

The Rise and Fall of the British Motor Car legend, Sir William Lyons and the iconic Jaguar Cars. - Part 2

By Geoffrey O'Connell (Continued from Part 1 - March magazine)

Whilst mentioning lifetime longevity two other examples come to mind, both originating at 5 Broomfield Road. The youngest employee was Harry Teather aged 14 and taken on as a general assistant in April 1923. In his initial five years he worked in every department including frame-making, wood turning, panelling, trimming and painting. In 1928 as he was unable to cope with the 'pear drop' smell which was caused by the presence of ethyl acetate, so he moved to the stores department which dealt with purchasing, packing and the dispatch of spare parts. In time he became the Purchasing Director of Jaguar Cars and the company's longest served employee, working for some 50 years prior to his retiring in 1973. Alice Fenton commenced working as an office junior for Swallow Sidecars at the Broomfield Road factory in 1925. She became secretary to Lyons and progressed to assist in the sales of the company products. In 1956 she was appointed the Home Sales Director of Jaguar Cars – the first female director in the company's history and the most senior woman in the British motor industry.

Lyons who had first met Greta Brown some three years previously, married her on the 15th of September 1924. They were to have three children, namely: Patricia (born 1927)

who first married the rally driver Ian Appleyard; John Michael (1930-1955); and Mary (born 1937) who married a Guy Rimell and had three children.

It was in 1926 that it was realised that the existing premises were not large enough to house the company. It was fortunate that the father of William, Thomas Walmsley had sold his coal merchant's firm when he and his family retired to Blackpool in 1921 and he had been considering finding an appropriate investment for part of the sale money.



Bloomfield Road factory



That dilemma was solved when the Swallow partners heard about a property at 41 Cocker Street, on the corner of Exchange Street, North Shore, Blackpool. The floor area of the building was ideal, as was the construction which was capable of accommodating heavy vehicles on both the ground and first floor. Furthermore, there was a coach sized lift to the first floor. As Lyons and Walmsley (Junior) did not have the necessary 'readies' to make the purchase, father Walmsley purchased the building which he proposed renting to the Swallow Sidecar Company. A 21-year lease was negotiated and signed for on the 9th of September at a £325.00 per annum rental.



Cocker Street factory

The move from Bloomfield Road and the other premises to the Cocker Street factory took place over a weekend apparently without the loss of any production. That was greatly aided by the assistance of the delivery driver and his truck of the Wolverhampton based A.J.S Motor Cycle and sidecar manufacturer.

Customers of their sidecar chassis included the motorcycle manufacturers of Ariel (Birmingham), Brough (Nottingham), Excelsior (Birmingham), Norton (Birmingham), Scott (Shipley, West Yorkshire), Sunbeam (Wolverhampton) and Swallow Sidecars, who were reportedly one of their best customers. In the new to them building the sidecar assembly was placed on the ground floor with a paint booth in a corner of the factory. The first floor contained a space for the manufacture of hoods and side curtains as well as a blacksmiths shop. The relocation of Swallow Sidecars was heralded by an advertisement in the Blackpool Gazette of the 6th of November with the company's title now the Swallow Side Car & Coach Building Co. The second rebodging job occurred late in 1926 and involved a Talbot Darracq racing car that had rolled whilst competing on Southport Sands, Southport, then in the county of Lancashire, 27km/16.7 miles north of Liverpool. The work was supervised by Cyril Holland, an extremely competent all-round craftsman.

The introduction of the RAC Horsepower Tax of 1921 and the need for the Austin Motor Company to be taken out of receivership, which had befallen it in 1921, spurred Herbert Austin into action. With those two events, in 1922 Herbert Austin oversaw the design and completion of three prototype Austin 7's, a four-seater, family, economy motor car. The four-cylinder, side valve engine originally had a capacity of 696cc with a three speed and reverse gearbox and was priced at £165.00.



1922 Austin 7

However, when the car started to be produced in 1923 the engine capacity was increased to 747cc and the first open tourer Austin 7 went on sale in March 1923. The range of configurations included an open 4-seater, a two-door tourer, a two-door saloon, a two-door cabriolet, a two-door coupe and a three-door van, all of which had a somewhat 'sit up and beg' style of bodywork. Between 1923 and 1939 some 290,000 Austin 7's were produced in the UK. Moreover, about 100,000 were manufactured under overseas licences by such as Rosengart, France, the Dixi brand, Germany, and the American Austin Co., in the USA. Additionally, without a licence, possibly by Nissan/Datsun in Japan. The Austin 7 price had a detrimental effect on the UK motorcycle and sidecar market.

Lyons purchased an Austin 7 soon after its introduction and reputedly was impressed with its uncomplicated engineering but initially did not set out to improve the rather utilitarian, 'top hat like' bodywork. I understand it was his sighting of a Gordon England rebodied Austin 7 that persuaded him to consider his own version of the car. Towards the end of 1926 Lyons managed to purchase an Austin 7 rolling chassis from Parker's, the then Austin dealer in Bradshawgate, Bolton, Lancashire, for £114 5 shillings. I understand that an element of

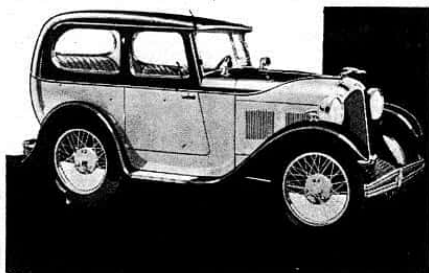
that trade was that Stanley Parker would be granted a dealership for the to-be Swallow bodied motor cars. Later on Parker's became a Jaguar dealer. The first prototype two-seater Austin Seven Swallow (Reg. No: FR 7995) was produced by the Swallow Side Car & Coach Building company towards the end of 1926. The first production line A7 Swallows were available from May 1927 priced at £175.00. By August 1927 a second rolling chassis product line was added for the Swallow treatment of the Morris Cowley. An important sales feature was that the Swallow bodied cars had an attractive two-tone colour scheme.

In order to increase the sale of the Austin Seven Swallow's, Lyons arranged to make a visit to their sidecar dealer in Birmingham, one Frank Hallam. Hallam allegedly visited a local public house instead of keeping the appointment which as it turned out caused him to miss the visit of a lifetime. Undaunted Lyons visited the dealership of P.J. Evans who gave Lyons an order for 50 Austin Seven Swallows for which he was granted exclusive distribution for Swallow cars over a large part of the Midlands. A greater coup for Lyons came about due to his former Brown and Mallalieu colleague, Charles Hayes, who then was working for H. G. Henlys & Company, Great Portland Street, London. Hayes arranged that Lyons should meet the owners of the company, Herbert 'Bertie' Gerald Henly and Frank Hough. Consequently Lyons drove an Austin Seven Swallow from Blackpool to London in the hope of gaining some orders for the car.



SUCH GLEAMING GRACE

SUCH
SCINTILLATING
BEAUTY



Sweeping along the high roads, or in the city, the gleaming grace of Swallow Coachwork compels attention and universal admiration.

But that is not all. Swallow Coachwork is just as comfortable and strong as it is beautiful. And the Austin '7' Swallow Saloon provides ample accommodation for four adults, at the price of £187-10. Like the Saloon, the two-seater and Coupe models are also very roomy, and are lavishly equipped with many exclusive fittings and features.

SWALLOW EXCLUSIVE COACHWORK

HENLYS

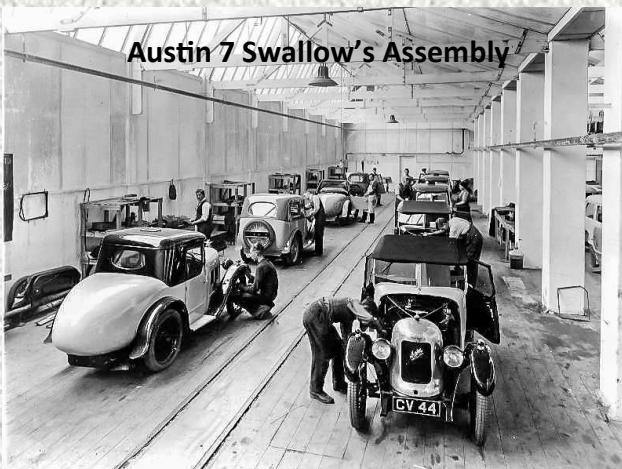
MANUFACTURERS:
THE SWALLOW COACHBUILDING CO., COVENTRY.

91, GT. PORTLAND STREET, LONDON, W.1

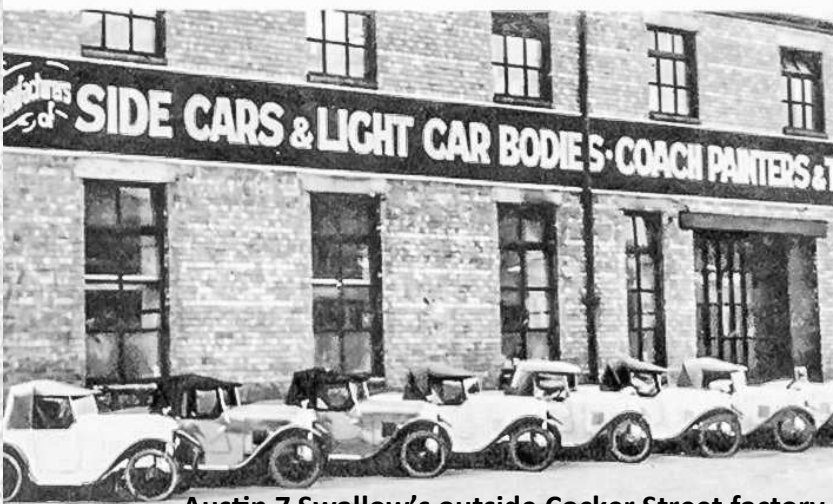
Swallow Distributors for Southern England
TELEPHONE - MUSEUM 7734 (30 LINES)

Henly and Hough were greatly enamoured by the Swallow and 'some orders' became a Henlys commitment to order 500 Austin 7 chassis' to be delivered to the Cocker Street factory for the manufacture of 20 Austin 7 Swallow cars a week. As the Austin chassis were delivered in consignments of fifty at a time storage became a problem and at the same time the sidecars were selling at some 150 a week. Chassis were often parked-up all round the Cocker Street factory and every so often worked on outside the works reportedly to the amusement and interest of passers-by. Whilst at Blackpool, a Cyril Holland was of enormous assistance to Lyons in speeding up the coach making process and increasing the production speed. However, needs must and it was decided another move of the firm was necessary and this time closer to the centre of the British car industry - that was to the West Midlands of England.

Whilst searching for a suitable premises, Lyons was introduced to an estate agent who suggested Lyons met Noel Gillitt, the solicitor for the Whitmore Park Estate Company. They had a property for sale beside Holbrook Lane, Foleshill, Coventry, some 5km/3 miles north of the city centre.



Austin 7 Swallow's Assembly



Austin 7 Swallow's outside Cocker Street factory

The WW1 building was four double blocks which had been erected as a reserve munitions factory beside a track (to be named Swallow Road) off to the side of Holbrook Lane. It has been recorded that each block had eight factory areas each of 464sq.m/5,000 sq.ft. There's big! At that time two of the blocks were taken by Holbrook Bodies Ltd., who were making bodywork for the Hillman Motor Car Company. Lyons considered that Block number three would be a good fit for the Swallow Sidecar and Coachbuilding Co., even if it had not been occupied since 1919 and was rather dilapidated. However, it was necessary to persuade the Whitmore Park Estate board of directors that they should make a concession and enter into a lease agreement with Swallow with an option to purchase. Lyons must have made a satisfactory impression with the powers that be, and they agreed to such an arrangement. A contract was entered into for a three-year rental of £1,200.00 per annum with an option to purchase freehold at a later date. On the 8th of October Lyons and Walmsley signed the lease and the move to Coventry, which took some six weeks, was completed by the end of November 1928.

Lyons would not pay the quoted price of £800.00 to renovate the factory so the task was performed by their own workforce and outside labour. After the move to Coventry another key employee joined the company, namely Fred Gardner who ran the sawmill department. He was regarded as a difficult character, often voicing himself with choice offensive expressions, despite which he and Lyons got on very well together.

To ensure that the manufacture of sidecars and motor cars continued with as little interruption as possible 'knock-down' components were boxed up and taken to the assembly lines of the new Coventry works.

It was reported that within two weeks finished cars were being placed in the dispatch bays for delivery and or collection.

Geoffrey

Continued as Part 3 in May magazine