

The Cape Crusaders



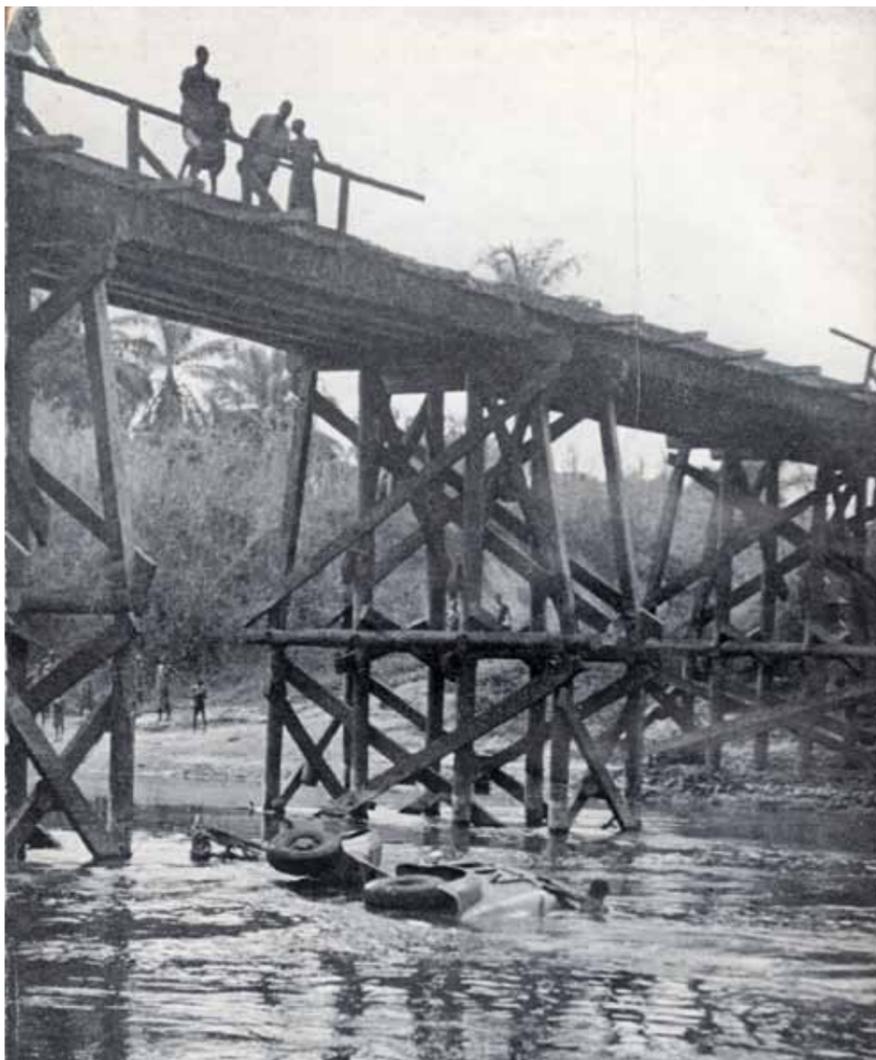
Eighty years after a Morris 8's record drive from London to Cape Town, Philip Young describes subsequent record attempts – and tries to set a new one. Will he make it?

ALAN GILG was in party mood when he walked under the chandeliers of the Piccadilly Hotel – with good reason. It was New Year's Eve, 1932, and the celebrations were in full swing. Outside, friends were arriving in their MGs, Aston Martin Internationals, Bentleys and Lagondas. He had parked his lowly Morris 8 tourer behind a Jaguar SS, eager to meet the love of his life.

Then the spirit suddenly drained – the lady, ten years older than his 23 years, announced that their relationship was over. He was head over heels in love, with a desire to marry her, and now all his ambitions lay in tatters. 'Why? Where have I gone wrong?' We have all been there, and we have all realised later that it's a question best not asked. Predictably, she gave it to him with both barrels.

All around were young men who were far more dashing... they led a far more exciting lifestyle, their cars were just an example of it. 'You will never ever consider taking risks with anything,' she said. 'You are basically as boring as your Morris!'

GERARD BROWN



'WHILE THE CREW SAT AROUND CATCHING MALARIA, THE PRISONERS BASHED OUT THE DENTS AND DRIED THE BATTERY'

with could not be more daring. Let's drive to Cape Town! Alan's friend knows South Africa well; until his accident, he had been flying mail bags from town to town. It's never been done in a small car, we could set a world record! In fact, the first motorised drive the length of Africa had only been completed ten years before, when a team of Crossley trucks, led by Major Chaplin Court Treatt and his wife Stella, took 16 months of dragging through jungle, swamps and desert just to get from Cape Town to Cairo. This certainly would be daring.

The Morris 8 would end up being shot at in the Sahara while trying to outrun a bandit on a camel, and, thanks to ill-fitting air-cleaners, consuming a total of 15 gallons of oil for a drive that totalled over 10,000 miles. But the pair of adventurers drove into the record books and chalked up a time of five months.

Another team hit upon the idea of making sure all the pink bits of the map – most of the right-hand side of the Africa page in the *World Atlas* – were joined up in a reckless race against the clock to be the fastest to Cape Town. Humphrey Symons and Bertie Browning also managed to blag a car from a manufacturer to make more of a race of it: a non-stop drive to Cape Town.

This was December 1938, and the car was the ex-Earls Court motor show Wolseley 18/85, middle of the range, but a good performer, lugging a strong body. Fitted with tiny 13in wheels but tall balloon Dunlops with a 9in tread, the car ran well until it fell off a bridge at night in the Congo. The crew swam across crocodile-infested waters and, despite broken ribs and shoulders, walked three miles and knocked on the door of a Catholic Missionary, which organised 50 prisoners to be released from the local jail to haul the sodden Wolseley from the river. While the crew sat around catching malaria, the prisoners bashed out the dents and dried the battery, and soon they were on their way again... roaring into Cape Town to claim a new record of 31 days.

Not to be outdone, the BMC press office then struck up a loan of their shiny new Austin



What to do? Our poor hero walks down the street towards Piccadilly Circus, sobbing on the injustice and the hurt of life, and into the first pub he finds. Where he ends up chatting at the bar with someone who is getting over a major setback – two broken legs, the result of a flying accident caused by trying to fly too low under cloud, colliding with a radio mast. Here is someone who takes risks, dashing and full of gung-ho derring-do... If only I could be like him, muses Alan, who pours out his troubles.

Do something, come up with a plan, is the advice he receives. And what they come up

Above
That's a 1938 Wolseley 18/85 in the Belgian Congo's River Gada. It was subsequently rescued by 50 prisoners and knocked back into shape so the intrepid drivers could carry on to their Cape Town goal.



Clockwise from above
The Rootes press office charged the pairing of George Hinchliffe and James Pulman with the task of breaking Wolseley's London to Cape Town record twice in the same year, first in this Hillman Minx, then in a Humber Snipe; the Morris 8 that kicked the craze off in 1933; Austin A70 Hampshire takes its turn; Ford's Cortina record stood for 47 years – but fortune didn't favour the Corsair crew, who pitted their car against the *SS Windsor Castle* for the return leg.



A70 Hampshire, with just 1200cc of B-Series engine, loaded it up with spares, and sent it off to Africa. They avoided falling into rivers and chopped ten days off the record.

In 1952 BMC's deadly rivals in the publicity stakes over at Rootes thought they could improve on that with their new sidevalve 1200cc Hillman Minx. Later the same year, drivers George Hinchliffe and James Pulman went one better with a Humber Snipe.

Their 13-day record was the target for Walter Hayes, Ford's enterprising publicity chief, in a bid for column inches for the new Cortina. Ford dealer and rally driver Eric Jackson was sent a press demonstrator (with an estate's uprated rear springs) and told to race it to Cape Town. Eric just had to beat the Humber, whose record had stood for 11 years. Jackson was delayed in Egypt getting into Sudan, was held up by gunmen in Ethiopia, and lost so much time come the halfway point in Kenya that he faced having to average nearly 90mph all the way to Cape Town.

He arrived exhausted, it was raining, the car was on cross-ply tyres, and he couldn't find the Mount Nelson hotel! The timekeeper was sitting at the bar, where he had been all day, and was now the worse for wear. Up and down, round the block and round again – Eric could see the hotel but couldn't find the entrance. So he drove across the pavement, into the garden, and across wet grass... where he got stuck. Rose bushes were flying from the rear wheels over the Cortina's roof. The commotion summoned the time keeper and he stopped the watch. The record had been snatched by... a mere 18 minutes.

THE COMMOTION SUMMONED THE TIME KEEPER, HE STOPPED THE WATCH. THE RECORD HAD BEEN SNATCHED BY... A MERE 18 MINUTES'

Such was the publicity that Ford asked Jackson to race a Ford Corsair back from Cape Town against the liner *SS Windsor Castle*. The ship had the advantage of being able to average 22mph every night with no punctures, whereas Jackson had over 30 tyre failures.

The Cortina's time stood until two years ago, when a three-up crew in a Land Rover Discovery led by Mac Mackenney devised a cunning route via Saudi Arabia, crossing the Red Sea into Sudan, and established a best ever time of 11 days, 14 hours – with a Yellowbrick tracker confirming they had not broken any local speed limits.

Mention here should be made of Brigadier John Hemsley, who tried to beat the Cortina's time by driving up from Cape Town, the idea being that the border opening times would be

better suited to a non-stop drive. With a works-supplied Tom Walkinshaw Range Rover, Hemsley and his doctor wife Lucy dodged borders when they were shut by just driving into the bush and then rejoining the road.

It meant that, by the time they hit Syria, there were five frontiers which their passports showed no record of them having passed through – impatience, or the fact the frontier was closed, meant Hemsley had just blasted through. This was not good enough for Syria, and the pair were locked up for two days.

They still established a best record from Cape Town to London's Marble Arch of 14 days – but this time Land Rover felt there was nothing to shout about.

It's against this background that myself and Paul Brace, designer of the Eagle E-type Speedster, set out on 1 February from Cape Town with ambitions of beating the lot. We wanted to smash Hemsley's Cape Town to London record, while also carrying a Yellowbrick tracker to display average speeds and progress online as we drove. We both had experience of the route – I had driven it twice, having organised the London to Cape Town World Cup Rally.

Our car was about as nutty as Alan Gilg's Morris 8 and shared its engine capacity of 850cc. It's a Fiat Panda Twin Air, the two-cylinder turbocharged city car. With a sumpguard, mattress in the back, and a couple of spotlights, it was very much in the spirit of the original record run; and as this issue of *Octane* was being readied for press, we set out on the 80th anniversary of the Morris effort, and the 30th anniversary of Hemsley's...

...SO DID THEY DO IT?

Yes! 10,000 miles from Cape Town to London in 10 days, 13hrs, 28min

ONE OF THE WORST desert tracks in Africa, 500km of boulders like footballs, Moon-style craters and long, soft sandy stretches, to be driven at night... that's just one of the big tests that faced one of the smallest cars you can drive out of a British showroom.

The Fiat Panda romped to the Ethiopian border, where we discovered a petrol shortage so bad we had to cross the country on one tank of fuel. The Panda averaged 90mpg! A land-based border into Egypt was specially organised, and slickly run. Into war-torn Libya, landmines were exploding around the Panda and youths with machine guns stopped us at midnight – but the Union Jack across the bonnet advertised that the Brits were here, so locals took us to a roadside fire for a celebratory cup of tea.

A Channel-crossing delay caused anxiety, yet we roared into London clipping more than a day off the record. Nothing broke, nothing fell off, and the toolkit was never opened! 

