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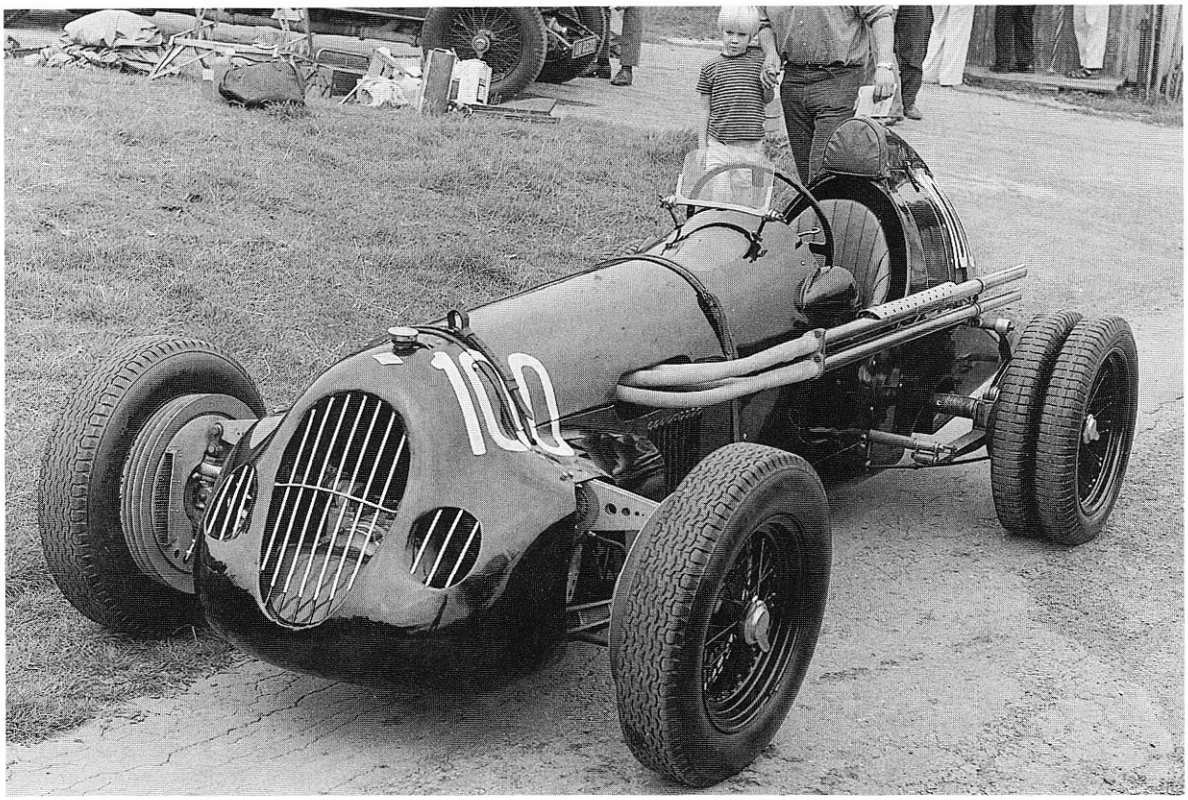
Appleton Special

By rights, the 1078 cc Maserati two-seater sports car of Scandinavian enthusiast Henken Widengren should have been a very impressive machine. Maserati had established a reputation as a manufacturer of good, fast vehicles, and the specification of this model with its eight cylinders, twin ohc and supercharger, coupled with its bright crimson paintwork, certainly made it look the part. But the car flattered only to deceive, as unfortunately it did not have the performance to accompany its exciting exhaust note. When entered for the 1931 Ards TT, with Major R F Oates as



The Appleton Special at Prescott hillclimb. Note the twin rear wheels.

reserve driver, the little Maserati was not among the fastest cars in Class G. In the race, Widengren had to retire on lap 3 after running into a sandbank at Newtonards – although the official reason for retirement was given as "gasket failure".

In 1933 the car was for sale at a low asking price and was bought by R J W Appleton as the basis for a special. The Maserati engine and gearbox were sold and replaced by a Riley Nine unit that drove through an ENV preselector gearbox taken from an MG Magnette. As the Riley engine makes do with four cylinders it was substantially shorter than the original unit, so the wheelbase was reduced by 1 ft. In this early form, the Maserati-Riley retained its original body and radiator, together with a shortened bonnet, and looked very much like a Maserati GP car, until you counted the exhaust pipes.

Although the special performed tolerably well, it was still lacking power so a large Zoller supercharger was fitted. The improvement was immediate and the car won its class at Shelsley Walsh in 1935, but subsequently broke its two-bearing crankshaft.

During the winter of 1935, the Maserati-Riley underwent an extensive rebuild to become the Appleton-Riley. The chassis frame was dismantled, the side members extensively drilled for lightness, new cross members were fabricated, and the whole frame reassembled at a width more suited to its new streamlined single-seater body, which was reminiscent of the W25 Mercedes racing cars. The original Maserati springs, axles and hubs were retained; the rear springs were outrigged to the new narrow chassis. The Riley engine also received much attention; the main improvement was the fitting of a special three-bearing crankshaft, designed by Robin Jackson and manufactured by Laystall, together with new rods and pistons. The new crankshaft featured a centre main bearing of very large diameter (5.25 in), but was very narrow so that it could be accommodated in the Riley crankcase. To alleviate cooling problems a watercooled shell was fitted. Apart from totally altering the appearance of the car, the rebuild reduced the overall weight by some 220 lb and increased the power output to nearly 120 bhp.

The following two seasons proved very successful for John Appleton who, besides competing in short races at Brooklands and the recently opened Donington Park, ran in sprints and hillclimbs. In 1936, he set the quickest times in his class at both Shelsley Walsh meetings, and won a short handicap race at Brooklands with ease, as well as establishing a new 1100 cc record for the Mountain circuit there at 76.1 mph. Appleton also set new Class G records for the standing start kilometre at 82.1 mph, and the standing start mile at 91.3 mph.

In the winter of 1937 there was further development of the car. The Zoller supercharger was replaced by a larger Arnott blower, which ran

at 27 psi to give a power output of 160 bhp (although 183 bhp was apparently observed on the testbed). A contributory factor to this massive power output was the work carried out by A F Ashby on the cylinder head and valve gear. A new bronze cylinder head, with recessed steel washers to prevent lifting, and Wills pressure rings, gave improved gas flow. The special valve gear featured roller tappets to reduce friction. Each valve assembly boasted no fewer than four springs. Besides the double springs acting directly on the valve there was a hairpin spring attached to the rocker arm, plus a special tappet return spring that fitted into the cylinder block and was retained by a screw collar. A section of Clayton-Still "hedgehog" tubing now protruded through the side of the bonnet and acted as an intercooler to reduce the temperature of the fuel mixture. Although the Maserati axles were retained, larger-diameter brakes with steel-lined Elektron drums were substituted. The front semi-elliptic springs were kept, although fitting transversely mounted alloy friction dampers gave at least the illusion of independent front suspension. A new slightly slimmer and lighter body helped to bring the weight down to 1456 lb, and contributed towards an estimated top speed of 130 mph.

In the remaining seasons before the Second World War, Appleton continued to enjoy considerable success with the Appleton Special, as it was now known, at a variety of venues, including Brooklands, Crystal Palace and the Poole speed trials.

In the immediate postwar years, Appleton again campaigned the car at sprint meetings, but difficulties in obtaining the potent methanol fuel mixtures, coupled with a shortage of spares for the highly tuned power unit, led him to detune the engine and use a Roots-type blower. Running at a much lower boost pressure, the power output was "only" 135 bhp. In this form the car was still the fastest blown 1100 at Shelsley Walsh in June 1946 (47.10 sec), and made an impressive, ear-splitting run at Luton Hoo in 1948 before shearing its blower drive. By this time the Maserati beam axles of about 1931 were becoming decidedly dated, so the decision was taken to rebuild the car with a new independently sprung chassis. This final modification never passed the drawing board stage, and the car was sold off with a heap of bits and pieces, including a spare engine, in the early 1950s.

By the time the Appleton Special reappeared in the early 1960s the blown 1100 cc engine had been lost; its place taken by a Riley 12/4 1500 cc motor fitted with four Amal carburettors. It ran in vintage events in the 1963 and 1964 seasons driven by R Baker, who was fortunate enough to be helped by the car's originator in preparing it. It was offered for sale by Baker in 1966, and spent most of the following year at the premises of Northern Sportscars Ltd awaiting a new owner. The Appleton next appeared in the early 1970s after being rebuilt and painted red by Alan Wragg – nowadays he is best remembered for his Alvis and Bugatti refabrication work, and his series of Austin Seven racing cars.

By 1974 the car had passed into the hands of Colin Warrington who at first ran the car in its unblown form before adding a supercharger, which restored something of its former performance – and noise! In 1978 it became part of the Majzubs' collection of interesting historic cars and is given an occasional outing in VSCC events by Julian Majzub.

In the late 1970s one of the original blown three-bearing engines turned up, so it may be hoped that this will find its way back into the Appleton and restore its ear-shattering pre-war performance.

Appleton Special

Technical Specification Data

Date of origin: 1931-9

ENGINE
Type: Riley
Capacity: 1600 cc
No of cylinders: 4
Valve operation: ohv
Estimated power output:
Carburation: 1 x SU carburettor & supercharger

GEARBOX
Type: ENV
No of ratios: 4

CHASSIS
Type: Maserati

FRONT AXLE
Type: Maserati
Suspension: 2 x Semi-elliptics

REAR AXLE
Type: Maserati
Suspension: 2 x Semi-elliptics

BRAKES
Type: Drums all round
Actuation: Hydraulic

WHEELS
Size: 16 in
Tyre Size: 550 x 16 (front)
650 x 16 (rear)

OVERALL DIMENSIONS
Length:
Wheelbase: 88 in
Track: 52.5 iin (front)
53.25 in (rear)