

Friends



reunited

You never forget the first time. For most of us it was a beaten up Micra, but Tom Stewart learned to drive in the family's beloved Doretti. Sold in 1986, he's tracked it down again 16 years on. Divorce papers are now pending on the Fiat Multipla

IT'S LATE in the afternoon here in Oslo, mild but changeable, with just the occasional tiny spot of rain to be felt on the top of my slowly but inexorably expanding forehead. But no matter because it's near enough perfect for a nice drive in an open two-seater sports car.

I've been to Norway once before in my life, right up in the frozen north. But I'd never been to its capital, founded (according to Norse chronicle) by Harald Hardrade in 1048. Hardrade had a reputation as a formidable Viking warrior, although that didn't save him from defeat at the hands of Harold at Stamford Bridge, days before Harold himself was defeated by William the Conqueror at Hastings and the face of Britain was transformed forever. For a place that played such a pivotal role in European history, it's a surprisingly sedate kind of city, marked by dignified parks and self-consciously classical vistas.

But I'm not here to gab about the history of Oslo, rather to retrace a few steps of my own. That said, as I follow the Punto driven by my local guide, I've really no idea where we started from, where we're going or how to get back. And all the road signs are in Viking. None of that matters, though, because the traffic is light, the motor's sweet and anyway, I'm here to drive the car, not to arrive at any particular destination.

We drive past a couple of toll booths, over some bridges, through some underpasses – where we take time to savour the particularly fruity exhaust note – and within minutes we've escaped the leafy suburbs and are heading out to nowhere in particular on a snaking road which cuts through even greener rolling pastures and past shimmering lakes.

So, just another enviable but unexceptional working day in the life of *Top Gear's* Road



'Although I've driven one before, this '54 Shoal Green example is special to me'

Test Editor then? Well, 'enviable' I'd go along with, but 'unexceptional' couldn't be further from the truth this time, because the car I'm driving is something of a rarity; it's one of only 178 identified surviving Swallow Dorettis.

Essentially it's no more than a British designed and built all-aluminium body on Triumph TR2 running gear. Although I've driven one before – a red one in *TG* issue 56 and one of just 276 built at The Airport, Walsall – this '54 Shoal Green example, chassis 1118, originally registered PEL 589, is very special indeed. For this is the very same car in which my mum,

without saying a word about having just bought it – ten years old but in showroom condition for £250 – came to collect me from boarding school when I was an innocent and impressionable nine years old.

The very same 'Dotti', as we soon nicknamed her, which I accidentally scraped along our gatepost aged 16. The car in which, accompanied by my late father and a pair of floppy red and white L-plates, I took my first tentative steers out on the public road, aged 17. It's the car I learnt to drive in and would have taken my test in, had mother not opposed the notion of me turning up at the test centre in a sports car.

The family Viva, Cortina and a couple of Mercs all played their role in turn as primary family transportation, but our Doretti was part of the Stewart family for 22 years until, in 1986, circumstances dictated, despite much regret and sadness, that she was to be sold.

Since then we've occasionally gazed at old photos of her, reminisced and remembered her fondly, but knew little or nothing of her over the past 16 years except that she'd been exported, to Sweden we were told, more or less immediately after dad sold her to the Paradise Garage, a London classic car dealer.

We'd also heard, sometime in the late

WORDS

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PHOTOGRAPHY

ALISTER THORPE

Eighties, that she'd been crashed beyond repair, though quite where my father gleaned that erroneous info I don't know and can't now ask him. Looking at her now, Mark Twain's remark that "reports of my death have been greatly exaggerated" springs to mind.

Just a few years ago, pre-Internet, the task of tracing and locating a car like this, 16 years on and not worth a great deal of money in collector's car terms, would have required concerted effort over a period of months or more with absolutely no guarantee of success.

In truth, it had never really occurred to me to track her down as such – but within 20 minutes of idly entering 'Swallow Doretti' into Google's search engine I was in e-mail contact with one Knut Skoglund, Oslo resident and, as of July last year, the car's current owner. In fact the reason it took as long as 20 minutes was that I paused to peruse many of the other examples in doretti.co.uk's gallery before accidentally stumbling across the one that really matters.

As you'd imagine, there was an immediate flurry of e-mail exchanges between Knut and I. I was excited and indeed relieved to see our precious Dotti looking much as she did when we sold her. I could see from the photos on Knut's website that the exhaust was new, as were the 'wegian registration plates – D for Doretti, 1118 chassis number – and hey, the reversing lamp was missing, but otherwise she looked pretty much the same. Same largely original paint, same original interior, same wheels, same spotlamps, same tonneau and hood, same everything. I was also heartened to feel Knut's enthusiasm for the car shine though in his e-mails.

Knut was equally keen to learn more of the car's earlier history, to hear anecdotes and to have it confirmed that pretty much all he wanted to believe about Dotti's history, authenticity and originality was true.

Spurred on by an e-mail flyer from BA announcing that fares to Scandinavian capitals had just been slashed, I proposed to Knut that if he had no objection I'd love to see her again in the metal. "Of course you can come and drive it again, anytime you want, after all it used to be yours..." The only small proviso was that it better not be in the next week or so, because Knut was renewing the rear wheel bearings and servicing the rear drums.

And so, within the month, I'm in a car park under a block of flats somewhere in Oslo, and so is Dotti. It's a moving moment for me, partly because – I don't mind admitting – I can feel affection for a man-made machine and partly because, perhaps more than any other chattel, it's symbolic of a huge chunk of my formative years. So much water has flowed under the bridge since then that it now seems almost part of another, totally different life. Memories spark and flutter about it like moths around a lightbulb.



- **MODEL**
two-seater roadster
- **ENGINE**
1991cc, 4cyl, OHV, 8v,
90bhp @ 4,800rpm,
117lb ft @ 3,000rpm
- **TRANSMISSION**
four-speed + overdrive,
rear-wheel drive
- **BRAKES**
drums f & r
- **PERFORMANCE**
0-60mph in 13.6 seconds,
max speed 105mph
- **CURB WEIGHT**
864kg
- **ON SALE IN UK**
not since 1955
- **COST**
£1,200 (1954), £250 (1964),
c.£7,000+ (now)
- **RIVALS**
Austin-Healey 100/4, MGA,
Triumph TR2
- **RECENT PROBLEMS**
rear wheel bearings, brakes
and clutch
- **FURTHER INFO**
www.doretti.co.uk

Following a respectful period to reacquaint ourselves on our first reunion, Knut starts her up – right on the button, I might add – and drives her up the ramp outside. I'm now approaching sensory overload; there's almost too much to absorb and talk about. Aside from the car itself, Knut has her original Instruction Book (as a kid I used to regard this as almost equal to War Picture Library journals), the original vinyl side-screen wallets, the original jack and tools and a V5 complete with my mother's signature but unmistakably in my father's handwriting... For Knut's interest, I've brought over some copies of old photos from the family album.

The tyres and headlamps have been replaced, as required in Norway for driving on the wrong side, but otherwise she's pretty much as I remember her, including the home-made centre console with heater controls, ashtray and PYE radio which my dad fitted in the Sixties. There's now a small crack in the windscreen, the leather and carpet certainly look older as do the paint, tonneau, hood and screens; but all the hood studs bar one still work, while the chrome (mostly re-plated in the mid-Seventies) is still in excellent order. Bit of a shame about that dent on the nearside sill, though.

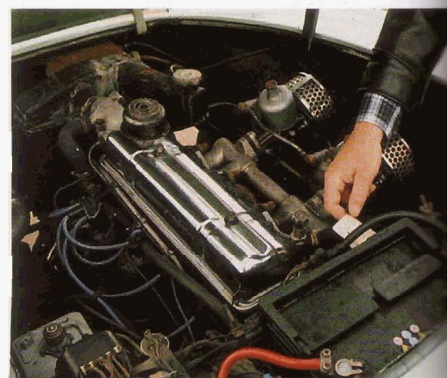
Lifting the handsome blistered bonnet reveals a new (to me) battery, distributor cap and HT leads and a new voltage regulator (under the original cover) along with a pair of K&N air filters, but otherwise all is just as it was, if a little bit older and more worn.

I remember my father replacing the head gasket once, but other than that there's no evidence, either mechanical or documentary, that the motor has ever been stripped down beyond the cylinder head, but then with the speedo reading just over 64,000 miles, there's no real reason why it should have been. I am, however, surprised that the condensed coolant recirculation system which dad fitted back in the Sixties (using a heavy-duty airline squash bottle and a foot or so of some plastic tubing) is still fully functional.

As previously agreed, it's now my duty to phone mother. Among other things, I mention to her that it's just spotting with rain and she instantly reminds me that whenever she garaged Dotti after driving in the wet she'd dry off the plastic screens with a soft towel to prevent any permanent spots forming. I assure her I'll remind the new owner to do likewise.

Before setting off for the countryside, Knut warns me that the clutch is dragging and requires some pedal pumping, and because he's serviced the rear brakes but not the fronts yet, she pulls to the left under braking. Oh, and the brake hydraulics need a bit of pumping too. And you know what, he's not wrong. I console myself with the knowledge that these faults are easily remedied and that

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PASTSTEER

the engine and gearbox are sweeter than ever. A small mid-range carburation flat spot which used to be in evidence until the engine was fully warmed has now gone. Must be those new K&Ns, because nothing else appears to have been done.

I must say, from the driver's perspective I don't remember the wood-rimmed steering wheel (a Christmas present one year, I recall, to my mother from her TR3-owning nephew) being quite so large or close to the chest, but that was how things were in 1954. And I'm willing to concede I might have been a touch leaner myself, of course. But the view through the screen and the direct, unassisted steering response brought some of my early driving memories flooding back.

The ride is as comfortable and absorbent as ever – Doretis were never street-racer sporty, they were comfy-tourer sporty. The Jaeger rev counter needle is still steady as a rock while the matching speedo needle wavers between 10mph increments, just as I remember it did 38 years ago! And during the past 16 years, it would seem that no one had unravelled the mysteries of my dad's secret immobiliser switch which, and I checked, still works just as intended. I suppose it's a good job it's been left in the on position all this time!

It transpires that Knut is actually the third Norwegian owner since this particular Doretti emigrated back in '86, and the car is one of only three which exist in Norway, the country which currently holds the monopoly of Doretis in Scandinavia.

Once or twice in recent times she's taken the odd knock – and I confess to a couple before then. My mother has also recently reminded me that dad returned home one day with his tail between his legs and a dented front wing, but that she never left so much as a mark on her. (There you are, Mum, it's on record now.)

Just before Knut acquired the car, she'd endured maybe five years of inactivity holed up in a barn, which can't have benefitted either the cosmetics or mechanicals, but Knut isn't bothered. Unlike many contemporary classic car buffs, it's the car's honesty, patina and the rich, pithy 48-year-old smell which makes it so special to Knut, and to me.

I suspect, though, that if I were to buy dear old Dotti back – tempting for me though it is, it's not under consideration for either of us – and had a pot of money to lavish on her, I'd probably travel a little further down the road as regards restoring it than Knut might be happy with.

At the airport, we say our goodbyes. Against the stylish backdrop of Gardermoen's 21st century terminal, our Doretti looks better than ever before. Or maybe it's knowing that I'm unlikely to ever see her again. As I walk to the check-in desk I try hard to swallow a lump just appeared in my throat. ●