

# A Brief History of Historic Racing in Australia

The inaugural meeting of what was initially called the HISTORIC RACING REGISTER was held at the Light Car Club of Australia premises on 21 April 1971. As the fiftieth anniversary is approaching, it is a good opportunity to review historic racing in Australia and to suggest that the VHRR celebrate its foundation in 2021.

It is my belief that there was never a moment when Historic Racing commenced; it was a more-or-less seamless transition from old cars racing against what were then modern cars to old cars having their own events. In the forties and early fifties, a good old-un could be raced successfully against more modern cars, which, in Australia, were mostly specials. However, in the mid-fifties all this changed with the importation of more modern machinery for racing, commencing with the likes of 5 years old Talbot Lagos and moving on to even younger Cooper Bristols, Ferraris and Maseratis. At the same time the mid-engined Cooper revolution was taking place with relatively inexpensive new cars being imported. No longer could the pre-war car keep pace with these imports. None-the-less a few pre-war cars remained competitive, usually in 'B' Grade races – I still recall a furious battle for first place in a B grade race at Fishermans Bend in the fifties between a Bugatti Holden and Les Murphy's Q Type MG. When the old cars were finally outclassed, some 'Vintage' races were held at modern meetings at Fishermans Bend under the auspices of the LCCA and probably at the instigation of the Leech brothers. These were mostly contested by pre-war drivers in their old cars, e.g. Cec Warren in the Talbot Darracq, Bill and Jim Leech in Bugattis and notably Les Murphy and Otto Stone in their supercharged MG's.

In about 1960 a younger group of old racing car enthusiasts began to go interstate to compete in races for historic cars, still held under the umbrella of a modern race meeting. These early meetings attracted a band of travellers to Mallala for the Easter meeting, to Warwick Farm and later to Hume Weir during the Christmas break; this was when 'Historic Racing' in the modern sense, began. Sandown Park opened for cars in 1962 and initially they held 'Historic Demonstrations' for the old cars, rather than races. The Vintage Sports Car Club (Vic) had been an active promoter of speed events for predominantly pre-war cars, notably at Rob Roy, Fishermans Bend, Lakelands, Geelong, Mount Tarrengower, as well 'lap dashes' at Calder, Winton and Phillip Island. The growing number of these events eventually exceeded the capacity of that club to organise them; it was time for a new, dedicated, organisation to promote Historic Motor racing. (The LCCA, which had promoted the early vintage races, had bigger fish to fry; this eventually led to their undoing).

The meeting that established the Historic Racing Register was held at the club-rooms of the LCCA in Queens Road, with support from the then President of the club, John Ould; it was chaired by Graeme Steinfort. There was much discussion as to what the organization should be called. While 'Historic Racing Drivers' Association' was initially supported, I felt the emphasis should be on the cars and suggested 'Historic Racing Register'; a natural choice for me as I had already been involved in establishing, in order, the 'Australian Lancia Register', the 'Australian Bugatti Register' and the 'Australian Ferrari Register'.

Although there was some resistance to having the new organization affiliated with C.A.M.S., it was eventually agreed that the Register adopt their regulations regarding Vintage, Thoroughbred and Historic Cars. Further discussion related to the date of acceptance of a car as historic. It was agreed that the cut-off point should be the date of the last Albert Park

race meeting in 1958. The minutes of this meeting are available on the VHRR web-site – the list of those attending and their racing cars make interesting reading. It was not until 1977 that the HRR was renamed ‘Victorian Historic Racing Register’.

As more and more old racing cars were resurrected, there were eventually enough cars to support an ‘All Historic ’meeting. Rob Rowe had attempted a relatively short lived newsletter for like-minded enthusiasts, but it was not until the interstate competitors got together in Emilio’s Restaurant in Albury in late 1974 following a Hume Weir meeting, that an alcohol fuelled plot was hatched to have an all Historic meeting which was to be publicized via an interstate newsletter. This led to the memorable first ‘All Historic Races ’at Amaroo Park in Sydney in January 1976, organized by Rob Rowe, John Medley, John Cummins and Peter Jones. In June 1977 the Austin 7 Club held their first Historic Winton; an event that remains a feature of the historic scene. This was followed in March 1978 by the fabulous celebration of Fifty Years of the Australian Grand Prix in at Phillip Island; an event that arose out of my attendance at the 50-year commemoration of the celebrated 1914 Grand Prix de l’ACF at Lyon, in 1974. The rest is history.

It would be appropriate for the fiftieth anniversary of the HRR to be celebrated at Phillip Island’s historic races in 2021.

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