

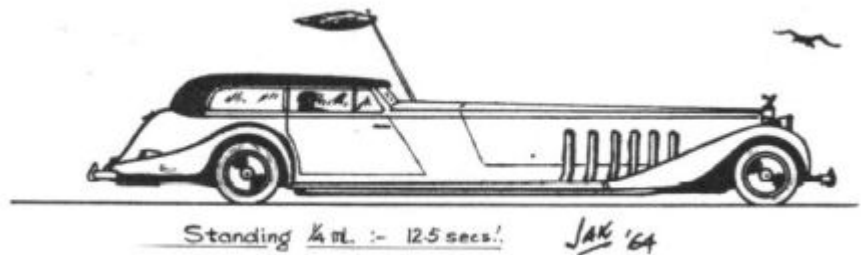
# Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia

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## BE KIND TO YOUR WEB-FOOTED FRIENDS

or

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE CUSTOM- BUILT MOTOR CAR



*by John S. Bellamy, 1964*

The scene is very familiar. You are sitting in your Rolls-Royce or Bentley peacefully minding your own business and waiting for the traffic lights to change, when your privacy is shattered by the bright coloured custom-job which has just pulled up alongside you. Its exhaust note is an exuberantly healthy and anxious burble, and its rough idling gives a clue to the worked over camshaft of the "breathed-on" motor crammed under the louvered bonnet. A second glance would reveal the modified and restyled bodywork hugging the road in an aggressive manner. It would probably be very difficult indeed to recognise the original Holden or Ford beneath the eagerly throbbing fireball beside your motor car.

If you notice this car, what is your reaction? Do you merely glance at it as you would any other motor car pulling up beside you? Maybe you notice that it *is* different but that's as far as it goes. If you are, however, a true motor car lover, you probably sit back, relax and admire the craftsmanship, hours of loving care and hard work, and the ingenuity which begat that car. You may even hope that the traffic lights will take longer than usual to change, or wind down your window and move off slowly, the better to appreciate the other car as it moves off ahead of yours.

I hope your reaction to the custom-built car was the latter, because Rolls-Royce and R-R Bentley are probably more responsible for the custom car trend than any other marque today. Yes, that's right, your Rolls or Bentley is a rather close relative. Pause with me for a few minutes, lower your eyebrows again and join me in a brief exploration of a few aspects of motoring history and genealogy.

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For the first twenty years of motoring nearly all motor bodies were custom-built for their original owners according to their whims, tastes and bank-balances. The styles were often

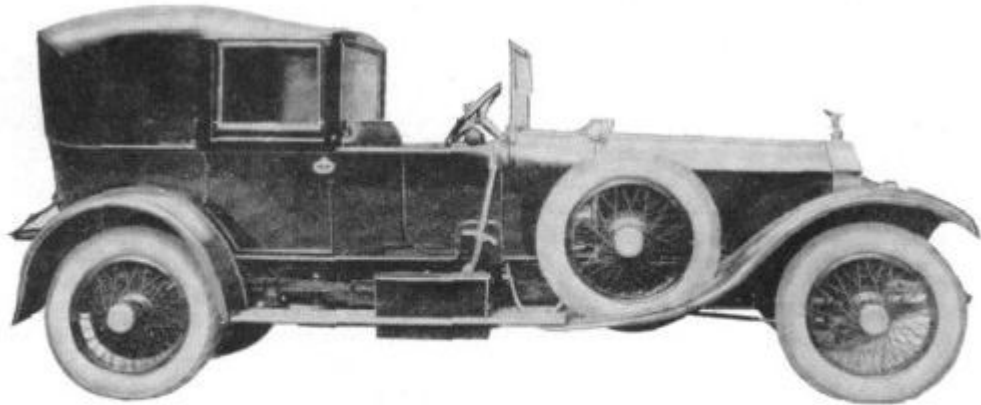
grafted or adapted from popular horse-drawn vehicles. Motor car manufacturers made chassis only.

From the beginning of the twentieth century the motor car was here to stay, and its own individual body style came to stay also. Bonnets appeared, and radiators became the identifying symbols of each marque. Bodywork, whilst still "horsey", was nevertheless more "car-ish". However, few manufacturers built stock-standard bodies - all were still expressly designed to the owner's taste, money and so-on as before, but much more free-thinking was being shown and the bonds of tradition were starting to fray.

The halcyon days of the late Edwardian era are reflected in the motor bodies of the time. Cocktail cabinets were quite common. Many car bodies were delivered from the body builders complete with fully fitted picnic hampers and wine chillers, and gay Surrey tops were very popular. Many town carriages had fully enclosed bodies upholstered in rich tapestries and panelled in exquisitely inlaid figured timbers, with luxuriously deep Indian or Persian carpets. Vanity bars containing fine perfumes were frequently installed for milady. The poor chauffeur and footman still sat out in the weather, probably the last real connection with the horse and carriage days. By this time, the day of the owner-driver was well on the way to being established, and it was easy to tell which bodies had been specified by an owner-driver - they were those with enclosed driving compartments! During this time too, one could even say that the grandparents of the red-blooded sports cars of the late "twenties" and early "thirties" were born. These were clearly custom-built cars, bristling with options selected by proud and enthusiastic young owners and sporting spartan body styles known variously as Raceabout, Torpedo or Spyder - depending on nationality. The Mercedes and Mercers were popular chassis for this purpose.

A year or two before the outbreak of the First World War some of the cheaper cars were equipped with relatively standard bodies. But in the main each body was specially built onto the chassis of the owner's choice. It was built to his specification although many ancillary items were now standardised, such as "Cape-Cart" hoods, windshields, body hardware, instruments, lamps etc.

World war I was naturally restricting to the world's motor industry, but it was not long before the motor car was called to active service and fitted out with



A Silver Ghost taken from a tribute, published in 1922, by Rolls-Royce of America, Inc. to its American suppliers of parts and equipment.

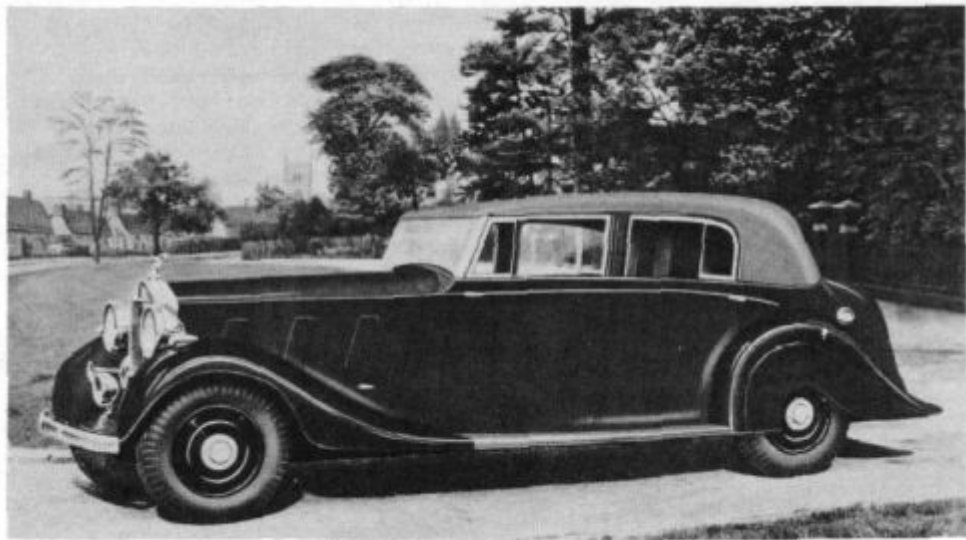
ambulance bodies, truck trays and even armour and machine cannon. The Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost, as we well know, proved itself beyond the wildest expectations in its now famous role as an armoured car. Other Silver Ghosts were pressed into service as official vehicles, whilst the lesser marques served in more mundane positions as lorries and service vehicles. Unfortunately, although the War probably did more than anything else to accelerate the mechanical development and refinement of the motor car, it also sounded the knell of the average hand built motor car.

Mass-production of motor cars came into full swing soon after the end of the First World War, and Mr. Ford brought motoring to John Citizen in a big way. Even if Henry Ford had not fathered mass-production in the motor industry it would have happened about the same time anyhow. Messrs Austin and Morris in Britain, Louis Chevrolet and the Dodge brothers in the U.S.A., and M. Renault in France were well on the way to mass-production by then. With mass-produced chassis in great abundance after the War, the mass-produced body just had to come. At first these were spartan affairs, but later "de luxe" versions followed. Mr. Citizen was now mobile, enjoying the "Jazz Age" in his "Tin Lizzie", "Baby Austin", "Chevy" or "Bull-Nose" Cowley. The age of the custom-built motor body had practically disappeared. Even though the better marques such as Rolls-Royce, Isotta-Fraschini, Hispano-Suiza, Bentley and Mercedes were still supplying chassis only, most body builders had standardised to quite a large degree on panels and fittings with the obvious result that their bodies looked the same no matter what the chassis. Originality was starting to take a knock and imagination seemed stifled by the overwhelming number of exciting happenings in the world and the large numbers of new inventions and gimmicks dreamed up by the few free-thinkers for the fawning masses. The age of conformity had arrived.

The Depression spelt the death of many of the original and rare marques, but one small highlight was the few weird and wonderful body styles which were built for motorists who couldn't quite afford a new car and so had a custom-built body fitted to their old chassis.

Most of these, whilst interesting, were rather ghastly, so perhaps it is just as well that few survived the ravages of time.

The "Post-Vintage Thoroughbred" era saw the return to some degree of custom-built bodies, but - compared with the total motor car output of the time - these were few indeed. Even



Phantom III

so, most car lovers will agree that some of the most beautiful bodies were commissioned by owners in collaboration with extremely talented designers and builders during the "thirties", particularly on sporting and semi-sporting chassis. We must all be familiar with some of the better examples of Phantom II Continental, "3½" Bentley, SS Jaguar, Bugatti, Alfa Romeo and Invicta. Even the makers of the better types of mass-produced vehicle were aware of the demand for customised bodywork and offered many different body panel and trim options to help the purchaser to personalise his car, some (such as Lincoln, Deussenberg, Mercedes, Delage,) sold stock chassis to the owner who wished to have a custom-built body fitted. However, for the average enthusiast who wished for something different, life was a little frustrating. These then were the conditions leading up to the development of what is commonly known these days as "Custom Body Building", and the time was ripe for this to explode. This unfortunately had to wait a few years because an ex-patriot of Austria then living in Germany and named Herr Schicklgruber - better known as Adolf Hitler - had other ideas. The motor car once again had to wear a military uniform.

At the end of the Second World War, custom-built motor bodies really came into their own all over the world, but particularly in U.S.A. Lack of new motor vehicles could be said to be the main cause, but another more subtle factor was also a prime contributor to the situation. This was the "desire for something different", a natural reaction to six years of regimentation and conformity. All the world over body shops were working overtime building new bodies for old chassis (many purchased from military disposals), and much imagination was shown but the poor quality of wartime materials was very restricting. Even plastics were of little assistance as they were still generally in their infancy.

In the early 1950's the motor industry became stabilised again and, with motor cars once more readily available, most body builders were occupied mainly with repairs. This situation further stagnated when the last of the chassis-only builders also began to produce their own standard bodies - Rolls-Royce Ltd. included.

About five years were to pass before coachbuilding (to give it its family name) revived. This was brought about by the maturing of the first of the "war-babies" who had reached the age when they could obtain a Driver's Licence. Due to over-population and its economical side-issues, unemployment was rife and most available money was being ploughed back into industry and commerce. Therefore these resourceful young people who were also mechanically minded set about and built their cars from "scratch", just as their earlier motoring forebears had done several decades before.

Many of these creations were so well executed and beautifully finished, in the manner of the earlier craftsmen, that they attracted overseas attention, and so the movement spread. From the same necessity, but from a different type of person, the modern "hot-rod" sprang, but these retained their essentially competitive personality whilst the custom car, like its ancestors, was basically the product of its proud owner's imagination and ingenuity in association with the body-builder's various skills and hours of painstaking careful labour. As with the car's ancestors, the only limiting factor was usually the owner's bank-balance. Although some "customisations" are decidedly ugly, most are thoughtfully, tastefully and competently done, often going unnoticed by the familiar shaped car but somehow pleasantly different. The engine may be "hotted up" somewhat, but usually it is basically that which came from the manufacturer as standard.

Manufacturers are once again recognising the desire of the motorist to express his individuality as he did thirty years ago. It is common practice overseas to offer a popular motor car with so many options, body-, engine- and transmission-wise, that it is possible for the prospective buyer to choose from over three hundred different combinations in each popular make. Even Rolls-Royce and Bentley can supply their standard motor cars with several approved options, so that the owner can personalise his motor car. A few quality car makers, particularly in Britain and Italy will still sell you a chassis if you desire a custom-built body.

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Even after what I have said, you may still be inclined to "pooh-pooh" custom-built motor cars or lightly dismiss them with the driver-classifications of "Wheelie" or "Thrasher". Therefore I'll ask you two questions. First, if you had spent much of your hard-earned wage on transforming an ordinary, mundane, everyday engine into a beautifully engineered high performance engine without sacrificing any reliability, wouldn't you want to enjoy it as much as possible but at the same time making sure not to over-extend and damage it? Secondly, in your youth did you never enjoy fast acceleration just for the sheer pleasure of real

motoring? There are of course real "Wheelies" and "Thrashers" who are menaces to all, including themselves, but if you observe closely, you will notice that they are the ones without sufficient love or respect to possess a really good motor car. These people usually drive an ordinary stock-standard motor car with a loud exhaust and make exhibitions of themselves with flashy driving and a great quantity of rubber on the road behind them. The only people who like "Wheelies" and "Thrashers" are the tyre manufacturers. Therefore, be careful whom you label loosely, the cause of your thumping pulse may be quite harmless - just a careful but sporty enthusiast.

This article is not written as an apology or appeal on behalf of the modern custom-car owners and drivers - they are quite capable of looking after themselves. It is written in an endeavour to promote more understanding between us and another section of motor car enthusiasts, and to illustrate an affinity. Personally I prefer a well restored PVT Bentley any day, and you no doubt prefer your own Rolls-Royce or Bentley to any other, but next time you are waiting for the traffic lights to change and a custom car draws alongside, remember that it is a more-or-less direct descendant of your own car by Imagination out of Bodybuilder. Remember, he is a relative and not an enemy!