



Charlie Hankin with young Alex in 1930.

Hankin's Garage, Alresford in the early 1920s.

Family wheels still turning at Alresford

by LESLIE DREW

HANKIN'S Garage, West Street, Alresford, is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year. Garages today are accepted as being part of the local commercial scene in the same way as butchers and grocers, but what possessed someone, in 1913, in a town only half the size it is today, to even think of such a venture? Charlie Hankin did, and at the time no doubt, many tongues must have clicked at such foolhardiness. No one could make a living out of such a trade. Only the gentry possessed horseless carriages. Even Charlie couldn't have foreseen a time when the general public as a whole would find a garage a necessity, nor even dream that in Alresford they would be served by a third generation Hankin.

When Thomas Hankin, landlord of the Swan Hotel, died in 1906, his 25-year-old son Thomas Charles, "Charlie", left London and came to Alresford to assist his mother with the running of the hotel. The Swan is an historic building, reputed to have been used by Oliver Cromwell, and once an important staging post for carriages travelling from Southampton to London. Situated on the corner of the West Street and Station Road, much of its custom at the turn of the century, was connected with the railway. Travel in those days was at a leisurely pace, and train passengers would stop at The Swan for an hour or two for refreshment, before travelling on by road to the many big estates around.

Some of the owners of the big houses sent their own transport for guests, but the

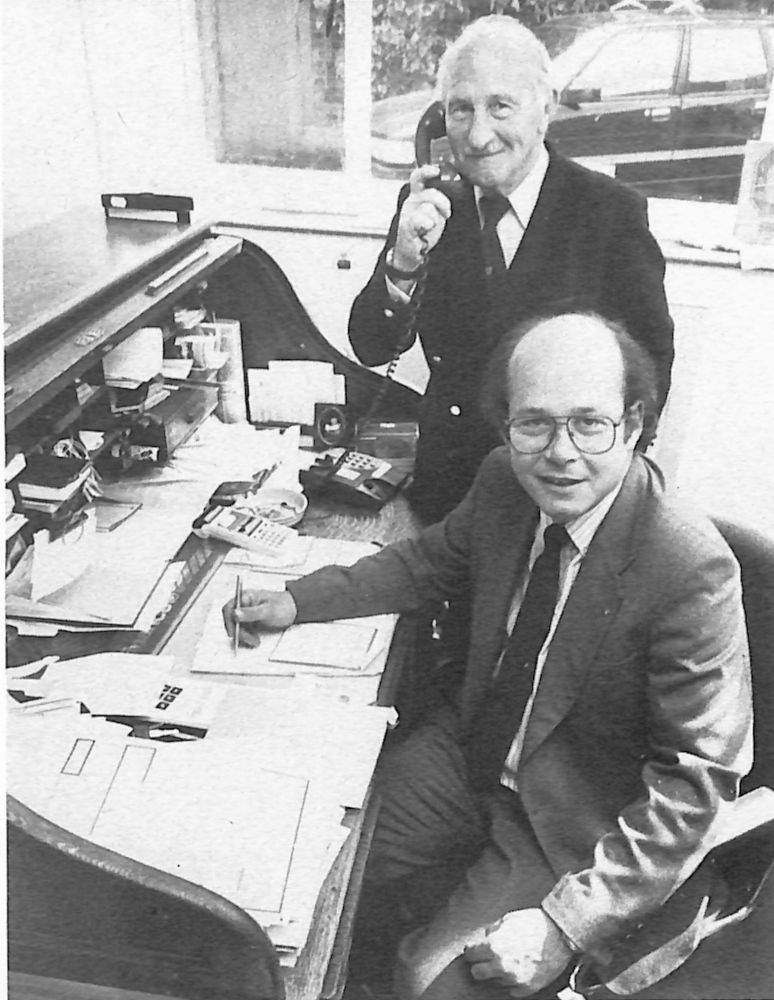
hotel also supplied a taxi service. Charlie was much taken with the new motorcar in the hotel's possession, so much so that he would be able to maintain and service it properly. From then on, Charlie's days were spent far more in the backyard of The Swan, than in the hotel itself, and when his mother decided to retire, he was not interested in taking over. He, mother and sister, moved to a rented house in Grange Road, and Charlie bought a repair shop for traction engines further along West Street. His idea was to open a garage, as cars were being seen more and more frequently in the area. Charlie had already begun looking after other people's cars for them in the back of The Swan, so he was assured of a few customers with which to begin his trade.

The war hindered progress, just as ironically war was to do twenty years later. Never of robust health, Charlie was not fit enough for active service, and in order to earn a living, he turned his business premises into a works for making under sub-contract, shell components. The main contractor was Wadham Brothers of Waterlooville. As Alresford had no electricity supply, and lathes had to be powered, the problem was overcome by

Charlie driving a generator by a gas engine using the town's gas supply.

By the end of the war, motorised transport was becoming commonplace, and Charlie was able to turn his attention once again to motorcars. But again his progress in this line of business was slowed down, this time because he contracted the infamous Spanish 'Flu. His wife, Jane Bailey, whom he had married in 1915, and who in 1918 had presented him with their son Charles Alexander "Alex", successfully nursed him to a full recovery.

The greatest need for a garage was in the area of repairs, as for several years, few new cars were to be seen. However, as time passed and car manufacturing increased in volume, Hankin's garage became agents for Ford, Austin, Morris and Standard. Before the war, and for a short time afterwards, fuel supplies had to be collected from the railway station and sold in cans. As demand increased, fuel companies delivered the cans, and then introduced tanks and petrol pumps. Charlie had his first petrol pump in 1923. It was put outside the premises, beside the road, but Charlie was promptly told to remove it, as the land belonged to the County Council. As a result, his first pump



*Seventy-five years on - 1988 Father and son
- Alex and John Hankin at the same desk.*

it was the repair side of the business which dominated. Alex now had 25 men working for him. As new cars started arriving, Hankin's became dealers for Morris and Standard, and the sales side slowly began to grow. As car manufacturing companies merged, so Hankin's saw changes to the franchise. Today they are an Austin/Rover dealer.

A cottage at the end of the premises had been demolished in the 1920s in order to provide a showroom. Thirty years later, Alex extended this to give the building virtually the look it has today. Expansion was also going on behind the scenes, into part of the old Alresford Brewery stabling. In the 1960s the rear of the works was roofed to create a modern workshop, leaving the old workshop at the front, to become more showroom space. Sales were now in greater demand than repairs.

Alex inherited from his parents the community spirit. He has been an Alresford parish councillor for very many years, and served seven terms of office as chairman. He is a Justice of the Peace and an Alresford Town Trustee.

Alex and Jean have three children, Peter, Diana and John, and it was the youngest of them who expressed an interest in coming into the business. John Hankin followed his formal education with a business management course, then gained car sales experience in Kent. He returned to Alresford in 1974 to work with his father for the next nine years, until Alex decided to retire five years ago, and John took over as Managing Director.

To the casual observer in Alresford, things haven't changed much at Hankin's in recent years, but John, now 38, is no more standing still than his father did before him. A new paint shop has been created, the workshop refurbished, and the showroom modernised. Yes, and computers have arrived too, in order to give customers a more efficient service.

John's staff number 20, and among them are some of his father's faithful employees, including the service manager, Denis Biggs, who has been with the family for 45 years, and two employees of 30 years standing. Sales are now the dominating side of the business, with increased activity on bodywork and parts sales, though many locals still see the service side as being most important to them.

For all his modernisation, John still displays a sense of the past and not just with his interest in veteran and vintage cars. In his Managing Director's office, he refuses to part with the great solid bureaux with its mass of small drawers, which his father and grandfather sat at before him, and which he thinks belonged to his great grandfather at The Swan. He sees a continuing need in today's society, for people who want individual care and attention and service from a 'family concern'. Indeed, some people will travel miles for the personal touch to be had at Hankin's, and for them, he is determined to see his business thrive successfully alongside 'the big boys'.

had to be installed inside his shop front, with the arm stretching outside.

In many ways, Charlie Hankin was ahead of his time as a small country town businessman. He was by nature an entrepreneur, always seeking opportunities to expand. Although he bought various premises in Alresford, a petrol filling station at Ropley, and opened a new one at the West Meon Hut, he was not a successful businessman. Worry rather than wealth followed these business ventures, though one success was his corner shop in West Street, dealing with bicycles and motorcycles. Another was due to his knowledge of electrics, which led to him selling radios, and these combined businesses offered employment to local people. Then the years of the depression hit.

In spite of his poor health, Charlie was a workaholic. His wife and son saw little of him except on Sundays, which was family day. He was a great supporter of the parish church and a member of the choir all his life. He was a parish councillor, and captain of the Fire Brigade when he died in 1933. He had been unable to realise any money through the sale of property, there were no buyers, and under the strain of work and worry, his health deteriorated. At 52, he did not have the strength to fight pneumonia.

Alex Hankin was a 14-year old schoolboy when his father died, but he promptly informed his mother he wanted to take over the garage. Jane had never taken a part in her husband's business activities, but she was a spirited lady, and prepared to keep things going until her only son was of age. She found buyers for the petrol stations at Ropley and West Meon,

and this, plus the sale of the cycle and radio business, settled the problem of death duties. The garage however was still close to going under.

The friendship link with the Wadham Brothers, now of Portsmouth as well as Waterlooville, had been maintained after the war, and following Charlie's death, they offered to take Alex and train him in the business of cars. They also offered Jane an excellent manager in the person of one of their own staff, Captain Norman Mansfield. It was this dedicated man who revived the business after the depression.

By February 1939, Alex had completed his education and been fully trained by Wadhams. He was ready to start in Alresford, taking over the reins gradually from Captain Mansfield. But in September, both he and the captain were called up to serve in the second world war.

Jane Hankin was once more on her own, but she still had with her company secretary John Sayell, who had assisted her through the financial difficulties immediately after her husband's death. Together they somehow kept things going during the war years, and she personally extended her interests in Alresford by becoming a parish councillor and an active member of the Conservative Association.

When the war ended, Captain Mansfield retired, and Alex came home from the Army to take over the business from his mother and John Sayell, almost 13 years after his father's death. Mother decided to retire and live with a relative elsewhere, and Alex and his bride Jean, moved into The Alders, next door to the garage, the home his father had bought shortly before his death.

Again, few new cars were available, and