

Numero UNO

Simon Moore explains how he witnessed the discovery of the first Cisitalia sportscar in South Africa, and unfolds its history.

Finding a 'lost' car is always exciting but one with chassis No.001 even more so. Not that a car is ever totally lost as *someone* knows where it is even if most enthusiasts don't! In 1984, my employer sent me to work in South Africa for a couple of years. Soon after arriving there, an old friend and Alfa Romeo and Maserati historian, Ken Stewart, of Port Elizabeth, was staying with me in Johannesburg and a dinner party was put on for him.

Over coffee, the conversation turned to exotic cars that had disappeared in South Africa. Hugh Gearing and Rob van Zyl recalled a coupé that had been imported to Johannesburg in the late fifties. It seems to have raced only once, in the sportscar scratch race at the Rand Autumn meeting in 1961, held at the now defunct Grand Central Airport circuit. In Italy, it had gained a nose from, or at least patterned on, a Barchetta Ferrari. The air intakes above the windshield had been filled in, the fuel filler stuck out of the perspex cover in the tail and there was a scoop in the bonnet. Despite the new nose, it still had an original Cisitalia badge.

Exactly who had the car next is not clear but it seems it was never raced again. Around 1960 it was bought by someone called Brian Green who left it lying outside with the engine and gearbox removed. His brother finally acquired it and, in 1965, he passed it on to 'Rocky' Rockas of Benoni, east of Johannesburg. Rocky towed the engineless car back to his

father-in-law's property in Bocksburg but for some reason never went back for all the mechanical bits. Apart from the original engine and gearbox, these included engines spares, two quick-change differentials (one a hillclimb-type low ratio) and at least one more gearbox. (The two gearboxes were a four-speed plus reverse and a five-speed - with no reverse!). All these parts were in storage with Brian Green, not his brother, and were eventually thrown away in a municipal dump/landfill when he moved house. They are gone forever.

The rest of the car sat where it was for 20 years - in a lean-to shed at Rocky's father-in-law's property. Hugh had traced it and contacted Rocky seven or eight years before, but failed to persuade him to part with it. With a bit of help from the telephone book - and some very perplexed people who also have the surname Rockas - we tracked Rocky down again despite the fact that he had moved more than once in the intervening period. He still didn't want to sell but agreed to let me see the car on January 13, 1985. It was filthy dirty and the tyres were flat. We pushed it out and he washed it down with a hose. My notes on the condition ran as follows:

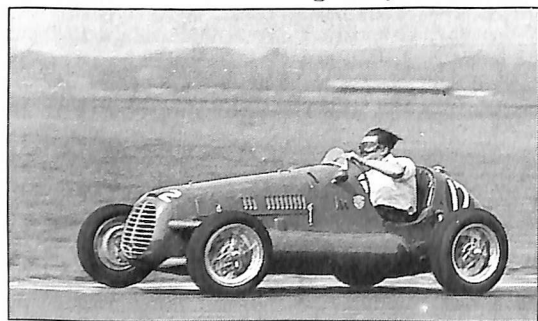
'Original Cisitalia badge missing; an oval badge saying CISITALIA/SPECIAL MM still fitted as it was when the car arrived in South Africa; Mocco body-builder's badge original; amazingly shaped fuel tank intact, with space for spare wheel to fit in the



Cisitalia Savonuzzi and Taruffi



Dramatic streamliner designed by Savonuzzi



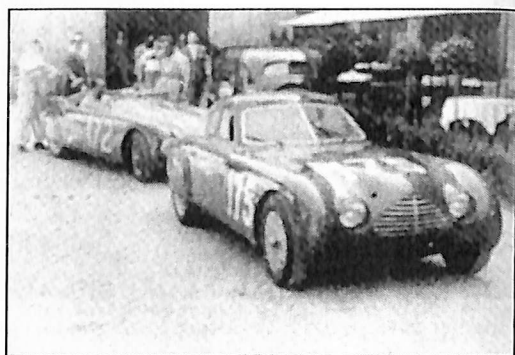
D46 of Kennington at Goodwood in 1949

modifications apart from a set of VW wheels. It was discovered by Violati, and returned to Italy where it was sensitively restored by Roberto Vesco in Brescia three years ago. The bodywork is completely original.

When Cisitalia went bankrupt, Dusio salvaged what he could by selling most of the assets and a completed Formula 1 car to Autocar in Argentina. Although essentially a truck manufacturer, they struggled with the Tipo 360 GP project but were beset with mechanical problems.

Back in Italy, Cisitalia was reconstructed under the direction of Dusio's son Carlo and several prototype models were built using Ford engines due to the enthusiasm of Henry Ford II, himself a Cisitalia owner. A projected order from the American company never materialised. In 1958 Michelotti produced drawings for a daring new coupé but a prototype was never built. The last car to feature the famed Cisitalia badge was a special-bodied Fiat 600. How the mighty fall...
Mick Walsh

Our thanks to Rudy Pass and Marcel Rokos of Classic Car Associates for their help.



Evolution of the 'Box' from prototype, Mille Miglia team car and South African club racer



top of it, and no filler cap. Also evidence of the air scoops over the windshield, but now closed up.

Obviously, I tried to buy the car over the next few months but without success as Rocky always claimed that he was going to start a rebuild soon. I saw it again on February 22, 1986 and I took David Cohen along with me. He subsequently managed to prise the car out of Rocky's grasp. When we got the car back to David's workshop, he took a wire brush to the dirt on the front cross member and there it was, the magical 001 number appeared! With such an historic car that had first appeared in the 1947 Mille Miglia, David set himself the almost impossible task of rebuilding it in time for the 1987 running of the Retrospective. David found a later engine (supercharged) and gearbox and these were rebuilt by his ace mechanic, Ginger. The body was completely stripped and the original nose recreated.

One of the many memorable moments at the 1987 Mille Miglia was seeing 001 sitting gleaming in the Piazza della Vittoria. Inizio Bernabei, 001's first owner, would have been proud of the car in the Mille Miglia as it completed the course, although not without a few teething troubles.

Construction of 001 started in the Autumn of 1946 with the intention of completing it, along with at least four others, in time for the 1947 Mille Miglia. 001 was selected to have a coupé body created by Cisitalia designer, Dante Giacosa, and progressed by his successor, Giovanni Savonuzzi. The body was built by Rocco Motto in Turin and was first shown to the press in early 1947.

Although this car had the first chassis number (001) it probably had the body built on it without an engine in it as the original engine number was 005. The car appeared at Brescia for the 1947 Mille Miglia on June 22 with slots cut above the windshield to improve ventilation, driven by Bernabei, with co-driver Pacini (Race No. 175). Bernabei had not really featured in any race results before 1947 although he did drive the 1938 Alfa Romeo 8C2900B Le Mans coupé in at least one event for the Rome-based Ventura brothers and also had one or two outings in D46 single-seaters. Whether he bought 001 at this time or later is not clear but the car was virtually his only mount for three whole seasons. It was nick-named 'Cassone' which can be translated as 'box'. Certainly it must have been awfully hot inside and, both before and after its first appearance, it's gained a number of additional air intakes around the cockpit area.

The 1947 running of the Mille Miglia stipulated that no superchargers could be used and also that all entrants would receive a new set of tyres at an attractive price. In post-war Italy, tyres were scarce so it is no surprise that over 230 cars entered but only about 150 actually started – and some of those were 'starting money specials'! The supercharger

ban should have excluded the 2.9 Alfa Romeo model which had won the last three full Mille Miglia events (1936/7/8) but Brescia Alfa dealer, Emilio Romano, entered a coupé (412036) for himself and 1938 winner, Clemente Biondetti, with the blowers removed and replaced by carburettors. Five Cisitalias appeared, including 001, but the star entry was Tazio Nuvolari in his open car. Bernabei was in fact the fastest on the wet leg from Turin to Brescia at an average of 153kph (96mph). Overall, 001 completed

the 1000 miles in 16 hours 38 mins for an average of 109.8kph (68.6mph), only 12 mins behind the winning Alfa and less than 6 mins behind Nuvolari's Cisitalia.


Bernabei brought the car out for the 1948 Targa Florio/Giro di Sicilia on April 4 but retired, reaching as high as third. He also failed to finish after making it to Rome well placed in the Mille Miglia (Race No. 86) on May 2 where the car (co-driven by Sari) featured additional lights either side of the radiator grille. This running of the Mille Miglia saw the first of many wins by a Ferrari.

More successes came later in the season with a first overall in the Giro dell'Umbria, followed by several 1100cc class high placings, including victory in the Rome-Ostia 20km sprint recording a speed of 171.43kph over a measured kilometre. That's 107mph, which is pretty impressive for 1100cc in 1948. Bernabei rounded off the season with a class victory in the Coppa Gallenga hillclimb near Rome.

His third season with 001 proved the little coupé was getting a little fragile but was still competitive. He finished seventh overall in the Targa Florio but failed to finish the Mille Miglia again. The car's final appearance in Italy was the Vermicino-Rocca di Papa hillclimb in October where Bernabei took fourth in the 1100cc class. The car seems to have languished in Italy for some time, perhaps being used as a road car, until the late 1950s when an Italian took it to Johannesburg.

I was back in Johannesburg on holiday in August 1988 and finally had the chance of a ride in the Cisitalia that I had first discovered four years before. I say 'ride' as it is virtually impossible for me to fit my 6 feet 4in (1.94m) frame into this tiny coupé. The passenger side forces me to be a bit of a contortionist but to try and drive it at any sort of speed in traffic is totally out of the question.

Two environmental factors strike you very soon after you set off – the heat and the noise! Even in winter, Johannesburg is pleasantly warm (16-20°C) and the temperature starts rising inside the 'Cassone' as soon as you start. No wonder they cut extra ventilation holes into the original body. There is absolutely no sound insulation either under the bonnet or in the cockpit so the willing little engine and the rasping exhaust, coupled in this case with a supercharger, make quite a racket as you drive up the road. Performance is quite good, due in part to the later engine and to the low weight of the car and it stops and steers well for the immediate post-war era. Driving around the city, it certainly draws some interested looks although most people who ask have never heard of a Cisitalia. It is low even by modern saloon car standards and looks – and indeed sounds with its open exhaust – very much the part of early post-war Italian sportscar.

Special thanks for help in preparing this story must go to Ken Stewart and David Cohen. 



Day of discovery of the first Cisitalia



Instruments, engine, gearbox were missing



001 restored to full glory in South Africa

