

Weird and wonderful

Today's drivers want CD players and sat-nav systems. But the motorists of yesteryear equally craved their 'toys'. David Burgess-Wise recalls the impact of Dunhill's stores for motorists

True to its Edwardian slogan "Everything but the Motor", coined in the days when it supplied pioneering "automobilists" with a host of accessories for their horseless carriages, the luxury goods company Dunhill this year sponsored the Goodwood Festival of Speed's Soapbox Challenge, where motors are forbidden.

Marking the centenary of the opening of Dunhill's first central London showroom, the company also displayed eight classic British racing cars outside the Drivers' Club at Goodwood, ranging from a 1903 Gordon Bennett Napier to the latest Bentley EXP Speed 8 Le Mans racer. Dunhill continues to supply the great and good with their travelling requisites.

The first mention of the company was as long ago as 1793 when a Dunhill ancestor was "concerned with outfitting for horse traffic". The next 100 years passed relatively uneventfully until, in 1893, 21-year-old Alfred Dunhill took over his father's business, which sold horse leathers, saddlery and accessories for carriages in the Euston Road, London.

Although he had served an apprenticeship in harness-making and travelled with a pony and cart selling carriage blinds, Alfred was quick to abandon horse traction for motor cars as soon as the 1896 Locomotives on Highways Act raised the national speed limit from 4mph (with a red flag man walking in front) to a slightly less restrictive 12mph.

In 1897, Alfred launched into the manufacture of motor accessories, for

which he coined the name "Motorities". Despite the limited market – there were then only a few hundred cars on Britain's largely unmade roads – the bold venture must have paid off quickly, for Alfred was soon to be seen at the tiller of a solid-tyred, Coventry-built Daimler, Britain's first true production car, which, with a price of about £300, cost as much as a house.

The first "Motorities" were, in the main, strictly practical – "real cape leather gloves, with double palms for driving, 3s 6d a pair, will wear out six pairs of ordinary gloves; gauntlets to reach up to the elbow for use when starting or attending to the machinery" – but already there was temptation for the car-proud motorist with the offer of "the 'Pure White' India rubber footboard mats, made to any pattern and fitted by our experienced workmen".

Alfred had found, like his contemporary Henry Ford, that the purchase of the car was only the beginning of the transaction: "I quickly discovered that there were scores of things wanted for the new mode of travel – leather coats, knee aprons, caps with special flaps to afford extra protection, goggles, veils, foot muffs, special funnels, tools, clocks, and even first-aid sets. By these means I attracted practically the whole motoring public to the out-of-the-way premises near King's Cross which, though central for the original trade, were inconvenient for the new class of customer."

It was a class of customer that was growing with amazing speed: in 1897 there were an estimated 650 cars in use in Britain; by the time registration numbers were introduced in 1904, there were 8,500 private cars on the road. The number had doubled a year later and trebled in 1906.

To cater for this growing clientele, Dunhill set up an employment agency for motor mechanics, a motor discount company and published a magazine called Motor Mart.

But it was the accessories that brought in the customers, and in 1903

Dunhill opened some showrooms in Conduit Street, just off Regent's Street, in the West End, selling such gems as the "Patent Collapsible Bexhill Goggles", which "folded into a small case for the waistcoat pocket" and a whole menagerie of fur and leather clothing made from such skins as opossum, squirrel, mink, chinchilla, seal, Russian foal, kid, lambskin, leopard and puma.

There were also bizarre fur-covered facemasks, designed to protect fair complexions from wind, dust and flying insects, and furry foot muffs ("lined lambskin 6s 6d, puma £2 10s"). Photos of models wearing these fur garments made them look like hairy Michelin men, so Alfred, quickly realising that sex appeal sold clothing, used a drawing of a short-skirted cutie in cap, goggles, leather jacket and calf-hugging knee-boots to advertise his "chic motoring attire and equipment".

Nevertheless, the company maintained two separate showrooms, at Nos 2 and 5 Conduit Street, as the curious code of Edwardian proprieties – so attuned to the clandestine affairs of weekend house parties – considered it improper for ladies and gentlemen to buy articles of clothing in the same shop.

The alfresco nature of pioneer motoring was emphasised by such garments as "Umbrella Coats" and "Dunhill's Patent Freer Apron, the most perfect form of Motor Apron yet introduced... designed to fit closely to the legs, thereby giving ample space for steering pillar, ignition manipulation and pedal control".

In 1904, Dunhill's headquarters moved in a more fashionable direction along the Euston Road to an impressive corner site that incorporated showrooms, workshops and offices. Presumably it was where the chauffeurs and footmen came to try on their liveries.

Already Dunhill's 130-page catalogue included 1,334 motoring accessories, including the legendary "Bobby Finders", binocular goggles intended to

detect hidden police traps and guaranteed to "spot a policeman at half a mile even if disguised as a respectable man". These arose from an unfortunate encounter in 1903 between Alfred and the notorious Portsmouth Road police speed trap along the Fairmile at Cobham, Surrey, when he was timed at an alleged 22mph by a police sergeant who refused to take a statement in Dunhill's favour from a witness because his tea was getting cold.

Smarting from the £1 fine imposed on him at Kingston-on-Thames Magistrates' Court, Dunhill did his best to keep fellow motorists out of the courts, offering "speed indicators of every make for motor cars" and "tell-tales for back lamps", for a common cause of prosecution in the early days was that the oil rear lamp had blown out. But those were just the tip of the iceberg where Motorities were concerned, for the new car in those early days was a blank canvas, often sold in chassis form to be clothed in bespoke coachwork to the owner's choice and usually devoid of such necessities as lamps and horn. Dunhill's catalogue was ready to fill the gap, offering a panoply of such "interesting and useful devices" as the Dreadnought hand-made lamp, the Adnair jack, folding ladders "for loading baggage on to the roofs of closed cars", eight-day dashboard clocks, "triple and single exhaust whistles", vacuum flasks and Dunhill's Scroll Horn, "possessed of a very powerful and deep note".

By 1910, the enterprising Mr Dunhill had extended his range to include "Avorities" for the new sport of aviation ("Everything but the Aeroplane" was now the boast) and offered a fetching choice of safety helmets, including a positively medieval device with a steel collar and crown, covered in leather and padded with felt.

There was even a brief venture into car marketing, with Dunhill's taking on the agency for the French-built "Tweenie" cyclecar whose friction drive gave a remarkable seven forward speeds and offered "rapid acceleration, top-gear hillclimbing and handiness in traffic akin to the attributes of a

high-powered motorcycle". Happily, the last surviving Tweenie was acquired for the Dunhill Museum in the late 1990s by its curator Peter Tilley and was displayed at last year's Goodwood Festival.

The 1920s saw a radical change in Dunhill's market: cars were now sold equipped with lamps and horns, and the rapidly increasing popularity of saloon cars meant that there was no longer a huge market for specialised motoring clothing. Elaborate picnic sets and foot-warmers – in fact "everything for the tour", including portable baths for use on the Continent – took over.

As did watches and lighters for the Bright Young Things whose style icon, the Prince of Wales, was a dedicated Dunhill customer at a new shop in Duke Street in the heart of West End clubland, where a monocled and morning-suited manager attended to a client list that included Winston Churchill, Noel Coward, Somerset Maugham, PG Wodehouse and Ivor Novello.

If Dunhill's had become the "ultimate lifestyle brand", Alfred's bushy-bearded brother Bertie believed in living the ultimate lifestyle, directing the company's by now international empire from his villas in the Italian Alps and at Monte Carlo, where he dallied with a succession of exotic mistresses, one of whom – the lovely Frederika Agnes Stodolowksy – was the wife of a Dunhill employee who had conveniently been given a one-way ticket to Australia. Alfred, too, fell under the spell of the high life and ran off one day with a fisherman's daughter in his Rolls-Royce...

The brothers died in the early 1950s, but the company continues to be run by the Dunhill family to this day and involvement with motoring continues alongside the menswear, luggage and fashionable accoutrements more than a century after Alfred devised his first Motority. The "Everything but the car" rule was broken again in the 1990s with the Alfred Dunhill DB7, a limited edition of 150 Aston Martins finished in a unique shade of platinum paint.

Latest addition to the range is the D-type watch, whose profile is inspired by that of the Le Mans-winning 1950s Jaguar: no doubt it will eventually find its way into the Dunhill Museum alongside the "MC" pipe designed by Speed king Sir Malcolm Campbell and smoked by King George VI. And did you know that when Donald Campbell's body was recovered from Lake Coniston, they found a Dunhill lighter in his pocket?