

Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

Number 38

Autumn 2001

MOWER SPOTTING

Very occasionally over the past ten years or so I have been able to put together a newsletter that has a few items that are in some way linked to each other. But for this edition, readers may be able to detect not one, but two themes.

It is always good to see lawn mowers featured in the media and we seem to be in a bit of a bumper period at the moment. In this issue you will find news about a forthcoming TV documentary, a new book that features the history of the mower (and mentions the Club) and a BBC film that was made with the help of one of our members.

As many people will have realised by flicking through the new membership booklet (I hope you have, given all the hard work and time it took!) we have an increasing number of members in "overseas" countries. I am particularly pleased to include some information from two of them in this issue.

Please keep articles and photographs coming in as it really does help to make the newsletter more interesting (and easier for me). If you send a photograph, a few words to describe the mower is always helpful.

This will be the last Grassbox of the year, so I should like to take the opportunity to thank everyone for their help and support in the past twelve months and wish everyone a really happy Christmas and successful New Year. Let us hope we can all make 2002 and even more mowertastic year.



Here is something a bit different - a Greens Silens Messor with gears! The Silens Messor was available (in various guises) from the 1850s to the 1930s, giving it one of the longest production runs of any mower. For many years it was advertised as being available in chain or gear driven form at the same price for each model. It is clear that most people selected chain drive because almost no examples with gears survive. This example of a 14" Silens Messor is part of the Hall & Duck Trust Collection. The mower is identical to other Silens Messors except for the gears. It was photographed at their special open day earlier this year. There will be a special report in the next Grassbox. Incidentally, Greens also offered its Multum In Parvo mowers in gear or chain drive forms but most examples that have survived are gear drive.



Tim Durant found this old photograph which includes what appears to be a 12in or 14in Silens Messor in a domestic setting. There is no indication of the date, but by the look of the clothing it could be early 1900s.

BBC DOCUMENTARY

Over the Summer, BBC East was putting together a documentary on mowers based on the idea that many of the country's remaining mower manufacturers (Ransomes, Atco-Qualcast, Hayter, Lloyds) are based in the eastern counties. The programme includes sections on mowers used today at places such as Ipswich Town FC and a stately home. But the makers were keen to include information about the history of the mower and contacted the Club to see if we could help.

We put them in touch with some people and were able to arrange for them to interview a number of members (including Charles Crouchman, below) at a rally we held at the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket over August Bank Holiday weekend (more on this event in the next Grassbox) to celebrate a new building on the history of Ransomes. The pieces recorded that day should be a major part of the programme. The makers also visited Milton Keynes Museum to film the pony mower and "Budding" in action. The half hour documentary should be shown before Christmas on BBC2 in the "Look East" region, probably in a 7.30pm slot, although the producer is hopeful it will also be shown in other regions. We do not have a precise transmission date at the moment but will do our best to tell as many people as possible when we know.



DIARY DATES

Milton Keynes 2002: Saturday 18/Sunday 19 May 2002. Our Annual Rally will be held on the third full weekend in May. As always, the Annual General Meeting will be on the Sunday morning. Everyone is welcome. In fact, for some of you it is more or less compulsory! Put this in your diaries now, and do not forget to book the time off. Details from Keith at the usual places.

WELLAND RALLY

There was a smaller turnout this year with only two mower exhibitors because of clashes with other events. Martin Briggs brought a fine assortment of push and motor mowers and garden accessories to fill the space. The display ranged from Martin's 1900 Chain Automaton and Silens Messor to a 1948 17in Emery Clipper in regular use in Tony's garden and Martin's sectioned Villiers engines. Coincidentally there was another restored 14in Clipper in the rally auction which sold for £85. The brilliant weather ensured a big attendance and useful leads were obtained from visitors. Tony Hopwood.

KNOWL HILL

The usual suspects attended Knowl Hill Steam Rally in August with a wide selection of hand mowers and a few motorised machines for good measure. Event organiser Tim Durant had made sure that everyone was very welcome, but could do nothing about the rain on Sunday morning. Mowers are now an established part of this popular rally, due in no small part to Tim Durant's excellent organisation of the event and the quality of the mowers on show.

More rally reports next time!

STATESIDE SHOWTIME



Here is Clyde Nafzinger, from Wilmington, Delaware, USA, at the Eastern Shore Threshermen's and Collector's Association annual show at Federalsburg, Maryland. Clyde says that about 25,000 people attended the show, where there were eight steam engines, 263 tractors and numerous stationary engines on display. His display included mowers by Stearns, Jiffy, Valor, Reo and Pennsylvania as well as an Allis-Chalmers-powered rotary and an Allis Chalmers "Big Ten" lawn tractor. Clyde, who collects mowers, engines and garden tractors, has been in the club for two years and can be seen with his some of his display and a club banner that he made.

ABOUT THE BOOKLETS

Everyone in the Club should now have received their copies of this year's Membership, Museums, Books and Services booklets. If you have not received these please let Keith know. We are always looking to improve the booklets and add more information so if you spot something that could be included in future editions, please let Keith know. Inevitably some people who joined the club over the Summer, or for whom we had insufficient information, were not included in the Membership booklet. If this affects you, please let us know and we will try to add details on the Advertisements sheet of a forthcoming Grassbox.

MONITOR THE MONITOR!

By Christopher Proudfoot

In Grassbox 36, a short piece on the Green's Monitor referred to a pre-war version with a handle of flat-section steel and a wood cross-handle (as shown below).



I wonder if anyone else has seen an example of this, or a contemporary illustration? None appears in any of the 1938-9 catalogues I have seen. Keith has a photograph, and the handle is not unlike that of a Ransomes Countess; the mower in question was reputed to have been bought in 1938. I remain sceptical - I think it is a post-war model with an owner's improvement. In my experience, even 'original' invoices need to be studied carefully; they often turn out to be for a different, or insufficiently specific, article. Post-war mowers do not excite all of us, but for younger collectors the Monitor is a product of a past generation, and it is the final descendant of the Silens Messor, so here is a New Boy's Guide to Monitors:

- 1 - Early models (c. 1947-50): 'pram' handle, with cast iron oval badge reading MONITOR. Smooth cast-iron roller with free-wheel. Cylinder adjusting screw with elongated hexagon heads with tommy-bar hole.
- 2 - (As in GB36): same handle, but the badge is now alloy and says GREENS, with the word MONITOR in smaller type in the centre. The roller is now ribbed. Cylinder adjusters now conventional hexagonal-head screws.
- 3 - (1953) The same, except that the 'pram' handle is replaced by one with separate, rubber-covered handgrips facing rearwards.
- 4 - The sides are now of pressed steel (with turned edges) rather than the solid steel plate of earlier models, and the grass box is redesigned to a more conventional, rounded shape. The badge is also pressed steel, with a transfer which has similar lettering to the previous cast badge, with the addition of '58 or Mk2 under MONITOR. The roller is smooth steel, with no freewheel, but to compensate for all these economies, adjusters for both cylinder and front roller are cast iron hand wheels.
- 5 - As above, but the transfers on both badge and grassbox are updated; both are now oval, saying *Greens Monitor* in simple Italic script on black and yellow background. This was current in 1961, if not before, and I doubt if the Monitor survived much beyond this date.



Ransomes 15" Kutruff from the 1920s and 1930s.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ANTIPODEAN GRASS CUTTING

By Anthony Conroy

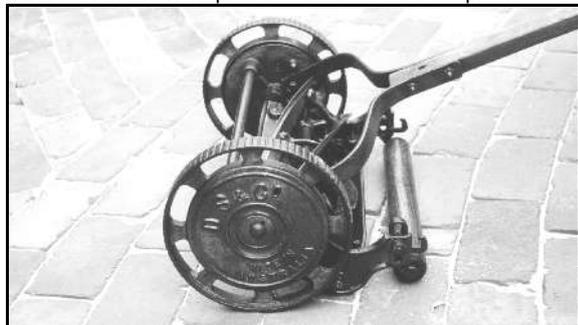
The great southern land has been well represented by English and American products from the turn of the 19th century, plus a few home grown brands along the way, some of which are still flourishing. The rest have long since gone to seed! English companies like Qualcast had established a factory in Melbourne and many of their products were cast here up until the early 1960s. Other names like Ogden, Pope, Crowe, Clyde, and Rexmow were all producing hand mowers for the local market. Merv Richardson, a former salesman for an engineering firm, ultimately sounded their last cuts. His product was to change the local scene forever.



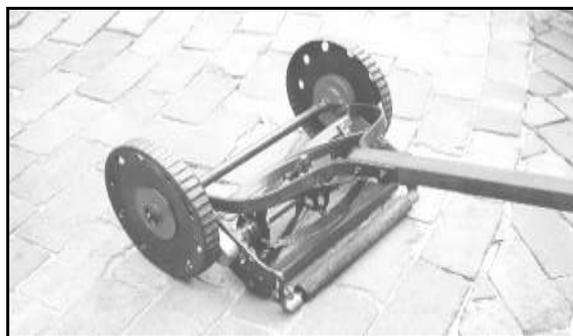
From humble beginnings in his garage in 1952, the Australian rotary mower was born and over the next four decades was to become an Australian icon. Victa Mowers Pty Ltd, as they were called, opened for business in 1955 and by 1966 the millionth Victa rolled off the production line. By 1972 the two million mark was reached. Merv Richardson dies. His interests included ballroom dancing, speed boat racing, flying and table tennis. He had created a cheap easy-to-operate alternative to push-type hand mowers. Virtually every Australian home had one and by 1989 over five million had been produced at the Campsie plant in New South Wales.

Merv's early examples are in demand by collectors and enthusiasts alike. The 160cc high-revving, high torque two-stroke engine is still in production to this day, albeit with some modern enhancements.

The following pictures are from my 100+ collection of hand mowers with emphasis here on local examples.



"DS&Co": This 12in machine was made in Australia but based on a US design. It is very unusual. Probably made in the 1930s or 40s but could be older.



"The Clyde": looks like a regular 14in hand mower but on closer examination we find a fairly heavy but utilitarian mower - no ornate solid cast wheels here! Instead nasty pressed steel 11in wheels with holes around the circumference, looking rather like a pie-dish that Mother used to bake dessert in. The drive is achieved by means of a large cog followed by two small cogs. The pawls are shaped like old-fashioned key-holes and are located on the inside of the wheels, in a special housing which is permanently attached. Removal of the wheels is a breeze - pull out the split pins and they are off. Putting them back again is tricky - a little patience is needed here to relocate the pawls in their correct position. Blade adjustment is fairly conventional with two screws, left and right. As the gear-housing and teeth are enclosed and well away from the ground (unlike more conventional mowers that have the teeth around the outer rim of the wheel) where the "crud" accumulates, the Clyde suffers none of these problems therefore cleaning is relatively easy. Not a beauty by any means but very capable nevertheless. Typical colours were gold and green and also red and green.



"The Rexmow": circa 1920s to mid-1950s - Australian-made in several sizes. This heavy cast mower had a Qualcast appearance at first glance but a second look reveals some strange features. A large knurled knob on the top of a metal tube on the right side of the chassis which contained a super-strong coiled spring which constantly put pressure on the cutting cylinder to bring it in contact with the lower sole-plate blade. Dismantling the mower for maintenance was very hazardous. If for any reason the spring was disturbed, it was not uncommon for it exit the housing at tremendous force! Given that it had a round half-dome on the top (rather like some kind of WW2 ammunition) it could cause severe damage. I can relate to this well - a sizeable dent in the roof of my "zincalume" shed is clearly visible to this day! The original "blurb" said the specially designed arrangement of springs ensured automatic sharpening and eliminated the need for hand adjustments. Most Rexmows were supplied with a five-blade cutter in two widths and two wheel size options, for "English" grass or longer "Buffalo" grass. Timken roller bearings were standard. The handle was adorned by a very attractive brass plate with the manufacturer's logo. Typical price in the McPhersons 1936 Melbourne catalogue was six pounds ten shillings for the 16" version.

Do you have a story to tell about one of your mowers? We would love to include it in a future edition of Grassbox. Send ideas and photographs to Keith at the usual places.

TIM'S TOP TIP!

DISTRESSING YOUR WOODEN BITS

The final touch to a restoration or renovation project is often the wooden handles and rollers. But although new wood is often required, what is the best way to get an authentic brown "used a lot" look? You can of course use wood stain but this never seems to give quite the right effect. My own preference is to use Van Dyck crystals. You should be able to get some at an ironmonger or anywhere that also sells furniture renovating products. Just dilute the crystals to suit, apply with a cloth or sponge, then rub down with some 00 grade wire wool to expose the grain. If this doesn't have the desired darkness, you can always repeat the process until you are happy with the result. I usually give mine a light waxing, or buff with linseed oil for that final 'patina' touch!
We'll be featuring more of "Tim's Top Tips" in future editions. If you have any ideas for inclusion, let us know. By the way, these items are based on information provided by a number of members!

FORGIVENESS OF NATURE

Hot on the heels of last year's "The Grass Is Greener" comes another book about lawns that includes a section on mowers. "The Forgiveness of Nature" is written by Graham Harvey, agricultural story editor of "The Archers" radio programme and award winning journalist.

The book has chapters on many aspects of lawns and their history. Graham visited Milton Keynes Museum for the Annual Rally a year or so back to research part of the book and there is a chapter dedicated to the lawn mower which includes information provided by a number of club members. He even gives some credits at the back of the book and says some nice things about the Club and the museum.

The book is an easy read with lots of new and interesting facts and references. We can of course thoroughly recommend it. "The Forgiveness Of Nature" is published by Jonathan Cape (ISBN 0-224-06047-3) and is priced £17.99, although websites such as Amazon.com might have discounted copies.

Incidentally, "The Grass Is Greener", Tom Fort's book on all things grassy, has apparently been published in paperback. Either book would make a good Christmas present for your mower mad friends!

HIS FINEST HOUR

Tony Hopwood, one of our regular contributors, has recently been helping the BBC to make a film about the life on Winston Churchill during the 1920s and 30s, before he became the Prime Minister. Tony appeared as an "extra", fulfilling the important role of Churchill's gardener, complete with authentic Dennis lawn mower, alongside stars such as Albert Finney and Ronnie Barker. The film will be shown on TV in the UK and USA (and probably elsewhere) early in 2002, so look out in case it is on before the next edition, when we will have a full report from Tony.



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This advertisement for the British Excelsior is dated 1907.

ON THE MARK WITH RANSOMES

By Christopher Proudfoot



This unlikely looking sight was revealed when we finally got round to removing the (seized) cylinder from the Villiers Mark 5 engine on a much battered Ransomes 18" Mark 2.

It is not actually a miniature bird's nest, just an indication of how long this wreck had been standing, minus sparking plug, in a straw filled barn, before I acquired it.

Both side frames are bent (so they are malleable, not plain cast iron), both handles are broken, one with a large chunk missing altogether, and there are other defects, like the broken fuel-tank support. All these are replaceable or repairable, however, but one piece is entirely missing and I cannot make a replacement; that is the flywheel magneto. Is there anyone out there who has one going spare (it's the early, flat topped engine, as found on oval frame Atcos, for example)? Or even another derelict Ransomes Mark 2 that I could use to make one good one out of two?

Perhaps this might be an opportunity to explain for those who find the Ransomes Mark numbers of motor mowers inexplicable how they work:

The basis is that each model is identified by its size (unlike hand mowers, where each model had a name and was available in a choice of sizes). That is why apparently identical machines in different sizes often have different Mark numbers. The 18 inch size disappeared around 1925 but the recently introduced 16 inch carried on its place. The first 16 inchers has cast iron plate sides, unlike the open frames of the 18 inch and 20 inch, but once steel sides came in on both 20 and 16 inch they were essentially the same machine but with the Mark numbers at least two apart. At this time, too, four stroke engines replaced two stroke but later on a two stroke option returned for the 16, albeit based on the 14 inch chassis rather than the four stroke 16/20 inch design. Thus the 16 inch Mark 6 (which is two stroke) is a totally different machine from the 20 inch Mark 6 (Blackburn four stroke).

The 14 inchers are even more complex, because some of them did have model names as well as Mark numbers (Midget, Lightweight, Minor) but all had notional Mark numbers in one series, so that the first Minors were described as Mark 6.

BOOK A BANNER

Remember to book a Club banner free of charge for your local event next year. Contact Keith well in advance so that we can make arrangements for it to be delivered.

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 or via the web at: <http://www.oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk>

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