

Buick

in the Ambulance Service of NSW



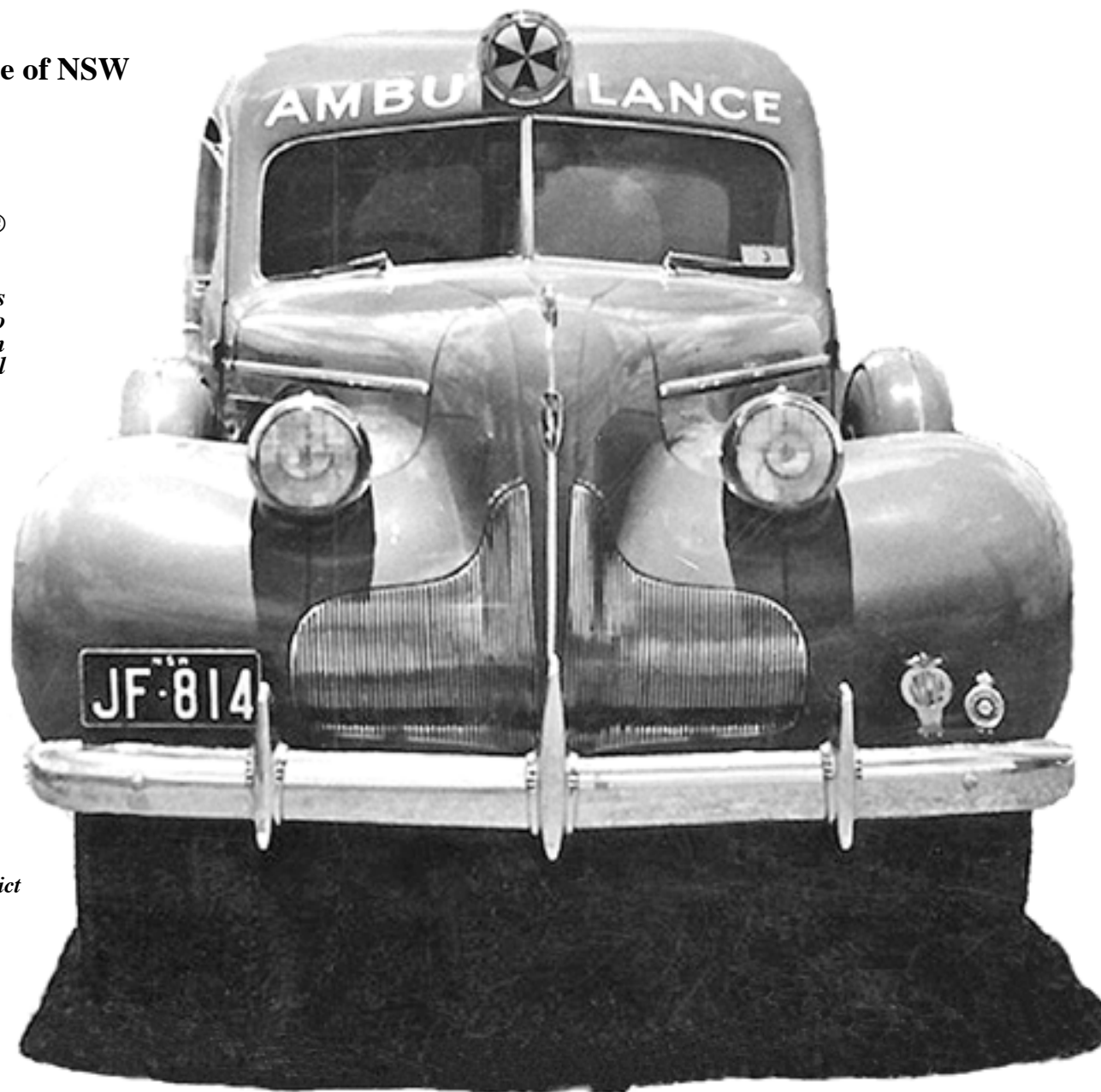
John Gerdtz

BUICK in the Ambulance Service of NSW

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Research and story by John Gerdtz ©

*Thank you to Ambulance Officers
Mike Taylor and George Purdie also to
the Ambulance Service of New South
Wales for access to their archival
photography.*



1939 Buick, Parkes District

The Civil Ambulance and Transport Brigade of New South Wales, as the service was first called, commenced operations on April 1, 1895, with two officers and a hand litter. A. Forsyth & Co presented the first horse drawn ambulance in 1899 and Mr Anthony Horden presented a Minerva vehicle on May 27, 1912 as the first motorised ambulance.

The superiority of the motor over the horse was soon demonstrated and a second ambulance, was delivered in 1913, funded by public donation. It was built on a 15/30 H.P. Armstrong Whitworth chassis with lever spring suspension. A third motor ambulance was ordered in October, 1914 and by 1915 ambulance drivers were instructed not to exceed 15 mph and were held responsible for any breach of this regulation.

The Randwick Division of the St. John Ambulance Brigade presented a fully equipped Armstrong-Whitworth motor ambulance to the Corps in January, 1916 and on September 9, 1918, The Governor of New South Wales, Sir Walter Davidson, commissioned the fifth motor ambulance built on a Sidley Deasey chassis at a total cost of £930.

The service rapidly expanded throughout the state, being organised in regions that were responsible for arranging and raising their own finances, much of the money being donated or raised through community activities. Regions made decisions individually, purchasing motor ambulances built on the chassis of local choice.

By now Buick motor vehicles had established great favour with Australian motorists, particularly in country areas. Farmers soon learned the Buick marque stood for quality, reliability and service. Buicks were strong, fast, reliable and rode smoothly by the standards of the day, particularly over rough country roads. It's no surprise that the Buick chassis found favour as being very suitable for ambulance work.

Although it is not certain when the first Buick came into ambulance service in NSW, the picture (right) shows a 1921 Buick, six cylinder, fitted with wooden ambulance body, in service at Grafton in

Northern NSW. Buicks continued in favour for ambulance building through to 1947 when GM-H (General Motors Holdens) ceased production of Holden built car bodies locally, in preparation for the all new Holden car to be released in 1948. Buick, the foundation marque of General Motors, continues to produce quality cars in the USA today, but sadly have not produced a right hand drive version since 1953.

Buick chassis were supplied to build ambulances for many, if not all, the NSW Ambulance Service divisions as can be seen in the following pages.

1921 Buick Six, Grafton District



ARMIDALE

The 1936 Buick pictured is believed to have been bodied by A.H. Peters of Marrickville. Built on the new 138" wheelbase "Limited" chassis, it would be powered by the also new straight eight, 320 cu.in. engine developing 120 bhp. Although probably quite heavy, this ambulance would have been a very fast comfortable cruiser as this engine, when installed in the 1936 "Century" sedan body, easily powered the car to 100 mph.



1936 Buick, Armidale District



1936 & 1929 Buicks, Armidale District

Armidale's 1936 is also pictured in the Ambulance Station in company with a 1929 Buick Master Six. The '29 built using the 129" wheelbase tourer chassis, was powered by an in-line 6 cylinder engine of 309.6 cu.in. capacity developing 90 bhp. The open cabin body work would have made for very cold driving in winter as Armidale is snow country.

The picture (right) has the 1929 Buick on the left, parked outside the station in company with a vintage Hudson ambulance.





The new 1946 Buick 8/40 series

BERRIMA

Pictured is a 1946/47 Buick, a Dodge Suburban and two Austin Sheerlines of the Berrima District Ambulance at Bowral. It was reported the Buick mainly did the transfer to Sydney work, the Dodge did the bush work and the bigger Austin Sheerlines were set up for road accidents.



*1946 Buick, Dodge Suburban
& two Austin Sheerlines*

BOOLAROO & ERALBA

A big 1923 Buick Six ambulance of Boolaroo & Eralba District is fitted with the factory optioned wire wheels. Like many of the early Australian bodied ambulances the headlight mountings are not the standard mounting although the headlights themselves look authentic.



1923 Buick Six, Boolaroo



BRAIDWOOD

This 1929 Buick is stationed at Braidwood. Mechanically this vehicle is the same as the 1929 at Armidale, described earlier, but this one is fitted with a sedan type body making it considerably more comfortable for the ambulance officers in winter. It is believed the body was built by Gilbert Bros of Newcastle.

1929 Buick Master Six, Braidwood



CANBERRA

These 1939 Buicks of the Canberra Community Ambulance appears to have been built on the "Roadmaster" 133" wheelbase chassis. However, the front doors are smaller than the Roadmaster's and most likely were modified 40 series doors available from local Holden body production.

Both were powered by the straight eight, 320 cu.in. engine developing 141 bhp. with bodywork by W.S. Grice of Summer Hill.

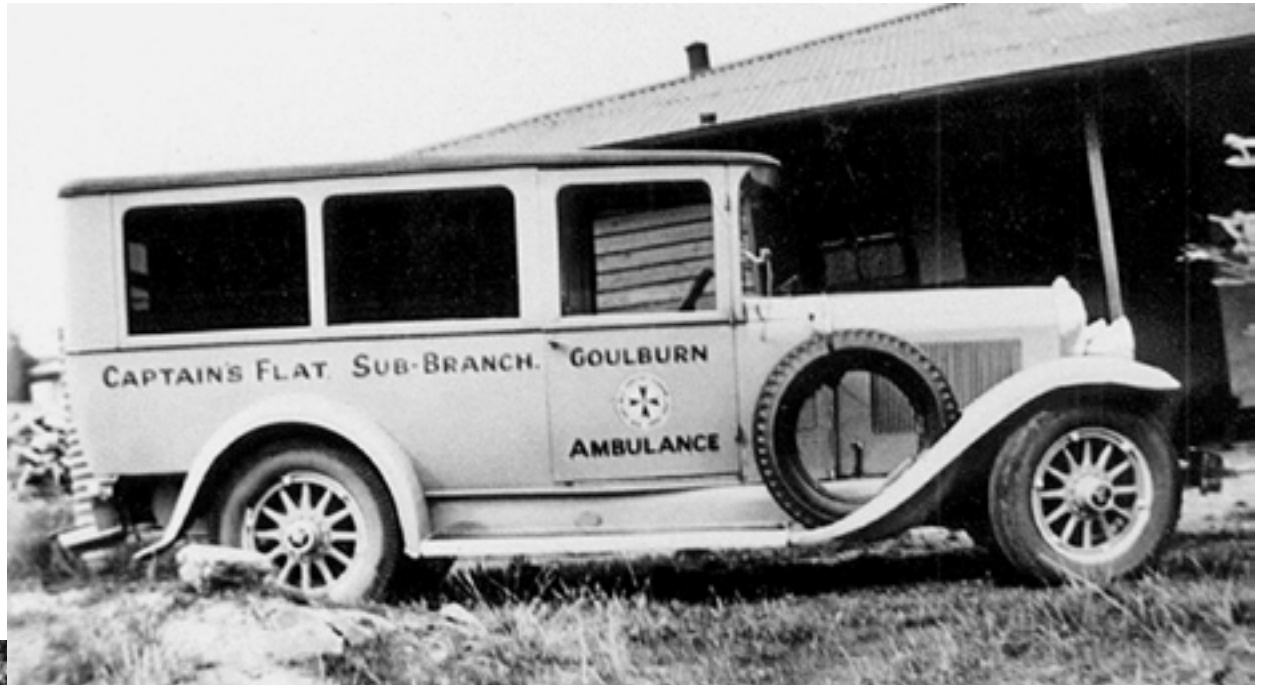
The inset photo shows the car when new with trade plates ready for delivery to Canberra. Both photos were taken out front of the Grice works in Summer Hill.

Two 1939 Buicks for Canberra Community Ambulance



CAPTAINS FLAT

This small, one car station, had a 1929 Buick, with sedan type body, built on the 116" Standard Six chassis issued to their Sub-Branch of the Goulburn Ambulance Service.



1937 Buick Limited, Cootamundra



1929 Buick Standard Six, Captains Flat

COOTAMUNDRA

Cootamundra station was home to this 1937 Buick ambulance built on the "Limited" 138" wheelbase chassis with the straight eight, 320 cu.in. engine, developing 130 bhp. The body builder is unknown but the styling looks just right.



1927 Buick Master Six, Erina District

ERINA

Erina Shire Sub-branch of Newcastle District Ambulance Service's 1927 Buick Master Six is seen attending the Gosford Show in 1929.

GILGANDRA

This Buick Six is different and interesting. The location is thought to be Gilgandra and it must have been quite a project for the ambulance builder. The radiator with large badge and cowl lamps confirm 1925 and the absence of a chassis cross member at the front spring anchor point plus the apparant lack of front brakes and earlier mudguards and lamps indicate was possibly based on a 1921 or 1922 Buick six chassis.

In earlier years it was common to fit an earlier refurbished ambulance body to a new chassis, but this work, with it's narrow body, seems to have been a modernisation of an older vehicle. Never the less, being a Buick, it is sure to have given good service.

Unkonwn model Buick Six, Gilgandra



GOULBURN

The car on the left is a 1929 Buick Standard Six of the Goulburn District, on the right is a 1934 Vauxhall BXL with 130" wheelbase. The second picture is of the Goulburn Ambulance Station with the fleet parked outside. This is testimony to the 1929 Buick's lasting endurance as it is still in service at the time the picture was taken in the late 1930's.



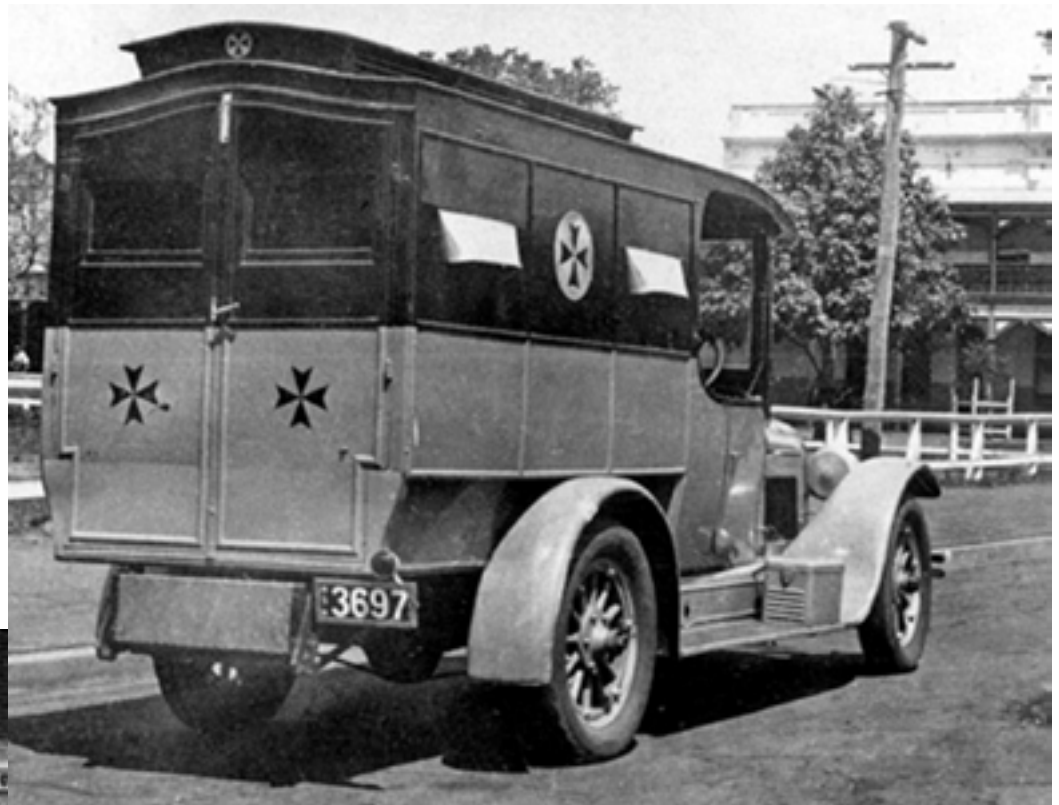
1929 Buick Standard Six & 1934 Vauxhall BXL cars, Goulburn District

(L to R): Unknown motorcycle, two 1937 Hudsons, 1936 Hudson, 1936 Chevrolet, 1935 Vauxhall, 1929 Buick and vintage Dodge.



GRAFTON

NSW-3697, the new 1921 Buick Six from Grafton Ambulance Service, was probably brand new in this photo (right). It hadn't been sign written, nor had it been fitted with the running board spare wheel bracket that can be seen in the later photo. It is also interesting that in this photo it was fitted with a front bumper bar which had disappeared in the later photo and the lower bodywork had been repainted. Again the coachbuilder has used non-standard headlamps.



1921 Buick Six, Grafton District



*1939 Ford V8 & 1937 Buick
Century, Gundagai*

GUNDAGAI

The 1939 Ford V8 together with the 1937 Buick from the Gundagai-Tumut branch of the Wagga Wagga District Ambulance Service. Note that the Buick only has one side mount on the left side when Buick only offered side mounts as a pair. This demonstrates the independence of the body builder.

The second picture of the side view of the 1937 Buick really shows the coach builders elegant bodywork.



1937 Buick Century, Gundagai

GUNDAGAI

Another view of the same Buick outside Pyemonts Rendezvous Cafe, Gundagai together with the station officer and the Crown Sargent of Police looking very smart in their uniforms.

1937 Buick Century, Gundagai



ILLAWARRA

(L to R) 1935 Buick, 1929 Buick, a pair of 1927 Buicks and an Essex.

Outside the Woollongong's Illawarra District Ambulance Station, are a 1935 Buick, 1929 Buick, a pair of 1927 Buicks and an Essex. The tree on the left of the Ambulance Station has grown somewhat in the later picture next page showing a big line up of cars from Wollongong. They include a 1935 Buick, 1937 Buick, 1936 Buick, a Chrysler product perhaps a 1936 Dodge, 1929 Buick, 1926 Buick, 1927 Buick and a 1937 Chevrolet.

Two views, (here and page over) of Woollongong's 1935 Buick built on a 90 series "Limited" chassis with 136" wheelbase. The straight eight, 344 cu.in., engine developed 116 bhp. The builder of the enclosed, windowless body is not known. It was quite possibly used as a mortuary car.



1935 Buick Limited 90 series, Woollongong

ILLAWARRA

1935 Buick Limited 90 series, Woolongong

(L to R) 1935 Buick, 1937 Buick, 1936 Buick, a Chrysler product perhaps a 1936 Dodge, 1929 Buick, 1926 Buick, 1927 Buick and a 1937 Chevrolet.



KEMPSEY

A very smart 1937 Buick from Kempsey provides service at a de Havilland Dragon Rapide aircraft of similar vintage. The Buick ambulance was built on a 60 series "Century" chassis with 118" wheelbase. The straight eight, 320 cu.in. engine developed 120 bhp and when fitted to the sedan body could power the car to 100 mph.

Aviation records show that the Australian built, DH84 No A34-35 was delivered to the RAAF in 1942, then decommissioned and sold into commercial service in 1945 when it was registered as VH-AFK. It later operated in New Guinea, crashing at Bena Bena in September 1948. Fitted with two 145 hp DH Gypsy Major 10 Mk.II engines, it had a maximum speed of 134 mph compared to the Buicks 120 bhp and maximum speed of near 100 mph. The photo shows the Buick was still in service after W.W.II.

1937 Buick Century, Kempsey District & deHaviland DH84



LAKE MACQUARIE

Cars no.1 and no.2 from Lake Macquarie Ambulance Service are pictured at Speers Point. Both vehicles are 1924 Buick Master Sixes. It is interesting to note that car No.2 on the left is fitted with the factory optioned wire wheels.

The 1924 Master Buick was available with either a 120" or 128" wheelbase and was powered by an in-line six cylinder OHV engine of 255 cu.in. capacity, developing 70 bhp.

*1924 Buick Master Sixes,
Lake Macquarie*



LISMORE

Car No.1 from Lismore is a 1927 Buick Master Six built on the 128" wheelbase chassis.

1927 Buick Master Six

LITHGOW

The 1946/47 Buick at Lithgow was photographed between two new Austin Sheerline Ambulances that had, about 1950, replaced the two 1940 Buicks from Lithgow.

Early in the 1940's a railway porter broke into the Lithgow railway Station Master's office and stole a hand gun. In the early hours of the morning he held up the duty officer at the ambulance station and then stole one of the 1940 Buick Ambulances. Fuel rationing was at its peak at this time and the Buick was of course full of fuel and a prime vehicle to make a getaway out of town. The Police anticipated that he may be heading for Sydney and the only other vehicle in town capable of matching the speed of the Buick was its twin. The police commandeered the second Buick ambulance and proceeded to give chase down the main



1946/47 Buick 8/40 with a pair of big Austin Sheerlines, Lithgow

street of Lithgow and headed out towards the Great Western Highway. When nearing the junction of the highway they heard the familiar Buick "whine" approaching from the opposite direction at a tremendous speed. After it passed they turned around a gave chase, eventually apprehending the felon in the back streets of Lithgow. He was later imprisoned for his deeds.

Photo (left) shows Officer Alexander "Sandy" Purdie standing with one of the two 1940 Buicks featured in this drama. The Lithgow District had purchased two 1940 Buick 8/40 Chassis to replace their ageing 1934 Vauxhall's, but by 1940 Australia was at war, so, due to the lack of materials and labour, these 1940 Buick chassis were fitted with refurbished bodies removed from the retired 1934 Vauxhall ambulances. The bodies were transferred onto the Buick chassis by coach-builders W.S. Grice at Summer Hill, who did an excellent job of blending the old to the new.

1940 Buick 8/40, Lithgow



LIVERPOOL

This is a G.H. Olding built body fitted to a 1924 Buick Master Six chassis. Mechanically this car was the same as the Maitland cars (page over) but it looks quite a heavy vehicle, with the enclosed sedan type body, when compared to the canvas covered body work of the Maitland vehicles.



1924 Buick Master Six, Liverpool



Maitland Ambulance Station in 1924 where the sign on the wall proudly reads "Ready Always". The cars are both 1924 Buick Master Sixes and the factory option wire wheels made these ambulances look very sharp. The body work, by Gilbert Bros, Newcastle, was canvas covered above the waistline.

MAITLAND



1924 Buick Master Sixes, Maitland

NEWCASTLE

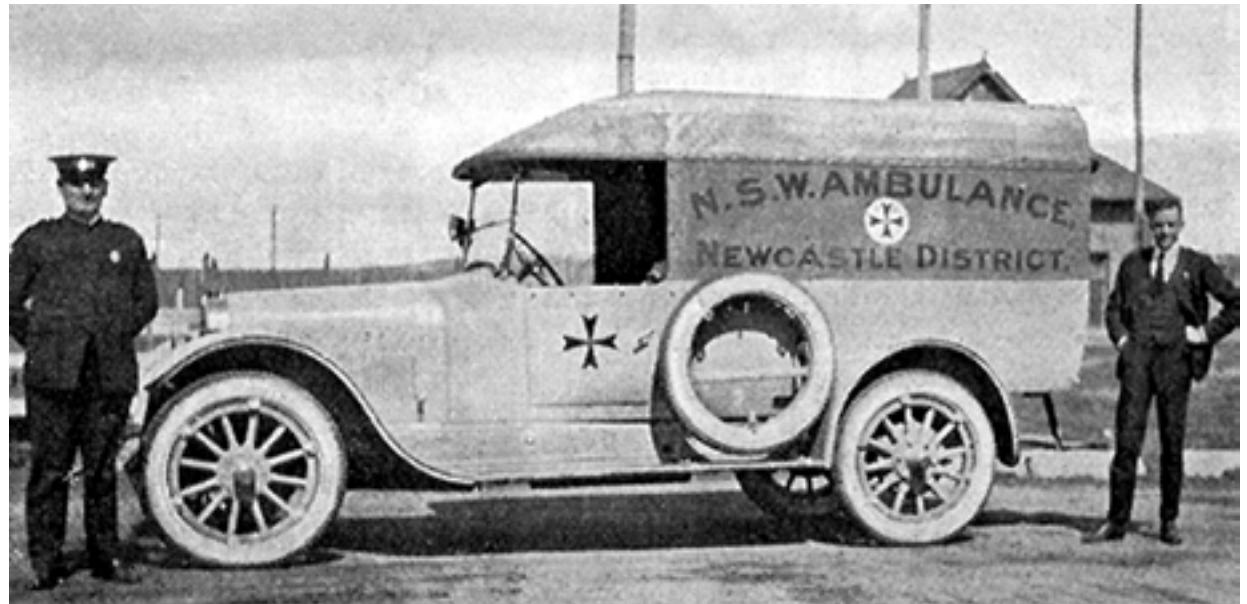
Newcastle's 1920 Buick Six, "K" series (right) was the earliest example of ambulance body work fitted to a Buick chassis found during research for this article.

Gilbert Bros Ltd coachwork identification on Newcastle's 1924, No 5.



Newcastle District Ambulance had a fleet of 1924 Buick Master Six vehicles built by Gilbert Bros of Newcastle. The smart canvas covered body and optioned wire wheels were very similar to the cars of Lake Macquarie and Maitland, suggesting their bodywork was also built by Gilbert Bros.

1924 Buick Master Six, Newcastle



1920 Buick Six, Newcastle



NEWCASTLE

Left of photo (right) is a 1920 Buick, "K" series which looks to be the longer 124" wheelbase. In the centre is a 1921 Buick model 21-45X on the 118" wheelbase. The car on right is an early 20's Dodge.

The new Newcastle District building was a quantum leap forward from the old premises pictured above, but Buicks were still very much in favour for ambulance service in the Newcastle area as depicted in this photo taken from an old postcard.



Left is a 1925 Buick Touring, model 25-25X, an unidentified motorcycle & sidecar, then a 1922 Buick Six, next is a 1923 Buick 4 cylinder, fourth is another 1922 Buick Six and right a 1920 Buick Six.

NEWCASTLE

L to R: Unidentified motorcycle, two 1926 Buick Master Sixes, a 1924 Buick Master Six, then four 1923 Buick Master Sixes, an Austin and an unidentified vehicle on the far end of the row.

The lower photo shows the Newcastle fleet in the early 1950's lined up outside the Ambulance Station.

Below, L to R: Five 1946/7 Buick Specials, three 1946/7 Ford Mercurys, two 1942 DeSoto's, a 1941 Dodge, two 1939 Plymouths, two 1938 Dodges and a 1940 Chevrolet with a very smart looking 1951 Ford V8 "Twin Spinner" sedan out front.





Vintage Dodge & 1929 Buick

ORANGE

Two views of the Orange Ambulance Station with vintage Dodge (left) and 1929 Buick Master Six (right) with sedan style enclosed body.



PARKES

Photos of the fleet lined up outside the Parkes Ambulance Station in central western, NSW. The 1940 Buick and the two Chevrolet's appear to have mesh screens fitted over their grills. The area often experiences grasshopper plagues in the hotter months playing havoc with the engine cooling, so fitting mesh, which is easier to clean, prevents the hoppers blocking the radiator core.

1940 Buick, 1939 Buick, two 1940 Chevrolets and a 1934 Ford V8.



*1939 Buick, 1940 Buick
and two 1940 Chevrolets.*



SHOALHAVEN

These Buicks of the Shoalhaven Ambulance Service at Nowra are believed to have been bodied by Moriarty. The photo pictures (left), a 1935 Buick on a '90 series "Limited" chassis and (right) a 1938 Buick on the 60 series "Century" chassis.

The 1938 Buick at Nowra (centre) appears to have been in service for quite some time, perhaps 14 or 15 years, as the car in the back-ground is an early 1950's Vauxhall. After such service the Buick appears a little tired, with hubcap missing and the driver's door sagging, but it still looks to be very straight. Well worn, but worn well!



Above (left) 1935 Buick 90 series & (right) 1938 Buick Century 60 series, Nowra



1938 Buick Century, Nowra

SHOALHAVEN

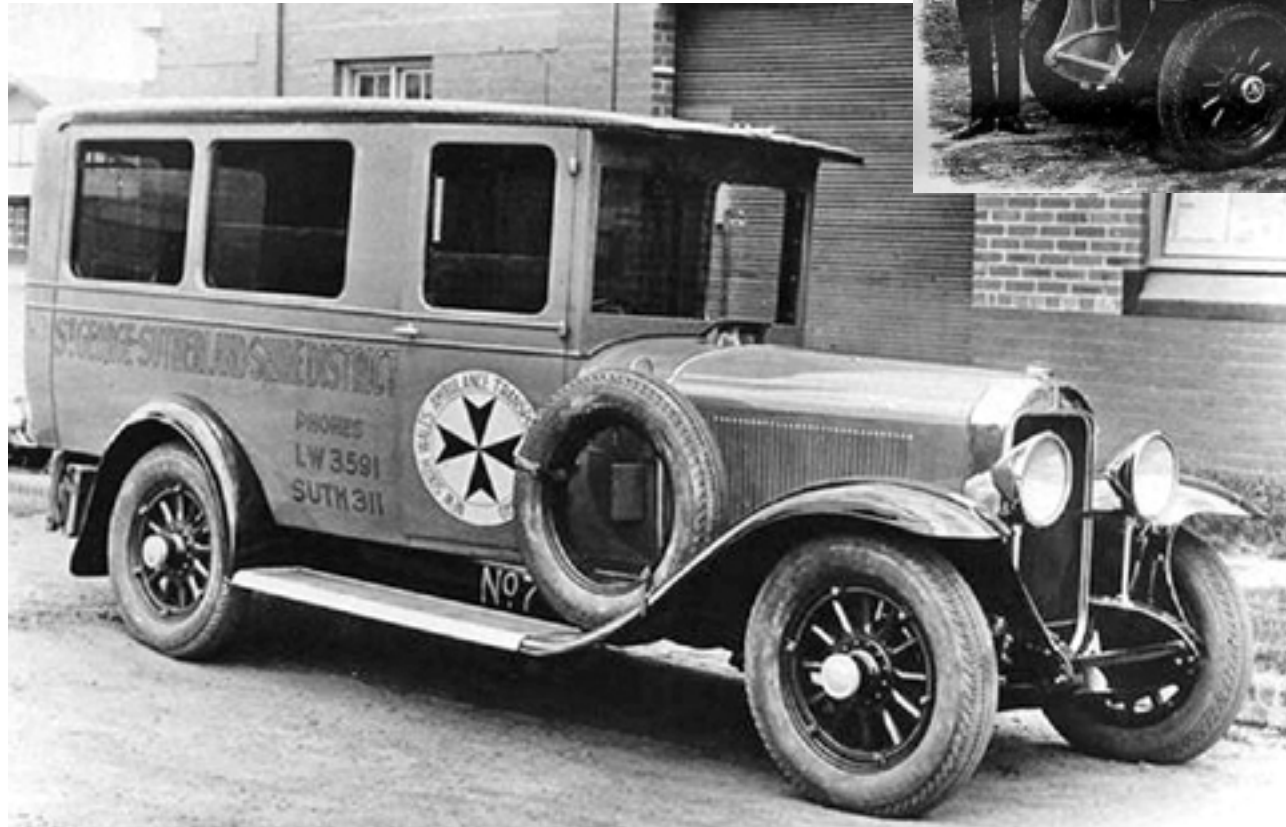
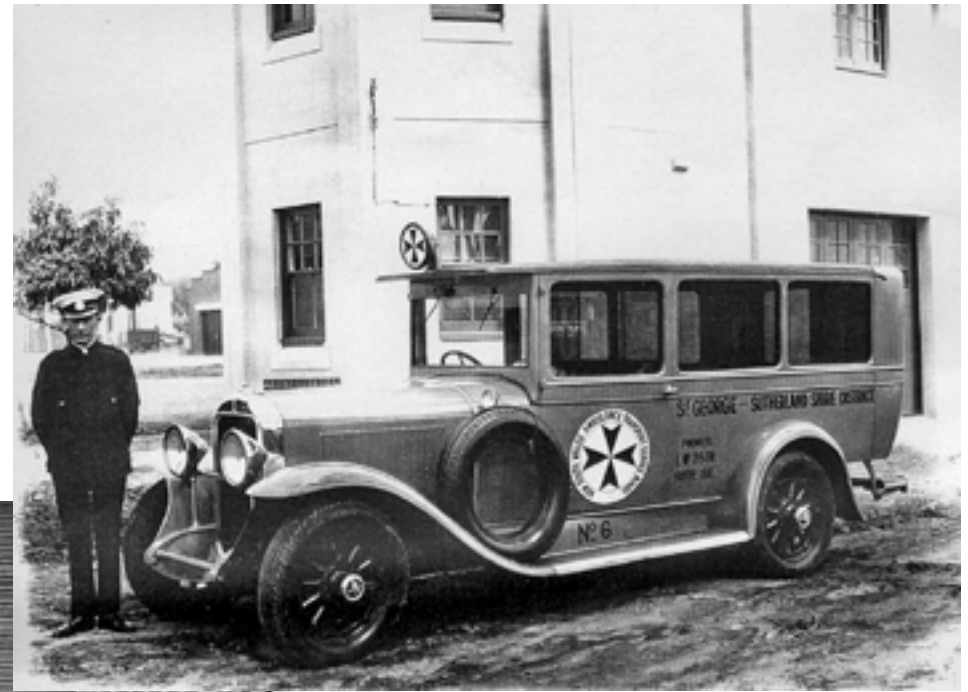
This is a 1946/47 Buick “Boot Loader” Ambulance stationed in the Shoalhaven District at Nowra. “Boot Loaders” were a sedan with the rear seat removed and a platform built to accommodate a stretcher. This type of vehicle was popular as a fill in ambulance just after WWII when there was a shortage of body steel resulting in a long lead time to have a full body built onto a new chassis. The car was converted from a GM Holdens assembled 8/40 Buick. This Buick body style was assembled in Australia by GMH from late 1946 through 1947 when all local assembly of Buick ceased. The model used panels pressed from the 1942 US model Fisher Body dies enabling an early start-up after WWII. Even so new cars were scarce and virtually rationed with most of the early production being absorbed by the Government.

1946/47 Buick 8/40, Nowra



St. GEORGE - SUTHERLAND

Cars number 6 and 7 from the St. George - Sutherland Shire District, Sydney were part of the fleet of 1929 Buick Master Sixes. They looked very sharp with the sedan style bodies and side mounted spare tyres. These Buicks were built using the 129" wheelbase chassis and were powered by an in-line 6 cylinder engine of 309.6 cu.in. capacity developing 90 bhp.



*1929 Buick Master Sixes,
St. George - Sutherland*



SINGLETON

Singleton's 1924 Buick Six had canvassed topped bodywork but was better weathered with the fitting of sedan type doors. Body was by Gilbert Bros., Newcastle.

1924 Buick Six, Singleton

TAMWORTH

On the left is a mid 20's Austin, in the centre is a 1926 Buick Standard Six, and on the right possibly a Nash.

Austin, Buick & Nash, Tamworth



WAGGA-WAGGA

On the left is a 1925 model 25-X-45 touring, fully imported with Flint built, Stewart body and optional export style single side mount spare. Parked behind is a big vintage Hudson.

*1925 Buick Master Six
& Hudson, Wagga Wagga*



Wagga's District Ambulance also favoured 30's and 40's Buicks with bodies built by W.S. Grice of Summer Hill. Pictured outside the Wagga Wagga District Ambulance Station are (L to R): 1938 Buick, 1937 Buick, 1934 Vauxhall and vintage Studebaker.

*(L to R): 1938 Buick, 1937 Buick,
1934 Vauxhall and vintage
Studebaker.*



WAGGA-WAGGA

Wagga Wagga is a regional city in southern New South Wales. Like so many Australian locations it retains the original aboriginal name for the area. Wagga Wagga means "the land of million's and million's of crows".

These Wagga Wagga ladies are very smartly turned out for the photograph with the new 1938 Buick ambulance.

*1938 Buick Century,
Wagga Wagga*

The picture tells the story. Community raised funds provided ambulances and equipment and here the Wagga Wagga Police are presenting the newest 1940 Buick ambulance to the local service.



1940 Buick 8/40, Wagga Wagga

WAGGA-WAGGA

Pictured are the earlier fleet cars at Wagga Wagga, right is a 1937 Buick, 1934 Vauxhall and two vintage Studebakers. In the later photo below are a 1939 Buick Century, 1937 Buick Century and 1937 Buick Limited.



L to R: 1939 Buick, 1938 Buick and 1937 Buick.

L to R: 1937 Buick, 1934 Vauxhall and two vintage Studebakers.



WAGGA-WAGGA

The earlier Buicks, still in service at Wagga Wagga after WWII, were joined by a new 1946/47 Buick 8/40. The photo top shows the four consecutive models of Buick, 1946/47 Buick, 1939 Buick Century, 1937 Buick Century and 1937 Buick Limited.



1946/47 Buick 8/40, Wagga Wagga



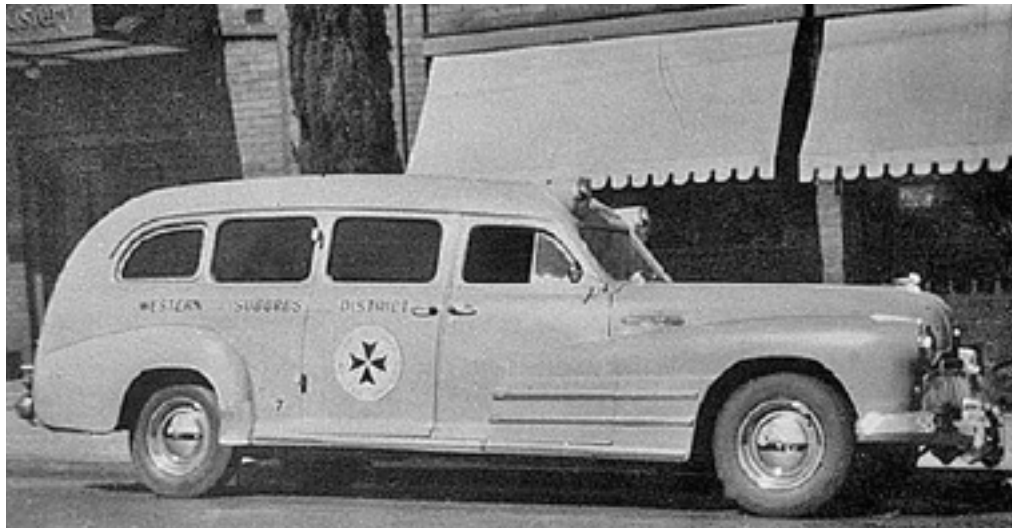
*Another view of Wagga Wagga's post war fleet line-up,
L to R: 1937 Buick Limited, 1937 Buick Century, 1939
Buick Century, 1946 GMC (15cwt), 1946/47 Buick 8/40.*

WALCHA

Pictured is a 1929 Buick Master Six of the Walcha Branch of the Armidale District Ambulance Service.

1929 Buick Master Six, Walcha





1946/47 Buick 8/40, Western Suburbs

In earlier times the Western Suburbs District Ambulance Service operated this very smart fleet of premium cars pictured right, two Packards, two Buicks and a Humber. The very smart 1935 Buick built on the 90 series "Limited" chassis was powered by the 344 cu.in. straight eight engine developing 116 bhp., and the 1936 Buick built on the 90 Series "Limited" chassis of 138" wheelbase was powered by the also new straight eight, 320 cu.in. engine developing 120 bhp.

WESTERN SUBURBS

Western Suburbs District Ambulance Service at Summer Hill served the community with this new 1946/47 Buick in the years following WW2. The 1946/47 Buicks were the last Buick vehicles assembled in Australia, the production being stopped in preparation for the production of the all new "Holden" car in 1948. Because of this, these '46/47 cars built on the "Special" series chassis were the last Buick ambulances made in Australia, and the last Buicks to join the NSW Ambulance Service.

Two Packards, 1936 Buick, 1935 Buick and a Humber, Western Suburbs





1935 Buick 8/90 Western Suburbs

WESTERN SUBURBS

Pride of the fleet, the two big and beautiful Buick Limited Ambulances of the Western Suburbs District service.



1936 Buick 8/90 Western Suburbs

YOUNG

This image is of three cars of the Young District Ambulance. The car on the extreme left is the 1929 Buick Master Six from Young with Supt. Bergin and members of the District Committee. The other two cars are a 1934 Dodge with Station Officer Moorhouse and a 1927 Buick Master Six with Ambulance Officer Robert McRobert of the Cootamundra Branch Station. The Buick at Young was built by Gilbert Bros. of Newcastle under the supervision of Supt. W. Davey (the first permanent officer and super-intendant at Young).

The saying "life wasn't meant to be easy" is graphically illustrated in this picture of the 1929 Buick Master Six ambulance from Young bogged down literally below the axles despite being fitted with mud chains.

"Bogged" 1929 Buick Master Six, Young



*1929 Buick Master Six, 1934 Dodge
& 1927 Buick Master Six, Young*

The Buick Motor Company were represented by Manufacturers agents in Australia from late 1907, before the formation of General Motors. Buick quickly established a reputation for quality and reliability, particularly in Australia's rugged out-back road conditions. In February, 1912 General Motors Export Division opened an office in Sydney marketing just Buick and Oakland vehicles. By 1919 Buick was the number three, only out sold by Ford and Dodge. It held almost all the prestige market and Buick sales at this time exceeded the sales of all other marques combined.

As these historical photos confirm, there can be no doubt Buick built vehicles made a significant contribution to the extensive fleet of the Ambulance Service of New South Wales during the years to 1947, the period when General Motors Holdens assembled and sold in Australia vehicles of this great American marque.

