

A THIRTY FIVE YEAR DREAM FULFILLED

Grahame McDonald July 1999

As a new member of the Club following the recent acquisition of a 1963 Silver Cloud III it occurred to me that the year the car was built was also my first full calendar year in employment, as articled clerk to a chartered accountant, and was also the year I passed my driving test (at the second attempt). My first experience of actually driving was behind the wheel of my grandfather's 1938 Ford Prefect but it was a comparatively short flirtation as after a few minutes one of my (understandably, I think) jerky starts was blamed for a snapped rear axle half-shaft. The fact that my grandfather kept a small supply of spare half-shafts in his shed rather led me to believe that I had been made a bit of a scapegoat for the most recent of what was obviously not an isolated occurrence. Nonetheless I was banished to a driving school where a Farina Line Austin A40 led me to test failure, followed by a Triumph Herald providing success a few months later. The inevitable search for my own car was on.

Just a few months or so prior to these events in my life, the Gaumont (Havelock) cinema in Sunderland had closed its doors for the last time. In common with most cinemas of its era it possessed a theatre organ, in this case a Hope-Jones, which was the fore-runner of the more famous Wurlitzer, found in cinemas built later. A member of the congregation of the church I attended at that time had been reserve organist at the Havelock for many years until advancing years and the early signs of Parkinson's Disease prevented his continuance in that role. His name was Donald Harkness, and he was determined that his beloved organ would not be destroyed along with the building, so he arranged its preservation and incorporation with the organ in the church, possibly the only church in the country where the organ had sound effects and Glockenspiels etc. This church was not in a wealthy parish, and Donald was forced to use the most economical transport available to him for the removal of the organ from the cinema to its new home. In this case the most economical transport available was Donald's own personal Roll-Royce! I am not sure of the exact model, but it was a comparatively straight backed limousine body of late 1920's early 1930's style, and I remember the Registration number was CNB784. (This car does not appear on the Club database, so any information would be gratefully received.) The sight of this elderly lady negotiating the streets of Sunderland with two 16' organ pipes strapped to the roof and smaller ones poking out of every window was quite something to behold, and the less-than-perfect exhaust system ensured that there were plenty of onlookers to do the beholding! However, despite a certain level of deficiency in the spit and polish department and the broken exhaust, the car seemed to be generally sound and Donald never mentioned it ever having failed him mechanically.

Back to my 1963 search for a car, and Donald was not prepared to part with his Rolls-Royce just yet but promised me first refusal on it when his advancing Parkinson's Disease precluded driving, so I had to look elsewhere for something a bit different from the 'norm', at the time. The search ended when I acquired a 1938 Alvis 12/70, which had seen better days but appeared to be basically sound. Not long afterwards the church suffered the same fate as the

cinema, and its closure resulted in a reduction in my level of contact with Donald. A few months passed and I saw CNB784 being driven by someone I did not recognise but assumed to be Donald's son who lived away and whom I had never met. A chance meeting with Donald soon after produce the dreaded truth. Without asking, he had assumed that I was happy with the Alvis, by-passed his promise to me of first refusal and sold the car to someone else for £50. Initially I was quite devastated as I had really wanted that car, but Donald was a lovely on gentlemen, ravaged by the Parkinson's Disease and it was impossible to stay angry with him for long, but the disappointment 35 years ago has always lingered in my memory.

The Alvis was sold soon afterwards, as the practicalities of forging a career, setting up my own home etc., required a different type of car, with no spare funds to enjoy the delights of owning a classic in addition to the workhorse. For nearly 20 years only a succession of Vauxhall VX 4/90s provided me with personal transport, and good they were too. In December 1983 I accepted a position in Zimbabwe, where I found the county's general vehicle fleet to contain many pre 1965 vehicles as a direct result of the sanctions placed on Ian Smith's Southern Rhodesia after UDI. Almost everywhere one looked were cars in daily use, which were already considered to be classics back home. The Lady Captain of the Golf Club had a mint Vauxhall Wyvern; a local Primary School teacher had a DeSoto Diplomat with just about the biggest fin tails I have ever seen; and yes among the hordes of Ford 100Es and Morris Minors in daily use there was also at least one R Type, and S Type and a Silver Cloud that I saw personally, although I am sure there will have been others which I did not see. My time in Zimbabwe did two things for me; one was to re-kindle what for some years had become a somewhat dormant interest in classic cars, and the other thing was to have provided me with the financial wherewithal to enable me to indulge that interest when the right time came along.

That right time has now come along and 35 years after the disappointment of losing CNB764, I finally have my Rolls-Royce in the shape of a Silver Cloud III, built in the year I passed my driving test and also my first full calendar year of employment. I intend to enjoy the belated experience!

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