



## Rolls before Royce

David Neely,  
History Consultant,  
The Sir Henry Royce Foundation, Australia

Charles Rolls had been driving and racing motor vehicles for eight years before he took to the wheel of the first Royce car. He purchased his first car in October 1896 and three years later the 19 August 1899 issue of *The Autocar* reported he had owned nine 'carriages', as he called them, to that point. And his introduction to Henry Royce's first car was still five years away.

As well as petrol engine machines, Rolls owned an electric car and drove steam cars, which he also sold through his company. With that wealth and breath of automotive experience he was particularly well placed to appraise Henry Royce's first car.

The automotive stars of Charles Rolls and Henry Royce aligned when they met on 4 May 1904 in Manchester at the Midland Hotel. After lunch Rolls had his first drive. As it turned out he was so impressed he subsequently commandeered the small 10 h.p. Royce as a demonstrator. Royce observed some twenty years later that Rolls, "Ran our first attempted car for thousands of miles with great enthusiasm."

This is a tribute to Charles Rolls's astonishing automotive career before he met Henry Royce.

*Above: The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls (1877-1910). [National Portrait Gallery, London.]*

## Rolls on Two Wheels



*Left: Rolls was a keen cyclist from his early years. In May 1888 he started at Mortimer Vicarage School in Berkshire, then Eton in May 1891 and Cambridge University in October 1895. He is probably aged 15 here while he was at Eton.*

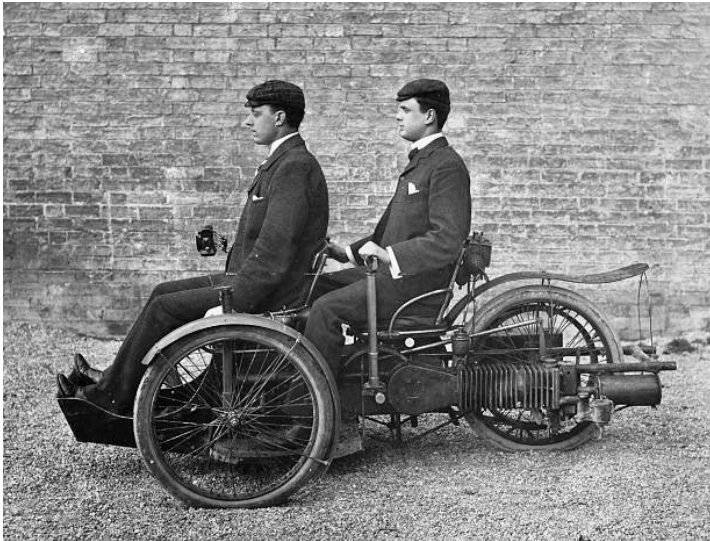


*Above: Rolls in town on his Osmond bicycle.*



*Right above and below: Rolls at Cambridge.*

## Rolls on Three Wheels



**Above left:** Rolls seated at the rear of 1895 4 h.p. Léon Bollée tandem purchased in March 1897. Pictured here with Cambridge friend A L (Louis) Paul as the passenger in front. Soon after the purchase Rolls drove the Bollée from Coventry to Cambridge.

**Above right:** rolls sitting on 1897 1¼ h.p. De Dion tricycle purchased in March 1897.

**Below:** Three wheels Vs two wheels and four hooves at Richmond, London, 1898. Or perhaps 1¼ h.p. Vs 1 h.p. Place your bets ladies and gentlemen!





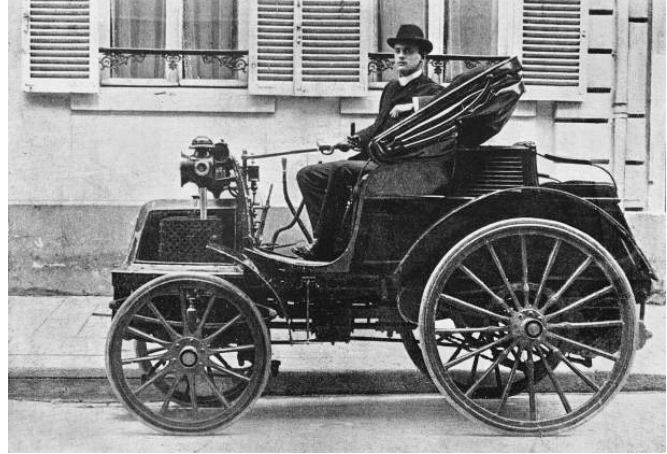
## Rolls on Four Wheels



**Above:** In October 1896 Rolls went to Paris and purchased a used works-mileage 1895 3 ¼ h.p. Daimler-engined Peugeot Phaeton, not long after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. It cost him £225 - a loan from his father for £140 helped. It was shipped by boat train to Victoria Station and his first journey was from London to Cambridge.

**Below:** Rolls drove his 3 ¼ h.p. Peugeot in defiance of the legal restrictions. This photograph with man with the red flag, however, was just for publicity purposes. It was taken in the driveway of his father's London house.





**Above left:** in 1897 Rolls acquired this 1896 8 h.p. 4-cylinder Panhard and Levassor. M. Émile Mayade (1853-1898) had driven it to victory in the September 1886 Paris-Marseilles-Paris 1,710 kms 10 day event. No. 6 was the winner from Harry Lawson. Just visible behind is No. 8 another Panhard and Levassor which came second. Both were fitted with Daimler engines. It had been used in the November 1896 London to Brighton 'Emancipation' Run. [Grace's Guide]

**Above right:** Rolls with his 1896 8 h.p. Panhard.

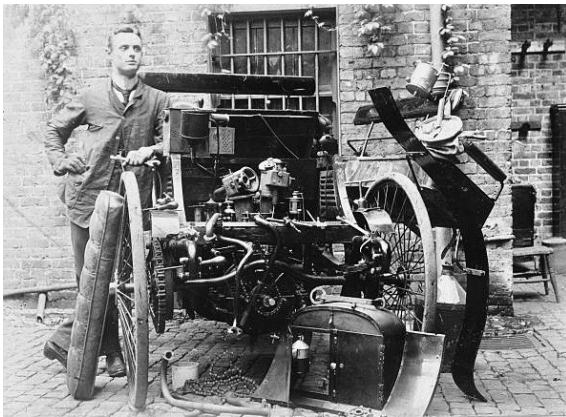
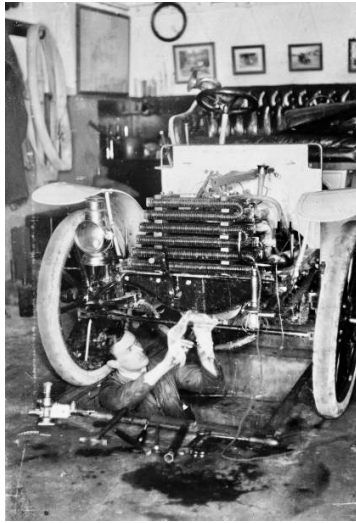
**Below left:** Rolls behind the wheel of his 1902 24 h.p. Mors with his dog Gazeka at his father's London home.

**Below right:** The 1896 8 h.p. Panhard after it had been converted to a wagonette. Pictured at Rolls's family's home, The Hendre, Monmouthshire, Wales.





## Rolls the Mechanic



*Top left and centre:* While Royce is more usually associated with the word mechanic, Rolls studied engineering, for which he had a natural flair, and eventually qualified for the M.I.M.E.

*Top right:* Rolls is instructing a mechanic.

*Above:* The 3 ¼ h.p. Peugeot dismantled.

*Above right:* Rolls is inspecting an engine before donning his overalls.

*Right:* Rolls is adjusting the clutch prior to the start of the Paris-Boulogne race 1899



## Rolls and Royalty at The Hendre



**Above:** The Hendre, Monmouthshire, Wales, Rolls's family's home is pictured here around 1900. Rolls was born in London. By the age of 13 he was living at The Hendre with his parents, Lord and Lady Llangattock, and two siblings - plus 21 servants. His father's London rental income approximated five million Australian dollars in 2022 value – plus income from 6,000 acres of Monmouthshire farmland. [Wikimedia commons.]



**Left:** Rolls's grandfather, John E W Rolls (1807-1870), established the family in Monmouthshire, Wales. He is pictured here in the Oak parlour at The Hendre. He was succeeded by his son John Allan Rolls (1837–1912), sheriff in 1875 and MP for Monmouthshire, 1880–1885, created Baron Llangattock of the Hendre, 1892. John Rolls's ennoblement brought the family, and the house, to its social apogee, culminating in a visit from the Duke and Duchess of York, who stayed with Lord and Lady Llangattock at the Hendre in late October – early November 1900. This was an important event in the family's social history, confirming their elevation to the upper echelons of society.



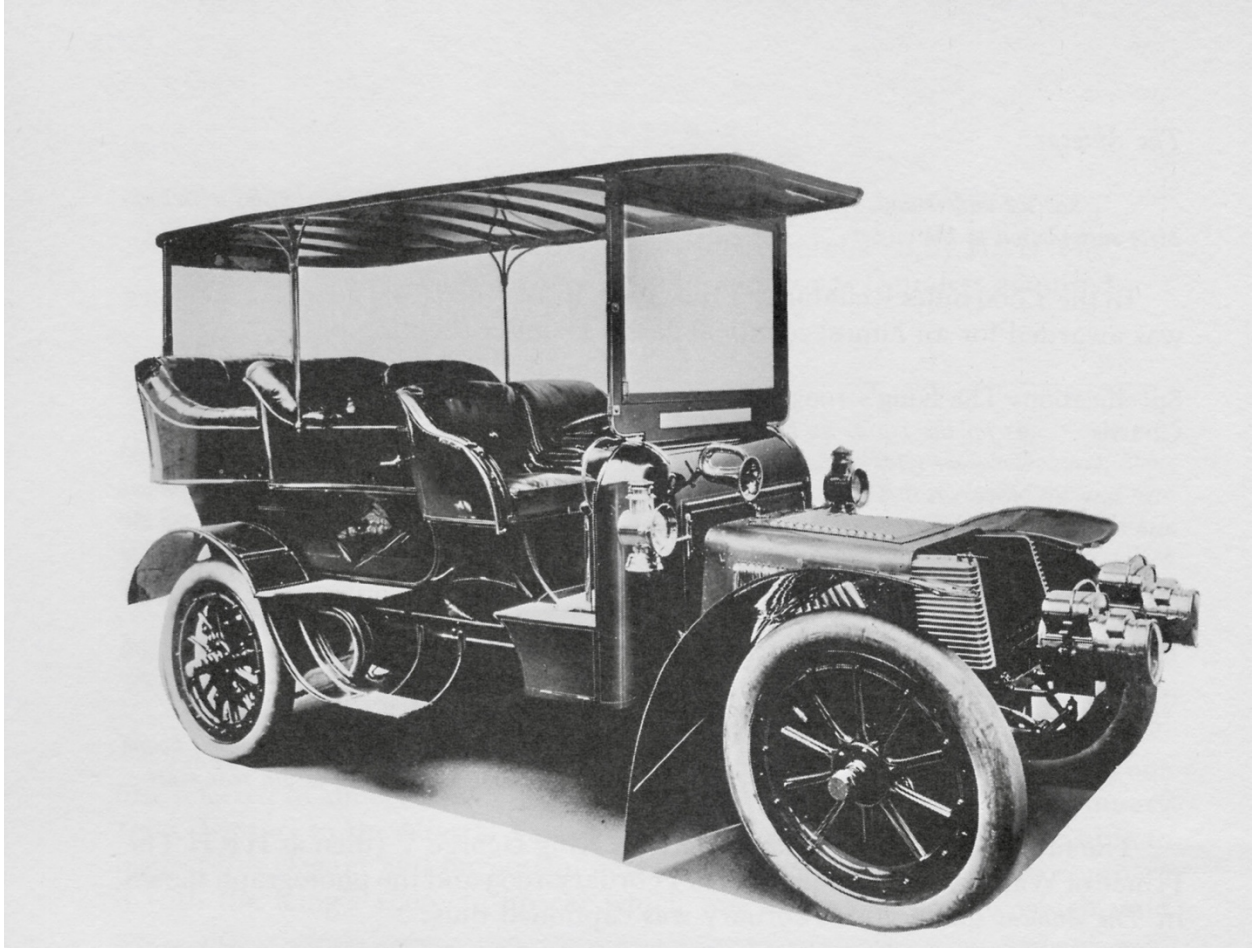


**Above:** The 1900 12 h.p. Panhard racer was rebodied in August 1900 as an aluminium rear-entrance tonneau painted in the Llangattock colours of dark green lined yellow. Rolls is at the wheel with the Duke of York, later King George V in the passenger's seat. Rolls's father Lord Llangattock is in the rear behind the Duke with Sir Charles Cust, the Duke's equerry. Lady Llangattock is standing at the entrance to The Hendre in the centre.

**Below:** "My first drive in a motor car!", was the inscription Princess Mary, Duchess of York, later Queen Mary, wrote underneath this photograph of herself in the passenger seat next to Rolls. Lady Llangattock, behind her son, and Lady Eva Dugdale, Lady-in-waiting to the Duchess, are seated in the back. Rolls took them on a motor tour of Chepstow and Tintern Abbey. Three months after their visit the royal couple bought their first Daimler. [Royal Collection Trust]







**Above:** The royal couple's first Daimler is nicely documented by Brian E Smith in his magnificent book *Royal Daimlers*, "The first Daimler car acquired by HM King George V (then as HRH The Prince of Wales) was delivered in February 1903 and the photograph shown in *The Autocar* dated 28<sup>th</sup> February was captioned thus:

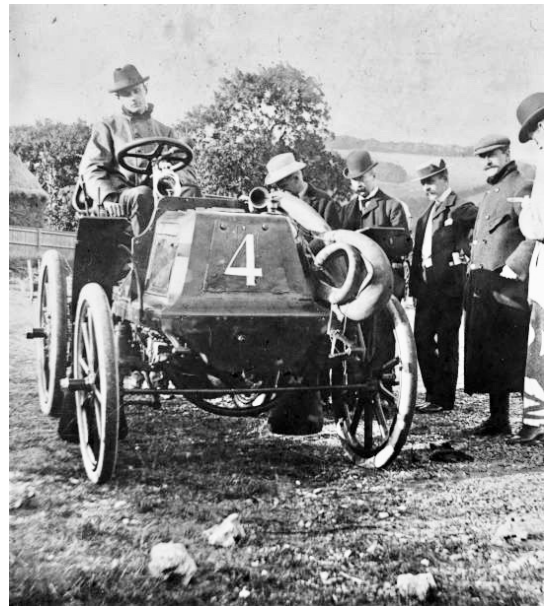
*"The Prince of Wales, who has owned an electric car for some time, and who, of course, has often driven in the King's cars, has now selected a fine 22-hp Daimler, which Mr Oliver Stanton had the honour of submitting to him on Wednesday last. The engine and transmission are of the standard Daimler type, but the body is provided with seven seats, and is extremely comfortable, not to say luxurious. The two front seats are of the scoloped type. Immediately behind them are two more seats, each of the fauteuil pattern, which are approached by side doors. There is a space between these two middle seats, and the horseshoe back gives most comfortable seating for three, in fact the machine may be described as the old John-o'-Groats type with two front seats added. The wheelbase is no less than 10 feet, the wheels 36 inches in diameter, and the tyres are Goodyears (pneumatics on front, solid at rear). The canopy and front screen are detachable in the usual way. The Daimler Co and Mr Stanton, who we need hardly say is the King's advisor on motor matters, are to be congratulated on the unique honour they have enjoyed of supplying the King with no less than three cars, and now the heir to the throne has selected the make which has given his royal father such satisfaction."*

## Rolls the Racing Driver

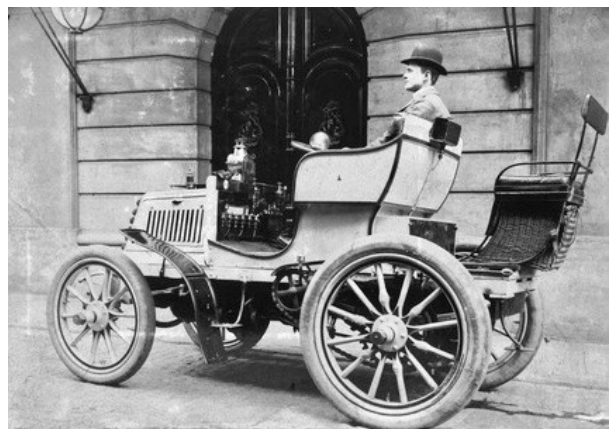


**Left:** The 1899 8 h.p. 4-cylinder Panhard rear entrance tonneau and with steering wheel was purchased in May 1899. Rolls came second in this car in the Tourist Class of the Paris-Ostend race held between 31 August and 1 September 1899. It was sold in November 1899.

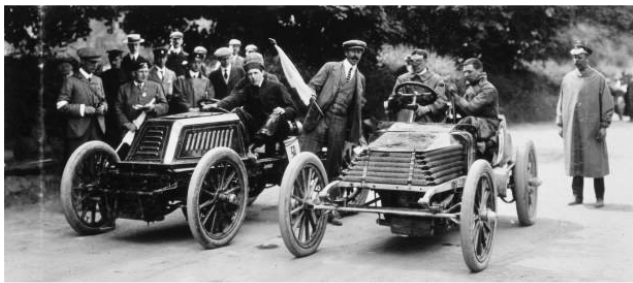
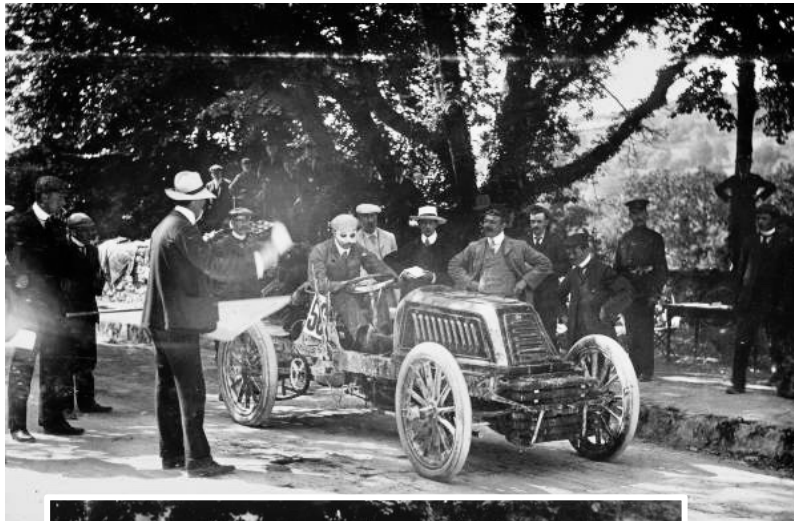
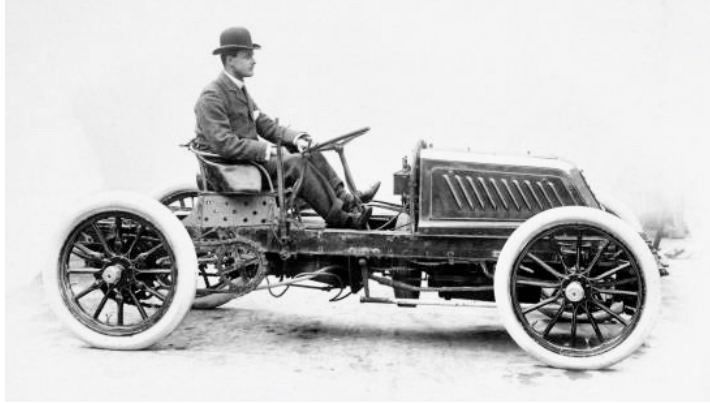
**Right:** The 8 h.p. Panhard on the Paris-Boulogne race 17 September 1899. Rolls's riding mechanic was Archie Millership, who paid half of the expenses. They came 4<sup>th</sup> in their class, which was in fact last, at 23.2 mph! [Information kindly provided by Tom Clarke]



**Below:** The 1900 12 h.p. Panhard racer, a white two-seater with outrigger rear seat purchased in early 1900. Shown here before and during the 1,000 Mile Trial, which lasted 14 days during April and May 1900. The trial was the marketing masterpiece of Claude Johnson, the future manager of Rolls's business and later Managing Director of Rolls-Royce. Rolls won the trial.







**Above left:** The 1901 80 h.p. Mors racer purchased in early 1902.

**Above right:** The Mors racer at the start of the 1902 Paris-Vienna race.

**Left:** The Mors racer at the 1903 two mile speed trial Cork, Ireland.

**Inset left:** Rolls's Mors racer competing against a Wolseley at the 1903 Castlewellan Hill Climb in Ireland.

**Below:** Rolls in his Mors racer versus J E Hutton in his Mercedes 'Sixty' for the 50 Guineas Cup, Phoenix Park, Dublin in 1903. Rolls won the contest.



**Above left:** Rolls in a Napier during the elimination trial for the 1903 Gordon Bennett Trophy.



**Above right:** Race between Rolls and J E Hutton, York, 1903

**Right:** Rolls in another Mors racer. On 26 February 1903 he covered the kilometre on the Duke of Portland's Welbeck Park Road in 27 seconds, equivalent to 82.85 mph or 133.33 kph as reported in *The Automotor Journal* of 7 March 1903.



**Above:** Prizes and trophies.



**Left:** Rolls in another Mors a marque he favoured for high speed work.



## C.S. Rolls & Co.



**Above:** Rolls established C. S. Rolls & Co. in January 1902 again with financial assistance from his father, who lent him £6,600. It was one of Britain's first car dealerships, Rolls based the company out of Lillie Hall, a disused roller skating rink in West Brompton, London. Rolls's familiarity with London's wealthiest ensured a successful opening. Claude Johnson a close friend and former Secretary to the Automobile Club soon joined Rolls in the business.

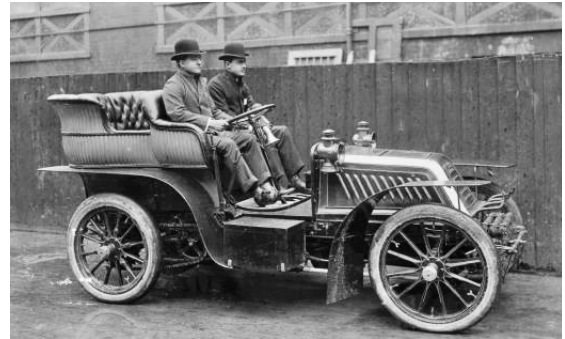
**Below:** Rolls and the staff at Lillie Hall. Rolls is in the centre of the front row and on his right is Claude Johnson, the manager, holding the dog. Tom Clarke estimates the photograph was taken after December 1903 and more likely the British spring of 1904. He added, "If the dog is Rolls's then it must be Gazeka."



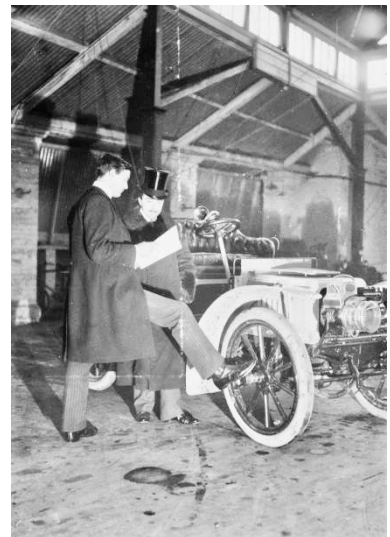


**Above:** Cars at Lillie Hall.

**Right:** Rolls unusually pictured in the passenger seat. It is his ex-racing 80 h.p. Mors now rebodied and sold here to the Duke of Manchester.



**Below left:** The machine area at Lillie Hall.







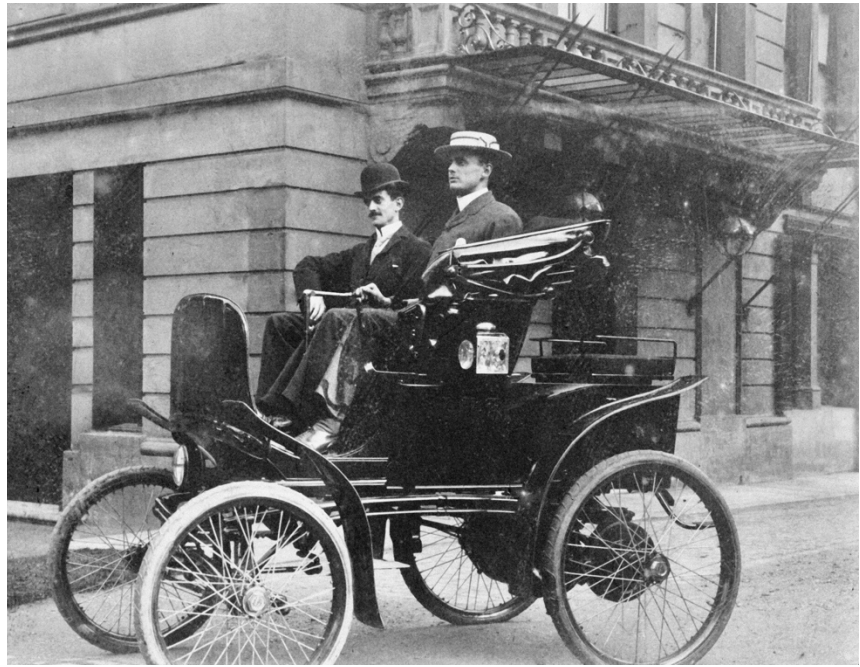
*Above: Rolls's first stand at the London Agricultural Hall in 1902.*

*Below: The company's stand in 1903.*



## Electric and Steam Cars

**Right:** Rolls's Columbia Electric Carriage, bought from the newspaper magnate, Alfred Harmsworth in 1898, outside South Lodge, the family's London home. His passenger is Charles R D'Esterre (1876-1943) an early aviator, who in 1902 applied for two patents with Rolls for improvements to engines. Rolls and Claude Johnson seriously contemplated electric cars before Rolls joined forces with Henry Royce.



**Below:** Rolls onboard a 1901 Locomobile steam car. While French Panhards and Belgian Minervas were the main cars that C.S. Rolls & Co. initially marketed, they also sold Gardner-Serpollet steam cars.

**Below:** On a personal note, I saw a very rare 1900 Gardner-Serpollet on the 1978 Australian International Veteran and Vintage Motor Rally from Sydney to Southport on Queensland's Gold Coast. It was entered by JW and MB Eisenhauer (NSW). To the delight of locals it steamed around the Ipswich showground during the rally.





## The London 'Stud'



**Above:** In 1898 Rolls's London 'stud' comprised the 1897 De Dion tricycle, his 1895 3¼ h.p. Peugeot and the 8 h.p. Panhard after Rolls converted it into a wagonette.

**Below:** Rolls's 12 h.p. Panhard rebodied, next is possibly his 1898 Lynx dogcart, then 1895 4 h.p. Panhard and the De Dion tricycle. [Identifications for both photographs kindly provided by Tom Clarke]



## Rolls and the Motor Volunteers Reserve



*Left and below: Rolls in 1903 became a captain in the Motor Volunteers Reserve.*

*Bottom: Rolls driving the Prince of Wales, the future King George V, the Archduke Frederick and General Methuen in 1904.*





## Rolls and the First Royce Car



**Above:** Rolls at the wheel of the first Royce car with HRH the Duke of Connaught seated alongside and J T C Moore-Brabazon (later Lord Brabazon of Tara) at the front. Seen here at Folkestone railway station on 5 August 1904. [Tom Clarke's dissertation on the pre-40/50 h.p. cars, in Fasal and Goodman's *The Edwardian Roll-Royce*, page 10]

**Below:** Rolls and the first Royce with its second rear entrance tonneau body at Hay Tor in the English county of Devon during the summer of 1904.



**Acknowledgements:** Tom Clarke has generously provided his research about Charles Rolls and assisted with the identification of photographs. Bruce Lawson's excellent biography, *Charles Rolls of Rolls-Royce*. Images are online sourced from Charles Rolls's photograph albums. David Neely, Sydney, 2024