

Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

Number 27

Winter 1999

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Happy New Year! The evenings are already drawing out noticeably and the warmer weather will soon be here. Winter restoration projects are well under way (I assume a lot of people are working on Atcos due to the good response to the new transfers) which means lots more mowers at events during 1999.

This edition contains an article about one of the more adventurous and ambitious restorations that I have heard of. I am sure other people have similar stories, so why not write a similar piece for a future edition? Even if your project is less complicated, your experiences may well still be of interest to other members, particularly if you have had to solve a problem or have a few useful tips.

Inside you will also find news about all of the events being planned by the Club or individual members for the coming year. No doubt there will others to add over the next few months. Some of these events are now well established, while others are just getting off the ground. They are all worth supporting, and if you have not been to an OLC event before, why not make the commitment to try one out this year?

If you are planning an event, or attending a show with your collection, why not borrow one of the Club's banners to promote what we do? It is completely free, but you need to book up well in advance.

There should be another Grassbox before the Annual Rally and AGM in May, but now is the time to put the date in your diary and organise your visit to Milton Keynes. I know that many of you are planning to attend for the first time, so it looks like being our best ever show. You do not need to come for the whole weekend, although we hope you do, and you don't need to bring a mower, although you'll need a pretty good excuse! See you there.



The Godiva Engineering Company was based in Reading, and produced mowers like the one above during the 1920s.

SHIRE PUBLICATION REPRINTED

Members may be interested to know that the Shire Publication "Old Lawn Mowers" by David Halford is being reprinted this year in time for the summer. I am not sure whether the booklet is being updated or simply printed in its original form, although some of the "where to see lawn mowers" information is being revised. The book can be ordered through any good bookshop.

SORTED AT SALTEX



Andrew Hall and Michael Duck of the Hall & Duck Trust, with support from Andrew Grout, exhibited a range of Victorian, Edwardian and inter-war lawn mowers, garden tools and associated items at Saltex, the UK's leading trade show for professional groundsmen, held at Windsor Race Course last September. Housed in a special marquee sponsored by the Institute of Groundsmen, the exhibition comprised over 50 machines from the Trust's collection. The exhibition was extremely popular with visitors, including a number of Club Members, and the Trust was able to add to its collection as a result. Pictured are a 1920 Green Supreme 12" (above) and a c1920 Haycraft's Closecut, both displayed at Saltex. Other mowers will be featured in future editions.



DIARY DATES

MK Museum Annual Rally, including AGM, 15/16 May 1999: Our Annual Rally will be held, as usual, at Milton Keynes Museum. Everyone is welcome, and there is no need to 'book', but please let Keith Wootton know if you are planning to stay at the Museum on Saturday night. The AGM will be held at 12noon on Sunday 16 May. Further information from Keith.

Belper Steam Rally, 12/13 June: Please contact Peter Holborn. Tel: 01773 824862 (Derby).

Banbury Steam Rally, 26/27 June: Details from Robbie.

West Dean Garden Show, 26/27 June: Details from Jim Buckland. Tel: 01243 818209 (day) or 01243 811656 (eve).

Farm Machinery Preservation Society Annual Rally, Braintree, 3/4 July: Details from Chris Thompson. Tel: 01376 320259 (Braintree).

Dittons Nurseries, Stone Cross, Near Eastbourne, 10/11 July: Contact Colin Huggett. Tel: 01323 761868 (Eastbourne).

Trerice, Cornwall, 17/18 July: Details from Keith.

Welland Rally, 24/24 July: Please contact Tony Hopwood on 01684 592134 (Upton on Severn).

Knowl Hill, 8/9 August: Details from Tim Durant on 01628 521953 (Bourne End).

Erewash Museum, Saturday 14 August (TBC): Details from Keith.

Millennium Show, Old Warden Park, 28/30 August (Bank Holiday): Details from Alan & Dick Hardwick on 01462 816018 (Beds).

Bedfordshire Steam Rally, 18/19 September: Details from Alan & Dick Hardwick on 01462 816018 (Beds).



This "Philadelphia" lawn mower was produced in the USA by The Philadelphia Lawn Mower Company at the turn of the century. The company made a roller mower of the same name as well as sidewheels with names such as "The City", "The Dewey" or with an alphabetical designation (eg Style H). The company was descended from Graham, Emlen & Passmore, formed in c1885. This photograph was sent in by Chris Thompson (as was the Godiva on page one).

WIND UP MOWER



Charlie Jones has produced some lawn mower wind vanes which he was selling at the Annual Rally at Milton Keynes Museum in May. For more information, contact Charlie on 0181 804 1677.

Transfer Update

The new Atco Standard transfers, as featured in Grassbox 26, have been selling well, and I expect to see a number of professional looking machines at rallies in 1999.

Since the last edition of Grassbox, we have realised that a full set of transfers should include three of each design, not two of one and three of the other. The original pricing was set to cover the cost of five transfers, although everyone buying a set so far has been sent the full set of six for the original price of £12.

To make the best possible use of the transfers available, we have decided to introduce a new pricing structure. From now on, a set of four transfers (ie 2+2 for mowers without grass box) will cost £10 and sets of six (ie 3+3 for mowers with grass box) will be £15. Full instructions are supplied with each order. Additional singles will cost £3 each, as before.

The transfers are available from Keith Wootton at the usual address. As always, cheques payable to "The Old Lawnmower Club".

CLASS WAR!

In Grassbox 24, we published an article by an anonymous author about his experiences when trying to buy a mower. The author has subsequently suggested a classification system for machines on sale (similar to that used in the stationary engine movement), along the following guidelines.

Class 1: Fully restored and operational. 100 per cent complete or totally original and in excellent condition.

Class 2: Complete, original condition or restored to average extent. Not necessarily having been rebuilt but operational.

Class 3: Original condition, shabby but with potential to restore. Engine not seized (if applicable).

Class 4: Box of bits, at least 70 per cent complete.

Class 5: Poor condition, partially complete, but still worth saving. Not for the feint hearted!

He suggests including a classification with each Grassbox advertisement wherever possible. The idea is good, but given that so many of the machines offered for sale through Grassbox are from Non Members, it may be difficult to identify the correct classification for all machines. However, Members selling in Grassbox could provide the correct information, perhaps on a voluntary basis to start with. Does anyone have any thoughts?

INFORMATION SHEETS

Over the last few months members of the OLC Committee have been busily updating the information required to produce a new set of OLC Information Sheets. We are hoping that these will be mailed out to all Members sometime between the publication of this Grassbox and the Annual Rally.

THE LUCKY MONEY PIT?

By Andrew Grout

In issue No 10 of Grassbox I made a rash statement: "If a lawnmower's interesting enough, it's worth restoring however derelict it may be." With reference to my 42" ride-on machine (See Issue 11), I would like to add to this statement, "as long as you have a spare arm and a leg."

The mower is a Mk4 Ransomes, Sims and Jefferies 42" ride-on, manufactured between 1927 and 1935. More accurate dating isn't possible at this time because the machine's identification plate is missing.



As described in Issue 11, many parts were missing when I saved the machine including the radiator, carburettor, Patent Emptying Grassbox and tinwork...the list goes on. As a result of these "minor-problems", the machine sat in the shed for many years contemplating its fate.

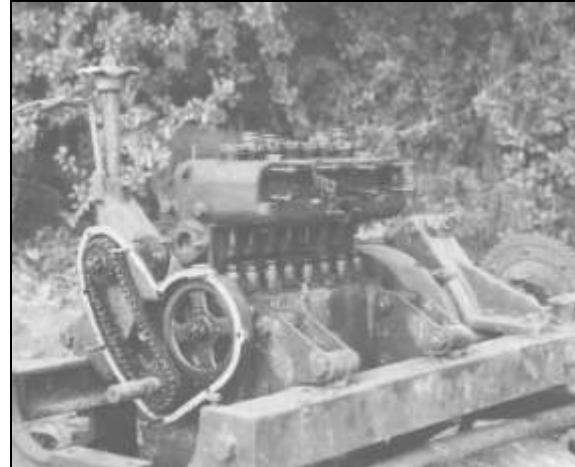
In the early part of 1996 I started tinkering with the engine. Originally thought to be a four cylinder Orwell engine, subsequent research has revealed it is an Alpha, built by Johnson, Hurley and Martin of Coventry and badged as being a Ransomes. It soon became clear that it wasn't coming apart without a fight. Once all the nuts holding the water pipe to the top of the engine had been removed, the whole weight of the mower (22cwt) was lifted with it until the roller just brushed the ground. The pipe stayed in place and all eight studs had to be drilled out before the pipe would budge. A special tool had to be made to remove the valve caps, and the valves themselves took an average of two hours, or one evening apiece, to free and remove. By the Autumn of '96 it had become necessary to remove the engine from the machine before I could continue with the restoration. A weekend was set aside and the mower was rolled out of the shed, all mounting bolts and brackets removed and, using a tractor and loader, the engine and gear box assembly removed. The gearbox was split from the engine and put back into the chassis after which the mower was pushed back into the shed to await further attention. Dismantling of the engine continued until all that was left was the cylinder block and crankcase assemblies, as these could not be parted. The pistons were stuck fast in the block and wouldn't go down and the connecting rods, although free of the crankshaft, wouldn't come up through the crankcase. Like the pistons they were designed to come out down hill, with the little end coming out through the crank case. It was then that I remembered a piece in Grassbox 6 written by Geoff Christopher on freeing seized pistons. All eight valves were replaced, minus tappets so that all the valves sealed to some extent, then grease was pumped into each of cylinders using a specially adapted sparking plug. Eureka, all four pistons broke their seals and slid out! With the engine now in bits I could access what I'd got.

In the early part of 1997 the engine block was pressure tested, and the news was not good with five cracks in the water jacket. Conversations with various friends in the preservation movement suggested that although various local blacksmiths/welders could tackle the job of welding the cast iron engine block, to have the job guaranteed and to be sure that the block wouldn't be damaged beyond repair I should take it to a specialist in Leicestershire. They heat the block up in a kiln, weld them hot and then gently bring the temperature down.

This process, which takes several hours, removes the risk of the cylinder bores distorting and the weld cracking, but costs a small fortune. The two round trips of 140 miles apiece isn't worth taking into account.

It was a long trip in January of 1997 that brought home a spare 36" Chassis. Although initially this machine seemed expensive (I won't write prices down because it hurts my pocket too much), it's since been the source of many spares: radiator, seat bracket, rear roller bracket, makings of a steering wheel and foot pedals for this project, and gearbox, cutting unit sides, sole plate, and sprockets for a future project. I've only three of these ride ons to restore, a 30", 36" and this 42".

Since Easter 97 progress has continued as and when funds and time have allowed. The cylinder bores were honed by a local engine specialist, although they unfortunately couldn't reface the valve seats in a monoblock engine. Again it was thanks to the advice of friend in preservation that I found an engine rebuilders in Northampton who could do this work. This company, who usually work on veteran Bentleys and Rileys etc, also had eight new valves manufactured for me, this being cheaper than having off-the-shelf valves altered to fit. New valve springs have been made by a company in Wolverhampton, extras being made for an Alpha engine fitted to the 36" ride-on that I own. The big end bearings have been overhauled, these being in an awful state when the engine was dismantled, some having excessive play others pinching on the journals.



So where to now? The engine's going back together this winter, with a few minor problems left to overcome such as a lack of piston rings, oil indicator, carburettor and the magneto still requires rebuilding and a new water inlet pipe needs casting from aluminium. But I'm getting there, believe me!

A lot of the chassis is finished and painted, but that warrants another article. People keep asking when will it be finished and I keep saying in eighteen months time, and eighteen months time like tomorrow never comes. So I will say that this project will only be finished as and when time and money permit. My girlfriend says I should call the mower lucky because it's lucky there's an enthusiast/mug like me to take it on. I'm tempted to call it the money pit.

Has it been worth it? Well, I've enjoyed tackling each and every problem and I've more to show for it than if the money was spent down the pub. As to what everyone else thinks, that I will learn when it's finished.

The next edition of Grassbox features an article about the restoration of an Atco HY. It would be good to include similar stories in future, especially if they include useful tips or 'how to do' ideas for other members. The articles need not be very long or even include any unusual techniques. Something covering a basic restoration, but perhaps expanding on Alec Hillyar's series, would be of interest. Get writing!

ATCO-QUALCAST MILESTONES

1: QUALCAST

The name is derived from "Quality Castings", although the company was originally known as Derwent Foundry Co Limited.

- 1920: First "Qualcast" hand powered cylinder mower was launched by Derwent Foundry of Derby.
1928: Qualcast Ltd was formed as a separate trading company devoted to lawn mower manufacture.
1932: Production of the Panther commenced. It became an instant best seller and achieved over one million sales by 1956 (1959 model pictured below).



- 1938: Follows & Bate of Manchester, famous for its hand mowers, was absorbed into the growing Qualcast group.
1939: Qualcast introduced two stroke petrol mower to their Panther range, but onset of World War II suspended mass production until hostilities ceased.
1945: within a few months of War's end, Qualcast was the largest manufacturer of lawn mowers in the UK.
1951: Qualcast relocated to a purpose built site at Sunnyhill, on the outskirts of Derby.
1958: The Kaufmann Group, including competitor Suffolk Lawn Mowers, was acquired by the Qualcast Group.
1967: Birmingham Aluminium, Midland Cylinders and the Qualcast Group merged to form Birmid Qualcast Industries Limited.
1970: Qualcast introduced light mains electric mowing to the UK with the launch of the Rota-Mini.
1970: Introduction of Qualcast's first light mains electric cylinder mower, the Concorde 12", in new pale blue livery.
1984/5: Qualcast introduce safety bladed mowing with the launch of the Mow'N'Trim and Hoversafe.
1988: The Group was acquired by Blue Circle and foundry divisions were sold off.
1991: Derby site closed down, with all activities transferred to Stowmarket. Atco Qualcast Ltd was formed, but its collection of famous brand names continued, each competing in different sectors of the market.
1994: Qualcast launched the Hedgemaster range, designed and built in Stowmarket. The Hedgemaster became the UK's best seller in its launch year.
1995: Six millionth Concorde sold - limited edition of 10 produced in black and gold.
1996: The QX - quick exchange - cassette system was launched. This system marked a new beginning for cylinder mowers.
1997: Qualcast enter the Hover Collect sector with Cyclone 6000, a revolutionary new concept for hover mowing.

Based on information supplied by Atco Qualcast Group Limited during the Club's visit to the company factory in Stowmarket. Similar items on Atco and Suffolk, the other two main constituents of the company, will appear later.



Alec Hillyar with his Brill "Cutwell" mower, dating from 1928, made in Germany. The company is still in existence.

FORGET THE FACTLET

The "Villiers Factlet" in Grassbox 26 is only partly correct. To put the record straight, I have drawn from the definitive history of the Sunbeam bicycle and motorcycle ("The Sunbeam Motorcycle") written by Robert Champ. The Villiers Cycle Components Company (as it started off life) **was** founded in Villiers Street, Wolverhampton, 100 years ago in July 1998, but not by Sir Charles Villiers MP. It was an offshoot of Sunbeamland, the main Sunbeam cycle factory since the 1880s, and was run by Charles, son of John Marston, the founder of the Sunbeam empire. Villiers Street was named after the MP, who I suspect had died some time before 1898, as the street was in existence prior to that. In fact, Marstons (later to give their name to the vehicle radiator business) bought an existing factory (a japanning and tinning business) for the Villiers cycle parts manufacturing. This was used later on for engine manufacture and the surviving remnant of the original Marston Sunbeam group, Villiers Industrial Engines Ltd, still occupies part of the factory in Villiers Street. Are many Villiers engines still fitted in new lawn mowers now? When I worked at Ransomes, they were a dearer option for the marquis 18" and 20" mowers I believe, being superior to the standard B&S engine. By Chris Armour

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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