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Classic cars

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THIS MONTH

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Seventies child that grew into the ultimate Eighties macho car, the Countach is quick, dynamic and in-your-face

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Usually overshadowed by Alfa's 8C, this fantastic 6C was tweaked by a legendary tuner to become a race winner

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THERE'S MORE >>

Vittorio

Pre-war tuning legend Vittorio Jano re-engineered
this underrated 6C to produce a race winner.
Robert Coucher drives it at Brooklands



ALFA ROMEO 6C

Having just the right amount of power on tap makes the Alfa easy and rewarding to drive quickly



‘This Alfa is crying out for a long and hard road race to add the required road rash to its beautiful flanks’

Thirties. The ‘second growth’, the 6C B-series cars, were introduced in 1934. While it is true these cars were built to a price, their biggest crime, in the eyes of detractors, was that they were finished in a modern rather than Vintage tradition. Pressed steel bodies, cheaper instruments and independent suspension were deplored by the old guard, and never mind that the 6C Bs proved themselves in the hard school of competition.

This particular 6C is something different. Franco Cortese ordered the chassis and immediately turned it over to the legendary Vittorio Jano, engine designer of the big-gun 8Cs. Jano had by this time left Alfa for Lancia (he was later to develop the first, seminal production V6 engine, as used in the Aurelia and now much copied) but was persuaded by Scuderia Ambrosiana to modify and develop Cortese’s car so that it would be suitable for sports car racing.

Starting with the shortest and lightest Pescara chassis, Jano set about massaging the 2300cc engine, upping the compression ratio, improving the breathing, fitting special valves, installing a non-standard close-ratio gearbox and moving the power unit and controls back in the chassis to optimise weight distribution. Special wheels, aluminium finned drum brakes and a bespoke hand-beaten Touring aluminium body meant that the whole car weighed the same as the unclothed

original chassis. This gave Cortese’s Alfa a top speed of 115mph at 5000rpm, compared with the maker’s guarantee of 90mph at 4500rpm for the standard machine.

On a bleak December day in 1938, Franco Cortese joined *Speed* motoring journalist Dennis May to put the Alfa through its paces. Cortese drove out of London towards Brooklands, completely disregarding the cursory speed limits, while passenger May relished the Alfa, as he put it, ‘spanking through gaping Barnes and aghast Roehampton. The trip to Brooklands passed uneventfully except for the champion’s treatment of a certain roundabout on the Kingston bypass, which can only be described as unconventional... Cortese entered the double turn a good 10mph above tyre-adhesion speed. Well, he ought to know what he’s about. So it proved. The second of two four-wheel slides carried the car precisely the width of the road, no more, no less. And that, of course, is how races are won.’

Franco Cortese and Dennis May were met at Brooklands by the legendary photographer Louis Klemantaski, where, unfortunately, the car and the weather proved off-song. We could not miss the opportunity of returning to Brooklands with the Alfa 61 years later: this time photographer Tim Andrew had glorious sunshine and the car was game for a good ‘spanking’.

Finished in dark Rosso Corsa, the 6C is drop-jaw gorgeous. It’s more voluptuous than most pre-war cars and the low headlights would confer a bug-eyed appearance if it weren’t for the subtle flow of billowing aluminium wings and a pronounced radiator bulge. Although the car sits on a short chassis, these wings enhance the impression of length and fluidity, while the nipped waist and rear wing are pure Spider.

Surprisingly, the Alfa has had only three keepers since Cortese in 1938 and recently the altered bodywork was returned to pukka Touring style in fresh aluminium. In 1946 the engine was enlarged from 2300cc to 2500cc (as most 2300cc Monzas were upgraded to 2600cc in the search for more power). Owned today by a well-known racing personality, this special Alfa now looks like new. It’s crying out for a long and hard road race to add the required road-rash to its beautiful flanks.

The dainty, light door opens by means of a leather pull to reveal beautifully crafted light-weight seats. Their black frames are exposed, and their leather cushions are adjusted by numerous buckles, so that they look like furniture from a bang-up-to-the-minute designer shop. The wind-deflecting scuttle is high enough to obscure the end of the bonnet and small aero-screens add a bit more wind protection, while the low-cut doors leave ample elbow room. Pale yellow >>>



Light and inch-perfect steering contribute to fine handling in the corners

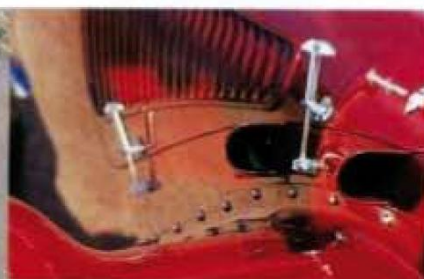


Clockwise from above: unblown straight-six engine, as modified by Jano, gives 125hp; simple yellow-faced dials complement painted dash; bucket seats have exposed metal frames onto which cushions are buckled; Borrani wire wheels heighten the glamour of this dramatic car

ALFA ROMEO 6C



Semi-faired-in headlights contribute to a modern, aerodynamic look



instruments are scattered across the body coloured aluminium dash and a Telecontrol refers to adjustable suspension settings.

After a couple of pumps to prime the three Weber carburetors, the Alfa fires and idles in a surprisingly smooth manner. No raucous pre-war shriek is apparent. The foot pedals are laid out in the conventional manner, so there is no need to worry about a disconcerting centre throttle.

This is the point when most old machines require the deft touch of a seasoned Vintage driver. But the Alfa's clutch engages with a firm action, the long S-bend of a gearlever finds first gear with minimal resistance, and it trundles off the line without drama. Second gear requires a double de-clutch and slow action, but third and top have the luxury of synchromesh and they're the ratios you use most of the time.

The single most striking feature about this car is its steering, which is simply superb. At walking speed it lightens up immediately, and when pressing-on the rigid steering wheel transmits a smooth, finger-light message devoid of stiction or build-up. Then the car's chassis composure is almost as remarkable. Those who decry the 6C's independent suspension are wrong. This car exhibits the precision of the Vintage models but with it a measured and supple ride which makes for rapid progress on bad country roads.

Realising this graceful Alfa is not about to bite, I feel brave enough to explore its potential. The throttle pedal has a long travel and extending it to the full wakes up the double overhead-cam straight-six. The cams are driven both by chains and gears and these, combined with the deep breathing of the three Weber Tipo 36 carbs, produce a wonderful mechanical howl. It is not as feral as an engine equipped with a blower, but the magic is abundant. You know this engine is going to impress but its appetite for revs is astonishing and care is needed not to overrev it as it comes on cam and the Alfa lunges forward.

Early independently suspended cars can display strange handling quirks but this one remains absolutely predictable. Cornering produces the most wonderful slides from the Dunlop racing tyres, mounted on Borrani wire wheels. The Alfa's chassis can be set up and slewed into corners, the back end controlled by the throttle, but the hydraulic brakes are well up to hauling your exuberance down safely. The fact is that this

car's chassis can handle more power than the 125bhp engine can muster. This makes it sure-footed and controllable rather than being constantly on a knife-edge. Being benignly exploitable rather than hair-trigger responsive makes this Alfa fast while leaving plenty in hand, and it's no wonder Cortese won the challenging 1938 Targa Abruzzo with it.

This Alfa Romeo 6C 2500 was built to the specifications of a racing champion. It received the attentions of one of the greatest engineers of the time and inherited the provenance and pedigree of the most outstanding racing cars ever. Not only is it magnificent to look at, it is, simply, fabulous to drive. That is more than can be said about some other venerable icons.

Thanks to... Coys of Kensington for the Alfa. For more information on this and other fine cars, contact Coys of Kensington at 2-4 Queen's Gate Mews, London SW7 5QJ. Tel 0171 584 7444; website www.coys-of-kensington.co.uk

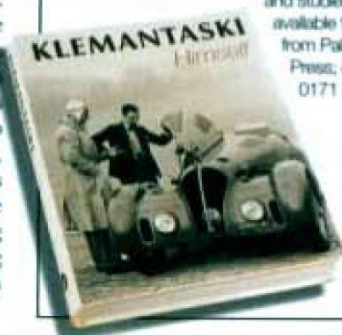
NEXT MONTH: AUTO UNION STREAMLINER

Klemantaski, in his own pictures

ON A COLD and misty December day in 1938, Louis Klemantaski, Dennis May and Franco Cortese were subjected to the worst vagaries the British weather could throw at them. The damp conditions meant this Alfa Romeo 6C Super Sport was reluctant to start and never got up to proper operating temperatures at the Brooklands circuit. The car was also hamstrung by the low-grade British fuel foisted on motorists at the time, making it pink badly.

Nevertheless, Louis Klemantaski managed to produce one of his most famed photographs from these poor conditions, and pictures of this Alfa at Brooklands grace the cover and sumptuous pages of the beautiful Palawan Press book, *Klemantaski Himself*.

This work, featuring a wide canvas of Klemantaski's action-packed racing photographs as well as many other portraits and studies, is available for £95 from Palawan Press; call 0171 371 3060.



6C 2500B specifications



Registration no VNO 323

Chassis no 815.001

Engine no 256/2T

Engine Dohc, straight-six, seven main bearings, triple Weber carbs, extractor exhaust, modified by Vittorio Jano to produce 125bhp

Transmission Four-speed, close-ratio with synchro on third and top

Brakes Four-wheel lined drums, hydraulic operation

Suspension Front: independent with trailing links, coil springs and dampers
Rear: independent swing axles with longitudinal torsion bars and dampers

Body Aluminium one-off in Touring style

Top speed 118mph

0-60mph 13sec