ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

ROLLS-ROYCE ‘MAKERS OF THE MARQUE’:

ELEANOR VELASCO THORNTON

15 APRIL 1880 - 30 DECEMBER 1915

10 April 2024, Goodwood, West Sussex

* A brief overview of the life and career of Eleanor Velasco Thornton, born 15 April 1880
* Secretary to both Claude Johnson and Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, muse of illustrator and sculptor Charles Sykes and the model for the marque’s iconic Spirit of Ecstasy mascot
* Third in a series profiling the principal characters in the Rolls-Royce Motor Cars foundation story as the marque celebrates its 120th anniversary in 2024
* Insights into the people, personalities and intertwined relationships that indelibly shaped the marque’s creation, development and lasting legacy
* Each account underlines and celebrates the essential human dimension of ‘the best car in the world’

*“Eleanor Thornton has a unique place in Rolls-Royce history. She is best known as the purported model for our Spirit of Ecstasy mascot, but how this came about is part of a far more complex and fascinating story. Secrets, sacrifices and the ever-present risk of scandal dominated her tragically short but intense and colourful life. She was a strong, intelligent, self‑assured and highly influential woman in an automotive world that was then almost entirely male-dominated. She also played a pivotal part in a timeless, tangled, deeply human drama that would eventually make her, and the artwork she inspired, immortal."***Andrew Ball, Head of Corporate Relations and Heritage, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars**

Eleanor Velasco Thornton was born on 15 April in 1880 in Stockwell, south-west London. Little is known of her early life: what's certain is that as the 20th Century opened, she was working as assistant to the ebullient and charismatic Claude Johnson, General Secretary of the Automobile Club of Great Britain & Ireland (later the RAC) and soon-to-be business partner of The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls.

Eleanor rented rooms at The Pheasantry on the Kings Road, Chelsea; now a Grade II Listed building, its eclectic and flamboyant architectural flourishes were the work of its then owner, the artist and interior decorator Amédée Joubert. At that time, it was home to a thriving colony of artists (in the 1930s, the basement became a restaurant and drinking club, the regulars of which included the painters Augustus John and Francis Bacon, the poet Dylan Thomas and legendary actor Humphrey Bogart; it remains a nightclub to this day). Amid these bohemian surroundings, Eleanor lived a remarkable double life: by day, a professional executive assistant; by night, a life-model for the Pheasantry's resident artists. One of those for whom she regularly posed was a talented illustrator, Charles Sykes.

Eleanor's life changed completely and irrevocably in 1902. That year, almost 100 miles from London, on the edge of the New Forest in Hampshire, John Walter Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu, was grappling with a longstanding problem. He was yet to ascend to his future title of 2nd Baron Montagu of Beaulieu; in the interim, for all his impeccable lineage and shining prospects, he was perennially short of cash. By a double misfortune, his life's great passion was the motor car, which in those pioneering days was still very much the preserve of those with deep pockets.

Happily, Montagu had a flair for journalism, so his inspired solution was to set up one of Britain's earliest dedicated motoring magazines, *The Car Illustrated*. Montagu could handle the writing, editing and publishing himself; but for images, he needed a professional illustrator. In one of those odd coincidences that so often shape history, the man he hired was Charles Sykes.

Among Montagu's circle of motoring friends was Claude Johnson. When, through him, Montagu met Eleanor, he was instantly captivated by her intelligence and promptly poached her, offering her the position of Office Manager at his magazine. Eleanor accepted, and the aristocratic publisher and his new colleague – 14 years his junior – soon embarked on a lengthy clandestine affair.

Thereafter, Sykes and Eleanor found themselves suddenly thrown together as colleagues at *The Car Illustrated*, while already well acquainted with one another under very different circumstances. Whether this caused any awkwardness between them is impossible to say; but it seems unlikely, since Eleanor was soon posing for him again.

During this period (the precise date is unknown) Sykes produced a mascot for Montagu's Rolls‑Royce Silver Ghost. Called ‘The Whisper’, it was a small aluminium statuette of a young woman in fluttering robes with a forefinger to her lips. It has been confirmed that Eleanor was the model: whether the mascot was a token of appreciation from Sykes to his friend and employer, or made at Eleanor’s instigation as a gift for her lover, remains a mystery. Whatever the truth, Montagu displayed it on every Rolls-Royce car he owned until his death in 1929; perhaps as a discreet acknowledgment of his love for Eleanor, which he kept secret for so long.

Tragically, Eleanor was among hundreds who drowned when the P&O passenger ship *SS Persia* sankin the Mediterranean in 1915. Montagu was among the handful of survivors: he spent three days adrift on an upturned lifeboat, having suffered a fractured shoulder. He was also nursing a broken heart. Devasted, he never fully got over the emotion of the loss of Eleanor – of which, naturally, he could never speak publicly. But for the rest of his life, she was with him in spirit wherever he travelled in his Rolls-Royce motor car.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

You can find all our press releases and press kits, as well as a wide selection of high resolution, downloadable photographs and video footage at our media website, [PressClub](https://www.press.rolls-roycemotorcars.com/rolls-royce-motor-cars-pressclub).

You can also follow marque on social media: [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/rolls-royce-motor-cars/); [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/user/RollsRoyceMotorCars);[(X) Twitter](https://twitter.com/rollsroycecars); [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/rollsroycecars/); and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/rollsroycemotorcars).

EDITORS’ NOTES

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a true luxury house, creating the world’s most recognised, revered and desirable handcrafted Bespoke products for its international clientele.

There are over 2,500 people working at the Home of Rolls-Royce at Goodwood, West Sussex. This comprises both its global headquarters and Centre of Luxury Manufacturing Excellence – the only place in the world where Rolls-Royce motor cars are designed, engineered and meticulously built by hand. Its continuous investment in its facilities, products and people has resulted in a series of ‘record years’ for global sales, peaking in 2023 with over 6,000 motor cars sold worldwide. An [independent study](https://www.press.rolls-roycemotorcars.com/rolls-royce-motor-cars-pressclub/article/detail/T0414618EN/%C2%A34bn-for-uk-plc%E2%80%99%3A-rolls-royce-motor-cars-%E2%80%93-the-great-british-success-story) by the London School of Economics & Political Science confirms that since the company first launched at Goodwood in 2003, it has contributed more than £4 billion to the UK economy and adds more than £500 million in economic value every year.

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BMW Group and is a completely separate, unrelated company from Rolls-Royce plc, the manufacturer of aircraft engines and propulsion systems.

120TH ANNIVERSARY

In 2024, Rolls-Royce marks the 120th anniversary of the first meeting between its founders, Henry (later Sir Henry) Royce and The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls on 4 May 1904. The meeting, at The Midland Hotel in Manchester, was arranged by a mutual friend, Henry Edmunds. Rolls agreed to sell all the cars Royce could make and the rest is, literally, history. Together, Royce and Rolls created what was soon dubbed ‘the best car in the world’ and gave their names to a dynasty of motor cars that continues to define superluxury motoring across the world.

The Rolls-Royce ‘Makers of the Marque’ series:

* Henry Edmunds, born 19 March 1853
* Henry Royce, born 27 March 1863
* Eleanor Thornton, born 15 April 1880
* Ernest Hives, born 21 April 1886
* John Walter Edward Douglas-Scott-Montagu, born 10 June 1866
* The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls, born 27 August 1877
* Claude Johnson, born 24 October 1864
* Charles Sykes, born 18 December 1875
* Eric Platford, born 25 February 1883

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