Sidelights

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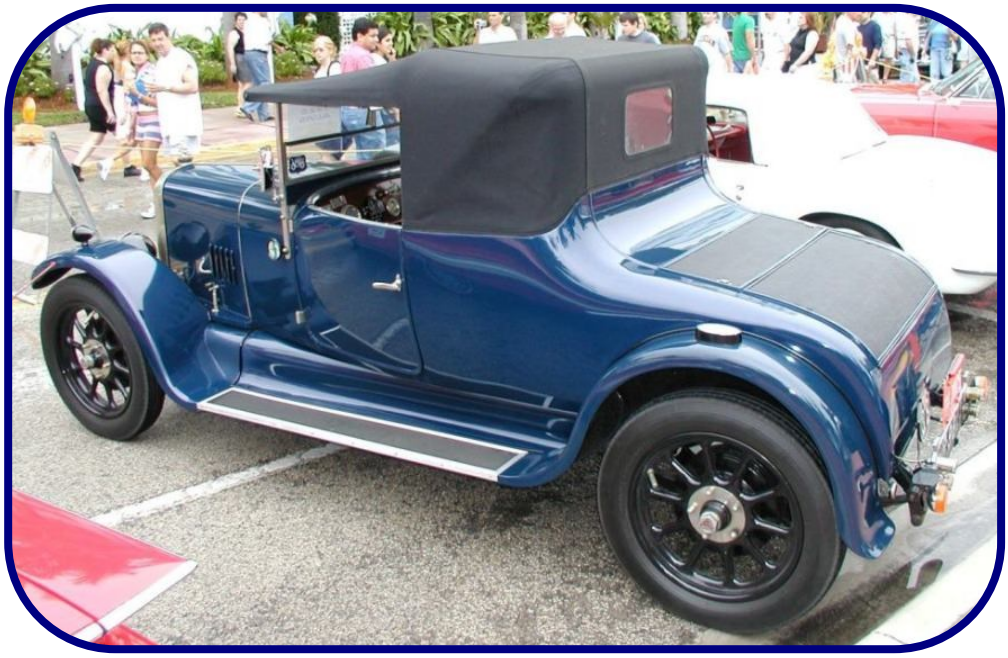
1925 Alvis SC 12/50



(See story on page 6)

A 12/50 in the Sunshine State

Submitted by John Layzell

HP 9877, the British registration number by which my Alvis has been known for the past 97 years, is a 1925 Alvis SC 12/50 2/3-seater drophead coupé, body by Cross & Ellis in royal blue, first registered April 8, 1925. Car number 8738, frame number 3419, engine number 3709, chassis number 3407, body number 9037. The engine is 68 x 110 mm, 1,598 c.c. (97 cu. in.) producing 12 horsepower (treasury rating) /50 bhp. Approximately 700 12/40s and 12/50s were produced in 1925, and between 1924-25 about 115 carried the SC designation. Today, only 18 SC 12/50s survive worldwide.

To true aficionados of the marque and devotees of *The Vintage Alvis* I and II, much of the early history of my car in Britain may be familiar. The car has been in my family since my great-uncle, George McKerrow, collected it new from the Alvis Works in Coventry, England, on Easter Saturday, 1925. Because of the Holiday, the Works was practically empty with no workers and very few cars. An acting secretary introduced Uncle George to the Alvis works racing driver, Major Maurice Harvey, winner of the 1923 Brooklands 200 Miles Race in an Alvis at an average speed of 93.29 m.p.h. They walked over to one of the very few completed cars, and Harvey showed Uncle George very briefly "what did what". Uncle George declined Harvey's offer to take a test drive and purchased the car. The original list price was £570 (pounds sterling), which included front wheel brakes, offered for the first time in 1925 for an additional £25. Because my great-uncle purchased the Alvis through The Chloride Company, a generous discount was secured. Harvey advised that the engine had been run for quite a bit, but that the car should be kept to about 30 m.p.h. for the first 1,000 miles. Uncle George asked him what happened then. Harvey's reply was: "Put your foot down and if you don't get 70 bring it back!!" After that, HP 9877 only went back to Alvis once when they offered to fit less noisy gears.

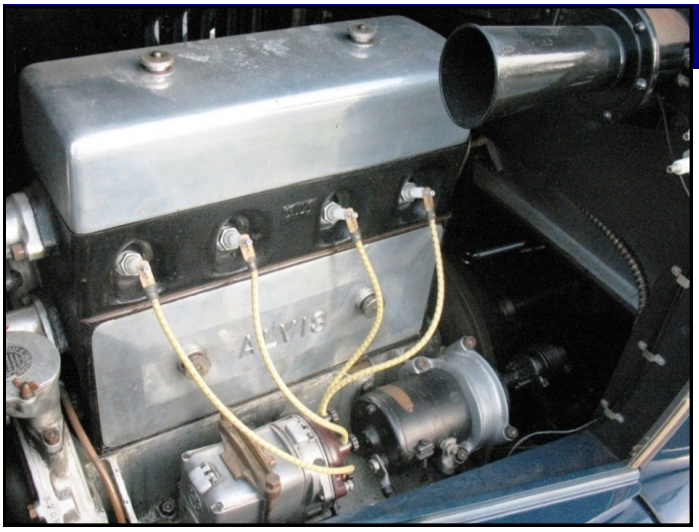
From time-to-time Uncle George, an engineer, with first class degrees in both mechanical and electrical engineering from Cambridge University, made minor modifications. He was not interested in preserving a museum piece and always maintained that the Alvis had to justify its existence. In 1930, the three-piece windshield was replaced by a single pane of glass with wiper. The original Solex carburetor with manifold mounted fuel filter was replaced by a Zenith with a glass bowl filter. The original high-pressure straight sided tires and the 23" split rim wire wheels with open hub were replaced in 1934 by wheels from a later Alvis. A few years later the insides of the headlamps were replaced by something more modern. In all other respects the car remained as it was the day it left the Alvis Works on Easter Saturday, 1925. In all its 61 years of Uncle George's ownership, HP 9877 only stopped two times when it wasn't supposed to. One time, in 1938, when the speedometer drive dropped onto the flywheel; it was a loose set-screw and put right immediately. The second time, in 1947, was due to dirty points on the magneto contact breaker. Uncle George twiddled them round a bit and he was on his way.

As Uncle George advanced in years he bought other cars including a 1934 Armstrong Siddeley, a 1952 Daimler and a 1968 Volvo, only keeping the latter. He considered the Volvo the modern equivalent of the Alvis 12/50, in terms of ruggedness and reliability. He drove HP 9877 occasionally until just a few years before his death in 1986, at age 94. That's when I inherited the Alvis.

Actually, I first drove the Alvis at the age of 13 under the watchful eye of Uncle George (I had learned to drive at age 11 on a friend's 1938 Morris 8, which I put on its side studying the intricacies of the hand-brake turn, but that's another story.....). I have been driving the Alvis fairly regularly since 1961 and am one of the few people other than Uncle George to have driven it in the past 84 years. Consistent noiseless gear changes, however, are still a challenge!

This is me in 1970 - 22 years young!

After Uncle George's death in 1986, HP 9877 remained in storage until January 1989, when a full restoration commenced at Wilkinson's of Derby, U.K. The single windshield was replaced with the original three-piece, without wiper. An original Solex carburetor with correct fuel filter was located in France, and the inappropriate wheels were replaced by correct (though not original) 20" well base artillery wheels. Restoration was completed in March 1993, and the Alvis left Britain for the first time to come to its new home in Miami, Florida. (*continued on pg 7)*



In anticipation of the Alvis' arrival, I joined the national and local chapters of the Antique Automobile Club of America (AACA), which seemed the most appropriate club to support Alvis related activities in South Florida. As the sole representative of the marque, the 12/50 attended several National judged shows, and with additional restoration work, fettling and detailing, made its way from AACA Second Junior, to First Junior then First Senior; and VMCCA Silver then Gold Award of Excellence. Shows up to about 100 miles away were, and still are, driven to. Over 100 miles and I usually resort to a trailer. It's very hot in South Florida! Longest distance driven to date was to an AACA show in Naples on Florida's west coast - 236 miles round trip. Unfortunately, any distance driving from Miami entails the use of an interstate highway with traffic traveling significantly faster than the 12/50. HP 9877 cruises fairly happily at 45-50 m.p.h., but initially proved to be a little unhappy with South Florida's 90° F+ (32° C+) degree summers. Frequently, on the way home from an outing when stopping at a toll both or red light, the engine would suddenly die as a result of vapor lock or fuel boiling in the carburetor. Often the coolant would also boil in heavy traffic. Modern high-octane fuel is apparently the primary culprit, about which much has been written elsewhere. The addition of an 11-inch electric fan, which can be removed in 8 minutes if necessary, and use of distilled water with *WaterWetter*â, a cooling system heat transfer agent, completely cured the coolant boiling, but not the vapor lock. One by one, I experimented with the various remedies proposed by members in both The Alvis Register and Alvis Owner Club Circulars and Bulletins, but it was not until all of the following steps had been taken did I achieve success:

- fuel filter bracket to distance the filter from the manifold
- aluminum and rollboard insulation heat sink between manifold and fuel line
- aluminum heat sink between manifold and carburetor, with 1/8" gasket
- exhaust pipe blanket wrap in engine compartment
- fuel line Heatshield Products HP thermal sleeving, from petrol tank to carburetor

Finally, now added to the standard US 89 octane unleaded fuel is a liberal cocktail of *Marvel Mystery Oil*, fuel stabilizer and lead substitute, all of which have resulted in no vapor lock, boiling or engine dying in over 20 years or about 6,000 miles. Oil used is Shell Rotella 15/40 diesel, and when hot, pressure is a steady 30 psi at 30 mph, or about 1,500 rpm in fourth gear. After experimentation with various different spark plug types, I have settled on NKG AB-6.

To date, my 12/50 has never been in the company of another Alvis at any old car activity. Herbert Hoffman of West Palm Beach, 66 miles north of Miami, owned a 1927 SD 12/50 Beetleback, and although we have chatted and admired each other's cars at outings, to date the cars have never met. Back in 1997, *(continued on page 8)*

(continued from page 7) we agreed to park the two 12/50s side by side at the Boca Raton British Car Meet. My high spirits were, however, dampened less than two miles from home when the resulting bang after letting out the clutch as the lights turned green, followed by complete loss of drive, immediately signaled a broken half-shaft. All my uncle's detailed records indicate this was a first, so after 72 years I took the precaution of also replacing the "good" half-shaft. Incidentally, for 12/50 owners who have never replaced a half-shaft, Micky Radford's "The Restoration of A 12/50" (aka "The Bible") details the procedure exactly, down to the wooden broom handle required to be cut into 20-25 ¾-inch pieces! (The uninitiated are now doubtlessly wondering what the heck I'm talking about, but it works!) Other than the irritating vapor lock, which would correct itself with about ten minutes of cooling down, the broken half-shaft constituted the third time HP 9877 stopped unintentionally in 84 years.

The fourth and fifth times the 12/50 embarrassed itself were both BTH magneto related. On the 2002 Glidden Tour of North Florida, sparks would disappear after about 10 miles driving. After several "flatbed" trips we gave up and toured with others. A rebuild of the magneto solved the problem. Two years later, on a Precision & Endurance Rally in Southwest Florida, while trundling happily along at about 50 MPH after a 150-mile stint, the engine suddenly died. No sparks! The 79-year-old contact breaker spring had finally lost interest and broke. Installation of the spare Watford maggie produced enough sparks to start and run, but not enough power to pull the skin off a rice pudding. No amount of advance/retard and other fettling helped. Another embarrassing 100-mile flatbed trip home! The spring was replaced, the Watford rebuilt, and since I've purchased an American Bosch AT4 and a Simms K4 as back-ups.

Since then, HP 9877 has behaved as expected and continues to be exercised on a regular basis.

John and Celia at Art Deco

John at the Motorcar Cavalcade