TEAM SPIRIT

Now in its seventh decade and more popular than ever, the 750 Motor Club's Birkett Six-Hour Relay Race is once again open for entries in 2014

Words: David Lillywhite **Photography:** Mel Walker/Steve Jones

JIM CLARK, GRAHAM HILL, Gerry Marshall, Vic Elford and Richard Attwood all took part in it. Steve McQueen is said to have become hooked on endurance racing as a result of it. Colin Chapman, Jem Marsh and Eric Broadley developed their now-famous brands with help from it.

What is 'it'? The famous Birkett Six-Hour Relay Race, in which historic saloons can run up against modern specials. Up to 70 teams of between four and six drivers compete to lap the circuit as many times as possible within the six hours, with only one vehicle per team allowed out on track at any one time. Entry is restricted to saloon and sports cars – no open-wheelers – but that still allows for a hugely eclectic mix of cars of all ages out on track.

In fact, the Birkett is often said to be two events in one, because in addition to competing for the maximum number of laps in the Six-Hours, teams also compete in a handicap classification, which in theory can be won by anyone. Each team, unless it's in 'scratch' position, is credited with a number of laps, according to perceived performance (based on observations and timings by the organisers at previous race meetings throughout the season).

This means all teams should have a chance of winning the handicap side of the competition. In fact, due to the volume of traffic on track, it actually favours the slower cars, which are more easily able to meet their target race times as they're less affected by congestion.

The entertaining formula was dreamt up by one of the 750 Motor Club's founding members (and later president), Holland 'Holly' Birkett,

with the first event taking place in 1951. When Birkett (pictured above) died the race was renamed in his honour, and it's been run ever since. It started out at Silverstone, moved to Snetterton for a while, and is now back at Silverstone on the full GP circuit. Last year the club achieved a record maximum capacity entry of 70 teams.

In those original races there was little in the way of a track at Silverstone, and the Relay was run on a one-off circuit using a selection of the internal runways on the airfield – often described as a cross between the latter-day Club and Grand Prix circuits. Diversity was always a characteristic, as Richard Hudson-Evans summed up perfectly back in 1979: '...From Minis to Morgans, from Ferraris to Ford Anglias – and it has not been unknown for the unspeakable to lap faster than the desirable'.

The humble cars are often the most fun to complete in, as Steve McQueen found driving a Mini in the 1962 Birkett. Richard Attwood chose a Triumph TR3, while Vic Elford went for an Anglia. It was a far cry from the Porsche 917s that all three later experienced in respect of that other endurance race, the Le Mans 24 Hours...

The secret of Birkett success is for a team to keep a car circulating the track at all times – which means that avoiding driving errors or mechanical failures is crucial. The critical role of the team manager comes into play here: it's their job to decide how long a car goes out for, and when. Driver changes cost time, but leaving a car out on track for too long could cause a breakage or even an over-tired driver to spin or crash. Strategy is everything.

Of last year's competing teams, many had the full complement of six cars and drivers per outfit. Most tend to choose similar cars, and those that don't usually go for similarly matched machinery. Inevitably Caterhams and Radicals are popular, but in 2013 there was a team of Jaguar XJSs and another made up of XJSs and XJ40s; one of Morgans, four- and eight-cylinders; another of MR2 Mk2s; one of MX-5s; another of Midget and Sprites; and a team made up of MGBs plus a lone Allard.

The names reflect the camaraderie of the event. We like last year's 'The Fat and the Curious', as well as the paired teams of 'Three Southern Softies & A Northern Monkey' and 'Three Northern Monkeys & A Southern Softy'. And you won't be surprised to read that 'BWRDC Angels' was an all-woman team – although 'Run By Birds' wasn't...

Inspired? The Birkett takes place at the end of the season, on Saturday 26 October, but the sooner you gather up a team and apply for a place, the better. Entry costs £1450 per outfit, and each driver must join the 750 Motor Club, at just £20 each. More details on www.750mc.co.uk or from +44 (0)1332 814548.