

Report on December 2021 meeting Craig Horner: Early Motoring in the North West

Dr Craig Horner, Senior Lecturer in History at Manchester Metropolitan University, was the speaker at the December meeting of Sandbach History Society held by Zoom. His subject was "Early Motoring in the North West". He said that he is interested in how people got into motoring and what the issues were at the time.

He reckoned that the first car in Manchester was probably an 1896 Lutzman - which looked like a horse and carriage without the horse. By 1900 there were 20 cars in the city but by 1905 there had been exponential growth and the number was 1,200. What had happened to cause that massive increase?

The first car in Cheshire was probably in Bowden in 1897 where Samuel Okell owned a Hurler. Motor vehicle registration was carried out on a county basis from 1904 onwards. Cheshire was allocated the letter M. Samuel Okell's car in 1904, a James and Brown, was assigned the number M16 but he had changed his car several times since 1897.

Dr Horner used the example of a motorbike to illustrate how machines changed ownership. An Ariel bike had been registered new to Albert Wright of Nantwich in 1904 but the registers show that it had changed hands ten times in as many years before ending up by being owned by a publican in Birmingham. Because vehicles were sold on quickly, with a consequent reduction in price, it allowed the less well-paid to engage with motoring. The same applied to cars. A Swift Voiturette, registered new to a plumber in Northwich in 1904, was on its fifth owner by 1912.

In the development of both motor bikes and cars, there was no standardised type, said Dr Horner. He showed an image of the 1903 "Trimo", made by Coventry Eagle Cycle Company, advertised as "Almost a motor car" and looked like a motor bike with the front wheel removed and replaced with a bath chair. Nevertheless, it became popular as a small family vehicle. Other models were aimed at "men of moderate means" which contributed to wider ownership.

The manufacture of motor cars originated in France and Germany in the 1880s. Buyers would often travel out to the factory to see their car built then drive it back to Britain. But dealers slowly started to emerge. One of the first in the North West was Manchester Motor Car Company who promised to obtain "any make of car at short notice." Advertisements appeared in newspapers but would be found in the small ads columns under "bicycles".

Anyone buying petrol in 1900 would have obtained it from the chemist's shop where it was sold by the pint and regarded as a cleaning solution. Petrol was seen as a waste product in the distillation of lamp oil. At this time there were only two agents in Manchester where petrol could be purchased in quantities sufficient to fuel a car.

In 1900 a labourer, in regular employment, was earning £60 per year and a skilled engineer about £150. A Voiturette at £200 (an extra £10 for a windscreen) was clearly out of the question but five years later the car might only be valued at £20 and, although could probably be described as "a bag of nails", brought it nearer to being affordable by the lower-paid.

Dr Horner said, "The more I read, the more I realise that the past was a foreign country" with regard to social attitudes towards women at this time. Men asked, "What is the world coming to?" when they saw a woman riding a bicycle wearing trousers. But attitudes did start to change and by 1912 "The Cyclecar" magazine featured a vehicle with the caption, "So easy, that a lady can drive." One big change came with the start of electric ignition. Prior to that, the job of starting an engine was definitely regarded as "a man's job" as it often resulted in fingers or wrists being broken.

The Automobile Association was formed by a group of enthusiasts in 1905 and became very popular. They wanted to champion motorists and, in particular, to help drivers avoid being caught for speeding. With an army of patrolmen, on bicycles, they had a coded system whereby they would salute the driver of a passing car which displayed the AA badge, except when there was a speed trap ahead.

For scholars, students and enthusiasts interested in early mobility studies, Dr Horner mentioned two reference books which he has written: *The Emergence of Bicycling and Automobility in Britain (Bloomsbury)* and *The Cheshire Motor Vehicles Registrations 1904-07 (The Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire)*.

The next meeting of Sandbach History Society will be on 4th January (via Zoom) when Tony Bostock will speak about "The Holdcrofts of Vale Royal." Visitors are welcome to attend virtually; please e-mail Richard Vickery on info@sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk or view the Society website www.sandbachhistorysociety.org.uk for further details.