

ESCAPE ROAD

Rolls-Royce Phantom III

Smooth as clean oil, as long as the oil was clean

By Roger Barlow

Although the Fiat 500 of a couple issues back was mine, I cannot lay claim to ever having owned an example of the legendary Rolls-Royce Phantom III, though I have driven two of them.

In the 1930s almost every maker of luxury cars felt obligated to offer something smoother and more exotic than a mere eight cylinder power plant...Packard, Pierce Arrow, Hispano-Suiza, Daimler (sleeve valves!), Cadillac, Lincoln, Franklin (air cooled, of course), Lagonda, Maybach. Less prestigious makers tried to cash in on the glamour of V12s somewhat on the cheap...like Auburn and Ford's Zephyr and Continental; in England, Atalanta and Allard.

Considering how smooth and unobtrusive most of today's four cylinder engines are, with a BMW six being almost turbine-like, were more than eight cylinders ever needed? Maybe not actually "needed" but certainly 12s were desirable engines for large luxury cars requiring something like six to 10 liters to produce the power and torque to get the job done with near silence and minimum vibration...and maximum prestige.

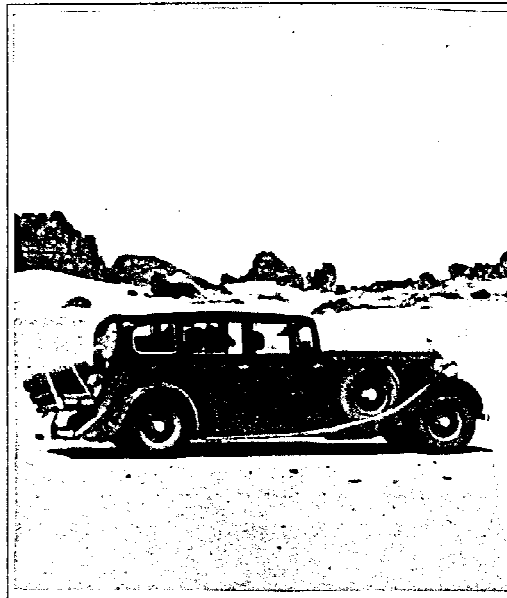
Remember, in the late '20s and '30s, engines were not isolated from the chassis by sound- and vibration-absorbing motor mounts as effective as we have today. Engines really could be felt by the occupants...like the pea beneath the mattresses. And the bigger the pistons and cylinders, the larger and more disturbing the automotive pea. A 12-cylinder 7.0-liter engine was simply going to be appreciably less evident at idle and at full power than one with only six or eight larger cylinders. It would also be more likely to pull top gear from a walking pace and so reduce gear shifting with the attendant slight lurching of the regal or wealthy occupants at each gear change.

As no one had more regal and/or wealthier clients than Rolls-Royce, the company was behooved to provide them with a car of ultimate smoothness...the Phantom III with 12 cylinders. A model of which just over 700 were constructed (most other cars are manufactured) before WWII.

This was the last automobile with which the failing Frederick Henry Royce (residing

in the more salubrious climate of southern France due to a prolonged illness) provided any input or guidance. He died before the PIII was ready for production. So there are aspects of it that must be to the credit or discredit of the R-R design staff at Derby.

In any event, the \$13,000 PIII was the



first Rolls with independent front suspension...horizontal coil springs enclosed and working in oil in conjunction with the shock absorbers. Complex, perhaps, but effective. Above all, praise is due the basic concept of that 60 degree V12 engine. One glance and you knew you were in the presence of automotive craftsmanship and engineering elegance of the highest order. No rusting cast iron or tacky polished alloys in sight when an owner proudly lifted the hood (or had his driver do so), it was all lustrous black enamel with only bolt heads or nuts of polished nickel. As beautifully finished as the R-R aero engines, it looked much like one.

The two banks of cylinders were cast in light alloy with iron liners and were not offset; necessitating blade-and-fork con rod big ends. The crankshaft ran in seven main bearings. There were two spark plugs per cylinder, each part of a completely duplicated and separate ignition system.

Pushrod actuated valves operated in light alloy head castings and here was to be found the most controversial aspect of the PIII. The valve tappets were of the newly developed self-adjusting type, their reliable functioning depended upon very clean oil. There was, apparently, definite trouble there. Either the design of the tappet mechanism had not yet been perfected, or oil filtration was just not good enough. Enough that after a couple of years of production the factory switched to solid tappets with a consequent gain in customer satisfaction and power output, said to then be about 180 bhp.

For this reason or others, the PIII acquired the reputation of being the most expensive engine in the world to overhaul. (Of course, no one had yet to deal with a Ferrari or Lamborghini V12!) However, I doubt it was an engine that, except for those hydraulic valve lifters, gave all that much trouble. This opinion is based on the 1937 experience of H.E. Symons, of the *London Sunday Times*, who drove a PIII Park Ward limousine 12,500 miles, round trip, from London to Nairobi in record time across the Sahara desert and through the mud of tropical central Africa.

He experienced no mechanical trouble whatever with this "town" car that had already done 20,000 miles. The indestructibility of the Rolls engine, driveline and suspension was manifest as the car was often driven full throttle in second gear for great distances through heavy sand, sometimes deeply rutted or ridged and rocky. (A film-making friend, shooting in central Australia, became an authority on broken axle shafts because he had to replace so many on Land Rovers, Toyotas and Dodges.) Symons carried no axle shafts and virtually no other spares on that African run. And added not a drop of water to the radiator despite most of the distance being covered in over 100 degree heat.

By comparison, my own few miles at the wheel were as nothing but they served to confirm the silence and flexibility of that 7.3 liter V12 with its smooth surge of power in second gear that would send this almost 3-ton, 142 inch wheelbase sedan on its way at a pace that must have been really impressive in the '30s, when its top speed of 95-100 mph was the equal of many sports cars. Steering, unassisted but aided by the large R—R wheel, was surprisingly light and reasonably quick at less than 3.5 turns.

Forgive me, Sir Frederick, if I praise your noble last effort by suggesting that it might well have been known as the Rolls-Royce "Royale." As I said at the start, Sublime Complexity. ■