



Stratos still looks stunning today. Five hundred road cars built for homologation. Below: rally winner and 1971 Geneva show car

Birth of an icon

1971
Lancia Stratos

Lamborghini's Countach is the model that usually crops up when people are discussing cars that looked amazingly futuristic in their day, but what about the Lancia Stratos? Even now it looks outrageous, with its fabulous wrap-around windscreen and ridiculously short wheelbase which, at 2180mm, is 120mm shorter than an Elise's.

The Stratos started its life as a Bertone show car at the 1970 Turin motor show. Called the Stratos Zero, the car was based on a Lancia Fulvia, though it actually contained more styling cues for Bertone's forthcoming Countach than it did for what we now know as the Stratos.

Around the same time, Lancia's rally team, led by Cesare Fiorio, realised that the Fulvia rally car was right at the end of its life and that a replacement was needed. In an inspired piece of management, Fiorio

gathered together the rally team and asked each member to write down his thoughts on what the new car should be. Including legendary rally driver Sandro Munari.

'Everyone was asked to contribute,' recalls Munari. 'Drivers, mechanics and even co-drivers. It was a committee that was made up of the people who really knew what they were doing. My main concern was that we should build a car that had 300bhp. And that meant using an engine of over 2 litres.'

At the 1971 Geneva show, Bertone showed a second prototype, this one closer to the eventual Stratos shape but with aluminium bodywork instead of glassfibre, a wider body, and a 2-litre V6 from Ferrari. In fact, Lancia had asked Ferrari to supply the 2.4-litre V6 from the 246GT Dino for the Stratos, but the Ferrari bosses weren't too keen, despite the fact that since 1969 both Ferrari and Lancia had been under the Fiat wing.

Indeed, in true Italian fashion the matter of engine supply was up in the air well into the project. So much so that Fiorio's team considered using the V8 from the Maserati Bora. Paperwork was drawn up for a deal between Lancia and Maserati, though chiefly to goad Ferrari.

By the end of 1971, Munari and his colleagues had prototypes to test. 'Immediately we encountered terrible handling problems,' remembers Munari. 'The problem was that the car was totally unpredictable. One time you would enter a corner and it

would do one thing, another time you went into the same corner and it would behave differently. Sometimes it would even handle well through the corner! Every time we checked the car's geometry it was fine. We spent months trying to get it to work.'

'Then we entered a small rally in southern Spain that was on gravel. The car was superb. Then we realised what the problem was: we'd been testing on tarmac, on which of course the cornering forces are high. It turned out the suspension uprights were bending and changing the geometry.'

Working freelance at Lancia was Gian Paolo Dallara, the engineer behind the Lamborghini Miura. 'The problem with the Stratos was that we were trying to use parts from road cars,' says Dallara, 'and they just weren't strong enough. The cause of the handling problem was the rear suspension upright. It was fine for a road car, but too weak for a racing or rally car and it was flexing, causing the rear suspension geometry to change.'

Eventually the political wrangle with Ferrari was resolved and the Stratos got the little 2.4-litre Dino engine. The car would have been phenomenal with a Bora engine on an event like the Safari Rally, but perhaps not so good on slower and tighter stage rallies.

'At the beginning we were getting about 230bhp from the engine,' says Munari, 'but eventually we had over 300bhp with four-valve heads fitted.'

Rallying rules at the time stated that 500 roadgoing models had to be built before a car could be homologated for

rallying. The job of building the cars was down to Bertone, which received the powertrains from Fiat (which built the Ferrari V6) and chassis from local constructor Golden Cars, the company that later supplied Lamborghini with chassis for the Diablo.

Once the handling problems had been addressed, the Stratos started to win. The first victory came in the Firestone Rally in Spain in 1972. It was the first of many, over what was an incredibly long life for a competition car. The Stratos was winning as late as 1982, when only the expiry of its homologation papers finished its career. The Stratos also saw success on the race circuit in Group 5, using a turbocharged version of the V6.

The Stratos will never be forgotten by those who watched rallying in the '70s or by kids who had Scalextric sets. And the fantastic reception for Fenomenon Design's Stratos concept suggests the story isn't over yet. ■

