Lancia’s decline and fall from being a well-respected brand… and the firm is now rising again!

Published: May 11, 2023

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Online version:

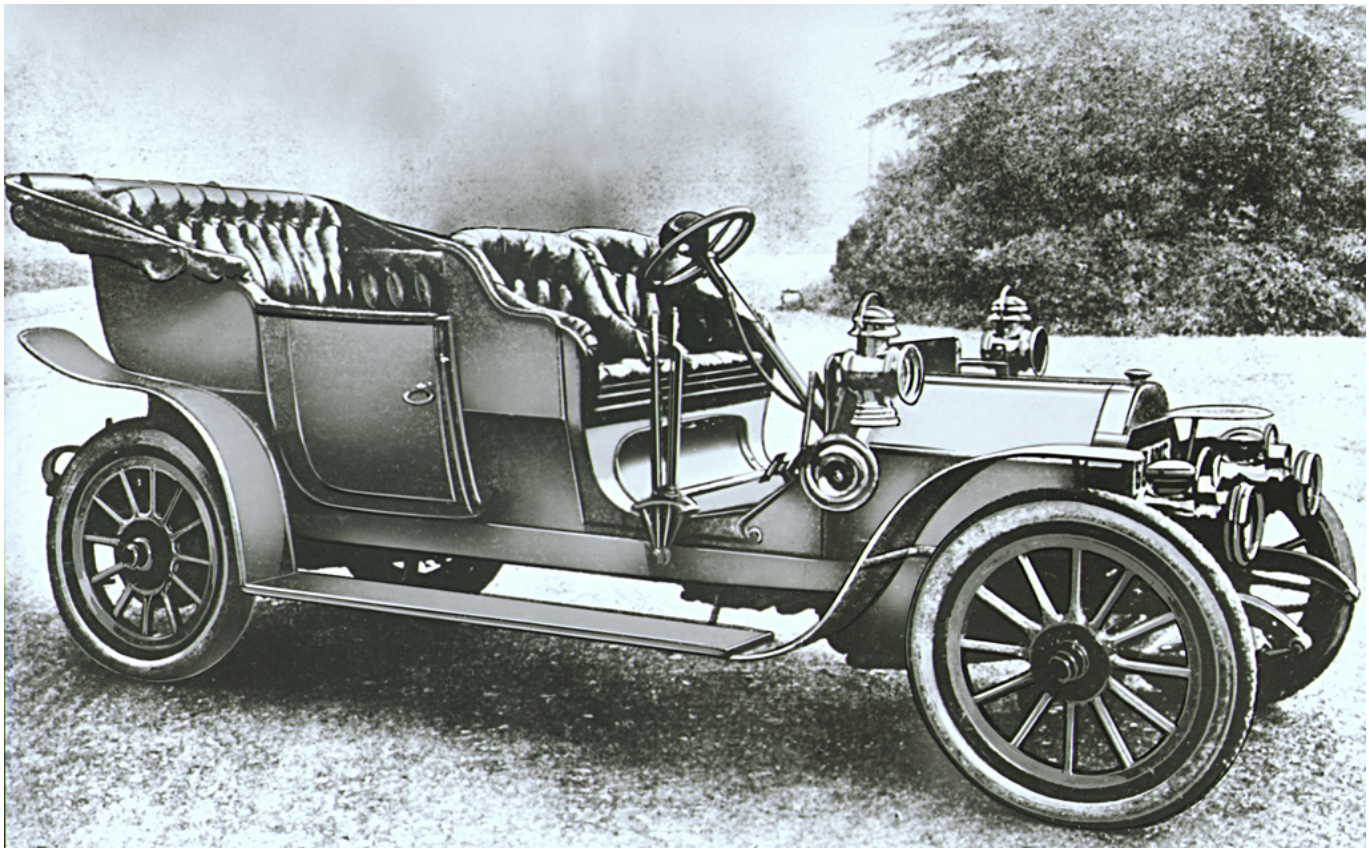
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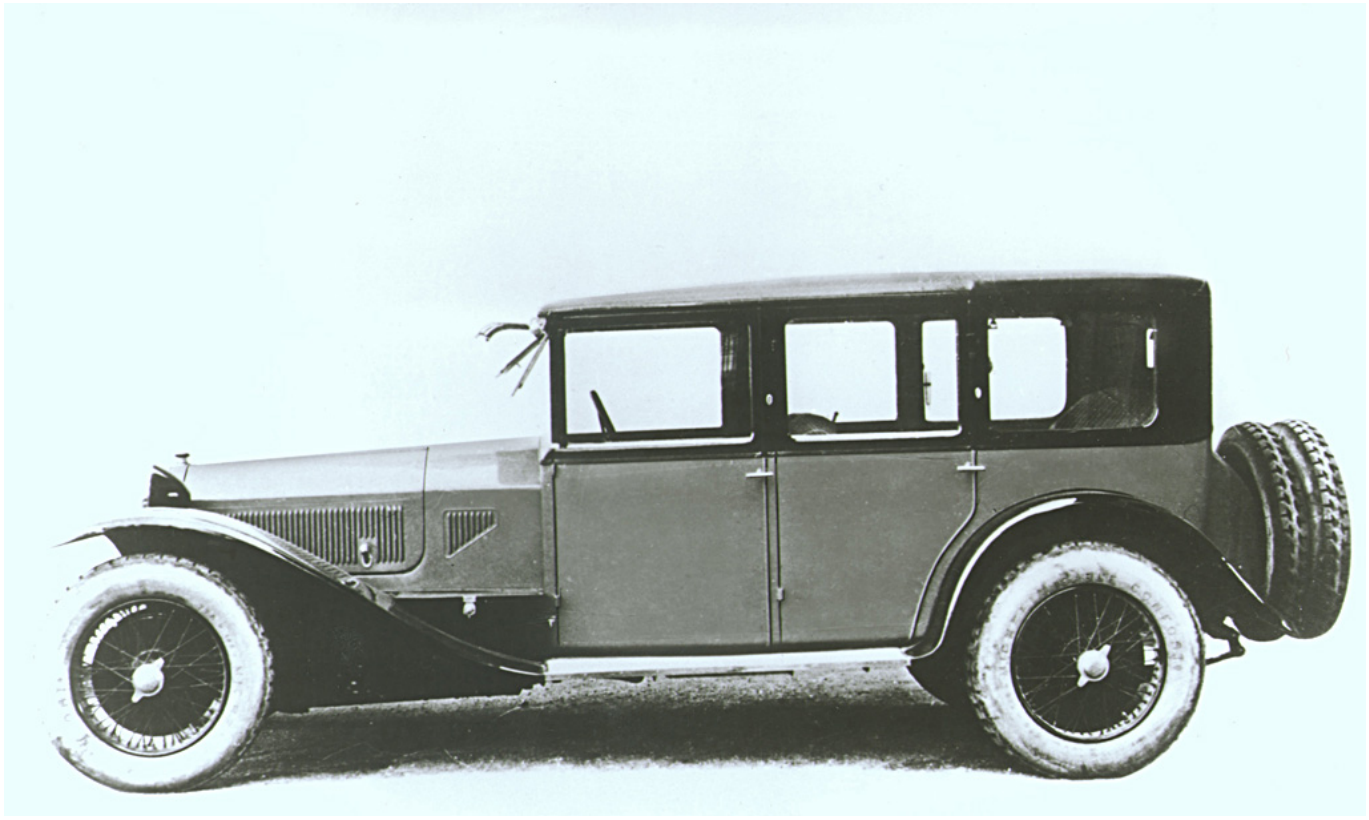
Vicenzo Lancia.

Better late than never… a sad story heading for a happy ending – by Dave Moss.

It’s thirty years since Lancia cars disappeared from British showrooms, the start of a slippery slope for this much-loved Italian marque with a long, diverse history. Established to make cars in Turin in 1906, later adding commercial vehicles, buses, and, eventually, trolleybuses, the first half of its existence brought a succession of cars featuring a certain style – and lots of quite innovative engineering. The following photographs show examples of the firm’s historic early models…



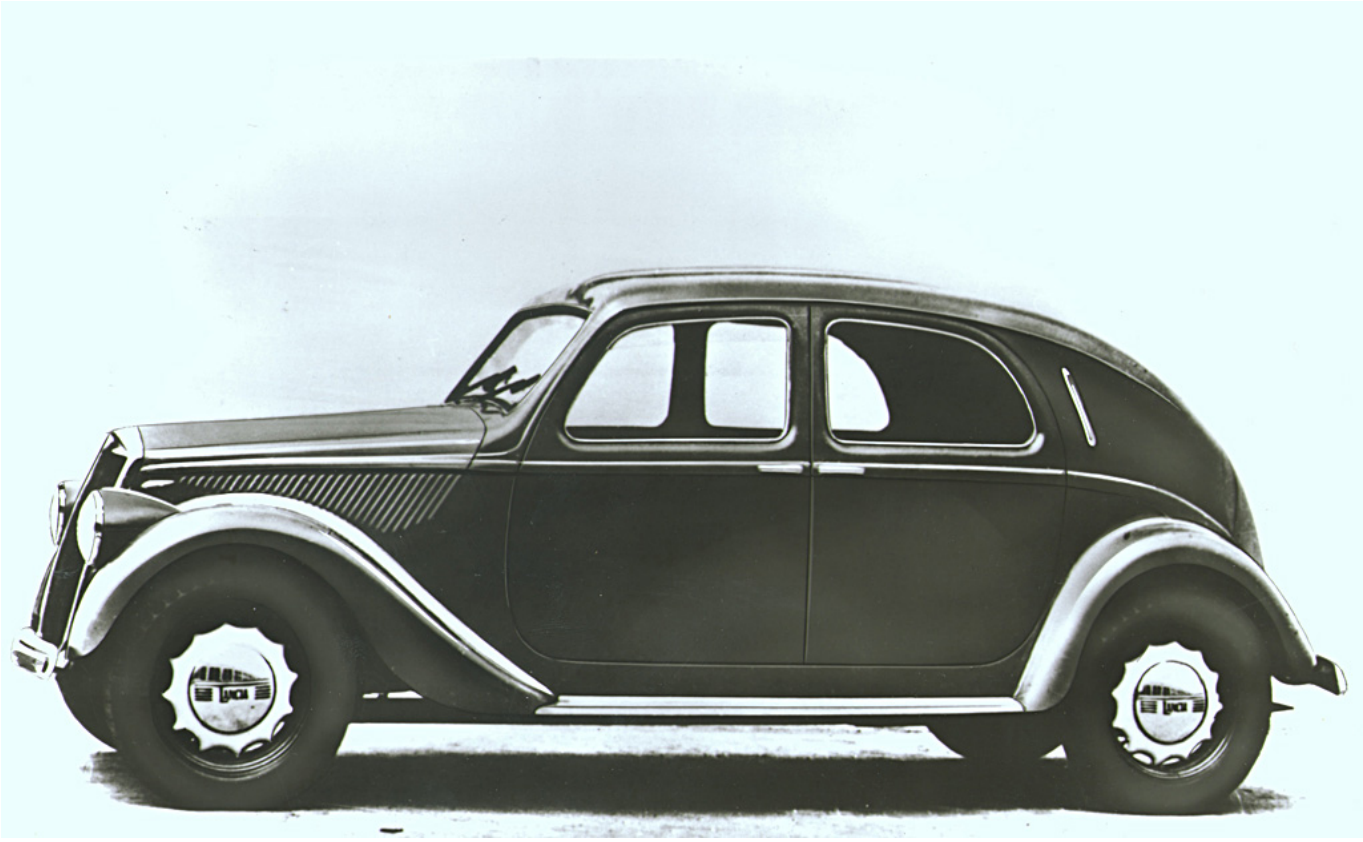
Lancia Alpha 1907-9.



Lambda 7 Serie 1926-8.

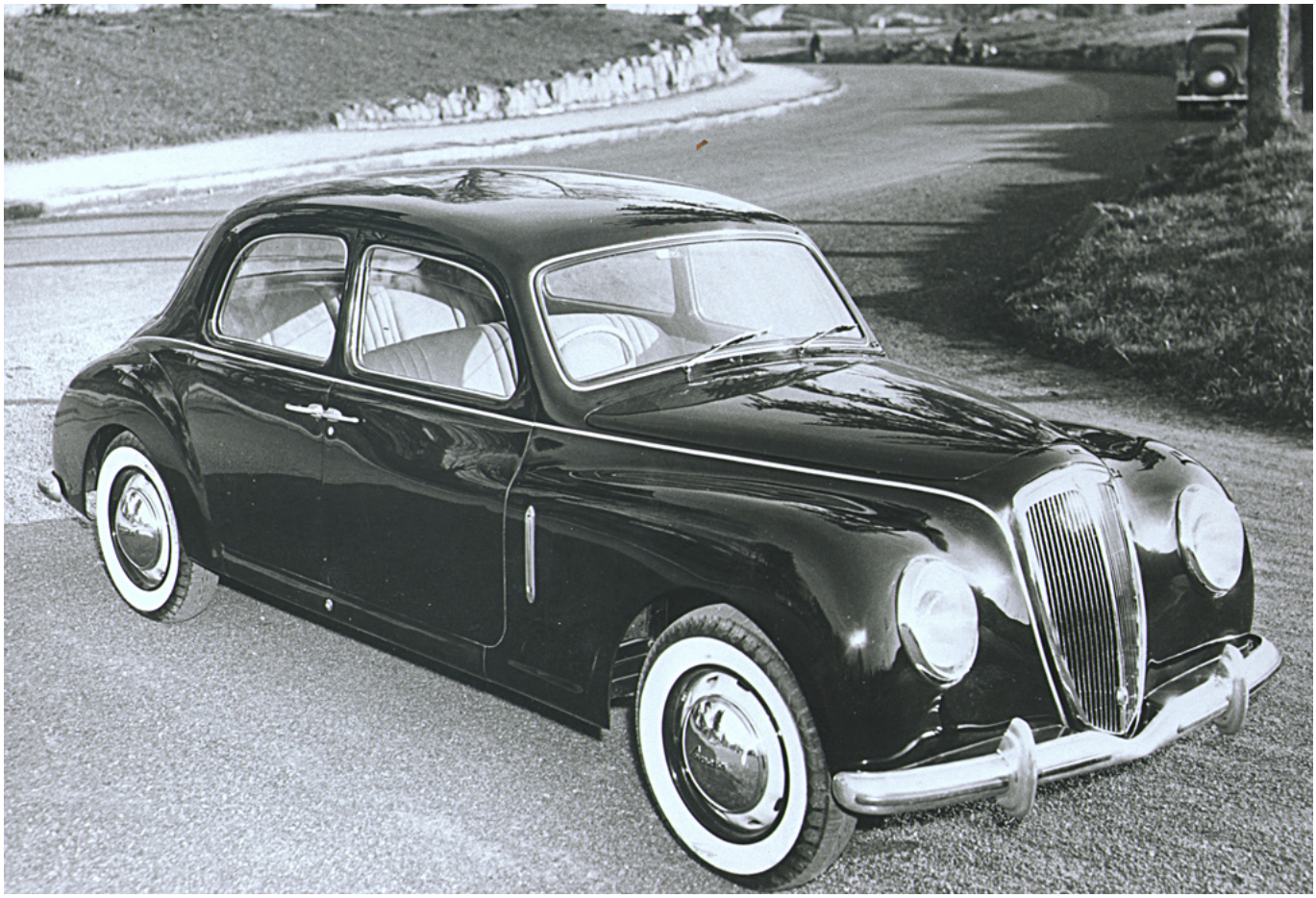


Augusta 231, 1933 to 1937.



Aprilia 238, 1936 to 1938.

By the 1950s, although an established reputation for Italian style and pursuit of technical advancement differentiated Lancia cars from its contemporaries, the combination was not translating into consistent post-war sales growth. Indeed, an ever widening car range was accompanied by spiralling business complexity, while the products – especially their engines – lacked sufficient mechanical and manufacturing commonality. There was also a failed 1950s dalliance in top level motor racing, the major financial impact of which was still being felt ten years later. Add in burgeoning manufacturing costs, and Lancia gradually turned into a financial millstone, weighing heavily on its then still independent owners. Yet the cars were cleverly designed and well-engineered…



Aurelia B10, 1950 to 1953.



Appia 3 Serie, 1959 to 1963.

In October 1969, Fiat's takeover bid was accepted, and the company's remaining commercial vehicles were promptly either abandoned or morphed into Iveco products… but, to the surprise of many, Fiat committed quite heavily to Lancia's passenger car line. Subsequent launches included the slavishly extravagant but flawed Gamma – the last car to come close to Lancia's original idiosyncratic bloodline – and the Beta, a particularly diverse model range marking the point where the cars began reflecting the fortunes, corporate cost cutting decisions – and the parts bins – of its new parent company. Nonetheless it proved popular in Europe, with over 200,000 units built.

The images below show examples of 1970s Lancias…



Lancia 2000 Coupé, 1971 to 73.

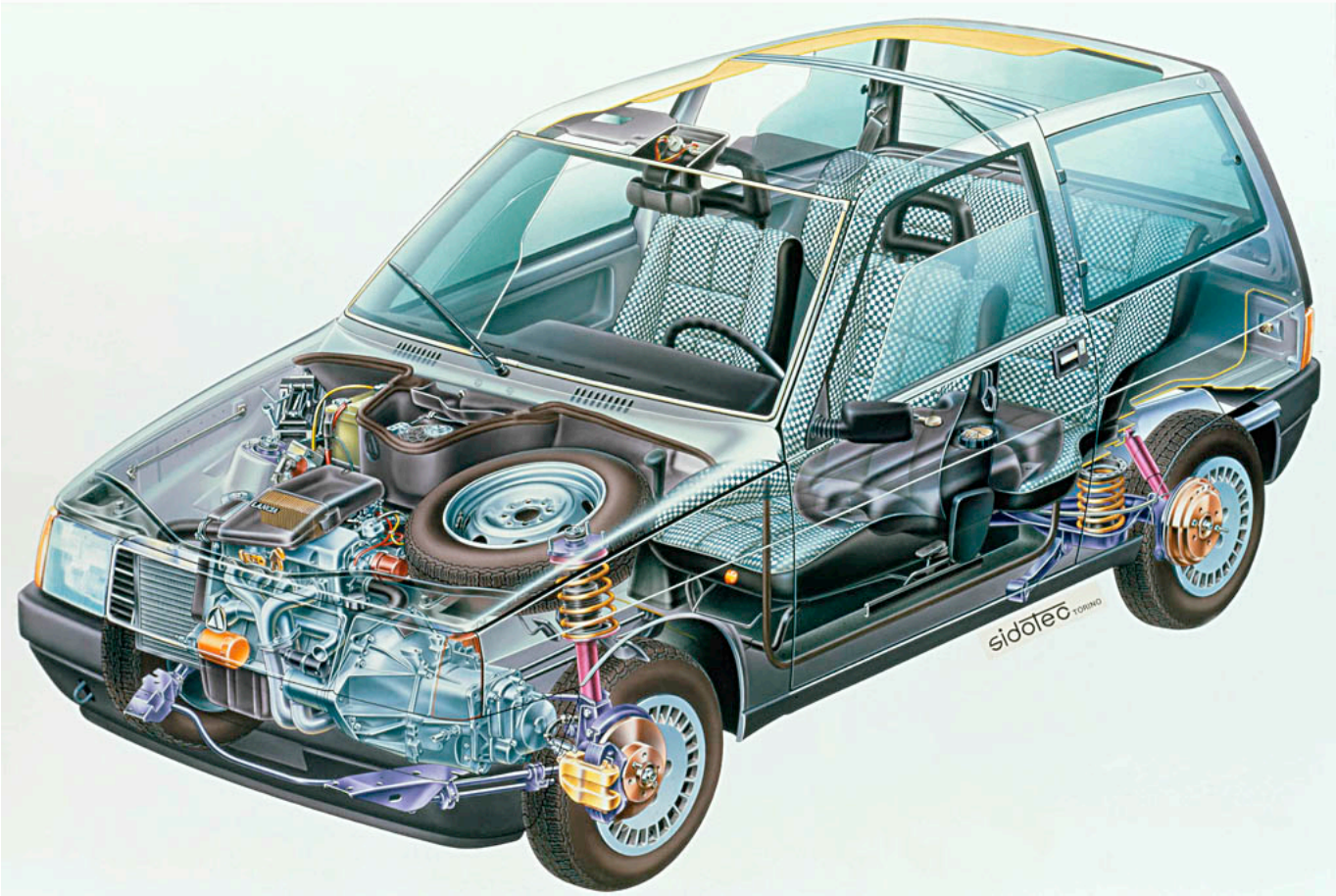


Spider 1.6 and 2.0, 2nd serie, 1975-78.

The Beta range – usually regarded as principal architect in the brand's British downfall – appeared here in 1976, expanding quickly into a slightly bewildering range of coupés, sportshatches and saloons. Early examples were beset by build quality problems – but by 1979 these had paled into insignificance alongside the Beta's propensity to rust – badly and terminally – in the British climate. The apocryphal, never officially confirmed, story goes that inferior steel was used in their manufacture, sourced from the Soviet Union in a reciprocal deal which brought Fiat various materials in part exchange for rights to build the then obsolescent Fiat 124, later offered to British motorists as the Lada 1200. Whatever the reason, Fiat subsequently spent much cash buying back rusting Betas from dissatisfied British purchasers.

The last Beta, the mid-1980's Monte Carlo, was a stylish but troubled two-seat, mid-engine,

rear drive coupé, conceived as big brother to the sharply styled Fiat X1/9. Though by then the rust problems were resolved, questionable wet road braking ability saw it removed from sale. It reappeared much later with radical improvements, but by then British motorists had clearly had enough, with sales on a downward spiral, The only Lancias to make any real mark in Britain after this were the Delta hatchback, and the 1985 Y10 supermini.



Y10 ‘Fire’, 1985 to 89.



Lancia Y10 ‘Fire’, 1986 to 89.

Paradoxically, from the mid-1980s, first Lancia’s Rally 037, and then the extrovert, limited production Stratos, began making their mark in motorsport – followed by special versions of the 4wd HF Turbo Integrale Delta, which took on the world’s best cars and drivers in international rallying – and won… again and again, though sadly not without tragedies along the way. Lancia didn’t capitalise in the showrooms on these cars’ top-level successes, and though the marque’s full post-1970s range was never sold in Britain, those models which did arrive proved to be bland Fiat clones, detached from Lancia’s heritage, offering little to attract or inspire British buyers.



Lancia Rally 037 Group B, 1982-83.

Excluding a handful of left hand drive Delta HF Integrale variants, the last mainstream Lancia to come to Britain was the unfortunately named Dedra in 1990.



Dedra.

The Dedra proved to be just as uninspiring as its immediate forebears, with the scale of Lancia's fall from favour by that stage revealed in SMMT sales figures. In 1978, 11,800 sales made Britain Lancia's biggest export market, but fifteen years later, in December 1993, with just 569 cars sold that year Fiat group announced the cessation of right hand drive Lancia production, stating that "…future Lancia Automobiles would not be engineered for right hand drive markets". It wasn't only Britain where disillusionment had set in; Lancia's 1993 European sales plateaued around 163,600 cars, and by 2003 just 99,500 were sold.

Lancia hung on in Europe, but muddled thinking following the 2009 Fiat and Chrysler merger left its future hanging by a thread. In 2010, a bizarre marketing decision saw the big Chrysler 300C saloon and the Grand Voyager rebadged for European sale as Lancia models – and, as Chrysler already had an established UK presence, it was decided to offer the small Lancia Ypsilon and mid-size Delta in Britain – badged as Chryslers… The move completely outfoxed strong rumours then circulating that Fiat-Chrysler was plotting Lancia's return to Britain, with an avowed intention of rebuilding the marque's European sales to their 1990 level of around 300,000 units over four years from 2010. The reality was that sales fell from 112,000 that year to 74,313 in 2014, and the plan was hastily abandoned, with Chrysler products soon withdrawn from Britain and Europe.

The photographs below depict some of the Lancia models of this period…



Phedra, 2008 (not sold in Britain).



Lancia Voyager 2012 (Sold in UK as Chrysler Voyager).



Thema 2013 (but Thema model not sold in Britain after 1993).



2014 Delta (sold in UK as Chrysler Delta).

In 2016 Lancia discontinued all models except the newly updated Ypsilon, and restricted sales to Italy alone, based on an unchallengeable rationale.



Ypsilon, 2015.

The marque had lost genuinely meaningful European appeal – but, in its homeland, that one car was consistently amongst the top 10 best-sellers. By 2019, the Ypsilon – ironically built in Poland since 2014 – was growing home market sales, with well over 46,000 examples finding buyers that year. In the UK that remarkable single model performance would easily have bettered Honda's total 2019 sales, and placed it 7th overall in the year's top 10 best sellers.

Since Fiat became part of the sprawling Stellantis automotive conglomerate – within which Lancia is an absolute minnow – its parent company appears to have developed a new faith in the survival and development of the historic marque, unleashing an unexpected revival

which is now gathering speed. On May 20th 2022, Lancia brand CEO Luca Napolitano publicly declared that “Lancia is now ready for Europe, taking a first step to become a credible and respected brand in the premium segment. Our ten-year plan, approved last September, is now taking shape, step by step. We are the Italian Elegance brand, and this is our renaissance. Innovation and timeless design have always been our core values, and to these we want to add sustainability, customer-centricity and responsibility – because we look to the future with great ambition.”

Under the Stellantis strategic plan, known as “Dare Forward 2030”, Lancia will launch three new models, somewhat ambitiously aimed at covering 50% of today’s highly fragmented market. Appearing at two yearly intervals from 2024, these will be electric-only from 2026, and from 2028, only fully electric vehicles will be sold. First to arrive will be a new Ypsilon in 2024, about which little has yet been revealed beyond the fact that it will be about 4 metres (just over 13 feet) long, with a 100% electrified powertrain. Inevitably given the way today’s market is moving, there’s already speculation that, as with the highly successful Toyota Yaris Cross, the new Ypsilon will be positioned in the compact SUV sector. A new 4.6 metre (15 feet) long flagship is promised for 2026, taking the brand into Europe’s large car segment, followed in 2028 by a new 4.4-metre (anout 14.4 feet) long Delta. Lancia say this will be a “sculpted and muscular car, with geometric lines, which will attract car enthusiasts throughout Europe”.

All three new Lancias will be aimed squarely at improving Stellantis’s current lacklustre performance against premium model competition in Europe, where the well-regarded, very long established but underperforming Alfa Romeo, and relatively new but equally underperforming DS marques are already targeted. The task sounds challenging, but could well be achievable in the context of those stablemates’ performances as revealed in official ACEA 2022 European sales figures. Last year Lancia sold 41,096 examples of its single model, making it the best-selling car in its category in Italy for the fourth year in a row – as well as the country’s second best selling car overall, with a 15.3% market share – its highest ever. Those Italian sales alone amounted to under 9000 cars less than entire Europe-wide total for DS, and also put Lancia very convincingly ahead of Alfa Romeo, which sold just

32,737 cars across Europe.

The newly motivated marque has plenty of ideas to help address that future challenge. It aims to become the Stellantis brand utilising the highest percentage of recycled material, with half of all “touchable” surfaces made from eco-sustainable materials. A comfortable interior environment is also promised, inspired by the exclusive materials and typical Italian elegance and style of some of Lancia’s best remembered historic vehicles. However customers irritated by today’s often needlessly complex screen-based switchgear and controls might sense a conflict between Lancia’s comforting assertion that its “next-generation vehicles will have simple and intuitive on-board technology, with a minimalist and intelligent virtual interface,” followed by the less endearing statement that it “…will give the customer total control of the vehicle’s cabin from the sound system to the air conditioning and lighting… with the use of a single button.”

Markets where Lancia’s renaissance will first blossom were apparently chosen for three reasons; love and passion for “Made in Italy”, where Spain, Belgium and France scored highly; second, online sales relevance, with The Netherlands and Germany leading the way, and third, the size and importance of the B-sized premium sales segment, where all these countries ranked in the top five. Brand managers have been appointed for each, representing what is described as the first step in the “internationalization” process of Lancia, through a presence in 60 major European cities, and a network of 100 dealerships.

A new Corporate Identity was launched in Milan in February, with implementation planned in all five countries by July 2024, when the new Ypsilon is due to arrive. Innovative distribution methods are planned, with some 50% of sales made online. It’s rumoured that yet another return to Britain is being considered, though Stellantis won’t currently comment on the possibility, and such a move seems unlikely before 2026, when the new range-topping big Lancia will arrive.

Lancia’s Logos through the years



Lancia’s new 2023 logo.

Instantly recognisable manufacturer logos, appearing on everything from cars to showrooms, and pens to pin badges, form part of carefully designed and developed corporate identity packages regarded as vitally and enduringly important by auto makers everywhere. Lancia is no different from the rest, and it’s a measure of how slowly such identity evolves in that a 116 year history has seen just seven revisions of the marque’s logo, which the company says is designed to “encapsulate unique values of the brand’s DNA in terms of elegance, what it sees as ‘graphic power’ and sophistication”.

Lancia’s renaissance and reappearance in international markets was seen as an appropriate time to invest in a new logo, both as the symbol of a whole new era, and to mark its entry into the electric mobility arena. It will appear on its three new upcoming models, as an integral part of a new Corporate Identity and communications package appearing at all

dealerships in coming years.

Inspired by a revised logo first seen on the Lancia Flaminia in 1957, the new look version (please see above) is manufactured in aluminium, and features a circular brushing, typically found on watch dials – aimed at expressing "the new graphic codes of the brand", being "shrouded in light". The design is described as "Progressive Classic", revisiting all the distinctive elements of the earlier logo, including the wheel, flag, shield, and lance. Lancia says these constituent elements are symbols of their nobility and heritage, which have been "simplified in terms of lines and shapes, and positioned in a new balance, to express innovation, premium-ness and Italian-ness, with a touch of eclecticism." Also changed is the lettering, now in an original new font taking inspiration from fashion, an area of Italian excellence closely linked with the brand's history.

To create the new logo, Lancia's design team studied all seven previous versions, from the simple, minimalist 1907 version, where the "Lancia" name is italicized and gold coloured – consistent with the period 'Liberty' style. The next logo appeared in 1911, designed by Count Carlo Biscaretti di Ruffia, which added elements including a four-spoke steering wheel, hand throttle control, rectangular flag, and the lance-shaped pole – all of which then remained for over 80 years, though a 1929 revision added a triangular shield framing the circle of the steering wheel.

Updates have become more frequent in recent years, with 1957 and 1974 revamps developing a more minimalist and refined theme, while in 1981 designer Massimo Vignelli stylised the shield, lance, steering wheel, and flag. The last Lancia Logo update was in 2007, a version never seen in Britain – officially at least. Marque enthusiasts across the country must be hoping that won't be the case with the newly announced eighth logo, due to appear when the new Ypsilon goes on sale in June 2024.

The photographs below show the evolution of the Lancia logo since 1957:



1957.



1974.



2000.



2010.

New identity for old-established marque



Lancia’s new showroom identity.

Lancia’s new corporate identity has recently made its first appearance on its Via Gattamelata showroom in Milan. It features a new logo, and new script, with close attention to detail, carefully chosen colours, and use of innovative materials – all said to be inspired by Italian architecture and design.

It will feature on around half of Lancia’s Italian distribution network by the end of 2023, and all remaining locations by mid-2024, when the new Ypsilon is launched. Outside Italy, all seventy new European sales points will receive the new corporate identity during 2024. Lancia says: “…there will be no need for huge showrooms. These locations will be capable of guaranteeing the perfect combination of digital and physical purchasing, and have been designed for a totally immersive customer experience, both online and offline”.