

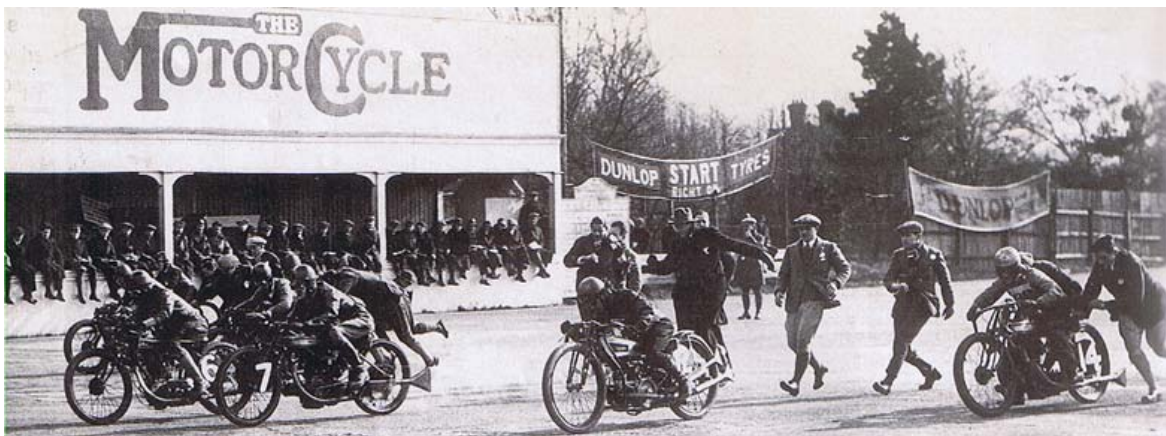
SUNBEAM'S STAR TURN GORDON COBBOLD (1903-2004)

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Gordon was born in West London and went to Westminster School. Cobbold major did not shine in the classroom except perhaps in Maths, but on the athletics track, the football field, the rackets court and the shooting range he demonstrated a will to win that was to determine the rest of his life.

He started to earn his living as chief tester for Wex, a variable-jet carburettor company set up by Harry Westlake who later became Gordon's engine tuner. After trying a few others and finding them wanting, Gordon acquired a Sunbeam Longstroke which he showed off to a friend who rode a Norton. To settle the obvious argument they joined a club and took their machines to Brooklands. "I won the first two races which upset my Norton friend" he smiled "In those days we just rode to the track and took the mudguards off." This was in 1923. His next bike (105 guineas from Sunbeam's Holborn showroom) was a 1925 Model 90 Sprint 500, one of the first to be offered with an ohv engine. Based at Brooklands he and Harry worked relentlessly developing carburettors but they had some fun as well, once taking a joy ride with Alcock and Brown (of transatlantic fame) in their Brooklands built Vickers aircraft and tobogganing down the banking in winter.

Having chalked up a few wins his potential was spotted by Sunbeam who gave him and Harry a 350 and a couple of 500s "to mess about with." Gordon was soon a professional racer with contracts with oil, chain, plug and tyre companies, not forgetting John Bull knee-grips, an essential piece of kit for Brooklands' bumpy banking at 110mph. Other earnings came from prize money for races and fastest times at sprints and hill climbs. His record at one hill climb will never be broken as they closed the climb just after he had set it because the hill was it too dangerous!



Gordon (6) gets a good start at Brooklands

At Brooklands he won a clutch of world records, 16 to be precise between 1927 and 1929, amongst them his British Motor Cycle Racing Club Gold Star (for lapping the 2¾-mile outer circuit at over 100mph) and the 1000km endurance record for which the headlights of cars parked at the top of the banking were the only night-time illumination.



Surrounded by fans after a Brooklands success



Gordon reunited with his 1926 Sunbeam 70 years later

He never competed in the Isle of Man TT but he did get 4th in the French GP of 1927 which was an improvement on his previous year's stab at the Brussels GP when his petrol tank leaked, soaked him, and then the machine caught alight. He rolled down a steep bank to put out the flames on his clothing and then returned to the burning Sunbeam which he extinguished by beating it with his body belt.

Sunbeam's interest in Brooklands slumped and Gordon went on to Speedway or dirt track riding as it was then known. He recalled that he could get £5 a night, 5 or 6 times a week at Haringey and White City. "One night I won £90 at Crystal Palace and blew the lot on a party at the Castle Hotel in Richmond!"

He and 'Westy' Westwood set up dirt-track racing in Paris and they went on to organise a so called 'world championship.' It played to a full house and they made a lot of money and went on to Monte Carlo "where we blew the lot again." Clearly he enjoyed living dangerously on and off the track! Not averse to a flutter, he recalled winning £100 on a car race at Brooklands. "Rushing off to collect my winnings before the bookie disappeared I tore the backside out of my trousers on a car door. The gorgeous girl occupant invited me home to borrow a pair of her husband's trousers....but I won't go any further with that story!"

During the war Gordon worked for General Aircraft which was a reserved occupation so he could not follow his yen to join the RAF and when hostilities were over he went back into the garage business becoming an MG car dealer. He never lost his love of motor cycles or Brooklands; he was instrumental in reforming the BMCRC (now Bemsee) after the war and became its President, an office he held for the rest of his life.

His headmaster, writing in his last school report was probably more perceptive than he realised when he wrote **“he leaves a happy memory of himself behind him.”**



*With family, celebrating his
100th birthday*