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A.C. Hills and his ‘real good fellowship in a community of pioneers’

Craig Horner

A chance correspondence last year led to the landing on my doormat of a parcel of papers. They were those of Albert Charles (‘Charlie’) Hills (1864–1952), a contemporary of S.F. Edge (1868–1940), about whom I’ve had a few things to say.¹ Both came up through cycling clubs and racing, before moving into motor sales in the late 1890s. Both were wheeler-dealers, moving around the country to chase business opportunities. Hills’s career, though, was rather more modest; he never sought the limelight and glamour in the way that Edge did. However, Hills’s story, I suggest, is every bit as important as Edge’s as that of an observer of and participant in the new worlds of the bicycle and the motor car.

The son of a London commercial traveller, Hills attended City of London College and started out as a chemist. He had taken up cycling in 1877 when about thirteen, and became active in the Brixton Ramblers Bicycle Club (BRBC), probably at about the time it was formed, in 1879–80.² Undated cycling cuttings amongst the papers show that from the 1880s he was a tricyclist pacer at Crystal Palace for when A.L. Bower of the Ripley Road Club set a fifty-mile tricycle record in 1887 (Edge paced at the same event). In 1889 Hills competed in the one-mile ordinary handicap.³ Evidently not quite good enough for, or maybe not seeking, a racing career, he turned his talents to the social side of the club. He was a ‘smooth’ manager of BRBC ladies’ nights and smoking concerts, and instrumental in managing the club’s programme of walks, billiards, dances and concerts.⁴ He is identified in club tours, for example of Kent in Easter 1886; and in the club’s first trip to France in 1887, both undertaken on ordinaries. For the latter tour he was known as the ‘The heir to all the ills’ due to a reputation

A.C. Hills at the time of the BRBC French tour, 1887. A.C. Hills papers, loose sheets



for being accident-prone, a detail picked up by *The Cycle* in 1894 which described his enduring ‘an almost unparalleled series of misfortunes’, including ‘croppers’ and cycle failure.⁵ In due course he was elected captain of the BRBC.

But it is Hills’s connection with the motor industry that is of particular interest to us, and on this the papers have much to say. In addition to the cuttings, bound in a booklet, ‘Cycling reminiscences’, there is a typescript of about 10,000 words of his unpublished motoring memoirs, ‘Early motoring days’, with an intended sub-title of ‘Those were the days’. It would appear the memoirs were written as a result of contacting the Circle of Nineteenth-Century Motorists in 1946. The papers include a letter to Hills from Montague Grahame-White (1877–1961),



The BRBC tourists on their return from France, 1887. Hills is standing, on the right. A.C. Hills papers, loose sheets

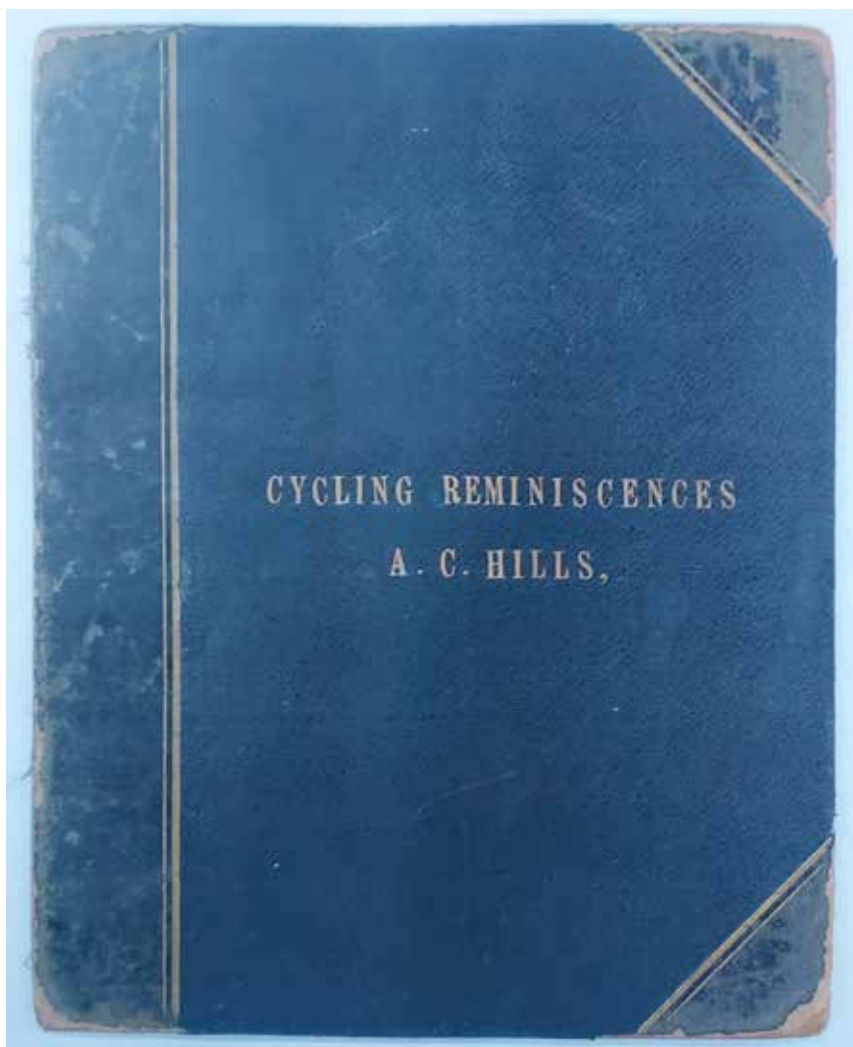
honorary secretary of the Circle, and dated 3 November 1946.⁶ This letter suggests that Hills's election to the Circle would be a formality: 'I will get your election agreed to', wrote Grahame-White, which would have enabled Hills to attend the Circle's annual knees-up at the Criterion restaurant on 5 December. Thus, while it is unknown whether he went on to apply, Grahame-White would clearly have considered him eligible. In any event, it is likely Hills did indeed follow the invitation up, as he starts his memoirs with:

At a gathering of old-timers, pioneers of the motor industry, the idea originated, after much swapping of experiences when cars were highly-inefficient and unreliable contraptions and roads abominable, the suggestion arose that present-day motorists, knowing nothing of such matters, might be interested in them. Hence these memories.⁷

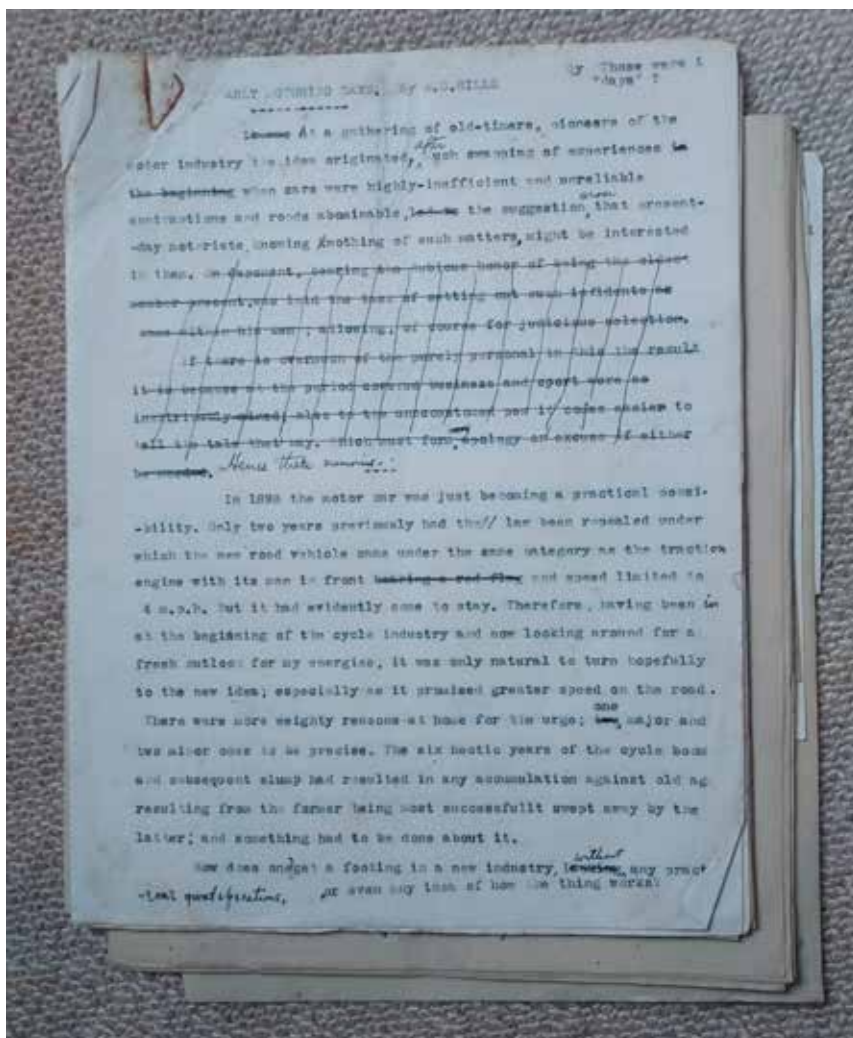
Hills mentions his friendship with Charles Jarrott (1877–1944), 'best sportsman ever', and his time when, as a judge at the 1903 Gordon Bennett in Ireland, he happened upon the presumed-dead bodies of Jarrott and his riding mechanic Cecil Clement Bianchi (1886–1970) – as competitors they had been thrown from their car following a crash. Meanwhile, we know the memoirs were written around 1946, as Hills mentions bidding Jarrott his 'last "good-bye"' in Golder's Green 'only a year or so ago'.⁸

But to backtrack. Hills moved into journalism, responsible for the cycling 'chatter' in the *Evening News and Post*, assuming the *nom de plume* of 'Achilles'. Thereafter he worked for *Scottish Cyclist* at the invitation of its publisher (and ACGBI committee member) James R. Nisbet; the connection with Nisbet is unclear, but, as shall be seen, it enabled benign copy for Hills throughout Nisbet's other titles. Hills then set up the Arnott Cycle Co in London, managing

'Cycling
reminiscences'.
A.C. Hills papers



that company for a year, and was a travelling salesman for the Premier Cycle Co before joining *Wheeling* as the Birmingham rep. With the cyclist F.J. Osmond (1867–1919) he was chairman of the Osmond Cycle Co, which, being timed well with the cycling boom, was successfully refloated in 1896. Buoyed by this, he left to set up the Ascot Cycle Company in Birmingham in 1897. As its managing director, he acquired a 2½-acre site in Stirchley and started tooling up to make the 'Ascot' bicycle. This was a disastrous venture, as it coincided with the slump in the bicycle industry. At much the same time – 1898 – the flour-factor partnership between him and his brother Alfred George, Hills Bros of Catford, was dissolved.⁹ Hills, then, had found getting into the cycle industry had been 'comparatively easy'. With his cycle-racing competition background, he could 'ride a little faster and farther' than many other cyclists, plus he had 'modest' links to the press, and some commercial experience. This



'Early motoring days' A.C. Hills papers

'automatically brought offers of management'.¹⁰ The move into the motoring business was in part because of the collapse of the bicycle trade in the late 1890s. Necessity, then, drove Hills's move into motoring.

Graham-White's confidence in Hills's eligibility for Circle membership was not misplaced. The Circle was restricted to those 'who actually drove and/or owned a Motor Vehicle prior to April 15th, 1900'; the date of the conclusion of the Thousand Mile Trial. 'Driving', the Rules went on to clarify, 'shall mean being in sole charge of and personally driving a vehicle for a reasonable period or distance on the Public Highway'.¹¹ Now, all of the early motoring salesmen were self taught. In Hills's case, he consulted his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to learn a little more about petrol, and he tells us it was his old friend, the cyclist and latterly manager for de Dion-Bouton, J.W. Stocks (1871–1933), who taught him how to handle a 2¾hp Ariel motor-cycle. Just as Edge and others had found, Hills observed that, 'In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king'.¹²

Hills had had a chance meeting early in 1899 with a 'young American' which led to Hills handling the agencies of the Mitchell motor bicycle, Goodyear car tyres, and a small, unidentified, motor-car. This marked his shift into the motor business. The intention was to use the Mitchell to make calls on prospective purchasers in the Midlands, demonstrating 'the efficiency of the new form of travel', as well as saving railway and cab fares. For over four months he went without booking a single order of any kind, and this was down to the effort and time spent trying to get the Mitchell to go – or to keep going. 'The few people I did manage to call upon were no doubt not impressed by my usually dishevelled and overwrought condition on arrival', he wrote. The leather driving-belt of the Mitchell was prone to stretch and 'did more slipping than driving'. Its 'very small and utterly inadequate' dry battery would run for several miles then peter out, causing him to spend the next hour or two pedalling 'in a vain endeavour' to get the engine going. 'Then for no apparent reason off it would go again, luring me on to further effort'. When the engine didn't run, 'it was a heavy machine for riding home push-cycle fashion. Usually it became a question whether I could arrive in time to relieve wifely anxiety; in a completely exhausted state and having made no business calls.'¹³

Finding any editorial or advertising copy mentioning the Mitchell motor-cycle for this period has so far eluded me. If it hadn't been advertised, nor noticed by the motoring press, then Hills's prospects were indeed small. The memoirs, then, appear to identify a brand of motor-cycle hitherto unrecorded for 1899 and beg a wider question: just how many other salesmen were there, fruitlessly attempting to sell other, now-unknown, brands? In the case of the Mitchell, Georgano identifies an unsuccessful motor-cycle made in 1900 by the Wisconsin Wheel Works, a subsidiary of the Mitchell and Lewis Co of Racine, WI; this is probably the same one that Hills wrestled with, and if so, this would suggest it was marketed a year earlier than Georgano thought. The same concern had more success from 1903 in motor-car manufacture.¹⁴

The memoirs also reveal that Hills took part in the Thousand Mile Trial of 1900. He accompanied R.E. Phillips (b. 1855) in his 'Petit Duc' Mors – this participation is not otherwise recorded in Bennett.¹⁵ 'I shall never forget the thrill of that journey', he wrote, candidly confirming that the Mors needed pushing (by him) in the Lake District and on other climbs.¹⁶ For us to learn that somebody like Hills was part of that circus is useful in helping us understand how, when trying to work out who the people were who made the Trial happen, it was not only the 'usual suspects' of Edge, C.S. Rolls and so on. On this theme, Carter has recently identified others who hitherto have not been associated with the Trial. These include the cyclist and journalist H.W. Bartleet; Harry England (d. 1913), editor of *Cycling* and later an aviator; and the cyclist John Urry – all were drivers in the Trial. The racing cyclist and motoring journalist F.W. Bidlake (1867–1933) tracked the Trial, while G.H. Stancer (1878–1962), who went on to edit *Cycling*, was a local organiser of the Trial.¹⁷

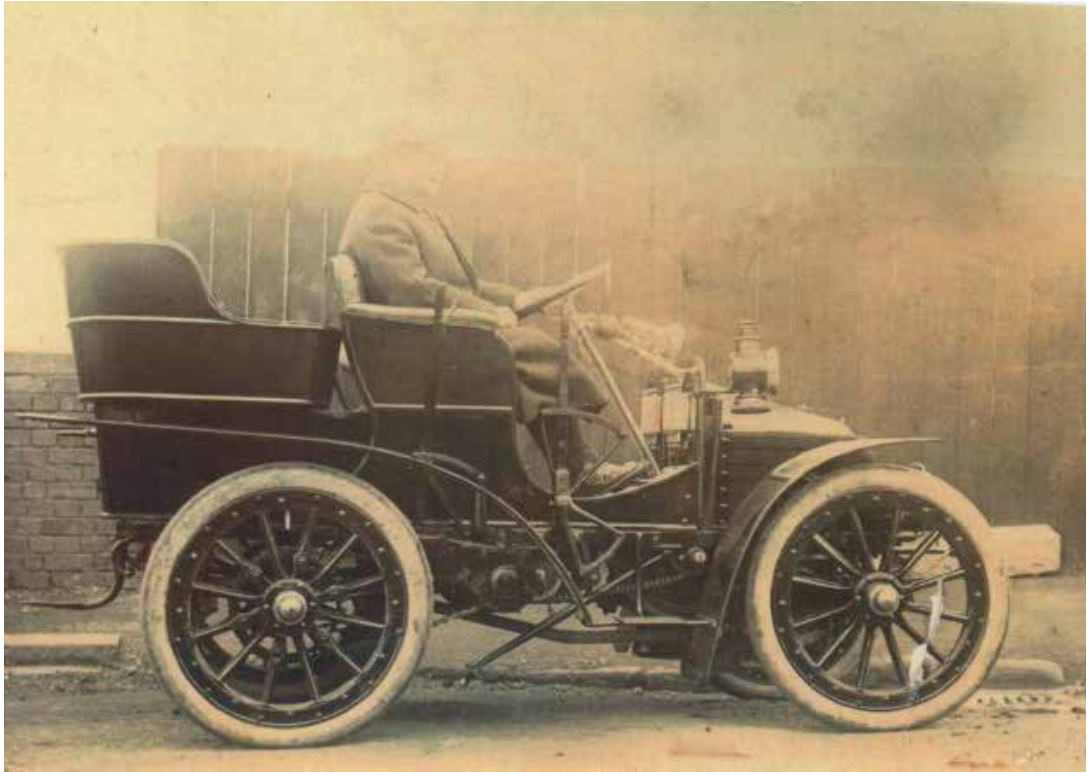


The Thousand Mile Trial in Manchester, with R.E. Phillips's Mors 'A24' to the left. Courtesy of the late Malcolm Jeal

Hill's first motor-car purchase was a 10hp Wolseley late in 1900. 'It was a real good bus,' he recalled,

even when looking at the matter from this later date. It gave me grand service, mostly between the Midlands and London in the course of business. Not fast, of course; about 40 m.p.h. being its maximum speed; but in April 1901 averaged 26½ between London and Birmingham; and thereafter could usually rely on doing the journey in about the same time.¹⁸

Hills remembers the horrors of early driving, such as the necessity of the sprag but also the refusal of right of way by drivers of horse-drawn vehicles. While he mentions tyres and tyre-changing, it was dust that was the 'greatest bugbear'. He recalls clouds of dust being whipped up from the unsealed roads by motor cars such that 'to pass another car going in the same direction was almost an impossibility; and always a grave risk. One had to travel blind as in a London "pea-souper" fog, for quite a considerable distance [...] many serious accidents resulted.' Skidding also stood out in his memory: 'Skidding is hardly the word for what my dear old Wolseley could do on occasion. She just revolved like a teetotum.'¹⁹



Hills with his 10hp Wolseley, c.1900. A.C. Hills papers, loose sheets

Security of income came with Hills's appointment as managing director of the Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Co (Gt. Britain) Ltd, and thereafter he appears to enjoy a degree of affluence, which accords with his having a servant in his home in Lewisham in 1911.²⁰ In 1903 he switched to manage the Euston Road branch of the Mercedes agent E.W. Hart. Hart sold electric vehicles under the Lutonia brand but its main business was the import of Lohner-Porsche electric and petrol-electric vehicles.²¹ Hills recorded how here, as early as 1903, at their Abbey Road repairs branch, he had been experimenting with petrol-electric transmission. Hills tells us this gave a definite gain of about 15 percent on average over running the same Mercedes car by electricity instead of through its standard gearbox. The experiment, though, was abandoned due to the constant breakdowns:

We never got out of them a run of over fifty miles. In fact the principal item of equipment was the towrope with another car standing by to fetch the wanderer home. In that respect the works resembled the main establishment where owing to the type of 'has-been' there to be found, a trial run was never given without a rescue squad standing by with another car to bring the wanderer home.²²

While at Hart's, Hills claimed to have four of the 40hp 'Flying Darracqs' to sell; these had taken part in the Paris-Bordeaux race of 1900. Hills said they were reputed to have done 70mph, 'and I can fully believe that report.' Despairing of ever selling them, one day 'a very quiet reserved individual of the business-man type – I mean definitely not the sporting type' walked in, seeking a test-drive. The works manager, 'who was supposed to have had racing experience, flatly refused on the plea of a wife and children,' leaving Hills to do the test-drive. Driving from Euston Road to Barnet, the 'snorting beast' proved highly sensitive to road camber, jumping about 'like a cat on hot bricks.' Past Barnet, Hills had the open road and reached 68mph three times – the passenger had his own stop watch and did the maths to confirm this. Hills wrote, 'I fully appreciated his magnanimity in not insisting on the other 2 m.p.h.; especially as he was obviously from the North.' The nameless customer wrote out a cheque for £750 and had his chauffeur collect the vehicle the next day.²³ The story reveals how Hills was not cut out for on-the-limit driving like sales contemporaries such as Edge, who could rely on the glamour associated with motor racing. Hills admitted that hitherto he had only managed 40mph in his Wolseley; one suspects, most salesmen of the time had never travelled much faster. Hills did record, though, driving two 'well-known' pressmen in 1906 in a 40hp Martini to see what it 'could do.' On that occasion, Hyde Park Corner to the Royal York Hotel in Brighton was reached in one hour and nineteen minutes.²⁴

The Brighton story marked Hills's next move. Joining the motor importers Deasy and Co in 1904 as general manager, by 1906 Hills had set up Hills-Martini, intended to handle all British sales of the Swiss Martini brand. That year at Olympia, the new company was obliged to exhibit on the Corre Depot Ltd stand, as there had been no time to make the arrangements to get their own stand. The clippings reveal how Hills was thinking big: the new Hills-Martini garage on Shaftesbury Avenue, opposite the Trocadero, had a huge ground-floor showroom, with plans to install a lift to get cars into the basement.²⁵

Around this time, Hills describes his involvement with the SMMT and its moving the motor show from Crystal Palace to Olympia in 1905. Hills, with Sydney Straker (1861–1929) and H.G. Burford (1867–1943), orchestrated the move, and Hills nearly ended up running the motor show at the new venue, until H.A. Blackie (b. 1871) accepted the post.²⁶ Later, Hills was manager of BSA in Birmingham from 1910 to 1916. During this time it appears he took full advantage of his press connections. In a glowing tribute, a 'friend' in *Irish Cyclist* described how Hills had promoted the Mitchell motor cycle 'with very marked success' and declared, 'He is now considered one of the most skilled motorists in London.'²⁷

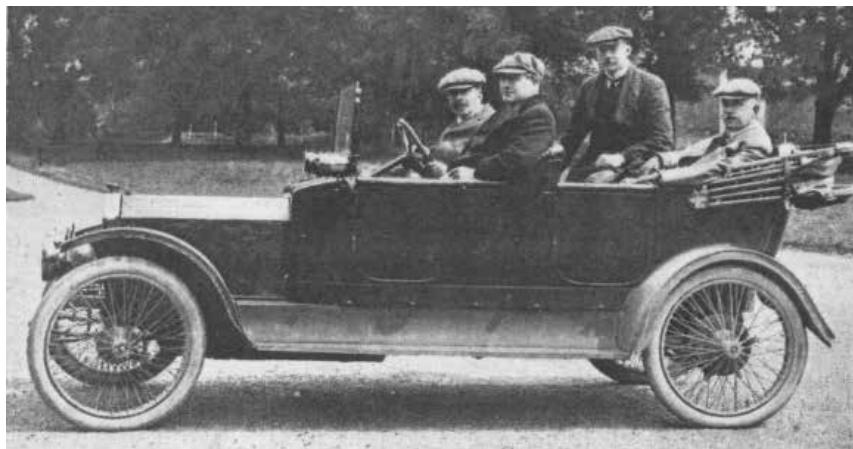
Hills described in his memoirs a fortnight's tour of the Highlands in his 14hp BSA with Stenson Cooke (1874–1942, of the Automobile Association) and J. Inglis Ker (editor of *Motor World*). A vivid entry described how all were nearly killed when a stub-axle on the BSA sheered as they were driving alongside a ravine.²⁸ Yet this was not mentioned in *Motor World*. Indeed, it reported, 'throughout the whole journey we had no mechanical trouble of any kind.'²⁹ The

Hills with Capt H.H.P. Deasy (1866–1947) in the Martini used in the 4,000-mile Trial



CAPTAIN DEASY, MR. A. C. HILLS (IN THE TONNEAD), MR. E. G. WILLIAMS AND MR. BELL, WORKS FOREMAN, IN THE MARTINI USED FOR THE 4,000 MILES RUN.

Hills at the wheel of the 13.9hp BSA used here in a tour of Ireland, 1912. From 'A B.S.A. outing', *Motor News*, 17 August 1912, p. 1,698



toothless reporting is probably due to the *Motor World* connection; it was also published by Nisbet. Earlier coverage by *Motor World* of the BSA was equally glowing. It reported how Hills had made his own car available for the test, in and around the 'mountainous country' between north Wales and Yorkshire. Now that the management of the firm is in the hands of 'Charlie', it gushed, the future of the new BSA car is 'assured'.³⁰

Hills was a 'wheeler-dealer' to the end. The clippings include accounts of his 40,000-mile trip around the globe in 1917 when he was manager of the Eastern department of the motor exporters Tozer, Kemsley and Millbourn; he was with them between 1916 and 1923. In a puff piece, *The Car Illustrated* described his return from this trip in glowing terms.³¹ He moved on to become the receiver and manager of the Mercantile Bank of India of T.R. Pratt of Calcutta Ltd (1923–5). In 1934 he was managing director of Hills and Hills Ltd, export agents of automobiles. He was even an agent, in 1945, for 'Red Hackle' whiskey – his motoring memoirs are written on the back of sales correspondence for this brand.

Undoubtedly, the memoirs give a fascinating and hitherto unseen view of a pioneer motorist who used his cycling and press connections to build up a career in the motoring world. He saw it as a world long gone: 'My general idea of those early days is that of real good fellowship in a community of pioneers. No wonder some lifelong friendships were formed. Of course there was competition; but it was with few exceptions clean and wholesome'. Of course, as memoirs, written forty or more years after the event, we should be wary of taking every detail at face value. Hills, for example, was quite specific about the dates when he acquired his Wolseley – in late 1900. He goes on to mention using the same car in early 1901. Now, according to Anders Clausager, Hills definitely had a Wolseley, car number 758, a two-cylinder horizontal-engined 10hp, but delivered on 10 September 1902. Hills's name is not in the Wolseley records against any other car. Clausager continues,

There were a few cars delivered before February 1901, and they included some two-cylinder cars, which were however called 8hp at the time, although they were broadly speaking identical with the later 10hp, and I am sure the engines were the same size. So we can not rule out the possibility that Mr Hills had one of these. It is also of interest that there is a specific reference to the Sheep Shearing Company, and premises in Alma Street. After February 1901, the company became the Wolseley Tool & Motor Car Co, and production moved to Adderley Park.³²



Hills in 1917.
From *The Car Illustrated*, 19
September 1917,
p. 92

The odd thing is, why didn't Hills mention that he was so taken with the Wolseley that he bought another, in 1902? While it is possible he did actually only own the one Wolseley, bought in 1902, I think on the balance of probabilities he did in fact have two, acquired in 1900 and 1902, and Hills's dates are accurate. Hills, though, has form when it comes to inaccuracy. An article was published about Hills in about 1921 in which he reminisces about his twenty-one years in the motor trade. Here, he mentions '[going] up to Edinburgh with R.E. Phillips in a little "Petit Duc" Mors car in the great 1000 miles trial in 1901'. This was in fact the Thousand Mile Trial of 1900.³³

One intriguing diversion to end with. The German Paul Brodtmann (b. c1876) was, immediately before the First World War, head of the British branch of the (German) Continental Tyre Company. The memoirs record how Brodtmann was known to Hills. Brodtmann was, according to Hills, 'about as unlike the typical Hun (Nazis not then having been invented) as can be imagined'. However, this 'great tourist, apparently always on the road' disappeared on 2 August 1914, just as war was about to be declared. Hills confirms that Brodtmann was, in fact, a joint head of the German secret service, a detail that has since been confirmed elsewhere. But there is a sequel to this revelation, as told to Hills by Brodtmann's private secretary. This private secretary had been with Brodtmann for four or five years. Shortly after Brodtmann's departure, the secretary walked into the office with 'Well good-bye boys. I'm jolly glad it is all over and I can get back to my own job'. Asked what he meant by that, he expressed surprise that they had not 'tumbled'. He was a captain in the British army on secret service.³⁴

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Maggie Cook, whose great-grandfather was A.C. Hills; and the Richard Roberts Archive.

Craig Horner

A.C. Hills and his 'real good fellowship in a community of pioneers'

- 1 See Craig Horner, 'S.F. Edge: the salad days', *Aspects of Motoring History*, 11 (2015), pp. 43–54; Craig Horner, *The emergence of bicycling and automobility in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), passim.
- 2 Gleaned from the BRBC winter programme for 1894–5, A.C. Hills papers. This gives details of the fifteenth annual supper (8 December 1894); and of the celebrations marking fifteen years (9 January 1895).
- 3 'Fifty miles tricycle record', *Daily Telegraph*, 27 September 1887; *The Referee*, 21 July 1889.
- 4 By the fifth annual supper of the BRBC, on 5 December 1890 at St James's Hall, Regent St, the programme consisted of toasts, piano and banjo solos, singing, presentation of prizes. Hills was noted as a visitor from the *Evening News and Post*.
- 5 George Lacy Hillier, 'A ramble in France', *Bicycling News*, 7 May 1887, n.p.; George Lacy Hillier, 'A lazy tour through Kent', *Land and Water*, 1 May 1886, n.p., describing the BRBC Easter tour of 1886; 'Quite a contrast', *The Cycle*, 17 February 1894.
- 6 Letter, from Montague Grahame-White, 3 November 1946.
- 7 A.C. Hills, 'Early motoring days', unpub. typescript, A.C. Hills papers, p. 1. The text will be made available on 19thcenturymotorist.org.
- 8 'Early motoring days', p. 18.
- 9 'Men of mark: No. 9: Mr. A.C. Hills', *Cycle Trade Supplement*, *The Cycle*, 18 September 1897, n.p.; 'Wayside echoes', *Irish Cyclist*, 3 August 1904; *London Gazette*, 12 July 1898, from Grace's Guide. Nisbet detail from Grace's Guide. Hills's *nom de plume*: *Motor Trader*, 6 January 1915.
- 10 'Early motoring days', p. 2.
- 11 'Rules', Circle of Nineteenth Century Motorists (1932), A.C. Hills papers, loose sheets.
- 12 'Early motoring days', p. 3.
- 13 'Early motoring days', pp. 3–4.
- 14 Nick Georgano (ed. in chief), *The Beaulieu encyclopedia of the automobile*, vol. 2 (Norwich: The Stationery Office, 3 vols, 2000), pp. 1,044–5.
- 15 Elizabeth Bennett, *Thousand Mile Trial* (Heathfield, E. Sussex: Elizabeth Bennett, 2000).
- 16 'Early motoring days', pp. 5–6.
- 17 Neil Carter, *Cycling and the British: a modern history* (London:

- Bloomsbury, 2022), pp. 69–72, 82. Carter does not give any more detail beyond identifying them as ‘drivers’. Bidlake is mentioned in Bennett but should be indexed as p. 157.
- 18 See also Anders Ditlev Clausager, *Wolseley: a very British car* (Beaworthy: Herridge and Sons, 2016), pp. 28–32.
- 19 ‘Early motoring days’, pp. 6, 6a, 7.
- 20 The 1911 census records him as a ‘motor engineer and agent – employer’ living with this wife, four children and servant.
- 21 Georgano, *The Beaulieu encyclopedia of the automobile*, vol. 2, p. 674.
- 22 ‘Early motoring days’, p. 13.
- 23 ‘Early motoring days’, pp. 13–15.
- 24 ‘Early motoring days’, p. 15.
- 25 ‘Hills-Martini’, *Motor News*, 8 December 1906; Grace’s Guide.
- 26 For background see St John Nixon, *The story of the SMMT, 1902–52* (London: SMMT, 1952), pp. 36–8. Nixon does not mention Hills.
- 27 ‘Wayside echoes’.
- 28 ‘Early motoring days’, pp. 23–5.
- 29 ‘In the highlands with the BSA’, *Motor World*, 12 September 1912, pp. 1,083–5.
- 30 ‘On the road’, *Motor World*, 9 May 1912, pp. 597–9, a report on the new BSA 13.9hp.
- 31 ‘The ambassador of commerce’, *The Car Illustrated*, 19 September 1917, p. 92, picked up and repeated verbatim in *Motoring in South Africa*, 1 November 1917, p. 29. See also *The Motor*, 17 July 1917, p. 555.
- 32 Email exchange with Anders Clausager, 20–21 June 2023.
- 33 A.C. Hills, ‘Some recollections of a veteran trader’, pp. 8–9, c.1921. The title and date of this source is unknown (but probably *Motor World*) – it was one of the clippings amongst the papers.
- 34 T. Boghardt, *Spies of the Kaiser: German covert operations in Great Britain during the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); ‘Early motoring days’, pp. 28, 28b, 29.