1886 BENZ PATENT-MOTORWAGEN

German Patent No. 37 435 is the single most important document in motoring history. Applied for by Carl Benz on 29 January 1886 and granted on 2 November that year, it is practically the motor car's birth certificate.

The Patent-Motorwagen was the product of this one man's determination. Born in Karlsruhe, Carl Benz established an engineering workshop in Mannheim, devoting himself to developing compact petroleum-fuelled engines. He achieved his first breakthrough in 1879 with a successful stationary four-stroke engine; the commercial success of these powerplants enabled him to pursue his vision of a "horseless carriage".

Unlike contemporary horse-drawn vehicles adapted to accommodate mechanical power, the Patent-Motorwagen was engineered from the outset as a self-propelled machine. Benz chose a three-wheeled layout, rejecting the swivelling front axle then used on carriages, and created an integrated design in which chassis and engine formed a single unit. Beneath its lightweight tubular frame sat a single-cylinder, four-stroke internal-combustion engine mounted horizontally at the rear, producing just 0.75 horsepower. Modest by modern standards, it was nevertheless enough to propel the only vehicle of its kind.

First demonstrated on the streets of Mannheim in July 1886, the Patent-Motorwagen astonished onlookers with its ability to move completely independently with its own power source. Its potential was further demonstrated in 1888 when Bertha Benz, Carl's supportive wife, undertook the world's first long-distance automobile journey, covering around 124 miles and proving her husband's invention could travel far beyond its immediate surroundings.

From this remarkable three-wheeled machine grew an industry that has transformed the world over the past 140 years. The Patent-Motorwagen remains one of the most important vehicles ever built: the car that started it all.

Brief Technical Specification

Engine: single-cylinder, 964 cc	Top speed: 7.5 mph
Maximum power: 0.75 bhp	Price when new: £29 7s. 4d.

On display Tuesday 27 October to Monday 10 November, courtesy of Mercedes-Benz Heritage.
For more information, please see the cabinet outisde the library on the first floor.