbourhood or their view, or felt isolated and cut off from friends, they only had to drive a few miles in another direction to change it. Even desiring a change in climate was not impossible, for despite the fact that Cornwall is geographically vast, the distance from one coast to another could easily be overcome with an hour's drive. Personal experience has shown that rain or fog on the north coast can easily appear as sunny and dry on the south coast.

Irrespective where the cars were parked, the 'rooms' they offered the young men facilitated opportunities to create private or social spaces with all the comforts of home, with heating, lighting and entertainment, the facility to lounge casually over the upholstered furniture and put their feet up if they so wished, or even take a nap. They could change the décor with minimal effort and accessorise to their hearts content, being as flamboyant or as restrained as economic funds and creative capability permitted. They were able to retain control and set boundaries for those they allowed into this space. If more than one person visited, they had the power to control the social mix within their 'room', and with access to varying in-car entertainment systems, examples of which are shown in Chapter 6, they could also set the atmosphere for the day or night ahead. Each experience could be exoticised, concealed or neutralised when related to peers at a later date.

## Performative Exhibitionism and Risk

Undoubtedly by virtue of the fact that the boy racers had deliberately and creatively modded their vehicles to stand out from the crowd, such activities had also increased their level of social visibility beyond their own groups, thus attracting a wider audience. Like the Raggare in Sweden, who I discussed in Chapter 2, boy racers' were also regarded in many instances as 'Symbols of danger and moral decline' (O'Dell, 2001). In common with the Raggare, boy racers' had prepared or modded their cars in ways which readily distinguished them from other young men who owned and drove the same make and model, and the difference was not just in the car's external appearance. Their cars had been spectacularised in such a way that they replicated those which were displayed within the pages of car enthusiast's magazines including Max Power, Revs and Redline. In many instances the newly modified cars bore little resemblance to those which had left the factory production line.

The initial purchase of a car usually provided the boy racers with a forum for self-expression. Many of them had developed their own aesthetic codes surrounding embellishment, which were on occasions rarely practical, or indeed based on reason, the intention was to confound, not conform. Thus their designs had often been provocative, challenging the manufacturers original specifications and involved risk, not only in terms of personal taste, how they had accessorised, painted or equipped the vehicle, but also in terms of how they had invested in the aesthetics rather in the more fundamental requirements like safety features. This of course had fanned the flames of anxiety in all those who were anti-boy racer or merely anti-car culture *per se* and the media had been quick to respond and provided a number of accounts, some of which I have included in the foregoing chapters.

Whilst the aesthetics of modification and external styling of the cars bodywork was able to 'say' as much about individual taste as it did about the amount of economic investment the young men were prepared to commit to their cars, their primary concerns surrounded the amount of power under the bonnet. A car's engine capacity and thus its ability to perform were often judged on the amount of break horse power it possessed. This was not simply reserved for how well it could perform in terms of speed, but also its ability to effectively execute many of the torturous activities some young men engaged with at meets. Cars like many other mass produced commodities, have been designed and marketed to invoke emotional states such as desire, excitement and envy, all of which manifested at various times during the boy racers regular meets or cruises and never more so than when they engaged in performative exhibitionism in or around their vehicles which ultimately resulted in them being labelled as problematic. The theme of 'performance' was prevalent throughout my research albeit performance of the self, through acting in ways consistent with what the young men considered to be appropriately masculine. This was often in contrast with their 'real' self and as I discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, in contrast too with the often high levels of public visibility the boy racers had created with their demonstrations of driving prowess, many of which took place in areas which had become the playgrounds or the stages upon which they, as actors, performed with their cars.

During their performances upon such playgrounds, I had observed what I would describe as their occasional alarming disregard for personal safety. Such demonstrations were not reserved for interventions in, or criticisms of the boy racer activities, but more their response to the death or injury of friends, or to the disappointment of exam failure, the lack of success at gaining employment, or feeling disenfranchised in their family or personal lives, all occasions where they appeared unable to articulate their emotions for fear of being regarded

less of a man to peers and family, something I discussed in Chapters 6-7. Here, I have also discussed the belief of the police and others, that in addition to this performative exhibitionism, many of the modifications the young men had carried out had been in breach of their motor vehicle insurance policies. Yet having a limited disposable income or displaying a reluctance to adhere to statutory regulations was not at the forefront of many of the young men's decision-making. Rather my research revealed that they were prepared to use any type of engagement including confrontations with authority figures as a means to gain notoriety and a rise in their hierarchical positioning within their cohort or posse of boy racers, evoking respect and admiration from peers.

In many cases, particularly at meets, cruises and 'fly-by's', the young men had actively sought such attention as they pitted their wits, their vehicle handling skills, and the power of their machines against those they perceived as authority representatives (police and department of transport officials) and peers. At this point however, I would argue that another reason for their attention seeking which had emerged from my research and had often been overlooked in other dimensions of youth research was the young men's perceived invisibility in wider society. Thus the boy racers had come to regard any form of recognition, albeit negative or on occasions punitive, as better than the extent of invisibility which had pervaded their very existence at the time of my research.

### **Establishing Male Identities and Ties of Friendship in a Changing Climate**

The life experiences of young people in today's society are different from the experiences of young people over the last two to three decades and many have had to negotiate a set of risks which were largely unknown to their parents. Whilst Furlong and Cartmel (1997), have

suggested that this may be irrespective of social background or gender, what appeared to be particularly pertinent to those who participated in my research was that Cornwall, with the demise of its foundation industries including mining, fishing and agriculture, was no longer able to provide opportunities for its working class residents particularly through education, employment and housing. Furthermore, the risks in terms of some of my participants, had often begun with education, having either too little or inappropriate qualifications for the type of employment opportunities which had existed.

The boy racers' experiences have shown that there were certain problems faced by working class youth in Cornwall at the time of my research, which were intensified by their young age and by their class position. They perceived that they lacked power and authority, had few material resources and could not necessarily expect rewarding employment and that their adult life did not always hold out much hope for them. Whilst I discuss this in some detail in Chapter 4, I also acknowledge that many of the boy racers from my research had dysfunctional backgrounds devoid of appropriate male role models. They had revealed anxieties about long term individual unemployment, and prevailing unemployment amongst family members had been common. The result was a number of male insecurities experienced by my participants, and increasingly there was a less consistent view emerging of what it was to be a man in our society. This was particularly pertinent when the onus seemed to have been placed upon the young men to adopt a more traditional role within their family groups, that of provider, something which had become combined with another perhaps more female expectation, which revealed that the young men should also be sensitive and caring, willing to play a more nurturing role within relationships. The young men who participated in my research regarded this as an uneasy path because of the contradictions surrounding what it was to be a man within their social and familial environments, and the tension between expressed

power and dominance and sensitivity, and the worry that demonstrations of the latter in front of peers would lead to bullying and ostracisation, or acts of homophobia.

For many of the boy racers and their families, unemployment had become an uncontested feature of their everyday life. Older male relatives had previously taken their identity-role from their work, were now forced to look elsewhere for the props they required to create an appropriate identity for themselves. Those whose physical strength and the ensuing dirt and grime associated with heavy industry, mining, fishing or agriculture was evidence of 'real' labour, had now become forced to seek employment in areas not traditionally associated with men. The result was that men were no longer judged by what they did in terms of work, but more so by what sort of car they drove. These vehicles then created an identification pattern through which their owners were assessed by others in terms of their economic and social positioning within their community. Their sons, the boy racers, had taken this one step further in the absence of what they believed to be appropriate masculine employment opportunities, and used *their* cars and car-related practices to display particular characteristics they regarded as being essentially masculine and ones which 'spoke to others' of them as 'real' men.

The majority of my respondents had had at one time or another, a father or significant male in their lives who were 'measured' in terms of how masculine they were through the visual evidence of their labours described above and which they wore home at the end of their working days as evidence of their waged labours. Their leisure time was spent in the company of other men similarly employed, through participation in sport (including motor sport), through drinking sessions on Friday and Saturday nights, playing darts or pool in the working men's clubs and local pubs. During spare evenings and weekends they were involved in carrying out maintenance activities of a mechanical nature on a range of vehicles in and

around their garages or at the homes of their friends. For men who were in management roles or worked in non-manual occupations and arrived home at the end of the day as pristine as when they had set out, there was little visual evidence of their labours, and thus they were regarded as less of a man than their 'macho' counterparts. Nonetheless, any sense of inferiority which may have been brought about by evidence of their economic success, such as expensive houses and cars, was quickly over-ridden when they called upon their more mechanically adept peers to address a practical problem with a car.

To a degree the boy racers had been socialised into believing that to be a 'real' man required the type of job which relied upon physical strength and dexterity which in turn provided physical evidence of hard laborious work, the like of which simply could not be achieved through office work. Many of them perpetuated the actions of their fathers and older male relatives during evening and weekend, by 'hanging out' in close proximity to one another engaged in a reciprocal exchange of skills whilst working on their cars. Imbibing the sort of messages which living in these environments had brought, it was no surprise that the boy racers' prospective relationships with young women was based upon an expectation that she would nurture and provide him with support, thus perpetuating the role he had been exposed to within his home environment. As a consequence, relationships often appeared superficial with little or no apparent emotional commitment on the part of the younger men. Instead there was an expectation that the young women would, upon demand, fulfil their physical as opposed to emotional needs.

The advantages of being accepted into almost all of the dimensions of my participants' daily lives led me to experience their relationships and behaviours within their private and personal domains, including their homes and with their family members. In many cases the young

men's 'backstage' performances revealed traits more associated with the female gender. This included emotionality, nurturing and caring which was quite at odds with the macho 'real' man's image they portrayed through their 'front stage' performances with peers. My observations led me to believe that the young men taking part in my research, appeared to work extra hard to 'act up' portraying what they perceived to be an appropriate masculine image either on a personal level or through their cars. The young men's behaviours, their engagements with the police and other authority figures and the way they modified and performed with their cars appeared to be more extreme than those exhibited by their peers whose family backgrounds appeared more stable. Furthermore they appeared to attach higher levels of importance and meaning to their friendship networks with other boy racers, policing and guarding them jealously. This closed cultural circle of the peer group has become increasingly recognised as key areas of influence in masculinity making and has been acknowledged by theorists including Mac an Ghaill (1994) and Connell (2000). However I would argue that the boy racers' meets which had come to replicate a *de facto* family and is discussed in Chapter 7, is also a key area of influence for affirming perceptions of appropriate masculinity, but has rarely been mentioned in other areas of academic literature.

Throughout my research a recurrent theme suggests that apart from their cars, the most valuable resource identified by boy racers' had been their ties of friendship with other young men. Friendships are one of the most valuable resources a young adult can have and an open and accessible friend can serve as a protective factor for late adolescents and young adults, isolating them against various risk factors including feelings of worthlessness, loneliness and isolation. The transitions and changes which many of the boy racers' had experienced in their lives posed many challenges to their friendships, especially where these had been developed from a young age and over a substantial period of time. Many of them had found that the ways

in which they behaved as friends at a younger age no longer worked in the same way, when there were competing responsibilities such as employment, contributing to their family's economic status, and in some cases with the older boy racers', rent or a mortgage to pay, a partner and young children to support.

Nonetheless as my research has shown, the boy racers' male friendships served quite different functions than the relationships they had with prospective girlfriends or those which they had with their families. In Chapter 5, I discussed how through their relationships with older male relatives and with one another, they had learned about being men and the supportive, open male relationships that ensued, were those which they hoped to rely on when they were having troubles in their work, with their families, or in other dimensions of their lives. My research shows too that in the majority of cases the boy racers' relationships with one another were unconditional which appeared to be essential for their growth and the space they afforded one another. It gave them the space to *be*, not to *do*. This was most apparent from the way they were very relaxed around one another, devoid of the need to worry about the manner in which they communicated because they accepted one another for *who* they were not what they *did* or *said* something wider society seemed unable, or unwilling to do.

The boy racers who took part in this research appeared to know intuitively what their peers wanted, when they needed to talk about something or when it was important to allow them to just *be*. Their families or girlfriends (if such existed) and I too in the early stages of my research, often mistook their not wanting to talk, as denial and often pressed for detail thus evoking the usual response "You're always on my fucking case". Their significant ties of friendship were far more important and nurturing than the media or existing academic literature has suggested, and it would appear that male friendships like these have been

neglected areas in research, and all too often such omissions allow areas of need and understanding to go unaddressed.

Cultural theorists including Featherstone (1990) have argued that style and consumption have superseded social class in shaping young people's lives. Yet my research has shown that poor economic means can often limit the degree of freedom people have to consume, but rather than allow poverty and limited access to resources to curtail their creativity, mobility and social networks, many of my respondents had relied upon their imagination and ability to reproduce images they had seen in car magazines, which together with a reciprocal exchange of practical skills, had often succeeded in creating the spectacular out of the substandard. It was by engaging in such activities that some of these young men had been able to replicate childhood experiences which had been significant and served as a means by which they had been initiated into an adult male world, representing a time and space where the contours of working class masculinity, was reaffirmed and directed towards 'traditional' social roles. To reinforce these roles, the boy racers had turned to their cars often demonstrating predominately masculine activities such as mechanical skills, risky driving practices and performance, as a means to show characteristics of working class masculinity, in the absence of the traditional male skill based work.

Ultimately my research has examined the cultural world of boy racers in Cornwall; the young working class men, often unskilled, often inarticulate, and often unemployed, (and in some cases unemployable), who through their cars and car-related practices, have determined the power of disposal over their lives and over the resources they deemed necessary to define and to live the lives they wished to lead. The research too has also offered an acknowledgement of a world of practice and discourse in which we can now talk of boy racers and car cultures. In

doing so it has revealed the paradox of 'doing gender', particularly evidenced by the way the boy racers had modified their cars. In the moddin process they had contributed significant amounts of emotional and economic investment and had engaged in the type of labour which allowed them to demonstrate what they perceived to be the characteristics of working class masculinity; the physical strength, endurance and fortitude and accompanying dirt and grime, sweat and the scarifications of labour. The camaraderie they engaged in whilst working on their cars with other like-minded young men facilitated opportunities for them to define their masculine identity and work pride and constantly affirm and reaffirm what was important to them.

As I have described in Chapters 6 and 7, during the moddin processes the boy racers' cars took on the squat, menacing, aggressive features with the type of accessories which spoke to the onlooker of maleness, power, risk, challenge and competition. When driving these cars and using their mechanical skills and knowledge to engage in performative activities, exhibiting risk, power and daring, they talked of their cars as 'he'. Yet during what I term the nurturing processes, the cleaning and polishing, the bestowing of gifts and through the reclaiming processes observed when the young men had been apart from their cars for some time, they responded in a gentle, caring, emotional way; the caressing of the bodywork, and the murmured endearments and spoke of the car as 'she'. They had attributed to it a set of characteristics and emotions more associated with the female gender. Paradoxically in doing so, they demonstrated the type of characteristics which they had overtly despised and derided in others, citing emotionality and demonstrations of nurturing and caring as weak, girly or gay and thus the recipient of such observations was in their eyes less of a man.

## Postscript

Last night, Thursday, 15<sup>th</sup> September 2005, at approximately 11pm a blue Vauxhall Nova hit a lamp post on the A30 slip road at Tolvaddon near Camborne. The car burst into flames. The driver died. He was 18 years old. He was a boy racer and one of the Makie D's posse. His name was Ben. I knew him, but not well. However his friends tell me that he was a "Good bloke; a good ole boy, kinda quiet like and strugglin' to make ends meet, livin with iz old lady since the ole man left". Subsequent local newspaper reports captured his gender, his youth, the location of the accident and the type of vehicle he drove together with the information that his body was so badly burned, identification had to be made through dental records. Perhaps Ben in common with so many of my young participants had been seeking a way to escape invisibility in his life through demonstrations of performative driving activities including risk and daring. His accident made him visible, as an obituary notice and as another road traffic accident statistic.

## Appendices

<b>Content</b>	<b>Page Number</b>
<b>Copy of a Transcript: An impromptu attendance at a meet</b>	<b>273</b>
<b>Copies of Field Notes</b>	<b>277</b>
<b>Examining the Need for Speed: Interview for Postgraduate Lives, The Independent Newspaper, May 2005</b>	<b>278</b>
<b>The Tarmac Cowboys: Masculinity and marginality among boy racers in Cornwall. Copy of an Abstract Prepared for the International Policy and Periphery Conference, April 2006</b>	<b>280</b>
<b>Gatsobyter: The Culture of the Street Car</b>	<b>281</b>
<b>Advertising Plan 9: A call for Sponsors / Supporters</b>	<b>282</b>

## A Copy of a Transcript: Impromptu Attendance at a Meet.

[3<sup>rd</sup> April, 2004]

1: Woken by the sound of my mobile phone ringing, I glanced at my watch, it was 11.40 at  
2: night. Placing the phone to my ear a voice echoed through the receiver "Alright mate,  
3: wassup?" "Who is this?" I asked, half asleep. Maniacal laughter from the caller was the  
4: response. "Whaddya mean, who is it?" a male voice replied. "Oh it's you Nathan" I  
5: replied. "Too fucking right it's me, mate. Whaddya doin' now?" he asked. Gathering my  
6: wits whilst at the same time having a sinking feeling that perhaps something had  
7: happened to one of the posse, I replied that I had gone to bed. "Look outa the window  
8: then bird" I was instructed. I climbed out of bed and peered behind the curtains, car  
9: lights flashed at me. What do you want Nathan, it's almost midnight?" I asked. "Well  
10: we was thinking that we might have a bitta fun like... a road trip or summat" he  
11: responded. Certainly it was difficult to see who the 'we' might be as he looked to be  
12: alone in the car, and as for 'road trip' I was trying to remember what that entailed. Did I  
13: really want to go out, after all I had to work tomorrow, but there again I thought so did  
14: Nathan. On the other hand if I rejected his offer it may mean that I would be unlikely to  
15: be asked again in a hurry. Gesturing acceptance through the window, I pulled on jeans,  
16: sweatshirt, baseball cap and boots and grabbed my wallet and small tape recorder.  
17: Outside the air was damp and it was drizzling, not ideal weather for any risky practices  
18: with cars I thought. The passenger seat was full of clothes, a rucksack and magazines. I  
19: had seen this before when it had been so arranged to discourage passengers, so feeling  
20: that perhaps we were on the way to pick up somebody else I opened the rear passenger  
21: door. "Nah, it's alright mate I just chucked me stuff in after work like" he said  
22: sweeping it up and throwing it over the back seat. "Thanks" I responded, thankful that I  
23: wasn't relegated to the back seat where I would suffer the inevitable motion sickness in  
24: the event of any performative manoeuvres. "Why are you around so late?" I asked as  
25: we drove off. I was also conscious of the squealing tyres and accompanying engine  
26: noise as we took off down the road in a sideways position, and hoped that my  
27: neighbours were sound sleepers. "Yeah well we was all a bit pissed see after we heard  
28: about Tris (he broke off to look at me) you hear 'bout 'im I guess ave ee?" My heart  
29: sank, I had become to dread any sentence that began with 'You've heard about...' for  
30: it usually followed that some ill had befallen one or other of them and often it involved  
31: either personal injury or police. "No I've not heard anything about Tris" I said,  
32: desperately trying to remember who Tris was. "Aw he's some tosser, ee really is". He  
33: continued, "We was coming back from a meet t'other night an ee was windin' you  
34: know, showin' off like, course daft bastard ended up in the hedge, had to go home an  
35: borrow father's truck to pull 'un out. Fucking car's twisted like yer wouldn't believe. I  
36: switched the tape recorder on as I wanted to record the ensuing conversation. Nathan  
37: looked over and grinned, raising his voice, "All that fuckin' work ee done on un". He  
38: tutted, hissing through his teeth to emphasise his disapproval. I was conscious there  
39: was no mention of Tris's wellbeing. "And Tris, was he okay?" I queried. Nathan shot  
40: me a glance "Ess well ee was shook up, but fuckin' serve un right. Ee'll have to get the  
41: fuckin bus for a week or so now". Certainly this would be difficult I thought having  
42: remembered who Tris was, and appreciated that he lived in quite a remote area where  
43: to my knowledge, public transport didn't visit. Warming to his theme Nathan  
44: explained that Tris would be unlikely to repair his car as he didn't have the necessary  
45: skills. "Can he afford to pay somebody to do, like the garage?" I asked. Nathan shot me  
46: a look of disbelief, "Nah he can't afford to do that as ee ain't worked fer about 6  
47: months". "How did Tris manage to do all the mods then if he hasn't got the skills and  
48: isn't working?" I asked. There was a long silence interrupted only by the sound of

49: music as Nathan increased the volume on his CD player. Thinking that perhaps he  
50: hadn't heard me I repeated the question. Not looking at me and staring fixedly ahead  
51: he said, "Yeah well there's some stuff you don't need ter know like". Well why not I  
52: wondered, so asked again. "Fuck me, yer like some bleeding ferret, always askin  
53: questions" he said unexpectedly. "Mmm well I can draw my own conclusions then" I  
54: said. "I assume then that it was bent gear and one or other of you lot did it for him".  
55: Nathan smirked, "Yeah we did it between us ter 'elp 'im out like. I ain't gonna tell yer  
56: anything else as you got that bleedin' recorder on an un's recordin everything I s'pose".  
57: He removed one hand from the steering wheel and began to rummage in my pocket  
58: closest to him. Gleefully he pulled out my wallet. "Aw right then bird, KFC tonight  
59: then if they're open". Hastily I snatched it back. "Well" I said "I know how tetchy you  
60: can be but yes the recorder's going, do you want it off?" I asked. "Nah bird yer'll be  
61: alright" he responded. Approximately 20 minutes later we arrived at an industrial estate  
62: just outside Redruth and I noticed there were half a dozen cars there already. The  
63: weather was not conducive to standing around outside and it appeared that everyone  
64: had clamoured into 2 or 3 cars and from the steamed up windows it appeared they may  
65: have been here for some little while. As we approached the parked cars, I was aware of  
66: Nathan accelerating. Quickly working his feet alternating between accelerator and  
67: clutch all the time increasing speed, he ran his hands across the steering wheel, this way  
68: and that, effortlessly piloting the vehicle into a series of movements which snapped my  
69: head back into the headrest and then out again, reverberating side to side and against the  
70: window. Swearing, I rubbed my head and readjusted the baseball cap which had slipped  
71: with the disturbance caused by the manoeuvres. We screeched to a halt in what seemed  
72: like inches from the first car, and I felt that rush of prickly fear which dissipated as  
73: quickly as it had arrived. "Fuckin top fun" yelled Nathan, punching the air. "Bang yer  
74: 'ed did yer?" he enquired. "Yeah, thanks" I muttered. He laughed. The car furthest  
75: away began to show signs of life and leapt forward with tyres screaming and smoking  
76: and the engine revved to full decibels. The owner propelled it in tight circles until it  
77: almost disappeared behind the smoke its tyres were producing. Doors opened and out  
78: spilled a number of young men, some of whom I recognised from previous meetings.  
79: One walked towards us, hands in pockets, slouching, baseball cap covered by a hoodie,  
80: a cigarette glowed between his teeth. Arriving alongside Nathan's car he positioned  
81: himself by Nathan's window which was now open and small droplets of water began  
82: cascading in. "Fuck me mate, yers letting the rain piss in" Nathan hissed at him. "Get  
83: here [he indicated the back door] an you can put that fuckin glow stick out before ycr  
84: get in". Doing as he was bid the newcomer hastily took a long final drag from his  
85: cigarette before disposing of it on the ground. He climbed into the back seat; I say  
86: climbed because he had to negotiate Nathan's possessions which he had earlier thrown  
87: from the front passenger seat. The newcomer looked at me curiously and Nathan caught  
88: his gaze, "Oh her's alright. Her's the bird what's writing the book about us". He looked  
89: at me and thumbed a gesture towards the back seat passenger, this is Dan. "Hi Dan",  
90: and by way of introduction I said, "I'm Zannagh". "Who?" he enquired, Nathan  
91: laughed "Aw yeah its some bloody stupid name, but you'll get used to it. We have" he  
92: added as an after thought. Grabbing my tape recorder which up to that point I had been  
93: grasping firmly, he placed it in front of Dan, "and 'er uses this a lot... well not always as  
94: we don't let her, not when it's summat special" he winked at me. Dan seemed to freeze  
95: and recoil from the machine. I hastily snatched it back and switched it off. What  
96: seemed to be an age passed before Dan spoke again. Leaning over the back seat and  
97: directing his gaze at me, "What sorta book is it then?" Briefly explaining the purpose of  
98: my research, I hoped that it sounded interesting enough whereby he might be keen to  
99: participate. Dan looked at Nathan as if for confirmation that what I was telling him was  
100: correct and almost silently querying as to whether it was something he could subscribe  
101: to himself. Nathan nodded, "Well its like this 'ere bro' with all the crap that's written

102: about us you can use it as a way to show what its really like fer us livin 'ere an' doin  
103:our stuff". Any response which Dan may have offered was stifled by the arrival of  
104:another lone car with a single occupant. "Oh yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah" they almost said  
105:in unison and accompanied the words with obscene gestures. "Someone new?" I  
106:suggested. They looked at one another and smirked, "Nah not new as such, more yer  
107:batty boy" Dan said. "What's that then?" I asked. They both broke into uncontrolled  
108:mirth. "Well it's like this see, he (gesturing towards the newcomer with a thumb), ee's  
109:not exactly manly (more laughter) I mean ter say yer just gotta see un walk towards us  
110:in a minute. Oh 'ere we go, 'ere ee comes". Immediately there was a hive of activity  
111:within the car. Dan was hastily arranging Nathan's possessions across the spare side of  
112:the back seat. Nathan threw a handful of CD's into the back narrowly missing Dan  
113: who cursed him. "What on earth are you doing?" I asked incredulous at this  
114:behaviour. "Well if it looks kinda busy in 'ere ee won't try an get in" hissed Nathan.  
115:"Why wouldn't you want him in here? I asked. "Ssssh" hissed Dan. The newcomer  
116:arrived level with the car and peered through the open gap in Nathan's window.  
117:"Right on?" He enquired. "Yeah, sound" my fellow occupants replied. "Fuckin  
118:awful night innit" he commented. There was embarrassed shuffling from within the  
119:car, "Yeah fuckin right. Bin out somewhere?" Nathan enquired. "Yeah" was the reply,  
120:"I bin out lookin fer some action". Stifled laughter emerged from the back seat and the  
121:newcomer peered suspiciously at me. "Gotta car full then mate" he observed, "I ain't  
122:yer fuckin mate" I heard Nathan mutter under his breath. "What is wrong with you?" I  
123:hissed at him, quite disconcerted by this uncharitable behaviour. "Just look at 'im"  
125: he hissed back, so I looked. He was aged about 20 with close cropped hair but unlike  
126:my companions and those I had glimpsed in the other cars, he wasn't dressed in T-  
127:shirt or sweatshirt, but appeared to be wearing a short sleeved, patterned shirt with a  
128:collar and possibly something other than jeans. Certainly he was neat, in appearance,  
129:smart even, compared to the rest of us. "Well we woz just goin, so we'll see you  
130:around" Nathan said. Just going, I thought, how bizarre as we've only just arrived. I  
131:looked over into the back at Dan who had receded into the seat as far as he could. The  
132:new arrival withdrew from the window, "Yeah alright, I'll be seeing you" he replied  
133:and I thought that he sounded rather crestfallen. Without further ado Nathan started the  
134:car's engine and accelerated forward amidst much wheel spinning and screeching  
135:protestations from the tyres. "What was all that about, I thought we were here for a  
136:while" I said. "You must be fuckin' jokin' mate " Dan replied, "Yer don't want ter be  
137:seen hangin wiv the likes of ee". "Well he seemed harmless enough to me" I replied  
138:feeling sorry for the smart young man who had withdrawn back into his own rather  
139:smart car of indiscernible make and model. "Yeah well darlin' we 'av ter educate you.  
140:Yer can't say ee's one of us as ee's too poofer-like" Dan said laughing as he spoke.  
141:"What do you mean, I don't get you, I can't see your problem and I'm feeling sorry  
142:for him already" I said. They looked at one another, sniffed with derision and rolled  
143:their eyes. "Put it like this then," said Nathan speaking very slowly, as if I was clearly  
144:the imbecile he thought I was, "He works in an office, he's what we call a Finance  
145:Boy, they don't do nothing on their cars, they get it for for 'em. They never get's their  
146:hands dirty, they dress like poofters and they got finger nails". I laughed out loud,  
147:"Finger nails? We've all got finger nails, although I have to say mine aren't that great  
148:at the moment" I said. Nathan looked at me and silently extended a hand towards me,  
149:it was quite grimy and the knuckles were cut and grazed. I looked at the nails, they  
150:were black, and the nail beds lined with residue of oil or grease and there was a faint  
151:aroma of Swarfega. Not to be outdone a pair of hands were extended from the back of  
152:the car almost brushing my face accompanied by the smell of WD40. It was Dan not  
153:wishing to be overshadowed by Nathan. They both beamed at me, "Now them there  
154:hands are proper working men's hands, hard an' rough an' done a proper days

156:job”said Nathan and with that they both started scruffing me roughly and roaring with  
156:laughter at the discomfort and dishevelment they were causing me.

## Copies of Field Notes

[illegible]

2 15 14105

- Sp. - working towards Exile.  
- with boys (B D + J) - Dave  
- wife - arguments arising as to  
- who's doing what & when going  
- with them - D. seems all attention  
- putting me out - cleaning everything  
- in site - Shannon could - but  
- he's still a "some other"!!  
- still arguing as to what time  
- to place - says it suits me  
- there for what to come later -  
- v. boring! J & B discussing  
- Shane - seems press at home again -  
- father's worried out - "D. seems  
- to have shopped" - And - boys  
- (concerned about Shane - drinking /  
- drugs / "else etc") - so, as usual  
- arguing - & so expected to be present  
- (have late as his work!) -

was being tipped from the  
the other was transferred to the other side of the car  
and was then taken to the  
to be taken to the  
down to the ground

8 November - claim before High Court

Wish - Can't understand them  
Jim wearing T-shirt - heavy muscles  
Elli - 3 acornus tonight - legs don't  
See I planned us from out of town  
Kathleen - I know I know - I know

chf - array pointer (not up to

Budora has grass with lot of pine.

Sounds like they've settled down here - really

how has changed - argue it is "different"

NR10-05 peltamano biding a dayen

usually not imposed either way.

diving seals - full has appeared

cars stolen already!! Says it's possible

20. for IV - going to Marwan, Beirut

Newcomers are living in a declining area

of Vietnam - new app to improve - Sec 2

a 1st grade from local - 17'4 - 18'6 in

• High risks - cars too many go either

Some days (e.g. 2) were not visited but

have expensive clocks + numeric systems -

beam was run over by car of Mrs. Ruby

or not hurt - dragged her out of the row

• smartest kid around a bit - seemed legit -

harvested - show - 2 quills were retained - bear,  
harvested or harvested - lot of quills -

ପ୍ରଥମେ ଏହି କଥାଟି ସମ୍ପର୍କରେ ଯୁକ୍ତି ଦିଆଯାଉଛି ।

## **Extract from the Independent Newspaper, 12 May, 2005**

**Postgraduate Lives: Examining the need for speed**  
Zannagh Hatton, PhD student at Plymouth University

**Interview by Caitlin Davies**

**Published: 12 May 2005**

*Zannagh Hatton is in her early forties and has been researching boy racers*

My PhD thesis is called "Tarmac Cowboys", and it's an examination of the modern world of boy racers. "Boy racer" is a term used to describe a particular group of young men, aged between 17 and 24, who adopt a similar style in dress, music and cars. They drive sporty hatches which are "modded" - for example with huge exhaust pipes and lowered suspension - so the cars look squat and menacing.

Boy racers are often looked down upon by the police, by mainstream society and by the media. Because they meet in public spaces and drive noisy cars with loud music systems they are regarded as accidents waiting to happen. But I believe many are merely lost boys who use their cars as symbols of status and rebellion.

What I found fascinating is that they are often youngsters who have grown up in a fragmented family environment where the father is a shadowy figure in the background playing an occasional walk-on role. The group they hang out in becomes their family, one they have constructed for themselves.

Some boy racers are practically talented, but not always academically gifted. Many have been excluded from school, have dyslexia, or have dropped out of college. They talk about being invisible. They see themselves as rebels, as protesters against a system which seeks to control them and thwart their ambitions, whether that means being told "you can't drive your car here" or "you can't have this job because you aren't qualified".

My research started at various garages, and then the lads I met would parade friends of theirs. I was a bit of a novelty factor. They got kudos for "going to see the bird who's writing a book about us". However, I was brought up in a car environment - my father raced bikes and cars - so I'm knowledgeable about car performance.

The racers congregate at car-parks, at McDonald's and on industrial estates. They set out to get thrills, but when they meet it's more about showing off and demonstrating skills. Sometimes they strip race, seeing who can drive the fastest between two points, often in multistorey car-parks. But most of it is about parking up and talking; these are the "repair shops" for what's wrong in their lives and for demonstrating driving prowess. They work on a shoestring budget, often building cars from scratch, and there's a lot of swapping and transferring of skills.

I interviewed 250 boy racers and in the past three years many have been killed, in car accidents and by suicide. It's been a privilege to have been a part of their world.

I spent three years on the PhD, while working full time as a research co-ordinator for the university. It's been a bit of a nightmare combining research with a full-time job, and I have two children as well. One had a car accident a year ago as a result of boy-racer activities and was seriously injured. So I don't just research it, I live with it.

**Copy of an Abstract Prepared for the International Policy and Periphery  
Conference**

**April 2006**

**The Tarmac Cowboys: Masculinity and marginality among boy racers in Cornwall.**

**Zannagh Hatton, University of Bristol**

**and**

**Kevin Meethan, University of Plymouth**

**Abstract**

Peripherality is not only a matter of proximity and geography but can also refer to a sense of distance and marginality in a wider cultural sense. When the two are found together, we could talk of a 'double edged' form of peripherality and disadvantage. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork undertaken in Cornwall, this paper will examine some aspects of the social relationships and values that underpin the hitherto neglected subculture of 'boy racers,' young men whose sense of self worth and identity is built around the status and prestige they derive from 'modding' cars, displaying them and their driving skills at 'meets.'

Often castigated by the media and others as a danger to the public, elements of near and real illegality and a sense of 'living on the edge' also provide the tarmac cowboys with a strong sense of being outsiders, peripheral to many of the values of 'mainstream' culture. The boy racers' world is one that is also governed by a notion of 'traditional' masculinity rooted in forms of manual work. In Cornwall however such 'traditional' forms of masculine employment have given way to a more seasonal, service oriented and low waged economy, so that opportunities for the expression of such masculinity are limited. The modding of cars and the display of driving at the meets then offers a means by which such identities can be expressed though forms of conspicuous consumption.

## Gatsobyter: The Culture of the Street Car

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### **GATSOBYTER<sup>1</sup> - CALL FOR SPONSORS/SUPPORTERS**

Plan 9 presents a look at Bristol's street car culture through a range of actions and events in May 2005.

Proposed events to include:

- instore car make over by artists Angus Sanders-Dunnachie and Kieran Brown[coming out of discussions with local young people] with technical assistance from Trevor Hudson, a professional car sprayer and bodyworker
- DJ/ mixing with Gerard (Drive By) and Basement Studios
- trials of racing/crashing computer games including: Grand Theft Auto – San Andreas; Mashed, Burnout 3, Gran Turismo
- videos by Pak Kan Chan [and Matt Stokes and Mike Stubbs] examining the realities of cruising and donutting
- [in-store 8 track scalextric racing]
- talk by Zannagh Hatton – University of Plymouth - leading on cruising and street car culture

As the academics put it:

“Social issues of car dependency, vandalism, sexism, car crime and delinquency collide within the often overlooked and frequently unloved ‘cruising’ or ‘street car’ culture. This working class subculture attracts enormous criticism from the establishment and yet its unwritten codes, whereby young men express individualism within tightly defined aesthetic parameters, is not a million miles from the aspirational longing expressed in the mainstream through home decoration. The ‘rides’ of the cruisers are quite literally nests, designed to attract the attention of young women who at this crucial stage of their personal and societal development are looking for expressions of daring and bravura within a coded framework that simultaneously points to hard graft, dedication and commitment – all the attributes of a successful father and husband...

For the streetcar enthusiasts, who position themselves in an ambivalent and ironic sexual position – part street warrior and part nerdy technician – there is a tacit acknowledgement that no girl is really going to be interested in a guy who spends more time cleaning his wing mirrors than his penis. Having only recently graduated from airfix kits or radio controlled models – this edginess provides these young adults a formulaic framework for safe sexual display and competition.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> GATSO is the acronym of the yellow box speed cameras

<sup>2</sup> Patrick Bannon “*Changing Vrooms*” essay for Variant Issue 34, Dec 2003, pp 11-12

## Blimey!

Enough of the social analysis - GATSOBYTER will be a chance to see local artists, streetcar and car paint experts make over an L reg Metro as an instore, live action performance over ten working days. Plan 9 will also host racing/crashing computer games and scalextric / radiocontrolled model racing alongside a series of talks from academics. We also plan a full scale drive by involving hot rodders, boy racers, drag racers, speedfreaks and classic car enthusiasts from Broadmead to Spike Island for the Spike Island Open Studios event where Plan 9 will have a racing stand...

More seriously GATSOBYTER aims to directly involve young socially excluded young people in the production of artwork that has an identifiable working class sub-cultural base.

## About Plan 9

Plan 9 is a new artist led project space in an empty retail unit in Bristol's Broadmead shopping centre.

We are supported by the Arts Council England and Bristol City Council.

We aim to produce exciting cutting edge visual art experiences that will be open and accessible to all who use Broadmead.

Despite limited resources we aim to pay artists and others who work on our projects.

Plan 9 is a not for profit organisation –none of the directors or project coordinators are paid.

Our first exhibition, 'Industry & Idleness' ran from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> March 2005 and looked at the political realities of generating a local arts economy away from London and issues of status and hierarchy faced by emerging artists everywhere.

We have a programme of future exhibitions and events including an exchange with other West coast cities – the 'Plan9 triangle' of Bristol, Los Angeles and Lima; a collaborative project involving emerging and established artists; a short history of protest; and an examination of the occult and druidism.

We are actively seeking other proposals from emerging artists and new curators with a Bristol connection.

For more information see [www.plan9.org.uk](http://www.plan9.org.uk) or contact us at [info@plan9.org.uk](mailto:info@plan9.org.uk) or 07811 428 381

**PLAN 9**



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