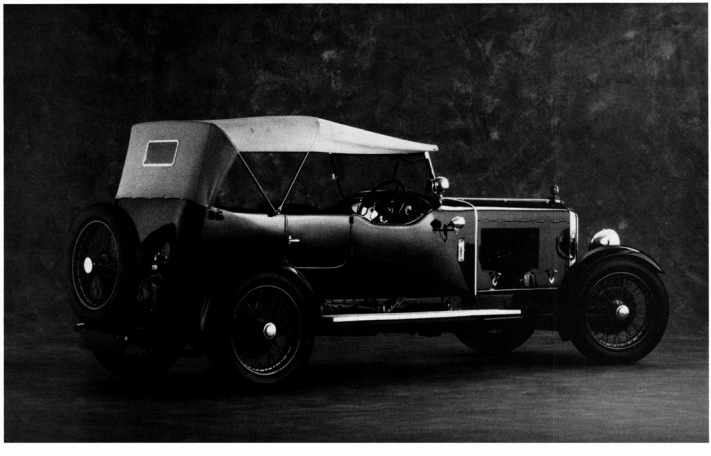
S U N B E A M

"Too fast for its chassis." Perhaps the praise is more than faint, but the Twin-Cam Sunbeam has forever been damned by the notion that it was not structurally sound enough for its performance. Somehow it doesn't seem fair. Consider the Twin-Cam's debut in the 1925 Twenty-Four Hours of Le Mans. Granted, of the two cars entered, one retired early, although not before winning the Gustave Baehr Award for covering the greatest distance in the first hour. The second car motored on, driven by veteran Jean Chassagne and S.C.H. Davis, who was a rookie to international road racing on the Continent. "Finish the race. Keep the revs down to 3200. Do not skid on the corners. Be gentle with the brakes," Sammy was told. He did so. Over twelve hours into the race, about 6:00 a.m., with Chassagne at the wheel, the Sunbeam was forced off the road by a competitor and emerged from a gully with its rear axle bent. Still, it motored on. During Sammy Davis' next stint, pot holes in the road jarred the dashboard loose and, to keep the gauges from breaking, he had to hold the dash up with one hand. Not a great way to race. Chassagne was behind the wheel when the Twin-Cam crossed the finish line several hours later, placing a remarkable second to a 3.5-liter Lorraine-Dietrich. It bears mentioning that neither of the two Bentleys in the same race went the distance. So far as robust chassis are concerned, the Bentley was built like a tank. "Personally I walked with the gods for weeks after that race," Sammy Davis said, "and no calamity had power to touch me."

Meanwhile, calamity befell the Sunbeam Motor Car Company Ltd. in Wolverhampton. Early in 1926 came word that racing was over. The reason was largely financial; the sprawling Anglo-French Sunbeam-Talbot-Darracq empire was in disarray. Louis Coatalen, the French-born engineer responsible for the English company's competition success since before the First World War, was distressed—until he hit upon the idea of building a single car in which Henry Segrave would attempt to break the land speed record. That plan—as students of L.S.R. history know—worked very well. Sammy Davis' Sunbeam racing days were over. He would become one of the "Bentley Boys." The Sunbeam that raced at Le Mans in '25 was put on the market.

Double overhead camshafts in a production car was rare in the mid-Twenties. So was a 90 mph performance. One had to pay dearly for it, more so as time went on. During the Twin-Cam's penultimate production year of 1929, the U.S.-delivered price was $6,750, higher than any American luxury marque save the Locomobile and the brand-new J Duesenberg.

Fewer than twenty Three-Litre Twin-Cams remain extant. Figures vary on the total number built. An indication of the pace at which production and sales moved is illustrated by the car in Miles Collier's collection. Its engine was completed in 1926, the chassis in 1927, the car itself was assembled in 1928, a customer was found in 1929. The Collier car also illustrates the production quagmire of the S-T-D empire. Its French-built engine uses the metric system; the English-built chassis/body is to British Whitworth standard. Price and perplexity kept customers away in droves.

In 1949 this Sunbeam was raced against a three-liter Bentley team in the Vintage Sports Car Club races at Silverstone. The result was the same as at Le Mans in '25. Sunbeam enthusiasts regarded this as nicely significant. It has long been thought that Louis Coatalen built the Twin-Cam in the first place to go W. O. Bentley one better.

1929 Sunbeam Three-Litre Twin-Cam Super Sports *Owner: Miles C. Collier of Naples, Florida*