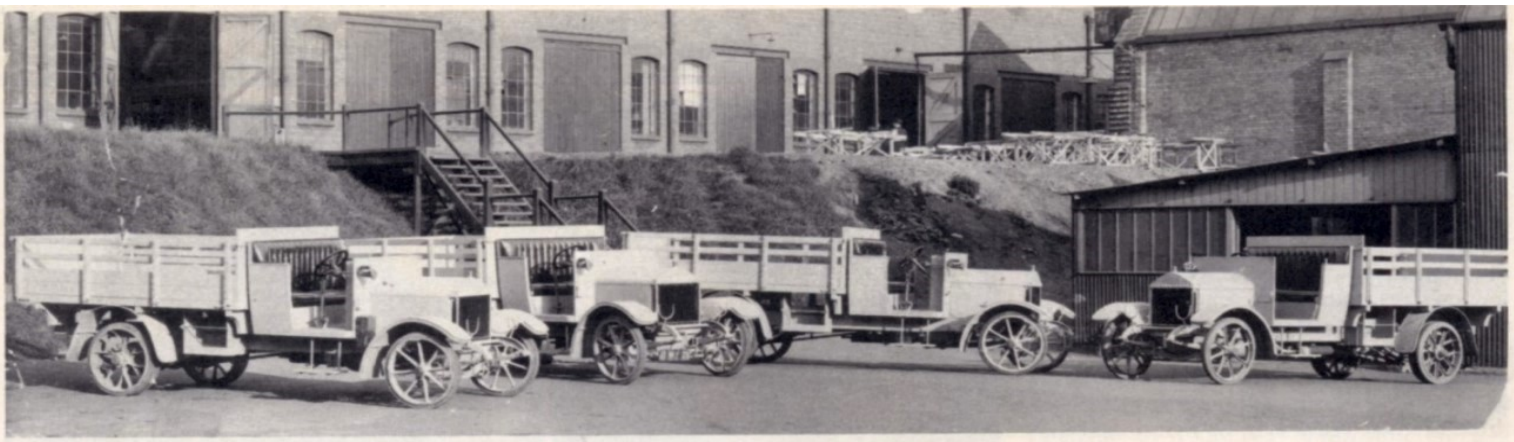


The Submerging of Wolseley

Nick Baldwin

WOLSELEY had one of the best possible starts to life. In its early existence it was blessed with the talents of Herbert Austin and John Davenport Siddeley, allied to the deep pockets of the mighty Vickers armaments business. Later it was to pass into the hands of legendary entrepreneur William Morris, who concentrated his successful Morris-Commercial range at Wolseley's old factory at Adderley Park, Birmingham.

The birth of the business is well-known and was the result of Frederick Wolseley going from Britain to Australia and establishing a sheep shearing machine company. It was difficult to get precision-made components in Australia so he moved the new enterprise to Birmingham. Even in this famed metalworking city there were many problems which, without the perseverance of Works Manager Herbert Austin, might never have led to the prosperous Wolseley Sheep Shearing Machine Co. As it was, he moved to a factory at Aston, Birmingham in 1895 where everything could be made on the premises and under his supervision. Tools and bicycle components were added to the range and

Above: **A fleet of 1½ ton capacity CP models at the factory in August, 1914. Not all went for military service, as surviving pictures of vans belonging to Jolly of Bath and Vernon Road Bleaching of Basford in use during the War go to prove.**

Below: **Commercial vehicles were sometimes built on Wolseley's car chassis. This ornate hearse is a particularly fine example.**

Austin found time to tinker with a car built on Léon Bollée lines. This was followed by an Austin-designed three-wheeler in 1896 and a production four-wheeler with horizontal engine in 1900. Herbert Austin was friendly with American gun designer Hiram Maxim, who was a partner in Vickers Son and Maxim Ltd, and had built components for him. Through this connection Vickers acquired Wolseley's car business in 1901 for £12,400 cash plus debentures.

The Wolseley Tool and Autocar Co Ltd was formed with a capital of £40,000 and 3½ acre premises acquired from Starley Brothers and Westwood at Adderley Park. Here 323 cars (more than any of its UK rivals) were made in 1901, 523 in 1906, nearly 1,600 in 1911 and around 3,000 per year by the time of the Great War. These figures put Wolseley amongst the British front runners and with their wealthy Vickers backing it is hardly surprising that other products soon joined the cars.

In 1901 a half-ton van was offered on the single cylinder car chassis and this was joined in 1902 by three-quarter and one-and-a-half-ton versions, powered by horizontal two cylinder engines. Soon there were four-cylinder types too, including ones with conventional radiators as well as the typical Wolseley tube type that wrapped round the bonnet.

Vickers' involvement was obvious with the massive 12½ litre four ton lorry offered for colonial and military purposes that had a transversely pivoted front axle for use on rough ground. The 1905 range covered everything from 2 cwt car-based parcel vans up to 36-seat double-deck buses. In that year 1,200 men were employed in the works and a new 334 ft by 353 ft commercial vehicle plant was built. The year 1905 saw the arrival of *The Commercial Motor* (the cover of the very first of which was taken by Wolseley for advertising) and that year Wolseley supplied

Right: **A Subsidy CR or B type, as it was known by the WD, Wolseley in action. Its engine, which bore the name Vickers, was limited to 1,000rpm, developed 35bhp and had an SU carburettor.**

Below: **The Subsidy three tonner included a tapered frame at the front to lower the radiator and improve engine access.**

an eleven man fire engine for Glasgow Corporation Fire Brigade that could do 30mph and scale a 1 in 8 hill at 10mph fully laden. More unusual was a purpose-built vacuum cleaner chassis with, as was typical of Wolseleys of the time, a crankshaft running at right angles to the chassis side members. This vehicle carried yards of flexible hose and was parked outside the house to be spring cleaned!

Wolverhampton Corporation ran three Wolseley 20hp buses in 1905 and after 31,347 miles realised that, though fairly reliable, the fares that could be charged were insufficient to make a profit. A 20hp van carried Siddeley cars from Crayford factory, the Midland Railway bought another van and the War Office bought three semi-forward control ambulances.

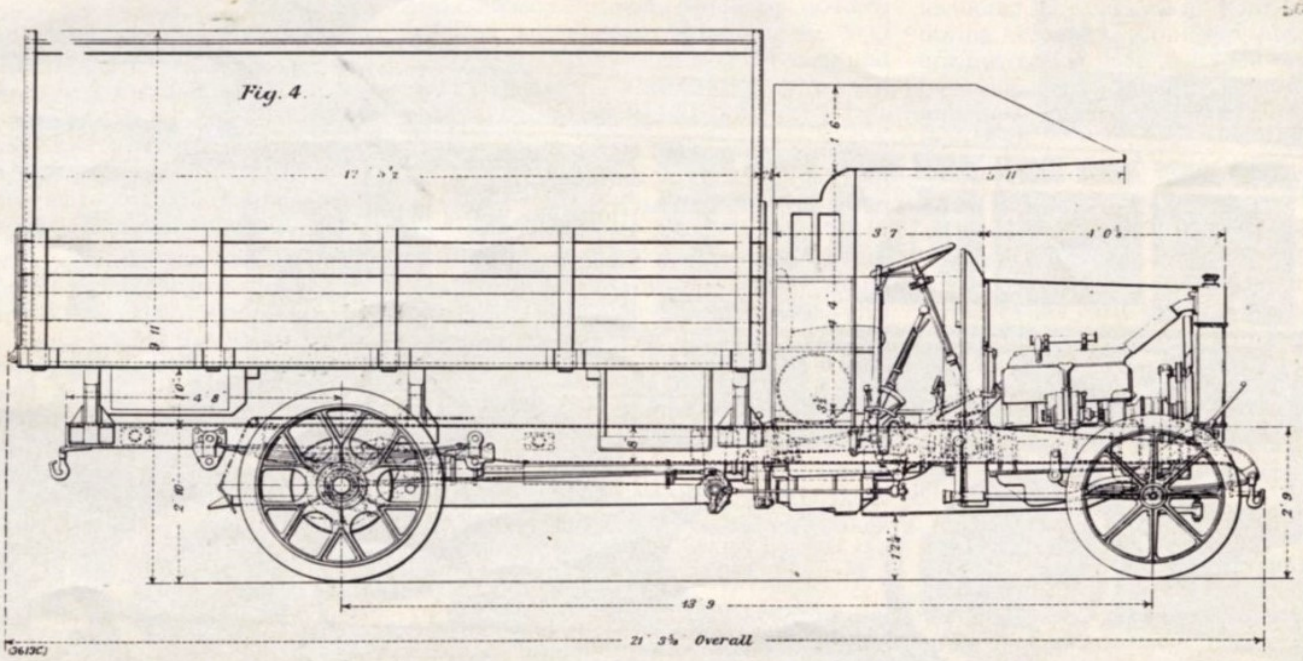
In April 1906 came first talk of vertical engined Wolseley commercials, the change from horizontal types coming about as a result of Austin's departure in 1905 to start the Austin Motor Co (though he retained an interest in the old sheep shearing firm). His place was taken by J. D. Siddeley, who had previously worked for Humber and Rover and had created his own Clipper Tyre Co. In 1901 he had begun to import Peugeot cars with backing from Lionel de Rothschild, later a Vickers director, and from 1902 had produced versions of these under the name Siddeley Autocars in Coventry. Vickers had taken on production of the Siddeleys at its Crayford works in 1903 in competition with Austin's Wolseleys and had made J. D. Siddeley its London Manager in 1904. His arrival at Adderley Park in the following year brought about a concerted effort by Wolseley to break into the London bus market, which was dominated by foreign manufacturers. At the time a census showed 153 Milnes-Daimler, 80 Straker Squires (Büssings), 34 De Dions, 27 Dürkopps, 10 Dücommen and 8 each Brillié and Orion. The highest placed British maker was Leyland with thirteen buses. The LGOC's experimental four cylinder 33hp (at 1,050rpm) Wolseley had done ten thousand miles by July 1905 and carried on to give such satisfactory service on the Cricklewood to Elephant and Castle route that an order for about one hundred Wolseley-Siddeleys followed. In August 1906 it was announced that six per week were being built. At about this time a demonstration run from Birmingham to Barrow in Furness was undertaken. The 180 mile journey lasted from 11.15am until 7am the next day, delays being caused by the swing bridge on the Manchester ship canal being closed and by a restive horse forcing the bus into a ditch, from which it had to be pulled by a team of better behaved horses.

The buses were said to be controlled by a single lever that regulated the lift of the inlet valve. A 20hp 35 seat bus was supplied for use in Calcutta in 1906 and further exports went to Spain and the Crown Agents. At the Olympia Show in the following year the exhibits included 30hp and 18hp chassis as well as a 10hp taxi. The larger vehicles all had Wolseley's usual semi-forward control layout and the 18hp size had double-reduction live axles as opposed to the chain drive of the 30hp types.

Wolseley was slowly chiselling away at the foreign dominance of the capital's bus fleets, though of the British vehicles represented there, both Clarkson and Scott-Stirling were doing somewhat better and the Straker-Squire had become wholly British. A bus with BTH petrol-electric transmission was tried in 1907 but despite successful trials between Rugby and the hilly district around Sheffield as well as a journey over the Malverns there were no buyers.

In the 1907 Trials Wolseleys did quite well, though their team chances were dashed when a laden lorry crashed at Dunstable in lashing rain on the way to the start. Even this misfortune was turned to Wolseley's advantage when pictures of the bent, rather than broken, Vickers steel axles, etc., were shown to the press!

Birmingham supported its local heavy vehicle maker with an order for a 20mph sixteen-man fire appliance on one of the



Left: **The Ishikawajima Shipbuilding Engineering Co. of Tokyo made both Wolseley cars and commercials for some ten years from 1918. This is a Japanese artist's impression of the Wolseley CG bus.**

Below: **One of the original horizontal engined Austin type Wolseleys. Herbert Austin is seated inside. The GWR must have been satisfied for vertical engined types with both double deck and charabanc bodies were run later.**

30hp semi-forward control bus chassis which in the Siddeley era had conventional front radiators. There had also been an interim model in 1905 after the curved tube type that had two horizontal radiators at the ends of the driver's seat. Birmingham Corporation also ran one of the large buses on the Harborne route, but few, if any, other orders followed.

The two-cylinder taxis were proving to be a considerable sales success, with orders of 250 each for the General Motor Cab Co and United Motor Cab Co in 1907. In 1908 a hundred of the four cylinder 18hp type were in service with the London and Provincial Motor Cab Co. Taxis appear to have been made at Crayford and amongst the smaller customers was William Morris of Oxford, later to become Viscount Nuffield.

There was a major depression affecting the motor industry at the time which caused Wolseley to concentrate on its core business and discontinue all but the car-based commercials.

Works manager Owen Clegg departed for a very successful career with Rover and Darracq, whilst J. D. Siddeley himself went to join the Deasy Motor Car Manufacturing Co in Coventry. This of course became Siddeley Deasy (where some Stoneleigh lorries were made before the Great War) and ultimately Armstrong-Siddeley.

There was much acrimony between Deasy and Wolseley, which both used the addition of the Siddeley name until, in about 1910, Vickers was persuaded to discontinue the practice.

Owen Clegg's place at Adderley Park was taken by Max R. Lawrence, who had held the same position at the severely curtailed Crayford factory. Ernest Hapwood, from British Electric Traction, was brought in as managing director in 1909 and in 1911 his post was split with A. J. McCormack who had joined Wolseley in 1907 from one of the earliest exponents of vehicle mass production, Cycle Components of Bournbrook. The chief designer since 1904, Arthur Remington (born 1877, the son of a manufacturing jeweller in Birmingham) became chief engineer in 1908 and was responsible for all vehicles to 1919.

Wolseley was trying all manner of alternatives in these difficult times, though running a mail service between London and Aylesbury (sold to Thomas Tilling in July 1909) was one of its least successful.

Case hardening furnaces were made for various other manufacturers and in 1910 a curious tracked tractor for towing Captain Scott's Antarctic sledges was developed. It had an air-cooled engine and two forward gears and by all accounts was not as useful or reliable as the Husky dogs and ponies used in the past. Luckily for Wolseley, the German Antarctic team did not know this when it ordered three more of the diminutive crawler tractors.

More successful were aero engines (since as early as 1906 for airship use). Other engines were built for boats, including V12 types for the Duke of Westminster's racing launch. There were even engines built for petrol-electric railcars on the Delaware and Hudson railroad, as well as for the LNER. Strangest of all was a sixteen-cylinder submarine engine for Vickers.

In March 1910 Wolseley announced that trade was improving and that the pleasure car, marine and aero sides of the factory were getting busier, 'A return to the commercial side to be the very next step'. Plainly there was some money about for in February 1912 as many as possible of the 3,000-plus workers crammed into the Theatre Royal, Birmingham, where they saw a variety show with special motoring associations.

One of the contestants in the 1907 RAC Trials would have been this 6½ tons gross lorry, which crashed before it reached the start.

Incidentally, times must have been pretty rough, as Birmingham's old Wolseley ambulance could only go out when the pubs closed if someone stood guard over its lamps and medical supplies.

In fact, no purpose-built commercial chassis were offered until early in 1913, at much the same time that the LGOC's fleet of Wolseley-Siddeley buses was being withdrawn.

The new vehicle was designed by Arthur Remington and was for one-and-a-half-ton loads. It had a 16hp engine and underslung worm back axle. There was a conventional bonnet and radiator. An ambulance version with bodywork by Wilson and Stockall was shown at Manchester that Spring and in July at the Olympia Show a whole range was exhibited. It consisted of 12cwt, 1 ton, 1½ ton, 2 ton and 3½ ton models, several of which had double-reduction rear axles.

One of the 1½ ton sizes was built to War Office standard and the 3½ tonner was to 3 ton Subvention specification. In view of the Vickers involvement it is perhaps not surprising that Subsidy vehicles for potential military use should have taken priority. The timing of their introduction was perfect as well, because an enormous three storey factory specifically for lorries had been opened in January 1914 under the supervision of A. E. Headen, just in time for the war needs. The factory was also intended for car production, though the declaration of war soon saw Wolseley making large numbers of aero engines, including the famous Hispano-Suiza based Viper.

At roughly the time that chairman Sir Vincent Caillard was changing the name of the company in July 1914 to Wolseley Motor Ltd, some five thousand five hundred men were employed, compared with the 30,000 at Vickers as a whole, and no less than 13,500 vehicles had been made since 1908. Amongst these were a new cheaper range of Stellite cars, which in 1915 could be bought as quarter-ton vans. The factories at Adderley Park stretched to 21 acres (including the old premises of Vickers subsidiary Metropolitan Railway Carriage and Wagon Co, which moved to another part of Birmingham and was later responsible for MCW buses).

Incidentally, in announcing all this Sir Vincent dared to suggest that Wolseley was putting an end to Birmingham's former reputation as a maker of cheap and inferior articles. Boulton and Watt as well as the City's other founding engineers must have turned in their graves!

During the War Wolseley, whose telegraphic address was Exactitude Birmingham, made something like four thousand aero engines, spares equivalent to a further fifteen hundred, three million shells, airship transmissions, gun sights, gun mountings for previously unarmed merchantmen, 850 wings and tailplanes and six thousand propellers. In vast tin sheds nearby, Wolseley assembled 700 aircraft. Meanwhile, over at associate company Electric and Ordnance at Ward End, where the Stellite had been made, vast numbers of fuses and shell cases were made by a workforce that at its peak numbered 13,000.

Amidst all this activity the Wolseley lorries seemed to take second, if not third place and died out altogether during the war. Amongst all the statistics, which included four thousand cars and ambulances, no lorry numbers are quoted. However, the WD stock figures of 1919 show 1,096 cars and ambulances surviving along with 404 medium and heavy lorries.

The range listed for 1913 to 1915 consisted of the 12/16hp 12cwt CA, 16/20hp 1 ton CC, the 16/20 (also) 1¾ ton CO and 20/28hp two ton CL and the 35hp 3½ ton CR. In addition, in 1914/15 there was a 6.6 litre 40hp five-tonner known as the HR – all the models having four-cylinder side valve engines. Presumably as a result of Vickers' associations around the world and its shipyards the Ishikawajima Shipbuilding and Engineering Co Ltd of Tokyo acquired rights to build Wolseley vehicles in 1918 and made something like one hundred lorries and buses per year up to 1929, latterly under the name Sumida. This business was linked with DAT in the 1930s and merged with the maker of Isuzu lorries.

Commercials were not continued by Wolseley in Birmingham after the war, apart from a 7cwt version of the 1921 10.5hp car. It built a peak twelve thousand cars that year, but was in increasingly serious financial difficulties thereafter. Part of the trouble was that its factories had grown so large to cope with war production that they now represented a millstone round the company's neck. Vickers had raised more than £1.7 million for extensions and for buying the Ward End factory where the Stellite had been made. This, with interest, was to be repaid over the next 25 years, which would have been fine if sales had remained buoyant, but instead brought the firm to its knees and led to the much publicised Morris takeover in 1927. William Morris had been determined not to let it fall into the hands of either Austin or General Motors.

He concentrated his new acquisition on the Ward End factory and moved his Morris-Commercial business from Soho to Adderley Park. The aero sheds were used for a variety of other purposes, including the assembly of the abortive Brocklebank car. The whole complex was demolished in relatively recent years.

It is said that Wolseley men were responsible for the production of the new range of heavy Morris-Commercials, including double-decker buses produced during the Depression years. Morris was anxious not to have to lay off skilled men from his newly acquired business, which remained his personal property until the mid-1930s.

Though no more commercials were made under the famous Wolseley name, it was by no means the end of the firm's commercial vehicle involvement. Wolseley built almost six thousand of Morris-Commercial's 6x4 lorries in the early years of World War II (interestingly, Austin built a further 6,686 of them). Wolseley was also the country's largest producers of tracked vehicles, notably Loyd Carriers. Some six hundred ambulance bodies were also built at Ward End and fitted to various chassis.

After the war Wolseley was to be responsible for the Nuffield Oxford taxicab from 1947 to 1953, and that really marked the end of its c.v. involvement. Only one Wolseley-badged commercial is known to have survived, a 1915 CR rescued by the Best brothers and now preserved by the Hardwicks at Ewell.