

Endurance Racing at Snetterton *by Peter Swinger*

Long distance racing came early to Snetterton. From 1956 that bible of the motor racing enthusiast "Autosport" supported a championship for sports cars which was contested around the circuits of the country culminating in a three-hour race at the end of the season. In 1957 the Final was transferred to Snetterton and run on the weekend that the clocks were turned back at the end of British Summer Time when someone had the inspired idea of running a day and night race: the new Autosport Championship Final now started at four o'clock (when else!) and ran into darkness at seven o'clock. The format was to continue until 1964 with the exception for 1963 when the race was run entirely in daylight with a starting time of 1.30 pm.

That first running at Snetterton saw victory go to Ken Rudd driving his AC Ace and the Championship went to Ian Walker in a Lotus. In 1958 John Lawry won the Three Hours at the wheel of the Equipe Arden Lotus Elite at 77.5 mph from two Ecurie Chiltern-entered Cars, M E S Bond in a Frazer Nash and Wing Commander K W Mackenzie in an MG MGA.

In 1959 a name that was to become famous around the world took the honours: Jim Clark drove the Border Reivers Lotus Elite to victory and the Autosport Championship was shared by Bob Gerard in a Turner and Dickie Stoop in his Frazer Nash. The passage of another year saw Stoop win the race in a Porsche Carrera at 82.14 mph from Chris Sumner's Equipe Arden Lotus Elite and Alan Foster in the Dick Jacobs-entered MG MGA.

1961 saw Mike Salmon take the Gerrards Cross Motors D-Type Jaguar home in first place from Major Ian Baillie's Aston Martin (presumably a DB3) and Peter Sergeant's Jaguar E-Type. Salmon's winning speed was 81.53 mph and the fastest lap was set by Sergeant at 86.18 mph.

The author regrets that for 1962 he has only details of the winning car in the Three Hours which was Tommy Sopwith's Equipe Endeavour Ferrari 250 GTO.

The 1963 running was the only time that the Three Hours was run as a single race run entirely in daylight: Jim Clark took his second win driving a Lotus 23 entered by Normand Ltd. There were no less than forty-five entrants of whom forty-one came under starters' order.

In 1964 the race format reverted to its traditional format of a four o'clock start but it turned out to be the very last time. The race started in bright sunshine but there had been heavy rain earlier in the day which resulted in the track never properly drying out during the race and as the race wore on thick fog descended upon the Brecklands of Norfolk and the race was stopped twenty minutes early. But by that time Jack Sears had lapped the entire field in the John Willment-built Willment Cobra: it was a debut win for the car. Willment had wanted to purchase a Selby Cobra but Carroll Shelby would not sell him one of the six which were built so John built his own. At one time Jack was observed rounding Riches Corner holding the door open trying to see his way in the fog!

And so to the final running of the Autosport Three Hours: for 1965 the decision was taken to run the event as two sixty-five laps races on 12th September starting at 2 pm and 7 pm. Part One was won from a rolling start by Sid Taylor's Repco Brabham-Climax at 89.18 mph from A L Sergeant's Merlyn-Ford and D Beckett's Lister Jaguar. The results of Part Two are not available as the author retired his Sabre from Part One with mechanical problems and went home in disgust!

And that is the end of the story for in 1966 the Autosport Trophy Race was run on October 16th as an eight lap event which was led from flag to flag by Brian Muir piloting a Cobra entered by Race Proved by Willment. The Autosport Three Hours became an institution and was, for many years, the high spot of the Snetterton season.

Thus ended the first phase of long distance racing in the Brecklands: by 1966 John Aley was the Competitions Secretary of the East Anglian Centre of the British Racing and Sports Car Club

and under his aegis a round of the European Touring Car Championship came to Norfolk on 31st July. The race was The Five Hundred Kilometres of Snetterton run over one hundred and fifteen laps of the original circuit. Notable amongst the forty-seven entries were Paddy Hopkirk in an Austin Cooper "S", Jochen Rindt and Andrea de Adamich in Alfa Romeo Giulia GTA's Sir John Wimore and Jackie Stewart in Alan Mann's Lotus Cortinas and Hubert Hahne and Dieter Glemser in BMW 2000 T's.

On Sunday 17th September came the second running of the five hundred kilometres this time under the title of the Scott Brown 500 km European Saloon Car Championship Race, the last round of the European Touring Car Challenge. However, on this occasion only the smaller Classes ran at Snetterton the larger capacity cars having been removed to Oulton Park: so often over the years Snetterton had its good ideas pilloined and the races moved to other circuits.

The final running of the 500 kilometres took place on Good Friday 12th April 1968 when it was run as the BRSCC Guards 500 Km Race as a qualifying round of the European Touring Car Championship but on this occasion the larger capacity cars were back with entries from BMW AG. The overall winner was John Ewer Ford Mustang from Helmut Kelleners driving Auto-Kremer's Porsche 911 and Terry Hunter's similar car with Dieter Basche and Dieter Quester in the works BMW 2002. The winner's time was three hours thirty-one minutes 49.4 seconds at 88.28 miles per hour.

In 1980 that erstwhile Competitions Director of the British Racing and Sports Car Club the late John Nicol decided that his Club was fully capable of running a real long distance motor race and so the first twenty-four hour race in Great Britain came to be. The Brooklands Automobile Racing Club had run its Double Twelve between the wars but this was to be the first round the clock event. Such an event naturally produces side effects not least the fact that neighbours might object to cars passing their back doors throughout the night as might be the case with many circuits. However, Snetterton is fairly remote with not too many near neighbours although noise can be heard clearly at East Harling when the wind is in the right direction.

With sponsorship from the East Anglian car and van rental company down the ensuing years the race came to be known as "the Willhire" but to give it its full title it was "The Willhire Twenty-Four Hour Race". It was first run on the weekend of 21st and 22nd June 1980 and was billed as "Britain's first ever round-the-clock motor race". Practice took place at midnight on the preceding Friday evening and that format was to continue throughout the life of the event. That first running of the Willhire was for production cars be they saloons or sports cars and a team of cars could be run to compete in relay or singleton entries; those competing in relay had to carry a sash in the car which was actually running which caused the marshals some headaches in ensuring that it was in the car before it left the pits. There was more than one occurrence of the sash being retrieved from a car which had expired on the circuit so that the next member of the team could continue. The start time was, of course, four o'clock. There were some interesting entries including the family team of John, Robin and Martin Brundle in a Toyota Celica GT and Eddie Jordan drove a Colt Lancer with Jeremy Shaw, Barrie Williams and John Cleland whilst Stirling Moss was teamed with

Desire Wilson, Danny Chow and Juliette Slaughter in VW Scirocco. Twenty-three teams started and eighteen finished led home by the Opel Commodore SE Pete Hall, Martin Carroll, Hamish Irvine, Phil Dowsett, Syd Fox and Andrew Jolly who completed 955 laps of the 1.971 mile circuit.

The second running on 27th and 28th June 1981 attracted twenty-nine entries: the Brundle family was back and victory went to the Opel once again but this year it covered 990 laps. For 1982 the race was run for cars complying with the British Production Sports Car and Saloon Car regulations: there were twenty-two entries and the Opel completed 939 laps on its way to its third victory.

By 1983 the race had moved to the first weekend in June but attracted only twenty entries including two Caterham Sevens and two Porsches – a 911 and a 928 in Class which was for any car with a price or value exceeding £15000 on January 1st 1983. The 928 won completing 995 laps in the hands of Tony Dron, Win Percy, Andy Rouse and Phill Dowsett. At 4.6 litres it was the largest capacity car entered.

Come 1984 the entry list included two BMW 635CSi's amongst the thirty-nine entries (approaching a capacity grid). The race was won by the Porsche Carrera RS Tony Stubbs, Caroline Grant-Sales, Tony Bostock and Gerard Sauer which covered 952 laps in one minute 5.38 seconds over the twenty-four hours at 75.98 mph. There were twenty-four finishers. June the first and second 1985 saw the sixth running of "The Willhire": there were thirty-seven entries of whom twenty-five survived the winning car being the Ford Capri 2.8i entered by Roy Eaton and co-driven by David Oates and John Clarke all the way from Aberdeen.

1986 saw thirty-six entries over the weekend of fourteenth and fifteenth of June (always June to ensure the shortest period of darkness – John Nicol used to enjoy playing God and declaring that it was "night"). 965 laps were covered by the winning Ford Escort RS Turbo driven by Mike Smith and Lionel Abbott at 77.03 mph. By now the event was run solely for saloon cars which many people regretted. For 1987 the race moved forward a week to 20th and 21st June attracting a field of thirty-six entries including the managing Director of the main sponsor Roger Williams in a Ford Sierra RS Cosworth accompanied by Peter Sudden, Mike Littlewood, Dave Wallis and Graham Bryant. 984 laps were covered at 78.55 mph by the winning RS Cosworth of Robb Gravett, Graham Hathaway and Phil Bullman.

In 1988 Lionel Abbott took his second victory in the Willhire over the weekend of 18th/19th June win in a Sierra TS Cosworth at 81.5 mph accompanied by Graham Scarborough; they completed 995 laps at 81.85 mph.

1989 the BRSCC and Willhire really went to town for it was the year of the Silver Jubilee of Willhire and to mark the occasion the race was promoted as "the world's longest motor race" and run over twenty-five hours – to date it still holds the record. Mark Hales and Slim Borgudd won covering 1025 laps in a Sapphire Cosworth at 78.55 mph. There had been thirty-eight entries.

June 22nd and 23rd 1990 saw the event return to its "normal" format of just twenty-four hours and saw twenty-six starters: the Matt Neal, Dave Wallis, Stuart McCrudden BMW M3 covered 896 laps at 76.29 mph. There Mercedes-Benz 190 2.3-16 of Alistair Davidson, Ricky Fagan and Arthur van Dedem won on the road was excluded from the results by the Stewards following post-race scrutineering.

There were only twenty-one entries plus an invitation class of three for the 1991 race over the weekend of the fourteenth and fifteenth of June: victory at 909 laps went to the Kurt Luby, Will Hoy, Ray Bellm BMW M3 at 73.93 mph for the 1774.39 miles.

Although it was not realised at the time by 1992 the life of The Willhire was drawing to its close. Now co-sponsored by the Heat Electric Advisory Team (HEAT) the race attracted a mere nineteen entries BMW M3's took the first two places the Team Eurotech entry covered 928 laps at 75.47 mph from the Kurt Luby entry with the Abbott SAAB in third place.

For 1993 the Twenty Four Hours moved into July for the only time in its history to be run over the weekend of 3rd and 4th: entries had improved to twenty-four. Daley Thompson was drafted in to drive a Peugeot 106XSi with Eugene O'Brien which was the only entrant in Class E but just where he obtained the necessary licence is not known! This year the race was a round of the National Saloon Car Championship and a BMW M3 won again in the hands of Mike Jordan Kelvin Burt, Charlie Cox and John Morrison: 935 laps were covered at 81.87 mph.

So to the first weekend of July 1991 and final running of the Willhire twenty-four Hour Race – but it had not been planned that way: it was round seven of the National Saloon Car Cup. There were twenty-four entries (fittingly!) Including a BMW M3 from Munich in the Invitation Class. The winning Ford Escort Cosworth of Del Delaronde, Nick Torigiani, Jeffrey and Prochowski covered 939 laps at 76.31 mph; they were no less than ten laps clear of the Harrison/Liddle/Warburton Honda Civic.

And so the curtain came down on the only twenty-four race ever run in the British Isles (and one of only a very few around the world). Whether the event will ever return is in the lap of the gods for the BRSCC East Anglian Centre has made valiant efforts to bring it back to the calendar.



Snetterton Merry-go-round

The "Three Hours" 30th September, 1961

All the magic of night racing is captured in this fine photograph which is reproduced by courtesy of "The Autocar"