THE WOLSELEY-SIDDELEY AMALGAMATION

THE WOLSELEY - SIDDELEY AMALGAMATION

ONE of the chief benefits which British automobilism derived from the Thousand Miles trial of 1900, in which the Wolseley car performed so meritoriously, was the settlement of certain fundamental principles in design which had long been disputed among Engineers. Steam, as the motive power, air-cooling, belt transmission, solid tyres, tiller steering and tube ignition had all been the subject of fierce argument, but the trial in question had dealt many of them the well-merited *coup de grâce* and designers were then free to develop their ideas along channels which this long and strenuous trial had proved to be sound.

It had not had this effect, however, on one of the most thorny problems of all, namely, the horizontal engine versus the vertical. In spite of the fact that the horizontal school was small in numbers and was losing rather than gaining ground in popular favour, the Thousand Miles Trial had demonstrated that in point of reliability and freedom from breakdown, the vertical engine could concede nothing to the horizontal. Indeed, the latter had upheld all the claims of its sponsors, and those who possessed cars with such an engine were seldom heard to complain of their choice. Never theless, the vertical engine had also proved its high degree of efficiency and had many more supporters than the horizontal.

But motoring was then indulged in largely by those with sporting instincts; nine motorists out of every ten in those early days motored for the pleasure of motoring and not merely for the purposes of transportation from place to place. Some early semblance of a fashion in motor cars had already sprung up, it took the form of a long bonnet in front which gave the car a somewhat rakish and speedy appearance which the horizontal engine could not provide without waste of space and a certain amount of "make believe."

The motorist who had a car with a horizontal engine was not always anxious to change, but the chief difficulty was to convince the intending purchaser of no previous experience that the "horizontal" advocates, who constituted the extreme minority, were right, and that the overwhelming numbers of "vertical" enthusiasts were wrong, and as time went on and new car after new car appeared on the market each with a vertical engine, without any notable additions to the horizontal ranks, the task became still more difficult.

From 1900 onwards, the horizontal engine slowly but surely lost ground and was abandoned by such important manufacturers as Peugeot, Benz and others. The writing on the wall could not be overlooked, and by the time the winter of 1902 arrived, a landslide had set in and the vertical engine had become practically supreme, but the Wolseley Company continued to struggle against the strong tide of public demand and fight its lone battle. The first crack in the ice came in the following manner:—

One of the competitors in the Thousand Miles Trial had been J. D. Siddeley (now Lord Kenilworth). At that time, he was the Managing Director of the Clipper Tyre Company, and he drove a 6-h.p. Parisian Daimler fitted with a set of British-made Clipper tyres through that trial with marked success. The object was to test the tyres, not the car, over the whole distance. He remained with the Clipper Tyre Company a couple of years, but the then swiftly developing motor industry caused him to resign that position and to strike out in the motor business on his own accord. At first, and largely to acquire the necessary experience, he became the British agent for the French Peugeot car, the makers of which had recently abandoned the horizontal engine for the vertical, but it was not long before Siddeley felt this circle was too narrow for his activities. He desired to see a British-built car on the market bearing his own name and incorporating various features his experience had taught him were desirable. One thing he desired was a more extensive use of aluminium, and the adoption of a propeller shaft and torque tube for the smaller cars, in lieu of the heavier chain drive which was then so common.

In those days, when motor-cars still had more enemies than friends, it would not have been easy to find the necessary capital to build and equip a factory and start manufacturing a new car, so Siddeley decided to have his car designed and manufactured, according to his specification, by some well-known firm of engineers. In company with Mr. Lionel de Rothschild, who afterwards became a Director of the Wolseley Company, and with whom he was in close touch, he approached the Vickers Company to whom he unfolded his whole proposition.

It has already been explained that Vickers had bought the motor business of the old Wolseley Sheep-Shearing Machine Company, and were the owners of the Wolseley Tool & Motor Car Company, Limited, who were, at the time Siddeley approached them, still making horizontal-engined Wolseley cars.

But the ever-growing popularity of the vertical-engined car had not escaped the notice of the Directors and of Mr. Albert Vickers in particular. It was apparent to them that the Wolseley car was losing ground, but by developing and manufacturing the proposed "Siddeley," with its vertical engine and other interesting features, they would gain experience in a direction which they might, at no distant date, be forced to follow.

A certain amount of competition between the two cars would, of course, be inevitable, but after certain negotiations, it was agreed that the design of a car laid down by Siddeley should be developed by the Wolseley Company, and manufactured at Vickers factory at Cravford.

The importance of this amalgamation to the Wolseley Company needs no emphasis. The trend of motor-car design, the growing competition among manufacturers and the necessity of the Company to resist the feeling among the public that Wolseley productions were not keeping pace with the unwritten laws of development fully justified such action.

An ambitious and exceedingly costly racing programme had been undertaken by Austin, and at a time when the finances of the Company hardly justified such a high rate of expenditure. 1904 was a year which produced no profit, and the Directors viewed with growing concern Austin's refusal to redesign the Wolseley car with a vertical engine. Many discussions, before the Siddeley absorption was even mooted, took place between Austin and the Directors in regard to this serious matter, but these led to nothing, and he remained one of the few pioneers who refused resolutely to move with the times in the direction indicated. When, however, the Company began to manufacture a car with a vertical engine, even though it did not bear the name of Wolseley, Austin's position became a very difficult one, for he was chiefly responsible for the light in which the Wolseley car was regarded. Company had been reached, and during the summer of 1905 Austin handed in his resignation. For some time, he had paid but scanty attention to the affairs of the Company; all his old keenness had gone, and his resignation was the only possible solution to the problem. J. D. Siddeley was at once appointed General Manager.

The fact that the Company had, for a couple of years or more. been manufacturing a car of wholly different design from the hori zontal engined Wolseley proved of inestimable advantage when the change-over had taken place, and it was decided to concentrate on the new car. They were not faced with the possibility of having to close down the Works or considerably curtail operations until plans were ready to manufacture the new vehicle. All that was required was to slow down with the one hand and speed up with the other, and this entailed a minimum of disorganization. The horizontal engine was not abandoned immediately, for every type of car. At the Olympia motor show held during November, 1905, the Wolseley Company exhibited two small 6- and 8-h.p. models with horizontal engines, which were practically the same cars the Company had turned out during the previous year, and three 15-, 18- and 32-h.p. cars with vertical engines. It is note worthy that the reports in the motor press described the Wolseley exhibit as " a distinct departure in Wolseley practice."

Austin leaves and Siddeley becomes General Manager during the summer of 1905

The new productions of the Wolseley Company took part in most of the reliability and other trials organized in this country. It is, however, not necessary to describe these because records still exist and such trials would be hardly appreciated to-day as trials by the average motorist. They consisted of little more than long daily outward and homeward runs with some hill-climbs, none of which would tax the modern car to the slightest degree.

Nevertheless, during the summer of 1905 a privately arranged match was run off between an 18-h.p. Wolseley-Siddeley and a 24-h.p. De Dietrich car, which went far to establish in France the prestige of the British-built car.

This match was the outcome of an article which appeared in *The Times* claiming that a British-built car held the world's record for reliability. This claim was resented by certain of the leading French manufacturers who held precisely the same views for French cars. Paul Meyan, the Editor of *La France Automobile* issued a challenge offering to demonstrate the reliability of his 24-h.p. French-built De Dietrich car, which was then two years old, against that of any similar car of British construction, in a trial which had never previously been equalled in point of severity. He stipulated that both cars should run a distance of 4,400 kilometres in daily runs of 350 kilometres, for 10,000 francs a-side. This challenge was accepted and a Wolseley-Siddeley pitted against one of the most famous productions of a French factory.

Each day's run was to begin at 5 a.m. and 200 miles had to be completed within twelve hours, a two-hours stop for lunch being allowed.

The match started on July 12th, 1905, and the route selected was a varied one and included some of the best and worst roads in France. It ran as far north as Lille, west at Aix-Les-Bains, then to Mont Cenis to Nice. Thence a westerly direction was taken to Bordeaux. Still continuing north and west, Brest was reached. and after going to Trouville, a return to Paris was made. It was practically a grand circuit of France. The Wolseley-Siddeley had already covered some 40,000 and the De Dietrich 30,000 miles before the match began, so both cars were by no means enjoying the first flush of youth.

It is not necessary to record the many incidents of this long and arduous trial. Owing largely to the extremely hot weather, the engines of both cars overheated and tyre troubles were frequent, but the match resulted in a dead heat, not a single mark being lost by either the Wolseley-Siddeley or the De Dietrich.

Another long-distance trial was organized between February and May, 1907. On this occasion it was a 40-h.p. Wolseley Siddeley which was entered to complete, under official R.A.C. observation, no less than 10,000 miles over the roads of this country. After finishing the car was dismantled and a report issued by the Club on its general condition. The trial occupied sixty seven running days and the fuel consumption worked out at a shade over 10 m.p.g.