

A sensible look at DAFs

We have mentioned quite a lot recently that DAF Variomatics are gathering interest and coverage in the classic car press, which is very good news. Over the years, both when DAFs were still in showrooms, and then before the classic car world took a real interest, one often used to read reports that really were not fair and didn't explain just how special the cars and Variomatic were.

One exception was the renowned motoring journalist, the late LJK Setright. It could be said that he was an eccentric, but he absolutely respected engineering achievements from manufacturers large and small.

This is a reprint from *Collector's Car* magazine from 1980, which makes very encouraging reading. Of course, it must be co-incidence that this was the year that Steve's idea came to fruition.



ONE OF the reasons why Fiats and Lancias and Alfa Romeos are such splendid cars on the road is that they are built and tested amidst some of the most demanding — and at the same time the most encouraging — roads in Europe. When a car factory has the Alps at its back door and an *Autostrada* at the front, not to mention a teeming toiling tetracyclic town like Torino alongside, the cars it makes are likely to be good. The bad ones will have fallen over a precipice or blown up on the way to Bologna, if they did not slide down the banks of the great grey-green greasy limp Po river, all set about with fever trees ...

I recall the launch of some high-performance Fiats, when we were sent off on a route that took us up the St Bernard, down the Col des Faucilles, up again over and through Mont Blanc, and down again through the beautiful and exciting Val d'Aosta to return to base. It proved a lot about those cars, but I must have been naive to suppose that the manufacturers did all their own testing over those roads. How could they ever keep a new car secret, that way?

It turned out, of course, that Fiat have their own extensive testing grounds tucked into the forestland not far from the town. Curiously, despite all my years of going to Italy for car-testing, I had never been to that track until this year, when I drove a Ritmo fitted with the Transmatic transmission that Fiat have developed in conjunction with Van Doorne's Transmissie, with Borg-Warner intervening as third party, as the lawyers might say. The experience reminded me of a lot of happy DAF-driving; and that in turn reminded me of the Marathon Rally.

No, not the trans-world festivals of light and heat you so often read about in this magazine as it repeatedly charts the simple annals of BMC The Marathon de la Route is what I have in mind, the rally that was also known as the Liège-Rome-Liège, the Spa-Sofia-Liège, and the world's toughest open-roads race. Now you may find this difficult to believe, but it is a demonstrable fact that an Austin-Healey has only won this event twice, and that there are a lot of funny foreign cars with really much more remarkable records of participation in this, as in so many other of the greatest roadgoing events. What is not a fact, but is only a matter of opinion or at best of definition (because the same may be said of what constitutes a classic car) is that there were far more 'classic' or even 'collectors' cars coming from outside the ABC triangle (Abingdon-Birmingham-Coventry) than ever came from within it. I think this would remain true even if we excluded the AEIOU area (*Americae est imperare orbi universo*); at any rate, 29 of the 32 winners of the Marathon were continental Europeans, of which 10 were German and 13 French. Nevertheless it was an English com-

petitor, that accomplished navigator John Davenport, who wrote one of the best tributes to the Marathon as a road event: ... it will always be remembered as the toughest of them all: an event where to finish was an achievement in itself, and where the organisers were so confident that their course was a full test of man and machine that they allowed any modification at all to the car, and never had to resort to coefficients or driving tests to find the winner'. Indeed Monsieur Garot, the Clerk of the Course, once declared that it should go on getting tougher because the ideal Marathon should have but one finisher. As far back as 1952, only 24 were classified as finishers from the 116 starters.

At that time, Hubertus van Doorne's finest of all automatic transmissions, the Variomatic, was still half a dozen years in the future. A decade later, Variomatically (and furiously) driven Dafs were competing in all manner of rallies and in particular putting up a stupendous show in the Marathon. No, the event was never won by a Daf. It would be fair to say, too, that it was never lost by a Daf, for the little Dutch cars were not there to compete with the other starters but to compete with the roads and the frighteningly tight schedule. The firm had a little competition department run by a very pleasant leadfoot called Rob Koch, and the cars had done much to convince the typically sceptical world of motoring ostriches that they could be driven hard and far. There was one year when their leading rally driver put 150,000 kilometres behind him in the course of 25 events; but whenever roadworthiness and speed and endurance had all to be proven together it was the Marathon de la Route which provided the best evidence, and when the little Daf came storming back into Liège at the end of about 3000 miles of hammering, its point was proven.

What really shook the other competitors, and any onlookers who were brave enough to watch, was the speed of the Daf downhill. It might not have had the sheer power to romp up an Alpine pass at stage-winning speed, but if the course ran down an Alp the Daf's steplessly variable gearing could find a ratio high enough for the engine to keep up with gravity's assistance, and downhill speeds well over 110 mph were often reached.

What the best place ever won by a Daf in rallying was, I cannot tell. Certainly it scored a third in the 1969 Acropolis, but I was never as impressed by competition as I was by the cars, and was always much too engrossed in the niceties of the Daf's engineering to worry about filling my head with a list of who did what. Niceties were more numerous than you might expect in such an avowedly modest little economy car: the *Invar* slotted pistons of the air-cooled twin-cylinder engines were typical of the van Doorne method of doing good by stealth, tucked away as they were where nobody would ever see them or suspect their effect. Just imagine a smugly satisfactory slice of suburbia, with all the Austins and Fords and Jaguars lined up so that the neighbours could read blazoned on their rumps of such marvels as overdrive, automatic 3.8 or gt; can you imagine in such circumstances a little Daffodil with the magic neighbour-baiting word *Invar* on its tail? Pity the sweet little old lady taxed on this by her envious next-door name-dropper: "I don't know, I am sure; wasn't there a nice young man who came from Loch Invar? Perhaps ...?"

Pity, for that matter, the firm whose cars were mistakenly supposed by too many people to be suitable only for sweet little old ladies ...

idling



L. J. K. Setright

petitor, that accomplished navigator John Davenport, who wrote one of the best tributes to the Marathon as a road event: ... it will always be remembered as the toughest of them all: an event where to finish was an achievement in itself, and where the organisers were so confident that their course was a full test of man and machine that they allowed any modification at all to the car, and never had to resort to coefficients or driving tests to find the winner'. Indeed Monsieur Garot, the Clerk of the Course, once declared that it should go on getting tougher because the ideal Marathon should have but one finisher. As far back as 1952, only 24 were classified as finishers from the 116 starters.

At that time, Hubertus van Doorne's finest of all automatic transmissions, the Variomatic, was still half a dozen years in the future. A decade later, Variomatically (and furiously)