



A BUG'S LIFE

French racer Anne-Cécile Itier made her name with a Bugatti Type 51 GP car – but its history includes time spent as a roadster. Now it's been restored as both...

WORDS David Burgess-Wise PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Howell

HER JEALOUS MALE rivals called Anne-Cécile Itier a 'moving chicane', but in reality this pretty little redhead was more than a match for most of them at the wheel of her speedy Type 51 Bugatti, and she continued her racing career far longer than most. Just as remarkable is the story of her Bugatti, whose double life has been celebrated by a restoration project that has skilfully preserved the very different dual identities of this old racer.

Anne Itier came to motor sport at the age of 31 in the wake of a divorce. She had earlier tried flying – an unusual sport for a woman in those days – but in 1926 she entered a Brasier into her first competitive motoring event, the Paris-Nice Rally, finishing second in the amateur class, sixth overall, and even beating the Brasier's designer, Chaigneau. Things got more serious a couple of years later when she won the 500cc class in the 1928 Bordeaux Grand Prix driving a Sima-Violet two-stroke cyclecar on the Quatre Pavillons circuit; the same year she won the Rallye Féminin at Montlhéry and came first in the La Mothe Sainte Heraye hillclimb in a T37 Bugatti, setting a new record of 1min 6sec.

Itier must have received a substantial divorce settlement when the decree absolute came through in 1930, for she moved into an apartment overlooking the Jardin des Tuileries in Paris and bought a house in Capbreton, a resort just south of Bordeaux, which she called *Le Volant* – 'the steering wheel' – and would own until 1971. She also bought a supercharged

four-cylinder Type 37A Bugatti, chassis no 37365. After two seasons the T37A was increasingly outclassed and ultimately cried 'enough' at the 1500cc Masarykuv Okruh race in Brno, September 1932, when the gearbox failed after just two laps.

And so a 1500cc Type 51A was invoiced to Mme Itier in March 1933 at FF60,000, with a trade-in value of maybe FF40,000 for the old T37A. 'That is about the price of a chassis of the new Type 49,' notes Bugatti historian Pierre-Yves Laugier, who investigated the history of Anne Itier's T51.

This is the car for which she was to become famous – and which would go on to a remarkable 21st-century revival. Anne Itier's 'new' T51 was actually new wine in an old bottle: the chassis had started life in 1926 as no 4827, a 2.0-litre Type 35 delivered to Bugatti's London agent Colonel Sorel in the Brixton Road, and had twice been a trade-in at the Bugatti works, where its engine, no 93, had been transformed into a twin-cam unit and renumbered '3'.

Its first outing was the St Quentin sprint, a 1km standing-start event on the RN44 organised jointly by the Automobile Club de Picardie and the Motorcycle Club d'Aisne. Anne Itier won the 1500cc class, 'admired for her performance... at the wheel of her eight-cylinder Bugatti'.

Next up was the T51's first circuit race, the 15-lap 1500cc Grand Prix de Picardie, where Itier faced opposition from a brace of T26C 1500cc Maseratis, four T37 Bugattis and a lone Salmson. Reported *Motor Sport*: 'From the start it was Mme Itier's race. Her eight-cylinder Bugatti had the measure of all →

1933 BUGATTI TYPE 51 GRAND PRIX CAR

ENGINE (now) 2262cc straight-eight, DOHC, 16 valves, supercharged **POWER** 187bhp @ 5200rpm (on methanol)

TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **SUSPENSION** Front and rear: beam axles, semi-elliptic leaf springs, friction dampers

BRAKES Four-wheel drums, cable-operated



‘She set a lap record then laid a floral tribute at the spot where Trintignant had been killed in his Bugatti’

the other competitors, and she steadily built up a comfortable lead.’ She finished almost eight minutes ahead of the second-placed Maserati, setting a lap record in the process, then laid a floral tribute at the spot where Louis Trintignant had been killed during practice in his Bugatti.

The T51 was entered for the Eifelrennen 1500cc race at the Nürburgring on 28 May but – like two-thirds of the cars entered – failed to arrive, maybe because the turmoil in Germany following Hitler’s appointment as Chancellor had proved a deterrent to their drivers.

In August came the Eymoutiers hillclimb near Limoges, where Anne Itier took second place in the 1500cc class, and the Grand Prix de la Baule, where the 1500cc class only attracted three entries. This was a match between the C6 Amilcar of José Scaron and Itier’s T51, with little chance for De Fresne’s little Rosengart. But after ten laps, Scaron fell out with a fractured piston.

‘Mme Itier then had a fairly easy task,’ reported *Motor Sport*, ‘but her hopes of victory were quickly dashed when another competitor clumsily rammed her Bugatti broadside on one of the corners, damaging it so badly that she could not continue. This left the little Rosengart alone in the field, but two laps later mechanical trouble caused its retirement, so that the class was null and void.’

Itier’s season ended on a high, with a class win at the Lectoure (Midi-Pyrénées) hillclimb and outright victory in record time in the 0.5km climb to the lighthouse at Biarritz, only 15 miles from her home in Capbreton. The Bugatti was on good form in 1934, too. Its first Grand Prix of the season was the 20-lap Grand Prix de Picardie on the 9.62km Peronne circuit on 27 May, where Anne Itier secured third place, finishing three minutes behind Decaroli’s monoposto T37A Bugatti, ‘...having driven her Bugatti in a calm, unhurried fashion throughout the race,’ noted *Motor Sport*.

She rounded off the year with another win in record time in the climb to the Biarritz lighthouse, beating all comers and winning the trophy offered by the magazine *Paris-Soir*. A surprise party was held in Anne Itier’s honour by a group of friends in Capbreton to celebrate her record in speed trials and hillclimbs during the year.

For the following season Anne Itier bought a second T51, this time with a 2.3-litre engine, which she entered for the GP de Picardie at Peronne, a favourite race of hers and one which she was to enter in every one of the five years she raced T51A 51142. However, her mechanic Champion rolled the new Bug in practice, damaging it so badly that she had to have her old T51A sent as a replacement. She waited anxiously in the hours before the race for its arrival; it turned up just in time to make the start but stood no chance against the rapid T59s of Robert Benoist and Earl Howe, which finished 1-2, while the Itier Bugatti finished sixth, five laps in arrears.

The following May at Montlhéry, at the first Journée Automobile des Indépendants organised by the Association Générale Automobile des Coureurs Indépendants, Itier drove the Bugatti in the showpiece event of the meeting, a five-lap match race between her car and a Potez 43 high-wing monoplane flown by Georges Détré, winner of the 1933

Coupe Deutsch, on the banked oval 2.5km Circuit de Vitesse. The ‘plane won, but only by 1.2 seconds from the Bugatti, which recorded a fastest lap speed of 109.623 mph.

Following a fruitless attempt to sell the car via a small advertisement in the weekly paper *L’Auto* of 15 July, the Type 51 was given one last outing that season, in the 188km Coupe Annuelle de Vitesse race at the AGACI’s second Journée Automobile des Indépendants at Montlhéry on 20 September. Itier saw off two other T51As – both retired – and finished first in class and second overall behind a Delahaye.

Itier hadn’t really planned to race the Bugatti for another season, but nevertheless she brought it out three times during 1937, finishing fourth overall and first in class in the Grand Prix des Indépendants on 26 May. That was the car’s final success, as mechanical trouble curtailed Itier’s final appearance in the Grand Prix de Picardie in June, and she failed to qualify for the final heat of the Grand Prix de Berne in August (though the starting money must have been some small compensation for the fruitless journey).

Yet that still wasn’t the end of Anne Itier’s racing career; by the time she retired in 1953 at the age of 58 to run a teashop in Capbreton she had competed in a feminine record five Le Mans 24 hours – in 1937 she co-drove a streamlined Adler Trumpf Rennlimousine with ‘the racing Baron’ Huschke von Hanstein (and when it broke down after 40 laps they both retired to her little tent for some horizontal consolation...), as well as seven Monte Carlo Rallies, more than 30 races and hillclimbs with the T51A alone, plus many other events with other cars, including a Paris-Nice in 1938 with Kay Petre.

As Sammy Davis recalled: ‘By all accounts it was a notable occasion during which Anne learned her one English sentence, which was “Kay, stop!”’ Nor did Itier abandon racing entirely, for she continued in French motor sport administration until the 1960s, mostly working with the association for independent drivers that she and Jean Delorme had formed in 1935. She died in Cannes in 1980.

As for her T51A, with its racing days over, it was transformed – as were a number of other superannuated Bugatti racers – into a fast sports car, with delightful two-seater roadster coachwork replacing the racing body. Just who was responsible or where the transformation took place is not known, though it’s possible that Amédée Gordini or his erstwhile partner Camerano were involved, as both were adept at creating special sporting coachwork. Nor is it known when the power unit – of which all trace has vanished – was replaced by a larger but less powerful supercharged 2.0-litre T38A engine; it could simply be that a careless owner had pushed the tired racing unit beyond its limits.

Though the rebodging had obviously taken place before the war, the first record of the reborn T51A is a registration document dating from October 1951, describing the car as a T38A two-seater torpedo belonging to Mme Suzanne Lenglet, the wife of a mechanic named Pierre Lenglet, who lived at 338bis Rue de Vaugirard in the Montparnasse area of Paris and had owned a Type 37 Bugatti between October 1950 and June 1951; Laugier surmises that he could have sold the T37 in order to buy the roadster.



Clockwise from above left
Anne Itier in determined mood ahead of the 1934 Berne Grand Prix, where she finished ninth from 23 starters; she raced a Potez monoplane at Montlhéry, lapping the banked circuit at nearly 110mph; in conversation with Nuvolari at Berne (the Italian was driving a Maserati 8CM in a different race during the meeting); having a less-than-successful race at Picardie in 1937; in the pits at Berne in August 1937, her last competition outing with the T51.





The next appearance of the roadster was in February 1957, when it was for sale – possibly on commission from Mme Lenglet – in a garage run by Bugatti specialist Jean Varenne at 8 Rue du Saussure in northern Paris. At some time it had been updated with a bulbous cowl concealing the Bugatti radiator and fairings around the headlamps.

It was bought by a 25-year-old Dane named Erik Nielsen, who toured Brittany in it before returning home to Denmark because of the death of his father, who left him Einar Nielsen Automobiler, the Danish Peugeot agency in Frederiksberg, Copenhagen. The Danish customs proved awkward, and he was forced to pay more in import duties than the car had actually cost him.

Around 1959 Nielsen, who had moved to the town of Svenborg on the island of Fyn to manage the Nordisk Karosserifabrik, hired a lock-up at a local garage and undertook a restoration of the Bugatti that involved removing the body and de-rusting the top face of the chassis; the anachronistic radiator cowl was also discarded.

In 1962, after taking part in a few club rallies, Nielsen tried to sell the car, which he described as a '35C Grand Prix chassis', but found it difficult to attract a buyer. Eventually it was sold on commission in 1964 through one Jens P Lüsberg, who optimistically credited the unattributable 1930s bodywork to Fioni & Falaschi.

However, for Swedish purchaser Alan Söderström, the main BMW dealer in Malmö who owned a considerable pre-war car collection, it wasn't the bodywork that attracted but the fact that the car had the supercharger and GP steering wheel his T35C lacked! With the blower and wheel removed, the roadster languished in a corner of Söderström's garage, where it was noticed by a young architect named Henrik Schou-Nielsen, who was being given a guided tour of the collection by its owner in 1977.

He recalls: 'I thought little of it, but it did stay in the back of my mind for the next 20 years.' To the extent that in 1996 Schou-Nielsen returned to Malmö and bought the roadster from Söderström's son Lars.

It seemingly hadn't moved under its own power since being sold to Alan Söderström, for the battery was corroded in place, there were a few gallons of stale petrol in the tank, and an old Danish newspaper dating from 1961 was discovered behind the spare wheel. It was known that, despite the Danish registration documents that described the car as T38 chassis 38239, the frame was actually that of a T51A – but which one? Henrik Schou-Nielsen called in Bugatti historian Pierre-Yves Laugier.

Revealing that not one of the 1.5-litre T51As sold by Bugatti was actually a new car – all had been confected from existing cars – Laugier added that most of them had been dismantled. Carefully examining his archive of period photographs, Laugier compared the position of the holes drilled in the chassis frame and determined that the only T51A that corresponded was the ex-Anne Itier 51142.

Further corroborative evidence was supplied by a number – '307' – stamped in the rear crossmember, which related to that car's original identity as chassis 4827. A physical examination by well-known restorer Terry Cardy, who flew to Denmark especially to look at the car, revealed that the only modifications to the chassis were fabricated attachment points for the rear engine mounts and brackets to support the front wings, while a touring T44/T49 steering box had been substituted for the original unit at the time the new body was fitted. The brakes had been converted to hydraulics and the wheels changed from alloys to wires, but apart from that the chassis was to standard specification.



ANNE ITIER BUGATTI

With that knowledge, the bold decision was taken to return the car to Grand Prix specification as a tribute to the extraordinary lady who had raced it with such success back in the 1930s.

During the chassis restoration, all the existing holes – including those relevant to the two-seater roadster body – were left as witnesses to the car's continuous history. As the work continued, evidence of Anne Itier's crash in August 1935 was revealed. The front of the chassis had suffered damage and the front dumb iron had been straightened; it would require strengthening during the restoration.

An original Grand Prix body originally fitted to chassis 37379 was acquired in 2008; it had been removed from the T37A chassis when that car was also converted into a sports roadster (which survives in America) and had been rescued by Swiss Bugatti enthusiast Hans Matti in the early 1960s. Henrik Schou-Nielsen had known about the T37 body for years, but had not managed to buy it when Matti sold it four decades later; fortunately the purchaser, English collector

Peter Rae, eventually decided he had no use for it, and sold it on to Schou-Nielsen.

The quest for a suitable power unit involved a ten-year search; the major components of the engine of a lost T35B, no 4943, were found in the Czech Republic – fittingly, some of the parts were found to have been held as spares for the car of another legendary lady driver, Elisabeth Junek. Since the crankshaft had a 100mm stroke rather than the 66mm of the 51A, the decision was taken to rebuild the engine as an externally identical 2.3-litre T51 unit using as many original parts as possible, the work being carried out by Tula Engineering in England.

With the chassis and engine restored by Tula, the body restoration was carried out by Richard Scaldwell. Comments Schou-Nielsen: 'Few understand the fine line between shining restoration and theatrical ageing, but the end result is fantastic – just how I wanted it to appear. The T51A looks just like it has been well kept; it's had its history preserved in the best possible way.'



1933 BUGATTI TYPE 51A/38A ROADSTER

ENGINE 1991cc straight-eight, OHC, 24 valves, supercharged **POWER** 90bhp **TRANSMISSION** Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive

SUSPENSION Front and rear: beam axles, semi-elliptic leaf springs, friction dampers **BRAKES** Four-wheel drums, cable-operated

PERFORMANCE Top speed 100mph



For exhibition purposes, a set of T51 alloy wheels stamped with the names of Bugatti works drivers was acquired from Dick Crosthwaite – two stamped for Pierre Veyron and two for Marcel Lehoux – while, for running, a set of original T35 wheels was acquired.

As the T51 restoration progressed, Schou-Nielsen decided to reconstruct the roadster and its T38 engine on a new frame: 'This Art Déco roadster body was just too stunning not to be seen rolling again,' he declared. With the engine restored by Ivan Dutton Ltd and the body carefully rebuilt to correct any asymmetry caused by age and accident, the roadster returned to Paris to make its debut at Rétromobile in February 2013, and came to England for the Cartier Style et Luxe concours at the Goodwood Revival the following July.

At long last, both the cars appeared together for the first time in front of the restored Race Control building at the Goodwood Revival Meeting last September, complete with a young lady dressed as Madame Itier. Deservedly, that remarkable recreation of the dual personas of this unique doppelgänger Bugatti was shortlisted for the Restoration of the Year class in the 2013 International Historic Motoring Awards, supported by *Octane* and EFG International. Says a jubilant Schou-Nielsen: 'A fine conclusion to the rebuild.' **End.**

THANKS TO Bicester Heritage for our wonderful photo location. This former RAF airfield is in the process of being sympathetically transformed into a business centre for historic motoring and aviation, where craftsmen can work on a shared site that features 50 pre-war buildings, an active airfield and four hangars, in an attractively leafy setting. Much regeneration has already taken place and the first seven tenants are now in residence. Bicester Heritage is just a few minutes from Junctions 9 or 10 of the M40: see www.bicesterheritage.co.uk. Thanks, too, to Charles Knill-Jones of Tula Engineering, www.tula-bug.co.uk; and Tim Dutton, www.duttonbugatti.co.uk.

Racer or roadster?

Mark Dixon drives both Bugattis – and comes to appreciate their very different characters

HOW APPROPRIATE that our *Gone But Not Forgotten* subject this month is Hergé (page 124), because the pontoon-fendered Roadster looks as though it's leapt straight from the pages of a Tin-Tin adventure. It's amazing that the creator of this gorgeous jewel has yet to be identified.

Much of the car's appeal is that, for all its visual drama, it's actually very compact. You notice that when you try to get in: there's not much space for legs beneath wheel, or feet on pedals.

It's a pleasant little thing to drive, peppy and brisk rather than particularly fast, and easy to master thanks to its (whisper it) Fiat four-speed gearbox, which was fitted in period. The brakes, however, are truly scary, having minimal effect no matter how hard you push on the pedal. 'They're better than they

were!' says specialist Tim Dutton, 'but the position of the cross-shaft is wrong and needs changing if they're ever to work properly.'

No such compromises with the Grand Prix car, which is just delightful in every respect. It even rides more comfortably than the Roadster, despite having performance (and brakes...) that are in a different league.

The plugs will foul all too easily, but that's the perfect excuse to keep revving the snappy straight-eight so you can revel in its famous 'tearing calico' rasp. It's impossible to drive a car like this slowly, and inch-perfect positioning is easy thanks to the open wheels.

The GP car is the polar opposite of the Roadster – thrilling rather than relaxing, a car for 'scorching' rather than touring. What a fabulous pair they make.

