

Captain George Eyston 1897–1979

The 1920s and 1930s were golden years for motor sport and record breaking. Whilst drivers of the period such as Sir Malcolm Campbell, Sir Henry Segrave and John Cobb are still widely known, others have been almost forgotten. One such is Captain George Eyston, who achieved considerable success as both a racing driver and record breaker.



Figure 1: Captain George Eyston

Eyston began racing in 1921 and was still breaking records in 1954, retaining his great interest in the sport up to his death in 1979. Close associates called him The Skipper or The Captain – he was always a polite, reserved gentleman and sportsman.

Born in Bampton, Oxfordshire in June 1897, George Edward Thomas Eyston led a happy childhood taking part in activities such as sailing and horse riding. The family later moved to Weybridge in Surrey where he gained an interest in the motor cars and aeroplanes seen at nearby Brooklands. He was a keen cyclist but was banned from racing by his parents, taking part in various 'record runs' instead. He later started racing motorcycles, using an alias to shield the truth from his mother.

During World War One Eyston joined the Dorset Regiment as an officer, later transferring to the Royal Field Artillery. He attained the rank of Captain, was mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Military Cross.

In 1919 Captain Eyston returned to Trinity College, Cambridge to complete his studies, graduating with an engineering degree in 1921. During a business trip to France later that year he watched the French Grand Prix, re-awakening his interest in motor racing. His racing career began in 1923 driving Aston Martins. Marriage and a brief period of speed boat racing followed but he returned to car racing in 1926.

Eyston raced a variety of cars including Bugatti, Alfa Romeo, Riley, Lea-Francis, Sunbeam and Maserati and gained particular fame at the wheel of various types of MG. Notable race wins included the La Baule Grand Prix in 1927 and the 1934 British Empire Trophy, as well as second places at the 1929 Spa 24 Hour Race and the 1932 Ulster TT. However, Eyston is probably best remembered for his many record breaking achievements.

Records in a wide range of classes and categories were broken at Brooklands, Montlhéry, Pendine Sands and Utah with cars as diverse as Singer, Riley, Sunbeam, Hotchkiss, Chrysler and MG. He was responsible for the engineering of his record breaking cars and was a pioneer of diesel engine record vehicles, first with a Chrysler based car fitted with an AEC bus engine and then Flying Spray; essentially the same car as his Rolls-Royce kestrel powered Speed of the Wind but fitted with a diesel engine. His favourite record car was the 8-litre sleeve-valve, single-seater Panhard.



Figure 2: Captain George Eyston in the Magic Midget EX127 at Montlhéry during the Class H (750cc) record attempt, December 1932.

Eyston's best-known achievement was to take the Land Speed Record in 1938, achieving 357.50mph/575.34kph in Thunderbolt, powered by two V12 Rolls-Royce R aero engines, at Bonneville Salt Lake Flats, Utah. Thunderbolt was designed quickly and the assembly took little more than six weeks as Eyston drew on all of his considerable engineering and organising ability to source and oversee the manufacture of components from across Britain.

His last personal record run was in August 1954 at the age of 57, averaging nearly 121mph/194.73kph over 12 hours in the un-supercharged 1.5 litre MG EX179 shared with Ken Miles. Having given up active record-breaking himself, Eyston master-minded record attempts for MG at Utah until 1959 working with drivers such as Stirling Moss and Phil Hill.

George Eyston was a director of Powerplus Superchargers and C.C. Wakefield, the manufacturer of Castrol lubricants. He was a qualified pilot, Olympic standard yachtsman and universally recognised as a sporting gentleman but above all a family man. Awarded the OBE in 1948 for his many exploits, he died in 1979 at the age of 82.

Further Reading:

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