

SPRING 2022
ISSUE 14



20-GHOST GAZETTE

The oldest Rolls-Royce car club in the world - Australian Chapter



A Twenty Returns Home

Tony Strachan

The voice on the phone was peremptory 'your Twenty is for sale in the US, you must buy it back' – such were the instructions from one David Davis, the keeper of the flame for the 20hp Rolls-Royce. I did.

The Travels of a 20hp Rolls-Royce

I quote from my journal – July 29, 1963 – 'Embarked aboard Royal Hellenic Mail ship 'Patris' amid scenes of indescribable confusion. Ship finally sailed at 12.54am. Park Ward 20hp loaded on ship during the day – apparently without incident' (little did I know). Two friends, Don and Paul, embarked with me. So began the most dramatic and probably the longest trip of my, at the time, every-day car. GNK50, coachwork by Park Ward, had been delivered in 1925 to Sydney for Mrs Hill. It was later owned by a Dr Rees, and it was probably he who had the vehicle 'modernised' in the 1930's, mainly by altering the front wings to look more of that period. These changes were easily removed when I bought the car in 1961.

Well, after a delightful voyage – we learnt some Greek, we danced, we almost missed the ship in Columbo and after a truly memorable day in Cairo, we arrived in Piraeus on a very fine Sunday, August 25th. We could live on the ship, but after three days touring by bus, we were disenchanted on arrival back in Athens to find the car unloaded with a dint to the back bodywork and an off-side front wing slightly pushed in. The damage was repaired in London many months later.



Camping in Greece in 1964 - Paul with a petrol stove.



In Greece, two different forms of transport.



A current side view of the car, now fully restored, and photographed in July 2022.

The car was heavily laden, with three of us, a great deal of luggage and a tent designed to cover the car and form a room beside it. The front seats slid out easily; we had two pump-up beds with a stretcher outside. This latter bed was the favoured position until we found scorpions in a Greek field. Frankly Greece, then very poor, was a culture shock, but overall, we had a wonderful time; camping by the sea; buying produce for next to nothing in markets and cooking dinner in a big pressure cooker on either our petrol stove or our small gas stove. A particularly delightful area was the Pelion range on the Peninsula of Magnesia – my Journal ‘very spectacular scenery, high mountains, narrow winding road, lush vegetation, but growth is very close, colours of deep olives and browns with sea always the most brilliant blue’. The Greeks were always generous – often giving us fruit, raisins etc. This led to a delicious, shared dinner on Corfu, when we stewed up rock hard nectarines, nuts, raisins and retsina in the pressure cooker. On Corfu we were lucky to meet the Voss family, from England, in whose 16th century barn the Park Ward was stored in mid-1964, while I settled in to living and working in the UK.

It was August, very hot and Greece is quite mountainous – the Twenty performed valiantly and gave no trouble though engine temperature was often in the nineties. It boiled briefly once. The roads were often a nightmare with carts, donkeys, people walking, whilst the standard of driving of trucks and busses does not bear recollecting. But we survived, indeed were enriched by the whole Greek experience. We flew a small Australian flag in Greece, but afterwards, it was only flown in communist countries. I still have the flag.

ITALY – I quote again from my Journal ‘what a civilised place after Greece’. Our adventures in Italy could be the subject of a small book – a superb drive in the evening stands out - from Naples to Rome on the new autostrada. We had arrived after 10pm to beat the peak traffic but were stopped twice by the police for illegal moves (Australian innocents abroad - in sign language, they believed us).

Later we had the good fortune to meet Francisco Santovetti, Secretary of the Circolo Romano Automobili d’Epoca. This charming and most hospitable chap parked the Twenty in the garage of his Rome Villa where I later did the only mechanical repair in nine months, that of replacing the cork in the starting motor clutch. Francisco had a substantial car collection, including a Rolls-Royce Phantom I, a 1929 Isotta Fraschini, a type 37 Bugatti a 1931 Alfa and other superb cars. He took me to excellent lunches and a stunning dinner at Sans Souci in Via Veneto beginning at 11pm. The innocent Aussie was maturing. Over the years I’ve been back to Rome several times, even having my 80th birthday dinner there in recent times.

I pause to reflect on the great advantages of having such a personal car on such a grand tour. Passing

through all these different countries over 9 months, retreating to the Park Ward was a sort of coming home – a very reassuring feeling – great at combatting feelings of home sickness.

We stayed in many of the best cities in Italy. For Venice we were lucky to arrive by water at the Doge’s Palace – having camped further down the coast. Then to Austria via the Dolomites, including the Pass of Costalunga (1753m), the Pass of Pordoi (2239m), the Pass of Falzarego (2105m) and were disappointed that the Grosslockner Pass was closed. In delightful Klagenfurt we accidentally caught up with a Gerolf Prause who had just purchased for restoration a P 2 by Thrupp & Maberly. Then it was Vienna which was, so far as we were concerned, the music capital. We stayed 16 days and attended 10 (proper) concerts. We also attended a meeting of the Osterreichisher Motor Veteranen Club – having an old car is a great way to meet people. This is what I did, again by chance, in Budapest when a 1929 Steyr came our way – owned by a young chap whose family gave me dinner.

However, getting to Communist Hungary had its amusing aspects – over one hour delay at the border where the custom officials thought the car a huge joke – they kept blowing the klaxon and virtually dismantled the interior. Paul, who had been born there, spoke some Hungarian (his parents came to Sydney in 1938), so we had contacts which proved most hospitable. On leaving, we were given a duck by an old family retainer. Operas, museums etc were experienced with Paul’s cousin, a charming artist lady, Kata Benedek – I still have the drawing by her signed ‘Remember Hungary and Me’. It was somewhat sad to see Kata – who spoke five languages and who had travelled extensively in Europe pre-war – stuck in this restricted society.

Back to Vienna – more concerts - my Journal says ‘a particularly memorable drive’ to Salzburg – more concerts – to Munich on the autobahn. More museums and a handsome 20/25 Rolls-Royce in the street. Back to Salzburg for a special concert (it was sold out, we sat on chairs on the stage) and on later to Innsbruck and Stuttgart where we saw the Mercedes Museum.

Amusingly, in Germany one was not (in those days) to arrive at a Youth Hostel in a car, so we would park a couple of streets away and turn up looking exhausted. In France, no one cared about arriving in a Rolls-Royce. I remember a delightful stay by the Rhone looking across at the Palais des Papes in Avignon. Sometimes we stayed in inexpensive hotels in cities or if convenient we slept in the car. When it became cold, camping was no longer a satisfactory option.

Another comment about the 20HP Rolls-Royce. It can be annoying to hear Twentys described as slow, heavy etc. GNK50 is a ‘goer’. From Mildura to Hay in the early 1960s after a RROC Federal Rally, the car averaged 54mph. In Germany on the autobahn, I could pass trucks in the rain at just over 60mph. In nine months,

the car ran smoothly, coping with all conditions (tuned by your-truly, I may add). I have often speculated since on the virtues of driving a two-wheel brake car with a crash gear box.

Our objective was Frankfurt where Paul was to leave us to work. After four days touring, we went to a performance of the Bach Mass in B minor, afterwards bidding an emotional farewell to Paul. Don and I sped off to Zurich in high winds and heavy rain.

The Park Ward has an all-metal roof, so the car is always dry and snug. Park Ward were newcomers to coachwork and were innovative. GNK 50 has very good proportions with fine mouldings around the doors. The opening V windscreen with the slim pillars is not only practical but sets off the frontal appearance splendidly. The weight of the body is appropriate to the engine's performance – unlike some later cars which had excessively heavy bodies – quite at variance with Sir Henry's ideas of what was appropriate for a Twenty.



Camping in Switzerland with Don and some visitors.

Zurich impressed us both – I visited the Stock Exchange – I had been visiting various Exchanges as I had introductions from the Sydney Stock Exchange where I had worked. Next was beautiful St Gallen. We then had a particularly memorable drive through Rapperswil, Schwyz, Brunnen and Goschenen where we boarded a train to Como. All good things came to an end in an 'hideous traffic jam' at Varese.

Milan was very wet and unpleasant (Kennedy was assassinated) and we were glad to move on to handsome Turin. I had an introduction to Lancia, so was very pleased to drive the latest Flavia coupe. (Later I acquired Lancia Fulvias in Sydney)

We were pleased in Turin to meet the very welcoming Prof. Quaglino, President of the Veteran Car Club Italiano. I gave him two articles which were published in the club magazine *La Manovella* – 'Tre australiani a zono per l'Europa con una Rolls-Royce del 1925', and 'Appunti sul movimento dei Veteran Cars in Australia'.

Off to the French Riviera. My Journal recalls an agreeable dinner of chicken and white wine in the car north of Cannes. This brings back memories of the Michelin maps and the green colour tourist roads in

that area. We travelled on all manner of back roads. The maps had been given to me by Rob Gunnell who had toured part of Europe in his Alvis 12/60.

So on to Avignon – where we stayed in the wonderfully situated Youth Hostel. Then Nimes, Montpellier – a most attractive city and on to the unimpressive Perpignon before passing into Spain. We were horrified by the 'monstrous and hideous' approaches to Barcelona. However, once settled in central Barcelona, we were impressed. I noted that we found the 'modernity of Spain something of a shock'.

We camped in a ruin on the way to Madrid having chicken and mushrooms cooked up in the pressure cooker. Then followed one of the most unpleasant drives of the trip, fog, light rain, mud, shocking roads, heavy trucks, impossible to pass – ouch! However, entering Madrid in better weather about 9.30am we were treated to an unlikely sight. We had been moved off the road by green cloaked police – soon a grand sight came into view - many outriders in white surrounding a stunning Phantom IV – moving at a stately pace – taking Franco taking to the country, we presumed.

We found an excellent hotel in the very grand city of Madrid, spent a day in the overwhelming Prado, and were able to attend a meeting of the Club de Automoviles Clasicos y Veteranos where we saw an elegant 25/30 by Gurney Nutting. After a few days we left for El Escorial and slept in the car that night in a forest. It was now winter – next morning I was appalled to find the water starting to freeze in the top of the radiator and in the water pump. We gathered pine needles, lit a fire, warmed some water and unfroze both. This was a lucky escape – what a disaster had the head frozen. By this time, we were both very cold – we drove to Segovia and found a warm restaurant providing hot chocolate under the wonderfully preserved Roman aqueduct – all covered in snow.

Toledo was also seen under heavy snow. We were glad to set off for Portugal where we encountered much more pleasant temperatures. In those days, the villages of Spain were dirty and poorly kept – what a delight it was to cross the border to Vila Vicosa – paved with white marble, streets lined with orange trees in well laid out pots – so neat and attractive. We then inspected handsome Evora. But, whilst having a coffee in a restaurant, we were somewhat appalled by how one attracted the attention of a waiter – one hissed!

Our objective was Lisbon. It was 19th December. We were fortunate to be able to stay in a Boarding House 'Casa Universitaria' – an excellent set up, with full board. Many of the students were away on holiday, but we made several friends. Board was cheap, but petrol in Portugal was so expensive that we only used the car once. We walked a great deal in this lovely city. I quote from my Journal 'Lisbon for me derives its special character from the 18th century, but this is one aspect of a complex of factors including the type of architecture, the building materials – white stone, tiles,

the use of paint in drab colours in green, red, blue, pink stucco – the hilly nature with the harbour background’ - ‘Although grand in parts and elegant in others, it remains an intimate city’. It was a great success to stay here (my enthusiastic letters back home resulted in a Sydney friend’s coming to live there for three years).

We were interviewed by a Vasco Callixto and an article headed ‘Um Rolls-Royce de matricula da Australia em Lisboa’ was published in *Volante* a motor vehicle paper. I have a copy with a very faded photo of Don, me and the Rolls-Royce.

A note on money – at this time the Australian pound was worth something internationally – I saved for nine months before I left Sydney; this set me up for the fare to Greece, (about 200 pounds, but only 80 pounds for the car, discounted, as I was a passenger) and nine months touring with a bit left over on arrival in UK. Six weeks in Lisbon cost only 30 pounds.

Petrol consumption – 16.8mpg Athens to Lisbon, but an improvement from Switzerland to Lisbon – 17.37mpg.

On a really superb morning of the 1st of February 1964, we set off north, taking our time in several places but especially in Coimbra and Porto. Of course, we sampled the port at Cockburn’s.

We inspected the car museum at Caramulo and were impressed especially by the collection of veterans but also by two Ghosts – 1911 and 1920 and a PII from 1930.

We entered Spain without incident and headed for Santiago do Compostela – my journal says ‘a mediaeval city – more charming than Toledo’ I was unexpectedly pleased to hear Bach on the organ in the 13th century cathedral. Northern Spain is mountainous, attractive, picturesque and has some very winding roads, tiring to drive on. Temperatures were barely above freezing.

We were pleased to be in France again, but in Bordeaux a thief rifled Don’s suitcase. This was the first of our encounters with les voleurs; in Paris we had a more serious encounter and Don was left with barely more than the clothes he wore. I also lost most of my earlier photos. However, France is one of my favourite countries and the drives up the west coast, through the Loire and Chartres were enchanting.

Paris was marvellous – I stayed three weeks. The cleaning of buildings, I noted, had recently taken place, so the architecture – particularly floodlit – looked splendid. One walked and caught the metro, but I did quite a bit of driving in the Twenty showing two friends around. I attended many delightful concerts. I upgraded my hotel from 7/6 per night to 10 shillings a night; I now had a bidet to wash in. The Australian Trade Commissioner kindly took me to visit the Stock Exchange and to lunch – I recall being shocked by his Aussie accent in French. Don went on to London as he had employment obligations later. In one day, after 330 miles, I arrived in Darmstadt where Paul was working and living.



Some onlookers queuing to view the Rolls-Royce in Prague.

Paul’s passport needed stamping – so we drove to Luxembourg. Coming back, we, and I quote ‘had a particularly glorious day, firstly along the Moselle Valley, much tasting of wine and secondly down the Rhine Valley’

Further touring beckoned, I set off for Amsterdam on the autobahn in the rain. At the airport I picked up Brian, Jim and Carole (from London) – we were headed to Prague through rain and snow.

I would mention here that I never had the slightest trouble with the 2-wheel brakes on GNK50. Bert Ward had relined them in Sydney. He maintained that in the early 1920’s the Rolls-Royce two-wheel brakes were as good as regular four-wheel brakes.

We were – no surprise - delayed at the Czech border. But approaching Prague was dispiriting; it was wet, cold and grey; the streets were dirty and muddy; the buildings were grey; the noisy trams were grey, and the people were grey. The air was filthy. However, as discerning readers will know, Prague is renowned for its architecture, particularly the gothic and baroque. I was enchanted with this city and with its splendid geographic position. An amusing incident occurred with the car. We had left it in the main 19th century square. On returning, we found a queue of locals walking slowly past looking at this unlikely Rolls-Royce with NSW number plates. We joined the queue; we reached the car; we got in and drove off, rather to the astonishment of the onlookers.

On April 2nd we left for Vienna. My Journal records that my companions were in a ‘delicious mood’ in the bright lights of Vienna after grey Prague.

Sunday April 12 – we were headed to Ostend – on the way the Twenty ‘failed to proceed’. The problem – a broken battery cable. We caught the ferry on time and after a smooth crossing arrived in ‘typical English weather, moist with some fog’. The countryside looked exactly as I had always imagined, seeing it for the first time as a sixth generation Australian. The Glorious Tour was over.



The Twenty in Budapest with an Australian flag.



On the return to London from Goodwood in 1964.

Postscript

I soon had a job in the City of London. The Twenty went on one important excursion, to Goodwood, in June 1964. Then - how can I explain my betrayal - I discovered Derby Bentleys. I fell for B18MR, a high vision saloon by HJ Mulliner. I had borrowed money so the faithful Twenty had to go - sold to 'Gus' Savalas, brother of the actor Telly Savalas. Gus was attached to the US Embassy. He registered the car in the UK but took it to Egypt (I have the number plate in Arabic) and then to Virginia. It stayed in the US until the fateful day when David Davis rang me. GNK 50 has now been comprehensively restored; trimming done by Sydney Motor Trimmers; spraying by Brett Ingham whilst all the mechanics have been comprehensively overhauled by Garth Selig.

When I repurchased the car, I never intended a complete restoration, but these things just tend to happen.



The car as it is now and freshly restored. Much work was done by Garth Selig.



The restored interior is finished in leather.



The front seats are adjustable and set up for the owner-driver.



The delightful dashboard, shaped to follow the V of the windscreen.



The car is fitted with a rear seat footrest in which a selection of tools are stored.



Numerous tools are also located in the running board compartment.



The engine compartment presents beautifully.



The tool selection in the footrest compartment.