



50 YEARS AGO

The 1969 Birkett Six-Hour Relay Race

Dating back to 1951, this race was the brainchild of one of the 750 Motor Club's founder members – Holland 'Holly' Birkett. Following his death, the event was subsequently renamed in honour of the Club President. 2019 will represent the 68th anniversary of the six-hour event and the 69th Birkett event – the 50th anniversary was celebrated with an extra one-off 12-hour Birkett race. It is the UK's largest car race in terms of the number of cars entered and has been won by a number of famous names, including Colin Chapman and his team of Formula 1172cc specials.

In 1969 the recently formed Viva Drivers Club entered a team into the event and the race was run on the Silverstone Club Circuit. As per present day, teams comprised up to six cars and drivers and there were in excess of 40 teams entered that year – a quantity that has grown over the years – the 2019 event is expected to reach the GP circuit's 70-team maximum capacity.

The 1969 Viva Drivers Club team entered comprised Gerry Marshall and Eddie Heasell driving the Shaw and Kilburn Viva GT prepared by Bill Blydenstein, Chris Coburn with the Shaw and Kilburn Rally Viva GT, Jeremy

Lawrence with his Blydenstein-prepared Viva HB 1300, Peter Garratt with his Viva GT and Bob Beaumont with his mechanical specification Viva GT, formerly a pilot production 1159cc Viva de Luxe. Rodney Spokes was the Team Manager and Gerry Johnstone was the mechanic for the day.

The race was worked out on a handicap basis and Gerry Marshall had a strict limit on how many laps he was allowed to drive. With several relatively unknown cars and drivers in the team, the handicappers looked favourably on the team, and so thought they may be in with a chance of finishing well up in the results.

Gerry Marshall took the start and completed his allotted laps, followed by Jeremy Lawrence and Eddie Heasell, by which time they were vying for the lead against a wide variety on cars that included 750cc and 1172cc Formula cars, Aston Martins, various Austin Healey Sprites, MG Midgets and similar cars. Bob Beaumont took over in his Viva GT and continued until the car would not stay in top gear, at which time Jeremy Lawrence took over and Gerry Johnstone changed the faulty gearbox, lying on his back in the paddock under

the car, using the infamous 'S' shaped ring spanner, a feat that took less than 40 minutes. There were a few showers during the race that helped to make things even more exciting. Bob returned to the battle and at the end of the six-hour race the Viva Drivers Club team took the chequered flag, victorious by three laps.

The 750MC Bulletin report stated that "Gerry Marshall's very fast car – being shared by two drivers – was never out of first place" and whilst the Cars & Car Conversions magazine team hung on to second place for a couple of hours, they eventually relinquished it to the Historic Sports Car Club's team. The final top six was as follows:

- 1st Viva Drivers' Club
- 2nd Historic Sports Car Club
- 3rd Cars & Car Conversions
- 4th Special Builders 1200s
- 5th 750 Special Builders
- 6th Formula 1200

This was one of the first victories for Vauxhall cars in a major race in the modern era and all drivers received telegrams of congratulations from Geoffrey Moore, Vauxhall Motors' Sales Director. Some of the team were even lucky enough to receive a cheque from the company to cover the cost of a set of racing tyres. Although the Viva Drivers Club entered the race for several years, this was the only time they finished at the top, suspecting that the handicappers were far more aware of the team potential and were never so generous again.

Several of the team members had their 50-year reunion in July 2019 at the Vauxhall Bedford Opel Association annual rally at Sywell Airfield. Those present included Chris Coburn and Bob Beaumont, Rodney Spokes, Gerry Johnstone, and Andrew Duerden, the Vauxhall Archivist, who brought the Britax Trophy.

Unfortunately two of the team members are no longer with us but the majority of others are here today at Silverstone as Guests Of Honour to celebrate half a century since their Birkett victory, and see how the event has evolved - yet remained exactly the same - over the years since they lifted the trophy.

