

AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING—

—BEING AN ACCOUNT
OF THE FIRST MOTOR
RACE RECORDED IN
THE R.A.C. ARCHIVES

By

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It is never very safe to assert that any particular thing was the first of its kind on record. Almost invariably some student of Sinitic history comes forward and proves that the object under discussion was in everyday use in China in the year 4000 B.C. However, I have never seen any claim advanced that the Chinese had anything in the shape of a Brooklands or Le Mans, so I hope I can state without fear of contradiction that the first motor competition of any importance was that organised in 1894 by M. Pierre Giffard, of *Le Petit Journal*, for "vehicles without horses, propelled by mechanical means." Even so, I am in danger of tripping up, for actually there was an earlier trial, staged by M. Fossier, of *le Vélocipède*, in 1887. As, however, in that contest only one machine started, a little steam quadricycle driven by the Comte de Dion, the event can hardly be classed as having been important.

The regulations for the *Petit Journal* trial were chiefly noteworthy for their extreme vagueness. The entrants had first of

all to undergo a preliminary test, in which they were required to cover fifty kilometres in four hours. Originally the time limit had been fixed at three hours, but this was amended, as the average speed thus demanded (10 m.p.h.) was considered too dangerous by the competitors. Those who came through this first ordeal successfully were entitled to start in the trial proper, which started from the Porte Maillot, Paris, running via Courbevoie, Saint Germain, Mantes (where the intrepid speedmen stopped for lunch) and Gaillon, to the finish at Rouen, a distance of about 80 miles in all.

The first prize was to be awarded to the car which seemed to the judges (the members of the staff of the *Petit Journal*, with a leavening of consulting engineers) best to fulfil the conditions of being "without danger, easily handled and of low running cost." Entries poured in, so that when the lists finally closed no less than 102 "horseless carriages" appeared therein. By some happy chance entrants were required to state the motive

power of their vehicles, though unfortunately working diagrams were not required. How valuable these latter would have been to-day will be realised when it is seen that of the cars entered, besides the petrol, steam and electric vehicles which one would expect, and those described as "compressed air," "semi-electric," "mineral oil," "hydraulic" and "high-pressure gas," which are understandable, there were others whose workings, always supposing they *did* work, are shrouded in mystery. Amongst these we have "gravity," "weight of passengers," "system of pendulums," "system of levers," "system of pedals," "electro-pneumatic," "combination of animate and mechanical motor" and "constant propulsion motor." Then there was an extremely versatile and obliging machine working on "steam, compressed air or gas," three more that were, quite simply, "automatic," and, lastly, the gem of the collection, which was optimistically described as "self-acting." Unhappily, when it came to the preliminary trials

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Above is the De Dion steam tractor, the first arrival at the finish at Rouen. The driver in the bowler hat is Comte de Dion and his companion in the "boater" is M. Georges Bouton. Although it averaged 11.6 m.p.h. and finished ahead of all its rivals, this outfit was ultimately excluded from the awards list for reason set forth in the accompanying article.