ROLLS-ROYCE | MEDIA INFORMATION

A GRAND SUCCESSION:

FROM CLAUDE JOHNSON TO TORSTEN MÜLLER-ÖTVÖS

Tuesday 14 November 2023, Goodwood, West Sussex (EMBARGO TO 13.00 BST)

* Rolls-Royce Motor Cars reflects on the lasting influence of the company’s first chief executive, Claude Goodman Johnson (24 October 1864 - 11 April 1926)
* A gifted publicist and marketer who became known as ‘the hyphen in Rolls-Royce’
* Managed the company from 1906 until his death 20 years later
* Retiring in November 2023 after almost 14 years, Torsten Müller-Ötvös is the longest-serving CEO of the modern era, and second only to Johnson in time at the head of the marque
* Continued a long line of influential Rolls-Royce CEOs who shaped both the company and the wider automotive and luxury industries during their tenure

*“Though perhaps less familiar in the public mind, Claude Johnson is probably the most important and influential figure in the annals of Rolls-Royce apart from the founders themselves. As we mark the retirement of Torsten Müller-Ötvös after almost 14 years as our Chief Executive Officer, this seemed the ideal moment to shine a light on the only person in the marque’s history to have held the top job for longer. A larger-than-life character, Johnson was evidently a force to be reckoned with; it was his energy, enthusiasm, vision and dedication that made Rolls-Royce a household name around the world. Even today, he's still known as ‘the hyphen in Rolls-Royce’ – a fitting tribute to a truly remarkable man.”***Andrew Ball, Head of Corporate Relations and Heritage, Rolls-Royce Motor Cars**

**A BIG PERSONALITY**

The Hon Charles Stewart Rolls first met Henry Royce in Manchester on 4 May 1904. On his return to London, the first person he told about his historic encounter was his business partner, Claude Johnson.

Large-framed, broad-shouldered and extrovert, Johnson was 13 years Rolls’ senior. A gifted marketer and organiser, he began his career running scientific and trade exhibitions, then spent six lively years as the very first Secretary of the Automobile Club of Great Britain and Ireland, which would become the Royal Automobile Club (RAC).

In 1903, he joined C S Rolls & Co, one of Britain’s first-ever car dealerships, which Rolls had established in January of the previous year. When Rolls and Royce set up their new company following their 1904 meeting, Johnson brought much-needed commercial acumen and financial backing to the fledgling enterprise.

**MAKING HIS MARK**

In 1906 Johnson became the first Commercial Managing Director of Rolls-Royce Limited, taking on the job of sales and marketing. A natural showman with a prodigious talent for generating publicity (for himself, as well as the company) it was a task to which he was ideally suited, and applied himself with both great zeal and tremendous success. It was he who persuaded Royce to refine the company’s offering to a single model, the 40/50 H.P., which became world-famous under the name Johnson coined for it – the Silver Ghost. It was Johnson who also overcame Royce’s numerous objections and convinced him of the virtues of offering to supply every Rolls-Royce motor car with an official mascot. More than a century later, the Spirit of Ecstasy, designed by the sculptor Charles Sykes, remains one of the world’s most recognisable and desirable brand emblems.

**A FRIEND INDEED**

In 1911, after years of accumulated stress and overwork, Royce’s health collapsed. As part of his recuperation, Johnson took him on an extended road trip through Europe to Egypt. During a stop in the South of France on the return journey, Royce became enchanted with the tiny hamlet of Le Canadel, near Nice. Johnson knew his man, and promptly bought a parcel of land, where he commissioned a new house for Royce, plus a smaller villa for visiting draughtsmen and assistants. For the rest of his life, Royce (very sensibly) spent his winters working from home at Le Canadel, and from 1917, summers at his beloved Elmstead in West Wittering, West Sussex.

**‘THE HYPHEN IN ROLLS-ROYCE’**

Johnson remained in charge of Rolls-Royce until his death in 1926, at the age of 61. His 20 years at the helm make him the longest-serving chief executive in the company’s history. His influence on the marque was wide-ranging, profound and indelible; indeed, such was his pivotal importance to its growth and success, he is still known today as ‘the hyphen in Rolls-Royce’.

**WORTHY SUCCESSORS**

The job title of Rolls-Royce’s most senior executive changed over time. Johnson was Commercial Managing Director; those who followed him were referred to as Chairman, then Chief Executive Officer (CEO) – the designation still in use today. Of Claude Johnson’s successors in the years prior to the present-day Goodwood era, two in particular stand out for their lasting contributions to the company’s identity and commercial success.

**DRIVEN TO SUCCEED**

Ernest Hives worked as Charles Rolls’ chauffeur, then in the workshop at C S Rolls & Co, before joining Rolls-Royce as an experimental tester in 1908. In this capacity, he took part in the 15,000-mile endurance test of 1907, and the famous 1911 London to Edinburgh run with the cars locked in top gear only; in the same year, he became the first to exceed 100mph in a Silver Ghost (chassis 1701). He also headed up the Rolls-Royce works team, again with Silver Ghost cars, on the legendary 1913 Alpine Trial, which cemented Rolls-Royce’s reputation as ‘the best car in the world’.

Armed with the in-depth engineering knowledge he gained on these events, Hives set up a fully-fledged experimental department, which helped develop Rolls-Royce’s aero engines as well as its automotive products. In 1937 he was appointed a Board Director and General Works Manager; his most significant act was to split the company’s car (chassis) and aero engine operations into two independent entities, which remains the case to this day. During the Second World War, Hives oversaw production of some 160,000 Merlin aero engines; he was also a staunch and early champion of the emerging jet-engine technology.

In 1946, Hives became Managing Director and in 1950, Chairman of the Board. The man who at 17 had been Charles Rolls’ chauffeur was now head of his former employer’s eponymous company. He retired in 1957.

**A COMPLETE CHANGE**

In 1945, Dr Frederick Llewellyn Smith – known simply as ‘Doc’ – was given the daunting job of converting Rolls-Royce’s factory in Crewe from its wartime role making Merlin aero engines to civilian car production. To his role as a Main Board Director and Managing Director of the Motor Car Division, he brought not only great organisational skills, but an uncanny knack of foreseeing future trends.

On a visit to the USA in 1950, he became convinced that the traditional British coachwork still being fitted to many Rolls-Royce chassis was hopelessly outdated, and that a ‘new look’ was urgently needed. Under his auspices, the marque produced the Silver Dawn and highly successful Silver Cloud, the first complete cars (chassis plus bodies) ever to be designed and built in a Rolls-Royce factory. Even these pioneering models were fairly conventional: it would be with the Silver Shadow that his bold vision was finally realised with its chassis-less, semi-monocoque design. The advanced engineering was ahead of its time, and the Silver Shadow became the best-selling Rolls-Royce of the entire pre-Goodwood era. Popular with the workforce, Doc succeeded Ernest Hives as Chairman, a post he held until his retirement in 1967.

**INTO THE MODERN ERA**

In 2010, the baton passed to Torsten Müller-Ötvös, who has led Rolls-Royce Motor Cars for almost 14 years – the second-longest tenure of any Chief Executive since Johnson himself. Like his 20th Century predecessors, Torsten has overseen a complete transformation of the brand and its products. Dawn, Wraith, Cullinan and the Black Badge family have all been introduced under his leadership, which has also seen a huge expansion in Bespoke and the renaissance of coachbuilding as a permanent capability. In 2022, Torsten guided the company into the future originally prophesied by Rolls in 1900 with the launch of the first all-electric Rolls-Royce, Spectre.

Torsten Müller-Ötvös retires on 30 November 2023. His successor is Chris Brownridge, who joins Rolls‑Royce having previously served as CEO of BMW UK.

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## FURTHER INFORMATION

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You can also follow marque on social media: [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/rolls-royce-motor-cars/); [YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/user/RollsRoyceMotorCars);[Twitter](https://twitter.com/rollsroycecars); [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/rollsroycecars/); and [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/rollsroycemotorcars).

EDITORS’ NOTES

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a true luxury house, creating the world’s most recognised, revered and desirable handcrafted Bespoke products for its international clientele.

The company employs more than 2,500 people at the Home of Rolls-Royce at Goodwood, West Sussex. This comprises both its global headquarters and Centre of Luxury Manufacturing Excellence – the only place in the world where Rolls-Royce motor cars are designed, engineered and meticulously built by hand. Its continuous investment in its facilities, products and people has resulted in a series of ‘record years’ for global sales, peaking in 2022 with over 6,000 motor cars sold worldwide.

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BMW Group and is a completely separate, unrelated company from Rolls-Royce plc, the manufacturer of aircraft engines and propulsion systems.

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