



# The Automobile



## A good Ardea

Steady Barker on Lancia's forgotten baby



1914 Le Zèbre  
back on the road



Auto-biography:  
Hamish Orr-Ewing



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# Back on the Road

by Michael Ware

The subject of this month's article in our series on restoration dates from the era of the French cyclecar before WW1. SA le Zèbre (later to become Borie et Cie) was founded in 1909 at Puteaux in the western suburbs of Paris. The company has been credited with producing France's first truly popular light car. Jules Salomon, its designer, came from Unic and went on to work for Charron and for Citroën, where he was responsible for the 5CV. The company continued throughout the Vintage period but a move to a larger, more expensive product to fight competition from the selfsame Citroën 5CV and Renault's 6CV proved unsuccessful. Le Zèbres were not made after 1931.

Although it is commonly believed that the make took its name from the black and white striped African equine quadruped, its derivation is probably less obvious. The marque historian Philippe Schram believes it came, in fact, from the nickname of an office boy at Unic.

The car I have been to see is owned by Gerry Belton from West Somerset, whom I first met in 1961 when he was public relations officer for Allard. His car is a 1914 four-cylinder Model C with a capacity of 785cc.

In 1994 Gerry and his fellow stall-holders at the September Autojumble were having a cup of tea in the restaurant at the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu. Looking out over the Automart arena, they could see 100 or so cars lined up for sale. Right in front of them, painted yellow with black stripes, was a barn find Le Zèbre. The tiny car intrigued Gerry, though he did not go so far as to buy it on the spot. It was not until a day or so later that he got in touch with the owner and a sale was agreed.

Over the years he has been able to piece together much of its more recent history. Apart from the chassis number, 3965, telling us it was built in August, 1914, nothing is known about it until WW2, though many examples of this make were used from new by the French Army during the 1914-18 conflict. In 1944 it was found in a Paris scrap yard by Jacques Benoist, a butcher from Courseulles sur Mer in Normandy.

In recent years Gerry has met this former owner. 'Despite language difficulties on both sides,' he says, 'We learned a lot from him'. The butcher hid the little car until after the war was over, and then had



Gerry Belton's 1914 Le Zèbre Model C, fully restored in time to celebrate its centenary in August this year

it 'totally repaired' for use in his business. The work included the addition of modern wings and a large, rounded compartment at the back, as well as the fitting of full electrics, well based wheel rims and a later gearbox. When he no longer had a use for the Le Zèbre – we are not certain exactly when this was – he 'retired' it to a local barn. Before

it was laid up, however, someone painted the front part yellow with black stripes and the rear in a chequer-board pattern in the same colours, with the number three on the doors, to take part in the local carnival. This colouring is never found on a real-life zebra, of course.

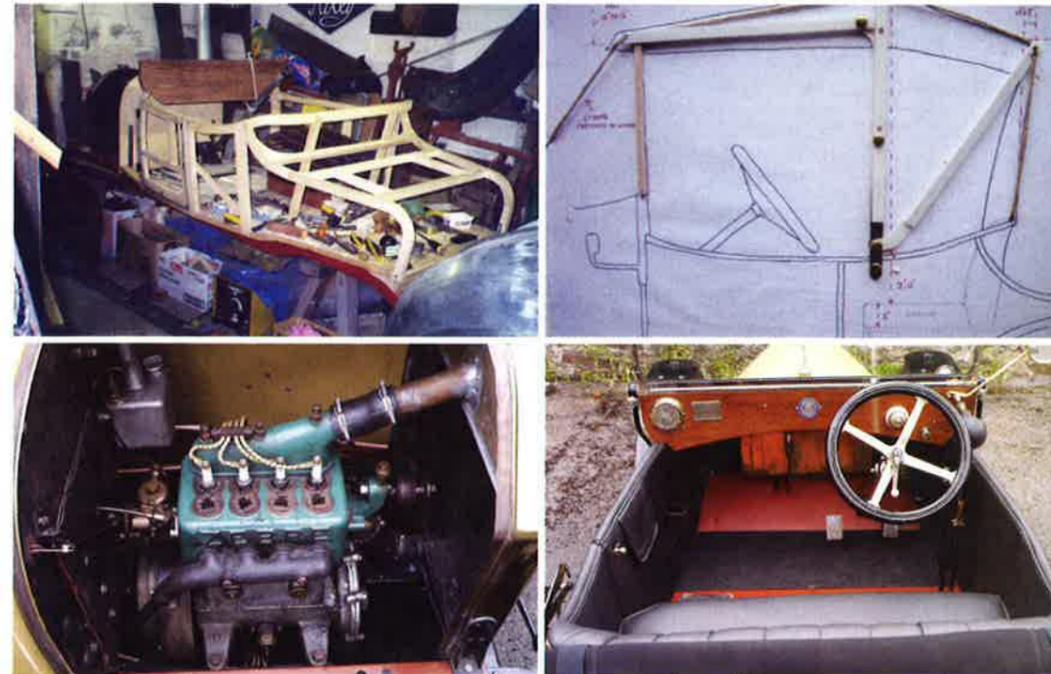
In 1988 the barn in which it still languished was about to be

converted into a house. When it was being cleared out, this motley relic was discovered by a French dealer. Stored with it was a 1930s Peugeot commercial travellers' saloon with doors at the back. Later the Le Zèbre was bought by the well known autojumbler Shaun Magee, who owns a converted water mill nearby. It was Shaun who took it to

**Below left** A Le Zèbre in use by the French Army in WW1 **Below right** Gerry's car as found in the barn at Courseulles sur Mer in Normandy **Bottom left** The engine of the Le Zèbre, as bought **Bottom right** Interior of the car when it was purchased



# 1914 Le Zèbre



**Top left** The new ash frame built by Dave Partridge **Top right** The balsa wood and string working model that was used to design the hood and frame **Above left** The engine, showing the carburettor at the back of the block and the pressurised oil tank **Above right** The simple dashboard and cockpit, with gear lever on the right-hand side

the Beaulieu Automart.

When Gerry got it back home, he stripped the car right down so he could examine it in detail. Apart from the post-war modifications, most of it appeared to be original and in pretty good condition. The engine, though in need of rebuilding, was in surprisingly good order. Whilst he knew he could undo most of the alterations to bring it back to its original form, he was stuck for a gearbox. In place of the quadrant change to the right of the driver, a more modern type had been fitted, with the gear lever coming straight up from the box.

Having come to the conclusion that he had no alternative but to use the one that came with the car, he saw an advertisement in this magazine in January, 1997, which read: '1914 Le Zèbre Type C, chassis totally renewed. Engine running, no body', followed by an address on the Continent. After satisfying himself that it had the right type of gearbox, Gerry went straight over to Belgium and bought it. He used the engine, gearbox and wheels from the Belgian car, all of which had been completely rebuilt, and sold the other parts.

The four-cylinder engine has a quaint, pressurised oil system, run from an air pump on the offside of the crankcase. This leads to an oil tank on the nearside and a pipe leading to an oil sight-glass

mounted on the back of the petrol tank under the scuttle. The carburettor is at the back of the engine.

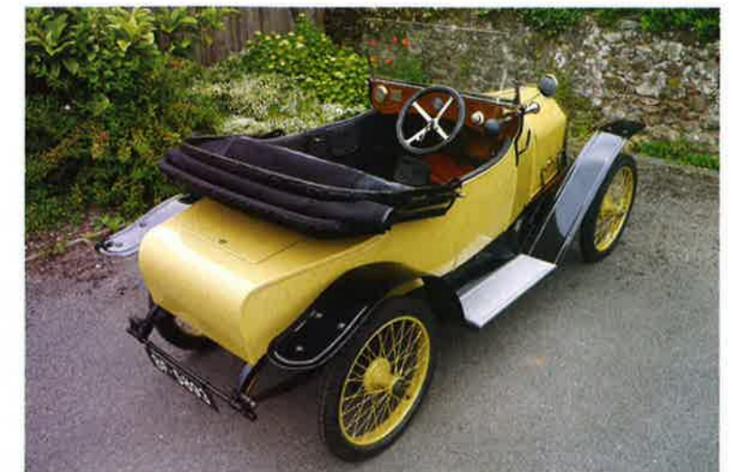
Having got all the chassis components and the engine together, he took them to his friend Tim Whellock at Vintage & Sports Car Services in Chard (telephone 01460 66434). Tim had previously restored a Tickford-bodied Wolseley Hornet Special for him (see *The Automobile*, January, 2000) and a 1927 Austin Seven Chummy. In the process of assembling the Le Zèbre, he had to make all the linkages for the gear change, now on the right-hand side, and the handbrake, which operated on the back of the gearbox. As the car had no propeller shaft, one from an Austin Seven was adapted to fit.

Since advancing years dictated that Gerry needed a self-starter, a Dynastart was fitted very neatly under the floorboards in such a way that a future owner could remove it easily. Whilst this was going on, Gerry tried to find someone to rebuild the steering wheel in the correct wood – all he had was the frame. So far, no luck, though he did obtain a similar wood rimmed wheel of the right period from Guy Ravenscroft. He is still keen to find a correct example.

The ash body frame of the car, although complete, required a lot of work, especially as the back end

had been drastically altered by the butcher. It was decided to make a completely new one, using many of the old parts as patterns. In the absence of any plans to work from, Gerry took his inspiration from contemporary photographs. Being a bit of a perfectionist, for this job he turned to another old friend, the skilled coachbuilder Dave Partridge, of West Chinnock near Chard (01935 881332). He produced a new frame from seasoned ash and skinned it with steel, as the original had been. Gerry had made a full scale cardboard mock-up of the correct rear end as a guide for him.

The rear of the car now looks as it would have done originally



The new steel wings were made up by one of Tim Whellock's craftsmen. Some of the original body panels have been preserved and are now hanging on the garage wall. As the original dashboard housed many 'modern' instruments, Dave Partridge made a new, relatively plain one in mahogany.

Gerry had carefully taken the old trim apart. Amongst the scrim under the old leathercloth he found a child's embroidered badge depicting a zebra-like creature with the word 'rapide' above it. In the belief this could only have been put there by someone in the factory trim shop in 1914, Gerry has kept it and mounted it in a small, glass fronted licence disc holder on the dashboard. The body was trimmed by Adrian Hagerty, also of Chard (01460 221025). Again, to avoid any doubt about what he wanted, Gerry mocked up the trim using leathercloth taken from an old sofa.

A working model in balsa wood and string, pinned to an A4 drawing of the body, was the best way he could find of showing how he wanted the hood frame to be made. Working from this model, Dave Partridge made up the new hood. The floor is covered in the original style of linoleum. After a debate about the colour scheme for the finished car, a yellow shade fairly close to mustard was chosen and was applied by Tim Whellock.

Gerry concedes it has taken a long time from that far-off day at Beaulieu Autojumble in 1994. But he is well pleased with the result, and so he should be: it's a wonderful rebuild and all concerned with it should be proud. Gerry will make sure the car celebrates its centenary in style in August, 2014.