British Blue Bloods Teach BMW How to Retool Rolls Royce

By Scott Miller

GOODWOOD, England—In the summer of 1999, BMW’s Karl-Heinz Kahlbelf persuaded his bosses to buy a Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph and send him on a road trip.

The German engineer steered his Rolls up and down England for two months, hobnobbing with British aristocrats and taking in events such as the Ascot horse race. There were parties on castle lawns, cricket matches, gin and tonics aplenty. It was the sort of trip that produces suspicious-looking expense-account claims. But he was on a mission—to learn why British blue bloods revered this famous ultraluxury car.

On Jan. 1, the world will see the results of Mr. Kahlbelf’s trip—the first new generation of Rolls-Royce cars in five years. Bayerische Motoren Werke AG started from scratch after outmaneuvering Volkswagen AG for rights to the Rolls brand four years ago. VW got to keep all the production facilities, staff and even the dealerships. BMW received only the hood ornament—the winged lady known as the “Spirit of Ecstasy.”

Rolls-Royce built its first car in 1906, two years after Henry Royce and Charles Rolls first met. Their creation, the six-cylinder Silver Ghost, was praised from the beginning as one of the best cars in the world. Since then, the company has become synonymous with refinement and sparse-no-expen-

dence luxury. Its cars have long been a favorite of England’s royal family.

For BMW, retaining its engineering prowess and skill at capturing the essence of an automotive brand, taking on Rolls-Royce is risky. For one thing, British aristocrats have good memories.

"Over 90% of the British population was very sad that Rolls-Royce was falling into foreign hands," says Phillip Hall, chief executive of the Sir Henry Royce Memorial Foundation. To some Brits, it seemed particularly ironic that the company was going to the Germans because Rolls made engines that powered the Spitfires, the British fighter planes that helped defeat the Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain.

One of the first BMW executives to show up at a British Rolls-Royce club quickly learned the depth of sadness over the loss of Rolls-Royce. He asked an elderly Rolls owner at the club about a model Spitfire on display there and was told: "That, my boy, is what your dads used to see in their rear-view mirrors."

"I learned right away that you couldn’t compete with many of these people on the history of the car," Mr. Kahlbelf says. "I faced some pretty grueling questions."

Still, Mr. Kahlbelf figured that if he, and later teams of designers and engineers, talked to enough owners, enthusiasts and Rolls-Royce historians, BMW, based in Munich, could produce a car that reminded people of Rolls’s glory years.

By one account, BMW executives made more than 100 visits to the official Rolls-Royce archives at Hunt House, a center for the car’s enthusiasts, studying the blueprints for what one club officer said was “every nut, bolt and screw” ever to appear on a Rolls-Royce.

Mr. Kahlbelf and his team learned that unlike some recent models, which have a small, thick steering wheel, Rolls traditionally have thin, large ones. The “Spirit of Ecstasy” hood ornament has been shrinking over the decades. Past Rolls owners also said they missed having the rear doors hinged at the back so that chauffeurs could easily open them. And there shouldn’t be a lip on the rear floor that passengers could trip on: It has to be flat. That requires a stiff frame, which BMW decided could only come from a super-strong, all-aluminum body.

The BMW team also heard about an almost mythical Rolls-Royce concept—"waftability"—the car’s ability to accelerate and maintain high speeds without seeming to work very hard. BMW engineers found that drivers were referring to high torque at low engine speeds. "It should feel like the hand of God is pushing you along," says Tony Coats, the current head of BMW’s Rolls-Royce project.

Eri Helliwiler, chairman of the Rolls-Royce Enthusiasts Club, said that the origins of "waftability" have long been forgotten. "Everyone's just been using it to talk about the Rolls-Royce," he says. "It's a wonderful car. We're all in love with it."

"But we all know that it's a Rolls-Royce," he says. "It's not a BMW. It's not a Mercedes. It's a Rolls-Royce."

So when BMW executives learned how much Rolls-Royce owners valued the car’s cachet, they realized that building a Rolls-Royce is about more than just producing a luxurious car. It’s about preserving a legacy. BMW was now building not just a car, but a Rolls-Royce.
CORPORATE FOCUS

Brits Help BMW Tune Up Rolls-Royce

Fit for Royalty

Some highlights in the history of Rolls-Royce:

- 1904: Engineer Henry Royce and impressed Charles Rolls form Rolls-Royce with exclusive rights to sell their cars in Britain.
- 1977: The Rolls-Royce "silver glove" device is marketed and receives attention for its impertinent and ghastly silent motor.
- 1910: Artist Charles Sykes creates a feminine hood ornament for the brand; it's later called "The Spirit of Ecstasy."
- 1921-1971: The company launches several of its classics, including the Phantom, Wraith, Silver Ghost, and Corniche.
- 1996: BMW and Vickers PLC to produce Rolls-Royce from Vickers PLC. VW buys Rolls-Royce and Bentley, but discovers at the last second that it won't get legal rights to the Rolls-Royce brand, which belongs to Rolls-Royce PLC. BMW switches up the legal rights to the name.

World-wide production of Rolls-Royce vehicles

![Graph showing world-wide production of Rolls-Royce vehicles]

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ability may be related to early Rolls drivers who had trouble shifting properly. For those few Rolls owners who chose to drive their own cars, a high-torque motor allowed them to avoid frequent shifting.

BMW hasn't shown the new model Rolls publicly, but the new car is expected to incorporate doors with the images in the back and unnecessary sills. Mr. Kalffell also said he would restore the Spirit of Ecstasy to its former size.

When Mr. Kalffell asked a group of Rolls owners what they wanted in the new car, many said they wanted it to be dependable, reflecting trouble in recent years with unreliable engines and other parts.

Rolls's quality had slipped in previous years. In the 1980s and 1990s, then-owner Rolls-Royce PLC focused on jet engines. Later, former owner Vickers PLC was more interested in its main defense business. Mr. Kalffell assured the Rolls owners that BMW will make high-quality cars.

Of greater concern to some British Rolls aficionados were rumors BMW was going to shift production out of the U.K. Many want BMW eventually to shift all Rolls-Royce production to the U.K. BMW has no plans to shift all production soon, but it didn't rule it out forever.

For now, major parts of the car, such as the body and 12-cylinder motor, will be made in Germany. But the company will assemble the cars in the brand's ancestral home near Goodwood, a small town south of London. Each car will spend three weeks in the U.K., where the Rolls will get its Englishness, the subtle leather and polished wood that are the brand's hallmarks. After advertising for craftsmen from all over the U.K., BMW hired sailmakers to stitch the interiors and cabinetmakers to do the woodwork.

The new Rolls factory a couple hours south of London is a manufacturing showcase with glass walls so that anybody can come to watch Rolls rolling down the line. BMW hopes to roll out 1,600 of the cars a year, charging upward of $350,000 each.

Mr. Kalffell knows there is no room for error with the new car. "Rolls customers are almost invisible to start with and if you approach them in the wrong way they will just disappear," he said.