

VEHICLE MANUFACTURING IN RUISLIP & NORTHWOOD

by Tony Beadle

Introduction

Although as many as fifty steam-powered road-going carriages were used in this country prior to 1850, and individual pioneers had built a number of petrol-engined vehicles in the early 1890s, it is generally accepted that the British motor industry was established in 1896. A major catalyst for its foundation was the Locomotives on Highways Act, which passed through the House of Commons and became law on the 14 November 1896.

The most important clause in the new regulations was that 'light locomotives' (i.e. vehicles under three tons unladen weight) were now legally classified as carriages and subject to a maximum speed limit. Initially set at 14mph, the limit was subsequently reduced to 12mph by Local Government Boards, as they were entitled to do under the terms of the Act. Heavier vehicles had an even lower speed limit.

To celebrate this new freedom of the roads, Harry John Lawson, founder of the Motor Car Club, organised a tour from London to Brighton which attracted thirty three starters. This later became known as the Emancipation Run and is nowadays called the London to Brighton Veteran Car Run. Previously, Lawson (who bought the Daimler Motor Syndicate in October 1895 for £35,000 and re-launched it as the British Motor Syndicate), had staged an International Horseless Carriage Exhibition at the Imperial Institute in London which ran from May to July 1896. It was during this exhibition that he announced the creation of the Great Horseless Carriage Company and the purchase of a factory to be called the Motor Mills at Sandy Lane in Coventry. These premises were shared by the Daimler Motor Company and the two companies started production before the end of the year.

At this point in time the Ruislip and Northwood area was largely devoted to

agriculture, with village blacksmiths performing the basic engineering work needed to repair horse-drawn wagons and farming implements. However, it did not take long before motor vehicles made an impact on the local infrastructure and for over a century a number of firms and individual people have been involved with building cars, lorries, vans and motorcycles. These activities are summarised below in alphabetical order.

Anthony Hoists Ltd, Braintree Road, South Ruislip

Based in Minerva Road, North Acton, London NW10 for many years, in August 1948 Anthony Hoists moved into what it described in advertisements as 'larger and more up-to-date factory premises' at South Ruislip.

The main business activity in the period leading up to the relocation was the construction of lorry bodies and hydraulic tipping mechanisms that were fitted to various makes of chassis. However, the technical know-how behind the tipper machinery came from the USA. The Anthony Company Inc. of Illinois was founded in the 1920s, and now called Anthony Liftgates Inc is still a major supplier of equipment to the US truck industry. The Anthony Company invented its first 'liftgate' in 1941 but the new device was not seen in this country until after the war.

At the October 1948 Earls Court show, Anthony Hoists was one of two companies that introduced hydraulically operated tailboard lifts to UK road transport operators. Throughout the next decade or so business continued to evolve successfully, with official Ford approval of its small pick-up bodies for the E83W model a valuable plus. Such bodies could either be fitted at the Braintree Road factory or supplied to a local Ford main dealer to carry out the installation.

In 1965, Anthony Hoists survived a takeover, and activity at the South Ruislip plant continued for several more years.

Duramin Engineering Co Ltd, Stonefield Way, South Ruislip

Manufacturers of commercial vehicle bodies, lorry cabs, chassis, trailers and containers in Duralumin (an aluminium alloy originally developed for the aircraft industry), this company was founded in 1920. For a long period the firm was based at premises in Standard Road, Park Royal, London NW10. In 1960 the business moved to South Ruislip, where for several years a wide range of light alloy commercial vehicle bodies were produced.

Edge Sportscars Ltd, 49a High Street, Ruislip

Kit car manufacturing company Edge Sportscars was formed in May 2003 by Robin Hall (an automotive engineer) and Dev Lall (at one time a surgeon at Hillingdon Hospital!), two men originally from Southampton who had known each other since schooldays. The Edge Devil was launched later that same year at the Newark Kit Car Show.

It is presumed that the office was only a post box, with any enquires forwarded. However, all attempts to contact Edge Sportscars have been unsuccessful. It is not known how many kits were sold or the number of cars actually built and it is believed that the company is no longer trading.

Bob Geeson, Ruislip

Robert E. 'Bob' Geeson worked as a senior production engineer for the Metal Box Company in Wembley, relocating from Ruislip to Croydon in 1953. Geeson started his motorcycle racing career at Brands Hatch in 1936 and built his REG range of motorcycles from 1948 to 1963. 1954 was a great year for REG, John Surtees winning fifteen races out of seventeen to take the British 250cc Championship.

Although he only made a few racing motorcycles (sadly, his idea for a road-going version was never taken up by the British motorcycle industry) Geeson undoubtedly produced some top quality machinery.

Gurney & Ewer Ltd, Mill Works, Bury Street, Ruislip

Instead of following the Ewer tradition of becoming a farmer and working on the considerable amount of local land controlled by his family, Henry Nelson Ewer (1878-1947) became an apprentice draughtsman at the Great Western Railway works in Swindon. On the completion of his indentures Nelson Ewer returned to Ruislip, and by 1905 was married and had started Gurney & Ewer, an agricultural engineering business, using the Mill House barn in Bury Street.

His son, also named Henry Nelson Ewer (who was known as Nelson Junior), was born in 1905 and two years later the family moved from a house in West End Road called Elm Grove to take up residence at Mill House.

Gradually the Gurney & Ewer business expanded beyond its original activities of making and mending farm implements, entering into the motor trade as a garage with petrol pumps, plus vehicle repair and engineering facilities. In a similar fashion to his father, Nelson Junior took up an apprenticeship with lorry manufacturer John Thornycroft & Co Ltd at their Basingstoke factory. Once he came back home a coach building operation was established which seems to have concentrated on making commercial vehicles, the customer ordering a chassis from a manufacturer and specifying the type and style of body required. The Mill House barn was demolished in 1936 to make way for a larger building needed to cope with the increased size of the vehicles being produced.

'Apart from an occasional body made to special order, Gurney & Ewer builds large numbers of van bodies of a specified type for a popular make of 20-25cwt forward control chassis' was how a magazine article¹ described the company's activities (as they

were a main dealer for Commer it is assumed this was the make of chassis referred to). The construction method was outlined as '...a matter simply of erecting a number of jig-built units, comprising the body and cab.' with the added comment that this '...entails no more work than building up a portable shed or garage.'

A typical example of the work carried out by Gurney & Ewer in the immediate pre-war years was a special van body installed on a Commer 2-3 ton N3 forward control chassis for Twickenham Film Studios in 1936. Designed as a mobile sound-recording unit, the 14 feet long body was partitioned into two insulated compartments which could also be used as dark rooms. The batteries for operating the Visatone recording equipment were housed under the floor, with a generator mounted below the driver's cab, enabling the van to be employed both on location and in the studio.

Gurney & Ewer advertising in the late 1930s described the company as: 'Specialists in commercial body building of all types' with the address given as Mill Works (or Millwork), Ruislip, and a telephone number of Ruislip 3077-8.

During the Second World War, Gurney & Ewer manufactured munitions and components for aeroplanes, tanks and guns, with up to 150 employees working in the factory. Nelson Junior also devised a new method for automating the production of Sten gun breech blocks and was involved with taking out four patents which ranged from improvements to wheelbarrows, mechanical stokers and brick-making machinery to carburising plant (hardening iron and steel with carbon using a heating process).

Nelson Junior had married in 1931 and his parents gave him land adjacent to Mill House to build what is now called Robins Dell (21 Bury Street). Sadly, his mother and father died soon after the war and then he separated from his wife, so Nelson Junior left the district and the Gurney & Ewer factory was sold to EMI who acquired the freehold of the site in the 1950s.

A management buy-out in 1994 created Electron Tubes Ltd, producers of photomultiplier tubes and accessories, who continued to occupy most of the buildings until they were taken over by ET Enterprises Ltd (a subsidiary of Ludlum Measurements Inc) and relocated to new premises in Uxbridge during October 2008. Sans-Tech Ltd, the last company to operate from the factory, moved out later. In September 2009 Ashill Developments put forward a proposal to build 84 dwellings on the site, but this scheme has yet to be approved.

Northwood Engineering & Motor Works, Rickmansworth Road, Northwood

As far as is known there has only ever been one make of motorcar that was built commercially in Northwood – the Armadale, all be it for a short period. (See Fig. 1)

A report on the Cordingley Motor Show² held at the Royal Agricultural Hall, Islington, in March 1905, that was published in *The Motor-Car Journal* of 15 April 1905, carried the following description: '...the novel tri-car exhibited by the Toboggan Tri-Car Company... is attracting much attention... The name of this little car is derived from the shape of the body... The makers claim that the machine can attain a speed of thirty-five miles an hour, and that it is an excellent hill-climber.'

Compared to other three-wheelers of the period, the Toboggan/Armadale with its steel channel chassis frame was constructed more like a car than most of them, being equipped with a steering wheel and decent seats – rather than handlebars and saddles.

In March 1906, Toboggan Motors were again exhibiting at the Cordingley Motor Show but the name of the three-wheeler had been changed to the Armadale, without any explanation for the new choice of name. The report in the 14 April 1906 issue of *The Motor-Car Journal* mentioned that two sizes of engine were now available: a 5hp single cylinder and a 7-8hp twin-cylinder.

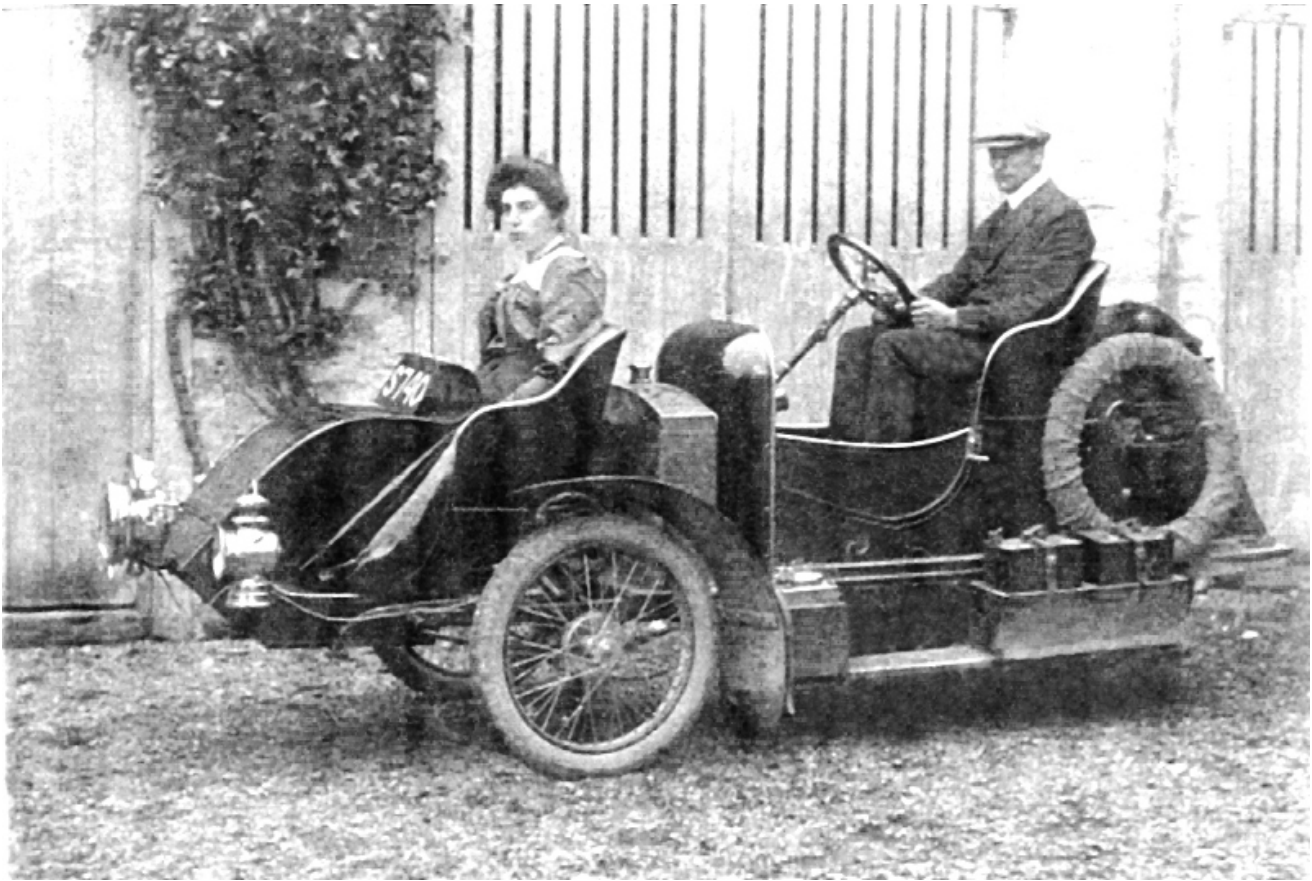


Fig. 1. Armadale Tri-car c.1906, with an Edinburgh registration number S740.

As well as '...several passenger tri-cars, which have accommodation for two or three persons...' also on display was '...a tradesman's machine built for the *Evening News*... designed to enable the driver to deliver newspapers without stopping the engine, or even dismounting.'

The Motor-Car Journal of the 14 July 1906 announced the following: 'We learn that the style of the firm manufacturing the Armadale has now been altered from Toboggan Motors Ltd. to Armadale Motors Ltd. For some time past it has been apparent to the directors that the title of 'Toboggan' was unsuitable. They have therefore, by special resolution of the company and sanction of the Board of Trade, made the alteration. The company is now installed in its new works at Trinity Road, Wandsworth Common, S.W.'

An Armadale was built to compete in the 1906 Tourist Trophy Race held in the Isle of Man on 27 September. Sadly, the Armadale was disqualified before it could even take part in the event as engine problems en route

to the start delayed the car and it arrived too late, the organisers strictly enforcing the closing deadline for participants. Describing the TT car in some detail, *The Motor-Car Journal* of 29 September 1906 gave a clear indication that Armadale were now intent on producing a four-wheel model.

What part the TT debacle played in the company's decline is hard to say but towards the end of 1906 Arthur Cyril Godwin Smith – the managing director of Armadale Motors Ltd – was in serious financial difficulties. This is undoubtedly what caused him to sell off the company, or at least part of its assets.

The final appearance of the Armadale was at the Cordingley Motor Show in March 1907, the report in *The Motor-Car Journal* of 20 April merely noting: 'The Northwood Engineering and Motor Works, of Northwood, Middlesex, have now taken up the construction of the Armadale Tri-Cars...' with no mention of any four-wheel cars.

According to some reference books, Armadale Motors Ltd of Northwood came into existence during 1906, but that could be when Northwood Engineering & Motor Works acquired the rights to the Armadale name. Unfortunately, the timing could not possibly have been worse; people now wanted four-wheeled models and the market for tri-cars simply evaporated. Production of the Armadale is thought to have come to an end sometime in 1907 and it is not known how many cars were actually built.

Although the Armadale saga ended in failure, the Northwood Engineering & Motor Works survived the set-back and continued to function for around sixty years or more. In the 1965 SMMT Directory of the Motor Industry the company is listed as a 'Motor Vehicle Repairer not holding a vehicle franchise' at the Rickmansworth Road address with a telephone number of Northwood 354. It has still to be ascertained exactly when the business ceased trading.

The Northwood Engineering & Motor Works premises were next to the M.A. Nichols Dairy on Rickmansworth Road³ which it is believed later became the site of a service station adjacent to the golf course. The original buildings are understood to have been demolished in the mid-1970s and the petrol station is now a second-hand motor dealership and car wash.

Wooler & Partners Ltd, Willow Bungalow, West End Road, Ruislip

Having started out designing and building motorcycles, of unorthodox configurations, as the Wooler Engineering Co Ltd at Alperton in 1911, John Wooler introduced an unusual cycle-car called the Mule in 1919. Although it had four wheels, the rear pair were positioned so close together that the Wooler Mule is often mistakenly described as a three-wheeler. However, the Mule was not a success, so after a few prototypes had been constructed Wooler abandoned the idea of becoming a car manufacture and from 1921

onwards concentrated his efforts on motorcycles and engine design.

John Wooler moved into Willow Bungalow in the 1920s but it was not until after the Second World War that he concentrated his business affairs at Ruislip. In 1948 Wooler introduced a new motorcycle with a 'beam engine' of his own unique design, Fig. 2, a 500cc four-cylinder unit. Unfortunately, despite advertising in specialist magazines and displaying the Wooler at major Earls Court motorcycle shows it never sold in any quantity.

In 1953 Wooler produced a slightly more conventional motorcycle, again using a 500cc 4-cylinder engine with shaft drive, but this time the power unit was of a normal design. The prototype achieved 100mph and an order for 500 machines was received from the Spanish Police, plus there was also considerable interest elsewhere. However, pre-production examples could only reach 80mph and there were innumerable problems that severely delayed the project. Sadly, John Wooler died in 1954 and despite the efforts of his son Ron, the motorcycle business closed down in 1955.

A derivation of the Wooler four-cylinder engine was also developed for use in an experimental inflatable aeroplane and supplied to the Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough in Hampshire for tests. Although it is believed that the plane flew successfully, the government cancelled the contract.

Wooler Car Care, 315 West End Road, Ruislip, was listed as late as 2004/05 in the Hillingdon telephone directory under 'Car Servicing and Repairs' (The author actually visited this workshop in the mid-1980s to enquire about a quote for some car body repair work and spoke to the proprietor who confirmed the connection to the Wooler motorcycle family). The site is now occupied by a car wash and body repair company.



Fig. 2

This 1948 photograph shows the Wooler 500cc 4-cylinder 'beam engine' motorcycle with John Wooler's son Ron.

(Photo courtesy of the Vintage Motor Cycle Club)

References

1. 'Engineering Applied to Coachbuilding', *The Commercial Motor* magazine, 17 December 1937.
2. Charles Cordingley was editor and proprietor of *The Motor-Car Journal* (first issue published 10 March 1899) and organised what was officially called an 'Automobile Exhibition' at Islington between 1896 and 1908, but these events are almost always referred to as 'The Cordingley Show'. During the early part of the 20th century there were several competing Motor Shows held each year in London. In 1903 for example, apart from Cordingley's there was The Stanley Automobile Exhibition at Earls Court, the Automobile Club of Great Britain & Northern Ireland's show and the first one organised by the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders (SMMT) at Crystal Palace.
3. See photograph in *Around Ruislip*, Page 117; Newbery, Cotton, Packham, Jones. (Chalford Publishing Co., 1996)

The above article comprises edited extracts from a forthcoming book by the author,
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