

HIGH PERFORMANCE CARS

With AUTOSPORT road test reports

1962-1963

Erik Carlsson at Monte Carlo

Carlsson had his first Monte rally victory in 1962—in this flashing SAAB, co-driven by Haggbom. And he did it on BP fuels and lubricants.

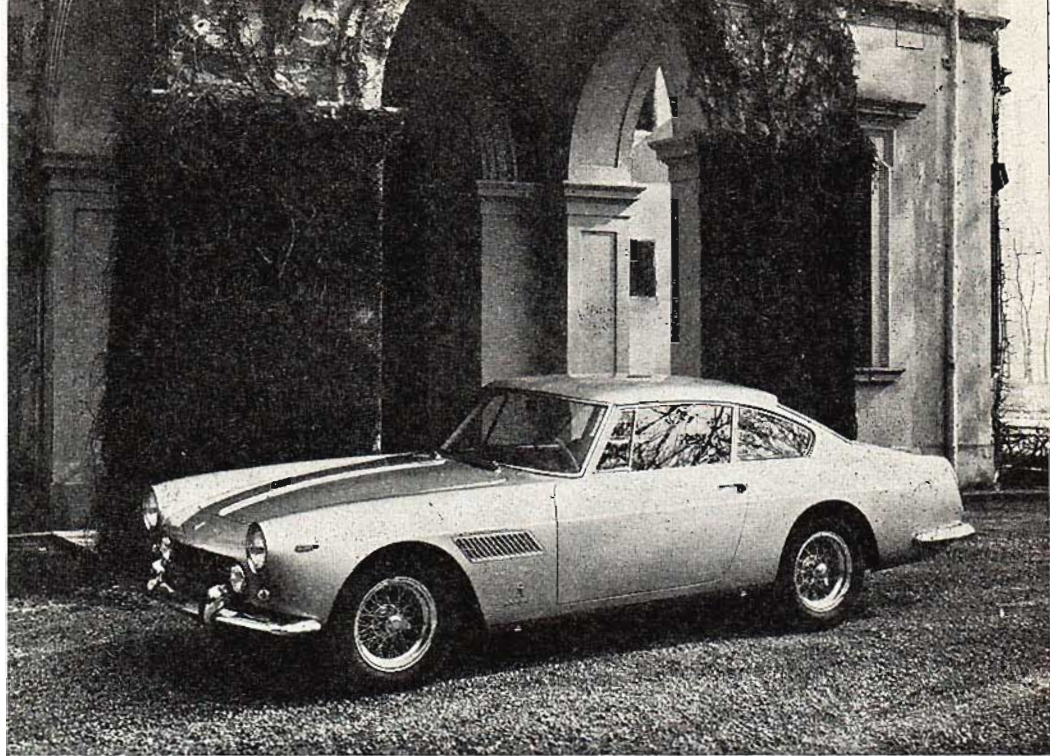


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FERRARI: The Pininfarina 2 plus 2 coupé is based on the very fast 250 GTO chassis, but is far more luxurious in its appointments, and detuned for refinement

There is a subtle difference between status symbol, and prestige cars. The first-named can embrace practically every make of motor-car, according to the social position of the owner. For example, a family in a street of semi-detached homes, occupied by people of fairly modest means, might wish to have something just a cut above the kind of vehicles usually seen outside their neighbours' houses. Thus, amongst a line of obviously second-hand machinery, a brand-new saloon must stand out, thus tending to enhance the local status of the purchasers.

On the other hand, the car could go along with the actual financial position of the buyer, with the accent on the gradual moving upwards of his (or her) job, whether in trade or in one of the professions. Naturally some people couldn't care less about this, and would cling stubbornly to the "old bus", stating quite definitely that they were not in the slightest bit



THE PRESTIGE CARS OF TO-DAY

by
GREGOR GRANT

interested in keeping up with the Joneses. Even so, there is often something suggestive of inverted snobbery attached to persons who will go too far along these lines, and hold on to a vehicle which has long passed its best, merely because it bears a famous name. These people are quite distinct from the true vintage enthusiasts, and generally labour under the delusion that the retention of a vast 1929 Rolls-Royce (ex-Royalty, old boy!) is a status symbol, much above their next-door neighbour's brand-new 3.8 Jaguar.

The status symbol may well blossom forth in the transformation of perfectly standard touring cars, to which is added every possible gadget it is possible to fit. Thus we find curious exhaust systems, port-holes, batteries of extra lamps, special colour schemes and so on. We must not, of course, overlook the "personal" registration numbers, which are considered extremely effective in impressing others of the ability to obtain such things.

Prestige automobiles fall into two distinct categories. Firstly we have the ultra-luxurious vehicles, often built regardless of cost, and secondly, the high-performance machines which stamp the owners as connoisseurs of automotive engineering. True, certain fairly low-priced sports cars carry prestige, but not in their own country. Whilst an MG 1800, a Sunbeam Alpine or a TR4 will carry a certain amount of prestige in Italy, they fall more into the status symbol class in Great Britain. Similarly, ownership of an Alfa Romeo, is not regarded as anything out of the ordinary in Italy nor is the possession of a Porsche taken as a prestige matter in Germany.

There are, of course, certain motor-cars which do fall into the prestige category

all over the world, following the tradition of the great marques of the past such as Isotta Fraschini, Hispano Suiza, Pierce-Arrow, Duesenberg, Bugatti, Lincoln Continental, Mercedes-Benz, Rolls-Royce and Bentley. Of these, only the four last-named survive today.

Now let us take a look at the British contributions to the prestige market. Some people may maintain that Rolls-Royce is merely a shadow of the great Silver Ghosts and Phantoms of an earlier era. Be that as it may, the Rolls-Royce is still regarded as one of the world's most desirable motor-cars in the luxury field. This also goes for the Bentley, with the accent on the Continental edition. Neither makes are particularly renowned for performance, but their prestige value is unquestionable. By transforming the Bentley from the undeniably sporting vehicle of the 'twenties and early 'thirties to its present similarity to the Rolls, the Derby concern has sought to combine the desire for luxury and silence,



ASTON MARTIN: Britain's prestige car in the high-performance category is the DB4 GT, developed from the David Brown sports-racing cars.



(Top left): The Mercedes-Benz 300SL Roadster—with fuel-injected six-cylinder engine.

(Above, right): Daimler's vast limousine has a 4.5-litre, V8 engine.

(Left): Bentley's famous Continental has a Rolls-Royce V8 engine.

with the wish for a car with a sporting name.

For many years, Britain's rival to the Rolls-Royce in the luxury class Daimler, and today, ownership of the big Majestic Major still carries a certain amount of prestige. When Daimler was the official Royal vehicle, no one could dispute the right to its claim, but despite the efforts of the present owners (Jaguar Cars Ltd.), the Daimler, for all its impressive performance, just falls short of the full requirements for the prestige machine. This is also true of the Jaguar range, the main reason being that the cars are in such a price bracket, that they are readily available to far too many purchasers. At the time of writing, the scarcity of the Mark Ten gives it prestige value, but this will tend to drop off within the next twelve months. This was shown in the E-type, which, during the first few months of its production, carried immense prestige value, but no longer does as such, although it is a most valuable contribution to engineering in general. Nevertheless I would certainly put the 4.5-litre Daimler Limousine in the prestige bracket.

Aston Martin is, on the other hand, very definitely a prestige marque. It appeals to the connoisseur who knows that fairly limited production will prevent it becoming commonplace. This is not the place to argue the merits, or otherwise, of both makes, but it is acknowledged that ownership of an Aston Martin does place the customer in the prestige section of the community. Lately, David Brown has attempted to re-introduce the Lagonda in the luxury class, in which the pre-war V12 almost succeeded in becoming a prestige automobile. It will be interesting to see whether or not he can emulate Rolls-Royce, and provide vehicles for both classes of customer.

Curiously enough a comparatively old-fashioned (as regards design) motor-car has gradually invaded the prestige market. This is the 3-litre Alvis, with bodywork by Graber.

Other concerns produce what are prestige cars in comparison to their other models, but, so far, none has managed to occupy the niche held by the vehicles already mentioned. Cars such as the Austin Princess, Jensen, and Humber Super Snipe

must therefore be put in the status symbol class. However, there is one claimant which must be added to the list of prestige machines, and that is the Bristol. Ford hope to establish a prestige range, with special Hooper-bodied versions of the Zodiac III.

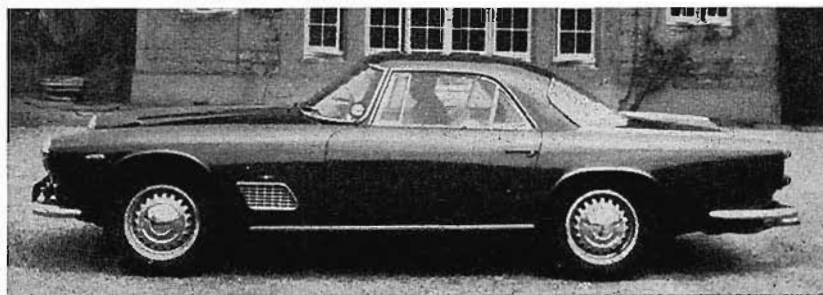
France can claim only one prestige car, and that is the Facel-Vega, which, like the Bristol 407, utilises an American engine.

Italy has three, with Ferrari probably occupying the position of Number One in the world. As regards performance, the 250 GTO and "America" series are in a class by themselves, and for the more comfort-minded, the 2 plus 2, is well established in this specialised market. Maserati's contribution is the 3500 GT, with fuel injection, and the remaining claimant is the Lancia Flaminia, preferably in GT form, although not quite regarded as such in its country of origin.

Germany can offer two, both from the same factory—the Mercedes-Benz 300SL, and the 300S. The 220SE is a status symbol car, both in Germany and in other countries, with the accent on the convertible.

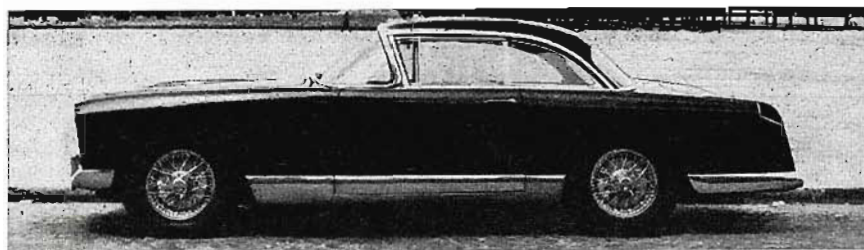
The U.S.A. can offer several "custom-built" versions of standard, or stock, automobiles which fall into the category, but taking it by and large, those with world-wide acknowledgment are the Cadillac, Buick Invicta and Lincoln Continental. The first-named has completely supplanted Packard, which is no longer in production, but the present owners of the name, Studebaker, may well invade this market with the Avanti, until such time as production causes the car to be more readily available. This occurred in the case of Corvette and Thunderbird. I would also be inclined to class the Chrysler Imperial as a prestige car, especially the Ghia versions.

One or two small-capacity cars can also be claimed as being in the prestige class. Italy's Osca and Abarth "1000" are something above mere status symbols, as is Britain's Lotus Elite and Germany's



(Above): Sportsman's coupé: the "3,500" Maserati has a six-cylinder engine with British Lucas fuel-injection.

(Right): France's Facel-Vega has an American V8 power-unit.



(Continued on page 13)

The Prestige Cars of To-day—Continued

Porsche Abarth Carrera. These machines appeal to the more sporting section of buyers, mainly those who do not want very powerful cars, and who are inclined to enter competitions.

Again, there is a small minority which prefers completely individual cars, usually "one-off" vehicles never likely to go into series production. Thus we find cars such as Gulbenkian's famous Austin "taxi", and very special Rolls-Royces built to the order of extremely wealthy potentates.

Some people have had racing cars converted for road use, in the search for exclusive machinery. The prestige value of the short-lived Jaguar XKSS was such, that one or two people have had sports-racing D-types converted, rather than purchase the quantity-produced E-type. It is also prestige-making in the U.S.A., to acquire one of the pre-war SS100 models, and restore it to showroom condition. Another section of the American prestige-seeking community is busy restoring early MG models.

Naturally every manufacturer believes that at least one of his productions can be regarded as being in the prestige class, but the truth of the matter is that the specialised market is extremely difficult to invade. In articles in daily use, there are some which carry the sort of prestige which is impossible to emulate, despite the most careful copying and studying of why they make that certain appeal to discriminating buyers. Cars fall into this category, and the history of the automobile industry contains countless, heart-breaking examples of those who sought to create prestige vehicles, and failed.

The great period for these machines ended with the Wall Street crash in 1929 and the financial results of this were far-reaching, causing the demise of many makers whose fortunes were bound up with the limited demand for prestige cars. With the wiping out of wealth overnight, orders were drastically reduced, and it is only quite recently that there has been a steady return to a demand for prestige cars.

Undoubtedly motor-racing has a marked

effect on preference, as is instanced by the remarkable rise of Ferrari. It is now fairly certain that the great Ford empire will seek to acquire this sort of prestige in the not-so-distant future.

Rover, long-known for quality cars, could be first in the field with a road-worthy, gas-turbine passenger car. This would carry immense prestige, a fact which is realised by other manufacturers. Already the British concern has produced several prototypes, and their latest version is such a step nearer realisation, that Rover may lead the rest of the world in this particular field.

B.M.C. would dearly like to have a prestige automobile, and the recent announcement of a technical tie-up with Rolls-Royce may be the first step to the introduction of a new range. On the other hand, it could quite possibly mean that Derby, trying to lower production costs, seek to take full advantage of B.M.C. automation practices. In any case, an alliance of the two concerns could lead to higher engineering standards all round.



*TOURIST TROPHY: Innes Ireland (UDT-Laystall) at Goodwood with the 250 GTO Ferrari he drove to victory in the RAC T.T. He is seen here at Madgwick Corner.
(Photo, Pat Benjafield)*