

A Dozen Rolls-Royce Owners in South Australia in 1926  
“Napier Birks, Park Terrace, Parkside”  
1925 Phantom I, chassis 44RC, H J Mulliner (UK) Tourer

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“Rolls-Royce Owners – Twelve in State” was the heading of an article in the 26 January 1926 edition of the Adelaide newspaper ‘News’, which was published from 1923 to 1954.

It continued: “There are 12 owners of Rolls-Royce cars in this State so far as can be ascertained from records. On account of this rather small number casual observers usually look twice if they happen to see a Rolls-Royce purring along. Among those who are stated to own one of these cars, which are regarded as the aristocrats of the road so far as the British automobile industry is concerned are Messrs T. E. Barr Smith, Glen Osmond: T. Tait, Oaklands: C. H. Angas, Angaston: G. Milne, Brougham Place, North Adelaide: J. M. Reid, Victoria Avenue, Unley Park: J. P. Lewis, Nelyambo Station, Wilcannia: Napier Birks, Park Terrace, Parkside: Mesdames W. T. Mortlock, Martindale Hall, Mintaro: L. Hughes, Lee Lodge, Strangways Terrace, North Adelaide: M Symons, Walkerville: T.R. Scarfe, Eden Park, Marryatville: and Miss M. F. Simms, Moseley Street, Glenelg.”

[Napier Kyffin Birks \(1876-1953\)](#) was born in Adelaide. His unusual names derived from his paternal grandmother, Hannah Napier, and his maternal grandfather, William Kyffin Thomas. His father, Charles Napier Birks, (1844-1924), was born at Chorlton, Manchester, England. He was a draper and co-founded Robins and Birks, of Hindley Street, from which Charles Birks & Co. Ltd was later formed. Birks was the managing director of Charles Birks & Co. from December 1920. It became one of Adelaide’s great department stores. Birks was also managing director of Kingsway Ltd, Nuffield Distributors, another motor trading company and chairman of directors of the Merchantile Mutual Insurance Co Ltd.



**Left:** *Napier Birks joined the Australian Imperial Force in July 1915 during World War I. [Ancestry.]*

**Right:** *Lucy Birks worked tirelessly in South Australia to help improve health services for babies and their mothers. She represented South Australia at the International Conference on Child Welfare at Geneva in 1925. [Ancestry.]*



Birks's grandfather, Dr George Vause Birks (1815-1858), a medical doctor, and his grandmother, Hannah Napier (1807-1883) lived in Knutsford, near Manchester, England. The family arrived in South Australia in 1853.

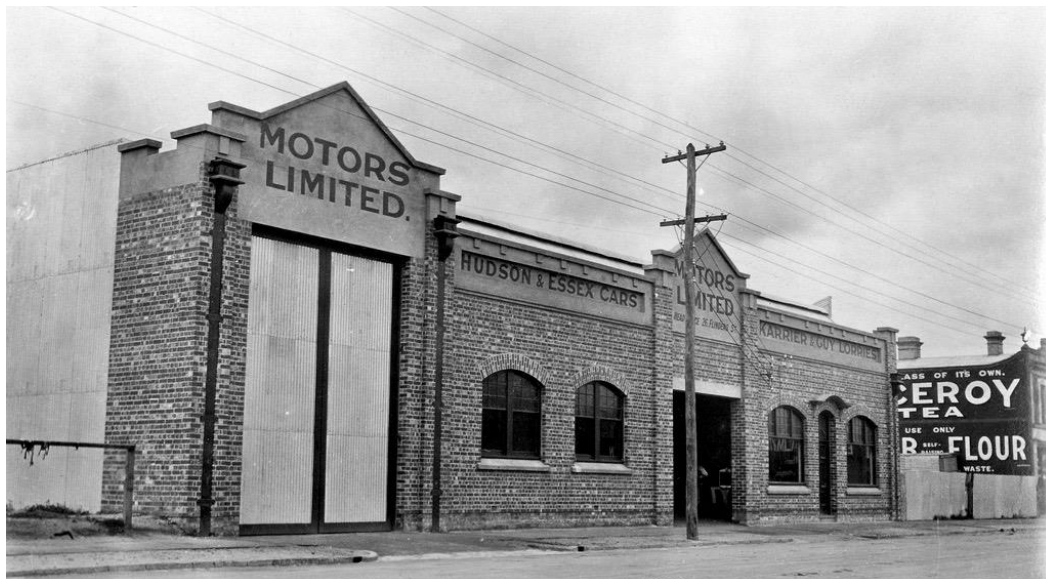
Birks's mother, Mary Maria Thomas (1843-1878) died when he was an infant and his father married Mary's sister, Rosetta Jane "Rose" Thomas (1856-1911) in 1879. Birks's aunt, then step-mother, Rose, was a devout Baptist, social reformer and philanthropist. She was the treasurer of the South Australian Women's Suffrage League until the vote was achieved in 1894.

Birks's uncle, George Napier Birks (1838-1894), and many of Birks's relatives, were involved in William Lane's 'New Australia' settlement in Paraguay. It was a utopian socialist settlement founded in 1893 and comprised 238 people. Its aims faulted and 'New Australia' was dissolved as a cooperative by the Paraguay government, and each settler was given their own piece of land.

In 1899 Birks married Lucy Maria McDougall (1868-1951), who was born in Chorlton, Manchester, England. Their wedding took place at 'Knutsford', the Birkses' family home at Glenelg. She worked tirelessly in South Australia to help improve health services for babies and their mothers. She became associated with the Mothers' and Babies' Health Association and was the president for many years. Her father, Sir John McDougall (1844-1917) was an English businessman associated with the McDougall flour-milling company and an east London politician, who chaired the London County Council for a year in 1902.

Birks was the chairman of directors of Motors Limited, which he founded in 1911. He was involved in motoring from the early days. Birks took part in the first hill-climbing event conducted by the Automobile Club of South Australia in December 1904. He competed in the Motor Cycle Section on a 3 h.p. Rover. He had a Humber in 1907 registered with 357, the number he kept and later used on his Rolls-Royce.

*Below: Motors Limited, Gilbert Street, Adelaide in 1924. [State Library of South Australia.]*





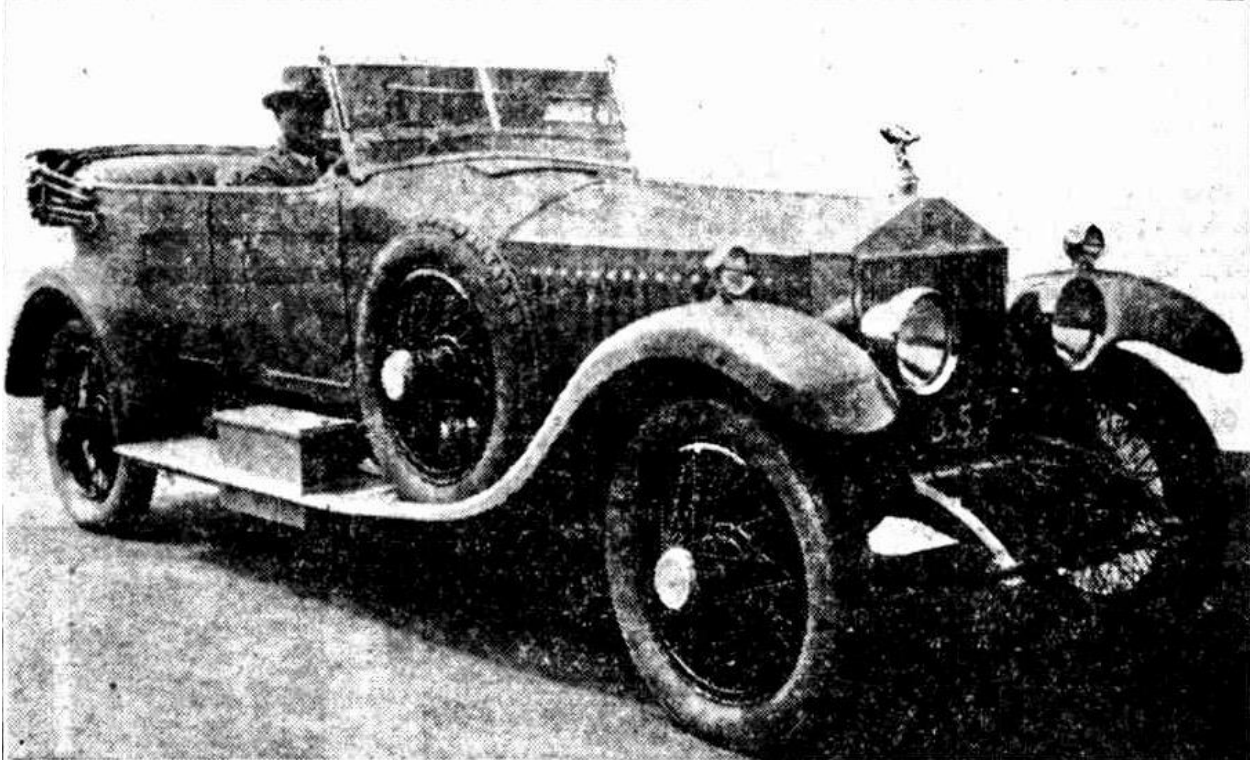
*Above: The new premises of Motors Limited in 1927 showing the Rolls-Royce agency. The Rolls-Royce is 1921 Silver Ghost, chassis 179MG, Barker limousine, registered to Mrs Kathleen Tennant of Glenelg in July 1925, with the number 47-172. The Tennants first owned the car in England. In 1948 it was owned by Rev Lionel Renfrey, who founded the South Australia Branch of the Rolls-Royce Owners's Club of Australia with Gavin Sandford-Morgan in 1958. [State Library of South Australia.]*



*Left: The Charles Birks and Co. building on the northern side of Rundle Street in 1898. A penny farthing bicycle is parked at the kerb and a horse drawn tram is making its way along Rundle Street. [State Library of South Australia.]*

*Right: The Charles Birks department store in 1911. The store merged with the store of Sydney based David Jones in 1953. [State Library of South Australia.]*





*Above: Napier Birks at the wheel of 1925 Phantom I, chassis 44RC, a H J Mulliner tourer. This photograph appeared in the Adelaide 'News' on 26 January 1926.*

Birks joined the Australian Imperial Force in July 1915 in World War I. He left Australia for France in December 1916 to join the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, which took part in the horrendous trench warfare. Birks attained the rank of lieutenant. In 1918 some serious legal matters arose with his business interests and he requested, "to return to Australia for business reasons. In my two businesses in which I employ 300 workpeople, I have in use besides my own capital, over £140,000 belonging to other people .... In businesses of this magnitude it is obvious that managers have limitations and cannot successfully deal with legal matters." His request was approved and he returned to Australia in March 1918.

Birks appeared in the Adelaide Police Court on 28 January 1925 charged with having driven a motor car at a speed dangerous to the public. He was accused of driving at a speed of 40 to 50 miles per hour. When stopped he was reported to have said, "You know me - Napier Birks, Motors Limited. I was half an hour late in leaving the city, and I am in a hurry to get to Goolwa. Don't make it too hard. I don't want to 'do' my licence, as I do a lot of driving." Birks stated that at the time in question he was proceeding to his bungalow at Goolwa in a Rolls-Royce motor car. Birks claimed he was an expert driver and posed no danger to the public. The magistrate found that the speed at which the defendant had travelled had constituted a possible danger to the public, although he believed the defendant, as an expert driver, had been alert. A fine of £15, with £1 costs was imposed. Birks did not dispute the speed attributed to him as he did not have a speedometer so possibly the Rolls-Royce was an early Silver Ghost.



**Above:** *Napier Birks's yacht, 'Stormy Petrel' at Port Adelaide in 1923. It was the largest craft on the register of the Port Adelaide Sailing Club. Built in 1908 in Hobart it was fitted out with all the conveniences for luxury ocean cruising. [State Library of South Australia.]*

**Below:** *Napier Birks was the mechanic when his daughter, Edith Napier Birks (1900-1975), was the pilot in 'Lady Sid'. Pictured here during 'The Griffith Australian Championship Cup' in 1924, 'Lady Sid' was a 33 foot single-step hydroplane fitted with a V-type 12 cylinder Thornycroft engine developing 375 h.p. Edith and Napier finished second in the race. [State Library of South Australia.]*



The testing of chassis 44RC was completed in September 1925 and a tourer body was fitted by H J Mulliner. It was with Motors Limited, Adelaide, by January 1926. Birks must have been particularly pleased with the arrival because the October 1925 Rolls-Royce New Phantom (as the model was originally named) catalogue listed his Motors Limited as the Rolls-Royce agents for South Australia. He proudly used it as a demonstration model. Phantom 44RC was owned by Capt T E Barr Smith in 1933 when it was badly damaged in an accident and not repaired. Barr Smith was made an honorary captain while serving (1931-33) as aide-de-camp to Sir Alexander Hore-Ruthven, governor of South Australia.

Birks left an estate valued at £209,360, equivalent to 38 new Rolls-Royce Silver Dawns at the time in 1953. Using Rolls-Royce "currency", 38 present-day Rolls-Royce Phantoms, would put Birks's estate at over \$30 million.



**Above:** *Napier Kyffin Birks's maternal grandfather, William Kyffin Thomas, was part owner of the newspapers 'Adelaide Observer' and 'Register'. Reflecting the family's wealth, Thomas's residence in late life was Albert Hall built in 1878 at 16 South Esplanade, Glenelg. [City of Holdfast Bay.]*