

## The History of the OECC - Ian Cox

### **The Little Van That Did: Twenty years of the Old English Car Club and Registry in British Columbia**

Club shirts and medieval costumes. Little cars on strings and shoestring restorations. The buying and selling of cars and trucks. Making new friends and testing old relationships. Discovering new techniques and tasting vintage wines. Highland games, trips to England, and building businesses. A 1904 Wolseley and a fleet of Austin pedal cars. Meetings, drives, rallies, prizes. Country fairs for English cars. Trips around the park, the province, and international rallies. ICBC calendars, Roundabouts, Dynamos, Beans, Leaky Gaskets, and line dancing! What's it all about, where did all this come from and how did we get here from there?

This abridged tale of the history of the Old English Car Club & Registry must begin in March 1969 with an advertisement in a Vancouver paper:

*1963 Triumph van for sale.  
Good condition. \$450. Ph 643...*

This young husband and expectant father of twins wanted a small, simple, and affordable van to replace his ailing Austin A55 car as an everyday vehicle, and this was to be the answer. It happens that in those days a favourite drink was hot beef bouillon with a little milk added. The resultant colour of which was referred to describe the colour of our new van to Gail, as she lay in the hospital. So "Oxo" was adopted just a few days before my two sons were born.

Fast forward to 1982. After 13 years of faithful everyday service, which included transporting the family to Winnipeg for a 5-year stint, Oxo was back in British Columbia and had only recently lost his status as the family vehicle in favour of an Oldsmobile station wagon. Now his new responsibilities were to haul the Osoyoos scout troop to camp, the canoe to the lake, and assorted other leisurely activities. With this orientation to fun we began to respond to the delighted comments of Okanagan holidaymakers who gave us a new perspective on the joys of owning a unique vehicle.

Owning Oxo became so much fun that in 1985 I began to search out others to share the delights with:

*Wanted: information leading to contact  
with other British vehicle owners.  
Phone Ian 497...*

A list of contacts grew and soon became a project of listing all known British vehicles. The area of interest was the southern interior of B.C. I was addicted to the excitement of discovering so many forgotten cars and trucks. The bonus of meeting people with great stories to tell was a genuine thrill. My sons got into the act by setting up a database on their computer and we were unstoppable! I remember that selecting a name for the list was challenging, especially around the choice of the terms "English" or "British". Then I discovered there was an Olde British Car Society in Vancouver, under the guidance of Steve Diggins, so the choice was made clear.

As this Old English Car Registry grew, communication between car owners increased and I realized there was a great potential for the formation of a British car club. In 1988 I modified the registry to form The Old English Car Club & Registry. The ads became:

*Old English Car Club and Registry. Free registration.  
Free memberships. Parts, service, and advice.  
Help. Meets. Help to buy, sell, swap, etc.  
Call soon 497...*

In June of 1990 I borrowed a neighbour's swimming pool cover to form a tarpaulin tent in a park on the lakeshore in Penticton. I made a huge banner sign using yellow housepaint on some black polyvinyl and strung it between two trees. We were having the first British car field meet in the interior. Gail was there holding down the tent in the wind while her mother served doughnuts and hot chocolate to one and all. Gail's on-going support was to be crucial to our future success. A business meeting was the only break in the car talk. In quick order Len Drake of Kelowna and Ken Finnigan of Kamloops declared that they would form branches of the OECC & R in their areas. Officers were elected, I was chosen to be president, and we had taken another great step forward. There were 111 cars in the Registry up to this point. We were delighted to have 25 there that day. The addition of cars from Kelowna and Kamloops brought us up to 160 registrants overnight.

No one could have guessed how significant a casual interview which was taking place that afternoon would be. The Western Advertiser, Penticton's local free paper, had responded to our invitation to send a reporter. How I wish I could recall her name so that she could be acknowledged for the great job she did. Thelma and Cliff Hultgren had come along with their daily driver, a 1956 Morris Isis. The charming elderly couple were local pioneers and original owners of this fine very worn old car, which, like them, was unrestored, proudly vintage and still going strong. A copy of the reporter's tale featuring the Hultgren's is filed in the OECC&R archives. Suffice it to say that over the next several weeks unsolicited newspaper clippings were received from all across Canada, showing how this delightful story about the forming of a club for British-car enthusiasts had appealed to news editors far and wide. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation was intrigued too, and a live broadcast took place on a province-wide morning show soon after. The floodgates were being opened!

Once word of the club spread outside of the B.C. Interior the Registry grew exponentially. The Penticton-based club had members across the country and in the States too. Not long after the meet Lofty Hall formed a branch in Salmon Arm. I moved to the coast in 1991. We had accumulated registry members in the Vancouver area so I called them all together and we formed a branch there too. The Kelowna branch grew rapidly and effectively absorbed the members in Penticton and the south Okanagan, and then they broke away from the OECC&R, becoming the Okanagan British Car Club. Salmon Arm did well for a few years then floundered. Oxo and his family moved to Victoria in 1993 and called a meeting of Registry members there, and the South Island Branch was formed. Members from Nanaimo attended the South Island meetings and then initiated the Central Island Branch. The Comox Valley Branch was initiated in a similar fashion. It was persons listed in the registry who eventually became the branch centred on Prince George. Word of the club spread outside of B.C. and it soon had members across the country and in the States too. Enquiries had been received about forming branches in Alberta and Saskatchewan. That was a challenge which we were not quite up to at that time, but we encouraged them to see what they could do for themselves and promised our support.

Although the branches were sufficiently well organized in those days, the club management was a bit loose. We had a treasurer in Summerland, a secretary in Penticton, and a president on the Coast. Executive meetings just didn't happen. The club's Registry was now on a PC-File database, donated by ButtonWare, and I was able to support the club's growing mail and telephone expenses by making up lists of up to 200 cars for sale and selling them for \$2 each by mail order and at car shows. We actually ran a cash surplus in that way. People who bought the lists we encouraged to help keep them up-to-date and to join the club if they bought a car. Hundreds of lists were sold. Expanding the Registry as the basis of a growing club was a major part of what I did in those years. Contacting owners who advertised their cars for sale in newspapers and on notice boards, then offering to help sell them was one effective method. On many occasions the owners decided to keep their cars when they learned that there was a club of like-minded souls to support them. It was very rewarding. I would follow cars that I encountered on the road until they stopped, sometimes jumping out of the car at stop signs and red lights to pass on the ever-ready club promotional material to very surprised drivers. Parking lots and ferry line-ups were fair pickings too. My reward was the interest, appreciation, and enthusiasm of virtually everyone I encountered. I learned very early on that if a person drives a British car they would most likely be congenial and responsive.

Until now there had been no one club in Canada supporting all makes of British cars. The untapped interest was tremendous. Enquiries, applications for membership, offers to buy and sell cars, requests for assistance with restorations, valuations, parts, and everything else imaginable came through the mail and over the telephone daily. Responding to these initial interests was the basis of the club's philosophy and purpose. They shaped the club and made it what it is today, a response to its members' interests.

From the start this club was designed to be a little different from most others. The focus was to be on accommodating diversity, and on enjoying the hobby through the experience of camaraderie and mutual respect. Competiveness, while not to be avoided entirely, would not be valued. We declared ourselves to be "The club which encourages the restoration, preservation, and enjoyment of all makes of British vehicles. Offering meetings, rallies, technical assistance, social events, and informal appraisals of value".

The work of guiding the club from this point forward became much more demanding. We were on the road to becoming a registered society with all its encumbrances. For several years the management of the club fell to members in the Victoria area. They did a terrific job of setting the club on course. More recently the management has centred on Nanaimo. And now there's talk of electronic networking and tele-meetings so that every branch can be involved equally. That's wonderful!

Suffice it to say that the development of the club has never been dull. We've had our portions of pain, frustration, resentments, and even some anger. We're still here, and still on the same road that we started down 20 years ago, and still with the same objectives and philosophy. We are a healthy, growing, innovative, and unique club. The satisfaction expressed by members far and wide makes past efforts all worthwhile.

Branches, newsletters and some members have come, gone, and come back again. The club as a whole has reflected the interests of its members as understood by whichever brave souls accepted executive positions at various points in time. The Registry of all known British vehicles, which was the foundation of the club, became cumbersome and was put to rest

after attaining almost 2000 entries in the year 2000. Some potential branches, such as in the Fraser Valley, the Kootenays and even the Prairie Provinces may never come to pass after all. We may now be in a period of stability rather than rapid growth. Responding to the growing interest while holding it all together is a constant challenge. We have always been blessed with officers who have the best interest of the club at heart. That's all we'll ever need.

For the last four of my nine years as club president, we sought someone to take over from me. That wasn't easy for any of us. "Where do we find another zealot?" Dave Pollard said when given the task. The OECC&R has become a significant part of my life, and my family's too. The wonderful people I've come to know and the way it has all changed my life are a great gift for which I shall always be grateful.

People are what it's all about. If you'll pardon the pun, cars are the vehicle that brings us together. As much as we delight in the diversity of the club's cars I am confident that it is the diversity of our members that makes the club so strong. Different vehicles bring different members to the club and that variety is our source of strength.

A little van that puts a smile on people's faces still represents who we are and what we do. We have something to be proud of, and we have fun. The OECC&R was magic from the start. It has become a great club with a wonderful unique character. We have much to look back on with pride. If we respect and protect our club's heritage by continuing to do what has made us successful, an important part of which is being willing to evolve, then our bright future is assured.

Ian Cox,  
OECC&R founder.  
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