ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

ROLLS-ROYCE ‘MAKERS OF THE MARQUE’:

ERNEST HIVES

(21 April 1886 - 24 April 1965)

17 April 2024, Goodwood, West Sussex

* A brief overview of the life and career of Ernest Hives, born 21 April 1886
* Pivotal figure in the early days of the marque, driving Rolls-Royce’s success in the great motor trials of the early 20th Century, before becoming Chairman of the Board in 1950
* Fourth 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’

*“Even for so gifted an engineer as Henry Royce, there’s a limit to how far theory can take you: there comes a point where someone has to determine whether your design actually works in practice. In the early days of Rolls-Royce, that was Ernest Hives. From humble origins, Hives turned his fascination for motor cars and outstanding self-taught driving skills into a glittering career with Rolls-Royce, first as an experimental test driver, then as one of the ‘works’ team contesting the great motor trials of the day. His observations and hands-on experiences from the road would have been crucial to Royce’s continuous improvement process, making him a key figure in the technical development of the ‘best car in the world’.*

**Andrew Ball, Head of Corporate Relations and Heritage, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars**

Ernest Walter Hives was born on 21 April 1886 in Reading, Berkshire. In 1898, aged just 12, he began a three-year apprenticeship with a local engineering company that had a sideline dealing in motor cars.

From the outset, the young Hives was captivated by these fascinating new machines. He saw his future in them and, like Henry Royce a generation earlier, he did not allow his humble background and limited formal education to impede his ambitions. He shared Royce’s unending capacity for hard work, putting in long hours and applying what was evidently a similarly lively and enquiring mind. In particular, he would watch and listen to those on the night shift, steadily building his knowledge of the motor cars’ inner workings and operation.

But his was not merely a theoretical interest, and he soon taught himself to drive by moving cars around the garage. We can assume this was with his employers' blessing since, though still only 14, he quickly graduated to the road, where he taught clients to drive. His combination of technical understanding, an intuitive ‘feel’ for the motor car and outstanding practical skills would shape his career in the years that followed.

That nascent career took a defining turn sometime around 1903 (the precise date is not known) when Hives rendered assistance to a motorist who was having trouble with one of his motor cars (likewise, history does not record whether this was at the Reading garage or out on the open road). What is certain is the motorist’s identity: The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls.

Whenever and wherever this encounter occurred, Rolls was so impressed that he promptly took Hives on as his personal chauffeur. The young man’s star continued to rise with a swift promotion to the position of mechanic at C S Rolls & Co, the prestigious London motor car dealership established by his new employer at the start of 1903.

But driving remained Hives’ true calling. He left C S Rolls & Co to work first at Owens and then Napier, for whom he drove in the gruelling Scottish Reliability Trials of 1907 and 1908, and also at the 1908 Brooklands meeting, where he sported jockey’s racing colours of yellow and white (which he described as looking like ‘a poached egg’).

In 1908, he made what would be the most pivotal move of his career; taking a job at Rolls-Royce, by now in its fourth year, as an experimental tester. His own account suggests he was less than overjoyed at the prospect, at least initially. “When I got to Derby in 1908 and walked out of the station it was raining hard,” he wrote later. “Looking up Midland Road, it was so drab that I spun a coin to decide whether to go on to Rolls-Royce or catch the next train home.” By such small chances, momentary decisions and tiny margins for error are careers, lives and history itself so often determined.

Rolls-Royce had created the new role of experimental tester following its showing at the 1907 Scottish Reliability Trial. Not that the event had gone badly for the fledgling marque, on the contrary: the 40/50 H.P. – better known as the Silver Ghost – had comprehensively beaten the opposition, including the Napier driven by Hives; even more impressively, the punishing 15,000-mile test had been the motor car’s first competitive endurance run. Never one to rest on his laurels, however, Henry Royce saw this overwhelming success as conclusive proof of the need for continued testing to, in his own words, ‘take the best that exists and make it better’.

Hives joined the company’s newly formed experimental department, and immediately proved a natural at this highly structured, technically exacting work. His insights into the subtleties of a motor car’s performance and responses – that it developed a resonance noise at a certain speed, that the chassis felt either too stiff or not stiff enough under cornering, or that the engine seemed to have a ‘flat spot’ at a particular rpm (revolutions per minute) – would have been invaluable to Royce and his design team. Indeed, such were his gifts that when the Royal Automobile Club (RAC) announced its headline 1911 endurance trial from London to Edinburgh and back, Hives was automatically chosen to drive Rolls-Royce’s entry: Silver Ghost 1701.

Designed as an ‘Experimental Speed Car’, 1701 easily won the event, in which entrants completed the entire 794-mile trip between the two capitals locked in top gear. Under Hives’ expert handling, the vehicle averaged almost 20mph and returned a then unheard‑of fuel efficiency of over 24mpg – genuinely astonishing figures given the parlous state of Edwardian Britain’s roads, and a testament to Hives’ skills, courage and powers of concentration behind the wheel, as well as Royce’s engineering.

Rolls-Royce followed up this performance by contesting the even more daunting Alpine Trials, held over eight days and 2,600km on some of the highest roads in Europe. After an embarrassing underperformance by a ‘privateer’ car in 1912, Managing Director Claude Johnson was eager to set the record straight and approached the 1913 event in typically energetic and uncompromising fashion. He assembled an official ‘works’ team of three specially prepared Silver Ghosts, each with a hand-picked driver and mechanic, plus a fourth car built to the same specification driven by private owner James Radley. Hives was one of the company’s top drivers – as proven by his being the first to exceed 100mph in a Silver Ghost – and therefore an obvious selection for Johnson’s new crack team. Piloting the Number Two car, accompanied by mechanic George Hancock, he completed a near-faultless run (he was docked a single point for stalling on leaving the parking area in Salzburg) that earned him one of the team’s three silver medals, in an overall performance that saw the Silver Ghosts generally accepted as ‘the fastest, quietest and strongest cars in the event’.

Alongside his racing exploits, Hives continued to make a vital contribution to Rolls-Royce’s research and development efforts as an experimental tester, introducing the first ‘chassis bump rig’, that could test chassis’ components to destruction. He also undertook the still potentially hazardous work of testing Royce’s latest designs on the open road. Having settled on France as the ideal place to carry out high-speed road testing, he made regular sorties along a route he devised between Paris and Royce’s winter home at Le Canadel, near Nice. For someone who had adored motor cars since childhood, this must have been as close to the perfect job as it is possible to get.

The natural-born talent and sheer love of driving that Hives first demonstrated as a teenager never left him. Many who knew him spoke of a ‘sixth sense’ he had when driving, seeming to know instinctively if the road ahead was clear and when he could take the fastest line through a corner or needed to ease off.

As his career progressed, Hives became increasingly involved with developing Rolls-Royce’s aero engines as well as its automotive products. In 1937, he became a Board Director and General Works Manager; his most significant act was to split the company’s motor car (chassis) and aero engine operations into two independent entities, which remains the case to this day.

In 1946, he became Managing Director, and in 1950, Chairman of the Board: that same year, he received a peerage and, as 1st Baron Hives, completed an extraordinary journey from working as Charles Rolls’s chauffeur to leading the great company his late employer had co-founded almost 50 years earlier. Yet the man who had doggedly worked his way up from a Reading garage to the House of Lords always remained modest, describing himself with an understatement worthy of Royce’s equally understated self-characterisation as ‘just a mechanic’. Respectfully, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars begs to differ.

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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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