Car club's golden anniversary

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Driving forces: Former club presidents Munro Tall, left, and Stuart Maclean, who also co-founded the club

By PHILIP CHANDLER

After a long and sometimes rocky road, the Queenstown Car Club celebrates its 50th anniversary today.

It was founded — originally as the Wakatipu Car Club — by the late Brian Middlemass, who owned a local car museum, and then-insurance agent Stuart Maclean, who finished his latest stint as club president only a year ago.

In its second year, 1972, it launched the renowned Coronet Peak Hill Climb on the suggestion of Southland Sports Car Club member Colin Bunce.

Remarkably, the road was then administered by the former Ministry of Works, and organisers only got the go-ahead after a telegram from Minister of Works Percy Allen, after the assistance of local mayor Warren Cooper.

The club used to run events on many locals roads like Glenda Drive, Domain, Hunter, Littles and Hogans Gully Roads, and even got permission to close Malaghans Rd for a standing quarter mile.

Former president and ace driver Munro Tall recalls an autocross around where he now lives at Lake Hayes Estate, while Frankton Flats was another venue.

Finding venues is a major issue these days, Maclean says.

''I don't think we'll ever have a motor-racing circuit because of the high price of land.''

Autocrosses are nowadays held at Gibbston and near Kingston, though members once a year burn up Invercargill's Teretonga and Cromwell's Highlands tracks.

Their biggest event was a sprint on the then-gravel Glenorchy Rd, to mark its 25th anniversary, and beyond to Elfin Bay Station.

The winner, Malcolm Stewart, clocked 13 minutes between One Mile and Glenorchy, but also had one of his biggest ever scares near 12 Mile Delta.

Club's biggest event: Cars belonging to winner Malcolm Stewart, right, and runner-up Ray Wilson after the club's Glenorchy race in 1987

In its heyday, the Coronet Peak hillclimb attracted well-known winners like Inky Tulloch, Reg Cook and Trevor Crowe.

But after two spectators died at the 1998 Queenstown Classic Car Race, the club effectively went into recess for just over 10 years, even though it didn't organise the event.

''No one had the enthusiasm for it for a period of time,'' Maclean says.

''It got revived thanks basically to Tony Adamson and Grant Aitken.''

There are currently about 130 members, about 70 of whom competed at least once over the past year.

''We call ourselves a grassroots motorsport club,'' Maclean says.

''A lot of people join and do a few events and then next thing you know they're doing South Island rallies, and they're doing well.''

The guest speaker for tonight's anniversary dinner is Cromwell-based former world rally champ Hayden Paddon.

scoop@scene.co.nz