WOLSELEY RACING 1902-1905

WOLSELEY

A Saga of the Motor Industry

By
ST. JOHN C. NIXON

1949
LONDON
G. T. FOULIS & CO. LTD.
7 MILFORD LANE, STRAND, W.C.2

THE WOLSELEY RACING PROGRAMME OF 1902-1905

In 1902, the Wolseley Company turned its attention to racing, for it was generally anticipated that valuable lessons were to be learned in that sphere which would benefit the ordinary touring car. The British motor industry, then but little more than a weakling, was labouring to keep its head above water, largely owing to intense foreign competition and lack of support and encouragement on the part of the Authorities. On the other hand, almost from the moment self-propelled vehicles were used in France, the roads of that country were thrown open to organized racing because it was felt that it would prove a powerful stimulus to a new industry, and much was to be learned by submitting cars to high-speed road competitions.

Whilst here in England it was still illegal to use a motor vehicle on the public highways except under impossible conditions, in France some of the most famous road races were being held, notably the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris and the Paris-Marseilles-Paris of 1895 and 1896 respectively, which proved a boon to the various manufacturers of that country who could trace weaknesses which only came to light when cars were subjected to stresses racing alone could reveal.

British interests were first represented in the racing circle of France in 1900, when the late S. F. Edge took his 16-h.p. Napier car across the channel to see what kind of performance it would put up against the French manufacturers who had their factories almost within bow-shot of any selected course. The odds, at first, were too heavy, but in 1902, the Gordon-Bennett International Trophy—the Derby of the motor-racing world—was won by Edge, and it was this win, completely unforeseen by all foreigners, that first opened the eyes of the Continent to the fact that serious competition existed on this side of the Channel, and that their long string of walk-over successes was likely to be cut short. It was, too, during the same year that the Wolseley Company entered the field of racing, and thus provided a second string to the British bow.

It was a plucky action for the Company to take. It was obvious that in the store-cupboard of fate, there existed far more kicks than ha'pence for any inexperienced new-comer to the racing sphere. There was then no "Brooklands" and any high-speed car could only be tested in this country in defiance of the Law. True, the Continent was at his disposal, but the difficulties and the cost of taking racing cars to France, together with the necessary mechanics and drivers, added to the already heavy burden of production, and so it was that any British racing car had a poor chance against the foreigner.

When Herbert Austin undertook to design the first Wolseley racing car, he had no experience whatever of building such a machine. As far as is known, he had never ridden in one, but he saw what had been going on in France for some years past. There was a strong tendency for the racing car of yesterday to become the touring car of to-day, subject to certain modifications. Racing had caused the names of Panhard and Levassor, Mercedes and Mors, etc., to become household words throughout the world, and the British Napier Company had entered the lists and were learning the secrets racing had to teach.

It was during 1902 that the first Wolseley racing car was produced; in actual fact, two were constructed for the forthcoming Paris-Vienna race on June 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th of that year.The Wolseley chances of success were slender for reasons stated, but the plunge was taken.

The first time a Wolseley racing car made its bow to the public was at Bexhill speed trials held during May, 1902. Following the common practice of those days, the general lay-out of the chassis was on similar lines to the Wolseley touring car. It had four-cylinder horizontal engine of 5-in. bore and stroke which gave a reputed 30-h.p. This was far below the power of most of the foreign machines of that period which were ranging up to some 70-h.p. or more.

On the occasion in question, the car was handled by Austin himself, but it was entered for no other purpose than to submit it to the best kind of test the laws of this country would permit. There had been little time in which to tune it up, discover its faults and rectify them, and it was not anticipated that it would put up any kind of performance against the large number of continental racing cars which were taking part in these speed trials. It proved to have a fair turn of speed, but it was, of course, outmatched.

Three months later, Austin drove it in some further speed trials held at Welbeck Park, but the competition encountered was equally severe; a 30-h.p. Wolseley against a 70-h.p. Panhard was no match at all. Nevertheless, it covered the flying kilometre in 513 seconds which equalled a speed of 43.66 m.p.h., although the weather, on the day in question, was particularly unfavourable for a car of such moderate power. In the Paris-Vienna race, very bad luck was experienced; the crankshaft broke immediately prior to the start, and Austin and his driver had to pull the whole of the engine down by the road side and fit a new one before a start could be made. This delayed them some twelve hours. Half-way through the race, precisely the same thing happened again, and it was this double breakage that inspired Austin to adopt force-feed engine lubrication in future.

The plucky action of the Wolseley Company in designing a car for competition against the pick of Europe caused a number of Sportsmen to become interested, and when a new and improved design was brought out for the 1903 season, some of them were sold to private owners who intended driving them in any competi tions for which they were eligible. Lieut. Mansfield-Cumming purchased a 50-h.p. model, as well as Harvey Foster, of Battle, Sussex; C. E. Allan, of the Allan Line, and John Gretton.

It was during the same year that the disastrous Paris-Madrid race was held, which effectively put a stop to all long-distance point to-point races on the Continent.

Three Wolseley cars took part, Nos. 214, 255 and 243, driven by Herbert Austin, Harvey Foster and Leslie Porter respectively. Both Austin and Foster failed to reach Bordeaux for various reasons, and Porter met with a terrible accident. He was approaching a corner at high speed, round which there was a concealed level crossing, this had been deserted by its flagman. Going too fast to get round the corner, he tried to steer into a field, but struck the wall of a house. His mechanic was thrown out and killed on the spot and the car turned over and caught fire. It is of interest to record that part of the steering wheel of this car is still in the possession of the Wolseley Company. Owing to the number of accidents which took place, the race was stopped by the French Authorities at Bordeaux and each car had to be towed to the railway station and brought back to Paris by train. Not an engine was allowed to be started. This race was followed on June 22nd of the same year by what was known as the "Circuit des Ardennes" contest organized by the Belgian Automobile Club. The total distance was 318 miles, and two Wolseley cars took part, driven by Sidney Girling and Arthur Callan, both of the Wolseley Experimental and Car Test Department. Girling's car completed the course but was obviously not fast enough to become a serious competitor. The second Wolseley retired after completing three circuits of the course.

By this time, the Company had learned some valuable lessons about international racing and the class of machine required. For the 1904 season, a great effort was made to produce a team of cars which would offer a serious challenge both to the other British cars entered for the eliminating trials for the Gordon Bennett 'l'rophy and to competitors in the race itself. Five Napiers and three Darracq cars—specially assembled in this country to comply with the rules of the contest—were entered. A particularly strong team of first-class drivers was engaged, to drive the three Wolseley cars, namely Campbell Muir—a pioneer driver of great experience in handling racing cars Charles Jarrott and Sidney Girling.

The car Girling drove had an engine of 72-h.p. and was of striking appearance. The four-cylinder horizontal engine was sus pended from the frame immediately below and in front of the dashboard, and was so placed that minor adjust~ents could be effected by the mechanic while the car was running. The flywheel was of a very large diameter, and the radiator was in the form of a nearly circular nest of tubes surrounded by a water tank. Four speeds were provided, and the gearbox was suspen~ed at three points, ball bearings were used. It had H-section axles and a stamped steel frame with the weight well distributed as the engine was considerably behind the front axle. In order to counter lateral strain, the wheels were provided with wire spokes which ran from the outside flange on the hub to the inside of the rim.

The cars designed for Campbell Muir and Jarrott had a more powerful engine and a still more unusual appearance. They were known as " The Beetle," because the long bonnet coming almost to a point in front suggested that insect. The general lay-out of the chassis was very similar to Girling's car, the steering in both cases was very sharply raked with the drivers and mechanics sitting very low. Altogether the Wolseley team, both as regards the

cars them selves and the drivers, were far more formidable than they had been previously. The preliminary trials were held in the Isle of Man over a five-lap course of some fifty-two miles per lap. This was followed by speed tests over a three-mile stretch, speed over a flying half-mile and a two-mile hill climb out of Ramsey. Jarrott's car, which proved the fastest of the team, stripped the first speed and reverse which retarded acceleration considerably. Campbell-Muir's car had lubrication trouble, and was withdrawn and Girling was obliged to fit a new chain. The Judges decided that the two Wolseleys and one Napier should represent this country in the race. The contest was held in Germany over a circuit near Homburg. The course was a very trying one, and the winner's average speed was 54.4 m.p.h. Jarrott, dogged by bad luck, only finished the race with some difficulty. A chain broke, the third speed stripped its teeth, and for half the distance the engine could not be governed. Girling's car completed the course of 317.86 miles in 7 hrs. 22 mins. 55 secs., which showed an average speed of 43.1 m.p.h. Then, during July of the same year, came the "Circuit des Ardennes" race in which two Wolseley cars took part. They were driven, on this occasion, by Sidney Girling and young Bianchi, who had been Jarrott's mechanic in previous races. He put up a very creditable performance, and, although his final placing was twelfth, he beat such famous competitors as Lancia on a 90-h.p. Fiat, Salleron on a 100-h.p. Mors, and others who failed to complete the course. Girling was forced to retire after completing two circuits.

At the beginning of 1905, it was announced that the well-known Sportsman, Mr. Lionel de Rothschild, intended entering a car for the eliminating trials of the Gordon-Bennett Trophy of that year, and that his choice had fallen on a "Siddeley" which was being specially designed and made for him by the Wolseley Company. In a subsequent chapter details will be given of how the Wolseley Company came to manufacture " Siddeley " cars for the Siddeley Autocar Co. Particulars of this new production were awaited with great interest, and when the general lay-out of the chassis was made public, and photos of the complete car were shown, it seemed that it would prove a very formidable string to the British team if it were successful in the trials in question. It had a massive four-cylinder engine with a bore of no less than 181-mm. or 78-in. while the stroke was only 152.4-mm. It had double-ported overhead inlet valves, mechanically operated, and the cylinders and heads were cast in one piece. The crankshaft was hollow with H-section webs. Both low-tension magneto and high-tension ignition were provided which were controlled by levers working on a sector upon the steering wheel. The clutch was of the multiple plate type, but with a greater number of plates than was then common on touring cars. Three-point suspension for b~th engine and gearbox was adopted to allow for frame-distortion, etc. The frame was of channel steel section, strongly braced by cross members. The wheelbase was 9-ft. l-in. and the track 4-ft. 6-in. The Wolseley team consisted of two 96-h.p. cars, driven by the Hon. C. S. Rolls and Bianchi. The remaining cars taking part in the trials were four Napiers, one British-built Darracq and two Star cars.

During his second circuit of the course, Girling on the Siddeley met with an accident, due to the collapse of a wheel. He was travelling at high speed when this happened, but he managed to hold the car on three wheels only for some sixty or seventy yards when it ran into the doorway of a shop. The mechanic was thrown out but was not hurt. Girling was badly bruised by the impact of the steering wheel, and one of his fingers was injured. The selection of the Judges for the Gordon-Bennett Race was the two Wolseleys and a Napier, with two more Napiers in reserve. The race took place on July 5th, 1905, over the Auvergne circuit —a distance of just over eighty-five miles—which had to be covered four times, and one of the features of the race was a duel between Rolls on the Wolseley and Earp on a six-cylinder Napier. How close these two cars were will be gauged by the fact that the Wolseley managed to beat the Napier by exactly 47 seconds over a total distance of some 341 miles. Braun on a huge 120-h.p. Mercedes was also defeated by the Wolseley. This final contest for the trophy resulted in a second win for Thery on a Richard Brasier.

This was the last occasion on which Wolseley cars took part in any Continental classic. Many valuable lessons had been learnt but at enormous expense, and it was this factor which occasioned the withdrawal of the Wolseley Company from any further Continental Racing. It was obvious that to turn to account the lessons learnt in the racing field, and to put up any good performance against the pick of Europe, would entail designing and manu facturing a new fleet of cars each year. A vast sum of money would have to be earmarked for any such purpose—far too much for the Company to afford—and so the racing programme ended. There was too a further consideration. In 1905 many problems had still to be solved, and the proper solution for these was more likely to be found in the research laboratory than-on the high speed roads of the Continent. Racing, in such circumstances, had ceased to be an economic proposition. The Wolseley touring cars would soon be undergoing extensive alterations in design which would entail casting aside more than one feature which the Company had actively supported from the beginning.