

The roads become so narrow that a timid driver might consider



# DAWN TO DUSK

## continuing on foot. Then with a sigh of relief, I spot The Hunt House



Piotr R. Frankowski enjoys a pre-lockdown drive from Goodwood to The Hunt House in a Rolls-Royce Dawn before spending a long day enthralled by documents in the archive

words by Piotr R Frankowski and pictures by Patrycja N Frankowska

ENGLAND HAS ALWAYS embraced secrecy. The Secret Intelligence Service derives from the Secret Intelligence Bureau, founded in 1909, and all such institutions are shrouded in a sort of romantic mystique. The British also hate to throw anything away. That is why many World War Two files are periodically reclassified, so nobody can learn what they contain for decades to come. This, and the fact that Britain was not invaded, means that there are archives which can bring an historian to his knees.

One such archive is located in Paulerspury, a small village in Northamptonshire. Accessible only by narrow lanes running between fields and rows of trees, it is very quiet and has the air of a place which could serve as a backdrop to the opening paragraphs of a John Le Carré novel. Sat-nav systems get confused here and finding a destination may call for a more traditional solution. Like asking for directions.

The Hunt House, seat of the RREC, not only creates fabulous events for members, but also takes care of a truly exceptional archive. It houses the production records of all Rolls-Royce cars, including chassis cards from 1904 onwards (which are filled out by hand in period handwriting). It also holds experimental and test records, lots of photographs, books and coachbuilding documents. It holds all the factory papers for more than 100,000 individual cars, so it is the right place to look for evidence of a car's provenance or to prove its originality.

But my journey began elsewhere. I drove to Paulerspury in a modern Rolls-Royce from the factory in Goodwood. En route, I was planning to put the car to the test and discover whether it was as great a tourer as its forebears. Today, it seems, people are reluctant to use luxury cars for long journeys. With the famous London to Edinburgh run of 1911, performed in top gear only, Rolls-Royce proved that on long routes it had no equal. I was curious whether that statement would hold true more than a century later, in modern day traffic between West Sussex and Northamptonshire.

### THE DAY BEGINS

Arriving at the Rolls-Royce manufacturing plant is an experience in itself: hidden away in the countryside, within walking distance of the Goodwood racing circuit, it is so perfectly blended into the green surroundings that one might be tempted to see it as a film location, playing the part of some top-secret government agency. The discreet signs dispel the illusion and soon I am in possession of a heavy key, which weighs down my pocket and stays there. The Dawn, which I am borrowing, is by definition a vehicle for people who do not mind being noticed or indeed stared at. When the sun shines on the pearlescent paintwork it becomes clear that this car would look equally at home on the Promenade des Anglais, on the main drag in Dubai or in the heart of Texas on a summer day. Right now it appears almost too clean for the muddy lanes it must brave on its journey north.

I set off, enjoying the silky hum of the turbocharged V12 and the gearchange which is well-nigh imperceptible on part throttle. The steering seems too

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light at first, but isn't, and offers lots of precision. The weight of the car is apparent only when the driver makes a rash, violent course change. The stability system keeps the car out of trouble and smooths the result of any erroneous use of the tiller. But this car is at its best when driven smoothly, with precise, fluid inputs. In this manner, the huge Rolls can surprise other road users with its pace over twisty roads.

The sound system is outstanding, and Joe Sample's perfectly recorded acoustic piano provides the correct soundtrack for cutting across the Downs. The air of serenity which this car imparts is due in no small part to the torsional stiffness of the roofless body. It is simply otherworldly, and allows the suspension a great foundation to work on and as a result the car is so eerily quiet. Not silly-quiet in the way active noise cancellation could make it, there are still pleasant, subtle car noises to entertain the senses, but incredibly quiet nevertheless. The feeling of space, airiness and the great visibility (including the door mirrors which are large enough to actually see what is behind you) contribute to the driver's sense of control.

Have you ever noticed how in some cars you feel comfortable in the seat even before you adjust it and in others you keep fiddling with the controls for weeks and never get it right? The Dawn's magnificent seat felt right immediately and perfect after adjustment. I am one of those rare people who does not feel comfortable in Volvo seats. I suffer from back problems (part of the cost of being old) but here the pains did not occur, allowing me to concentrate on the car's behaviour. The Dawn can sprint from standstill to 60mph in less than five seconds, and it does so with dignity. Its top speed is governed at 155mph (not that this would be put to the test on the M40). What is most impressive, however, is the 570bhp engine's responsiveness at low throttle, which is what you really need in slowish, modern traffic. Most of the time the turbocharged character of the motor is hard to detect and that is a good thing. Rolls-Royce Motor Cars frown at the use of the word 'Sport' with regard to their cars, so there are no F1-style gearshift paddles and no fancy ECU 'configuration' menus but, yes, this car can be hustled cross-country should the need arise, and its occupants still arrive unruffled.

Once off the main road and nearing The Hunt House, the roads become so narrow that a timid driver might consider stopping the car and continuing on foot. They are also heavily potholed, so progress is slow and careful. The Dawn has so much suspension travel, and such fine damping, that even a road that feels as though it was last maintained in 1969 poses no challenge. Passing parked cars is difficult and finding the destination requires old-fashioned intuition, as the navigation system struggles to find the exact location. Before I start to despair, I spot The Hunt House which I recognize from photographs. A sigh of relief, then gently through the gate. Safely parked, I enter the building ready to immerse myself in the files requested in advance.

In my native Poland, Rolls-Royce cars were not terribly common before World War Two. Some sources quote the number of such cars in the country at 15.

One Phantom II with a body by Barker or Kellner was used by Jozef Pilsudski, the supreme leader of the country between 1918, when it regained independence after 123 years, and his death in 1935. It was later used by General Smigly-Rydz, the Supreme Commander of the Polish Army, and nobody knows what happened to it after Poland was attacked by the Germans and the Soviets in September 1939. Perhaps it survives and will be found some day? But I came here to search for the build records of another car, a Phantom III with a Vanvooren body once owned by General Sikorski, which was displayed in 2015 at Villa d'Este.

### IMMERSED IN THE ARCHIVE

This Phantom III is now resplendent in deep burgundy, complete with a plaque showing general's stars, plus the correct flags showing the prewar Polish national eagle. However, trying to find out more of the car's history has been somewhat difficult. Sikorski, a hero of the 1920 war of defence against the Soviet invasion of Poland, fell out of favour with the country's ruling elite in 1926 and did not get a command until 1939. He devoted his time to writing books, including one which predicted a future return to manoeuvre warfare (how right he was) and to teaching at France's L'École Supérieure de Guerre, spending more time in Paris than in Warsaw. It is difficult to fathom why he chose to order a Rolls-Royce via an intermediary (a Polish commercial mission to France) rather than in his own name, and how he could even afford one... Perhaps he had a source of income which he did not want to disclose in Poland? But in that case why order a Phantom III Sports Cabriolet by Vanvooren? Hardly a way to stay invisible. Perhaps the truth will emerge but all I have now is speculation. The person who placed the order was Mr S Czarniecki, of 30 Rue Clairant in Paris, on behalf of Towarzystwo dla Przemyslu i Handlu Surowcowego (Society for Industry and Raw Materials Trade), based in a prime location in Warsaw. Curiouser and curiouser. Was this company paying Sikorski for services rendered, or were they just a convenient front?

The chassis order at Rolls-Royce bears the number 3CM81 and was sold on 20 October, 1937. The rolling chassis was then transported to Vanvooren in France aboard SS Plover and the accessories ordered with it are described as 'usual'. It had a speedometer in miles and kilometres, a fuel gauge in litres and gallons, Dunlop wire wheels and tyres, an Exide battery, and was destined for 'France, Poland, Continent'. One interesting item on the chassis card is the 'louvred bonnet'; the angle of 11 degrees of each louvre is described, as well as the aluminum mouldings.

The paperwork suggests that the body was completed in 1938 but then the history of the car becomes muddled. Did Sikorski keep it in France until the war? We know that just prior to the German and Soviet invasion in September he was seen being driven around in a BMW. 'Driven' because he never got a driving licence. He evacuated to France via Romania like so many members of the Polish armed forces, but it is not known whether the car went with him or if it had never been in Poland at all.

**Right: hand written records relating to General Władysław Eugeniusz Sikorski's 1937 Phantom III 3CM81 reveal details of the ordering process, the £1900 purchase price and the list of options**

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## This place is full of treasure. I will be back to do more research

Sikorski then joined the Polish government in exile in France, became its first prime minister and also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. He began to form the Polish army in France, a task never completed, although Polish aviation and land forces fought gallantly to cover the French retreat. The army was again evacuated, this time to the British Isles, and Sikorski, still held in high regard by the Allies, commenced to recreate a Polish army on British soil. At this point the car was with him and Sikorski was granted membership of the Royal Automobile Club.

Sikorski did not manage to convince the Allies that the Soviet Union had been an aggressor but, despite that, he tried to normalise relations with Moscow. Many millions of Poles had been caught in the aftermath of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, and were imprisoned or simply stranded and persecuted in the USSR. He was making headway but, suddenly, when the Germans discovered the mass graves at Katyn, where at Stalin's orders (now found and made public) 20,000 Polish army officers had been executed, talks broke down. Just before Sikorski was able to convince the American public that this had really happened, he died in a B-24 Liberator crash at Gibraltar. Poland lost most of the clout that Sikorski was able to wield against the Allies and in 1944 this led to them acknowledging the puppet Communist government and ceasing to support the Polish government in exile. Sad times.

Not only do I feel that the dark red car bore witness to most of those moments, but the yellowed card I am touching is like a means of telepathically moving through time and touching the actual people who ordered the car, rode in it, drove it. I am surprised by the emotion. I didn't expect that.

### FURTHER DISCOVERIES

I move on to another set of files. These are less emotional but no less interesting. Digging in the archive is a bit like archaeology, you have some idea of what you might find, but you're never sure. For instance it is known that the Shah of Persia, later Iran, owned a number of Rolls-Royces. One of them stands out because it was a singularly original one-off: a

drophead coupé built in 1951 by H J Mulliner on a Phantom IV chassis and the ordering party is described on the order sheet as "His Imperial Majesty the Shahinshah of Iran, Tehran." Heady stuff.

"Speedometer in kms," it continues. "Colonial springing. English wiring. White-sided tyres." But more interesting is an inspection form, filled out by an engineer who later travelled to the Iranian embassy in Rome to check on the condition of the car. This man wasn't one for mincing his words.

"Body: In poor condition, generally knocked about. This car is very badly maintained, and has considerable minor damage to the body and bumper bars." With disdain, the engineer added that the "Embassy has been in the habit of employing casual drivers for two or three hours."

More digging brings to light the build sheet for the last Phantom V ever built, which went to Switzerland, and the fantastic convertible which starred in the famous Michelangelo Antonioni film *Blow-up*. This place is full of treasure and I will be back.

The inspection forms feature stilted prose which makes it easier to understand the meticulous manner in which those long gone engineers and technicians performed their duties. All chassis measurements are recorded with unflinching accuracy and the care with which everything was done is evident.

Is it any different today? Yes and no. Coachbuilding of the old type is all but gone. However, any interaction with a new Rolls-Royce, especially spending many hours driving it across the country, shows the old spirit of perfection is very much alive.

Leaving The Hunt House I encounter a blocked road, thanks to holes dug by a water company, and have to travel via a series of muddy detours and gravel tracks, not really staked out with a Rolls-Royce in mind. Squeezing past cars travelling in the opposite direction is extremely difficult because the edge of the road is basically a muddy ditch following heavy rain the previous day. Taking care not to make contact with any tree branch, I slowly make my way out of the maze of narrow rural lanes, thankful not to bring the car to the condition described as "generally knocked about" by the engineer sent to fix the Shah's car.

### AT THE END OF THE DAY

As darkness falls, the automatic headlights swiftly reshape the beam so as not to dazzle oncoming drivers while keeping the road ahead well lit. I finally reach the major trunk road and exhale a sigh of relief. I doubt many owners demand this much of their Dawn convertible, perhaps they choose a Cullinan for such roads, but it is reassuring that the car can handle the challenge. Searching the archive made me realise that Rolls-Royces are not anonymous conveyances, built only to transport people from one place to another in comfort and safety. Each of them, as much now as in the past, is an individual with its own separate history. Thanks to my trip north I have touched some of that history and am hooked for life.

*This article was provided courtesy of the secretary of the RREC Polish Section, Michael Moran.*

### VISITING DURING COVID-19

**The Foundation and RREC are complying with Government guidelines and therefore The Hunt House and archive are currently closed to visitors. However, the staff continue to deliver their functions through a combination of working at THH and from home as our systems are able to support remote working. With the second wave of COVID-19 projected to worsen over the next few months, it is unlikely we will be able to open the facilities before the New Year**

