

## Rover Time Traveller

German journalist Michael Schäfer and his photographer Stephan Lindloff came over to Coventry to try out the 1909 Rover 15hp in the Coventry Museum of Transport. The RSR was able to help him with some information about the car, so Michael has kindly provided us with his original German text and a full set of photographs. The full version of this story has been published in the German magazine 'British Classics'. We have done our best to translate, interpret and slightly condense the story here, while keeping most of its charm!



Michael Schäfer gets to grips with the Rover 15 behind the Coventry Museum.

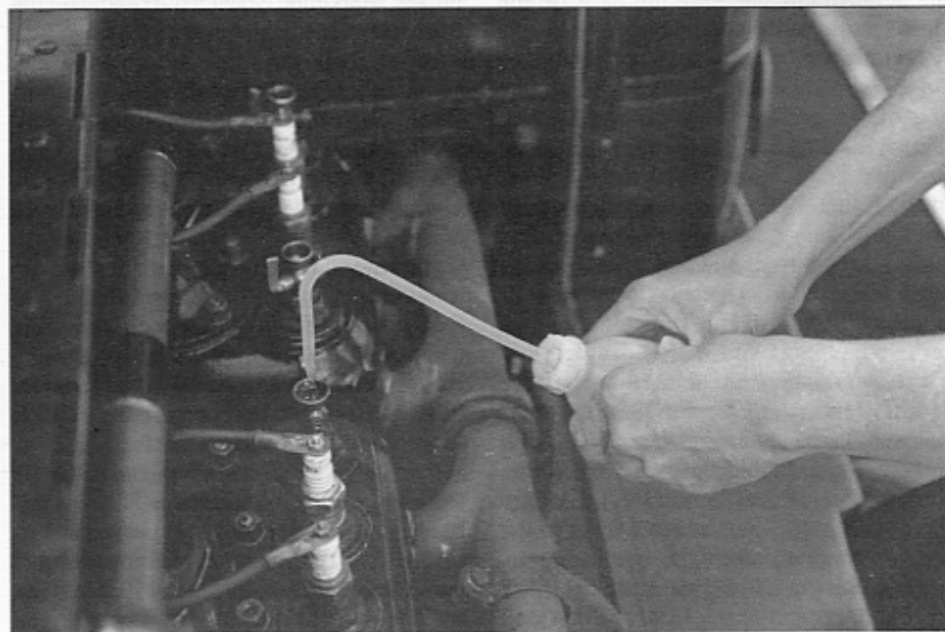
How many times have you wondered what it was like in the early days of motor-ing? You really want to know? Okay, BRITISH CLASSICS takes us back to the year 1909

HG Wells has kindly lent us his time machine, now expanded into a two-seater. We aim it discreetly into the corner of a supermarket parking lot in downtown Coventry. Because this was, 105 years ago, a larger orchard, just south of the nearby Rover car plant. And this will be our goal: The Rover Motor Company, Meteor Works, Garfield Road, Coventry, England. Time: 18 September 1909. Hold tight - the lever is pulled - let's go!

Shortly before our landing, we reduce our time travel speed. We have reached the year 1909. The stroboscopic flicker before our eyes slows down to see images: In February, the first public demonstration of colour film takes place in Brighton - all coloured by hand. In Belfast on 31 May, at the shipyard of Harland & Wolff, we see the keel laying of the building construction no. 401. As "Titanic" it will gain notoriety. How fitting: On June 10, the radio operator of the steamer "Slavonia" made the first "SOS" morse distress signal when the ship runs aground off the Azores.

From water to the air: The French aviation pioneer Louis Blériot crossed the English Channel in just 28 minutes on 25 July with his 25-hp monoplane. He receives the "Daily Mail" prize of £ 1,000, which corresponds to a current value of

£70,000. For £1000 pounds - we could get two brand new Rover 15 hp cars with all the extras. So we are landing here to try out the Rover 15hp. The rapid switching between day and night has come to a standstill. We are here! Precisely calculated in said



Filling the fuel-priming taps before attempting to start the 15.



Folding the large hood away is a two-man job.

orchard, behind the shed, we hide the time machine. Dressed appropriately, we walk to Warwick Row behind the Rover "Meteor Works" factory building.

There, the company's own sales room is on the ground floor of the main administration. We are received courteously and offered a test drive in the latest Rover product: the 15 hp of course. The number refers to the so-called taxable-horsepower. Determined by an arbitrary calculation method which is based on the diameter of the cylinder bore, the figure has little to do with actual power developed, which is actually a little more than double this number. The 'salesman' is trying hard with us – the 15hp must improve Rover's low sales. Rover has been lagging in technology compared to its competitors. In 1906 the com-

pany had introduced the first four-cylinder 16/20, but De Dion-Bouton in more advanced, more motor-friendly France have already made the first V8 engine in the world!

In the US, Ford has reached the incredible number of almost 18,000 vehicles on their spoked wheels. In the UK the clocks seem to run a little slower. Nevertheless, a year after the debut of the 16/20 one of them wins the prestigious Tourist Trophy on the Isle of Man. The winning car wears a characteristic radiator grille, which is modelled on that shield-shaped badge which adorns the steering column of each Rover bicycle. The Rover name began with cycles. Rover cars started in 1904. And they are decidedly expensive. A new Rover 15 hp hits your wallet for £ 375. For com-

parison, a not exactly underpaid policeman receives at that time around £70 - a year!

This makes it clear who the buyers of automobiles in the early 20th century are: The (not impoverished) nobility and the powerful landowners - primarily in the colonies. We behave as if we belonged to one of the two target groups, presenting ourselves alongside the burgundy-lacquered 15 hp. Its pretty baroque shape is reminiscent in its curves of traditional coach-building. Very beautiful are the large acetylene headlights - small artworks made of brass. They are complemented by two kerosene-fueled light sources. Acetylene and Petroleum - this is somehow "hybrid"?

With such a nice Indian summer sun laughing at us, we want to see how the red beauty drives in open form. For removal of the top (optional for extra charge £30), it takes two pairs of hands, taking great care to follow the instructions of the manual and not to trap any fingers. The 'salesman' informs us, meanwhile, that the 15 hp is available as a Landaulet with an extended wheelbase, with "Touring Carriage" construction - like that standing in front of us. Boldly he enters the cockpit and asks us to take a seat. It is surprisingly comfortable, with a beautiful panoramic view, because you can sit on and not in the car.

The leather-covered furniture is reminiscent of the typical seating of an Old English smoking salon. To travel in the rear is of course the more convenient alternative - you feel like a king in a mobile opera box. Here, an arm relaxed upright, with slightly inclined forward hand in greeting the common people on the pavement. Looking ahead explains the origin of the word dashboard. For it is just that: A board - of course made of fine mahogany and especially robust. Then loosely scattered: Various clocks showing speed, distance miles and time.

A sight glass provides information on the operation of engine lubrication. Everything looks so gorgeous, carved and moulded from solid. The chassis and body make a very solid and rigid impression. Unusually for the time, that Rover produces the body in its own factory. Even Rolls-Royce will for another thirty years provide only road-worthy chassis for independent coach-builders to mount their bodies on.

Dominating the cab is the wood steering wheel with its thick, confidence-inspiring rim. The steering wheel carries the controls for idle speed and ignition timing. To the right of the driver's seat, two levers stand out handily: One is the handbrake, which leads to the rear wheels. Then the gearshift, looking very reminiscent of a sequential gearbox, though of course it isn't one. The first latch engaged the reverse gear, the second the neutral and the three following the forward gears. We gratefully acknowledge that the accelerator pedal is positioned at the far right, as we know it from the future. Then we check: There are four pedals: accelerator, brake (acting on the transmis-





Getting into the swing of things ...

sion), and a clutch, plus a pedal of initially unknown function.

"Mr. Rover" enlightens us: This mysterious far left pedal controls the positioning of the camshafts. Depressed and locked at half-travel it aids starting by reducing the compression to one-third, because it slightly opens the exhaust valves. But when fully depressed as an "engine brake" the intake valves remain fully closed, as well as the exhaust valves during the discharge cycle. So there is a third and quite usable brake, especially when driving downhill. In the non-

existent mountains of the region around Coventry we will ignore it though, otherwise we'll get confused. Now our 'salesman' offers us the much-anticipated test drive. Simply turn the key and off you go – not! With a steam engine, you have to wait for the boiler heat to build up steam pressure.

The preparations to start the Rover are a little similar to the readying of a locomotive. Instead of water, first the fuel supply must be checked. Simply done with a wooden dipstick. The tank sits there right in front of and under the windshield. The

resulting slope to carburettor makes a pump unnecessary. Because "who lubricates well, the going is good" even then, we have to work our way around the vehicle. Nearly two dozen lubricators stuffed with fat brass caps that resemble thimbles, are moved to their operating positions. Make a half turn to the right. So the content is slowly pressed into the lubrication point.

Next we have to enrich the mixture. This is done by means of small filler neck and intake valves on each cylinder. Fill the small brass funnel with fuel, open the tap to let gasoline drain into the cylinder, close the tap. With every failed startup (and there can be a few), the procedure must be repeated. On the dashboard-mounted speedometer switch for magneto ignition "ON" and the fuel tap is behind a flap in the footwell is moved to "Open". The tension rises as the culmination of the physical action is imminent: winding the starting handle. Virtuoso muscle game and a well-defined choreography are required. Press the handle with your right hand against a spring on the crankshaft, then support the left hand on the front leaf spring mount. The 'salesman' tells us emphatically, never put your thumb around the crank, in case of kick back.

People know this of course in 1909, hopefully we haven't blown our cover. Well, with a powerful lift, working the arm and leg muscles together, we jerk the handle up clockwise. As usual with the first cold start attempt ... nothing. In the second, nothing again. With no. 3 we already feel then a slight rise in body temperature and



Michael samples the "King's mobile opera box".

despair. Then, the fourth time: the jerk of the handle elicits a discreet snort from the exhaust and the engine is running - just so unspectacular, stable and quiet. Amazingly quiet and amazingly low vibration. This successful experience with included ego-boost is at most comparable to climbing a mountain peak in the Himalayas. People who could afford cars in 1909 probably had a chauffeur to do all this, of course.

Machine running, we sit on the driver's seat and adjust the idle and ignition timing. Leather gloves are recommended for hands slightly perspiring with excitement, to grip the wood steering wheel firmly. Taking attitude and operated against some spring pressure, the clutch pedal. When you press it always float above the pedals, so steep is the angle required for the operation. Push the gear lever from the neutral position to the first detent behind it and slowly let the clutch up, which bites only on the last centimeter. The accelerator pedal on the other hand responds so directly, that you only have to look at it for an increase in speed. From the depths of the transmission hear a deep groan, as if the castle ghost ushered in the witching hour. Then a slight jerk ... we go! Stalling anyway seems hardly possible with the steam engine-like torque. From the exhaust it penetrates the sonorous sound of joyous exhalation, accompanied by milled howling of the transmission.

The four leaf springs make a solid job, the seats themselves also take quite a bit of spring work. "Mr. Rover" reacts to my gearchange noises with a facial expression like biting into a lemon. Well, with us, this is not a God-given skill. Only practice makes perfect. On the second try it works even better: A dull "thunk", the gear is in, the acceleration orgy can continue. However, the top gear is so high that it takes us a while to get to the point of needing it. The ratio change from 2nd to 3rd feels like from 2nd to 6th of a modern passenger car. The powerful engine pulls well and we are moving ever faster down the Warwick Row. The 15 hp is relatively easy to maneuver, but you certainly need arm muscles and concentration.

The faster we roll, the more telepathic abilities we need to anticipate traffic difficulties ahead. Because the events before us differ little from what we know from home: carriages, horses, greengrocers, coal transportation, bicycles, handcarts - everything pushes on and above the street. Downshifting is improving, as well as the anticipatory brakes. Since cars are a symbol of wealth, with appropriate envy factor - Therefore we try to provide a good friendly smile for the policeman (who, remember, only earns £70 a year) when he turns a critical eye upon us. We turn off before he wants to see our papers.

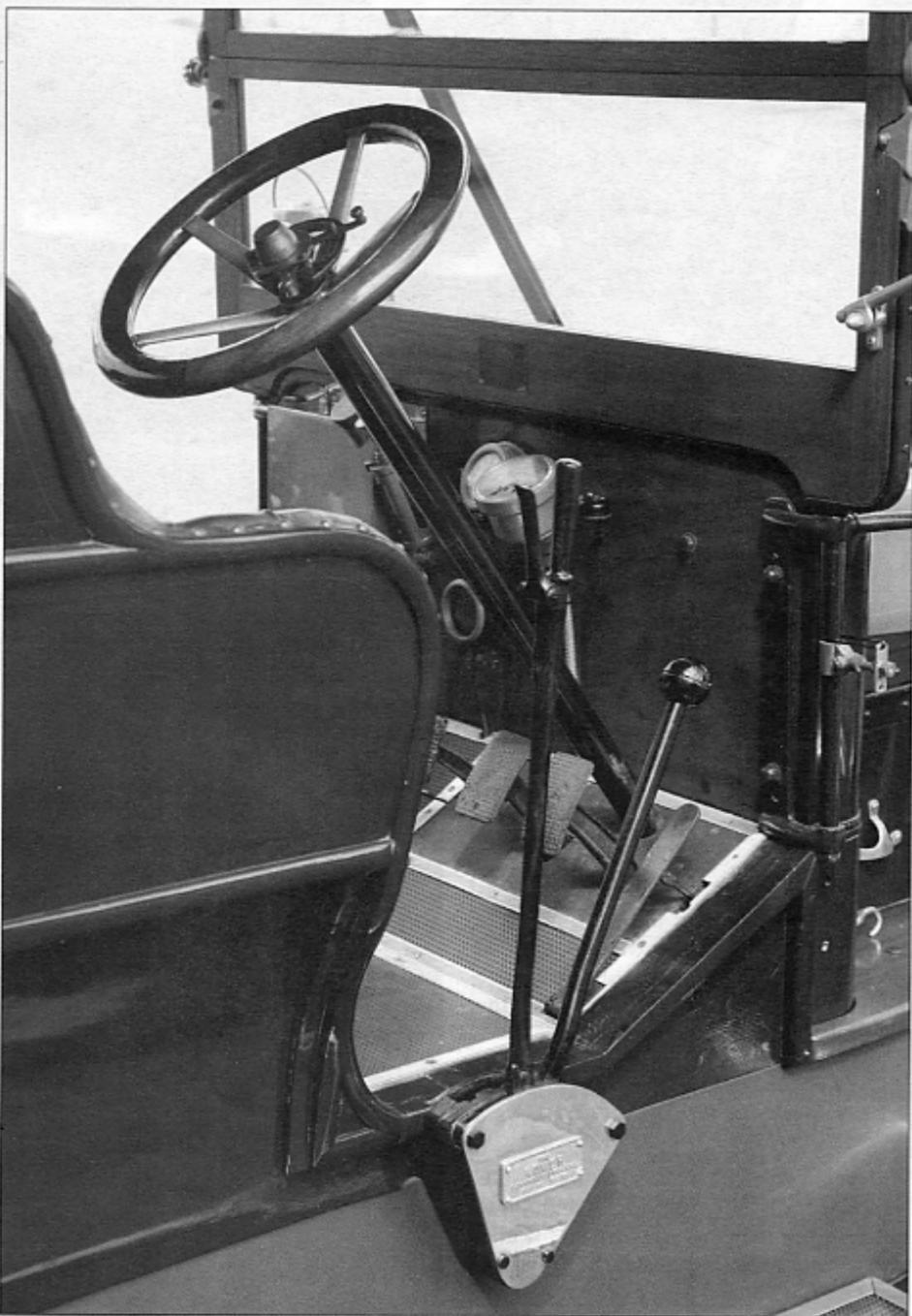
The steering is working correctly, though it is a little like a boat rudder in its slow response. Comparing it unfairly with modern standards, it drives like a tractor.

But no matter, it's ... fun! Not necessarily by the use of force by the valance, but by this accompanying feeling of deceleration, the sensual discovery of slowness and each time feeling as an active part of the machinery. Therefore, we also do not feel as merely inert cargo. We extend the arm laterally to announce our turn in and roll out in front of the headquarters of Rover.

This is really a fine car, as we tell the 'salesman'. What he does not know: the 15 hp will be built for only two years and will be replaced in 1911 by the "Twelve". 1911, the coronation year of King George V, the year Thomas W. Burgess crossed the English Channel from Calais to Dover in 22 hours and 35 minutes, and when the "Titanic" is launched. We time travellers must now wander back again, before the supermarket car park will be closed in 2014. We thank with words of praise and

friendly gestures "Mr. Rover" for a convincing presentation and say goodbye with all due courtesy.

Ensuring that no one is following us, we go back to our time machine to return to 2014. As we jump towards the present, we see clearly recognizable images: On November 8, 1909 Victor Hémery breaks the 200 km/h barrier (202.7 km/h) with the legendary "Blitzen-Benz" on the Brooklands circuit. Then the images swirl with the usual wild flickering until we reach 2014. We reappear behind our van, that have placed as a screen before our landing site. We think, was not that a most illuminating excursion? Definitely get off now with another feeling about our new-fangled car? After our experiences with its great-grandfather we will see it with different eyes - probably even with a wink and a smile.



Everything falls to hand, or feet.