

Healey Moment

An extract from "Healey - The Specials" by Geoff Healey

1956

"For a third time, we proceeded to Utah with most of the original crew. George Eyston, who had been ill, brought along George Williams, also of Castrol, to help with the organization. We unpacked and repaired the cars, which had suffered some slight damage on the long trip from Warwick. We had always been made very welcome by the local people and officials, and old acquaintances displayed great pleasure at our arrival.

This year we were confident that we would exceed 200 mph, after coming close in 1954. We thought little had been left to chance, for with some 70 more horsepower and reduced drag the car had a predicted top speed of 217 mph. Prior to our departure for the USA, Ron Flockhart had tested the car for us over several laps of the high-speed banked circuit at MIRA. There were no problems with these tests.

We mixed the fuel and got everything ready for a dawn test run. Dawn is usually the best time as the air is then at its lowest temperature and wind speeds are low. The wind tends to increase as the sun rises and the air warms up.

Early the next morning, 9th August, we assembled at the south end of the straightaway, fitted the high speed tyres, and warmed up the engine and transmission before changing the spark plugs to Champion NA12 racing plugs. DMH got in the cockpit and we clamped on the canopy. He then accelerated steadily up the straightaway, changing up through the gears. In fifth gear he had accelerated to over 200 mph when there was a loud explosion, and flames and smoke shot upwards from the exhaust stacks on top of the bonnet. When he had coasted to rest, we found that the blower drive had broken, which meant that the car had to be taken back to base for repair.

We then tried out the endurance car but this was not very inspiring. It tended to miss at speed and was not reaching the calculated speed. After the car had stopped it proved very difficult to restart, as the hot exhaust manifolds were heating the inlet manifolds and boiling the fuel in the carburettors. We removed the inlet manifolds and filed them to provide clearance from the exhaust manifolds, and then arranged a duct to blow cold air across. We also put additional lagging on the fuel lines in the engine compartment. A further run showed a definite improvement and the car was deemed to be satisfactory for the runs scheduled for 11th August. We did not have exclusive use of the salt flats and had to give way to others who had booked them.

Shelby, Jackson-Moore and DHM, with the cars



Back at the base, we stripped the sprint car's blown engine for inspection. The blower drive was a mess, with a broken chain and a mangled crankshaft sprocket. The cylinder bores had slight scores and three pistons showed signs of having picked up. We filed and polished the piston skirts to increase the clearance and honed the cylinder bores to remove most of the scoring. No one present could find any apparent reason for the problem — and that included several experienced racing officials, George Eyston, DMH, Roger and myself, altogether a fair collection of men, experienced in looking at blown engines.

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The engine was rebuilt with as much care as possible and seemed to be perfect when restarted.

On 14th August, Carroll Shelby set off round the 10-mile circle in the long-distance car. After six laps, it lost power and went rough. A check revealed that compression had been lost in one cylinder — obviously another rebuild job. The cylinder head was removed to reveal trouble in number one cylinder. One valve had a badly carboned stem and was not seating properly. The water ways in the block and the cylinder head did not line up correctly, failing to seal on the ferrules in the gasket. We checked the spare cylinder head and found the same error in the water passage positions. Using Roger's favourite compound for sealing gaskets, a mixture of Hermatite and aluminium paint, we refitted the head. We ran the rebuilt engine up to normal operating temperature and torqued the head down, and then checked the valve clearances. We decided that we would have to be very careful not to overstrain the engine and accordingly reduced the scheduled speeds for the record attempt.

Carroll Shelby again took the start at 05.55 on 16th August. We maintained a very close and somewhat nervous watch on the run, Carroll maintaining the speed we signalled to him on each lap. After 50 laps we called him in for refuelling and for Roy Jackson Moore to take over. Two hours later the engine started to overheat. Roy stopped at the pits and we refilled the cooling system with water and Wondarweld, a leak-stopping compound. From now on, the scheduled speed was lower and Roy carried on till the engine expired some 80 miles short of the 1,000-mile distance. The gasket had blown again but we had broken the records from 200 miles to 1,000 kilometres at speeds from 151.27 to 153.58 mph, and the six-hour record at 146.07 mph. Fuel consumption worked out at 12.52 mpg.

Our next booking for the straightaway was on Sunday, 19th August. On his first run north, DMH exceeded 200 mph according to the official timing, but on the return run the engine blew up again. We now had a real problem as we needed spares from England and our time on the flats was drawing to a close. At Wendover all overseas calls had to be made from the railway station where the telephone exchange, telegraph, ticketing and station buffet were all run by one efficient woman. She got on the line and soon located Doc Weaving in England. I explained all our problems and told him what I thought we needed. Less than 24 hours later, we had all the bits and rebuilt the engine again.

On 21st August we again went to the start. DMH was instructed to take it easy and reserve full power for the timed distance only. The north run went well, with an average speed of 203.76 mph. On the return run, the engine failed again in the timed distance and DMH had to coast. He was rewarded by a two-way average of 203.11 mph. Naturally, he was delighted that he had achieved his ambition and managed to exceed 200 mph."

ED - I love this passage from Geoff's book. I find myself re-reading it, almost every time I pick up my copy. For me, it evokes the spirit of adventure of the time, as well as demonstrating some of the detail and commitment required, to achieve the groundbreaking outcome. In just these few words, there is so much information - like being there and feeling the heat of the air, the dust and the excitement, in your throat.

