



OVER ICE, SEA AND DESERT, ONE MAN IS ON A MISSION TO

AIR FORCE

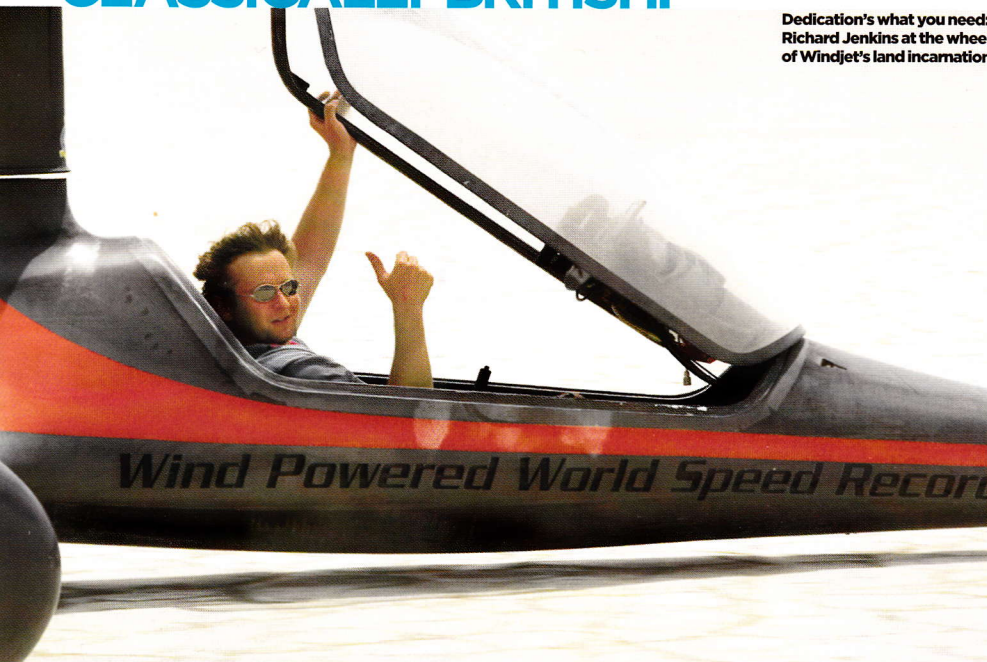
Vapour trail: Windjet in Smith Creek, Nevada, in June. The craft reached 107mph before 50mph gusts sent it spinning into bushes. There will be another record attempt in September

MAKE BRITAIN THE FASTEST COUNTRY ON EARTH AGAIN

DRONE

WORDS BY PHILIP WATSON | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREW MACPHERSON

RICHARD JENKINS IS A BRIGHT, ENTHUSIASTIC AND TECHNOLOGICALLY INGENUOUS YOUNG MAN WHO IS TRYING TO ACHIEVE SOMETHING AT ONCE REMARKABLY DIFFICULT AND CLASSICALLY BRITISH.



HE IS ATTEMPTING TO BREAK WORLD SPEED RECORDS ON LAND, ICE AND WATER, USING WIND POWER ALONE.

NOT FOR HIM THE MADCAP DERRING-DO OF STRAPPING A TURBO-JET ENGINE TO THE REAR OF HIS CRAFT, FIRING THE IGNITION AND SHOOTING ACROSS SALT LAKES, ICE FIELDS AND GLASSY SEAS. Jenkins is more original and 21st-century than that. He has designed and built three stunningly beautiful craft that combine personal research with the latest in Formula One and aeroplane technology. Named Windjet, the craft are sleek, unique and highly advanced. And they should enable the 28-year-old Englishman to become the fastest and most efficient naturally powered human being of all time.

With its 8m-high Union Jack wing, the Windjet land craft looks like a cross between a NASA Moon Buggy and an Austin Powers dream machine. It has, in fact, already unofficially broken the world land-sailing record of 116mph, set in 1999 by Americans Bob Schumacher and Bob Dill. In 2001, Jenkins piloted Windjet along the two-mile runway at RAF Waddington in

Dedication's what you need: Richard Jenkins at the wheel of Windjet's land incarnation

Lincolnshire at speeds up to 125mph.

Unfortunately, there were no independent ratifiers present. Undeterred, a year later, again at RAF Waddington, Jenkins smashed the (admittedly sluggish) British land record of 56mph with an official speed of 113.4mph, just three tantalising mph short of the Americans' speed.

"Windjet is a hugely powerful machine and pretty near the ultimate wind-powered vehicle," says Jenkins at his workshop in Lymington, near Southampton. If this makes him sound boastful, then the opposite is true: he is assured and determined, yet modest too. "If the conditions had been better, I know we could have gone faster – up to 150mph, theoretically. On ice, if everything is perfect, we could touch 200mph."

LIKE A FORMULA ONE CAR, THE LAND CRAFT IS HANDMADE ALMOST ENTIRELY FROM CARBON FIBRE, with Kevlar reinforcement that protects the pilot in a similar way to the "crash pads" in racing cars. It weighs just 400kg, despite being 9m long. The 7m-wide axle is

bookended by two American Champ Car wheels and tyres; another wheel at the front provides steering. However, the really inspired feature – common to all three Windjet craft – is the oversized aerofoil, a tailfin that looks more like that of a jet fighter than the traditional flapping sail of a land yacht or windsurfer.

It is this soaring, solid sailing, perfected over five years and 3,000 miles of rigorous testing and development, that powers the Windjet craft. Capable of generating 1.5 tonnes of thrust, the wing has three adjustable sections that turn sideways gusts into immense forward power – without toppling the craft over. In doing so, it creates propulsion of up to six times the prevailing windspeed on land and up to nine times that on ice.

"It's like driving a car with all the power of a Ferrari but with none of the subtleties and with someone else pressing the accelerator," says Jenkins. "The side-force on the wing is also the equivalent to that on an F1 car cornering at 130mph – except that with Windjet it's permanent." That can lead to particular problems with basic things such as stopping. The brakes can either catch fire on Tarmac or clog up on lakebeds. "It's like trying to slow down a car with your foot still on the accelerator," he explains.

For a vehicle without an engine, the craft is extremely noisy – there is the roar of the wing, the whistle of the carbon-fibre body, and the high-pitched whine of the tyres. It can also suffer from severe vibration, especially when it's sent into a sideways drift in an effort to slow down. On ice, where skates replace wheels and speeds are potentially even greater (the world record is 143mph), ridges, cracks and snow can make the ride so violently bumpy that it's often hard to focus. "It feels like you've clamped your head inside one of those paint-blending machines that they have at DIY stores," Jenkins says.

While the ride is smoother at sea, for which Jenkins uses a radically designed craft that has tested successfully but largely been kept under

The land craft

Construction

carbon fibre with Kevlar reinforcement

• **Weight:** 400kg

• **Dimensions:** 9m x 7m x 8m

• **Top speed:** 125mph (est)

• **0-60mph:** 3.5 seconds

• **0-125mph:** 10 seconds



wraps, the experience of speeding along even the flattest stretches of water, in almost hurricane winds, at upwards of 40 knots (the current record stands at almost 47 knots) is not to be underestimated.

"Some think trying to beat one record is enough to kill most people, but I didn't want to be a one-hit wonder," says Jenkins. "I know that the technology is applicable to all three records and I want the project to have a long lifespan and make more of an impact. There are plenty of people trying to break one record – and perhaps 15 or more serious challengers for the water record alone – but we're the only one trying to break all three."

While Jenkins plays down the risks and is at pains to stress that the craft is "phenomenally strong", wind speed record attempts are inherently dangerous. He has had several crashes and near misses. At a testing ground for new cars near Lincoln, he veered onto grass at high speed, smashed through a tyre wall and over a 10m bank. In June, halfway through a record attempt in a lakebed in Nevada, a sudden storm turned the bleached dry surface into slippery clay. Losing control at 106mph, Jenkins went into a series of spins for more than a quarter of a mile, ending up beached in the bushes that fringe the lake. "I went from 106 to zero in six seconds," he says, "but I think I was concentrating too hard to be scared."

JENKINS WAS BORN AND BROUGHT UP IN SURREY BY AUSTRALIAN PARENTS WITH AN ARCHETYPAL SENSE OF ADVENTURE. He grew up sailing, climbing, water-skiing and scuba diving, and was an RAF air cadet in his teens. He has piloted gliders and light aircraft, and driven rally and racing cars. Tall, broad-shouldered and square-jawed, he has the flaxen-haired good looks of an outback jackaroo. "Success is the combination of preparation meeting luck," he says gnomically. He's like a cross between Crocodile Dundee and Chuck Yeager.

He is also, of course, part of a great British tradition of speed record-breaking. Windjet connects Jenkins to such British heroes as Richard Noble and Andy Green of Thrust SSC, which set a supersonic land record of 763mph in 1997; sailor Ellen MacArthur; and, most of all, Donald Campbell, who held both the land and water speed records in the Sixties. The Windjet prototypes were tested in the same wind tunnel, at London's Imperial College, that Campbell used to develop his own craft.

Since then, Jenkins has managed to keep himself afloat through family, friends, business contacts – and his credit cards. He often refers to "the Windjet team", but in fact the project has a team of just one. At record attempts, he relies on the help of friends he made at Imperial College and in the wider speed-record community.

He has managed to raise more than £100,000 in cash and £250,000 in hardware, but still lacks a title sponsor. "Windjet is eco-friendly, fast, has media value and is about youth, enthusiasm and engineering," he says, his gusto almost causing him to swallow his words. "It baffles me that someone somewhere can't see the merits."

One person who did spot its worth was US adventurer Steve Fossett. Having heard that Jenkins had unofficially broken the record, the multiple world-record-holder saw a chance to add to his tally and approached Jenkins with a financial incentive. The figure quoted was as much as £250,000, but he turned the offer down. "I have great respect for the guy, but there was

a principle involved," he says. "I'm not in this to sell my soul to the highest bidder. I'm in this for the challenge – this is record-breaking for record-breaking's sake – and for what I've experienced along the way."

"I guess I am pretty patriotic, too," Jenkins continues. "I'm proud of the craft, I think British technology can lead the world, and this is my token gesture to put Britain back at the top. This is a record that is a genuinely difficult

IT'S LIKE DRIVING A CAR WHICH HAS ALL THE POWER OF A FERRARI BUT SOMEONE ELSE PRESSING THE ACCELERATOR

challenge, requires a lot of time to get right, and gives you a real sense of achievement. It's not how many baked beans you can eat in 30 seconds."

Jenkins gets another chance at the land speed record in September when he and Windjet return to the arid lakebeds near Reno, Nevada and await the right conditions. While the elements have worked almost uncannily against him over the past couple of years, he has every confidence that the world land speed record will soon be his.

"If I thought it was marginal that we could get the records, I would stop tomorrow," he says. "The water record is perhaps more difficult, but I know for a fact that we can do it on land and ice. Give me anything like the right place and right time and I'll break the records." His voice is racing now; his wind is up. "That's for sure. Totally possible. Without a shadow of a doubt." **📍**

Enquiries: www.windjet.co.uk