

FINANCIAL TIMES

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## ALL ABOARD LE TRAIN BLEU

A masterpiece restored

PLUS — THE BRILLIANT BUGATTIS, GENE (GALLAGHER) THERAPY, SUMMER'S SLEEKEST HANDBAGS, JEREMY O HARRIS'S BERKSHIRES



# THE FIX



MOTERING

## WHEELS OF FORTUNE

The restoration of a vintage Type 39 Bugatti is a bracing testament to a brilliant artistic dynasty, says *Nick Foulkes*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NIALL HODSON

It is the sort of perfect sun-dappled afternoon in the British countryside that inspired “Adlestrop”, Edward Thomas’s famous poem of contemplation and blackbird song. There are “high cloudlets” in the sky and, if not quite blackbirds, there are birds with black plumage (crows, I think) at rest in a neighbouring field. Thomas could have made something of this afternoon at the foot of the South Downs, had it not been for a distant insect-like whine. The whine becomes a scream that matures into a high-pitched wail before I see its source: something not much larger than a go-kart, on spindly wheels, belting along the

bosky lanes of rural Sussex doing a passable imitation of a sky-blue lightning bolt.

I have just witnessed a 100-year-old Type 39 Bugatti being put through its paces by specialist Bugatti restorer Oliver Way. It can certainly shift. You can see why it finished on the podium at the Monza Grand Prix in 1925. Given the required amount of pumping, cranking, lever-tugging, sage inspection of the instrument panel, and operation of the Chitty Chitty Bang Bang braking system (all before letting the clutch out and actually moving), Way takes an

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THE SIZE OF  
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Above: the author in West Sussex with the Type 39 Bugatti No 4604



CARLO BUGATTI CHAIR, c1900



appraising look at me and wisely decides not to offer me the opportunity to operate anything more than an individual windscreen about the size of an iPhone.

I wouldn't have let me drive either. Even so I am, shall we say, equivocal about putting what remains of my life in the hands of Ettore Bugatti's 100-year-old mechanics, much of which seem to be occupying the passenger footwell. Ungainly contortions are required to negotiate the exposed componentry. Tearing along the leafy lanes, careering around corners, rocketing over humpback bridges, and every jolt bouncing me out of a seat about the size of a barstool with a token back to it, I am simultaneously alarmed and wildly invigorated. It is an experience that I would like to stop immediately but go on forever.

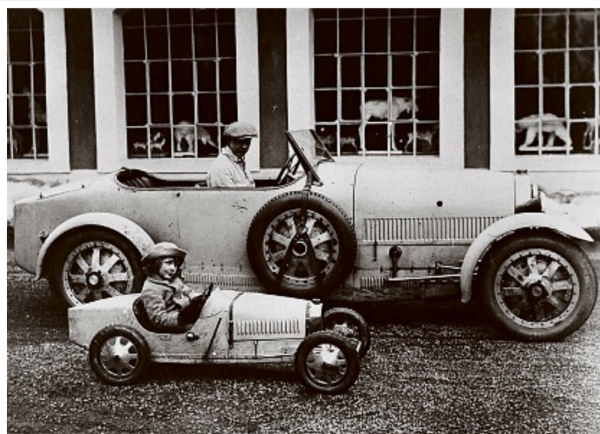
Long before there was Koenigsegg or McLaren, before Lamborghini and Ferrari, there was Bugatti. "Once you've worked on one, there's no going back," says Way, caressing the louvred bonnet. "Ettore Bugatti was a very talented engineer but at heart an artist. That front axle is all exposed and all beautiful. Other



MON CHIEN, 1906, BY REMBRANDT BUGATTI



Below: Ettore Bugatti's sons, Jean and Roland, in a Type 43 Grand Sport and a Type 52 Baby Bugatti, in France, c1930. The animal sculptures in the windows are by Rembrandt Bugatti. Right: the author at Oliver Way's workshop



manufacturers try to hide the gear and brake shaft because it would have looked unpleasant to them, whereas Bugatti was so proud of the perfect shape and proportions he made it a thing that you didn't mind looking at. He even designed his own nuts and bolts, which no one else did then."

#### TALENT COULD NOT SHELTER THEM FROM TRAGEDY

If you want to see the supercar of the Jazz Age in person, make your way to the Royal Hospital Chelsea in London at the end of June. This remarkable survivor from the infancy

of motorsport will be on display at The Treasure House Fair (26 June to 1 July) as part of *The Brilliant Bugattis*, an exhibition about the family where, alongside cars, will be shown sculptures, furniture and a medal-winning tea set.

**THE SHOW IS CURATED BY** Edward Horswell, director of the Sladmore Gallery. He first came to Bugatti through the sculpture of Ettore's brother Rembrandt, but was then sucked into the wider, multidisciplinary Bugatti universe. As this exhibition amply demonstrates, Ettore was just one scion of a remarkable dynasty of artists whose impact on European creativity during the first four decades of the past century was felt around the world.

The story began with Ettore's father, Carlo, who dazzled the belle époque with furniture that has lost none of its intensity since it was first exhibited at the 1888 Fine

Arts Fair in Milan. His exotic, Ottoman-influenced pieces captured that era's imagination: typical were strange asymmetric tufted and tasselled chairs made of varied inlaid woods, vellum, animal hide, pewter, copper, cord and mother-of-pearl. The Waldorf Astoria in New York furnished its Turkish Salon with Bugatti creations. What is remarkable about Carlo was his seemingly effortless movement between disciplines – furniture, silverware, textiles and ceramics – a fluid approach that Ettore would later apply to the many facets of car-making.

Rembrandt also inherited his father's sensibilities, which he expressed in lively animalier bronzes with a textured finish that recalls heavy impasto. "Rembrandt was a modeller," Horswell explains. "He worked the clay very quickly with his fingers and produced a sculpture in one session, generally speaking, in front of the animal – be it a domestic or a zoo – then he'd take it back to his studio, finish it off or chuck it in the bin." Perhaps his most famous creation is the dancing elephant that adorns the radiator cap of the Type 41 Royale, and was later reproduced by Lalique.

Ettore's son Jean created the celebrated Type 57 car, an unarguable masterpiece with sweeping bodywork. There will be one of these in the exhibition and, having been allowed to get behind the wheel, I can confirm that it drives extremely elegantly: the engine rustles rather than roars and what motoring journalists call "contact with the road" is mercifully absent. It is also drop-dead gorgeous. The Type 57 is usually in the top 10 lists of the most beautiful cars ever constructed, jockeying for position with the likes of the Ferrari 250, the Jaguar E-type, Lamborghini's Miura and the Mercedes Gullwing.

Alas, talent could not shelter the Bugatti family from tragedy. Rembrandt died by suicide in 1916, when the animals of Antwerp's zoo were slaughtered. The brilliance of Jean Bugatti was snuffed out, aged 30, on 11 August 1939 when he lost control of a test car. Ettore tried to restart the business after the war but the factory was largely in ruins. He died in 1947, the last of the Brilliant Bugattis. But their legacy roars on. ■HTSI

