

Saint Helena's Number 1



The Number 1 in 1935

Recently whilst idly browsing photo's of sevens on the internet, I happened across a black and white image of an RK Saloon with distinctive white '1' on the radiator (shown above). Interest peaked, I followed the link to the website, to try to find out more about the car, the result being quite astonishing. The website I arrived at was www.sainthelenaisland.info, an interesting, informative and entertaining website about this remote outpost in the South Atlantic Ocean, famous for, amongst other things, being the place where Napoleon Bonaparte lived out his final years in exile. The story of the car in the picture, as covered on the website, was far more than I could have imagined, and I hope that you will enjoy my retelling of the story here.

The notion of motorised transport on Saint Helena was initially met with strong opposition, in fact in 1919 an ordinance was passed prohibiting their use, which initially went largely uncontested. By the mid 1920's interest was growing, and the subject became more widely debated. Opponents maintained that the island had gotten on fine with horses and donkeys in the past, and that the islands steep and winding roads were unsuitable for motor cars anyway. It would be 1927 before, debate still raging, the ordinance would be repealed and the import of motorcars made lawful. In 1928 100kms of roads were prepared for the coming traffic. Though it was actually, 1929 before the first car took to the roads of Saint Helena, This car was imported by the islands most enterprising inhabitant, Mr Humphrey Solomon, it was registered with the number '1', and as will now be clear, is the 1929 RK Saloon in the picture. The car was sold to, and run by a Mr Withecombe, and was fondly referred to as 'The Number 1'. Within a year of its arrival the number of cars on St Helena had risen to 14, and there were also 5 lorries.

The website has this lovely account written by a Mrs Hilda Benjamin, recalling a chance meeting with 'The Number One' when she was a girl.

“It was just coming on dark, when I first saw the headlights of the car travelling down Constitution

Road. I was 15 years old, and living at Maldivia House at the time. I asked our house keeper, Maggie Francis, who it was and realising it was Mr Solomon's number 1, I ran as fast as I could down the road to St. John's Church and met the car just as I reached the corner. Mr Peter Brooks was driving the car that night, and I asked if I could have a ride. He agreed, and drove me down to Reagons where my Grandmother was living. When the ride came to an end I thanked Mr Brooks and felt proud to have ridden in number 1."



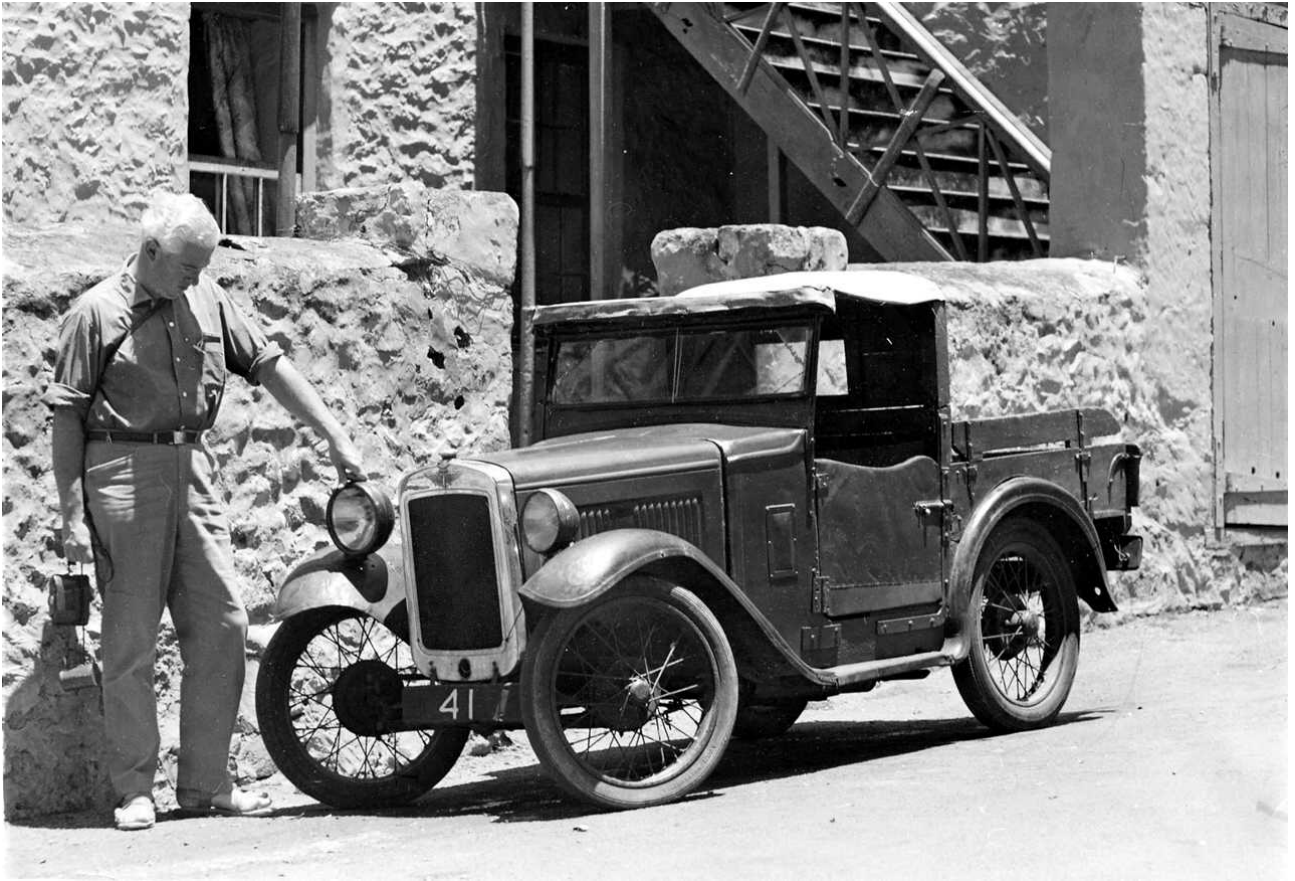
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A still from the 1962 film 'Island of Saint Helena'

In 1962, a film unit visited the Island, the resulting half an hour film 'Island of Saint Helena', is available on 'YouTube' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BO5xxrWLowg>), and features footage of 'Number One' being driven through the streets (from 8:56). They also took a number of stills, and captured two more 'Sevens' on the island.





The most recent known Photograph of 'The number 1' thought to be the 1970's

John Turner, who manages the website, put me in contact with his son Andrew, a reporter for the local newspaper 'The Sentinel', who emailed me with the following.

“I’ve been trying to trace number 1 for the last 2 months but am not pulling up much. I can tell you that there are currently no running Austin 7s on the island, which is a great pity. It’s been a bit of a dream of mine to find this car and get it restored, with the full intention of driving it around the island.”

Sadly since this contact, Andrew's research has turned up bad news. Though the car was still around into the 1980's, it has been described as having been 'burned out'. With this knowledge it is suspected that the remains have since been scrapped. Without confirmation though, it's always possible it is still out there, here's hoping this isn't the end of the story. Either way here's to 'The Number 1'.

Huge thanks go to John and Andrew for their assistance in creating this article, and for allowing the reproduction of the information on the sainthelenaisland.info website.



A Saint Helena Stamp part of a series celebrating the Island's early vehicles.
(Image from austinsevenfriends.com)