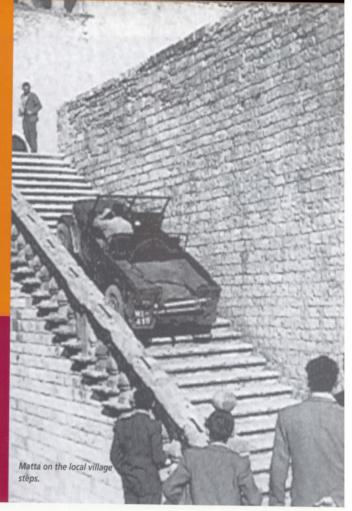
Alfa Romeo 1900M **AR51-AR52** "Matta"

Steve Ball delves into the history of Alfa Romeo's short lived military Land Rover and describes how a mad old woman has become part of his life



What's the Matta?

Perhaps a more accurate title would be "What's a Matta" but thoughts of Robert de Niro or Marlon Brando uttering the immortal line before "cleaning" a rival sprang to mind far too quickly; and the author didn't feel this would be a particularly good start, especially in an Italian Car Club magazine!

Enough prevarication and on to answering the question..."Matta" is the nickname for the Alfa Romeo 1900M AR51, meaning "crazy" or "mad old woman", depending on where you read. The "mad" label is not usually applied to cars but it is well deserved in this case and applied at the time because of the mad antics the Matta was capable of, such as climbing steps and crossing the odd river or

To be more specific about the model name, "AR" means Autovettura da Ricognizione (Reconnaissance Vehicle or "Scout Car") and the

"M" refers to Military. The "51" refers to the vehicle's year of design and those built between 1951 and 1953. Starting in 1953, and overlapping the first series of "Mattas" was a second series designated AR52. An explanation for the different denominations is that the AR51 was for the military and the AR52 for the civilian market, but this did not preclude the selling of some AR 51s to private individuals.

The AR type number was seemingly shared between Alfa Romeo and Fiat as a result of the military giving a brief to both companies. Subsequent ARs continued to at least AR59, as per the Ministry of Defence's specifications, but they were attached to the Fiat Campagnolo. There are some mechanical and bodywork differences (see fig.2) between some of the cars but to be honest I don't know if they were mid-range changes or simply differences between the AR51 and AR52. The latter would seem to make sense bearing in

mind the change of designation in 1953 but then again both the vehicles in figure 2 carry the AR 51 type number.

The Matta started life in January 1951 when Alfa's engineer Giuseppi Busso was asked to design a replacement for the Italian Army's ageing Willys Jeep. Jeeps had served the Army well through the years since the war but by the late forties and early fifties were well past their sell-by date. The story is that Ing. Busso slipped an Alfa 1900 Berlina engine into a Jeep for the first mock up. The engine was taken straight out of the 1900 Berlina but later detuned for greater torque. Power dropped from 80bhp at 4,800rpm to a pedestrian 65bhp at 4,400rpm with a top speed of only 105km/h (65mph).

There were reportedly six prototypes made eventually, including a Giardinetta (fig.3), one fitted with a diesel engine and a snowplough version. During it's reign as the "Italian jeep" the Matta was



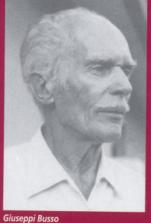
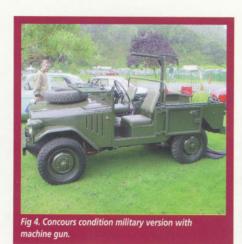






Fig. 3. Prototype Giardinetta, never went into production.



seen in a variety of guises including a Fire Engine. farmer's plough, ambulance, Mille Miglia class winning race car and finally the standard option of having a machine gun mounted behind the driver as originally intended for its military purpose (fig.4).

The original prototype of the Matta was equipped with a rigid axle coupled to leaf spring suspension at the front and rear. This set up combined with only about 100mm of foam for the seats must have made for a pretty solid and unforgiving driving experience, all part of the charm and apparently "borrowed" from Land Rover along with the steering and transmission! Ironically, the Land Rover was designed to replace the Willys Jeep

Initial trials with the hybrid Alfa powered Land Rover were held in May 1951 at Serravalle del Chianti. The Matta was in competition with the Jeep and another prototype, the Fiat Campagnolo. Unknown to Alfa, Fiat had been designing their Campagnolo since 1949. The real life testing highlighted a few issues including the gear ratios being too high and lubrication problems.

Busso went away and, as part of a team under Orazio Satta, designed an all Alfa Romeo "jeep". They replaced the gearbox with an Alfa designed unit complete with more appropriate gearing, running through a transfer box. The gearbox itself is slightly unusual due to the lack of synchromesh on first and second gears, making it what might be called a semi-crash gearbox. The transfer box is operated via a smaller gearlever, which allows the driver to select just rear wheel or four-wheel drive and still use the standard gear lever. However, the Matta can only be driven in four-wheel drive with the low ratios and not with the normal ratios, unlike many modern 4x4s. The rear axle is equipped with a limited slip differential but a handle at the side of the driver locks the rear differential for as long as it is held

The suspension was also redesigned; the front leaf springs were replaced with an independent torsion bar suspension set up and finally the engine was dry sumped (with oil scavenge and pressure pump) to combat the previous lubrication issue and allow for safer progress over rough terrain.

Another notable mechanical feature is the carburettor. The Matta is fuelled by a Solex 33 PBIC carburettor, which appears to be as rare as the Matta itself. There is very little information to be found about the 33 PBIC but communication with Peter Marshall (1900 Register) and his friends has revealed that it's similar to the 32 PBIC as fitted to

the Simca but still a very unusual carb. If anyone knows more about this item, please contact me (via the Derbyshire section).

The re-engineered and vastly improved Matta again went for trials at Serravalle del Chianti in October 1951 and this time flew through with no problems. As a result it went into production, with the first examples appearing in March 1952.



However, in the rush to prepare for the second round of trials, Busso and his colleagues had forgotten to add up the small container of accounting beans allocated to the project. It transpired that the infamous Alfa Romeo quality of the period came at a higher cost than the Fiat Campagnolo, in fact around three times the price. The Matta weighed in at 1,935,000 Lira in 1951 (approx. £4,160 in today's money), a considerable sum at the time if one was working to a budget and needed to manufacture a fleet of reasonably priced multi-purpose vehicles for the Italian Army. Apparently the Campagnolo was not as effective as the Matta in practice, but the price difference could not be ignored and the contract eventually went to Fiat after 1954.

In table 1, chassis numbers and production figures are listed, as taken from the usual sources of "Le Vetture di Produzione" by d'Amico and Tabucchi; and Luigi Fusi's book "Alfa Romeo Tutte le vetture dal 1910

From the total of 2073 quoted by d'Amico and Tabucchi or 2050 listed by Fusi (despite the figure totalling 2167), 2000 units went to the Italian military, the remaining fifty or so being used for agricultural or heavy domestic duties such as Fire Engines. What I could not establish from these sources is exactly where the 120 (or 154 depending where one reads) Police vehicles came from. Presumably they were cut from the 2000 military vehicles and delivered to the Police of Cagliari, Turin, Florence, Rome and Milan in 1953 but also quoted is a definite figure of 2000 for the Military; all very confusing. (Want to add to the confusion? Editoriale Domus suggests

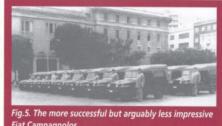
a total production figure of 1921 - Ed.).

Peter Marshall has pointed out that both the Tabucchi and Fusi listings fail to distinguish between AR51 and AR 52, listing the entire production run as AR52. Also Tabucchi gives 50001 as a Matta manufactured in 1954 when in fact this was the very first AR51 and is still in existence, owned by Enrico Checchinato and Franco Melotti, co-authors of a book on AR51-AR52 published in 2003. These two passionate Matta enthusiasts have re-examined the production numbers and their research suggests that as many as 457 went to the police from an allin production run of 2058 of which 1899 received the AR51 type number.

The confusing uncertainty of type numbers left me wondering where my own Matta fitted in but contact with Elvira Ruocco at the Alfa Romeo Archive has at least confirmed that my Matta. chassis number AR 01149, was sold on the 3rd of September 1953 to Ministero degli Interni. Direzione Generale di Pubblica Sicurezza from Rome. As best as my lack of Italian can work out this is the Director General for Public Security. Fortunately for me, this means I am the current keeper of one of the rarer variants, initially sold for the domestic market and used as a police vehicle. I was informed the colour is original to this particular police force of the time, which no longer exists. Subsequent paint removal on the hubs has confirmed it was indeed initially green (factory colour), and then painted a gloss red oxide colour for the security force.

Owning a Matta

Owning a Matta is like having your very own full sized Tonka toy! To some, the Matta may appear to have the styling of a common house brick, albeit a slightly rounded one, but those who have seen it in the metal seem to have approved.



The Matta takes obvious styling cues from the Willys Jeep but to some is a lot more attractive and to be fair there's only so much you could do to style a utilitarian vehicle such as the AR51. Main competitor of the period, the FIAT Campagnolo (fig.5), was similar in appearance but somehow does not look quite right to me, perhaps the curved

Model	Year	d'Amico and Tabucchi	Numbers	Luigi Fusi	Numbers
AR52	1952	00001 to 00761; 00788; 00793; 00806; 00827	765	00001 to 01005	1005
	1953	00762 to 01506	745	01006 to 02012	1007
	1954	01507 to 01913;			
		50001 to 50005	409		
AR52	1954	00001 to 00154	154	00001 to 00155	155
		Total	2073	Total	2167

Table 1 - chassis and production numbers.



















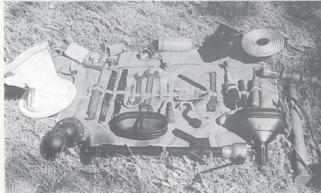




1950 World Champion Nino Farina at the wheel.



Mobile police on parade.



Matta tool kit.



Door pouch.



Mudplugging.



Kerb crawling.



Matta and 6C 2500 Coloniale used as wartime staff car.

AR51 Ambulanza.





Fire tender.



Snow plough.



Matta on the 1952 Atlantic-Pacific crossing of South America.



Snow plough.



Support vehicle for Fausto Coppi on 1952 Tour de France.



Mattas before the start of the 1968 Pekin-Paris 'raid'.



Matta used for North Pole expedition.





bonnet top making it appear almost van like. The other contender needs no introduction: the Jeep was and still is a household name and everyone knows what they look like. However, compare the Matta with the Jeep in the picture (fig.6) and I hope you'll agree which is the most appealing.

The Matta's appeal grows further when one realises how the design, or rather the design and construction assists the ownership experience. For example, the front wings and bonnet can be removed for all round access to the engine. Also, the transmission tunnel cover is removable, again to facilitate greater access. This seems to apply throughout the design and build of the Matta; most of the oily bits are very easy to access due its high ground clearance and the amount of space around the various components. Having enough space to place one's hand down the side of an engine is considered a luxury these days. By comparison, the Matta has enough room to swing a hammer! The lack of sensors and electronics on the Matta is a real pleasure although I must admit they are simpler to replace when the faulty one is located.

But, as you would expect there are other aspects that do not enhance the experience. For example, passengers may not thank the driver when asked to alight from the vehicle to allow for refuelling. Not only will it be slightly bewildering and inconvenient for them, especially in inclement weather, but the realisation of just what they've been sat on will finally hit home. Returning to sit back on a fuel tank of fifty litres can be a sobering thought, especially if you're a smoker!

Another capacity worth noting is the quantity of oil required to fill the sump. The dry sump strategy may be advantageous for off road activities but is a distinct disadvantage in the wallet department come oil change time, for the sump will hold a more than generous twelve litres. Go on; ask me how I "accidentally" found this out whilst emptying the sump of old oil directly into an old washing-up bowl. Coincidentally, I also found out that washing up bowls don't hold anywhere near twelve litres!

Driving Mattas

With flat sheet metal panels, no sound deadening and a large Bakelite steering wheel, coupled to an old-fashioned steering box, the Matta is noisy and can be a cumbersome vehicle to drive. The steering doesn't allow for particularly fast input but then the engine matches the steering for lack of speed. With a maximum velocity of 65mph the realistic cruising speed is around the 50mph mark and nought to sixty isn't counted in seconds. The slim padded seats are static, therefore not favouring the taller driver or

passenger, add to this the requirement for a dislocated right ankle to operate the accelerator pedal and the driving position is best described as cramped and upright.

Having noted the shortcomings, the standard equipment can be thought of as just about adequate (fig. 7). All the necessary controls are there, starter button, hand throttle, choke, oil pressure temperature fuel level. gauge, speedometer/odometer (in kilometres of course). The key is the same round push in type (not a cut blank like modern keys) seen on pre-war Alfas. Set the choke and hand throttle, push the key in (fuel pump now audible), press the starter button and the fifty-one year old beast kicks into life. A couple of stabs on the throttle to ensure the motor will continue spinning and then re-set the hand throttle and choke to allow it to idle and warm up.

The first thing you notice once moving is the amount of noise since, as already mentioned, there is no sound proofing of any description so all the engine and transmission noise is freely available to one's ears but so is wind noise, the flapping of canvas and of course that infamous tyre noise usually associated with Land Rovers. Pedestrians turn to see us passing, warned by the approaching whine of rubber on tarmac. Despite all of this, there is a perverse pleasure in driving the Matta. Grasping the horns of the left handed beast and wrestling with it whilst bouncing along on the road grinning inanely at each challenging bend traversed successfully and smoothly. Failure to do so will result in approaching bends with the body leaning unnaturally and veering dangerously away from the apex and toward a hedgerow or hard wall with a real sense of vulnerability. This is when the reality of non-existent 1950's safety measures finally dawns. No airbags, crumple zones or even seatbelts in this



Obviously the Matta is more than capable of handling much greater angles and of course much rougher terrain than the local A or B roads (have you seen Derbyshire's roads!) but it will take a braver person than myself to try it. Fig.8 shows just one of the Mattas that are still used in anger as they should be.

Junctions are an interesting challenge that can be hard to overcome due to the left hand drive and poor all round visibility. Depending on the angle of the junction, leaving the seat and peering through the passenger door (or hole when the door top is removed) is a necessity if only to see what is about to hit you on your slow entrance to the adjoining road. However, in common with all 4x4 vehicles the



extra height does allow for an excellent forward view from the cabin, but as a six-footer my line of sight is just below the canvas roof. Not that surprising when you think about it, this model was designed with the body measurements of people from fifty years ago!

So, the Matta is not designed for a six footer but what about creature comforts to make longer journeys just a little more bearable? Well, the canvas roof just about keeps one dry and ventilation is taken care of by either removing the door tops or closing them in inclement weather and relying on the 25mmm gap for incoming fresh air. Once driver and passenger are fully prepared for travel by dressing in full winter gear the lack of a cabin heater isn't too noticeable and thankfully there is some heat radiating from the transmission tunnel and bulkhead. Winter would not be fun but then this Matta is not likely see adverse conditions!

Why?

After reading all the gripes and groans already mentioned you might be wondering why I would want such a tortuous machine? Why indeed? This has become one of the first questions people ask when chatting about the Matta and one I'm still struggling to explain. The story of how I came to purchase the car may offer some enlightenment but a definitive answer is not promised.

Back in early 2003 I stumbled across a photograph of an Alfa Matta on the Internet, thought it rather odd and carried on "surfing". Then around November of the same year I again stumbled across a website whilst looking for something else. This site was advertising the sale of a Matta and amazingly it was fairly local to me. I searched for a photograph again and was instantly interested in the history of the Matta. I started to search the Internet, information is scarce but is available with only a bit of digging. After a very small amount of time I had become hooked on the Matta and my thoughts kept returning to the one for sale in the same county.

After deliberating, an email was sent to the vendor and electronic discussion took place. It was still for sale but without MOT, which was to be completed in the next month or two. To cut a tedious story shorter for the sake of your patience, three months later the vendor decided to withdraw the Matta from the market pending full restoration. The air in our house became tainted with disappointment and the dogs ran for cover; I had set my mind on a Matta by this time and only a Matta would suffice! Unfortunately, that was the only Matta in the UK I knew of at the time though I later

recalled the Montreal engined Matta that your editor had written about in Auto Italia.

Thoughts turned to possible alternative sources. for during my previous research I had stumbled across an Ebay user called "Alfamatta". Too much of a coincidence for me and an email had been sent tentatively introducing myself, and my interest in Alfa Romeo Mattas. Thankfully, Enrico didn't think I was a cyber lunatic and replied. He had been extremely helpful during my initial search and discussions with the previous potential vendor. Now. I needed to ask his advice again about the possibility of finding another as for some inexplicable reason I must have a Matta. Finally my luck had changed. Enrico knew of an excellent, fully restored Matta for sale. Interest strengthened further and a newly released book was purchased, called strangely enough...AR 51-AR52 Alfa Matta (fig 9). The text is in Italian (would anyone like to translate it for me?) but it is still worth owning. The authors Enrico Checcinato and Franco Melotti seem to be the world's authorities on Mattas, and then the penny finally dropped! My contact in Italy, formally only known as Enrico suddenly had a surname; how stupid could I have been (please, no response required!).

After suitable introductions by Enrico, contact was made with Mrs Pace, pronounced "Pasha", the then owner of my Matta. To cut to the chase, my partner Nadine and I devised a whirlwind tour of Italy. We planned to purchase the Matta and then make a holiday of the trip by touring Italy; the itinery was to start in Milan where the car was located.

From Milan we would travel onto Venice, but not before visiting the Alfa Romeo Museum at Arese, then through Florence onto Rome, Pisa, Turin, Paris and finally the ferry from Calais back home. On arrival at each city we would stay the night and then visit the city during the day; a planned meeting with Enrico near Venice was to be a wonderful bonus.

Anticipation grew as the end of April approached; a five-hour coach journey from home to the airport went unnoticed, as did the brief flight to Linate airport, Milan. The day became even better as we met Mrs Pace and her daughter and were chauffeured to their villa in the family 156

Twinspark. The sun was shining, we were in a 156 travelling to see a Matta in Italy, what more could one want? On arrival at the Pace residence the Matta was in the courtyard parked next to a 1954 Fiat Campagnolo, how ironic, but this time the winner would be the Matta. The condition was as described and expected apart from a few holes in the exhaust which didn't sound loud. It started, moved and stopped as it should although we could have done without the added distraction of the horn sounding at every corner.

The first challenge was a test drive, my first time driving on the right hand side of a road, in a left hand drive vehicle, in a Matta, in Italy, with no syncromesh on first or second gears and no seatbelts and I was loving it. Thankfully the aforementioned enthusiastic horn sounding at every bend was a blessing in disguise as it warned other unfortunate road users in the vicinity that we were approaching, not rapidly but approaching nonetheless.

The deal was done as was inevitable, followed by the even more inevitable glass of wine. My suggestion of refusal due to driving and an empty stomach (it was now 7pm) was not acceptable to Italian hospitality and conceding was the only suitable solution to finalising the deal. Mrs Pace was happy her late husband's pride and joy was being taken to the UK by an Alfa "nut", where hopefully it would be cherished and I finally had the object of my desires.

That's where the good times stopped. Our short 20 mile trip to the hotel turned into a two hour nightmare, not knowing where we were going despite detailed but unhelpful Autoroute directions, Italian toll booths and their confusing Italian speaking "English help" and finally, travelling at speeds of 35mph on Italy's equivalent of the M1 with traffic flying by on both sides at 100mph left us mentally drained almost immediately.

But there was more: the penultimate straw for Nadine was when the throttle cable appeared to snap after about half an hour's driving, thankfully just beside a lay-by and easily repaired – the ball and socket arrangement had just popped apart. The final straw affected her even more, when saying goodbye





Fig.9: The cover of the only book devoted solely to the Matta

to the Pace family the Daughter had shut the door on her side, but obviously not properly. So there we are trundling along the Italian M1, cars whizzing by all over the place when Nadine's door flew open followed by her screaming at me and later promising never to go near the Matta EVER again. The Matta has suicide doors, which open backwards and then lock into a catch effectively making it impossible to shut them again unless you get out. Also, the bodyline is only about three inches above the seat and there are no seatbelts so a feeling of vulnerability is guaranteed.

I was still managing to keep it all together at this point despite being lost many times (something I hate). One final wrong turn led us to ask a lovely couple walking home for directions. Whilst they spoke little English and we in our ignorance spoke no Italian, we managed to strike up an understandable conversation. They thought it highly amusing that we were out in the Matta and seemed to connect the car's name with our current state of mind and mental capacity; madness was setting in! They gave us excellent directions despite the language barrier and thankfully we weren't far away, but the evening's frights were not over yet. Rounding the bend into the hotel I forgot where I was and drifted into the path of an oncoming 156, the ensuing crash would have been irony at its worst had the driver not leaned on his horn waking me from my growing fatigue. The first night of Matta ownership ended with Nadine and I sat slumped on the end of our hotel bed pondering the week ahead and the possible end of our holiday. We agreed to review the situation in the morning.

Morning arrived and the situation was no better. Nadine was still refusing to go near the Matta so plans were begun to arrange the return home by other means. A friend, Glen (aka. "Speed Freak") tracked down a friendly flatbed truck owner called Colin (07709 377741) who was willing to come out to Italy at short notice and transport the Matta to its new home in the UK. Meanwhile, we flew home, rather dejected and worried about the safety of the Matta (no locks or security fitted and stuck in a hotel car park), to have a few days holiday in Chester to recover.

Of course the story has a happy ending as everything worked out in the end. We recovered in Chester – with a diamond ring as compensation for Nadine, Colin arrived with the Matta and I was happy to see it tucked up safely in my garage.

Alfa Promeo AR 51 – AR 52

"Matta"

Specifications

Body – "Torpedo" – 6 seats, steel construction Engine type – Alfa Romeo –1307

Fuel - Petrol

No. of Cylinders - 4 in line

Bore - 82 .55mm

Stroke - 88mm

Capacity – 1884cc

Brake horse power – 65bhp

Carburettor - Solex 33 PBIC

Fuel system - Mechanical pump

Ignition – Marelli S6 4A

Bosch VEU4RZ

Lubrication - Forced, dry sumped, 12 litres!

Max Speed - 105 km/h

Electrical - 12V/ 38Am/h, Negative earth

nansinission -

Open drive shaft, single dry plate clutch, four speed and reverse. Transfer box for low ratios.

Ratios - 1:4.70

Chassis - Ladder frame, steel construction

Wheelbase - 2200mm

Track - 1300mm/1300mm

Suspension -

Front: Independent front suspension with

torsion bars

Rear: Solid axle with leaf springs

Shock Absorber -

Hydraulic lever shocks originally

Steering - Left hand drive, steering box

Brakes - Hydraulic drum brakes all round

Handbrake - Mechanical, on propshaft.

Wheels - Steel 4.50x16

Tyres - 6.40x16/6.50x16

Acceleration (0-60) - You are joking!

Manufacturer of equipment - Veglia / Marelli

Unladen weight – 1250 kg

Total weight - 1900 kg





First Club outing for the Matta at the Derbyshire Section's Peak Alfa Drive 2004, pictured next to John Gibson's 156. (Photo: Steve Ball.)

Meeting the new family

A few trips around the Derbyshire countryside restored my faith in the mad old woman and even Nadine managed to forgive her the tantrums in Italy. The Derbyshire Section's annual Peak Alfa Run quickly arrived and became the Matta's first official outing into the UK Alfa Romeo scene. Initial responses from Alfisti were of humour and genuine interest in this strange piece of Alfa's history, not often seen or even known about.

The same amused but genuine interest was encountered at National Alfa Day in 2004 where the Matta was part of a special display to celebrate the Club's 40th Anniversary. We arrived early in the morning and the Matta promptly refused to start when asked to move again to comply with Fire Exit regulations. A defective starter motor was the diagnosis; the mad old thing had decided to embarrass me in front of all the amassed Alfisti, perhaps a protest about being moved away from her homeland. Later investigation revealed a rusty and therefore weakened starter motor brush spring as the cause of failure, nothing too bad thankfully.

Being pushed twice in one day may not have been very impressive but it was certainly memorable. Who said cars don't have character?

Another feather in the bonnet of our crazy car was a recent appearance on the AROC stand at the Classic Car Show at the Birmingham N.E.C where the Land Rover boys were particularly interested in the Matta. Praise indeed considering its humble beginnings using Land Rover mechanicals.

So far life with our Matta has lived up to the crazy reputation gained many years ago when they were climbing the local village steps. Thankfully she seems to have settled into her new home and nothing big has gone wrong so far. There were a few little niggles to deal with (oil leaks on the gearbox, half shaft, rear diff and oil seals on the driveshafts) but on the whole the experience has been worthwhile. Ownership of such a rare and different piece of Alfa Romeo history is fun, but also I feel there is a sense of responsibility. As far as I know there are only three Mattas in the UK and this is the only one currently roadworthy and original to my knowledge...perhaps that's why I bought it!

Steve Ball

