

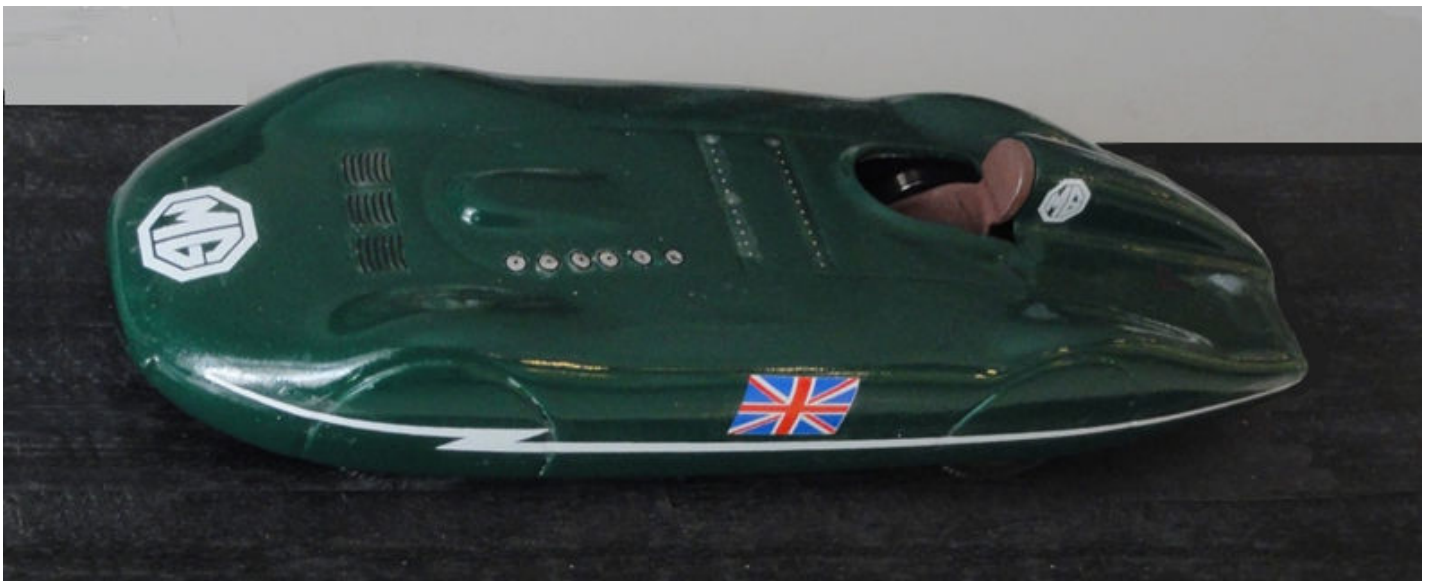
200 MILES PER HOUR ON THE AUTOBAHN

By Geoff Wheatley

1939 was a dramatic year for Europe and later for the rest of the world. There was little doubt that Germany would eventually go to war with its European neighbors, it had already invaded the Rhineland and then Austria and was now looking east towards the Soviet Union via Poland. Britain was on a desperate rearming program having allowed its military forces to dwindle to an all time low with a Prime Minister who's only desire was to appease Hitler and ignored Hitler's plans for a new order in Europe. With all this in the worlds political melting pot it is strange to recall that a small group of motor enthusiasts decided to cross the English channel in May 1939 to try and set a new world speed record on the then wonder Autobahn system of Germany. Led by the English racing driver Major "Goldie Gardner". The other members of the team were Alan Bicknell the PR Manager of Lagonda Motors. (The Lagonda Motor Company had loaned them the latest model straight off the Earls Court Show stand for personal transport). George Tucker publicity manager of MG and John Dugdale the assistant sports manager of "The Autocar" a popular motor publication of the day with a journalistic history going back to the turn of the century.

Four men with the idea of creating a new world record of over 200 miles an hour with a one liter power unit. The Italians had attempted a similar record in 1938 with a 950 cc Fiat but the car had disintegrated on the third attempt seriously injuring the driver at an estimated speed of about 177 mph. (No was quite sure as there was very little left of the car after the engine burst into flames and the car blew up a few seconds later.) The British vehicle was a special MG registered in the international light car class that required the power unit to be less than 1100 cc capacity. Major Gardner, a former field officer in the Royal Artillery had driven a similar car in the previous year and was well know in Germany as a race driver and sports record breaker. He stood in excess of six feet tall, unusual for someone who had to fit into a small race car or any race car for that matter, and in addition to this he had a stiff artificial leg! The destination for these four individuals was Berlin or rather a location about sixty miles from the capital at a place called Dessau. Question; Why travel 800 miles from the shores of England to drive a car in Germany? Easy to answer; The Berlin-Leipzig autobahn.

The German authorities had filled in the center of the two thirty foot wide road system to create a ninety foot super highway to test special vehicles. The overall length was in excess of eight miles and in the previous year a Mercedes-Benz had beaten the world Big Class record three times in three runs each one faster than the last. The final speed was 231 mph and the driver maintains that had he had enough fuel he would have completed a forth run and pushed the speed higher. There was no other road in the world like this stretch of European highway and in consequence any would be world record beater had to come to the Fatherland to try his luck. OK there was always the Utah flats and a couple of locations in South Africa and Australia but they were not paved roads and often were unusable especially in the wet weather. On top of that the cost of transporting a vehicle to such places in 1939 was, to say the least, expensive.



The German Autobahn system was quite unique and certainly the very best road construction in the pre-war world. Built by Hitler as a show case of German industry with an eye to the future when it would be necessary to move mechanized troops either east or west at high speed. They were the first roads to be built with aircraft in mind; it was possible to land medium size military aircraft on these highways without any serious problems. They were straight like any runway and had a tapered surface to ensure that rain and snow could easily be removed. To give some idea of the strength of the construction in the 1960s it was decided to remove what was left of the original Autobahn system and replace it with modern surfacing. Estimated time to clear these old roads was about eighteen months, in reality it took almost eight years and some sections still remain today. Europe enjoyed a wonderful summer that year despite the war clouds that were gathering with alarming speed. Sunshine every day with just about the right level of rain.

After two days on the road the group reached their destination at Dessau and met up with the crew who had brought over the special MG. They set up headquarters in the "Golden Bottle" Inn which was to be their home for the next ten days. Included in the crew were two additional MG racing men, Jacko Jackson and Syd Enever. Enever had been with the Morris Company since 1920 and had risen to the position of Chief Engineer and Designer at MG by 1939. He is best known as the man who created the Le Mann's MG that eventually became the famous MGA in the mid 50's

Jacko Jackson was a dedicated engineer with an ability to design the impossible in record time. When MG attempted to achieve 100 miles an hour with a 750 cc engine in 1931 he worked for a total of 146 hours during the proceeding week to get the car ready for the attempt. When the car hit 98.3 mph on the first run and 99.1 on the second attempt he obtained a packet of putty and covered every protruding rivet on the vehicle to reduce air drag which in turn enabled the Midget known as the EX120 to hit the magic 100 mph. On the forth run it achieved 103 13 mph and was able to claim the world record with out dispute. The impact of this achievement was incredible especially when you remember that the average top speed of a standard production four cylinder car at a 1000 cc at that time was around 50 mph. Also included in the Dessau group was Leslie Kesterton an expert on carburetors and superchargers who had been a fighter pilot in World War One and had shot down one of Richtonfen's famous circus pilots and a few other German flyers before joining the SU Company as part of their design team.

The MG had been fitted with a Centric supercharger which certainly boosted the cars performance but also added to the possibility that the small power unit could be seriously damaged if the charger was not used correctly, hence the need for Kesterton. The appearance of the car was certainly not the standard 1938 MGTA. The shell body was a sleek streamline design created by Reid Railton a famous automobile designer in Britain who had been responsible for the then new airflow look of the 1930s. The whole body was enclosed including the wheels and the structure was similar to a long sleek tapered semi flat bullet very close to the ground with the driver sitting in an almost lie down position. Even the steering wheel was designed to enable Gardner to get in and out without the need for a door panel. It was rectangular in design and could be removed when the driver needed to enter or leave the vehicle. The frame was made from a new material called Duralumin designed to be used on British fighter aircraft for its strength, light weight and durability. Examination of the road surface convinced everyone that this was the ideal location to hold the speed test. The road stretched ahead as far as the eye could see in a perfect straight line. The concrete surface was in the words of Gardner, "Quite Perfect, in fact it looked like they had hand finished the surface". The road was spanned by several arched steel bridges which during the test runs were used as markers in company with additional red posts at each side of the entire run.

The section that was to be used for the "Time Section" incorporated a slight dip in the road of about two miles which would give the MG with its one liter and a bit engine an advantage as the car needed to hit 7500 rpm in forth gear to reach its potential and the slight downgrade would certainly help achieve this. It was agreed that the car should be fitted with the largest diameter tires that they could fit and the highest gear ratio. The tire pressure was in excess of sixty pounds per sq inch to reduce tire drag. On the morning of May 31st the first run at the Kilometer, Mile and Five Kilometer records were attempted. Gardner wanted to start at dawn but cross winds were forecast. By eight am none had developed so Goldie and his crew pushed the car to the starting line, he got in, the engine burst into life and the car took off down the ultra straight road to disappear out of sight. If the records were to be broken the car would have to run in both directions with the average speed deciding the final performance. The red markers used to mark the timed sections were in place. The concrete sweeper had finished its work and the whole crew in company with about fifty German policemen and soldiers on duty to guard the highway from any stray vehicles in company with a few early risers who had come to see these mad English kill themselves waited.

From the distance the roar of a supercharged engine filled the morning air then like a bullet out of a gun a small round flat object came into sight at an estimated speed close to 200 miles an hour. As it flashed past the time marker the smell of burnt rubber and boiling hydraulics filled the air as the car turned around paused for a few seconds then took off in the opposite direction in a cloud of blue smoke. The small black dot vanished out of sight but the crew could still hear the high pitched whine of the engine although they could not see the car. In a matter of seconds the black dot reappeared and streaked past the timer box now in excess of 200 mph. In fact the recorded speed for the second run was 207 mph and the recorded speed for the first was 199 mph giving an average for the mile of 203.21.

A new world record for both the MPH and the Kilometer performance. That evening Gardiner gave a very rare interview to a German Motor magazine in which he said.” There is not much difference from 150 to 200 mph but from 100 to 150 you do notice the increase”. An understatement if there ever was one! Two days later it was decided to go for the 1500cc (1.5 Liter) records. A boring bar had been brought along with all the other tools with the idea of boring out the cylinders to raise the capacity from the original 1086 cc to around 1250cc to fit into the 1000/1500 class. Obviously replacement pistons were at hand and the work was completed in a matter of twenty four hours. New tires were fitted and it was found that a section of the front forward camshaft holder needed welding. This was not a task that could be undertaken by the crew in their makeshift workshop so the car was moved to the Junkers aero factory a few miles away to have this done. This was the same factory that was engaged in producing the famous World War Two bomber the J88. At that time it would have been in secret development so the MG crew was certainly lucky to be able to even enter the factory. Someone must have known the right person! When the work was completed once again the team pushed the car to the starting line, Gardiner hit the button and the car took off in the same directions as before one lap each way with the mean average representing the final achievement. Records show that this time they started much earlier with a breakfast call around 4 am. The car averaged over 200 mph for the five kilometers run but when Goldie hit the breaks at the close of the first lap the rear set seized.

The only way to complete the rest of the record runs was to free the rear breaks completely and slacken off the front this meant that the car was virtually without any means of stopping for the final run.

As some of you will know this is no problem for a veteran driver like Gardiner, he completed the run and even stopped the car at exactly the right spot at the finish line. His best overall performance was 206 mph a record that stood 17 years until Sterling Moss shattered it in another MG with a 1500 cc OHC engine on the Utah flats in 1957 at a speed of 245 mph. Not to rest on their laurels in 1957 a similar MG recorded 254 mph driven by Phil Hill. Think of that over two hundred and fifty miles an hour in a 1.5 liter engine the same capacity as the first production MGA and smaller by 300 cc than the standard MGB.

After the war Gardiner had hopes of setting a few more new records but by then he was in his early sixties and sad to report was in poor health. If you want to see these world record beaters that are on display at the Heritage Collection in the UK a visit well worth while if you are ever on vacation in England. Today the special autobahn at Dessau is just a memory destroyed during the war and replaced by a modern highway that could never be used as a world record track. In reality such things are part of the past, like Brooklands and the open road races in Europe. But if you close your eyes and imagine that you are on the special speed section of the Autobahn at Dessau on a brisk May morning in 1939 you will smell the Castrol R in the air, hear the whine of a small supercharged engine as it flashes past at over 200 miles an hour and feel the excitement that comes when you know you are part of a special moment in history.

