



ENGINES, ELVIS & EYELINER

THE SPIRIT OF
THE HAYRIDE

Words/Photographs: Chris Tarling
Event: Hot Rod Hayride
1st to 3rd August 2025

Once a year, on the first weekend of August, the 3000 acres of Bisley Shooting Ground become home to a discriminating mix of cars and people. Against the ever-present background of the sharp ‘crack’ of gunfire there is the rumble of flathead V8s, laughter, and the sounds of Rockabilly music. For this weekend is the 17th running of the Hot Rod Hayride; a unique lifestyle and art event, where the art is mechanised on two wheels and four. It is a celebration of individualism, colour, noise and spectacle.

Clustered amidst Bisley Camp’s colonial architecture and traditional wooden lodge buildings are the vehicles, tents and caravans that make up the enthusiastic audience. The vast majority are sporting period fashions; 40s and 50s in the main. For the men, lots of denim cut 50s style. For the ladies glorious 50s dresses allied to immaculate hair and make up. But this is not a ‘look’ adopted for the event weekend in the way of, say, Goodwood. It is the chosen lifestyle of those who come together here.



The event is the brainchild of Rockabilly DJ and promoter Jerry Chatabox. Jerry has been a DJ on the Rockin scene, combining music (50s Rockabilly, R&B and rock & roll) and clothes, for the last forty years. Jerry explains the origins of the event. 'We did pubs and clubs and sort of weekend events based on the music and the clothes. And then as the crowd got older they started to get into cars. They started to look at the sort of cars that were being used by American kids in the 50s. Everyone started looking at hot rods. There was already a hot rod scene in the UK, and so we basically joined the Rockabilly music scene with the hot rod scene and created an event specifically for people who like both things. But what's actually happened is it has become a cult event over the years. Because it's just a very narrow niche. Hot rods by day, Rockabilly by night. That was our thing, you know. And people just loved the idea because all the other car shows in the country that have hot rods in, they all cater for modern hot rods and modern cars and street rods with chrome and billet on them, and all that sort of stuff, which is not what we do. We try and get the more authentic side of hot rodding. So that's why it's become a cult event.'



Hot rods come in a gazillion forms, the term loosely relating to cars that have been customised by their owners in look or performance, and principally American in origin. But that's only a part of it as the term generally describes an older vehicle, perhaps an open 30s roadster, or a 50s pick up truck, or 60s station wagon. There are no rules (other than a strict age limit) here but the cars at the Hayride are firmly from the traditional pool of hot rods.

There are some distinct facets to this event, which ultimately are a key part of its appeal. Having attended now for a couple of years I feel it would be entirely wrong to describe the Hayride as a 'show' in the traditional sense. Lifestyle event is more fitting I feel. There are no 'day' visitors; if you want to attend you must stomp up for a full event 3 day ticket. To bring your hot rod it must conform to the aforementioned age cut-off (basically pre-66 only). But key amongst the attributes is that it is not a static show; there is a continual flow of rods and bikes around the Camp. Indeed the main thoroughfare Queens Way is lined from event start to finish with a seated audience soaking up the atmosphere with a drink or two, and watching the vehicles cruise past. Chatting to the audience it is clear that this 'moving art' element is crucial to its appeal.

Just off Queens Way are the pre '66 show field and the music marquee, which sees a variety of live bands and DJs throughout Friday and Saturday afternoon and evening. The contents of the pre '66 show field continually change. There are pickups, coupes, roadsters, station wagons, saloons and low riders. Some are slammed to the floor, clearly running an air ride system. Artful patina abounds, baked into the bodywork. Last year I saw a riot of candy paint but this year's palette of colours and finishes is more muted. Some of the pickups have their rear beds completely removed such that the custom suspension arrangements become a key feature. Flathead V8s seem to be in the ruling majority but I do spot the occasional inline four









and V6. It's easy to while away hours in the field admiring the endless variety of personalisation and innovation on show – and then to return again and again as the cars change through the event. A personal highlight was meeting ace custom car builder Andy Saunders and his latest creation the Dodge Daroo tribute.

This year there is a large collection of racers made from aircraft belly fuel tanks. An innovation borne out of American land speed racing these racers seek to use the natural streamlining of the tanks to produce a fast car. American Bob Rufi built one of the first 'streamliner' racers in 1939, but it was Bill Burke who built the first streamliner using a fuel belly tank in 1946. The collection here at the Hayride is probably one of the largest brought together in the UK; it is topped by a well-attended raucous 'fire up' session on Saturday evening, much to everyone's delight.

Saturday afternoon sees a Hayride staple – the Detonators Dust Up dirt track oval racing. Taking place at Tongham Raceway this is both a demonstration of heritage stock cars from BriSCA Heritage and an opportunity for anyone attending the Hayride in a hot rod to have some light hearted competition on the dirt track oval. The racing is very simple – two cars start at opposite points on the oval and when the flag drops they try to catch each other. The winner is the first past the chequered flag after three laps. This year the event starts with a BriSCA Heritage demonstration which very soon disappears in a dense dust cloud as the cars throw the track surface into the air. A quick track dousing with the tractor-towed bowser and it's time for the Hayriders to have a go. It's a well supported part of the Hayride and clearly great fun for spectators and competitors alike.





There's more fun on Sunday as everyone convenes in front of Bisley's Pavilion to see the Soapbox Derby on Queens Way. Kicking off with 'Lone Wolf Racing', which pits individual racers against each other, this is followed by the 'Club Challenge'. The club names are as colourful as their soapbox creations; 'The Cannibals', 'The East Coast Sidewinders', and 'The Executioners' to name but three. Bringing the Hayride to its close is the final race which pits the 'Lone Wolf' winner against the 'Club' winner.

It really is a cracking event and lives up to its 'moving art' billing. Its cosmopolitan audience (the large contingent from Belgium were having a whale of a time) is overwhelmingly friendly, approachable and having a chilled out good time. Here's to number 18.....

For more information, visit <https://hotrodhayride.co.uk/>

