

# AHEAD OF TIME



*The Story of Transport  
Built in Walsall*

**Walsall Local History Centre**

## **THE DORETTI**

**Almost forty years were to pass before Walsall could boast another car. The Doretta was born at the Walsall Airport site where its predecessors the Swallow 'Gadabout' scooter and the Swallow sidecars were made and was designed by the same gifted engineer, Frank Rainbow.**

**Together with Sir John Black, the head of Standard-Triumph at Coventry, and the Californian industrialist Arthur Anderson, Rainbow designed a two-seater sports car for the lucrative American West Coast market. The mechanical bits were to come from the existing Triumph TR2 sports car and the chassis was to be made by Tube Investments (T.I.). The car would be built by Helliwells, a T.I. subsidiary with spare capacity at Swallow Coachbuilding's Walsall site due to the slowing down of the**

sidecar market. Other T.I. companies would also be involved.

Design work began in early 1953 and the first car was completed in nine months. It was built entirely from the drawings done by Rainbow who was a meticulous draughtsman. The body was made by Panelcraft Ltd. and was a pleasantly flowing two-seater with a hint of Jaguar at the rear and a rather prominent, American-style grille at the front. The car was slightly larger than the TR2 and used the Triumph's engine and gearbox, front suspension and rear axle.

The prototype was taken to America where it was enthusiastically received. This was in an era when the States couldn't get enough of Britain's traditional MG, Morgan and Austin-Healey sports cars to satisfy demand. The car's name was inspired by Arthur Anderson's daughter Dorothy, whose name was 'italianised' to become the 'Swallow Doretti'.



*Period shot of the Mark I Doretti (courtesy of Stephen Matthews).*



*The Mark II Doretti (courtesy of Stephen Matthews).*

The Americans had suggested fitting wind-up windows instead of the old-fashioned sidescreens and a larger boot. Neither of these would have been a problem since the car's tooling hadn't yet been made. However, Ernest Sanders, remembering the lost orders from America that had so crippled the 'Gadabout' scooter, insisted on the Doretti being produced as it was, to the dismay of Arthur Anderson.

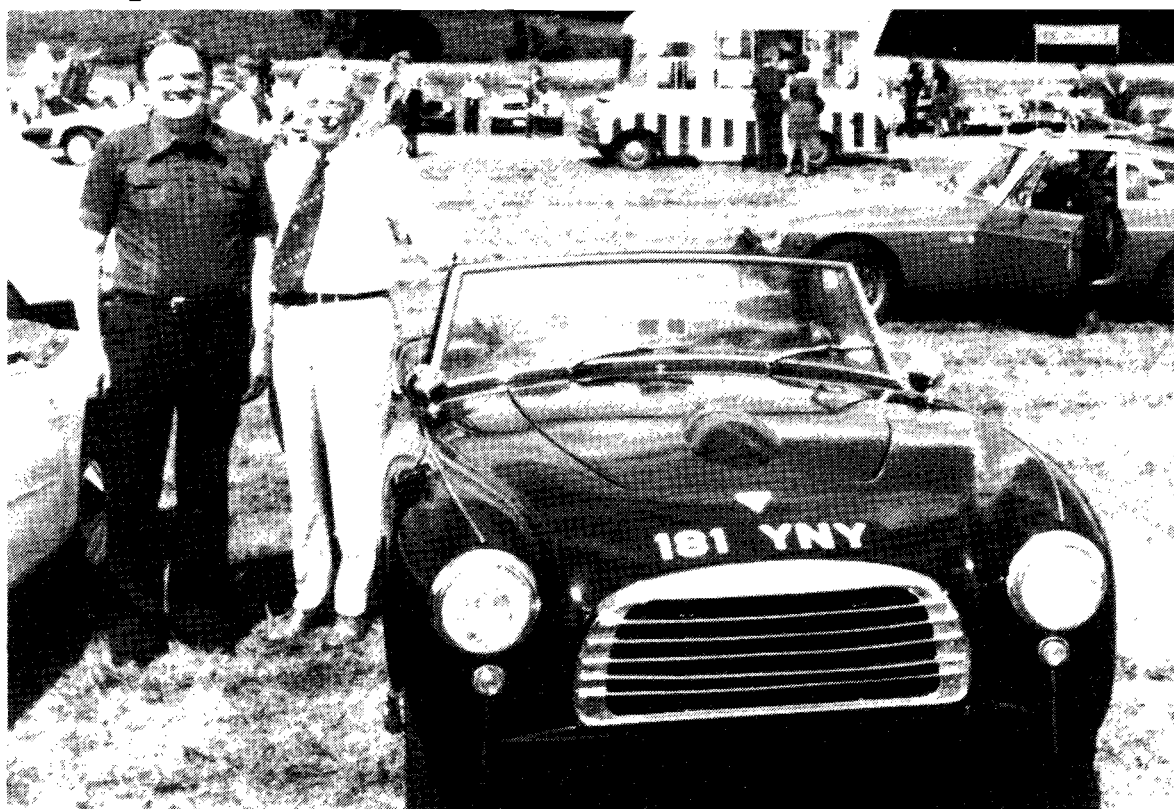
Nevertheless, the car sold well, being promoted by catalogue and road-test in the normal way and by racing both here and in the States. In standard form, the Doretti would just top 100 m.p.h, in an era where a family car was lucky to reach 60. 'The Autocar' tested one in 1954 and pronounced very favourably upon both its performance and the quality of construction, without putting too much emphasis on the use of Triumph TR2 parts. 'The Swallow Doretti', they said, 'is a neat and compact two-seater which has a very lively performance with a very satisfactory fuel consumption. It is a trim little car with pleasing lines and the general finish indicates that it is a well-made, workmanlike job. It is



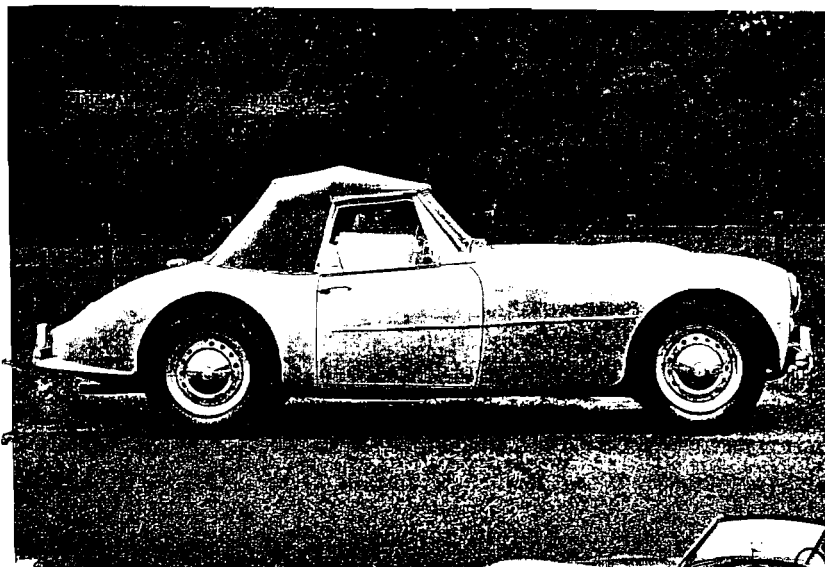
moderately priced (£777 as against the TR2's £600) and should meet the needs of those requiring a medium-sized sports car that will stand a lot of hard work and be fun to drive'.

In fact the Doretti was good value for the increased price over the Triumph. The body was panelled in corrosion-resistant aluminium as against the TR2's very rust-prone steel. The Swallow also had leather upholstery and a chassis made of 50 ton Reynolds chrome-moly steel making it a much better long-term proposition. It even had a fitted leather suitcase for the owner's luggage. Nevertheless, production ceased in 1955, abruptly and with no reason given. It is perhaps forgivable that most people think that the Doretti was a failure when, in fact, the reverse was true. In 1954, it was selling at the same rate as the TR2.

Although only 276 had been made, other car makers such as Triumph and Jaguar were worried by the very favourable test reports, the sales and the evident quality of the Doretti.

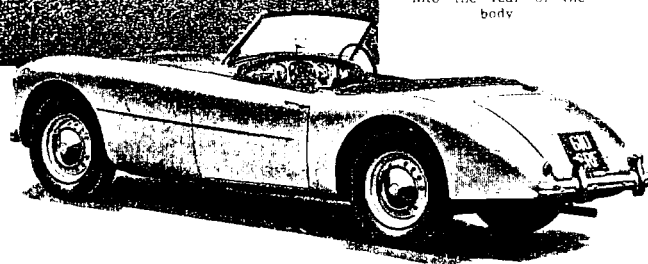


*Frank Rainbow (right) with a Mark II, chassis 10001, at Donnington Park, 1978. This car was a prototype Swallow Sabre (courtesy of Stephen Matthews).*



The Doretti has a full-width body style with open wheel arches at both front and rear. The doors are fitted with push-button locks and there is a bright decorative strip running along the sides of the body.

An unusual feature at the rear is the bright horizontal fin fixed to the rear wings at bumper height. To give increased protection, bumper overriders are fitted. Combined stop, tail and indicator lamps are built into the rear of the body.



#### No. 1546 : SWALLOW DORETTI

ONE of the most recent sports cars to be introduced, by a company well known for both car bodies and sidecars, is the Swallow Doretti, which was described in *The Autocar* of January 15, 1954, and one of the first production versions of this new open two-seater has recently been put through its paces by this journal. This car was designed initially to cater for the large potential market that exists in America for a small and compact European sports car to complement the large "home produced" sedan used for normal day-to-day transport. Many of the mechanical components used to make up this vehicle, such as the engine, transmission and front suspension, are similar to those in the now well-known Triumph TR2, but for the Doretti these have been built into a new tubular frame on which is mounted a neat two-seater body with full-width styling. The car tested was fitted with optional equipment in the form of the Laycock-de Normanville overdrive unit which, in conjunction with the four-speed gear box, provides five forward ratios. The combination of the 90 b.h.p. engine and an unladen weight of under a ton results in a car with

a very lively performance, a satisfactory maximum speed to suit the normal requirements of most people, lively acceleration, and, in view of the performance, a modest thirst for fuel.

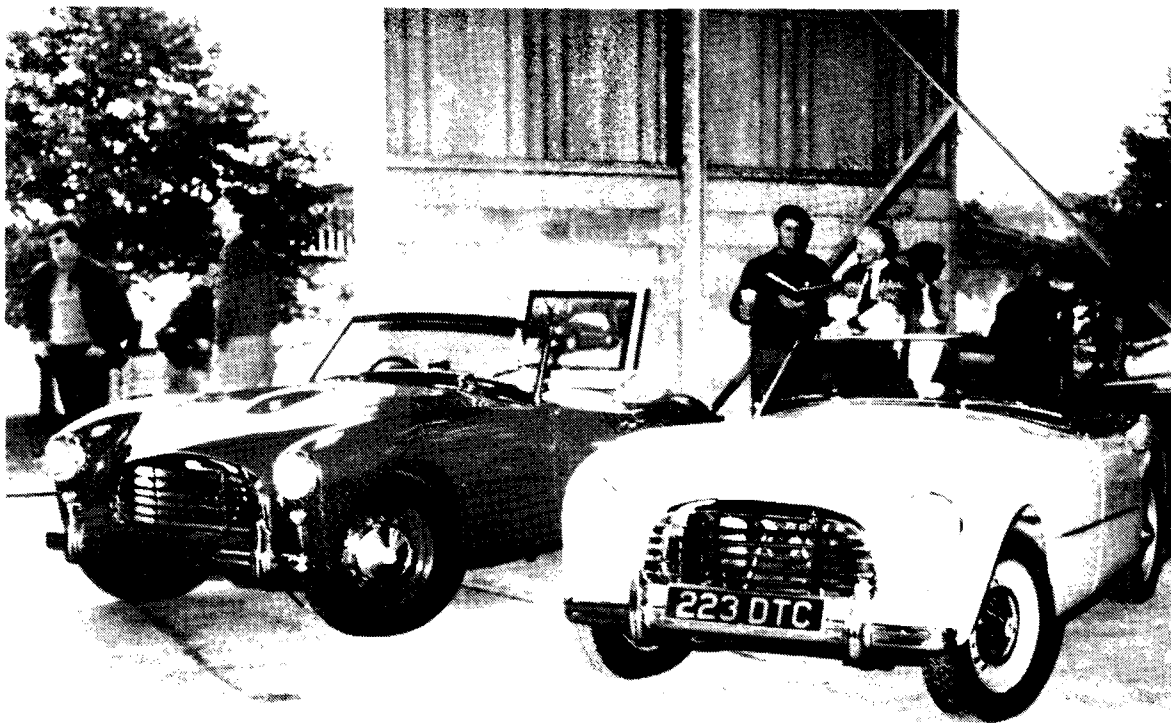
Under test conditions the mean maximum speed was 97.25 m.p.h., while the best speed in one direction was 101 m.p.h., using direct top gear, and no increase in maximum speed was recorded if the overdrive was switched in when the car was completely wound up in direct top. This is not surprising, as the function of an overdrive is primarily to reduce engine speed and to improve economy in the cruising range of the car, rather than to increase its maximum speed, which is, of course, a question of power required and power available and not merely one of reducing the gear ratio. The Doretti will cruise very comfortably at around 80 m.p.h. on the speedometer—equal to a genuine 74 m.p.h., leaving plenty of power in hand should it be required. As well as providing a good top end performance, and in spite of its high compression ratio, the engine has plenty of power at low revs and is very flexible, and under test conditions it was found that it would accelerate smoothly in top gear from a speed as low as 11 m.p.h. This bottom end flexibility is particularly useful in dense traffic.

The clutch, with an hydraulically operated withdrawal mechanism, is both smooth to operate and well able to cope with the demands that are likely to be made on it by an enthusiastic sports car driver. The pedal has a satisfactory length of travel and is quite light to operate. The gears are selected by a particularly robust central remote control lever which has a very pleasing short travel from gear to gear. The synchromesh, on top, third and second gears, is effective, but can be beaten if snappy changes are made.

A neat and simple frontal treatment gives the Doretti a smart appearance. Overriders are placed wide apart on either side of the grille, and separate side lamps—which also contain the flashing type of direction indicator—are mounted below the head lamps.



*The Swallow Doretti road test from 'The Autocar' 24 September, 1954 (courtesy of 'Autocar and Motor').*



*Frank Rainbow with two Dorettis at the Malvern Triumph meeting, 1982 (courtesy of Helen Rainbow).*

Their worries increased with the development of the Mark II Swallow 'Sabre' prototypes. This much improved model offered everything the Americans wanted as well as two roomy children's seats which the Coventry competitors didn't have. These competitors were also customers of the parent T.I. group, but on a much larger scale. It was made known that if the Swallow continued in production, they might look elsewhere for components. The result of this was that Frank Rainbow was told to close down the production line at Walsall Airport and to sack workers who couldn't be used elsewhere. All were found other jobs. The Doretti, a well-made luxury sports car, was no more. Frank Rainbow left to run his own firm and motor car production ceased in Walsall.

It is possible to speculate that Walsall lost much by this decision, since the Doretti was likely to have become an even bigger success. Frank Rainbow was both an engineer and a stylist of great ability who could have headed a business which would have been as successful for Walsall as Morgan cars is for Malvern. Sadly it was not to be.

## **SWALLOW 'DORETTI' 1954-6**

**1991 cc Triumph TR2 engine, 4-speed overdrive gearbox, rear axle. 4-cylinder, 83 x 92 mm bore and stroke, overhead-valve operation by pushrod. Two carburettors. 90 brake horsepower.**

**Chassis of Swallow design, twin-tube steel, with front suspension by independent wishbone and coil spring, rear by half-elliptic leaf spring and torque rod. Drum brakes. 5.50 x 15 inch wheels and tyres.**

**Bodywork of Swallow design in aluminium and steel, two-seater, two-door sports car. Leather interior trim, canvas hood, sidescreens.**

**Wheelbase 7' 11". Track 4' 0" front, 3' 9½" rear.**

**Overall length 13' 0".**

**Width 5' 1".**

**Ground clearance 6".**

**Weight with fuel, etc. 1 ton.**

**Maximum speed approx. 100 m.p.h.**

**0-60 m.p.h. 13.4 seconds.**

**Fuel consumption 28 m.p.g.**