

CELEBRATING

PLYMOUTH

It's time to celebrate the 70th birthday of a truly classic Chrysler marque: Plymouth. **PETE GRIST** looks back at seven decades of Plymouth innovation

BOTH DeSoto and Plymouth brand names have now reached their 70th anniversaries, both marques dating back to 1928. But while the De Soto car name went to that big corporate scrapyard in the sky way back in 1961, the Plymouth marque continues to go from strength to strength. And with fantastic current models like the Prowler grabbing headlines around the world, it seems there's no stopping Plymouth.

Throughout the years, Plymouth has produced plenty of what one could call 'milestone' cars. Too many to mention here. But to celebrate 70 years of Plymouth, we're going to take a look back at the marque's history and a few of the cars that helped to shape one of the most successful names in the American auto industry.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

So what about that name? Where did Plymouth come from – and why? Well, it's 1928 and Walter P Chrysler is looking to expand his still young but growing empire. He already has a popular semi-luxury car on the market, but one of his goals is to take on the might of Ford in the 'low price' car market. He has already made unsuccessful bids to buy Dodge after the untimely deaths of the Dodge brothers.

The purchase would have helped Chrysler have a stable of cars that spread across the whole market, from budget priced to luxury vehicles. So when he was refused Dodge, he introduced two brand new marques of his own. The lowest priced line was Plymouth, while just below Chrysler came DeSoto. As things turned out, the bankers that were looking after the Dodge estate eventually changed their minds and did sell to Chrysler later that same year. Suddenly, Chrysler had no less than three new divisions.

It was Sales Manager, Joseph W Frazer, who suggested the Plymouth name, inspired by Pilgrims who first settled in

America. A press release at the time said: 'We have named it the Plymouth because this new product of Chrysler engineering and craftsmanship so accurately typifies the endurance and strength, the rugged honesty, the enterprise, the determination of achievement and the freedom from old limitations of that pilgrim band who were the first American colonists.' This tribute to the settlers who sailed the Atlantic in the Mayflower and landed on the shores of Massachusetts, at a place they named 'New Plymouth' in December of 1620, was signed by Walter P Chrysler.

So the Mayflower ship sailed again. This time on the front of the new Plymouth automobiles, just below the Viking winged radiator cap. Production of the new Plymouth 'Q' started on June 14th, 1928. It was designed to have a 'corporate look', emulating the big Chryslers but with its own distinctive style.

All 'Q's were four-cylinder and initially shared the same production line as the slightly larger six-cylinder De Sotos. Offered in six body styles (Roadster, Phaeton, Rumble Seat Coupe, Business Coupe, Sedan and Deluxe Sedan), prices were between \$620 and \$725 – a fair bit more than equivalent Fords and Chevies. The 'Q' was evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Its history could be traced from the four-cylinder Maxwell and Chrysler 52, but with features that would not be seen on competitors' cars for many years to come.

The car was a success. Not overwhelming, but good enough to take Plymouth straight into the manufacturers' ratings in 15th position. Not bad for a car with less than one year's production under its belt. The little Plymouth soon picked up a following and, by 1931, had knocked Buick off third spot in the industry as it passed the 100,000 unit per year mark for the first time.

Much of Plymouth's early success can be put down to the purchase of the huge Dodge Brothers car company in 1928, which brought with it an instant sales and distribution



PLYMOUTH

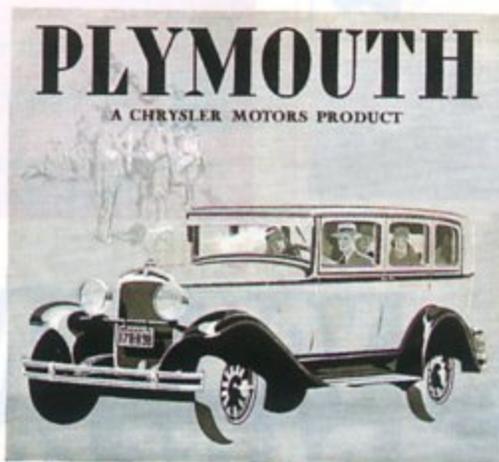
network. Plymouth's 'Q' sold initially through Chrysler but mainly Dodge franchises. And as popularity grew, more and more Plymouth dealerships started to pop up.

Such was the growth of Chrysler's empire at that time, another factory for the Corporation had to be built. In the winter of 1928, work started on a plant in Lynch Road, Detroit. At the time it was the largest of its kind in the world, at just over half a mile in length. It had four construction crews building it - one crew at each end working in, and two in the centre working outwards. It took just three months to build and was churning out Plymouths even before the last construction workers had left.

THE THRIFTY THIRTIES

It is well accepted that during the long days of the great depression in the 1930s, it was Plymouth, helped by DeSoto, which kept the Chrysler Corporation alive. In 1933, as America faced one of its worst economic years ever, Plymouth's output leapt forward to nearly 300,000. A new six-cylinder Plymouth, with a very competitive start price of just \$445, was very attractive to potential buyers, billed as 'A low price car without that low priced look'.

At Chrysler HQ, plans were being made to introduce a radical new car called the Airflow. It was intended that all Chrysler marques would have an Airflow styled line. The financial disaster that this became is well documented, but basically the smooth aerodynamics were too radical for the public at that time. They sold as Imperials, Chryslers



AT NEW LOWER PRICES
Plymouth presents even greater contrasts with other cars in its price range

\$655

Price includes tax, license, and delivery. Dealer's price may vary. Plymouth is a registered trademark of Chrysler Motors Corporation. © 1933 Chrysler Motors Corporation.

Five Plymouth-like Chrysler Motors cars in the lowest priced field—comes to you at substantially lower price—quality unchanged and with all the beauty, full-size and equipment which have been responsible for Plymouth's sweeping public response in the lowest-priced field. Strongly as Plymouth stood out before in comparison with other cars in its field, it presents even more vivid contrasts in value at today's lower price.

Keep expense down to Plymouth's simple, sturdy engine and rugged chassis construction. No other car at anywhere near its price offers Plymouth's full-size, its mechanical safety of control due to mechanical hydraulic front-wheel brakes, and its characteristic Chrysler power, speed and pick-up.

To see the new Plymouth in person is to be amazed beyond any car with which it may be compared. To ride in it is to recognize quickly why Plymouth is everywhere considered today's greatest value in the lowest-priced field.

LEFT: WHERE IT ALL BEGAN - PLYMOUTH GOT OFF TO A FLYING START IN 1928

and DeSotos. The plans to build Plymouth and Dodge versions were quickly scrapped.

Again, Plymouth became the backbone of the Corporation as customers turned away from the Airflow. Through the decade, all Chrysler marques eventually received a watered down version of the failed Airflow style, called Airstream.

1937 - The Fat Fenders

In 1937, Plymouth introduced its newly restyled 'P's - the P3 Business Six and the P4 Deluxe Six. Underneath the car, the drivetrain and chassis went largely unaltered from previous years, but the body was all new. Whereas the 1936 cars had been relatively narrow, the new Plymouths had put on a few pounds - over 100lb on some models.

These were the first 'fat fendered' Plymouths. Advertisements at the time called it 'Impressive, artistic massiveness in design'. Everything on the car had been smoothed out and rounded off. The tear-drop shaped headlights now came straight from the side of the radiator grille instead of up from the wings, and were for the first time painted the body colour of the car. The grille itself was much wider and featured thin vertical strips of steel with a narrow painted vertical section in the centre, again in body colour, that curved up onto the hood where sat the redesigned 'Mayflower' badge.

The long hood, again with strips of stainless steel running along the sides, only accentuated the speed bulges that ran up to the cowl. The single-piece windscreen still opened at the bottom for ventilation but would be gone for 1938. And a year

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THE FABULOUS FIFTIES

The decade started with America going into Korea under the UN banner to help South Korea defend its borders against the communist North. Unfortunately, the Chinese had the same idea to help the North, and so began another bloody conflict that would last for three years and take over 55,000 US lives. With war came the 'Jet Age'. War brought technological advances that overspilled into civilian life, and the world was gripped by new fads like 3D, automated gadgets and power-assisted everything. Space and science fiction seemed more like science fact and this showed in the cars. It was the era of the fins.

Chrysler had been left napping but, in the autumn of 1950, things started to change. Lester 'Tex' Colbert was now in charge and set in motion a fast redesign of all the Corporation cars. In 1951, the new Hemispherical Head V8 was introduced, although only in Chrysler and Imperial cars. And somebody let Virgil Exner loose in the design studios.

Virgil had joined Chrysler in '49, after spending time at GM and Studebaker. He reworked Chrysler's 1953 facelift so much that they looked unrelated to the 1949-52 cars

underneath. Exciting space age concept cars were produced, giving a hint of what the future might hold. But 1955-59 was the real Exner era.

Exner, now chief designer, introduced the first generation 'Forward Look' in 1955. He wanted cars that gave the impression of forward motion even while stationary. They were low, sleek and powerful. Colourful two-tone and tri-tone paint helped to give that 'in-motion' illusion.

The Next Generation

1957. Elvis appeared on the Ed Sullivan show from the waist up. Martin Luther King's black civil rights protest gained momentum. And the first true American compact car, the Rambler, was introduced. '57 also saw the second-generation 'Forward Look' cars rolled out.

'Suddenly it's 1960!' cried the Plymouth ads for '57. 'Flite Sweep' styling, as it was called, was an immediate hit with the public. These cars looked like rocket ships compared with the competition, even lower, longer, wider and faster than before. Kids all over America begged their parents to buy Chryslers, but the grown-ups didn't need much persuading.

Of all Chrysler's marques, Plymouth had the most subtle styling. Five lines were available: the 'base' line Plaza, then Savoy, Belvedere, Fury and the Suburban station wagon. Many Savoy's were used as taxis and by police forces. The

“THEY WERE LOW, SLEEK AND POWERFUL. COLOURFUL TWO-TONE AND TRI-TONE PAINT HELPED TO GIVE THAT 'IN-MOTION' ILLUSION”



ENJOY GREAT TV ENTERTAINMENT FROM PLYMOUTH! The laugh and love hit of the year, "DATE WITH THE ANGELS," with Betty White, and Lawrence Welk's "TOP TUNES AND NEW TALENT."

“We're not wealthy...we just look it!”

"Life has taken on a big lift for the whole family since we got our new Suburban. Never knew a car could make you feel so downright proud. It's a sort of 'millionaire feeling'... without a big price tag attached. In fact, when people look enviously at us, I grin to myself and say: 'Congratulations, fellow: you got all this right in the low-price 3!'"

It's true that a millionaire couldn't buy more satisfaction and com-

fort than you get in the years-ahead Plymouth! For example, you can't buy a bigger station wagon at any price than the beautiful Plymouth Suburban. And no matter which Plymouth you pick... choosing from 17 glamorous body styles... you get sensational advances like floating Torsion-Aire Ride... same suspension as in America's most luxurious \$6000 car. Compare all 3! See how much more Plymouth offers!

When you drive a

Plymouth

you're 3 full years ahead



CUSTOM 200... most glamorous "winner" you've ever dealt with!

BIG-TIME SPLENDORS: THE VALIANT 200 SERIES

big and bold the Valiant 200 is crisp and contemporary characteristically Valiant... soundly built

Over the past years, there's been a growing groundswell of opinion in favour of a car that provides economy and manoeuvrability without sacrificing roominess, luxury and performance. Well, the final and definite answer has at last been achieved: the Valiant 200 series for 1965, provides all this and more. Seen from the outside, the 200's please the eye with their precise proportions (there's 196.4 inches of beauty and de-



VALIANT 200 4-DOOR SEDAN: compelling combination of value and verve! Here is a car that proves beyond doubt that luxury and performance need not come with a high price tag. Valiant 200 is big and spacious inside—with generous stretch-out dimensions front and back. And its power-choice is exceptional—from the economical Fleet-516 to a big 16-performance V-8!



possibility balanced on a wheelbase of 111 in.). Valiant 200's clean, contemporary styling puts the emphasis on form and function rather than meaningless "decoration". Inside, you find that both the Custom 200 and the 200 provide the kind of moving-around room that you're accustomed to in cars that are much bulkier and more expensive. In spite of their low and svelte profiles (the 200's stand only 54.4 inches

from the ground), these surprising cars give you nearly 40 in. of headroom, and well over a yard of legroom for rear-seat passengers. The Valiant 200 seats are extremely comfortable and interiors are colour-keyed for beauty and engineered for long life. (see illustration "A"). Slip behind the wheel, and you'll be delighted with the functional good looks of the instrument panel, dramatic in black and satin silver

(see illustration "B"), with a steering-column gearshift within handy reach and slide-type heater controls mounted in the centre of the panel. In both the Custom 200 and the 200 you can add further luxury touches with fingertip power steering (illustration "C") and power brakes (illustration "D")... and for a sporty accent, smart wheel covers are another favourite option. (illustration "E").

ABOVE: CHRYSLER DID A U-TURN WHEN IT LAUNCHED THE VALIANT, FINALLY RECOGNISING THE NEED FOR A SMALLER MODEL IN THE RANGE

Belvedere was the most luxurious of these low-priced cars, and was the most popular with over 280,000 sold. But top of the range was the sport and power option: the Fury.

Sitting lower than its line-mates, the Fury made the most of the new torsion bar suspension that was fitted across the marques. Gone were front coils for this sportier 'Torsion-Aire Ride'. Although much larger, these cars handled like small European sportsters.

Set on a 118in. wheelbase, the Fury was a Belvedere sub-line that came with most extras as standard. Sand Dune White finish with a gold 'Sport-tone' trim running the length of the car, they were very eye-catching. Only available as two-door pillarless coupes, they were powered by a standard 299.6cu.in. V8 or the optional 318cu.in. Fury V800. This gave the suburban street racer an awesome 290bhp to play with. They also had some success on the race circuit.

The Fury was as beautiful as it was fast. The low wings, razor thin roofline and gradually rising fins very elegantly created that wedge shape that gave the illusion of motion. Even the fenders had fins on them. The front end was designed for dual headlights, but approval from all of the then 48 states could not be found, with eight states disapproving. To get over this problem, Plymouth mounted large parking lights next to the headlights, giving the look of duals. By the next year, this was rectified with proper dual headlights.

Something else that was quickly fixed for '58 was the front lower valance, which had taken a lot of criticism. The front bumper was raised in the centre, and below this was a set of six unsightly vertical slots that just didn't look right. The '58 Plymouths would have horizontal chrome strips to match the grille above the bumper.

It wasn't only the public that hailed the '57s. *Motor Trend* awarded its Best Handling Car award to Plymouth, and the entire Corporation won Car of the Year for its '... superior handling and roadability qualities'. Total Plymouth sales reached 762,231, a record that put them firmly back into third

place, once again relegating Buick to fourth.

But Chrysler paid a heavy price for all this success. Due to the high demand, build quality fell by the wayside. Complaints of poor fittings, shudders, leaks and creaks abounded. Far worse though, was early rust-out. Even before 1957 drew to a close, these cars had started to rust badly.

Over the next few years, Chrysler did an amazing turnaround thanks to anti-corrosion dips and much higher quality control. But it was all too late. The bad name stuck and would haunt the Corporation until late into the Eighties, almost killing Chrysler completely.

THE SWINGING SIXTIES

The Chrysler Corporation found itself well behind its main competitors again when it came to introducing compact cars in the early Sixties. 'We'll never make a small car', was the cry from the Chrysler camp. They missed completely what the buying public was after, so Ford's Falcon and Chevy's now infamous Corvair got off to an excellent head start. Imports like the Volkswagen Beetle and even British cars, like Austins and Vauxhalls, were selling well.

In answer to all this, Chrysler did a hasty u-turn, and what they came up with was the Valiant - another Virgil Exner-inspired design that must surely go down in history as one of the weirdest cars of all time. The 1960 Valiant had all the styling characteristics of its bigger brothers, even down to the 'dustbin lid' trunk, but on a slightly smaller scale. I say 'slightly' because, compared with most European cars, this was still a pretty big automobile, larger than most British family saloons. It had the honour of being the first mass produced car to have AC rather than DC electrics. Odd looking or not, it sold nearly 200,000 in its first season alone.

As the decade progressed, the Valiant had the usual mild facelifts, until 1963 when it squared up with the rest of the Corporation in a complete redesign. Come 1964, Valiant's

If you think a fastback can't cost under \$2,500, seat 5 nicely, and offer enough power to let you swing

meet the Barracuda



It's a free fastback. Plymouth makes it. Standard equipment: front bucket seats, 7-foot carpeted "anything" space (back seat flips down), tinted rear glass. Swinging options: 4-cylinder-600, 273-cu.-in. V-8, wheel covers with chrome-plated legs. Sharp! Meet Barracuda at your Plymouth Dealer's.

"Under \$2,500" is based on Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price for lowest-priced 6-cylinder model, exclusive of destination charges, taxes and local fees, if any, and optional equipment.

Barracuda the spectacular new fastback by **Plymouth**
PLYMOUTH DIVISION CHRYSLER
CORPORATION

“THE MUSCLE CAR WAR WAS HOTTING UP AND THE LITTLE PLYMOUTH WANTED A PIECE OF THE ACTION. THE VALIANT WAS EVOLVING AND, FOR 1965, WENT ‘SPORTY’”

LEFT: STYLE, POWER AND VALUE FOR MONEY WAS THE ORDER OF THE DAY IN 1965, EPITOMISED BY THE STUNNING LOOKING PLYMOUTH BARRACUDA

initial 170cu.in. in-line 'six' was still available, but some buyers were going for the 273cu.in. V8 which was now optioned. The muscle car war was hotting up and the little Plymouth wanted a piece of the action. The Valiant was evolving and, for 1965, went 'sporty'.

The 1965 Barracuda

It was April 1st, 1964 when the new Plymouth Barracuda was launched, some two weeks ahead of Fords now legendary Mustang. But this was no April Fool's joke.

The sports fastback was mechanically identical to all other Valiants of the time, but the body was unique – and amazing. The Barracuda's fastback roofline was dominated by a huge rear wraparound screen that was hand-formed and measured 14.4 square feet. This looked into a carpeted cargo area that, with the back seats folded away, gave seven feet of stowage space. But this low sleek car wasn't that interested in being a 'home mover'. Like its bigger Plymouth brothers that were then racing with the big 426cu.in. Max Wedge V8, this little upstart wanted to go fast. And how!

Still standard was the Valiant's 101bhp in-line 'six'. But buyers could also go fishing for an option package, giving this fish some teeth: the 'Formula S' pack. In it came, amongst other things, firmer suspension, front anti-sway bar, larger tyres AND a 235bhp 'Commando' V8 engine. The 273cu.in. Commando came with high-lift camshaft, solid valve lifters, unsilenced air cleaner and a low restriction dual-exhaust system. The understated performance of this set-up was called 'vigorous'. A tamer version of the Barracuda could be had, fitted with a 273cu.in. V8 but giving only a modest 180bhp.

Because it was launched so closely to the Mustang, most people assumed that this was the Barracuda's direct competition, and it didn't do too badly either, thanks to a production run of 64,596. But the Barracuda was in all probability a response to the sporty Corvair Monza. To put the Barracuda's success into perspective, Ford's Mustang sold nearly 700,000 units in its first ten months of production ...

As the swinging Sixties progressed, the Barracuda was facelifted and modified – lower, smoother and faster. Barracuda convertibles were available in '67, as well as a notchback version. These cars now had little in

common with their Valiant kinsfolk.

Plymouth matched its Dodge relations in the 'Muscle Era'. The restyled '69 had the abbreviation 'Cuda on the 440cu.in. option. At the same time, other cars like Roadrunners, Furys, Sport Satellites and GTXs were available and were getting more powerful too. In 1970, a street racing AAR 'Cuda became available, but the ultimate was the Hemi version: this 426cu.in. street Hemi was offered in very few numbers and is now one of the most sought after muscle cars.

THE END?

There have been many peaks and troughs in Plymouth's 70 year voyage; thankfully it has been mainly peaks. But the 1980s saw an identity crisis at Plymouth. Too closely linked to the Chrysler Division and using no less than three captive imports (like the Mitsubishi-built Champs, Sapporo and Arrow pickups) at any one time, sales dwindled. The 'K' car helped somewhat, but there was a time in the early Nineties when it looked as if the Plymouth name might be dropped completely, reduced as it was to just two car lines: the Neon and Aclaim (plus the Voyager MPV, of course). Thankfully, a turnaround in fortunes and thinking at Chrysler has changed all that.

The general transformation at Chrysler over the last ten years has been dramatic. Breathtakingly exciting designs and imaginative concepts have been put into production. Cars like the Viper and Plymouth's Prowler have become reality.

When the Aclaim was dropped in 1995, it was replaced by the Breeze. The Prowler, as mentioned, went into full production. And Plymouth's Voyager MPVs and Neons went worldwide (sold in Europe as Chryslers).

So what of the future? Plymouth's Pronto and Spyder concepts are very exciting. The Neon is due to be 'all new' in 1999. And now, with Daimler-Benz's financial support and name for build quality, it seems that the Corporation as a whole has a much more secure future. Division wise, Plymouth is still a major player but cannot afford to rest on past laurels for fear of joining the DeSoto and Eagle divisions in that great junk yard in the sky.

Profit is all important. Let's hope that the Mayflower sails on for another 70 years. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, PLYMOUTH! 🇺🇸



ABOVE: THE FUTURE FOR PLYMOUTH LOOKS BRIGHTER THAN EVER, THANKS TO CONCEPT CARS LIKE THE 1998 PRONTO SPYDER