DAIMLER
&
LANCHESTER

A Century of Motoring History

by

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Best wishes,

11.6.95

Again, an aluminium head was employed, with a much improved gas-flow. Raising the compression ratio to 7.5:1 resulted in a 10bhp increase in maximum power; at 4,400 rpm, 147bhp was now obtained, and the engine's torque characteristics were also much better suited to the car's transmission. The automatic transmission featured a torque converter which locked out in top gear, and had a provision for manually holding the intermediate ratios.

The cars braking system was very interesting. The Company had been experimenting with disc brakes since about 1952, and now Daimler was at last confident enough to offer this form of braking as a standard feature. In fact, the Majestic was almost certainly the first British saloon car to have disc brakes fitted as standard, although Jaguar were already fitting them to their XK series sports cars, and offered them as an option on their saloon car range. The brakes were of Dunlop design, operating on 12inch diameter discs at the front and rear of the car. A vacuum servo unit was employed, and the handbrake worked on a separate pair of callipers at the rear.

Daimler decided against using automatic chassis lubrication on the Majestic. Automatic chassis lubrication had been a feature on most of the Company's cars since before the Second World War, but it was decided to increase the number of grease nipples instead. The reasoning behind this reversal of tradition was sound, because if any part of the automatic system failed, and remained undetected, sooner or later further difficulties would be encountered - grease nipples could be easily maintained each time the car was serviced.

The *Motor* magazine summed it up as follows: *"Altogether, this Daimler Majestic is a car which fills an admittedly limited, but nevertheless very real, market which has been neglected in recent years - a market for a car which is frankly large and luxurious, but which matches these requirements with speed, acceleration, and handling qualities that go far to minimise the effects of sheer size in the congested conditions of today. With this combination of qualities, its basic price of just over £1,662 must be adjudged moderate."*

Autocar followed on by saying: *"It has a quite excellent performance for its size, with first class brakes and good roadholding - in a word, it is in all these respects the best Daimler model which we have road-tested."*

Shortly before they closed down in 1959, Hoopers carried out several special orders for customers on Majestics, although most of this work involved nothing more than the fitting of divisions, and refinishing cars with new paint schemes - no specialist coachwork was ever fitted to the Majestic chassis.

The SP250

One of the most interesting of all recent Daimlers, was the SP250 (or "Dart" as it is more commonly known). Introduced in April 1959, the Dart was a complete departure from the Company's standard practice. To understand why the SP250 was introduced at all, we must first go back in time, and look at what was happening in the Company's Experimental Department.

For two or three years, Daimler had been looking into the possibility of cutting costs by, if you like, "Daimlerising" a mass-produced car, and employing a brand-new small Daimler engine. The Panhard Dyna 54 was given a great deal of consideration, but unfortunately, the Government of the day were totally against the importation of ready made panels. Despite the enormous size of the BSA empire, it did not have the capacity needed to manufacture its own aluminium body panels, so the idea was dropped.

As an aside, one of the very last Jowetts found its way onto the Daimler testbed. As this marque was already extinct, it seems likely that the engineers had

Below:
An early advertising proof for the new Daimler Majestic.

Above: *A superb Empress III coachbuilt body mounted on a 1956 DF308 chassis. Many enthusiasts have mourned the passing of the Empress line.*

obtained one to see if they could crib any ideas from it, and were not intending to reproduce it. It also seems that the Company was at one time considering a front wheel drive three cylinder two stroke machine, which would have changed the course of Daimler history beyond recognition.

However, after the Panhard idea failed to materialise, Edward Turner entered into private negotiations with Vauxhall, with a view to producing a Daimler built Vauxhall Cresta-based saloon. A chassis designation of DN250/1 was assigned to the new project and in the meantime, Turner, who was the BSA Group's engine designer, had the new small power unit poised to go into production.

Development work on the new engine had started late in 1956, and by the summer of the following year, the first unit was built and running. The engine was a 90 degree V8 with a capacity of 2,548cc. It employed a cast iron block, aluminium alloy heads with hemispherical combustion chambers, and aluminium alloy pistons with steel connecting rods. A nice feature was the high mounted single camshaft/ pushrod arrangement which managed to keep the engine a very compact unit. The very first V8 was fitted with a twin-choke Solex carburettor, although it was later tried with eight Amal motorcycle carburettors. The Amal carburettors resulted in an overall increase of 60bhp, but after further experimentation it was eventually decided that two SU HD6 carburettors should be used when production finally got under way, giving a very respectable 140bhp.

The Daimler engineering team was headed by the vastly experienced Cyril Simpson and the initial road testing of the engine took place in a Conquest Century. The new V8 proved itself over more than 12,000 miles, and the design appeared to be a good one from the start. However, the Company was left with a problem. One prototype DN250 had been built, but the contact in Vauxhall was still holding proceedings up. They now had a superb 2.5litre engine, but nothing to put it in.

All that Daimler had on the market, was the large 3.8litre Majestic and the somewhat dated DK400 limousine, both of which were built in relatively small numbers, especially the latter. The Majestic, good though it was, could certainly not be relied upon to carry Daimler through these hard times. Thus, a new car was needed which had to be right first time. Rather surprisingly, the management decided to build not a saloon, but a sports car; presumably they felt that the deal regarding panels might still come to something. In any case, the SP250 project was born.

With cash and time in increasingly short supply, as many shortcuts as possible had to be taken. The pressures of the time dictated that a chassis design would have to be borrowed from somewhere. So to speed things along, a white Triumph TR3 was purchased and stripped down behind the closed doors of the Radford works, with all those involved being sworn to secrecy; Bob Guillianotti took the car to pieces, and Phil Lomas drew each of the TR components in turn.

The chassis specification included coil and wishbone front suspension, an underslung rear axle on semi-elliptic springs, and cam and peg steering. The braking system, however, was designed especially for the new car, and employed the use of Girling discs on all four wheels.

The original SP styling was by Jack Wickes, *"Edward Turner's pencil"*, and then left in the capable hands of Percy McNally. He was the General Manager of the Carbodies plant at the time, and had previously been responsible for the styling of the Majestic and the Phase II Lanchester Sprite, as well as the infamous Austin FX4 taxi. The resulting lines were quite unlike anything Daimler had come up with before, but overall, the effect was rather pleasing.

Due to the excessive time and expense involved in making steel bodies, the BSA Board decided at quite an early stage that the shell should be made of glassfibre. This would keep the tooling costs down, and make use of the existing facilities owned by the Company, which made panels for the Daimler buses - this course of action also enabled production to get under way far quicker. The use of glassfibre may have only been

intended as a temporary measure though, as a statement was later released saying that should demand for the vehicle increase, the body would almost certainly be built in steel.

At about this time, a survey of projected SP250 sales was prepared. It was hoped that something like 7,500 cars would be sold during the first three years of production, with about 1,500 being sold in the first twelve months. If met, these figures would have made the car one of the most successful Daimler models ever made. It was vital, however, that the Daimler Dart was a success. Even if the sales targets were met, the Company still wouldn't see a profit until the end of the third year, and a heavy loss of about £500,000 would be experienced during the second year.

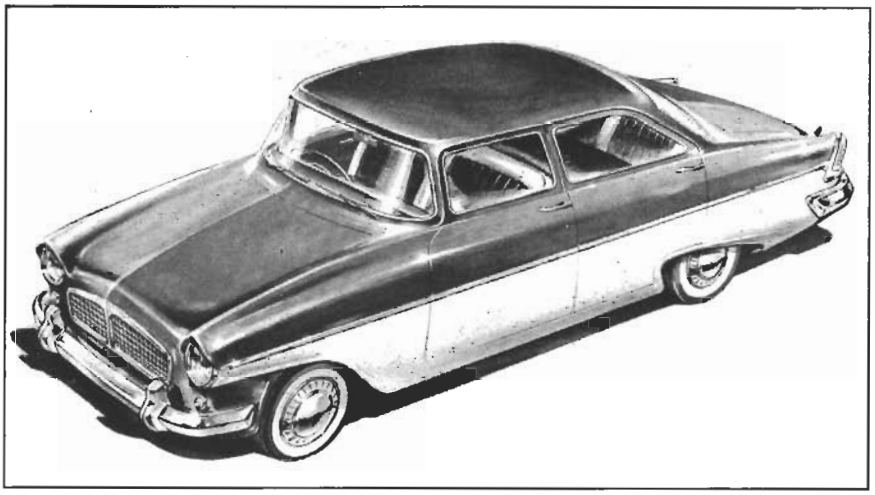
The original testbed prototype (illustrated here, registered WDU 654) was driven extensively around the Welsh countryside. The prototype was fitted with an Austin-Healey gearbox, as opposed to the four-speed Triumph TR based unit that production models were equipped with. The prototype's body was merely a mock up of what was to come, and bore only a passing resemblance to the finished product. According to John Box, one of the first Daimler people to actually take the machine out for a test run, the car was a *"real animal"* to drive, and he could vividly remember several incidents with the car that he would much rather forget! The driver's report on the car recommended several minor changes to the steering and suspension, as well as a change of tyres from the Dunlop RS3s used on the first test car.

After several months of testing, the time at last arrived for the official launch of the new Daimler. The 1959 International Automobile Exhibition, held in New York during April, was the chosen venue. It is not clear why America was chosen for the launch, as to this day, the Daimler marque is still virtually unknown in the U.S.A. However, export hopes for the Dart were high, and it is possible that the management hoped to win extra sales from the goodwill shown by launching such an important model in America, along with the added appeal of a V8 engine.

Certainly, the Company went to a great deal of trouble to gain good public relations with the American's. Earle C. Antony, a local car dealer, actually managed to keep one of the runways at Palm Springs Airport clear for over an hour, so that he could demonstrate the speed of the car to potential customers. The same car had just completed a 15 day tour across a large part of the country, just to prove that it was as reliable as it was quick. No less than 6,500 trouble-free miles had been clocked up by the time the tour came to an end.

Series production of the SP250 began in September 1959. By now, Daimler had been banned from using the name "Dart" as Chrysler had already registered the name, and objected to its use by other manufacturers. There were a few minor changes before production; the grille was made slightly shallower, a lid was now fitted to the glove compartment, and tailor-made rear lamp units replaced the Alvis ones originally used. Including purchase tax, the launch price of the SP250 was put at £1,395 - slightly higher than was hoped, but nonetheless, still a good buy. At this stage,

Left:
The Daimler Majestic, introduced in July 1958.



Left:
Jack Wickes drawing of the proposed DN250 saloon dated November 1958.

Right:
A styling mock up of the elusive DN250 saloon.

optional extras were to include such items as front and rear bumpers, wire wheels, whitewall tyres, an adjustable steering column, tonneau cover, a detachable hard top, a leather covered steering wheel and Borg Warner automatic transmission.

The styling gained some mixed reactions, but the V8 power-unit was highly regarded by everyone who experienced it. Writing in the *Autocar* of September 1959, one driver was said to have remarked, *"Whether I were to choose the new Daimler or not, I should always be glad to have its engine in any car."*

The SP250 was displayed at the 1959 Earls Court Motor Show, and Hooper exhibited a close coupled saloon version of the sports car. Chassis no. 100571 was used for the prototype, which had a two door four seater body in metal. The standard features included wind-up side windows, hinged quarter lights, bucket front seats with hinged backs, a fully upholstered rear bench seat, and a leather padded instrument board. A heater/demister unit was also provided, as was a screen washer system and radio.

Unfortunately, the Hooper-bodied SP250 was not a success with the public, and this was probably the last Daimler ever built with a Hooper body, as the London works closed down later on in 1959. Perhaps Hoopers, more than any other coachbuilder, helped to contribute to the Daimler tradition, and it was indeed a sad day when the firm announced that they were going to bring production to an end.

When Hoopers finally closed the works gates for everything but servicing and repair work, their former Chief Designer, Osmond Rivers, spent several months at the Daimler factory in Coventry. Under his supervision, about five or six further bodies were built with a view to series production, although this time, glassfibre was used. A number of improvements to the suspension and steering were devised, and the interior layout was also redesigned slightly. After all this effort, it was decided in the end not to develop the model any further, and none of the cars are thought to have survived.