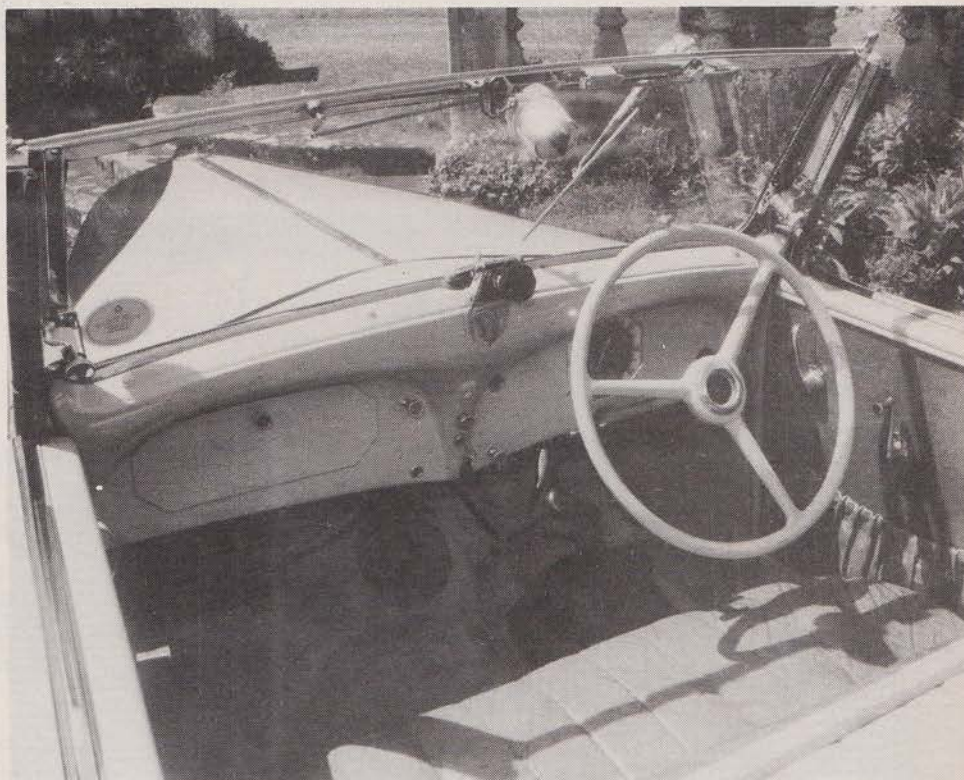


Renault Celta

Brian Palmer looks at an unusual Renault from the 'thirties

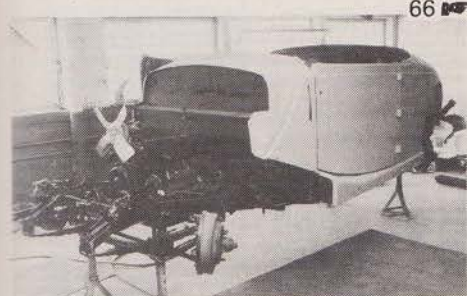
As the years go by idle dreams of owning a vintage Bentley or a Phantom II Continental dwindle in the wake of ever increasing prices which put these cars further and further out of the reach of ordinary mortals. Delving into the classified columns of motoring magazines of the 'forties and 'fifties is a positively sick-making experience especially for younger enthusiasts. It was in the middle to latter 'sixties that prices started rocketing. Nowadays enthusiasts are turning to other marques and models for their old car enjoyment at more reasonable prices — and, let's be honest, not everyone aspires to Bentleys and Royces anyway. Some of these, whilst not recognised as vintage or even post-vintage thoroughbreds by that august body, the Vintage Sports Car Club, can offer some motoring fun reflected in the charm of a by-gone age. If they have engines of modest capacity they can be economical fun too.

One such car is Peter Jewson's Renault Celta-quatre which was first registered on the first of July 1938. What makes this Renault special is its appearance at the 1937 Motor Show from where the first owner purchased the car. What it was doing between October 1937 and July 1938 we do not know — maybe it was retained by Renault for publicity purposes, or perhaps the first owner garaged the car for the winter and only used the car during the period July to October each year when the weather might be expected to be fine. In the intervening period only one other owner took charge of the vehicle and it was in storage for eight or nine years until advertised for sale in 1977. Peter Jewson is Managing Director of Luxicars of Oxford who run a thriving Renault Agency, so it seemed natural to him to try to buy the car — Peter was already an old car fanatic and owned a very nice



Above, note painstakingly simple interior details and windscreen wiper motor carefully arranged to brain the centre passenger in an accident!

Below, various stages in the Renault Celta's renovation, with the car as found at the bottom.



Renault Celta

(and fast!) post-war HRG and a couple of motor-bikes. The car as bought was complete but "edgy" and some might have been tempted to run the car there and then. But Peter Jewson decided that the time had come to restore the car to something like its original condition. So in the company's workshops the staff embarked on quite their most ambitious task to date and loved every minute of it. After twelve months of tender loving care the old Renault emerged resplendent in a new duo-tone colour scheme of chocolate and cream which suits it very well. The bow-wave treatment on the bonnet top is particularly pleasing.

The two seater coupé body sits on a boxed ladder-frame chassis with cross bracing at front centre and rear; front springs are semi-elliptic leaves while at the rear a transverse leaf spring is employed. The 1½-litre side-valve engine is rated at 12hp and has a bore and stroke of 70 × 95mm. When new that would have set you back £9.15s in Road Tax. The carburettor is a single downdraught Solex. Power is taken through a single dry disc clutch to the three speed gearbox with a silent second gear; ratios are: 1st — 15.4 to 1; 2nd — 7.8 to 1; top — 4.5 to 1. A torque tube links the gearbox and back axle. The steel disc wheels were shod with 5.50 × 16 Avon H. M. Tourist tyres and the four wheel brakes are operated by rods, with the handbrake working on all four wheels. Rather typically for European cars of the time, six volt electrics suffice, while a little bit of Gallic eccentricity

shows through with the starter motor operated by a floor pedal on the passenger's side of the car, which is a bit of a stretch for the driver. However it does give a passenger a feeling of "involvement" if allowed "to operate the starter". The metal instrument board is a splendid mixture of French Art Deco and Futurism. The pressed top rail sweeps downwards dramatically to the centre, recessed to the nearside is a lidded cubby hole while to the right, immediately in front of the driver, lies a large chrome bezelled octagonal Jaeger speedometer containing sectors to show petrol contents, oil pressure and battery charge. Numerous octagonal knobs (a wailing and gnashing of teeth from the direction of Abingdon) look after choke and ignition advance and retard, lights etc. The three spoke steering wheel contains a central horn button, but the trafficator switch is on the right of the instrument board, while a chromed twist and pull handbrake emerges from under the speedometer alongside the steering wheel. A long willowy cranked gearlever emerges through the floor high up by the scuttle and wanders sinuously like an Art Nouveau tendril under the instrument board and ever upwards towards light and air and the driver's hand. Thus in the words of a period brochure "the front seat provides ample room for three, the centre passenger enjoying ample leg-room since the driving compartment is free from obstructive levers." The windscreen is cunningly arranged to wind up or fold flat, while the window winders are geared at something like ten turns, which is another European phenomenon which still crops up today. The hood is easily put down by operating turn screws fixing it to the windscreen top rail and breaking the hood irons. The car looks at its best with the hood down, and the aspect from the driver's seat is improved immeasurably as a tiny letter-box like slit of glass suffices for rearward vision. There is a fully upholstered dicky seat for two in the rear deck though the entrance is a wee bit narrow and one might need to be fairly sprightly to ascend the two tread plates and manoeuvre into the recess provided. Comprehensive equipment for the day included: safety glass, hydraulic four wheel jacks, flush fitting trafficators (badly placed on the scuttle), plated bumpers, rear luggage grid, twin windscreen wipers, inside and outside mirror. The petrol tank holds ten gallons, while overall dimensions are: track 4ft 4in; wheelbase 8ft 11in; overall length 13ft 9in; overall width 5ft 3in; height 5ft 3in.

I had a brief run in the car along the bye-ways of Oxfordshire. The car started easily after a spell in Luxicars showroom, and after stowing the hood (I intensely dislike openable cars in the closed state in anything but the most appalling weather) we set off through the Oxford one-way systems with Peter Jewson proudly at the wheel. Out on a clearer stretch he handed over to me: the car is clearly more touring than sporting but is very pleasant nonetheless. The engine sounded remarkably smooth and the whole car felt very taut and rattle-free which does credit to the restoration team under Mr Jewson's jurisdiction. It has been some time since I last used a three speed gearbox; first (left and back) is very low; intermediate is hard over to the right and forward and it is possible to miss it if the lever is not pushed over hard enough; a gentle pull straight back finds top gear. The engine was surprisingly flexible but I really do prefer four properly spaced gears to three. The steering felt quite accurate and not too heavy, though there was an annoying squeek from a dry steering column bush when turning the wheel. The brakes seemed adequate for the job but were surprisingly light in view of their rod actuation. This is not the sort of car I would wish to fling round corners — especially with the owner sitting next to me — but I was surprised to find that it rolled very little in spite of the fact that one sits fairly high in the car. Thus it is very much one of those cars that put up a good average speed on a journey more by constancy than out-and-out performance. In short it shows that one should not be put off because a vehicle does not figure in an "official" list of what is and what is not a "proper" car. These lists are often pretty arbitrary anyway and those cars not on the list may be a lot cheaper to buy in the first place which is a plus point. This Renault Celta certainly had bags of charm and its owner had even installed a period radio receiver — it would not have surprised me at all to have heard the strains of Henry Hall and his Band! ●

Various views of the restored Renault Celta in the American Ford genre: note duo-tone paintwork with bow-wave bonnet treatment, dicky seat, rear luggage grid, simple underbonnet mechanics.

