

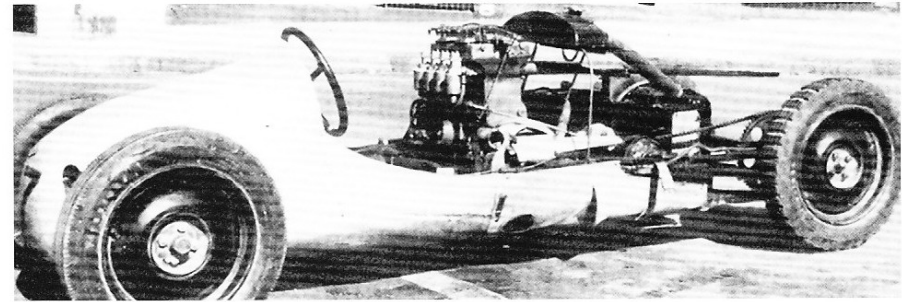
Bill Jennings' Rileys by Bill Buys

Griquatown is a remote settlement in an arid region of South Africa, known mainly for its dorper sheep and jasper and tigers eye stones. It was the unlikely birthplace of Bill Jennings, one of the world's best Riley exponents of his time.

As a teenager the young Jennings was taken to Kimberley – about 200km distant – to see the Kimberley 100. He was instantly smitten, particularly by Italian star Mario Massacuratti, who had imported various exotics, among them a pair of Bugattis, an Alfa Romeo and a Maserati 6C-34.

A cousin of the great Tazio Nuvolari, he also acquired several of the Italian legend's cars and raced to success in the 1936 South African GP.

Bill moved to Cape Town, where he became a motor mechanic, but was especially interested in chassis design and engineering. After WWII, he built a Riley Nine 1100-powered special that stunned rivals and fans: it was rear-engined, with the motor mounted east-west.



Exposed: The first Jennings Riley Special of 1948, with transverse engine.

It was quite successful and the basic design ended up in Formula One in 1964, when Honda used the same principle in its radical 12-cylinder 1.5litre RA271.

After campaigning the 1100 for four years, Jennings bought the 1934 ex-Freddie Dixon Riley from local driver Ed Hoal for 150 pounds sterling.

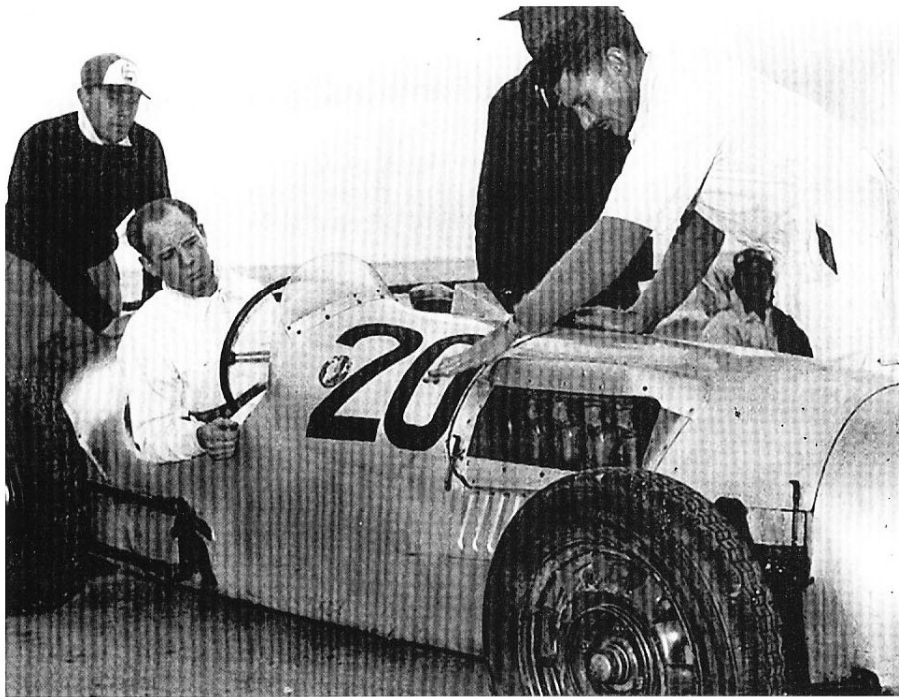
He set about on a major improvement program, using a variety of other car components in a tubular spaceframe, including bits of Packard, Austin, Morris and Fiat. With a lot of attention to suspension, steering, camshaft profile, valves and exhaust length, Bill ended up more than doubling the car's power, increasing its rev limit and improving its handling.

He was a very polished driver too and from 1952 he started overhauling the mainly locally-built MG and Ford specials that dominated the flourishing South African road racing scene, taking third place in the national championship in 1953 and winning in 1954, 1956 and 1957, plus running second in 1955.

The cherry on top, for me, was in 1957 at Grand Central, a circuit midway between Johannesburg and Pretoria, when two of the then brand new T41 Cooper-Climaxes

arrived to much media hype. They were driven by Kiwis Ronnie Moore and Ray Thackwell but their fancied cars, described in some editorials as 'in a class of their own' simply could not match the pace of the unpainted (to save weight) cigar-shaped Jennings Riley Special, which was a runaway winner. Second came Lord Louth, of Jersey, in his D-Type Jaguar.

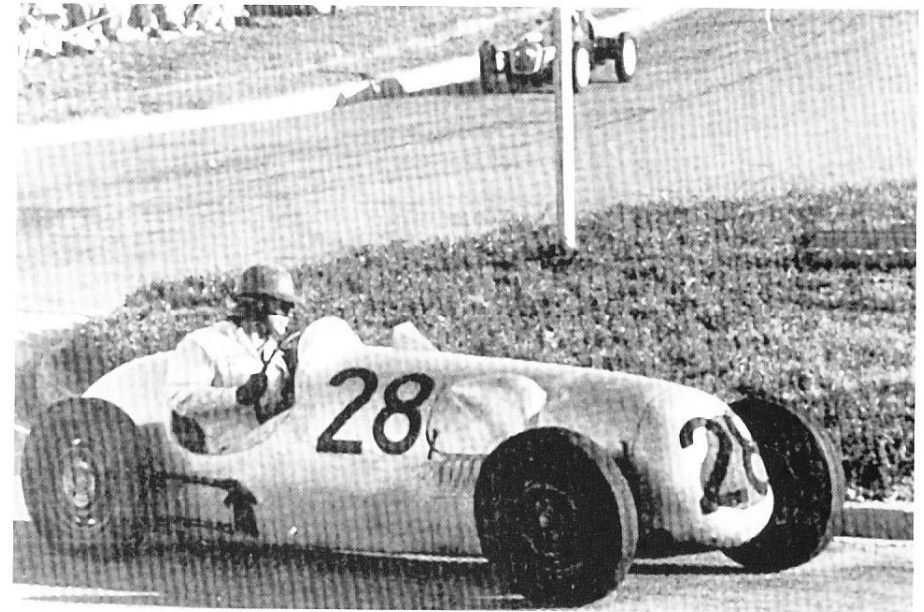
Shortly after, Jennings sold the car to Rhodesia's John Love, for 500 quid. Love, later also to take several South African championships, immediately also scored success with it, within a fortnight winning the Heany Summer Handicap in Rhodesia from a strong field which included a brace of Cooper-Climaxes, a Connaught, an ERA and a D-Type Jaguar. Love then moved to Europe to race for Ken Tyrrell. What happened to the Jennings Riley is not known. What is known is that it was simply a masterpiece of engineering. Jennings died in 2008, Love in 2005.



Pit crew attend to the Jennings Riley Special. The car had advanced suspension at a time when most specials still used leaf springs.

Meanwhile Griquatown seems oblivious of its link with one of Southern Africa's greatest drivers and racing engineers.

Its main claim to fame is it still produces a great sheep breed and semi-precious stones, and the tree where Griqua leader Andries Waterboer hanged criminals in the early 1800s, is still standing proud in Water Street.



Bill Jennings in action. Note the absence of safety barriers in the 1950s.

Jennings' Riley in Cape Town: Bill Jennings, far left, at the start of a race in Cape Town with Table Mountain in the background.

