

## John Cobb & The Railton.

Aside from the Bluebirds of Malcom Campbell, the Railton is perhaps one of the most famous & best known cars from the golden age of land speed record breaking.

Up to the mid 1930s the answer to the question of "how to go faster?" was to shoehorn more & bigger engines into the car, culminating in the massive Thunderbolt driven by George Eyston, which in 1937 beat Campbell's record of 300 mph. Although the Thunderbolt was more sophisticated than earlier LSR monsters, Cobb & designer Reid Railton decided on a more subtle approach. Rather than emulate the brute force of the blunt instrument that was Thunderbolt, he designed a low, sleek slippery aerodynamic teardrop shape, interrupted only by fairings to cover the drivers head & tops of the wheels. The car still had 2 engines, but were ingeniously mounted at an angle on a unique 'S' shaped chassis beam, in order to maintain the aerodynamic integrity of the car.

In 1938 a sleeker Thunderbolt came to the salt, the lozenge shaped front intake of 1937 reduced to a smaller oval, & with a fully enclosed cockpit. To this Goliath, the David of the Railton appeared, & battle commenced.

The earliest version of the Railton in Utah seems to have had an open cockpit, but the most striking feature of this early incarnation was an air brake in the form of a plate that was intended to rise from the rear of the body, very much in the manner of the bullet screen, later seen on James Bonds Aston Martin DB5. We have never seen any pictures of this air brake deployed, but it is clearly visible on shots of the car with the body removed.

After early shakedown & test runs a few modifications were made for the record runs: The car was fitted with steel & asbestos plates on top of the body to protect the aluminium skin from the hot exhaust gases, & the sides of the car were painted black to help the early electronic timing apparatus to register the passing of the car, the reflective bare metal skin often failing to trigger the equipment. The Thunderbolt was similarly painted for the same reason.

Although the Railton was eventually to become one of the most successful cars in LSR history, (taking & holding the LSR no fewer than 3 times, & holding it for an unprecedented 24 years), its early victories did not really receive their due recognition. In contrast, each time Campbell claimed a new record, an impoverished depression era Britain would welcome him home, people lining the streets eager to cheer the conquering British hero. His exploits were what we would now call a big media event, with much Newsreel footage & newspaper column inches.

On August the 27th 1938, the Mk2 Thunderbolt beat its own 1937 record by 33.5mph, but was beaten in turn by Cobb on September the 15<sup>th</sup> at just over 350mph. Cobb's amazing success however was short lived: A further modified Thunderbolt (*sans* tail fin, its front intake now cowled over by a smooth nose cone, & its black sides reduced to an arrow with a central disc), re-took the record the very next day at 357.5 mph. (The colour of the central disc is still a

matter of debate, although what evidence there is seems to suggest that it was yellow). Cobb was running short of tyres & needed to return to London to meet business commitments, so Eyston & the Thunderbolt ended the 1938 season still holding the record, leaving Cobb just a plucky also-ran.

In 1939, Cobb returned to Utah, the Railton now without its black painted sides, due to the improved timing apparatus, but now sporting a pair of red lions on either side of the nose, & a circular lions' head sticker on the cockpit front. This was courtesy of Cobb's sponsor for the 1939 attempt, The Gilmore Oil Company, whose symbol was a red lion. On August the 23rd, Cobb shattered Eyston's 1938 record at 369.7mph. Also at this time an oval opening appeared at the cars front to allow ventilation for the driver. Photographs exist of this hole both opened and plated over on this, & the 1947 incarnation of the car, & it is difficult to tell whether the actual record runs were made with the hole opened or covered.

Photographs from this 1939 campaign are few, due mainly to the media being distracted by the impending World War. A man trying to drive fast car many thousands of miles away seemed suddenly trivial, & as result, Cobb's second Victory over the Thunderbolt again received scant attention from the mainstream media.

Confident that the Railton had not yet reached its full potential, in 1947 Cobb returned to the salt, & took the record again at 394.2mph, 400mph being recorded on one of the runs. This time, finally, Cobb received the public attention he so richly deserved. Britain was eager for something to celebrate after the dark years of the war, & in 1947, the Railton & Cobb's unassuming modesty stood for all that was best about Britain: quiet confidence, engineering skill, & the plucky underdog spirit. But it also stands as a symbol of Britain punching above its weight in a world where power was shifting, & The British Empire was starting to crumble. Indeed, aside from Donald Campbell's wheel driven record of 1964, it would be the last time that an Englishman would take the LSR until 1983.

In its final guise, the car was sponsored by Mobil, & christened the Railton Mobil Special, the Mobil winged horse logo replacing the Gilmore lions.

This is perhaps the most familiar of the three record versions of this car, but the two previous incarnations of the car, although poorly documented are no less important in LSR history. It's all about being the fastest man on earth in a straight line for a mile, & Cobb & the Railton did it no less than three times. It wasn't until 1963 that Railton was beaten, & that was by the jet powered three wheeler "Spirit of America".

Mach One models will be producing all three record versions of this car, along with limited editions of the car in its early test guise with air brake, & as it is now displayed in the Birmingham Museum of Science & Technology with "Dunlop" on the sides above the Railton Mobil Special script, which presumably allowed the tyre supplier to bask in some of the glory as the car embarked on its homecoming victory tour.

There is one other version of this car that Mach One models will be producing. Recently photographs from the Utah Tribune Telegram were auctioned off on e-Bay, & amongst them was a photograph of the Railton in a guise that no one we have spoken to has ever seen or heard of. This is seemingly a hybrid of the 1938 black sided car, but with a 1939 Gilmore red lion on the nose. However, the lion is different to the one on the 1939 car, which is sleeker, & only has one paw visible at the front. The lion on this new photo has 2 front paws, & is much closer to the "proper" Gilmore lion used on Gilmore products. As advertised on e-Bay, the rear of the photo was also pictured & is date stamped 15<sup>th</sup> September 1938.

As we see it, there are three explanations for this scheme as it appears in this photograph. The most likely is that late in Cobb's 1938 campaign, negotiations had begun with Gilmore, & the lions were applied right at the very end of the season.

Another possibility is that the photo is incorrectly dated, & hails from 1939. The car could have spent the winter in its black paint, & early in the 1939 season, red lions applied in line with Cobb's new sponsor, but removed with the black paint when it was realised that this was no longer necessary. They would then have been replaced with the "Type 2" Lions seen on the standard version of the 1939 car.

The third explanation is that the photograph was doctored, & the lions added after the photo was taken. We think this unlikely, as even on a high zoom, the photo looks un-retouched & original: even the grain distribution looks consistent with the rest of the photograph. The question to ask, is that even if the technology were available to produce such a skilful & convincing fake at a relatively small local newspaper seventy years ago, why would anyone bother to do it?

However, given that there appears to be no other evidence of the car in this form, written or photographic, it remains a puzzle. If anyone out there can shed any light, especially if you are the purchaser of the photograph, please don't hesitate to contact us!

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