



1903 Napier

The National Motor Museum's 1903 Napier is a significant vehicle in the history of British motor sport, representing the heroic pioneering era of continental road races and the Gordon Bennett Cup. It is one of the oldest surviving British racing cars.

During the early 1900s American newspaper owner James Gordon Bennett Jr. sponsored a number of large sporting events. The Gordon Bennett International Cup for automobiles was run each year between 1900 and 1905 for teams of cars representing individual nations.

The rules for the competition stipulated that each car had to be wholly constructed within the country of origin. There was also a requirement that the winning nation should stage the following year's event. Famously the races were also the origin of the traditional national racing colours, although at this time the red now associated with Italy was in fact allocated to the USA. In 1902 the race was won for Britain by S.F. Edge driving a Napier. 1903's race would therefore be staged in Britain. Napier chose to paint its cars green and this became the colour of British racing cars for much of the twentieth century.

Having secured the race for Britain, the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland (ACGBI) faced a dilemma in that racing on public roads in Britain was illegal. However it proved possible to pass legislation through Parliament that would allow the 1903 Gordon Bennett race to be staged in Ireland on a large road circuit in County Kildare. The British team consisted of three Napiers driven by S.F. Edge, Charles Jarrott and J.W. Stocks.

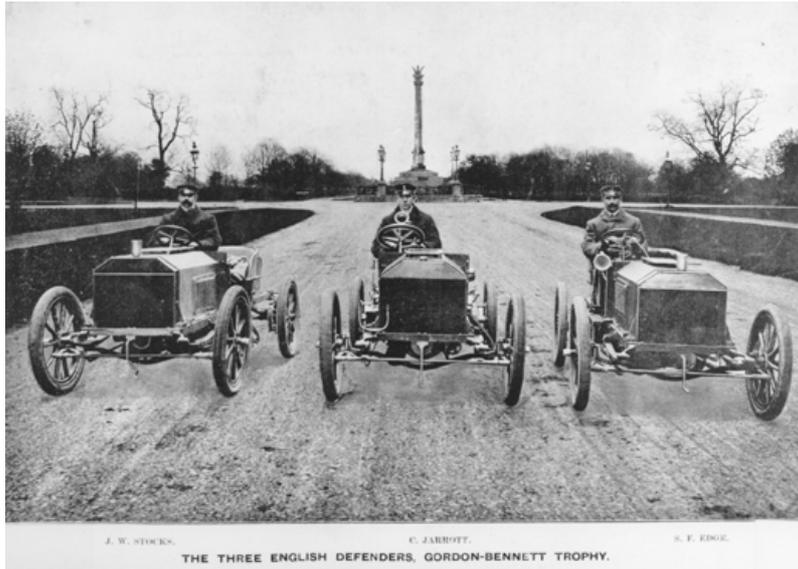


Figure 1: Gordon Bennett Race 1903. S.F. Edge, Charles Jarrott and J.W. Stocks.

The car driven by Jarrott now forms part of the National Motor Museum's Collection. Unfortunately he only managed to complete one lap before the steering broke, causing the car to crash and overturn. Jarrott was thrown clear but his riding mechanic, Cecil Bianchi, was trapped underneath. Somehow Jarrott managed to lift the car enough to allow some spectators to pull Bianchi free, before he himself passed out. Fortunately both men lived to tell the tale although their team mates at first thought they had been killed.



Figure 2: Photograph taken immediately after Charles Jarrott's accident in 1903.

The race was won by Camille Jenatzy driving a Mercedes, securing the 1904 race for Germany. Edge finished in fifth place, the only British entrant to complete the event.

The relatively poor British performance in the 1903 Gordon Bennett race led the ACGBI to decide the team for the 1904 event by staging a series of eliminating tests on the Isle of Man. Entries included three Wolseleys, three Darracqs (British built versions of the French marque) and a total of five Napiers, including the vehicle previously crashed in Ireland by Jarrott driven by Napier's works test driver W.T. Clifford Earp.

Each entrant in the eliminating trials had to complete a timed five lap road circuit, a half mile (0.8 kilometre) hill climb and a speed trial that was staged on the promenade in Douglas. Earp, accompanied by his brother as riding mechanic, had put up a good performance on the first two events and was in second place overall behind Edge. Unfortunately, whilst returning to the start of the speed trial, he managed to lock the rear wheels and crashed into a wall. Although the two Earp brothers were only slightly injured the car sustained damage to the radiator, wheels and chassis. However enough had been done for Earp to finish second to Edge with Girling and Jarrott (both driving for Wolseley) in third and fourth place.

Controversially the ACGBI decided that the British team for the Gordon Bennett Cup would consist of Edge, Girling and Jarrott. Officially they claimed that they had ruled Earp out because his car had been damaged and could not be made ready in time (which Napier did in fact manage) but many believe that Earp's position as a 'professional' test driver for Napier in an amateur British team proved unpopular amongst decision makers.

In the end, the 1904 race at Homburg in Germany did not go Britain's way with the Wolseleys of Girling and Jarrott finishing in 9th and 12th respectively. Edge's Napier retired 20 miles/32.19 kilometres from the finish with a seized engine. It was the last time that he raced, deciding to retire from motor sport in the face of increasing commercialism.

The Museum's Napier did not compete again. It was sold and re-bodied for road use. It went to America in the 1950s ending up in the Harrah Collection. It has been part of the National Motor Museum's Collection since 1987. An older 1902 Gordon Bennett Napier also survives in private ownership, restored from original parts.

Manufacturer: D. Napier & Sons, Acton, London.

Engine: 4 cylinder in line.

Capacity: 7,708cc.

Output:

Max. Speed: 75mph

Further Reading:

Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, 1963. *The Gordon Bennett Races*. London: Cassell.

Montgomery, B., 2000. *The 1903 Irish Gordon Bennett*. Minster Lovell & New Yatt: Bookmarque.

Venables, D., 1998. *Napier, The first to wear the green*. Sparkford: G.T. Foulis & Company.

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