



Garcia and, at the wheel, Botta. They came 11th at Le Mans in a Type 30 in 1925. On the 7th of May 1927 a similar car averaged 59.2mph to finish seventh overall, winning the two-litre class in the Essex CC six hour race at Brooklands.

# DIATTO

## Part Two

*In Part One, Frank Lugg described the early history of this respected Italian manufacturer. The late 1920s saw the demise of the company after a limited number of competition successes.*

The Type 20 Diatto was well received at the 1922 Milan Motor Show. The company started to make deliveries to agents throughout Europe, and even to Australia. But early in 1923 it was reported in the motoring press that, due to the difficult period which Italy had passed through between 1918 and 1922, they had been unable to produce vehicles on anything like the anticipated scale. In 1921, their UK agent had been Automotive Industries Ltd, of Bagshot, in Surrey, with a showroom and offices at 25 Heddon Street, off Regent Street in London. They now appointed Captain Cyril Durlacher, AMIAE, of 6 Upper St Martin's Lane (see Letters page, *The Automobile*, June, 1998).

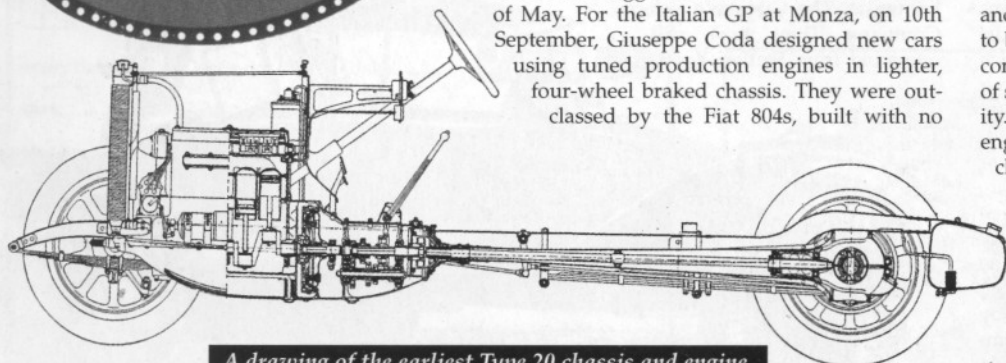
The competition programme had got under way with the preparation of a team to take part in the 1922 Targa Florio. Three cars were assembled on shortened touring car chassis. The mechanics were still working on them as the ferry took them over to Sicily. All failed to finish, but one met with success soon afterwards. Driven by Meregalli, it won the two-litre class in the Parma-Poggio di Berceto event on the 14th of May. For the Italian GP at Monza, on 10th September, Giuseppe Coda designed new cars using tuned production engines in lighter, four-wheel braked chassis. They were out-classed by the Fiat 804s, built with no

expense spared. Alfieri Maserati, who had been taken on as a driver and manager of Diatto's competition department, spun off at the Lesmo curve. Meregalli suffered a dropped valve. Subsequently these cars were used for road racing in normal two-litre (79.7 by 100mm) and also three-litre (97.7 by 100mm) forms. A three-litre won its class, beating Sivocci's Alfa Romeo RL, at the Monza meeting that autumn.

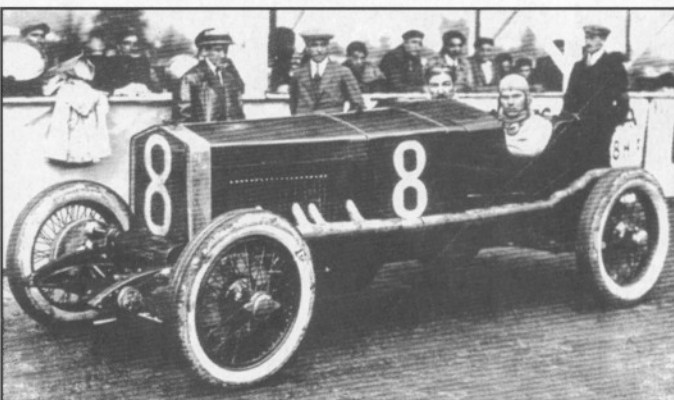
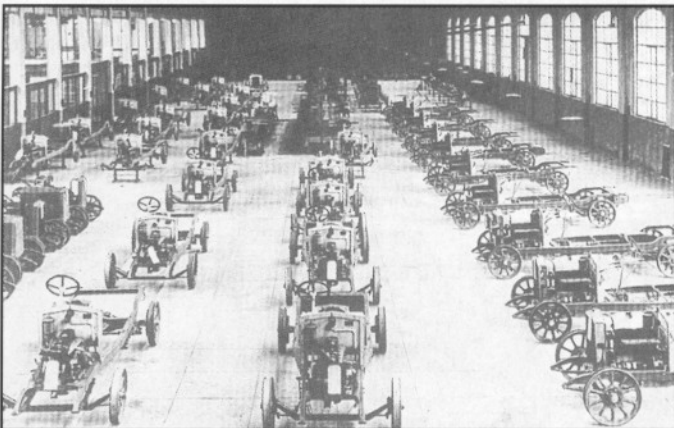
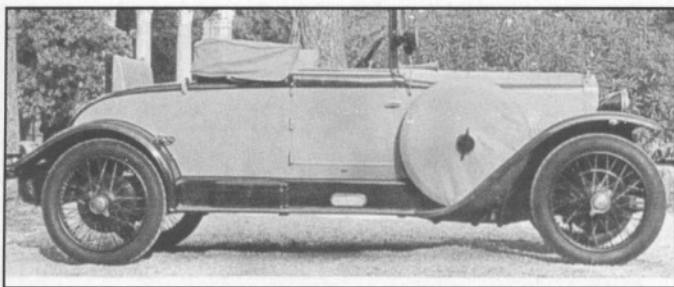
All the evidence points to the Type 20 having been conceived as a three-litre with these dimensions, the bore being reduced for production when it became clear that two litres would be a more popular capacity. This would explain the rather heavy chassis construction, large valves, and combustion chambers with a maximum width of 97.7mm at the head face.

*The Automobile Journal* published a road test of a T20 tourer on 15th February, 1923. It stated '...with the needle hard down on the '120' (75mph), the car is delightful — the engine has a distinctly aeromotor roar — a smoother running engine at high speed I have not met. It seems as good as that of the Three-Litre Bentley, and at least on this trial car there would appear to be very little between the TT model (or high compression) Bentley and the Diatto in the way of speed despite the disparity of cylinder capacity.' We can assume that this car had the 'sports' engine, which was a £25 optional extra, giving a claimed maximum of 80mph. Front wheel brakes were £30 extra and Rudge wire wheels another £20. The total price came to £725. The production sports Type 20S with semi-elliptic rear springs, which was listed in 1923 and 1924, had this engine as standard.

The extensive competition programme continued with good results in national events, but



A drawing of the earliest Type 20 chassis and engine.



Above, top to bottom: A 1924 Type 20 with S engine. The cabriolet coachwork is by Schieppati; The Type 20 assembly shop in 1922; Alfieri Maserati and Luigi Parenti in the Diatto-Hispano at San Sebastian in 1924. In subsequent years this car was driven to FTD in a number of mountain climbs by the Marquis de Sterlich. He also drove it in the 1926 Targa Florio, but is believed not to have finished.

disappointment in major races. Alfieri Maserati held third place in the 1922 Coppa Florio until a rock punctured his sump. In the 1923 Targa Florio he worked his way up to second place at half distance but was later forced to retire. In the same year a GP chassis, fitted with a 5881cc Hispano-Suiza engine, was very successful in mountain climbs. A new, all alloy two-litre 8cyl twin cam engine was put in hand under Coda's direction. Assembly was carried out by the Maserati brothers in their Bologna workshop.

The production cars were selling well in what we would call today a niche market. Then disaster struck. The Banca Italiana di Sconto failed. Diatto was placed in liquidation on the fifth of November, 1923. Ansaldo, the armament manufacturer, and N Romeo and C were equally badly hit, but survived with government aid. Fortunately Diatto found support from the Musso brothers, who had banking and textile industry interests. The engineers Modesto Panetti and Giacinto Prandi joined the Board, as did the businessman Carlo Gorini.

The prototype 8cyl twin cam engine completed its bench tests in April, 1924. It was fitted into a lengthened version of the 1922 GP chassis. Subsequent 8cyl engines were completely redesigned by Coda; the aluminium block and head were retained, but the cam followers were

changed from finger to piston type. The crank now ran on ball or roller as well as plain bearings, while ball bearings were used for the camshafts and timing gears. The crankcase, sump, timing cover and even the cam covers were all new. There was also provision for a supercharger. The fresh influx of money would have stimulated this work, but Coda was dissatisfied. He did not see eye to eye with the new directors. The company was reconstituted as SA Autocostruzioni Diatto on 25th May, 1924. Coda left Diatto and joined Citroën around this date. His friend Alfieri Maserati decided to stay on.

The San Sebastian GP, held on 27th September, 1924, provided an opportunity for an attack upon the full GP field. The regulations imposed a minimum weight of 650kg. It seems that was the sole stipulation. This formula was ideal for a large engined special. A production 20S chassis was fitted with a 5881cc Hispano-Suiza engine, identical to that used previously for mountain climbs. It was probably a whole V-eight aero engine with one bank removed. The car proved very fast, holding third place at one stage, until gearbox failure caused it to retire.

On the ninth of November, 1924, Meregalli, said to be one of the most temperamental drivers ever to come from Italy, won the Circuit of Garda for the third year running in a two-litre 4cyl car. Ernesto Maserati was fifth in the unsupercharged prototype 8cyl.

The production range was extended by widening the crankcase sufficiently to allow for an extra 8mm of crank throw. Thus the T20 was joined by a 2952cc (90 by 116mm) version, the Type 25. The two-litre sports was now known as the Type 30. It could also have the three-litre option, in which case it was known as the Type 35. The gearbox was converted from gate to ball change and the transmission handbrake was deleted.

On 20-21st June, 1925, two T30s and two T35s, reportedly of 108hp, took part at Le Mans. They did not meet with success. That same month, the first supercharged twin cam engine was delivered for bench testing.

One would have thought the company had enough on their hands. Yet 1925 also saw Alfieri and Ernesto Maserati, presumably under the direction of the factory design office, build a four-litre straight eight for mountain climbs and *formule libre* racing. An

8cyl GP chassis frame was fitted with a supercharged engine utilising two two-litre road car blocks and heads on a common crankcase, with a one piece crankshaft. The back axle was provided by Bugatti. This may well have been the type with integral gearbox, as the very long engine could have precluded the fitting of a normal Diatto gearbox and torque tube axle.

The supercharged 8cyl twin cam was entered for the Italian GP on the sixth of September, 1925. Evidently it had not had sufficient development, for the supercharger mountings failed. The company's situation was looking grim, though the order book was said to be full. Competition for sales was intense. In Europe alone, there were approximately 30 manufacturers building a similar car to Diatto at a similar price (about £30,000 in today's money), which had in any case been reduced by at least 25per cent between 1922 and 1926.

Diatto made economies in production. Though the rockers were not now finished all over, the tubular con rods were still very expensively machined from alloy steel forgings supplied by the Bismark Steel Works. In addition, there was a racing programme to be run and there were 400 workers to be paid. The sums just did not add up.

This situation caused the collapse of the Musso brothers' bank in February, 1926. Prandi, Diatto's managing director, was blamed. He suffered a heart attack which proved fatal. The GP cars passed to the Maserati brothers, almost certainly thanks to finance provided by the Marquis de Sterlich. The workforce was cut and the factory reduced to a parts department. A few cars were assembled from parts in stock until 1928. Some of these, known as the Type 26, were of 2.6litres (85 by 116mm).

In 1931 the moribund firm was rescued by one Carlino Sasso, previously a Diatto employee, who had come into a large inheritance. He resumed production of the firm's old sidelines, pumps, compressors and generators. Pneumatic drill compressors, using the T20 engine, were in use by the Italian army during the Second World War. After the war, the possibility of resuming car production was considered, but rejected. In 1955 the factory was sold.

On the 7th May, 1927, a Type 30 averaged 59.2mph to be placed seventh overall, winning the two-litre class in the Essex Car Club's six hour race at Brooklands, beating AC, OM and Lagonda opposition.

Perhaps 30 Diattos of all models survive today, of which 20 are from the Vintage period. 🏁

LA CLASSICA CORSA IN SALITA  
**PARMA - POGGIO DI BERCETO**  
 segna un nuovo trionfo della  
**DIATTO**  
 La nuova vettura Diatto con motore 8 cilindri 2 litri 2952 cc. - 108 hp. - 1925 - 1926 - 1927 - 1928 - 1929 - 1930 - 1931  
 2ª Categoria: - 1° MEREKALLI GUIDO  
 abbassando il RECORD PRECEDENTE  
 di ben 4'28"15  
**Automobili Diatto**  
 VIA FREYUS 21 TORINO - VIA FREYUS 21

The 1922 Targa Florio type, winner of the two-litre class in the Parma-Poggio di Berceto event.