

TIME MACHINES

Robert Coucher travels to Glashütte in Germany to drive an AC and Frazer Nash, and discovers cars with the precision that suits their watchmaker owner

Photography Jordana Schramm





Discreet. Low-key. These are terms that sometimes get lost in today's battles of the brands, in which the big, brash and obvious tend to hold sway, shouting from the rooftops or represented by huge illuminated billboards.

Take a look at the two classic cars featured here. Do you know what they are? One open sports car and one closed one, certainly. British? Probably. From the 1950s by the look of them. The white AC, one of only 463 in this guise, is marginally easier to identify thanks to its famous Cobra sibling, yet it doesn't have a V8 engine.

The coupé is less obvious because only nine were ever constructed. The intention was to go racing, particularly at Le Mans. Hence the nomenclature of this Frazer Nash Le Mans Coupé from 1954, while the AC is an Ace from 1958. Both are powered by the Bristol straight-six, developed from Germany's BMW 328 engine. These sporting classics are the best of British while also featuring the best of German.

Well-travelled readers will spot that these photographs are taken not in England's green and pleasant land but somewhat further east, in the rural landscape of Saxony. We're just outside the city of Dresden in what was, until 9 November 1989, the closed German Democratic Republic. Dresden, known as the 'Jewel Box' because of its magnificent Baroque and Rococo city centre, was infamously bombed during World War Two, but in recent years it has been completely rebuilt using as much of the old stonework as possible.

The Ace and 'Nash are parked in the impressive Neumarkt square with a view across to the imposing Frauenkirche, the

rebuilding of which took 11 years and was completed in 2005. It is also heartening to learn that the huge gold cross atop the spire was funded 'by the British people and the House of Windsor'.

I climb out of the obligatory airport Merc and am met by Wilhelm Schmid, CEO of watch company A Lange & Söhne and the owner of these two immaculate cars. I've known Wilhelm for several years, having attended the Concorso d'Eleganza Villa d'Este (which A Lange & Söhne sponsors). I invited him in return to join us on the Octane Tour two years ago as part of the Concours of Elegance at Hampton Court, when he drove his immaculate Aston Martin DB MkIII. His company is now the headline sponsor of the event.

Wilhelm likes his classic cars to be as discreet and low-key as the timepieces his company produces in the quiet town of Glashütte. 'In Germany most people have no idea what these cars are. They often ask me if the AC is a replica and are totally unsure about the 'Nash. But the cars draw real interest as most Germans are keen on things automotive and they want to discover what these machines are.'

The son of a car dealer, Wilhelm completed an apprenticeship in mechanical engineering before studying business. He worked for Castrol in the UK then moved to BMW, becoming head of sales and marketing for Southern Africa for ten years. He still has his first classic car, a red MGB that he restored, and the immaculate B remains on-the-button in his capacious motor house.

'I will never sell it,' says Wilhelm. 'It is in great condition and has done about 400,000km. So yes, it is a user.'



This picture and below
Two specialist sports cars from
1950s Britain cruise through their
BMW-based engine's homeland;
Ace looks demure compared with
the AC Cobra it later spawned.



'AS EXPECTED, THE 875KG ACE IMMEDIATELY FEELS LIGHT, DELICATE AND ACCURATE'



Left and below

Lines of Frazer Nash are intriguing if not beautiful, while this early Ace presages later car's, and Cobra's, smaller grille; owner and writer share thoughts; Coucher bonds with taut, crisp 'Nash.



A LANGE & SÖHNE WAS FOUNDED in Glashütte in 1845, where it produced fine timepieces until the last days of World War Two. It was then appropriated into the Soviet-occupied zone of Germany and the brand all but disappeared. But with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Walter Lange (the great-grandson of the founder) relaunched the watchmaking business and this year A Lange & Söhne is celebrating the 25th anniversary of its definitive Lange 1.

Wilhelm has arranged for us to sample the AC and Nash along his – enviable – everyday route to work. From his elegant villa in Dresden it snakes along rural backroads to Glashütte in the mountains. This is the test track he uses to make sure his classics are in perfect running condition.

Leaving the MGB under its dust sheet in the garage, Wilhelm asks which car I'd like to drive first. I select the Ace, because I've driven a few in the past and am familiar with them. He issues a few helpful operating instructions, then nimbly folds his frame into the diminutive Frazer Nash and

is off through the leafy backstreets. As expected, the 875kg Ace immediately feels light, delicate and accurate while simultaneously relaxed, refined and comfortable.

Designed by John Tojeiro, it has a ladder-type frame and is the first British sports car with all-independent suspension, thanks to transverse leaf springs and lower wishbones. The gearshift is long of throw and needs a little practice, but is soon learnt. Slow and easy inputs are best, and this Ace has the optional overdrive for relaxed cruising. It does not have the optional front disc brakes; Wilhelm assures me the Alfin drums are effective but they feel rather less than that. My own '50s Jaguar XK140 has been upgraded to discs, so maybe I need to recalibrate myself.

A neat touch is the tonneau that Wilhelm had made, which incorporates leather straps to buckle down the driver's side when driving. It's typical of his attention to detail. Chassis number 312 is totally correct and in original specification, but it has led an interesting life.

'The Ace was exported to America, where it spent many years, most of them as a racing car,' he says. 'We think it even had an American V8 fitted at some point, but now it has a correct Bristol straight-six once again. It has had bodywork repairs but the doors, bonnet and boot are still stamped with the number 312. It then went to Australia.

'When I bought it, I sent it straight to Steven Stanton at Stanton Motorsport in Hungerford, who went right through it. The AC now runs perfectly and is in good condition, but is not too precious to use.' Well, it looks pretty perfect to me, finished in soft ivory with red leather trim.

As we leave the city limits the road opens up onto a deserted dual carriageway. Wilhelm accelerates fast in the Frazer Nash, so I drop a gear in the Ace and open the triple Solexes' butterflies to the max. Originally producing 128bhp, this 1971cc overhead valve BMW straight-six doesn't usually feel especially powerful... but as this one reaches 4500rpm, its character changes. The rasp from the

delicate twin exhaust pipes hardens into a tuneful blare and the power comes on smoothly and urgently. There must be around 150bhp here, and in the light Ace it feels fantastic.

As we flow down the backroads the worm-and-peg steering sharpens up nicely, with good feel through the thin-rimmed steering wheel. The suspension, while firm, soaks up the undulations on these immaculate, near-deserted roads, and the skinny 5.50 R16 Michelins mounted on gorgeous Borrani wires allow an enjoyable amount of lateral slippage. I can't quite believe this is Wilhelm's commute to work. Actually, 'commute' is too pedestrian a word. This is his *drive*, and he's not hanging about in the Le Mans 'Nash.

As I manage to keep up with him I can feel that the fettle Ace has the greater grunt, but watching the little 'Nash working the twisting and diving tarmac ahead is a treat. My vantage point is one of the most elegant British sports cars of the 1950s, and it is relishing this early-morning blast. The Ace's nature is one of balance rather than brawn. The steering



1954 Frazer Nash Le Mans Coupé

Engine 1971cc OHV straight-six, triple Solex carburettors
Power 128bhp+ @ 5000rpm **Torque** 120lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission**
 Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Rack and pinion **Suspension**
 Front: lower wishbones, transverse leaf spring, telescopic dampers. Rear: live axle,
 torsion bars, telescopic dampers **Brakes** Drums **Weight** 780kg
Top speed 120mph **0-60mph** 9sec approx

is accurate, the power is ample, the chassis is benign and predictable and the Ace is in its sweet spot as it flows along the road. It feels relaxed and comfortable while travelling a lot faster than it seems to be. With the drum brakes now nice and warm, more speed can be carried into the corners, too.

We pull over to swap cars and I feel enlivened by the whole AC Ace experience. It's no surprise that an Ace won its class at Le Mans in 1959 and finished seventh overall. Aces are much prized today by enthusiasts who appreciate the art of swift driving. 'Yes, it does drive well, doesn't it?' says Wilhelm, with smiling understatement.

This 1954 Frazer Nash Le Mans Coupé, chassis number FN197, was designed specifically to compete in the world's most famous 24-hour endurance race. Of the nine cars completed, three raced there and chassis number FN186 finished 13th overall in 1953, and first in class. The following year it finished 11th. In essence it is a Frazer Nash Targa Florio with a hardtop and, although not quite as well resolved as the pretty Ace, the rounded and curvaceous 'Nash catches the eye with an almost aeronautical look. Its hardtop is much like the cockpit of a light aircraft.

'You will find the Frazer Nash is rather different, even though it has the same Bristol engine as the Ace,' Wilhelm advises. 'The car is extremely original, so the engine output is less than the Ace's. This was the Earls Court Motor Show car, featuring a higher-compression engine and a heater,

1958 AC Ace Bristol

Engine 1971cc OHV straight-six, triple Solex carburettors
Power 128bhp+ @ 5000rpm **Torque** 120lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission**
 Four-speed manual with overdrive, rear-wheel drive **Steering** Worm and peg
Suspension Front and rear: lower wishbones, transverse leaf spring,
 telescopic dampers **Brakes** Drums **Weight** 875kg
Top speed 120mph **0-60mph** 9sec approx

which is why it has a fresh air vent only on the driver's side. The other was closed off to house the relocated battery. That's peculiar, as it really doesn't need a heater, but it's a British classic so a little eccentricity is to be expected. I don't think BMW would have done that,' he laughs.

The Frazer Nash Le Mans coupé was introduced in 1953 and was the company's first closed production car. Like the Ace it features a parallel-tube chassis with independent front suspension, but the steering is by rack-and-pinion and the rear axle is sprung by torsion bars. FN197's history is well known and it remains a matching-numbers car.

It was first owned by Anthony Twentyman, who loaned it to AFN for the Earls Court Motor Show in 1954. He'd ordered it with adjustable radiator slats, centre-lock wires, Alfin brakes, a fly-off handbrake and that special heater. Twentyman enjoyed competing in FN197 for a few years before it went into long-term ownership elsewhere. It was later bought by the highly regarded Peter Jay, who restored it to its current immaculate condition.

The aerodynamic coachwork is finished in correct metallic silver, unadorned by any brightwork. The twin spotlights allude to its endurance-racing intent, as does the quick-release fuel-filler cap, and the low stance necessitates a bonnet scoop to clear the three upright carburettors. The small door aperture makes some contortion necessary but the leather bucket seat hugs you



Clockwise from top left
 Tuned Bristol engine in Ace; neat tonneau; clever quarterlights; 'Nash cabin; Bristol engine tail with Solexes on top; 'Nash dash; stubby lever controls precise shift; cranked lever feels looser.





in place ahead of the large, upright three-spoke steering wheel. The painted dash is plain to the point of austerity.

'They specifically removed all chrome from the interior to reduce glare when racing at Le Mans,' Wilhelm points out. He does get detail... talking of which, as he shows me around the cabin of the 'Nash I notice he's wearing an A Lange & Söhne Zeitwerk Date. Finished in tasteful white gold with a grey dial, it is one of the more rarefied Langes. Then again, he *is* the boss.

The Bristol six fires with a zing and the rasp exits from a single tailpipe. The clutch is firm and tight, the gearshift is the same, and the rack-and-pinion steering shows only a little slack at standstill. The gearshift is much shorter of throw than the AC's, and the clutch is a bit sharper.

As I move off the 'Nash instantly feels lighter, which it is at just 780kg, and very eager. Its steering is accurate, the brakes are strong and the whole package feels taut and responsive. The coupé top seems to confer a degree of rigidity on the 'Nash which is absent in the more relaxed Ace. The Le Mans Coupé's racing heritage comes through immediately. Thus usefully small car can be placed accurately on the road, and it responds precisely to every input. Wilhelm thinks this engine is in a milder state of tune than the AC's, but it feels to me like it has all the beans.

On the fast country roads through Saxony, the Frazer Nash's solid rear axle doesn't make itself thumpingly apparent. Overall, this car is a whole lot tighter, lighter and more immediately responsive than the more languid, if faster, Ace. The two cars share the same type of engine and a similarity of chassis, if not of steering and suspension, and

they complement each other well. To my mind, though, the Frazer Nash is the sharper driver's car.

Arriving at the Lange & Söhne 'manufacture' in Glashütte, I'm impressed with Wilhelm's British thoroughbreds and envious of his daily route to work. Equally impressive is a quick tour of the Lange works, which was opened by the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, in 2015 – 25 years after reunification. The buildings are filled with dedicated technicians, who greet Wilhelm Schmid warmly.

The serene workspace in which they construct the Lange 'complications' is accessible only through airtight doors once shoes are cleaned and covered in plastic overboots. Once inside, I notice one young chap is wearing the most beautiful and eye-catching wristwatch.

Is it a Lange? It looks slightly different. 'No, I made this watch myself as part of my Lange training,' he says nonchalantly, as he shows me how one of just a couple of thousand A Lange & Söhne watches manufactured each year is meticulously assembled. The young chap turns out to be Patrick Ritschel, head of the Complications Department. That's impressive; at his seemingly young age he already has the skills of a master watchmaker.

It's good to observe how exquisite craftsmanship continues in Glashütte. Here is a thriving company run by a man who is as passionate about his beautiful classic cars as he is about his complicated timepieces. **End**

THANKS TO A Lange & Söhne, www.alange-soehne.com,
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