



Seeing the Sights in a Rolls-Royce Charabanc

David Neely

“Rolfe Bros., of Blackheath (N.S.W.) drive the public to the various mountain sights in a Rolls-Royce. It is always in use. How the visitors to the district love to have their photographs taken seated in the car even if it doesn't belong to them!” This item appeared in the Sydney ‘Smith's Weekly’ on 29 January 1927 and referred to Rolfe's Rolls-Royce charabanc.

Originally horse-drawn, the name charabanc derives from the French char à bancs meaning carriage with benches.

Robert John Rolfe (1883-1942) was described as a coach proprietor in the 1930 NSW Electoral Rolls. Other Rolfes listed were all motor drivers: Harold William (1892-1958); Frank Eric (b1893); Burwood Casper (1894-1915); Claude Roland (b1894) and Robert Manton (1896-1950). The 1914 City Directories and Almanacs, recorded under “Motor Cars & Coaches”, “R. Rolfe, Phone 2 Blackheath. “Te-Whare”, Station Street.”

The “Only booking office for Rolfe's Packard and Hudson sedans, Rolls-Royce, Cadillac and Hudson tourers” was at W J Oates Cash and Carry business in Govett Street, Blackheath according to an advertisement in the ‘Blackheath Beacon’ on 6 February 1931.

Above: These tourists are onboard a 1911 Rolls-Royce charabanc on their way to Jenolan Caves west of the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. This charabanc is a Silver Ghost model, chassis 1663, owned by R Rolfe by 1927. The body was extended from the usual tourer length. [Courtesy of Mrs Elizabeth Plimer via Clarke and Neely's Supplement to 'Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country']



Above: Another view of the 1911 Rolls-Royce charabanc on the Jenolan Caves run in a presentation frame. The driver is most likely one of the Rolfes. Note the label on the bottom right-hand corner for Rolfe's Touring Service [Courtesy of John Lackey via the Supplement to 'Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country']



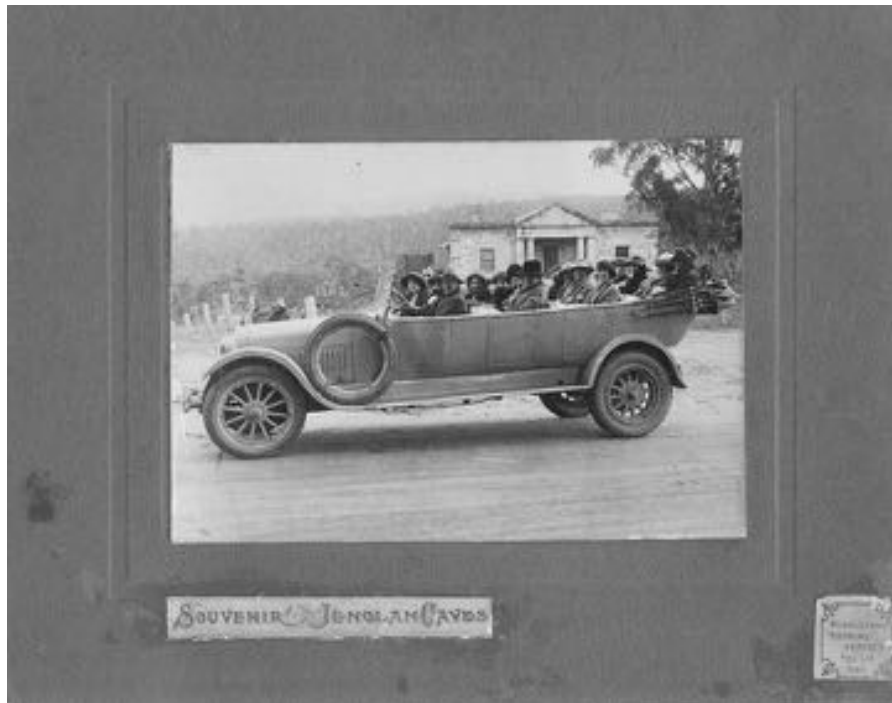
Above: The Rolfe children attended Blackheath Public School. This charming photograph from 1902 shows: Burwood 3rd row up, 3rd from left; Claude bottom row extreme left and Frank top row extreme right. [Blue Mountains Library via flickr]

Middleton's Touring Service operated from Katoomba in the Blue Mountains and also served the Jenolan Caves tourist route. Steve Wood saw the Rolfe Rolls-Royce in the Supplement to Clarke and Neely's 'Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country' and sent photographs of his grandfather, Harold Arthur Wood, who drove a Rolls-Royce and other cars for Middleton's on the Jenolan Caves trip. There is a report in the 'Windsor & Richmond Gazette' of 5 February 1915 of a fire in Mr A S Middleton's motor garage at Richmond and his touring motor car was destroyed.



Above: Harold Wood, who is in the collar and tie standing next to the smoker, drove cars for Middleton's Touring Service. The Rolls-Royce is 1921 Silver Ghost chassis 24LG. **Below left:** A Hudson Super Six. **Below Right:** A Dodge Four. The photographs are mounted in Jenolan Caves tour presentation frames. [Courtesy of Steve Wood and car model identifications by Ian Irwin and Tom Clarke]





Above: A Middleton's Touring Service Hudson charabanc in 1923 at the popular photographic location of Hartley courthouse on the way to Jenolan Caves. Note the label on the bottom right-hand corner for Middleton's Touring Service with the telephone number 117 KAT for Katoomba. [Emerald Museum & Nobelius Heritage Park via Victorian Collections VEMUP669]

The Melbourne firm of Withers also promoted tours of 21 days to Sydney in 1915. The trip included the Blue Mountains and Jenolan Caves.

ALL-DAY TRIPS

TRIP TO THE BLUE MOUNTAINS
 This trip will be run every Wednesday and on all Public Holidays at 11 a.m., commencing at 11 a.m., and every Sunday, starting at 11 a.m., and returning at the same time on all weeks.

(Among the places visited on these excursions)

WARRANGETTE
 Via the Upper Falls, and in the midst of lovely bush and river scenery.

SANDSHOUBERS
 One of the most lovely and magnificent scenery throughout the Blue Hill country.

POWERS POINT
 Melbourne's finest picnic ground. Superb scenery from the hill tops and charming tree glades and big oaks.

100 YEAR BIRTHDAY
 The beautiful lake, 11 miles in diameter, and with a capacity of 1,000,000,000 gallons, which serves Melbourne with the greatest portion of its water supply.

RETURNS FARE, 8/- for each Trip

EVENING TRIPS

Blue Mountains included. The cars will start from St. Paul's Cathedral corner at 8 o'clock and will return to Melbourne, returning along the Beach Road to St. Paul's and thence via the Fitzroy, Brunswick, and along Albert Park Lake to the city.

FARE, 8/-.

Special Arrangements
 Arrangements will be made with the proprietors of any special sight to be taken within the Blue Mountains, subject to an advance of 10/- on the day of the trip.

A. A. Withers & Sons
 333 Richardson St.
 Middle Park

THE 28 HP MILNES-DAIMLER CAR

BEAUTIFUL MELBOURNE MOTOR CHAR-A-BANC TRIPS

ESTD 1888

RONALD'S FLORAL STUDIO
 81, Swanston Street, C.B.D.
 Telephone 1393 Central

Proprietors:
A. A. WITHERS & SONS
 333 Richardson St.
 Middle Park

M.C.C.
 Commercial Vehicle Bureau
 Telephone 1340 (Melb.) 200

WITH the advent of longer days the proprietors of the

"BEAUTIFUL MELBOURNE" MOTOR CARS

have decided to make Extended Afternoon Tours from the 1st of November till the 31st of April, and to advance the fare from 2/6 to 3/-, but are making an allowance for family parties of 4/6 on such days.

We beg to thank our numerous patrons for the liberal patronage extended to us in the past, and hope the new trips now introduced will meet with the success they merit - we can ask no more.

All-day Runs are also now introduced, which will enable those who desire to spend a day in the country the opportunity to do so at a moderate cost.

The Evening Run to Hargrave, Dighton, &c., will prove a boon to those who wish to enjoy an evening run around the beach in comfort.

A. A. WITHERS & SONS
 Proprietors

Left: A Withers advertising brochure c 1910 including a photograph of a 28 hp Milnes-Daimler charabanc. The Society of Automotive Historians in Britain records that the British company of Milnes of Birkenhead, founded by George Milnes c 1888, in 1901 entered a partnership with Daimler Motoren-Gesellschaft to sell Daimler products in the British Empire. [Brochure Museums Victoria Collection HT29384]

THE

White Chars-a-Bancs

Magnificent 45-h.p. Saurer Cars

**GET OUR PROGRAMS OF SPRING
and SUMMER TRIPS**



DAILY AFTERNOON RUNS . . . ALL DAY TRIPS
WEEK-END TRIPS ROUND THE BAY, &c.
Personally conducted 4, 5 & 7 DAY TOURS
GRAND TOUR TO SYDNEY, 21 DAYS, including trip
to the Blue Mountains & the Jenolan Caves
The greatest Char-a-Banc ever run in any part of the world

Don't fail to get our Programs
They may be obtained from our Drivers, from any of our Offices, or
at the Government Tourist Bureau

Booking Office: S. COHEN & SONS
Queen's Walk, City

WITHERS Pty. Ltd.

PHONE _____ CEN. 9108

Left: A Withers of Melbourne advertisement promoting tours in 45 hp Saurer charabancs including the NSW Blue Mountains and the Jenolan Caves. [Weekly Times Annual' 4 November 1915]

Below: A Withers charabanc c 1916 in the NSW Blue Mountains. [Museums Victoria Collection MM 233]





Above: This horse-drawn charabanc with four benches was commissioned by Queen Maria II of Portugal (lived 1819-1853) from Thrupp & Co., London. It features the painted monogram of her grandson King Carlos I (lived 1863-1908), the last owner. It was used for promenades in the country or hunting expeditions. It is on display at the Coach Museum, Belem, Lisbon, Portugal. Joseph Thrupp in 1760 set up his business in George Street near Portman Square, London, and built elegantly styled carriages. George Maberly joined the firm in 1858 and in 1866 it became Thrupp & Maberly. [Wikimedia Commons]



Above: A horse-drawn charabanc on Huon Road, Tasmania, c 1900. [flickr]



Above: In 1908 the South Australian government created a tourist bureau and renamed it in 1910 as the Intelligence and Tourist Bureau. The Commer charabanc pictured here was taken between 1908 and 1910 after which dates the façade and the name changed to the Intelligence and Tourist Bureau (see below). [Wikimedia Commons]

Right and below: During World War I the Commer charabanc, patriotically draped, was used to advertise the opening of the Central Recruiting Depot in Currie Street, Adelaide, on 2 October 1915. [Wikimedia Commons]





Left: A group of tourists sightseeing in the Commer charabanc along a muddy road at Mount Lofty, South Australia, in 1913. [State Library of South Australia B 11943]

Below: The Adelaide Tourist Bureau hired charabancs up until 1910 when they purchased this Albion charabanc in 1910. It was built by the Adelaide company of Vivian Lewis Ltd. and seated 15 passengers. Note the ingenious rear mudguard formed to provide steps. [State Library of South Australia B 9231]





Above: A Lacre charabanc in the Adelaide Hills c 1912. It was licensed to Richard Mitchell with registration A64 and operated by Richard Mitchell & Co., Currie Street, Adelaide. The business was general carriers with fleets of pantechinons, furniture vans, transport vans and motor vehicles. [State Library of South Australia B56436]

Right: Richard Mitchell & Co., employees' picnic in 1912. ['Observer' 20 January 1912]



Below: The Mitchell Lacre charabanc in the Mount Lofty ranges in South Australia. The Lacre Motor Car Co. produced commercial vehicles from 1904. [State Library of South Australia B 28391]





Left: In a quintessential Australian bush setting, this charabanc is on the Waterfall Gully Road, South Australia. It is a 1918 30 hp Dennis registered in August 1918. Was an existing tree on the left used as a power pole? [History Trust of South Australia via Wikimedia Commons]

Below left: A picnic party in the Adelaide Hills around 1919. [State Library of South Australia PRG 280/1/18/296]

Below: A Signal charabanc around 1918. [State Library of South Australia PRG 280/1/18/79]



Right: A Hudson Super Six charabanc in the NSW Blue Mountains c 1923. [www.oldclassicar.co.uk courtesy of M. Connell]



Below: An A.E.C. charabanc probably c 1920 outside the South Australian Intelligence and Tourist Bureau. The Associated Equipment Company built buses, coaches and lorries from 1912. [Creative Commons]



Below: An illustration of a 1920 A.E.C. with a charabanc body identified by The Society of Automotive Historians in Britain.

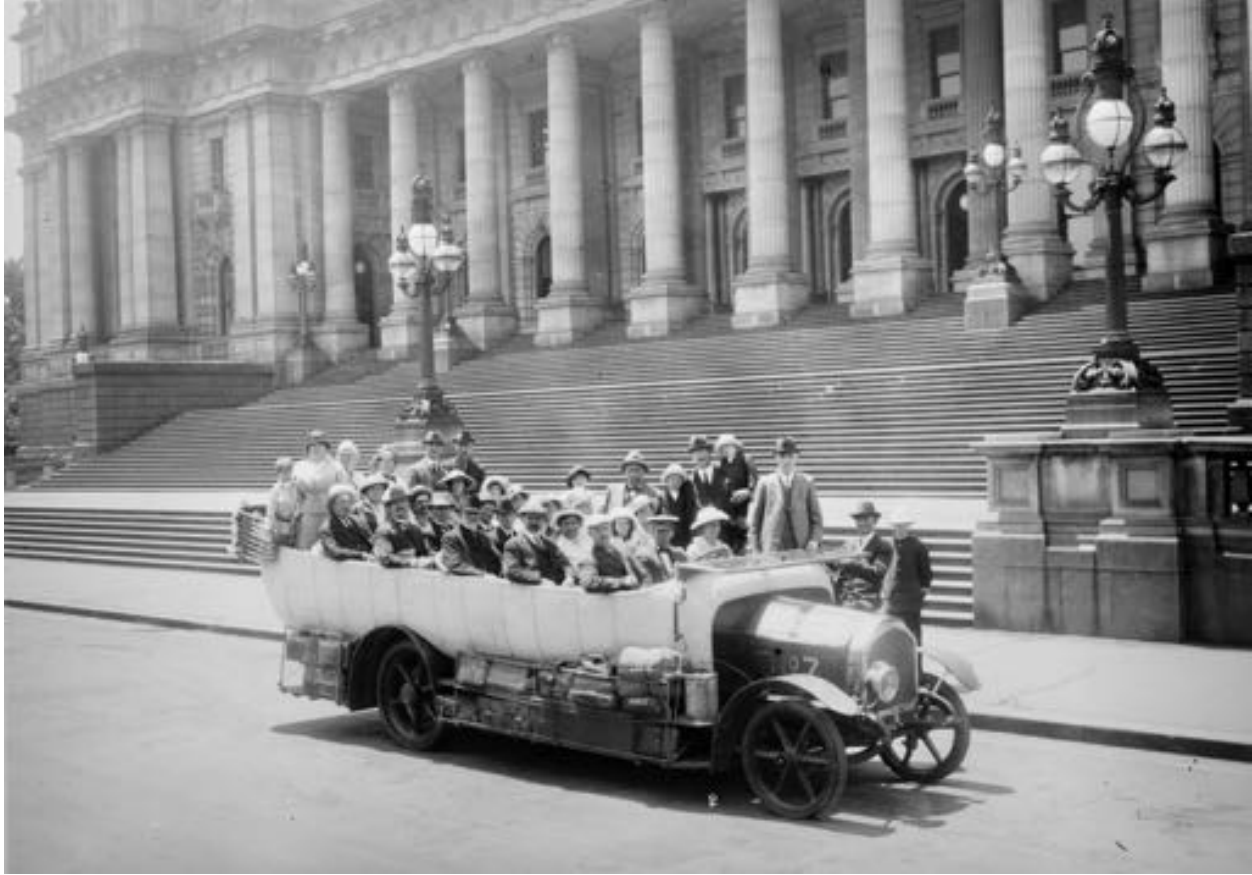




Top: This charabanc, also shown below, dates from 1926. [Adelaide A-Z]

Below: South Australian Tourist Bureau charabancs carrying British schoolboys on 22 September 1926. [G Brooks via Wikimedia Commons]





Above: In front of Parliament House a Swiss Saurer charabanc leaving for a picnic with the staff from the Melbourne firm of Darge in 1920. Darge were photographers so naturally a photograph was taken to mark the occasion! [State Library Victoria 10381/43139]

Below: A charabanc in Tasmania c 1925. [University of Queensland, The Fryer Library Photograph Collection]



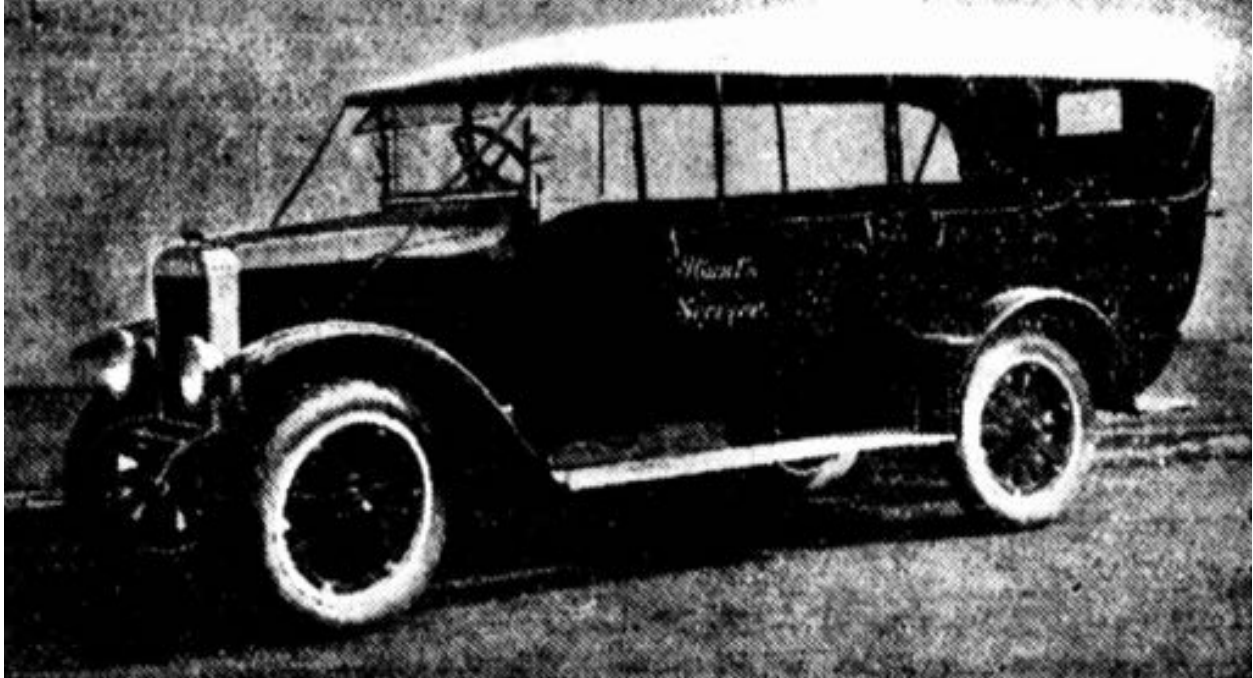


Above: Marion Bell's charabanc in 1924. Bell owned and operated a small fleet of buses from 1924 to 1927. Described as "the intrepid lady motorist" she drove around Australia in 1925-26 from Perth via Broome and the Northern Territory to Brisbane and returned to Perth via Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. She completed the trip in an Oldsmobile Six with her 11 year old daughter. She was a New Zealander by birth and growing up in remote areas gained bush and mechanical skills. Later she operated a taxi fleet in Fremantle. [Fremantle Library E000089.09 Also see Jenny Fawbert's 'Marion Bell – Round Australia in 1925' at Automotive Historians Australia]

Below left: Marion Bell's departure from Fremantle. [via facebook]

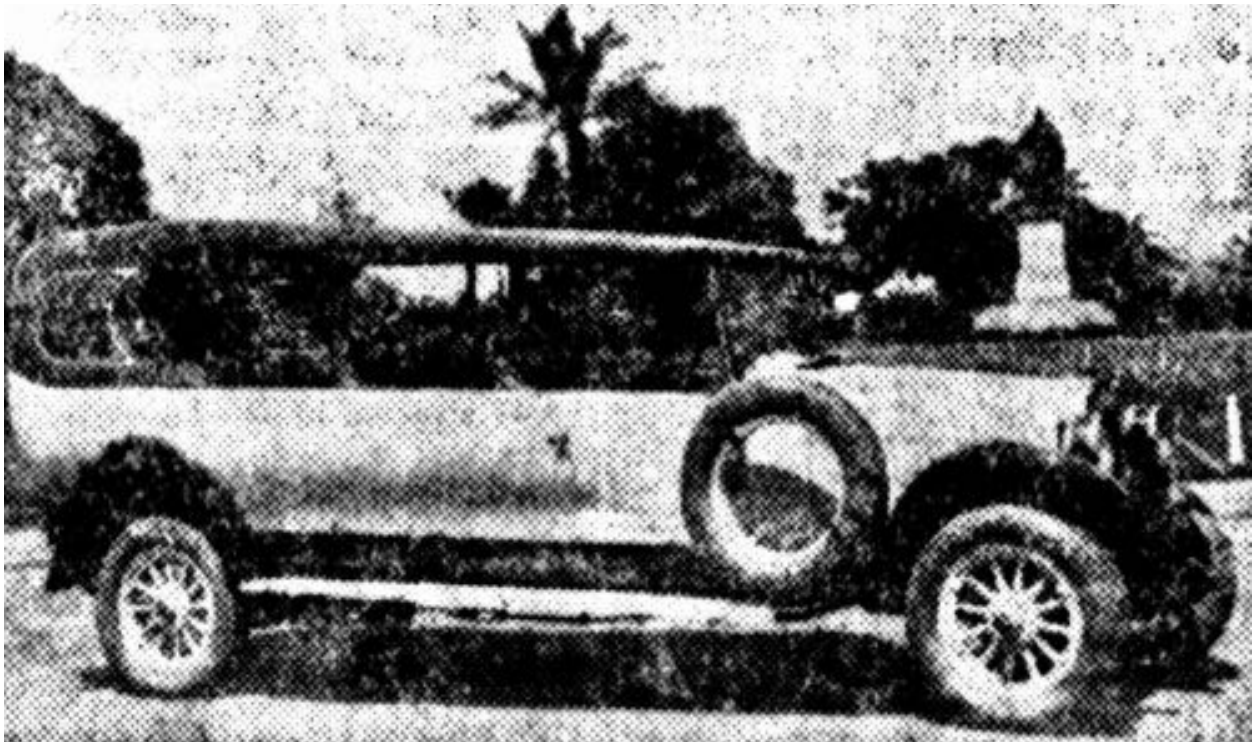
Below right: Marion Bell and her daughter during the around Australia trip. Note the driving gloves. [State Library of South Australia B47072/398]

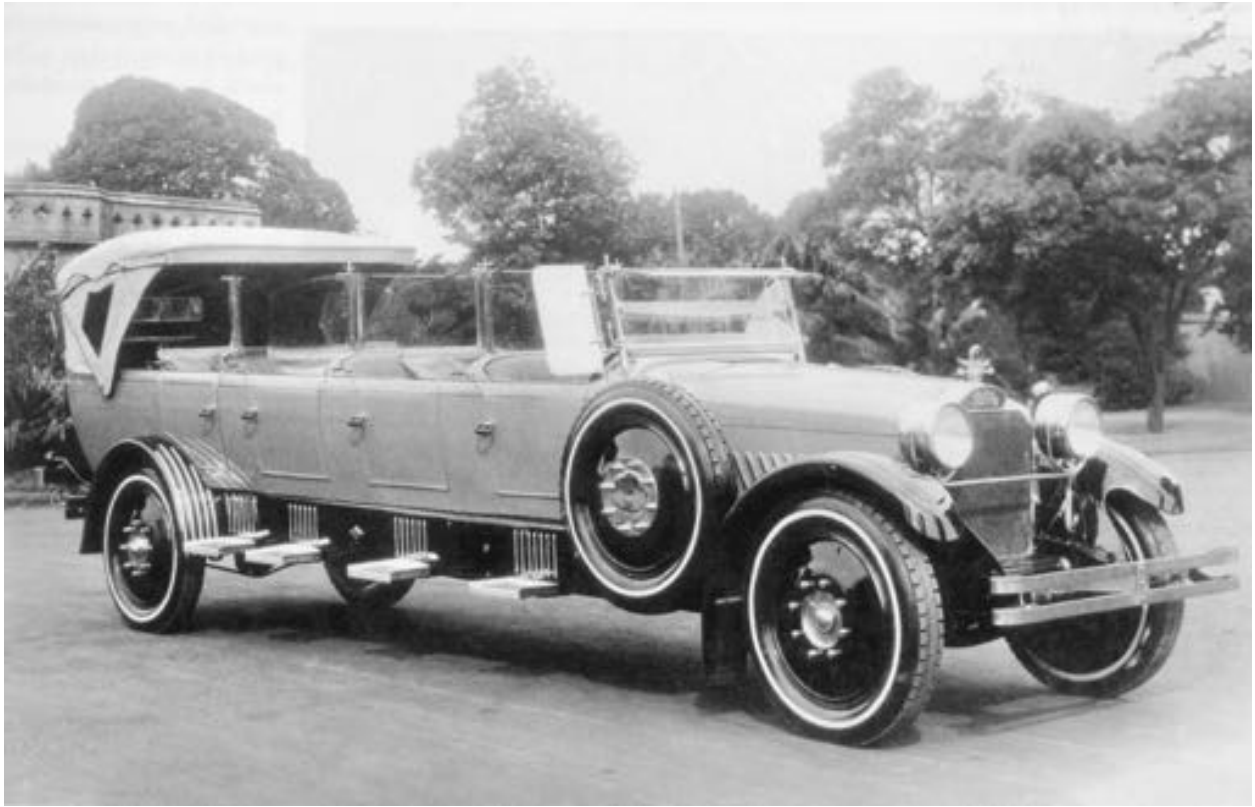




Above: An International charabanc supplied to Hunt's Motor Service of Nowra, NSW, by Jackson, Thompson, Ltd., local agents. [Sydney 'Sun' 17 March 1923]

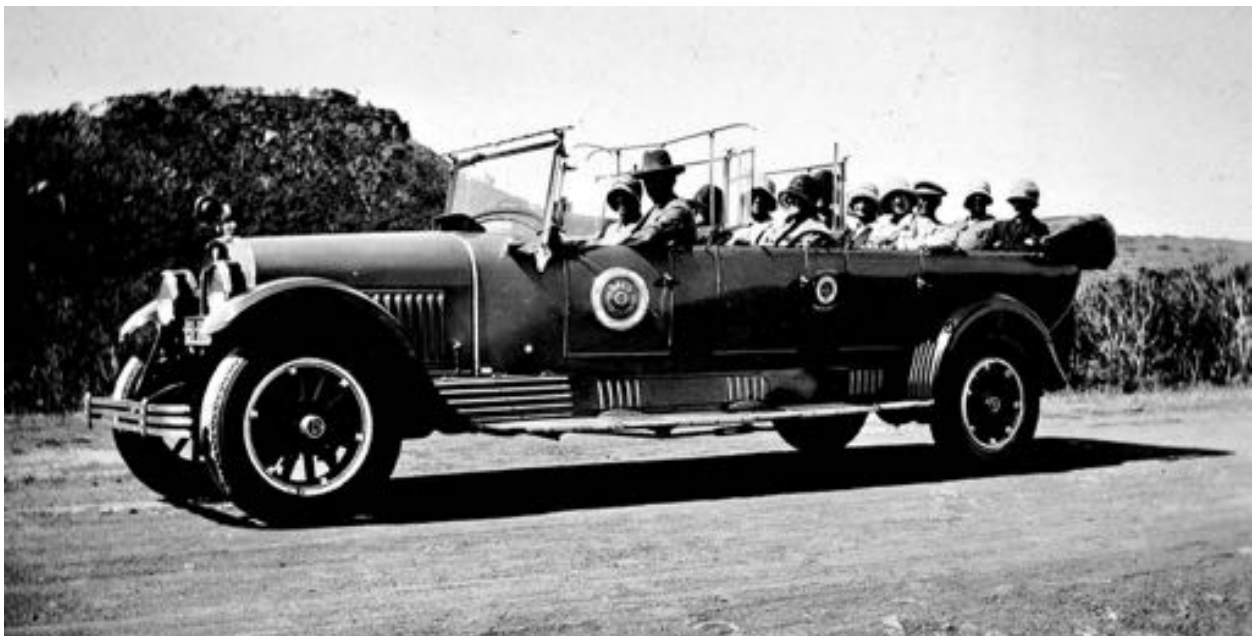
Below: The caption reads, "Hudson Super-Six Charabanc. One of two 16 passenger tourers recently delivered to Balmain Bros., of Bega, for their South Coast motor service (in NSW). Smith & Waddington were responsible for the smart body-work and the neat semi-California top, the front portion of which is removeable." Balmain Bros. started in 1909 with a small fleet of F.I.A.T. cars, conducting a regular passenger service between Bega and Cooma. [Sydney 'Truth' 18 October 1925]



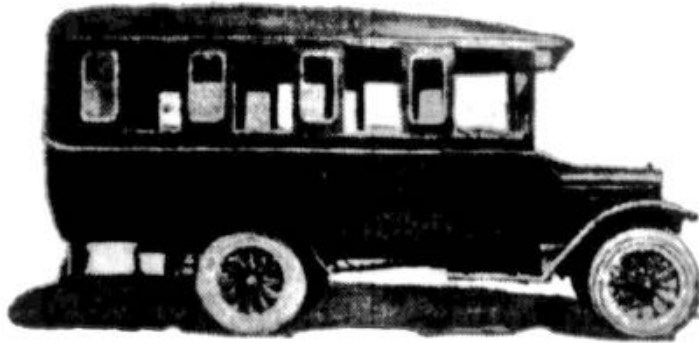


Above: This new Smith & Waddington 15 passenger White charabanc was photographed in February 1924 outside the Sydney Conservatorium. It was owned by N L Day of Coogee, a beach suburb of Sydney. Day operated excursions on behalf of the NSW Tourist Bureau. [*Comeng A History of Commonwealth Engineering Volume 1: 1921-1955* by John Dunn]

Below: A Day's Motor Tourist Service, Sydney, Hudson charabanc c 1930. [Museums Victoria Collection MM8012]

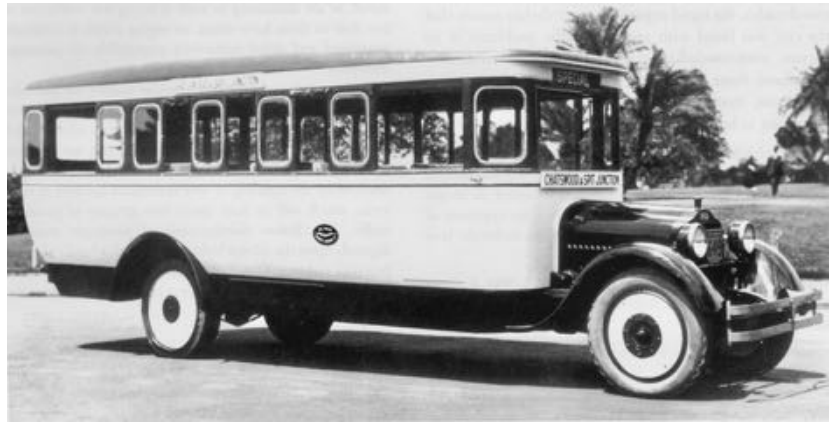


Motor charabancs were popular in the 1910s and 1920s for touring, sight-seeing and picnics, eventually giving way to motor buses, that afforded greater comfort.



Left: A Missenden Road Motor Body Works bus body on an International truck chassis. It appears to have fixed windows with alternate ones open in the California top style. [‘Evening News’ 19 September 1924]

Right: A White Transit Company bus with a body by the Sydney firm of Smith & Waddington. In the California top style it had a number of fixed windows, the alternate ones being without glazing. During inclement weather celluloid blinds could be pulled down over the glassless windows. [‘Comeng A History of Commonwealth Engineering Volume 1: 1921-1955’ by John



Below: This 20 passenger 1924 Vulcan charabanc is one of very few left working in Australia. Rolls-Royce Owners’ Club members were passengers when the SMART register catering for “Silver Spirit, Mulsanne and Related Types” met in Echuca in 2018. [D Neely]



Acknowledgement: Assistance from Tom Clarke. David Neely, Sydney, September 2024.