ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

ROLLS-ROYCE ‘MAKERS OF THE MARQUE’:

THE HONOURABLE CHARLES STEWART ROLLS

(27 August 1877 - 12 July 1910)

21 August 2024, Goodwood, West Sussex

* An overview of the life and career of The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls, born 27 August 1877
* A pioneering racing driver, balloonist and aviator, and a serious engineer and innovator in his own right
* His many achievements underline the tragic brevity of his life
* Sixth in a series profiling the principal characters in the Rolls-Royce Motor Cars story
* Published in recognition of the marque’s 120th anniversary in 2024
* Each account underlines and celebrates the essential human dimension of ‘the best car in the world’

*“The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls lived a short but highly eventful life that epitomised the adventurous spirit of the age. Aristocratic, urbane and seemingly fearless, he was also a highly trained engineer exploring the leading edge of two new technologies – motoring and aviation – that were already changing the world. It is easy to forget that he and Royce worked together for just six years before his death in 1910, aged only 32, which makes his achievements and influence all the more remarkable. Given the extraordinary, enduring magnitude of all they accomplished in that short time, we remain inspired by his legacy, while wondering what might have been.”*

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

The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls was born on 27 August 1877, the third son of Lord and Lady Llangattock. Though his birthplace was registered as 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.

It was here that his aptitude and enthusiasm for engineering first emerged. Aged nine, he rigged up an electric bell between his bedroom and the stables; a few years later, he planned and supervised the installation of electricity in the main house. In an early demonstration of the persuasive powers that would serve him so well in his subsequent career, he persuaded Lord Llangattock to pay for it.

Rolls went on to study Mechanical and Applied Science at Trinity College, Cambridge, where his constant tinkering with imported European cars earned him the unflattering (but probably accurate) nickname ‘Dirty Rolls’ from his fellow undergraduates. After gaining his degree, he quickly made a name for himself as a racing driver, finishing fourth in his first race, the 1899 Paris to Boulogne. Four years later, he competed in the fateful Paris-Madrid race, in which 34 drivers and spectators perished. That same year, he set an unofficial land speed record of almost 83mph in his 80 H.P. Mors.

The other great love of Rolls’ life was aviation. He was a founding member of the Royal Aero Club, initially as a balloonist, making more than 170 flights. He described his first trip in a powered airship in 1907 as ‘something worth living for; it was the conquest of the air’. In 1910, he became the first pilot in history to fly across the English Channel and back non-stop, earning a personal message of congratulations from King George V and a tribute from one newspaper as ‘the greatest hero of the day’.

But it was in motoring that Rolls chose to make his living. In January 1902, he opened one of Britain’s first car dealerships, C. S. Rolls & Co., in Fulham, West London, importing and selling French Panhard and Mors cars, and Minerva vehicles built in Belgium. The cars sold well, but Rolls was troubled that no domestically produced car met either his clients’ needs, or his own standards as a trained engineer and lifelong enthusiast.

Among Rolls’ large social circle was Henry Edmunds, whom he had met through the Automobile Club of Great Britain & Ireland (later the Royal Automobile Club). Edmunds was a shareholder at Royce Limited and had been enormously impressed by the company’s early Royce 10 H.P. car, designed and built by Henry Royce, which he had driven in a 1,000-mile trial.

It was one of those moments of serendipity that, with hindsight, seems inevitable: Edmunds realised the Royce 10 H.P. was precisely the high-quality, British-made car Rolls was looking for. Such was his enthusiasm that Rolls asked for a meeting with Royce, which Edmunds duly arranged on 4 May 1904 at The Midland Hotel in Manchester. On returning to London, Rolls enthused to his business partner – and future Managing Director at Rolls-Royce – Claude Johnson, that he had found ‘the greatest motor engineer in the world’ and that he would sell all the cars Royce could make.

Rolls was the right man, in the right place, at the right time. A skilled engineer and enthusiast who understood motor cars intimately, he was also an astute businessman, with extensive connections in politics, industry, the media and even royalty. His quick mind immediately grasped the importance of marketing and public relations in promoting Rolls-Royce and its motor cars. Famously, he would demonstrate the refinement of the Silver Ghost by balancing a brimming glass of water on the radiator, with the engine running, thoroughly enjoying his audience’s reaction when not a drop was spilt.

By 1910, Rolls-Royce was firmly established as the world’s pre-eminent luxury motor car maker. The company had outgrown its original premises and its factory in Derby had opened in July 1908. Its flagship model, the 40/50 H.P. ‘Silver Ghost’, was in high demand following dominant performances in a series of gruelling long-distance trials. It was a period of extraordinary innovation, expansion and commercial success that would rarely be repeated until the dawn of the Goodwood era in 2003.

Everything changed on 12 July 1910. Less than two months after his triumphant double Channel crossing, Rolls was taking part in a flying competition at Bournemouth when the tailplane broke off his Wright Flyer. The aircraft plunged to the ground, crashing in a tangle of spars and canvas. Rolls 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 just 32.

The Hon. Charles Stewart 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, and he was a true pioneer in both fields. That he achieved so much in so short a life is extraordinary and inspiring; indeed, it is tempting to wonder, regretfully, just how much more he might have accomplished.

He had an innate ability to see things that few others could, with his forward-thinking nature perfectly encapsulated in an article he wrote for The Motor-Car Journal in 1900: “The electric car is perfectly noiseless and clean. There is no smell or vibration, and they should become very useful when fixed charging stations can be arranged. But for now, I do not anticipate that they will be very serviceable – at least for many years to come.” Indeed, it would take 120 years, but this statement proved to be prophetic with the launch of Spectre, the first all-electric Rolls-Royce motor car.

His legacy is assured. His daring, imagination and desire to always think bigger, go further and attempt what had never been done before remain powerful, animating forces at the heart of the company that bears his name today. More than a century on, his imagination and courage endure at the Home of Rolls-Royce in Goodwood, West Sussex.

- ENDS -

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:-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.

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); [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/rollsroycecars/); and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/rollsroycemotorcars).

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
* Sir Henry Royce, born 27 March 1863
* Eleanor Thornton, born 15 April 1880
* Ernest Hives, born 21 April 1886
* Lord 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

The Rolls-Royce ‘Models of the Marque’ series:

* 1900s: Royce 10 H.P. / Rolls-Royce 10 H.P.
* 1910s: Rolls-Royce 40/50 H.P. ‘Silver Ghost’
* 1920s: Rolls-Royce 20 H.P. the ‘Twenty’
* 1930s: Rolls-Royce Phantom III
* Watch this space for more…

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