

THE SOUTHERN

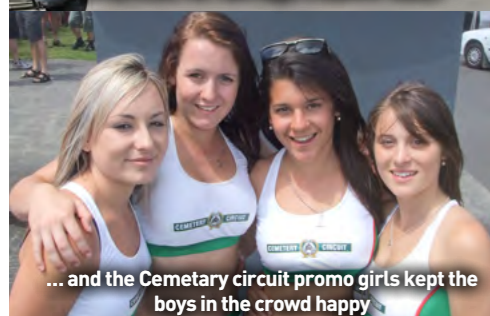
STORY RENNIE SCAYSBROOK PHOTOGRAPHY DALLAS ALEXANDER



The start of the F1 Superbike race was a clean but frantic affair



The Classic Sidecars offered plenty of entertainment for the huge crowd on hand...



... and the Cemetery circuit promo girls kept the boys in the crowd happy



Glenn Haden stole a surprise victory from Toby Summers in SuperMotard



The keenest punters spend the night before in the cemetery to ensure a good spot!

The Wanganui Cemetery Circuit event is one of the world's great road races, and it's right on our doorstep

Let me take you to a land not so far away. A land that allows a different form of racing to what you and I are used to. A land that isn't restrained by the insurance-strangling suits that say something this outrageous simply cannot be done. This is Wanganui, New Zealand. And this, my friends, is motorcycle racing at its best.

The Wanganui Cemetery Circuit races are arguably the jewel in the crown of the New Zealand motorcycle racing season. Held every year for 59 years on Boxing Day (bar one – the first race being held on 27 December), the event takes over the sleepy town of Wanganui, about an hour's drive north-west of Palmerston North at the lower end of New Zealand's North Island.

Upwards of 12,000 screaming Kiwis line the edges of the track, itself a 1.6km dash that takes around the 50sec mark if you're really on it, and takes in Taupo Quay, railway crossings and manhole covers, as well as the section where the event gets its name from, the cemetery.

The marvellous Heads Road Cemetery which sits inside the circuit grounds is one of the oldest European burial grounds in New Zealand, with the first recorded burial taking place on 25 November, 1843. Exquisite tombstones and grave craftings, some well over 150-years old, dot the landscape between Heads Road and Ridgeway St and provide one of the most unique backdrops for racing anywhere in the world. This is one of the world's oldest continual motorcycle races of any discipline,

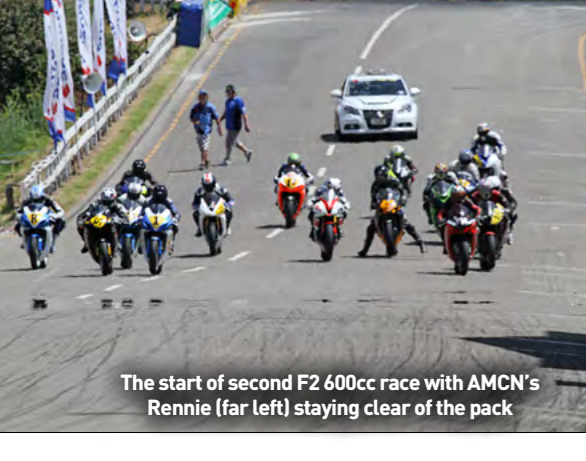
with the first race in 1951 taking place just two years after the start of the World Motorcycle Championship.

For road racing purists, this is as close as you will get to races like the Isle of Man TT and North West 200 outside of the United Kingdom. Indeed this event has been described as the Isle of Man of the Southern Hemisphere, and it's attracted almost as many international stars to its start line over the last 59 years (see breakout).

The Cemetery Circuit event is part of the three-round championship known as the New Zealand Tri-Series, which also takes in Hampdon Downs near Auckland for round one and Manfield Park at Fielding for round two, about 45 minutes south of Wanganui. Prior to this, for a period it was part of the annual Battle of the Streets with the Paeroa



It looks like he's winning, but Rennie is actually in fifth place on lap three of the second F2 600cc race



The start of second F2 600cc race with AMCN's Rennie (far left) staying clear of the pack



The 12,000 eager fans at Wanganui make the most of every vantage point



Rhys Holmes took five from six BEARS victories aboard the BMW

circuit near Auckland, but split from its street cousin to join the the Tri-Series.

The Tri-Series is run and promoted by Wanganui local Allan Willacy, this being his first year in the top job alongside Cemetery Circuit Clerk of the Course Perry Lett and Director Mick Paul. Willacy notes that despite the Tri-Series being a three round championship, Wanganui takes up "99 percent of my time".

"To make this event happen is a massive undertaking," Willacy says matter-of-factly. "It takes about a week to get the track set-up – it's a lot of work to do in a week but it can only take a week because we can't block the roads off. We're fortunate that a number of local businesses offer their services free of

charge in terms of the circuit construction, the overhead bridge in the cemetery, and all the fences to keep the crowds safe."

Willacy is in the unique position of being the custodian of the land while the racing is in place. Effectively, the council signs the track over to him and it becomes his land.

"It becomes my property," Willacy says. "It sounds funny but I have to give the cops permission to come onto the premise and police it. Private property owners sign over a document to us that that states we can go onto their property and evict people if there are any problems, which can happen occasionally but most of the time people are pretty responsible."

The event's long 59-year history has

cemented the races as one of New Zealand's great sporting events, with crowds growing year on year. The significance of this is not lost on the local economy, with the annual motorcycle spectacular now the biggest single earner for the city.

"The event costs us around \$NZ200,000 (\$150,000) to put on, but with all the people coming here and spending money, it ends up pumping around \$NZ1.4m (\$1.07m) over the two days into the local economy," Willacy says. "It's by far the town's biggest sporting event, and the local community really gets behind the race as it's been here for so long and is so important to them."

"We see the race now as a similar thing to the culture that fits around horse racing,"

The event costs \$150,000 to put on but pumps around \$1.07m over two days into the local economy



Rennie goes up the inside of David Hall

RACE FACE



There's something raw and intense about participating in an event that by all rights shouldn't be possible in this insurance-strangled day and age.

The chance to have a crack at the Wanganui event came after a meeting with Suzuki NZ head honcho Simon Meade at the 2011 GSX-R600 and 750 launch at Hidden Valley (NT). After mentioning in passing that I'd be keen to do the event, Simon quickly offered a ride on a 2011 GSX-R600 in F2. Needless to say I jumped at the chance.

THE TRACK

The Wanganui Cemetery Circuit is 1.6km long, and a good race lap on a 600 here takes about 52 seconds. It's physically demanding – stop/start, full gas/full brakes/full gas. Turns one on Ridgeway St and two down Wilson St are slow speed, second gear right-angle right-hand corners, with turn two sporting a manhole cover on the inside. There's only one place on the track where you can rest, down the back straight out of turn two of Taupo Quay, and even then you only get a one-second breather. Then it's into the fast right/left flick over the train lines of Heads Rd, past the pits and into the cemetery for another quick right/left flip-flop. The entry is blind, heavily cambered and shadowed by trees – taken in third gear – and you need to nail the exit here to get the run up Heads Rd to Robert Holden Corner, which is the first of two consecutive second gear, right-angle, right-hand corners. Exiting Robert Holden Corner up Guyton St, you peel right into Ridgeway St once again and accelerate up to the final corner – an off-camber, third-gear left hander and down the straight that cambers right off down the hill as you click to fourth for a split second over the start and finish line, before braking hard for turn one.

It's an intense lap; a corridor of Kiwis, all screaming as you whiz by close enough for them to touch you.

THE BIKE

My ride for the races would be a bog-stock 2011 Suzuki GSX-R600, save for the race bodywork and Yoshimura slip-on exhaust. A shim was fitted with the shock to jack the rear up a bit, but the suspension itself was completely standard, which turned out to be a good thing on the bumpy road circuit.

A WANGANUI VIRGIN

Being a first-timer, I went out for the four "Virgin Laps" behind a course marshal. With guys on everything from chook chasers to sidecars and superbikes all together, it was hectic to say the least.

You have about 10 laps over two sessions to set a time for the grid. The really quick guys like Glen Skachill and Dennis Charlett get down to business in the low 52s almost straight away. I managed a 53.7sec lap to slot into ninth on the grid. I was over the moon and my goal was to finish in the top 10.

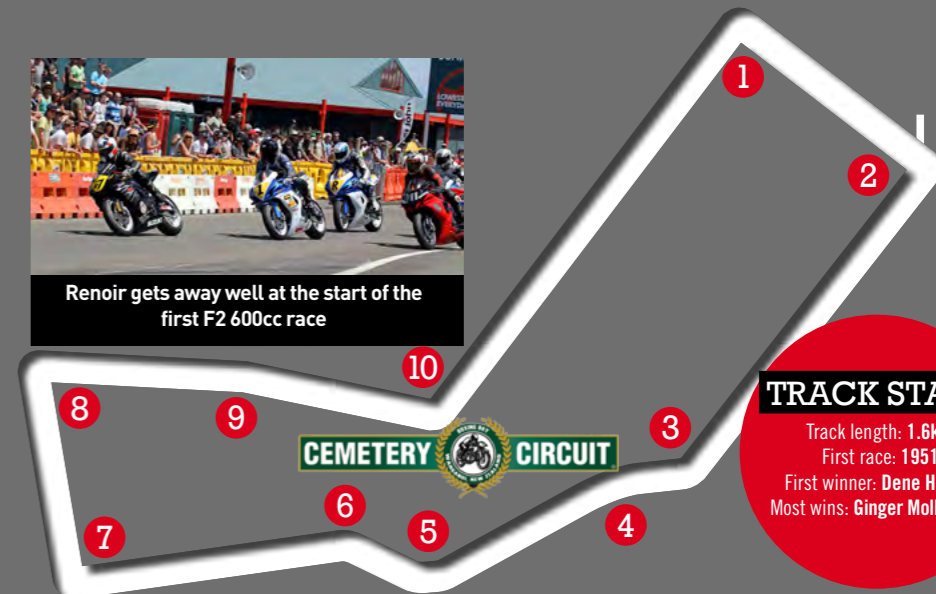
One of the natures of street racing is crashes and the ensuing delays, and Wanganui is no exception. One such delay was caused by a sidecar hitting the hay bales and setting them on fire, while various sidecars and classic bikes dumped what seemed like litres of oil across the circuit prior to the first F2 600cc race. As a result, when we fronted the grid the course resembled something of a concrete dust mill.

RACE 1

Don't ask me how, but I pulled the start of my life in race one. Starting ninth on the grid, I shot straight up to third behind Charlett and Skachill, before getting muscled into fifth by turn two. The cement dust down



Renoir gets away well at the start of the first F2 600cc race



TRACK STATS

Track length: 1.6km
First race: 1951
First winner: Dene Hollier
Most wins: Ginger Molloy (14)

over the majority of the course made line selection critical, and I eventually tucked into a duel with Honda rider John Oliver and the Yamaha-mounted Rhys Holmes. My good parts of the track were the fast entry over the train lines and into and through the cemetery – I'd pull a bit back on Oliver through here, but he had me across the final two corners leading onto the straight, plus he was a lot faster (and braver) across the cement dust strewn all across turn two.

Eventually I settled for seventh – I couldn't quite keep the pace of the two in front of me, but I managed to keep Triumph rider Jamie Galway behind in eighth.

ROBERT HOLDEN MEMORIAL RACE

I had no idea that I had qualified for the Robert Holden Memorial feature race, which is for the fastest 30 riders across all the classes bar Supermotard. Five minutes before the green light Simon from Suzuki NZ came rushing into the pits to tell me to get in my leathers and on the grid! The 10-lap Robert Holden

Don't ask me how, but I pulled the start of my life in race one, straight up to third place

Memorial is the one everyone wants to win and to do so puts your name up there with the greats of NZ racing. Sitting 20th on the grid (although not all the competitors showed up), I got another decent start but rather than being on the inside I got shoved by a bunch of 1000cc riders to the outside, almost taking a gutter/hay bale with me. Within two laps I'd lost touch with the guys in front and had a three-second gap to the rider behind, so I just cruised around the last five laps and tried to save energy for the last F2 race, which was on after the next race. Up front Dan Stauffer showed everyone who's boss, very nearly cracking the elusive 48s laptime bracket as he took the win from Nick Cole and Andrew Stroud. I ended up 13th – out of 14 finishers (d'oh!).



Rennie holds off Rhys Holmes to take sixth in the second F2 600cc race

RACE 2

I only had one race left in F2 600cc, and it was reduced from eight laps to six as the organisers were rapidly running out of time to get the program finished. I was determined to make this one count – I wouldn't say it was win or crash, but I was hoping to crack a top six, maybe even a top five result.

Still ninth on the grid (no progressive grids here), somehow I again channelled my inner Pedrosa and got another blinder, up to fourth in turn one, then fifth in turn two. Down the back straight I lost another place to my teammate Karl Morgan, and at Robert Holden Corner I lost another to John Oliver. But this time I didn't lose my head and kept the pace, and a lap later when Oliver outranked himself at turn one, forcing himself and Suzuki rider David Hall wide, I jumped past both and up to fifth place. I held Oliver off for another two laps, and on the third did my fastest lap of the weekend at 52.342s. I just couldn't keep Oliver behind any longer, and eventually he sliced past at the railway crossing to take back fifth place.

Oliver was on a mission and quickly put a one-second gap on me, but now I had my hands full with Rhys Holmes breathing down my neck. On lap five he pulled the same move Oliver had done on me at the railway crossing, but I nabbed him straight back at the entry to the cemetery. I was determined not to finish seventh again. All I could hear in the braking points was this wailing R6 right behind me, but I managed to hold him to the flag for sixth place. What a rush!

This was without a doubt the most fun I've ever had on a motorcycle. The racing was tight, the riders were hard but fair, the immense crowd was something I've never experienced before and the atmosphere was electric. The Wanganui Cemetery Circuit races should be on every racer's to-do list. This is real road racing at its best.



Robert Holden leads Australian Paul Feeney in the Cemetery Circuit esses in 1983

THE GREATS

Running for 59 consecutive years, but for a period in the 60s when the roads were unavailable for racing, thus forcing the event to be run out of town, the Cemetery Circuit event has become a New Zealand institution. The Cemetery Circuit has been run as part of a couple of different championships over its life, with arguably its most glamorous period taking place in the 70s as part of the famed Marlboro Series.

The Marlboro Series drew the biggest names in the sport during the 70s, including American Pat Hennen – a three-time winner and firm Wanganui legend. Along with the names came the machinery – full factory 500cc Grand Prix racers ruled the city streets, piloted by the best riders of the day. Imagine Casey Stoner and Jorge Lorenzo coming to race on their MotoGP machines!

To win at Wanganui is to put your name up there with the greats of New Zealand racing. Hugh Anderson, Ginger Molloy, Aaron Slight, Andrew Stroud, Richard Scott, Tony Rees, Bruce Anstey, Jason McEwan and Roger Freeth have all taken out the feature event at the Cemetery Circuit. International riders have also staked their claim as kings of the

Cemetery Circuit, with names like American Pat Hennen, Aussies Len Willing, Gregg Hansford and recently Daniel Stauffer etching their name on the trophy.

However in this part of the world one man is the eternal king of Wanganui – New Zealander Robert Holden. His death at the 1996 Isle of Man TT shocked New Zealand racing to its core, and his name will be forever linked to the Cemetery Circuit, with the feature race re-named in his honour in 1996. Holden won at this venue no less than 47 times, also taking 22 second places and 22 third places over 19 years of racing. His last appearance at the Cemetery Circuit in 1995 was fittingly one of his greatest, with Holden taking six race wins throughout the day.

The memory of Holden lives on with not just the feature race in his name but also the former Flower Garden Corner renamed Robert Holden Corner, where Heads Rd and Guyton streets meet. The site is also marked by a large picture in the cemetery welcoming fans and riders to the venue of Holden on the “Plastic Fantastic” Suzuki racer he made so famous in Australasia and Europe.



Boxing Day crowds line the Streets to watch the Superbikes led by Stauffer



Exhausted, Dan Stauffer after winning the feature race

Stauffer recognises the challenge of racing a venue that has an element of danger



Toby Summers took out the SuperMotard class



Ron Grant (A) smokes out Pat Hennen in Marlboro Series Leg 1 1973



Pat Hennen and the late Len Perry



John Woodley leads Warren Willing and Pat Hennen in 1976

Willacy continues. “Whereas some people go to the horse races after Christmas, instead these crowds come and watch motorbikes. That’s how we perceive the event; it’s what you do after Christmas!”

A lot of the race’s appeal has to do with the circuit itself. It’s an adrenaline-charged 50sec flyer, one that allows no rest for the riders but encourages incredibly close and exciting racing, all at arm’s length from the spectators. The fact that the circuit hasn’t changed since that first race in 1951 adds to the event’s allure. Back in 1951, Feature Race winner Dene Hollier set the fastest time of the weekend in the 30 lap event on his Triumph 500cc GP machine of 1m06.2s. Compare that to 2011, when Robert Holden Memorial Feature Race winner Daniel Stauffer knocked out a blistering lap of 49.081s in the 10-lap event on his Yamaha YZF-R1.

Stauffer is an interesting case in point with Wanganui. A winner at his first attempt at the street race back in 2010 – and the first rookie winner of the feature race in over 40 years – Stauffer is more recognised as a racetrack regular at places like Phillip Island

and Eastern Creek rather than the streets of New Zealand. Far from ready to sign up to the Isle of Man TT, Stauffer recognises the challenge of racing a venue that has an element of danger and excitement not found on purpose-built racetracks.

“Last year was such an eye opener, and after winning the event first time out I wanted to come back again and prove to myself it wasn’t a fluke,” Stauffer said. “The track is like nothing I’d ever seen before – there are obstacles, different lines you can take, and even though the track is quite short it’s flowing and requires you to be on it all the time. Racetracks like Eastern Creek and Phillip Island are wide open and super-fast but it’s usually only one line. Here you can take a million different lines – you can go inside or outside the manhole covers – or go over them if you like – plus there are the train lines and the cemetery itself. There’s so much variety, it’s so much fun to construct a lap in different ways and see how it turns out.”

“The crowd is another big factor,” Stauffer says. “They go completely nuts. I didn’t bring a pit board because it’s such a short



Glen Skachill heads for the esses



Mark Perry was the next best in BEARS behind Rhys Holmes

lap but I was watching the crowd as I was going around in the feature race and they were giving me signals like this [Stauffer outstretches his arms to signify a big gap] so I could tell I was pulling away and in good shape.”

The distance of the crowd to the racetrack is one unique thing about the venue, as is the element of risk. This year former Robert Holden Memorial Feature Race winner Craig Shirriffs decided to sit the event out after contesting the first two races of the 2011 Tri-Series, robbing the F1 grid of one of the country’s biggest racing stars. Up-and-coming F2 600cc rider Jaden Hassan also decided to sit out.

21-year old Wanganui 600cc F2 winner Glen Skachill, one of New Zealand’s brightest racing prospects, put the event into perspective.

“It’s a double-edge sword; I love the event, but there certainly is that element of risk that really gets you going before a race, gets the blood pumping!” Skachill said. “I’ve been unfortunate to have a crash here and it’s not fun. I know first-hand that if you do come off and walk away you’re pretty lucky. But that’s what makes this event what it is – you have to ride within your limits and ride smart, and when you make it to the end of the day it’s a great feeling!”



Glen Williams cleaned up in Formula 3 Sportsbike

It’s a sentiment nine-time New Zealand Superbike Champion and multiple Wanganui-winner Andrew Stroud agrees with.

“It’s a fun place to come and race but at the same time you want to make sure you stay on the bike,” Stroud said. “It’s pretty wild out there, and I had a few problems today in the races and it requires you to have a different machine set-up due to the bumps of the surface.

“The event actually started to go down for a few years until it became part of the Tri-Series, once it became the last round entries almost doubled. But the fact that it is so close to the start of the national championship I think might keep a few of the top riders away, because if you get injured here it’s hard to get fit in time for the national championship, which starts only a



Nick Cole and Andrew Stroud entertained in their battle for second



The place to be on Boxing Day



Superbike rookie Scott Moir crosses the railway lines on his way to fifth overall

I love the event, but there certainly is an element of risk – Skachill



Stauffer, Stroud and Cole going hard at it



Stauffer on his way to taking three from three at Wanganui



Wanganui attracts plenty of enthusiastic fans from all over New Zealand



Stroud was the Tri-Series champ again



Andrew Stroud on the way to his fourth Tri-Series title

Tri-Series pulls big crowds because it brings racing to the people

couple of weeks from the end of this race.”

The sad fact is races like these are very thin on the ground these days. Indeed they are completely extinct from the streets of Australia – the last street race of note was the Port Kembla TT in NSW which ended in a financial disaster for the promoters – so to witness this type of competition outside Europe, one must venture across the ditch to En Zed. The Land of the Long White Cloud still embraces street racing, with the Paeroa Battle of the Streets event on 19 February traditionally pulling crowds similar to those of the Cemetery Circuit, not to mention various other street races run across the country over the race season.

While racing in New Zealand and indeed Australia struggles to get a decent crowd to a traditional racetrack event, these events pull people in hand over fist because the promoters are bringing the racing to the people, not the other way round.

It's racing the old-school way, and although the danger might deter some riders, the fact of the matter is the Cemetery Circuit, with all its history and grandiose, is going from strength to strength as more and more riders seek to find something a little different from the ordinary. If you haven't seen this event before, hop on the computer, book your flight and see the event for yourself. I hand-on-my-heart promise, you won't be disappointed. 🏍️



Suzuki was the Tri-Series' major sponsor



Richard Dibbon was the find of the Series

THANKS FOR EVERYTHING!

This trip would not be possible without the help of some amazing Kiwis and Suzuki Australia. Simon Meade from Suzuki NZ was instrumental, organising my entry and a new 2011 Suzuki GSX-R600. He and his lovely wife Jenny also fed me for the first two days and lent me a roadbike and car to get around on. Top people...

Within five minutes of meeting me in his motorcycle shop, Perry Lett, Cemetery Circuit Clerk of the Course, graciously took me in for Christmas dinner with his family and helped me with a few pointers and stories about the track, and Circuit Organiser Allan Willacy put me up in

a nice hotel and picked me up from the airport, even though he had a massive race meeting to get underway in a couple of days' time.

Ray Clee and Karl Morgan went out of their way during raceday to help me out where I needed it, with Morgan giving me a tow in race two to get into the 52sec bracket – cheers mate!

Also thanks to Ray Wittam for his help with the history side of this feature and Graeme 'Spider' Staples for helping me out while I was in Wanganui and presenting me with a "Skippy" DVD at the presentation!



We reckon Rennie's bike should be wearing an 'NF' plate, but it's too rude to explain why