

Vintage Vehicles - A Transport of Delight

by Jack Tempest



'From the Cradle to the Grave - a Chronology of Personal Transport 1902-1987', starting with, on the left, a perambulator! Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



'Poor Mans Rolls-Royce' in the Brussels Auto Museum.



Some of the early cars on show. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.

As we move into a new year and our thoughts begin to turn to spring and summer days ahead we might give some time to thinking about viewing these extra large antiques! From April through to October the vintage car rally season will attract millions of visitors nationwide and the vintage vehicle museums will once again attract their largest crowds. You could find nowhere better to visit than the Museum of Transport at Alford in Aberdeenshire.

Bygone road vehicles are now very desirable collectables. Many people collect the actual vehicles and spend their spare time renovating them or showing them off at vintage rallies. Others satisfy their interests by collecting model vehicles. The latter may prefer to collect models from the past, such as the famous Dinky Toy products, or be perfectly happy to build up a collection of currently produced examples. Modern models are often formed from up-to-date plastic materials and resins, though metal examples are still popular.

There are many museums dedicated to motor vehicles of all kinds, from bygone buses to racing cars. Antique examples have the highest values naturally, but enthusiasts also eagerly seek 'Classic' cars from more recent years. In Brussels, Belgium, is a famous museum that features amongst its fascinating collection a unique 'Poor man's Rolls-Royce', a car that was known as the 'Belga Rise'. It has a typical Rolls-Royce radiator showing 'BR' on its badge instead of 'RR'. It carries a good likeness of the famous 'Spirit of Ecstasy' mascot and looks very 'Rolls-Royce' altogether. My guide, who spoke reasonable English in an accent I was not always to clearly understand, indicated that Rolls-Royce took the company to court, as one might well expect, over the copying of their famous radiator. Apparently they did not win the case because, according to my guide, Rolls-Royce was unaware that they had apparently neglected registering the unique design! However, the eventual outcome was that some arrangement was made to withdraw the manufacture of the offending car!

One of the best places to see a good variety of mechanical vehicles in the UK is the famous Museum of Transport, at Alford in Scotland. Alford, pronounced locally as 'Affod', lies some twenty miles to the west of Aberdeen. Here the visitor can see vehicles of all types, from steam-powered traction engines to a wide selection of family motor cars, but definitely no 'Poor Man's Rolls-Royce'! The motor cars include examples that were produced in Scotland, including the 'Argyle', 'Arroll Johnson', and the 'Albion' cars. The 'Albion' company later concentrated upon the production of commercial vehicles. The museum owns most of the vehicles on display, though privately owned examples are often included. The policy is to keep the display interesting by including different exhibits from time to time. Of course, all the exhibits are kept in first-class running order and need to be removed from time to time for servicing.

There is one unique vehicle always on view at the Alford Museum, though it was removed for a short while a few years ago to take part in the famous London to Brighton Run. In spite of its age (it dated from the nineteenth century) it completed the 50-plus miles journey without problems. This is the local curiosity known as the 'Craigievar Express' produced by the local postman who was something of a natural engineering genius. It was a steam-powered three-wheeler that was designed to make the local postal deliveries easier. It could travel at around 10 miles an hour, but found journeys along rocky local highways hard-going. Not exactly a success in that respect, it caused much amusement for many years, appearing at local celebrations. The museum is certainly proud of its 'Craigievar Express'!

The 'Craigievar Express' is not the only vehicle in the museum to be powered by steam and there are several early agricultural traction engines and steam lorries to see, including a fine example of a Sentinel

Steam Wagon that once served way down south with Senior's of Chertsey. This is reckoned to be the oldest Sentinel in existence, being produced at the company's original Glasgow factory before manufacture was moved to Shrewsbury. One well-preserved traction engine is 'Olive', an example of a Wellington Steam Tractor from the factory of William Foster of Lincoln. It had served agriculturally in Scotland from the 1920s after quitting its brief service with the army not long after the end of the 1914-18 War with Germany. Another interesting piece is an unusual Sanderson & Mills steam tractor.

Amongst the 'oldies' on view are one or two horse-drawn vehicles, including a nineteenth century sleigh. And from the same period of time a horse-drawn Aberdeen tram. Designed for the wealthy to travel long distances at top horse-drawn speeds of the day, by way of the newly planned series of 1850s turnpike roads, is an excellent surviving example of a typical 'Travelling Chariot'. An 1840s Marshall portable engine was presented to the Museum by HRH Prince Philip. It had served many years to operate a sawmill on the Balmoral Estate. The mill was closed in the 1970s and the engine found a new home in Alford.

Motor scooters are apparently enjoying a return to the popularity they enjoyed way back in the 1950s and 60s. There are two Lambretta scooters on show at the museum along with a Trojan 'bubble-car'. In fact, one of the motor scooters takes us back into pre Second World War days. A 'Skutamota', a black bicycle-like contraption offered little protection against the rain, as did, to a certain extent, the postwar varieties. A few examples appeared in those days, but with nowhere the success enjoyed by their postwar descendants.

Several cars by overseas manufacturers are represented, with a section reserved for American models. There is usually an example of the notorious De Lorian car made in Northern Ireland. It was a De Lorian that was chosen to play the time-travelling car featured in the American movie 'Back to the Future'. This original film-star version was sent to Britain to publicise a sequel to that film and, for a time, could be seen in the Alford Museum!

The museum has its own stretch of outdoors tarmac road circuit, along which their fast cars can show off to visitors, as well as their more dignified companions. Once a year there is an Alford Steam Rally and railway enthusiasts can always enjoy a visit to the Railway Museum next door which occupies a stretch of closed line. The enthusiasts have reintroduced a length of narrower-gauge track and now run a regular service along the old route.

The number to call for up-to-date enquiries is 01975-562292. Public are admitted from 10 am to 5 pm daily, from the beginning of April until the end of October.



The 'American Dream', a section devoted to cars from the USA. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



Motorcycle and racing cars represent the Age of Speed. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



An Edwardian family preparing for an outing. The chauffeur waits on the left. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



Bicycles are not forgotten - or their advertisements! Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



An antique horse-drawn sleigh. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



An early 'Skutamota' of the 1920s celebrates the world of motor scooters that peaked in the 1960s with the Lambretta and other makes. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



The Victorian 'Craigievar Express' made from odds and ends by an ingenious local postman to help deliver the mail in the Craigievar Castle area. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.



A 1930s Lagonda Sports Tourer. Museum of Transport, Alford, Aberdeenshire.