

## Preface

### The Austin Seven – The Motor for the Millions

By Ron Burchett

The Austin Seven, or the “Baby Austin”, as it became affectionately known, was the brainchild of Herbert Austin, who in the early 1920s foresaw a market for a “proper” baby car to bring motoring within reach of the working class masses, whose only means of transport at the time was a motorbike and sidecar outfit, if they could afford that.

Austin had produced his first attempt at a motorcar in 1896 and had formed the *Austin Motor Company* in 1905. By the time World War I broke out in 1914 his factory was turning out large numbers of cars and lorries. After the war, he decided to concentrate on the medium size Austin Twelve, but by 1921 sales of cars were dwindling as the Great Depression loomed.

When the Austin 7 was first released in 1922, a lot of people, including some members of the motoring press, thought that it was a joke, but they soon changed their minds when the new little car was found to equal and out-perform much larger vehicles on public roads with its hill climbing ability.

Success came very quickly on racetracks too, and by 1923 sporting versions had achieved a number of notable successes: road racing at Brooklands, where it won its first race, and then at Monza in Italy. And of course, in March 1928, an A7 driven by Captain Arthur Waite won the first Australian Grand Prix at Phillip Island in Victoria.

A7s were built with progressive improvements but maintained the basic simple design up to the outbreak of World War II in 1939, by which time close to 300,000 had been made. The A7 was the catalyst for the birth of many other car companies and models.

BMW moved into car manufacturing with the take-over of the DIXI factory, which was building A7s under licence in 1928.

The French Rosengart Company also built a version of the A7 under licence, while in America a small factory at Butler produced the “Bantam” or American Austin. This company produced the successful prototype for the World War II “Jeep”, but its production was handed to Willys and Ford because American Austin did not have the manufacturing capacity. They received a contract to build Jeep trailers as a consolation prize.

Jaguar also had its origins related to A7s. A small firm, Swallow Sidecars, branched out into car manufacturing by putting their own Swallow bodies on the chassis of A7s and several other makes, including Standard. By 1932, they had progressed to building their own car, the SS1, which eventually evolved into a Jaguar.

Around the same time, the Japanese company Datsun made a small car remarkably similar to the A7 and debate continues to this day as to whether or not this was a copy.

The first A7s arrived in Australia in Sydney in 1924 and I have spoken to several people who can remember early models without electric starters.

A7s have been used for purposes far exceeding the original intention of their design. A number of adventurers have driven them on epic journeys around the World, around Australia, from Sydney to Cape York, from Buenos Aires to New York, to the top of Table Mountain, South Africa, on Antarctic expeditions and even part way up Mount Everest!

Now 80 years on, there are still large numbers of the cars kept on the road by enthusiasts. Apart from their almost universal quaint appeal, their practicality stems from a simple design, which is easy to work on and maintain. There are support clubs for owners spread right across the World and a very good network of spare parts suppliers ensures that the cars are kept running.

It is little wonder then, that early in its life, the car was dubbed, “The Motor for the Millions”.



In 1954, Max Bowden towed the family caravan to Wallaroo with his A7.