

## **Dick Caesar and his Specials**

### **RICHARD DYNELY "DICK" CAESAR**

*"As a man he was above all courteous and kind and he had a deep understanding of human nature as well as machinery; Dick always had time to listen to other people and to explain patiently to the young in simple language."*

*"Out of his fertile and creative imagination were born not only a number of ingenious 'specials' but also new kinds of motoring event or competition; his enthusiasm was infectious."*

*"Always gentle and charitable, he shunned limelight. Other motoring personalities may be more widely known but those who were privileged to know Dick Caesar will always remember him with gratitude."*

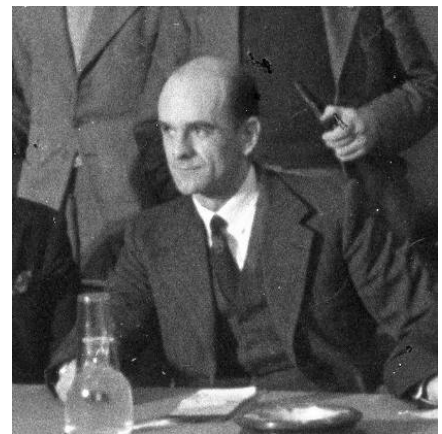
Some extracts from the obituary which appeared in Motor Sport magazine following Dick Caesar's death on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1974 that characterize a little known, but significant, figure in British motor sport history.

Born in Kent in 1906, Dick Caesar graduated from Cambridge University with a degree in English and History in 1928, and in the early 1930s studied medicine at the University of Bristol – his father and grandfather (also Richard, a GP originally from Cork, Ireland) having been in the medical profession – before taking up journalism. When at Cambridge in the 1920s he had owned a Morgan 3-wheeler and became closely associated with RR 'Robin' Jackson who became well known for tuning Morgans and MGs, and for his Brooklands tuning establishment, The Robinery.

Settled in the Bristol area, Caesar's enthusiasm for motoring and motor sport continued, being actively involved with the University's motor club. He was an inveterate 'special' builder, having constructed about 16 of his own pre-World War 2, and been involved in several others. He was also interested in older vehicles, during the 1930s and 40s owning a 1912 Belsize which he used in VSCC events. His great interest in motor racing for fun and enjoyment, but at little cost, surfaced with the creation of CAPA<sup>1</sup>, a private racing organisation. Caesar and a few friends began racing stripped down Austin 7-based specials, initially using a track around the woods at his 12-acre home Limeridge, in Clapton-in-Gordano in northern Somerset, but in the late 1930s CAPA moved to a better grass track on Joe Fry's estate nearby at Lulsgate. A prominent member of the Bristol MC & LCC, he was heavily involved in the organisation of local hillclimbs and speed trials, and also invented a new event, the Mendip Grand Prix de Tourisme. Intended to mimic the Le Mans 24 hour race, this used a 5-mile course on public roads on top of the Mendip Hills. With a low average speed to be maintained in this daytime social event, the actual competition took place in the compulsory pit stops every lap, when the competitors had to carry out such tasks as changing a wheel; draining and refilling the radiator; etc.

*Dick Caesar, pictured in 1945*

In April 1939 he gained his Royal Aero Club Aviators' Certificate on a BA Swallow, and during World War 2 he worked in the Service Department of the Bristol Aeroplane Company at Filton, using his own cine-camera for making instructional films. At war's end in 1945-46, as a member of the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Sports Club, his enthusiasm for affordable motor racing came to the fore once more, and he was the driving force behind the creation of the new 500cc racing car formula intended to allow the average person to go motor racing<sup>1</sup>. It was this new formula which inspired Charles and John Cooper to

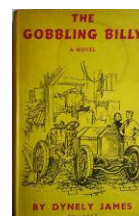


build their first rear-engined racing car in 1946 and thus create the Cooper marque, leading eventually to double World Championships in 1959 and 1960 for Jack Brabham in his Cooper-Climax, and the pre-eminence of British cars in Grand Prix racing - without Caesar's enthusiasm and drive none of this would have happened. As a committee member of the 500 Club, founded in 1946 to control this new formula, Caesar maintained direct involvement through to 1950.

In 1946, to encourage the construction of racing cars to the new formula, he drew up a simple chassis and suspension design, the Iota, which was sold as a kit for budding constructors to complete (one of these chassis was also used by David Fry as the basis of his 1948 version of the Freikaiserwagen hillclimb car<sup>2</sup>). An updated Iota 500 was later offered as a complete car by Iota Racing Cars (Caesar and Dick Bickerton), operating out of premises in Alma Vale Road in Clifton, Bristol. In 1951 Caesar then produced a novel design for a small Iota sports car for the road, using a 350cc Douglas engine in a lightweight monocoque chassis. Although prototypes were completed, this car never reached production.

Earlier, in 1945, Caesar's desire to create a high-performance sporting road car had emerged with his design for the Gordano. Using a relatively conventional chassis, the Gordano was originally intended to be fitted with a new air-cooled rotary-valve engine. Caesar, with co-directors Bickerton, et al, operating out of the same Alma Vale premises as Iota, produced a pair of prototypes, but this project also folded, in 1950.

During the 1950s, and up until retirement around 1964, Caesar worked in the Press Office of Bristol Aero. Engines Ltd. (later Bristol-Siddeley). In 1959, with William Mayne, he wrote a motoring novel for children "The Gobbling Billy", published under the pseudonym "Dynely James". Set in Ireland, his engineering and motor sporting knowledge clearly showed throughout this story about the restoration and racing of an old racing car, a "1908 16-litre 6-cylinder Gobelin-Billet"<sup>4</sup>.



He was a member of the VSCC from 1938, and also an active member of the Bentley Drivers Club.

In 1958 Dick Caesar was married to Aileen Attwell. He died suddenly on 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1974, aged 68.

## THE SPECIALS OF DICK CAESAR

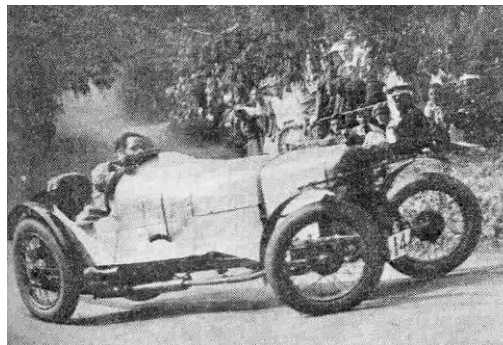
Dick Caesar built numerous specials, around sixteen pre-war, and several post war. In the 1920's these included "Snapdragon I" (JAP & ABC), "Snapdragon II" (Rhode) and "Snapdragon III" (ex-D'Yrsan); in the 1930s several CAPA racers, and also road-going machines including the first Caesar Special and his modified Bentley "Thor".

**Caesar Special 'YC 9642'** (later known as "Kaiserwagen")

***An AC-engined road-going sports car originally built by Dick Caesar sometime prior to 1935, and known as the Caesar Special. He rebuilt it as a single-seat racing car, still known as the Caesar Special, and used it during 1936. It was then acquired by the Fry cousins, renamed "Kaiserwagen", and used by them 1937-38. In 1939 a two-seater body was fitted and its last appearances as "Kaiserwagen" were at Prescott and Shelsley in 1946 in the hands of Jeremy and David Fry.***

Constructed of parts from numerous different cars, the Caesar Special was described by Caesar as "a true hybrid in the Shelsley tradition." A 1923 GN chassis, with Austin front hubs and wheels, it had a 6-cylinder, two litre AC engine of 1925/26 vintage, Morgan cone clutch and GN transmission. This two-seater car was used regularly on the road by Caesar, and was said to be good for 90 mph even in touring trim (the registration number was YC 9642).

In August 1935 the car was driven in the first local Backwell hillclimb by Franklin Coombs (*photo, right*), who crashed, fortunately without injury, as *Light Car* magazine reported: "... snaking nastily and finally out of control...." "It approached the corner hopelessly fast and still steaming, as railway folk put it. A slide, a half-roll and a crash....." "Fortunately the driver, C.J.F Coombs, was not hurt, but his two-litre Caesar Special was distinctly awry. Amongst other things the extremely light front axle was in two pieces and, although an old flaw was disclosed by the fracture, it seems clear that the break was a result and not the cause of the crash. As it happens, all the damaged parts had already been shortlisted for replacement so nobody was much the worse for the affair."



For 1936 Caesar rebuilt the car as a single-seater, replacing the original front end with Morgan-based independent suspension. It had an Austin Seven radiator, and with three Solex carburettors and some slight engine tuning by Robin Jackson, 70 bhp was produced. With a weight of 7 cwt, in this form the maximum speed was said to be well over 100 mph. In its new racing car form it was entered by Caesar in the 1936 Backwell hillclimb in July.

He later sold it to the Fry cousins, David and Joe, who then renamed it "Kaiserwagen". During 1937 David entered the car at Shelsley Walsh and Brighton in September, and in 1938 it appeared at Syston Park in March, Prescott in July (driven by P Dunlop), and was entered by Joe in the September Brighton Speed Trials. In 1939 it was taken over by Keith Steadman, who built a two-seater body and used it for trials, entered as a GN.

During the winter of 1945-46 it was rebuilt once more by Steadman and David Fry, still with sports body, using the rear axle and Morgan front axle left over from the Freikaiserwagen following its 1939 smash. It was used in this form, as "Kaiserwagen", at Prescott in May 1946, when David Fry's younger brother Jeremy made his competition debut, *Autocar* recording that "Fry with the Kaiserwagen used the grass, or bits of roadside bank, to assist his car on corners whenever opportunity availed" and by David at Shelsley Walsh that June.

The car was then sold to the Bristolian trials-driving partnership of Cyril Butler and Cecil Evans, but while the performance was terrific it was most difficult to handle, and quite unsuitable for trials so this pair rebuilt it once more. By now there could have been little of the "Caesar Special", apart from the GN frame and 991cc AC engine, renamed "Starkadder", then, following yet another rebuild in 1947, "Daisy", and later "Dacy". For the subsequent history of YC 9642 as a trials car through to 1951 see "*Daisy and Ophelia – the Trials Specials of Cyril Butler and Cecil Evans*".

**"Alfi-CAPA"** (later known as the Caesar Special)<sup>3</sup>

***Built by Dick Caesar over the winter of 1937/38 and used by him for CAPA racing, and hillclimbs at Backwell and Prescott. At the end of 1938 he sold it to Joe Fry, who sold shares to Bobby Price and Tony 'Doc' Taylor. It was used by them in 1939 in CAPA racing, and by Taylor at Prescott and at Backwell, where a rod went through the sump in July. Pre-WW2 it was always called Alfi-CAPA. Post-war, it was now solely owned by Taylor, who got it running again in 1948 and then campaigned it for many years, now always known as the "Caesar Special".***

Caesar's new special for CAPA racing in 1938 was also constructed using parts from many different marques. Alfi-CAPA's frame, transmission, and steering box were very early GN. There were only two gears, with one chain for each gear, and the radius arms had been lengthened to enable the driver to sit between the two chains.

The independent front suspension was made up of two semi-elliptic springs from a Humber, mounted transversely. Stub axles, king pins, and front brakes were early Austin 7. The front wheels were Austin Ruby, with 16x5 tyres. The rear hubs were Amilcar Six, with 16" wheels.

*Dick Caesar and his Specials*

Hydraulic shock absorbers were used front and rear, the brakes were cable operated, and the steering very high-geared - 1/3 turn from lock-to-lock, and very accurate.

The engine was an unblown 2-litre AC from 1928-29, with three Amal motor-cycle carburettors. It appeared to peak at 4,500 to 5,000 rpm, and was believed to develop 60-70 bhp, but with excellent low speed torque.

It originally had full bodywork, in maroon, with cowled nose and streamlined tail, reminiscent of a monoposto Alfa Romeo.

During 1938 Caesar raced "Alfi" regularly at CAPA, and with the 2-litre car being much the fastest, would have to start on the scratch mark for these handicap races and chase everyone else down. That September Caesar also drove "Alfi" at the local Backwell hillclimb, recording times of 25.2 and 25.3 secs. for the 550 yard climb.

At Prescott on 25<sup>th</sup> September Light Car magazine reported: *"Dick Caesar's very low-set Alfi-CAPA was a terrifying sight, for the exhaust system belched forth sheets of flame from the bonnet in the recognised world-record-attempt-manner."* Troubled by the gear lever jumping out several times, Caesar recorded 55.24 sec to place seventh of seven in the 1501cc to 2000cc racing car class.

At the end of the year Caesar sold "Alfi" to Joe Fry for £30 (the amount it had cost him to build) and Joe then sold third shares to RD 'Bobby' Price and 'Doc' Taylor for £10 each.

During 1939 it was used by this trio in CAPA races, again being much the fastest car, although it was not always trouble free, as Autocar related : *"Fry, in Alfi, having got a good second in the long race, stopped his engine and, sitting in the cockpit, had only just remarked that there was something a little funny with one cylinder, when came a tremendous hissing noise, quantities of steam squirted into the cockpit and from the bonnet, and the driver came out like a shot from a gun, for the gasket had blown."*



Taylor drove at Prescott on 11<sup>th</sup> June, recording 55.97 sec. for third in class, and then again at Backwell in July when a con-rod went through the sump, marking the end of pre-war events for "Alfi".

*Taylor in "Alfi" at Backwell, 1939  
(photo courtesy of Richard Atkinson)*

Although the engine was repaired in 1940, the car spent the rest of the war in a damp shed at Joe Fry's place, and by 1945 was in a poor condition. Taylor bought out his co-owners and embarked on a complete rebuild and lightening exercise, removing the aluminium nose, tail and side panels, and repainted the entire car black. Finally, over three years after beginning, in September 1948 it was complete and Taylor ran for the first time at Prescott, recording a best time (during practice) nearly 5 seconds faster than pre-war.

With the car now always known and entered as the "Caesar Special", Taylor continued to run it for many years, incorporating various improvements, with Dick Caesar, a close friend, continuing to provide help and advice.

Eventually it was sold to Mark Walker, who campaigned it for several years, and more recently has been in the hands of Paul Martin.

**'Thor' – a Bentley road car.**

Created in the 1930s out of a 1927 6½ litre Big Six Bentley saloon (reg. no. YE 9409)<sup>5</sup>. After stripping the chassis (a standard 12 ft. 6 inches wheelbase 6½ litre) bare, Caesar built a light wood-framed open four-seater tourer body on it, and later, with the help of Robin Jackson, the engine was modified, having a Le Mans block with Speed Six camshaft. The car weighed just under 36 cwt. and was geared to do 97 mph at 3,500 rpm. It would reach 70 mph in 17 seconds and 105 mph flat out. According to Caesar *"It handles beautifully in a large way and is as dignified a mass of brute force as you could wish for!"*

**CAPA Racers:**

*"Sir Toby Belch"* or *"Toby I"* - the original CAPA car. An Austin 7 stripped down to the bare chassis, with centralised steering wheel, clutch pedal moved to the left of the gearbox, and a central bucket seat. Sold to Franklin Coombs, then to Tony Taylor in 1936 or 37, through to 1950. A sister car, *"Toby II"*, was sold to Keith Steadman.

*"Scumph"* - raced before the war by Caesar. This was a Triumph Scorpion which soon had its original engine replaced by an Austin 7 unit. It then passed into the hands of Pat Dickinson, and was fitted with a Riley 9 engine. Post-war went to George Bowen and Philip Weaver, and then to Tommy Jones in 1947.

Austin - a new Austin special built post-war by Caesar and Pat McCormack, first appearing in October 1946.

**Caesar Special** - a post-war, Humber-based, roadgoing car.

**References:**

1. "BACKfire – the History of the Bristol Aeroplane Company Motor Club"
2. "Freik – The Private Life of the Freikaiserwagen" by Hugh & Rob Dunsterville.
3. "The Caesar Special by 'Doc' Taylor", Bugantics 1958.
4. "The Gobbling Billy" – 1959 1st Edition: Dynely James (UK - Victor Gollancz Ltd.; USA - EP Dutton). 1969 Edition: Dick Caesar & William Mayne (UK - Brockhampton Press Ltd. SBN 340 04232 X; paperback - Hodder & Stoughton Ltd/Knight Books).
5. Obituary Dick Caesar, Motor Sport February 1975.

Other information Sources include: Light Car, Autocar, Motor, Motor Sport, Bugantics.

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January 2021*

Westcountry Motorsport History

Website <https://bpmc.org.uk/petestowe/wmh.htm>

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