HISTORY OF SIGNALLING IN 100 OBJECTS
MORRIS-MINOR - EARLY MECHANISATION

Mechanisation after WW1 was a very slow process. The final battles on the Western Front had highlighted the need for Joint Arms cooperation and mechanisation, but these lessons were quickly forgotten in the peace-time British Army. It was the German "Blitzkreig" in 1940 that highlighted the need for fast moving tank units, to be accompanied by fully tactical and mobile communications. When Royal Signals was formed as a Corps in 1920 this lesson was far in the future.

Early Army endeavours to find a suitable cross-country vehicle had resulted in a prototype six-wheeled 1 ton lorry with four wheel drive, but as usual during peacetime, the price was too high. As a result Army mechanisation was largely restricted to chassis types in manufacture by the British trade for commercial purposes. Hence we see in the photos above the Morris Minor being used by Royal Signals to carry radios into the field. At this time there had also been imposed a horse-power tax over a period of many years, which had resulted in the commercial market producing vehicles with insufficient reserve of power to negotiate poor roads or tracks, let alone any cross country performance. These under-powered commercial vehicles were unsuitable for towing trailers. Two other factors affect Army mechanisation policy - namely, concealment from enemy aircraft and bridging (The Bailey Bridge was not designed until much later).

So not only were these early signals vehicles under-powered and not able to tow a trailer, the radio sets that they were required to carry needed power as well. Vehicle dynamos could only just power the lights on a vehicle and charge the vehicle battery. This battery was not able also to power a radio set. Additional batteries and early generators were all additional weight, therefore had to be carried in a separate vehicle.

The design of new signal equipment during the 1920s and early 1930s would be only too familiar to procurement staff today. There were 3 possible courses at this time: firstly, buy the nearest existing commercial equivalent from trade with or without modification, secondly place a development contract with trade - i.e. Get them to design and subsequently manufacture equipment; and thirdly, task the Signals Experimental Establishment to design the item and eventually let a contract with trade for manufacture. Army radio requirements were rarely of interest to commercial firms. Army equipment had to be purchased and delivered in year because the Army only had funds guaranteed for that financial year. Commercial firms were therefore not interested in contracts of this nature (Sound Familiar?) . Hence the Morris Minor, which could look good on a parade with bands playing, but was of little use for mobile warfare. Armoured Command Vehicles and Jeeps were a long way in the future. (See History of British Army Signals in WW2 by Major-General R.F.H. Nalder, CB,O.B.E)