



# FRAZER NASH LE MANS REPLICA

—  
by  
Geoffrey Bewley

Say "replica" to most people today and they'll probably think of a D-type Jaguar or AC Cobra recreation, or else one of those kit products with a plastic Bugatti look-a-like body and bits of Volkswagen chassis sticking out at the corners. There are replicas and "replicas".

The best of the replicas can come pretty close to the real thing. British D-type replicas can have genuine Jaguar XK engines and mechanical parts, with subframes made to the original specifications and body shells correct to the last rivet. The maker and the buyer can end up with a car looking and going so well that the chassis plate is the only proof of its true origin.

These cars are replicas with a small r. In the earlier sense of the word, Replica takes a capital R. This is far from a minor semantic point of argument. Mix up the two, in practice, and you're likely to find yourself in all sorts of costly trouble.

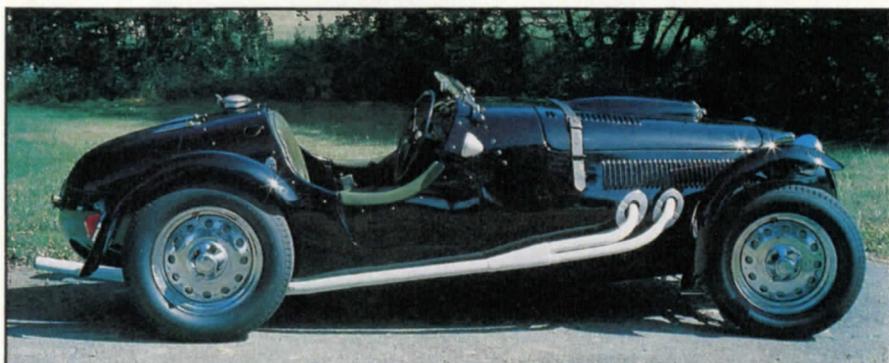
A big-R replica is an allegedly exact copy of a specially modified car which has done well in competition. If it came from the works which produced the original car, it's a true Replica. Otherwise, it only counts as a copy. The true Replica counts as a serious competition car,

although, since it's taken from a model that's already been raced, it may not be quite up to the mark of the latest works cars by the time it's delivered.

These Replicas are generally christened after the event where the original car showed up well; Ulster, Alpine, Monza, Sebring, and so on. Frazer Nash was one make which produced at least its share of competition-founded Replicas, and the pictures here present the likeness of the best known postwar Frazer Nash sports racer.

The Frazer Nash 2-litre Speed Model Le Mans Replicas, to give them their fullest possible name, were definitely big-R Replicas. In fact the design was largely German, an Anglicised assembly of 1945 war loot. There was a BMW-derived Frazer Nash chassis powered by a BMW-derived Bristol engine, under Frazer Nash's own elegant cigar shaped body with bullet headlamps and cycle fenders.

Frazer Nash links with BMW went back to the Thirties. When Captain Archie Frazer-Nash yielded control of his company to the Aldington brothers, they kept on building his tough, eccentric, chain-drive vintage sports two-seaters. Presently they found the market for these totally sporting machines was saturated,



and the machines themselves were becoming outclassed by more modern designs.

Impressed by the performance of the latest BMWs on the Alpine trials in Europe, they'd made a deal in the middle Thirties to sell the German cars in England, modified and rebadged as Frazer Nash - BMWs. After the war, they raided the BMW works and collected engineering stores, plans, a new BMW engine, a BMW 2-litre Mille Miglia racer, and the designer Dr. Fritz Fiedler.

This loot was shared with the new Bristol company. Bristol was to make the engines which would be used in Bristol high-performance grand tourers and the new Frazer Nash sports racers. The kidnapped 1940 BMW Mille Miglia car was refitted with right-hand steering and a new Frazer Nash radiator grille, and it appeared as the new Frazer Nash 2-litre Speed Model at the 1948 London Motor Show.

The 2-litre Frazer Nash, ex Bristol, ex BMW engine was a long-stroke six with an aluminum head and two overhead valves per cylinder, worked by vertical and cross pushrods, and fed by triple SU carburetors. The chassis was a welded frame of 5.5-inch steel side tubes and

5-inch cross members, with independent front suspension by an upper transverse leaf spring and lower wishbones. Longitudinal torsion bars were used with the back axle. Steering was by rack and pinion and stopping was provided by big hydraulic drum brakes.

In Bristol cars, the engine produced about 85 bhp. After Frazer Nash treatment, it gave 120 bhp. The engine was placed well back in the chassis for good balance, and with a dry weight of about 1500 pounds, the Frazer Nash's power-to-weight ratio was excellent for the time. H.J. Aldington and Norman Culpan drove one in the first postwar Le Mans 24-hour race finishing third behind a new 2-litre V12 Ferrari and a 3-litre Delage. The production cars were called Le Mans Replicas from then on.

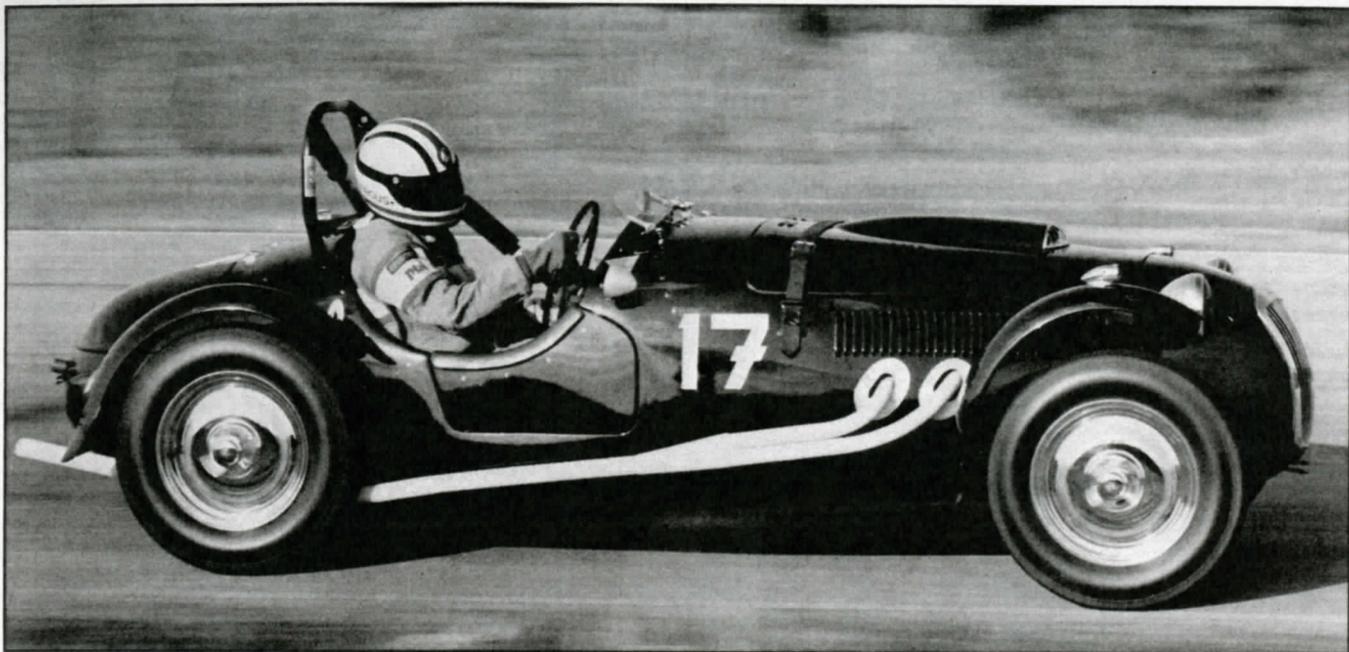
Frazer Nash built about 60 Le Mans Replicas, and for several seasons they did very well in serious sports car racing. In the hands of the Italian veteran Franco Cortese, one became the only British car ever to win the Targa Florio. Stirling Moss used one to win the 1951 British Empire Trophy on the Isle of Man. Another won the Sebring 12-hour race and scores of out-right and class wins in shorter events, sprints, and hillclimbs.



Representing an example of a small "r" replica is the car in the collection of Australia's York Motor Museum (car #73 - above & opposite)  
photos by Geoffrey Bewley



A genuine, or big "R" Replica is represented by the 1951 model owned by Robert Fergus.  
photos by Art Eastman



## REPLICA BETTER

Two Frazer Nash Le Mans Replicas currently active in U.S. vintage racing events are pictured above.

Both are most definitely of the big "R" variety. No. 17 is a 1951 example owned and driven by Robert Fergus.

No. 21 is of 1950 vintage owned and driven by Ned Curtis

Most Frazer Nashes of the Fifties were reworkings of the same theme — the trusty tubular chassis and Bristol engine under more stylish bodywork. Frazer Nash car production wound up in 1957, and the firm concentrated on imports and sales of Porsches. As the years passed, the Le Mans Replicas picked up the same sort of cult following Archie Frazer-Nash's original "chain-gang" cars had earned a couple of decades earlier. They were fast, fun, pretty, and there were no more where they came from.

Many people thought this was a great pity. Some years ago, Dick Crosthwaite, a British motor engineer, decided to do something about it. He'd been given the job of rebuilding a Le Mans Replica from an original chassis hidden under a Swallow Doretti body, using a proper engine and a collection of correct parts. Then he bought the last spare genuine Frazer Nash tubular chassis from the club, and built a second car for himself.

Then, with a real Frazer Nash and a half-breed behind him, he went all the way. He produced a small batch of duplicate tubular chassis, and collected engines and running gear from scrapped Bristols. A set of cars were finished with copies of the Le Mans Replica body featuring correct instruments and generally correct trim. These were definitely small replicas.

"The replica Replicas are very well made," another British motor engineer wrote, "but suffer from cooking Bristol engines, cooking Bristol gearboxes with free wheel in first gear, wire wheels in place of the original perforated discs, flimsy wing stays, thin gauge alloy panels,

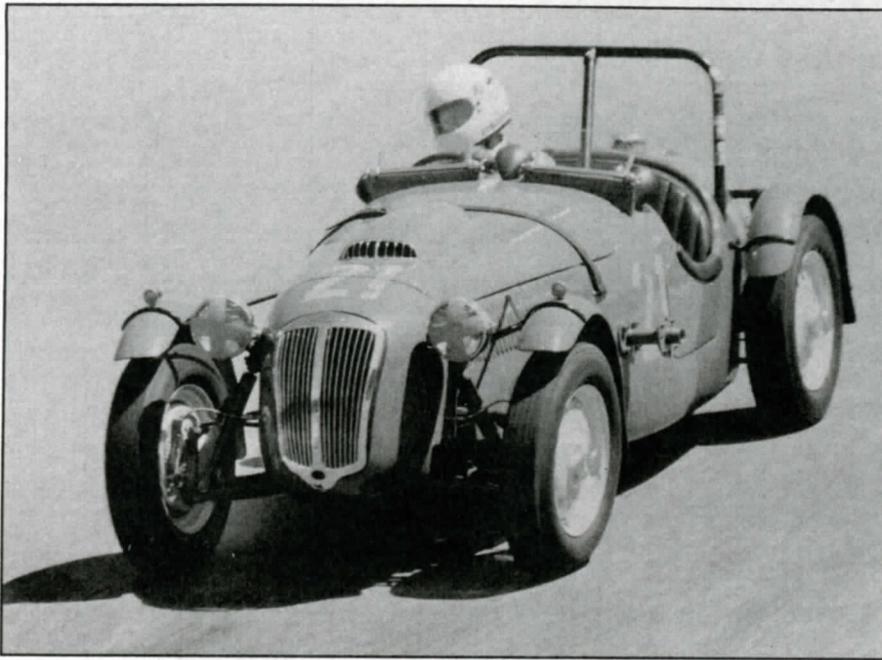
poor pedals, no provision for wipers, no Frazer Nash badge (hopefully), and only one support lug under the spare wheel. Otherwise they are very nice cars."

The car shown here is one of these. However, it actually does carry a Frazer Nash badge of sorts. This looks like one of the circular, blue-and-white quartered Frazer Nash - BMW badges used in the Thirties, with both names removed and 'Frazer Nash' lettered in again. All the genuine postwar Frazer Nashes appear to have worn the diamond-shaped badge inherited from the vintage chain-drive cars.

This car's appearance is good enough to fool anybody who doesn't own a proper Le Mans Replica, or hasn't worked on one, or hasn't one handy for comparison. This covers rather a lot of people. It certainly covered the patron, curator, and associates of the York Motor Museum in Western Australia, who bought it a few years ago under the impression it was the real thing.

The York Motor Museum exercises many of its sports and racing cars in the York Flying 50, a round-the-houses event held on the streets of York each year. A photo of this car in action there appeared in a British motoring magazine. John Aldington of AFN Limited, the heirs of the Frazer Nash company, noticed the photo. He wrote to Peter Briggs, the Museum's patron.

"As the original Frazer Nash manufacturer, we are very anxious to keep a record of all Frazer Nashes still in existence, and therefore, request your help in letting us know the engine and chassis numbers of the car along with



any previous known history. Of course, upon the receipt of this information, we can advise you of any history of the car as is known to us from our archive records."

The Museum sent the details; Le Mans Replica body, 2-litre Bristol engine number 85A 1374, chassis number 400 1566. This drew an unsettling answer, in an entirely different tone.

"According to the information in my possession, this car is not a Frazer Nash," wrote John Aldington.

"It reportedly was built to as close a copy of a Frazer Nash Le Mans Replica design as possible within the limitation of non-accessibility of Frazer Nash components."

"As such, I would ask you to ensure it is not promoted as a Frazer Nash, nor, if selling, should it be inferred that the vehicle has any Frazer Nash origin whatsoever, as this could be grounds for legal action."

"I regret that I could not have given a more pleasant reply."

Another letter came from Dr. Lionel Stretton, writing on behalf of the Frazer Nash Section of the Historic Sports Car Club. This was milder in tone and more informative.

"Many thanks for your letter with regard to your Le Mans Replica Frazer Nash," he began.

"All original cars bear a chassis number beginning with '100/' or '200/' according to whether they had the early tapered chassis frame or the later parallel tube frame and this prefix number was followed by three further numbers; for instance my own car is 200/162. A few cars did

have a Bristol engine number beginning '85/', but I cannot find a reference to 85/1374 in the Registry. This is probably an engine from a Bristol car."

"It seems likely that your car is one of several replicas built some years ago which may have used some original parts. These were not produced by the works so their degree of originality is in some doubt....."

The York car's engine number is given on the engine plate as 88A/1374, but on the body plate as 85/1374. The chassis number is given as 400/1566, not exactly like a real Frazer Nash number, but not too far off. Somebody went to a lot of trouble to make the false plates, and they look just as you'd expect them to look if the car were the real thing. The question now isn't whether you'd count the car as a big R Replica or a small r replica — it's whether or not to count it as a forgery.

I don't know if it was Dick Crosthwaite or a later owner who had the false plates made and fitted. In any case, the fake Replica project apparently came to an end after John Aldington and the Vintage Sports Car Club came to hear of it and legal action was threatened. Crosthwaite moved on to less controversial projects.

The fake Replicas apparently remained. There doesn't seem to be any ironclad register of the 2-litre Frazer Nash sports racers, because of the number made and many of them have been crashed, dismantled, rebuilt or rebodied. It seems the Crosthwaite cars are already losing themselves in the crowd.

There's nothing much wrong with them mechanically, and the example at York is certainly a rather good copy of a very

good original. Peter Harbin, an experienced Western Australian sports racing driver, has used it often in local events where the Museum's cars are exercised.

"It's a magnificent little car to drive," he said. "It's very forgiving. You can throw it into a corner and it just sits there, and if it does get out of line it comes straight back. It takes a while to get used to the driving position, but the pedal arrangement is first class, and it has a very simple gearbox. I've probably given it more scares than its given me."

Naturally, as a close copy it must share most of the good qualities with the real thing. Unhappily, this isn't what decides its value. At a Sotheby's auction in London in July, 1989, a genuine 1950 Frazer Nash Le Mans Replica, in good condition, was sold for £209,000 (\$335,000). A copy, in like condition, might be worth \$40,000, but probably not much more.

Perhaps the replica Replica used a few original Frazer Nash parts, or at least, parts of original specification, but does this make any difference? Some people call this sort of car a clone. In medical terms, a clone is actually a group of individuals reproduced asexually, from fertilized eggs. A parallel with motor cars can be drawn, so it's a fairly useful term, as long as we understand it's really a warning. A clone isn't a rebuilt car which should at least have the foundation of the original chassis if not the engine. Carburetors, instruments, and a wheel or two aren't enough to prove it's the real thing.

Some rebuilt cars are not rebuilds of the right cars. Lots of small r replicas of competition cars have been made up on the bones of road cars, where the two share common origins. Skillful engineers have turned 1929 Morris Minors into imitation 1929 MG M-type Midgits, and 4.5-litre Bentley tourers into pseudo Le Mans pattern sports racers. The finished article is always more attractive and more valuable than the original donor, with only an expert able to quickly determine its true origins.

Dishonest painters have been forging old masters for a long time. According to many reports, the world's art galleries and museums are full of these fakes. The top cars at current auctions, rare sports racers in particular, can fetch prices in the old master class. From now on, obviously, this temptation will always be present. We can expect more cases of real life, once again, imitating art.