

The Real William Morris – Jon Pressnell



Morris: the man. Lord Nuffield's recipe for success. The Real William Morris. He was Britain's first and only motor-industry tycoon. In the year the Morris car celebrates its centenary, (2013) Jon Pressnell takes a look at the career of its creator. Photography Lat/Haynes Publishing.

In modern terms, how should one judge William Morris? Maybe as a sort of Richard Branson: Britain's most prominent inter-war businessman had a similarly high profile, albeit in a markedly less flamboyant way. As a benefactor who donated more than £30m to worthy causes – the equivalent today of roughly £800m – he merits comparison with philanthropists such as Warren Buffett or Bill Gates. But behind the celebrity, behind the myths, what is the truth about the man, about the motor magnate and the vast business empire he ran?

Perhaps his essence is summed up in a terse description by his penultimate vice-chairman, Miles Thomas. Morris was, he wrote, a 'bright-eyed tight little man'. Speaking more of the younger Morris, Thomas more expansively portrayed him in his conversations with official biographers Andrews and Brunner: "There was something about him which gave people more than normal confidence. He was small in stature, wiry, friendly and yet remote... he combined a working knowledge of engineering and tremendous attack as a mechanic with a magnetic personality which attracted people, made people anxious to serve him, proud to work for him and with him. But at the same time they never got to know him because he was so brittle, so exclusive and unpredictable in his likes and dislikes."

Retaining an Oxfordshire burr to his voice, he remained an undemonstrative man, despite his wealth. Reginald Rootes, used to the exuberance of his larger-than-life, cigar-chomping brother Billy, found Morris dull company when he accompanied him on a boat to Argentina. "Morris was a more popular man in the trade than [Herbert] Austin, but a man of not much personality," said Rootes. "He couldn't talk much, but he was very honest, very

straightforward. He was admired by his dealers. He never left the boat, and didn't mix with other people at all. I had dinner with him; he had nothing to talk about except the motor business."

Always prudent with his money, Morris had ordinary tastes, as will be appreciated by anyone visiting his former home, Nuffield Place. He was not a man of culture, had no real hobbies, read little, and had unrefined music-hall preferences in entertainment. But if he was no intellectual, he was nonetheless mentally very sharp, as Thomas impressed on Andrews and Brunner: "Whereas the college professor could talk and impress by rarefied logic, Nuffield had not got that ability. But he would make a devastatingly simple remark which went right to the root of the matter. That was one reason for his success."

He was not an engineer – although he sometimes presented himself as such. He was in essence a talented mechanic, a savvy garage owner who knew what worked and what did not, and what his customers wanted, and put this into practice when he moved from running his bustling Morris Garages business to manufacturing his own motor car. In engineering terms the vehicle that made his fortune, the 'Bullnose', was nothing special. Indeed, the first Morris- Oxford of 1913 drew on the practices of other makers, not least in its gearbox, which was a direct crib of that of the Belsize. The genius of Morris lay in making an assembled car, put together from proprietary parts, to high standards of quality, and at a competitive price.

His great skill, when he set out in business, was in being an ambitiously forward-looking buyer, demanding from his suppliers higher quantities of parts than was thought prudent, thereby driving down the cost of those parts and enabling him in turn to sell his cars at ever lower prices, in increasing numbers. He was a challenging man with whom to do business, but always regarded as honest and true to his word. Although no accountant, Morris was a natural and meticulous man with figures, as his painstakingly kept personal ledgers testify. He had that gift of seeing the general implications of financial problems and acting decisively once these had been assessed. The classic example was his reducing of prices by up to £100 during the slump of 1921, a brave initiative that relaunched Morris sales and dealt a savage blow to his rivals.

Rigorous weekly budgeting was a cornerstone of the Morris empire, and was based on long contracts with suppliers plus the prompt and regular payment of their bills. In the formative years of the company, profits were ploughed back into the firm and cash reserves were kept low. More crucially, Morris did not borrow extensively from the banks, and when he did have loan facilities in place they were always for more than he knew he might need.

Unlike many of his peers who were engineers, he did not feel an endless need to tinker with the design of his car, to the detriment of production efficiency and business profitability. The Bullnose was improved only in detail for most of its long career, thereby assuring reliability and low prices. The downside was that the emphatically conservative Morris did not want to move on, and his managers had a struggle to convince him that he should replace the Bullnose with the more modern-looking Flat-nose.

Fortunately, the new car was a success. But Morris remained in mentality an assembler, unwilling to build up a design team that could engineer a vehicle as a whole. The result was that two subsequent models, the Empire Oxford and the Morris Six, were parts-bin specials that suffered from fundamental conceptual failings. Morris prided himself on his ability to pick good men, starting with Hans Landstad, who designed the first Bullnose and was soon poached from engine supplier White and Poppe.

Arthur Rowse was another talented engineer recruited. Having put in place the systems for Cowley to mass-manufacture mine-sinkers during the Great War, Rowse subsequently left a post in the government munitions industry to become production manager for Morris.

Then there was Frank Woollard, formerly chief draughtsman at axle-maker Wrigleys, who ended up running Morris Engines Branch. In introducing mechanised transfer machinery, lean manufacturing methods and just-in-time control of production inputs, Woollard put Morris at the forefront of the global motor industry, and he was widely regarded as a genius in his field. Other key personalities included another brilliant production engineer, Leonard Lord, who was inherited when Morris bought his engine supplier, the English branch of Hotchkiss. Then

there was Miles Thomas, who in 1924 left a career in motoring journalism to join the company as a publicity man.

From the mid-1920s onwards Morris was very much in the public eye, pronouncing on the need to maintain import controls and the desirability of a strong, non-partisan national government. But if Sir William Morris, as he had become in 1929, was by then a household name, his cars having come to dominate the UK market, the irony is that he had already distanced himself from the running of his factories. Worse, by the early '30s the company was in a mess, making too many models in too small quantities, and failing to invest in new plant. Profits and sales were waning and the Ten, created under Rowse's direction, was the only real success.

The outwardly vibrant and healthy Cowley empire was in fact a pretty miserable ship by that time, poorly managed by an increasingly absent and out-of-touch Morris. Unhappy in board meetings, which he shunned as a result, he was spending substantial time abroad, notably on long cruises to Australia, but had failed to put in place an alternative management structure. Those running the business had to second-guess his wishes and accommodate his not always well informed interventions, which inevitably led to tensions and misunderstandings.

In 1926 he appointed former Dunlop sales manager Edgar Blake as deputy managing director, and stepped back at least in part from day-to-day involvement in the business. By all accounts a decent and straightforward man, Blake was in above his head, lacking engineering knowledge and unable to hold the ring between squabbling colleagues defending their own turf.

Intrigue and plotting became the norm at Cowley, two of the principal guilty parties being memorably described by an observer as "pinkeyed rats". Morris would return from his voyages and be assailed with tittle-tattle. The temperature was further ratcheted up by his wife: Lillian Morris was not only a conduit for all of the company gossip, but also a notorious prude who would regale disapprovingly to her husband any personal transgressions among managers.

But Morris still had the ability to move decisively and effectively, as was proven by the snap 1933 transfer of Leonard Lord from Wolseley, to become deputy MD of Morris Motors in place of Blake. Morris knew that Lord was the man to shake up Cowley, and so it proved. Lord tore up plans for a rejigged Minor and pushed the Ford-inspired Eight through to production in record time, in a refitted and modernised factory, before going on to replace the sundry bigger models with a unified range of related Morris's and Wolseley's. Abingdon's MG products became more closely related to the mainstream cars and the entire group was restructured. Profits – and sales – soared.

But while Morris had acquired valuable management staff in his early days, during the 1930s he contrived to lose all of these men but Miles Thomas – who himself would be obliged to step down in 1947. The corrosive cocktail of a capricious absentee boss and cats-in-a-barrel internal rivalries led to the departure of key figures on the most specious of grounds, as often as not talked up by scheming colleagues. The first to go, in 1931, was Woollard. Supposedly this was because of shortcomings in the power unit of the six-cylinder LA-series Oxford. But what really annoyed Morris was that the portly Woollard would overindulge at lunchtime and retire in the afternoon for a snooze in an annexe to his office. Next to fall on his sword was Rowse.

A piffling problem with a fuel pipe on the Morris Ten was flagged as a major technical disaster, then Rowse was falsely accused of having an undeclared interest in an outside firm, in contravention of company policy. Again, though, the real reason seems to have been more petty.

Rowse was fond of his own erudition, and in explaining engineering concepts to Morris tended to condescend to him, which badly rankled. Rowse ended up phlegmatic about his removal, saying that had he stayed at Morris he would surely have died in his job. "Life at Cowley would drive you to the grave," he said.

The most notorious departure – regretted by many in the industry – was that of Leonard Lord in 1936. Ostensibly this was because Lord had demanded a share of the firm's profits and this was refused by Lord Nuffield, as Morris had become in 1934. There seems little doubt that this was a key reason for the breach, as may have

been a difference of opinion over Morris participation in the government Shadow Factory scheme for the manufacture of aero-engines. But again, personal factors played a part: the married Lord had been caught having a dalliance with a young lady in the drawing office, and word inevitably reached Nuffield. Certain rival senior managers, doubtless unappreciative of Lord's brusque ways, were not slow to fan the flames.

Meanwhile a part-flotation of the group in 1936 had freed up substantial sums of money, and Lord Nuffield seemed more interested in spending this on charitable donations than on actively managing his multi-company conglomerate.

By then he expected to be deferred to by government, and when the Baldwin administration refused to play ball and buy his Wolseley aero-engines, he withdrew Morris from the Shadow Factory scheme and in a fit of petulance closed the aero-engine operation. Meanwhile, a catastrophic venture to build and run a factory to make the Spitfire seemed to prove that by the time of WW2 Nuffield was losing his grip as a businessman. The fault wasn't all his, but had he not sacked his best production men the start-up of the government-sponsored Castle Bromwich plant might have been less of a fiasco.

In the post-war years, Nuffield personally expended much effort on acquiring a manufacturing facility in Australia. This went against the wishes of his senior managers, but was a prescient act of engagement in a market from which the Nuffield Organisation would otherwise have been progressively barred. Success in Australia was indeed a Holy Grail for him, and an early Holden was despatched to Cowley as an indication – alas not acted upon – of what was needed Down Under.

Lord Nuffield's influence back home was more baleful. He fought a rearguard action to delay introduction of the new Minor, pressing for the existing Eight and Ten to remain in production. Valuable engineering time was dissipated, management didn't know whether it was coming or going, and Austin beat Morris to the market with its new A40, which it sold aggressively in the United States. The firm was in a bigger shambles than in the early '30s. To make matters worse, in 1947 Miles Thomas was forced to step down, his principal crime being to have accepted a post on a government body, supposedly without informing his boss. Losing the multi-tasking, affable and able Thomas was a major blow. It was also a cathartic one: his replacement, Reggie Hanks, declared "Rome is burning" and initiated a wholesale clear-out of the Morris board. All Nuffield's old trustees were shunted into retirement, and the company started to move forward.

'CREATING THE WORLD'S FOURTH-LARGEST CAR BUSINESS WAS HIS CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT'

The last business initiative of Lord Nuffield was to merge with Austin, in 1951. He had already attempted this in the late '40s, but was dissuaded by Hanks and the other directors, who judged the group to be at too low an ebb to be a strong partner. It is tempting to condemn the final fusion of the two rivals as an act of resignation by a tired old man – then aged 74 – who had lost interest in the increasingly arduous struggle to run a complex company in complex times. But there is another argument, namely that Lord Nuffield was ahead of the curve, with a visionary appreciation of the new industrial realities.

In global terms, Austin and Morris were relative small fry, and they were devoting a lot of energy to fighting each other. Nuffield, with his mentality of a buyer rather than a creator, could see that to compete with the US firms that were rapidly expanding in Europe, and with state supported companies such as Renault and VW, it was necessary to drive down costs. That meant sharing components, so they could be produced or bought in greater numbers, more cheaply. Creating the world's fourth-largest motor manufacturing business could be judged as the crowning achievement in a dazzling career, and one calculated to ensure the survival and continued development of the enterprise he founded.

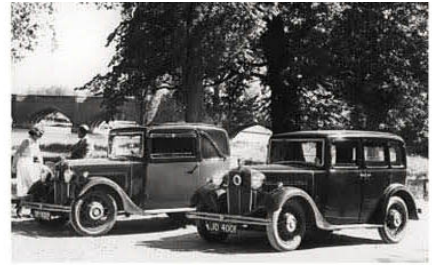
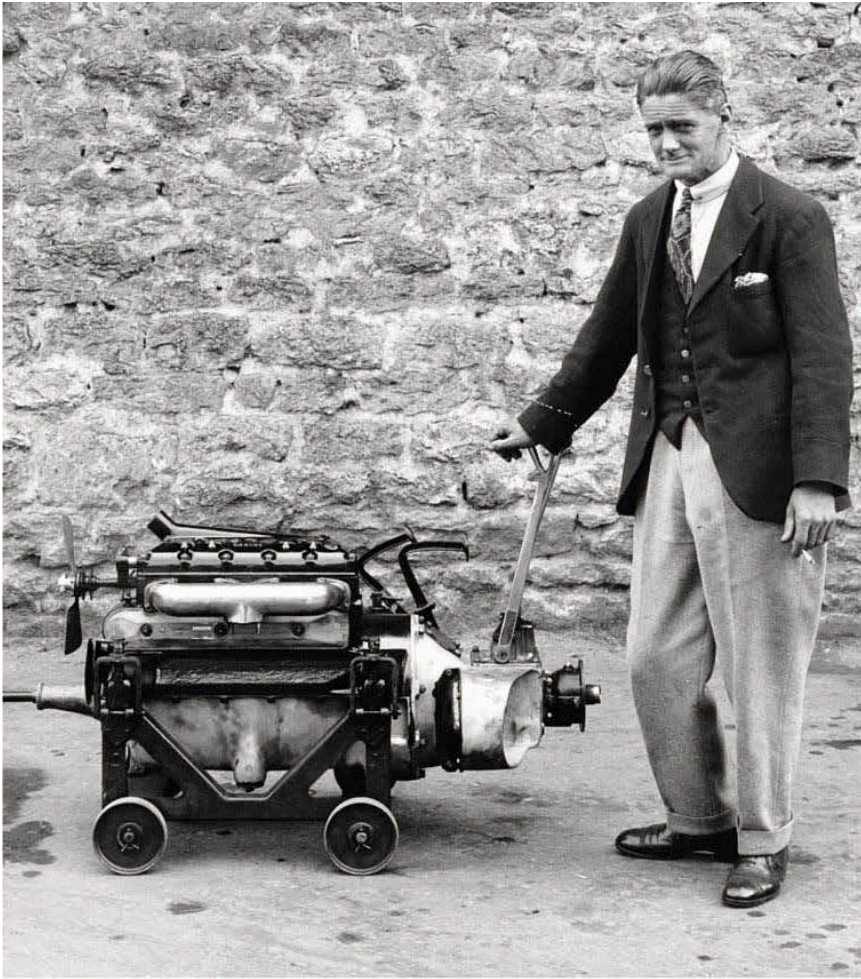
The story of the **British Motor Corporation** was not to prove a happy one. It is legitimate to ask whether the business might have had a more robust future had at least some of the money disbursed to charitable causes by Nuffield been ploughed into improved production facilities, engineering research and the like. On the other hand, the history of the British motor industry suggests that, however healthy a firm he might have bequeathed to the newly formed BMC, his legacy would inevitably have been squandered by the underendowed incompetents who ran the combine and its successor companies.

In that context, it may be more pertinent to note that people can benefit from Lord Nuffield's benefactions at every step in their life. As a child, you can be cared for in the paediatric ward of a Nuffield Hospital. You can study a Nuffield syllabus at school, be supported in your research by the Nuffield Foundation, and carry out postgraduate work at Nuffield College, Oxford. You can have your wisdom teeth extracted in the Nuffield House wing of Guy's Hospital, and be looked after in later life through a BUPA scheme that owes its existence to a Nuffield gift, before spending your last days in a Nuffield Care Home. The Morris motor car might be no more, but the impact on modern life of that jaunty businessman-viscount in the cheap suit can be seen all around us. It's not a bad memorial to William Richard Morris: dynamic, flawed, but fundamentally decent, the one-time bicycle maker and garage-owner who became one of Britain's most famous citizens.

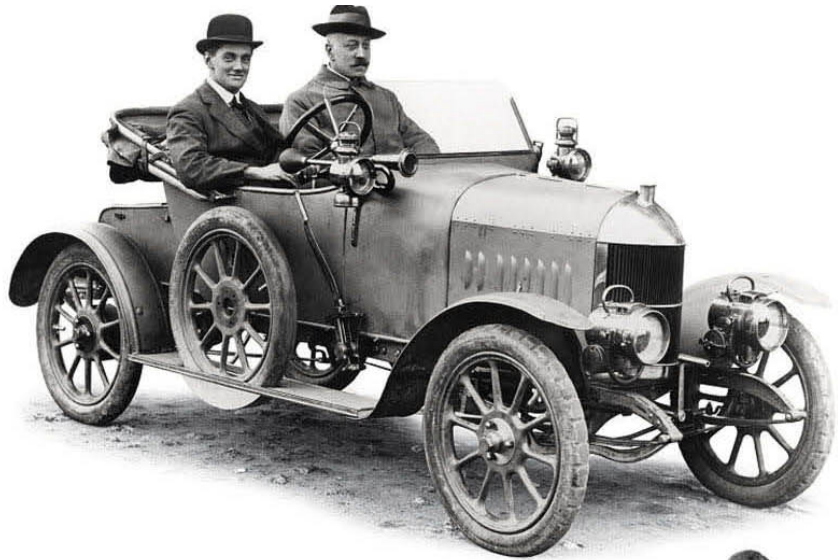
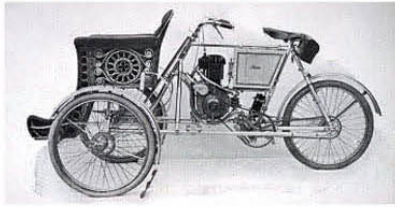


Above: Lord and Lady Nuffield with the Wolseley 25hp dhc paid for by the workforce and presented to the boss at Christmas 1937. Left: with Victor Riley (on right) at the launch of the Pathfinder. Above: in uniform, as Director-General of Maintenance at the Air Ministry, a post he only briefly (and ingloriously) held. Left: Nuffield with Hanks (right), personal secretary Carl Kingerlee (left) and Charles Mullens, Overseas Director and Former Wolseley MD.

‘UNLIKE HIS PEERS WHO WERE ENGINEERS, HE DIDN’T FEEL A NEED TO TINKER WITH DESIGNS’



Clockwise, from left: in 1925 with the 100,000th Unit by Morris Engines – and inevitable cigarette; the Ten saved the firm's bacon; Miles Thomas (left) was a talented manager. Clockwise, from above: Morris and Lord fell out, and Cowley lost another top-flight engineer; at Abingdon with MG boss Cecil Kimber; 'WRM' receives the Dewar Trophy in 1959 for BMC's Mini.



From top: Morris moved into motorbikes in 1902; a year later (centre row, third from left), with staff of the Oxford Automobile & Cycle Agency, in which he was a partner; 'Flat nose'– here a '28 Cowley – was a success. Clockwise, from above: looking happy at the wheel of a very early Oxford; Morris began making bicycles at the age of 16; with his wife Lillian, reputedly an austere and difficult woman.



Jon Pressnell