

FARINA'S ART *of the* STATE

Months before the Queen's visit to Italy in 1961, Pininfarina was commissioned to build four Lancia Flaminia-based limos. **Martin Buckley** tells their story

Forty-five years after their state debut, the Lancia Flaminia limousines Pininfarina built for the Queen's visit to Italy in 1961 live in quiet, but pampered, semi-retirement in Rome's parliament building or Quirinale.

With hardly 70,000 miles between them, their dark blue paintwork remains deep and rich, the chrome gleams and everything still works, even details such as the microphones for communicating with the chauffeur. They are taken out for sporadic exercise and, on very special occasions, pressed into service as limousines of state; for instance, when a new president of the Republic is elected. But that is all.

The presidential Flaminias were born into a colourful era of truly memorable cars of state. JFK's tragic and vast Lincoln X100 would, curiously, be used by subsequent incumbents in slightly scruffy form. When De Gaulle commissioned his magnificent Chapron-bodied Citroën DS, his only stipulation was that it should be longer than Lyndon B Johnson's Lincoln. The Mercedes 600 Pullman became famous for its inglorious history of African dictator owners, as well as David Bowie's alleged Nazi salutes out of a Landulet. The Russian ZIL and China's Honqi Red Flag encapsulated the chill of the cold war while the Nissan Prince Royal was a reminder that the Japanese still had an Imperial family for whom only six of these cars, powered by a 4-litre V8, were ever built. To this day you still need permission from them to publish a picture of it.

The presidential Flaminias replaced stretched Aurelias (Ghia built a particularly awkward one

in 1953) and Alfa 1900s, and outlived the bullet-proof Fiat 130s and Lancias Kappas.

Even when, in the '80s, De Tomaso donated an armoured Quattroporte, the Lancias stayed in the background. When the Maserati failed to start on its maiden trip though, the Flaminias were forced out of retirement. Today they are as well known in Italy as the Royal Phantom VI. They are so warmly remembered that there is a society at home dedicated to their preservation.

Officially they are known as Flaminia 335 Specials, built on a version of the V6 Lancia's chassis, with the wheelbase stretched from 2.87 to 3.35m, hence the '335' nomenclature. As the flagship car of Italy's most aristocratic marque, there could have been no choice other than a Flaminia as the country's top car of state. The president was already chauffeured in a standard sedan and other famous owners such as Juan Manuel Fangio, Audrey Hepburn and Brigitte Bardot added to its image as a car of glamorous Euro-sophistication.

From the beginning, however, the limousines had classical equestrian names. Belfiore, Belsito, and Belmonte are all cabriolets; Belvedere is a full convertible. Should the elements decide to rain on the Flaminias' parade, then special transparent roof canopies can be fitted to the cars. Although there is no true pressurised ventilation system, the plethora of opening vent windows makes this irrelevant.

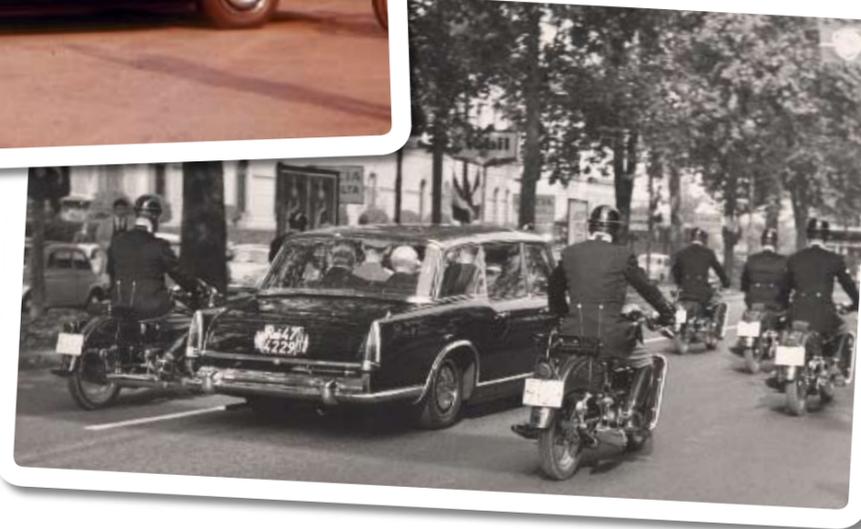
Pininfarina, which had built a number of government limousines on the Astura chassis in the 1930s, was awarded the task of constructing



'When the amoured Quattroporte donated by De Tomaso failed to start on its maiden trip, the Lancias were forced out of retirement'



Far left: four Lancia Flaminia-based stretched limousines were commissioned by Italian president Giovanni Gronchi for visit of the Queen in 1961. Above: at Pininfarina, this car shows the transparent canopy that could be fitted in bad weather. Cars were reserved for state occasions and had police escorts; they only left Rome by road once, for a visit to Naples





Above: elegant side profile of Flaminia 335; 3.35m wheelbase gave rise to name. GM helped with design, supplying electrics for the hoods; all could seat seven, with folding occasional seats in Connolly hide-trimmed cabin. Far right: passing Colosseum – mounted escort was appropriate because the cars were named after horses: Belfiore, Belmonte, Belsito and Belvedere



'Even more intriguing is the widely asserted story that the Queen was given one of the Flaminia limousines as a gift during her 1961 visit'

the cars by Italian president Giovanni Gronchi in March 1960.

There was a grim precedent for the commission in the world of international diplomacy: four convertible Fiat 2800 limousines had been constructed for Hitler's visit to Italy in 1938.

Working to Gronchi's personal brief, the designs for the Flaminia were completed in six months. *The Times*, trailing the Royal visit in April 1961, reported that two cars were under construction by Pininfarina but that their design was still secret. Come the day of the visit, they wafted HM The Queen through Rome's ancient

squares and thoroughfares with whispering efficiency, flanked by police motorcycle outriders.

Pininfarina schemed a design based on the standard 2.5 sedan, but fuller bodied and with an elegant hip that curves over the wheelarch. It would have been all too easy to have produced an absurdly gross car, pompous and over-blown. The Flaminia limousines were substantial, imposing cars but svelte and gracefully restrained. There was a division and jump seats to the rear – each car could seat seven – with everything trimmed in black Connolly leather. General Motors helped with some of the electrical equipment, particularly the hood. The two-way communications system was devised by Urmet (which makes Italian public phones) and the cars were fitted with Voxson push-button radios front and rear, plus electric windows.

Little was outwardly shared with the standard saloon. The cars were not even built with door locks, although there is a key for them. All had twin distributors in case of a malfunction – just press a switch in the glove box and swap over the king leads – and a back-up fuel pump. Although the cars ran standard single-carburettor 2.5-litre V6 engines, they were fitted with low-ratio differentials so that, when parading, they could potter along in top without needing to change down.

They are said to be capable of a stately 75mph flat-out but even in their younger days they rarely hit the open road. Pinin-

farina did, however, drive the cars from Turin to the Quirinale to deliver them. Apart from a trip to Naples, they have never been beyond the outskirts of Rome by road. Today, if the Flaminias need to travel long distances, they are transported to their destination by a specially modified railway carriage.

Although the cars have number plates they are exempt from having to display their licence and insurance documents which, in Italy, are supposed to be shown in the front windscreen. In the presidential Lancias, these documents are kept in the glovebox. The only place that they have ever been requested is when the cars passed through Vatican City.

The Flaminias were paid for by the Italian state treasury and were only later acquired by the Quirinale which today owns only two of the limos, Belfiore and Belsito. One of the Lancias was given to the Turin Automobile Museum, and another, in 1983, was sold to a Roman lawyer for what was believed to be a modest figure. The Queen again rode in one of the four cars on a visit to Italy in 2000. There may have been as many as six, however. In his memoirs, Battista Pininfarina recalled delivering another Flaminia 335 limousine to Pope John XXIII.

Even more intriguing is the widely asserted rumour that the Queen was given one of the Flaminia limousines as a gift during her 1961 visit. Polite enquiries at the Royal Mews have yet to throw any light on the story. Could a presidential Flaminia be rotting away, forgotten, in a royal lock-up? Do let us know. ■

