

Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

Number 25

Summer 1998

ON THE MOVE

A lot has happened since the last Grassbox, and not just because of the long gap between editions 24 and 25. The last newsletter previewed the Club's premier event of the year, the Milton Keynes Rally and AGM. This now seems a distant memory, but hopefully the report and photos in this edition will give an idea of what happened for those unable to attend or remind those who were able to make it.

The bulk of the season's other events have also come and gone, mostly successfully and despite the mediocre weather in the UK this year. Now that Winter is approaching (apologies to our Australasian Members who are doubtless looking forward to their Summers), thoughts will naturally turn to new acquisitions and restoration projects.

Since the last newsletter, we have published the first edition of the Directory of Lawnmower manufacturers and models (again, more elsewhere), and made some progress on the long awaited Atco Standard transfers (information in next edition).

Another successful event this year was the visit to the Atco-Qualcast factory in July. There will be a report in the next edition, but does anyone have any ideas for a suitable venue for a similar visit next year? We have now done Ransomes and Atco, so what about Dennis or Flymo? Let me know.

As usual, it has taken a bit longer to produce this newsletter than I had originally hoped, with work and other commitments exceeding my expectation. Thanks to everyone who has called to check the status, and sorry for the delay.

Finally, I have moved house and can now be contacted on a new telephone number, 01327 830675. Good luck for the coming months, and thanks for your continuing support.



Ransomes' Bent Cutter was designed to cut the long grass stalks or 'bents' after normal mowing. Available throughout the 1920s, this example belonging to Andrew MacMorland.



Brian Radam with his 1930s Atco car at Milton Keynes Museum in May. The car was designed for use as an aid to learning to drive, but was not particularly successful.

NEW DIRECTORY AVAILABLE

Chris Thompson has now completed the first edition of the new Old Lawnmower Club Directory of lawn mower manufacturers and machines.

The bulk of the directory is dedicated to brief descriptions of individual mowers, the dates they were made (where known), sizes of cut produced, original prices and anything else of interest. However, there are also potted histories of the manufacturers and personalities important to the development of the mower.

The directory has over 750 entries, with extensive cross referencing, on over 50 pages of A4. It includes an introduction by Chris and a glossary of lawn mower terms.

The directory is not designed as a history of the mower, but more as a ready reference guide to help members identify and date their machines.

Although the directory contains a huge amount of information (probably the first time this much has been published in one booklet), there is more that can be added. Chris will continue his good work as editor to add new listings and include amendments and supplementary information to existing entries.

The master copy of the directory will be updated constantly so that a buyer at any given time has the most up to date version available. Copies are printed off when ordered, and each edition will be dated so that buyers know exactly when theirs was produced.

Chris has put a tremendous amount of time and effort into producing the directory, and deserves the thanks of all club members. Thanks are also due to the people who have helped by providing information for Chris to add to the directory.

The price of production prohibits making the directory available free to members, and a small charge is necessary. Copies of the directory can only be obtained from Keith Wootton (not from Chris, please), priced £5 to include postage and packing. Please make cheques payable to 'The Old Lawnmower Club'. The directory can instead be supplied on a 3.5" PC disk in a variety of common word processor formats if required.

EVENTS NEWS

MILTON KEYNES ANNUAL RALLY

For the first time in a good few years, the Annual Rally at Milton Keynes Museum on 16/17 May was blessed with good weather. Sunshine all the way in fact for the 40 or so members who brought the usual wide selection of mowers over the weekend. Although no specific count was taken this year, well over 100 different mowers were on display at some point.

The machines on display once again proved the diversity and quality of the mowers in members' collections and the efforts that have obviously gone into preserving and restoring them.

As always it was good to meet up with familiar faces, but it was especially pleasing to welcome some first time exhibitors from as far afield as Norfolk, Sussex and Worcestershire (and elsewhere).

As chairperson of the club it would be unfair of me to pick out any specific machines, especially as members obviously have such diverse interests in the mowers they collect and widely differing resources with which to preserve, transport and exhibit them.



Andrew MacMorland with his award winning Ransomes motor mower, as seen at Milton Keynes this year.

The Andrew Grout Plate, presented to the owner of the mower that exhibitors selected as the one they 'would most like to take home' was a one sided affair this year, with the top three places all being taken by machines belonging to Andrew MacMorland. The winning mower was Andrew's large and impressive Ransomes motor mower, dating from the earliest years of the century, although his Ransomes Bents Cutter and a water cooled JP were also popular with voters (see photos in this edition).

The setting for the rally was the grass area adjacent to the Museum's new lawn mower pavilion which had been erected over the previous year. Although work on the shed was virtually complete, the display itself was in its early stages, but at least most of the Museum's main mowers were on display. The grass area was still in a rough condition, but good enough to display the machines that brought to the rally. Keith hopes to have the display and grass areas in much better condition by 1999.

The weather helped contribute to a relatively short AGM at which Keith, Robbie and Martin presented the Chairperson's, Secretary's and Treasurer's reports respectively.

All committee members were re-elected for a further year in office, these being: Keith Wootton (Chairperson), Bernard Robinson (Secretary), Martin Stephenson (Treasurer), Andrew Grout, Tim Durant, Alec Hillyar, Les Harrison and John Barnard (Committee Members).

An innovation at this year's event was the presentation to exhibitors of a souvenir bottle of beer produced by a local brewery and labelled as 'Half Cut'.

Next year will mark the tenth anniversary of the first lawn mower rally at the Museum, and I hope it will be as enjoyable and successful as the 1998 event.

ALDHAM RALLY

On Saturday/Sunday 6/7 June 1998 several Club members exhibited at the Aldham Rally in Essex which, this year, was held at its new venue of Chalkney Meadow, White Colne. As usual, mowers were well represented, with 20 machines on site on the Sunday. Exhibitors included Mrs J Austin, Chris Armor, Chris Stoneman, Tony Houghton, Alan Mattin, and Chris Thompson. Amongst the manual machines on display were three Victorian roller mowers and two Ransomes lawn edgers from around the turn of the century, whilst powered mowers included two Ransomes lightweight mowers, one from 1933 and the other from the late 1940s. Reciprocating knife mowers were well in evidence and consisted of two early mark Allen scythes, a Vivien Loyd Motor Sickle, a Lloyds Autoscythe and a Teagle Jetscythe. Three of these were included in the ring parade on the Sunday. The award for 'Best Mower in Show' went to Mrs Austin for her very original 1875 Ransomes, Sims and Head 8" roller mower, not the first time this mower has won the award. The new site was certainly very attractive and placing the mower enclosure near to the ring certainly helped to get better participation in parades. What problems there were seemed to be centred around the parking and movement of vehicles in this central part of the site, but no doubt these will be attended to in future years (Chris Thompson).

ROGER WINS BANBURY

Each year, the organisers of the Banbury Steam Rally present a special prize to their choice of 'best exhibit in show'. Normally, this is awarded to a large or mainstream exhibit such as a steam engine, tractor or vintage vehicle. But this year, the surprise winner was Roger Wilkinson's Dennis motor mower, making its first appearance at the rally. Roger was naturally delighted to win the prize, even more so because he was unaware that any judging was taking place or that his machine was in line to win.



"It's fantastic to win," said Roger. "It shows that mowers and the Club are now really part of the rally scene."

The mower, which has been featured in previous Grassboxes, was restored by Roger after he found it in his local vicarage. A couple of years ago it was invited to be the only mower at the Dennis centenary celebrations.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Old Kiln Farm Museum: 12/13 September: Details from Richard Jones on 01705 598601 (Waterlooville).

Stafford Chrysanthemum Rally: 12/13 September: Popular gardening event held at Stafford Showground. Details initially from Keith Wootton.

Bedfordshire Steam Rally: 19/20 September: Details from Alan & Dick Hardwick on 01462 816018 (Beds).

Are you organising or taking part in a rally or event next year? Don't forget that you can advertise the event in Grassbox free of charge and also borrow one of the Club's special banners. Contact Keith Wootton for more details.

RANSOMED TWO - THE SEQUEL

By Tony Hopwood

Using a mower is the best way to find out how good it is. The 1933 Ransomes Mk7 is no exception.

First the good points; The Sturmey-Archer engine starts and runs well and quietly once the carburettor float valve was polished and resealed to stop it flooding. The cutting cylinder adjustment is also easy. The clutch and epicyclic gear drive is smooth and quiet.

The bad points are incredible for a mower built by the firm which pioneered all types of mowing. The whole design of the mower is flawed because the engine is too far back on the frame causing the mower to easily tip over backwards when the grass box is lifted off for emptying. Worse still, there is even a bracket bolted on to the profiled steel handles to stop the machine falling back too far and breaking them - a relic of earlier models with cast iron handles. No wonder nobody ever put spanners in the clips on the handles - their weight would be enough to tip the machine over when the grass box was off!

Using the machine very carefully and only emptying the grassbox on level ground, I managed to avoid tipping it up most times. I plan to fit heavier front rollers to improve the balance. The next problem was the height of the handles. At 31 inches they were too low for me although I am just under 6 foot tall. They are the right height for a push mower, but need to be 3-4 inches higher to prevent backache. My 1926 Dennis handles are easily adjustable to 35 inches so why didn't Ransomes design theirs to be easy too? Were 1930's gardeners worn short by hard work?

Adjustment is not easy. There is a slotted clamping hole which allows the handles to be raised on a cross bolt pivot, but only after other fixing bolts are permanently removed from their clearance holes. Unfortunately, raising the handles also causes the starting handle cross shaft to move forward and foul the carburettor. That problem was solved by drilling another fixing hole one inch inboard on each starter shaft bracing stay so it clears the carburettor when the handles are raised to a comfortable height.

The inflexible handle design implies that customers expected the selling agent to modify the machine to suit them before delivery - does anyone know if that was normal practice, or did taller gardeners have to put up with backache? Despite the grumbles, I'm looking forward to using the Mk 7 this coming summer- it's an interesting and unusual machine which cuts the grass well.

Ed's Note: A photo of Tony's mower appeared in the last Grassbox. Would anyone else like to 'lawn test' a mower in their collection? Just a few words will do, but try to point out the good points and bad points of the mower.



Advertisement for Crowley's 'Invincible' mower, from a catalogue dated 1879.



RANSOMES' PATENT MOWER.
For cutting Banks and Slopes.

In the 1894 Country Gentleman's Catalogue Ransomes advertised a sidewheel mower with an extra long handle and modified coupling for cutting grass on banks and slopes.

A MONSTER MOWER

By Neil Jordan

My fascination with mowers began when I was about five years old. My grandfather owned about one acre of cherry orchard that needed regular mowing throughout the summer period. As a boy I was always mesmerised (partly terrified!) by the large mechanical monster, with teeth to suit, that was used to perform this task. It was of course an Allen Scythe of mid 1940's vintage. I could always tell when this was being used by virtue of its unique sound, and spent many happy hours raking the grass into piles to transport to a compost heap.

This wonderful old machine was used up until 1980, long after the introduction of the lifeless ride on mowers. I remember the sad day when I saw this machine being taken away by the scrap man. I vowed that one day I would rescue and restore such a specimen.



Many years had passed since that fateful day when a blacksmith friend of mine informed me of a 'brace' of Allen Scythes for sale. I immediately purchased them over the phone and promptly hired a van to collect them. On arrival the pair turned out to be in a fairly poor state, but solid. Both machines had been laid up in a barn for many years and came complete with many pounds of grain stored by vermin. I spent most of the summer of 1996 restoring the older 1951 vintage machine. Unfortunately the newest machine had been involved in an accident and the fan had been shattered along with some other minor damage. This however acted as an ideal donor machine and supplied me with a healthy coil for the Villiers Mk25c engine. Other engine items were obtained from the company Meetens who proved invaluable in the supply of spare parts and advice.

In October 1996, after several failed attempts due to ignition problems, the freshly restored Allen Scythe fired into life. It has left me with a great feeling and the urge to add to my embryonic collection. One mower that I used extensively in my youth was a Qualcast with a Villiers two stroke engine. It had a large 'T' shaped handle and 8-10" cast wheels incorporating the Qualcast name. It was a cylinder mower with a wrap around cord pull start. Can anyone tell me what model of machine this was?

SPOTTING THE GREMLINS

The gremlins were out in force when Grassbox 24 went to press... On page one is an illustration of a Multum in Parvo with simple gear drive. The caption miss-spells the name (the word is Multum, not Multim, being Latin rather than Hebrew). It also dates the mower to 1895 to 1905, but in that period catalogue illustrations show the Multum with compound gears. These were normally exposed, but a perimeter guard was added, probably in 1905 (two of this type were at Milton Keynes last year, the later of the two with the same curly spoked driver as the present, simple geared example). Simple gears seem to have taken over in or by 1907, still with a perimeter guard, which is presumably missing on this one. Later on still, the perimeter guard gave way to a totally enclosed gear train (on the models with the H section handles).

Page two gives us a glorious hint of certain substances, other than lawn mowers, to be found in the Hall & Duck emporium in Somerset, and page three has a very readable article, unfortunately based around the false premise that a 16" Patent Automaton has fancy cast iron handles on its grass box. It does not; all it has are two very inconspicuous castings at the bottom corners, to support the box on the front of the machine; and a piece of wood on each side, 4in x 1in x 1³/₈in screwed on at a suitable angle to rest on the sides of the draw bar and double as handles. It is the 8, 10 and 12in models only which have cast iron handles since there is no draw bar.

Page four? Well the Qualcast shown is not a Model C, and if it were, it would be early 1920s, not 30s. It is a high wheel, ball bearing machine (ie Model H), and judging from the handle, dates from the beginning of the 1930s.

Now, can anyone tell me what a Qualcast Model K looks like? It also has high wheels (10in, while the H's are only 9in) and ball bearings, but cost nearly twice as much as an H in 1930. Was it a Pennsylvania lookalike? (Christopher Proudfoot).



Harry Day sent in this photo of his unusual Coldwell gear driven roller mower. The mower is dark blue, except for the red jockey wheels, cutting cylinder, name plate background and handle recesses. Does anyone have an idea of the age and country of origin of this machine, my own guess being 1890-1900 made in USA (Keith).

Four Seasons Scrubcutter

I found this machine in a barn in Northumberland and the owner was only too pleased to get rid of it. It was dismantled, put into the car boot and brought south to my home in Swindon. Having tinkered and eventually got it going, I was well pleased to be given this present.

At the time (1981) I was not into rallying of any sort, but with a little encouragement from my brother I entered my machine in the Nelson Park Rally at Melksham. A lot of people showed more than a passing interest in the Cutter so I decided to renovate it to the standard shown in the photograph. Just out of interest I entered under the Stationary Engine Section, and it caused a few raised eyebrows.



Mower Information:

Made by: Standard Insulation Company, Camberley

Called: Four Seasons Scrubcutter

Engine: Villiers Two Stroke No 5284, 98cc

Machine: Number 4055

This machine has been rallied on a regular basis ever since, and from obtaining my machine back in 1981 I have not seen too many others around apart from one at an auction at the Lister Petter Rally, one at the Cardiff Rally and another one I have in my shed awaiting the darker nights to appear. Vivian Lloyd and Company Ltd also produced a similar machine called the Motor Sickle (Malcolm Hoskins).

MORE HELP WANTED

Please keep sending in articles and photographs for future Grassboxes. I already have some pieces prepared for the next edition, but it is always good to have a choice. Information on 1950s/60s mowers in collections would be useful. Please try to send photos of single machines taken against a clear or tidy background.

Keith Wootton can be contacted by post at Milton Keynes Museum or at 7 Church Lane, Cold Higham, Towcester, Northamptonshire NN12 8LS. Tel: 01327 830675 or 0378 315966 (mobile). **Robbie Robinson** can be contacted at 10 Burchester Avenue, Headington, Oxford OX3 9NA. Tel: 01865 450899. The Club can also be contacted by email at: olc@artizan.demon.co.uk or via the web at <http://www.artizan.demon.co.uk/olc>

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Edited and written (except where stated) by Keith Wootton