

THE EARL'S COURT MOTOR SHOW 1968

“The Sandwich Board Man” and “The Syrup”.
Two recollections of the 1968 event, acted out on the
Standard-Triumph main stand



The UK London Motor Show venue was held annually in October of each year at Earl's Court in west London. The Exhibition Hall was first opened in the early years of the 20th century when it was decided that the other previously used venue at nearby Olympia was found to be too small. For its epoch, Earl's Court, was the ideal location for all types of exhibition where the general public were assured of being able to see their preferred product on an 'up close and personal' basis. Crowds were assured for all exhibitors and the cost of having a stand (or stands) to display your wares were guaranteed to be costly. Quite apart from the number of people required to be present on each manufacturer stand in terms of hotel costs, keeping them fed, watered and 'rested' (big joke!) – not to mention the 'flu we were all awarded for our mandatory attendances, rarely changed from year to year.

Standard-Triumph was unusual in terms of display opportunity, as we had two stands.

The main stand – usually in the middle of the central ground floor area – was inevitably stuffed with company people, dealer staff and those from the general public, who had fought their way to enter the car display area, but there were the 'models' of scantily dressed young women who draped themselves across and inside the cars for the benefit of the members of the press who had a field day using up miles of 35mm film

photographing these human beauties who (mostly) had to appear calm and relaxed while simultaneously fighting off the depredations of testosterone laden males whose interests were certainly not directed at the highly polished mechanical items on four wheels that were on display. The main stand, had one of each model of car for any market, while the Liverpool Stand, was still on the main floor but under an overhanging first floor balcony that ran all around the whole building. The Liverpool stand, usually had just the cars that were made in whole or in part in the Liverpool plant and probably it was better that way, as Liverpool products – usually a TR with one or two other smaller saloons, were so appallingly put together that it was better not to have them on the Main Stand.



*Mr. A.G. 'Jock' Brown –
General Manager – London Sales & Service
(right)*

That said, after Jock Brown, the company's former Chief Inspector in Coventry, had done what he usually did in making each car so perfect in terms of finish and unequivocal completeness, anyone who bought a new car and expected it to be the same as an Earl's Court display model, would be doomed to disappointment.

No production car ever came even remotely close to the level of finish as a 'show car'.

Jock Brown saw to that!

The fact that Mr. Brown, or Sir – as you always addressed him – and you meant it, consistently won first

prize in the Coachwork competition and annually beat firms like Aston Martin, Bentley and Rolls Royce – much to their annoyance and complaint to the organisers, made him ensure that future events at Earl's Court would see him repeating his earlier successes.

Regarding the event in general, Press Day and the weekdays that followed, were usually less crowded and manic than general public days – and nothing ever came close to the unmitigated hell of Saturdays and Sundays. At weekends and if you were on Stand Duty, you made sure you'd dealt fully with the needs of Mother Nature for the duration of your shift and you'd also found a way that required less pushing and shoving to get to the Employee Lounge, bar and toilets where for thirty minutes only, you could sit down, have a breather and enjoy(?) the inevitable cold meat and withered salad lunch the company grudgingly provided at stupendous cost.

After that, it was back to the hell hole.

It's all a long time ago – and I did many more than just one motor show in the UK and overseas in my automotive career, but the 1968 event stands out as being especially memorable for two happenings in particular.

On the Saturday, I well recall that the Duty Stand Manager was one Maurice Goymer, one of the UK Regional Sales Managers. On this particular day, a man appeared wearing front and rear sandwich boards that proclaimed his dis-satisfaction with his Triumph 2000 saloon which, if the content of the boards were to be believed, had spent more time in his supplying dealer's Service Department being sorted out, than it had in the man's driveway, garage or on the road with him driving it. Maurice wasn't happy about this new

and unwanted arrival. He politely approached the man and commented that while he was sorry the owner was not happy with his car, *“perhaps it might be better, Sir, if you air your grievances outside where all the people coming to the exhibition would more easily be aware of your complaints?”*

“Absolutely not!” was the reply. *“I’ve paid my admission and I’m staying here. Get my car sorted to my satisfaction and I might consider leaving”*

Impasse. He stayed.



After a while, two uniformed men from the Metropolitan Police, arrived on the Stand and stood close to Maurice. Presently, one of the pair, a Sergeant, quietly spoke to Maurice within my hearing.

“Are you the Stand Manager today, Sir?”

“I am,” Maurice replied.

“That gentleman over there, Sir. The one wearing the sandwich boards. I suppose he’s not the ideal type of person you’d want to see here today, judging by the faults he’s claiming to have had with his car?”

“Hole in one, Sergeant. I’ve already suggested to him that he can make his protest outside where more people will see him - and it gets rid of him from our stand. But he’s refused to go.”

“Well, Sir, what we’ve got to recognise is that he’s obviously paid his admission and this is a free country where he’s legally entitled to express his views about his car, so there’s not a lot we can do about that. We can however make a suggestion to him, if you’ve no objection?”

“Absolutely not,” Maurice replied. *“The man’s a confounded nuisance. I just want to see the back of him for all time.”*

“Quite so, Sir. The Constable here and I might be able to help you. Let’s have a go and see what happens.”

“Help yourselves, by all means.”

The pair moved quietly over to the sandwich boards and spent a few moments talking to him. It was clear the listener wasn’t at all happy at what the Sergeant was saying but eventually and very grudgingly, he stepped off the Stand and started to walk round it, using in the gangways that were heaving with people.

The policemen returned to stand by Maurice and I.

“The thing is, Sir, we need to stay here for a bit if that’s acceptable to you? Just to make sure he doesn’t take up position elsewhere on the stand. You see, as I said just now, he’s entitled to air his grievances, but not in a private place. That’s the distinction, you see. I’m assuming this stand is private as your company will have paid a sum of money to take part in the exhibition?”

“Of course it has,” Maurice responded, by now getting somewhat fed up at the sight of this man, his sandwich boards, what was written on them and everything in general.

“I’ll explain a bit further, Sir, if I may? The thing is, this stand is effectively private property, but the gangways themselves are public footways – and he’s perfectly entitled to air his complaint in public if he’s in a footway, keeps moving and doesn’t start shouting

about his car. We just need to wait here awhile to make sure he's not a naughty boy and trespass again. Do you have any objection in us being here?"

"Not at all."

"Thank you, Sir. We appreciate that. It is a bit of a mêlée today, isn't it?"

"Well, it's Saturday. It's always like this."

"Indeed, Sir."

We all stood watching.

From memory, Sandwich Board man managed to do about three laps of the Stand, getting jostled and shoved by the surging crowds as he moved, until he tripped on something and fell over. Because the sandwich boards were so long and snug fitting, he wasn't able to get into a position to stand up. This is why the Sergeant and Constable had waited.

"Right, Constable. Off we go. Thought that would happen. Caution him to the effect he's under arrest for causing a needless obstruction on a public gangway. We don't need to charge him unless he objects to the arrest – but we can do all that once we get him out to the main foyer. Make sure you cuff him in case he starts getting obstreperous" – and off they went.

The man was very unceremoniously hauled to his feet and with two burly policemen on either side and holding him up, he was hustled - none too gently out of the display hall - and towards the main entrance.

About half an hour later, the two policemen came back.

"All over, Sir. We've not had to charge him this time, but he's in no doubt that the only place he can make his complaint publicly, is standing at the bottom of the steps outside the main entrance. You might be pleased to hear Sir, that at the moment, it's pouring with rain out there, he doesn't appear to have a coat and I expect that within ten minutes he'll be so soaked to the skin, he'll give up and go home."

"Serjeant, the company can't thank you enough for what you've done. Is there anything we can offer you as a gesture for our sincere thanks, in our private club upstairs? A drink of any sort and or something to eat?"

"Very kind of you, Sir. But we're not allowed alcohol or food while on duty, but we're coming up to our break time, so if there's a large cup or a mug of tea up there to which we could do serious damage, and somewhere to sit down for a bit, that would be most welcome, thank you."

Maurice turned to me.

"John, please take these kind gentlemen to the Distributor Club and impress on the Catering Manager, with my authority, that he is to provide them with whatever they may want for the duration of their break time with us and for their kindness."

Because of the crowds, it took me quite a long time to get our benefactors to the Club upstairs – and believe me, I didn't rush back. At least, that's my story and I'm sticking to it – but those two policemen in the sanctuary of our Distributor Club and where they couldn't be seen by their superiors, each sank three pints of best bitter almost faster than I can blink an eye – and I don't think I was far behind them!

o-O-o

The following day was just as manic.

In fact it was worse.

The pretty girls weren't required any more and I'm confident were delighted to be rid of the sex-crazed stand personnel and the press cameras of Earl's Court for another year. It was about mid-afternoon, and I was jammed in behind the Technical Service booth counter, with my dear friend and Berkeley Square showroom colleague, Peter Cole, together with one of the Regional Field Service Engineers by the name of Henry Julian.

What can I say about Henry?

Oh, so much.

Henry, was a true 'motors man,' the type of which you just don't find anywhere today.

He was one of a breed of motor industry 'characters' of any vehicle company in the UK immediately pre-World War Two and for a decade or two after it. They were a hard-bitten bunch of walking encyclopaedias who could quote verbatim, any Service Bulletin or Engineering Change Bulletin for any car made by their employer back to the year dot.

On top of that, they'd heard every type of customer complaint, reason for failure, 'fiddle' by a dealer for claiming warranty reimbursement when the warranty was long expired and any other technical issue you cared to throw at them.

Henry, bless him, was one of this long-vanished group of industry professionals. He'd heard it all. There wasn't anything you could throw at him on a technical aspect that he couldn't handle.

On this particular Sunday, the Stand was at Siege status. We hadn't quite got to receiving boiling oil being poured on us from the top gallery as in days of yore when it was bows, arrows, spears and trebuchets – but not too far removed.

Earlier in the day, someone wearing a white boiler suit - with **Standard-Triumph** written across the back of it (none of our staff ever wore that style of clothing) - was caught under a Spitfire with a range of spanners, trying to relieve the car of its differential! It was only when the car suddenly lurched on its own and shouts of help were heard from under it, that we were alerted to the fact that a ne'er-do-well had penetrated the show security arrangements. He too had to be removed, extracted and hustled off to find the police who were always somewhere in attendance. The girls on the literature desk were going flat out dishing out skads of brochures to small boys with huge carrier bags, while other stand personnel were arguing the toss on the merits of the TR5 against Healey 3000's, and further members of what we irreverently termed as 'the general pubic' (the absence of the 'l' is intentional) were submitting unvalidated opinions of product knowledge based entirely on the fiction commonly found in the lounge bar of any pub where the utterer rarely speaks from an informed base.

In other words, 'an entirely normal' Motor Show weekend.

Henry, Peter and I were talking of this and that, when a man arrived in a large Homburg hat, wearing a massive overcoat with an Astrakhan collar and carrying a large plastic carrier bag in which lurked something heavy. He was accompanied by a much younger person who we soon learned was his son.

"Which one of you do I complain to?" was his peremptory demand.

"That depends on the matter in your focus, Sir," Henry responded with icy politeness. *"Is it aftersales service, new car sales or parts supply?"*

"It's manufacturing defects," was the reply, *"and bad manufacturing at that!"*

"I see. Can you give me any examples or do you have something with you to back up your claim?"

"Yes, I've got it in this bag."

Clearly the bag was heavy and our visitor was more than a little warm under his hat and coat. The bag was dropped to the floor with a thud and then he removed the Homburg and put it on the counter.

Seeing him bare-headed made Peter and I clench our teeth to not laugh at what we saw and here, I must briefly sidetrack to clarify differences in the English language.

A lot of people, spend a great deal of money to acquire a 'hairpiece' if they're getting a bit thin on top or are undergoing the ravages of chemo – and for that latter group I have the greatest sympathy. For those thus afflicted, the conventional term for a 'hairpiece' is a Toupée, and in the UK we pronounce it, as do the French, as Toopay. In the States and maybe parts of Canada, I believe the term loses its '*accent aigu*' and is pronounced as a Toop?

However, the London Cockney rhyming slang goes one better and knows a Toupée/Toopay/Toop as a 'Syrup' - as in Syrup of Figs = wigs.

Got it?

So, having dumped his hat on our counter, the 'Syrup' bent down to pick up his bag containing whatever it was he needed to show us and looked at all of us, full in the face. Teeth were clenched even tighter and hopefully our visible expressions remained humourless, because the 'Syrup' had clearly been fixed in place with some form of adhesive which, at the front was making it clear the adhesive had lost some of its 'tack' leaving the front of said syrup about a quarter inch clear of the wearer's scalp!

I digress.

Rummaging in the plastic bag, an article wrapped in dirty newspaper was dumped on the countertop.

"There you are. Appalling manufacturing. What have you got to say about that? Just came off my son's new Triumph Herald that my wife and I gave him two weeks ago as his twenty-first birthday present. It left the factory like that, too! What's more, it's cost me more than four hundred pounds to replace as the dealer says it can't place a claim under warranty. Disgusting. Sharp practice by the dealer. If you don't give me satisfaction now, I'm going to the press, TV and anyone else I can find to further my complaint".

By this time, Henry had gently probed inside the newspaper and carefully rolled it back to avoid grease and oil stains getting on his fingers and shirt cuffs.

"Ah, yes. If I'm not mistaken, a Herald driveshaft from the rear axle out to the wheel-carrier and hub. Interestingly, this example appears to be bent. If you look carefully, Sir, you'll see it isn't exactly straight. There's a slight bend in the middle – just there. Not much, I grant you – but definitely bent".

"Well, I can see that. Anyone can, but the important thing is what are you going to do about it?"

"Perhaps I can ask your son about it, Sir? Now young man, you're a lucky chap to have a new car so early in life. Do you like it?"

"Yeah. Love it."

"Well, that's nice to know. Have you done anything to it in terms of personalising it to your tastes?"

"Not really. I did have two Cibié spotlamps fitted at the front to improve the night time driving."

"Cibiés, eh. Like the ones Paddy Hopkirk has fitted to his Mini Coopers on the Monte Carlo rallies? You can certainly see where you're going at night with those two switched on."

At that point, the 'Syrup' started to lose his rag.

"For heaven's sake, we're not here to talk about spotlamps and driving at night! Get to the point and tell me what you're going to do to refund the bill I've had to pay out!"

Henry ignored him.

"Well I'm glad you like your new car. Care to tell me where it came from? The supplying dealer?"

"The dealer in Finchley. That's in north London."

"Yes. I've know them. Very good dealers. Very loyal, Very professional. Tell me, what colour is the car?"

"Wedgwood blue."

"Nice," Henry replied. He looked again at the half shaft. *"Wonder what happened to the radius arm?"*

"The what?"

"The radius arm."

"What about it?"

"No matter," Henry replied – and he played for time studying the bent shaft as the 'Syrup' got more and more agitated.

"Tell me, young Sir. When did you first notice this defect? Surely the car must have felt strange to drive – and noisy too. Indeed, it probably would have looked a bit odd with one side slightly higher than the other?"

"Well, errrr, well, I'm not too sure."

Son is getting quite worried and the 'Syrup' is now shouting.

Henry is as calm as a cucumber.

"Don't suppose you've got the car's commission number, have you Sir? It could certainly help me do a production trace when I'm in Coventry next week."

"What the hell's a commission number when it's at home? Is that the registration number?"

"No, Sir. But if you've got the registration, I can easily give the dealer a ring to get the information I need. Would you know the registration, young man?"

He did. He gave it to Henry who wrote it on a slip of paper.

"So when did the dealer have the car to do the repair for which you claim cost you some four hundred pounds?" Henry said with a smile.

"A week last Wednesday," the 'Syrup' replied.

"Oh, quite recently then?"

He paused.

"Just a minute, I need to check on something," and he went into his jacket pocket, extracted his diary and leafed through a few pages until he found the date he needed – and then he peered at the slip of paper bearing the car's licence plate details.

"Well gentlemen, I think I have good news and bad news. Which would you like to have first?"

"What the hell are you talking about, man?" the 'Syrup' shouted.

People turned to stare.

The public was straining to hear the juicy titbits between an angry customer and how the Stand staff were handling it.

A small crowd made movements around the Service Desk impossible to anyone wanting to get away. Oooh, this was entertainment. Jo and Josie Public hadn't expected

‘a customer/manufacturer confrontation when they’d paid their admission an hour or so earlier.

Get to it lads. Don’t disappoint us! We want blood and guts – but we’re not too worried whose it is.

Henry got into his stride.

“Well, gentlemen, I’m afraid there’s misfortune facing one of you by coming here. Having just checked in my diary, I can confirm that I was actually at the dealer you named on the day in question. I was running a training course. During that morning, we had some exceptionally heavy rain which was so severe, it caused some temporary flooding in the area generally. Interestingly, just after lunch, a breakdown truck arrived at the premises on which was a Wedgwood Blue Triumph Herald, with serious damage to one of its rear wheels. Interestingly too, I happened to see the car just after it was unloaded and I do have to say this one had two substantial Cibié spotlamps on the front end. The breakdown truck driver was heard telling one of the service receptionists that the car’s driver, a young male, so it is said, claimed he had lost control and skidded while negotiating a traffic roundabout and the rear of the car allegedly lost its grip and swung round, severely damaging the nearside rear wheel, as well as ripping off the rear radius arm on the same side. Also, that same Receptionist alerted me to the fact that another involved party was unwilling to pay the repair cost and was adamantly maintaining it should be charged to warranty. He asked me to make a note of the registration number which I recorded in my diary, just there! Could this be the same car, I ask myself, and if it is, can we easily corroborate your statement in further identifying whether it was definitely your son’s car – or another one like it? Now I can call the dealer as soon as tomorrow morning if you’d like me to – or perhaps you’d like a few hours to consider and then let me know on this number? On the face of things, I do have to say that losing control of the car while driving at speed in wet weather, and causing damage to it thereby, is unfortunately for both of you, not covered by our warranty. Under those circumstances, the cost therefore, is to your account – Dad!”

The ‘Syrup’ went apoplectic, the crowd cheered. Blood was surely going to appear soon?

I can’t remember now how it all ended but the ‘Syrup’ ranted and vented and screamed and stamped his feet.

Henry remained calm and implacable. Peter and I had to turn away to hide our laughter.

The ‘Syrup’ was briefly silent as he grabbed Henry by his jacket lapels and the two were face to face, close up.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyers about redress and I’ll see you in Court if necessary so that I’ll be assured of satisfaction.

“And I’ll be pleased to see you in court, Sir – because then I’ll be able to inform those present of your visit here today, a possible charge of physical assault and your somewhat pathetic attempt at attempting to commit fraud!”

As Henry started to say the ‘f’ in fraud, he did it with such force from his lips at the front and base of the now very unstuck syrup we’d first seen earlier, that it lifted so much, it almost left its wearer’s head!

For his part, the ‘Syrup’ - and son (who now was almost in tears with embarrassment) had a major battle to escape the crowd that had gathered around them - but that whole incident had helped what was a more than manic day pass a little faster.

And what's more, it was down to the cleaners who came later that evening when we'd all gone home, to dispose of the half shaft the 'Syrup' had left behind – and we never found out what had happened to the radius arm.

Yes, we looked – and it was nowhere to be seen – because the carrier bag had been left behind as well.