

# Tony Vandervell's all-conquering Vanwall racing cars. - Part 1

*By Geoffrey O'Connell*

The 'Vanwall' racing car's existence was due to Guy Anthony 'Tony' Vandervell (1898-1967). He was the eldest son of Charles Anthony Vandervell (1871-1955) who was born in Paddington, London, and whose grandfather was Henry Eugene Vandervell, a London Stockbroker. In his later teenage years Charles was educated at the 'Institution of Electrical Engineers'. In 1892, aged 21, he opened a works in Kensington, London, trading as 'C.A.V. - C. A. Vandervell and Co'. Early brochure items included accumulators, electric lights and small lamps. In 1902 C.A.V. moved to Willesden Green, London, then in Middlesex, when the range of products available included dynamos, cycle and portable lamps, ignition batteries and Weston Type frequency meters. In respect of the latter device, I have read and reread the bibles of explanation and am still unable to advise readers what they do. After two years at Willesden, the business '*upped sticks*' and moved to Warple Way, Acton Vale, London, W3.



**Tony Vandervell**

In 1913 '*Norton Motors*', Birmingham, founded in 1898 and manufacturers of motorbikes since 1902, became beset by financial difficulties, which was not helped by the illness of the founder of the firm, one James Lansdowne Norton (1869-1925). Amongst the creditors of '*Norton Motors*', the largest was R T Shelley Ltd., a Birmingham engineering company who acquired the business at auction. Either through an association with R T Shelley or by some other means, Charles Vandervell became chairman of '*Norton Motors Ltd*'. Incidentally, in a thesis paper published in 1995 it was maintained that Bob Shelley of R T Shelley, purchased '*Norton Motors*' at auction and that in turn R T Shelley was actually owned by Charles Vandervell who became Chairman of the soon to be renamed '*Norton Motors Ltd*'. Who am I to argue with that? This paragraph has some significance to me so if at all interested read on to very nearly the end of this 'carry on'.

However, back to the main plot. In 1916 C.A.V. became a Limited Liability Company with over the years an ever-enlarging range of electrical goods for sale including C.A.V. magnetos, starter motors and ignition equipment for automobiles, which were followed by wireless components. In 1926, after some thirty-four years at the helm, Charles allowed Joseph Lucas Ltd., of Great King Street, Birmingham, to take a controlling interest in C. A. Vandervell and Co Ltd.

During WW1 (28<sup>th</sup> of July 1914 to 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918) Tony Vandervell dropped out of Harrow Public School, Harrow on the Hill, Middlesex. Having '*adjusted*' his age he joined the then Army Service Corps and later in the conflict became a Workshop officer in an Artillery Battery. After the hostilities he motor raced, certainly from 1920 through to the end of 1924. That took place at such venues as **Kop Hill Climb**, Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire, which held hill climbs between 1910 and 1925, and **Brooklands Circuit**, near Weybridge, Surrey, which was in operation from 1907 through to August 1939. Another venue was the **Shelsley Walsh Hillclimb**, Worcestershire, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July 1920, at which he entered his '*4½ litre Talbot 25/50*' (straight 4, side valve, 4447cc). At that event he came second by 2.2 seconds to C. A. Bird's 1916, '*4.9 litre Sunbeam Indianapolis*' (straight 6, dohc, 4914cc). On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1923 he was entered to



**Kop Hill Climb**

race his Talbot at the **Georges Boillot Cup event** at Boulogne-sur-Mer, France but he did not turn-up. In those years his chosen car was the Talbot, a sister car to that owned and raced by Malcolm Campbell (1885-1948). It was in a streamlined version of that car that one Percy Edgar Lambert (born 1881-1913) covered 103.8 miles/167kms in an hour at Brooklands Circuit on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1913, becoming the first motorist ever to drive in excess of 100 miles/160.9kms in an hour. Later that year a 5.6 litre '*GP Peugeot*' driven by Jules Goux (1885-1965) broke his record, covering 106.2 miles/170.9kms in the hour. Lambert decided to attempt to reclaim the land speed record, despite having promised his fiancé that he would give up record breaking attempts. That took place on the 31<sup>st</sup> of October 1913, and it was to be his last attempt to so do. On his 21<sup>st</sup> lap of Brooklands it is believed a rear tyre collapsed causing the Talbot to overturn. Percy Lambert died whilst being transported to Weybridge Cottage Hospital. That tragedy was some two weeks prior to his planned marriage. The remains of his Talbot were obtained by Tony Vandervell who subsequently used parts of the wreckage, especially the engine components, in his car.

He at least once raced a '*Ford Model T*' at Brooklands in 1922 which it was reported '*went well for 2 laps*'. In 1923 he was entered in the **JCC 200** at Brooklands in a '*Crouch*', almost certainly a '*12/24 Super Sports*' (1496cc) but '*DNA*'.

Tony first married in 1925, I believe to a Molly Agnes who was described as an actress. He secondly wedded a Muriel Foster and thirdly his personal secretary, Marion Moore, a mere seven weeks prior to his dying.

Immediately after the sale of C.A.V., Tony worked at Joseph Lucas Ltd. for a short time after which his father set him up retailing radiograms, an item of household furniture in which both a radio and a record player were accommodated. In the meantime, in 1927, father Charles had acquired O & S Oilless Bearings Co., based in Victoria Road, Park Royal, London NW10, and placed Tony in control of the business. After a few years in the job Tony became aware of the recent method of bearing surface production that had emerged in America. Up to that time bearings, such as crankshaft main bearings and those of the big and small ends of the connecting rod, were constructed by pouring the bearing material – usually babbitt alloy or white metal – into a mould, and once set, cleaning it off and then in-line boring the surfaces. After having done so, on occasions it was necessary to hand scrape in the surfaces with a flat, triangular or curved scraper, using ‘Engineers blue’ to indicate the high points in the faces. On a need-to-know basis, the alloy was so-named after one Isaac Babbitt living in USA who in 1839 formulated the compound.

After that digression back to the plot.

The Cleveland Graphite Bronze Company of Cleveland, Ohio had managed to manufacture a new bearing arrangement to replace the old system. That was a most important development of the existing cast in-situ scheme. The Thin Sheet or Thin Wall (thus Thinwall) bearing surfaces were composed of a thin steel backing plate on to

which was affixed a layer of bearing material which had been precision ground. They were easily replaceable and could tolerate high loads. Accordingly, in 1931 Tony crossed the North Atlantic Ocean and travelled to the Cleveland company. Once there it has been detailed that he sat on a settee in reception for six days, refusing to leave the office before being given an audience with the powers that be. His dogged persistence paid off as he was granted a licence to manufacture the Thinwall bearings for the British and European markets from 1932. It appears Tony had little difficulty in persuading father Charles of the viability of the project who underwrote the scheme with little short of half a million pounds. ‘Vandervell Products’ was formed and a new factory built in 1935 on the north side of the Western Avenue, in the Municipal Borough of Acton, then in the County of Middlesex. By 1936 the company employed 200 personnel and as the end of the 1930s approached the ‘Vandervell Products’ Thinwall bearings were traditional practice across the British and European automobile industry. Naturally WW2 greatly increased the need for their products and excellent expertise in the whole field of ever-increasing military equipment. In 1942 Tony became a director of the Cleveland Graphite Bronze Company.



Tony was appointed a director of 'Norton Motors Ltd.', in 1946 and in the same year he formed 'Vandervell Products (Canada) Ltd'. In 1947 Tony was invited to join with other stalwarts of the automobile industry in supporting the proposed 'British Racing Motors (BRM)' efforts to manufacture an all-British Grand Prix racing car. Those in that select group included: Oliver Lucas (1892-1948), the joint managing director of Joseph Lucas Ltd., and the grandson of Joseph Lucas, the originator of the business; David Brown (1904-1993), the managing director of David Brown & Sons and the grandson of David Brown, the founder of David Brown in 1860; and Alfred George Beech Owen (1908-1975) who on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 1930 aged 21¾ became the Chairman and joint Managing Director of Rubery Owen Co., reputedly then the largest private family business in Great Britain. Tony's oft considered abrupt, exacting and impulsive nature determined that he became increasingly dissatisfied with the 'BRM' managements politics. Furthermore, he became of the opinion that they had no hope of successfully motor racing in Formula One (F1).

Thus, it came as no surprise that he departed the 'BRM' set-up at the end of 1949 in order that he could manage his own challenge and 'beat those bloody red cars'. Earlier that year Tony purchased a short wheelbase, 1949 'Ferrari 125 GPC' (V12, supercharged, possibly dohc 1497cc), had it painted green and christened it the 'Thinwall Special No. 1'. Tony's engineers found the Ferrari racing machine surprisingly unrefined – and that is putting it politely. Whatever, it was entered in the

14<sup>th</sup> of May 1949 British Grand Prix at Silverstone Circuit to be raced by Thomas Raymond Mays (1899-1980) and Williams Kenneth 'Ken' Richardson (1911-1997). They had an accident on lap 81 or 82 – take your choice – of the 100-lap race around the 4.8km/3-mile-long course. The car was returned to Ferrari. Also in 1949 'Vandervell Products' built a factory at Cox Green, Maidenhead. Within that building were engine test beds and it was there that first the Ferrari and then the Vanwall racing car engines were tested. The 'Vanwall Racing Team' remained based at the Acton factory.

Enzo Ferrari (1898-1988) extolled the virtues of his new F1 racing car, the 'Ferrari 125 F1' fitted with a double wishbone suspension. Tony swallowed the bait and ordered a long wheelbase, swing axle rear suspension one for the 1950 season. It was entered in the 26<sup>th</sup> of August BRDC International Trophy race at Silverstone Circuit which was raced over 35 laps of the 4.6km/2.9 miles track. With Alberto Ascari (1918-1955) at the wheel, the 'Thinwall Special No. 2' spun off on lap 7 of 15 laps in Heat 2. Once again, the 'Vanwall Products' engineers were rather uncomplimentary in respect of the car's construction.

*Geoffrey*

*Continued as Part 2 in October magazine*

