

# Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

Number 35

Winter 2001

## GREATER SPOTTED MOWERS

Spotting the first old mower of the year is a bit like hearing the first cuckoo. It causes great excitement among those who are interested. And spring has come extra early this year because there have already been a number of sightings in the newspapers and on television. Well done to all those concerned and a big thanks for all the mentions!

I know from the many conversations I have had with club members over the past couple of months that many people have been really busy with some preservation and restoration projects. I hope everyone in the club will make it to a show this year to either display their latest prides and joy or to see what the others have been up to.

Someone wrote to me about a vintage rally being held in Australia that was open to lawn mower exhibits. I was able to tell some of our members in the country and I understand that one or two are planning to make it along to the event (which is being held in February).

Many thanks to everyone who has contributed to this edition of Grassbox. I have a small amount of material ready for the next edition but I am always looking for new material. Photographs of a favourite mower in your collection or anything showing mowers in the old days are always useful.



Another of Chris Thompson's collection of old photographs, this shows a young boy with a JP Super on a tennis court. Unfortunately there is no date for the photograph although the mower was introduced in the 1920s.

## ON YER BIKES!

In recent years a few club members in the midlands have tried to get together at least once over the winter period to visit an interesting museum without their mowers.

This year's the group is going to the National Motor Cycle Museum on Sunday 4 March from 11am onwards.

The Museum is packed with motor bikes from the early part of the last century right up to the present day, although the majority are from the 1930s, 40s and 50s.

The Museum is located close to the NEC and Birmingham Airport, just off M6 junction 4 where the A45 crosses the M42. Everyone is welcome, so just turn up and meet some fellow collectors. If you arrive late, just go into the museum and it should not be too difficult to find the group. Someone is bound to be wearing one of the club's green sweatshirts!



Crawford Stirling sent in this shot of a Shanks Pony Mower. Although the date and location are unknown it appears to be late Victorian or Edwardian.

## A LOT ON THE LOT

Channel Four's popular 'Collectors Lot' TV programme was recently themed on gardening. Not surprisingly this gave some club members a chance to become stars!

Stan Hardwick (below) was featured each day for a week in January restoring an Atco Standard motor mower. Starting with a rusty rolling chassis on the Monday, Stan had a gleaming, fully restored runner on the Friday afternoon. The finished machine was up to the usual high standard (pardon the pun) we expect from Stan but I wonder if he used some trick photography to get it all done so quickly. The sequence also featured Stan talking about his collection and work as a green keeper. This was the second time he's been on Collectors Lot because his collection was also featured a couple of years ago.

The following week, Mike Tomkins appeared with his model and toy lawn mowers. Mike's collection is unique in the club (probably anywhere) in that he is the only person to collect miniature mowers. At present he has well over 100 examples and he can fit most of them on a table top.

Also recently, Brian Radam of the British Lawnmower Museum was featured on Radio 4's "Gardener's Question Time" talking about the history of the mower. Brian is often featured in the national newspapers and on the radio.



## DIARY DATES

**Milton Keynes Museum:** Saturday/Sunday 19/20 May. This year's Annual Rally and AGM will be held on Saturday 19 and Sunday 20 May, at Milton Keynes Museum as usual. Do not forget the Annual General Meeting at 12noon on the Sunday. We also plan to hold a special party on the Saturday evening.

It will be possible to camp at the Museum on the Friday and Saturday evenings, by prior arrangement, so please let Keith know if you intend to stay. Details of local hotels and bed and breakfasts can also be obtained from Keith.

**Chignall Village Hall Vintage Rally, Chignall Smealy, Chelmsford, Essex:** Sunday 2 June. Horticultural exhibits and related items wanted for this rural one-day event. Contact Norman Wastenev on 01245 440947 (Essex).

**Banbury Steam Rally:** Saturday/Sunday 23/24 June. Details from Robbie.

**Farm Machinery Preservation Society Annual Rally, Gosfield, Braintree, Essex:** Saturday/Sunday 7/8 July. Exhibits to include mowers and horticultural machinery, tractors, cars, military and commercial vehicles. Closing date for inclusion in programme, 31 May. Contact Chris Thompson on 01376 320259 (Braintree).

**Welland Steam Rally, Upton on Severn:** Saturday/Sunday 28/29 July. Details from Tony Hopwood. Tel: 01684 592134 (Upton on Severn).

**Knowl Hill Steam Rally:** Saturday/Sunday 11/12 August. Details from Tim Durant on 01628 521953 (Bourne End).

**Bedford Steam Fair, Old Warden:** Saturday/Sunday 15/16 September. Details from Dick Hardwick on 01462 816018 (Shefford).

**Malvern Autumn Show:** Saturday/Sunday 29/30 September. Details from Tony Hopwood. Tel: 01684 592134 (Upton on Severn).



*Andrew Grout's Ransomes Mk2 Motor Mower dates from the early 1920s. The mower features the same Villiers MkV 269cc two stroke engine as other machines of the same period including the Atco Standard 'Oval Frame' and Shanks Jehu mowers and the MP mower pusher.*

## BOOK A BANNER

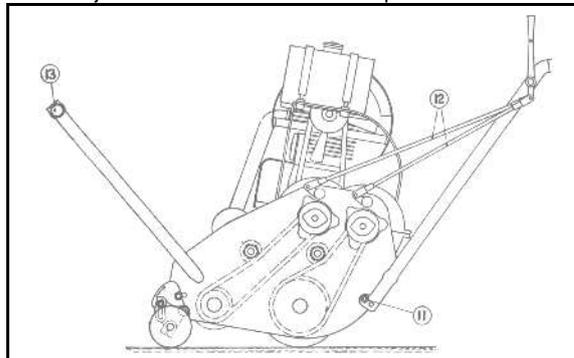
If you are holding an event or taking your mowers to an event, do not forget that the Club has some banners that you can borrow free of charge. All you need to do is book a banner well in advance so that we can make arrangements for it to be delivered. Details from Keith at the usual places.

## DENNIS CUTS UP ROUGH

*Tony Hopwood describes how he recreated an authentic 1940s attachment to solve a modern-day problem*

Question - How do you cut an acre of horse paddock when you only have an elderly Hayterette rotary push mower. Answer - Get Dennis on the case.

I was faced with the problem of keeping a newly acquired paddock tidy until it could be rotavated, levelled and reseeded in the autumn. The answer came from the handbook of my 1947 Z Series 24" Dennis - the 'High Cut Attachment'. This shows side rollers replacing the front rollers to jack the front of the machine up several inches.



I didn't have such an accessory, so it was time to improvise with a pair of steel wheels with decent bearings and some metal from my scrap pile to make the axle. After the existing front roller was taken off, the axle was fitted through the clamp holes on the carriers which were undone to make things easier. The axle was cross-drilled at each end to take a standard 'P spring' clip to hold the wheels on, and washers and spacers were fitted to keep the wheels from rubbing the frames.

That left the problem of balance. Without the front roller, the mower was only just stable, so a balance weight was required. The easy answer was to fix the front roller in the grass box carrier forks using wire to lash it in place.

Now for the test. Coincidentally, the paddock had been grazed for many years by Dennis the horse (no relation) and apart from exhorst all over it he had scooped shallow pits with his hooves when the ground was soft. These pits are not easy to see, and the machine fell into several until I sussed out where they were and went round them. The mower cut really well and coped with nettles and docks up to 12" high. It was like steering a boat through a sea of foliage.

Apart from the rough ride there were no other problems, so I can recommend adding a high cut attachment to any decent cylinder mower with a trailer seat rather than buying a garden tractor.

## GREENS OF LEEDS APPEAL

The Road Roller Association has launched an appeal to commemorate the site of the Smithfield Ironworks of Thomas Green and Sons in Leeds with a special 'blue plaque'. The appeal is being arranged in conjunction with the Leeds Civic Trust and aims to cover the costs of the preparing and erecting the plaque at a special ceremony on Sunday 15 July this year. As many readers will know Greens manufactured a whole range of items in addition to mowers, including steam rollers, steam tractors, railway locomotives and tram engines. The company was one of the most significant in its field and the blue plaque will be a unique and lasting reminder of this piece of our industrial heritage.

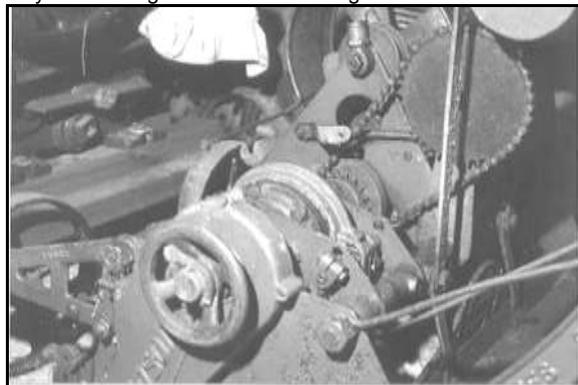
The Club intends to make a contribution to the cost of the project but individual members can make an additional contribution direct to the appeal by sending a cheque made payable to 'The Road Roller Association' to D L Crampton, 6 Norwood Close, Mackworth, Derby DE22 4GA (please mark envelopes 'Greens Appeal'). Members can add to the Club's own contribution by sending a cheque payable to 'The Old Lawnmower Club' to Keith at the usual address.

The Hall & Duck Trust will be exhibiting a selection of Greens mowers at the July unveiling event which will be open to the public. OLC members will be welcome to attend. Details in the next edition.

## RESTORING A RANSOMES

*Crawford Stirling continues the story of his latest restoration. A tricky, sticky nut had left him flummoxed at the end of part one.*

The following morning saw a solution in the shape of an old friend with a socket that fitted the now rounded bolt. Having informed me that it would more than likely be a left hand thread, he gave the bolt the gentlest of taps with the socket bar and lo and behold the nut obliged and came loose. If only I had thought of that the evening before...



Having totally dismantled the machine I could concentrate on the grand clean up. Once again, all the components were sorted out and neatly stacked over my garage floor to wait their turn. I decided to tackle the tinwork first and started with the fuel tank, the type with a separate oil compartment. The petrol side was thick with internal rust as usual with machines that have stood for many years. Having removed all the surface paint and rust, several pin holes on the underside appeared. I also discovered that the threaded portion of the oil outlet had been soldered (badly) and parted company with the main body of the tank. I decided to leave any repair until I had finished the cleaning and grinding so the tank was placed to one side and I started a 'done' pile.

Bit by bit I worked through each component, taking everything back to the bare metal. I have assembled a special tool set over the years which consists of a toothbrush, a very rusty watchmakers screwdriver (I left it out in the rain and forgot about it for a couple of weeks), several pipe cleaners and a rather disgusting looking cloth. It is with these questionable items that I am able to get into all the nooks and crannies that a comprehensive restoration demands. Slowly but surely the 'done' pile grew, although the 'waiting' pile had not diminished. Funny that! Anyhow, as time drew on things started to look rosier and eventually I was down to the clutch assembly, engine and cutting cylinder which were the very last items to receive my attention. The thought of tackling the cylinder was the main reason for it being left until the end. On these mowers, it is formed by taking two 10" cylinders and joining them in the middle to give the vee-shape. A very effective cutting cylinder but an absolute so and so to clean!

As I was looking at it on the bench it seemed to grow bigger and more inaccessible! Taking a wire brush in hand, I set about getting all the old paint and grime off. I succeeded in doing one side of one blade in about 10 minutes. I counted eight blades per side and it struck me that I was embarking on about six hours of the least satisfying work imaginable! All of a sudden, the solution came 'out of the blue!' A quick phone call to the local sandblasters and ten quid later I had a perfectly prepared cutting cylinder! Best ten quid ever I reckon!

Thinking I had finished dismantling, I found that I had to take the clutch assembly apart to get to all the fiddly bits. I decided to remove the flywheel from the crankshaft. The flywheel-retaining bolt came loose without any bother at all, which not only surprised me but also pleased me greatly. Just the matter of attaching a puller and, hey presto, the job would be done. Not flaming likely! I wound my meagre puller right up until I could almost hear the steel sing. No sign of life. Copious quantities of WD 40, followed by the persuasion of the hammer and still no relenting. Knowing how easily castings can suddenly shatter into hundreds of pieces I decided to stop and find someone with a more capable puller. Two all!

I am fortunate to have a couple of friends who farm, and farmers tend to have decent tools! The flywheel took a large hydraulic puller to come off which it did with a sickening bang. I dare not look for a moment as I knew that the bang could mean two things – either the castings had shattered or the flywheel had given up its struggle. I was lucky, but left with a further 'waiting' pile! Undeterred, I ploughed on.

I was beginning to get a clearer idea why the mower had been retired so many years earlier. The fuel tank must have caused problems towards the end of its working life because it was peppered with pinholes, the drain tap had broken and the outlet tap had been replaced. The cast alloy inlet manifold was badly cracked and no way could have ensured an airtight seal from the carburettor. This alone would have caused very poor running. The exhaust box had rotted away as had the wooden front rollers and the original grass box must have gone the same way. The cutting cylinder would have struggled to cut a wet paper bag and was so worn that there was no adjustment left. Even wound right down, the cylinder cleared the bottom blade by a good 1/8". This was solved later by using three tuppenny pieces either side placed between the bottom of the adjusting bolt and the top of the bearing cases!

It was now time to tackle any repair work. The only solution for the tank was a good dose of Petseal. This sealed the pin holes and cured the rust problem on the inside. It also strengthens the tank immeasurably. A new petrol tap was fitted and the oil leak dealt with. The inlet manifold was taken to the local aluminium fabricators for welding. Trouble was, the manifold turned out not to be aluminium but some sort of alloy high in zinc, making it impossible to weld. I ended up having a new one turned up from steel, which cost me plenty!

Time to start repainting. Everything received a couple of coats of red oxide primer followed by a couple of grey undercoats. Once these had been applied it was time to decide the colour for the top coats. On each restoration, I always try and find some original paint unaffected by the ravages of time. This is usually inside the chain case if the mower has one or otherwise on the throw plate behind the roller. If anyone in the past should have given the machine a lick of paint to smarten it up, most likely they will not have been to either of these places. That's the theory anyway!

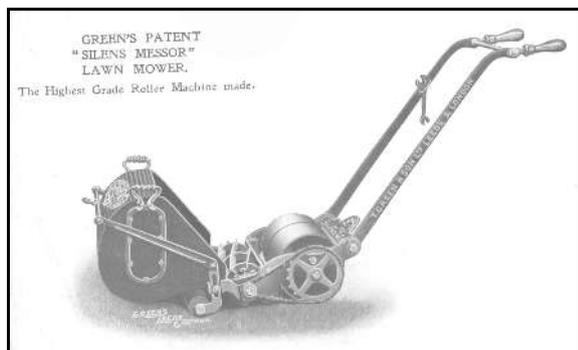
Ransomes Green was not as it is now, so any contemporary paint stating as much will be incorrect. This is of no consequence if the person doing the painting is not too fussed. After all, the mower will look just as smart whatever green it is painted (within reason of course...!) On this mower, the green was a fairly grassy colour and not too dark. I therefore mixed up the colour using various greens, yellows and browns that I had 'in stock'. I was quite happy with the result but it could have been a wee bit darker. I was afraid to spoil the whole batch by overdoing the blending, a mistake I have made before which leaves a whole pot of useless paint of a colour beyond description!



All the components received three top coats and were left to harden for a fortnight. Lettering was picked out in gold leaf, although I had originally done it in red as I have a photo of a similar machine which had been done in red. However, my friend with the puller informed me that it should be gold so I had to start again. But it does look a lot better now!

*Crawford puts it all together in the next edition!*

## SM DATING UPDATE



Following his article in Grassbox 33, Christopher Proudfoot has been continuing his research into Silens Messor dates. He has unearthed some additional information that can be regarded as supplementary to the details in the original article.

According to Christopher the prefix letters used from 1924 onwards were not necessarily in alphabetical order. While this is useful to know, he says, it will not make dating the mowers any easier.

More importantly, with help from a number of members, Christopher has been able to fill some gaps in his list between machine numbers 135589 and 181836. Although 135589 is still the latest curved handle machine, the lowest straight handle is now number 149616. A machine with the 1889 mark on the handles with number 153884, belonging to Mick Taylor, is so close to that number that it is reasonable to assume that mower 149616 was made in 1888. Two 1894 models, numbered 194683 and 195861 from Stan Hardwick's collection, suggest that an "1889" model numbered 189693 is almost certainly from 1893. This probably means that the 1889 marking does not necessarily mean the date of manufacture.

Christopher suggests that the period 1889 to 1893 must have been very prosperous for Greens because the numbers so far identified suggest annual output of over 8900 mowers, significantly more than the 5000 that seems to have been the norm. He estimates that the change from curved to straight handles in 1887 must have occurred between numbers 136000 and 140000.

Christopher would like to hear about any Silens Messors numbered between 135589 and 149616 with details of the handles because this will help give an even closer estimation of the dates. He would also like to hear details (with photographs if possible) of any later models (with a letter prefixed to the serial number) including SM Deluxes and Supremes. Most of these have similar serial numbers with lots of useful specification changes to help with dating. Christopher can be contacted on 01474 707513 (Kent).



Jeff Skinner's neat 18" Atco rotary dates from 1962-66 and is powered by a 150cc Villiers four stroke. The mower is cream and green. The company introduced its first rotary in 1957 and that version was yellow.

## TIM'S TOP TIP!

### PAINTING RAISED LETTERS

Many old lawn mowers had their names or other information cast into the handles, scraper plate and side frame. These were often picked out by the manufacturer in a different colour to decorate and highlight the wording. Picking out the lettering really finishes off a restoration authentically.

Many people use a small brush and a small pot of paint, perhaps slightly thickened to make the job easier, but this is time consuming and fiddly, especially if you have a shaky hand like me.

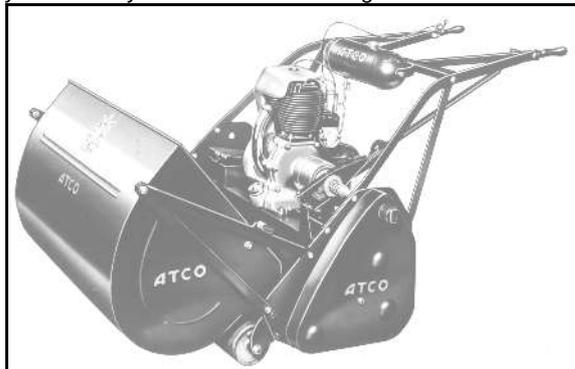
A better way is use a special paint pen from a manufacturer such as Revell. These can be found in most hobby or craft shops and make the job easier, quicker and cleaner. You just run the pen over the letters. It's as simple as that and if you need to do an extra coat, it's just as easy. A neat finishing touch in just a few minutes.

The pens are available in a variety of colours including red, yellow and gold that are the most common on the old mowers.

We'll be featuring more of "Tim's Top Tips" in future editions. If you have any ideas for inclusion, let us know.

### TOP TIP TOP UP

Following the tip on degreasing in the last edition, Tony Hopwood adds: I use burning oil (28sec kerosene, (not lamp paraffin) rather than gas oil (35sec heating oil or red diesel) because it dissolves oily crud just as well and does not leave a waxy deposit. Better than that, burning oil evaporates quickly, leaving a dry surface ready for painting. If you use traditional red oxide solvent-based machinery primer it also acts as a thinner giving a brilliant key if there is still a bit of oily residue in odd corners. If you use some of the modern synthetic metal primers, they need peculiar thinners which are expensive and can lift original paint if you have only cleaned off the oil and grease.



The Atco 28" and 34" motor mowers produced in 1950-52 were normally powered by a 147cc Villiers two stroke engine. However, a more powerful 250cc Villiers four stroke generating 2.5hp was available as an option when, according to Atco, "exceptional mowing conditions" were expected. This photo from Tony Edwards shows the four stroke version.

**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 07778 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@oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk](mailto:olc@oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk) or via the web at: <http://www.oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk>

**Next Edition: April 2001**

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