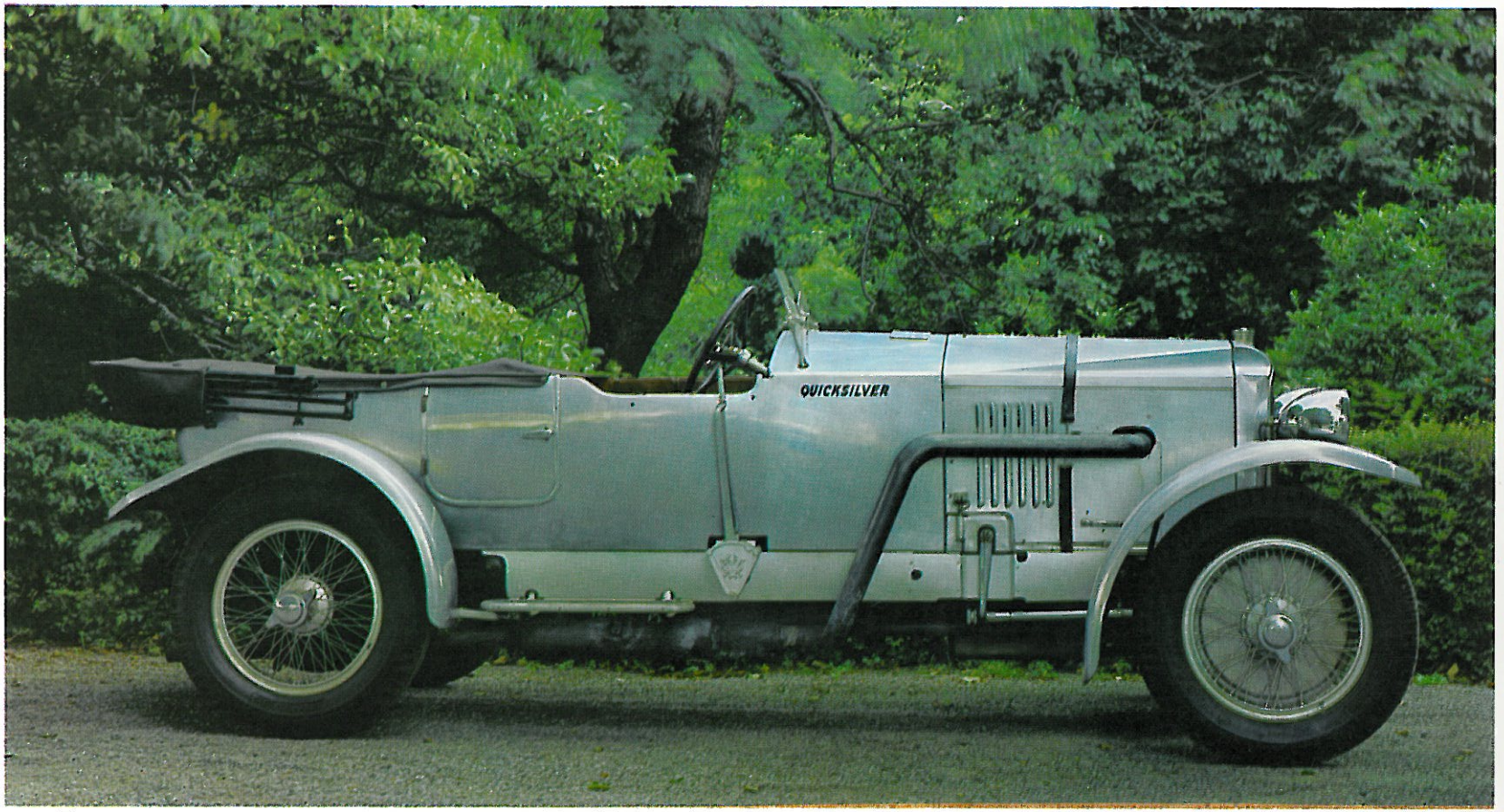
THE VAUXHALL 30/98



when an automobile becomes a state of mind

In seeking to explain an automobile like the Vauxhall 30/98, one can always run to a Thesaurus, begin with "grand" and proceed through its gamut of suggested cross references. The result of such research would be a long list of adjectives which when strung together would approximate the Vauxhall company's own vainglorious "the car superexcellent." Owners of the 30/98 might agree it was that, but that's not the whole story.

To tell the story of the Vauxhall 30/98, or Velox as it was popularly called, without mention of its aura is to tell only half a story. "A distinctive atmosphere surrounding a given source"—that's an aura according to Webster. The Vauxhall 30/98 undeniably had it; its atmosphere was distinctively seductive. Aldous Huxley gave literary voice to its lure in *Those Barren Leaves*, a novel published in 1925 during the peak of the 30/98's popularity. One of the protagonists of the book was a young milquetoast named Lord Hovenden who, detached from his motorcar, according to the author, was "an entirely different being from the Lord Hovenden who lounged with such deceptive air of languor behind the steering wheel of a Vauxhall Velox." Then he was the most daring and dashing of fellows. It was only while doing seventy-five on the Great North Road that he was able to tell Mrs. Terebinth, seventeen years his senior, who had four children and adored her husband, that she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. At eighty miles an hour he could tell her he loved her. With the breeze of speed and the sound of the engine to back him up, Lord Hovenden could make all sorts of promises he couldn't keep when his car was in the garage. If only, the hero wished, if only one could spend all one's life in the Vauxhall.

Be it social satire or not, that's quite a testimonial for any car. But the Vauxhall 30/98 was quite a car! Affectionately known as the last of the Edwardians or boastfully decreed as the first and perhaps the best British sports car, its production life spanned less than ten years, by the end of which its career had become a many-faceted legend.

Even the name "Vauxhall" had a long albeit dubious heritage. It was chosen by Scottish engineer Alexander Wilson in 1857 as the name for the ironworks company he set up on the south of the Thames in London. He had a Scotsman's interest in heraldry and chose the crest of Fawkes de Breauté, a vassal of William the Conqueror and later successful soldier of fortune under King John, to adorn his products. De Breauté had lived near the location of the Vauxhall Iron Works Co. in an estate supposedly called Fawkes Hall. When the company began producing its first automobile with regularity and modest success—it was a one-cylinder, five-horsepower runabout having much the appeal of the curved dash Oldsmobile—Vauxhall expanded and moved to Luton. The change of location fortunately did not lessen the pertinence of the Vauxhall name or crest, for Luton turned out to be another of the homes of Fawkes de Breauté. But then during the height of his power, de Breauté's command had stretched from Oxford and the Middle Thames over five shires, so Vauxhall had considerable latitude for relocation without the necessity of redesignation.

With the entrance of designer Laurence Pomeroy, Sr., into the firm in 1905 and the incorporation of Vauxhall Motors Ltd. in 1906, Vauxhall moved forward on added cylinders. Its sporting career began with a four-cylinder, long-stroke 20-hp machine that garnered twenty-two first prizes and special awards in track events, hill climbs and reliability trials throughout Great Britain in 1909. The following year when the sporting 20-hp Vauxhall showed no proclivity toward speed in the Prince Henry trials, Pomeroy produced the famed Prince Henry model, a low-slung, wire-wheeled sports phaeton based on the 20. Characterized by its V-radiator and "torpedo" styling, the Prince Henry was a handsome vehicle. It blanketed itself with countless successes both by amateur and works team drivers in Great Britain, and it was a happy diversion to racing enthusiasts in the waning years of czarist Russia.

So it was smooth riding for Vauxhall by 1913, with the company in full swing and a Vauxhall in many an English garage. And it befits the legend of the Vauxhall 30/98 that it was conceived and born by chance in that year. Repetition has given almost epic proportion to the story of how one day Laurence Pomeroy was approached by a certain J. Higginson. (Automotive writers almost to a man have never recorded his having a first name, although evidence indicates it was Joseph.) A well-to-do North Country enthusiast and inventor of the "Autovac," Higginson was eager to better his Shelsley Walsh hill climb time of 68.8 seconds in a 80-hp La Buire, and he wanted Pomeroy to build him a lighter and faster car to do it. The record at that time was 63.4 seconds made by H. C. Holder in a Daimler in 1911.

Pomeroy set to work among the various component parts that were available at the factory, modifying, adding to and altering what they had. Nothing really startling appeared to be the result. There was a standard L-head side-valve engine—about as pedestrian as any good orthodox four-cylinder powerplant could be. But Pomeroy had taken the 95 x 140 mm unit, bored it out 3 mm and then lengthened the stroke 5 mm by cold-stretching the crankshaft throws with the aid of a steam power

hammer. The camshaft was given a rather radical chain drive from the front end with a high-lift cam and tappet clearance of .050 to .060. All components together, the engine was fitted with a modified Prince Henry chassis and mounted on a narrow, all aluminum, four-seater body with light aluminum wings, a flattened radiator and no doors.

No really satisfying explanation has been given for the designation of the car as a 30/98. The official works history contends that the first number represented the increased horsepower over its 25-hp sire and the second its maximum intended horsepower. But its R.A.C. rating was 23.8 hp and there are conflicting reports as to whether it ever developed 98 bhp. The latter number could, of course, represent the increased bore, but that seems hardly significant. A more logical explanation suggested is that the figures were a tongue-in-cheek answer to the Mercedes 38/90, a bigger and slower but popular car then. At any rate, it was a promising title; as one contemporary commented, "it looks and sounds so well."

So did the car. In May Higginson drove it to the Lancashire Automobile Club hill climb at Waddington Pike, and in its debut performance, the 30/98 made fastest time of the day. A few weeks later its premier performance was repeated at Aston Clinton. And then the Shelsley Walsh. On June 13 three certainly apprehensive passengers joined Higginson in the Vauxhall at the bottom of the hill, and 55.2 exciting seconds later found themselves at the top. The 30/98 had covered the 1,133-yard upgrade with its double bend in the middle at an average speed of 42 mph. It was a triumph for Higginson—13.6 seconds faster than his time in the La Buire—and a Shelsley Walsh record that was to stand for eight years.

The following year Higginson entered the Vauxhall in dozens of events, and a works car was run primarily at Brooklands. Between them they collected thirteen first and thirteen second places. Publicity, as any of its practitioners will tell you, creates demand, and there logically grew a widespread desire for the new Vauxhall. About a dozen replicas were made for selected drivers, the last being delivered to P. C. Kidner in 1915. Then the Vauxhall 30/98 had to wait out the First World War.

The 30/98 didn't get into actual production until after the war, but by that time it already had a heady reputation. Two weeks after the Armistice, Vauxhall announced the two models to be offered the following year—one a 25-hp four cylinder of the pattern used by the army during the war and the other the sporting 30/98. The British motoring journals were more lavish in their attention to the 25-hp model, as might be expected. But the announcement that the 30/98 would undoubtedly prove to be one of the snappiest sporting type British cars on the market probably prompted many a young prep school man, as it did Raymond Mays, to write home urging that an early order be placed for one of the cars. The Vauxhall showrooms in London were in Great Portland Street, and one of the first 30/98's sold there went to the father of Raymond Mays.

The Vauxhall 30/98 was originally marketed at £1,960 with the Velox touring body. In 1920 the price was lowered to £1,676, in 1921 to £1,300 and for the 1924 model year to £1,220.

Early in 1921 a surgeon wrote *The Autocar* asking in essence if the 30/98 was worthy of the acclaim it was receiving and the money received for it. What followed the appearance of that letter was more than a year of published answers—love letters from enraptured, delighted and dedicated owners. Replies ranged from C. A. Villiers's contention that the 30/98 was far in advance of anything yet manufactured in standard production to the frankly fascinated fan who found that the car was in truth accurately described by its producers, no small compliment considering Vauxhall advertising was less than humble. In spirit the attitude of the Vauxhall owner was aptly caught by one gentleman who declared that "in spite of my eighteen years experience, I only began to motor in reality since I purchased my 30/98."

What the 30/98 owners were motoring in was a refined and improved version of the prewar model known as the E-Type. Mechanically, it was pretty much the same; its side-valve, fixed-head engine and a Zenith carburetor of the type popular on wartime aero-engines were installed in a sub-frame with a separate four-speed gearbox. Some of the carburetors, so it's been reported, were of the surplus aircraft variety that Vauxhall bought from the Air Ministry in 1919 for two shillings each. The engine gave about 90 bhp at 2,800 rpm and was light enough to pull a high (3:1) axle ratio. There were semi-elliptic springs all around. From 80 to 85 mph could be expected from the 30/98 in production form, and with racing refinements a lap at Brooklands at 100 mph was guaranteed.

Standard coachwork was the famous Velox four-seater body: slim, low-sided, elegant and very light. It had its disadvantages. The lightness was paid for by a lack of comfort in the back seats, and the body was so low-sided that rear passengers might have been warned that they were traveling at their own risk. With the mid-Twenties vogue for car bodies on the lines of motorboats, another body style was added to the 30/98 series in 1926. Available at extra cost, it was the Wensum, a boat-tailed two- or three-seater named after the River Wensum in Norfolk on which Vauxhall works

driver A. J. Hancock kept a fast boat. Despite its handsome flared wings and rakish lines, it never replaced the traditional Velox four-seater.

Acceleration on the 30/98 was grand. It could pull away smoothly from 8 to 10 mph in top gear, and accelerating smartly into the upper seventies was no problem—but the Vauxhall's brakes were. The E-Type brakes were à la Prince Henry. There was no front braking facility; the rear wheels with their sardine-tin drums were operated by a mighty hand lever. The pedal worked shoes in an adequate enough drum behind the gearbox, which unfortunately was nearly always full of oil that had leaked from the rear bearing and so produced only a nasty odor. What all this meant was that one had to literally steer clear of trouble. The car oversteered, so a driver with good hands and who understood how to use the handbrake and was not flustered by a transmission footbrake could do just that and, what is more, could corner astonishingly fast. With practice the handbrake, the one recommended for normal use, could be employed on a wet road for steering or even for turning around. In an emergency, however, braking was a waste of time. As one Vauxhall owner commented, the only thing to be done was to steer, change gear, jump out or pray—perhaps in that order.

In 1922 the E-Type engine was revised. Pomeroy had left the company in 1920, and his successor, C. E. King, after deciding that the side-valve engine would no longer do, developed a straightforward pushrod overhead valve conversion. Called the OE-Type, the new 30/98 engine stroke was shorter (140 mm, reducing the capacity to 4224 cc), and it revved faster, 112 hp at 3,500 rpm compared to the E-Type's 90 at 2,800.

Brakes remained a problem. Late in 1923 after the first OE model was put on the market, a front brake layout was added. The front brakes were linked to the foot pedal, which still worked the transmission brake. Compensation was by a rather untidy kidney box haphazardly affixed to the front cross-tube. This arrangement was thought to negate the possibility of a steering movement working the brakes by accident, and indeed, *The Autocar* commented that with the new Vauxhall brakes, "foot and hand brake used together should pull one out of any scrape." Some owners, however, still thought it best to steer and hope. In 1927 the 30/98 acquired notoriously temperamental hydraulic brakes, still on the front wheels and transmission only. These had to be pumped up by hand and appeared to be at their best when fortified by a sticky mixture of glycerine and water. They operated efficiently about half the time.

Despite such apparent disadvantages, the Vauxhall 30/98 took the British motoring world by storm during the Twenties. And as late as 1953 it again showed its spunk by covering 107 miles in an hour at Montlhéry, a feat that set Bentley owners to wondering and working. Depending on point of view, the Vauxhall in its day could either be seen as a triumph or a dismal failure in motor competition. Certainly it distinguished itself with innumerable wins in British hill climbs, sprints, Brooklands races and long-distance endurance runs. But the Vauxhall 30/98 was nowhere in international competition. It's only natural to wonder and conjecture why.

An obvious point relating to all this is that the 30/98 was not a racing machine. It was a fast touring car, a car less for the track and more for the road. Nor did it boast the vocal accouterments that distinguished the usual swift car on the circuits. There was no howl, no shriek, no wail. It was power with decorum in the Vauxhall 30/98. A tranquilizing rumble of the exhaust, and the car was off, cruising along at 60 or 70 mph amidst traffic proceeding generally at 30. Wide open, the car was like a domestic animal unleashed, happy to be free and fast; running more slowly, it was the docile pet, quietly willing to heel with the change of a gear.

One could develop a feeling about a car like that. Vauxhall 30/98 owners did. Partly it was the subtle satisfaction following the knowledge that with a few refinements, the car would lap Brooklands at 100 mph. The Vauxhall company guaranteed that; some owners wanted the test, got it and were reassured. Those that didn't knew they could. Much has been made of the fact that Vauxhall never called their 30/98 a sports car, yet undeniably it was just that. Actually the company did caption it "the finest sporting car the world produces" and other like epithets which were pretty close to calling a spade a spade. But what it was called really didn't matter, for the Vauxhall 30/98 had a personality that made terms rather unnecessary. It was a car that could pass just about anything else on the road, a vehicle for those who, as *The Autocar* commented in 1923, regarded a car "as something much more than a carriage." It was a car that seemed to ask to be driven. Behind its wheel, one could and would want to feel different.

Today it is fashionable among automotive writers to compare the Vauxhall 30/98 with the Bentley, the Vauxhall managing a very poor second. Those comparisons aside, however, one can only suggest that Ian Fleming's use of the Bentley for agent James Bond is an example of a car to suit the man. In literary reference, the Vauxhall 30/98 made the man—at least while he was in the car. And there is a bit of Lord Hovenden in us all.

—Beverly R. Kimes