

Ollon-Villars

Switzerland may have banned circuit racing in the 1950s, but it still had this gem of a hillclimb

BY ED FOSTER



Ollon-Villars was only used between 1953 and 1971, and yet it remains one of the best-known European hillclimbs. Playing host to one of the few international motor sporting events held in Switzerland at the time, the climb attracted some big names – including a certain Jim Clark – and was a regular fixture in the European Mountain Championship.

Happily situated overlooking the Rhône valley and under 10 kilometres south east of Lake Geneva, the hillclimb ran from the town of Ollon at 400 metres to Villars-sur-Ollon and Chesières at 1208 metres, passing through the village of Huémoz along the way.

During the '60s the surrounding woods and grassy fields echoed to the sound of racing, but nowadays the area is a playground for skiers.

When we visited a huge amount of work was being done in order to prepare the area for the winter influx, and it seemed the hillclimb had been all but forgotten. But ask a few locals and they'll tell you all about it thanks to a relatively new revival event, which celebrates its fifth anniversary this year on September 18/19. And of course those who were around in the '60s still recall the original meetings. Our discussions on this point were usually cut short, however, when said local caught sight of our on-loan Audi R8. They may be *de rigueur* in the winter with Russian skiers, but apparently they aren't a common sight in the summer...

Against a backdrop of Mont Blanc and the Dents du Midi, the road features almost every conceivable type of corner over its 4.97 miles, with the majority being quick for a hillclimb. There are seven hairpins, but they didn't prevent the likes of François Cevert from finishing the

course in under four minutes. What's more, there must have been little room for error, as a steep drop borders most corners with not much in the way of a barrier. Cevert must have felt this, as after posting a time of 3min 47.04sec in 1971 he told *Autosport*: "Never again will I indulge in such a dangerous adventure. I find the climb quite frightening, brushing guardrails at high speed and clipping trees. Circuit racing is much less demanding."

Demanding Ollon-Villars may have been but Derek Bell, who was part of a three-man FIRST Brabham team with Peter Westbury and Mac Daghorn in 1967, remembers the hill fondly after winning both the F3 and single-seater classes. "It was tremendous because it was so varied," he says. "It wasn't particularly narrow – although in modern terms it may have been – but there were some really great corners, it wasn't just a string of hairpins.

"You could have a really good blast up Villars and there was a section with steep drops on one side of the road and some quick corners, all in succession. You could really hammer through those esses. It was pretty damn quick, which I guess it had to be to get a little F3 car up there fast, as you'd need the momentum. If it was all hairpins, the bloody V8s would have murdered me!

"The interest in hillclimbing was definitely waning by 1967. I mean, I'd got to know Peter Westbury, but it was something that had never appealed to me. I'd met him six months before and he'd said 'look, we can make this work'. He was a good engineer, a clever man. We were between races and he said to me 'come on, why don't you come and do Ollon-Villars'. It was really a lovely thought. It's funny – in those days you never considered the cost because there wasn't any. The cost of running a car for



Derek Bell was fastest up the hill in 1967 in Brabham BT21

Philippe Souge

featured a meeting at Ollon-Villars for the first time in 1958, the twisty road running up to Chesières had hosted a couple of meetings in 1953 and '56.

Since the start of the Formula 1 World Championship in 1950, Switzerland had every year held a Grand Prix at the glorious Bremgarten track. The 1955 Le Mans disaster put an end to circuit racing in the country, however, with the authorities deciding that it was just too dangerous to have cars racing side by side. As a result hillclimbing and rallying became the only way that drivers could race cars in Switzerland – a law that remains intact to this day. The upside to this was that even before the post-war European Mountain Championship was relaunched, hillclimbing at Ollon-Villars was particularly popular, a fact that no doubt helped the event make it onto the calendar. >>>

||| TRACK VISIT

In 1958 after rounds at Mont Parnes, Mont Ventoux, Trento-Varese, Freiburg-Schauinsland and Gaisberg, the hillclimb circus made its way to Ollon for the season finale. Edgar Barth, driving a Porsche RSK1500, was over two seconds quicker than Sepp Greger after two runs to win. But victory wasn't enough to change the outcome of the championship, which was won by Wolfgang von Trips, with Jo Bonnier and Hans Hermann second and third in the points.

The following year the Swiss round was held at Klosters, some 230 kilometres to the east. But in 1960 Ollon-Villars was back on the schedule, before Klosters took over again in '61. It was in 1962 that Jim Clark made his first appearance at Ollon, in what can only be described as a disastrous couple of visits to the hillclimb – through no fault of the driver's, of course. In '62 Clark was touted as being the driver most likely to challenge Jo Bonnier in the Racing class for cars with an engine capacity between 1101-1500cc and, as you can imagine, the crowd eagerly anticipated such a showdown. But there followed some complications.

For starters, Team Lotus couldn't make the journey to Switzerland and provide Clark with a competitive car. To make matters worse, the Lotus considered to be the second-quickest available – the Swiss Filipinetti Lotus-BRM – was damaged beyond repair while being towed to the start line at Enna in Sicily.

All that was left was a MkII Lotus-Climax. Not a *bad* third choice, but this particular model was described by *Motoring News* as being “excessively tired, to be charitable. It had everything apart from an aged motor, no front shock absorbers and no brakes”. Even someone of Clark's talent couldn't tame such a beast, and



Ferrari SWB crosses the finish line in 1962 having negotiated the final right-hand hairpin, one of seven on the hillclimb. Although trees have grown up, the road remains the same

he ended up in a meadow “viewing the sheep” on his first practice run. Bonnier went on to post a new hill record, smashing Jean Behra's 1958 time of 4min 46.7sec by nearly 20 seconds.

Clark wasn't the only famous face to be seen that day, as the likes of Juan Manuel Fangio, Louis Chiron, Robert Manzon and Paul Frère watched the second runs from the sidelines after they had all tackled the hill in Alfa Romeo Giulia Spyders. Fangio delighted the fans with a long oversteering slide round the final hairpin with one hand off the steering wheel, waving to them. The others were reportedly less exciting to watch, although that didn't stop them having a good laugh at some of the cars attempting the climb, with “an antique Maserati 2.5 monoposto” apparently sending them into hysteria.

Clark was to return in 1965 – in between practice and a race at Brands Hatch for the

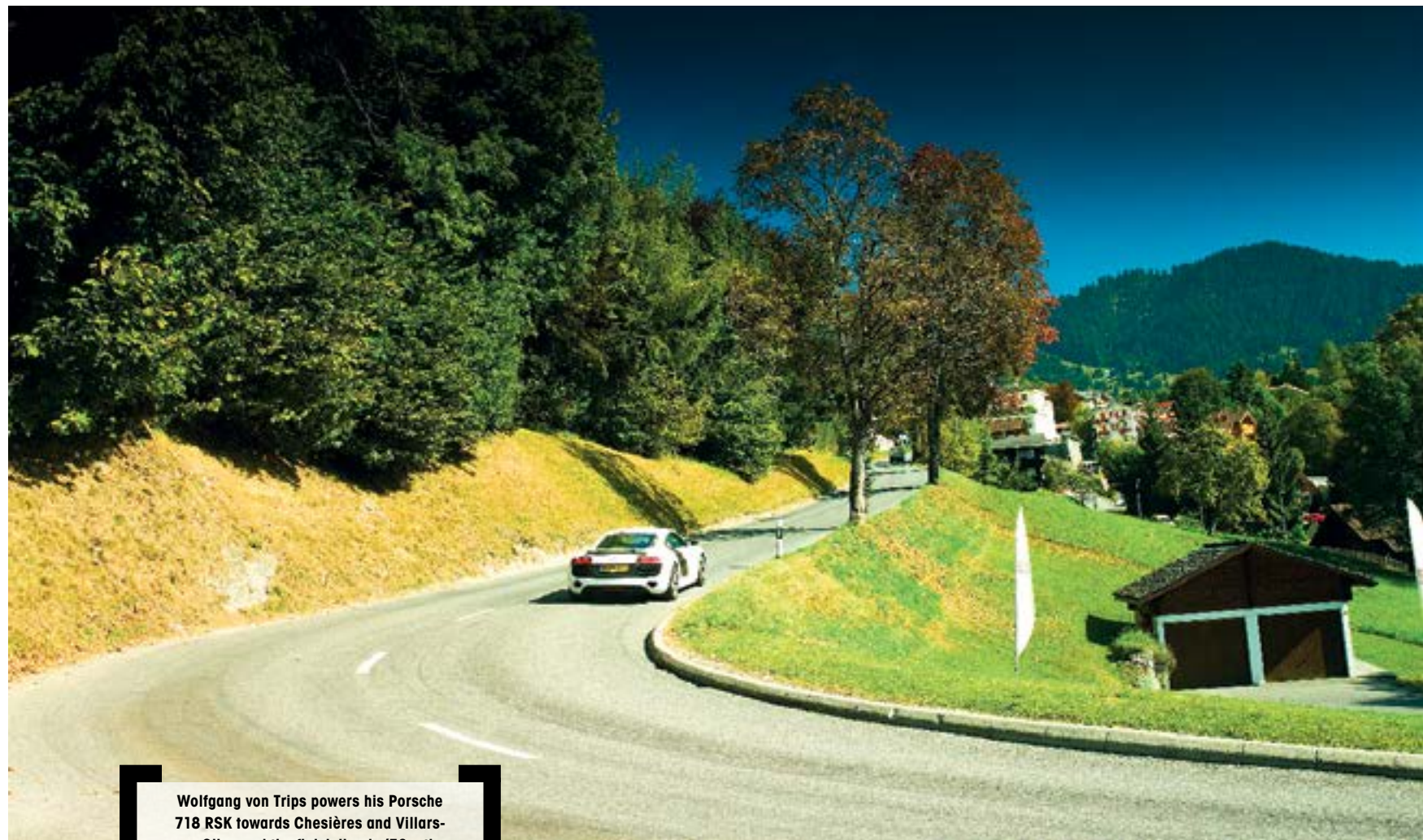
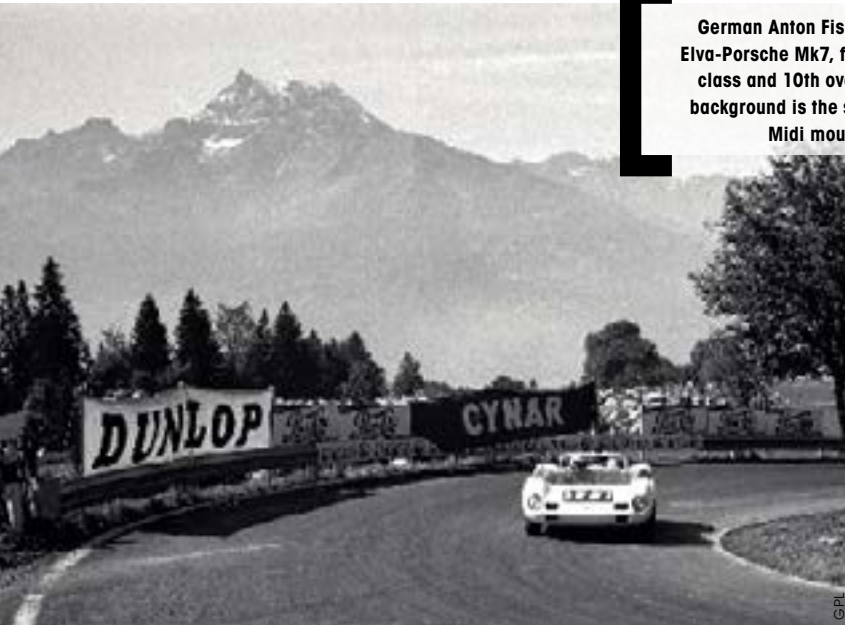
August Bank Holiday meeting – but once again the machinery available made it nigh on impossible for him to make any sort of impact. Behind the wheel of the rather overpowered Indy-winning Lotus-Ford 38, the Scot managed 4min 34.5sec in practice, but failed to do better on the timed run thanks to a misfiring engine. When he returned to Brands for the British Eagle International Trophy, he was driving an up-to-date and well-prepared Lotus 35. He won the race by three seconds from Denny Hulme.

By 1963 the popularity and importance of Ollon-Villars may not have granted the event a slot on the European Mountain Championship every year, but it did gain it entry as a round of the World Sportscar Championship alongside the Coppa della Consuma, Rossfeld and Freiburg-Schauinsland hillclimbs. Even though the climbs never carried the same weight as the circuits used in the championship, that didn't stop crowds of 40,000 or more attending Ollon-Villars. Thanks to the sort of organisation that only the Germans or Swiss can pull off, the whole 1963 meeting was over five hours after the competitive runs had started, so as to avoid a blockage on the one road off the hillside. And to think Silverstone had problems...

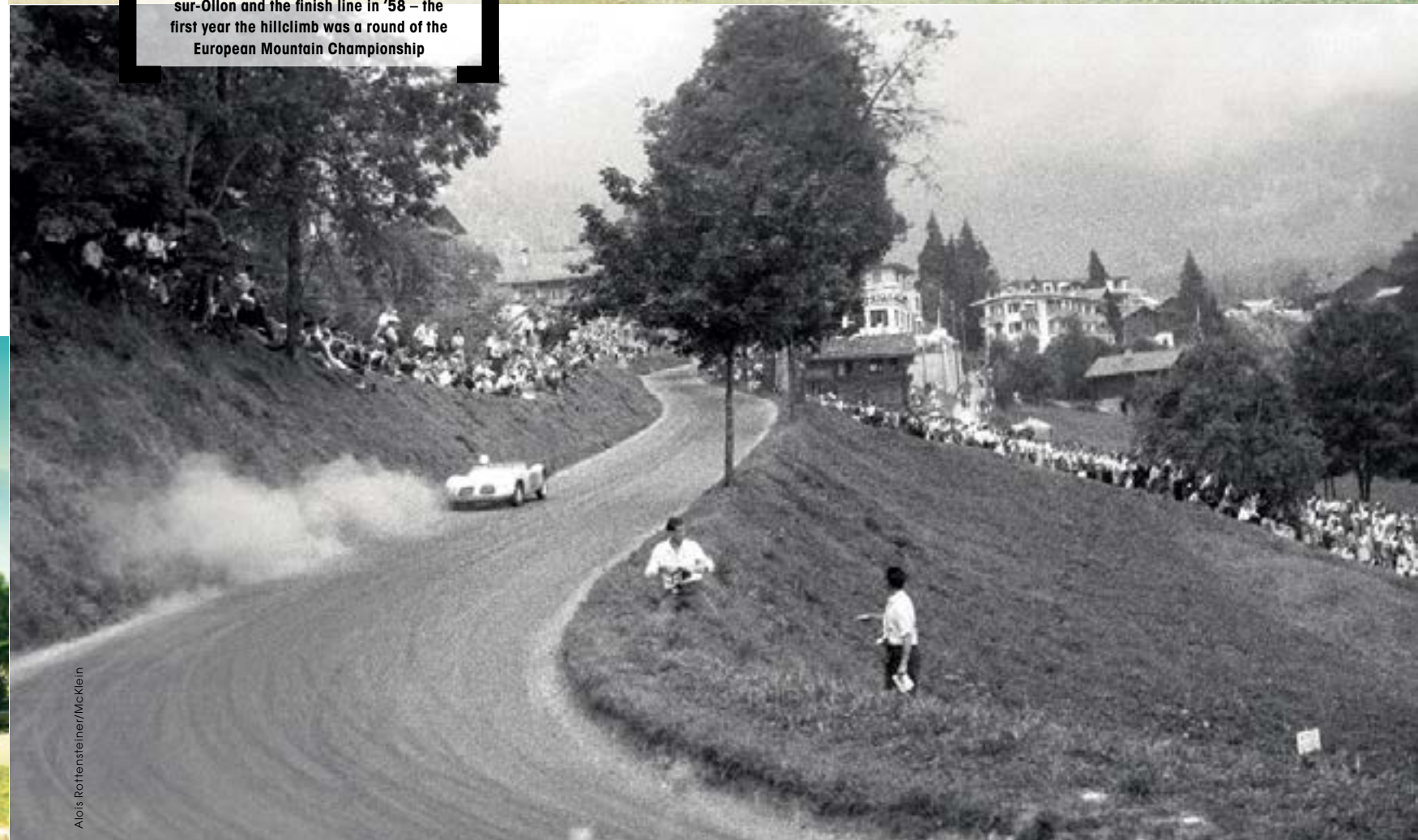
Despite Clark's misfortunes the '65 meeting was another success story with fine weather, plenty of entries and a large crowd. By now Ludovico Scarfiotti, aboard a Ferrari Dino 206P, was the dominant force in the European Mountain Championship and he continued to impress at Ollon-Villars with a record-breaking run of 4min 9.8sec, leaving his main rival Gerhard Mitter – behind the wheel of a Porsche 904/8 Bergspyder – to settle for second-best.

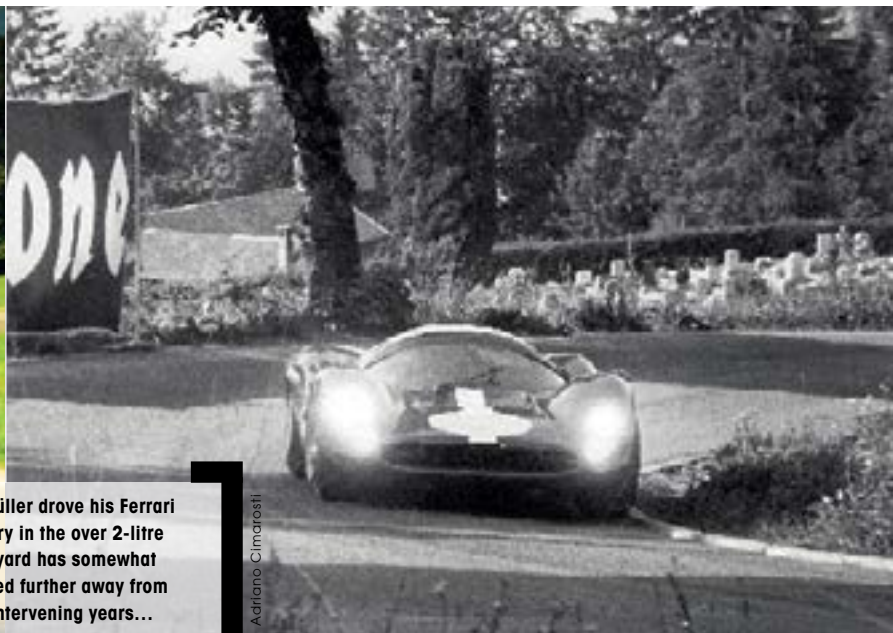
Although the 1965 meeting was a round >>>

German Anton Fischhaber, driving the Elva-Porsche Mk7, finished third in 2-litre class and 10th overall in 1965. In the background is the spectacular Dents du Midi mountain range



Wolfgang von Trips powers his Porsche 718 RSK towards Chesières and Villars-sur-Ollon and the finish line in '58 – the first year the hillclimb was a round of the European Mountain Championship





In 1967 Herbert Müller drove his Ferrari 330 P3/4 to victory in the over 2-litre class. The graveyard has somewhat mysteriously moved further away from the road in the intervening years...

Adriano Cimarosti

of the World Sportscar Championship, that title had all but been decided with only the Nürburgring 500km and Bridgehampton Double 500km rounds remaining, meaning the focus was on the Mountain competition. One star attraction was local hero Heini Walter, who managed to get his badly damaged Ferrari 250LM to the meeting following an accident in a previous Mountain round. But in order to make the car race-worthy, the roof was chopped off. Despite looking slightly bizarre, he went on to take second in the S-R/Prototype class for over 2-litre cars and was seventh overall.

The next hillclimb at Ollon-Villars, in 1967, would be the last time such an event formed part of the World Sportscar Championship. Hillclimb cars were becoming far more specific to the discipline – with various modifications including fuel tanks that were only big enough to allow for one run up the hill – leaving the production cars well down the field. Ferrari had pulled out of the sport after Günther Klass died following an accident during practice for that year's Gran Premio del Mugello, leaving Porsche as the only works entry with factory-supported cars. The '67 meeting at Ollon-Villars would do little to persuade Ferrari it had made the wrong decision when two rare fatalities occurred: Axel Perrenroud left the road on the exit of Huémoz village in practice, clipping a tree and rolling his Cobra onto a hut below, and Michel Pillet crashed going back down the hill.

It wasn't all bad news in '67. There was a huge entry list, including an impressive array of F3 cars, motorbikes and sidecars, Formula Vee and even karts. Another reason for the event's

popularity might have had something to do with the AC Suisse organising club's reputation for offering generous start and prize money... In the event Derek Bell finished first, and Westbury and Daghorn third and fourth, meaning the FIRST Brabham team went home with 7000 Swiss Francs, although some of this may have been claimed by Bell's father following some practise mishaps in his Lotus Cortina. "I remember going up with my dear old Dad, the Colonel as he was called," says Bell. "He helped me immensely in those couple of years and he had this Lotus Cortina which we used to learn the road. Of course, it's a public road, so you couldn't just blast up it. So we'd go out there at dawn and someone would stand four corners up in order to check the road was clear. I'd then scream up a kilometre section. I remember clipping the kerbs and the old man moaning about his bloody Cortina wheels having chips out of them."

It was in '67 that some 21 ex-GP drivers did demo runs up the hill, the roll call including Stirling Moss, Tony Rolt, Duncan Hamilton, Tommy Wisdom, former Auto Union drivers Hermann Müller and August Mombberger and, as in '58, Juan Manuel Fangio.



Alfa Romeo Giulia TZ of Italians Teodore Zeccoli and Roberto Bussinello approaches the final hairpin in 1965. This was where Juan Manuel Fangio waved to an appreciative crowd in '58

Once again the meeting had a 'year off' in 1968 and then 1970, returning in '69 and '71. But by this time the European Mountain Championship was suffering heavily due to an increasing lack of interest from the major manufacturers. For the last meeting at Ollon-Villars in 1971 the Lausanne club invested over £30,000, banking on there being more than 25,000 spectators to make a profit. Thankfully the weather was clear – as it was when we visited the Rhône valley – and well over 30,000 spectators came to watch a bumper field of cars that included François Cevert in the works Tecno F2 car.

Despite the presence of some minor roadworks, Cevert charged up the hill in 3min 47.04sec to set the all-time record, which stands to this day. After 1971 public interest in the Mountain championship continued to dwindle, and Ollon suffered as a result. But, unlike other hillclimbs, at least it has the revival meetings to remind people of its glorious past.

For such a short hillclimb in a country that had banned circuit racing, it's a wonder Ollon-Villars managed to host even a single event. Thankfully it did, and although its 'years of

business' may have been short, it is quite rightly remembered as one of the most popular of hillclimbs. Now that we've seen what the drivers had to contend with, there will be few appointments that might stop us making the revival meeting in September to see some

proper hillclimb cars hammering up the twists and turns of Ollon-Villars. **M**

Many thanks to Audi UK for their help with this feature.