

# INTRODUCTION

This book is the result of a visit I paid to London's National Portrait Gallery five years ago. I was absorbed by the images of the British heroes adorning the walls of what was then known as the Twentieth Century Room – aviators John Brown and Amy Johnson, explorer Ernest Shackleton, writers Aldous Huxley and Dylan Thomas, and composer William Walton, to name but a few.

Then I spotted a picture, painted in 1961, of racing driver Graham Hill, sporting a trim moustache and a pair of pale blue Dunlop overalls and dark blue rally jacket. He looked for all the world as though he was staring out at the World Championship he would pip Jim Clark to the following year. The painting below was of James Bond's creator Ian Fleming, in his trademark short-sleeved blue shirt and bow tie, and sporting that unique nose he reprofiled against the head of Henry Douglas-Home, brother of the future prime minister, in an Eton football match.

The same man painted both portraits. He also helped to design the engine that drove Hill to that 1962 championship, supercharged the Blower Bentley driven by Bond in *Casino Royale*, *Live and Let Die* and *Moonraker*, and provided Fleming with the first illustrations for *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang*. He held dual British and US citizenship and was just at home on either side of the Atlantic. He was equally adept at making racing cars, planes and rockets go faster, and he was a regular Anglican churchgoer who painted a pope and studied the teachings of a yogi saint.

His name was Charles Amherst Villiers, pronounced Vill-ers. If you

## INTRODUCTION

plan to read this book out loud to your children or grandchildren (and why not?), do please bear in mind that he was most insistent that he had a two-syllable surname. While his second wife Nita called him Charles, and his colleagues during a two-decade sojourn in North America called him Charlie, or even – much to his chagrin – Chuck, in his home country he was generally known as Amherst, so that is how I shall refer to him.

His two-syllable family name is also a clue as to why, in among all the cars, aircraft, rockets, paintings and court cases, one thing you will find missing from his story is mention of the three-syllable Villiers engines. When the Sunbeam bicycle company opened new premises in Villiers Street, Wolverhampton, in 1898 to manufacture pedals, it called the operation the Villiers Cycle Component Company. By the First World War it had become the Villiers Engineering Company and had begun manufacturing its splendid engines. It may be that the company was named after the road, or perhaps it was named after the local MP who had died in 1898. But since the road was named after the MP, the company's name stems either directly or indirectly from Charles Pelham Villiers, the UK's longest-ever serving Member of Parliament. He was Amherst's great-uncle, and this distant familial link is the only one that existed between the engine manufacturer and Amherst.

Given that Amherst lived to the ripe old age of 91, and has been dead now for over 17 years, it seems astonishing that a story as extraordinary as his has not been told before. He himself was given more than one opportunity to tell it in his own words. In 1963, when a limited edition of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* was released with his portrait of Fleming as a frontispiece, the publishers of the James Bond canon, Jonathan Cape, asked Amherst to write an autobiography, focused on speed and space. But Douglas Aircraft had invited Amherst out to California to work on a Mars project, his spare time was spent restoring a Blower Bentley, and the moment passed.

Then, in the late 1980s, when Lord Montagu of Beaulieu tried to help settle out-of-court a dispute between Amherst and Rolls-Royce,

he proposed that Amherst should focus instead on an autobiography, and introduced him to a freelance journalist to support him in the task. Amherst, who had a high level of trust in his fellow man, and an equally strong belief in the English legal system to put right breaches in that trust, chose to have his day in court.

So the honour – and that is exactly what it has been – of telling Amherst’s story has fallen to me. I hope that I have managed to convey something of him as a man, as well as his myriad achievements, between these covers.