

OF MATTERS HAMMER AND SPANNER (or Wrench)...

Do you remember the singing duo, Flanders and Swan?

Apart from the 'Mud, Mud, Glorious Mud' and "London Transport, Diesel-Engined, Ninety-Seven Horsepower Omnibus' songs, they had another that started off with, "Twas on the Monday morning that the Gasman came to call."

To my delight they are all on YouTube!

Whenever I hear Flanders and Swan entertaining their audiences with yet another saga of personal misfortune, or the frustrations of daily life, I am reminded of the Standard-Triumph Service Departments at Western Avenue in London - and Allesley in Coventry.

Were they in place today, I'm confident they would have easily coped with



The London Service Division on Western Avenue at Park Royal.

the plethora of Health and Safety at Work legislation – but of the Organised Consumerism, Menu Card Service Pricing and Customer Courtesy Cars that plague us today?

Hmm, I'm not so sure.

Of course, to use either Allesley or Western Avenue as a paying customer, was to demonstrate the utmost confidence in returning your car to no less a

body than the manufacturer itself for service or repair – and what better move could anyone make?

But as many hapless owners later found to their frustration, disappointment and chagrin, both Western Avenue and Allesley could sometimes be likened to a sort of extra-terrestrial 'black hole', geared entirely to making money, which they did – and in substantial quantities.

Looking back, I sometimes think that if Jock Brown, who ran the London Service Division had been able to charge for the air that passed down the carburettor throats of the cars in his care, he'd have done it with glee.



Serjeant Major Jock Murray and Mr. A.G. 'Jock' Brown who jointly ruled Western Avenue with a rod of iron.

After all, wasn't it Jock Brown who created such delightful hybrids such as the Vitesse Estate, Vitesse Coupé – and Herald 13/75 Coupé, long after the factory stopped making the Herald variant?

Additionally, the 'Jock Brown' interpretation of his Herald 13/75 Coupé was something of a stunner. Full spec Spitfire engine, chromed valve and air filter covers, woodrim steering wheel, overdrive, Vitesse instrumentation and knock-on painted wire wheels. Gorgeous!

"Aye, laddie. It's the way to make money."

Sure was!

A Vitesse Estate at 1500 of the Big Ones (£'s) out of Western Avenue, only trailed a 2.5PI Estate by a couple of hundred out of Berkeley Square - AND with all the bells and whistles to boot!

But these premises as a 'holy of holies' for the technically unaware, certainly were not places where the customer would find a shoulder to cry on if they felt their local dealer had failed to come up to expectations. Mostly, the dealers offered an excellent standard of service – and this started with the customer having a reasonable level of expectation of getting his/her car back later the same day.



The former Service Division at Allesley in Coventry. Apart from the Social Club on the original factory site, this is the only other remaining building still in use but under new ownership.

This was not a safe assumption to make for company owned and run facilities – unless it was for something quite minor, such as fitting a wing mirror.

Meaningful entries on a job sheet such as *"investigate and rectify propshaft vibration"* would see your pride and joy gorged into the hallowed portals of Allesley or Park Royal for at least a week and when it did finally emerge – the vibration was often still present.

Okay, the original vibration may have vanished, but there was a new one – and at a different road speed, different pitch – and usually worse than before.

Usually, the propshaft vibration was because the fitters had finally abandoned sliding two wormdrive hose clamps up and down the propshaft to (a) hopefully cancel out the original vibration and (b) ensure the worm drives on the clips cancelled the out-of-balance forces of the other.

It was real rocket science!

Today, we'd fit a new propshaft, either under warranty, or as a chargeable item – but not then.

This condition, that manifested itself so frequently on Heralds and their derivatives was, to quote Western Avenue's Workshop Manager by the name of Dick Carter (disrespectfully nicknamed 'Doorlock Dick') as an "i.f."

In other words - and in 'Doorlock Dick' parlance, it was an "*i*'erent (inherent) *fault*." But one should also recognise that as far as 'Doorlock Dick' Carter was concerned, almost everything made by Standard-Triumph was an "*i*'erent *fault*" by its totality on wheels, witness a handwritten notice seen on a Standard Ten windscreen – "**DANGER StanDrive.**"

Unfortunately, no-one had had the foresight to remove the notice before the customer came to collect that particular car! For the technically unaware, 'StanDrive' was a semi-automatic gearbox on the Standard Ten. I don't think the Eight had enough guts to work it and it certainly made a Ten grunt. Anyway, to savour the delights of StanDrive, the clutch pedal was replaced by a button on the gear lever. You engaged any gear, quite often the one you didn't want, by pressing a button on the top of the gear lever, moving the lever to the (hopefully) desired gear and then releasing the button. The mechanical actions were achieved by a cunning combination of engine vacuum, some electronics - and a degree of luck. All StanDrive cars had a vacuum tank, similar to those found on most Fords with vacuum operated windscreen wipers. Let me just say that a StanDrive equipped car was not one for the faint-hearted, especially when the technology between Stan and Drive wasn't quite working as it should – which was most of the time.

But in all seriousness, working at Allesley or Western Avenue could be, and often was, a very stressful experience for customer-facing staff.

As has already been said, there was no organised consumerism or consumer legislation in the UK and by signing the Warranty Acceptance Form on delivery of a new car, the customer effectively agreed in writing to the terms of warranty as laid down by Standard-Triumph. I think I'm correct in saying that by so doing, they also signed away their rights under Common Law!

This, in its way, brought a new meaning to the term of '*life in the fast lane.*'

Indeed, as many later discovered, their understanding of a 12 month/12,000 mile guarantee could often be at variance with how Coventry saw it, or intended it to be. To that extent, Western Avenue in particular, periodically sent letters to owners headed "**WITHOUT PREJUDICE.**" If such a heading appeared, the letter would also feature the comforting words of "*as a non-prejudicial gesture of goodwill*" in the first paragraph.

Legally, the employment of these terms conveniently got the company out of any form of legally backed retribution by the customer!

All these letters were usually the result of an-off-the-ground-by-the-jacket-lapels 'discussion' between irate owners and Reception Staff in which the latter were the assaulted. Sometimes, the insults would become very personal and very occasionally might lead to physical violence with even more occasional possibilities of the customer facing a Summons for physical assault.

On the day when Amos drove a very new 2.5PI Estate car through the wall of the Western Avenue car wash, the owner was seen in tears. Understandable really. The poor bloke had only arrived minutes earlier to take delivery of his new car, having been saving for two years to buy it.

But in those now far off days, it can safely be said the role of a Service Receptionist at either of these factory-owned locations, or a dealer - was not to be envied. The build quality of cars was mostly mediocre to appalling, while some of the problems in the early days of a car's life were 'interesting' from a

manufacturing standpoint. There is ample evidence too, that many people who were Zone Service Managers for British manufacturers suffered from what we now medically (and properly) recognise as severe work-related stress – so stress is by no means a recent phenomenon. After Sales Service was mostly an utterly thankless task in which very few owners or users ever expressed satisfaction with what they had purchased, or been allotted as company cars - and the problems were endless.

Only today, my old colleague from those times, Peter Cole, told me of an experience at Western Avenue involving a 2000 Estate car that was two months outside its warranty. It was Peter's first week at Park Royal and he was still, shall we say, a little damp behind the ears?

In the mid-sixties, Carbodies in Coventry who made London taxis, also did the Triumph 2000 estate car conversion. But their handiwork created a major problem with the lack of torsional rigidity of the rear tailgate. For some obscure reason, many tailgates developed a cross-wind – and they wouldn't stay closed. This particular car arrived at Western Avenue with the tailgate held closed with several pieces of string. Its owner, had clearly had more than enough of driving a car with a variably timed, automatically operating rear tailgate - and was by no means deterred in expressing his displeasure. Quick investigation proved this particular car had an atrocious tailgate cross-wind and Peter, being newly arrived at Western Avenue, solicited the help of an old hand, known to everyone in the company's London operations as Maurice *"god-knows-we're-all-'ere-to-'elp-lad-but-please-don't-give-them-my-name"* Whiting.

Maurice, who was the salt of the earth and had already had three major nervous breakdowns from an excess of work-related stress, instructed Peter to fully open the tailgate.

Then, moving a half-smoked cigarette to the corner of his mouth so the smoke truly inflamed his right eye and accelerated a violent fit of coughing, Maurice checked to ensure the tailgate was fully open.

"Right, my old son. You catch hold of the bottom corner on that side, and I'll do the same this side. When I say 'go' you push up as hard as you can - and I'll do the same and pull down. Ready?"

Peter nodded.

"Go!"

There was some grunting from both men.

"A bit more. Ready? Go!"

More grunting and something inside went 'poing.'

"That's got 'im," said Maurice. *"That's what we needed to 'ear. Now, where's the bloke who brought it in?"*

"Over there," Peter replied.

"Fine. Let's employ the skills they use down in the bodyshop. Bring the tailgate down to the halfway point about here – and then close it with a bit of firmness and friendly persuasion."

Peter stood back and watched Maurice put all his weight into the closing manoeuvre. As the tailgate crashed into place, the whole rear window shot out of its glazing rubber and shattered into a thousand pieces in Dukes Road.

The customer was, perhaps understandably, less than pleased. As Peter commented, *"it was the first time I began to understand the true meaning of a 'hostile countenance."*

The owner ranted, he raved, he promised punitive Court action, loss of employment, a replacement car, TV exposure, the press – and other choice experiences for the unwary.

Maurice stood there and listened patiently.

He'd heard it all before – and when they eventually got around to talking about the cost of repairs, Maurice opined that *“a couple of hundred ought to fix it, wot with the new door, glass, painting – and all.”*

The owner became stratospheric at that point and soon began to explore the outer reaches on the far side of Pluto when the truth finally dawned that the cost would be to his account as the car was now out of warranty on time and mileage. The added admonition that he should have brought it in earlier for attention, did little to ease the tension, or foster some by now much-needed goodwill.

Can't life sometimes be an absolute ****?

I guess that in the end, the owner was like all the rest. He paid up and went on his way – probably to buy a Volvo.

But my favourite recollection is of two people that Allesley staff irreverently referred to as 'the two wise virgins' – the Misses Elspeth and Doris Brentwater, though I've given them new identities here.

These two remarkable ladies were spinsters and to look at them, bless their hearts, they couldn't have been anything else.



*The late Joan Hickson
in her acting role as
'Miss Marple'.*

Imagine Miss Marple in duplicate (as portrayed by Joan Hickson in the Miss Marple TV series) and you've got Elspeth and Doris in one!

With minimal make up and always exuding a discreet aroma of lavender water and mothballs, they dressed in country tweeds, wore thick stockings and 'sensible' shoes of the laced, brown brogue variety.

The ladies were twins.

Dress habits notwithstanding, they were both courteous in the extreme and I suspect may have lost the loves of their lives in World War One. Furthermore, it's likely that neither ever recovered their individual losses, nor had they later found another person for their affections. Their Dear Mama had left them *“to play a harp above the clouds”* a few years earlier, but before so doing, had had the foresight to invest in a very early Herald saloon.

Without doubt, the Herald was a noble horseless carriage and handcrafted with loving care to the most appalling standards. The bonnet didn't fit, the doors wouldn't shut – and the 'Frying Tonight' drop-down basket in the front passenger footwell had a permanently broken catch.

The car was a duotone Coffee and White example – and one way and another, it cost Elspeth and Doris a small fortune at Allesley.

Both women claimed they 'shared' all aspects of its use and maintenance and in the curious way that many women have in sharing and apportioning a total cost, a compromise was reached in terms of who owned what. The mutual frontier of individual ownership was the 'B' post. Doris looked after

costs at the front end of things – engine, steering, front suspension, gearbox and clutch, while Elspeth took control of propshaft, diff, rear suspension and the multitudinous water leaks in the boot. How they apportioned things on the electrics or hydraulics, I have no idea. Sometimes, these hapless twins faced a major bill and their solution to preserving cash flow was to request an estimate and *“then we’ll go home and talk about it over a nice cup of tea, won’t we dear?”*

“Yes, I think that’s a very good idea” and off they’d go.

An hour or so later, the phone would ring and it would be Elspeth or Doris saying, *“please carry out the work, but could you prepare two invoices – one for work at the front and another for work at the rear?”* This request was on the assumption that remedial work would be required on either side of the B post. On other occasions, if the work was more local to the engine or boot, either Doris or Elspeth copped for the lot!

Allesley was pleased to meet this requirement, if only to get its money and be rid of the car until the next time it paid a call, which usually, would not be too far into the future.

The Herald was a frequent visitor to the Coventry Service Department – and for two key reasons. The regular replacement of front tyres and the simple fact that when it came to clutch control, Elspeth and Doris weren’t very good at it and still had much to learn. Dick Chandler, the Senior Receptionist, said he’d lost count of the number of blown clutches and scored flywheels the car had had. The workshop said they’d given up on the propshaft vibration, the differential was the noisiest anyone had ever heard and if any more Dum-Dum was put in the boot to discourage water ingress, the rear suspension would probably collapse with excess weight.

The Herald was simply not the car of which dreams were made and Elspeth and Doris should certainly have been given medals for perseverance and stoicism!

The story is that when the Customer Service file flagged up the 43rd visit, Elspeth and Doris blew their gaskets (in relative terms) – and it came about in this manner.

A new employee had taken the call to proceed with the work, but had failed to note the requirement for two invoices of inevitably varying value. This action, or lack of it, was to precipitate something that can best be described as an unladylike earthquake.

When the day came for the car to be collected, Doris and Elspeth arrived in a taxi and took their ease in Reception to await the Herald’s arrival from the workshop. By and by, the car arrived and the invoice was worked out in the Cost Office alongside Reception.

Note, ***the*** invoice, not the ***invoices*** – and it was presented to either Elspeth or Doris for payment.

They expressed concern. They said they expected to have two invoices. They said Mr. Chandler had always agreed to this. They were disappointed. *“This is not Service,”* they said.

The Cost Clerk was unaccommodating, explaining that once the invoice was written out, it was written out. He then threw in a few *‘more than my job’s worth’* comments for good measure and placed emphasis on the fact he was unwilling and unable to meet their requirements.

At this point, Elspeth uttered an extremely unladylike expression to the effect that if the Cost Clerk was unwilling or unable to locate 'nice Mr. Chandler', he could "**** off" and they would go home and leave the car until their needs were met.

And Doris supported her sister in saying she'd "*never heard such a load of ***p!*"

How could it be such demure ladies, of unquestioned breeding, of such impeccable standards actually *knew* words and phrases of this type – and what's more, were prepared to use them, in public?

The result was an impasse and much discontent.

With the coincidence of fortuitous just-in-time, Dick Chandler mercifully appeared on the scene, though he later claimed it was entirely by accident – and disaster was averted, though only just.

Hastily grabbing the recently employed Cost Clerk by his shirt collar, Dick took him behind a partition in the Cost Office and together they studied the time sheets and parts requisition notes.

"Easy," said Dick. "*More labour hours at the front than on the back. Divide the invoice in two, put ten percent on the front end and knock the same ten percent off the cost for the back. Make sure the total payment due isn't higher or lower than the first one you did – and re-word the whole thing so they don't*

smell a rat."

Bless their hearts, they didn't – and that Christmas, Dick Chandler received a box of **Meltis New Berry Fruits** (which he utterly hated) to which was attached a label, "*with grateful thanks for all your past kindnesses – from Doris and Elspeth Brentwater.*"

There were even two kisses in the bottom right-hand corner!

As Dick later commented, "*Wouldn't surprise me if Elspeth bought the box and Doris paid for the contents.*"

But do you know, I really miss those days.

It was the Triumph Acclaim that did it – and the virus spread too fast.

As soon as those blokes from Honda set foot in Coventry and Oxford with Triumph's variant of the Honda Ballade, it all went pear-shaped.

Eastern oriental gentlemen walked around in white coats, smiling inscrutable glins, and muttering strange oaths like '*Kai-Sen*' and '*ploduct quarity.*'

The result was utter chaos. Things fitted – and always in places where they hadn't fitted before, there weren't any odd rattles, you couldn't find orange peel in paint finish as peel was only found on an orange - not on the car, and the days when a car went down the line with a left hand drive instrument panel on top of a right hand drive pedal layout, were over.

The final death-knell was when the Liverpool plant built its last three door Toledo – two on the right and one on the left – and people like dear old Maurice Whiting and Dick Chandler went into retirement, out of boredom. They hadn't got anything challenging to do!

