

# Men & Motors

– Myth-making and the emulation of a past elite class



# Abstract

This thesis is about a motor club of, mostly, middle class Englishmen of senior years and the activities of that club. The club in question is the Vintage Sports Car Club (VSCC), which is a club dedicated to the use and preservation of vintage cars, the cars of the 1920s. The club was originally established in the 1930s as one of many clubs in existence at that time for participation in club motor sports events – circuit racing, hill climbing, sprints etc. What makes the VSCC unique is that the club has continued holding the same competitions and competing with the same cars as it did when first established over 70 years ago, but is now a large international club.

In this thesis I have analysed how the members of the club, over the many decades of the club's existence and over the generations that have now passed through the club, have created myths of the past relating to their cars, and more specifically how they have mythologised a version of history that has transformed cheap old cars into a special category of objects that are superior to everything that has followed. I analyse the myths, and I discuss the myth creation and maintenance processes in relation to ideas of class and notions of superior values and in relation to living out a mythical idealised past.



# Acknowledgements

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I wish, in particular, to thank my father, John Whiting, who did much of the background work of persuading his friends and acquaintances to be interviewed and who has told me everything he could of the passion he has had ever since he can remember. My thoughts are also for my mother, Anne Whiting, who saw me through a dark time while I was trying to do the research for this thesis, and who succumbed to cancer in November 2006, still hoping to see the day when I would complete this thesis and move on.

Thank you, Gry, for putting up with me through the extended period I have laboured over this. Never again!

Note on the text: All the names of the people in the following text have been changed.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1

Research Question 1

The Vintage Car 4

Defining the terms 7

My Fieldwork Site and Informants 10

Tools and Methods 17

    Expatriate Anthropology 17

    Ethical considerations 19

### CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL APPROACHES 21

Myth and history in anthropology 21

Material Culture 28

Commodities and economic approaches to the vintage car 32

The worth of a vintage man 37

The meaning of things 38

In search of Car Culture 40

### CHAPTER THREE: HISTORY OF ENGLAND IN THE 1920S-1930S AND THE MOTORING INDUSTRY 45

Introduction 45

Class: The structuring of English society 46

    The Aristocracy 48

    The Middle Classes 49

    The Working Classes 53

Politics 55

Industry: Decline and rejuvenation 59

Zeitgeist 59

The History of Motoring 64

    Introduction 64

    The three ages of motoring 64

The three ages of motoring in the UK 68

The three ages of motoring for the vintage car enthusiast 71

The inter-war period 73

#### **CHAPTER FOUR: VSCC MEN 81**

Tom 81

Elsted Noggin 87

Dial Post Noggin 90

VSCC Silverstone 92

VSCC Prescott 96

#### **CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING MYTHS 105**

Introduction 105

Mythology Played Out 106

A History of the VSCC and the vintage car 109

The myths of motors and inter-war England 114

Mythology, Cultural Boundaries and Identity 119

#### **CHAPTER SIX: MEN AND MOTORS 123**

Technology 123

A working definition of technology 127

Anthropology of Technology 130

Technology and the Vintage Car 133

The enchantment of technology 137

The SS 139

Conclusion 141

#### **CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUDING REMARKS 143**

**List of works cited 147**







# Introduction

## Research Question

"Strictly speaking, the humans of the age of affluence are surrounded not so much by other human beings, as they were in all previous ages, but by objects" [(Baudrillard, 1998a: 25)  
quoted in (Dant, 1999a)]

Today, in the wealthy nations of the West, probably more than at any other time in history, people are in a position to select the sort of life they wish to lead, from quite an amazing variety of possibilities. As workers, securing the income that they exchange for their and their family's material needs, there is a great range of diverse employment opportunities to become proficient in and to pursue. No longer is a young person necessarily expected to following the trade of his father.

Away from work, one is no longer automatically the member of a closed local community in which one's neighbours share the same leisure pursuits, tastes, values and destinies. With modern communications, modern information and modern industry and commerce, each individual is able to pursue the interests that suit them, to fill their life with the material objects they choose, not just from the huge selection of what is produced now but from what has been preserved or restored from previous patterns of life. They can choose too from quite a wide geographic area the community they belong to and whom they spend their time with.

I focus on the members of a car club in England. The club is the Vintage Sports Car Club (VSCC), and the members I have studied are mostly middle class Englishmen, living in the South Coast counties of Hampshire, West Sussex, East Sussex and Dorset, who all share a

passion for the vintage car - the motor car of the 1920s. The VSSC was formed in 1934 as a car club to provide a group of young men the opportunity of racing old sports cars on a low budget. In 2007 the VSSC continues and has never been larger, 7500 members worldwide, and it provides a large group of, mostly, old men the opportunity to race old sports cars, regularly meet each other at the pub and follow their passion for vintage cars with like minded men.

In this thesis, which is essentially a study of material culture, I shall explore how the men relate to a particular material artifact; I will be looking at why and how a community of men has come together and thrives around a material artifact, which represents an obsolete technology that is of no practical use to society today; I will look at how this artifact gains a particular classification of its own that sets it apart from other artifacts that seem to be almost identical to it; and I shall look at how these vehicles, which were once the fast, expensive and glamorous icons, representative of a lifestyle attainable only by the elite in society, have passed through the years into neglect and almost worthlessness, only to be seized upon by a community of men. These men have found value in using them once again for sport and have built a successful club, very nearly a cult, around the vehicles and their use, and through them pursue an exciting pastime of a generation of people who they grew up hearing stories of from their parents.

I have been fascinated how cars that were once described as " rich men's discarded toys"<sup>1</sup> have become the beloved objects of a community of men, most of whom are in their later years. The cars that were mostly once worn out and discarded, many of them having been brought back to full operation after expensive, and time demanding complete

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1 "I once remembering hearing a radio programme in the 1960s. This was on Bentleys, vintage Bentleys, before they became extremely valuable, and they were referred to as rich men's discarded

restorations. The cars today are either beautifully presented and gleam as they must have when new, 80 years ago, or otherwise driven to and beyond the limits of what the old technology and metals can stand for the limited glory of winning the motor sport events the club holds each summer.

I wanted to find out how a community of men uses and thinks about a material artifact from another time. What are the values and the stories an historic object like an 80 year old car represent, what does the car communicate to its current owners and appreciators of both the time of its manufacture and first and the intervening period? What, culturally and socially, is a 1920s car, in the twentieth century, and how does this compare with what it was meant to be when new?

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toys, which probably would have summed it up. Now, of course, it is rich men who have mainly got them again” (Tom, my main informant).

## The Vintage Car

The vintage car is a class of car that was defined by a group of motorsport enthusiasts in the 1930s. The term was coined by this group refers to a specifically defined group of cars. When the general public use the term, they often do so incorrectly by using it to refer often to “classic” cars, i.e. any old car that is worthy of attention due to its place in automobile history. Quite simply, a vintage car is any car manufactured between the end of the WWI in 1918 and the end of 1930.



A Vintage Bentley from the late 1920s attending the Dial Post noggins (Photo: the author)

Specifically, a club was formed at the end of 1934 to race inexpensive, old, cars, by a group of men who could not afford to buy new cars at a time when still less than one in five British families could afford to own any car at all (O'Connell, 1998a). At this time the very cheapest new car on the market was priced at around £100, but cars at around this price were

too slow and not designed to be suitable for sporting activities. Sports cars and performance cars commonly cost many times this figure. The men who formed the club found that older cars from the 1920s, often built to a much more simple design but with large powerful engines and good road-holding properties, could be purchased for no more than £50, and because of their simple technology were easily maintained by an amateur enthusiast. At the beginning of 1935 the members of the newly formed club specified that this was a motor sport club “for the not so rich”, for competing in motor sports in cars that were at least 5 years old. They counted on being able to purchase the secondhand cars of their desire for around £50 and maintain and race them on only a modest budget (Hull, 1964a).

In the 1930s motor sports events were arranged by local clubs, and entrants were entered as belonging to a particular club, so that in addition to racing for individual placings each driver was also representing his club for the club prizes (Hull, 1964a).

The club attracted attention from the very beginning and it was not long before well known grand prix racing drivers were joining the club. From its early days the club was gaining a reputation not only for its success in race meetings but also for the recklessness and good humour of its members. When WWII broke out the club claimed 300 members (ibid.)

While vintage cars today do appeal to younger generations the vast majority of enthusiasts are men, often unmarried, between the ages of 60 and 85, who often invest a great deal of their time and money in their cars, and who regard their enthusiasm for vintage cars as an essential part of their identity.

The vintage car is impractical as a means of transport. It is not suited to modern motorways, it is unreliable, uncomfortable, difficult to maintain both in terms of acquiring the

necessary knowledge, financial resources, the components that make up the car and the time to do the work in. And yet its enthusiasts are prepared to spend a great deal more time and money on this vehicle than they are prepared to invest in their daily transport upon which they rely. Additionally, most of them read journals, magazines and books on these cars and meet other enthusiasts regularly to admire these objects and to swap knowledge and stories relating to the cars. Still, many of the enthusiasts meet year after year to pit car against car (often the same cars) and driver against driver to prove the superiority of the car and themselves.

On the positive side the cars are filled with the great romantic notions of the roaring twenties that many people have. Many of them are exotic beautiful creations, they are rare, and they never fail to be noticed when out driving on the roads.

Enthusiasts will tell you that the cars of the 1920s are the best cars that were ever made and that since 1930 when the era of “modern” cars started (all cars built since 1930 are modern) cars have never been as good again. This is because the nature of the motor car changed between these two decades. As one informant put it:

The VSCC was founded in 1934 so cars made up to the end of 1930 were vintage cars then, even though they were only four years old. It was meant to distinguish between two different types of car. The vintage cars were sort of high chassis, light, open, of a particular type. In the 1930s, in the view of a lot of people, cars went downhill because people wanted more luxury: you had colossal weight introduced to cars, colossal body weight, heavy cars lower chassis, poorer performance in many respects and that was why the distinction was made. Vintage cars were simply a different type of car. (Tom)

What we see is that the vintage car has become to a certain extent a sacralized object. The vintage car community has raised one object, originally a commodity, out of the realm of



consumption and, through singularising it (Kopytoff, 1986a) and sacralizing it through the creation and retelling of a mythology of the vintage car they have instilled in this vehicle a whole range of cultural and social meanings, which by using the cars and being a member of the community they create and recreate their identity as in keeping with the values of a certain class of Englishmen from the 1920s.

## Defining the terms

Anthropology has long studied mythology and the relationship between mythology and history. In this work I contrast two narratives of the past, one of which I call a mythical narrative, and the other which I call a historical narrative. What I intend to do here is not to rehearse any arguments about there being a fundamental or classificatory difference between the two terms, and therefore concepts, but merely to draw attention to the former as played out by my informants within the sub-culture with which they identify. I here treat myth and history as different traditions of narrating the past.

“Myth” has a variety of different definitions. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of the Social Sciences*:

“myth – Generally refers to stories that contribute to the elaboration of a cosmological system and to a cohesive social identity... Myth is frequently opposed to history—to events that can be dated or located in a chronological relationship to the present” (Calhoun (ed), 2002).

Whereas, *The Dictionary of anthropology* says of myth:

“ myth is commonly used as a term for purely fictitious narrative that often involves supernatural persons, actions, or events, but it also embodies popular ideas about the natural world and historical events in a given culture. Indeed it implies that the group telling the myth believes it is true” (Barfield, 1997).

In this respect we can take it that myths in a “modern” society and within sub-groups of such societies are popular stories or popular ideas, repeated often, and that these stories and ideas are believed to be true. It is this version of a myth that this text focuses upon.

“History” is the trickier of the two terms to define. In one sense I could differentiate it from mythology due to its being “strongly biased towards documentary as opposed to oral records” (Thomas, 1996). So, history can be defined as, “that branch of knowledge which deals with past events, as recorded in writings or otherwise ascertained – the formal record of the past, esp. of human affairs or actions;” (; ).

Jonathan Friedman warns, however, that like a myth an “objective” history is equally a representation of the past that is produced in a present context, as part of a contemporary project, and which deals with questions of identity. Following this train of thought Friedman continues to criticize the use of history that deals in truth-value with the intention of “evaluating other people’s constructions of reality” (Friedman, 1992a).

The difference that I think expresses itself between the definitions of these two terms is in the emphasis, on the one hand, on “popularly repeated stories” and on the other on “the formal record of the past”. Popularly repeated stories are different from the formal record in that the stories are repeated, often orally, without further reference to any original sources and

are accepted usually uncritically and without further documentary confirmation. History, on the other hand, is based on formal recordings and produced by qualified professionals with a declared purpose of explaining the events of the past.

Like myth, “History...is very much a mythical construction, in the sense that it is a representation of the past linked to the establishment of an identity in the present” (Friedman, 1992a: 195). With Friedman’s warning in mind my intention is to narrate what I have learned about the social construction of a narrative – a narrative, which without stretching anything too far, can be referred to as a myth. When this myth is compared to the historical narrative I pieced together from old publications and documents it becomes clear that the elements included in the myth are those that emphasize the uniqueness of “vintage” cars and therefore emphasize the borders of the culture around vintage cars.

To accomplish the task before me I have researched the culture of the various classes of 1920s England and the lifestyle of these people, especially with regards to leisure, sport and fair play. Such research inevitably recalls Thorstein Veblen’s turn of the previous century book, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)(Veblen, 1994), which has been much criticised, not least because he concentrated very markedly upon economic status, but did not look at the social and cultural aspects of what he described as a wasteful lifestyle.

During the 1920s the car in the UK was still an object whose ownership was restricted to members of the upper classes and the wealthy end of the middle classes. This picture changed dramatically during the inter-war years as technology changed and prices came down, which “enabled car ownership to filter down through Britain’s professional and commercial middle classes, who began to identify car ownership as a necessity rather than a

luxury” (O’Connell, 1998a: 20). Yet, the car of the 1920s was still a luxury product of exclusivity while the car of the 1930s through design changes, which made it more practical, became associated with work and family. Even with a twenty-fold increase in the number of cars on British roads, between 1920 and 1939, by the end of this period, still only one in five of British families had acquired a car.

## **My Fieldwork Site and Informants**

My project is concerned with a community of people in Southern England delineated by their love of vintage cars and by their membership of the Vintage Sports Car Club (VSCC). This is a community, therefore, that is not understood in one traditional definition of “community” as a number of people dwelling in one locality as a society, but in a looser sense, i.e. a number of people who recognise themselves as a community, as having something in common between them, due to their shared love of a particular class of material objects and by their membership of an organisation dedicated to that class of objects.

The information that I provide in this section comes from a variety of empirical settings. These can roughly be divided into “Meets”, competitive motor sport events, “Days”, interviews, and from research I have done in literature relating to the vintage car movement.

A “meet” is generally a social get together, and normally at a pub. These are often also called a “noggin<sup>2</sup>”. The basic premise of these events, normally organised by a local branch of a car club, is that once a month, club members meet with their cars at a pub – specifically a

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2      noggin: 1. a. A small drinking vessel; a mug, cup, or ladle. 2. A small quantity or measure of alcoholic liquor, usually a quarter of a pint; a small drink of spirits (OED, 2005).

pub with plenty of space for parking. The venues are usually permanent, and all the pubs I have visited where these noggins take place proudly display vintage car photographs and other motoring memorabilia on their walls. In 1936, the pub, which was run by the Vice-Captain of the VSCC, the Phoenix at Hartley Wintney became the headquarters of the VSCC, and has maintained close ties with the club ever since (Hull, 1964a). From those early days, club business became closely associated with pub meetings, and beer and pub meetings remain an essential ingredient in the life of the VSCC.

At these noggins the emphasis is on a relaxed and social meeting of friends and where new club members can, in an informal environment, meet their local vintage car community and become a member of that community. Generally, one arrives with or without one's car, however there is kudos in arriving in a vintage car, the more interesting or prestigious the better, and one buys a beer and perhaps orders a meal at the bar, and then the time is spent wandering around the car park admiring the cars, chatting with other members about the cars or any other related topic and combining this with having a pleasant lunchtime or evening meal at an English pub.

The motor sport events on the other hand are a much more serious affair. While my informants who participate in them do describe them as fun, some of them take them very seriously and are highly motivated to win the competitions. There have even been many cases of competitors deliberately illicitly introducing modern technology into the cars to give them a competitive advantage . It is hardly surprising that the races can get serious when one considers the sheer amount of time and work that needs to be dedicated to a 70 or 80 year old car over the course of a year to make it capable of seriously competing in motorsport events. As one of my informants, John, explained to me, these cars were never really suitable for serious racing when they were new so now that they are the better part of 100 years old they

are definitely not really that suitable for racing now:

“And the trouble with vintage cars when you're racing them, or with all pre-war cars is that the engines are so fragile, and you know you are trying to get more and more power out of something that really wasn't up to it in the first place”.

The motorsport events range from circuit racing at England's national Grand Prix circuit, Silverstone; to sprints at traditional sprint tracks; hillclimbs at traditional hillclimb courses, such as Prescott House; and trial events on often very uncivilised terrain, i.e. steep muddy tracks through forests, across fields and through rivers. Some of these forms of motor sport were very popular in the 1920s and 1930s, but are virtually unheard of today.

There are also longer road rallies and informal events like treasure hunts. The motorsport events, the circuit race variety most typical of today's motorsport, tend to be of the same variety as those of the 1920s and 1930s, and so if the reader has not heard of the sprint, the hillclimb<sup>3</sup> or trial before I will explain these in the proceeding text and on motorsport traditions.

The next category is what I have termed a “Day”. I don't believe anyone else has termed these events in such a manner, but since the individual events have been called “Alvis Day”, for example, for a good many years and since all the club members know exactly what is meant when the word *day* is used in the title of such an event I believe that to use the word *day* as a general term for these events is the most accurate. The first obvious thing about a *day* is that it is an event that runs over the course of a whole day. If we imagine that the average travelling time to such an event is somewhere between 1½ hours and 2 hours, and the event

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3 A hillclimb is one of the oldest surviving forms of motor sport, having started in 1897. Cars

officially runs between about 10:00am in the morning and about 5:30pm in the late afternoon it is simple to see that that it is indeed quite a long day. Participants may leave home at around 7:00 or 8:00am in the morning to return again between around 7:00pm or 8:00pm. The typical course of event at a day is as follows: Cars gather in a large field and line up in rows, often organised into marque and model categories. The cars are parked so that they are easily viewed by those attending who spend part of the day walking around the cars admiring them. During the course of the day a driving tests competition takes place and a *concours d'elegance* to select the best presented cars. Late in the day everyone gathers for the awarding of prizes and to show their appreciation for the event's organisers. People then leave and return home at their leisure.

These events are normally regular yearly events, and it would be accurate to say that each national club has one *National Day* which are sometimes now called *International Day* and also one regional *day* for each regional or local branch of the club. The clubs depend on their regional branches because the country is too large to expect very many members to travel the whole length of the country in very old and often rather uncomfortable and primitive cars. There are quite a number of older cars that do not have heaters or even roofs that are capable of keeping bad weather at bay.

I conducted 20 interviews of car club members. These were members of the Vintage Sports-Car Club (VSCC) and members of the Alvis Owners Club (AOC). Several of my interviewees are members of both clubs since the Alvis is one of the most popular marques of vintage car. One of the reasons why there are a good number of vintage Alvises still running is because they were always built to a high standard of engineering which made them popular among those who appreciated quality and because that quality is responsible for so many of

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compete against the clock over a short winding course up a steep hill.

these cars surviving the ravages of time where more cheaply built cars succumbed to the usual problems that ageing cars suffer much more quickly. My initial plan was to include non-vintage Alvis owners in the analysis, but that has been largely dropped in order to focus on the vintage car.

The interviews were semi-formal in that I had a basic core of questions that I posed to all interviewees, but the questions were tailored to the particular interviewee based on what I had previously learned about that person and their relationship to vintage cars. I also only used the questions very loosely and concentrated more on having an in depth conversation with the interviewee about their life and their cars. In this manner the focus was on what the interviewee wanted to say about their life and not on some preconceived formula to find information that would follow the agenda of the ethnographer. The interviews were normally conducted at the home of the interviewee and typically included a tour of the garage where the ethnographer was shown the car or cars there and gained an insight into how the cars' owner works on those cars, and spends their time in the garage with them. In some cases the garage was the normal garage of a residential house, while in other cases it was a purpose built and fully equipped engineering workshop. In one case the informant had a very large office that lead onto what I can only describe as a mini-museum where the informants most desirable cars were on show, and that in turn led onto his workshop equipped with an impressive collection of engineering tools.

The Vintage Sports Car Club (VSCC) is a British based but international club for enthusiasts of vintage cars and Post Vintage Thoroughbreds (PVTs)<sup>4</sup>. The club has about 7500 members, the vast majority of which reside in the UK. I based my research around

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4 A vintage car is any car produced between 1918 and 1930 inclusive. The club also accepts cars built before this period, though Edwardian (1911-1918) are particularly favoured. PVTs are cars



members of the VSCC who attend two monthly noggins along the south coast of England.

The two noggins in question were the second Friday of each month in the evening at the Railway Inn, Elsted and a lunchtime meeting at the Crown Inn, Dial Post, on the first Friday of each month. The latter meeting is a joint VSCC and Alvis Owners Club meeting. Several of my informants are also the proud owners of Alvis cars, vintage or otherwise and so they see the second meeting in particular as their's. Both meetings are organised by the South branch of the VSCC.

It is among the attendees of these two regular noggins that have selected my informants, most of them regulars, and I have spent time with them at the meetings, at other club events such as hill climbs and race days at Silverstone, I have been with them at their homes as they attend to the practical work of restoring and maintaining the cars, and I have conducted in depth interviews with them, regarding their passion. These interviews were recorded in an audio format and subsequently transcribed to text.

I have attended a number of motor sport events organised by the VSCC. These included driving tests, race meetings, hill climbs, speed trials and sprints. At these events I have studied the whole process involved in being a participant in motor sport events and in being a spectator. I have talked to both participants and spectators and I have attended the events with my informants, who have told as much as they are able about the events and in particular their personal history in relation to the events.

I have visited the VSCC's library at it Head Office in Chipping Norton on a number of occasions. The library contains collections of all important and relevant motoring journals and periodicals since the dawn of motoring and many hundreds of books published on motoring, motor sport individual marques and models anything else relevant to vintage car culture. I

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built between 1931 and 1939, but which "adhere to earlier standards".

have utilised this resource to research the motoring journals of the relevant decades of the twentieth century to trace as thoroughly as I could the ever changing motoring culture, mostly from the perspective of the motoring and motor sport enthusiast, rather than the general public. I have thoroughly researched the clubs own production of vintage motoring literature, in the form of newsletters, bulletins and published books.

In addition, to concentrating on the VSCC and the events of that club I have attended many events of the Alvis Owners Club (AOC), in the company of my informants. Alvises are one the most popular vintage and post-vintage marques of car, and were manufactured until the company finally finished its production of cars to concentrate purely on military vehicles, in 1967. Several of my informants are in both car clubs. I attended Alvis meetings, Alvis International Weekend at the Beamish Museum, near Newcastle, in the north of England, and I was a marshal at South East Alvis Day.

I have been following the restoration of a 1932 post-vintage Alvis Speed 20, since its purchase in 2000 until today. In that time the car has been stripped down and rebuilt twice. The first time was mainly to have the car in its current, then, condition properly screwed together and set up. The more recent rebuild included upgrading and replacing many worn out parts, and treating, preserving and painting or re-chroming most metal parts of the car. I have attended events in the car and have been present when it has been presented to the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency for inspection in relation to establishing the identity of the car, in order to reassign it its original 1932 registration, which was transferred to another car in 1936.

## Tools and Methods

### Expatriate Anthropology

I have not come across the term Expatriate Anthropology before, but I wish to introduce it as a possible theme in my study. By “Expatriate Anthropology” I mean ethnography and the subsequent writing of an anthropological text by a person who has moved away from his/her native land (an expatriate) and settled in a different country for a substantial number of years before returning to his/her native country to conduct ethnographic research.

This is relevant because I left my native country, England, 12 years ago and have resided in Norway for the last 10 years. This is, therefore, a theme very closely related to Anthony Jackson’s edited volume, *Anthropology At Home* (Jackson, 1986a) and the discussion in Narayan’s text *How Native Is a "Native" Anthropologist?* (Narayan, 1993a).

Without wishing to get embroiled in a deep discussion on this subject I would like to mention one or two observations on the position of the “Expatriate” anthropologist. The “native” anthropologist has the advantage of understanding many of the cultural nuances of a society which the “outsider” anthropologist will either miss, misunderstand or only be able to interpret in the broadest terms, until they have spent many years in the field.

The “outsider” anthropologist has the advantage over the “native” anthropologist of being able to see significant cultural traits where the “native” only sees “natural” behaviour, i.e suffers from home blindness.

In my opinion, the “Expatriate” anthropologist is ideally positioned to gain some of the advantages and avoid some of the pitfalls of each of the other type of anthropologist. The expatriate anthropologist, having been raised in the society where the fieldwork is to be

conducted, knows exactly how to interpret the behaviour within that society while also knowing how to link together cultural traits that an outsider would not recognise as connected.

Additionally, having spent many years away from their home society in another society with its own culture before return to conduct fieldwork the expat anthropologist will have gain a cultural distance from what was once second nature and will be able to look upon behaviour in light of and in some form of contrast the society and culture they have become used to on a daily basis. This puts the expat anthropologist in a privileged position to gain useful cultural insights.

## **Ethical considerations**

The most important ethical problem facing me is the fact that close family members and family friends constitute at least some of my informants. This, however, I take to be an advantage as my sensitivity towards the informants point of view and values will be heightened. I was able maintain the respect and consideration they expect from a fellow member of the community while at the same time knowing what is sensitive information and what it is perfectly acceptable to use as empirical data.

I have also been careful to assign each of my informants the credibility they deserve and to not favour some opinions on the basis of my own social and familial relations. In addition to this I was raised around vintage cars and have good sense of many of the attractions of owning and driving them, and of attending the various meetings, while never have been active as a club member before joining it as part of my fieldwork.

It is also important for the anthropologist to be aware of his/her own limitations, to be aware of the values s/he brings to the field, to be reflexive. In short, the ethnographer must be his own sociologist (Wadel, 1991). Also noteworthy in this respect is that I have also become my own informant, as I became a member of not only the VSCC but also the Alvis Owners Club (AOC) for the year in which I conducted fieldwork, and have driven eligible cars to meetings and have taken part in events as both a member and as a marshal. As the ethnographer I have been careful, although it is my project and it will be my words and from my point of view, not to give my own views as informant a privileged position in respect to my more important and knowledgeable informants.

chapter 2

## Theoretical Approaches

### Myth and history in anthropology

If I am to do this I obviously need to set out definitions of *history* and *myth* that are both meaningful and acceptable, and which are qualitatively distinct enough to be able to be used as two contrasting means with which to understand past events. What is more important is that I am able to persuade the reader that the use of these distinctions to analyse fieldwork data can be a productive and useful way to go about writing social anthropology.

I am immediately warned of the dangers of this approach by anthropologists Kevin Yelvington and Jonathon Friedman. Friedman warns that social anthropology has, at least in the past, been associated with colonialism, and that social anthropologists would, as often as not, study down – that is, due to their status as a representative of what was often a colonial power, at least in the eyes of the informants, their status *vis-à-vis* their informants was one of authority and symbolic power. This meant that the narratives that the social anthropologist had to tell about his informants had more legitimacy in the wider world than the narratives the informants had to tell about themselves. Or as Friedman puts it:

The anthropologist may often be led into the usual superciliousness of the supposed expert confronted by the (supposed) childish imagination of his subjects.

This has become somewhat of an institution in anthropology and also in history, that is, debunking the others' representations of themselves on the basis of a presumed monopoly of the *truth* (Friedman, 1992a: 197).

Friedman continues that whatever the truth happens to be is completely irrelevant. And that regardless of how relativist an anthropologist may be, he can fall into the trap of ethnocentrism by claiming or assuming that the version of history that he has access to has a higher truth value than the mythical version of history that the informants have access to. Friedman continues that it can be argued that “our own academized discourse is just as mythical as is theirs”(Friedman, 1992a: 197). In his article he demonstrates how western anthropologists and historians have, probably unwittingly, attacked their subjects’ right to define their identity and to live their social and political identity by attacking those people’s historical/mythical narrative with a “truer” version of their history.

Indeed, both Friedman and Kevin Yelvington in his *History, Memory and Identity: A programmatic prolegomenon* (Yelvington, 2002), warn of uncritically using Hobsbawm and Ranger’s (Eds) *The Invention of Tradition* (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1992a) to describe the traditional histories of one’s informants as untrue and contrast them with a truer more academic history.

In the present mood of the social sciences, difficulties – epistemological and political, not to mention methodological – are bound to arise if and when anthropologists weigh in and invoke absolute dichotomies between ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ history, between ‘real’ and ‘imagined’ pasts, between ‘actual’ and ‘invented’ traditions [Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983]. (Yelvington, 2002: 231)

While this is a common criticism of Hobsbawm’s and Ranger’s book it misses the point. What the latter two authors were referring to were deliberate acts of creating new traditions as political act, which were only very loosely based on traditional elements. What

the authors describe are the acts of individuals, or very small groups of collaborators, who intentionally organise the enactment of a new phenomenon, which they justify by appeals to a supposed tradition, and who successfully insert that phenomenon into an existing historical narrative, so that the story they intentionally invent uncritically assumes a different historical value.

Thus they do not criticise either the mythical histories that exist in traditional societies or popular culture in western societies. That some anthropologists may have used this approach to “debunk” the traditions of their informants is unfortunate. However, if they used this approach to describe and explain how traditions do, in fact, become established, then there is no reason to criticize them for this, as it is precisely their job to describe and explain how social life and cultural patterns come about and operate.

Elizabeth Tonkin, in *History and the myth of realism* (Tonkin, 1990), too, warns that believing in history, or what she terms “representations of pastness”, is “a false faith” (Tonkin, 1990: 25). And I think it is on this point that those who criticize the use of history as a tool to approach myths make an important mistake. They assume that to use a tool like history or a historical narrative you must believe in it in some positivist sense. Yet, historians and most other academic users of history are sophisticated enough to take a pragmatic approach towards history’s veracity status, and they need little more than the contextual information of how a historical narrative was constructed in order to take an appropriate critical approach to that narrative.

While it seems to be true that some anthropologists have unwittingly lent themselves as tools to colonialism, or colonial dogma, in their uncritical preference for white man’s history



over that of the natives' version of their past, I think it also a little disingenuous to claim that detailed, well researched, and thorough history writing is no truer than the informal stories people in a community tell one another. Were this the case then no historians would be in a position to claim that their story of the history of the Third Reich is any more true than the version subscribed to by groups of neo-Nazi skinheads. If we allow truth to become relative to this degree then we can close the universities down, because the research done in them and knowledge passed on to students becomes as good as useless. All we really need to do is to maintain our critical faculties, be as well informed as possible and to not give in to any dogmatic representation or theory, no matter what the direction from which it comes.

Of course, one has to be aware of and consider all of the caveats regarding truth and knowledge. In natural science, just as in the social sciences and the humanities, any facts and truths that emerge must be seen as part of the narratives of the ongoing search to understand the world, life and society, and that these narratives are only ever stories told in our code of communication, i.e. language, to convey what we have learnt about the world. Once one realises that no one has either a monopoly on the truth or, indeed, access to the actual truth, then what is actually the correct version of events is a moot point. In other words, we are always forced to utilise what we think are the best descriptions of the world; we always have to make a choice of one description in preference to another; and we must rank narratives according to what we believe to be their truth content. We are forced to choose out truths, irrespective of academic arguments to the contrary. The best truths we can choose are those that have the best empirical base combined with the patterns of ordering that we believe we discern in other groups of truths.

Moreover, in a situation where one narrator of historical descriptions has greater symbolic power than another narrator, the educated reader or researcher has a duty to

understand the political context in which different narratives operate. This means that the reader must keep her wits about her, and not that any narrative is as good as any other narrative, or that one social group has a better claim to the ownership of past events and thus the right to have their narrative recognised as true. We do not need to make general rules concerning the truth value of various possible accounts; what we need is to closely attend to each account and judge it on its individual merits. It is this assessing of each unit of data on its merits that represents a true democratisation of knowledge – not general laws being passed down from above about what counts as a legitimate form of knowledge.

A concrete example of this problem in practice was the debate between Gananath Obeyesekere and Marshall Sahlins. Sahlins had previously published a historical narrative about the death of Captain Cook at the hands of the Hawaiians, which followed the western historians' narrative that the Hawaiians had believed Cook was a manifestation of their god, Lono, and that he was killed in accordance with the traditional mythology around that god (Sahlins, 1987a). Obeyesekere rejoined that Sahlins' historical evidence was suspect and that the interpretation that the Hawaiians thought Cook was a god was the product of western colonist imagination, and that it was western academics such as Sahlins who were the myth-makers (Obeyesekere, 1997a).

What can be taken from this example, I believe, is that it is illegitimate to construct a historical narrative which purports to have some truth value when the evidence available on which to construct the theory is so fragmented and largely absent. The records of Cook's party's contact with the Hawaiians and the events that took place during that period are just not thorough enough to reconstruct a historical narrative of what may have taken place. Guesses are for the dinner table and not for scholarly works. Obeyesekere commits the same

error as Sahlins in suggesting an alternative historical narrative, but in fairness to him it may have been necessary to suggest that alternative. If Sahlins narrative was the only one available to anyone who wished to look into this issue, it is very likely that despite its shortcomings it would gain the status of being the closest approximation to the truth. It could be further said that history abhors a vacuum, and where no historical narrative exists someone will invent one.

In my own fieldwork and subsequent writing there is no question that I or any of my potential readers yields a political or symbolic power that might have any negative consequences for the community I have studied. My informants' positions in society are not connected with any version of the history of their enthusiasm, and since I know that they are quite happy to have their version of past events contrasted with other versions, and that they find the results as interesting as I do, then I feel that I am not likely to write anything that could be considered disempowering towards my informants or that tries to dictate the historical narratives that are most true, in any way. Additionally, most of my informants enjoy a higher status in their community and abroad than I am likely to achieve, and I feel they are in no danger of being oppressed by any of my ideas. Of course, nothing I write here could persuade someone who has already made up her mind on the matter that I am wrong to take the contrary opinion, but this is the case in all such debates, where theory, language and political approaches meet.

Having expressed my opinions in the above passage on the veracity of historical knowledge I will continue by saying that in that there is enough historical data available with which to construct a reasonable historical narrative I will lay out what is a historical narrative

of the events surrounding the founding and growth in popularity of the VSCC and the enthusiasm for vintage cars. This is, I claim, a better historical picture than the “myth” the members of the club tell each other. This is because the historical narrative I have reconstructed is based upon readily available historical records, and the details of which are largely confirmed by the individuals who have taken an interest in this history. In a number of cases my informants have heard the stories of the early days of the club directly from the participants in those events themselves.

The “myth”, on the other hand, is the historical narrative that the club members relate to each other, even though they are often aware that the myth distorts the historical fact. They choose to uncritically accept the myth, however, because it is for them a pleasant way of imagining the history of their enthusiasm, and that its historical veracity in this context is not an overriding priority.

## Material Culture

"The authenticity of artifacts as culture derives, not from their relationship to some historical style or manufacturing process – in other words, there is no truth or falsity immanent in them – but rather from their active participation in a process of social self creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others..." (Miller, 1987a: 215)

This project falls under the rubric of Material Culture. The most obvious thing initially to note about this branch of social anthropology is that its focus is not on the objects themselves, but rather on the social and cultural implications of peoples interactions with these objects. According to Dant, "Social human beings establish what we might call "quasi-social" relationships with objects in which they live out in a real, material form the abstract relationships they have with the wider society in which they live" (Dant, 1999a: 2)

Specifically, my focus is upon the myths associated with historical artifacts and past events, and the cultural values that people associate with a certain class of objects and how, by way of these cultural values, the objects influence the manner in which my informants approach their life both in terms of action and thought. My focus is also historical in that the objects of this study, or vehicles of culture if you like, have traveled through time, i.e. they have survived many years, and my hope is to trace certain cultural values that have specifically traveled with these objects. This is in order to come to understanding of how the objects are cultural objects today.

My job is at least eased by the fact that English culture has gone through quite a major transformation during this period. What I want to do in this chapter is set out my approach to my project and to construct the particular social anthropological context in which I wish to operate in this thesis. Finally, having built a framework and painted the background

in broad strokes I will approach the vintage car as an item of material culture, and explain why I choose to look at the car in the way I do.

The approach I take to analyzing the study of material culture in social anthropology is determined by my ethnographic project. My preliminary findings led me to the conclusion that none of the previous methods of analyzing the cultural and social aspects of people's relationships with the objects in their lives are suitable to my own work. After briefly going through these methods and their associated theories I intend to give an account of the method and theory I propose to use in my analysis and to explain why I am taking this approach.

To be able to tie anything to any car it is first necessary to have an idea of what, culturally speaking, the motor car is. And in the case of the car of the 1920s and 1930s what the motor car was and what that car, if still existing, has now become. While it is not my intention to focus purely on the meanings of this particular object of material culture I have found that it will not be possible to communicate my findings without giving a substantial anthropological analysis of the vintage car. Firstly, the car, is a thing, an object, a commodity, a form of transport, and a technological artifact.

My focus is, however, on a quite special class of motor car. If I were studying the cultural meaning of the contemporary car I would need to start from the function of this particular piece of material culture. The car is a means of transport for both people and objects. It replaced the horse and the cart, and then it went on to revolutionise how we live in place and space. In most reasonably materially wealthy societies in the world the car has become the means of transport for the majority of the population, and enormous networks of roads have been specially created, at astronomical expense, to make this transport as efficient as possible. How far the present situation has been reached for purely economic reasons and how far for social, political or other reasons is not a question for this particular exercise.

No, this project does not have within its sights the cultural or social aspects of contemporary motoring in modern vehicles. Rather, this project focuses on vintage cars: Cars that most people would not consider to have any practical function in contemporary life, except to provide an unusual and pleasurable spectacle on what are often regarded as monotonous and dull roads – especially on Sundays.

The vintage car is not a possession to be adopted in any casual or half-hearted manner, unless one has the considerable wealth necessary to employ others to take care of all the practical considerations that the car demands, and plenty of garage space in which to store it. In fact, the ownership of these cars is largely a pastime for “greybeards<sup>5</sup>”, i.e. older, grey-haired, bearded, men who are free from the responsible of raising children and often from generating an income through daily work . From my informants it would seem that the time and money involved in keeping a vintage car makes the pastime only practical for men (and ladies, but I shall come to that later) whose children are adults, but more specifically, men who have retired. The exceptions to the rule are men that have never been married, and are said by some to be married to their cars, men who have managed to engage their whole families in the vintage car passion and men who due to their passion neglect the needs of their families.

A phenomenological approach, using Heidegger’s concept of dwelling, informs us that our relationships with the objects around us are an essential part of being human in the world, and, since we are pretty well stuck in the world, an essential part of being human. ‘Dwelling’ is part of Heidegger’s attempt at discovering what it means to ‘be’ a human being, i.e. living a life in place and time. He says, “the manner in which we humans are on the earth

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5 greybeard: 1. A man with a grey beard; hence (often contemptuously) an old man (). *This is a term that has been in use in English since at least Shakespeare’s time, and was common in ancient Greek.*

is...dwelling”(Heidegger, 1976a: 325). He equates this manner to using and staying with things. It consists of preserving what we have and building onto it in order to live. We build things and we gather things, and in our consciousness these things gather together also into a whole that is place and that is structured by the connecting spaces. As humans we live in a world of objects and things, spatially and temporally organised. Bu using objects in certain settings and under certain circumstances we contemplate them in relation to our activities and values and in relation to other people and in forming our identity.

For much of its history social anthropology has been concerned with abstract structures, either the invisible structures of society, or unobserved structures of the human mind. Objects, for much of this period, have only been interesting as signs standing for ideas. Yet, given the breadth of anthropology there is plenty of anthropological work available that has taken objects seriously, as phenomena of material culture that are fully a part of human existence, which is nothing if not a material existence.

A review of the anthropological literature on material culture should reveal whether this point has been considered in the literature available on material culture. The anthropological literature on things starts off on its journey through the twentieth century with the economical focus of Mauss, followed by Marx-inspired texts and then travels down a two lane highway of economics and structuralist-inspired symbolic readings of people’s relationships with material objects only to finally lump all objects together as commodities or museum artifacts. One obvious reason why this economics and exchange focused approach is unsuitable to my work is merely that the objects of my study while indeed often being ascribed a very high monetary value, this monetary value might only actually be realised once



in 50 years. While the monetary value of a car is often referred to, it is usually used as a very rough and quick indication of the history, rarity and performance of the car.

## Commodities and economic approaches to the vintage car

Monetary value is an issue, however. In September 2004 a rare vintage 1929 Mercedes SSK was sold at auction for £ 4 170 000 (€ 6 340 000). It was the second highest price ever paid for a car in an auction. The highest and third highest sums were paid for two 1931 Bugattis – Bugattis being one of the greatest vintage marques. Desirable cars do command very high prices, as one of my informants can confirm. It might be noted that a 1931 Bugatti is not a vintage car, but since manufacture of this model began in 1929, it is indeed vintage. Only 6 of these cars were built.



The 1934 Aston Martin Ulster that is sought after in Germany (Photo: author)

Towards the end of my fieldwork period, an informant received a telephone call from a man he did not know in Germany, who offered him five hundred thousands pounds (€760 000) for his 1934 Aston Martin Ulster (a car the VSCC include as a Post Vintage Thoroughbred [PVT]). My informant is now 80 years old. He bought the Aston Martin

(above) as a young man of 24, 56 years ago in 1951. He has no wish to sell the car, as he has now had it most of his adult life. In October 2006 he had quite a serious stroke that temporarily paralysed him, but he is still not interested in parting with it. His wife is now driving him to meetings in the car. When I suggested to her that he might wish to sell it for some much needed income, she replied, “No way! That car’s my inheritance”.

What these cars have in common, however, is that they have a race-winning history. And their price reflects that they are among those few surviving race winning cars from the period. There are many vintage race meetings during the race season each summer, both in the UK and for those who can afford the costs involved, all over the European continent. The VSCC has many enthusiastic amateur racing drivers, and these few cars offer the men with money, a competitive spirit, a reckless streak and the desire for the camaraderie of a racing elite, a rare chance to compete for the top honours within the vintage racing circuit.

Additionally, the prestige involved in owning such cars must be acknowledged. Looking at the cars and the club members from a psychological point of view, we can see that the age of the most prestigious vintage and PVT racing cars is between 80 and 70 years. The ages of the vintage car enthusiasts in the club tends to range from about 60 to 90 or more. In most cases the club members would just about remember when these cars were great, when they were really prestigious vehicles about which stories would be told legends were established. Some of them were told the stories of racing heroes, as young boys, by men of the older generation, often their fathers. Tom, my main informant, tells me how the famous racing driver and world Land Speed Record holder, Malcolm Campbell<sup>6</sup>, used to frequent his grandparents’ public house and became good friends with his father. One informant

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6 Malcolm Campbell broke nine land speed records between 1924 and 1935 and 4 water speed records. He was the first man to drive a car at over 300 miles per hour (484 km/h).(Wikipedia, 2006)

remembers first seeing the 1920s racing cars in books, and spent his time in lessons at school sketching their cigar shapes in his school exercise book. Yet another remembers pictures of vintage cars on cigarette cards that came free in his fathers packets of cigarettes

My informants were too young to take part in any of the events of the 1920s and 1930s, but they were often well acquainted with the early club members who were in the generation before them, and who have become heroes to them or were already celebrated racing drivers in their own right. In this respect the greatest racing cars can be said to represent the fantasies of their childhood or in the case of those who were raised in families that were not interested in motoring or motor sport, the fantasies of which they would have liked their childhood to have been comprised.

Another interesting point about the relationship between the passion for vintage cars and economics, is how, in the early days of the club in the 1930s, it was a point of pride among the members that although their cars were old and cheap they were competitive in motor sport competitions despite not having the financial resources normally necessary for such an endeavour. In the original announcement in *Light Car* magazine that initiated the establishment of the club the instigators called for a motor sport club for the “not so rich” xx . It did not take long before the members of the club were making it a point of pride that they in their old bangers<sup>7</sup> bought for less than £50 were more than a match for other racers in newer much more expensive cars.

Terry has two very valuable and rare MG racing cars, one of which is the largest and most powerful racing car MG ever built, the 1930 Tigress, of which only two of the original

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7 “Old banger” is a common English term for an old, worn out, unreliable and worthless car. Funnily enough, the 70 and 80-year old cars of my informants are anything but worthless, although many of them once were.

five still survive. Besides these two singular vintage cars he owns two more MGs, one vintage and one PVT, an two valuable post-war sports cars – an Austin Healey 3000 and an Aston Martin DB6. This collection is very valuable indeed ( well over € 1 000 000). Terry told me:

“My philosophy has always been that the cars and what we do with the cars has to be outside the budget, i.e. I never value my cars. In my net worth calculations the cars are at zero. The money is gone money. So I don’t mind if the market in Healeys goes from £25 000 to £100 000<sup>8</sup> or from £25 000 to nothing. I have regarded it as written away.” (Terry)

However, these monetary matters that affect prestige pale into insignificance in comparison to the demonstration of a vintage car enthusiast’s passion. And although the enthusiasts are aware that the objects of their passion are gaining more attention from society in general, as members of an increasingly affluent and educated society are looking for more individualist pastimes to devote themselves to, and as the enthusiasts themselves have become moderately wealthy men thus forcing up the value of the vintage cars as the men compete to own what is a very scarce resource.

It might be noted that in the clubs early days the cars they covet were merely old cars and did not earn a man status or prestige. Tom says of his Alvis, “People never used to talk about my Alvis out there as a classic car. That was only 12 years old when I bought it; just an old banger.” Ian bought his first vintage Alvis in 1958 when the both he and the car were 30 years old:

At the time there wasn't much respect for old cars. Children would laugh, because it looked scruffy, and if it made a bang they would laugh even more, and people in the, then, day

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8      € 37 000 to € 149 000

modern cars weren't particularly enthusiastic about it. They would think, 'that thing's a disgrace to the road', you know. Some of them looked a bit untidy. Mine looked very untidy. This was in 1958. The car was just 30, 30 and a half years old. It wasn't that old actually. But, what I came to realise later, I didn't at the time, was really how good it was. (Ian)

Over the years vintage cars have become scarcer and scarcer, but now the trend is, if anything, in reverse. Ancient wrecks are being raised from lakes, dug out of sand flats and still, amazingly, being found in barns under old equipment, hay and shit. What were once cheap old cars that only a handful of eccentric men were interested in have been sought after items of supposedly very high quality and value.

The inter-personal values that are considered important within the group are, however, the degree of one's enthusiasm, expertise and knowledge related to the vintage car. These values can only be purchased to a very small degree if at all, and therefore monetary considerations are only very peripheral. There does exist a rich elite within the club, who can afford full-time mechanics for their cars and move their whole operation around Europe during the racing season (the summer), but after many interviews and conversations with my informants it seems clear that this group is considered as a more or less closed clique within the club. They are respected, but, if anything, the average club members view them a little as outsiders. Most club members are proud that their cars represent their own hard work.

The values that therefore garner prestige and respect among club members are, probably, firstly, that a member own an interesting eligible car. Note that there is therefore an entry price. The most basic eligible car today will cost little more than £ 5000 (€ 7550), but because this is likely to be a cheap, low powered, mass-produced car it will be considered of little interest. Interesting vintage cars start at around £ 20 000 (€ 30 200). By interesting I mean cars that are considered to be of decent design, were well made and had comparatively

good enough performance and handling to be suitable for driving them fast and having fun in them. Cars that were not particularly interesting in themselves but produced by a company that did produce particularly interesting cars are also looked upon with respect.

## **The worth of a vintage man**

Having an interesting car is just the price of the entry ticket into the community. Long time club member, and my main informant, Tom told me that although he had been well known to, and friends with, other club members for many years, it wasn't until he finally attended a club meeting (after 30 years club membership) with an eligible car of his own that he felt truly included.

Once a man has paid his admission price his status and prestige are decided by his personal qualities in social settings, and his activity, knowledge and enthusiasm for club activities. The club's main activities are divided into two types of meetings. Firstly, there are the social meetings. These are regional and local pub meetings, preferably using an eligible car as transport to and from. Secondly, there are the motor sports events. And it is within the arena of these latter events that a man's reputation as a true vintage car man becomes established and perhaps stories of his exploits in races, sprints, trials or hill climbs travel around community and he experiences some small measure of fame.

It is one's participation in these two basic types of club activities that accord one status, respect and prestige in the club, and the effort one puts into participating in these activities. A man that has to rebuild his car in his garage after each motor sports event (as many do), modifying parts to fit etc, will have a higher status than a man who sends his car to a professional mechanic after each event.

The ideal club member is therefore someone who has an interesting car for racing, who races with spirit at a variety of events, meets his fellow club members at the pub, does his own fettling, and has a good technical and non technical knowledge of the cars and the community. Many club members have been carrying on in this way for decades. All of this



only requires a modest monetary input but a passion that doesn't waver.

### **The meaning of things**

What I propose to do, therefore, is to largely keep away from an economics and politics approach to the vintage car as is to be currently found in the fashionable consumption studies, where the car is classified as a commodity. According to Appadurai, objects that are often thought of as commodities are only so in certain contexts:

“I propose that the commodity situation in the social life of any “thing” be defined as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (Appadurai, 1988: 13).

The objects at the centre of my study are owned and used by their owners and are only likely to come into a commodity situation once every couple of decades or so. The cars I have been experiencing have been beloved possessions and tools, sports equipment and family heirlooms, and the approach that best justifies them as these things is a psychological and biographical one. This is not to say that I am using Kopytoff's *Cultural Biography of Things* (Kopytoff, 1986a). I find the biography of a thing largely uninteresting if it does not shed light upon the people whose lives the thing has passed through. What was that thing to them? What does a thing do to someone's life, their self-identity, their dreams, their purpose, the identity other people ascribe to them and how these things interact with each other within a community? I am therefore referring to human biographies in which the cars hold the position they do, due to what is often nearly a lifelong relationship between their owners and this class of objects and particular individual examples of these objects.

The work that encapsulates best this approach is *The meaning of things: domestic*

*symbols and the self*(Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981a). This work was the result of a 5 year long ethnographic study of how and why people in contemporary America relate to the things in their domestic environments. It involved interviewing 300 people, in some cases several times, from 82 families (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981a). In this approach the authors recommend returning to the original meaning of the word *cultivation* and continue "...we concluded that the potential significance of things is realized in a process of actively cultivating a world of meanings, which both reflect and help create the ultimate goals of one's existence" (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981a: xi).

The significant material objects in a person's life are used by that person to cultivate an identity of themselves and to situate this identity in the World. When I write "situate this identity in the World", I mean very much to materially situate oneself in the material world. From looking at materiality in this perspective it is possible to introduce a Cartesian inspired discussion on mind and body whereby the mind is lost, anchor-less, without the necessary corporeal attachment to the material environment. I don't intend to embark on this particular discussion, but wish merely to note that our material life is essential for identity building, communicating that identity, and, just as importantly, conducting our lives and maintaining both bodily and psychological health and merely for living a human life.

"To understand what people are and what they might become, one must understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished, and why, should become a part of our knowledge of human beings (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981a: 1)

This approach, then, takes in the psychological significance of objects and combines this with the significance of these objects for leisure and in social life, and demonstrates how a powerful relationship with a class of material culture can become a central defining feature of one's identity and one's life.

I also believe here that it is legitimate to use own's experience of how one relates to

objects in the world, as I think that if one's own experience is human then it also has something of the universal in it. When it comes to obtaining material objects I find that the commercial transaction in which one obtains the object, which is in that context a commodity, is just a necessary process one has to undergo in order to obtain the object. According to our rules of exchange and society one trades a sum a money for an object to its owner in order to gain possession over the object. Once that transaction has been completed the commodity status of the object is removed and becomes irrelevant. And perhaps, the commodity status of the object was always irrelevant. Commodity status is just something an object undergoes in regards to our system of production and exchange, but such things are perhaps irrelevant outside of the context of exchange and economics.

And yet, in reference to both Mauss and Appadurai, it is very interesting, because men do compete, and their fame does spread from competing in contests of wealth, in sporting contests of physical and mental prowess, in competitions of political power. These competitions to prevail over own's fellows is obviously a central part of male human society, if not necessarily human female society, but although they always include the most prominent and visible of men in a society it is often that these individuals are the exception rather than the rule, and that most men are not interested in achieving the status of big man, in whatever community of which they are members.

### **In search of Car Culture**

Moving onto the car there has not been a great deal written about man's four-wheeled friend relative to the other objects central in our lives in socio-cultural anthropology. While there is a positive buzz about how the internet or the mobile phone are changing our

ways of communicating, the car, having completely restructured our geographical relationship with the region and country we live in, not to mention the time and resources we spend in and on it, has been largely overlooked, even though it has completely changed our communications.

So far, little has, for example, been written about the motorist's sense of place, which, with only the assistance of a little thought experiment we can say must be profoundly different to that of the foot bound villager. The car gives us the power to select the places that inform our own geographical biography in a way that has never before been achieved. Only in our motorised times do some people completely lack a sense of place for the local community in which they live. Their lives outside of their house can take place purely at locations that are many kilometres from the house, and the actual "place" in which they dwell can be completely alien. One can say that their dwelling does not take place at their *dwelling*. Compare this to two or three generations ago, when the peasant identified herself/himself with their immediate surroundings and immediate community. Because of the car our sense of place and space has changed immensely.

Malinowski started the focus of anthropology on man's vehicular means of transport when he devoted two whole chapters of his social science-creating work, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, to the Trobrianders' canoes. The car remained neglected in social anthropology, however, until the last two decades. What does exist however gives a very interesting insight into how the car has been interpreted in the social sciences. In one of the relatively few car focused social science PHDs of the previous few years Simon Andrew Maxwell, in his Human Geography PhD, entitled *Car Cultures* opens his work with:

"The unrelenting growth of transport is possibly the greatest environmental threat facing the

UK, and one of the greatest obstacles to achieving sustainable development (RCEP, 1994, 1997). Accident risks from traffic are now one of the greatest dangers for children, and are intimidating for many adults. Globally, by one conservative estimate, road accidents kill a quarter of a million and seriously injure three million people annually" (Maxwell, a: 01)

The focus of Maxwell's research was on how car users in Cambridge, England, justify using such an anti-social form of transport. The context for his project is one in which it has already been decided that the car is an evil instrument, that the traffic on our roads is unwelcome, and that reason would suggest that we would all be better off without this hideous blot on our society. Selecting negative data on motoring without saying anything about how motoring has altered society is, plainly, unhelpful, and really has no place in academia. This works springs from an anti-car political movement that must not be allowed to be the default approach of social science towards motoring culture.

I believe that if one begins with the premise that there is something wrong with cars and using them as a normal means of transport, then, from the outset, it is very likely that one's conclusions will be rather one-sided and of limited use to the community. Thankfully, since Kopytoff's reminder that the biography of a car "would reveal a wealth of cultural data" (Kopytoff, 1986a: 67) has been heeded by a number of social scientists some very interesting work has been carried out without the taint of anti-motoring politics. Interestingly, in my project, which has focused on motoring enthusiasts, my informants expressed their animosity towards what they regard as the anti-motoring authorities whenever the topic of the politics of motoring arose. The social scientist would do well to position him/herself, therefore, in a more neutral position regarding the morality and politics of motoring if he/she is at all interested in the word "science" which makes up half of the term "social science".

In recent years a number of social scientists have begun to take the car seriously as an item of material culture, and we are beginning to see some literature in the same vein as the much larger bodies of anthropological literature on the house, food or clothing. The most significant anthropological work on the car is collection *Car Cultures*, edited by Daniel Miller (Miller, 2001a), in the *Materializing Culture* series. A collection of chapters written by various anthropologists and an introductory essay by Miller, and including a chapter by the aforementioned Simon Maxwell, this collection goes some way towards showing the ways in which cars are culturally incorporated in a variety of people's lives. Miller introduces the topic as "the humanity of the car" (Miller, 2001a: 2). The first chapter of Miller's book is called "Driven Societies" and it is the introductory chapter of the collection. Miller starts off his discussion on "the humanity of the car" in true social science tradition by talking about the car as a vehicle of destruction. Obviously one starts with the familiar in any work and from there moves on to the unfamiliar. This is a conventional device for drawing the reader into the discussion to get them on side before introducing new, and sometimes uncomfortable, thoughts.

Miller's language in the opening text is more or less what one would expect in an essay that is seemingly hostile to its subject; "the car as the sign of our alienation", "the car is the villain that has separated us from the world", "this should not be taken as some mark of adulation or defence of the car", "to take seriously the humanity of the car must imply a perspective that examines the car as a vehicle for class, oppression, racism and violence...", "nevertheless the mere idea of the car having humanity is not something that is easily accepted; indeed many readers might be revolted at the suggestion" (Miller, 2001a: 2-3)

Of course, Miller wants to introduce a different way of looking at the car, but it is

exactly this intellectual, environmentally friendly, politically correct approach that he first acknowledges that my informants find so patronizing, insulting and antagonistic. In a study of society and culture, for what rational reason would we begin with the position that the car is an object of evil? Is this not the stuff of superstition and ignorance? Interestingly, as Miller points out, historically we have done very well at associating the car with evil. Firstly, we have Fordism, and the brilliant use made of it by Aldous Huxley in his dystopia *Brave New World* (Huxley, 1983a) and then there was Hitler's obsession of making Germany a truly motoring nation and his efforts to produce a people's car. Since then the car has supposedly been a killing machine in *Unsafe at any speed: the designed-in dangers of the American automobile* (Nader, 1965a), and has been responsible for global warming, urban pollution, deaths, respiratory diseases and, through high density traffic, for destroying communities. Miller goes on to point out how scholars have rushed to negative conclusions about cars and car use without attempting to balance their accounts. He points out some of the many areas of car use and many attitudes towards cars that have received this hasty treatment which I have no need to pursue here.

Instead, having been forced into taking notice of cars in Trinidad, by the sheer flamboyance and vitality within the practice of individualising car upholstery in that society, Miller begins by asking the question, "What is a car?" (Miller, 2001a: 17). What he learnt from the research he subsequently did was that in that society a person's identity was very closely tied up with their automobile and that they used their car, therefore, to express to society both who they were, what they were doing and not least where they could be found. The car therefore took on a variety of social meanings and tasks for its owner and was an extension of both their physical presence in society and their social identity (Miller, 2001a).





chapter 3

# History of England in the 1920s-1930s and the motoring industry

## Introduction

In this chapter I will provide the historical background to my argument. To recall that I am focusing my efforts on showing how the mythical idea of the vintage car carries with it a mythical English past. In this chapter I will trace the historical outline of the major events that shaped the two decades which are focused upon here: The nineteen twenties, the decade during which vintage cars were manufactured, and the 1930s which saw a change in the motor car and which provides that other by which vintage cars could be defined. The end of 1930 marks the official boundary between the two relevant ages of car, vintage and modern, but on the level of everyday thought the boundary is more simply thought of as the changing of the digit from 2 to 3 in terms of decade. This is despite that the technical change does indeed fit in with the strict definition of the ending of the decade at the end of 1930.

By following the major changes in the structure of English society using the dominant theme of class, by laying out the final democratisation of the UK which took place during this period in terms of politics and by looking at the changes in manufacturing and technology that also took place at this time, and which is closely related to the other two topics, I intend to show some of the structural changes that took place that assisted in the categorising of the cars as they are now, and that assisted my informants in having the clearly defined categories into which they assign a range of values that again collaborate with their thinking about their

cars and their lives.

One point to note is that when discussing the different classes in relation to one another, both between classes and within classes, it is normal to employ the terms “higher” and “lower”, as if class is synonymous with verticality. I shall continue that usage here, as it is easy to understand the relative power and status of the different classes in society thus, but I will avoid any ethical or philosophical (or political) discussion of this usage.

### **Class: The structuring of English society**

The basic outline of the structure of class in England, and indeed in the UK, into its tripartite of the upper, middle and lower classes is common knowledge, and really needs no introduction here. What is more interesting though is the emergence of this structure after the industrial revolution that took place at the end of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century and its evolution since then. The tripartite class system of England, which has relevance for the structure of society over the whole of the UK, and that we know today, emerged as England transformed from its medieval feudal social structure, largely formed of the landed and the landless, to the industrialised social structure of the labourers/workers or proletariat, the middle classes also known as the bourgeoisie (although this term has other meanings), and the upper class, who continued to own most of the country's land.

Despite what knowledge we have today of the appalling conditions under which the working class often lived in mid-nineteenth century English cities, Perkin argues that class distinctions were at their greatest between 1880 and 1914, at a time when the working class had become much better off than since the formation of this class – the period directly before the period in which we are interested, in this chapter (Perkin, 1990a). Despite a rising

standard of living for the working class, which was giving more people a dignified and relatively healthy existence during these years, the absolute difference in incomes was at its greatest and the segregation of the classes from one another was increasing rapidly (Perkin, 1990a). Britain was increasing its wealth, and everyone was benefiting. With Perkin, I will also argue that another class, the Professional class, was emerging during the critical period that this chapter focuses on and that this emerging class figures largely in the current middle class vintage car owners who make up my informants. The growth of the Professional class can also be described, as in (McKibbin, 2000a), as the emergence of a modern middle class out of an Edwardian middle class (McKibbin, 2000a). The meaning of this will be discussed in the remainder of this section.

The bare facts, when it comes to the class system, is that the tripartite division obscures the intricate structure of multiple class divisions that really made (and still make) up English society, and that can also be referred to as a caste system (see (Marwick, 1971a)), and that these divisions have been shifting constantly. Additionally, modern communications have assisted the continual division of classes and to a large extent made them more absolute by assisting the classes into reorganising themselves geographically into class enclaves, something that was not so possible in the days of poorer communications (Perkin, 1990a). In the twentieth century, the car was a tool that assisted and accelerated this process, which was begun with the train in the previous century.

## **The Aristocracy**

In terms of rank, status and power the first class in the class system is the aristocracy, otherwise known as the gentry. It is interesting to note that power of class was in reverse

proportion to its relative size in the total population. The monarchy can be regarded as a special instance of the aristocracy, or indeed as its first family. This class was the small elite class that traditionally owned and administered the land and the people who lived on it, and this system is often referred to as the *Traditional* system (McKibbin, 2000a). The aristocracy emerged largely in the late Middle Ages and lasted several hundred years until the Industrial Revolution shook things up once more and the country moved into the age of *Modernity*. Its most prominent members comprised the majority of peers that sat in the House of Lords – the upper house of the two house English Parliament. “Peer” in this context means a “nobleman”, a person of social rank from baron and above, or/and, as in this case, a member of the House of Lords. If the reader does not find this very enlightening I can perhaps add that a peer is a person who inherits a large titled estate or who, by their conduct, gains special favour with the ruling powers of the nation, whether that be a monarchy or a democratic government. This class are additionally often referred to as “the ruling class”.

With increasing industrialisation in Britain a growing number of modern industrialists gained power equivalent to or greater than many of the landed gentry and began to join this small elite class and began to be recognised as such by becoming peers. McKibbin estimates that the upper class, after the first world war, in 1919, probably stood at somewhere between 20 000 and 40 000 people or between 0.05% and 0.1% of the population (McKibbin, 2000a).

What this means in practice is that the vast majority of the English owned nothing and served their masters. For centuries the members of the very small class of landowners maintained their position at the top of society by maintaining their holdings, their social network and by living to a code to which only the elite subscribed. Cultural values were essential in this mix, and, as are to be found in the elite of many such sharply stratified

societies, the elite class developed a culture of their own which was quite alien to their fellow countrymen.

By 1920 the upper class consisted of the old landed gentry, a newer, but well established, industrial gentry and an emerging group of sporting and show-business celebrities (it was at this time that the cult of celebrity began to emerge) (ibid.), and this latter group had joined the ranks of the upper class by virtue of their acceptance into *Society*, the fashionable clique within the upper class. The cultural values of this English upper class are highly relevant to my thesis. This is because this is the class of people who were the first to adopt motoring, which was initially a form of leisure pursuit, and inscribed the activity of motoring with their cultural values.

### **The Middle Classes**

Directly below the upper class in the tripartite class structure of England is the middle class. The middle class stretched from, at the poorer end, families of which the sole worker was a relatively unskilled but literate clerk in a factory, to families that were more or less on a par with the gentry and who lived on large estates and had large-scale industrial interests. The middle classes (much more accurately referred to in the plural) fill the enormous divide between the upper and lower classes. They made up the 20% of the population that filled the divide between that 0.1% of the population that owned nearly the whole country and that 80% section of the population that owned, literally, nothing and had almost no influence on how things were run.

While it can be said that, so far, I am using wealth as the defining category for class, and which contemporary surveys also used, the truth is often far more complex. Individuals were defined in terms of class by how they saw themselves and by how the community

around them saw them, and very often wealth had not a great deal to do with the classification. Class was often, in effect, defined by a family's occupation.

"By education (frequently at grammar school<sup>9</sup>), by style of life, salary, dress and deportment, by social aspiration, by what was expected of them from parents, employers and society, these men and women were middle class" (McKibbin, 2000a: 45). Before the Great War the English middle class was traditionally made up of the professional class of doctors, lawyers, teachers, priests and bureaucrats and merchants as well as some industrialists and also the clerks and other "pen-pushing" office-based workers, which had become prevalent in the new manufacturing industries.

This picture changed somewhat after World War I when engineering, technology and business related professions began expanding and there opened up a whole new modern class who worked in these new technical professions. According to McKibbin, at the end of the Great War the middle class was largely what he calls an "Edwardian" middle class and was recognizable as the traditional middle class as described above (McKibbin, 2000a). These were the traditional professions that had largely remained stable for the previous couple of centuries. This picture remained, for the most part, intact until about 1930 when there was a rapid increase in technology-based professional employment from the professional scientists and engineers higher up the middle class ladder to the increase in technical support staff towards the lower end of the middle class.

Since the notion of class includes many elements of lifestyle and outlook, as well as a lesser focus on actual wealth, and with the aspirant upper middle class trying to emulate the upper class it is difficult to set the boundary strictly between the top two classes. At the lower

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9 schools that were either state-run or private that concentrated on an academic education and practiced selection of pupils by academic ability. They are still criticised by some as being elitist but defended by others actually breaking down class barriers.

end of the middle class, however, people were very careful to maintain the cultural border between themselves and the prosperous section of the working class, even when financial differences did not exist. Often it was members of the middle class that owned the properties in which working families lived and were in at least that respect parasitic upon them (McKibbin, 2000a).

"At the top the middle class merged with the fringes of 'society', which some tried desperately to enter. At the bottom they overlapped in income, though not in lifestyle, with the prosperous working class..."(Perkin, 1990a: 80)

What seems to characterize the middle classes was their snobbery and their segregation, according to Perkin. These classes spanned from the wealthy with aristocratic values to the quite poor who kept apart from the working class by their lifestyle, and not through any ability to maintain a better material existence. And it is the middle classes that most justified the following quote from Perkin: "As Frank Harris...noted, 'Snobbery is the religion of England.' We shall find that not only to be true between the major social classes but within them as well" (Perkin, 1990a: 62). It was their manners and their aspirations which often made them middle class. Seen from the view of the workers, while lower middle class workers might not have earned much more than skilled workers, they were however connected to the management by working alongside them and wearing the same uniform, and they did not tend to mix with the workers.

After the first world war there was a dramatic rise in the demand for technical and engineering based professionals. The educational system was gearing up to provide these new professionals (more on which below), and between 1921 and 1931 the number of technology,

engineering and science professionals employed in the country doubled, but between 1921 and 1951 it increased by ten times. McKibbin points out that while things were changing in the 1920s the real dramatic increase in this new class of professional worker took place in the 1930s.

While the traditional upper middle class professions of doctors, clergymen and lawyers were firmly established as belonging to a particular community in which they were likely to spend their whole working life the new professional middle class were much more mobile, and came to live in the huge new housing developments that were built in the period between the two wars, especially what is known as ribbon development – long chains of mock tudor houses spreading out along main arterial roads from the major cities of England (McKibbin, 2000a: 46).

In 1921 the middle class numbered about 9 million people, equivalent to just under 22 percent of the population, and this remained virtually unchanged in 1931, but by 1951 it had increased to 13 million people or almost 28 percent of the total population (McKibbin, 2000a).

The middle class experienced a steady rise in their disposable wealth during the inter-war period despite the depression that occurred in the middle of this period. The period that saw middle class income decline, the two or three years of the onset of depression from 1928, also saw a drop in consumer prices and so the purchasing power of middle class people continued to rise. McKibbin describes the period between 1923 and 1938 as a golden age for the middle classes and one in which they gained in wealth and power at the cost of both the upper class and the working class (McKibbin, 2000a: 65). During this period the average middle class family earned and spent twice as much as the average working class family (ibid), and in the 1930s conspicuous consumption had increased enough for there to have



emerged a culture of 'shopping' among the middle classes (McKibbin, 2000a: 61). This was an important element in the changing structure of the British car industry and in car design, which the motoring historian Setright argues still influences car design today (Setright, 2002a).

### **The Working Classes**

Beneath the middle classes were the working class, who according to the above figure would have made up around 78 per cent of the population in 1921, but traditionally were unable to translate this to any sort of political power (though more on this below). McKibbin describes England as "one of the most working-class countries in the world" (McKibbin, 2000a: 106). The working class also underwent major changes throughout this period, but most of all in terms of political participation.

The working class of the late Victorian period is generally considered as being split into two major divisions: the relatively genteel skilled working class, and the unskilled 'Roughs' who were paid less, often lacked even a rudimentary education and lived segregated in areas of poor housing and sanitation.

By far the dominant class in terms of numbers the working class was to become smaller in relation to the other classes in the period from 1921 to 1951, and by the latter date comprised only 70 per cent of the population (McKibbin, 2000a). The most important change during this period was the decline in the skilled work available to workers and the rise in unskilled work. The heavy industries were in decline in the UK during this period and were generally being replaced by light industries such as the manufacturing industries one of which was the motor industry. The decline in skilled work can also be seen as an effect of the

increasing use of the techniques of mass production. Assembly line factories required large numbers of unskilled workers, while there was a rise in the number of skilled workers required to service the machines of the assembly line. In the textile industry especially there was a sharp decline in work for skilled women. Throughout this period there was a rapid decline in the number of apprenticeships available in heavy industries.

The working class are not an important element in this thesis as they were generally excluded from owning cars and therefore motoring culture until at least the 1960s (Bowden & Turner, 1993a), since the car was until that time outside of their financial reach, and they have little role to play in the spread of the motor car through the middle classes and the latter's constant desire to emulate the upper class, all of which had a constant influence on car design, manufacturing and marketing. The story of the working class and motoring will not be written about here.

In relation to cars it was the gentry, or upper class, that first adopted them when the technology was new. It was adventurous men with considerable wealth and with the time and inclination to play with the new technology and with education enough to dream of the future.

As car technology moved on and cars became more practical some of the wealthier middle class began to adopt them in the 1920s.

## **Politics**

The period 1880-1914 represents the “zenith of class society” (Perkin, 1990a: 27) , in which the social classes were more sharply distinguished from each other than at any time before or after. The middle classes had been enjoying a steady rise in income, as were the

working classes, and were beginning to move away from their distinguishing feature of hard work and austerity and towards more conspicuous consumption and a general attempt to emulate their social superiors. The working classes, despite their overwhelmingly dominant numbers, had as yet no managed to exercise any real political influence in the country, having traditionally been encouraged to leave such things to “the ruling classes”. The working classes were, however, becoming better organised and through many different organisations and trade unions were beginning to flex their political muscles.

In 1910 there began to emerge a crisis in class society (Perkin, 1990a) that was to put the country under pressure for the next twenty years. If we compare the the UK to many other industrialised countries of that time it is clear that the crisis may well have brought about the breakdown of class society or even revolution. Industrial action started taking place on a larger and larger scale, and the number of working days lost to strike action each year rose from an average of around 3 million to over 10 million in the 4 years before the first world war broke out (Perkin, 1990a).

The crisis was perhaps assuaged by the growth of government. The minimalist style of Victorian liberal government was no longer suitable for a highly complex and troubled industrial society. It was at this time that the Liberal party, the traditional party of government in the UK, was experiencing a flight of support towards the Conservative party. Also rising quickly was working class political organisation, and after the franchise was first extended to working class voters outside of the towns, men who were householders and £10 lodgers at least, in 1884, a further 6 million working class men were able to vote. It wasn't long before the rise of the political power of the working class was to become spearheaded by the Labour party. The Labour Representation committee was founded in 1900 and after it won its first 29 seats in the general election of 1906 it became the Labour Party and went on to increase its

number of parliamentary seats to 49 in 1910 (Perkin, 1990a). It was, however, still only attracting a small amount of the available working class vote, as the majority of working class voters still supported the two larger traditional parties (ibid).

In the twenty years from 1881 to 1901 the number of people being employed in government, both local and national, rose from 97 000 to 172 000 (Ryder & Silver, 1970a). This was still very modest by later standards, but it was the beginning of the growth of government that was to eventually lead to a more corporate society. In fact, the government was still very modest in size at the beginning of the first world war and it was the war itself that forced the country to adopt a centralised management of industry and services that led to the growth in government ambition to manage society to a greater degree, and which led to a more corporate society in the later inter-war period. The swelling ranks of state employees in government related jobs also inevitably increased the middle class participation in the running of the state, which was all part of the middle classes taking over the management of the nation from the upper class.

Internationally, and especially in terms of international trade, the UK started losing out to its foreign competitors from the 1880s onwards, most notably to Germany and the United States. This was partly caused by adverse trading conditions for British industry, but also on its reliance on heavy industry and being slower to adopt new industries and new techniques than its competitors (Perkin, 1990a). However, the situation was not felt in incomes, which continued to rise during the period. And there is no contradiction between this decline in industrial strength and increase in revenues.

In politics the move to full democracy continued after the first world war. With two further increases of the franchise, particularly to women, to eventually attain universal suffrage by 1929. Equally important were the improvements in the education system. The

government introduced changes that made it possible for working class children to progress through the system and to gain a university education, though the obstacles were very great and only a few did achieve this. “As a result, while Britain had one of the smallest percentages of university entrants in the developed world, it came to have the largest percentage of working class students within its university population” (Perkin, 1990a: 247) It was again the middle classes who benefitted from greater chances of a university education. For both middle class boys and girls born after 1910 the chances of a university education was twice as high as it was for those born earlier (8.5 per cent of middle class boys would go to university and they had twice as good a chance of a university education than girls, and about 6 times as good a chance of a university education as working class boys) (Perkin, 1990a).

The other major change in politics that affected how society was organised after the first world war was in the redistribution of income. Already in the 1880s the government had started introducing a progressive tax, which was in effect to some limited degree the start of getting the rich to finance services for the poor, but after the first world war unemployment payments were started in 1921 as it was recognised that an efficient modern society needed to have a healthy well-nourished population ready to work when they were needed.

In politics, then, we have seen, above, that upper class had slowly been losing their dominance over control of parliament and society from towards the end of the nineteenth century. After World War I for the first time the landed gentry did not command a majority in the cabinet. The middle classes were getting a better education, they were enjoying rising standards of living, and with the rise of more and more recognised professions, especially in technical areas, which the lower middle class were eager to fill, there developed a new modern professional middle class that also increasingly took up the new positions in

administration, industry and education, which further increased their influence and control over political discourse. By the 1930s there was already a large new middle class population, who had purchasing power, and who wanted to experience for themselves some of the finer pleasures that hitherto had been reserved for the upper class members of “Society”. Veblen’s “conspicuous consumption” was spreading down through the classes as new strata of society began to get their hands on the kind of material goods that had traditionally been reserved for the rich (Veblen, 1994).

### **Industry: Decline and rejuvenation**

As noted above the British began to be overtaken by Germany and the US towards the end of the nineteenth century. From this perspective it would seem logical that because Britain had industrialised so early it may have had more obsolete equipment and techniques than some of the countries that industrialised a little later. With its entrenched class system it is also not surprising that industry remained concentrated on the heavy industries later than its industrialised counterparts. With such a large working class population who owned nothing and were not to be able to afford manufactured consumer products for a while there was no obvious economic incentive for manufacturing to go light as early or as to the same degree as in the USA or Germany.

However, during the twentieth century British manufacturers did begin to catch up and there was a boom in British light industry, beginning in the 1930s and that lasted until the 1970s (McKibbin, 2000)

### **Zeitgeist**

The adoption of the vintage car by a community of young men in the 1930s is very closely tied up with the history of class, politics and industry, as I have presented it above. These factors alone, however, cannot explain the passion for obtaining cars and racing them that was spreading through the community of educated young middle class men. There was also a change in the spirit of the times between the 1920s and the 1930s, which had an effect on people, the economy, politics and not least on the market for consumer products.

History books often refer to “The New Consumerism” (Johnson, 1994a) in Britain of the inter-war period. Until approximately WWI, consumerism, although *the term* was not coined until the 1940s, was the exclusive domain of the upper class. The interwar period, not only saw the middle classes ostensibly taking over politics in the UK from the upper class, as mentioned above, but it also saw, through their continuing rising wealth, the middle classes efforts to emulate the upper class in the public symbols they adopted to reflect their lifestyle. Given the middle classes’ increasing wealth and desire to emulate their social “betters”, a consumption (“shopping”) culture developed, which some of the upper class looked upon with hypocritical horror (Ryder & Silver, 1970a).

In the 1920s the modern age could be said to have reached a peak. After the economically prosperous decade that emerged after the first world war, the 1930s saw the worst of the world depression, the ugly rise of fascism and the beginning of a short dark age in Europe which lasted until the 1960s. It appears, though not understood at that time, that modernism’s rational and objective values, which were the values of the elite ruling class as much as they were of a time, were to be overshadowed from around 1930 onwards by a post-modernist refusal to be loyal to ideas and values that were previously thought to be undeniable.

I argue that the 1920s saw the peak of Modernity while the 1930s saw the beginning of the post-modern spirit begin to take over, and therefore the decline in the values of Modernity. I shall explain what I mean by *post-modern*, given that it is an expression that has had so many different meanings ascribed to it and is constantly the subject of huge debate. By post-modern I mean a time or cultural climate in which the core values associated with what we understand as Modern are questioned, challenged, manipulated and broken down. Once again, “all that is solid melts into air” (Marx & Engels, 1998a: 06), but it is the all-destructive Modern spirit that this time faces the same destructive spirit that has driven it (see (Berman, 1983a)). It is a climate in which what was considered concrete truth has become an artificial barrier, a manufactured truth that is only true if you choose to believe in it, but if you do not choose to believe in it, then it is something that becomes a point of departure or an object to manipulate.

In art, as early as 1916, the Dada movement had started to turn the Modern values of rationalism upside down, with its campaign of *anti-art*. It is also no coincidence that the rational, observable, predictable laws that had dominated physics for the previous 240 years were being brought down by quantum mechanics theories that were being published in the second half of the 1920s.

From the final achievement of a real representative democracy in British politics from 1930, society was to witness an increasing application of democracy, or at least the rise in arguments for increasing democracy, in many realms of society and life. Authority was to be increasingly questioned, and the citizen was to feel more and more that her truth was as good as any official truth handed down from the elite. And as the middle classes took over from the aristocracy, so were the dominant rational, positivist, ideas of Modernity questioned and



challenged, as the middle classes continued on their more pragmatic course. This questioning of values and tastes was to continue through the following decades, as musical tastes were to be overturned by the rock and roll revolution of the 1950s and 1960s and following from this a revolution in sexual mores in the 1960s and 1970s, and the feminist struggle to overturn men's primordial dominance over women. Authority would be questioned on every level, and a philosopher could write in the 1970s that the control of science ought to be taken out of the hands of experts, the scientists, and given over to the people to manage (Feyerabend, 1983a).

One of the first victims was the supposed rationality in design in light industry, which supposedly involved honest firms producing honest functional products. This rationality was assumed by the elite to be the true natural design ideal in manufacturing, but again it was only the central element in the elite's own discourse on design rather than something inherent in design itself.

From the 1930s marketing and product design became more sophisticated and began to sell "the lesser as the greater", and this was to be seen nowhere better than in the motoring industry, the products of which became increasingly aesthetically attractive in terms of their flamboyancy of shape and detail, and the claims for such cars in marketing became greater as the cars themselves became heavier and slower.

Popular culture also plays an important role in the process, and it is the spirit of the age that had an undeniably strong influence.

If we put aside for the moment the social values of status and distinction, there are undoubtedly two very strong factors in the initial popular success of driving cars, and they are speed and freedom. The former of these two had been achieved by the train. And trains became a symbol for speed in much popular graphical art. Before railway travel it was the horse, aided by the carriage, that had embodied popular images of both speed and freedom,

but, as Sachs and Reneau have pointed out, by the late 19th century train passengers had begun to sneer and laugh at horse and carriage passengers as they sped passed in their carriages. The train however was not able to deliver the freedom of private transport, so that the speed one achieved was at the cost of one's freedom (Sachs & Reneau, 1992a). In 1902 Otto Julius Bierbaum lamented:

“Whoever goes traveling in a railway coach forgoes, for a time, his freedom. Every trip made by railway is also a transport of prisoners; the wardens are called conductors...the prisoner rules are called railway regulations...[and] as the solitary cell system is too dear, the prisoners are transported ...together in groups, more or less large, whereby, admittedly, some consideration is shown for the capacity in one's purse.” in (Sachs & Reneau, 1992a: 9)

The car offered the speed of the train, though not in its first few decades, but also total freedom to go where one liked, but independently from the crowd. Popular posters of the 1920s and 1930s, in the style that later became known as Art Deco, depicted trains, cars, ships and planes all leaning forwards, streamlined and obviously moving at velocity.

Speed and style blended into one another in the eye of the consumer and added to social status and the undeniable practicality the car brought especially to professional people living in rural areas the almost wholesale adoption of the car in the 1930s seems practically inevitable.

By the end of the 1920s the image of wealthy people travelling around the world at speed, and in technologically amazing machines, from one society event to the other, had been instilled in minds of millions of consumers and potential car owners, and those who were now in a position to buy into that dream were going to do just that.

## **The History of Motoring**

### **Introduction**

But young men were not only looking for the appearance of speed, style, comfort and status they were looking to emulate their heroes thundering around the race circuits of Brooklands, Le Mans and many more. Young graduates in the 1930s, men educated often in the emerging new fields of engineering and science wanted to join the excitement of the fast life, but without the money to buy new cars and without the desire for slow cars, found that for approximately £50 they could buy the fast sporting cars that were approaching 10 years old, often in disrepair, but technologically very simple (Hull, 1964a).

These young men found that once fixed up and running well, these cars were extremely competitive against newer cars, in addition to being exciting, and that on a reasonably limited budget these men, and one or two pioneering women, could drive around the country and take part in motor racing events for a great deal less money than those who were racing new cars. In 1934 these men formed a club called the Vintage Sports Car Club.

### **The three ages of motoring**

In a similar vein to David Gartman in his *Three Ages of the Automobile: The Cultural Logics of the Car* (Gartman, 2004a) I have come to see the history of motoring as divided into three different ages, and this indeed reinforces the rationale behind the enthusiasm of my informants for their particular class of cars. So viewing the history of motoring in this manner

has become fruitful for my whole project.

Since David Gartman writes about the history of motoring in the US I will not keep to his particular three ages since they do not apply to the UK, but I will rather describe the ages as they apply to the history of motoring in the latter country. And as alluded to in the above sections of this chapter it is social class that has been one of the dominant factors throughout the history of consumption of the automobile, and so again it is social class in relation to the car that defines my three ages. So, along with David Gartman I can employ Bourdieu's idea of *distinction* where Gartman writes:

Pierre Bourdieu conceives of consumption as a game of distinction, in which different classes compete for cultural capital or status honor. For him, the automobile is a distinctive status symbol, marking off but ultimately misrecognizing the inequalities of class society (Gartman, 2004a: 170).

In the UK, class and competition for cultural capital and status has defined the whole history of motoring. Ever since the wealthy elite adopted motoring in its infancy as a leisure pursuit, those who aspire to the lifestyle and status of those directly above them on the social ladder have wanted to join the party. While in its early days motoring was financially out of the reach of all but the very wealthy, the lower classes, for whom motoring was not conceivably possible, resented the horrible motorised machines. However, motoring filtered down slowly through the classes, over many decades, until most of the population was included. However, given its early class connections many motorists today still aspire to motor in the style of their social "superiors".

Although David Gartman, using O'Connell's *The car and British society: class,*

*gender and motoring 1896-1939* (O'Connell, 1998a) as a reference, constantly compares the situation between the US and the UK he writes that already by the mid twenties, in the US, handcrafted luxury cars went into decline, as superficially similar cars were being mass-produced by what had become the big three American car manufacturers, and that the luxury marques only survived by either downgrading their products to compete directly with mass-produced cars or by being bought up by one or other of the big three manufacturers. Consequently, already in the 1920s the *distinction* that was present in the consumption of cars was beginning to disappear in that country.

For Gartman, from the mid 1920s onwards, the US entered the age of mass consumption of cars. American car manufacturers were mass-producing cars for the workers, but with body styling that superficially resembled the expensive exclusive cars of the previous generation. At this time, they also introduced many different models so that people could individualise their motoring experience (Gartman, 2004a: 178).

In the UK, however, he writes that the same thing did not happen until after World War II (Gartman, 2004a), and this conclusion is supported by studying the market analysis data for the motoring market in the inter-war period (Bowden & Turner, 1993a). However, in a society that is stratified to the degree England was at that time, there were many different layers of distinction, reflecting the many different layers of middle class society. Therefore, when we look at distinction and car ownership in that country we see that in the period between car ownership as an elite pastime and it becoming an almost universal condition there is a continual situation where each strata of society would aspire to the lifestyle of the strata immediately above them. And the car gradually filtered downwards through the middle classes.

I would add that the disappearance of distinction in owning a car did not occur until

much later than that in the UK, probably in the 1970s and even 1980s, because motor manufacturing in the UK after World War II was so depressed that it did not fully return to a more normal full production until the 1960s. Distinction within car ownership was maintained by the introduction of different classes of cars in the 1920s, a practice which continues today.

The post World War II depression of British industry was largely responsible for influencing many of my informants' attitudes towards cars, because most of them were, as young men, in a position to buy their first car towards the end of the 1950s and early 1960s, when the only affordable cars available to them were the old bangers from the 1920s. Their first experience of driving their own cars was, then, with the already thirty year old hand built, light, primitive vintage cars of the 1920s, and the surviving cars from that era were often the bigger, more powerful, more solidly built hand-crafted cars.

Gartman's third age of the automobile is the age of post-modernism, from the 1960s onwards, where car manufacturers brought out a whole diffusion of different car styles designed to slot into the US's different lifestyles and sub-cultures. This time the cars were not just superficially styled variants of one basic model as in the 1920s, but were fundamentally different in structure and engineering, and carefully aimed at different niche markets in American society (Gartman, 2004a: 185). In the UK, the 60s and 70s saw a superficial mimicking of this policy, but under the bodywork there were just a few basic models, and they were generally very poor cars, that era not being one of British manufacturing's finest. The sort of market for lifestyle vehicles that the US saw in the 1960s was not really to emerge in the UK and the rest of Europe until the mid 1990s.

Certainly, the one redeeming feature of this time in the British motor industry was the boom in the sports car industry from the end of the 1950s until well into the 1970s. This was the first time the British motoring industry had much to offer in the way of sports cars since

the glory days of the 1920s, thirty years previously. The sixties English sports car, like those of the twenties, was primitive, light and exciting.

### **The three ages of motoring in the UK**

The motor car, driven by an internal combustion engine, is first said to have been successfully invented and put into use by Karl Benz in 1885. Although this is not the strict truth, and although this historical “fact” was promoted both by the commercial pride of Daimler-Benz and the nationalist pride of the Nazi party in Germany, because the Benz of 1885 was the first motor car to achieve any degree of commercial success, then this historical “fact” serves perfectly well as the basis for our knowledge (Setright, 2002a).

In the first two decades of motoring the car was restricted to an exclusive group of engineers and wealthy technology enthusiasts. The cars were rarely reliable enough to be used over longer distances, and most people only very rarely caught a glimpse of a car on the roads, if at all. Cars quickly gained a reputation for being noisy, smelly and dangerous. And in some countries, such as England, very restrictive laws made it almost more trouble than it was worth to use a car on public roads at all. It must also be remembered that solid tarmac surfaces for roads did not exist at that time and it was not long before motor vehicles were creating huge clouds of dust wherever they went also generating anger from pedestrians and those using equine transport (ibid).

Given the restrictions on the use of cars and the hostility of both the legislature and the general public it was not long before British motorists felt that they were being persecuted. This feeling of persecution has succeeded in being transferred from generation to generation, and older motoring enthusiasts, if not younger ones, still talk of the state’s hostility towards

them today. Speed limits were restrictive in most countries that had motor cars, but in the US depending on the State one was driving in it was already permitted to travel up to speeds of nearly 65 km/h, while new laws passed in Britain in 1896 allowed for a relaxing of the speed limit from 6 km/h to 19 km/h (Setright, 2002a).

The 1890s also saw the birth of motor racing, which ever since has had an enormous impact on the development of the car. Long road races of distances of up to many hundreds of kilometres were held on the European continent, and were particularly popular in France. These were literally lethal events in which many competitors lost their lives together with a number of bystanders.

A number of different motorsport events were soon developed, but road racing was to be popular in continental Europe while circuit racing became very popular in the UK and in the US, since road racing was illegal in the UK and not practical in the US. The two main variants of race circuit that we know today are the oval racetrack widely used in the US which today's Europeans look upon with curious bewilderment, and the road style race track with its many bends, chicanes, hills etc that Formula One and most other classes of track cars use in Europe, and beyond, today. Le Mans, probably the best known of the road style tracks was for many years just formed from several roads in the French countryside.

The most famous (nearly) oval track from the pre-war era was Brooklands, the 4km long circuit built in 1907 in the Surrey countryside, south west of London, and was a very popular venue until its eventual closing in 1939, shortly after the outbreak of World War II. In fact this was the first purpose built racetrack, and was built because it was the only option since road racing was illegal. In the US the Indianapolis Motor Speedway built in 1909 was based upon Brooklands, and the first Indianapolis 500 was raced in 1911. The track and the length and title of the race have remained the same ever since (Setright, 2002a).



By 1905 there were 16 000 cars in Britain (O'Connell, 1998a). By 1906 the figure had increased to 23 000, 1 car to every 1740 people, and the motor industry had achieved some success. At the Olympia car show in London of that year there were 434 different models of car on display. At the same time an economic depression hit almost of all the industrialised countries and the car industry was decimated. In 1908 Ford set the future course of the industry globally by introducing the Model T – “the car for people” as Ford himself said (Setright, 2002a: 38). The US had supplanted France as the biggest car producer, and by 1912 Detroit was turning out almost four times as many cars as the whole British motor industry. Ford was increasing the efficiency of his manufacturing process constantly and technological advances were being made that were making cars more user friendly, including Cadillac’s introduction of the electric starter of 1912, which, it is claimed, made motoring a more viable proposition for women (Setright, 2002a). The electric starter replaced the necessity of cranking the motor by hand with a starting handle. Since the engine is heavy and under compression the person cranking the starter handle risks the engine suddenly turning unexpectedly fast, and the handle thus propelled can easily break the arm of the person turning the handle.

By 1914, when the mass-production of cheaper cars was beginning to change American motoring, the British motor industry was congratulating itself that it continued to make a better class of product and had not gone down the American path of producing cheaper cars for the masses. Praising British car manufacturers for maintaining their high standards of workmanship the popular British motoring magazine *Autocar* wrote that they kept their “reputation for high grade work rather than cheapen their reputation by the use of inferior material and workmanship they would be obliged to employ to compete with

American manufacturers of cheap cars” (O’Connell, 1998a: 16). In other words cars remained luxurious toys for the rich, handbuilt in workshops; the assembly line could wait another generation.

And so we move onto the inter-war period that was to see, in Britain, cars really starting to become the practical transport we know them as today. It was during this period, I argue, that motoring in Britain moved into its second age. Throughout this period, cars were still to remain the exclusive property of only two of the three classes, while the third class, the working class which constituted over 75% of the British population, would have to wait two more decades still beyond the end of this period before they could really afford their own four-wheeled motor transport. And with that motoring would move into its third age (Bowden & Turner, 1993a).

### **The three ages of motoring for the vintage car enthusiast**

For my informants, on the other hand, motoring is also divided into three ages, but three quite different ages, and this is crucial to understanding their perception of the vintage car. For them the first age was from the birth of motoring and up to and including the era of Edwardian motoring which lasts until the end of World War I. This first age, then is the same as the first age of motoring that I have proposed above. From 1918 motoring entered its second age for the vintage enthusiast, the age that saw the production of “real” cars, what they term “vintage cars”. The end of 1930 saw the end of this second age and the introduction of the “modern” car, which is still, as far as they are concerned, what is produced to day. This is not to say that they are ignorant of the huge advances that have been made between 1931 and today. These enthusiasts are, generally speaking, very knowledgeable on all stages of car

history and technology. They rather see the changes that have taken place between 1931 and the present day as continual improvements to what they consider was an inferior mass-produced product that was a cheap and poor imitation of the true car of the 1920s. In this respect they lump the diffusion of the car through the middle classes and to, and through, the working classes as one period. Their focus is on the car before it was mass-produced at all, when only the upper class and the more wealthy among the middle class could afford it.

Note the difference in the choice of the ending of the second age and the beginning of the third age between the enthusiast's view and my own. My choice of ages is closely bound up with the social stratification that dominates society and culture in the UK. It refers to the lifestyles of the segments of the population who adopted motoring at a particular time, from an external observant position, and it also reflects how what was once known as a "shopping" culture, but now described as consumerism, has diffused through society from a small elite to now include the whole population. Motoring has changed British society and culture, as that society and culture has changed during the upheavals of the twentieth century.

The three ages of the enthusiast, however, are seen from within the cultural context of those people. It is the emic view. Since their position was first laid out by the early enthusiasts of "vintage" cars, i.e. the people who coined the term in the 1930s their structure for the ages of cars was largely laid out already in the mid and late 1930s. And because the object of their interest was and has remained the car of the 1920s, the VSCC and its members, the enthusiasts I write of, have seen no need to change or update their classificatory scheme.

### **The inter-war period**

At the end of World War I there were a little over 100 000 cars on British roads, but by

the end of the interwar period this had increased twenty fold to 2 000 000 (O'Connell, 1998a). And it was during this period that the nature of the British car changed, largely from an exclusive toy of the wealthy to the practical everyday transport of the middle classes. It is this change during the two decades of this period, and with 1930 standing symbolically as the essential and decisive mid-point, that was largely responsible for defining the category of cars that my informants hold higher than all others and which defined for them what a true car should be.

Car technology, and not least car manufacturing technology was moving forward quite quickly, yet compared to progress in science car manufacturers remained bumbling mechanics. Various methods of treating steel and the development of different alloys made it cheaper to manufacture cars that would be light, strong and more durable. In the US in 1923 new techniques in spray painting were developed which made the production of car bodies much cheaper and quicker (Setright, 2002a).

By the mid-twenties the US was mass-producing big powerful cars that could endure the hostile conditions of that continent, whereas in Europe manufacturers such as Citroen and Fiat were producing small, light cars of clever design to sell to the masses of their countries. In the UK a few manufacturers led by Austin were doing the same, most notably with the tiny Austin 7 first produced in 1922 (Setright, 2002a).

While the US was heading in the direction of big, rugged, powerful, stylish mass-produced cars, and Italy and France were both pioneering clever light small people's cars, in the UK a number of manufacturers were too beginning to turn out small light cars, but their technology was primitive and the cars were given no more than the absolutely necessary mechanical parts to make them go.

Yet in England, distinction was to remain the thing, and those who could afford a car

did not at that time want a small car that might suggest lower social status than that they aspired to. The Austin 7 was to be manufactured in a number of countries under licence, including in Japan by Datsun (Setright, 2002a).

The best known and most prestigious of the British car manufacturers continued to turned out simple powerful machines, that were handbuilt, and that required a skilled driver. The difference between the classic vintage car of the late twenties and the small people's cars that were beginning to gain a market hold were that the classic vintage car was a product for wealthy enthusiasts, who were looking for sporty leisure activity. The small cars were for less wealthy middle class people aspiring to join the motorised classes.

The vintage car, with its powerful engine, direct steering, primitive gearbox and rudimentary suspension demanded attention and skill to drive, and rewarded the driver with speed and excitement. For this reason the motoring press and literature of the time was full of prejudiced comments by men on the unsuitability of women as motorists. The next generation of cars that was emerging was closer to the reliable utility vehicle we know today. They didn't have much power, they were easier to control, they were more comfortable, and they were more likely to get you somewhere without adventure. For enthusiasts they were boring.

An early editor of the VSCC's news bulletin, and one of the founders of the VSCC, Sam Clutton was in 1937 to sum up the pre-1931 car in retrospect:

The occasion may not be altogether inept to attempt an analysis of those most intangible qualities which make a vintage car so different from practically anything available today.

...On the one hand there is the easy assurance of a relatively large engine working at conservative revs. and moderate output. On the other—perhaps the most important aspect—there is the intimacy between car and driver which is fostered by absolute positive and accurate

steering, a close-ratio gearbox, aided only by a clutch stop and controlled by a sturdy vertical lever, and the 'all-in-a-piece' roadholding, characteristic of the best vintage years (Hull, 1964a: 17).

He is writing of the handbuilt cars that were the leisure vehicles of the well off of the late 1920s, and he is describing them when compared with the mass of cars of the 1930s, and this within a purely British context. He is also ignoring the poorer, smaller and cheaper cars of the 1920s. Firstly, the large engine. The cars he is familiar with here were often between 3 litres and 6 litres (or more) in cylinder capacity, although the 750cc Austin seven and its competitors were available throughout most of the 1920s. Many of the cars of the thirties were between 750cc and 2 litres.

Secondly, the steering. When you turn a tight bend in your modern car, have you ever wondered why you have to quickly turn the steering wheel through many revolutions and back again? The steering in vintage cars is completely different. You only turning the steering wheel so may degrees and back again – no flailing around moving hand positions on the wheel. This means that the driver of a vintage car (and this is still true of modern racing cars) can turn the wheels of the car in the desired direction in only a fraction of a second, and much quicker than later cars, but it also takes more skill to steer the car accurately, because slight adjustments of the steering wheel will be transformed into major adjustments of steering on the road. It also means that at lower speeds one needs to exert considerable for on the steering wheel to actually turn the wheels of the car. Although invented in the 1920s power steering was not introduced to a production model car until the 1950s.

Thirdly, the synchromesh gearbox was only introduced in 1929, and it took a number of years before most cars had them. Cars had clutches and gears prior to this, but again one

needed skill to operate them. When changing gear you had to depress the clutch to take the car out of gear, and then wait and “feel” when the gears were “meshed” before putting it into the required gear. One of my informants, relatively new to the 1920s cars, describes the experience of these old “crash” gearboxes as follows:

“...but crash boxes are another art altogether. It's a black art, and if you've never driven with one you really have to start learning. You really have to use the brain as well as the feet. I like this aspect of it. It would be nice if I had something like 12/50 that had that in its early stage, but the Firefly has these crash boxes and I find it's adding another dimension to the whole aspect of motoring” (Desmond).

Automatic transmissions were not introduced until the 1940s, originally in the US, and by the 1960s most cars in that country had automatic transmission. In Europe and most other countries, however, manual syncromesh transmissions remain the most popular type today.

Independent suspension was also introduced to cars at around 1930. All these innovations added a great deal more steel to cars and made them heavier than their more primitive predecessors.

For most middle class families in the UK aspiring to car ownership by around 1930, however, for whom it was becoming a financial reality the car would give them the freedom previously only available to the wealthy to escape the polluted cities and the working classes and enjoy their leisure and the better things in life (O'Connell, 1998a). By 1939 about 20% of the population would have access to cars as the “...opportunity it gave owners to translate the social space between them into geographical space” (O'Connell, 1998a: 79). And they were

not the sporting enthusiasts who had aspired to car ownership of the previous decade. The mass of middle class families that were to achieve car ownership in the 1930s were more interested in the freedom motoring gave them, in the distinction it afforded them and as consumers a practical and comfortable way to achieve these things.

While the price of new cars was coming down, with the introduction of more efficient manufacturing techniques, better financing was made available for potential buyers. Until the 1930s financing schemes were eschewed, and it was believed that if a potential buyer could not raise the purchase price without assistance then they would not be able to afford to run a car. O'Connell writes that to use payment plans, such as hire-purchase, to buy one's car carried considerable shame, and although he supposes many cars were bought in this manner, and this was increasing substantially in the 1930s, it was always something that was kept secret due to its negative connotations (O'Connell, 1998a: 25).

However, in the 1930s the British motorist, like the American motorist, as described by Gartman, was now interested in individuality and style. This was an effect of the car being incorporated into a middle class lifestyle. One of my informants, Tom, gives knowledgeable opinion of the changes introduced into cars of the 1930s:

“In the 1930s, in the view of a lot of people, cars went downhill because people wanted more luxury: you had colossal weight introduced to cars, colossal body weight, heavy cars, lower chassis, poorer performance in many respects and, yeh, and that was why the distinction was made”. (Tom)

That was why the distinction was made between the 1920s' vintage cars and the cars of the 1930s. As the social distinction of the very status of being a car owner began to lessen



with the expansion of car ownership through the middle class motor manufacturers began to focus on design, comfort and the aesthetics of cars in their attempts to appeal to customers.

Although Austin, Morris and others had very small inexpensive cars on the market it was not these that potential buyers wanted. They wanted cars that were more sophisticated, stylish and comfortable, and ones that would reflect their social status. To sell cars to these middle class consumers motor manufacturers found that the tastes of the motoring elite were not those of the average middle class. What the middle class wanted was something that looked good (by their standards), was comfortable, convenient and reliable and was easy to use. To achieve these things the motor manufacturers gave them big comfortable stylish cars, that were easier to drive, but were slow, heavy and no fun.

The nature of motoring was changing. The big expensive carriages of the wealthy and lightweight rockets of the wealthy motorsport enthusiasts were being replaced by the curvaceous and intricately styled, but slow and more dependable carriages of the middle classes. The motor car had fully entered the world of the consumer and vice versa, and it was the consumer who was to be the most important consideration in future motor car design.



chapter 4

## Chapter 4: VSCC men

Having provided the context for the participatory observation part of my thesis it is now time to present the ethnographic data. Hopefully, the background I have written above will allow the reader to immediately gain some insight in to what I am going to describe. This will make it less complicated when I commence on the anthropological discussion which immediately follows this section.

The information that I provide in this section comes from a variety of empirical settings. These can roughly be divided into “Meets”, competitive motor sport events, “Days”, interviews, and from research I have done in literature relating to the vintage car movement.

### Tom

Although I had regular contact with a number of informants in this project there is one informant who I am on quite close terms with and whose home I lived in for the latter 2½ months of my research. His name is Tom and much of the empirical information presented in this chapter, if not directly about Tom, will be coloured by what Tom has conveyed to me about his passion for vintage cars.

Tom was born in 1936, and is 70 years old at the time of writing this. One of his early memories is during the early 1940s of riding around east London with his father in his father’s Alvis Firefly. The Firefly was one of Alvis’ lower powered and humbler models. It still had the kudos of a car produced by a company towards the forefront of motor

engineering and which built prestigious cars, including success in racing, but it was not built with sport and performance solely in mind. It was the first memory Tom has of a material relationship with a specific car. Today, Tom owns a 1932 Alvis Speed 20 SA *Vanden Plas* Tourer and a 1959 Alvis TD21 dhc<sup>10</sup>, and it seems reasonable that Tom already had developed some loyalty to this particular marque of car at a very early age.

Tom comes from a lower middle class background. His father owned and ran a small building firm, and Tom spent his whole working life as the manager of a branch office of a building society<sup>11</sup>. In terms of education Tom completed the standard. While some owners of prestigious vintage cars are only doing what, for them, comes “naturally”, Tom consciously appreciates the status that he believes owning high status cars brings.

Tom bought his first Alvis car in 1971, the 1959 Alvis TD21 dhc. In fact, Tom says that his Alvis TD21 which was only 12 years old when he bought it was, at that time, just an “old banger”<sup>12</sup>. Tom found, however, only a few years after buying his Alvis that the demands of a working married man with three young children meant that he had neither the time nor financial resources to run his classic car. After only three years of occasional use his Alvis was stored in the garage for 17 years before being it was finally recommissioned and back on the road.

During this time, however, Tom attended more and more *noggins* and became acquainted with his local vintage car enthusiasts, and, with his family, attended the few major events he could manage. His favourite annual events were National Alvis Day (now

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10 dhc is an abbreviation of drop head coupé (convertible): fhc is the abbreviation for fixed head coupé (non-convertible). A coupé is an early term for an enclosed car with two doors. It must also be remembered that the vast majority of early cars were open. Roofs were a later development.

11 A building society until approximately 15 years ago, shortly before Tom retired, was a special type of bank which loaned savers money out specifically for house purchases. Originally, building societies closed when all their savers had acquired a house, but they were transformed into permanent institutions where anyone could keep their savings and anyone could apply for a house loan.

International Alvis Weekend) and one of the VSCC's twice annual Silverstone race meetings. Tom's situation, regarding having to prioritise his family over his motoring passion, is quite typical of the vintage car enthusiast and has been repeated to me on a number of occasions. Many of the men who have consistently run vintage cars during the course of their life are have never been married or been married and divorced. The enthusiasm for cars was, additionally, almost exclusively a male pastime, and along with O'Connell it is necessary to wonder whether sometimes the car is incidental to the male camaraderie it helps to foster (O'Connell, 1998a: 97).

Tom has been married to Jane for over 40 years. Tom and Jane, who was a piano teacher, have been retired for over 10 years and enjoy a leisurely lifestyle in greater material comfort than they ever had while they were working.

One of Tom's closest vintage car enthusiast friends, who also lives in the same village Clanfield, is Ian. Ian is a single man who is 76 years old, and who has spent his whole life as a bachelor. Outside of the vintage car movement Ian has few interests, and his estate is more of a disorganised motor museum than a home. A significant fact with Ian is that he also comes from a relatively humble lower middle class background, and through his passion for vintage cars has throughout his life adopted the demeanour of a higher middle class gentleman. By trade he is a civil engineer, working in the defence industry, but has never been able to translate this profession into a competence in vintage car engineering. Spread around his property are the carcasses and assorted parts of a surprising number of vintage cars and motorcycles. He has recently acquired a very nice 1927 Alvis 12/50, and in fact all of the five vintage cars he has owned have been different varieties of this one Alvis model. Ian is considered an authority on this model of car and has written a number of articles on it for the

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12 An "old banger" is an expression for a worn out old car, especially a noisy one

bulletin of the Register, the club solely for *vintage* Alvis enthusiasts.

Another vintage car enthusiast in the same village and one with whom Tom is in regular contact is John. John is quite different in that he is middle middle class, privately educated, a graduate of Cambridge University and speaks English with the distinctive “cut glass” accent associated with the more privileged.

Unlike the humbler figures of Tom and Ian, John is a sporting man and by nature competitive. John bought his first vintage car in 1958, which he still has and which he still races. It is a Frazer Nash, a car which is driven by a chain like a bicycle or motorcycle, and it is one of the fastest of the vintage sports cars because it is very light, and very simple (primitive) with a high revving engine. The Frazer Nash due to its primitive technology is considered by many vintage car enthusiasts as little more than a “roller skate” with a powerful engine in it and is hard to control and uncomfortable to sit in. Additionally, many consider it downright dangerous. But for the man who is looking for speed and thrills, and who wants to win races, and who does not care for the finer pleasures of life it is ideal. John told me that when he bought his 1928 Frazer Nash it was with the specific goal of joining the VSCC and taking part in races.

I have introduced Ian and John here to show the differences between my informants at this early stage of relating the empirical material, but I will continue the text with a more in depth look at Tom’s passion before going into more detail about other informants. I asked Tom what the whole vintage car thing is about:

“It's all part of the interest in antiques generally, isn't it. Whether it's antique furniture, antique railway engines, antique machinery of all sorts. There's enthusiasm for it. It's all part of that

scene. Love of antique things. They don't perform as well as modern machinery, the furniture is not as practical as modern furniture. It doesn't exactly fit the modern pattern of life, but it's the love of the way these were built, the enjoyment of looking at them, using them" (Tom)

Tom expresses, initially, the love and enjoyment that these objects provide in terms of their construction (technology), their aesthetic qualities and in the physical relationship of operating them. These are the purely private pleasures that this individual has cultivated towards these objects, but Tom adds a more social perspective, "There is...quite a bit of snobbery and elitism. Amongst the vain people it's the enjoyment of seeing [the cars] admired by other people who haven't got them" (Tom). In this respect then the ownership of a vintage car is to send a message to the members of the community. It is at once the act of drawing attention to oneself and then communicating that one has taste and that one appreciates finer things than the anonymous mass-produced commodities of today. An interesting element in choosing a complex technological manufactured product like the car, which slowly was adopted by a community according to a pattern of wealth and class, is that the car meant different things to different segments of society. Interest in and ownership of cars reflects the class patterns and gender roles present in a society that are in turn a reflection of the political power and wealth of these divisions.

The next relevant thing for the researcher is to find out where the informant's love and enjoyment for these old cars comes from. I asked Tom about his Father and Alvis cars. His Father bought an Alvis Firefly during WWII when Tom was 8 years old. "He loved Alvis", according to Tom. Tom knows a number of other members of the AOC who got their enthusiasm from their fathers. Indeed, one of his close friends, Bill, who also used to live in Clanfield, and who has also been an AOC member since the early 1970s is currently, at great

expense, restoring his father's Alvis Speed 20, which has been in pieces in his garage for several decades. Another club member, Peter, whom we met at the Alvis International Weekend at Beamish and who I also interviewed was present with his wife in his father's 1935 Alvis Firebird, a car which Peter remembers riding in as a young boy and which he has had a relationship with all his life.

Tom and Jane live in a detached house which they had built in the 1970s on the same plot their previous house is on. The house has a double garage which houses Tom's two Alvises, while on the drive are two modern large and quite powerful saloon cars, both of which are a little under ten years old. These two modern cars represent what Tom looks for in a car. They are both quite large, but also understated, comfortable and powerful, and sober in both body style and paint-work.

Tom's two Alvises are cars that were produced by one of Britain's most prestigious car manufacturers. The older car, his 1932 Alvis Speed 20 SA tourer, was, when new, the fastest touring sports car that the company made and it could compete with any contemporary high powered touring car on the market. Alvis boasted the car's speed in newspaper and magazine advertisements.





Tom's 1932 Alvis Speed 20 SA Vanden Plas Tourer (Photo: the author)

It is a car, Tom told me, that he has coveted all his life. When he was raising a family he had absolutely no resources to be able to buy one, but he watched the market for them year after year and as he reached retirement the value of this model of car had also climbed dramatically leading Tom to believe that time had seen him priced out of the market. Indeed, to buy one of these cars in top condition today can cost anything from £50 000 to £70 000 (€75 000 to €124 000), when they do come upon the market. Tom had a stroke of luck and was able to acquire his Speed 20 for only a fraction of this price in 2002.

## **Elsted Noggin**

Before I actually stayed at Tom and Jane's home, but more especially while I was staying there there were many car events to attend. Firstly, once each month there was a noggin at a relatively local pub to their house, at The Elsted Inn. The noggin at the Elsted Inn is one Tom has been attending for almost 30 years, and he knows all of the regular attendees quite well.

Some of the other attendees of this meeting Tom rates as among some of his closest friends, and these are the vintage car enthusiasts Tom knows best. This meeting is arranged by the local branch of the VSCC, and it is only in the last four and a half years that Tom has owned a qualifying vehicle. Although Tom has been an enthusiastic participant at these meetings he has always lacked the kudos of having a qualifying car with him or even of having one at home in the garage undergoing restoration. Tom confided to me on one occasion that he had always felt that some of the club members at this meeting had never treated him as an equal, but rather as something of an outsider, or perhaps as a spectator, rather than a participant.

He went on to say that since he had bought his qualifying 1932 Alvis Speed 20 this had changed, and he was now accepted as one of the gang. He finally felt fully accepted into this community. Tom was by no means the only attendee that did not regularly turn up in a vintage car, but he had noted that the members who were almost always present with their vintage cars formed a small clique of those for whom vintage motoring is not to be compromised.

Not long after Tom took ownership of his post-vintage Alvis, and before its first rebuild, which really put it in mechanical order, he and Bob did take it to one of these noggins. On the way home from this meeting the cylinder head cracked necessitating an expensive repair at a specialist workshop. I relate this because this car had only attended one other event by the end of my fieldwork, and I think that the normally over-cautious Tom took it to the first event, more than anything, to prove to his fellow enthusiasts that he was indeed one of them.

The meeting at the Elsted Inn was very popular about a decade ago, and in the summer months there was often at least twenty vintage cars present and perhaps 50 people at the

meeting. Since then the pub had new management who was interested in attracting a younger clientele. Additionally, characters such as Dudley Gahagan<sup>13</sup>, who was a central figure in the vintage car community and a man who epitomised the *joie de vivre* and sporting spirit of pre-war racing, had passed on leaving a hole in the community.

When I was doing my fieldwork the noggins at this pub had all but died out, and even though there was still interest in a noggins with a tradition that was so well established, few club members were willing to make the effort at that time. One central attendee at these noggins, Ian, decided to do something about it, and he made direct contact with the pub's landlord to see if the pub could adapt itself once more to the needs of the car people. The landlord agreed to his wishes, and meanwhile Ian got in contact with all club members who had previously attended these meetings and asked them all to make an effort and attend this meeting in July 2004 to demonstrate to the landlord that it was worth his while to accommodate them and to see if they could get this noggin back to something like its former status. I attended this meeting with Tom, Jane and Bob, with me at the wheel of the 1959 Alvis, and in all about 15 people were present with 5 cars of interest. It was hopefully a start to the rebirth of what had been a thriving noggin just a few years before.

I have been informed that the VSCC's New Year meeting at lunchtime on January 1st, at the Elsted Inn, was attended by over 100 old cars and many many people this year, 2007.

## **Dial Post Noggin**

Meanwhile, in a another part of West Sussex there was a regular monthly noggin that

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13 the VSCC now holds an annual Speed Trials event named after Dudley Gahagan, who died in 1997 after more than 60 years of vintage motoring.

was thriving, at the tiny village of Dial Post. The noggin at the Crown, at Dial Post, is a joint meeting of both the VSCC and the AOC, and therefore suited Tom very well, as a member of both clubs. It takes place at lunchtime on the third Friday of each month. The first time I attended this meeting, on the 18th of February 2004, at the very beginning of my fieldwork, there were 15 vintage cars in attendance even though it was still the winter<sup>14</sup>, half of which were Alvises.

The Crown is a very pleasant English country pub. It is in the tiny village of Dial Post, which is little more than a hamlet or settlement, and is to be found on the old A24 main road between Worthing and London. Since the main road now bypasses the actual village it is a very quiet place with just a few houses, a garage and a pub, strung either side of the wide silent road. The pub makes a perfect venue for a car meeting as communications to this point are good both from London to the North and from South coast areas to both West and East, and there is room for the cars to park either side of the road and a large car park down the side of the pub and in the rear. There is easy parking for the sometimes 40 cars that turn up on a warm summer's day.

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14      Vintage cars did not have heaters, and many did not have roofs.



The Dial Post noggin, on a summer's day in 2004 (Photo: the author)

The building is not particularly old, being a red brick detached house from the 1950s, but inside it is traditionally furnished with dark wooden tables and chairs and dark red velvet upholstery. Traditional pictures and antiques line the walls. The old dark wooden bar serves three traditional English ales, the preferred drink of most vintage car rivers as well as everything else, and also at the bar one can order food chosen from the blackboard menu of traditional pub dishes: steak & kidney pie, fish & chips, chilli con carne, steaks, lamb chops etc. The interior of the pub is furnished as an idealised version of a building, perhaps much older, and the atmosphere is relaxed and dark, and a comfortable place to sit and talk and drink and eat.

Most of the people who attend this noggin will have their main dinner here, and they sit in groups to eat and talk, and while the wives who attend will often continue to sit inside the pub and talk about their families and friends in common, the men, both before eating and after, will be outside with their beer in their hand perusing the cars that are present and discussing car matters, from the “widgets” for the “what’s-its-name” they have been

searching for to who has bought what recently and the health of absent friends.

People and vintage cars start arriving from 12:00pm, and for an hour, every few minutes there is a low growl of something that sounds like a tractor engine and an ancient car comes flying down the road and stops abruptly outside the pub at an unfilled piece of curb. The strong smell of Castrol R engine oil, the choice of the vintage car driver, fills the air – a smell that never fails to arouse the men's vintage passions.

The next time I was able to attend this noggin was in April. On this occasion I counted over thirty cars. Alvises had turned out in strong numbers as had MGs<sup>15</sup>. It was a sunny and warm day with a fresh breeze. Later, in the summer, I had the opportunity of attending one of these meetings, driving Tom's later Alvis.

## **VSCC Silverstone**

The next type of event, and the one which is more than anything else the *raison d'être* of the VSCC is motorsport. The VSCC organises a number of different type of motorsporting events and I have attended a number of them. The most straightforward recognizable sporting event is circuit racing of the kind that is one of the World's most popular spectator sports today, in the form of Formula 1 racing. Each year the VSCC arranges two race meetings at Britain's premier racing circuit, Silverstone.

I attended the Peter Hull Memorial Race Meeting at Silverstone on Saturday 24 April 2004. This meeting is normally called the Spring Start Race Meeting as it traditionally starts

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15 Actually MGs were frowned upon in the early days of the VSCC and are still not popular with many members as they are considered too heavy, and underpowered, i.e. slow. They were sports versions of Morris cars, one of the earliest small mass-produced English cars. However, they are popular among others because they are small, pretty sports cars that at least look very vintage. MG

off the racing season for the VSCC, but on this occasion it was dedicated to a central figure in the VSCC, Peter Hull, who had recently died, and who also wrote *The History of the Vintage Sports Car Club* (Hull, 1964a). The meeting involves ten races which take place throughout the afternoon. While some of the races are of little historical importance to the club there are others which have become legendary and for which some of the fastest cars in the club will be pushed to their limits to win. Take, for example, Race 3, The Itala and Lanchester Trophies for Vintage Racing Cars. This is one of the biggest races in the VSCC's annual calendar, and attracts record holding cars from the Brooklands circuit, Britains ultimate pre-war race circuit, built in 1907 and closed for eternity in 1939.

One entrant for this race was Keith Schellenberg in his eight litre Bentley, the Barnato Hassan Special, which once held the outer circuit record at Brooklands with a speed of 142mph (228.5 km/h) and which Keith has owned for over 50 years. This car is famous among vintage car enthusiasts as is one of the other competitors, the improbable 24 litre Napier Bentley, which bears the legend on its bonnet "Napier-Bentley: The Ultimate Laxative". In the round-up of entrants supplied in the meeting program the last sentence sums up what many in the VSCC still feel is the essence of vintage car motoring. The the last of the entrants earns the comment "...Mark will have driven to the circuit, removed the minimal road equipment and gone racing. That is the way to have fun motoring today just as it was in the twenties and thirties!"(Club, 2004i).

I went to the race meeting with Tom, my main informant. This event is a relatively small one by Silverstone standards, and so there is room for everyone attending to park in the large parking area in the centre of the race track. For major events tens of thousands of cars

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stands for Morris Garages.

are parked in the fields surrounding the circuit. Tom and I park, and, true to tradition, we begin the meeting with a cup of coffee served from a thermos in the boot of Tom's Rover.

After the boot-lid up, coffee drinking ceremony, which seemed to be repeated all around the car park Tom and I went off to catch some racing. Tom has been coming to this race meeting for many years, and he knows many of the cars and their drivers from years of watching them competing in the same races. This is a small milieu, and, as one example, a friend of Tom's and another of my informants, John, was racing his Frazer Nash at this meeting, which was the first car he bought, in 1958, and has been racing ever since. On this occasion, as Tom and I were waiting for the second race of the day we listened to John who was in the commentary box discussing many of the cars and drivers who were taking part in the days races, his voice broadcast around the whole circuit. John had raced against many of them for many years, and so the more seasoned competitors know their foe intimately. I had seen John at the pub several times in deep conversation with his arch-enemies (and best friends).



John in action, racing his 1928 Frazer Nash (Photo: courtesy of VSCC)



Tom and I saw most of the races, Tom filling me in on many interesting facts about the cars and drivers he knew, and in between watching the races we wandered around the car park, looking at the vintage cars, but also the paddock where the competing cars were.

The Paddock has a special atmosphere as cars are constantly being driven off to join the circuit for a race or returning from a race, stinking of petrol, Castrol R, hot rubber and whatever else, while other cars are being worked on or driven up and down, the public scattering like movie chickens before them. While many of the competitors are one-man enthusiast operations there are a number of serious vintage racing teams with a professional set-up. One such operation is Stanley Mann Racing. Stanley Mann Racing is a company set up by Stanley Mann which deals in vintage Bentleys. The service they offer is a full, service, sales and rebuild operation and appears to exist only so that Stanley Mann can devote both his working life and leisure life to vintage Bentleys, which he loves to race more than anything else. His operation at this race meeting consisted of two vintage Bentleys, one of which he raced himself in two races, plus his team of mechanics and a proper transport lorry to transport them on.

Although I have not seen an accident in the paddock the potential for one is huge, and not surprisingly at more professional race meetings members of the public are not allowed in this area. Tom and I strolled around and we inspected some of the more famous cars, some of the more interesting cars, and any racing Alvis we found, almost all of which Tom was quite familiar with. “Ahh, there’s the Malcolm May Alvis”, Tom says, pointing at a green sports tourer with a racing number on its side, “that’s the one that went over the high banking at Brooklands, you know”. And I do: There is not a great deal of racing footage from the Brooklands race track, which closed at the start of WWII, but I remembered seeing the clip of the Alvis, in 1932, with Fotheringham-Parker at the wheel, flying over the top of the banking

and disappearing into the woods beyond. The car was totally rebuilt and is a regular at club meetings and race events.

## **VSCC Prescott**

Another fascinating motorsport event that I attended during my fieldwork was the annual speed hill climb at Prescott. The hill climb is one of the very earliest motor sporting events, and one that is no longer known by the non-enthusiast public at all. A hill climb is a motorsport event that has gone out of favour in the last 50 years. It comprises of cars competing, one at a time, against the clock, a course up a short, difficult and steep hill. The cars are divided into various classes determined by their engine capacity and what type of car they are. In each class the car that records the fastest time over the course is the winner. The Prescott event took place for the first time in 1938, in the very early days of the VSCC which was founded in 1934, and is hailed as the best event in the VSCC's annual motorsport calendar. This is partly due to the event itself and its wonderful setting in the English countryside and partly to do with the fact that it has become a firm tradition dating back almost to the club's beginning.

The hill at Prescott was acquired by the Bugatti owners club through the help of the VSCC which did not have the necessary financial resources to acquire it themselves, and after a tarmac surface was put on the driveway in 1938 it was ready for sporting use and experienced its first hill climb event in April of that year. The VSCC likes to point out that a current VSCC member, Bill Boddy, took part in that first event.

Prescott House is set on the top of a hill in the beautiful green countryside of Gloucestershire. The driveway that forms the hillclimb course winds up the steep side of the

hill through a series of hairpin bends. The hillside is grassed with trees covering one part of the course. From the hillside spectacular views extend for miles across the Gloucestershire countryside.

I arrived at the venue at around 11am on Saturday morning. Many of the participants and their families had arrived on the Friday evening, and of the two fields set aside for camping, one was already a bustling village while a second field was beginning to fill up quickly. I estimated that anything up to one thousand people were camping at the event. Prescott House is a 15 minute drive along country lanes and a main road from the nearby town of Gloucester.

The practice sessions had already started and the often giant machines were lurching round the field and queueing up for their practice run. I showed my ticket and found a place to camp in the fast filling second field. After setting up my tent I wandered up to the venue. The whole grounds in front of Prescott House were devoted to the event. One area was set aside for the paddock. At this year's event there were 250 competitors. The paddock was on a section of the hillside that has been terraced for this purpose. Nearby, various workshops had been setting up for various maintenance services. The tyre service was doing excellent business changing the tyres of the competing cars.

Every second minute there was a roar from the starting line as another car flew off to take its first official practice run. Each car had been rationed two practice runs on Saturday, and then two competitive runs on the Sunday. After entering I threaded my way between the cars queued up, waiting for their run, their drivers looking somewhat out of place in modern regulation fire-proof overalls and helmets but sitting in vintage cars.

I wandered up the hill. The VSCC library had set up a tent where they were selling surplus stock from the club library. The library has many book collections donated to it on the

demise of elderly members, and needing to recycle them this is probably the most fitting manner to do it. On this occasion I found two books that took my fancy and purchased them. A little further up the hill was the clubhouse, which in the sweltering heat was almost deserted and not doing very good business selling hot food. Beyond the clubhouse I found the crowds.

People were strewn along the grass bank watching the practice runs, and a large crowd was spilling out of the beer tent, a long queue snaking through it back into the tent. The scene at the tent was immediately recognizable as the usual pub meeting crowd, in groups of two, three or four, standing with pints of beer in their hands. These men were used to meeting each other at various noggins, and so it hardly seemed surprising that the beer tent was where the largest amount of people were gathered. Raised voices of the mature, privately educated, middle class men could be heard conversing in jovial tones or discussing some aspect of vintage car life. I can say that these men were privately educated with a degree of confidence because their spoken accent is of the upper middle classes that tend to almost exclusively attend private schools and not state ones. Many voices were raised as warm beer was flowing down many throats on what turned out to be the hottest day of the summer, and cheers went up as vast clouds of smoke from burnt rubber spewed out behind a car as it left the starting line or as another almost overturned, going up onto two wheels on a hairpin bend only to land again at an awkward angle and headed off the track into the trees, breaking an axle on the uneven terrain of the hillside.

This is not a quiet pastime. Since we had arrived we could easily hear the cars. Firstly, the cars make a terrific growl as they leave the starting line as fast as they can manage it and accelerate through the first two or three gears as quick as they can. Many of the, especially, smaller engined cars achieve quite a high pitch and very loud scream at higher revs while some of the bigger engined cars have and equally audible but much lower rumble. Many cars

as they set off produce a great deal of noise only to brake hard, often producing a high pitched squeal, and the sound of screaming tyres before the driver put his or her foot on the gas and roared out the corner at the highest possible speed and accelerate once more.

Before entering the grounds of Prescott House I could also hear that a number of the other vintage cars assembled were using the public roads around the venue as a bit of a race track, and various growls, screams, screeches and bangs were coming from the lanes of the surrounding countryside.

The whole place smelled of fuel and burning rubber, and although many of these vintage car enthusiasts are refined people who love the old cars for their prestige and status value, or their elegance, it was quite clear that the hill climb set are much more about speed and metal and fumes and noise and competition. This was motorsport, but motorsport on the terms of these people, and that meant simple technology, and it meant fun, and it meant more than a little nostalgia. At this event there were people of all ages, and it was definitely a family event. Three generations of a good number of families were in attendance. In a number of other cases there were old men accompanied by young men, and I soon realised how much of a father and son event this was.

Older men were passing on, successfully in many cases I believe, their passion for these cars and these events to their sons. The families I was witnessing were the families that deal in privilege. What I was witnessing here was the successful fathers doing what the successful in a class society always do. They raise their children to take their position in society, and to continue the class traditions and lifestyle of *Distinction* (Dant, 1999a).

In the evening, the main social event of the weekend was taking place back up at the marquee in the grounds of Prescott House. Sounds of 1920s jazz were reaching us lower

down the hill and we walked up through the campsite to join the party. As we walked up the hill and into the grounds of Prescott House it was almost like stepping back in time. The house and its grounds remind one of the various movie scenes depicting the lifestyle of the English upper class when they could afford to run their country estates with a full complement of servants. In the large marquee a little way up the hill a 1920s style jazz band were belting out dance numbers, sung by a female vocalist, all in period dress. People were dancing on the makeshift dance floor in the marquee while several hundred other people were gathered all around, some standing and some sitting. They were mostly standing in groups chatting animatedly, drinks in hand, and evidently in good spirits. Parked nearby on the grass were a late 1920s Bentley and a 1931 Bugatti type 50. I took in the whole scene. The country estate, the marquee with 1920s band and dancing guests, a brave few of whom were in period costume, prestigious vintage sports car in almost showroom condition, people from the educated and wealthy Middle Class in groups of family and friends everywhere with drink in hand and a joyous festive atmosphere. I experienced a rush of insight. This was a festival to the worship of the vintage car. The whole event was not only a hobby and sporting event but these people were celebrating a number of elements from a past time and culture at the same time.

The party continued until quite late, which surprised me, because most of the guests were considerably older than I am, and I left quite early, exhausted after the day's events. But here were the gallant racers, drinking and dancing until late, the day before some serious motorsport.

The next morning the day was kicked off at 9am with what has now become a tradition: the bike race. The bike race is a fun event for anyone with a bicycle with them to race up the

hillelimb course on a bicycle. It is one of several peripheral events the organisers have introduced so that non-competitors and children attending the event can be included in the proceedings, and is part of the VSCC's overall strategy to keep the club popular and relevant as generations change, by trying to involve children and whole families

The next morning the actual race event began. Not long after the day's main events began, Tom arrived with his friends, Ian and Tom Beer. They had travelled together the 2 hour drive to Prescott with Tom driving: the only one of these three vintage car enthusiasts who actually had a suitable car for such an ordinary journey. I joined Tom while Ian and Tom Beer disappeared in another direction deep in conversation. Before they went, however, there was the usual roar from the start line and Tom Beer exclaimed, "Oh, it's Tim. I know Tim". Tim didn't make it more than 50 metres before his engine died under the footbridge. I watch him pump furiously at a hand-operated petrol pump before he ground to a halt, and had to just let the car freewheel backwards down to the start line where he would be helped from the course.

Tom and I watched the runs. Tom was pointing out the cars he was familiar with, and I, after a number of different events, was now able to recognize some of the more individual looking cars having been to a number of different events.

One of Tom's great joys at these events was going round the vintage car park, and the VSCC claimed that this event attracted probably the best collection of vintage cars one could see anywhere. As often at major VSCC events there were three different car parks. The outermost car park was for the general public. Closer to the venue was the car park for club members, though in reality this was too small for all the club members, many of whom were parked in the general car park. The innermost car park was the vintage car park and this was reserved solely for vintage cars, and was actually within the grounds of Prescott House and

bordering one side of the actual competition course. There were several hundred cars in the vintage car park and Tom had not been at the event very long before he suggested that we abandoned the competition for a while and had a look around the assembled cars.

Having now been with Tom to several such events I knew that he wanted to update his knowledge of vintage and PVT Alvises that are still around. I have often seen Ian perusing the membership list of both the AOC and the VSCC, and he contains in his head a reasonable overview of the surviving Alvis cars from this era that we are likely to see at such an event. He is especially interested in looking at contemporary Alvis Speed 20 SA's to his own, and on one or two occasions asked me to take photographs of detail on some of these cars so he would know how to restore his own. We spent the rest of the day enjoying the racing and the event, and talking to some of the competitors, like John, who was as usual participating in his 1928 Frazer Nash Boulogne.





# Making Myths

## Introduction

As I related in the historical chapter above, the two inter-war decades saw a great many changes in Britain. The UK was rapidly being replaced by the US as the dominant power in the world, and both US and German industrialisation had long since taken the initiative from British manufacturing. Although Britain was still very wealthy in global terms and its incomes from abroad were very substantial, the decline was setting in in its international status, and its position as a progressive and innovative society was being eclipsed by its social and cultural conservatism. My argument is that such changes on the macro level of nations and society are reflected on the micro level of society in values, tastes and behaviour.

This chapter focuses on how my informants retell each other myths of the founding of the vintage car movement in order to not only recreate their sense of identity as vintage car enthusiasts but also to strengthen that identity. This is particularly interesting because it is a simple demonstration of the existence and unexceptionableness of myth in a contemporary western society. Although much weight has been put on myth as history in illiterate societies, with the unstated implication that this is in contrast to literate societies, it has often been assumed that because literate societies do have academic literary history they do not make use of myth for narrating the past in the same way.

## Mythology Played Out

Author: Did you see the distinction between the vintage cars and those that came after?

John: ...the VSCC was formed in 1934 because people were so horrified at the cars that came after 1930... Well, the cogniscenti were horrified so they formed a club to promote, or to use cars which were pre-1930, and they did start to go downhill from there because everything was heavier and they became lower geared. (interview with John)

One of the first patterns to emerge from conversations and interviews with my informants was the contrast between the vintage car and the “modern” cars that have been built since the end of the vintage era. Nearly everyone I spoke to retold the story of how after 1930 the character of cars completely changed, and that “proper” cars were built almost exclusively until the end of 1930.

I spent 6 months of 2004 driving around the English countryside with eccentric old Englishmen in their noisy old bangers. What I wanted to look at was how culture is embedded in our material objects and how it persists through time, how our dearest material possessions and our culture are intertwined in our minds, and how this produces and reproduces our cultural identity.

My informants are members of the UK-based Vintage Sports-Car Club (VSCC). The VSCC, founded in 1934, which now has a membership of 7500 mostly in the UK, but also with members grouped in various countries around the World, is an organization that “is primarily concerned with the preservation and competition of sports-cars built pre-1931” (VSCC, 2005). In fact, in its early days it was little more than a club for young men who wanted to compete in motor racing events with the less expensive, ageing, sports-cars of the

1920s, which were the only ones they could afford.

On one Saturday evening during my fieldwork, I was at an English country house, on the occasion of the Vintage Sports-Car Club's Prescott Hill Climb. A hill climb is a motorsport event that has gone out of favour in the last 50 years. It comprises of cars competing, one at a time, against the clock, over a one mile or so long course up a short, twisting and steep hill. The cars are divided into various classes determined by type, engine capacity and age. In each class the car that records the fastest time over the course is the winner. The VSCC Prescott event took place for the first time in 1938, almost at the beginning of the VSCC's existence, and is hailed as the best event in the VSCC's annual motorsporting calendar. This is partly due to the event itself and its wonderful setting in the English countryside and partly to do with the fact that it has become a firm tradition dating back almost to the club's founding. In fact, it was a motor sport enthusiast who discovered the course in the 1930s, and it was the VSCC that tipped the Bugatti Owners Club of the course who bought it then and still own it today.

I was camping for the weekend in a field reserved for the participants and other members of the club. After Saturday practice sessions, for the actual competitive runs on the Sunday, and after many barbecue parties in the fields in the early evening where approximately 1000 people were camping, most people spending the night at the event headed up to the marquee in the grounds of Prescott House where the main party was taking place. A 1920s style traditional jazz band had been hired for the event and people were dancing in the marquee and spilling out all over the grounds, enjoying the company of old and new friends, and were excited by the prospect of the thrilling motorsport that was to take place the

following day. A bold few had even gone to the trouble of wearing period 1920s costume.

I stepped back from the scene, for a moment. Everything was in place and I was truly experiencing a recreation of the 1920s. Old cars, such as Bentleys and Bugattis were parked casually on the grass, the band was blasting out jazz and dance numbers from the 1920s, the English being spoken by voices raised to make themselves heard was the “cut-glass” English of the privately educated wealthy elite, the venue was a the typical country house of the aristocracy, and I thought, “Here we see it: This is an ecstatic festival to worship the culture and lifestyle of the elite of the 1920s”.

I am going to relate two narratives of what happened in the early years of the VSCC. One of the narratives I have pieced together from club documents and publications as well as orally from my informants, and I call this the historical narrative. The other narrative is the story of the early years of the VSCC as narrated to me by my informants. I call this the mythological narrative, and it is the one the club members identify with. The latter narrative was repeated to me on several occasions by my informants until I realized its cultural significance. From then on I specifically asked each informant to relate to me the story of the founding of the VSCC and to describe the vintage car as compared with “modern” cars. The stories they told were consistent.

## **A History of the VSCC and the vintage car**

The Old Post Office in the gentrified and idyllic Cotswold town of Chipping Norton is home to the Headquarters of the VSCC. The Cotswolds area of west central England could almost said to symbolically reflect the vintage cars themselves. Until recently, a rural part of

England where farming was the main occupation, particularly sheep farming, this area of rolling hills is interspersed with small market towns, all built from the attractive local yellow limestone.

Situated within 2 hours of London this area has been colonised wholesale by the middle classes, and property prices have risen to the point where only the wealthy middle class can afford to buy the traditional converted stone cottages in which poor agricultural workers once lived. The working class have been forced into smaller cheaper accommodation or out of the area altogether. A significant number of the residents of this area live out a romanticised and nostalgic existence of what they imagine a past genteel traditional English existence was (Rosseland, 2005a). The English middle classes have created an idealised past of a gentrified England which they use as the basis for their current identity and upon which to build an idealised typical English lifestyle.

Inside the Old Post Office in Chipping Norton, behind the reception area and the offices, is the VSCC's library, where I pored through old magazines, books, bulletins, event programs etc. on the several occasions I made the journal through the beautiful Cotswold countryside. The content of the library is more or less split into two. Half of the library is taken up with the bound volumes of motoring magazines and journals, mostly from the first half of the twentieth century and dating back to the 1890s. The other half of the library comprises books divided up into such categories as biography, racing history, and many individual marques and models. The library also has good selection of motor sport films. The librarian is one of the vintage car enthusiasts and is also the Chairman of the Alvis Owners Club and the author of several books on Alvis cars. His position is unpaid, and he is an active pensioner who divides his time between his positions in the two clubs, his writing and attending events with his cars.

Until the end of the 1920s, cars in the UK were built as technologically advanced machines, designed and built by engineers, to be used by the wealthy elite for their leisure and for motorsport (O'Connell, 1998a). In fact, just as some manufacturers really were innovating and producing ever more technologically sophisticated products, other manufacturers were doing little more than bolting together components they purchased from a variety of suppliers and clothing the machine with a cheaply made body, often with poor results (O'Connell, 1998a). Unlike the situation in the USA the British car had not at this time become something so trivial as a means of mass daily transport. Cars were hand-built by craftsmen to standards of simplicity, with power, speed, road-holding and lightness of weight in mind (O'Connell, 1998a; Gartman, 2004a).

However, as the price of new cars was forced down, especially due to the success of the mass-produced American Ford Model T in Britain, and as the wealthy middle class began to use cars as a means of daily transport, rather than only for recreation, car manufacturers rethought their products to appeal as a practical and reliable form of transport to all who could afford it. With this shift to mass production and with new opportunities from credit schemes a large section of the British Middle Class could, for the first time, contemplate owning a car (O'Connell, 1998a). Marketing began to aim the car at the mobile professional rather than the sporting and fashionable enthusiast. Suddenly, speed and glamour were no longer the dominant themes in car advertising, as affordability, practicality and reliability began to become the dominated themes in the marketing of the car.

In 1920, 40% of cars running on British roads were the American Ford Model T. The 78 000 cars on British roads at this time represented less than a hundredth of the cars in

America (Setright, 2002a). In an attempt to win some of that market, in 1922, the Austin Motor Company launched the tiny Austin 7, a proper car but with a tiny four cylinder 747cc engine. This was one of the most successful British cars ever, and can be considered as the British Model T Ford (Setright, 2002a). The Austin 7 was so successful it was responsible for wiping out the whole cyclecar<sup>16</sup> industry as well as causing the bankruptcy of many manufacturers of small cars.

Morris were also attempting to bring motoring to the masses. They mass-produced the 1500cc Morris “bullnose” Cowley, also a small car but larger than the Austin 7, which also became a best seller in the 1920s and helped make Morris the largest motor car manufacturer in the UK (O'Connell, 1998a).

These successful smaller mass-produced cars dominated the sales market, but it would be a mistake to think that motoring became accessible to the majority of the population. The British motor industry failed, in the inter-war period, to diffuse throughout the population, only diffusing through the upper and middle classes, and then not reaching saturation point within this minority of the population (Bowden & Turner, 1993a). The percentage of families in England owning a car went from 5 per cent in 1924 to 20 per cent in 1938 (Bowden & Turner, 1993a). The tiny, light and cheap Austins and Morrises, what we would today think of as cheap “peoples” cars, were in fact peoples cars for the middle classes in the UK and were in contrast to the larger, more powerful and more solidly constructed cars of the upper class. It was these smaller cars that largely diffused throughout only 20 per cent of the UK population between 1918 and 1939 (O'Connell, 1998a). Bowden and Turner's analysis of motor industry data for the inter-war period shows that almost all of the growth in

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16 the cyclecar was typically a light four wheeled vehicle, propelled by a single cylinder motorcycle engine and typically seating for two - practically, a four-wheeled motorcycle. Their only virtue was that they were cheap (Setright, 2002a).



the motor industry for the inter-war decades was at the end of the market catering for cheaper small engined cars (Bowden & Turner, 1993a).

At the other end of the market, the big, powerful, but primitive cars of the 1920s were undergoing constant technological improvements. Most of the improvements such as synchromesh gearboxes, independent suspension, improved brakes, electrics and more sophisticated engines were introduced in the late 1920s and early 1930s, and they made the best cars much more sophisticated, but were also to add weight to the cars, make the ride softer, the steering easier to handle but less direct and generally to make the cars more suitable for touring and less suitable for racing (Hull, 1964a).

Delving into the archives at the VSCC library I pieced together the forming of the car club and its early years from 1935 onwards. The founders of the club formed “a club for the not so rich” (Light Car, 1934 quoted in (Hull, 1964a)) in order to race older, cheaper sports-cars produced in the 1920s – the only ones they could afford. In the November 1934 issue of The Light Car magazine (there were surprisingly many motoring magazines in the UK at that time) there appeared a letter appealing to young motoring enthusiasts to start a sports-car club, where motorsport was to be the overriding theme, mostly for young men who could not afford to buy the newest and more expensive models of cars (Hull, 1964a). Such a club was necessary because, they claimed, older cars would stand “little chance” in motorsport against the faster, new ones (Hull, 1964a).

The letter gained some interest and one month later “The Veteran Sports-Car Club” was formed, but soon changed its name after complaints from “The Veteran Car Club” to the current “Vintage Sports-Car Club” (ibid). Initially, any car that was 5 or more years old and with a value not exceeding £50 was eligible for the club’s events (Hull, 1964a). Immediately,

it attracted a small but dedicated membership of, mostly, young middle class men. The idea appealed to other, mostly young, men, and by the time the club had to go into hibernation in 1939 for the duration of WWII it was doing quite well with 300 members (ibid.), and had successfully held and competed in many motorsport events. In 1946 the club started up again and on holding one of the very first post-war race meetings in the UK, to the members' amazement, tens of thousands of people turned out to watch (ibid.).

Soon after the club was formed it was decided, in 1935, that any car that was more than five years old was eligible at club race meetings, and hence the 1930 cut-off date for vintage racing eligibility came into existence. As this was a practical classification in order to include only old cheap cars, and exclude more expensive and supposedly faster newer ones, it was also decided that the cut-off date would be revised each year, to remain at five years old, and so theoretically, today, cars produced up until 2001 should be eligible as Vintage cars. This might have been the original agenda of the club's founders, but it soon became apparent to the early club members that they preferred their old bangers from the 1920s and that, suitably maintained, their cars were a match for almost any new car. Already by 1936 the club made the decision to retain the 1930 cut-off date for eligibility.

## **The myths of motors and inter-war England**

As I contend above, the inter-war period in England represents a period of history neatly divided into two decades, and these two decades represent a shift in how we look at England as having changed substantially in culture and character between what can be called a traditional period before WWI and post-modern period after WWII. The 1920s still largely

symbolically belongs to that traditional period, while the 1930s represent the beginning of the post-modern society that emerged after WWII. The roaring twenties is the last decade when those privileged few who inherited the wealth, the health and adventurous sporting spirit, continued to lead the life of the leisure class (Veblen, 1994; Dant, 1999a), before the middle classes took over power and the thugs of the Nazi Party in Germany brought Europe to its knees. The dividing point between the two periods is 1930, and for the vintage car enthusiasts this date also represents the divide between the age of “real” motoring and the age of “modern” motoring.

To many non-experts the term “vintage” is just one of many terms for old cars such as “classic”, “veteran”, “historic” etc. For the car enthusiast, however, it has a precise definition. The Vintage Car as defined by the VSCC is any car produced between the years after World War I and the end of 1930, i.e. between 1919 and 1930, inclusive. It seems that for many of the club members the latter date is held as a date when there underwent a categorical shift in car manufacturing philosophy. As one informant told me, “The cut off was December 1930 and the VSCC was formed in 1934 because people were so horrified at the cars that came after 1930... they did start to go downhill from there because everything was heavier and they became lower geared”.

Already by March 1937, little more than two years after the club was founded, it began to build a mythology around the “Vintage” car, a class of car that only came into existence around an arbitrary date. When Sam Clutton, one of the founding members of the club, took over responsibility as the Editor of the VSCC Bulletin in that year, he wrote, in the editorial, of the Vintage Car:

The occasion may not be altogether inept to attempt an analysis of those most intangible qualities which make a vintage car so different from practically anything available today.

...On the one hand there is the easy assurance of a relatively large engine working at conservative revs. and moderate output. On the other—perhaps the most important aspect—there is the intimacy between car and driver which is fostered by absolute positive and accurate steering, a close-ratio gearbox, aided only by a clutch stop and controlled by a sturdy vertical lever, and the ‘all-in-a-piece’ roadholding, characteristic of the best vintage years (Hull, 1964a: 17).

Whereas, of the cars produced between 1931 and 1937 he wrote;

Modern sports cars seem to divide themselves in to four classes. Most popular is the buzz-box of loathsome repute. A small car is reluctantly propelled by a tiny engine working at very high speeds...the total weight is preposterously high...all components are cut down to the narrowest margin of safety and the result is incessant unreliability...The short chassis is excessively prone to pitching and tossing, and to avoid this the suspension has to be dumped to such a point as would shake the back teeth out of an ostrich [...]. (Hull, 1964a: 17)

The cut-off date, that arbitrary point at which cars became eligible for what was to be the “veteran sports car club”, has now taken on symbolic value as a boundary between when cars were real and when they became modern and inferior. Of the other three classes of sports car only one, that of small production, hand-built, high performance, sports-cars were worthy of being compared to vintage cars, which “retain most of the finest characteristics and traditional construction of the Vintage years while incorporating the best modern improvements” (Hull, 1964a: 17).

In fact, this one class of cars, which the club calls “post vintage thoroughbreds (PVTs)”, was officially admitted as eligible to the club in 1946, when it reformed after WWII, when there were fears that the club might die out due to the rapid disappearance of vintage cars. The PVT is described as “a car built between 1931 and 1940 but adhering to earlier standards” (VSCC, 2005), and the club strictly maintains a list of the cars that it includes in this category. Most of the cars included in this category are the cars produced by the more exclusive of the vintage car manufacturers of the 1920s. Interestingly, many vintage car enthusiasts still lump the cars of the 1930s with today’s cars as “modern”. The opinion of Sam Clutton written in 1937 can be compared to that of the motoring enthusiast, journalist and historian, Leonard Setright, expressed in his book, *Drive On! A Social History of the Motor Car* (Setright, 2002a). This is a typical, if somewhat extreme, opinion of what went wrong with car design and production from 1930 onwards, from the point of view of today’s vintage motoring enthusiast.

Price came first, comfort next, appearances third. Engineering mattered little; roadholding, handling, speed and other dynamic properties seldom mattered at all... [A] new cynicism expressed itself in car design. Radiators grew more and more imposing; bonnets were tall, and sometimes outrageously long, echoing the proportions of steam-locomotive boilers and signifying corresponding power, even though the engine caught cowering in the shady shallows when the bonnet was lifted might be the most pusillanimous little low-compression side-valve affair that could conceivably propel a car... It was disgusting, albeit for explicable and possibly good reasons, and although the industry’s products have never since been as consistently awful – not even in America – as the majority became in the 1930s, motoring has never wholly recovered from the blight which then settled on it. (Setright, 2002a: 66)

This opinion is almost identical to those I have collected from other vintage car enthusiasts, namely that vintage cars were “proper cars” that provide “real motoring”, while the majority of vehicles produced from 1931 onward are “loathsome” and “awful”. The cars of today are mostly considered to be boring.

There are exceptions, however. I interviewed an Alvis enthusiast who has a two Alvises from 1933. These cars are included in the VSCC as being the Post Vintage Thoroughbred category, since Alvis continued to build cars by hand using high quality materials throughout the 1930s (although the cars did become heavier and slower from about 1932). When I asked Desmond about the cut-off date and some of the feelings around it he told me:

“No I don't like the humbug concerned when people try and draw a strict line between what is vintage and what is post-vintage. That to me drives me slowly insane. It's a bit like people who harp on about originality. It's just a theoretical argument you shouldn't have. [Ian's] very much a draw a line sort of man, and it drives me insane because I can't see it. To me it's all old car motoring....He draws a very strict line. He thinks the 12/60<sup>17</sup> is a bit of a cheat cause most of them were manufactured in 1930-31, and it should have been pre-30, and the Firefly<sup>18</sup> is definitely ostracised because that is definitely post-1930 design, you know”. (Desmond)

This is not to say that Desmond didn't make a distinction between the two decades. He went on:

“Yeh, the 1930s were a bit strange in actual fact. A lot of the common sense and logic went out of car design. There were many dreadful cars, but then thinking back there quite a few

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17 The Alvis 12/60 was the model that was an update of the very vintage Alvis 12/50 which was produced between 1923 and 1933. The Alvis 12/60, looked very similar and was produced between 1931 and 1933.

18 The Alvis Firefly was a small Alvis built 1932-1936 and often derided by vintage enthusiasts

dreadful things in the 20s.” (Desmond)

I put it to him that in the opinion of enthusiasts car design in the 1920s was driven by engineers but in the 1930s it was driven by fashion. He responded:

“Alvis, in particular, kept on ruining their designs by pampering to fashion all the time. A good example is the Speed 20. They designed a superb car and each successive marque of those 4 marques got gradually heavier and heavier without any great increase in power. So the performance got gradually worse.” (Desmond)

In this narrative there is an item of material culture, a style of car, that was produced between the years of 1919 and 1930 and then ceased, never to be equalled in the following 75 years of automobile manufacture. As we have seen, after less than three years of the club’s existence centrally placed members of the VSCC were, in 1937, taking certain material facts about their cars when compared to later cars, and they were using them to redefine a category of material culture, which had originally become a category mostly through accidental historical events. Already in that year it was decided to freeze the eligibility date of cars at 1930. The redefinition reinforced the category, “the vintage car”, and gave it an essential quality much stronger than that of a line drawn under a date on the calendar. Once this redefinition had taken place the members were in a position to build a stronger mythology around their beloved category, which is partly, I would argue, responsible for their joyful celebrations of this category today.

## **Mythology, Cultural Boundaries and Identity**

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for being too heavy, which Firefly owners vehemently deny.

I would argue that the vintage car enthusiasts' version of the history of the VSCC and the vintage car itself, while close to the documented history is a myth. What I have shown here is the actual establishment of this myth, which can to some extent be compared with the events as they are recorded in the historical documents that were part of those events. The effect of this myth is to make clear boundaries between the members of the VSCC (and other vintage car owners) and the very large community of, mostly, men who are passionate about cars from the various ages of motoring, by relating the past in such a way that the vintage car is pure when compared to the compromised later cars.

This serves a number of different purposes. The most obvious purpose is to help reinforce the category of car, *vintage*, as something that actually exists as part of the cars' physical reality rather than as just an arbitrary date. Another informant, Terry, who is first and foremost an MG<sup>19</sup> enthusiast and only reluctantly a VSCC man is the exception that proves the rule. His beloved MGs, of which he owns four including two of the most valuable and sought after MG racing cars still in existence, are looked down on by many of the VSCC members as being heavy, slow and thus not true vintage cars. Regarding dates and classifications Terry has to say:

“My main distinction is between pre-war and post-war...As I get older I'm beginning to understand that the vintage period up to 1930 is a totally arbitrary date. My market place is the 1927-1937 period, when cars were wonderfully made, mechanically quite simple, all individualistic and are still thoroughly practical” (Terry)

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19 MG stands for Morris Garages, and was formed in the 1920s as the sports car branch of the Morris Car Company. Many vintage car enthusiasts view MGs as heavy and slow, for what they are, like the cheap underpowered saloon cars that underlie their sleek exterior, and consequently they don't



Terry does not fully subscribe to the VSCC categories, and this might well be because his favourite marque of car is tolerated within the club but not fully embraced. When the VSCC drew up its list of PVT cars in 1945, of cars from the 1930s that would be eligible for the club, the list included any car from popular vintage car manufacturers like Alvis, Bentley, Bugatti and Riley, but of MGs only the models that were actually built for racing were included.

While Terry is a VSCC man and owns two very valuable vintage cars, because his cars do not gain the respect he believes they deserve he cannot subscribe uncritically to the classifications the VSCC has created, and neither does he subscribe to the myth. As he says himself in the above quote, the end of the vintage era is just an arbitrary date, and in his opinion no great change in the nature of cars happened at this time.

The vintage car enthusiasts who do have cars that are embraced as true vintage cars, and in the case of Bentley, Bugatti and a few other select marques that are seen as the best of vintage use the vintage category as sign of their *Distinction*, of their excellent taste in engineering and design, and in choosing the best of lives of exciting sport and leisure in the company of their fellows who are similarly endowed with fine tastes.

The vintage car enthusiasts of the VSCC have emphasized a historical narrative that specifically focuses upon the diacritical elements of their cars. In order to further demarcate themselves they have developed a mythology around the vintage car. By telling their story in this manner and communicating it to others they are reproducing and reinforcing their cultural identity as vintage car enthusiasts, which in functional terms helps to set them apart from other motoring enthusiasts as well as the wider population.

While an ethnic group, a nation, or a religious community may very well have an myth

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view them as true vintage cars.

it is not often considered that members of a club might have one about a commodity, but in this case they do. As McNeill writes, to strengthen group identity and to flatter themselves the history-makers of groups in a “mingling of truth and falsehood, blending history with ideology,” write historical narratives which are, “...mythical: the past as we want it to be, safely simplified into... 'us' and 'them'” (McNeill, 1986a: 05). We need to know what groups we belong to, and we do this through these simplified narratives.

## Men and Motors

### Technology

As we moved into late summer in England in 2004 the car events continued. Sunday August 22nd was South East Alvis Day, the sky was bright and the air was warm, and eventually after some discussion, and a little persuasion on my part, it was agreed that both of Tom's two Alvises would attend. Tom drove the younger car while his friend Bob, all-round mechanic and engineer, drove the 1932 car, with me in the passenger seat.

We were early arrivals at the event, as much in deference to my status as an event marshal as anything else, and soon friends, acquaintances and other club members were driving into Loseley Park stately home grounds in their gleaming machines. Bill, a good friend of Tom and whom Tom met through the AOC thirty years previously soon arrives. He has started a total restoration of his father's Alvis Speed 20, which is very similar to Tom's, and he soon falls into conversation with Bob on technical issues to do with the car. Bob has been responsible for rebuilding Tom's Speed 20 and has a pretty good all round knowledge of the car's engineering.

When we meet for coffee a little while later and then again for lunch I notice that Bob and Bill are still discussing technical issues related to the Speed 20, and indeed I see they continue this conversation all afternoon. At the end of the meeting we are invited back to Bill's house for tea, and to look at his car, which at this stage does not look like anything

other than rusty old pieces of metal in various boxes, and larger pieces of metal spread around his large garage and workshop. Throughout all of this, Bill and Bob continue their conversation right up until the moment we leave.

For me it was quite amazing that these two men could discuss the highly complex details of engineering and technology of a machine, for a whole day, with only minimal use of a visual aid to help them (I did spot them, once or twice, poking around in the engine bay of Tom's Alvis Speed 20, pointing at components). This suggests that they share an immense amount of both knowledge and understanding of the machine in question, which I find truly impressive and which I wish to explore further.

As explained above, there are a variety of reasons for the love of the vintage cars among my informants, and each individual has his own profile of motivations. One of the main reasons is, however, a fascination for technology and engineering. In this section I wish to explore a specific feature of the male relationship not only to vintage cars but to technology in general.

Casual observation throughout my lifetime, in addition to specific observation during my fieldwork, has made me aware that a significant portion of the male population, perhaps not only in the societies with which I am familiar, holds a fascination for technology, that is to say, with the practical or industrial arts. In the study of vintage cars this translates as a fascination for the industrial art that these cars are based upon, or the specific creation of the vehicles seen from an engineering point of view. Furthermore, it can be noted that this interest is predominantly held for a certain point in the evolution or development of car design.

This most certainly must have a very strong cultural element, but in some respects it could be said to be a universal fascination among men, and perhaps is one of the defining

traits of our species, or, at least according to Merete Lie, a defining trait of the male sex (Lie and Sørensen, 1996). We only need to look as far as Malinowski's archetypal text, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (Malinowski, 1961a), to see this fascination for engineering and technology both among the informants and the ethnographer, but perhaps this is because Malinowski as a man of the early decades of the last century lived during a time of technological optimism and it was very normal at that time for men to be particularly interested in engineering, since it was great works of engineering that were often thought to be the driving force of progress.

During the 1920s and 1930s, in the UK, many men were choosing an education in engineering, and the new profession of engineer along with other new technical and science professions were behind the large inter-war expansion of the British middle class, which had formerly been mostly made up of traditional careers of doctors, priests and lawyers.

In 1911 the higher professional middle class was predominantly composed of clergymen, lawyers and doctors; in 1951, its bent was predominantly technical, scientific and commercial.

In 40 years, therefore, its composition had been transformed. (McKibbin, 2000a: 46)

Alfred Gell took up this topic, and the canoe building of the Trobrianders in particular, in his text *The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology* (Gell, 1992a). Having conducted fieldwork among my Father's generation I can clearly say that his generation, and the generation before that clearly hold an interest in mechanical engineering that is scarce among my own generation today.

Technology, however, has many facets. Not only are my informants interested in the cars from a technological point of view related to their design and manufacture, but they are

also very much involved with the technology of the car as maintainers and restorers of the cars and perhaps even more so as the drivers of these cars. When driving these cars my informants themselves embody the 1920s technology, and they prefer the embodiment of this 80 year old technology to embodying current motoring technology.

In this chapter I discuss what this interest is composed of in cultural and social terms and attempt to explain what makes the technology of precisely vintage cars fascinating to my informants. A fascination that is often wholly or partially limited to vintage cars because of “what society has done to the car” (Setright, 2002a: vii); because technology is social – is as much a part of culture as any other element Social Anthropology has chosen to focus on – in the case of the car it has been subjected to all manner of social influences through the course of motoring history:

“The unfolding and interaction of political, scientific, technological, migrational, agricultural and domestic histories will be shown to have affected the course taken by the car in its development, to have distracted and delayed and debased it. It will be seen that it is no fault of the car that it has failed to keep its initial promise, nor that it has been accused of evils beyond all reasonable guilt.” (Setright, 2002a: vii-viii)

As I have previously described in the introduction above, my informants are primarily interested in cars built between 1918 and 1930. For my informants these two dates represent two points in time at which motoring technology underwent significant changes, and that between these dates, despite a continuous development of motoring technology throughout

the period, the cars produced can be seen as being of one generation, technologically speaking. Therefore, it is correct to say that my informants both as individuals and as members of a community maintain special relationship towards an historical stage of technology in the history of motor cars. The change in technology during this inter-war period took place parallel with upheavals in the balance of power in British politics and with a period of radical readjustment of sections of the population within the stratified framework that is known as the British class system.

### **A working definition of technology**

Technology has traditionally become one of the parameters by which we define not only historical societies, but also often geographically distant ones. In archaeology technology has been used as one of the major measurements by which communities, and often mankind in general, have been included in our overall picture of our social development and development of civilisation. Today, we think of stone-age, bronze-age and iron-age man as our forefathers who laid the foundations of our modern societies, which we consider to be based upon a highly developed and sophisticated material culture. But what is technology?

In social anthropology technology can be described as:

Technology is the means and agencies by which human societies cope with and transform their material environment. As a process or system, technology includes the materials that are acted upon, tools or other means by which that action is carried out, the application of an operating procedure to effect the desired action, and the knowledge of how to perform it. (Glick, 1997a)

“Technology” has a diverse range of uses both within anthropology and in general usage. For Lemonnier, for example, “Technology embraces all aspects of the process of action upon matter, whether it is scratching one’s nose, planting sweet potatoes, or making jumbo jets” (Lemonnier, 1992a:1).

In anthropological terms I am going to instead employ a quite narrow definition of technology, which owes its origin more to modern engineering than to definitions employed in social science. This is because I am indeed using “technology” from an western engineering perspective and not from a universalist abstract perspective. My use of “technology” here is one of its more common uses and can be considered as being used in non-technical everyday language. Following a Western tradition of the use of the word I will use it to describe *collective knowledge applied by people working both as individuals and as members of a society working upon material, to produce material outcomes that solve or improve a solution on an explicit material problem or problems.*

I state it in such a way in order to include the concept that within a tradition of technology new ideas and improved solutions are constantly sought to more effectively realise goals, over time, and that new goals and problems continually emerge. This is an understanding of technology from a historical perspective. As Dobres put it:

“...technologies bind the material, corporeal, and meaningful experiences of sentient makers and users to the flow of social life, values, collective history, and change. Technology produces not only functional and aesthetic objects; it simultaneously engenders self-awareness, forges social relationships, and both reaffirms and contests tradition.” (Dobres, 2001a:48)

Dobres distinguishes between makers and users, and it is this distinction I wish to



utilize in this chapter. We are all users of technologies regardless of our maker status, but in this chapter I am looking at it from the point of view of its development and manufacture and at the perspective of those who are specifically interested in it.

That is not to say that my informants develop technology, but that they tend to look at the technology their vehicles represent with a maker's eye, or with an engineer's eye, as much as they do with a consumer's eye. The difference is necessary because while the consumer will learn techniques in order to utilize a technology he will not need to worry about the technological acts involved in the production of the technological artifact.

The engineer, on the other hand, will be deeply involved in the technology of the artifact both for utilizing it but also for recreating it and improving on it, and not least for maintaining it in working order. Additionally, the engineer will contemplate the technology involved in a much more profound manner than the mere consumer and will thus incorporate the ideas behind the technology into her overall understanding of the world and life. Using the cars for what they were designed is one aspect of the love of vintage cars, but equally important is the love of the technology, of the design and building process and the resulting material artifact. The person who is deeply aware of the technology utilised and made concrete in material artifacts connects the technology with other values, ideas and knowledge associated with that time

In this manner it becomes clear that technology is only partially the rational "scientific" field that it has once been considered to be, but is rather an essential element of material culture, regardless of which society one is concentrating upon.

### **Anthropology of Technology**

In the anthropological literature on technology it has been noted that a particular technological innovation is not only successful by its ability to solve a technical problem and thus be of positive ecological benefit to a human society but also it is only successful if it is adopted into the cultural practices of the society, i.e. by its becoming a cultural artifact with all the necessary cultural associations that are entailed (Pfaffenberger, 1992a:498). With regard to my informants, in many cases their fascination with the technology of vintage cars is inseparable from their interest in the social world, and indeed the socially stratified world, of the 1920s. While many of them see the 1920s car as a product of technological and engineering expertise to be driven by “a quick-thinking resourceful man” xx they see the later cars of the 1930s as a (feminised) product polluted by the marketing considerations introduced with mass production and the need to substantially increase the product’s market: “It was disgusting, albeit for explicable and possibly good reasons, and although the industry’s products have never since been as consistently awful...as the majority became in the 1930s, motoring has never wholly recovered from the blight which then settled on it” (Setright, 2002a:68).

The technology of the vintage car is very much associated with how England in the 1920s was quite strictly divided into different social groups and that these groups had recognisable cultures. If the car had been a more democratic vehicle of transport during that period (as it was to a large extent in the US) then this would have been reflected in the technology that was used in motor engineering, and cars of that time would not have been what they actually were. As noted above, once the car manufacturers began to make a concerted effort to broaden car ownership to a larger populace and crossed class and gender boundaries adherents of the vintage car, an elite product, reacted with disgust not only to the

finished products but also to the technology being employed in the cars to do this. Although some effort at mass production did take place, and this meant that cheaper cars diffused throughout the 20% of the population that constituted the middle classes, Bowden & Turner describe a “failure” of the motoring industry to move into a third mass market stage (Bowden & Turner, 1993a).

In one respect this whole thesis is based on an anthropology of technology. The vintage cars that my informants love so much are as much defined by the technology behind their manufacture as by the other cultural, social and historical factors that make up their unique identity. Although the cut-off date for this class of cars was originally an arbitrary point in time decided by social factors it soon became the date this community chose to use as the time when there underwent a fundamental shift in the technology of car manufacture in the UK and abroad. The shift from workshop-based craftsman manufacture of cars in the UK to a production line, factory-based, manufacture involved redesigning the cars and using different technology in order that cars could efficiently be built in this manner. Adopting a production line in the manufacture of cars also went hand in hand with the business plan of selling cars in much larger numbers than previously. To do this one needed to greatly expand the market for cars, and this was to be done largely through price and through providing better credit schemes to allow easier entry in to market.

Cars needed to be redesigned so that they could effectively be assembled on an assembly line, using parts that were comparatively inexpensive. Thus, choosing the same date for the classification of vintage cars and for the change in the technology of production, and, with it, the intentional opening of new markets for the car, reinforced the absolute classification of the vintage car and facilitated the defining of this class of car in terms of the

technology it is based upon.

In reality, of course, car manufacturers went over to a production line style mass manufacture of cars at different times. Some manufacturers like Alvis and Morgan never did make this change but continued the manufacture of small numbers of cars built by skilled craftsmen. Alvis stopped manufacturing cars in 1967, but Morgan continue to this day to provide individual cars to customers who are prepared to wait up to several years on a waiting list to receive the individual car they order. Aston Martin, too, continued to produce exclusive, high performance, cars in this manner, and although they have become, only in recent years, part of the Ford empire they maintain a reputation for design, quality and performance that is second to no other car manufacturer in the world.

Other manufacturers simply could not compete with the much cheaper mass-produced item and closed their doors for good. The badges of some of the quality vintage car manufacturers like Riley were to be taken over in later decades, to be used on mass people's cars, so that even one version of Issigonis' mini bore a Riley badge and was called the Elf.

## **Technology and the Vintage Car**

One of the important elements of the vintage car is the technology it represents. It represents the technology of its time, and this can only be understood when put into a historical narrative. It represents a technology that is both socialised by class and by gender. Furthermore, and necessary for the understanding of my informants' relationship with technology, we must remember that the VSCC was started by less wealthy young men who purchased their vintage cars when they were already commanding much lower prices than new cars. Using a combination of historical explanation and data from my informants I will

one view of the anthropological relevance of the technology of the vintage car.

The most salient point was made by one of my informants again and again. The end of 1930 was the point in time real cars made way for modern cars. What is a *real* car and what is a *modern* car? What are the symbolic characteristics associated with the 1920s and 1930s that can also be associated with the changes in technology between those two decades to be included into a narrative of the value of different technologies and different material objects? How did society in England change during this period, and more importantly what cultural memory of these years are retained and are alive and well in the minds of my informants?

As discussed above, English society underwent considerable change during this period and it is clear that these changes have come to influence the culture not only of the whole of English society but they influenced each class in English society in different ways and affected the class structure in a variety of ways. Specifically, I am looking here at where technology fits in alongside of all these changes.

Desmond likes to work with his hands. By profession he was an electrical engineer, but he is now retired, and, unlike the majority of my informants, engineering and technology are both his trade and his hobby. Not only has he restored several old cars, two of which he still has, but he likes to build and renovate houses too. When he got his first restored old car on the road he drove it for the first time with great trepidation, at least partly due to the old fashioned gearboxes that were fitted in the cars:

“It is quite funny actually because when we bought this first Firefly which has now been rebodied into a Tourer it had a pre-selector gearbox and centre throttle, neither of which I've

ever driven with, and I used to think with quite a lot of trepidation whether I would ever be able to conquer these cars although I was restoring them (he laughs)...When I first drove the Firefly, although this doubt was in my mind, I found that by 200 yards up the road I'd sort of mastered it. It was so easy. It all comes naturally. Since that time I've gone away from preselector and gone on to crash box. It's because I find it is a lot more interesting. It makes driving so much more interesting because you've got more thought to do." (Desmond)

At this stage, I am sure I'm not the only one who would normally be scratching my head and asking what all these strange types of gearbox are. Desmond can provide the answers:

"Well, pre-selector's easy because except for actually remembering to put the car in gear before you actually change gear, but crashboxes are another art altogether. It's a black art, and if you've never driven with one you really have to start learning. You really have to use the brain as well as the feet. I like this aspect of it. It would be nice if I had something like a 12/50 that had that in its early stage, but the Firefly has these crash boxes and I find it's adding another dimension to the whole aspect of motoring." (Desmond)

This is obviously one aspect of the vintage technology that appeals to Desmond. He finds that driving and controlling a vintage car is more interesting than a modern car, because it takes more skill and more thought, and he likens aspects of it to a "black art".

Crashboxes, or more correctly non-synchronised transmissions, are an old design of gearbox that was used before the synchromesh gearbox began to become widespread in the 1930s. Today, we take the synchronised gearbox for granted and move the gear shift in and out of the gears as quickly or slowly as we please. Just a couple of generations ago we would have had to be much slower with our gearshifting as the technology could not cope with

sudden movements. Drive a 1950s or 1960s car and you need to carefully slide the gearshift in and out of gear as you hold the clutch down. The vintage car is much different in that the gearbox is not synchronised. This means that you cannot directly shift from one gear to another because the gears are all spinning at different speeds. When changing up through the gears it is necessary to remain in neutral and allow the engine speed to die away until it is moving at the same speed the higher gear is spinning at before engaging that gear. When changing down through the gears you need to first change into neutral and then increase the engine speed to the correct speed for the lower gear before engaging that gear. In the 1920s this was the reality of driving a car, but today it is what Desmond calls a “black art” – another term for magic.

Take another example, my informant Donald, who was educated as a civil engineer, and has worked his entire working life as an engineer on the roads for Sussex county council. He owns ten classic cars, of which three are vintage cars, and three classic motorbikes. He does all his fettling<sup>20</sup> himself, and tries to keep all his ten cars in full working order. This is quite an accomplishment when one considers that his “newest” car is over 40 years old.

"I bought a P1 MG when I was 18 or 19..."I bought a P-Type MG because that was a cheap, fun, pre-war car...it was very cheap, it cost £70...It took a few months to get it on the road. But I loved it. I enjoyed driving the pre-war car because it needed more skill driving it. It was also pretty unreliable so it tested one's abilities to keep it running. It was just more of a challenge than running a modern car". (Donald)

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20     fettle, v. *trans.* To make ready, put in order, arrange. Now only *dial.* to put to rights, ‘tidy up’, scour; also, to groom (a horse), attend to (cattle).

One of the fascinating ways to see just how interested the men are in the technology is to attend an autojumble with them. There are many smaller autojumbles spread throughout the country and throughout the year, and I attended a number of them with my informants, but the greatest of them all, at least in Europe (apparently there are much larger ones in the US), is the Beaulieu Autojumble. An autojumble is a market where stallholders sell classic car parts, accessories and all manner of automobilia. Most autojumbles I have attended have comprised of 20 to 50 stalls. Beaulieu Autojumble is an annual event that takes place on the second weekend in September and has now grown to 2000 stalls. I joined three of my informants on September 12th 2004 for my last excursion before returning home after my fieldwork.

Tom and Bob, as usual, had mental lists of items they were on the lookout for, but often spend a day attending an autojumble only to return home empty handed. Bill, on the other hand, was keen to really get on with the job of restoring his father's 1932 Alvis Speed 20, which was at that time in pieces in boxes spread around his very large garage. He had brought with him a few rusty parts for which he hoped to find replacements in usable condition. At this time

### **The enchantment of technology**

"The authenticity of artifacts as culture derives, not from their relationship to some historical style or manufacturing process – in other words, there is no truth or falsity immanent in them – but rather from their active participation in a process of social self creation in which they are directly constitutive of our understanding of ourselves and others..." (Miller, 1987a: 215)

The men I have been studying include vintage technology in their process of self creation. They cultivate their identity through their material relationship with the world and



with their social relationships. Of all my informants only two were not men between the ages of 60 and 85. For most of my remaining informants their first real experiences of motor cars was with the vintage cars of the 1920s or the PVTs of the 1930s. Because of the realities of the car industry and the supply of cars in the two decades following WWII it just so happened that for many men who reach adulthood during this period it was the vintage cars that were the affordable choice, if they were to have a car at all.

For men like John, who is naturally competitive and was encouraged to pursue this competitive streak at the private school he attended as a boy, when he bought his first car in 1958 at the age of 21 he knew he wanted a car he could race, and he was already aware that he could buy a vintage car and race with the then 23 year old Vintage Sports Car Club. It turned out that the car he bought was one of the lightest and most primitive of all the vintage cars. The 1928 Frazer Nash he bought was chain driven and had fixed axles, which makes the ride very bumpy, but the car is extremely fast. Frazer Nashes are one of the most competitive marques of car in vintage races, and John has had a great deal of success. He has now had the car for nearly 50 years and is still racing it.

Ian became enchanted by a vintage Alvis as a young man. As a sixteen year old he was introduced to vintage cars by reading the magazine Motorsport. He knew immediately that those cigar shape vintage cars were more exciting than the newer cars on the road:

And every Saturday morning, when I was off work of course, if I was lucky, I would lean out the window and I would see this silver flash go by up this one way street, Bond street, and it was a most beautiful looking car, and it turned out to be an Alvis 12/50. Silver, actually was an aluminium duck's back, and changed gear most beautifully and had a nice sounding engine. Mmm, I like that, duck's, that's an Alvis. Mmmm I quite like the idea of that. So, as the years went by I got more and more fixed on the idea of, "Mmm, I like this old car business. Alvis,

yes that seems interesting but what else is there." (Ian)

The Alvis 12/50 was manufactured from 1923 to 1932. From there Ian went to the VSCC Prescott hill climb to see more vintage cars and to look them over. From this time on he was a dedicated vintage car owner, and soon bought for himself his dreamt of vintage Alvis. He has since then, had a string of vintage Alvises and is a member of the Alvis Register, a club for vintage Alvis enthusiasts. He refuses to join the Alvis Owners Club, however, as he believes they are more interested in non-vintage Alvises, an interest he does not share.

## **The SS**

A special case that demonstrates the point I am making is the Jaguar. Initially, the Jaguar company started producing sidecars<sup>21</sup> in 1921 as the Swallow Sidecar Company, and from there moved on to making car bodies and eventually their own cars. Their first car was manufactured from 1931 and was sold under the unfortunate name "SS". This was a mass-produced sports-car that had many of the qualities of the workshop-produced vintage car but at a much lower price (£350 compared with a starting price of £695 for a, similar, Alvis Speed 20) , to the disgust of the vintage car cognoscente. The SS was low, sporting and quite quick. It seemed to embody the design philosophy of the vintage cars in what the car was designed to be and how it was designed to be used.

What was different, however, was that no SS was ever built by craftsmen using the

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21 A sidecar is a vehicle that is attached to a motorcycle, to carry one or more passengers.

traditional techniques. The car was assembled, mass-produced, on a production line using new techniques and incorporating the latest technology that made bodies, for example, cheaper and quicker to manufacture.

The new price of the SS cars was closer to the £50 to £100 that the vintage crowd were prepared to pay for vintage “old bangers” than it was to the new cars produced by the famous vintage car marques, and perhaps this cheapness was off-putting to many of them who did not want a cheap new car, but wanted an old expensive car that was cheap. It was also flamboyantly styled and much lower slung than vintage sports-cars putting it firmly in the 1930s in terms of looks.

At one race meeting in the 1939, in which the VSCC took part as one club among many car clubs, the VSCC members were particularly pleased that their machinery beat the 1930s upstart car, the SS:

The spoils were very reasonably divided between Vintage cars, ‘Nashes and B.M.W.s<sup>22</sup>, and it was remarked with ghoulish glee that a certain inferior brand of pseudo-sports car represented in large numbers (the name is either R.R. or T.T.) only once came in among the first five of any race and included most of those who did a behind-about face at the turnings. ((Hull, 1964a: 38)).

The above quote is from the May 1939 VSCC Bulletin, and demonstrates how at least some of the VSCC’s more prominent members, took quite a hostile attitude to at least one “pseudo-sports car” of the 1930s. Not only was the SS born (immediately) after the 1930 cut-off date, mass-produced and over-styled in the manner of the 1930s, but it must also be noted

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22 The BMW sports car of the late 1930s was the most technologically advanced sports car of the time and one many races. It was widely respected for being an excellent evolution of the sports car.

that it was a potential threat to the vintage cars. If, in these early years of the VSCC, it was considered as good as or better than a vintage car then it was a potential threat to the legitimacy of the vintage car movement. It is no wonder that there was some hostility towards it.

One of my informants told me that in the late 1940s his father who drove an Alvis used to race any SS/Jaguar he saw and referred to them as “jew boys’ Bentleys”, presumably in a racist suggestion that jews who were rumoured to be unwilling to part with their money.

Today, partly because the original SS cars are actually the first cars in the now long and highly regarded Jaguar bloodline (the Jaguar E-Type is considered by many car lovers to be the “sexiest” car ever produced and is a symbol of the racier side of the sexy Sixties) the SS cars of the 1930s are highly regarded by many motoring cognoscente, and they command very high prices, equivalent to the most coveted vintage cars, when they come up for sale. Having talked to some of my informants about these cars they acknowledge that some of the “old boys” opinions of these cars were extreme, but still they maintain a somewhat ambivalent attitude to these cars.

## **Conclusion**

For the vintage enthusiasts, the technology the cars embody, is an essential element of the cars. It is an important defining factor that makes a car acceptable to a vintage car man or not, so that a 1933 Frazer Nash is considered thoroughly vintage and loved by the club members as such, while an SS from the same year, while perhaps selling in auction for twice the price of the Frazer Nash, is shunned and deliberately excluded from all VSCC events. And indeed, I have never seen an SS present at a VSCC meeting or event (though, there must be

the occasional one present, not participating, at the larger race meetings).

Although designed to emulate the best of the vintage cars, but doing so at a reasonable price by employing modern manufacture technology and modern technology of pressed steel in body panels and painting technology the SS embodies the supposed cynicism that crept into the motoring industry of the 1930s, and the end of the rational design values of a supposedly pure engineering to build quality machines. As the technology in vintage cars visually and materially represent the ideological values of rationality of the elite ruling class the age of mass production and mass marketing represent the newer values in which the appearance of an object or a design becomes of foremost importance and the functionality of that object becomes a lesser matter. The technology of the age of consumerism for the person who aspires after elite values represents a subordination of quality to the dominating ideology of sales maximisation; the honest values of quality become subordinate to the strategic values of business.

chapter 7

## Concluding Remarks

“I don't know why we are such nuts about it, but we are nuts about it” (Terry)

This thesis has been a study of how Englishmen relate to antique motor cars, how they keep them, maintain them and use them regularly to re-enact the motor sport competitions that the cars took part in when just a few years old. It has been about how the men reproduce in their minds and in reality the culture of a club for racing sports cars that was first started more than 70 years ago and survives today, and with those same cars that were there at the start of it all. And most of all it has been about the meaning of the club and the cars has changed subtly over those 70 years so that new categories and classifications have come into existence that form a part of my informants' understanding and organising of social and cultural data.

For many members getting their hands on these cars symbolises their wish to partake in the life and values of a class of people greatly admired and would have liked to be members of. It represents a time when those who could afford it seemed to be free of all petty restrictions and political correctness, and with the help of fast cars were free to race around the countryside, unhampered by queues of traffic and over-regulation. For others, they grew up around fast cars and they preferred to keep the cars they knew when they were young rather than move on to newer machinery and newer technology, and the VSCC provided them with this opportunity. Others wanted to have fun and race, and that's what the VSCC provided, and on a low budget. Even today, maintaining something like a Frazer Nash is not that expensive, even though buying one is.

Conducting interviews with vintage car enthusiasts is generally a very simple task. These people, mostly men, have a passion for their cars and their activities that they genuinely wish to share with everyone. Normally, they get to talk to other enthusiasts who share their passion, and they get to bore their wives stupid with endless descriptions of failed repair attempts or stories that begin, “You know what darling? I saw Kenneth Winsmythe’s 1927 six and a half litre blower<sup>23</sup> Bentley at the circuit today. I haven’t seen that in action since Donnington, in 1983, when it snapped a con rod. It came second to Baron Hauser’s Lagonda in the 1932 Double 12 at Brooklands, you know.”

So when I requested interviews from these, mostly, retired men, they were only too happy to invite me to their homes, put the kettle on and open a packet of chocolate biscuits. The questions came easily to me, and the replies were generally well considered and informative. However, there was one question which always brought the interview to a temporary standstill: “Why do you spend all your time and money on cars that are 70 to 80 years old, and that should have been scrapped 50 years ago?” I would ask. There would be a pause while my interviewee would mumble to himself, and scratch his beard or look at the ceiling for inspiration before coming out with, “Ermm, well, it’s, ermm, just bloody good fun!”

The mundane truth for most of my informants is, therefore, that they are members of the club and they follow its well-established traditions of competitive events and social gatherings because they are fun.

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<sup>23</sup> a blower is slang for a supercharger unit, attached to a motor. A supercharger is an air compressor that forces more air into the motor than normal air pressure can achieve, and therefore can

Several of my informants who drive some of the most quickest and most exciting sports cars of the 1920s have commented the capacity of these cars for generating pleasure. John, who loves driving fast, and is a keen and very competitive racer of his 1928 Frazer Nash answered the question as follows:

“You mean why should we still want to do that. Well, it's a good question. I don't know. I suppose I have always been used to it and had a lot of fun out of it. You can have a quick modern car which is very efficient and so on, but it's not necessarily as fun. It's a bit like buying a Porsche Boxster as against having a Healey 3000 for instance. The Porsche Boxster will get from A to B quicker but they're very boring cars.” (John)

And for many of my informants this is the greatest motivating factor behind their enthusiasm. Cars produced today are so good at doing their job, in comfort and safety, that you can drive one at speeds well above the legal speed limit and at speeds that if something does go wrong then a major accident could result while still feeling, inside the car, that everything is relaxed and comfortable. They are so reassuring that the exciting of driving that some people look for is not possible without resorting to criminal activity. In a vintage car, on the other hand, one push the car to its limits and challenge one's skill and technique as driver, while still travelling at perfectly legal speeds, and this gives the vintage driver an immense amount of pleasure. Of course, this does not make such driving safe.

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produce a much more forceful combustion with which to propel the car.



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