

British Heart, Italian Soul

The Story of the Triumph Italia



Photos by Detlef Krehl

Although the Italia might be known to most stalwart Triumph enthusiasts, many inaccuracies have been perpetuated over the decades. Italia owner and consultant to the Vintage Triumph Register, Adrian Sinnott, with Jörg von Appen, visited the son of the Italia's creator, to dispel all mysteries...

It is not often that you see the past in a tangible form before you, but I experienced a form of time travel when I visited my good friend Jörg von Appen at his home in Germany. There, in a climate-controlled atmosphere, was the most original Triumph Italia in the world.

It was as though I had walked into a Triumph dealership in 1961. It had covered just 27 kilometers from new! This car had been kept in a dealer's stock from 1962, and only sold in 1989 when the dealer was 92 years old. Yet he was still willing to offer a two-year warranty! We all hear of these automotive discoveries, and as we get older and more experienced, we tend to treat them skeptically. Not with this car! Completely documented and absolutely stunning, it is the finest original Italia to survive.

The Italia offers refinement not found in other Triumphs, the coupé body (it had been designed from the beginning as a coupé and never intended to be a convertible) has structural rigidity generally attributed to unibody cars with none of the squeaks and rattles prevalent in rag tops. All four wings are part of the main body and not bolted on as is common practice with early Triumphs. The body is welded to the chassis near the rear of the passenger compartment (I believe this was used to locate the first section and the body built up from there as it is bolted on in many other areas).

Unlike Triumph-based specials, the Italia used the entire TR3 chassis and drivetrain with only minor modifications. This combination of dependable and

rugged British engineering with the beauty of Italian artistry produced a very desirable automobile.

When Vignale built a car body, he never used wooden bucks to test-fit panels. Each of his cars is different and not even symmetrical from side to side. This also applies to the Italia. Vignale felt that this made each car a work of art, and no two are exactly alike.

There is a very large glass area making the interior seem voluminous. The seats are comfortable and spacious compared to other period types and are specially made for the Italia. The back seat is best left for packages, but you can squeeze in a small child. Instrumentation is all TR3 and, unless your car was equipped with the optional Nardi steering wheel, that was also a TR3 item (only Nardi brand wheels were an original option). There is a folding footrest for the passenger, real interior lights that go on when you open the door, and a map light under the dash! A radio was available as a dealer option and here in the States it was the same as in a TR3. Most cars have an awkward looking cigar lighter somewhere on the dash and except for Italia No. 1, the overdrive switch was also located at the base of the dash (not always in the same spot).

Other available options included a leather interior, Borrani wire wheels, and Weber carburetors. The Italia was available in a variety of colors and could also be painted in a special color at your request. Most options for the TR3 could be fitted to the Italia through your local Triumph dealer.

The boot is quite useful, and it contains the spare and tools (these are the same as in a TR3). There are two different fuel tanks; the early cars fill from inside the boot and look similar to a TR3 tank, the later cars have an outside filler and to accommodate this the tank sits where the spare tire should be. Where is the spare? It fits into the tank! Possibly the most unusually shaped tank ever used in an automobile.

On the road the Italia is remarkably stable and quite powerful (no, we didn't take the 27 km car out but Jörg's other Italia, a nice original car that he uses whenever he can to drive to work or down to the Nurburgring for a few laps!), a little slower off the line than a TR3, but with a higher top end due to the



ABOVE: If you could read the odometer, you'd see just 27.4 km! This 34-year old car is like new.

TOP RIGHT: Chassis plate shows Triumph origin.

more aerodynamic styling. It is well able to hold its own on Germany's famous Autobahn. In 1959, Italia No. 1 was tested on England's M.I.R.A. track and was faster than any other Triumph up to that time except one, which we believe was the TRS LeMans car. The Italia lapped at over 109 mph, this on a car with less than 1,200 miles, not even run in!

Under the hood sits Triumph's 1991cc version of its venerable Standard-Vanguard engine exactly as in the TR3, except for an addition to the valve cover of

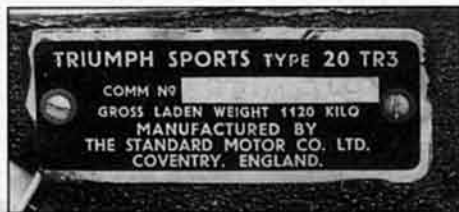
a small tab to hold the temperature gauge line (this was later added to regular TR3 production covers). All the cars were equipped with the usual non-synchro first gear transmission, whether one of the early cars or one of the last TR3B-based cars. If you are lucky enough to own one with overdrive you may also have the 4.1:1 rear which will speed up your 0-60 times. The chassis may have a front anti-sway bar, heavy-duty shock absorbers and uprated rear springs depending on its vintage. While almost everything to do with the chassis and drivetrain was available from Triumph, certain parts were specific to the Italia, including the radiator and heater core which are of Italian origin.

A well-restored or good original Italia has sound deadening material, not only on the interior, but also a material sprayed into the engine compartment. If you ever have the opportunity to sample a well-restored Italia next to a TR3, try it - you'll be amazed. Not that there is anything wrong with the TR3, but just to see how two different approaches to the same chassis produce very different automobiles.

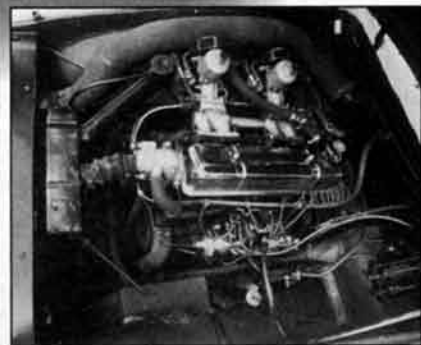
The question I am most often asked is, "How many did they make?" And my answer is "we don't really know." The long-accepted figure was 329, as an Italia with Vignale No. 329 surfaced (and disappeared) in Florida some years before I became consultant. I personally have seen car No. 328. Rumors abound that Vignale never produced this many and we found references to the Italia in *Quattroruote* (the Italian automotive magazine) listings of Triumphs to suggest that fewer than 100 chassis were imported to Italy (this might not have allowed for chassis shipped in 'knocked-down' form which probably were not considered imported automobiles). This summer Jörg and I spent some time at the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust Museum as the guest of Mr. Anders Ditlev Clausager. With Mr. Clausager's assistance we were able to track down 297 chassis numbers having been shipped to Italy. Whether all were built into completed Italias is unknown. So your guess is as good as mine. We know at least 60 survive, another five or six are with owners that have not answered our requests, and four or five are known to have been scrapped.

When I became Italia Consultant for the Vintage Triumph Register, very little was known about the Italia, and many thought the car to be a small-time effort completely without the support of Standard Triumph. Few Triumph enthusiasts

knew of the car and certain clubs would only allow it "associate" membership. It had been taken for granted that Dr. Ruffino (the name



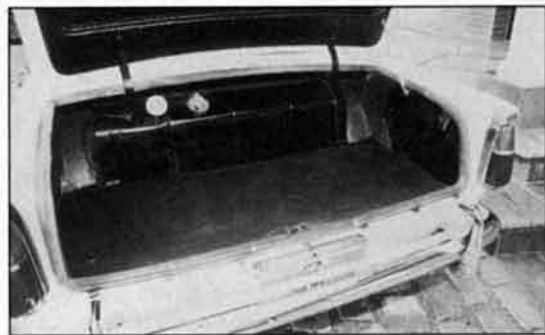
Italia 2000



ABOVE: Familiar Triumph TR3 engine in unfamiliar surroundings.
BELOW: Note fuel tank in large boot.

most often associated with the Italia and rarely spelled correctly) was deceased and no one bothered to look for him, most believing that this was entirely a Vignale project.

After years of intensive searching we finally located Dr. Ruffino. Unfortunately, not until two days after he passed away! But his son Dario has been an enormous help as he was also involved with the Italia project.



Continued next page

THE ITALIAN CONNECTION

In 1957, Dr. Salvatore Ruffino purchased the rights to distribute Standard-Triumph automobiles in Italy. This was the true beginning of the Triumph Italia, and of Dr. Ruffino's dream to build his own sports car.

The new firm was called C.E.S.A.C., based in Naples. With his company now established, Dr. Ruffino met with his friend Mr. Zambrini, the director of Autobianchi. Mr. Zambrini arranged a meeting with Zagato to produce sketches of a sports coupe. The drawings produced by Zagato did not appeal to Dr. Ruffino (they bore some resemblance to the later Lancia Zagato coupe). A second meeting was arranged with Giovanni Michelotti and, from May to September 1958, Michelotti delivered various sketches starting with the 'Coupe



ABOVE: The Slope-nose prototype at the 1958 Turin show.

RIGHT: The second prototype at Triumph's Styling Studio.

posti su TR3', the so-called 'Slope-nose prototype' (never actually called an Italia) to what was to become the Triumph Italia 2000GT. Shortly thereafter, Michelotti produced the TRS, the 'ZOOM' prototype, and the initial drawings for the TR4. The Italia's influence can be seen in all these cars. The original plan called for the cars to be pro-



LEFT: The first English language brochure shows Italia Number 1. **BELOW:** A Giovanni Michelotti illustration of the Italia on a postcard.

duced by a firm called Romanazzi, but this plan was abandoned because they would have been unable to start producing cars immediately. Vignale had surplus capacity and close contacts to Michelotti, so the cars were produced there on an assembly line owned by Dr. Ruffino.

The first thirteen chassis shipped from Standard-Triumph went directly to Vignale. These included the three known show cars, two of which still exist, No. 1 and No. 3. After these cars were delivered to C.E.S.A.C. in Naples, they underwent some serious testing by Carlo Quagletta, chief test driver. Some stability problems were encountered and these were remedied by the installation of a front anti-sway bar, stiffer shock absorbers and uprated rear springs with

an additional leaf (7 instead of 6 as on the TR3). Here is where Standard-Triumph recognized the Italia as a serious production automobile by including a special section in the original TR3 Production Specification book detailing all the changes to the chassis required for the Italia. Italias also had an "I" added to the engine number.

TRIUMPH STEPS IN . . . AND OUT

In late 1959, Dr. Ruffino was in direct contact with Mr. C. L. P. Edmonds of Standard-Triumph (their representative in Italy) and they negotiated a verbal contract for Triumph to require that each Triumph dealer worldwide purchase one Italia for a total of 720 cars. Ruffino planned to produce 1,000 cars; 500 in 1960 and the remaining 500 in 1961. Both the second prototype and Italia No. 1 were shown at the Standard-Triumph styling studio with more intensive testing done on No. 1. Quoting automotive correspondent Denis Holmes excerpted from the book *The Triumph Companion*: "He (Alick Dick, then managing Director of Standard-Triumph) cannot resist a certain flamboyancy, and used to show me proudly the TR sports car with the special Italian-designed body, the only one of its kind in the country."

By 1960, Standard-Triumph was in a desperate situation and was about to be purchased by Leyland. Mr. Edmonds was recalled to England to be replaced by a Mr. Tustin. Triumph, about to launch their new TR4, no longer had any interest in the Italia and felt it would only provide unnecessary competition. Therefore they failed to carry out their obligations and left Dr. Ruffino to build and distribute the car on his own. As Standard-Triumph's Italian distributor, this left Ruffino with many Italian dealerships to carry the cars but denied him access to the U.S. and other parts of Europe. This was partially solved by Mr. Stutz Plaisted of Stutz Plaisted Imports, Salem, Massachusetts. He imported the Italia on his own and it now became the Italia 2000, with the only external reference to Triumph being a T.M. Triumph badge on the rear wings.

At this time, Dr. Ruffino started 'Ruffino S.p.A.' to handle all Italia business with C.E.S.A.C. to continue as Standard-Triumph distributor. Ruffino S.p.A. maintained production of the Italia until early 1962, but without the sales promised by Triumph and the increased competition of the less-expensive TR4, the Italia quietly faded away. Ruffino was left with a huge debt, but contrary to popular belief, he never went bankrupt. In 1963, he paid a total of over one billion Italian Lire by selling many assets including an entire street in Milan. Embittered by Standard-Triumph's actions, which doomed the entire project, Dr. Ruffino destroyed many of the original documents, drawings and sketches.

Ruffino S.p.A. sued Triumph over failure to supply the chassis as ordered (many were missing the antisway bar, etc.) but remained their distributor until 1965. Dr. Ruffino was also the Mercedes-Benz agent for Naples, Salerno and Avellino. Triumph felt that he would be unable to handle both concessions.

When their contract was up they handed the distributorship to Ducati Meccanica, although Ruffino kept the Triumph concession for the south of Italy. In 1969, he left the auto industry and moved to Rome where he developed economic relations with Canada and the U.S.

Dr. Ruffino was a Knight of Gran Croce of the Holy Sepulchre and was President of the Order for the Campania region. This honor kept him involved in many important aspects of Italian business. Dr. Ruffino passed away on the 19th of February, 1994 without the knowledge that, in many enthusiasts eyes, the Italia was a great success.

SCRUTINIZING ITALIA

Varying production numbers, inaccurate information, no known parts supply, and other worries have plagued the Italia owner trying to restore a car. It was often mentioned that owners had to sign a release acknowledging that no

body parts were available! This was only true within the U.S., as the Italia was imported by Stutz Plaisted, and this waiver was for his protection. Cars in Europe could be returned to Ruffino S.p.A. for repair.

If you are lucky enough to find an Italia to purchase, make sure that the car is complete. While mechanical

parts pose no problems, missing trim pieces can be a nightmare to locate and glass is unobtainable. As with most cars of the period, rust usually attacks the floors and sills; on the whole Italias are very robust with thick steel used to form the body panels. Surprisingly, since the car was hand-formed, it is quite a simple, if somewhat costly, task to replace missing or damaged body parts.

There are three distinct trim changes with the Italia and a few minor ones:

The first ones were the 'Show cars' (these appeared at the Turin show and in the magazines), these are car No. 1 and No. 3 (and probably No. 2). They had special Vignale and Michelotti badges on the nose and bonnet respectively, no side marker lights, a Vignale script beside the Vignale emblem on the front wings with Michelotti crossed flags on the rear wings, plexiglas sun visors, chrome interior handles and were called the 'Triumph Italia 2000GT'. Even the crinkle finish on the dash was different from the following cars.

The next group consisted of the 'Production cars'. These were now called the 'Italia 2000', the only mention of Triumph being the 'T.M. Triumph' badge on the rear wings. There was a side marker light on both front wings, with only a Vignale



emblem on the front wings (one owner has fitted the Vignale script near this emblem to fill some extraneous holes but this is incorrect on these later models) with Michelotti crossed flags on the rear wings. Their interior handles were now aluminum and the sun visors had been replaced with more ordinary vinyl covered versions. These cars still had the fuel filler in the boot.

The final incarnation was basically the same

as the previous series but the cars now sported an outside fuel filler. This continued through the last thirty cars which were TR3B-based.

Throughout the production of the Italia there were running changes that must have been related to the supply of parts. Cars with aluminum tail light housings generally had Lucas tail lamp lenses as used on the Alfa 750 and the Nash Metropolitan. These cars also could have Lucas headlamps. Cars with chrome tail light housings had Carello lenses (as seen in the photos) and these are practically impossible to find if yours are broken. Chances are that these cars will also have Carello front lights. The front parking light and turn signals were made by Altissimo. These were clear or amber with longitudinal flutes on the early cars and translucent with concentric circular flutes on the later models. A very few had a rectangular parking/turn signal combination lamp as on the second prototype. No cars were built with the TR3 style Lucas lights although many owners have had to install these when the originals were broken or lost.

There were three versions of the rear license plate light. The first as shown on our test car, the second version consisted of the same type light/handle with

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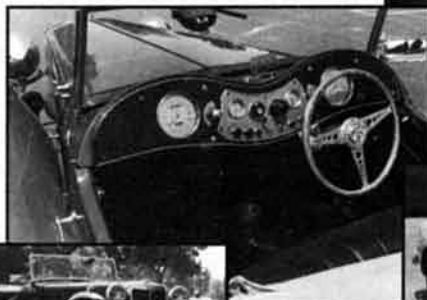
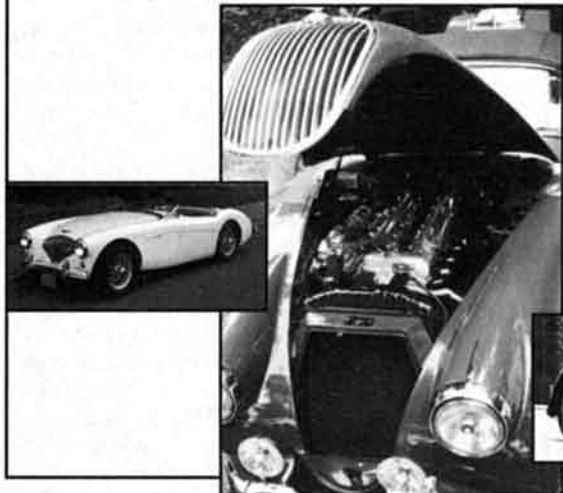
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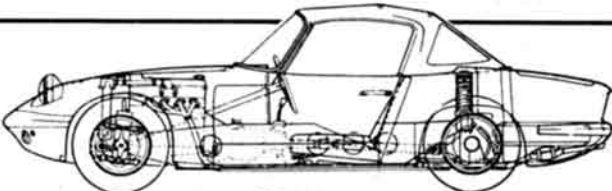
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Italia 2000

an additional light mounted on the rear bumper, and the final style used a smaller handle with the light mounted on an escutcheon below the boot lid.

Most Italias had a vinyl interior, very few had Borrani wire wheels, some had TR3 type disc wheels and a handful were built has right-hand drive. Overdrive became more prevalent after No. 96, and all had the 1991cc engine with the non-synchro first gear trans - even the later TR3B-based cars. After Ruffino had arranged the production specification with Triumph, most Italia engine numbers now ended with the suffix 'EI'.

There was always some confusion regarding Italia chassis numbers. While they are continuations of the TR3's consecutive numbers, the suffixes are different. All Left-hand drive TR3-based Italias start with the prefix TS and end with the suffix LCO or LCOO. The 'L' represents Left-hand drive (right-hand drive cars are listed as 'CO' or 'COO'), the 'CO' means chassis-only and the additional 'O' stood for overdrive, although some cars with overdrive did not receive this extra letter. The last thirty cars which were TR3B-based had the TSF prefix.

ITALIA REGISTER

According to the Vintage Triumph Register, my position as a consultant is to assist owners with questions regarding their particular automobile. I and other owners before me have considered starting a quarterly newsletter but we were unable to interest more than a small number of owners, never enough to cover the cost of postage, paper, etc. I am proposing to create the International Triumph Italia Register open to owners and enthusiasts alike with a quarterly mailing.

Jörg and I are also planning a very limited production book on the Italia containing copies of the brochures, pictures and many other previously unobtainable pieces of information for release sometime during 1995. If you would be interested in purchasing a copy of the book, or joining the Italia Register as described above, send a S.A.S.E. to Mr. Adrian Sinnott, P.O. Box 1423, Huntington, NY 11743, for further information.

CREDITS

Jörg and I have been on an expedition since we met many years ago to find out the true history of the Italia. We have gathered information and shared it freely with all Italia owners. Many owners have been kind enough to pass on copies of whatever material they possess. We would like to thank Mr. Dario Ruffino, Mr. Anders Ditlev Clausager and the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, Mr. Edgardo Michelotti, Mr. Guiseppe Del Core, Mr. Ted Watson, Mr. Bob Slayden, Mr. Dave Hutchison, Mr. David Tomlin, Mr. Krehl for his photographic skill and all those others who have helped over the years and continue to support our efforts. I apologize to all those that I could not list. A belated final thanks to Dr. Salvatore Ruffino for creating such a wonderful automobile, this article is dedicated in his memory. □