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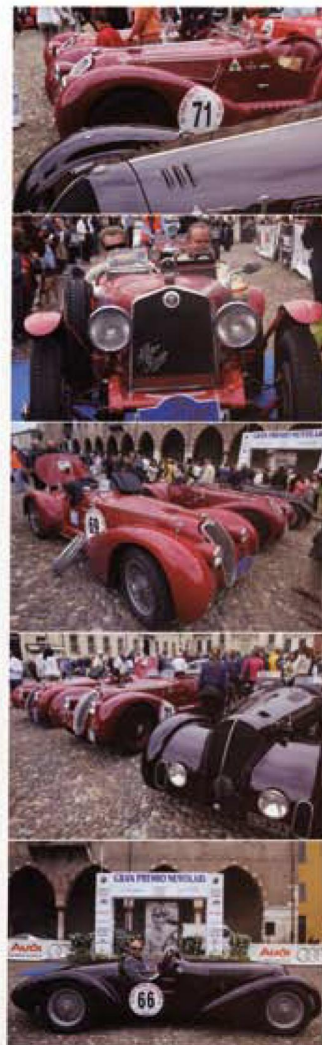
Gran Premio Nuvolari

The Editor co-drives an important old Alfa Romeo in one of Italy's great retro road races

Story by Phil Ward Photography by Michael Ward



ALFA ROMEO 6C 2300B MM



Sometimes persistence pays off. I had known about the featured Alfa Romeo 6C 2300B for some time but had not met the owner. I knew it was being restored by ace historic car engineer Neil Twyman, but unless you get an introduction through the old car network, the chances of photographing, let alone driving cars like this, are slim. Often the owners of valuable cars are very private people and are not interested in sharing their collections with the hoi polloi and don't always take kindly to being pestered by journalists.

The collector who owns the 6C 2300B is, indeed, a private person and wishes to remain so, which is far enough. I met him via the good offices of Andy Heywood who was doing a restoration job for him on a Lamborghini Miura that eventually became an Auto issue cover story. Later we were to feature the collector's Ferrari Daytona. Having successfully covered two of his cars, I asked if it would be possible to feature the 6C 2300B. Eventually the reply came that if I wanted to feature the car, why not co-drive it in the Gran Premio Nuvolari?

It was a fantastic offer that took me just over a millisecond to consider. When my excitement subsided, I began to plan how the great thing to



auto italia



ALFA ROMEO 6C 2300B MM

“Power delivery was smooth and drama free taking the car up to deceptively high speeds”

do' might translate into a sensible feature. Having followed Italian road events before, I knew that any serious photography would be impossible as the cars don't stand still long enough. I asked the Swiss-based owner if it would be possible to familiarise myself with how the car worked and also to take some pre-event pictures. He agreed because the car, post restoration, was being looked after by Adrian Hamilton in London. So it was quite convenient to have it transported to our test track in Surrey.

One fine day last summer, the gleaming Alfa Romeo was rolled out of its trailer. I was given a briefing by Doggie Mitchell, the car's minder, and found that everything was very straightforward and that it was not the complicated beast I expected it to be. I was expecting all the drama of the methanol-fuelled GP Alfa Romeo P3 we ran recently. Not a bit of it. The 6C 2300B started on the button and quickly settled down to an even tickover, a gentle six-cylinder throb emanating from the small-bore exhaust pipe. Having driven old Alfas before, I was expecting that

ABOVE: With just the driver in the car, a body-coloured alloy cover can be fitted over the passenger area

this car would require great concentration but I was pleasantly surprised to find that it was very easy to drive. The gearchange was the conventional H pattern and the pedals were in the right order. I soon found that the gearbox did not want to be hurried and neither did the brakes! Those big drums up front had to be treated with respect and slowing down was an operation that required pre-planning. With around 112bhp available, acceleration was not going to be electric – and it wasn't. The power delivery was smooth and drama free taking the car up to deceptively high speeds, the subdued exhaust note easy on the ears. The steering was surprisingly light and direct without any play or vibration through the column. Franco Corbese must have found the Alfa a delight to drive on the Mille Miglia, a car for covering great distances with ease, as we were expecting to find out.

Mantova in September, late summer sunshine and blue skies? Not a bit of it, grey and rain forecast – great. The reality of my volunteering to co-drive was beginning to dawn on me. Just how do you map read in

a cramped, open car at night and in the rain? In true Italian tradition you just go with the flow and trust that everything will turn out OK.

The administration is a typical Italian affair with queues of entrants and countless desks of officials, each one ticking your name off the entry list. You have to pay a doctor £40 to sign your health declaration. You could not enter this event by mistake. With little storage space in the car, our concern about carrying luggage for our overnights in Rimini was solved as the organisers had a van to transport our belongings.

Checks completed, we drove off to assemble in Piazza Sordello, the start and finish of the event. In true Italian tradition everything stops for lunch. Suitably reinforced, we started up the Alfa and were flagged off by a hysterical commentator amidst flashing cameras and cheering crowds. While I smile and wave I am inwardly preparing myself for the daunting task ahead.

The voluminous road book is full of 'tulp' hieroglyphics. Fortunately there's a good map, and I

“By the second time check the engine had dropped down to five cylinders. Not a good sign”

This wonderful picture shows Franco Cortese with Louis Klemantaski at Brooklands in 1938
Photo: The Klemantaski Collection



had brought one of my own, too. Tulp directions are fine unless you miss one and then it's really hard to backtrack mentally to where you went wrong. As it happened, every road junction over the entire 1000km course had an event direction arrow on display. How thoughtful. Now I am feeling more relaxed and offer a prayer to whoever it was that went out in a van the day before to mount the signs. Did they have to collect them all up afterwards?

After our first time check, where we were greeted by villagers in medieval costume and presented with cakes, the Alfa started to sound a bit grumpy. This was not a good sign. By the second time check the engine had dropped down to five cylinders.

My owner/driver did not seem too concerned about

HISTORY OF 815001

Built in 1938, chassis 815001 was the prototype for the model called 6C 2300B (Mille Miglia) Series 2 of which 1200 were constructed. It was personally prepared by Vittorio Jano for Squadra Automobili (run by Giovanni Lurani) for the 1938 season for the Sport Nazionale class and owned by Franco Cortese. Jano built the car on a chassis obtained by Cortese and upgraded the 2300cc engine by increasing the compression ratio and fitting special valves. A close ratio gearbox was installed and the whole power unit was moved back in the chassis to improve weight distribution. Top speed was increased from 100mph at 4500rpm to 120mph at 5000rpm. The finished car was registered in Milan as 63995 MI.

The car's race debut was the XI Mille Miglia in the hands of Cortese and Funagalli, where it finished first in class and a creditable ninth overall. A series of class wins, including a first overall win in the Targa Abruzzo with Cortese/Gherzi, resulted in Cortese becoming the 1938 Italian Sportscar Champion.

For 1939 a new 205 (2.5-litre) engine was fitted and the car was redesignated 6C 2500S. The Alfa was raced four times that year by Cortese achieving two third places but two DNFs. In 1940 it ran in just one race, the Gran Premio di Brescia. Driven by Tessera and Piero Facetti (father of Carlo Facetti) it finished a lowly 35th.

The shortage of motorised transport during the war years resulted in Cortese rebodystyling the Alfa with two-tone Rivin-Ratina convertible coachwork, probably in 1941. In 1940 the engine was

changed to a 2581cc unit and the car sold to Renato Marilli in Parma. Following a second Parma owner, the car was exported to Egypt in 1947 and used by a hotelier. It was later purchased in 1950 from the Cairo Motor Company for £800 by Squadron Leader Peter Piper. Piper imported the car into the UK in 1952 registering it as VNO 323 and raced it in club events at Silverstone. He bought two spare engines for the car, one of which was an unused dry sump marine unit from an Italian navy mini-submarine.

The car was sold in part-exchange in 1958 to dealer John Little, who was also the owner of an 8C and a Bugatti Type 35. After three more UK owners, which included racing driver John Coombs, the car became the property of David Aspin. Aspin had the car rebodied to the original, unique Touring style by Neil Tynman in 2000. Tynman constructed the body using period photographs as a reference. After being shown at the Louis Vuitton concours in 2003, the car was purchased by its current owner and won an award at the 2006 Goodwood Festival of Speed Classic Style at Lime concours.

POSTSCRIPT

The fault that sidelined the Alfa was confirmed as a head gasket failure between the bores of numbers five and six cylinders. There was also evidence of valve to piston contact so the decision was taken to rebuild the complete unit. The owner believes that the block is actually the dry sump marine unit installed by Peter Piper. There is no record of the cylinder head ever being removed since 1958!

ALFA ROMEO 6C 2300B MM



Franco Cortese with the Alfa in 1938



1938, Brooklands 1938



Egypt 1950



Silverstone 1952



Final appearance pre restoration



ABOVE: Neil Twyman did an expert job in recreating the bodywork using period photographs as his only point of reference

LEFT: This 6C 2300B was effectively the prototype for the series and is the only car bearing this style of front end

this, though he did agree that we should stop to investigate. As it happened we came upon an Alfa Romeo 'Servizio' in the middle of nowhere. The solitary mechanic did not seem unduly overawed when a 1938 6C 2300B MM pulled into his workshop. Perhaps cars like this arrive all the time. Anyway, he took the distributor cap off, squirted some stuff inside, waggled a few leads, revved the engine up and expressed his satisfaction for a job he considered well done. Payment was refused and we were on our way, only to find that the fault still existed.

Rather than risk serious engine damage, we elected to seek assistance 'off piste' and abandoned the route in favour of a divert into Modena, home to artisans who are used to exotic machinery. We soon found ourselves outside Giuseppe Cordini's workshop, a name well known in the Maserati world - see www.candrimodena.com. We were greeted by the man himself, Giuseppe Cordini, former Scuderia Maserati 250F mechanic and renowned classic Maserati specialist. It was a pleasure to watch him at work but his findings were not good news. The head gasket had blown between numbers five and six pistons. Although Cordini was obviously capable of working on the Alfa he didn't have any parts. 'You want Alfa Romeo parts, you go to Milan, not Modena,' he said. 'Fair comment' I thought.



ALFA ROMEO 6C 2300B MM

BELOW: Giuseppe and Marcello Cordini diagnosed that the Alfa's misfire was caused by a damaged cylinder head gasket

“The route between Arezzo and Siena is most agreeable, so life wasn't so bad after all”

So, our race was run just 50km in. The owner was quite philosophical about the whole thing and made preparations for the car's recovery. He called his transporter driver who was staying in Mantova and who came down to collect the Alfa. Mindful that our luggage was on its way to Rimini, the owner suggested that we catch up with the event in his Toyota Landcruiser, not quite in the spirit of things but at least we would see the finish. We arrived in Rimini after a dash down the autostrada to find many of the travel-stained cars already in parc ferme. There had been rain and some attrition along the way.

The following morning, instead of joining the early risers for the 0700 start, we had a bit of a lie-in and caught up with the event during the morning. The route between Arezzo and Siena is most agreeable, so life wasn't so bad after all. Siena is stunning. It was my first visit and the steepness of the huge Piazza where the Palio is run is quite surprising. You cannot appreciate the perspective when you see it on television.

Though the Gran Premio Nuvoletti is a regularity event there are some seriously fast cars in the entry. Driving

standards were acceptable but there seems to be an unwritten law that if you are driving a classic car in an event then you can overtake anywhere with impunity, and that includes the entry into blind corners and over hill crests. Of course, being in Italy, whoever is coming

GRAN PREMIO NUVOLETTI

The Mille Miglia-style road race was created as a tribute to Tazio Nuvoletti in 1954, the year after his death. The original Gran Premio Nuvoletti was only run four times and was abandoned in 1957, when road-racing was stopped in Italy following the disastrous Mille Miglia. The Gran Premio Nuvoletti might have been short-lived but those four races attracted the world's finest drivers - big names like Moss, Ascari, Fangio and Gendebien.

Tazio Nuvoletti was Mantova's greatest son and the city is where the modern event is based. Revived in 1990, Gran Premio Nuvoletti is organised by Scuderia Mantova Corse and Museo Tazio Nuvoletti as a regularity time trial. The three hundred strong entry is made up from eligible cars built between 1910 and 1960.

The 200km route starts in Mantova and runs down to Rimini via Ferrara. An overnight stop in Rimini is followed by a round trip via Arezzo and Siena back to Rimini. On the third day the cars return to Mantova via San Marino and Inola.

The race entry which includes hotels and dinners is €2000 plus €100 for single room supplement. For details visit: www.gprnuvoletti.it

the other way doesn't get upset. We only saw one potentially serious incident where an open four-seat Lagonda had rolled over on a hairpin bend. The occupants were trapped inside. Fortunately when the car was righted they were found to be unharmed. A gala dinner was held in Rimini on the last night and

on them that a car so clean with a crew looking so fresh could not possibly have covered 1000km in all weathers. Being early did give me the opportunity to stage manage a photoshoot and we were able to form an impressive line-up for our 6C 2300B and two 6C 265 Corsas.

“We were able to form an impressive line-up for our 6C 2300B and two 6C 265 Corsas”

we had another relaxed start the following morning. The plan was to drive directly to Mantova, fire up the sick Alfa and drive it from parc ferme to Piazza Sordello so we could be in at the finish. We arrived just ahead of the game and some onlookers erroneously thought that we were the first car back, though it soon dawned

Gran Premio Nuvolari is a great event, more relaxed than the showcase Mille Miglia and also cheaper. Would I do it again? Of course, and it can be done without the need to own an important, expensive car. Those crews driving Alfa Giulietta Spiders seemed to have lots of fun. They also had a top to raise when it rained. ■■

