

Henry Ronald Godfrey (M.I.Mech.E) – 1887 to 1968

By the early 1930s, Henry Ronald Godfrey was a long established and well-respected engineer, motor car manufacturer, and past competition driver.

Always known as “Ron”, he had met Archie Frazer Nash at the City & Guilds Technical College in Finsbury, near central London, and they both went on to serve their apprenticeships at Willans and Robinson, a railway engineering company, in Rugby.

As a boy, Ron had witnessed the 1896 “Emancipation” run from London to Brighton and this and his own early experiments and exploits with bicycles, motorcycles and small motorcycle engines led him eventually to a career in engineering and building “early vehicles” (often known as *run-a-bouts* or *creep-a-bouts*) with Archie Frazer Nash.

Together, they took their passion into forming G.N. Ltd (Godfrey & Nash) in 1910. The two of them were probably quite a pair of “characters” in their early 20s and one example is Archie (who had trained as a pilot) flying the two of them in a small Avro aircraft to France to visit the Paris Salon (Motor Show) in 1921. They had to force land in a field in Northern France on the way.

At GN, Ron was not only the co-designer of the GN “cycle” car, and overseeing production, but he also designed and manufactured a new 90-degree V-twin GN engine. GNs were one of the most prolific and desired “cycle” cars (a cross between a *motor-cycle* and a *motor-car*) of their day and one has to understand the motoring scene of that period to fully appreciate them. Equally admirable are the challenges, engineering skills and business skills of both Godfrey and Nash who were able to bring such motoring to more people. Early “motor” cars were extremely expensive and exclusive, “cycle” cars were much more affordable but also clever.

Ron and Archie were both skilled competitors, in GN cars, from their earliest days, and GN established itself as a name in emerging motor sport too. Most notably they won the 1100cc class in the JCC 200 Mile race at Brooklands in 1921. Ron also became an R.A.C scrutineer and a founder member of the British Automobile Racing Club (BARC), later Junior Car Club (JCC).

By 1915, over 200 GNs with belt-drive had been made and later, after The Great War his evolved into chain-drive. By 1921 about 50 cars were being made each week and, under a licence to manufacture GNs agreed with Salmson, in Paris, a further 2,000 or so were made.

When GN ran into problems in 1922, due to the declining interest in “cycle” type cars and the evolution of the “light” car (for example; the Austin 7), the sales in GN declined and the company went into receivership. It was eventually sold and re-formed as GN Motors Ltd. Ron and Archie Frazer Nash stayed there for a short while until Ron left to form his own company, H R Godfrey Motors, to maintain and upgrade GNs in 1922. Archie also left in 1922 to go onto making his own chain drive “Frazer-Nash” cars.

When Archie left Frazer Nash cars in 1929, Ron re-joined him at Nash & Thompson, an aircraft engineering consultancy known for their hydraulically operated aircraft gun turrets.

Later, in 1934, after a considerable period of illness due to rheumatism, Ron saw an opportunity in the British market place to design and manufacture a new “sports” car. He left Nash & Thompson (when they merged into the Parnall Aircraft company) to join up with new associates Ted Halford and Guy Robins in 1935. The three of them co-founded the H.R.G car and then formed the Engineering Co. in 1936 with Ron as Chief Designer and Technical Director. Co-incidentally, the initials of the new company were also those of Godfrey, now aged 48, which must have pleased him.

Ron Godfrey was always seen as “the man” behind H.R.G but many others, of course, helped make it what it became and he would very likely have quickly acknowledged that. Following seeing the company through the twin-cam project in the mid ‘50s he eventually retired from H.R.G in 1958.

In retirement, he bought a 16th century water mill, near Guildford, which he restored along with its waterwheel which provided some power to the premises. He also indulged in several past-times including his interest in medieval clocks. One of his own 1921 GN cars is now part of the Science Museum Collection, in London.

Ron Godfrey is often referred to as an important part, but also considered a secondary, more modest, quieter character, in the more widely known “Archie Frazer-Nash story”. Whilst he was clearly different, he and Archie clearly gained much experience and enjoyed many exploits together in their early days. Ron was arguably a better business man.

The H.R.G sports car is also, perhaps, not as appreciated, especially by those who follow the revered Frazer Nash cars, as it should be. The H.R.G is a lighter, more refined car, and arguably better quality and better engineered as one would expect of a car produced some years later. Whereas other manufacturers bought in various components to make up their cars, H.R.G designed and made a lot more of their own car themselves including all the chassis, front axle, brakes, shock absorbers, and many other details. Ron had massed produced GN cars in the past. The H.R.G was a quite different concern and they were expensive cars aimed at the true enthusiast and sportsman.

Ron’s career is quite remarkable when one thinks what he had witnessed in his life, and his working career, from the very earliest days of motoring in England, through two world wars and into the 1960s. Through “cycle” cars to “light” cars and beyond, even the term “sports” car means something quite different today to what he experienced.

He overcame enormous challenges in the pioneering days, saw the evolution of motoring through to the mass market, huge changes to roads, legislation, through to the motoring we all know today. He witnessed it all and made an enviable contribution.

He died in 1968, aged 81, and is buried in Brookwood Cemetery, near Woking, Surrey.