

## WALTER GORDON WILSON - TANK PIONEER (1874-1957)



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Major Walter Gordon Wilson  
C.M.G. (1874-1957)

# **WALTER GORDON WILSON – TANK PIONEER (1874-1957)**

## **WORKING ALONGSIDE SIR WILLIAM TRITTON HE DEVELOPED THE FIRST TANK IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

- 1890s Interested in developing the internal combustion engine.
- 1897 Founded Wilson & Pilcher Ltd. with Percy Pilcher, in order to build engines for flight and for motor vehicles.
- 1901 Despite the shock of Pilcher's death in 1899 in a gliding accident, he went ahead to produce the Wilson-Pilcher motor car.



In 2012 this 1904  
Wilson-Pilcher  
car at auction  
fetched £203,100

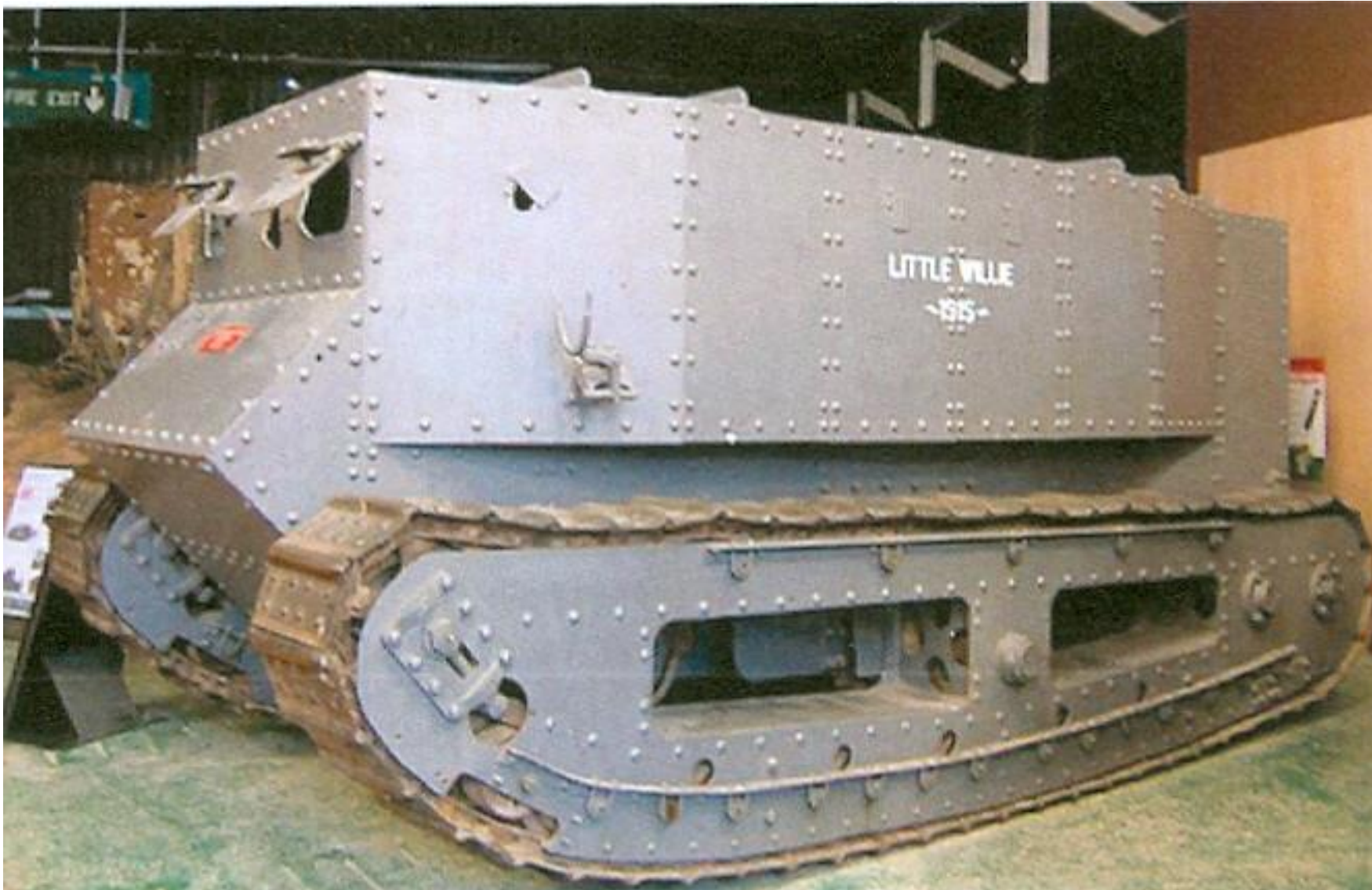
## WALTER GORDON WILSON - TANK PIONEER (1874-1957) - 2

- 1906 After financial problems worked for Armstrong-Whitworth and developed a wheeled artillery tractor that could pull or be equipped with guns, while the driver was protected by armour – hints of a tank, but the prototype was rejected by the army.
- 1907 Became chief engineer at J & E Hall Ltd of Dartford, a manufacturer of commercial vehicles.
- 1914 Enlisted in the Royal Naval Air Service, where he supervised the production of armed trucks. Became interested in developing armoured trench-crossing vehicles.
- 1915 Developed chain-driven tractor with Sir William Tritton – first tanks 'Mother' and 'Little Willie.'

### **WHY CALLED TANKS?**

**Because of need for utmost secrecy when extra steel was ordered to make the first 200 tanks, the reason given for the order was that it was needed to build water tanks for the British expedition to Mesopotamia – hence quick and easy name 'TANKS'**

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'Little Willie' tank, Bovington Tank Museum, Dorset, first prototype soon outmoded by 'Mother' design



## WALTER GORDON WILSON – TANK PIONEER (1874-1957)



'Mother' tank, this was a prototype following 'Little Willie' and the Mark 1 tanks were based on this. The first to enter battle made it the 'mother' of all tanks

## WALTER GORDON WILSON - TANK PIONEER (1874-1957) - 3

**1916** First tanks saw service on 15 September during the Battle of the Somme. At first not very successful, but further refinements included Wilson's special steering box.



**TANKS HAD A  
DEVASTATING IMPACT  
ON THE MORALE OF  
GERMAN TROOPS WHEN  
INTRODUCED IN THE 1ST  
WORLD WAR.**

Heavy tank Mark 1 in action on the battlefield near Thiepval – first saw action in 1916, Battle of the Somme

After the 1st World War Wilson developed pre-selector gearboxes. In 1937 the Tank Design Department commissioned him to build a gearbox for a new, heavy tank. As late as 1967 his ideas used.



## WALTER GORDON WILSON – LOCAL CONNECTIONS

1908 - **Moved to Kent** following appointment at J & E Hall, Dartford.

1908 - Leased **THE MANOR HOUSE, FARNINGHAM**, with wife Ethel Gray. Married since 1904, she was always supportive of Walter's ideas. They had 3 sons, Gordon b.1905, Brian b.1907 and Rodney b.1912.



## LIFE FOR THE WILSON FAMILY IN FARNINGHAM

The family lived comfortably, with a cook, kitchen maid, parlour maid, nurse, nursery maid, gardener, garden boy and groom.

Sunday morning ritual was to raise the Union Jack on the flagstaff.

Walter G. Wilson fished in the river.

The children watched steam traction engines take on water by the road bridge outside the house.

1913 he planned to install electricity in the house, but was forbidden to do so by the landlord.

In 1912, in an outbuilding near the kitchen he experimented in extracting oil from shale, producing large amounts of noxious fumes smelling of bad eggs. This made him unpopular with the kitchen staff and the landlord, Herbert Waring.

Manor House, Farningham, home of the Wilson family, 1908-1914





## WALTER GORDON WILSON – LOCAL CONNECTIONS

### 1914 Leased **CHARTON MANOR, FARNINGHAM**

Was allowed to install electricity. His family delighted with the system.

He left for 1st World War service.

Mrs Wilson involved in local war work, cycling round Farningham delivering food to workers' canteens.

Armoured cars stopped at Charton for refreshment on way to Dover.

Phone calls from Farningham Post Office to warn of Zeppelin raids.



Charton Manor, home of the Wilsons 1914-1925

1925 - Leased **SOUTH ASH MANOR, near WEST KINGSDOWN**

1931 - Left Kent and moved to Hampshire.

## WALTER GORDON WILSON – LOCAL CONNECTIONS



Charton Manor, Farningham, before alterations to a Nursing Home



## WALTER GORDON WILSON – LOCAL CONNECTIONS



South face of Charton Manor, now Nursing Home, little of original manor house left, July 2013