

THE HUSTLING HERMIT OF BROOKLANDS

The six fast years of J. G. Parry Thomas.

By DENNIS MAY

AT PENDINE, a tiny coastal hamlet in South Wales, the first Sunday of last March was slated for curious solemnities. Following normal A.M. devotions in the village chapel, a detachment of the congregation trudged three miles eastwards along the foreshore and scattered flowers on an unmarked grave—the grave of a 600-horsepower car.

Sunday the third of March, 1957, marked the thirtieth anniversary of the sudden and bloody death of the greatest speedman and automobile engineer that Wales ever cradled, John Godfrey Parry Thomas. Thomas's remains lie far beyond sabbath hiking range of Pendine—200 miles away at Byfleet, in the shadow of the desolate but intact bankings of Brooklands track, where in the heyday of this now extinct English Indianapolis, Thomas frazzled records galore and ran up countless race victories. But *Babs*, his huge Thomas Special car, rests and rusts forever beneath the sands of Pendine, a hundred yards from the spot where she foundered at 180 miles per hour on the fateful March third, 1927. For the reverent Pendiners her grave is the one local link with a compatriot who bred legends as a hedgehog breeds fleas.

Parry Thomas, shortened to Tommy by the few who knew him well enough to risk nicknames, was shooting at

his fourth Land Speed Record when the end came. *Babs* made the west to east run over the mile at record-plus speed, then was turned around and headed back towards Pendine village. About halfway through the trap the big white pan-technicon shed its landward back wheel, did a 180-degree spin, traveled tail first for five hundred yards, looped two loops and caught fire. Thomas was killed in the first split second of the eruption, brained by a broken driving chain. It was this chain, describing a murderous arc, that had amputated the wheel from the axle, setting *Babs* off into a *danse macabre* that no human power on earth could have controlled.

Two days later, with authority from the dead man's relatives and associates, a posse of Pendine rustics dug a great pit in the nearby dunes, manhandled the scorched and battered hulk to the brink and toppled it in. Not one of Thomas's mechanics could bring himself to watch as sand was shovelled in on top and the carcass finally vanished.

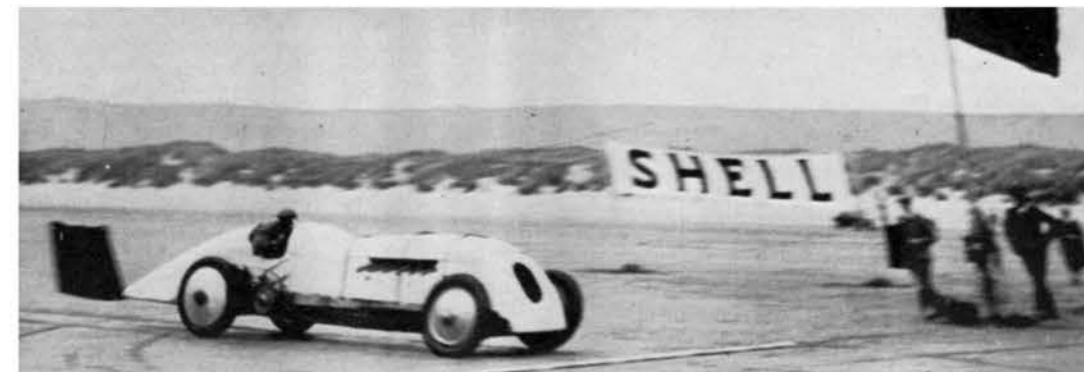
In his short career of speed—it lasted less than six years—Parry Thomas attained a popularity that was practically unanimous and came as near to adulation as anything the phlegmatic British allow themselves. Moreover, so far from courting popularity he seemed to despise it, and in his appearance and manner there wasn't one of the stock

trappings of a public idol. His heavily jowled face was homely almost to the point of ugliness, and in repose was host to an expression halfway between a frown and a scowl. Except in conversation with children, whom he adored, and his technical equals, who were few, he seldom smiled and usually talked in brusque monosyllables.

He dressed his big shapeless frame in untidy, shapeless clothes: on or off the track, he was rarely seen in anything but baggy flannel pants of obsolete cut and an oil-spotted Fair Isle jersey. He never threw or attended parties and remained a bachelor to his death at the age of forty-three. The remark by a contemporary funnyman that "he kept a bargepole specially for not touching women" expressed the essence if not the letter of his attitude to the female sex.

Thomas made his abode within the actual precincts of Brooklands; his bungalow, appropriately named The Hermitage, was in fact the only habitation the track possessed. Here, his sole companions were two enormous police dogs of uncertain temper, Togo and Bess. News papermen pumped him in vain for the there-was-I stories that tripped so tritely off the tongue of his chief rival for Land Speed honors, Captain Campbell, later Sir Malcolm. He wrote no books, no articles for the public prints. So far

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The beginning of the end, Parry Thomas sends "Babs" hurtling past the start line on the down run at Pendine sands. Turning around to make the second leg of the two-way record attempt, a drive chain broke on the return run at 170-plus, ending car and driver.



LEFT, Parry Thomas in the huge straight eight Leyland-Thomas rides high Brooklands banking. RIGHT, Start of the terrifying battle between Tommy, at right, and Ernest Eldridge in the LSR F.I.A.T. Thomas won by a hair. RIGHT, BELOW—Thomas grunts instructions to mechanic working on V-12 Liberty engine in "Babs" just prior to last Pendine run.



"Babs" gets push start for 1926 record run at Pendine. This one was successful but short lived, Malcolm Campbell grabbed it back, forcing a fatal return.

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Hustling Hermit

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as can be discovered, he only broadcast once, and it was characteristic of him that he donated the fee for this spiel to a children's hospital. It wasn't known that he had done so until after he died.

Parry Thomas had more engineering skill in his little finger than most other Knights of the Land Speed Table in their entire bodies. The only partial exception to this was and is Captain George Eyston, who moved into the L.S.R. picture a decade after the Welshman was killed; and not even Eyston ever designed a car himself, whereas Thomas was the sole designer of some of the most advanced automobiles of his day.

His first essay in this field, the straight-eight Leyland passenger car of 1920, was a technical *tour de force* and made an overnight sensation. There was hardly a feature of this majestic barouche that didn't proclaim its creator's passion for doing a familiar job in a way that was different, better. Thomas's individuality expressed itself in such terms as triple eccentric drive to the single overhead camshaft—a noise suppressing practice adopted six years later by W. O. Bentley; fully hemispherical combustion chambers; a common cam operating both intake and exhaust valves—thus only eight cams in all; cantilever leaf springs to return the valves; cooling fan speed controlled by suction governor; pressure lubrication to every working part in the plant, including the wristpins, which received their supply via hollow conrods; and thermostatic regulation of airflow to the radiator.

In only one particular, its bore-stroke ratio, did Thomas's engine conform to the conventional thinking of its day. Measurements were 89 by 146 millimeters, making the displacement 7266 cc. Fed by a single carburetor, and therefore obviously underfed, its maximum output was 145 bhp at probably somewhere around 2500 rpm. One hundred horsepower was given off at 1800 revs and 60 at 1000 rpm. The original purpose of the project being to out-Rolls R-R in silence, refinement and flexibility, little attempt was made to procure a lot of power relative to capacity. Later, when Thomas was no longer concerned with a dowager clientele and harnessed the big Leyland powerplant for races and records, the carburetion deficiency was duly rectified and the output figures went to far higher levels. What these levels were is a secret that probably died with him; by 1924 they sufficed for a Land Speed Record at 129.73 miles per hour by a car of extravagant cross-sectional area and fairly crude aerodynamic shape.

Too, the chassis of the big Leyland abounded in interesting gooks, including a rear suspension combining laminated and torsion springs, anti-sway torsion bars

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(Continued from page 52)

front and back, power assisted brakes (but on the rear wheels only), a splayed back axle to counteract road camber, and automatic chassis lubrication actuated by axle rebound following spring deflections. All these features were reproduced on successive generations of the Leyland and Leyland-derived track cars that Thomas raced and broke records with. The plain inference is therefore that, while ostensibly designing the parent passenger car to please the elderly and sybaritic, he was all the time envisaging its racing possibilities in re-bodied and hopped-up form. As it developed, in fact, the fame of the Leyland straight-eight was earned almost entirely in speedwork; perhaps because of a selling price that even made the Rolls tag look modest, the only production records set by Leyland were minimal ones. As however the staple product of the company was trucks, the commercial failure of the automobile didn't matter much.

A characteristic of the Thomas-designed suspension system was a resilience and range of deflection far in excess of anything normally used for either touring or racing back in 1922, the year of Tommy's Brooklands debut. This flexible springing gave the big Leyland a peculiar heaving gait like a wounded whale, causing track veterans to speculate without much optimism how long it would take for the taciturn Welshman to heave himself clear over the bankings and into the

At maximum speed or near it, cars of the Leyland's calibre were natural tenants of the upper lands of the banking, and Thomas, who had the unique distinction of breaking the lap record seven times in a single season, could claim a better right to the top strip than anyone else. One time, coming up to pass a slower rival who was leaving less than a car's width between his outer wheels and the shoulder, Thomas deliberately ran his outside wheels a foot over the lip, uprooting a couple of small bushes and regaining the concrete seventy feet further on. On the other hand, faced with even narrower gaps on the legitimate passing side, he was just as liable to wrench his silver and blue bolide under the tail of the competition and go by on a line that by every rule in the book was "impossible" for a car traveling that fast and weighing that much.

It was always a point of controversy whether Parry Thomas dealt only in calculated risks or whether he sometimes abandoned arithmetic in favor of blind faith. Endowed as he was with driving skill and judgment that was scarcely approached by the other great track-smiths of his day—Campbell, Eldridge, Cobb, Zborowski, Don and others—it is certain that the Welsh hermit often essayed an apparently suicidal maneuver in complete and justified confidence that he could make out. Much of this confidence, of course, was born of his perfect and comprehensive knowledge of his car and its capabilities, an asset exclusive to drivers who design their own

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Hustling Hermit*(Continued from page 53)*

machinery from scratch, build most of it with their own hands and minutely supervise what little of it is delegated to others.

In this, Tommy was unique among British racemen of his generation, although his case was strikingly paralleled by young Frank Lockhart on the other side of the ocean. Tommy followed Lockhart's career with great admiration and interest. If there is a corner of Valhalla reserved for designer-builder-drivers who lose their lives on sand (Lockhart, it will be remembered, crashed fatally at Daytona thirteen months after Thomas was killed at Pendine), these two should have plenty of notes to compare.

Supporting the view that Parry Thomas had a telescopic neck are various authenticated stories of his tire testing exploits at Brooklands. For these trials his standard formula was to keep right on lapping at full noise until either a tread flew off a casing or a casing left the rim. Once a Russian tire plant shipped him samples of its wares for destruction testing, asking Thomas to quote for the job. The quality and design of the merchandise being visibly horrifying, he put in an astronomical tender, confident that this in turn would horrify the Russians. It didn't, and their answer enclosed payment in advance to prove it. So, being a man of his word,

Thomas subjected the Red shoes to the regular treatment. Luckily for him, they burst one at a time. What he'd been nervous of, as he admitted afterwards with his customary absence of emotion, was that two or more might pop simultaneously.

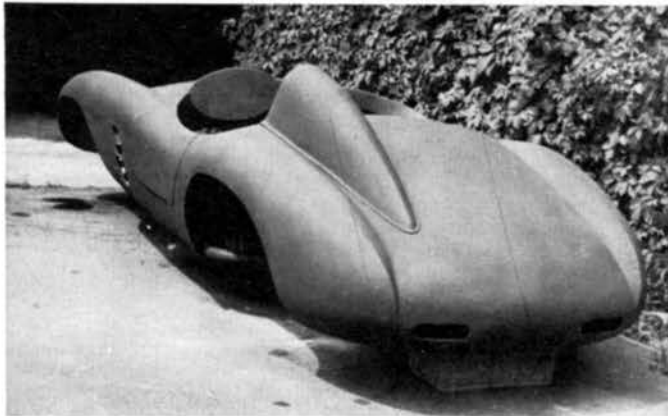
Perhaps the most famous Brooklands race that Thomas ever drove was a single-combat match in 1925 against Ernest Eldridge and his 21 liter F.I.A.T., *Mephistopheles*, which Malcolm Campbell's Sunbeam had recently dispossessed of its 145.9 mph Land Speed Record.

This duel, outcome of a challenge by Thomas for stakes of 500 pounds (around \$1400 at present exchange rates), was run over ten laps of the 2.7-mile track and wrung the following poignant passages from the *Autocar's* quill: "A more horrid spectacle to sit and watch has probably never been seen in motor racing . . . several well-known drivers hurried to the bar, at which they remained out of sight, full of apprehension, until the race was over." The apprehension was well merited. It was a tigerish fight from start to finish, further enlivened by both cars peeling tire treads at over two miles per minute, the F.I.A.T. from a back wheel, the Leyland from a front one. Thomas, in one of his theoretically impossible passing maneuvers, received a timely rap on the wrist from centrifugal force and slithered obliquely from near the lip of the steeper banking to the track's centerline before regaining control. But he won nevertheless, at 123.23 mph average, turning a

single lap at the above-record speed of 129.7.

Among the innumerable records, of local, national, international and world status, that Parry Thomas set at Brooklands, there was one of unofficial standing that nobody ever cared to challenge: with both eyes open he turned three-figure laps at various times with only three tires inflated. This would probably have been impossible on any car but the Leyland, which not only had abnormally soft suspension but also much lower geared steering than the classic track heavyweights of its time. Physically, too, Tommy had the strength and endurance of an ox.

For cars of lap record potentiality, the full Brooklands circuit had one feature—an unbanked re-entrant curve—calling for something akin to a road race technique. This in consideration, it is surprising that Parry Thomas, king of the *piste de vitesse*, was by no means a great road driver. Fast, yes, but lousy to boot. It is probable that he realized his failings in this field, and therefore seldom if ever contested a true road race. In fact, his best known performance on the highway was in the role of a volunteer bus driver on the streets of London during the general strike that threatened to paralyze British industry and communication in 1926. With a conrod from a truck engine thonged to his right wrist as a weapon against any striker who might care to start something personal, he threw himself into the job with a kind of

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Hustling Hermit

(Continued from page 54)

grouchy zest. Ignoring official time schedules but keeping a keen eye on the stopwatch he carried, Tommy amused himself by progressively improving his own record for the route. When it looked like he was turning in a slow trip, he just skipped a stop here and there, leaving would-be customers yelling blue murder into his slipstream.

I don't know for sure how many straight-eight Leylands Thomas rigged for racing, but two that I do have tabs on both met picturesque and violent ends. While practicing for speed trials at Boulogne in 1925, on a wet, narrow road with a fierce camber, Tommy went into a whirl at top speed; after shooting backwards for a distance that fortunately was long enough to slow the car to less than seventy, it rammed a tree tail-foremost and was completely wrecked. The only thing left worth shipping home to The Hermitage was the front axle. That time, Thomas undoubtedly owed his life to the enormous strength and weight he always built into his cars. The impact curled both the chassis girders back on themselves in a great up-and-over arc that finished three inches from the back of his head.

A cousin car to this Boulogne casualty was bought by a fellow called Munday after its designer's death. During a Brooklands race in 1936, Munday's Leyland-Thomas spilled its entire engine, all 7¼ liters of it, out onto the concrete at around 125 miles per hour. At that, the driver and the rest of the car escaped destruction, but the latter survived only to be bombed to bits by the Luftwaffe in 1940.

Compared with the children of his own brain, the mighty *Babs* was a primitive monster. He didn't design this one but the modifications he carried out were quite extensive enough to justify his usual practice of naming it after himself. It was bitterly ironic, too, that the big girl's chain transmission, a crudity that must have been a pain in Tommy's scientific neck, caused his death.

Babs had been built for playboy Count Lou Zborowski (who was killed at Monza on a Merc in '24), to the drawings of Colonel Clive Gallop, who played important technical parts in the infancies of two famous British marques, Bentley and Aston Martin. Zborowski named his trundler the Higham Special, after the English village where he had his palatial home. When Thomas acquired the car he re-christened it the Thomas Special, later adding the affectionate soubriquet of *Babs*. He paid one hundred and twenty-five pounds for her (about \$370 at modern values), his total investment being as little as 850 pounds after he'd brought her up to Land Speed Record standard.

Light and flimsy for her enormous power—output of the 27 liter Liberty airplane engine was raised from 450 to around 600 bhp by Thomas-devised reworks—she weighed less than 4000

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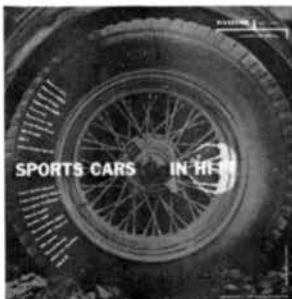


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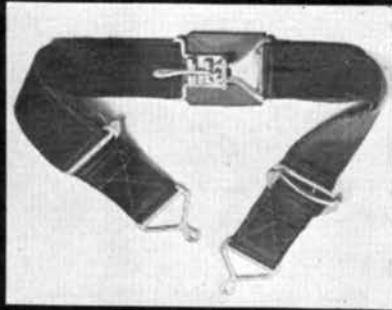
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Hustling Hermit

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pounds. As however her new owner's ambitions centered mainly on straight-line running on smooth sand, in other words the Land Speed Record, this questionable strength-power ratio was not of much importance. As it developed, the car duly pulled off the L.S.R. the very first time Tommy appeared with it in public, clocking 169.23 over the flying kilometer at Pendine in the summer of 1926. This burst jacked the record up by 17 miles per hour, the biggest hiding it had taken in the whole of its 28 years' history. The next day, after expurgating a misfire, Thomas improved his speed to 171.09 mph.

Early the following year, Campbell visited Pendine with his Napier-Campbell and went one better again, 174.88 mph. That was the figure Tommy was out to beat when the broken driving chain knocked his brains out.

Shortly after *Babs's* Pendine triumph in 1926, Thomas returned to Brooklands and filed entries for three races in the first meet that came up, nominating John Cobb to drive *Babs* twice and himself once. Although Cobb was already an experienced hand with big man-hater cars, a comparison between his performance and Tommy's on the same machine and under identical conditions puts Thomas's skill and fearlessness into true perspective. The hermit's best flying start lap was nearly ten miles per hour faster than John's. Here again, the fact that Thomas knew every nut and splitpin on the car, and exactly understood its capabilities and limitations, no doubt accounted for some part of the difference. Cobb, of course, had about as much knowledge of automobiles as Little Red Ridinghood.

Born and raised in the unpronounceable Welsh village of Bwlch-y-ciban, of which his father was vicar, Parry Thomas had a pious upbringing. Although in his adult life he certainly never wore his religious convictions, whatever they may have been, on the sleeve of his Fair Isle jersey, he had an integrity and underlying kindness that won him everybody's respect and admiration. Behind his taciturn and even morose manner there was a vein of humor and boyishness that is a treasured memory of the few who could claim his friendship. Veteran race mechanics around the Byfleet district still vie in reminiscence of the greatest European trackman who ever lived, including a prideful greybeard whose favorite souvenir is a pair of flannel pants that had the seat ripped out by Bess and Togo in the winter of '24. "Paid me double their value," he recalls, "and then, dammit, what does he do but add in an extra quid to buy a Christmas spree for my kids." That would be just like John Godfrey Parry Thomas.

Dennis May.

Redex Trial

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Asked what he was doing in Katherine in mid-week, he shrugged "A bit sticky," he said. "I should be out at the station for muster, but the strip's too soft. Aircraft can't land for another three or four days."

I said, "But isn't there a road out to the west from here? The map shows a track out via Wooleroo and Victoria Station, then on west."

"Mate," he said, "I think you've missed the small print, down at the bottom of that map: see, it says, 'most roads and tracks impassable . . . November until March.' This year, a bit later." Like the newspaperman in Adelaide, he took time to be thoughtful. "Not that it's any boulevard any time," he said. "Might ride out and have a look."

We did. A little rented Vauxhall had done well, down from Darwin, but it bucked and complained as soon as we headed off the highway. Before we were out of sight of the paving, red dust was rising around the wheels and filtering under the doors. "Bull dust," said the station man. "You get used to it." On the flat plain, white ant towers stood like gravestones in a limitless cemetery—some a foot high, some ten feet high. A few coolibar trees fought for life, but the thin and twisted ghost gums with white trunks appeared already to have given up. After a quarter-mile, low gear was necessary. The Vaux yawed like a tug in a rip tide as we dodged boulders and scraped bindle-eye bush, then jounced down a small incline. Another hundred yards, and nobody needed to tell the driver to stop. Ahead was a depress flat, perhaps half a mile wide. Water from the late rains ran down ruts in the track as rivulets, then disappeared, as moving streams, and became part of the enormous mud pie ahead. A heaved rock landing where the road should be made a soft sucking sound, nothing more.

I said, "I don't think we'd better try it. Maybe, with a four-wheel drive . . ."

"Cobber," said the station man, "you couldn't get through there in a bloody tank. And in the dry, it's almost as bad. Hard clay underneath but two feet of loose sand and dust on top. Last year—he paused and grinned—"there were about twenty of those Redex cars, stuck in here at the same time. I heard somebody with some horses made a stinking packet—"

I lighted up a NavyChoice, just as if it tasted like a cigarette. I said, "Well, but they're not quite the full pound, those Redex chaps, are they, now?"

"The bottom," said the cattleman. "In sense, the absolute bottom."

Down here where kangaroos are a traffic hazard and wild donkeys bray at night, you learn the language fast. I knew exactly what he meant, I also knew what he meant when he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth,