Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

EARLY CAR AND BICYCLE TRANSPORT H46/B

The coming of the railways in the mid-nineteenth dealt a major blow to horse-drawn forms of transport. However, the blow was not fatal. Steam trains and railway stations replaced horse-drawn coaches, with their network of inns and stables, but horse carriages and carts were still very much a part of everyday life. It was the coming of the motor car which finished off horse transport.

The motor manufacturing industry took off in the 1890s. 1896 saw the first British built Daimler - it looked more like a carriage than a car, but it was the forerunner of the modern motor car. In the same year the Red Flag Act was abolished and cars were able to travel on the open road above four mph and without a man with a red flag preceding them. The speed limit was raised to 14 mph, or to a lower limit decided by local government. Lights also became compulsory along with 'an instrument capable of giving audible and sufficient warning'.

The objects in this box belong to this transitional period between Horse-powered and petrol powered machines, the period in which carriages were transformed into cars.

Motor Horn



In the early part of the nineteenth century mail coaches and other carriages were all provided with a horn. It was used by the coach guard to warn other road users of their approach. All traffic including soldiers on the march and farmers driving slow hay carts, or herding cattle, had to give way to the mail coach as it blasted its horn.

The motor horn is a relic from this earlier era, although it illustrates the increasing mechanisation of the transport system. Horns used on coaches could play a range of notes. This car horn plays a single note and would have been operated using a rubber bulb.

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Even at the time the glamour and destructiveness of the motor car were recognised. This tension is well captured in Kenneth Grahame's *Wind in the Willows* (1908) in the scene in which the animal friends are gently ambling along a country lane in a gipsy caravan:

> when far behind them they heard a faint warning hum; like the drone of a distant bee. Glancing back, they saw a small cloud of dust, with a dark centre of energy, advancing on them at incredible speed, while from out the dust a faint `Poop-poop!' wailed like an uneasy animal in pain. Hardly regarding it, they turned to resume their conversation, when in an instant (as it seemed) the peaceful scene was changed, and with a blast of wind and a whirl of sound that made them jump for the nearest ditch, It was on them!

Mr Toad is instantly hypnotised by the glamour of the car. Although knocked over he sits in the road in trance, echoing the sound of the car's horn:

> Toad sat straight down in the middle of the dusty road, his legs stretched out before him, and stared fixedly in the direction of the disappearing motor-car. He breathed short, his face wore a placid satisfied expression, and at intervals he faintly murmured `Poop-poop!'

Carriage Lamp



Like the horn, this lamp shows how the structure and style of carriages were carried over into the design of motor cars. This lamp could, in fact, come from either a carriage or a car. Horse-drawn coaches didn't stop running when it got dark. They often began their journeys very early in the morning and, during winter, continued long after dusk. Coaches carried lamps to illuminate their way and also as warning lights on the rear. The 1896 Traffic Act required similar lighting on cars. This example is a rear warning light. It was illuminated by a candle but, unfortunately, this example has lost half of its candle holder. The tube at the bottom would originally have been another 12-15cm long. It could be unscrewed and a candle fitted onto a spring-loaded platform inside. As the candle burned down the spring mechanism pushed the remainder of the stub upwards. The lamp would have fitted onto a bracket on the side of the coach using the flange next to the hinge of the glass door.

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Bicycle Lamp



While the impact of the motor car as a means of personal transport was limited in Britain before 1900, quite the opposite applies to the bicycle. Crank-driven boneshakers and velocipedes were common from the 1850s. These led to the penny-farthing, the most popular form of bicycle during the 1870s and 1880s, despite its inherent instability and dangerous impracticality. However, the real ancestor of the modern bicycle is the Rover safety machine of 1885, designed by John Kemp Starley, the most successful of a new generation of bicycles featuring chain-drive from the pedals to the rear wheel, a rigid triangular frame and a low centre of gravity between two small diameter wheels. By 1888 the safety bicycle had been improved by the addition of gears, pneumatic tyres and good brakes. This launched a cycling boom that not only made personal transport almost universally available but also inspired a major social revolution as women took to the bicycle in great numbers. Cycle manufacturers were also quick to exploit the export potential, particularly in colonial markets.

This lamp was made by Brown Brothers, of Great Eastern Street, London. Brown Brothers were a small-scale manufacturer that seem to have begun production in the 1890s. For about twenty years at the beginning of the century they also manufactured motorbikes. At some point their trade name changed to Vindec and chopper bikes with this name were being sold in the 1970s. Around 1980s Brown Brothers had about 30 bicycle wholesale shops in the UK, but they may have ceased involvement with bike manufacturing around that date.

The lamp is lit by means of paraffin. One of the side windows can be slid up and the paraffin burner pulled out. At one time the wick mechanism could be unscrewed and paraffin poured in. The little wheel which would have been turned to raise the wick is missing. This is a red rear light, but the side windows are coloured red and green, giving some protection from vehicles approaching from the side.