WATCH OUT FOR THE OLDEST FORD

On November 2nd 2003, for the first time ever on the Veteran Car Run, the oldest surviving production Ford car can be seen on the road between London and Brighton – reports Elizabeth Bennett.

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF ELIZABETH BENNETT

top: **Ford Model 'A' 1903 believed to be the oldest surviving Ford production motorcar.**

above: **The Ford decal on the body work.**

The Ford Motor Company was incorporated on June 16th 1903, and offered its first production car, the model "A" for sale. How appropriate that in the centenary year for the Ford company, the very oldest known survivor of that production run should make its first appearance on this world famous Veteran Car Run from London to Brighton.

Historic research has shown that this car appears to be the earliest surviving Model "A", and it has only had three previous owners from new. The car bears the number 30 on the fly wheel, and copies of factory shipping dates from 1903 show that it was bought by HL McNary of Iowa, and shipped on the 4th August 1903. Cheque stubs from the company's bank records show the Ford Motor Company balance as of June 15th 1903, to be down to $223. Then an investor paid in $5,000. Alongside this entry, the first three orders for motor cars are recorded; Dr E Pfennig paid the full $850 for his car, a $300 deposit from the Indiana Auto Company for another, and HL McNary's deposit of $170 was recorded for this car, number 30. There have been no signs of the survival of the other two cars mentioned above, which were number 11, and number 9.

Yet more research has traced the ownership of number 30. The first owner, HL McNary, was a butter-maker at Britt Creamery Iowa, and the Ford featured in the Britt Centenary Celebrations. The basic two seater Model "A" cost $750 and one could have a rear entrance tonneau added for $100 converting it to a four seat motorcar. This was the option chosen by HL McNary, as can be seen from a photograph taken of the car in 1935.

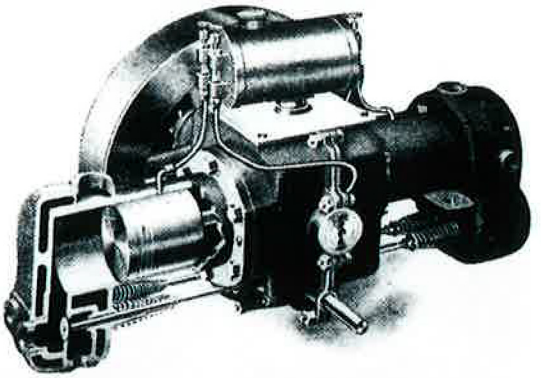
The second owner Harry E Burd of Waterloo Iowa acquired it around 1950. Harry E Burd was an

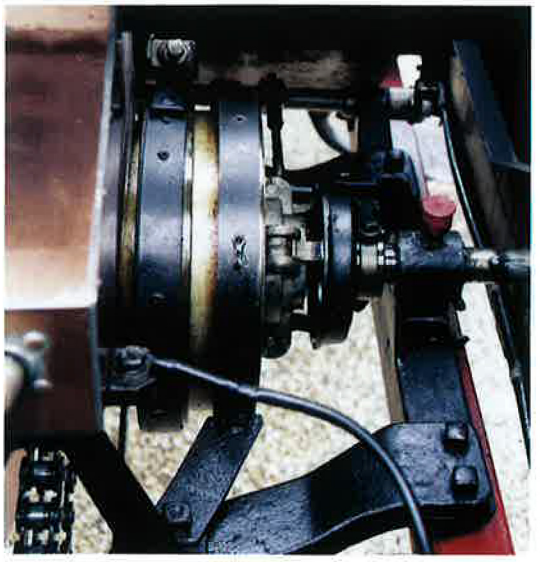
historic car collector, and recorded that the Model "A" Ford was one of his biggest finds, and it had taken him three years to negotiate the purchase. He had the history researched by the Ford Motor Company, who confirmed in 1954 that it was the third car that the Company ever sold. In 1961 he sold the vehicle to Ernst Ruegg in Zurich Switzerland, who regularly used the car for over 25 years, and then loaned it to the Ford Motor Works in Cologne Germany. It was displayed there in the foyer for fifteen years, and serviced and maintained by their master mechanic. After Ernst Ruegg keeping it for 40 years, the present owner in England has acquired it. So the car that you will see on the road today is quite possibly the oldest survivor, and the third of approximately 285,000,000 Ford Motor cars sold world-wide.

So what is it like to drive?

The aim was to produce a car so simple to drive that someone who had never considered having a motorcar before could master it with ease.

The public had seen that racing cars were difficult to handle, rather like a spirited horse; and slow and quiet running was often not possible with these monsters. Henry Ford had experimented with motors from 1891, and the Ford that you see today, although 100 years old, runs quietly and smoothly. The engine is a horizontally opposed two cylinder unit with ➜





above: **McNary – taken in 1935 on the Ford Model 'A' number 30.**

left: **The Ford motor.**

below: **The gearbox.**

The rear axle is almost totally enclosed.

Below centre: **The steering wheel stands to the right of the vehicle.**

transmission of the planetary type, provided with two forward speeds and reverse.

It develops a sturdy 8hp (on a good road 30mph can be achieved), and has a band brake in the differential to stop it! In emergencies both the foot brake and the reverse gear pedal can be depressed; but although effective, this is likely to result in breaking of a different kind.

Power is transmitted by chain drive to the almost totally enclosed back axle.

This was altered in later models because stones from the unsealed roads would become trapped and troublesome. Later Model "A"s had open chain drive, with all the inherent problems that option brings, but at least one could see what was happening!

Henry aimed to give the public a simple and efficient motorcar for business and family use. No one can dispute that he did that, and the Company has continued to supply the market for 100 years. He issued instructions with each car saying *"The aim of the builders of the Ford is to construct an automobile which combines strength, durability, simplicity, ease of handling and adjustments for the compensation of wear, all of which advantages have been combined."* (extract Preface "How to Run the Ford.") Henry Ford also said that he would have made the Model "A" even lighter if he had known how to.

Riding in the Model "A" one can see how it was such a success right from the beginning. Steering is by wheel placed to the right. There are floor controls for accelerator, brake, and reverse gear engagement; and there is a smooth take-up of power by the sliding of one lever coming easily to hand at the right of the driver's seat which engages low or high speed, according to position.

By moving the lever towards the rear of the car, a friction is applied to the transmission case by a band that holds the case and causes the gears inside to revolve, thus multiplying the power about three to one. When the lever is pushed forward the transmission is clamped bodily against the flywheel and no gears are in motion, consequently the sprocket revolves at the speed of the engine. For reverse, place the hand lever in a neutral position and apply the foot brake. Then press on the reverse foot pedal, keeping the right foot on the accelerator as required.

In 1903 a potential customer would be aware that Henry's use of a two cylinder power unit had ironed out the bumping and thumping transmitted to all parts of man and machine in contact with a one cylinder engine. The result was, as his advertising suggested, "progress without vibration". Four elliptic springs and pneumatic tyres were all designed to "ensure the acme of comfort and ease to all passengers on the Ford".

Shopping around for a car in 1903, improved comfort must have been the first difference the prospective new motorcar owner would have noticed; because to the unskilled eye, the Ford Model "A" looked pretty much like a Cadillac of it's time. This was because Henry Ford had been Works Superintendent of a Company called Detroit Automobile Company that was set up by Henry's backers to make cars. They became unhappy with his lack of progress in producing the results they wanted, and bought in Leland as a consultant. Henry disagreed with this move, and left Detroit Automobile Co., and after some dalliance with race cars, set up the Ford Motor Company on June

'In emergencies both the foot brake and the reverse gear pedal can be depressed'

right: **Floor controls operate accelerator, brake and reverse gear.**

far right: **The wheels are artillery wooden wheels fitted with a tube tyre.**

above: **On this early Model 'A', the carburettor is made by Byrne Kingston and Co, Kokomo.**

far right: **Wheel steering with advance/retard lever attached to column (post), and bulb horn for warning. Note the electrical double-throw switch controlling the two sets of batteries on the lower left.**

16th 1903. He bought to that company his knowledge of how the motorcar Leland's company was making, then called the Cadillac, was put together: and in his view, improved upon that basis. His customers approved; for in the following 15 months 1,700 Model "A"s were built and sold.

So, imagine you are Henry Ford's first customer, how do you start the Model "A"?

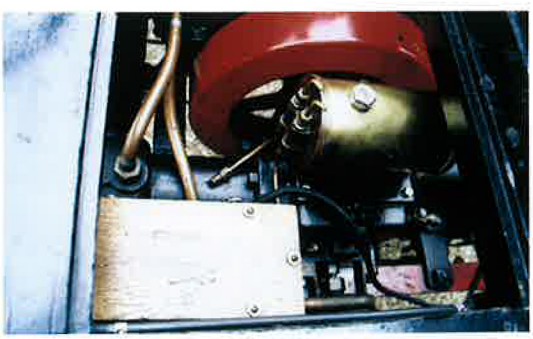
Well, you would be used to your horse and possibly a buggy, so you would first make a quick check that all was well at the 4 corners, and that your "shoeing" was not going to let you down – ie there's still air in the new-fangled pneumatic tyres? These were still experimental, rubber being a soft compound applied to canvas to create a tyre. The addition of carbon to give "rubber" tyres hardness (and blackness) was in the early stages of development.

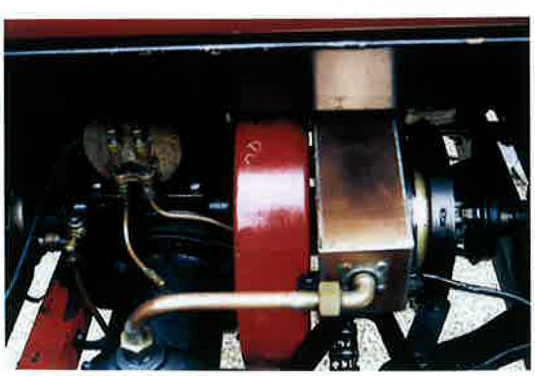
So, if the tyres were still inflated, the next check was the oil reservoir, to be sure lubricating oil is delivered to various points to facilitate moving parts. Check the water level is correct in the engine coolant tank, and now check you have fuel in the gasoline tank (this would in all probability have been purchased in two gallon cans delivered by rail and stored in your motorhouse – another potential hazard).

All systems look OK? Then flood the carburettor. On this early Model "A" it is a Byrne Kingston & Co carburettor, made in Kokomo. (Later, for some reason, Henry changed to Holley carbs – this could have been a business reason, for the Byrne Kingston carb works well). Flooding is by release of the wing nut on the top of the carb – see photo, (the floor boards were lifted for ease of access!). Note also a priming cup and tap arrangement for direct introduction of fuel into the cylinder on "difficult" days. Obviously you would check that this tap is closed, otherwise there would be a loss of compression!

Turning to the starting handle inserted in the side of the body behind the drivers' seat, a couple of rotations will distribute some lubricant and introduce some fuel in to the bores.

The manual tells us: *The steering column mounted spark advance lever should in starting be parallel to the steering post or otherwise you are liable to get a premature explosion when starting and the starting crank will kick back with the liability of injuring an arm.* You switch on the electric current (which in Henry's time would have come from two sets of six dry cell batteries to furnish the spark for the ignition). The electrical control is a double throw switch which was designed for connecting two sets of batteries each consisting of six cells in series. It was suggested in the manual that the car be run on one set of batteries until

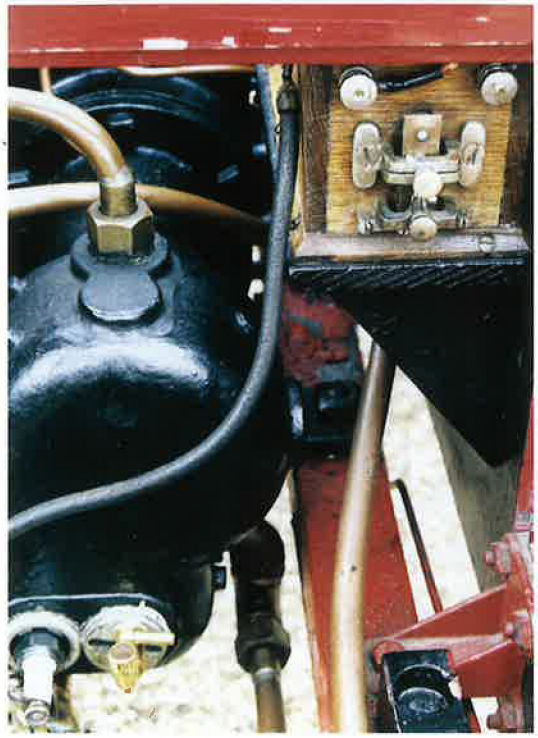




above and right: **The engine (front, top and rear).**

above: **The radiator proudly carries the name of the marque.**

right: **The trembler box is situated on the top right of this picture.**



below: **Cranking the side-accessed starting handle fairly rapidly.**

bottom right: **Enter with the aid of the thoughtfully provided footplate.**

exhausted, and then on the other set – meanwhile replacing the first set. A weak set of batteries may cause an explosion through the carburettor on account of weak current. (this can be remedied by adjusting the vibrator of the trembler coil).

It is interesting to note that even in 1903 there was security consciousness, for Henry had a plug in the electrical switch which could be pulled out when leaving the car, which breaks the electrical contact; "avoiding the liability of any one tampering with the machine."

The electric current flowing should make a small buzz from the wooden trembler coil box. All is ready for the ignition of fuel in the cylinders.

The instruction book gives a stern warning. *"It is very important that one should always insert the starting crank in such a way that you will pull up on same. In this way if you should receive a back explosion on account of having forgotten to have the advance lever parallel to the steering post, the crank handle will pull from you. Otherwise the shock will be against your shoulder."*

Time for action!

Crank the handle fairly rapidly to bring together the magic of fuel and electricity. The engine "fires" very easily if all is well, and the advance should be retarded to half very quickly to allow the two cylinder engine to "tick over". Soon the metal parts warm up, so they are all working in harmony. Iron parts will expand as they warm, allowing tighter fitting, less escape of power, and better performance. Engine warmed, you are ready to enter with the aid of the thoughtfully provided footplate, and glide away in your self propelled horseless carriage. ●

Acknowledgement: The author wishes to thank Mike Timms, owner of this Ford, for his kind help and co-operation in preparing this article

Further information on the history of this car is available on: www. brighton-early.com