

## CHAPTER FIVE – THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

If Lord's development and launch of the Morris Eight was spectacular, it was nothing in comparison with his decline within the company. There are complex issues which surround the circumstances and we need to review them all extremely carefully as they are pivotal to his story.

Not everything Lord did at Morris Motors was on a grand or dramatic scale. He shaped the future of MG, yet his impact on that company occurred almost by accident. However, the circumstances help give a further insight into the calibre of the man and his personality. Consequently we need to look in some detail at the story of MG.

As most devout sports car enthusiasts agree, MG probably stands for 'Morris Garages' although this is not proven. The 'garages' were a wing of William Morris's business that went back to the earliest days and formally received its title in 1910 – The Morris Garages (W R Morris Proprietor) – when he began erecting new accommodation and generally expanding, what was, quite simply, a motor repair business and dealership for a range of car makes.

When Morris started to build his Oxford, fortuitously for MG devotees, The Morris Garages was allowed to remain a separate company and a new firm was formed to take on manufacturing. It was registered in 1912 as W R M Motors Ltd.

From 1921, a young man of 33 named Cecil Kimber was the sales manager of Morris Garages. Kimber was from a distinguished, but not affluent, English family. Richard Kimber had served with Oliver Cromwell. His grandson, Isaac Kimber, wrote a biography of the great Puritan republican. Other members of the clan included a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and a free spirited female artist. Later generations, however, were more mechanically minded and moved into the manufacture of printing and reprographic equipment.

Kimber was destined for this world too, even though the fortunes of his father's Lancashire ink business had taken a downturn, and despite his passion for motor cycles. Yet, fate took a hand. A stockbroker knocked Cecil off a borrowed Rex machine on the road from Grappenhall to Lymm, in Cheshire, and seriously injured him. The medical procedures of the day did not serve the young man well and after a series of excruciatingly painful operations it was decided to amputate his right leg altogether. When all seemed lost, the shattered thigh began to heal to the satisfaction of his surgeons. The amputation was abandoned, and Cecil Kimber spent the rest of his life with one leg two inches shorter than the other and a consequent limp.

Some of the sizeable amount of compensation received from the stockbroker put Kimber on four wheels with a 1913 Singer Ten. But nothing could compensate for the loss of his mother from cancer just a few years before. As his only sister left home to get married, his only brother went to War, and the ink business went to the wall, Cecil Kimber suffered an irreparable rift with his father over the remains of the accident damages.

They never spoke again and Kimber committed himself to the motor industry. There was initially a vague link with a local Manchester firm, Crossley, before he joined Sheffield-Simplex. While there, he married Irene (or Rene)\* Hunt from Ladybarn in Manchester and promptly quit, or lost, his job at Sheffield-Simplex. One theory is he could not tolerate being subservient and walked out when his employer was less than enthusiastic about an innovation he had suggested.

\*This is sometimes rendered Renée, probably incorrectly.

...57

By 1916 he was working as a buyer for AC in Thames Ditton, Surrey, with Rene as his secretary. Then, two years later, with possibly a brief interval at Martinsyde Aircraft in nearby Woking, he headed north again and to our familiar E G Wrigley of Birmingham. This very firmly establishes the link with Morris, of course. But Kimber, who had bought shares in the company, was there as works organizer for the débacle with the Angus Sanderson car, and there seems little doubt he lost most of his money as a consequence. Kimber got out in 1921 and secured the job of sales manager with Morris Garages.

Fate again took a hand. His boss at Morris was the 'Garages' general manager Edward Armstead. He had taken over Morris's bicycle business in 1908 and had clearly gone on to higher things. Not long after Kimber joined, Armstead mysteriously resigned and a few weeks later gassed himself to death, a suicide for which no explanation has ever been found.

Kimber was offered Armstead's post and began running The Morris Garages from March 1922. His enthusiasm for fast motor cycles and cars again came to the fore. Helped considerably by his wife, he started designing rakish coachwork at the couple's home in Banbury Road, Oxford, that could simply be 'bolted on' to the standard chassis from Morris Motors (this title had been adopted in 1919 and the name W R M Motors Limited dropped). The bottom line was that so treated, the cars could be sold for a third more than the standard models.

According to the young Hubert Charles, who was a production 'trouble shooter' working for Morris Motors at the time, and who used to visit the Kimbers at a new address on Woodstock Road, Rene was '*a most cultured, charming and wonderful person*'. Incidentally, Charles, a brilliant engineer, had cut his teeth as engineering officer during WWI to the squadron in which the legendary aces James McCudden and Albert Ball served. He worked, appropriately, on Wolseley Viper (aka V8 Hispano-Suiza) engines and later joined Kimber at MG as chief draughtsman.

Harold Connolly, who was the talented freelance artist who illustrated all the MG catalogues and brochures from 1929 onwards, also remembers Rene, and that she used to like to pose for publicity photographs with the new models. This is probably just as well because Kimber liked pretty girls to be seen in his cars and, by his own admission, Connolly couldn't draw them as well as he, the artist, would have liked.

Gradually Kimber developed the tuned, 'sports', Morris but output was very much on a peripatetic basis. The first cars were built in Longwall (the area of Oxford that accommodated the Morris Works on Holywell Street), then Queen Street, then another 'Garages' address in Pusey Street and finally in part of Morris's equally mobile radiator factory, which, by 1926, had new premises, built on the site of an old brick works, on Woodstock Road. In 1927 Kimber's enterprise got its own purpose-built plant in Edmund Road, Cowley and was registered as the MG Car Company Ltd on July 21, 1930, although 'MG' had been used as the name actually on the cars from 1928.

It was at Edmund Road that the elegant, Kimber-styled, MG radiator was first fitted, initially on the 18/80 launched in August 1928 using a tuned version of the six cylinder Morris Isis engine, and then on the Midgets, in which the Minor's overhead camshaft engine was to find a welcoming home.

In 1929 MG moved yet again, this time to a site in Abingdon, about 10 miles to the south west of Cowley, and, coincidentally, the ancestral home of the Kimbers. The move was necessitated by growing demand for the Midget (altogether 3,235 were built in its four year life) and occurred at a stage when Kimber was becoming increasingly interested in racing. This is an important point.

We cannot be sure how committed he was to the sport for its commercial value. His talent for salesmanship and publicity was probably sufficient for his marketing needs without the competitive activity. For instance, he told Connolly: '*If the car's good let's make the literature good*', admittedly, somewhat regardless of print costs. He was also of the view that '*the catalogue is the salesman that goes home with you*'.

Other of his sayings included '*a sports car should look fast even when it's standing still!*' Connolly recalled how he could make the staid Bullnose Morris look quick. No tricks were applied by the artist to make them appear faster. '*He was after something beautiful, attractive; efficient in so far as it performed what he wanted it to do. He had a lovely idea of what the young lad of the village wanted and that's what he built*', explained Connolly. Thus the racing may have simply indulged a private passion.

All that accepted, there is no question racing and record breaking made MGs famous in no small measure. It also made them desirable. Kimber had seen the same effect at Crossley, where the famous pioneer racer, Charles Jarrott, was a director, and to an even greater extent at AC. Whatever the scenario it did not augur well. Although William Morris had been a robust racing cyclist in his youth, and, supposedly, one of his proudest possessions was the numerous awards for the sport contained in a glass case in his office, and even though he had driven his first cars in hillclimbs and reliability trials, Morris had a schizophrenic relationship with motor sport.

On the debit side, one of the first articles Miles Thomas wrote for *The Morris Owner*, the customer journal he had been charged with producing, decried the benefit of racing. '*For anyone to suggest that a concern that builds a successful racing car must ipso facto produce a good touring model is sheer rubbish*'. While Morris himself was wont to say: '*there isn't a motor firm that has supported racing that hasn't had the Receiver in*'.

On a more positive note, Morris provided the whole £3,100 prize money for the 1933 Ulster Tourist Trophy road race. Also, when Bentley were competing in the famous Le Mans 24 Hour *Grand Prix d'Endurance*, he loaned them the former Leon Bollée works in the city for each of the years from 1925-30. Morris had bought 'Bollée' in 1924.

But clearly there were reservations about racing and it is all the more impressive Kimber kept a full scale Works racing programme running for around five years – 1929-1934. The anti-racing ethos was compounded by two unhappy events in 1934 – one a tragedy in real terms, the other only as regards ego.

...61

In the first instance, the well-known racing driver Kaye Don crashed an MG, killing his racing mechanic, Frank Tayler, who was an employee of the company. The accident happened on May 28, in the run up to the Isle of Man TT. Don was testing a K3 Magnette, outside the official practice period, at 10.30 pm, in virtual darkness, driving untaxed, uninsured, with neither lights nor horn. Having lost control of the MG on a bend he hit a 'civilian' saloon, killing Tayler and fracturing his own skull.

The inquest decided Tayler's death was '*due to the culpably negligent driving of Mr Kaye Don*'. The latter was charged with manslaughter, convicted, and sentenced to four months in prison, which he served after an unsuccessful appeal. The circumstances of 27-year-old Tayler's death were horrible enough but the ensuing bad publicity in the national and motoring press was considerably exacerbated by crass insensitivity from a number of quarters.

James Wentworth-Day, a prolific writer on a wide variety of subjects, was about to publish his biography of Don, supposedly a man with the common touch. He managed to include an account of the events in his book, which conveyed little remorse and scant regard for the grief of Tayler's family.

Meanwhile another voluminous scribe and himself a famous racing driver, S C H (Sammy) Davis of *The Autocar*, held forth on the injustice of Don being brought to trial and does not even acknowledge the victim by name in an October 26th article. This so repelled the readership that on November 23, the magazine was forced to devote a whole page to correspondents whose '*views differ from those of Mr. Davis*'.

...62

Morris was unquestionably deeply upset by the death of a young man who had originally joined The Morris Garages in 1923, been at Abingdon since 1929, and developed into a first class mechanic. And we can be sure Lord was equally disgusted by the events and especially some of the attitudes.

On the second occasion, trivial by comparison, Morris, recently elevated to the peerage as Lord Nuffield and on one of his numerous trips to Australia, was to address a crowded public function. The introduction as '*the man who makes Morris cars*' was met by a sea of blank faces. Almost as an aside, it was added that he was also responsible for MG and while there may not quite have been uproarious applause, there was instantaneous and enthusiastic recognition. To repeat again Graham Turner in *The Leyland Papers*: Kimber's days were numbered!

To recap briefly. Morris Motors Ltd bought the MG Car Company Ltd in 1935 using money raised by an offer of ordinary shares. This followed the deal to free Morris Motors from Morris Industries Ltd, in effect free it from Morris the man. As Leonard Lord was already managing director of Morris Motors he also became head of MG with Kimber, to all intents and purposes, demoted to general manager but with a directorship.

F Wilson McComb puts it thus in his book *The Story of the MG Sports Car*. '*Things could never be quite the same again. Kimber's personality flourished only when he had freedom of action, when he was in a position to make quick decisions. He was anything but a committee man; still less a company man. MG owed their success to his personal control and direction, under which the Abingdon factory had become a close-knit unit owing loyalty to him, the personification of MG*'.

...63

There is no evidence that Leonard Lord had any enthusiasm for motor sport on two, four or any other number of wheels – especially now. It is true that his youngest daughter, Pauline, had modest rallying success in the mid-1950s, but that, of course, is two decades later.

The surplus money that would have enabled Lord to take part in any form of competitive motoring when he was young would simply not have been available to the household, and we can reasonably assume that in the 1920s and '30s he would have viewed it as a pointless waste of time for the affluent classes and over-indulged rich kids. On an early visit to Abingdon, having toured the racing department, he is reported as saying: '*Well that bloody lot can go for a start*'.

Naturally, this has been seized upon ever since by those who think they can demonstrate the managing director's arrogance, short sightedness, his ruthless inflexibility and insensitivity, plus, no doubt, a simple lack of *joie de vivre*. Unfortunately, without having actually heard the comment and being able to judge Lord's demeanour, it is impossible to accurately interpret his words. It may have been a half-joking throwaway line, or, a declaration of what he intended to do, and did, but without malice.

...64

Lord is now in a very difficult position. His boss has become unsupportive of the racing programme and he himself is committed to practical and economic objectives in a competitive commercial environment. And MG's figures are disastrous. Between 1930 and 1934 they had shown a total trading surplus of just £419. By September 1935 they had broken all their records by losing an incredible £28,156 with sales at a five year low. All this the work of a man described by Connolly as someone who could add up a column of figures three times and end up with four different answers. Lord must have asked himself, with another débâcle in view, what really was the point of continuing to run an expensive competitions department at Abingdon? He was absolutely right to do so.

In 1930 racing had cost just over £1,000, in 1931 it had consumed nearly five, was back to £2,700 in 1932 but at the all time high of £5,863 in 1933 while at the time of MG's acquisition by Morris Motors on July 1, 1935, it was already racing again towards £5,000. In addition the development costs for the R Type single-seater racing car were being concealed in the everyday accounting.

Furthermore, it was increasingly apparent that the Austin Seven, the MG's principal rival in the small sports car category, was out-dated and outclassed and there were sufficient customers possessing the excellent Midget and J Series MGs to race them privately. By so doing the prestige of the car as a thoroughbred could be maintained at minimal cost and new devotees wooed along the way.

...65

To revert to a point expounded earlier. This was not a game. It was not a frivolous pursuit for amateurs acted out on the grassy slopes beside Brooklands, Donington or Shelsley Walsh race tracks, whilst lying on picnic blankets, listening to '78s' on a wind-up gramophone. This was hard-nosed commercial life and Leonard Lord was there to deliver.

Meanwhile, the incident in Australia, where Nuffield was upstaged, probably hadn't helped Kimber's reputation, particularly as we have another shadowy figure moving through the 'wings' – Lady Nuffield. A former seamstress and member of the sales team in a large Oxford draper, Elizabeth Maud Anstey had married Morris in 1904. Graham Turner says of her: '*(she) was an assiduous guardian of her husband's supreme status*'.

Miles Thomas, after describing the extremely tight rein she kept on domestic expenditure, adds: '*Lady Nuffield managed to retain her lines of communication with people in the works. Up to the time of his early death her brother, Bill Anstey, was transport manager to the company (Morris). Lilian, as Lady Nuffield was always called\*, kept an ear very close to the ground and any member of the staff who was guilty of a social misdemeanour at a dance, dinner or other public occasion in Oxford soon found he had registered a black mark for bad manners*'.

Later he reveals, and I paraphrase: At the inevitable works dinners and dances during the winter season the party never really began to go until 'the boss' (*William Morris*) and his wife had gone. On the rare occasions when she did not accompany him to a 'mixed' party things got under way much earlier in the evening. The significance of this cameo will take on more, possibly momentous, status later.

\*This is one diminutive of Elizabeth.

...66

Also moving furtively about the 'set' was Wilfred Hobbs to whom Miles Thomas applies that 'accolade' that offends most people: '*he had a good war*'. Hobbs was the son of a golfing acquaintance of Morris who was a miller from Goring-on-Thames. The son was the accountant who Morris brought in to handle financial matters at Wrigleys when he acquired it. Further described by Thomas as '*the perfect bachelor*' he became the industrialist's *de facto* personnel assistant from the mid-'20s until 1945. A man we learn, in the ambiguous statement from Thomas, who told Morris '*all that it was necessary for him to hear*'.

I would suggest that Lord dealt sensitively with Kimber. Rather than the villain he is portrayed as by some MG protagonists, he was the hero of the hour. McComb tells us (*The Story of the MG Sports Car*) that at a personal level the two men were '*quite friendly*', although Jonathan Wood, writing for *The Automobile* in October 2007, claims that Lord '*amongst his many prejudices disliked Kimber*' and had '*the perfect excuse to close down the racing department and drawing office*' – presumably the catastrophic finances.

I can find no evidence that there was any antipathy between Lord and Kimber and furthermore, let's be clear, Lord didn't need an excuse to close anything at MG. What he did was the obvious, intelligent and business-like course of action.

...67

But to return to the personal level. Lord would almost certainly have known many of Kimber's circumstances. Of his mother's tragic death, if not his alienation from the father, and he must have had an empathy with that general situation. He probably also knew that Kimber's wife, Rene, had been diagnosed with a debilitating illness that increasingly prevented this once vivacious beauty taking any part in a family life that previously had been filled with activity and conviviality. He may also have known that Kimber had begun a relationship with another lady. Some sources suggest the liaison did not start until as late as 1936/7, others place the first sparks about three years earlier, but both these estimates are questionable.

Finally, Lord could well have been aware, as a father of girls himself, of the difficulties Kimber was experiencing with his own young family of two daughters. Their father could be severe and draconian domestically. He separated from Rene as her condition worsened, and the younger child, Jean, was sent to boarding school.

Betty, who later liked to call herself 'Lisa', turned into what was almost certainly nothing more problematic than a rebellious teenager. Naturally she quarrelled with her parent about make-up, clothes, music, politics. Lord may have feared all that would come his way too!

At a semi-professional level Lord and Kimber would have had much in common. The former was a superb draughtsman and liked to sketch and outline the details of cars. Kimber was the man who could make a sports car look fast even when it was standing still. In any event, Lord was perfectly placed to shield Kimber and let MG continue. And maybe he bought Cecil Kimber the time to save himself and MG.

...68

The range of models was simplified to about five from an absurd 15, the annual sales of some of which were not reaching double figures. Output and sales rose, Kimber was reinstated as managing director and by 1938 his salary had more than doubled, although by the time all this happened Lord had already departed the Nuffield Organization.

Ostensibly, it was Miles Thomas who ended the career Kimber had loved.

When the outbreak of war brought motor car production to an end at Abingdon, Kimber, with commendable initiative one might have thought, secured a contract to build the front section of the Albemarle bomber. Those familiar with aircraft will recall this was a twin-engined, Armstrong Whitworth-designed medium bomber. It featured an extremely large nose that accommodated not only two pilots but also the navigator and radio operator. Six hundred were eventually built, all by A W Hawkesley of Gloucester, who placed contracts with a large number of suppliers for the components.

A weight issue arising from the use of steel rather than aluminium over the wooden frame meant the Albemarle only ever served as general and paratroop transports and on military glider towing duties. However, they did see action in such distinguished battles as those for the beaches of Normandy and at Arnhem.

Kimber's contract though was not to the liking of Cowley management and seen as the pursuit of 'non-conformity' when the 'party line' was unification. This is of enormous significance, as we shall explore later. It was Miles Thomas who was sent to deal with Kimber and leave him 'thunderstruck' after being told: *'he had better look for another outlet for his energies because he did not fit into the wartime pattern of the Nuffield Organization.'* Brutal and insensitive though that may seem we can probably take comfort from the accent being polished and that there was no swearing. In his autobiography, *Out on a Wing*, Thomas then launches into what most would find a repellant diatribe on his technique for firing high-level executives.

To what extent the 'Albemarle contract' caused Kimber's dismissal is uncertain. Rene had died in April 1938 and three months later, with the approval of his daughters, their father secretly married his lover.

Jean said afterwards: *'Gillie (her stepmother) had all the joie de vivre that poor Rene had lost. He (Kimber) used to be so grim, so stern. I can remember him sitting there for ages, not saying a word. He changed so much after he married my stepmother. I loved Gillie on sight. She was very good for him. Liberated him. He was more relaxed, happier.'*

This, of course, would not have met with the approval of Lord and Lady Nuffield, especially the latter. What had happened was more than 'bad manners' to coin Thomas's earlier phrase; or even bad form.

It is also reported (by Jonathan Wood in *The Automobile* article) that Kimber had transgressed further by refusing to fire a conscientious, unmarried, female employee because he knew of the dependency of her widowed mother. But the precise circumstances are unclear.

The moralistic comment should be, perhaps, not to make an assessment at face value; something Leonard Lord has been subjected to, so many times. We should not judge Lady Nuffield too harshly either, even if she *did* have a hand in Kimber's dismissal. She was a Victorian and unquestionably held the values of that age. Kimber is said to have flaunted his extra-marital relationship at a time when he had not only left the wife who had been his rock when he was struggling to get MG underway, but also departed when she was dying. The words of the Christian marriage vows probably passed through Lady Nuffield's mind.

After his departure from Morris, Kimber went to coachbuilder Charlesworth who were reorganizing for wartime aircraft production in Gloucester and then, his health breaking, to a job with the Specialloid Piston Company that he didn't particularly relish. '*Cabbage isn't good boiled twice, Gillie,*' he was prone to say. Or, to paraphrase, '*the motor industry is not as palatable second time round*'.

But by 1944, fitness and happiness were returning. There was talk of work from Harry Ferguson, of tractor fame, and at Triumph to build sports cars, and even of retirement. But on the Sunday evening of February 4, 1945, that malevolent hand of fate he had sidestepped before to find reward, caught Kimber.

The train taking him to a Monday morning meeting with diesel engine maker Perkins at Peterborough, on behalf of Specialloid, stalled in the steam drenched darkness of the notorious tunnels above London's Kings Cross station. Mishandling allowed it to run gently backwards. A signalman shifted his points to divert it from the main line, but a second too late. The last carriage derailed against a signal gantry. Cecil Kimber was one of the two passengers who died.

...71

As Leonard Lord left MG in what would then have been the rustic Oxfordshire town of Abingdon after those visits of 1935 and '36 and returned to Cowley, there were philosophies developing that would have a profound influence on his own career.

William Morris was of the view that the privately owned light aeroplane could become as popular as the privately owned light car. He was not alone in this. Herbert Austin, who had vastly more experience of aeroplanes, dating back to a somewhat eccentric interest in pre-Wright days, and maturing in the development and large-scale production of aircraft in WWI, was of a similar opinion.

Austin, though, was more realistic, but even so, ahead of his time. He had experimented with a machine called the Whippet in 1919. With no bracing wires, no wood and a 16-foot fuselage made of steel tube, it was aimed at simplifying flying for the lay person. Furthermore, because of folding wings it could be accommodated in a shed 18 feet long by eight high and eight wide. Landing speed was just 30 mph and the plan was the fortunate (*sic*) owners would put it down on about 150 yards of grass near their home, collapse the wings that spanned 21 feet, then taxi along the highway to the shed-cum-garage-cum-hangar.

It was claimed by an experienced RAF instructor that he could teach anyone to fly a Whippet in 10 minutes, whereupon the newly qualified flyer could reach 95 mph, soar to 10,000 feet in 18 minutes and cover about 180 miles on two hours worth of fuel for the six cylinder Anzani rotary engine. To be fair, the machine proved stable, comfortable, reliable and simple to service.

Just what Morris envisaged? No. The Whippet flopped. To quote Bob Wyatt in his seminal work on Austin history (*The Austin 1905-1952* David and Charles 1981) '*...not because the machine was in any way unsatisfactory or because of heavy competition, but because amateur flying did not catch on and people with money to spend in the immediate post-war period, even though they all seem to have disposed of it by the time of the slump which followed, certainly did not spend it on Austin aircraft.*'

Austin had one last attempt. The Kestrel was a Beardmore powered, steel tube fuselage aeroplane that could cruise at 80 mph at 3,000 feet for four-and-a-half hours consuming a gallon of fuel every 32 miles. But it landed fast (for this market) at 45 mph and needed 220 yards to stop. It didn't take off in the marketplace either. Yet it did not suffer the final indignity of the Whippet whose left over parts ended up as a pergola in Austin's son-in-law's garden.

Typically, Morris had a different approach. He wanted to build only the engines for aeroplanes. In 1933 he is quoted as saying, and I summarize: '*As the aeroplane improves and becomes safer, so it will be more popular as a means of transport, and the more aeroplanes that are sold, the more reasonable their prices will become. This also applies to the cost of the engines. I have no wish to build aeroplanes myself. I am just out to sell engines. There is no big demand for engines at the moment, but it was because we realized that the sale of aircraft would gradually climb – as did the sale of motor cars – that we decided it was time we set out to design engines for manufacturers. It might be true to say that the aeroplane is today where the motor car was in 1914. Where aeroplanes are sold in sufficient quantities, there is no reason why they should not be as cheap as the light car today.*'

...72

A few statistics might be helpful. In early 1925 a de Havilland Moth biplane could be bought for £885 and was advertised as being for '*the school, the flying club and the private owner*'. The public imagination was first captured when a pilot called Alan Cobham took the prototype from Croydon aerodrome to Zurich, Switzerland, and back in a day during which he spent a total of 14 hours in the air.

Matters were helped considerably when around the same time the government, not for entirely altruistic reasons one suspects, decided to subsidise five light aeroplane clubs. They each got two Moths, a spare engine, £2,000 to spend, a guarantee that half the cost of replacing a crashed aeroplane would be met, plus a £1,000 grant for the first year to cover general expenses and a £10 bonus for every pilot who learned to fly using all this equipment. Over the next 11 years the scheme was developed and expanded.

By late 1927 de Havilland had 43 per cent of the light aircraft market and economies of scale had allowed the Gipsy Moth, now described as '*the motor car of the air*' to be reduced in price by £150. A year later the tag nose-dived by a further £80.

To capitalize on all this airborne activity, Morris instructed Wolseley in 1929, to develop a range of air-cooled radial engines suitable for light aircraft. Engineer Edward Luyks, who had been taken over with the company when Morris acquired it, was in overall charge of the 60-strong department. James Woodcock who had served his apprenticeship with the firm, and also been absorbed in the take over, was placed in charge of production.

...73

Lord, who, of course, was works manager, reputedly told Woodcock when he pointed out he had never been near an aero engine that '*it's about time you bloody well were!*' We might wonder when *Lord* had been '*near an aeroplane engine!*' Almost certainly 'Coventry Ordnance'.

Barely a year later, a further boost to private flying came when a 27-year-old from the north of England, Amy Johnson, flew in a second-hand Gipsy Moth from Croydon to Darwin, Australia. Morris presented her with an MG 18/80, which she used to go to Buckingham Palace to receive a medal. Then she waxed incredibly lyrically about flight: '*You who fly; do tell your friends of the joys you experience in the air, of the exhilaration of knowing yourself free and alone in the glorious freedom of the skies, of the wonders to be seen. Show them by your example as a fine, careful pilot, how safe it is to fly a machine so shining clean and well cared for as your own.*'

Then she came down to earth with a bump, but in terms that would have pleased Morris. '*Flying is still pretty expensive because it is as yet a luxury for the minority instead of the pleasure of the majority. Think aviation, talk aviation, read aviation and if you're determined enough your chance will come.*'

By the early summer of 1931 the first Wolseley aero engine was ready. It was a seven-cylinder radial and made its maiden flight from Brooklands in July installed in a Hawker Tomtit. A nine-cylinder version was also developed and flew in the same Tomtit (G-ABOD) on the first day of September, 1932. Teams of three such aircraft then competed with moderate success in the 1933 and '34 King's Cup Air Race and by 1936 the company had a range of four radials on offer. They were all named after signs of the zodiac – Aquarius, Aries, Scorpio and Libra and spanned power outputs from 168 bhp for the seven-cylinder Aquarius (the only model to this configuration, the other three had nine cylinders) up to 505 bhp for the Libra.

Although the engines are interesting in themselves, proved reliable and were backed by a committed customer care, service and spares operation, what is most significant to our story is a quote from Nuffield where he says: *'I put up the aero engine factory because I realized that, in time of national emergency, firms with experience of building internal combustion engines might be called on for national defence, and I wished to play my part'*.

This leads us to the thorny area of Morris's involvement, or rather lack of, with the Shadow Factory Scheme. Later, we will need to look more closely at this concept because it is pertinent to the story of Leonard Lord. But for the moment it is sufficient to understand that this was a British government plan, devised in the mid-'30s and in anticipation of a war with Germany, to, firstly, facilitate the urgent expansion of the RAF, and then, if and when hostilities began, to guarantee an adequate supply of aeroplanes.

...75

The idea was to rely on approved types of aircraft and engine from established suppliers, for example the Bristol Aeroplane Company and Rolls-Royce, but also to boost output by using firms outside the industry. They would work from new, dedicated factories to supplement, or 'shadow', the production of the established 'names'. Examples of the 'shadows' were Austin, Daimler and Rover and, at first and perhaps the exception, Wolseley Aero Engines Ltd.

However, there was controversy as to whether the best way forward was for the 'shadowing' firms to make the complete, ministry approved, engines that had previously been the staple business and exclusive domain of the core organizations, or if it was preferable for the 'shadows' to make sets of components – crankshafts from one, superchargers and pumps from another, etcetera.

From as early as 1933, Wolseley's managing director, Leslie Cannell, on behalf of William Morris, had been trying to interest the air ministry in the company's engines and had been fairly firmly rebuffed: *'I think it improbable we will be in a position to utilize either of the types of engine you describe in your letter,'* wrote an unnamed civil servant.

Cannell and Morris persisted and the correspondence grew chillier and more displeasing to the latter. I paraphrase a rebuttal that is typical: *'It is a matter of the greatest difficulty to provide the four engine firms already under contract, except for one which also relies on civil work, with enough to keep them employed. It is unlikely, therefore, that anything can be done to consider any engine of your design for Royal Air Force purposes.'* The reaction seems to slam the door unnecessarily on a valuable manufacturing resource!

...76

Having, in July, 1935, asked for a meeting with the newly appointed air minister, Lord Swinton and been snubbed, Morris and Cannell did actually meet Swinton, and his adviser, Lord Weir, and Air Marshall Sir Hugh Dowding, air member (at the ministry) for research and development, towards the end of that year. However, matters were no more harmonious.

The point that Wolseley engines, with the possible exception of one under development (the 600 hp Gemini), were considered broadly unsuitable was driven home and Morris's suggestion that he make American Pratt and Whitney engines for them under licence was not at all to the men from the ministry's liking. Thus it ended with Morris walking out with the words: '*God help you in case of War*', and going off in a huff to Australia for four months.

While he was away, discussions on the shadow factory scheme gathered momentum. The policy of component rather than whole engine manufacture was broadly agreed and a committee, chaired by Herbert Austin (Now Lord Austin), appointed to liaise with the air ministry. Included on this panel was Leonard Lord.

It is not easy to understand how Lord now views himself...is he the diplomat, is he duplicitous, or is what follows an example of irrepressible ambition?

As soon as Morris arrived home in early May, 1936, he made it plain he disapproved of the shadow factory scheme – something his senior executive, Lord, had 'signed up' for – clear that he wanted to supply the ministry with finished engines and obvious that he believed any other production policy was beset with practical problems.

...77

Almost immediately he revealed to the ministry, and Lord Austin's aero engine committee, just how out of touch he was. Morris, via a letter from Cannell, offered to build large quantities of Bristol engines at Ward End for the same price the ministry were paying the originator. He seems oblivious to Bristol having insisted that no company should have sufficient access to their designs to enable them to become a rival. Indeed, this dictate was probably the most important catalyst in establishing the 'components only' strategy in the first place.

Cannell, that is to say, William Morris, was rebuffed yet again and in a desperate bid to introduce some order to the situation Weir met Morris on June 16 and expressed concern that the latter did not seem to grasp how the ministry envisaged utilizing his production capacity. It was suggested that Leonard Lord show Lt Col H A P Disney, director of aeronautical production, what was available at both Morris and Wolseley. Lord, in the supposedly uncharacteristic role of diplomat, is now 'on the back foot'.

However, he tactfully points out, we suspect with no authority from William Morris, that while Wolseley is prepared to take part in the shadow factory scheme on the terms agreed by the aero engine committee, they would prefer to build complete engines.

This observation prompted Swinton to call a meeting with the committee on June 29, 24 hours in advance of their visiting the Bristol Aeroplane Company to view the components of a Mercury engine and be assigned the parts their companies would make. Swinton sought an assurance everyone was in agreement that: *'the only safe and practical scheme is for each firm to manufacture one section of the aero engines only'* and warns, perhaps pointedly, *'it would be a most serious matter if a mistake was made and an unsuitable plan adopted'*.

...78

We next hear the gruff voice of committee chairman Lord Austin, 66-years-old, tired physically if not mentally. He affirms that although there was room for difference of opinion between the selected 'shadows' and that some, including the Austin Motor Company, would have preferred to make complete engines, he recognized such a course '*would not have secured the objects in view*'.

Leonard Lord then weighed in, and if he'd been on the back foot a few days earlier, he was now about to shoot himself through it. He said he thought the output required was most likely to be secured by specialization - the simplest and most direct strategy. He added that he had little doubt Wolseley would participate, but just for the moment this agreement was provisional as he needed to consult Morris. But back in diplomatic mode and taking a position that was not career limiting, he suggested the air ministry cover its options by obtaining engines '*from another source as well*'. One presumes that means, completely assembled and from Wolseley.

Lord did not linger in London to set out for Bristol and the factory visit the next day, but hurried back to Cowley to consult Morris, as he had promised. The next morning he phoned Swinton with the news that would embarrass all: '*Lord Nuffield has decided Wolseley Motors will not co-operate in the shadow scheme*'.

Thus Swinton was forced to put a dampener on the day out at Filton when he sent a message to the Bristol Aeroplane Company and their guests from the aero engine committee telling them to '*proceed on the basis that Wolseley Motors would not co-operate*'.

Lord had compromised Morris and compromised himself. It was June 30, 1936. Before the summer was out he would do so twice, maybe three times, more.

...79

There is no question Lord's behaviour is puzzling and we see him next in a role that could very obviously lead to career suicide at Morris.

As soon after the Filton bombshell as July 7, he attended a meeting with Lords Austin and Weir where he advised the assembly that Morris had apparently changed his mind. The deal Lord tried to strike was for the air ministry to buy from Morris Motors a factory in Coventry and set it up as a shadow plant, whereupon they could again count Wolseley 'in'.

It is not known for certain which was the works in question, but it seems likely to have been the old Hotchkiss factory in Gosford Street that had subsequently become the home of Morris Motors Ltd Engines Branch. At the relevant time the latter were vacating for new premises on the city's Courthouse Green. Neither are we aware if Lord, who would have known Gosford Street intimately, was the sole brain behind this piece of fast footwork or whether Morris was also privy to the proposal.

The next day Weir discussed the idea further, not only with Lord, but Morris himself; then rejected it. Predictably, if not petulantly, Morris responded that he did not want to take part in the shadow factory scheme. He did however, and for what it was worth, give it his blessing.

That was not quite the end of the matter. Not long after Weir's rebuttal the aero engine committee suggested Wolseley made some of the required parts at Ward End and also erected and tested engines.

...80

Lord bided his time. We cannot countenance the idea he was consulting Morris. Then, on August 7, he phoned Disney (the air ministry's director of aeronautical production, you will remember). Wolseley Motors Ltd are definitely coming into the shadow factory scheme, he said, and went on to again suggest the ministry took over the Coventry works. When that was turned down a second time he agreed to establish instead, a similar facility in Birmingham. It was further agreed one of Disney's team would come to Ward End to make the detailed arrangements and on August 14 Lord submitted his plans for the building and equipping of a factory.

All of this must have been without the approval of Morris. Surely it was a policy Lord could not hope to survive. But why was he so determined to involve Morris, or perhaps himself, in the shadow factory scheme?

We must wait and see.

© Martyn Nutland 2011