

A New Look at Old Machines

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"THE PRESERVATION of early motor vehicles — and all transport relics for that matter — has been well publicised and it is now a "respectable" interest. The poor relations, the typewriters, sewing machines, early electric equipment and the like, were considered until very recently, no more than scrap. But we must take a new look at old things — and stop throwing our history in the dustbin!" These forthright editorial words appear in the first issue of a new magazine, *Veteran Machines*¹, which seeks to redress the balance by concentrating on these poor relations. That is an admirable aim, and anyone who is prepared to support his convictions with the financial worries and expenditure of time involved in launching a magazine must surely command respect.

Now to voyage successfully, in print, into somewhat turbulent and only partially charted waters (as many regard the study and preservation of industrial remains to be) will require a stout vessel and an able crew. Or, again, a readable well-produced magazine and an editor with a clear idea of its aims, supported by good material. *Veteran Machines* is certainly well-produced, in a format similar to that of *the London Archaeologist*. The text is both easy to read and, in this first issue, readable; and there are plenty of photographs and drawings.

The aims of the magazine are set out in the editorial already quoted, and are worth considering in some detail. To attempt to encourage "serious research and exchange of information between enthusiasts and authorities in the various fields covered by the magazine" is wholly worthwhile. But to precede this with the intention of showing that "something of this pleasure (. . . drooling over early transport relics . . .) can be found in the owning and appreciation of early manufactured goods of other kinds," having already given a favourable mention to the dealer ("that important preservationist"), may create uncertainty as to the way in which the magazine intends "to spread the word of the preservationist, the domestic historian and the industrial archaeologist."

These objectives, broad in their scope, are surely

1. Published 6 times yearly at an annual subscription of £2.40, by Grade Magazines, Sheldon Way, Larkfield, Maidstone, Kent ME20 6SE.

2. The museum or publicly-accessible collection must

intended to bring to the magazine subscribers whose involvement in the subject ranges from enthusiasm, casual through passionate, to dedicated serious study. But to maintain their support will require (returning to the nautical metaphor) the most skilled navigation, because it is clear that there is a potential conflict of interests between the dealer, the preservationist, the domestic historian and industrial archaeologist, and the enthusiast. It is useful to consider each in turn.

The dealer's motive is financial: he hopes to earn a living from his trade. This is a wholly honourable intention, but understandably he will be most concerned with material which has a good sales potential. He may well become an expert, just as many authorities on the fine arts have developed their knowledge while working for a Bond Street gallery or an auction house. But the prudent dealer will have an eye on current taste, and cannot be expected to involve himself deeply, at least not in the working day, in the "why" and "how" of technical innovation. His concern is the "what."

The preservationist too, when wearing that label, wants to save the "what." His efforts are often part-inspired by nostalgia, a wish to recreate some small part of the remembered past. Practical considerations will almost invariably demand that the threatened machine is removed from its original context to a museum or collection.² (Even when retained *in situ*, it can seldom avoid being seen in a different light, for the act of display places it firmly with inverted commas — it is no longer there for its original purpose. It is *ipso facto* not necessary to preserve what is still being used.)

The domestic historian and industrial archaeologist are, or should be, different breeds. Both will be looking at physical relics as source material which can assist in an understanding of the past. The survival of such tangible remains should be an incentive to thorough recording and documentary research; their interpretation can be attempted not just by the industrial archaeologist or domestic historian, but by the social or economic historian, the historian of technology, *et al.* Furthermore, such records accom-

be preferred, as limited funds and display requirements will impose some restraint on collecting policy, and encourage decent cataloguing. And what is the use to anyone but the private collector himself of his hoarding material that no-one else can ever see?

panied by a representative selection of preserved material can be of great educational value; they depict an important aspect of our past, and offer comparison with things as they are today.

The enthusiast's motivation is quite simply the pleasure he gets from his interest in old machinery. That is not to be derided, unless it becomes an overriding obsession. (In the 18th century, the word "enthusiasm" was sometimes used as a synonym for possession or even hysteria!) Indeed, some degree of enthusiasm is an essential nourishment for everyone concerned with the study of the past, if their activity is not to wither away in dull aridity; and the authorities of today are often the enthusiasts of yesterday. But it is important that the enthusiast should not without further ado adopt the label of "industrial archaeologist". The tag should not be regarded as an elasticated one that can be stretched to cover any conceivable involvement with the industrial past. (Maybe the fault lies with some writers. It is galling to see those who attend traction engine rallies or ride a preserved steam railway described in the Press as industrial archaeologists; if this is true, anyone who visited Baynard's Castle excavations was a medieval archaeologist, and the crowds at the Tower of London in high summer are all really architectural historians . . .)

So what is each likely to find in the new magazine? It would be quite unfair to dissect the first issue and deduce the future from its entrails. But equally the contents cannot be ignored as giving no guidance.

The three principal articles, each 2-3 pages in length, are devoted to early talking machines (phonographs, etc.); to a reprint of a 19th century account of Bradbury's of Oldham, makers of sewing machines and cycles; and to the history of valves. (Readers of *the London Archaeologist* will be interested to see illustrations of a Roman pump circa 300 B.C., looking incredibly modern.)

There are notes on the National Musical Museum at Brentford and the Broadwater Collection at Tunbridge Wells, whose Brian Jewell edits *Veteran Machines*; on early units of measurement (useful when researching in trade documents—1 firkin of

soap=64lbs., did you know?); and on a 1930's Beatty washing machine of unbelievably hideous appearance but some social interest. (Perhaps the ugliness of much early domestic machinery can account for its neglect in favour of the elegance of the steam locomotive or the colourfully quaint vintage car?) There are letters, and an impassioned account of the indifferent neglect of the world's largest reproducing organ in Southborough, Kent.

The first part of a Directory of Mechanical Writing is published, and the Editor appeals for more information from readers to make this and other directories into really comprehensive records. Admittedly "an attempt at the impossible," this first listing contains entries of varying quality. Twenty eight lines on the Blickensderfer Company are impressive, but surely there is more to say about IBM than the rather terse "Electric typewriters have been built by IBM since 1933"?

This issue therefore probably contains something of interest for everyone concerned with old machinery. It is clearly not intended to cater for the transport buffs, but then they are already generously fed by the magazine world. Equally, one must not expect exhaustively-detailed treatment of particular items, because space prevents this in a magazine which will be looking for a wide readership.³ Towards preservation the attitude is sensible: "it is not suggested that we should overwhelm ourselves with a lot of old junk".

Veteran Machines seems then to be setting a middle course, between the Scylla of indiscriminate generality and the Charybdis of obsessive pedantry. This is good, for there is definitely a need to maintain contact between the specialist authority and the more generally-interested enthusiast. If it can achieve that, tempering the unrestrained excesses of each, the magazine will be playing a worthwhile role.

Postscript

The above article was at proof stage when it was learned that *Veteran Machines* ceased publication after only two issues had appeared. What was written as a review has perforce become an obituary.

The reasons for such a brief life are a matter for speculation, not to be pursued here. But it must be regretted that the magazine did not survive long enough for us to judge whether it was achieving the aims set for itself in the first issue.

3. The magazine does however carry an advertisement for what sounds like a lengthy volume on the history of the typewriter. Details of Wilfred Beeching's 284 page *Century of the Typewriter* from: British Typewriter Museum, 137 Stewart Road, Bournemouth.

Local Societies

The third list of amendments to the list of local societies published in Vol. 2, No. 9 is as follows:

Enfield Archaeological Society: Sec. Mrs. J. Ledran, 53 Hawfinch Walk, Chelmsford, Essex.

Holborn Society: Sec. Miss J. M. Warren, 3 Belvedere Court, Catherine Road, Surbiton, Surrey.