

FROM RAILWAY ENGINES TO RACING CARS

The Diatto is probably best remembered as the forerunner of the modern-day Maserati. However, this is not a completely fair image as Diatto themselves made some interesting cars

SOME MOTOR MANUFACTURERS have gone down in history not so much for their own achievements but for the marques that they have spawned: manufacturers such as Mason, Maxwell, Perry, Castro and Diatto of Turin.

Diatto was a railway engineering and iron-founding concern which entered the motor industry sometime between 1904 and 1907, building Clément-Bayards under licence.

The company started out with high hopes: it had a six-model range consisting of 8 hp and 10 hp twins, and 12, 20, 35 and 50 hp fours. Unfortunately, though, there was a recession in the Italian industry soon after the concern had got under way, and savage cutbacks were necessary.

By 1911, only one model, a 15.9 hp four, was being built; a half-hearted attempt to import this model into Britain was made, but lasted only a short while. In fact, the marque's pre-war history was almost totally undistinguished, being relieved only by an eighth place in the 1914 Targa Florio for Rigoletti's car.

In 1919, Gamboni's Diatto took third place in the same event, although this was completely overshadowed by the antics of the winner, André Boillot, who crossed the finishing line backwards in his Peugeot.

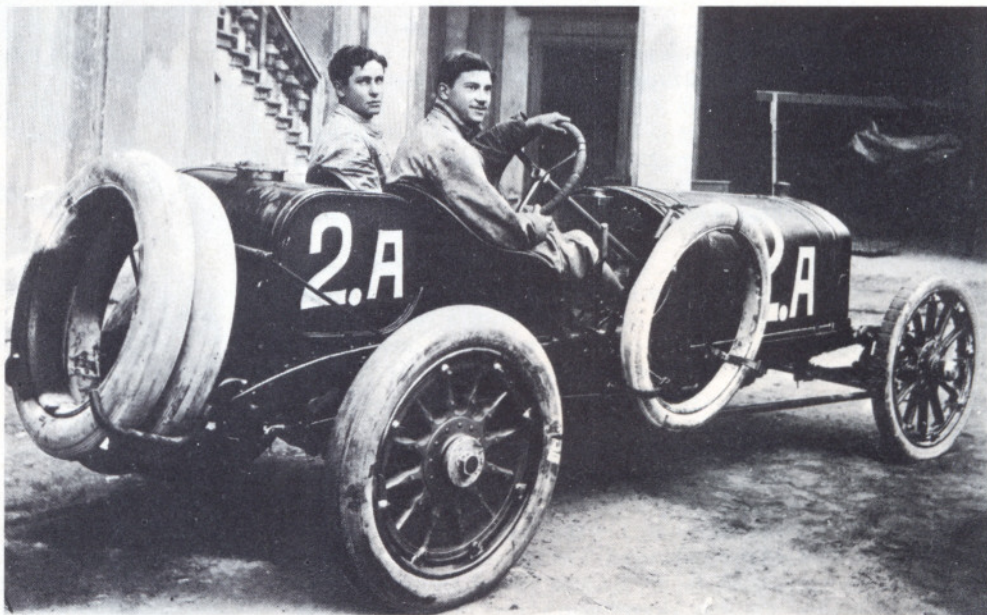
Post-war models were a 10 hp and a 20 hp, both with four-cylinder engines, of 1 and 2.7 litres respectively. There was also a brief excursion into the manufacture of Bugatti Type 13s (like Crossley in Britain and Rabag in Germany), one of which won the 1921 Circuit of Brescia, from which the Type 13 took the name 'Brescia Bugatti'.

The little 10 hp was a far more modern design, with an 8.9 hp side-valve engine, featuring pressure lubrication, and a cowled fan to increase the efficiency of the thermosiphon water circulation.

For the 1923 season, Diatto announced a more exciting new model, the 15 hp four, using the 20 hp chassis, but with a 15.9 hp, single-overhead-camshaft, 2-litre engine of great potential, developing 52 bhp in standard guise. At a chassis price of £575, it appealed to the sporting market, and racing versions were soon in action.

Among the most effective tuners of the 15.9 hp Diatto were the Maserati brothers of Bologna. Alfieri Maserati had already driven a tuned, overhead-camshaft, 3-litre Diatto to a number of class wins; in 1924, he entered a modified 2-litre Diatto with twin overhead-camshafts for the Spanish San Sebastian Grand Prix, and made his way to third place before the engine gave out.

Its performance had been convincing enough for Diatto to commission the Maserati brothers to design a proper racing car in the shape of a straight-eight, 2-litre, GP model. It made only one appearance, at the 1926 Italian Grand Prix, where sheared blower bolts forced its retirement. Diatto, in deep financial trouble, gave the car to the Maseratis for further development



work and withdrew from competition for the time being.

The touring range was rationalised in 1923, when the 10 hp model was dropped, and production centred on the 2-litre Model 20 and its derivatives. The ambitious English importing operation collapsed and the agency passed to Cyril Durlacher of Upper St Martin's Lane, London.

In 1924, a short-wheelbase Super-Sports 2-litre became available, with a lightened chassis on which semi-elliptical rear springs replaced the cantilevers; the 1924 London Show car was a real eyecatcher, with a two-seater body painted geranium red. During the same period, the touring model gained a longer wheelbase and four-wheel brakes as standard.

The 1925 range included another new model, the Model 35 3-litre, on the same chassis as the Model 30 2-litre Super-Sports, while the Model 20a 2-litre touring model continued virtually unchanged; indeed, the same range ran on for another four years before closing down, except for a couple of sporting interludes. First, a handful of the straight-eight, GP-type cars were built as road-going sports cars, then in 1927 the four-cylinder, 5-litre 'M Special' was announced, although it seems to have been undistinguished.

The Maserati brothers, however, had more success: the GP straight-eight Diatto was reborn as the 1500 cc Maserati.

So as Diatto died, Maserati was in the ascendant. Had the 2-litre GP car been more successful and had Diatto been adequately financed, the course of motoring history might have been different, who knows! Maybe Diatto would now be a luxury marque and Maserati still a workshop in Bologna. DBW



Above: Diatto began their career as motor manufacturers by producing cars under licence from Adolphe Clément. Pictured is a 1907 Diatto-Clément with team drivers Burzio and Restelli