ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

SIR FREDERICK HENRY ROYCE, 1st BARONET, OBE

27 MARCH 1863 - 22 APRIL 1933

22 April 2023, Goodwood, West Sussex

**INTRODUCTION**

For all his many honours and achievements, Sir Frederick Henry Royce OBE was a humble man, referring to himself simply as ‘a mechanic'. 90 years after his death, his technical genius and engineering philosophy – the pursuit of excellence – continue to inspire the company that bears his name.

**FROM HUMBLE BEGINNINGS**

Henry Royce was born in Alwalton, near Peterborough, on 27 March 1863, the youngest of five children. When his father James, a miller, went bankrupt, the family fell on hard times. By the age of 10, Royce was lodging in London, selling newspapers at railway stations: the long hours and poor diet he endured during this period almost certainly contributed to the health problems he suffered in later life.

In 1876, he became a telegram delivery boy at the Mayfair Post Office in central London. His beat included 35 Hill Street, where a certain Charles Stewart Rolls was born on 27 August 1877. It’s thus perfectly possible that Royce delivered messages of congratulation to the proud parents of his future business partner.

In September of that year, Royce made his first foray into engineering, as an apprentice at the Great Northern Railway locomotive works in Peterborough. To make up for his lack of formal education, he attended evening classes in English and mathematics. Family financial problems struck once more, however, when his sponsor, one of his mother’s sisters, was unable to pay the £20 annual fee. Undaunted, the 17-year-old Royce set off on foot in search of work, eventually becoming a toolmaker in Leeds, on the princely wage of a penny an hour (2.44 old pence)!

In 1881, he returned to London to work in the fledging field of electrical engineering. His natural aptitude earned him, aged just 19, the position of Chief Electrician to a company supplying electric lighting to Liverpool. Even so, he continued to devote his spare time to his electrical engineering studies. By 1884, the company had gone bust, so Royce decided to use the money he’d saved to strike out on his own.

**MAKING HIS NAME**

Royce set up a small electrical and mechanical engineering company, F H Royce & Co, in Blake Street, Manchester. Within months his friend and fellow engineer, Ernest Claremont, joined him as a partner. From making simple electrical devices such as bell sets, fuses, switches and bulb holders, the business quickly expanded, producing everything from dynamos, electric motors and winches to cranes for the Manchester Ship Canal.

Over the next 15 years, the company, which became Royce Ltd in 1894, enjoyed sustained growth and financial success. However, the Boer War (1899-1902) combined with an influx of cheap mass-produced electrical products from Germany and the USA saw its sales contract sharply. Royce’s health, never robust, deteriorated until in 1902, it collapsed completely. His wife persuaded him to take a trip to South Africa to recover. He returned 10 weeks later, mentally and physically refreshed, and ready for a new challenge.

On the long sea voyage, Royce had read a book entitled *The Automobile – Its Construction and Management,* by French engineer Gerard Lavergne. Royce already owned a rudimentary motor vehicle – a De Dion quadricycle – but Lavergne’s work showed him just how far Britain had fallen behind France in automobile engineering.

Royce bought a second-hand two-cylinder Decauville on which to experiment. When the machine failed to start, he quickly rectified the problem; but having entirely dismantled the car and examined each component in detail, he identified a host of other potential improvements. In typical fashion, he decided that rather than modifying the French car, he could build a better one himself.

On 1 April 1904, the new Royce 10 HP car made its first run. Three weeks later, on the opening day of the Side Slip Trials endurance event, it covered the 145.5 miles from London to Margate and back at an average speed of 16.5 mph. In an age when motor cars were both noisy and temperamental, Royce’s machine had also proved itself exceptionally quiet and utterly reliable.

**A MEETING OF MINDS**

The driver at the Slip Side Trials was Henry Edmunds, managing director of one of Britain’s largest electric cable manufacturers (of which Royce’s business partner Ernest Claremont was a Director). Among Edmunds’ friends was The Honourable Charles Stewart Rolls, an aristocratic, Cambridge-educated aviation pioneer and racing-driver, who sold French-built Panhard cars from his premises, C. S. Rolls & Co. at Lillie Hall, Fulham.

Edmunds persuaded Rolls to travel to Manchester to meet Royce and examine the Royce car. Despite their starkly contrasting backgrounds, and 14-year age difference, Rolls and Royce formed an instant rapport.

They agreed that Rolls would sell all the cars Royce could make, under the name ‘Rolls-Royce’. The arrangement allowed Royce to concentrate on designing and building the perfect machine, and Rolls to fulfil his ambition of selling his own line of the very finest English-built motor cars.

**FROM STRENGTH TO STRENGTH**

Rolls-Royce Limited came into being in March 1906. In the same year, Royce produced his six‑cylinder 40/50 HP, the legendary Silver Ghost, and also began to design the company’s new works in Nightingale Road, Derby.

Over the next two decades, Royce continued to develop and refine his automotive designs, and also produced some of the world’s finest aero engines. Most famously, he produced the ‘R’ engine for R J Mitchell’s Supermarine S6 and S6B, which helped with the future development of the iconic Spitfire, with the ‘R’ engine the foundation for its legendary Merlin engine.

**A LIFETIME OF ACHIEVEMENT**

During his long and varied career, Royce filed 301 patents – an astonishing feat for a largely self-educated engineer. He was awarded an OBE in 1918, and in 1930 he was made a Baronet – thus becoming Sir Henry Royce – for his services to aviation. With characteristic modesty, he wrote to all Rolls-Royce employees thanking them for their contribution to the honour.

**THE PASSING OF A NATIONAL HERO**

Sir Henry Royce spent his later years working at his homes in West Wittering in Sussex, and Le Canadel in the South of France. He died on 22 April 1933, after finally succumbing to long‑term illness resulting from poor nutrition in childhood, and a lifetime of overwork. Even on his deathbed, he sketched a design for the first adjustable shock absorber: the sketch, which still survives, is annotated by his nurse, Royce himself being too weak to write. That he was still producing original ideas in his final hours encapsulates his devotion to his craft, and the breadth and brilliance of his engineering mind.

-ENDS-

## 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. 2,500 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.

## 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).

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