

# An unfortunate encounter with British Engineering!

*By Eric West*

Those of you who struggled through my “Magnum Opus” of a profile might recall that I once had a rather embarrassing encounter with a rather posh British motorcar. I said then that it was a tale for another time and, sadly, that time has now arrived!

I finished my schooling in Waiouru, a place where employment opportunities for a young lad were remarkably sparse. My parents had already decided that, after my dad finished with the Army they would move to Rotorua, a town they liked, so I was sent there, as a kind of advanced guard.

I was a mere 16-year-old and found accommodation in an Apprentices Hostel in Ranolf St.

The manager of the hostel had a few contacts and I soon found myself employed washing cars and changing tyres at a local garage, as a possible precursor to being taken on as an apprentice.

One of our clients was a rather distinguished looking gentleman, who had apparently been a Major in the British Army, a title he still insisted upon, and who appeared to be a bit eccentric, as he always came into the garage dressed in an immaculate hacking jacket, Jodhpurs and “spit polished” riding boots. I understood that he had a rather successful Real Estate business.

His car was suitably British, being a very well preserved 1934 Rolls-Royce Phantom II, with a Gurney-Nutting body, obviously in black, and polished until it shone.

It was my job, once a month or so, to wash the car by hand, using only new towels, polish it and black the tyres, clean the whitewalls with “Reckitt’s Blue”, check the oil and vacuum it out to the Major’s satisfaction. This was a job that often took all day.

I had completed this job for the first time and had to drive the car out to the car park, so I carefully removed my overalls and leaped into the car for my first experience driving a Rolls-Royce.

Now, this was a car designed to be driven by his Lordship’s Chauffer and had the gearchange lever by the driver’s right leg next to the door, with the parking brake handle alongside, I assume that this was so that the chauffer could not caress her ladyship’s knee if the daughter of the house was riding in the front. This lever was quite tall, the knob being above knee level and it moved in an open gate.



**1934 Rolls Royce Phantom II  
with a Gurney-Nutting body**

Those of you who remember the '60s will recall that trouser cuffs were somewhat wider than now, and thus, as I leaped into the car, this gear lever shot straight up the right leg of my trousers.

It was about then that I discovered that it was much easier to get the lever up your trousers than it was to get it down again!

After struggling for some time, I came to the horrible conclusion that the only way to escape was to slip my boots off and wriggle out of my trousers, so that I could unthread them off the gear lever.

This I did with some difficulty, but by now my plight had been noticed by all the mechanics, apprentices, and office girls!

Of course, this was too good a joke for any assistance to be expected from the older, more experienced guys who were all waiting to see how I would get myself out of this one. So here I was, a shy, naïve young lad exiting a Rolls Royce in my white "Y-Fronts" and socks, in about as undignified a manner as anyone has ever alighted from a Roller!

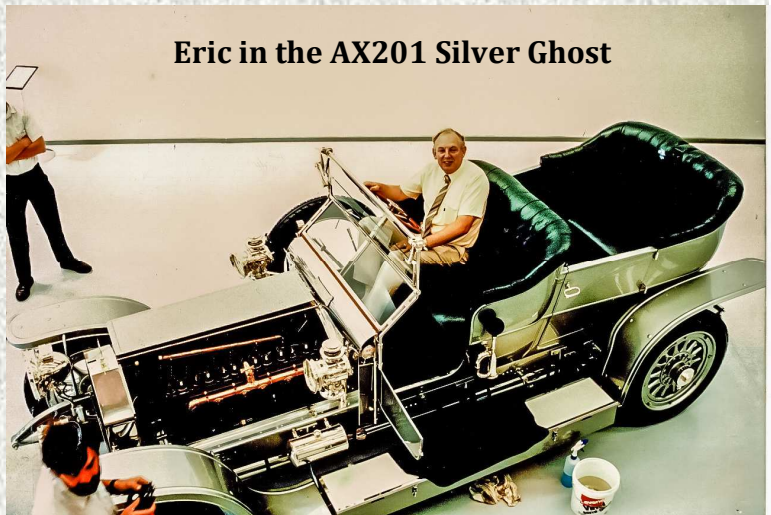
What made it worse was that at the time I had a severe, unrequited, crush on one of the young office girls and she was "front and centre" of the onlookers, rolling on the floor! Oh, the trials of young love!

Then, just as things could not possibly be more embarrassing, the Major turned up!

He looked at me with a very knowing smile, turned to the audience and said, "Aah, I see this young man has discovered why I always wear Jodhpurs and Riding Boots"!

Well of course it was!!! No doubt, it was also the reason that in the photos you see of chauffeurs of those days, they are similarly attired. What a stupid place to put a gear lever!

Years later I got to sit in AX201 the original "Silver Ghost". It has no driver's door, a much more satisfactory arrangement!



**Eric in the AX201 Silver Ghost**

(There was an odd sequel to this many years later. I used to frequently visit a company in Ellerslie, in the course of business, and the receptionist seemed vaguely familiar, a fact I mentioned to her, but neither of us could work out why this was so. But the next time I went in, she leaned across her desk and enquired "Soto Voce", "Do you still wear white Y Fronts"? She was one of the office girls!)

*Eric*