



Women in Motoring (up to 1960) Presented by Joe Mendell

Fri 10th Apr 2015

The speaker, Anna Aston, was unfortunately unable to give her presentation but luckily her partner, Joe Mendell, was able to step in.

Despite historically sexist attitudes, women have in fact had a major role in the development of the internal combustion engine powered motor car, since its introduction in the 1880s. The first recorded leisure trip made by a lady was made in 1885, a distance of 65 miles that took 10h to complete. Given the environment of un-metalled roads, no service stations, vehicles without suspension, gravity fed fuel systems for engines that generated just 2-3HP, no lights or protection from the weather, this was a monumental achievement. The lady in question was Bertha Benz, wife of the prestigious car developer.

Her journey highlighted the social, physical and infrastructure problems that prevailed in the pre Great War era. Roads at that time served predominantly horse drawn traffic, with a few steam powered vehicles, so adverse cambers and sharp bends presented additional hazards. Early cars were open to the elements, which meant that leather weatherproof clothing was essential. This created opportunities for the fashion industry.

The mobility that cars offered enabled some ladies to trail blaze; Camille du Gast took part in the 1903 Paris to Madrid rally that witnessed the tragic death of 14 participants.

Ladies also came up with practical developments of the car:

In London, Dorothy Levitt was a pioneer of female independence and was the most successful lady racer in Britain. She also wrote "The woman and the car" to encourage those ladies who wanted to drive. It contained practical tips such as carrying a hand mirror, which could be held up to enable to see what traffic was behind. This came 7 years ahead of the introduction of the rear view mirror in 1914. The American Mary Anderson came up with the idea for the windscreen wiper after witnessing the struggle that car drivers had seeing through their windscreens on a snowy day in New York.

Florence Lawrence came up with the idea of the brake light at the back of the car.

Violet Cowdray came up with the idea of the spare wheel and spare petrol can.

The Great War saw a great number of women driving ambulances etc. Afterwards, they continued to race and demonstrate what they are capable of. Marketing of cars developed too, using women to incorporate fashion, colour adverts, sponsorship, the concept that driving is fun and significantly, that women buy cars and men pay for them.

In WWII, over a million women in uniform were driving in the WRVS, ATS & WAAF. The resulting spread in opportunity allowed new entrants into the world of racing, with ladies like Pat Moss and Sheila van Dam reaching the top.

The talk and accompanying slides left no doubt about the significance of women in driving.