

## Early Ballarat Motoring, Part 1

### Ballarat's First Registered Car & the Briton Ambulance

Whilst the subject of which was the first motor car to make an appearance in Ballarat has been one of much discussion, there is no question as to the first vehicle to be registered in Ballarat.

Following the appearance of the motor car on Victorian roads in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it wasn't long before the ever-growing number of vehicles made it very difficult for authorities to maintain any form of effective regulation or control. In 1909 the Victorian Government passed the Motor Car Act which came into effect in January 1910 and provided the regulatory framework for registration and licensing.

From January 1910, all vehicles in Victoria were required to be registered. It is difficult to estimate the number of vehicles existing at that stage, but the subsequent list of registration numbers gives a fairly accurate estimate. Between January and December of 1910, 3,800 vehicles were presented for registration.

In 1910, registration number 29 was issued to a car belonging to local Ballarat doctor, Charles Henry William Hardy. Frustratingly, the early registration records do not record the model of car.

#### Doctor Charles Hardy

Born in Maldon, Dr. Hardy received his Bachelor of Medicine and Surgery in the early 1880s. He established a practise in Buninyong in the 1890s and in 1901 married Miss Helen Smith from Casterton. At the time he was also President of the Ballarat Mechanics Institute, who held a function at Craig's Hotel prior to them departing on an extended European and American honeymoon.

In 1910, when he registered his vehicle, he had settled into practice at 816 Sturt Street where he and his family lived for nearly 25 years (the site is now a Shell service station, next to the Ballarat Base Hospital, on the corner of Sturt and Drummond Streets ).

In 1915, Dr. Hardy enlisted in the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance at the age of 54 with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel, having previously served in the Citizen Military Force.

Dr. Hardy returned to Ballarat in 1917 to continue his medical practice. For his service he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and eventually attained the rank of Brigadier General. He was again President of the Mechanics Institute in 1920 and President of the Ballarat Branch of the RACV in 1924.

Upon retirement, the Hardy's moved to Toorak where Dr. Charles Henry William Hardy died in 1941, aged 80.

#### The Ballarat Ambulance

Before Dr. Hardy departed for active duty in 1915 he accepted, on behalf of the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance, a locally made "beautiful motor ambulance". It was a gift from the Ballarat Red Cross and was presented to Lieutenant Colonel Hardy in a ceremony at the City Oval.



Built at a cost of £500, the Briton chassis was supplied by Messrs. Adam Wilson and Co. of Armstrong Street South, described in the Ballarat Star as “well known engineers and motor builders”. The coachwork was completed by Messrs. L. E. Cutter and Sons, also of Armstrong Street.

#### Adam Wilson and Co.

In December 1914, the Ballarat Star dedicated a short article to Adam Wilson and Co., whose motor garage had secured the Victorian agency for Briton motor cars. The report suggests that Mr. Wilson was doing quite well, with his agency still selling a number of Briton cars despite the depression brought on by the war and the drought.



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The Star reported that “the motor car has now established itself as a commercial and social necessity, and not as a luxury” and that Wilson had a nice stock of Briton cars to choose from. The 10-12 h.p. single-seater was particularly popular in Ballarat and “is regarded by experts as the best value in cars offered in the State.”

#### Briton Automobiles

The history of Briton motor cars is inextricably linked to the Star Engineering Company of Wolverhampton. Edward Lisle had founded the Star Cycle Company in 1889, venturing into motor car production in 1898, albeit with a version of the 3.5hp Benz.

Edward’s son (also Edward) continued the production of cycles and from 1905 had begun production of small cars, the Starling and Stuart. In 1909 the Star Cycle Company became a subsidiary of the Star Engineering Company and, to avoid confusion, was renamed the Briton Motor Company. Joseph, another of Edwards sons, was appointed managing director.

Initially producing the twin cylinder, 7hp Little Briton, four cylinder models of between 10 and 16hp soon followed. Production continued during WW1, however in only a limited number of small commercial vehicles were produced in 1917/18. Vehicle manufacture resumed in 1919 but receivers were eventually appointed in 1921. Briton found a new owner and continued for a number of years until ceasing car production completely in 1929.



A number of examples of Briton survive with at least three remaining in Australia. The most recent addition to the Australian veteran fleet is the attractive 1910 Briton 14hp Briton roadster, restored on and off over a period of more than 40 years by Tim Harris (pictured).

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