

Volunteers dote over iconic cars at Rolls-Royce museum

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The Associated Press

MECHANICSBURG, Pa. — Mike Fowler had been faintly aware that a museum of Rolls-Royce and Bentley vehicles existed near his boyhood home in the suburbs of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, but the car enthusiast didn't expect the experience he got when he started volunteering there.

Fowler had oil on his hands within a half-hour of his first volunteer session at the Rolls-Royce and Bentley Museum. More than a year later, he keeps a list on his phone with notes about cars in the collection to help him get them started properly or disconnect their batteries.

Fowler is part of a group of about 50 volunteers who gather twice a month at the museum to help out, including cleaning, maintaining and driving the fleet of customized iconic vehicles, many designed to be driven by a chauffeur. For many volunteers, it's an opportunity to experience a life few people can afford.

"You take it out on the road and you are trans-



Tommy Tate opens the hood of a 1946 Rolls-Royce Silver Wraith during an interview at The Rolls-Royce Foundation in Mechanicsburg, Pa., on April 5.

ported to a different time, a different mentality," said Fowler, a 28-year-old Camp Hill resident.

Newcomers are first paired with a more experienced volunteer for about a year and must pass the museum's driving school. They start with the most

modern vehicles, which have automatic transmissions.

"We're very protective of the collection. We're its caretakers, and we take it very seriously. So you can't just come in off the street and start driving," said Sarah Holibaugh, the muse-

um's head librarian and archivist. "But it should be that way."

The 29 antique and collectible Rolls-Royce and Bentley automobiles that date as far back as the late 1920s are the central attraction of the largely overlooked and seldom visited museum, which is easy to miss among the surrounding miles of farm fields and stretch of nondescript industrial buildings just outside Mechanicsburg. The museum, owned by the Rolls-Royce Foundation, includes a showroom, maintenance area and a third room being converted into a library and reading room.

"I often wonder if the homes around here know the foundation exists," Fowler said. "Or if they always just wonder, 'Why do we see these vintage Rolls-Royce and Bentleys roaming around from time to time?'"

The museum has its roots in nearby Harrisburg, where Rolls-Royce put an owners'

club in the 1960s, located between large dealerships in New York and Washington. After Hurricane Agnes devastated that location in 1972, a businessman donated the Mechanicsburg property for a new facility. The 6,000-person owners' club, with members in 26 countries and a headquarters in the same complex, is a separate entity but works closely with the museum.

Though admission is just \$5, the museum launched in 2004 gets only about 1,000 visitors a year. It typically draws members of car clubs, groups of seniors and students on school field trips, with visits that have to be scheduled in advance.

It also has rented out its cars for films and similar uses. The museum's 1961 Rolls-Royce Phantom V was in last year's Timothée Chalamet biopic about Bob Dylan, "A Complete Unknown," and a 1959 Silver Cloud I from the collection appeared in Season 4 of the series "The

Marvelous Mrs. Maisel."

Volunteers also help preserve and digitize the museum's archive of ownership and service records for North America, which span from 1907 until 2004, shortly after Rolls-Royce and Bentley were acquired by BMW and Volkswagen, respectively. Records for cars made for the European market are available through the Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts' Club in the United Kingdom.

The North American records, which are available for a fee and produce the foundation's biggest revenue stream, have helped prove cars outside of their collection were once owned by famed director Alfred Hitchcock, actor Zsa Zsa Gabor and hockey great Wayne Gretzky.

Foundation records have also debunked claims about purported prior ownership, including a Rolls-Royce vehicle thought to have been owned by country singer Hank Williams Jr.

"We were able to absolutely prove that it was not owned by him," recalled volunteer Randy Churchill, a Boiling Springs man now retired from a marketing career. "They just thought they had a million-dollar gold mine on their hands."

Vehicles in the museum's collection range in value from about \$30,000 to about \$120,000. A whiskey delivery truck appraised at \$320,000 has been donated and will soon be on display.

Many of the cars Rolls-Royce has built are still on the road and used models can be surprisingly cheap. But maintaining an older Rolls, with its customized features and expensive parts, can be pricey, noted volunteer Ron Deguffroy, a retired psychologist from Chambersburg.

"The most expensive Rolls-Royce you will buy," he said, "is a cheap one."

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