



*Marcel Renault setting out on his fatal journey, Paris to Madrid, 1903*

## OUR CAPE MOTORING SCENE

# NEVILLE MINCHIN'S MYSTERIOUS FRIEND

By *Derek Stuart-Findlay*

**G.R.N. (Neville) Minchin, the Crankhandle Club (CHC)'s third President, had an extraordinary career going back to almost the dawn of the British motor industry (CHC Chronicle July 2020).**

**H**e and his wife Gladys (Gipsy) visited South Africa in 1948 and, on impulse, bought the St James Hotel on the False Bay coast. Two years later they moved to SA permanently and settled in Montagu in the Cape. This gave Minchin the opportunity to renew contact with an old acquaintance. By that time Minchin had published his classic 'Under my Bonnet', basically his memoirs. In the book he refers to his 'old friend Harry Knox, who certainly inherited his share of joie de vivre from his sporting uncle Lord Lonsdale'.

In a fascinating article in the Automobile of May 2023, David Burgess-Wise uncovers much of Knox's life:

Henry (Harry) Knox was born in 1887 in Belgravia, London, as the grandson of Henry Lowther, third Earl of Lonsdale and the nephew of the flamboyant fifth Earl, patron of Brooklands and the Automobile Association. Knox's mother, Lady Sibyl Lowther, had married Major-General George Knox and Harry was their eldest child. He studied at Harrow School and became infatuated with cars at an early age. He and his widowed mother wintered at a small apartment at Nice and they came to know many of the regular dwellers there, including the Jellineks, whose daughter was to become famous for her name, Mercedes. In 1903, at the age of sixteen, Harry's headmaster allowed him to travel to Ireland to watch the Gordon Bennett Race as he was 'so clearly quite determined to launch himself on to this strange new craze of motor cars'. Camille Jenatzy hurled his Type 60 Mercedes around the circuit at breakneck speed to win the trophy for Germany.

Shortly afterwards Knox went

up to Cambridge where it's likely he met and befriended a fellow student and motoring enthusiast, Neville Minchin. Knox later established himself as a motor engineer in the West End of London, specializing in sports and racing cars.

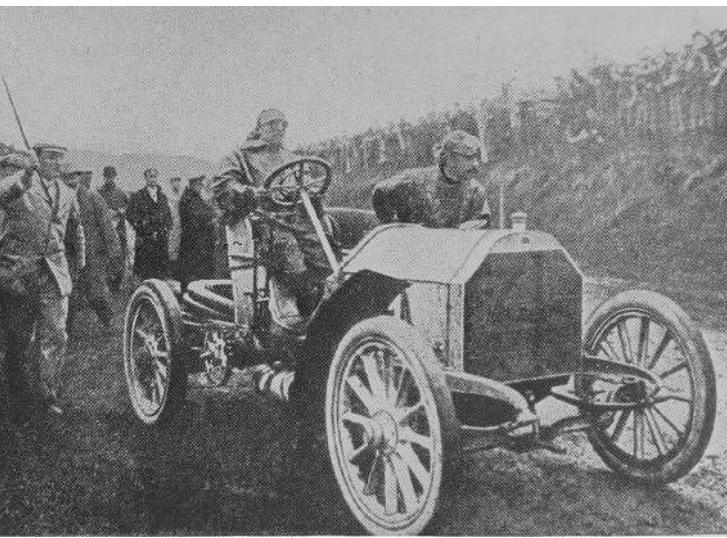
In 1950, probably at Minchin's instigation after his move to South Africa, Knox began corresponding with Douglas Tubbs of The Motor,

relating his many extraordinary experiences during the golden age of motoring before WW I.

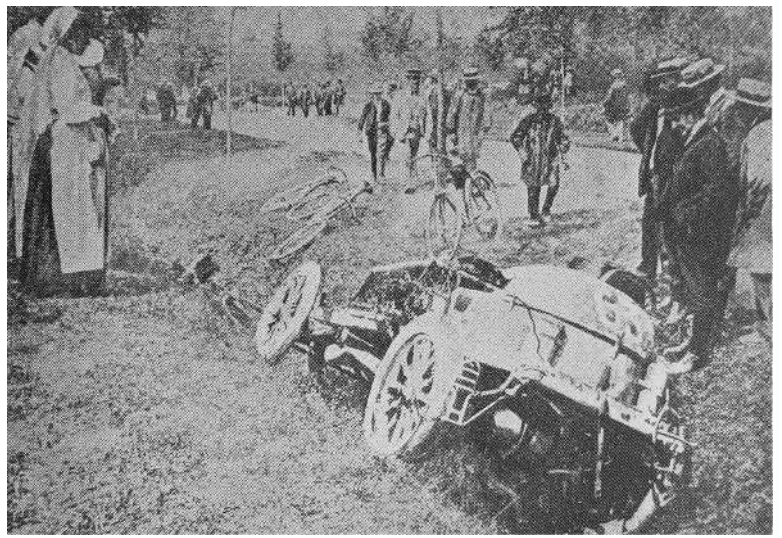
Knox had been a spectator at most of the important European races of that era, from the disastrous Paris-Madrid race of 1903 in which so many were killed, through to the July 1914 Grand Prix at Lyons which the Mercedes team had dominated, coming in first, second and third. The Peugeot



*Neville Minchin and friends at the St James Hotel, 1950s*



*Jenatzy racing the type 60 Mercedes in Ireland, 1903*



*Marcel Renault's fatal accident, France, 1903*

team, which had won in the previous two years, had been crushed. Within a month the hostilities of the Great War had erupted and the Germans and the French were at each other's throats.

He had been given a hair-raising run by Ferenc Szisz in the Renault in which he had come second in the 1907 Grand Prix at Dieppe. The car had a superb engine but its narrow track and solid back axle made it a very tricky car to drive.

Knox had very definite ideas on the origins of the sports car. For him, the Type 60 Mercedes was the first of these, and he believed that many other fine four-seaters had been built by Panhard, Renault, Fiat, Minerva, Isotta and Benz.

In his opinion the first of the English sports car was the London-Edinburgh type Rolls-Royce. One of these had driven the full distance between the cities in top gear, and in 1911 was timed at 100 mph at Brooklands. After their gearboxes had been converted from three to four speed units, four Rolls-Royce 'Alpine Eagles' had triumphed in the 1913 Austrian Alpine Trial.

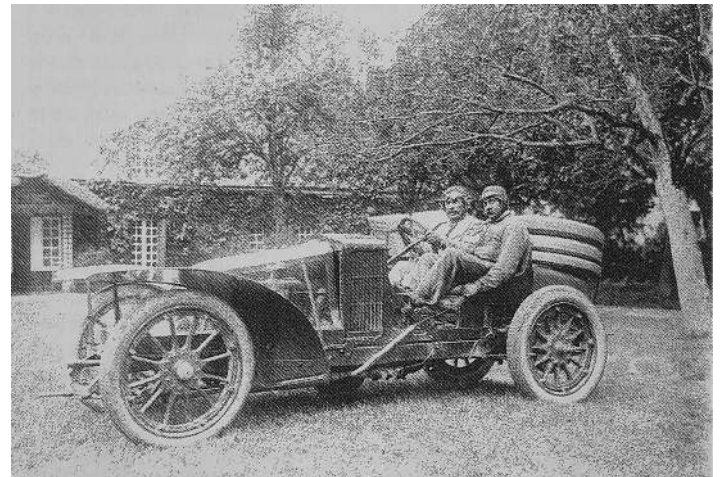
During the pre-WW I period Harry Knox bought and sold many famous sports and racing cars in the UK, Europe and the USA, but after the war his motoring career came to an abrupt halt under mysterious circumstances.

According to the Lonsdale family records he died in July 1924, aged 37, in the London suburb of Newham, then a deprived area of the East End. If so, he must have been a modern Lazarus as Minchin's book involves Knox in a tale that took place the early 1930s. He helped a wealthy German opposed to the Nazis smuggle a fortune in diamonds out

of the Fatherland hidden in the chassis of a Mercedes-Benz. Was his 'death' an attempt to save the family name after some unforgivable scandal?

Records in the UK and in South Africa have revealed much of the story of the rest of his life. In 1934 Harry married Ethel Mary Wardell from Wellington, New Zealand, at the British Consulate in St Malo, France, and soon afterwards the couple moved to South Africa. They settled at Zandvliet, a prominent fruit and wine estate in the Robertson district of the Western Cape, after registering a company, E & H Knox, as manufacturers 'under the style of the trademark Quinch'. From her Kiwi origins, Ethel appears to have had experience in the fruit-processing industry and by 1950 she and Harry had moved to another prominent fruit-growing area, De Doorns in the Hex River Valley, where they lodged at the Monitor Guest House. The wife of the owner, Winston Toy, was a Christian Scientist, and the guest house had been named after the publication, the Christian Science Monitor.

But it soon became clear that the

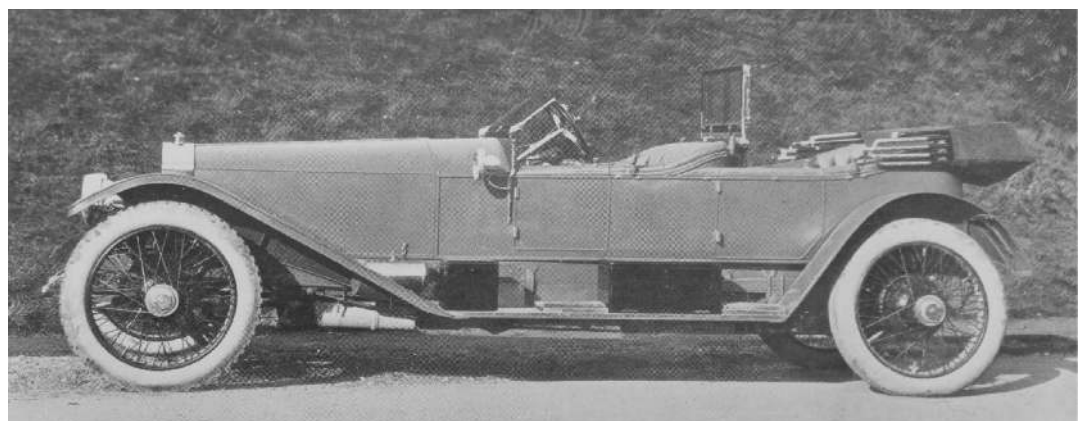


*Ferenc Szisz in his Renault Grand Prix race car, 1907*

Knoxes were struggling financially, and eventually they moved to the down-market Railway Hotel in the town of Wellington. Perhaps the name of the town had appealed to Ethel, but it had probably been chosen as it was much closer to the Minchins, who in 1961 had moved into a beautiful home at 27 Belvedere Avenue in Oranjezicht in Cape Town. Neville Minchin later revealed to his friend Bob Johnston that he had paid the Knox's board and lodging for many years.

Harry and Ethel moved to a

boarding house at 14 Burger Street in Wellington. To visit them the Minchins would have driven over in their 1951 Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn. This beautiful car now forms part of the deceased estate of Crankhandle Club member Johann Marais. Another interesting link with the CHC is that club member and Rolls-Royce enthusiast Gabriel Viljoen's family now owns the Monitor Guest House at De Doorns. The beautiful old Cape Dutch manor house and its farm buildings have been restored and



*London to Edinburgh Rolls-Royce, 1913*



*Snow in the mountains above the Monitor Guest Farm, De Doorns, c. 1950*



*Neville Minchin and his 1951 Rolls-Royce Silver Dawn*

since the 1990s have operated successfully as De Vlei Country Inn.

Harry Knox died in May 1969 at the age of 82. Ethel died in July 1974 at the Herfsjare, an old-age home in Somerset West. She bequeathed a picture of 'Home-going Workers, Piccadilly' to the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington, and the small balance of her estate to a relative, William Alan Wardell, living in nearby Masterton.

Burgess-Wise summed up Harry's life superbly; 'From gilded youth in Edwardian London to

penury in South Africa via a mysterious resurrection from the dead - that was the remarkable life of Henry Knox, front-row witness to motoring history.'

Neville Minchin died in Cape Town in 1977. Always a gentleman, if he had ever known the nature of Harry Knox's 'unforgivable scandal', he carried the secret to his grave.

*Acknowledgements to David Burgess-Wise in the Automobile, May 2023, Under My Bonnet by Neville Minchin, John Ryall and Gabriel Viljoen* 🌀



*The restored De Vlei Country Inn, De Doorns* ➔

## Technical Tip - Battery lifting straps



As many of us have found out, some early cars had their batteries situated in the most unacceptable places possible. I was reminded of this when recently replacing a battery which was situated in a "well" behind the driver's seat. One had to be a contortionist to get to it.

Fortunately, some 20 years ago a gentleman with years of experience was watching me trying to get a massive six-volt battery out using two vice grips on the battery poles. In rather expressive language he let me know where the battery and I would end up. He was quite right reminding me how dangerous a battery can be, especially if dropped and the case disintegrates.

He then went to his workshop and quickly made a battery lifter for me out of bits of scrap lying around. Over the years I have used this lifter dozens of times and will always be grateful for it as it is one of the most useful tools in the cabinet.

It's a case of when you need it you need it! I believe they were available from parts shops many years ago but I haven't seen them for sale.

If you are in the habit of using vice grips, may I suggest you make a battery lifter. See the picture - It won't take long to make one and will be worth the time and effort.

*R.I.P to Cyril Richmond, he taught me so much.* 🌀