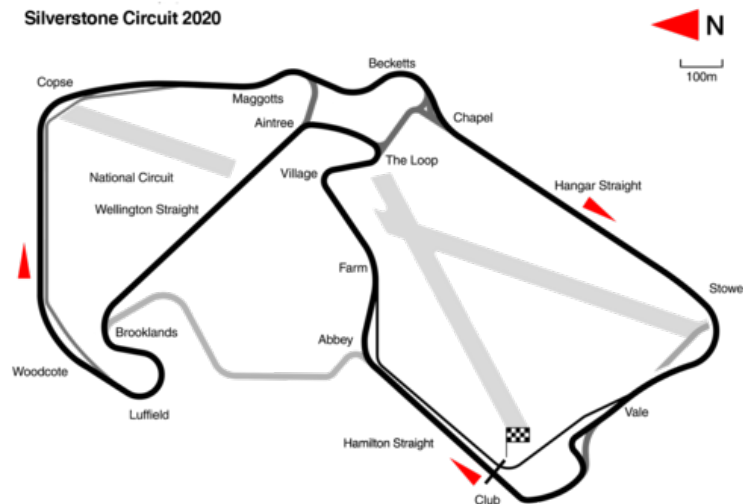


Silverstone

The Home of British Motor Racing

By Bob Vitrikas



Silverstone, the word brings visions of Formula 1 cars screaming around the legendary circuit at warp speed in front of hundreds of thousands of screaming race fans. And so it has been since the circuit was opened in 1948. Silverstone served as a World War II Royal Air Force (RAF) bomber training base from 1943-1946 before being converted to civilian use as a race track. Look carefully and you can still see the remains of the three runways. The airfield is still used by helicopters ferrying the rich and famous in and out on race day, by-passing the monumental traffic jams caused by 150,000+ race fans trying desperately to get in and out of the circuit. On race day Silverstone is the busiest airport in the U.K.! Before WWII Brooklands was the primary road racing circuit in Great Britain but the German Luftwaffe put an end to that with its bombing campaign. After WWII there was a lot of pent up desire to go racing, as competitors and as spectators. The war was over, we had won, and now it's time to have some fun! There were several other RAF airfields that were converted into race circuits after the war but Silverstone stands head and shoulders above the rest.

Racing started at Silverstone in a rather innocuous manner and so veddy British. In 1947 a fellow by the name of Maurice Geoghegan who lived in Silverstone village became aware that there was a deserted airfield nearby and wouldn't it make a cracking race circuit! The Brits love their clubs and so naturally Maurice got together 12 of his racer friends and in September they had a go at an impromptu two mile circuit. All was well until...it wasn't. A poor lost sheep wandered onto the race course and as luck would have it, Maurice ran into it, much to Maurice and the sheep's dismay. Maurice's car and the sheep were written off and the race became known as the "Mutton Grand Prix." Oh dear me!

The next year the Royal Automobile Club was searching for a way to get road racing restarted in the U.K. but was unable to get financing to build a new track. At that time Brooklands was long gone, Donington was still a military stores depot, the Crystal Palace was in disrepair and Brands Hatch was still a dirt track. What to do? Innovate! The RAC leased the abandoned Silverstone airfield for a year and somehow persuaded a farmer who raised crops and pigs in the middle of the airfield, to lay out a race course using the runways and parts of the perimeter roads. Protection for the crowds was provided (barely) with hay bales. This was a formula used by the U.S. Air Force Strategic Air Command which hosted races on U.S. Air Force (USAF) bases from 1952-1954 before Congress put an end to the fun. Started by private individuals, today the Sebring 12 hour endurance race is the sole remaining U.S. airport based racing circuit, apart from the annual Put-in-Bay vintage races held on the small municipal airfield on this historic island in Lake Erie. If you haven't experienced this event, I highly recommend it!

On 2 October 1948 the first modern era British Grand Prix was held at Silverstone. The course utilized the two longest runways and parts of the perimeter road for a lap of approximately 3.7 miles. This configuration was only used for this one race. Subsequent race circuits only used portions of the perimeter roads. The opening race of 50 miles was for 500cc class vehicles. Small, lightweight, usually rear or mid-engine design with home-made chassis and bodies, they were a cheap way to get on the grid and begin one's racing career. The entry list totaled 35 cars, of which 28 started the race but just 8 finished. On the grid were future racing stars Stirling Moss and John Cooper, Duncan Hamilton, a Royal Air Force pilot during the World War Two, Tony Rolt, who had also fought in WW2 and attempted to escape the infamous Colditz prison using a glider, Lord Selsdon and Prince Bira of Siam (now Thailand). In a 2014 BBC Sport interview Moss explained, "The reason one does racing is because the danger is there, it makes it exciting. These days, it can be like fighting a bull without its horns." At 11:45 Ayem John Cobb, World Land Speed Record holder, drove a Healey "Sportsmobile" around the course and Silverstone was officially opened for business!

The start was a shambles. Apparently due to miscommunication at the driver's meeting, when Lord Howe dropped the green flag not all the cars were on the grid, mechanics were still working on cars, and many drivers were not in their cars! Only Strang and Moss saw the starting flag drop but the others quickly took off after them. Strang led them around for the first lap but dropped out with a seized engine on lap 2 giving Moss a 0.7 sec lead over American Spike Rhiando. Moss' lead was quickly eclipsed when his Cooper's drive sprocket came loose on lap 5 and Rhiando moved into the lead which he was able to hold to the end despite enduring excruciating pain from being drenched in fuel leaking from the fuel tank located at his back. An ominous haze was seen coming from Rhiando's engine compartment and it appeared a fire was sure to ensue! After a short interval it appeared a fire was not in the offing but a new pair of trousers was urgently required by the very uncomfortable American! A broadcast appeal was sent out for the loan of a pair of trousers but no one stepped forward. Ahem. Unsure if he would have enough fuel to finish the race, Spike still managed to keep his foot down and averaged 60.68 mph for the distance. John

Cooper came second in another Cooper designed car. Cooper cars took five of the first six places, giving the new startup company great publicity and were an indicator of great things to come. Eighteen year old Stirling Moss, who had dominated 500cc racing to this point and set the fastest time in practice, did not finish due to his Cooper's drive sprocket failure. After walking back to the pits, Moss gathered the tools necessary to reattach the sprocket, ran back to his car, repaired the errant sprocket and after the checkered flag had fallen, drove his Cooper back to the pits where his father, Alfred Moss anxiously awaited his return.

For the main event, the British Grand Prix, the large crowds were treated to an international grid of 25 racing machines of the highest caliber from Britain, France and Italy. To no one's surprise, there were no cars entered from Germany. In contrast to the 500cc class, engine displacement for non-supercharged engines was 4.5 liters and 1.5 liters for supercharged engines. The two top Maserati drivers, Villorese and Ascari made a last minute run non-stop from the Maserati factory in Italy to Silverstone where they arrived just in time to take a couple of laps during the practice session. As a result they started last on the grid. Not a good start!

Lord Howe again held a driver's meeting after Villorese, Ascari and Bira were rounded up. This time everyone was on the starting grid and awaiting Lord Howe to drop the green flag. As reported by MotorSport magazine, 'Then he raised the flag, it fell, and that finest of sights was witnessed—the whole pack 'howling away in a tumult of sound and smoke, each man watchful and jockeying for an opening ! As it happened, not everyone started, for Mays stalled and Salvadori oiled a plug . . .' Goodness sakes! The fans enjoyed exciting racing between Italians Gigi Villorese in a Maserati beating fellow countryman Alberto Ascari, also driving a Maserati, to the checkered flag. The margin of victory was 14 seconds with an overall average speed of 72.28 mph. Third came Englishman Gerard in his E.R.A. (English Racing Automobiles), 1 min. 45 sec behind Ascari. Mrs. Gerard, sitting on a low stool on the counter of the pit, calmly kept his lap times while a friend moved colored pegs along a board as a second check. The crowd was ecstatic at the result and Gerard was mobbed as the crowd surged uncontrolled onto the course. The race was hastily and unceremoniously stopped with flag signals while Villorese and Ascari high-tailed it out of town driving their Lancia Aprilia through a potato field to escape the boisterous crowd. Fortunately there were no accidents in the melee following the race and the crowd had plenty of time to cool off as they crept along the exit roads. Some things never change!



Bob Gerard's E.R.A., fittingly painted British Racing Green. Photo courtesy Wikipedia.

On 13 May 1950 the very first race in the newly created World Championship of Drivers was held at Silverstone with King George IV in attendance. Not in attendance was Ferrari who snubbed the race complaining the appearance money was too little to justify his team's appearance. Harumph! Despite Ferrari's absence, the starting grid was impressive; 21 drivers from 9 countries providing entertainment for over 200,000 spectators. Of the 21 starters, 10 retired. Of the 11 finishers, Alfa Romeo came in first, second and third with 44 year old Italian driver Nino Farina taking the top spot on the podium, followed 2.5 seconds later by his fellow countryman Luigi Fagioli and Briton Reg Parnell taking a distant third despite hitting a hare during the race. Ouch!



Start of the 1950 British Grand Prix. From left to right; Farina, Fagioli, Fangio, and Parnell all driving Alfa Romeos. Photo courtesy Goodwood Road Racing.

Oh by the way, in 1950 Alfa Romeo won every World Championship grand prix race, except the Indy 500, a feat that has never been equalled! Another interesting factoid, Fagioli is the oldest driver to win a Formula 1 Grand Prix, coming first in the 1951 French Grand Prix at the ripe old age of 53. Ferrari would win its first Grand Prix at Silverstone on July 14, 1951 with Froilan Gonzalez at the wheel. From 1955-1986 the British Grand Prix was rotated among circuits at Silverstone, Aintree (using roads around the Grand National horse racing course), and newly opened (1964) Brands Hatch. Since 1987 the British Grand Prix has been held at Silverstone.

Did you ever wonder how a race circuit's corners are named? Silverstone's corners were named after nearby landmarks and locations associated with the Royal Automobile Club (RAC). Stowe was named after the nearby Stowe School, Hangar Straight ran past two large hangars which are now gone, Becketts and Chapel corners are next to the ancient Chapel of St. Thomas Becket. Finally Club and Woodcote corners are named after the RAC's offices in London and Surrey. I was thwarted in my efforts to discover how Maggotts corner came by its name. Please use your imagination! As speeds increased, chicanes and corners were added to slow things down a bit. The last major revision was done in 2011 which stretched the lap length to 3.66 miles. Silverstone is still considered one of the fastest circuits on the Formula 1 schedule with average lap speeds of 150+ mph and top speeds of 225 mph. Yikes!

Somewhat surprising, every Formula 1 team except for Ferrari, have their home base in the UK. Aston Martin's race headquarters is located less than 1 km from the track and Red Bull Racing is located in the nearest town, Milton Keynes.

The 2025 British Grand Prix will be held on the 4th of July weekend with the race on July 6, 2025. Single-day tickets will range between £70 - £329, with weekend tickets ranging between £269 - £399. If you want to experience Silverstone first hand, you can rent an open wheel race car or a road going Aston Martin or Ferrari for a very reasonable fee starting at £199 pounds sterling. In case you are interested, as I write this the exchange rate is \$1.30 for every British Pound Sterling. Of course you have to get to England to begin with. Here's the link. <https://www.silverstone.co.uk/drive>
Have fun!