

THE BIRKETT RELAY RACE

The most varied and dangerous race in the world, or so they say. That has PPC written all over it. James Winstanley lays out the timeline of our race

Legend goes,' says Dave Roberts. Team PPC member and Sylva Phoenix driver, 'that just before Le Mans in 1965, Graham Hill was given a long, in-depth technical explanation of how best to operate Rover's BRM turbine car by a white coated development technician from Rover. After listening patiently, Graham then replied, saying, 'The thing is, old boy, I'm not going to do any of

that. I'm just going to get in and then go as fast as I can.' And that, in a nutshell, is the theory that we're all keeping under a hardened outer shell of technical premise, veil of organisation and demeanor of racecraft contained within our team at the 750 Motor Club's 63rd and annual Birkett Relay race. Anything and everything was already in the midst of going wrong before we'd even started, so we'll just have to rely on our natural ability. Gulp.

THREE WEEKS TO GO

- Ian Smythe's RWD Fiesta is still in pieces. He applied for the PPC competition a few months earlier from the confines of a hospital bed, and although his body is back on track, the car needs sorting.
- I still have a novice cross on my BMW, and the flooding at my last races at Cadwell Park is threatening the last licence signatures needed to play with the endurance boys.
- PPC's Mark Hammersley has

DRIVER: Andrew Stacey
CAR: MINI Cooper S

DRIVER: Ian Smythe
CAR: Ford Fiesta Mk2 RWD

DRIVER: James Winstanley
CAR: BMW 318i

DRIVER: Geoff Wade
CAR: Ford Fiesta

DRIVER: Dave Roberts
CAR: Sylva Phoenix

DRIVER: Mark Hammersley
CAR: Clio 162

broken his hand with a sledgehammer. We don't know yet if it will be anywhere close to healing in time. Or if the doctor will let him race. Perhaps the Clio is an automatic.

● Some good news; we've been approached by Iain Jones, an experienced Birkett team manager who can co-ordinate our rabble. He also has an agenda to fulfill in beating another team managed by his wife. I can't remember whether I'm allowed to write that or not.

THE RACE FORMAT

The race dates back to 1951 and was devised by one of the 291 Motor Club's founding members - Holland 'Holly' Birbeck. The event this year is held on the huge Silverstone GP circuit, and each team has to log as many times as possible in six hours, usually with between four and six cars and drivers. Although some of the historic cars weren't present this year, the variety of machines still ranged from a Smart car, to an ex-BTCC tin top, to a Jaguar XK8, and more classics and Caterhams than you can actually see. There are even Salers and Spines that do a great job of looking like a Le Mans car in your rear view mirror.

Sometimes casually described as The Most Dangerous Club Race in the world due to big differences in closing speeds, the race is clearly handicapped so that everyone has a fair chance of doing well based on their car's specs.

TWO DAYS TO GO

- Geoff hits the rolling road for tweaks after his Integra's trigger wheel fell apart at Blyton Park. The dyno operator hears a knock. It's game over for the Honda.
- Geoff remembers buying a Fiesta race car last year on eBay in a haze of Shiraz.
- Geoff finds an ex-LMA Saloons Mk5 Fiesta with a Racing Puma engine in his garage. Driving it onto the trailer adds another 50% to the number of test miles he's driven it. That should be fine.

ONE DAY TO GO

- Dave arrives at Silverstone first as 350 cars behind 350 tow vehicles gradually start to take over the landscape. He bumps into a couple of people from his usual Sports Specials series. They suggested Dave is now a 'professional driver' for being in Team PPC.



- Andrew and I try to apply white backgrounds for race numbers in a dark and windy paddock. Dave pre-empted this situation by purchasing a white car nine years ago. 'Saves on roundels' he donotes. Wise man.
- We all stand in our garage, looking across at the Mazda Works team next door with their Jota-prepared MX-5. They have a cacophony of equipment, engineers, professional racing drivers and branded backing boards to cover the breezeblocks.
- Team PPC are competitive types so, beer in hand, we start applying PPC stickers to everyone's cars and gaffer tape our time-lapse camera to the wall.
- We start to worry about missing Iain, our rear-wheel-drive Fiesta pedaller. Partly as he has the fastest car and is our secret weapon. But mainly because his kind wife is bringing a huge pan full of chilli.
- Midnight. We've all retired to bed, except Iain, who has just arrived. Turns out that converting his clutch from cable to hydraulic actuation a few weeks ago didn't do much for his reliability. He's just spent the last five hours converting it all back again.

RACE DAY

- 7am. Eyelids unpeel themselves, there's a good waft of dampness in the air, but a bright sky and contagious

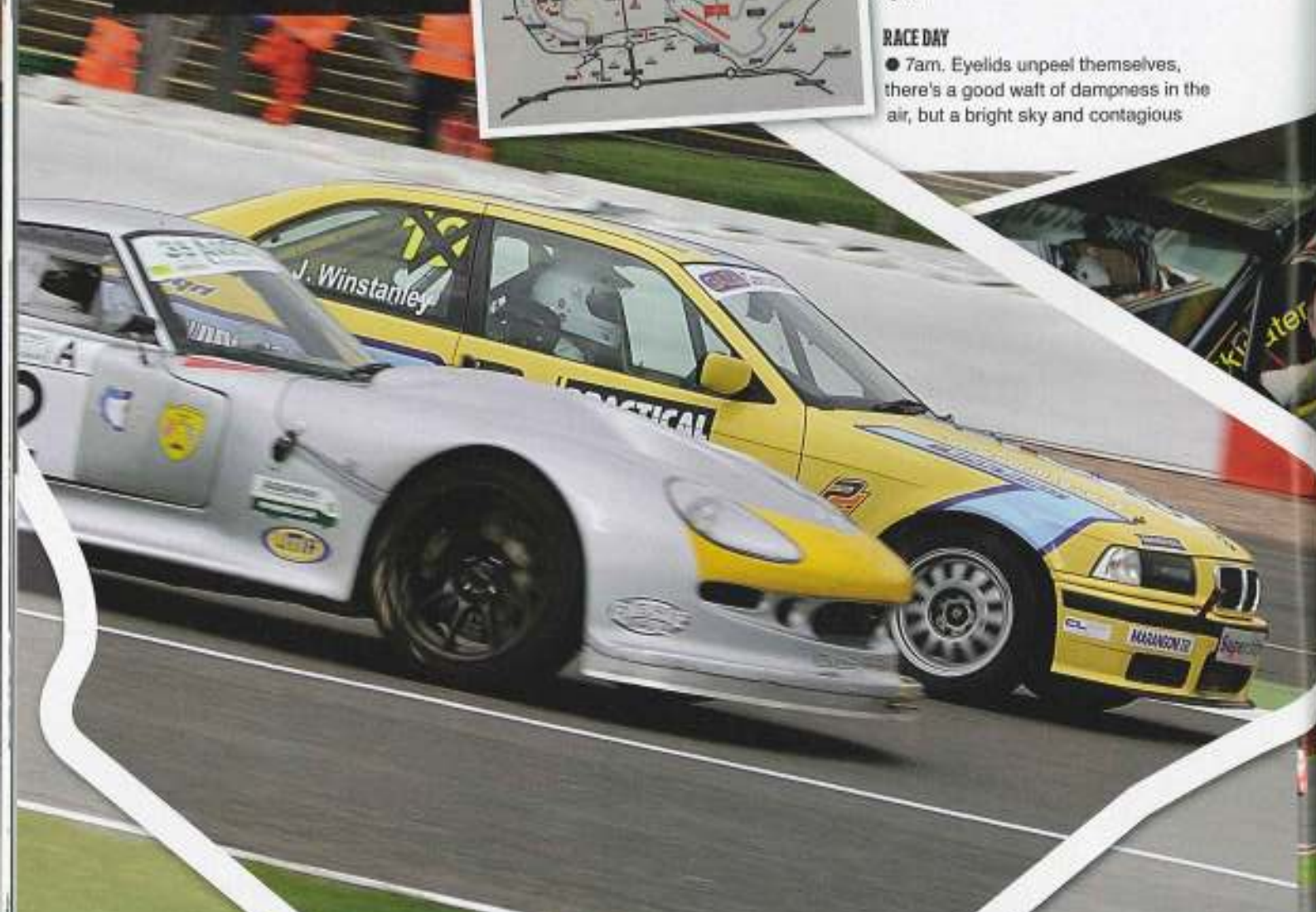
atmosphere around Silverstone. Our starting positions have already been decided based on the handicap - we are 59th out of 70 - and practice gets underway.

- Iain receives his very own wake up alarm at the pit wall, when a big Jag lights up its tyres exiting Woodcote and smacks the concrete right underneath him.
- Our plan is both simple and complicated at the same time. We are all to do 45 minute sessions as an expected maximum per fuel tank. Iain will take the start in his Fiesta, and the rest of the order is to be formulated later on, as we know that anything could happen...

THE RELAY RACE

Omins

...which is exactly why, come race start at 11:45am, not Iain, but Mark is on the grid in his Clio. The rain came down hard in practice, and it was decided that a front-wheel-drive car on all-rounder tyres would be better to start. His hand might still be a bit broken, but if Matt Neal can race in BTCC with the same injury, it's good enough for our Mark.





Andrew's MINI proved faultless in the wet conditions.



A purple clipboard is the sign of a pro team manager.



Onlookers soon realise this is no ordinary Mk2 Fiesta.

CLIO 182 RACER

Over the last year the 750 Motor Club have been developing this new race category, by taking a bog standard Clio 182 and giving it a spec ECU and suspension to keep cuts rolled down tighter than a first gear hairpin. This car was less modified than Shaun Osborne's race, but is the car I've sampled at the Birkett. This particular Bucks Automotive-prepped car provides track wheel-to-wheel racing in its own right. I wasn't sure at first how it would cope being the underdog to Radicals at the Birkett. The little 182 however really upheld its hot hatch status. It showed its tail to a lot of much faster cars, especially in tricky conditions. It was fast, well balanced and supremely easy to drive. Which was lucky as my hand was still broken. I was astounded at how effortless it was to drive in the wet conditions, so I could really concentrate on enjoying the racing. It might even have convinced me to have a crack at the series next year. - PH



Geoff waits to drive his Fiesta for the very first time.



Team briefing and brew starts the day.

'We think it's all over. Then, all of a sudden, it's not...'



Mark - 'I'm sat in a borrowed car on the Silverstone grid, so far back I can't see the lights, and surrounded by 69 other drivers with their sights on victory. The lights go green and we all stream down to turn one. Cars vanish behind me in the spray as the track in front fills with brake lights. Opportunities and gaps open up ahead, bits of flailing bodywork litter the air, and I oblige by sticking my Clio in every space I can find.'

● Lap by greasy lap the 182 unleashes its diminutive power on cars with twice the grunt, and the cross-Channel combo sails past them on one of the UK's fastest circuits.

● Back at pit HQ, Iain is looking every bit the consummate professional on the pit wall with a stopwatch. Andrew is sitting in his car ready to go, and everyone else is acting out a rendition of 'Michael Fish The Musical,' such are the animated and theatrical fingers in the air attempting to guess what the weather might do next.

35mins
● Mark has gone AWOL. There are a few worried faces, then a marshal appears to say that he's broken down on the other side of the circuit.

● Andrew hits the track immediately in his MINI.

● Mark and the stricken car return. Despite the guys from Bucks Automotive having set up a cracking car that allowed Mark to climb up to 33rd and an epic 14th on handicap, it transpires that taking evasive action over the kerbs to avoid a pesky slow M3 was enough to detach some OEM wiring, killing the ignition and fuel.

● It all looks pretty undramatic from the pit lane, but Andrew and his MINI are rapidly beavering their way back up the standings. 'The car is very easy to drive on the limit,' he says afterwards, 'especially in the wet, so I made the most of it and seemed to pass quite a few cars initially!'

50mins
● The rain keeps on coming. Andrew keeps on climbing. 'Every lap was a voyage of discovery, but I had to have a word with myself at one point as I started to get a bit scrappy and out-braked myself in various areas.'

● 'Dry or wet? Wet or dry? Not sand paper but tyres,' says Geoff. 'Sodding difficult to know which ones to put on the car...' Having been dropped back for Andrew to take advantage of the conditions, he's out next in his new-but-old Fiesta.

1hr, 30mins
● Andrew has brought the position back up to a healthy 39th overall, and Geoff heads out. 'I'm pleased to discover a

nice big speedo in the Fiesta to make sure I don't break the strict pit lane limit. Unfortunately it turns out that it doesn't work.'

2hrs, 10mins
● Geoff's times are constantly improving as experience builds and the track dries. Inside the car though, things are going awry: 'Tick, tick, tick. What's that I wonder? Maybe nothing, get on with it. Next corner, big vibration - feels like a knackered driveshaft. Best to abandon ship quickly.'

● Geoff appears at random in the pits. 'Entering the pit lane, I waved my arms about like a demented octopus in an attempt to alert Team PPC to my early arrival.'

2hrs, 15mins - James
● I'm dispatched. Having never driven at Silverstone before today, downtime this morning was spent on a laptop. Not in-depth analysis of data and linear potentiometers, but instead watching Andrew's mate driving in a previous Birkett on YouTube, since 20 minutes in the pouring rain wasn't enough to learn my way round.

2hrs, 25mins
● I round a corner to see what I think was a Midget on its roof but seemingly otherwise untouched, not moving, with the driver still sat inside holding the wheel.

3hrs, 05mins
● The session keeps getting better and better, and although the 150bhp BMW tends to head backwards on the straights, it hustles its way well through the bends and manages to hunt down a couple of other Compacts to help my confidence. - Back in the pits, Geoff has confirmed driveshaft failure, so it's game over for the Fiesta.

● Dave is sat in his Sylva ready to go. He has carefully analysed the weather and decided that he would run on his well worn Yokos, as his other option - more well worn Yokos - are in his van. 'I did check my wheel nuts were tight though, just so it looked like I knew what I was doing.'

3hrs, 10mins
● I'm called in after an hour under a perfectly timed safety car attending to a stricken Ginetta frontrunner.

● Dave's little white Sylva buzzes onto the track. 'I seemed to be the lead behind the safety car with everybody behind me. I'd never experienced this before so just went 'my quite quickly,' which is probably a 'Radical quite slowly.'

● The safety car comes in, Dave puts his foot down. 'I got in front of a Seven going through Copse, but then he wanted to get by again through the left-right-left-right bit after. Or is it right-left-right-left? What's that all about? He must have thought it

was a race or something.'

3hrs, 30mins

● In the garage, Ian's trusty pit crew have removed the wets from the Fiesta to put it back on slicks, and in the process have been re-cutting the threads on the Group 4 wheel nuts which were found to be damaged on removal.

● Meanwhile, Dave in his Sylva is having fun. 'I had a great blast after that, caught and passed a works MX-5 as we both overtook a Smart

Car, then stayed ahead of them. As the pit board came out, it was quite a moment as the last race for me with this faithful little car.'

4hrs

● Running 55th, Ian heads out on what is now a dry track. 'Dave flashed past, the adrenalin surged and I was off! I powered out of the pit lane with the turbo coming on hard, and the car feels good, and I ease off the power at Maggots and hard onto the brakes. The slicks are still cold, but down the Hangar Straight she pulls us up to about 130!'

● The hours count towards five out of six. 'My car feels great, and we put in some solid laps, although I made a couple of silly mistakes with a small off due to missing my braking point, and again at Maggots when finding a gearbox full of neutrals. Before I knew it, the pit board was shown and I felt like I'd only done six laps when it was actually 17, and I'd beaten my previous best by five seconds. I returned to the pits absolutely buzzing, these are the highs that only racing can give!'

5hrs

● After some dry setup changes with the help of guru Andy from Podium Prep, Andrew dutifully takes up the proverbial Team 8 baton again to take us to the finish. 'When I got out there it was obvious how much quicker the circuit was in the dry, although the MINI now seemed to be getting passed more than I was passing other cars.'

● I'm reminded to sit in the BMW by Ian, as with Geoff's Fiesta retired, Dave's Sylva about to be handed over to its new owner, Ian recovering from his stint and Mark's now temporarily fixed Clio a last resort, I'm marked as the emergency backup.

5hrs, 55mins

● The chequered flag is mere minutes away, and there's something quite fitting about experiencing the race conclusion whilst sat fully suited and booted in my

MINI driveshaft eventually gave up.



car. As well as making new racing friends and generally having a laugh all weekend, we'd battled with everything from vintage classics to modern GTs and drivers ranging from the nearly-new to current BTCC wheelmen. I didn't want to go home, I just wanted to sit here and soak up the atmosphere.

5hrs, 56mins

● Ian is stood on the pit wall with two others, and they all appear to be celebrating slightly prematurely by doing The YMCA. It must be a private joke.

● A split second later, the sound waves finally finish their journey across the narrow tarmac lane and the penny drops. They're actually trying to remember the universal hand signal of 'James-quick-start-your-engine-as-Andrew-has-an-issue-and-is-20ft-away!'

● Roger. Let's go again.

5hrs, 58mins

Back in the pits it transpires that Andrew's car tried to swap ends on him, and he knew something was seriously wrong. As it turns out, a drive shaft failed and had just lasted long enough to make the pits.

6hrs

● One half lap and one flying lap later I cross the line to see the chequered flag. Slightly sheepishly, I coast through all the pit lane applause for completing my sub-four minute session.

The handicap race was so close that if we had more than a few seconds delay in the unplanned changeover then I wouldn't have finished the extra lap, and we'd have dropped to 40th in the handicap standings. Not so bad but in the end Team PPC came home a really rather epic 22nd in the overall 70 team handicap, 9th in our 26-strong Class B.

With our army of helpers and dutiful team manager calling the shots, it turns out that Dave's old quote was almost right. We basically just got in, drove, and had a cracking result. I'll wager a pretty penny that Graham Hill didn't experience the same atmosphere and camaraderie along the way though.



If in doubt, just build a tyre wall with them.

Dave's office space for one more race only.



PPC BMW wasn't the only Compact on track.



Forget the cars, check out this funny cat video!



Mark likes to practice victory waves in advance.



Team PPC bonding. With gaffer tape that is.

Andrew did the breakfast run at the drive-thru.



THANKS

Our entire team of helpers, pit crew and caterers, and of course John Jones. JJJ/Thelapart Insurance www.insurance-partnership.com/schemesforraces/mini/sport Puck's Automotive www.bucksautomotive.co.uk