

Speed on the shore

Harry Pearson recalls days of breaking records on the coast

On a late June afternoon in 1911, the people of Yorkshire might have been forgiven for thinking that somebody had awakened a dragon.

For thundering along the highways with a rumbling roar that could be heard a mile away, flames and dark smoke shooting from its flanks, came a vehicle the like of which the county had never before seen nor ever would again.



Racer Pietro Bordino

The Fiat S76 had a 6ft-long bonnet, weighed close to two tons and was powered by a 28-litre engine designed for an airship.

It fully justified its nickname, *The Beast of Turin*.

The S76 took nearly two miles to reach top speed and another mile to bring to a halt, but here it was, hurtling northwards through towns and villages, 23-year-old Italian racing driver Pietro Bordino at the wheel.

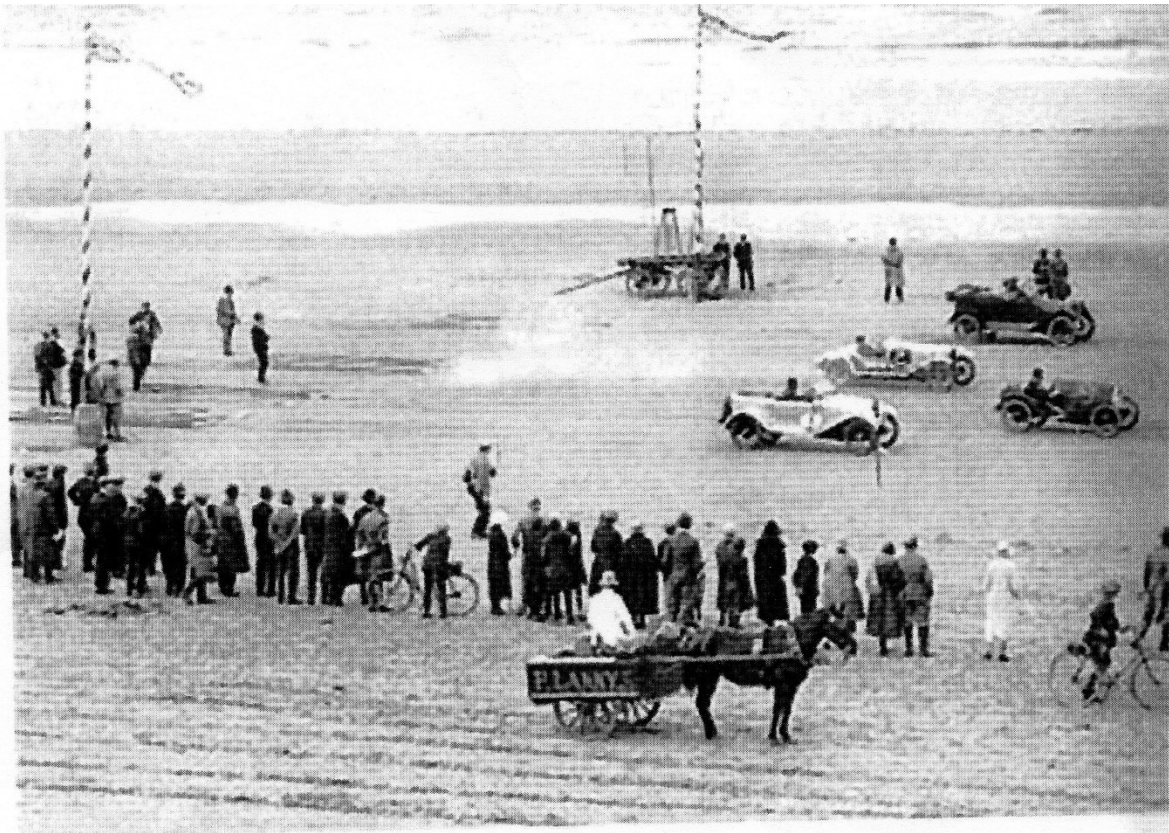
The future Italian Grand Prix winner had experienced a frustrating few days at Brooklands race track in Surrey.

The massive Fiat had been designed to shatter speed records but was far too cumbersome to negotiate Brooklands' bends.

So now Bordino was driving the car to the North Riding to try his luck at the annual Yorkshire Automobile Club speed trials on Saltburn beach.

Bordino – who'd die at the age of 40, when the Bugatti he was driving in the Targa Florio hit a dog, overturned and tumbled into a river – did not push too heavily on his accelerator, but, nevertheless, his passenger, an English businessman, noted that the speedometer sometimes hit a startling 120mph.

When the land speed record is mentioned, most people picture streamlined cars hurtling across the shimmering surface of Utah's Bonneville Flats, the Black Rock Desert or perhaps Lake Eyre, the Australian saltpan where Sir Donald Campbell set his last land speed



The Saltburn Speed Trials in 1922

mark. Searing heat, dry ground and still air are ideal conditions for high speed.

It is fair to say that these are not necessarily things we associate with Saltburn.

Yet Bordino was not the first daredevil to pick the North Riding seaside resort for his record breaking attempt, nor would he be the last.

“Two years later, 60,000 spectators crowded on to the beach”

Motor racing on Saltburn sands began in 1904, but it was when the Yorkshire Automobile Club moved its annual speed trials there from Filey in 1906 that things began in earnest.

Two years later, 60,000 spectators crowded onto the beach and headlands to watch Warwick Wright – part of the family

that founded the Teesside engineering company Head Wrightson – drive a Belgian Métallurgique named *Billiken* at the then astonishing speed of 96.25mph, the highest ever achieved in the county.

The following year, Sir Algernon Guinness, of the famous brewing family, flashed across the beach between Marske and Saltburn pier at the wheel of a 200hp V8 Darracq (which looked like an engine mounted on a bedstead).

He covered a measured kilometre in 18.25 seconds.

The 111.84mph mark established a British and Yorkshire record.

Twelve months later, Sir Algy was back in Saltburn with the intention of beating the world speed record of 127.659mph set by American Fred Marriott at Daytona Beach in a steam-powered Stanley Rocket.

It was 27 June, but rain poured down, thunder rumbled and lightning flashed across the North Sea.

The soft sand denied Sir Algy a world mark, but his speed of 121.6mph was the fastest ever achieved outside the USA.

Pietro Bordino hoped ultimately to break the land speed record in his Fiat, but at Saltburn he was aiming to capture *The Flying Mile*, a record held by the French motor-racing champion Victor Hémery.

Unsurprisingly, the arrival of the giant red car at the Zetland Hotel had provoked huge interest, and on Saturday morning large crowds gathered to watch the record attempt.

Neither damp sand, nor the familiar rain showers could stop the dashing Italian and his monster motor.

He covered the measured mile in 31 seconds flat, easily breaking Hémery's mark.

Soon afterwards, *The Beast of Turin* would be ferried to Belgium where, on the beach at Ostend, it hit 132.27 mph – then the highest speed ever attained by an automobile.

In June 1922, Captain Malcolm Campbell borrowed the 350hp Sunbeam of French motor engineer Louis Coatalen (the man credited with inventing shock-absorbers) and brought the car to Saltburn's Carnival of Speed.

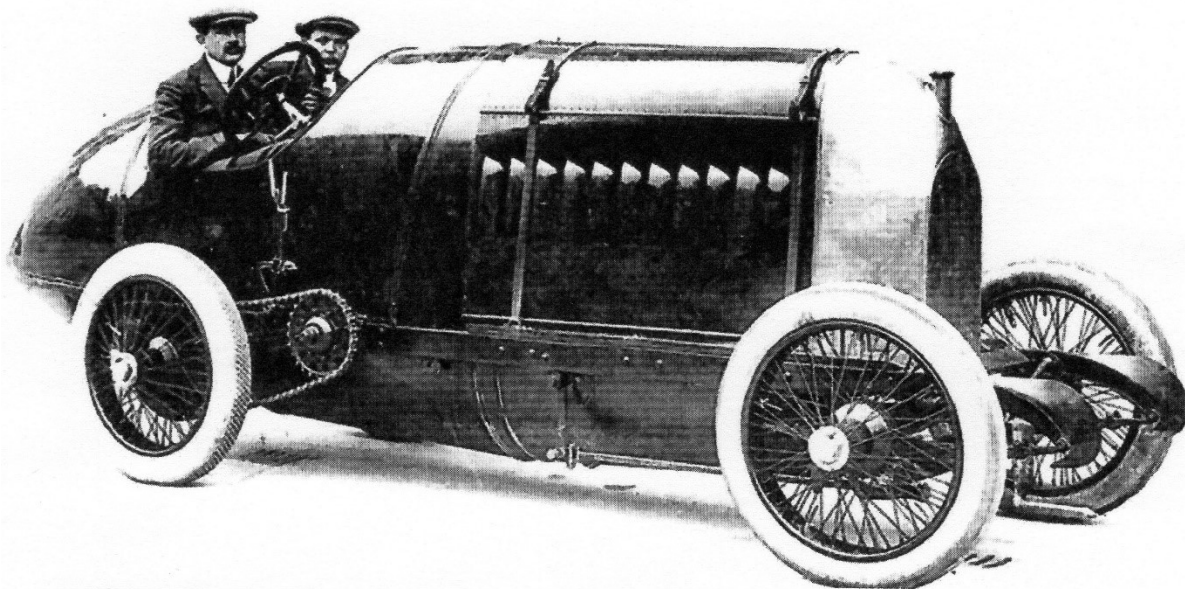
“After all, they had already chalked off several American ‘records’”

The Sunbeam had been used by Sir Algernon Guinness's younger brother Kenelm to break the Land Speed Record at Brooklands earlier in the year.

Campbell believed the mighty V12 Manitou engine could go even faster on the straight, flat sands of the North Yorkshire coast.

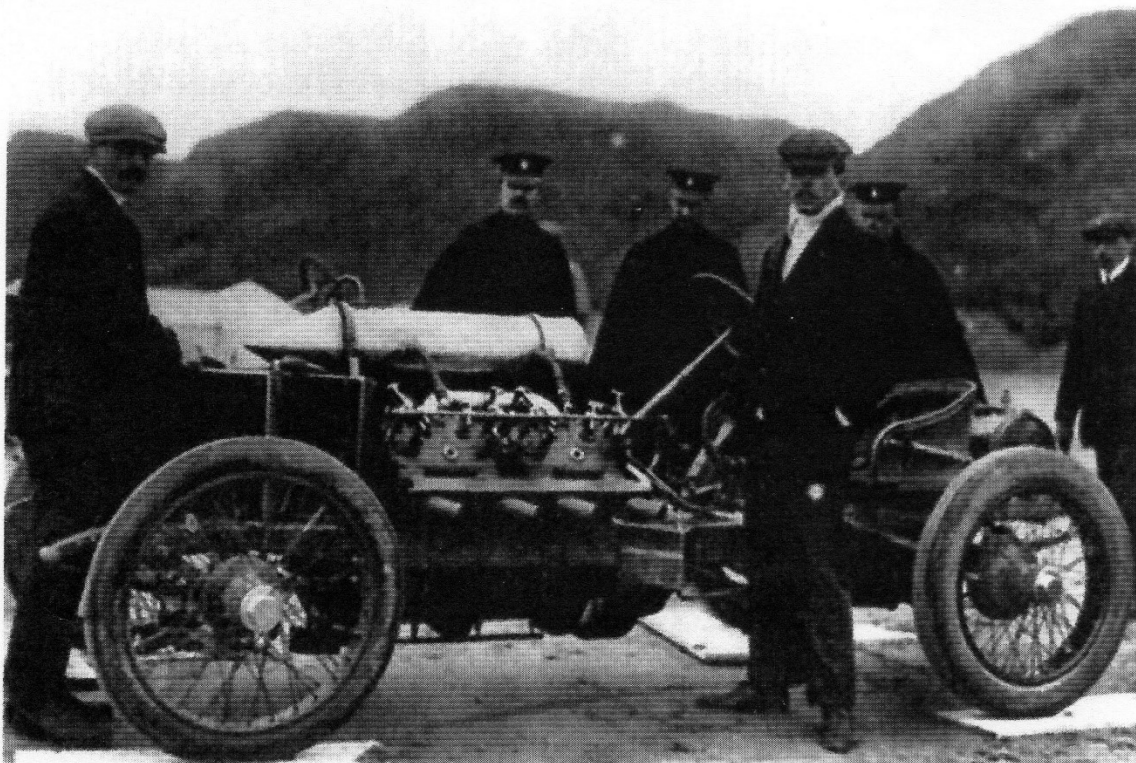
For once, conditions were excellent – clear and bright with a good breeze off the land.

The start of the event was delayed by



The Beast of Turin

The V8 Darracq pictured at Saltburn



a late tide, but very soon Campbell had embarked on a series of six runs along the beach that would see him hit a top speed of 138.08mph, five miles per hour quicker than Kenelm Guinness's mark.

A land speed record in Yorkshire, then? Well, not quite.

The rules governing the land speed record were administered by the Association Internationale des Automobile Clubs Reconnus in Paris, a body both autocratic and pedantic.

The rules of the AIACR stated that a car must cover the course both ways, the record judged on a mean of the two runs.

Campbell's highest mean that day was 132.59mph.

And even if it had been quicker, the men from Paris would have rejected it.

The Yorkshire Automobile Club had

used handheld stopwatches and the Frenchmen demanded electronic timers.

Campbell complained and the British press protested, but rules were rules, the officials from Paris replied.

After all, they had already chalked a several American "records" for similar breaches.

Two years later, Campbell got his land speed record, officially this time driving the Sunbeam, now painted his favourite colour and renamed Blue Bird, 146.16mph.

He did it on a British beach, but not the one at Saltburn.

Pendine Sands near Carmarthen has now become the British speedster's place of choice.

In 1927, Blue Bird went at more than 170mph at Pendine – it would be the last land speed record set on these shores. 🐦