

1897 AUSTRALIA'S FIRST CAR

The first Australian-made car is generally acknowledged to have been a Pioneer made by the Australasian Horseless Carriage Syndicate and demonstrated in Melbourne on 26 February 1897 with the Governor of Victoria, Lord Brassey, as the first passenger.

This rudimentary motor car — little more than a mail cart with an engine — reached a top speed of 16 kilometres an hour, which must have provided a pretty bumpy ride with its wooden wheels and iron tyres.

But it was a 'five-horsepower steam phaeton', with a two-gear belt drive and tie rod system for steering, which pioneered long-distance motoring and did much to popularise the new form of transport.

It was unveiled in April 1900 at Sydney's Royal Agricultural Society's show. Reported the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

An object of curious interest in the parade ring was The Thomson motor-

car. Motorcars of all kinds are things of everyday life in France, and are rapidly entering the daily economy of London existence. But in New South Wales, so far, they have not been common.

The Thomson motor vehicles are of Melbourne manufacture, and have the peculiar recommendation that, unlike all foreign cars, the fuel is kerosene, which reduces the estimated cost of running to 1/4d a mile.

Unfortunately, this car did not come under classification provided in the programme, but the judges of the horse vehicles yesterday expressed the opinion that it should be highly recommended for a prize.

The car is purely Australian production, and was driven by Messrs. H. Thomson (the inventor) and E. L. Holmes several times round the track, and an exhibition of trick driving and steering was given.

Mr John See (Colonial Secretary) and president of the society, took the opportunity of a trial ride, and expressed his satisfaction with the running. The car will be on view at the carriage tent, and trials will be given on the track each afternoon.

Meanwhile, in neighbouring South Australia, David Shearer manufactured a 'twenty-horsepower steam car' in which, after special permission was obtained from the Mayor of Adelaide, he used to take up to nine passengers at a time for demonstration trips around the city.

But it was Thomson who first showed horse-lovers and sceptics what the motor car could do for long-distance travel.

After the Sydney Show he and Holmes set off on a pioneering drive from

Bathurst (the steep gradients over the Blue Mountains made this standard practice for many years) to Melbourne, a trip they completed within nine days on some of the worst roads imaginable — and in some places virtually no roads at all.

It certainly attracted orders for Thomson vehicles, until, four years later, production halted because of competition from imported, mass-produced cars.

Harley Tarrant, who had been involved in the construction of the Pioneer, built Australia's first petrol-powered car at his Melbourne workshop in 1901. It had a two-cylinder Benz engine (for which Tarrant held the Australian franchise), a chain drive, and three forward gears.

By early 1905 cars were becoming so popular that the Dunlop Rubber Company sponsored the country's first reliability trial from Sydney to Melbourne, which attracted twenty-seven cars and fifteen motor cycles.

Tarrant, driving a 'ten-horsepower' Argyll, won the heavy car class by covering the 920 kilometres in seven hours and five minutes — a feat proudly mentioned in advertisements of the time.

Australia's first motoring club was formed in Sydney in March 1903 at the suggestion of Harry Skinner, who had been threatened with arrest by a constable for leaving his De Dion car parked unattended in the street.

The concerned policeman argued that the vehicle 'might start up on its own and endanger the public'.

The six foundation members of the Royal Automobile Club of Australia saw

it as one of their tasks to organise refuelling facilities for motorists at points in and around the city. The days of the petrol station on every corner was still very far in the future.

The Royal Automobile Club of Victoria was founded in January 1904 at a meeting of fifty motorists and motor cyclists who were united in opposing an 1865 law which laid down that a pedestrian with a red flag had to precede any self-propelled vehicle.

The club's motoring outings were popular from the start, with the first annual general meeting being told that 'this was and still is the best method of advancing automobilism'.

In 1904 South Australia became the first State to introduce a 'Motor Car Act', which laid down a general speed limit of 24 kilometres an hour (between 7 and 19 kilometres an hour in the City of Adelaide), as well as compelling vehicles to display a disc giving the owner's name and address.

A group of 'respectable' motorists publicly protested at this 'invasion of privacy', by driving down the main street of Adelaide with their faces hidden behind black veils.

How Western Australian motorists reacted to obtaining their driver's licences from the local dog inspector is not known, but they could not have objected too strenuously, for this practice continued until 1919.

By 1908, H. H. Dutton and H. M. Aunger had driven a 'twenty-four horse-power' Talbot through the roadless bush from Adelaide to Darwin in just forty-one days, while Harley Tarrant was bringing the motor car to the masses

by importing Henry Ford's 'Tin Lizzies'.

By the outbreak of the first World War, the country could boast 37 000 cars, trucks, and motor cycles.

When it ended after four years, and despite severe import restrictions, there were nearly 60 000 cars and trucks on Australian roads, proving even to the sceptics that the horseless carriage was here to stay.