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chapter 1

how it all started – the bubble cars

After the Second World War, the economy of Europe was in poor shape. Fuel was in short supply, and even rationed in the UK well into the 1950s. Unless you were in a priority occupation, it was difficult to acquire a new car, even if you could afford it. Secondhand, pre-war cars didn't come on the market very often and fetched high prices when sold.

In France, the basic Citroën 2CV was only made available to certain privileged customers, with a long waiting list. In Britain, many motorists made do with a motorcycle and sidecar combination.

Former aircraft manufacturers in Germany were banned from building planes, so some of them, notably Heinkel and Messerschmitt, turned their attention to small car manufacture. Lawrie Bond was building his simple Villiers-engined three-wheelers in Britain. In Italy, Fiat was looking for a new small car to replace the Topolino, and Piaggio were developing a new line of scooters and small vans.

The Suez Canal in the Middle East was strategically important to the British, with two thirds of Europe's oil being transported along it. Troubles in that region led to the oil crisis of 1956. This produced a greater demand for economy vehicles, as fuel supplies became restricted again.

These microcars were built with economy in mind, but with often appealing and innovative results. Refrigerator and Scooter manufacturer Isotherm went on to produce what was to become the most memorable bubble car of them all – the Isetta.

Isetta

Over 175,000 Isettats of all types were made worldwide. Of these, 30,000 were produced by Isetta of Great Britain, and around 8500 cars were exported to the United States. Isetta production ceased in 1962 in Germany, and 1964 in the UK.



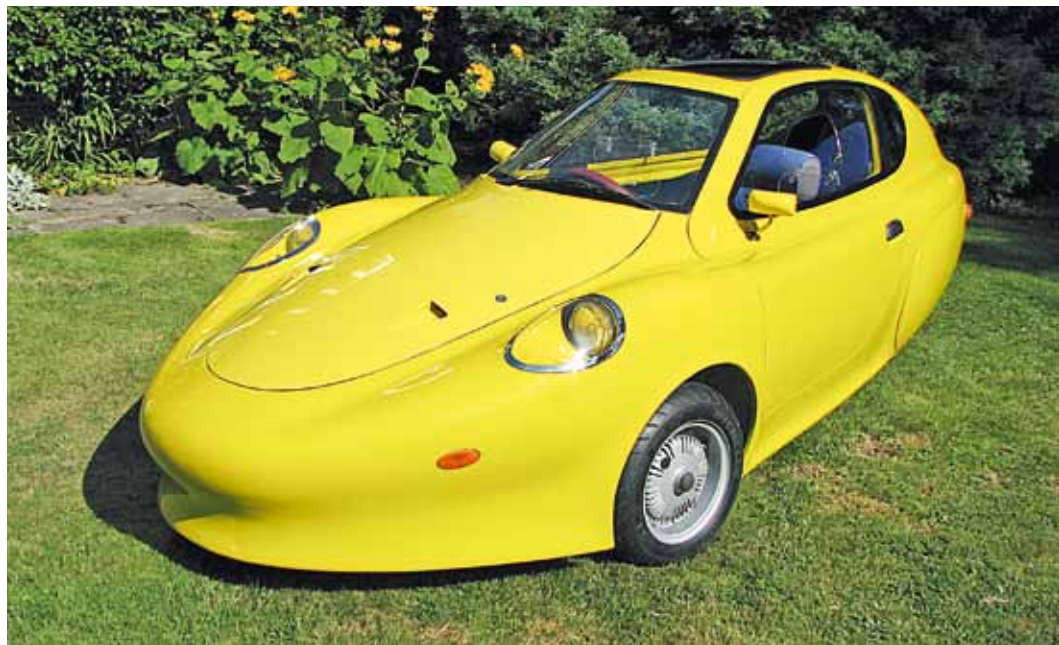
**The Fiat Topolino C, produced from 1959 until 1964 when it was replaced by the all-new 600.
(Courtesy Steve Pepper at Low Tide Studios)**



Line-up of Peels standing smartly to attention. The Peel P50 was produced on the Isle of Man and powered by a DKW moped engine. It was the smallest production car in the world. At only 52in long and 39in wide (1320mm x 990mm), with the engine right next to the driver, progress was a noisy, bouncy affair. The tiny 5in tyres meant that potholes were particularly hazardous. The Trident which followed gave the appearance of hatching its occupants whenever the canopy was lifted. There was no reverse gear, but, like the P50, the Trident could be lifted round by a handle and manoeuvred into a very small space.



Along came the Frisky Family Three in 1958. This proved the bestseller, thanks to its three wheels and tax advantage over the other cars. The Family Three was fitted with the Villiers 9E 197cc engine, but those hungry for more power could go for the Excelsior Talisman 246cc or 328cc engine. (Courtesy Grant Kearney)



Bob Curl's Dolphin. Bob's machine is striking in appearance, and its curved front and faired-in headlights are reminiscent of the Ferrari Dino. It's long and narrow, with tandem seating for two. The interior is neatly finished with corbeau seats and Vespa Cosa instruments. A sequential gear change lever is easily placed in the right-hand side panel. A conventional steering wheel operates a rack and pinion system taken from a Triumph Herald. There's no heater or radio, the door is opened by pulling on a wire, and the roof panel can be detached and stored in the front luggage boot.