

Zborowski — the birth of a legend

by Martin Shearsmith

FACT is very often far stranger than fiction and the real story behind the legendary Chitty Chitty Bang Bang would rival that of any Hollywood movie.

For many though, the 1968 film about a magical car which helps two youngsters overthrow a child-hating government is the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang story.

But it was nearly 50 years prior to the film being made that a Chitty Bang Bang of a very different kind was making headlines in newspapers across the world.

At the heart of each report was a man who at the age of 16 inherited a fortune of around £11 million — Count Louis Vorow Zborowski.

The story of Chitty Bang Bang is — no extra Chitty in those days — his story.

Born at Melton Mowbray on February 20, 1895, Louis entered a world where horse-power no longer meant the clatter of hooves but the throaty roar of the car engine.

His father, the wealthy Count William Elliott Morris Zborowski, foresaw the changes and developed a passion for automobiles, a love he shared with his son.

But if cars and motor racing were the Count's life, they were also his death.

Soon after completing the Great Paris to Vienna race in 1902, he was killed when his Daimler accelerated over the cliff on the La Turbine Hill on the Grand Corniche, Nice.

It was reported at the time that the Count's gold cuff links had caught in the throttle lever on the steering column. Louis was just eight years old.

The house at Melton Mowbray was sold and after a short time in London, he and his mother, the granddaughter of William Astor, moved to Bridge Hill House, Bridge, near Canterbury, 1909.

It was there that the widowed Countess saw, and fell in love, with Higham Court — now Highland Court — and moves were made to purchase the 150-year-old mansion.

Two years later, as work on refurbishing the building neared completion, Louis' mother died of influenza.

Barely 16 years old, Louis inherited a fortune estimated at around £1 million, and the chance to take up where his father had left off.

Obsessed with anything mechanical, Louis owned an aeroplane at Bokesbourne Aerodrome, a motor boat moored at Faversham, and spent £8,000 on building a 15-inch gauge railway around his estate.

It also featured in some early homemade films, usually where a heroine would be tied to the tracks in front of an approaching train, only to be rescued in the nick of time by a masked hero — Louis!

Louis enjoyed anything

new or innovative and one of the first wireless installations was at Higham.

Another fascination was explosives and it is said that on one occasion Louis had a small house built in the grounds, filled it with petrol and blew it up!

But like his father, whatever his other interests his first love was always the automobile.

A comprehensive workshop was established at Higham under the direction of William Martin, brother of the Count's chief engineer Len.

Around the same time, 1913, the impulsive 19-year-old acquired an interest in the Canterbury firm of Bligh Bros Coachworks, in St Radigund's Street.

For close on a century, Henry and Sidney Bligh had built up an enviable reputation as manufacturers of quality horse-drawn carriages.

With the advent of the "horseless" carriage, they converted their workshops to build automobile bodies and for a time were very successful.

But with the development of mass production and the high cost of individualised body building, the company fell on hard times, and the Count's purchase of Bligh Bros must have come as a godsend to the two brothers.

Two people who recall the change of ownership through tales told by their father and grandfather are Ian and Graham Moat.

"At the time when Chitty Bang Bang was built, my father Reginald Moat was a yard boy at the St Radigund's workshops," said Ian, who lives in Pettman Close, Herne Bay.

Then aged just 15, the young Reginald went on to become managing director of the firm, a

position he held until his retirement.

Blighs was bought by the Count to maintain his racing cars, and Reginald's grandson Graham recalls being told of the numerous orders he had to place through Bligh Bros for parts — like the long piano hinges necessary to fasten down the long car bonnets.

And the reason the workshop got its distinctive overhanging first floor, as seen in our picture.

Originally square when Bligh Bros took over the building in 1812, a later road widening scheme meant that the corner of the first floor had to be demolished.

Because the upper storey contained a mechanism for a carriage lift, it was retained and served Bligh Bros well until 1960, when expansion forced them to take new premises in Dover Street.

For Count Zborowski the acquisition of Bligh Bros heralded a new phase in automobile development — but it was shortlived for in August, 1914, Britain went to war.



Richard Gilmore

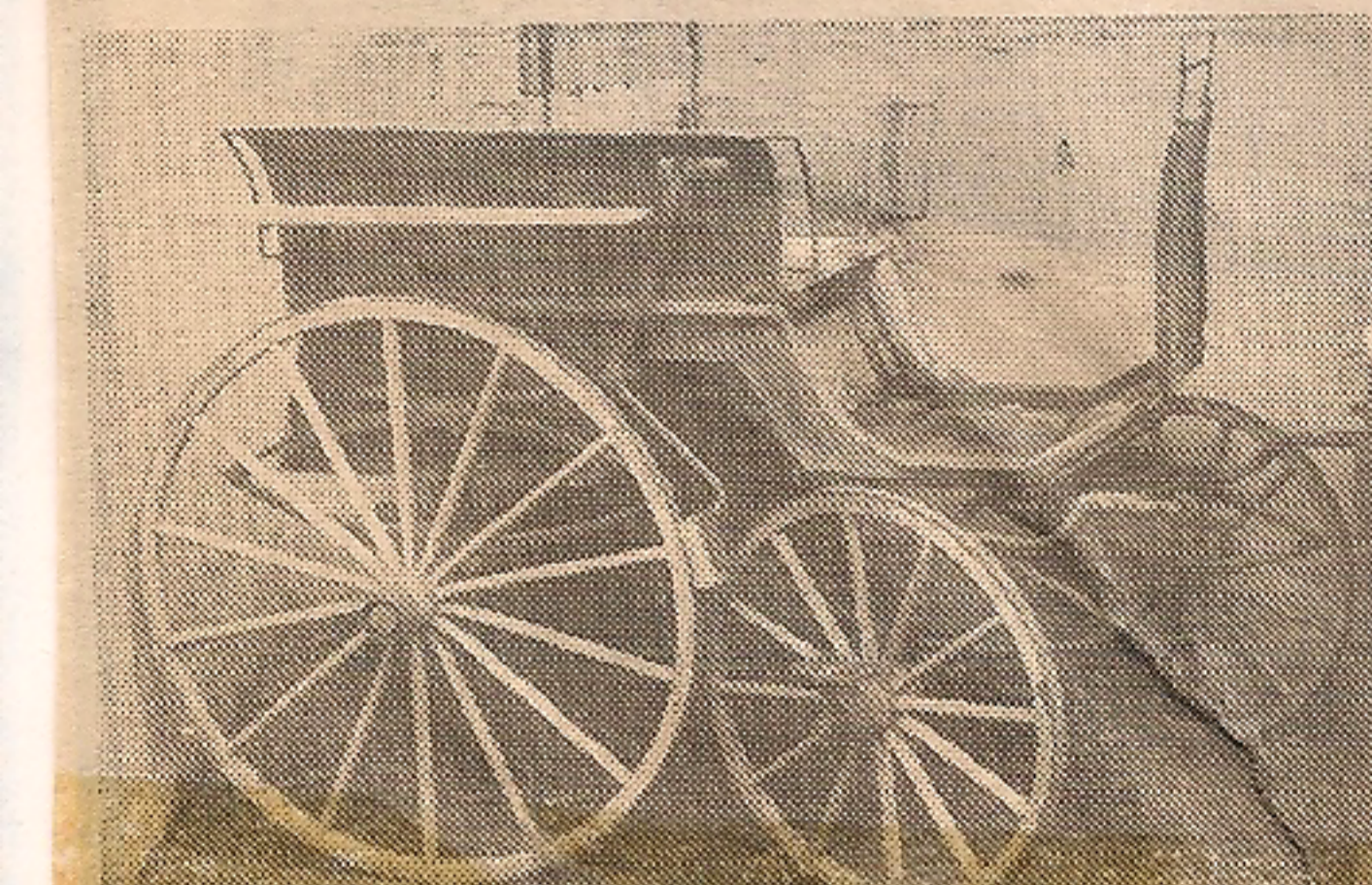
A request from extra reader Richard Gilmore for any information about the legendary Chitty Bang Bang sparked a flood of letters from Extra Memories readers.

Richard wrote to the Extra in March asking readers to rack their brains for any information about either the car or the film.

Richard, who lives near Maidstone, became obsessed with the story after seeing the musical film starring Dick Van Dyke in 1976.

"The film fascinated me and since then I have wanted to find out more," said Richard who admits to having a bedroom plastered with pictures of the car.

This article is the first in a series which will tell the whole story.



The Canterbury Phaeton — an early product of Bligh Bros