

1952/53 Alfa Romeo

Disco Volante

Simon Moore tells the story of the Alfas that never quite made it.

RACING HISTORY

ALFA ROMEO retired from racing after Fangio won the 1951 Spanish GP and with it, the world championship, in that phenomenal 13-year-old design, the Tipo 158/9. Thankfully, however, the competition department did not close down completely and went to work on producing a Le Mans/Mille Miglia type sports car, initially aiming for Le Mans 1952. (They were also working on the seat-behind-the-rear-wheels Tipo 160 but that is another story!). However, this was soon postponed and the first cars were shown to the press in October 1952. In that year, a total of five cars were built, three with four cylinder 2-litre light alloy engines and two with 6 cylinder 3-litre cast iron block engines, and one of each was shown at this first press showing. The chassis of both cars were vaguely elliptical in shape and, with suitable bodywork fitted (by Touring), they looked somewhat like the objects from outer space after which they were named. The 2-litre car was somewhat shorter than the 3-litre, it was displayed at the Motors Sports Show at Madison Square Garden in March 1953.

Of the other two 4-cylinder cars, one was fitted with a very similar body but in closed coupé form, the other with an open "narrow sided" body. The original open car and the coupé were never sold and are now to be seen at the Alfa museum. A flat-sided car was sold to a Swiss racing driver by the name of Jean Ducrey. He had a little success with it, including third in the "Course de cote de Planfoy" hillclimb in May (behind two 4½-litre Talbots) but he failed to finish the Prix de Bremgarten later in the summer. In 1955, he continued to use the car including finishing second in the Circuit d'Orleans. The car remained in Switzerland for some years until being purchased in the last five years or so by Fritz Schlumpf. A somewhat similar looking car (but with flatter sides) was built up on a modified 1900 chassis by Carrozerie Colli with a 2-litre iron block engine for an Italian driver, a Signor Bellucci of Naples. This car found its way rapidly to the USA where it was raced during 1954 in SCCA events by Rezzaghi. It then passed through several hands before being acquired by John Willock of Ridgefield, Conn. This is not a true Disco.

The two 6-cylinder cars were identical

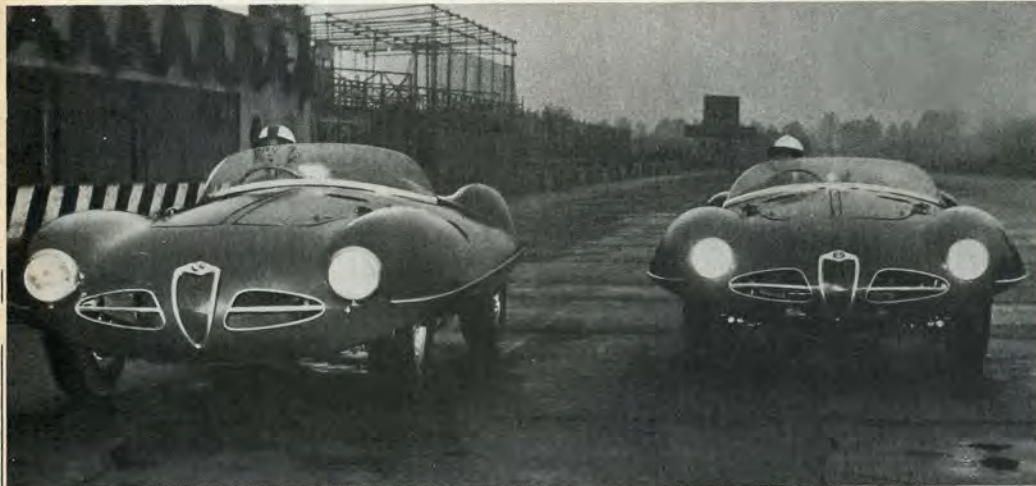
and were kept by the factory, one being dismantled and the other presented to the Turin Museum in 1956. A strong rumour during 1969 of an open Disco in Nardi's shop in Turin was found to be false but someone there thought they had had a car at one time. This must remain a mystery, unless it is a missing 3.5-litre car.

These two 6-cylinders were different from the later models in that the capacity was only 3 litres, the gearbox contained four speeds all with synchromesh and the carburation was by three 2-choke Webers.

1953 was the first year of the World Sports Car championship for manufacturers and Alfa Romeo decided to contest this championship with revised Discos. These new cars were designated AR 3000 CM by the factory; this is in fact a misnomer as in most cases the engines were 3.5-litres! Everyone continued to call the cars "Disco Volante" even though the original shape disappeared.

Carburation on these 3.5-litre engines was by 6 single-choke 48DOM Webers fed with air from the nose via a huge duct, on top of which were six small pipes feeding air to the float chambers to equalise the pressure as the duct produced such a large ram effect. A five-speed constant mesh/dog clutch gearbox replaced the earlier four speed and the rear suspension was revised - now being de Dion type with vast inboard drums. Location was by Watts link. This inboard location caused some problems with overheating and was one of the reasons that the Colli body fitted to the four cars when they appeared at Brescia for scrutineering, was fitted with numerous air scoops.

The four cars were a sensation at Brescia and they were expected to do well. Drivers were Juan-Manuel Fangio (still not fully recovered from his frightening crash in an A6GCM Maserati at Monza in 1952),



Announcement of the Disco Volantes in November 1952 with alloy-block 2-litre and cast-iron block 3-litre, above. Right,

2-litre Disco coupé; the 1952 cars had Touring bodywork.



Left, the 3½-litre was rebodied several times by Pininfarina and is seen here at Geneva 1959. Right, the same car in original guise when Fangio came second in the Mille Miglia 1953 with a broken track rod.

Karl Kling (on loan from Daimler-Benz), Cansalvo Sanesi and Freddy Zehender all in 3½-litre cars.

The race result was encouraging for the future but still a little disappointing. Sanesi led nearly all the way to Pescara only to retire with transmission problems; Kling then took over and led into Rome, a thing only two winners ever did (Moss 1955, Castelotti 1956) but retired soon after with a cracked rear axle housing.

Zehender had already retired so Fangio was left to uphold the honour of Portello, which he did in one of the best sports car drives of his career. Having taken the lead, he discovered that a track-rod had broken and there was steering on one wheel only. Despite having to slow for the hairpins over the passes, he continued when many people would have quit, but could not match the speed of Giannino Marzotto's 4.1 Ferrari, still in good condition, and finished second, 11 minutes 44 seconds down on the big Ferrari. But a great drive despite the lack of a win.

And so the scene shifted to Le Circuit Permanent de la Sarthe for the next round of the championship. Three cars were accepted for Fangio/Marimon, Kling/Reiss,

and Sanesi/Carini and a fourth car in reserve for Stagnoli/Palmeri all cars being fitted with 3.5-litre engines. The three cars refrained from participating in the initial "Grand Prix" with the Ferraris and Jaguars but started to move up around the first refuelling stops. Unfortunately, Fangio had a piston burn out after two hours after getting up to 6th. Kling was up to 2nd after five hours with Sanesi 3rd. After eight hours they were still well in contention with Kling 3rd and Sanesi 4th. However, the transmission of both cars gave out after ten hours, Sanesi completing 125 laps and Kling 133.

Another disappointing outing at Le Mans and only one car appeared for the next round at Spa for the 24-hour race, to be driven by Fangio and Sanesi. Sanesi spun off into retirement in the rain in the early stages after Fangio had reached 3rd place after two hours behind the works Ferraris.

And the "hoodoo" seemed to be continuing when Karl Kling apparently smashed a car up while practising for the next round, the first running of the Nurburgring 1000Kms, when the steering failed. This occurred during private practice and the factory never put in an official entry; a works Ferrari won the race, and with it, the championship.

Three cars were entered for the non-championship event at Merano, the Supercortemaggiore GP, but only one car turned up for Fangio. Sanesi and Carini were left unemployed. This meant that the original Colli Coupés were only seen the three times (Mille Miglia, Le Mans and Spa) since the single car at Merano was an open car (possibly with a 3-litre engine). The body was like a coupé without the top but with different location of the headlights and a headrest.

Fangio won against opposition from the



Fangio won the Supercortemaggiore GP at Merano in this car; second head-rest is later growth. Seen in 1973 Sanesi and Zanardi

works Lancias of Taruffi, Bonetto and Manzon; he never fell below third and inherited the lead from Bonetto on the 12th lap (out of 15) winning at 78.96 mph. Sanesi, as factory chief tester, continued to practise the cars for development purposes until he is reported to have crashed. It was rumoured that this car had a 3.8-litre engine. Development of the cars then ceased and they never appeared again under works jurisdiction.

SUMMARY OF WORKS HISTORY

1952 CARS

- 1359.00001 Original Disco 2-litre: Retained by Alfa Romeo S.p.a.
 1359.00002 Narrow sided 2-litre car raced by Jean-Ducrey. Now owned by Fritz Schlumpf.
 1359.00003 Coupé 2-litre. Retained by Alfa Romeo S.p.a.
 1361.00011 Original Disco 3-litre. Retained by Alfa Romeo and presented subsequently to the Biscaretti Museum in Turin.
 1361.00012 Disco 3-litre. Dismantled.

1953 CARS

- 1361.00121 Dismantled or renumbered.
 1361.00122 Dismantled or renumbered.
 1361.00123 Colli coupé which probably ran in the Mille Miglia and was raced at Le Mans (race number 21) by Carini/Sanesi with engine 00503. Probably dismantled or renumbered.
 1361.00124 Probably dismantled or renumbered.
 1361.00125 Colli coupé which ran in the Mille Miglia driven by Kling (race number 603) with Italian registration plate 212039 MI. At Le Mans, Fangio and Marimon drove the car (race number 23) fitted with engine 00505.
 1361.00126 Colli coupé which ran at Le Mans driven by Kling and Reiss (race number 22) fitted with engine 00506.
 1361.00127 Ran at Merano fitted with a Colli spider body, fitted with engine 00507.
 1361.00128 Colli coupé which ran in the Mille Miglia driven by Fangio (race number 602) with Italian registration plate 212038 MI. At Le Mans, it was the spare car (number 68) with engine 00508.

EX-WORKS HISTORY

The history of the 1952 cars has been covered above, but four of the 1953 cars are still around and their history is as follows.

1361.00125

This car has had a large number of racing miles on it. Towards the end of 1954 it was sold to the Swedish Alfa-Romeo dealer and up-and-coming racing driver, Jo Bonnier. He never raced it with the original Colli body but only with an open body by Zagato. The reason for this change is usually quoted as being a lack of headroom for the lanky Swede but *Motor Sport* of the time thought that the original body was destroyed in a testing accident.

The first international outing for the Zagato-bodied car was the Swedish GP at Rabelov on 7 August, 1955, driven by Jon

3.5-litre "six" used six single choke Webers with ram-air balance tubes to each float chamber.



Disco Volante

Kvarnstrom. The 300SLR Mercedes of Moss and Fangio (running with Le Mans air brakes) dominated the race – the Disco ran seventh for a while, dropped to eighth and then retired with braking problems.

In that year of 1955, there was a three-race sports car series in Sweden so the Alfa re-appeared the next weekend, but now with Jo Bonnier at the wheel, for the second race at Karlskoga. He did not challenge the leaders due to a recurrence of the Rabelov brake trouble but finished third nonetheless. On 4 September, Bonnier took the car to its first win in the final race of the series in Stockholm.

By 1956, the car was three years old and had had no further development so was now rather uncompetitive. Bonnier came to the UK for the early season races but had no success with this car, although he did well with his 1900 in saloon car events.

First outing was at Oulton Park for the British Empire Trophy, run on handicap. Ken Wharton did the driving chores but only managed tenth in the final after finishing in the first six in his heat. Bonnier drove at Aintree and Silverstone but without success, and good placings eluded him until the very end of this disappointing season, which included a major clutch blow-up at Bari. The final race was at Caracas where he finished fifth to works Ferraris and Maseratis and promptly sold the car.

The brake overheating problem had been cured by modifications to the front bodywork – in its original form it is pictured in September, 1955 and May 1956 *Motor Sport* showing also that it was still being used on its original Milano number plate (MI 212039).

The new owner of the car was a young enthusiast and SCCA racing driver called Henry W. Wessells III of Paoli, Pennsylvania. – His comments on the car are worth quoting "A great car to drive; the response was tremendous and no vices in handling. The rims supplied by Alfa were much wider than in 1953, giving very high cornering power by 1956 standards – much better than Ferraris of that era, to say nothing of 1953. The gearbox was superb and one never regretted the lack of synchromesh."

He raced the car once or twice before selling it to Shelly Spindel who lent it to Rodger Ward at Lime Rock and Bruce Kessler at Bridgehampton, to race. By this time the car was really uncompetitive and passed eventually to John H. Willock of Ridgefield, Connecticut. The bearings were in a sorry state (possibly due to a missed gearshift at Lime Rock) and the car remained stored for some years without running. I first saw the car in July 1968 and it was quite something to gaze down on that fabulous engine for the first time. I saw it again in August 1971 just before it left for Italy and its new owner there. It has been rebuilt subsequently and appeared running at the Targa Florio Storica in May 1973.

1361.00126

This car was rebodied by Boano into a

wild looking coupé; it was sent to Argentina for President Peron, who was a real enthusiast. No payment was ever made, so a rumour was put around that it was a present. The car was painted a very dark blue/charcoal colour and the interior was very lavish with black quilted upholstery including the cover over the gearbox transmission tunnel. For 1955, it was pretty sensational. A large number of spares went to Argentina with the car but these have subsequently disappeared.

Some time after Peron was deposed all his cars were auctioned; the Disco was bought by the Argentine racing driver, Roberto Mieres, who had it for 4 to 5 months. During his ownership that great enthusiast Lucio Bollaert drove the car and he talked about it to me in late 1971. His main impression was heat – he said it was terribly hot inside, even more than his own 8C2900 B Touring Berlinetta which won the 1947 Mille Miglia. He remarked to me on how powerful it was (and he was racing Ferraris at the time) but complained of a jerky clutch. The weather seemed to have an abnormally large effect on its performance, which is probably explained by the huge valve overlap (101 degrees). Obviously, though, he was very impressed with the car's speed.

The car was sold to a firm of car exporters in 1965/6 who approached Ed Jurist at the Vintage Car Store (Nyack, NY); he refused the car and it was sold to an American in Maryland. By now it was red and it was repainted yellow before passing, after all, to Ed Jurist.

I saw the car at the Vintage Car Store in August 1968, when it had been there for nearly a year. It presented an exciting frontal aspect, but the rear treatment was a little dated. The car was in original condition including some dents in the front bumper. At that time, the car had not run for six months; Mr Jurist commented it was very difficult to start – he usually used a rope! He kindly let me insert my 6ft 4in frame into the car and I was pleasantly surprised that I could even get into it.

Ed Bond of Old Saybrook, Connecticut bought the car, after a deal with the late Carl Bross had fallen through, but subsequently sold it to Henry Wessells in 1970 who is putting it back on the road; he is nearly as tall as I am, so he must agree with me that there is more space inside than most Italian cars. Everything is comparative, though, and it *has* to be better than his Tipo 33 coupé.

Henry loves the Discos and is the only man to have owned two of them. He left his wedding reception in the Bonnier car – in a shower of gravel and 4000rpm noise – and his mother-in-law thought she would never see her daughter again!

1361.00127

This car is the open Supercortemaggiore car and was retained by the factory. It is now in the Alfa-Romeo museum. It has gained a second head rest and fairing but otherwise is as raced in 1953. This car was also at the Targa Florio Storica in 1973 with Sanesi and Zanardi driving. I was at the Hotel Torre Normania, where all the Alfa people were staying, waiting for the cars to return from a function in Palermo on the day before the race. Suddenly, the howl of a racing engine shattered the peace and quiet and the Disco came up the winding road at racing speed. It was the first time I had heard the scream of that engine and it was a fantastic sight and sound to see the car in those circumstances.

1361.00128

After the 1953 racing season, this car was used by Pininfarina for various "show" experimental bodies, four in all. These were two "Superflow" coupés and one open car, with twin headrests à la 300 SLR Mercedes Mille Miglia car for Moss/Jenkinson, before the current body. This was shown first at Geneva in 1960 and it had Swiss plates when it first arrived in the USA. This was in late 1960 when a Swiss public relations company undertook a tour of the country on behalf of Alfa-Romeo Inc. of Newark, N.J. A man called Walter Grutter came over with the car and he and Giovanni Grecco of Alfa-Romeo Inc. joined up to take the car on tour. Before the tour started, however, Karl Ludvigsen – then editor of *Sports Cars Illustrated* (now *Car and Driver*) – road tested the car in the issue for February 1961 under the heading "Last of the Red Hot Alfas". This is a fascinating article and is well worth reading. Some time ago Karl told me that it was one of the hairiest cars he had ever driven – and he only got into third a couple of times testing the car on Randall's Island in the East River and around New York City.

The car then went off for its tour but never got farther than Denver, where it was purchased by the local Alfa agent (Aaron Mosko). The car is still in Colorado (owned now by Howard Wignall) where I first saw the car as long ago as September, 1968.

The car is still painted dark maroon, with yellow chassis and light tan interior and is very startling. The garage door opens, the light comes on and there is the Disco shining in the left hand half; the white Giulia spider in the other half goes unnoticed.

When Mr Wignall first acquired the car there was body damage to the front and he ran it for a while like this before taking it off the road for repairs – but not before he had personally checked out the fabulous performance; I'd better not say how fast he has driven it but Fangio seldom went quicker in this car. The radiator was still out thus depriving me of the possibility of a run, but allowing me to see the repaired core – damaged sustained from the flailing track rod end in the Mille Miglia?

The car had done around 8000kms at that time since reaching the USA and was still in beautiful condition. Starting the engine, such a difficult thing with the large valve overlap, is taken care of by the biggest 12-volt battery I have ever seen!

After ten years off the road, the car was driven again in the summer of 1973. I quote a recent letter "With a little fresh gasoline in the tank and an overnight charge of the battery, it fired up with scarcely a turn of the starter".

FINALE

If you should ever come across a car, the chassis number is stamped on the top of the right hand front shock absorber mounting; the engine number is on the web between the camshaft covers at the front of the engine.

And so, that's about the end of the story of a car that showed so much promise but which failed to live up to expectations. But let's leave the final word to Karl Kling in a letter to me:

"The Disco Volante was marvellously easy to drive, road holding characteristics and brakes were very good, and its engine output was far superior to that of its rivals. Therefore, all we drivers regretted that Alfa Romeo did not continue its development."

Right: The ex-Fangio Mille Miglia car with its final 1960 Pininfarina body. Photo by present owner, Howard Wignall.

