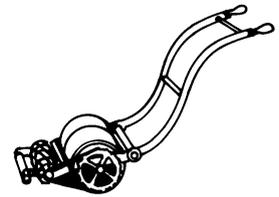


Grassbox



The magazine of The Old Lawnmower Club

Number 71

Winter 2010

EDITORIAL

Mowers, grass and other such matters seem a long way from my mind as I write this surrounded by our second lot of snow this winter. However, I'm sure many of you are working away on your latest restoration projects, though I have to confess I've always been a fair weather lawnmower restorer, with the workshop being largely unvisited in the depths of winter. Hopefully the fruits of your labours will be on display over the coming rally season, and we have some of the dates for this year already available in the usual place in this issue. Most importantly though, if you are going to be showing this year, please fill in and return the third party liability insurance form which is on the back page of the advert sheet.

Most important of course is the Annual Rally organised for the club in May at the Milton Keynes Museum by Keith Wootton, and part of that event has in recent years been the auction, which has grown in popularity. The entry form for the auction is in this issue of Grassbox, so you have plenty of time to submit items for sale.

Finally, an apology for those who noticed that the quality of some of the images in the last issue was somewhat below the usual standard. This was a fault on my part not the printer's, it being the first issue I have produced on my new computer and I was caught out by the loss of quality that can come from changing the sizes of the images. Hopefully I have avoided such a problem this time. I also apologise for a number of typing errors on the last page, I hope they didn't detract from the magazine.

OLD MOWER SCULPTURES

Dusty Millar has been in contact with Michael Kusz, a sculptor based near Richmond in North Yorkshire. Dusty thought members would be interested to see that he has incorporated old lawnmowers into some of his sculptures, such as this one of a 12" Silens Messor. Apparently it is mounted in such a way that it is able to rotate in the wind, presumably like a weather vane. A sculpture like this would sell for £2000.



TONY HOUGHTON

Members will be saddened to learn of the untimely death of Tony Houghton in December. I recall first meeting Tony in 1991 when he came to one of our very first annual rallies at Milton Keynes. He'd been a mower enthusiast for some time by then and already had a fairly large collection, acquired and restored over many years. It was to bring enthusiasts like him together that we formed the club and Tony was one of our first members. This was well before 1993 when we started to charge for membership and Tony was one of the first 30 to enrol.

Over the years Tony attended a huge number of rallies, not just those organised by the club but many throughout the east of England and near to his home in Basildon, with his wife Maureen and son Gary. He was always cheerful and I don't recall him ever having a bad word for anyone, or indeed anyone having anything but good words to say about him. Each year at Milton Keynes he would come along on the Sunday with a trailer or van full of mowers of all ages and sizes, cheerfully unloading them as he met up with old friends. As far as I can recall Tony only missed one or two of our annual rallies over the years and each time he always took the trouble to contact me and apologise for not being there.

He was always ready to help other enthusiasts. Just before our annual rally last year I asked if he could collect a mower from a nearby town in Essex for our auction. As always this was not a problem and Tony duly arrived on the Sunday morning with the machine. There are lots of examples like this and I am sure many members will have their own memories. It was for this selfless participation in our club and hobby that I was privileged to present Tony with our Charlie Jones Award at the annual rally 2009. He was a most deserving recipient.

I know that all members of our club will join me offering our condolences and best wishes to Maureen and the rest of Tony's family. We will all miss him greatly.

Keith Wootton



Tony and Gary Houghton packing away their gazebo after another OLC annual rally at Milton Keynes. Tony will be sorely missed at this and future events.

DIARY DATES

Whitewebbs Museum, Enfield: Sunday 28 March. A small display required here, 10AM to 4PM C: John Bloxham. T: 07956 252691

Annual Rally & AGM, Milton Keynes Museum: Saturday 15 & Sunday 16 May. See the adverts page for more details or contact Keith Wootton. T: 01327 830675 E: keith.wootton@oldlawnmowerclub.co.uk

West Park Wolverhampton Vintage Rally: Saturday 5 & Sunday 6 June. All on grass, no cut off date for entries any displays welcome. C: Ray Williams, 47 Oldfaling Lane, Wolverhampton WV10 8BH. T: 01902 731663

Bramshott Open Gardens Weekend, Nr Liphook, Hants: Saturday 12 & Sunday 13 June. 30 different gardens to visit, lawnmower display and demonstrations in one of the large ones. C: Colin Stone T: 01428 604003

Banbury Steam Rally: Saturday 26 & Sunday 27 June. A club regular for many years, second only to our annual rally. Details as usual from Robbie (see "souvenirs" in the contacts list)

Vintage Lawnmower Weekend, Exbury Gardens, Nr Southampton, Hants Saturday 31 July & Sunday 1st Aug. A new event this year set in the prestigious 200 acre historic garden within the New Forest National Park. Also features a narrow gauge steam railway. We've been promised a decent bit of grass, so it would be great if more members came along and we could put on a good show to kick things off. C: Geoff Christopher T:01425 616364 or e-mail geoffrey@christopher5661.freerve.co.uk

Alresford Agricultural Show, Titchbourne Park, Hants: Saturday 4 Sept. Extremely popular and well supported traditional show, record crowd last year. C: Colin Stone T: 01428 604003

Bedford Steam Rally, Old Warden Park: 18th & 19th September. C: Dick Hardwick T: 01462 816018 E: hadw2@aol.com. W: www.bseps.org.uk

Tilmow '10, The Rural Life Centre, Tilford, Nr Farnham, Surrey: Saturday 25 & Sunday 26 Sept. Combines with their Steam and Vintage Rally. C: Colin Stone

Malvern Autumn Show: Saturday 25 & Sunday 26 September. Details from Tony Hopwood. T: 01684 592134 (Upton on Severn).

AN ODD SIZED RANSOMES...

"But Ransomes didn't do odd sizes" exclaimed one well known club member and Ransomes enthusiast when confronted with the evidence. Of course, this is something of an exaggeration as for many years the company made Lions and high wheel Pennsylvania types in odd sizes, but otherwise even numbers generally prevailed. In fact the Ransomes 17" Lightweight is a strange amalgam of several models, in an unusual size and finally with a very bizarre paint job.

Firstly, this machine was very short lived. It only appeared in the catalogue in 1939, and was never resurrected after the war. So what is odd about it? Well it actually makes a lot of sense as it is a largish domestic mower, but lighter weight and involving less engineering than the standard 16" Mk 9 Motor Mower. However, as the welded chassis shares a lot of parts with the ordinary models, why was it made in 17" rather than 16"? A quick glance at the 17" shows that it also shares the same 147cc Villiers engine as the 16" Mk 9, and the same heavy all steel grassbox, which again had to be produced specially for that model. The 14" light weight, which from the way it is advertised one would imagine being a similar machine is in fact completely different, with a rounded wood sided box, smaller 98cc engine, and practically no common parts at all. In spite of all the non-standard parts, the 17" managed to cost £32 10 0 compared to £35 0 0 for the standard 16" Mk9. The

answer is that the 17" competed with the 17" Atco Middleweight, which cost exactly the same. Ransomes obviously felt a need to compete, but the large number of non-standard parts needed for the 17" must surely have prevented it from being cost effective.

One thing it has in common with the 14" lightweight are the Ajax handles, complete with that fuel tank that runs from side to side where the intermediate crossbar normally fits, and on a 17" this is a very long narrow tank. This design also means that you have a much heavier mower than the 14" being controlled by a pair of handles meant for a 12" hand mower. There is more flex in them that would be desirable, I can assure you.



From front on, the silver shading on a black background shows up clearly on the top corners of the grassbox.

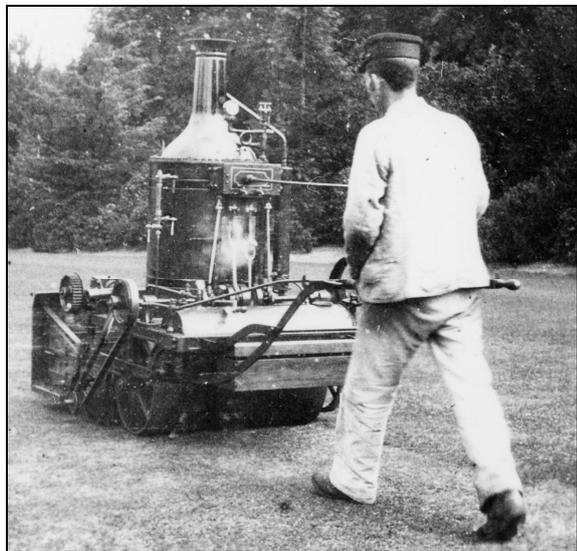
So what else is unique to this mower? Well, how about the chain cover. The 16" and 20" machines have a cast aluminium cover which encloses the whole chain, and on the 4 stroke version is even lubricated with used engine oil. Ransomes spared no expense on the 17", Making a higher side frame, and a parallel steel plate the other side of the chain, then putting a pressed steel sheet over the top, which is unclipped at the front to oil the chain. There was quite a bit of tooling up to make that pressing, again, only used on this model.

The design even has its Achilles heel, as it doesn't have ball bearings on the rear roller shaft, merely plain iron castings with the plain steel shaft rotating in them. These have to be oiled regularly, and if they aren't they wear very quickly, especially on the drive side, which can only be oiled by standing the machine upright, and which has the force of the jockey wheel spring on the drive chain pulling it tight. On our machine, this part had worn to an oval slot about twice as long as it was wide, and the ingenious repair needed may be the subject of a future article.

So what about the aforementioned colour scheme? By this time Ransomes were spray painting all their machines, and it seems they took the opportunity to try out their skills on the 17". First they painted it black, then they sprayed silver onto all the protruding corners and areas near nut and bolt heads. The result can only be described as antique armour effect, and what's more they weren't always very good at it. Some parts are common to other models, such as the starting gear, and ours has a telltale bit of Ransomes green showing through where the black spraying missed out. Another 17" I saw recently had green bits showing through all over the place. Conventional Ransomes transfers were applied in the normal places on top of the black. For some reason, almost all the pressed steel side chain covers on the other Ransomes motor mowers of the time were also painted black, even after the war, years after the 17" had ceased production.

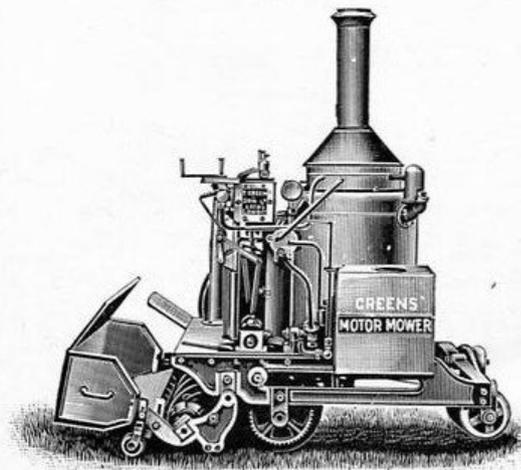
STEAM MOWERS

Steam powered lawn mowers are something of a holy grail for many collectors, combining as they do our passion for mowers with an interest in steam engines that appeals to most collectors of vintage machinery. Sadly, the steam mower was probably one of the shortest lived mowing developments, largely because for some reason the possibility of powering a mower in this way was not applied until a suitable internal combustion engine was almost upon us anyway. One James Sumner, of Leyland, Lancashire, took out the patent for a steam powered mower, and proceeded to make a few of them for sale. These machines were not ride-on, and the operator walked behind it as he would have done with a horse mower.



Probably a Leyland machine, this is a steam mower in use, showing the engine well. The rod coming back towards the driver leads to the regulator, controlling the entry of steam to the cylinders. Notice also how the cutting cylinder appears to be driven by a flat leather belt rather than a chain, and the operator wears a loco driver's hat rather than the bowler or flat cap normally seen on gardeners and lawnmower operators of the period.

GREEN'S STEAM MOTOR LAWN MOWER and ROLLER.



For large Estates where a power machine can be utilised for other purposes besides lawn mowing, we recommend our larger **Steam Power Motor**.

This Machine is made in 30in., 35in., and 42in sizes, and by simply moving a lever to raise the cutting cylinder it can be used as a **Roller**, or if necessary as a **Stationary Engine** for sawing wood, pumping water, etc.

Simplicity of construction as well as utility has been our aim in producing these Motors.

Obviously, only the very largest mowers would have been suitable for steam power, and as we all know the survival rate of large horse mowers from the turn of the century period is very low. Therefore it follows that even fewer of the miniscule numbers of steam mowers that were actually built have survived into preservation. I would imagine that a good proportion of those that were made ended up being converted to internal combustion power anyway. Some of the mainstream mower companies also made tentative moves into the steam mower market, such as Greens as seen in this (*below, left*) advert from their 1904 catalogue. They also advertised several sizes of internal combustion motor mower in the same year. The possibility of using the steam engine for other purposes seems to have been the best selling point Greens could come up with! Unlike the Leyland, this machine is a ride on.

The Rural Life Museum in Reading is of course home to the most well known survivor, a Leyland Steam Mower. However, I was lead to discover another machine in existence, largely complete, in the USA recently, as I have been sent some photographs showing this machine when new, probably in 1903, the clearest of which I have reproduced (*below*). The mower is made by Coldwell, and is a Style A (steam) lawnmower. Little is known about it other than what can be seen on the surviving machine, and even Jim Ricci has very little information relating to it.



Of course by this date the first Ransomes internal combustion powered mowers had already appeared, and Jim Ricci says that there is some evidence that Coldwell's had themselves already produced such a mower. The steam mower was therefore almost on the way out before it had even begun.

As can be seen, the mower was a ride on, and had a 40" cut. The steering is by a tiller arrangement, and as would be expected from an American machine there is no provision for collecting the grass cuttings. The boiler is liquid fuelled, and the steam engine has two cylinders and is vertically mounted on the back of the boiler. One slightly alarming feature of the machine is that the driver, when facing forward, would be unable to see the water gauge without turning round, making the risk of low water and a consequent boiler explosion somewhat more likely than it need have been. It is presumably the size of the vertical boiler that prevents the operator from sitting at the rear of the machine as in most of the later internal combustion ride-ons of a similar size. Water was fed to the boilers by two feed pumps attached to the crosshead of the engine. Note also the rough American grass that is being cut, compared to the very smooth lawn the Leyland is seen on in the picture above.

There are more details and some photographs of the surviving Coldwell Steam Mower on the website: www.dself.dsl.pipex.com/MUSEUM/TRANSPORT/mower/mower.htm

Next Edition: Spring 2010

Edition 71 – Winter 2010. Edited & written (except where stated) by William Proudfoot

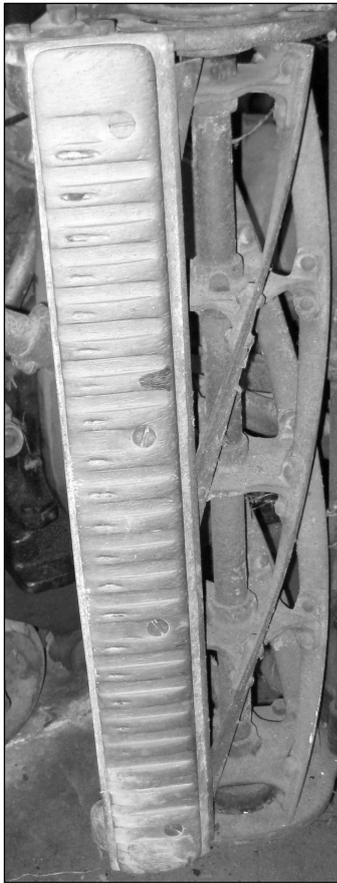
CEMETERY GAUGE SHOES

An ingenious piece of American mower engineering is explained by Jim Ricci.

The Locke Steel Chain Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, USA began manufacturing their innovative power lawn mower in 1928 following several years of development involving numerous prototypes.

From 1898 until 1928 their only product was a stamped steel detachable link agricultural chain. Here at home one only needs to mention manure spreaders to jog the memory as to what this product looked like. Locke style chain is still being made by Allied-Locke Industries Dixon IL with most of its output going to South America. The production of this chain was dependant on the innovative progressive die and press system was patented by Sylvanus Dyer Locke, Senior, (1833-1896). The chain was refined and finally brought into production by his son Sylvanus Dyer Locke, Junior, (1871-1959).

The company's power lawn mower was ahead of its time with a chain driven counterbalanced front cutting unit which seemed to almost float over the ground. The counterbalance springs were tensioned to give 9 lbs on



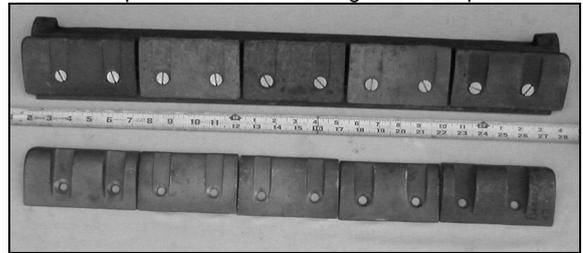
each end of the front cutting unit to partially lift it off the ground. This means that there is no need for a roller or side caster wheels to trample the grass in front of the blade. Therefore the cutting height was set by a thick spacer called a gauge shoe on the underneath of the sole plate and bottom blade which rubbed on the ground, so yes, it even leaves a very nice stripe on the lawn.

This gauge shoe(s) also served to clamp the 1/8" thick steel bottom blade onto the bottom of the cast iron blade back (sole plate). They also advertised that the user didn't need to sharpen the bottom blade as by turning it round, all four edges could be used before it needed to be

replaced. From the beginning the factory height of cut with a single bronze gauge shoe set at 5/8". However with a 1/2" aluminum spacer plate a 13/16" "long" cut could be obtained, as seen in the picture above.

In 1930 a thinner .085" bottom blade and shallower cast iron blade back allowed cuts below 1/2". Also produced in 1930 was a triplex version. The wing units were attached to the chassis by spring loaded brackets which helped reduce ground pressure. They were driven by metal shafts, aka 'dog bones', shaped in such a way to give the side units extreme flexibility to follow ground contour. By 1934 factory height of cut was increased to 3/4" and by WWII it was 1 1/4". In 1935 the one piece gauge shoe was changed to five separate pieces or sections. Since the ends took most of

the wear this redesign allowed cost savings by only having to replace the smaller end pieces. Various combinations of shoes and spacers now allowed heights of cut up to 3".



Separate piece gauge shoes, the upper ones being screwed to a sole plate. Note that the end pieces have a thicker section to withstand the increased wear.



These 3 gauge shoes show the different thicknesses available to provide differing cutting heights, while those below the tape measure show the back side of the shoe, which would normally be against the bottom blade.

These bronze shoes became popularly known as 'cemetery' shoes because the mower could drive right over cemetery ground markers made of stone or bronze without breaking or marking them. For many years Locke supplied mowers to maintain the American war graves in Europe and the Pacific.

Even though bronze shoes were more expensive they filled a niche. Bronze shoes remained in the catalogue until well after the Second World War. Today they are not that rare but are uncommon.

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