



A right rare Riley

By Ian M. Johnston, the Tractor Historian

In addition to his collection of rare old tractors, our tractor historian IAN M. JOHNSTON is assembling a collection of classic roadster cars. In a departure from his usual tractor articles, he tells us of his desires and tribulations relating to the acquisition of a Riley.

THE REICHMARSHAL

The responsibility for my recent purchase of a Riley Roadster rests fairly and squarely with the late unlamented Hermann Goering. Such a pronouncement, no doubted greeted with scepticism by some, requires I believe a hasty "please explain" on my behalf.

The Reichmarshal's personal bullet-proof Mercedes Benz Grosser went on tour throughout Great Britain in 1948. This expressive example of a WW2 reparation prize was tangible evidence to the people of Britain of the complete humiliation of the Nazi regime.

I remember well, as a tousle haired schoolboy in Edinburgh, taking a No.9 tramcar to Princes Street, then walking the short distance to a Shandwick Place motor dealer's showroom, in which the swastika embellished Mercedes Benz was on display. I was astonished by its gargantuan proportions, but also mature enough to comprehend the historical significance of its presence.



The Riley badge is synonymous with British sporting sedans and roadsters of the 1930s and 1940s.

The following day I persuaded my father to accompany me on a second visit to Shandwick Place. But upon our arrival at the showroom the big car was conspicuous by its absence. It was, we were informed, en-route to Dundee on the next leg of its grand tour. However, in its place stood one of the most stylish and desirable cars I had ever set eyes upon. We gazed in admiration at the newly released, magnificently sleek, Riley Roadster!

THE TURNHOUSE RILEY

The second occasion I was favoured with a sighting of a Riley Roadster occurred a year or so later, at Turnhouse RAF Airbase (now Edinburgh International Airport). A disused corner of the base, which a few years previously was home to the RAF City of Edinburgh 603 Spitfire squadron, was leased to The Midlothian Gentlemen's Sporting Car Club. It was there, on a glorious Sunday afternoon in 1949, that my senses were again excited by seeing a bright yellow Riley Roadster, this time completely eclipsing an assortment of lesser sporting cars competing in various car gymkhana events.

I recollect that among the 50 or so cars, there was a gaggle of MG TCs, several Austin Seven Roadsters, plus a Dellow, an Allard and a Railton. The Riley, with its hood down and windscreen folded flat across the bonnet, was being driven by a rakish fellow complete with gauntlets, tweed cap, a flowing yellow scarf, a pipe clamped in his mouth and, believe it or not, a monocle. To me he looked the typical "silly ass" upper crust young playboy.

Be that or not — he certainly could handle the Riley. In a high speed competition sprint, only the Allard's time came near to that of the Riley's. I was amused to note that at the conclusion of each event, puffs



Photo is of the frontal view of the 1949 Riley Roadster showing the hood erected. The long bonnet conceals a high performance 2.5 litre twin cam engine. The same engine was used by Donald Healey in his race specials prior to his association with BMC and the Austin Healey.



A rear view with the hood erected. There are also side curtains, stowed behind the rear seat, which can readily be put in place rendering the inside of the car completely dry in wet weather. The capacious rear boot is capable of accommodating several large suitcases plus a bag of golf clubs.



A frontal view with the hood folded, stowed and hidden beneath the tonneau cover. It takes no more than two minutes to either drop or erect the hood.

of smoke continued to emit from the “chap’s” pipe and the monocle remained firmly in place.

The Riley Roadster had the highest top speed of any of the cars that day at Turnhouse. In fact it was one of an elite few British cars of the period capable of delivering a genuine 100 mph (160 kph). The Allard with its Ford V8 engine and the Railton with its Hudson straight eight, cer-

tainly would have been close seconds. The 2.5 litre twin cam Riley engine developed 100 bhp and, having the longest stroke of any British car engine, had the sort of torque back-up one might expect from the Queen Mary. There is no doubt the Riley engine was several decades ahead of its time. Interestingly, it was also used to power the record braking Healey Silverstone race car.



Taken from the rear quarter, this view of the Riley shows the hood down and the windscreen folded flat. During sports car race events it was common practice to lower the windscreen to obtain less wind resistance.

HALF A CENTURY LATER

A mere 504 Riley Roadsters were produced — the majority being assembled at the MG works at Abingdon. They were made primarily for export into the Californian market. Only a handful found their way to Australia. Accordingly, it is not surprising that it was to be more than half

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a century before I was to sight my next Riley Roadster.

Some weeks ago, an acquaintance with whom I had discussed the rarity of Riley Roadsters just a short while previously, phoned to tell me that a Canberra based Riley Roadster was about to come onto the market. He was able to furnish me with a relevant telephone number.

Within half an hour I had successfully negotiated a purchase subject to inspection with the vendor and a short while later Margery and I were heading south down the Pacific Highway in the general direction of Canberra.

There was a high degree of urgency in our hurried action, because the next day the vehicle was scheduled to be advertised for sale in the columns of a popular classic car magazine. I knew there would be an immediate clamouring response from collectors, anxious to purchase such a rare and desirable motorcar.

From the outer approaches of the ACT, I phoned our "usual" Canberra hostelry only to be advised that there was no available accommodation and that the city was booked-out owing to the visitation by the US President the following day. I considered it incredibly un-sporting of President Bush to have selected what was to be my "day of the Riley" for his Canberra invasion.

There was an immediate imperative therefore to consult the *NRMA Accommodation Guide* starting at "A". My first call on the mobile was to The Ambassador Hotel which fortuitously had just received a cancellation, so a bed for the night was assured. We were to discover later that, by an amazing stroke of good luck, The Ambassador happened to be only one street away from the domicile of the Riley.

At nine am the following morning, it was not only President Bush's impending arrival that tended to gridlock the traffic around Parliament House. The spectacle of a bright cream Riley Roadster competing for space alongside the modern cars, was sufficient reason for the normally easy flowing roundabouts, of which there are countless in the ACT, to become choked as drivers deliberately slowed their vehicles to a crawl, in order to obtain a better view of the old car. Drivers honked, waved and flashed headlights to indicate their approval of such a fine classic in their midst.

Only the legions of visiting US Security



The Riley cockpit featured a comfortable bench seat, leather upholstery and walnut fascia. Note the folded down windscreen.

Marshalls frowned as we progressed in front of Parliament House. Their diligent searching under bushes and in waste receptacles (for weapons of mass destruction?) was a serious business and they had no time for such frivolities as classic British sports cars — although an overhead military helicopter seemed to stalk us for a while!

The experience in Canberra of finally sighting a Riley Roadster after 54 years of abstinence and then actually folding myself in behind the wheel and driving the thing — was possibly, for me, the highlight of 2003. Certainly, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, but the ardour I felt way back in 1948 has endured and perhaps intensified, particularly now that I have experienced the sensuous delights of the vehicle's performance.

The twin cam 2.5 litre engine, with its

twin SU carburettors, is a tribute to the British design engineers of so long ago. As previously stated, this is a genuine 100 mph (160 kph) motorcar built at a time when few cars could achieve more than around 70 mph (116 kph). The individual torsion bar front suspension provides a rock steady road holding characteristic equated by only the best of modern vehicles. The leather seats and walnut fascia belong to a past dignified era.

The Riley reposes now in our roadster collection shed — adjacent to the tractors. Certainly, the Riley cannot pull a plough, but then a Lanz Bulldog or a David Brown Cropmaster is not the ideal conveyance for a swift spin around the beaches on a balmy summer evening.

The above article is a condensed version of an extract from a yet untitled book currently being written by the author.

IAN'S MYSTERY QUIZ

QUESTION: The two cars pictured were manufactured in 1926 by a well known tractor manufacturer. Can you name the manufacturer?

CLUE: The Company in question was located in Europe.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: Very difficult for tractor buffs but relatively easy for vintage car enthusiasts.

ANSWER: See page 80.

