



1920 350hp Sunbeam

For a period following World War I the world of motor racing was enthralled by a breed of racing cars powered by huge aircraft engines. The 350hp Sunbeam is one of the most famous of this group of aero-engined giants. Not only did the car compete on the race track but it also broke the Land Speed Record on no fewer than three separate occasions.

The car was the brainchild of Sunbeam's chief engineer and racing team manager Louis Coatalen and was constructed at the company's works in Wolverhampton during 1919 and early 1920. Power came from a modified 18 litre Sunbeam V12 Manitou engine, a type used on naval seaplanes. Transmission was via a four speed gearbox and drive shaft. It was fitted with a narrow polished aluminium single seat body with radiator cowl and tail painted in green.

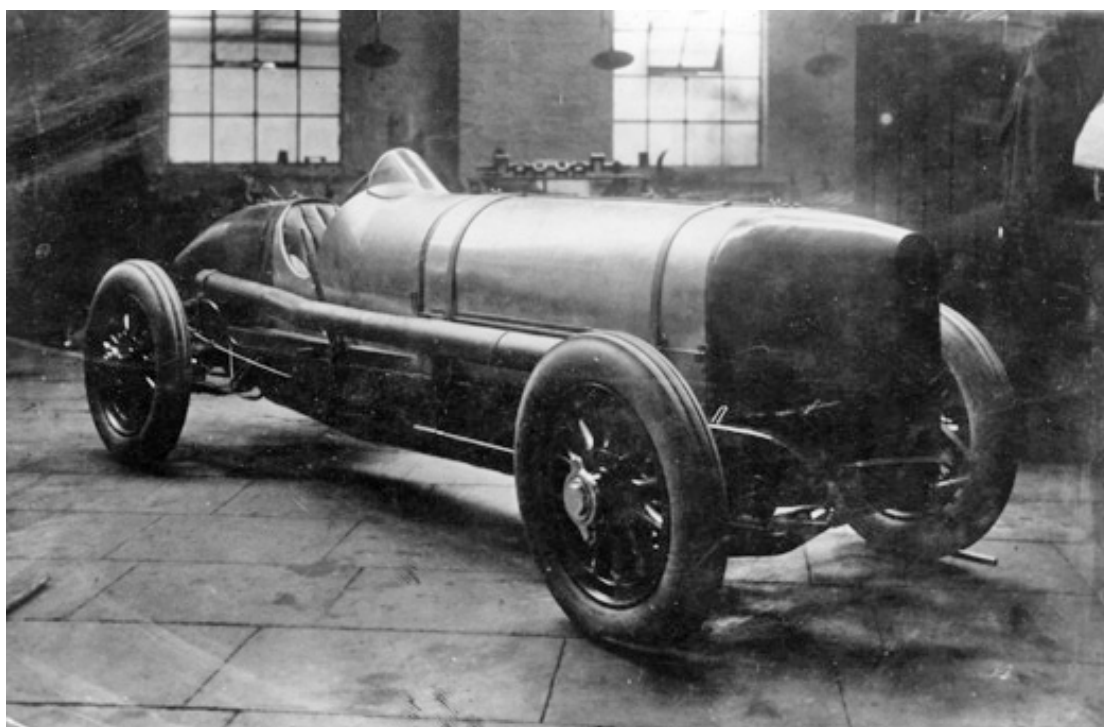


Figure 1: The 350hp 12 cylinder Sunbeam at the Wolverhampton works in 1920.

The Sunbeam's first outings were plagued with bad luck. Its first race was scheduled to be at the 1920 Whitsun Brooklands meeting driven by Harry Hawker. However, a burst tyre caused it to crash on the Railway Straight during a practice lap. Hawker was uninjured but the car could not be raced that day. At the August meeting a stalled engine meant that the Sunbeam could not start its race.

In late 1920 the Sunbeam was taken to the Gaillon Hill Climb in France where René Thomas succeeded in taking the course record with a 108mph/173.81kph run on the 1km hill.

At the 1921 Brooklands Easter meeting Kenelm Lee Guinness, perhaps one of the few drivers able to get the best from the car, drove the Sunbeam for the first time. In the Lightning Short Handicap second gear was broken but this didn't stop Guinness driving the car to second place in the Long Handicap event later the same day. At the Autumn meeting he drove the car again, in both the Short and Long Handicap races. In the latter event he finished in second place but in doing so achieved speeds of 140mph/225.31kph and completed the last lap at an average speed of 116mph/186.68kph.

The Sunbeam continued to perform well in early 1922 despite bursting a tyre at the May Brooklands meeting. On 17 May Guinness was at Brooklands again to make a number of record attempts. These included a flying kilometre speed of 133.75mph/215.25kph which qualified as a new Land Speed Record.

Guinness raced the Sunbeam one more time at Brooklands, in the autumn of 1922. Malcolm Campbell borrowed it in 1923 to compete in the Saltburn Speed Trials. Here he achieved a speed of 138mph/222.09kph. Being only a one way run this was not recognised as an official world record, so Campbell decided to purchase the car in order to undertake a serious record attempt.

Campbell commissioned Boulton & Paul to build a new body for the Sunbeam, painted in his distinctive blue colour scheme. In September 1924

he took it to Pendine in South Wales to make an attempt at the official Land Speed Record, achieving a new record speed of 146.16mph/235.22kph.

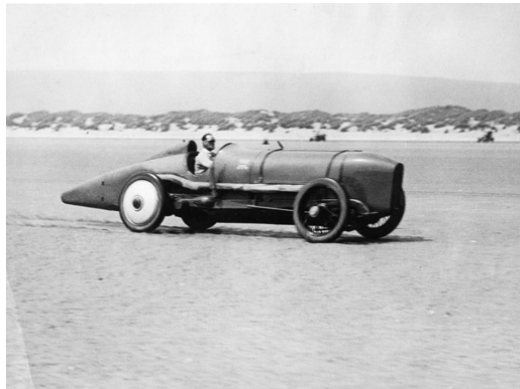


Figure 2: Malcolm Campbell at Pendine Sands in South Wales, 1925.

Intent on achieving even greater speeds, Campbell advertised the car for sale with a price tag of £1,500 and made plans to build a new record breaking car. However, there was much interest in the land speed record from other drivers and Campbell decided to make one further attempt with the Sunbeam. Returning to Pendine on July 21 1925, he became the first person to exceed 150mph/241.40kph when he drove the car to a new record of 150.76mph/242.62kph.

The 350hp Sunbeam passed through various owners after 1925 including band leader Billy Cotton who achieved a speed of 121.50mph/195.53kph at Southport Speed Trials. Harold Pratley acquired the car in 1944 and loaned it to Rootes Ltd (successors to the Sunbeam Company) who undertook a cosmetic restoration for promotional purposes.

In 1958 the 350hp Sunbeam passed into the care of the Montagu Motor Museum where it was restored to working order and driven by Lord Montagu in various events. The car can be seen displayed alongside other famous Land Speed Record holders in the National Motor Museum – a tribute to the heroic era of aero engined racing cars and record breaking.

Manufacturer: Sunbeam Motor Co., Wolverhampton.

Engine: V12 Sunbeam Manitou aero engine.

Capacity: 18,322cc.

Output: 355bhp at 2,100rpm (as built).

Max. Speed: 150.87mph/242.80kph.

Further Reading:

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