



A dark blue Alfa Romeo 6C 2500B is shown from a low-angle, front-quarter perspective, driving on a paved road. The car's iconic round headlight and grille are prominent. The license plate reads 'VNO 323'. The background consists of a blurred line of trees, suggesting motion. The overall lighting is warm, likely from a low sun.

# Mile Eater

Recently restored with its unique Touring body style, this Alfa Romeo 6C 2500B will be competing on the Mille Miglia next year – celebrating a class with it notched up in 1938

Vendor: Mark Dixon Photography: Michael Balle





### Organising a classic car photoshoot

in Britain can be a fraught affair. Finding a suitable location is always a problem on this crowded island, and the weather is notoriously fickle. And then, of course, there are the problems associated with driving machinery that is well past its first flush of youth. The boys on the modern-car magazines, with their press office back-up and no mileage restrictions, don't know they're born...

So I could empathise with pre-war journalist Dennis May, whose road test of this Alfa 6C 2300B was published in *Speed* magazine back in 1938. 'Our original plan,' wrote May, 'had been to get to Brooklands around mid-morning, clock a few flying laps by way of appetizer, lunch, then off in all directions for an afternoon of glorious road blinding... In fact it didn't work out like that. First there was a mist, leading to polylingual and prolonged debates as to whether we should call the whole thing off. Next, the motor wouldn't start, what with unsuitable fuel and a 60-hours stand-by in a coldish garage. Anyway, finally it did start, thanks to a one-in-nine gradient and the efforts of seven picked athletes.'

Like all good journos, May got the job done in the end, although a thickening fog meant he had to abandon any attempt at 'road blinding'. But it's ironic that, 68 years later and on roads that are unimaginably more crowded than they were in 1938, the 'shoot for *Octane* went as smooth as silk. We didn't even have to pick any athletes.



'IN 1938, CORTESE WAS FIRST IN THE OVER-1500CC CLASS ON THE MILLE MIGLIA AND FIRST OVERALL ON THE TARGA ABRUZZO'

That's partly because London doesn't suffer from the kind of coal-fire driven smog that it used to, and partly because the Alfa is in perfect mechanical health. It feels ready to go and do the Mille Miglia all over again, tomorrow – and that's just what its current owner, a Continental collector, would like to do; except that he missed out on an entry for the 2006 event and is having to kick his heels until 2007.

This chap part-exchanged three exceptionally desirable cars to acquire the Alfa last year, and it's easy to see why. Its unique Touring coachwork – a replica of the original body, which was swapped for a new and considerably uglier Pinin Farina body in 1941, possibly to make it more usable on the road during the war years – is visually arresting but precisely the opposite in aerodynamic terms. Even though this 2300 is the *Corto*, or short-chassis model, the swooping pontoon wings and wasp-tail rear deck of Touring's outrageous design give it an almost cartoon-like sense of elongated motion.

Historically the 6C 2300 is not as celebrated as the eight-cylinder 2300 and 2900 models but its engine has the same Vittorio Jano pedigree. Alfa Romeo was just entering the era of mass-production at the time and, while it's easy to get snobby about this kind of popularisation, there's no doubt that the 6C 2300's independent suspension was also a major advance on the vintage set-up of the 8C 2300 that preceded it.





Photo: The Klemantaski Collection

Above Franco Cortese discusses the Alfa's engine with photographer Louis Klemantaski during the *Speed* magazine test at Brooklands in 1938.

This car has significant competition history. It was bought as a standard 2300B chassis by Count 'Johnny' Luran's Squadra Ambrosiana and then handed over to Jano, the engineering genius who would later be responsible for Lancia's classic post-war V6, for further refinement. Jano specified a new, higher-compression cylinder head for the Alfa straight-six engine, which was moved further back in the chassis for better weight distribution, along with ventilated drum brakes and aluminium alloy wire wheels. After these changes the overall weight of the car, including its alloy body, was the same as that of the original rolling chassis.

By 'adding lightness', upping the engine's power output and altering the gearbox ratios to suit, Jano was able to bump the top speed up from a standard car's 150 to 180kph. Not a bad result for an unblown 2.3-litre engine in 1938, and one that allowed its driver, Franco Cortese, to win Italy's Sports Car Championship that year. Among his more notable individual victories in 1938 were first in the over-1500cc class on the Mille Miglia, and first overall on the Targa Abruzzo – a six-hour marathon that Cortese completed at an average of 69.139mph. Including stops to refuel...

Dennis May gained a first-hand understanding of Cortese's driving style when he rode with *il maestro* from central London to Brooklands on that misty day in 1938. 'There seemed nothing else to do while the



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Alfa was spanking through gaping Barnes and aghast Roehampton at cool sixties, but to keep a look-out astern for pursuing gendarmerie...'

Sixty-eight years later, I'm also watching the Alfa's rear-view mirror for pursuing gendarmerie as we rattle off some semi-legal photographs on the A30, near the Alfa's current home at Hampshire-based dealer Adrian Hamilton. It feels as though we're travelling at bicycling speed but photographer Baillie has to ask me to slow down, because I'm getting towards 70mph and the slipstream is making his hands shake. This would be a fantastic car for the Mille Miglia, without doubt.

You know the 6C is going to be on your side the first time you press the starter and the twin-overhead-cam straight-six fizzes into life without a second's hesitation and settles into a contented burble. Ease the long, raked-back gearlever into first and you're away, the clutch action initially seeming sharp but proving to be nice and progressive, the steering light and delicate from the moment the wheels start turning. There's a decent amount of room even for late-20th century physiques and the seats are military aircraft-style padded bolsters buckled to tubular frames, adjustable by altering the tension on the fastenings.

Mechanically, the Alfa is noteworthy not so much for its fine engine – you tend to take that as a given for a 1930s Alfa – as for its independent suspension,





Alloy body is a recreation of Touring's original, junked in 1941 – possibly so the Alfa could be made more practical for use during the war years.



introduced by Alfa on its 1934 range. At the rear the 6C has Porsche-style swing-axes and torsion bars, while up front there are transverse links that bear on coil springs housed in oil-filled tubes. The ride is still on the firm side but the independent action of each wheel means that the Alfa deals efficiently with the pockmarked surfaces of a typical English country lane, just as it would have done with the even more badly scarred features of 1930s Italian roads. It just goes with the flow, allowing you to keep a gentle hand on the big-rimmed wheel, feeding delicately metered inputs into each corner and feeling the car respond faithfully.

If you have the room and the confidence, you can keep your foot in round the corner and slide the rear wheels with bravado, for the car is superbly balanced and there's no live rear axle to skip sideways over bumps. The fast-reacting steering makes it easy to correct the oversteer and, when you need them, the hydraulically operated massive drum brakes haul the car down from speed surely and squarely.

Vittorio Jano's engine, though, is the heart of the animal. As long ago as 1946 the original 2.3-litre, twin-carb unit was replaced by the current 2.5-litre, triple-carb lump – a capacity change that Alfa itself introduced for production cars in 1939 – and the combination of three barely filtered Weber 36s and a rasping exhaust teases your eardrums with a complex medley of



IT'S EASY TO IMAGINE HOW IMPRESSIVE THIS CAR MUST HAVE SEEMED AS IT BLASTED PAST POTTERING AUSTIN SEVENS'

mechanical snarls and induction hisses and sighs; like all great engines it encourages you to shift down a gear when there's really no need. And usually there isn't, because it's a hugely flexible motor. Encountering a pair of horses, to whom low-slung and noisy sports cars are the work of the Devil, it was possible to ease past them and pull gently away from a walking pace in third gear.

In normal circumstances, no sane person would dream of treating an Alfa like that, of course. The pleasure comes in winding that glorious 'six' around the tachometer dial and feeling the steady and relentless pull of the car as it gets into its stride. We may be a few miles south-east of Brooklands but on the tree-lined straights of the old A30, now relatively lightly trafficked thanks to the parallel M3 motorway, it's easy to imagine how impressive this car just have seemed as it blasted past pottering Morris Eights and Austin Sevens, a manic Italian hunched over the wheel, causing outrage among the upright citizens of 1930s Surrey.

The police take an even dimmer view of that kind of behaviour today than they did in 1938 – except, of course, in Italy when the Mille Miglia is in town. I'll bet the owner of this Alfa is already counting the days.

Many thanks to the car owner, and to Adrian Hamilton of Duncan Hamilton Ltd (+44 (0)1256 765000) for making it and his mechanic Dougie Mitchell available for the photoshoot.



