

E. E. Agate
Motor Car and Carriage Works
Summer Hill, Sydney

David Neely

Ernest Edwin Agate was christened on 18 June 1861 at Cuckfield in Sussex, England. The 1871 England census for Sussex recorded his father, Robert Jonathan Agate (1827-1917), as a farmer who employed two men and three boys. Ernest was nine at the time with an elder brother and sister and two younger brothers and one younger sister. A housekeeper and two servants completed the household. Robert was a widower. Ernest's mother Elizabeth Bannister (1831-1868) died when Ernest was aged seven.



Above: A Milton Kent photograph of 1927 Rolls-Royce Phantom I 29EF with a saloon body by E. E. Agate when new, being delivered to Maurice Shmith. Photograph courtesy of David Shmith.

Left: This portrait of Agate was published in the 15 August, 1904 issue of 'The Australian Coachbuilder and Wheelwright'.

Left below: Agate's signature from a 1903 document provided by Geoff Boscoe.

Ernest Edwin Agate.

Ernest served his apprenticeship in the coachbuilding trade in a small town near Lewes in Sussex. He moved to Brighton after his apprenticeship, and there worked for Mercer Bros one of the leading firms of coachbuilders and wheelwrights. In the 1867 edition of the English Kelly's Post Office Directory James Mercer, wheelwright, was listed as running his coachbuilding business in Brighton along with other members of the Mercer family.

In the 1881 England census Ernest now 19 was described as a wheelwright. Having established himself as a coachbuilder, at the age of 25 Ernest left England and arrived in Sydney on 11 January 1886. His first job was with the Clyde Engineering Works at Granville, west of Sydney, near Parramatta. In a few months the contract on which he was employed was completed. However, a day or two later he found work as a coachbuilder with the Sydney Omnibus Company, which was formed in 1870.

Under the heading "Sydney Omnibus Company" the 'Illustrated Sydney News' reported on 10 August 1878, "The suburban traffic in Sydney is rapidly improving under that useful association, the Sydney Omnibus Company....It is comforting, too, to notice the care evinced towards the horse of the company." Horses frequently died through overwork and poor food. In the 1890s the name changed to the Sydney Tramway and Omnibus Company, expressing the hope that it would be involved in tramways. However, the NSW Government decided to construct a public system of tramways. Subsequently, the Sydney Tramway and Omnibus Company went into liquidation in January 1904.



Above: A Sydney omnibus in 1898 from Wikimedia Commons.

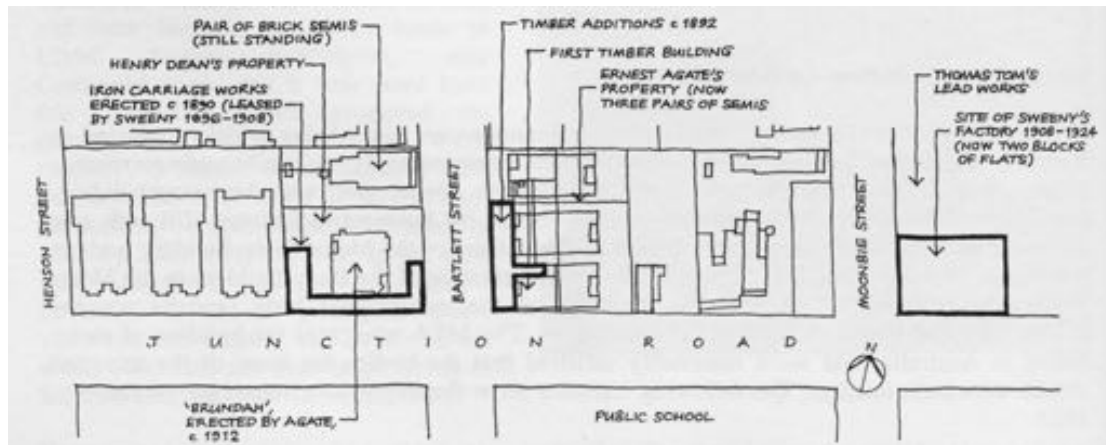
Agate then returned to the Clyde Engineering Works where he was promoted to foreman of their coachbuilding department. Next, he went into two partnerships before striking out on his own.

In 1889 he joined Thomas Dean, whose name first appeared in the Sand's Directory in 1882 when his occupation was given as a "coachpainter". Dean & Agate operated from 8 Junction Road, Summer Hill, a suburb of Sydney's Inner West. They were coach and buggy builders as well as blacksmiths. Dean had purchased the land in 1884. The firm was located on the north side of Junction Road, between Henson and Bartlett Streets. In 1891 Agate would leave Dean to form a new partnership with Earner.

Henry Sweeny, who like Agate would become a prominent Sydney coach and motor body builder, began working for Dean in about 1894 managing Dean's Centennial Coachworks. Dean was also the proprietor of the Ashfield Omnibus Company and mayor of the local Ashfield Council in 1888. Dean continued

trading until 1899, when McGregor & Sweeny, coachbuilders, took over 8 Junction Street. In 1900 Henry Sweeny was in business at 6 Junction Street.

Agate meanwhile moved to join Earner at 10 Junction Road in the next block between Bartlett and Moonbie Streets, on the corner of Bartlett Street. This partnership was also short-lived and by 1892, E. E. Agate, coach and buggy builder, was conducting his own business at this address.



Above: Sketch plan showing the location of the three carriage works late 1880s and 1930s published by the Ashfield Historical Society in 1999.

**TRY THE SUMMER HILL CARRIAGE FACTORY,
JUNCTION ROAD,**

For First-Class Vehicles of all descriptions.

Sulkys a Speciality Repairs and Painting executed with
dispatch. Tiring daily. Substitutes provided.
Buggys and Sulkys for hire.

E. E. AGATE,
PROPRIETOR.

Shoeing and General Smith. Estimates given for all kinds
of Iron work.

Above: Advertisement from 'The Advertiser' 21 April 1894, via Ashfield Historical Society.

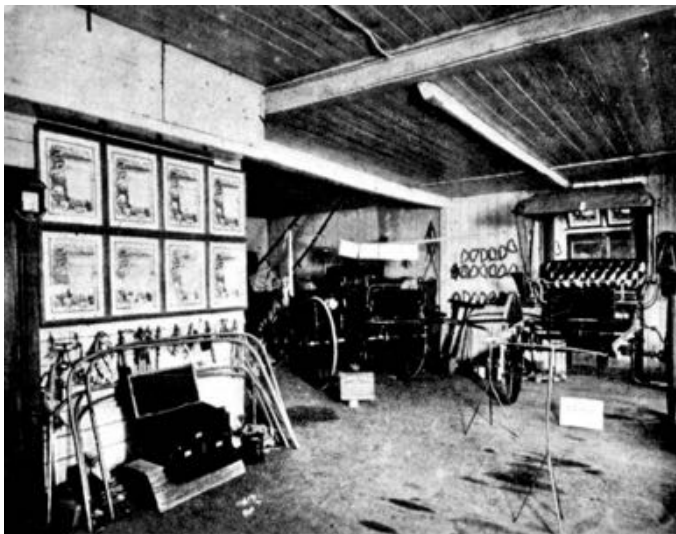


Right: A Drop-Front Phaeton exhibited by E. E. Agate at the 1905 Sydney Show.

Agate, who was now living at Summer Hill, married Catherine Ritchie (1868-1924) who was born at Parramatta. No doubt they met when Agate worked in that district. In anticipation of the marriage, a Marriage Settlement was drawn up on 17 December 1889 giving Catherine the use of land owned by Agate at Granville and Summerhill, as it was then spelled, the latter of which was mortgaged for £250. The marriage took place in 1890 at Granville where Catherine's family lived. Her father, William Duff Richie, was in business as an agricultural implement maker in the Clyde siding near Clyde railway station. Shortly after their marriage, the Agates sold the Granville property for £70 in November 1890.



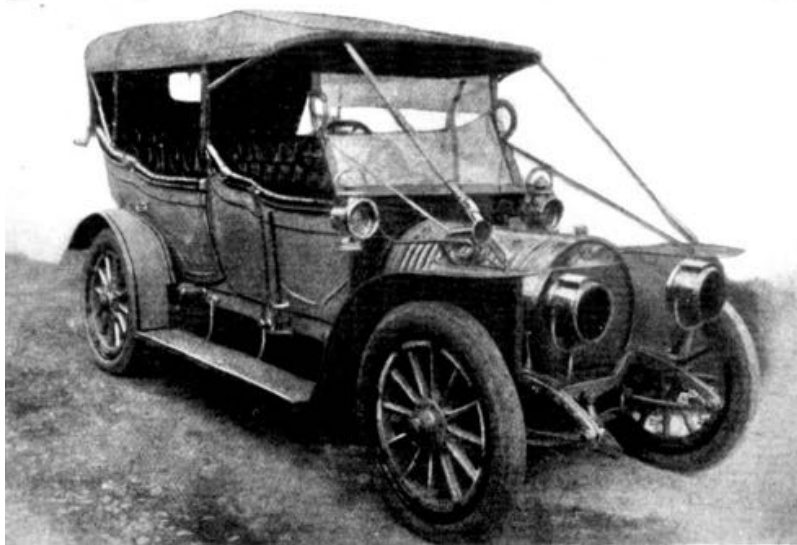
Above: E. E. Agate's Motor & Carriage Works pictured in 'The Sydney Mail' on 6 April 1910. Bartlett Street to the left, Junction Road to the right.



Left and below: Two views of the interiors of E. E. Agate's works pictured in the 'The Sydney Mail' on 6 April 1910.

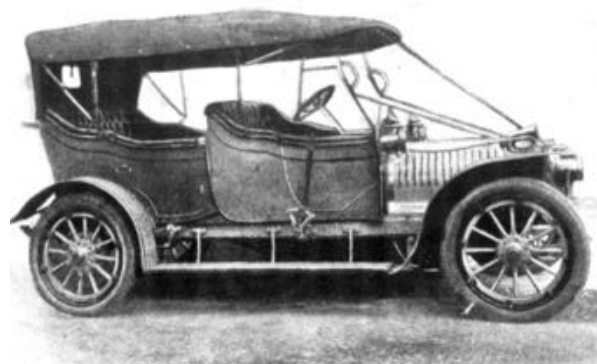


The Summer Hill Agate premises were extended in 1895 by the erection of a large and roomy shed for wood and blacksmith's shops. Street numbering commenced about 1896 when Agate's address became 10 Junction Road and Dean's, number 8. The Agates lived on the site of the factory at 10 Junction Road in the early to mid 1900s before building their own home.



Top: The body on this 12/16 hp Star was built by E. E. Agate. Dr James Hollywood, of High Street, Maitland, is at the wheel. The photograph is from 'Parade from the Past', compiled and written by John Hughes, published by The Veteran Car Club of Australia (NSW).

Centre and right: Two views of a 16/20 hp Hotchkiss displayed at the 1910 Sydney Royal Easter Show. Hotchkiss was a French company which made cars from 1904.





Above: The E. E. Agate body, hood and windscreen fitted to a 8/12 hp F.N., a Belgian company which made cars from 1900.

1906—old, they were

The flight of years

Illustrating these two Cars accentuates the progress made since 1906

BEING the pioneer builder of Motor Bodies in Sydney my many years of experience are placed at the disposal of Motor Owners.

All that is worth while in Bodybuilding—expert workmanship, distinctive style, luxurious comfort—are all combined to produce a perfectly equipped car

Designs and full particulars upon application.

1921—old, they are

E. E. AGATE
 JUNCTION ROAD SUMMER HILL
 Telephone U1228

Left: This advertisement is from 'Motor Life' in April 1923. It shows the firm had been in business for 34 years, confirming it commenced in 1889. The telephone number shown here as U 1288 was originally Ashfield 228 when it was connected in 1900.

Below: Advertisement from 'Australian Motor Owner' in September 1923, via Ashfield Historical Society. It suggests their first motor body was built as early as 1906.

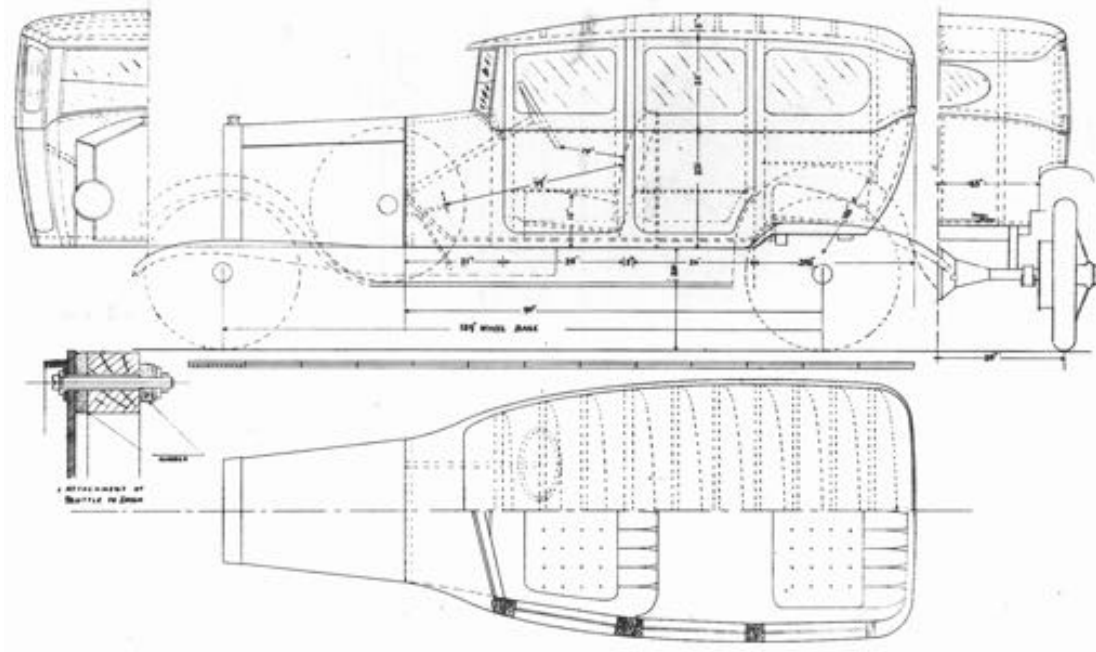
Beauty. Comfort. Strength.

When a body combines the Maximum in Beauty with the Maximum in Comfort and the Maximum in Strength, it attains the standard set for EVERY AGATE-BUILT BODY.

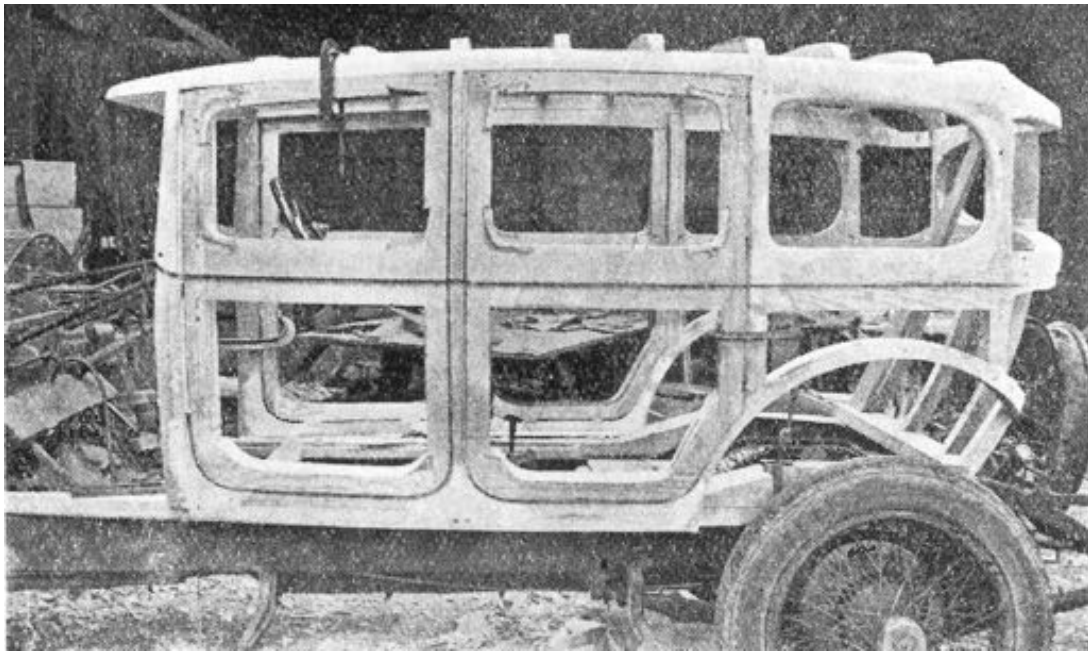
Agate's Motor Car Bodies
for ALL Types of Chassis.

E. E. AGATE, Motor Body Builder,
SUMMER HILL.

Tel.: U 1228. Estab. 34 Years.



Above and below: Drawing and construction of an E. E. Agate V-screen saloon on a Rolls-Royce 20 h.p. chassis from the February 1924 edition of 'Coach and Motor Body Builder'. (This drawing and photograph during construction shown on pages 140 and page 141 of 'Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country' by Clarke and Neely was incorrectly identified as GA79.)



Right and below: *Grazier Henry E. Kater from the NSW outback had this utility tourer from new by E. E. Agate on his 1927 Rolls-Royce Phantom I 34LF as pictured in the Rolls-Royce company's 'Bulletin' from April 1934.*



Below: *The chassis of this 1918 Cadillac was delivered to Australia on 14 February 1918 and E. E. Agate built this 7-passenger tourer body. While photographs are from coachbuild.com the car is believed to be in Northern NSW.*



The Agates had three children, Athlee Jean (1891-1952), Norman Lawrence (1893-1965) and Dorith Frances (1899-1990).

The 1890s were economically depressed times and Agate did well to establish and expand his firm in this inhospitable business climate. Other coachbuilding operations did not survive this period. Agate exhibited a double phaeton on three springs and a single seat curved side cart at the Sydney Show in 1901.

In 1902 Agate paid £212 for land at Granville. His parents-in-law, William and Jean Ritchie owned the land and they had defaulted on a mortgage of £200 to the Bank of New South Wales. Part of this Agate sold for £30 the following year and the remainder for £300 in 1911.

Agate was involved with the Master Coachbuilders and Wheelwrights' Association from its formation, and in September 1904 was appointed Secretary. He maintained a close association with the trade bodies throughout his career.

At the 1906 Sydney Show Agate won awards for: Phaeton, double seated, hooded; Single-seated hooded; Carryall hooded; Curved side cart; Cart for pony; and, Best finished vehicle fitted with Dunlop solid rubber vehicle tyres. By 1909 motor car work had been added to the coach and buggy building business but probably as early as 1906.

In the proceedings of the Tariff Investigation of 1916, Agate reported that in 1911 the business was reasonably profitable, but there was not as much profit in 1912 when output was down by £2,000. 1913 he said was up on 1912 and in 1914 Agate employed about 35 hands.

Catherine Agate bought the land opposite the factory on the corner of Junction Road and Bartlett Street in 1908 from Dean. The Agates demolished the old iron carriage works and built a fine new house, which they named 'Brundah'. The property passed to their unmarried daughter Athlee in 1940 and passed out of Agate possession in 1953 (Athlee died in 1952). 'Brundah' survives (in 2007), though houses now occupy the site of the former factory.

Agate successfully steered his business over four decades from the coach and buggy trade through to the manufacture of motor car bodies. Known at the outset as a coachbuilder, his description of himself in 1916 to the Tariff enquiry as a coach and motor body builder reflected his work spanning the two eras. Finally, in the 1920s his occupation was that of a motor body builder.

Ernest Edwin Agate died aged 69 years on Wednesday 24 September 1930 at his residence, 'Braemar' Flats in Kensington Road, Summer Hill. Motor Funerals Ltd officiated at his funeral, which departed from his residence at 2:15 pm on Friday 26 September 1930 for the Church of England Cemetery at Waverley in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs. He was survived by Julia Isabel Paterson (1870-1961) whom he had married in 1929 and his three children.

On the anniversary of Agate's death "In Memoriam" messages were placed in 'The Sydney Morning Herald' on 24 September 1931 by his wife Julia, son Norman and former loyal employee John Bulgin. As we shall see, Norman Agate received two convictions. One was for assaulting Bulgin at the factory and the other for defrauding the Tax Department!

But to begin, Norman joined his father in the family business as a motor body builder. In 1922 he designed and built a single seater body on his own Maibohm Six car. The American firm of Maibohm Motors produced cars from 1916 to 1922 when the name was changed to Courier.

He became a motor dealer operating at first at the Agate works in Summer Hill. In 1923 he advertised a Hudson for sale at the factory in the 10 November edition of 'The Sydney Morning Herald'.



Above: The Sydney 'Sunday Times' of 20 August 1922 carried this photograph with the caption, "The latest Maibohm Six, fitted with an attractive single-seater body of semi-sporting type, designed and built by the owner, Mr. Norman L. Agate, of Summer Hill."

In 1927 Norman described himself as the "Peugeot Distributor for NSW" when he advertised a Peugeot 7/12 hp in 'The Sydney Morning Herald' on 30 November. He exhibited Peugeots at the Sydney Motor Show in January 1928. Included were a 950 cc, a 12/40 hp four-seater sports and a new 16/55 hp sleeve-valve model in chassis form as reported in 'The Sun' on 13 January. He established a Peugeot service station on Parramatta Road at Ashfield, west of Sydney. As a sales gimmick, Norman placed a Peugeot on top of a tree outside the premises on Parramatta Road. He remained a Peugeot dealer until 1932 and later took on an Austin dealership. In 1954 he changed to a Ford agency and retired after 1956. The Peugeot up the tree was recovered and replaced by an Austin 7 at some point and it too was eventually reclaimed.

Advertisements in 1948 and 1952 were for Austins at his premises on Parramatta Road, Ashfield. In 1954 he advertised Fords.

A curious date appeared in an advertisement in 'The Sydney Morning Herald' of 1 August 1953, "Austins at Agates of Ashfield Est. 1910 UA7886". Norman was 17 years of age in 1910. Was he suggesting this is when his motor trading career began?

Norman joined the Motor Cycle Club of NSW in January 1920. In February 1920 while on holidays in Tasmania he broke the Launceston to Hobart motor cycle and side car record on a Harley-Davidson. He covered the distance in 3½ hours at an average of 41 miles per hour, despite, "The main road is at present in anything but good condition, in fact parts of it were never worse.", reported the Launceston 'Daily Telegraph'.

"Son Bites Father" and "Assault at Summer Hill", were the sensational headlines in the normally conservative 'Sydney Morning Herald' on 9 February 1928. It was reported, "A quarrel between two employees of a motor body-building establishment at Summer Hill on January 9 last resulted in the appearance before Mr. A. R. Perry, S.M., at the Burwood [an inner western Sydney suburb] Police Court, yesterday of Norman Lawrence Agate, 34 years of age, a motor body builder, who was charged, by warrant, with having unlawfully assaulted John Bulgin on January 9."

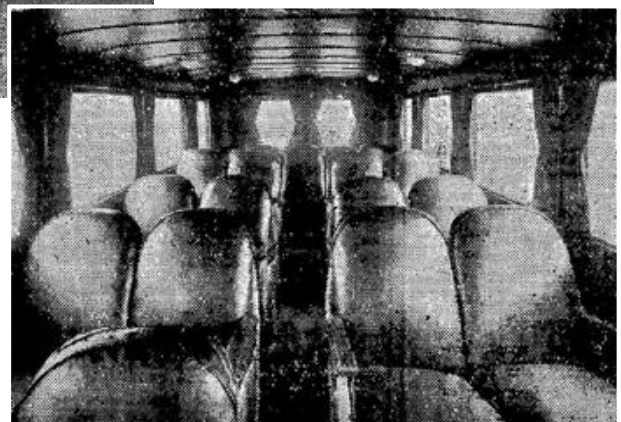
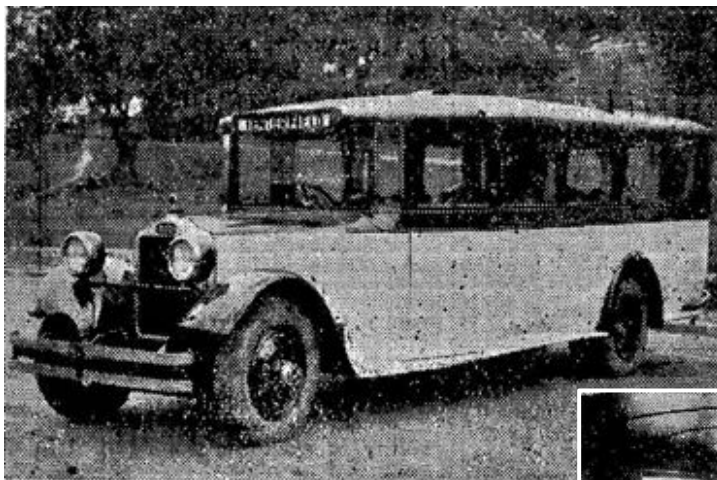
The article continued, "Complainant said that he had been employed by defendant's father, the proprietor of the business, as a coachbuilder for many years, but owing to having been assaulted by defendant on December 20 last he had not been to the works. On January 9 defendant's father called for him in a car, and drove him to the works at Junction-road, Summer Hill, to carry out some special work. Defendant said that until witness apologised he could not resume work. Witness did not reply, whereupon defendant rushed at him, and they struggled on the ground until Mr. Agate, sen., intervened. While they were being separated defendant bit his father on the hand. When witness reached the footpath he was again assaulted by defendant, who, remarking: "Now I hit you on the King's highway" struck him on the jaw, rendering him unconscious.

Further, "Defendant alleged that Bulgin made a rush at him, and his father placed his arm across his face, exerting such pressure that he was compelled to bite his father's fingers to compel him to release his grip. Defendant was convicted, and was bound over in sureties of £40 to be of good behaviour for 12 months, being ordered to pay costs and expenses totalling £17/12." It wasn't the only fine Norman had to pay ... some 20 years later ...

"Tax Dodgers" was the heading in the more tabloid Sydney 'The Daily Telegraph' on 5 November 1952. Norman L Agate, motor vehicle trader, was one of those charged by the Taxation Department of understating his income. In Norman's case by £15,397 from 1930-31 and for ten years including 1946-47. He was penalised £2,527. Norman retired from business in 1956.



Above: 1927 Rolls-Royce 20 hp GOK74 saloon by E. E. Agate when new, being delivered to Maurice Shmith. Photograph courtesy of David Shmith.



Above and right: E. E. Agate built this bus for the New England Motor company for the Lismore-Brisbane run. Designed to carry 23 passengers it was constructed on a 53B model White engine and chassis. It was pictured in Lismore's 'Northern Star' on 29 December 1926 and as shown here from the 'Tweed Daily' on 5 February 1927.



Above: The only surviving E. E. Agate coachwork on its original Rolls-Royce chassis is this saloon body on 1923 20 hp GA79. It is seen here at Bobbin Head on the Hawkesbury River north of Sydney in September 2002 on a Rolls-Royce Owners' Club NSW Branch event, photographed by David Neely. Coachplate courtesy of Peter Moran and Bryan Inder.



It is thought that E. E. Agate built eight bodies on new Rolls-Royce chassis: one Silver Ghost, 24LG; two Phantom Is, 29EF and 34LF; and, five 20hps, GA79, GCK50, GOK36, GOK63 and GOK74. The only surviving E. E. Agate coachwork on a Rolls-Royce chassis is believed to be the saloon body on 1923 20 hp GA79.

E. E. Agate closed for business after Ernest's death in 1930 and the Great Depression may have been another factor.

This portrait of Ernest Agate appeared in 'The Motor Trade Journal' 15 October 1930, via Ashfield Historical Society.

References and acknowledgements: This is a revised version of an article about E. E. Agate in 'Praeclarum' December 2007. Tom Clarke for editorial assistance, 'Sand's Directory', 'The Australasian Coachbuilder and Wheelwright', Electoral Roll, 'The Motor Trade Journal', the invaluable assistance of the late Geoff Boscoe with searches from the Land Titles Office, NSW, Russell Hall's history of Norman Agate's motor dealerships, Peugeot, Austin and Ford on The Australian French Car Forum, 'Summer Hill' edited by Chris Pratten, published by Ashfield and District Historical Society 1999 with articles, 'The Summer Hill Carriage Works and Ernest Edwin Agate' by Nora Peek and 'Henry Aird Sweeny' by Ann O'Connell.