

COACHBUILT

Cadillac

It was meant to go into limited production, but so much time and effort went into the creation of the prototype that this Thirties-style Courier-Cadillac Special must remain a one-off forever

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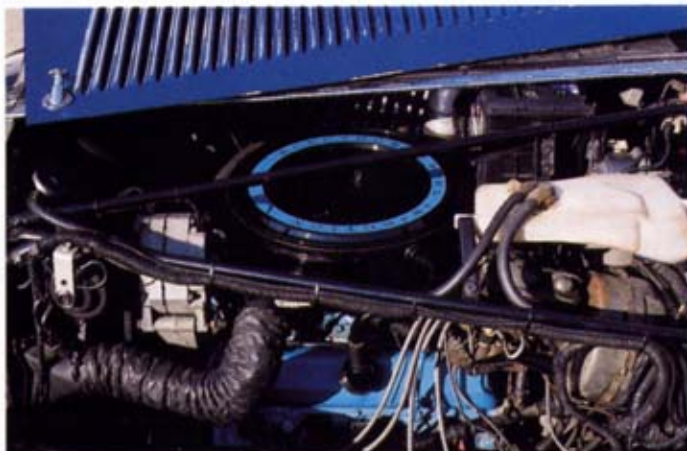
SOME people just aren't afraid to take on a major project. Indeed, they seem to thrive on the sheer challenge. And so it was that, back in 1988, Rob Maidment embarked upon the task of creating a 1930s-style roadster, albeit with all the creature comforts, safe handling and performance of a modern car.

The project was initially commercially motivated, the idea being to produce between ten and fifty cars, with sales targeted at the affluent end of the market, aimed at the discerning enthusiast who sought something that little bit different and characterful to drive.

First though, a prototype had to be built and Rob, from Haverhill, Suffolk, a mathematician, engineer and boss of manufacturing company Courier Products, already had the ideal 'donor' vehicle which would form the basis of the main structure, as well as donating the engine, gearbox, interior, running gear and most of the necessary fixtures and fittings: his own 1978 Cadillac Seville. The Seville's floorpan and wheelbase dimensions were exactly in keeping with the size of scale Rob had envisaged for the new car. All he had to do was strip off all the Seville's body panels, carry out a little restructuring work, re-clothe it with Thirties-style bodywork, add some detailed finishing work and, hey presto, job done!

I joke, of course. It was to be a major undertaking that would take Rob the next two years to complete. He put in six hours of hard toil every day after a normal day's work, plus every weekend, and ended up employing additional skills and craftsmanship from twenty different companies. An estimated 6000 man hours went into the construction of the prototype, and even after the car was completed it still required quite a bit more development work to improve the handling.

The project was very nearly shelved on three or four occasions, and no magazine article could begin to tell the full story of the trials and tribulations encountered building this really amazing Cadillac special. That's why Rob felt compelled to write a book on the subject, a volume that should appear in print very soon. All thoughts of a limited production run were



soon quashed when it became clear how much Rob had taken on just building the prototype, a car that will remain truly unique. There will, it seems, only ever be one Courier Cadillac.

Retaining the Seville's monocoque at least ensured that its inherent strength was maintained. It also already had all the tooled-up fixings for things like seat belts, doors and so on, which made life considerably easier. In addition, keeping the wheelbase in exactly the same position meant retaining the good driving qualities of the late 1970s Seville, which was very important.

A spaceframe (retaining all the original inner wings) was specially fabricated and then attached to the front of the monocoque in order to re-attach the original front half chassis. A tubular frame was made, to which the rear bodywork would be attached. The rear doors of the Seville were retained, cut to suit and used in reverse.

The Seville's original roof was cut to size, kinked twice and a hole cut out for the rear window. The roof was then covered in mohair. Although the new car looks like a roadster, it actually isn't - the roof is a permanent fixture. Much thought

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went into creating a genuine roadster, but potential problems with longitudinal rigidity dictated the car should be a coupe. Bearing in mind the British climate, this was all probably for the best.

The styling of the Courier-Cadillac's aluminium bodywork was initially inspired by the Mercedes 540K of the 1930s, with additional influences from several other Thirties classics and a front grille copied from the '78 Cadillac. This was beautifully fabricated by third-generation, 21 year old Gary Pitney of GP Panelcraft (of Bracknell, Berkshire), who nowadays is considered to be one of the top body fabricators in the country.

The Courier's final two-tone blue paintwork (two-pack) is as close as possible a match to the shades used by Duesenburg on their cars, much favoured by Rob Maidment. The overall effect is an absolute delight.

The Seville's 5.7-litre V8 powerplant and automatic transmission were installed in the fast developing prototype, as was most of the running gear. Later though, after the car had been running for a few years, Rob decided to upgrade the performance and fitted a 6.6-litre GM block, sourced from

FAR LEFT: THE ENGINE WAS MOVED BACK BY TWO FEET A 6.6-LITRE GM BLOCK USES THE ORIGINAL 5.7-LITRE CYLINDER HEADS

LEFT: COMFORTABLE CABIN MAKES LIGHT WORK OF LONG JOURNEYS

'Buffalo Bill's' emporium near Heathrow Airport. The original 5.7-litre fuel-injected cylinder heads were retained and the engine now cranks out around 300bhp, giving it a top speed of 125mph and a 0-60 time of around eight seconds. The engine is now positioned two feet further back than when in the Seville, as the radiator currently sits exactly between the two front wheels.

The interior of the Courier-Cadillac Special retains all the Seville's creature comforts: switchgear, cruise control, electric windows, air conditioning and other such goodies. The project was finally completed in 1990, but did it perform and handle as well as it looked? Not quite, as Rob explains: 'The springs needed to be altered front and rear, not drastically but enough to make a worthwhile difference. We had to get the ride height correct as we'd taken 400 to 500 pounds off the front, and although we hadn't put any weight on the rear, the weight distribution was now wrong and therefore the springs were out of synchronisation.

'That was an area we knew nothing about and had completely failed to foresee. Then again, because of the change in weight distribution, the anti-roll bars were also out of synchronisation. Conveniently, doubling up at the rear and partly welding them solid made them about two and a half times the strength of the original - a good cure.

'The shock absorbers were a bit of a nightmare because the level ride on the back is a standard GM component and unadjustable. What we had to do in the end was fit Koni shocks all round, to the correct damping. Now the level rides are empty of oil, other than pure lubrication, and they simply level the car, acting as nothing more than added adjustable springing. We also had to widen the track at the back slightly - which helped - and we also had to put a lot more castor on the front.'

The finished and fully sorted Courier-Cadillac Special is



ABOVE: SEVILLE'S SUB-STRUCTURE WAS THOROUGHLY BLASTED

ABOVE RIGHT: THE CADILLAC'S REAR DOORS WERE RETAINED, TAILORED TO FIT AND MOUNTED 'IN REVERSE'. CLEVER STUFF!



ABOVE LEFT: THE BASIC BODYSHELL STARTS TO TAKE SHAPE

ABOVE FAR LEFT: LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL!

LEFT: THE 'DONOR' CAR. THE TRANSFORMATION IS REMARKABLE -

ABOVE: FASCINATING OLD LELAND & FAULCONER DOCUMENTATION

COACHBUILT *Cadillac*

‘THE CAR MAY BE IRREPLACEABLE,
BUT IT’S NOT IRREPAIRABLE’

now a truly stunning automotive creation. It's beautifully built, turns heads wherever it goes and has received wide acclaim on both sides of the Atlantic. Perhaps most satisfying of all for Rob was when the car was featured in Cadillac's own in-house magazine, *Cadillac Voice*, in 1994. They seemed more than enthusiastic for their name to be continued to be associated with this classic special.

The fact that a Cadillac was the basis for the car is even more appropriate when we learn that Rob's very first car was a 1939 Cadillac, while in his university days he used to transport his student friends down to the pub in a Cadillac hearse. His daily driver is also a Cadillac, another '78 Seville, which has so far clocked up an amazing 295,000 miles.

Not content with using his creation purely to attend shows or for high days and holidays, Rob also enjoys competitions and the Courier-Cadillac Special is regularly entered in sprints. It has even taken part in the Pomeroy Trophy race at Silverstone. The Special has also been tested on the track both at MIRA and the Goodwood Circuit, where professional driver Chris Snowden was complimentary about its handling qualities, likening it to that of the current Bentley Brooklands. You have to remember, of course, that the Cadillac weighs in at a hefty 4100lbs, just under two tons: 'Because the diff is so highly geared at under 3-1 ratio, on some sprints I hardly get out of first gear', grins Rob. This proud creator/owner clearly derives enormous pleasure from driving the car, especially when making the most of it in sprints. Indeed, he has a good attitude that many of us could learn from: 'The car may be irreplaceable but it's not irreparable.'

Rob seems to have exactly fulfilled all the initial design criteria for the Courier-Cadillac and, in recognition of all the people who had a hand in creating the car, he has had a plaque engraved, listing all their names, which is mounted on the car.

But our story does not quite end here. Indeed it takes on a bizarre twist, for Rob has only recently discovered that his wife Linda's great great uncle was none other than Robert C Faulconer who, together with partner Henry Leland, produced the very first Cadillac cars in 1902. 'I had seen the name Faulconer, with its same unusual spelling as my wife's maiden name, in a Cadillac book in 1988 and we often joked about Linda's family having the same surname. Of course, we knew there couldn't possibly be any connection with her

family', enthuses Rob. 'We even joked about my father-in-law's father also being a Robert C Faulconer!'

'Nevertheless, I still found it intriguing that they shared the same name and, when clarifying certain aspects of the book I had written, decided to dig a little further. My father-in-law, Ivor, had quite forgotten about the Faulconer in



Cadillac, but he had met, quite by chance, the Reverend Jim Faulconer from Ohio in a bank in Arundel, Sussex, where Jim was a tourist passing through.

Amazingly, he was a genealogist and had written a book on the Faulconers of America. He sent Ivor a copy of the book, but when I read it I was dismayed that there was no mention of Robert C Faulconer.'

Rob then wrote to Jim and politely informed him of the omission, which led Jim to do some further research at the Great Genealogical Library in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Robert C Faulconer had, in fact, been born in England in November 1845 and Rob later discovered that he had gone to America in the early 1870s to live, married a judge's daughter, had six daughters and went on to become a timber tycoon before forming the partnership with engineer Henry Leland. He retired as president of the Leland and Faulconer Manufacturing Co in 1905 and died in 1907.

'Two of the six daughters were named Margaret and Kathleen', continues Rob. 'And my father-in-law, Ivor, suddenly remembered that he had once met two old ladies who were relations, who had been called Margaret and Kathleen. Ivor had not realised that they had anything to do with the Faulconer side - but, of course, they were actually two of Robert C Faulconer's daughters. Ivor researched the family tree and found Robert C Faulconer with six daughters, but then there was no further mention of him. With no sons though, and being the eldest of his generation, it is just possible that the other Robert C Faulconer, my wife's grandfather, was in fact named after him - but that we will never know for sure!'

By this stage, Rob just couldn't believe the story that was unfolding. But the clincher came when Ivor went through some very old family papers and came across indisputable evidence which proved beyond any shadow of a doubt that Robert C Faulconer was indeed Rob's wife, Linda's, great great uncle. He found a sheet of Leland and Faulconer Manufacturing Co of Detroit headed notepaper, on which Robert C Faulconer had written all his family details. Eureka!

This new-found information was just as enthusiastically received by Cadillac historians in America. Rob, who also just happens to be acting magazine editor of the Cadillac Owners' Club GB, has since discovered that the date on which the very first Cadillac rolled off the production line - October 17th - was also the date that he married Linda. But perhaps the most amazing aspect of this whole story is that if Rob's father-in-law, Ivor, had not chanced upon meeting the Rev. Jim Faulconer, Robert C Faulconer's personal details, along with his family connections, may never have been unearthed. Isn't life just full of incredible coincidences? ★

Special thanks to Lee and Stort Cruises for the Water Mill at Gaston Green (near Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire) photo location.



ABOVE: HENRY LELAND (ON THE LEFT) AND ROBERT C. FAULCONER