



*Two photographs of Burton's Vauxhall during his record attempts.  
(I didn't know they had camels in Australia, either.)*



The following epic first appeared in the Australian motoring magazine, *Wheels*, to whose Editor I am grateful for permission to reprint. Thanks also to Mr. Burton; and to David Manson, of N.S.W., who worked astonishingly hard to produce a legible MS for me, and somehow got hold of some really excellent pictures. Mr. Burton writes so keenly that it is hard to credit that the events he describes took place very nearly forty years back.

## **BLUE MURDER IN A 30/98 VAUXHALL**

By John Burton

Since all stories have to have a beginning, this one began in 1918 when I had arrived at the R.A.A. Club of Sydney, having just driven a 1917 Hupmobile the long hard journey from Freemantle across Australia, via Port Augusta, Broken Hill, Cobar and Dubbo to Sydney; establishing a record time of seven days two hours and seventeen minutes *en route*.

There were numerous R.A.A.C. officials there to check my time of arrival, and with them was a tall big man wearing a cap, who, after patting me on the back and saying, "Good man, Burton, you and I will have a crack at this record with a Vauxhall some day," introduced himself as Boyd Edkins. Edkins was a record breaker and trials driver of considerable note, as well as N.S.W. agent for Vauxhall.

It was late in 1923 that I received a letter from Boyd Edkins asking me to call on him regarding his Vauxhall promise, made five years before. He was anxious to have me pilot a 30/98 Vauxhall, for I had built up some little reputation for handling automobiles in rough and sandy going by having taken part in several journeys across the Nullarbor to Adelaide through the sandy desert country; first in the old 1915 Studebaker, doing the trip in 8 days 23 hours and 35 minutes, via Adelaide and Melbourne. Again in 1917, this time with a Hup, taking the first mixed party from Perth to Adelaide.

A Mrs. Maloney, her daughter and her three huge sons (one being 7 ft. 2 in. tall!) and someone else called "Simmy" formed the party. Then again in a 1916 Model T Ford; and now again in 1918 — the record referred to at the beginning of this story, driving another Hupmobile. There wasn't much doubt that I had gained plenty of experience the hard way in the sand, and, too, of driving over all sorts of rough trackless country and bad roads, some of them real "horror stretches".

The 30/98 Vauxhall was waiting, stripped of all guards, and with a sort of utility body built on to the rear in place of the car's normal seat and doors. The idea behind the journey — apart from our testing the car's ability to stand up under the most adverse conditions — was that I should write the story and illustrate it with numerous photographs so that it could be used to boost the sales of Vauxhalls — this was what I had done in the case of the Hup.

Well, there I was with a car but no co-driver, and as all known Vauxhall enthusiasts contacted showed little if any eagerness for the trip, things were beginning to look rather desperate!

Worse — the sandhill country was daily becoming much drier. So I said to Edkins, "Who is that big chap down in the garage workshop?" and he told me his name was "Bill". I wanted to know what Bill could do, and was told that he was a pretty good hand at changing tyres, as well as a fair enough driver. So I forthwith announced that Bill would do me as an offsider.

Result : next day Bill and I were off *en route*, escorted from Sydney by a flock of Vauxhalls to wish us "God-speed" and with all sail set for Melbourne. There, under instructions from Boyd, we had the 30/98 equipped with a set of special "Poldi" steel springs — of these more anon.

Leaving Melbourne and taking the car very quietly we had a good run to Geelong and through the Western Victorian towns to Kingstown, a small S.A. town near the eastern end of the famous — or infamous — Coorong Lake. This is a ninety-mile-long shallow, narrow strip of water bordered by sandhills, bogs, and scrub-dotted sandy desert. From this lake, should the wind be blowing towards the west, the water blows clear away, exposing a perfectly smooth pipeclay bottom which will carry any car at good speed.

About 17 miles beyond Kingstown I saw a decent sandhill and, thinking it would make a good picture, I stopped the 30/98 and got out the cameras. A few moments later, when trying to get the bus out of the sand, we "did in" the crown-wheel. We had about 15 miles to go back into Kingstown, and we reached that town with clanking noises coming from the rear end.

Now it was a case of HOW to get the car to Adelaide, for no truck was available and the railway people said it would take them at least a week. Well, walking about as miserable as a bandicoot, I met a gentleman who said he "might" be able to help us. He insisted that we book our passages to Adelaide by a train leaving Kingstown that night, which

would connect up with the Melbourne-Adelaide Express at, I think, Wolseley. We did this.

The following morning, on our arrival at Adelaide, I was walking down the platform looking for information as to when the car could be expected, and — to our amazement — there was the Vauxhall on a truck attached to the Express! It turned out that our unassuming friend in need was the Head of the S.A. Railways, and had indeed performed a miracle!

The Vauxhall was towed to Autocars Ltd., where a new crown-wheel and pinion, sent from Sydney, were duly installed; and once more we were headed for the Far West. On to Port Augusta, and across the Gulf by punt, and we felt that, at last, we were fairly on our way. The whole country from Port Augusta was fearfully dry, and was in fact in the middle of a four-year-drought. Apart from a few man-made tanks and native "gnamma" holes, the first running water we crossed was the Avon River at Northam, in W.A., over 1,500 miles further on!

All went well until we were deep in the Yardea sandhill country. These sandhills, by the way, all run north and south, and, as we were going west we had to climb up and over them the best way we could. Heavy ropes wound around the tyres were our best method, and gave a good grip in the sand.

These sandhills were all covered with dense Mallee scrub or low trees, and on top of many of them were salt "pans", dry white salt, inches thick. With the very high final gear ratio of the 30/98 and the sudden type of clutch fitted, it was impossible for us to get the car away from a dead stop in the sand. The clutch being made of copper and steel plates which would not permit any amount of slipping, and became so hot that it would seize up, and time and again we would have to wait about an hour for it to cool off. Eventually we met our Waterloo in the shape of a real stinker of a sandhill which had a long, soft, sandy approach to it.

Rushing at it in low gear with the engine fairly screaming we got about a third of the way up, when Bill and I both leaped out, and, with the car still in gear, started pushing; but with the high gear ratio, it was no good. Dropping back in our tracks to where the going was a bit harder, again I rushed the hill, Bill staying where we stopped on the first effort and getting ready to push a little further.

Suddenly, however, "bang" went something in the rear end and we came to a final "full-stop". As Bill very truly put it, we were "Fixed and far from home".

Actually, we were about 75 miles from Wirulla, a small siding on the Port Lincoln-Murat Bay railway along the S.A. west coast. It was no use our shedding tears or cussing sandhills and things in general; we had to find out the cause of our stoppage. In order to do this it was necessary to dig a hole in the sand beneath the bus and crawl in — and eventually we found that the crown-wheel had gone west!

We were in a nice mess, faced with a long, hot and heavy 75 miles

walk to Wirulla. It was nearly dark by the time our preliminary investigation was over, so we camped alongside the car until early the following morning, when we set off on what nearly became a "perish" for us. I had two 2-gallon waterbags in the car, one full, and the other with about half a gallon left in it. Knowing that we were about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles from the first of the desert catchment tanks, we took only the lighter bag, but, in reaching the tank, found that it was dry! The next tank was about 12 miles further on, but instead of turning back to the car and collecting the other, full, water bag, we very foolishly pushed on, and by the time we arrived at the second tank we were as dry as it was.

Now we were in real trouble, for the only sure water supply was at Wallala Rocks, a huge granite outcrop in the sandy desert about 19 miles or so further. We tossed up for it, and the Rocks won; so on we went, pretty well done in, by this time. We had plodded along for quite some miles when I saw a new track which led off the one we were following along the telegraph line; so leaving Bill there, I barged along it for a mile or more, until I came to a fairly bare, big sandhill from which I could see in the distance a small house. Going back, and collecting Bill, we again set off together and made our way eventually to the house.

It was empty, but there was water in a tank, a horse in the paddock, a saddle in a shed, and some food in one of the cupboards. After a much-needed meal with tea — quarts of it — I set off alone for Wirulla, and on the way met a fine type of Australian bushman driving a team of horses heavily laden with water tanks. He asked some very pertinent questions about where I had got the horse and saddle; but, on my explaining things, he said, "Right'o Boy, go ahead and send your wires, and when you catch up with me again we will camp."

This we did and on the following day we set off together for the wrecked 30/98 and dragged it back to his home. I'll never forget that long, dry tow, with the horses kicking up the light, powdery sand and nearly stifling me. Our Good Samaritan turned out to be A. S. Wilson, a returned soldier settler from World War I. He was responsible for the catchment tanks being empty, since he had taken all the water for his neighbours — this being the water on his lorry when I first met up with him. If ever there was a friend in need, Mr. Wilson was that friend. He fed, housed, and helped us, and would take only £7 for all his time and labour. I recall he told me one day that his wheat, sown on land which he had cleared, did not germinate for three years — so dry was the district under drought.

He towed our Vauxhall into Wirulla and left us there waiting for a train "sometime". When it eventually arrived we loaded the Vauxhall aboard a flat truck, and the train went on to Murat Bay, about 19 miles. We were told it was coming right back, when it would pick us up again and take us to Port Lincoln; and we camped there under the station sign until late the following day. When it did pick us up, cold and dirty, we sat up on the truck in the car all the way to the Port, with our hair full of cinders and smoke — a pretty miserable pair of expeditionaries, believe me!

At Port Lincoln the general idea was for us to ship the car back to Adelaide but by this time we did not have sufficient money on us. Feeling pretty despondent and wondering what to do, I met the one man whom I knew could help us, a Mr. McReady — representative of the Dunlop Rubber Co. — and prevailed on him to cash a cheque. He endorsed a cheque which I made out, and the publican cashed it; and away we went, car and all, by the next steamer to Adelaide.

At Autocars there was a wire from Boyd Edkins saying that neither crown-wheel nor pinion was available. Neither was a hub, in which we had found a split. There was nothing else for it but to have an engineering firm make up a new crown-wheel and pinion. Unfortunately — or as it turned out, fortunately — they could not cut the same type of helical teeth as in the original, but could cut a straight tooth, which actually gave us a heavier section of metal under the load. They also made up a new hub by carving it from the solid metal.

Off we went again, headed for the West. This time we negotiated the sandhills country successfully, with only minor troubles, until we left Nanwarra Tank, and were about 250 miles west of Murat Bay. Here we struck more sandhills — not as bad as those of the Yardea, but bad enough — and the car stopped again.

There we were, in a worse fix than ever, even further than before from any place to which spare parts could be sent. This time our trouble was traced to a broken axle shaft! I walked back to the outstation at Nanwarra, where there was a native living in a small hut, in charge of the windmill and pump. He had a horse and cart, so I hired him to try and tow us back to the tank.

We hitched his outfit to the car, but the horse was quite unable to budge the car in the heavy sand. Whilst we were telling the horse just what we thought of its poor b.h.p. rating, along came an Afghan with a native boy offsider, in a buggy drawn by two camels. We tied the lot — horse and cart, camels and buggy, to the Vauxhall, and off we all set for Nanwarra, where we dismantled the rear axle and found, to our amazement, that the broken axle was not an original Vauxhall shaft at all, but a locally made one.

Once the full extent of the damage was known we started for Murat Bay — about 250 miles away. After walking for many miles we finally got to a place where there was an old Ford, which the good folks said we could use provided we could start it. After much cranking and cussing the Ford finally decided to go, and we set off for a Lutheran Native Mission some miles east, from which we would be able to catch a mail coach (another Ford) running to Murat Bay. The following day we boarded the mail coach for Murat Bay, and settled down to wait until the parts arrived from Sydney. Waiting for us at the Murat Bay Post Office, incidentally, was a wire from Boyd Edkins, saying: "Consider failure of parts due either improper fitting Adelaide or your driving!"

As you can well imagine, I saw red, and endeavoured to send a reply which the Postmaster, luckily, said he could not accept without

substantial modifications. I did, however, manage to say something about "dry nursing the bloody Vauxhall", and sent the wire urgent and collect — about 15s. worth! At any rate, after waiting about ten days, with the time spent surfing and fishing from the long wharf, the parts duly arrived. I hired a Dodge which the owner said he would not drive out through the heavy sand — although if I drove it out he thought he would be able to come back along our tracks.

The new axle was finally installed, and off we set again, headed West. It's hard to believe, but we had got only about  $3\frac{1}{2}$  miles past the place where the axle shaft had gone west, when that blasted car stopped dead again! At first I thought another axle shaft had gone, but examination showed another major trouble, the propeller shaft itself having given way. The splined shaft carrying the universal joint had broken its brazing away and had sheared off the rivets, allowing the short shaft to spin around inside the larger tubular portion of the propeller shaft.

This was the last straw! This time we were well and truly fixed and far from home! Still — repairs had to be executed somehow. After digging a hole beneath the shaft, I would file out a single rivet hole with a rat-tail file, while Bill was filing a bolt down small enough to fit the hole; and so, after hours of work in the stifling heat and sand, we finally got the hole large enough to start the bolt in it, and belted it home with a hammer. Again we started the old bus — and the makeshift repair lasted as long as it takes me to write this, before the bolt sheared off!

Rigging up a Spanish windlass, I lugged the battered Vauxhall up over the rise and back on to the track. Suddenly, we heard an exhaust!

Sure enough, of all things, a car was coming along the track from the direction of White Wells. I don't suppose more than 10 cars in all have ever been along that track, yet here was an Overland belonging to the Nanwarra Pastoral Co., coming towards us. Aboard it was the English representative of the company which operated this enormous tract of country called a Station, and he was making his first and only tour of inspection of the property! Hooking on the Vauxhall behind, they towed us back to Nanwarra Tank, and then very kindly took Bill and myself back to Murat Bay, where, again, we had to wait several days for a new propeller shaft to come from Sydney. This time, however, there was no nasty telegram!

We hired the same Dodge again, and found our way, mostly in low gear, ploughing through the heavy sand, back to Nanwarra Tank and the old bus. Shortly afterwards we were again on our way to the Nullarbor Plain, and could soon see the Nullarbor Homestead Station in the distance. The so-called Nullarbor Plain is really a tableland rising about five or six hundred feet above the lower plain, which is called "Eyre Patch" after the famous explorer Eyre. A few miles past the border post we descended from the Nullarbor to drive about 4 miles across the lower plain to Eucla on the coast at the head of the Great Australian Bight.

Leaving Eucla, we continued along the lower plain for about 130 miles to Madura Pass, up the steep cliffs known locally as the Hampton Range, to the Nullabor Plain. The Nullabor — meaning “without trees” — is about four to five hundred miles across. Near the western edge of this plain is Baladonia Station, which was owned by Mr. Pontin, a very good friend of mine from previous trips across. However, about 10 miles before coming to his dingo-proof boundary fence, we ran into more trouble.

In swinging the Vauxhall around a hazard I hit a small mallee stump hidden in saltbush, and a rear tyre collapsed immediately. We had already had two punctures and both our spares were flat, since we had not bothered to take time off to repair them.

Amidst the kit, however, we carried a complete tyre and tube repair outfit which had never been opened. On opening it up we were aghast to find the tube of solution was completely dry! The heat, it seemed, had dried it all up! Well, we filled that tyre with grass and saltbush, and drove on into Baladonia Station with it running flat, following which we spent the entire night repairing tubes, using all Mr. Pontin's solution in the process.

From Coolgardie to Southern Cross, the road — or rather the excuse for a road — was a beastly rough, worn-out, eroded nightmare. From Southern Cross to Northam there was plenty of sand, but no sandhills, thank the Lord; and then — finally — Perth! We were welcomed like long-lost prodigal sons, being so long overdue.

The 30/98 was installed in the Vauxhall representative's garage, and I immediately gave Bill a list of all the things which had to be seen to before we could set out on our Record attempt. Meanwhile, I did all the arranging of our time schedule, meals, accommodation, and the many different petrol supply depots for our return journey. New Dunlop Cord tyres were fitted all round.

Finally, with everything ready for a start the next day, we intended taking things very quietly with a swim and a lazy day. I strolled down to take one final look at the car. There had been some little “movement” in the near side running board, and I had a feeling that this should be stiffened up a bit, for we had intended to carry a lot of gear strapped on the running boards. Getting down on my knees, the better to peer, I suddenly saw, to my horror, a thin thread of what looked like oil down the main frame member!

“Bill,” I yelled, “this bloody frame is cracked.”

*(To be continued.—Ed.)*