



An Open and Closed Case
The Saint-Didier Convertible Body
By David Neely



The 1924 Rolls-Royce Twenty, chassis GRK81, pictured above has a body by the London company of Barker and was built to a French patent. On each front window frame is a plate inscribed 'Carrosserie Transformable' with the French Brevet Baehr, Patent No. 2312. The completed car was delivered to Motors Limited, the Adelaide Rolls-Royce agents, for John Reid in 1925. Reid was the principal of the firm of John Reid & Sons, tanners and leather merchants, who operated the Victoria Tannery at Hindmarsh, South Australia.



Gustave Baehr pictured here had facilities for prototype production in his garage, Saint-Didier Automobiles, 12, Rue Des Sablons, Paris. [gw.geneanet.org] [nuancierds.fr]

The patent was held by Gustave Baehr (1881-1954), a Parisian inventor and constructor of high-grade bodywork, and was amongst some 40 patents he filed in a number of countries, including Australia. The Australian patent for this style of bodywork was lodged on 7 July 1925 with the Department of Patents, Commonwealth of Australia:

"I, Gustave Baehr, Manufacturer, of 2 Rue des Sablons, Paris, France, of French nationality, hereby declare ... My invention relates to improvements in convertible carriage work for motor vehicles ... in which the hood or moveable roof portion is provided with a pivoting frame enabling it to fold back upon the rear of the vehicle or to be brought forward in the closed position of the carriage work, without requiring any considerable effort from the occupants of the vehicle. The space between the longitudinal beam of the hood and the upper edge of the carriage work, at each side of the vehicle, is closed by a set of glass windows which are pivoted together by means of hinges thus allowing all of the said windows to be folded down upon a common window which latter is pivoted at its lower edge to the upper edge of a recess provided in one of the windows of the carriage work, or in a door, and the whole set of windows can thus be made to disappear by a simple pivoting movement."

Baehr had lodged a patent in France on 30 December 1913 for just the folding of window frames into a door and the same patent was lodged in the United Kingdom on 3 April, 1915. On 27 January 1922 Baehr filed an application for a patent with the United States Patent Office which, like the subsequent Australian patent, also included the folding roof arrangement.

The title and extracts from Gustave Baehr's Australian patent. [pericles.iaustralia.gov.au]



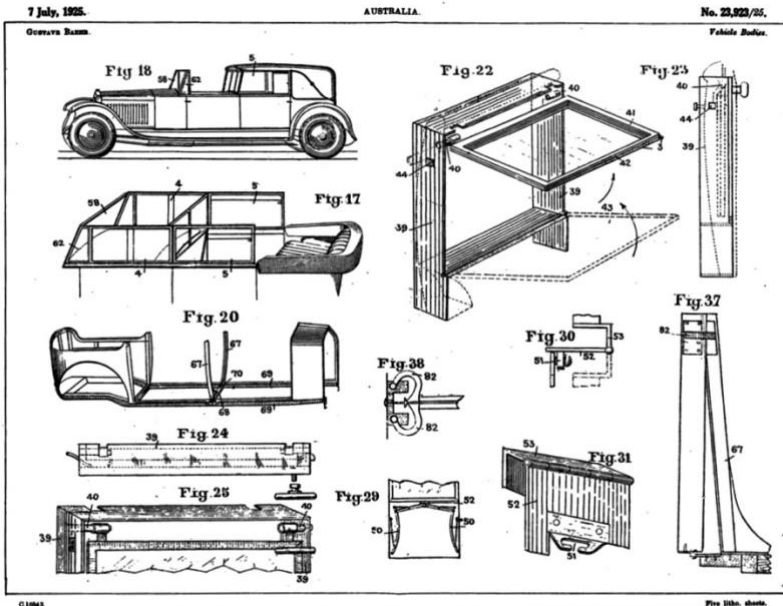
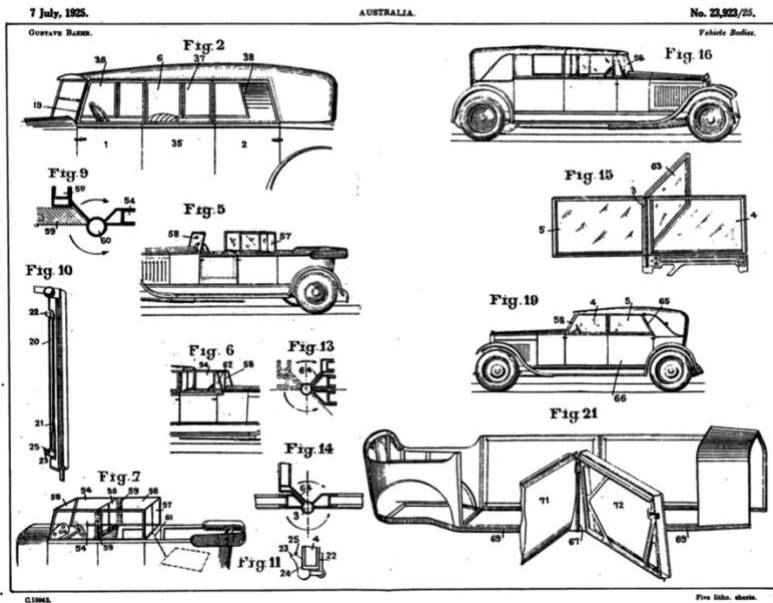
No. 23,923/25.

APPLICATION DATED

7th July, 1925.

Applicant (Actual Inventor) ...
Application and Complete Specification ...
Application and Complete Specification Accepted
 14th Oct., 1925

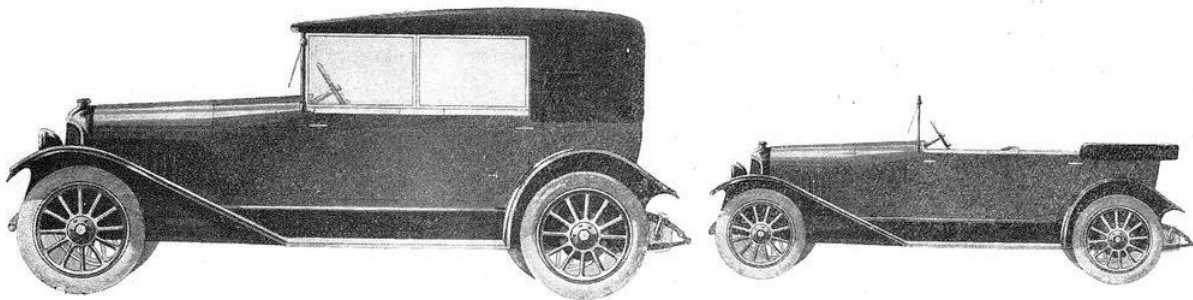
GUSTAVE BAHR.
 Lodged 7th July, 1925.
 Acceptance Advertised (Sec. 50) 27 Oct., 1925.



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Le Nouveau
Transformable
Standard

SAINTE-DIDIER
NOUVEAU BREVET G. BAEHR — GLACES AMOVIBLES



SAINTE-DIDIER

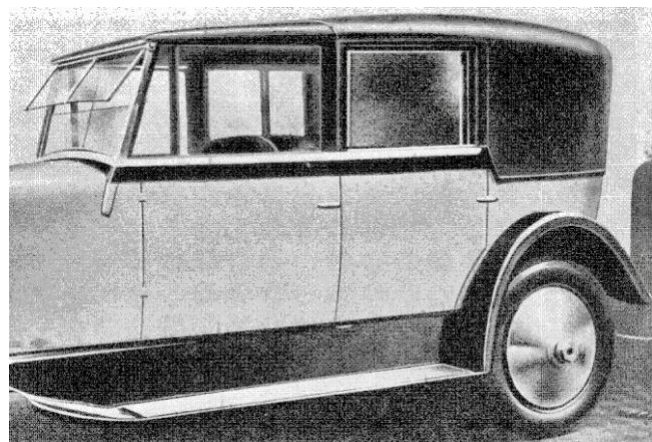
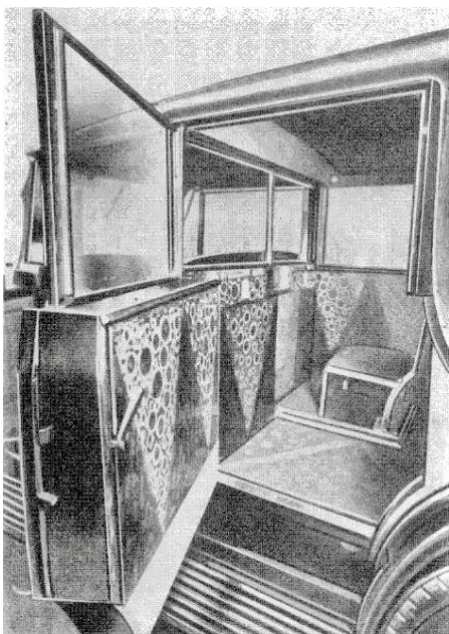
2, Rue des Sablons, Paris (XVI^e)

SUR DEMANDE IL SERA ENVOYÉ UNE NOTICE EXPLICATIVE DU SYSTÈME

AGENT EXCLUSIF DES BREVETS G. BAEHR
POUR LE MONDE ENTIER

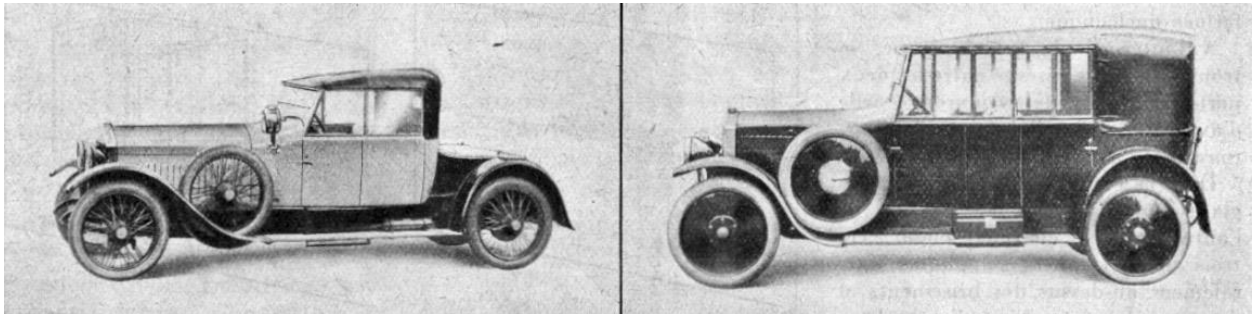
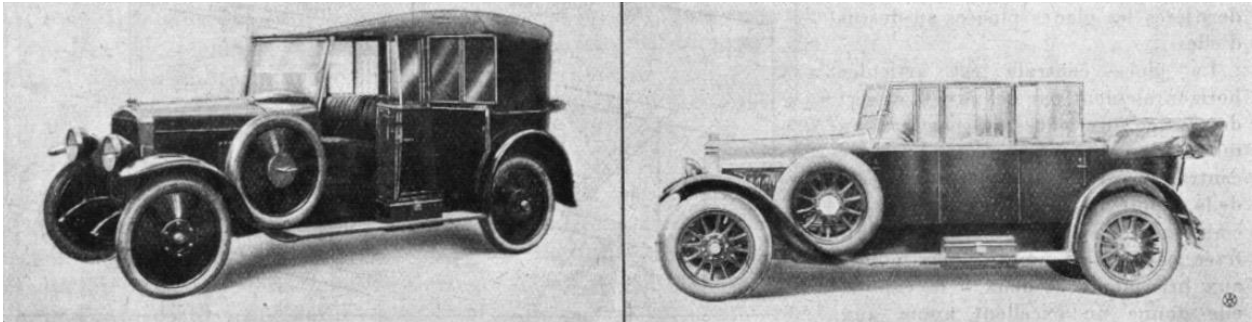
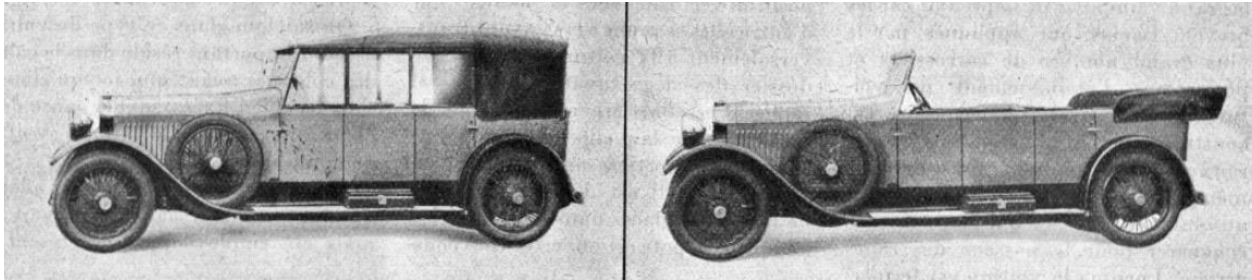
Téléphone 10 lignes : PASSY 13-83 et la suite

*An advertisement for Baehr's design of his Le Nouveau Transformable Saint-Didier.
[coachbuild.com]*

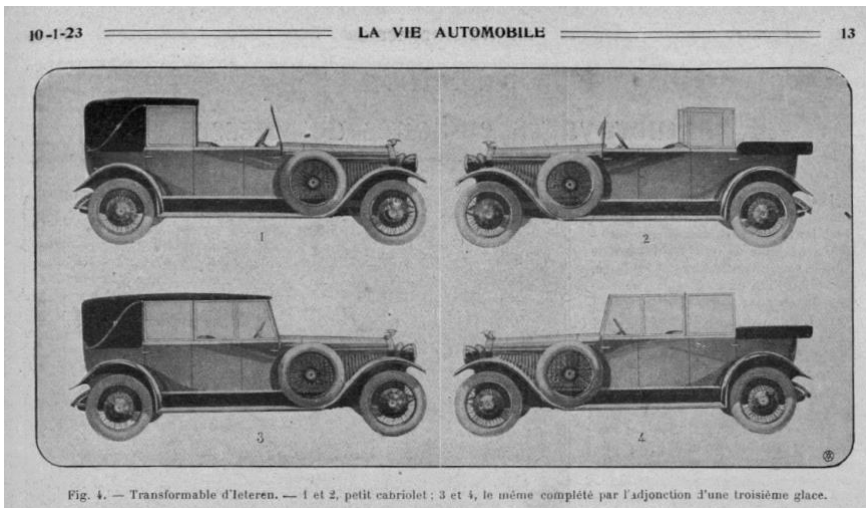


*Henri Binder, Paris, exhibited at the 1925
Exposition Internatioanale des Arts Décoratifs et
Industriels Modernes this 'Voiture
Transformable « Saint-Didier »'. [cnum.cnam.fr]*

The French motoring journal, 'La Vie Automobile' reported on 25 May, 1922, the "Système Baehr" was employed by major European coachbuilders. Examples by Carrosserie D'leteren, Brussels, were illustrated.



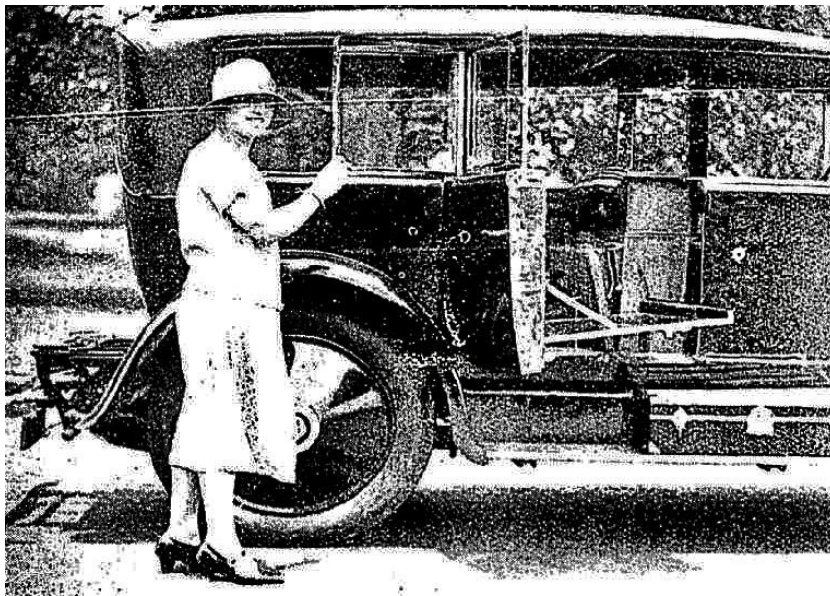
Below: This transformable by D'leteren was illustrated in 'La Vie Automobile', 10 January, 1923.



Baehr's patent rights were acquired for Australia by a Sydney resident. The formation of a new company was reported in 'The Sydney Morning Herald' on 7 January, 1925. All-weather Bodies, Limited was registered, "To acquire from D A Craig his rights to patents in connection with Gustave Baehr All-weather Bodies and to carry on business as manufacturers of and dealers in motor cars, engines, chasses (sic), etc. Permanent director, D A Craig." David Alexander Craig (1887-1950) was a businessman, though he was not connected to the motor industry. His preferred entrepreneurial strategy, well-illustrated here with All-weather Bodies Limited, was to introduce overseas brands to Australia, but to sell out rather than develop the product.

C. B. Bradley was appointed the managing director of All-weather Bodies Limited. In January 1925 he demonstrated the Saint-Didier convertible body on a Hispano-Suiza, which was, "Fitted with a seven-passenger body executed by the French builder."

Bradley, who was also the managing director of C B Bradley, Ltd., Phillip Street, Sydney, was well-known in the Australian motor industry. In 1922 he made a five months tour of America, Europe, England and India. While in France he attended the French automobile exposition at Grand Palais Internationale. They were agents notably for Rover as well as Hillman and F N cars.



The Hispano-Suiza that Bradley used to demonstrate the Saint-Didier coachwork was illustrated in Melbourne's 'Table Talk'. The caption read, "The convertible Baehr fitted to an Hispano-Suiza. Windows and sides can be folded neatly into the door, this making the car an open tourer." ['Table Talk', 28 January, 1926.]

All-weather Bodies Limited exhibited a Buick car with a Saint-Didier convertible body at the 1926 Sydney Show.

At the April 1925 International Motor Show in Melbourne a Saint-Didier body on a Renault was exhibited. At the Albury Motor Show in September 1926 Wests Motors exhibited a Rover with a Saint-Didier body, which was sold to Mrs Lang of the Albury Hotel.

The Sydney firm of Steenbhoms advertised in the 'Sydney Mail' on 20 January, 1926 that two examples of the "St. Didier Patent" were on exhibition at their stand at that year's Sydney Motor Show. Presumably, Steenbhoms built the bodies. Their advertisement in 'The Sydney Morning Herald' on 17 February, 1926, included the "St. Didier Patent All-weather Body" amongst those they built.

All-weather Bodies Ltd was short-lived and on 23 September, 1927, the NSW 'Government Gazette' recorded that All-weather Bodies Limited was to be wound up voluntarily and a liquidator was appointed. The market for the Saint-Didier convertible style was slowly disappearing by about 1928.

In Australia, Gustave Baehr's ingenious Saint-Didier convertible body, first designed in 1913, had its heyday in the mid 1920s. The popularity of open tourers in the early 1920s gave way to closed cars towards the end of the decade. For those who could afford what was said to be the additional £50, the Saint-Didier convertible body provided the best of both automotive worlds. The design was feted by the press in Sydney, "From Open to Closed Convertible in a Minute Latest All-weather Body" ('The Daily Telegraph, 19 September, 1925), and in Melbourne, "Convertible Cars Open or Closed at Your Will" ('The Herald', 18 January, 1926). Baehr was applauded, "the celebrated body-building engineer of Paris" and "a Parisian constructor of high-grade bodywork."

Baehr's Saint-Didier convertible design executed by Barker on the 1924 Rolls-Royce Twenty has survived in the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia. The body is original and in immaculate restored condition. It is a fitting legacy to the coachwork inventiveness of Gustave Baehr.

Acknowledgement: Tom Clarke for extensive material on Gustave Baehr and the Saint-Didier convertible.

Author: David Neely is an Honorary Life Member of the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia, George Sevenoaks Medal (NSW), Sir Henry Royce Foundation, Australia, Historical Consultant, co-author with Tom Clarke of 'Rolls-Royce and Bentley in the Sunburnt Country', author of 'In the Rear-View Mirror – a History of the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club, former editor of PRÆCLARVM and regular contributor of articles. He has owned a 1926 Phantom I, 1929 Phantom II, 1957 Bentley S1, 1963 Silver Cloud III and currently has a 1985 Silver Spirit [2022].

1924 Rolls-Royce Twenty, chassis GRK81, was built by the London company of Barker to Gustave Baehr's patent and retains its original coachwork. It was present at the inaugural meeting of the Victoria Branch of the Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia in 1957 and has been owned by Club members continuously until the present. Pictured here when owned by Rolls-Royce Owners' Club member, the late Jim Kelso, who undertook this magnificent restoration. [Photos David Neely.]



