



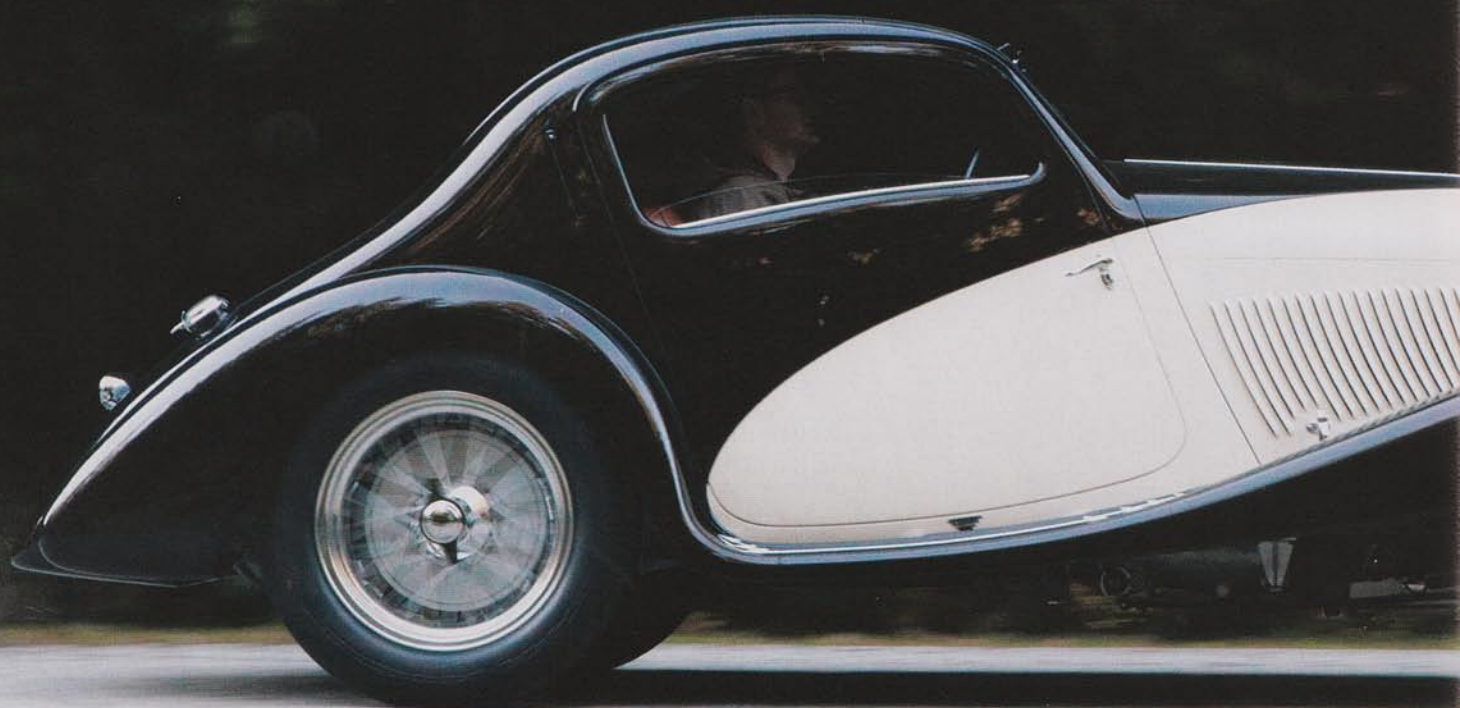
6C

and I know it

There's no need for the unique Figoni-bodied Alfa 6C to be modest. It led a dual life as glamorous concours queen and Le Mans race car before falling into disrepair. Fully restored, it has taken the concours world by storm – now we drive it

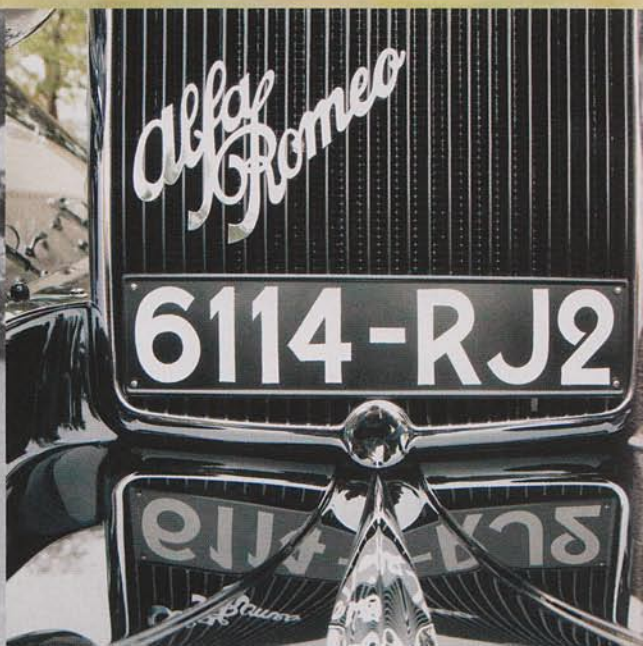
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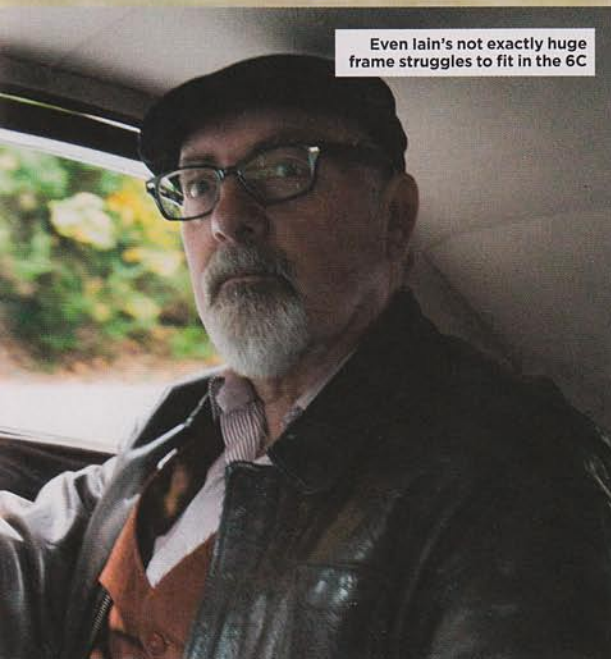




*'I have to admit to some
trepidation in taking
on **one of the world's
most valuable cars**'*

A beauty with a beast within
- at home here and at Le Mans





Even Iain's not exactly huge frame struggles to fit in the 6C

Rare achievements in the classic car world don't come much rarer than winning the Triple Crown at Villa D'Este, the world-class concours event held every year on the shores of Lake Como, Italy.

It takes a very special car to claim the Coppa D'Oro, the jury's Best in Show and the public's choice of Best in Show. Only three cars have managed that feat in the past 80 years – and David Cohen's 6th-series 1933 Alfa Romeo Gran Sport 1750 6C by Figoni is one of them. After its multiple success at Villa D'Este in 2012, the Alfa went on to win its class at Pebble Beach and was the judges' choice as runner-up in the Best in Show competition. No doubt about it – this is one of the world's most admired cars.

Alfa Romeo chassis number 121215054 arrived in France in 1933, where it was assembled in Paris and bodied by Figoni (see below) before being shown at that year's Paris Salon. However, as well as being very pretty, it was seriously fast – this is a fully competitive racing car.

Driving a one-off ex-Le Mans Alfa Romeo racing car in its Figoni finery is a rare privilege, and I'm aware of that as the car's custodian, Rob Fram of RX Autoworks, ushers me towards the driver's seat. The doors are suicide, so you slide in backwards past the big wheel, which is right in your lap. If my physical shape were more rotund than its slight plumpness, I simply wouldn't be able to drive it. Height-wise, I'm at the upper limit for fitting this car comfortably – and I'm a modest 5ft 9in.

Rob's guided tour of the car's office suggests that I'll have to concentrate. The H-gate is reversed and the footbrake's on the right; the handbrake

isn't actually a handbrake but a lever that locks the footbrake down. There's no choke: you squirt fuel into the supercharger's chamber, fire up the engine and then control the idle speed with a dial on the dash. From a cold start, the car dies after 60 seconds – every time, like clockwork. There's no identifiable reason, it just does that. The idle speed dial has to be adjusted constantly depending on engine heat: the intake tract is about three feet long, resulting in occasional hunting.

Right, let's do this. I squirt fuel in, turn the key and poke the starter. The engine churns over with nothing happening until there's a minor explosion from the supercharger, and the engine rumbles and whines into life. The whining of the supercharger's straight-cut gears is the dominant note in the chord: there's no other audible mechanical noise apart from a baritone mutter from the back, which sounds like an angry rasp from outside. The interior is distractingly gorgeous: I'm all too easily sidetracked into admiring the perfectly restored Jaeger dials in their art deco crackle-finished panel, rather than checking the readings.

I have to admit to some trepidation in taking on one of the world's most intrinsically and extrinsically valuable cars, but I'm mollified by the fact this engine endured 24 hours flat-out at Le Mans 77 years ago – testing it around rural Vancouver won't present much of a challenge.

Moving away follows a formula. With the engine's whine muted and the idle dial turned low to slow down the gearbox internals, I approach first gear via second. I declutch, feel for the speed of the cogs, snick into second, then go straight into first. I'm pleased by how precise the operation is. The handbrake must be let off with care, as

Giuseppe Figoni



F&F-cloaked Delahaye more daring than 6C 6

Giuseppe Figoni was born in 1892 into a poor family in Le Moline, a village in the Appennines. The Figonis moved to France in search of work, and Giuseppe started work in a body

repair shop when he was just 14, and soon moved up to coachbuilding.

He set up on his own at 31, and launched Figoni et Falaschi in 1935 with fellow Italian expat Ovidio Falaschi, a

businessman and art trader. The combination worked well, and F&F went on to tailor increasingly sculptural bodies for assorted European art deco exotica.

Many were French marques, such as Delahaye (see photo) and Delage. The teardrop styling seen here developed later into the more spectacular late-

Thirties F&F designs. Figoni described his signature teardrop mudguards as *enveloppantes*; they were inspired by contemporary French aircraft technology, which was relatively advanced.

Figoni et Falaschi also built bodies in France for imported foreign cars in response to a near-prohibitive import tax level.

the lever is too tall and there's a good chance of chamfering a knuckle on the edge of the dashboard – Rob just did.

The clutch is dry, but it was designed with racing in mind and it's something of an on-off switch that requires subtlety and firmness. For me, using leg muscles rather than foot muscles improves control over fierce clutches.

The engine was rebuilt just 100 miles ago, so I don't want to rev it much. It whines momentarily in first, then it's time to double-declutch and into second. Third is a good town gear, with 3000rpm being plenty to keep up with traffic and to keep the dynamo charging the battery. In the lower gears, the whines from the supercharger and the gears combine for a truly exotic chord, with just the occasional percussion accompaniment of a gear crunch. After a few hundred thousand unsynchronised crunchings over the decades, the original gear teeth resembled Albert Steptoe's crooked smile, so replacement made sense: the gears are still new and tight.

The mechanical brakes have a hard pedal, but are strong and reassuring. They probably faded a bit coming to Mulsanne corner for the 200th time in 1935, but today they're fine.

Bespoke details show the level of luxury massaged into every surface



The steering is very heavy at rest, but lightens to some extent as I gain speed. It's still weighty, but having the big wheel next to my chest means I can put my shoulder muscles into the job. There's only one-and-a-half turns lock to lock: I have to keep remembering this car is a Le Mans racer as well as a beauty queen. There's about 100bhp available, and the engine wants to spin. There's little torque and it can bog down on steep hills if the revs aren't kept up: it really only comes alive above 3000rpm. It doesn't yield scary power, but this is a fast car and will be quicker still once run-in. So far it's only been driven on the Tour d'Elegance at Pebble and in and out of a container.

The chrome gearlever is tall, which may be because most 6C chassis had higher bodywork. That would also explain the lengthy handbrake lever. The long gearlever makes changing gears easier, amplifying my fingers' ability to feel what's going on inside the box. It's harder to get smooth shifts than in some pre-war cars but nowhere near as difficult as in, say, a pre-war Bentley.

Vision through the letterbox rear window is useless so there would be no point in a rear-view mirror – and there

Figoni: the build sheet establishes that this is the one. The 6C's Alfa Romeo Paris radiator badge refers to Alfa's French-registered business in the Paris suburb of Boulogne-sur-Seine, which imported and assembled Alfa mechanical and chassis components in Paris for tax reasons. Perhaps a dozen were completed in this way. They were for seriously rich sports car enthusiasts, who could stay rich by not paying any more tax than they had to. Alfa Romeo had begun selling racing cars to the public for bodying as road cars – but in tiny numbers and at such fearsome cost, only the aristocracy and industrialists who owned companies such as Thyssen and Piaggio needed apply. There was no need for luggage space, as that went ahead with the servants. The modern equivalent would be Richard Branson ordering a current F1 car and having Zagato design and fit a sports body.

Alfa Romeo's 1752cc engine replaced the 1500 in 1929. The six-cylinder single-overhead-cam 1752 was intended for hauling big saloons so, in the short-wheelbase (106.3in) Gran Sport configuration it was rapid. The Gran Sport engine had double overhead cams, which were still



The owner – David Cohen



For David, this car has provided an emotional roller coaster. Firstly, having admired it as a child and later co-driven it in the Mille Miglia, he has literally wanted this Alfa for most of his life. Finally getting his hands on it was

magnificent. But when it arrived in Vancouver a broken container strap had resulted in cosmetic damage. Being closely involved in a fine restoration over the next two years was, however, very satisfying.

So too was his experience at Villa d'Este. 'I thought the car had missed out on the honours and went off for an afternoon nap,

only to be woken by the organisers banging on the door and telling me to come and collect my prizes.'

The car was then shipped to Pebble Beach via Panama to avoid unfriendly Montreal customs officials, only to be pulled off the ship at San Francisco by American customs, and released only one day before the concours.

'I have to keep remembering this car is a Le Mans racer as well as a beauty queen'

are no wing mirrors either. In the surprisingly lawless arena of Vancouver driving, you just have to keep up your speed, flip up the trafficator in plenty of time and change lanes very slowly.

The ride is vintage-stiff but the seats are very good. The Andre Hartford-style friction shock absorbers are adjustable from inside the cabin via dials on the dashboard. You would have turned them down to soft when driving back from the Paris Salon in 1933, and then up to hard while doing 110mph along the Mulsanne straight a year or two later.

The tiny cockpit is cosy rather than claustrophobic, with plenty of side and forward vision – the windows are small but most are in the right place. Conversation over engine noise is no problem, although the supercharger's whine is omnipresent.

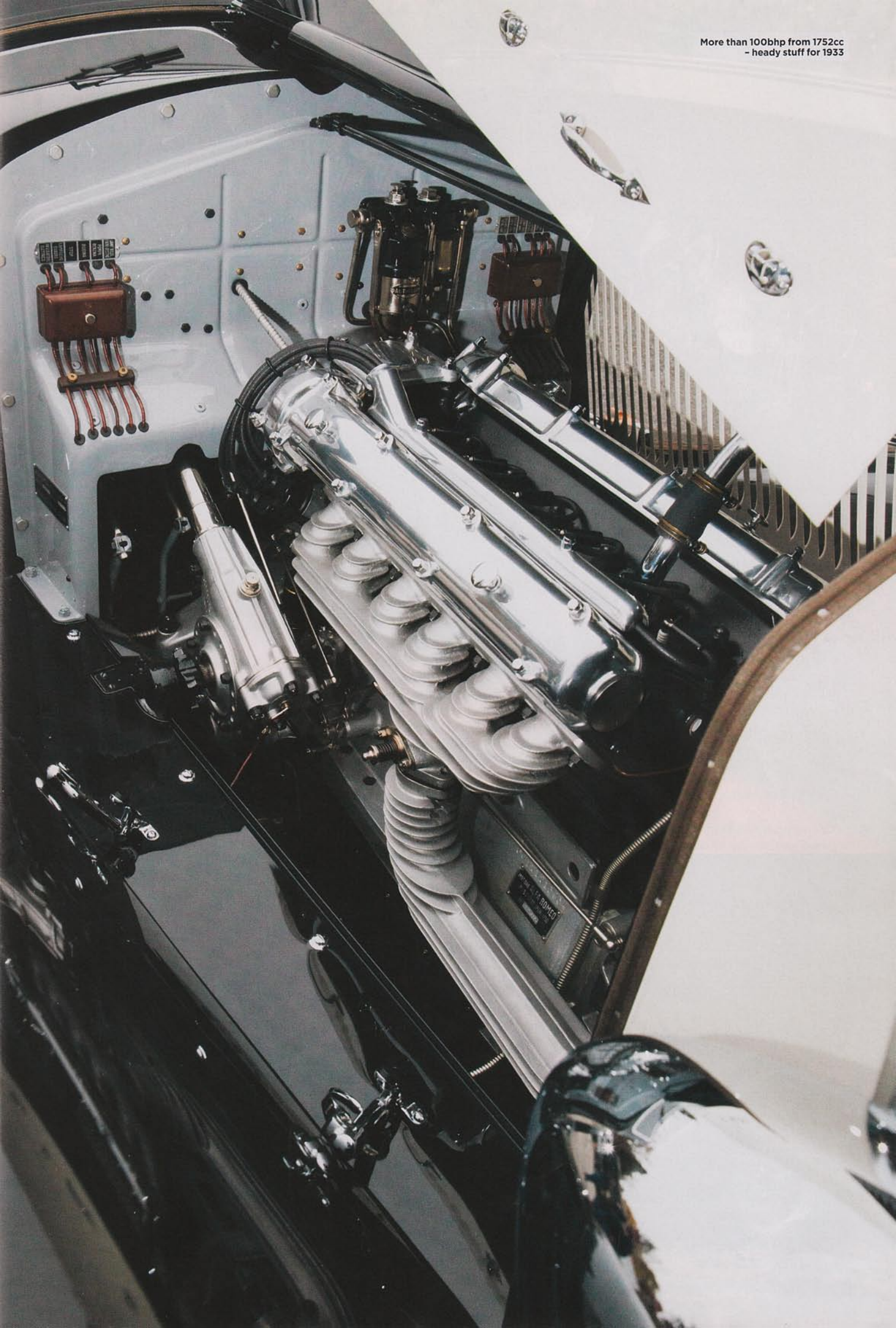
As well as being charismatic and gorgeous, this car is unique. Angela Cherret's book on the 6C1500, 1750 and 1900 says that a 6C chassis went to

regarded as sexy technology 15 years later in the Jaguar XK engine. A supercharger helps the Alfa to around 100bhp. With a light chassis and an aluminium body, it had a dramatic power-to-weight ratio. It was seriously fast, and this particular example was not destined merely for weekend amusement.

In 1935, the body replaced with a small open racing body for the Le Mans 24 Hours. A dash plaque claims fifth place, but Le Mans records award it sixth overall and a class win in the two-litre group with 204 laps completed – compared to the 222 laps that winners Johnny Hindmarsh and Luis Fontes achieved in a Lagonda Rapide M45A.

The Alfa's drivers were Frenchman Jean Desvignes, a regular and successful driver of Alfas, and one 'Guy Don' of Britain who, rather intriguingly, doesn't seem to exist. There's no record of him in any other races, and you simply don't appear from nowhere, co-drive to sixth place

More than 100bhp from 1752cc
- heady stuff for 1933





It took 300 colour swatches
to find the right leather





The restoration

The team at RX Autoworks are very conscious that, as restorers of rare and significant cars, they are entrusted with important art and science history. That's why 6000 hours of careful work went into this Alfa.

The frilly edges of the bodywork have been replaced, but only as far up as the few inches necessary for full structural repair. The bodywork and

body frame are nearly all original, with no panels replaced. When such a body comes off its wooden frame, the aluminium wrapped around the wood becomes work-hardened and those few inches have to be replaced.

Wood repairs were restricted to small, localised areas of wood rot – for example, around the door catches where water could drip

in. There was also a lot of revision to previous restoration work.

The chassis is pretty well untouched. It's solid and was well made, needing little contribution from RX other than cosmetic attention. There have been some major component replacements, the most notable on the running gear being the front upright/steering box assembly. Crack-testing

revealed alarming defects: the steering arm housing was cracked through, and it could easily have come adrift after a pothole impact. Its replacement was made in a military aircraft factory, by a multi-million-dollar milling machine that measures complex objects in seven axes and then mills identical replacements, in this case in chrome-moly

steel. The block is still the original, but the cracked crankshaft had to be replaced, and the pistons and head were also remanufactured.

David's collection isn't a museum, and he uses his cars enthusiastically but taking the risk of poking a period piston through the original block casting wasn't worth it. The box of leftovers should probably be in a museum, though.

at Le Mans and then vanish again. In all likelihood, it was French driver Guy Weisweiler who partnered Desvignes' in the race. He seems to have been provisionally listed as such, so the most probable explanation is a typographical error in the published race programme.

Second and third places were taken by an Alfa 8C 2300 and a 1500cc Aston Martin Ulster respectively. The next three places were taken by a Riley MPH, a Delahaye 18CV and our 6C Alfa Romeo.

The 6C engine's reputation for toughness and reliability was enhanced after surviving 24 hours of full-throttle thrashing round Le Mans, and further bolstered by achieving a very decent placing. The same matching-numbers crankcase is still in the car 80 years later and still going strong. It is a magnificent piece of art deco engineering sculpture.

After Le Mans, the car was rebodied with its original coachwork at Fighi et Falaschi. Claude Fighi, a descendant of Guisepppe, has been to look at the car and has helped with information.

Nothing is then recorded of the car until 1946, in common with many valuable European cars that absented themselves during World War Two. The Alfa was sold without paperwork to somebody in Montpellier, then to George Elkin in 1948. George drove the car in France and then shipped it to South Africa, taking it out and about in Johannesburg, where it was admired by a 14-year-old David Cohen.

The 6C passed to Waldemar Greyvensteyn, who carried out a restoration, but not at a modern standards. He did enjoy the car in proper style, though: it was entered in the 1986 Mille Miglia and co-driven by a slightly less youthful David Cohen.

David is a notable collector of fascinating cars, but he always had a soft spot for this Alfa and, while he couldn't persuade Waldemar to sell it, he was invited to buy it from the Greyvensteyn estate after his death.

When it appeared in Vancouver it was two-tone blue, and had suffered minor damage to the front apron in transit. For its restoration, David took the car to RX Autoworks in Vancouver, which had a reputation for winning at Pebble Beach with top-level restorations of pre-war Lagondas and Alfa Romeos. With the body off the car and perched up on stands, it was clearly something special.

Emerging evidence of the Frenchness of the body proved entertaining during the 2011-2012 RX restoration. The Alfa Romeo Paris radiator badge, the Jaeger instruments marked in French and French knock-off wheels were obvious, but more Frenchness appeared as complete dismantling progressed. A pencilled instruction at the top of one of the wooden door frames reads: '*Border de chaque coté de la feuillure*,' meaning 'wrap around both sides of the groove' – presumably instructing a craftsman on how to skin the door to suit a weather seal. There were two left-hand

door handles on the car, so RX fabricated a mirror copy, finally getting it right after 79 years.

The seat back has 'Alfa Romeo' scrawled on it, followed by 'et Juliet', added by a workshop wit. Another period scribble says 'Jeudi matin' (Tuesday morning).

The structure of the RX restoration collective is interesting: the team is made up of three self-employed craftsmen, and in each project the customer becomes a fourth member of the team. The aim is a careful balance of preservation and perfect renovation. There are thousands of hours in a car such as this Alfa.

The interior surfaces are all new but, again, as much of the structure as possible was preserved. The dash had been painted black, but under a riveted plaque the restoration team made a delightful discovery – a square inch of the original trendy art deco crackle finish, which a local furniture restorer was able to reproduce perfectly.

The control knobs for the dampers were made as new castings, replicating the old ones. Just selecting the correct colour, texture and durability for the seat leather was a major task – there are 300 colour swatches in storage at RX, just for this car. The gearlever pedestal was blasted with a carefully chosen medium that achieves the right degree of smoothness when light falls on it. The cigar lighter was disintegrating, but RX rebuilt it with the guts from a new one, and days of work were applied to fabricating new parts for it and polishing and plating original ones.

Rob Fram has his own recipe for the shellac that covers the wiring loom, which is, nightmarishly, all covered in the same beige cloth. Commercially available shellac is slightly too light in colour for 1934.

The RX guys are already focusing their attention on Pebble Beach 2013. They have a pleasing problem – having achieved the Triple Crown at Villa d'Este and Best in Class at Pebble Beach, how do you top that?

I'm asking myself the same as I ease myself out from behind that giant steering wheel, hoping I can commit the heady experience to the corner of my mind that is reserved for permanent memories. **CC**



Top: reversed H-gate shift. Above: original panel had been painted over

Alfa Romeo 6C 1750 Gran Sport F&F

• **Engine** 1752cc, in-line 6cyl, DOHC, supercharged through Memini carburettor • **Power and torque** 105-115bhp @ 5000rpm, 100lb ft @ 3500rpm • **Transmission** Four-speed manual, synchro on third and top • **Steering** Worm and scroll • **Suspension** Front: beam axle on semi-elliptic leaf springs, adjustable friction dampers. Rear: live axle rear on semi-elliptic leaf springs, adjustable friction dampers • **Brakes** Drums all round, mechanical rod operated • **Weight** 920kg • **Performance** Top speed 105mph; 0-60mph 14sec • **Fuel consumption** 14mpg • **Cost new** Unknown • **Current value** Unknown