

Amazing Grace

A glamorous motor car built in 1930 – a time of great economic strife

Story and photography by Johann Lemerrier

Luxury and sophistication, it would appear, are best expressed in double names: Van Cleef & Arpels, Vacheron Constantin, Moët & Chandon, Dolce & Gabbana, Bang & Olufsen – the list is endless. Motor car manufacturers are no exception, and throughout Europe in the first half of the 20th century the high end of the car market was dominated by names such as Delaunay-Belleville, Hispano Suiza, Rolls-Royce and Mercedes-Benz. No exception to the rule, Italy's 'fer de lance' was the mighty Isotta Fraschini.

The name Isotta Fraschini resulted from the association between Cesare Isotta and the Fraschini brothers (Oreste, Vincenzo and Antonio) in 1900, first as importers of Renault, Mors and Pieper motorcars in Milan. From there they started building cars under licence, and brought their own original designs to market within three years. They were united by a common passion, the same observed in most automotive pioneers: they saw the car as the perfect conjunction between novelty, sportsmanship and mechanical engineering. Setting out as automobile manufacturers logically appealed to the adventurous industrialists in them. In 1905, a talented 24-year old designer

was hired to look after the technical department and organise production: Giustino Cattaneo would stay with the company for 25 years, developing not only the finest motorcars but also aero engines, marine engines, and military vehicles.

With this chief asset, the company grew steadily through 1915 and the business expanded with World War I commissions to build tow trucks and tractors. Meanwhile, Isotta Fraschini cars had become a staple in races across Europe and even in the USA, quickly establishing a reputation for technical excellence and reliability. In December 1919, Cattaneo introduced his masterpiece, the Tipo 8. Electing to concentrate its forces on this unique model – certainly very advanced for its time – Isotta Fraschini was effectively taking a gamble by presenting itself now solely as a high prestige manufacturer to rival the likes of Rolls-Royce, and soon Duesenberg, at the very highest motoring echelons. It was a gamble that paid off, though admittedly the company's revenue (and cachet) came mainly from the construction of milestone aero engines throughout the 1920s.

The 600hp straight eight propelling the Tipo 8 verged on 6 litres, with a





LEFT: Magnificent detailing in the woodwork complemented by a fine set of instruments



state-of-the-art single overhead camshaft, a twin side-draught carburettor set-up and a three-speed gearbox. The fully equipped rolling chassis tipped the scales at just under three tons. It featured mechanically operated brakes to all four wheels, an important Isotta Fraschini patent even Rolls-Royce would only adopt in 1924. The model was upgraded in 1924 (the Tipo 8A) with a displacement of 7.3 litres which was good for 115bhp. Development continued with the contemporary 8AS (150bhp), the 1927 8A SS (155bhp) and finally the 8B (160bhp) of which 100 were initially planned (but far fewer assembled) before automobile production finally ceased in 1934.

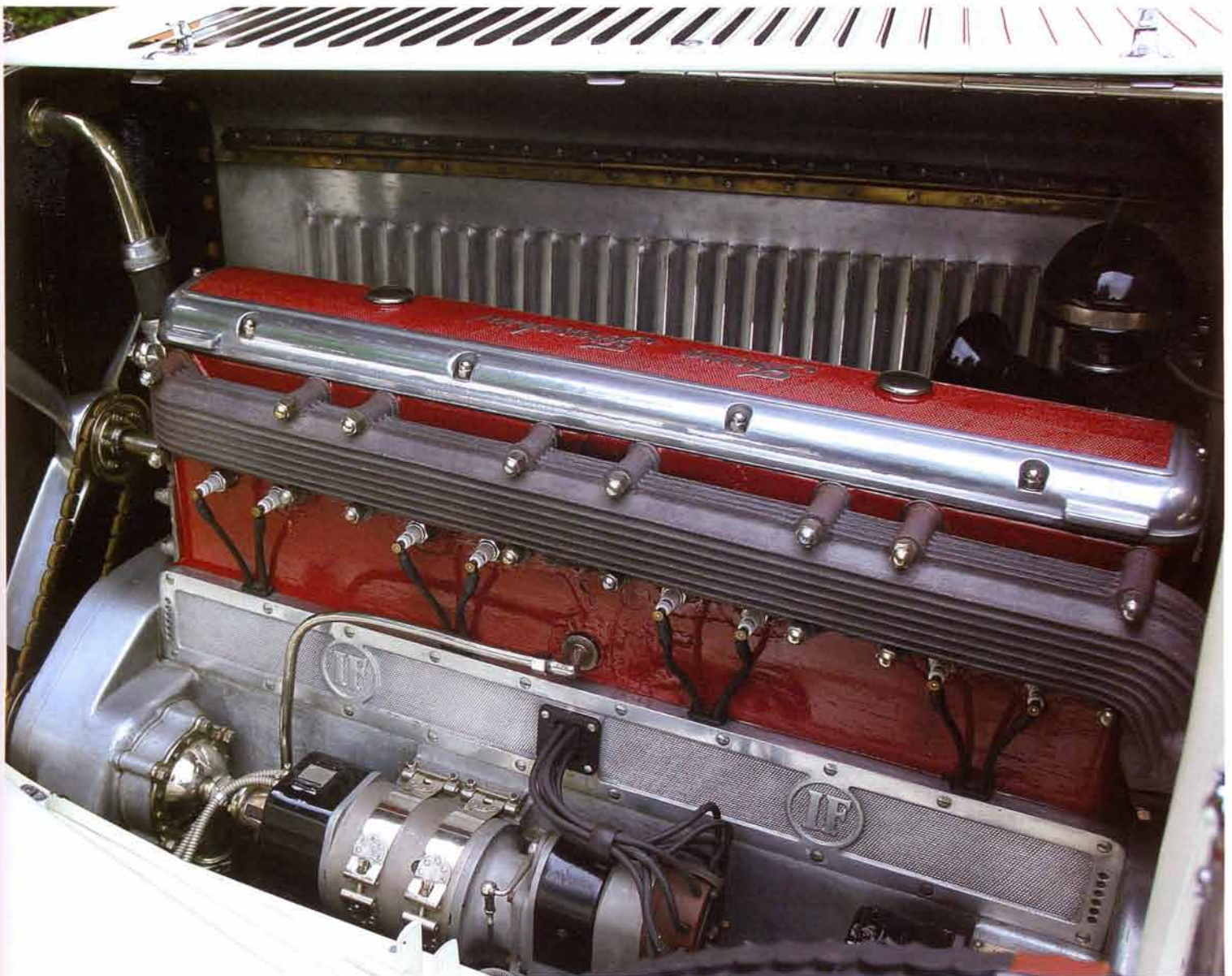
The company became another victim of the aftermath of the 1929 financial crisis. In 1930, the Isotta chassis exhibited at the London Motor Show was

listed at £1750, or £3000 with Coupé de Ville coachwork fitted. In truth, the collapse of Isotta Fraschini did not only reflect a sudden drop in demand from the luxury car market, because to consolidate its finances, the company had made substantial investments linked to the New York Stock Exchange. It was rescued by the Caproni group in 1932 and continued trading, assembling trucks and undertaking projects in the aircraft business.

The car depicted here is a Tipo 8A SS, representing the true zenith of Isotta Fraschini manufacture, because the 8B that followed it was seen as no longer in tune with the harder times it encountered in the market. Whilst initially the S in 8A S was short for Spinto, or 'tuned', the SS in 8A SS actually stood for Super Sport, presumably a more agreeable terminology

BELOW: The car looks better with the top raised rather than down. Such a large cover and nowhere to stow it away out of sight





ABOVE: The 7.3-litre straight 8 in the 8A SS developed 155bhp at 2400rpm. It sported a single overhead camshaft

in view of the marque's conservative clientele. Either way, the tuning on the latter version consisted of a high (5.5:1) compression ratio, new valve gear and a pair of downdraught carburetors. Two chassis lengths were available, with a 3.40m and 3.71m wheelbase respectively, the one here being the longer of the two as it was often preferred even on this supposedly 'sporty' model. The powerful engine was capable of a top speed of up to 105mph for cars fitted with lighter

consider such traits as actual shortcomings. On the positive side, torque is as overwhelming as one would expect, and the car will toddle along at 4mph in top gear, gradually picking up from there to its three-digit maximum speed.

The relative silence and inherent smoothness of the in-line straight eight is undoubtedly one of the features which make the 8A SS so appealing. Balance a coin on the cam cover and then rev the engine - it doesn't

“The car will toddle along at 4mph in top gear, gradually picking up to its three digit maximum”

bodywork, a considerable hike over the original 1921 Tipo 8 which, as tested by *The Autocar*, had only managed 67mph.

Driving an 8A SS today is no mean task, not least because of its sheer size that belongs to another age. Pedal action demands hard work with a distinctly heavy clutch, and the steering is not for the faint-hearted. Then again, most of these cars were chauffeur-driven and their owners would thus rarely

move. Peak power is reached at 2400 rpm, just 400rpm below the maximum rotation speed. On the move, there is a rumble to the Isotta's engine note which confirms the sense that there are refined mechanicals at work.

One's idea of 'fast' is shaken aboard the Isotta Tipo 8A SS. Not only is this machine capable of a hefty 100mph on paper, but its mass makes it quite intimidating once it reaches a good speed. All of a



sudden, you become more worried about stopping distances than ever before in your motoring experience. Ah! And value, too. One wouldn't like to face the repair bills even for a minor bumper brush. But back in the 1930s, when behemoths such as these were current (albeit anything but common) the Isotta would actually have been praised for its braking power and road-going virtues. Sturdy and massive it certainly was, but it was also a very highly refined piece of engineering, whose roadworthiness was highlighted by its resounding sixth place overall finish in the inaugural 1927 Mille Miglia. With a point solidly proven, it was also the last year Isotta Fraschini would indulge in any form of motor racing.

Castagna was the coachbuilder of choice for Isotta chassis (alongside Cesare Sala, also of Milan) and executed magnificent coachwork, whether on two-seater convertibles, on formal town cars or landaulets, exerting either restraint or flamboyance with equal ease according to each specific order. At the end of the 1920s, few cars offered the versatility of the fully transformable bodies crafted by Castagna. Their thick fabric roof could be folded partially to transform a fully enclosed sedan into a *Sedanca de Ville*, with the

chauffeur driving in the open air and the rear compartment still enclosed, or it could be folded back altogether. Side pillars neatly disappeared into a special compartment and the dividing screen was in turn collapsible to make the car either a phaeton or an open tourer. Castagna had become masterful at such five-position designs, following its purchase of Baehr patents over a decade earlier. The car examined here, although less versatile, shows off a rare evolution of the folding mechanism according to another patent obtained in 1929 from Paris-based coachbuilders Hibbard & Darrin. This resulted in a lighter construction which offered optimised side protection at speed – hence the lateral elements of the roof dropping down in a vee shape between the trapezoidal side windows.

Castagna's construction standards inspired so much respect worldwide that an astounding 80 per cent of Isotta's US customers chose to have their cars bodied in Italy rather than Stateside, and Castagna bodied no less than 135 cars for the North American market. As an aside, the poet Gabriele d'Annunzio had distinguished himself during WWI flying Isotta Fraschini-powered fighter planes, and it was his son Ugo Venerio d'Annunzio who acted as agent in New York for Isotta

ABOVE: 80 per cent of Isotta's USA customers chose to have their car bodied in Italy by Castagna

RIGHT: The Isotta's very high standard of presentation resulted in it winning the coveted Coppa d'Oro trophy at Villa d'Este in 2006



Motors Co, the distributor of Isotta Fraschinis across the Atlantic.

According to the Isotta Fraschini records, this very car (chassis number 1651) was sold in New York in April 1930, whilst a strikingly similar example was exhibited at the London Motor Show in October that same year. The early history of 1651 is not fully known but in 1934 it was the property of an Italian Count, heir to a tobacco family, who left the car behind upon returning to Italy. Sam Rubin, a lawyer, received it as part payment for his services and kept it for 25 years. He finally handed it to his nephew upon his 16th birthday, who then offered the car up for sale in a section of the New York Times in 1959, with a \$750 price tag. It immediately caught the attention of a few collectors and a deal was swiftly concluded for \$200 over the asking price. It remained in the same collection until 2004, when it was brought back to its homeland by *Auto Italia's* good friend Corrado Lopresto, having spent presumably its entire life overseas.

The car was complete although it arrived dismantled in 64 crates. It was duly restored and reassembled in

time to win the best-in-show award at the 2006 Villa d'Este concours. It was the second time Lopresto had received the prestigious Coppa d'Oro trophy, yet perhaps an even more prestigious recognition awaited his Isotta: the following year it was voted best among 400 classics at the Festival Automobile in Mulhouse, France, and was thus displayed at the Schlumpf National Museum throughout the summer, taking the place normally occupied by the collection's Bugatti Royale Coupé Napoleon.

That was a most appropriate homage, for this mightily impressive motorcar epitomises the amazing level of craftsmanship and the manufacturing strength that characterised the city of Milan in the 1920s and 1930s. Along with Alfa Romeo, Touring and Zagato, Isotta Fraschini and Castagna contributed greatly to the immense automotive heritage of the Lombard capital, leaving their own indelible mark in history. Representative of a pinnacle for both companies, it reminds us of a golden era during which Italy's motoring industry set a standard of greatness the whole world respected. 🇮🇹

