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.....A Motoring Age of Power and Elegance .....

Anne Vansverry

The house – Higham Court, a beautiful mansion at Bridge near Canterbury.

The man – Count Louis Vorow Zborowski, a handsome wealthy aristocrat.

The car – Chitty Chitty Bang Bang – definitely ingredients for a story. The famous author Ian Fleming thought so and imortalised the Chitties in his childrens' book which was later adapted into the film of the same name. Count Zborowski's Chitties didn't fly (despite being fitted with aero-engines), although some of the local constabulary would have disputed that as the monster cars with the Count at the wheel sped along the country lanes. However, the narrative is a little ahead of itself.

There is evidence of a large house, called Higham, existing in the Parish of Patrixbourne during the reign of Edward II (1320). The owners then were a family called De Hegham.

Since that time Higham Court has seen many notable families come and go. Thomas Culpepper acquired the house in 1543, during Henry VIII's reign. The Aucher family came next – Elizabeth Aucher married Thomas Corbett and one of their daughters, Antonia, married Ignatious Geoghegan, who in 1768 built the house which we see today.

1781 heralded a long association with the Hallett family, until 1901 infact, when Col. J. W. Hughes-Hallett of the Seaforth Highlanders put the house up for sale, as he lived in Scotland. William Gay purchased Higham and developed the gardens, grew orchids and raised pedigree highland cattle. His wife lavished care and attention on the house, with the decor and furnishings reflecting her French ancestry. Mrs Gay loved entertaining and one of her frequent visitors was Countess Margaret Zborowski who lived with her son locally at Bridge Hill House.

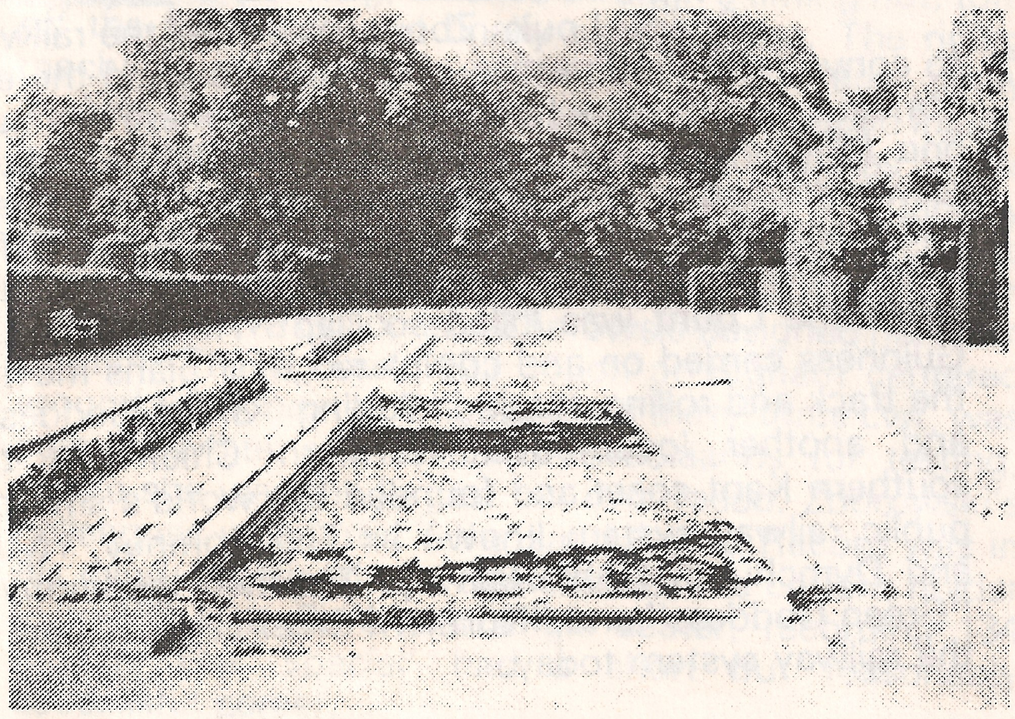
The first time Countess Zborowski saw Higham she was enchanted and set her heart on owning it. Finally the Gay's succumbed and Higham Court passed into the most colourful period of its history.

Count William Elliott Morris Zborowski was of Polish/American stock, his family moved from Poland in the 1800's. He inherited immense wealth from his father, who owned prime real estate in New York (including Broadway) and the Eastern United States. Margaret Laura Zborowski was the very wealthy granddaughter of William Astor. They were fun loving people with a great zest for life, this with their wealth and lineage moved them along in the very highest levels of society.

Into this happy enrivonment was born Louis Vorow Zborowski on 20th February 1895, his early childhood was spent at Coventry House, Melton Mowbray, taking holidays with Lord Limerick's two children, Viscount Glentworth and Lady Victoria, at their ancestral home, Dromore Castle in Ireland.

Count Elliott was an expert horseman and polo player but when he became interested in cars, the stables at Melton Mowbray were turned over to a different type of horse-power. Elliott Zborowski's first car was a Daimler. The young Louis grew up with cars and Elliott regaled his son with stories of participation in the Great Paris to Vienna motor race in June 1902, which he felt, he, should have won but the French adjudicator decided against him. Louis Zborowski's happy and carefree childhood came to an end in 1903, he was eight years old, when his father was killed at the La Turbine Hill Climb on the Grand Corniche, Nice. It was said that his gold cuff-links caught in the throttle lever on the steering column, the car accelerated and crashed down the mountain side. Naturally Louis was distraught at the loss of his father, their joint love of automobiles had made them exceptionally close. As Louis grew up, his close friends said that he continually tried to emulate the deeds of his father and live in the style he would have wished.

Melton Mowbray was sold, Louis and his mother moved to London and then finally to Bridge Hill House, Bridge, near Canterbury in 1909. Countess Zborowski's purchase of Higham Court proceeded, she had grand plans for refurbishing the whole house, but sadly just before completion, she died of influenza. Once again Louis's life did an-about-turn. He was just sixteen when he buried his mother beside her husband at Burton Lazars cemetery, the year was 1911.



[Front cover shows 3/4 view of front of Highland Court. Issue lent to L.G.S.S. by Mr. Harold Deacent.]

Count Vorow Zborowski moved into Higham Court an extremely wealthy young-man, his inheritence was eleven million pounds, he lived to the full the life of a young millionaire.

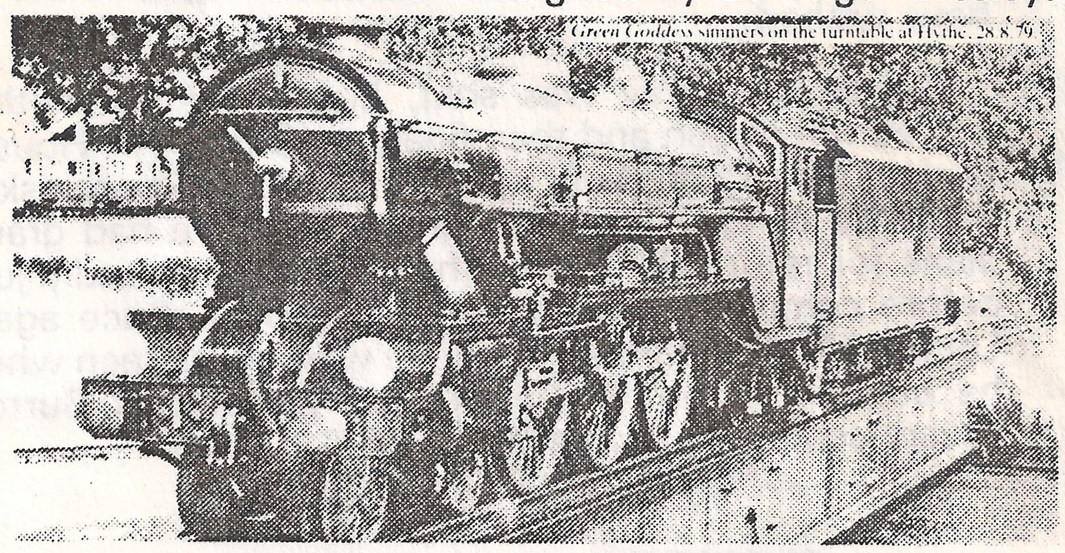
Unfortunately he was not academically inclined – educational establishments and Count Louis were never compatible, he attended Kings School, Canterbury, lasted one term at Eton and tried life at University – all without success. He was naturally intelligent, had a flair for language, artistic ability and an in-born fascination for the mechanical.

He had an aircraft at Bekesbourne Aerodrome but according to his mechanic The Count did not find flying exciting enough and never really liked it. Likewise a motor-boat moored at Faversham Creek, fitted with a seven litre Mercedes engine, did not hold his interest for long. Both this and the aircraft tended to be used by friends and employees. Motorcycles were ridden at great speed through the estate and local countryside, where many a local villager had to leap out of the path of the young Count.

Louis was endowed with a happy and genial disposition and was fast developing an eccentric personality. He was ever mindful of his employees and looked after them well. He was remembered with great affection by William G. Pierce, the son of William J. Pierce a veterinary surgeon in Canterbury. He recalled the Count as a wonderful and generous man, kind to his employees. The young William's first bicycle was a gift from the Count. William senior taught Count Zborowski how to use a sporting gun and found him to be an apt pupil. William junior, further recalls a visit to Higham on a "shoot", when he saw the Count shooting at clay pipes placed in garden statues.

Zborowski enjoyed anything innovative – one of the first wireless installations in the country was at Higham; another fascination was explosives. He built a small house on the estate, filled it with petrol and blew it up! Edward Mansell, the head gardener at Higham also had an explosive story to tell – small explosive devices would be hidden in rose trees, when guests admired them, they received more than just a pleasant perfume!

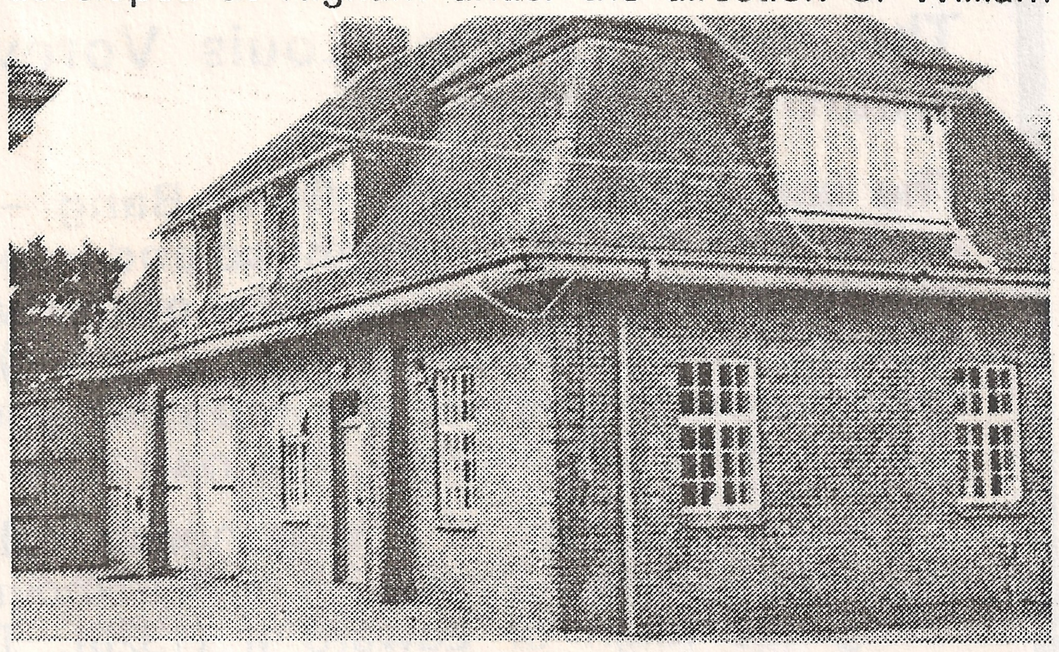
Count Zborowski and Capt. J. E. P. Howie (a fellow racing driver) planned the layout, which encircled Higham estate of a 15 inch gauge railway. The track came from Jackson's Scrapyard in Canterbury and with the locomotive, cost the Count £8,000. The locomotive was "Green Goddess" designed by Sir Nigel Bresley.


Green Goddess simmers on the turntable at Hythe. 28.8.76

Count Louis Zborowski used the railway to convey shooting parties and guests around the est ate and also to plan homemade films,where the heri-one (one of his lady house guests) would be tied to a railway track by a villain (one of his male house guests) and would be rescued by a hero (guess who). The full extent of their plans for the railway were not completed when the Count was killed so Capt. Howie and Lee Guinness carried on and completed their plans moving the track and rolling-stock, including "Green Goddess" and another locomotive 'Northern Chief" to the southern Kent coast and founded the world's smallest public railway system known as The Romney, Hythe and Dymchurch Light Railway. The two locomotives "Green Goddess" and "Northern Chief" are still part of the railway system today.

Cars and speed were the breath of life to Count Zborowski. His friend from his Kings School days, Clive Gallop, an automobile engineer and racing driver (later to become one of "The Bentley Boys") came onto the scene again and was to remain one of the Count's closest friends.

At one time Zborowski owned 27 cars, including a Mercedes engined Model T Truck, Rolls coupés, an Austin Cabriolet, Hispano's and an Electric Brougham, to name but a few. A magnificent workshop was developed at Higham under the direction of William



Martin, whose brother Len was the Count's chief engineer. The workshop was considered to be one of the most comprehensive in the country. Extensiv chassis work would obviously be required, to this end he acquired an interest in the local firm of Bligh Bros. Coachworks.

Henry & Sidney Bligh had achieved their reputation making superb horse-drawn carriages – but with the advent of the 'horseless' carriage, slowly went downhill. So Zborowski's acquisition came at a time when Bligh's were at a very low ebb.

Zborowski's involvement with cars was interrupted by the outbreak of the first world war in 1914. He offered his services to the Army but was not accepted – it was thought, at the time because of his Polish ancestry. However, he intended to make a definite contribution. Much of the Estate grazing land was put under the plough for cropping and Bligh Coachworks was re-equipped to handle the manufacture of artillery wheels for military vehicles. But, without a doubt his most enjoyable contribution to his self imposed 'war-effort' was when he fitted a searchlight onto one of his high-powered cars and patrolled the Dover road – keeping an eye open for the enemy!

The war came to an end in 1918, the Count resumed his life at Higham much as it had been pre-war, with parties and a gay social whirl, which was quite normal for someone of the Count's income and social standing. His weekend house parties were famous and invitations eagerly sought. Guests would sometimes indulge in races from Canterbury to Sandwich in Louis's five sports cars. These gatherings invarably included beautiful young ladies from 'theatreland'. It was from this strata of society that the Count found himself a wife. Violet Ethel Leicester, one of 'The Gaiety Girls', became Countess Zborowski in 1919. For the first time that year and annually thereafter they had a grand Christmas Ball at Higham for all the servants and estate-workers with their families. The very best was provided, including some of the top London bands.

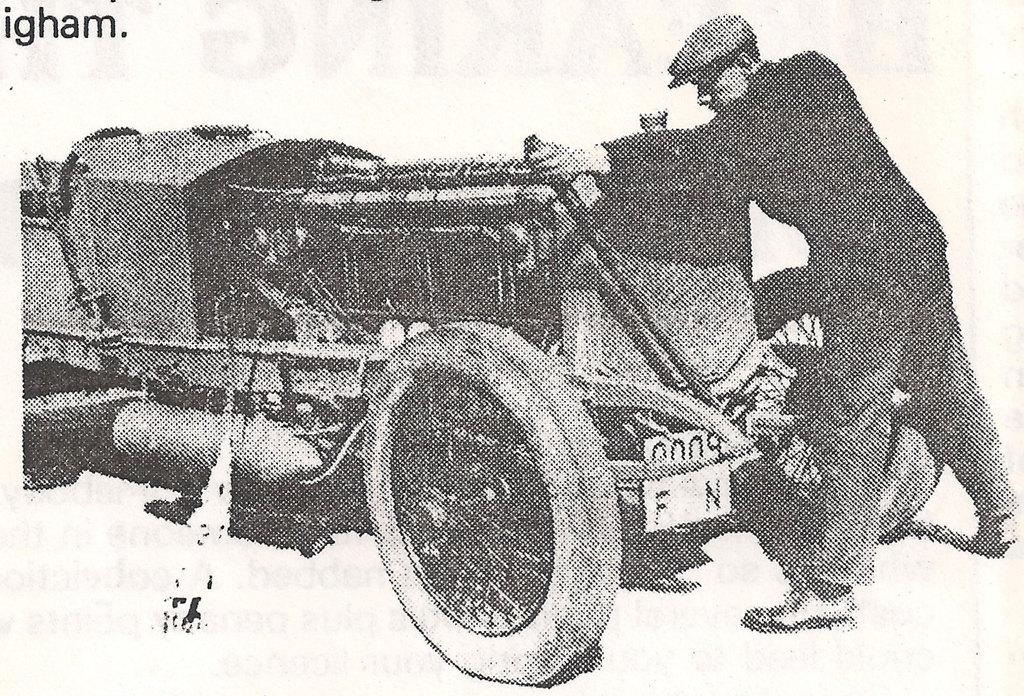
The Count's generosity showed in a practical way as well. The local fire service were having problems – they were finding their horse-drawn fire quenching appliance too slow in reaching outlying villages in time to be of use. This came to the attention of Count Zborowski, he offered them a vehicle – based on a Rolland Pilain racing chassis, with a custom built body by Bligh Bros. To mark such a magnificient gesture they made him honorary Captain of the Fire Service.

The post-war years found Count Zborowski deeply involved with cars and racing. He re-financed the Aston Martin company in the early 1920's, they were not involved in serious production of cars for public use at that time. They were located at Feltham and were making small single seater sports cars.

The first legendary Chitty Chitty Bang Bang emerged from the Higham workshops in 1921. She was engineered and designed by Count Zborowski and Clive Gallop.

The Chitties were so christened because of the distinctive noises eminating from under their long bonnets.

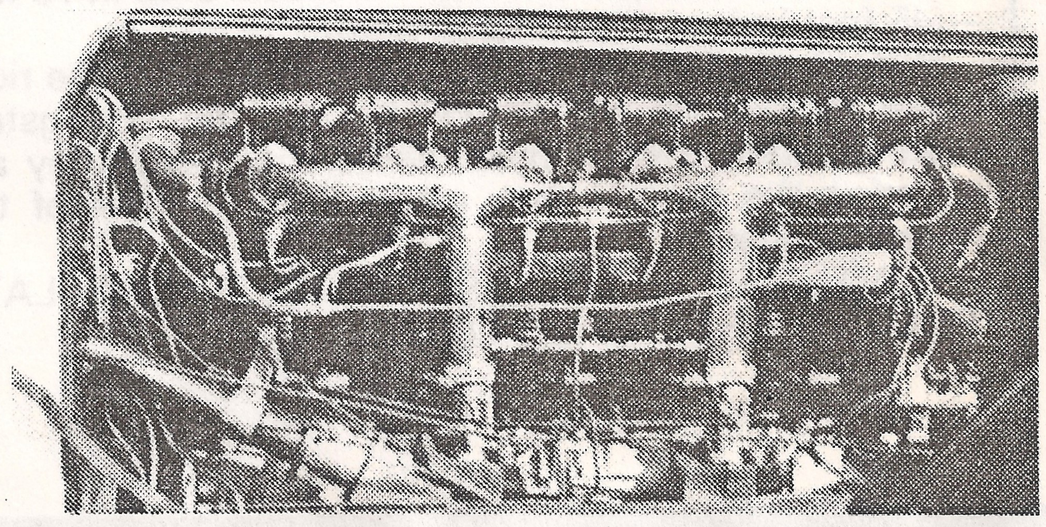
Chitty I was the largest of the three that were built at Higham.



The engine was a 23 litre Maytrack aero-engine capable of developing over 3000 hp, the chassis was a pre-war Mercedes chain-driven model. Zborowski & Gallop also retained the Mercedes radiator and scroll clutch. She had a four seater body built by Bligh Bros. Coachworks, Canterbury. This Chitty being the first and an experiment, was a little crude.

Brooklands Race Track, near Weybridge, Surrey, Easter 1921 was the scene of her sensational first appearance. She was enormous – to start her required a half-axle from an aeroplane, a compression appliance and somebody furiously winding the magneto. Zborowski knew that much would be expected of Chitty and she did not let him down. She won three events that day and came second to the Count's 4.5 litre Mercedes, driven by a friend. Elated with his Chitty the Count and his team developed and refined her, three Claudel-Hobson carburettors replaced the Zenith ones, a six-branch manifold, with outside pipe exhaust system was fitted. The four seater body was replaced by a two seater with duck's tail rear-end. Lastly guards were fitted over the exterior driving chains. She was now more of a 'race' car and was ready for serious work at the Brooklands Whitsun meeting. The first race she won easily averaging 102 m.p.h. Unfortunately the magnificent machine had to be withdrawn from the next race – her handicap and the flexing of her chassis over the rough Brookland track proved too much, the petrol tank split and the radiator cowl fell off.

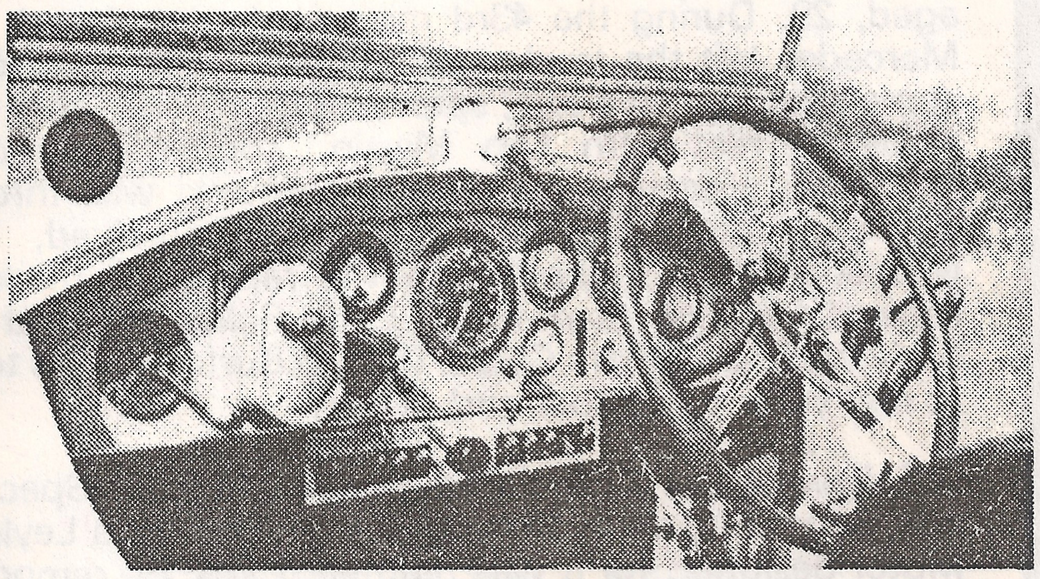
Early September 1921 saw Chitty II emerge from the workshops at Higham. She had a shorter wheelbase than Chitty I but used the same type of pre-war Mercedes chain-driven chassis with an 18 litre Benz aero-engine.



A six cylinder using four valves per cylinder, the crank-shaft ran in seven main bearings and when fitted to the chassis the engine was converted to dry sump lubrication to allow ground clearance. The engine was reputed to have come from a Zepplin shot down in the first world war.

Chitty II was seventeen feet long and weighed over two tons, theoretically she was capable of 145 m.p.h. at 7 m.p.g.! Her four seater body once again came from Bligh Bros. Experiences gained on Chitty I by Zborowski and Gallop were professionally put to good use on this new creation, essentially conceived for continental touring. She was a highly unconventional 'road' car, but was more attractive in appearance than her 'sister'.

Zborowski entered both cars in the August Bank Holiday meeting at Brooklands, but it was not until the Autumn meeting that Chitty II appeared for the first and last time.



She proved to be under-geared for the race track. Count Zborowski continued to race Chitty I at Brooklands, until she crashed on a practice run in 1922.

Despite the lack of racing success for Chitty II and the early teething troubles of Chitty I, the giant cars were here to stay. Zborowski loved driving his magnificent machines on the uncongested Kentish roads, he was a skilled superlative driver and despite his thurst for speed had relatively few accidents. However, he did hold the record for speeding fines and endorsements in his locality!

In January 1922 the Zborowski entourage embarked on a 'grand tour' across France to Algeria. Chitty II with "The White Mercedes" (sometimes referred to as Chitty III) as the tender car, moved down through France like two stately leviathans, mustering thirty-three litres between them, to stay at the Negresco Hotel, Nice – what a splendid sight they must have made. From Nice they ventured into Algeria to the very edge of the Sahara desert.

As both Zborowski and Gallop had entered cars in the French Grand Prix later that year, they took the opportunity, on the return journey to inspect the Strasbourg circuit.

Sadly, September 1922 marked the end of Chitty I's racing career, during a practice lap at Brooklands. An off-side front tyre burst, the car struck the parapet, slid down some banking, crashed through a timing hut, tore off the front axle and finally came to rest. The riding mechanic, Len Martin was thrown out and badly shaken, Zborowski remained seated and escaped injury.

Another car in the best Chitty tradition was under way in the Higham workshops. A massive V12 Liberty aero-engine giving twenty-seven litres and a crude chain driven chassis formed the basis for "The Higham Special". Clive Gallop and Zborowski designed her from scratch. Throughout 1923 action at Higham centered around this monster. She weighed thirty-three cwt, was painted white and taken to Brooklands for testing, where she was the largest car ever raced. Zborowski's colleagues wondered if the Land Speed Record was in his mind, his friend Lee Guiness was the current holder in a 350 h.p. Sunbeam single seater, recording 134 m.p.h. The 'special' had a short but reasonably successful career.

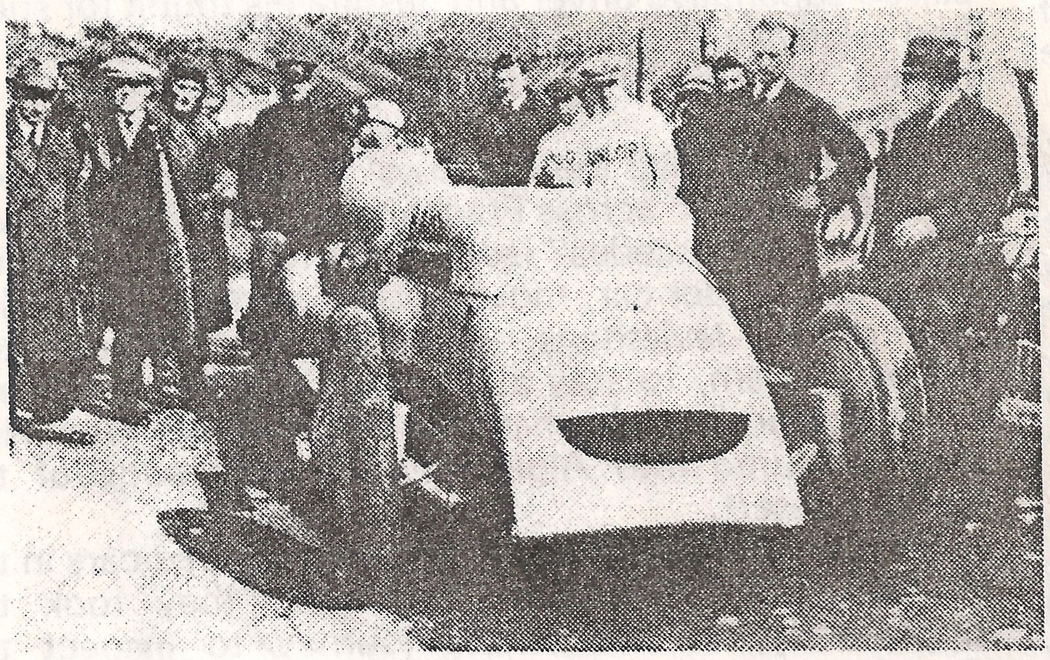
Zborowski's first grand prix experience was the French Grand Prix at Lyon in 1924. His automobile was a Miller, bought whilst in the U.S.A. at Indiannapolis. S.C.H. (Sammy) Davis was his riding mechanic on this occasion (yet another of Count Louis's friends to become one of the "Bentley Boys")

Count Zborowski was now a team driver for Mercedes, Chitty III was entered as such in the Brooklands Whitsun meeting and was unplaced in the Private Competitors Handicap, but in the short-handicap Gold Vase event she lapped the track at 105 m.p.h. and won by a ¼ of a mile.

Zborowski's last appearance at Brooklands was at the summer meeting, Chitty III was just beaten by Parry Thomas in a Leyland-Thomas Special.

During the Italian Grand Prix at Monza on 19th October 1924, Count Louis Vorow Zborowski was killed aged, 29. During the 43rd mile the brakes failed, the Mercedes left the track at immense speed, went over some banking, hit a tree, spun around several times and came to rest with Len Martin, Zborowski's riding mechanic pinned underneath. Zborowski was thrown out and fatally injured, Len Martin survived. The Mercedes team retired from the race as a mark of respect for their team-mate. Clive Gallop brought his body back to Higham Court, then to Burton Lazars to lie at rest with his mother and father.

Following the Count's death the "Higham Special" was bought by John Godfrey Parry Thomas, a Leyland Motor designer, for it was reputed, £125. He remodled and renamed her 'BABS'. Parry Thomas raced her at Pendine Sands, sadly she crashed, Parry Thomas was killed and BABS burned. She was buried at Pendine and there she remained under the sand until the early 1970's when Owen Wyn dug her up and BABS was restored to her full glory.



Count Louis VorowZborowski combined the advantage of immense wealth and inexhaustible enthusiasm with something but little short of engineering genius. He was patron of new ideas and all the more valuable a patron because he was a competant critic. Louis was without doubt the most interesting and colourful character to reside at Higham Court.

The house passed through many owners, one of which changed the name to Highland Court. It is now Highland Court Hospital for the mentally handicapped, and my gratitude and thanks go to Sister Barbara McGuinness for her kind assistance and Janet Marsh for photographs of the Count.

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The John Trafford Column

BREAKING THE SPEED LIMIT

Ever been caught speeding?

If you haven't, you probably know somebody who has and there's always but always someone in the pub who has so "unjustly" been nabbed. A conviction will cost you several pound notes plus penalty points which could lead to you lossing your licence.

So is it worth it?

Financially it's not, of course, but when you look into it a bit deeper, there really seems very little point in speeding at all.

Excluding the large Metropolitan Areas, most speed limits are not overlong in length and have been estabished for good reasons anyway. For example take a main road with a 30 mph limit running through the suburbs of a town. In many cases this would not be more than about 2 miles in length before culminating in the conquested town centre. Presuming there were no hold ups, driven at 30 mph (½ mile per minute) it would be traversed in 4 minutes. At 45 mph (¾ mile per minute) it takes 2⅔ minutes. The earlier arrival – a mere 80 seconds – does not even warrant placing your liberty to drive, in jeopardy. In any case it usually means you join the traffic jam a bit earlier or wait a little longer for a green light or slot in the car park, and you chance being held up even longer while a traffic policeman writes out a ticket.

But, apart from all that, a speed limit is imposed because of the difficult nature of the road, e.g. heavily built up, concealed or difficult junctions etc. – in other words, areas where sudden or concentrated movements of vehicles and pedestrians could take place. Take the situation where a car is attempting to emerge from a side road in a 30 mph limit say 40 yards from a bend. The driver is obliged to take proper care when joining the major road but he must be given the chance to move off in safety. If the speeding vehicle suddenly appears at say 40 mph – that's above 60 feet per second – it will take it 120 feet – or 40 yards – to stop. Even if a collision is avoided it would be a nasty scare for all concerned. Had the vehicle been driven at 30 mph – 44 feet per second – it would stop in 75 feet – 45 feet before the collision point.

If the speeding vehicle is a motorcycle then the rider could well come off worst. If only the youngsters roaring round town would realise the speed they are covering the ground they might stop to think of the consequences.

REMEMBER – ITS BETTER TO ARRIVE LATE THAN TO BE DEAD ON TIME.