Craig Horner

'Much of the horror of motoring is centred on the chauffeur': the rise and fall of the chauffeur, 1896–1914

The very first motorists – those drivers of the 'light locomotives' that appeared in the latter part of the 1890s – were likely to drive (rather than be driven), and be prepared to effect repairs at the roadside as necessary.[1] The thrill was as much in making the journey as arriving. This meant all manner of obstacles needed to be overcome: unreliability; hostile onlookers; poor roads, signage and hospitality; indifferent access to petrol, spares and repairs. Nevertheless, there was a demand from the outset for paid drivers, a role that might also involve demonstrating motor cars to the public, teaching others to drive, or acting as a mechanic. Initially, nobody had any experience of driving, and everybody learnt on the job. However, before long a 'problem' started to arise: these new paid drivers, often lumped together as 'chauffeurs', were seen as arrogant and failing to remember their social place.[2] This article takes a brief look at how this might have arisen, and tries to unpick the reality, using specific examples. It concludes the picture was rather more multi-layered, and the arrogant chauffeur was not as common as the elite writers would have us think.

For the early American experience, and it is likely much can be transferred for the British experience, Kevin Borg has traced the roots of the 'problem' to the days of the coachman in the nineteenth century. This was an employee of a household who acted as 'superintendent of transportation', for all things horse. The coachman usually had a higher status than the live-in servants, and often had his own living quarters in or near the stables. Coachmen were expected to be deferential to their masters, and to wear livery when in public. His master was also immersed in an equine culture, meaning the coachman had no particular advantage of knowledge or know-how whenever they discussed work. Thus, when wealthy, horse-riding gentlemen were persuaded to move to the new 'motor traction', they would be inclined for their coachmen to make the transition with them, because they 'already knew their place'.[3]

And sometimes this worked. Dr Henry Eugene Tracey (1866–1911)[4] used a horse and dogcart when on his rounds in Devon. He was accompanied by Gunner, a 'green-liveried coachman', a young man who sat in the doctor's dogcart, arms folded, with 'immaculate' top-hat with cockade, and who held the horse at the doctor's stops. When Tracey took to motoring in 1907, the first in his village to do so, Gunner apparently only needed 'three short days' to be 'transmogrified' into a 'motor mechanic and chauffeur', after which he was able to do maintenance and repairs such as valve grinding.[5]

Gunner, coachman to Dr Tracey, c.1900. From Hugh Tracey, *Father's first car* (1966), image 5, following p. 40.

Major Matson with his 'shuffer', a fourteen-year-old boy paid 5s in 1903. From Major C.G. Matson, *The modest man's motor* (1903), frontispiece

Another method to instil compliance was to train staff from a tender age. Major Charles George Matson (1859–1914), a columnist and author who around 1903 ran his Benz on a shoestring, had retrained his fourteen-year-old boot boy to be his 'shuffer':

> he now cleans, oils, starts, and generally looks after the car, sits by my side in a neat motor livery with folded arms and a grand air, rings the bell and asks if the lady is at home when I am calling, takes care of rugs, wraps, maps, goggles, and the luncheon basket, knows from his intimates where all the local police traps are, lays down the law on motoring subjects to all and sundry […] I do not think he would change places with an emperor.[6]

Generally, though, it was those with mechanical backgrounds who often made the best chauffeurs. An article in *The Strand* magazine from 1903 identified the difficulties of then retraining staff for the new 'motor traction'. 'A school for chauffeurs' discussed the resistance by coachmen, grooms and footmen to retrain for a motoring environment. It described the London school of Mr Ernest Livet of the Daimler Co., and the coachmen and footmen gathered together for their motoring lessons. One [William] beheld a motor car and said: 'Huh! Looks like a bloomin' iron foundry. My guv'nor'll never get me to chuck the last old crock in the stables for *this*! This ain't natural, this ain't! I'd rather drive a double tandem of mokes[7] any day. They'd have four legs apiece and a tail, anyhow!' The instructor remarked: 'They'll never make engineers. They may be able to drive through a bit of straight country and clean the motor, but they lack the brains for machinery. They are past thirty, and – well, their hearts are with the horses.'[8]

The very term 'chauffeur' had come into common parlance by the late 1890s, and is derived from the French word for a stoker, usually of steam engines. It suggested, then, a manual and menial occupation, to bestow on a household employee, suited to a time when the wealthy usually had multiple live-in servants. Perhaps it is no wonder, though, that in the very first issue of *The Autocar* in 1895, when the owner would be the driver, 'chauffeur' was not used. Indeed, for the article on Sir David Salomons, photographed in charge of his Peugeot at the Tunbridge Wells Agricultural Show, the term '*directeur*' was.[9]

It was, then, probably more typical for the first chauffeurs to come to the trade through a mechanical background. The *Chauffeur's Blue Book* described the likely candidate: 'you have probably served some time in a bicycle or engineering shop' where you 'felt more or less independent'. 'Chauffeurs, you know, are a class and a type of men that have never existed before', and require a 'keener intelligence that is generally found in those who work amongst horses'.[10] Martin Harper (1881–1963) fitted the mould exactly. The son of a blacksmith, he worked in his brother's bicycle repair shop where he built his own motor-tricycle.[11] Another, Albert Oscar Bradley (b. 1878) had been a fireman with a railway company when he answered an advert for 'mechanics' with the Daimler Company in 1896.[12] And Arthur James Edsell (1879–1939) was the son of a gardener living in Penge when he was engaged by the Anglo-French Motor Car Company to drive a demonstration vehicle around the Crystal Palace in 1896.[13] All went on to do chauffeuring work: Harper became 'driver/mechanic' for Lionel de Rothschild (1882–1942) for twenty years,[14] Bradley was 'chauffeur' to Lord Farquhar (1844–1923), while Edsell described himself as 'chauffeur' in 1911.

The French driver's licence of Albert Bradley, c.1908. RAC Archive, ACQ 9/3, loose sheet

We know a little about the training processes for these men. Bradley had to study the 'mechanism', learn to drive and help to tune the engines for the daily demonstrations of motor cars. He was given a 'short lesson in driving' before giving demonstration rides at the Imperial Institute in 1896. Harper had responded to an advert in 1902 for a 'hand' in the workshop of the Cambridge University's own Automobile Club, through which he met the undergraduate Rothschild who in turn offered him a job. Edsell, as we have seen, had taken up work with the Anglo-French Motor Company in 1896, and cleaned and repaired motor cars before giving demonstration rides to a paying public.

The stereotype of the chauffeur – liveried, discreet, usually to be seen in photographs alongside a large motor car – is then a little problematic for this early period. While Harper was taken on as a driver, it is also evident that Rothschild also employed another man as a 'chauffeur' for day-to-day ferrying.[15] Harper, instead, related the nature of his work as going on adventures, sharing the driving with Rothschild, which included hair-raising improvised road races to Monte Carlo, and more.[16] The next difficulty for the historian is that, when chauffeurs did what they were supposed to, that is, blend in, they became invisible to the written record. Yet, many motoring magazines, motoring fiction and motoring advice books suggested the opposite, that chauffeurs were, as a collective, arrogant. In the Williamsons' yarn *The Lightning Conductor* (1903), the chauffeur Rattray had dreadful manners and ran off with the money given to him to repair the car.[17] *Punch* had a story in 1909 of a motor-car owner on the road with his chauffeur: 'Owner of motor-car: "Let me have my bill please. I've had some biscuits and cheese and a glass of bitter. What has my chauffeur had?" Waiter: "Salmon trout, half a bottle of Moselle, black coffee and a cigar, sir."'[18] In his advice book *The happy motorist* (1906), the journalist Filson Young had concluded, 'Much of the horror of motoring is centred on the chauffeur'. Abusing his position of knowledge, the chauffeur will drive slowly

'An unpardonable mistake': *Punch*, 9 August 1905, p. 99. Richard Roberts Archive

when you want to go fast, he will stop when you want to carry on. 'He smokes the vilest known cigarettes – there seems to be a brand especially blended for chauffeurs'.[19] *Punch* ran a cartoon, 'An unpardonable mistake' in 1905, with the caption: 'Short-sighted old lady outside railway station mistakes a chauffeur, near to a very large motor and very well attired, for a porter: "Porter!"' (The joke is in the expression of disbelief on the chauffeur's face.)[20]

Meanwhile, commissions and kickbacks from garages – the chauffeur being 'on the take', in other words – was perceived with distaste. But Borg has pointed out that the chauffeur wasn't doing anything improper that the coachman hadn't done before him; the difference was, in the days of the coachman, the employer would himself be steeped in horsey culture and understand what was happening. Another difference in the early motoring age was that employers now feared they were being fooled by a lingo and a world they did not now understand. Furthermore, with a coachman, it had been straightforward to replace one who was incompetent. With chauffeurs, there was initially less confidence in the decision about the replacements. Bradley, for example, observed how chauffeurs to the royal family came and went as they failed to fit in, before a method was found of employing suitably skilled police officers, who would better understand the demands and subtleties of a class-based employer-employee relationship. In one instance, the king's car ran out of petrol, and Bradley was summoned to collect him – this breakdown would suggest a degree of incompetence that was entirely down to the chauffeur. On another occasion, when Bradley was delivering a Panhard to the Duke of Norfolk at Arundel Castle, he stayed three weeks because the duke 'could not get a chauffeur to suit the Duchess'.[21]

The wearing of livery was a bone of contention. With garments sold by Dunhill's and other motor accessory shops, the icon of the uniform immediately identified the chauffeur with his profession, whether in the car

or not. It conferred an authority and presence. Dr Tracey's chauffeur Gunner, for example, abandoned his green uniform and top-hat, used when he drove Tracey in a dogcart, to be equipped with 'smart tunic, knee high, knee breeches, leather leggings, shiny black boots and peak cap'. 'Livery looks well', wrote Tracey, 'He wears it for the first time.'[22] Reading the literature from the time, one would think that Gunner was exceptional, and that chauffeurs were reluctant to wear any livery.

Indeed, stories about errant chauffeurs are easy to find, and they certainly bolster any prejudice felt at the time. It was not at all unusual, apparently, to find the chauffeur who 'borrowed' his employer's car, and chauffeurs seemed to get much of the blame for accidents and hit-and-runs. 'Automan' described how, having dropped him off, the chauffeur would drive the car to a public house and thereafter use it for jaunts for his friends.[23] The *Chauffeur's Blue Book* reminded its professional readers in its very first paragraph that the chauffeur was paid and therefore a servant. Later, it warned that without 'special permission', 'under no circumstances' would you be entitled to drive your friends in your master's car. And if the chauffeur engaged in racing other road users, 'it will be you locked up if anything happens'.[24] Little wonder, then, that the National Society of Chauffeurs resolved in 1913 that chauffeurs' endorsements should lapse after a period of time; and that owners when present in the vehicle were responsible for the lapses of their chauffeurs.[25]

One notorious event served to reinforce all the fears of the employers. On 18 April 1905 four-year-old Willie Clifton was knocked down at Markyate, a village in Hertfordshire, in what would now be called a 'hit and run'.[26] The boy was struck on the face by the car's mudguard, sustained broken ribs and a dislocated spine in the impact. Death was probably instantaneous. It transpired that the chauffeur Rocco Cornalbas (b. c.1878) was driving the vehicle. He had failed to stop or report the accident later. The car was owned by Hildebrand Harmsworth, who, having had a denial of any involvement from Cornalbas, took him at his word and offered £100 reward in his brother Alfred's *Daily Mail* for information.

Harmsworth had not been in the car, but two companions of Cornalbas had. It transpired that Cornalbas had attempted to pervert the course of justice by asking these occupants to give a specific, and wrong, leaving time from Coventry, from where the vehicle had come on that journey. Harmsworth was unaware that the chauffeur had offered the use of the car to anyone. Both occupants had asked Cornalbas to stop at the time of the incident, but not insisted on it. For good measure, all three had been drinking alcohol earlier in the day. A jury found the occupants 'deserving of severe censure' and their expenses disallowed, with Cornalbas found guilty of causing death by driving recklessly and negligently. For this 'killing and slaying', he was sentenced to six months' hard labour.[27] Harmsworth was absolved of any blame and paid the vicar of the parish £300 to give to the boy's mother.[28]

It is also difficult to get a handle on the wage a chauffeur might have commanded. Clearly, one who was multi-lingual, diplomatic, tactful and handy

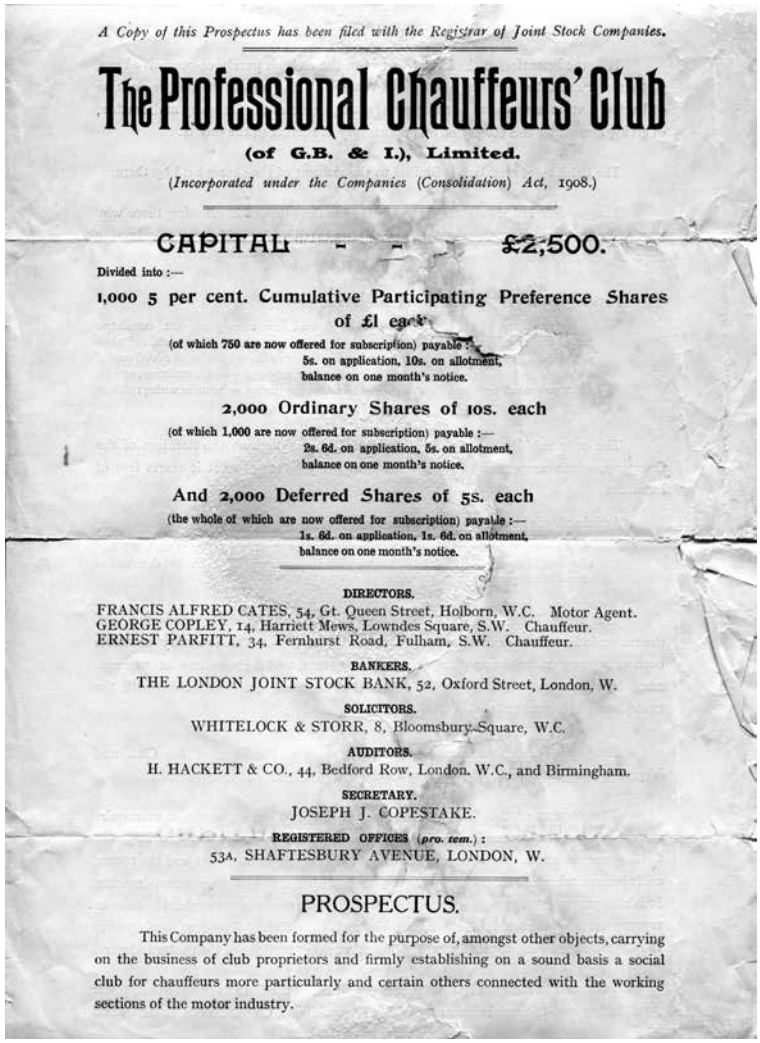
was at a premium. This may have been the type Henry Sturmey was referring to, when, writing in 1914 and looking back at the era of the 'Man of Moderate Means' (say, 1900–05), he decided, 'Those were the days [when] timid ones [owners] were gravely told that to get decent satisfaction out of a car it was necessary that a good chauffeur should be employed, at a salary of £5 per week'.[29] But accounts of salaries varied widely. In 1906 the *Chauffeur's Blue Book* was suggesting a qualified chauffeur should command 30s per week or more,[31] on which salary, 'you shouldn't worry your employer for twopences' for tips.[31] Filson Young suggested that if you had a small car, 'any youth with a head on his shoulders and some taste for machinery' would do, and need only cost 10s–18s per week. For a large car, a 'mechanic' would be suitable (although he might object to wearing the livery), and might cost £3 per week.[32] In 1905, 'Ignorant' wondered whether a four-week training course for chauffeurs was long enough for a man to then be able to apply for a job realising as much as 35s a week.[33] Matson paid his lad 5s a week plus food. In any event, the chauffeur usually 'lived in', with board, lodging and livery 'all found'.

If chauffeurs were working class, they were almost entirely white and male.[34] Female professional drivers can be found in the motoring press, but tended to feature because of their novelty. Georgine Clarsen has identified Sheila O'Neill, a professional taxi driver in London in about 1908. There was also Alice Hilda Neville (1884–1954) who hired out, and was available to drive, motor cars from her garage in Worthing;[35] she came from a comfortable upper-working-class background, her father a bank clerk. It is also likely that male chauffeurs to female owners played a variety of roles, sometimes on hand to do the dirty work in the event of a breakdown; this is the likely function of George 'Tim' Brooks (b. c.1883), who was fifteen when he was taken on in 1898 by the Kennards in Leicestershire.[36] Here, the novelist Eliza Kennard (1850–1936) was an early motorist and probably brought Brooks along simply for this purpose. Alternatively, the male chauffeur might serve on other occasions to act as a physical presence to mitigate any unpleasantness a solo female driver might experience from the roadside.

Alice Hilda Neville, pictured in 1913. 'She is a capable driver, and evidently a competent business woman': *The Motor*, 2 September 1913, p. 193

Instead, then, the chauffeur, on those occasions when we hear his voice, often saw himself as put upon. A debate raged in *The Autocar* in autumn 1914 about the availability of chauffeurs now

that war had started. Complaining that good chauffeurs could not be had, outraged unemployed chauffeurs wrote in. Many had been old soldiers and had done the patriotic thing, gone off to fight, been replaced, and presumed they would not get their jobs back. Charles A.V. Curren wrote in to say he still retained his pride when he said that any chauffeur who took on employment which involves odd-job work 'ought to be ashamed of himself'. 'It seems that our day has passed. I mean the day when a chauffeur was considered a responsible person, and fit to have charge of the lives of a gentleman and his family and when it was no difficult job to get a good place at £4 per week and all found, and then to be asked to dine with the family. I am speaking of 1900–1905.'[37] ('Not ashamed' replied directly the following week, amazed that any employer would ever pay £4. He wondered, with tongue in cheek, if the chauffeur was offered the employer's daughter's hand in marriage.) The correspondence continued for some months.



A Copy of this Prospectus has been filed with the Registrar of Joint Stock Companies.

The Professional Chauffeurs' Club

(of G.B. & I.), Limited.

(Incorporated under the Companies (Consolidation) Act, 1908.)

CAPITAL - - £2,500.

Divided into :—

1,000 5 per cent. Cumulative Participating Preference Shares of £1 each

(of which 750 are now offered for subscription) payable :—
5s. on application, 10s. on allotment,
balance on one month's notice.

2,000 Ordinary Shares of 10s. each

(of which 1,000 are now offered for subscription) payable :—
2s. 6d. on application, 5s. on allotment,
balance on one month's notice.

And 2,000 Deferred Shares of 5s. each

(the whole of which are now offered for subscription) payable :—
1s. 6d. on application, 1s. 6d. on allotment,
balance on one month's notice.

DIRECTORS.

FRANCIS ALFRED CATES, 54, Gt. Queen Street, Holborn, W.C. Motor Agent.
GEORGE COPLEY, 14, Harriett Mews, Lowndes Square, S.W. Chauffeur.
ERNEST PARFITT, 34, Fernhurst Road, Fulham, S.W. Chauffeur.

BANKERS.

THE LONDON JOINT STOCK BANK, 52, Oxford Street, London, W.

SOLICITORS.

WHITELOCK & STORR, 8, Bloomsbury Square, W.C.

AUDITORS.

H. HACKETT & CO., 44, Bedford Row, London, W.C., and Birmingham.

SECRETARY.

JOSEPH J. COPESTAKE.

REGISTERED OFFICES (*pro. tem.*) :

53A, SHAFTESBURY AVENUE, LONDON, W.

PROSPECTUS.

This Company has been formed for the purpose of, amongst other objects, carrying on the business of club proprietors and firmly establishing on a sound basis a social club for chauffeurs more particularly and certain others connected with the working sections of the motor industry.

Prospectus for the Professional Chauffeur's Club, dated 2 September 1912 on the reverse. Courtesy of the late Malcolm Jeal

Chauffeurs recognised they had a credibility problem and that there might be strength in numbers. The Institute of Chauffeurs was established in about 1905, and the Professional Chauffeurs' Club was registered in 1912. The chauffeuring profession even had a flurry of magazines, including *The Chauffeur & Auto Driver*; *The Chauffeur & Mechanic*; and *Chauffeur & Motor Cab Driver*.[38] Another, *The Chauffeur and Garage Gazette* appeared in 1907, priced one penny, as the 'weekly journal of the chauffeur's calling', and 'edited by a practical chauffeur'. It was the official organ of the Society of Automobile Mechanic Drivers of the United Kingdom, formed in 1904 with a 7s 6d subscription, with the usual trappings of club membership, such as an annual 'show' dinner, which in 1907 was at Hammersmith town hall. Qualification for membership was a minimum of three years' experience as a chauffeur. This magazine believed 'the most important factor in the whole Motor Industry, bar none, is the Chauffeur', because a good chauffeur 'can get wonderful results from a veritable old crock of a car, and make a set of old tyres last thousands of miles'. The magazine included notices of known speed traps and a precis of what other motor magazines had been saying about the chauffeur.[39]

Chauffeurs were rarely 'equals'. Harper dwelt on the social distance between him and the world of his employer. Bradley, engaged by Lord Farquhar, then Master of the Household to Edward VII, was never allowed to forget his inequality. He was often left waiting for three to four hours, and in one instance at Buckingham Palace, Farquhar forgot Bradley was there and hailed a cab home. After a five-year service, Bradley contracted pleurisy after waiting about with the car for hours in the cold. He concluded, 'being in private service was very nice up to a point', but 'I never knew when I was going to start work or when I was going to leave off, being out sometimes all day and night. I thought it best to throw up the sponge to private service.'[40]

While chauffeurs often served as mentors and facilitators to their socially superior employers, they were of a working class that knew job insecurity. Edsell had been employed to drive paying members of the public at the Crystal Palace in 1896, and would be all but invisible to history now were it not for his ill luck in being the driver of the car involved with (possibly) the first motoring fatality. His vehicle struck the pedestrian Bridget Driscoll who died at the scene.[41] Whilst absolved of blame, he is next seen seeking work in late 1896 through the small ads of *Automotor Journal*.[42] In 1901 he is a billeted soldier, and in 1911 described himself as a 'chauffeur', but living in lodgings. During the war he became a sergeant, but thereafter cannot be traced. Meanwhile, once Bradley left the employment of Lord Farquhar, he found how little his experience now counted for. He went on to work for Panhards doing testing, demonstrating and teaching. After the war, approaching forty, he moved to motor manufacturer Sizaire Berwick where he had to start as a bench hand and work his way up to foreman, before the firm went bust. Status, then, often disappeared with the job, while chauffeuring positions became fewer and less secure.

Several concluding remarks can be made. The first is how social status always trumped other considerations, rendering chauffeurs so often invisible.

Bradley was one of the very first 'motorists', driving some hundreds of miles even before the 'Emancipation Run' of 1896, and taking a motor vehicle on his employer's instructions to Hull, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Ipswich and towns on the south coast, with the intention of parading it on the streets.[43] Yet he is not even mentioned in *The Autocar* (1895, 1896) or *Automotor Journal* (1896) who would have been desperate for copy. (This presumably is because he was using a vehicle as a mobile advertising hoarding, a practice the magazines looked on with disdain.) He drove one of the vehicles in the 1896 Emancipation Run (a Panhard, probably #11, for his employer Hunt & Co), yet I cannot find his name in any published account.[44] He did not attend the grand breakfast in London that morning, or the evening meal in Brighton; he would not have been invited.[45] Bradley is almost certainly the 'engineer' who accompanied Charles Jarrott to get a stricken vehicle going, and who would have been the one who identified the fault and rectified it. Yet he remains nameless in Jarrott's account of the same event, and Jarrott by implication took the credit.[46] Bradley was clearly comfortable mixing with the motoring 'usual suspects', mentioning Charles Rolls and S.F. Edge, none of whom identified him in any of their memoirs.

The very word 'chauffeur' covers a multitude of sins, and 'driver', 'mechanic', 'engineer' could often replace it. What job description that employee then had appeared to vary, from being simply in attendance in the event of a technical problem, to being a companion or fellow adventurer. Many chauffeurs were drawn from mechanical backgrounds, but there were opportunities for existing staff (coachmen) to retrain at his master's expense, and for mechanically-minded people to learn on the job. Once motor cars became more standardised and easier to drive, and more chauffeurs came onto the labour market, their value plummeted, as did their wage. If a chauffeur ever was able to command five pounds a week in the earliest days, this was out of the question by the time of the war. Throughout, 'carriage-folk' continued to command social respect – Farquhar continued to use a horse brougham. Chauffeurs, then, were symbolic of changing times and values, but, as so often, the wealthy and elite – the very writers of letters to magazines, of motoring fiction, of motoring advice books – wanted change on their terms.