



GEORGE EYSTON - TRIPLE CENTURION

by Dennis May

“Big cars, big speed,” said the Captain — and proved it!

PEOPLE who design cars for the Land Speed Record generally have too much sense or not enough courage to drive them themselves, but there have been exceptions. One such, and the only surviving example, is Capt. George Eyston. Since the death of John Cobb in 1952, Eyston has been the world's fastest living motorist. Odd as it seems in a day and age of medium displacement sports cars with 200 mph on the tips of their tongues, only three drivers have ever beaten the triple century. Two of them, of course, Campbell and Cobb, are dead. The third, sexagenarian George Edward Thomas Eyston, is not only alive but also a summit figure in the autosport worlds of two continents, equally active and honored on both sides of the Atlantic.

Eyston personally evolved the overall designs: in 1937 these took 3-D form as *Thunderbolt*, all-time's biggest, heaviest and most powerful automobile — 30 feet long, 7 tons in weight, and harnessing 5000 horsepower from two Rolls Royce airplane engines aggregating over 73 litres. Nobody but George ever drove *Thunderbolt*, even on just the warm-up runs. Three times, once in 1937 and twice the following year, the big bairn arrowed over the salt at the fastest land speed on record, first 312 mph, then 345.5, finally 357.5. Although Cobb's Railton officially was the first to exceed three and one half centuries, this honor would likely have been Eyston's if the timing apparatus hadn't nodded off during the second of two runs he made on August 24, 1938.

The first gave 347.16. Going back, the rev-counters showed *Thunderbolt* to be traveling appreciably faster—354 per hour, Eyston estimated—but the electric eye never gave a wink. Expert diagnosis was that reflection of the sun's rays off the car's polished aluminum flanks had been to blame. Eyston subsequently took the timekeepers' advice and had the offending surfaces painted matt black, but before he could again hit his August 24 form, Cobb had made a round-trip average of 350.2.

Steered as it was through two interconnected pairs of front wheels, *Thunderbolt* was sometimes facetiously referred to as “Eyston's four-in-hand.” Coincidentally, his earliest experience in relatively fast travel on wheels had been at the reins of a veritable four-in-hand. In George's boyhood his father had been famous for miles around the 400-year-old ancestral seat of the Eystons at East Hendred, Berkshire, as an amateur coachman. In unbending moods Eyston père would shift over on the box and give young George the whip hand for spells. By further coincidence, a favorite objective for these haymotor excursions was the ancient Red Lion inn at Abingdon, just down the road from the site of the future MG factory, from which would roll, almost a quarter of a century later, the Eyston-bespoke Magic Midget and Magic Magnette record cars.

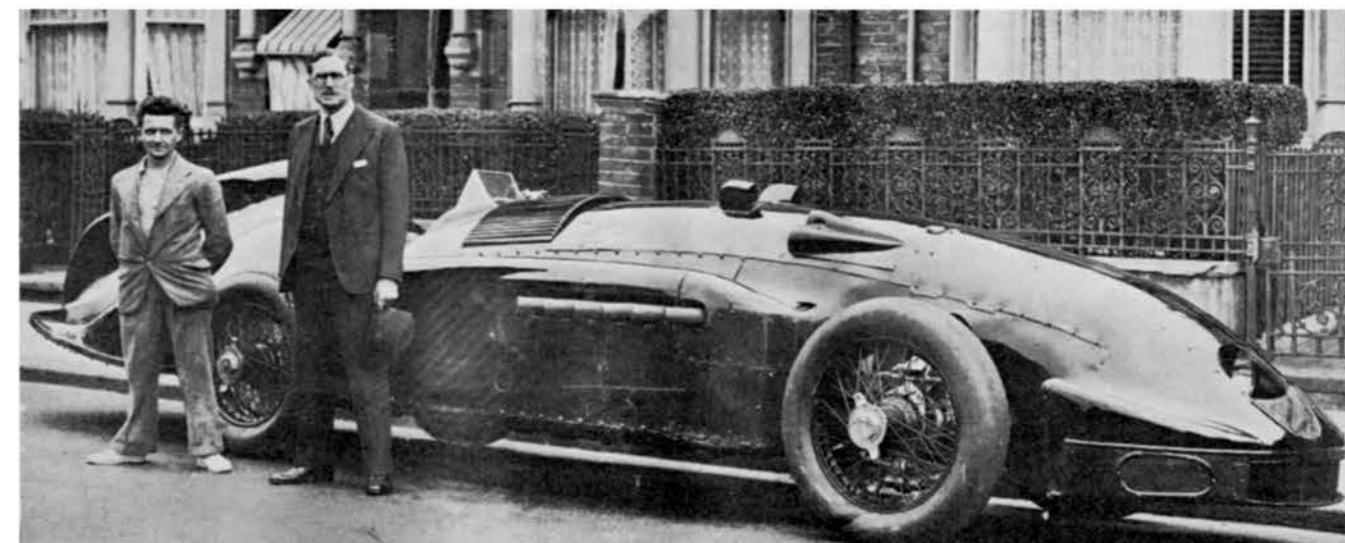
When *Thunderbolt* finally perished by fire at Wellington, New Zealand, during an exhibition tour, nobody could say she didn't have it coming. Cars, like men, “owe God a death,”

and the *Thunderbolt*-Eyston partnership made several feints at settling the debt. Perhaps their narrowest and luckiest escape was one that to my knowledge has never been reported up to this writing. Apart from the driver himself, who incidentally doesn't mention it in *Fastest on Earth*, his book on the history of the Land Speed Record, there were no eye-witnesses to the affair.

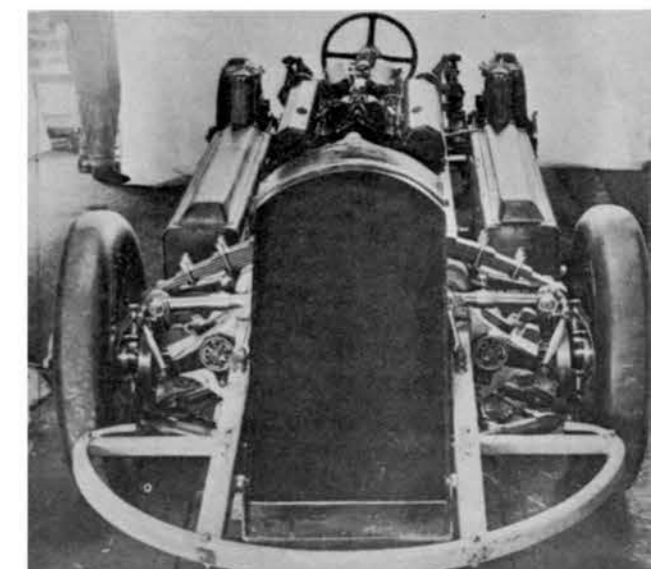
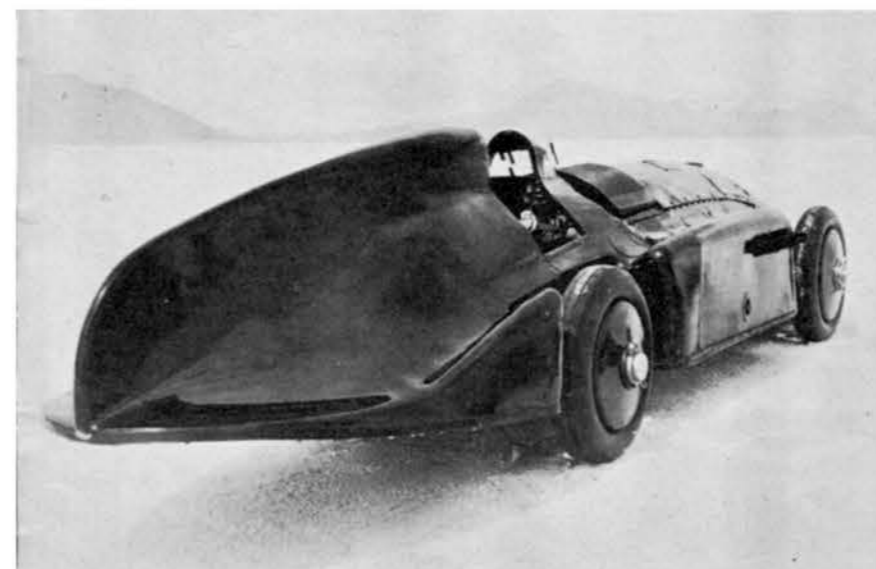
It happened on the salt in 1938, during *in camera* trials following the 357.5 mph record. Eyston and his technicians had reason to believe, as a result of on the spot mods and George's improving familiarity with the brute, that the car was already capable of considerably higher speeds than those officially clocked. These private tests, conducted after the departure of the timekeepers and other hitherto interested parties, were for the purpose of confirming paper calculations with a view to new attempts at a future date. Sure enough, theory and practice were right in step. According to Bert Denly, who was first on the scene after the lamed monster had reeled and gyrated to a lopsided halt, *Thunderbolt* was making close to 400 mph when the anchorage of one of the rear suspension wishbones broke, clenching the wheel against the chassis girder and locking it solid.

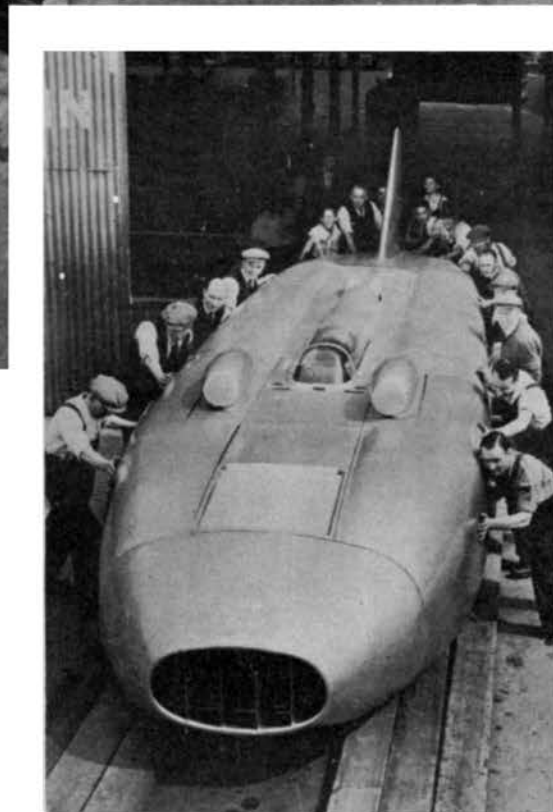
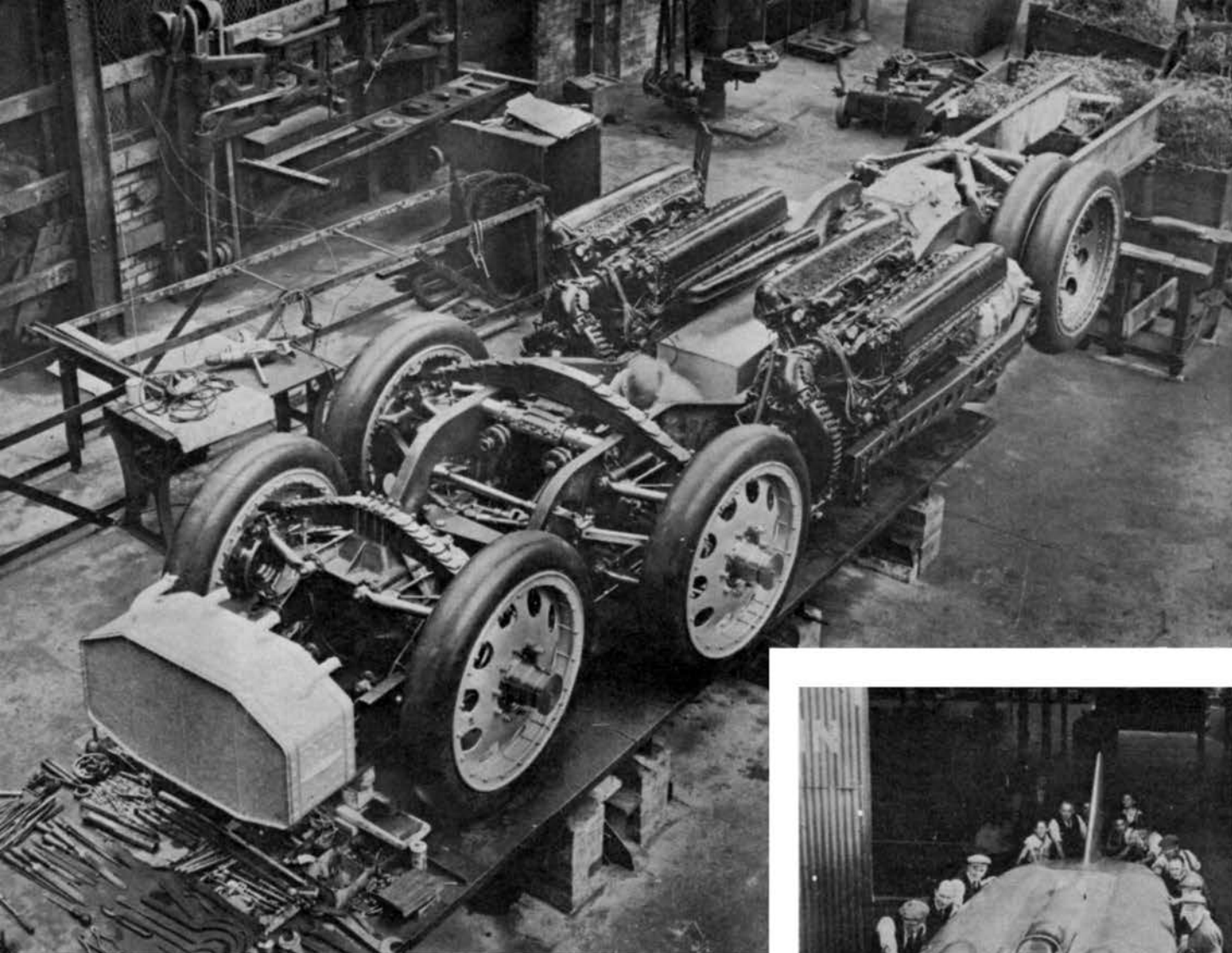
Denly's recollection of Eyston's reaction is that “he didn't say much.” In crises, of which he has had his fair share in seventeen years of speed on land and water, Eyston never did say much.

Although it was his nature to make light—or more exactly, to refrain from making anything—of his miraculous deliverances, George didn't intend to leave Bonneville on a bier if he could help it. To him, G.E.T. Eyston in the role of a dead hero savored of a piece of gross miscasting. It was for this reason, when *Thunderbolt's* cockpit was sealed right in under a transparent dome as part of a general aerodynamic improvements program in the winter of 1937/38, that he decided in future he would always use a respirator. He had worn one (surmounting his famous asbestos suit) while breaking records on tight-fitting Midgets at Monthléry years earlier, so he was anured to humorists' allusions to bagpipes. At Bonneville, as it developed, the gasmask undoubtedly saved his life. Chassis modifications for 1938 had included a makeover to servo operation for *Thunderbolt's* disc brakes (there were windjammer panels behind the cockpit as well). First time on, at around 260 miles per hour, the servo did a square job on pedal-push multiplication and burned the lin-

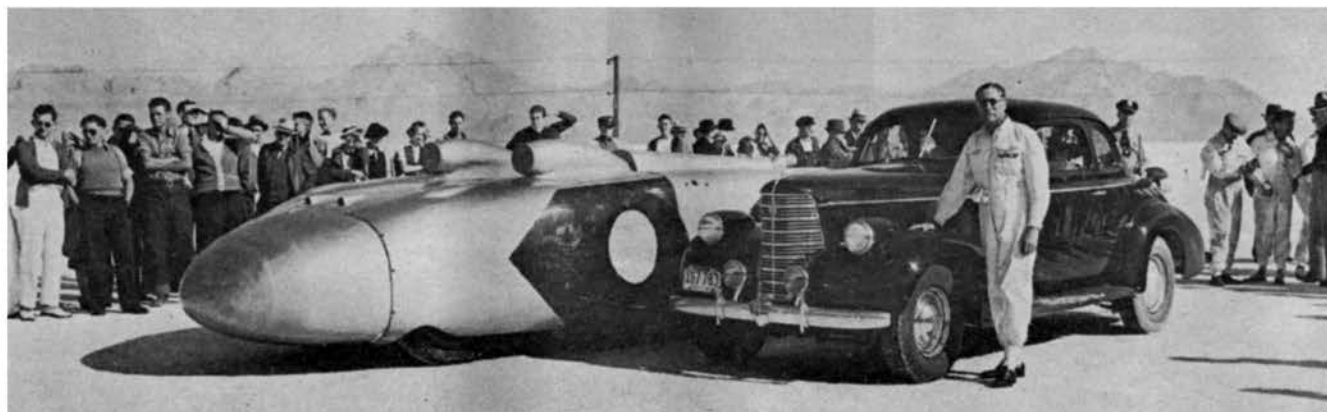


Eyston, and the diminutive Bert Denly, who shared so many of *The Skipper's* record bouts, pose alongside *Speed of the Wind*. *Speed of the Wind* on the salt, where in 1937 Eyston and Denly averaged 163.68 mph for twelve hours. With offset nose fin and canted springing, car turned 10 miles hands off at 165. Chassis had front drive, transverse springs, side tanks.





The front-wheel drive chassis that was shared between the gasoline powered Speed of the Wind (400 hp Rolls Royce Kestrel engines) and the oil-burning Flying Spray. Thunderbolt, posed with current-model auto, in its final shape, with no fin, bigger air scoops, bullet nose (no radiator). Prior to this (pre-'38), Thunderbolt, with radiator, open cockpit, tail fin shown being pushed from hanger.



ings to powder in half a mile. Located as they were, approximately alongside Eyston's shins, the brakes burped the resulting smoke and fumes directly into the cockpit through the pedal slots. Completely blinded, but at least able to breathe, George steered by guess for interminable seconds. *Thunderbolt* veered right, into the clear. If it had gone the other way, chances are it would have collected one of its own replenishment depots, where a score of mechanics stood frozen to their footprints in fear for The Captain's life.

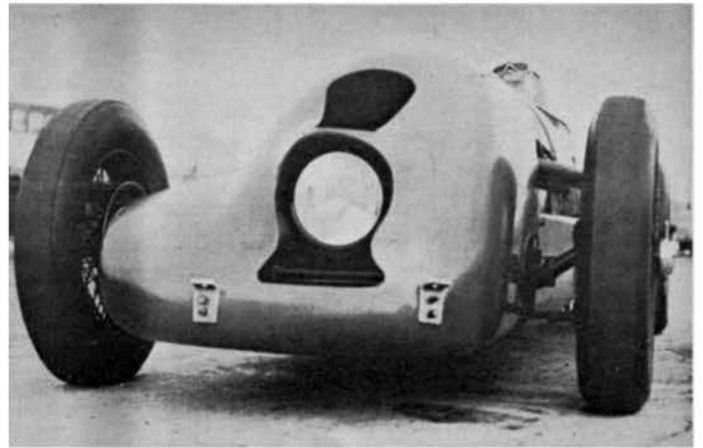
Power output I have quoted for this car, 5000 bph, was the final figure, reached in 1938 after sundry attentions to the engines and their appurtenances. The enormous forward-facing airscoops, for instance, jutting from the deck behind the cockpit, were still further increased in section, and thereby enabled 73 litres of engine to swallow 200,000 litres of air per minute at maximum power.

Various important drag-defeating measures were adopted, too, apart from the sealing in of the cockpit already mentioned. The big tail fin was removed and so was the radiator, the latter's air intake aperture being stoppered off with a sort of sheet-metal goitre that must have greatly improved the car's penetrative qualities. In the short time available, however, it wasn't possible to rig up ice tanks for the coolant to circulate through (*à la* Railton), an omission that led to George being almost casseroleed alive the last time he felled the L.S.R. As he afterwards wrote in *Fastest on Earth*: "We had not reached the measured distance before the heat flow from the hot water in the nose became almost intolerable. I knew I would have to stick it out for quite a while, but each second the heat intensified, roaring up like a blast from a furnace. . . . I knew that there was little margin, so that perhaps a couple of dozen joints in the water piping might spring a leak under the strain, and a mass of boiling water pour out."

In round figures, *Thunderbolt's* power-weight ratio was just about equal to that of Cobb's Railton, which was approximately half as powerful and half as heavy. The Railton's best two-way speed prewar, 369.70 mph, was only 12 per hour up on the mighty four-in-hand, the former's smaller cross-section and superior aerodynamic shape easily accounting for this difference.

If Eyston had a one-track mind, so had Leonardo da Vinci. George's record cars covered an engine displacement range of over 72 litres, from 750 Midgets to *Thunderbolt*—a kind of
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George Eyston astride his eight-liter Panhard, likened by Dennis May to "a grandfather's clock laid on its side".

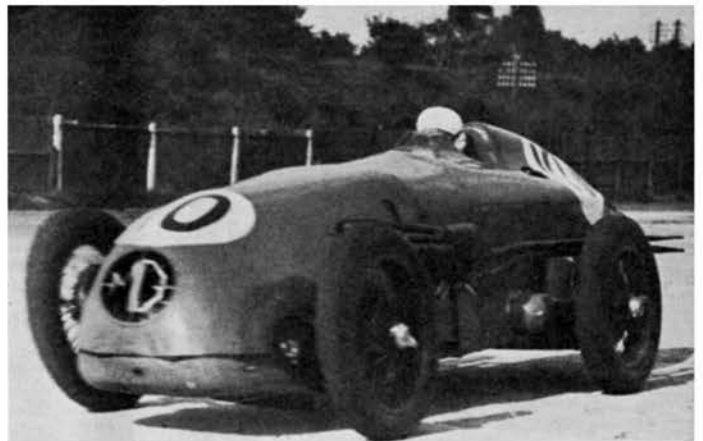


With George and Bert co-driving, this single-seat Hotchkiss once held the world's twenty-four hour record at 116 mph.



The Chrysler-A.E.C., with diesel bus engine, that did the last 6 of 24 hours with one of chassis side members broken in two.

Eyston on Brooklands Outer Circuit with one of his mid-'30's Magnettes. The body, special for Eyston, typified track cars.



George on salt in 1954, his swansong year as record breaker. Car EX179, powered by unblown MG engine.

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a record in itself. His single-engine Bonneville car, *Speed of the Wind*, was unique in its field by way of front wheel drive; if it survived today, which it doesn't—the Luftwaffe laid an egg on it during the war—this one would still, I fancy, be the world's fastest pull-instead-of-push car. *Thunderbolt* was the only L.S.R. contender ever built with more than four wheels (it had six—or eight if you count double for the twins at the back). *Flying Spray*, which was actually *Speed of the Wind* fitted with a Ricardo deisel engine, was the sole British candidate for world's-fastest honors in the C.I. class; it held this record, with a kilometer speed of 159.1 mph, for many years. Also, the 24-hours mark set up prewar by Eyston's Chrysler-A.E.C. oil burner, 97.05 mph, has never yet been beaten. In the early 30s, George was a jump ahead of Fred Dixon in adapting Riley sixes to take a separate carb per inlet port; he disclaims inventor's rights in the idea, however, recalling that it originated on Millers in the U.S. earlier still.

Eyston, unlike many of the best brains in the race and records business, wasn't self-taught. He had a formal education in mechanical engineering at Cambridge university, immediately after serving with distinction in the British army throughout WWI. But nature equipped him with something that perhaps has served him better than whole libraries of book learning ever could: a receptive mind, a venturesome angle of attack on technical problems, and a readiness to heed and profit by the experience of others. In the company of people with even modest pretensions to engineering authority, or authority on any subject on earth for that matter, he has a characteristic way of listening absorbedly with his head tilted slightly to one side . . . and "not saying much."

The f.w.d. car, which, like *Thunderbolt*, was designed in outline by George himself, served as a laboratory for several experiments in the distinctive and unconventional Eyston idiom. One of these, perpetrated late on in the life of *Speed of the Wind*, took the form of a big nose fin, angled at about 8 deg. to the longitudinal axis. Combined with suspension biased to tilt the whole car a bit off-keel, dirt track style, this "sail" enabled George and his Bonneville partners to drive hands off, or merely by resting their hands on the wheel while describing ten-mile circles at better than 165. Another time a start was made grafting a small auxiliary deisel onto *Flying Spray* for the sole purpose of powering a supercharger. This exercise, although technically feasible and promising, never actually went into action on the salt.

Although some of Eyston's blueprints were, to say the least, bold, he never was in danger of developing into a dreaming abstractionist. On the contrary, his feet stayed firmly planted on the ground. Proof

of his high rating in the eyes of unimpressible authority was given when the British government released to him the V-12. Ricardo deisel engine used in *Flying Spray*. This engine, built in unit with a gearbox designed for front drive, was one of only three or four that ever were constructed, and mere money couldn't buy them. What they cost the taxpayer, history doesn't record. Output of these big sleeve-valvers was surprisingly low at around 300 bhp. The unblown Rolls Royce Kestrel engine used in *Speed of the Wind* gave about 100 horsepower more.

Standouts among the many world records set at Bonneville by *Speed of the Wind* were Eyston's 159.3 mph for one hour in 1935, and the 12-hours mark he and Denly shared in '37—163.68 mph. The fact that the 1937 average for a full day was 4 mph up on the 1935 speed for a single hour is a remarkable testimony to the heat of the competition in this era, with relentless mutual pressure maintained between the Eyston and Cobb crews on the one hand and Ab Jenkins on the other. These relative speeds and durations point up the virtual unburstability of the slow-revving Kestrel.

A copybook on pitwork could have been written around the Eyston camp's feats of legerdemain in Utah. Denly recalls, for instance, that twenty-seven seconds usually sufficed for changing all wheels, refueling, and getting rolling again with the take-over driver aboard. The sensation when turning ten or twelve mile circles at 160-plus with front-wheel drive, says Denly, was unlike anything else imaginable—almost as though the back wheels didn't exist and you were balancing, quite effortlessly, above the single pair in front.

Pit routine was always organized and drilled by Eyston himself, who from his earliest days in the game had schooled himself in this craft and the kindred art of team management with almost priestly zeal. Latterly, of course, his skill has been periodically exercised in Utah on behalf of BMC's serial expeditions, culminating last August with the fine job of mothering he did when EX181 and EX179 toppled Class F and G records. The last time George played an itinerant role in record breaking was in 1954, the year he and Ken Miles co-drove EX179 at Bonneville to average 120-plus for distances and times up to 2000 kilometers and twelve hours. Back then, the car was running with an unblown MG engine. George's days of record breaking are now over, he says. It isn't that his sixty-one years are weighing unduly heavily—he just feels he shouldn't stand in the way of younger men, that's all.

The Eyston-Denly association, which was to become one of all time's most potent forces in record breaking, originated by pure chance. At Brooklands one day in 1930 George was doing a marathon tire testing job for Avon, driving one of his Bugattis. In mid stint, somebody flagged him in to attend to an urgent business matter. Anxious not to break the continuity of the tests, he buttonholed Bert, who happened to be doing nothing in particular on the sidelines, and asked him to stand in. He did. Although long famous as a racing motorcycle rider, Denly had never driven a fast car in his life. He nevertheless gave satisfaction in the elementary chore of

wearing Avons out, so other part time commissions for Eyston ensued. The following year George hired him permanently, and thereafter he stuck with The Skipper, as he invariably calls him, right up to the war. When peace returned and Eyston became a Castrol director, the first thing he did was to call Denly and put him on the Castrol payroll in their engine test department. He's there still, and still accompanying The Skipper to such faraway destinations as Bonneville whenever an opportunity occurs.

If anybody ever cast a slur on his boss in Denly's hearing, it is predictable that Bert, who stands about five feet high, would climb on a chair and hit him in the navel. That is the sort of loyalty that Eyston, with his unfailing kindness, courtesy and straight dealing, inspires in people who work with him and for him. With one home in England and another on Park Avenue, New York, George's circles of acquaintance in the two countries are about equally large. Tall, broad, and white haired, and with a fast, long-striding gait, he is a familiar figure at such U.S. speed venues as Sebring, Watkins Glen, Elkhart Lake and Turners Field, at all of which he acts as a steward when his New York sojourns happen to coincide with races.

Of all the cars Eyston ever raced, perhaps the most self opinionated was the straight-eight Panhard, a lofty, narrow single-seater somewhat resembling a grandfather's clock laid on its side. Powered by an eight litre sleeve-valve engine that may have been the only one of its kind ever built, the Panhard twice broke the world's hour record, among many others, in George's hands. Possessed of a titanic understeer, this car had to be dissuaded by brute force from beelining over the Montlhéry bankings each time around. Denly recalls that the preliminaries to long duration records on the Panhard usually included a program of physical training. The Skipper, who had rowed for Trinity College in his Cambridge days, would go sculling on the Seine. Denly, formerly an amateur boxer of some attainments, would knock hell out of a punching bag, alternating with marathon runs and walks. In the result, their bouts of combat with the Panhard always produced a draw, though sometimes only just.

As well as breaking records on it, George drove the Panhard in Brooklands races, the most memorable being the 100-miler around the Outer Circuit which in 1932 inaugurated the British Empire Trophy series. This resulted in practically a photo finish between the future rivals for the L.S.R., Eyston and Cobb, the latter driving the 10 litre Delage on which René Thomas had held the land record in 1924. The judges gave the decision to Cobb—by one fifth of a second. Then Eyston, claiming he'd been inadvertently baulked in a wheel-to-wheel approach to the finish line, protested to the stewards and got the verdict reversed. Cobb in his turn had the matter referred to the Royal Automobile Club, who put the reversal into reverse and declared John the winner after all. It was typical of George's benign nature that, so far from going away and griping under his breath, he signified his satisfaction with the R.A.C. ruling by standing Cobb a little celebration dinner . . . and thus ended The Great Who Wunnit.

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EYSTON

Two years later, after the British Empire Trophy had been made over into a synthetic road race, run on a *chicane*-bedevilled circuit at Brooklands, Eyston really did win it, driving his Magic Magette. This time, due to the fact that George's pit crew either hadn't kept a proper lap count or weren't sharing their intelligence with The Skipper, he was quite unaware of his position when they flagged him off at the end. It took quite a bit to convince him that he'd won. This skepticism was really understandable, because he'd always had a hoodoo on him in Brooklands classics; once he was beaten into a third placement in the Two Hundred by a fifth of a second, and twice he cracked up and had to retire after leading the Five Hundred at three-quarter distance.

Eyston, sportsman and man of science, was always something of a poet, too, with a tendency to relieve the materialistic grind of a records campaign by rising at 3 a.m. and tramping to some preselected vantage point to watch the sunrise and listen to birdsong.

Orderly and conscientious by temperament—he is, for instance, never late for an appointment, and hates other people to keep him waiting—he seldom took an uncalculated risk during his speed career. A possible exception, though, was the time at Monthéry when his Chrysler A.E.C. deisel, fitted with a modified sedan body, broke one of its chassis side members during a 24-hour record run. The breakage occurred six hours from the end, and

George optioned to keep on going and see what happened. With the sound girder flexing like a hula dancer's backbone, the propshaft gradually sawed its way through an adjacent cross-tie. Then the body panels, unaccustomed to a stressed skin role, started buckling into pleats. But the Chrysler, driven in shifts by Eyston and Denly, never did fold up and the schedule was adhered to, the record duly falling.

Between about 1927 and 1954 inclusive, George's personal score of world and international records, including shared bags, was almost certainly the biggest by any Briton. If his totals were outstripped by various Frenchmen—and they were—this was because Eyston, unlike these French mass producers, was only interested in *breaking* records, as distinct from establishing ones that nobody else had hitherto bothered to establish (e.g., 59 days at 58.28 mph by Marchand and friends with a Citroën sedan in 1933, a mark that presumably stands to this day).

Aside from his Utah exploits, George's association with MG produced the most colorful and technically significant chapter of his whole records career. It remains to add that Eyston's initiative was directly responsible for the MG company's entry into the records field. In fact, if he hadn't propositioned them when he did, in the sense he did, it's quite possible their pre-war contribution to autosport might never have gone further than running a few lightly modified stock cars in minor Brooklands races.

The train of events, very briefly, was this. Back in 1929, Eyston conceived an

ambition to acquire, build or adapt a car that would be capable of traveling faster on 750 cc than anything hitherto. The short records, mile and kilometer, in international Class H were currently held by a Frenchman called Ratier, with a car of his own design and construction. First, therefore, George took the logical step of finding out whether this Ratier could and would make him a seven-fifty to lick the Ratier. M. Ratier tried, but the deal never came off. Next, Eyston was attracted by an idea propounded by Ernest Eldridge, a friend and business associate of his, for downscaling an 1100 Riley engine for the same purpose, and hanging it in a chassis that Parry Thomas had built for one of his 1½ litre Thomas Specials. Well, this didn't come off either.

Then George happened to cross paths with one Jimmy Palmes, an old Cambridge buddy of his. By a lucky and fortuitous piece of timing, Palmes was at that moment busy sleeving down an 850 cc MG Midget—his own property—to 750 cc, his plan being to use it for an attack on the Class H 24-hours record. Intrigued, Eyston accepted Palmes' invitation to move in on the conspiracy, and between them the pair enlisted the enthusiastic support of Cecil Kimber, the head of MG. Gradually developed beyond recognition, and with a potent aid to poop in the form of a Powerplus blower (which George and his technical associates had designed four years earlier), this formerly undistinguished Midget grew up gracefully into the world famous EX120. Among other highlights of its sensational career, EX120 was the first seven-fifty to exceed both 100 mph and one hundred miles in one hour. Its immediate successor, EX127, vulgarly styled the Magic Midget, was also built to George's order, and with it, at Monthéry in 1932, The Skipper set a further Class H landmark by beating two miles per minute for the first time. Afterwards, you may remember, it was acquired by Bobby Kaulrausch, the German, in whose hands it jacked the 750 mile record to 140.6.

Denly a truly great trackman, made Monthéry history on EX127 by being the only driver ever to win a 200 kph lap badge on less than 2 litres. This local record still stands. As a further but unrelated example of Bert's mastery of the art of rapid ring-o'-roses, on *Speed of the Wind* at Bonneville he once turned five consecutive laps of the ten-mile circle with a maximum variation of two-fifths of a second; this at over 160 per. So great was the discrepancy in size between Eyston and Denly that, when taking over the big front-drive from his chief during stage stops, Bert always had to have the Skipper-size seat removed bodily and a special uplift pew substituted.

Although automobile history has Eyston typed as a records man, his circuit race activities and successes were by no means paltry. In the mid to late 20s, for example, he won the Boulogne GP des Voitures Légères and the Grand Prix de La Baule, driving various Bugattis. Alfa Romeo's concessionaires in Britain picked him to handle their stuff in such classics as the TT, the Irish GP and the Brooklands Double Twelve, while in 1929 he shared second placement with the then-famous Boris Ivanowski in the Belgian 24-hours

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EYSTON

race at Spa. As we saw earlier, he won the British Empire Trophy at Brooklands on his own Magic Magnette, which afterwards formed the nucleus of Goldie Gardner's 200 mph streamliner, EN135. In 1933 at Monthéry, George finished third on a 2.3 Alfa in the French Grand Prix, a month or two after winning his Mille Miglia class for MG in partnership with Count Johnny Lurani. The Eyston-Lurani Magnette formed one third of an Abingdon task force that copped the Mille Miglia team prize; Earl Howe, who was another of the MG team members on this occasion, had rather astutely entered his own blown Merc independently (a fellow named Penn-Hughes drove it) and loaded it to the lid with Magnette parts in case of emergencies en route. On paper, Penn-Hughes was in the act to race, but *de facto* his job was to nursemaid the Magnetics. They didn't, as it turned out, have any need for his wares, Eyston for his part having learned during training, by the traditional M.M. process of driving through railroad crossing gates when they were closed, that it's worth waiting until somebody opens them.

Although, unlike Segrave, Campbell and Cobb, The Skipper never reached for the water speed crown as well as the L.S.R., he has always had a toe in the other element, either on the technical, sporting or commercial levels. In youth he served an apprenticeship with Britain's biggest marine propeller makers; in the early 20s he quit car speedwork for a couple of years and raced hydroplanes instead; and he is currently a director of John I. Thornycroft Ltd., the international marine engineers, whose weightier preoccupations include repair work and refits for the *Queens*.

Unwittingly, it was a famous American racing driver who first infected young Eyston with the itch that led him, by a long and adventurous road, to Utah and the Land Speed Record; and this, in light of the part that Americans and the U.S. scene were to play in his subsequent fortunes, was somehow prophetic. In 1921 he went to Le Mans to spend a vacation with friends and to brush up on his French. Ranging the Sarthe countryside one day, his contemplation of nature's glories was interrupted by the sight and sound of a car approaching along a little frequented stretch of die-straight road. It was a sight and sound that, even in George's mind, gave nature and her glories some stiff competition. From a blue-chinned mechanic, waiting at the roadside with tools and equipment, he learned that the goggled demigod crouching over the wheel of this flying projectile was Ralph de Palma, doing tests on his Ballot for the imminent French Grand Prix.

Eyston, as he pobbled back to Le Mans in his old two-cylinder G.N., was a thoughtful fellow. Less than two years later, the seed de Palma had unknowingly sown was bearing fruit. First, with Brooklands neither sitting up nor taking the slightest notice, he drove a prewar *Coupe de l'Auto Sunbeam* there. Then a 4½ litre Vauxhall. Then an ex-Zborowski GP Aston Martin. After that, the Bugs and the Alfas and an OM and a thing called a Halford. G. E. T. Eyston was on his way!

Dennis May