

Charles Follett

A car salesman par excellence, his brusque style was infuriating, but no-one could argue with his capacity to find customers



Left
Charles Follett presenting ERA driver Prince Bira with the trophy for winning the 1937 London Grand Prix at Crystal Palace.

Follett bought the Berkeley Street showroom with a bank loan, and filled it with shiny new Alvises, but the cars weren't glamorous enough. So he doorstepped Vanden Plas, another business in financial trouble, and said that he wanted the best-looking sporting bodies – with his direct influence into their rakish lines. Prepare to make money, he thundered, because he was willing to order them by the hundred for his Alvis chassis... at £195 a go rather than the usual £600. Follett's handsome Speed 20s and 4.3s quickly became ultra-desirable. And having cultivated this stylish and powerful new image for Alvis, Follett campaigned the cars in motor sport.

His debut as an Alvis driver came in 1933 at Brooklands in a 12/50 with a racy, red, cowled two-seater body. This car won its first race the following year – driven for Follett by WE Humphries – at the August meeting, and at the 1935 event Follett drove it to a second place, Harry Bowler's Bentley 3 Litre beating him by just 0.2sec. At the 1935 Autumn BARC Meeting, Follett's green Alvis Speed 20 with full touring body won the October Long Handicap, lapping at 105mph. In 1936 the pair grabbed a second at the Easter races, and lapped at over 108mph.

But Follett overstepped the mark in the Torquay rally, which he won in a Speed 20 saloon. His crime? He beat Alvis's works cars, and the ensuing rift between Coventry and Mayfair proved absolute. It was probably Alvis's loss, because Follett started selling other sporting marques: first Railton (he campaigned his black 'Light Sports Tourer' with gusto, and great results, on track and trial), then Lea-Francis and later the American-engined, supercharged Lammas-Graham.

After the Second World War, Follett found the perfect new partner in Jensen, for which his company acted as the London showcase and distributor right up to the marque's demise. Follett, however, sold his firm in 1961, remaining on the board for two years before retiring to his Wiltshire farm to breed cattle and work his land virtually single-handedly. He died in June 1982, but the showroom was such a London fixture that it survived for years afterwards, still redolent of style and racing but usually stuffed with secondhand Porsches.

NATURALLY FOR a larger chap, Charles Follett demanded a spacious car. But for his customers it was all about comfort, effortless deportment and, with commodious luggage space, long-distance touring. Meanwhile, he liked to press the accelerator pedal with an outsize brogue and feel a surge of power.

These were points Follett made to Alvis top brass in 1930. He told managing director TG John he needed time alone in the boardroom, and that he'd ring for him when he was ready. This was reluctantly agreed to. When John was summoned, he found £895 fanned across the table in crisp new £1 and ten-shilling notes.

'That,' Follett boomed, 'is what a customer has to lay out on one of your cars. Isn't it important you offer them everything they want?' He then pointed out that Alvis cars, while of great quality, needed to be bigger, more attractive, but not much more expensive to snag monied West End customers.

It was the first of his many confrontations with John and Alvis engineering chief Captain Smith-Clark. They may have inwardly loathed Follett, but they needed his car-selling skills because Alvis was floundering. Once they'd got their act together with the Speed 20, powerful enough to accept heavier coachwork, Follett took cars as they flowed off the production line, ordered in batches of 100, and put Alvis

into contention with Bentley, Lagonda and Sunbeam for style and oomph.

Follett, the consummate wheeler-dealer, was born in 1899. By his early 20s he was scouring provincial Britain for choice secondhand motors and funnelling them into London's showrooms, especially around the car trade Mecca of Great Portland Street. Most proprietors would buy sight-unseen because they knew Follett's quality would be bang-on and there'd be plenty of mileage, profit-wise.

Once he was asked to breakfast by three of his contacts who'd bought a showroom at 18 Berkeley Street, just off Piccadilly. With it came the London Lancia agency. Would he run it for them? By the following morning he'd agreed. As he recounted to *Motor Sport's* Bill Boddy in 1972, he regarded the Lancia Lambda as 'looking hellish', so he designed a new body with a more inviting interior. Lancia was unhappy with the modifications, and the relationship soured.

With his expertise in second-guessing customers' tastes, Follett was exasperated that coachbuilders seemed incapable of building attractive bodies. He'd already supervised the build of a drophead coupé on a Bentley Speed Six, approving its sleek lines only with the hood folded and then letting the bodymaker (Maythorn of Biggleswade) work out the fixed position. So he knew it could be done.