

Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia Library

The Ghost Goes West

1921

'Alpine Eagle' Silver Ghost

Chassis No. 88NE

*By Gavin Sandford-Morgan,
1997*



Early motorists usually photographed their cars at Madura Pass, a major point of achievement in a Nullarbor crossing. 88NE duly lined up for photographs with glimpse of the Escarpment and flat plain beyond.

Some senior readers may recall the charming film 'The Ghost Goes West' in which a wealthy American bought a Scottish castle, had it dismantled stone by stone, transported to America and there re-erected, not realising that the friendly ghost which inhabited the castle had also emigrated along with the building, continuing his unpredictable haunting in the castle's new location.

Since 88NE, our 1921 40150 h.p. 'Alpine Eagle' Silver Ghost had recently been transported from England to Australia, had been refurbished in Adelaide, and was now being asked to drive nearly 2,000 miles half across Australia, the title of this old film seemed appropriate to our journey.

While we were contemplating the purchase of 88NE Jeanette turned to me and said "If we buy this Ghost, I'd like to drive across the Nullarbor to Perth in it". In the euphoria of pre-purchase excitement this seemed like a good idea, so I readily agreed.

In preparation for this long trip, apart from the previously mentioned mechanical refurbishing, attention was paid to sensible creature comforts like the removal of lumps from the seat cushions and the making and fitting of a full set of side curtains to give us protection from whatever weather the Nullarbor might throw at us. Stowage was found for

additional spare parts and tools, also suitable containers for spare fuel, oil, and water, together with tyres and tubes.

Since Ghosts are well known to have a healthy thirst, consistent with their weight and engine size and not inconsiderable frontal area, the distances between petrol supplies were studied and plotted. Careful refurbishing of the carburettor was also carried out this activity being rewarded with an average fuel consumption of a little over 14 mpg, despite some head winds, and there were no concerns about shortage of petrol supplies while averaging 55 to 60 mph at a steady 1600-1700 engine rpm.

In planning this trip of some 1750 miles we decided to try to work to a five-day program, which meant an average of some 350 miles per day. However, actual mileages were dictated by reportedly acceptable accommodation. As a result, we anticipated at least one long day of some 450 miles, compensated by one or two shorter days.

Tuesday 25th March

Adelaide to Wudirma, some 360 miles via Port Augusta. No problems except for ineffective seal between top of windscreen and front hood bow creating very windy cockpit conditions.

Comfortable and friendly small motel, the evening enlivened by pleasant chat with two enthusiastic BMW-mounted cycle-cops accompanying over-width road transport to the W.A. border. On their advice we decided to head for Nullarbor Roadhouse, at the head of the Great Australian Bight, some 320 miles, as we were making better progress than anticipated.



Wednesday 26th March

An hour spent in the morning lacing down the front hood flap to the windscreen wingnuts, wiper pivots, and any other available protuberance. This proved very effective in closing the wind gap but also meant that windscreen wipers could not be used. Problem if we meet rani.

Hot day with nasty strong north wind and temperature up around 40C. Conditions unpleasant for occupants, but Ghost apparently unperturbed.

Strong wind blowing from right hand side accentuated the heavy impact of the air shockwave produced by oncoming fast moving road-trains, giving us serious concern for the ability of the hood fabric to survive. Adopted policy is slowing right down as each road-train thundered down on us. Time wasting, but prudent. Nullarbor Roadhouse consists of fuel

station, small motel/cafe/restaurant, a light aircraft strip immediately behind the motel. and a large fibreglass whale disporting itself in front of the petrol pumps. Nothing else.

Pulling in after long hot tiring day, with the sand and dust being blasted along by the hot north wind. Face appears in window of one of the temporarily dormant, but still menacing road-trains, and calls out "Its a hell of a long way to bring a nice old car like that to get it sandblasted, mate why didn't you get it done at home?" Good ~on!

Nullarbor Roadhouse is a popular gathering point for 'whale-watchers' during the calving season. when the whales come close in shore under the spectacular cliffs. At the height of the season there can be forty or fifty light aircraft parked around the back of the motel, with similar number of cars and vans bringing people from all over Australia and overseas to see the spectacular frolicking of the whales. Hence emblem of the lonely fibreglass whale in front of the motel.

Discussion with some West-East travellers suggests that next reasonable accommodation is at Balladonia, some 450 miles at western end of the Nullarbor Plain. Then decided to make this our extra-long day which would be helped by the 2½ hour time difference between Western Australia and South Australia, which would give us extra time to reach Balladonia in daylight.

Quick stop to view and photograph the magnificent coastal cliffs at the Head of the Bight and then on to Eucla. While fuelling Ghost and crew, bedraggled local wove his way across from the pub, peered closely at the Ghost, and said "I told the silly buggers in the pub it was a Rolls-Royce not a Model T Ford. Anyway, I know a Silver Ghost when I see one; used to have an SA MG and a TC!" Man, then circles off back in general direction of pub calling out over his shoulder "good on yer, mate - have a good trip". Obviously, man of rare motoring erudition and discernment.

Drop down through the Eucla Pass to the plain below the Escarpment a row of cliffs which follow the coastline a few miles inland, apparently having been the sea cliffs in an earlier age. At Madura climb up through Madura Pass back on to high ground. Early motorists usually photographed their cars at Madura Pass, a major point of achievement in a Nullarbor crossing. So 88NE duly lined up for photographs with glimpse of the escarpment and flat plain beyond.

Encountered the 90-Mile Straight 'Australia's longest straight road'. Slight bend at the end of the 90 miles a very welcome sight! Road surface conditions poor due to combination of 'tramline' effect and corrugation-like ripples and bumps. Locals and other travellers tell us this deformation caused by the high-speed road-trains which are quite intimidating, with up to three trailer



sections. roaring along at 90-95 mph (140-150 km/h). Rough road conditions cause heavy work for Ghost's suspension and steering, but some compensation to hear that modern cars and 4-wheel drives also experience same unpleasant effects.

Another potential, but somewhat unexpected road hazard is chance of meeting light aircraft on road! Signs every now and again with silhouette of aircraft warning that road may be used by Royal Flying Doctor Service for emergency landing. And why not? Perfectly good landing strip stretching for miles.

Plenty of signs warning of kangaroos, emus camels, and wombats on road, but no sign to warn of huge eagles feeding on dead bodies of above animals. Not nice thought for Alpine Eagle to have head on confrontation with Wedge-tailed Eagle!

Make it safely to Balladonia just before sunset, last twenty or thirty miles in evening dusk resulting in some near misses with above assorted birds and mammals. Ready to dodge every roadside bush if it suddenly moves and develops into fauna.

Happy to reach Balladonia safely after nearly 11½ hours in the saddle. Share motel with 70-year-old Cliff Young who is *running* to Perth on a charity fund-raiser.

Friday 28th March (Good Friday)

Relatively easy run of some 245 miles to Kalgoorlie. As we Ghost along, ready to dodge further fauna, am reminded of old Scottish prayer:

*From ghoulies and ghosties and lang leggety beasties,
And things that go bump in the night,
Good Lord, deliver us.*

Taking account of the significance of the Day, am thanking Good Lord for indeed delivering us from unwanted encounters with lang-leggety beasties with which we were in danger of going bump in night. Suddenly encounter little three building townships with sign

announcing it as Ghooli! Quick stop to photograph Ghostie visitor at Ghooli, making due allowance for Colonial spelling variation.

Entering Norseman encounter thoroughly unfriendly railway crossing. Normally treat railway crossings with some respect; especially in old car, assuming rail protrusion above road surface to be minimal. As we approach town, looking ahead for suitable fuel stop, fall to notice that rail protrusion must have been 3 or 4 inches at least. Without warning, loud crash, Ghost thrown bodily into air, descends with further loud crash back to earth after which we limp into first petrol station thoroughly disconcerted. Expect to find buckled wheel, broken spokes or broken spring leaf, worst fears realised when note car has developed considerable list to starboard. Luck with us, no visible damage except impact thrown car so far into air that nearside front spring shackle forced over centre!

Virtually all establishments closed tight on Good Friday morning in Norseman. Just about to start unloading jacks, tyre levers, and tools when find young man at tyre depot cleaning his ute. Yes, we can borrow floor jack and tyre levers, yes, we can come in out of rain, and hey presto, shackle back in right position and all well with the world.

Get to Kalgoorlie in time to service and check 88NE, then do some sightseeing and photography of this splendidly historic town before looking for evening meal. All establishments in Kalgoorlie appear well and truly closed on Good Friday, including those housing the famous ladies of Hay Street, and all restaurants. Last restaurant we check is Amy's (remember Amy Johnson, Aviatrix?), closed but man watering pot plants outside. Man glances up, sees Ghost, look of horror crosses his face. Turns out he has a booking for the Over lander Rolls-Roycers the following night and thought he had got the date wrong! Kind man finds us delightful, converted pub on edge of town where we have excellent dinner. Thank you, Mr Amy.

Saturday 29th March

Head off on 350 mile run to Perth with Ghost, if not occupants, showing no signs of weariness. Skirt lightning and heavy rain with rapidly darkening sky, finally heavens open just as we encounter extensive roadworks. Ghost wading through thick red mud like motor-boat and of course road-trains slow down, don't they? Situation made interesting with inability to use windscreen wipers but colour scheme of 88NE changed from two-toned blue and black to mono-toned sandy-red. On final run into Perth encounter another heavy thunderstorm and more roadworks - told later that this thunderstorm was one of heaviest recorded for many years. Can well believe it. Hope other traffic has better view of us than we have of them.

Finally pull up outside the Weld Club in Perth at 5.00 p.m. with quiet Sense of satisfaction in having achieved Nullarbor crossing safely and without any major problems in our 76-year-old steed.

Thanks, offered to the inspired designs of Sir Henry and his assistants, and original skilled workmanship of t'lads at t'works at Derby - complemented by those who helped prepare 88NE for this trip. Proves yet again what a remarkable machine a well-found Ghost can be.

Photographs by the Author