Roy Oliver Hesketh

1915 - 1944

Few know that though Roy Hesketh left his name indelibly inscribed in the annals of South African motor racing history, he first showed his talents as-you'd never guess-a swinger of Indian clubs! When not much bigger than the clubs he twirled, young Roy gave exhibitions in the Pietermaritzburg Y Club gymnasium. Motor sport fans may also be surprised to know that he was a champion swimmer while at St Charles' College in the City and later became the Seals' Senior 100 yards recordholder and club champion, only losing the Natal championship to George Evans by a touch. Today, George generously concedes that if the race had been held in Pietermaritzburg instead of Durban, Roy would have taken the title. But though Roy was good at all sports, he was never happier than when he was playing with something that had wheels. He graduated from a hoop to a tricycle, from a bicycle to a motorcycle and inevitably, for one

so keen on all forms of sport, to

competition riding.



The first mention of Roy was in 1932, when he was 17 years old, riding a "Blue Star" BSA in a consistent riding test. The next, a few months later, when he broke the Currie's Fountain three-lap grass track record. When one considers that such recognised stars as "Old Charlie" Young, Bob ("Hellfire") Jackson, Percy Jackson, Len Moody, Chick Harris and Burton Kinsey competed regularly on this fancy lay-out, it will be readily understood why this boy from Maritzburg caused a stir in the garages where racing fans congregated.

They had plenty to talk about, too, for when Hesketh was on the job he made it willing. Whether it was at Currie's Fountain, the old Oribi flying field or in a hill-climb, the baker's apprentice could be relied upon to stir things up. Just read this excerpt from a contemporary report of a knock-out hill-climb on Oldfield's Hill near the city.

"On the first run Ernie Ireland, riding a 500 cc model "90" Sunbeam, broke Eric Schroenn's record. Hesketh, on a 350 Norton, equalled his time of 30 seconds. "On run two, Ireland was 2/5th seconds slower than the Norton, which again clocked 30 seconds. The next run up by the Sunbeam rider was hectic to behold and he succeeded in knocking 1/5th second off the new record. Thereupon, Hesketh wound his Norton right up and squealed over the line in a terrific ride, half out of the saddle, only at times on the road, and once trailing his legs high in the air. The spectators scattered as he tore up in a cloud of flying dust." When the spectators recovered their breath, his time was announced-29 4/5th seconds-equalling the record just set up by the 500!"

After trying his undoubted good luck at the usual club events, he entered his Norton for the 1934 Durban - Jo'burg, which, as readers of this series will know, was the "hailstorm race" won by Don Hall. Roy got as far as Howick, where he retired, following two quite fright some (to the spectators if not to Roy) pile-ups-the first on Town Hill when his throttle jammed wide open.

Early in 1935 he teamed up with that shrewd campaigner Don Hall and imported a 250 cc Excelsior-Manxman. The idea was that Don would ride this in the SA Lightweight TT and Roy would use it in the Jo'burg race later. Don worked hard on the camshaft motor, bumping up the compression ratio, hand-scraped the piston so that it wouldn't kiss the valves, and in the process took the head off 22 times. To his sorrow, after all his hard work, the race was rained out so he didn't have his ride. Roy, of course, was delighted with his DJ entry.

At the bottom of Mayville Hill, 70 riders gathered to take their places below the starting banner. Bevy Moore led off the procession, riding a 172 James off 1 hr 50 min handicap mark. All the recognised stars were in the pack. Old Alf Long, the shrewdest schemer in the country, had chosen a 557 s/v. Ariel this year, Don Hall on a 350 Cam Norton appearing, contrary to all expectations, after a bad practice spill on Ingogo when his fork spring broke and he was catapulted over the handlebars, sustaining severe eye injuries; that quick-starting pair, Charlie Young and Joe Sarkis (500 Sunbeams); two seasoned campaigners, Chick Harris and Baby Scott (500 Triumphs); the unobtrusively brilliant Burton Kinsey (500 s/v. Norton) and Eric Schroenn (557 s/v. Ariel); Nobby Clark, better known as a Velo rider, now on an AJS, like that of the new discovery, popular Jock Leishman, and the quietly-spoken Johnny Galway (Norton).

As in all Jo'burg races, there were the big name riders, as well as the clubmen who had still to prove themselves in a road race, and the usual sprinkling of novices riding because of the fascination this event held for every South African motorcyclist. People who wrote about it called it "romance", though young Noel Horsfield, competing for the third time, stated bluntly that there was "little romance", as far as he could see, in the possibility of running into a team of oxen or a herd of Afrikaner cattle dreamily filling the road round a blind bend! Horsfield was entered on a 250 ohv New Imperial, a standard job hotted-up by Chick Harris. The TT replica that had been ordered hadn't arrived. (Later it was discovered in the agent's garage in Jo'burg, where a mechanic had "claimed" it, the touring machine being sent to Horsfield.)

Starting around the 59 min mark with Horsfield were the quiet, unassuming Harold Brook (250 Velo), Arthur Mackenzie (250 Sunbeam). (Few people knew that "Arthur Mack" of the shy smile had competed in boxing championships and finished a Comrades Marathon (on his feet!). Likeable Alan Reeve (Rudge) from Pretoria, the boyishly exuberant Hesketh on his Manxman and

> flaxen-haired Percy Jackson who looked so calm and peaceful off a machine, but on his 250 BSA was a real demon. Here, said the experts, was a bunch to watch, and how right they were. All loved a good dust-up, all were friends, and all wanted to win.

Lesar, on the 198 James was first in Pietermaritzburg, followed by B V Moore on a 172 Villiers of the same make. Zeeman (350 Ariel s/v) was seventh, Zurcher 10th - and Hesketh, who had started 32nd, was 16th into the City, 44½ min behind Lesar, to whom he had conceded 58 min 40 sec start. Roy was leading Horsfield by 2½ min., but because of

the time allowance here of 12 min in the control, Roy, Noel and Harold Brook had gathered again to chaff each other while awaiting the timekeeper's signal to leave. It was here that they spoke of their intention to use the new deviation through Nottingham Road rather than take the short-cut through the notoriously bad Currie's Post-Karkloof section. The road to Nottingham Road was also paved with good intentions, but when the three, riding almost abreast, arrived at the turn-off, they all changed their minds, literally on the turn-off, and swung right on to the rutted old main road. After all, they hadn't conceded an inch, why should they concede miles? But within the next few miles there were only two, for Harold overdid things in the heat of the battle and crashed. Meanwhile, behind them Jock Leishman had made fastest time to Maritzburg with a time of $45\frac{1}{2}$ min. (It is worth recording here that the fastest ever made was 41% min put up by Harry Adams in the 1932 race.) Kinsey had shattered the side-valve record with a quite astonishing 48½ min.. Young had done 46, Hall, Cohen and Sarkis 47.

But, away up in front, Lesar and Moore were buzzing away like stung bees through Mooi River to Estcourt. But Hesketh and Horsfield were then up to 11th and 12th positions, Roy being 34 min 25 sec in arrears, with Noel $3\frac{1}{2}$ min. behind him. Kinsey was 22nd, Alf Long 25th, Hall 35th, new boy Nathan Smith, on a 500 ohv BSA, 38th.

Moore took Lesar before Ladysmith and led into that control. Wolfe was 5th, Hesketh 7th, now 26 min behind and Horsfield had snatched back nearly two minutes in 41 miles, clocking in there a mere 25 sec after the Excelsior rider! Kinsey was 19th, Hall 28th and Harris up to 35th.

Now riding close together for miles, Roy and Noel sped across the wretched 66 miles of "nothing at all" to the siege town, to take 3rd and 4th positions on the half-way position board. The leader was still Moore, but his lead was now cut to 16 min 20 sec - and he had started almost an hour ahead in Durban! Forty-one seconds after Roy came Horsfield. What a race! Kinsey was 12th, Leishman, after a great ride, 18th, Young had battered his Sunbeam through into 19th position, Hall was 21st and Harris 28th. One of these looked the likely winner, if all went well for them on the second day's run. But anything could happen and it usually did in this race. The following morning a heavy mist hung low over the Drakensberg range, making an already difficult section doubly dangerous. Despite the perils that faced them as they raced through the enveloping clouds, there were no mishaps, but speeds were naturally down. For all that, Hesketh cut his deficit at Volksrust to 10 minutes, but right on his tail was the New Imperial. Surely never in the whole history of the Durban-Jo'burg races had two competitors ridden together all the way from the coast, going into all the controls within minutes, and sometimes seconds, of each other and riding miles and miles abreast. (It was a good thing for them there was little or no traffic on the roads in those days and no cattle taking siestas round blind bends!)

A few miles out, Hesketh roared into the lead and left Lesar rapidly behind. Now the "bigger bangers" were making their presence felt on the Transvaal plateau. But Charlie Young, who had been going exceptionally well, packed up with a sick motor at Paardekop, just when he was about to make his big challenge. He had had the speed to do it, as his record time to Newcastle demonstrated.

With the smell of the kill in his nostrils now Hesketh pulled away from Horsfield. His Manxman was quicker than the New Imperial on the flats and he reached Standerton (307 miles) two minutes in front of Moore and three ahead of Horsfield. Meanwhile Eric Schroenn, from Maritzburg, had whipped his amazingly fast side-valve Ariel through into the reckoning, lying just ahead of Kinsey, and - what's this? - Leishman was in ninth berth and going great guns.

At Heidelberg, with 28 miles to go, Roy was almost four minutes to the good and pulled out all the stops for the final leg. Here misfortune struck Jock

Leishman who retired with a broken chain. The order of the others hadn't changed much and it was obvious that one of the flying 250's must win. So it was at City Deep. Lying flat on his tank, the boy from "Sleepy Hollow" roared over the finishing line to get the checkered flag of victory. His time of 6 hr 51 mm 41 sec was a new record for his class. Only 4 min 46 sec later came his "shadow", Horsfield, to finish a very worthy second. Sidevalvers Schroenn and Kinsey took the third and fourth berths. Up the Banana Boys!

Roy's had been a great victory and no one was happier than his Dad to welcome him when he stopped. Now he was the toast of Johannesburg, the hero of the whole sport-loving public of South Africa.

(Note: In the excitement of the victory let's spare a thought for poor Ferguson, whose 250 ohv OK ran out of fuel a quarter of a mile from the finish. Pushing in from there he lost six places and Fred ("Fireworks") Taylor piped him for 15th place by one yard!!)

After the victory celebrations, Roy and Eric Schroenn rode back to Maritzburg, where a further celebration had been planned. The City was rightly very proud of its two racing sons. Schroenn, it was recalled, had won a 10-mile foot race from the Royal Agricultural Show grounds to the Star and Garter Inn when he was a lad of 10 years old, and had broken a leg when he crashed in the 1934 DJ. Such things were being spoken of among the supporters gathered round Oxenham's Bakery, where "Old Man" Hesketh had furnished a clubroom for the City MCC. It was dark when the heroes arrived



to be thumped joyously on their backs and have their hands almost wrung off by their jubilant club mates. But when Schroenn, turning to "Pop" Hesketh, asked, "How am I doing between Ladysmith and Newcastle?" there was mild consternation. Then they learned that he had crashed outside Howick when blinded by the headlights of a car and had sustained concussion. Unknowing, he had remounted and ridden on to Maritzburg-all the way down Town Hill in the dark, too! A doctor was sent for and Eric attended to at once. Fortunately it was a mild case, but it could have had serious consequences. With the Kimberley Handicap Races in the offing, Roy entered his personal two-seater Ford in the car race and his now famous Manxman in the 100-mile race for motorcycles. In the latter, there was a high-class field of 43 competitors. In the race, Roy had a great duel with Joe Sarkis, on a 250 Sunbeam, and finished seventh. The event was won by a novice from Pretoria riding under the nom-de-plume of "D Williams". The bandages that swathed his face were not further disguise, but were worn because of injuries.

"Williams", who surprised everybody by recording the fastest lap, turned out to be Darryl Allam, well known later when he moved to Durban.

For the car race, which had produced 13 entries, Roy had Roy Harrison as his riding mechanic. Among those lined up against him were "Mario" (Bugatti), Doug van Riet (Indianapolis Stud) and Billy Mills (Mills Special). Mario and Van Riet were early leaders, driving in spectacular fashion, but their lurid cornering inevitably forced them into the pits for tyre changes. Roy, whose big, bulky two-seater was capable of 90

mph, drove steadily-for Hesketh-and finished second, less than three minutes behind the winner, Whitehead, in a similar car. Bothner completed the Ford 1-2-3. Van Riet got fastest lap, his 4 min 57 sec effort being 25 sec faster than Allam's 500 Norton.

The first Durban Grand Prix was held in August that year over 14 laps (150 miles) of the then new Bluff Marine Drive circuit. This was the first race ever within the Durban city boundaries and drew a crowd estimated at over 20,000. To Cliff Menzies, riding a 172 James, went the honour of leading off the racers. He had 43 minutes start from scratch men Cohen (BSA) and Harris (Triumph) on 500's.

Hesketh went out early when he missed a gear and his valves had an argument with the piston. It looked as if Alan Herschell, on the Fred May 172 James, would win, but with eight laps to go his carb came loose and he finished holding it with one hand! The eventual winner, Jock Leishman, off the 1 min 30 sec mark, rode in spectacular fashion on his 500 ohc AJS. Second was exjockey Herschell, the little man with the big heart (and hot hand), with Percy Jackson, Burton Kinsey, Schroenn and Sarkis following them across the line in that order.

Don Hall had retired after this tank ran dry on the last lap. Then in fourth position, he didn't know that refuelling en route was allowed, and both Herschell and Schroenn were said to have done so in the later stages of the race.

With the 1936 SA Junior TT in mind, Roy bought a 350 Excelsior and, together with Don Hall, the old TT master, travelled to East London, where the races were staged on the 12-mile Prince George Circuit. This was Roy's first attempt in this classic scratch event. There was a small but select field of 11 starters, Hall and Galway being pre-race favourites. Roy was down on maximum but hung on grimly to fifth place, making up for his loss on the straights by some desperate work on the round-abouts.

Hall made the pace from the start, with Galway challenging, but not far behind was Harold Brook on a KTT Velo and Johnny Strydom. So they went for lap after lap, with Hall breaking the lap record three times, but when he stopped to refuel late in the race, Brook took the lead, with Hesketh now right in his slipstream. Galway went out on lap 16 and, despite another record lap of 81,01 mph Hall couldn't catch the three ahead and the crowds were treated to the exciting spectacle of the first four men on the finishing straight together, the only time that had happened in the TT since the inception of the series in 1924.

Brook and Hesketh repeated their performances in the 100-mile handicap that followed, and Roy was buoyantly joyful about his prospects for the DJ, which was only six weeks away. The roads were magnificent, tarred for many miles and the old hands must have found it difficult to believe this was the same course over which they had battled in the years gone by. If they had need of further proof of the progress in road surface and machine performance, they had but to examine the handicaps!

Herschell, who was No 1, had been allotted 1 hr 53 min start on a 172 two-stroke James from scratch-men Kinsey (Norton), Sarkis (Sunbeam) and Scott (Triumph). In 1925, the last-named rider had piloted a 172 Francis-Barnett in receipt of 4 hr 42 min start from back marker Du Toit's 989 cc Harley-Davidson, and Scott was nearing Ladysmith before Big Bill pushed off from Mayville!

Perusing the handicaps for a possible winner, the gents with the pencils and the record books ticked off No. 10, Jarman, as the most probable winner. With a start of 1 hr 20 min he appeared to be "thrown in" if he had a clear run on his 350 s/v. AJS. They skated over all the other names till they came to Hesketh, now a "known quantity", as his bracketing on the 7 min mark with Cohen (AJS) and Harris (Excelsior) showed. The great old Alf Long was two minutes behind on a 500 Ariel, with Allam on a Triumph. Then came the evergreen Charlie Young (Sunbeam) and popular new favourite Jock Leishman (AJS), who left 2 minutes before the big three "A" class riders.

Don Hall and Johnny Galway were notable absentees, being away in the Isle of Man for the TT races.

At three minutes past seven the flag fell and Herschell hopped into the

saddle of his 172 James-Villiers and the crowds lining Mayville Hill watched the little man start the 20th race in the series. Hesketh scared the wits out of everybody at Westville Hotel when he used all the road, including the wrong side, to avoid a car, but that did not appear to have unsettled him, for he clocked 44 minutes to his home-town, the fastest of the day and 45 seconds quicker than Leishman on the 500 AJS.

The pace was the hottest ever set and, with records being shattered in nearly every class, the watchers at the score boards in Durban were kept at a high pitch of excitement and anticipation. There were "Oohs" and "Aahs" as the sign writer posted up the times for the intermediate stages. The incredible little Herschell clipped 6 minutes off the tiddler class record to Newcastle. This was a great run, for he had literally stood from Howick when his saddle broke. To make matters worse, outside Newcastle the nipple came off his throttle cable and he was forced to operate it by hand.

Hesketh, who had started No. 61, was 10th arrival at Newcastle and had taken 6 minutes off the 350 ohv time. That man Jarman was 7 minutes to the good, Lesar a cool 15 minutes better than the 200 two-stroke record, Schroenn and his fabulous side-valve Ariel had swiped 10 minutes off his old time, and Joe Sarkis, who had gained 2 minutes on Kinsey and 3 on Scott, was 3 seconds inside the 500 ohv record time.

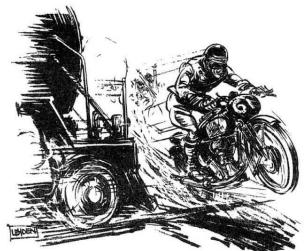
Perhaps the biggest surprise, however, was Cliff Menzies' run on Roy Hesketh's 250 Excelsior. He had equalled the time Roy established on his winning way the previous year. It almost took one's breath away to think what the second day's run would bring. What did provoke audible gasps was Jarman's casual statement that he "had been taking things easy, and was going to open up when he got into the Transvaal!"

Next day the game Herschell struggled along manfully, holding the throttle wire in one hand, yet in spite of the pain, added to the discomfort of the broken saddle, led into Standerton (307 miles). Here Lesar passed and had No 1 position to Heidelberg, where time spent repairing a broken chain cost him the race. Jarman was now in full flight - the reverberating roar of the big boys behind shattering the stillness of the veld.

Hesketh, meanwhile, was belting along as no one had ever done before and enjoying himself in the process. Away in the distance, as he headed for the Natalspruit railway crossing, he could see the crowds moving about. He told me later that, as he approached, he said to himself, "These people think they have seen this crossing taken fast! Well, now they will see it taken as it has never been taken before." Sliding right back on the tail pad, Roy flattened himself on the tank, chin touching the sponge rubber cushion, eyes just glimpsing the road which curved away to the right. He ducked his head, then lifted it again to peer over the steering damper and the forks, which bobbed up and down over the bumps.

Now the mob was jumping and gesticulating as if in a frenzy. "Here I come, folks!" The Excelsior took off across the railway lines. "Whoosh! Heavens - a train!" (In Roy's words, "Jock, I missed that train by the thickness of the paint on my rear number plate! The crowds had been waving to warn me of an oncoming train!")

So near - and yet not so far to Jo'burg and fastest time ever in the 23 years history of the race. His 6 hr 5 min 2 sec beat the old 350 record by 33 minutes and the all-comers' record by 26 min 27 sec but it was not good enough to give him victory. That went to the wily Jarman, who had taken 26 minutes off his class record by getting to City Deep in 7 hr 8 min 8 sec. Third was



Lesar, who, despite his stop, took a fantastic 38 minutes off the old 200 cc two-stroke time with a 7 hr 36 min 66 sec run. In this race of records the first six had all established new records. Schroenn, Sarkis and Herschell also being champions of their classes. "King of the Road" was Hesketh, but it was not all joy and jubilation. The race was marred by the first fatality in the series, when Jock Leishman was killed near Ladysmith, his machine running into a boulder when he crashed off the road after a tyre burst. A gloom settled over all, for in the short time he was in the game he had endeared himself to old and young. Immediately after the race, Roy confided to his Dad that his greatest ambition was to win the Jo'burg race from the scratch mark, so a 500 cc Norton was ordered from the Bracebridge Street factory. Little did he know that the 1936 race was destined to be the last of these great inter-town races and his time, therefore, an all-time record that couldn't be beaten. The days of racing on public roads was over, and though there was regret that such a famous old classic was to be abandoned, it was generally agreed that the decision to ban racing on public roads was the right and wise one. (All aspiring young Heskeths of the present day please note that the open road is NO place for racing. The only place for high-speed racing and record-breaking is on the tracks, where racing is properly controlled.) When East London put car racing on the map with the SA Grand Prix races, Roy started thinking in terms of four wheels, and wrote asking Pat Fairfield, the well-known British driver (often mistakenly called a South African because he lived for some time in the Cape) to get him something suitable in raceware. A blown "R" type MG was sent out. It looked wonderful when uncrated and assembled, with its slim mono-posto body, independent suspension, pre-selector gearbox and huge quick-filler caps on the radiator and fuel tank. It looked the "last word" in "baby" racing cars, but if ever a car deserved the description "white elephant", this was it-even if it was blue. (In fairness to all, let it be noted that the MG factory ceased racing soon after this model was produced, and so was not able to tackle the eradication of the faults which showed up with its usual thoroughness.) December 1936, found Don, Roy and myself headed for the south - destination Port Elizabeth for the P.E. "200" and East London for the car Grand Prix. The roads through the Transkei in those days bore the notorious distinction of being the worst in the Union, but if ever anyone wanted to witness a demonstration of skilful driving, he had but to swop places with me in the front seat of the then famous white Oxenham's Bakery van and see Don and Roy at the wheel. The big Chevy van was loaded with the Norton and Excelsior machines, boxes of tools and luggage. A handful, to be sure, but the way they drove that slewing, drifting, sliding vehicle on the loose dirt roads, one might imagine it was a Mini Minor. As soon as we got to Port Elizabeth, Don took us straightaway on a conducted tour of the course in the van, pointing out the main features and the correct line as he went. Later the Rudge agent introduced us to Chris Heidemann, local rider of a very swift Rudge, and asked Don to show him the way around next morning during official practice. Getting out to The Deviation early, we at once noticed from the faces of riders and officials that something was seriously amiss. They soon broke the news. Young Heidemann had decided to do a quick

Under a blazing summer sun a huge crowd of about 60,000 lined Kragga Kamma's 20 miles, making a day of it in real picnic style, and the 2nd PE "200" started. Roy showed that he had absorbed all Don had taught him about the circuit by settling down immediately, and it looked as if he might win,

further added hazards.

lap before Don arrived and, while negotiating the winding 7-mile full-bore section of the Cape Road to Greenbushes, ran head-on into a car travelling in the opposite direction of the course. It took us a long time to forget that tragedy and it also further emphasised why high speed racing on open roads had to stop. Racing is dangerous enough on closed circuits without

till he ran short of oil near the end of the race. Johnny Strydom led Galway and Sarkis home, Roy being content with fourth place.

Don took another of those early knocks that he received from time to time at PE, going out on lap 2 with mag trouble while having a ding-dong duel with Joe Sarkis. (For those interested in maximum speeds, Roy's Excelsior touched 90 mph, Hall and Sarkis, on 350 Nortons, 96, and Galway's 500 Norton 105 mph. These were fastest in their classes in 1936. Back in East London, Roy started in the 3rd SA Grand Prix, held again on the long Prince George Circuit, but he retired after a lap when his supercharger ceased to blow, and ended as a spectator watching Pat Fairfield win in a 1 litre blown ERA, from local garage proprietor Buller Meyer (1089 cc Riley) and Capetonian F Chiappini in a similar car. Hans Reusch in the huge 3.8 Alfa-Romeo was next, and boyish Bernd Rosemeyer brought the awe-inspiring, thunderous Auto-Union home fifth, after turning in a record-breaking lap at 115 mph. One who fell by the wayside but impressed all by his impeccable style was Dick Seaman (Delage), to become famous later as a team-driver for Mercedes-Benz. For the SA TT at Easter, Roy, Don and I did things more comfortably, going

For the SA TT at Easter, Roy, Don and I did things more comfortably, going down to East London for the motorbike races by car instead of van. Once more Roy's handling of his car made me realise how accomplished a driver he was. Many people imagined him to be a wild young man at the wheel. If they had seen him in his two-seater Chrysler (equipped with tyres having a ribbed tread only) negotiating the notorious Umzimkulu Hill, wet and muddy after a rain storm, they would have changed their minds. Past a dozen vehicles lying stranded all over the mountain road, waiting to be extricated by a team of oxen, he threaded his way with masterly skill. No lead-foot this boy. His magnificent demonstration of sensitive throttle control was a delight to watch.

In the Junior TT the field got away at the fall of the flag, all except Roy, whose Manxman oiled a plug, losing nearly three minutes before he could get going. Then he put in some quite hair-raising laps to catch Hall and Galway, out in front from the Rhodesian Welsh and Strydom. Galway dropped out and Hall started knocking off record laps, so that it looked all over bar the filling of the cup with bubbly.

Roy then pulled in to re-fuel. A third place seemed assured if he kept going. Pit helper Bill Booth filled him up and, just as Roy started to push off, somebody shouted, "Your chain's off!" There it was, lying on the road. Somebody behind the pit whispered that he could get another chain from a machine nearby, but Roy preferred the honest way of racing and retired. Next bit of excitement was when Don Hall failed to make his scheduled appearance. "Out - piston trouble" was the official announcement.

Now it was anybody's race. Reeve and Welsh started fighting it out. On the last lap the former led by 50 yards. It was going to be an exciting finish after all. Yes, there they were coming down Potter's Pass going "like the wind". On they came until, within a few hundred yards of the finish, Welsh slowed - out of fuel! Reeve took the checkered flag. Welsh took a walk! Fastest lap went to Don Hall at 82,7 mph.

This year both Junior and Senior races were run on the same day. Imagine 400 miles at an average of over 80 mph! That was enough to sort the men from the boys. Denny Hawes, that beautifully neat stylist from the Cape, streaked into the lead. Galway, Strydom and Hesketh followed. Hall was fifth, slowed by a partial seizure, but he thereafter proceeded to break the lap record five times, pushing it up eventually to 87,909 mph and going on to win by two minutes from Hawes. Roy, whose Norton wouldn't function on full throttle, did well to take third place some five minutes behind. I was in the pit with Bill Booth and we gave him the OK signal, being afraid that if we gave him his position "3", he might blow things up trying to catch

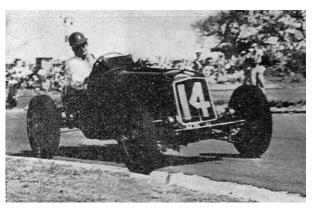
the two ahead. During the year Roy started in three more motorcycle races and finished in none, going out early through one fault or another.

In the 1937 Natal "100" he rode his Norton off the scratch mark and put up fastest lap on the Alexandra circuit at 73.8 mph. In the Bluff Grand Prix he again conceded starts to all and didn't complete a lap. But what he did complete was quite breath-taking to watch, and the manner of his crashing in the narrow, winding road that dropped down from Wentworth to Jacobs was a sight never forgotten. Hitting a bump, his Norton stood on its rear wheel and Roy was thrown right back over the tail pad.

He fought the bucking machine for some distance, then decided discretion was the better part of valour and stepped off, counting himself exceedingly lucky to get away with a bad bruising, for his leathers were completely torn away at all the trouser seams. Sliding along on his back, he had watched the Norton turn end over end, demolish a pile of bricks and smash into a tree. The bike looked a sorry mess but Roy was more interested in getting enough safety pins to make his return to the pits as dignified as possible.

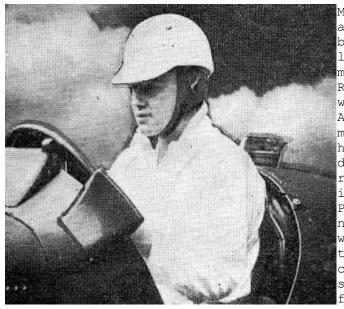
It was another first lap retirement in the Kimberley 100. Not exactly Roy's happiest year of racing. But it did underline one thing and that was that Roy was not mechanically minded, for here as well as in Maritzburg, he had gone out through paltry mechanical failures that a quick check-over with a spanner could have prevented. In this he was not alone, for many of the greatest racing stars-Tim Hunt, to quote an example-knew little of things mechanical.

So to the second Rand Grand Prix Car Races on the Earl Howe circuit outside Johannesburg. There were 20 entries and Roy shared the limit mark with Doug van Riet on a much modified supercharged Baby Austin, Buller Meyer and Vic Berrange (1089 cc Riley's) and Woodhead in a very sleek home-built single-seater MG. Six minutes after this lot came a bunch led by Count "Johnny" Lurani 1100 cc Maserati, Norman Wilson (ERA), McNicol (Talbot) and E P Roberts (Bugatti).



Some five minutes later started two more South Africans, Govoni (Bug.) and Roderick (Maserati). While on the scratch mark were eight Maseratis, led by Luigi Villoresi, Pietro Taruffi, Eugenio Siena and Everett (1500 cc's). "Mario" (Dr. Massacuratti) 3700cc, Du Toit and Hartmann's 2500 cc plus Raymond Mays and Earl Howe in 1500 cc ERA's.

The course was very short (2 mls 369 yds), the turns tight, making passing difficult, but van Riet was in his element from the start, going to the front followed by Woodhead. Hesketh and Lurani. That was the position after 10 laps (25 mls). Roy was hanging on to the Austin and took the lead on the 28th lap, with Berrange third, Lurani fourth, then Meyer, Mario, Siena, Everett, Howe, Mays, Villoresi, Taruffi and Hartmann. Reports from round the course said that Roy's driving was hectic in the extreme, which just showed that they didn't know what to expect from our baker boy!



Mario of the flailing arms was also going like the wind in the big Maserati, and had set a new lap record of 2 min 7 secs (68,89 mph). Then, with 10 laps to go, Roy signalled that all was not well, and slowed, allowing the Austin to assume the lead once more. The oil pressure in the MG had dropped considerably and Roy decided to ease off and finish, rather than blow his motor up. We in his pit held our breaths, but Pop Hesketh kept saying, "This is no good!" When he asked him what was no good, he told us he'd have to get Roy a better car as he couldn't stand the sight of his son being passed by so many faster cars. But Doug, and Roy

held on to their positions right to the end, to the disgust of the visiting Italians with their latest Maseratis, who, despite all they did, could not catch the South Africans.

One voluble Iti said to me afterwards that he'd "never come back to South Africa, to race against drivers with £10 motor cars." I didn't like to tell him that some of the "£10 car" drivers' lap times were as fast as some of the fancy imported ware!

The finishing order was:

1st, Van Riet (749 Austin), 1 hr 59 min 50 secs. 2nd, Hesketh (749 M G), 2 hrs 0 min 11 secs.

3rd, Lurani (1100 Maserati), 1 hr 56 min 38 secs.

Berrange, Wilson, Mario, Siena, Mays and Howe were the other finishers. Roy was happy. We in his pit had been amazed to learn that he could ease off after all. It was something we did not think he was capable of doing in a race. Pop Hesketh at once started making inquiries about a new car for Roy, preferably an ERA. It isn't everybody who is lucky enough to have a Dad like that. But, if Roy was down-hearted about his performances on the twowheelers, he got immense pleasure from his latest car



when it arrived. As Pop had promised, it was a blown ERA of 1500 cc. Just for the record here is its history before being sent out to South Africa. The third E.R.A. to be built, it was completed in 1934, being fitted with a 2 litre engine and later a 1500 cc version. That year with Raymond Mays at the wheel it took the world's standing start record for the kilo. In 1935 Mays added the record for the climb at the famous Shelsley Walsh and took first place in the 1500 cc race at Eifel. Then, with C E C Martin at the wheel two years later, it won the 1500 cc class at the Avus track and set a course record at the Poole speed trials. But, let's not forget that it was four years old when Roy got it, and, naturally, had none of the refinements of the cars of Mays or Howe. (After the war, Basil Beall bought and raced

it with success, and it is now in the hands of the perennially young Gordon Henderson.)

Reconditioned by the Weybridge Engineering Co., it arrived here in immaculate condition. There wasn't even a spanner mark on a nut anywhere to be seen! People who saw the first essay in the dark red car when Roy wound it up on the deserted Richmond road, say it was a sight they'll never forget. The car needed the whole road width as Roy, unused to the light and direct steering, gave it the gun, and didn't ease up till he'd mastered it. His eyes were sparkling and his face creased in smiles as he braked to a stop. This was a real man's motor car at last. The time for departure for East London couldn't come quick enough.

The fifth GP was a scratch race. No £10 motor cars! For the 1939 event there were eight Maseratis entered, to be driven by Luigi Villoresi, Francesco Cortese and Piero Taruffi (Italy), Armand Hug (Swiss), Louis Garard (France) Buller Meyer, Steve Chiappini and Mario (SA), ERA's, with Lord Howe, Peter Aitken (Britain), Peter Whitehead (Australia), Roy Hesketh (SA), and a lone Riley in the hands of Fay Taylor, the English woman who used to ride motorbikes on the dirt before turning to four wheels. That was a field to satisfy even the most fastidious race fan.

Practice showed that the Villoresi-Cortese Maseratis had the legs of the others and Roy discovered that his was the slowest of the ERA's on the straight. Howe's newer type car was some 10 mph quicker, but that just made Roy try all the harder on the corners.

On race day, Villoresi jumped to the front at once, followed by team mate Cortese. Believe it or not, by dint of some real Hesketh-style-cornering, Roy held third place for 10 laps! averaging 98 mph - 1,66 mph slower than the leading man. Villoresi put in a lap at 102 mph. Hesketh got in one at 100,49 mph but tore his tyres to ribbons and had to pull in to change wheels, bringing his average for that one lap to a paltry 80 mph, dropping him to fourth place.

Mario stepped up his lap speeds and with one at 104,27 mph, the fastest of the race, consolidated his third place. Nothing Roy could do - and believe me he tried plenty - could change that order, and he finished a worthy fourth, an outstanding performance. For he only held that place through superb work on the corners.

The result was:-

- 1. Villoresi av. 99,66 mph
- 2. Cortese av. 98,60 mph
- 3. Mario av. 97,802 mph
- 4. Hesketh av. 96,307 mph
- 5. Howe av. 95,245 mph
- 6. Hug av. 94,791 mph

Strangely enough, though Roy had been racing on motor-cycles for five years, his Dad had never seen him perform at Curries Fountain. Roy kept asking him when he could come and watch at the grass-track, situated below Durban's Botanical Gardens. It happened that on the day he did decide to spectate a special novelty event was included on the programme. Roy was scheduled to ride in a "special match race" against young Charlie Young then 10 years old. Charlie, on a little 98 cc Excelsior, which Charlie Senior had cut down for him, was given a generous start and Roy proceeded to put on a hair-raising display in his attempt to make the race a close one. Going through the Esses on the last lap with little Charlie and the finishing line just ahead Roy overdid things and looped the loop, breaking both wrists in the tumble .How strange is fate, to think that he got his only severe injury in a race in which nothing was at stake!
Roy took a long time to recover, and when his bones would not heal he was put on a diet of milk and oranges. For a man of action, the period of

inactivity was most frustrating but eventually he was fit and raring' to get back in the seat of his car again. Mindful of his run at East London, there was thus great interest when he entered his ERA for the Fairfield Handicap to be held on the Snell Parade in Durban.

Among the 37 entries were the fiery "Mario" in a Maserati, Don Hall in a Halford, the winner of the first car race ever held in Durban (Bluff 1938), Les Miller driving Bill King's MG, Max Miller in the big Plymouth (winner of the Coronation "100"), Tom Scheckter, the East Londoner in a 1500 Riley, Peter Whitehead, the Australian, Bill



Ross in Mickey Hooper's Bugatti that formerly belonged to Earl Howe and Eddie Hall, the famous British race driver handling a big Bentley. Shelton Bowyer was No 1 and early on Don Hall, Tony Starling, Zank and Grierson Beall were prominent.

On the 15th lap, Noseworthy led from Hall and Bruin. Hesketh was really giving the crowds a thrill around 80 mph, stepping this up later to 84 mph, the fastest lap of the race, a speed nobody, be it noted, ever touched in subsequent races on the seaside circuit. At half distance, Don Hall, driving in his immaculate unhurried style, led G. Beall and the fiery Hesketh, who had, by this time, been given the "ease up" signal by his pit attendants, and with 12 laps to run, Roy was in the lead.

Going down to Sunkist the E.R.A. hit the railway crossing lines standing proud in the road an almighty wallop. The petrol tank fractured and fuel started to pour out, necessitating unscheduled pit stops to refuel. The unruffled Mr Don Hall chalked up his second car race win. Allen, on an SS Jaguar, was second, Hesketh third .Schlarchick (Plymouth), fourth, Grierson Beall (Austin) fifth, and Basil Beall (Riley) sixth. That was to be the end of Roy's racing career for the storm clouds had gathered across Europe and were soon to be seen rising over Africa.

When War broke out he tried to enlist in the SAAF as a pilot and for the first time regretted that he had left school without matriculating, calculating it was better to spend the extra years from JC learning the Baker's Trade - to take over his Dad's business when he grew up. But the OC at the Flying School stated, "No Matric - no Pilot's Course." Roy was despondent. Five times he drove to Pretoria, begging to get into the Air Force. All to no avail. The OC was adamant, telling Roy he was wasting his time in trying.

In desperation, Roy returned some weeks later, but, instead of going in to see the OC, decided to sit on the roadside outside the Camp and wait till the OC came by. His patience was rewarded, for he did appear later in the day, and, recognising Roy's big smiling face, stopped. This was Roy's last card. "Sir, won't you please give me a chance? You say I must have my matric to learn to fly but I have been flying for months. (This was true. He had even competed in a Rhodesian Air Rally a month after his first solo.) Many boys with matrics will never be pilots - as you know for yourself. Won't you please give me a chance?"

LIEUTENANT K.O. HESKET H DIN SEPTEMBE 1944 AGE 29

The OC couldn't resist any longer and Roy was thrilled, more than he'd ever been, when he joined the SAAF. Working hard on his courses he qualified as a pilot and became an instructor for a time at Standerton. But all the time he was yearning to get up North where the real action was taking place, and, when a call was made for Bomber pilots he volunteered. Passing all his tests at Saldanha Bay, he was posted up North in 1944.

Two months later, while flying as co-pilot in a Ventura, another plane in the flight swung out of formation and cut the bomber's tail off. It was a sad, sad ending for one who fought so gallantly when the going was toughest, and when the end came he had nothing to fight with.

Tailless the plane was uncontrollable and it spun into the ground killing all four occupants. He was 29 years

old.

To the younger generation the name, Roy Hesketh may mean nothing more than the name of the track near Pietermaritzburg. If this story will serve to preserve the memory of the man and his deeds, the writer will have been rewarded.

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Roy Hesketh married Flora Mary Hirst in Durban in 1942 which his parents were not happy about. Upon his

death Flora sold his cars and then married a travelling salesman in Durban.

When you drive up Town Hill, or Howick Road as it is known, there is a fork off to the right into Hosking Road there



is a small traffic triangle.

The Hesketh home was in the fork between the Howick and Hosking roads and after the death of Roy Hesketh there was a very well tended rose garden in the triangle and memorial bench on the side of Hosking Road, so you could sit and look at the roses, which Mrs Hesketh used to do. Some time ago the bench and the roses went and there is sadly now no Roy Hesketh memorial there anymore.