

# John Cobb and the Napier Railton

by Rob Young



Photo Rob Young

*This was a proven engine known as the 'broad arrow' and had three banks of four cylinders each. One was vertical and the others were at 60 degrees to it.*

**I**n the early 1930s, John Cobb, a wealthy fur trader, commissioned Thomson & Taylor to build him the ultimate record-breaking racing machine. In an era of national pride involving speed records, his object was to be the fastest at Brooklands. It was powered by a 12-cylinder, 24-litre Napier Lion aero engine.

T&T fitted this powerful engine, mated to a Moss three-speed gearbox, to a chassis they'd designed and developed. Spoked wheels of 21-inch diameter were used and interestingly the contrivance was fitted with brakes only at the rear.

Gurney Nutting, famous coach-builders, built a beautiful polished aluminium body to clothe the machine.



Photo Internet

*John Cobb at the wheel of the Napier Railton.*

In 1934, the daring Cobb set a number of speed records at Montlhery, near Paris, including a 12-hour average at 121 mph. He then succeeded in setting the circuit record at Brooklands in 1935 at just over 143 mph and a year later at Bonneville Salt Flats, on a 10 mile unbanked circular track, he and his team set a 24-hour record at an average of some 150 mph. Considering the car had a 65-gallon fuel tank and fuel consumption was only around 5 mpg these long distance runs necessitated several fuel stops, so running speeds were considerably quicker than the averages set!



Photo Rob Young

*This painting of Brooklands shows just how big the Napier Railton was. The painting shows John Cobb, high up on the banking, storming past a Bugatti.*

*A picture taken a year or so ago shows how steep the banking actually is.*



Photo Internet

*John Cobb in the Napier Railton at high speed on the Brooklands banking.*

Dougie van Riet's famous little Austin racer was sold to Austin Seven enthusiast and restorer, Martin Eyre, in 1993. Martin is seen in the Austin next to John Cobb's Napier Railton at the Brooklands Museum in 1993.



Photo Andrie Lubser

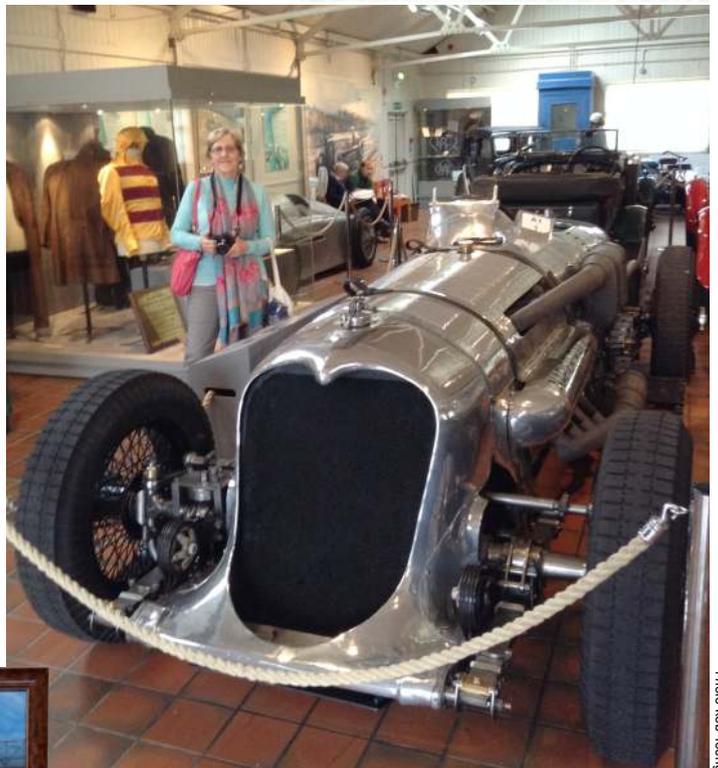


Photo Rob Young

*The Napier Railton as it is today with Sue Young looking on.*



Photo Rob Young

The war brought an end to the Napier's racing career and in 1951 it became the 'star' in a film called Pandora and the Flying Dutchman in which Ava Gardner and James Mason were its supporting cast. The Napier Railton featured in the film's land speed record scenes at Pendine Sands in Wales. The tail and radiator surround were changed for the film, possibly to get it to resemble a land speed record breaker of the early 1930s.

In the early 1950s, Mike Compton, a well-known motoring man in Durban, was apprenticed to Thomson & Taylor and was

involved in an interesting project with the famous car.

'The Korean War started in 1950 and the various UN air forces used temporary forward airstrips for their jet fighters in order to fly as many sorties as possible,' Mike recounts. 'These strips were not only primitive but also short and a major problem was extremely high brake wear, with lining replacement only possible at base. Parachute braking was an advantage but its drawback was that already fatigued pilots had to repack the 'chutes themselves before returning to the air.'

Somebody in the Air Ministry must have remembered that among the 'lucky packets' taken from the German Luftwaffe in post-war reparations was the design for a device that deployed and retracted braking parachutes. With the Korean War problems in mind, these were passed on to the GQ Parachutes Company together with a contract to bring the design into reality and evaluate its capabilities. The contract conditions were quite clear and, among other things, speed had to be reduced from 135mph to 50mph in 10 seconds with time limits for both deployment and retraction.

To test the idea, mainly because of the cost of using a jet fighter, it was decided to use a vehicle capable of imitating the landing speed of the airplane and being able to stop in time should the device fail.

The Napier Railton, at 2,500kg, was of the same weight as a typical jet and had adequate speed capability so it was decided to 'dust off' the old warhorse and fit the parachute device.

Mike's first task was to clean out all the sand and oil that had accumulated in and on the Napier Railton during its sojourn in Spain and the Pendine beaches. He could think of no more a disagreeable task to start life in the automotive industry.

A major change in the braking department was to remove the rear drums and fit Dunlop discs and calipers. This would compensate for 'chute failure'.



Photo Rob Young

*Sir Raymond Quilter in the Napier Railton at Hawker's Dunsfold aero facility.*

The T&T team designed and manufactured the device and mounted it by framework on the rear chassis seven feet from the ground (no doubt to replicate the height from which it would be ejected from the airplane) and Mike took part in the final fabrication and mounting of the apparatus.

The driver of the Napier Railton for the tests and trials was the owner of GQ, Sir Raymond Quilter.



Photo Rob Young

*Several parachute configurations were tested this was one with a single slot.*

As Mike Compton recalls, the Napier Railton did all that was required of it, reaching the release speed of 135mph in good time and the brakes bringing it to a stop well within the runway end in the event of 'chute or device failure, neither of which occurred.

Sometime in 1954, the results of the tests were given to the Air

Ministry but the idea was not adopted. Mike believes that the Dunlop Maxaret system, the first anti-locking braking system (ABS) to be widely used was quite sufficient for service duty and it was rapidly adopted for aircraft use.

The Napier Railton now resides at the Brooklands Museum.



## More on John Cobb

by André Loubser:

Following John Cobb's record attempts up to 1935, he then had the Reid Railton Mobil Special built in 1938, also by Thomson & Taylor in Surrey. The shape of the car was so advanced for its day that it could have passed for a futuristic space ship. The monster car with Cobb sitting way up front with no protection was powered by two old Napier Lion 1,250hp aero engines.

On September 15, 1938, he set up record speed of 350 mph at Bonneville salt flats. He broke it a second time at the same site on August 23, 1939, at 369.74 mph. Following the cessation of WW2 hostilities he beat his own record again at Bonneville in 1947 with a speed of 394.74 mph.

After the 1947 achievement, he turned his attention to record attempts on water and commissioned from Vospers a jet-engined boat by name of Crusader. On September 29, 1952, while attempting to break the world water speed record on Loch Ness he hit a wake at a speed of over 200 mph with the boat disintegrating around him and killing him instantly. A memorial was subsequently erected on the Loch Ness shore to honour his memory.



Photo Sue Young

*Rob Young at the John Cobb Memorial in October 2014.*



Photo Internet

*The futuristic Reid Railton Mobil Special.*



Photo Internet

*John Cobb, a tight fit in the cockpit of the Reid Railton Mobil Special.*



Photo Internet

*John Cobb with the body of the Reid Railton removed.*



Photo Internet

*Bluebird begins its backward somersault.*

References and thanks: Mike Compton, Brooklands Museum, The Brooklands Society Gazette



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