



LASTING TRIBUTE: DONINGTON HONOUR FOR ACE WHO WAS KILLED 30 YEARS AGO

UNFORGETTABLE!

Williamson's bid for glory ended in flames in Holland

July 29, 1973, is probably remembered by Leicestershire motor-racing fans as the day the county lost its greatest hope of Formula 1 fame in a fatal accident at Zandvoort, in Holland.

But for the friends, colleagues and family of 24-year-old motor-racing virtuoso Roger Williamson, it was the day they lost an irreplaceable friend, son and brother.

Today is the 30th anniversary of his death, which is to be marked at Donington Park with the unveiling of a life-size statue – a lasting tribute to the Ashby-born man who gained the admiration of racing legends such as Jackie Stewart and Ken Tyrrell in his short lifetime.

Already behind the wheel of his father's car at the age of 10, Williamson loved everything

There was no doubt at all that he was a future world champion. If you compare him to Nigel Mansell, Mansell probably didn't have as much natural ability as Roger.

Trevor Foster

EXTRA TIME



BY GEORGE DRYDEN

connected to cars, earning his living as a motor mechanic at his father's garage in Northgate, Leicester, and getting brides to the church on time as a chauffeur for his father's wedding car-hire service.

His career started at Monarchs Speedway in Leicester's Slater Street, from which he soon progressed to go-karting, a hobby which he shared with his father, 'Dodge'.

By the 1960s, he was firmly in the driving seat of Minis and Anglias at Mallory Park, from which he moved on to Formula 3, when he met the man who was to be his professional mainstay and a second father to him – Tom Wheatcroft, the owner of Donington Park and the Grand Prix Collection.

Under Wheatcroft's guidance, Williamson continued to excel whenever he competed, with a series of accolades including BP Superman of the Year in 1971,

winner of three Formula 3 championships in one year and an additional 32 race wins.

But his bid for Formula 1 Grand Prix glory ended in tragedy at Zandvoort in only his second F1 race. The treads of his tyres caused him to veer out of control, causing him to hit the crash barriers, reputedly secured only by posts hammered into the sand.

His March's ruptured fuel tank burst into flames and in spite of the selfless attempts of fellow British driver David Purley, he lay trapped in the upturned vehicle for 20 minutes and died of smoke inhalation.

At the same time, a nation's hopes for an invincible British world champion died with him.

Trevor Foster, who was one of Williamson's Formula 2 mechanics who was also at the fateful Dutch Grand Prix, shared his memories of this unforgettable Leicester hero.

Foster, a 50-year-old and the former managing director of Jordan Grand Prix for 15 years, said: "The week before the Dutch Grand Prix, Roger had been involved in a collision at the start of his first Formula 1 race at Silverstone, which wasn't his fault.

"Everyone was desperate to repair the car in time to go to Zandvoort.

"There was also the opportunity of a Formula 2 race in Sweden on the same day, so the plan was to stop off at Zandvoort and wait for a call to see if the



A RARE TALENT: Roger Williamson, who was being remembered at Donington today

car was ready. If it was, we did the Dutch Grand Prix. It was like fate and extremely sad looking back that the car was ready.

"There was no doubt at all that he was a future world champion.

"If you compare him to Nigel Mansell, Mansell probably

didn't have as much natural ability as Roger; but the same dedication and determination to the job.

"The Formula 2 Monza race shortly before he died was amazing. He got knocked out of the race at the first chicane, so by the time he recovered, he was

way behind everyone else.

"By the end, even the Italians were chanting his name and cheering him on. He came right from the back of the field and won it."

The dedication of the statue was due to take place today at 11.30am, with all welcome.

Saddest day of my life – Wheatcroft



MEMORIES: Roger Williamson with his sponsor and mentor, Tom Wheatcroft, in November 1972

TOM WHEATCROFT regards the day that Roger Williamson died as "the saddest day of my life".

The 80-year-old Donington Park owner, who provided moral and financial support to Williamson during his career, said that the driver was "like a son". And he explained that the day Williamson died had been "so strange" with an occurrence of number 13s.

"The day he died was so strange, just lots of little things," said Wheatcroft.

"The car should have been number 13, but it was changed at the last minute, the race was 13 minutes late starting and

BY GEORGE DRYDEN

when he crashed, he was in 13th position.

"He was like a son to me – such a big part of my life.

"It was the saddest day of my life, but I have so many good memories of him.

"He was a wonderful fellow in every way – his character, integrity, honesty and determination. He never asked me for anything and we never argued. After that, I tried to work with two other drivers, but I couldn't replace him. There will never be anyone like him, either as a friend or a driver."

Wheatcroft remembers: "I first met Roger driving a Ford Anglia at Mallory Park. I thought what a marvellous effort he was making as he went round the track.

"I was going to offer to help him with any equipment, but he had a few friends around him and had people queuing up for autographs, so I didn't butt in.

"Then I saw him at Monte Carlo. He had a poor engine and the smoke was pouring out, but he still kept passing the cars.

"I went and found him afterwards. He was sitting there with the engine out on the pavement, trying to mend it.

"I said 'Oh, no, lad, that won't

do', so I found out the engine supplier and bought him a new engine.

"I never really expected to see him again, but a while later, I was just about to go to bed and there he was on my doorstep, covered in grease because he'd been working on his car. He gave me two tickets to Silverstone to say thank you.

"I got him sorted out after that with equipment and sponsorships and I went to every race in his career after that, except one.

"He had an offer to go on Tyrrell's team, and I'd got the contract all sorted for him when he just turned to me and said he wanted to stay with me."

If you have any memories of Williamson, write to: Sports Postbag, Sports Desk, Leicester Mercury, St George Street, Leicester LE1 9FQ. Fax: 0116 253 0645. Email: sportsdesk@leicestermercury.co.uk