

Lancia International Meeting in Turin

A Turin-Trek by Theo Kyriacou

Vincenzo Lancia was born in a little village outside Turin in 1881 and by the turn of the century, after a short spell working as a bookkeeper for a bicycle importer, he became chief inspector and test driver for Fiat at the young age of just 19. When Fiat decided to go racing, Vincenzo became a racing driver for Fiat and he proved to be an exceptionally fast driver.

But Vincenzo's real interest was in machinery and engineering and fuelled by his fascination for the motor car, in 1906 he formed his eponymous motor manufacturing company. Lancia's first car, the 12HP Alfa, included a lot of the technology now taken for granted and Lancia continued to produce groundbreaking models such as the Lambda and the Aprilia. Lancia was the first company to produce a V6 and a V4 engine and pioneered the narrow angle V engines. The company continued to pioneer technical breakthroughs that were to prove fundamental to the automotive development: the load-bearing body, independent front suspension, transmission tunnel incorporated into the floor, luggage compartment built into the load-bearing structure, tubular axle structure etc.

Not many motor manufacturers have managed to survive for 100 years and none as innovative as Lancia, so it was fitting that in 2006 a major celebration should take place to commemorate Lancia's Centenary. The UK Lancia Motor Club started as early as their AGM in 2005 to organise a homage trip to Turin. The organisation of the celebrations in Turin was subsequently taken over by the Italian Lancia Club and eventually, after a period of indecision and claims of "lack of money", Fiat, now the owners of Lancia, decided they should be part of the celebrations or at least the organisation of the celebrations. A full program of events was planned starting on Monday 4th September and ending with the public celebration on Saturday 9th of September. I was sure this would be an event "not to be missed" so I had to be part of it. And I was determined to make the journey to Turin and back in my Lancia Gamma Coupe rather than take the simpler and cheaper option of Ryanair flights.



Lancias of all shapes and sizes and ages came from all over the world

The Italian Lancia Club, with some help from Fiat, pulled out all the stops in organising the celebrations. They even hired a specialist company to manage the organisation of the different events planned for the hundreds of people from all over the world. A range of

activities was planned which were not all car related. There were museum visits, Stately Home visits, Palace visits, as well as the petrolhead prerequisites of going to the Mirafiori car plant and Mirafiori Motor Village, visit to the Fiat Research Centre, as well as racetrack visits and activities. And of course this was in Italy so there was a lot of food!

It soon became evident that there was a lot of interest from Lancia owners and enthusiasts all over the world wishing to be part of the celebrations, so the number of entries would have to be limited to 300 cars with a suitable limit on the number of people taking part without a Lancia. Due to the large number of people taking part, we were all divided into four groups of 75 cars with different activities organised on a rota system on different days for the different groups. Some of the visits and activities required the use of our cars but the organisers ensured we didn't have two consecutive days of driving activities. I am not sure what criteria the organisers used to put different people into the different groups. We were told that the four groups were *"carefully selected to ensure there was a representative selection of Lancia cars in each group"* but I suspect it was more a case of sequential selection according to entry with a few minor adjustments. In other words, those who registered early got into group 1 and those who registered late (like me) got into group 4. I delayed sending off my registration and deposit to see if I could convince anyone to join me on the journey. My wife and daughter could not join me as the celebrations coincided with the start of the new school term; although I suspect that was a handy excuse for them! When it became clear to me that nobody was willing to join me (nobody loves me!) I sent off my registration and deposit for a "single", only to be told that I may have to be placed on a waiting list awaiting final number of entries confirmation from the Italians. My place was confirmed soon afterwards and as one of the last people to register from the UK I ended up in Group 4. Coincidence? I doubt it...

In all there were 175 cars going from the UK so I thought we'd be able to get a fair size convoy of cars going to Turin. I was wrong again and just managed a convoy of two Gammas which on the day of travel changed to a convoy of my Gamma and an Alfa 147 as the other Gamma developed rear suspension trouble on the way to Dover. I told my friend in the other Gamma he was putting too many spares in the boot but he didn't listen. Obviously all the weight of the spares proved too much for the rear suspension!

We decided to make the journey to Turin over two days with an overnight stop in France. We arrived in Turin on Monday 4th September and the excellent organisation for the celebrations became instantly evident as we found a special "Lancia Centenary Welcome Desk" at the hotel's reception where we were handed our "Welcome Pack" with all the required information for the celebrations.

Everything was pre-arranged. We had numbered Rally Plaques and stickers for our cars, name badges for all the participants, dated vouchers for our meals, passes for the museums, commemorative T-shirts etc. We were even given a Lancia stop-watch which wasn't clear to me what it was for and wouldn't become clear until almost too late! The commemorative Roadbook which had details about everything during the celebrations, as well as the actual routes to be followed, was a bound A4 size book over an inch thick! Too much to read over a cup of coffee...



Lancias parked at the Palazzo dell'Arsenale

Four luxury hotels were used for the participants and the Palazzo dell'Arsenale, seat of the Army's Scuola di Applicazione e Studi Militari was taken over for the celebrations. The courtyard at the Arsenale was used as one of two secure car parks and the Palazzo's huge dining room was also used for our Welcome Dinner on Monday evening. I was staying at the Turin Palace Hotel, where Prince Charles had stayed when visiting Turin a few years ago. I am not sure how the hotel allocation was worked out but it meant that a lot of us Gammaphiles from the UK ended up in different hotels. Not a major problem as all the hotels

were within about 10 minutes walk from the Arsenale, which was used as our base for all the activities.

Group 4's ('my' group) programme of celebrations started with the museum visits on Tuesday 5th September. For that, the group was subdivided into 4 smaller groups of about 25-30 people each. Each mini-group got its own professional guide and we visited The Egyptian Museum, the Royal Armoury, and the National Museum of Cinema. And of course we had the obligatory lunch break for which we had a choice of 4 cafes/restaurants in the historic part of Turin to choose from.

For Wednesday 6th September it was a driving day for Group 4. We had to be ready with our cars at 8:30 am and we set off about 9:00am to Orbassano to visit the Fiat Research Centre. Italian Police motorcyclists provided an escort for us and stopped all other traffic to allow us easy access out of Turin. I now know how Royalty and politicians feel when their cavalcade whizzes through a town without having to worry about traffic. And to be able to do that in a town as picturesque as Turin was an added bonus.



"Sportiva Latina" The new FIAT Coupé?

The Fiat Research Centre was founded in 1976 as an Engineering Centre providing research and development services to all the car companies within the Fiat group. They currently employ about 1200 people of whom 250 are graduate trainees. We had the opportunity to see some interesting prototypes there like the "Sportiva Latina", a futuristic Sports car built on a separate lightweight rolling chassis as well as see research into more mundane technology like LED lights.

Al fresco lunch was arranged for us by the Hunting lodge of the Racconigi Royal Castle. The castle was converted from an old stronghold by the Marqises of Saluzzo and acquired by the Savoy Dynasty in 1605. I've often wondered why the Margarita pizza is called as such. Why name a pizza after a Mexican drink or the Greek for daisy? Well, now I know: The light alternative to traditional pizza was specially created for the extremely liked Queen Margarita who was very slim (I saw her portrait) and didn't want to have 'heavy' food. It's amazing what one can learn on a car event.

After our castle visit we made our way back to Turin where we once again picked up the police escort who took us to Lignotto, the old Fiat factory which is now a shopping centre but still has the test track on its roof. We made our way up to the roof where we got to drive two laps of the test track in groups of five cars. At the end of the laps we were given a commemorative plaque to prove we were part of this great event.



Lancias lining up at the Lignotto rooftop test track

Thursday 7th September saw Group 4 loaded into coaches and taken first to the Mirafiori Village and then onto the Mirafiori plant to see the Lancia production lines. The Mirafiori Village was a 'factory outlet' where Fiat employees could purchase Fiat Group cars but earlier this year they had a huge investment and restructuring and the Mirafiori Village is now open to members of the public as well as Fiat employees. For those of you who remember the old Strada TV adverts showing the automated Mirafiori plant at work, you really have to see the real thing to believe it! There are still a number

of manual jobs in the factory but the main processes are all automated with robots doing all the hard work. I was especially amazed by the 'marriage department' as it is called because it joins the chassis with the engine/transmission and front suspension. We visited the production line for the Punto, Idea, Ypsilon and Musa. The completed cars without front mechanicals arrive on an automated line at the top and below them, on a different automated line, arrive the engine, gearbox and front suspension as one unit. The fact that the correct combination of mechanicals are matched to the right car is clever enough but when the two come together, 10 pairs of robots go to work and fit the mechanicals to the chassis in 12 seconds! The reason the robots are in pairs is because if one of them develops a fault, the other one of the pair can do the work of two, which does add some extra time to the 12 seconds but it does mean that the production line does not stop. The rest of the Thursday was less car-related as we had lunch the "Locanda della Posta" in Cavour, half way up the mountains, followed by a relaxing afternoon walk, coffee and ice cream in Saluzzo,

For Friday 8th September we were back to driving and early morning saw Group 4 head for the Mandria test track. The track, situated in La Mandria Park at Fiano, a few km North-East



Gammas line up for the Mandria test track

of Turin, is a private 17Km proving ground used by Fiat Group companies to test their production cars. The entrance to the track, in the very picturesque parkland, is near a small village called Borla. The cars were all lined up in sequence number order and we were then told we could have two "familiarisation runs". Julian, my co-pilot on the day, and I, were wondering why the Integrale in front of us was going very slowly, speeding up, then slowing down, then speeding up again...

While we were lined up to go on the track for the “proper” runs we realised what the supplied stop watch was for. This was not meant to be a “go like the clappers” run round the track as I thought but it was a regulation run for which we had to keep to an average speed and go past three timing checkpoints at precise times with penalty points awarded for every second over or under the required time! In fact the rules stated “*every hundredth of a second (1/100) of advance or retard on the imposed times, for each stretch will count as 1 penalty point*”. Luckily, I had the supplied stopwatch with me so it was hastily retrieved from the boot of the car but we had already ‘wasted’ our two practice runs. Needless to say we didn’t do too well. We were 5 seconds early at the first checkpoint, 2 seconds early at the second and got it spot-on by the third checkpoint but we were nowhere near winning. Still, it was great fun and the seemingly endless runs we could have on the track before and after lunch was even more fun. I was very pleased that the Gamma could easily keep up with the Integrales and even managed to pull away from much newer cars like the big Thesis. They all needed to slow down for the corners; something you don’t have to do in a Gamma! But there was no way I could keep up with the official Lancia Ypsilon driven by one of the professional test drivers. It’s embarrassing to think that the largest engine the Ypsilon could have is a 1.4 but that guy could definitely drive and knew the track very well. My Gamma has a 2.5 litre engine but was severely handicapped by having me as the pilot.

For the afternoon of Friday we had yet another visit to a Stately Home, or ‘Palace’ as the Italians like to call them. It was a short and once again picturesque convoy drive from the track to the *Royal Palace of Venaria Reale* where we could visit the “*galleria di Diana*”. I didn’t get to see the gallery as I received a call from my daughter to tell me she had passed her driving test. For me, talking to my very excited daughter seemed a better thing to do than see a small portion of the stately home as most of it was closed for renovation.

It was a police escort drive back to the hotel after that but the Friday events were not over! At 9:30pm all the participants were collected by coaches from their hotels and taken to the *National Museum of Automobile Carlo Biscaretti di Ruffa* for a special Lancia evening.



The Lancia 'Fulvietta' concept car based on the Fiat Barchetta

The museum had put on a special exhibition of cars to present a hundred years of history of the Lancia brand, as a tribute to Vincenzo Lancia. The cars on display came partly from the Museum’s collection and partly from private collectors. The exhibition will be open to the public until 26 November 2006, from Tuesday to Sunday from 10 am to 6.30 pm. We got a special private evening viewing of all the museum’s exhibits and we even got a professional fireworks display thrown in. As I mentioned before “this was Italy” so we also got a huge selection of mouth-watering cakes and sweets to eat while admiring all the lovely machinery.

The models on display represented various episodes in the history of Lancia. Some of the cars on display were the 1914 Theta, the 1919 Kappa, the 1922 Trikappa, the famous 1928 Lambda and the 1958 Aurelia Convertible (made famous in the film *Il Sorpasso* by Dino Risi). As for the world of racing, there was the D24 from 1953, an example of state-of-the-art engineering, which was one of the key cars in the Carrera Panamericana the same year. There was also a D50, the Grand Prix car which eventually led to the formation of the Ferrari Formula 1 team. The exhibition took us up to the 1980's, with the 1983 LC2 Gruppo C and the 1988 Delta HF Integrale Safari, which won the Rally World Championships two years running. There was even the Fulvietta concept car based on Fiat Barchetta floorpan and mechanicals. This is the car that all Lancia enthusiasts are screaming for Lancia to put into production. Latest news is that a new version of the Fulvietta will go into production soon. The evening was finished off with a conference and speeches from all the top guys in Fiat and Lancia and this is where Lancia's new CEO, Olivier Francois, announced that Lancia will return to the UK and Japanese markets with the new Delta HPE.



New Lancia Fulvia concept

Onto Saturday 9th September and the day for the Public Celebration, the main event of the celebrations. All the cars present for the week-long celebrations, plus a few more that joined us for the public day, formed a Police escorted motorcade procession through the historic streets of Turin, finally arriving and parking at the Piazza San Carlo. A show featuring a selection of the most interesting models was put on for the attending public and of course all the cars were available for the public to see, admire and enjoy.



Gammas from the UK line up at the Piazza San Carlo

So which was the highlight of my week in Turin? It's hard to choose from the organised events as they were all very special and most were "once in a lifetime" events. Driving round the Lignotto rooftop test track was very special. Just the buzz and adrenaline rush of whizzing up to the roof made it feel special. The Mirafiori factory visit impressed me immensely and I really enjoyed the time on the Mandria test track when I didn't have to go slowly. And of course the day of public celebration on Saturday was very special. The drive through Turin, the sight of all those lovely Lancias parked at the Piazza San Carlo, it was all very special and memorable. Even the fact that I met so many new people with common interests and made new friends is something which I shall cherish for ever.

But the real highlight of my whole trip to Turin was not part of any organised event. Following our Turin museums tour on Tuesday, Jack Romano and I decided to make our own way back to our hotels and get to see a bit more of Turin. For those of you who have never heard of Jack Romano, he is the UK's renowned Gamma expert and without whom a lot of the Gammas in the world would not still exist. Jack has single-handedly been running the Lancia Gamma Consortium in the UK for many years and he has been helping Gamma owners throughout the world. Tuesday evening was a "free" night and all of us Gammaphiles decided it would be nice to go for dinner somewhere special. Jack and I were contemplating dinner when we decided to stop at *Café Torino* at the Piazza San Carlo for coffee. *Café Torino* claims to be Turin's oldest restaurant and we decided it was a good place to have dinner that evening. "We should call Aldo to join us" said Jack. Aldo Brovarone used to work at Pininfarina and is the designer of the Lancia Gamma Coupe, as well as a selection of Ferraris, including the Dino. Jack just happened to have his number handy (Jack had previously interviewed Aldo for *Viva Lancia*, the Lancia Motor Club's magazine) so we called him and he said he'd be delighted to join us.

Spending an evening with the man who designed what I consider to be the best looking car ever made was certainly the highlight of my trip to Turin. Mr Brovarone is so typically Italian and so immensely and undeniably talented. On top of that he is a very nice guy!

He is retired now and draws car related postcards which are published and made available through a small number of specialist retailers. He brought a varied selection of his postcards with him which he gladly autographed and gave us as mementos. One of the guys asked Mr Brovarone to draw a Gamma Coupe on the back of the postcard. "Ah...it's so long since I've done this I am not sure I remember..." he muttered and he started to draw on the postcard. If I, and I suspect



Sitting down for dinner and lots of chatting
From left to right: Yours truly, Mr Aldo Brovarone, Jack Romano

most of you, were to draw a car, we'd start with the outline and then add the wheels, doors etc. In other words, we'd draw the easily identifiable parts of the car first. But Mr Brovarone started his Gamma Coupe drawing with the front bumper. "The bumpers were an important styling feature of the Gamma. The Gamma was the first Pininfarina car to use this type of plastic bumpers" he said. He then drew part of the front aspect of the car, stopped and went to the back and drew the 'rollover' hoop. "This was a very strong styling feature of the car" he said. He then continued to draw and joined the two small sketches to form a perfect drawing of a Gamma Coupe! I was very impressed!

Even though the Gamma Berlina was also a Pininfarina design, it was not designed by Aldo Brovarone and Mr Brovarone is not a fan of the Berlina design. "Too fat" he says when asked what he thinks of the Berlina. One of our Berlina owning guys went up to Mr Brovarone, handed him an old envelope and said "If you were designing the Gamma Berlina today, how would you do it?" Following a short discussion on how design trends have changed over the last 30 years since the Gamma, Mr Brovarone started to draw on the back of the envelope.

Within a few seconds we could see a drawing of a lovely looking saloon car! It was long and sleek and had the right balance between straight lines and curves. I am sure a lot of manufacturers would love to have a copy of that drawing and while I've asked my Berlina owning friend to send me a scan of the drawing on the envelope, I have not received it yet. Maybe he is gauging interest from car manufacturers first!



The Gammaphiles surround the Gamma Coupe's designer, Mr Aldo Brovarone

The whole evening was an immensely enjoyable social event chatting about cars in general and of course about the Gamma Coupe with its designer. Discussions ranged from the silly *"do you consider the Smart to be a car?"* to privy insights of meetings that took place over 30 years ago at Pininfarina's offices. It all went a long way to minimise the pain of our 1000 Euro bill at the end of the evening!

Lots of my photographs from my trip to Turin can be seen at:

<http://www.GammaConsortium.com/LTIM>

Theo Kyriacou