

Twin Passions

Simon de Burton talks “old motors”
with Breguet specialist Andrew Crisford



Visitors to the much-publicised art deco exhibition currently running at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum will undoubtedly have spotted the large and ostentatious Auburn Speedster motor car displayed at the end of the show to demonstrate deco decadence at its four-wheeled best. *QP* readers will be interested to learn that the 1935 car has a strong connection with the world of watches in that it belongs to antiquarian horologist Andrew Crisford, a founder and director of Bobinet Ltd.

Mr Crisford, 56, set up the firm during the 1970s along with fellow director Simon Bull and former Asprey watch specialist Sebastien Whitestone. Bobinet’s particular speciality has always been in the field of Breguet pocket watches and, over the years, Mr Crisford believes he has been involved in the sales of all of the significant Breguets to have come onto the market. Aside from timepieces carrying the mark of this most illustrious of brands, Bobinet also deals in other top-quality watches and clocks from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, as well as occasional complicated 19th century timepieces.

It is not uncommon for lovers of fine watches to be also passionate about fine cars, but in Mr Crisford’s case the cars came first. “I bought my first old car at the age of 17, not because I particularly wanted to own an old car but because they were the cheapest form of transport at the time. It was a 1936 MG TA and it gave me nothing but trouble until the day I sold it over the telephone to a man from north Norfolk who asked me to deliver it all the way from London. Miraculously, it proved to be about the only journey I took it on during which it didn’t break down. From there I just carried on owning old cars, and still do. The only difference nowadays is that I can afford to buy and run slightly more expensive ones.”

And, unlike the owners of cosseted classics who leave their vehicles hermetically sealed in heated garages in any conditions other than perfect sunshine, Mr Crisford believes old motors are there to be driven. When I asked him whether or not he owned a modern car for daily use he replied that he did – it is a Bentley R-Type Continental Sportsman’s Saloon from the 1950s.

“It is the newest car I own and I take it everywhere: up to Scotland, down to the south of France and everywhere in between. I don’t really get involved in rallies because to me they are just events that clutter up the roads with old cars. I prefer to use my cars for going somewhere with a purpose, which is exactly what they are made for.”

Among his 10-car collection, Mr Crisford counts Bugattis (his favourites) and an unusual Model T Ford with centre-door sedan bodywork that was designed along the lines of the western stagecoaches, with the doors, as the name suggests, positioned in the middle.

The Auburn Speedster on show at the Victoria and Albert Museum – and seen with Texan model Jerry Hall draped across the bonnet in a recent BBC documentary about art deco style – is, because of its early history, one of the most interesting cars in Mr Crisford’s collection. It was originally delivered to RL Evans, the Auburn agent in South Africa, in December 1935. He entered it for the South African Grand Prix a month later, but his race ended in tragedy when he ploughed into a woman at more than 80 mph after she ran onto the track in front of him. The car, one of only around 50 still surviving, remained in South Africa until it was brought to England during the 1980s, and was acquired by Mr Crisford about 10 years ago.

With its 4,585 cc supercharged straight-eight engine, the 851 Speedster produces 150 bhp at 4,000 rpm. Every new car was tested at over 100 mph on Bonneville Salt Flats prior to

delivery and was fitted with a plaque guaranteeing its abilities and signed by test driver Ab Jenkins, “the Mormon Meteor”. Designed by master styling engineer Gordon Buehrig, creator of the 810 Cord, it features a tiny two-seat cockpit in a boat-tail body constructed from 22 separate panels. The hood requires two people to operate it, and there is no easily accessible luggage space – other than an area set aside on the passenger-side floor specifically to accommodate a set of golf clubs.

The Auburn Speedster can be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum from now until 20 July. The exhibition features more than 300 art deco items, ranging from jewellery to clothing, which tell the story of the great aesthetic trend that peaked in the mid-1930s. ○



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