



Vertical, unassisted and motionless, the Wolseley Gyrocar hovers for this 1913 photograph.

THE BIKE FANTASTIC

Wolseley's two-wheeled Gyrocar never leant over
Mike Worthington-Williams explains . . .

If an eccentric East European aristocrat walked into British Leyland tomorrow with plans for an improbable six seater motorcycle weighing several tons and fitted with a coachbuilt body, it takes little imagination to guess what his reception would be. Things were different before the Great War, however, and although it wasn't British Leyland, the company chosen by His Excellency Count Peter Schilowsky was just as large and important a manufacturer at the time.

The company was Wolseley — at that time a subsidiary of the mighty Vickers armaments conglomerate — and the Count's Gyrocar was not really a motorcycle in the accepted sense. One suspects, in any case, that Wolseley foresaw military possibilities for the strange device, for the date was 1912, and those close to the armaments world could see the direction Europe was heading.

Count Schilowsky was not only a gifted amateur engineer, he was also a lawyer and a relative of the Czar, and since he was willing to pay handsomely for the construction of a prototype, Wolseley accepted the commission to build it. The Gyrocar was heavy and complicated, but basically consisted of a large open body slung between two wheels in tandem — as in an ordinary motorcycle.

Pandora's Box

Between the front and rear

seats sat the pandora's box which housed the secret of the contraption: a gyroscope, driven at between 2,000 and 3,000rpm by a 1.25hp electric motor, resisted the vehicle's natural tendency to capsize by means of an intricate rack and pinion system connected to a frail arrangement of cords and pendulums. The whole mechanism was controlled by

two electric switches — one on either side — which were triggered by two hyper-sensitive glass containers of mercury.

So precise was this mechanism that upon being mounted, the running board would immediately rise up to counteract the weight of the potential passenger, and no difficulty was encountered in keeping the vehicle in an upright position when being driven in a

straight line.

Motive power was provided by a conventional 20hp four cylinder Wolseley car engine mounted at the front and ahead of the radiator, and this drove the single rear wheel through a conventional gearbox and clutch. Practically a whole year passed before tentative field trials of the bare chassis could begin — a year in which the Count was a frequent visitor to the works.

Despite his eccentricities of manner — he used to toss his glove into a crowd of apprentices and reward the youth who retrieved it for him, and on at least one occasion declared a half day holiday for the entire Wolseley experimental department without benefit of managerial approval — he proved a good supervisor as well, so the work progressed steadily.



Naked Gyrocar shows leaf springs, outrigger wheels and immense chassis.

Public Showing

Eventually, and after altered suspension had cured a tendency for the Gyrocar to lay down on corners, the great day came for a public showing. November 27th 1913 witnessed the Gyrocar put through its paces in Regent's Park before a distinguished gathering of journalists, engineers and scientists. Having thus proved its practicality, the Count made arrangements to ship it home to Russia, where he hoped to interest the Czar's military chiefs.

The assassination of Archduke Ferdinand of Austro-Hungary — the heir to the Habsburg throne — however, precipitated the Great War before dispatch could be arranged, and the Count hurried home without it. By 1922, the directors of Wolseley were becoming a little restless about

the unclaimed monster which lay in the works, and not unnaturally assumed that the good Count had fallen victim either to the Kaiser's troops or to the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution.

Burial and Exhumation

Wolseley themselves were getting into deep financial water, and couldn't be bothered with the Gyrocar any longer. The directors ordered it buried — literally — and there it lay undisturbed until 1938, by which time

Wolseley had gone bankrupt and been taken over by Morris's Nuffield Organisation. Then someone remembered the Gyrocar and, miraculously the burial spot was located.

Exhumation took place, the chassis was restored (but never ran again), and given a place of honour in the company museum. The Count — by this time a penniless exile — then briefly reappeared but took little interest in his property and subsequently disappeared for ever.

But it was wartime again, and

with war work and air raids to worry about, Wolseley hadn't much time for relics like the Gyrocar. Despite all this, however, it survived the war — as did other early exhibits in the company museum, until at least 1948.

Disappearance

Sometime in 1949, before the merger of Austin and Morris to form BMC, the Wolseley works were moved from Ward End to Cowley to make room for the

manufacture of the Nuffield tractor and to establish the Tractor and Transmissions Division of Morris Motors. All the old vehicles left Ward End at this time, and some of them are now preserved by B.L. Heritage — all except the Gyrocar, that is.

Where it went, no one seems to know, and although the strongest rumour indicates that it was broken up there is no positive evidence to this effect. It's a mystery which both B.L. Heritage and we would like to solve.



Buried when Wolseley ran into lean times the unique Gyrocar was exhumed in 1938, restored and displayed in a museum until it vanished forever in 1949.