

# Adapting to the emergence of the automobile: a case study of Manchester coachbuilder Joseph Cockshoot and Co. 1896–1939

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[Adapting to the emergence of the automobile: a case study of Manchester coachbuilder Joseph Cockshoot and Co. 1896–1939](#)

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## Abstract

Today motor vehicles are ubiquitous. Yet at the end of the nineteenth century motoring was a new pastime, and there were only a few hundred motorised vehicles on the road. Many believed motoring to be a fad and motorists faced opposition on many fronts, from local corporations, the police and rural residents. Coachbuilders also had an uneasy relationship with this new technology. Automobile manufacturers and customers required coachbuilders' skills to build motorcar bodies. Yet the growth of the automobile began to affect the use of horse-drawn transport during the first decade of the twentieth century. This paper will analyse the relationship between the horse-drawn and the motorised vehicle in the UK during this transitional period before exploring the records of Manchester coachbuilder Joseph Cockshoot and Co. that survive at the Museum of Science and Industry Archive. This collection offers a rare insight into the dilemmas faced by coachbuilders in this era of transition. This paper argues that the emergence of the automobile was not a simple matter of technological progress, but involved complex relationships between manufacturers, coachbuilders and customers.

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## Keywords

automobile, coachbuilding, carriage, Cockshoot, Manchester, motoring

## Introduction

At the end of the century came the turning of the tide so far as traditional forms of transport went. It began as a tiny trickle but grew, as we all know, with fantastic speed.

John Norris, former Cockshoot's Director.<sup>[1]</sup>

The transition from carriages to automobiles was a messy, indistinct overlap of several decades, but to so many who lived through it, it seemed to happen so quickly. Then again, was this not in keeping with the automobile's very nature? (Kinney, 2004, p 298)

The first quote above describes the arrival of the automobile as an inexorable event. Slowly, and then more rapidly, sweeping away the horse-drawn vehicle into extinction. Traditional automobile scholars have also viewed the coming of the car as the inevitable replacement of the horse, debating only the speed of its rise to dominance (for example, Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinlay, 1995; Church, 1995). However, more recent automobile scholarship has shifted the focus away from automobile production and technological advancement by exploring the uses and users of the automobile (for example, Mom, 2015; Reid, 2015; Merriman, 2012). These scholars have highlighted the importance of cultural factors in the transition to the automobile, such as the social, sensory and emotional experience. Contradicting the first quote is the second, which highlights that the transition was neither clear, nor as quick as we might imagine. The focus on the 'victor' of this transitory period has led to a lack of exploration of the horse-drawn vehicle and its supporting trades, such as the coachbuilder or the wheelwright. More recently, scholars such as Kinney (2004) for the USA, and Tjong Tjin Tai (2015) for the Netherlands, have sought to address the imbalance by exploring how coachbuilders adapted to the arrival of the automobile.<sup>[2]</sup> They highlight the great disparity in the speed of coachbuilders to transition; the contradiction that coachbuilders were, on the one hand seen as natural builders of the new horseless-carriage with their woodworking skills, yet unsuited to the new demands of metalworking and mechanical engineering; and the varied impact of the automobile depending on the types of coachwork – high-class coachbuilders were affected much quicker than wagonbuilders. The aim of this study is to show how the transition of coachbuilders in this country generally fit with these findings from abroad.

This paper examines the archives of a Manchester coachbuilder, Joseph Cockshoot and Co., which are housed at Manchester's Museum of Science and Industry. The firm's extensive collection offers a unique perspective on the advent of the motorcar. To establish the context of the transition period this paper will start with a brief analysis of the use of horse-drawn and motorised transport in the UK from 1901 to 1921, before using the Cockshoot archives as a case study.

## The transitional period in context

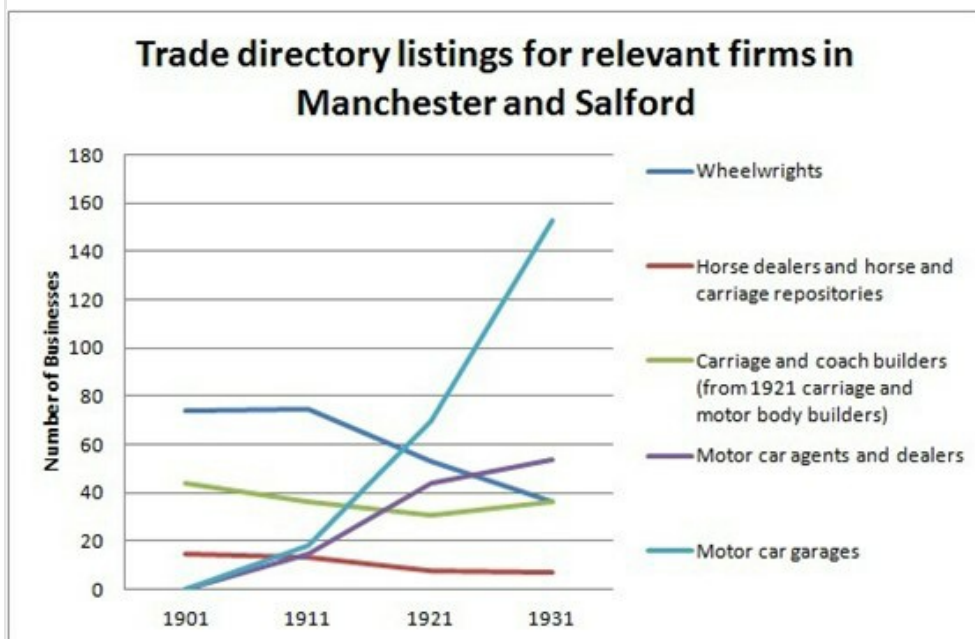
Georgano (2001, pp 3–41) provides an overview of the transitional period in the UK. However, Georgano's focus is on motorcar body building, thus the work neglects the rest of the coachbuilding industry, which included wagonbuilders, cartbuilders, wheelwrights and carriage component manufacturers. It therefore fails to provide an overall perspective on the impact of the automobile industry on coachbuilding, because its focus is on the private vehicle and not on public vehicles such as buses, taxi cabs, or commercial vehicles such as lorries. Because there is no authoritative work on the UK's carriage industry it is necessary to explore some national trends during the period of transition.

Diffusion of the motorised vehicle varied between private, public and commercial vehicles. This difference is noted by Barker and Gerhold (1993, pp 56–61), who argue that private and public motoring rapidly replaced horse-drawn vehicles, whilst commercial motor vehicles were much slower to diffuse. However, this conclusion is reached by comparing motor vehicle statistics and generally lacks a comparison with horse-drawn vehicle statistics.<sup>[3]</sup> Mom (2015, p 65), in an analysis of transport usage in France between 1863–1921, presents a much more balanced picture, taking into account both horse-drawn and motorised transport use, which shows that whilst private horse-drawn travel was on a steady decline it still accounted for more overall passenger kilometres than both bicycles and motor vehicles, even after the First World War. The speed with which coachbuilders adapted to the rise of the automobile also depended both on the location (urban or rural) and the type of coachbuilder – high-class carriagebuilder or wagonbuilder (Tjong Tjin Tai, 2015, p 191; Kinney, 2004, p 298). The variety of the coachbuilding trade is important as the arrival of motorised vehicles affected different areas of the horse trade in radically different ways. For example, high quality carriagebuilders like Cockshoot's noticed that their upper-class customers were buying automobiles as early as 1902, while wagonbuilders would probably have seen little difference in trade until well after the first decade of the twentieth century, and motorised commercial vehicle sales were very modest before the First World War, especially when compared to passenger vehicles (Barker and Gerhold, 1993, p 60).

Diffusion of the automobile started slowly, but rapidly increased into the 1920s. One would expect this to be mirrored by the decline in horse-drawn transport; however, there were subtle but significant variations. Changes can be tracked in the analysis of occupational data from the censuses of England and Wales in 1901, 1911 and 1921. In 1901, there were only 623 people employed as either chauffeurs, commercial drivers, or motorised cab drivers; this had increased to 43,094 by 1911 ([Anonymous, 1917](#)). Despite this rise there was an increase in the level of horse-drawn transport employment, from 347,655 in 1901 to 374,587 by 1911.<sup>[4]</sup> Motorised employment represented only about ten per cent of road transport employment in 1911, a relatively modest amount. If we explore these statistics further we can see some other interesting trends. While the number of chauffeurs grew to 23,151 in 1911, the number of coachmen and grooms employed only fell by 8,127 (to 67,228), suggesting that new automobile owners were not necessarily replacing their coach staff when hiring chauffeurs.<sup>[5]</sup> Numbers involved in horse-drawn commercial haulage had increased. This is mirrored by the coinciding increase in the number of horses being used for freight purposes ([Barker and Gerhold, 1993](#), p 60). There was a marked decline in public horse-drawn transport, as cabmen, grooms and stablemen numbers declined by a third by 1911.<sup>[6]</sup> However, this decline was also affected by improved electric tram systems in the cities ([Lyddon, 1987](#), p 180; [Barker and Gerhold, 1993](#), p 54). Statistical analysis is not as detailed for 1921, but by this point the ratio of horse-drivers to motor-drivers in the road transport industry was virtually 50:50. However, the census report noted that this ratio varied significantly by area. For example, while the South had many counties with a majority of motor employment, the North only had one ([Anonymous, 1927](#)).

Business listings in local trade directories allows for an analysis of the regional motor and carriage trade in the first few decades of the twentieth century. Figure 1 shows relatively little difference between 1901 and 1911, notable only for a small number of motorcar garages and agencies emerging, with only a small drop in associated horse and carriage trade businesses; however, between 1911 and 1931 there is an appreciable difference, especially in the rise of motorcar garages and the decline in wheelwrights. However, the number of carriage and coachbuilders stayed roughly the same throughout the period as they often became carriage and motor body builders, showing that coachbuilders were able to adapt and survive in the motor age. Many, like Cockshoot, became motor body builders, agents and garage proprietors.

**Figure 1**



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Data collected from the *Slater's Manchester and Salford Trade Directory*, 1901, 1911, 1921 and 1931

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This statistical analysis has been brief, but serves to demonstrate changes over three decades, from a gradual increase in motor transport before the First World War to an ever quicker increase afterwards. This eventually saw the decline of horse-drawn transport in all areas in the inter-war period, although the increase of motorised transport employment did not see a mirrored decrease in horse-drawn. This analysis has also demonstrated the varied speed of diffusion of private, public and commercial vehicles, which would have affected different coachbuilders in different ways.

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## Attitudes towards early motoring

In the late nineteenth century many believed motoring to be a fad and motorists faced opposition on many fronts, from local corporations, the police and rural residents and those with a vested interest in the horse trade. At the advent of the industry many coachbuilders were also sceptical. However, this attitude was not necessarily due to the threat posed to the established horse trade, but more to do with the unreliability, smell and noise created by the automobile. Simpson and Bodman, an early motor manufacturer founded in Manchester, focused on commercial vehicles because they believed the passenger vehicle to be unviable:

when as a carriage builder one of us has pointed out the defects of noise, clumsiness, and complication that he knew would never be tolerated... We do not think there is a village wheelwright even who would risk his reputation to say that any of the French or Franco-Coventry productions possessed the running – or standing – merits of a private carriage, in the sense that English carriage owners would accept it ([The Engineer, 1897](#)).

This view was also held by coachbuilders across the world. A Dutch trade journal noted that the automobile missed the grace of horse-drawn transport, an opinion also echoed in by American coachbuilders (Tjong Tjin Tai, 2015, p 191; [Kinney, 2004](#), p 267). A few British coachbuilders, such as Arthur Mulliner, involved themselves in the motor trade in the nineteenth century; however, these were exceptions ([Georgano, 2001](#), p 246). Despite this the popularity of motoring soon defied the automobile's inherent flaws as the experience of speed and the adventure of touring became a powerful driving force in the establishment of automobile culture ([Mom, 2015](#), Chapter One: 'Racing, Touring Tinkering Constructing the Adventure Machine (1895–1914/1917)', pp 59–113).

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## Introducing Joseph Cockshoot and Co.

**Figure 2**



© Museum of Science and Industry

Drawing of the High Sheriff of Lancashire's coach, built by Cockshoot

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Joseph Cockshoot set up as an independent coachbuilder in 1844, before forming a partnership with William Norris in 1851. By the twentieth century the firm had a long history of building quality carriages for Lancashire and Cheshire's upper-classes, as well as selling second-hand carriages. Examples of the firm's elegant and high quality work can be found in abundance in the company archives, including the carriage in Figure 2 which was commissioned by the High Sherriff of Lancashire. The firm also won numerous awards, such as the Premier Gold Medal at the Paris Exhibition of 1878. Cockshoot entered the motor industry between 1901 and 1902 by building a few motorcar bodies for clients, before opening a motor department in 1903. By 1907 they had auctioned off their remaining stock of horse-drawn carriages and accessories and were wholly committed to the motor trade, which brought them good business for the rest of their history. The firm became a private limited company in 1895 and public limited in 1959. For Cockshoot, as motor body custom declined they expanded motorcar sales and repairs for which they were successful well into the latter half of the twentieth century. The business was bought in 1968 by Lex Garages Ltd. and by 1970, after 119 years, the Norris family had ceased involvement in the management of the firm.

Cockshoot are an example of a coachbuilder successfully and rapidly adapting to the rise of the automobile and the decline of the horse-drawn vehicle, although as we have seen in the analysis above many other coachbuilders survived the period as agents and motor body builders. In the following analysis we will explore the firm's relationship with both customers and early motor manufacturers, the decision to set up the motor department, and set the firm's actions in context, both regionally and nationally.

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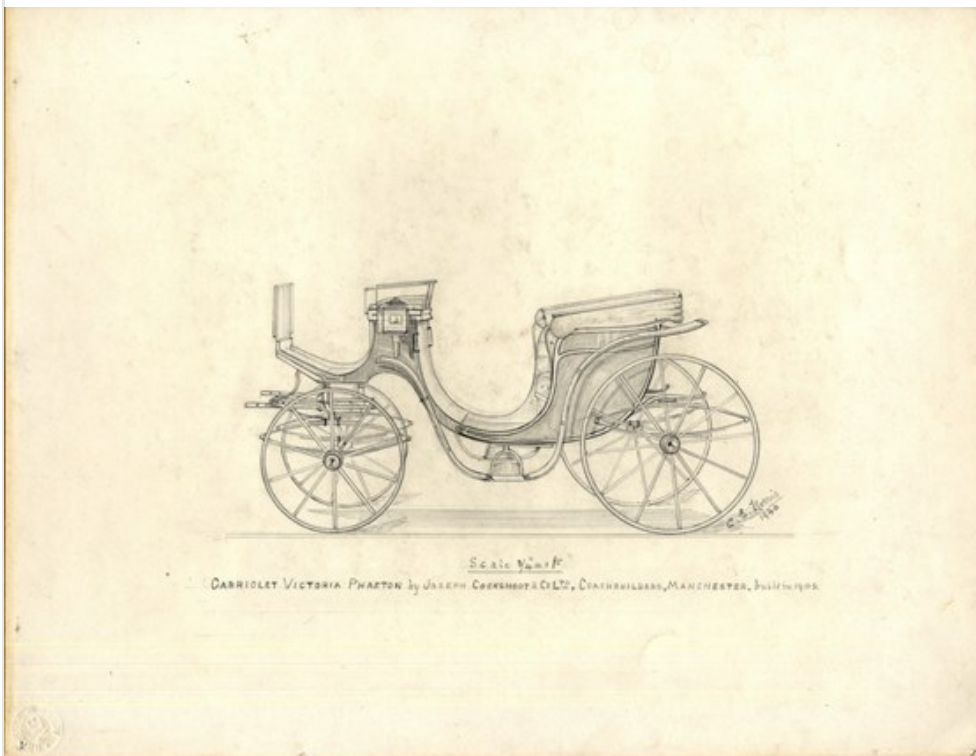
## Cockshoot's entry into the motor industry

A special letter addressed to shareholders on 23 December 1902 announced the decision that J. Cockshott and Co. was creating a Motor Department, with the purchase of new premises to support the operation. In the letter they reasoned:

It has been evident for some time past that customers of the firm have been purchasing motorcars in addition to their carriages, and it requires no great amount of argument to show that if that be the case their carriages, used alternatively with motorcars, will last much longer than if they used carriages solely.<sup>[7]</sup>

They then noted that although there was no change at the moment, there would be if the fortunes of the motor industry continued to improve. Their research involved visiting coachbuilders in London, Paris and the provinces to see how they had been adapting to the new motor industry. The letter suggests that ownership of an automobile without a carriage was unlikely in the period up until 1902. Indeed, the carriage and the motorcar could easily serve separate functions. Many coach-owners had several different carriages for different uses, with two and four wheelers, gigs, Broughams, etc. carrying a variety of different passengers and cargoes. Similarly, there were open top carriages for summer, such as in Figure 3, and closed cabs for winter (Watney, 1961, p 17). More recent automobile scholarship has emphasised both the unreliability and the adventuring qualities of the automobile during this period, used for touring and racing (Mom, 2015, pp 59–113). Carriages therefore might still be used to provide practical transportation, to the railway station, the church, or to visit friends. Indeed, as late as 1907 Rolls-Royce proudly advertised in *The Autocar* that: 'A private owner of a R.R. writes: "I may say my car is a perfect dream. It is so reliable that I have done away with my carriages and horses."' (*The Autocar*, 1907) The implication being that carriage owners were not replacing entirely with motorcars.

**Figure 3**



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Drawing of a Cabriolet Victoria Phaeton made in 1902. Carriage nomenclature was used for automobile bodies

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The decision therefore shows bold leadership from the Norris family, whose second generation were largely responsible for

running the business during this period. Despite this, the decision was challenged within the company; two of the six directors, John Ainsworth and Ezra Miller, voted against entering the motoring industry.<sup>[8]</sup> Ainsworth was a large shareholder, and Miller was a harness maker for the firm, representing a specific skill that was unique to horse-drawn transport. This highlights that coachbuilding firms were a collection of many different crafts. Trimmers, coachbuilders, carpenters and painters would still have a role, whereas harness makers and wheelwrights might feel threatened by the new department.<sup>[9]</sup> This split is highlighted in the United Kingdom Society of Coachbuilders membership ([Lyddon, 1987](#), p 73). Roughly 33 per cent of the workforce might be affected negatively, which would certainly explain the opposition within Cockshoot and more widely among other coachbuilders.

The venture was one vote from not starting. The internal loggerhead is remembered in a note on the subject written in the 1950s, by former director John Norris, working for the company at the time, 'There was, in fact, a sharp difference of opinion between the Directors, which persisted for many years'.<sup>[10]</sup> He expands on this in other memoirs: 'And again there was a tremendous amount of prejudice surrounding the motorcar and a serious maker found he not only had to break down this but also fight the vested interest. I remember my brother's own tough fight with his co-directors on Cockshoot's board to persuade them to take the trade seriously.'<sup>[11]</sup> Interestingly, but not perhaps unsurprisingly, this decision was viewed very differently by the company in later decades. The company's catalogue for 1924 announced 'it was but a natural development that the firm should take its place with the pioneers of the motor industry in this country'.<sup>[12]</sup> This insight into the firm's dilemma is a rare opportunity to challenge the assumption that coachbuilders naturally adapted to the change brought about by the automobile. Indeed, while Cockshoot both entered early and negotiated this difficult period with relative success, one wonders what the situation was at other coachbuilders. This entry period also highlights the problem with considering coachbuilders as a single trade when in fact there were several that made up the industry, each with quite different roles and prejudices.

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## Early dealings (1902–10)

Ainsworth and Miller might have been justified in their objections. Cockshoot leased a garage on Deansgate, known as 'The Arches' and negotiated the agency for the Velox, the Rex, the Northern Runabout and the Stanley Steam Car, all of which were initially unsuccessful for Cockshoot and led to a loss for the new department in 1903, which had to be offset by carriage trade profits.<sup>[13]</sup> However, the opening of the motor department in 1903 might have been viewed as visionary in hindsight. It demonstrates how difficult and unnatural it was for a coachbuilder to open a garage and begin with motorcar agencies. Cockshoot lacked expertise among the staff already employed at the firm and relied on those in Manchester who did. Fred Settle was employed as chief mechanic. Settle had been involved in one of Manchester's first garage ventures – the Manchester Motor Car Corporation – and had at least three years' experience as a motorcar mechanic.<sup>[14]</sup> With a good reputation as a coachbuilder Cockshoot were well placed to sell motorcars to their clientele. However, in the UK dealerships were almost always agreed with a territory arrangement, so picking the right car agency could be a tricky, especially with no experience. In this respect the firm bought the business and the rights to the agency agreements of Manchester dealer F. Wilkinson and Co., who had agencies for the American Stanley Steam Car and the petrol driven Northern Runabout.<sup>[15]</sup> Like Settle, Wilkinson also had a history in the local industry – for several years previously he sold steam engine components and steam-powered automobiles.<sup>[16]</sup> To demonstrate the difficulty of selecting agencies we only need to examine the number of motorcar manufacturers at the time. The North West alone had twenty automobile manufacturers, while estimates show there were around two hundred automobile manufacturers in the UK, not counting all the foreign manufacturers ([Beaven, 1994](#), p 46). Adapting to engineering and agency sales was not straightforward, a step that is often neglected. Automobile scholars such as Georgano (2001, p 3) and Foreman-Peck, Bowden and McKinley (1995, p 7) focus instead on coachbuilders' more natural transition to motorcar body production. For example, Cockshoot had already been approached by several clients to fit motorcar bodies prior to 1903 (Brooks, 1979, 09002).<sup>[17]</sup>

The initial poor performance did not deter the firm who soon established themselves with some more successful agencies and some regular motor body building work for local and international firms, including Renault, Rolls-Royce and Panhard. Despite the controversial and rocky entry into the motoring industry, Cockshoot ceased all involvement in the carriage trade when in October 1909 the remaining stock, including harnesses, whips, etc. were put up for auction.<sup>[18]</sup> Although 'coachbuilders by tradition' from then onwards, Cockshoot were solely engaged in the motor trade.

Despite Cockshoot's bold decision to enter the motor trade in late 1902, economically it was a difficult road to success. Indeed, John Norris in his memoirs put a large emphasis on the firm's crucial relationship with Renault, both as agent and motorcar body builder.<sup>[19]</sup> To demonstrate how complex and contradictory this period was for coachbuilders we only have to explore Manchester's other coachbuilders. Anne Cowburn was also a high-class, long established coachbuilder. Yet they did not enter the industry until 1909 when they announced in an advert: 'Finding that there is an inclination amongst our numerous clients to replace their Carriages with Motor Cars, we have opened and equipped...an engineering department and garage.' (*Manchester Courier, 1909*) However, there were also new firms like Hollingdrake of Stockport that set up business as early as 1902 specifically to manufacture motorcar bodies (*Clarke, 2002*). Going back to the opening quote from Kinney, it was both messy and indistinct.

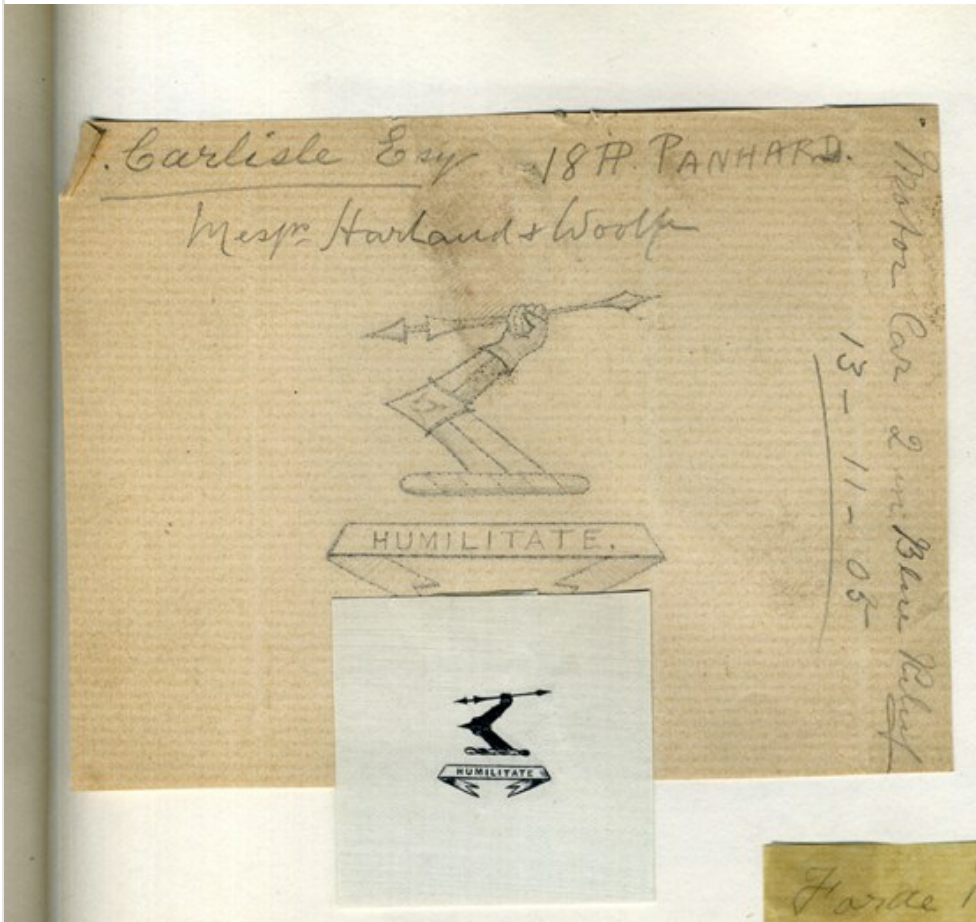
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## Relationships with customers

As seen above, Cockshoot was motivated to enter the industry after noticing the changing trends in vehicle ownership amongst their customers. Coachbuilders with upper-class clientele were more likely to take this step early (Tjong Tjin Tai, 2015, p 191; *Kinney, 2004*, pp 271–272). Examining Cockshoot customers and their early business in the motor industry has highlighted the importance of the relationship between the customer and the coachbuilder in the early motor industry. It is clear that Cockshoot's customers were upper-class. We can tell this from the types of cars they were buying, their titles and the number of motorcar bodies bought with crests. Between 1903 and 1906 motorcar bodies were commissioned by four knights, a lord, several high ranking military officers and many prominent Manchester businessmen. Of the first 55 bodies photographed by the firm, 28 had crests emblazoned on the side; many of these were also pictured with chauffeurs at the wheel. The use of crests was inherited from carriage ownership and the surviving Cockshoot book of customers' heraldry shows hundreds of examples, including Figures 4 and 5. Further demonstration of the class of customers was the facilities to 'stable' vehicles at the firm's Deansgate garage, which included sleeping quarters and a billiard table for chauffeurs.<sup>[20]</sup>



Figure 4



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The crest of John Carlisle, who bought a motorcar body from Cockshoot in 1905, with the Latin motto that translates as 'Humility'

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Figure 5



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The crest of the Ashworth family used on several carriages and cars bought from Cockshott. The motto translates as 'Love of country conquers'

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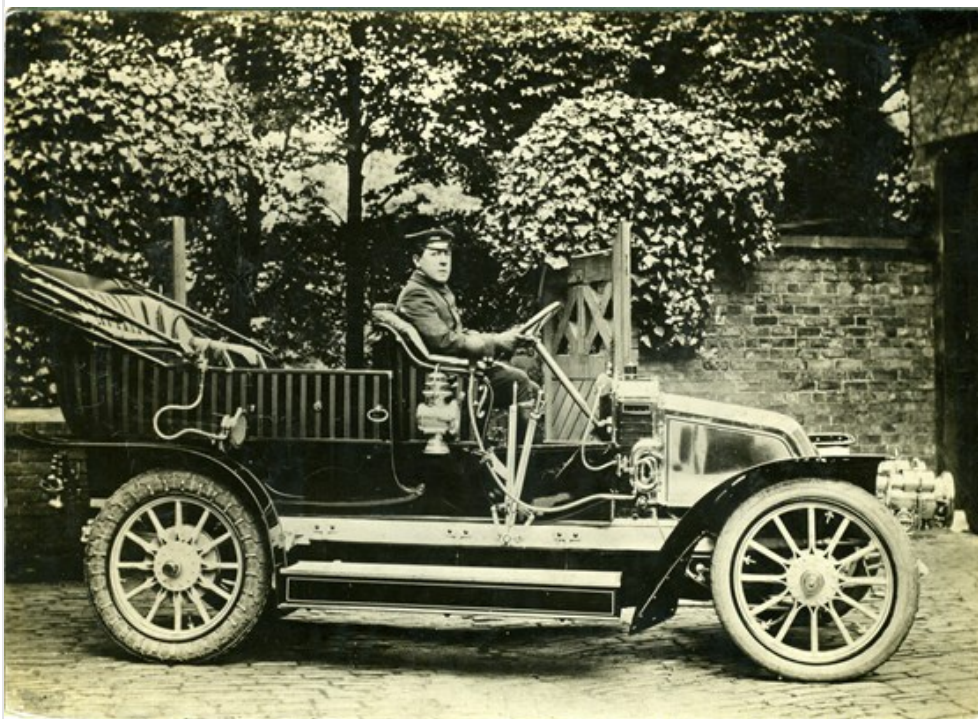
Carriages tended to last a long time and required very little maintenance especially compared to early automobiles (Georgano, 2011, p 3). The rate of progress of the automobile and its capacity to breakdown led to frequent new purchases for those who could afford it. Among Cockshott's customers were several repeating commissions, the most frequent of which were Mr and Mrs Ashworth, who returned four times to Cockshott for new motorcar bodies between 1903 and 1912.[21] The relationship between the coachbuilder and the customer was important in the making of custom motorcar bodies, which could include several visits to the works, and lengthy correspondence over the specifications of design (Brooks, 1979, 08025-080059). This could span several months, as often chassis were made after receipt of an order and coachbuilders would work with each customer to build their specific body, included choosing the interior decoration, the colour, the style of the body, whether closed or open, how many seats, as well as any other number of customer demands such as luggage space, or items like additional horns, as seen in Figure 6.

What is also noticeable is the number of customers that bought both carriages and motorcars from the firm. For example, the

Rice family used Cockshott either to buy carriages or for getting carriages re-painted in 1892, 1896 and 1897 and then commissioned motorcar bodies in 1906 and 1908. Similarly, G S Ball had work commissioned on carriages in 1889, 1890, 1893 and 1895 before purchasing motorcar bodies in 1905 and 1906.<sup>[22]</sup> There are many more examples, but they serve to confirm that the customer base of high quality coachbuilders gave them potential to move into motorcar body building during the Edwardian period.

Brooks' list of all the motorcar bodies manufactured by Cockshott shows that between 1908 and 1912 women made up over ten per cent of total motor body customers (Brooks, 1979, 08005). This was particularly high, especially compared to Cheshire registration data which shows that between 1903 and 1911 only 41 out of 3,658 vehicles were registered by women, a proportion of just over one per cent.<sup>[23]</sup> While further afield in Arizona, in 1915, only 5.5 per cent of automobile registrations were by women (Scharff, 1991). The customer records at Cockshott therefore support Scharff's assertion that there were more women drivers and buyers than registration statistics suggest, with the habit being for vehicles to be registered in the male name.<sup>[24]</sup> The range of female customers and the types of cars they were purchasing shows an interesting variety. While many women motorists were challenging gender assumptions by racing or driving large powerful cars, other upper-class women positioned motoring as a suitable pastime as chauffeur driven passenger-owners (Merriman, 2012, p 99). This complexity is certainly evident in Cockshott's female customers of the Edwardian period. For example, racing driver Miss Daisy Hampson purchased a 60-horsepower Mercedes in 1904 and a powerful 120-horsepower FIAT race car that had finished second in the Gordon Bennett race of 1905 (Manchester Courier, 1906). At the other end of the spectrum was Miss Ella Ross Cordingley Shaw's more sedate 12-horsepower Velux, bodied by Cockshott in 1903. While somewhere in between was Miss Parry's 20/30-horsepower Renault bought in 1905, as seen in Figure 6, with a horn for the rear passenger, presumably so Miss Parry could do some backseat driving, behind her chauffeur (Brooks, 1979, 08011).

**Figure 6**



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Miss Parry's 20/30-horsepower Renault with horn attached to the back seat, chauffeur at the wheel - YMS Cockshott Photograph Box 1, 1905

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## Relationship with manufacturers

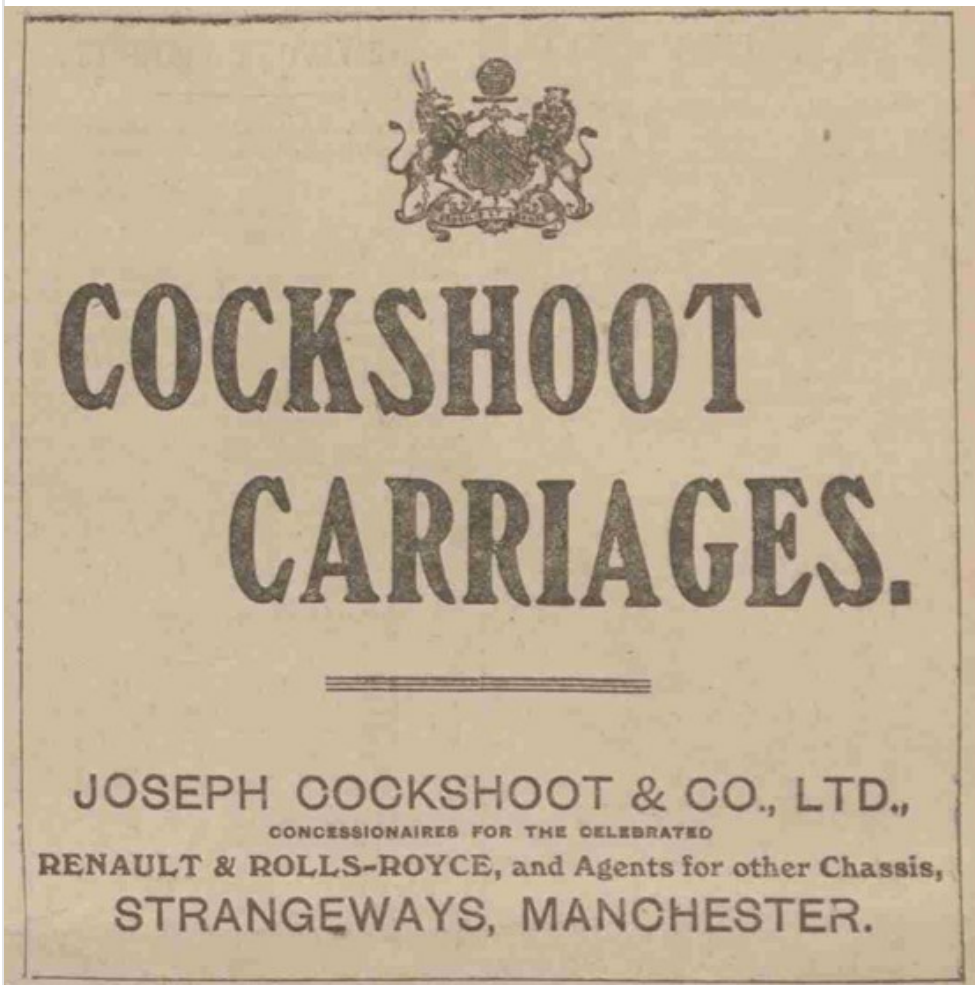
The relationship between automobile manufacturer, coachbuilder and customer was complex, the coachbuilder acting as an intermediary between the manufacturer and the prospective customer. Cockshoot's large established clientele of rich and upper-class carriage owners looking to purchase a motorcar would be an attractive proposition to a manufacturer seeking customers. Cockshoot, as the provider of the car body and as the agent for the manufacturer, would have been the first point of contact when there was a problem with the vehicle. Therefore it was not just the relationship between Cockshoot and its customers that had to be maintained. There was also the relationship between the newly emerging car manufacturers and Cockshoot, as the agent, that had to be established and built upon in order for both the growth and future survival of the new partnerships.

This becomes clear in the case of Mr R P Richards, who was sold a Rolls-Royce chassis and custom body by Cockshoot in 1911. Full correspondence survives between Cockshoot and Mr Richards and shows the level of customer support that Cockshoot gave, dealing with problems with the coachwork, creating bespoke solutions to mechanical issues, as well as offering to acquire new parts (Brooks, 1979, 08025-08059). Mr Richards' motorcar body came with 36 personal specifications, including: a small folding table in the rear, a portable luggage grid at back with strappings, silk curtains with tassels, tool boxes under the steps, a generally light body, well sprung, with seats not too upright. Cockshoot also provided him with spares for his Renault, which was being taken by Cockshoot in exchange for his new Rolls-Royce. Richards thanked Cockshoot for writing to Rolls-Royce to press them for quick delivery of the chassis, for which Rolls-Royce could not guarantee delivery before Easter 1911. The car was finally ready for Mr Richards' touring holiday on July 1911, the whole process lasting around six months. After delivery, a rattle developed which Cockshoot promised to rectify 'we shall...either send out a man to do what is necessary, or better still to correct the fault here if you will drive it in some day'.<sup>[25]</sup> Clear in the correspondence is the complexity of the work and the difficulty of dealing not only with bespoke orders but mechanical issues, after the sale.

After the short-lived agencies for American steam cars ended in 1903, Cockshoot struck up a good relationship with Renault that lasted several years. This relationship developed through personal contacts – the former Motor Department Manager Mr P Dobson left to work for Renault in London. It was this agency, and the custom body orders that came with it, that helped guarantee Cockshoot's success before 1914. Brook's analysis of motorcar bodies built shows that 36 of the 52 bodies built in 1906 were Renaults, and 78 out of 118 in 1907 (Brooks, 1979, 05008). However, this relationship ended around the time of the First World War, perhaps because Dobson left Renault to manufacture his own cars. A more lasting relationship was formed with Rolls-Royce, for whom Cockshoot would be local agents well into the middle of the century. While Rolls-Royce and Renault agencies fitted with Cockshoot's upper-class clientele, after the First World War their relationship with mass car producer Morris was to be of more importance in a period that saw the rapid growth of automobile sales in the UK.

Once Cockshoot had decided to open the Motor Department in 1903 they were very quick to advertise their involvement in the automobile industry, both in local newspapers and in automobile trade journals such as *The Autocar*.<sup>[26]</sup> Apart from J Walmsley of Preston, advertising as early as 1902, Cockshoot were the first North West coachbuilder to advertise in motoring journals (*The Autocar, 1902*). Interestingly, the firm continued to boldly associate with their carriage building history long after they had anything to do with carriages. For example, Figure 7, an advert from 1909, was printed after the final sale of carriage stock.

Figure 7



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Advert from the *Manchester Courier* 28 December 1909

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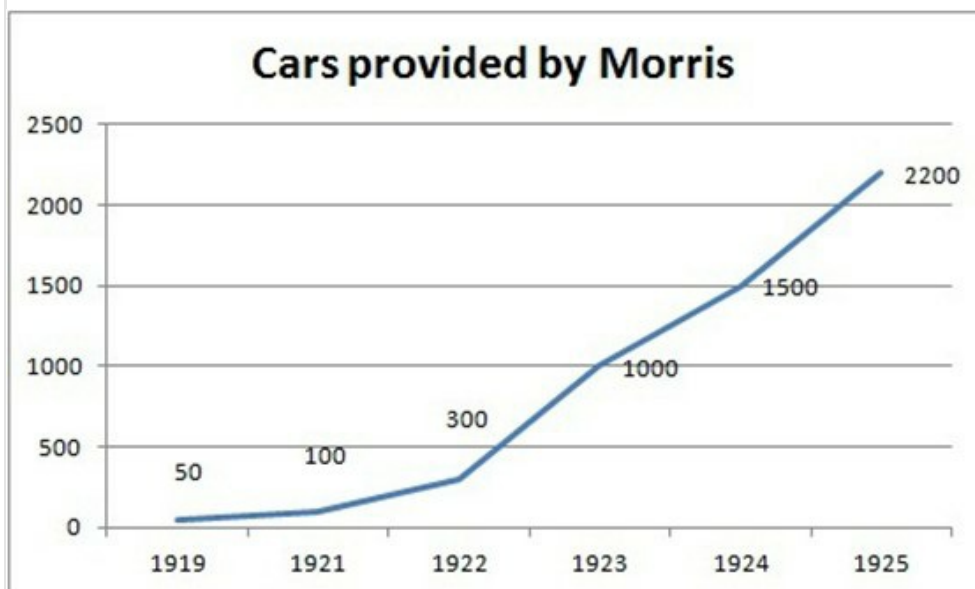
## Cockshoot in the interwar period: agency and sales

During the First World War Cockshoot produced bodies for Royal Flying Corps Crossley Tenders, a local motor manufacturer for whom Cockshoot had worked before.<sup>[27]</sup> However, in the interwar period the firm moved further away from coachwork and enhanced their role as motorcar agents. Up until 1914 Cockshoot produced 717 motorcar bodies, between 1920 and 1929 they produced 242, and between 1930 and 1939 as few as 68.<sup>[28]</sup> This follows a general trend in the coachbuilding industry as custom coachwork became less common with the majority of customers purchasing already finished motor cars. In the 1920s motorcar bodies were made as part of the production processes or outsourced to local coachbuilders. However, in the 1930s bodies began to be made from pressed steel, which saw a decline in coachbuilding skills (Lyddon, 1987, pp 585–586). There were a few exceptions. Firms like Hooper's in London built nearly as many motorcar bodies in the 1930s as the 1920s; however, after the Second World War they too saw a decline in custom body orders (Brooks, 1979, 09009).

Cockshoot continued their association with Rolls-Royce into the interwar period making the occasional body and acting as regional agent. However, key to their survival and prosperity was their relationship with Morris, one of the three successful mass producers of the era. The first agency agreement with Morris was signed in September 1919 for a modest fifty cars.<sup>[29]</sup>

However, as Figure 8 shows, the number of cars being supplied to Cockshott was as high as 2,200 by 1925. This boom in sales coincided with the rapid rise in fortune for Morris, who became Britain's market leader in 1923. It also shows the importance of gaining an agency for a popular car. A rise in car sales necessitated the opening of a new showroom in St Anne's Square in 1927, increasing their potential. The first Morris Minor was delivered to the showroom, where it was advertised as the first £100 car, in 1930. John Norris remarked from memory that 'within minutes the showroom was almost besieged by people wanting to see this new, cheap car' (Brooks, 1979, 09009).

**Figure 8**



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Data from Cockshott's surviving dealership agreements

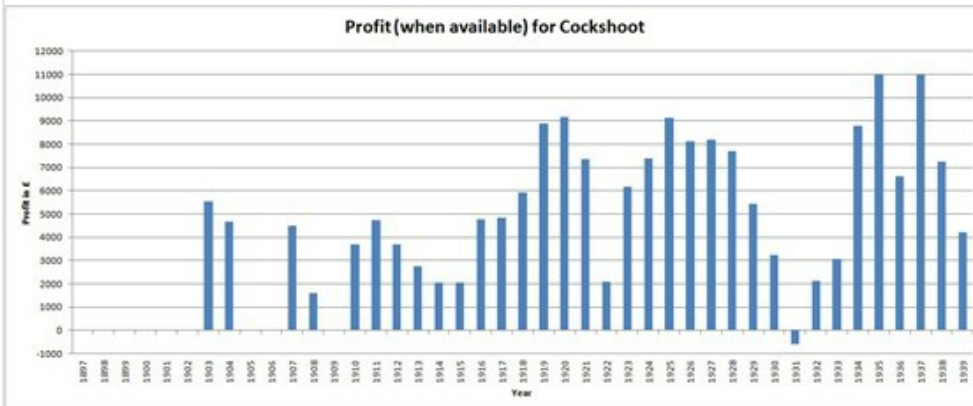
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15180/170803/018>

By 1924, with the number of cars taken by Cockshott rapidly increasing, the agreement changed to include much more detail for sub-dealers, including rates of commission and rules of appointment. Whilst Cockshott had the agency for East Lancashire and Cheshire, they were based solely in Manchester city centre until after the Second World War. So they relied on sub-dealers in the towns outside of Manchester. The agreement for the 1939 season described Cockshott as 'distributors', overseeing the appointment of 'dealers' and 'retail dealers'. There was a small fleet of nine demonstration models available and Cockshott and its partnered dealers were selling four thousand of the various Morris vehicles a year. The contract also included increased advertising stipulation. No longer was it good enough to put up a sign outside, as per the 1919 agreement; 10 shillings per vehicle sold had to be spent on advertising by various means, reflecting an increased control over dealer operations from the start of the interwar period.<sup>[30]</sup>

At the back of each completed agreement, there was a schedule or 'estimate of distributor's monthly requirements of vehicles'. What is most striking, when these are filled in, is the difference between the schedules of the 1920s and those of the late 1930s. In the 1920s there is clear seasonal variation, with Cockshott estimating higher sales of vehicles in the spring and early summer, with a big drop off in the autumn and winter months. For example, in the schedule for the 1923 season 43 cars were ordered for autumn and 102 for the summer.<sup>[31]</sup> By 1939 there is very little seasonal variation in Cockshott's estimate of requirements, with the biggest variation being 304 in August compared to 355 in May.<sup>[32]</sup> This shows how Cockshott catered for a changing car culture, as motoring became an all-year-round activity. The Oxford and Cowley models sold in the 1920s were seen as summer touring cars, whereas the Morris cars of 1939 were designed for comfort in all weathers, also reflecting the change from open coachbuilding to mass produced pressed steel enclosed bodies.

So quick was the decline in Cockshoot's motorcar bodybuilding that Brian Norris remarked of the 1930s that 'We just kept on the coachbuilding side of the business to keep the old men happy. If ever it had been subject to cost analysis, we would have had a fit' (Brooks, 1979, 09015). However, the success of motorcar sales and the relationship with Morris secured the survival of the coachbuilding firm. Figure 9 shows the profit made throughout the interwar period, with the exception of the period around 1930. Notable also is the larger interwar profits compared to those of 1903–1914.

**Figure 9**



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Data gathered from profit and loss accounts

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## Conclusion

This paper has challenged the idea that the move from the carriage to the car was one of simple technological progression, or that the carriage trade and use of horse-drawn transport rapidly declined soon after the arrival of the automobile in a predictable uniform fashion. The case study of a Manchester coachbuilder, Joseph Cockshoot and Company, has highlighted aspects of this transitional period, including some rather stark contradictions. Most striking of these was the end of Cockshoot's involvement in the carriage trade in 1907, two years before local rival Anne Cowburn had even opened a motor department to sell motorcars. While building motorcar bodies might be more natural for coachbuilding firms as demand increased for motorcars, the decisions over agencies and the entry into mechanical engineering was much more alien, and included substantial risk. A study of the firm has also shown the importance of relationships both with the customer and with the automobile manufacturer that went beyond the building of a motorcar body, including the ordering of spare parts, dealing with all kinds of customer requests, the arrangement of sub-dealerships, advertising, repairing and demonstrating the manufacturers' products.

Above all I hope this paper has impressed the need for a detailed study of the transitional period between the horse-drawn vehicle and the automobile in the UK that would complement those that exist from other countries. While this paper has looked at an upper-class coachbuilder due to the survival of particular archive material, similar case studies of wagonbuilders, cartbuilders and wheelwrights would almost certainly provide an interesting and insightful contrast which would further highlight the complexities of the era.

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## Tags

- [History of technology](#)
- [Science and society](#)
- [Nineteenth century](#)
- [History of transport](#)



## Footnotes

1. The Cockshoot collection, YMS 0197/8/5/9
2. There has been little research on the UK carriage trade. However, there are studies on other countries including Kinney, 2004, for the USA and Sue-Yen Tjong Tjin Tai, 2015, 'Building Carriage, Wagon and Motor Vehicle Bodies in the Netherlands: The 1900-40 Transition', *The Journal of Transport History*, Vol. 36:2
3. The exception to this is their analysis of London public transport (Barker and Gerhold, 1993, p 57) and their analysis of freight transport (Barker and Gerhold, 1993, p 61).
4. Ibid. pp 110–112
5. Ibid. pp 110–112
6. Ibid. pp 110–112
7. YMS 0196/3/6
8. As noted in YMS 0196/3/6
9. YMS 196/1/9/25 *The Story of a Centenary of Service to Travellers by Road*, 1944, unknown author
10. Norris's short typed history on the Deansgate 'Arches' – YMS 0197/3/3/2
11. YMS 0197/8/5/9
12. Catalogue for Wembley exhibition 1924, YMS 0197/6/2
13. Advert for these first appears in *The Autocar*, 8 February 1903
14. YMS 0197/3/3/2 The Manchester Motor Car Corporation was formed in 1899 and was probably the first garage in Manchester, *The Autocar*, 18 February 1899
15. YMS 0197/3/3/2
16. There are numerous small articles on F. Wilkinson and Co. in the early trade journals. For example, *The Motor-Car Journal*, 15 March 1902, p 33.
17. In 1901 and 1902 the firm had made seven motorcar bodies – Brooks, R, 1979, *Motor Car Coachwork by Cockshoot of Manchester*, (Manchester: M. Sc. Dissertation) 09002. Dissertation held at Museum of Science and Industry: YMS 1996/535
18. YMS 0197/6/3
19. YMS 0197/3/3/2
20. YMS 0197/3/3/2 Newspaper cutting from 1903
21. YMS 196/5/1/1
22. YMS 0196/5/1/9 – The surviving book of heraldry documented repeated jobs
23. Forthcoming publication by C Horner on Cheshire vehicle registrations
24. Ibid.
25. This correspondence was recorded in Brooks, (1979) 08025-08059; it is part of a private collection.
26. For example, *Manchester Courier*, 1 August 1903 and *The Autocar*, 7 February 1903, advertising supplement, p 17
27. YMS 196/5/2/1/4
28. Brooks (1979) 09002, graphed the number of bodies produced (data taken from complete records of bodies YMS 0196/5/1/1)
29. YMS 0196/1/2/5
30. YMS 0196/1/2/12
31. YMS 0196/1/2/7
32. YMS 0196/1/2/12

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19. *The Engineer*, 18 June 1897, p 625
20. Watney, M, 1961, *The Elegant Carriage* (London: Allen), p 17

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