

Daimler

CENTURY

The full history of Britain's oldest car maker

LORD MONTAGU & DAVID BURGESS-WISE

Foreword by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh

Montagu of Beaulieu

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to the already high cost of the machine, which proved a sales disaster and was discontinued in 1957, effectively ending the Sunbeam marque (though BSA did use the name subsequently on a rather dismal little scooter). And though the position of the BSA and Triumph marques seemed unassailable in the late 1950s, the story was quite different in the 1960s when Japanese bikes took over the market and the British motor cycle industry, weakened by poor management and complacency, simply melted away in the heat of the Rising Sun.

Oddly enough, although the Dockers were gone, the tradition of showing a special Hooper-bodied car at Earl's Court continued with the display of an eight-seater Hooper limousine on the company's stand, though no exotic fauna had been asked to surrender their hides to upholster it and this time the headlines on the coachbuilding front were snatched by an extravagantly-equipped Rolls-Royce bodied by Freestone & Webb. Though the model was consistently listed in buyers' guides, the Hooper-bodied Limousine was one of just seven in this style built on the DK400 chassis between 1955–9 and was acquired in 1959 by C.F. Anderson & Sons, passed to the Birmingham Cooperative Society in 1961 (who used it as a wedding car) and eventually returned to its manufacturers.

In fact, Daimler's old role as furnisher of official limousines had been taken over by the North London coachbuilders Vanden Plas, which in association with Austin had begun producing the Princess luxury saloon in 1947, reaching an output of five a week in 1948 and ten a week the following year. Inevitably, a limousine version followed in 1952 and the first two off the production line at the Vanden Plas Kingsbury works were bought by the Queen even before her Coronation, and the model became a permanent feature of the Royal fleet.

The lacklustre nature of the Daimler products at Earls Court had fuelled rumours that the company was about to cease car

production, and these were intensified by the closure of one of the Daimler foundries and a number of redundancies. At the group AGM in November 1957 Jack Sangster was compelled to reassure BSA shareholders that these rumours were untrue and that 'intensive development work has been proceeding with all speed on our Daimler products'. Now in charge of the Automotive Division of the BSA Group was famed motor cycle designer Edward Turner, who backed Sangster, saying that the remaining level of foundry production 'appeared to be assured' for the next 12 months and that 'no further substantial redundancy was contemplated'.

Turner was, of course, the creator of such classic two-wheelers as the Ariel Square Four and the famed Triumph Speed Twin, which equipped practically every police force worldwide; for many years he had declared that he wanted to build 'equally good cars'. He backed his statement with the launch the following July of the Majestic, a development of the One-O-Four with a 3.8-litre engine which gave a genuine 100 mph top speed. It was the first British-built limousine fitted with servo-assisted disc brakes on all four wheels and came with Borg-Warner automatic transmission as standard, the first Daimler model since 1931 not available with the 'self-changing' gearbox. The critics were impressed; testing the new car for the *Sunday Times*, Stirling Moss wrote: 'There is no wallow even when cornering fast. Steering is light and accurate . . . You can make 80 or 90 come up on the speedometer very quickly and the maximum is over 100 mph.' More alarmingly, he added: 'I simply touched the brake pedal with my fingers at 70 mph and slowed the car to a halt.'

By the end of 1958 the news was out: Turner – one of the best engine designers in the motor cycle industry – was working with Cyril Simpson on a new 2½-litre V8 power unit for future Daimlers. Models under development, it was revealed, were a sports car and a saloon car, 'of strikingly modern conception and in the medium price range'.

Fortunately, the proposed DN250 – the 2½-litre V8 engine in a Vauxhall Cresta bodyshell with a Daimler radiator shell – never made production. [JDHT]



Sadly, the planned saloon, codenamed 'DN250', showed a considerable lack of understanding of the needs of the Daimler customer, for, despite claims that it was 'entirely new', it was to have been based on the bulbous bodyshell of the Vauxhall Cresta: fortunately, this ill-conceived hybrid never reached production.

Change was apparent elsewhere in the organization: the company's bodybuilding associate Carbodies was not only producing convertible bodies for Ford Consuls and Zephyrs but had also just launched the famous London black cab. And though Daimler Hire had been independent for many years, it still marked the end of an era when at the beginning of 1958 it was announced that the company – whose chauffeurs covered 2.3 million miles a year, with self-drive clients accounting for a further 7.5 million – had been acquired by the Hertz Group of America as their first inroad into the British car hire business.

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The 2,547 cc Turner V8 engine made its debut in the spring of 1959 powering a new sports car, the SP250. This was aimed directly at the American market – its public announcement was at the New York Show in April, where a red pre-production car was exhibited – and was initially known as the 'Dart' until representations from Chrysler, who had registered the name, forced its abandonment by threatening to sue.

Just as Vanwall had taken the 500 cc Norton motor cycle engine layout for its 1959 Grand Prix car, so Turner had also looked to a two-wheeler power unit for his inspiration, in this case his Triumph Speed Twin. The new engine was patterned on the motor cycle unit's top end, though unlike the long-stroke Speed Twin it had a very oversquare bore-stroke ratio. The camshaft was set high between the cylinder blocks, operating inclined valves in hemispherical combustion chambers through short duralumin pushrods and valve-gear like that on the Speed Twin. Given the engine's air-cooled antecedents, the water-cooling