

Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia

Better Late than Never!

The restoration of 1929 New Phantom Chassis No.50OR

By Jim Kelso, 1995 Jim Kelso is an Honorary Life Member with a long record of service to the Club, including two terms as Federal President. His superb personal restoration of 50OR has taken more than half the life of the car! However, it has been worth it. What follows is Jim's story of that remarkable restoration.



The magnificent finished product, Jim Kelso's 1929 Phantom I (50OR), with the de ville extension closed and landaulette rear in the open position.

It all began on September 14th, 1929, when 50OR was born. This is the date on which she received her Guarantee. I was born in the following year of this century (for the benefit of doubters) and we met in 1960 when I purchased her in very much modified form from her original presentation. Now, some thirty-five years later, her restoration to that original presentation is nearing completion.

Mr A.M. Nicholas, on April 17th, 1929, at Hoopers, ordered "a new Hooper Enclosed Limousine Landaulette with division behind the driving seat and a folding leather extension over the driving seat". This type of coachwork was to be fitted on a Rolls-Royce New Phantom long wheelbase chassis to be purchased from Rolls-Royce Ltd at a basic cost of £1,900. The chassis supplied by Rolls-Royce was 50OR, in the final series of New Phantoms.



From the Nicholas family album: 50OR outside their residence in Harcourt Street, Hawthorn, Victoria.

Osmond Rivers was the Chief Draughtsman at Hoopers at that time and many years later he came to Australia to visit his son who was living in Melbourne. When Mr Rivers was in Australia, he came to see 50OR and he gave me a lot of good advice on the restoration about to commence. The whole process was significantly assisted by the consumption of some

Johnny Walker Black Label. It was a small price to pay for such expert advice. Subsequently, on his return to London, he spent time at the South Kensington Science Museum in whose archives the Hooper records and drawings have been deposited. He found the original order for 50OR and copied it for me. It ran to three typewritten pages and some of the interesting accessories were:

- 'Triplex' glass throughout, £35-0-0;
- Hooper patent quick-action signal window to off front door, £5-10-0;
- 'Dictograph' for communication with driver, £8-8-0;
- A.T. speedometer, £11-0-0;
- Luggage rail to roof and cover for same, £12-0-0;
- 'Brooks' special three-chested trunk, £40-0-0;
- Rolls-Royce mascot, £4-0-0;
- Two electric cigar lighters with pipe elements, £4-10-0.

The total cost of the car was £3,216-0-0 and Mr Nicholas took delivery in London in late September 1929, prior to some continental touring. Subsequently the car was shipped to Melbourne on the s.s. Otranto.

During World War II 50OR was converted into an ambulance to transport convalescing troops from Station Pier, Port Melbourne to 'Burnam Beeches', the very large family holiday home of the Nicholas clan in the Dandenong's (and the site of several R.R.O.C. Victoria Branch concours d'Elegance). The house had been converted into a hospital for the duration of the war.

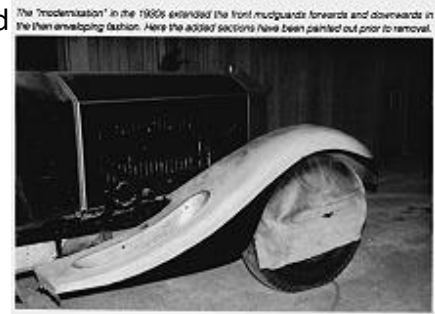


The conversion of 50OR involved the complete removal of all of the coachwork behind the rear door pillars. Everything went - seats, woodwork, the complete mechanism for the landau top, all of the aluminium panels aft of the back doors, - in fact, everything! The items removed were said to have been stored somewhere but I was never able to find their location or to establish who carried out the conversion to an ambulance. Whoever it was, in deference to Hooper, removed all of the coachbuilder's plates on the door steps and reversed them so that they appeared to indicate an anonymous coachbuilder when the car was purchased. It was only when the plates were removed prior to the body restoration that Hooper construction was confirmed.

The converters constructed an extended rear platform and a wooden framework with a fixed roof, steel panelled sides without side windows and double doom at the rear, so that

stretchers could be slid in and out. On the roof an enormous red cross on a white field was painted. It could not have created a feeling of confidence for its convalescing occupants as it looked more like a hearse than an ambulance!

Osmond Rivers examined 50OR in this condition and I could see that what had been done to his original design did not exactly please him. However, he made several drawings as to how the body could be rebuilt. I still have the sketches and a later letter from him in response to my advice that I was determined to rebuild the car exactly as it was on delivery. The letter included the following: "Personally, I think you would be wiser to turn it into a limousine - the making and fitting of all the parts for a landaulette would scare even a good coachbuilder"! However, with the enthusiasm of youth (now so long departed) I had resolved that this was my objective no matter what it cost in terms of time and money. I was not to be disappointed in expenditure of either!



The restoration began in Melbourne with the removal and discard of the whole of the non-original rear section. The remaining body was removed and the chassis dismantled. All of the component parts were spread over the garage floor to assess the extent of the work. It was at this juncture that my employer, McPhersons Ltd, decided that I should be moved to Sydney with my family. Therefore, the running gear had to be reassembled, the body replaced on the chassis and the loose bits loaded into many packing cases for the move. Some years later, the restoration began again in Sydney.

Despite these setbacks, some useful events occurred. The Nicholas family found a Brooks trunk in one of their many garages and kindly let me have it. When I got it home, the little key on the keyring that came with the car opened the lock. It was a very happy reunion. In addition, the Nicholas family found some early photos of 50OR taken soon after delivery. They allowed me to re-photograph these and they have been enormously helpful in trying to return the car to its original condition.

Some fifteen years after purchase work on the chassis was resumed. Everything was dismantled and reassembled, some once, some quite a few times before getting it right. New pistons and rings, rebore to .010" oversize, crankshaft and camshaft regrind, new valve guides, etc. The chassis was completely rewired with cotton covered wire of the correct current capacity and stranding. Additional wiring was incorporated for reversing lights, turn indicators, etc.

On September 14th, 1989 - 50OR's 60th birthday - the chassis reached running order with many well-wishers and much champagne to celebrate the occasion!



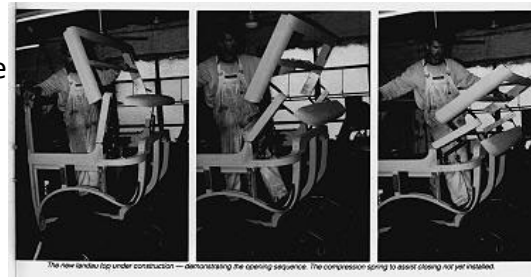
Whilst the chassis work was relatively straight forward even for an amateur such as myself, the same could not be said for the body, which presented more complex problems that could only be solved with professional assistance. The problems were:

- The complete absence of the rear of the body and, more significantly, of the landau mechanism.
- the aluminium rear mudguards were beyond repair, and the front mudguards required drastic reforming to return them to original configuration.
- what remained of the upholstery in both the front and rear compartments was beyond repair.
- the two cast aluminium windscreen posts and the two cast aluminium front door posts were all broken off at a level adjacent to the bottom of the windows.
- the instrument board and most of the polished woodwork throughout the car was beyond repair and would have to be replaced.
- the paintwork on the remaining body was beyond repair and a complete repaint was required. In addition, all the aluminium panels required attention in some way.

In the "modernisation" in the 1930s all the brightwork, including the radiator and shutters, had been chromium plate. As the original finish had been nickel, all the chrome had to be stripped electrolytically before replating in nickel or polished in the case of the nickel silver radiator and shutters. All of this plus the myriad matters that every restorer is faced with such as replacement of all the door striker plates and wedges, refurbishment of the instruments, reconstruction of the 'Dictograph', etc.

The body work was commenced some five years after purchase, beginning with consultation with the late George Williams. George was in the process of handing his business over to Geoff Spaulding but found time to lecture me on many subjects including spray painting, body design, upholstery, handling employees, sex, and interpersonal relationships, in which he regarded himself as something of an expert. Geoff Spaulding commenced work on the timber frame for the rear of the body and also undertook the reconstruction of the landaulette mechanism. With Osmond Rivers' advice ringing in my ears, we began trials leading to the construction of the intricate four-component hinge and balancing mechanism. All of this must be hidden behind the woodwork and body panels as this body is a 'six-light', i.e. three large windows on each side of the car, all capable of being lowered. To achieve this end, three important actions were necessary:

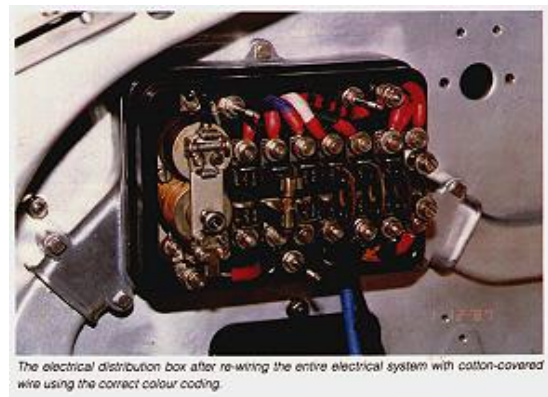
- Convince Barrie Gillings to allow me to remove the interior lining of his Phantom II Hooper landaulette to examine and measure up the components of the hinge;
- construct a mock-up of the whole of the mechanism from light timber and aluminium arms cut from heavy sheet.
- develop considerable patience and a lot of perseverance in order to get lengths, pivot points, spring loading and limiting stops all correct.



The new wooden frame was then panelled in aluminium with the compound curves being 'Wheeled' by Ray Patterson, in my view one of the best wheelers around. John Spalding of Fairford Autos (no relation to Geoff Spaulding above) supervised all the metal work on the body and was responsible for the paintwork, which was in two colours - black ahead of the 'chariot' pillar, above the waistline and on the mudguards, and a deepish blue on the remaining bodywork.

The upholstery and interior woodwork were carried out by Geoff Spaulding and Bob Hutton. The origin of the blue-grey cord upholstery in the rear compartment is interesting. Keith Laycock, a former Victorian member of the RROCA, knew that I was restoring 500R and produced a bolt of upholstery fabric for the job. It was believed that Keith's grandfather (who owned Laconia Blankets in Melbourne) ordered a Rolls-Royce in the 1920s and when it arrived was not keen on the upholstery. He therefore arranged to have his factory produce two bolts of cloth to his liking. He only used one and the other is in 500R, which makes the rear upholstery some years older than the chassis!

As the restoration nears final completion all the usual problems have arisen. The process of tuning and refining goes on and I guess it will be ever thus. A noise in the transmission necessitated complete dismantling of the sphere and torque tube. It was found that the new bronze bearings and hardened steel sleeves in the universal joint enclosed by the sphere needed shims to reduce the horizontal/vertical tolerances. The noise



The electrical distribution box after re-wiring the entire electrical system with cotton-covered wire using the correct colour coding.

disappeared. On an earlier outing, vapour locks occurred on a hot day (fortunately just out of the Sydney Harbour Tunnel) and as a consequence an alternate fuel supply system was installed with the addition of an electric fuel pump and bypass taps.

The front wheels were balanced before the aluminium discs were fitted, but when the discs were fitted the wheels were found to be badly out of balance due to the valve apertures in the discs. Rebalancing with the discs in place presents some difficulty but certainly reduces the possibility of wheel wobble or shimmy. In this regard, the cross-steering tube must be checked to ensure that the ball joints are adjusted to the correct tension as this provides an essential damping action in beam axle assemblies such as on the Silver Ghost, Phantom I and Phantom II.



The justifiably proud owner with the finished 50OR

50OR has now completed some 300 miles since returning to the road after her long absence. The rebored engine is settling down gradually and driving her three tons is a cross between piloting the Queen Mary and driving Dick Hehir's steam traction engine!

Nevertheless, after all these years it is nice to be looking down that long bonnet and following in the wake of that delightful lady up front. After 35 years - better late than never!

Photographs by the Author