

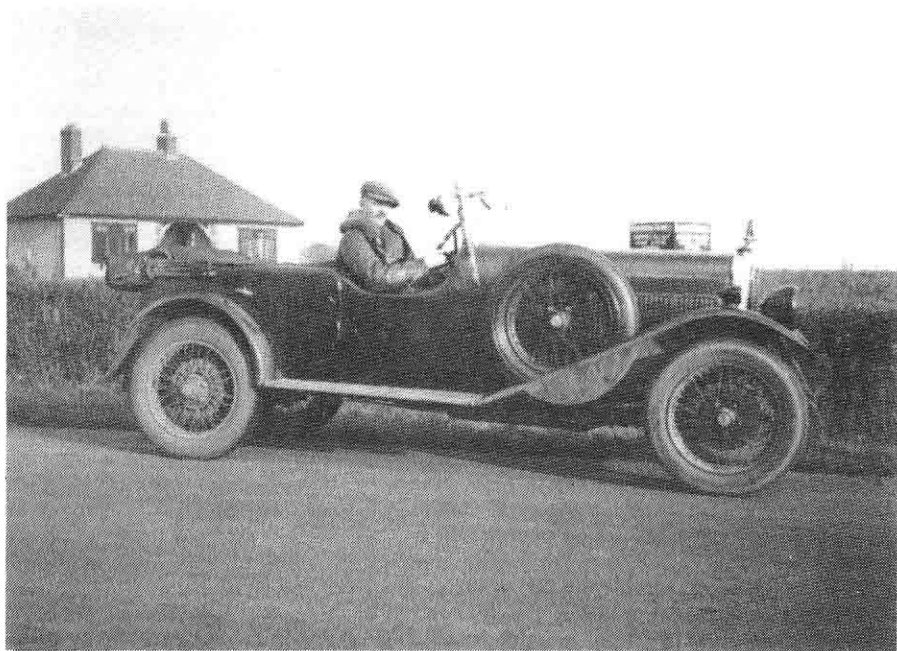
## The (Silver) Eagle Has Landed

*Richard Williamson*

My father's Silver Eagle sports car, well known to his readers, celebrated its 60th birthday in October 1990. The birthday party, which included champagne and a magnificent iced cake, was attended by most of the car's previous owners. I represented my father, travelling by train to Morpeth in Northumberland to the home of Alex and Elspeth Marsh, who have restored the car to its former magnificence at considerable cost. The party was actually a year late, for the car was first registered in October 1929, but the delay was necessary for the restorers to manufacture a brand new camshaft which necessitated a total engine rebuild.

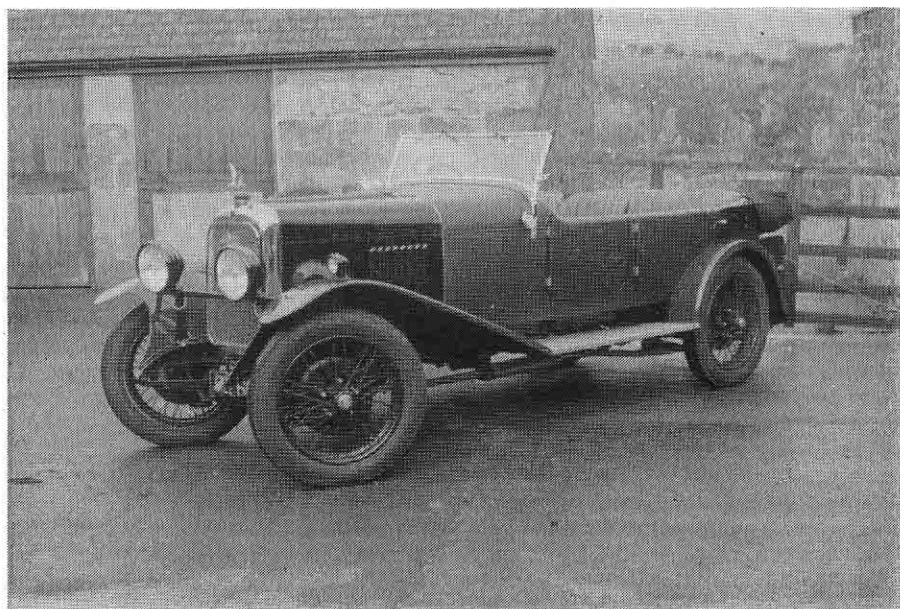
Henry took about a dozen photographs of the Silver Eagle between 1931 and 1947, the years of his ownership. Some had never been printed, the negatives being found among his considerable archive in the literary estate which Anne and I continue to catalogue at our home in Sussex. The car was always depicted with its original Cross and Ellis coachbuilt body, which shows that no photographs were taken after 1943 when the Stiffkey carpenter Mr Ebbage built a wooden box body in place of the elegant four-seat open tourer. Sweeping and rakish front mudguards descended at a long and effortless line to running boards extending the full length of the paired half doors, accentuating the enormous length of the bonnet. Black fabric covered the scuttle, very chic in its day and much used by W.O. Bentleys of the late Twenties. All appeared to be black, except for nickel, chrome, and silver plate (on the Eagle mascot only) brightwork. Even after the rough treatment that Henry gave the car it was a stunning ensemble, with foldflat windscreen adorned by mounted searchlight, large wire wheels with central Alvis embossed locking nuts, vestigial hood tightly folded out of sight, full length tonneau, and leather coated occupants ready for a blind into the westerling sun. One set of photographs depicted the Alvis at the head of 'The Flying Column', which was the convoy of vehicles described in *The Story of a Norfolk Farm* transporting goods to Norfolk. Here the Alvis was dragging the old Eccles caravan complete with diamond leaded windows. Several photographs were taken in 1937 at Pine Tree Camp on the Stiffkey Home Hills, one with mother and brother Windles, and the scene appears idyllic, with sunshine and spreading canvas and the car a pleasing addition to open air living. By about 1937 or '38 the car was in full service as a farm wagon. Mother remembers carrying a huge pig to Fakenham in it. I remember, the first memory that my brain decided to record for itself into adulthood, being driven along a river bank sweeping down half a mile of nettles in front of the radiator. When the box body was fitted corn sheaves were rushed up to the elevator during stack building while the bigger carts were being laboriously loaded. The car pulled a harrow at twenty miles an hour over Fourteen Acres; it then might have to face a faultless three hundred mile journey down to Devon, when at least the subdued thundering rumble of boiling water might be allowed to cool in the seventy mile airstream rushing through its honeycomb core.

By 1948 father was at odds with nearly all aspects of his previous life. Amongst the changes was his personal transport. His family car, a Ford 8, was kept, and eventually mother took it with her. The Alvis was given away to Ann Welch, the flying ace, and she used it at the Redhill Gliding Club to tow back to the winch a long cable for reattachment to another glider. Henry found the Alvis awful. Due to local garage bodgers the poor thing had no way of avoiding his wrath, even though it still went. Instead he bought a handsome 1938 Aston Martin 15/98 2-litre sports car, again with folding windscreen. This machine, built to the sort of pedigree tolerances usually found in



... ready for a blind into the westering sun'.

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The Silver Eagle has landed.

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sensitive machines like Bugattis, was even less able to be doctored by yokels and was to cause him far more misery than the Alvis had ever done.

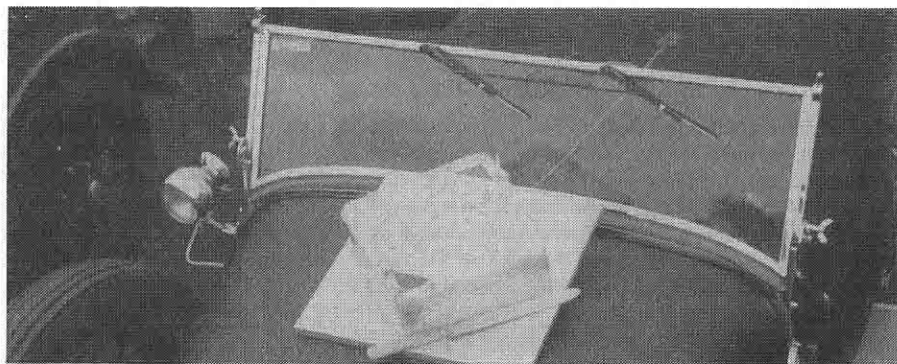
It was the Alvis that was chronicled throughout the later novels of *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*, the trusted familiar there at the bitter end. Well, despite *The Gale of the World* fire, the car still survives. With all this history behind me, it was with some interest that I arrived on a dark and cloudy evening at its new moorland home. As we turned into the gateway under pines and sycamores, the grey north country stone of the old farmhouse rising sombrely on either side, the Silver Eagle stood facing us. All possible last rays of light were caught in the polished metal, outlining in curve and edge the essential structure of the car, from the upheld wings of the eagle, downwards through shouldered arches of the radiator to silvered dishes of the lights. There was the sloping windscreen, window of a hundred thousand miles of travel in the night and day of a faraway time. There was the dashboard, instruments poised perpetually with their needles ready to record pressure, heat, speed, time and distance. There was the bonnet, holding power as though to fly, there the black steering wheel, polished by the hands that chipped ten million words, and there the flinging wheels that hurled the miles away.

I was shown the engine, so big, so simple, the lovely curves of the three SU carburettors so highly gleaming as to make dwarfs of our reflections. There were polished pipes, an embossed oil filler, propeller turn-screws that held the cover to the valve gear, and at the bottom, the mighty sump, cast in one piece of aluminium and cleanly curved that the heat from this cauldron might the better escape.

Tomorrow, my host, a Director of Swann Hunter informed me, we will drive out over the moors. I was shown the great cake, iced with the words SILVER EAGLE – DR 6084 – 1929–1990, several bottles of best champagne cooling in a refrigerator, and dozens of photographs of the rebuild, painstakingly undertaken over several years, displayed on panels ready for the celebrations in the morning.

To these I added a dozen of my own, particularly the one of HW in plus fours and tweed cap, foot nonchalantly holding down the buckled wheel of the overturned car at Filleigh, rather as Hemingway trod the carcasses of slaughtered big game. I had also brought along the original Eagle mascot, made of solid brass, all its silver plate gone, as well as the silver eagle motif finished in nickel, that was once pinned to the radiator. I had also brought along some of the books, in order to read passages to the assembled company of former owners.

Fortunately the day began fine. Moorland and copse dissolved and were occluded by occasional trailing cloud, otherwise it was to be open air motoring of the finest kind. Immediately the engine fired I remembered Stiffkey, and Georgeham of long ago. Here was my madeleine. A rhythmic thunder of beats, clean and without a trace of oil smoke, sounded the engine's life. Soon we moved off, and swept through the lanes with views out over hedges. What an extraordinary old car. It felt very high off the ground, quite bumpy, reasonably stable and certainly eccentric. The wind tore at our heads, the gears were carefully notched in, we were flying! By God, this was the life. Telegraph wires dipped and rose to their posts, a crow swept over with sun-silvered wings, the moors opened before us. I glanced at the speedometer. Thirty-five miles an hour! Was that all? We seemed to be racing along. I held the wheel, reaching from the front passenger seat. Every pebble and white line could be felt through its trembling hold. At one point on a long, sloping sweep, we touched fifty, and felt that the road beneath would bump, fall away, and we should soar high into the sun, the mascot's wings striving like a shining propeller. "It's mine, I say!" I shouted to Alex, who grinned certain in the knowledge that it was not, unless I had sixty-thousand pounds to spare.



How had Henry been able to feel safe in the car at eighty miles an hour, swinging securely through the bends of those long-ago roads? It all felt definitely of the Heracles and Hannibal era, those monsters of Imperial Airlines. Compare a flight in one of those to a 747 and you will realise how far modern motoring is ahead of the Silver Eagle, though today we have lost the abilities of feeling our way over ground or air. It is done for us. Even after years of Eagle ownership, Alex said that he felt that eighty would be a difficult speed to control.

On our return I met David Royle, whose Darlington firm had restored the car. He does not need to search for business; rather, he will only restore cars that capture his imagination. When he removed the coachwork he found bodged repairs from the '33 crash. The car was taken apart nut by bolt, and lovingly reassembled as new. Shortly after our meeting he placed an advertisement in international classic car magazines showing a picture of the Eagle, and explaining that he had recently restored the author of *Tarka the Otter's* old car, a nice bit of symbiotic publicity. Four previous owners arrived, most in Alvis cars, all of them open. It was by now raining heavily, one couple had driven 250 miles from Lincolnshire and would return after lunch.

We cut the cake, sang happy birthday, popped the champagne, just as had been forecast last year in a Radio 4 broadcast about this event. I then read passages from *The Gold Falcon*, *The Story of A Norfolk Farm*, *Goodbye West Country*; but when we came to the opening scene in *The Phoenix Generation* the listeners burst into cheers and laughter. All seemed only too familiar. Henry had not missed a single detail: for instance, the oil flow adjusting nut to the tappets had still to be carefully adjusted, the new owner had discovered for himself. When Piers Tofield, in the novel, makes the remark that the Eagle had cost Phillip too much, since the previous owner had obviously caned it, the remark was surprisingly astute. Henry had not known who the previous (first) owner had been, neither had Piers. But Alex Marsh had discovered who this had been, by writing to the Alvis Works for any original documentation that they might have on the car. He had been none other than nineteen-year-old Whitney Straight, later to become a famous racing driver, Chairman of B.E.A. and B.O.A.C., Chief Executive of Rolls Royce, holder of the C.B.E., M.C. and D.F.C. One would have expected the car to be somewhat tired after his heeling and toeing, the marks of which fancy footwork on the floorboards had partly led Piers to his statement. That the car also survived Henry's tractor driving, Ann Welch's flying lessons, Windles' and John's experimental driving techniques when Henry was out of the way, and Alex Marsh's rally driving makes even more apt the remark by Dr Wheatley Blench when he saw my own Alvis for the first time a year or two ago: "They don't make them like that any more." How true, Wheatley, how true.