

# A Verbatim Report on the Epic Crossing ... and never to be repeated

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*Jim Redman, George Harris's co-driver of the 1914 Silver Ghost 6TB for the 1979 'Across Australia Drive' gave the following account of the dash.*

We left on Sunday morning, 26 October 1979 at 5 a.m. from the Sydney Town Hall. To farewell us were Gilbert Ashby, Malcolm Johns, Dennis Sowden, Roger Fry, John Lockbridge, June Bradshaw and several policemen. We crossed in 46 hours and 57 minutes. We were met at the Perth Town Hall by Guy Freeman, Mr Sowden Snr, Carolyn Birdseye, Adrian Birdseye, Di Deacon, Peter Deacon and numerous other members of the West Australian Branch.

Leaving Sydney we went via Victoria Road, Richmond, Lithgow and Bell Road. We struck very bad fog out of Richmond. Into the hills and right on top we were above the fog, but going into Lithgow we again struck the very heavy fog. It was extremely cold, with ice on the windscreen. I had to stand up, when George was driving at one stage, and wipe the fog off the windscreen. My forehead was numb with the cold as was any exposed bare skin. Even our hands, which were gloved, were extremely cold. At Bathurst the ice was really bad on the windscreen. It was daylight by this time, and -you could see the whole of the ground was frozen.

There was no ice on the road, fortunately. We went right through Bathurst to where you make a right hand turn and go out onto the main road. We had stepped our journey into two hundred mile steps as we thought we'd make about 200 miles to the tank. As we made this right hand turn (we carried 3 five-gallon plastic containers of petrol on the back luggage rack) I heard this funny noise and looking around saw one had slid off. We stopped down the road a fair way, and came back. There was this fellow going to borrow our petrol, but we told him to change his mind. George at this stage had a great complaint about wanting to go to the toilet, so as we had stopped I said, you go to the toilet and I'll tie this on. As there was nobody watching, George decided to use the rear wheel of the car when a little old lady stuck her head over the hedge of the corner house and said - "How many cars are in the race?" A little boy join her and watched George's emergency drill whilst I tied the petrol on. We had some sandwiches and hot coffee that we carried with us. We carried all our food, which consisted of four different nuts and dried apricots and we had this one flask of coffee. I was driving, doing about 65-70 miles an hour and George decided we'd have the coffee, so he reached into the back of the car and poured nearly a full cup out and handed it to me. As he did so, I thought this is going to be nice - I might wear it. He points it at me and I more or less took it right across the front of me with my right hand so that it was going to be on my right hand side, and with that a bit of turbulence in the air just sucked the whole of the coffee out of the cup, it went up my arm and coat and it was gone. I gave him the cup back. He said, "Where is it?" I said, "I cooled it down, I held it out - and it's gone."

Finally, George leaned as close as he could to the windscreen and poured about half an inch into the cup, I'd have a little drink and another little drink and we devoured the coffee thus.

We didn't use our own petrol until well into South Australia. We didn't have a fill-up from the backup vehicle until well into the trip. We were able to stop at Service Stations and get what we wanted.

We got better than 200 miles to the tank. We were getting up to 240 miles through New South Wales and part of South Australia, which was a lot better than we thought we'd get.

It is a 20-gallon tank, so we were getting over 42 mpg. At times it seemed it did drop down to a bit under 10, so it was rather hard to calculate exactly how far we could go. We didn't endeavour to extend our legs for 200 miles. Once we ran out of petrol east of Broken Hill near Topar. We ran out and just idled into the Service Station and got some petrol and did a complete fill up at Broken Hill. Checked all our oils and water and the rest there. One problem we encountered was, we had fitted a new battery just prior to leaving and it failed. We did take a second battery, which was a big 90-amp job out of my boat. The battery conked out at 2.30 am at the side of the road. We lost, I'd say, 30 minutes there. We also had trouble at Mildura the next day, with the car, and it wouldn't start. We blamed the battery again, which we had swapped over to charge during the day, we ran the big battery all the rest of the night, and had good lights. In the morning when we were able to use no power and just charge the dud battery but apparently it didn't hold its charge and was still no good. When I looked at the motor to see if there was anything else wrong I found that the top had completely screwed off the carburettor and was just sitting in there at a funny angle; the whole brass top. Fortunately we didn't lose it. With the aid of the local Service Station proprietor and 4 or 5 local fellows, and the policeman, we obtained a brand-new set of jumper leads that the service station proprietor just ripped out of a packet and we started the car up by jumping it from the good battery to the bad and we ran on again.

We ran the spare battery the rest of the time. Just west of Broken Hill, there were wombats all over the roadway. In one section there were three to a hundred yards. There were dead wombats lying all over the place. There was one section which had signs "be careful, wombats crossing" a little bit further "be careful, camels crossing", "are careful, kangaroos crossing" (all in one kilometre). There were no Afghans however. Our whole trip averaged 55.76 miles per hour.

That's an all-up elapsed time from go to whoa including all of our petrol stops, our battery problem and all of our oil leakage problems. We put about five gallons of oil through the motor over the trip. We were losing it, not using it. We think we were losing it out of the sump, which was a bit loose - and possibly out of the direct feeds at the top of the cylinders. They appeared to be a bit loose. So we hope that - we have no oil leaks, and we hope that we don't lose any on the way back. We only topped the radiator up on one occasion for the whole of the trip. We had no mechanical problems whatsoever. We did run a pair of 600 x 50 20c on the rear wheels (it's only a 2-wheel brake car) they're a much wider tyre and much more rubber on the road. They were off my Ghost, and they made the car, we feel, handle better and stop better, and it looks like an old racing car.

At about 11 o'clock at night - we'd been calculating our times on our way through and trying to establish the time we would arrive. We were traveling quite well, although, despite the stops, we felt that we were going to do it better than we had originally anticipated. George was driving and we were pushing the car fairly hard. We had lost our taillight earlier in the night; I think we may have hit a rabbit or something and it flicked up and ripped the wires straight out of the bottom of the tail light but we didn't have time to repair it. We were going along this dark section of roadway with no streetlights, with rally lights on the front of the car, which were crossed so we could flick the one off which was facing the centre of the road for the oncoming traffic. Apparently a policeman coming in the opposite direction copped a bit of a dazzle off our lights, so he turned round and chased us. We have been informed since that he clocked us at 74 miles an hour. The first we knew of him was all these lights, like Coney Island - there were green lights flashing, and funny noises. It's very hard to hear in the car because of all the wind and the rain that was pouring down at the time. I looked behind and I said "there's someone behind us - looks as if it's a policeman, so we had better stop". We pulled up and at this stage we were very heavily rugged up with bright yellow oilskins and leather cap, a pair of big goggles and a scarf wrapped around the bottom part of

the face. We both had big fur coats on, collars turned right up and gloves. As soon as we stopped I jumped out and I ran back to the policeman - he'd got out of his car by this time, and I said "Look, you can't pull us up, we're in a great hurry, we've got to get to Perth as quick as we can - we're trying to do a reliability run and if you hold us up here we'll miss out on getting to Perth as quick as we wish - so you've got to let us go". He looked at me for a minute and shone the torch up and down, tried to shine it at the car and back at me, and he said, "I don't believe this, this isn't true, and I'm not here. But I am - it's gotta be true - it's really happening to me. Who are you, what are you doing?" I said, "it doesn't matter, you've just gotta let us go. We've gotta go now. Don't worry -we're off", and I ran back to the car and he ran up and said "But, you've got no tail light and there are lots of kangaroos! You'll have to be very careful of the kangaroos and it's going to rain very heavily soon". By this time he was almost soaking wet. But it didn't worry us because we had been wet for hours. So I just ran off and left him standing in the middle of the road.

Dennis Sowden and Roger Fry following in the Silver Wraith pulled into a service station about 2 hours later and the policeman was there. They asked him, "Have you seen an old Rolls-Royce go through here". And he said, "Yes, I saw it, what's going on". They explained the situation and he said, "The fellow said not to worry and ran away and hopped back in the car and off they went. I realised it was useless to book them for anything because no judge in the world would believe what I'd seen and I didn't believe it either.

We both had problems with hallucinations - we'd be going along and George said to me "We're going up a big hill now, and we weren't, we were going along the flat. Always at night you'd find this problem. You'd think that you were going down a big hill into this great big dark hole and you couldn't see the bottom of it. All the trees at the sides of the road were leaning in on you.

We had no tyre trouble whatsoever. We didn't carry our own spare wheels until Broken Hill, where the Silver Wraith had a heating problem and couldn't stay with us. We were worried that something could go wrong so we then took our spare wheel.

The whole venture started in Adelaide - when we did the run to Adelaide and got the record between Sydney and Adelaide. At one of the functions of the Federal Rally last year, somebody said to us "You'll have to do something and get the record over to Perth". I think it may have been Dennis Sowden who said it, so we said we would. That was the challenge so we did it. George reckons we're going to drive in reverse to Canberra now. I hope he's not serious.

## **Jim Redman**

