

THOSE SPORTING ROADSTERS! - by Bill Haverly, 18th June 1980 - via Barry Paine

Surprises are stock-in-trade for anyone who takes an interest in Singer cars, but more than a few heads turned in early 1980 when details came to light of the Singer Roadster's sporting activities just before the Hitler war. In March 1939 this new 4 seater tourer was marketed as a 'fun and fresh air' car with no sporting pretensions, but 7 weeks later Singer's took an unexpected plunge, entering a team of 3 Roadsters in the RAC Brighton Rally. Painted in Singer's patriotically traditional team colours, the cars and crews were: N E Riddihough and W.D. Williams in red Roadster EDU 150, R A Bicknell



The Roadster Team Cars with four of the drivers, taken before the 1939 RAC Brighton Rally. From left to right: Norman Riddihough, Reg Bicknell, Mrs Kay Petra and Bill Williams.

and Mrs K Petre in white car EDU 151 and L Cade and C Bicknell in blue Roadster EDU 152

All the engines were factory tuned under the guidance of Reg Bicknell, two being 1074 cc units, whilst his own car had a 10 hp rating.

Spotlights were fitted and extra attention was paid to the bodywork and chrome plating

of items like door hinges, rocker covers and tool kits, as the last assessment in the Rally was a coachwork competition.

Altogether six Roadsters took part in the event out of a total Singer contingent of eleven, the other three being privately entered by J E Johnson (EDU 153), WC Butler (EDU 154), and A Broadley (EDU 155). These cars had consecutive numbers to the works team as they were registered from the factory in the same block, so it's quite likely they received some assistance in their preparation. As to the drivers, Johnson and Broadley were both competitively minded garage owners, and Bill Butler, well known on trial and rally circuits, received backing from Harcourt Motors of Derby. The Rally began on Tuesday 25th April, and although it finished at Brighton, the starting controls were from four different points - London, Torquay, Stratford-on-Avon and Blackpool. Starting from their allocated controls, the competitors travelled over various routes to Scarborough and were then despatched to Buxton for the overnight stop. From then on they were required to average 30 mph over a scheduled route to Brighton, and this road section was reckoned to be ridiculously easy, being no real test of the capabilities of the drivers or their cars. Competitors arrived at Brighton on Thursday evening and it was here that a series of tests sorted out the men from the boys. First challenge was Drove Hill, a 1 in 4½ gradient with a good surface. The getaway here was critical, and a reversing

manoeuvre around a pylon half way up presented problems, with wheel-spin and clutch slip losing drivers the odd second or two. Bill Butler made the fastest time for the Roadster group, with Reg Bicknell and J F Johnson close behind. Friday's first eliminating test in Madeira Drive was fairly simple, being a straight mile standing start sprint, but braking to a standstill between a narrow lane lined with barriers. Reg Bicknell and Kay Petre were fastest here with the Riddihough/Williams Roadster only four fifths of a second behind. The final test, a bit too long to suit the Roadster's gear ratios, consisted of a sprint for 270 yards, around a pylon and back again, and up a hairpin bend into a side road. Reg Bicknell was again first of the cars, clocking 53 3/5 seconds, with Riddihough only a fraction of a second away. All six Roadsters did consistently

well in the tests, but overall only Reg Bicknell and Mrs Kay Petre's performance was exceptional. They took 5th place in their class, only being beaten by pure sports cars in the order of Morgan, HRG, Riley and MG. The results of the coachwork competition were disappointing for the team cars, [which] attracted a great deal of admiration but won no prizes.



N E Riddihough and Bill Williams leaving the Stratford starting control in the Brighton Rally. Behind them is W C Butler in Roadster EDU 154

A writer in 'the Motor' magazine sympathised, saying 'I am quite unable to understand why the Judges turned a blind eye to the very attractive Singer Roadsters'.

Final positions for the six Roadsters in Class 1 (open cars under 10 hp) were:

5th - Mrs Kay Petre and Reg Bicknell : 9th - W C Butler

10th - N E Riddihough and W D Williams : 12th - J E Johnson

16th - A Broadley : 19th - L Cade and C Bicknell.

A very good all round performance considering this was the Roadster's first works outing in competition, and there were 37 entries in its Class. Moving on to the summer, the only other national event entered by Singer's was the Scottish Rally, highlighted by glorious weather in July. Although Roadsters were much in evidence during the run, the sole supported car was EDU 151, driven by Tommy Wisdom and N E Riddihough. Wisdom was a first class driver who had in earlier years raced at Le Mans and at Brooklands in 'Replicas', but even with his talent available the car did not come up to expectations. Overshadowing this event was the Singer Rally, the SMCC's big sporting/social occasion of the year, held at Victoria Park, Leamington Spa on June 17th. Undoubted star of this show was Will Nicholl's beautiful orange 15hp Singer, nicknamed the 'Yellow Peril' for the day as it clanked cheerfully around the grounds

giving off clouds of smoke. On board were the Mayor and Mayoress, company director Charles Latham and special guest Miss Amy Johnson. Miss Johnson, world famous airwoman, drove the ivory coloured works car EDU 151 during the competitions, but it was clear her skills on four wheels did not compare with such flair in the air. Roadsters took two of the big prizes - Bill Butler won the 'Singer' Challenge Trophy for the best overall performance, and the 'Patrick' Challenge Trophy for best performance up to 1100cc was taken by A Broadley. Everything taken into account the Roadster's achievements in 1939 did not amount to much, and only Reg Bicknell and Kay Petre's performance in the RAC Rally was really noteworthy.

Mrs Petre was one of a handful of talented women drivers in the thirties, and Reg Bicknell (usually in charge of works team preparation) took time off now and again to win such races as the 1935 Brooklands Relay, in which he partnered J D Barnes and A H Langley. Knowing Reg's skills at engine tuning, one wonders what 'special effects' went on under the bonnet



Tommy Wisdom in action on a 'Figure of Eight' test during the Scottish Rally. Clinging to the grab-handle is co-driver Riddihough.

of the ivory coloured team car. Apart from the crew of star car EDU 151, only Norman Riddihough was a really good works driver with experience in previous rallies. He was advertising & publicity manager at Singers and Secretary of the SMCC for a few years, and his friendship with Tommy Wisdom had much to do with their partnership in the Scottish Rally.

Tommy Wisdom was, of course, motoring correspondent of the Daily Herald, and the other three drivers in the Brighton Rally were also in the newspaper business. The members of team car EDU 152 were both on the staff of daily newspaper, The Star, Laurie Cade being motoring correspondent and Cedric Bicknell (no relation to Reg) Works Advertising Manager. Bill Williams, who shared EDU 150 with Riddihough, was a motoring correspondent as well, working for the Birmingham Mail and Post. So with journalists along for the ride, Riddihough had ensured the Roadsters activities would get sympathetic press coverage, and it is important that its competitive career in 1939 should be seen in this light, for Singer's had never intended it to be a sports car. But whatever the achievements it is a satisfying feeling to learn that the Roadster had a sporting chance, and knowing it was once driven with gusto by the likes of Kay Petre and Tommy Wisdom, our view of the car will never be quite the same.

Barry.