

Address by Roger Collings, Past-President, Vintage Sports-Car Club at the Memorial Service for George Daniels 16 Apr 2012.

Google George Daniels watchmaker and you'll find thousands of entries. Google George Daniels racing driver and there are but three.

Andrew Crisford and Roger Smith have eloquently told us of George's prowess as a watchmaker. I'd like to recall some memories of George as a vintage car driver and good chap.

Lady Luck played a large part in George's life. His first piece of luck was to buy a decrepit 3 Litre Bentley. A beautiful dowager duchess Gurney Nutting landaulette.

George once told me that as a young watchmaker he had few friends but as soon as he bought a vintage Bentley he found he had a hundred. Such was the camaraderie of the Bentley Drivers Club.

His next piece of good fortune was to be introduced to Cecil (Sam) Clutton, a keen organist, a fabled collector of pocket watches, vintage cars and other exotica. Sam opened many doors to the owners of important, historic timepieces. One of these doors led to Robert Marryat and thence to a beautiful young girl, Julie Marryat. They married in 1964 and their daughter, Sara, was born a couple of years later.

George readily admitted that Sam Clutton was a great influence in his early watch-making career commissioning the first Daniels pocket watch.

George's philosophy on possessions was very simple. He just wanted to have owned, to have touched, the very best things he was interested in. Fine Brequets, fine Tompions and fine cars. Now to George the car lover. George would always say that "the purchase price of any car was merely the deposit on its rebuild"

and how right he was. Bearing this in mind he completely restored his Bentleys with his own hands. How suited his hands were for this task; probably more suited to this than the intricate workings of a Brequet.

He owned manifold Bentleys. The one that stands out from all the others is the famous Brooklands car; the red, single-seater in which Sir Henry Birkin created the Outer Circuit lap record at 137.96 mph before the war. George never drove it quite that fast but I well remember an early morning drive to Silverstone along the A5 when my wife, Judy, and I were in the Le Mans Bentley, YU 3250, following George in the single-seater when, goaded on by Judy I started to overtake George on a long stretch of dual-carriageway. Hearing us alongside George gave us one of his imperious glares (I'm sure you've all had one of those), put his foot down and accelerated away into the distance. The SOUND of those two racers from the past, their superchargers baying at each other, will go with me to my grave ..

George took the Le Mans car to the Nurburgring in 1988 to celebrate some sort of Bentley v Mercedes do. George annihilated the German cars single-handedly so much so that their gruppenfuhrer complained that the whole thing was most unfair because Daniels was a "professional" driver.

The other important motor in George's stable, standing outside St George's today, was the 1908 Grand Prix Itala. A giant of a car in many ways, coincidentally owned by Sam Clutton, this car was to give George immense pleasure. When he was in his late 70's he took the car to Montlhery, near Paris, for a race, driving through a blizzard for hours to be, rightly, feted as an hero.

As recent as 2008 he drove the car to Dieppe to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the French Grand Prix of 1908. The only car to be driven there, and back, under its own steam. George didn't own a trailer. If the car couldn't be driven to a meeting it didn't go.

The Itala and George were of a pair. Strong, useful, historic, aesthetic and amusing. I think we've all heard similar words like this before. The advantage of vintage cars over watches is that they could, as George would say "transport one, at great speed, as on an Arabian carpet".

Alongside his racing career George also enjoyed ambling through France in the company of "like-minded" souls. His first such tour was at the wheel of the ex-Lord Craven family, 1907 Daimler. A HUGE, copper-plated, large-engined veteran that he drove like Jehu scaring the pants off Julie most of the time. At least Julie got her own back a year later driving George in her own ENORMOUS Silver Ghost Rolls-Royce.

It's remarkable that George survived as long as he did. He very nearly expired on me twice. Once, when inspecting a house in Mid-Wales, he just collapsed onto the floor. After a few minutes he rose, ashen-faced, and asked for a strong whisky. After this I thought "enough was enough" and after an hour on the computer managed to search out George's heart consultant in London. Next day we drove to London in the Continental to seek him out. This led to George being admitted to King's Hospital for tests. George, of course, flew through all the tests, but still his heart flutter remained. One evening being completely bored with all this enforced inactivity George insisted on a decent meal so, secretly, we drove to the RAC in Pall Mall. George was a regular there and first off there was the regulation large gin and tonic followed by fillet steak washed down with a good bottle of claret. This all went well and I left to get the car with George agreeing to meet me at the front door of the Club. After twenty minutes; no George. I went back to the restaurant and there he was, laid out on the floor, two paramedics in attendance and most of the Club looking on. Lights flashing, the ambulance took George back to the hospital to sneak in at the back entrance and a "good ticking-off" by matron. The outcome of this little excursion was to nag the consultant to give George a pacemaker which probably gave George a few extra years.

Nice to think that a man whose life had been consumed with the orderly regulation of time could be helped by a device that regulated the beat of his heart. His escapement.

Now on to one or two amusing, personal memories of George.

George, as you are all aware, was possessed of a very quick, incisive, wit. At cocktail parties he told me that upon being offered a cigarette he would say, in his guttural-sounding voice, and pointing to his throat “That’s most kind of you to offer me a cigarette but, you know, I gave them up ever since I got throat cancer”.

George loved his beer and, upon ordering a pint in a pub would always say to the barmaid “I should like my beer in a glass with a handle because, such is my passion for beer, I’m afraid my hand would crush a plain glass”.

During his search for a home in the Marches of Wales George looked at the finest Georgian house in Ludlow that came complete with gardener and butler in residence. The price was enormous and whilst viewing this mansion he seemed a little quiet so I asked him if the price being asked was too high, He looked me straight in the eye and said “You know Roger, I could buy this ‘ouse and still ‘ave enough money over for an ‘oliday”.

We have all had our lives enhanced by knowing George Daniels, by spending time with him, by admiring his artistry. George wasn’t just an horologist. He was a supreme mechanical artist. The 21st century Leonardo DaVinci of the mechanical world. An acclaimed National Treasure. A genius.

He was, and always will be, an inspiration to young watchmakers. He was a true enthusiast, not just for cars or watches, but for life itself. It simply remains for me to say, as George always did:

HERE’S TO US AND ALL WE STAND FOR !