

HistoryHubUlster

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CAPT. LESLIE PORTER THE MAN WHO DIED TWICE

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“Capt. Leslie Porter, the man who died twice”

History Hub Ulster Chair, Gavin Bamford recently came across a late 1920s/early 1930s photograph of a motor garage posted on a local history Facebook group. The garage was at 20-24 Great Victoria Street, Belfast. That site is now occupied by the former Chamber of Commerce House which currently has a unit on the ground floor occupied by a Tesco Express store. This building was made famous in 1966 when a brick was thrown from it onto the Rolls-Royce taking HM The Queen and HRH the Duke of Edinburgh to an event.



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NEW CAR
YOU ARE INTERESTED IN
FIND OUT IF ITS SPECIFICATION INCLUDES
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- × Four speed gear box?
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- × 12 Volt electrical equipment?
- × Bumpers—front and rear?
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- × Overhead valves?
- × Safety glass throughout?
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- × Window Louvers?
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THESE ARE ALL INCLUDED IN THE
SINGER EQUIPMENT.
THE BEST EQUIPPED AND MOST UP-TO-DATE
CAR IN ITS PRICE CLASS.

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9 H.P. MODEL, including all the above items, etc.	£174
9 H.P. MODEL, including all the above items, etc.	£159

Every day more people are becoming confirmed SINGER enthusiasts. Come and have a trial run. You will be amazed at its performance.

SOLE DISTRIBUTORS FOR NORTHERN IRELAND
LESLIE PORTER, LTD.,
20-24, GT. VICTORIA STREET, BELFAST.
PHONES: 2316 and 2317.

The photograph was posted by Merlin Porter who is the great-grandson of Leslie Porter. Many readers of the Facebook page started commenting on the photo adding to the history and stories around the business. Many of the stories were of the takeover by Archie Phillips of Phillips Garage fame around 1970.

There are a number of articles and biographies (see further reading) around the internet about Leslie Porter, his motor racing days and his life and death later in the Great War. Captain Leslie Porter was a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) and was reported by the Belfast News Letter on 27th October 1916 as missing. It was to be a further three months before his family found out the truth about his death. The Belfast News Letter reported on 22nd January 1917 that Captain Porter, Royal Flying Corps, the well-known Belfast airman and motorist, who has been missing since 22nd October, is now known to have died in the hands of the Germans two days later on 24th October 1916.

What was the story of Leslie Porter and his motoring businesses? This article is mostly researched from the British Newspaper Archives and includes many contemporaneous newspaper reports written in the style of journalism from that period.

Born in 1881, Leslie set up business with his friend George Combe in 1899. It was known as the ‘Northern Motor Company’ and was based at 5 Montgomery Street, Belfast. On 7th November 1901,

the Belfast News Letter reported in an article with the headline **"The Coming of the Motor. Establishment of a Motor Depot in the City"**.

"The Northern Motor Company have just established themselves in premises in Montgomery Street, and already we are pleased to record, doing considerable business. Any desired information can be readily obtained from the courteous head of the establishment, Mr Leslie Porter, a motor expert, who has had considerable experience with all kinds of horseless vehicles, and is, in addition an electrical and mechanical engineer. One of our (newspaper) representatives yesterday had an opportunity, by the courtesy of Mr Leslie Porter, of experiencing the delights of a short drive through the city. One great advantage which the Northern Motor Company provide is that they will lend a motor car to any owner of horses for the purpose of enabling the animals to become accustomed to the machines".

In 1902 the business introduced a *"new type of motor waggon; and, judging by its appearance and capabilities, there is no doubt that it will entirely revolutionise the present clumsy methods of vehicular traffic. It should amply reward an inspection at the premises of Northern Motor Company, Montgomery Street"*.

Leslie Porter was the original 'petrol-head' and was seriously into the motor racing scene. In 1903 he entered the Paris to Madrid motor race driving a 50 horse-power Wolseley together with his mechanic, Willie Nixon. On 25th May 1903 reports started being published in the local Irish newspapers. One headline in the morning paper, Belfast News Letter of 25th May 1903 advised readers **"There is, however, no doubt of the fate of Mr Porter"**. The article continued *"The (Paris to Madrid) motor car race fatalities are all very terrible, and the most shocking of them has unfortunately happened to a Belfast competitor, Mr Leslie Porter, of the Northern Motor Company. He was pinned underneath the overturned car, and burned to death, presumably being drenched with petrol from the reservoir. One can only hope that Mr Porter had been so injured in the collision that he was instantly deprived of consciousness, and was, therefore mercifully saved from the agony of his death"*.



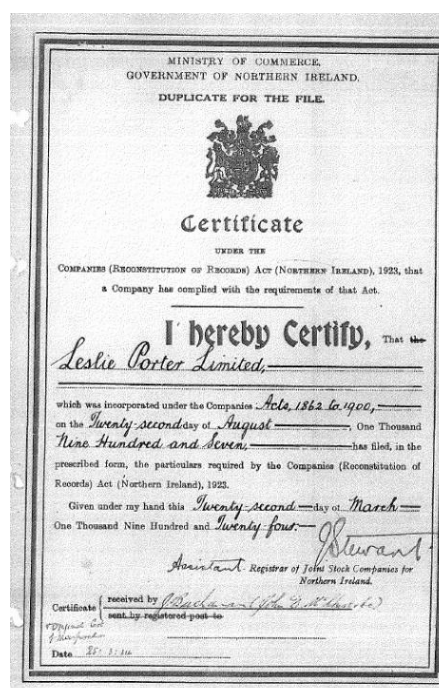
By that evening, the Belfast Telegraph of the same date reported "**Latest Particulars. Mr Willie Nixon Killed**". *"Later information regarding the accident to the car driven by Mr Leslie Porter, points to the fact that it was Mr Willie Nixon, of Cavehill Road, Belfast, who lost his life. The (original) telegram contained the statement that Mr Porter himself had been killed. On enquiry however, it was ascertained that he was safe, but that the intelligence with regard to Mr Nixon was true. It was announced later that the car driven by Mr Porter ran into a woman crossing the road, killing her instantly"*.

On 26th June 1903, the Northern Whig newspaper reported in its '**Law Reports**' column that *"John Hutton, Sons & Co (had) sought an injunction to restrain the defendants (Northern Motor Company) from acting as agents for any other firm for the sale in Ulster of motor vehicles during a period of 5 years from 27th June 1901. The action was later settled on terms that the defendants were to pay the sum of £204 in full discharge"*.

April 1904 saw the Northern Motor Company move to larger and more central premises at 38 Chichester Street, Belfast.

Three years later on 9th March 1907, the Belfast News Letter and other papers reported "**Motor Accident Near Belfast**". The article read *"At an early hour this morning, Mr Leslie Porter, manager of the Northern Motor Company was admitted to the Royal Victoria Hospital suffering from fracture of the ribs, caused by a motor accident near Balmoral. He is reported to be progressing satisfactorily"*.

Later on, in August 1907, Leslie Porter decided to leave the business of Northern Motor Company and set up his own motor company, "**Leslie Porter Limited, Consulting Motor Engineers & Brokers, 38A Queen Street, Belfast**". An advertisement in the 12th August 1907 edition of the Belfast News Letter advised readers that *"We are pleased to inform you that Mr Leslie Porter has been appointed Managing Director of above firm, whose premises will be opened on Wednesday, 14th August, when he will be pleased to give his careful and personal attention to all callers. Mr Porter has over six years practical experience of the motor trade ..."*.



The business of Leslie Porter Limited was incorporated on 22nd August 1907 and formally registered in Northern Ireland on 25th March 1924. Companies House, Belfast holds in their off-line archives the various business returns for the period 18th January 1922 to 26th June 1999.

In a move similar to the legal case of June 1903 the 25th September 1907 edition of the Belfast Telegraph reported in a headline **“Belfast Motor Trade Law Suit - Northern Motor Co Ltd versus Lesley Porter”**. The article continued *“An injunction is sought restraining the defendant Leslie Porter from being connected with a firm carrying on a similar business under the style of Leslie Porter Ltd. The plaintiff is also seeking damages for breach of an agreement dated 11th September 1906 between the two parties not to enter into a business in opposition to the plaintiff”*.

In late 1907 the new business was advertising in the local press as selling Humber Motor Cars and being the sole agent for Daimler Motor Cars.

However, on 25th January 1908, the Irish News & Belfast Morning News ran the headline **“Mr Justice Barton refused the injunction, with costs”** and continued with *“During the case, the defendant stated in an affidavit that Leslie Porter had been engaged with Northern Motor Co Ltd for 3 years with effect from 5th June 1906. On 5th April 1907 the company wrote a cheque to Leslie Porter for £16 13s 4d being his salary to date and intimated that his services would not be required from 5th May 1907. Mr Porter responded “I did not sever my connection with the company; I was dismissed summarily, and as far I know without cause.” Mr Porter also claimed that he had been in an accident and seriously injured being incapacitated for four months. In an affidavit, the plaintiff company stated that the defendant took one of the company’s cars after business hours, and without permission, solely for his own pleasure, and to give a friend and two ladies belonging to a pantomime company then in Belfast a drive after a night’s performance at the theatre. Counsel said that apparently in the course of their peregrinations, they ran over something or other, and came to grief. In a replying affidavit the defendant stated That he took out the car; that he did know the ladies, and that the transaction was purely a business one”*.

On 16th April 1908 the business advertised in the Belfast News Letter that they had moved to **“22A Howard Street, Belfast”** in what they described as the *“Largest garage free to customers”*.

Through 1908 and 1909 Leslie Ported Limited advertised regularly in the local papers that they: were selling Darracq cars; had the finest motor cars for hire; that in an end of season sale were selling Calthorpe and Minerva cars; were now agents for Daimler, Hotchkiss, Arrol-Johnston, Calthorpe and Delage motor cars. The next year, 1910, saw them open up additional premises at **“5A Brunswick Street, Belfast”**. In 1912 the business advertised that they were *“very successful at introducing to Ulster people, Singer cars”*.

In early 1913, the business launched what is thought by the writer to be a marketing campaign by advertising in the Belfast News Letter edition of 18th January 1913 that a **“£100 reward will be paid to anyone giving such information as will lead to the conviction of any person or persons engaged in the motor trade who are making defamatory statements about Arrol-Johnston Cars or any other new cars sold by us”** followed by an advertisement in the Northern Whig on 31st January 1913 stating *“Proof of the low running costs of the Arrol-Johnston. Don’t forget our £100 reward is still open”*.

On 1st July 1914 the auction company, Wm Montgomery & Son advertised in the Belfast News Letter of the **“Salvage sale of a motor car”** continuing with *“The remains of an 11.9 four-seater 1914 Arrol-Johnston, injured by fire, and removed from the premises of Mr H H Martin, Galwally Park, Belfast”*. Henry Herbert Martin and his address was connected to the Belfast building firm, H & J Martin.

War was declared against Germany on 4th August 1914 and on 17th November 1914, the Belfast News Letter reported that **“Four ambulances** are being built by C Hurst and Co on Wolseley chassis with the special Daimler ambulance chassis being supplied by Leslie Porter Ltd. The ambulance bodies being built by Belfast coachbuilders”

Having already learnt to fly in 1915, Leslie Porter volunteered and enlisted into the Royal Flying Corps (RFC) in November 1915. **Barry Niblock’s excellent website** (see further reading) records *“that promotion to Flight Commander came on 1st May 1916 following which he trained as a flying instructor. In the first week of September 1916 while based at Sedgeford in Norfolk Captain Leslie Porter was granted a period of home leave before being sent to the Front. He flew home to Carnalea in his bi-plane and during his stay he performed several spectacular flying displays over Belfast and Bangor. His daring stunts attracted big crowds and, on several occasions, he ‘looped the loop’. At the end of this period of home leave he flew back to Norfolk and the 380-mile flight from Carnalea to Norfolk, via Newcastle-upon-Tyne, took 3 hours 27 minutes.*

In October 1916, 45th Squadron went to France and on 22nd October Captain Leslie Porter led a small group of Sopwith 1½ Strutter aircraft behind enemy lines. His plane did not return. The first message from the War Office intimated that Captain Porter was missing and at the beginning his family harboured hope that he was being held as a Prisoner-of-War. Leslie Porter’s family sought help from several people in high places to try to ascertain his fate. Following representations made by the Crown Princess of Sweden, who was a daughter of the Duke of Connaught, the American Ambassador in Berlin made enquiries. He was informed by the German authorities that Captain Leslie Porter had died on 24th October 1916 and the authorities returned a silver locket that he had been wearing.

Captain Leslie Porter was 35 when he died and he has no known grave. He is commemorated on the Arras Flying Services Memorial in France; in the annals of Helen’s Bay Presbyterian Church and in the Belfast Book of Honour (Page 534).”



Photos courtesy of the Imperial War Museum

Back at home, during Leslie Porter's 'missing' period, the business advertised in the 18th November 1916 edition of the Belfast News Letter that they were now agents for "Daimler, Arrol-Johnston, Singer, Chevrolet and Ford cars".

Following death of Leslie Porter, **Mr Andrew Hunter Wilkinson** was appointed managing director. In 1919 the business was advertising in local newspapers as now being located in "Brunswick Street and Great Victoria Street, Belfast". Mr A H Wilkinson was also attending the Olympia Motor Show on an annual basis for Leslie Porter Limited.



WHICH CAR?

The numerous exhibits at Olympia renders the selection of a car extremely difficult. Now that the exhibition is over, please **CALL AT OUR SHOWROOMS** and we shall be delighted to give you full particulars of the cars which created the greatest sensation of the show,

THE "ARROL-JOHNSTON"
"DAIMLER"
"METALLURGIQUE"
"RILEY"
"GALLOWAY" AND
"DERBY 9."

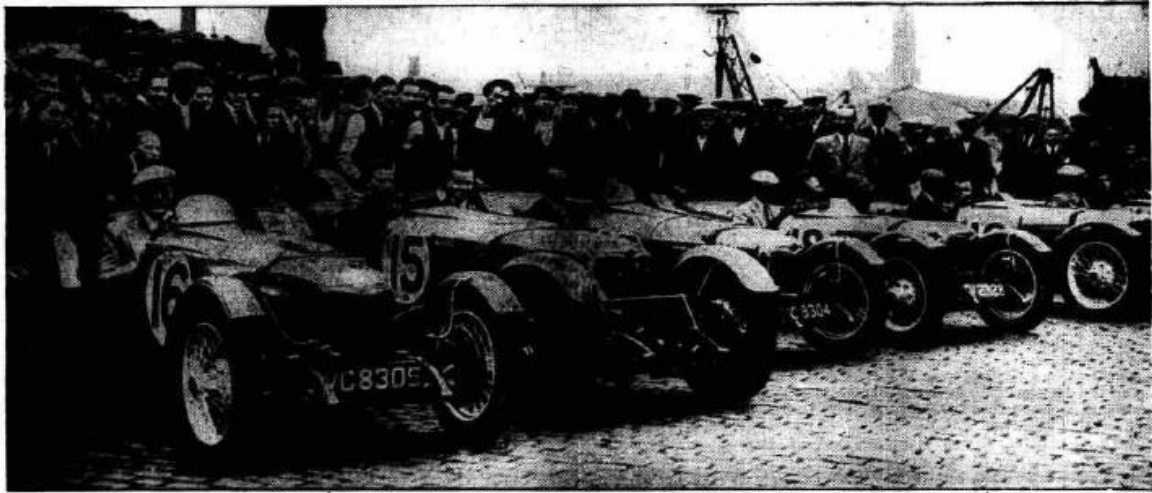
Do not miss seeing the new "DERBY" Light Car which is due to arrive in a few days. "THE WONDERFUL LITTLE FRENCH CAR" at £195 complete, with electric lighting and starting outfit, side screens, clock, speedometer, etc.

Ask for particulars of the new 14 h.p. "ARROL-JOHNSTON." "THE CAR OF LUXURY." Price, £398.

SOLE ULSTER CONCESSIONAIRES—
LESLIE PORTER LTD.
24/28, Great Victoria Street, BELFAST.

1932 saw the "arrival of the Riley's" pictured outside the Great Victoria Street garage. The cars had been brought to Northern Ireland for the "Ards TT motor race" that used run over many laps on a circular course around Dundonald, Newtownards and Comber.





T.T. ARRIVALS.—THE RILEY TEAM, WHICH ARRIVED IN BELFAST ON SATURDAY. ALSO IN THE PHOTOGRAPH IS MR. A. H. WILKINSON (STANDING), OF MESSRS. LESLIE PORTER, LTD.

Andrew Wilkinson died on 19th December 1946 aged 66 and is buried in Dundonald cemetery. His son, **Ernest John Alexander Wilkinson** took over the managing of the company. He passed away on 4th February 1963 aged 56 and is buried in the same grave as his father and mother.

Prior to the death of Mr E J A Wilkinson, the Belfast Telegraph edition of 31st January 1963 headlined ***"Garage sold for around £80,000 to Mr J A (Archie) Phillips who took over control on 30th January 1963. The company had moved in 1959 from Great Victoria Street to the present glass-fronted premises in Victoria Street, Belfast. Founded in premises in Brunswick Street, on the site of the old Belfast Prison just after the turn of the century"***.

By 1971, the business had already moved to 226-248 York Street, Belfast and 2-16 Craigavad Street, Belfast.

George Combe, Leslie Porter's partner in the Northern Motor Company died in October 1938 aged 74.

The company, **Leslie Porter Limited** still exists today.

Leslie Porter's great-grandson, **Merlin Porter** writes: *"I have been chatting to Gavin Bamford about my great-grandfather Leslie Porter who was a racing driver and car dealership owner back in the very early 1900s. He died in the First World War and was one of Northern Ireland's first top racing drivers. I found a lovely image of his in the archives online (which I purchased) and have done a quick ink and watercolour painting of it, attached. You may notice I slipped my great grandfather Leslie and his co-driver into the image"*.

"I am an artist based in Oxford who loves to paint live on location at events like concerts, weddings, car shows and markets. I also do many commissions from my studio ranging from illustration to architectural studies. I recently decided to have a little bit more of a look at my great grandfather Leslie Porter's life as I had heard he was a racing driver but not much more info than that. I was very

pleasantly surprised that he managed to do some great things in his short life (the not so nice discovery of his fairly young death) and was a prominent racing driver and businessman in Belfast. I posted a photo on an old photos of Belfast fb group and I had some fantastic responses that ended up with me getting pretty tearful reflecting on his life and feeling grateful to finally realise this missing gem from my family history...to me at least".

"I have now also purchased and read his biography which has been brilliant to read and filled in so many gaps and provided some brilliant photos too. Many thanks for your interest in my great grandfather and my own artwork. I hope it brings a smile. You can find more of my art at -Merlin Porter Arts- on facebook and my website www.merlinporter.co.uk



Further Reading:

1st January 1999 - 'Leslie Porter. Ireland's Pioneer Racing Driver' by Bob Montgomery & published by Irish Transport Series – via Amazon

21st April 2004 – by Bob Montgomery, Irish Times – 'The Life and Death of a Motoring Pioneer' – https://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/motors/the-life-and-death-of-a-motoring-pioneer-1.1308997?fbclid=IwAR1edUBQlICSkIroP5Uf14rnTeK2X6xzwMKI1LN_GQA15caDm1yg2S7f0k

'The War Dead of North Down and Ards' by Barry Niblock – <https://barryniblock.co.uk/world-war-one-list-of-dead/names-listed-alphabetically-by-surname/pepper-to-quinn/porter-leslie-vernon-lusington/?fbclid=IwAR1b264LxOhGHpIGnH3XZ69pS58rxzFgBaXKMwK0mYObdIRDm2L81EUDyB8>