

A Tale of Two Men:

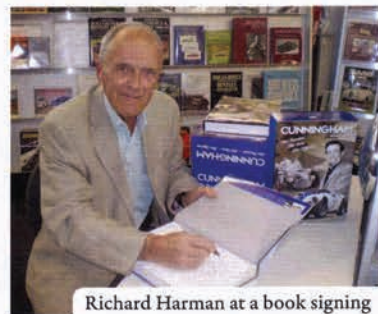
Briggs Cunningham
& Richard Harman

Editor's note: In March I was approached by one of our readers, Richard Harman, who asked, "I wonder if you may be interested in this story – my 10 years' work to produce a complete and definitive book about the all-American racing driver Briggs Cunningham?" There followed a correspondence between us and much to Richard's surprise, one of our regular contributors is a motor car enthusiast who had heard of Briggs Cunningham and was delighted to have a chance to meet Richard.

How can you compare two men with such widely differing characteristics, but united in a love of motor sport?

The men in question are Briggs Cunningham, once described as the most famous racer you've never heard of, and Richard Harman, who lives locally in Moseley. The link is that Richard has produced the most monumental history of Cunningham, a prominent racer in the USA and Europe from the 1930s onwards, and who competed several times against Jaguar at Le Mans but failed to achieve his ultimate dream of winning the 24 hour sports car race for the USA. The Cunningham cars' record at Le Mans was outstanding, with nine top ten finishes including two 3rd and three 4th places. Personally he drove ten times in the big race, with seven finishes.

Briggs and his first wife Lucie, a prominent yacht racer, were described as 'America's richest couple' at one time, and though it is not certain whether this was true, they were nevertheless fabulously



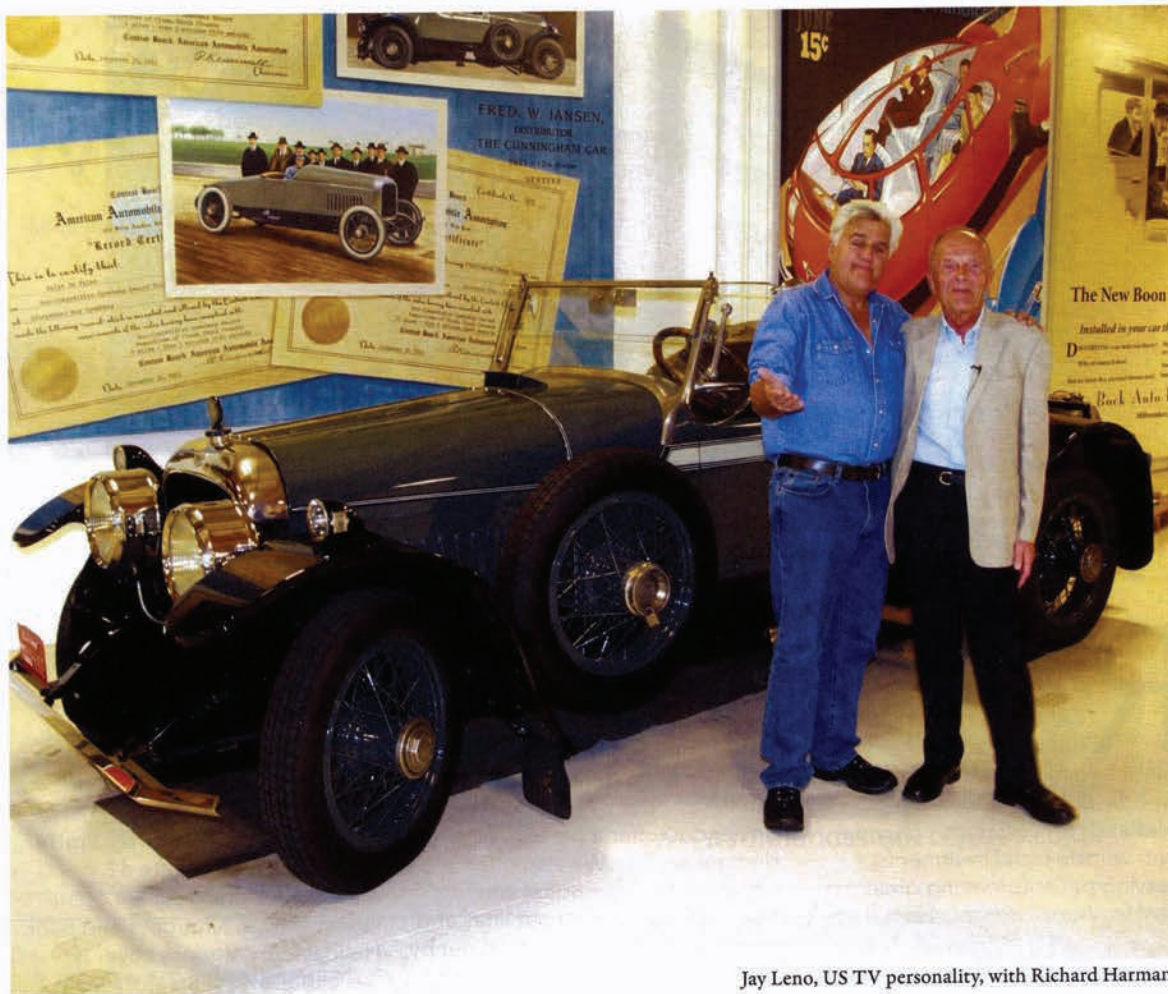
Richard Harman at a book signing

wealthy. Briggs' father had invested some money in two young Yale chemistry undergraduate roommates, named Proctor and Gamble.

Inspiration from a Dinky toy

As a child, Richard had a Dinky toy model of a Cunningham racer, and though all the rest have now gone, this one stayed with him, and literally fuelled his passion.

Richard has traced the Cunningham life history in detail – including such



Jay Leno, US TV personality, with Richard Harman

moments as the wedding present of a Mercedes-Benz SS being delivered to him in Paris, driven by Rudolph Caracciola, one of the greatest racing drivers of all time. A mechanic was supplied by Mercedes to accompany the vehicle, and he travelled in the back seat of this monster machine during the honeymoon.

The Briggs Legacy

Briggs' endeavour to win at Le Mans in the 1950s was ultimately unsuccessful – not because of a lack of racing skill and ability, but because he needed to manufacture cars to be eligible to enter. After a number of years of not making any money, the US tax authorities said that this was not a business but a hobby, so he was forced to withdraw. Thirty six cars had been built with a further 14 unfinished when the end came. Since then, there have been four re-creations.

The technical challenge of winning Le Mans was proving more and more difficult. Jaguar had the monopoly of disc brakes

- now thought of as universal, but an innovation at the time which helped to give Jaguar victories in 1951, 1953, 1955, 1956 and 1957. Cunningham later became Jaguar sales distributor in the United States.

The Cunningham legacy paved the way for later successful American race cars, including the Corvette, AC Cobra and Ford, the latter ultimately fulfilling the American dream of winning Le Mans with an American car and American drivers in 1967.

And the catalogue of road cars that Briggs owned is no less phenomenal than his racing stable. Apart from familiar names such as Rolls Royce and Bentley, the list includes some of the finest cars of any generation: Stutz, Hispano Suiza, Cadillac, Bugatti, Lincoln, Packard, Duesenberg, Mercedes-Benz, Jaguar, Maserati and Ferrari – as well as some of our more local products – Austin Mini Cooper 1275S, and Morris Minor. At one time, Cunningham had a major museum in California. If all the vehicles

he ever owned and raced were gathered in one place at one time it would be the best collection in the world – bar none.

And Richard's book?

The book is readable, though not a light read. In two volumes and running to over 800 pages, it is heavier than my kitchen scales can recognise! At a price of £225, it is not for the impoverished, but the wealth of detail is phenomenal, and a tribute to Richard's research and gathering of source material – over a period of more than 40 years. Writing the book took him almost ten years of full time endeavour. See what I mean about a love of motor sport?

Stephen Clapcott
GEM Contributor

Author's note: *Cunningham – The Passion; The Cars; The Legacy* is available from Dalton Watson Fine Books (daltonwatson.com) and most specialist motorsport book retailers.