

## THE SILVER EAGLE

*Henry Williamson's celebrated Alvis Silver Eagle figured largely in his life and also in his writing. The following short history of the car is traced, in the main, by two contributors, and dovetailed into Richard Williamson's article is Henry's own account of The Accident, taken from Goodbye West Country (Putnam, 1937, p.116).*

THE SILVER EAGLE was the first real car in our family, but my father rather preferred to be in it alone, the open 'cockpit' tonneau covered except for the driver's seat. It was used for last minute blinds to the Bristol BBC studios, a two hour journey from North Devon, for a weekly broadcast. Often it went to London. Thus, in *The Gold Falcon* (Faber & Faber), we read of the strange, haunted genius, Manfred, ex-Royal Flying Corps, who had everything, or so his friends thought - a beautiful and tender wife, two fine children, an Elizabethan house, a sailing boat, and a fast car for visits to London. Manfred's end is tragic. The book, I think, rates with other novels of the Thirties of the calibre of Scott Fitzgerald.

In *Goodbye West Country* adventures in the Alvis are numerous, including turning it over one night in a narrow Devon lane.

At the right-angle turning into lesser lane leading down to Shallowford a white owl flew across the windscreen, appearing to flatten a moment against it. It didn't really startle me, I was too tired; but when it was gone I saw I had turned the corner too widely and was going into the bank. I neither braked nor tried to wrench round the wheel in a dry skid, to hit sideways. I just sat there and knew it was coming to me. When the offside front wheel struck, the car lifted upon the bank and fell off, hovered in the balance at an angle of about 44°, and then rocked back on its side.

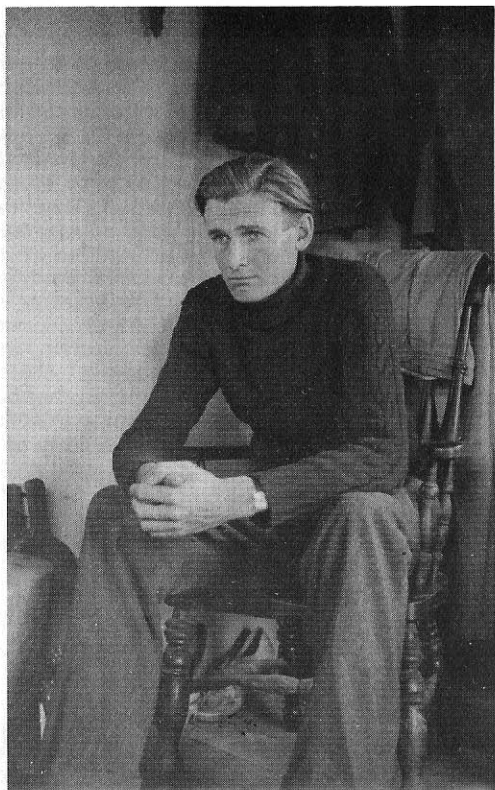
A photo of the car taken next morning appeared in *The Daily Mirror*. The author was almost killed as the car very nearly rolled. Having climbed out, petrol and oil gurgling and spreading over the road, the headlights switched off, he removed the Silver Eagle mascot and contemplated setting fire to the car, "the last honour to a friend of six years, betrayed by its driver". My father hoped the caption in the paper would be "This car goes so fast it corners on a vertical bank", a remark which did not amuse the photographer.

The Alvis then, in 1937, underwent the worst moments of its life, for it had to move the family of seven, lock, stock and barrel, to Norfolk. A trailer was made and stuffed full of books, furniture and children, which the car pulled several times on the round trip of 600 miles. All this is recorded in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm*, which begins "One dull day in 1935 I went to London in my open car, which I loved. It was painted black, and all the seats were covered except the driver's, in which I sat as in an airplane. There was a sense of freedom in my car,

which had a Silver Eagle as a mascot on its radiator cap. It was fast, doing 85 m.p.h. when flat out, and it covered 24 miles to the gallon. These mechanical facts interested me, as once the precision of words had occupied all my time." Again: "American cars could accelerate faster than I could, though they would be on the scrap heap 2 or 3 times before the Silver Eagles joined them." My father had taken a farm, and the Eagle had to work for its living. Harrows were fixed to the drawbar, horses apparently being too slow for cultivating the fields. "I started off, and was soon doing 20 m.p.h. in 2nd gear, the engine revving almost flat out. After twice up and down the field I stopped, to hear a subdued bubbling thunder in the radiator and to see steam blown from the vent pipe. There was no fan behind the radiator to draw cold air through the comb, since the car was designed for speed, not transport." A box body was fitted by Mr Ebbage, the Stiffkey carpenter. With this my father was the hare, while the Ferguson tractor was the tortoise, gathering up sheaves of corn at harvest time. He would tear down to the far end of the field, throw in half a dozen sheaves, rush back again and throw them off into the elevator, the idea being to keep the men on the stack working.

The car would be required to take pigs to Norwich market, or transport the driver at great speed back to Devon to his hilltop hideout when things were low. My first memory of anything was going through a long nettlebed in the Alvis at the age of 3, when the hilly farm boundaries were being surveyed. It was an extraordinary car, and would have been perfect for this life except for one thing - its electrical ignition. Time and time again the magneto (or the self-starter) failed. I can remember once sitting by the roadside for 4 hours, while the magneto was puzzled over. Another time, the hooter jammed on, and my father rushed around pulling out wires in fear that people would think he was signalling to the Germans. At the end of the war the farm was sold, and the Alvis lingered on till 1947, when it was given away to a glider pilotess who had ferried Sterlings in the war. She used it for a year towing gliders off the ground, a task which the car was asked to perform all the way in one gear. At the end of that it ought to have been a wreck but wasn't and at last fell into sympathetic hands. But its literary life had not ended. In 1949 my father started on the marathon 15 volume saga of Phillip Maddison, a character rather like Manfred, poet, visionary and man of many parts. The saga, collectively called *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, finds Phillip in the war in possession of - a Silver Eagle! In *A Solitary War* we find Phillip about to start on the trip to the farm: "Would the engine restart? The self-starter, to his immense relief, gave its raucous cock crow. The cogs were, as Luke (the bailiff) would say, coggin-in". Further on, the self-starter would not work, "although by now six local garages had 'put it right'. The draining of the radiator did not let out all the water. The drain-plug was not at the lowest point. Water remained in the phosphor bronze pipe leading to the water pump below the radiator base. It was solid with ice". After a page of frustration we are not surprised to read that the car was nearly set on fire again, deliberately, the driver with it. Luckily, after much hot water to free the pistons (?) the Eagle was pushed down a slope by the farmhands. "The Silver Eagle became a leaden vulture, a torpid whale. More hot water, sparking plugs heated by blowlamp. Once more





down the slope. She fired. Jumping out, leaving the engine at 1500 revs, Phillip shook hands with his deliverers, and promised them a duck each for Christmas". In the warm weather, as always with all Alvis cars, it was back in favour, "the mascot and radiator polished by the little boys". Then Phillip was arrested for his political views, in the dark days of the war. On being released again he noticed how comfortable was the police car. "It showed how old the Silver Eagle really was. It oversteered. The springs were laid. The kingpins were loose. So were the shackle bolts. Steering probably out of track." However, the car reappears in the last novel of the saga, *The Gale of the World*, and it plays a leading role in the almost total disintegration of the hero. Almost, you might think on relecting this end, the Silver Eagle was the scapegoat. It was obviously an extension of the author's or the hero's persona. Now DR 6084 is owned by Mr Alex Marsh. I am sure that he appreciates its more than unusual history. If ever Mr Marsh wants the mascot to go back to its proper place, then he can sell the car back to me! At the moment the mascot rides not as a silver eagle, but as a golden eagle, on the radiator of my TA 14. In other words, all the silver was polished away by "the little boys" and is down to the brass, and I think it should stay like that.

## Richard Williamson

*Reprinted, with permission, from The Alvis Owner Club Bulletin, March 1972*

MY HUSBAND'S FATHER was at college in 1950 and heard of a car used by Redhill Gliding Club to pull gliders into the air. After much barter he bought the car which consisted of a bucket seat, a windscreen on support, an engine and bare chassis. He left college that year and with his new wife moved to Sheffield where he proceeded to repair the Alvis. The engine sat in the kitchen, a target for his two just-crawling children who 'stole' vital parts and popped marbles in the spark plug holes. He rebuilt the body from hardboard and a friend helped him make a bonnet cover. At the time he was serving an engineers' apprenticeship at Firth Brown's, Sheffield, and had the ability to manufacture parts, though many parts were ex-R.A.F. spares readily available in the 1950s. A cover was made later by a local tarpaulin maker.

In 1955 my father-in-law sold the car to a young schoolmaster for enough to buy a typewriter. The owning and restoration of vintage cars was at this time make-do-and-mend and did not reach the standards of manufacturers' specifications attained in rebuilding work today. He simply tidied the car up, lining the body inside with plywood from tea-chests, fitting two newer bucket seats from an old BSA three-wheeler, replacing the ex-R.A.F. webbing bonnet straps with old leather harnesses, and finally painting the whole body British racing Green. He remembers the car with affection as it ran well with no faults.

He later sold the car when the family required a more respectable car able to tow a caravan. The Alvis went to one of his friends who put it into service as a vehicle to carry him to and from race meetings with spares and tools for a friend's racing car. The Alvis ran well with minor repairs to bearings, brakes etc. The Alvis was eventually put to one side in favour of a newer car. The intention was to return to the car later. However, my husband's friend was badgered to sell the car to an acquaintance of his, and eventually, with much sadness, he sold her.

The Alvis's new owner ignored advice to reline the clutch-stop, continually using brute force which resulted in the demise of the gear box. He ripped out the original triple carburettor, replacing it with a modern S.U. type, fitted modern flick-switches in the dash and eventually left the much abused car in a lock-up. He later sold the Alvis, now in a very poor state, as he was emigrating to Australia. After that she was acquired by an engineer/shipbuilder in Northumberland who patiently rebuilt her. He completely stripped the plywood and tea-chest body and replaced it with a new ash frame and stretched-fabric body in the original style. He will never sell the car, saying that it is most reliable, runs beautifully and is a joy to drive. In fact my husband and I have been to see the car and it started easily after priming the engine with petrol; it had not been run for six months. When the car's present owner removed the windscreens he found well pinned ash supports which he believes are a legacy from the accident when Williamson rolled the Alvis on its side.

**Linda Pearce**

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### **Tree to mark site of Lawrence crash**

A tree is to be planted at Bovington Camp, Dorset, next Friday to mark the spot where T. E. Lawrence, "Lawrence of Arabia", died in a motor-cycle crash in May 1935.

The oak is being planted by Mr Tom Beaumont, from Luton, Bedfordshire, who was Lawrence's machine-gunner during the fighting in Arabia during the First World War.