

CLASSIC, VINTAGE AND VETERAN MOTORING FOR 80 YEARS

Beaded Wheels

No. 400 June/July 2026

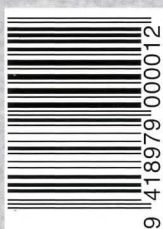
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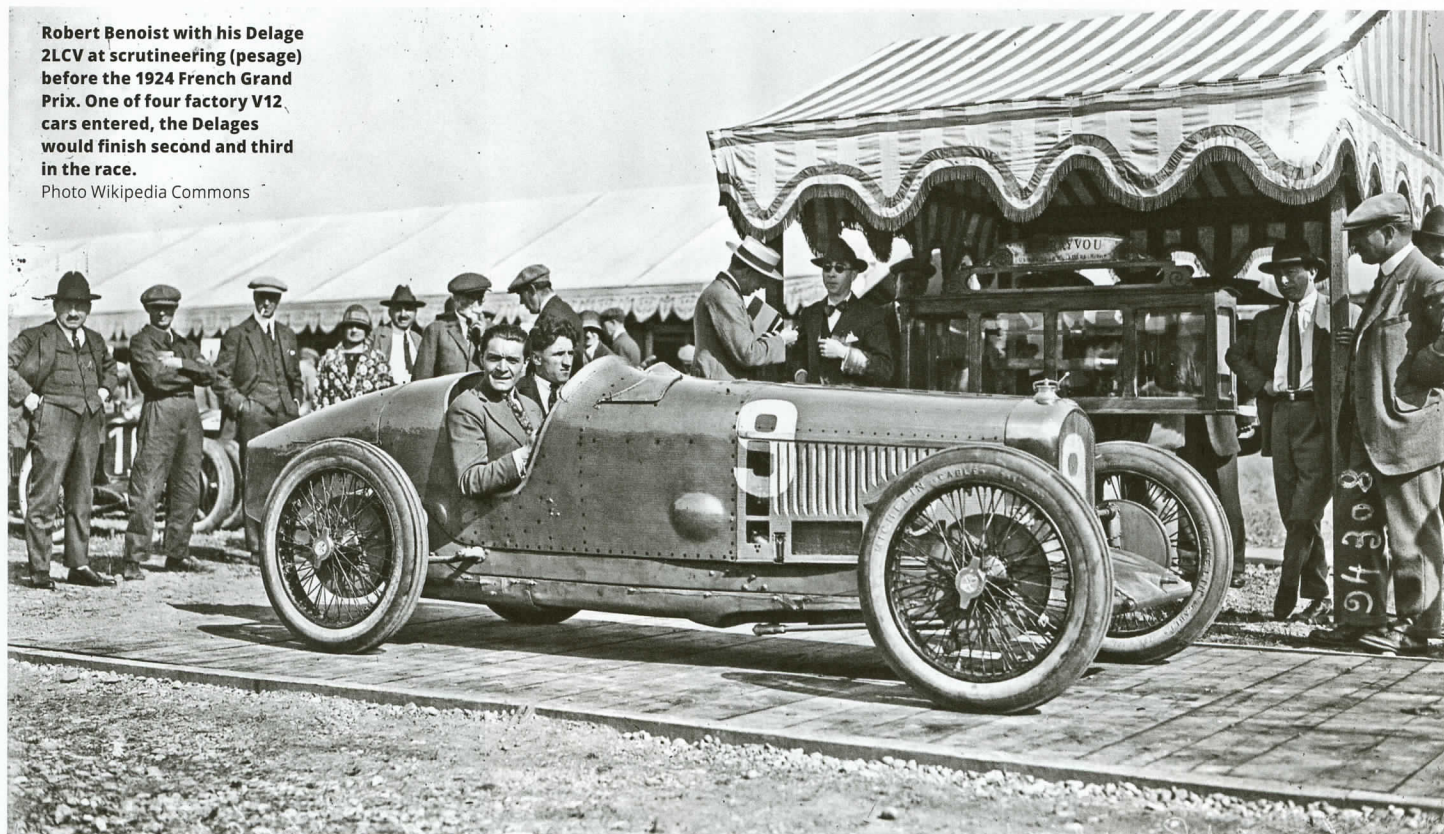
A TOUCH OF FRANCE IN THIS ISSUE WITH
DELAUGE REBUILD IN KIWI HANDS
RALLYE DES PRINCESS

BEHIND THE WHEEL
1912 WOLSELEY 12/16



Robert Benoist with his Delage 2LCV at scrutineering (pesage) before the 1924 French Grand Prix. One of four factory V12 cars entered, the Delages would finish second and third in the race.

Photo Wikipedia Commons



French Clockwork, Kiwi Hands

Compiled from correspondence supplied by Peter Withers

Bay of Plenty Branch member Peter Withers recalls an extraordinary Delage story — from a Chilean barn to a painstaking V12 rebuild in California, brought to life by the skill and determination of a remarkable Kiwi engineer.

I was prompted into action after reading your June/July 2025 issue featuring the 1927 DM1 Delage. Some time ago, I was given these photographs, accompanied by a lengthy letter, by Steele Therkleson, who I got to know well while living in Los Angeles.

Steele was a legend in vintage racing circles — an expatriate New Zealander from Napier whose burning ambition was to work on a race team. He succeeded admirably, working for (among others) Jack Brabham, John Whitmore, and Carroll Shelby, and was revered for his skill with engines. Later, he established a workshop in Pomona, California, with vehicles sent to him by collectors worldwide.

Among these was Bob Sutherland, a wealthy US collector known for his Bugattis. Bob discovered a derelict 1924 2LCV Delage in a barn in Chile. He purchased the entire contents of the barn — not knowing what was Delage and what was not — filled a container, and sent it to Steele in Pomona. The Delage that arrived in Pomona was no replica or re-creation, but one of the original 1924 Grand Prix team cars — a machine that had competed at Lyon before disappearing into South America, where it continued its racing life before being abandoned and ultimately rediscovered in Chile.

It was a mammoth task, beginning with significant research to locate original drawings. Steele painstakingly rebuilt the complex 2.0-litre, four-cam V12, machining many components from scratch. He described the engine as “French clockwork” — an apt phrase that captures both its delicacy and intricacy.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

By 1994, the car was running again and travelled to the UK and then to France, where it was reunited with the course of the 1924 French Grand Prix. Steele’s letter from that trip gives a vivid sense of the car in action — and of its character.

“The engine fires up nicely and it is very responsive to the throttle,” he wrote. “Surprisingly it pulls very well from about 1500 rpm on, and at about 3300 the torque comes on really strongly.”



▲ 1950 Talbot Lago T26 race car shown with the Delage outside the Pomona workshop.

But this was no modern machine. As Steele noted with typical understatement, “another aspect which is rather disconcerting is the very low oil pressure — in the order of 2 psi, while “the ride is buckboard hard — the very short, cord-bound springs not allowing much travel at all.”

The driving position, too, reflected its origins: “the cockpit is really designed around a 5'5" French driver — a 6'1" Kiwi with long legs is not too comfortable in it... in short order my leg went to sleep.”

Yet for all that, the Delage clearly delighted him. “On top of the mechanical smoothness of the engine it makes a great sound... who needs a radio with all that good sound going on around you.”

BACK TO WHERE IT BEGAN

One of the highlights of the trip was returning the car to the original circuit.

“The 1924 circuit is very largely intact,” Steele wrote, “and there are still many corners clearly recognisable from photographs taken all those years ago.”

An unexpected encounter brought the history into sharp focus. While parked near the old pits, an elderly man approached the car:

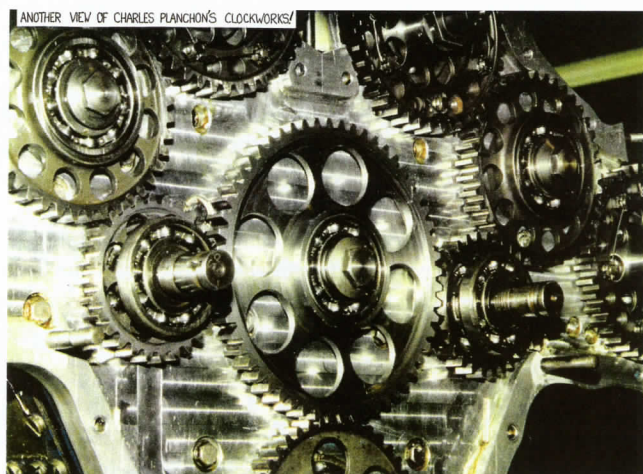
“He was pretty emotional at the sight of its V12... and it turned out that he had actually spectated at the race in 1924.”

The man, aged 93, had been just eight years old at the time — yet, as Steele noted, “he had a very clear memory and answered questions as though the event was still quite fresh to him.”

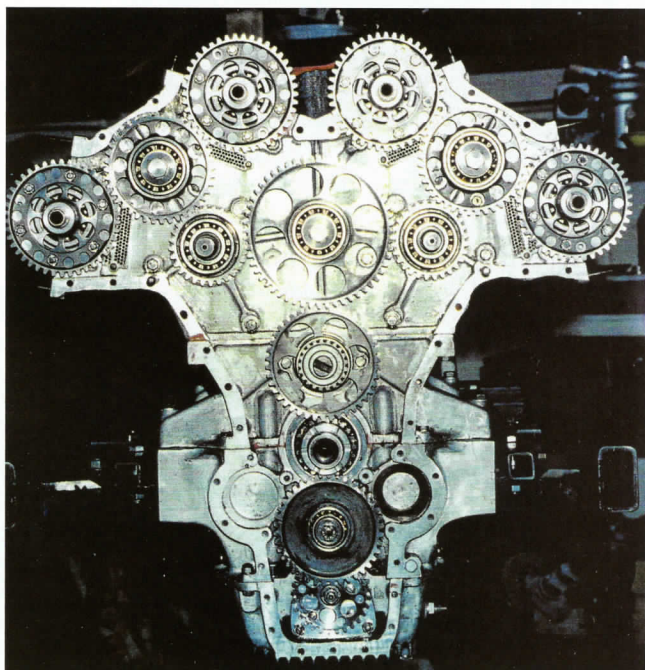
Moments like that underline the significance of such restorations — not just mechanical achievements, but living connections to the past.

The complete 2.0-litre, four-cam V12 laid bare. Rebuilt in California by Kiwi engineer Steele Therkelson from a container of parts, much of this “clockwork” was machined from scratch.

The #16 Alfa Romeo P2 of Louis Wagner is followed through the hairpin corner at Vourles, the only tight corner on the Lyons circuit, by the #14 Sunbeam of Dario Resta during the 1924 French Grand Prix before packed crowds, the roadside alive with period advertising for Spido, Dunlop, and Moto Naphtha—a snapshot of interwar European road racing.



▲ Another view of the intricate timing gear assembly, revealing the density and precision of the V12's cam drive. With multiple gear trains in constant mesh, the engine's distinctive mechanical whine was as much a feature as its performance.



FOUR CARS, SEVENTY YEARS

Another highlight came during a remarkable gathering of historic machinery.

"It really was a once in a lifetime chance to see these four cars together for the first time in seventy years," Steele wrote, describing a photo opportunity that included a Bugatti Type 35 and an Alfa Romeo P2.

In an era before detailed record-keeping, certainty was elusive: "in those days nobody concerned themselves with chassis numbers, so positive identification becomes very difficult."

Still, the moment mattered — the cars, the setting, and the people drawn together by them.

AFTER THE GLORY

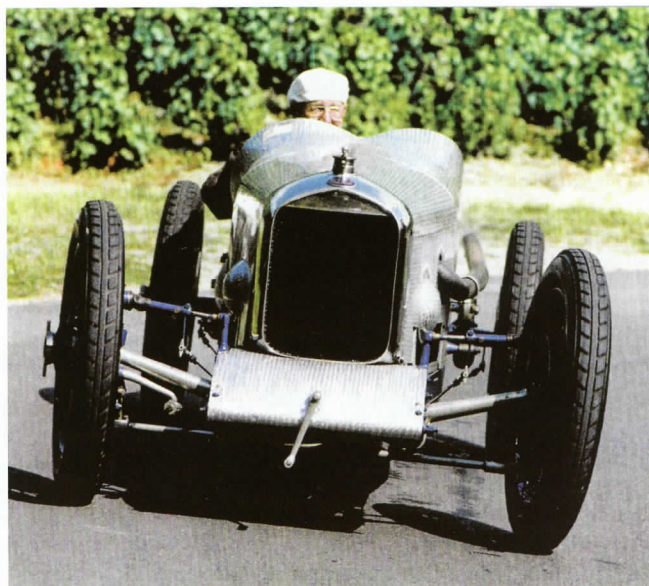
After France, the Delage continued its journey. I was fortunate enough to see the car run at the Monterey Historics — a sight never to be forgotten. Subsequently, it went to Australia, where it overheated and snapped the crankshaft.

It was sent back to Steele in Pomona, who proceeded to machine a new crank from scratch. I recall watching in awe as he went about this task.

The car's story did not end there. In 2012 it appeared at Pebble Beach, and there is a well-known video of it being started for Jay Leno.

POMONA STORIES

The photographs also show a 1950 Talbot-Lago T26 race car alongside the Delage outside Steele's workshop — and that, too, has a story.



▲ The Delage returns to France, circulating on roads that formed part of the 1924 Grand Prix circuit. Seventy years on, the "French clockwork" V12 was once again in full voice.

The Talbot had been sent from Europe for an engine rebuild. The car itself was immaculate, apart from a derelict driver's seat with stuffing bursting out. When I queried this, Steele's answer was simple: Juan Manuel Fangio had won the Argentine Grand Prix at Córdoba in the early 1950s in that very car.

Because the "Great Man" had sat there, the seat was sacrosanct — never to be touched.

A LASTING IMPRESSION

I happened to visit Steele one afternoon when he had just finished an engine rebuild and had it mounted on a stand ready for testing.

"Shall we?" he asked — and fired it up. The engine ignited instantly.

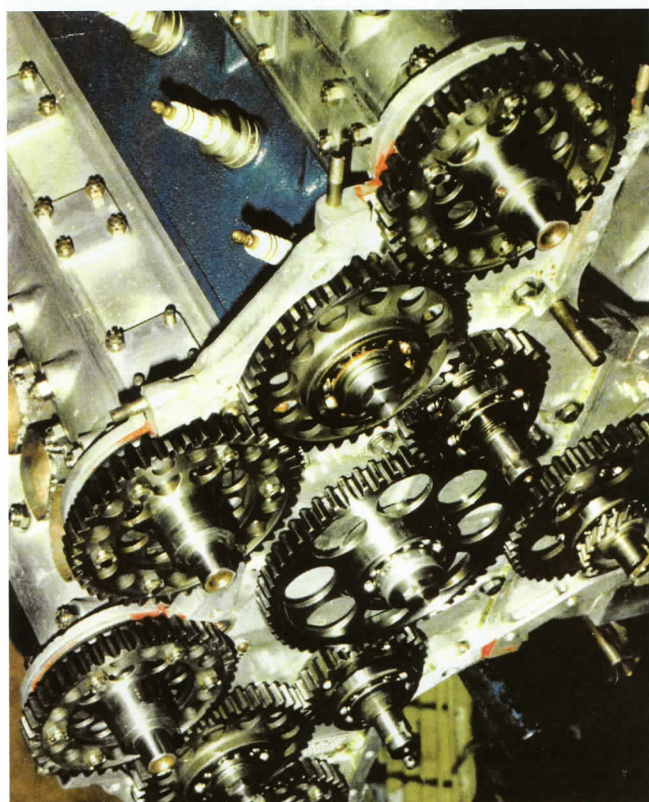
Two expat Kiwis stood there, hooting with delight as an open-exhaust racing engine reverberated around a closed workshop.

Steele's letter ends on a typically practical note. Reflecting on the Delage after its return to Europe, he wrote that the trip had shown "the car is worth a lot more work to refine a myriad of small details... I have already drawn up a work list of more than 25 jobs."

That was Steele — always another job to do, another improvement to make.

Sadly, he died in the early 2010s. But through cars like this Delage — and through memories such as these — his work and spirit endure.

|BW



▲ The Delage 2LCV's extraordinary gear-driven valve train — a cascade of straight-cut pinions driving the four camshafts. Steele Therksleson described the engine as "French clockwork", and here the comparison is hard to argue with.

For those wanting to see and hear this remarkable machine in action, a wonderful period-correct example of the Delage 2LCV can be seen running at Pebble Beach. In a short feature with Jay Leno and Lukas Huni the car is started bringing that intricate V12 "French clockwork" vividly to life. :https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LUPOZ_mLMI

