



Ebrey/BTCC

ABOVE The big guns are back: Vauxhall, Subaru, BMW, Honda and MG go wheel-to-wheel in this year's BTCC – the biggest manufacturer contingent since the glory days of the Super Touring era

THE FULL WORKS?

Andrew Charman examines the relationship between manufacturers and the British Touring Car Championship, and asks why they are returning when the series no longer needs them...

In March 1994, Alan Gow, managing director of British Touring Car Championship (BTCC) organiser TOCA, stood up at the pre-season media day and announced that an unprecedented 10 manufacturer-backed teams would contest that year's series.

The BTCC was at that time the fastest-growing race series in the world – OEMs wanted to be in it, and particularly to win it.

As is so often the case with manufacturer-dominated categories, there was – quite literally – a price to be paid. Just six years later spiralling costs would almost implode the series and kill off the Super Touring formula, born in the BTCC and so successfully spread across the globe.



“ The difference is manufacturers today can't influence the technical regulations and the costs to the teams ”

Gow stood in front of the 2017 media day attendance, last month, and announced that this season will see five teams contesting manufacturer honours – the most since 1999, the penultimate year of Super Touring. But these ‘works’ entries will be amongst full 32-car grids – larger even than in the best Super Touring years – populated by cars of 11 different brands, and in the knowledge that today’s BTCC regulations ensure a manufacturer cannot spend its way to success. The Independents have just as much opportunity to win races, and regularly do.

How has this come about? And what is the appeal that is making an increasing number of OEMs again consider a national Touring Car series a good place in which to make their mark?

A VOLATILE DECADE

Many, the writer included, believe the level of competition seen in the BTCC’s Super Touring era will never be repeated. The 1994 BTCC grid contained manufacturer-backed squads from Alfa Romeo, BMW, Ford, Mazda, Nissan, Peugeot, Renault, Toyota, Vauxhall and Volvo. The grids ▶



ABOVE Honda, Renault, Nissan, Audi, Volvo and Vauxhall do battle at the height of Super Touring

Ebrey/BTCC



ABOVE The pace of development in Super Touring's final years required large teams – Ray Mallock and squad celebrate 1999 title success. Nissan was rumoured to be working to a budget of £9 million

NGTC vs Super Touring: different eras

JUST what was it like to run a team at the height of the Super Touring era, compared to today? West Surrey Racing has been there all along, with Ford and Honda in Super Touring, MG in BTC-T and BMW today.

According to WSR head Dick Bennetts in the penultimate year of Super Touring, 1999, when his team took on the Honda programme the budget was approximately £5.5 million, whilst it's believed eventual champion Nissan had £9m and Ford £10m. Such large figures were necessary due to the pace of development allowed by the loose technical regulations.

"For a two-car team we had about 35 full-time people, to design, build, develop and race the cars," he says. "Today in the NGTC we have about 12 full-time staff running a three-car team, with 25 at race meetings where we are joined by our 'weekend warriors'.

"It's a very different arena – you are not changing uprights every second race, not changing wishbones or the aero. In Super Touring you were allowed to keep developing your car through the year."

He adds that today the race engines, in which many components must remain standard and are controlled by TOCA, are expected to last a lot longer than in Super Touring days.

"We have a fresh engine at the start of the year and then a rebuild midyear – in Super Touring it was a fresh engine for virtually every race. Some people had qualifying engines, with 8-10 hp more than the race engine, that would only do 100 km. The engine would be installed Friday night for qualifying, and replaced by the race engine on Saturday night. That would then do the two races on Sunday and the following test before being replaced by a qualifying engine.

"It was ridiculous. It didn't make the racing any better, just more expensive!"

Today, Bennetts feels, the period between race meetings is a lot less frenzied than in Super Touring days: "At the start we design the rollcage, under bonnet and internal layout of the car. Once that's done there's only a bit of winter work but not the ongoing design there was then because so many parts, gearbox, dampers, uprights for example, are controlled by TOCA."

So as an engineer, is there any aspect of Super Touring Bennetts misses? "I loved it in some ways, but it was basically a fast-moving technical formula: who could come up with something new by the next race?"

"It got so competitive, became such hard work with incredibly long hours. Today the racing is just as good, if not better, at much, much less of a price – at the end of the day it's a better spectacle for TV and the spectators." **TI**

stretched to at times 27 cars, 22 of them works entries – remarkable considering the single-class 2-litre formula, what would become Super Touring, had only been adopted three seasons earlier.

The challenges of being part of all this were quickly demonstrated in the 1994 season. Having failed to find sponsors the Mazda team was on a very low budget. When Matt Neal's plain-white Mazda Xedos 6 rolled itself to destruction in round four at Silverstone, his season ended, and teammate David Leslie lasted only four more meetings before the finance ran out and the team disbanded.

The arrival of Alfa Romeo that year would lead to increased costs for everyone.

As documented in our feature in Race Tech 168 (Nov 2014), the Italian team took the BTCC, and Super Touring, into the world of aerodynamics. Alfa's clever interpretation of the aero rules obliged the FIA to produce regulations for wing and splitter packages across the formula, adding aerodynamic development, including several hours in wind tunnels, to the costs of teams competing.

At the same time Renault demonstrated just how important it considered success in the BTCC. The team that ran its Lagunas was replaced by Williams Grand Prix Engineering – Renault's representative in the Formula 1 World Championship. The F1 resources deployed no doubt helped Renault win the manufacturer title in that first campaign, though it still took lead driver Alain Menu three seasons to secure the drivers' title.

By 1998 there were still eight manufacturer teams in the BTCC, but by now the rampant spending was at its height, with manufacturer budgets in some cases stretching towards £10 million a year. Teams were working to top international standards. A former mechanic with Vauxhall works team Triple Eight Racing described recently how each car's suspension was effectively "thrown away" after each meeting, and every half a season every nut and bolt on the car replaced. Each bolt was £15 and there were a thousand or more on the car...

Such major spending became increasingly more difficult to justify in OEM boardrooms. At the end of 1998 Audi and Peugeot left the series – the latter having, until its last of seven seasons, been the only true works team in the BTCC. It was



ABOVE Years of success as a constructor have earned Dick Bennetts (with hand on car) a full works BMW contract for 2017

BMW

run out of the manufacturer's Stoke plant in Coventry and all the team employed by Peugeot Sport.

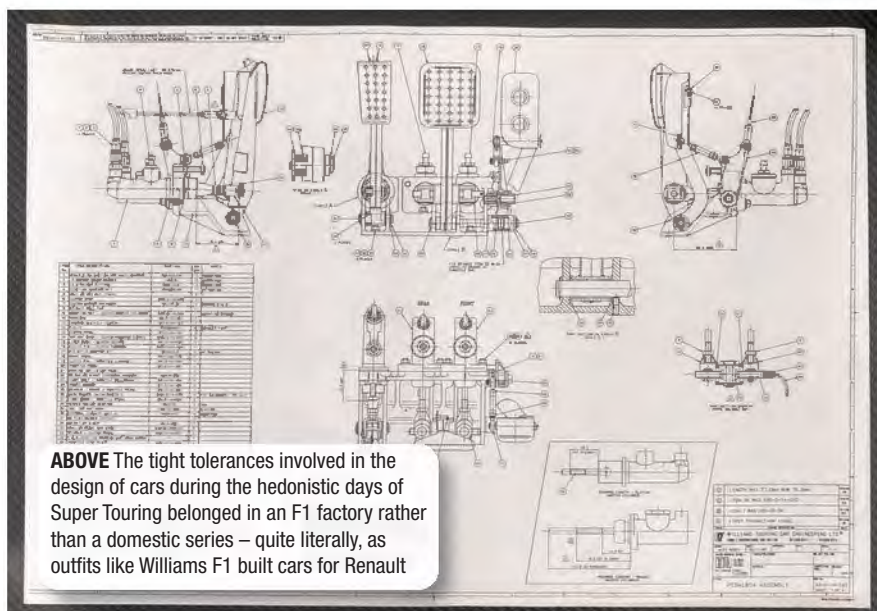
One year on and the still spiralling costs accounted for half of the remaining manufacturers, Renault, Volvo and Nissan. The latter showed just how

brutal manufacturer decisions can be, quitting directly after winning the 1999 championship. That left just Honda, Vauxhall and Ford, each adding to their costs by running three cars, while a class B of 'super production' cars was added to bolster the shrinking grids.

NEW DIRECTION

BTCC management had seen what was coming, however, and had in May 1999 announced new technical regulations for 2001. The cars that became 'BTC-T' had more aggressive bodywork but no carbon fibre-festooned interiors. They used specification alloy wheels in place of the highly expensive forged aluminium rims of the Super Tourers, while a host of common components included the transmission, brakes, clutches, engine electronics and double-wishbone suspension. Cost savings were put at 40 per cent overall, 92 per cent on certain parts.

Yet throughout this era, and a subsequent switch to Super 2000-spec machinery, the BTCC continued to have a love-hate relationship with manufacturers. While the domestic series appeared healthy, Gow and his technical director Peter Riches could see familiar problems looming: as the car giants fought ever more keenly to win on the world stage, costs were inevitably rising and trickling down to national level. ▶



ABOVE The tight tolerances involved in the design of cars during the hedonistic days of Super Touring belonged in an F1 factory rather than a domestic series – quite literally, as outfits like Williams F1 built cars for Renault

BELOW & INSET Part of the success of the NGTC is the process undertaken to equalise cars before they reach the track. Here the prototype Toyota Avensis is in the wind tunnel. Back in the Super Touring era, inset, even the boot catches were fashioned to have a beneficial aero influence



As touring car followers will know, their solution, the Next Generation Touring Car (NGTC), has since proven a major success. The category's key ingredients are a combination of spec parts, equalised aerodynamics and use of either a TOCA official engine or an OEM equivalent with its performance matched to the TOCA unit. The impressive list of suppliers – AP Racing, ATL, Carless Fuel, Cosworth, Dunlop, Lifeline, Owen Developments, Penske, PWR, RML, Swindon Engines, Rimstock and Xtrac – all work closely with the series organisers and teams.

Today NGTC cars are generally considered to be quite expensive to build but significantly less costly to run than previous formulae. They also boast high residual values. The very first car built, a Toyota Avensis demonstrated by James Thompson in 2010, was driven at two rounds in 2016 by Tony Gilham. The shell of Jake Hill's 2016 Avensis was built as long ago as 2011. Its running gear is new, however, as at the end of the 2013 season previous owner Cicely Racing stripped out the official components, suspension, drivetrain and such like, and installed them in a Mercedes A-Class chassis that Adam Morgan has campaigned since.

Today's BTCC boasts a full grid of 32 cars, its size limited only by circuit licences. And crucially, the majority of those cars ▶

What's in it for them?

SUBARU arrived in the BTCC in 2016 as a full-blown manufacturer entry, with four Levorg estates built and run by Team BMR in a deal brokered to a large extent by multiple champion Jason Plato. But what advantage does Subaru gain from entering the BTCC as a manufacturer, rather than simply letting BMR build the cars from shells and run them as independents? As with BMW, the answer is control of marketing.

"We have a rallying pedigree, we've won the World Championship, ticked all the boxes – we wanted to do something that would promote the current and next generation of cars," says Subaru managing director Paul Tunncliffe. "The STi that we rallied was part of our history; the future is about estates and SUVs."

"We needed to have a little more control over the programme than just selling the team some shells – the first choice for a team wanting to run a Subaru would probably be an STi, but that doesn't suit our marketing aims whereas the Levorg does. It is very much the future of Subaru."

Tunncliffe even admits that the operation is not technically a factory-supported team: "We've come to a gentleman's arrangement that I'm sure the team finds very beneficial. But in return we get great exposure, with the best team and the best drivers."

And the presence in the championship is having an unexpected marketing benefit. "Interestingly we are seeing overall brand awareness, and the STi sales have benefitted as much as those of the Levorg – the Subaru owners are reappearing at race meetings in numbers, having not been there since the rallying days." □

BELOW Subaru is one of the new wave of manufacturers finding marketing value in the series



are independent, not manufacturer entries. Due to the effectiveness of the NGTC regulations, the independents have equally as high a chance of victory as any manufacturer team. In the final meeting of the 2016 season Subaru manufacturer squad Team BMR almost snatched the title with its Levorg, debuting that year. But exactly 12 months earlier BMR had come equally close to title glory, running a squad of privateer Volkswagen CCs.

Series Director Gow succinctly summed up the way NGTC works when he told Race Tech that required budgets for NGTC can be 10 per cent of what was needed in the Super Touring years. If a manufacturer really wants to win, the only areas it can throw money at are the salaries of its drivers and the size of its hospitality awning. "There's nothing they can spend to make the car go quicker; it's good old-fashioned engineering and racing," he adds.

THE MANUFACTURERS RETURN

So having been through two new formulas without attracting the manufacturer interest it formerly enjoyed, the BTCC now boasts a stable technical package that does not need such interest – yet the 2017 season will see the most manufacturer entries since the Super Touring era. The five manufacturer teams are two more than in 2016, yet still comprise less than half of the overall field.

The two newcomers, BMW and Vauxhall, appear to be taking very different views of the series.

BMW has effectively been in the series



ABOVE & BELOW The move to specified components from trusted suppliers, like AP Racing (above) and Cosworth, has controlled costs in the NGTC era

with West Surrey Racing for 10 years. WSR has flown the BMW flag as an independent, winning the drivers' title with Colin Turkington in 2009 and 2014. Several independent teams' titles were also secured until WSR was declared a constructor for 2015 and took the manufacturer/constructor prize in 2016. So why does BMW now desire a full works involvement,

for the first time since 1996?

"Primarily because we wanted to have a little more responsibility for how we market the results that Dick and the team are achieving," BMW UK MD Graham Grieve told Race Tech at the launch of the 2017 car.

"Dick has been really lucky over the years with some really good sponsors but we wanted to step in this year as BMW UK, just to maximise the team's chance of winning the drivers' championship.

"Previously it was a lot more direct (BMW) motorsport involvement – this time it is a local activity. We've put financial support behind it to make the engine development happen, but it is very much West Surrey Racing's design, their car, and they have shown over the years an amazing competence to deliver fantastic results."

WSR team head Dick Bennetts does not anticipate full manufacturer status making any difference to the day-to-day running of his team. "I've always run the team like a manufacturer – you always have to have the right amount of people and I probably overspend each year as the engineering comes out," Bennetts says.

"If you give the drivers the best opportunities then you should win – manufacturer status ►





ABOVE The BTCC today: off the grid at Silverstone an independent leads, a manufacturer car second, with four independents and four works cars in the rest of the top ten – equalisation working

Two sides to the manufacturer coin

A MANUFACTURER deciding to use the BTCC for its marketing can get it badly wrong, as was demonstrated only two seasons ago by Infiniti.

The basis was a project dubbed 'Support Our Paras Racing', set up by Derek Palmer, a Scotsman behind many motorsports programmes over the years. Working with the official Parachute Regiment charity, the team aimed to include several injured paratroopers among its ranks, with the long-term aim of propelling one of them to a BTCC driving role.

The laudable project proposed using the Infiniti Q50 as the basis of the BTCC race cars but rather than Infiniti simply supplying the shells to the team, at some point it was agreed that an entry into the manufacturers' championship would be made – and to the outside world the complexion of the team changed.

All involved possibly underestimated just how big a challenge the BTCC

represented. Only one of the cars was completed in time for the opening round and being untested it struggled. The second car was built in time for the second meeting at Donington – driver Richard Hawken did not trouble the top 20 in any of the three races, while Palmer's day ended with retirement in race one. Hawken was replaced by former F1 driver



ABOVE Even bringing in the F1 experience of Martin Donnelly failed to save Infiniti's short-lived works BTCC programme

Martin Donnelly for the next round at Thruxton and the best of six results was a 17th place.

Had this been a privateer team running Infiniti cars, such struggles would not have garnered headlines, more likely support and appreciation of its charity aims. But as it was a manufacturer entry, the image was of a major car brand running at the back instead of fighting with Honda, BMW and MG at the sharp end of the grid.

Inevitably, Infiniti took what appeared to be the most effective means of damage-limitation, and pulled its manufacturer backing after the Thruxton races. The team was forced to scale back to one car and by mid-season had lost its second TOCA entrants licence. Palmer Jnr soldiered on to the end of the season, the best result a 15th place at Snetterton, and despite regular rumours of a revival the team has not been seen in the series since. **T**

puts a bit more pressure on us but the drivers always drive the best they can so it shouldn't make a lot of difference."

The other newcomer, Vauxhall, appears to be taking a much more backseat stance. The entry for PowerMaxed Racing in the manufacturers' championship is an element of a fleet deal between PMR parent company Automotive Brands and Vauxhall, which has seen latest specification Astra shells delivered to the team to form their 2017 race cars.

Vauxhall personnel spoken to by Race Tech insist that the entry is not a works team and maintain that Vauxhall will not return to the BTCC as a full-blown manufacturer while the brand's marketing centres on the UK's international football squads.

Honda, however, is more than happy going into its eighth season as a full works effort with Team Dynamics, and like BMW sees the series as important to getting its message out. "Racing plays a large part in the DNA of Honda, it runs through the veins of everyone in the business," the brand's Karen Parry says.

"The BTCC is a fabulous and engaging form of motorsport: it's accessible, it's also great for families and shows us racing our 'showroom cars'. We're massively proud

“The only areas a manufacturer can throw money at are the salaries of its drivers and the size of its hospitality awning”

of our touring car team and we're looking forward to the season."

Gow, meanwhile, sees the increasing manufacturer involvement as only good news for the series, opening it up to marketing levels it cannot reach by itself, and no longer carrying the boom-and-bust risks of the 1990s.

"Manufacturers leverage their involvement and investment in the championship in ways in which we could never reach the public," Gow says. "The marketing and PR they carry out around their involvement does nothing but add tremendous publicity to the BTCC – that's the most important aspect by a long shot, it keeps on putting the BTCC in front of a public that might not be exposed to it otherwise."

He would be happy for more manufacturers to join the BTCC: "The difference is manufacturers today can't influence the technical regulations and the costs to the teams. That's a good thing, and good for the manufacturers too.

Manufacturer involvement in motorsport and particularly touring car racing has changed dramatically from what it was. Then it was an engineering exercise; today it's a sponsorship exercise."

So the manufacturers in the BTCC are happy and the BTCC is happy to have them – they have nothing like the clout they enjoyed in the 1990s, but the financial investment required of them is also nowhere near as challenging to justify. And if every competing manufacturer withdrew tomorrow, their BTCC representative teams would likely be able to continue as independents, due to the level of cost control established. "The teams running with manufacturers were independents before; they could easily be so again," Gow says. "A team can design, build and run a car at the highest level with or without manufacturer involvement."

The BTCC appears to have achieved the Holy Grail: it is today a self-regenerating racing series. **LT**



ABOVE BMW's return as a manufacturer has added to the buzz around this year's series