

The People's Car & John T Buckingham

Norm Darwin ©

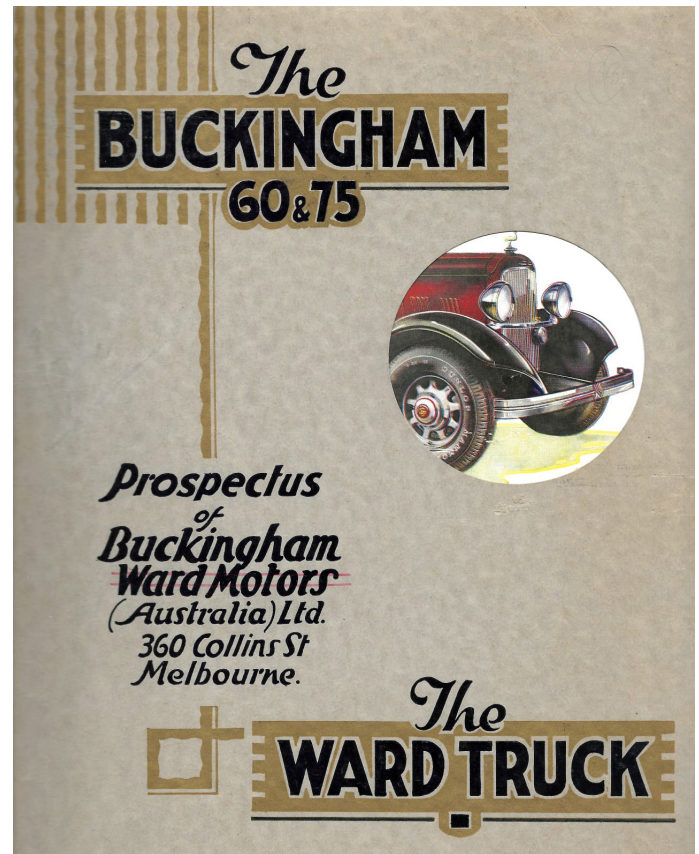
The term 'The People's Car' has been used by many to suggest the subject vehicle was owned by the people and was priced accordingly. The VW was perhaps the original 'People's car', then the T Ford was also a People's car.

In Australia there have been three attempts at producing a 'People's Car'. The Hartnett is the best known and a search of 'Trove' using the term returns many references to newspaper items concerning Hartnett's dream of producing an automobile.

Before the Hartnett, in April 1947, John Buckingham and John Dillon, two men who were involved with past attempts at Australian car manufacture, registered The People's Car (Australia) Ltd. Directors included R C Dyer (grazier), J Aitken (builder), K Pickford (grazier) and A E Boquest (wholesale butcher). This effort was also connected to a previously proposed Pengana car by Buckingham who would feature in two further car proposals.

Who was John Thomas Buckingham? Born to Howard Buckingham and Ann Dunstan in 1897 (one record suggests 1892, this is possibly a transcription error), John was made a Ward of the State (Victoria). In 1919 he took over Richardson's garage in Mildura, agents for Studebaker and Overland, with a Mr Edwards. In 1924 Buckingham patented 'Improvements in Resilient Wheels' and formed The Buckingham Floating Hub Company Ltd to protect his invention for the replacement of spokes in a motor car and truck wheels in 1925.

By 1926 Buckingham had moved to Footscray with his wife of 10 years, Pearl May Dunstan and formed a partnership with O S Jensen to run a garage called Spencer Motors P/L. Three years later he joined Alfred Thomas Ward, a local pastry cook, to form Buckingham & Ward to manufacture cars and trucks under the name Hamard, after the last three letters of



Cover of the Buckingham 8 page prospectus.

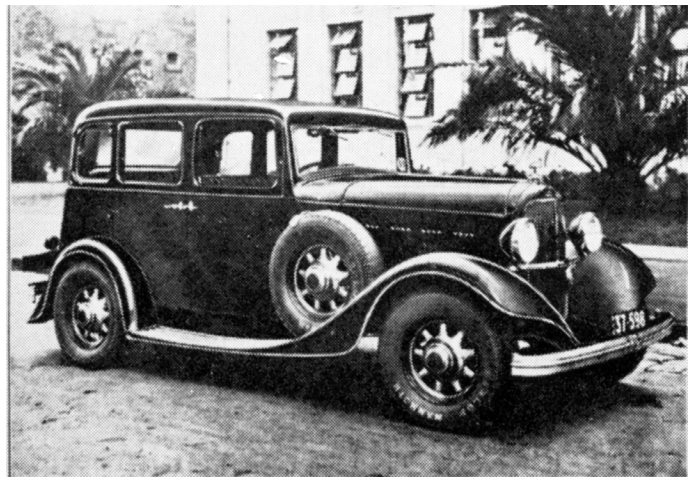
the surnames. Hamard Motors Ltd was subsequently registered in 1930. By early 1933 the car was known as a Howard after his father and capital was recorded as £10,000.¹

By July 1933 the car's name had again changed, now to Buckingham. A specification and 8-page prospectus based on a locally made 21.7hp 4-cylinder engine was underway with a prototype chassis being displayed at the 1933 Melbourne Motor Show. Buckingham Ward Motor Car Manufacturers Ltd, with a capital of £500,000 was registered at the same time.² Four months later Buckingham (Aust) Ltd. was registered with £1,000,000 capital and additional directors, Albert Davies, Roger O'Halloran and William Luke Lee.³ Both a 4-door 60 sedan and a 2-door 75 coupé were being proposed for production with a tourer and roadster model to follow. A commercial version, the Ward truck, was also promoted. Buckingham and Ward reported they had purchased the engineering

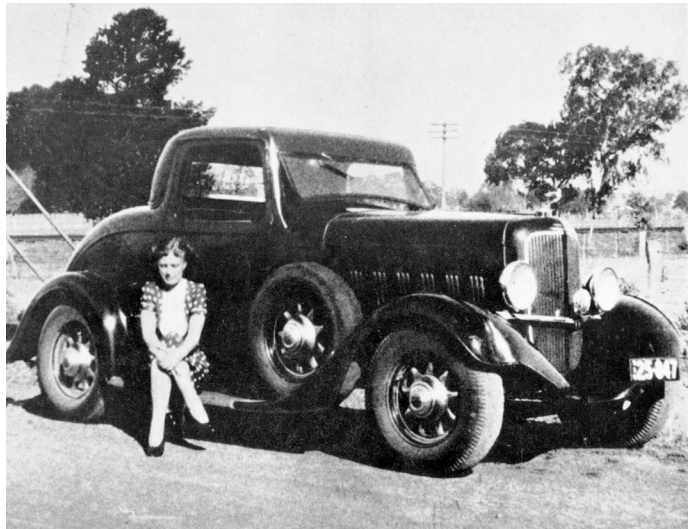
firm of Humble & Sons of Geelong to facilitate production, closer to the truth is a report explaining they had only leased the Vulcan foundry, a part of Humble & Sons.⁴ Humble & Sons were sold to W E Davies P/L in 1939. Only very few Buckingham vehicles were sold despite expectations of 100 cars per week. Parts for the Buckingham vehicles were made by H V McKay (Castings), Mephram, Ferguson and Co (chassis), A T Richardson (steering, differential and gearbox), Henderson Springs (springs and brakes) and Elite Motor Bodies of South Yarra for the bodywork.

A report in March 1934 suggested production was imminent however in February 1935 shareholders of Buckingham and Ward asked the Crown Law Department to investigate the financial position after Buckingham told them he had to liquidate the company, he had failed to produce any accounts at shareholders meetings and refused to meet. At this time there were only two registered companies, Buckingham Ward Motors P/L (1930) with £10,000 capital and Buckingham and Ward Motors (Aust) Ltd. with a £1,000,000 capital and William Luke Lee acting as secretary. For the next five years nothing was heard of Buckingham. Buckingham & Ward appear to have reverted to repairs until Buckingham's dream of producing a car resurfaced, this time with Ralph Melville Curry and William R White, under the Pengana Motor Industries P/L banner. Pengana was Aboriginal for Hawk.

Additional directors were William Luke Lee, James Chisholm Dillion (MLA), William James Grant and Sir Thomas Blamey. William Lee announced that Pengana was formed as a result of an Australian Government's call for car manufacturing plans in 1937, this had arisen from a tariff board enquiry.⁵ Lee also suggested Pengana would purchase the American Hupmobile factory that was in liquidation.⁶ A Footscray engineering company famous for making water pipes, Mephram, Ferguson & Co., were to produce the chassis for Pengana as they had the Buckingham.⁷ Pengana said they



The Buckingham 60 Sedan. SLV Paynting Collection



The Buckingham 75 Coupe. SLV Paynting Collection

SOMETHING REALLY NEW

AN ALL - AUSTRALIAN TRUCK

SEE IT AT STAND X NORTHERN GALLERY.

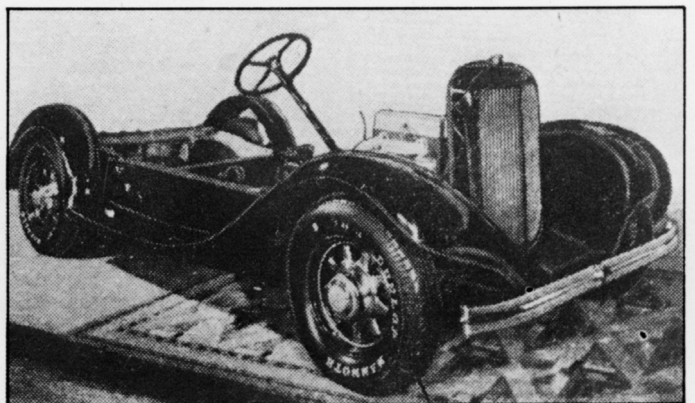
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Visitors are invited to inspect the Australian-built Chassis and component parts of cars and trucks. The chassis has recently completed a 10,000 miles' hard road test.

BUCKINGHAM & WARD MOTORS PTY. LTD.

COLLINS HOUSE, 360 COLLINS-STREET, MELBOURNE.

Advert from the 1933 Melbourne Motor Show catalogue.



Buckingham chassis as displayed in the 1933 Melbourne Motor Show. SLV

had bench tested an engine designed and built by William R White in 1935.⁸ Pengana was established with £50,000 capital on 4 January 1939 however Lee was soon reporting to the press this would be increased to £2,000,000. A factory site was selected in Essendon on land controlled by Dillon and the company said they were ready to start. Pengana soon ran into problems, directors resigned leaving Buckingham and Lee sole owners by November 1939. No actual vehicle was produced.

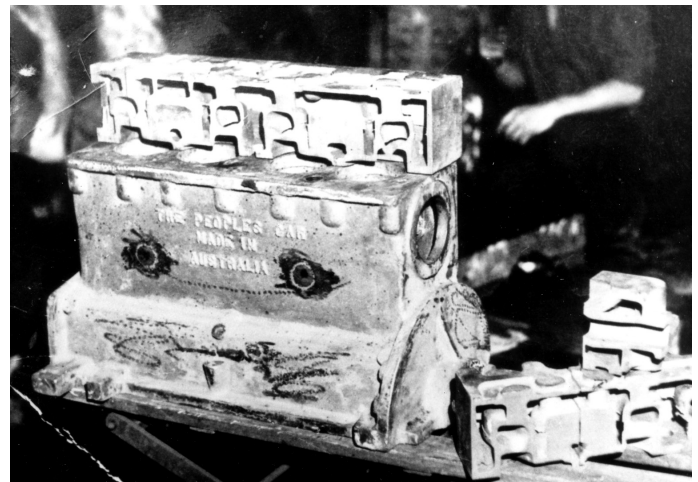
Smith's Weekly weighed into the story in January 1940 suggesting Messrs Buckingham and Lee were two gentlemen who were involved in previous ill-fated enterprises in which money was lost and *Smith's Weekly* had not seen anything to doubt Pengana could do what it projected. Buckingham was still pushing the Pengana car at the end of the war when he told Federal Government he was good to produce a 27hp 6-cylinder car that would cost £275.⁹ Nothing further came of this proposal.

News of the next Buckingham car proposal surfaced in Horsham Victoria where Archibald McIntyre was recorded by the local paper as have been involved in the manufacture of a 4-cylinder block casting with "The People's Car" "Made in Australia" cast in the side. McIntyre worked at May and Millar's foundry and as a moulder, was interviewed in 1997 by automotive historian, Ivan Hoffman. McIntyre recalled making patterns and then components for the engine. The *Horsham Times* photographed the engine and those involved in its production, McIntyre was present when four men associated with the People's car company arrived and told him to "burn the thing and stop the motor [production], we don't want a car made in Australia".

McIntyre was upset as the castings they had made were fed back into the furnace and destroyed. McIntyre believed the company making the engine had American finance, (this may have come about through the Hupmobile story) though he could not recall the company name, he also thought the car would be made in Sydney and said the foundry was



Ralph Curry, wife and daughter. This is the only image of one of the Directors.
Curry Family



The People's car engine block as produced by May and Millar's foundry in Horsham.
Horsham Times

working on other components that were then being fitted to a chassis on site. Buckingham had registered The People's Car (Australia) Ltd with a capital of £2,000,000, a significant amount in 1947, as it was in 1939, he also planned to manufacture aeroplanes, seaplanes, motorcycles and bicycles. The People's Car (Australia) Ltd and John Buckingham was last in the news in 1949 seeking an import licence for Toyota cars and trucks.¹⁰ The firm also advertised for agents to sell the BN and BS People's Car truck in early 1950, they were Toyota BN and BS trucks

for which they had no import licence and the timing, just 4 after the end of conflict with the Japanese, was not the best.¹¹

Was Buckingham just unlucky that three enterprises collapsed owing money? Perhaps; one of his directors, William James Grant, was severely criticised at a hearing, "This is a shocking bankruptcy. He has left a trail of loans and wreckage" said registrar C E Troyahn. Grant appears to be the only director taken to court, however *Smith's Weekly* made it clear money had disappeared. Were these three separate cars? I expect not, Buckingham would have been left with the remains of chassis and engines that would have been easily reconfigured into new proposals, what appears to have happened is his other directors were more interested in their pockets than Buckingham's dream of building an Australian car.

There is no link between the Buckingham People's car and the Hartnett car, they were completely different designs made for different materials, the Hartnett was predominantly aluminium.

Endnotes

- 1 'Australian Car', *Mail* (Adelaide), 14 Feb 1931, 14; Australian Car Planned, *Register News* (Adelaide), 2 Feb 1931, 22.
- 2 'New Industry', 1933, *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga), 3 July, 1.
- 3 New registrations, *The Argus* (Melb.), 1 Nov 1933, 4.
- 4 All-Australian Motor Cars, *Sunraysia Daily* (Mildura), 5 Sept 1925, 6.
- 5 'Australian car to be made at Geelong', *The Argus* (Melbourne), 24 March 1934, 22; 'Australian Motor Cars', *The Age* (Melb.), 24 March 1934, 23.
- 6 'Manufacture of Cars', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 Jan 1940, 9; Hupmobile was still operating until mid-1939 and Lee probably meant the engine and chassis tooling rather than the whole factory.
- 7 'Australian Motor Cars - Manufacturing Plans - An Australian-Made Engine', *The Age* (Melb.), 18 February 1937, 10.

the plans we had!



Here are the moulders who helped produce the People's Car engine block in Horsham in 1947. Some of the workers are dead, others have moved on and a few still live in Horsham. The names as Arch McIntyre remembers them are:
 BACK, standing, from left, Reg McCartney, Hughie Brand, Harry Devlin, Bill Friend, Bob McKie, Jack Hodge, Cliff Lane.

CENTRE, Happy Wilson, Des Doran, Jack Stout, Arch McIntyre, Wally Parfett, Bram Waits, Ken Freeman, obscured.

FRONT, Wally Hooper, Alan Waits, Bill Allen, unknown, Bill Wilson, George Esulch, Syd Parfett, Bill Harders. In the foreground are Ivan Parfett, Jock Curran.

AGENTS WANTED IMMEDIATELY



THE PEOPLE'S CAR (Aust.) LIMITED
 announce the forthcoming release of their
1950 MODEL TRUCKS

"BM" (4 ton) and "BS" (1½-2 ton)

★ The People's Car "BM" and "BS" trucks are designed to meet the exacting requirements of Australian transportation and agricultural conditions, with performance and price comparable to latest overseas trucks.

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 323 BOURKE STREET, MELBOURNE. TEL. CENT. 1055. BOX No. 2699X, G.P.O.

Advertisement for the Toyota BM and BS truck under the People's Car banner. Trove

- 8 'Australian Made Cars - Conference at Canberra', *The Age*, 14 Nov 1939, 7; Beruldsen, J *Beneath the Bonnet*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire Victoria., 1989,, 113.
- 9 'Australian-Made Motor Cars', *The Age* (Melb.) 10 Nov 1944, 5.
- 10 'Licence sought from Japan', *The Argus* (Melb.), 9 August 1949, 5
- 11 'Agents wanted immediately', *The Argus* (Melb.), 10 February 1950, 9.