

# Golden

English Racing Automobiles  
– ERA to its admirers – produced  
one of the greatest cars in the history  
of racing, says **Richard Williams**



If someone asks you what a racing car should look like, tell them to go and stand in front of an ERA. Let their eyes take in its proud, upstanding radiator, its handsome, wire-spoked wheels, its long, louvred bonnet, its abbreviated cockpit behind a small aeroscreen and its tapered tail. This is a design pared to the bone, leaving only the essentials. Form has followed function, creating a kind of beauty which, this year, celebrates its 75th birthday and still has small boys peering at it in wonder.

ERA stands for English Racing Automobiles, a company formed in 1933 to build cars capable of mounting a challenge to the French and Italian teams that had dominated motor racing in the years following the First World War. This was an age when cars seemed to express national characteristics and, by contrast to the feline grace of Ettore Bugatti's designs and the sheer raciness of the Maserati brothers' creations, the ERA appeared to exemplify a certain rugged attitude to the world. If it was not the most technically advanced of racing machines, it was the one with the soundest heart and the strongest will.

Between 1934 and 1939, the company built a mere 17 vehicles, far fewer than their main competitors. But their success allowed them to become perhaps the most beloved of all British-built racing cars. It says everything about the affection they inspired, as well as paying tribute to their enduring mechanical integrity, that all but one, which was destroyed in a fatal crash in 1936, are still in existence; indeed, several are still active and successful in historic racing.

The ERA was not the biggest or fastest racing car of its time: that accolade was reserved for the Silver Arrows, from the state-supported German teams of Mercedes-Benz and Auto Union, which, as war approached, were exerting absolute control over the major grands prix races. Instead, at a time when Britain's contribution to European motor sport was at a low ebb, the ERA was designed to compete with the highly successful Bugattis and Maseratis in the category known as voiturette racing. This was for smaller cars with supercharged engines of no more than 1.5 litres, in which wealthy amateurs could expect to compete on reasonably equal terms with the best professionals.

It was a collaboration between an ambitious professional and an enthusiastic amateur that led to the founding of ERA. Raymond Mays, the flamboyant, theatre-loving son of a businessman in the market town of Bourne, Lincolnshire, had served in France and Germany with the Grenadier Guards before studying engineering at Cambridge. His father, the owner of the local abattoir, had been a pioneer motorist, and young Raymond was given a Hillman sports car with which to take part in university competitions and, before long, at Brooklands, Britain's foremost race track. As the Hillman was followed by a pair of Bugattis and then by a supercharged Riley, his talent at the wheel made itself apparent to Britain's followers of motor sport.

Mays had a wider vision, however, and with the aid of Humphrey Cook, the heir to a London drapery fortune, he began to turn it into reality. Cook's money – eventually around £200,000 of it, a huge sum at the time – funded the creation of a factory in the grounds of Mays'



1934 ERA single-seat  
Racing Voiturette  
Chassis no. R1A  
Estimate: £400,000 - 500,000  
(\$800,000 - 1,000,000)



The R1A, 1934: shortly after its creation at the factory in Bourne



Raymond Mays takes R1A out for its first test at Brooklands in May 1934



R1A thwarted by mechanical problems at the Isle of Man racetrack, 1934



At the Thompson & Taylor factory, 1934



R1A with its sister ERA and a Riley at the Nuffield Trophy, its first-ever victory



Brooklands, August 1934



Prinz zu Leiningen on the starting grid at Brooklands, 1935



Raymond Mays with the R1A at Dieppe Voiturette Grand Prix in July, 1935

family home in Bourne, at which all 17 pre-war ERAs were built. And the very first of them, the one that is to be offered for sale by Bonhams at the Goodwood Festival of Speed on July 11, was the car that became known as R1A.

Designed by Reid Railton, already known for his work on Malcolm Campbell's Bluebirds, the chassis was constructed at the factory of Thompson and Taylor, near Brooklands, where Railton was chief engineer, before being taken up to Bourne. There it was fitted with a six-cylinder engine drawn up by Peter Berthon, a self-taught engineer who had helped Mays to modify his Riley. Although this was an era of elegant coach-building, few aesthetic considerations appeared to have been applied to the ERA. Its aluminium body was simply a covering for what went on underneath, which is, perhaps, why it still looks so authentic today.

Painted a distinctive shade of pale green, R1A made its public bow at a test session at Brooklands in May 1934. An attempted race debut on the Isle of Man a few weeks later was thwarted by mechanical problems, but all was well on June 23 when the car returned to Brooklands and, with Mays at the wheel, competed in the British Empire Trophy. Shortly after Mays had driven a two-litre car to ERA's first competitive victory at the Shelsley Walsh hill climb, he claimed the company's first win in the Nuffield Trophy at Donington Park, where R1A finished ahead of the MG of a tall, handsome young man, just down from Cambridge, named Dick Seaman.

Attracted by the lengthening string of impressive results, customers began to form a queue. In November of that year, having persuaded his reluctant mother to advance him £2,000 against trust funds that would not mature until his 27th birthday, the 21-year-old Seaman visited Bourne and put his name to a deal that would make him the owner of his own ERA in time for the 1935 season. It would also contribute to the death that winter of his elderly and infirm father, who had banned his only child from racing and threatened to disinherit him if he did not pursue a career in the diplomatic service. After coming across Dick's letter to his mother, outlining the racing plans of which he had been kept in ignorance, the old man suffered a series of falls that culminated, barely a fortnight later, in his death in a nursing home.

Seaman's season with an ERA was part of the apprenticeship that would see him become Britain's most outstanding pre-war racing driver. As a member of the all-conquering Mercedes-Benz team, he would win the 1938 German Grand Prix on the Nurburgring circuit before perishing a year later when his Silver Arrow caught fire after hitting a tree in the Belgian Grand Prix at Spa. He was still a promising amateur, however, when he piloted R1A to second place in a handicap race at Donington Park, behind the Bugatti of Charlie Martin.

Seaman had been loaned the car while he awaited delivery of



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his own ERA. When the black-painted vehicle, designated R1B, finally arrived, it proved initially disappointing; after several poor performances, there were harsh words when Seaman discovered that instead of the promised brand-new engine, the company had fitted a reconditioned unit. Once again his mother's chequebook came in useful, subsidising his decision to do without the factory's technical support and employ his own mechanics instead. Victories in the Grossglockner and Freiburg hill climbs, the Coppa Acerbo race at Pescara, the Prix de Berne at Bremgarten, where he had the satisfaction of beating Mays in the official factory-entered car, and the Masarykring race at Brno brought him to the attention of Europe's motor-racing elite.

Meanwhile, R1A remained in the factory's possession and was entrusted to a variety of prominent drivers of the day, including the Hon. Brian Lewis, later Lord Essendon, who crossed the Atlantic to finish 15th in the 1936 Vanderbilt

Cup at the Roosevelt Field track on Long Island, a race won by the Alfa Romeo of the great Tazio Nuvolari. The following year the ERA was sold to Fugen Björnstadt, a Norwegian enthusiast whose outings in the car included a win, in the voiturette race at Turin's Valentino Park, before it

returned home in 1938.

The company struggled on after the war, under new ownership and no longer with the aid of Cook's subsidies or the leadership of Mays. A new single-seater was produced for Stirling Moss, the successor to Seaman as Britain's most gifted young driver, to race in the world championship grands prix of 1952, but it proved a failure and ERA's assets were sold. Mays, meanwhile, had used the facilities at Bourne to set up British Racing Motors, whose cars, after many vicissitudes, would win the Formula One world title in 1962.

As for R1A, once the hostilities were over it re-emerged in the hands of Reg Parnell, the well-known professional driver and team manager, who lowered its bonnet in an attempt to improve its aerodynamics and won two ice races in Sweden in 1947. In the late 1970s it was rebuilt to its original condition, becoming a familiar sight at historic race meetings, still in its pale-green livery. Well into the new century it remained capable of winning the 1500cc class at the Shelsley Walsh hill climb, the site of the very first ERA victory so many years earlier, when British success in international motor racing still seemed a distant dream.

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**Sale: The Festival of Speed  
Goodwood, West Sussex  
Friday 11 July  
Enquiries: James Knight +44 (0) 20 7447 7440  
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