ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

THE HONOURABLE CHARLES STEWART ROLLS

27 August 1877 – 12 July 1910

August 2021, Goodwood, West Sussex

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

The Hon Charles Stewart Rolls lived through a pivotal period of history, as the Victorian era gave way to the brave new world of the 20th-century. And as his story reveals, he was at the very heart of changes and developments that would shape the modern world.

His short but highly eventful life epitomised the adventurous spirit of the age. A pioneering racing driver, balloonist and aviator, in 1910 he became the first pilot to fly across the English Channel and back non-stop – a feat that won him a personal message of congratulations from King George V and a tribute from one newspaper as ‘the greatest hero of the day’.

But his aristocratic background, swashbuckling style and instinctive genius for publicity and salesmanship tend to obscure another side of his character. Far more than a mere daredevil, playboy or privileged dilletante, Rolls was a serious, highly talented engineer and innovator in his own right.

Perhaps the fact that he died so young, in a flying accident aged only 32, helps explain why he is often somewhat overshadowed by the famously perfectionist and workaholic Henry Royce. Yet his daring, love of the new, fascination with possibilities, and desire always to go further and better than anyone else had ever dared to try, remain powerful, animating forces at the heart of the company that bears his name today.

NOBLE ORIGINS

Charles Rolls was born on 27 August 1877, the third son of Lord and Lady Llangattock. Though his registered birthplace was at 35 Hill Street, off Berkeley Square in London, his heart was always at the family’s ancestral home, The Hendre, in Monmouthshire, on the border of Wales and England.

His aptitude and enthusiasm for engineering were evident from childhood. When he was nine, he rigged up an electric bell between his bedroom and the stables at The Hendre. A few years later, he also planned and supervised the installation of electricity in the main house; in an early demonstration of the powers of persuasion that would later make him world-famous, he induced his father to pay for it.

DRIVEN TO SUCCEED

Rolls' passion for motor cars was equally precocious. In 1896, aged just 18, he travelled to Paris and bought his first car, a 3¾ HP Peugeot Phaeton. As an engineering student at Trinity College, Cambridge, his inveterate tinkering with imported European cars earned him the unflattering, but probably accurate, sobriquet ‘Dirty Rolls’ from his fellow undergraduates.

After gaining his degree in Mechanical & Applied Science, the seemingly fearless and relentlessly competitive Rolls quickly made a name for himself as a racing driver. In his first race – the 1899 Paris to Boulogne – he finished fourth in the tourist class, driving an 8 HP Panhard & Levassor. Four years later, he competed in the fateful race from Paris to Madrid, in which 34 drivers and spectators perished: in the same year, he set an unofficial land speed record of almost 83mph in his 80 HP Mors.

A TRUE HIGH-FLYER

Rolls had also been captivated by flying from its inception. He was a founding member of the Royal Aero Club, initially as a balloonist, making over 170 flights and winning the Aero Club de France Gold Medal in 1906 for the longest sustained time aloft. On his first flight in a powered airship, the *Ville de Paris*, in 1907, he described the experience as ‘something worth living for; it was the conquest of the air’.

In the spring of 1909, when the Wright brothers came to England from America as guests of the Royal Aero Club, Rolls acted as their official host. A year later, he became only the second person in Britain to be awarded an aeroplane pilot’s licence; and it was in a Wright Flyer that he became both the first Englishman to fly an aeroplane across the English Channel, and the first aviator ever to fly non-stop from England to France and back again.

AN HISTORIC MEETING…

On 4 May 1904, Rolls travelled from London to the Midland Hotel in Manchester, England. There he was introduced by Henry Edmunds, a fellow member of the Automobile Club, to an engineer named Henry Royce. Upon returning to London, Rolls told his business partner, Claude Johnson, that he had found ‘the greatest motor engineer in the world’. Rolls agreed to sell all the cars Royce could make.

A shrewd businessman, Rolls recognised the power of marketing and public relations. In his role as Technical Managing Director, he used his extensive connections in politics, the media and even royalty to promote Rolls-Royce and its motor cars. He famously enjoyed demonstrating the refinement of the legendary Silver Ghost by balancing a brimming glass of water on the running engine and watching people’s reaction as not a drop was spilled.

…AND A TRAGIC END

On 12 July 1910, less than two months after his triumphant double Channel crossing, Rolls was taking part in a competition at Bournemouth when the tail-piece broke off his Wright Flyer. The aircraft plunged to the ground from a height of 100 feet, crashing close to the crowded grandstand in a tangle of spars and canvas. Rolls sustained a fractured skull and was pronounced dead at the scene. He was only the twelfth person in history to be killed in a flying accident, and the first Briton to lose his life in a powered aircraft. He was only 32.

Charles Rolls combined a fine technical mind with a bold, adventurous spirit; small wonder that aviation and motoring held such powerful, almost magical attractions for him. He was a true pioneer in both fields, instrumental in the development of aeroplanes and motor cars with his record-breaking feats. That he achieved so much in so short a life is extraordinary and inspiring. More than a century on, his imagination and courage are still very much alive at the Home of Rolls-Royce.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

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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);[**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 wholly-owned subsidiary of the BMW Group and is a completely separate company from Rolls-Royce plc, the manufacturer of aircraft engines and propulsion systems. Over 2,000 skilled men and women are employed at the Rolls-Royce Motor Cars’ head office and manufacturing plant at Goodwood, West Sussex, the only place in the world where the company’s super-luxury motor cars are hand-built.

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