



Guy Smith, *Good roads near Beachport S.A.*, 1 June 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 12.5 x 9.5cm, UMA 2002.0003.00553.

# **Russell Grimwade's Motoring World**

**Miegunyah Student Project Award 2023**

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## Introduction

I was delightfully surprised when I discovered Russell Grimwade's Melbourne–Adelaide road trip photos among his wealth of colonial art collections. Even from a contemporary view, motoring seems way more rebellious and carefree compared to his other scholarly hobbies and interests in the early 1900s: photography, botany, cabinet-making, collecting, etc. This research originates from my obsession with Formula One racing as well as my appreciation of art and beauty in manmade machinery from a curatorial perspective. For me, the seemingly repetitive process of racing along the same track for 90 minutes embodies not only a pursuit of speed but also a test of competing mentality and race craft. Looking back, what was motoring like in Victoria at the time? And why was Russell drawn to cars? Perhaps most importantly, what personalities and stories can we gather from Russell through piecing together these historical fragments? By combing through photographs, news articles, and Russell's personal effects in the Grimwade Collection and Archives, this report sheds light on Russell Grimwade's motoring world.

## Early Motoring in Victoria

With the surge of technological innovations in motor cars at the beginning of the 20th century, Russell embraced this era with curiosity and an inquisitive mind. He was fascinated by the technological developments in cars in regard to the increased complexity and reliability.<sup>1</sup> In 1903, aged merely 24, Russell became one of the founding members of the Automobile Club of Victoria (ACV), later known as the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV).<sup>2</sup> Highlighted in the proposal, the club was conceived by enthusiastic motorists to promote automobilism and enjoyment.<sup>3</sup> Such objects shaped the outlook of early motoring contests in Victoria. In 1904–06, the ACV organised various motoring contests and races, one of the popular ones was the hill climbing contest. It offered social and entertaining opportunities for the club members. Even the then Victorian governor, Sir Reginald Talbot, participated in the 1904 competition at Heidelberg, albeit on horseback.<sup>4</sup> Russell, accompanied by Harley Tarrant, participated in the 1905 contest at Wheeler's Hill and achieved a satisfying result with a 20 h.p. 4-cylinder Tarrant car.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Poynter, 'A Colonial Inheritance,' in *Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade*, eds. John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2015), 18.

<sup>2</sup> 'RACV (Royal Automobile Club of Victoria),' eMelbourn, published July 2008, <https://www.emelbourne.net.au/biogs/EM01219b.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Susan Priestley, *The Crown of the Road: The Story of the RACV* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983), 6–8.

<sup>4</sup> 'Motor Notes,' *Table Talk*, 2 June 1904, 24, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article145847078>; Benjamin Thomas, *Pride of Place: Exploring the Grimwade Collection*, ed. Alisa Bunbury (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2020), 29.

<sup>5</sup> 'Motoring and Cycling,' *Table Talk*, 27 July 1905, 30, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article145939356>.

Apart from hill-climbing contests, reliability tests, known as the Dunlop Cup, played a pivotal role in promoting the acceptance of automobiles in Australia. The first Dunlop Cup was organised in 1905 by Mr. Harry James of the Dunlop company, with the goal of demonstrating that automobiles were not mere novelties but could withstand Australia's challenging road conditions.<sup>6</sup> At that time, there were fewer than 150 cars in Australia.<sup>7</sup> The first test took place in February, during the Australian summer, presenting participants with extreme dust, high temperatures, rough unpaved roads, and a lack of service stations.<sup>8</sup> This made the test particularly gruelling. The course ran from Sydney to Melbourne, and a second Dunlop Cup was held later that same year in November. In the end, five participants, including Russell Grimwade, were collectively awarded the 1905 Dunlop Cup.<sup>9</sup> Together, they played a significant role in demonstrating the feasibility of motor travel in Australia.

However, most other motor races organised by the ACV at the time were more participant-friendly and emphasised control and handling of motor cars. In 1906, two motor races took place at Aspendale Park, the world's first purpose-built motor racing track.<sup>10</sup> Both events attracted huge crowds.<sup>11</sup> The competitions included a potato race, lemon slicing competition, car balancing test, and tortoise race, testing driving skills, precision, and balance. Russell won a car balancing test on a see-saw during the January Aspendale race and a potato race in July (Figure 1).<sup>12</sup> In a potato race, the front seat passenger was equipped with a pole with a nail or spike in the end.<sup>13</sup> The object was to skewer potatoes that were placed on the ground and bring them into the vehicle while the car was still in motion. The winner was the one who retrieved the most potatoes within the shortest time. In a car-balancing test, the car needed to drive onto planks over a log and remain stationary and balanced with both ends of the planks off the ground. In the event of a tortoise race, the driver was required to drive the vehicle over a predetermined distance at the slowest possible speed without actually stopping. Judges may occasionally walk alongside to

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Hutton, 'Melbourne to Rally to a Car Rally,' *The Argus*, 12 August 1939, 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article11251794>.

<sup>7</sup> Hutton, 'Melbourne.'

<sup>8</sup> Hutton, 'Melbourne.'

<sup>9</sup> 'The Motor Contest,' *Yass Evening Tribune*, 30 November 1905, 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article248629972>.

<sup>10</sup> 'Aspendale Park Speedway,' *Hyper Racer*, accessed 13 December 2023, <https://www.hyperracer.com/history>.

<sup>11</sup> 'Automobile Race Meeting,' *Punch*, 1 February 1906, 153, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article175372834>; 'Cycling and Motoring Notes,' *Traralgon Record*, 7 August 1906, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article59664310>.

<sup>12</sup> 'Automobile Race Meeting'; 'Automobile Notes,' *Critic*, 1 August 1906, 22, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article211412935>.

<sup>13</sup> The following explanations of the four competitions and additional information were summarised from communications with the National Motor Museum, email correspondence, 14 November 2023.

confirm the vehicle was still moving. Lastly, the lemon-cutting competition was literally about cutting a lemon from inside the vehicle, using a knife and potentially a sword. Although these events were probably unheard of for most people today, the first three types were still running occasionally at Gymkhanas right up into the 1970s. Despite being well-received by both drivers and the public, these tests gradually faded out of history due to safety concerns despite their entertainment value.



W. R. GRIMWADE WINNING THE BALANCING SEE-SAW TEST.

Fig 1. W.R. Grimwade Winning the Balancing See-Saw Test, 1 February 1906,  
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article175372834>.

Among Russell's motoring experiences, the first-ever road trip between Melbourne and Adelaide was the crown jewel of them all. On the 30th of May, 1905, at 5:43 am, Russell and his companion Guy Smith embarked on their road trip from Melbourne to Adelaide in Russell's new twin-cylinder, 12 h.p. Argyll against pouring rain.<sup>14</sup> Soon after, they ran into a thunderstorm before daylight. Besides needing to navigate water between 6 inches and 2 feet deep, which led to an involuntary stop, they even missed their track once, driving too far inland and encountering an Aboriginal camp. On the second day, they faced 12 inches of deep sand at Strathdownie in Western Victoria. To get the car moving, they had to spread rugs on the sand to prevent sinking and run the engine at top speed (Figures 2-3). It took over an hour to move the car just 10 feet. They encountered flooded roads in the Coorong

<sup>14</sup> The following Melbourne-Adelaide roadtrip account synthesised information from 'Motor Ride from Melbourne,' *The Register*, 5 June 1905, 3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article56675482>; 'Motor Notes,' *Weekly Times*, 10 June 1905, 18, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article222766866>; 'Cycling and Motoring Notes,' *Chronicle*, 17 June 1905, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article88170673>; 'Motoring Notes,' *Referee*, 28 June 1905, 21, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article120500090>; 'Melbourne to Adelaide by Motor Car,' *The Autocar*, 12 August 1905, 204-05, UMA 1975.0089 1/19.

area of South Australia on the fourth day, where tussocks grew 2-3 feet high (Figures 4-6). The greasy roads made driving incredibly challenging due to the lack of grip and frequent side slips. Russell and Guy had to drive through many roads completely submerged in water. Unreliable maps of South Australia meant they had to make numerous enquiries on the spot to find their way. They finally reached Adelaide on the 3rd of June, with a total travel time of 40 hours and 50 minutes, covering over 600 miles. Russell admitted in an interview afterwards that he 'would never undertake the trip again,' but he was proud to have accomplished it (Figure 7).<sup>15</sup> This eventful road trip showcased his resilience in the face of challenges and his strong interest in exploring the world with the latest technology.

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<sup>15</sup> 'Motor Ride from Melbourne.'



Fig 2. Guy Smith, *Stuck in the sand near Strathdownie*, 31 May 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 10.5 x 15.7 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00113.



Fig 3. Guy Smith, *Sand difficulties near Strathdownie*, 31 May 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 10.5 x 15.7 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00550.



Fig 4. Russell Grimwade, *Lunch on the Coorong*, 2 June 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 10 x 15cm, UMA 2002.0003.00240.



Fig 5. Russell Grimwade, *Caught in a tussock on the Coorong*, 2 June 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 10 x 15cm, UMA 2002.0003.00520.



Fig 6. Guy Smith, *Rain-water on the road between Beachport and Robe S.A.*, 1 June 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 10.5 x 16.5 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00408.



Fig 7. Unknown (photographer), *Arrival in Melbourne after 1100 miles of road [mud?]!!*, 17 June 1905, Gelatin silver photograph, 14 x 18cm, UMA 2002.0003.00321.



## The Scientific Mind

Russell's passion for motoring extended beyond driving; he also conducted research and documented his understanding and studies on motoring. As early as 1904, he examined the rapid development of automobilism and classified motorists into two main classes in his article 'Is a motor manageable without an engineer,' published in *The Scientific Australian* (Figure 8).<sup>16</sup> He underscored the importance of both utility and public comprehension in the acceptance of this new technology. His draft of 'Early Motoring in Victoria,' on the other hand, provided insights into the challenges and advancements in the early days of motoring, illuminating the transition from horse-drawn carriages to motor vehicles and societal attitudes of the time (Figure 9).<sup>17</sup> Russell was also an advocate of using alcohol as a motor fuel. In a lecture to the RACV members, he spoke about power alcohol as a substitute for petrol in automobiles, highlighting Australia's potential for alcohol production due to its heavy reliance on external sources for liquid fuel supplies.<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, together with Harley Tarrant, he was also involved in producing the first petrol-driven cars made in Australia.<sup>19</sup> His biographer J. R. Poynter asserted that Russell's penchant for motor cars was 'inevitable'.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this momentous invention in human history tapped into Russell's 'technical curiosity,' and the breakthrough in speed drew out his 'adventurous spirit'.<sup>21</sup> Across Russell's 50-year motoring journey, he owned 32 cars of six nationalities.<sup>22</sup> His acquisitions were not a superficial flaunt but rather reflected his genuine curiosity in understanding the intricate mechanisms in a car and the changing technology.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Russell Grimwade, 'Is a motor manageable without an engineer,' *The Scientific Australian* (Dec 1904): 27-9, UMA 1975.0089 13/9.

<sup>17</sup> Russell Grimwade, 'Early Motoring in Victoria' typescript, UMA 1975.0089 13/3.

<sup>18</sup> 'Motoring Essentials,' *The Herald*, 11 October 1920, 2, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article242246700>; 'Liquid Fuel Supplies,' *The Argus*, 3 September 1920, 4, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article4586266>.

<sup>19</sup> Poynter, 'A Colonial Inheritance,' 18.

<sup>20</sup> J. R. Poynter, *Russell Grimwade* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1967), 88.

<sup>21</sup> Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, 88.

<sup>22</sup> Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> See the description of Russell: 'He always remained inquisitive about what was under the bonnet...' in Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, 96.



Fig 8. Russell Grimwade, 'Is a motor manageable without an engineer,' *The Scientific Australian* (Dec 1904): 27-9, UMA 1975.0089 13/9.

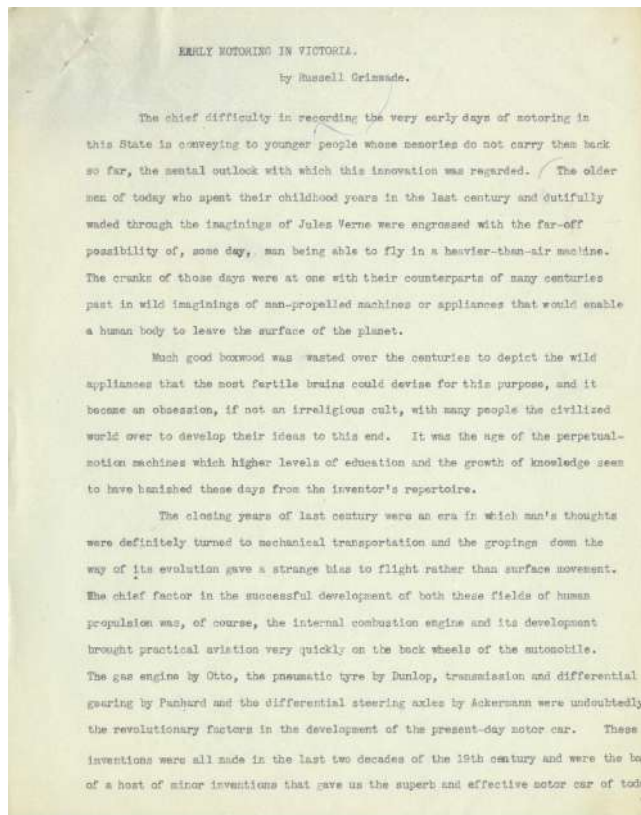


Fig 9. Russell Grimwade, 'Early Motoring in Victoria' typescript, MS 1975.0089 13/3, UMA.

## Motoring Life and Family

More than just a motorist on the race track, Russell was an avid driver in his youth. In September 1910, Russell was charged with speeding in Toorak while driving a motor car.<sup>24</sup> During the trial, Russell defended himself with his extensive driving experience, emphasising the speedometer on his car indicated a lower speed. He also had reputable witnesses who vouched for him, including a passenger in his car, George Kelly, who was also his wife's brother, Major Harley Tarrant, the car designer, and Henry Ernest Hall, the Vice-president of the ACV. While the bench believed Russell was a careful driver, they could not ignore the sworn statement of excessive pace and the specified safe speed on Toorak Road, resulting in a £3 fine, which the defense requested to increase to £5 to allow for an appeal. This unnoticed story covered by a local newspaper added a warm personal touch to Russell on top of his motoring achievements by bridging his everyday life with his life passion.

It may be easily overlooked that Russell's family was also part of his motoring world. While Russell and his brother Sheppard were fascinated by the emerging technology, their father, Frederick Sheppard Grimwade, had a more cautious and sceptical attitude toward the new machine, considering it to be 'dangerous and undignified'.<sup>25</sup> Frederick probably reconciled with the new technology eventually; hence, a lavish family photo with their car collections was kept in the album (Figure 10). In the same light, Mab, as Russell's life partner, played an essential role in his motoring journey. Although they never had children of their own, it did not prevent them from enjoying a lasting and happy marriage.<sup>26</sup> Their wealth and social status ensured their worldly experience. Both in Russell and Mab's honeymoon and the later extensive trips abroad, motoring was always part of the fun.<sup>27</sup> In Thea Gardiner's book, *The World of Mab Grimwade*, we learned that she was enthusiastic about orchestrating social events such as race meetings, much more so than Russell.<sup>28</sup> While it is unclear if Mab was as passionate about participating in motor races as Russell, we can infer that she was not opposed to motoring and was probably keen, as she was often captured behind the wheel by her photographer husband from her 20s to 30s (Figures 11-13). I believe Mab was the closest person to understanding Russell's passions and dreams. Even though Russell settled

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<sup>24</sup> 'Helped to Frame the Act,' *The Argus*, 4 October 1910, 8, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article10465951>.

<sup>25</sup> Poynter, Russell Grimwade, 89.

<sup>26</sup> John Poynter, 'A Will and a Life,' in *Miegunyah: The Bequests of Russell and Mab Grimwade*, eds. John Poynter and Benjamin Thomas (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2015), 77.

<sup>27</sup> Thea Gardiner, *The World of Mab Grimwade* (Carlton: The Miegunyah Press, 2023), 21.

<sup>28</sup> Gardiner, *The World of Mab Grimwade*, 36.

down and engaged much less in motor races after their marriage, his passion for motoring and cars did not die down and was preserved through these moments and his extensive car collections.<sup>29</sup> Later in their life, they both received life member certificates from the RACV, which recognised their 'special services rendered to the Club and to Motoring generally' (Figures 14-15).

### Conclusion

In conclusion, Russell's motoring experience had both breadth and depth. It encompassed his playful, curious, and adventurous sides, as well as his scientific exploration and research. Through motoring, we also catch glimpses of the intimate relations and emotions he shared with his family and his beloved wife, Mab. As a prolific photographer, Russell kept a detailed visual account of his motoring moments and the associated connections. There may be no better way to end this report than with the photo of Russell and Mab standing by their car near Cann River, Gippsland – using one of Russell's life passions to document another (Figure 16). The photograph profoundly captured a sense of serenity within the natural environment and the distilled harmony that flowed between Russell and the three great loves of his life – Mab, cars, and trees.

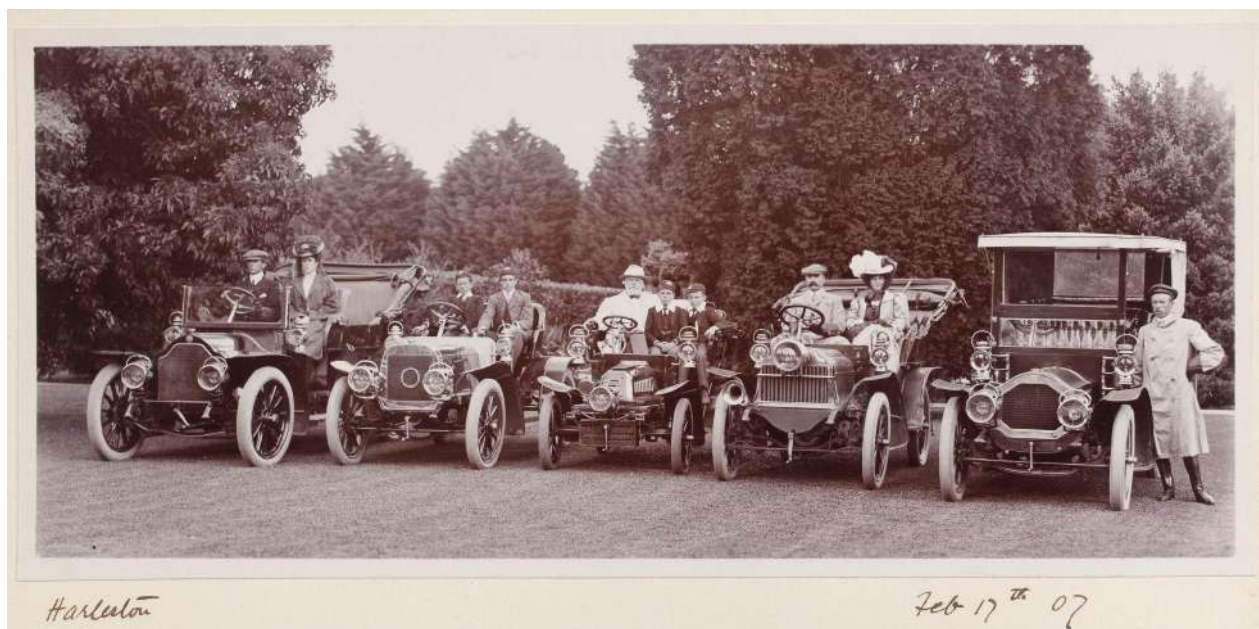


Fig 10. Unknown (photographer), Harleston, 17 February 1907, Gelatin silver photograph, 9.5 x 21 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00355.

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<sup>29</sup> Poynter, Russell Grimwade, 96.

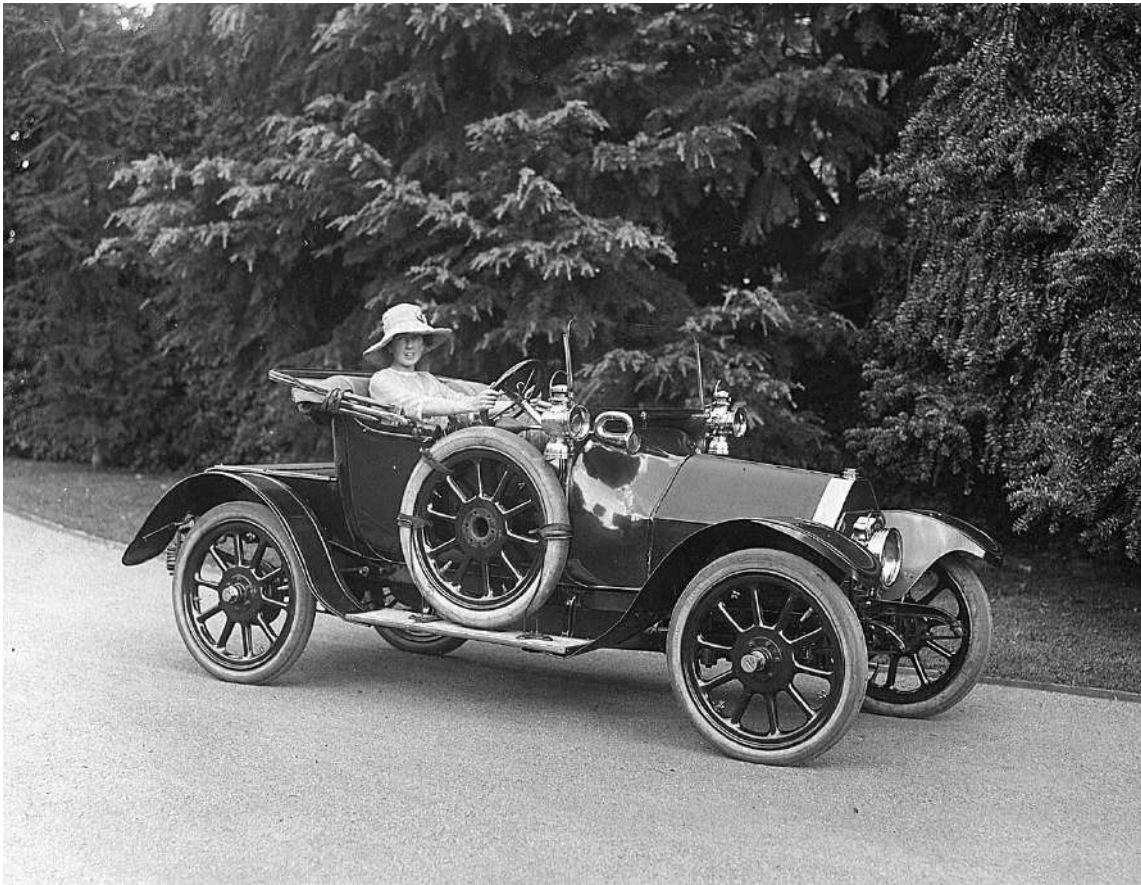


Fig 11. Russell Grimwade, *Early motoring enthusiast*, Harleston, 5 July 1908, Gelatin silver photograph, 15.2 x 19.5 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00107.

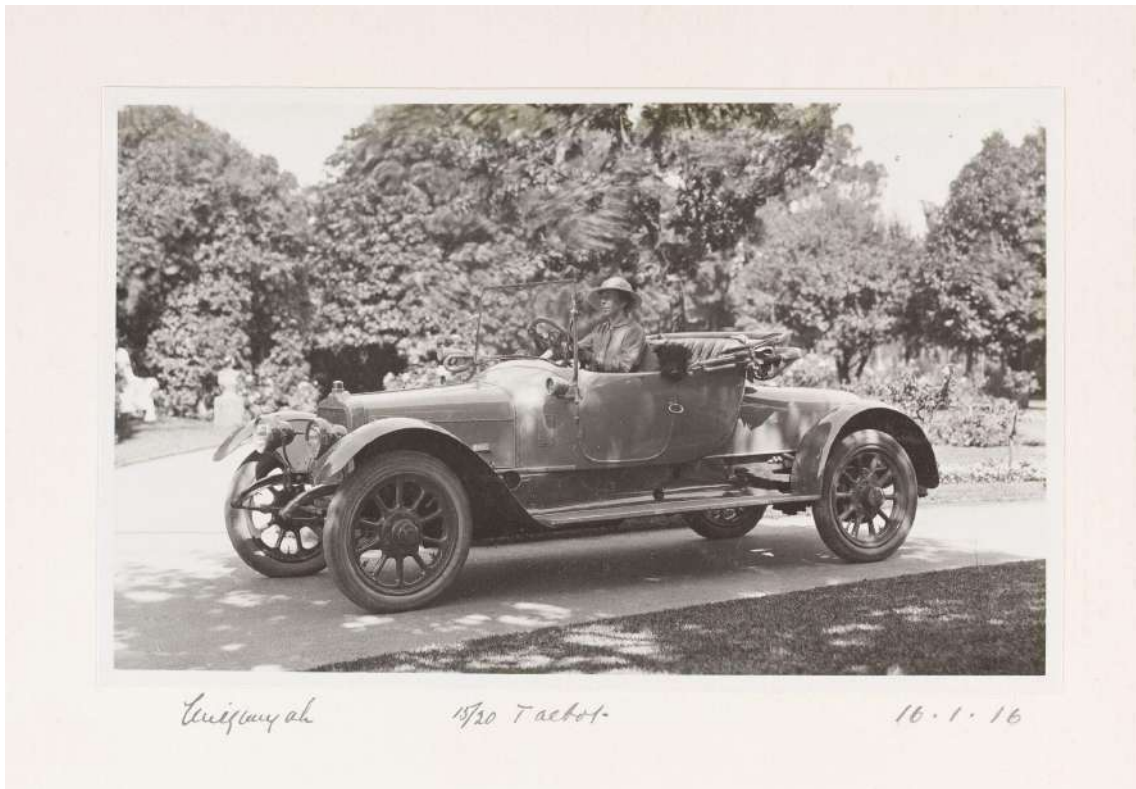


Fig 12. Russell Grimwade, *The Talbot*, Miegunyah, 16 January 1916, Gelatin silver photograph, 12 x 19 cm, UMA 2002.0003.00106.



Fig 13. Russell Grimwade, Mabel Grimwade in the new Fiat car, March 1923, Gelatin silver photograph, Unknown (dimension), UMA 2002.0003.00003.

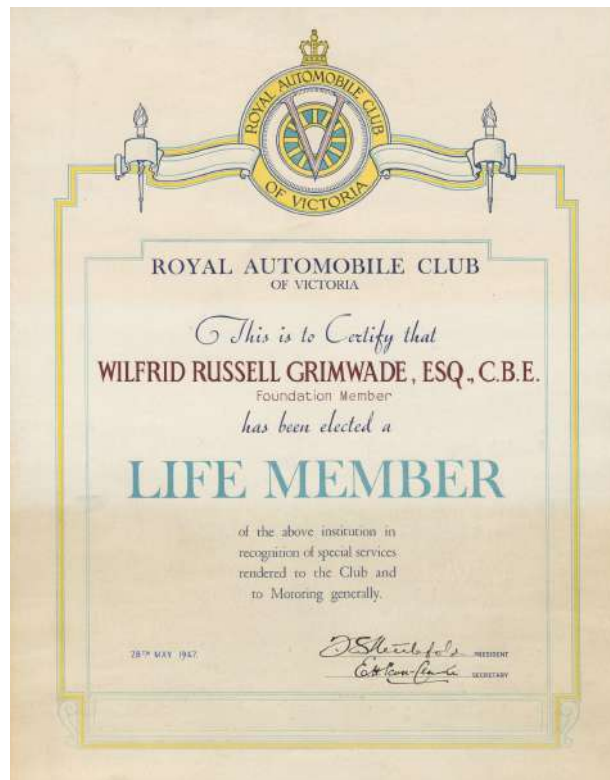


Fig 14. Wilfrid Russell Grimwade Life Member Certificate of the RACV, UMA 1975.0089 11/2.

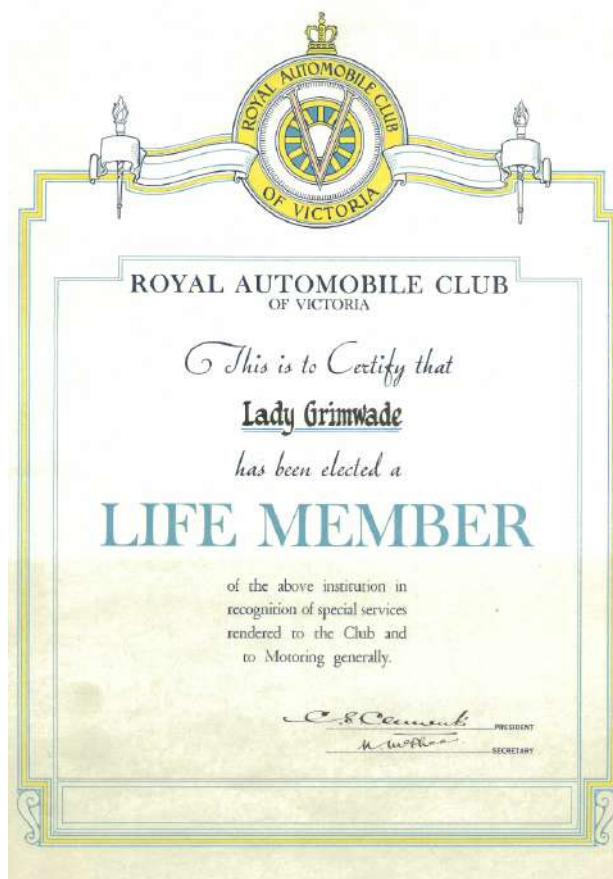


Fig 15. Lady Grimwade Life Member Certificate of the RACV, UMA 1975.0089 16/14.



Fig 16. Unknown (photographer), Near Cann River, Gippsland, 20 March 1924, Gelatin silver photograph, Unknown (dimension), UMA 2002.0003.00892.

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