

THE LOST SUPERCAR

To counter the record-breaking “Blitzen” Benz of 1909, Benz’s historic arch-rival Daimler used one of its mighty in-house airship engines to create the sensational – but now vanished – 79/200 hp supercar

ARTICLE
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IMAGES

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During the early days of the automobile, inspiration and technology could come from anywhere. Mechanical advancement had not yet separated aircraft engines from land or marine powerplants, and the fledgling industry was feeling its way forward. Daimler, for example, had been evolving engines for lighter-than-air craft since 1888 when Gottlieb Daimler produced an engine for a passenger-carrying balloon.

Airship engines became a Daimler specialty, with its creation of bigger and better engines for ever larger balloons and early dirigibles. In 1909 Paul Daimler placed all the valves overhead in a new airship engine. In that same year Luftschiffbau Schütte-Lanz was founded by visionary professor of naval architecture Johann Schütte and financiers Karl Lanz and August Röchling.

Building an airship engine

For its first dirigible, Schütte-Lanz turned to Daimler for engines. Powering the SL 1 were two powerful straight-eights, one in the control gondola and the other in its own gondola to the rear. Made from two fours, however, the eights were

judged too weighty for their power, so Paul Daimler took another tack. In 1913 he laid down a fresh inline six-cylinder design, optimized for lightness. Initially the Type 6 H6L, it was finally designated the L1676 with a nod to its dimensions of 160 x 170 mm for a displacement of 20,508 cc. This was fully 95 percent of the capacity of the rival RE Benz four.

An aluminum two-piece crankcase was a base for as sparsely efficient an engine as Paul Daimler and his team had yet designed. Its steel cylinders were formed in pairs with welded-on water jackets over the upper two-thirds. Integral heads carried two overhead valves per cylinder set in a gentle included vee. Between them ran a tube containing an overhead camshaft operating the valves through rocker arms pivoted from a housing over each pair of cylinders.

Exhaust from the L1676 was into connected cylinders whose double walls circulated warm coolant to facilitate operation at altitude. A large updraft double carburetor fed two ducts to manifolds for groups of three cylinders. As mounted in an airship the vertical-shaft drive to the camshaft was at the rear of the six, where it also drove a pair of magnetos for the dual ignition. At its

bottom the shaft powered the water pump and oil pumps.

This impressive engine delivered 185 bhp at 1,100 rpm and 200 bhp at a modest 1,250 rpm, laid out as it was to deliver steady and reliable power over long distances. Weighing 940 pounds, it improved by one-third on the power-to-weight ratio of its eight-cylinder predecessor. Four such engines were delivered to Schütte-Lanz for its next dirigible.

While the Daimler L1676 was the firm’s last dirigible engine for the time being, the company remained active in airplane-engine design and production, becoming a major manufacturer during World War I. Daimler had also considered installing aero engines in its automobile chassis, an idea that dated from 1912.

From sky to street

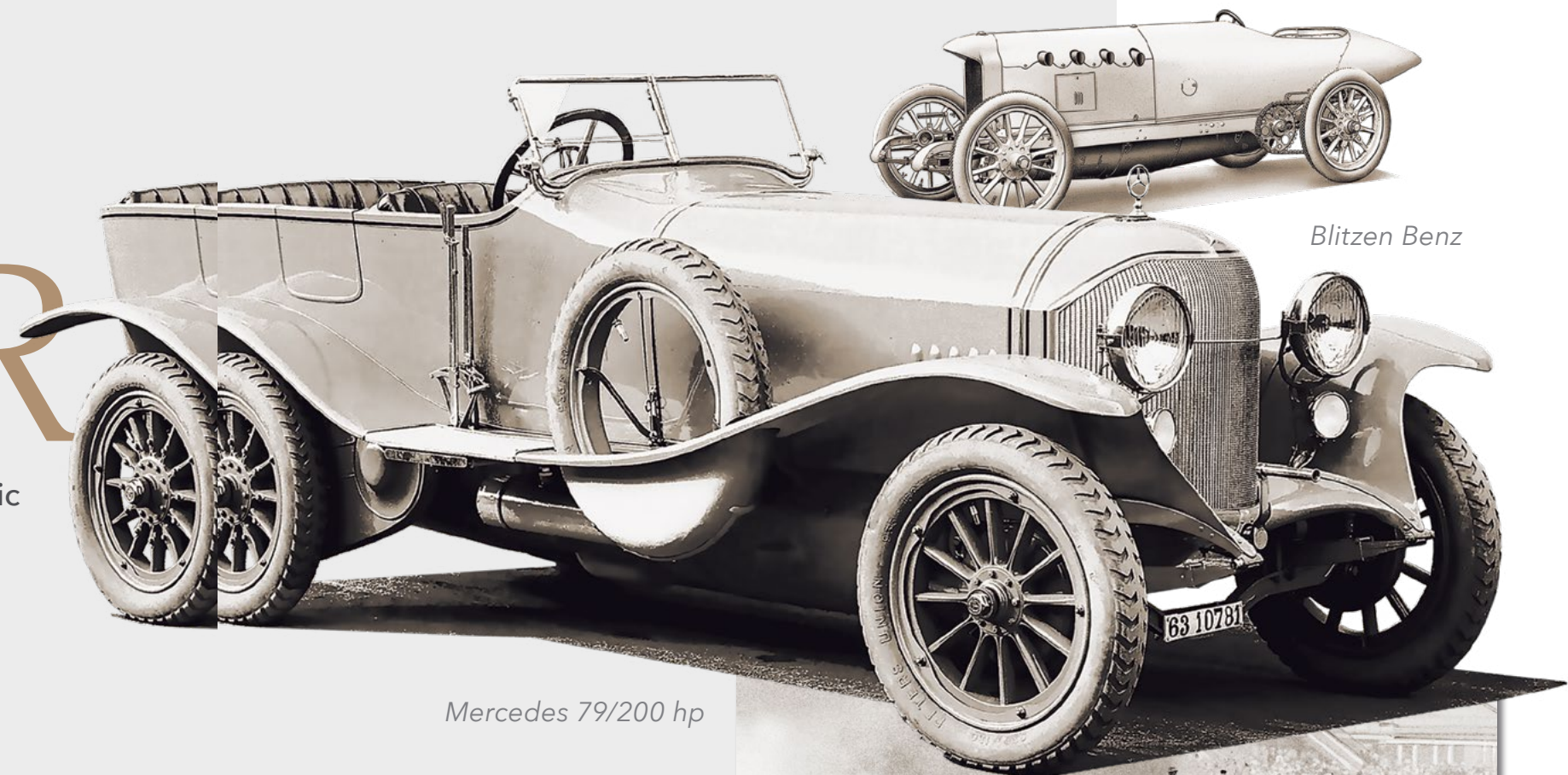
Finding that it had a plentiful supply of 70-horsepower four-cylinder aero engines, with demand having shifted to larger motors, on October 2, 1912 the Daimler board debated possible uses for them. One suggestion was that they could fit them to automobiles, perhaps even for Grand Prix racing.

The same course of action was considered by Daimler’s engineers

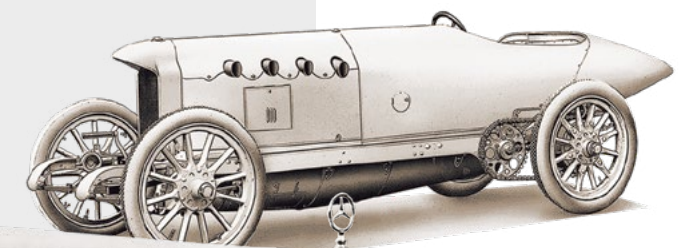
for the now-redundant L1676 straight-six, no longer required for airship use. Here was an engine that, if properly deployed, would be a convincing rival for the annoyingly fast, impressive and prestigious Type RE Benz, the American-dubbed “Blitzen Benz”. Daimler could show that it too could create a fast road car if it so desired.

As configured for its original purpose, the drive from the L1676 came from the end opposite the accessory shafts and gears, a customary arrangement in aviation. For the 79/200 hp, as the new Mercedes model was named, the other end – where the accessories were located – delivered power to a leather-faced cone clutch. The former output end was revised to accommodate the all-important starting crank. A pulley was added to drive a four-bladed fan mounted on a pylon.

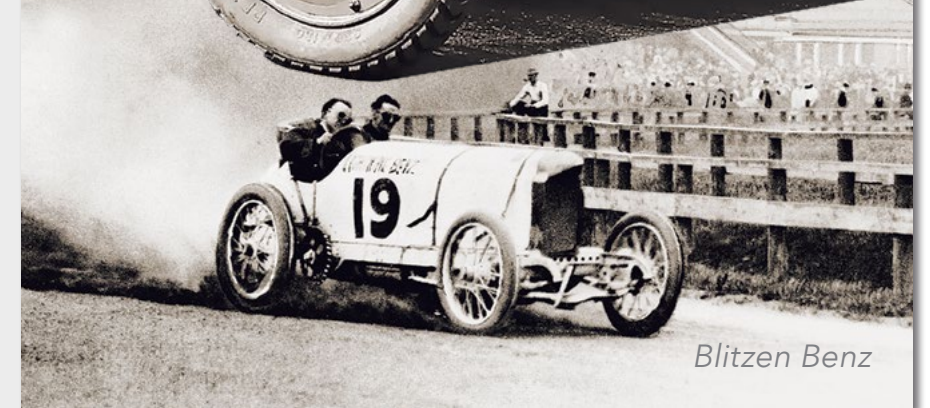
In the aeronautical version of the L1676 its water pump was below the rear of the sump, driven by a downward extension of the shafting that turned the camshaft. This being inconvenient for auto use, the pump was moved to the mount of the former left-side magneto. Piped upward from the pump, water flowed along a gallery into the upper level of the cylinders. With dual ignition retained



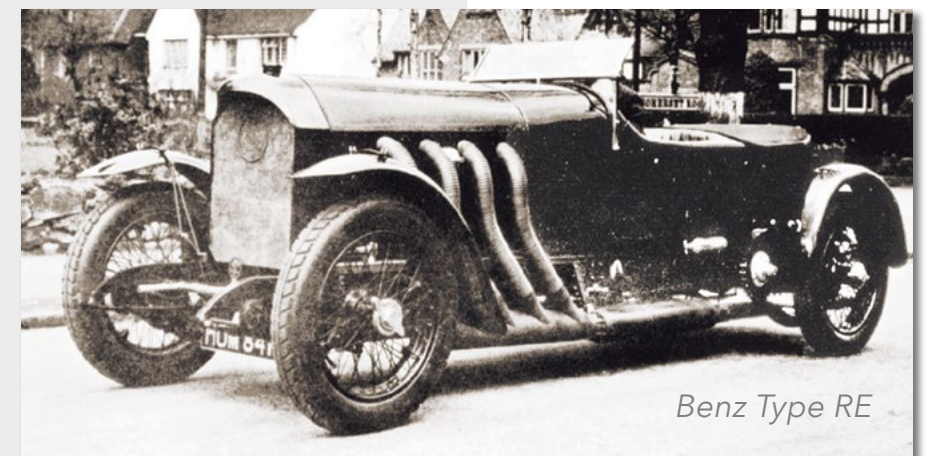
Mercedes 79/200 hp



Blitzen Benz



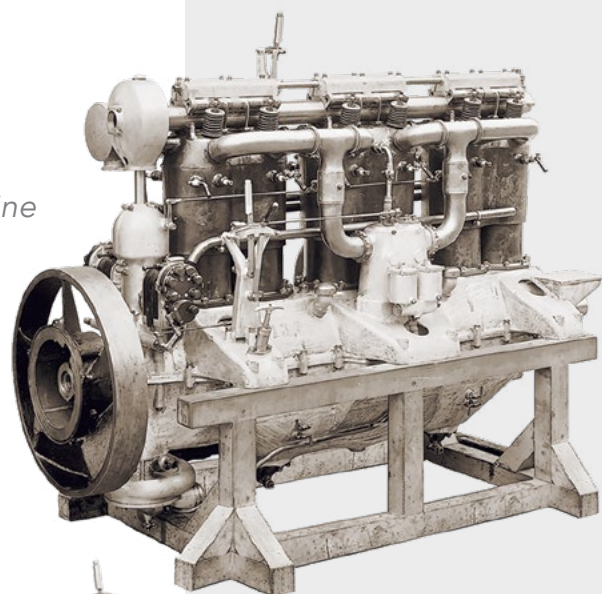
Blitzen Benz



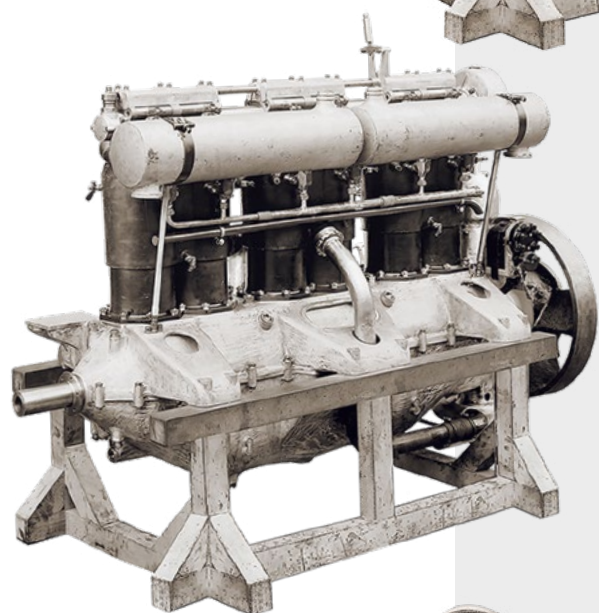
Benz Type RE

FROM THE TOP: In the face of rival Benz’s fast and successful “Blitzen Benz” of 1909, the massive Mercedes 79/200 hp was intended to reassert Daimler’s sporting credentials. Benz reaped favorable publicity from the American exploits of Barney Oldfield and Bob Burman driving Blitzen Benzes in races and record attempts. Benz made a long-wheelbase version of its 21.5-liter Type RE; used on both road and track, the mighty Benz outpowered the biggest Mercedes road cars.

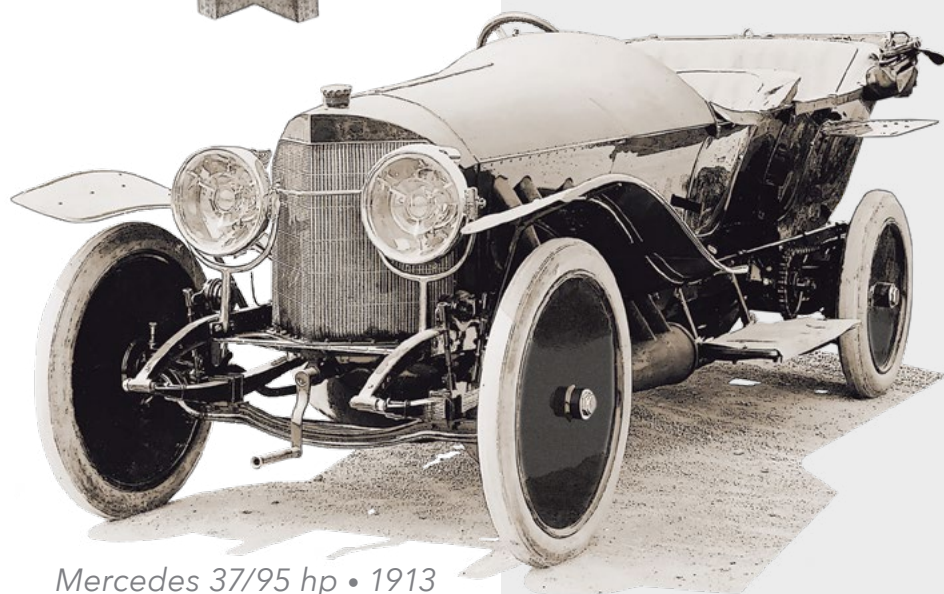
L1676 airship engine



Induction side



Exhaust side



Mercedes 37/95 hp • 1913

FROM THE TOP: Paul Daimler's superb dirigible engine, the L1676, seen from its induction side, showing the single carburetor that fed all six cylinders as well as the camshaft drive. As outfitted for airships, on the exhaust side the Daimler L1676 had cylindrical exhaust manifolds with water jackets. A pipe from the water pump delivered coolant to the cylinders. With its 37/95 hp model, Mercedes had a substantial chassis which, in its longest version, was suitable for installation of the L1676 airship engine. However, faced with the need for increased cooling, the vee radiator was not used.

for this large-bore engine, sparks were now delivered by a coil-fed system whose distributors were in a siamesed unit on the right side of the camshaft drive.

The Untertürkheim engineers fitted entirely new induction arrangements to the lengthy six. The two manifolds, each feeding three cylinders, were retained but now fed independently by a separate updraft carburetor for each. Above their inlets to the manifolds a small balance pipe joined them together. Pipes between the cylinder pairs delivered warm air to the carburetors from a sleeve that ran the length of the engine and contained the exhaust manifolds.

Exhaust arrangements were also new, the former cylindrical collector giving way to a Y junction for each pair of cylinders leading to three flex-covered exhaust pipes that protruded through the side of the hood. This was a style that Daimler had adopted in 1912 for its most powerful models, of which this would be the apogee. In this automotive application the L1676 could easily have been taken beyond its rated-power revs of 1,250 rpm, thus producing considerably more power.

A car to handle the engine

Only the most expansive of the existing models, the 37/95 with its 9.9-liter four, was suitable for the big six. This car had a wheelbase of 147.5 inches. Like all previous high-powered Mercedes, it had chain drive to its rear wheels. Beginning in 1908, Daimler had converted to shaft drive for all but its high-performance models, for which company engineers preferred chains for their known ability to transfer high power. As on the 37/95 hp, the chains and their lubricant were contained in cases that swung up and down with wheel movement. Drive to the chains came from a four-speed transmission located at the rear of the chassis.

As was customary at the time, braking was on the rear wheels only, applied both by a pedal and an outside-mounted handbrake next to the shift lever. The radiator was unique in Mercedes annals and indeed in the history of cars in general. Neither flat nor vee, it was rounded in plan view and curved back at its top to meet the header tank. This bespoke a vehicle quite out of the ordinary.

Bodywork for this mega-Mercedes was an open touring car with two rows

of tufted-leather seats. Only on the left side of the right-hand-driven car did a decent door give access to the front seat. Rear-seat occupants had the benefit of three steps up to tiny doors on both sides. Wheels were artillery-type although wires and newly popular discs were optional. Tire sizes were 935 x 135, indicating a rim diameter of just over 36 inches. The 37/95 hp used the same size on its rear wheels, smaller rims in front. Depressions in the running boards plus braces carried spare wheels on both sides.

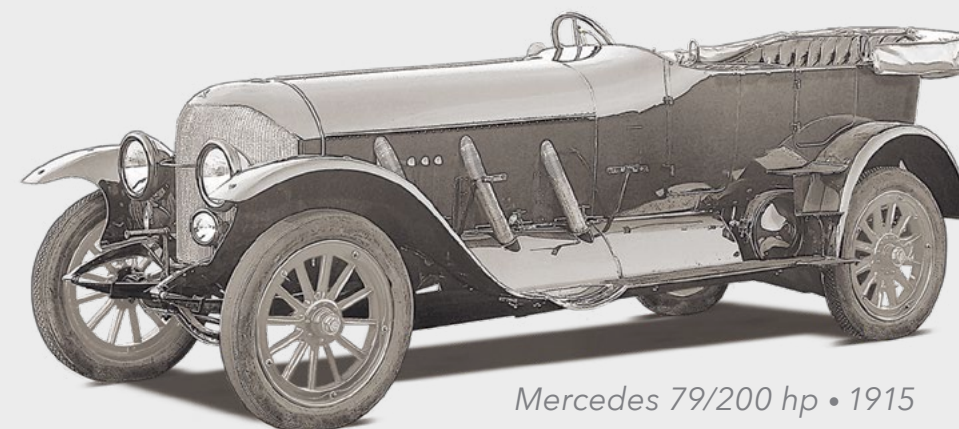
As first pictured the 79/200 hp lacked an identifying radiator cap and windscreen but was fitted with a folding top. Supplementing its headlamps were driving lamps canted outward to give peripheral illumination. It was as imposing an anti-Benz as could have been created. Reports spoke of a top speed of 105 mph, which would have been well within its capabilities. Although some reports suggest that three such cars were projected, this is the only one known to have been created.

The 79/200 hp on the road

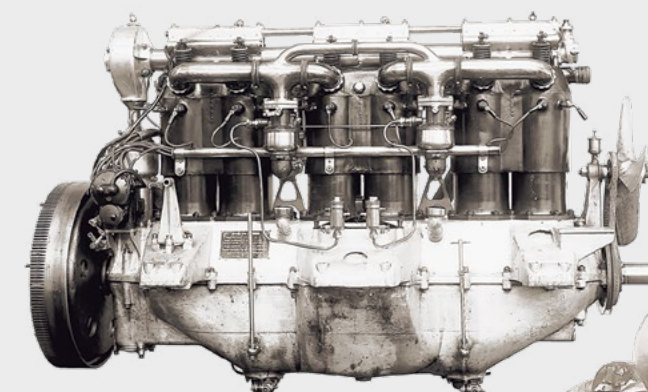
This magnificent machine was ready for its owner in early 1915 at the latest. Who might that fortunate person be? His name was Alberto Marone in the order placed though the Daimler representative in Italy, Milan's Carlo Saporiti. Forty-four years old in 1915, Marone was the husband of Paolina Cinzano Rossi. Paolina was an authentic member of the Cinzano family, a direct descendant of the two brothers who created the popular aperitif in Turin in 1757. Thus it is likely that Alberto Marone was able to afford the 79/200 hp, whose chassis price was 36,000 German marks, some 8,600 pre-war dollars.

However, there is no evidence that Alberto Marone took delivery of the 79/200 hp. In the turbulence associated with the outbreak of war in Europe he may well have been unable to accept delivery of the vehicle. It seems to have waited out the conflict in Untertürkheim.

After the war the Italian connection remained in force, doubtless thanks to the reach and resources of Carlo Saporiti. In March of 1921 the 79/200 hp received its Italian registration in Turin in the name of Ricardo Biglia. Before shipping the unique automobile the Daimler engineers updated it. No doubt to the relief of Biglia

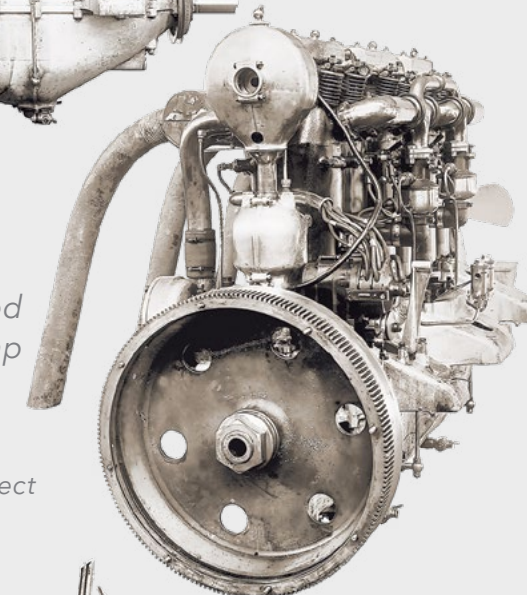


Mercedes 79/200 hp • 1915

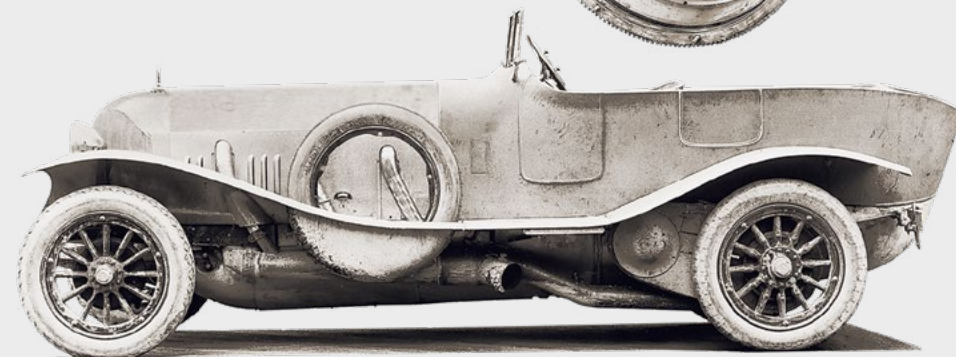


Induction side

L1676 engine as installed in Mercedes 79/200 hp



Rear aspect

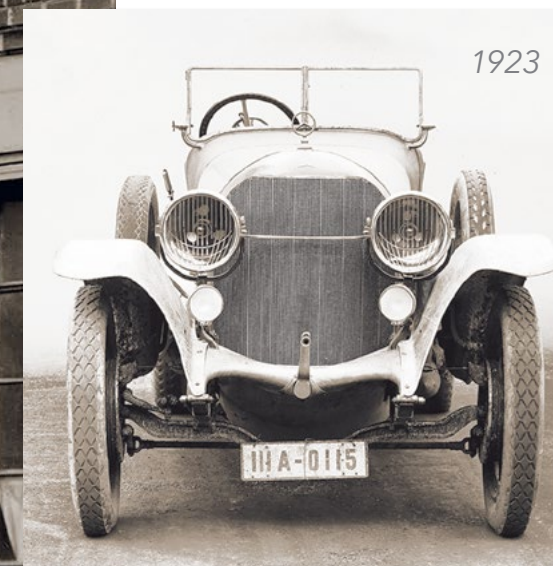


Mercedes 79/200 hp with postwar coachwork • 1923

FROM THE TOP: The 1913 Mercedes 79/200 hp cut a fine figure, with a hood far longer than its passenger area. To cool its 20.5-liter engine, the 79/200 hp had a radiator unique in the annals of Daimler and Benz. The L1676 used in the 79/200 hp had an aviation sump. Two updraft carburetors fed two manifolds joined by balance pipe. After the war, Daimler fitted the L1676 with an electric starter and toothed flywheel; the coil ignition's siamesed distributor is visible. Back in Untertürkheim for refurbishment in 1923, the car showed hard use by a keen owner. What may be an exhaust cutout is visible.



Reinvigorated Mercedes 79/200 hp • Untertürkheim • 1924



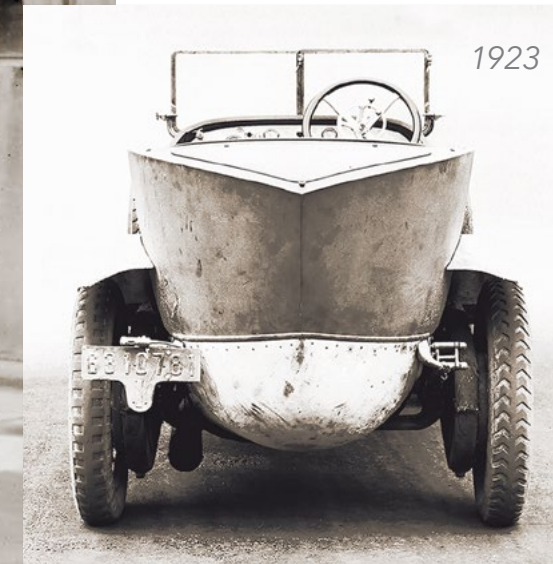
1923

Easing that big airship six into top gear and aiming this massive machine toward the horizon must have been a powerful sensual gift for the lucky driver

hint of weather gear was a strong clue that it was created for use in sunny Italy.

When they were finished about all that remained of the original body were the radiator, hood and side-mounted spare wheels. The small doors were even smaller, with invisible hinges, the body beautifully boat-tailed and shielded underneath. Raised and flowing one-piece fenders were less resistant to the wind. Grebel headlamps lit the way.

When the Mercedes 79/200 hp returned to Stuttgart-Untertürkheim in 1923 it showed all the signs of having been driven hard and put away wet. Paint was pocked and its underbody abraded. Its owner commissioned Daimler to overhaul its engine and chassis and restore freshness to its bodywork. The engine was overhauled, photographed for the first time and returned to the chassis. In 1924 the deceptively large Mercedes was ready to rumble again.



1923

Without a trace

In final form the Type 79/200 hp's looks suited its personality far better. This was the wealthy sportsman's ultimate motor car, not for mundane errands but for the open highways and byways of its era. Easing that big airship six into top gear and aiming this massive machine toward the horizon must have been a powerful sensual gift for the lucky driver. When, where and how he used it thereafter we do not know. The sensational 79/200 is the ultimate lost supercar.

and his mechanic they installed a new geared flywheel and starting motor. It still had a crank but only for emergencies. They also brought the chassis up to date with the addition of the post-war necessity of front-wheel brakes.

It is the author's belief that after the 79/200 hp arrived in Turin its owner decided to ask one of his city's first-class coachbuilders to give it more advanced and adventurous bodywork to suit its matchless specification. That it bore no

ABOVE: Back at the factory in 1923, and fitted with works registration for road testing, the 79/200 hp had Grebel headlamps and a Mercedes star on its header tank; front brake drums are finned. Registered in Turin, Italy in 1923, the 79/200 hp Mercedes had an impeccably shaped boat-tail well suited to its dynamic character. **LEFT:** In Untertürkheim just after rebuilding, the massive Mercedes 79/200 hp supercar reveals its true dimensions, thanks to the driver behind the wheel.