

# Cutting a Dash

A touch of glamour for the Bristol 400 by Pinin Farina to brighten up British post-war austerity

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The beauty of the Bristol marque is this: its products have escaped the vagaries of fashion by never being in fashion. A Bristol – any Bristol – is a connoisseur's choice rather than a mainstream attraction, as evinced by the fabulous Pinin Farina-bodied example pictured here. It is one of several models to wear coachwork by Latin couturiers, and is unquestionably one of the most elegant.

At the end of World War Two, the Bristol Aeroplane Company had unused factory space and a highly-skilled workforce in need of gainful employment. Thanks to the vision of George White and Reginald Vernon-Smith, the company set about producing a new breed of sporting saloon built to aircraft standards. By chance, Don Aldington of AFN (the company responsible for the pre-war Frazer Nash-BMWs) had been invalided out of the army and posted to the Bristol office of the Ministry of Aircraft Production. There he caught wind of what was afoot and mentioned the news to his brother, HJ Aldington, who in turn descended on the West Country to demonstrate a BMW 327/80 to the Bristol management. And in 1945, a Stirling bomber returned to Filton loaded with drawings for the proven six-cylinder BMW engine along with assorted components. Bristol now had a basis for its proposed motor car, the forthcoming Frazer Nash-Bristol being trumpeted to the media in September 1946. However, differences of opinion between the Aldingtons and White soon led to a parting of the ways. AFN would continue to act as Bristol agents and be supplied with parts for use in its own Frazer Nash products.

The Bristol 400 was unveiled at the 1947 Geneva Motor Show, but HJ Aldington had already been canvassing various Italian coachbuilders. While in-house man Dudley Hobbs worked on the 401 'Aerodyne' successor, Aldington managed to persuade the Bristol board to release a few chassis to be clothed by Touring of Milan and Pinin Farina. Elements of the Touring

outline would filter into the regular 401, not least the Superleggera method of construction whereby aluminium panels were draped over a tubular steel structure. The Farina offering, however, was something else entirely, borrowing some cues from contemporary coachwork for Lancia Aprilia and Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 chassis. Three 400 platforms were dressed by the Turin firm (plus four 401s in 1949), the Bristol board preferring to push on ahead with its own home-grown offerings rather than adopt the Italian outlines. AFN, however, went so far as to list the Pinin Farina and Touring bodies in its promotional material.

Of the trio of 400 Farinas, as they have since become known, two are known to survive. 'Our' car, chassis 400/181, was originally delivered to AFN in Isleworth on December 3 1947 in left-hand drive configuration for onward shipment to Zurich. It had been purchased by Mr C A Drenowatz of Radex AG, the main agent for BMW in Switzerland. Over time, Drenowatz would purchase as many as 20 chassis from Bristol, including five of the 400 model. However, by the end of 1949, the car was back in Middlesex where it was converted to right-hand drive, the two-litre straight six being uprated with three Solex 32BI carbs (in place of as many SU D2 items). It was registered to AFN on February 27 1950 before being dispatched to Leeds marque agent, Bolton Motors. Shortly thereafter, it was registered to a Mr GF Hanson, the managing director of textile firm Fredericks Ltd. He would retain the 400 Farina for 12 years. However, the car suffered a holed piston in 1958, a replacement engine being substituted. It is still in the car.

In 1962, the Bristol was sold back to Peter Bolton who was a prominent fixture in Leeds with a chain of car dealerships and petrol stations. The Yorkshireman was also a well-known figure in rallying and sportscar racing during the '50s and into the '60s, most famously driving ACs at Le Mans. Indeed, in April '64 he and 'Gentleman' Jack Sears famously





reached 185mph along the M1 aboard the unique works Cobra coupe in the run up to that year's 24 Hour race which caused a furore in the populist press. (Their actions were subsequently – and erroneously – blamed for the imposition of the 70mph motorway speed limit). Bolton re-registered the Bristol 1 PRB and held onto it for more than 40 years, taking it with him to the Isle of Man on his retirement in 1988. The car was acquired by its current owner, Adrian Berry, in 2005.

Commendably, Berry enjoys using the car in anger, having toured Northern Italy, Corsica, northern Spain and the south of France in it in addition to completing the 2011-'12 Mille Miglia retrospectives, the 2011 Targa Florio Historic and the 2012 Coppa d'Oro delle Dolomiti. Berry isn't above showing the car, either. In 2010 the 400 Farina was exhibited at the inaugural Uniques concours in Florence where it earned a third in class prize. It was also awarded with class honours at the Bristol Owners' Club concours in 2007. Over the winter of 2010-'11, the car was treated to a bare metal respray, with some aluminium panel work being replaced where the ally had reacted against the steel superstructure.

Otherwise, the Bristol is largely original as Berry remains eager to refurbish rather than replace items.

It really is gorgeous, and physically disparate from a regular Bristol 400. While an attractive machine, the production car's outline appears to be from a different – and earlier – era by comparison with Pinin Farina's take. It's a lovely thing, and there isn't a bum note stylistically with the corporate grille in particular being beautifully integrated. That said, from many angles you could just as easily substitute the Bristol badge with one from any number of Italian nameplates. Indeed, this probably counted against it being adopted as a production model.

Moving inside, it's a handsome office, complete with an Italianate body painted dashboard rather than the Ye Olde England walnut affair you might expect. Most of the gauges are Bristol-sourced, although some minor controls and door furniture appear to have been robbed from period Lancias, while the St Christopher medal attached to the dash masks a hole from when it was converted from left-to right-hand drive. The generously sized seats are extremely comfortable, as befits a car which has

*BELOW: Hard to believe that this lovely car was built in 1947. Its design was way ahead of its time*





crossed continents in single bounds. And here you do feel like you're sitting in the Bristol, rather than on it as with so many cars of this vintage.

Those new to early Bristols are often amazed at how smooth and refined they are, at least compared to most period rivals. Much of this is down to that rather wonderful hemi-head 1971cc straight-six. According to factory figures, it produced around 85bhp at 4500rpm in standard form along with 107lb ft of torque at 3500rpm, and when pressed the engine note is crisp and refined. For many, nothing beats the sound of a V12 under load. For others, it's an angry V8 blasting out fanfare. And for the rest of us, it's an in-line 'six' at its most strident. Here, you can almost hear every alternating click of its cross-pushrods; every stroke of its crank. This classic unit powered so many motor sport greats, with class or overall wins on blue chip events such as the Targa Florio and Le Mans 24 Hours. You're aware of its breeding.

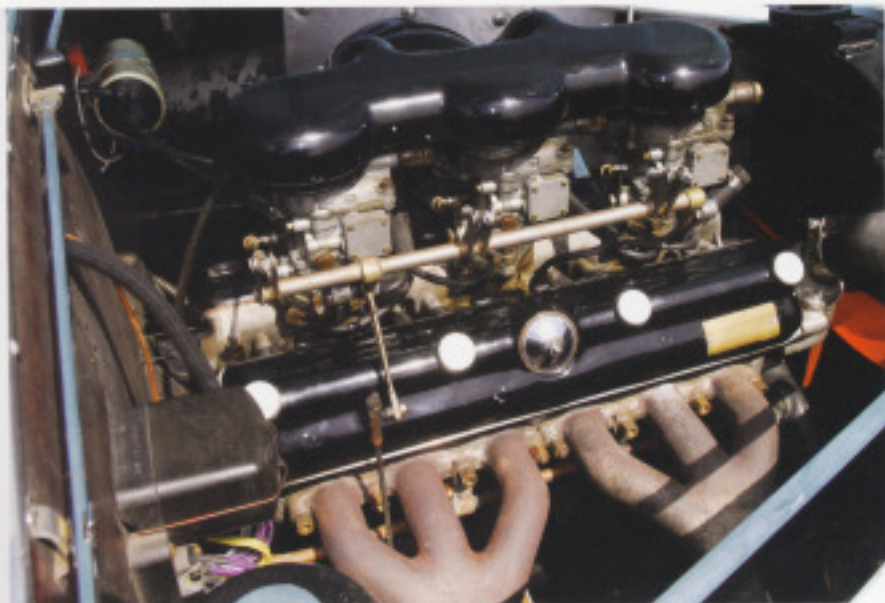
But more than that, the gearbox it's allied to here is so much better than you would find in any equivalent Aston Martin or suchlike. It had a pleasing change and well-spaced ratios. The addition of an

overdrive is no doubt a boon for Berry on his continent-crossing missions, too. The best bit, however, is the rack and pinion steering. It's high-g geared, but feels surprisingly light and accurate, although you could never call the 400 Farina nimble. It rides well, rolling a little on its firm(ish) springs, while the steel drum brakes stop the car without any fuss but you wouldn't want to call upon them in a hurry. But then that's true of any 60-something classic.

After even just the briefest of sorties, you emerge enamoured of the 400. Bristols will always appeal to a certain type of enthusiast, the square-rigged post '61 cars with their Chrysler V8 power being more attuned to the tycoon with taste than the 'tweedier' two-litre models. Early Bristols weren't really about look-at-me conspicuousness; rivals such as Jaguar having that covered, except here the 400 Farina exudes a certain raffish poise. You can just picture some suave and suntanned playboy and his smitten conquest cruising the roads around Lake Como by moonlight, which rather trumps the grey ration book austerity of immediate post-war Britain.

But would the Pinin Farina Bristol have succeeded

BELOW: The straight-six engine was inspired from BMW drawings 'liberated' from Germany in 1945







had it been adopted as a production model? Perhaps, but cost would always have been an issue, and it isn't as though Italian influences didn't seep in later on. Under Tony Crook's tenure from '61, Zagato clothed several chassis (he was the Milan coachbuilder's UK concessionaire), while Viotti bodied one car which was acquired by Peter Sellers (Crook had UK rights to Viotti Fiats). Some Bristols were even equipped with Abarth exhausts (Crook was the British importer...). You get the idea. This hardest of marques may be a great British survivor, but its genes are encoded with Italian influences. 🇮🇹

TOP: The Berry family have shown the car at Uniques in Florence and also run in the Mille Miglia and Targa Florio

