

'Officer Quality' Transport

A number of notable events occurred in 1909:

- Ernest Shackleton and three Australians expedition members reached the South Magnetic Pole.
- Andrew Fisher resigned as Prime Minister, with Alfred Deakin being sworn in as his replacement on Wednesday 2 June.
- HV Mc Kay designed and built one of the first disc cultivators.
- Prince Foote, ridden by W.H. Mc Lachlan, won the Melbourne Cup.
- The song of the year was 'I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now'.
- Mr. William Officer of Mount Talbot Estate at Toolondo near Horsham in Western Victoria, purchased a brand new green Renault AX from Kellow Falkener in Melbourne for the sum of £275.

Recently I was privileged to be able to interview Kevin and Beth Officer at their home in Tewantin near Noosa. Kevin is the current owner of the Renault AX and is the grandson of William Officer, the original owner. The AX has been owned by the Officer family for all of its ninety six years! Kevin and Beth were able to provide a lot of details of the fascinating history of the AX.

In 1909, the Commonwealth Government initiated the old age pension for men over 65 and women over 60. The pension was £26 per annum, but pensioners were allowed to earn up to another £26 per annum without losing the pension. While the pension was probably only just enough to survive on, it illustrates the fact that motoring in 1909 was for the 'well to do'. The Renault was not an expensive car by the standards of the day, yet it cost over ten times the annual value of the age pension! The Officer family were obviously 'well to do', but they were practical hard-working country people too. The AX was not purchased as a show pony - it was purchased to work and work it did too!

The original registration number was 'Vic 0714'. It was the 714th car registered in Victoria, and the 0714 suggests that the Victorian authorities did not expect that more than 9999 cars would ever need to be registered!

Seventy Years Hard Labour! After driving the AX home to Mount Talbot Estate, it was used for trips to Horsham and other local towns, visiting neighbors and before too long for tasks around the farm such as checking windmills, feeding sheep, rounding up sheep etc – all of the duties which many people today think are impossible without a four wheel drive vehicle. The Renault did it all, year in, year out without missing a beat. It could get to most areas of the Officer's 14,000 acre property, and if it got bogged in wet weather, it was easy to push out. In fact, Kevin remembers that the AX was a lot easier to get out of a bog than some of their tractors! As well as the more mundane usage, the Renault was used for occasional trips to Melbourne. This 420km trip over some atrocious roads took a full twelve hour day. Motoring was an adventure in those days!

The AX soon endeared itself to the Officers because it was reliable, it always started, it didn't use too much fuel and it was easy to drive. But the AX had some limitations. It was only a two seater, although it would accommodate two adults and one child and perhaps their dog. Later in the life of the AX, Kevin Officer's dog 'Dook' would love to ride with him around the farm in the AX, to the extent that some of the locals started calling Kevin 'Dook' as well!

In 1910 the Officers purchased a large Wolseley car which was generally used for longer trips with the whole family and the Renault was used for the hard work around the farm, and for the shorter trips to Horsham and other local towns. In many cases with veteran cars, they were replaced after a few years when newer and better models became available, but not the Officer's Renault. They found that it was so useful that they just kept using it and it just kept going on and on and on without fail.

William Officer may have worked the AX hard, but he did look after it. He serviced it regularly and always kept it under cover at night. However, if it was raining and he needed to go somewhere, he would use the Renault without any thought that getting it wet could possibly harm such a tough little car!



In 1924, William Officer died and left the AX to his son, Errol Officer. However, for the AX, life just went on as before. After over twenty years of daily use, the Officers decided that the AX could be made even more useful by fitting an extended tray at the rear. The photo to the left is thought to have been taken in about 1945, when the AX was still in daily use as a vital part of the operation of the sheep and wheat property.

Up to 1943, the AX had needed no major maintenance. Some of the springs had been replaced after they broke when the AX hit large rocks or slid down deep gullies. Also the tyres had been replaced, but apart from that and routine oil changes and greasing, nothing more had been necessary.

In 1943, the AX had its first and only re-bore, with new pistons, rings and gudgeon pins fitted. After that it continued its duties as before until a crisis arose in about 1946. The tyres were worn out and

no replacements were available in the AX's size.

The AX was far too useful to abandon for such a small thing, so the original wheels were cut off and sixteen inch wire wheels grafted on. With new wheels and tyres, the AX resumed duty as if it was a new car. Around this time, the AX was repainted with a dark beige colour replacing the original green, which by now was very chalked and faded.

Well Earned Praise The AX came to the attention of the 'Horsham Times', who published an article about it on 3rd February 1950 under the impression that it was a 1907 model. The headline read "**Renault (43) Going Strong**". The article continued.....

'Horsham's first car is still going strong and will continue for many years on present indications although it has been in constant use since it was bought by Mr. William Officer of Mount Talbot 43 years ago.

It is a 1907 model Renault and although estimated to have covered 250,000 miles (Ed. =400,000km), has never had a new part, except when it was re-bored seven years ago.

The Manager of Charles Motors (Mr. Frank Charles) said that the metallurgy reflected in the production of the Renault was equal in quality if not better than its present day counterparts. The car has its original crown wheel and pinion, bearings, magneto, valves, valve springs and has the same silencer, 43 years old..... It has never had a windscreen and is fitted with gas lights, hand rails and a sight feed for oil. The motor starts very easily on the first few turns, even in cold weather, according to Mr. Officer.The owner says that it has been used and is still being used for just about everything that can be done with a car. **It has never broken down and, as Mr. Officer puts it, "You can't knock her out".**

He remembers when the car was purchased in Melbourne, the salesman, Jimmy Beggs, told him that anyone could drive it and that it would never wear out. Beggs was a Frenchman and a famous racing motorist during that period on the Continent. He took them for a demonstration drive in South Melbourne. Beggs claimed that the Renault was foolproof and so far it has lived up to his prophecy.

The present owner has an affection for the old bus and in recent years turned down an offer of £500 from an oil company. "I wouldn't sell it for a thousand pounds" he said.

The article had plenty more to say in a similar vein. Everybody seemed to be amazed that a forty year old veteran could have required so little maintenance and continue to provide reliable transport! What would they have said if they had known that this would continue until the present day?

New 'Make-up' for an Old Lady! So, what happened to the car? Where is it today? Well, it wasn't affected by all the praise that it received. It just continued on doing its duties around the farm with the occasional 'outing' to Horsham or neighbor's places. In



1976 Kevin Officer, grandson of William Officer inherited the car from his father Errol Officer. Errol Officer had noticed that Kevin had taken a real interest in the AX and thought that he was the one most likely to look after this most faithful family servant! Kevin Officer engaged Wes Atwell of Horsham to carry out a cosmetic restoration of the AX. The body was restored to the original configuration and brush painted in the original green, using the methods of the period of construction. The seats were re-upholstered and it was generally restored to 'as new' condition. It was restored, but not 'over-restored'. No mechanical work was carried out because none was found to be necessary! The only exception was the wheels, which were not original. Kevin Officer searched the Mount Talbot property for the old wheels, but to no avail. Wes Atwell found some visually similar Ford wheels from the same period, and these wheels are on the car today. They have twelve spokes and look very much like the original wheels in the 1945 photograph.

The photo to the left shows the AX beside a lake in Horsham in about 1980, with three of Kevin and Beth's sons.

In 1977, Kevin and Beth moved to live in Horsham and the AX came with them. Although the AX spent most of its time in the garage under the house, it was run regularly and remained reliable and easy to start. It was a great hit with visiting children

and guests, who all loved to be taken for rides in 'the funny old car'. Kevin also drove it in the Horsham show parade.

Retirement In 1981, Kevin and Beth Officer moved to Sunshine Beach, near Noosa on Queensland's Sunshine Coast. This was a lifestyle move rather than retirement for them, but what of the AX? The AX was stored in the garage and was still taken for the occasional run. However, Kevin thought that the AX was a beautiful car which really deserved more attention. One day, Beth came home and noticed that the AX was not in the garage as usual. She wondered where it was until she walked into her lounge room. There in the middle of the lounge room was the AX! Beth was initially not happy, but she came to accept that it was a good conversation starter when they had visitors. In fact, Kevin would often invite visitors to sit in it while they had drinks. The AX was proving to be useful again, but not in the usual way!

The AX stayed in Kevin and Beth's lounge room for seven years until they moved to their current house at nearby Tewantin. The AX was again provided with a place in the garage and was taken for the occasional run around the local streets. Again, it was a great favorite of children and visitors.

The AX in 2005! The AX still starts easily. It started first time even when it had not been run for seven years. Beth Officer says that she can start it without any problem and that it usually starts with less than one turn of the crank handle. Kevin says that the gearbox has no synchromesh, but is easy to use once you get the knack. Kevin is not frightened to let visitors and friends drive the AX and he says that some have given the gearbox a hard time until they learnt how to use it. The gearbox doesn't seem to mind and shows no signs of ninety six years of use and abuse.

Kevin says that the AX has some limitations in today's traffic. It still has the original acetylene lamps, which restricts night-time driving. It has no windscreen, so it is not good to drive on a cold or wet day. The 'new' wheels are a slightly larger diameter than the original ones and this has increased the turning circle. Still, it has never broken down, never been in an accident and it has

never needed extensive mechanical repairs. It has always 'earned its keep'! **Perhaps Jimmy Beggs was right after all – it will never wear out!**

For a car with such history and 'provenance', it seems a shame that the AX is now up for sale. Kevin and Beth say that they have four sons who are all equally deserving and it would be unfair to give the car to just one of them and impractical to give it to all four. The car is so good and with so much history attached to it, it's a wonder that it is not listed for preservation by the National Trust!

You can see the AX on display in Norris Motor Group European showroom in Lutwyche Road, Windsor in Brisbane. As you can see from the photographs below, the AX has a patina of age, but is still in magnificent condition. She is a beautiful lady for a ninety six year old. All she needs is a new owner who will work her hard for the next ninety six years!



If you are as impressed with the AX as I am, and can find a lazy \$42,000, you should contact Kevin Officer without delay on Ph. 07 5449 0568. For \$42,000 you will be purchasing history as well as a faithful car well suited to veteran car rallies and plenty of runs around the block just for the hell of it. Also, if you are a farmer and are sick and tired of four wheel drives that are worn out after only ten or twenty years

Words by Phil Harrison, Photos by Kevin Officer (historic) and Phil Harrison (recent)