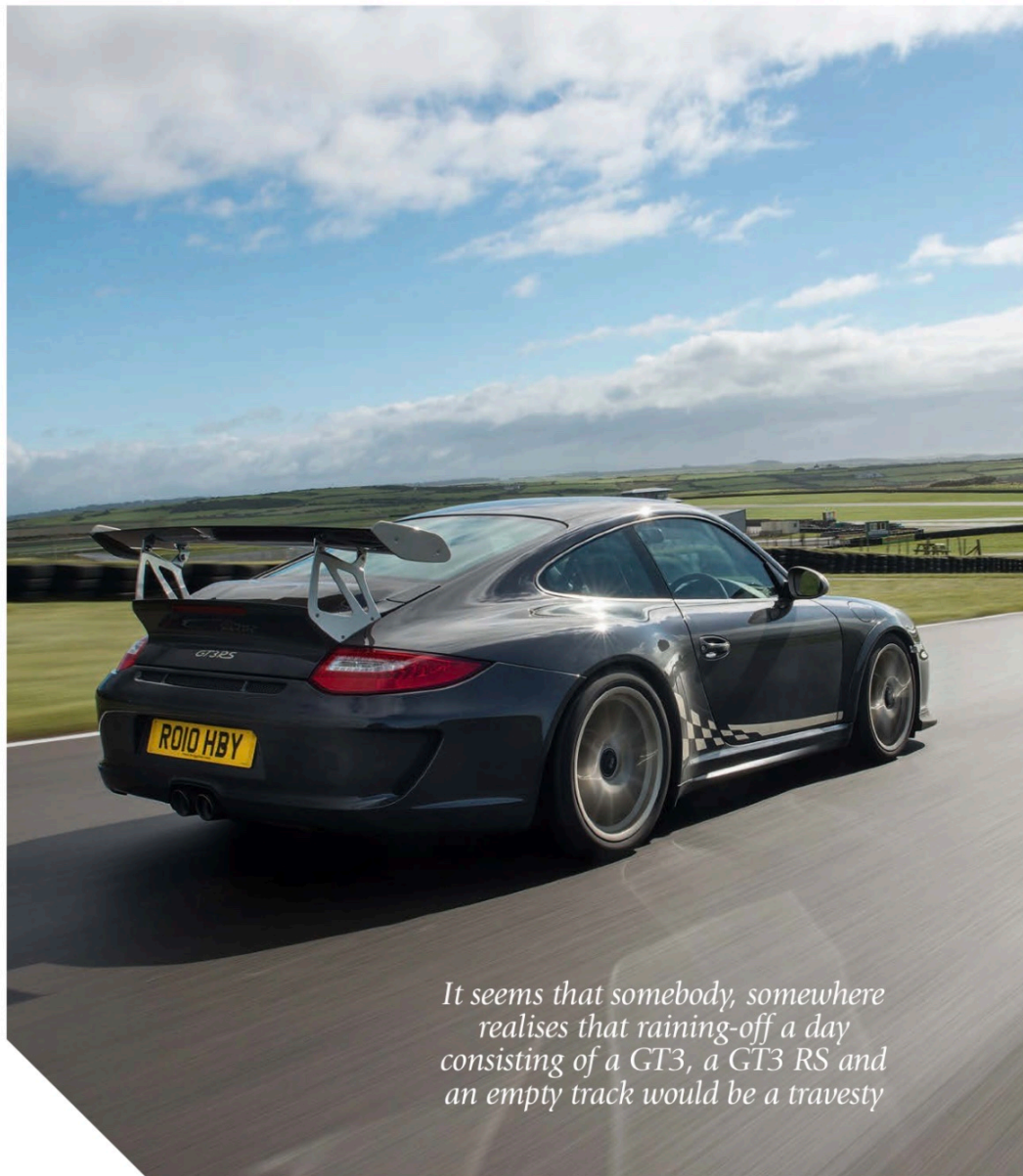




# Final Fling

This is it. This is what it comes down to:  
Two 997s, one track, one day. Which is  
the best 997?

Story: Jethro Bovingdon Photography: Andrew Morgan



*It seems that somebody, somewhere realises that raining-off a day consisting of a GT3, a GT3 RS and an empty track would be a travesty*



Welcome to part two of our long, tearful farewell to the 997 GT3 and GT3 RS. Yesterday (last month in publishing speak) we howled, skipped and slid across north Wales on empty roads and despite a threatening sky, the rain mercifully stayed away. All things considered it was a pretty bloody epic send off. However, today we're not just waving goodbye for good to 911 GB and RO10 HBY but we're sacrificing a couple of sets of Michelin Cups+tyres, too. Today Anglesey race circuit is all ours to do with what we please. We'll record some hard lap time data and drive just for the fun of it, which together should tell us whether there's really much to choose between a GT3 and an RS for hardcore track day enthusiasts.

At least that's the idea. Splashing between puddles towards the cars in the morning, the wind whipping big droplets of rain into a great, unbroken sheet of water, I'm not holding out too much hope. In fact, driving along a river that was once the A55 towards Anglesey at all of 45mph, wipers set to max, the RS aquaplaning

and skating quite alarmingly, I'm tempted just to turn around and crawl home.

Things don't improve as we pull into the pit lane – the paddock wind turbine looks ready for takeoff and through the grey murk I can just make out the white foam of crashing waves being hurled at the land mass. The staff at Anglesey are holed-up in a cosy office and say it should clear by midday. We collectively look out of the window and laugh at the absurdity of the hopeful forecast...

But then something magical happens. The clouds disperse, the sun starts to shine and within an hour the howling wind and percussive rain is but a distant memory. There is literally not a cloud in the sky. It seems that somebody, somewhere realises that raining-off a day consisting of a GT3, a GT3 RS and an empty track would be nothing short of a travesty. So that's it, it's time to get out the VBOX and see how the GT3 and the GT3 RS stack up on this brilliant circuit.

Naturally enough I take the slim-hipped GT3 first. On a damp track it feels sensational and

*The GT3 is simply incredibly exciting. It's just so absorbing and feels so fluid. Fast, too*



just like we found on the road in last month's episode, it's the cohesiveness of the package that is really amazing. Yes the 3.8-litre flat-six initially seems to dominate everything. The incredibly precise and instant response, the insistent torque and then the way it climbs into a frenzy towards the rev limiter really makes it a far more special engine than even the 430hp at 7600rpm and 317lb ft at 6750rpm hint at. However, once you become accustomed to this stunning delivery, the chassis, steering and brakes start to come to the fore. Pretty soon the shock and awe of the engine has faded to leave something approaching euphoria. The moment that you realise how finely tuned each dynamic component is to the next is the moment that you start to really pedal the GT3 hard. Today – still with yesterday's re-education of all things GT3 fresh in the memory banks – that takes about two laps.

We're using the Anglesey Coastal circuit and thankfully it dries pretty quickly, just a trace of stubborn moisture through the tricky Peel cresting right-hander slightly hampering the lap.

So you flash past the pits before tackling Turn One, a fast left taken in fourth gear. On the exit you rumble over the kerbs but then have to pull the car hard to the left-hand side of the track for the following banked right hairpin, imaginatively called The Banking.

From here it's a dauntingly fast run through a right-hander (Church) that seems to never end and you build up to over 125mph before turning slightly harder right again and climbing rapidly to the slowest corner on the track, Rockets, a left with a blind apex taken in second gear. Then it's a quick flick to a right hairpin, a short straight and then the tricky cresting and off-camber Peel.

From there the track falls away and you brake hard into a left-right Corkscrew and then try to build speed through the last left-hander and back on to the pit straight. It's a circuit with everything – fast corners, dips and crests, a massive braking zone and plenty of turns that require patience and superb front-end bite. The RS *should* really make its shorter gearing, extra power and wider track tell around here.

First it's the GT3's turn to register a lap. We



haven't recorded lots of laps around here before so it's hard to know exactly what to expect. For reference, last year I ran a new BMW M6 around the Coastal circuit in an impressive 1.17.22 and some bloke called Chris Harris recently recorded a 1.16.9 time in a 997 Turbo S. This will be about quality as well as (lack of) quantity, but I'm still hoping to match or beat the mighty Turbo S. So 'Sport' mode is selected for a sharper throttle, the dampers are on their stiffest setting and traction and stability control systems are disabled.

The GT3 has a tiny bit of turn-in understeer through Turn One but hooks up brilliantly on the exit and rides the jagged kerbs beautifully. Brake hard into The Banking and the front bites hard but the tail rolls into a bit of oversteer. This is actually quite a good thing as it straightens the car for the exit and gives a clean run up to Church. A little dab of brakes and then throw the GT3 at the apex. Again it displays superb front grip and the rear – here with optional dynamic engine mounts – is controlled and follows obediently. Now it's just a case of getting on the throttle as early as possible and trusting the car. The detailed steering feel allows you to be

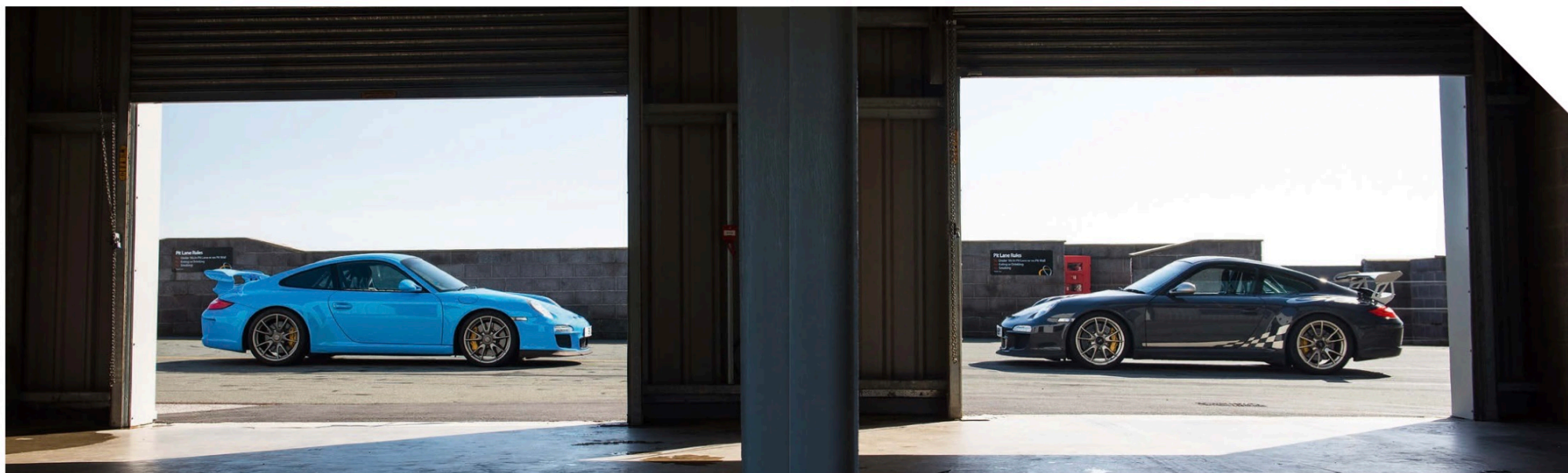
decisive and the numbers build very rapidly indeed. The GT3 can take the right-hand kink flat at nearly 130mph but then you can't slow it quickly enough for Rocket – so a lift is required to give the ceramics j-u-s-t enough space to make the apex.

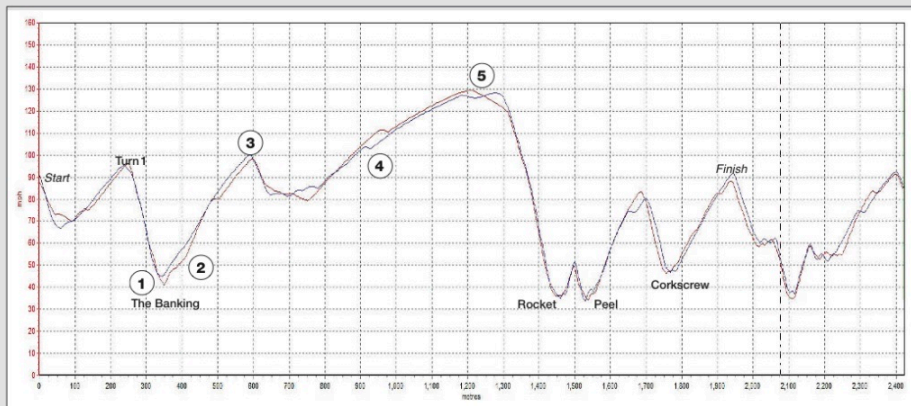
There's a little oversteer on the exit to Rockets and to correct it, get the car straight and then immediately turn hard right is very tricky indeed. So you tend to have to manage a bit of oversteer through the right hand part of this complex too, trying to bleed away any slip as it straightens so you can thump along the next straight. Peel is a pig to master and it sucks you in to carrying too much speed on the way in almost every time. Do so and the GT3 will understeer quite wide here and then – just as the circuit crests – snap into oversteer at the exit.

However, when you nail the entry it's superb, slipping into a lovely drift but still building speed quickly as you plunge back down towards the Corkscrew. This section demands heavy braking as you turn left and as the track falls away and the tail slides again through sheer momentum. It's actually the only corner on the track that can make the GT3 feel clumsy.



*The RS looks so at home in a pit garage, I can almost feel it shrugging at the GT3's turn of speed*



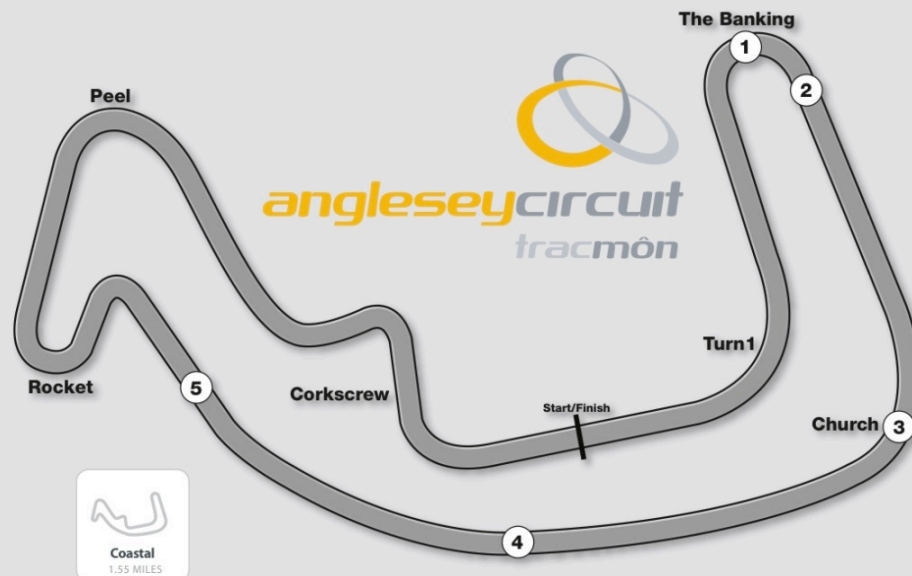


## GT3 v GT3 RS: THE DATA

The stability of the RS generally shows throughout the lap with smoother acceleration curves and higher minimum apex speeds. For example through The Banking (1) the RS never drops below 45mph whereas the GT3 is down to 41mph. It gets a cleaner exit too (the wobble on the GT3 line (2) suggests a bit of oversteer on the exit kerb) and by

Church (3) it's touching 100mph to the GT3's 97mph. This is a real confidence section and the RS brakes cleanly and then holds its minimum speed steady through this long corner, where the GT3 requires more patience before it can start to accelerate again. The GT3's longer gearing lets it claw back some time as the RS goes from third to fourth (4) but from here the RS' greater grip and

stability shows. It takes the final right kink in this section (5) with less of a lift as it stops more efficiently on the steep climb to Rocket. Carry similar speed in the GT3 and the car snaps sideways as you brake and you'll miss the next apex. For the rest of the lap the RS just eeks more time, showing more grip and greater traction. A full second around here is a big margin.



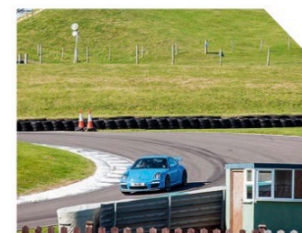
The end of the lap is tricky, too. Once you have plummeted down the Corkscrew there's a third gear left that looks easy but again seems to punish any excess speed on the way in with a nasty flash of exit oversteer over very rough kerbs. It's a busy lap and the GT3 is simply incredibly exciting. Every second you're managing the balance, feeling the car edge from mild understeer to driving oversteer and you really need to harness that pendulum to unlock the time. Simply drive to the front end and you would be hopelessly off the pace. So you cajole the car, provoke a little turn-in oversteer and then utilise the traction. It's just so absorbing and feels so fluid. Fast, too. The GT3 stops the clock in 1.16.3 despite Peel staying wickedly slippery.

The RS looks so at home in a pit garage and I can almost feel it nonchalantly shrugging at the GT3's impressive turn of speed as I plug in the VBOX. 'You think that was good, wait until you get a load of me...' On paper it should have a small but decisive advantage. Power is up to 450hp at 7900rpm, weight reduced by 25kg to 1370kg, the front track is 26mm wider, the rear

track up by 44mm and 13-percent shorter gearing takes full advantage of the RS' added firepower. What that little lot will add up to we're about to find out.

As on the road, the RS immediately does feel like a different car. There's a sense that it's lower and wider and it takes a single steering input on circuit to feel the added stability on corner entry. I don't just mean front-end grip, but the way the whole car instantly pivots with no perceptible roll and an amazing sense that front and rear axles respond as one. You'd swear the centre of gravity was a good chunk lower and although the stability makes it a little harder to tweak the balance with the throttle on the way into a corner, the RS actually feels more oversteery in general because only a trace of understeer remains and because the shorter gearing pumps up the power delivery markedly. 20hp more? Feels like 60...

So the circuit changes as you learn about the RS and the way you drive it changes, too. Instead of driving around a little understeer and managing oversteer the RS lets you really attack. That gorgeous feeling in the GT3 where you turn-



in on the brakes, feel the rear slip just a little and then manipulate the throttle to keep the tail moving just enough to kill any understeer is gone. Now the car turns-in with rock solid precision, there's just a tiny sliver of mid-corner understeer but it's gone in a blink and if you're up above 4000rpm it's replaced by smooth oversteer that doesn't seem to cost any time because the car is still accelerating at a ferocious pace. It feels at once more controlled and more rabid. It's louder too, a relentless howl punctuated by that heavyweight gear change that you just won't ever want to end. Rather than asking you to manage its little foibles, as the GT3 can, it demands that you really step-up and search for the last few tenths.

It's a real surprise to look at the data trace for these cars and find that such different driving experiences look so, erm, similar when etched as a simple speed/distance graph. The headline number looks good for the RS – it posts a 1.15.3, which is a full second quicker than the GT3 – but drill down into each corner and the RS' obvious

advantages from the driver's seat are really very small indeed. It carries a little more speed here, brakes a smidge later there, but describing the differences (see box-out) can't hope to convey the different feel and balance of these cars when you're going for a clean lap.

If data can't really illustrate what your eyes, hands and backside are telling you, then it's no surprise that the lap time isn't the whole story, either. The GT3 and RS do feel different but I'm not sure you'd describe one as 'better' than the other. Sure, the GT3 doesn't quite have the grip and stability of the RS but it draws you in more and certainly keeps you utterly involved at all times. Then again the RS feels rawer, goes harder and is so poised when it is sliding...

The truth is that you could make a cogent argument for which is 'best' for either of these wonderful cars. I'd gladly – make that ecstatically – drive these cars for a decade and enjoy every minute of it. Put a gun to my head and I'd take the RS and never sell it, never covet another car. Anyone got a gun handy? ☹

