

# BRISTOL 401 PININ FARINA

*With mischievous help from Frazer Nash and a dose of Italian mastery, this Bristol 401 was taken to the pinnacle of contemporary style. But why were only three examples built?*

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**PREVIOUS PAGE** *Kidney donation? Too to be precise, hence the similarity to the BMW 328, after Bristol availed itself of German designs and technology to launch the aerospace giant into the world of exclusive motor cars.*

**THIS PAGE** *A well-stocked dashboard was a key facet of every 401, but in this Pinin Farina-built version the walnut fascia gave way to painted metal as a continuation of the coachwork.*



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action – cars simply as the product of ruthless efficiency and cost-calculation.

When a tour guide mentioned to Henry Ford that a keen young Italian kept coming back for more, he couldn't resist meeting the foreigner and inviting him to lunch. Once he saw Battista's coachwork design sketches spread out on the restaurant tablecloth, Ford wasted no time in offering the 27-year old a job as his chief designer. After all, as the young man explained, he'd worked in his brother's coachbuilding company since age just 12, propelled from fetcher of espresso to de facto chief designer by his own drive and intuitive skills.

It may seem a giant leap from the sepia days of the Model T to this urbane Bristol 401 cabriolet, whose lines were probably drawn by one of Pinin Farina's unnamed disciples, supervised by the pint-size design genius. But it is illuminating nonetheless. Farina politely declined Ford's offer. He had other plans, and he'd decided he didn't need industrial might to be a personal success.

After returning home to Italy, in 1930 Farina broke away from his brother and established Carrozzeria Pinin Farina in Corso Tripiani, Turin (the family and company names were changed to Pininfarina in 1961). Ostensibly, it was a simple statement of independence, adding yet another coachbuilding workshop to the teeming industry around the city. Battista Farina knew everything about delivering a quality job to customers, and his company's initial output was a stream of handsome if largely unremarkable saloons, cabriolets and roadsters, frequently utilising chassis from Lancia with which Farina enjoyed a close and cordial – perhaps even preferred – relationship as a bodywork supplier.

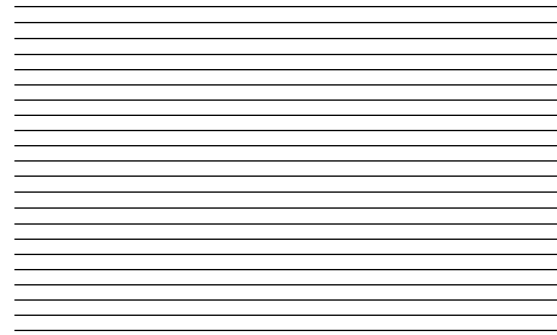
**P**ininfarina's thick-as-thieves relationship with Ferrari only tells some of the story of the remarkable Italian design house. Its global influence and outlook stretches back to a time when even the biggest carmakers were essentially parochial. As an adventurous young fellow, Battista Farina – known in his family circle as "Pinin", or "baby", spent two weeks at sea in 1920 between Genoa and New York to travel to the USA. Once there, he toured Henry Ford's Detroit assembly plant several times to take in the epic sight of mass-production in furious

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Beginning in 1935, however, Pinin Farina's designs suddenly took a quantum leap into the future, ably assisted by Felice Boano, chief engineer and an understudy Farina brought with him from Stabilimenti Farina. The Alfa Romeo 6C 2300 Pescara with Pinin Farina coupe body was a riveting centrepiece at the Turin motor show that year. It was obvious the company chief had been observing the clumsy attempts at futurism that emanated from Detroit, the 1934 Chrysler Airflow and the 1933 Briggs 'Dream Car'. If they were notable for anything, besides the general tapering behind enclosed rear wheels, it was in the way headlights were no longer free-standing objects perched on the car's nose but embedded and integrated into the frontage. Meanwhile, a separate radiator grille surround was replaced by an air intake in harmony with the car's entire profile.

The Pescara had all of this, but it was the flow and balance of the lines in alliance with this svelte frontal treatment that set Pinin Farina's work apart. Of course, virtually every car then was a bespoke order; even the individual cars in series designs often differed in their details. Pinin Farina, though, would not adopt a trend unless its designers were sure that overall harmony was achievable. So by the end of the 1930s, although frontal radiator intakes could sometimes be almost horizontal on some of its Lancias and Alfa Romeos 8C 2900s, front and rear mudguards remained as manifestly separate entities in the cars' overall forms.

We can safely presume that the man in charge was acutely aware of the design mistakes being made in the mass market in the gradual move towards the 'pontoon' look – that continuous



**RIGHT** *Pinin Farina is the undisputed master of design harmony on larger cars of the classic period; there's not a line nor a curve that jars on this glorious 401 drophead.*



wing line from front to back achieved by entirely smoothing away separate mudguards. Whether the Kaiser Frazer in the USA, the Singer SM1500 in Britain or the Borgward Hansa in Germany, all too often the effect was an unyielding slab-sidedness that killed off visual interest.

Farina outlined some of the issues underlying his work to US reporter John Wheelock Freeman in 1952.

"Believe me, it's no easy job to design a big car," he said. "You have so many things to consider. You must see out, you must be low enough, but you must have room. When I'm in America, I'm happy. But American cars are designed for the mother-in-law; you want to carry everything, the dog, the cat, the furniture. You want to go everywhere [but]

transportation comes first. You go fast in a straight line but these cars aren't designed to be driven. They're designed to be ridden in."

For his company's 6C 2500 cabriolets of 1947-52, then, the delightful undulation of the wing-line and the sparing decoration of the raked-back nose and focus on the shield-shaped grille produced cars that were admired worldwide for their uncommonly pleasing style.

These beautiful, standard-setting Alfa Romeos typified Pinin Farina's approach to mainstream design. Each car, no matter what the detailed difference, was a rolling advertisement for Italy's automotive design mastery. The drawing office in Turin, directed by Farina and Boano, was a rigorous enforcer of contemporary styling good



**LEFT** a world-famous emblem but the name is strictly case-sensitive – Pinin Farina on cars up to 1961 such as the Bristol, and only Pininfarina thereafter.

**BELOW** the plain and simple bumper and widely-spaced headlights tally with contemporary Pinin Farina Alfa 2500s, and make the car appear wider than the standard 401.



taste, and if you took a bare chassis to its factory, as for the Bristol 401, you could expect something entirely comparable to result.

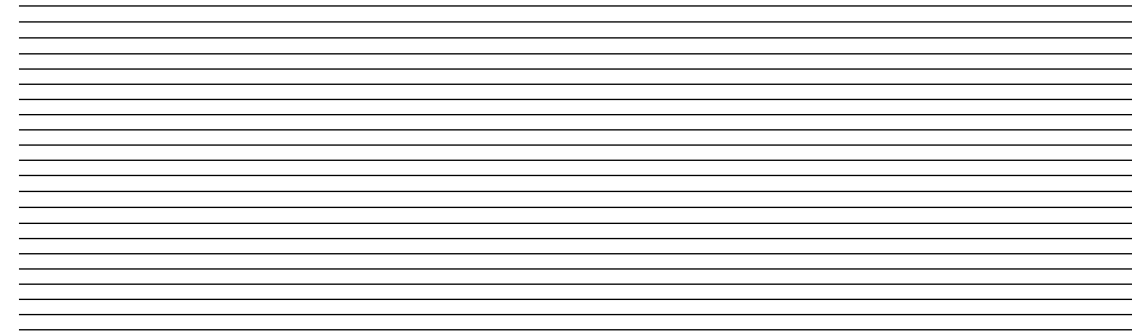
For Bristol in the UK, though, the idea of catching Pinin Farina's stardust was daring. And not a little controversial. It was at the axis of a philosophical disjoint between the co-founders of the car project: Harold 'HJ' or 'Aldy' Aldington of Frazer Nash, and the Bristol Aeroplane Company. Aldy held UK manufacturing rights to BMW's superb six-cylinder engine, the unit that before WWII had made the BMW 328 such a desirable sports car. Bristol, meanwhile, had taken out a licence from him to make the engine for its new car, and collaborated fully with Aldy to gain access to other designs, specifications and blueprints that would form the basis of the 328-based Bristol 400.

It was a happy, constructive partnership, but for one thing. Aldy's deal with Bristol included a supply of engines for his own, post-war Frazer Nash cars. Yet he also felt Bristol would find a much bigger market – be much more viable – if its own cars had a more sporting edge. Bristol managing director Sir George White thought differently.

'By involving such Italian coachbuilders as Touring and Pinin Farina, Aldington hoped for a chance to give the planned Bristol car a decidedly sporting nature,' recorded historian Rainer Simons. 'It was precisely for this reason that Sir George White resisted any involvement on the part of the Italians. He continued to prefer the concept of a respectable tourer because he believed this corresponded much better to the tastes of his countrymen.'

The difference in outlook no doubt represented

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the differing worlds of the two men. Aldy's life had revolved around Brooklands and racing drivers; White, an astonishingly successful industrialist, moved in the sort of tycoon circles where Bentleys and Lagondas were the norm. Nonetheless, in the end White relented. While Bristol created its own, highly aerodynamic 401 sports saloon of 1948 as a rapid and luxurious four-seater tourer, some ten early chassis left the Filton factory for final interpretation by outside designers. A couple of these carried bodywork by Beutler of Thun in Switzerland, while another received the attention of University Motors in London.

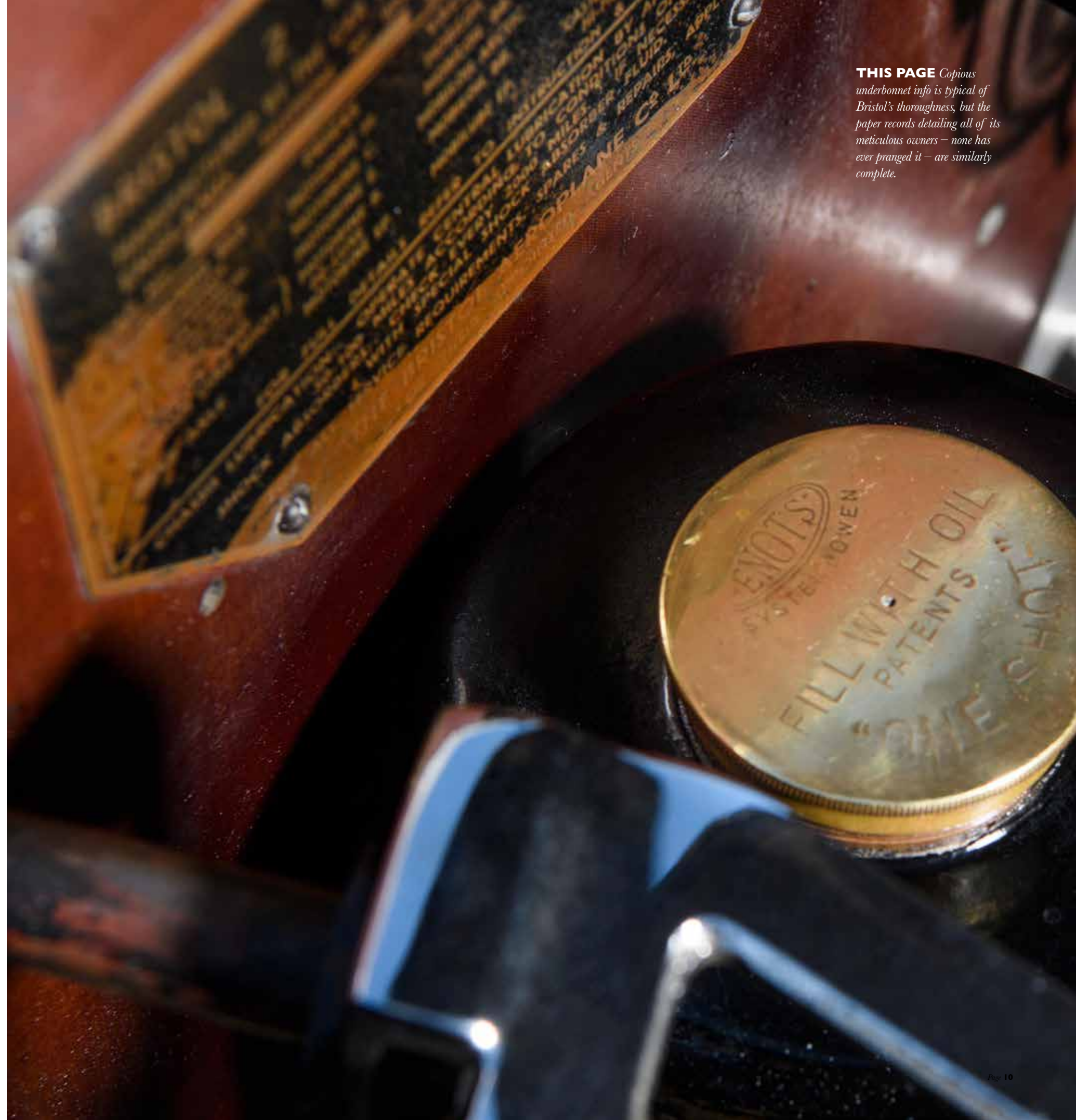
The remaining seven chassis went to Italy. Four were delivered to Carrozzeria Touring and the other three arrived at Pinin Farina where

they were turned into four-seater cabriolets in the contemporary Alfa Romeo idiom.

This very car, chassis 401/208, was consigned to its sea voyage to Pinin Farina by Aldington's AFN Ltd on 27 July 1948, three months before the 401's formal launch at the London Motor Show at Earls Court. It was back in the UK by March 1949 ready to be delivered to AFN's customer Robert Lee of London. It set him back £2500, five times the cost of a Hillman Minx. In the interim, in late November 1948, the car was illustrated in *The Autocar* magazine, where it was referred to as a 'Drophead Cabriolet'.

'A fine example of hand craftsmanship and possessing the beautiful lines, exceptional attention to detail refinements, and luxurious

**THIS PAGE** Copious underbonnet info is typical of Bristol's thoroughness, but the paper records detailing all of its meticulous owners – none has ever pranged it – are similarly complete.





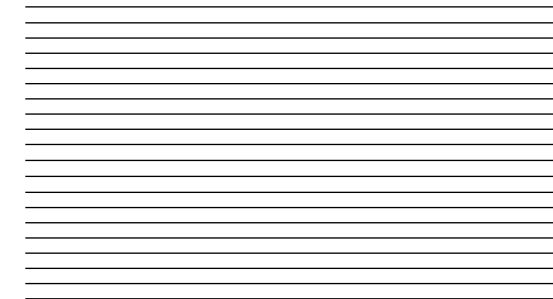
finish throughout, which have distinguished Italian coachbuilders' exhibits at Brussels, Geneva and Paris,' ran the report. 'The combination of coachwork by leading Italian designers on this latest version of a thoroughbred high-performance chassis provides the perfect car for the discriminating enthusiast.'

Its straight, unadorned bumper and widely spaced headlights give the car an impression of ground-hugging width absent from factory coachwork. The car, in uplifting blue with restrained chrome accents on its all-aluminium body, possesses an ownership and history record to die for.

There's not a single unexplained void between any of the 10 owners over the 70 years the car

has been in and out of choice collections in the UK, Belgium and Holland. It's been so cherished that not one single instance of accident damage has ever needed repair. An attentive maintenance regime included a major overhaul in 1992. Then came an engine and transmission rebuild in 2019. This total mechanical restoration included careful polishing of the cylinder head and fitting a 'Fast Road' camshaft that boosted power from the standard 80 to 118bhp, and gives a torque curve more suited to fast, effortless driving; overdrive was fitted to complement the same. Together with the strip and repaint of the coachwork, it's all in a hefty history file that accompanies the car along with delightful original artefacts like its half-tonneau, tool kit, and original Bristol leather key fob.

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There's an odd irony about Pinin Farina's influence in the first 10 years following the WWII. It was understandably delighted that New York's Museum Of Modern Art (MOMA) picked a Cisitalia 202 for its 1950 exhibition entitled 'Eight Automobiles', retaining it in its permanent collection as an unparalleled example of modern sculpture. This delightful GT coupe, though, showed little of Battista Farina's moderating hand (it was designed by another great name in Italian design, Giovanni Savonuzzi, and Pinin Farina was the contractor picked to build it).

It was not typical Pinin Farina at all, in bald contrast to the Bristol 401 Drophead Cabriolet. This can be seen as a key car bridging the era when coachwork was a collection of separate sections on a separate chassis to fully enclosed, full-width bodies as a single form, yet finessed by Pinin Farina to avoid the stylistic mistakes that befell mainstream manufacturers.

Specifically, and despite polite rejection from Bristol, a closely-related design went on general sale in 1951 as the Lancia Aurelia cabriolet. Good work could never be wasted. In contrast to the trio of Bristols, the Aurelia was positively commonplace, with 265 cars made, but they were all stepping stones towards Battista Farina's decision, in 1955, to industrialise his fine designs when he opened a new plant to mass-produce the Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider in 1955. There would be 14,500 of those – in some small way, Farina's lunch with Henry Ford finally left its mark on car design history... with just a tiny push from one of Bristol's finest. ■

Sadly, you might even say misguidedly, Bristol was stout in its resistance to Pinin Farina's influence. Even though the Italian design house's output of the first half of the 1950s was globally influential – numbering cars like the Lancia Aurelia B20, Peugeot 403, Ferrari 212 Inter and Alfa Romeo Giulietta Spider – Bristol went its own way with the subsequent 404 and 405. They were shaped to reflect forms that were more overtly aircraft-influenced, shunning the harmonious automotive aesthetic that Pinin Farina was pioneering. And nor did the British factory have much fondness for open cars. On the convertible 402 of its own design, Bristol experienced enormous frustration in getting the doors to hang properly, and stopping the scuttle from shaking.

**ABOVE LEFT** *the twin exhausts are the vocal chords for the superb 2-litre, six-cylinder engine, the responsively beating heart of every early Bristol.*

**ABOVE RIGHT** *the car's chassis plate, the brass identifier that would have been in place that day in 1948 when it set sail for Turin and a fine new set of clothes.*