

A.J. HANCOCK AND THE RACING VAUXHALLS

by

BILL HANCOCK AND PETER HULL

Edited by Alisdair Lockhart

PART ONE

1. Childhood in Victorian London

Alfred James Hancock was born in Camberwell New Road in South East London on 8th April, 1884. He was the fifth child of a family of nine, and had four brothers and four sisters. They were all brought up in a strictly disciplined Victorian environment, both the parents being very religious.

Every Sunday morning, while mother and one sister were left behind to superintend that important ritual, the Sunday dinner, the rest of the family were marched off to St Mark's Church, Kennington Green, Mr Hancock Snr and the two elder boys wearing top hats, AJ (as he was always known in later life) and the next brother in bowler hats and little Bill, the youngest boy, wearing a mortar board and Eton jacket. All the male members of the family wore stiff collars and carried umbrellas. The girls wore floppy hats above their spotless dresses, and tightly fitting scented gloves. The family walked in order of age with the youngest first, and as they crossed the Foxley Road, it was Bill's privilege to hand a shilling to the crossing-keeper.

After a huge lunch, which was some compensation to the younger members of the family for the somewhat tedious period spent in church, there was hymn singing in the afternoon with the head of the family at the pedal organ. As the organist was rather deaf, the noise was almost indescribable, particularly as any visitors to the family were expected to join in.

AJ was educated at the family school, St Olave's and St Saviour's Grammar School, Tooley Street, Tower Bridge and, at the turn of the century when he was fifteen, he was an apprentice engineer at the Vauxhall Ironworks Co Ltd in the Wandsworth Road.

2. Apprenticeship at the Vauxhall Ironworks

This firm had been founded in 1857 as Alexander Wilson & Co by a Scottish engineer of that name whose main products were small high pressure steam engines for Admiralty pinnaces, and compound and triple expansion engines for use in river tugs. Two well known pleasure steamers had Wilson engines, the "Queen Elizabeth" and "Cardinal Wolsey", plying between Westminster and Hampton Court.

Various pumps were also manufactured, as well as dry air refrigeration plants, and within a few years 150 men were being employed. Wilson himself was described as a better engineer than accountant, his desk being a mass of papers which the office cleaner was told on no account to disturb, and he was an inveterate scribbler on the backs of envelopes.

In 1892 a limited company was formed, but two years afterwards Alexander Wilson left the firm and set himself up in Fenchurch Street as a Consultant Engineer. A Receiver was appointed in 1896 and in 1897 the name of the firm was changed to "The Vauxhall Iron Works Company Limited", thus taking on the name by which the factory itself was known. The factory's trade mark, adopted by Alexander Wilson, was the Griffin which was used as the sign for the famous Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens, the site of which was within walking distance of the factory.

The life of an apprentice in the early 1900s was not an easy one, and when referring to the training of young engineers, Laurence Henry Pomeroy, later Chief Engineer and Technical Director of Vauxhall Motors wrote:

"I think the ordinary apprentice, if he wants to become anything at all, should be prepared to put in evening classes three nights a week for two or three hours each night, and on the remaining nights he should be prepared to put in two or three hours home work. If he is up at five in the morning and knocks off at six at night and puts in this amount of work at evening classes, he will not have very much time for himself when hours of rest are taken into account, but unless a lad is prepared absolutely to devote himself to the profession he does not deserve to get on."

Living up to Pomeroy's dictum, at school and in his early adult life AJ took no part in sport or outdoor games as all his spare time was spent in work or study, including night classes at Lambeth Polytechnic. However, his work was also his hobby as he was a keen maker of model steam engines, which he constructed in his bedroom-cum-workshop in the attic, known to his brothers and sisters as the Bogey Hole. AJ had two brothers and two sisters younger than himself who were immensely curious as to what went on in the Bogey Hole, their curiosity only being exceeded by AJ's determination to keep them out of his holy-of-holys. Tidiness being almost a fetish with AJ, he immediately knew if a member of the family or one of the servants had disturbed his belongings, and he would be quite capable of laying traps for the younger members of the family in order to score a point in the constant battle that was being waged between them. One most effective deterrent he constructed which terrified brothers Bill and Arthur was a headless "Bogey" made out of blankets, which one day issued from its lair, making sinister grunting noises.

Later, when Bill was at boarding school at Teynham in Kent and AJ was 17 years old, the latter travelled on his motor-cycle to the school in order to present Bill with the considerable luxury of a pot of raspberry jam. Unfortunately, AJ had put the jam in his tool bag and then over-tightened the straps, with the result that when he opened the bag he found the jar had broken and all his precious tools were smothered in raspberry jam. Furious with himself for his carelessness, AJ spent half an hour or so cleaning everything up and putting back in the correct order all his beloved tools, during which time he hardly spoke a word. Finally, starting with a run and a jump and without a "goodbye" or a wave of his hand, leaving young Bill staring after him and suffering from an acute sense of deprivation.

3. The first Vauxhall motor cars

It was whilst AJ was still serving his apprenticeship at the Vauxhall iron Works that steps were taken there to enter the motor car market. A certain marine engineer called FW Hodges, who had been apprenticed to Alex Wilson & Co, joined the Company again when it was reorganised with the name change in 1897, and became interested in motor cars. Like Henry Royce, he acquired a car (which was the early Benz tradition of rear engines, tube ignition and belt drive) and stripped it down with the idea examining and studying the design in order to improve it.

Several experiments were made, including the building of the first Vauxhall petrol engine with a single cylinder and opposed pistons, later put in a tiny launch called "Jabberwock", but the car design that Hodges worked on all through 1902, together with JH Chambers, who had been appointed Receiver in 1896 and had subsequently joined the Board of Directors, was very different from the Benz-like device that had inspired it. The car that was put on the market in about the middle of 1903 had a normal single piston 5 bhp air cooled transverse horizontal single cylinder engine of 6.4 RAC rating with a bore and stroke of 4 ins by 4.25 ins. It had automatic inlet valves and trembler coil ignition. The chassis had coil springs all round and tiller steering. Final drive was by chain, and there was an epicyclical gear drum with two forward and no reverse. A doctor who bought one of these not wildly exciting cars priced at £150.00 reckoned that the average cost of daily running worked out at one third of the upkeep of his horse, and the wear and tear when driving at 15 mph was, in his opinion, "almost a negligible quantity".

Only a few of these 5 hp cars were made and a 6 hp version with a 4ins by 5ins bore and stroke incorporating a reverse gear came out in 1904, later fitted with a steering wheel in place of the tiller. For publicity purposes, one of the firm's Directors, Percy Kidner, drove these cars in the trials of the period, from Glasgow to London and in Light Car trials between London and Hereford in which, however, the connecting rod broke on the third day.

A letter from the Works manager to AJ's father concerning the completion of the boy's apprenticeship, not only reveals the coming 3-cylinder Vauxhall car, but it also tells of AJ's enthusiasm for the new motor cars, with the hint that it might supplant his interest in going to seas as an engineer.

There were several 3-cylinder designs on the market at the time, and for 1905, Vauxhall brought out three models of 7, 9 and 12/15 hp with vertical water-cooled 3-cylinder engines incorporating mechanically operated inlet valves and with chain final drive transmission. Normal half elliptic springs were fitted and wheel steering. The smaller model was quickly withdrawn, as it was over-bodied for the power available. The 12/15 hp model cost £375.00, over twice as much as the single cylinder 6 hp cars.

4. The 1905 Tourist Trophy race on the Isle of Man

On Thursday, 14th September, 1905, the first Tourist Trophy race was held on the Isle of Man over four laps of a 52-mile circuit, 208 miles in all, with red flagged "no passing" zones in the villages of Ballasalla, Castletown, Foxdale Bridge, Kirkmichael and Ramsay. One 2.4 litre 12/15 hp (95 x 114) Vauxhall was amongst 58 cars entered, and the driver was not Percy Kidner but a youthful AJ Hancock. The car was modified for the race by the addition of an overdrive on each of the three forward speeds, thus giving a six-speed box with the following maximum speeds: 7.28 mph, 9.9 mph, 15.8 mph, 21.5 mph, 26.2 mph, and 35.5 mph.

The winner of the race was a 3.8 litre horizontally opposed twin piston 2-cylinder Arrol-Johnson driven by John S Napier, whose four speed gear box gave maxima of 9 mph, 22 mph, 32 mph and 45 mph. Napier averaged 33.9 mph to 33.7 mph of Percy Northey's Rolls-Royce in second place. AJ evidently did not count his maiden effort as one of his memorable racing appearances for he did not keep any souvenir photos or cuttings of the first TT, though a photograph was taken of his car being towed to the start behind a horse. AJ only got half way round the second circuit when a wheel broke on a corner and he crashed, although without injury.

5. 1905 Vauxhalls move to Luton - the Griffin returns to its lair

In 1905 the lease ran out of the Vauxhall Iron Works premises in the Wandsworth Road, and the move was made to new site 30 miles north of London at Luton in Bedfordshire. In the same year, a further model was added to the range of 80 x 110 mm 9 hp and 95 x 114 mm 12/14 hp 3-cylinder cars at the London Motor Show, the single cylinder model having been discontinued. The new model was a 95 x 120 mm T-head 18 hp 4-cylinder, which also had chain drive but was fitted with a four-speed gearbox. This was the first Vauxhall with the well known flutes along the sides of the radiator and bonnet. The idea of these is said to have come to a Director whilst lying in bed contemplating a shield design carved on his wardrobe.

6. 1906 and LH Pomeroy joins Vauxhall

In 1906 the Vauxhall iron Works amalgamated with a neighbouring factory at Luton, West Hydraulic Engineering Co Ltd, manufacturers

of hydraulic machinery, and the new firm was known as the Vauxhall & West Hydraulic Engineering Co Ltd. Also in this year, Laurence Henry Pomeroy joined Vauxhalls as assistant draughtsman. He was born in 1883, and was therefore only one year older than AJ, and had been apprenticed at 16 to the North London Locomotive Works at Bow, simultaneously commencing a four-year engineering course at East London Technical College. His son has recorded that in the three years 1900-1903 he sat 22 examination papers, gaining 15 seconds, 5 firsts and 2 honours, passing sixteenth out of thirty Whitworth Exhibitioners for 1903. His first paid job was with the civil engineers Humphreys & Co in Victoria Street, London, then he went to Thorneycrofts of Basingstoke where he made his first contact with road vehicles.

AJ was now living away from home in Luton, and a letter of recommendation from Alfred Ash shows he was thinking of returning to London to act as an instructor at the Battersea Polytechnic, but perhaps it was changes at Vauxhalls and brighter prospects which persuaded him to remain there.

In 1907 there was a separation at Luton, when Vauxhall Motors Limited was formed with Percy Kidner and Leslie Walton as joint Managing Directors and FW Hodges as consulting engineer to take over the entire automobile interests, whilst the West Hydraulic Engineering Company took over all the other lines and the two forces operated as separate entities, though they were still geographical neighbours.

7. Pomeroy designs the 20 hp Vauxhall

In the meantime, a new Vauxhall had been produced which was to be the basis of the great Vauxhalls of the next two decades. Known as the 12/16, this car had a T-head 4-cylinder engine of 92 x 95 mm and a live rear axle, so chain drive was abandoned for the first time at Vauxhalls. It was not this model, however, that was so remarkable, but the 3-litre 20 hp which was derived from it, specially designed for the 1908 RAC 2,000 Miles Trial by LH Pomeroy, who worked far into the night on many occasions whilst FW Hodges was away on holiday in Egypt.

Pomeroy's engine, which, according to Percy Kidner, was also one of the first in which Harry Ricardo had a hand, was a L-head monobloc

design which was given a bore and stroke of 90 x 120 mm, and great attention was paid to gas flow and the lightness of the reciprocating parts, whilst fully forced lubrication and a 5-bearing crankshaft were featured. As a result, 38 bhp at 2,500 rpm was achieved, compared with the 23.5 bhp at 1,800 rpm of the 92 x 95 mm engine. The 20 hp was given a four-speed gearbox, and much effort was spent in deciding suitable gear ratios.

8. The 1908 2000 Miles Trial

Percy Kidner drove the 20 hp in the 2,000 Miles Trial with AJ accompanying him. The start was in London, linking up with the Scottish Reliability Trials in Glasgow. In an event extending over 13 days there were some timed hill climbs in Scotland and the lake District, finishing up with a 200 mile speed test at the Brooklands track in Surrey, which had been opened only the year before.

The Vauxhall's success in winning the Trial is summed up in a remark in the "Auto Motor Journal", which said "that 1908 performances brought the 20 hp Vauxhall from a comparatively uninteresting background into the full glare of public interest". The remarkable feats which brought the publicity included not a single stop for any mechanical reason, including replenishment of oil and water or tyre repairs, so that marks were only lost for re-filling with petrol: an aggregate of 37 seconds less time in the hill climbs than any other car in its class: on a marking system at the end of which took speed, reliability and mpg into account, the Vauxhall came out top of the 47 starters with only 77 marks lost, the next lowest being 115 marks lost, achieved by a Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce: an overall average of 26 mpg was accomplished, including averaging 45 mph over 200 miles at Brooklands, whereas the most economical consumption in the trial was 29.1 mpg was achieved by a car of only 8 hp. In all classes, the Vauxhall came fifth on the score of economic fuel consumption.

This Trial was held between 11th and 27th June, and on 11th July Kidner won his class in the same car at the Hertfordshire AC's hill climb at Aston Clinton. Kidner achieved further class successes with the 20 hp Vauxhall in 1908 at Gaillon hill climb in France, where he was also second in the Index of Performance, as well as at Shelsley Walsh, where he won the President's Cup for the best performance on formula.

9. 1909 the first Vauxhall to win and AJ wins the O'Gorman Trophy race at Brooklands

Having tasted blood, as it were, in the world of motoring competition in 1908, the position was consolidated in 1909 by Vauxhall, when AJ came to the fore as their works driver, although amateurs, also, achieved many successes. The "score" for the year can be seen in the poster issued by Vauxhall Motors at the end of the season, and it will be noticed that a Director of the Company, Rudolf Selfs, was the first man to win a race at Brooklands in a Vauxhall, whilst the amateur driver TW Mays who put up the best performance in his 20 hp in the Grimsthorpe Park Speed Trials in Lincolnshire, was the father of the famous racing driver of later years, Raymond Mays.

In the Irish Trials of 1909, it is of interest that FW Hodges and AJ drove 20 hp models, whilst Percy Kidner had a 24 hp prototype. In the Scottish Trials, in which Kidner and AJ took part in their 24 hp and 20 hp cars respectively, a "lead passenger" weighing 160 lbs had to be carried and AJ reported that "he was very quiet and no trouble at all". AJ preserved a number of photographs of the Scottish Trials, and also a cutting and photographs of the Aston Clinton hill climb and of his first win in the O'Gorman Trophy race driving a 20 hp which, like many of its competitors, was a stripped chassis with a bucket seat. AJ wore a violet cap and green coat as part of the traditional jockeys' dress affected by Brooklands drivers of the day.

10. 1909 "KN" at Brooklands

It was Vauxhall Motors who virtually pioneered the production of the streamlined single-seater type of car at Brooklands racing when AJ took records with the smooth and narrow racer known as "KN" - because, like Cayenne pepper, it was hot stuff! Between March and December 1909 in its "KN" form, a power increase at 2,370 rpm of 39 BHP to 52.6 bhp was achieved from the engine of AJ's 20 hp car.

A special poster was produced to advertise "KN"'s records on December 14th for the 21 hp class, the short over flying half mile of 88.6 mph, and the long over 10 laps of 81.33 mph. AJ preserved a cutting about the match race against Dick Leslie's Star at Brooklands on 21st December, which was also commemorated in the records poster. Another cutting is reproduced from the magazine "Golfing" of October 1st, 1909, which tells something about Vauxhall personalities

if the facetiousness of "lolous", alias Edgar N Duffield, can be endured.

11. The 1910 Prince Henry Trials

In 1910 a team of three specially tuned 20 hp Vauxhall cars, fitted with unique V radiators, was entered for the Prince Henry of Prussia Tour of some 1,200 miles over the roads of Austria and Bavaria, including two speed trials. This was a very competitive event run on a horse-power handicap basis which happened to favour long-stroke engines, whereas the Vauxhalls, with dimensions of 90 x 120 mm had short-stroke engines for their day. The event was won by Dr Ferdinand Porsche driving a 5.7 litre Austro-Daimler with an overhead camshaft engine having a bore of 105 mm and a stroke of no less than 165 mm. AJ kept a number of photographs of the event, in which he and the other two drivers, Percy Kidner and Rudolph Selz, received "non stop" plaquettes, but the Vauxhalls, with their small engines, were at a disadvantage in the speed events: nevertheless, they were timed at 72 mph, a high speed for a 3 litre car at this time. From these cars were evolved the famous model known as "Prince Henry" Vauxhalls, distinguished by their V-radiators.

12. 1910 Hill climbs at Aston Clinton, Pateley Bridge and Shelsley Walsh

In the 1910 hill climbs, AJ drove 20 hp Vauxhalls at Aston Clinton, where and at Pateley Bridge, in Yorkshire, where he won his class and made what was described as best overall performance of the day, although the fastest time was put up by a TT Hutton driven by E. Hyde. At the MAC's Shelsley Walsh hill climb AJ drove a "12/16" or 16 hp Vauxhall, coming third on formula to Richard Lisle's 12 hp Star and Kidner's 20 hp Vauxhall. In the Open (as opposed to closed to MAC Members) event, Lisle's 15 hp Star went up in 1 min. 30.6 secs, and AJ in his small 16 hp Vauxhall was second with 1 min 31.8 secs.

AJ's main successes in 1910, however, were at Brooklands, where the well-known historian of that track, W. Boddy, tells us that at Easter his 90 x 120 mm streamlined Vauxhall "KN" was a star performer, winning one race at 81.5 mph, lapping at 85.24 mph,

whereas a stripped chassis Vauxhall of the same capacity could only manage 69.5 mph.

This year the O'Gorman Trophy race, held in August over 10 laps, or just under 28 miles, attracted only three entries of 20.1 hp Vauxhalls, driven by AJ, Kidner and Selz, whose car was named "Hans V1", AJ's car had the engine out of KN in a new chassis, with narrower bodywork and a long tail. Every effort was made to cut down the frontal area, the main expedient being to set the radiator sideways on in the cowling, which consequently had louvres cut in each side of it. The frontal area did not exceed 6.75 sq ft at a time when the frontal area of the big Grand Prix cars of the day averaged 18 sq ft. The frontal area of "KN", incidentally, was 10.25 sq ft.

In the race, Boddy tells us, AJ won so easily that, after getting around at 80.82 mph on his best lap, he slowed down to average 76 mph. This compares interestingly with his best lap of 72.88 mph in the stripped chassis 20 hp car (later "KN") when he won the same race in 1909. "Hans V1" retired after seven laps when well in front of Kidner, who consequently finished second.

13. 1910 100 mph half mile record at Brooklands with the 20 hp single seater

In 1910 "KN", with another engine, won the August private Competition Handicap driven by K. Horn at 73 mph, lapping at 79.78 mph. In this year, AJ raced at Brooklands wearing "a white coat and sleeves, brown cap".

On October 7th, 22nd and 26th, AJ was busy breaking 21 hp class records at Brooklands with the narrow streamlined 20 hp car. On 7th October he averaged 97.15 mph for the flying half mile, and brought the standing start 10 laps record to over 85 mph. On 22nd October he did the flying half mile at 98.10 mph and the 10 laps at around 90 mph mark. The desire to average the magic 100 mph with a 21 hp class car over the half mile was very great, and after a conference it was decided to make the attempt on 26th October with the back axle and gearbox drained of the heavy oil used in such components in those days. The gamble paid off, with a record of 100.23 mph.

By now AJ was established as Works Manager at the Vauxhall Luton factory, and was married with a little daughter called Joan. His

brother Bill gives an illuminating view of an apprentice's life at Vauxhalls in 1911, with a further glimpse at AJ himself at that time:

On 1st January, 1911, I started my apprenticeship at the Vauxhall & West Hydraulic Company, the large works in Kimpton Road, Luton, and for the first year or so, I lodged with AJ and his wife and small daughter at his house in Conway Road, which was on the opposite side of the town to the works.

The working hours at that time (the good old days!) were from 6.00 am sharp to 5.00 pm exactly. On the last note of the starting bell in the morning the gate was slammed shut, and if one missed the 6.00 am gate opening time, the gate was not opened again until 6.30 am, just long enough to let in those waiting outside.

At 5.00 am AJ would wake me and leave me in no doubt as to the time and what was expected of me, and rain, hail, snow sunshine, light or dark, I would, six days a week, cycle right across Luton with my whicker basket containing my breakfast and lunch strapped to carrier on my bike, the lid fastened with a skewer. If I was early enough I would stop at Morby's coffee stall at the Corn Exchange for a slice of cake and a cup of coffee, but this did not happen every morning, as with a wage of 4 shillings per week I had to watch my expenditure carefully.

In those days little attention was paid to an apprentice, who was unceremoniously dropped in amongst men and machines, starting in the tool stores and then passing through the machine shops and on to the fitting and erecting sheds. The machining was merely a semi-finishing operation, the manning skill being on the fitting benches and in the assembly shop's, where everything was completed by hand tools and no part was inter-changeable, each component being hand made to fit another.

My grubby appearance when I arrived back at AJ's house in the evening can be imagined. Cleaning up was insisted upon before I was allowed to have my tea, and then, three nights a week, I gathered up my small drawing board and tee square to catch the tram to the centre of town to attend evening classes at the Luton Technical Institute. Eventually I had to admit that the Conway Road discipline was too much for me, and before I was thrown out it was mutually agreed that I should live nearer to the works. I moved into

digs with Mr and Mrs Freddie Field whose house was a few hundred yards from my works and next door to Vauxhall Motors, where Freddie worked as a carpenter.

As is often the case, my timekeeping which had been exemplary when living miles away from the works, became little short of shocking when almost next door. As a consequence, I came under the cruel discipline of my foreman, Billy Yeo, but whilst I suffered at first, I finished as one of his best "boys", and he always selected me to go on outside jobs with him to shipyards, installing our engines, condensers and boilers etc, into their assigned ships.

During all these formative years, I kept spasmodic contact with AJ, and was full of pride about his wonderful achievements in the field of motor racing. I came close to him again in 1914 when, in order to complete my indentures it was agreed that the drawing office part of my apprenticeship would be undertaken at Vauxhall Motors, so once more I was under the eagle eye of AJ. The famous LH Pomeroy was my direct chief and I was very happy during this period and met some new people such as Joe Marriot (jig and tool designer), CE King (leader of the Drawing \Office), Frank Beecher (sales) and Ernie Swain (foreman of the running shed). During this time, I became closer to the production of motor cars, and still have the blue print of a general arrangement drawing which I did of the D Type chassis (25 hp) which was used by the army for staff cars and ambulances during the first world war.

Editor's Note: *I was quite close to Peter Hull at the time that he was writing his monograph on Vauxhall history, when he told me that he had written an article on his interview with Bill Hancock, AJ's younger brother. For some reason, he did not wish to publish his article, despite my pleading and he remained of that decision up to his death. After Peter's demise, I respected his decision while his widow lived, but Jennifer Hull died a few months ago, so I feel that I am now released to publish his article – Alisdair.*

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