

IT must have come as some relief to Les Gardner that when he turned up in Malvern recently he didn't have the shirt ripped off his back by adoring females.

After all what's cool when you're 20 is not so cool, in fact probably drafty, when you're 83.

But those were the days, six decades ago, when The Trakkers couldn't walk down a street in town without being recognised and Les was the lead singer.

He fronted one of Malvern's first and most successful rock groups and they all got together at the Malvern Hills Hotel in 2024 for a reunion. A lot older and maybe a bit wiser.

"It was a really good evening," said Les. "A chance to meet old friends again and listen to some of our old recordings."

All the others were there - lead guitarist Selwyn Read, bass man Alan Redgrove, Dick Lawrence, who played rhythm guitar, and drummer Pete Willcocks.

Also present were the group's sound recordists Roy Snook and Dave Harries, roadies Paul Burbidge and Hugh Nightingale, along with families and fans from long ago.

The band was originally formed in 1960 by Pete, Alan and Dick who were electronics apprentices at Malvern's RRE establishment. They were soon to be joined by Selwyn and Les.

Pete explained: "One thing I am often asked is where the name Trakkers came from.

"Most of the band had connections with The Royal Radar Establishment and so, when we were wondering about a name for ourselves, I thought, well, the purpose of radar is to track items with its rotating dishes – so maybe The Trackers.

"But back then it was trendy to have some slight difference in a name to catch the eye – like Cliff Richard, when you would be more likely to expect Cliff Richards with an 'S'. So how about 'The Trakkers'? That seemed to go down well so the name stuck."

The group went on to play rock 'n' roll right across the Midlands up to Birmingham and Wolverhampton and into Wales with Les especially hot on Elvis material.

He recalled: "In February 1961 we played a gig at Central Hall in Birmingham and the screaming from the young ladies in the audience was so loud you'd have thought Elvis had entered the building.

"It was picked up by the pickups on Sel's guitar and recorded on our homemade echo unit. Coming off stage they mobbed me and even tore my shirt. It was quite some experience!

"Also in 1961 we had a track played on Radio Luxembourg. We all gathered to listen in but, medium-wave reception being what it was, it faded out in the middle.

"Fortunately, someone had recorded it. 'Rediscovered' in 2015 we had a 15-minute spot on Dutch radio station Radio Venray's 60s Pop Gold show which was presented by Dave Edwards who was also from Malvern."

But if this early rock 'n' roll lifestyle seems glamorous, it wasn't always.

Without a car between them, the band relied on lifts from friends and fans to get them to their shows. At the end of one winter performance at Cheltenham Town Hall their transport failed to turn

up and after shivering for a couple of hours in below-zero temperatures the band had to chip in and pay for taxis home for themselves and their equipment. All the gig money gone.

However, there were definitely up sides.

Les added: “On stage at the Regal Ballroom in Ammanford, south Wales, in November 1963 a fault developed in Sel's amplifier which caused us to invent the 'fuzz box' sound years before anyone else. The audience loved it.

“Next morning we discovered about a dozen girls camped outside our digs, waiting for us to sign autographs. A similar autograph session occurred in 61 in Woolworths in Malvern after a gig at The Festival Theatre.”

Alan added: “We did quite well and were at one time offered a professional contract but we mostly wanted to finish our training first so did not take it up. We really played for fun – and the beer money.”

The Trakkers eventually disbanded in 1963 but several went down other musical avenues.

The multi-talented Selwyn has been involved in numerous musical projects and is still playing his violin at country and western events while Alan is a member of a ukelele band in Yorkshire.

Pete worked for Thames TV as sound supervisor on the Kenny Everett Show and the children's programme Rainbow and sound recordist Dave went to work with George Martin at the famous Abbey Road studios recording groups like The Beatles, Beach Boys and Pink Floyd. He currently works with Mark Knopfler.

But it all began back in Malvern and as Elvis might have sang: “There was good rockin' tonight”. Maybe for one last time.