



The *Bristol* Sprint

Filton Airfield

28 October 1945

The British and Colonial Aeroplane Company established its new aircraft factory in the village of Filton, just to the north of the city of Bristol, in 1910. In the 1920s, by now renamed the Bristol Aeroplane Company, they also established the massive engine plant a mile farther out at Patchway.

By the outbreak of the second World War the plants, straddling the A38 Gloucester Road and separated by Filton airfield, had expanded significantly, and was the largest aircraft factory in the world. The workforce, which peaked at over 50,000 employees in 1942, were busy producing Blenheims and Beaufighters and a range of engines that also powered many other aircraft, such as the Wellington bomber with its Pegasus power units.

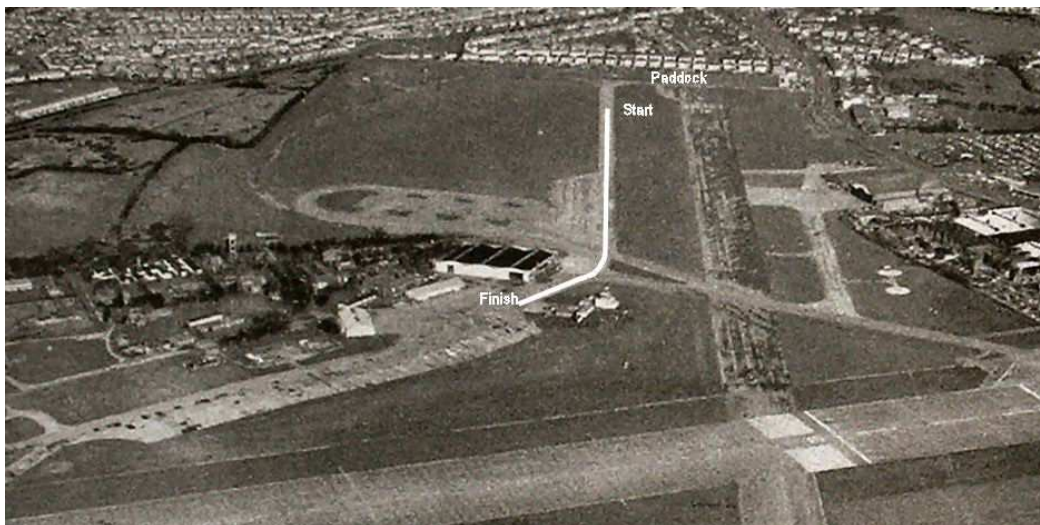
Many Company employees had been actively involved in car and motor-cycle sport before the war and, in the autumn of 1944 with the war's end on the horizon, these enthusiasts formed the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club. While the war was still in progress activities mainly comprised social events, and a gymkhana for cars and 'bikes was held on the north-eastern corner of the airfield. With the ending of the war in Europe in May 1945 Club activities could be increased.

Motor racing enthusiasts everywhere were keen to resume competitions, and BAC members were among those involved in the first timed speed event to be authorised by the RAC, a hillclimb in August at the Bristol MC&LCC's twisty, loose surfaced, Naish Hill venue near Portishead. Wartime airfields such as Filton now appeared attractive as prospective motor racing venues. In addition to Company use Filton was also occupied by the RAF; but by 1945 this had been reduced to ferry and flight test operations. In December 1941 Filton's concrete runways and taxiways had replaced the two pre-war grass runways so now it naturally invited the attention of the Club.

Ambitions were high, as the following report from the Bristol Evening World newspaper of July 27 shows: *"The motor section {of the BAC MSC} intends to hold at least one first-class road race a year, probably on the perimeter track and runways at Filton. World famous crack drivers will compete"*. For a first experimental event however the 'Bristol Sprint' *"the first opportunity for machines to be opened out to the full that has been presented anywhere in the country since 1939"* the report continued, was planned for Sunday 28 October 1945. Prior to the second World War motor racing on mainland Britain had been confined to a handful of circuits: Brooklands; Donington Park; and Crystal Palace, so other forms of speed event had a greater prominence than today. Competitions on open tarmac courses that allowed racing machinery to be fully extended could also be considered to be 'motor racing'. Club Secretary John Siddall therefore felt able to claim that the 'Bristol Sprint' represented *"the first post-war motor race meeting in this country"*.

Organising this event was not without difficulty however, with official permission being granted only five days before the scheduled closing date for entries. The 'paddock' was up at the north end of the airfield. The sprint course itself, on a tarred concrete surface, was half a mile long, starting at the northern end of the taxiway parallel to the NE-SW runway and, according to period reports, was quite challenging. As the Motor reporter wrote: *"The course, to the fastest drivers, was rather a terrifying affair, consisting of nearly half a mile of straight road, slightly downhill followed by a flat-out bend to the right. Here the track was very wide {over 50 feet}, but to offset this advantage, the camber, designed more for drainage than speed, leant in all*

directions at once". Following this long bend, past what were then RAF buildings to the right, and the control tower to the left, was a short run to the finish line, then plenty of space to pull up.

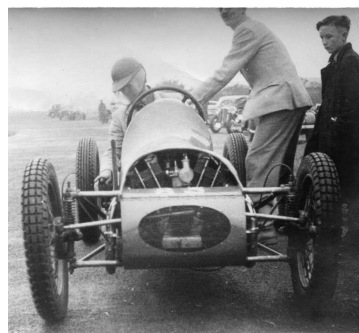


A 1950s view of Filton airfield looking northeast with the approximate 1945 sprint course marked

As might be expected from those at the forefront of technology, much thought and effort had been put into the conduct of the event, Siddall claiming the use of 'walkie-talkie' radio and photo-electric timing as "firsts". The Evening World reporter commented "*The ingenious and effective timing system was designed by Rodney Mellor and other members of the club and used on Sunday for the first time. It consisted of an electric shoe placed under the competitor's front wheel and held on the end of a broomstick. This was wired to the other end of the course, where it set an electric clock in motion. The clock mechanism was stopped when the vehicle cut a light beam across the track at the finish.*" Aldis lamp signalling (supplemented by the radio) was used from the airfield control tower to start and finish lines. The RAF presence on site was put to good use, with their fire and ambulance services being supplemented by a St John ambulance.

The event catered for both motor cycles and cars and naturally attracted much attention, with an entry of around 100 fairly evenly divided between those on two and four wheels. Although nominally restricted to members of the BAC MSC and guest local clubs, drivers from all over Britain were entered.

Among the racing cars local aces such as Naish hillclimb winner Walter Watkins in his V-twin JAP-engined Watkins-Nash special, Alf Morrish, and BAC test pilot Dick Northway, were joined by Alec Issigonis and George Dowson with their advanced Lightweight Special, and the R-type MG of Dennis Poore. John Bolster had 'Bloody Mary' and Bob Gerard a 1.5 litre supercharged ERA (R4A) and a sports Riley Sprite. The sports car classes also included Sydney Allard, Rivers Fletcher's Alvis Speed 12/60 and Arthur Mallock in his Austin 7 special 'Bren', while Tony Crook had his Frazer Nash-BMW 328. The motor cycle contingent included former TT winner Bob Foster on a 600cc grass-track Levis and St. John Horsfall on a Vincent-HRD entered by Rivers Fletcher.



Walter Watkins in the Watkins-Nash

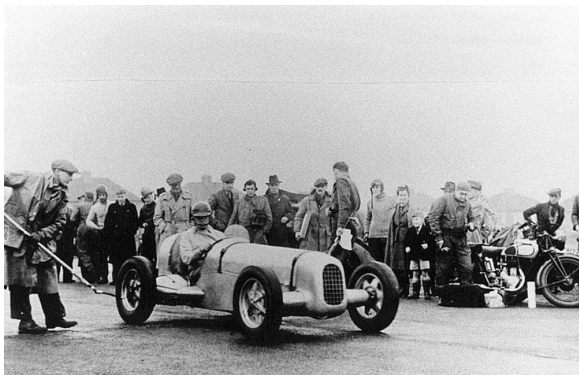
Although not officially open to the public a number of interested onlookers found their way in, such as John Eason-Gibson, and Denis Jenkinson, who later recalled that he was working at Farnborough when word went round about the event and, as it was something not to be missed, came down by car with a crowd to see the fun.

The late autumn weather wasn't kind however. Practice was underway by 10.30 am, but it poured with rain throughout the morning session - *"it was impossible to maintain full speed owing to the driving rain"* according to the Motor Cycling reporter. However the rain cleared by the time the meeting started with the motor-cyclists' runs, although the course remained damp throughout and was covered in puddles. The only serious mishap of the day involved a motor-cyclist, Bristolian E Powell crashing his sports Triumph Speed Twin on the fast bend. *"Powell got too far to the outside of the corner and continued straight on over the grass, with his throttle apparently jammed and fighting full lock swings all the time eventually to crash some 100 yards further on"* read the Motor Cycling report; he was taken off to the Bristol Royal Infirmary with a reported broken leg.

Fastest motor cycle time of the day was the 27.4 seconds by St. John Horsfall on the 998cc Vincent, to win the Club Cup. *"His progress round the bend was spectacular"* recounted Motor Cycle *"for the surface at this point was a trifle rough, and his spring frame appeared to be working overtime."* Just 0.1 seconds behind was Tommy Wood's 500cc JAP-engined Erskine Special, Wood also winning the 350 class on a Velocette KTT. Second in the unlimited sports class was BAC club member Ian Macleod on a 596cc touring Scott. Club Treasurer Mike Nedham was less successful however, his R5 special BMW being handicapped by gear-shift problems.

Alf Morrish comfortably won the 1100c sports car class in his supercharged MG PA, a good ten seconds quicker than the 750cc Austin Specials of David Allen and Arthur Mallock. Competitors were able to enter more than one class, thereby having multiple runs, and running again in the upto 1500cc class Morrish cut 0.1sec from his time, but was now outpaced by RE Richards' Rover 12 Special, Ken Baillie-Hill's HRG, and the class winning Riley Sprite of Bob Gerard. After working all night on the oil pump, BAC club member Pat McCormick, finished rebuilding his ex-Fane Frazer Nash 'Nurburg' at 5am, only to be handicapped by a slipping clutch.

Best time in the unlimited sports car class was recorded by Bath garage owner Len Parker, renowned as a forceful driver, in a 3.5 litre Jaguar 100. This, however, was only after a triple spin on his first run resulted in him crossing the finishing line backwards and narrowly missing a substantial van, although he'd not lifted his foot throughout the whole episode. His time would actually have won him the class, but he improved by 0.4 sec on his second, less eventful, run. Gerard and Baillie-Hill ran again in this class, and this time their positions were reversed, with second place taken by Baillie-Hill who, between runs, and assisted by Eason-Gibson, replaced a broken pushrod on his HRG's Meadows engine.



The Lightweight Special on the start line

Issigonis won the small racing car class, *"the india-rubber suspension for all its four wheels proved a boon and a blessing to the 'Lightweight Special' over the bumps"* according to Autocar, ahead of Walter Watkins, and Poore's MG R-type. Watkins and Poore also placed 2-3 in the upto 1500cc racing car class, Poore's MG not running cleanly, and without a bonnet, on this occasion being beaten by Bob Gerard in the twin-rear wheeled ERA R4A.

Fastest time of the day was contested by Gerard and Bolster. *"Bob Gerard was quite nervous knowing that he was expected to make ftd and fearing he would fluff it"* remembered Mike Nedham. However it was Bolster who had more to be concerned about, the short wheelbase 2 litre twin JAP-engined special not really suiting the course. *"Not having experienced any really fast driving for so long, I found that holding my small and extremely unsteady car at about 110mph on the slippery surface was a pretty alarming experience"* he related in his autobiography. Autocar described Bloody Mary's progress: *"It snaked through the bend with the well-known Bolster elbows working overtime and with a trace of front wheel flap."*

On his first run Bolster, seemingly almost submerged in some of the deeper puddles, had his engine cut out near the bend, and recorded 30.0 sec, which on his final attempt, with the track a little drier he improved by a tenth.

In contrast Gerard's ERA was easier to handle "*He took the bend very wide with sheets of spray streaming from all his wheels and was beautifully steady with no fireworks*" Autocar continued. Ultimately recording 26.3 seconds (average 68.5 mph), Gerard finished nearly 3 seconds clear of Bolster to secure the Bristol Trophy (*pictured, right*), donated by Club President Ken Bartlett. Third quickest overall, and not far adrift of Bolster, was Sydney Allard who clocked just 31 seconds, running his open 4-seater Allard Special with hood up, having driven the car to Bristol the day before.



Despite grey skies throughout the afternoon the rain held off until the meeting concluded at four-thirty, after nearly 300 individual runs, 170 timed. Autocar congratulated the club on the "*speed and efficiency with which the meeting went off*" commenting that "*the organisation was good without being officious*"; the event was an all round success, and crowned an exciting first year for the new Club.

Following that first sprint there was an intention to put on something similar for the public the following year, although not on the same track, and dates were set for further events in July and September 1946. However, as work began in March 1946 on extending the main runway for the planned new Brabazon airliner, this probably ruled out further use of Filton, and the dates were ultimately cancelled. In 1965 a request by the BAC Motor Club to use the airfield for a sprint was refused, and so the Bristol Sprint in October 1945 remains the only speed event to have been run on Filton airfield.



Fifty years later the BAC Motor Club arranged to revisit the site to commemorate the event, and the first use of an airfield for motor sport in the UK. On 5th November 1995 a small party was allowed onto the airfield by the then current operator British Aerospace. Although the exact 1945 course couldn't be used - a couple of Airbus aircraft were parked in the way - Sir John Venables-Llewellyn (*pictured left*) brought along Gerard's winning ERA R4A from 1945 and, in company with Chris Dowson and the Lightweight Special and Tony Crook (with a Bristol 400 rather than the Frazer

Nash-BMW 328 he'd originally run in 1945), took a few short blasts up and down the runway.

Filton airfield was closed in 2012 and many areas are being built over. A few patches of the old sprint course currently remain near the new Aerospace Bristol heritage centre, where the last Concorde to fly (Alpha Foxtrot) now sits approximately on the finish line of the 1945 Bristol Sprint.

*Pete Stowe
January 2020*

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| Filton Airfield Location: |
| Coordinates: 51.522614 N, 2.578077 W |

Known Entries and Results

Bristol Sprint, Filton Airfield, 28 October 1945.
 Organised by the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club.
 Invited Clubs: Bristol MC&LCC, West Bristol MC&LCC, Bristol MCC, Douglas MCC.

| No. | Driver | Car | #No. | colour | cc | Timed 1 | Timed 2 | Best time | Class Pos |
|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|---------|--------|-------|------------|------------|--------------|--------------|
| Sports cars under 1100cc | | | | | | | | | |
| | AW Morrish | MG PA Midget | | green | 847s | | | 36.2 | 1 |
| | DF Allen | Austin 7 Special | MV3806 | | 747 | | | 46.8 | 2 |
| | AR Mallock | Austin 7 Special | EPG171 | | 747 | | | 48.0 | 3 |
| Sports cars under 1500cc | | | | | | | | | |
| | FR Gerard | Riley Sprite ¹ | APM351 | cream | 1496 | 33.0 | | 33.0 | 1 |
| | KV Baillie-Hill | HRG | GPB250? | red | 1496 | 34.4 | 33.2 | 33.2 | 2 |
| | RE Richards | Rover 12 | | | 1496 | | | 35.0 | 3 |
| | AW Morrish | MG PA Midget | | green | 847s | | | 36.1 | |
| | Pat McCormick | Frazer Nash Nurburg | MV2303 | | s | | | | |
| | JE Patrick | MG Midget T-type coupe | | | | | | | |
| | | Singer Le Mans | | | | | | | |
| Sports cars unlimited | | | | | | | | | |
| | Len Parker | Jaguar SS100 | | black | 3485 | 32.0 | 31.6 | 31.6 | 1 |
| | KV Baillie-Hill | HRG | GPB250? | red | 1496 | | | 32.6 | 2 |
| | FR Gerard | Riley Sprite ¹ | APM351 | cream | 1496 | | | 33.1 | 3 |
| | G Northway | Jaguar coupe | | | | | | | |
| | MA Howard-Rowson | Invicta | | | 4500 | | | | |
| | AF Rivers-Fletcher | Alvis 12/60 | GO2619 | | 1452? | | | | |
| | ES Taylor | AMAC Special ² | | | 2000s | | | | |
| | TAD (Tony) Crook | FN-BMW 328 | EYW3 | black | | | | | |
| Racing cars under 1100cc | | | | | | | | | |
| | A Issigonis | Lightweight Special | | | 747s | | | 32.0 | 1 |
| 85 | WO Watkins | Watkins-Nash | | red | 996 | | | 32.7 | 2 |
| | JM Dowson | Lightweight Special | | | 747s | | | | |
| | D Poore | MG R-type | #R0258 | | 746s | | | 34.2 | 3 |
| Racing cars under 1500cc | | | | | | | | | |
| 89 | FR Gerard | ERA | R4A | white | 1496s | 28.3 | 26.3 | 26.3 | 1 |
| 85 | WO Watkins | Watkins-Nash | | | 996 | 32.2 | | 32.7 | 2 |
| | Dennis Poore | MG Midget R-type | #R0258 | red | 746s | | | 34.3 | 3 |
| Racing cars unlimited | | | | | | | | | |
| 89 | FR Gerard | ERA | R4A | white | 1496s | 27.2 | | 27.1 | 1 |
| 100 | JV Bolster | Bolster Special "Bloody Mary" | | | 1962 | 30.0 | 29.9 | 29.9 | 2 |
| | SH Allard | Allard Special ³ | LMG192 | | | 31.0 | 31.0 | 31.0 | 3 |
| | K Burgess | | | | | | | | |
| Class unknown | | | | | | | | | |
| | DMR Adams | Bugatti-Anzani ⁴ | YU 2200 | | 1496s | | | | |
| | Gerry Millington | AC | | | 1991 | | | | |

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|--|-----|------|------|------|---|
| Motor Cycles - 53 entries | | | | | | | | |
| M/C upto 350cc sports | | | | | | | | |
| | TL Wood | Velocette KTT | | 348 | | 30.4 | 1 | |
| | JA McLachlan | MV Special ⁵ | | 248 | | 32.8 | 2 | |
| | JF Saunders | Velocette | | 348 | | 32.9 | 3 | |
| M/C unlimited sports | | | | | | | | |
| | St.J Horsfall | Vincent-HRD Rapide ⁹ | | 998 | 28.4 | 27.6 | 27.6 | 1 |
| | IG McLeod | Scott | | 596 | 33.2 | 32.9 | 32.9 | 2 |
| | HF Whitehouse | Norton | | 490 | | | 33.1 | 3 |
| | N Seymour-Smith | Norton ⁶ | | 490 | | | 34.3 | 4 |
| | OE Norris | Scott | | | | | | |
| | E Powell | Triumph Speed Twin | | | 35.1 | fail | 35.1 | |
| M/C upto 350cc racing | | | | | | | | |
| | TL (Tommy) Wood | Velocette KTT | | 348 | | | 29.4 | 1 |
| | CA Dickens | Excelsior JAP | | 346 | | | 30.5 | 2 |
| | R Good | Norton | | 348 | | | 31.5 | 3 |
| | JA McLachlan | MV Special | | 248 | | | | |
| | JF Saunders | Velocette | | 348 | | | | |
| | D Cox | Triumph | | 349 | | | | |
| M/C unlimited racing (21 entries) | | | | | | | | |
| | St.J Horsfall | Vincent-HRD Rapide ⁹ | | 998 | 27.4 | 27.4 | 27.4 | 1 |
| | TL (Tommy) Wood | Erskine Special ⁷ | | 495 | 28.1 | | 27.5 | 2 |
| | J Mountford | Excelsior-JAP | | 495 | 29.0 | 28.6 | 28.6 | 3 |
| | AR (Bob) Foster | Levis ⁸ | | 596 | 29.6 | | 29.6 | 4 |
| | HH Brown | Triumph | | 498 | 30.5 | | | |
| | AE Davis | Velocette | | 348 | 30.9 | | | |
| | N Seymour-Smith | Norton ⁶ | | 490 | | | 30.4 | |
| M/C Class unknown | | | | | | | | |
| | TUC Waterman | Triumph | | 498 | | | | |
| | RJ Petty | | | | | | | |
| | Mike Nedham | BMW R5 | | | | | | |

¹ Chassis no. S27S7069

² Aston Martin with AC engine

³ Four-seater body. Originally intended for the 1939 Motor Show, and completed after the war. Although reputedly entered in the unlimited sports car class, and running in full road trim, the organisers moved the Allard to the racing car class in. In 1945 press reports of the event the engine was stated to be a 3662cc Ford V8; a letter to Motor Sport magazine from Adlards Motors states it was a Mercury engine; & in Tom Lush's Allard book it is stated to have been a 3917cc Lincoln V12.

⁴ 1927 Type 37 chassis no. 37238

⁵ Basically a Velocette

⁶ 1925 machine

⁷ JAP engine

⁸ Grass-track machine

⁹ Entered by AF Rivers Fletcher

Sources

Autocar, Motor, Motor Sport, Light car, Motor Cycling, Motor Cycle, Bristol Evening World, Bristol Evening Post

Filton Airfield Through Time, Andrew Appleton, Amberley Publishing, 2012

Action Stations 5, Military Airfields of the South West, Chris Ashworth, Patrick Stephens Ltd., 1982

Motoring is my Business, John Bolster, Autosport, 1958