

This story courtesy of
Sports & Classic Cars Australia magazine
By Dennis Harrison (late)

SHEER WIZARDRY



They were waiting for the clock to chime. It was a few minutes before 4:30am on Tuesday November 27, 1923, outside the Adelaide GPO. Norman 'Wizard' Smith and Leonard Emerson were seated in a stripped down four-cylinder, 18hp Essex, its engine throbbing impatiently anxious to be off on their attempt to break the record to Melbourne. The secretary of the Automobile Association of South Australia handed them a signed certificate confirming their departure and told them they could go as soon as the clock began to strike,

As the first echoing peal reverberated through the bleak morning air the car roared off down the street like a rocket and vanished around a corner before the clock had finished announcing the half hour. One of Australia's most skilful daredevil drivers was on his way. During the previous 12 months, the 32 year-old Smith had broken the record between Brisbane and Sydney set by the famous Boyd Edkins in a Vauxhall 30/98, and the Melbourne to Sydney record twice. The press

loved him. One journalist called him a wizard and the name stuck.

Smith was employed by the Hudson Essex agents in Sydney Dalgety's, and they and the other agents around Australia promoted their cars as having the same standard chassis as Smith's. Essentially this was true except for a higher rear axle ratio and extra leaf springs. However, the motor in Smith's car was by no means standard. It had a special racing cylinder head with two rows of spark plugs, two carburettors, four large inlet ports and very big valves. The car was capable of 100mph (161kph). Having no body contributed to the car's speed and its point-to-point performance was enhanced by the inherent advantages of a high ground clearance and no overhang front and rear.

It is strongly believed that the motor in the 'Wizard' Smith replica featured on these pages was the unit used by Smith himself. The replica's builder, Jim Scammell of Adelaide, South Australia has been unable to prove or disprove the engine's provenance. It has a

special racing cylinder head, like Smith had, and the engine number is most unusual - S881 unlike any other on an Essex Four. Jim has initiated inquiries in the USA but he is really quite content to have built a working memorial to an amazing Australian. Copied from photographs, the car is as accurate as he could possibly make it, from the extra tyres and long distance fuel tank to the protective wire netting over the radiator. For Smith, on his dash from Adelaide to Melbourne, none of his safeguards were adequate to cope with a collision with an emu. Little protection was available from the elements and wayward Emus for the would-be record breakers despite a high and large frontal area. Near Salt Creek in the Coorong sand hills, two of the swift, long-legged poultry decided to challenge the Essex to a race. They were doing quite well until one decided to cross to the other side of the road by means of stepping over the car.

"He made a slight miscalculation, quite pardonable in the circumstances," wrote Smith afterwards, "and landed on top of the radiator, tearing off the cap in a second, and rolled on to the windscreen and smashed it, and then tumbled off on to the sand on his back. He got up and, after a reproachful glance in our direction, trotted off at great speed and went clean through a wire fence'.

With hot water from the radiator splashing over their faces they pressed forward

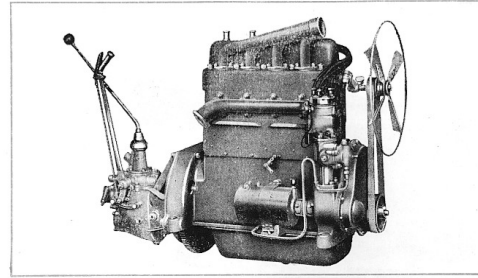


reaching speeds of up to 90 and 100mph despite having to pause every 20 miles (32km) to re-fill the rapidly emptying radiator using a hat. Rain, in hurtful drops like hail, which had dogged their progress for 300 miles (480km) and turned their faces to scarlet, was now a blessing.

From the pools of water they replenished the radiator. The windscreen was replaced at Casterton and they went on making good speed until the float chamber of a carburettor came adrift. Emerson volunteered to be strapped to the windscreen and, with one leg on the chassis and the other over the bonnet, held the carburettor together with his hand as the car raced through the wind and rain.

Soon, numb with cold, Smith, who had covered 68 miles in as many minutes, decided that no record was worth a man's life and stopped, intending to abandon the attempt.

Only then did they notice that the 3 spare tyres and wheels had fallen off. They examined the carburettor and with wire, insulating tape, cloth and a piece of a cigar box used for carrying spare spark plugs they made it work and then drove back to look for the tyres. When they found them they had second thoughts.



After all the Essex was still running well and Melbourne was 200 miles (320km) away and there was four hours left to break the record. In Smith's words: "Men who don't think they'll win, don't win." Maybe they could do it, after all. And they did. They arrived in Melbourne at 6:21 pm having covered the 595 miles (960km) - not counting the extra miles collecting the tyres - in 13 hours and 21 minutes, beating the record by 1 hour 30 minutes - an average of 45mph (72kph).

It should be remembered there was no direct route to Melbourne and the roads, as such, were earth-formed, poorly maintained and frequently no more than stock routes. The Essex's trajectory was through Kingston and the Western District of Victoria and down to Mortlake and Geelong. Between Wellington and Meningie a crossing by punt was necessary and in the Coorong the sandy winter track had to be taken because the pipeclay track was flooded.

Contributing to Smith's successes was his thorough preparation, not only of the car itself but also by a close examination of the route to be followed. He would drive in the opposite direction to the intended attempt and nail markers to the trees and posts to register rough patches and dangerous spots. Each would be recorded so that on the run they could be anticipated and the margin of safety shortened to its limit.

Smith never drove blindly. He adhered to a planned schedule. Combined with his skill, the outcome was consistently trouble free. For the Adelaide-Melbourne run he had additional help from Motors Ltd., the South Australia Essex agents. They mustered 100 men who were each allotted a special corner, dangerous bend or gate along the 190 miles (305km) to Kingston and were to signal if there were any hazards. Also, red flags were posted in the Coorong to show where it was

necessary to leave the winter track due to sand drifts.

At a time when there was no media, only a medium - the newspapers - no one examined Smith's motivation other than to recognise his determination and competitiveness. His inter-city record-breaking came after considerable experience and success in reliability trials - he had won 45 of them including the 1922 1000 mile (1610km) Victorian Alpine Trial. His great rival was A. V Turner-Albert, but always referred to as AV. When AV set a new Melbourne to Sydney record at the end of 1922, Smith broke it a fortnight later. Then, in January 1923, S. C. Ottoway broke Smith's record only to have Turner break his in February. In December 1923, after Adelaide to Melbourne, Smith again broke Turner's Melbourne to Sydney record. In between he set a new record from Hobart to Launceston and return - thus establishing three inter-city records in the space of one month. The 243 miles (390km) to Launceston and back was covered in four hours 19 minutes at an average speed of 56.5mph (90kph), quite remarkable considering 60 miles (96km) were a series of sharp turns. An eyewitness claimed that at a railway crossing out of Hobart the Essex leapt more than 50ft (15m) through the air after hitting bumps on the track.

Smith was given to wearing a tie and a butterfly collar when driving, but not gloves. He preferred to have maximum feel of the wheel. In wet weather he would apply tar to his hands in order to maintain his grip. Thousands would gather for the expected conclusion of a record-breaking run. For the majority their experience of a motor vehicle was limited to a trip in a taxi - then only for a special occasion - or a ride in a well-off neighbour's car. Roughly only one in 50 Australians owned a car at that time. To the public at large, each record broken was perceived as another milestone on the road to

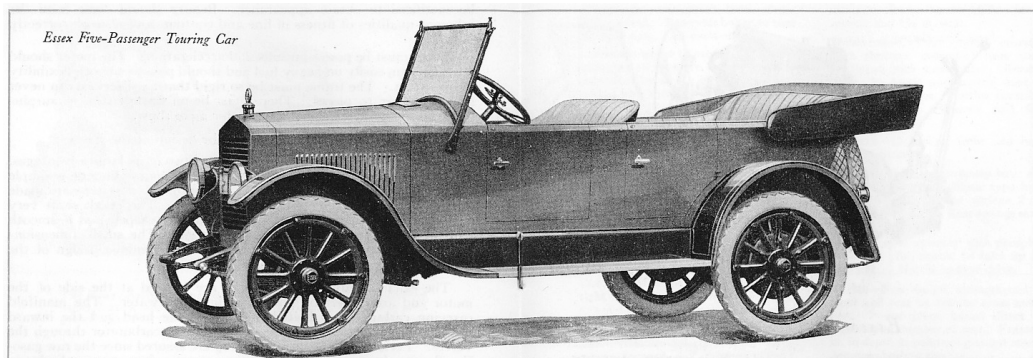
progress which had its beginning with the first inter-city dash from Sydney to Melbourne in 1907. Nowhere else, other than the USA, was the motorcar hailed as the weapon by which the 'tyranny' of distance could eventually be conquered. Nowhere else did it seem more urgent.

Supporting the adventurers were the tyre and fuel companies. If the dependability of Dunlop tyres and the purity of Plume Motor Spirit gave a Smith or a Turner confidence, then why not you? Smith set other records, notably between Brisbane and Sydney and never failed to break any record he attempted, let alone finish.

But the enthusiasm of the record breakers was eventually to be their downfall. Frequency undermined the novelty. The public who happened to live in the suburbs and country towns through which the record-breakers hurtled at 80mph (128kph) or more did not wave to them as heroes. They often stood transfixed with terror. Charges of speeding and dangerous driving were avoided by the transparent ruse of carrying military despatches 'On His Majesty's Service'; so urgent in peacetime that an express train would not suffice.

The words 'menace' and 'maniacs' began to appear in the press. Nevertheless, record-breaking attempts continued until the end of the 1920s. In 1930 two Victorians in a Bugatti were killed while attempting to break the Melbourne to Sydney record. Consequently speed attempts on public roads were banned in NSW. Over the next four years Automobile Associations around the country refused to act as official timers. The races were over.

Scammell's replica is unlikely to win a concours d'elegance but it is guaranteed to arouse curiosity and if the questioners take the time to sit with him on the running board he will tell them what his car commemorates and about a forgotten period of Australia's motoring history which will never be repeated.



SPECIFICATIONS

1922 Essex Four – ‘Wizard Smith Special’ Replica



COMPETITION MODIFICATIONS:

4 port racing cylinder head
Twin opposing side draught Hudson 1¼ in. carburetors
Bosch two spark magneto ignition
4 in. Straight through exhaust
36 gallon (165 lit) long-range fuel tank
Hartford 104 Shock Absorbers, single lever, 4½ in. dia.
Oversize 33 x 4½ cord tyres (+ 3 spare wheels & tyres)
Helper springs added to half elliptic springs
AAA Extra Air Valve - engine brake
Corbin Tachometer to 5,000 rpm
Smith's 100 mph speedometer

STANDARD SPECIFICATIONS:

ENGINE:
Four cylinder, 2933cc, (179 cu in)
Alloy Crankcase, Cast Iron Block
3 bearing counter balanced crankshaft
Overhead inlet & side exhaust valves
Bore & stroke, 3³/₈ in. x 5 in. Rated hp 18.2

TRANSMISSION:

Manual, three speed. Clutch, multiple discs.

SUSPENSION:

Front - half elliptic
Rear - half elliptic

STEERING:

Worm and gear

BRAKES:

Two wheel, rear
External contracting, rod operated.

WHEELS & TYRES:

Wire, 66 spokes; tyres, 32 x 4 cord

DIMENSIONS:

Wheelbase 2765mm (9ft 6in)
Tack, 1486mm (4ft 10.5in).

Bosch Magneto Types “ZR4”, “ZR6”, “Z4”
and “Z6” for Two Spark Ignition.

