

BACK ON THE ROAD

by Zack Stiling

Clive Button is, very simply, a car enthusiast in the broadest sense. His fascination started as a child when he was bounced around in the back of his father's Ford Anglias, and never subsided. His preferences now lean heavily towards cars of the classic period, although he appreciates a well-made modern vehicle, too. He has never professed an allegiance to any particular marque, but we'd not be publishing this article if he hadn't fallen into Wolseley ownership some 15 years ago.

Having already owned a string of more familiar classics, Clive found himself suddenly drawn to the ex-Lord Nuffield Wolseley 25hp drophead coupé when it was offered for sale in 2006. It had been built as a present for his lordship by appreciative Wolseley workers. On his death it was donated to the Montagu Motor Museum, whose successor, the National Motor Museum, eventually sold it through Bonhams in 2003. During his ownership, Clive became thoroughly enamoured of it, but decided he should part with it a few years ago as his desire to preserve its remarkable originality prevented him from using and enjoying it as much as he would have liked. In that time, Clive managed to rise through the ranks of the Wolseley Register to become chairman, and he even wrote the comprehensive model guide *Wolseley 25hp Drophead Coupé: A Profile*.

It was in the capacity of chairman that he was summoned to investigate a mysterious Wolseley which surfaced in 2017. "A friend in Helmsley, North Yorkshire, made contact to ask if I could identify his neighbour's Wolseley," Clive explains. "The neighbour was selling the family farm and had commented that at the back of the barn was her father's old Wolseley, but she didn't know what model it was. I had been called to such missions before only to find that what was once a prized motor-car has, after several decades of poor storage, decayed into something that is all but worthless. It is never pleasant having to explain that to the owner, but in Helmsley I needn't have worried. I squeezed past numerous old tractors and farm equipment to the far corner of the barn and found the remains of an open 1930s car."

The Wolseley was easily identified by Clive as a Hornet Special, although it no longer carried original bodywork. He took some photographs and consulted one of the Register's Hornet experts, who worked out that it was a very early 14hp model. In fact, car number 175507 was only the second 14hp Hornet built, in 1934.

The matriarch of the farm, Mrs Barker, filled Clive in on the car's history. She could remember her father, William Sturdy, acquiring it from his brother-in-law in 1940, when she was four. He worked as a town clerk in Kirkbymoorside, drove it through the war when he was a member of the Royal Observer Corps, and continued using it into the early '50s, by which point he had started modifying it. It had had a good innings: it was last taxed in 1974 before it was driven into the barn for the last

time, but it must have been well and truly on its last legs by that point.

Sturdy's grandson Stephen took an interest in restoring the car and started stripping it, but, sad to say, died before he could make any progress. Thus, the chassis languished with all its parts stuffed into potato crates around it. Happily, the engine was all together, as it had been removed – probably in the 1950s – and a slightly later New 14 engine was installed in its place. Ultimately, Mr Sturdy's great-grandson Matthew decided it should be sold to someone who would commit to resurrecting it. Clive was feeling brave enough to take on the responsibility and became the new owner.

Before getting too bogged down with the restoration, he was eager to investigate Mrs Barker's claim that the Hornet had originally been bought from the London Motor Show.



The car carries a Sheffield registration and it is fortunate that the registration records from the old County Borough Council survive. Clive learnt that its first owner was one Richard Clive Mosley, the 29-year-old grandson of R F Mosley, who had founded one of Sheffield's leading cutlery makers. He had risen to a directorship in 1930 and became chairman in 1934 or 1935. As Clive opines, "He was, perhaps, just the sort of man who would have visited the Motor Show at Olympia and said 'I'll have that one.'"

Clive's Hornet wears a Eustace Watkins Daytona body, which was built by Whittingham & Mitchel. The Whittingham & Mitchel stand at the 1934 Motor Show exhibited two 14hp Daytonas, described in the catalogue as a red two-seater and a black four-seater. Knowing his car to have been originally black and only the second 14hp built, the claim is most probably true. Incidentally, the red car is said to survive but to be in need of restoration after a serious

1 The Wolseley Hornet as first seen by Clive Button, in the barn where it had languished since the 1970s

2 Now fully restored, this car is certainly one of the most attractive examples of the model on the road today

1934 WOLSELEY HORNET SPECIAL



fire. The 14hp Hornet Special was made in very small numbers.

Having established the car's historical importance, Clive felt somewhat daunted by the task at hand. He says, "I lacked the skills, facilities and time to restore the car myself, but through my contacts in the Wolseley Register I received an offer to restore it from two Hornet Special experts. Neither of these gentlemen wants to be named, but I knew they had the knowledge and skills I needed and, most importantly, their own stock of Hornet Special spares."

Work started in March, 2017, with an inspection of the body tub. "It was immediately apparent that the ash frame and the metalwork, which had been modified, were beyond redemption," Clive recalls. "The engine, gearbox, bulkhead and both axles were removed to leave a naked chassis."

The axles came apart to be overhauled before they were returned to the chassis, which had needed extensive work. It was cracked in places and going into holes, so it was partly dismantled and bead-blasted in order for the restorers to see what they had to work with. One of them placed it on a chassis jig and pressed on with the necessary repairs. It was discovered that the Wolseley had suffered an impact on one of the dumb-irons at some point, as the front crossmember was out of square. It was all fixed on the jig, and the chassis

number emerged once all the debris had been scraped away.

The axles weren't especially lovely, either. The brakes "showed 50 years' worth of inaction," Clive explains. "Everything was stripped down to the last pin. We epoxy-coated the axle casing and brake back-plates. With everything cleaned up and repaired, we started to put it back again." Two teeth were missing from a star wheel in the rear axle, but a new set was sourced from the Wolseley Register's stores.

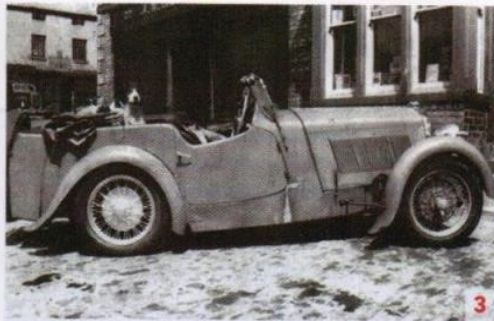
The gearbox and original engine were rebuilt, with new bearings fitted all the way through. The starter ring gear was found to be worn in three places 120 degrees apart, suggesting it had simply been rotated whenever the wear started to affect its operation. Clive's restorers were sufficiently skilled that they were able to rebuild the damaged teeth one by one with new metal, before filing them back. As the block had been rebored several times, it was resleeved and returned to standard-size pistons. Initially, the throttle linkage was remade using parts from some other car, but one of the restorers was overcome by an attack of perfectionism and insisted on making a new linkage precisely replicating the original components.

Despite the problems faced so far, it was only when Clive's restorers started to address the exterior that Pandora's box was opened. In Mrs Barker's own words, her father had been "a dreadful bodger" who fitted all manner of non-

standard parts, while other parts had been lost during stripping in the 1970s. The car hadn't even had a proper hood since wartime.

As found, the Hornet sported a non-original boot, rubber cycle wings and oversized Lucas P100 headlamps. The lamps, at least, were not such a bad inheritance. Clive was able to recoup a small part of the cost of the restoration by selling them for a few hundred pounds to someone with a more appropriate car. For the restoration, some parts could be sourced from the Hornet Special Club and some came from the restorers' private stores, but a number had to be remade entirely. The door catches were made from scratch by one of the restorers. He made 10 sets, the first pair for Clive's Hornet while the rest were relegated to his spare stock.

Elsewhere, a new battery box had to be fabricated, as there was no trace of the original. The original fuel tank was full of pinholes, and a new one had to be made. The missing floor and transmission tunnel had to be produced from scratch. While the restorers were in fabrication mode, one of them decided he could improve upon the doors. From his experience of Whittingham & Mitchel door frames, he found the joints tended to open up and weaken causing the doors to sag. To prevent this, he strengthened the joints with steel plating. The bonnet catches were peculiar to the Hornet Special and these days prove almost impossible



3 The Hornet in the 1950s, when it was owned by William Sturdy, showing the modified bodywork

4 A new body frame was constructed, including reinforced door frames to prevent sagging

5 The new bodywork, with hood frame in place, is an exact recreation of the Whittingham & Mitchell original

6 Perhaps the most complex part of the new bodywork to recreate was the sweeping front wings

7 The matching-numbers engine was fitted with sleeves to bring it back to the original bore

8 Gibsons Car Trimmers created the new hood using only period photographs for reference

9 The Eustace Watkins Daytona coachwork is one of the most attractive styles fitted to the Hornet Special chassis

to source. Fortunately, the restorers had a rummage and found some dog-eared ones, which they have restored to as-new condition.

At least chassis 507/163 and engine 505A/163 belonged to 175507, so Clive didn't have any undue trouble in obtaining the original registration from the DVLA. "I have always prized originality in my cars and was pleased that, even if the body was beyond salvation, we were starting with a matching-numbers chassis and engine," he says. "The gearbox, final drive and axles were original, too. It also proved possible to use the original radiator grille, windscreen, instruments and fuel filler. Consulting with the restorers, it was agreed to produce a body which was an exact copy of the original and, as far as possible, to have a completed car which was to original specification. I did not want electronic ignition or an alternator, however carefully they were hidden."

Clive's restorers did a remarkably good job with the body, making a new ash frame and steel panels, including the wings. The body is all steel apart from the aluminium bonnet sides. It is almost unbelievable that such a curvaceous, well-proportioned body could have been assembled by just two enthusiasts in a small garage, and Clive says, "I am completely in awe of the quality of the end product." Even though it was riddled with holes and cracks, the restorers saved the original bulkhead. Sanding it all back revealed the original black paint. The wartime airfield RAF Wombledon was not far from Kirkbymoorside and saw a lot of activity during the war. Afterwards, a lot of surplus stores remained and it's not unlikely that Mr Sturdy's grey paint came from there.

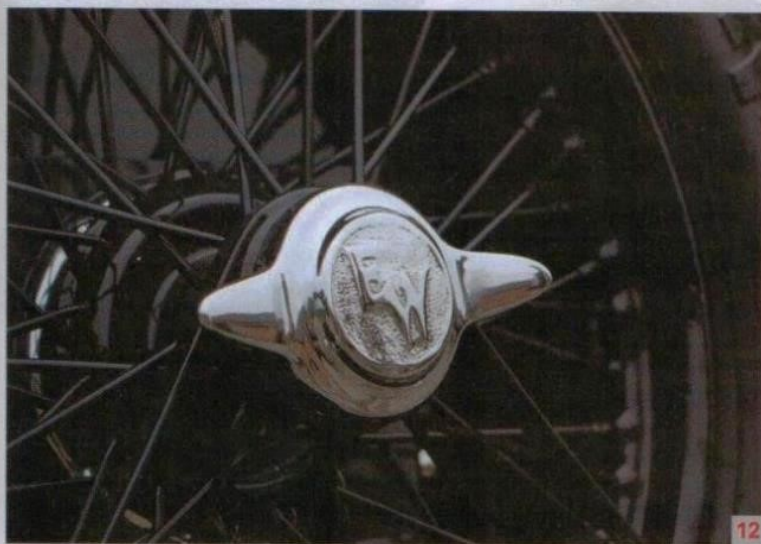
The next job was to make a new hood frame and side screens by eye from period photographs, although one car was borrowed for measurements. The radiator was recored, all the ancillaries were either rebuilt or replaced, and then new wheels, new lamps, new seat frames and the rebuilt instruments



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all went in one by one. The seats had to be made from scratch as those in the car were not from a Hornet, nor even a matching pair. Stainless steel was used to make them stronger than the originals.

Later, when the time came for the interior to be upholstered, that was entrusted to Adrian Windsor at Gibsons Car Trimmers of Harrogate, who did a similarly impressive job of creating an accurate interior and weather gear with only period photographs as points of reference. Pictures of the car with the hood erected proved difficult to come by, but one from a road test in *The Motor* gave a good view of the profile.

The project turned into a four-year labour of love, finally reaching fruition in June, 2021. Clive made it his first job to visit Mrs Barker, who was delighted to see her father's old car in peak health once again. Clive parked the Daytona outside the old family home and recreated some photographs which had been taken in the early 1950s.

He is happy to credit his restorers with virtually all the work, but says, "If I've done anything, it was right at the end. I have been involved in re-commissioning and sorting some teething troubles. A few road runs revealed a frightening amount of wander in the steering, making it undrivable above 30mph. This was easily corrected by putting in three-degree castor wedges. A little engine tuning and some adjustments have given me the car I hoped for." Having completed his first restoration, Clive

says, "It'll be my last, as well," but he's pleased he's seen it through to the end. "It's a little bit of a shock because for the last 12 years I'd been driving around in a 3½-litre drophead coupé which was very quiet and comfortable and not at all hairy. Lord Nuffield modified his 25 so it was very high-g geared and effectively had overdrive. The Hornet is not easy to climb into, it's noisy and you get blown about. I'm sure it's not fragile, but it feels more late-1920s in design. I'll get used to it but I'm not sure that I'd do long distances. It's got a lot of character and it should be good fun. Because it's restored rather than original, I don't mind if it has to have more work done in the future."

Having been impressed, when I saw the two Hornets of Dave Phillips (see Back on the Road, August, 2021), by the muscular power of the Hornet straight-six, which went on to power some of the larger sporting MGs, I make the somewhat half-baked remark that the Hornet is like an MG with Wolseley badges, but Clive quickly puts me right – the MGs were more like Wolseleys with MG badges. What is really remarkable is just how civilised it is. At 50mph with the hood down, two people can sustain a conversation without recourse to raising their voices.

The awkward position of the seats in relation to the body is a drawback, though, and getting into the car is difficult enough on the passenger side, without the cumbersome steering wheel to contend with. When I attempted to try the

10 The contrasting beige upholstery sets off the car's gloss black paint

11 Now the engine has been run-in it gives spritely performance

12 Eustace Watkins 'EW' hub spinner is a charming touch

13 Clive says the car feels more Vintage than he was expecting – "It's got a lot of character"

driving seat of Dave Phillips's Daytona for size, I had to give up, although I was restricted by the confines of his garage.

Still, the only view most of us will get of a Daytona Special is as an external admirer, and to that end Clive's car is a treat for us all. From the deep shine of the radiator shell, through the swooping wings to the foppishly over-elaborate fuel cap, Eustace Watkins lent his initials to one of the best-looking sports cars of its day. Since Clive's is possibly almost unrivalled in its historical importance, too, he deserves to get as much satisfaction and enjoyment from it as he did from the Nuffield car. ■

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