

The Automobile

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Lea-Francis by Corsica

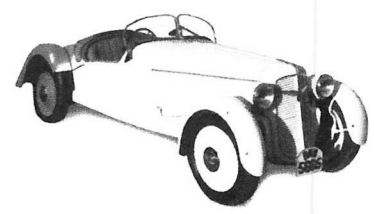
1939 Super Sports restored at last



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The 1939 Corsica Lea-Francis Super Sports in its restored condition, February, 2013 (Malcolm Bobbitt)



Lea-Francis by Corsica

Malcolm Bobbitt reports on a rare 1939 Super Sports model that has just emerged from long-term restoration

Often, the course of life takes a strange twist so that one's original intentions prove to be far different from the eventual outcome. So it has transpired with this rare 1939 Corsica-bodied Lea-Francis tourer, which for so long was known about but largely unseen. The car in question is chassis 129, one of a small number of four-seater Super Sports models that were constructed between 1938 and 1939 to a specification instigated by Charles Follett. Three of these, including this one, carried Corsica bodies. The car was acquired by Lea-Francis in 1982, and was kept by Frank Delaney 31 years ago. When he saw it, it was a near wreck and was in danger of being scrapped. It is only in the last few weeks that the car has emerged from its remarkably convoluted restoration journey, and the achievement of its long-time custodian in giving it a renewed lease of life is a story of stubborn resolve. Despite being severely suffering ill health which denies him the enjoyment of using the car now it is back on the road, Frank Delaney's fortitude has meant

that at last he has realised his dream.

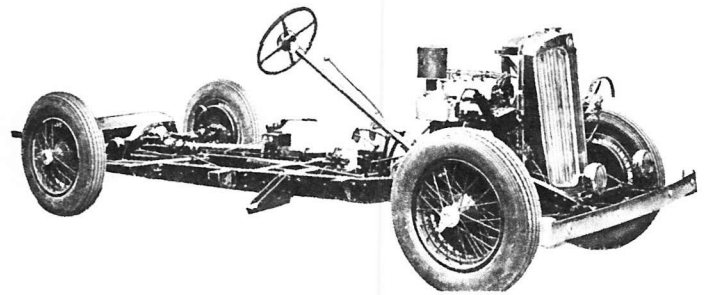
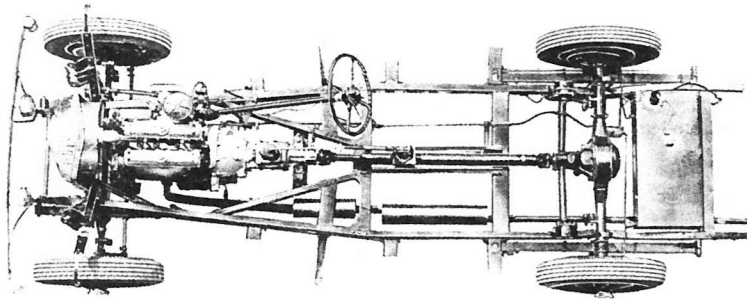
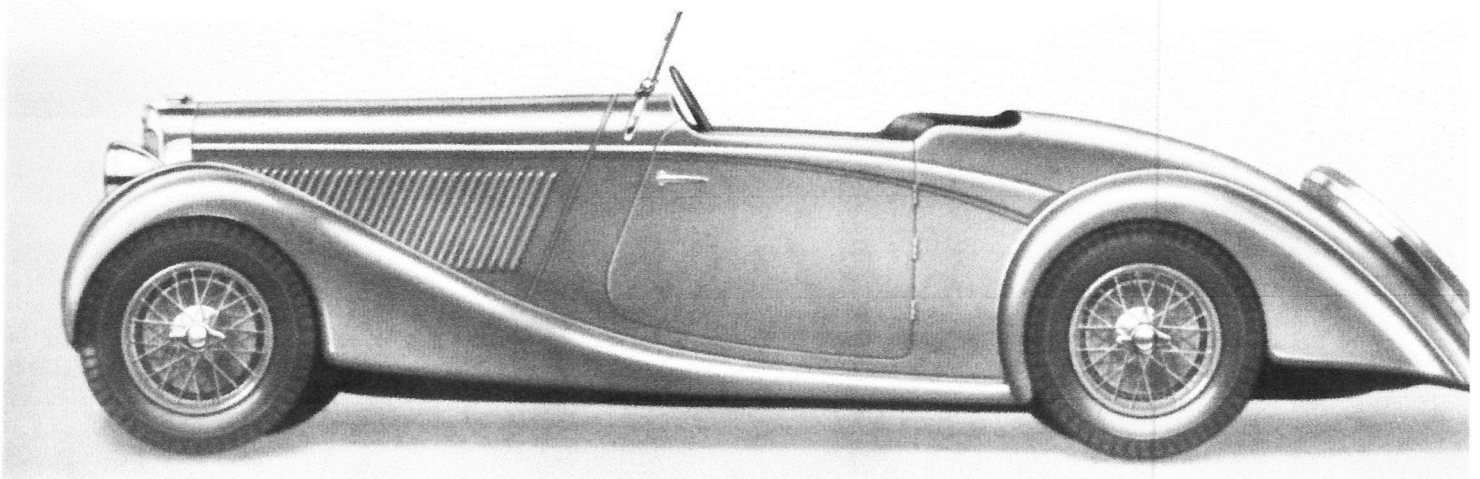
Lea-Francis, recognised for its specialist motor cars built to a high standard, is highly regarded amongst the old-car fraternity. The firm's origins can be traced to 1895 when Richard Lea and Graham Francis produced high quality bicycles at premises in Lower Ford Street, Coventry. An initial venture into constructing motor cars followed in 1903, but was short-lived owing to the vehicle's unusual type of three-cylinder underfloor engine. They were successful with motorcycles, which they built from 1912 to 1924, after which they returned to motor car manufacturing. The firm's first light cars, fitted with Meadows engines, saw success in competitive events and evolved into true sporting machines.

An indication as to the high repute of the 'Leaf', as it became known, can be judged by the decision made by London's police in the 1920s to invest in high-powered sports cars to replace its Crossley tenders that formed the fledgling Flying Squad. No doubt the choice of Lea-Francis was influenced by the fact that the Hyper was the

first British supercharged production car, with 85mph performance. Lea-Francis's reputation was the magnet for Frank Delaney, whose first car was a Leaf. His adventures with the marque began in 1975 when he bought a 1948 14hp Sports. These were handsome machines with rapid acceleration and a top speed of 87mph, as revealed in a road test conducted by *The Autocar*.

Frank found the 14hp Sports in a village near where he lives on the Cumbrian coast. He recalls that it was in an almost derelict state amongst a heap of garden wreckage. "It took me four years to put the car together, and since then I've had 10 Leafs," he says. Visiting Frank at home, it is immediately apparent that he has a lifelong interest in engineering – all types of motor vehicle and anything that has wheels, floats or flies. A semi-assembled gearbox takes centre stage on the ground floor, as does a working scale model of a steam engine.

The 1939 Corsica-bodied Super Sports tourer was acquired in 1982. He discovered it in a derelict building in Leeds. It had been previously



Top Catalogue illustration showing the two/four-seater Super Sports. The Corsica-bodied cars differed from this because they had a bonnet line lowered by two inches (All Lupton and Frank Delaney) Above left and right Chassis arrangement of the Lea-Francis as published in *The Automobile Engineer* of September, 1941

advertised as a complete car, with an asking price in excess of £800. Frank did not see the original advertisement, but one person who did is Allan Lupton, now chairman of the Lea-Francis Owners' Club. Allan got in touch with the then owner, A J Rayfield, and on seeing it in a lock-up garage in 1977 he discovered it had been dismantled. Some work had been done, but the chassis was beginning to rust under its new paint. Not wanting to take on such a big project, Allan declined to buy the car.

By the time Frank saw the Super Sports, it was in a truly decrepit state. "I went to see it and the owner took me on a 10-mile drive to a derelict cavalry barracks," he recalls. "It took the two of us quite some time to shovel away sufficient debris just to get to the shed where it was housed."

The seller was obviously keen for Frank to have the car, intimating that it would not be expensive to buy and that it would be scrapped if he didn't have it: "We'll do a deal here and now if you can take the vehicle away today." Frank

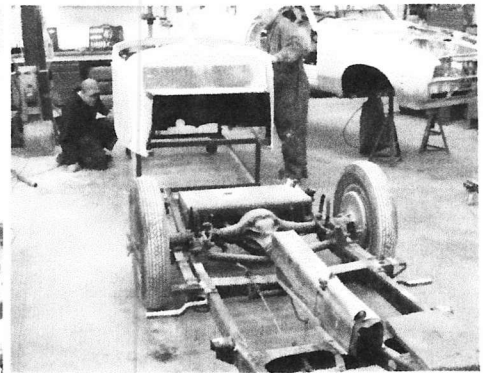
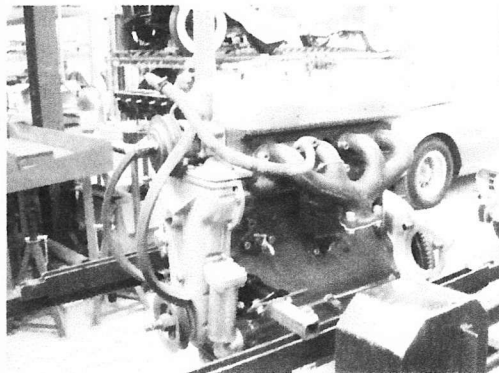
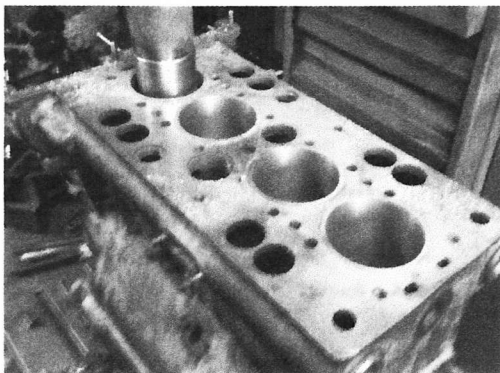
says: "I spent a whole afternoon looking for somewhere in Leeds I could hire a trailer, and on finding one we managed to get the car from its resting place and on to it with as many bits and pieces as I could manage. We arrived home at 2am." Asked how much he paid, Frank's reticence was accompanied by a wry grin. "Money and fair words" is all he would divulge.

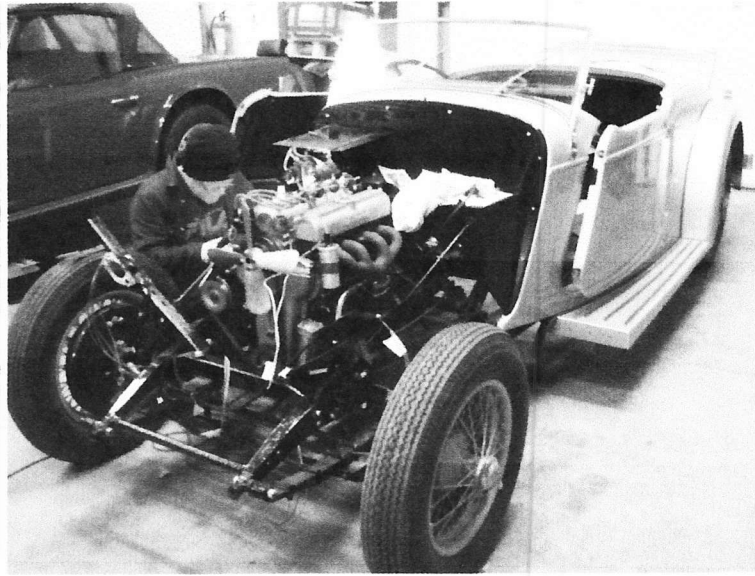
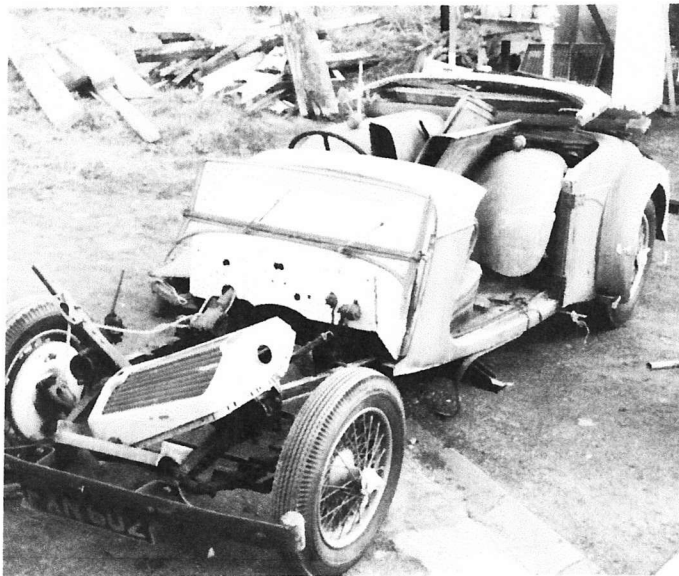
The Super Sports is one of a range produced by the management of the revived Lea-Francis company, Lea-Francis Engineering (1937) Ltd. The cars were designed by Hugh Rose, who had been persuaded to leave Riley, develop a 12hp engine and move to the firm's Much Park Street premises. The engine he devised had similarities to that of the Riley, with twin high-mounted camshafts and short pushrods. Transmission was via a four-speed gearbox, the three upper ratios having synchromesh. Some 50mph was achieved in third and 72mph in top in the 14 saloon tested by the Earl of Cardigan for *Britannia & Eve* in September, 1938, and by *The Autocar* in December the same year.

In its evaluation of the car in September, 1941, *The Automobile Engineer* described the engine in detail. Its four-throw counterbalanced three-bearing crankshaft and Specialloid don crowned pistons were noted with approval. A standard Borg and Beek 9A6 clutch was fitted and though the four-speed gearbox was standard a Wilson preselector box with centrifugal automatic clutch was obtainable at an extra cost of £30. The chassis was of channel section with the transmission comprising a Hardy-Spicer propeller shaft and a spiral bevel semi-floating rear axle.

With the Lea-Francis safely in Frank's possession, his researches revealed the car to carry chassis number 129. Of the four produced in the same series as his Super Sports, the first he built was chassis 52, which was bodied by the Carlton Carriage Co for Charles Follett, a director of the newly reconstituted company. Follett, a respected motor trader having connections with Alvis, Bentley and Daimler, and later Jensen, raced the car at Brooklands.

Left The engine is shown here removed from car and having its cylinders honed at The Carrosserie Company Ltd (Dick Francis) Centre The engine rebuilt and on the test bed ready for running Right Paul Archer (left, background) and Jim Charlton working on the Super Sports. The chassis in its original condition is being used as a jig for the reboddy before it is renovated (Dick Francis)





Left The car pictured as it arrived at Frank Delaney's storage facility in 1982. It would be another 30 years before the Lea-Francis was finished **Above right** At the time, Neil McGee is fitting the engine to the restored chassis (*Dick Francis*)

ty purposes.
second car, chassis 115, owned today by Upton, was the first of the Corsica-bodied sports models, built in 1938. In his history book, Barrie Price refers to the original Loftus-Tottenham, described as being a 'the Turf', ordering a replica of Charles's sports model. At Loftus-Tottenham's request, the car was restyled with the radiator extended by two inches to give it an even more pronounced sporting flair.
Chassis 129, carrying the index number FXN, was the second of the Corsica cars and was commissioned by W G Iliffe of Ightham, in Kent. It related to the Iliffe publishing family, he

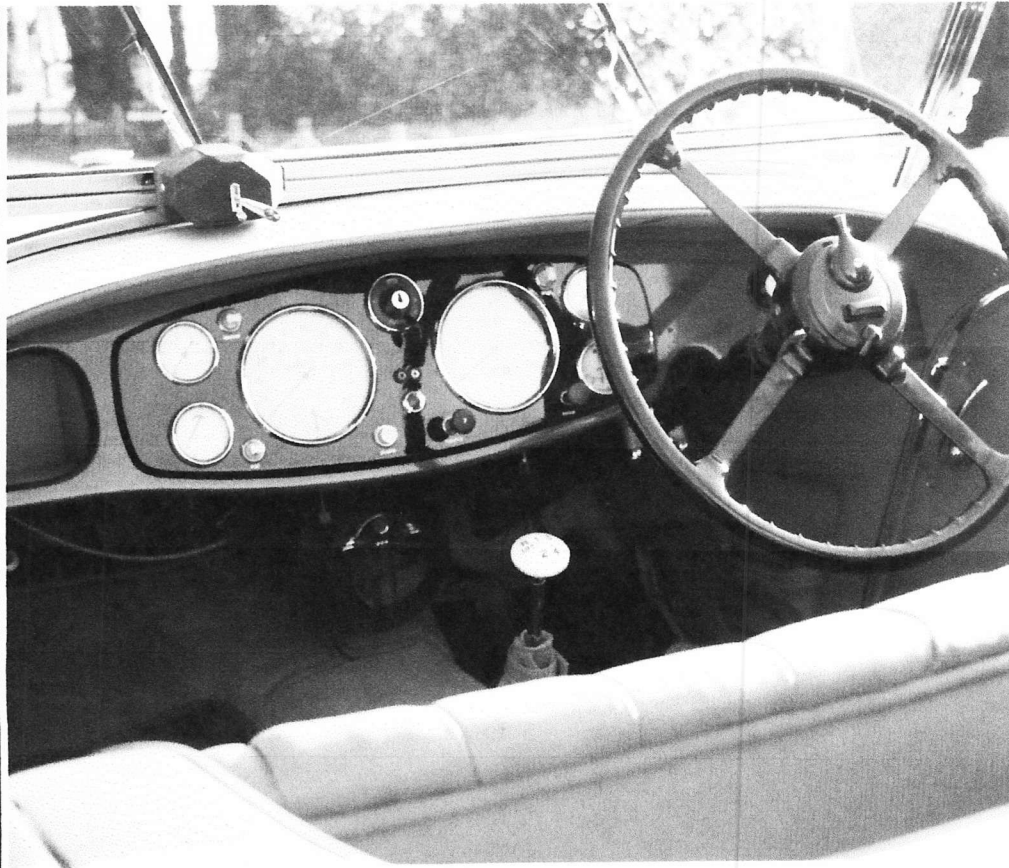
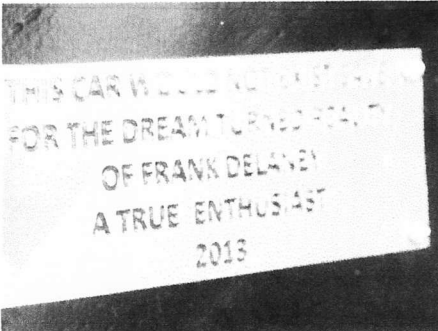
wasn't involved in any of its business connections. The third Corsica Super Sports was 132, and this has the distinction of having been featured in the Bob Hope and Katharine Hepburn film *The Iron Petticoat*. It was last heard of in Illinois some 20 years ago, when it was in a dismantled condition.

For how long Iliffe kept 129 is unclear. However, it was photographed somewhat the worse for wear in the Earl's Court district of London in the spring of 1960 when it belonged to one Kenneth Bedford who, not having a garage, parked it by the roadside. What is recorded is that the car was submitted for an MoT test on 4th October, 1966, at Eclipse Garage, 879 Camden

Road, London N7. A notification of test refusal was issued as the Lea-Francis was found to have its front axle beam loose on its mountings, faulty brakes and excessively worn track-rod ends. According to the Owners' Club records, Bedford sold the car after 1964 and A J Rayfield had acquired it by 1966.

When Frank Delaney eventually began work on reconstructing his car, progress was slow. His first task was to establish the condition of the parts that were still intact, and to identify those that needed to be sourced. This at least gave him an encyclopaedic knowledge of the car and its siblings and an enormous hoard of parts from various sources.

Left L-F radiator badge on the Super Sports (*Malcolm Bobbitt*) **Bottom left** A plaque on the engine casing now commemorates Frank Delaney's efforts in rescuing the car from possible destruction (*Malcolm Bobbitt*) **Bottom right** The interior of the Corsica-bodied Lea-Francis, now beautifully restored (*Malcolm Bobbitt*)





Frank Delaney poses in the driver's seat of the completed project at long last, with Dick Francis of Carrosserie Company, while Bob Gelley looks on (Malcolm Bobbitt)

But no-one gets any younger, and eventually in 2004 Frank took the decision that, if he were ever to see the project come to fruition, he'd have to entrust the Super Sports to a specialist. "I bit the bullet, assigned the car to David Royle in Darlington and issued a blank cheque," he says. When that company went out of business, the restoration was taken over by Dick Francis and Steve Layton at The Carrosserie Company (UK) Ltd in nearby Barnard Castle. To take on the job, Dick employed Paul Archer who had previously worked for Royles, and who had undertaken much of the renovation to date. It is Paul who has achieved so much in returning this important car to its beautifully restored condition.

When the car arrived at Carrosserie's premises Dick found that much of the frame and tub had been repaired and new running boards

had been fabricated. The engine and mechanicals, to use Dick's words, were basketcases and in need of complete rebuilding. The suspension and brakes required comprehensive overhaul. But the hardest part of the restoration was adhering to originality, and it was fabricating the trim and interior for such a rare beast with appropriate accuracy that presented most headaches. Photographs were taken of Allan Lupton's Corsica car so that comparisons could be made, and Dick Francis is quite happy to admit that, through everyone's efforts, the restored vehicle is just that little bit better than when first built.

Frank Delaney's recent poor health resigned him to finding another custodian for the car. Bob Gelley had seen the Lea-Francis whilst visiting Carrosserie's workshops. He eventually negotiated with Frank to continue the project,

at all times concurring with his wishes.

Sadly, Frank has never driven the car he bought in 1982. However, Dick Francis, together with Bob Gelley, was able to reunite him with it in February this year and take it for a drive. It was a poignant but delightful occasion, made all the more touching by the owner having installed a plate on the engine block to the effect that the car survives only through Frank's determination.

Thanks to Allan Lupton, the Lea-Francis Owners' Club, Dick Francis and Steve Layton at The Carrosserie Company (UK) Ltd, Bob Gelley, Jonathan Wood, Nick Georgano, Joe Day at the National Motor Museum and, not least, Frank Delaney. Publications consulted: The Lea-Francis Story by Barrie Price, The Automobile Engineer and LFOC material.

Left The Lea-Francis with this rare coachwork is among the more handsome British sporting cars of the late 1930s. Right Dick Francis at the wheel of the Super Sports with Frank Delaney beside him. This was the first outing for the car after leaving Carrosserie's workshop (Malcolm Bobbitt)

