



BURTON'S VAUXHALL.

BLUE MURDER IN A 30/98 VAUXHALL

by JOHN BURTON

(continued from our last issue)

Cursing, we piled all our stuff on to the car and drove it gently along to an oxy welding specialist in Subiaco, where we pulled off bonnet, radiator, and all the gear so carefully stacked on the running boards. Believe it or not, there were no less than seven welds put in that car's frame, sub-frame and cross-members; and that is how Bill and I spent our final night!

We were eventually started off at 3.30 a.m. on our way to Sydney, 2,950 miles away, by R.A.A.C. of W.A. officials, and away from Fremantle Post Office charged the 30/98, roaring its way into the darkness as though it was glad to be heading for home. The

road to Northam, 70 miles away across the Darling Ranges, was covered in a little over an hour and a half — this being the only good part of road in the whole 360 miles nightmare journey to Coolgardie. My time of nine hours over this stretch was so good that Boyd Edkins, back in Sydney, got excited; and when we arrived at Baladonia only 20 minutes behind the stiff schedule I had set, he wired the punt man at Port Augusta to stand by the punt so that no time should be lost in our crossing over the Gulf to Port Augusta.

We made wonderful time across the Nullarbor to the Madura Pass, and along the lower plain for another 130 miles to Eucla, where the good folk had a bath waiting for us, and a huge meal. Having rested for a few brief hours, we again climbed aboard the 30/98, and soon Eucla too was just a spot in the distance.

Barging steadily along, we found fairly good going on the Nullarbor until suddenly I skidded through some tough mallee scrub and tore the speedometer drive clean off! This was disconcerting, since I did not know exactly where we were, and although I was expecting a certain deep washaway at one spot on the track we shortly afterwards hit it with a terrific bang. We must have been doing a good 70 m.p.h., and the car went straight up like a skyrocket, its headlamps illuminating the clouds like searchlights and when we came down to earth again, it was with a soul-shattering crash, following which the car ran for about fifty yards and stopped dead. The engine would run okay but it just would not drive the car, and I could find no gears whatever.

It was pitch dark and there we were in the middle of nowhere, about 100 miles from Eucla, and in a nice mess. Examination by means of a torch, following removal of the floorboards, showed that the fork of the universal joint had broken clean away. Instead of being finished off with a heavy fillet, it was sharply squared away from the shaft and had broken off at the junction, leaving about three-quarters of an inch sticking out from the smooth face of the clutch cover plate. There was nothing we could do but camp where we stood.

I might mention at this point that, due to the scarcity of water, we would find dingoes alongside the car whenever we stopped, attracted by the smell of our water-bags. That night, sweeping the spotlight around, we could see dozens of eyes reflecting the light. Bill wasn't too happy about it, and when we got into our sleeping bags, he got between me and the car. In addition he had my "44" Colt under his head and my rifle lying alongside him "just in case"!

Next morning we had to figure out a way to get going again, and the only thing I could think of was to cut two flats on the very short piece of shaft protruding from the clutch. I set about chipping these with a cold chisel, while Bill collected some dry saltbush and scrub, and started up a "yell for help" in the form of a smoke signal, in an effort to attract anyone within cooee to our plight.

I managed to get the two flats cut, and had two heavy plates which I had intended to use in case of a broken spring. These were just long and wide enough to meet the other end of the fork on

the clutch shaft from the gearbox. Two three-eighth inch bolts proved to be long enough and the two holes already provided in the plates were far enough apart for me to clamp them firmly on to the flats I had cut. To stiffen this up, we had a coil of good wire in our outfit, so I sent Bill away across the plain with the coil, and, making the other end fast to the clamp, I started up the engine and tightly wound about 100 yards of this tie-wire around the whole of the improvised repair. We also splinted several broken parts of the sub-frame, damaged in the crash, with wire and green mallee sticks.

Turning the bus around, we went back to Eucla to see if it would be possible to get the car on to a railway truck at the nearest East-West Railway siding. We found there would be no hope whatever of loading the heavy car on to a truck. Having already gone back about 100 miles to Eucla, we then thought it might be possible to get right back to Murat Bay, from where we could ship the car to Adelaide, although I was scared stiff of the sandhills between White Wells and Nanwarra. The record attempt was well and truly postponed.

Crossing our fingers, we set out to try our luck, and eventually made it to Murat Bay — although at every extra heavy pull one or other of those three-eighth bolts would give way and the whole business would have to be gone over again, time after time until we were fed to the back teeth of it! Much to our disgust, when we finally did arrive at the Bay, we found the steamer to Port Adelaide had departed about a day previously.

Thinking we might catch it at Streaky Bay, its next port of call, we pushed on along the road to Port Lincoln, instead of tackling the heavy Yardea sandhills. This coast road, although very rough, was not very sandy, and we eventually arrived at Streaky Bay — and found that the steamer had left a few hours before! When we had finished cursing, I found a blacksmith's shop, and, as he had a lathe, I set about making heavier plates, with heavier bolts, and altogether making a much better job of the driveshaft repair. We left Streaky Bay feeling much happier, and in due course came to Port Lincoln, from where we intended to ship the car to Adelaide.

But we had very little cash left, and there was only one thing to do, and that was to drive up the coast to Port Augusta, and, after crossing the Gulf, drive the car on to Adelaide. This drive, after dark, turned out to be a nightmare, for there was no defined road, but only dozens of different tracks through the scrub. Many of these which I followed simply "petered out" where some woodcutter had felled a tree, and I would have the greatest difficulty in turning the crippled Vauxhall around. Eventually I gave it up as a bad job, and we camped where we were until daybreak. When dawn came I could see Iron Knob in the distance, and taking anything that looked like a track going in that direction, we finally came to the Port Augusta road.

Boyd Edkins, you will remember, had got excited and had wired the Punt man at Port Augusta to stand by for me; well there he was waiting, as mad as a cut snake! He had been there for three whole

days, and it took me several drinks and a couple of pounds to pacify him enough to take us across the Gulf at all. In due course we got to Adelaide, on a Sunday. No garages were open, nor hotels — only churches — so we tossed up whether we would stay or go on to Melbourne. Melbourne won, and off we went. The 560 odd miles went so smoothly, and such a fuss was made over our repair when we got there, that they kidded us into driving to Sydney, which we did!

On the way there were so many unpleasant noises emanating from all over the car that we fully expected the whole sub-frame to drop out on to the road at any moment, for, as you will remember, it was all tied up with wire twisted over green mallee sticks! At Sydney they made the usual fuss over us, although Boyd Edkins was naturally very disappointed — particularly as we had been going so well as far as Eucla.

So were we ! We had been away nine weeks all told, and had spent many days of that time barging back and forth from Nanwarra Tank to Murat Bay, 250 miles apart ; and we had covered that particular stretch of bad sandy track — sorry, road — no less than six times in all!

Most of our troubles had been caused by metal fatigue, this particular Vauxhall having been driven (we found) for over 50,000 miles — mostly on record-breaking attempts between Melbourne and Sydney, and Sydney and Brisbane — by Boyd Edkins himself and his friends. It had also been on many Reliability Trials.

About October some new parts arrived from England, after which the old engine, gearbox and front and rear axles were fitted to a new frame, together with the special "tray" type body. All was tested and okayed, and again we were ready to start.

This time there was no fanfare of trumpets, and, with only minor troubles encountered *en route*, we duly arrived in Perth, where the 30/98 was given the overhaul of its lifetime. Believe me, there were no cracks in the chassis this time ! Incidentally, when the new frame was fitted in Sydney, another crown wheel and pinion (number three!) was fitted, but I took that tried and trusty straight-toothed pair along with us as well for luck! New tyres were fitted all round, all oil and spare petrol tins were filled — as was the tuckerbox — and we were ready again to go hell-for-leather on a second, and, we hoped, successful record attempt. After all arrangements had been made, we left Perth and drove to Fremantle, where we had the best part of a good night's sleep.

In the morning we were started off on our long 2,950-mile journey to Sydney by one of the R.A.A.C. of W.A.'s officials, and from the Fremantle Post Office all went well for us — although this time I took half an hour longer to reach Coolgardie. We filled up with a full load of Shell at Norseman, made good time to Baladonia, and from there across the Nullarbor to Eucla, where petrol had been brought from Kalgoorlie by train to Cook, and thence by camel. On we charged across the Nullarbor through White Wells and the sand

hills country to Nanwarra Tank — where we paused to say “hello” to our native friend. Eventually we reached Murat Bay without further trouble.

From Wirulla we drove to our very good friend Mr. A. J. Wilson’s home, where we picked up and fitted specially-made belts about 11 in. wide, which were fitted with wooden blocks shaped to fit the tyres. These blocks were attached firmly to the belts, and the whole was made to bolt tightly together over our rear tyres. Needless to say, we found them a godsend in the infamous Yardea sandhills, and with them fitted we could and did stop later, in the middle of our hoary-headed old enemy, “Bullocky’s Delight”, to take photos!

We made good time to Adelaide — 1,734 miles in 3 days 15 hours 1 minute, and were a full 27 hours 19 minutes ahead of any previous record. At Adelaide we had our tanks refilled, ourselves ditto, and snatched some four hours’ restive sleep. Leaving about 8 p.m., we rushed the next stage through to Wellington, where we had to cross the Murray in a punt — a 65-mile trip on a craggy winding road through the Mount Lofty Ranges, which we accomplished in 1 hour 15 minutes, in the dark!

While waiting for the punt at Wellington, a drizzling rain set in. After making the punt crossing, we were racing in this rain along the dead white limestone road towards Meningie at a great rate of knots, when suddenly the road seemed to end in a huge black hole.

As I had flashed past I had seen tracks turning off the near side of this white road out of the corner of my eye, and did the most natural thing in the world; put my foot on the brake and hauled the Vauxhall off the road’s near side — and bang went crown wheel number four!

Well! Here was a pretty kettle of fish! We had come through all the really tough going to Coolgardie, across the Yardea sandhills, through all the rough stuff to Port Augusta, and had made such wonderfully good time to Adelaide; and now, with only a few minor sandhills in the Coorong Desert to come, and good roads all the rest of the way, this had to happen! We yanked off the offside rear wheel, and put our puller on the hub to draw it and our only spanner big enough to use on the puller immediately broke!

Came daybreak, and I saw a station homestead some distance away, so off I chased in the hope of borrowing a spanner sufficiently big enough to get the hub off. Fortunately they had one. We tried soaking all our bits of rag and spare shirts with petrol, wrapping them round the hub, then setting them alight to try and expand that terribly tight hub and loosen it a bit. After hours of hard work we finally got it off, after which came the heart-breaking job of dismantling that rear axle housing to get at the crown wheel and pinion — a long job in any garage, but doubly so on the road, in drizzling rain, and on damp muddy ground.

We lost a total of $17\frac{1}{2}$ hours before it was accomplished at last, and with the old straight-toothed gears installed we were ready for

the run through the Coorong where, luckily, the water had blown off the pipeclay and we were able to put in a magnificent burst of speed for 12 miles on a perfect surface, with the speedometer registering 95 m.p.h.

Shortly afterwards we left Kingstown on the way to Millicent, on a limestone road bordered with thick scrub, and our lights, as can well be imagined, being as powerful as we could have them, and giving a marvellous stream of light, attracted from the bush on both sides of us thousands and thousands of winged ants. As these converged into the floodlit pathway we "copped the lot". Soon the cockpit was filled with thousands of these crawling horrors, for they had dropped their wings on alighting, and our faces, hair, and clothes were full of them. I have never seen anything like it in my life, before or since.

Leaving Millicent, via Penola, we shot over the Victorian border to Casterton and on good roads now, made good time to Geelong and Melbourne, where we checked in 5 days 4 hours and 56 minutes from Fremantle — still 39 hours 29 minutes ahead of previous records, despite the 17½ lost hours. One of the rear dumb-irons had broken its rivetting away *en route*, and I had punched out a rivet and tied the whole thing up with fencing wire, in which condition it had held for about 1,000 miles. On our arrival in Melbourne, I found the other side had gone too, in a similar position. I pointed this out to the Melbourne agents, and asked them to do as I had done and wire the whole thing up for me while we had a bath, a feed, and four hours' rest.

When we went to collect the car we found that instead of doing as instructed they had taken the petrol tank off and were busy trying to weld the breakages, which, as the metals were dissimilar, was of course impossible! We lost a lot more time over this, and when eventually we did get away from Melbourne, we drove into a heavy thunderstorm which stayed with us all the way to Wangaratta. By this time it was very dark and the track (no made roads in those days) twisting as it did through heavy timber, was making driving extremely difficult, when — "bang" — out went all the lights and we wondered what in merry hell had happened!

The vehicle, at first glance, looked exactly the same; our swags, which were supported mainly by my rifle, across the utility body's rear, had not moved — but on closer examination everything else had gone completely by the board. It appeared that the floorboards had fallen out, goodness only knows when and where, and along with them the battery box! The sudden drop had torn the terminal out of the battery and, with no electricity, there we had to sit until dawn let us barely see the track winding along through heavy timber. I might mention that when the floorboards had gone, all our tools and spares had gone also!

With daylight we checked the magneto, and went on to Albury, thence to Tarcutta, where we had to make a detour through Wagga, the Hellas Creek Bridge on the main road having been washed away

by floods. From Wagga, the way took us on through Junee to Cootamundra and across again to the main road near Yass.

This was very rough, and on one bad bump the nearside rear spring reversed itself on its hangers, and as I slipped beneath the car to attend to it, my thumb slipped under this reversed top leaf at the very moment when Bill hit the leaf a heavy blow with a rock, and it flew back, jamming my thumb. I was held there in agony, my thumb crushed as flat as a pancake, for several minutes until Bill could get out the jack, take the weight of the car, and prise the leaf open sufficiently to release my thumb — which from then on hurt like the dickens! Eventually, in Sydney, it was found that the trouble encountered with this nearside rear spring (it had occurred several times) was caused by its being half an inch shorter than the other one — so much for those specially-made Poldi steel springs!

Off we went again, and everything went moderately well until we hit a deep rounded water gutter a few miles south of Goulburn. There the same thing happened again, only this time, to make it really interesting, the rear eye of the top main leaf snapped clean off! We had just patched this up in semi-serviceable fashion and were ready to start again, when we heard the distinctive exhaust roar of a 30/98 approaching us from the direction of Goulburn. Sure enough it was Mr. Williams, who had driven his 30/98 down from Sydney to meet us, bringing with him a battery and — wonder of wonders — a bottle of ice-cold beer!

We had to rig up temporary battery connections, which Bill held together by hand, so that when we reached Sydney we would have enough light to avoid being stopped by the police. We finally did reach Sydney (they gave us a terrific reception at the G.P.O.) in a new record time of 6 days 13 hours and 57 minutes — a clear 41 hours 24 minutes ahead of any previous record across the continent, via Adelaide and Melbourne — a journey of 2,950 miles.

I was immediately installed at Ushers Hotel and when I woke up I never saw so many empty bottles in my life! It seems that all the officials had been there celebrating our record heavily, while we slept!

THE NEW RECORDS :

Fremantle — Adelaide (1,770 miles), 3 days 15 hrs. 1 min.
(old record 4 days 18 hrs. 20 mins.)

Fremantle — Melbourne (2,385 miles), 5 days 4 hrs. 56 mins.
(old record 6 days 11 hrs. 25 mins.)

Fremantle — Sydney (2,950 miles), 6 days 13 hrs. 57 mins.
(old record 8 days 7 hrs. 21 mins.)

On this particular trip, I kept a meticulous record of all lost times, and, comparing it with our schedule, it showed that we had lost 61 hours, including the sleeping rests and all enforced stops. Our total time was 157 hours 57 minutes, giving an actual running time of 96 hours 57 minutes, or an average speed of 30.2 m.p.h. The train

time then was 109 hours 45 minutes. Despite our many trials and tribulations I still maintain that the 30/98 Vauxhall was one of the best sports-type cars ever made. It was magnificent for fast work on good roads, but for the conditions which we encountered on those trans-continental trips, they were nowhere sturdy enough in construction.

How does it feel to be a record-breaker? One does, admittedly, feel a bit of a hero when being cheered off at the start; but by the end of the first day you feel as though you would be far better off had you been put in an asylum; and certainly by the next morning, after having driven all night you are sure of it! To relieve the monotony *en route* we used to sing anything we could think of at the top of our not very melodious voices, but found that shortly after singing "Mother McCree" something invariably seemed to happen! This occurred so many times that we gave the song away.

I remember during our first West-East trip, when we were driving in through the suburbs of Sydney — we hadn't had any tyre troubles at all *en route*, despite our dreadful run of universal hard luck. I turned to Bill and said, "Well, fella, we're home and hosed." He grinned, and we joined hands across a passenger whom we had picked up along the way, and began to sing "Mother McCree". "Bang" went one front tyre immediately — the first flat we had had in 2,950 miles since leaving Perth!

On showing Boyd Edkins our record time, together with the numerous photographs I had taken along the way, he said, "Well, Burton, how about writing the story?"

"If I wrote this story as it actually happened," I said, "you would never sell another blasted Vauxhall." And naturally I didn't write it! However, now that the magnificent 30/98 Vauxhall is no more, with the exception of some carefully preserved examples in the hands of enthusiasts, the position has changed; and so finally I have managed, at the ripe old age of 72, to put this flashback from Australian motoring history down on paper. I hope you have enjoyed it.

JOHN BURTON.