



A car called DOROTHY

The Swallow Doretti – named after the daughter of one of the car's originators – sold faster than the TR2 on which it was based. Yet only 276 were made.

Mike Lawrence reveals that the car was a victim of its own success; pictures by Phil Rudge

You may have dozed through history lessons at school, and still not know the answer to the Schleswig-Holstein Question, be unsure where you stand on the Problem of the Spanish Succession, and be baffled as to who did what, and why, and to whom, in the Balkans, but if you are a car enthusiast, one thing is more or less certain. Sooner or later you will get an urge to undertake historical research on some car or another.

When you get the urge, usually the best advice is to sit down and wait until the feeling passes. I know whereof I speak. In the days before I earned a crust by digging into motoring history, and before I learned the wrinkles of the trade, I had such an urge. Like most people it centred around a car I was fond of, in my case the Swallow Doretti, and because I had once owned one.

The question I wanted to answer was simple: why did Swallow stop making cars? The usual reason given, that it was no more than a re-bodied Triumph TR2 which didn't go as well and so failed to find customers, I knew was nonsense. For a start, it was selling at a rate of almost one a day in its first year of production, and that did not suggest failure.

Indeed, Swallow made 276 cars in the ten months

it made cars, and that compares to the 244 TR2s made by Triumph in 1953. If it had been ill-conceived it would not have caused a collective reaching for the worry beads by Triumph dealers who wondered how they could sell TR2s when customers could have a graceful, hand-built car for not a great deal more money.

Unlike most sports car projects which flourish and fade, Swallow did not have financial worries. It was making money and was anyway part of the giant Tube Investments group, so cash could not have been the issue.

When I turned to 'authoritative' works on the period, I found their assessments did not square with my own experience. Often the assumption was made that the Doretti was a tourer, but it wasn't. It was a full-blooded sports car.

Every book made a direct comparison with the TR2, but although they shared the same running gear, they were different animals entirely. In fact the Doretti's nearest competitor was not the TR2 but the Allard Palm Beach. This, too, was a specialist sports car using proprietary components (Ford) and cost almost the same, but was inferior in every department, with a top speed of only 87mph to the



Doretti's 101mph, and acceleration which suggested concrete wheels.

Alternatively, one might cite the original, AC-engined, AC Ace as the Swallow's direct rival. In this case you'd pay a hefty premium for similar performance, a chassis which was under-employed but, to my mind, a prettier body. The Doretti out-sold both the AC and the Allard because it made the right compromises. The mistake is to compare the Doretti to the TR2 because it had the same running gear. Nobody compares the later AC Aces to the Ford Zephyr simply because they shared the same lump under the bonnet.

Nothing I read about the car made sense, and the Swallow Doretti Problem got to me in a way which the Don Pacifico Affair and the War of Captain Jenkins' Ear had not. It was this unsolved problem, I suppose, which turned me from a respectable citizen into a motoring historian.

I went to a library and pored over books and runs of magazines, and at the end of a solid day's work got no closer to the reason why the Swallow Doretti went out of production. I read the contemporary

The Swallow Doretti



CO. (1935) LTD.
DORSETSHIRE · ENGLAND

Hundred mile an hour ELEGANCE

road test reports, and those for the TR2, and their rivals, and the more I read the more complex the question became.

People liked the Doretti; it fitted neatly into the market between the TR2 and the Austin-Healey 100, and it had many of the qualities of both cars. Along the way I learned that the TR2 had a slightly higher top speed (105mph to 101mph) and marginally better acceleration, but in a world crying out for sports cars this slight inferiority was something the Doretti could ride.

As for being an over-weight TR2, I discovered that the Doretti was only 56lb heavier. Triumph beat Swallow on price, since the TR2 had a basic tag of just £600 to the Doretti's £777; to keep its prices down, Triumph made a heater an optional extra (at £10), whereas the Doretti was fully equipped with luxury items such as Connolly hide trim and a leather fitted suitcase.

A 25 per cent premium for a hand-built car with considerably more pleasing lines hardly made the

Doretti over-priced. People today pay a much higher premium for having a cabriolet version of a hot hatch.

Further, under the aluminium body was a ladder-frame chassis made of 50-ton Reynolds chromium-molybdenum steel, to which TR2 suspension and drivetrain were fitted. Many's the TR owner who

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wishes that Triumph had looked up the word 'corrosion' in a dictionary before making a car from mild steel of indifferent quality. Rust-resistance was not a big issue in 1954 but all the contemporary magazines made a point of highlighting the Doretti's sensible construction.

So we have this sports car with pleasing lines and rugged, proven, mechanicals, which is getting favourable notices in the press and selling well, particularly in America. Suddenly it ceases production and the only reason anyone can think of for its demise is that it's a failure. Swallow itself did not help matters. In 1955, some time after the last car had been made, it merely issued a statement to the effect that production had ceased; no reasons given.

As a researcher I was back to square one; I was back to the Doretti was an overweight and over-priced re-bodied TR2 which failed to sell. The only difference was now I knew it was balderdash. Cliché-ma-claver. A paste jewel in the skull of a stuffed toad. Nothing added up, and it was at that point that I hoped the urge to know more would go away.

Years passed and then I came across a reference in the TR Register's magazine to Frank Rainbow, designer of the Swallow. The name was new to me, as none of the contemporary reports of the car mention him. The old urge to know was stirred

again, and I went to see Frank. All my questions were answered, including my own gripes as a former owner. The matter was laid to rest for me, all the ends tied up, mission accomplished.

More years pass and Duncan Rabagliati, a co-conspirator in seeking out those bits of motoring history which defy an easy solution, like bits of food which get stuck between the teeth, buys a prime example of a Doretto and offers me a drive in it. Two days later the editor of C&S phones to ask whether I would be interested in writing a piece on the Swallow Doretto. Would I? We all have our weaknesses, and that was my very first sports car.

It is arranged. Duncan will lend me his car and we will rendezvous with the photographer, Phil Rudge, who also has a lovely example, and we will descend on Frank Rainbow in the West Country. Like most Doretto's I've seen, Duncan's is not entirely original: it lacks the leather-covered padding on the tops of the doors and the special Doretto rocker cover. Sometime in the past, someone has replaced the original steering wheel.

The rest of the car is lovely. I still have my reservations about the grille (it was designed with the American market in mind) but the lines are voluptuous and the car looks right from almost every angle. It's astonishing that it was Frank Rainbow's first attempt at styling a car.

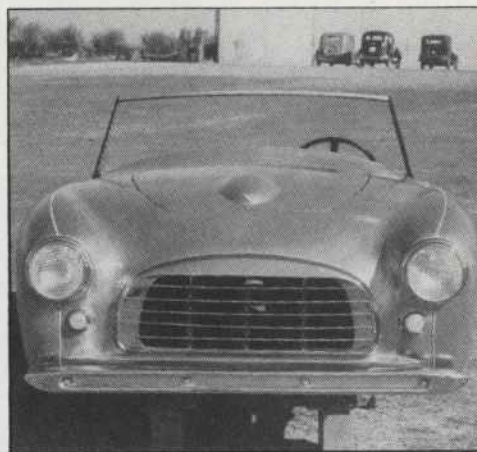
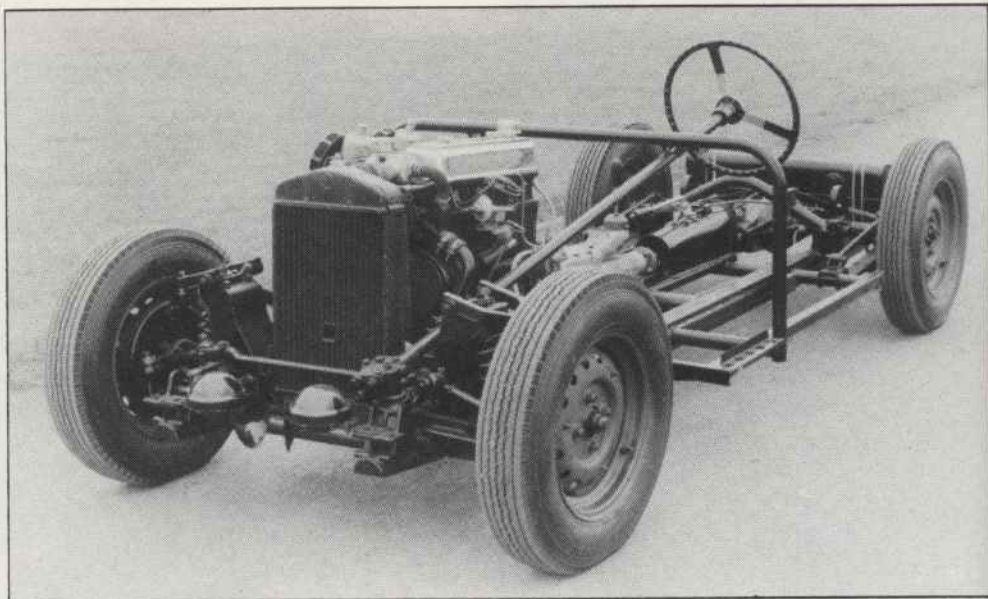
It's slightly unusual in that it has the optional wire wheels, for most owners specified pressed steel, and it lacks the optional overdrive which my car had and which made motorway driving so relaxing. I remembered that the boot was small but had forgotten how ridiculously tiny it is, no more than a repository for the spare wheel and side screens. That is why Swallow supplied a fitted suitcase for the storage space behind the seats.

Seated behind the wheel it all comes back, the good and the bad. The cockpit is fairly tight and the steering wheel large, which can be awkward, for the Doretto inherited the TR2's very wide turning circle. The hood is one of the strong points because it can be erected in a matter of seconds while seated, as the weather soon forced us to discover.

One of the delights is the deep-throated roar from the 90bhp TR2 engine which really does sound the business, though slowing down again needs the exercising of anticipation because the TR2 drum brakes are definitely 1954.

One of the features of the Doretto is a 52/48 weight distribution, and the engine is set seven inches further back in the chassis than in the TR2. This makes for precise handling once under way, but the steering is vague at low speeds and, combined with the turning circle, made me edgy when driving in congested city streets. Other features which stem from the engine location are a fairly cramped cockpit, that long and voluptuous nose and, for which I was most grateful on a wet day, warm feet.

While I treated Duncan's car with circumspection, once behind the wheel all my memories came flooding back, including some of the ridiculously low



Top: The chassis was made of chrome-molybdenum steel, and the engine set 7in further back than in the TR2. Above: The only difference between this original prototype and the production cars is that the sidelights were moved and the bumpers replaced by proprietary items. Below: Few Doretto's were raced, but this is Don Truman at Silverstone in July 1954. Opposite: Frank Rainbow, now 78 and 'retired', but still working on new projects, with Mk I and Mk 1½ Swallows

times I set between two points in the early seventies when traffic was lighter and my Doretto was younger – I've never been able to reproduce them. My own car had 5½in wheels on the back and the road-holding was sweet and predictable, usually neutral but with oversteer available on demand.

When we met up with Phil Rudge a surprise was in store. I knew only two Mk II Swallow Sabres had been built; one is in Canada and the other is being restored in Wales. Yet here was another staring me in the face. It had Mk I front wings and grille, but from the cockpit back it was definitely Mk II, with its bigger cockpit and occasional seats in place of the large parcel shelf. Under the skin it seemed to have a Mk II chassis, no question. It also had a proper boot, something Mk II owners dream about. You see them at car boot sales – *Got anything for a Doretto, John?*

There it was but it doesn't exist. Frank Rainbow himself had told me that only two Sabres had been made. Yet apparently here was a third. A phantom car. Luckily there's no incentive for anyone to make fake Doretto's, and before the end of the day we were able to piece together a thesis about the car.

Readers will have noticed two things: while I loved my Doretto, I was not so starry-eyed as not to notice glaring deficiencies. Also, within the first year of production, a Mk II was built, which overcame most of anyone's possible reservations. Not many cars have a Mk II version under way within months of the launch of the original. What happened was this.

Frank Rainbow was a gifted engineer who served his time with the Bristol Omnibus Company and then went to Bristol Engines. He rose to a senior position, felt he was under-used, and then went to work for Tube Investments as a troubleshooter.





liaising between the 50 or so companies within the combine.

Along the way he designed the 'Gadabout', Britain's first motor scooter, and this was put into production by Helliwells, a firm in the TI group. The head of Helliwells, Ernest Sanders, was pleased with the 'Gadabout'. He had a network of contacts which included Sir John Black of Standard-Triumph, and Arthur Anderson, head of a machine tool company in California, who proposed importing Triumphs into the States.

Between them Sanders, Anderson and Black conceived the idea for a sports car aimed at the American West Coast market. Black would supply the running gear, Frank Rainbow would design the car, Sanders would build it and Anderson sell it. Sanders thus had a second package to put to Sir Ivan Stedeford, chairman of Tube Investments. Further, it would use spare capacity at Swallow Coach-

building, a TI company, be a customer for other TI firms such as Reynolds, and be a good advertisement for the group. The proposal was accepted.

The Swallow Coachbuilding Co (1935) Ltd of Walsall was, at a few removes, the company founded by Sir William Lyons as Swallow Sidecars, which eventually gave birth to Jaguar. In the early fifties it was making sidecars of no particular distinction and, indeed, the Doretto's bodies, aluminium on a mild steel sheet frame, were built by Panelcraft, because Swallow Coachbuilding was not up to the job - but the name had the right ring to it.

Rainbow met Anderson and the two men sketched out the design parameters and decided on a name. Anderson had a daughter called Dorothy, an Italian-sounding name had the right tone for a sports car, so 'Doretto' was invented. Frank began work in January 1953 with a free hand, except that his total design staff was three draughtsmen and a secretary, and

the car had to be completed in nine months. Thus no mock-ups of the body were made, and Panelcraft built it from full-scale drawings. It is astonishing it came out so well.

Apart from the TR2 running gear, the Doretto also had Triumph coil spring and double-wishbone front suspension, and semi-elliptical springs at the rear with radius arms locating the live rear axle. All the main dimensions were larger than the TR2.

The prototype was completed within the specified nine months, and it was shipped off to the States on the Queen Mary. Two things distinguished the prototype from production cars. One was its attractive, bespoke, front and rear bumpers. To save pennies on the production car, proprietary bumpers were bought from Wilmot Breedon, another TI company. The prototype also had the rev counter in front of the driver, where it should be, but for reasons best known to himself, Swallow's workshop

foreman located it on the passenger side on production models.

Frank accompanied the prototype to California, where it received a very favourable reception, and Anderson went to town on the publicity with film actresses looking suitably pleased to be in the company of such an attractive car. It was not beyond criticism, however, and Frank returned home with a list of constructive suggestions to improve it. These included making the boot larger and fitting wind-up windows.

Since no jigs had been made, it would have been the work of a few weeks to implement these ideas, but Sanders insisted that the car be rushed into production as it stood. Frank thinks that perhaps he had over-committed himself to the board of TI, who wanted a quick return. They were obviously businessmen and not car men. So the Doretti Mk I is essentially a replicated prototype, which was not to the satisfaction of either Rainbow or Anderson.

Flawed it may have been, but it received good notices in the press and was soon being turned out at a steady rate. Few Doretis were raced in this country, although Frank urged a competition programme to promote their image. Sanders was against this, although Don Truman campaigned both a standard model and one with a special body which looked rather like the Speedwell Sprite. In America, however, Anderson promoted them through racing and had special engines built with Isky cams, lightened flywheels, four Amal carburetors and modified heads. Among the drivers who raced Doretis in the States was Phil Hill.

By an extraordinary coincidence both of the cars featured in this article have a competition history, Duncan's in the Far East and Phil's in Britain.

Some Doretis were supplied with a hard top and Peter Kirwan-Taylor, who styled the Lotus Elite, had built a coupé with the rear end resembling the Mulliner Bentley Continental. This car is still in existence, and is undergoing restoration.

Sir John Black had a Doretti with special trim, and indeed he wanted to take over the project and have it made by Triumph. He also wanted Frank Rainbow to change jobs and design the replacement to the TR2. Shortly after taking delivery, Black asked Ken Richardson, then the Triumph Competitions Manager, to take him for a test drive and Richardson hit a lorry crossing his bows. Sir John Black was seriously injured and retired soon afterwards. Had he been in one of his own cars, he might have died in the accident.

After designing Mk I, Frank returned to his main job at TI, but found time to design Mk II. This had a slightly stiffer frame achieved by replacing some of the round-tube members with square sections. This achieved an entirely different feel to the car, and in ordinary driving it makes it much more relaxing, with a better ride and less of a 'seat of the pants' feel.

By locating the petrol tank vertically between the cockpit and the boot instead of under the boot, Frank was able to create two genuine child seats and a decent luggage area. He also restyled it, giving it a different profile and air intake. In every respect it was an improvement and had it been put into production it would surely have taken off in no uncertain terms, for it had no direct rival in the market place. The flawed Mk I was selling at a rate of better than one a day towards the end of 1954, so the Mk II would surely not have done worse, and the total staff of Swallow was only 18 – so there was plenty of room for expansion, and the backing to do it.

Then one day Frank got a phone call telling him to sack everyone; the project was at an end. What had happened was that a number of TI customers, such as Jaguar, were not pleased to be facing competition in the marketplace from a supplier. The message was clear. If TI did not stick to its traditional role, then perhaps it would lose far more valuable business from other companies.

Thus the Doretti was killed off not because it was



Above: One of the two Mk II Swallow Sabres built; one is now under restoration in Canada, the other in Wales. Below: Actress Mitzi Gaynor with a Doretti; it sold very well in the States and was originally aimed at the West Coast market

a failure but because it was a success which worried the opposition. Far from being just an over-priced TR2, its rivals were concerned that it was an under-priced luxury car because companies within TI were supplying components at a much lower cost than outside firms were able to buy them. Thus the Doretti was a bargain with which other firms could not compete on equal terms.

All the workers were found jobs in TI companies and Frank himself, more than a little disappointed, went to Triumph as a development engineer. In 1960 he took over his father's business, Teesdale Tools Ltd, and is now in what he is pleased to call retirement – with an exciting car project under development. He's actually 78 years old, and either drinks from the same stream as Cliff Richard or else

has a decaying portrait in his attic.

Frank had laid down just two Sabres, and both are accounted for, but after carefully examining Phil Rudge's car was satisfied that it is a third. Piecing together the story, the history of the car would seem to be as follows.

After Frank left TI, a third Sabre was built for Triumph, possibly for evaluation purposes. It was certainly used as a test bed for suspension systems, since the nature of the chassis made it easier to play around with than a TR2. At one point it had a de Dion rear axle, which Phil possesses. It was also raced and was crashed at Silverstone in 1959. When it was rebuilt the damaged Mk II front wings were replaced by Mk I wings and radiator grille.

The car was not registered until 1961, and the first named owner was the Triumph Motor Company, so it appears that it was employed strictly as a test track special. Mystery solved.

The Swallow Doretti is possibly unique in that its demise was caused by its being too successful. It is therefore a minor tragedy that it was killed off, because with an engineer-cum-stylist of Frank Rainbow's gifts guiding future projects, who knows what cars might have come from Walsall?

