

Belgium's Best

by David Blumlein

Having returned thoroughly uplifted from the recent Spa 24 hours race and seeing the Excelsior on the front cover of FSW puts me in full Belgian mode!

The Spa race ranks in my mind as second only to Le Mans, which has to be sacred, and like it's French counterpart it has a long and wonderful history, this year's race being the 60th even though it started in 1924 just one year after the Sarthe classic – there were gaps, the RACB not having the wealth of the ACO. Spa-Francorchamps is of course a spectacular circuit in a spectacular setting, the shortened version still very demanding of the drivers, and Le Mans lovers will find in the Belgian race's annals a rich and varied list of interesting participants – even Peugeot scored it's first 24 Hour victory there!

We don't tend to think of Belgium as a car-producing nation but, before the First World War, this little country with coal and iron ore on tap was one of the first industrialised countries in Europe. It had up till 1914 a thriving motor industry, producing mainly high quality cars, seventy-five per cent of which went for export, especially to England. Minerva in Antwerp, for example, made nearly eight hundred cars in 1905; other well-known makes that flourished were Imperia, Nagent, Pipe, Métallurgique, F.N. and Excelsior. Of these Excelsior was perhaps the nearest to Rolls-Royce but things went terribly wrong for Belgium with the outbreak of war. It was not just that the Germans destroyed her factories but that the post-war period was characterised by much protectionism – Belgium's home market was inevitably small and without markets abroad readily accessible the car firms suffered. The Wall Street crash did not help and Belgium did not have the financial resources to keep up with the accelerating advance in technical

developments that were so apparent as the Thirties unfolded. Some manufacturers hung on but Belgium gradually became a convenient centre of assembly for other companies – one sees a big VW plant as the Eurostar enters the western suburbs of Brussels!

Excelsior, a high quality make, was no exception to this fate. Conceived by Arthur De Coninck in Brussels in 1903, it began by making modestly-priced cars with French Aster engines but it was not long before Excelsior was making a whole car in house. A move to Saventhem [modern Zaventem in the shadow of Brussels airport] in 1911 enabled expansion to take place and by 1913 a 4.4 litre six-cylinder model was available. De Coninck was an original engineer and he was keen for his cars to compete; his entries for the 1912 French Grand Prix were the first of that GP field to have six-cylinders. A 6th place and an 8th and 11th in 1913 underlined the quality of the cars while another example led the 1914 Indianapolis 500 eventually finishing 6th.

After the cessation of hostilities Excelsior resumed production of it's 6-cylinder car which in 1919 was updated to 4.7 litres and known as the Adex B. This label was a contraction of Arthur De Coninck/Excelsior and the name was used to cover De Coninck's patents. By 1922 a sporting version developed from the Adex B appeared, the Adex C, and this had a 5.3-litre overhead camshaft engine with seven main bearings, three Zenith carburetors, a 3-speed gearbox separate from the engine, diagonally – compensated four-wheel brakes, semi-elliptics at the front and cantilever springs at the rear. An Adex patent was a system of stabilisers for the rear suspension, two diagonal links to the differential accompanying a transverse link.



Excelsior 9th Le Mans 1923 kit (SLM23002) & hand built (SLM23002M) by SLM 43

Two such cars took part in the inaugural Le Mans 24 Hour race in May 1923. They were not factory cars and were lent back to the works for this race by their private owners; apparently they were not even given any pre-race attention by the factory! Car no. 1 driven by the factory test drivers, Nicolas Caerels and André Dils finished 4th and car no. 2 came in 9th after running out of road and losing two hours; Lecureul and Fland were its drivers.

By the second running of the Spa 24 Hours in 1925, Excelsior returned officially to competing in Belgium and three Adex sport cars lined up impressively for the start. Only the Elskamp/Marin car survived and that was limping after brake trouble had caused the failure of a shock absorber. Oil pump failure and a petty loose screw dropping into the distributor accounted for the other two entries.

Brakes played up again for Dils/Caerels in the 1926 Spa race when the single Excelsior was the only real threat to the winning sleeve-valve Peugeots, the Belgian car coming home in ninth. Some compensation for the marque came that year from victory in the destructive Circuit des Routes Pavées, testimony to the car's solid build.

The Adex C was updated in 1926 becoming the "Albert 1" model with a four-speed gearbox and Dewandre servo on the brakes. The Belgian King, a motor enthusiast who had inaugurated the "Coupe

du Roi" award in 1912, later a feature in the 24 Hours of Spa considered on a par with the famous Index of Performance at Le Mans, took delivery of the first of the new cars to be produced named in his honour. Appropriately three of these headed the line-up for the Le Mans type start at Spa in 1927 and here they triumphed even if the third car hit a bridge while in the hands of Thoua. Sénéchal and Caerels led home Dils and Ledure in what is till the only success for a Belgian car in this famous 24 Hour race.

But, alas, economic forces were catching up on this fine company and in 1927 it was taken over by Imperia of Nessonvaux, some chassis later being assembled in one of the Imperia factories in Liège and the Brussels Salon on December 1930 was the last time an Excelsior was displayed publicly. Imperia itself soon had to embrace assembling other countries' products and using them as a basis for their own: Adler pre-war, Standard-Triumph and Alfa-Romeo post-war!

The Excelsior was admired for its speed, road-holding and elegance and constituted a worthy chapter in Belgian motoring history. And there was one Belgian car competing in this year's Spa 24 Hours: the gorgeous little Gillet Vertigo, powered this year by a 4.2-litre V-8 Maserati engine. Transmission failure accounted for its retirement, but I was just glad to have seen it compete in this historic race!

REVIEWS

Selfords MODELS

Selfords Models - New 1:43rd metal hand built

SEL43001MB Maserati Mistral Coupe Blue

£124.95

Also available **SEL43001MR** - dark red

This hand built model is the first release from Simon Elford who has worked for a number of the British kit and hand built makers as a builder before tackling a full pattern. The model is made in the English style with fairly soft panel engraving and plenty of use of plated white metal for the bumpers, lights etc. The paint finish on our sample is very good and the shape checks out pretty well.



Francorchamps mini models

Francorchamps Mini Models - New 1:25th decal

FRATK2412 Chevrolet Corvette C6R Spa 2007 Alphanand

£20.40

For Revell kit **REV07396**

This well printed decal is for Revell's C6-R kit and offers a simple but effective livery. The car was entered by Alphanand Aventures for the Spa 24 Hours and finished 6th overall in the hands of Vosse, Gavin, Beretta & Franchi. The base colour is pure white, giving a nice easy base for the red and grey decals. With all of the options available for this kit, there must be some nice collections building up out there.

