

Henry Royce

Un mécanicien de Génie au Rayol-Canadel

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HENRY ROYCE A MECHANICAL GENIUS AT RAYOL-CANADEL

Few know that the Rolls-Royce engines owe their prestige to the Var. Between 1911 and 1931 Henry Royce, the founder of the famous company, lived every winter in his villa at Le Canadel. It is there, surrounded by engineers that he designed engines that are still today, the fame of the British brand.

Admired for its reliability, its silence, its flexibility and its power the brand with the two entwined Rs has gone around the world, the figurehead of the cars, the Spirit of Ecstasy has represented for more than a hundred years the aura of excellence of Rolls-Royce. The mythical statuette was created in 1911, the same year that Henry Royce started coming to Rayol-Canadel.

At that time the British firm, founded in 1904 by the brilliant self-taught mechanic, with Charles Stewart Rolls an aristocrat, passionate about cars, had already conceived the Silver Ghost 40/50 HP. Leaving the factory in 1907 this model which Royce considered his life's masterpiece, drives in almost total silence hardly sounding louder than a sewing machine. The car is capable of 15,000 miles without any mechanical failure. The original remains in perfect working condition with 920,000 kilometres on the odometer! If the Silver Ghost is one of the most expensive cars in the world it also established since the Belle Epoque, Rolls-Royces elite global reputation. Despite the sudden death of Charles Rolls in an aircraft crash in 1910, the first victim of this kind of accident, Royce continued the development of the company. He arrived in Le Canadel a sick man in 1911, the pioneer of the automobile is seriously affected by relentless work and neglect of food. Notwithstanding fame and fortune he works up to sixteen hours a day to perfect the performance of his cars. A serious operation after which he was given only months to live precludes his return to the Derby factory. Seduced by the calmness of the Var coast he decided to settle each winter at Le Canadel, passing the summers on his property in Sussex in the south of England. He has the company acquire several parcels of land. Le Canadel and Le Rayol were then only hamlets attached to the community of La Mole. The Le Canadel Pass road connecting La Mole to the sea is not yet built and would not be finished until 1920. But the coastal railway line built twenty years earlier to connect



above: The front page of the "la Var" story about Sir Henry Royce in the South of France.

below: Henry Royce (later Sir Henry).



Hyeres to Saint Raphael opened the way to the resorts. There was still no station, just an open siding where the passengers hastened to catch the train. The tranquility and beauty of the place charmed Henry Royce. He had four villas built above the road to keep in touch with his team. But his fragile health did not alter his passion or his philosophy:

Strive for perfection in everything we do. Take the best that exists and make it better, when it does not exist - design it!

It is at the foot of Les Maures surrounded by his director Claude Johnson, engineers and his faithful nurse Ethel Aubin, that he will work every winter until 1931 to innovate, organising work remote from the factory. The Villa Jaune destined for Claude Johnson is the biggest and most elevated. A score of metres away the Villa Mimosa designed by Royce himself will be his home. Below is the research and design



Royce controlled all the new projects and drawings of the engineers in the company. It was mainly at Rayol-Canadel that aircraft engines were designed, a project launched in 1914. During the First World War half the allied aircraft were equipped by Rolls-Royce. By the end of the 1920s aeronautical engineering was the most important part of the company's business and earned Henry Royce the title of Baronet. The last creation of the man who liked to present himself as a simple mechanic was the Merlin engine which was released in 1935 two years after Royce's death. Originating from the first drawings at Villa Mimosa and the Le Bureau, these engines were used by many British aircraft during the Second World War, including the Spitfires and Hurricanes which won the Battle of Britain in September 1940.

studio for the engineers who are housed in the villa Les Rossignols. The neighbouring property is owned by banker Theodore Courmes who has just bought a twenty-one hectare estate, today the Rayol estate. Did they meet? There is nothing to prove it.

Recalling his memories at a conference in Nottingham in 1964 HF (Ivan) Evendem, one of the engineers at Le Canadel, talks about their diligence. He noted Le Bureau with its vast workshop, the mild climate, absolute tranquility and lack of distractions and the delightful accommodation at Les Rossignols. What was life like for these co-workers? Single or married they had little freedom, some did not stay. But for those who embraced a love of nature and the sea it was a grandiose life.

The quality is remembered long after the price is forgotten.

Henry Royce.

While the Var provided the framework for improving the performance of the Silver Ghost it also inspired the more modest Rolls-Royce 20 HP between 1922 and 1929, and the Phantom I which replaced the Silver Ghost from 1925.



above top: The Villa Mimosa, designed by Henry Royce himself, has changed little since that time.

above: The view into the main bedroom, past a photo of Sir Henry Royce and one of his cars in the south of France.

below: The studio, where Royce liked to paint, is always dedicated to painting.

The Villa Mimosa where Henry Royce lived for twenty years is still in existence as are the other buildings of the complex. Bought by an Irish family little has changed in the last 100 years except for a few changes following damage during the Second World War. (It was very close to Le Canadel that the southern Allied invasion of occupied France landed in late 1944 - ed). Inside the house the owners have even retained the studio where Henry Royce liked to paint.

- Our thanks to Françoise Viala, whose works, 'Le Rayol-Canadel et Villes et paysages de la corniche des Maures' with edition 'La Draye du Patec', have been a valuable source of information. and the Kevany family who opened the doors of the Mimosa villa.

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