

# **FROST: RONALD WILLIAM ARTHUR**

**Known as Ron  
Nickname: 'Frosty'**

**Born: 12 January 1918, Richmond, Surrey, England**

**Married: 25 January 1947 to Hazel Jarvis, Barnes, SW London  
(divorced 1970)**

**Married: 19 March 1971 to Suzanne (Suzy) Ward, Christchurch, New Zealand**

**Died: 14 April 1997, Auckland, New Zealand, aged 79**

**Cremated, with commemorative plaque in Puriri Cemetery,  
near Remuera, Auckland**

## **Honours**

**Motorsport Association of New Zealand (MANZ) 'Award of Merit' 1975**

**Member of the British Empire (MBE), 1976**

**MANZ President d'Honneur, 1977**

**Inaugural member of Motorsport New Zealand's 'Wall of Fame', 1994**

## ***Ron's parents were:***

William Frost (born Manchester, England)  
and

Alice (nee Truman) (born Manchester, England; died Sunbury, Middlesex, May 1973).

## ***He had two younger brothers***

Howard Gordon Frost  
Dudley Frost

Both lived out their lives in England.

## ***Ron's first wife Hazel had a daughter to a previous husband, James Gray, (who was lost in combat during WWII) before marrying Ron***

Pauline (born London, England, Jan 1943 – lives in Coromandel, New Zealand).

## ***Ron and Hazel had one daughter:***

Linda Jane (born London, England, 23 March 1948 – lives in Australia)

## ***Ron and Suzy had one daughter:***

Justina 'Tina' Yvette (born Auckland, 11 August 1972 – lives in Auckland, New Zealand)

## Early Life

Born in Richmond on the south-western outskirts of London, Ron was the eldest of three sons to William and Alice Frost, who came from Manchester. Their marriage didn't last. William returned to Manchester to work in the textile industry, Alice remaining in London with the children. Ron was 8 at the time.

He had attended a Montessori school in London from age 3 and was able to read and write while still very young. However, by the time he was 13 the Great Depression was setting in (early 1930s) and Ron had to leave school without formal qualifications to work and help support his mother and brothers. His first job was with a tea-blending company in City of London.

By the age of 20, Ron was a keen motorcycle racer competing at the Brands Hatch circuit in Kent.

## War Service – World War II

When World War II started, he enlisted in the hope of becoming an army dispatch rider. He joined the Royal Artillery 101 Light Anti-Aircraft and Anti-tank Regiment as a gunner and was sent to France.

As the Germans pushed the British Expeditionary Force back towards the beaches of Dunkirk in June 1940, Ron was in a unit helping evacuate troops on to boats to be ferried back to England. The day after the evacuation, his unit had moved south along the French coast to a small bay at St Valery en Caux. It was here they were captured (12 June 1940), and so began four-and-a-half years as a German prisoner-of-war.

He spent most of this time in a labour camp in Silesia (in modern-day south-west Poland). Stalag 8B, later renamed Stalag 344, was one of the biggest Nazi-run camps with over 100,000 prisoners passing through during the war.

Ron made repeated unsuccessful escape bids, resulting only in periods of solitary confinement and bouts of pneumonia. But his time in incarceration wasn't entirely wasted. He learned to box proficiently, and also developed a command of the German language which he believed would be valuable if he should manage a successful escape. (He was already fluent in French). This finally happened at the 12<sup>th</sup> attempt, near the end of the war in early 1945 as Russian forces closed in on the Germans from the east. Accompanied by an American airman, Ron made his way across Germany as far as a US base in Paris, before finally arriving back in England in time for VE Day in May 1945.

## Work, Racing and Family Life in England

Having qualified as an engineer, he set up a garage at Bexleyheath in Kent, selling Hillman cars and Shell fuel.

In 1947, he married Hazel Jarvis, a widow with a daughter, Pauline. Hazel's first husband was an RAF pilot whose Spitfire was shot down over the English Channel in October 1942 and his body was never recovered.

Soon Ron and Hazel would have a daughter of their own, Linda, born in 1948.

Ron resumed racing – in 500cc motorcycle-engine cars this time. In the 1951 season, he secured a number of podium finishes in his JBS 500 at Brands Hatch against drivers like Stuart Lewis-Evans. He also finished a notable second in a race in Spain at Retiro Park, Madrid.

### The Move to New Zealand, and Levin

Ron became increasingly fed up with petrol rationing and was encouraged to emigrate to New Zealand by a close friend from his school days, Bob Thomson, now the New Zealand manager of the British Motor Corporation in Wellington. It's recalled that Bob told Ron "You must come to New Zealand, this place is paradise". So, following the 1951 UK racing season, Ron sold up in Kent and, with wife and two children, re-settled on this side of the world, opening a dealership in Levin in partnership with a fellow English expatriate, Arnold Stafford. This time they sold the range of Rootes Group cars (Hillman, Humber and Sunbeam), along with Chryslers and David Brown tractors. Frost Motors' showroom and petrol pumps were on Oxford Street south, with a second-hand car yard opening years later on the corner of Oxford Street north and Tyne Street.

Both Ron and Arnold immediately joined the local car racing fraternity. Arnold had imported a 500cc Cooper Norton (which he had previously raced in England with a Vincent engine) while Ron had brought over a trio of JBS 500s.

He first raced here in 1953, at Ohakea aerodrome. His FIA (world body) competition licence didn't impress the organisers who insisted his driving had to be 'observed' before being granted a New Zealand competition licence. Ron was equally unimpressed with having to be reassessed!

The following year, though, he won the handicap trophy at Ohakea (while finishing 2<sup>nd</sup> overall) in a new Cooper Norton Mk VII. Another year on, 1955, the 500 'team' extended to three, with Kiwi motorcyclist Syd Jensen from Palmerston North acquiring the MkVII, while Ron and Arnold were now running the latest-import MkVIIIs. They called themselves *Ecurie Pomme*, and Ron would become known as 'Mister 500 Down Under'.

Another victory was chalked up on the road circuit at Mairehau, Christchurch, in 1956, but by then his energies were being more fruitfully deployed in securing a permanent home for motor racing in his adopted town of Levin.

### Levin Motor Racing Circuit

It took about 18 months to convince the Levin (horse) Racing Club, most of whom were farmers, that such a project could be mutually beneficial. When a group of local businessmen (including Ron and Arnold) each put up 500 pounds, Ron's brainchild became a reality. It was the first purpose-built car racing circuit in New Zealand to compare with the major temporary tracks laid out on the airfields of Ardmore and Wigram.

It was just 1 mile long, and modelled on the Brands Hatch track he was so familiar with from his English racing days. Levin's inaugural meeting was held in January 1956.

An estimated 15,000 spectators turned up, making it one of the best attended events ever in Levin. For the next 20 years, there would be three meetings held here annually, with each January date attracting some of the greatest names in that era of Grand Prix motor racing.

Ron's own racing days lasted just another two years. In 1958, he rolled his Cooper in an accident at Levin, sustaining minor injuries. Although at the next meeting he scored 4 victories from 4 starts, he decided to retire from racing at the end of that season.

From now on it was all about promoting Levin as a guaranteed fixture within the emerging annual international series. Initially known as the Tasman Championship for Drivers, from 1964 to 1975 it became the acclaimed Tasman Series – four race meetings in New Zealand each January followed by four in Australia through February. World champions Jack Brabham, Phil Hill, John Surtees, Jim Clark, Graham Hill, Jochen Rindt and Jackie Stewart all raced here, along with arguably the greatest driver never to win the world title, Stirling Moss. Ferrari Formula One driver Chris Amon, from Bulls, cut his racing teeth at Levin in a Maserati 250F while New Zealand's other world class drivers Bruce McLaren and 1967 World Champion Denny Hulme also appeared to thrill the huge crowds with their high-speed dicing.

#### "Mr New Zealand Motorsport"

From 1958, Ron was President of the Association of New Zealand Car Clubs, which became the Motorsport Association of New Zealand (MANZ), right through to 1977. To be nearer to the heart of our national motorsport administration, Ron and family moved to Auckland on being appointed the General Manager of the New Zealand Grand Prix Association (NZGPA) in August 1964. In this role he became New Zealand's negotiator in elevating and maintaining the high standard of talent taking part in the Tasman series. Accompanied by an Australian counterpart, Geoff Sykes, he flew back to England each winter for meetings with Grand Prix team bosses, like Lotus's Colin Chapman, to sign up their drivers for the next summer's series 'Down Under'. His role also extended to promoting New Zealand as a round in the World Rally championship, which came to fruition in 1977. He continued his NZGPA role for some 20 years.

#### Levin's Demise

Back in the small town of Levin he had left a very deep impression. Those international race days are now legendary and locals are extremely proud their town was once on the world motor-racing calendar.

The way motor-racing was developing with larger, much faster cars, Levin's future was inevitably going to be limited. Due to its compact layout, its appeal was waning to drivers who were now grappling with the super powerful Formula 5000 cars that became the regulation Tasman formula by the early 1970s.

Another factor - a bigger Manfeild circuit built in Feilding - ended Levin's dominant place in the lower North Island.

Finally, the Levin (horse) Racing Club, landlord of the site, became resurgent with plans to expand their training facilities across some of the car-racing circuit. At the end of 1975 they decided against renewing the Car Club's twenty-year lease. Race meeting no. 60, an international match between New Zealand and Australian Formula 5000 drivers, was held on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1975. Not long after, the track was ripped up in its entirety and returned to grass.

Frost Motors continued in Levin after Ron's departure, with son-in-law Scott Ward (who was married to Ron's step-daughter Pauline) moving from Auckland to take over until selling out in the late 1970s.

#### Other Business and Leisure Interests

Another little-known Frost venture was a foray into the commercial mushroom growing business. In the 1960s, the import of better-quality spawns and refined sterilising techniques led to a sudden boom in the production of button mushrooms on small 'farms' across the North Island in particular, and Ron became one such 'farmer', with large premises built on Fairfield Road, opposite Kath Black's orchid farm.

A further string to his bow while living in Levin had been his involvement with the town's Amateur Operatic Society for whom he would produce shows in the Regent Theatre like 'Rose Marie', 'South Pacific' and 'New Moon'. He was a leading figure in Levin Little Theatre too, producing the first play to be performed in their new home in Weraroa Road in 1955. This was 'Arsenic and Old Lace', and he followed up with a lead acting part in 'Two Dozen Red Roses'. He was widely appreciated as an entertaining raconteur.

#### Queen's Honours and International Motorsport Duties

In 1976, Ron's extraordinary services to motor-racing in New Zealand were regally rewarded with an MBE, presented by the Queen at Buckingham Palace on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1976 (by coincidence the same date he had been captured by the Germans in France 36 years earlier).

A year later he decided to retire as President of MANZ after 19 years at the wheel, to let a younger person take over. But he retained his international role as New Zealand's representative to the Federation Internationale de l'Automobile (FIA), the world governing body of motoring. This required his presence four times a year for meetings in Paris, the FIA's headquarters, where he became bound up in the top tier of motorsport politics. In 1978, he became a vice-president of FISA (world motoring's sports division), representing the Pacific area, including Australia who had no representatives at that time.

Beyond the boardrooms Ron was a steward-of-fact at many Formula One races each year - in Australia, England, Italy and Portugal, hearing and adjudicating on protests lodged by teams during a Grand Prix weekend. He particularly enjoyed this practical role in the sport.

In 1997, in an ironic move, Ron was appointed to be a steward-of-fact at the forthcoming German Grand Prix at Hockenheim in July. This was the nation that had held him captive for four-and-a-half years, but that was all water well and truly downstream now. Indeed, he was looking forward to the event, starting to plan a side-trip to the WWII labour camp in Poland and then trace his escape route back to Britain.

None of it happened. On Saturday April 14<sup>th</sup> 1997, Ron died unexpectedly. There had been some health concerns caused by a pancreatic tumour but he was well enough to play a round of golf on that last day. By evening, he was admitted to Auckland Hospital's A&E and died of septicemia. He was 79.

His funeral, attended by 300 mourners, was held in St Mary's Anglican church in Parnell. His ashes were dispersed from his yacht off Cheltenham Beach on Auckland's North Shore, and a commemorative plaque lies in Puriri cemetery at Meadowbank, near Remuera.

#### 'The Ron Frost Award'

In 2000, Motorsport New Zealand introduced 'The Ron Frost Award' to "*recognise the actions of an individual who, either through vision or commitment or a special set of circumstances, have brought credit to the sport and themselves*". The recipients have been instrumental in the creation of enduring motorsport events, teams or facilities at a very high level, particularly international in scope and achieving a significant public and media profile, thereby emulating the indelible, innovative contribution made to the sport by Ron himself.

Its first winner in 2000 was Ian Gamble for the marketing and promotion role he spearheaded in the establishment of events like the Wellington Street Race for touring cars, Truck Racing in this country, and the highly successful Nissan Sentra GT Cup series.

#### References:

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