

# Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia

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## Working for Mr. Royce

*by L.F.R. Fell, 1979*

Royce was exacting in the demands he made on his staff. No one who knew him well would deny that. Those destined to assist him personally were selected by what certainly appeared to be a ruthless process of elimination of the unfit. Regular working hours meant nothing to Royce. If there was a job to be done, a problem to be solved, work must go on far into the night, leaving only a few hours for sleep before returning to the attack.

Anyone who aspired to working for Royce had to be prepared to subordinate his private life absolutely to his employment. Discipline was so severe in the Manchester works when he was in control that a man seen loitering or joking at his machine or work bench was likely to be dismissed without notice. It used to be said that he allowed a man half a day off to get married.

But Royce was no tyrant. He took a very personal interest in each member of his staff, not only in his technical approach to his work but also in that which concerned the happiness of his private life. Royce's attitude towards his staff appeared to the casual observer to be a strange mixture of ruthlessness and kindly sympathy. In order to understand this seeming paradox, it is necessary to realise that although Royce did not appear to adhere to any religious faith, he subjected himself to a rigid discipline.

Royce once told me that he believed man was put into the world so that he should do his utmost to improve it through his diligence. He lived this "religion" up to his last hours of consciousness, and throughout his life he did his best to see that his staff followed his example. Here it is of interest to note that on a stone mantelpiece in his house at West Wittering were carved the words "QUIDVIS RECTE FACTUM QUAMVIS HUMILE PRAECLARUM." This lettering was the work of Eric Gill, the sculptor, whom Royce met in West Wittering when Gill was staying with his father, the Vicar of West Wittering. Royce became friendly with Gill and they often met. At one of their meetings Gill asked Royce what he thought was the basic reason for his success. Royce replied, "I have always believed that whatever I do, however humble the job is, if I do it as well as I can, it is noble." Gill was so pleased with this thought that he had the words freely translated into Latin, and presented Royce with the inscription carved over his fireplace.

Royce could not tolerate insincerity, either in his work or socially. The importance of sincerity in engineering is paramount. This insistence on sincerity no doubt accounted for his friendliness with children, which was mutual. Children said what was in their mind, and he liked it that way. I remember seeing Royce showing off the features of a new car to a group of people outside his house. Among several adults was a little girl of about 10 or 11. She asked him quite an intelligent question, which he answered, and thereafter he concentrated his attention on the points she raised, forgetting all about the other members of the party. On the otherhand I was once with him at a tea party to which Dr Hel-Shaw had invited Royce and others. Hel-Shaw was full of fun and given to practical joking. With great solemnity Hel-Shaw entertained his guests to a demonstration of water divining, using a hazel twig. This he manipulated so that it appeared to turn above a certain spot on his sitting room floor. It was a fairly obvious joke, but some of the members of the party appeared to be impressed. Royce, however, made it quite apparent that he was finding it difficult to be civil to Hel-Shaw thereafter, as Royce considered it was grossly improper for a man of science to deceive with intent those less educated than himself with a pretence of scientific experiment which was faked.

Royce used to refer to his men as "Knights of the Rubber." The amount of work put into each design was far in excess of anything practised elsewhere, and the utmost patience had to be exercised by all the members of his team when trying to meet the high standard which Royce insisted upon. Royce used to say that all the problems should be solved on the drawing board and when the part was made and tested "it should only be to prove that the design was right". Some of his best work was, however, completed at almost incredible speed. In 1914, after war broke out, the Admiralty approached Royce to design a 250 h.p. aircraft engine, and work on this project began in September 1914. This engine came to be known as the "Eagle" and for its period the design was revolutionary and far in advance of anything in existence at the time. The first engine was running on the test bench in the beginning of March 1915, just six months after the first scheme was on paper, developing power in excess of the specification at the first attempt. The engine was an outstanding success from every point of view and was still in use in various parts of the world ten years after the war ended in 1918. It never required any major modification in its service life.

It is true to say that the design was based on information obtained by Rolls-Royce's private research, the result of which at that date was not available to other makers. All Royce's instructions and design had to be transmitted 200 miles to the works in Derby. Copies of Royce's correspondence about this time are still in existence and show that he was at all times completely in touch, grasping the technical points at his seaside home in the South seemingly as easily as if he had been on the spot at the Derby works.

After the First World War Rolls-Royce's interest in aircraft engines lapsed, as it was the policy of the management of the day to concentrate on motor cars. This policy was finally reversed by the intervention of Royce himself in 1927, and it was also Royce who made himself

personally responsible on behalf of the company for the design of the famous "R" engine which enabled the Supermarine monoplane to win the International Schneider Trophy for Great Britain in 1929 and again in 1931. The production of the "R" engine was as spectacular an achievement as the production of the Eagle engine of earlier days, both as regards the speed at which it was developed and the excellence of its performance.

Royce possessed a quite exceptional ability to inspire those who worked with him to reach heights of achievements which did not appear to be attainable. Nobody complained of overwork and nobody suffered from what is now called a "nervous breakdown". If the "Old Man" wanted it done, they did it - somehow. Royce seldom gave an emphatic instruction. He usually spoke very quietly and almost as though he was shy. He always had time to listen to what anyone had to say, however junior the speaker might be. He was extremely modest about his own achievements, and always ready to recognise and admire the good work of his competitors where this was justified. Those who worked with him at his home seemed to become imbued with his spirit. It was noticeable that they always seemed to understand what was in his mind, when he might appear far from lucid to a stranger. His sketches, badly drawn, generally very small and almost incomprehensible, were instantly transformed by his chief designer into beautiful freehand drawings in perfect perspective. They all talked his language, using vivid expressions which to the uninitiated, had no relation to engineering terms. Even his way of talking, his changes of facial expression and verbal emphasis seemed to become common to his staff.

Royce was not a great inventor. He used to say, "We are not pioneers". Judged by any standard he was a very great engineer with a brilliant analytical mind. When it is remembered that his regular education ceased in early youth and that thereafter he was self-taught, he may be rightly described as a genius. As a master of men, he has seldom been equalled.

*Courtesy - The Guardian*