



Fuel For Thought

Landspeed Louise

Once In A Lifetime

Books like this one don't come along very often. They are a rare breed, mainly because the author first needed to live a momentous, cutting-edge adventurous life before sitting down to pen a revealing, insider's tome.

"Jet Blast and the Hand of Fate" by John Ackroyd (ISBN 978 0 9544357 8 3) is just such a book. If the name sounds familiar that's because "Ackers", as he is known to friends, has been involved with, or responsible for a great part of many world records, attempts, fix-it projects and general "gee-whiz" stuff.

During a recent spring visit with Ackroyd and Mike Horne (ThrustSSC team member) on the Isle of Wight in the south of England, I bought John's 288-page hard cover book that had only days ago arrived from the printers. Invited into his inner sanctum, Ackroyd dazzled me with his astonishing hoard of land speed racing technical data, background material and photography – all meticulously filed and cross-referenced by hand.

Yes, by hand. He's managed to get to 71 without ever using a computer – everything he has designed was drawn by hand, with pencil and eraser on a drafting table. No television either. No email. I wondered if it bothered him to have a telephone and fax machine.

Before you get all uppity and dismiss Ackroyd as some wonky, but very fit, dinosaur, consider this: John has had a hand in more than 2 dozen projects that most of us would give the world to be part of just one! A quick summary breakdown shakes out like this: 4 World Land Speed cars; 2 water speed boats; 2 airplanes, 1 gravity racer; 2 world record bikes; 3 electric cars; 1 hydrofoil (the first, by the way); 7 world record balloons; 2 cars; 1 rocket ice record; 1 outer space toilet.

Sipping tea kindly brewed up by Horne, I sat on the floor mesmerized as Ackroyd pulled file after photo after ORIGINAL drawing out as we segued at random through land speed racing subjects. If the subject came up, John instantly produced documentation, in some cases details I was unaware of on a project I thought I knew inside and out. It was like a magician pulling rabbits...

no, scratch that, like releasing one bird after another from a silk scarf!

"I wrote the book," Ackroyd told me sitting on the floor with me surrounded by a pile of historically significant photos and drawings, "to tell the story behind some of the world records, about the people and what it took to get there."

He does not disappoint. Although thoroughly capable of being able to write in perfect "engineer speak", Ackroyd's prose is intimate and welcoming. The reader will find it is as if he is in the room sharing the story with you, not giving you a sermon from high atop Mount Speed.

Generously sprinkled throughout are a multitude of technical tidbits that provide insight in ordinary terms about how particular problems were discovered and resolved – or not! The story is personal and revealing.

We discover that his military dad was more absent than attentive to young Ackroyd, that after a privileged childhood with servants in India he took to running into the street to watch the buzz bombs hit during WWII and that his unquenchable thirst for adventurous projects (read: no stable job) eventually wrecked his marriage.

Through it all he kept coming back to the Isle of Wight (IOW), especially in the summer to take up as one of the "Deck Chair Boys" – something that continues today – and riding his beloved Hercules bicycle, he's got four others as well, in his tidy and tiny garage workshop dominated by his "frogeye" Sprite – another IOW creation.

His design of the 633MPH Thrust 2, driven by Richard Noble, and of hospitable cages to hang under giant circumnavigating

balloons are, of course, great achievements, but I was taken aback by the cosmic crapper. A spaceship toilet is as essential as tight trajectory when you launch people toward the stars. The detail drawings in the "Waste in Space" chapter are as fascinating as they are amusing. Give me gravity any day!

I'm no balloon expert, but you'll also find some head scratching stories about the folks who like to separate from terra firma suspended under giant gas-filled bags. As part of the recovery team for Virgin

Atlantic Flyer, Pacific Flyer, Earthwinds and Virgin Global, Ackroyd chased down the big floaties in the Sahara, along the "loneliest road in the USA", on iced roads of the Northwest Territories and Manchuria, among other exotic locales.

This "boy senior" has been places and done things that kids dream of and many adults lack the intestinal fortitude to try. Jet Blast isn't his first book either. In 1984, Ackroyd published "Just for the record", a 72-page soft cover book that tells the story behind building Thrust 2.

This little six-inch by eight-inch book was so crammed full of specs that successful Australian drag racer Rosco McGlashan used it as his design and build manual to construct Aussie Invader, his jet-powered world record challenger. This single act endeared him to a stunned Ackroyd who would later lend a hand to help McGlashan in his speed attempts.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all in the book is the rendering across two pages of Steve Fossett's absolute land speed record project. For as tight-lipped as the Marathon Racing Team has been since buying the former Spirit of America from Craig Breedlove, it stopped me cold when I saw the car I had helped build more than a dozen years ago. Now morphed into modern fighting form, I never lost faith in that car, only the man. I'm hoping that by the time you read this, Sonic Arrow will have had its shakedown runs.

What impressed me most in the book was Ackroyd's approach to every single project. Regardless of the level of his involvement, John devoted himself to helping every group achieve their goals. Even when faced with bitter defeat, he found something positive to extol with an infectious, sincere enthusiasm and is no doubt one of the reasons so many have called upon him for help.

But he is a speed junkie fan as well. When, in 1999, Richard Brown brought his rocket-powered motorcycle streamliner to Bonneville, Ackroyd telephoned the late Don Vesco and the pair drove up to the salt



Bitter cold inflation



The 362mph Aussie Invader



Sammy Miller – 144mph



Dreams go down on paper. Drawing Thrust 2 in the Ranalagh kitchen. May 1978



Setting the 633MPH record



John Ackroyd & Sir Richard Branson in the capsule

together just to watch. Well, if you knew either of these characters, then you already know they did more than just spectate.

Jet Blast, chock full of color photos mostly taken by Ackroyd himself, can be yours for 29 pounds sterling, but with today's miserable exchange rate than means you can expect to shell out \$60 for the

book. Save on overseas shipping costs by ordering from www.carttechbooks.com. Search by title, or ID #: RL578.

Note: Photojournalist Louise Ann Noeth is the authoress of the award-winning book, "Bonneville: The Fastest Place on Earth," a complete historical review of the first 50 years of land speed racing now in its 6th printing. For more details and to order, go to: www.landspeedproductions.biz.

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Wendover, Utah looking east over the Salt Desert, 1963



Richard Brown's 350mph rocket-powered motorcycle streamliner



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When the love affair gets serious.



Fast Friends: "Dad and I haven't always agreed on everything. You know how dads are, always preaching about stuff like do-it-right, take care of the things you love and enjoy your accomplishments. Turns out he's right, especially about keeping our rides in top condition. That's why we both agree on using 3M products - the same ones the pros use. And it's cool that they won't put a serious dent in the allowance."

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