

History of the London to Brighton Run

"The Motor Car Tour to Brighton"

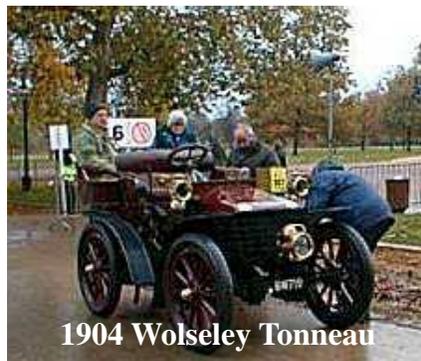
On Saturday, November 14, 1896, the newly formed British Motor Car Club staged the first of a century of events we now know as the London to Brighton Run. The event, known then as The Motor Car Tour to Brighton, was approximately 62 miles (100 km). It was a celebration of motor cars coming of age.

Red Flags and Locomotives on Highways

The motor cars of 1896 had evolved from steam powered vehicles not unlike rail locomotives adapted to road use without rails. They were referred to as "light locomotives" in early English vehicle regulations. "Light locomotives" were defined as vehicles under 3 tons and legislation dating prior to 1878 specified a 4 mph speed limit and required that they be preceded by a man on foot carrying a red flag. The speed limit may have had some relation to the speed that a man could maintain over a significant distance. Although several sources have stated or implied that motor cars had to be preceded the man with the red flag prior to the first London to Brighton run, an article published by The Veteran Car Club of Great Britain states: "the need for

the man on foot to carry a red flag had actually been abolished in 1878." The 4 mph speed limit, however, had endured and by 1896 had come to be a "red flag" despised by motor car enthusiasts.

The Locomotives on the Highway Act of 1896 was a substantial improvement in motoring laws, undoubtedly encouraging the development of motor vehicles. It was known at the time as



1904 Wolseley Tonneau

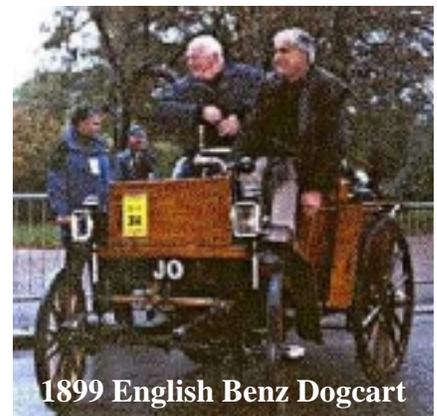
the "Red Flag Act," possibly because it removed the "red flag" 4 mph speed limit and raised the speed limit to 14 mph. The web site of the UK Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency elaborates on the 1896 legislation:

"The speed limit was raised to 14 mph, or to a lower limit prescribed by a local government board. Lights also became compulsory along with 'an instrument capable of giving audible and sufficient warning'. Regulations passed soon afterwards also provided for a speed limit of 12 mph; keeping to the left when passing oncoming carriages,

horses and cattle and to the right when overtaking; and stopping the vehicle at the request of any police constable or person 'in charge of a restive horse'".

Motor Cars on Trial

Before the start of the first run the Earl of Winchester solemnly tore up a red flag, symbolic of the detested speed regulation that the Locomotives on the Highway Act repealed. The London to Brighton run demonstrated that the automobile had come of age. Automobiles were here to stay. In an attempt to staunch public skepticism with regard to motor cars, event organizers distributed instructions stating: "Owners and drivers should remember that motor cars are on trial in England and that any rashness or carelessness might injure the industry in this country."



1899 English Benz Dogcart

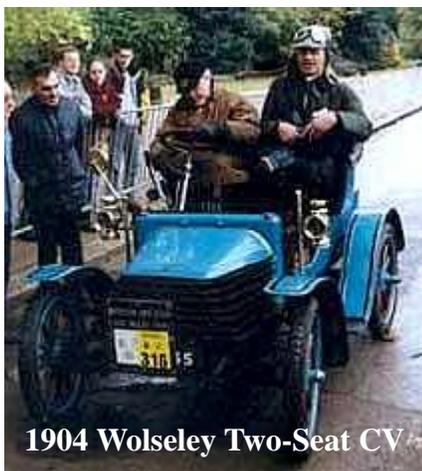
How Many Finished?

Considerable confusion exists concerning the statistics of the first run. Even articles published immediately following the event couldn't agree on the

number of participants or the results. An article on The Brooklands Society web site states:

“When The Sporting Life attempted to report on the original London-Brighton run ... it lamented, ‘There never was an important event so lacking in authentic results.’ To a paper used to dealing in first-past-the-post racing certainties, the organisation of that first ‘Motor Car Tour to Brighton’ left much to be desired. Few published accounts even agree on such basic details as the number of cars that took part, who arrived first and, indeed, who arrived at all. Some of those who arrived in Brighton had traveled by train and some tried to disguise the fact.”

The following statistics emerge from various



1904 Wolseley Two-Seat CV

sources. Approximately 58 cars were entered in the event but not all started. One source says that 35 cars actually started the event and 25 finished, while an-

other source says that 33 started and 14 finished. The differences between entries and starts and between starts and finishes probably reflects the fragility of vehicles of the era and, likely, the condition of the roads as well. Indeed, an article on the web site of The Veteran Car Club of Great Britain says “it was hinted that one car was taken by train and covered with mud before crossing the finishing line!”

London to Brighton Today

Every year, on the first



Sunday of November, the first London to Brighton run is commemorated both in London and Brighton. In England it has come to be a spectacular event, drawing 500 pre-1905 motor cars from all over the world in 2000. Interestingly, a few of the cars that participated in the first run are still there. Participants, though challenged, find roads that are undoubtedly far superior to those experienced in 1896. The speed limit is now 20

mph and a million people line the route to watch the early motor cars pass. All who finish by 4:30 pm are given an award. After all, it's a run not a race!

Sources

The sources below provided the content for this article. From them you can learn even more about the London to Brighton Run. I especially recommend the home page of Classic Car & Mc which includes coverage of the 2000 event and photos of many of last year's entrants. The home page of The Veteran Car Club of Great Britain should be of interest to those interested in veteran English motor cars.

Web Sites:

Brooklands Society [<http://www.brooklands.org.uk/Montagu/MONT6.HTM>]

Chicagoland MG Club [http://www.chicagolandmgclub.com/guests/ibcu/l2br_run.html]

Classic Car & Mc [home page: <http://www.hvidovrebo.dk/lb/>]

LBRun page: <http://www.hvidovrebo.dk/lb/page29.html>]

UK Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency [http://www.dvla.gov.uk/histm_l/arrival.htm]

The Veteran Car Club of Great Britain [home page: <http://www.vccofgb.co.uk/>]
LBRun page: <http://www.vccofgb.co.uk/lbpage.htm>]