

WHY I AM IN LOVE WITH MY

23/60 VAUXHALL

by Harry Shell

OVER THE PAST TEN OR MORE YEARS, I have been fortunate enough to have had the pleasure, and sometimes otherwise, of handling, acquiring, and generally experiencing quite a number of cars, nearly all of them conceived, and constructed in what is now accepted as the Vintage mould.

Several of them have carved a niche in my memory by reason of the sheer joy and interest they afforded me; just a couple of them have given me such spasms of sheer pain and horror that even though I try very hard to put their memory behind me, they still re-visit me at odd times to remind me that not every Vintage car is eminently desirable!

However, just a few months ago I became acquainted with the "O.D." Vauxhall which I am now happy to call my own. When I saw the car for the first time I had some difficulty in repressing the unmistakable feeling of revulsion that crept over me. It looked so glaringly stark, so unutterably uncared for, with its threadbare hood, and "tatty" tonneau cover, while the rat holes in the upholstery did nothing at all to alleviate the overall picture of despondency. Incidentally, there really was a mouse nest reposing under the front passenger's seat!

I must have felt something else besides revulsion, because I eventually settled for the car, and although I had some qualms of apprehension when surveying the amount of work I would have to eventually do as regards the hood and tonneau cover, I could hardly help but feel that this might well be the beginning of a lasting love affair. Now to a description of the car, my driving experiences with her, and why I have come to regard her so highly.

She is one of the first of the "O.D.'s", having seen the light of day for the first time in early 1923. Her chassis number is OD 410, her engine number is OD 411, and she is, so far as I can reasonably ascertain, absolutely original in every respect, except for her horn, and the size of her present tyres. The horn fitted to the car when I bought her was one of those horribly effete, little modern horrors that give off a high pitched squeak when goaded into life. Needless to say, this was tossed out promptly, and I have now fitted a very handsome, large and robust "Amplora" two-tone klaxon-type instrument, with a beautiful six inch brass bell, which is warranted to give audible warning of my approach from village to village, even though they may be ten miles apart! The tyres now fitted are 895 x 135, and the original size was 880 x 120, so there is little discrepancy here, and I feel, therefore, that I can truthfully claim the car to be virtually original. I have been given to understand, from the previous owner, that the bores are original, although new piston rings were fitted some time ago, I have not so far removed the head to ascertain this, but I see no reason to doubt it. All electrical equipment is exactly as was, except that I would like to find an exact similar for my original tail light to conform with present regulations. The added one is of a similar type, but does not accurately match up.

Upon lifting the very nice and firm feeling aluminium bonnet, one is instantly aware of the exact similarity of the 23/60 engine, and the 30/98 engine, and, indeed, in all main respects, they really are. The 23/60 cylinder dimensions are: 95 m.m.

x 140 m.m., while the 30/98 is 98 m.m. x 140 m.m., and their nominal h.p. ratings are 22.4 and 23.8 respectively. There is, of course, the usual array of warm-looking brass, copper and aluminium which is so delightful to behold when polished, so that little shafts of piercing light dart off into all directions as the sunlight strikes the engine compartment.

Altogether, it is a most rewarding job to keep this little lot polished and clean, and one gets a most satisfying feeling to stand slightly back after plying the polishing cloths and observe the engine reflections in the aluminium bulkhead. The magneto is mounted on the nearside of the engine, on its own little platform, the ignition leads passing through a neat copper conduit out to the offside of the engine, where also is mounted the starter motor. The generator is situated under the front compartment floor boards, and is driven by whittle belt from a pulley fitted to the drive, or cardan shaft, between the flywheel and clutch assembly and the gearbox. The gearbox is a truly massive affair, fitted with a very delightful method of checking the oil level; one simply turns a large serrated knob on the top of the box, lifts off a large oblong plate, and there, the whole innards are revealed to one's astonished and admiring gaze. There is no dipstick to fiddle about with and the correct level can be seen and checked in seconds.

So much for the brief survey of engine and gearbox. The chassis is long, very long I would imagine for a normal four-seater tourer—no less than 10 ft 10 in. between wheel centres, with an overall car length of just 15 ft. A 3-litre Bentley photographed alongside looks positively dwarfed by comparison! Braking layout is typical of Vauxhall practice of this era. The foot brake pedal actuates a large transmission, or drum-type brake fitted directly behind the gearbox. Oil level in the gearbox has to be carefully watched, since any presence of oil leaking through the mainshaft bearings instantly finds its way on to the transmission brake linings, and when this happens it does not take too long to realise that the footbrake is then virtually useless. The handbrake links up to the very large diameter rear wheel brakes, and these, I am relieved to say, are really effective, since just a bare two notches on the hand brake lever will lock both rear wheels firmly, and will leave a nice long trail of black rubber all along the road. But a practice not to be over indulged, with 895 x 135's in short supply, and high in cost also. Suspension is by semi-elliptics all round, and shock absorbers are not fitted. Nevertheless, a perfectly even and comfortable ride can be enjoyed at all times, unless the road surface is really awful, with a pronounced camber. Needless to add, there are no front wheel brakes. Just as an afterthought, this is the model which is fitted with the Lanchester Harmonic Balancer device, fitted to the crankshaft, and Vauxhall's claimed for this model that it was the most perfectly balanced four-cylinder engine then available.

Once in the driving seat, one is forcibly impressed by the typically Edwardian feel of both the driving seat position and controls layout. One sits perfectly upright, yet comfortable, and high as well, since the level of the driver's thigh will only be a couple of inches below the level of the top of the body

line. The wheel has a very thick rim, giving one a very firm and substantial feel of control. There is virtually no play at all in the wheel, barely more than a quarter inch either way. On top of the wheel are two massive brass levers, controlling the throttle and ignition, moving up or down a massive, notched quadrant, each and every notch contributing, or detracting from engine noise, depending on which way one wants to manipulate aforementioned brass levers. The aluminium dash is laid out in typical Edwardian manner, and from left to right we have: hand pump for pressurising the fuel tank, nice and big and chunky, and all brass! Next, mixture control for the Zenith 42KA triple diffuser carburetter, then the air gauge to record the pressure in the tank. The Jaeger speedometer follows, with the electrical control panel, with ammeter and lighting switches occupying the centre of the dash, a neat little dashlight over the top. Then a gaping hole where some beastly fellow has "whipped" away the clock. The layout is then completed with the magneto switch, oil pressure gauge, and starter button. The horn switch I have moved from the inside rim of the offside door, and relocated it on the dash next to the magneto switch.

The gear lever is short and thick, with a large ebony knob which just about fills up the average driver's palm. One has to reach forward, and down slightly, to grasp the lever, and this action serves to give one just the right amount of body leverage needed to pull the lever back into top gear when in motion. The handbrake lever is placed just alongside, and comes quite easily to hand.

Now to record a few brief impressions of a ride in this lovely old car, so that readers can understand just why I have fallen so madly, and so completely, in love with her charms. Starting procedure goes this way. First, one briskly yanks the hand pump up and down, until about one pound of pressure is recorded on the gauge. Lift the nearside of the bonnet, and gently flood the carburetter. Turn the lever on the dash-mounted mixture control to start. Move the ignition lever atop the steering wheel to retard, and the throttle about five or six notches open. Switch on the magneto, press the starter button, and after about four or five engine revolutions, the commotion will commence with complete certainty. Settling down behind the wheel, one allows a few moments for the engine temperature to rise, meantime listening with acute pleasure to the lovely deep rumble emanating from the two and a half inch diameter exhaust pipe.

We are now ready to move off, and after cautioning passengers (if any) to firmly adjust their safety belts, bottom gear is tentatively approached, with a view to engaging, and setting in motion the train of events which will eventually propel the car along the highway. This is not the kind of operation that can be put into action by a mere deft flick of the wrist. The clutch pedal must be depressed, and held down for a short time to allow the clutch brake to slow down the spinning transmission pinion. After allowing the proper time, the gear lever can then be pressed home into the low gear gate. Any attempt to force the cogs into mesh before their proper time is doomed to failure, and one's right arm is reduced to the consistency of jelly. This is not surprising, when one remembers (after looking into the gearbox) that the cogs contained therein are roughly about the same size and shape as those in an old-fashioned, upright mangle! Knowledge comes after a short time, and the proper way to get into bottom gear is soon mastered, and we are under way. The clutch action is very smooth and positive, with no trace of judder, or snatch. One then goes through the box, in a lovely slow, and unhurried manner, with the steady pull, pause, pull motion, so beautifully demonstrated many years ago by the old, extremely accomplished 'bus drivers of the lamented London General days.

This is by no manner of means an easy car to drive—that is, to drive well—as I now know. A precise and exacting science is demanded, especially when changing down, and road speed and engine revolutions must be carefully timed, otherwise some extremely untuneful sounds will emanate from the unco-operating gearbox. It is as well not to engage in lengthy conversation with a passenger, otherwise the car is bound to show her resentment at this lack of attention, and will purposely muff your next gear chance! Steering is a revelation—it is taut, firm, and very positive, but at the same time, very easy to control. Once on the open road, and travelling at a fair clip, the car can be steered at, shall we say, a foot or so from the nearside grass verge, and that line can be held, without any fear of straying, for mile after mile, no matter how the road twists or bends, and no matter what the surface. She covers ground in a pleasantly deceptive manner, her long stroke, low revving engine and large driving wheels contributing to the effortless manner in which she does this.

I believe maximum engine revolutions for this type of engine are in the order of 2,500 or maybe a little more, so that with a final drive ratio of 3.6 to 1, 1,000 r.p.m. will propel the car at 28.5 m.p.h. With the engine turning over very comfortably at 2,000 r.p.m., and well within its safety range, 60 m.p.h. can be regarded as a very nice touring speed, as and when required. Moreover, one gets the feeling that the car is performing very happily, and willingly at this gait, and that she would, if necessary, continue on for hours on end.

One gets the usual nice whine from the indirect ratios, although a definite vibration period occurs when pushing third gear up to its maximum of about 40 m.p.h., due, I believe, to a slightly sloppy transmission pinion shaft. The rear axle, of straight cut bevel type, is quite noiseless at all times. I mentioned earlier on that no shock absorber devices are fitted to this car, nor were they originally. Nevertheless, the ride is perfectly even and quite comfortable, unless the road surface happens to be really bad, and then her four feet long, leather-clad road springs do tend to flex somewhat noticeably. The body, wings and valances are of all aluminium construction, and, consequently, there is not a trace of rot or corrosion anywhere. The leather upholstery has suffered somewhat through the passage of time, and therefore when this season's fun has been enjoyed to the full, she will go into hibernation during the coming winter, when it is intended to completely renew her upholstery, hood and tonneau cover.

During the short time I have had the car, she has been used extensively, and has travelled to just about every old car event within a hundred odd miles radius of home, and has never given any cause for apprehension, except for a couple of stops when travelling to and from Beaulieu to clear a blocked main jet. The car is still fitted with her original Zenith triple diffuser, and, in this connection, I have received very valuable advice and material help from the Zenith people, who must have gone to considerable trouble to find some parts to renew the starter device.

To summarise the true reasons for my affection for this really nice old car. Firstly, I am attracted to her shape and style, and excellence of body construction which, in my opinion, so closely adheres to pure Edwardianism, as to be immediately apparent to all who see her. Secondly, but of course most important, I admire without question the truly fine engineering qualities which went into the construction of her engine, transmission details, and chassis construction, qualities which, alas, are sadly lacking nowadays. Lastly, but not by any manner of means least, is the truly fine feeling of satisfaction I get when I climb up behind her wheel, lovingly run my hands around the rim, wedge myself firmly upright in my seat and just listen to her engine beat before moving off for another very enjoyable run.