

OSCA WINNER

Abbreviations come no sexier than this, reckons **Richard Heseltine** as he's seduced by the sublime 1600GT

PHOTOGRAPHY PETER SPINNEY



Italian motoring lore is littered with fallen acronyms. Some were too deprived of vowels to articulate, others high on comedy value if not on outright charm. Remember the FART? Little early '70s microcar? Didn't catch on, surprisingly. High on the list for sonority, brevity and general ease of use has to be OSCA.

By rights it should be OSCAFM, but the last two consonants were wisely dropped on the grounds that not even locals could pronounce the whole thing. Yet it's the FM bit that added credibility – Fratelli Maserati. For a decade or so, real Maseratis were OSCAs.

The Fratelli were Ernesto, Bindo and Ettore, survivors of the original 'gang of four' who had founded the firm that bore their name in 1926. Unfortunately, Alfieri, the sibling who was, by all accounts, the guiding force behind the marque, died after a racing accident in '32. Five years later the remaining financially straitened brothers sold out to Adolfo Orsi. Retained under contract for a further 10 years, a decade that was said to have been less than harmonious, the brothers left



Double-bubble roof, with vents, best shown from rear

But it couldn't last. By then advanced in years, and habitually under-financed, the Maseratis were ill-equipped to counter the rise of the British constructors as the '60s dawned. But their fine 1.5-litre twin-cam, as used for that Sebring win, attracted the attention of Fiat which was keen to use it in a new sports car to counter the Alfa Giulietta. Except OSCA was in no position to build these engines in volume, every unit having to be machined, honed and laboriously fettled by hand. Fiat contrived a deal whereby it would produce them in volume for its forthcoming 1500/1600 models and supply engines back to OSCA. Only it never really worked out that way, with Fiat happy to reap the benefits of competition kudos in much the same way as Ford did with the Lotus twin-cam. But it's hard to see what the Maseratis got out of the deal.

Yet it did, in a typically contorted manner, lead to OSCA building proper road cars. A favoured punter approached the brothers with a view to building a new model, the Tipo 1600GT being announced at the 1960 Turin Salon. Originally



Modena the second the agreement expired. They set up shop in a disused part of the original Maserati factory in their home town of Bologna to build small-capacity racing cars. Because Orsi retained the rights to their name, they contrived the extravagant alias *Officina Specializzata per la Costruzione di Automobili* – Fratelli Maserati SpA which easily rolls off the tongue.

With Ernesto as designer, Ettore the artisan and Bindo running the whole show, the trio ushered in their first model, the MT4 (Maserati Type 4), in 1948, aimed at the 1100cc class that was popular in Italy at the time. Attracting the likes of Gigi Villoresi, Felice Bonetto and Luigi Fagioli, OSCA was soon at the forefront in the tiddler categories, often in contention for outright wins, too. After unsuccessfully dabbling in Formula 1 (and F2), they wisely stuck to sports cars, the highlight being victory in the '54 Sebring 12 Hours for Stirling Moss and Bill Lloyd aboard their fully enclosed MT4 1450 *barbetta*.



OSCA nominations, from top: '61 Boneschi; glassfibre-bodied Corbetta-styled '64 1050, based on Fiat 850; late-model MV used Ford Taunus 1.7-litre V4 engine

bodied by Boneschi, this new strain featured the enduring 'four' in a tubular ladder-frame and, unusually for the time, all-round independent suspension by double wishbones and coils plus four-wheel Girling disc brakes.

This being a low-volume 'etceterini', there were numerous variations. Zagato and Fissore were the most prolific (and the only coachbuilders to feature in the factory brochure). Fissore's offering was more sober, and much of the look was transposed on to the *carrozzeria's* later efforts for Vemag-DKW. Zagato's take was the pick of the motor sport fraternity.

Offered in four states of tune from 95 to 140bhp, a full-house 710kg variation, the 1600SP, was added to the line-up in 1963, featuring heavily revised Zagato coachwork. More biffer than bombshell, only the one was made. That same year, the embattled Maserati brothers sold out to the Agusta motorcycle/helicopter combine. It marked the beginning of the end.

Production of the 1600 continued erratically, the new regime introducing a raft of new models at the '64 Turin Salon. The 1600TC (*trave centrale*) featured a backbone chassis and glassfibre body (sound familiar?) but it didn't find favour. Nor did the 1050 Coupé and Spider, based on the Fiat 850. The final ignominy was the MV shown in open and closed forms a year later, with 1.7-litre Ford Taunus power. In 1967, it was all over, and apparently much of the existing spares and tooling were fed into a furnace.

Except that's not strictly the end of the story. With Japanese finance, OSCA was revived in 1999, new keeper of the flame GMP Automobili srl having already bought the rights to Touring. With Luca Zagato and designer Ercole Spada among its number, great things were promised. Instead, the bizarre Subaru flat-four-powered 2500GT (or Dromos) disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared.

Which makes the 1600GT the last true Maserati OSCA yet, as is to be expected, precisely how many were made remains a mystery. It



Build plate: preferred types and weights of Shell oils



Eager twin-cam thrives on high revs; good for 140bhp

depends who you believe. With chassis numbers starting at 001 and ending at 00127, the factory claimed a total of 128 examples, of which Zagato bodied 98, Fissore 24 (three of them convertibles), Touring a brace, Morelli just the one and a trio from Boneschi. Problem is, most historians believe the total figure is probably closer to just 56 cars. Bit of a difference.

Either way, it's ultra-rare, this delicious 1600GTS (chassis 0094 for you number crunchers) being the ultimate variant and one of only two known in the UK. Sold new to Alberto Luti, and originally white, it was extensively campaigned in local hillclimbs, taking class wins at Ascoli-Colle San Marco in September '63 and Pont Edecimo-Giovi a month later. It subsequently moved through numerous owners and headed Stateside for a time before returning to Europe and an eye-bogglingly expensive restoration, much of the original patchwork of ally panels apparently having been flanged together with spit.

This being a Zagato, a firm more than capable of the odd credibility chasm, it's an idiosyncratic

OSCA 1600GTS

Construction tubular steel chassis with aluminium body
Engine iron-block, alloy-head 80° 1568cc 'four', fed by twin Weber 38DCOE (or 42DCOE) downdraught twin-choke carburettors
Bore & stroke 80x78mm
Max power 140bhp @ 7000rpm (with original twin-plug head)
Max torque 105lb ft @ 4400rpm
Transmission five-speed all-synchromanual
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar; telescopic dampers
Length 12ft 9 1/2in (3900mm)
Wheelbase 7ft 4 1/2in (2250mm)
Width 4ft 11in (1497mm)
Height 3ft 11 1/4in (1200mm)
Weight 1801lb (817kg)
0-60mph 7.5 secs (est) **Top speed** 118mph
Price new 3,200,000 lira
Price now £150,000 approx

bases. The speedo runs to 200kmh, the rev counter to 8000rpm: there's no redline.

This being a peaky Italian unit, with ridiculously high-profile cams, there's nothing below 2000rpm which is a pain when progressing at the rate of tooth decay through Essex congestion. You can live with this truculence, however, because, once clear and on to some testing B-roads, adoration is swiftly meted out. Acceleration is near seamless: it thrives on revs. Being conservative, and short shifting at 5500rpm, this little device punches well above its weight. And it's predictably as noisy as hell, all pop and fizz on the downshifts, singing its little heart out when pressed. Near the upper reaches, it sounds positively fiendish.

The in-house gearshift is close-coupled. Without familiarity, it's all too easy to shift from second to fifth but, once mastered, it's delightfully precise. Apart from reverse, which is a pig: to the right, push in, crunch.

The steering, too, is decidedly crisp, ultra light yet accurately defined, loading up beautifully at speed. You steer in tiny, smooth inputs, both ends



Neat and stylish: Jaeger dials show subtle Fratelli Maserati Bologna brand

design: gawky from some angles, sublime from others with hints of Alfa Giulietta SZ and Abarth Bialbero. There's no ersatz styling chintz, just a purity of function. This most charismatic of coachbuilders came up with a novel means of gaining headroom without sacrificing shape or lightness, the corporate 'double bubble' extending the full length of the roof into two neat extractor vents – rear passengers may feel a bit of a draught. It's nominally a four-seater, although not in GTS trim. Equally characteristic are the side windows (here Perspex) made to fit almost flush with the coachwork. Riding on gorgeous Amadori magnesium alloys, there's much to like.

Just 47in off the deck, it isn't the easiest of cars to get into but it's worth the effort. Simple, pared-back, almost rationalised, the cabin is purposeful but tidy. The seats, with their partially exposed frames, are as attractive to look at as they are to squeeze your bum into (those wider of *derrière* may find this problematic). The attractive alloy-spoked wheel fronts an array of gauges bearing the legend Fratelli Maserati Bologna at their

working in unison: deft, accurate, crisp and predictable. Turn-in is sharper than you initially expect, with little weight transfer, and you can balance the back end with your right foot. The ride is stiff yet reasonably yielding, the brakes perhaps overly powerful considering the lack of weight although there's commendable front-to-rear balance.

Thing is, you can have too much of a good thing: it doesn't allow you to relax. In this state of tune, you cannot simply cruise. You're constantly incited to go faster. And, despite those rear air-vents, there's precious little airflow up front: it's near purgatorial within minutes.

Not that you'll really care all that much about melding into the upholstery because you already feel part of the car. As acronyms go, the OSCA's Fast Atom Bombardment (or Feline Advisory Board, take your pick). ■

Thanks to Gregor Fiskin, who is selling the OSCA. Call 020 7584 3503 or see www.gregorfiskin.com