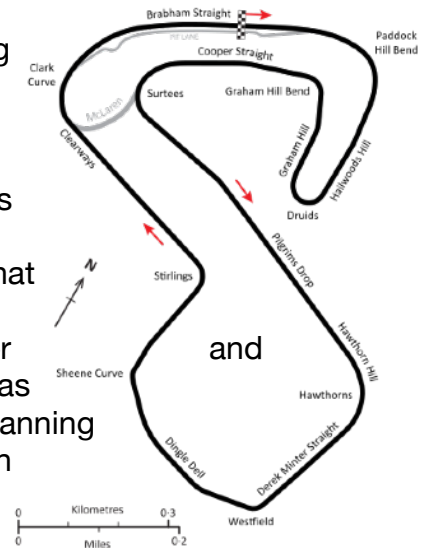


Brands Hatch

And a Brief History of Grand Prix Racing

by Bob Vitrikas

Automobile racing got its start in France, a hot bed of engineering excellence and enthusiasm. The first organized race was held in France on July 22, 1894. These early races were held on public roads, hence the term “road races,” typically from town to town. Designed as endurance races to test the mettle (metal?) of drivers and machines, these early races saw speeds quickly exceed 100 mph. Needless to say holding a race on public roads with cars that had only the crudest of brakes and handling not to mention zero safety features or crowd control, was a recipe for disaster so it came to pass. The infamous 1903 Paris-Madrid road race was the culmination of horrific road racing accidents resulting in the banning of road racing in France. Road racing had always been banned in Britain. Outside of Britain, roads were used for racing but were closed while the race was underway.



The term “grand prix,” (translated “grand prize”) as it applied to automobile racing, was first used to describe the prizes won in the 1901 Pau circuit race. The first race to carry the title “Grand Prix” was the French Grand Prix (GP) held in 1906 on a circuit based in Le Mans, France. The first grand prix was won by a Renault. The U.S. quickly followed in 1908 with the Savannah Grand Prix. The first British Grand Prix was held at Brooklands on August 7, 1926. These first GPs were neither part of a championship series nor did they mandate a uniform set of rules regarding car construction. That would come later, much later, with the introduction of the Formula One race series which began in 1950 with the British Grand Prix. Fun fact: the Formula One race series was cancelled in 1952 and 1953 only to be revived in 1954.

The British Grand Prix Formula One race has been held at three circuits; Silverstone, Aintree and Brands Hatch. Silverstone was the site of the first British Formula One race in 1950 and coincidentally the first Formula One race anywhere, followed by Aintree in 1955 and finally Brands Hatch in July 1964.

When Brands first opened after WWI, it was a motorcycle circuit on a piece of grassy farmland. The circuit followed the slopes of a natural amphitheater. The first race on the four mile dirt circuit carved out by farm machinery was in 1926. Competitors included bicyclists and cross-county runners. In March 1932 the first use of the circuit by motorcyclists began. World War II was not kind to the circuit. The surrounding land served as a vehicle park and was subjected to multiple German Luftwaffe bombing raids. Goodness! Shortly after the War motorcycle racing began anew and the first motorcycle race (on grass and cinders no less) was held. In 1947 the BBC televised the motorcycle race, the first of its kind to be televised on British TV. In 1950

everything changed. The 500 Club convinced the owner that Brands' future lay in car and motorcycle racing and together they financed a tarmac surface. Voila Brands Hatch became the first purpose built post-war racing circuit in Britain and the rest is history!

On 16 April 1950 it was opened to 500 cc Formula 3 car racing. By 1964 the circuit had been improved and its direction reversed, becoming a grand prix approved course. Brands has gone thru seven (7!) Circuit layouts since 1950. Today's full circuit was laid down in 2003. The 2.433 mile 9 turn Grand Prix Circuit it is considered one of the most demanding in the world and fan viewing is superb. Legendary Scot driver Jim Clark won the first British GP held there. From 1964-1986 Brands alternated with Silverstone in hosting the British GP until 1987 when Silverstone won the contract to host the British GP every year. The last Formula One GP at Brands Hatch was held on 13 July 1986. The lack of run-off space and room to expand spelled its doom for Formula One races. However, other racing series continued to use Brands for their world class races such as the Intercontinental F3000 Championship, World Touring Car Championship, World Sports Car Championship etc. drawing large crowds no doubt helped by the circuit's being only 20 miles southeast of London.

Would you like to take a lap of Brands Hatch with David Coulthard at the wheel of a Red Bull Formula One car? Here's your chance. This breathtaking video will give you a thrill!



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