



Rolls-Royces in the “Formaldehyde Fraternity”



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This title comes from a delightful article by Roger Thiedeman about a Rolls-Royce hearse that was published in the February 2006 issue of the RROCA's *PRÆCLARVM* magazine.

It was not unusual for pre-World War II Rolls-Royce chassis to be re-bodied and in a number of cases the original bodies were replaced with hearse bodies to serve in the undertaking trade. RROCA Foundation Members Margaret and Barrie Gillings purchased two Silver Ghost in the 1950s both with hearse bodies that replaced the original coachwork. Straight forward, but the history of the hearse body in Roger's article is a bit different. It has been on two Rolls-Royce chassis and after serving undertakers in England and America, it is again in service in Australia.

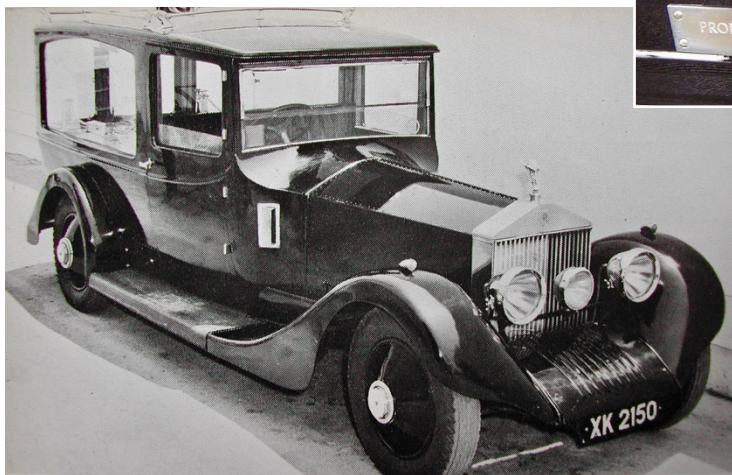
Roger's article, titled “The Resurrection of 68DC”, set the scene with the opening paragraph, “Late last year Melbourne's ‘formaldehyde fraternity’ saw the addition of a new motor hearse to the fleet of funeral directors John Allison/Monkhouse. Not ‘new’ as in a sleek, latest-model funeral car from the assembly line of Ford or Holden. But a New Phantom (Phantom I) 40/50 h.p. Rolls-Royce of 1926 vintage, chassis 68DC, that was rescued from dereliction, restored mechanically, and fitted with an appropriately refurbished hearse body that had previously adorned another vintage Rolls-Royce.”

Above: Photographs of 1926 Phantom I chassis 68DC with its hearse body provided by Roger Thiedeman for the 2006 PRÆCLARVM article.

The original body on 68DC was a Hooper landaulette. The first owner was Mrs. T.M. Burke of Armadale, Victoria. It has a succession of owners, including the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Dr Daniel Mannix, before it was converted to a farm ute in Queensland around 1940, a common fate for a number of vintage Rolls-Royce chassis. Eventually, it was acquired in chassis form and was back in Victoria with the Edgar family. We can pick up the story here from Roger, "For almost 50 years 68DC remained with the Edgar family, until purchased on behalf of John Allison/Monkhouse by one of its then managers, Richard Swinn, who was on the lookout for a suitable vehicle to reincarnate as a vintage hearse. The subsequent restoration of the Phantom I's chassis, and renovation and installation of the secondhand hearse body, was conducted by and under the direction of Nicholas (Nick) Simms of Simms Automotive in Sandringham, Victoria."

The next part of the story moves to England. 1921 Silver Ghost chassis 106AG was fitted with a hearse body in the 1930s and was operated by undertakers W.H. Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. of Ilkley, Yorkshire, before being exported to the USA in the early 1960s. Roger then explained, "Meanwhile, the funeral company had been looking for a suitable hearse body with which to 'clothe' the naked 68DC. That quest led to Perth, WA, and 1921 40/50 h.p. Silver Ghost, chassis 106AG, which had been imported from California by RROCA members Con and Val Keogh as a Woodall Nicholson hearse."

Now to the last part of the connection between Phantom I 68DC and Silver Ghost 106AG, as Roger discovered, "After purchase by the Keoghs in the late 1980s, 106AG had its Woodall Nicholson coachwork replaced by a replica tourer body crafted by WA specialist coachbuilder Roger Fry. Nick Simms says that he subsequently "found out through the grapevine that there was a hearse body [the one from 106AG] available in Western Australia (and) John Allison/Monkhouse already knew about it too." Evidently, the funeral directors were waiting for the hearse body to come up for auction at Shannons in Melbourne—and when it did, John Allison/Monkhouse were the successful bidders." And finally," On Friday, November 11, 2005, the completed vehicle was delivered to John Allison/Monkhouse; the next day it was the main attraction at the company's public open day at its Springvale establishment." Phantom I 68DC is now with G. Beavan Funeral Services in Bowral, NSW.



Left: Roger Thiedeman's research revealed, "In April 1962 the Silver Ghost hearse was advertised for sale in the RROC's Flying Lady journal, priced at US\$6,500. It then went on to serve funeral director C. Robert (Bob) Lingo of Norwalk, California until 1987. While owned by Lingo, 106AG reportedly appeared in episodes of The Addams Family and The Monkees TV shows."

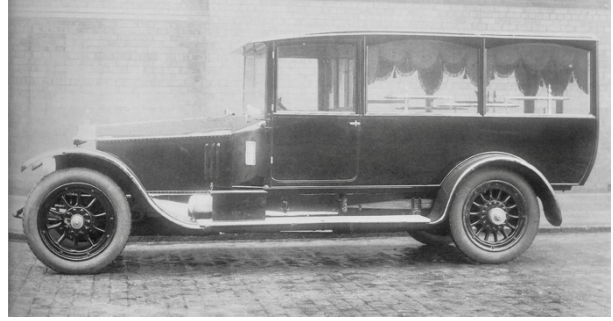
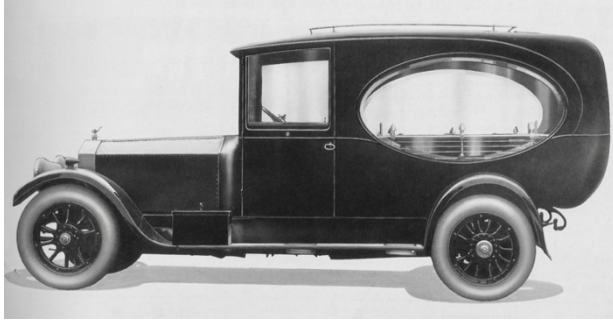
Inset: The name plate of the undertakers, for whom the hearse body was built in England, has remained with the body. [Courtesy Roger Thiedeman]



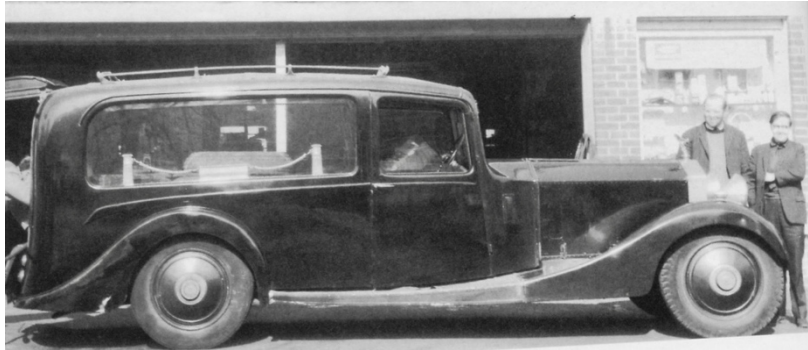
Above: 1910 Silver Ghost chassis 1492 was rebodied as a hearse owned by Charles Kinsella Funerals in Sydney and Cooper Bros. in Walcha, NSW. Acquired by RROCA Foundation Members Barrie and Margaret Gillings, Barrie was able to supply Cooper Bros. with a Hudson hearse to enable him to buy 1492 with an exchange worth £65 in 1957. [Courtesy Margaret and Barrie Gillings]

Below: 1922 Silver Ghost chassis 70SG was fitted with this Dodge-based hearse body in about 1938 by the Sydney undertakers Wood Coffill Ltd. It was acquired by Margaret and Barrie Gillings in late 1954, two years before the Club was formed. Pictured here at a petrol station on the Sydney Harbour Bridge approach about 1955. [Courtesy Margaret and Barrie Gillings]



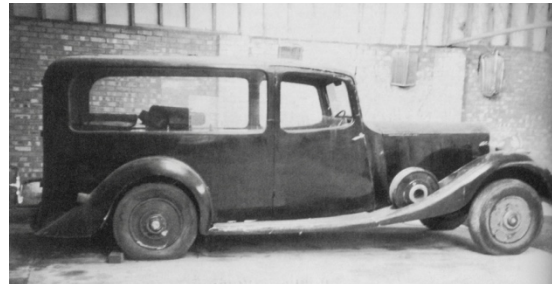


Above: 1912 and 1913 Silver Ghosts rebodied with hearse coachwork, chassis numbers unidentified. [Fasal and Goodman, *The Edwardian Rolls-Royce*, pages 539 and 667]



Left: Another Woodall Nicholson hearse on 1930 Phantom II chassis 115GN. It replaced the original Hooper sedan de ville. [Nick Whitaker & Steve Stuckey, *The Rolls-Royce Phantom II and Phantom III, A Complete Classics Publication 5*, page 82]

Right: 1937 Phantom III chassis 3BT51, originally a Barker limousine de ville, is pictured here as a hearse perhaps destined for its own graveyard. [Nick Whitaker & Steve Stuckey, *The Rolls-Royce Phantom II and Phantom III, A Complete Classics Publication 5*, page 298]



Below: Another Woodall Nicholson hearse, this time on 1957 Silver Cloud I chassis SDD100. It started as a standard steel saloon but was later converted for the undertaking trade. [Davide Bassoli & Bernard L King, *Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud 1 & Bentley S1, A Complete Classics Publication 8*, page 64]

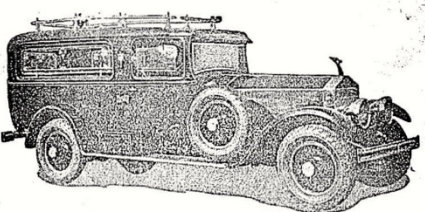




Above and Below: 1920 Silver Ghost chassis 62CW outside the Summer Hill, Sydney, premises of W. S. Grice with the new hearse body in 1932. Norman Larcombe was about to take delivery having decided to enter the undertaking business. His father was a stonemason in Goulburn, NSW, before he moved to Dubbo in western NSW in 1897 and established a business as a monumental mason. [Courtesy Joyce Laws (now deceased) widow of Jack Laws, who for many years was the foreman at W. S. Grice via Allan Simpson]

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Left: Norman Larcombe advertised his business as "Rolls Royce (no hyphen) Motor Funeral Directors" in the 12 January 1933 issue of The Dubbo Liberal and Macquarie Advocate.

The late Bruce Ross, RROCA Federal President and NSW Branch President, operated a motor garage and repair shop at Pennant Hills in Sydney. Any hearse repairs were a priority. The local undertaker called one day with a dent in the middle of the roof of the hearse. It transpired coffins were stored in racks above where the hearse was garaged and a cat walked along a coffin which tipped over crashing onto the roof. "Insurance job?" asked Bruce. "No!" replied the undertaker, "They wouldn't believe me with a claim, 'hearse hit by flying coffin'." Bruce told me that his undertaker customer always signed his letters, "Yours eventually".



Yours Eventually

Postscript



Above: Wood Coffill Ltd operated this 1919 Renault hearse before the late 1930s Dodge-based hearse body on 1922 Silver Ghost chassis 70SG. [Above and below, State Library NSW, Creator Sam Hood 1872-1953, Home and Away 7727 and 2471]

Below: Charles Kinsella Funerals operated this late 1930s Packard hearse after the hearse body on 1910 Silver Ghost chassis 1492.



Acknowledgements: I was privileged to publish Roger's article about 68DC in *PRAECLARVM*, which I edited from 2004 to 2009. Roger was a wonderfully supportive correspondent during that time. Assistance also from Tom Clarke. (David Neely Sydney August 2025.)