

1984 Birkett Six Hour Relay Race

by Fiddler

The 750 Motor Club's 6 Hour Relay Race is about the nearest an ordinary club member can get to long distance endurance racing. It is a type of event made famous by the Le Mans 24 Hour and the fact that it doesn't conjure the same image is partly explained by its position in the motoring calendar. Silverstone in October is definitely not like the middle of France at the height of summer. The empty stands opposite the start line and pits emphasise the fact that it is very poorly attended by spectators which is a pity as it can afford a very interesting and exciting spectacle. This year's race was no exception.

One feature of the event is the wide variety of teams taking part. Pre-war Austin 7s and Alvises compete alongside Chevron B16s and Porsches although modern, less exotic sports cars predominate. Each team is given credit laps based on the individual car's known performance. During the race these are gradually added to the team's total to produce the winner on handicap. Not for the first time, a group from the Merry Fiddlers natter at Epping succeeded in gaining an entry to this prestigious event and, as usual in these matters, were strongly supported by other members of the natter on the day; Andrew Short and Bernard Bull on hand to cope with any mechanical disasters, while Andrew's father Dave, together with Jacqui Perrin, Glenn Castle, Ralph Bateman and Mike Linward took charge of lap timing and pit signals. The cars entered were the Midgets and Sprites regularly used in MG Car Club championships and driven by Len Bull,

David Bull, Kevin Denson and Andy Hall. Our manager was Dave Jeal, who took to this unaccustomed role with great enthusiasm and cunning particularly with his first main task of preserving or improving our number of credit laps. It was clear before the event that Dave's own car, a Sprite, would be the fastest of the group with Kevin Denson's Midget filling the No.2 slot, so it was decided that if everything went well these would be the only two cars used. It was then necessary for all the drivers to gain some experience with Dave's car and this was achieved on the Wednesday before the race during a practice day at Mallory Park. However, two unexpected discoveries were made at this time, the first being that the car could only be driven for 1 hour 5 minutes on a full tank of petrol at racing speed. Although unknown then, this was to become a critical factor later on in the race. The second discovery was that the clutch became inoperable after running for 3/4 hour or so, apparently due to vaporisation of the clutch fluid. This of course, was easily changed but had it occurred during the race would have severely disrupted our race schedule. The merit of advance preparation cannot be overstated!

Race day itself was dry and cool and, as usual for Silverstone, a stiff breeze was blowing which luckily kept away the rain. Our practice session started at 09.20 and was uneventful except that Len Bull, lapping at 1 min. 22 sec., was too fast for the manager and Andy Hall complained of oversteer as a result of a full tank of petrol; something his car had never had before! After practice, our handicap remained unchanged at

84 credit laps which was not particularly good, especially as a team of post vintage Bentleys, had an incredible 95 lap credit. This was the second highest credit behind the Austin 7 team, and it was going to be a difficult target to beat as we knew from practice that at least one of their cars was several seconds per lap quicker than our fastest. The race proper started at 12 noon; one representative only from each of the 28 teams being allowed out at any one time. A marker or sash had to be carried by each car while on the circuit and only when a 'marked' car passed the start/stop line would a lap be counted. As the entrance to the pit lane was before this point, and cars could only change over in the pits thereby losing at least one lap, it was essential for changes to be kept to a minimum. With our fastest car capable of only 1hr. 5 mins. racing there would have to be at least five. Len started out in Dave's car and immediately settled to a lap time of 1 min. 19 sec. and was gradually whittling this down when after 27 mins. the race was brought to an abrupt halt. At Becketts, one of the Porsche B team did a good demolition job on the rear end of a Turner right in front of Len's Sprite. Fortunately for him, both cars parted on impact allowing Len to go through the middle. Despite being forced to drive over some of the wreckage plus spilled oil and petrol, he made his way unscathed back to the pits. The mess took some time to clear up so when the restart was made the first 27 mins. were void and the race reduced to one of 5 hours with a revised handicap. This suited us even less as the faster Bentley team still had a 9 lap advantage.

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Nevertheless, Len had managed 21 laps during that 27 mins. and that looked well for the rest of the race.

After refuelling, Len was again first out at the re-start, and with lap times of 1 min. 18 sec. settled down to complete 22 laps (27 on handicap) in the first half hour, enough to put us in 13th place. The Bentleys, who had completed the same number of laps were placed 6th due to their advantage, while the leading team of Chevrons had completed 31 laps with no credits. Dave's policy of running the same car gradually paid off as teams began to lose time in changing over cars. Our glory came at the end of the first hour when it was announced that the Merry Fiddlers team were lying 1st with Bentley 2nd and Alvis 3rd. Five minutes later Len was in the pits out of petrol.

Kevin Denson was next away in his own car but couldn't keep going at the same pace as before. Nevertheless he was able to put in laps of 1 min. 22 sec. right from the start and maintain this time throughout. So much so that later when asked to explain one inconsistent lap of 1 min. 26 sec. he told our manager rather indignantly it was because he had spun off! While all this was going on, Dave's car was re-fuelled and made ready again for the next changeover. At one and a half hours our position had slipped to 8th with 87 laps (67 completed) while Bentley were 1st with 89 (66 completed), 750 MC Racing and

Technical 2nd with 88 and Turner 3rd with the same number of laps. Progress was continued and when Kevin came in at the end of the second hour our team had pulled back to 6th place. Despite the exhaust pipe coming loose and the engine overheating due to loss of water, his car was running well. After changing the radiator cap and tightening the exhaust, it too was put back on standby. For the third time, Dave Jeal's car was out, this time piloted by David Bull and once again it settled down to lap times of between 1 min. 18 sec. and 1 min. 20 sec. By the end of the third hour despite slipping to 7th, we were still well placed on 173 laps (133 actual). Bentley were still 1st on 178 with Porsche A now 2nd on 176 and Alvis 3rd also on 176. On cue, at 1 hr. 5 mins. with the engine making signs of running out of petrol, David came in and handed back to Kevin. This was our fourth changeover and with everything going to plan complacency set in. Kevin only needed to stay out for 43 mins. but with the car still overheating, brakes steadily becoming ineffective and a bad engine vibration, he was back in after 42.

Andy Hall now had the unenviable task of being the last one out in the long suffering Sprite knowing that the car had to last 1 minute longer than he had petrol for. Remarkably his first flying lap was 1 min. 16.89 sec., all in a car that must have felt strange to him. At the fourth hour or team had been lying 5th with still the Bentleys

out in front, Alvis second and Porsche A third, but at four and a half hours we were 4th only one lap behind the Porsche team and they were in trouble having to make a late changeover. With Andy driving like a demon the 1 hr 5 min. time was passed and still one more lap to complete before the finish. It seemed an eternity waiting at the pit rails for the car to come into sight round Woodcote but there it was having crossed the finishing line with the engine misfiring, just before the flag went out!

We hadn't quite made 3rd place overall, although we were comfortably 1st in class. It was a magnificent achievement by any standards. With only two cars the team had driven 245 laps not counting credits, in 5 hrs. 27 mins. racing. Even more remarkable Dave Jeal's Sprite had completed 150 of them and together with the 50 or more laps put in as practice at Mallory a few days before, had not had a single problem. The tactics had paid off. Later, the équipe celebrated its achievement in the time honoured fashion thanks to the generosity of the proprietors of the Merry Fiddlers, in whose name the team had entered and Monza Classic Cars who had also supplied food and drink throughout the day. Next year who knows, we may do even better, but one thing's for certain we shall be there. How about you?

Len Bull at Copse during the relay. (Photo: Harold Barker). ▼

