

[1] Early motoring days [Qy: "Those were the days"?]

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At a gathering of old-timers, pioneers of the motor industry, the idea originated, after much swapping of experiences when cars were highly-inefficient and unreliable contraptions and roads abominable, the suggestion arose that present-day motorists, knowing nothing of such matters, might be interested in them. Hence these memories.

In 1898 the motor car was just becoming a practical possibility. Only two years previously had the law been repealed under which the new road vehicle came under the same category as the traction engine with its man in front and speed limited to 4 m.p.h. But it had evidently come to stay. Therefore, having been in at the beginning of the cycle industry and now looking around for a fresh outlook for my energies, it was only natural to turn hopefully to the new idea; especially as it promised greater speed on the road. There were more weighty reasons at home for the urge; one major and two minor ones to be precise. The six hectic years of the cycle boom and subsequent slump had resulted in any accumulation against old age resulting from the former being most successfully swept away by the latter; and something had to be done about it.

How does one get a footing in a new industry, without any practical qualifications, or even any idea of how the thing works? [2] In connection with the cycle industry it was comparatively easy. A capacity to ride a little faster and farther than some other cyclists of those days coupled with a modest Press connection and some commercial experience, automatically brought offers of management in the then rapidly expanding cycle trade. But I could not by any standard be considered an authority in the new sphere. Still, Edge Jarrott Stocks and other cyclists were in, presumably on their ability to handle road vehicles at speed; why not I?

Having always held it an axiom that to be successful in handling any article commercially, some practical knowledge is necessary; my first halting steps were in that direction. Reference to my faithful "Encyclopaedia Britannica" disclosed the interesting fact that petrol vapour, when mixed with air and ignited, expanded with great rapidity, like steam; and I knew where the power came from! Then my [3] old friend Jack Stocks taught me how to handle his 2¾h.p "Ariel" motor cycle; and when I learned from a scientific friend that the usual 'mixture' of petrol vapour and air was roughly seven volumes of vapour to 93 of air, I felt myself fully equipped. Almost an expert, in fa[ct]. With an item of information like that at [my] command one can go far in practically unexplored territory. "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king".

There was however another very innocent-looking phrase in the formula which was often to prove my undoing and rob me entirely of any idea that I was an expert. "When ignited". Aye, there's the rub! Electricity as a means of ignition was only then in its infancy, and the details of the various forms employed were crude and unreliable, to put the matter mildly; very different indeed to the well-made and highly-efficient 'lay-outs' of the present day. It must be borne in mind that the motor-car at that period was only just evolving from the era of tube ignition with oil lamps outside the cylinders which constantly blew out in a wind (or even in a calm; the draught created by the car's own movement being enough) instead of keeping red hot as intended the small platinum tube protruding from the combustion chamber. Also [then] there were low-tension systems and whatnot to puzzle the uninitiated.

But I must not get ahead of my story. The troubles came later, as the depth of my lack of knowledge of electricity in any form was abysmal, anyhow.

A chance meeting early in 1899 with a young American over on this side of the Atlantic with motoring 'lines' to place, did the rest. In a trice I found myself pledged to handle the agencies of the "Mitchell" motor bicycle, the "Goodyear" car tyres, and a small motor. I was in the motor business!

[4] The scheme was simple – if it had only functioned according to plan. The motor-cycle was not only to assist in selling all three 'lines' by making possible more calls on prospective purchasers whilst at the same time demonstrating the efficiency of the new form of travel, but also to save railway and cab fares. The latter was an important item just then.

That I went for over four months without booking a single order of any kind is probably accounted for by the fact of most of the time being spent on the roads in the Midlands (where most of the new business was likely to be found) trying to get the "Mitchell" to go – or to keep going. The few people I did manage to call upon were no doubt not impressed by my usually dishevelled and overwrought condition on arrival.

In addition to the over-stretching leather driving-belt, which did more slipping than driving, the "Mitchell" was equipped with a very small and utterly inadequate dry battery. It would run for several miles then peter out. For the next hour or two my pedalling ability as a cyclist was fully tested in a vain endeavour to get the engine going. The engine was started by pedalling the machine – if the belt did not slip. But as a candid friend put it "brute force and ignorance" was not sufficient equipment for the task; my pedalling was in vain. Then for no apparent reason off it would go again, luring me on to further effort. On the many occasions that this phenomenon did not take place, it was a heavy machine for riding home push-cycle fashion. Usually it became a question whether I could arrive in time to relieve wifely anxiety; in a completed exhausted state and having made no business calls.

It was not until sometime after, when too late, that I was told dry batteries as then made, would recuperate after an hour or two's rest.

Strangely enough it was another good American who helped me to get through that very critical initial period. Percy Martin the head of the Daimler Co put the sample Goodyear tyres through a most severe [5] testing: with the result, after demonstrations over long stretches of unrolled flint stones etc of "Goodyears" being fitted to Royal an[d] many other cars. Orders in quantity began to flow in, the Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Co (Gt. Britain) Ltd was formed, with myself as Managing Director; and modest prosperity once more showed in the offing.

In 1900 I had my first experience of real motoring; accompanying R.E. Phillips in his 'Petit Duc' Mors car from London to Edinburgh in the great 1000-mile trial. I shall never forget the thrill of that journey. True, the engine, being of nominal 5H.P only was not entirely adequate for some parts of the hilly route; but pushing the car from the rear whilst Phillips drove provided grand exercise in the keen air near the top of some of the stiffer [6] Lake District and Lowlands climbs. There was nothing wrong with my appetite on that trip; and R.E. praised my pushing ability.

In the latter part of 1900 I became the proud owner of my first car; a 10 hp Wolseley with horizontal two-cylinder engine. Unless I am mistaken it was one of the first dozen produced by "Pa" Austin (afterwards Lord Austin), he being at that time head of the Wolseley Sheep-Shearing Co whose works were in Alma St Birmingham. It was a real good bus; even when looking at the matter from this later date. It gave me grand service, mostly between the Midlands and London in the course of

business. Not fast, of course; about 40 m.p.h. being its maximum speed; but in April 1901 averaged 26½ between London and Birmingham; and thereafter could usually rely on doing the journey in about the same time. It was a little short on the amenities, though, judging by the luxurious standards of today. As will be seen from the illustration it had no screen, hood or side-doors to front seat; and as it was used continually Summer and Winter alike with only a single-breasted overcoat and a knee rug (which did not help greatly with driving) it was indeed a cold job at times. I remember one particularly severe 'black fro[st]' when the oil in the dashboard reservoir froze practically solid with disquieting effect on the running of the engine. I had cold feet in a double sense then.

Leather-lined driving-coats with windsleeves, also gauntlets came later; and when cars were equipped with hood screen and side doors many declared that the sport was being coddled out of existence. I did not notice, however, that any of these 'Die-hards' dispensed with them thereafter.

[6a] Dust was the greatest bugbear. It would be quite impossible for the modern motorist accustomed to well-kept dustless surfaces to visualise the conditions prevailing in those early days. Loose surfaces with deep ruts and 'potholes' – broken springs were a serious factor – set up such clouds of dust that to pass another car going in the same direction was almost an impossibility; and always a grave risk. One had to travel blind as in a London 'pea-souper' fog, for quite a considerable distance. Happily there were not many vehicles on the roads then, so the risk of being caught by one coming the other way was not so grave as it would be nowadays; but it was bad enough, and many serious accidents resulted. Hence the wonderful 'Tarmac' and similar roads of today.

Until they became general, the universal outfit for motoring included dust-veils and other weird wrappings which would be consider- [sic]

[6 continued] There was one item included in the design which does not appear in the modern car. It was for comfort of mind rather than of body. Observe the sprag to prevent the car fro[m] running downhill when the engine failed. [7] Happily the sprag did not often come into operation and it was omitted from later models. But I often wished that one could be devised for lateral operation. A total weight, minus passengers, of about 30cwt on a wheel-base of 6ft 3ins with high centre [of] gravity, coupled with unequal braking effect owing to the variat[ion] in stretching of the separate driving chains formed a combination on greasy roads which can only be appreciated by real old-time[rs.] Skidding, of the genuine brand is an unknown phenomenon nowadays. Skidding is hardly the word for what my dear old Wolseley could do on occasion. She just revolved like a teetotum. Many terrifying examples of that performance taught one how to drive however. It must be borne in mind that a[ll?] that early period every man's hand was against the motorist; and it was a long time before drivers of horse-drawn vehicles ceased to ignore the new-fangled monstrosities and to refuse them right of way. They would cheerfully dash out of side-streets, disregarding the fact that the newer vehicles had much greater speed as well as different tyres, from the iron ones on their own wheels. I had some fearsome experiences until it began to be generally appreciated that motor cars could not be pulled up dead in a couple of yards on a slippery road. I wish I could reproduce the full and complete description of all cars and their drivers on one occasion in the Bayswater Road, as I sat with engine still running (self-starters were unknown then and engines switched off did not always start again readily) facing the driver of a two-horse bus with my radiator cap beneath the noses of his still-trembling horses. I praised his vocabulary and told him how sorry I was to have missed some of the treat through the noise of the engine; and we parted quite good friends. He really was an artist.

[8] But to revert to the more sordid side for a brief spell, disaster was waiting for me round the corner. Just as the monthly commission cheques began to assume comforting proportions, burst tyres ended dreams of future affluence. I assume the samples had been made by hand by experts and the bulk supplies produced by mechanised organisat[ion] but at any rate a fault in design had developed, of too technical a character to deal with in this unscientific dissertatation; and the tyres were withdrawn from the British market for a few years until further experience had resulted in the present very fine type of Goodyear. Needless to say the art of tyre making, especially for high speed and heavy cars was in its infancy and all the known tyre firms British and French as well as American were having their infantile troubles – measles and whooping-cough etc. To be perfectly frank I have never been able to understand how flexible agents, to provide resilience such as fabric and rubber can be made to stand the enormous strain of hurtling along several tons of anything up to 100 m.p.h. It seems beyond all the laws of mechanics to my untutored mind.

I must say here that the parent Goodyear Co dealt with the matter in a fashion which has left me ever since with the greatest respect for the best American business methods. They invited me to their works in Akron O[hio] – this being my first trip of many across the Atlantic – where I met the principal Chas. Seiberling who sent me back with carte blanche to settle all just claims on their behalf before winding up the poor British Co giving me Power of attorney for the purpose. Result, good feeling which I hope is as sincere on their part as on mine.

[9] A set-back? ...Yes, but what did it matter? I was firmly established 'in the trade' and another job – of which more anon – was at once forthcoming. Then followed many years when every day was brimful of interest, if not actual adventure. Also many nights. There seemed to be continually functions combining business with pleasure in which it was imperative to take part if one did not wish to be out of things or miss opportunities of business. There were motor exhibitions galore, Paris, Glasgow, Dublin etc, motor races, hill-climbs and tyre trials at which were met practically always the same cheery crowd (sometimes more than a week at a time) all intent on having a good time to make up for the hard work and long hours undoubtedly entailed. I fear now looking back on that period that my own home saw very little of me; especially as in addition to the purely home-trade section my job called for trips to the U.S.A. as well as to various parts of the Continent in the interests of motor export trade.

My general idea of those early days is that of real good fellowship in a community of pioneers. No wonder some lifelong friendships were formed. Of course there was competition; but it was with few exceptions clean and wholesome. As to the exceptions I remember one instance which had its amusing side. The Council of the S.M.M. & T. of which I had the honour of being a member for some years was much concerned about the tendency of some in the trade toward offering trade discounts to private purchasers; and the chairman of the meeting on the particular occasion in question was the great high priest or apostle of purity. His denunciations of the crime from platform or in the Press – in which he appeared with great regularity – were something to remember. But [10] as I sat and listened to him in spellbound admiration I wondered what would happen if I produced from my pocket the letter a/d to a personal friend of mine in the country – who I much fear had been incited to make the enquiry – and signed by the great man himself, wherein 15% discount from the accompanying catalogue was offered without any special reason (such as last year's model or similar excuse) for the concession! However it seemed a pity to disturb the harmony of the proceedings, so I refrained.

Plenty of good work was done by the Council; and I venture to take credit for participation in one special achievement, which was the moving of the annual exhibition from the Crystal Palace to Olympia. It meant a stiff 18 months' fight for the trio concerned i.e. Sydney Straker, H.G. Burford and

myself. It must be borne in mind that in addition to the Palace not being a suitable venue on account of the slow railway journey involved (the electrification of the present day having not then been thought of) the terms of the arrangement were definitely not advantageous to the motor side. They practically provided the Exhibition; but received (unless my memory is greatly at fault) roughly about 20% of the proceeds from the public attracted by it. The opposition to any change from that rather one-sided arrangement was so strong that it was quite impossible at times to prevent the unworthy thought arising that vested interests might possibly be the reason. Defence-line after defence-line had to be carried. One very tough obstacle was the query as to where in London was the suitable building available on terms which the Society could dare to risk. This was carried at last by an advantageous option being secured for Olympia; and the final one was "Who was to run it?" No suitable choice presenting [11] itself, after much cogitation by the very aggressive trio, it was decided that one of us would give up his own post and take on the task. It seemed such a pity that we should be defeated when almost in sight of victory. As both Straker and Burford being heads of large concerns were more firmly fixed in their respective organisations than myself, it is easy to guess who was finally selected for the sacrifice. So for a spell it was 'on the tapis' that I was to be the first Show manager or sec'y. But luckily Straker found Hector Blackie in time; a much better arrangement altogether as he had the right kind of experience as second in command at the Crystal Palace exhibitions. I do not think there is any need to dilate unduly on the benefit which the S.M.M. & T. and the trade generally have derived since as [a] result of the change-over.

When it became known that the Goodyear British branch was closing down, I was offered the position of manager to E.W. Hart of Luton who had a depot in the Euston Road and a workshop in St John's Wood. He was a tremendous enthusiast about motoring [and] one of the most amiable and kindly men I have ever known; also quite obviously a success in his own business of straw-hat making, judging from handling of the financial side of his motoring hobby. His method was to visit Paris and acquire numbers of second-hand veterans at prices which put any idea of a favourable balance-sheet entirely out of the question. Frenchmen are notoriously good businessmen and those with whom he foregathered evidently had inflated ideas of what the British publ[ic] would be willing to pay for the new toys. As no question of agency was involved and the Panhards, Darracqs, Mercedes, Mors, Rochet-Schneiders etc in stock could also be obtained from obviously closer buyers, I soon found there was no future for me; so – with great regret at parting from Hart I took up the managership of H.H.P. Deasy & Co Ltd who handled Martini [12] cars for the world, taking the entire output of the Swiss factory. Hence the Continental etc. journeyings. I remained associated with the Martini car until 1910, some seven years in all; the last three of them as Managing Director of Hills-Martini Ltd with sole concession for the British Isles. If only the heads of the parent Co could have been persuaded that chain drive and low-tension ignition (with striker) had become obsolete, (the public demand was for the live axle and high-tension magneto ignition which had then already been in vogue for a year or two) how different the remaining portion of this brief inglorious history might have been! But the German-Swiss mentality insisted, during many pilgrimages to St. Blaise on Lake Nuechatel in the futile endeavour to convert it, that anything which bore the famous "Martini" rifle as trade-mark would sell readily regardless of fashion in design. The ultimate result was that of the Martini car being withdrawn from the market for a year or so; this being the second time of such happening for me and the third of having to start afresh through circumstances entirely beyond my own control. I would like to say here, that the Martini was a very fine job for durability, freedom from breakdown and efficiency of brakes (I guess this was because it was produced and tested amongst mountains; its brakes even as early as 1904 were better than I found on well-known cars many years later). In a word it was in every way a sound engineering proposition. It was only the out-of-date design which was wrong.

I cannot pass over the Euston Road regime without placing on record that we were experimenting on petrol-electric transmission at the Abbey Road repairs branch as far back as 1903. The system employed was the Lohner-Porsch[e] (Austrian). But although [13] a definite gain of about 15% on average resulted from running the same Merced[e]s car by electricity instead of through its customary gear box the matter was not proceeded with owing to the constant break downs. Electrical devices, at that period, as already mentioned, were in a very crude and undeveloped state, and we never got out of them a run of over 50 miles. In fact the principal item of equipment was the towrope with another car standing by to fetch the wanderer home. In that respect the works resembled the main establishment where owing to the type of 'has-been' there to be found, a trial run was never given without a rescue squad standing by with another car to bring the wanderer home.

In that connection there is one episode which will always remain in my memory. We had in stock four of the 40 h.p. "Flying Darracqs" which took part in the Paris-Bordeaux race of 1900. They were reported to have reached 70 m.p.h. in the race – and I can fully believe that report – but had little else than speed to recommend them. Being constructed to come within the 650 kilo class which unless I am misinformed means a total overall weight of 12½ cwt their bodywork was practically negligible. Even the side members of the frame had large holes bored in them for the entire length. They were all engine, in fact; and what engines! When they started up they gave a good imitation of a battery of 18-pounders in action. After I had long despaired of selling one there walked into the depot one day a very quiet reserved individual of the business-man type – I mean definitely not the sporting type – who merely said "Can those Darracqs do 70?" On being assured that our information was to that effect (I was careful to promise nothing) he asked how soon he could have a trial run. I said in 3 days; feeling [14] sure we could not be ready in less. I had visions of a preliminary but when he walked in, punctual to the minute, on the day appoint[ed] we had only just succeeded in getting one of the engines going – somehow.

Apart from purely mechanical problems there was another, i.e., as to who was to give the trial run. The works manager, who was supposed to have had racing experience, flatly refused on the plea of a wife and children and the others followed his lead. The flag had to be kept flying; so there was nothing left but the manager to handle the job himself and show them.

We moved out into the Euston Road and the fun began. I was much too occupied at the moment in trying to get a grip on the snorting beast to notice the general effect on other traffic but my passenger – who was certainly a brave man – told me afterwards that the dislocation was considerable. I know that by the time we reached Barnet I felt pretty well 'all in'; and the Darracq, being designed for speed only showed signs of having had enough of slow running by giving us a shower bath of very hot water from the radiator. I wanted that open road just beyond for cooling her do[wn] and when I got there I let her out. Up to then I had not studied the question o[f] road camber to any extent; but when perched precariously on a mere engine-on-wheels that jumped about like a cat on hot bricks and tried to clear the hedges on either side indiscriminately directly there is any deviation from the exact centre of the road, I must admit knowledge increased rapidly. I was not happy.

Luckily my client relied upon his own stop-watch for the tests, as I was too occupied to do any timing; and when he announced that we had touched 68 m.p.h. three times and he was satisfied, I was satisfied too. It was not for me to question his accuracy. [15] And I fully appreciated his magnanimity in not insisting on the other 2 m.p.h.; especially as he was obviously from the North. The point of the story lies in the fact that I had never driven previously at over 40 m.p.h. and if he had known it he was never nearer to a harp and halo.

We got back to Euston Road depot – somehow – [and] he drew out his cheque book and handed me a cheque for £750, sent his chauffeur for the Darracq the next day (I duly noted the latter had it towed to Euston for the North – by horse) and I never heard another word thereafter. I have often wondered since about what happened and why he bought it. By my influence over my staff as a prove[n] driver was completely established.

On the subject of speed, although I did not have the luck to handle a really fast car at any time through my career, I had another interesting experience. I had a special reason which need not be entered into here, for establishing what a 40hp Martini could do. It was in 1906, and design being on very different lines from the super-efficient products of today, it was a big fellow. The specification may be interesting as the 4-cyl. engine had a 5" bore and 6" stroke with maximum engine speed of 750 r.p.m.! Compare that with the 3000/4000 revs of the modern car! As self-starters were then unknown it is easy to guess that it was not a lady's job to get it going. However, I left Hyde Park Corner, accompanied by two well-known Pressmen armed with stop-watches as Big Ben chimed midday; and pulled up at the door of the Royal York Hotel in Brighton at 1.19 without having touched the feather of a chicken. The 'umpires' were satisfied that I had complied with the conditions, having taken reasonable care in all town-work, villages etc; and as [the] test was made in the middle of a midweek [16] day (none of your early-dawn stunts beloved of some of my hard-driving friends in the trade to prove that they had done the 52½ miles well inside the hour so beating the Brighton express train) it only shows how entirely we had the road to ourselves in those remote days.

By-the-way, the return journey of that particular trip was neither so fast nor so happy. With darkness a fog set in; so my kindly but somewhat over-zealous passengers decided I needed help. The second one sat on the floor of the front seat with feet on [the] running-board and leaning out moved the switchlever on [the] dashboard, cutting out the engine. The road was very slippery being covered with hoar-frost, and in my efforts to swing the engine – I mentioned that it was not a job for anyone but a strong man – my foot slipped and I put my head very hard indeed on the edge of the radiator. Immediately everything was blotted out as far as I was concerned. I was firmly convinced that I had lost my one good eye. As neither of my panic-stricken friends was capable of starting the monster, I had to do so in the dark. And neither of them could drive! It was a slow progress for the four miles or so into Reigate with one on either side of me giving instructions, a "little right", "a slight bend to the left", you are within a "foot of the footpath" and so on; and when we pulled up outside a chemist's shop a small crowd gathered murmuring sympathy. I expect I looked a horrid sight as my friends put it but when the kindly chemist had washed away the frozen gore which was the cause of the trouble, pronounced all well with the eye and stuck plaster on the damaged bone of [the] socket, I felt inclined to sing all the way home.

To avoid the suggestion of undue boasting about speed I may [17] as well tell of some other occasions on which I made a poor average; being reminded of same by the episode just mentioned.

One, which will probably not be believed, was in the Euston Road area; about 1902. My chief held that the best way of disposing of cars, secondhand ones at any rate, was to use them. So instead of my faithful Wolseley, I had taken my family for a Sabbath outing on a fine-looking Panhard. It may have been of good vintage but was definitely out of date, even in those days. About 1896, I should think; as it had what was then known as "feather" gears. Electric ignition was still in its infancy, as I have already indicated.

It was just beyond Chislehurst where we eventually got stranded on our way home to the usual Sunday hot lunch and anxious staff. (She was always quite sure we should never return alive.)

Garages or expert repairers being then unknown I had to do what I could with my own plentiful lack of knowledge. I admit at once that I could not get through any examination by an expert as to the mechanical details; but I do know that after putting the small battery beside me on the front seat I actuated the trembler-blade all the way home with my left hand whilst driving in bottom gear with my right hand – gearchanging being out of the question even if the engine had run on more than 2 or 3 cylinders at a time; the blade refusing to function on its own accord as it should have done. The memory of numerous shocks up my arm has fixed that point very firmly in my mind. It was about 8 miles and it took over 4 hours; but I must plead in extenuation that the Chislehurst district and thence to Blackheath was distinctly hilly from the point of view of that time though the lordly motorist of today would expect to do it all on top gear.

Thereafter on family runs I kept to the steady old Wolseley.

[18] When thus looking back memories of the early Gordon-Bennett races are inevitable. Everyone in the trade, or so it seemed, found it necessary to attend for one reason or another; so there was plenty of fun as well as incident. In the 1903 event I was judge of the half-mile speed stretch at Athy in the West. Whilst crossing Ireland to take up my station with Pressmen and officials as passengers we saw a small crowd gathered on the lonely roadside; so pulled up to investigate. Two bodies were lying there under sheets (presumably borrowed from the nearest house). They were those of my old friend Chas Jarrott and his assistant Bianchi. We were informed that both were dead; and as the matter was already in capable hands there was nothing to be done but carry on, feeling sad indeed. Happily the report was exaggerated, although things were bad enough. At any rate both recovered fully and I had the pleasure of foregathering with Charles – best sportsman ever – on very many subsequent occasions until I bade him his last ‘good-bye’ at Golder’s Green only a year or so ago.

On the same journey, to contrast grave with gay, we were doing a good 55 on a 16h.p. Mercedes (a class car, even at that date) across a long straight bogland road, none too wide, when I saw an old woman standing immovably right in the centre watching us. I naturally assumed she would make way on hearing the hooter but as she stood her ground there was nothing for it but to crowd on [the] brakes and hope for the best. As we pulled up I saw she had a dead chicken in her hand; and in response to our gentle expostulation she said “One of you fellas has killed my chicken and you have got to pay”. On pointing out the injustice of that attitude she said “He got away but you can’t”. The price of the victim was half-a-crown. We had it that night and it was a good bird well worth the money.

[19] The 1905 Tourist Trophy race was held in the Isle of Man; and in that I was again asked to take charge of a timing-stretch in a remote part of the course – A.C.H. for the lonely places! – Ballaugh on the opposite of the island from Douglas the H.Q. where all the fun was. Motor transport having run dry (I had not my car with me unfortunately on this occasion) it was discovered at the last minute almost that the only way I could reach my post was by horse vehicle, over the mountains direct. (I believe they are called ‘mountains’ in the Island, but ‘hills’ would probably be considered a better description to those acquainted with real mountains.) It was a long, weary and cold drive in an open carriage of the ‘Victoria’ type, but we got there by daybreak in good time. Having had no meal on the preceding evening owing to the rush of getting away, was I hungry? When the competitors had passed on their first round and I was free for a time I looked around eagerly for the farmhouse “on my right” at which arrangements had been made to supply officials of the race with meals etc. As I walked up the drive of the first house on my right it struck me that it did not quite fill my idea of a farm, but I was in no frame of mind for discussing problems with myself. I wanted breakfast. Being told by the lady I saw that it would be sent to me as soon as possible – she seemed a little surprised,



somehow – I went back to my lonely post. Presently appeared the most attractive vision in dainty cap and lace apron (I am a child in such matters and cannot guarantee a correct description. Besides it was what she carried that interested me) bearing a breakfast fit for the Gods. By the time my vigil had ended, in early afternoon to the best of my memory, it seemed like evening and I had accumulated the number of meals appropriate for a complete day. On paying my final visit for the purpose [20] of settling my indebtedness I was met by “There is no charge. Any official of the race is most welcome” and I realised that I had been calmly using the wrong house. When instructed to go to the right on any highway it is as well to be sure about the side of the road you are on before deciding which direction is to the right or left. I exuded apologies from every pore and got away as best I could. I have often wondered since what the people at the real farmhouse thought about my lack of hunger.

Not all incidents of the road had such pleasant results (even if the ending was unhappy) in those days. I have made it clear I trust, that I started without mechanical knowledge; but with no expert assistance available it was necessary to find out the why and wherefore of things for oneself, or give up the hopeless endeavour to become a real motorist. In time I could take my car to pieces – any one of the many types I had to cope with then – on the roadside. And on more than one occasion I practically had to. Once was when I had trusted the word of an employee that my tank was full on starting. Instead of going to the petrol supply at once when the car stopped as I should have done under ordinary circumstances, I went through ignition (always a source of trouble and still at that time a profound mystery), valvegear, and whatnot, first. The shades of night were falling fast before I discovered the empty tank and no spare can on the car. A naturally-trusting nature was thereby permanently warped; and anyone guilty thereafter of letting my car go out without [a] full tank and spare can was sacked, and no question about it. I so often had to start off on long trips at very short notice that it was absolutely necessary.

Perhaps I was not quite so bad as the important customer in Scotland who wired for our chief mechanic to come up at [21] once as his large and expensive car refused to start. The expert was soon back. He said the railway journey was quite interesting as he had not been up North before; but it seemed a long way to go just to turn on the tap on the main petrol supply pipe between tank and carburettor.

A still longer journey was entailed to cure another defect; but that was one of those real problems, of which we had many in the early days. A new model 28h.p. Martini had arrived from Switzerland for demonstration purposes; and on the first run it went like a dream, raising all our hopes of future business, until just short of Dunstable when it stopped suddenly. An hour or so of trying every device then known accompanied by constant winding, and away it went back home grandly, the hour being late, [and] starting suddenly for no apparent reason. This happened a number of times, the stopping place being if my memory is correct the 29th milestone or thereabouts on the main Birmingham road, which we purposely adhered to as a test. It seemed uncanny. Naturally we did not wish to admit to our Swiss friends, who were none too gracious at any time anent our knowledge of how to handle a car as compared with their own, that we could not solve the mystery; so I called in the help of my many friends in the trade, heads of firms and their experts (all of whom did their best most loyally, as usual) before asking the Martini heads to let their own expert come over. After refusing, ungraciously, the designer himself came; and on arrival did not seem pleased. In a word the great man was terse, if not contemptuous. After 20 miles or so of perfect performance that attitude seemed intensified, as there was a semi-smile (I don't think personally he was capable of a full or beaming one) on his face. We had not mentioned the 29th milestone purposely. It was always in the Cussedness of things, then, that what had [22] happened with us would not with him. I admit that as

we neared the fatal spot I felt definitely anxious. It was about the only time I can remember when I wanted a car to break down; there were plenty of occasions when I was afraid it would. But our dear old 29th did not fail us. After the sudden stop, as our distinguished visitor 'wrestled' with the problem – in complete but profane silence – the difficulty to repress the smile was on our side. On return to Town after the usual interlude of winding and whatnot, he spent several days before discovering that the vertical nickel pin against which the striker-arm produced the make-and-break (it was low-tension ignition) was a trifle too long, and on natural expansion under heat increased in length sufficiently for the spark to jump – excuse the display of technicality – to a protuberance in the top of the casting of the combustion chamber, so short-circuiting the current.

It sounds like a Harry Tate (he was an enthusiastic pioneer motorist, by-the-way, and a great friend) explanation, but it is the best I can do. It was just one of those things that would occur in early-days design; and being a fault in a solitary casting did not occur in the various cars of the same type which they had so thoroughly tested at H.Q. before sending us our demonstrator. So the peevishness may be forgiven. I am bound to say we got along better afterwards.

Some of the devices for getting home employed by us poor amateur mechanics were distinctly primitive. I have vivid recollections of a broken driving-chain with sundry small portions irretrievably lost in the dusty road – so different to the Tarmac luxury of today – the long search for a horsenail and then for stones of suitable shape and hardness to fashion it into a shackle pin wherewith to join up the chain, followed by the acute anxiety [23] on every semblance of an incline as to whether my first engineer in [the] job would stand the strain. Up long rises like Ridge Hill for instance – the Birmingham road again – the suspense was intense.

But it stood for the 40 miles and I was a proud man.

The most useful tool I ever had, though, was a lady['s] long button hook. (I am informed they wore high boots with many buttons then.) The Mercedes already mentioned had one grave fault; the very small inadequate valve-springs were situated at the bottom of the cylinders, and they were continually breaking, necessitating long waits until the engine cooled down sufficiently to get the hand between the cylinders. Even then it was a long and ticklish job to get the springs into position, until a brain-wave solved the problem absolutely. Thereafter I never went abroad in that car without the button hook and a pocket full of springs and soon beca[me] so expert with the tool that a cylinder out of commission meant a stop of only a few minutes only, hot engine or no hot engine.

The longest-seeming drive of my 28 years – in eleven different countries by the way, counting the British Isles as one unit – occurred later. It was only about 25 miles actually but it seemed never-ending. I was on a fortnight's tour of the Highlands with Stenson Cooke (afterwards Sir Stenson) the A.A. chief, his Scottish manager Milligan and J. Inglis Ker, editor of the "Motor World" as passengers. It was a grand trip as owing to Ker's peculiar knowledge we visited parts not usually touched by the ordinary tourist and saw some wonderful scenery. We also did some hair-raising climbing, being out to prove that the new 14h.p. "B.S.A." car with Silent Knight sleeve-valve engine could tackle anything in Scotland that had been done on wheels horsedrawn or motordriven. [24] Ker was the great authority on Scottish roads, having re-discovered 38 lost bridges built by General Wade in his military conquest of the previously inaccessible country – I trust I am not being tactless in mentioning this – and he did his job thoroughly. He provided some tight corners but the "B.S.A." got up everything without shedding passenger or luggage and the two A.A. magnates certainly increased their knowledge of the territory they so ably administered.

We were near Tomintoul, a very lonely spot, which I understand is the highest inhabited place in the Highlands, when the contretemps occurred. We were descending a steep hill approaching a small bridge over a ravine, which bridge formed the top end of a 'hairpin' turn as the road on the other side of it went back practically the way we were going. Suddenly I found the steering had gone, or as nearly so as to make no matter. I do not quite understand how we got over the bridge and gradually pulled up; but what I feel sure about is that if it had been the stub-axle of the nearside front wheel which had broken instead of the off side, it is more than probable I should not now be indulging in these reminiscences. It was a left-hand turn over the bridge and with a near-side front wheel out of control we could not have made it. The ravine I was informed afterwards is about 1500 ft deep so it is fairly safe betting that three good men and true and their driver would have been "for it", in the vernacular. The matter was beyond any amateur tinkering with horsenails or otherwise as the casting had broken clean through on account of an internal flaw (the design was promptly altered to avoid any possibility of repetitions [as] it was quite impossible to detect the flaw from outside) so it meant several hours of waiting in a shepherd's hut whilst the shepherd on his bicycle sought out the nearest blacksmith many miles distant, with explicit instructions [25] as to the mending of the fractured part which he took with him. It did not matter what the job looked like; but it must be safe. Unfortunately the blacksmith thought he knew better and made a neat job which I could see even in the fading light would not last long. So the position was a lonely mountain-top, three tired and hungry passengers, about miles of very difficult country to Ballater where our hotel accommodation was awaiting us and only a pair of small side-lights to guide us over several of the most trying climbs in the Highlands. I have always been ready to take my chance with the next man; but was I justified in exposing the others to risk? [I cannot imagine, though, at this late date, why my headlights were not functioning. I cannot even remember if there were any at all on the car. We had not figured on night work and having left as we thought plenty of margin for minor mishaps. Usually I was no foolish virgin to be caught without lights.]

However I decided there was nothing for it but to push on; so off we started in the dark. I will not dwell on the details of that journey, but will content myself with the statement that the next three or more hours constituted the longest drive in my motoring career; on account of mental strain, not mileage. The fractured axle gave out again, as I had been expecting for every yard of the journey; and we did the last six miles in a farm-waggon, arriving at the hotel well after midnight. Luckily, the second collapse of steering control took place on a straight piece of fairly level road.

I think the most unpleasant drive, from the point of view of actual physical discomfort was over from Glasgow to Manchester in the Show season. I have mentioned that in those cheery 'don't-care' days we in the trade did quite a lot of night work on the roads [26] entailing some hard driving at times; and on the occasion in question I was not able to get away from Glasgow until after lunch for business reasons. It was snowing then, but changed the programme frequently through the whole journey varying it with rain, wind, sleet and hail. When I was nearly at the highest point of Shap Fell after some miles of arduous climbing in the snow the back tyre burst. In these days of detachable wheels and greatly-improved design both of tyres and tools for dealing with them such happening would merely be considered an inconvenience; but changing a tyre in those days was no joke even under ordinary conditions. Trying to do so in deep snow, and in fading daylight, with a so-called 'jack' which consistently refused to keep upright or hold the wheel off the ground constituted a sufficient punishment in my opinion at least for any sins I may have committed previously. I do not know whether it was more or less than 3 hours before I got going again – it seemed more, anyway – when I arrived at the Midland Manchester (almost a home from home at that time) somewhere about midnight, I was unrecognisable by my anxiously-waiting friends, being spattered with mud from head to foot, with black face and soaked to the skin. However sundry hot drinks and a hot bath

did wonders and I was not very much the worse on the next day when I drove to London. I am glad to report that the snow had stopped then.

A very interesting trip was one made in 1907 when I hired two large Martini cars for three weeks or thereabouts to the Coastal Erosion Commission. As V.I.P. were involved and I wanted it to be a good advertisement for the cars I took the 28 h.p. myself and my own special assistant – a good mechanic and driver – had the 40h.p. I wore the same kind of cap and overcoat and occupied the chauffeur sections of hotel accommodation with him; discovering ‘en passant’ [27] that chauffeurs did themselves very well indeed at less than half of the tariff of their employers. At first some other members of the fraternity were not inclined to accept me as one of themselves but production of a presentation cigar-holder from the Committee of the Society of Automobile Mechanic-Drivers of which I happened to be resident at that period got me past the barrier. It was “Driver, do so-and-so” for several days; and I got at least one half-crown tip. I fancy my loyal assistant could not stand the strain and must have given it away that I was his ‘boss’, as the members of the Commission were extremely friendly thereafter and insisted on my dining and lunching with them (breakfast-time was devoted to work on the cars until the end of the trip. The great novelist Rider Haggard I remember was of the Commission.

As the work entailed getting down to the actual seashore at every point where erosion had taken place between the Wash and Sth. Devon, some very tricky cliff-climbing was included in the itinerary. The roads down to the water’s edge are not always constructed for vehicular traffic. A discussion one evening at Ventnor I. of Wight on that point led to the query as to whether a car could get up the ascent to the top of the cliff on the Western side of the town which local opinion asserted had hitherto not been done. None of the members of the Commission being willing to act as passengers, I drove alone and was rather glad I did as the sea looked very wet and uninviting as I incautiously looked back at a nasty awkward angle when the nearing the top; the extra weight of passengers might have made all the difference.

What with the Inglis Ker Scottish tests, and the others indicated I seem to have been fated to be reported (the reports may not have been justified as local tradition is proverbially unreliable) [28] the first conqueror of awkward climbs as after completely losing myself in Mid Wales, I arrived at Dolgelly without intending to be there. Anyhow one evening between nine and ten o’clock when the denizens would normally be retiring; and found much local excitement because it appeared I had climbed Dinas Mawddry (I hope I have got the spelling right) in the dark. They said it had not been done before even in daylight. That may or may not have been true; I only know it seemed as if I should never get to the top, and being tired and hungry, was heartily sick of the whole affair before beginning to descend again.

I expect it was the fact of the Martini being born in the mountains which influenced the tendency to unusual climbing.

[28a] There is, at least, one first-ever achievement to which I think I can safely lay claim i.e. that of exhibiting a full sized car in the main hall of the Mansion House. It was in 1907, I think; at any rate, there or thereabouts. Sir William Treloar the then Lord Mayor had organised a bit lottery in aid of one of his pet schemes and being interested in the same fund or charity (also I suspect having an idea of helping her brother in his Martini campaign) my sister offered to provide the first prize in the shape of a new 14 h.p. Martini with a very special “Park” body. As an exhibition of all the prizes was being held in the Egyptian Room (I think it was called) it seemed a pity not to have the first prize on show with the others; so by agreement with Sir William a dais to hold the car was erected in the centre of the hall; and the next morning at daybreak saw [28b] myself and several of my staff

engaged on taking the body and wheels off the Martini on the pavement against the narrow steps which lead up to the front entrance. The City Police are grand sportsmen and when they have the project explained to them entered into it with the utmost zest, not only keeping away curious passers-by but actually helping at the more awkward bits. It was not an easy matter to get the long frame, with engine (there was not time to take that off) round the corners; and I remember that at one period part of it was hanging over the street, being inserted between the pillars. It was done before the business rush commenced; and of course the process had to be repeated – in reverse – when the Exhibition ended.

[28 continued] Amongst the many interesting personalities I met in my motoring career was a German, Paul Brodtmann, head of the British branch of the Continental tyre, which was of course also of German origin. He was about as unlike the typical Hun (Nazis not then having been invented) as can be imagined; in fact his manners were delightful and he was the perfect host according to Mrs. Hills whom he entertained, with myself, on various occasions when on tour in the Midlands and North. He was a great tourist, apparently always on the road; and the well-known “Continental” yellow signboards advertising his tyres were to be found in the most remote spots from Land’s End to John O’Groats. When Prince Henry of Prussia came over to take part in one of the then current trials which involved covering most of the British Isles (including most naval bases etc it was noticed at the time) Paul Brodtmann was his conductor. Later, on August 2nd 1914 to be precise, P.B. disappeared; and it then transpired that he was one of the two ‘heads’ – the Huns would not trust one; there had to be two to watch each other – of the whole German secret service [29] in this country being a ‘high-up’ in the German army. The sequel as told to me by his second-in-command (British) in the tyre business, is interesting. Soon after this departure his private secretary who had been with him for some 4/5 years walked into the office with “Well good-bye boys. I’m jolly glad it is all over and I can get back to my own job”. Asked what he meant by that, he expressed surprise that they had not ‘tumbled’. He was a captain in the British Army on secret service.

Looking back thus from the hilltop viewpoint of nearly half a century later these random recollections, recording nothing of a sensational or dramatic character, may not seem worth the recital. There were of course the usual motoring incidents, narrow escapes, ‘close corners’ and so forth; but these are the commonplaces of motoring. I was lucky enough to get through my long career as a driver with one serious mishap: killing a cow which charged across the roads on seeing my headlights. These were the early days, remember, before cows learnt road manners. It was a very dead cow and an equally useless radiator etc; and I was 90 miles from home.

Also I got through with a clean license; though I was fined once for exceeding the 20m.p.h. speed limit. But that’s another story.

Equally any record of the subsequent world-travel in the interests of motor experts would be redundant. Traveller’s tales are very much alike I find. All have dodged submarines in wartime; some may have lost their luggage (enough for a year’s trip) in Korea for over 3 weeks as I did, or experienced earthquakes in Japan. [30] but such matters have no bearing on the conditions prevailing nearly 50 years ago when motoring was young. Driving a car, and keeping it going, was a man’s job then. It did not consist of just touching buttons in a highly-efficient machine with the speed and regularity of an express train. I can admire the modern product, just as I can admire modern roads on which it functions; but every run was an adventure in the days of which I write. Now it is just a matter of getting there in the greatest ease and comfort.

Brave days, providing plenty of good memories for those who lived through them; and for what greater possession can a veteran ask in the twilight of Life?

