

A Degree of Victory ...

Thirty years ago, Swansea Institute was pioneering the use of motorsport in education and in doing so, won the 1996 BRDC GT Championship!

In 1993 Swansea Institute of Higher Education was offering automotive engineering courses delivered to HND students and senior lecturer Roger Dowden, a keen motorsport enthusiast, persuaded the college to buy a Darrian T90 in kit form for students to assemble with a Rover K-series engine. By 1994 the T90 was completed, and Dowden bought it from the college and raced in the Welsh Sports & Saloon Championship to give his engineering students practical experience of motor racing.

Throughout this time Darrian proprietor Tim Duffee provided help and support so during visit to the 1995 Le Mans 24-hour race with Roger Dowden the plan to compete in the 1996 BRDC GT Championship was hatched. Someone then suggested pitching the idea to the Welsh Development Agency for funding and fully aware that Darrian was a fast-growing Welsh company, the WDA accepted and Swansea Institute Team Darrian – SITD – was created.

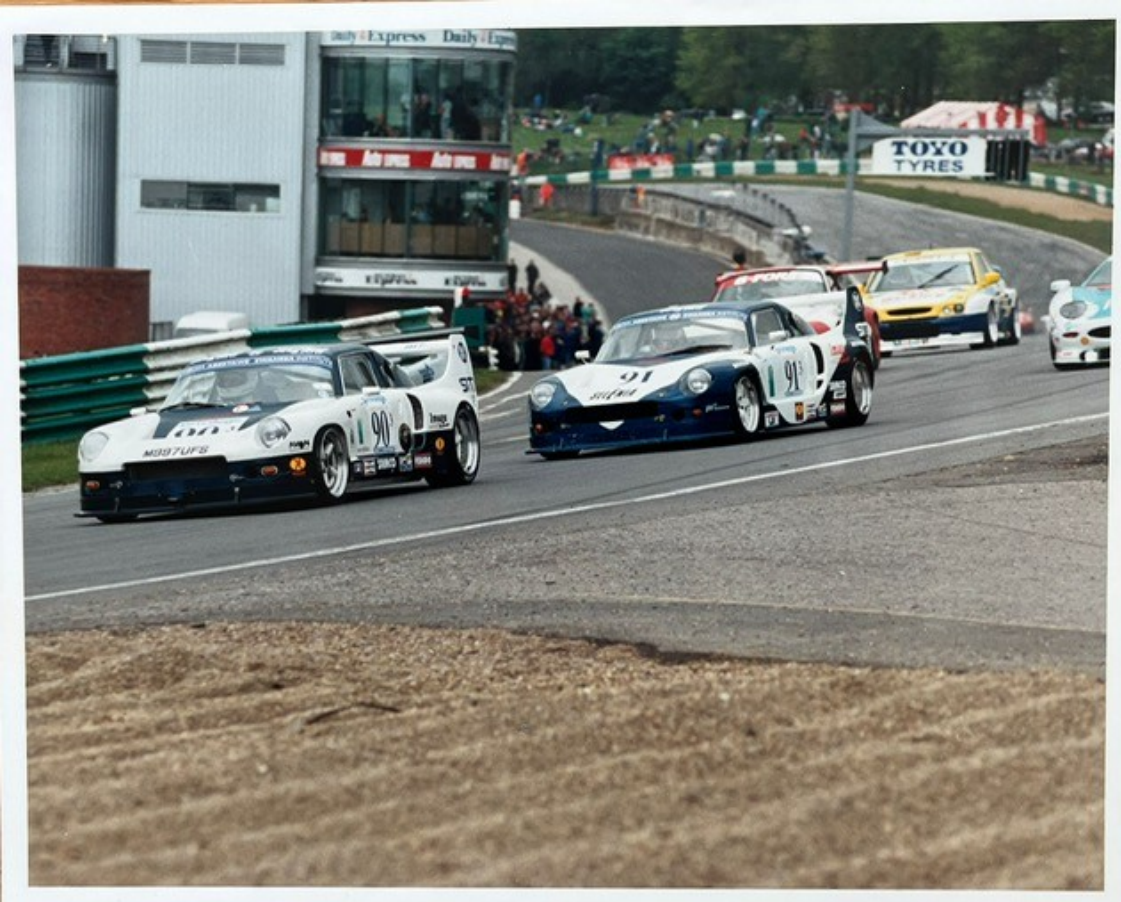
Initiated by the British Racing Drivers Club in 1993, the GT championship was designed to fill the niche between the UK's many one-make sports car series and top-level international sports car racing. Similar to the BPRO Global Endurance Series and the GT classes at Le Mans of that era, the championship was open to Sports GT cars based upon models designed, built and sold for road use. New for 1996 was that all rounds of the championship were mini-endurance format of 45 minutes duration for up to 2 drivers, with a one-minute compulsory pit-stop between one-third and two-thirds distance. Championship points were scored from the total number of races less one and it was sponsored by direct telephone-based motor insurance company Privilege Insurance, 1996-99.

At this point Scottish racer Ken Thomson enrolled as number one driver after winning the 1995 Scottish Modsports & Roadsports title in a Darrian T90-Vauxhall, complete with Hillman Imp front uprights and swing-arm rear suspension, self-built in a lock-up garage! He transferred his taxed, tested and road-registered T90 to Darrian at Lampeter where it was updated and a Millington Diamond 2.5 litre injected engine was mated to its Hewland FT200 transmission, funded from the sale of Thomson's hill climb Porsche 911! One small drawback was Thomson had only raced within Scotland so he began the 1996 season with no experience of the six challenging English race circuits the GT Championship would visit!



The Dowden car at Lampeter

The 1996 championship provided an 8-race calendar and invited lighter cars with smaller engines to compete in order to increase entries, allowing Darrian and Caterham cars to join. Round one was Silverstone 30th March and Thomson's T90 co-driven by Del Delaronde finished 9th overall and third GT3. Round two was Donington 5th May, but Thomson and Delaronde retired with alternator failure. At round 3 Brands Hatch 26th May, Ken Thomson, co-driven by Frank Bradley, finished 6th and won GT3. In addition, Roger Dowden, co-driven by Matthew Manderson, raced his own T90 fitted now fitted with a 2.4 litre carbureted Millington engine, but retired.



Brands Hatch

Donington 23rd June for round-4 where Thomson was joined by former Caterham/Vauxhall racer Simon Duerden to finish 7th and first GT3. Round five was Thruxton on 28th July, where Thompson/Duerden finished 5th and won GT3, with Dowden/Manderson 9th overall and 2nd GT3. Roger Dowden recalled; *"By mid-season our competitors were looking closely at our cars, we were weighed but found 60Kg over the minimum weight limit for GT3! Our budget for running two cars was probably just 10% of what some other teams allegedly spent."*

Round 6 at Snetterton saw Thompson/Duerden finish a magnificent 3rd overall and 1st GT3 car and Dowden, co-driven by David Wood, retire after going off the circuit. Following the race, the BRSCC recalled cars to parc ferme for noise testing which resulted in eight being excluded for allegedly exceeding maximum levels, including the Thomson/Duerden T90. The testing process was, however, highly irregular and Stewards heard two appeals immediately but despite noise officials admitting *some fudging of the test results* they rejected appeals. The Marcos LM 620 of Schirle/Warnock was third on the road and appealed exclusion based on grounds of *procedural errors in the testing process* and was reinstated into results. Following the publication of these

revised race results, Ken Thomson/SITD submitted their own appeal to be heard at a later date. Autosport headline 5th September 1996 read: **GT noise farce at Snetterton!**



Snetterton

The penultimate round of the championship was at Oulton Park on 28th September, yielding 4th place overall and a GT3 class victory for Thomson/Duerden, but the T90 of Dowden co-driven by Roddy Paterson retired. The 1996 Championship finale at Silverstone attracted twenty-eight GT cars and saw the lead T90 finish in fine style 4th overall and first in GT3 and the second T90 of Dowden and Frank Bradley finishing 15th overall.

Championship results remained provisional until the Thomson/SITD appeal was heard on 12th February 1997, when a RAC Motor Sport Association 3-steward panel decreed; *noise testing was not completed in accordance with RACMSA Regulations and all drivers subjected to the exclusion penalty should be reinstated in the results of the event.* Following the success of Ken Thomson/SITD's appeal, provisional GT championship winners Warnock/Shirle appealed the RACMSA steward's decision, and the matter referred to a full RACMSA Tribunal of Enquiry 21st April 1997. It was only when the original RACMSA steward's decision was upheld that Thomson/SITD were confirmed as overall and GT3 BRDC GT Champions 1996.

The late official declaration of championship results overshadowed the achievements of the tiny, Welsh SITD team. Reflecting on their success Ken Thomson recalled: *"Undoubtedly the nimble T90 powered by the tractable and reliable Millington engine played major roles in our championship success. We ran the team on a shoestring, not even an official tyre contract, but the Avon guys were great and really appreciated the underdog. They regularly made four new covers available under their van for us to collect!"*

1996 BRDC/Privilege GT Championship - Final Results					
Pos	Driver	Car		Class	Points
1	Ken Thomson	Darrian Millington	T90	GT3	139
2	Simon Deurden	Darrian Millington	T90	GT3	129
3=	Jake Ulrich	McLaren BMW	GTR F1	GT1	126
3=	Ian Flux	McLaren BMW	GTR F1	GT1	126
5=	Dave Warnock (GB)	Marcos Chevy	LM600	GT2	122
5=	Robert Shirle (GB)	Marcos Chevy	LM600	GT2	122
7=	Phil Andrews	TVR Cerbera	AJP	GT2	105
7=	Mark Hales	TVR Cerbera	AJP	GT2	105
9=	John Greasley (GB)	Porsche 993	GT1	GT1	90
9=	John Morrison (GB)	Porsche 993	GT1	GT1	90
11	Andy Purvis	Marcos	LM500R	GT3	77

The BRDC GT Championship class structure changed for 1997, and SITD used a newly built T90R chassis with Millington 2.0 litre turbo engine driven by Thomson/Deurden, scoring points in three rounds and finishing joint 16th. Then in 1999 two T90Rs appeared in the GT2 class for three championship rounds, driven by Michael Nippers/Steve Griffiths, Matthew Manderson/Frank Bradley. Among the SITD students participating was Jeremy Vick, who became Group Leader of Aerodynamics Design for Red Bull Racing, and two of his fellow students who went on to head-up departments for Gordon Murray Design.



The 1997 team colours

Sidebar 1

Davrian Developments – Cory Car Company – Darrian

Founded in Clapham, London in 1965, by structural engineer Adrian Evans, Davrian Developments quickly established themselves on the motorsport scene in 1967 with a low-cost, fibre glass coupé. These cars were sold in kit form thus avoiding purchase tax and forming an attractive prospect for impecunious race drivers. Originally utilizing the Coventry Climax based Rootes rear mounted Imp engines and transverse BMC Mini installations, later models were produced with Renault or Ford power units including Cosworth BDA complete with Hewland Transmissions.

Although Davrian's scored competition successes the company's financial fortunes ebbed and flowed, perennially short of working capital. In 1980, the Davrian Mk8 Dragon appeared with Ford Fiesta power, but the company slipped into receivership in early 1983.

Davrian was immediately bought by Irish entrepreneur Will Cory who renamed his new business the Cory Car Company, relocating to Northern Ireland and manufacturing the Cory Cultra powered by a choice of Ford engines – but ceased trading in 1985. Then in 1986 the company was reformed by Tim Duffee, an original Davrian engineer, based at Llangybi, Lampeter and renamed Darrian. The resurrected company produced the T90 GTR, usually powered by the Millington Diamond, 2.5-litre 16-valve, four-cylinder engine mated with Hewland transmission, making it a versatile all-rounder for racing, rallying and speed events.

During early development of the T90 1989/90, the car benefitted from various aero modifications cultivated by former MARCH designer and keen T90 rallyist Robin Herd, with time spent in MIRA's wind tunnel. When introduced, the legality of the rear aerofoil was contentious, but Robin Herd held discussions with Neil Eason-Gibson, technical director at RAC MSA and resolved the issue over an expensive bottle of vino! Tim Duffee recalled: *"It was Robin who introduced the original rear aerofoil to McLaren back in the day and having Robin's endorsement was a huge boost to my confidence as Darrian designer. I owe a lot to him."*

Sidebar 2

Swansea Institute of Higher Education

Established 1897, Swansea Technical College was based in the Mount Pleasant region of the hilly Welsh seaside city and became well-known and respected as supplier of vocational qualifications, creating strong alliances with international companies based around South Wales, including BP and British Steel.



The Mount Pleasant building

Later, the Institute morphed into the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and relocated to a purpose-built engineering campus in the fashionable SA1 Marina region. It continues to flourish and celebrated 25-years of their BEng Motorsport Engineering degree course in 2025. Believed to be the first UK institution to offer such a qualification, graduates from the course have secured roles within racing teams, car manufacturers and engineering consultants throughout the UK and abroad. The bond with Darrian flourishes to this day with technical collaboration and internships

Looking back, Roger Dowden highlighted the WDA's sponsorship of the 1996 BRDC Privilege Insurance GT Championship as being a turning point. Not only was it vital for the success of the team, but it also empowered Swansea Institute to offer its motorsport engineering degree. The program proved so popular that it effectively secured the engineering department's future.



The UWTSD Motorsport Engineering Workshop at Swansea Marina

Article provided by:

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