

## Uncle Clifford's First Car

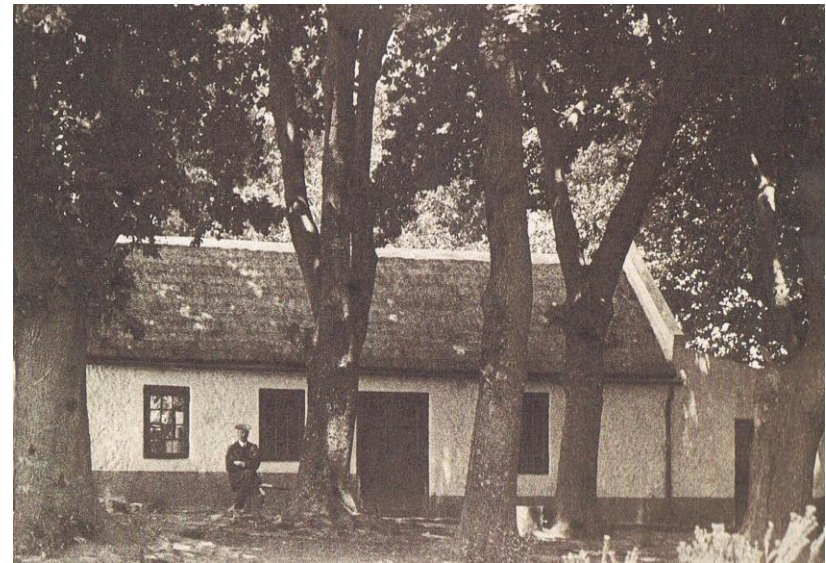
Uncle Clifford lived a long, long time ago. In fact, about a hundred years ago. He lived all by himself on an apple farm in Elgin. Elgin was the valley in South Africa where farmers grew apples which they sent all the way to England by ship. So that our grandmothers and grandfathers could eat fresh fruit during the winter before the English apples ripened in the summer.



**Uncle Clifford when he was a student at Cambridge University**

Uncle Clifford was a clever man. When he finished school in Cape Town, he went to one of England's most famous universities, the University of Cambridge. And studied there. But something happened to him at Cambridge. Nobody quite knows what. He began to be a bit odd. And when he returned home, Ted and Harry, who were his brothers,

decided to look after him. They gave him a house on the farm. And they gave him some money each month to spend. And for the rest of his life, Uncle Clifford didn't have to work. He never had to go to a job every day like the rest of us.



**The house where Uncle Clifford, with his brothers Ted and Harry, lived when they started farming in Elgin**

Then a big thing happened. The first motor cars arrived in Cape Town. And people very soon decided it was much quicker driving around in a car than in a pony trap or a cart. So Uncle Clifford decided to buy a car for himself. He loved it. And one day he thought

he would try and drive it all the way to Cape Town by himself. Up until then, he had always had to go by train – which was a steam train in those days. Or take a horse and cart, and that took two whole days!

Now the roads in those days weren't smooth and tarred like now. The road Uncle Clifford had to drive along was a stony, gravelly sort of track. There were



**The road Clifford took over the Hottentot Holland Mountains to Cape Town**

lots of potholes and rocky corrugations. But the car bumped along beautifully. After a few miles, Uncle Clifford and his car got to the mountain pass which went down the steep sides of the Hottentot Holland Mountains to the Cape Flats below. He carefully drove down the pass. And after a couple of hours he got safely to Cape Town.

There were almost no cars in Church Square when he arrived. So he just left his shiny new car in the middle of the square. It was a beautiful hot summer's day. He took a walk down Cape Town's main street to the sea. There at the bottom of Adderley Street was a



line of palm trees along the beach. And workers were having a dip during their lunch break. Luckily, Uncle Clifford had put on his swimming costume when he had got up that morning. So he took off his shirt and trousers and had a swim. When he had dried off in the sun, he went back to fetch the car.

Oh goodness, what did he find? Church Square had filled up with quite a lot of cars. One was parked on one side of his car. Another on the other side. But the real problem was the third car. It was parked right in front of him.

What to do? Luckily, Uncle Clifford, as I have told you, was a very clever man. And luckier still, there were four men hanging about in the shade on one side of the square. Uncle Clifford called out to them.

“Could you come and help me please?” (Only, he spoke to them in Dutch because that was the language the men who were hanging about spoke.) “Kan julle my kom help?” shouted Clifford.

The men didn’t have much else to do right then. And wanting to help, they hurried over. Clifford squeezed into the driving seat. He gripped the steering wheel.



**Uncle Clifford’s car looked a bit like this Essex 2-seater in 1920**

“Each of you stand at one corner of the car,” he said.

“And lift it,” he added.

The four men bent down. Two of them grasped the front bumper. The other two took hold of the back. The car was awfully heavy. But the men heaved and panted. And with a big effort, they managed to lift the car off the ground. Just at that moment, someone came round the corner into the square. He knew Uncle Clifford.

“Hey, what you are doing?” he shouted, as he saw the four men staggering a bit, and trying to carry the car backwards. The men paused. Uncle Clifford

looked round. And the car swayed dangerously.

“Can’t you see the problem?” shouted Clifford. “My car is boxed in by these other three.”

Clifford’s friend burst into laughter. He nearly bent over double, he was laughing so much. “But, Clifford,” he said, “why don’t you put your car into reverse, and drive out?”

“Reverse?” said Uncle Clifford. “Drive out?” he said. “Don’t be silly. I’ve had a motorbike for years and know perfectly well machines don’t have a reverse gear!”

“Oh yes, they do,” said his friend, straightening up and trying to stop laughing. “Every car has a reverse gear. You just slip the gear lever into reverse, like this, and away you go – backwards!”

And that is how Uncle Clifford, who you remember was a very clever man, learned something new about his first motor car.

#### **Endnote**

Clifford Molteno was my father’s uncle. He was born in 1878 before the first motor cars had been invented. A sweet-natured man who his sister Maria said was ‘very quiet and loves his own society better than any other’. Many delightful stories have been passed down in the family about him. This story is what was told me as a boy. But, of course, I have had to make up some of the details, including the actual conversation. **Robert Molteno, 2013**