

8.32

The Red Lion at Llanfair Waterdine lies on the banks of the River Teme, within spitting distance of Offa's Dyke, just a few miles down the road from Caer Caradoc. Driving there at the end of a first, long day with the Patrick Collection's newly acquired Lancia Thema 8.32, we'd passed signs welcoming us to Wales. When we sat down to enjoy a couple of pints of bitter in the bar of the lovely 17th century pub, we just more or less took it for granted that we were in Welsh Wales. We took it for granted until the landlord, himself a newcomer, late of the newspaper printing trade in London, disabused us of the notion by telling us we were actually back in England, albeit by only a few yards. It goes to show the power of a name.

After a leisurely breakfast the next morning in a pleasant dining room looking out across the Teme towards the Welsh hills, we drove east, through Ludlow and then quickly and enthusiastically along the entertainingly twisty A4117 to the lovely little riverside town of Bewdley.

In Bewdley the Severn flows gently below the wide stone arches of the bridge and from the wooded hillside opposite, the smoke and steam of a steam train rise, while a whistle pierces the early morning calm. It is like a siren call to the past and a quarter of a mile up the road, at Bewdley station, the time transport is complete on the platform of one of the Severn Valley Railway's fabulously restored halts on a line which runs a full daily timetable between Kidderminster, Bewdley and Bridgnorth. For almost 20 years, the Severn Valley Railway has been preserving history in the most

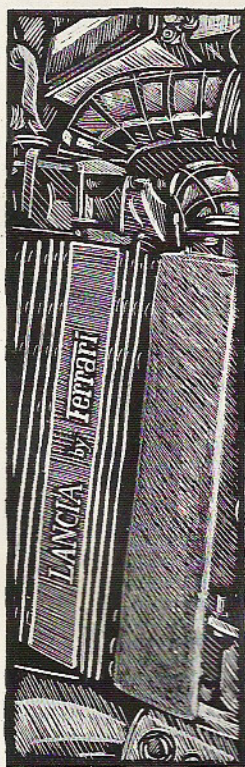
beautifully practical way and giving anybody with a heart the chance to wallow in a little nostalgia. On a sunny morning on the up-line of an ever-so-English railway station, every perfect detail, every sound, every smell, every advertising hoarding evoked a memory of childhood and a glow of pleasure.

So what's in a name, and is tradition really important? Well, you have to believe it, names can be everything, and, even now it seems, there's no harm in trading on tradition, however big you are. Especially when the name is something like Ferrari.

The Thema powered by Ferrari was the brainchild of Fiat boss Vittorio Ghidella, the man largely responsible for dragging the ailing group out of its near-terminal decline in the 1970s.

Not normally known for his sentimentality, Ghidella probably wasn't too nostalgic about the Lancia Ferrari D50 'Super Squalo' Grand Prix cars of the mid-1950s or the more recent Ferrari-powered Stratos and its all-conquering rally career, but he obviously saw the image-building possibilities in linking the Ferrari name with Lancia once again. In the end, of course, the corporate nerve stopped short at actually calling the car a Lancia-Ferrari, but Lancia was committed to building perhaps 2000 examples a year of a model designed to put the company name back into the sporting and luxury big league.

So, the super-Thema was introduced at the Turin Show in April 1986 as the Thema 8.32 (for eight cylinders and 32 valves) with the promise that deliveries would start in Italy by July and exports would start from late autumn. But it didn't hap-



Illustrations: Peter Blandamer

Technology old and new, as Ferrari-engined Thema poses with Severn Valley restoration



Despite the possibility of a substantial injection of credibility to bolster Lancia's still flagging image in 1986, the Italian company resisted all suggestions that its new super saloon be called a Thema Ferrari. It would instead be called Thema 8.32 — a V8 with 32 valves. **Brian Laban** spent two days getting to know one of the first to come into Britain, and found it to be more than just a gimmick



may be a little coy about using the hallowed name anywhere other than under the bonnet, but make no mistake, the engine is a real Ferrari.

It dates back to 1973 when it was introduced in two-valve, Weber carburetted form for the new Bertone-bodied 308GT4 (which was also rather reticent about being called a Ferrari and wore Dino badges). It is an all-alloy 90 degree V8, with bore and stroke of 81.0 x 71.0mm for a capacity of 2927cc, just like the former 308 unit.

Also like the 308 *quattroval-*

pen quite as planned; the car needed more development than it had had in the rush to introduce it.

Fortunately, rumours that it couldn't be made to work at all with so much power going through the front wheels were well wide of the mark, but Lancia did sort out a lot of minor problems and they also added the retractable rear wing in place of the fixed type originally intended. The main problem though was the Italian parts industry's traditional slowness - like the Spanish *manana* but without the sense of urgency...

In the end, production proper (and that meant virtual hand building) got under way in November 1986 at a small factory at San Paolo on the site of the company museum. It started with just a couple of cars a day, not for lack of capacity but because Lancia were very keen to get quality right on their expensive, up-market flagship. That increased to five or six daily by December and moved on to a peak of ten a day early in 1987 and, in spite of demand, Lancia have never been tempted to force it any higher.

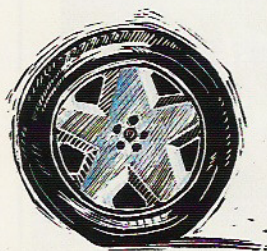
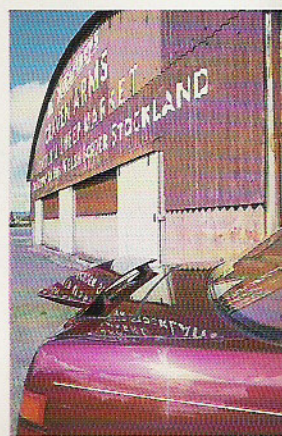
The car which has just joined the Patrick Collection's well-known line up of past and future history in Kings Norton, Birmingham, is the first customer car to make it to Britain - although it was ordered not long after the 8.32 was announced. Patrick's curator, John Ward, had already summed it up as one of the most pleasant and usable of modern performance saloons, including such tough competition as the Collection's new BMW 750i V12.

Lancia would be pleased to hear that sort of comparison, because there's no doubt Ghidella wanted to compete on that level, but however successful the image building, they would be hard pushed to make more 8.32's

than they actually do. Even given the obvious connection of Fiat as a common parent for both Lancia and Ferrari, the slotting of the Maranello V8 into the Type Four shell was by no means a matter of convenience.

It isn't, after all, just some surplus-to-requirements parts deal; the 8.32's V8, designated type F105L, is unique to this car - not only in capacity but also in fundamental specifications such as crank layout. Ferrari's commitment has to be fairly deep too; the same people who build the engine at Maranello, for instance, are directly involved in making it work in the car when it is fitted at San Paolo, and at the end of the day Ferrari effectively control the number of 8.32s built, simply by the number of engines they can deliver.

If it were any different, the point would be lost; what Lancia are buying in is not just power but breeding and what they are selling is mystique. The Thema



This Lancia is clearly more than just another Thema, top, the deep spoiler and wide Goodyear Eagle Tyres giving the game well and truly away



vole (the four-valve engine was introduced in 1981), it has four belt-driven cams, and four valves per cylinder. The biggest difference (mainly for refinement) is a slightly milder (and better balanced) 90 degree crank configuration, in place of the 308's fairly raunchy single-plane crank layout. It has electronically controlled Bosch KE3 Jetronic injection (injection was introduced on the 308 in 1981) and Marelli Microplex electronic ignition.

With a compression ratio of 10.5:1 the result is slightly less

power but slightly more torque than the 308 - the former down from 240bhp at 7000rpm to 215bhp at 6750rpm and the latter up from 188lb ft at 5000rpm to 210lb ft at 4500rpm. It also scores heavily on flexibility, with Lancia claiming at least 80 per cent of maximum torque (that's about 170lb ft upwards) from as low as 2500rpm.

It is an extremely tight fit under the bonnet of the Thema. As in the mid-engined 308, it is mounted transversely and just ahead of the axle line, but here, of course, driving the front wheels. The whole of the underbonnet area is dominated by the big, ribbed injection plenum chamber with the words 'Lancia by Ferrari' in red on the black crackle paint, and there isn't much else to see, it's all so deeply buried.

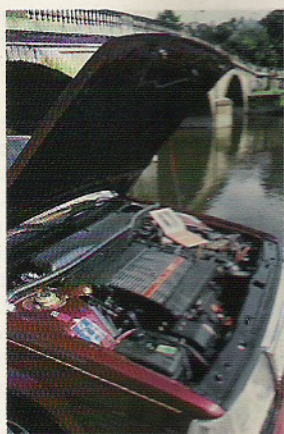
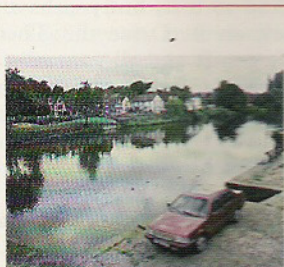
The problem isn't just one of size; although the 3-litre V8 with all its ancillaries actually is quite big, there is also the problem of keeping engine and car cool. That has dictated a larger radiator (which accounts for the more upright front grille styling) and a considerable amount of heat shrouding, including a steel/ceramic sandwich around the exhaust manifolds and extensive bulkhead insulation to stop the passengers parboiling even with the standard air conditioning. As for size, the fit is so tight that Lancia have provided a removable inner panel in the offside wheelarch to give access to the alternator belts and the steering pump.

If the fit under the bonnet is cramped and visually unspectacular, however, the story inside the car is totally different.

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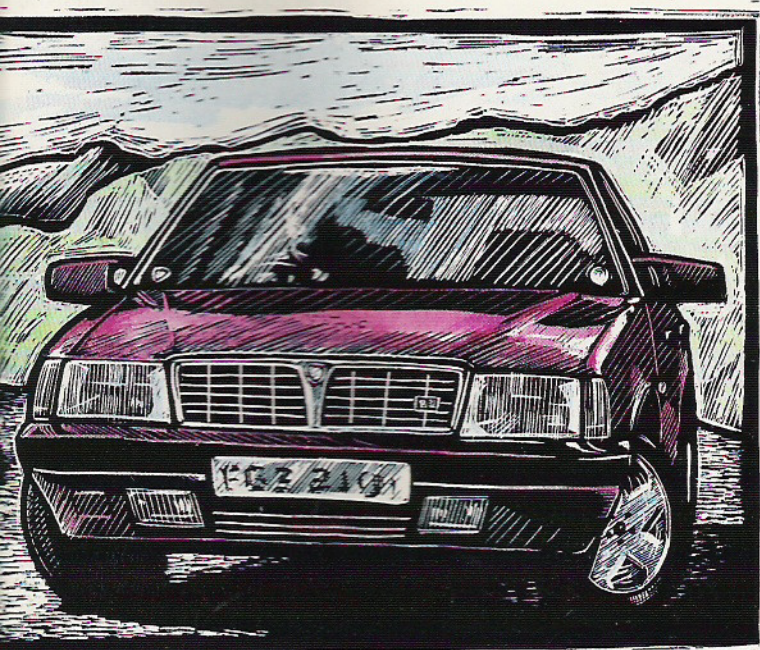
The engine's plenum chamber is the only part of the 8.32 to carry the Ferrari name. The engine itself is such a tight fit that there's an inspection cover fitted in the wheelarch

Remember that the 8.32 was built for comfort *and* for speed and you'll get the picture.

With four doors and four or five seats, all with ample space, the Thema is quite a capacious package. In this guise, with no expense spared, it is also extremely well trimmed. The seats are covered in very good quality leather by Italian furniture makers Frau and the walnut trim is beautifully finished, with a fine matt surface which is a pleasant change from the usual too-high-gloss.

The seats are big and fairly soft but with deep and effective side supports on both squab and back. Adjustment is electrical but the controls, on the door side of the seats, are a touch fiddly, with separate buttons for reach, back rake and height (though not tilt), plus electric heating. The rear seats are electrically adjustable too, individually, for reach and rake and the whole ambience is very soothing.

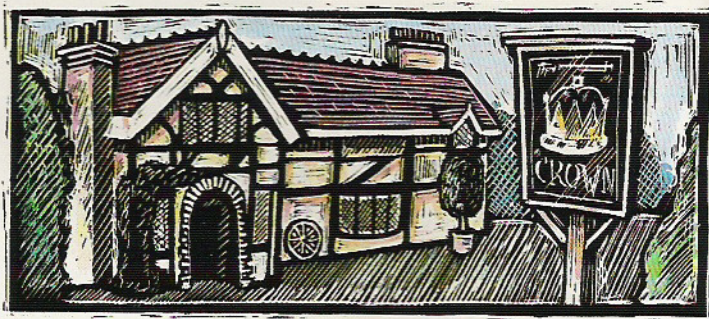
It's a comfortable car, with a fairly high stance but enough adjustment in the seat and the tiltable column to find a good position for most drivers - Italian or otherwise. The pedals are nice and straight ahead, quite closely spaced and at the right height, the wheel rim is thick, leather bound and just about the perfect size, the gearlever is short and chunky and the dash



is overflowing with instruments and big numbers, but the feel is of an executive express rather than just an express.

Even when you start the 8.32's magnificent Ferrari engine, you're likely to be left wondering what the fuss is about. It isn't actually terribly spectacular until you ask it to work hard.

It is very, very smooth and very, very quiet, but for the most part, in this two-plane crank guise and surrounded by lots of sound deadening, it certainly



doesn't promise to be particularly stirring. There's no temperament at all and very few traditional Ferrari noises; just like the family hatchback, Ferrari cams are now driven by rubber bands, so even the valve gear noise is pretty muted.

'Refined' is the word that springs most obviously to mind.

Yet there's another side to it, the side that makes the 8.32 more exciting than just another conversion, the side that makes

it unique; because, muted or not, this still is a Ferrari engine and 215bhp in a front-wheel-drive saloon does have to be special.

And so it is, but you have to work on it. Drive the Thema 8.32 gently and all you will feel is a big comfortable car, soft and sedate even, with a lot of engine refinement and a great deal of performance in reserve. If you do it that way though, you'll be missing at least half the car's schizophrenic character.

After the low speed quietness of the naturally aspirated V8, the next real surprise is the complete absence of any of the front-wheel drive vices that you would expect to be accentuated by all that power.

There are several contributory factors. First, the engine being just ahead of the front axle line does have a marked effect on traction, which, whatever the fears, is outstanding. Next, the flexibility and instant throttle responsiveness of the Ferrari engine make the Thema 8.32 a much less demanding car to drive smoothly than, for instance, many powerful turbos. And with beautifully matched gear ratios and all that torque,



Seating, top, is comfortable and the interior generally soothing. But the attractive wooden dashboard contains instruments whose markings are fussy and confusing

you don't have to be hard on the car to make rapid progress.

The biggest fear of all, excessive torque steer, just doesn't materialise. Even on tight, low speed corners taken in a low gear and with a sharp application of throttle, there is very little reaction, and while it is possible to provoke some waywardness in the wet, that's likely to be more down to driver than car.

So, we took the heart from Italy into the heart of England, around the beautiful high roads and by-roads of Shropshire, Hereford and Worcester and out towards the Welsh borders. It is a perfect car for anybody who wants his performance motoring to be kept low key and relatively anonymous; apart from the slightly restyled and more upright radiator grille, a deeper front bib and small side sills, there needn't be anything to give the game away that this is something more than just another Thema. The badges certainly don't shout very loudly, with just two small, yellow 8.32 logos low down ahead of the rear wheels and a discreet 'Thema 8.32' on the boot lid. The tyres are wider than normal, larger diameter and lower profile, on five-spoke, Ferrari-type, alloy wheels, but not ostentatiously so, and with the retractable spoiler in its lair in the boot lid, Giugiaro's design would only turn those heads which already know. It can be a very useful attribute.

If you're expecting the sharp, slightly nervous feel of the purely performance oriented car, you would probably be very disappointed by first acquaintance with the Thema. It just doesn't feel anything like the obvious saloon rivals such as the Sierra Sapphire Cosworth, the BMW M-cars, or the Mercedes 190 Cosworth.

All those disparate rivals are instantly recognisable as sporting cars for the sporting driver, with feelings of weight, direct control, power and precision. The 8.32 doesn't introduce itself that way. On top of the cocoon of luxury and the refined near silence, the low speed ride is soft and pampering. Suspension is essentially uprated Thema, with MacPherson struts, coil springs and telescopic dampers all round, with lower track control arms at the front and two transverse links at the rear, plus anti-roll bars at each end. All cars imported into Britain will also have the new electronically controlled damping system, which offers either a dashboard selected choice of firmer, 'sports'

damping, or an 'auto' mode which allows the car to think for itself. On top of that, the electronically speed-related ZF Servotronic steering is finger-tip light at low speeds and with very little feel. The mechanically linked clutch is light too, if a little sharp in take-up, which may just be a clue, and the gearchange is short and slick but with none of that positive mechanical notchiness of a Ferrari.

In fact the gearbox, like most of the rest of the running gear save the engine, is Thema-derived, the turbo 'box but with bigger bearings and some more hardy materials.

All-in-all, it doesn't feel capable of exciting, but then comes the other side of the coin. Where the already fairly quick Thema Turbo runs out of steam at 135mph, the 8.32 is claimed to be good for 149, with nicely spaced maxima in the first four gears of 40, 65, 96 and 130. It will reel off 0-60mph in a fairly ordinary 7 seconds plus, but then it really starts to get into its long-legged stride and will demolish a standing quarter-mile in around 15 seconds and 100mph in 16.5.

The intermediate acceleration in fourth or fifth is also well into the top league, with the whole range of 20mph increments between 30 and 100mph all separated by maybe 3 seconds, from less than 5 seconds for the crucial 50-70mph in fourth to fractionally less than 8 seconds for 80-100 in fifth.

That, of course, puts a different complexion on the 8.32 as rapid transport and you have to start by wondering whether the softness and lightness can really



match up to it.

Well, the answer has to be partly yes and partly no. The Thema is quite a big car, over 15 feet long on a 104.7-inch wheelbase, and it weighs a hefty 3086lb. That means it's certainly no hatchback to throw around the smaller roads, and no mid-engined lightweight.

The better news is that the steering lightness soon goes and with three turns lock to lock and rack-and-pinion precision, it soon becomes reassuringly transformed. The soft, not quite wallowing, suspension feel also fades to some extent on the move, but even with the stiffer settings the 8.32 is still prone to more roll than a car of this potential should be and, in some circumstances, perhaps too much dive under hard braking.

Yet under the softness you can feel a degree of chassis firmness and control. The wider, flatter 205/55VR15 Goodyear Eagle tyres (specially developed for this car) patter crisply and at speed there is plenty of information coming back to the driver, but there really is hardly a vestige of torque steer. The big mass at the front ensures that the Thema has exceptional traction and turns in sweetly and quickly but, surprisingly, it inflicts very little oversteer. What there is at low speeds is very easily neutralised by lifting off the wonderfully progressive throttle, which helps the nose in without

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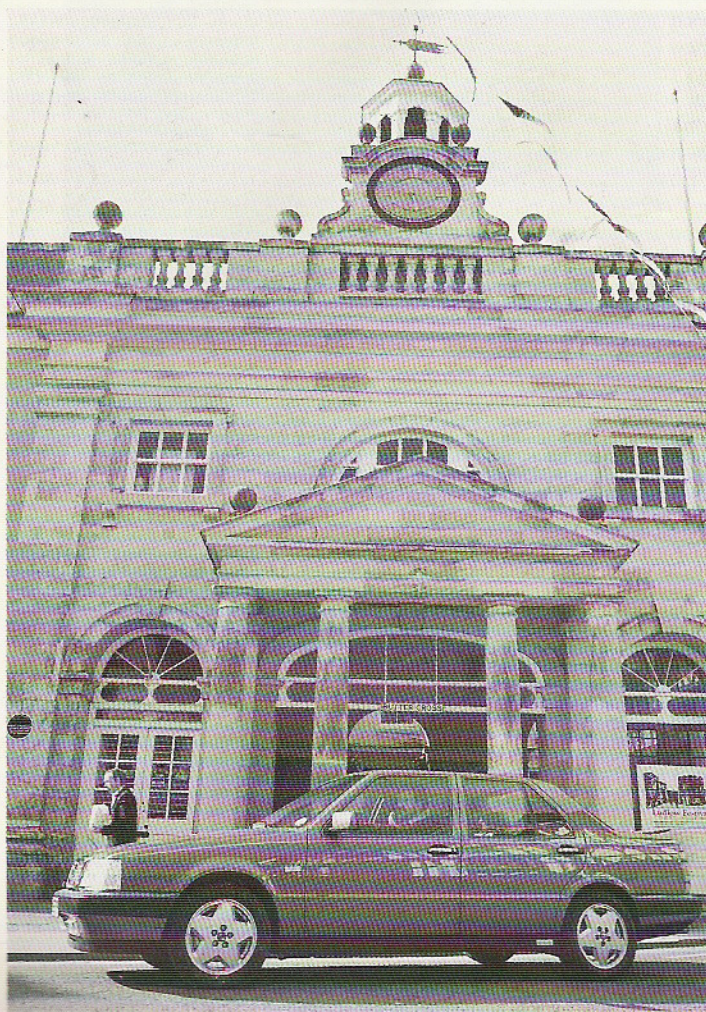
To some extent the brakes could be better, but in feel rather than in stopping power, which is excellent. The slightly larger diameter wheels have allowed bigger, ventilated front discs, and ABS is a standard fitment. The worst feature on tighter, twistier lanes is undoubtedly the body roll, which can make the car feel uncomfortably ponderous; the grip is actually there and the power and traction to blast from bend to bend, but the liteness of reaction to exploit them on quick successions of slower corners just isn't, not in the way of a Cosworth of either ilk, or the Motorsport BMWs.

Maybe it's wrong to expect it; if Lancia had really wanted a cafe racer like the rest they could obviously have built it. Instead, the 8.32 simply revels in wider, more open roads where its power and responsiveness can outweigh size and softness.

On fast corners and open sweeps it has tremendous poise and speed. The grip is tenacious and the handling almost precisely neutral. As before, you could eventually find understeer but it's easily neutralised off the throttle. There is still a touch too

much roll but you would have to be extraordinarily aggressive to make the car bite back. If you want it, there is also the retractable wing to show that you and your car have switched from Jekyll mode to Hyde, but although Lancia claim as much as 67lb of downforce at 135mph, you would have to concentrate hard to feel the difference.

When we first drove the Thema 8.32, back in February 1987, we concluded by saying that winding the wing up and down says something about the character of the car. That it didn't quite seem to know what it was trying to be: 'a car that could have been purely about performance seems to be hedging its bets with all its luxury accoutrements'. Well, after another few hundred miles with the Lancia by Ferrari, I'm inclined to think that's still true. It's a good deal more than just another Lancia, but a long way short of being any kind of Ferrari, the power is softened by the pampering. But now I think that somewhere in between, it actually *does* know what it wants to be, and anyone who'll pay £37,500 for the privilege will probably understand it too.



The big Lancia travelled east to Ludlow, right, then on to Bowdley and the Severn Valley