Early Days In The Motor Trade, 1904-1915



Ewell Downs Motor Services, with John Swift at left.

My dear Hazel, you asked if I could give you some of my earlier history. My father, Henry Swift, came of a large family in the county of Nottingham. He trained as an engineer and was skilled in steam and general maintenance of colliery and factory plant. In his early days it was the practice for a young man to go as a journeyman and so make himself more proficient and versatile at his trade. This took him up to the Yorkshire coalfields as well as those in the Nottingham district. He was more of a practical mind than a studious type, and really loved his work. In his late teens he associated himself with what was then known as the 'Blue Ribbon Movement', a teetotal organisation which set about to get reform in the drink laws of this country and was making big strides under the leadership of Robert Booth. It also had a big following amongst the Army in India. Whilst going about on the reform of public houses, he met a young woman, Emma Fox, who was leading a mission in the slums of Nottingham known as the Narrow Marsh Mission. The district was poor and harboured quite a lot of criminals at that time, and whilst Emma Fox could go about there with impunity, the police would not go there singly for fear of being sandbagged. Eventually my father and Emma married. Emma's sister was married to a chemist and was one of those women who will try to put other people right whether they like or not, and she considered it very 'infra dig' to be an engineer in overalls, so my father left engineering, and began in business as a coal merchant and greengrocer in one of the suburbs of Nottingham. He was fairly successful at first, but not having been trained in business he did not make the progress desired by his wife's family, and this led to unpleasantness, but my mother, who was of a very gentle disposition, worked hard in the shop. She had three children in quick succession – my sister Fanny was the first born, then 18 months later Harry was born, and I was born some 14 months later on October 12th 1886. From this time my mother began gradually to fade. Far from complaining of her worries, she struggled on unbeknown to her family. However the time came when it was necessary for her to go into hospital for treatment of an internal tumour, and she died under the operation. This made my father rather bitter against

hospitals and operations, and he would never have much truck with surgeons or hospitals afterwards. He was very fond of my mother.

He was left with three children under the age of 5, and business was not too good, so we three children were sent to various relations. I lived Aunt Jennie Booth for three years. Then my father met a young woman from the country named Gertrude Wragby. She was willing to take on the upbringing of his three children, so they were married and set up house in Radford, where my father was then working as a maintenance engineer in one of the big lace factories. I always remember with delight going round the big steam engines to oil up. My holidays were always spent with Aunt Jennie, and I can still remember the excitement of waiting for the village carrier to take me away. My aunt had two daughters, Nancy and Nell, and I was thoroughly spoiled by them.

My father still moved around among the Reform parties, the Nonconformist chapels and the Independent Order of the Good Templars. Needless to say, all the children had to be members of the juvenile branch. During these years there had been quite a number added to the family circle – Elizabeth, Annie, Mabel, Nellie and Will. Owing to the depression in the lace trade and the opening of a new railway in Nottingham, My father decided to go back into business with a coffee house and temperance hotel. This meant plenty of work for all of us, though my stepmother was very good to us. During this time I had moved to various schools, and always did very well: I was always in the first three at the top. About this time there were ructions regarding religious denominations. The Church of England was dead set against the Nonconformists. Big demonstrations took place, and my father went to prison rather than give up his rights. Thousands of Nonconformists did likewise. This made a very bitter feeling against the churches. At this time my teacher, the Master of the seventh form, wanted us to carry out certain High Church practices in the school. Being the son of a Nonconformist I led an opposition movement in the school. After a good many beatings my time was up for schooling at 13. I left at 4.30 on the Friday afternoon and started work at 8 a.m. on the Saturday, glad to be away from school and earning my living. It had been my intention to be a plumber, but as this man was fond of strong drink and my father was a rabid teetotaller, I was not allowed to go to him. My first job was with a firm making trunks and gladstone bags, but I was made to go errands and push a basket three-wheeler as much as four miles out, so I soon decided to make a change.

About this time I was given a chance to go to London to look after a stud of dogs at a nursing home in Manchester Square run by one of my father's sisters. I did not like her, but I was happy enough with my dogs; there were about 12 of various breeds, and puppies to look after. This was December 1899. The country was at war with the Boers in South Africa and we had been having a good many reverses – Modder River, Colenso. London was very dismal and depressing, thick fogs, bad street lighting, and conditions in the house were not too good – the servants were all grumbles. On Christmas Eve for some reason all the servants walked out and left the house. Now I had been used to Christmas being a happy time, with the family and music and

good things to eat. My aunt went out and left me to fend for myself. I complained, and was given a half-crown and told to go and enjoy myself at the Egyptian Hall, Regent Street. This was the first money I had had to spend since my arrival in London. Instead of going to the Devant show I decided to run away. First I walked to Charing Cross embankment, and suddenly I saw on a tram the word 'Croydon'. This gave me ideas. I knew that my stepmother had a sister there. I asked about the fare, which was eightpence. Thinking I had better get a meal first, I spent fivepence on a good feed at Lockhart's in the Strand. Feeling refreshed I decided to walk to Croydon, some 14 miles, arriving about 10 o'clock at night. My stepmother's sister was not pleased to see me as they were having a party. However they heard my story and put me up. Her husband wrote to my aunt that he would take legal action unless they paid my fare back to Nottingham. A few days later I went back to Manchester Square, picked up my belongings and took the next train back to Nottingham, my dream of London streets being paved with gold having vanished.

1900

With the new year came the birth of a new century. As I had always been interested in mechanics I joined a wholesale cycle firm in Nottingham. The proprietor had been a coal miner but had made a lot of money cycle racing all over England, and I looked up to him like a hero. After the war in South Africa had finished, there was a big depression in every trade; this followed an Engineers' and Coal Strike. Nottingham was in a very bad way. However, my boss had ideas. He would go to South Africa. I was to go to night school to learn commercial correspondence, shorthand and typing, and would follow him out as soon as he got settled. We shipped out hundreds of cycles to him on credit, he got in with some financial swindle and lost everything.

By 1904 I had passed thro' various branches of the cycle trade. At the same time taking a big part in the running of the Boys' Life Brigade in Nottingham and district. I also found time to go out on a Sunday with a local preacher and sing solos in the out of the way village chapels. This man was self educated and became a big noise in the miners' movement. Gypsy Smith the Evangelist came to Nottingham and took up the revival of religion which made a big impression on me in those days.

Our family had grown still larger by now. Fanny had left home and my brother Harry suddenly decided to go to sea. Motor cars were just coming in and I told my parents I intended to leave cycles and go into the motor trade. As I was earning good money, not only keeping myself in clothes, but also helping with the family exchequer, there were words, and I was told to stay put, but my mind was made up. Leaving home was no hardship as I went to live with Cousin Nancy at Chilwell, about 1½ miles from the factory of the Humber Ltd., Beeston.

Not being a premium apprentice I had to push my way, starting as an improver. My father's early training of me in engineering ideas stood me in

good stead. It was soon noticed that I could use and handle tools. After 9 months, Nancy Beardall and her husband, who had been good enough to put me up, left the district. This meant being in lodgings. I was very fortunate to get in a nice family and was very happy. To improve my technical knowledge I attended Nottingham University. This meant rushing home at 5.30, then cycling nearly five miles by 7 p.m., 2½ hours study three nights a week, then homework, then starting work at 6.30 a.m. My wages were about 12/6 per week, and lodgings cost 11/-. Things were a bit tight, but I used to earn extra money fitting up incandescent mantles for local people I got to know.

During the summer months the motor trade was very busy and meant overtime all night. I was often working 36 hours at a stretch before I was eighteen. My rate of pay had increased and was about 3½d per hour. A fully qualified engineer was lucky to earn 36/- for a normal week. I put in for a man's job on the electrical side. I was booted out of the foreman's office for having the cheek to ask for the job. Still, I got it, and managed to do it. Then I asked for more money and proved I was worth it. Whilst working nights or weekends I managed to get a good knowledge of driving and running repairs. At nineteen I was already getting known to the powers-that-be, as I was not afraid of work or hours.

1906

At twenty I was put on experimental work, preparing cars for racing. The motor industry was growing and we were very enthusiastic in our work. It meant long hours, but I was keen to get somewhere. It was my job to demonstrate new cars and teach the new owners and their coachmen. This took me all over the country, and I stayed in some very nice houses. My first big event was a Motor Race on the promenade at Blackpool on October 12th 1906 (my birthday), winning a gold medal for my company. This was followed by a spell in London for the Motor Show in November.

Then came a hard winter at work in the shops and studying at Nottingham University at nights. During the spring I was chosen for experimental work for the season's racing cars. Drinking was rife amongst the leading lights of the racing team, but I still kept on the teetotal game. T.C. Pullinger was a hard boss and knew his job, and if it was a special night run or weekend he usually chose me because I was steady and could be relied on to turn up on time.

Heavy Tourist Trophy and 1,000 Miles

By June of this year our three racing cars were ready and loads of spares, engines etc. were sent to the Isle of Man for the event of the year, the Tourist Trophy, Heavy and Light. Some weeks were taken up on testing and alterations. No tests were allowed after 6 a.m., so most mornings saw us on the road at 4 a.m. There was a certain amount of danger because the course round the island kept close to the sea, and fogs and mist made it very difficult to drive. I was spare mechanic on the last day before the race. G.P. Mills, the

driver, had a difference with his mechanic and I was put up in his place – needless to say, I was highly delighted!

The race was started in pouring rain, six times round the island of about 58 miles. There were a number of accidents and a number failed because the limited supply of petrol ran out. We arrived first with half a gallon of petrol to spare! Our firm also came first in the Light Tourist Trophy. On our return I was sent to London to demonstrate the Heavy model.

In July another big event took place in the motor world. Our company (Humber's) were well to the fore in most events. A big race of 1,000 miles started from Glasgow. I was chosen to drive Mr. and Mrs. Pullinger and friends. However, in the Lake District on the way up we came across a party of the Bioscope Company from London who were due to take pictures, and a correspondent from the Daily Mail. Their car was smashed. Mr. Pullinger decided to drive on with other friends and handed me over to the Bioscope Company. Filming was then only in its infancy, and my job was to get along early and await the cars at tricky spots and dangerous bends so that they could get good pictures. The whole trip was excitement, and I received a very nice report back at the company on my work.

Russia

A week later I was sent for and introduced to Mr. W. A. Priest, who was planning a trip across Russia to sell Humber cars. My old car from the Scottish Trials was overhauled and by August I was off to St. Petersburg. After a week of demonstrating there we went on to Moscow by train. There we spent about 3 weeks and met another motor party – Prince Borghese, an Italian who had travelled from Peking and was going to Paris. Mr. Priest, on learning of the difficulties and the costs, decided not to go any further and sold the car to an agent in Moscow. Whilst in Moscow I saw the sights – the Kremlin, and Sparrows Hill. Sparrows Hill was the spot where Napoleon saw Moscow burnt and had to start his retreat back to Paris. From Moscow I had to travel along back to England. I had mastered a few words of Russian and German. I arrived in Riga, caught a boat for London and thoroughly enjoyed by trip home. Mr. Priest went on to various cities and eventually came back to Beeston. About a fortnight later I was asked to go out to Riga to carry out another demonstration. This was my first big job on my own, and I was not 21 yet.

This trip was full of troubles with the car. It was a new model and gave me quite a bit to think about. However, after being stranded miles out, engine on fire, door torn off and windscreen broken, I still managed to put up a good show, and 'Eugene Fietelberg' congratulated the firm next November when they came over to the Motor Show in London, ordering quite a number of models for the next season. I was invited to go out for a year at a salary of £2.10.0. per week. I arrived out there in March and soon realised I could not live on that salary. I managed to get them to pay for my rooms. To supplement my income I used to give lessons in English, and then when I was

away from Riga, teaching and demonstrating, my expenses were always provided for.

In my travels round that part of Russia I came in contact with a number of royal princes and German barons. I was always treated well by them and their families. One long trip was down to North Germany with Prince Krapotkin. My knowledge of German was improving, but Russian I found very difficult, for the simple reason that I never mastered the grammar. By the time winter arrived, the demand for motors fell off, and the Russians soon went back to their old love, horses and sleighs. I tried all sorts of devices to keep the cars on top of the snow, but I was beaten about Christmas. Fietelberg's did not want the expense of me during the next three months, so I decided to break the contract. I had had a good deal of trouble with cars breaking down and no support from the factory. Still, it was a wonderful experience. My trip home was through ice-fields. I arrived in England on Christmas Eve and I decided to spend Christmas at Tuxford with Grandma Fox.

January 1909

On returning to Coventry I spent a short while on new models and then I was offered a post in Odessa to run a fleet of Humber and Fiat cabs. I settled down to this job and got to know quite a lot of local people. I found the English very standoffish so, beyond going to the English Church, I left them alone. I was entertained well by the Russians and German colonists. It was whilst out there that I got to know a crowd of enthusiastic Army officers who were learning to fly with an early Bleriot machine and a Maurice Farman bi-plane. These men were so poor they could not afford transport to the flying field 5 miles out, and I got permission from my firm to use one of our cabs. Our instructor was a Greek who had gained his certificate in Paris under Bleriot. Flying was very different in those days.

Our biggest engine was a 35 hp 3-cylinder Anzani. If there was any wind we were afraid to take off, and if we managed to rise off the ground and fly over a tree, well that was just the cat's whiskers! Sunday was a big day when the public was admitted. The Russians used to get very excited at any small attempts at a flight.

After 12 months' wear the cabs gave me a lot of trouble, and I was ordered a rest after 20 months out there. By the way, I met my brother Harry whilst out there. During the summer of 1911 our district of Odessa had a bad spell of bubonic plague, people dying like flies in the streets. Harry wrote me from Alexandria to say he was coming up the Black Sea ports. As Odessa was closed, I went up the coast and met him at Nikolaieff, and spent the Sunday with him. He was an engineer on an English ship from Liverpool. Soon after he left for the States, and settled down there and married a daughter of a Minister of Religion. I came back home for a spell, and it was at this time that Mummy and I became engaged. Whilst home I received a telegram to say I was to stay home for the winter. However, I went out, packed my tools and bags and left Russia for good. The wanderlust got me going again, and I tried

for jobs out in Egypt, Canaries and Gold Coast. As it was Motor Show time I filled in a spell at the Show. There I contacted motor agents from Vienna who eventually contracted to take up Humber cars, and I was recommended to represent the Company. I arrived there early December, spending a very enjoyable Christmas in Vienna and Semering.

Vienna 1912

The cars arrived in the New Year, and during January I left with Baron Widman and his wife for the Monte Carlo Rally. Cars were being driven from all parts of Europe. Unfortunately we ran into bad weather. Leaving Vienna at 5 a.m. on Sunday, running into snow at Semering through Graz to Trieste, then rain to Milan. Snow again to Genoa, reaching Monte Carlo on Wednesday afternoon at 2 p.m., having covered over 1,000 miles. After an enjoyable ten days at Monte Carlo, we motored through Lyons to Paris, where we stayed some 10 days, enjoying ourselves. Then, as funds were low, we entrained for Vienna with the car.

I then settled down to work and demonstrated the cars as they were sold. It was here that I met Julius Wolf, who was a car salesman. The models we were selling were rather high-priced because of high import tax. However, Hans Paulsen, the principal of the firm, did not make things easy for me. Like most of the firms out there, as soon as they had got the pick of my knowledge I became an expense. But my home was under my hat, so – the wanderlust again – I planned to see the big French motor race at Dieppe in July. I asked to be freed from my contract and, before going to France, I took a steamer to Budapest and spent a short holiday there. Then back to Vienna, a few days in Switzerland and Paris, and on to Dieppe. There I met my old boss, Mr. T. C. Pullinger, who was racing a team of Arrol Johnstone cars. I enjoyed helping to prepare the cars for the race, and saw the race from the pits. Unfortunately all our cars broke down. I came back to England and was offered a berth at the Arrol Johnstone works in Dumfries, but Scotland did not appeal to me, so I said goodbye to all my friends, and went back to Coventry. During the next few months I spent a good many weekends coming Londonwards, seeing quite a lot of Mummy and her people. I decided to make a change as I was anxious to get nearer to London and settle down.

Marriage and World War 1

I wrote to my old boss, G. P. Mills of Tourist Trophy fame, and he offered me a post at Clement Talbot's in London. This gave me more opportunity of spending some time with Mummy, and we decided to get married on December 4th. Neither of us had been of a saving disposition, but we managed to lay out quite a comfortable flat. My salary was about £3 per week, but we set about enjoying ourselves, and most Saturday nights saw us up at a West End show. Then war was declared. Our firm went on short time for a while, until we got a contract for light armoured cars for the Royal Naval Armoured Car Division. The first batch was not a success, and it was my job

to go to various dockyards and carry out repairs and replacements, as a civilian. However, the new year found me anxious to join up, for we had lost a number of staff at Antwerp. I decided to take the plunge and volunteered for the Royal Naval Air Service, Armoured Car Division. At first they were only operating from Wormwood Scrubbs as a Repair Depot, and I was fortunate enough to get home every night. Then a section was formed to go to France to carry out repairs at an advance post near Ypres. I went out as second in charge. We left Dover some time in May. We were a very irregular crowd, something like the commandos of today – every man a specialist in some type of repair of vehicles, guns etc. We were fortunate to pitch our camp some seven miles from the German lines. Whilst we were there we were under shell for practically the whole time. We lived underground until about September. During that time we were engaged in all sorts of activities behind the lines. I was in Dunkirk twice during the bombardment by 'Big Bertha', a gun with a range of about 21 miles.

John Swift, Feb 15th 1946