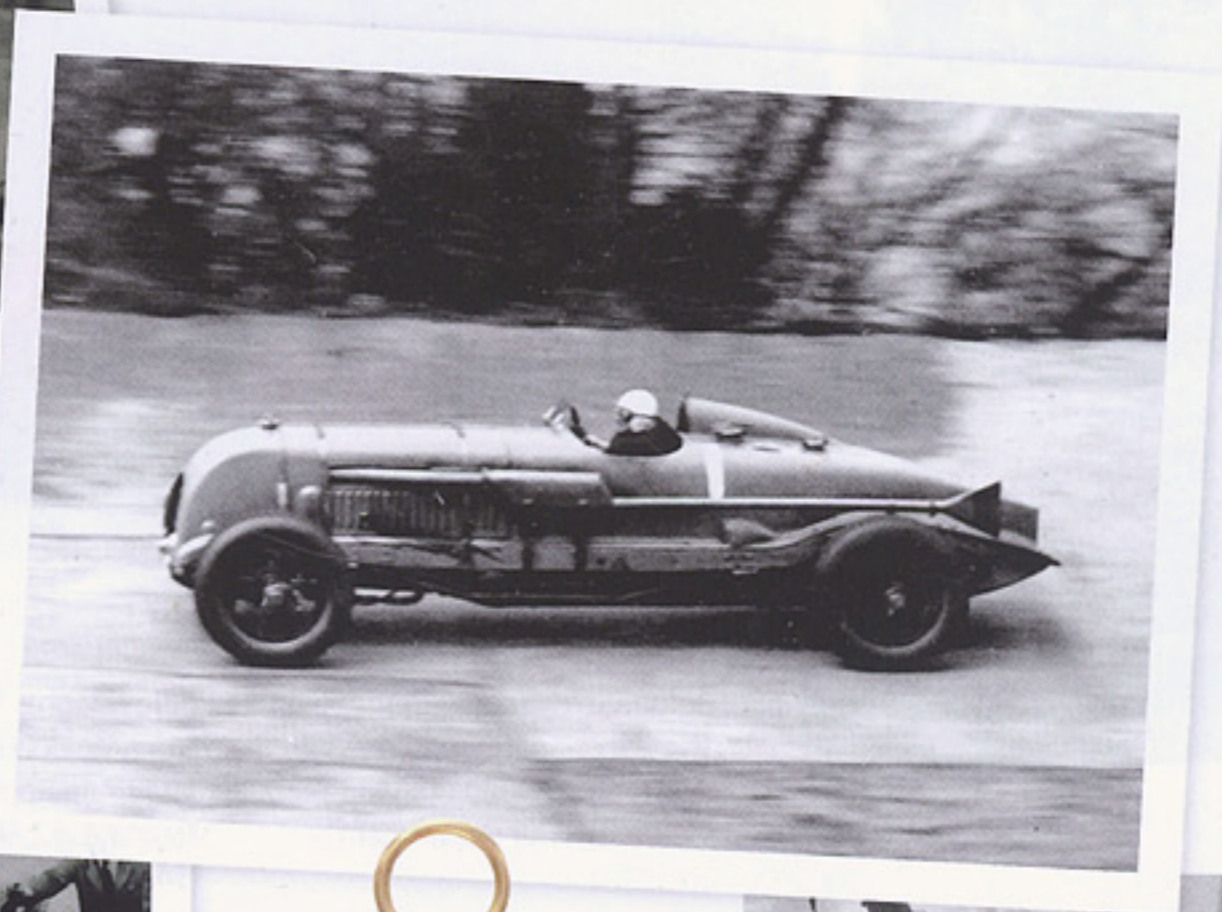


# Escape mechanism

George Daniels made a mark with his twin passions: watches and motor cars. **Richard Williams** describes the boy from a humble home who conquered the world of luxury





Above left: George Daniels driving Sir Henry Birkin's Supercharged Racing Single-Seater in the 1980s;

Left: The ex-Maharajah of Bhavnagar 1929 Bentley 4 1/2-Litre Four-Seat Tourer  
Estimate: £350,000 - 450,000 (\$550,000 - 725,000)

Centre and below, Sir Henry Birkin at Brooklands in the 1930s

Right: George Daniels, one of the world's greatest watchmakers, at work

At five years of age, George Daniels came upon a broken watch. When he managed to prise open its casing, the child of an unhappy, impoverished suburban home discovered the world and his destiny. "It was like seeing the centre of the universe," he remembered. Almost half a century later, Daniels would be recognised as one of the world's great watchmakers, celebrated for devising the co-axial escapement, a technological advance among the great leaps forward in the history of horology.

Watchmaking is a craft requiring infinite patience and precision, and each of the 37 timepieces Daniels built by hand between 1969 and his death in October 2011 at the age of 86, took 2,500 hours of work. The only parts he did not manufacture himself were the springs and the glass. Some of the watches have changed hands for hundreds of thousands of pounds apiece, and Daniels' success in selling his work to collectors was such that it enabled him to indulge in his other passion: classic motor cars. These were carefully selected to create a collection of distinctive and historic machines that were kept in regular use on road and track.

It would be hard, in the field of mechanical engineering,

to imagine a contrast much greater than that between a Daniels watch and the jewel of his motoring collection, the brutish single-seater Birkin Bentley, built in 1929 in the workshops of Sir Henry 'Tim' Birkin, one of the great British racing drivers of the day, to compete on the Brooklands track in Surrey. This legendary beast is a masterpiece of unashamed muscularity, its supercharged engine cloaked by cherry-red bodywork intended to set a schoolboy's pulse racing: the cowed nose; the lengthy bonnet with its row of louvres; the cramped cockpit, dominated by a gigantic steering wheel; and the elegant tail, shaped by an intuitive, if optimistic, notion of aerodynamic theory.

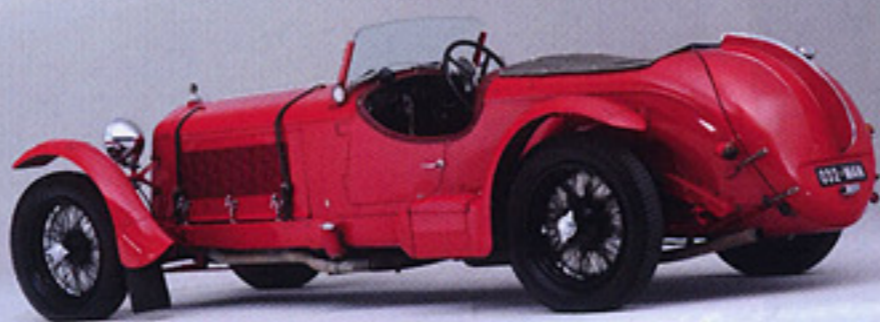
Time is the preoccupation shared by the Bentley and Daniels'

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**"His childhood in north London had been so miserable that his mother sent him a letter apologising"**

watches. Birkin commissioned the car with the intention of breaking the record for a lap of Brooklands Outer Circuit, a vast banked concrete speed bowl set amid the woods of the stockbroker belt. His ambition was achieved in 1932, when he won the *Daily Herald* trophy for the fastest driver of the meeting with an average speed of 135mph for a lap.

For Daniels, motor cars represented a world of luxury far removed from his background. His childhood in north



**Below left:**  
The Single-Seat Birkin  
team car,  
Estimate: Refer Department

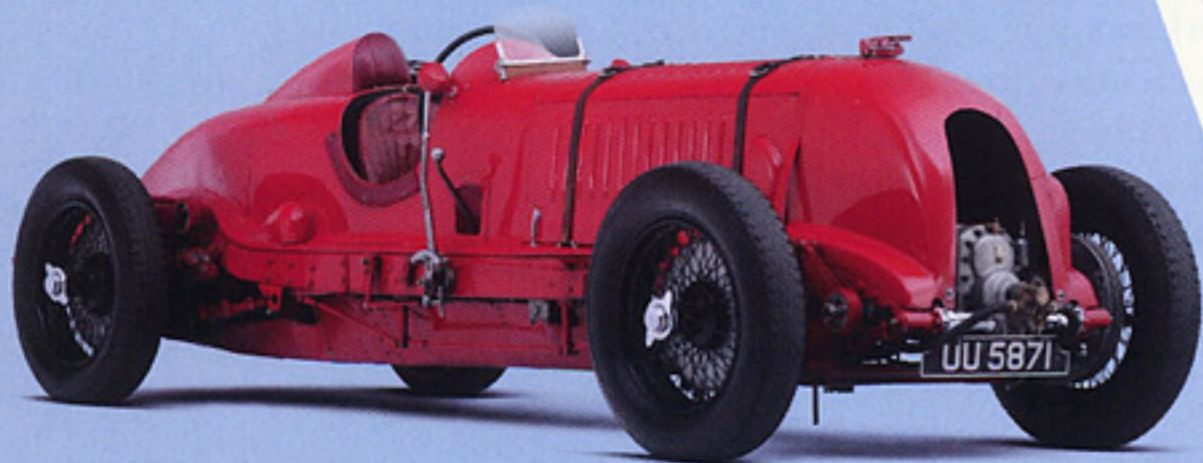
**Below right:** The ex-1932 Le  
Mans Works Entry,  
1932 Alfa Romeo 8C-2300  
Estimate: £2,500,000 - 4,000,000  
(\$4,000,000 - 6,500,000)

London had been so miserable that his mother, on her 90th birthday, sent him a letter apologising for it. Born in 1926, he was one of 11 children: there were no clean clothes for school, no birthday presents. His father was a drunk, prone to violence. His mother, a former scullery maid, had grown up without being exposed to affection. "My mother could not understand anyone kind or good being appreciated," Daniels wrote in his self-published autobiography, *All in Good Time*. "Good people were regarded with suspicion or ridicule, while to be kind was simply to be stupid."

If living well is the best revenge, he certainly got his own back on his dismal origins, although it took time. At 14 he started work at a mattress factory while soaking up all the information he could find about watches and watchmaking; before long he was earning extra money by repairing neighbours' clocks. Conscripted in 1944 and stationed in

Egypt, he made enough from mending the watches of his fellow soldiers that he had no need to draw his army pay, which he saved for his return to England. Demobbed at 21, he took a job with a watchmaker in Edgware and used his savings to buy the bicycle of his dreams, a hand-built Hetchins.

A study of serious horology at evening classes would bear fruit. He set up on his own as a watch repairer and was soon able to indulge his interest in fast cars, initially with an MG. His first Bentley was bought in 1956 for £100 from a former dance-band trumpeter who, having lost his teeth, had become a second-hand car dealer. The restoration of the dilapidated 1924 laundelette occupied hours of Daniels' time until it was completed to a sufficiently high standard to win him prizes in concours d'élégance. He would sell it for £800 in order to buy, for less than half that sum, the more exciting 4.5-Litre sports model with which he began his long racing career.

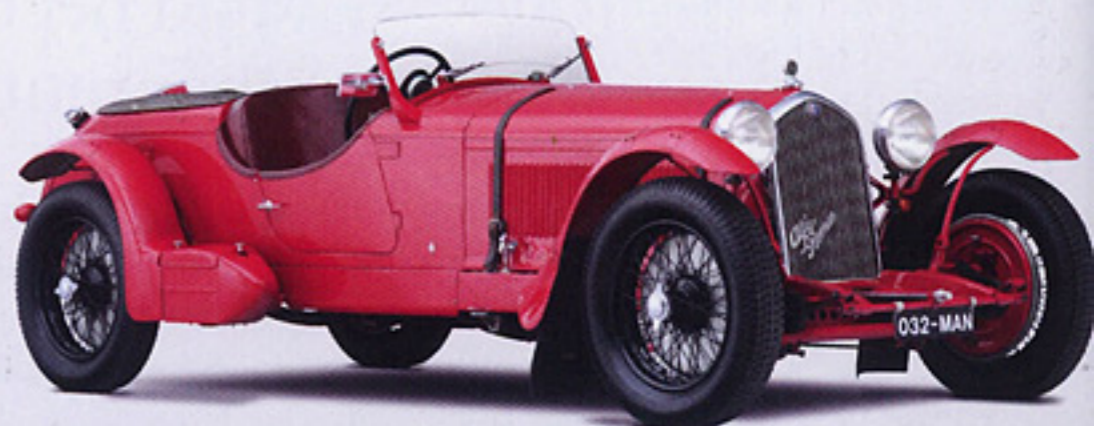


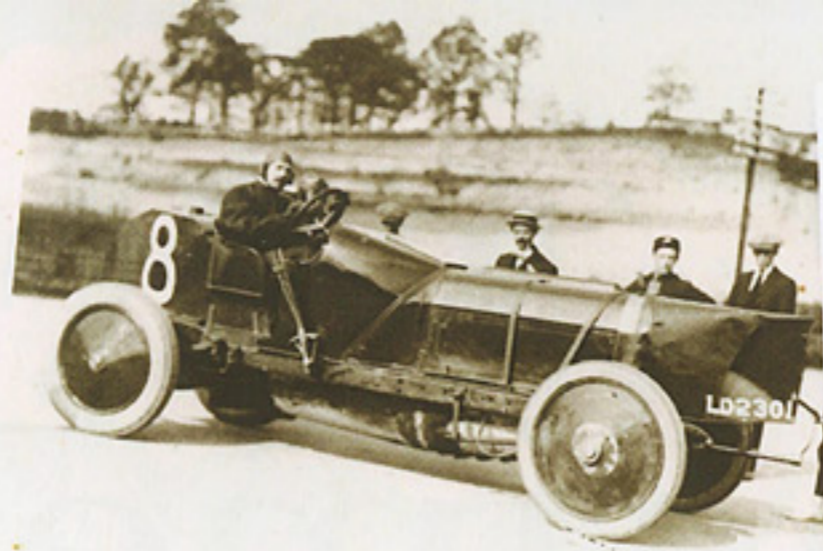
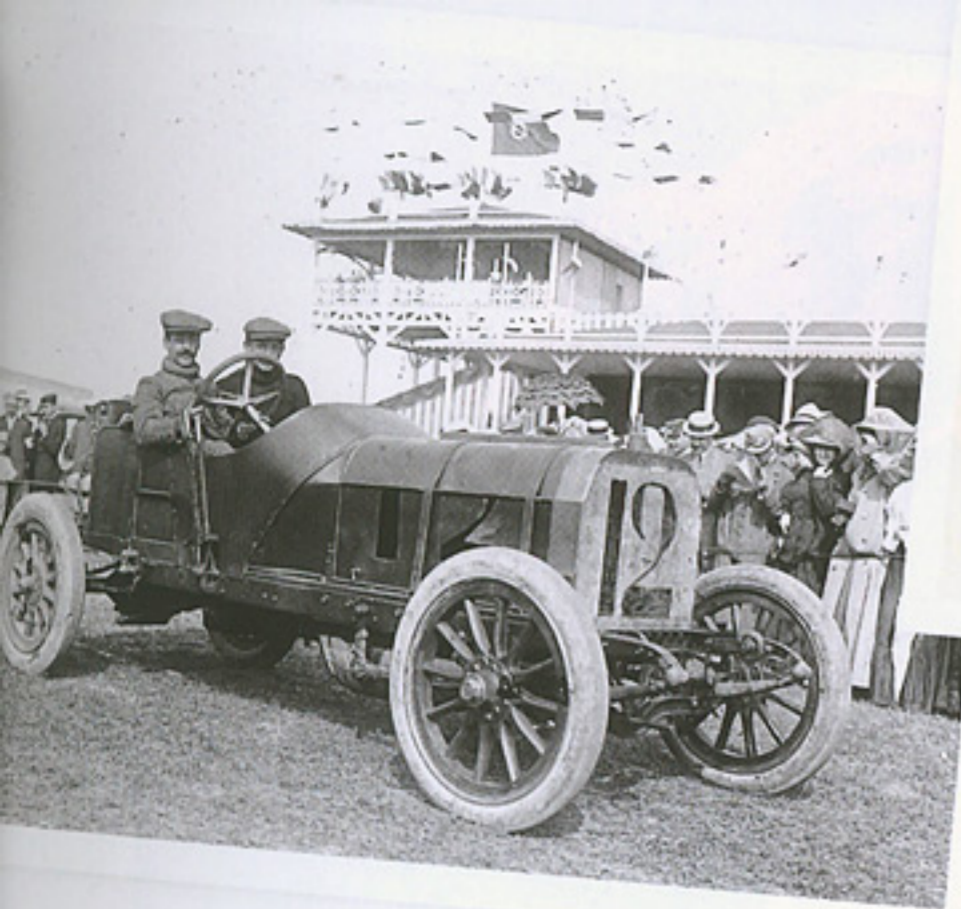
### Birkin Bentley

Built in 1929 to race at Brooklands by Sir Henry 'Tim' Birkin with backing from the heiress Dorothy Paget, this imposing single-seater first broke the Outer Circuit record in 1930 with a lap at an average of 135mph, raised two years later to just over 137mph. Its final race at Brooklands, against John Cobb's Delage for a prize of 100 sovereigns, saw Birkin prevail by a fifth of a second. The car was sold to Daniels by the widow of its previous owner, who had been at its wheel during a race at Silverstone when he stopped at Woodcote Corner. He was found to have died of a heart attack.

### Alfa Romeo 8C 2300

The most rakishly handsome of 1930s Italian sports cars, the Alfa Romeo 8C 2300 could be used either as an ultra-fast touring car or in the most prominent events of the day. Daniels' car was raced at Le Mans in 1932 by Earl Howe and Tim Birkin before being rebodied as a drophead coupé for road use by Giuseppe Campari, the grand prix driver and part-time opera singer. Upon Campari's death at Monza in 1933, the car passed into the hands of Marshal Italo Balbo, an ally of Mussolini, who used it for ceremonial parades. It passed through many hands before Daniels commissioned a rebuild to its original Le Mans specification.





**Below left: 1908 Itala 100hp  
Grand Prix Car**  
Estimate: £1,500,000 - 2,500,000  
(\$2,500,000 - 4,000,000)

**Below right: 1954 Bentley R-Type  
Continental 'Fastback'**  
by H.J. Mulliner  
Estimate: £380,000 - 450,000  
(\$600,000 - 725,000)

It was through the cars that he met Cecil 'Sam' Clutton, a founder member not just of the Vintage Sports Car Club but of the Antiquarian Horological Society. Clutton introduced Daniels to the world of high-end watchmaking, and particularly to the work of the Breguet company, on which Daniels would become the acknowledged expert. Clutton bought Daniels' first watch, and introduced him to other collectors. But Daniels chose his customers with as much care as he selected his bicycles and cars. "I never made watches for people if I didn't care for them," he said.

The recipient of virtually every honour the horological world could bestow, and ultimately recognised for the patented invention that enabled mechanical watches to function without the use of a lubricant, Daniels gradually expanded the collection of automobiles kept at his home on the Isle of Man. Bentleys formed the core, but there would also be the

great 1908 Grand Prix Itala, a famous Alfa Romeo raced by two intrepid Englishmen at Le Mans, and the remarkable 1907 Daimler Roi-de-Belges open tourer. Daniels kept the Daimler in exactly the condition in which it had left the hands of its only previous owner, the Earl of Craven; when one of his employees attempted to clean the tarnished copper fittings, he was swiftly instructed to desist and as a result the car, like all Daniels' vehicles, retains a rich patina of age and loving usage.

*Richard Williams is the chief sportswriter for The Guardian.*

**Sale: The Daniels Collection**  
Goodwood Festival of Speed, Sussex  
Friday 29 June  
Enquiries: James Knight +44 (0) 20 7447 7440  
james.knight@bonhams.com  
www.bonhams.com/cars



### Itala

When Daniels took a car to a race meeting or a parade, it was never on a trailer. For the centenary of the 1908 French Grand Prix, he roared up at the wheel of his 100hp Itala, a survivor of racing's Heroic Age, whose erstwhile rivals were arriving from museums without turning a wheel, as if they were pieces of porcelain. Three of these cars were entered by the Turin factory for the 1908 race, held over 10 laps of a 48-mile course laid out on the public roads around Dieppe.

### Bentley Continental

No car ever embodied the description 'grand tourer' more convincingly than the Mulliner-bodied R-Type Bentley Continental, easily identified by its elegant sloping tail. It would be many years before Bentley produced another car even half as covetable. The first owner of George Daniels' 1956 C-series car was Sir Frank Taylor, of the Taylor Woodrow construction company, who opted for the most desirable specification, with manual transmission and lightweight bucket seats. Daniels used it on his many trips to Switzerland while negotiating with local watch manufacturers on the application of his revolutionary co-axial escapement technology. This perfect car is finished in a perfect colour: Air Force blue.

