

## Walter Belgrove, the man with a magic pencil

By Giancarlo Cavallini

There are figures, in the car history, which left behind masterpieces of their work, but just a few signs of their presence.

Walter Belgrove is one of these. The myth of Triumph owns a lot to the genius and artistic talent of this designer that Donald Healey defined *"the first real British designer"*. To fully understand his imaginative mind we have to jump far in the past. Born in Liverpool, where he attended the "Liverpool College of Art", in 1927 he moved to Coventry where he was hired by Triumph, after some years of apprenticeship first at the "J. Blake and Co." body shop in Liverpool, then at "Windovers" in London, where he practiced both the design and the bodyworks modeling. In 1931 Belgrove moved from the Experimental Department, where he spent his initial period in Triumph, to the Styling Department, newly conceived by Triumph as an autonomous function and headed by Frank Warner; Frank asked Belgrove to join the new Office, impressed by the skills of the young Belgrove to create three-dimension models.

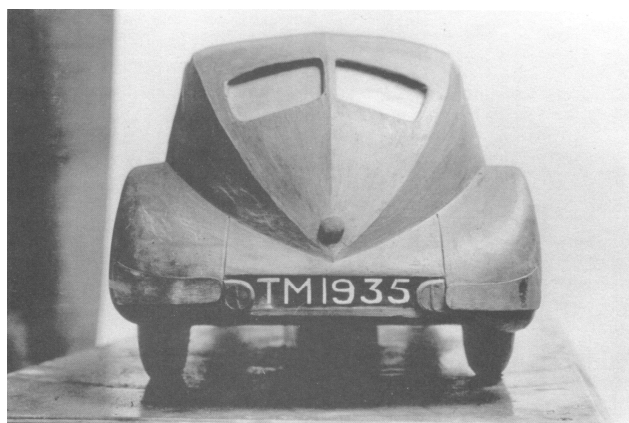
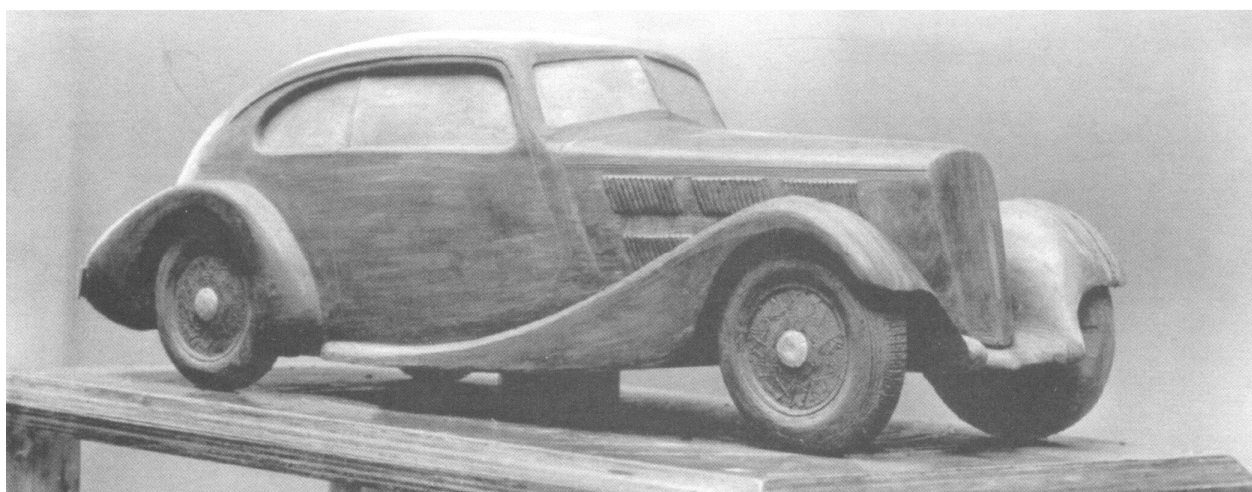
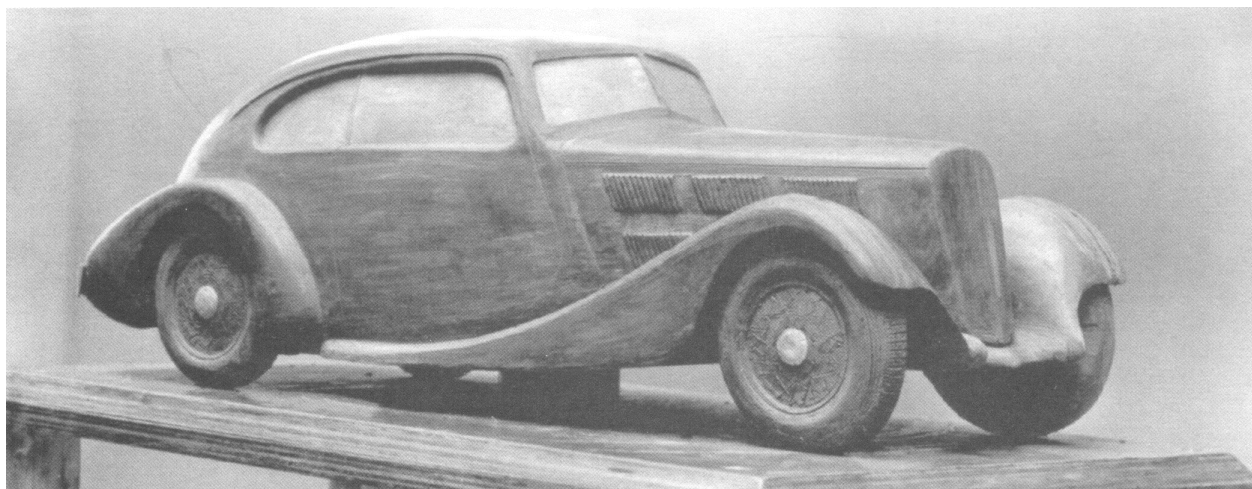


*"Frank Warner chose me to join the design department. They wanted me because, honestly, there were no one in the office able to create a project in its entirety, or to picturing the drawings or to build a scale model"*. When Warner left Triumph in 1935 to join SS, Belgrove was appointed head of the office; this was the period that saw the spread of the new stylistic trends inspired by Art Decò and the birth of the first ideas of aerodynamics in the design of bodyworks, giving rise to the style that was called *"airline"* or *"streamline"*.



The *"Flow-Free"* Triumphs of the Thirties are the best British examples of the *"streamline"* style not because they sold well, not because they were the first, but because they were the cars designed with the higher competency and harmony. In these years the name of Belgrove started to be known and his fame and reputation to get established. And it could not be differently, given that he was a real innovator. Up to that moment the car bodies were designed using orthographic

projections that defined the side, front and rear views of the body. Belgrove was the first British designer to model the body in three dimensions, using clay.

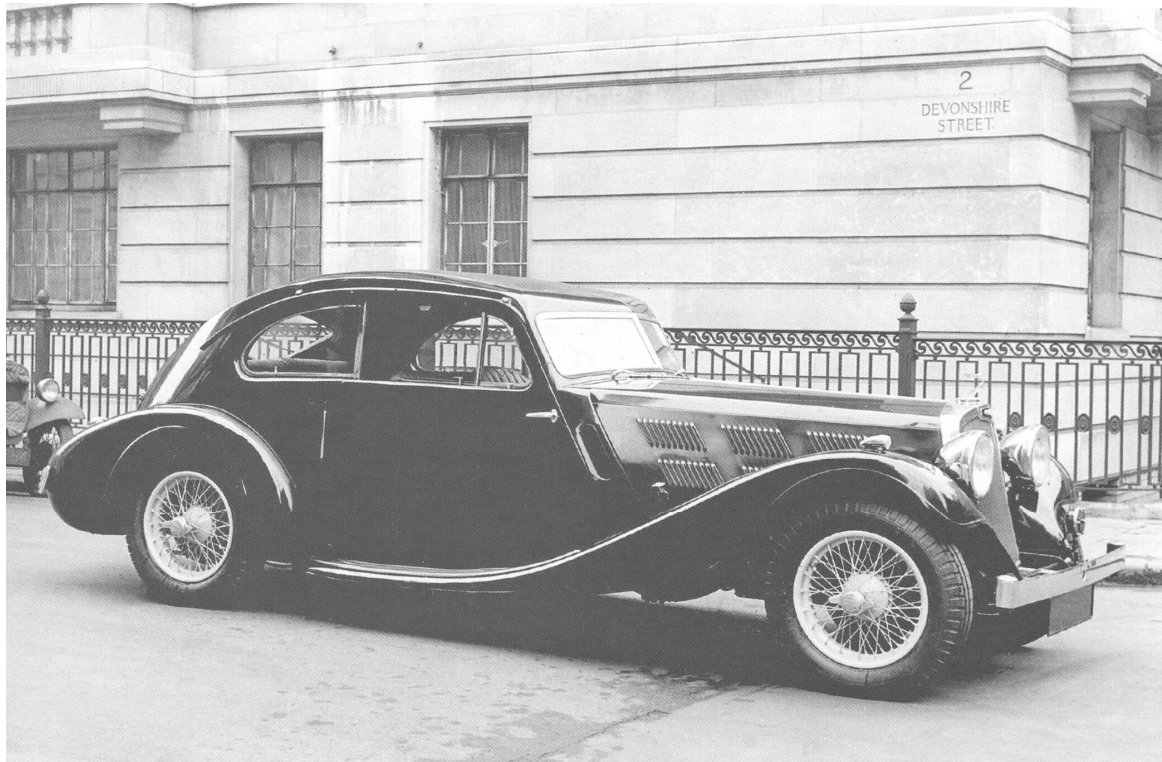


There was a world of difference in the results. The model, being three dimensional by its own nature, could be observed from an infinity of view angles so to check that all the lines and the shapes as defined by the designer are in harmony. The "Flow-Free" Glory of 1934 was his first complete work and the beauty of this car, after so many decades, is the proof of her perfection. *"The manufacturers started to become conscious of the aerodynamics and to*

*show their concepts. We were very far from the wind tunnels era, but we had some knowledge of the principles of aerodynamics. However, public in those days was rather conservative and had to*



*be introduced to these new lines gradually; the public, God bless them, were not ready even if, to say the truth, they never are!”.*



The “Flow-Free” Glory was the first example of “streamline” Triumph and in the following years Belgrove further developed these styling concepts with the beautiful Vitesse and the Dolomite roadster, as testified also by the “waterfall” design of the radiator grilles, probably inspired by the

contemporary American Hudson, and from the hot air exhausts on the side of the bonnet that begun immediately to be his distinctive signature. These were for sure the most creative and happy working years for Walter Belgrove.



The Triumph in the second half of the Thirties were fine and innovative cars, so much to deserve the slogan "*the smartest cars in the Land*", but this was not enough to avoid, in June 1939, the financial collapse of the Coventry company.

On request of Sir Black, that was well aware of the limited internal design capabilities of Standard, Belgrove in Autumn 1939 arrived in Canley, but war changed immediately all his plans, abruptly throwing him first on the Airspeed Oxford, and then on the Mosquito projects.

On 9 November 1944 Standard surprised with the announcement of the acquisition of Triumph Co. Ltd, of which only the brand name and the land where the factory, destroyed by bombing, was, remained. This was as being back home to Belgrove; furthermore, the end of WWII was in the air and the work on civil cars would therefore to be started again soon. But the first disappointment came immediately, because Sir John did not assign to him the design of the new roadster nor, let alone, the one of the 1800 saloon, where however he was later asked to intervene to correct the Mulliners' design.





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Belgrove was in effect still busy with his works on airplanes and has also to be considered that it was Standard tradition to give the bodyworks supplier also the order for the definition of the style.

But, if a war was about to end, another conflict – unforeseeable and unexpected – was shortly to explode: not on the seas, air or on battlefields, but within Standard, between the Engineering and the Styling Departments. It would have been a ten years war, child of a rapidly changing word between the engineering department claiming – as per long tradition– its primacy on the styling, and the designers claiming, with more and more support from the rising marketing, their independency and their supremacy in the definition of the new models.

In 1945 the former Technical Director Ted Grinham, lent from Standard to De Havilland and Humber during the war years, came back to Coventry. Belgrove remembered that he first met Grinham on “neutral grounds”, in Sir Black office .

*“I was introduced to Grinham in Sir Black office and I remember that meeting very well. The topic was the Vanguard project, that was going fine, as Sir Black underlined with great satisfaction, also because it was done on his inspiration...”*



*Grinham, not to be outdone, presented various drawings and details of projects that he had prepared during the years spent in De Havilland and Humber... At the end Sir Black invited Grinham to pay a visit to my office and my department to familiarize with the progress of our work on the new model. I cannot say that our relationship started in the best way. Grinham seemed not at all interested in our job, but only wanted to impress me with his theories on the inter-departmental disciplines, in practice inviting me to an implicit obedience."*

This feeling was not just Belgrove's, but was shared by all members of his team as well.

*"Quite frankly" told Belgrove "Grinham was an arrogant, sadistic, ruthless, vain, ambitious, greed for power man: a bastard. He was universally considered an unpleasant person and was feared by everybody in the Company".*







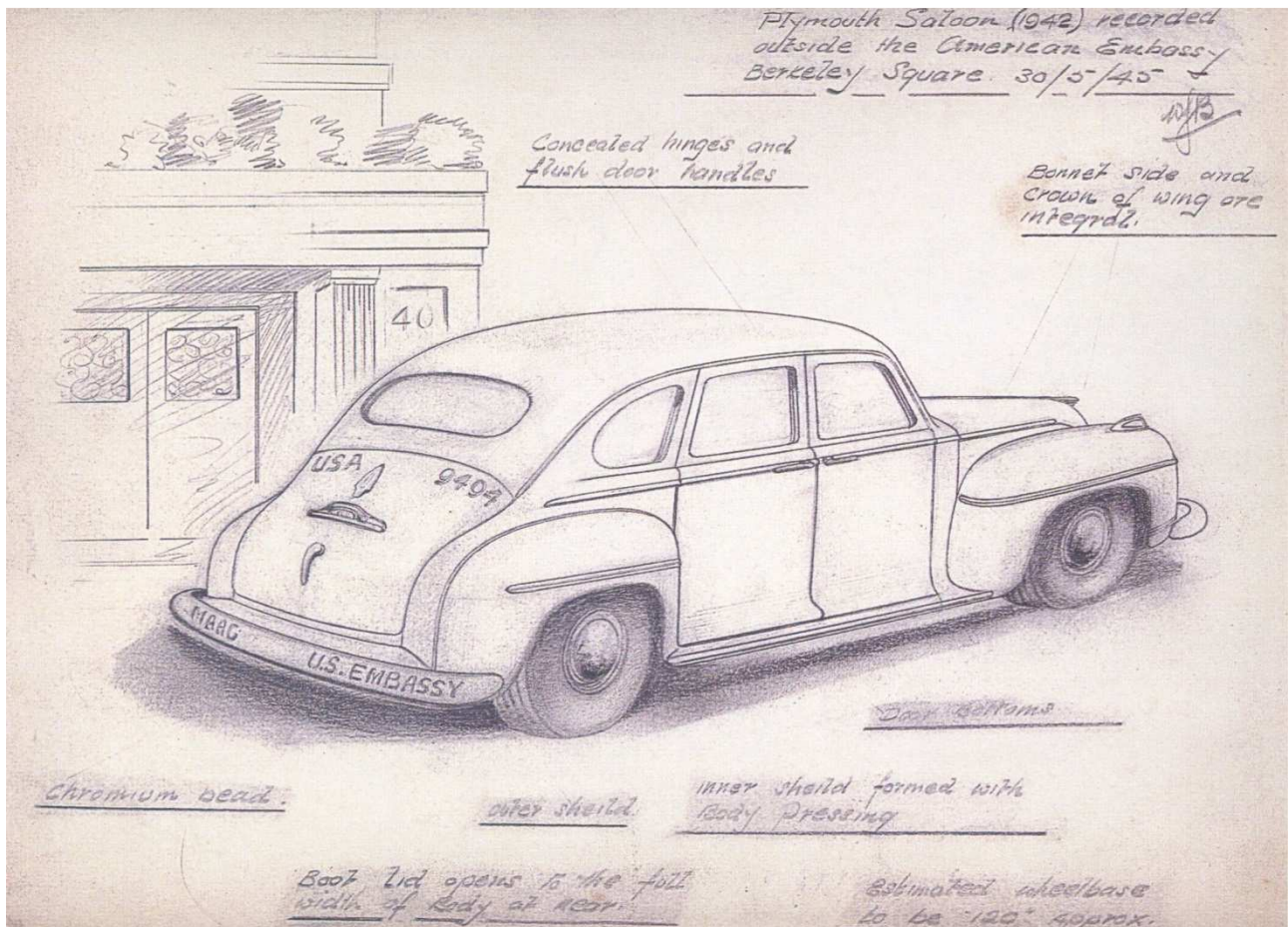
Ted Grinham, the technical director, and Walter Belgrove, head of the designers, became in a short time rivals to the bone, being incompatible as sun and storm.

Grinham was an engineer, orthodox and inflexible in his business view and very little interested in the styling of cars, but only and solely to their mechanical design and costs; Belgrove on the contrary was an artist, a free spirit that had the luck to work, in the years spent in Triumph in the Thirties, with a technical Director such as Donald Healey with whom he created the finest British cars of the thirties. Both Belgrove and Grinham were certainly stubborn and proud and none of them was ready to grant the other something.

Between the two stood Sir Black that obliged them right away, like it or not, to an armed truce also because the Vanguard project was at stake, and this was also the first design that Belgrove was following since then he joined the company. Sir Black welcomed him as chief designer in 1939 and now wanted him again to follow this project, new under all respects and on which the same survival of Standard was depending. By following diligently and literally the desires and the instructions of Sir Black, Belgrove took inspiration from the American Plymouth models.

As a matter of fact Sir Black, that felt the whole project as his creature, interfered with the project following it and giving directions, to the point to "invite" Belgrove to go to London to "copy" the Plymouth that he liked so much, parked in front of the American Embassy.





Belgrove, after so many years, remember very well that one morning Sir Black entered his office and, with little consideration, told him:

"Belgrove, the best looking Yankee car is the Plymouth and the best place to study one is outside the American Embassy in London! I suggest you to take yourself off to Grosvenor Square. The place is swarming with embassy vehicles...come back only when you have got all you want, and don't get shot".



Belgrove took with him a pad of paper, a camera and his wife and started with his little Standard 8HP to London to understand the secrets of those big American cars that so fascinated his boss.

Belgrove survived this experience because nobody, lucky for him, shot him; not only this, but the Vanguard was a success so that Sir Black's



esteem for him further increased, protecting him from Grinham.

After the Vanguard followed the TRX project, for which Belgrove asked and had from Sir Black carte blanche. Actually, constraints were later given with reference to the use of the Vanguard chassis and this became a new reason of confrontation with Grinham, whose Department was giving little cooperation and support.



The front track width was too narrow and this was creating problems in the tapering of the body in the rear section, with the risk to have the front wheels “disappear” below the fenders. But this



styling issues were beyond the capacity and will to understand of Grinham.

That was paying attention only to the mechanical issues and was not understanding the growing importance of the style in the design of a car.

The final result was anyway a car with a very clean style, so not to require any external ornamental addition. Belgrove should have been very proud of the result, to the point to take the license to “sign” this project with a badge on the car with a stylized “B” letter; Sir John Black, second to none as far as egotism, did not lose



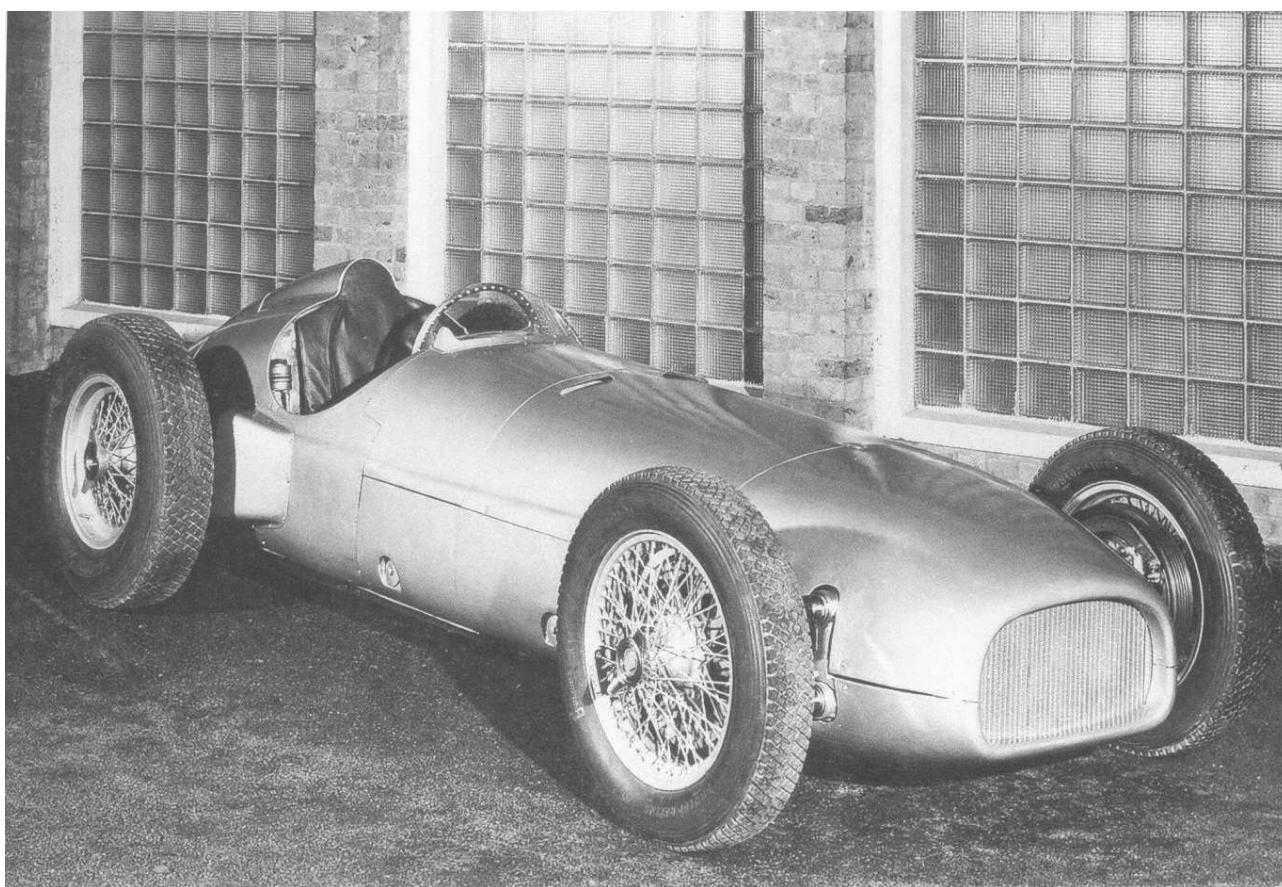
the opportunity to ask Belgrove, his protégé, what that nice “B” letter stand for: *“B for what? Is that Black, Belgrove or just balls?”*.



The futuristic TRX project, too complex to build, was abandoned and Belgrove proposed again the TRX style in 1952 for the restyling of the Vanguard saloon, but this proposal was rejected by the Company Direction.

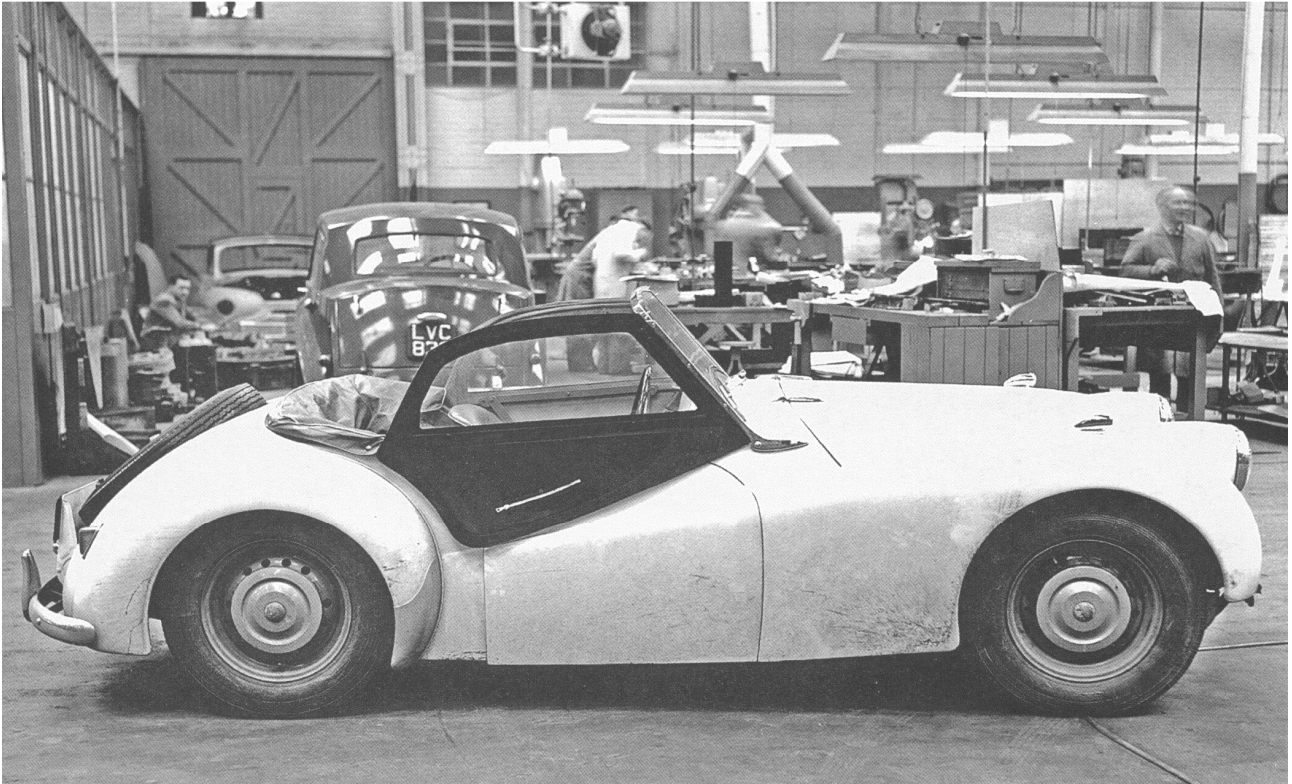
In the same years Belgrove designed the first body for the BRM V16, where Standard was not only among the financing companies but also a supplier of components and technology.

Unfortunately, the BRM designers have not correctly calculated the amount of air needed to remove the heat from the powerful V16 engine, so after a short time the resulting overheating problems required to obtain a greater air flow and this led to modify and distort the nice Belgrove





bodywork design, with its well-proportioned and streaming lines, losing its original elegance. After the TRX project, Belgrove started to work to the design of the TS 20 Roadster that would be evolved into the future TR2.



*"I guess that I designed the TR in the beginning of 1951, but I am not sure of the precise month".*

And this are his memories on the instructions received for the design: *"Sir John came a morning in my office, alone, sat down and came straight to the point: Belgrove – he told me –the MG sport cars are having a great success on the US market and I believe that we should try to keep our share of it. We need a sport car with good performances and light, like an MG. You have ten weeks. We will produce 500 per year, she shall be economic, no-frills. We have 16.000 pounds for the new moulds".* Sixteen thousand pounds were just a shadow of a budget.





*"Sir John suggestion was that we could either adopt a traditional style, or the MG style, and this was to me a punch to the gut. I did not like that style and also I wanted not to be blamed for plagiarism. So, I did it my way."* And luckily so, we can say today, considering that the TR2 was a real masterpiece notwithstanding the strict budget available and the short time given to develop the project: Sir Black actually wanted to unveil the new roadster at the London Motor Show in October 1952.



The car born from Belgrove's pencil was a car for all seasons and all tastes. In the same years Belgrove also followed the new Vanguard Phase II, that adopted the "pontoon" line, and the project of the new small four doors saloons Standard Eight and Ten designed by Vic Hammond, all models that had sale success. And we have not to forget that the TR2 at last succeeded in positioning the "Triumph" brand as the sport brand in the Standard Group.



Notwithstanding all this, Standard was suffering the impacts of Sir Black's often unexpected decisions, such as the one to give to the American designer Carl Otto the new future version of Vanguard, the Phase III. This car, of which only the model was built, was soon found to be "too American", so Belgrove was called to intervene to avoid the project to become a disaster. Belgrove, in a rush against the time, intervened and corrected the project rescuing it from a certain failure.





A series of unforeseeable events followed between end of 1953 and the first days of January of 1954. First, on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, Sir Black was involved as a passenger in a serious road accident when, just outside Banner Line, the test driver Ken Richardson, driving the Swallow Doretti prototype equipped with the TR2 engine, could not avoid a lorry that crossed her road.



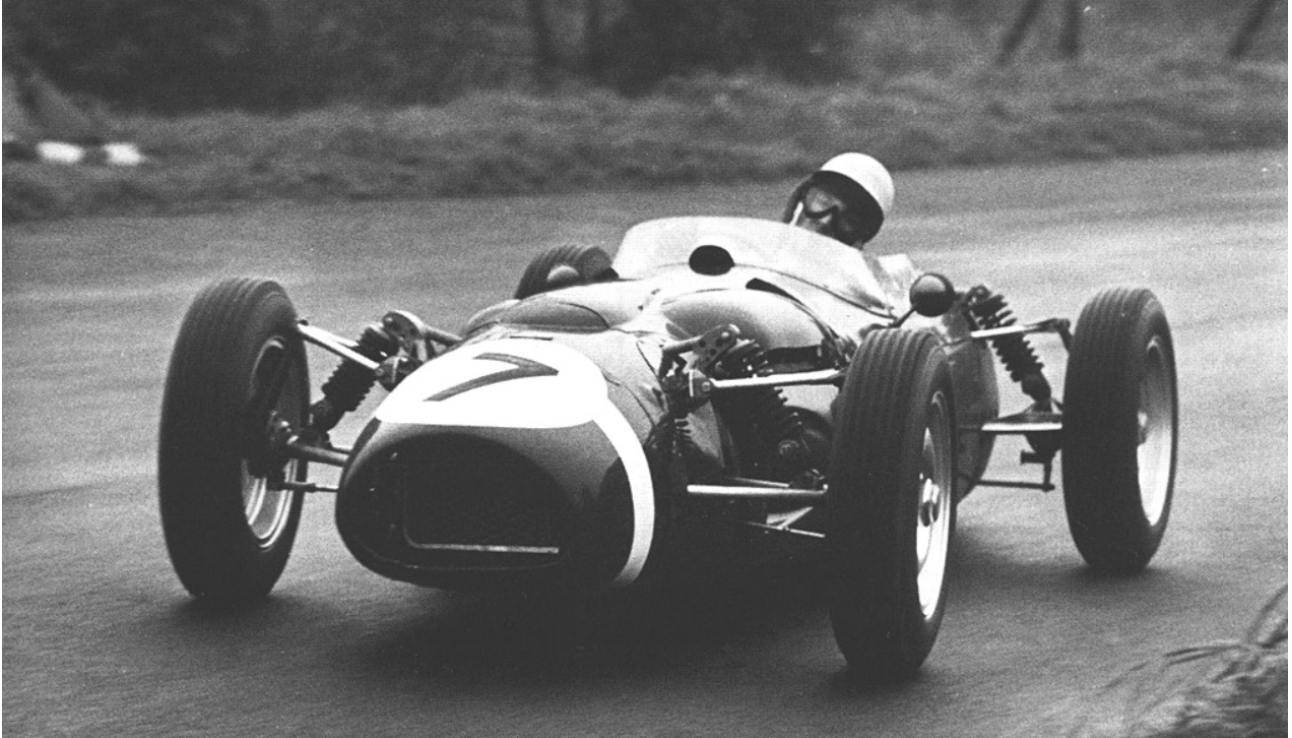
Then, on January 5 Black was fired from the Standard Board of Directors. This was an unexpected event: Sir Black for sure made quite a few enemies when he made clear his intention to fire some of the Directors, including Grinham. The Board accused him to have a too autonomous and personal management of the new contract with Massey Harris, having Sir Black informed the Board only when the contract was to be signed, after completion of the negotiation.

The first action of the new Director, Alick Dick, "the wonder boy" that worked years beside Sir Black, was to promote just Ted Grinham as his deputy.



Grinham, that was waiting this moment since years, decided that this was the right time to close his personal match with Belgrove, that he disliked and for which he felt only antagonism; it is

significant that in the following two years no new design job was carried out, not even the one already planned for the restyling of the Standard Eight and Ten. In this period Belgrove worked only to the design update of the TR2, which would have led in 1955 to the TR3, and to the project for the correction of the style of the Vanguard Phase III.



The final act came when the Vanguard Phase III, completely re-designed by Belgrove, received very good comments by the Press at the London Motor Show in October 1955. This was too much for Grinham that considered these as personal frustrations because all the mechanical work below the car body was in the background, when not completely ignored, with respect to the style work of the designers.

Grinham intention was to fire Belgrove when back to Coventry, but Belgrove, with a masterstroke, anticipated him announcing his resignation from Standard to the press during the Motor Show. The news caused sensation, catching Grinham unprepared; not only this, but Belgrove was immediately flooded by job proposals, including one by Leonard Lord, chairman of BMC, who had just fired Gerald Palmer. Belgrove, probably tired of all these figures, refused any offer. *"I felt that I could better manage myself as an industrial design freelance. For the following 5 years I was busy in a great variety of works, covering different areas of the design".*

The result for Standard Triumph was devastating. The Design Department, moved under the direction of Vic Hammond, was not prepared to the leaving of Belgrove and a creative crisis followed that took the Coventry company almost to an implosion; the crisis was overcome, by luck and in a fortuitous way, only with the arrival some years later of Giovanni Michelotti and the

leaving of Grinham substituted as a Technical Director, in May 1957, by the legendary Harry Webster.

Belgrove, now a freelance, worked actively with the Ferguson research center for which he designed the prototype of the four-wheel drive saloon/station wagon R5 and the body of the charismatic four-wheel drive Formula 1 Grand Prix P99. Then, in 1961, Belgrove took the decision to throw away his “drawing tools” and move to Barnstaple, in the North Devon district, to manage a Post Office, abandoning any link and relation with the world where he spent his youth and artistic maturity, almost to look for a voluntary exile.



Frank Rainbow, designer of the Swallow Doretta, recalled in the eighties his first meeting with Walter Belgrove, in 1949:

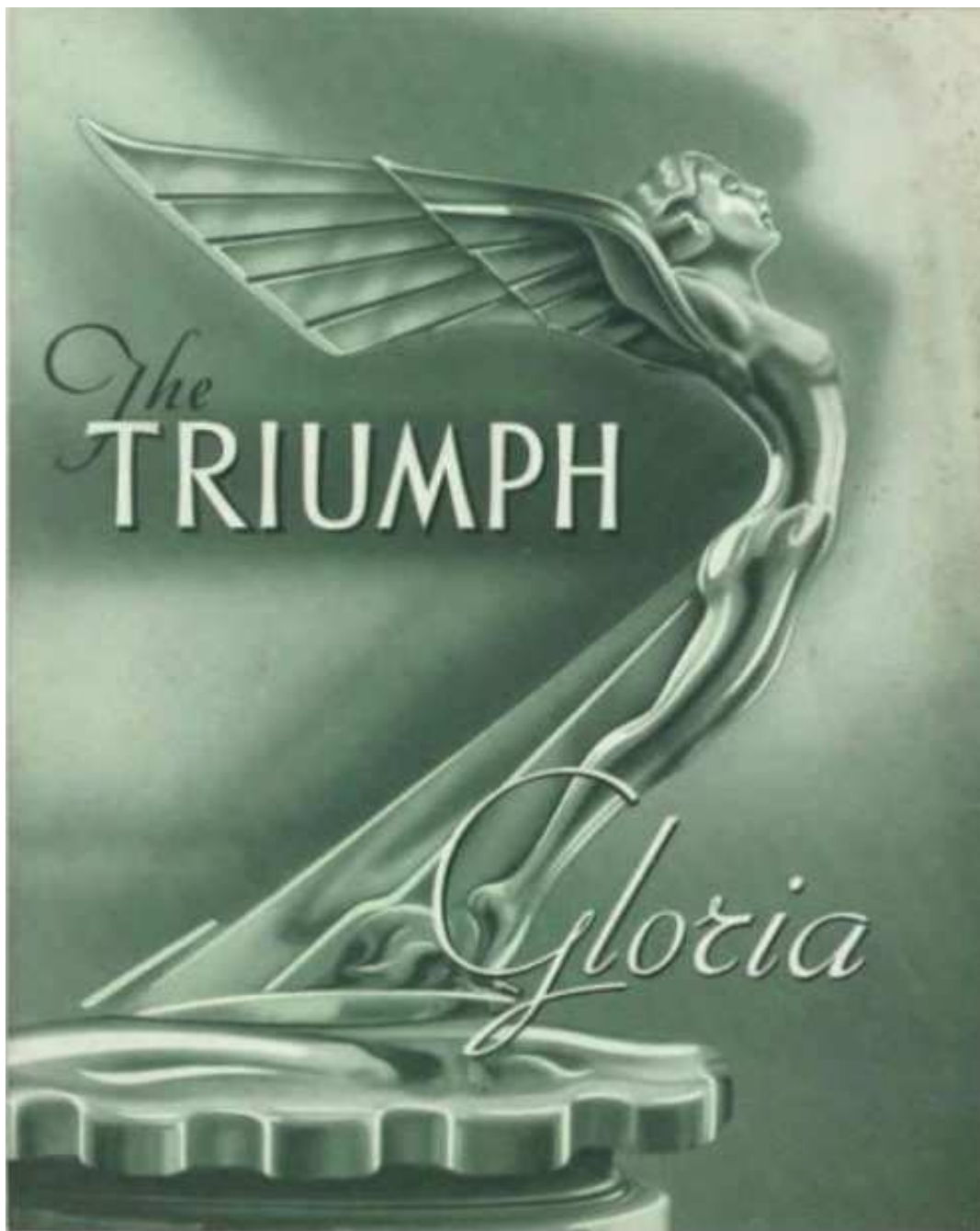
*“In that time, Walter worked as a head of style in Standard. I knew his past, when Walter was head of style in the thirties at Triumph Motor Company and designed a wide range of wonderful cars.”*



Rainbow was on friendly terms with Belgrove, earning his respect and his friendship: talented persons as they were, not only they had mutual respect but they understand each other having so much in common.

*"Belgrove had a great artistic talent, discernment, feeling and a great sense of humour".*

Moreover, Frank Rainbow owned various Triumphs including a 1934 Glory and a 1935 Vitesse. Rainbow was sure that Belgrove did his best works just in the Thirties when his artistic spirit was free, while the post-WWII years have been filled with interferences and frustrations.



He was recalling him meeting Belgrove in Standard when he often found him *“with his head between his hands before having a cup of milk and a biscuit to relieve the stomachache. He was suffering of ulcers due to a profound sense of frustration, and this was not the picture of a happy person”*.

The last phrase of Frank Rainbow’s story summarizes the bond that was between them.

*“Sadly, my friend Walter is not with us anymore, but I am proud to have been so well acquainted with him and to have the opportunity to share so many happy moments with him”*.

With no doubts, the myth of Triumph is linked indissolubly also to Belgrove’s work; it is impossible to imagine what Triumph would have been without his work and creativity, but we can for sure imagine what it would not be today, because Triumph’s myth, born in the Thirties and developed through the Fifties, is linked only to the fascinating lines of its sport cars, and certainly not to their mechanical and technical contents, that moreover were not passed into history.



Belgrove was a true artist: this is still today demonstrated by the statuette that he created for the radiators of his fine *“streamline”* cars that can be considered with no doubt true sculptures, artworks of great finesse.

After his passing away, his whole personal archive was gifted to the “Museum of British Road Transport”, better known as the “Coventry Transport Museum”.



At the end of the Seventies Tom Robinson, member of the Razoredge Owners Club Ltd. (T.R.O.C.), had the opportunity to meet Belgrove. Tom wanted to solve the doubt about who was the actual designer of the 1800 Saloon: opinions among historians and enthusiasts were different and contrasting, and the final word could only be given asking the question to Belgrove himself. Robinson succeeded in this and could clarify that the design of the 1800 Saloon, inspired by Sir John Black, was work of Leslie Moore, designer at Mulliners, but this was then corrected, even if with little enthusiasm, by Belgrove upon Sir Black request. He recall this meeting as follows:

*“Never did like the blxxxxy things”,* and with that stark comment, the one-time chief stylist of Standard Triumph, Walter Belgrove, turned on his heels after looking at a Renown limousine and went back into his retirement bungalow, leaving me standing on his doorstep.

Perhaps I should rewind the tape to fill in the background to this comment. Many years ago- the late seventies, or thereabouts, a car rally entitled STIR [Standard Triumph International Rally] was held every other year in the Midlands area and on one occasion it was thought most appropriate to invite Walter Belgrove, the alleged [by some] chief designer behind our cars, and that he be brought from Barnstaple to the Rally. The most appropriate car? – A Triumph Renown limousine, of course.

In those early days of the Club we were fortunate in having a limousine [TDC 2017] in our midst and this car was then owned by an active member in Cornwall, it seemed only natural that if the car was coming to STIR, then Barnstaple was not out of the way en route. Carrying a Coventry registration, LVC 313, this car when new was most likely to have been owned by Standard Triumph which made it even more of an appropriate choice. As a way of mentioning this idea to him, Walter Belgrove had made an appointment for the owner and me to call and introduce ourselves and explain our intentions.

So here we were standing on his doorstep and wondering what to do next. Well, eventually we were admitted to the bungalow and were shown some remarkable examples of his creative skills.

That time Tom shot the following pictures, which represent ones of the last memories of this great designer.





## CREDITS

Thanks are due to Tom Robinson to have agreed to the publication of his pictures and his witness published on "The Globe" magazine of the "Razoredge Owners Club Ltd." In the article "The Triumph Renown Limousine" of October 2013 and for his invaluable historical help.

Thanks are also due to Damien Kimberley, historical guardian of the "*Research & Information Culture Coventry*" center, for his permission to use the picture at page 1, and to Roger Ferris of TSSC for his help in my research.