1885 DAIMLER REITWAGEN

The Daimler Reitwagen occupies a unique place in motoring history. Built in 1885 by Gottlieb Daimler and Wilhelm Maybach, it was created to demonstrate that a compact, lightweight and high-speed internal-combustion engine could power a vehicle. The result is widely regarded as the world's first motorcycle.

Having previously worked with Nikolaus Otto and his pioneering four-stroke engine of 1876, Daimler and Maybach believed the technology could be developed far beyond its existing capabilities. Working from an experimental workshop in Cannstatt, they produced a single-cylinder engine that was considerably smaller, lighter and faster than contemporary designs. Nicknamed the "grandfather clock" engine because of its distinctive upright cylinder, it produced 0.5 horsepower from a capacity of just 264cc.

To prove the concept, the partners mounted the engine in a simple two-wheeled vehicle with frame and wheels made of wood. Drive was transmitted to the rear wheel by a leather belt, while a rudimentary two-speed arrangement allowed speeds of up to 12km/h. Patented on 29 August 1885 as a "Gas or Petroleum Power Machine", it represented one of the earliest practical applications of a high-speed petrol engine in a vehicle.

Later that year, Daimler's son Adolf undertook the Reitwagen's maiden journey from Cannstatt to Untertürkheim. Crude in appearance and never intended for production, the machine nevertheless fulfilled its purpose, proving the viability of compact internal-combustion power in transport.

By 1886 the Reitwagen had served its purpose and was abandoned in favour of four-wheeled vehicles. Its significance lies not in the machine itself, but in the revolutionary engine it carried, helping pave the way for generations of petrol-powered transport.

Brief Technical Specification

Engine: single-cylinder, 264 cc	Top speed: 7 mph
Maximum power: 0.5 bhp	Price when new: never publicly sold

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.