

ROBERTO GIORDANELLI DRIVES A CAR THAT ONCE BELONGED TO HIS FATHER'S EMPLOYER

Window shopping at Coys of Kensington should be on the list of things to do in London. Today, Auto Italia's task is to slide open one of said windows and take a fabulous Fiat on a jaunt around Hyde Park. Not any old Fiat but the 1938 ex-Mussolini/General Franco car or, to give it its full title: a 1938 Fiat 2800 Dual Cowl State Phaeton by Viotti of Turin.

A Fiat version of a luxury car was not out of place in 1938. You would be forgiven for thinking that Fiat was out of its league in rubbing shoulders with Rolls-Royce, but transport for the masses was by no means the only thing on Fiat's agenda. Italy was not going to see its leaders in foreign limos, so it built its own. These Fiats were used by the likes of King Vittorio Emanuele II, Pope Pious XII, Benito Mussolini's mistress Claretta Petacci and Italian film director Roberto Rossellini. This particular car was given by Benito Mussolini to General Franco of Spain. An Italian friend of mine commented, "Trust Mussolini to give Franco a secondhand car". Franco, who preferred Rolls-Royces, subsequently gave the car to a Spanish Marquis. It then had a number of Spanish owners until a French journalist from Toulouse bought the car in Spain and brought it back to a farm his family owned in the Pyrenees near the French/Spanish border. It changed hands once again to its current owner who had the car restored by one of France's finest restoration companies.

When looking at this large car, you should keep in mind the date – 1938. Its smooth curvy lines are more like those of an early 1950s car than a pre-War one. Fiat was well aware of developments in aerodynamics. You really need a human being in the picture to fully appreciate its size. Unfortunately for the chauffeur, space is biased for the rear seat occupants whose important feet could never reach the front seats even at full stretch.

The paint is almost black, imparting a quality that full black cannot. Chrome is there but not ostentatiously so. Its high waistline suggests solidity, while inside there is wood and leather: not to Rolls-Royce standard but just enough to elevate the car. The hood, when folded open, is partially on show as it was on cars of the period. No doubt it would offer some protection against turbulence. The windscreen that separates the bigwigs from the humble driver is controlled by the VIPs. It winds down flush into the front seat with the pillars automatically folding flush. Very neat.

The big Fiat is constructed on a conventional chassis with the four doors hinged on the central B-post. They close easily with a smooth mechanical kerclunk. The 2800 series →



Fiat 2800 State Phaeton

Mussolini's Gift

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