



# The National Motor Museum

It is more than half a century since Lord Montagu of Beaulieu put several old cars, mostly borrowed, into the hall of Palace House, the Montagu family seat, and declared it a motor museum.

"If we have a 100 visitors today we'll have champagne for dinner" he promised. They had champagne for lunch, and the interest in vintage cars set him off on a serious programme of collecting.

Today the Museum is set amongst the 8,000 acre Beaulieu estate and just before winning the Museum of the Year Award had transformed itself from the Montagu Motor Museum to the National Motor Museum.

Lord Montagu's father had been a pioneer of motoring in the late 19th century - he gave Edward VII his first ride in a car during an informal royal visit - but died when his heir was only three leaving the estate, with its rambling house and the remains of a 13th century abbey, to him in trust until he was 25. He came into his inheritance in 1951, with the war having reduced parts of the estate to a wilderness, run down and undercapitalised.

Lord Montagu gave up a successful career in public relations to restore the estate and became a pioneer himself, of independent museums. He handed ownership of his growing collections over to a charitable trust, of which he is still president, and the museum's expansion continued exponentially. In its heyday it was attracting half a million visitors a year. In 1972 the museum had a new building. This was followed in 1989 with the opening of the National Motor Museum Trust building, housing the reference library, education department, object collections, film and video material, photographic collections and important motoring related archives.

There is also a large restaurant/café and the longest monorail in the country running round the whole site which now includes Palace House itself and the Beaulieu Abbey ruins as an attraction.

In the main exhibition hall are still the ranks of more than 250 classic vehicles, including cars, motorcycles and commercial vehicles. Some of the star attractions include the 1899 Daimler used to take King Edward on an adventurous spin, Malcolm and Donald Campbells' land speed record breakers, the

ubiquitous Austin 7, and the opulent Rolls Royce Silver Ghost.

Since 1974 much has changed. In 1985, *Wheels*, a dark ride taking you through the 100 year history of the motor car, was added, followed in 1997 in the centre of the museum by Jack Tucker's Garage, a reconstruction to the minutest detail of a 1930s conversion of a blacksmith's forge into a garage pandering to the new fad of motoring.

In 2002, to mark the museum's 50th anniversary, Motorsport opened on a track soaring through the hall to tell the story of motor racing, complete with the cars of Michael Schumacher, Damon Hill, his father Graham, and other icons of the motorsport world.

In the last 30 years, the National Motor Museum has found itself competing on all sorts of unexpected fronts, from adventure parks to Sunday shopping, and although the public fascination with motoring has changed - the museum has survived and adapted. Visitor figures slumped in the 1990s to 300,000 a year, but are now reviving and this year are tipping the dial at 340,000.

Beaulieu's newest exhibition is *Weird Cars*, a display of some of the more innovative and eccentric vehicles - including the alleged "ugliest car", the 1957 Aurora.

Giving a flavour of the new approach of the visitor attraction is the *Secret Army* exhibition opened this year telling the story of the Special Operations Executive (SOE), whose agents were trained here at Beaulieu's "Finishing School" during the second world war.

The museum now needs to develop its displays and make the material they hold more accessible. Digitisation of the photographic collection is already underway, and now Lord Montagu's brainchild has to evolve further, under new director Marion Barnes.

"It is recognised that the story needs to show the history and development of motoring in its broadest sense and reflect the international designated standing of our collections. We have an important function to play." she says. "We aim to put innovation and fun at the forefront of our future redevelopment taking into account and balancing the needs of all our visitors."