ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

MODELS OF THE MARQUE – THE 1990s:

THE ROLLS-ROYCE SILVER SERAPH

Monday 24 February 2025, Goodwood, West Sussex

* A brief history of the Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph, built between 1998 and 2002
* A technological bridge and tangible connection between Rolls-Royce Heritage and the modern Goodwood era
* Tenth chapter in a series celebrating a landmark model from each decade of the marque’s history
* Year-long retrospective marks the 120th anniversary of the first meeting between Henry Royce and The Hon. Charles Stewart Rolls in 1904

*“A magnificent motor car in its own right, Silver Seraph is uniquely important as the tangible, technological link between the pre-Goodwood and contemporary Rolls-Royce eras. It was the first Rolls-Royce in history to be designed using computer-aided design (CAD) and, more importantly, the first to be powered by a V12 engine from BMW Group, which would acquire the Rolls-Royce brand while Silver Seraph was in production. Its development was extraordinarily protracted, with many twists and turns, at a time of great economic challenges and widely differing client requirements in Rolls-Royce’s major markets. That it answered its complex brief so successfully and beautifully is a tribute to the design and engineering teams, who combined innovation and imagination with their fidelity to the marque's fundamental principles.”*

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

In 1989, Rolls-Royce sold a record 3,333 examples of its Silver Spirit – a model that by this point was a decade into a production run that would eventually extend to 18 years. Silver Spirit was the descendant of a long-lived ancestor, the Silver Shadow, which itself enjoyed a career lasting some 15 years.

Such prolonged lifecycles were highly unusual in the automotive industry. The longevity and commercial success of these models seemed to prove that conventional wisdom did not necessarily apply to large, luxury cars. Nevertheless, the replacement for Silver Spirit was already in development; work on the project, codenamed SXB, had begun five years previously in 1984.

SXB was to be an entirely new model. The challenge facing the design team was to create a motor car that could simultaneously satisfy the contrasting market requirements in the United States and Britain. Clients in the former still wanted a car that unashamedly celebrated wealth and success; while those in the latter were uneasy about displays of conspicuous consumption at a time of economic recession.

Silver Spirit was itself based on the long-established SZ range; the designers were initially briefed that SXB should be smaller than the SZ cars but have at least the same interior dimensions. They were also instructed to include as large a boot space as possible without compromising the design’s aesthetics. Finally, the new model should seat the driver and occupants in the imperious yet cossetting ‘Command Position’ that had long been a signature Rolls-Royce feature, and is retained to this day in Phantom VIII.

It was a complex assignment; but happily, the designers could turn to a wondrous new technology to help them. SXB was the first Rolls-Royce to be created using computer-aided design (CAD), which became available to the team in 1989, to supplement the traditional clay, wood and fibreglass styling bucks still used at Goodwood in contemporary Rolls-Royce projects.

At that time, car designers everywhere were obsessed with the wedge shape: low at the front, high at the rear. Everywhere, that is, except in the Rolls-Royce styling department. Not only did Rolls-Royce – then as now – never merely follow fashion; its own fundamental design tenets were precisely the reverse, with a high front tapering to a lower rear.

Another important factor their heirs and successors at Goodwood would recognise was feedback from clients. When asked, American owners conceded that the SZ range were good cars, but remarked they lacked the charisma of the earlier Silver Cloud and Corniche models. Launched in 1955, Silver Cloud took its styling cues from motor yachts, with a tall radiator forming a prow, front wings flowing like a bow wave, curvaceous rear wings representing a wake wave, and a low-set, sloped tail. To add to the design team’s burdens, they were told to include similar aesthetic touches in SXB.

Initially, the plan was to build the Rolls-Royce and Bentley variants of SXB on the same underpinnings, but with different bodies. As the design developed, it became obvious that a single-body design could accommodate the biggest aesthetic difference – the two brands’ distinctive radiator grilles – with other details providing sufficient visual separation between them. The decision to drop the two-body approach was also driven by an urgent need to cut costs. Even with this major saving, however, the project was halted in 1992 for financial reasons.

When SXB was finally revived in January 1994, the designers continued with their homage to Silver Cloud, producing designs featuring its distinctive stepped rear wing. SXB was given a more contemporary falling waistline, while retaining some elements of Silver Cloud’s iconic yacht influence. The designers paid particular attention to the rear three-quarter and full rear views, reasoning that owing to its performance, these were the angles from which it would be most commonly seen by other motorists.

In October 1994, SXB (by now known as project P600) was given the formal go-ahead for a launch in 1998. In a first for the marque, and a foreshadowing of events to come, the new models would be fitted with BMW engines: a 5.4-litre V12 for the Rolls-Royce, and 4.4-litre V8 for the Bentley variant.

Six months later, in May 1995, P600 was redesignated as P3000 (P2000 for the Bentley variant), and the design details were finalised. After much alteration, the radiator shell was less angular and more rounded than the original design; the Spirit of Ecstasy was also made slightly smaller than on the Silver Spirit. Viewed from the side, subtle but clear styling cues from Silver Shadow remained in place, with flat panels reduced to an absolute minimum to restore that all-important ‘charisma’.

The new Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph was unveiled to the world’s press in January 1998 at Ackergill Tower Castle in Scotland. The assembled journalists were informed that the car had, “Solidness without heaviness. Authority without arrogance. Elegance without effort. Presence without pomp.” To help them understand what the designers termed the car’s ‘aesthetic premise’, they received a limited-edition print of chief designer Graham Hull’s ‘Yacht Aesthetics’ rendering.

The Silver Seraph remained in production until 2002, together with a long-wheelbase version introduced in 2000, known as the Park Ward Rolls-Royce Touring, some four years after the Rolls-Royce brand had been acquired by BMW Group. Indeed, its use of BMW powertrain, expertise and engineering are thought to have been instrumental in making Rolls-Royce attractive to its new owners.

Having taken an astonishing 14 years to get from the drawing board to the open road – almost certainly the longest gestation period of any Rolls-Royce in history – Silver Seraph then had one of the shortest lifespans. Its overall concept – to be smaller and less imposing than its predecessors – also upended previous Rolls-Royce thinking (and in fact has been comprehensively disproved by the consistent success of Goodwood-era models).

Yet Silver Seraph remains a highly significant model. It was the correct design for its time; and like all great designs, it has aged well and remains a good-looking motor car even today, albeit very much of its period. Perhaps most enduringly, with its BMW V12 engine and production extending until 2002, it also acts as a technological bridge and tangible connection between Rolls-Royce’s heritage and the modern Goodwood era.

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

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. 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%3A-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.

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 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
* 1940s: Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn
* 1950s: Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud
* 1960s: Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow
* 1970s: Rolls-Royce Camargue
* 1980s: Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph

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