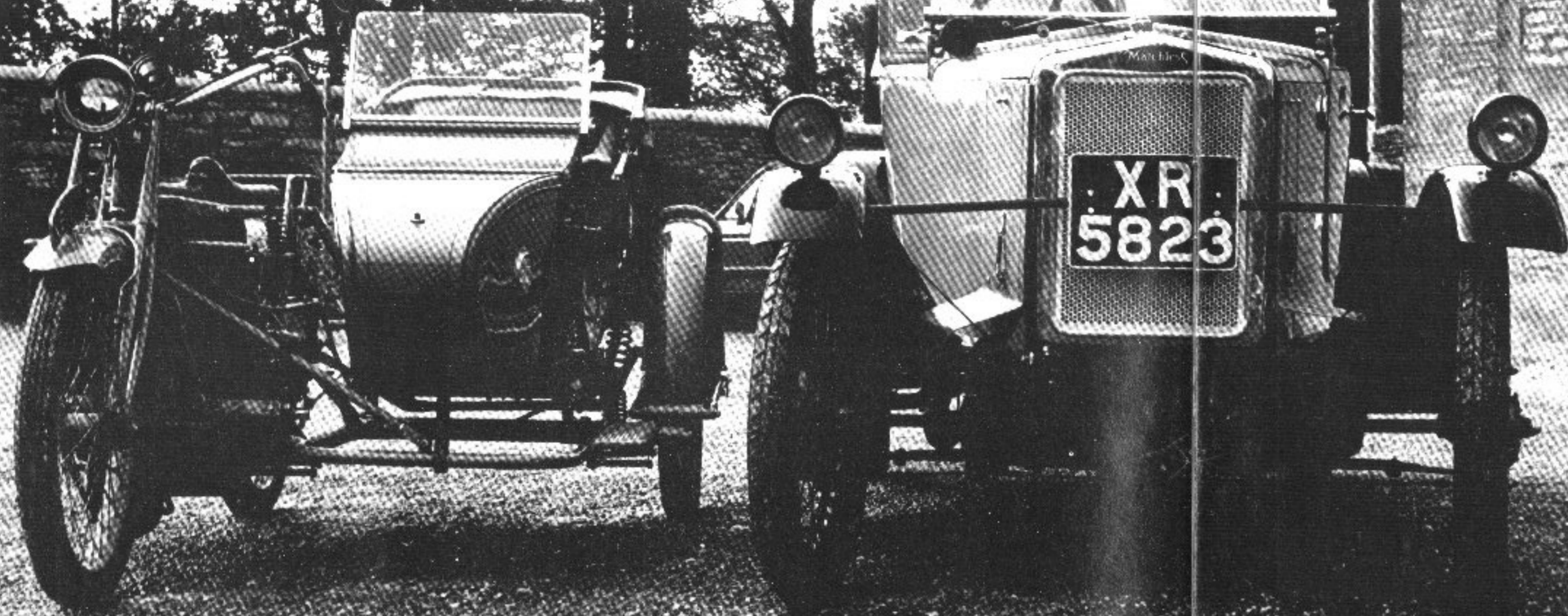


Production of the Matchless vee-twin outfit, and the flat-twin car, proceeded simultaneously at Plumstead, the car employing motor cycle design and construction techniques.



# A MATCHLESS PAIR

**"D** YOU know," remarked John Browne, "I reckon I must be the only man in the world to have a motor cycle that starts with a crank-handle – and a car fitted with a kick-starter!" And he's right, of course. The crank-starting bike is the long-wheelbase 1907 Roc which John takes down to Brighton in the Pioneer Run on (as near as dammit) the first day of each Spring. And the kick-starting car? Well, that's an air-cooled, flat-twin 1923 Matchless which is one partner in the pair of vehicles pictured here; the other half of the pair is John's 1921 Matchless Model H rear-sprung MAG-engined sidecar outfit.

Never knew that Matchless ever built a car? They did, indeed, though certainly not very many of them – fewer than 50, by all accounts, of which this one is the sole survivor. And mention of this particular example in a motor cycle magazine can be justified on a number

of counts. First, it was a great motor cycle company's one and only venture into the four-wheeled world; second, it was the Matchless concern's first attempt at making their own engine (previously, they had used proprietary JAP or MAG engines) and motor cycle rather than car practice was employed in its design and construction – yea, even unto the employment of a Lucas Magdyno to supply the electrics; and third, it was the first vehicle in the world to be fitted with wheels and brakes patented jointly by H. Collier & Sons and a man whose name would eventually become very well known in our field, one Capt. Alfred Henry Godfrey Girling.

As for why John Browne should be so thoroughly wrapped up in Matchlesses, we must here go back to the mid to late 'twenties, when John was employed by famous motor cycle dealers, Godfrey's of Euston Road, London. In his spare time, he raced, grass-tracked and scrambled

Which two vehicles have,  
between them, four cylinders  
and (not counting the spares)  
seven wheels?

Story: Bob Currie

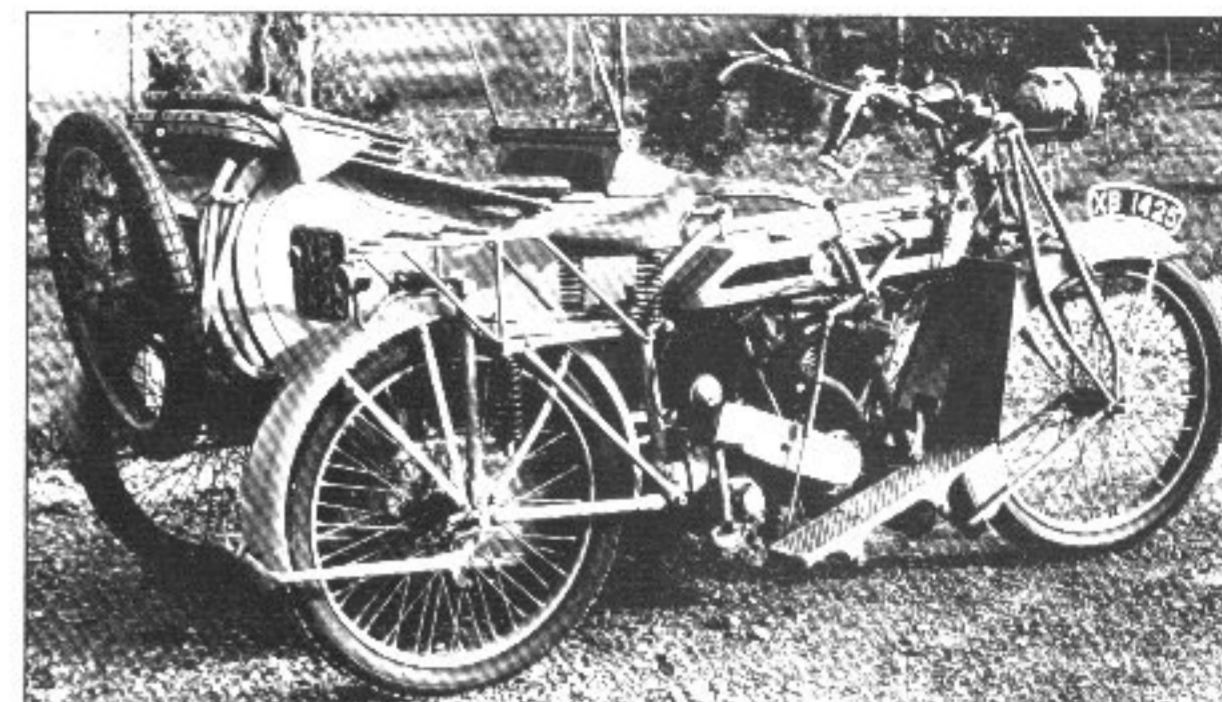
Photography: Jim Davies

assorted Matchless models which frequently had special works-supplied bits incorporated into them. That way, he got on first-name terms with such Plumstead personalities as Harry Collier, Jack Colver, and Fred Neill. "But", he says, "though I was in and out of the Plumstead factory all the time, I never knew they had ever made a car."

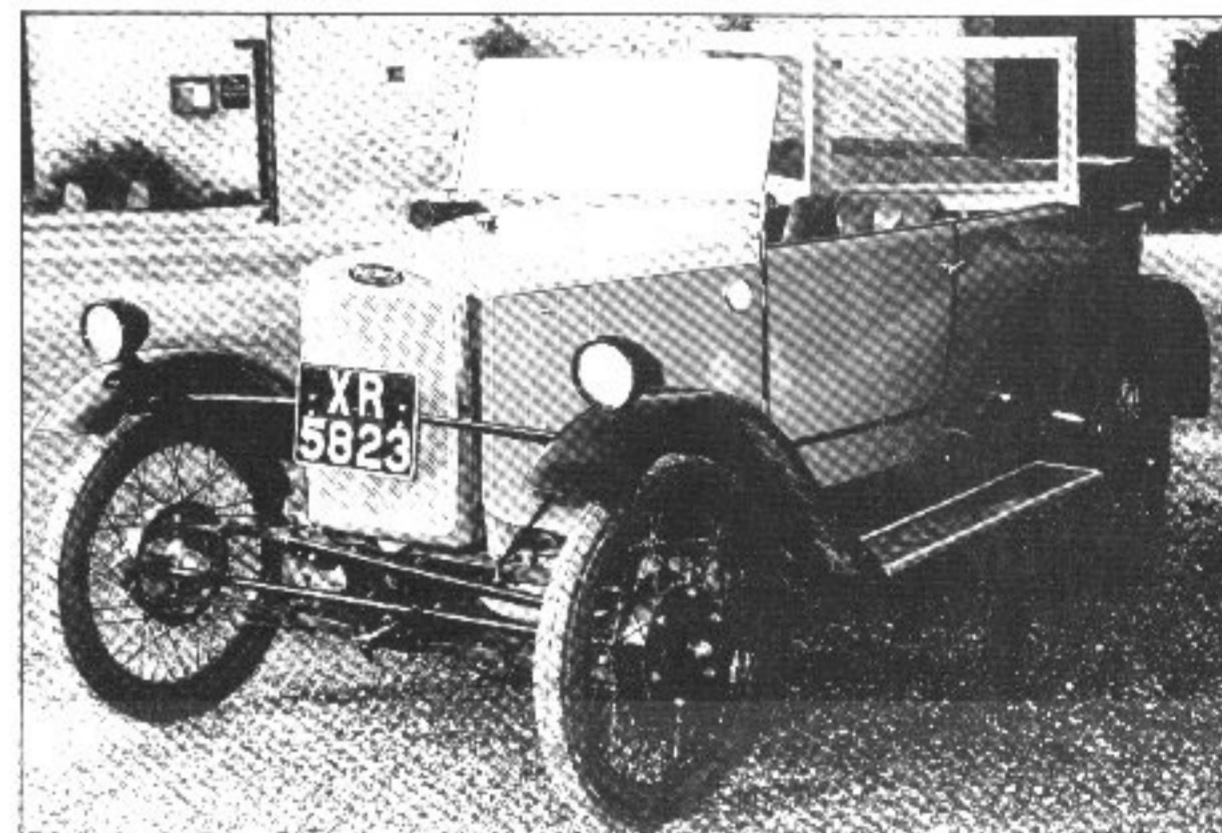
In due course, John left Godfrey's, set up in business for himself, and eventu-

ally found himself settled in the Cotswolds and running a garage and car body repair works. But around 1965 he decided to semi-retire and, selling off the garage, he retained the bodywork business. With some spare time now on his hands, he looked around for an old motor cycle to restore and ride; naturally, it would have to be a Matchless.

Well, he heard of one. It was a 1921 998cc Model H combination, with inlet-over-exhaust 998cc MAG (Motosacoche-Acacias Geneve) engine, cylindrical Matchless gearbox, and swinging-arm rear suspension under the control of undamped coil springs. One snag was that the Matchless was part of a collection. "Would you take five bikes for £100?", tempted the vendor – and though John cannot now recall what the others were, he knows that one was an immaculate 1924 Harley-Davidson, and another was a 1925 four valve four-speed Rudge. But in 1965 vintage



First of the post-WWI designs, the Model H Matchless featured a proper swinging-arm rear suspension system, though the coil springs were undamped. Engine is an inlet-over-exhaust 998cc MAG, built in Switzerland.



Plumstead's only venture into four-wheeling, the 10hp Model K has only one door, though it seats four. Note the full-width hubs and drum brakes, patented jointly by Matchless and Capt. Girling.

machinery was relatively valueless, and all he wanted was the Model H. He has no idea what happened to the others.

The bike seemed in reasonable mechanical condition, but the handsome touring sidecar had seen better days and a complete strip and rebuild was indicated (no problem for the owner of a car body business, of course). Out came the upholstery, and off came the corroded metal panelling – and to John's surprise, when the door trim was removed, there stuffed into the lining was a 1920 map of the London Underground!

Once the machine was back together, John gave it an outing or two, but the steering was diabolical and if one hand was removed from the bars the front forks went into a shimmy. But Model H Matchless are not all that thin on the ground, and by comparing his machine with others of the breed, he discovered that for some extraordinary reason the

front fork lower links were 1/4 inch shorter than standard. On making and fitting a pair of links the correct length, the handling of the outfit was transformed.

And now, picture if you will a clock with its hands whizzing round at nineteen to the dozen – or a calendar with the monthly leaves fluttering to the ground. Time moves forward to 1984 and John and a few mates, in a local pub, are discussing old cars. "Ever heard of a Matchless car?", asks one. "No, never", answers John, "and I've been in the car and motor cycle trade all my life."

"Well," comments the first, "they *did* make one – and here's the proof!" With that, he produces the catalogue of a 1968 Sotheby's sale at which the contents of a Heathfield, Sussex motor museum were put up for auction. And therein, Lot 97 is described as a 1923 10hp Model K Matchless tourer, registration no. XR 5823. His imagination fired, John decided to try and trace the

car and, if at all possible, add it to his own collection. He wrote to Sotheby's but, understandably, they wouldn't give him the name and address of whoever had bought it; on the other hand, they agreed to forward a letter – and it would be up to the new owner of the vehicle to reply if he felt like it.

It appears that the Matchless had gone first to Peterborough, then to Holland, and it was Sotheby's agent in that country who handed the letter to a Mr. Theo Kuyper, of Veendam – from whom John had a reply expressing surprise and joy that someone was showing interest in the vehicle. John was intending to compete in the Dutch Veteran Run, based on Assen, in any case and he arranged to drop in on Theo and see the car.

"I don't particularly want to sell the Matchless", said Theo, "but its rarity is not appreciated in Holland, and my feeling is that it should be part of an English heritage collection."

That was fine by John Browne. "Well, I don't particularly want to buy it," he answered, "but what I would like to do is restore it to original colour and specification, and take it around to shows and rallies". And so, that summer, agreement was reached, whereby Theo would retain ownership, but John would be the vehicle's custodian.

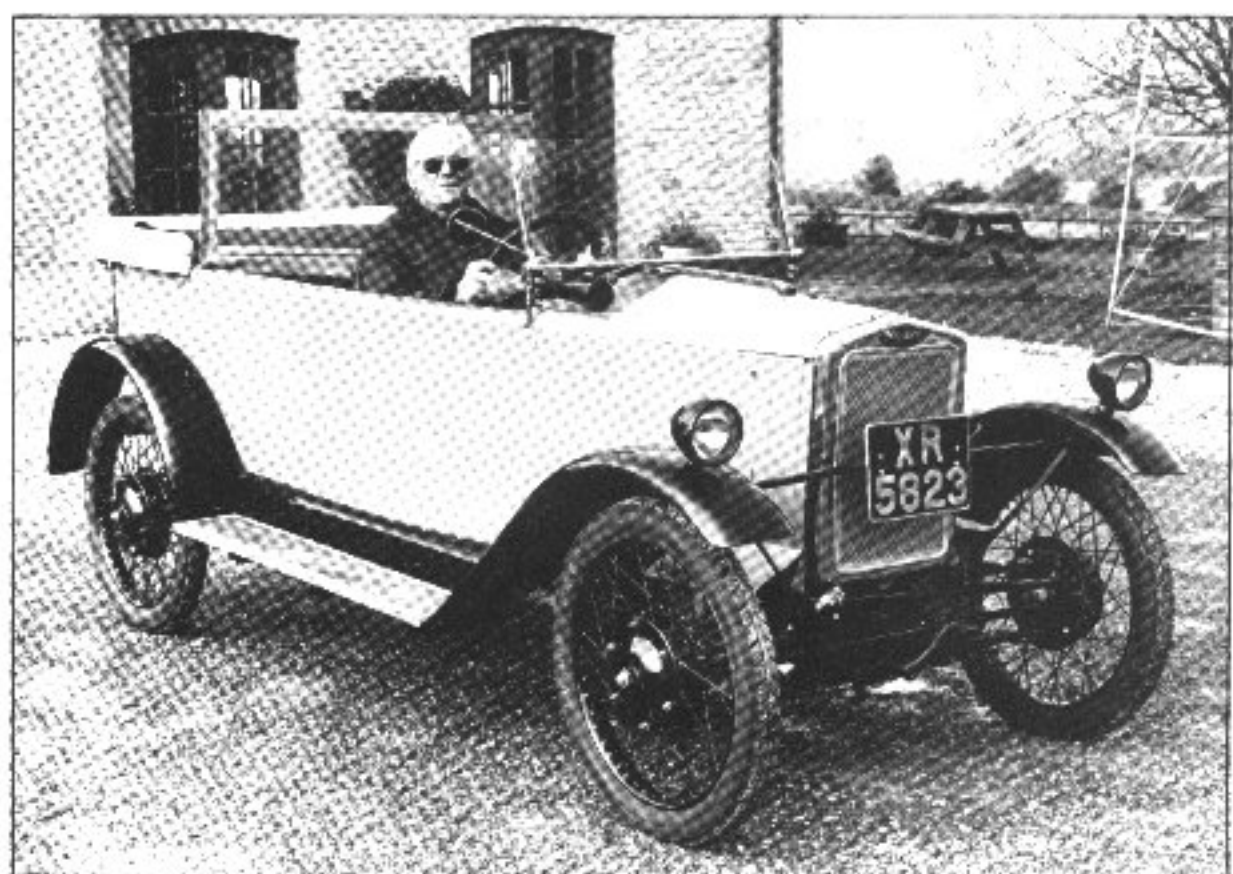
Getting it back to Britain led to something of a headache for the customs officials, for Theo still had the original British buff log-book, and the car was wearing its old British registration numbers. So, can a customs man charge duty on a British made car returning to its homeland but remaining Dutch-owned? In the end, the duty men gave up and just waved it through without payment!

Unusually, the car has no chassis in the normal sense but is unitary-construction – in wood! Longitudinal members are in eight-ply plywood, strengthened by 1½in-square ash bracing. In fact the bodywork was in surprisingly good condition, but the car had been painted a non-standard red, and John returned it to its original Matchless shade of khaki, exactly matching that of the Model H sidcar outfit. It did, however, need a new hood and cover, and detachable sidescreens.

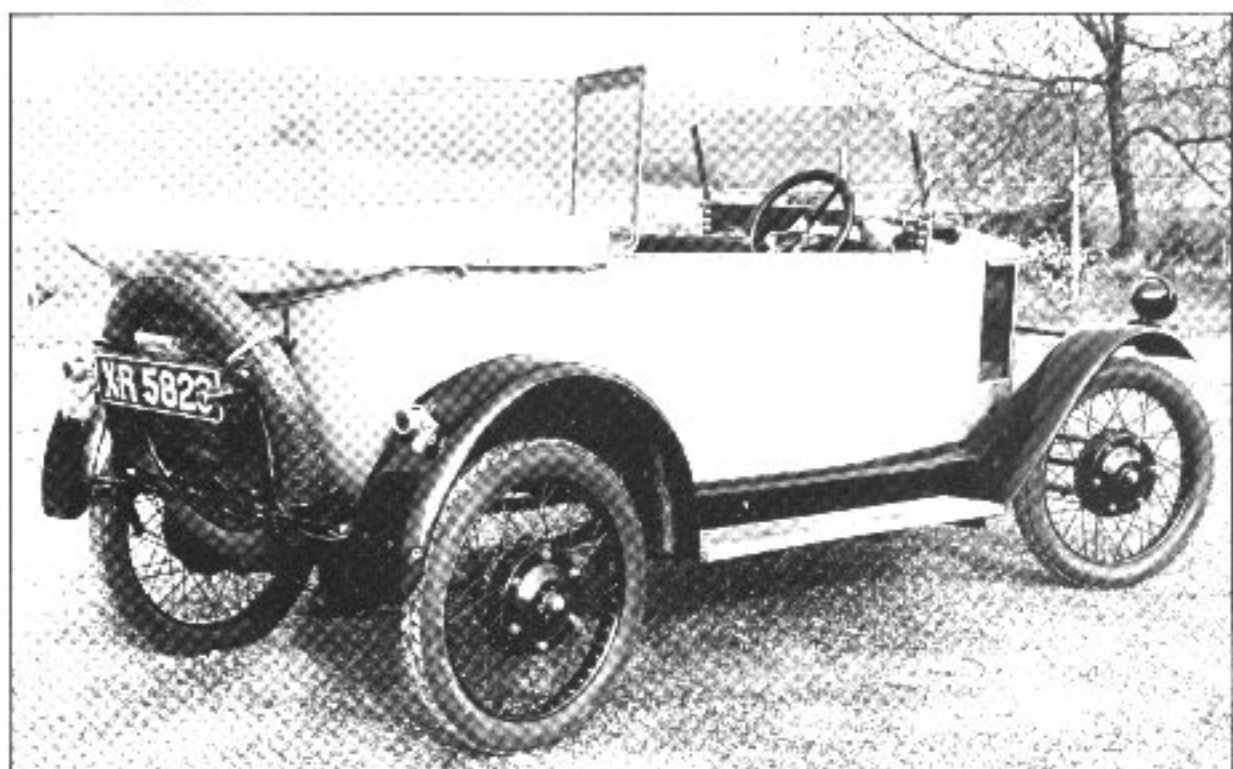
The engine, though, was in a poorish state and on being dismantled it was found that the left-side inlet valve was bent and the valve guide cracked, while part of the right-hand piston lower scraper ring was missing. A new exhaust system was made up, a new hot-spot manifold made, the non-standard dashboard clock was replaced by a genuine c-1923 Smith's – and then there was the matter of new ribbed rubber matting for the running-boards. "Yes," agreed the character at the rubber factory. "Certainly we can supply you with ribbed green matting. How much do you want?"

About six feet, suggested John – whereupon the chap on the other end of the 'phone fell about laughing. "I'm used to dealing with wholesalers who order the stuff in ten ton loads!" he explained;

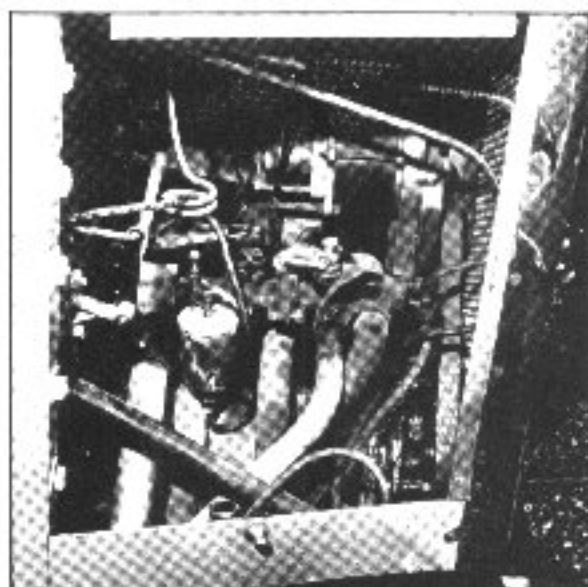
## A MATCHLESS PAIR



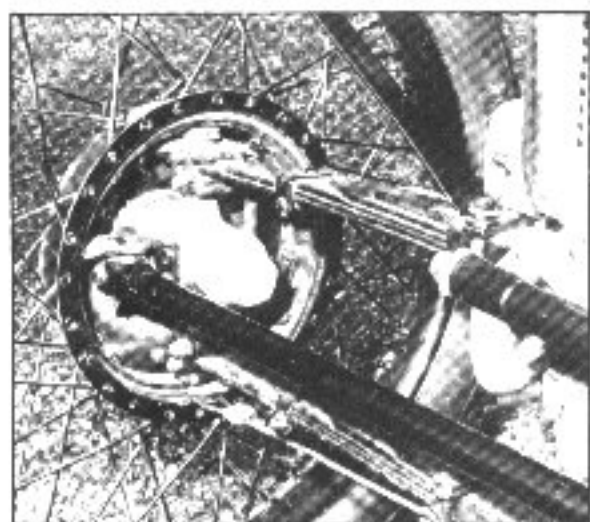
John Browne at the wheel of the Model K. Lack of a driver's door gives the body a very slab-sided appearance.



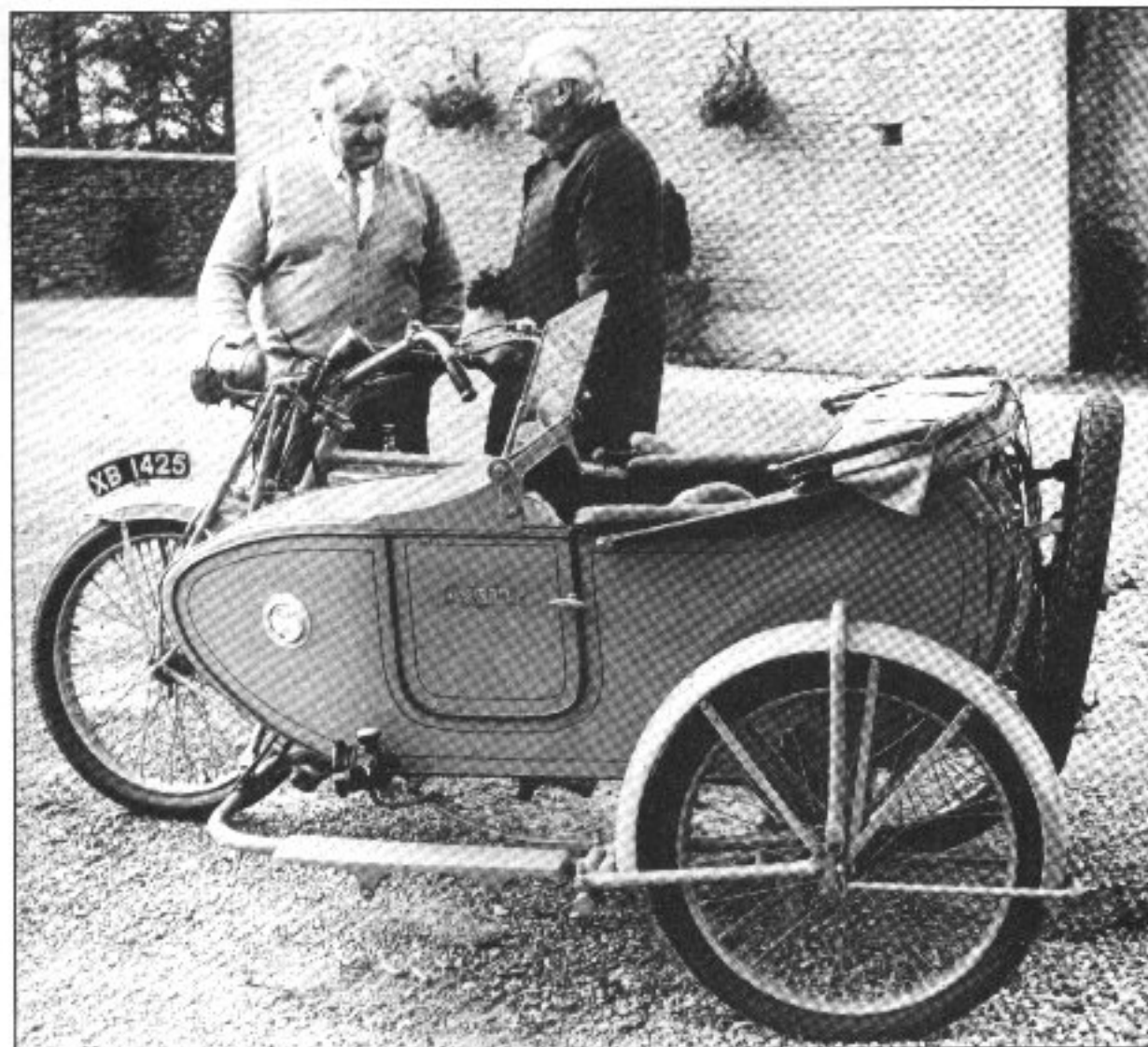
Wheel-at-each-corner layout makes for more than ample legroom. The spare wheel and luggage grid are virtually identical with those at the rear of the sidcar body.



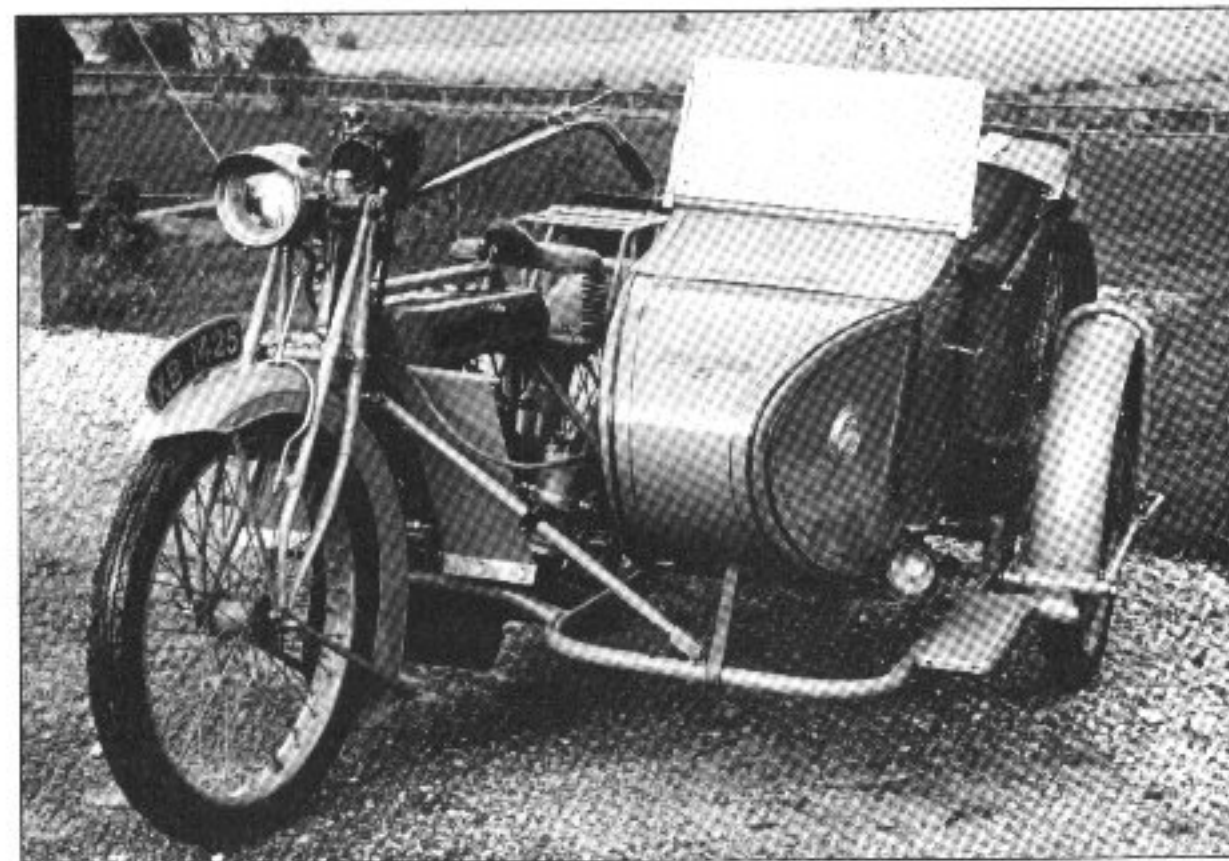
The engine is out in the open, under the front of the car, so minimum under-bonnet space is needed. The chain-driven Magdyno is prominent.



Unusual method of stub-axle construction was patented by Capt. Girling. There is one single brake shoe in each drum, arranged helically so that the ends are side by side. The fork-ended track-rod tube is non-adjustable.



The Editor listens attentively, as owner John Browne discusses a few finer points of the outfit. The magnificent sidecar is of Matchless's own make – and John found a map of the 1920 London Underground system hidden in the door upholstery! Note sprung sidecar-wheel trailing fork.



The Matchless sidecar is probably more comfortable than the car, but note the leather strap from the body nose to the sidecar chassis, to limit pitching.

but nevertheless, he did indeed provide the two strips of footboard rubber – green, to match the green enamel background of the car's Matchless "radiator" nameplate.

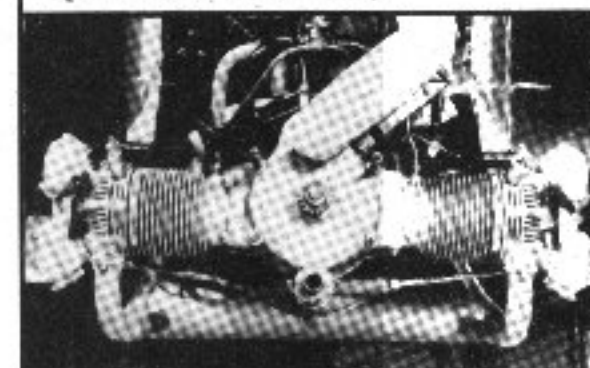
Reference to *The Autocar* for April 6th, 1923, reveals that the 1,249cc engine was 89 x 102mm bore and stroke dimensions, and drives through a single-plate light-alloy clutch fitted with Ferodo inserts to a peculiar three-and-reverse gearbox of Singer manufacture. Total weight is 10cwt 2qr (520+kg), top gear is 5.25 to 1, and on road test the vehicle reached a top speed of 50mph, and afforded an average of 40 miles to

the gallon. The prototype had been driven by Charlie Collier himself in the Exeter Trial which started from London on Boxing Day 1922, and it completed the route without trouble.

The contemporary *Light Car & Cycle-car's* description mentioned the fact that it "provides far more body space on a wheelbase of average length than is usually the case" (use of a transverse flat-twin engine, of course, requires only a very short bonnet), and certainly the "wheel at each corner" layout provides for exceptional legroom, for both front and rear passengers. Note, however, that everybody has to enter or leave by the



How the flat-twin engine is affixed to the front of the wooden-bodied Matchless car. There is no front axle, and the front wheels are carried on pairs of quarter-elliptic springs from a plate secured to extensions of the crankcase bolts. Note the Lucas Magdyno. In foreground is a spiral-band brake shoe.



Close-up of the Matchless Model K engine. Enclosed valve guides were very advanced thinking for 1923. Hole at base of crankcase is for kick-starter spindle, the kick-start operating on the pinion at the end of the engine shaft.

one-and-only door on the nearside, resulting in a very slab-sided appearance on the offside.

And although plenty of legroom is a good point, a short chauffeured trip showed that sizewise the Model K has very cramped accommodation. It was a blowy and very noisy ride, too, the mechanical clatter from the exposed, air-cooled engine being far above what a present-day car owner would accept. In its day, though, a flat-twin car was no novelty, and the Matchless had to battle for a place in the market against such offerings as the ABC, Rover 8, GN, and Belsize-Bradshaw (though the last two were vee-twins and the Belsize-Bradshaw had air-cooled heads but oil-cooled barrels).

But they were all on a hiding to nothing, anyway, for up in Birmingham one Herbert Austin had just produced what was, by comparison, the ultimate in light-car sophistication – the four-cylinder, water-cooled Austin Seven. And so the Matchless Model K died, almost as soon as it was born, but in its passing it did leave a legacy or two, for the cylinders, pistons, and overhead-valve gear (though in this case the valve springs were left exposed) were seen again in the Matchless Model M 591cc single announced in October, 1923 which, as *The Motor Cycle* commented "closely resembles the flat-twin used in the firm's air-cooled light car". So the work wasn't entirely wasted, after all. ■