

## Percy Wilbraham Northey

(1872 - 1935):

### Motor Car Innovator

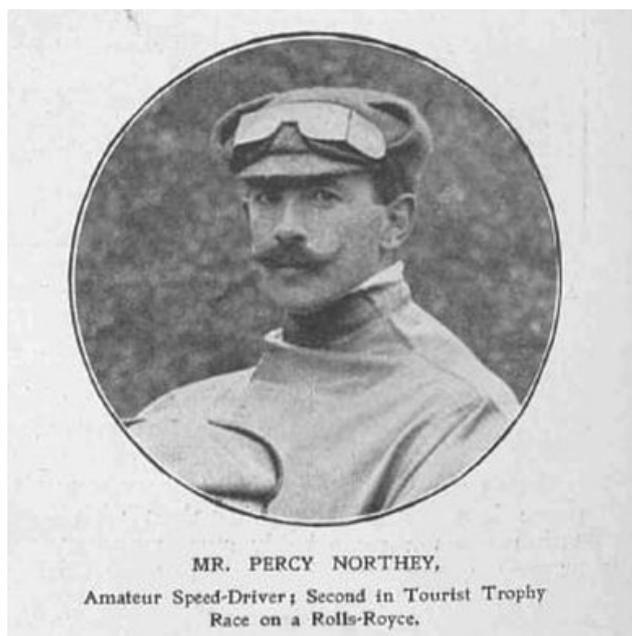
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Family photos and research Diana Northey

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The most surprising of the Northey siblings was probably Percy Wilbraham, usually known as PN. When he retired from the Rolls-Royce Company a motoring expert called him:

*A Great Man. There is only one PN ... with his singular genius for detail, (he) has had almost more than any other living person to do with the maintenance of a unique standard of excellence ... There has been no branch of motoring activity in which he has not played a conspicuous part ... PN remains one of the outstanding personalities, uniting great force of character with singular charm.[1]*



Courtesy The Sketch 15 November 1905

### Background

PN was George Wilbraham's third son and unlike the others not destined for a military career; instead, he trained as an electrical engineer. His obituary says he went to Somersetshire College, Bath and in 1889 was articled to a mechanical engineer, and later worked for a number of years on the installation of electric light in Bath, Richmond, London, and abroad in the Canary Islands.[2]

He became involved with the nascent automobile industry in 1898, when he was appointed managing director of the Electric Motive Power Company, which produced electric vehicles in the decades around the new century. He invented a two-speed gear for a new electric *landaulet* (prestigious car separating driver from passengers with convertible top for the latter). Other inventions followed: 1901 the Northey spark plug, 1903 the Northey electric vehicle system and in 1905 the *Northey petrol-electric vehicle with a magnetic clutch and two-speed epicyclic gear*. [3] He was clearly forging a reputation for himself and in 1903 was appointed manager of the Krieger Electric Carriage Syndicate Ltd, a company on the cutting edge of new developments in motor industry, including an independent electric motor for each wheel.

## Olympia Motor Show 1905

There had been motor shows before, mostly outdoors such as the 1899 show at the Old Deer Park, Richmond, but the 1905 show was of a different level. There were *rows and rows of stands, mostly white, thousands of electric lights, and a sea of cars*. The exhibition was the wonder of the modern age.[4] It was intended to promote the *English automobile market* in priority to the French show.

The eight-cylinder Rolls-Royce engine (four on either side of the crankshaft) was newly launched. PN was at the show, feted as the man who had made a non-stop journey of 208½ miles on a set of Dunlop tyres at an average speed of 33¾ miles per hour in that year's Tourist Trophy.



Courtesy Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 25 November 1905

## Tourist Trophy 1905 - 07

The Tourist Trophy was a race to establish the leading motor car and has been held on the Isle of Man every year since 1905. In the first year *the cars were towed by horses from the storage tents to the neighbouring side road*. [5] One gallon of petrol was allowed in each car for every 22½ miles of the 208½ mile course and each car set off separately. The winner the Arrol-Johnstons vehicle averaged 33.9 miles per hour, but it was a vehicle modified for rough Scottish roads. PN came a close second in an ordinary standard Rolls-Royce, *the first appearance in public of this comparatively new make*. At the time a two-hundred-mile, non-stop run was considered an amazing test of a car's reliability. Percy's time was 6 hours 11 minutes, compared to the winner's time of 6 hours 9 minutes.

The following year PN entered various motoring events, hill climbs, endurance, and races.[6] He entered the Tourist Trophy in a Rolls-Royce again, but his car broke its spring, whilst an identical vehicle driven by the Honorable Charles Stewart Rolls romped home in a time of 4 hours 6 minutes.[7]



### Work for Rolls-Royce

PN joined the Rolls-Royce company in 1909.[8] His driving skill and engineering expertise made him an ideal *technical liaison officer*, marketing the £500 vehicles to the wealthy after the First World War.[9] He was based in London, even though the company's works were in Manchester and Derby.[10] His time with the company saw the introduction of the classic cars of the century, *The Silver Ghost*, *The Phantom* and *The New Phantom*. [11]

There was a continuing relationship between the Rolls-Royce Company and the Northey family's interests at Box and Epsom and Ewell, Surrey.[12] The connection is probably was instigated by PN. From 1925 until 1930 Seleng House, Epsom Rd, Ewell became the home of the *Rolls Royce School of Instruction*. The school had previously been at Alvaston, Derby but moved to Surrey in 1925 where it taught 400 drivers a year until it moved to Cricklewood in July 1930.

When PN retired in 1933 he had worked for the company for 26 years. So much had changed in motor travel in that time. He had driven the 1905 Tourist Trophy in an average speed of 33¾ miles per hour. By the time of his retirement Donald Campbell had driven a Rolls-Royce engine at 280 miles per hour.[13]



### Reckless Character

In 1914 Percy undertook a journey through France across to North Africa to Tunisia in a Rolls-Royce Phantom. He claimed that *the only tool he had occasion to use throughout the journey was a penny piece, needed to buck up the carburetor on particularly dull or frosty mornings.*[14]

During the First World War he experimented with altitude photography for the War Office using an *Aeroscope* camera driven by compressed air, so that it had the same flexibility as a hand-held camera.

He served as part of Special Services at the Front in the war and in 1916 as the chief of the Dilution of Labour Department, Ministry of Munitions, to introduce innovation into manufacturing. In 1918 he became Director of Tank Construction in the Mechanical Warfare Department.

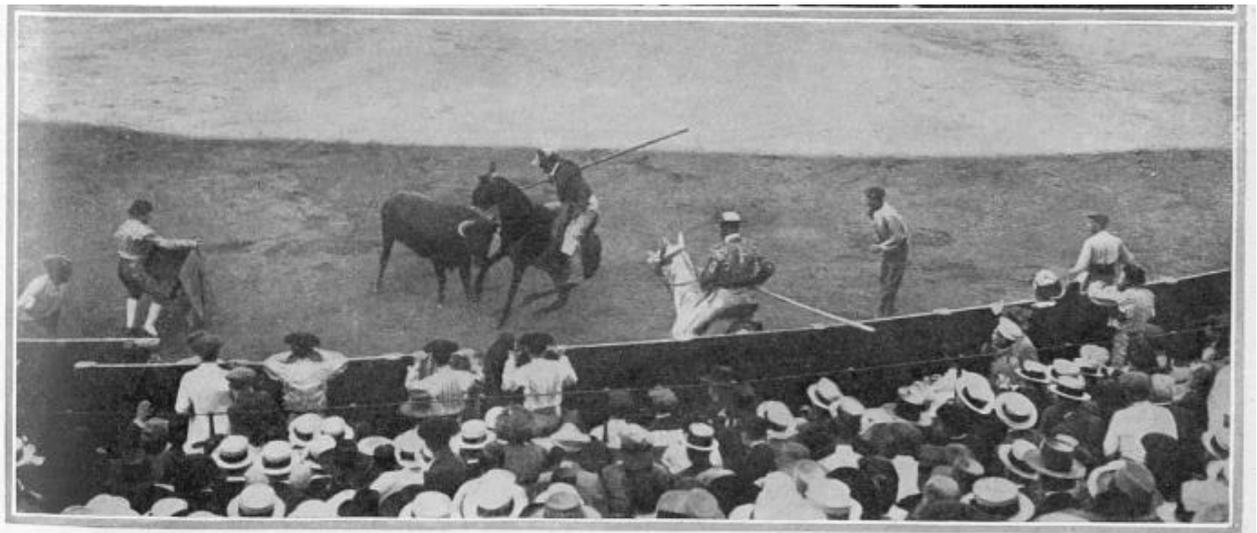
PN sometimes sailed close to the wind in the rush to exploit new developments in the motor industry. Possibly that was his natural character because in 1893 he dismissed a stoker from work at an electricity power station in Surrey and had to face down a claim for wrongful dismissal.[15] In 1906 he was sued for £3,563 for a valuation he had made of electric carriages. The case was dismissed but the suggestion of irresponsibility remained.[16]





1906 Tourist Trophy\_ <http://museum.imsearchcollectionsarchive.mnh-museum-534455.html>

In 1909 he was charged with driving a car on the public highway at Godalming at an *unsafe speed* of 22½ mph. He was acquitted. It was ironic because his father-in-law Colonel Roupell had complained vociferously to the Kingston-on-Thames County Police Court in 1906 that *he could not drive out in his carriage on to the main road without running great risk*. [17] There is no report of what he thought of his son-in-law's behaviour. In 1924 PN was fined for another speeding incident in Leicester in a new, four-wheeled, braked Rolls-Royce *alleged to have attained 35mph* [18]. Another charge followed in 1925 at Horsham, Sussex for which he was fined £4.10s [19].

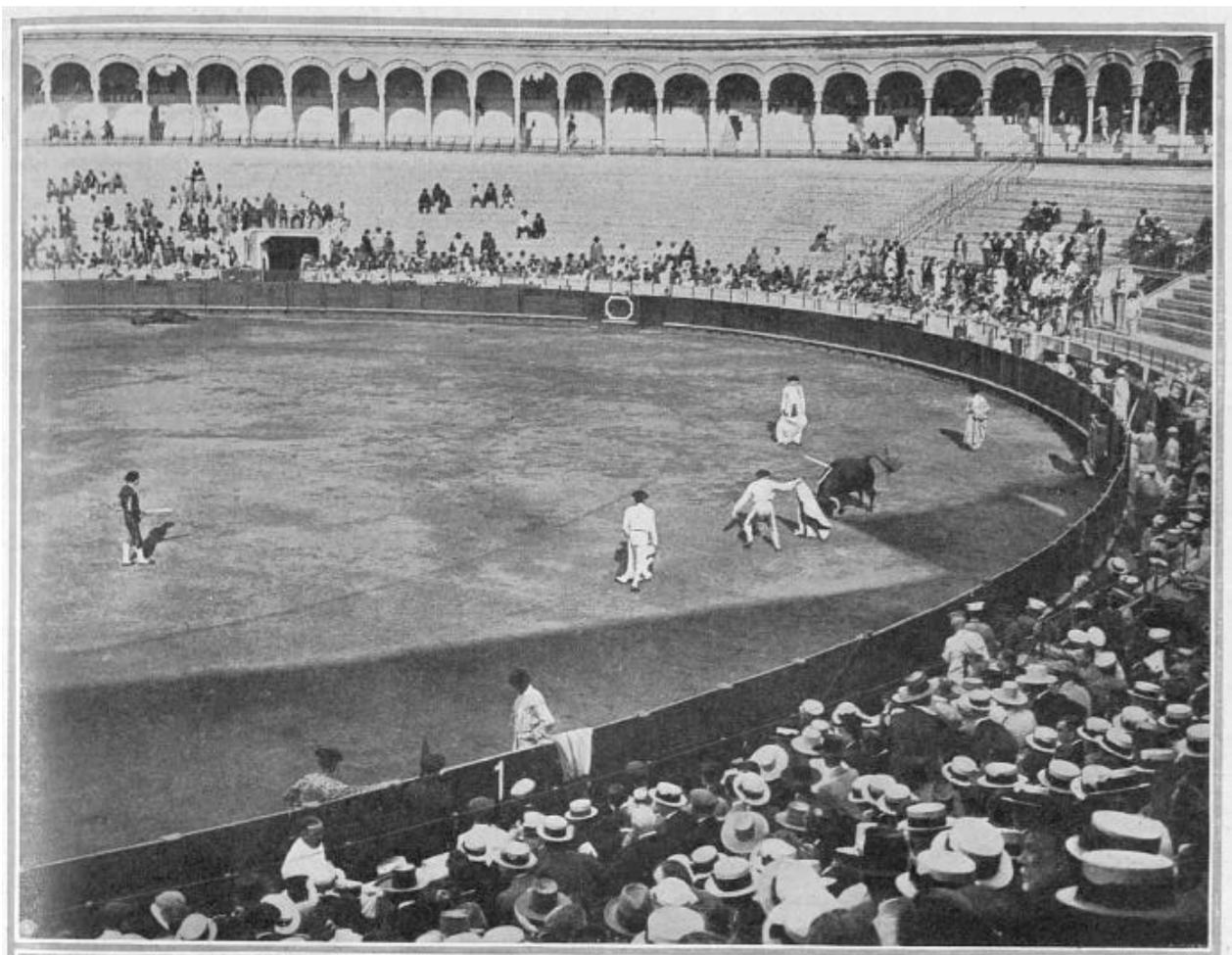


Bull Fighting Studies (courtesy Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 20 June 1925)

### Zoologist and Photographer

In 1921 PN's work was recognised when he was appointed Fellow of the Zoological Society of London.[20] Unfortunately the reason for this remains a mystery but it could relate to his photographic work.

PN was an exceptional amateur photographer. He illustrated the 1922 Rolls-Royce Catalogue with *actual photographs taken in natural colour*. [21] They showed cars in action rather than static, showroom shots. In 1925 he put on an exhibition of nearly 200 photographs under the title *Selections from a Wanderer's Portfolio* at the Spring Gardens Gallery, Admiralty Arch, Westminster. [22] There were also photographs taken during the Great War.



The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 20 June 1925



### Domestic Life

He married Gertrude Rosalie Roupell in South Kensington in 1896 and they had a child, John Wilbraham, (1897-1919). They settled in London and in 1901 they were living at Church Street, Ewell, where PN was working as a self-employed electrical engineer. They were wealthy enough to have a servant.

Rosalie petitioned for divorce in 1929 and in 1931 PN was engaged to Isabel Carss Gerveys Grylls and they married shortly thereafter.[23] His death of pneumonia occurred on 20th February 1935 aged 63 at 113 Ladbrooke Road, London. His *funeral took place quietly* at Box attended by the Box family and that of his wife and a few Northey residents from Epsom.[24] The remains were brought from London to the village and PN was buried in Box Cemetery.[25]

Left: Rosalie Roupell in 1895

### References

- [1] The Tatler, 10 January 1934
- [2] [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy\\_Wilbraham\\_Northey](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy_Wilbraham_Northey)
- [3] [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy\\_Wilbraham\\_Northey](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy_Wilbraham_Northey)
- [4] The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 25 November 1905
- [5] The Globe, 20 September 1905
- [6] The Sketch, 4 July 1906
- [7] The Graphic, 6 October 1906 and The Bystander, 3 October 1906
- [8] [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy\\_Wilbraham\\_Northey](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy_Wilbraham_Northey)
- [9] The Times, 28 February 1935
- [10] The Illustrated London News, 30 April 1932
- [11] The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 27 June 1925
- [12] <http://www.epsomandewellhistoryexplorer.org.uk/Rolls-Royce.html>
- [13] Derby Evening Telegraph, 1 January 1934
- [14] The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic News, 23 June 1928
- [15] The Surrey Comet, 23 December 1893
- [16] The Globe, 20 July 1906
- [17] The Morning Post, 28 September 1906
- [18] The Graphic, 19 April 1924
- [19] West Sussex County Times and Standard, 2 May 1925
- [20] [https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy\\_Wilbraham\\_Northey](https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Percy_Wilbraham_Northey)
- [21] The Bystander, 6 December 1924
- [22] The Tatler, 17 June 1925
- [23] Bath Chronicle and Herald, 17 October 1931
- [24] The Wiltshire Times, 23 February 1935 and Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald, 2 March 1935
- [25] The Wiltshire Times, 2 March 1935