

County Classics

BY GRANT FORD | If you have an event that classic car enthusiasts would like to know about let Grant Ford know. Email him at ford27163@aol.com



Sixty six years old and still turning heads ... just like Helen Mirren

RESTORING race team car transporters has become extremely popular over the past decade.

Historic race teams see it as part of the uniform to arrive at the circuit with a suitably liveried coach conversion from the 1960s or 70s.

Elva was not just a race team; they were an engineering company on the south coast of England who built beautiful sports cars from the mid 1950s.

The name Elva was derived from the phrase 'elle va' meaning she goes, but that was the only thing French about this team, British through and through.

The story starts with Frank G Nichols, a Sussex man, who on leaving the army with some mechanical skills set up a small garage in Westham in 1947.

The business was a success and bigger premises took Frank to Bexhill, a town with a big motorsport interest that held the country's first racing on public streets.

The early post war years produced a lot of specials; home built racers that were cheap and competitive, many using an Austin 7 base with tuned engines.

Frank saw an opportunity to build his own car that could be used for work during the week and raced on the weekend.

From humble beginnings the Elva marque were involved in the building of over 1,000 machines.

The list of engine manufacturers that used their racing chassis is impressive and includes Coventry Climax, Ford, Porsche and BMW.

The McLaren Elva came along in the 1960s with a variety of power plant options. Most preferred the American Chevy 358 V8 with 482bhp.

This combination enabled Bruce McLaren to race sports cars worldwide. The cars were built at the Trojan works in Croydon run by Peter Agg in partnership with Frank Nichols.

Designated the McLaren Mk1, it enjoyed great success in the United States. This particular model also helped Bruce McLaren's racing career with a Tasman



Championship victory and win at the New Zealand GP meeting in 1964.

In fact Elva had always enjoyed a massive following in the USA. Their tiny workshops in Bexhill started with the early model, the Mk1B, the car that preceded their most successful sports car, the Courier. Building these cars at a rate of 3 per week and having the parts available to do so, leads us on to the hero of the story, the Morris Commercial PV.

Originally launched pre-World War Two, a very small number were built, however an estimated 15,000 were produced from 1946 to 1953 and many supplied via specialist coachbuilders. This particular PV is a 1947 early example exactly matching the Elva Engineering vehicle. It seems that the variants and adaptations were almost endless with use as delivery and ice cream vans, a school bus, Black Maria and even by



funeral directors.

The Elva PV was mainly used for towing and parts movements. From the heavy industry of the Midlands via the London Dockyards to the south coast; carrying tube steel for the chassis and engines from Coventry, the PV finally delivered completed Elva race cars to the waiting ships for the long journey to the USA and beyond.

Unfortunately the original PV and their other support vehicle, a Fordson E83W Pickup, along with the Elva Engineering company itself, have long since gone.

Luckily Roger Dunbar of Elva Cars (Arundel) stepped up to the plate, with his vast knowledge and enthusiasm for the marque he went on the hunt for a Morris Commercial PV in 2005 with nostalgia and a promotion tool in mind.

A year or so later, a chance phone call and some luck took Roger north east to Hull - a PV in great condition was being used to ferry goods to market and car boot sales. A deal was struck and the PV headed south.

Considering the vast distances covered daily by the PV it is remarkably basic. A driver seat only and no luxuries (not even a heater). Roger tells of a noisy, heavy and rather slow way to travel.

We discussed performance and at the 45mph top speed things become uncomfortable. Roger says the 2050cc 16hp engine is happier at 35-40mph on the flickering speedo, and so is he.

It was a vehicle for a job in a different era, so how had she survived so well? The answer laid with a Bill Mattravers.

Bill, a restorer of some note, had purchased the PV in 1993. She had been sat in a secure lock up for twenty-odd years.

It is believed the PV originally put in years of service delivering carpets in and around Bristol.

It took four years for Bill to work his magic. When asked, he told of woodworm in the lowest part of the body and the front end framework was just rotten, all cut out and replaced, once all the wood was up to scratch, new alloy panels draped the sides.



Mechanically a full engine rebuild, gearbox bearing and clutch, followed by a re wire among umpteen other jobs.

Roger knew that the time and level of expertise put in by Bill would guarantee years of enjoyment and promotion for the Elva PV. However the van was handed over to Tony Brooks for a complete mechanical check-over, and his colleague David Cooper, who has many years' experience dealing with bodywork preparation and re-sprays. The attention to detail was not going to stop now.

Once the vehicle was painted in the original PV red, artist and sign-writer Mark Weston was given the task of matching the livery from old photos in Roger's collection; the final result is just stunning.

The PV is a credit to Roger and the Elva name, a sports car builder that produced some amazing machines that seemed to have been appreciated more overseas than at home.

The Austin Commercial played a major role in the build process. In the early years all that was needed to produce these fine race cars which arrived in the back of the PV, and once completed the finished machine was trailered to its new owner behind the PV. Sixty six years old and just like Helen Mirren, (66) still turns heads everywhere she goes.

Pictured below right: The Elva Austin Commercial PV with Roger Dunbar
Above: Elva McLaren stalled at Paddock then restarted and excess fuel lit up. It happens to a 5700cc V8 Chevy
Below left: Elva McLaren exits Paddock Hill bend chased by a Corvette at Brands Hatch
Bottom Left: The factory in Bexhill with original PV

DIARY DATES

March 6: Manhood Enthusiasts Meeting Siddlesham FC 7.30pm.
 March 6: BMC Meeting The George, Burpham 8.00pm.
 March 10: Southern Classics Noggin and

Natter. Worlds End Pub, Patching.
 March 11: SADCASE meeting The Fountain Ashurst 7.30pm.

March 15-16: Vintage Presents, classic car boot sale SouthBank Centre, London.
 March 16: Manhood Enthusiasts Meet Siddlesham FC 10.00am.

March 27-30: Sadc case spring-break to Belgium. See web site for details.

April 1: Jaguar Drivers Club (Sussex) meeting The Birch Hotel, Haywards Heath.

April 4-6: The Regis Tour. See Bognor Regis Motor Club web site for details.

April 6: Vintage Car Show Amberley.

April 13: Southern Classics first show of the year Chichester College.

April 13: MG Picnic Arundel Castle, Chichester MG Owners Club.

April 13: Mayor of Havant Classic Vehicle Run.

April 20: Manhood Enthusiasts meet Siddlesham FC 10.00am.

April 20: SADCASE 'informal gathering' North St Car Park Storrington 10.00 - 1.00.

April 23: MG Sprint Goodwood.

April 27: National 'Drive it' day.

April 27: SADCASE 'Drive it' day outing to Stansted House details on web site.

April 27: Southern Classics Churches & Pubs Treasure Hunt of Sussex. See website.

May 17: Brighton and Hove Club Sprint at Goodwood.

May 17-18: Spring Autojumble Beaulieu.

May 18: Southern Classics Show Newhaven Fort see website for details.

May 18: Manhood Enthusiasts meet Siddlesham FC 10.00.

May 24: Slindon Village Fete and classic car display, Slindon College.

May 31-June 1: Floral Fair and Classic Car Show, Ashington www.floralfringefair.co.uk

We do everything to ensure all dates are correct but can change so I recommend checking with the clubs or organisers before you leave. Have an event classic car enthusiasts would like to know about let me know. ford27163@aol.com

