

Ephemera

F X Velarde in his 1927 Gordon England 'Cup' Austin 7

The thread of information on Francis Xavier Velarde is thin, the practice archive was destroyed in an overzealous house clearing and most of the people who worked with him are now dead. Amongst the fragments passed along by his surviving son, Giles Velarde, were several cardboard boxes containing; postcards, diaries, a sketch book, correspondence, his RIBA Godwin & Wimperis Medal, a letter confirming his OBE and a collection of photographs. With Giles's assistance, we sifted through and tried to identify the people and places captured in this time capsule of ephemera. The photographs were mainly of buildings but with a few of the man himself. The image above is one of those few; it is of Velarde outside the entrance to the Casino de la Pergola, Jean-da-Luz, France, taken in 1928 by his close friend the photographer Edward Chambre Hardman.

Velarde was introduced to Chambre Hardman by his former tutor and mentor, Sir Charles Reilly, at the Sandon Studios Society in Liverpool. This was an independent art school established in a terrace on what is now the garden of Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts before moving to the Bluecoat Art Centre in 1907. An important centre for the artistic and cultural community in Liverpool, visitors to their dining room included: Igor Stravinsky, Augustus John, Margot Fonteyn and Lawrence Olivier. This also where he met Herbert Tyson Smith, the sculptor with whom he would work for the rest of his life and who would produce his gravestone.

Velarde used Chambre Hardman to photograph many of his pre-war churches, prints of which were also identified in Giles's box of bits. The originals passed to the National Trust along with the photographers studio and house on Rodney Street in Liverpool. This studio is open to the public and provides a fascinating insight into the cultural life of the city between the 1930s and 1960s.

It was probably, the well-connected, Reilly who suggested the pair for the job of the building review that would lead to the photograph with the car. He was always keen to promote his former students amongst whom Velarde was something of a favourite.

The photograph was one of a series taken by Chambre Hardman to illustrate an article by Velarde for the Architects Journal, published in December 1928. The building review was of a dramatic new casino entirely in concrete designed by Robert Maillart-Stevens and is a rare example of Velarde committing his thoughts to paper. The point of interest and the object of this text is not however Mr Maillart-Stevens elegant casino but Velarde's rather racy sports car.

The car is an Austin Seven; this was the British answer to the Model T Ford, a small family car capable of mass production and available at a limited price. Its popularity is evident by the numbers produced, 290,000 by 1939. The version we see here is not this sensible family model, Velarde is seated in a Gordon England 'Cup' edition. It is a fast sporty two seater with no room for a family, although he did manage to cram in Chambre Hardman and all his photographic equipment. Designed by the racing driver E C Gordon England, this road model was developed from a record setting Brooklands race car and utilised a plywood body clad in aluminium panels to reduce weight and enable higher speeds. Each car sold (£150 in 1928) came with a Brooklands certificate guaranteeing a top speed of 80mph. Considering its diminutive size and that the seats were fixed directly to the chassis the top speed must have been something of a white-knuckle ride. Here was

a standard popular and conventional vehicle souped up to achieve maximum performance and add more than a little of the racetrack glamour to the everyday family run-around.

Velarde loved travelling, invariably by car, often as in this image driving through France to Spain or travelling down the Rhine with Sir Charles Reilly. The few pages of his diary that survived in the boxes are full of details of his journeys, the stops along the way, the quality of the rooms and above all the food. His passion for driving was curtailed by a serious accident at a garage in 1932, (the insurance claim was also detailed in the archive fragments), when he was hit by a lorry resulting in damage to his legs. It is perhaps with some irony that Chambre Hardman's photograph titled 'The Mountaineer' is of Velarde who found walking difficult and climbing impossible. By the outbreak of the Second World War Velarde's mobility was sufficiently compromised from complications caused by this accident that his wife Madge, who had trained to become a military driver, would also take on this role for her husband. The sports car of his youth was traded for the practicalities of larger saloon models.

His first car, the Austin Seven, purchased without the compromises required for transporting a family or the consideration of comfort that comes with age was the vehicle that perhaps illuminates a little of his character. A modest man with an eye for occasional excess and a love of stylish objects. He dressed conservatively in conventional suits but carried some gold leaf around in his pocket, (which his wife considered vulgar).

Here is the motorised equivalent, a humble car customised to achieve something more powerful. The standard chassis cheap and easy to assemble fitted with a bespoke body and racing trims to create speed and glamour, much like the churches Velarde designed. Simple brick boxes enhanced by gold mosaic details and coloured ceilings elevating them to the extraordinary, the sports version of the sensible family church.

Attempts to trace this vehicle, registration number CM7755, have met with no success, so, as with much of the practice archive, it remains lost to the mists of time.

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