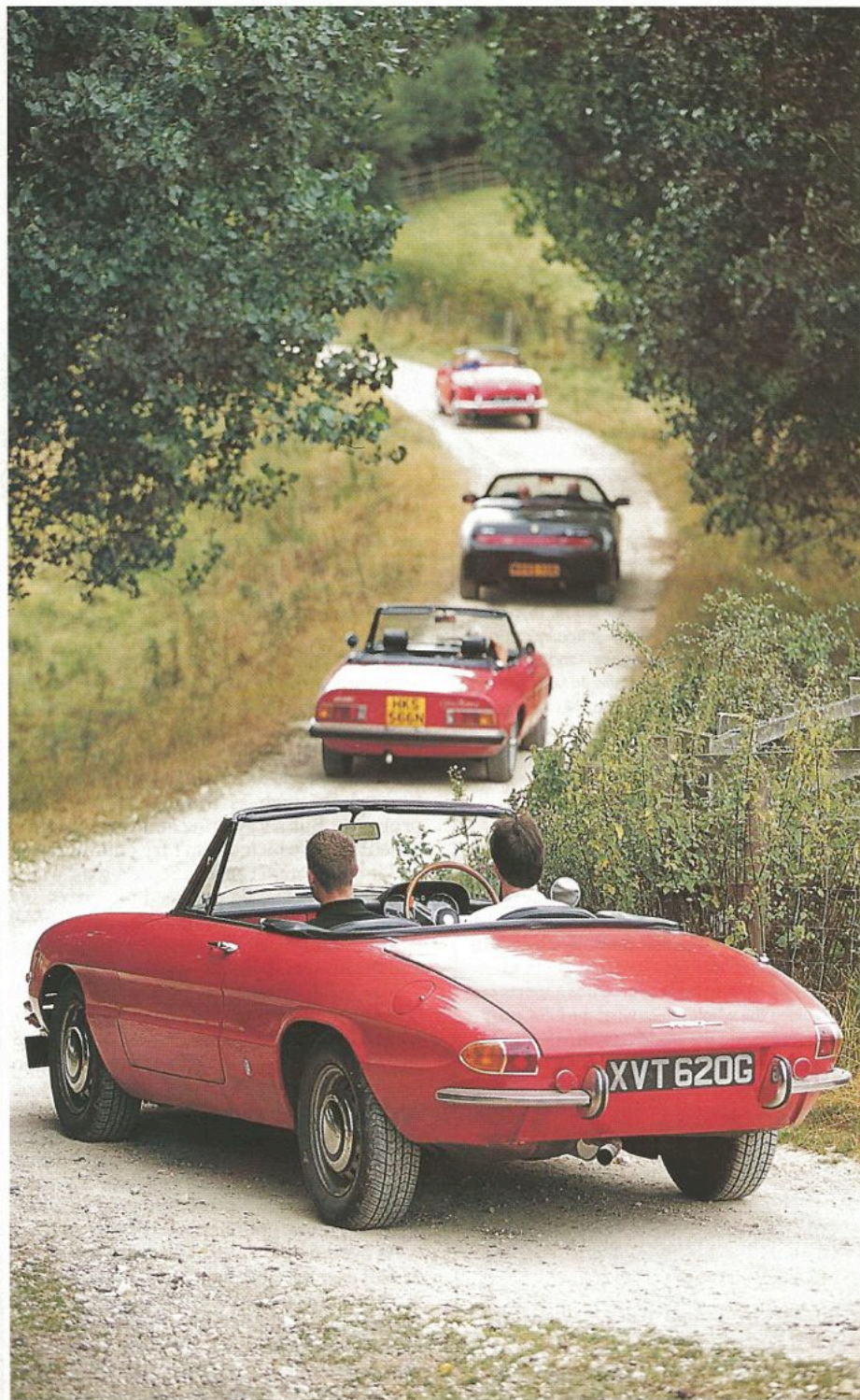


Arachnophilia

Chris Rees studies the evolution of the Alfa Romeo Spider species from Giulietta through Duetto and Veloce to the current descendant



Damp British summers. Embarrassing office-party behaviour. Toast falling butter-side-down. There aren't many things you can rely on. In this world of rapidly changing cycles, we shrug and accept jobs for life that turn into short-term contracts, coal valleys becoming silicon valleys, football managers getting sacked at the first sniff of defeat.

The same whirlwind of change whips through the car world. New models that everyone lauds as the bee's knees are guaranteed pondlife fit for the crusher just a few years down the line. The great names of history – MG, Lotus, AC – are bought and sold, deconstructed and revived on what seems an annual basis. Luckily there's an occasional fish that survives in the corporate net. Through thick, thin and every state in between, Alfa Romeo has plugged away with an open-topped sports car ideal that has come and gone and come back again. While others fled in the face of American safety scares and wilted before fickle market fads, the Alfa Spider has always managed to survive. It even defeated that most ferocious foe, accountants who threatened to stop its legendary production run time and again.

By all rights the Spider should have died out in the '70s, along with past-their-sell-by-date sports cars from Triumph, MG and Jaguar. In economic terms the car didn't make much sense and had to endure years of criticism from people who didn't understand what all the fuss was about. Through it all the Alfa Spider remained the perfect embodiment of heart over head. Something irrational and passionate and wonderful kept it alive during the barren ages of reason, playing it safe, doing the sensible thing.

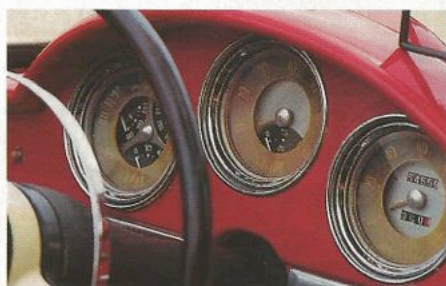
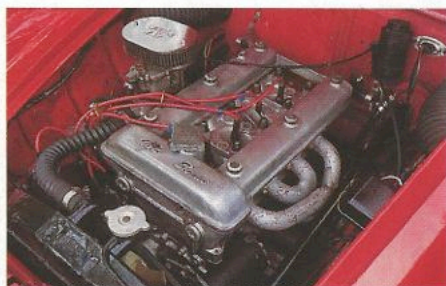
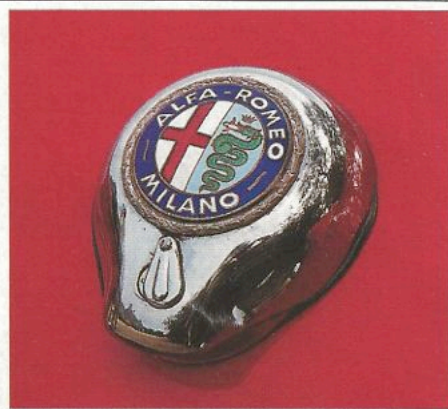
What breed of magic managed to fuse together five decades of Alfa Spiders? Undoubtedly the common ingredient between all four models – above even engineering prowess – is their artistic provenance. All were drawn under the artists' lamps of hallowed Torinese styling house Pininfarina. And all four bear little Pininfarina badges attesting to the quality of the design work.

Quality, certainly, but also controversy. Indeed the Giulietta is the only one of our four Spiders whose styling wasn't deeply criticised at launch. In 1955 Pininfarina's roadster design beat that of Bertone, which did the equally fine Giulietta Sprint coupé, and you suspect a certain amount of circumspection in creating an appealing shape for the Spider. The delightful delicacy of its curves remains an archetype of good taste. In contrast, its boat-tailed successor of 1966 was almost universally pasted in the





JAMES MANN



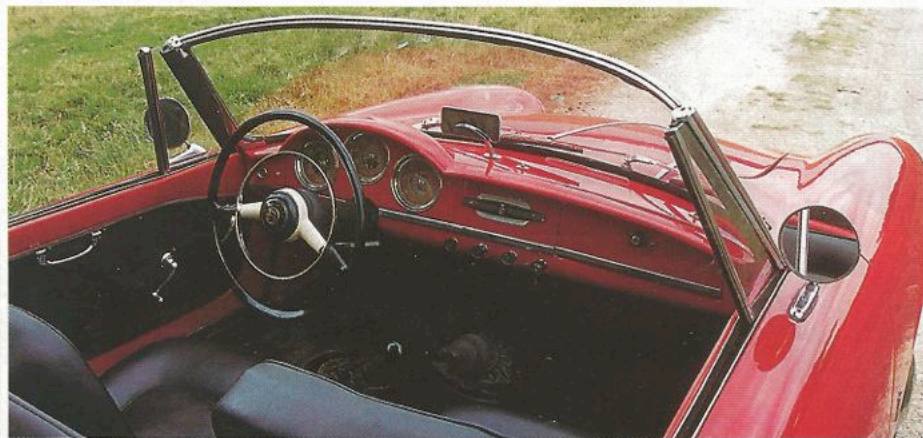
press at launch. Many writers thought the design over-bold and contrived – probably a simple case of the shock of the new. No one had dared produce a design with such bowed-out sides before, while the scalloped treatment along the flanks was a clever piece of character styling. Sometimes it takes a while for truly adventurous designs to be appreciated.

One controversial element of the new Spider – the round-tail ‘cuttlefish’ treatment – did not survive, however. Within three years Pininfarina’s Filippo Sapino sharply chopped off the rear end – and, despite what was said at the time, it was primarily an aesthetic job. Alfa Romeo presented it in purely scientific terms as ‘the fruit of the most recent study and testing carried out in the

Only one to have drums all round, but they respond well. Frisky 1290cc motor revs freely, but lacks low-down torque – it’s kept on boil with crisp gearchange. Purity of Giulietta’s painted dash lost in later Spiders

sharply chopped off the rear end – and, despite what was said at the time, it was primarily an aesthetic job. Alfa Romeo presented it in purely scientific terms as ‘the fruit of the most recent study and testing carried out in the

‘Once the second choke on the Weber cuts in, the cams sing and the exhaust rasps’



wind tunnel at Turin Polytechnic’, even though no-one could specify what (if any) aerodynamic advantage was achieved. Overall the car became more than 5in shorter, which at least helped reverse parking. ‘Our’ 1975 example is the ‘classic’ Kamm-tail Spider, still handsome before that unfortunate 1980s flirtation with rubber spoilers.

The current Spider is just as controversial. Enthusiasts either love or loathe its audacity. That deep swage line rising from the bumper along the flanks and up round the cockpit smacks of Harris Mann TR7 over-boldness or, even worse, *Starsky & Hutch* stripes. But the bonnet design acting as a *Zorro* mask to the headlamps is a stroke of genius, and the pleasure of watching it open oyster-like to reveal a pearl of an engine never wanes.

From 1955 until the last Series 4 in 1993, the story of the Spider is one of gentle evolution. Elements of the original Giulia persisted until the very end. Take the live rear axle, for example. How many cars of any description – let alone sports cars – had a solid rear axle in the ‘90s? Then there was the steering, which could be either worm and roller or recirculating ball, depending on how the parts sourcing division felt on the day. With few serious rivals, Alfa could get away with mere tweaks, but, by 1994, things were in dire need of change.

If the Giulietta/Giulia and 105 Series Spiders are perfect examples of Darwinian evolution, the new Spider represents brave

Factfile

GIULIETTA SPIDER

Engine 1290cc double overhead cam in-line ‘four’
Power 79bhp @ 6300rpm
Torque 74lb ft @ 3600rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive
Suspension front: double wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar; rear: live axle, coil springs, trailing arms, A-arm
Brakes drums all round
Steering worm and roller
Kerb weight 2050lb
0-60mph 14 secs **Top speed** 98mph

First-timer: the sculptor

Unlike the other owners here, the 1960 Giulietta Spider owned by sculptor **Howard Carter** is his first Alfa: “Among the exotic Italian marques Alfa is the most affordable. I saw some Giuliettas at Coys and fell in love. I restore veteran motorbikes as a hobby and traded two in to buy this car four years ago. It’s an ex-California import that had been restored, but I’ve now rebuilt just about everything.”





revolution. It's the theory of progress by leaps and bounds. Just as other car makers began to return to rear-wheel drive in sports cars, Alfa Romeo fused the new Spider into what was an entirely front-wheel-drive range. If power to the front wheels seemed like sacrilege, the replacement of the Spider's archaic, if superbly located, live rear axle by a multilink set-up was long overdue. And the new engine was radical: whether it was too heavy or just too powerful for the old Spider, the Twin Spark 16v never made it into Alfa's drop-top. It may have a dead-weight iron block (the others have all-alloy engines) but the superb Twin Spark feels right at home under the beak nose. It was followed – in the rest of Europe at least – by a Spider with Alfa's gorgeous

Boat-tail styling was criticised at launch, though they're now worth about 30 per cent more than later Kamm-tails. Sweet 1750 unit is felt by many to be Alfa's best twin-cam engine: free-revving but torquey too



'Through it all the Alfa Spider remained the perfect embodiment of heart over head'

3-litre V6. British drivers will have to wait until the new year for this prodigy.

Spin back to the 1950s and Alfa Romeo was absolutely in the vanguard of engine development. It doesn't take long behind the Giulietta's wheel to appreciate just how modern it was in its day. It may only have a 1290cc engine but the Giulietta exploits its advanced all-alloy construction and double overhead cams to make a maximum of 79bhp. This engine loves to rev – indeed you have to stamp on the pedal to get it spinning, as low-down torque is sorely lacking. Once the second choke on the Weber carb cuts in, the cams sing and the exhaust rasps gloriously in that peculiarly Alfa way.

One thing especially sets the Giulietta apart: its brakes. Most cars of the '50s made vain drum-equipped attempts to scrub away speed, and, while the Giulietta relies on drums rather than the discs of all the others here, it certainly doesn't feel like it. They bite immediately and with the confidence of discs.

The Giulietta's stark cabin with its painted metal surfaces is wholly alluring, having a purity that later Spiders lost. And, sitting behind the wheel, the enjoyment factor is every bit as strong as the round-tailed Spider that succeeded it. It has a wonderful engine and gearbox, an engaging interior plus a strong sense of feel in all the controls. Ultimately, compared to the later cars, its chassis is less compliant and less communicative, its steering too heavy, its ride stiffer and its handling less composed.



It's an Alfa family affair

Business studies teacher **Chris Lamb** inherited his 1969 round-tail 1750 Veloce from his father, who bought the car in 1971 for £950. "I had a Giulia Spider as a student and encouraged my father to buy this car. I've really grown up with it



and would never part company. My son John now enjoys driving it." Chris rarely uses the Spider in anger – as he collects ex-race series Alfas for that purpose.

Factfile

1750 SPIDER VELOCE

Engine 1779cc double overhead cam in-line 'four'

Power 122bhp @ 5500rpm

Torque 127lb ft @ 2900rpm

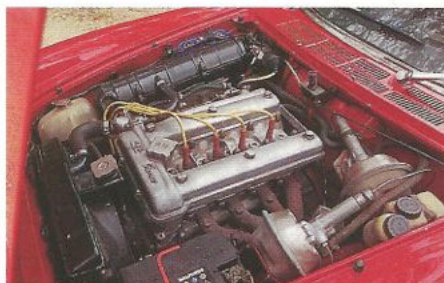
Transmission five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Suspension** front: double wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar; rear: live axle, coil springs, trailing arms, T-bracket and anti-roll bar

Brakes discs all round

Steering recirculating ball or worm and roller

Kerb weight 2292lb

0-60mph 9.2 secs **Top speed** 116mph



According to the theory of evolution, the 105 Series Spider launched in 1966 as the Duetto ought to be faster and stronger. Of that there is no doubt. The 1750 Veloce round-tail we have here is palpably quicker than the 1600 version, eager to rev and press on. It scores over the Giulietta with its all-disc brakes and a five-speed gearbox – both features that many '60s exotics never even boasted.

It's easy to see why Spider aficionados reckon that the 1750 engine is the sweetest and most

Handling beautifully balanced like 1750. Chopped-off tail of 2000 Veloce was said to improve car's aerodynamics. Twin brake servoes with 2000. Trademark dual-cowled dials, deep-dished wheel and sculpted steelies

rounded of Alfa's twin cams. The unit has a willingness to rev, while it loses very little in terms of power and torque compared to the larger 2000 engine. To my ears, it sounds better too.

The 2000 Veloce does have more

'Through the steering you get just the right messages, even if it's a little low-geared'



usable torque but it comes at the expense of a slightly less eager nature. It's a little quicker through the fabulously smooth gears and the flatter torque curve makes driving more relaxed, with fewer gearchanges involved. It's a gruffer, more masculine engine.

In other respects the 1750 and 2000 are remarkably alike. The most enjoyable thing about them is their delightful handling balance. Through the steering you get just the right messages, even if it's a little low-geared. Setting either car up for bends is blissfully easy and the control and feel you have makes cornering as easy as log-tottering. Combined with fabulous brakes, it gives you the confidence to use the power fully and really fling the cars around. Annoyances? The splayed-leg driving position, too-low fifth gear, the odd movement of the floor-mounted pedals and a general impression that noise suppression never occurred to the designers. But these vanish under a welter of charms so strong that you'd forgive the most trenchant criminal if he had such charisma.

The contrast provided by today's Spider could hardly be more acute. Dustin Hoffman's *Graduate* has grown up and become, if not a respectable lawyer, then a comfortable advertising executive. You sit swathed in black cloth and plastic – positively immersed, so high is the bodywork on all sides. If there is an element of familiarity, it's the trademark twin-binnacle main dials, first seen on the Spider in 1969.

The 155 horses galloping through the front

Factfile

2000 SPIDER VELOCE

Engine 1962cc double overhead cam in-line 'four'

Power 133bhp @ 5500rpm

Torque 132lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

Suspension front: double wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar; rear: live axle, coil springs trailing arms, T-bracket and anti-roll bar

Brakes discs all round

Steering recirculating ball or worm and roller

Kerb weight 2245lb

0-60mph 9.8 secs **Top speed** 122mph

Dyed in the wool tourers

Like many Alfa owners, **Audrey Watt** is a strong case of 'once tasted you never go back'. Audrey and her husband have a 156 as daily transport, so the restored 1975 Spider 2000 Veloce, bought six years ago, is driven purely for pleasure: "It's been on numerous rallies, including trips abroad to Holland for instance, as well as rallies in Britain such as the AXA. We get a lot of pleasure out of it."



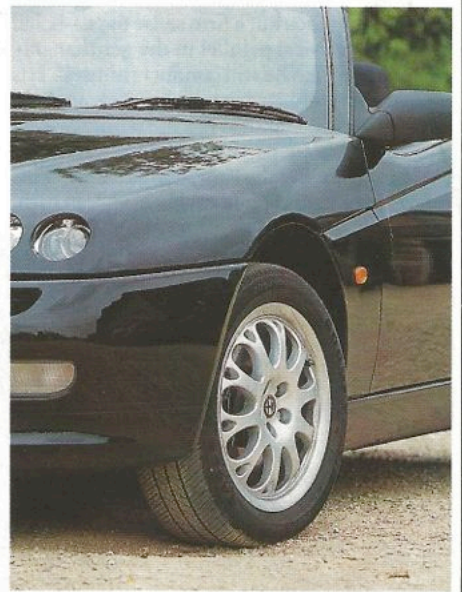


wheels do so far more strongly than its predecessors. Despite an extra 770lb to drag around, acceleration from rest and through the gears is much more urgent. The gearbox is crisp and precise, the ultra-quick steering a delight to use and the brakes more confident than most modern-day rivals.

And then comes the first bend. The neutral and rather rewarding chassis would make cornering dreamy – were it not for two words that make the Spider quake in its boots, quite literally: scuttle shake.

That awkward moment when the windscreen moves visibly in front of you while the steering column lurches the opposite way. Chopping the roof off a car inevitably weakens it – but the 16v Spider scores a floppiness

Shell-like nose is best feature. Peppy 16v twin-spark puts 155bhp through front wheels, but scuttle shakes like a blancmange on a Spacehopper: it's poor for a modern design. Interior has retro-look mod cons



'It's a real pleasure to watch the bonnet open oyster-like to reveal a pearl of an engine'

quotient of at least 8.5 (not entirely surprising since the fixed-roof GTV is 64 per cent stiffer). The wobbliness is no worse than any of the others here, but by modern standards you expect more.

And that's the point. The latest Spider isn't competing with golden oldies such as MGBs: it has to get one over on a host of snappy rivals including the Audi TT and BMW Z3. Last year Alfa revised the Spider with uprated engines to make it quieter and more civilised, while the interior now borrows components from the 156 saloon. But you just can't hide the fact that the design is now almost six years old.

This is, however, a worthy graduate of the Spider college. To paraphrase Darwin reflecting on evolution, it 'bears in its bodily frame the indelible stamp of its origin'. Fabulous engine, bold styling, quick steering, driver-orientated dynamics: qualities to celebrate in all four Spiders. But while the three 'classics' can trace a direct descent from Alfa's golden years, the current car is too tainted by genetically modified ingredients from daddy Fiat. It's a car that revolted under pressure rather than evolved. Look at what it revolted against, though, and you can't help feeling a dash of the old stuff wouldn't go amiss.

Whether it's the clean styling of the Giulietta, the sweet manners of the 1750 Veloce or the well-sorted balance of the 2000 Veloce, the early cars still have a thing or two to teach the young upstart. ♦



Busman's holiday

Charles Phillips gave up a career in accountancy so that he could be around his favourite marque. "I did my bit selling Fiats with Ryauto until the call came from the Stourbridge branch (01384 393231) to ask did I want to take a job selling



Alfas? I didn't even stop to pick up my stuff. I really enjoy talking to customers about Alfas, and, whenever a classic Alfa comes in, my nose is against the window."

Factfile

2.0 16V SPIDER

Engine 1969cc double overhead cam in-line 'four'

Power 155bhp @ 6400rpm

Torque 138lb ft @ 3500rpm

Transmission five-speed manual, front-wheel drive
Suspension front: MacPherson struts with lower wishbones and anti-roll bar; rear: multilink, coil springs and anti-roll bar

Brakes discs all round

Steering rack and pinion, power assisted

Kerb weight 3020lb

0-60mph 8.4 secs **Top speed** 131mph