THE CLEAN lines of the Swallow Doretti attracted much favourable comment, The New Statesman even calling it the most beautiful car of the 1954 Motor Show and describing its designer, Frank Rainbow, as a "genius".

Swallow Doretti

A Missed Opportunity?

WHEN reference books mention the Swallow Doretti at all, they tend to dismiss it in a few paragraphs as being merely an overweight, overpriced, and rather sluggish variant of the Triumph TR2. The comparison with the Triumph is made because the Doretti used TR2 components, but really the car deserves to be viewed in its own right. After all, nobody draws direct comparisons between the TR2 and Triumph-engined Morgans for the two cars catered for two different types of sporting motorist. The Doretti was not a pure, rugged, sports car like the TR2, rather, it was a refined sports tourer, built by hand, and aiming for a different section of the market.

Still, the impression is given that it was a failure, a car which died through lack of public response. In fact, the reverse is true. In just over ten months of production, 276 cars were built which is a highly respectable figure for a specialist sports car firm in its first year of production. Nor did it lose money, indeed orders were increasing at the time the decision was taken to kill the project. As part of the giant Tube Investments group, the Swallow Coachbuilding Company (1935) Limited, anyway had none of the cash problems which frequently beset small manufacturers.

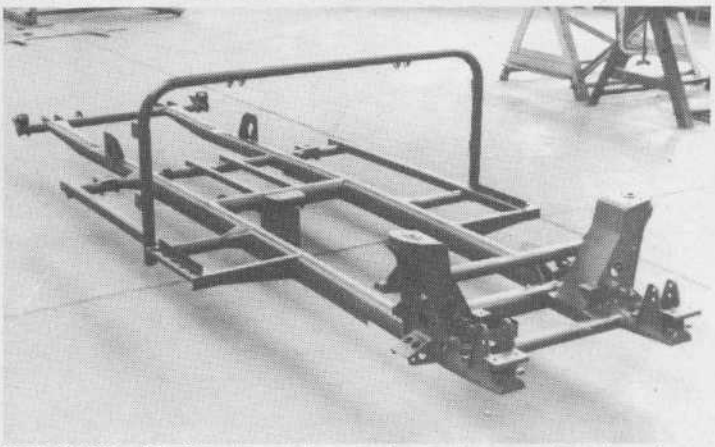
Since most commentators seem determined to compare the Doretti directly to the TR2, let us do the same and kill a few myths. The Doretti *was* heavier than the Triumph — by just 56 lb, yet it was five inches longer and five and a half inches wider.

It also cost more, selling at a basic price of £777 (£1,101 with UK taxes) against a basic £600 (£844 with taxes) for the triumph. Yet items such as a heater came standard, while one paid an extra £10 for a warm TR2. It had the additional value of being hand built, of being much prettier and also corrosion-free. If you want to see a strong man weep, creep up behind a TR2 owner and whisper "Rust!"

Contemporary road tests favoured the handling of the Triumph and found that it had better acceleration and top speed, but we are talking about perhaps a second better from 0-60 mph, which is actually a meaningless figure unless you are a keen competitor in traffic lights Grands Prix. The Doretti's top speed was 101 mph to the TR2's 105 mph which, again, is largely of academic interest — the Doretti I owned ten years ago once recorded 108 mph, if the tachometer is to be believed. Over the standing quarter, there was only a tenth or two in it, admittedly to the TR2, but the Doretti was not in direct competition with it.

The market had ample room for both cars. After all, when the Doretti was introduced early in 1954, only 50 TR2s had been sold on the home market with a further 196 going abroad. At the time, anyone producing a competent sports car had a large market hungry for the product. If direct comparisons have to be made with any other car, then the one which most resembled the Doretti in concept was the Allard Palm Beach. The Allard, like the Swallow, was a hand built sports tourer built around proprietary parts, in this case the Ford Zephyr engine. The Allard, at £1,021, was £80 less than the Doretti yet was 14 mph slower, and inferior in every other department.

Those who regard the Doretti as a failure have to answer the following questions. Why did it sell so well for a newcomer? Why did Standard Triumph dealers have a collective seizure when it was announced, being convinced that they could not possibly sell TR2s against such opposition? Why was it successful on race circuits in California, where it was driven by, among others, Phil Hill? Why was Sir John Black, head of Standard Triumph, so keen to take over the project? Had Triumph done so, and applied their own production techniques, they could probably have reduced the price by a considerable amount, sales would have increased and the car would probably be now regarded as a minor classic.



THE BASIS of the Doretti was this extremely strong frame made of 50 ton chrome molybdenum tubing.

THE DORETTI'S facia came in for criticism. The positioning of the tachometer in front of the passenger occurred during production against the designer's wishes.

The reason for my interest in the car has already been hinted at, I owned one and remember it with affection. Looking into the background of it, for my own amusement, I came face to face with the questions I've posed and became convinced that there was more to the story than most historians would have one believe. Through the good offices of Cyril Harvey, secretary of the Doretti Register, I was put into contact with Frank Rainbow, the designer, and recently visited him.

There must be something about engineering which keeps people young. Now aged 74, Frank is officially in retirement, except that he is building an advanced prototype vehicle which promises to have extraordinary performance, including a projected 70 mpg at 70 mph. It is due to be running next year and MOTOR SPORT readers will be kept informed about it.

On leaving school in 1927, Frank underwent an engineering apprenticeship with the Bristol Omnibus Company, leaving to join Bristol Engines in 1934 and worked on the Mercury and Centaurus aero engines. Refused permission to join the army during the war, he rose to a senior position with Bristol Engines but left in 1947 because he felt his potential was not being developed.

He then joined Tube Investments as a technical liaison man-cum-troubleshooter working among the 50 or so autonomous companies which comprised the group. It was during this period that he designed the Doretti and its successor, the Sabre, of which just two were built. When Swallow withdrew from car production he headed a development team at Standard Triumph until, in 1960, he left to take over his father's company, Teesdale Tools Ltd which he developed. Teesdale make specialist components for aircraft builders and airlines.

His first involvement with Tube Investments came when he designed and built Britain's first scooter, the "Gadabout". This attracted the attention of Eric Sanders, who headed Helliwells, one of the TI companies, and who put it into production, selling them mainly to public corporations.

Sanders, now dead, is pivotal to the Doretti story. In the summer of 1952, he met Arthur A. Anderson of the Rome Cable Corporation of Torrance, California. Anderson's company was involved in a similar line of engineering to Helliwells and, moreover, intended to import and sell the TR2 in California. Sanders happened to be a close friend of Sir John Black, head of Standard Triumph, so it is not difficult to imagine the process whereby it was agreed that Sanders should produce a sports car suited to the West Coast of America, that Standard Triumph should provide the running gear and Frank Rainbow should design it.

Sanders was able to go to the chairman of Tube Investments, Sir Ivan Stedeford with a sound proposition for building cars: he had a customer, a designer and facilities, a supplier of components and, further, much of the material for the car could be supplied, at the full rate, from companies within the TI group. He would be generating profit for Swallow Coachworks, providing a new customer for other companies within the group and enhancing the group's overall image. It was an extremely attractive package.

THIS one-off coupé was designed by Peter Kirwan-Taylor for his own use. Kirwan-Taylor went on to style the lovely Lotus Elite. This car, currently in the early stages of rebuilding, could have been yours in 1957 for £795.

The Swallow Coachbuilding Co (1935) Ltd of Walsall was engaged in building sidecars for motorcycles and, despite the company's name, was producing a product of not noticeably high quality, which is why they had to go outside for a supplier of bodyshells. It is the same company, incidentally, which at a few removes made the Swallow-bodied Austin Sevens and spawned Jaguar.

Rainbow met Arthur Anderson and the two men sketched out the design parameters of the car. The name "Doretti" inspired by the fact that Anderson had a daughter called Dorothy and an Italian name was the right style for a sports car. Anderson also supervised details such as the badge and Rainbow kept him informed with a monthly report, copies of which he also sent to Sanders who, apparently, never bothered to read them.

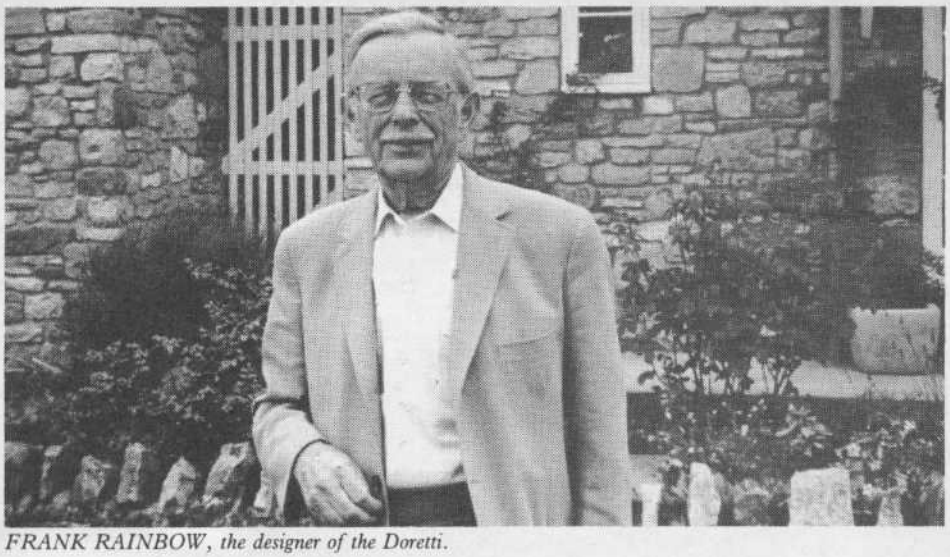
Rainbow began work in January 1953 and was given a free hand, except he had the proviso that the car had to be completed in *nine months*. He says now, "the only 'free hand' was that everyone kept out of the way while the struggle was going on!" His total staff consisted of two senior draughtsmen, one junior, and a secretary.

The chassis was designed using 50 ton chrome molybdenum steel tubing supplied by Reynolds, a TI company, and built by Helliwells. It was strong and rigid and durable. The bodies, of 16 gauge light alloy, with steel doors, were built by Panelcraft Ltd, of Woodgate, Birmingham. As has been mentioned, the car was longer and wider than the TR2, and it had a bigger wheelbase and slightly increased track. The engine was set back by seven inches to give a weight distribution of 52/48 in order to get a neutrally handling car which would be forgiving to the driver who became too ambitious. Front suspension was TR2 coil spring and wishbones while the rear was ½-elliptic leaf springs with radius arms. Lockheed drum brakes were fitted fore and aft.

The cockpit was nicely finished with leather bucket seats and trim, with large, rigid cubby holes set in the doors. Behind the seats was a luggage shelf and a tailored suitcase was available to fit it. The hood was simplicity itself to erect and the driver could effect the entire operation in half a minute without leaving his seat. There were however, three main points of criticism levelled against the car. The dashboard layout was not ideal, with the passenger getting a better view of the tachometer than the driver. It appears that, when production got under way, the workshop foreman, for reasons best known to himself, decided to swap around the positions of the speedo and tach! Photographs of the prototype show the tach by the driver.

The other main points of criticism were that the boot was ridiculously small and dominated by the spare wheel, and that perspex sidescreens were fitted instead of wind-up windows which a car of its class should have had.

Frank Rainbow takes up the story. "We completed the prototype within the nine months, which was quite an achievement and we crated it up and I took it on the Queen Mary to California. Arthur Anderson took it around Standard Triumph dealers, who were to handle it, and they came up with a list of comments and criticisms, which included the size of the boot and the side windows. I accepted all their points and could have redesigned to accommodate them very easily because at the time we had not made up any jigs or horses for the bodies so there was no pre-production work to undo. In the rush to complete on time, the



FRANK RAINBOW, the designer of the Doretti.

body had been more or less built up from one of my line drawings.

"For some reason, Eric Sanders would not let me make the changes. I think he may have over-committed himself to the board and was anxious to get the car into production as quickly as possible. We might say he was a businessman, not a motor car man. So it went into production in a form which was not entirely acceptable to either Anderson or myself."

Still, the car attracted a lot of favourable comment and was soon selling steadily, at home and in the States. Sir John Black had one, painted and trimmed to match his Bentley. As has been stated, Black wanted Standard Triumph to take over the project but he asked Ken Richardson (then his Competitions Manager) to take him for a trial run in his car. Driving fast up to the main gate of the works in Banner Lane, Coventry, Richardson hit a lorry turning in. Sir John was badly injured and the car was a write-off. The only consolation was that he might have been killed had the car been less sturdily built. Shortly afterwards, Sir John retired.

The reason why the Doretti has never attained a great reputation is, I believe, because it did not fit comfortably into an accepted category. The small boot and the perspex sidescreens were not quite what the purchaser of a sports tourer was looking for. In Britain, at least, it also never acquired the reputation of a true sports car, largely due to the fact they were only rarely seen in competition though, oddly enough, an early stunt was to run a light-hearted race on the Silverstone Club circuit for motoring writers — won by Don Truman and Bill Boddy. Sanders did not see the need for competition success, though Rainbow urged it.

Over in the States, however, Anderson was promoting the car through racing, with modified cylinder heads, Amal carbs, Isky cams, lightened flywheels, modified crankshafts and a new exhaust system. The scheme worked and the cars won several races which is possibly one reason why over half the production total was sold there.

Back home, Rainbow drew up plans for a car to tackle the flying kilometre record on the Jabbeke-Ostend motorway. Triumph had gained a lot of publicity when Ken Richardson managed 124 mph in a modified TR2 and Rainbow reasoned that with a modified nose cowling, metal tonneau cover, aluminium undertray and some general lightening plus, of course, a really hot engine, he might be able to exceed that speed. Plans were quite advanced when Eric Sanders killed the idea.

Apart from his involvement with the Doretti, Rainbow still had his liaison duties within TI but still he found time to design and build a Mk 2 version, to be called the Sabre. This car had a slightly stiffer chassis, caused by changing the cross beams from round tubing to square sections, which brought about an entirely different, improved, feel. It had room for two real children, not just the legendary legless midgets, much more luggage accommodation, wind-up windows and other detail improvements which Rainbow had wanted to incorporate on the original car. As the photograph shows, it was an extremely handsome vehicle though the hard top was added after Rainbow left the company in 1955. Had it been taken over by Triumph, it might have sold for less than £1,000.

Then came the decision to cease production. It was not brought about because the car did not sell or because it lost money, for neither explanation is true. It seems that some companies (not Triumph) who made sports cars and who bought components and material from the TI group, suggested that it was unethical for a contracted supplier to enter car production as a direct rival. The supply market was much more valuable to TI than the modest profits from a relatively small off-shoot and so they decided to withdraw.

There was no formal declaration to the outside world at the time. The last cars were completed and about a dozen sold in kit form and a second Sabre was also made. Some months later it was announced that production had ceased in February 1955. No explanation was given.

The pity of it is that it is hard to think of any other car of the time which would have matched the Sabre in what was now a more clearly defined market area. It would have probably been a little more expensive than the Doretti but it would have had no rivals as a relatively cheap, practical, hand-built Grand Tourer of proven strength, performance and durability.

The small workforce, which never exceeded 18, including design and office staff, found other jobs in the motor industry and Frank Rainbow went to Standard Triumph as Development Engineer.

The Swallow was a good car, potentially a very good car, but one which was thwarted and killed by company politics. It really was a missed opportunity. — M.L.

THE Swallow Sabre overcame every criticism levelled against the Doretti and had the potential of excellence. Just two were built.