

## "THE AUSTIN/BOLLEE" MYSTERY

by ST. JOHN NIXON

**I**N EXAMINING the first two Wolseley cars designed and made by the late Lord Austin in 1895 and 1897 respectively, it is curious that the second car bears little or no resemblance to the first, either in point of design or appearance, except that in both cases, the driver sat in front and the passenger behind with his or her back facing the direction of travel. Both cars, too, had only three road-wheels.

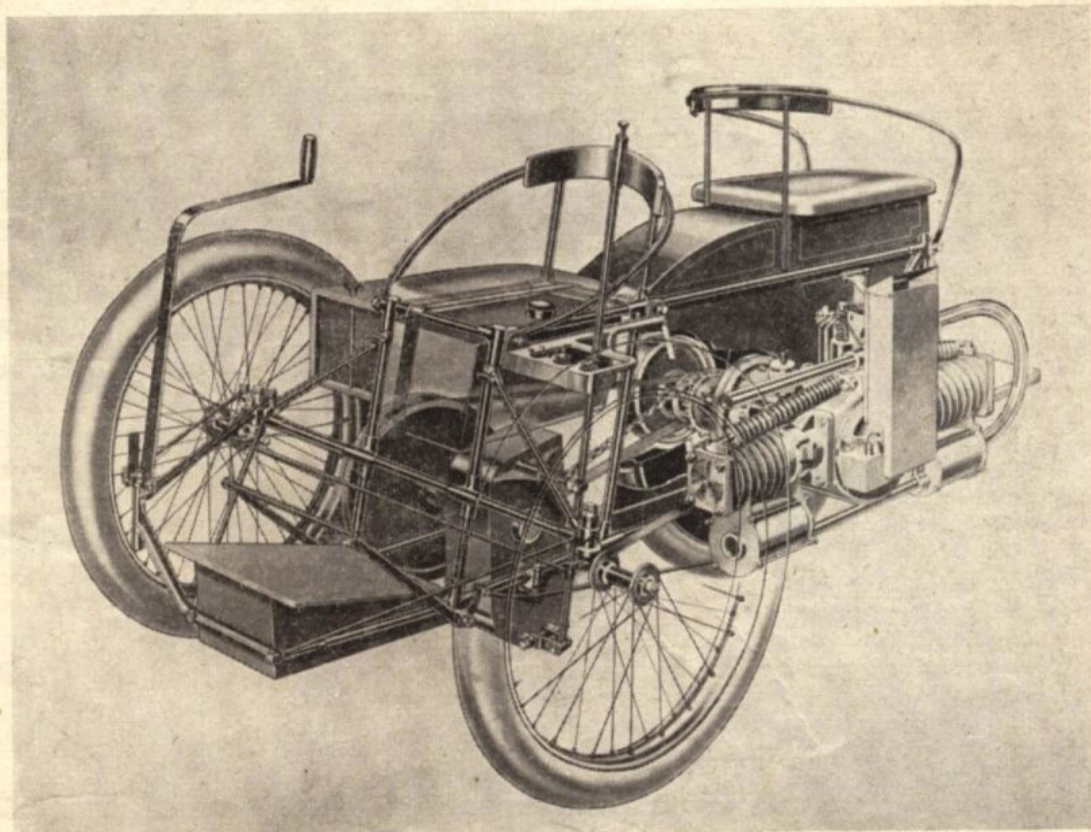
In point of engine position, and, to a certain extent appearance, No. 1 Wolseley bears a resemblance to the early Bollée three-wheeler, albeit Austin's engine was immeasurably in advance of Bollée's, particularly as regards the valve gear.

When, shortly after the end of the war, I was asked by the Wolseley Company—prior to the formation of the British Motor Corporation Ltd.—to compile a history both of the Wolseley car and of the various companies that have controlled its destiny, I discussed with the company the similarity between the early Bollée and Wolseley No. 1; there were two points of importance to be considered, viz.:

- (a) was Wolseley No. 1 the outcome of a visit paid by Austin to Paris "some two or three years before I built my first experimental car in 1895"—to use his own words, as recorded on page 399 of *The Autocar* of August 30, 1929; and
- (b) was the reason why Austin abandoned so deliberately his first design of 1895 and started again on Wolseley No. 2 which was entirely different in every respect, due to his desire not to become involved in the patent imbroglio of the British Motor Syndicate Ltd., who held the Bollée patents?

Without confirming or even investigating these two theories suggested by the company, as I most certainly should have done, I accepted them as correct, but subsequent investigation shows that it is scarcely possible for either of them to be the right explanation. They are inconsistent both in point of facts and dates. Let us now consider each such theory in the light of subsequent investigation, beginning with (a).

Austin was obviously incorrect in his dates when he said that he went to Paris to study motor car design "two or three years" prior to 1895. If



*Cut-away view of Herbert Austin's first Wolseley car of 1895.*

we assume that his visit was in 1893, the total number of petrol-driven motor vehicles in Paris at that time could probably have been counted on three fingers; indeed, it might well have been possible to have searched every street in Paris to catch sight of one, but without success. There were none, save one or two of the first cars made by such firms as Panhard, Peugeot, etc., but even so, it is highly improbable that these were running about Paris.

Austin could not have examined a Bollée, because none were in existence. The date of Bollée's first patent for his three-wheeler was December 4, 1895, but Austin's patent—No. 20401—was dated October 29, 1895, so he anticipated Bollée by no fewer than 26 days. Austin's first patent—No. 20400—was not carried through, but his second one, a photostatic copy of which lies before me as I write, is in respect of "driving gear for mechanical carriages".

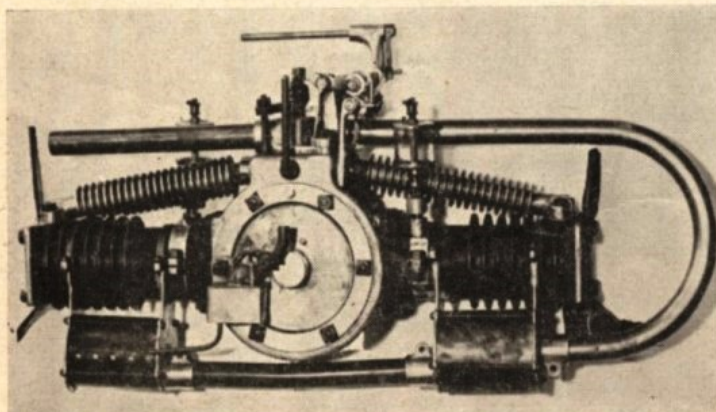
It is commonly said that Austin went to Paris to witness the start of the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris race of June 11-13, 1895, but it is extremely difficult to credit that he was then allowed by Bollée to examine any drawings, etc., of his machine that may have existed, seeing that it was not protected by any patent until some five months later, i.e. on December 4, 1895.

No. 1 Wolseley, however, was actually on the road during either the spring, summer or autumn of that year. This is borne out by the only known photograph of that car which shows Austin sitting in the driver's seat, and in the background can be seen plenty of foliage on the hedge which suggests that this photo was taken during the summer, possibly about the time of the race mentioned.

According to *The Engineer* of May 8, 1896, Bollée did not begin production of his car until January 8, 1896 which seems logical in view of the date of his patent.

The Bollée family was a fairly large one and several members thereof had the same christian name who are associated both with early steam and petrol work, so perhaps it will save confusion to explain that the original Bollée business at Le Mans was founded by the grandfather, Amédée Bollée, in 1842 as a bell-foundry. He was the inventor of the Bollée "Ram" and of the Aeolienne wind motor. He was killed by a runaway horse. He had three sons named Amédée, Ernest and Auguste;

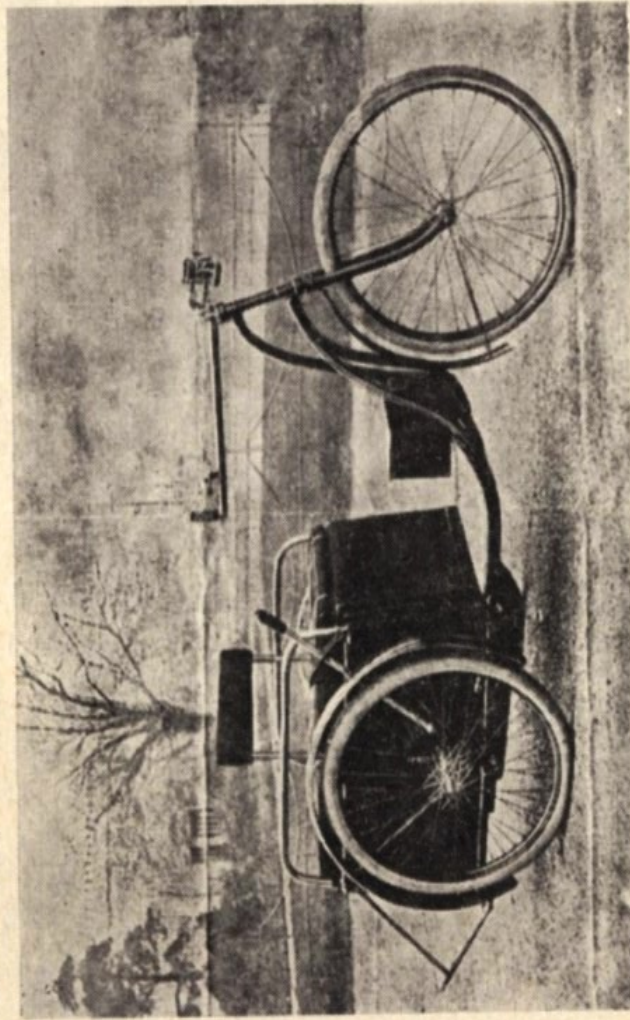
(continued on page 160)



*The twin-cylinder engine designed by Herbert Austin and fitted to his first car in 1895.*



## AUSTIN/BOLLÉE MYSTERY (continued)



*The late Lord Austin's second car of 1897.*

his grandsons were named Amédée, Léon and Camille, who will always be associated with the Bollée three-wheeler mentioned.

Returning again to Austin's early production, from the facts and dates recorded, there seems but little doubt that his Wolseley No. 1 was the product of his own engineering brain. Indeed, one does not need to give much rein to one's imagination to suggest that Bollée's production was inspired by Wolseley No. 1, rather than the contrary.

Let us now consider theory (b). There is little to support the plea that Austin abandoned the design of his first car because he feared being involved in patent difficulties. The Bollée patents were first offered to Lawson's British Motor Syndicate Ltd., during the first Motor Show held in London—at the Imperial Institute—from May 2 to August 8, 1896, and they were purchased for £20,000 during that summer. It was on July 17, 1896 that the Humber Works at Coventry, where the British Bollée was going to be made, were destroyed by fire.

There is a strong inference that Austin had dropped Wolseley No. 1 at this time and was at work on Wolseley No. 2, because the latter was exhibited at the National Cycle Exhibition during December, 1896 and it was described in both *The Autocar* of December 12, 1896, and in *The Engineer* of December 25 of the same year. In other words, Austin had abandoned work on Wolseley No. 1 before the Bollée patents had changed hands and certainly before the British Motor Syndicate, Ltd.,



*S.F. Edge on his Bollée with his first wife and Miss Wright of Upper Norwood.*

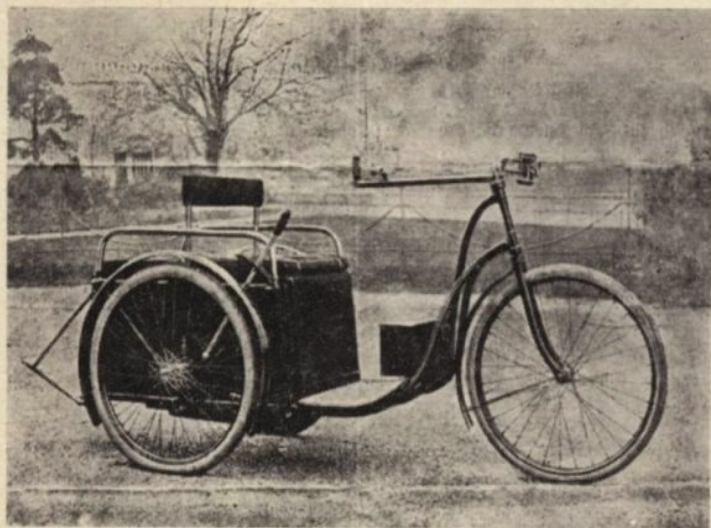
began seriously their campaign of threats to prosecute in cases of infringement.

There is every reason to believe that the main reason why Austin abandoned work on Wolseley No. 1 was because he realised he was working on a design that had no future and that his first ideas of a motor vehicle were wrong. It is not known precisely on what date he began work on Wolseley No. 2 except that he protected the frame-design by patent No. 12394 dated June 6, 1896. At all events, he soon realised that he had made a second mistake, and this caused him to abandon Wolseley No. 2 and work on Wolseley No. 3 which was entirely different to any of his previous designs. It is an open secret that he was determined to abandon entirely motor vehicle construction in the event of his third attempt proving a failure in the Thousand Miles Trial of April-May 1900; it was the success of this car that paved the way for his subsequent achievements.

Lord Austin's engineering gifts have always been grossly underestimated. For any individual to design an engine in 1895 with overhead valves and a camshaft driven by a vertical shaft and skew gearing, to say nothing of roller cam followers mounted on the ends of valve rockers, shows him to be an engineer with outstanding foresight and appreciation of future design.



## AUSTIN/BOLLÉE MYSTERY (continued)



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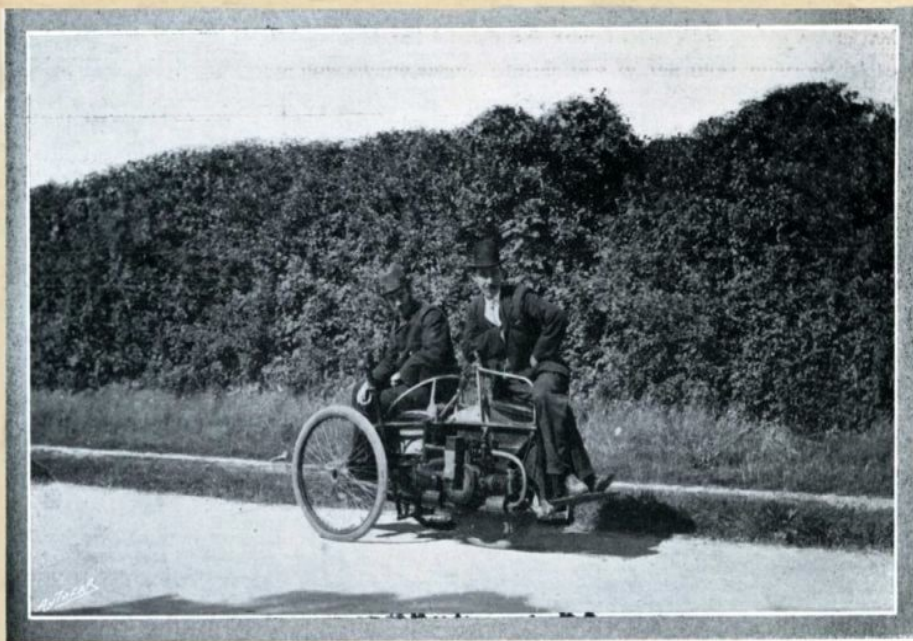
*S. F. Edge on his Bollée with his first wife and Miss Wright of Upper Norwood.*

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THE AUTOCAR. APRIL 2ND,



THE FIRST OF THE WOLSELEYS. The quaint vehicle illustrated above is one of the first Wolseley cars built. The photograph from which our engraving is reproduced was taken early in the summer of 1895. It will be noticed that the engine has two opposed horizontal cylinders and is fitted with tube ignition, the lamp case being seen on the left extremity of the crank chamber. Mr. H. Austin occupies the front and operator's seat. It affords a very interesting comparison with the latest Wolseley car, the 72 h.p. vehicle built for the Gordon-Bennett race, and the subject of our supplement plate to-day.