

THE SHEFFIELD SIMPLEX MOTOR CAR

Though he became a Liberal Unionist, the 7th Earl Fitzwilliam followed in the footsteps of his Whig ancestors in relation to his interest in agriculture and industry and was, like them, known as a benevolent employer.¹ After an expedition to Cocos Island in the Pacific, in search of buried treasure in 1904-5, he threw himself into many different fields of activity; and (amongst other things) founded a company which made motor cars. His Sheffield-Simplex company operated from 1907 to around 1920, and had factories in Sheffield and Kingston upon Thames.

The origin of the Sheffield Simplex was the Brotherhood-Cracker car of 1904, which was constructed by the engineering firm of Peter Brotherhood Limited, and designed by Percy Richardson, who had formerly been with Daimler. The Brotherhood-Cracker works were in London; but Earl Fitzwilliam took over the company in 1906, moved production to Tinsley, in Sheffield and changed the name to Sheffield-Simplex Motor Works Limited.

At first, the future seemed bright. The *Pall Mall Gazette* for Thursday 14 November 1907 reported as follows:

SHEFFIELD SIMPLEX

Those who visited the Olympia Show two years ago will remember one of the sensations of it was the Brotherhood Crocker car, turned out under the able auspices of Mr. Percy Richardson, in the Brotherhood works. The firm of Brotherhood, I need hardly say, possesses a worldwide reputation as makers of what are probably the most powerful engines in the world in relation to their size—namely, the little compressed-air motors which are used to drive the deadly torpedo through the water. In these circumstances, as might well have been expected, the first Brotherhood car was bristling with new features, among them being engine control by means of a pedal which slides more or less horizontally across part of the front footboard of the car. There was also in those cars a novel means of changing speed, which seems me a decided improvement upon the present gate change. A novel carburetter was also then employed. Since then the car has undergone considerable revision, and its manufacture been moved to Sheffield. The name, too, has been changed to the Sheffield Simplex, only Mr. Percy Richardson and some of the old features of the design being left to remind one of the Brotherhood Crocker.

It was Fitzwilliam's ambition, from the beginning, that the Sheffield Simplex become known as the best car in the world; and for a time it was a bestseller. Various models were made, including (in 1908) an automatic version was

¹ Mee; Bailey.

manufactured the first of its kind to be mass-produced. There was a craze in those days for driving from London to Edinburgh in top gear to test the mettle of luxury cars and one of the new Sheffield-Simplexes was even driven from Lands End to John O'Groats in its single gear: the advertising arm of the Company boasted that this was 'the most meritorious and useful trial ever completed'.

Not everything went so smoothly, at least not all the time. The Sheffield factory experienced some labour disputes, as reported in the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* for Tuesday 29 June 1909

SEQUEL TO A LABOUR DISPUTE.

A case arising out of a strike at the Sheffield Simplex Works was heard at the Rotherham West Riding Police Court yesterday, when Job Reynolds, fitter, and Ellen Reynolds, his wife, of 37, Newburn Road, Tinsley, preferred charges of assault against George Guest, fitter and turner, 18, Strafford Street, Tinsley. Reynolds, fitter, of Tinsley, said that on Saturday, May 29, he left his house about 8 p.m. went to Rotherham, and on returning about 11 o'clock, got as far Town Street, Tinsley, where two men were standing at a corner, and a group at the opposite side. One of the two men made a remark, and complainant replied. Complainant now identified one of the two men. One of the pair said, "He's one of the Sheffield knobsticks."² Guest then struck him in the mouth. Complainant had previously asked whether they were alluding to him, and one of them said, "It seems that the cap fits." After Guest knocked him down, witness made his way off. Another man attempted to strike him with a bottle. Complainant was a stranger to Sheffield, and knew nothing of the trouble at the Sheffield Simplex Works. He could give no reason why the man should have struck him.

By way of contrast the *Sheffield Independent* for Monday 26 July 1909 reported that the Simplex had won a prize in a sporting event held in Derbyshire:

HILL CLIMBING AT GRINDLEFORD.

The Sheffield and District Automobile Club have usually been unfortunate regards weather for their hill-climbing meeting, and on Saturday morning there was every appearance of rain in the afternoon. Fortunately, however, the rain kept off and the trials were put through in satisfactory fashion. For the three events there were twenty-four entries, the cars ranging from an 8 h.p. single cylinder Jackson and Dion to the 34 b.p. four-cylinder Daimler and the 45 h.p. six-cylinder Simplex. There was only one absentee.

² Knobstick meant 'blackleg'.

The course, as usual, was from the lane end at the Fox House side of Grindleford Bridge, to the entrance to Longshaw – a short distance down Padley Wood—the course measuring just over two miles, with a very heavy gradient. The results given below do not necessarily mean that the car doing the fastest time was the winner, the performances having been worked out according to the complicated formula of the Royal Automobile Club.

The winner of the Harvey Foster Challenge Cup Class III (open to all members) was P. Richardson, [driving a] 45 h.p. Sheffield-Simplex.³

That autumn, a Sheffield Simplex appeared at the Paris motor show. *The Telegraph* for Saturday 11 September 1909 regarded this as a new phase in the history of the British motor industry:

SHEFFIELD-SIMPLEX IN PARIS

Mr. Percy Richardson, managing director the Sheffield Simplex Motor Works, Ltd., has been able to fix up a French agency, and bring away an order for six cars for quick delivery, one of which is purchased by M. Clemenceau, son the ex-Prime Minister of France, for his own personal use. The ability of the gearbox of the Sheffield-Simplex to manoeuvre through the Parisian traffic and also obtain exceedingly high speeds in the open that the long straight French roads are suitable for, and also to climb some of the noted French hills, such Chateau Thierry at top speed, was absolutely an eye-opener the French motorists who tried the car. The newly appointed agents anticipate doing a large business with these cars in France.

Even more exciting was the announcement of a new venture in the following year. The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* for Monday 31 January 1910 reported

Aeroplane-making in Sheffield.

The Sheffield Simplex Motor Company contemplate taking up the manufacture of aeroplanes and a monoplane has been purchased by the managing director

This was confirmed in the *Telegraph* on Tuesday 15 March 1910

Airships and Aeroplanes.

³ I have recently found evidence that a hill climb used to held on the steep hill by Hoover Stand, at least for motorbikes.

It is not unlikely that Sheffield will shortly include the building of airships and aeroplanes among its industries. The Sheffield Simplex Motor Company of Tinsley are considering the desirability of adding this interesting branch of business to their existing manufacture.

Earl Fitzwilliam had been chosen as Lord Mayor of Sheffield in 1909; and, in the following year, he was complimented on his hard work and dedication, both in the local mining industry and at the Simplex works. Indeed, according to a local alderman, whose remarks were reported in the *Hull Daily Mail* for Wednesday 14 September 1910.

SHEFFIELD 'SHOULD THANK GOD'

The Sheffield Master Cutler-elect, Alderman George Senior, yesterday laid the foundation stone of new Conservative club the Park district of the city, which, when completed, will cost over £2,000. Alderman Senior replied to the "extreme fighters" who had levelled untruthful remarks against the Duke of Norfolk and the Lord Mayor (Earl Fitzwilliam). There were, he said, no two busier men in Sheffield. The Earl, for instance, in addition to his ordinary busy day, made it a rule three days a week to go down a coal mine at six o'clock in the morning to carry out inspections. This he was able to do because he held the certificate of a mining engineer. Next he visited the Sheffield Simplex Motor Works, in which he was interested and then was ready for ordinary work. Sheffield should thank God for having given the city two such Lord Mayors as the Duke of Norfolk and Earl Fitzwilliam.

The *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* frequently sang the praises of the Simplex, as an example of the city's industrial excellence. On Wednesday 08 November 1911 the paper ran a report about the Motor Show being held at Olympia in London.

THE SHEFFIELD SIMPLEX

On the opening day of the show, the Sheffield Simplex gearbox-less car which was driven from Land's End to John o' Groats on top gear, and from London to Edinburgh on top gear, was purchased, and that at a premium. In many ways the models shown on this stand—and they are as handsome as any in the show—are unconventional. In the 25 h.p. Sheffield Simplex engine all the valves are disposed on the left hand side, and are of remarkable size, though with very small lift. The tappet heads are normally kept pressed up against the ends of the valve stems by encased helical springs, so that the operating mechanism is as silent as it is mechanically possible to make it. The most notable feature of this engine is its distribution gear. Both crank-shaft and

cam-shaft carry skew gear-wheels, the drive between them being transmitted by a worm which is at an angle of 45 degrees.

In the gearbox-less model, the 45 h.p. six cylinder, there is, of course, no gearbox in the ordinary sense of the term, in respect that that member is combined with the bevel and differential casing in the rear live axle, a feature which caused much criticism on its introduction by this firm, as the first of the English makers to take it up, several years ago, for it was said that it was bound be friable by reason of the unsprung weight in vital parts, whereas today something like over 40 per cent, of American-built machines, that are chiefly used for cross-country work where roads are not, and therefore under conditions of service much more severe than obtain in Europe, are constructed on much this principle, and the Sheffield Simplex cars have themselves answered so satisfactorily as to reveal the system to be quite correct.

On Saturday 10 February 1912 the same paper carried the following article. Note the locally patriotic boast in the subtitle:

SIMPLEX CARS.

The only Motor Car of Sheffield Manufacture.

THE SHEFFIELD SIMPLEX MOTOR CAR has the enormous advantage of being an actual neighbour of the greatest Sheffield Steel and General Engineering Works. Although the first of these cars was constructed but five years ago, in that short period they have gained a reputation which would have been thought fitting reward for life-time of effort. The most gratifying evidence of the uniformly high character of Sheffield—Simplex cars is the fact that they have already won the favour of Royalty. Nearly three years ago His Majesty King George V., then H.R.H. the Prince Wales, was graciously pleased to use a Sheffield-Simplex the occasion of a tour through the West of England, and the car was referred to as having added materially to the pleasure of the journey. In conveying to the Sheffield-Simplex Motor Works His Royal Highness' appreciation, the Comptroller and Treasurer of the Prince Wales was pleased add that he "could not remember a pleasanter, smoother or more delightful journey. The ease with which the car mounted even the steepest hills was remarkable, and there never was the slightest hitch, anything approaching a breakdown, during the whole time." Similar testimony has frequently been given by motorists. The "Autocar," unbiassed authority, has also unanimously expressed the opinion that regards motor-car construction "The Sheffield Simplex cars are a credit to British engineering. Nothing better done in this country."

In 1912 there was a great deal of confidence about the future of the company. *The Sketch* for Wednesday 5 June even encouraged other peers of the realm to follow 'the good example of Earl Fitzwilliam',

who has most pluckily and patriotically fostered and financed the automobile firm who are responsible for the production of one of England's admitted best cars to wit, the six-cylinder Sheffield-Simplex of 25-h.p. and 45-h.p. With a quartet of the above calibre behind it, the booming of the Sheffield-Simplex is an assured thing.

Alas, this success was not destined to continue. During the First World War, priority had to be given to air production and the Simplex Company now made some very strange-looking vehicles. For example, a transport van was adapted for the Russian Government (*Sheffield Daily Telegraph* - Thursday 31 December 1914). This vehicle had a chassis which was far too luxurious for military purposes, but it was nevertheless engineered and supplied 'to assist in the work of crushing the foe'. In July 1919, after the Armistice whose centenary we have just celebrated, the same newspaper included a photograph of an armoured car which was 'off to the front', and boasted that Sheffield was the 'WORLD'S GREATEST ARSENAL.'

After the War, Fitzwilliam's the Simplex Company began to struggle. The cars continued to be produced almost unchanged (except for a seemingly retrograde change from the bi-block engine to individually cast cylinders in 1921, and a simultaneous increase in engine capacity to a startling 7,777 cc), but the market did not take kindly to these monsters, and the Company gradually abandoned the production of cars in favour of lorries and an unusual fully enclosed motor cycle known as the Ner-a-Car, built under licence from an American company.

The exact date when the company ceased production is difficult to ascertain; but the *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* for Friday 26 March 1920 carried a notice of a Creditors Meeting to be held in the City of London in April, where formal liquidation was on the agenda, while stressing that 'reconstruction' would also be proposed. Evidently, the company was indeed rescued for a time, but on 9 February 1922 the same newspaper informed its readers that the Simplex works at Tinsley works had reduced its workforce by 300 the previous September and had now suspended work altogether, with the result that 400 employees had been made idle. Even now, readers were assured that this was not necessarily the end; but a careful reading of the subtext indicates that motor cars, as opposed to lorries and motorcycles were no longer being made at Tinsley:

The concern, with which Earl Fitzwilliam is closely associated, has a capacity for a yearly output of 500 commercial vehicles and 10,000 motor-cycles. Manufacture has been continued until storage room was fully occupied, and we are informed that the suspensions are due solely to production being in

advance of sales. It is stated that half a million pounds' worth of finished and partly-finished lorries and motorcycles are in stock.

Evidently, what had happened was that Fitzwilliam had at some stage moved the manufacture of cars to Finningley in Lincolnshire, and it was moved again to Kingston on Thames, later in 1922. After that date, the only references I have found to the Sheffield Simplex in newspaper reports relate to the sale of second-hand vehicles, though construction of the Ner-a Car motorcycle continued at Kingston until 1927.

Fitzwilliam's experience with the Simplex would seem to show that the British did not do as well during the so-called 'second Industrial Revolution' of the late 19th century as they had done during the first great Revolution of that kind in the 18th century. The 7th Earl's car company was a home-grown industry which did not last the course, and failed because other people did the same thing better, or more cheaply, or both. The same thing could be said of the British car industry in general. For example, take the Triumph Herald, which I remember driving as a young man. The last Herald was manufactured in the mid 1960s; and the Triumph marque now belongs to B.M.W.⁴

⁴ The photographs were taken by me at Kelham Island Museum in 2017 or 18; but there are many black and white photographs of the 7th Earl in a Simplex, taken for example at Wentworth Woodhouse.



