

# RETRO: BTRDA AT 75

Photos: LAT archive and Maxine Fack

# SEVENTY FIVE YEARS OF FUN

## A group of drivers upset with a 1938 trial created an organisation that would have a huge impact on motorsport at the grassroots

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In December 1938, a group of concerned citizens met in unsettled times to discuss the big talking point of the day: organisational issues blighting car trials.

The event that had sparked their ire was the London-Gloucester Reliability Trial. While organisers had written to entrants promising an event “for the tastes of the ordinary member who enjoys an occasional adventurous journey” the reality was somewhat difficult. A series of tough hills meant that only two cars – both Allard Specials that were effectively designed for use on trials – completed the route with clean sheets. The event finished six hours behind schedule.

The concerned competitors decided to form a new association that would help improve the quality of trials around the country. The British Trial Drivers Association was born – and this year celebrates its 75th anniversary. A lot has changed in the world in that time, but the BTRDA (A rallies committee was added in 1953) remained firmly focused on running professional championships and events so that its members can fulfil its motto and have ‘serious fun.’

“The ethos from 1938 carries on,” says British Trials and Rally Drivers Association president Mike Broad. “If you look at the compilation of the committees it’s all competitors or former competitors who understand their sport.” These committees get together to run one of the disciplines that the BTRDA is involved with. There are seven committees in total and they cover rallying, rallycross, autotest, AutoSolo, sporting trials, car trials and the Allrounders prize.

“The BTRDA is an association rather than a club,” says Broad. “We don’t regularly meet every week or every month. We’re a team of committees and it’s the committees that give the direction. They have always been competitors of the particular area of the sport that they look after. That’s the key to the BTRDA.”

The success of that approach can be seen in rallying. The REIS Get Connected BTRDA Rally Series is the most popular in the UK, with some events reaching entry numbers of up to 180 cars. “It’s because the people on the committee are good thinkers,” says Broad. “And we allow them to do what they want to do. That’s so instrumental. There have only been subtle changes to the regulations over the years

and there’s been no big issues in the last 25 years. So the sport hasn’t radically moved and that’s given stability to the events and helps them and the sport to get stronger and stronger.”

Its not an easy job, as former co-driving star Broad knows from his years on the rally committee: “The time and effort they put in, and that all the committees put in, is impressive. They’re really giving a lot of time and they only have teams of six or seven people. That’s another reason why it’s so successful, the dedication that the committees show. A lot of the competitors have no idea how much work goes on.”

The BTRDA is very good at dealing with problems that crop up from time to time, as may be expected from an organisation with 75 years of experience. Currently, it is working on rallycross. Its Clubman’s series isn’t running this year for a variety of reasons. “Rallycross is something we’re looking at,” says Broad. “The main aim is we must get club motorsport back into rallycross. We want it back at a proper grassroots level. We’re working on that for 2014 and I’m confident we’ll get somewhere with it.”

Another challenge that the BTRDA is tackling is getting the message of AutoSolo and autotests out there to potential new competitors. “It really is a cost-effective way to get into motorsport,” says Broad. “Our people have worked very hard on it but perhaps we haven’t quite got that message out enough just yet.”

For all the challenges there are many success stories. One of those is the Allrounders series, which is unique in British motorsport. “It was dreamed up in the 1960s by Denis Flather,” says Broad. “He thought the pinnacle of the BTRDA should be the allrounder that competes in at least two of our series. Even more precious is the allrounder who competes in the same car. It encourages skill and rewards the club member who is the most skillful.”

A show of the stability of the BTRDA is the fact it’s only had four presidents since it was founded back in 1938. “It’s quite amazing,” says Broad. “I’ve changed the role a little. We operate like a proper business so it’s now a working position. I don’t personally get involved in the sporting committees though. They work without interference and we back them because we think they’re the best. These aren’t mainstream sports so we’ve got to have competitors at the helm. Four or five years ago we did a find a driver contest with *Motorsport News*. We were at an assessment day and two or three people came up and asked us where our head office was. They thought we were running a proper company like the MSA or the BRDC and I thought that was a fantastic accolade.”

It also shows how serious the BTRDA is about what it does. But motorsport is about having fun, hence the BTRDA’s strap line of Serious Fun. “It has to be serious because we’re sponsored and we’re using other people’s money,” explains Broad. “We have contracts that have to be done professionally. It’s got to be run as a business but we do have a lot of fun too. In the future we won’t change anything radical, we’re happy where we are.” ■

## 1938



The controversial Gloucester Trial led to BTRDA formation

### BTRDA PRESIDENTS

The BTRDA has had just four presidents since it was founded in 1938

NAME	YEAR
Maurice Toulmin	1938 – 1959
Denis Flather	1959 – 1967
Vacant	1967 – 1974
Denis Flather	1974 – 1989
Brian Midgley	1989 – 2007
Mike Broad	2007 – present

### Uncovering the rich history, but surprisingly few winners, of Sporting Trials

The world was a dramatically different place back in 1938, and so was the motorsport of the day.

Grand prix still took place on huge closed-road circuits and rallies, at least as we now know them, didn’t exist. There was only one type of trial rather than the sporting and car types that we have now. And the trials were much larger than they are now. For example, the London-Gloucester Trial that sparked the formation of the British Trial Drivers Association began in Shepperton, Surrey and ran over to Cheltenham before 13 observed competitive sections.

“They were big things back then,” says Julian Fack, the current chairman of the BTRDA Sporting Trials committee. “There were factory teams and the sport was probably where rallying is today. The cars were largely road going, and they used to go on the roads as part of the events. So they had to be registered and taxed. That lasted up until the early 1960s.”

The BTRDA didn’t immediately begin changing the way trials were organised. In fact, as you might expect, a few external factors meant it didn’t do much during its early years. “There were no trials for seven years during World War Two,” says Fack. “Motorsport was banned to save petrol. The problem then was that petrol continued to be rationed in Britain until 1950.”

As the UK recovered from years of war, grassroots motorsport slowly began to make a comeback.

“Sporting trials as we know it now was founded by the Royal Automobile Club in 1956,” says Fack. “The specials came along and started beating the road cars in trials so the RAC created a class specifically for the specials. That’s largely the regulations we still compete with today. It was then that trials split into the two categories we have now: car trials and sporting trials.”

It was at this point that the BTDA was able to start making an impression on the sport. It’s important to remember that it was formed not to promote the sport but to maintain the standards of the trials. It instigated a reporting system where drivers would write in with comments about the trials they had completed. That developed over time into organising championships.

The BTRDA isn’t unique, and other clubs around the country still run successful trials. But it’s notable that every event on the MSA British Sporting Trials Championship is also a part of the BTRDA series.

The sport of trialing has a rich history, although because it took place at a grassroots level it hasn’t been as well documented as grand prix racing.

Fack’s brother John and Duncan Stephens, who are both on the

sporting trials committee, have been building an archive of all the sporting trials results to date. It’s thrown up some fascinating results.

“We’ve collated most of the results but we’re missing big chunks from the 1950s and 1960s,” says Julian Fack. “The amazing thing is that there’s a staggeringly small number of people who have won trials. About ten people have won two thirds of them.”

For a sport with such a long history that is truly remarkable. Fack believes there is a clear reason for the pattern: “Trials demand a high level of skill and a very high level of concentration over a long period of time. A grand prix is over in an hour and a half but sporting trials can be six hours of continuous concentration. Very few people can maintain that over a whole day. It’s not uncommon to see someone have a brilliant result by lunch time but they’re nowhere at the end of the day.”

“We have newcomers who have penalty scores of more than 100 but the top five have only 20 points and they can’t believe those low scores. I always say anyone can do one good section. Some can have one good round, but very few can keep it up all day.”

Sporting trials are a unique form of motorsport and really has to be seen to be truly appreciated. For more information on the events or the BTRDA visit [btrda.com](http://btrda.com).



Sporting trials require huge amount of concentration

### THIS WEEKEND

The BTRDA is celebrating its 75th anniversary with a dinner and dance at the Drayton Manor Park Hotel near Tamworth in Staffordshire on Saturday.

But that isn’t enough for a motorsport club. Its members thrive on competition and so a variety of events will run at two nearby venues through the day. Spectator entry is free but you may be charged to take part in each event.

#### Catton Hall

Three branches of the BTRDA will be represented at Catton Hall near Burton upon Trent.

There will be a non-competitive car trial where members of the public can have a ride in the competitors vehicles. There will also be a sporting trial demonstration, which will conclude with a competitive bout between World Rally Championship winning co-driver Robert Reid and former Subaru World Rally Team boss David Lapworth. “Robert Reid and David Lapworth are going to have a shock as to how difficult it really is,” says BTRDA Sporting Trials committee chairman Julian Fack. “But they’ll have a lot of fun and it’s good publicity. When David Coulthard had a go in a car for the BBC a few years ago the pictures went everywhere. It’s good publicity for us when people come to see.”

A competitive Historic Sporting Trials event will also run. The trial has a taster permit, which means spectators (and former trials drivers) can have a go even if they are not a member of a motor club. The venue has grassy banks and few trees, which means it should provide a risk-free opportunity to have a go in the powerful machines.

**Starts:** 1030hrs  
**Postcode:** DE12 8LN

**Curborough**

Curborough Sprint Course will host three other sports that the BTRDA runs each year. The venue is only 15 minutes from Catton Park.

A non-championship autotest will be open to anybody. Entrants will be considered a member of the BTRDA for the day. The same is true of an AutoSolo. For the latter, any car can be entered if the driver has a driving licence.

Entry for competitors is £10 for both the AutoSolo and the autotest.

**Starts:** 1030hrs  
**Postcode:** WS13 8EJ

“It has to be serious... but we have fun”

MIKE BROAD

