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Newsletter No 18

The Lanchester Trust was started to raise awareness of the Lanchester name and give more value to Lanchester cars and artefacts. Since then many enthusiasts of Lanchester cars, aeronautics, boats etc who have donated £100 or more, have been awarded the life-time honour of 'Founder Member'. This situation will change at the end of March 2014, with all later donors becoming 'Members' only. So, for those considering joining us in the Trust, there is therefore only a small window of opportunity through which donors can jump in order to achieve the former illustrious title, so contact the Trustees straight away! Also closing shortly are applications for the Restoration Award (see Newsletter No 17), so the Trustees look forward to studying details of your Lanchester car restorations of the last few years.

Following on from the last Newsletter, the Trustees are sure that you are eagerly waiting for part 2 of the autobiography of Mark Gray, a Founder Member of the Trust:- www.LanchesterTrust.org

Continued Part 2

The name said Lanchester!

I was used to looking at the mechanicals of Silver Ghosts, but this was in another league. It had clearly been designed as one entity and beautifully made, to boot. The Ghosts I had experienced were of a different ilk, and although they worked very well, there was a sense that the car was the sum of well-made pieces, rather than a unified design.

Back home, the Clutton's pocket book of vintage cars, revealed that the museum chassis was a Lanchester 40. What was even more impressive was that Clutton had reserved more than two pages for Lanchester and the 40 HP had the lion's share of this. I enquired, but the Gilltrap car was not for sale!!!! Whilst waxing lyrical to a friend, also an old car nut, about the Gilltrap chassis, he informed me that he knew of another such car 200 miles south, in a wrecking yard at Coffs Harbour. Wrecking yards have lost their magic for me today. With concrete floors, shelving and high pressure water washing there is little chance of making a "find". This wrecking yard was of the earlier more interesting variety. It was situated on the side of a hill, and gave the appearance that it was about to be engulfed in lantana (a South American hedging plant that has gone feral on the east coast). To say the collection of vehicles in the yard was eclectic hardly does justice to the acquisitive inclinations of its owner. All manner of 20s and 30s American black iron was represented as well as a few jewels eg. 35 supercharged Auburn. A few British cars of a similar period were represented, but the majority of aching carcasses came from the 40s and 50s.

My mind was set on Lanchesters, and everything else was peripheral, so I headed for the indicated place where the Lanchester allegedly lay in repose. Although a German silver radiator was visible and this was definitely Lanchester 40, the rest of the car was buried in a mountain of the accursed lantana. Each attempt to get a better look ended in more scratching from the serrated canes until a stalemate was reached and imagination was allowed the upper hand. The owner of the yard was

Laurie Fernance, and he was not prepared to sell the car without the say so of Sydney gun dealer, Jack Hochstadt, who had informally negotiated to buy it. Jack was a smooth operator, and visited the yard regularly. He had bought a few cars from Laurie, often on selling them. As often as not, Jack would bring a box of chocolates for Mrs. Fernance. For somebody living with car parts throughout the house, rear axle assemblies down the hallway as I remember, chocolates were a refinement that was much appreciated and Mrs. Fernance became his ally in dealings with her husband. Jack must have had too much on his plate, or maybe he had seen the car out in the open, and

agreed to my purchasing the Lanchester.

When the car arrived in Sydney, the difference between what we imagined had been hiding in the lantana and what had actually been there, was all too apparent. The wonderful back end had been replaced with a huge truck diff. grafted onto a modified torque tube, the front axle was badly bent, the lovely Smiths carburettor was gone, replaced by a 50's Stromberg downdraught, and of course in true Aussie fashion, the body had been truncated behind the front seat and a table top added. Further investigation revealed a seriously damaged free wheel starter mechanism and broken bearing caps. The car had not arrived at the yard as a going concern as stated, but as salvage, that much was obvious!! The young can afford to be optimistic because time is on their side. So it was with this young man!! Then began the long drives into the countryside researching the car's history and searching for the missing bits. The last owner was identified as Peter Allisoff, now deceased, a German immigrant. Peter had used the car on a country mail run between Grafton and Casino (about 50 miles each way). The Lanchester had taken over from a Packard and was reputedly faster. On losing the contract Peter decided to become fully immersed in prospecting for gold, previously a hobby.

The Lanchester with its high gearing proved unsuitable for excursions off the beaten track and into the bush, so Peter decided to change the diff ratio. I found the local "engineer" who did the job and he swore profusely in memory of it. It seems Peter left with the redundant bits and pieces loaded onto the back tray. We found the vacant allotment where he had dumped the diff and all the rest, but just after a bulldozer had been used to push all the rubbish and rubble into an 8 feet high pile at one end. Some token digging took place, but we were 300 miles from home without a shovel and running out of time. We were also trespassing!

By now even youthful optimism was giving way to despair when I discovered that wonderful man Francis Hutton-Stott. I can't remember exactly how this happened but the contact resulted in an incomplete chassis being found somewhere in England and it being shipped to Australia. There are probably some in the Lanchester Register who can still remember this event. The timing corresponds with a story I read years later about the mysterious disappearance of a Lanchester 40 chassis from a briar patch. My car arrived in Oz with a quantity of briar leaves secreted in various places, so I am left to wonder! Lanchester accuracy meant that at last I had all the mechanical bits to make a car! The importation had proved expensive and I had had to sell my new car to pay for it. My new girlfriend was happy with the Humber Snipe replacement, which helped. Should have married that girl!!! I think it is an accepted truism that idealistic young men become pragmatists with marriage, a mortgage and children; such was my experience. Wife number one was comfortable with work on the family car (Mark 6 Bentley) but could see little virtue in the Lanchester. So the Lanchester was put to sleep, finally ending up in a shipping container in a storage yard. With the years ticking by, the family grown and grand-children running around, wife number two became amenable to the idea of work on Lanchesters. After all, she had put up with work on Jaguars, RRs. Bentleys and all the others, could one more make a difference?

Twenty or more years previously a Windover body of the correct period and size had been located in Sydney. It needed some woodwork and there was some rectification required to the aluminium but it was a marvellous find. As part of the second beginning it was decided to farm this task out to professionals. Quotes were sought and given, and as a result, the project ground to a halt at the prospect of the sums involved. At about the same time Gerry Wheeler's car came onto the market. With the strong dollar the UK price was less than the quotes received for the Windover restoration. The choice was easy. A going car now!! How long did I expect to live anyway?? The deal done, the rally attended, Chris Clark had one more surprise. He had some Lanchester 40 parts for sale. With these parts purchased and the results of my scavenging in Oz, I now have sufficient mechanical parts for another car. The radiator is missing but I have located a fellow who can make one (his work is brilliant). So now with retirement imminent I am contemplating bringing two more 40HPs back from the brink. If nature intervenes before the task is completed, I will leave behind for some-one else, in a well-organized state, what is necessary to complete the task. Being a hopeless romantic, I have in the back of my mind a plan. As I restore each car, I should return it to the UK to take part in the annual Lanchester Rally. We will see what develops.

Let me say that I am in absolute awe of the Lanchester brothers. When one considers that they made cars commercially for less than 30 years, and did almost everything themselves, starting from scratch, and in that time their vehicles progressed from buggies (admittedly very sophisticated ones) to refined vehicles "fit for a king", I wonder how they did it?? Henry Royce made a virtue of refining the ideas of others and built a highly successful enterprise that prospered through the Depression. The Lanchester brothers were brilliant innovators who considered everything from first principles, and came up with ground breaking ideas. That they were brought down

by lesser individuals well versed in the art of skullduggery begs the question, "Can too much virtuosity be a curse?" Actually I am always surprised how few people are aware of the contribution the Lanchester brothers made to car design, and the overall genius of Fred Lanchester in particular. To have contributed in so many areas in such a fundamental way and not be celebrated, speaks to the humility of the man. If Fred in his life time was unwilling to claim his place in history through self-promotion, there are some attempting to redress this situation today through the activities of The Lanchester Trust.

It seems very much in the spirit of the Lanchesters, and Fred in particular, to promote scientific thought, scientific research and the application of science in all its many forms. I was extremely happy to be offered the opportunity to become a founder member of the Lanchester Trust. Fred Lanchester had no children, so in a metaphorical kind of way, the young people being rewarded with scholarships or grants or whatever could be considered to be Fred's children.

Mark Gray.



