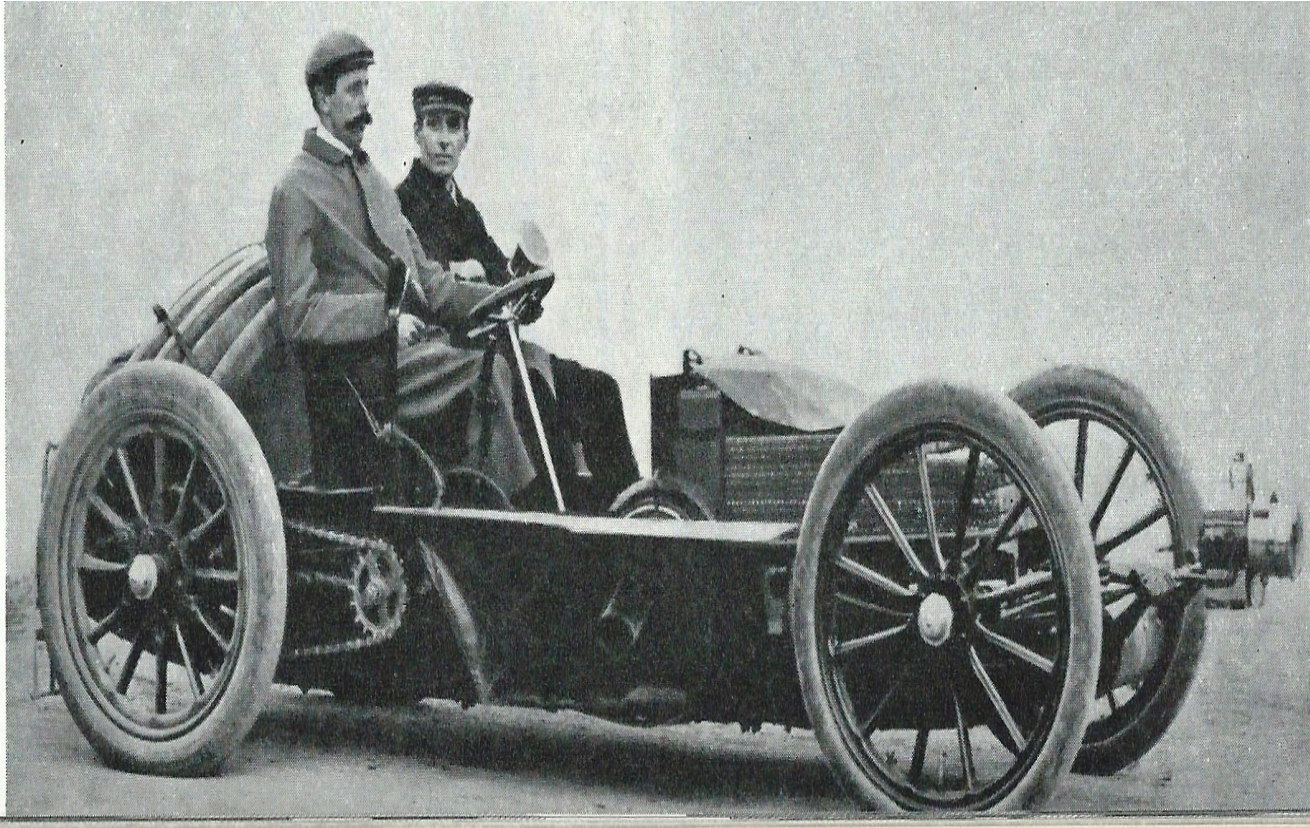


GORDON BENNETT ! - COURTESY MIKE STANLEY

The mysterious 45 h.p. Wolseley prepared for the 1902 Race. At the wheel is Mr Crowdy, later a car manufacturer in his own right, who drove it out to Paris.



" GORDON BENNETT ! "

While Wolseley's early involvement in motoring in this country is well documented , it is generally acknowledged that Germany had been responsible for the introduction of the motor car . This was promptly and enthusiastically followed by the French . Rapid development of cars gave rise not only to machines to transport people from A to B but devices to race against one another competitively . The long , straight , but rough and dusty , inter-city roads of France lent themselves well to the 'sport' of motor-racing , the first recorded event being from Paris to Rouen in 1894 involving some 21 'vehicles'.

The Automobile Club de France (ACF) was formed in 1895 , sponsoring a 'run' from Paris to Bordeaux , and back , a distance of some 732 miles . By 1899 racing on public roads was a recognised sport . This was not the case in this country though , stiff opposition by some MPs banning such behaviour . However , in France , the sport had grown rapidly by 1899 , with the ACF introducing rules and the first 'flag' system of marshalling .

Enter James Gordon Bennett ! He had arrived in Paris in 1887 to establish a continental edition of his father's New York daily newspaper . (Before this , while still in New York , Bennett had arranged in 1867 the expedition by Henry Morton Stanley in search of Dr. David Livingstone !) . While not a keen motorist himself , Bennett was a founder member of ACF and was involved in the formation of the rules for future motor racing . He sponsored the introduction of the Gordon Bennett Cup in 1900 , which would involve international teams of cars . One of the key rules was that cars had to be totally manufactured within the country of origin of competing countries i.e. NO outsourcing of any 'components' such as carburettors or gear-boxes . The problems this may cause can only be imagined .

Nevertheless , the first international contest for the Gordon Bennett Cup was staged in France in 1900 . It ran from Paris to Lyons , some 353 miles . The Cup was to be competed for by recognised national motoring clubs representing France , Germany , Great Britain , Belgium , Austria , Switzerland , United States and Italy . In the event teams from Austria , Great Britain , Switzerland and Italy did not take part . It is worth noting that one entry , the American 'Winton' still utilised 'tiller steering' ! The race was won by a French 'Panhard- Levassor' .

British interest commenced with the inclusion of a 'Napier' in the 1901 event . Following Wolseley success in the 1901 1000 - mile 'Trial' from London to Edinburgh and back we joined 'Napier' in providing the British entry for the 1902 Gordon Bennett Cup . The Wolseley entry consisted of 3 cars , 2 x 40h.p. cars plus the very advanced 45hp model pictured . Most manufacturers relied on

the the huge , upright models , the hp of which in some cases was by now nearing 100 hp . Unfortunately the Wolseleys were not ready in time to allow proper testing on the road before being driven to the start of the race in Paris . Due to the many adjustments necessary en route the journey time took an entire day and a night . Problems were experienced with overheating big-ends and the lubrication system . Further , one of the cars , driven by Herbert Austin , suffered a broken crankshaft within a mile of the starting point . The engine was stripped and re-built at the roadside and finally started rather late ! Being the only Wolseley starting they persevered , getting as far as the Landeck control in the Austrian Alps before the replacement crankshaft finally collapsed and they retired . The sole 'Napier' ran well , but was well behind the French favourite when the Frenchman had to retire within 20 miles of the finishing line in Innsbruck .

This win gave Great Britain the right to stage the next event in 1903 . Due to the opposition noted earlier it was not possible to find a venue on the mainland , but options in Ireland were examined . A suitable course was agreed upon centered on Athy in the Irish midlands . The course consisted of 2 loops of connecting roads in a figure of eight lay-out , each full circuit being approx . 93 miles with a total race distance of some 353 miles ; the first time the race had varied from a city to city one . It was also necessary for an act of parliament to repeal the existing legislation still imposing a blanket ban on motors exceeding the limit (in Ireland) of 14mph ! The sole British entry was that of 'Napier' with 3 cars , only that of S.F.Edge being 5th of 5 finishers in total .

Wolseleys represented Britain once again in the 1904 race , this time held in Germany . The race was won again by the French , with a Richard-Brasier ; the 2 Wolseleys finished 5th and 8th out of only 8 finishers . The last of the Gordon Bennett series was held in 1905 , back in France again . The defending Richard-Brasier repeated its previous victory . The 2 Wolseleys again both finished , this time in 8th and 11th places out of 12 finishers . It is interesting to note that the USA finally managed a finisher , albeit in 12th place . It is possible that this may have had some bearing on Gordon Bennett's decision to discontinue his sponsorship of the event , though it is usually reported that he had a new interest in hot-air ballooning . The subsequent "Gordon Bennett Aeronautical Cup " was awarded from 1906 to 1929 . The motor race series undoubtedly paved the way for international motor racing to develop into what we see today . Annual celebrations continue , with Ireland in particular hosting events over the appropriate weekend .. Incidentally , Wolseley connections were maintained when members participating in the Tour of Ireland of 2016 travelled on some portion of the route of 1903 !! "