

Brooke Special

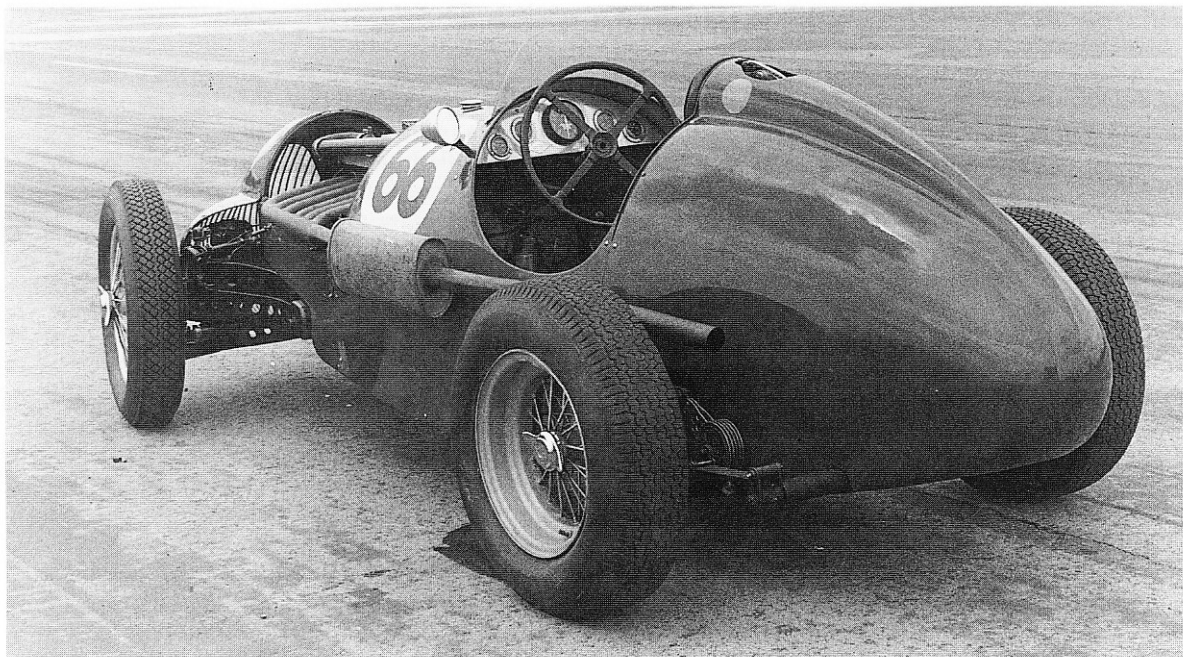
Despite the best endeavours of its creator, the Brooke Special still exists! Its pre-Second World War racing outings in the hands of Leslie Brooke were characterized by very fast driving that frequently led to over-enthusiasm and subsequent loss of contact with the race in progress.

When Brooke was "banned" from motorcycle racing by his wife on the grounds that it was far too dangerous, he turned to car competitions as a safer alternative. Rather than go out and buy a purpose-made racing car, he decided to follow the special builder's route. The fact that he ran a vehicle

Rear view of the Brooke Special shows the postwar body looks somewhat bulbous from this angle. Note the ex-Daimler suspension at the front.

dismantlers in Coventry meant that he was ideally placed for obtaining most of the necessary bits and pieces.

His special evolved around a new MG Magnette 1100 cc straight six engine in a chassis of Brooke's own design, but before the chassis could be built, a slightly bent Riley Imp frame arrived at the yard. After straightening, Riley front and rear axles were fitted. The engine was supercharged by a Powerplus No. 9 blower located between the front dumb irons. A Riley gearbox was used, which necessitated making up a special flywheel/clutch assembly. For initial trials an SS radiator and soapbox were attached, and several circuits made of the nearby back streets. A subsequent visit to the public weighbridge revealed that the car would be



substantially overweight, so it was completely stripped and lightened by drilling a multitude of holes and the substitution of aluminium for steel. A nearby "tin basher" produced an unusual rectangular style of body, usually described as being simply ugly, which incorporated an 18 gal fuel tank sited in the rear of the vehicle on a Sorbo mattress. It was intended to run in the new car on the Heenan and Froude car tester at the local Morris agents, but Equipe Brooke was soon banished for making too much noise.

A test outing at Donington proved that the car's performance was promising, despite problems with uneven fuel mixture distribution. Violent front axle tramp under braking was an undesirable feature, and Brooke later confessed that "holding the steering wheel under such conditions was impossible". After much hard work, car and driver arrived to practise for their first event, a 25-mile handicap. More problems cropped up, including numerous oiled plugs, overheating troubles and a slipping clutch. Despite all this the Brooke Special still made it to the starting line and during the race was as fast as most of the cars in its class, when the engine actually contrived to fire on all six cylinders. Unfortunately, Brooke's race finished after just three laps when a big end failed at Coppice Farm.

At a later Donington race meeting, overheating troubles again intervened in practice. Cutting away the sides of the radiator opening failed to produce any improvement, so a motorcycle fuel tank was attached to the side of the bodywork. This was filled with water that could be pumped to the radiator, thus maintaining the coolant level and preventing overheating. The special went well in this particular race, proving too fast for the owner on one occasion when it spun at Starkeys. Despite predictions to the contrary, Brooke actually finished the race, and not in last place.

Practice for the next race at Crystal Palace produced the well-known incident where Leslie Brooke ran out of road at Fisherman's Bend, took to the grass and eventually came to rest with the car perched on the parapet of the lily pond. Undaunted, a spare front axle was procured from a local scrapyard and the special repaired in time for the race. However, another bout of over-enthusiasm resulted in the car again leaving the circuit, this time choosing a sandbank as a suitable resting place. For the International Trophy race at Brooklands that year hydraulic front shock absorbers were fitted in an attempt to reduce the troublesome axle tramp, and a new inlet pipe improved the general performance of the blown engine. Brooke's performance in the race included numerous visits to the pits to replenish the vital liquids and for general fettling, but the car was still running at the end of the event.

During the winter of 1937, work was carried out to improve the handling and performance of the car. André Girling independent front suspension from a Daimler was attached, and the Powerplus blower replaced by a Zoller supercharger that gave about twice the boost. As the MG engine was getting rather tired another Magnette motor was installed.

For the next couple of seasons, the Brooke Special was little altered from this format, although engines were swapped to suit particular events. With the Magnette engine in place, it had usually been entered as an "MG-Riley", this name changing to "Brooke Special" when one of a variety of Riley engines was installed. Occasionally it competed with a 1.5-litre Alta supercharged unit fitted and was rechristened the "Alta-Brooke" for these outings.

For the JCC International Trophy race at Brooklands the power plant was a 1726 cc Riley six-cylinder unit fitted with a special Dixon six SU carburettor arrangement. It proved to be a successful outing, for Brooke finished second despite losing all except top gear in the latter part of the race. Less fortunate for Brooke was the British Empire Trophy race at Donington where clutch slip caused retirement.

A rare overseas outing was made in 1939 when, with the Alta engine in place, Brooke entered the Albi GP in France. An encouraging performance was shortlived for while he was catching George Abecassis the latter's engine seized, causing the two cars to collide. Both cars and both drivers were damaged, but all four recovered.

After the war, Brooke ran the car in sprint meetings, although by this stage most of the bodywork had been removed and an ex-aircraft oil cooler was used for the radiator. The car was reputedly fitted with a supercharged ERA engine, but this may have in fact been a Riley unit that incorporated many ERA-like features. By the time it was sold, via Reg Parnell, to its new owner George Nixon the six-carburettor 1726 cc engine had been refitted. Nixon had the car rebodied by his mechanic Tom Amos, the result being an attractive single-seater affair in the style of the contemporary Alfa Romeos.

One of the first events to be entered was the Vintage Sports Car Club's speed trial at Luton Hoo in May 1948, where the Brooke Special continued to display its well-known off-course tendencies. The meeting had to be temporarily suspended to allow the errant racing car to be lifted down from its precarious perch, halfway up the offside bank of the Barrel turn, after it had got away from its new driver.

In the Manx Cup race on the Isle of Man that year Nixon achieved a noteworthy win, despite problems in practice when number 3 piston was

holed and the repairs took until three o'clock on race day morning. In the race itself, Nixon left the course on the first lap and was passed by the entire field before he had a chance to restart. His victory from the back of the pack was even more creditworthy as it was his first "proper" motor race! Shortly afterwards Nixon sold the car to Ken Downing for £1800, showing a handsome return on the £950 purchase price, and turned his attention to "regular" racing cars like ERAs and the Cooper Climax.

Sometime in the 1950s, the Brooke Special suffered a fate that seems to have overtaken many pre-war racers, for it was turned into a roadgoing two-seater sports car. At the same time a postwar MG engine was reputedly installed, but when the car was found in Liverpool by Graham Baker in the late 1960s, the six-cylinder Riley unit with its Dixon carburettor arrangement of six SUs was in place. It was still equipped with its unusual circular ex-aircraft radiator, and the nose and tail cowlings as fitted for the 1948 Manx Cup were still with the car, although not attached.

Baker started a comprehensive reconstruction of the Brooke Special using those parts of the body that had survived, and making new pieces when they had not. In 1981 he sold the car when the project was about three-quarters finished to Geoffrey Perfect who arranged for the task to be completed.

The car reappeared on the circuits in 1984 at Donington in the hands of Barry Gillies who was responsible for most of the later restoration work. On this outing the conrods tried to escape through the side of the engine. Over the intervening period the car has become a regular competitor at VSCC events, with a variety of "Equipe Gillies" drivers at the wheel. It has yet to show the form of its heyday when it was on a par with ERAs, but that is possibly because most of the ERAs racing today seem, contrary to what might be expected, to have become quicker with advancing years.

Brooke Special

Technical Specification Data

Date of origin: 1934-6

ENGINE

Type: Riley

Capacity: 1808 cc

No of cylinders: 6

Valve operation: ohv

Estimated power output: 150 bhp

Carburation: 6 x SU carburettors

GEARBOX

Type: Riley

No of ratios: 4

CHASSIS

Type: Riley

FRONT AXLE

Type: Daimler

Suspension: 2 x Coil springs

REAR AXLE

Type: Riley

Suspension: 2 x Semi-elliptics

BRAKES

Type: Drums all round

Actuation: Hydraulic

WHEELS

Size: 18 in (front)

16 in (rear)

Tyre Size: 550 x 18 (front)

650 x 16 (rear)

OVERALL DIMENSIONS

Length: 146 in

Wheelbase: 91 in

Track: 50.5 in (front)

49 in (rear)