

UPDATE ON THE METEOR SPECIAL

By Rusty Crowhurst

The past two years have been action packed for me, settling in to my new life in North Devon, near Great Torrington, and bringing the Special to the point where it has now made its first run up our lane and not on a trailer!

There are so many diversions here to slow progress, the Rolle Canal restoration, the Tarka Railway restoration, Rotary etc. but I have managed to make progress on the car despite the adversities thrown at me with regularity. I thought it was going to go as smoothly as my Jaguar Special build went but I was wrong.

Without the engine manual I managed to buy from a chap in Switzerland I would have got nowhere as the engine has all of its oil and water piping outside the block unlike modern engines. I had bought a bare engine.

When I first tried to start the engine I found that the two

magnetos had to be properly cleaned of furring and that two cylinder head bolts had sheared, a not uncommon fault apparently and due to the lack of oil running down the front and back studs so that they rust. So the engine had to come out and I trailered it up to Flight Engineers in Leeds who specialise in Meteor and Merlin engines. Peter Grieve stripped it down and also found certain piston rings had seized and had to be renewed. He believes that the engine had had little use. Strangely he also found that some of the gudgeon pins were not the correct ones for this engine (which was built by Rover) Someone taking short cuts perhaps? The engine was run on his newly acquired dyno when it produced 631 horsepower and 1449 lb ft of torque, within the specifications for the engine. Should be enough!

Once the engine was back in the



The Meteor Special sans clothing.



The Meteor Special. Splendid!

chassis and running I found the autobox was not working so that had to come out and be taken to a specialist in Bristol who replaced most of the parts and it now works.

The step-up gearbox made for me in Cape Town has given no trouble but then it was designed and built for maximum torque for infinity. I am very glad I opted for helical gears as my 'box is much quieter than others in similar cars.

If I had known I had to take out the engine and gearbox I would have designed the mountings differently to make the job easier. Nevertheless it was possible with the use of the local garage's lifting aids. They were so helpful that their logo (NRG Racing) is now on the rear quarters of my car with other sponsors. People here have been so kind and helpful.

The car had to be taken to Bristol to have the engine and gearboxes properly aligned to stop vibration. A longer front propshaft would have been beneficial here.

I then found that the large Mercedes truck radiator and 30 litres of Evans coolant were not up to the job of taming the immense heat this engine puts out so I made up four three inch diameter

stainless tubes painted black and fitted them under the chassis to increase the coolant capacity to around 70 litres. Fortunately there was plenty of ground clearance there. Persistent airlocks then had to be got rid of so I took off the mechanical water pump and installed two electric Davies Craig coolant pumps donated to me by that (Aussie) firm, one below the radiator and one at the rear of the underchassis tubes. Now the coolant moves around slickly and the airlocks have gradually disappeared. So, another logo for the rear quarters of the car! Becoming a bit crowded with sponsors but only one to go, a fuel sponsor I hope, as the engine uses about a litre a minute, which at 60 mph is a litre a mile or 4.5 mpg. This is what I expected but I am keen to run it on a rolling road or track for half an hour to assess all systems. Unfortunately I cannot license it for the road in the UK as it does not have an original chassis. This was not a bar in SA. Testing venues are therefore limited to disused airfields and race tracks.

The ride on the Jaguar XJ12 suspension units and my double ladder chassis is excellent and on



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The Caractacus supercar takes its first spin on Saunton Sands beach

the local weighbridge the fore and aft balance is almost perfectly 50:50 (achieved by weighing the parts before I put them in)

The Jaguar ventilated disc brakes are just what the car needs as is the Jaguar power steering as the car weighs in at about 2100 kg, right on target for these monsters of which there are now about twelve in the world. There are a few others but they are simply re-engined production car bodies.

The mounting bolts for the wheels are too close together for the size of the wheels and I hope one day to have new hubs made up to spread the sideways loads around corners a bit better. The car is too unwieldy anyway for hillclimbs having sharp hairpin bends.

A local entrepreneur is arranging a Speedweek in October on Saunton Sands and has persuaded me to run my car on the beach to

make a promotional film for the event. Did I need much persuading? NOO.

He is hoping to have about five aero-engined cars entering the event and many pre-1955 cars and motorcycles. By all accounts interest is rising quickly and it is expected to be a sell-out. He hopes the event will be a rival to the Goodwood Revival one day. Period dress of course. I have a white mechanic's overall and leather flying helmet and goggles. My wife has appropriate garb as does my 76 year old riding mechanic (a retired engineer with a wealth of motorcar experience)

The sands are 3.5 miles long and one mile wide when the tide is out and the surface is hard and smooth. It does not suffer from soggy patches as does Pendine Sands. Cleaning the underside of the car afterwards may be something of a

chore though but will be well worth it. This first beach run is imminent and is dependent on the tide and the weather, the latter of which has been fairly miserable recently. Ten degrees is considered a warm day here! The promotional film may be shown on Channel 4 with Guy Martin at the wheel (he who built his own WW I tank). I intend to keep my speed below 60 mph as it is untried at any speed at this stage. I can't vouch for Guy though.

The 21 inch wheels made up with MWS rims and Cape Town machined aluminium centres give a geared top speed of 204 mph which is academic as the Blockley tyres are limited to 135 mph. I shall leave

it to a future owner to put on Aston Martin wheels and tyres and try out the top speed. However for that reason I gave it as much frontal downforce as was commensurate with 1930s styling.

If the beach run is successful I shall follow up with an update and further photo's.

I have acquired a small English wheel and will tackle the making of the mudguards shortly and then take it to as many of the car shows as I can. In summer there seem to be one a week. If anyone wishes to know how to build such a car I can now tell them and save them learning the hard way! Best wishes to all at the Crankhandle Club. 🏎️

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"Onlookers cheered as the 631bhp Roll Royce Merlin engine - the same kind used in Spitfire airplanes - fired up successfully first time before John drove the vehicle, cautiously at first, up and down the beach. Although he didn't reach 204mph, John said the purpose of this first run was to test the overall operation of the vehicle - something which seems to have been a success."
 Joe Bulmer from DevonLive



John Crowhurst being interviewed by DevonLive's Joe Bulmer. "To say I am satisfied with the runs would be the understatement of the year!" - Rusty

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