

Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

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CAN WE DO BETTER?

When I formed this club in the late 1980s the aim was to bring collectors together so that they could discover and make new friends while also developing their interest in what to outsiders seems such an unusual subject. As a club our aims are to promote the collection, preservation and display of old lawn mowers whatever their age.

I would like to think that we have been successful in these aims and, personally, I have made many good friends through our shared interest. However, there is still much we can and should do as a club to help each other, especially with regards to sharing and swapping information and advice on preservation and restoration such as how to find, repair or replace broken and missing parts, how to keep old engines running, the correct type and colour paint and so on. I think we have some way to go before we are as successful in these areas as some other parts of the vintage machinery scene. But I am sure if everyone who can contribute does so we can make our club even more successful in the future.

I would be interested to hear from anyone who has practical ideas on how we can improve what we do. These might include more articles in Grassbox that provide useful information on preservation and restoration or separate sheets or booklets covering specific topics.

Finally, do bear in mind that the people that run the club already spend a lot of time so offers of practical are especially welcome!

CHARLIE JONES



It is with great sorrow that I report the death of Charlie Jones in September.

Charlie (with sunglasses, above) was well liked and known by many members of our club. He attended many rallies, more than anyone as far as I know, in the South East over the past few years and had built up a lovely collection. He was also a great ambassador for our hobby, producing signs for the club and his own use at rallies and events. For example, he made the weather vane erected on the lawn mower display building at Milton Keynes Museum.

Charlie's wife died a few years after he joined the club in 1994 and he later suffered a stroke. Despite these sad episodes he gradually recovered and threw himself even more into the hobby that became one of his greatest passions. Charlie remained active until his death, attending the Knowl Hill Rally and a couple of local events during August. He died peacefully in his sleep in early September.

Andrew Grout and I attended his funeral on 10 September on behalf of the club and as his friends. We also sent a red and green bouquet in keeping with the traditional lawn mower colours.



This is a very early Ransomes motor mower at work on a tennis court. The mower is quite similar to a couple made around 1905 and now owned by club members. These early motor mowers were often little more than motorised versions of the manufacturer's pony and horse drawn mowers of the same size. Indeed, many of Green's early motor mowers carried its famous Silens Messor name. Ransomes was the first company to patent and commercially sell petrol engined mowers in 1902. Within a few years petrol engines were taking over from steam, horses and ponies as the preferred power source for mowers on large estates and similar establishments but examples of machines made before the first world war are still very unusual.

We were pleased to meet his family and learn more about his unusual and interesting life. I am sure that everyone in the club who knew him will miss him greatly. The picture shows Charlie how I am sure we would all like to remember him, among friends and mowers.

Christopher Thomson adds: It was with great sadness that I learned of the death of Charlie Jones. Charlie had often joined my wife and I in exhibiting mowers in some of the more rural areas of East Anglia sometimes at small one-day shows where one would have thought it not worth his while to make the journey from London. A lifelong exponent of social equality, Charlie had much in common with us but was one of those people who never had a harsh word to say about anybody, always treating the wide variety of people on the exhibition field with equal tolerance and affability. Often, when we weaker mortals were asleep in the sunshine oblivious of our surroundings or huddled in our vehicles against the weather, Charlie would be there with his mowers chatting with all and sundry and communicating to old and young his boundless enthusiasm for lawn mowers. He was a good salesman for our hobby.

Most startling of all was Charlie's ability to transform his small estate car and its attendant trailer into Dr Who's "Tardis". I have never known anyone to so neatly stack so many mowers into such confined spaces. No sooner had Charlie arrived on site than these two vehicles would disgorge their contents in a seemingly never ending stream of machinery, reversing the process at the end of the day. I wish I knew the secret.

In the rear window of my battered Austin van I have a cut out figure made of green baize, a man pushing a lawn mower. This was a present from Charlie, an ever-present reminder of a "great little man."

DIARY DATES

The season is pretty much finished so there are no dates this time except to give an early mention of for next year's Annual Rally and AGM at Milton Keynes Museum. This will be on Saturday 17 and Sunday 18 May. Make a date now!

BANBURY STEAM RALLY

By Robbie Robinson



A different location this year, we have now been in all the exhibiting fields. This year we put on a display of mowers made by Alexander Shanks of Arbroath and I was very pleased with the response I got from the Old Lawnmower Club members who attended. We had over 30 Shanks machines on display which is probably the largest gathering of Shanks mowers for many a long year considering that they are not common machines. The mowers on display went from an 1860 24" donkey mower to a small 10" sidewheel Hawk. We had three motor mowers - a 'Jehu', 'Wizard' (from the Hall and Duck Trust, shown above) and 'Rajah' - all from the 1920s.



There were six Caledonian mowers (four shown in the shot above) and all were different which showed the evolution of this machine over years of production from the 1890s to 1930s. Most of the 1930s models of Shanks push mower were represented and with the advertising literature they made a really great display. There were other machines other than Shanks and we put together a set of Ransomes Sims and Jefferies Patent Gear Automaton push roller mowers that were made from about 1895 to 1935 from 8 inches up to 20 inches with notices explaining what the intended use of each of the machine was. Outside the marquee we had two large Dennis machines and also an unusual Dennis Rotary mower where the engine could be lifted out and used as a stationary engine, also a 1960s Flymo, one of the first produced. All in all a very good display of mowers which attracted a lot of interest with the public and I would like to thank all my exhibitors for coming and for holding the fort for me while I was otherwise engaged in my other capacity of Field Manager.

WELLAND STEAM RALLY

By Pam Skingley

Welland is just a few miles from Malvern and the area is very picturesque. This was a new venue for us and we were glad that the weather was kind. As it is a three-day show we arrived Wednesday and already the area was filling up.

Several club members were there. Tony Hopwood with his beloved Dennis machines, a French Tondix, an Anzani, an Atco HY and his latest acquisition, a Monarch Excelsior which received lots of TLC during the weekend. Looking at Andrew Grout's display shows he has a love affair with Ransomes (OK so those of you who know him knew that)! Martin Briggs joined us with a collection of 16" mowers, Greens, Ransomes, Pennsylvania and a Hayn. Although the transfer was partially obliterated on the box I can imagine it was very pretty when new, just the church tower and a part of a tree top remaining. Martin also has a baby Webb complete with a box which made Pam Skingley turn the palest shade of green. Peter Skingley had among his display a rather delicate finger mower, the unusual Cyclo made by the same manufacturer as the Jobber.

The rally theme this year was Marshall, Sons & Co Ltd. The field Marshall tractor was here in force (I love the thump of that single pot engine). William Marshall set himself up in business in Gainsborough, Lincolnshire in 1848 and quickly became an engineer of some repute, manufacturing steam boilers to heat trains in Russia and dryers for the tea industry. 1910 saw them branch out into the manufacture of the internal combustion engine and eventually tractors and crawlers. By 1950 the single cylinder was becoming slightly old fashioned (don't know why as those that survive work beautifully). The series 3A was produced in May 1952 and its 50th anniversary prompted this gathering. A range of wheeled tractors were built throughout the '60s, '70s and '80s. The company's world famous Britannia Works were finally closed in the mid '90s. A sizeable area remains but for how long is anyone's guess. A magnificent sight of over 60 Marshall tractors to look at, this as a result of the organisers' efforts. A fire work display on Saturday night lit the sky up for about half an hour.

You need to be fairly fit to come to this rally it is approximately one quarter the size of Dorset and very hilly. Although to be fair most of the show was on level ground just the camping area disappeared up into the gods. It is however a show to go and see.

KNOWL HILL STEAM RALLY

A small contingent of members were at Knowl Hill for a really wet weekend. It rained for most of the week before the event so the site was a bit of a mud bath although the weather on the weekend itself was pretty good.



Members present included Tim Durant, Andrew Grout, Richard Jones, Alec Hillyar, Charlie Jones, Robbie Robinson and Keith Wootton. The display included examples of early Ransomes hand mowers through to machines from the 1930s (pictured is Alec Hillyar's Pennsylvania roller mower). A great deal of interest from the public and quite a few leads for new acquisitions!

THE EMERY CLIPPER

By Tony Hopwood



I have been lucky enough to add a 17" Emery Clipper to my collection from a local source. The machine was complete and in good order apart from festered front rollers and seems to have been well looked after.

The Clipper was made by a Birmingham engineering firm, J A Emery and Son Ltd of Halesowen between 1938 and 1950 with a gap for the war years. It was offered in two sizes, 14in and 17in.

As befits a machine built in the home of British engineering, it is very well made but if anything it is over engineered.

There are no machine numbers so dating is difficult. My example has the small rope start JAP 2A cast iron four stroke with an alloy cylinder head suggesting post war construction.

A test run confirmed that the original minimalist silencer had to be replaced by something less raucous before the machine could be used for regular grass cutting. Fortunately the silencer unscrewed easily so an appropriate modern Briggs and Stratton replacement has been adapted to the original exhaust pipe. This fits in a 17mm tapping rather than the more usual half inch BSP thread in the engine block. New front rollers have also been fitted from my stock of useful parts.

SCROLL UP FOR THE NEW TRANSFERS



We have produced some new transfers to help members with their restoration projects. The new design is the Ransomes "scroll" and comes in three sizes: 130mm, 200mm, 300mm (measured at the widest point) priced at £2, £3 and £5 respectively. The transfers are dryfix which should make them easy to use. The "manufacturer" lettering is a separate part of the transfer and can be detached if not required. We will be introducing additional designs later in the year.

Ivan Harrison writes: I am now the proud owner of a Shanks 16" Ivanhoe hand mower. Thank you all for bothering to read the advert. I would be grateful for any info on the above mower. I think I am a lucky fellow as I was advised to add another 0 on to the £20 that I was prepared to pay for an Ivanhoe, the final cost to me £30 and a trip to Scotland. Regards, Ivan.

The Clipper has a number of unusual features. There are two independent clutches. The first is a cone type operated by a foot pedal toggle arrangement to control the cutting cylinder which is split helical bladed to ensure cuttings are thrown into the centre of the grass box. The cutter is driven by twin V belts. The second clutch has a latching rod control working a band brake on the small epicyclic gearbox driving the heavy split land roller via roller chain. All three drives run inside substantial light alloy covers. There are no chain or belt tensioners or adjusters and the drive chains have no joining links. There is a spacious pressed steel grass box and the mower is heavy but well balanced at about 2cwt so it can be used as a powered garden roller by declutching the cutting cylinder.

The Clipper seems to have only sold in the midlands and must have been expensive to build so very few machines have survived. Any information and literature on J A Emery and their products would be appreciated. Loan items will be photocopied and returned promptly and costs covered.



Editor's Note: The Clipper pictured here belongs to Richard Jones rather than Tony, although the machines are virtually identical (except for the silencer). It's just that my pictures of Richard's machine are nicer.

LAST CHEFFINS SALE, AND THE NEXT?

The most recent Cheffins sale was a bit of a disappointment in terms of the mowers on offer. So much so that a number of regular visitors from the Club did not make the journey to this bleak part of Cambridgeshire.

The quality of the machines on sale and the lack of interest was reflected in the hammer prices. Unfortunately I was unable to be there on this occasion so there are no photos of the mowers:

Five name plates for Shanks Britannia, Shanks Scot, Ransomes Leo, Greens Cadet, Greens Monitor, £140; Five name plates inc Ransomes Anglo Paris, Shanks Wren, Ransomes Leo, Gordon Deluxe, £90; Ransomes Ripper, 14", £35; Dennis 24" c/w roller, £85; Ransomes Certes MK8 16, £15; 3 lawn mowers, 1950s/1960s, £15; Ransomes 'Leo', £45; 1920's Greens chain drive mower, £40.

The next Cheffins sale will be held at the company's Sutton sale ground in Cambridgeshire on Saturday 26 October. As always there will be a large contingent of OLC members present for a great day out and possibly to bid if there is anything worth buying! Why not join us for a bit of fun?



Chris Eames getting to grips with the long stuff at Milton Keynes Museum in May using his early Allen Scythe (Photo: Brian Yetts).

PUNCH UP BECKONS

By Dick House

With reference to the Suffolk Punch featured in Grassbox 40, in the late 1960s I bought exactly such a mower when we lived in Kent from the local garage for next to nothing with a broken con rod. This was the mower which awakened my latent interest in all things horticultural or agricultural. I sorted out the mower with a new con rod, polished up the big end journal with some emery paper, put some new oil in and used it for a year or so to cut the grass at home and in the village churchyard.

My machine was 100 per cent identical to the one described in Grassbox. The fuel filter, petrol tank shape, cowl type, oil filler, split pin type dipstick but with the exception of the metal recoil starter! But when we moved to Essex in 1970, and started using the machine to mow the grass here, I quickly got fed up winding the starter rope onto the protruding knuckle to start it every time so I got a second hand metal starter from a newer machine and worked out pretty quickly that four holes drilled in the cowl at the correct PCD concentric with the crank shaft, would cooperate with the metal starter lug feet and I could simply bolt it to the cowling through the lug feet, and grind down the fixing bolt heads so that they would not foul the magneto fan fins. And after removing the old wind-on-rope knuckle and replacing it with the disc with the flying engager, plus spacer, from the newer engine, BINGO I had a Suffolk engine which was much less effort to start repeatedly.

Whilst I can imagine other people doing a similar thing I wonder how many could actually be bothered, so I wonder if the pictured Suffolk is my own original, modified machine. I have no record of the engine number to help though, but I do know that the mower dated from the mid 1950s from its history in Kent. Mine was a Punch 14" too, rather than the Colt 12". You just never know!



The name Presto was a bit of a play on words, partly taken from the town where the manufacturer was based and partly to indicate speed ("always ready for use"). Arundel Coulthard produced mowers from the 1930s to the 1950s with other models including the Rollmo and Grassmo. The company was bought by Qualcast in the 1950s.

TIM'S TOP TIPS

We all worry about public liability insurance when attending rallies but what about insuring our prized possessions against theft and damage when stored at home?

Most household insurance policies will cover items stored in the garage or garden shed but it is wise to check with your insurer just in case.

Assuming you are covered what else can you do to help prevent theft of your mowers? It is obviously essential to make sure that all buildings are secured but there is sadly no sure fire way of preventing theft.

If the worst should happen it makes sense to be able to provide the police and your insurer with as much information as possible about your mowers. This will help prove your ownership of the mower and identify anything that is subsequently recovered. It will also help if you need to negotiate values with your insurer.

Take a photograph of each mower in your collection and, if possible, additional shots from different angles and to show any distinguishing features (such as mending welds) that should be unique to that specific machine. Make a note of any serial and casting numbers on the mower and engine.

Add a unique identifying mark of some kind that only you know about. This could be a special number hidden somewhere on the machine, for example etched on the underside of a crank case, on a piece of the frame inside a sleeve or inside the sidewheel frame. And remember to keep a note of it.



Another memory of Milton Keynes in May. The Beatrice sidewheel mower was produced by Barford & Perkins of Peterborough in the late 19th century. The mower has a rather ornate badge on the grass box. This example is owned by Christopher Proudfoot.

ANTIPODEAN ANNIVERSARY

Graham Marshall writes from Australia with news that Victa celebrated its 50th birthday on 20 September. According to a newspaper cutting from Graham, more than 6.5 million Victas have been sold. The company plans to open a museum and has been looking for good examples of pre-1960 machines. Apparently the first Victas were known as "peach tins" because they were made from, er, peach tins. The company has a website at www.victa.com.au

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