

## Bentley S Series, by Anthony Dacre



In the immediate post-war years the exploits of the Bentley Boys were still relatively fresh in people's memory. They were little more than fifteen years past, and the six years of war effectively reduced those years further. For me, it was an account of the incident when Sir Henry Birkin, Bart, played the hare and drew out the opposing Mercedes-Benz at Le Mans, enabling the Bentley team to achieve victory that began my interest in the Bentley marque. I always imagined that I would one day acquire one of the "W.O." cars, but many years later when I had the opportunity to drive various models of the Cricklewood cars and discovered how robust you needed to be to handle them, I gained a greater admiration for the men who drove them at Le Mans for 24 hours, and on the roads of the day. By the time I could afford to own a Bentley the values of the "W.O." cars had escalated beyond my reach, so I investigated post-war cars from the Mark VI to the S-Series.

I had sampled an R-Type in 1964, but it was some years later when I purchased B95CM, a 1956 S1. She was big, black, and beautiful, carrying body number 1312, and the record showed that she was delivered in July 1956 to J. Sutherland. I enjoyed many miles behind the wheel of this grand old lady. She still carried the original coat of Masons Black paint, and the small areas which had worn thin on the tops of the guards were easily touched up. Mechanically she never missed a beat and the only problem was the usual seepage from the gearbox. Sadly in 1986 I sold "Margot" as she had been named when health issues became a problem. She was then shipped to the United States but later returned to New Zealand until in 1988 she found a new home in Australia.

When I found I was able to continue driving I needed another Bentley in the stable and hankered for another S Series, but in 1990 settled for a fine T-Type which served me well until 2002. I had continued my search for an S1 and eventually in October 2005 responded to an advertisement for a

car, part of a collection being sold off from a property at Hororata. The owner was Jim Acton-Adams who amongst his collection also had a Mark VI and the T-Type previously owned by George Wright and now owned by Tom King.

S1 B282AN was not in the condition I would have preferred at the point of purchase. She had been laid up for about 13 years and there was evidence of mice having nested in the interior. At some stage she had been repainted rather badly with the main body colour Shell Grey, with the bonnet roof and boot in dark blue. The chrome work was tarnished and the over-riders were dented. The right front fog lamp lens was smashed and the left front head lamp was cracked with the reflector partially discoloured. One rear flasher lens was bleached white, as were the reflectors. The door cappings were peeling, but the dashboard was not too bad. The carpets were merely dirty apart from the panel on the driver's door which was in shreds. The seats were average with the rear being rather better than the front, but replacement leather panels of a much brighter red which was totally at odds with the original burgundy had been inserted in the rear cushion and the driver's seat squab. The head linings were intact but badly stained; so much so that the interior was very dark. There was evidence of water leaks around the rear window seal, and the back parcel shelf was tatty. The interior lights were not functioning, but all the gauges on the dash-board were working. A service sticker on the windscreen suggested that the car had last been serviced in 1989, and when the engine was started there was a loud tapping noise. The wheels were fitted with rather small radial tyres which were 3 inches smaller in diameter than the original 8.20-15 cross-ply spare which was bald. The boot would not latch.

Bodily the car was straight, and the only evidence of rust was a few pin-point holes in the lower left rear guard and the right rear door foot

tread, but there was no knowing what might be hidden under the repaint. The underside was caked with dried mud. Generally the car looked as if it had been around the world and back, but it was working!

I had made arrangements by telephone to inspect the car and had been told where to find a key if the owner was not home. When I arrived at the address it proved to be a farm opposite a farm owned by my brother-in-law's family for many generations, and there was no-one home. I duly found the key and opened up the garage. Even in its decrepit state I was stirred. I started up the old girl and took her for a brisk drive up the road to determine that the basics were functioning – it was marvellous! On my return to the farm another would-be buyer had arrived so I departed. I entered into negotiations by telephone and as the price seemed high for the condition of the car I decided to have another viewing, but this time I took a panel-beater friend to get some idea of the likely repair costs. My friend, Peter Catto, who runs a business specialising in paint-less dent removal (an impressive skill in itself) was impressed with the Bentley and pointed out the areas for repair, but with the major caveat that we did not know what was under the repaint. The

Sellotape over the shattered lens, and somehow the rear lighting had passed. I also discovered in addition to the faults already noticed that the lock did not work on the driver's door and that it virtually rained oil leaks from the engine, transmission, and front lubrication system. However, I again had an S1 Bentley!

Part of my purpose in acquiring another S1 was to have a car I could use on rough roads without concern about stone chips and other possible damage, as my finer feelings prevented me from exploiting my Bentley Arnage in such conditions. I therefore had not been seeking a perfect vehicle and I thought this car with a bit of a tidy-up would do just fine.

I spent the next few days laboriously trying to revive the paintwork. I managed to get a good gloss on the dark blue paintwork, but the surface was covered in humidity bumps and there was a large patch on the bonnet that had worn through to the undercoat. I simply could not get any life out of the shell grey colour, and determined that a new paintjob was in order.

I next set about cleaning the underside to determine where all the oil leaks were coming from. I spent several hours with a high pressure hose,



other interested party had dropped out. On seeing the car and its condition, his wife had simply said "No way."

I took the plunge and decided to buy the old girl. I had been looking for an S1 for almost 20 years without success and as events developed it was as well I did. The deal was that the vendor would supply the car duly warranted and registered, and two months later on 23 December 2005 Jim Acton-Adams brought the car to Christchurch duly warranted and registered, and formalities were concluded.

On delivery I discovered that the WoF had been issued by a country garage. The fog-lamp had been repaired by attaching plastic with

working off the mud, and removed so much muck that I succeeded in blocking the drain on the fore-court involving several more hours unblocking the drain. The good news was that there was no significant hidden rust, but it was clear that the seals and mechanisms would need attention. I dismantled the boot latching mechanism and found dozens of locating clips along with dried mud and general rubbish had jammed up the works, and after vacuuming all the dirt and rubbish out, and oiling the system, the latch was again working. Where next? Peter Catto and I had a council of war. Peter said the paint would need to be removed to the bare metal to solve the humidity bump problem, and in going that far it would be appropriate to remove all chrome-work and

rubbers, and to get a proper result the car should be fully stripped, with the removal of doors, windows, bonnet and boot.

And so the task began. Over January we took the car apart, virtually reducing it to a shell with the removal of all bright work, doors, windscreen, rear window, interior, boot, bonnet, and seals. We decided, having gone this far, to replace the headlining as well but thought that we would leave that to an expert.

Another friend, Dave Kennedy, the owner-manager of Shepherd and Kime, agreed to undertake the paintwork, and in mid-February the car was trucked to the Shepherd and Kime panel shop in Antigua Street. All the steel panels were bead-blasted (sand-blasting changes the constitution of the steel, making it difficult to work if any panel-beating is required), and the aluminium doors, bonnet and boot were stripped chemically.

Following the removal of all the paint we needed to repair the areas affected by rust. The small area on the left rear guard was sorted by butt welding a new panel to the lower edge, while the right rear foot tread was dealt with simply by welding. Prior to this work the whole shell of the car had been sprayed with epoxy resin to seal the metal against future rust and to give a base for the undercoat. Once the undercoat was applied any surface irregularities were to be removed, and it was here that I appreciated the assistance of a team of highly experienced panel-beaters and painters. Shepherd and Kime is possibly the biggest panel and paint shop in Christchurch, and with it they have the latest equipment including baking ovens. The team there became enthused by my venture, and as I almost lived there for some months I was on Christian name terms with most of them.

When I thought that a good surface had been achieved ready for final painting they would come back and point out the tiniest irregularities which needed further panel-beating. Some of these I failed to see and had to accept the judgment of the experts. The need for such detailed care was explained to me as with modern paint systems a thin colour coat is sprayed over the undercoat, with a clear coat over that. This then highlights the smallest irregularities in the body surface. Whilst this process took many months I consoled myself that I should get a perfect result.

The S1 had been requested as a car for two weddings, and the panel shop had been notified of the dates. I was told that the work would be completed in time. I calculated that following the completion of the paintwork we still had to reassemble the car, and I was hoping I could remember where everything went. To assist in that process, as we had dismantled the car the various parts were tagged and placed in clear plastic pottles on the garage floor in approximately the same position they would be on the car. I had set up the car in the middle of a four-car garage so we had plenty of room to work around it. This was great, but I had not bargained on the huge time frame to complete the work, and in the intervening time I was unable to use the garage for other vehicles.

While the panel and undercoating process was under way I set about sourcing details and parts for the S1. Some of the rubbers were able to be revived but I needed new seals for windscreen, rear window, tail lights, boot fittings, and the doors together with a rubber tread insert for the left rear door opening. The tail light lenses and reflectors, fog lamps and headlamps needed replacement, and of course there was the great decision as to what colour to paint the exterior. As every square inch of paint had been removed the choice was wide. I carried out research in various texts to get factory colour schemes and went through large numbers of colour advertisements to see what the various colours looked like. Bruce McIlroy was able to obtain a copy of the original factory build sheet for my car, and that revealed that the original colour scheme had been black-pearl over shell grey. The planning continued, and many suggestions were put forward. I did not know what colour black-pearl was but imagined that it would be a metallic black. Bruce McIlroy again assisted by supplying the paint codes for black-pearl, shell grey and Tudor grey. Shepherd and Kime then made up A4-sized colour tabs of these three colours. Black-pearl turned out to be a dark metallic grey with a definite greenish tinge in some lights. Around this time Fazazz were marketing another S1 which was painted shell grey and Tudor grey. I took the colour tabs and set them against this car for comparison. Peter Catto, Dave Kennedy and I had another council of war. We decided on the black-pearl

and shell grey but as I had thought the original combination of dark blue over shell grey looked a bit odd, we decided to paint the lower body and bonnet black-pearl with the boot and more in shell grey, thereby adopting the original factory colour in reverse. Dave Kennedy made the observation that it would be preferable to have the dark colour on the lower body as it would help disguise any body irregularities such as variable door shut lines.

In my mind I had programmed the course of restoration; first the stripping, then the interior reassembly, and finally attending to any mechanical restoration. However, the months slipped by and the S1 sat forlornly in the corner of the paint shop while more important tasks were attended to. Shepherd and Kime have a number of contracts involving the correction of pre-delivery irregularities on new and imported cars including BMW and Range-Rover, and these obviously took priority. In the meantime I was getting together the necessary new parts. Bruce McIlroy supplied a new windscreen rubber and tried to source lights and reflectors. Roy Tilley helped with a new windscreen and rear window rubber along with other rubber grommets, while Colin Gray assisted with rubber parts and a wealth of guidance by telephone. It was all a great learning curve. While I had previously done a number of "hands-on" restorations, this was the biggest and potentially the most complicated. Finding out how to take the car apart and remembering how to reassemble it were basic. We found out that the rear window needed to be extracted from inside, while the windscreen was extracted from outside. When it came to dismantling the doors and removing the window glass and regulators along with the locking mechanisms we found that, having unbolted everything that could be unbolted, Rolls-Royce for added security had riveted the window channels as well, so we had to drill out the rivets, noting as well whether the rivets were steel or aluminium. As this was an early production car (body number 92) it appeared that the assemblers at the factory had used a bit of trial and error in the original assembly. The stainless steel body trims on three doors were held in place by simple press clips, but on the other door a combination of clips and bolts had been used. Having successfully removed the trims from the first three doors we were puzzled as to why the fourth would not come away until we made this discovery. Removal of the roof aerial required care to avoid damaging the delicate wiring arrangement for the aerial connection to the radio.

Finally we had all the bright work off with electrical cabling tagged with strips of masking tape and directions to assist in later reassembly. The exceptions were the small stainless steel strips behind the rear doors, on the centre door pillar, and ahead of the front door shut line. The team at Shepherd and Kime said they must be clipped in, as otherwise how else would they be mounted? Before they attacked the car I insisted on investigating this point. John Bain at Fazazz came to my assistance. He has an original S1 that his father bought in 1958 (B147CM), and along with it a complete service manual and parts list. By reference to these texts I found that the trim strips were bolted in place. To remove them involved removing the door rubbers, then the wooden interior trims, rear bolsters and seats, quite apart from the boot lining, centre pillar trims and wood fillets, and dashboard rail. Having done this, Peter Catto made up a special spanner to get in behind the dash to remove the front fittings. We now have an extra tool in the tool kit, hopefully not to be used again in my lifetime. Another tool had to be made to remove the wooden door fillets from the rear doors. The chrome door-pull is bolted through narrow slots in the underside of the fillet. First we had to determine what size nut was hidden behind the fillet. John Ferguson was able to assist in this regard, and then we obtained the correct size spanner and ground it down until it would fit the slot. Everything was straightforward after that. The bonnet needed to be disassembled, and this again involved drilling out rivets.

Eventually the painters had their chance to perform, and the epoxy was carefully sanded back to a silky soft surface before the undercoats were applied, and the undercoats were in turn rubbed back to a fine surface before the colour coat was applied. The colour coat was quite dull but this was resolved with the application of the clear coat, and at each step of the process the various coats were baked in the baking oven. The end result is a glassy smooth surface, fitting for such a vehicle.

At this point the S1 was trucked to the upholsterer, Mark Sinclair. This remarkable young man is a true craftsman. I had been referred to him

by Dytec, which firm had undertaken the recolouring of the odd rear seat panel. Mark Sinclair had removed the head-linings when the car was in Shepherd and Kime, assessed the job, and furnished a written price of \$1200 including GST. The price included the supply of West of England cloth which he matched to unmarked samples from the car. The effort and detail he went to were impressive. As a trial run I had him re-trim my Wolseley 6/90. This involved new head-linings, new leather for the seats (he supplied the leather) and carpets along with re-trimming the dashboard glove boxes. The result was most satisfying, and he again performed when he did the Bentley. Despite a year having elapsed from the time of his quotation he stuck to it. The completed job is as good as new. The leather trims around the door openings were damaged and in some cases had shrunk, so Mark obtained a complete hide and had it colour matched. When the tanner did not get it right first time, he sent it back until he obtained a correct match. Again the completed job is most impressive.

The area which was always going to be of concern was chroming. My past experience of New Zealand platers has rarely been satisfactory so I wanted to keep any re-chroming to a minimum. The bumpers were largely

alright with some small imperfections, but one hubcap had been kerbed and the small ventilator side grilles were poor, while the over-riders were dented. I decided to try a sample by getting the side grilles re-chromed. I checked around town, including Auto Restorations, and was directed to Superb Plating in Clarence Road. They stripped the old chrome off and polished the units ready for chroming, but noted a small split in one surround. Again enquiring around town I found that no-one was brave enough to attempt a repair. Peter Catto had a brainwave and contacted a jeweller friend who was a competent silversmith, and he willingly attended to the repair but would accept no payment. Superb Plating then completed the chroming for a cost of \$20.

The next matters were the hubcaps and over-riders. Until now I had had impressive assistance and the costs had been reasonable. As Shepherd and Kime and Peter Catto were by this time heavily engaged in other contracts, I was directed to another firm which I was told would be able to attend to the work.

I duly presented the hubcaps and over-riders, and was told that there would be no problem repairing them. After four weeks I checked on progress.



Some work had been undertaken on the hubcap but none on the over-riders. A week later work was more advanced, and another week after that I was called to collect the parts. All the parts seemed to be fine and had been rubbed down with emery. I was presented with an invoice which I include for others to make their own determination. I conveyed the details to my friend Peter Catto, who was stunned, and when he conveyed the news to Dave Kennedy he elucidated the response of "F... off!" Dave would not believe the situation until he sighted the invoice. Both he and Peter said they should have done the job themselves if it was worth that amount. Their earlier estimates had been for a few hundred dollars, and further enquiries around town confirmed those estimates. After some negotiations and along with much wailing about doing two weeks' work for nothing, the account was settled for \$4,000 in cash. I still wince when I think about it, and I still get regular approaches on the issue from my contacts as my comrades in this venture have passed the news around.

Once I had retrieved the hubcaps and over-riders I took them to a plating firm, to be told that all parts would have to be re-polished to remove the emery scratches. This took another two weeks before the plating process could begin. The nickel coatings adhered alright, but the chrome surfaces would not attach evenly, involving re-stripping and re-chroming four times before getting a good surface.

The over-riders were another issue. They had come back from the polisher beautifully prepared. They were polished to a chrome-like surface, but when they were put through the plating process, holes blew out where there were weld repairs, requiring them to be bronze filled. The final chroming was undertaken by Ross Argyle at Plating Solutions. He went to considerable effort, making up jigs to plate the hubcaps, and despite having to redo the work a number of times he stuck to his original price including all out work for polishing. The end result is excellent, but to achieve it Ross Argyle had the over-riders reworked by Max Wildermoth to remove the blow-holes caused by the earlier repairs.

With the painted body back, reassembly started. The boot lid was easily attached along with the chrome fittings. New tail light lenses were supplied by Bruce McLroy, but I was unable to replace the bleached reflectors. This problem was overcome by sourcing clear red paint from Basis in Renwick. I applied this with a fine artist's paint brush and then used rubbing compound to remove the fine brush marks. The stainless steel door sill trims were reattached after applying a rock-hard under-body surfacing and liberally applying body cavity wax. The reassembly of the doors was more time-consuming. It was definitely a two-man job juggling the stainless steel frames into place with the new rubber seals between door and frame, then re-riveting the channels, making sure that everything lined up, so that the window glasses would move freely when refitted. The chrome body trims were reattached, followed by the wood fillets and door cappings, then the leather door panels and door controls. We had some difficulty rebuilding the locking mechanism on the driver's door, but my mechanic Peter Stokes welded up the worn parts and it is now working well.

Rubber parts were not always available, so we recycled what we could, and what could not be replaced we adapted options. The supplied door seal rubber just would not fit, so I began the laborious task of cleaning the old paint and glue off the original seals, which were otherwise in good condition. I used acetone, and it took many hours, but they revived nicely and were duly glued into place. The door sill tread plate was another issue. I had tried everywhere for a replacement, without success, so I used a sheet of thin rubber under the stainless steel tread plate and a thicker sheet of rubber which I cut to shape using the slots of the tread plate as a template. I then glued the strips to the backing rubber, then screwed the tread-plate in place to retain the whole structure, and hey presto it is almost undetectable.

I obtained some burnishing cream from the firm which resurfaced the door fillets, and set to work on the dashboard and windscreen rail, and after many hours of rubbing they have revived quite well, retaining the patina of use that I had set out to achieve.

The carpets and seats were refitted; I had soaked the leather over the many months to soften it. The rear seat in particular came up well. I'm still trying to improve the front seat, but at least there are no splits. The bonnet had

to be re-riveted, and then it was a two-man job to remount it, along with the stainless steel centre trim, the radiator and front lighting having already been remounted.

Paterson Brothers Tyre Services found a new set of five Goodrich tyres to the original specification 8.20 by 15, and the fitment of these transformed the appearance of the car, highlighting just how wrong it had looked on the smaller tyres. The wheels had been sand-blasted and repainted in black pearl. I remounted the painted rings to the hubcaps, which when fitted made the car look nearly, but not quite, finished. The final exterior touch was the coach-lining, and I wanted those painted on, rather than use the stick-on variety. The search for someone brave enough to undertake this role involved checking various paint shops around Christchurch, a visit to the hot-rodders' motorama, and Auto Restorations, where I was put on to Brent Taylor. Brent had just completed the coach-lines on the SIII that Keith Hunter has been restoring, and I was able to view that job to judge the quality of the work. Brent had done a fine job on Keith's Bentley, so I instructed him to proceed. Brent runs a paint-less dent removal business and is a qualified car painter, but his hobby is restoring old vending machines for Coca-Cola and the like. His garage is full of beautifully restored vending machines from the 1950s back, many with the detailed pin stripes and motifs popular in that period. In doing that work he has developed the steady hand necessary for the undertaking of coach-lines. He has imported a 1959 Chevrolet panel van (the year with the seagull-wing fins at the back) from the United States, and has restored it to the nth degree, the under-bonnet area being so perfect that you could eat your dinner from it. He hopes to open a traditional period soda-pop parlour in the future, and the panel van will have its advertising on its sides. Brent duly completed the coach-lining on the S1, and the end result completes the exterior, with the final result being very pleasing.

The remounting of the over-riders and bumpers proved to be a mighty fiddle, and at the time of writing I still have to make further adjustments.

The underside has been undersealed after treating all surfaces with rust preventative, and first time through the testing station she obtained a Warrant of Fitness.

During the process of recreating the S1 I sourced a book, through Tom King, "Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud 1 and Bentley S1 – 50 Years" by Davide Bassoli and Bernard L. King. (*This book was reviewed in our magazine 07-2. Ed.*) That text furnishes the full list of all chassis that left Crewe, with the details of engine and chassis numbers, colour schemes, original owners and purchase dates, and where possible the current fate of each vehicle. In addition, it contains a history of the development of the S Series, along with road tests and a mass of information including production numbers, prices, and countries where cars were sold. It has a good range of photographs, and its compact A5 size makes it a handy reference text. The book records that only eight Bentley S1s were sold in New Zealand and at the time of publication in 2005 only three of those still survived in New Zealand. B282AN is not listed as one of those as she was still off the road at the time the record was compiled. The list of cars sold in New Zealand is as follows:

B282AN purchased by Walter N. Norwood/Dominion Motors

June 1955

B388AN purchased by J. L. Griffin

July 1955

B414AN purchased by Sir Willoughby Norrie

September 1955

(returned to U.K.)

B23BC purchased by John Herbert Francis

February 1956

B235BC purchased by J. C. Fletcher

April 1956

B95CH purchased by J. Sutherland

July 1956

(now in Australia)

B147CH purchased by Jack Barrett

August 1956

(now owned by John Bain)

B173CM purchased by Mrs M. S. Scott  
August 1956

(now in U.S.A.)

Based on this record it is possible that B282AN was the first S1 Bentley to arrive in New Zealand. Her specification includes the oil-bath air cleaner fitted for dusty climates, the single hydraulic braking system of the early cars, no power steering, and the export type rear number plate mounting rather than the wide plinth.

The S1 is now mobile, and she took part in the January 2008 run to Michael Midgley's property at Rotherham in North Canterbury. Everything seems to be working with the exception of the windscreen washers, but I had some concern that despite fitting a new radiator the temperature gauge needle sits in the low portion of the "hot" sector. We ran the car up over an extended period with a thermometer in the radiator, and it registered 83 – 86 degrees Centigrade and it did not boil, so I hoped I had only a faulty gauge. On the run to Rotherham at cruising speeds of up to 75 m.p.h. there were no apparent problems, and the engine is virtually silent.

There are still a few detailing jobs to do, but I again have a mobile Bentley S1.

Over the following months I referred the matter of the temperature gauge to Parrotts, and the problem was identified as a faulty sender unit, so all the gauges are now functioning correctly. On the way, the technician fixed the clock, which worked for a few months but has recently stopped again.

Not long after the S was again roadworthy I experienced a total brake failure. There was no warning. The car had a recent warrant of fitness and I had just braked without incident for a roundabout and was accelerating back up to speed in an 80 k.p.h. zone. I had just reached 40 m.p.h. and eased back for slowing traffic ahead. I touched the brakes and immediately knew that something was wrong. There was no braking effort from either the hydraulic or mechanical systems. Fortunately a side road on the left provided an escape route, and with considerable rendering of rubber I hurled the old girl in that direction, and eventually coasted to a halt. On checking the brake fluid I found that it had all disappeared. I was surprised as the car had covered only

about 500 miles since an alleged complete brake rebuild that the previous owner had organised. After gingerly driving home, and the following day driving across town to my mechanic, without even a hand brake, the system was stripped down. Clearly the brakes had been rebuilt – everything was new looking and clean. We discovered that a new seal in the left rear brake cylinder had allowed the brake fluid to drain into the drum, thereby lubricating that drum so well that no braking effort was available. As there was no brake fluid left there was no braking effort available for the front wheels either. The mechanical system was available only on the right rear, and that was virtually useless in pulling up an over 2 tonne vehicle. I was certainly surprised that the failure had happened in view of the recent overhaul, and the fault was put down to old stock so that the rubber seals were not sufficiently supple to give an effective seal.

The miles have been steadily mounting, and the S has been used for three weddings now, on these occasions always getting considerable attention. She never fails to draw attention when parked in the street, and has been instrumental in my making all sorts of new contacts.

Recently after I had been unable to drive for a few weeks I found the battery flat, and after charging it up overnight decided to use the S the following day to assist in the recharging. I was due to attend at a property which I was administering for a deceased estate. When I arrived I discovered a break-in and called the police. Unbeknown to me while I was inside with the police someone slashed the left rear tyre. I had covered only a short distance when the tubeless tyre blew. Unfortunately the hubcaps are larger in diameter than the wheels, so as the tyre deflated the hubcap was damaged. So, little more than a year since having all the hubcaps refurbished I had to go through the process again for the damaged one, with a repeat of the problems I had experienced the first time. When we removed the tyre from the rim we discovered a box-cutter blade inside. The family are not very sympathetic, pointing out that I should not have been driving it in the part of Christchurch where the incident occurred.

All is sorted again and I continue to enjoy the sheer pleasure and sense of wellbeing that the S imparts.



*(Left) Willis Brown at play in the Marlborough Sounds, with the snapper he had just caught.  
(Above) Willis Brown at play in HF3198 at the 1975 Invermay Hill Climb, Dunedin.  
Both photographs courtesy Willis Brown.*

## Obituary - Willis Brown



*Willis Brown and his R-Type B151TO at Teretonga: (from left) 3<sup>rd</sup> place getter Tony Maggs, 2<sup>nd</sup> Innes Ireland, winner Bruce McLaren.*

**Willis Brown** died during the evening of 13 July at the age of 85. One of the great Bentley characters, Willis was the adopted grandson of an Invercargill manufacturing jeweller, with premises on the prime corner of Tay St and Dee St. The firm has changed hands since Willis's retirement from it, but he retained ownership of the building. He was educated at Southland Boys' High School, and was drafted into the army at the end of the war, too late to be shipped overseas, but his pianistic skills came to the fore when entertaining in the officers' mess. He married Mary, and their always interesting relationship produced four daughters and two sons. At about the same time, 1954, he borrowed from his father the full £350 asking price for the ex-C.W.F. Hamilton 4½-litre Bentley HF3198. This famous car had been bought second-hand in London in 1930 by C.W.F. Hamilton, who then took it to race at Brooklands at the Easter 1930 meeting, where, despite being re-handicapped twice, he won three races in one day against Bentley racing drivers who included Sir "Tim" Birkin.

Among those lucky enough to have known Willis Brown, a mention of his name and the stories attached to it will bring a smile and a flood of memories. One which your reporter can verify took place during the Bentley Drivers' Club weekend outing to

Central Otago in 1980. He had arranged to meet us at Danseys Pass, and sure enough, there at the top in the sleet sat Willis and his red-bearded fisherman friend, Gordon Crowther, in HF3198. We stayed that night in the Travelodge at Queenstown, which was situated on the lake-front, next door to Willis's holiday home. After dinner Willis, clad in pyjamas and dressing gown, popped down his path, through the lobby of the hotel, went up in the lift to the spa pool, had his bath, spent time with his friends in the bar, and then reversed his route home to bed.

He was present at a weekend function during a discussion on Bentley history in New Zealand which involved co-founders of the Vintage Car Club of New Zealand (Inc), Andrew Anderson and the late Rob Shand. No matter that it was 2:30 a.m.; a telephone call to the gentleman concerned would settle the argument as to where a shop veranda was demolished by a 4½-litre Bentley, and Commander Tunnicliffe R.N. (Rtd) slightly tersely confirmed that the incident took place at Devonport in 1942, and that four veranda posts were taken out. End of conversation.

Willis's cure for a hangover consisted of a generous measure of whatever brandy was to hand, mixed in a suitable goblet with two raw eggs, Worcestershire sauce, and several ground-up A.P.

Codeine tablets.

As well as HF3198, he owned a 4 ½-litre Bentley saloon, a Mark VI and an R-Type. He owned several Jaguars, finally a black E-type fixed-head coupé which he drove until his death. Mary and Willis lived on 5 acres of bush at Otatara to the south-west of Invercargill, and in those days of little traffic he was able to boast that the early narrow rear track wire wheeled 3.8 litre Jaguar saloon he bought was driven at 100 mph at least four times a day, since he always went home for lunch.

He was president for some years of the Southland Car Club, and had a close association with the Teretonga Park part of the Tasman Series of motor races, with both his Crewe Bentleys used as Course Cars on race day. Willis spoke of the thrill to see in his rear view mirror the entire grid of Grand Prix cars and their drivers following him. He was an excellent driver, and Scott Thomson recalls how proud Willis was of being able to hold his own in an encounter with Rob Shand in a 4½-litre Lago Talbot as they crossed the Southland Plains between Invercargill and Queenstown. On the final downhill stretch approaching Frankton, Willis in his Mark VI was able to pass the Talbot to win what had become somewhat of a race.

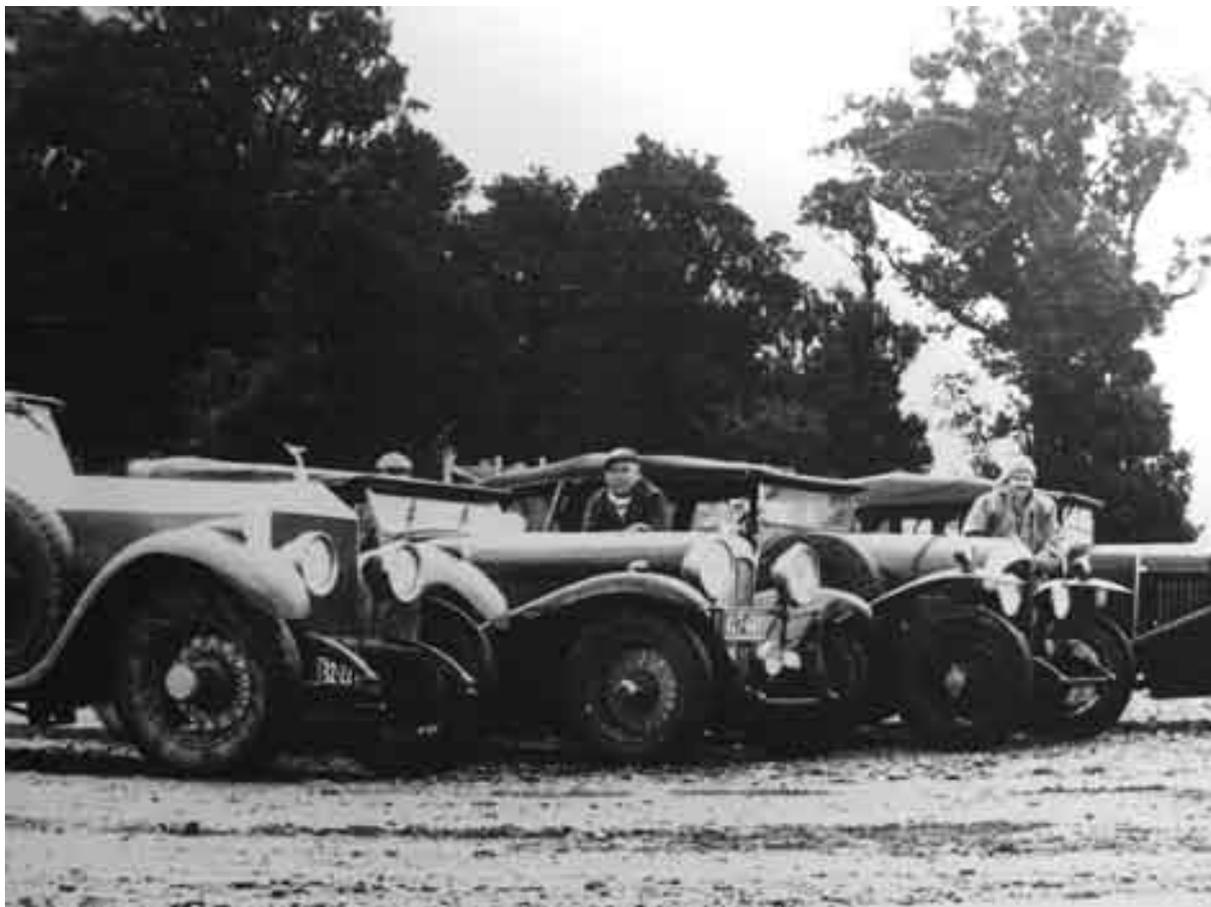
In 1987 Willis and Mary travelled for the first time to Britain, where they, together with Allan and Pam Bramwell, stayed in flats in Manchester St, a short walk from Oxford St. Willis was thrilled that he and Allan were able to walk from their flats to a small shop in Baker St where he was able to buy a replica rev-counter face suitable for HF3198. Another short walk brought them to the blue plaque signifying where the first Bentley engine was fired up in September 1919. This was a photo opportunity not to be missed. No matter that the angle was difficult, for someone had parked an XJS Jaguar in a handy position, Willis (after taking off his shoes)

climbed up on the Jaguar for his photograph, luckily escaping detection. Later they went to rural Oxfordshire, and Willis drove the short distance to the Bentley Drivers' Club headquarters at Long Crendon in Buckinghamshire. An hospitable and generous man, Willis had liberally entertained visitors from overseas, and he was disappointed when his kindness was not reciprocated. Upon his return from his BDC visit, he cut the logo and buttons from his blazer (keeping the perfectly serviceable blazer) and resigned from the Bentley Drivers' Club soon afterwards.

Allan Bramwell owned a Bell Jetranger helicopter, and one day asked Willis whether he would like to come for a spin as Allan built up his flying hours in the Oxford area of North Canterbury. Always game, Willis took along his beloved poodle, Harry, but because headphones for poodles had not been invented, Harry remained deaf for the rest of his life. Allan received a call from the Rescue Co-ordinator asking him to divert to Motunau Island to collect a sick DoC worker. Finding four similar boulders to land on was difficult, but the landing was successful, and the sick man was taken to Rangiora airfield, where an ambulance was waiting. Years later Allan's daughter Susan was at a party where one of the guests told her of a strange experience he had had while delirious. A helicopter, piloted by an old bloke, with an even older bloke and an ancient poodle aboard, rescued him, and took him to safety.

A keen photographer with a fine memory for detail, Willis Brown was a great help to your editor during the writing of the article on Ian Maxwell-Stewart which appeared in 07-6. Willis's photographs have appeared periodically in our pages, and will continue to do so.

Bob Beardsley, Allan Bramwell, Ron Hasell, Jim Sawers and Scott Thomson have helped in putting together this small tribute to Willis Brown.



*Willis Brown's photograph taken at Easter 1961, when (from left) the Pinckneys in Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost 14KG, McKellars in their 4½-litre Lagonda, the Haggitts in their 3-litre Bentley 1063, and Browns in HF3198 travelled to Haast. The road through the Haast Pass was still largely unmade, and the connection with the rest of the West Coast was not completed until the end of 1965.*

## Biggles and Derby, by Scott Thomson

Happy Birthday, Biggles! James Bigglesworth, Major, RFC; Squadron Leader, RAF, Detective Air-Inspector, CID, distinguished user of Derby products, is 77.

By strict chronology, he should be about 107, but it was 1932 when W.E. Johns, RFC pilot turned writer, took on the Americans. Pulp magazines and Hollywood films were making World War I a circus – won of course by American pilots in American planes. Johns decided to tell it as he had known it at first hand.

Biggles was born.

Biggles matured over time. In the first war stories Biggles is a scatty seventeen year-old. He must have been typical of many youngsters, over keen to get ‘over there,’ suddenly aged beyond their years. In the mid 1930s Biggles became a stock gentleman hero – bachelor rooms, not pressed for money - and available for charter flying when not serving British interest in some under cover mission.

World War Two saw Biggles deployed on special operations, although his squadron was a regular unit in the Battle of Britain and North Africa. By now, Biggles had become a fatherly figure. With no illusions about the dangers, Biggles usually took on the most dangerous missions himself. The final post-war books depict a rather world weary flying policeman.

### BENTLEY BOY

Biggles was a Bentley boy. He flung his Bentley powered Camel about over the Western front. In the 1930s he drove a Bentley car, as did other Johns heroes.

Biggles also received an early grounding in Derby power. Rolls powered Bristol Fighters ranked next to the Camels, the second seat invaluable for clandestine operations. Between the wars Rolls-Royce cars signified wealth – conspicuous if not positively ill-gotten. His civil flying was mostly on light aircraft, but Biggles specified Rolls-Royce Kestrels for a sortie to the Indian Ocean. ‘The extra horses under the cowlings saved them.’

From the Battle of Britain to the Desert and on to India it was Merlins all the way. Spitfires replaced the Camels of his youth. Even when assigned the latest Typhoon (in India) he still slipped back to a Spit. Long range Beaufighters were the kit in Borneo, but Merlin powered Fulmars saved the situation.

Biggles and friends show an impressive ability to leap into any aircraft – British or foreign – and fly it. American types came late, Liberators specially prized for their range.

The post war CID did not run to the latest high performance aircraft, but Biggles kept the Rolls-Royce service people busy using several Mosquitoes. For a humanitarian job he penetrated the Gobi desert in an early Halifax - Lord Bertie gunning down an MIG that got too close. Biggles’s only recorded sortie in a jet involved a Hunter of the Indian Air Force.

### FACE TO FACE

What was Biggles really like? The most convincing image of Biggles is the full-face flying helmeted paper-cover figure of the economy editions. Otherwise, Biggles is not well served by illustrations that show a beefy heavy-fisted son of superman, usually with a sports jacket, probably a tie, and what looks suspiciously like hair-oil.

In the text Johns is at pains to describe Biggles as undistinguished, slim, rather below average height and delicate looking. He’s obviously fit. His hands, ‘as delicate as those of a girl’ can do a lot of damage in a fist-fight. His fair hair is inclined to be unruly. His most notable features are deep-set restless hazel eyes.

In adult terms, there are a couple of aspects to set a reader thinking. Horatio Hornblower rose in rank, but not James Bigglesworth. Biggles finished the Second World War as he finished the first – a Squadron Leader, RAF, DSO, and DFC. Given the 1940 casualty

rate, one would expect all of 666 Squadron to have reached Group Captain at least! (Johns – and Erich von Stalhein – confuse the issue by continually referring to him as “Major”, his RFC rank)

Somewhere at Scotland Yard or in the RAF historical branch there must be an old confidential report by Air Commodore Raymond. “BIGGLESWORTH, JAMES: Brilliant pilot, first-class shot. (Destroyed 35 enemy aircraft Great War, 17 confirmed in the Second) Very observant, logical and thinks outside the square. Incorruptible – intensely loyal to friends and country. Uninfluenced by money, ambition, threats or women. Light drinker - except for brief period 1918. Languages: fluent French, German, Spanish, Urdu and fair Norwegian.

“Bigglesworth is disinterested in administration and sometimes doesn’t delegate. Doesn’t readily appreciate political realities and international implications. His leadership style is paternal; his loyal team tends to lack self-confidence as individuals. Bigglesworth can be blunt with superiors, inclines to sarcasm with juniors. Rudeness or injustice set off his quick temper.

“Bigglesworth has some wide contacts and tolerant attitudes. ‘There’s not much wrong with most people in the world.’ Too trusting and gentlemanly; e.g. failures to neutralize E von Stalhein. His prejudice against disguises is a handicap for covert intelligence work.”

In other words, no desks for Biggles...

### BIGGLES & Co

Biggles’s social circle was the Royal Aero Club. He called often and would cross the world for a fellow pilot. The big four lived in that later-day prefect’s room in Mount Street flats. Algy, a distant relation, came first. The young reader could identify with Ginger – a waif turned protégé. Events were often described from Ginger’s point of view. Other youngsters cropped up but seldom survived beyond one book. Only Lord Bertie – the ass on the ground and ace in the air – lasted the distance and joined the inner circle.

Apart from flying, they put stamps and old photos in albums and occasionally went to a film. Algy used to like classical music and tennis. Bertie was a sportsman and good on the guitar but it’s hard to imagine them having a sing along. Outside the faithful four, Raymond and Wilkinson – ‘Wilks’ in several books - probably knew Biggles best. Like good prefects, Biggles & Co were frozen into their strata of society. I can’t imagine Biggles meeting old Flight Sergeant Smyth at the local for a beer, or ringing Raymond for a round of golf.

### GIRLS?

‘Women and planes don’t mix,’ said Bertie sadly. Graduate students of Biggles know that he was hardened when he lost his heart to Marie Janis in 1918. Blue eyes and blond hair should have warned him she was a German spy. Around 1935 Stella Carstairs, rich, attractive, a keen pilot, thought the world of Biggles. All she got was a compliment on her financial management!

In 1942 Biggles dropped in at Monte Carlo to rescue pro-allied Sicilian Princess Marietta. She rescues him when he is wounded and patches him up. ‘Your commandant has often spoken of you during the long while we have been here,’ she tells Ginger. Interesting? Marietta had already shot several police and is ready to execute Algy and Bertie if they turn out to be spies. Not quite your type, if you see what I mean, old boy?

Finally, in the early sixties Biggles, did rescue the original Marie from behind the Iron Curtain. They were helped by Erich von Stalhein who at last realized he was never cut out to be a communist. Johns tells us they were all just friends.

Phew! What a relief!



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