

Motor

WEEK ENDING JUNE 4 · 1983 · 50p



**GOING
TOPLESS!**
Porsche 911
Cabriolet
tested

SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT
**Austin-Rover's
Revival**

NEW
ALFA 33 —
Full details



Motor

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HIS SPECIAL FORTÉ

Three years ago, the Rapport Forté was launched as "a new concept in sports car design", only to disappear almost immediately. Andrew Whyte discovers and drives one that has just been completed professionally — as a unique estate car!

BOTH CAR-oriented businesses, Rapport International and Patrick Motors couldn't be more different — yet there is a common link in the shape of the PMG Rapport Forté Estate. Let me tell you its story...

In the late 'Seventies, the Rapport International Group was founded — to quote its Chairman, Ian Leaf — "with the aim of creating an oasis in the world of mass-produced motoring". It specialised in convertible, four-door, and six-wheel-drive Range Rover variants, sub-contracting the work to several other engineering and coach-building companies.

Then, in July 1980, Rapport launched itself headlong on to the motoring scene when Mark Thatcher did a demonstration lap, in front of the British GP crowds at Brands Hatch, in a Chris Humberstone-designed convertible called the Forté.

Billed as "the British convertible with a difference", the Forté had a mixed reception. Sophisticated though it was in theory, it didn't work out in practice. It was certainly eye-catching: but, either open or closed, its looks did not give it the grace of line an exotic high-speed car deserves. Even so, in the fortnight following the British GP, fourteen deposit-paid orders were taken.

Chris Humberstone recalls that "management problems within Rapport" wrecked the project: and, true, Rapport International was soon to be placed in the hands of the Receiver. Only a handful of Fortés — if that — had been built, but neither the Rapport nor the Forté names were destined to die on the spot.

They, together with three part-assembled prototypes and a host of assorted parts, were purchased by the Patrick Motors Group, of Birmingham — a company also run by a true motoring enthusiast and connoisseur, Alexander Patrick, the founder's grandson.

Ever since its own coachbuilding days in the 'Thirties, Patrick Motors has associated itself with the work of high-quality professional specialists — such as the XJ-S convertibles and estates by Lynx, and the Panther in its Jaguar-powered forms. The Group had already sold several special Rapport Range Rovers when the Rapport operation went on the market. Never likely to get the cars it had ordered, Patrick Motors moved in.

At first, the complex heap of bits looked hopeless. Then came an idea. Alexander Patrick was having an Avon-Stevens XJ estate car specially built by Ladbroke Avon, of Warwick, who had already done sub-contract work on Rapport's Range Rovers. In passing, he mentioned to Ladbroke Avon boss, Graham Hudson that he had acquired the remains of the Forté project, but did not have suitable facilities to com-

plete it. Soon it was agreed that Ladbroke Avon's own special projects department would build up one vehicle — as an estate car — and the Spring of 1983 saw this remarkable brainchild of dreamers completed.

In fairness, Rapport had put a lot of thought into the Forté. Its history begins with the Californian dealer who wanted to sell a top-class British convertible there at a time when the Jensen Interceptor had gone, and the only possibility — the Aston Martin — was having service problems in the USA.

Chris Humberstone, formerly of Rapport, takes up the story: "The Jaguar was regarded as the most attractive basis for such a car, particularly when the fuel-injected 4.2 engine arrived. That generated new interest in the marque. We wanted a full four-seater, so we selected the regular XJ12 saloon as the standard base (rather than the XJ-S), with 3.4 or 4.2 engines optional. We offered turbocharging and, of course, with either of the 'sixties' the regular five-speed manual gearbox could have been specified."

The original plan had been to take brand-new cars from Jaguar Cars Inc., in New Jersey. Graham Whitehead, head of that operation, had been "quite encouraging". These would be converted, locally, to Forté specification, using parts shipped from Rapport in the UK. These possibilities become pretty academic before any testing, let alone development, could take place.

The first car was an open four-seater with a vandal-proof power-operated metal folding roof. Humberstone is quick to admit there were teething troubles in the mechanism, but claims that "once it was refined it worked very well and gave a feeling of real saloon-car-integrity".

In the original specification, however, the options of fastback and estate car detachable hardtops were mentioned, and it was a hardtop which Alexander Patrick decided to complete. Moreover, he had the top built permanently into the structure of the car.

There is, certainly, a feeling of rigidity about the PMG Rapport Forté estate which identifies it as a professional engineering job straight away. The XJ floorpan has been reinforced by adding a steel backbone over the transmission tunnel, and the scuttle and sills have been given similar added strength.

There is no doubt that it is a full four-seater. The seats are as high as those of a saloon, but each has its own private foot well, surrounded by structural members. The doors are big and quite high, so getting in and out doesn't present hazards. Instrumentation is strangely plain, with regular Jaguar-style dials and a set of rocker-switches across the centre in the old style, and familiar two-dial air-con-



ditioning controls. The seating position, too, is quite "XJ", with the usual steering wheel adjustment, but intrusion of the engine into the cockpit produces an awkward position for the GM 400 automatic transmission selector. However, it also permits a short, sloping bonnet. The front is, undoubtedly, the more attractive end — quite Lotus-like and futuristic in its sleekness, but keeping the overall dimensions within those of the XJ saloon had not permitted the sleekness to be carried right through to the tail. The open car looked ungainly — more "wedgy", even, than a TR7 — but the estate car overcomes this problem to some extent, thanks to the clever use of a stepped roof reminiscent of the Citroën CX Break. Still, the chunkiness of the waistline and the Cortina-like tailgate do contrast rather strongly with the sleek nose.

Normally, the headlamps are partly hidden in the snout; they are exposed when the front portion of the bonnet panel is raised, by an electric motor. This is a neater arrangement than pop-up headlamps which don't allow instant flash (not that it is often needed), and tend to vibrate at speed. If the electric motor should fail with the bonnet "aerofoil" down, there is still some illumination of the road head, though the effect is slightly weird.

The front is equally good-looking with the "aerofoil" in any position; when it is up, it is meant to help in tight manoeuvres because the bonnet slopes away out of sight. Even with the gimmick fully raised, however, I couldn't see the front corners of the car from my normal driving position. The mirrors also create blind spots, especially on the driver's side.

With less than 200 miles "on the clock" when I set out from Birmingham for the Cotswolds, there was no intention of using the performance to the full. The fuel-injected V12 engine can, nevertheless, be praised with all the usual superlatives despite its lack of running (it must have sat about in the coachbuilders' workshops for three years, if not more!) and the fact that it is not one of the newer "HE" versions. The four exhaust tail pipes emit a very pleasantly restrained yet sporting sound — the nicest I've heard from that engine. Jaguars are normally very

silent, of course, so the interior noise came as something of a surprise; but the Forté estate is still a lot quieter than most saloons, let alone estates.

Of the big Goodyear 235 section tyres on their cast aluminium 15 inch wheels, it can be said that they provide terrific grip and traction in the dry which, happily, is how it stayed all day! The front of the car did try to move around on undulating cambered surfaces. Ground clearance is generally adequate, but protrusions such as exhaust mounts catch on even the smallest lumps of mud left by tractors. That sort of thing would not happen if the Forté had ever reached the production stage, of course. The suspension felt good, but neither it nor the power-assisted steering have been developed to "match" the tyres — which of course they do on the standard (and so thoroughly engineered) Jaguar and Daimler saloons.

A priceless and unique car is an awesome thing to drive; but it can be a pleasure too — as was the Forté.

There is no doubt that the estate car could have found a small market if it had been developed for production, though it was possibly too small to be practical.

John Ward (curator of PMG's historic car collection) and I spent a lot of time considering who might buy such a machine. Then, late in the day, during our last photography session, we found one answer. A German-registered CX Break passed us, slowed, turned round and stopped. Its friendly Stuttgart-based Canadian owner was in Britain on business. Like so many other people who stopped to gaze at our dramatic-looking projectile, he wondered what it was. He, it turned out, needed a car that did everything: it had to carry the most, cruise the quickest, handle sweetly and restfully, be reliable, and have real style. The CX came nearest (he was on his second) but, boy, what wouldn't he give for the Rapport Forté?

Now if it just had the extra length for another row of seats... We gave him the PMG address, and mentioned the remaining pile of bits. I wonder if he'll persuade them to build him a longer version? It will cost him the earth if they do!

