

## THE BRISTOL 403

### The “definitive” Bristol

I shall always blame Robin Pitman for inspiring my interest in Bristol cars. He was my revered art master at school who gave a design tutorial in 1953 to 20 young boys on the virtues of the new Bristol 403. After an hour of design analysis all us boys came away with a dream of owning an aerodyne (as they are known) one day. It took me until 1972 to realise this dream when “The Bristol”, as it is known by the family, came into our lives and continues today to be a cherished mode of transport in the Manley household.

Bristol cars were built by the Bristol Aeroplane Company when they diversified after World War II, and the standards used in aircraft production were utilised in the construction of a sporting saloon. The result, cars fit for the modern era, generated lavish praise from the automobile press. This first model, the Bristol 400, achieved considerable sporting success, particularly in the field of rallying, with success in events such as The Monte Carlo Rally, The Tulip Rally, and the RAC Rally. Success for the Bristol engine was also experienced in the Le Mans 24-hour race, where the three Bristol racing cars came 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> in their class. The Bristol engines were also used by other manufacturers such as Frazer Nash, Cooper, Lister, AC and Lotus both in their racing cars and high performance road cars.

The 400 Bristol was followed by the 401 model, which was the subject of much wind tunnel testing to produce an aerodynamic shape which has led to the term aerodyne for the 401/3 models. The 402 was a convertible of which only 22 were made; this makes them one of the rarest Bristols produced. The uniqueness of the aerodyne design is the outcome of a collaboration with Italian designers at Superleggera Touring of Milan. The adoption of a Superleggera form of construction for the bodies of the Aerodyne models allowed such an aerodynamic shape to be achieved. This design has produced, in the opinion of many, the most aesthetically pleasing Bristol car so far. When stationary it looks as if it is travelling at 60 mph and the appearance from any angle is one of seductive curves and beautiful lines. This gives the car its intrinsic quality that is an ongoing pleasure for all owners of aerodynes.

Keats once said, “a thing of beauty is a joy for ever” and it is true that the car gives so much pleasure to many people with every journey, not just the driver. This was demonstrated recently when the car was stationary in traffic and a somewhat intoxicated passerby, with several gestures of delight then came and planted a couple of lavish kisses on the bonnet before continuing on his way. A female passer by even dropped an elegant curtsey recently and she was only drunk with the joy of seeing such a beautiful object.

The uniqueness of this model, however, lies not just in the handsome appearance of the hand beaten aluminum body, but the fact that its performs is as good as its looks and generates a distinctive driving experience. This commences with a combination of an adjustable steering wheel position with variable seating

arrangements, so that the driver can obtain the perfect combination for his or her stature. Once slotted in to your personal driving situation, it is time to start up the legendary Bristol six cylinder engine; an engine design format which is the epitome of perfect balance for the internal combustion engine. It is advised by various gurus of the Bristol 2 litre engines to keep the revs to no more than 2,500 until the oil temperature has reached 40 degrees centigrade as this will pay dividends in achieving a long engine life. My own Bristol 2 litre engine has covered more than 365,000 miles on the same crankshaft, which did not require regrinding when the remainder of the engine was overhauled at that mileage; no mean feat of engineering. This is also down to aircraft quality materials and engineering techniques used in the original construction and one would expect nothing less from an aircraft manufacturer of such renown.

In 1953 the Bristol 403 must have been seen as a supercar with a top speed of well over 100mph and a 0 to 60 mph performance in about 13 seconds; all this on low octane pool petrol. There is also a reference from the manufacturer that the maximum continuous cruising speed should be no more than 78 mph, which is more than adequate, even for today's circumstances and only legally possible on the German Autobahns. This performance makes for a very usable car that is totally capable of keeping up with modern traffic and one that outperforms many modern cars on bends and roundabouts due to its exceptional road holding.

This leads me to try to attempt to describe the unique driving adventure that awaits anyone who has the opportunity to experience these iconic machines. It is not just the lack of roll and the stiffness of the chassis that is immediately apparent when driving these cars, but the feeling of being at one with the vehicle. Compared to many modern cars there is a distinct feeling of being fully aware of the potential of the vehicle to go exactly where you point it with an exactness that is unusually reassuring. All this achieved without the need for electronic aids or the need to adjust suspension modes. This feeling of certainty when driving the cars, particularly at speed, is down to the combination of factors carefully introduced by the manufacturers in the design and construction of all Bristol cars. The near 50-50 weight distribution, the aerodynamic shape, the low centre of gravity, the lightweight aluminum coachwork together with the substantial box section steel chassis all contribute to this unique driving experience. This is aided by the sophisticated independent front suspension combined with torsion bars and telescopic dampers that give a comfortable, but precise ride.

The driving experience associated with these cars is intrinsically linked to the classic Bristol 2 litre engine. This unit, as installed in the 403, is a willing engine which, when suitably warm, will rev easily and smoothly with an eagerness which belies its capacity. The long stroke engine produces good torque, but perhaps not the best for traffic light drag racing. However once moving the acceleration is impressive and the close ration gearbox provides appropriate gears to suit every occasion. If required the second gear will take you to 60 mph while the useful third gear will take you to 85mph before slipping into top gear which will take you to over 100mph. Even if used hard it is unlikely that mpg will fall below 22mpg and with an overdrive unit fitted, an option on the later 403s,

up to 30mpg can be achieved when touring. When driven gently, goodness knows why, the unit is relatively quiet, but on acceleration especially over 3,500 revs the delicious exhaust note can be heard even inside the car, and with the window open an intoxicating yowl can be discerned as the revs rise. This is music to me, if not to all ears! Together all these factors add up to an exhilarating experience which never fails to charm and make any journey enjoyable.

Reliability of classic cars is always a question which is asked when discussing the merits or otherwise of the marque, and my experience after forty-three years of ownership has been one of consistent dependability. On the few occasions when mechanical malfunction has occurred, the car has always had the ability to “get one home”. This is in part due to the simple unsophisticated electrical system with only two fuses and no complex computer controlled engine management system to worry about. In most modern cars the complexity of the systems makes roadside repairs impossible. Journeys have included numerous trips to southern France, Scotland and this year a tour of southern Ireland as well as many weekend trips to various parts of the UK. It is important to use these cars and not have them standing idle for too long, as like most vehicles they are more efficient if regularly used. I try to use mine at least once a week all year round and more if possible, as they are such fun to drive. Some owners tend to mollycoddle their cars and not use them if rain or adverse conditions are anticipated. I feel this is contrary to their design concept and build quality, which was of a Grand Turismo character, and anticipated that the cars would be used over long distances and in all conditions. If they were suitable for use in the Monte Carlo Rally, I am sure they can cope in the less gruelling circumstances experienced in everyday use.

Besides the personal satisfaction of classic car ownership there is also a wider series of benefits that can be accorded to safeguarding celebrated examples of such design icons. The sustainable argument is strong when you calculate the resources required to perhaps have had several alternative vehicles, during the 62 years this Bristol has been in existence. Such longevity must counteract the criticism of poor fuel economy and exhaust emissions put forward by some.

Safeguarding examples of historic automotive design is also an important aspect of classic car ownership, which results in conservation of genuine models of the genre for future generations to enjoy. The enjoyment aspect is well demonstrated on every outing with the car due to the response it elicits from passersby and the small crowds that gather when parked. This leads to many conversations and social interaction similar to the experiences of having a dog or small child in tow. It gives people an opportunity to interact and was very prevalent in Ireland on our recent tour. The car’s ability to generate conversation could be seen as a social service, in an age when many people interact only with their electronic devices!

One of the reasons given by many people in relation to their interest and obvious enjoyment of seeing a Bristol car, and applies to many classic cars, is the comment that “all modern cars look the same” where classic cars are very individual. So if you wish to add to the happiness factor of society,

obtain a classic and use it, preferably a Bristol. You will not regret it, particularly as these cars are going up in value rather than depreciating at an alarming rate.

I trust that I have given a flavour of the qualities and characteristics of these truly unique cars, and of this particular model which is regarded by many - and certainly by me - as the "definitive" Bristol.

John Manley