

Avoiding Sales Tax, Part II | \$59m of Collector Cars Analyzed

Keith Martin's Sports Car Market

The Insider's Guide to Collecting, Investing, Values, and Trends

Project or Patina?

Ex-Earl Howe
Type 57 Makes
\$4.4m in Paris

\$1.9m Matra MS650

1964 Ford muscle
pair totals \$424k

Ferrari GTC/4
Bargain V12



1937 Bugatti Type 57S Atalante Coupe

It may not have been quite the “discovery” that the press suggested, but it was eagerly awaited

by Simon Kidston



Photos: Bonhams

Chassis number: 57502

Francis Richard Henry Penn Curzon succeeded to the peerage in 1929 on the death of his father, becoming the Fifth Earl Howe. At that time he resigned his seat in the House of Commons and began a long association with motor racing.

Howe's place in the history of motorsport was assured by his 1931 Le Mans victory, driving an Alfa Romeo and partnered by Sir Henry Birkin. He competed at Le Mans six times and mixed freely with the “Bentley Boys.” Indeed, Howe's support led to the formation of the British Racing Drivers' Club, and he was elected the first president in 1929.

Howe raced a number of Bugattis—Types 43, 51, 54, and even 59—and ordered a 57S for his own road use in 1936. The car was delivered to him in June 1937, and he was a familiar figure with it until 1945, when he sold it following an accident. After several owners, it was bought by Dr. Robert Carr of Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1955, who kept the Bugatti hidden away until his death in 2007.

SCM Analysis This car sold for \$4,408,575, including buyers premium, at the Bonhams Rétromobile sale in Paris on February 7, 2009.

Probably no motor car to appear at auction in recent memory has attracted more widespread interest than this Bugatti, images of which have been flashed around the world with the same enthusiasm as the “Portuguese Barn Find”—though this story is true.

Countless people with no connection to the classic car world have asked me if I knew of the “barn find” Bugatti coming up for sale. One local headline proclaimed ecstatically: “A rare 1937 Bugatti worth over £3 million has been found by a Gosforth family clearing out the belongings of a deceased relative.”

First, let's look at the car's background. The Bugatti

Type 57S (the “S” stands for “surbaissé,” or “lowered” in French, not “sport” as is sometimes suggested) was built by the Molsheim company between 1936 and 1938 as a high-performance version of the company's mainstay road car, the 3.3-liter, 8-cylinder Type 57.

By this time, Bugatti's golden era in Grand Prix racing was long past, challenged by Alfa Romeo then crushed by the state-backed German teams. But the glow of past racing successes was reflected in the prestige of Bugatti's road cars.

Clients demanded a sportier version

Like Enzo Ferrari a generation later, Ettore Bugatti realized his firm's survival lay in road cars, not race cars, and with his son Jean taking a greater role in design and strategy, “Le Patron” sanctioned the Type 57, which appeared in 1934. Rivaling Bentley, Delage, and Alfa Romeo in price and performance, it was an immediate success, but speed-hungry clients demanded a sportier version, and Bugatti created the 57S.

Apart from its lowered (and shortened) chassis, the 57S shared its basic components with the standard car. The high-compression engine was dry sumped but otherwise similar, although a Roots blower was offered as an option (which only two clients originally took up, perhaps due to the cable-operated brakes). The gearbox was standard 57, but top speed increased slightly, thanks to larger-diameter tires. These changes transform the car, and some say the model should have received a different number designation altogether.

Like the standard 57, the S was available with factory or bespoke coachwork. From 43 chassis built, most customers (17) chose the Jean Bugatti-designed Atalante coupe (two featuring “bureau top” roll-back roofs), while three ordered coupes by nearby carrossier Gangloff (similar in appearance to the Atalante but

Details

Years produced: 1936–38
 Number produced: 43
 Original chassis price: £1,100 (\$3,037); standard 57: £590 (\$1,629)
 SCM Valuation: \$4m–\$8m
 Tune-up cost: \$5,000
 Magneto: \$8,000 (est.)
 Chassis #: On firewall plate and additional frame number on rearmost crossmember
 Engine #: Rear corner of upper crankcase on passenger side
 Club: American Bugatti Club, 600 Lakeview Terrace, Glen Ellyn, IL 60137
 More: www.americanbugatticlub.org
 Alternatives: 1937–40 Alfa Romeo 8C 2900, 1936–38 Delahaye 135M Figoni & Falaschi, 1936–39 Mercedes-Benz 540K Special Roadster
 SCM Investment Grade: A

Comps



1937 Bugatti Type 57SC Atalante coupe
 Lot 27, s/n 57511
 Condition 2+
 Sold at \$7,920,000
 Gooding, Pebble Beach, CA, 8/16/2008
 SCM# 117573



1937 Bugatti Type 57S Atalante Coupe
 Lot 166, s/n 57551
 Condition: 1-
 Not sold at \$4,500,000
 RM, Scottsdale, AZ, 1/16/2009
 SCM# 119062



1937 Bugatti Type 57S Gangloff Coupe
 Lot 247, s/n 57501
 Condition 2+
 Sold at \$1,707,500
 Bonhams & Brooks, Carmel, CA, 8/18/2001
 SCM# 23251

designed by Lucien Schlatter, two with longer tails and the third with a higher cabin). The remaining cars received a variety of bodywork, including the sinister-looking, riveted-spine Atlantic coupe, the most prized version of all. Three or four were built, but rather more survive today...

Ironically, the 57S wasn't easy to sell. Complaints ranged from sauna-like cockpits to hopeless ground clearance, not to mention a price double that of a standard 57. Many buyers traded in their cars when the later 57C appeared. If only they'd known...

And what of the market?

So where does the Bonhams "barn find" fit in? Let's review comparables. The last Bugatti 57S to appear at auction until recently was back in 2001. My team consigned a lovely Gangloff coupe, chassis 57501, to the Bonhams & Brooks auction at Quail Lodge, where it set a benchmark \$1,707,500—"a total time warp and worth the money," commented SCM.

Seven years passed until the next genuine 57S came under the hammer: The 57S Atalante owned for decades by the late Dr. Peter Williamson was sold by David Gooding for \$7,920,000, the highest price of the 2008 Monterey weekend. Since then, it's been downhill. First chassis 57551, another 57S Atalante and RM's feature car at its January auction in Arizona, failed to sell at a high bid of \$4.5 million.

Then, just before the Paris auction, yet another 57S appeared for sale, this time with a well-known European dealer. I've long believed that great classics suffer less from a downturn than production exotica, but how many buyers are there for specialized pre-war models with a multi-million dollar price tag on any given day?

*Offering three Type 57Ss in just a matter of weeks doesn't reflect their rarity. Potential bidders at Bonhams's *Rétromobile* sale could hardly miss the rival offering—it was displayed about 20 paces away from the auctioneer's podium.*

57502's pedigree couldn't be much better

So to the famous "barn find." The pedigree of chassis 57502 couldn't be much better. Earl Howe resided at Penn House in Buckinghamshire (the driveway of which was banked and the trees painted white) and was a connoisseur of fine motor cars. He'd raced a string of Bugattis with success and thus enjoyed special standing at Molsheim. I know a little about Earl Howe as my father married his daughter (and bought his Alfa 8C for good measure).

How specified factory Atalante coachwork for his new 57S, bodied in aluminum rather than the usual steel, fitted with a badge bar and extra driving lights and painted black above his trademark racing blue. As an early Atalante, the windscreen was slightly lower than later examples (from chassis 57551 onward).

Earl Howe altered various other details, too. The bumpers were changed, a luggage rack and side mirrors were added, a removable panel was installed in the dashboard giving access to the sometimes troublesome magneto, and, for his Lordship's own comfort, extra air vents were set into the scuttle and ashtrays in the tops of both doors—essential for a Peer of the Realm rarely seen without a three-piece suit and rakish cigarette holder.

The Bugatti's colorful history includes numerous appearances at pre-war race meetings where Earl Howe was competing, and it had its own share of spills. The late Rivers Fletcher, a contemporary of Howe, recalled, "Francis was pretty hard on those cars," and en route to Shelsley Walsh in 1946, he and the Bugatti made violent contact with a tree.

Earl Howe parted with the 57S soon afterward (although he retained the DYK 5 registration, which mysteriously is still assigned to his lost Gullwing), and its next owner, architect John Tingay, added a Marshall blower to upgrade the car to factory "SC" specification, as the Roots units were no longer available. Tingay even ran the car on methanol and continued its off-road adventures with another mishap in the wet.

Known to most Bugattistes but unseen

Lord Ridley was the next owner before, in 1955, one Dr. Harold Carr of Gosforth, near Newcastle, parted with the princely sum of £895 (\$2,520) for chassis 57502: rather less than the £5,500 (\$15,488) Earl Howe paid that same year for his new 300SL, but more than a brand new Triumph TR at £600 (\$1,689), so the very second-hand Bugatti wasn't the gift it might appear.

For the next 53 years, 57502 sat in Dr. Carr's garage in a semi-dismantled state, known to most Bugattistes but not shown even to respected historians. Dr. Carr died in 2007, and Bonhams received the call every dealer had been hoping to get. It may not have been quite the "discovery" the press suggested, and opinions were divided as to whether it was preserved or neglected, but it was eagerly awaited.

As the lights dimmed in Paris and the Bugatti was pushed in front of the hushed audience (Bonhams had artfully put the car back together, but no amount of oil would free the seized engine), bidding immediately opened at \$2 million. Bonhams knew it had four big hitters on the car, two in the room and another two on the telephone, but hoped others might be waiting in the wings.

In the event, though, two Europeans made all the running, with the winner, a respected private collector, prevailing at \$4 million after barely five minutes. The collector who underbid the Williamson car to \$7 million at Gooding last summer dropped out before bidding even got underway (the exchange rate has made anything outside his home currency 15% more expensive since last year), and the Paris underbidder has since told me, "Last August I wouldn't have missed the Howe car, it's a fabulous machine, but times have changed."

Was it a fair price? The new owner faces difficult conservation choices and will need very deep pockets to complete the restoration of this car. But I'm pleased to report that he'll do as little as possible cosmetically and retain the Marshall blower, which is part of the car's lineage.

Its distinctive specification and above all its Earl Howe history make this one of the most charismatic and recognizable of all pre-war Grandes Routières, and the Bugatti 57S is surely one of the few cars of its era that can stand proudly next to the benchmark 2.9 Alfa. One could argue (I would) that despite its needs, this car was good value, and fellow experts I sounded out before the auction unanimously predicted a higher price. But when all is said and done, it's hardly a bad return on a \$2,520 investment. ♦

(Introductory description courtesy of Bonhams.)

