

I married a Cadillac

Jonathan Sale reports on one man's love affair with a classic American marque

FANGIO and Stirling Moss ate at the Bull's Head, Cheshunt, Herts when the Lotus factory was just down the road. But Lotus moved to Norfolk and Cheshunt's "Pub Lotus" is now patronised by the driver of a car that is virtually the antithesis of that sporting marque...

There is only one Cadillac in its car park as I pull in. In fact, there is only one Cadillac in the world like this one. Robert Maidment, who has parked it there, has been driving Cadillacs since he was too young to take them on a public road — and, uncannily, a family connection with the marque has recently been unearthed.

Maidment's car began its life as a four-door saloon, a standard 1978 Cadillac Seville, and has now morphed into a two-door roadster. A massive new radiator grille now nestles between the front wheels and the long narrowed bonnet stretches back over the space formerly occupied by the front seats. The wings sweep back from the steel bumper. In two-tone Duesenberg blue, it looks long, low and lean. In the words of Goodwood instructor Chris Snowdon, "For a road car, it's absolutely marvellous".

Described by the American magazine *Car Collector* as "one of the best looking neo-Classics ever built", this Seville is known as the "Courier Cadillac" (after Robert Maidment's Cheshunt-based company, which uses it as a promotional vehicle) and as the "Haverhill Cadillac" (after the town where the conversion took place). This roadster is like a racehorse, partly because of its speed (125mph on a German autobahn) and partly because it is



Hugely impressive: the Cadillac can hold its own on the race track

owned by a syndicate of six enthusiasts.

The star of motor shows at which it appears, the car is being kept indoors to prevent the winter weather wreaking havoc on its carefully restored body. In fact, sightings of Cadillacs in general will be rare until the spring.

"We are mostly busy on our cars throughout the winter months," says Bill Greenwood, co-founder and membership secretary of the Cadillac Owners Club of Great Britain (Dunvegan, Lynn Road, Kings Lynn, Norfolk PE33 0HG).

His own '78 Seville has been out of its garage once in the last four years — and that was only for a photographic session. "We had a 'Courier Cadillac' (after Robert Maidment's Cheshunt-based company, which uses it as a promotional vehicle) and as the 'Haverhill Cadillac' (after the town where the conversion took place). This roadster is like a racehorse, partly because of its speed (125mph on a German autobahn) and partly because it is

Ian Mucklechurch, who is about to join the club, keeps his vehicle even closer to home. "I have a Cadillac in one of my sitting-rooms," he reveals. "I had the room specially furnished around it by

Harrods. It is a wonderful ice-breaker, a '59 Cadillac Convertible with enormous tail fins."

Now that it has been restored, Mucklechurch's Caddy is as it was in July 1959: "It went in to have the electrics done and came out five years later with a total body-off rebuild." No wonder that, once driven into his house, it has been parked for keeps.

At this time of year our best bet of seeing the stars of the General Motors stable is in the pages of *The Cadillac Century* by John Heilig (Apple Press, £12.99). After the glossy pictures of seven-seater museum pieces comes a final chapter on "Dream Cars", the most dreamy of which is, yes, the Maidment-mobile. It was also a nightmare, as Robert will reveal in a book he is writing about the project.

As he chauffeurs me around the Cheshunt Bypass in armchair luxury, I watch the Cadillac badge at the far-distant end of the bonnet skimming majestically ahead of us.

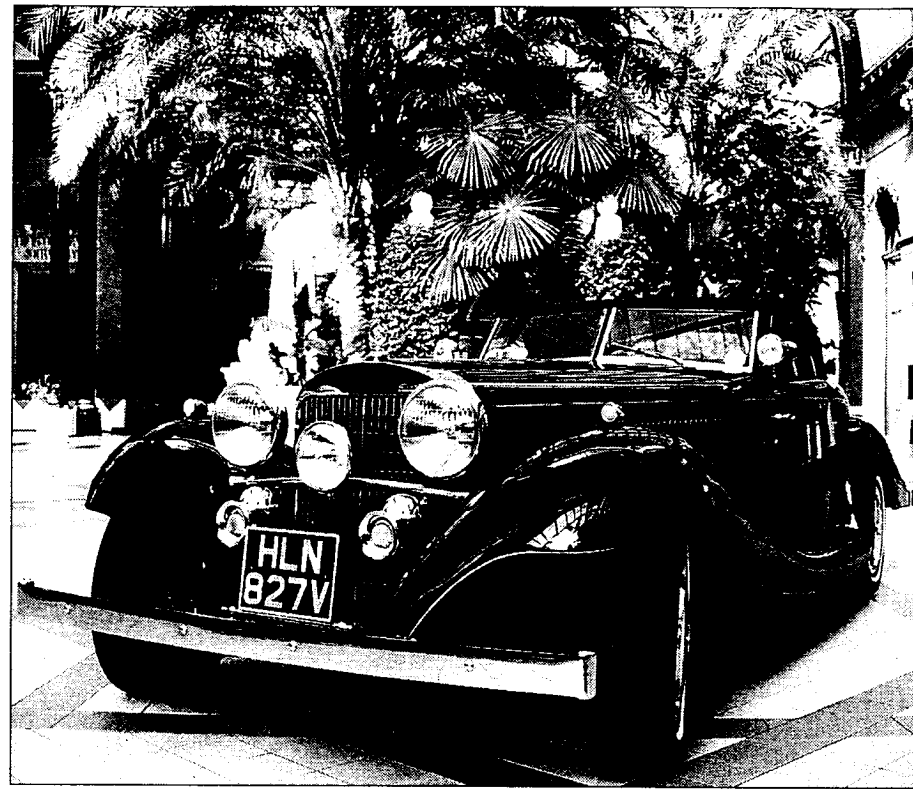
"Remember, you are effectively driving from the back seat," he explains.

Ever since as a child in South Africa he saw a Cadillac's windows shoot up and down, Robert Maidment has been fascinated by the marque. It might be in the genes: his great-uncle Percy was one of Britain's first Cadillac drivers, and Robert, too, became an owner, first in South Africa and then in this country. Having noticed that a battered old Mercedes had fetched £1.6 million at auction, he came up with the idea of turning a Seville saloon into a retro Classic, the first of a limited edition of high-priced — and driveable — cars. He gathered round him a band of men who were as enthusiastic, or possibly deranged, as he was.

There was, unfortunately, a problem with the timing, not of the engine but of the financial situation. Ten years ago, the nation's economy was screeching to a halt, which put the brake on any chance of selling models with six-figure price-tags. By 1990, Maidment and his colleagues had produced only the prototype, the Courier Cadillac, in the process spending the kind of money which would have brought them a new Cadillac off the shelf. That's quite apart from some 6,000 hours of their own time.

"This might not be a commercial success," Maidment says now, "but it is definitely not an artistic or mechanical failure."

Still, the Cadillac company itself had been born of a rare business failure by the generally successful Henry Ford. In 1902, Ford walked away from what was to become Cadillac when the fledgling enterprise ran into a financial roadblock. The shareholders called in Leland



Back seat driving: the long narrowed bonnet stretches back over the space formerly occupied by the front seats

& Faulconer, a Detroit engineering company, which promptly built the first three Cadillacs under contract and later merged with the car company itself. Maidment was intrigued when he came across the reference to Robert Faulconer, one of the partners in the Detroit firm, as Faulconer was the maiden name of Linda — Mrs Maidment. "Isn't that funny?" he joked to his wife. "Your family started Cadillac!"

In fact, it was true. Ivor Faulconer, Linda's father, had some years earlier bumped into an American clergyman who shared the same surname. The Reverend Jim Faulconer was an amateur

genealogist and later discovered, in the 1900 census for Detroit, that Robert Faulconer of Cadillac fame had been born in England and had four daughters. Ivor suddenly realised that as a boy he had met two of them. His wife was Robert Faulconer's great-great-niece.

Finally, Maidment discovered that proof had been in his wife's family archives all the time: a letter from her great-great-uncle Robert — on Leland & Faulconer notepaper with a letterhead depicting their factory.

Maidment was astounded. His first car was a Cadillac; by its conversion, his present car occupies an

honourable place on the Cadillac roll of honour; and now, as he puts it, "I discover I have been sleeping with the Cadillac family all these years!"

He climbed into the roadster in the afternoon gloom and the headlights came on automatically, triggered by the photosensitive cell. Cadillac lights have been doing that for decades.

● *The Courier Cadillac will be exhibited next Friday (10am-5pm) and Saturday (10-1pm) March 12-13 at Enterprise 2000, in the Haverhill Sports Centre, Haverhill, Suffolk. Admission is free.*