



The Hon. Mrs Assheton Harbord  
and  
The Hon. Charles S Rolls  
Balloon Aeronauts and Motorists in the Edwardian Era

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Charles Roll's credentials as a balloon aeronaut and motorist are impeccable and exhaustively documented. Does his friend May Harbord also deserve an accolade as an accomplished Edwardian balloon aeronaut and motorist?

**Top:** *The Hon. Mrs Assheton Harbord and the Hon. Charles Rolls in the balloon Nebula in May 1907.*

**Right:** *May Constance Cuninghame (1866), May Constance Blackwood (1885) and May Constance Harbord (1905).*



May Constance Harbord, who became the Hon. Mrs Assheton Harbord, took her first flight in a balloon in 1906. She became a long-term ballooning partner with the Hon. Charles Rolls, who had been pursuing this pastime since 1898. One of Rolls's balloons was *Midget*. Bruce Lawson in his biography of Charles Rolls quoted from Rolls's journal, "With Mrs Harbord in *Midget*, passed over a good part of London at four hundred feet, keeping perfect equilibrium just above the houses." They flew together 66 times. But there was another connection. Mrs Harbord purchased six Rolls-Royces between 1906 and 1912.



*Right: Rolls made an ascent over London with Mrs Harbord in Midget.*

May Constance Cuninghame (single n) was born on 6 June 1866 in Simla, West Bengal, India. Her father James MacNab Cuninghame (1829-1905) studied medicine in Edinburgh. He joined the Bengal medical service in 1851 and attained the rank of surgeon-general in 1880, thereby becoming the principal medical officer of the British forces in India. Dr Cuninghame was appointed an honorary surgeon to Queen Victoria in 1888.

May was in England at the latest by 1885 by which time her family had returned from India. She met an Australian barrister, Arthur Blackwood. They travelled to Australia and were married in St John's, Toorak, Melbourne on 15 October 1885. Their only child died young.

Arthur Ranken Blackwood was born in 1850 in Hobart and educated at Melbourne Grammar School (1858-64). Aged 15, Arthur continued his education in England at Harrow School (1865) and then Balliol College, Oxford (BA 1873 and MA 1888). He was called to the Bar of the Middle Temple in 1875. He returned to Australia in 1885 with his fiancée. In 1879 he was admitted as a partner in the firm of Dalgety, Blackwood and Company, established around 1857 by Frederick Dalgety and James Blackwood. In 1884 Arthur Blackwood became joint managing director with James Aitken of Dalgety & Co. Ltd. He continued his association with Dalgety until his death. He was the first chairman of directors of BHP in 1885 for a short period. Blackwood had pastoral interests in NSW and New Zealand and was chairman of the Victoria Amateur Turf Club in 1884-85. His horse Vengeance won the Caulfield Cup in 1890. He died on 2 February 1905 in Melbourne from a cerebral haemorrhage. His estate was valued for probate at £4,606 (\$777,000 in 2022 value).



*Above: Arthur Blackwood was president of the Mercantile Rowing Club in Victoria and helped establish the Henley on Yarra regatta in 1904. [Australian Rowing History]*

However, May and Arthur were estranged sometime before 1891. May Blackwood is listed in the 1891 England census as married and the “Head of Family” in the Ecclesiastical Parish of Holy Trinity Chelsea, London. There is a similar record in 1901 with her profession or occupation noted as “Independent Means”. May’s future husband, the Hon. Assheton Edward Harbord, is also listed as living in the Parish of Holy Trinity Chelsea in the 1901 census.

News of Blackwood’s death had scarcely reached London when two months later on 3 April 1905 May Constance Blackwood married Assheton Edward Harbord (1861-1929), a bachelor aged 44. He was the son of Charles Harbord, 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Suffield, courtier to King Edward VII. The marriage took place at Trinity Church in the Parish of Upper Chelsea in the County of London. At the time of their marriage May was living at 43 Eaton Terrace and Assheton at 3 Sloane Square Mansions. He was a member of the London Stock Exchange. Assheton, pronounced Ashton, is sufficiently unusual as a Christian name that Assheton Harbord is sometimes incorrectly portrayed as a double-barreled surname with a hyphen.



*Above: May Blackwood married into the British aristocracy. Her father-in-law was Charles Harbord, 5<sup>th</sup> Baron Suffield, pictured here second from the left, with a royal shooting party. King Edward VII is seated third from the right. [National Portrait Gallery, London]*

In Edwardian times ballooning was a sport in which women, who had the means, could participate on an equal footing with men. Mrs Harbord inherited what was said to be a large fortune. As well, her marriage into the wealthy British aristocracy paved the way for her forays into ballooning and Rolls-Royce motoring. Previously, she led a comfortable middle-class life in India and Australia.

Mrs Harbord gave a press interview to 'The Reader', which was syndicated to Australian newspapers, in April 1908. By this time, she had made nearly sixty balloon ascents. She also wrote an article which was published in the May to October 1909 issue of 'The Wide World Magazine'. It was titled "My Most Exciting Ballooning Experiences". Both contain wonderful accounts of ballooning in Edwardian times. A picture emerges of Mrs Harbord revelling in the thrills and competition of ballooning, told with a self-deprecating sense of humour.

This is how it started, "I took to the air on wings of chance", said Mrs Harbord, "To put it less poetically, I had not the slightest idea that I was going to make my first aerial voyage, when one day in May, 1906, I went to see some friends off who were making an ascent. At the last moment they suggested that I should go with them, and – well, I just went."

"The next day that occurs to me as worthy of mention", she continued, "is September 1, 1906, when piloted by Mr. Frank Hedges Butler, I was so very lucky as to win the Krabbe Cup for the longest voyage made during August, September and October. We started from the Battersea Gas Works at eight-fifteen in the evening, and at seven-fifty the following morning we alighted like a feather, thanks to Mr. Butler's skilful handling of the balloon, on Lord Londesborough's domain at Skerne, near Driffield, having covered 195½ miles. Here we were confronted by the foreign language difficulty, and it was necessary to get the inhabitants to understand, by means of signs, what was required of them in the way of help, and securing and packing our aerial conveyance. They could not understand us, and we, owing to our lack of education and the want of a Yorkshire-English and English-Yorkshire Ollendorff conversation book, could not understand them." Heinrich Ollendorff was a German language educator.



**Right:** Mrs Harbord was the first woman in Britain to obtain an Aeronaut's Certificate. [Ancestry]

“January 12, 1907, will, I think, always be a red-letter day in my memory, as marking my first ascent in my own balloon, ‘The Nebula’, which has a capacity of 45,000 cubic feet. Always from my initial trip I had longed to have my own balloon, so the realisation of my ambition was golden moment, and as the first lady in England to ascend in her own balloon I established a record. On February 21 of this year (1908), I set another record as the first lady to cross the Channel in her own balloon, but I hasten to add that the honour of being the first lady to cross the Channel in a balloon at all belongs to Mrs. Griffith Brewer.” Rolls piloted *Nebula* with Mrs Harbord in July 1907 and came third in the Harbord Cup given by Mrs Harbord herself.

“Four days later I crossed again, with Mr. Griffith Brewer, in the ‘Lotus’. This was a fairly exciting trip, as at one time there was considerable danger of our missing the French coast, and the prospect of reaching any land at all began to grow unpleasantly remote. However, by ascending we caught a favourable current and again landed safely – this time near Cape Grisnez.” Cap Gris-Nez is in northern France. The cliffs of the coast are the closest point of France to England.

The account of this next ascent appeared in both articles mentioned above, “Ballooning ‘adventures’ are usually few and far between and in all my ascents I have only known one really exciting five minutes. This was last year (1907), when, on October 2, Princess di Teano, Lord Royston, M. Jacques Faure and myself made an ascent from the Parc d’Aerostation, at Suresnes, Paris. We started about six p.m. A strong gale was blowing, but, in spite of the rain and wind we decided to attempt the ascent, in the hope that by rising above the clouds, we might, even if we did not find a comparative calm, at least escape the discomforts of a drenching night.



*Above: Princess di Teano, Mrs Harbord and Lord Royston.*

“The balloon ascended rapidly, but on attaining a height of about 4,000 feet we still found ourselves in the midst of the clouds; we therefore gave up the attempt as hopeless, and, remaining at the same altitude, the balloon was blown away in a north-easterly direction at the rate of about seventy miles an hour. Subsequently, we descended to 2,000, when, still, travelling at a tremendous pace, we presently sighted the lights of a large town. This we recognized as Antwerp by the broad Scheldt [river], which at first, indeed, we mistook for the sea. A descent was attempted, but as there was imminent danger of our being blown into the river, up we went again, and presently the coast-line came dimly into view. This time there

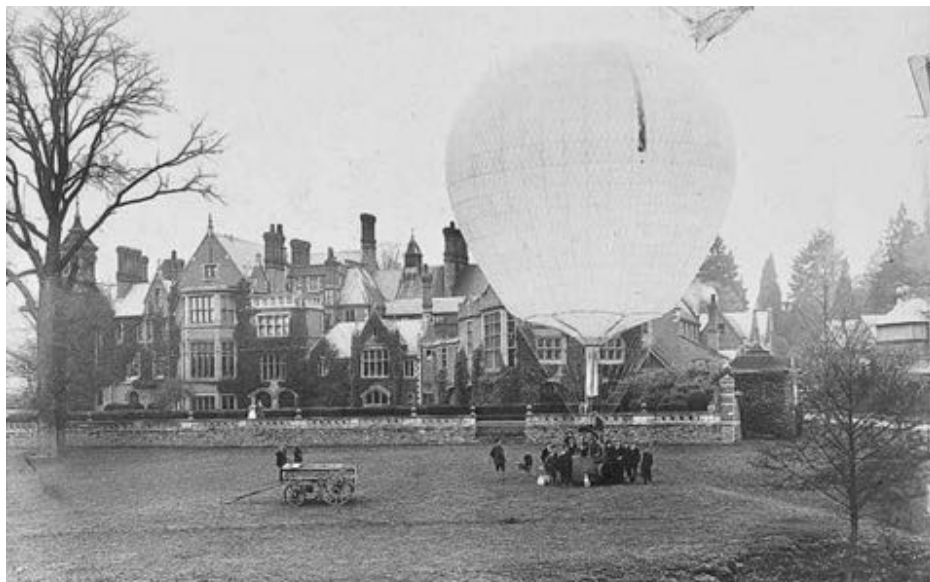
could be no mistake. We were approaching the North Sea at a fearful rate. It was then that we blessed the inventor of the ripping cord [a device to allow part of the air to escape]. But for it, our position would have been perilous in the extreme. As it was, M. Faure, timing the psychological moment to a nicely, half-ripped balloon, which collapsed some fifty yards short of the dreaded sea. But we did not escape without a severe shaking. As it came down, however, the car [basket] turned completely over, throwing Princess di Teano and me out on to our heads; so I think we have every justification for our claim that she and I are the only women in the world to arrive in Holland with our feet pointing to the heavens.”



On the evening of 21 January 1908 Mrs Harbord made another voyage across the English Channel in her balloon *Valkyrie* accompanied by Mr Charles F Pollock as pilot. They were seeking to win the Northcliffe Challenge Cup for the longest balloon trip. They left from the Battersea gas works at 9:45 pm [many flights were at night and in cold mid winter] and reached the French coast near Le Touquet having taken 51 minutes. At 2:00 am the next morning they encountered sheet-lightning and a terrific snowstorm which covered them and half-filled the car. They needed to descend but, “The discharge of five bags of ballast in four minutes had no effect in checking the descent, and suddenly the bottom of the car crashed down on something with great force. The trail-rope then began catching everything it could find, giving the car very violent jerks.”

“Suddenly down we crashed with great force into some trees once more, many branches breaking off into the car. Mr. Pollock shouted ‘Are you in’, fearing I might have lost hold and been thrown out, but I called back ‘Yes’, clinging on for all I knew; and very hard it was too, to keep in that basket while it received a succession of violent blows from trees. At last some boughs caught the envelope, causing a large rent, which, together with the ripping panel, allowed enough gas to escape to bring us to a standstill.... The envelope, being high up in the trees, was only got down with considerable difficulty, and sad to relate many pieces of the beautiful ‘Valkyrie’ were left hanging from various branches.

“This was my third trip across the Channel, was a most thrilling experience throughout, and though the distance accomplished was nothing very great, it was a most sporting run, and one always to be remembered.” They had travelled 290 miles at an average speed of 45 mph and arrived about seven miles from Verdun in northeast France. Ever with an eye to further adventure, Mrs Harbord felt that had they been able to weather that ferocious storm they could have landed in Switzerland over 600 miles from London before mid-day!



**Above:** Mrs Harbord was a guest at Rolls's family home, *The Hendre*, in Monmouthshire. The 1909 article in *'The Wide World Magazine'* carried this photograph of a balloon about to be launched in front of *'The Hendre'*. It incorrectly identified the house as belonging to Mrs Harbord with the caption, “The Hon. Mrs. Assheton Harbord making an ascent from the grounds of her house, *The Hendre*, Monmouth.” [Photo by G F Harris, Monmouth]

In May 1908 Pollock piloted *Valkyrie* to victory in the International Balloon Contest with Mrs Harbord and three others. Mrs Harbord also flew in a dirigible airship *Ville De Paris* with Rolls and Frank Hedges Butler in 1908.

The social whirl of Edwardian ballooning among high society can be seen in just one part of one month, 13-21 June 1909, when 12 ascents were recorded by members of the Aero Club. Mrs Harbord and Rolls flew together twice: "*Continental*, Hon. Mrs. Assheton Harbord, Hon. C.S. Rolls, Capt V.C. de Crespigny and Lady Westmacott"; *L'Esperance*, Hon. C.S. Rolls, Baroness von Heeckeren, Capt V.C. de Crespigny and Hon. Mrs. Assheton Harbord." Mrs Harbord also made an ascent in *Valkyrie*: "Hon. Mrs. Assheton Harbord, John Dunville. C.F. Pollock, Col. The Hon. G Napier and Admiral of the Fleet Sir E. Seymour."

Mrs Harbord made almost 200 balloon ascents in all, five across the Channel. She undoubtedly deserves an accolade as a notable Edwardian balloon aeronaut.



**Left:** Rolls in *Imp*. Rolls revived the sport of 'Hare and Hounds', a cross-country pastime where a lead balloon like the *Imp* was chased across the countryside by a 'pack' of other balloons. Mrs Harbord and Charles Pollock took part in such a race in July 1909 in *Valkyrie*.

**Below:** Rolls's 1908 Silver Ghost chassis 60785 an H J Mulliner two-seater designed to carry one of Rolls's light balloons and its basket. Rolls's personal driver, T O Smith is at the wheel and the passenger is balloon and plane maker Eustace Short. [*The Edwardian Rolls-Royce* by Fasal and Goodman Vol 1 page 211]





What of Mrs Harbord as an Edwardian motorist? She supported Rolls by purchasing Rolls-Royce cars. The company was less than two years old when she purchased her first car from them. The testing of the Heavy 20 h.p. chassis number 40502 was completed on 2 February 1906 and it was dispatched to the English firm of Barker for a single landaulet body. On 21 March 1906 Mrs Harbord took delivery and kept it for a year until 11 March 1907. It was the 51<sup>st</sup> car that Rolls-Royce built. Rolls would have appreciated her early patronage.

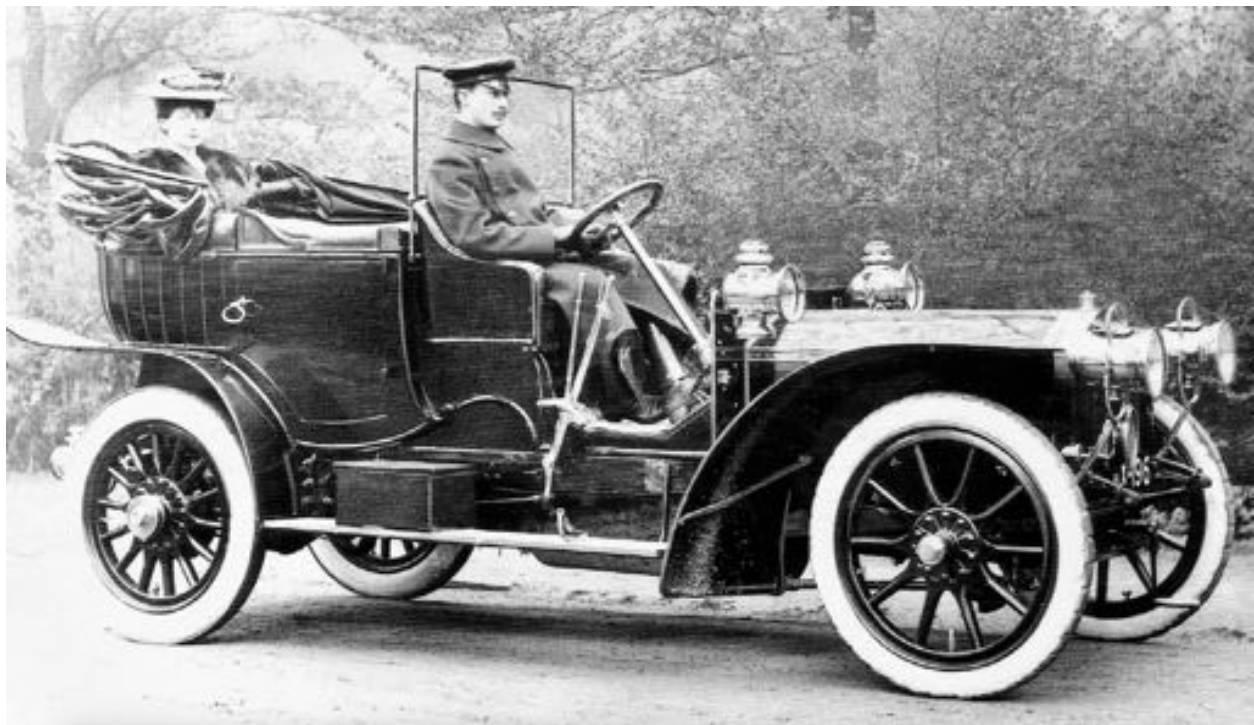


*Above and left: Mrs Harbord's 1906 Rolls-Royce Heavy 20 h.p. chassis 40502 a Barker landaulet. The front view shows the single landaulet folded with Mrs Harbord seated in the rear. [Tom Clarke's dissertation on the pre-Silver Ghost cars in 'The Edwardian Rolls-Royce' by Fasal and Goodman Vol 1 page 126]*

Her first Rolls-Royces were chauffeur driven with formal coachwork. They were elegant with luxurious rear compartments perfectly suited to motoring about town and for drives in the park. Could such motoring be more perilous as ballooning? Mrs Harbord thought so.

To prove her point, "The only 'adventure' I have ever had was a narrow escape from death in my own motor-car. My chauffeur foolishly tried to squeeze past a car in front when there was no room. The inevitable collision occurred, my car, in some marvellous manner, leapt an eight-foot fence, and then turned turtle in a field. Fortunately, the car was a landaulette, and mercifully, we – I had another lady with me – had closed it a few minutes before on account of rain coming on; the three of us escaped with a severe shaking and a few bruises and scratches. That was certainly a memorable day."

Her next Rolls-Royce was 1906 Short 30 h.p. chassis number 60533 delivered on 27 March 1907. It was a Barker phaeton de luxe with hood. Either 40502 or 60533 could be the car in in the accident described above. However, 40502 with the more substantial rear structure is the most likely candidate.



**Above:** Mrs Harbord in her 1906 Rolls-Royce Short 30 h.p. chassis 60533 a Barker phaeton de luxe. The driver is C S Rolls & Co's Harry Fleck. [Tom Clarke's dissertation on the pre-Silver Ghost cars in 'The Edwardian Rolls-Royce' by Fasal and Goodman Vol 1 page 126]

The third Rolls-Royce was 1908 Silver Ghost chassis number 60744 a limousine by the French firm of Labourdette.

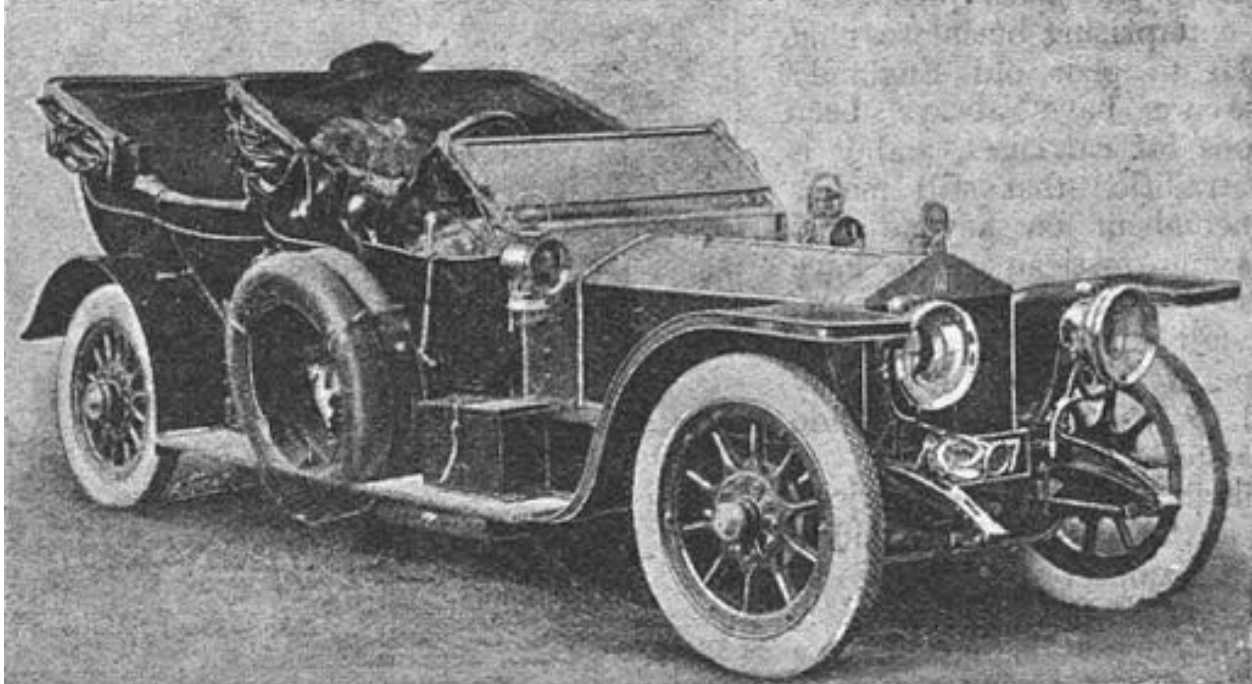


*Above: Mrs Harbord's third Rolls-Royce was 1908 Silver Ghost chassis number 60744 a limousine by the French firm of Labourdette. ['The Bystander' 23 December 1908]*

Mrs Harbord's next Rolls-Royces had bodies that lent themselves to be owner-driven rather than chauffeur-driven. On 16 December 1908 Mrs Harbord became the second owner of another Heavy 20 h.p. chassis number 40510 also bodied by Barker with a two-seater phaeton.

Mrs Harbord established her credentials as an Edwardian motorist with her 1910 Silver Ghost chassis 1261. It was a tourer which had two separate hoods built by the English firm of Hamshaw. She drove 1261 from Land's End to John o'Groats and back in nine days. The car covered over eight thousand miles in less than three months by November 1910.

The last of the six Rolls-Royces Mrs Harbord purchased, as recorded in 'The Edwardian Rolls-Royce', was 1912 Silver Ghost chassis 2129 a torpedo by the English firm of Portholme. She was the second owner after James Radley, who drove Rolls-Royces in the Austrian Alpine Trials 1912-14.



*Above: Mrs Harbord at the wheel of her 1910 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost chassis 1261 a Hamshaw tourer in which she travelled the length of Britain and return. She covered over eight thousand miles by the time this photo was taken by November 1910. [‘The Autocar’ 19 November 1910]*

The nature of the relationship between Mrs Harbord and Rolls has intrigued automotive historians.

Bruce Lawson noted that as well as time spent together in ballooning Mrs Harbord and Rolls went to concerts at the Queen’s Hall in London and she travelled with him to France to meet the Wright Brothers. Lawson added, “If they were a couple, Rolls and Mrs Harbord were extraordinarily discreet. But Rolls, nine years younger than her, was able to relax in her company and, because she was married, he felt under no pressure in the relationship. They ballooned with all the leading exponents of the sport and one of May’s balloons was called *Valkyrie*, which, in Norse mythology, means lover of heroes and other mortals – a sign of their status or merely a wish?”

The choice of the name *Valkyrie* for her balloon may have simply been introspective. *Valkyries* were female warrior goddesses who served the god Odin the main deity of the Norse pantheon. They were sent by him to battlefields to choose the slain who were worthy of a place in Valhalla. These foreboders of war rode to the battlefields on horses, wearing helmets and shields. In some accounts they flew through the air and sea. A female balloon warrior flying through the air on a daring mission – sounds like Mrs Harbord!

Tom Clarke writing in the October 1999 edition of ‘*Praeclarum*’ described Mrs Harbord as a close friend of Rolls and, like Lawson, also noted they went to concerts together. They

also enjoyed dining at Jules restaurant in Jermyn Street. Clarke concluded, “It is said that Mrs. Harbord spruced up Rolls’s image, both in his use of the press and his appearance. It seems his close and easy friendship with an older woman was an entirely platonic one and not at all the stuffy or stilted type we associate with the Edwardians.”

Mrs Harbord and Rolls were both outrageously adventurous in their shared sporting interests in ballooning and motoring. Their relationship perfectly reflected their passion and mutual enjoyment of these pastimes. Rolls died in an aeroplane accident on 12 July 1910. Mrs Harbord joined the Volunteer Motor Mobilisation Corps in World War I. She died in 1928.

Acknowledgements: Assistance from Tom Clarke; ‘Rolls and a woman’s touch’ by Tom Clarke in ‘Praeclarum’ October 1999; ‘Charles Rolls of Rolls-Royce’ by Bruce Lawson, 2013; ‘The Edwardian Rolls-Royce’ by John Fasal and Bryan Goodman, 1994; ‘The Boys’ Book of Airships’ by Harry Delacombe, 1909. David Neely, Sydney, 2024.

*Edwardian Ballooning Partners,  
The Hon. Mrs Assheton Harbord and  
The Hon. Charles S Rolls.*

