

# Silverstone

# Hits

Silverstone hosted GP bike for the first time in years, so what better time to have a look at some of the 'Stone's most memorable moments?

Over the years, Silverstone Circuit has been the stalwart of British motor racing, while other classic tracks such as Brooklands and Goodwood sadly faded into memory. It starting life as a World War II RAF base, doubtless packed with speed-freaks of a different kind, fighting for their lives, rather than for fun, sport or business. Interestingly, the Vickers Wellingtons that operated from the base would only

best a MotoGP bike by a mere twenty miles-per-hour, or so.

Yet since the early days of military aviation and motorcycle development, the two have always been linked by the daredevils that sat in the cockpits, and still are.

So it's fitting that now, seventy years later, the hallowed ground remains an arena for speed and bravery. It hasn't always been what dreams are made of,

and Silverstone has been criticised in the past for lacking an atmosphere. That may be fair comment, because it wasn't always the best place for spectators to enjoy a good race, being so far away from the action. That is mostly in modern times, however, but there have been some marvellous moments of drama, controversy and excitement that have had the Silverstone crowd on its feet. Let's remind ourselves of some. ▶

WORDS: BENJAMIN 'BJ' KUBAS CRONIN PICS: DON MORLEY, KEL EDGE, GEEBEE IMAGES, HONDA, YAMAHA



It's 1979 and the 500cc championship has just gone colour. If only you could smell the scene, too





Roberts poo-pooed the party by winning on Sheene's home turf

### 1979: THE BIG ONE - SHEENE V ROBERTS

This is the one Silverstone showdown we, as bikers, hark back to the most. Even if you've never seen the race, the chances are you've heard about it, or have seen clips from time to time. Sure, it eventually came down to then champion, Kenny Roberts, and Barry Sheene to slug out, but the race was so much more than that. It's this kind of race that deserves the tag of 'titanic' or 'epic'. And this doesn't include the drama Barry went through just getting there, as his Suzuki was plagued by leaky air-suspension, amongst other gremlins.

And to begin with, the dynamic duo had the Italian Virginio Ferrari and Dutchman Will Hartog to contend with. Hartog was away from the line 'like a rat up a drainpipe', to quote Barry directly, in his bright white leathers. Ferrari would drop off as the pace quickened, and eventually Hartog would also to succumb as things got really personal. Sheene had never won a British GP, but it wasn't for lack of effort. The race went to and fro; Barry keeping Kenny in line with blistering corner-speed, while Kenny's Yamaha would blast past on the straights with no need of a slipstream. With less than two laps to go, things got interesting, as the pair took different lines to pass backmarker George Fogarty, Carl's dad. The result was Barry losing almost a second, with seemingly no hope of victory. But it was nearly the lap of his life... Barry made up all the ground on the ballistic Yamaha through pure corner speed, to only lose the race by less than half a bike's length, in what's still one of the best

finishes to a GP, ever. It's hard to do it justice, so we implore you to seek it out and watch the entire race from start to finish. Might as well, it'll be more exciting than what we're watching on a Sunday these days...

NEARLY THE LAP OF HIS LIFE, BARRY LOST BY LESS THAN A BIKE'S LENGTH

### 1985: MAKE MINE A DOUBLE - FREDDIE SPENCER

There are those who believe former double-500cc champion, Freddie Spencer, was the most naturally gifted Grand Prix rider ever. Considering his final and greatest achievement, they may be right. Racers used to compete in several GP classes, but by the mid 1980s this was all but an obsolete practice. Consider also, that Spencer had lost the world title to fellow Yank Eddie Lawson in 1984. So what on earth possessed the man to challenge for both the 500 and 250cc



Switching from 500cc to 250cc was tough, but Spencer succeeded

SPENCER DIDN'T RACE 250s AGAIN. THE JOB WAS DONE

### 2005: FORGET ME NOT - TOSELAND

From surfing the highest of highs, 2005 brought James Toseland down with a thud. From the start, things just didn't go right. Unsurprisingly, Davide Tardozzi looked, up to this point, like a man about to start making a few 'phone calls'. Silverstone's round alleviated his pain somewhat, and allowed JT to remind everyone just why he won the title in 2004. Over to James. "Yeah, that was a tough year as Suzuki produced a factory bike and it was so good, Troy Corser was unbelievable on it. I'd had a tough pre-season, including an evil crash testing traction-control which was brand new then. It didn't save me when it should have as it had switched itself off mid-corner, and it wrecked my year. By the time we got to Silverstone I needed a lift; seeing my team-mate win race one gave me that, and in race two I never looked back. I still think it's one of my best wins and I love Silverstone so can't wait to try the new long circuit. The big difference for me was the crowd urging me on throughout the race; British fans are always the best, and have never let me down". ▶



Wearing the number one plate was a big burden



Toseland's cup didn't flow over in 2005. But at least he had one

Freddie Spencer. The Steve Plater of his day; would ride anything



crowns? More to the point we're amazed, even now, that Honda agreed to the caper in the first place.

Silverstone was the pivotal point. It was also pissing down on race day. Spencer had won several races, and in this case nobody saw which way he went. Only towards the dying laps did Lawson manage to claw back some time. But he crossed the line, virtually guaranteeing him the title. It was a true champion's ride, self-belief and confidence manifested into a display of sheer genius. In the 250 race, he only needed to finish fourth to clinch the crown, which is exactly what he did. This performance at the British GP marked the last man to win multiple

Grand Prix titles in the same year. He didn't race in 250s again that season; the job got done at Silverstone.



"I'll be back." And the Shoe Maker was

### IT'S NOT JUST BIKES...

Silverstone has also seen jaw-dropping action on four wheels and, unsurprisingly, part-time motorcyclist Michael Schumacher is at the forefront of a few of them. In 1998, Schumacher was issued a stop/go penalty, but communication from the FIA was late and unclear. Playing it safe, they brought him into the pits on the last lap to serve the penalty, which meant he passed the finish line. So he won the race sat dead still. Very strange.

In 1994, the German overtook Damon Hill on the warm-up lap, though because Flavio Briatore and Tom Walkinshaw argued with officials for so long, he continued in second for most of the race before eventually being black flagged.

In 1985, Keke Rosberg stubbed out a fag, then set an average lap speed of 160.9mph in his Williams, a record which would stand until 2002 when it was finally broken at Monza.

In 2003 religious nut-job Neil Horan, somehow got onto the track and ran into oncoming cars on the Hanger Straight waving a banner 'The bible is always right' and was lucky not to be killed. Oddly, the subsequent jumbling of the pack resulted in an exciting F1 race, for a change!





Whit was a relieved man after he binned the bike but still won

## 2002: JAMES WHITHAM

Hands up who doesn't miss Jim Whitham racing? A nicer, livelier character you could not have asked for, always capable of pulling a win out of the bag just when you thought he'd had his day. The former British Superbike champion slotted into the world supersport series like the proverbial glove, until dodgy eyes and an enormous crash finally persuaded him to quit. By far his most bizarre win was in supersport, at Silverstone. Like so many other races there, it was really wet. James took the lead after riding like a hero. Conditions worsened, then the image of Whit' sliding down the road on his arse was plastered all over the TV. The red flag came out, meaning the results would be drawn

from the previous lap, when Jimbo crossed the line in first place.

"I'd qualified real bad in twenty-first place," said James "but I knew I had a chance as the bike and tyres were good. We got going and people went down everywhere and I worked my way up to the lead behind my team-mate, Paolo Casoli. I got past him, but he came back past me then crashed! I just knew they were going to stop it so backed off, lost concentration and fell off. 'You wanker!' I was thinking while trying to get the bike back upright and on-track. Coming back into parc ferme was weird because I didn't have a clue what was going on until I saw my team all smiles, it was a bit surreal, but dead chuffed it went to me, really!"

THE IMAGE OF WHIT' SLIDING DOWN THE ROAD ON HIS ARSE WAS PLASTERED ON TV



Lorenzo was so far in front at Silverstone that he started with the stunts



## MOTOGP 2010

The first Motorcycle Grand Prix held at Silverstone in years is widely accepted to be a great success. The riders love the fast circuit and the facilities were finally brought in line with what we all expect, and Silverstone say they'll be making even more effort year-on-year, to make it the

best and only Grand Prix venue in the UK. Jorge Lorenzo won the race by a country mile, while Ben Spies took his first ever MotoGP podium, which many believe only the first of many. If that's the case or not, he's unlikely to ever forget the Northamptonshire circuit for the rest of his life. ☐