

CVpedia More

A repository of essays, independently authored, offering supplementary information to that available in The National CVpedia of Britain. Whilst items are subject to editorial input and the firm obligation is placed upon authors to articulate the truth as they see it, no responsibility is taken for the accuracy of the information presented.

More 17

18 March 2012

First motor car – demonstrated in London in 1711

by Keith Sinfield

The early history of the motor car is comprehensively documented (see Appendix I). The literature reveals man's first attempts to replace the horse, as prime-mover, with the power of steam, electricity and the internal combustion engine to create 'horseless' carriages or chariots. The names that frequently appear in this context are: Nicholas-Joseph Cugnot, for his steam powered vehicle in 1769, William Murdoch's steam carriage in 1784, a further steam vehicle by Richard Trevithick in 1801 and the man usually credited with introducing the first practical motor car, patented in 1886, Karl Benz. Writers on the subject, however, have neglected the work of one man who performed demonstrations of a horseless chariot in London in 1711, almost 60 years before Cugnot's steam vehicle and 175 years before Karl Benz's car. The man in question was Christopher Holtum, a clockmaker.

Christopher Holtum's name first appears in print in connection with his clock-making business. In 1710 he placed advertisements in London newspapers for '*A new invented Alarum to be discharged at any Hour, by any Watch, that may be affixed to it...*'. This, evidently, was an invention of his that would turn a pocket watch into an alarm watch, which was '*...convenient for all Gentlemen's Chambers, or Tradesmen, that have Occasion to rise at any Hour of the night...*'. A further advertisement later in 1710 gave '*...Notice to all Gentlemen, That there is now a very great Improvement made of the new-invented Alarum...*'. But then the bombshell! in January 1711 he announced through an advertisement in 'The Tatler' that he was giving '*...Notice, that at the Seven Stars, under the Piazza in Covent Garden, is to be seen from this Day till Thursday next, a Chariot, in which a Man may travel without Horses. It will go at 5 or 6 Miles an Hour and measure the Miles as it goes, and goes up Hill as easily as on level Ground, the like of which was never made nor seen in England before. Performed by Chris. Holtum, the first Author of Alarum for a Pocket Watch.*'

From January to March 1711, he placed notices in London newspapers advertising the fact that he would be performing demonstrations: '*By Christopher Holtum, a new invention of a wonderful Chariot in which Persons may travel without Horses several miles an Hour...It is much admir'd by the Quality and by the Ingenious.*' These demonstrations were performed first at Covent Garden, then The Strand, before his intention of '*...being then to Travel into the Country*'. In one notice placed in 'The British Mercury' from 19th to 21st February 1711 he states that '*The Invention is so highly approved, that there is already one bespoke by a Person of Quality...*'. thus suggesting that he had received an order for his horseless chariot.

EMBARGO: Strictly NOT for publication or dissemination without the prior written approval of the copyright holder

In spite of these, apparently, groundbreaking demonstrations little or nothing is known of Christopher Holtum's invention and how it was powered. It is tempting to think that, because of the trade he was in, clockwork was in some way involved - or perhaps a flywheel. Both of these means, however, we can rule out, because the duration of travel that either could have afforded would have been far too short for any practical purpose – a considerable expenditure of effort would have been required to store even a small amount of energy by manual labour. The likelihood is that the vehicle was powered by steam since, in the 17th C, miniature steam engines were not unknown (Ferdinand Verbiest, a Flemish Jesuit, is said to have been responsible for the first steam powered vehicle, built in China around 1672, but being of such a small scale it was unable to carry a man).

Tracking Christopher Holtum through the records we find that he married Ann Garfield (from Church Lawford, a village in Warwickshire), in London on 3rd March 1710. Next came the baptism of his children: the first, Elizabeth, on 1st January 1711 and the second, Mary, on 17th February 1716, both in Church Lawford, Warwickshire. It is supposed that when in Warwickshire he and his family resided in rented property in Church Lawford village, a part of the estate of the Duke of Montagu, however, his name does not appear in the rental records until the death of his father-in-law, John Garfield, in 1723. He and his wife lived in Church Lawford until their deaths, both in the same year of 1749: Ann on 2nd May and Christopher on 14th May. Clocks have appeared in auction houses in recent years carrying the legend: 'Chris Holtum, Church Lawford', indicating that he continued with his clock-making business in Church Lawford, possibly from around 1711 till the 1740s.

After his death estate records show that another clockmaker in Church Lawford, Daniel Dalton, took on the rental of his property and presumably carried on the business, in addition to his own. It is apparent that *someone* was continuing to make clocks branded 'Chris. Holtum, Church Lawford', for at least one clock has recently come to light dated 1771 – i.e. manufactured 22 years after his death.

Many questions remain concerning Christopher Holtum and his horseless chariot, not the least of which is the question: how was it powered? Less important, but nonetheless intriguing, are the questions concerning how he came to be in the business of 'chariot' making? why was his chariot not successful and what became of it after the demonstrations in London? – did the reference to his intention of '*...being...to Travel into the Country*', mean that the family was then intending simply to travel to Warwickshire, to his wife's birthplace, or did he intend to tour the country demonstrating the chariot?

This is certainly a fascinating story and one worthy of more research.

Keith Sinfield, C Eng, M I Mech E, has spent most of his working life in gas turbines as an analytical engineer (on stress, systems and performance) and in project management. Before retirement he worked for Rolls-Royce, Industrial & Marine Gas Turbines (Coventry). Apart from history, he now devotes his energies to the promotion of sustainable lifestyles; he is currently on the board of Trustees for the charity Action 21 (2010) and is a founder director of Community Energy Warwickshire Ltd.

Appendix I: Prior research

1. Eckermann, Erik (2001) *World History of the Automobile: Origin to 1900*, SAE Press
2. Hergé *History of the Automobile: Origin to 1900*

11 S. I. APR. 30, 1910.]

NOTES AND QUERIES.

343

1642) in the year 1652. This may have given rise to the Regicide tradition.

To conclude the story. Sir John St. Barbe died childless at Broadlands on 7 Aug., 1723, leaving that estate to be sold by "his only heir and executor Humphrey Sydenham," a descendant of Catherine, sister of John St. Barbe, by her husband Sir William Pole. The said Humphrey Sydenham erected the tomb at Ashington (also lately restored) to Sir John St. Barbe and Honor Norton his wife, and sold Broadlands to Henry Temple, Viscount Palmerston in 1736. But around Sir John St. Barbe's tomb at Ashington the Somerset folk still weave a romantic tale connected with Monmouth's rebellion and one of the St. Barbés. If there be any grounds for this tradition, possibly future search will bring the truth to light, as has now been done in the case of the inmates of the St. Barbe tomb in Romsey Abbey. F. H. SUCKLING.
Romsey.

AUTOMOBILE AND TAXIMETER ANTICIPATED: CHRISTOPHER HOLTUM.

It is possible to find suggestions at unexpectedly early dates concerning most modern inventions; but it is strange indeed to discover as long ago as the time of Anne a plain indication of a vehicle which was an automobile provided with a taximeter.

As I have previously stated in 'N. & Q.' (10 S. xii. 414) in *The Daily Courant* for 13 Jan., 1711, there appeared the following advertisement:—

"This is to give Notice, That at the 7 Stars under the Piazzas in Covent-Garden is to be seen a Chariot in which a Man may travel without Horses, the like never made nor seen before in England; it will go 5 or 6 miles an Hour, and Measure the Miles as it goes; it will turn or go back, and go up Hill as easy as on level Ground, Perform'd by Christopher Holtum, the first Author of Alarum for a Pocket-Watch. Where Attendance is given from 10 in the Morning till 8 at Night."

I have now further traced this striking announcement. On the following 3 February it was advertised in the same journal:—

"By Christopher Holtum, a new Invention of a wonderful Chariot in which Persons may travel without Horses several Miles an Hour, and measure the Miles as they go: It is much admir'd by the Quality and by the Ingenious. It is to be seen at the Sign of the Cabinet opposite to the Globe Tavern near St. Martin's-lane end of the Strand."

Twelve days later another advertisement indicated that the machine was attracting much public attention, this saying:—

"An Invention of a wonderful Chariot, in which Persons may Travel several Miles an Hour, without the assistance of Horses, and Measure the Miles as they go. 'Tis one of the greatest Curiosities that ever was seen in England, having the praise of all Persons of Quality and ingenious Men that have seen it. Which was at the 7 Stars in Covent-Garden, is now Remov'd to a Cabinet's Shop over against the Globe Tavern near St. Martin's-lane-end in the Strand. It may be seen to the 1st or 2d of March, being then to Travel into the Country."

This advertisement was precisely repeated on 19 February; but seven days afterwards it was elaborated into the following:—

"An Invention of a wonderful Chariot, in which Persons may Travel several Miles an Hour, without the assistance of Horses, and Measure the Miles as they go, it turns or goes back; having the Praise of all Persons of Quality, and ingenious Men that have seen it. Note, That it is convenient for any Gentleman that is incapable of walking thro' Lameness, to ride about his Park or Garden, without damaging his Tarris-Walks or Glass-Plats. The invention is so highly approv'd, that there is already one bespoke by a Person of Quality, which is to go on 4 Wheels, and swing in the Nature of a large Coach; which, according to a modest Computation will travel at the Rate of 7 or 8 miles an Hour. If any Person of Quality is desirous to use them with Horses, they may either travel as far again in a Day as they can with another Coach, or go as far with a Pair of Horses, as the Coaches hitherto in Use can with 6. Note, That such as are bespoke for Parks or Gardens only, will come very reasonable, others at Proportionable Prices. It is now to be seen at the Cabinet shop, over against the Globe Tavern, near St. Martin's-lane in the Strand; where Attendance will be given at all times till the 2d of March."

When this advertisement was repeated two days later, it was altered only in the last half-sentence, which ran:—

"where Attendance will be given till 11 a Clock at Night, this being the last Day."

But this announcement proved to be premature, for on 7 March the additional announcement was forthcoming:—

"Notice is hereby given, That by the desire of some Persons of Quality that have not yet seen the Invention of the wonderful Chariot, in which Persons may Travel several Miles an Hour without the Assistance of Horses, and measure the Miles as it goes; it is to stay one Week longer at the Sign of the Cabinet opposite to the Globe Tavern near St. Martin's-lane-end in the Strand."

In the usual tantalizing fashion, this wonderful machine then disappears entirely from sight; but further particulars concerning it would be decidedly welcome.

ALFRED F. ROBBINS.

[For other anticipations of the automobile see 10 S. xi. 305, 374, 431, 408; xii. 31, 96, 158, 414.]

Supplied by The British Library - "The world's knowledge"