

AN ABBEY 4.3 LITRE DROPHEAD COUPÉ

As interesting as the products of the Alvis company are, it is often their owners who are even more interesting. Many Alvis enthusiasts like tracking down the history of past owners of Alvises and our 4.3 Litre Model Secretary, Wayne Brooks, is a self-confessed enthusiast for eccentric and unusual Alvis owners and he spends a great deal of his time researching such people. Wayne's 4.3 Litre Register is a mine of interesting information but short on narrative. It was when Nick Walker came across the beautiful Abbey Coachworks drawing of a special four-door cabriolet body on a 4.3 Litre chassis, which heads this article, that Wayne started to put together information about the car's first owner, in 1938, a German Oxford undergraduate. Wayne sent the information to me and this article is the result.

A 4.3 Litre Alvis was by no means a cheap car in 1938 and it was wildly beyond the means of most undergraduates but by no means beyond the means of some fortunate young men. One such fortunate undergraduate who could afford a car like this, was Erwin Goldschmidt son of the German banker, Jacob Goldschmidt. The Goldschmidt family was extremely wealthy and in the late twenties Erwin was able to enjoy his first experiences of driving at the wheel of the ultimate toy, an electric Type 52 Bugatti, the miniature Type 35 Bugatti made by Ettore Bugatti for millionaire's sons. In the years of the Weimar Republic Jacob Goldschmidt was a respected figure in the German banking world and his expertise brought him into contact with the German automobile business, in particular Adler and Mercedes Benz, for whom Goldschmidt provided considerable financing. It is interesting that Adler was part of the Auto-Union combine, who were such rivals of Mercedes Benz on the racing tracks of Europe from 1934 onwards. It appears that the young Erwin Goldschmidt took a great interest in motor cars and his father's contacts allowed him to view all the latest models from German factories.

Jacob Goldschmidt was a cultured man and he collected impressionist and post impressionist paintings and eighteenth century Chinese porcelain. But despite his great wealth and culture, the Goldschmidt family had the misfortune to live in Germany, when Adolf Hitler came to power in 1933 as the new German Chancellor. From the moment that the Third Reich came into being, every Jew in Germany was under threat and tragically, for millions, the next twelve years brought ruin and death. Despite his standing in the community the Goldschmidt family was in no safer a position than any other Jewish family in Germany. In particular, Jacob Goldschmidt was singled out by Joseph Goebbels as a target for his anti-Semitic propaganda. Much luckier than so many others, Jacob Goldschmidt was able to call upon his international connections and take out some of his wealth from the country and escape with his family from Germany in the mid thirties, before it was too late. The Goldschmidts lived in a series of European capitals until 1938

when they arrived in the United States. In the States there was still anti-Semitism but not of a lethal nature. Jacob Goldschmidt died in 1955 at the age of 72.

In 1937, now at the age of twenty, Erwin Goldschmidt was sent to Oxford University to Christ Church College. Despite their flight from Germany the family was still wealthy and as an undergraduate Erwin enjoyed the luxury of driving at first a 3½ Litre Bentley but this was soon followed by an Alvis. The magnificent Alvis that came into Erwin Goldschmidt's hands was a SA 4.3 Litre chassis number 14298, registration number EXK80, dispatched on the 23rd February 1937 to Oxborrow and Fuller Ltd, London. The chassis was fitted with drophead coupé coachwork designed by Oxborrow and Fuller and built by the Abbey Coachworks Ltd. The Abbey Coachworks company was formed when A.P.Compton moved from Merton to Hanwell in West London and renamed his company Arrow Coachworks. His partner remained at Merton and with one other started the Abbey Coachworks business later moving to Acton. The company became well known for attractive open coachwork a reputation, which was well deserved, as can be seen from their body on the Alvis.

Unfortunately we have no information about how or why the young Erwin Goldschmidt decided to buy an Alvis or why it had Abbey Coachwork. Although Abbey had bodied a Mercedes Benz tourer. However with respect to the political circumstances in Germany this would hardly have been an inducement to Erwin. It is said that the 4.3 was specially prepared by the Works and the work was supervised by Lofty England. Modifications listed include dual manifolds and silencers, a 3.8 crownwheel and pinion and a special camshaft with "Straussler cam fan" whatever that might be.

Erwin must have cut some dash in Oxford in this car but he was not a "promenade Percy" and used the car to some effect taking part in 'numerous hillclimbs.' So far I have been unable to identify any particular event in which he competed. Erwin remained in England and Oxford until after the war broke out and he did not travel to the United States until 1941, having sold the Alvis and bought a 4.9 Litre Bugatti, which he later sold in America.

As the first owner of this unique Alvis, I think that it is interesting to follow a little more of Erwin Goldschmidt's life. Despite being an immigrant, a refugee, and recently an enemy alien, in 1941 Erwin entered the US Army and was detailed to the Office of Strategic Services and spent a considerable amount of time in the European Theatre of Operations. After the war Erwin set up as an insurance broker in New York and with his family background made a great success of this career. As might be expected he remained fascinated by cars and also motor sport and after the war started to race initially in a 327 BMW.

For a man who had been subject of Nazi persecution who had fought against them in the American army, it must have been an unpleasant surprise to find that he could not join the Sports Car Club of America. In the early fifties this was still a WASP-based organisation and Jews were not admitted as members, incredible though this may seem in 2005. Goldschmidt was a member of the Motor Sports Club of American and for this reason managed to get an invitation to race at the 1950 Watkins Glen Grand Prix which he won in his Cadillac-Allard. This win started the break down of the SCCA's racial policies. He later raced Ferraris and he owned at one time a Kieft fitted with a 4½ Litre De Soto engine.

Apparently Erwin Goldschmidt was a rather difficult man and had a somewhat notorious temper. He often fell out with people and his relationship with the auctioneers who dealt with the family artworks was fraught. The story is set out in a paper, *Fair Warning*, by Yolanda M. Deen, about auctions, "regarding the world of greed, of intrigue, drama, fraud, heartbreak, pathos and publicity. A world inhabited by the rich, nouveau riche, the bargain hunter, the thrill seeker, the tax collector, the pretender, the sleazy and the sentimental."

On October 15, 1958 the late Jacob Goldschmidt's Impressionist and Post-Impressionist pictures were sold at Sotheby's, not Christie's, on behalf of Jacob by his son Erwin.

It appeared that Erwin had first decided to deal with Christie's because his father had used the firm to sell his great collection of Eighteenth Century Chinese porcelain in 1938. Erwin Goldschmidt had actually decided to visit both Christie's and Sotheby's before determining which house he would award the auction. He tried first at Christie's where Sir Alec Martin was floored at the reserve prices Goldschmidt was stipulating. Sir Alec stubbornly refused to accept the tough terms and besides he considered this new Impressionist art to be, as he called it "filth." His taste was strictly for the Old Masters! He could not see the value of the Impressionists. It was he who had kept the firm alive during the Second World War even after a stick of incendiaries had totally destroyed Christie's premises on April 16, 1941. Not to be defeated by Hitler, Sir Alec led the way to the rebuilding of the firm's premises on King Street, St. James in 1953, where he clung to his old ways selling old masters.

After some negotiations, Erwin decided to award the sale to Sotheby's. Among many others there were seven important pictures: Cezanne's *Le Garçon au Gilet Rouge* and his *Still Life of Apples*; Van Gogh's *Le Jardin du Poete, Aries*; Renoir's *La Pensee* and three Manets, *La Rue de Berne*,

La Promenade and a self portrait. Some of these pictures had been seized by the Nazis from the Goldschmidt family. They were first auctioned by the Nazi Ministry of Finance in 1941. Erwin Goldschmidt got them back only after years of legal battles and he was not going to let them go easily or cheaply. Under the terms of his father's will, his picture collection was to be sold and the proceeds divided among family members. Erwin was not going to accept lower reserve prices from Christie's.

The actual sale took only twenty-one minutes and all the pictures sold for figures far above the reserves. The total of the sale was £781,000, a huge sum for the time

Erwin Goldschmidt died on 23rd January 1970. He was only 53. The end of a small chapter in Alvis history.

J.N.B.C.