



The Rolls-Royce Owners' Club of Australia Technical Library

A Phantom Goes Into the Arena

© Bill Coburn January 2009

One of the hapless custodians of this library was asked by the then Governor-General to prepare the 1970 Phantom VI owned by Government House, for use by The Queen when she travelled to Australia to open the Commonwealth Games. The following account resulted.

At the time of writing, (staging of the 2006 Commonwealth Games) I still had my anti-hype gear on, well zipped up complete with anti-broadcast helmet and ear plugs. I surely love athletics and gymnastics and seeing those sleek bodies ploughing through the water, but the cacophony of screaming fans and hysterical commentators is just a near death experience for me. No doubt all the competitors and of course the organisers died a thousand deaths in preparation as things went wrong, a sudden chill, an unexplained twinge or wondering whether someone has slipped a Mickey Finn into your orange juice. But none would have suffered the colonic torment I went through wondering whether the large black car intended to convey our reigning monarch around the competition arena and deliver Her to the designated debussing point, would actually make it.

Make no mistake, whilst I did not remove the crankshaft and have it crack tested in case it shattered half way around the 100m track, I did everything my amateur brain could think of to ensure that the mission was completed as planned. At Operational Headquarters at Yarralumla everybody was so sublime, after all they have more Heads of State through those gates in a year than I have had unsolicited phone calls from insurance companies! Clearly they had no idea of what could go wrong. I have for instance never understood how that dinky little stub axle manages to support the front wheels of any car let alone nearly three tons of hurtling protocol screaming around an arena! What if it broke? Driving it a week before it seemed to be a little slow at deciding which gear it wanted to use, probably the throttle valve is about to stick?? Recently we have discussed jamming rear axle bearings. Apparently they simply stop one of the rear wheels without warning and the car simply pirouettes around that point hopefully not turning over in the process.

The list of horrors was endless. This was not all unprecedented anxiety. Many years previous to this, HM and HRH proceeded onto Flemington in one of the then Commonwealth Government's Clouds III's and didn't even get to the starting post! The car simply expired. HM was decidedly not amused. In fact the chauffeur at the time actually drove the Phantom onto the arena on this occasion. He recalls that the Imperial glare was probably the inspiration for the later-to-be marketed microwave oven. HRH on the other hand thought it was hilarious and thought it was just the type of thing those bloody colonials would cock up!

Earlier I was prevailed upon to take the car at least part of the way into this century and fill her belly with the latest new fangled synthetic oil. I was assured of ultra-quiet valve gear plus all sorts of hidden dividends. Installed, the first heart stopper was, it appeared, there was no oil pressure at all! Remembering that the oil pressure sender is slow to send and the gauge is very leisurely in reporting what it is receiving and hearing no clattering bearings or rattling tappets, I assumed the oily nectar was getting to the most intimate places and that I should not worry! This self re-assurance proved to be my undoing.

The day arrived and the car resplendent with the Royal Standard on the masthead sailed down the lovely tree lined Dunrossil Drive accompanied by the equivalent of the complete inventory of a World War II car company! Much waving, HM looked exactly like an 80 year old woman who has just flown for 22 hours and can think of nothing else but a cup of tea and that bed on the second floor of the large house she can see through the trees. She did not look anxious about the oil pressure and neither did HRH so I relaxed a bit. Perhaps the oil pump drive gear, that dinky little bronze thing that whizzes around up at the front of the engine feeding all the intimate bits, was about to strip. They have done it you know!!!

Why was this foremost in my addled brain? Well the car had barely left the aerodrome when I had a phone call on the mobile to the effect that the oil light was coming on!! It was not clear as the message was third hand as to when it came on and when it went off. To make matters worse the car was to be placed into a pantehnicon immediately it had unloaded and then trucked off to Sydney. This was all well beyond my purview and I know from several enquiries that the Member for Wherever will now be asking why we have three of these cars when surely one would do! So there was no time to rip out the front of the car and replace the oil pump.

I distributed reassurances to all and sundry that there was no cause for concern since I reasoned if we really had oil pressure problem, the Royal Party would have long ago been out on Fairbairn Avenue trying to hitch a ride for the remainder of the journey! I also decided that it must be one of the pesky little switches on top of the oil filter housing that switches the little blinkin' lights on. Several mentors I consulted assured me that with age, the point at which the switch switches gets higher and higher!!

The car returned to Canberra by road on Monday night, the Opera House having been annexed (in the extension sense). I woke the old thing up bright and early on the Tuesday morning. I was armed with not one but two switches ripped off my long suffering Spur, a gallon or so of good ol' GTX2, bucket, jack, stands and sump plug tool. I got the car out into the sunlight jacked it up, stands properly placed and released the old girl's plug to remove the synthetic life blood into the bucket. I stood back filthy and still slightly anxious and admired Mr Mulliner's handiwork and then noticed that while I had demolished most of the dignity of his coachwork by virtue of having the car rearing up on jack stands, that this was partly restored by the flying Royal Standard proudly mounted on the masthead. The car was still 'dressed'.

Whilst draining I moved to the filter head to remove the possibly failing switch only to find ---- no switch! The only insertion in that part of her anatomy was the oil pressure gauge sender!!! There was no oil light! Resuming my totally calm face I quietly enquired 'which light was the one that came on'? Finger pointed – it was the coolant light! Some murderous thoughts crossed my mind. What had apparently happened was the car sitting under the wing of the Imperial 747 waiting for its passenger, had both air conditioning systems going flat out. It was quite hot even in the shade and the increased temperature prompted the steam valve in the header tank to open and ease the pressure. This of course lowered the coolant level in the header tank and once the car got moving again, the fluid cooled, contracted, lowered the level and the light flashed on! Solution until we get a new steam valve, a plastic container of water in the boot!

From there on there was not a moment of anxiety for anyone else, except yours truly. But when I saw the Phantom swing onto the arena under all those flood lights and if we are to believe the media, under the scrutiny of 1,500,000,000 television viewers around the world, I held my breath until HM alighted. I was furious that the blasted cameras concentrated on HM and the official party and did not follow the car back out of the arena – there might have been an unaccounted for puff of smoke, a twitch near the rear wheel a sudden vibration of the Flying Lady indicating imminent crankshaft failure!!!

Well she is back in the Yarralumla Mews none the worst for her gadding around. Apart from checking the usual comestibles I launched myself over the back of the back seat to search for vandalism. You see our Monarch is given to soiling the rear parcel shelf. For a long while this was something that was not talked about but eventually we worked out why the West of England cloth looked as though the rear occupants had been discarding their partly consumed Maccas over their shoulder. Before all this happened I found the supplier of this beautiful cloth and had re-covered the rear shelf.

Have you noticed that wherever HM goes there is always a little girl or boy with a posy which they thrust into the poor woman's hands with a beatific but terrified smile? And where does the posy go if it is not handed on to a Lady-in-Waiting or hapless Prime Minister standing to the rear? – why on the back parcel shelf of course – mystery solved. I think the message has gone out to all posy toters that if they must persist in this adulation, please put a condom over the stems – preferably under the gorgeous surrounding paper!

