



# Singers on the Crest of a Wave

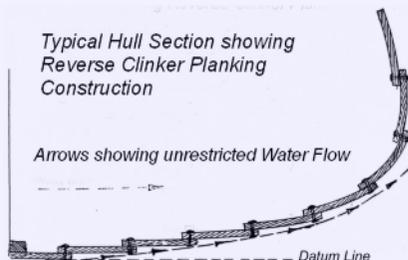
- by Nigel Hughes

**Percy Milner See** was born in 1881, the son of artist and photographer Joseph T See. When Percy was four, his family moved to Fareham in Hampshire, and it was there he developed a strong interest in boats, which blossomed as his father rose through the ranks to become commodore of the local sailing club. In the early 1900s, Percy built a highly successful boat-building business in Fareham, Hampshire. But in 1927 his eyesight was failing, and he persuaded his 14 year-old son, Eric, to join the firm.



*See's Premises in Fareham*

Like his father, Eric had become fascinated by power on water, and he was driven to exploit every ounce of motive force from an engine, allied to designing ultra efficient low drag hull forms, and he experimented with a number of design options. One of his finest developments was a unique form of reverse clinker construction, in which each hull plank overlapped the next in a reversal of the usual top down laying up, thus aiding the clearance of water from the landing strakes of each plank and reducing drag on the hull as it passed through the water.



By 1934, the See's business had grown in size and was now a major boat-builder. In an effort to become more self-sufficient and to resolve manufacturing issues with some out-sourced components, along with ensuring a supply of good quality, stylish and functional castings, they decided they needed to develop a foundry and workshop of their own to produce the range of fittings best suited to the boats they were building.

Percy and Eric looked far and wide to find a suitable partner who could help them develop this project. Their searches were almost exhausted when they met Mr W A Palmer, a manager from Singers, who was interested in boats, and who set up a meeting in Coventry with William Bullock, Managing Director of the Singer Motor Company. At this time Singers were virtually self sufficient in light alloy castings and heavier specialised units, which were supplied by their comprehensive foundry facility in Payne's Lane, Coventry.

Bullock was interested in the Sees' request for help, and the concept of a See designed, Singer powered boat was suggested. Agreement was reached that, in exchange for help in setting up and commissioning the new workshop and foundry in Fareham, Eric would design two

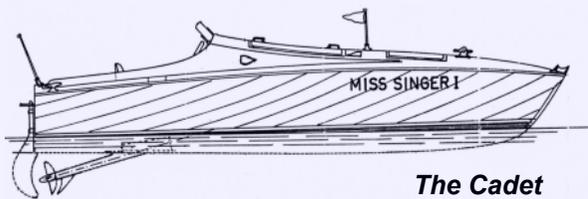


*Picture: [www.richardjohnstone-bryden.co.uk](http://www.richardjohnstone-bryden.co.uk)*

special boats for Singers that would rival anything yet built and afloat in its class.

The Singer Motor Company was riding on the crest of a wave, with a wide range of highly popular and extremely successful vehicles spanning many styles and markets. The firm was enjoying considerable competitive and racing success,

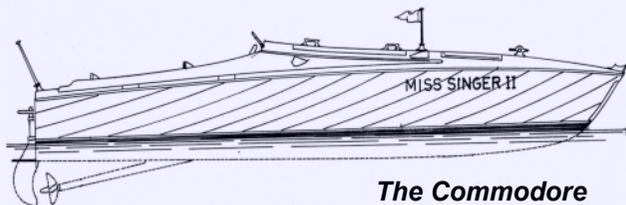
spurred on by the highly successful AG Booth designed Nine Sports and 1½ litre sports cars. Singers sales catalogues enthused over their successes at Le Mans; best performance in the 1100 cc class and 9th overall in the daunting Liege - Rome - Liege Rally; a class win in the RAC rally; a win in the Australian Grand Prix; the Wakefield Trophy; the Light Car Cup; The Haughton Cup; the Light Car's Relay Race at Brooklands and Merlin Minshull's success as the only British entry to finish in Mussolini's non-stop, 6,000 km Foreign Trophy race around Italy, not to mention hundreds of other competitive trials wins and awards. Flushed



**The Cadet**

with all this fame and success, it seemed that nothing could go wrong for the firm.

The addition of boats to Singers' portfolio was not as bizarre as it may at first seem, for Singer not only built cars, but had also diver-



**The Commodore**

sified into production of a whole range of unrelated products, and the boats were seen as a niche addition to the sales range. They were to be built in batches of six, ready for customers' orders. An agreement was quickly reached and work started.

The Singer Boats were: 1. **The Cadet** - a 14ft 6in two-seater, with a beam of 5ft 1in, with a marine version of Singers' 4-cylinder 972 cc Nine Le Mans ohc engine, giving a design operating speed of 28 knots. 2. **The Commodore** - a 16ft, four-seater, with a beam of 5ft 6in, and a marine version of Singers' 1½ Litre, 6-cylinder, triple carburettor, 1493 cc, ohc cross-flow engine, giving a design operating speed of 30 knots. Both boats had a draught at rest of 1ft 8in.

The boats' design meant that for a sustained period of high speed, they would rise onto a 17 degree operating plane, and thanks to the reverse clinker construction of the hulls and clear water hydrodynamics of the planing surfaces, they could run for a number of hours at high speed. This meant that the engines had to be suitably modified for marine use - carburettors had to be inclined by 17 degrees, a wedge shaped sump fitted, and because of the damp environment, all internal fittings, such as rockers etc, had to be chrome plated.

Picture: [www.richardjebnstone-bryden.co.uk](http://www.richardjebnstone-bryden.co.uk)



Drive was transferred to the propeller via a long shaft which was carried through the keel of the boat in a specially produced, heavy casting, fitted with roller bearings and seals. The Cadet had a three bladed, 8in dia x 9in pitch propeller, whereas the Commodore's was three bladed, 9in dia x 9in pitch.

Inside, the boats used the same car seat backs and cushions as in the Le Mans range, and instrumentation was basically a straight lift from the Singer

Sports dashboard of the period, with a 5" Jaeger rev counter sitting in the centre of the cockpit dash (there was no speedometer). Both craft were fitted with a 10 gallon fuel tank,

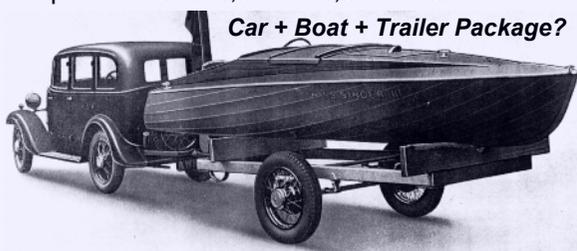
with fuel gauge, oil pressure gauge and ammeter. A throttle lever was fitted in the centre of the steering wheel, and Bowden levers for the choke and ignition were mounted on the column. Both engines were fitted with a special gear type water cooling pump and modified pressure lubricating system with dual filters, and were coupled to Parsons Reverse Gearing units.



**Commodore on Trailer**

The first two boats were named Miss Singer I (Cadet) and Miss Singer II (Commodore), and ran their official trials on 18 January 1935. They were taken down Fareham Creek to the open waters in the north end of Portsmouth Harbour and an officially measured half mile, to begin an extensive series of trials and tests, which proved a resounding success. Later the boats were taken to the south coast of the Isle of Wight and trials run there, where the engines were run for periods of up to 1 hour at 4,000 to 4,500 revs.

The weather conditions on the day of the trials was atrocious, with sleet and strong winds, so there was a considerable swell running, but both boats acquitted themselves admirably, and the Singer representatives were entirely satisfied.



**Car + Boat + Trailer Package?**

Once all the testing and post trials modifications were completed, Singers requested that the two boats be cleaned up and sent straight to their Park Lane showrooms in London. There, Mr Palmer was put in charge of the sales efforts and promotional work connected with them. However, before they arrived at Park Lane, it was decided they were to be exhibited on a dedicated marine stand at the Olympia Motor Show, which was opened by the Duke of Kent on 11 October, and by all accounts the stand created a lot of interest.

Singers debated whether they could market the boats as a package of car, trailer and boat, but in the end they sold them separately as a 'Boat complete with Trailer, Canvas Cover and Straps', costing £240 for the Cadet and £290 for the Commodore. The marine versions of the Singer engines were available separately at £65 for the Cadet with clutch, or £120 for the Commodore with reverse gear. The boat trailer cost £26. The sales effort was given a major boost when, on 25 January 1935, Motor Boat and Yachting produced a glowing, five page evaluation report of their testing of the boats, praising not only their beauty, but also the sheer exhilarating faultless performance of the craft.

A special, 2-seater Cadet, named Chorister, was built for William Bullock. This was fitted with a special "Stanus" propeller and was raced by Mr WA Palmer.

Once on the open market, the boats were bought by a variety of people, but as they had been designed primarily as high speed racing boats, they called for a high degree of skill in driving them, as they could be quite a handful to control and manoeuvre at high speeds.



**Cadet at Speed**

Despite their beautiful, elegant lines, these boats were no docile

## Commodore Cruising



Picture: [www.richardjohnstone-hydran.co.uk](http://www.richardjohnstone-hydran.co.uk)

machine - they were out and out brutish power boats, of immense strength and power for their day. They were open water boats, and needed wide expanses of water to get up on the plane and run at their full power and potential. In the narrower confines of rivers and smaller lakes they soon ran out of space when operating at high

speeds, becoming quite a handful to control, and out at sea, where they were best suited, many drivers got the fright of their lives once they hit successive large waves and the boat began buffeting and pounding on the wave tops - all of which was perfectly safe and what the boat was built for, but which didn't appeal to the average family man who wanted a quiet, sedate cruising vessel to take the family out for picnics.

The availability of the boats was limited to See's output, but none the less they sold in steady numbers. However, at £240 and £290 they were expensive toys, costing nearly twice the price of a good family car.

Sadly however, the spectacular crashes at the Ards TT in 1935 did irreparable damage to Singers reputation. No-one seemed keen to buy a car where the steering mechanisms broke up - nor a high speed boat built by them either!

With only a pitifully small number of these elegant water-borne racers sold, the boats programme was, like many other innovative Singer ideas, brought to a premature end. Percy See's boatyard carried on, and during the Second World War went on to make a significant contribution to the war effort, building a wide range of boats for the Armed Services. The firm remained in business until the 1970s, but by then the boating world had changed out of all recognition to that which Percy first ventured into in the late 1800s.

Eric See was a wonderful man, and I cherish my meetings with him in the 1990s during my research into his remarkable life and family boating business. Sadly Eric passed away on 5 March 1997, aged 83. His family still live in and around the Fareham and Portsmouth area, and are rightly very proud of their family history.



*5 year-old Eric See at the Launch of the Almora in 1919*

We for our part should always ensure their name remains as much a part of Singers' history as the other Singer vehicles we all admire so much.

Today there are three known survivors of Percy Sees' exciting partnership with the Singer Motor Company, and boats of such a high pedigree and calibre are highly prized acquisitions, commanding huge prices. Fortunately a number of other Percy See built vintage boats have also survived, and they form a lasting tribute to the brilliance of Percy See, his son Eric and the men who built them.

But I don't think any look quite as good as a Singer Commodore at full tilt on a flat calm stretch of water, roaring along at 35 mph!