

FIAT – FASTEST CAR IN THE WORLD

Back in the pre- and post-First War days of motor racing, the way to get a faster car was often seen as simply fitting a much bigger engine. At that time power units were generally unrefined and not so easy to tune and there were some pretty huge cars –in terms of engine size and overall dimensions- around anyway. With open, banked tracks like Brooklands and Montlhery, sheer power was more of an immediate concern to many racers of the day than agility and –much in the later American manner- size seemed to be the key to success.



The Fiat which came –perhaps aptly!- to be referred to as ‘Mephistopheles’ was one such vehicle and it began life in 1907 as a factory-built racer, arriving in Britain in 1908 and at that time possessing an engine of 18155cc. It had been ordered by a wealthy Scottish baronet, was the subject of a rather complicated court case soon after it arrived and it was not raced with much success pre-1914. Post-1918 it was found languishing in a London mews garage by someone who was already racing a somewhat aged Fiat S61 and apparently purchased for £100; its original price had been £1250!. It had slightly more success in this ownership, but while racing in 1922 the two rearmost pistons appeared through the bonnet and brought things to an abrupt close!

However, rather than bringing to an end the cars’ career, this point marked the beginning of its real success. Enter one Ernest Eldridge, who was no stranger to large-engine cars having been racing an Isotta-Fraschini with a 20800cc Maybach aero engine, but who was



looking for something faster! Having found a new war-surplus Fiat 300bhp aviation engine (still in its packing case!) he decided to purchase the Fiat with the wrecked engine for £25 and begin a new project. Some considerable engineering was necessary to bring car and engine together, not least the lengthening of the chassis by around 17 inches to accommodate the 21714cc unit and after some development during its first few appearances it began to perform well, lapping Brooklands at over 122mph in 1923.



The new owner had a liking for France and in 1924 he took the car to the Arpajon speed trials. Perhaps unexpectedly, he found his speed to be within World Land Speed Record territory and after spending two days making and installing a form of reverse gear to comply with the regulations for such an attempt, he returned to the course and recorded two-way averages of 145.89mph to take the mile record and 146.01mph to bag the kilometre record – on a road not officially closed and with the obligatory passenger too! These records are also historically important, as they are the last occasion when the LSR was set on a public road, the car being driven to and from France!

After this the cars' subsequent career might be regarded as something of an anti-climax, although it was sold in 1925 to an owner who took it to Australia for a spell and after sporadic road(!) and race use it spent a long period in 'retirement'.



However, in 1961 it was rebuilt and saw some action in Vintage Sports Car Club events, but eventually it was purchased by Fiat for their collection in Turin (for £10,000 plus a Fiat 128!) and



there it still resides, although it did return to Britain in 2004 for an appearance at the Goodwood Festival of Speed.

It would certainly be true to say of such cars that we will not see their like again, but it is certainly equally true that we will never again see men like those that constructed and drove them to their very limits in those extraordinary times.

MJB

For further information on this and other cars of this type, see Bill Boddy's excellent *Brooklands Giants and Aero-Engined Racing Cars At Brooklands*.