

Lady in Red

Carrozzeria Touring's sublime Alfa
Romeo Super Sprint Coupe

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The importance of the 1900 in Alfa Romeo lore is indisputable but see past all the sub clauses, codicils and addenda and it never quite realised its true potential. Instead the original Giulietta marked the turning point as the marque went over to the populist mainstream.

Well that's one theory. What is compelling about the 1900 as a breed is that it resulted in such a diverse array of spin-offs. What was conceived as a defiantly non-glamorous saloon car spawned everything from penny number coachbuilt exotics to sport-racing cars,

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aerodynamic styling studies to the 'Matta' jeep. This is Alfa Romeo; it couldn't help itself. Gazing lovingly at Robbie Webb's sublime 1900C Super Sprint, and marvelling at its exquisite detailing, we're grateful for the marque's capriciousness. It may not have sold in the sort of numbers once envisaged but Alfa's post-war game-changer cast a long shadow.

Unlike most other countries, the USA included, passenger vehicle manufacture continued in Italy throughout WWa, give or take the occasional distraction (such as, say, an RAF bombing raid). In 1943 alone, Alfa made 47 6C 2500s, with production slipping to just 18 a year later and a mere five cars in 1945. Nonetheless, this was the beginning of the end for Alfa as a boutique brand, the firm emerging from hostilities with an entirely new agenda. The arrival of the 1900 at the 1950 Paris Motor Show represented a sea change at Portello, the Giulietta a further move into the

accessible (if still pricey) production car arena.

Up to 1950 Alfa rarely made more than 800 cars a year and in the immediate post-war years manufacture of vehicles was virtually nil as the firm concentrated on making items such as roller shutters, window frames and cookers (complete with the Alfa Romeo script on their oven doors...); in fact just about anything that would keep thousands of employees occupied as the firm's future was mapped out.

The 1900 was intended from the outset for mass manufacture. Engineering deity Wifredo Ricart had

conceived a new car during wartime, his streamlined 'Gazzella' saloon having concealed headlights and spats over all four wheels. But it never reached production or even close. Resources were scarce to non-existent and, as a bloodied and battered Italy dusted itself down, scores needed to be settled. The writing was on the wall and Ricart didn't hang around long enough to read it: he fled for Spain in April 1945. A wise decision as Alfa boss Ugo Gobbato – the man who'd hired him – was assassinated by unknown gunmen a day after being cleared of having been a collaborator.

The Gazzella project was dead in the water, the 6C2500 being reheated as a means to an end as Alfa's new principal Consalvo Sanesi looked to the future. The firm needed a new product and fast. Something that would sell in larger numbers while still retaining the marque's core values of style and performance. The

BELOW: The Super Sprint versions were built from 1954 to 1958. The most sought after versions were those with Touring or Zagato bodywork



RIGHT: This Alfa Romeo is no dusty museum piece, it has covered many thousands of miles in the UK and Europe and is a regular at classic car events



answer was the 1900. Devised by new Chief Engineer Orazio Satta, who later acted as midwife to the Giulietta, this brave new world eschewed time-honoured coachbuilding practices, and was instead of unitary construction for lightness and rigidity. Its new 1884cc iron-block, alloy head 'four' produced a healthy 108bhp at 5200rpm, and was allied to a column shift four-speed 'box'. The front end was suspended via wishbones and coil springs with the live rear axle located by trailing arms and coils.

And it was warmly received, even if the saloon's outline was perhaps a mite dumpy. Predictably, it wasn't long before the motor sport fraternity began to take a closer look, with 1900 berlinas competing everywhere from the Carrera Panamericana to the Mille Miglia in time. With success, too. This in turn led to calls for more overtly sporting variants. Alfa responded with the higher compression TI from '51 and the Super series from '53, the shorter wheelbase 1900C Sprint proving a boon for the many specialist coachbuilders.

Umpteen confections followed which varied from the sublime to the beyond ridiculous. At a time when America's Big Three were tapping old school carrozzeria

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

ALFA ROMEO 1900CSS

CAPACITY:	1975cc
POWER:	150bhp @ 5000rpm
TORQUE:	108lb ft @ 3600rpm
GEARBOX:	Five-speed column shift
WEIGHT:	1000kg (2310lb)
YEARS BUILT:	1953-55 (series 3)
TOP SPEED:	118mph
0-62MPH:	11.8sec

to build their show cars, some Italian stylists conversely looked Stateside for inspiration. Ghia's Giovanni Savanuzzi produced some wonderfully overblown outlines, Medardo Fantuzzi's eponymous body shop producing one of the most outlandish coachbuilt 1900s called, ironically, Gazzella. Not forgetting Zagato's typically left-field competition-rooted coupe with its trademark double-bubble roof treatment or Bertone's Franco Scaglione-penned BAT dream cars.

But of all the many small run 1900s, by far and away the most attractive were those made by Carrozzeria Touring, not least when allied to a post '53 1900C Super Sprint platform (with a corresponding capacity hike to 1975cc and 115bhp at 5000rpm) as here. Touring chief 'Cic' Anderloni always had a discerning eye for proportion as exemplified by his different generations of 1900 rebodies. While interpretations of which 'series' is which differ between Alfa Romeo, the hugely knowledgeable 1900 Register and Touring's period records, unofficially there were four separate types of 1900 bodied by the Milan concern.

First up, the Series 1 edition – with 1884cc engines and four-speed 'box – had longer doors than the

BELOW: It looks great now but it took the owner many years of searching for missing parts to finally restore this old Alfa to this superb condition



otherwise alike Series 2 version along with flush door handles. The Series 3 car, as pictured here, featured the larger capacity engine, bigger front brakes, larger windows, different front side vents and so on. The Series 4 car was mechanically similar to the Series 3 iteration but with a completely different (and very sexy) shape. Confused? Alfa didn't make things easy for future historians, while Touring merely compounded the misery.

Some 21,304 1900s of all types were made to '59, saloons accounting for 17,390. The breakdown of Touring-bodied cars is roughly 300, 158, 477 and 571

“Most parts came from AFRA in Milan but I also found parts in Portugal, Singapore and Malaysia”

first to fourth series respectively. However, these figures may be optimistic. Either way you're not exactly tripping over them at marquee rallies. Unless it's this particular example, as Webb drives his car all over Europe to attend events. A long-time lover of the good stuff, having owned everything from a Ferrari 308GT4 to a Maserati 3200GTA, the former marine engineer admits to having always hankered after a 1900. "I've liked the Touring-bodied 1900C ever since I saw one in Fusi's book [*Alfa Romeo: All Cars From 1910*]. I started hunting around and nearly bought one in Portugal but the owner became very difficult. I just missed this car first time around as I was away working in Singapore when it became available. It was bought by Richard Banks, now of Alfaholics, who eventually sold it to me after a bit of badgering. I had a Montreal at the time

and sold it at the peak of the market in the late '80s to pay for the restoration.

"The car was delivered new from the factory on March 31 1954 to Giuseppe Mattioli of Carpi, just north of Modena. The colour was Grigio Scuro [dark grey], possibly metallic. It was imported into the UK on May 12 1960." Moving between Bromley and Chelmsford, it was possibly resprayed in two-tone blue at some point before Banks acquired the car. This being a near 60-year-old handcrafted Alfa, the restoration was needless to say not without its difficulties. "It took eight years to complete," says Webb. "Most spares

came from AFRA in Milan but I also found parts in Portugal, Singapore and Malaysia. I've also bought stuff on eBay, but very little appears these days.

"As for problem areas, where do I start? Repairing and remanufacturing missing parts for the bumpers I found in Sweden, rewiring the car using a number of diagrams even though none related exactly to my car; finding oversized pistons for the engine which was seized when I bought the car. The first piston, which I located in Italy, kept seizing and I later discovered that it had been cast rather than forged. I eventually had forged pistons made in the US which have been fine. Then there are all the rubber seals, which we had to do from scratch; making the rear Perspex quarter windows with the correct louvres [an optional extra in period, mostly seen on competition cars]; repairing the

BELOW: Unmistakable Touring styling transformed the mundane Alfa Romeo 1900 into a glamorous 1950s super star

RIGHT: The 1900 berlina was a milestone model for Alfa Romeo. It was their first post-war, mass produced car with over 7400 of them being built between 1950 and 1954



inner and outer sills around the wheel arches..."

The thing is, the effort was patently worth it. Webb's Ahab-like obsession in getting things done properly has resulted in a truly gorgeous car, one that has us salivating. Touring rarely did ugly outlines, and the 1900CSS has an almost sculptural look to it, the polished Borranis offering that little bit of extra glitz. In period, Alfa made a special platform available especially for coachbuilders, Touring using its patented Superleggera principal of light alloy panelling over a tubular steel frame. The overall effect is utterly compelling, the elevated bonnet line prompted by the height of the engine being expertly disguised. There isn't a line wrong on it, the only physical deviation from standard being the additional rear indicators which are absolutely in keeping. "There was a one-off car by Touring that had the same arrangement," Webb claims. "The colour is Rosso Matador which is an original 1900 shade. I managed to track down the paint code from the original supplier."

Once inside, the two-tone cabin is awash with delightful details, from the Roman font on the instruments to the delicate-looking door furniture. There's ample headroom, and excellent all-round vision. Nothing is a reach away, the overall effect being one of sophistication. A sense that is perhaps slightly lost on

start-up; at idle it sounds a bit gruff which is to be expected but once up to speed the engine takes on a strident, more thoroughbred demeanour. It's also surprisingly quick for its vintage, with more low down torque than expected. It's very much of its era but the 1900C SS is more than capable of keeping pace with cars more than 50 years its junior on B roads.

This isn't a car that you can exactly rush. Nor is tactility the answer, but even after a brief drive you know it would reward greater familiarity. The steering has no discernible dead spots; there's isn't much heft to it either. The column change is close-coupled and infinitely more user-friendly than many comparable set-ups, and when driven with a modicum of enthusiasm the car handles cleanly without ever threatening to spill. Quite the opposite; turn in and it leans ever so slightly and then stays on its given trajectory. It really is very lovely.

With the 1900, Alfa developed a case of vaulting ambition. It had a transformative impact on the company, yet survivors are all too rare on UK soil. Webb has no intention of parting with his just yet either, saying: "Recently there has been a significant increase in the value of these cars but mine isn't for sale." And don't even bother trying to sway him. "Eventually it will pass to my son." Silence. "When I'm six feet under..." ■

BELOW: The ubiquitous Alfa 1900 twin-cam found its way into various forms of transport including military and commercial vehicles

