

# Veteran Craftsmanship, Vintage Success.

At the 1933 Olympia show Riley exhibited a bit of stunning Continental taste in the form of a diminutive two place sports car. Company representatives portrayed the somewhat less than fully functional prototype on display as the forthcoming replacement of the Gamecock roadster. The transformation was impressive. The Gamecock had been a promising nod toward the sporting attributes and competition achievements of Percy Riley's robust 1087 cc engine and the rolling chassis to which it occupied, but its Midland Motor Body roadster coachwork was conservative in the extreme. In mild tune it was somewhat docile as well. Performance versions were made available. The most impressive being the rather more crisply styled, cycle fendered, 14/6 ( 1633cc six cylinder ) Gamecock rallye cars. The prototype sporting roadster on display at the Olympia was possessed of distinctly Italianette styling cues. Where the Gamecock looked to be the conservative product of Carrozzeria Castagna, the new car looked to be metal given form by Ugo Zagato. The little two seater was no poseur of Zagato styling pretensions. It truly possessed the graceful engineering relevant proportions and detailing that made the mid-Thirties Milanese designs the object of desire they were.

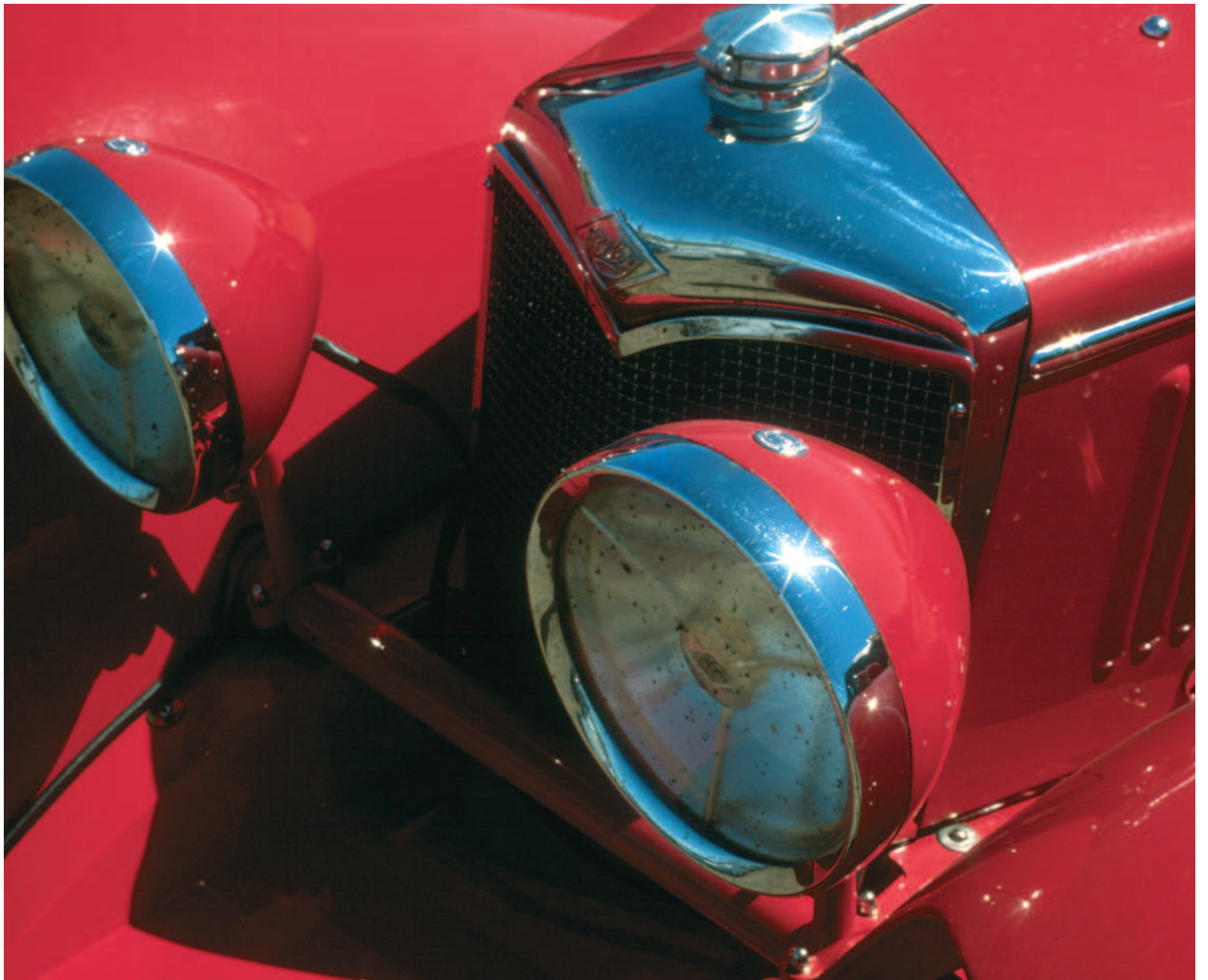
Public response being of a satisfactory nature, the Rileys' proceeded to create, not one, but two models based on the prototype design exercise shown. Promoted though they may have been as more sporting evolutions of the Gamecocks, the rolling chassis and engineering of the Olympia prototype came forth directly from the competition TT racers of '33, and the venerable Brooklands racers. The Gamecock, for its part, had been an open air evolution of the Riley Nine series progenitor, the Monaco

sedan. The simultaneous development of both the four cylinder Imp and six cylinder MPH-as the new cars were christened-and their aforementioned lineage, is but the subtlest implication of a most dramatically diverse manufacturing operation at this Coventry based company. The catalogues read like wish lists of model construction variations on a theme. One of the benefits of the coach builder / manufacturer relationship before the second world war was it allowed the manufacturers to focus talent and capital on rolling chassis engineering. The coach-builders listed the fully developed chassis' in their catalogue and conducted direct relations with the customers as to how the final car would be fitted out. This division of labor relationship relieved the motor manufacturers of any customer reaction-to-fashion coachbuilding responsibility. Without fully expounding upon its evolution into the motor industry from textile in the 19th century, in the case of Riley we have a family run company that had the same number of independent divisions as there were male siblings (three). These separate divisions overlapped in many areas of manufacture. It was all finally consolidated into one operation, along with the predominant subcontracting coachbuilder, in 1933. While they may have been consolidated on paper in contemporary fashion, the family had a distinctly le Belle Époque craftsman manner of manufacturing.

In 1934 Riley had six engines on offer of differing capacity, both in cylinder and displacement, in a number of bespoke levels of tune. As many chassis configurations were available, and an equal number of body styles with bespoke levels of trim. The base level being executive caliber. Ironically all of this product diversity was based on Percy Riley's outstanding 9hp engine; so named because of its British taxable horsepower rating.

The 9hp was a superb example of an evolution of type.





The type in this case being the twin cam in crank engine design. The Belgium firm of Pipe is credited with designing this engine about 1900. Their design interestingly was said to have incorporated overhead valves. The next application was by Fiat's racing department in '04-'05, where side valves were employed; gaining the name "T" head, and the Grand Prix laurels. The "T" head became a popular engine in the US for the stripped down sportsman's cars. The major players here were of course Harry Stutz' American Underslung of '05, and the Mercers that followed. The design reappeared with overhead valves in the 1913 six-liter 40-60hp A.L.F.A. designed by Giuseppe Merosi. The benefit of the design was positive valve actuation in a cross flow head. The design provided the performance of a twin cam at considerable less manufacturing cost. In the 9hp, Percy Riley increased this engine's efficiency through its small dimension. While its predecessors were of much grander displacement - the six-plus liter range - Riley's engine was 1087cc. The compact aspect of this package enabled Riley to move the directly geared cams high in the block, thus employing short lifters of high grade steel. The compactness of the lifters was enhanced by another performance upgrade, the valves being canted over at ninety degrees for the hemi-head combustion chamber and piston design. Matched to two carbs, this was an engine of superb power for the size. The Rileys became an immediate threat to the highly evolved voiturette stars of the late 'twenties and 'thirties; England's Alvis' and "Hyper Leaf" Lea Frances, and the Amilcars and Salmsons of France.

Ingenious mechanical interpretation was further exhibited by the Coventry firm in the first car produced with the "Nine" engine. Rather than apply the high-revving torquey little engine's 27hp to the ubiquitous open touring car, the Riley's engineered a closed sedan which carried all of the masses between the wheels. To be sure the firm

made certain their four door was light, by employing the oh so British wood frame and fabric body for the main cabin section of the car. The chassis design and passenger accommodation within the 8' 10" wheelbase sedan would forever put a stamp on the character of the cars to come from Riley. By kicking down the frame rails aft of the front axle they effectively lowered the chassis, and center of gravity there by. Combined with a light engine package, this was a saloon endowed with very effective handling and precise steering. A point not lost upon the performance minded. The rear seating arrangement combined the compact with the uniquely comfortable. Footwells were placed between the frame rails. This positioned the rear passengers close to the front seats in arm chair comfort. The aforementioned had the effect, and intent, of moving said passengers off of the rear axle, thus centralizing mass. The design provided a level of comfort unavailable in cars of this size. Rear passenger's of the era generally sat upon a rear axle that was very busy reacting to crowned and ungraded roads.

The company proceeded to establish a uniquely myopic manufacturing method. Constant mid-course corrections and upgrades were seen as paramount to series production consistency. Amidst all of this product inconsistency was a constant, the performance of the Nine, and the quality of the chassis it came in. Britons soon realized Coventry was producing cars of a standard and character quite unlike anything on the Isles. Suddenly there was a family car that Dad could take his sons for a drive in the manner of the Bentley Boys. Thus began the evolution of a well mannered sedan into a formidable 97-plus horsepower 1100cc class victor.

As the Italians bestowed Targa Florio, Mille Miglia and Monza on the deserving racer, so too did the little "Nine" in a modified chassis earn its Brooklands appellation. In the hands of Reid Railton, at the Surrey track's Autumn

Meet of 1927 much notoriety was achieved for the factory. With its twin carbs, four branch exhaust, and high compression pistons the engine's power increased to 50hp. In the manner of Continental competition chassis', Railton and Thompson & Taylor shortened the sedan's wheelbase to 8' 1", underslung the chassis and converged the frame rails at the rear, with leaf springs tucked below, to follow the shape of the lengthened boat tail rearend. To complete this sporting repackaging job, a lower profile radiator was fitted, as were cycle fenders. Appreciating the promotional benefits of Railton &c.'s efforts, the factory adopted the design for a line of sportscars titled by victory; producing the Brooklands Speed Model. This "Boys Own" sports car became a classroom in motion for many a young Brit whose future lay upon the circuits of Europe. The engine modifications soon migrated to the factory's saloons, further enhancing the sporting reputation of the company's cars and garnering many a Rallye victory in the process.

In 1928 Percy Riley further enhanced his engine through the addition of two cylinders. With its tax rated at 14hp, the 1633cc six cylinder became the 14/6. In its original single carb version it developed 50hp. The engine was initially fitted into a series of saloons. In 1933 the six was modified for 1500cc displacement classification competition. The engines were soon offered with numerous upgrades that spoke to the dynamic capabilities of Riley's evolving competition department, and the factory's near obsession for bespoke modifications. On offer were exotic magnesium sumps, timing cases and rocker-box castings.

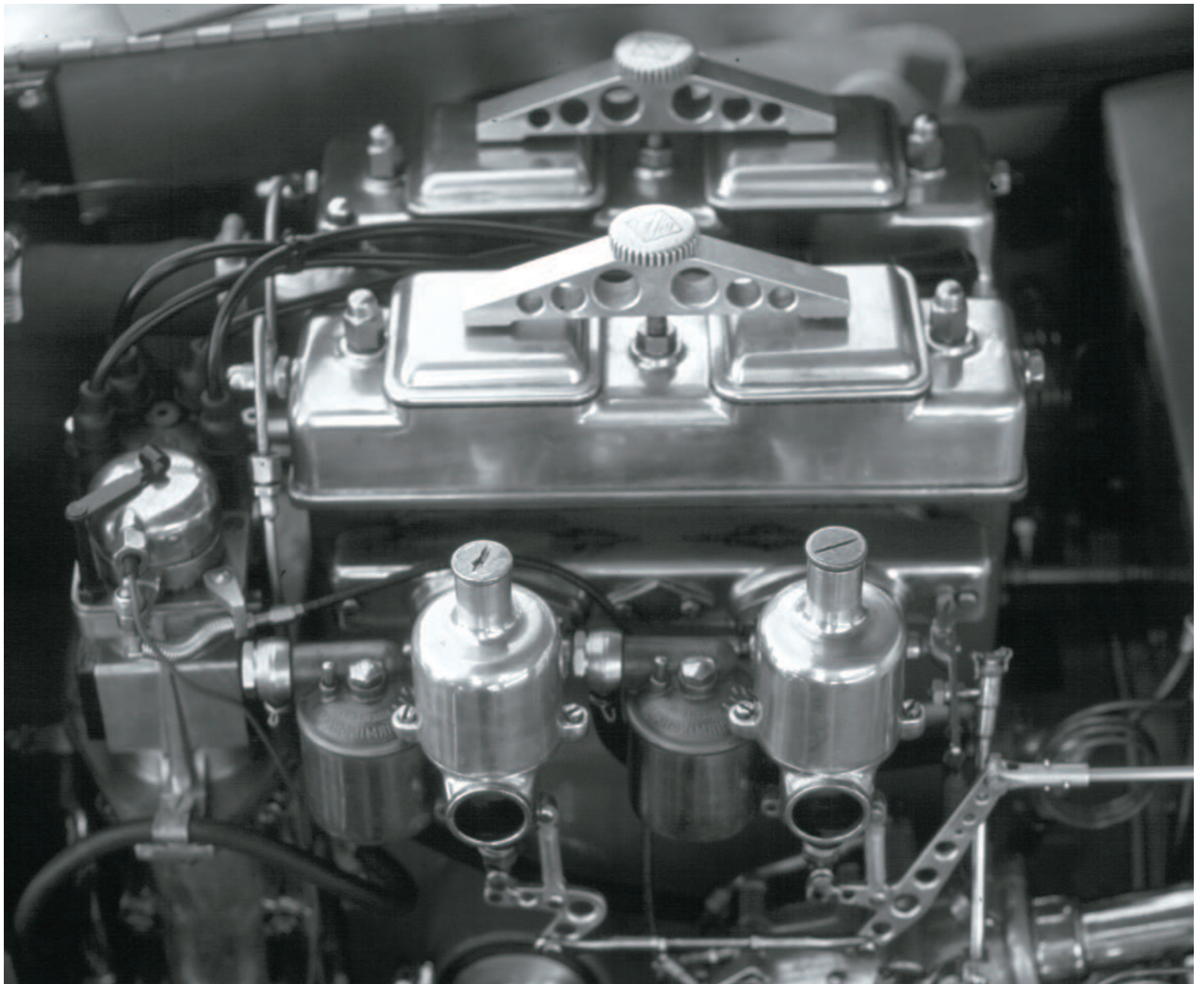
The Italianette two-seat prototype on display at the Olympia was based on the race bred mechanicals of the four cylinder "Nine". Beneath the bodywork were the squared rear frame rails in the underslung chassis design of the racing TTs. A wheelbase of 7' 6" resulted in a cockpit of the most diminutive dimension, for the slight of

frame. And it was the slight of frame that would write the Imp's competition history, often at the hands of Captain Hasting's "fairer sex". As Mark Gillies' tells in his rare Yuletide publication *The Golden Age of Riley Motor Cars*, at LeMans in 1934 Dorothy Champney and Kay Petre "recorded the highest speed for the race by female drivers". And some male drivers it would seem. After twenty-four hours of racing they brought the Imp home thirteenth. This same year Dorothy Champney took her Imp up to Scotland, with a factory team of the diminutive two-seaters. She took the Ladies Prize in that Tartan Rallye. D. Champney's performance assisted the team in achieving the Team Prize. A driver of singular talent was to enter the thick and the fray of competition motoring behind the wheel of an Imp, the Prince Birabonges. The prince become renown as B. Bira in his many GP cars that wore the blue and yellow livery of Thailand.

The Imps more muscular sibling, the MPH, came forth from the specification of the six-cylinder cars; specifically the less than successful TTs' of 1933. As was often the case in the rather opaque history of Riley, where competition cars were constantly altered leaving history only the column inch magazine descriptions of their specifications and exploits with no examples in metal, two of the TT race cars were altered to become the first two MPH sports cars. The MPH sat upon the 8' 1" wheelbase underslung chassis, powered initially by the 12/6 of 1458cc, or the 14/6 of 1633cc. The latter of which was replaced in the catalogue by the 15/6 of 1726cc. These engines were further altered from the norm, an illusive term for the Coventry operation, by short and individualized production runs that included racing roller bearing crankshafts, twin SU carbs, racing headers of a stylish six branch design, Scintilla magnetos, a water cooled middle main bearing...

Both of Riley's new sports car were on offer with either





the Wilson preselector transmission or the close-ratio silent-third manual. The siblings stunningly beautiful bodies were of such visual and dimensional similarity, and individual modification, that often the only way to differentiate the two was to walk about the rear. The MPH had a very Zagato like rounded rear, covering the spare. The Imp is made obvious by the exposed spare. The MPH competition involvement was limited to Rallies, as were its achievements in said. Its production numbers hardly warranted the term, as approximately sixteen were said to have been built.

Production records rescued from the inferno that was the terror bombing of Coventry during the Battle of Britain show that ninety-six customer Imps were made. Ulster was the name bestowed on the competition, cycle fendered, Imps. Ten were constructed.

Riley's passage from the automotive ferment was not to be the result of war's drama, but rather the insidiously bland. The ledgers of 1937 illustrated that years of conducting a le Belle Époque craftsman automotive operation, with such a dramatic range of models so individually detailed, had taken its toll. The company's losses were quickly followed by receivership. Talks were immediately entered into with cross town rallye racing rival Triumph, but with both companies operating under the shadow of receivership the investors in the City exhibited little interest. In the autumn of 1938 Riley was acquired by Britain's depression era harvester of the automotive infirmed, Lord Nuffield; thus joining the ranks of Morris, MG, and Wolsley. Nuffield's comments of "preserving the characteristics that have made Riley so outstanding" aside, the sport car and competition operations immediately

passed to memory. The saloons were resurrected within the firm embrace of economy-of-scale manufacture. They soldiered on with a modicum of their once signature performance and styling character. By the 'sixties they were reduced to the indistinguishable world of shared platform badge branding.

Through these mordant years of prolonged production of the merely nominal, it was the signature writ early by the eight work's Brooklands at the Irish GP, the Tourist Trophy, and LeMans that had fired the British imagination, defined an entire class of finely crafted lightweight racers; bestowing the status of legend. The impact of Victor Riley's cars were to be more than the merely sentimental. With Raymond Mays' acquisition and modification of a 1933 six cylinder TT for the Shelsley Walsh hill climb the foundation was laid for the pre-war English Racing Automobiles (ERA), and British Formula One racecraft there after.

By S. Scott Callan  
2000





