



the
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Kathleen Coad Defries (aka Kay Petre)

May 10, 1903 – August 10, 1994

Nationality: Canadian

Raced between 1934 – 1938

Origin: Kathleen Coad Defries was born in Toronto, Canada in May of 1903. She moved to England during her twenties and at the age of twenty-nine she married the aviator Henry A. Petre and took on his name. Like other racers of the time, she traveled frequently to compete, including a trip to South Africa in 1937. Her racing career ended at Brooklands in 1937. While she was practicing for the 500 Mile race, racer Reg Parnell lost control of his car and hit her Austin Steven, causing her serious injury. She tried to race there again in 1938, but it was her last attempt. She died in Camden, London in 1994.

Early Influences: It is believed that Kay Petre's interest in racing was sparked due to her husband. An avid flier, Henry Petre was often leaving from Brooklands airfield in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and witnessing the motor racing occurring there, Kay may have decided to try her own hand at it. It was Henry who bought her her first car in 1933, a Wolseley Hornet Special, which she would end up racing in a few times before trying such cars as an Invicta, a Bugatti, and a number of Rileys.

Apparel: Petre was most frequently seen racing in her all-in-one overalls, with her initials embroidered just below the collar.

Racing Accomplishments:

- Participated in the Light Car Club Relay at Brooklands in 1934 as part of the Singer team with Sheila Tolhurst and Eileen Ellison. The team won the Ladies' Prize.
- Competed at Le Mans in 1935 with Dorothy Champney and earned 13th place (they drove a Riley Ulster).
- Hailed as the "Brooklands Speed Queen," Kay set a number of records racing a Bugatti and a Delage at Brooklands.
 - On October 26, 1934, she set a record lap speed at the Ladies' Outer Circuit, clocking 129.58 mph.
 - When Gwenda Stewart beat the record in August 1935, Kay beat Stewart's record that same day, clocking in at 134.75 mph in a 10.5 litre V12 Delage car.
 - It was the first time a female driver had recorded a lap over 130 mph at Brooklands (Stewart beat this record three days later at 135.95 mph).
- Set a new ladies' record at Shelsley Walsh hill climb in 1935 (drove a White Riley).

- She beat her own record time there in 1937, clocking in at 43.70 sec. – the record stood until Dorothy Stanley-Turner beat it in January 1939 with a time of 43.40 sec.
- Finished in 9th place at the Mountain Grand Prix, again driving a White Riley 1.5L. The race covered 10 laps and included 15 starters.
- Traveled to South Africa to race in 1937:
 - Failed to complete the South African Grand Prix or the Rand Grand Prix. She was the only woman to compete in the South African Grand Prix of January 1, 1937.
 - Earned 6th place in a Grosvenor race.
- Placed in 5th at the Coronation 100 Miles at Dorington in 1937.
- Earned 16th place driving at the Dorington 12 Hours in 1937.
- Inducted into the Canadian Motorsport Hall of Fame in 1995. Opened in 1993, Petre was among the first women to be inducted there

Life off the Track: Like many of the other female racers of her time, Kay Petre was a skilled sportswoman even off the track, excelling in ice-skating in particular. After her racing career came to an end when Reg Parnell's car hit her Austin Steven in 1937, she moved onto motor journalism. She also became the first woman named to a factory team when she signed on to work for the Austin works team, assisting them in the fabric designs and color schemes of their cars.

Interesting Fact: An article in the London Times Online details how Kay Petre helped teach British actor Peter Bowles (who has appeared in over 40 television dramas) how to drive in 1962. Bowles said that Petre was a friend of his wife's mother and that it was her who taught him how to double-declutch and helped fuel his interest in cars.

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Research and biography written by Hilary Resteck and Casey Schuster, graduate students at Indiana University/Purdue University Public History Department.