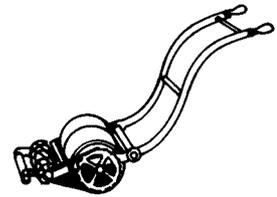


Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

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THIS YEAR OR NEXT?

I am not sure whether this edition will reach you before Christmas or early in the New Year as at the time of writing I am running far too close to the deadline I set myself. Whatever happens I should like to wish everyone in the Club a (possibly belated) Happy Christmas and successful New Year. Long term members will also remember that I always take this annual opportunity to thank everyone who has contributed to club during the past year whether it be in supplying some information, organising or attending an event, contributing to Grassbox or helping out in other ways. In particular I should like to thank Robbie for his continued sterling work behind the scenes processing the membership applications and renewals. I know that other club members will want to join me in this sentiment.

Thanks also to everyone who responded to my request for comments on how we can improve the club in the future. These have all been interesting and positive and we will do what we can to act on as many as possible.

Finally, on a personal note, I should like to say a big thank you to everyone for their kind words and messages over the past few weeks. See you all in 2003.



Here is what appears to be a Ransomes New Automaton with its proud user. It's another of our popular "period" shots but unfortunately it is not possible to give a precise date, although it looks to be around 1900.



We know how popular these photographs of old mowers in action are with readers, so here is another one for the album. This one looks like a Greens horse mower but it is a bit difficult to make out, so apologies if someone out there knows better.

JIM'S IN PRINT AND ON THE WEB!

Jim Ricci reports that he has recently had two articles published in quite different places. The first is about the ground keepers at the Melbourne Cricket Ground In Australia and appears in the MCG library's "Yorker" magazine and may also be found online at <http://www.mcc.org.au/yorker/>

Of course, we are not talking about cricket in the UK at the moment (we expect our Aussie members to gloat of course) as the Ashes have just been finished off in near record time, but the article sounds interesting.

Jim's second article has appeared in the magazine of the Ephemera Society and, you guessed it, covers lawn mower, er, ephemera (that's basically bits of paper to the rest of us).



This 1920s Shanks motor mower, part of Dusty Miller's collection, is a bit of a monster at 30" cut. Despite its size the mower is similar in design and overall layout to the more familiar Shanks Jehu and Wizard featured in other editions of Grassbox. This is particularly true for the frames, chains, clutch, bearings and starting mechanism. The engine is different of course because it is a large four stroke with a separate magneto rather than the Villiers two stroke on the smaller machines. The photograph was taken at the West Dean Garden Show in June.

DIARY DATES

Milton Keynes Museum: Make a date for the 2003 Annual Rally and AGM at Milton Keynes Museum. This will be on Saturday 17 and Sunday 18 May. Put it in your new diary.

Other Events: If you attended a show this year, please check with the organiser to get an early warning of dates for 2003. We will publish details of forthcoming events in the next Grassbox.

NEW EVENT IN WALES

The historic Talylyn Railway in Mid Wales is planning a vintage vehicle rally based in Tywyn, Gwynedd alongside the railway, the first to be preserved by volunteers in the world. As part of a revamp next year the event is being expanded from cars and light commercials to a steam and vintage rally and will be held Spring Bank Holiday Sunday and Monday (25/26 May) at Ty Mawr, just on the outskirts of the town off the A493. For further details and/or an entry form, please contact: Anthony Coulls, 31 Horseshoe Lane, Bromley Cross, Bolton, BL7 9RR. Tel: 0161 606 0116 (daytime). E: a.coulls@msim.org.uk



A selection of Robbie's mowers on show at the Quainton railway museum in September where he attended a show.

BEDFORDSHIRE STEAM FAYRE

The weekend of September 14/15 seemed to go very well and there was a record number of visitors, writes Dick Hardwick. We had a good display with 12 members, including several new to the event, displaying 40+ mowers. The weather was dry, though barely any sunshine and a 'cool' temperature. The Saturday evening musical entertainment in the beer tent was, er, shall we say, 'interesting'? It certainly made Charles Crouchman and myself wish we were 30 years younger while three of our 'younger' members indulged in similar entertainment on the Friday evening too!

The picture shows two mowers from the 1960s of local origin - a Farmfitters Rapier and the smaller Sexton (that's someone who looks after a church yard - Ed) that was designed specifically for cutting between graves - hence its 10.5" maximum width. Farmfitters were at Gerrard's Cross, Buckinghamshire but of more interest are the engines. Both are 75cc industrial units made by Vincent of Stevenage, the motorcycle firm of 'Black Shadow' fame! Vroooooom!



Here is Tony & Mrs Houghton with a fine selection of electric mowers at Chignall show earlier this year. Tony also showed many of these machines at the Gosfield event mentioned below (Photo: Peter Blackmore).

GOSFIELD SHOW

Quite a gathering of OLC members at the Gosfield Rally held on the local airfield on 6/7 July. Saturday saw Charlie Jones, Chris Thompson, Pam & Tony Skingley and Levi Stock with a varied display of cylinder push mowers and Tony with an assortment of finger mowers (Tony S has to have an engine with his). Sunday we were joined by Craig Hipperson, Tony Houghton, Charlie Crouchman and Chris Stoneham. Between us we had about 45 mowers. We had a good position both sides of the main entrance so we had double exposure! I won't bore you with all the makes of mowers which was very varied but just mention one from each collector: Chris Thompson's all silver Willing Worker; Charlie Jones' beautiful 8" Silens Messor (I'd love one of those); Craig Hipperson's very pretty 8" Ransomes Automaton Minor; Charlie Crouchman's Qualcast E types, all pretty colours (a lovely shade of blue). I have not seen these before and am glad that the lads were able to explain the E5/E6 markings to me; Tony Houghton had a very good selection of electric mowers which I don't think get enough coverage from us. He had restored an electric JP that sported a rich dark green colour and silver castings; Chris Stoneham had his beloved Allen Scythes; Tony Skingley had a Howard Bulldog with a finger mower that is sort of off-set and makes it a little more attractive; Pam Skingley had a Greens New Century with a very rusty cutter but when you know the reason, it adds a little magic.

The event had all the components of a good rally: steamers, veteran cars and lorries, tractors, stationary engine, motor cycles, cycles with a few penny farthings, small fair, retail stalls, auction, the army yesteryear, various food outlets, the obligatory beer tent, craft tent, some rabbits and tortoises. It didn't rain but was cloudy. The OLC members had a good natter (about lawn mowers mostly) and exchanged a few ideas. "The Eastern Lady".



Richard Jones and Alec Hillyar get to grips with the fine art of push and pull mowing at West Dean in June 2002. The mower is a Silens Messor that was set up really well and ran across the lawn very smoothly, which made it a lot easier than it looks.

MONARCH OF THE GRASS



I collect wacky mowers as well as using vintage Dennis to cut my grass, writes Tony Hopwood.

By wacky I mean unusual and distinctive machines away from the run of the mill. My first was a little French number, a late 1950s 33cm Tondix (tondeuse a gazon is French for lawn mower - Ed) is built like a kiddie car from pressed steel with rubber tyred wheels, rubber coated drive roller and baby's bonnet grass box. It cuts metric grass brilliantly!

Then came the "banana" mower, an Anzani Lawnrider of 1960 which works well but has to be ridden like a kid's tricycle. After that was the Dennis Swift rotary, completely out of the Dennis mould of robust cylinder mowers still working over 70 years after they were built. The Swift engine was designed to lift off the frame to power accessories like pumps and hedge trimmers. Then there is the 1947 Emery Clipper with its chevron blades and unique foot-operated cutting cylinder clutch.

Which brings me to my latest wacky mower, the 15in Excelsior Monarch made in the early 1930s by the Excelsior Motorcycle Company and stiff with motorcycle resonances like the twist grip throttle.



TIM'S TOP TIP!

DUSTY'S CHEAPY GASKETS

Dusty Miller reports that he has been trying to get some valve cap gaskets for square tank Dennis mowers up to 1928 and others, and have been quoted as much as £7 a pair. By accident he found the answer! Go to your nearest exhaust centre, speak to them nicely and you are liable to be given some for a token. He was given two sets which makes four gasket washers for nothing, when he said what they were for. All you have to do is put them on the large nut and cut round with a pair of tin snips.

THIRD PARTY INSURANCE

We will be sending out the Public Liability Insurance certificates for 2003 to all UK members early in the New Year, probably with the next Grassbox but definitely in good time for the coming rally and events season. As members will recall from when we introduced this insurance as part of the annual membership in May 2002 this provides cover at events organised in line with the NVT&EC guidelines (which is more or less all events). There is now less excuse than ever before for not attending an event that welcomes old lawn mowers, and their owners of course.

There is also a chrome plated flywheel and inlet manifold and, most distinctive, the type TMMC-D Villiers engine which has twin exhaust ports proclaiming its motorcycle ancestry. The flywheel magneto event has a lighting winding so I could fit a headlamp for night time mowing!

The grass box has brackets resting on the side frames secured by swivel hooks at the front. It also has a pivoted grass box deflector lid (missing on mine) to guide the cuttings into the box. The general machine appearance is reminiscent of Qualcast and Ransomes with the fuel tank inside a metal tool box between the handlebars.

Starting is made much more difficult, despite the decompressor, by having a 4:1 step up ratio between the cranking shaft and engine with no way to disengage the cutting cylinder which spins as well when cranking. Perhaps they forgot the couldn't fit pedals for starting. Definitely not a machine for the limp wretched. I look forward to cutting grass when I have repaired the ignition. There are still a few more wacky mowers on my list.

Data on Excelsior mowers would be appreciated and copying costs will be covered.



(Ed's Note: The photos show the Excelsior on the left with a Qualcast 16 of slightly later date. There are many similarities between the two machines, especially the overall look of the two designs, heavy duty cast iron sides, "through the roller" clutch activation rod and the adjusting mechanism for the bottom blade and thrower plate. Incidentally, the first Qualcast 16s had a similar starting mechanism which, on early models, meant that the cutting cylinder always turned during cranking. This was because there was a single chain that linked the drive shaft with the rear roller and the cutting cylinder. On later models this was replaced with separate chains from the drive shaft to clutch/rear roller and the clutch/cutting cylinder which must have made starting easier.)



The Shanks Britisher was one of the most popular side wheel mowers of its period, 1900 to 1939. On the early machines the name plate was a simple rectangle with the words "Shanks British Make". One of the unusual features of the mower was that the arms between the wooden handle and the mower were made of cast iron rather than malleable iron or steel which is much more common on sidewheel machines in general.

MOWERS ARK

A visit to the seaside produced an unexpected find for Roy and Pat Mitchell that inspired Pat to put pen to paper for this verse. The mower in question is a Shanks Thistle and was found lurking somewhere off the starboard bow on the beach by Lindisfarn Island in Northumbria. Roy says the mower was carried up a rocky shore and along a sandy beach to the car. It is way beyond restoration and, still draped with seaweed, it now resides as a work of art beside the goldfish pond.



Old Neptune had a seagrass mower
It lived beneath the waves
It spent its life on salty plain
And subterranean bower
Northumbrian coast and north sea tides
Have done their best in years of time
To make the mower which we see
That started life in pristine green
Now with rust encrusted frame
And cutting blades that look the same
The barnacles and limpets too
Combine to give a curious hue
It drove, one roaring stormy night
And fetched up in a rocky plight
Its roller smashed, its gears askew
The question now was what to do
The salvage plan that went quite well
Began what's now its driest spell
This one time proud and classic beast
Now sits for all their eyes to feast
On shingle bank with shady fronds
Beside a garden goldfish pond
It finally has come to rest
A work of art among the best

YOU MUST BE JOKING!

A club member was in his front yard mowing grass when his neighbour, also a member, came out of the house and went straight to the mailbox. He opened it then slammed it shut and stormed back in the house. A little later he came out of the house again, went to the mail box and again opened it and slammed it shut. Angrily, back into the house he went. As the man was getting ready to edge the lawn, the neighbour came out again, marched to the mail box, opened it and then slammed it closed harder than ever. Puzzled by these actions the first man asked the second, "Is something wrong?" To which he replied, "There certainly is! My stupid computer keeps saying, YOU'VE GOT MAIL."

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ALIEN TANK INVASION

Earlier this year, writes Tony Hopwood, I had a problem I've never seen before in over 30 years of motor mowing. My 30in Dennis stopped with fuel starvation during a Sunday morning mow. The fuel tap on the tank was completely blocked so I blew it clear thinking it was a bit of crud which had settled over the tank outlet. Five minutes later, the problem reappeared so I unscrewed the fuel tap and drained the tank. The fine gauze filter on the tap looked clear but was coated with a sort of clear jelly which blocked the fuel flow and which reformed after blowing through.

In the past I have had problems with water or debris in the fuel tank but nothing like this. The jelly was some sort of hydrocarbon-munching algae or slime actually growing in the tank.

This hardy livestock may be a side effect of the removal of lead from fuel which is toxic to most life forms. If it can happen in a fuel system which is used every week in the growing season the problem will be worse in mowers used only occasionally.

Routine fuel system flushing may be the only way of keeping the bug at bay. Apart from lead I don't know of anything toxic to put in fuel to debug it. Beware - there may be aliens in the tanks on your lawn.

(Any ideas anyone? I found some references to the phenomenon on the web but nothing very specific - Ed).

So now we know where all those "Rolls Royce of Lawn Mowers" quotations come from. This 1932 advertisement from the Amateur Gardening shows that JP was using the slogan from almost the start. No wonder so many people remember it!

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