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LIVES AND TIMES OF 17EX

A rare experimental car, a royal Indian provenance and a corgi. What's this Rolls-Royce worth?

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PHOTOS: SIMON CLAY/RM AUCTIONS & SUCHANDRA ROY





cyan magenta yellow black



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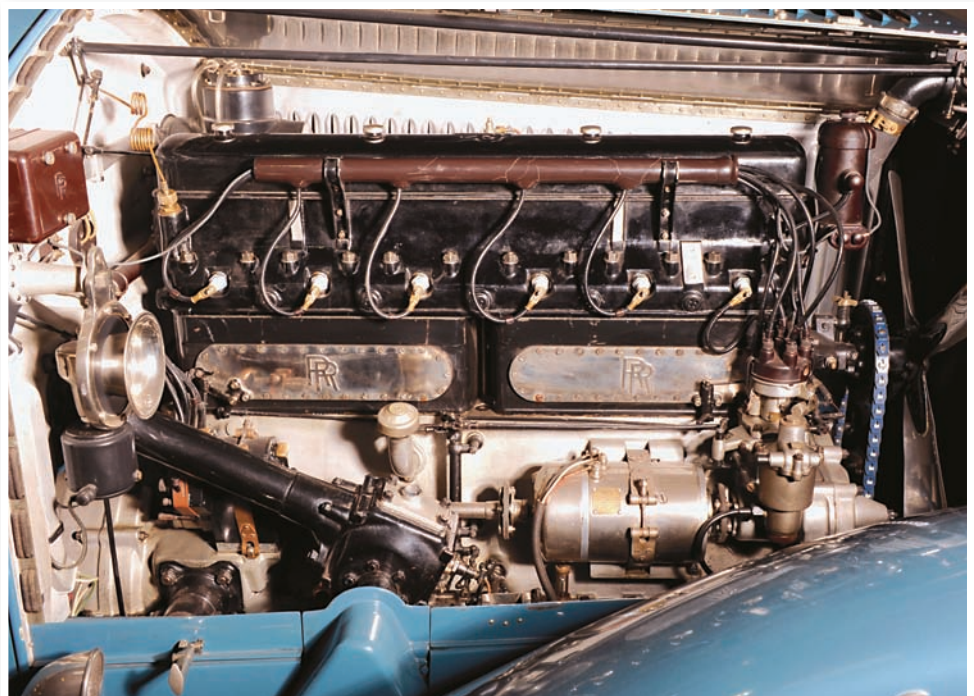
VICTOR MULLER, THE EXTROVERT CEO of Spyker Cars, is a diehard car enthusiast, a true aficionado. Other than making some very exclusive handcrafted supercars from his modern little factory in Holland, Muller also has a very fine collection of rare automobiles from the distant past. And the star of his collection is a Rolls-Royce. And now that car is up for sale!

Building upon the success of their recent record-breaking Ferrari Leggenda e Passione event in Maranello, Italy, Canadian auction house, RM Auctions, in association with Sotheby's, will be offering Muller's Rolls-Royce on the October 28, the distinguished Automobiles of London event at Battersea Park. Over the past three years this stylish event has attracted discerning collectors from around the world, emerging as one of Europe's leading collector car events for the highest quality automobiles. And this year's event promises to continue the momentum with over 75 of the world's finest collector cars set to go under the hammer. Amongst early highlights are – what RM Auctions describe – as a very rare, remarkable 1928 Rolls-Royce Phantom I 'Jarvis Torpedo' (the car that is the subject of this article), a unique 1914 Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost Boattail Skiff, and a hugely historic 1950 Aston Martin DB2 Team Car, which is coming to market for the first time in 53 years.

"Both Aston Martin and Rolls-Royce are quintessentially English, making these cars perfect for our London sale," said Max Girardo, Managing Director of RM Europe in describing the early consignments. "The Rolls-Royce Phantom I has a magnificent history and provenance, while the Aston Martin DB2 is undoubtedly the most significant and original Aston Martin Factory team car ever to be offered at public auction. We are thrilled to have the opportunity to offer both at our upcoming London sale," he added.

More importantly, the car in our feature has a well-known 'Indian' history.

Muller's pride, the Phantom I 17EX, was one of four extraordinary cars designed by Rolls-Royce in the 1920s that has a most distinguished history, and was the last of a series of light-weight experimental 'sports' cars. With Bentley winning at Le Mans and stealing all the thunder, Sir Henry Royce thought that Roll-Royce should also look at





acquiring a slightly sporting image, and to that extent, the task was outlined to develop a series of cars that would explore sporting possibilities.

The first in the series was the 10EX. Based on the new Phantom I chassis, the 10EX received a specially-tuned version of the 7668cc overhead valve engine that the standard car had, yet was hardly quicker as the open tourer body by Barker was just too heavy. Removing the wings, the side-mounted spare wheel and the headlamps did improve matters, yet the max speed of 86mph (138kph) that they managed was far short of the 100mph (160kph) that Royce wanted.

Obviously the bodywork department needed to be re-looked and Rolls-Royce designer H I F Evernden was tasked with redesigning the 10EX. The car was lowered, and 10EX received a lowered steering wheel, new rear section, new wings and a lowered windscreen. The 'new' 10EX was definitely quicker.



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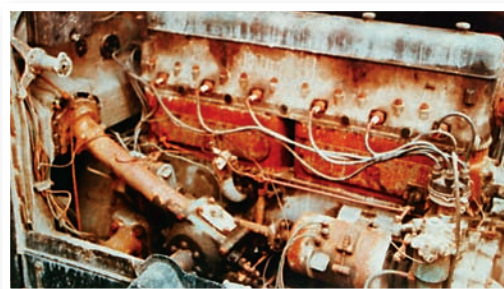
Royce was pleased with the result and it was decided that three more 'experimental' cars were to be built. The three that followed were the 15EX, 16EX and 17EX, coach built respectively by Hooper, Barker and Jarvis of Wimbledon. The 15EX was sent off to Europe for extensive high speed testing, but it met with a catastrophic accident in France. 16EX spent most of its life in the UK, changing hands several times and eventually finding its way to the US, where after some years in the Blackhawk Collection, it is in private hands now.

17EX traveled the world. Noticeably quicker than 10EX, it developed 92.6bhp at the dyno, going up to

99.5bhp with the cutout open when the car was benchtested at the Rolls-Royce works in Derby. Extensive testing was carried out on 17EX – some 7,000km, of which half was without the body – before the car was sold to the Maharaja Bahadur of Jammu and Kashmir just before Christmas of 1928. He kept the car till 1932, then sold it to a certain Ram Narain of Kanpur.

A few months later P K Mitter of Calcutta, a well-known connoisseur of very exclusive cars (including a Duesenberg and an Isotta Fraschini, the latter being sold to finance the acquisition of Rolls-Royce's experimental car) acquired 17EX and he used it for some 11 years.

In fact, his son Jayanta Mitter recalls 17EX very fondly, mentioning that though his father saw 110mph several times on the speedo, the speedo error was certainly considerable, with the max speed far short of the magical 100mph. He also mentions that the 17EX kind of fell between two stools – the Duesenberg J roadster of his father (and that of his uncle's, who too had a Duesenberg) was faster overall, and for short bursts, his uncle's 1938 Mercedes-Benz 250 was quicker. But the 17EX was undoubtedly the most striking of the lot. And interestingly, the 17EX was sold when P K Mitter decided to acquire a Packard that was advertised to do a genuine 100mph...





17EX was then acquired by Greta Devi of Allahabad in 1944. A West Bengal registration document dated 1956 indicates a transfer of ownership between one Sukosh Banerjee and Bimal Kanti Ghose, both of Calcutta, but the next long-term owner was the Raja Saheb of Bhadri, a princely state in Madhya Pradesh. Sometime in the 1960s, news of the car's existence reached the ear of a keen collector named Protap Roy, a scion of the royal family of Santosh, who eventually persuaded the Raja Saheb to part with 17EX, which was in poor shape, in 1967.

An authority on vintage matters, Roy had the uncanny ability to track down

Madhya Pradesh," explains Suchandra.

"The Raja of Bhadri was a dog-lover and was to judge the dog show in Calcutta. This was Protap's opportunity! In the past he had made efforts to pin the Raja down and had even thought of traveling to Bhadri, but without success. So plans and railway bookings were made. We traveled the 1500-odd kilometres from Delhi to Calcutta in our coupé, with Simba looking fit to ride a Rolls-Royce of his own. He walked away with the Best-in-Show, and Protap began negotiations with Raja Saheb Bhadri. He did part with the 17EX, but in addition to the agreed price, he wanted Protap to try and get hold of a pair of Corgis!"

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Protap Roy did get a reply with many congratulations for finding such a rare car. All the names and addresses he needed were supplied, and so was advice for obtaining the Raja Saheb's dearest wish: "As for the Corgis," wrote the club, "our advice is, try Buckingham Palace!"

As Roy had a penchant for acquiring cars – and cash was limited – for every new buy he had to sell some from his collection. And so it came to pass that 17EX was eventually sold to Christopher Renwick, a Brit known for locating and purchasing rare and special classic cars from India. Renwick in turn, had the car



rare and extraordinary cars across India. Of how Roy acquired the car is in itself an interesting story recounted by his widow, Suchandra Roy: "It all began with my ambition to win the Best-in-Show award for my Doberman Pinscher at Calcutta's championship dog show. In 1967, the Doberman was still a fairly new breed in India and my Simba was magnificent by any standard. Little did I know that Protap, my husband, had ambitions of his own. Protap tracked rare vintage and classic cars like a bloodhound."

"He already possessed a 1928 Hooper-bodied Rolls-Royce Phantom 1 and a super-charged Mercedes, the 540K, and now he had heard of a Rolls with the 17EX nomenclature in the remote princely state of Bhadri, in

So how did that work out? "The 17EX arrived in Calcutta. She wasn't in very good shape after years of being locked up in a dark garage," continues Suchandra. "Still, with her pointy back, high-flared mud-guards and the fairy on the tip of the hood leaning forward as if leading the way, the car looked like some extraterrestrial dragonfly! Our mechanic – who didn't look as if he could put a bicycle together, leave alone an experimental Rolls – was actually an expert at restoring old cars. He and Protap made out a long list of what was required to get 17EX moving. This was forwarded to the Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts Club in England, together with a request for names and addresses of suppliers. Protap also asked for advice on how to

shipped out of India, eventually selling 17EX to two Italian car enthusiasts Veniero Molari and Giulio Vignale (the nephew of coachbuilder Alfredo Vignale) in 1976.

In the 1990s Molari and Vignale decided to entrust the job of restoring 17EX to Gianni Pena, who works as a model maker for many of the Torinese coachbuilders. When Victor Muller acquired the car, 17EX was with Pena. After extensive restoration work the car was ready for the Pebble Beach concours d'elegance in 2004, in time for Rolls-Royce's 100th anniversary. Two years later it won the Trofeo Rolls-Royce as the most elegant Rolls-Royce at the 2006 edition of the Villa d'Este Concours d'Elegance, in Italy. 