

The Lincoln Continental

“Conceived in the mind of the late Edsel Ford and dedicated to the discriminating taste of the American Public, the Lincoln Continental still maintains a special place in the hearts of devotees of fine automobiles”

So said the introduction to the original 1939 Lincoln Continental in a book written by Floyd Clymer and first published in 1963. Mark historian Clymer went on to describe how the first Continental was introduced in October of 1939, and was lower, longer and wider than its American contemporaries. It’s artistic lines quickly caught the public’s imagination as no other car had.

Clymer explained that Edsel Ford presented to his stylists sketches for an automobile unlike anything then produced in the United States. Experts in the field of automotive design, the stylists, found little to criticize. They did recommend, however, that the spare tyre be placed inside the trunk compartment - a practice generally favoured at the time - but Edsel Ford insisted that it remain mounted outside the rear deck. Public

opinion subsequently vindicated Edsel’s choice; the Continental rear tyre mount has become a mark of high style that is found on a number of latter-day cars. It was a feature, along with the long hood, relatively short passenger compartment and rear deck treatment, that distinguished this car from others built in America and led to use of the name “Continental”, suggestive of certain European styling characteristics.

In the enthusiasm evoked by this styling concept, many lost sight of the fact that Edsel Ford originally intended that the Lincoln-Continental would be his personal car. While its panels were being hammered out, he decided to have two more made for his older sons, Henry II and Benson, both of whom were in school at the time. Then with no thought of producing the car in quantity, he left for a Florida



vacation and the first car was shipped to him there. He returned with some 200 orders for an automobile that was not even being made for public sale.

Because each car had to be virtually custom-made, it was inevitable that it cost more than a vehicle produced with conventional mass production techniques. Yet, the die was cast - literally and figuratively. Although the cost exceeded that of a typical production models, slightly modified Lincoln-Zephyr parts were used in many areas. Special wood dies with metal surfaces eliminated the need for costlier steel dies, and aluminium castings, for example, were used for the windshield pillars.

Only twenty-five Lincoln-Continental, all cabriolets, were produced in the first year, 1939. Although 935 were built the following year, each car continued to be virtually hand-made. There were no piles of stampings to be fitted into place as the chassis inched along an assembly line. Many exterior parts were, in fact, improvised as the production process developed. Even the fenders were not available as a single unit. Instead, a special insert was added to the standard Zephyr front fenders and hood to give the

added length.

The steel-top, two-door coupe, a Continental body style, was the forerunner of the so called hardtop convertibles that became so popular in the 1950s. While the Lincoln-Zephyr was unit constructed, the Lincoln-Continental had a sheet steel body with a distinctive chassis. Panels were made on a arch press, then finished on a hammer form. Peak year for Lincoln-Continental production was 1947, when 1,569 were built. After 1,299 cars were made in the first three months of 1948, the company suspended production in order to concentrate on other lines with greater volume. In the years of actual production, between 1939 and 1948, 5,322 units were made - 3,045 coupes and 2,277 cabriolets. They soon became collector's items.

Built on a 125-inch wheelbase, the Lincoln-Continental was three inches lower and seven inches longer than most of its standard contemporaries, and it's V-12 engine was polished like a jewel. The V-shaped grille on the 1940-41 models was identical to that of the Zephyr. The 1941 Continental, with parking lights atop the front fenders and flush-type button latches instead of standard exterior



door handles, was slightly different from its 1940 predecessor. It also had hydraulic window lifts and some changes in the chrome treatment.

One contemporary publication said of the 1941 model: "every line of this new car, every move it makes, tells of far places, and ease of reaching them. The Lincoln-Continental is true to a great heritage. It blends Lincoln precision and care with Lincoln-Zephyr leadership in design".

The Lincoln-Continental for 1942 again stirred the automotive world. Gone were the Zephyr grille, and in its place was a new, massive array of chrome which, about midway down the front, angled outward to the bumper. The parking lights were placed beside the headlights, a gracefully curved side mirror was added, and all four fenders were squared and lengthened to lend an even lower and longer appearance. This illusion of greater

length was heightened by the addition of chrome strips on the rear fenders.

Some of the reasons for the almost unparalleled popularity of the Lincoln-Continental still remain clouded in mystery. Since its weight ranged from 3500 to 4100 pounds, it could not be classified as a sports car. From the side it was the picture of simplicity with less chrome and glitter than most cars of the period. It's not enough to say that it reflected the personality of a man who possessed fine taste in automotive design. Yet, as typified by the then unorthodox position of the spare tyre, the car was not designed to meet carefully tested public preferences. Rather, it created preferences. Perhaps the Lincoln-Continental achieved popularity because it was different without being radical, clean without being stripped of important features that were both functional and decorative, and luxurious without breaking with the family car tradition.

The Continental MKII

The Continental name would disappear for several years until Ford took the momentous decision to create a new auto division in the form of the Continental Division, in the mid-fifties, and introduce the new Continental MKII. Despite manufacturing costs that were considerably greater than its high selling price, this new model was viewed as a bit of an understated masterpiece by collectors, in a time when automobiles were growing evermore outrageous.

Staying true to its 1940's predecessor's form, the new Continental maintained a long hood, short deck appearance, with a two-door passenger compartment that was relatively compact for the length of the car. The styling echoed the unadorned simplicity of the original, and featured the classic Continental rear

spare tyre treatment, but, overall, was thoroughly contemporary in appearance.

In a move to emphasise the new Continental's exclusivity, the new MKII version was is not a Lincoln, despite its inspiration which could be traced back to the 1939 Lincoln-Continental model which is commonly described as the most beautiful American car ever produced. The design brief for the newly created Continental Division was to produce "the most distinguished car in the world", and in contrast with other products of the Ford Motor Company, the MKII was essentially to be hand-built.

With the appointment of Henry Ford II as head of the Ford company at the end of WWII, "The Deuce" actively pursued an aggressive expansion plan which, while primarily aimed at the



Unadorned purity of design was a hallmark of the 1956/7 Continental MKII

everyday Ford & Mercury ranges, also encompassed brand new models. Armed with fresh funds from taking the company partly public, "The Deuce" appointed his brother, William Clay Ford, in charge of the newly created Special Projects Office. Apparently, Lincoln dealers were clamouring for a model that could compete more equally with Cadillac because existing Lincolns were thought to be a Buick/Chrysler competitor. Inspired by the 1939 Continental, which was a pet project of Edsel Ford and Design Chief Bob Gregorie, William Clay Ford set in motion a competition between Ford's own stylists and outside designers to come up with a model that would compete with the very best designs from around the world.

Ultimately, a design by Ford's own John Reinhart, who had previously worked at Packard, was selected as the design that would go forward, and under great secrecy, the new division was announced to the public in 1954, with the Continental MKII debuting at the Paris Auto Salon in the fall of 1955. The Continental MKII proved to be elegant and understated, almost devoid of extraneous decorative trim, and available

predominately in single colours with just five rare two-colour combinations. Priced at \$9,695, it cost significantly more than any other American passenger car of its time (a 1956 Ford Customline Six two-door sedan was yours for \$1,939), and adding the only option available - air-conditioning - pushed the price well into five-figure territory. Despite this lofty price, it was said that Ford lost nearly \$1,000 on each car sold.

All examples of the Continental MKII were built at the Allen Park Body and Assembly plant in Allen Park, Michigan, and there was a great emphasis on quality, both in terms of materials and build quality. The finest leather hides from Scotland's Bridge of Weir were selected for the interior; chrome plating was triple industry standards and pre-delivery inspections of all supplied parts was far greater than for all other Ford products. Assembly time was double that of any Lincoln model and workers hand-fitted body panels carefully to ensure a perfect fit. Each car received a multiple coats of lacquer - the only Ford model to be painted in this way in 1956, and it was said that the paint process

took as long as it did to produce many normal production cars. Even the four wheel-covers were hand assembled with individual vanes fastened to the main hub cap, while each 'Continental' letter was individually bolted onto the trunk lid.

Powered by a 285-horse-power, 368 cubic inch OHV V8 which had first been introduced in 1952, Lincoln engineers thoroughly upgraded the familiar power plant with new block, crankshaft, camshaft and other features, before balancing the reciprocating assembly, including the generator, for smooth, vibration free running, and then ran each power plant in on a test bed, with random engines selected for a tear-down to check quality. Employing a 9.0:1 compression ratio and a 4-barrel Holley carburettor, the Continental V8 produced 402 lb-ft of torque, driving through a Borg-Warner Turbo-Drive 3-speed automatic gearbox. For 1957, the second and final year of production, horsepower increased to 300 and torque to 415 lb.ft.

The classic short deck, long hood

styling included a prominent, upright spare-wheel cover which housed a real spare tyre. Standing on a wheelbase of 126 inches (huge for a model only available as a two-door model), the Continental MKII had an overall length of 218.4 inches with a width of 77.5 inches and a height of 56.3 inches which resulted in an overall weight of a hefty 5,000 lbs. While a two-door hard-top model was launched for the Continental MKII's introduction, a retractable-hard-top convertible and four-door hardtop sedan were originally planned. However, sales and subsequent losses meant that neither would see the light of day, although two convertibles were eventually built to special order, one for William Clay Ford himself, and at least one of these still exists, although some later 'tribute' cars might have muddied the waters. The retractable hardtop engineering was not wasted though, and appeared in the 1957/8/9 Ford Skyliner models, and later Thunderbird and Lincoln Continentals where the costs could be successfully recouped.



Terry Jeeves' 1956 Continental MKII seen at the Brooklands American Day event in 2019

Chassis details employed a body-on-frame layout, unlike the following Lincoln models which would employ a full monocoque. A fully boxed cross-member was placed under the front seats and suspension, while largely standard Lincoln, did incorporate what was referred to as speed-sensitive shock absorbers.

The Continental MKII had an extensive list of standard equipment for the time which included power steering, power brakes, power windows, power seats, power vent windows, full instrumentation including tachometer and low fuel warning device. There were 19 standard exterior colours available with 43 interior design schemes using five interior fabrics.

1956 sales numbered 2,550 vehicles while 1957 only resulted in a further 444 units plus the two convertibles referred to earlier, before production ended, and the Continental name plate was integrated into regular Lincoln production with a target price of under \$6,000.

Club members Terry & Jackie Jeeves acquired their own version from a seller in Canada where it was for sale on eBay. Terry had been looking to add a Continental MKII to his collection of some fifteen American vehicles (see *H&F* Spring 2014), which are predominately Fords in origin, although a 1954 Cadillac

Eldorado in baby blue and a white '57 Cadillac convertible do add some variety. Terry had been looking for the right car for some ten years, and didn't want a black or blue example. He and Jackie looked at an example in Sweden, but the car didn't match it description, not helped by the fact that the seller was trying to sell it based on ten year old photographs! The Continental MKII he finally settled on is finished in a silver grey platinum hue, which is the cars original colour and was called Dark Grey Metallic 31332. This is contrasted with a grey carpets, and off-white leather seating with charcoal coloured inserts.

Prior to its Canadian ownership, the car had been purchased new by a surgeon in the USA whose name, in accordance with the Continental Division's practice, is inscribed on a custom plate attached to the instrument panel (his son is still alive and practices plastic surgery). The car later became a Massachusetts museum exhibit in 1985 until sold to the Canadian owner some two years ago. Thus, its 36,000 miles are confirmed to be all that this remarkable cars has covered in its 60 years of existence. Other than new carpet and a change by Terry from cross-ply tyres to a set of new radial wide-whites, the car is totally original, and Terry confirms that it drives like a new car.

The Continental Reborn

For 1958 the Continental line was reinvented. While it still relied on many of the same mechanical components, it was the complete antithesis of a journey that had started way back in 1939. A rear deck which was almost as large as the hood; a greatly extended interior; heavily sculptured, angular and with more decoration, and with an option of four-doors, the new Continental Mark series resembled nothing like that which had gone before. It was now built to an all new unit construction

method, at a brand new Wixom assembly plant which it shared with the all new 4-seat Thunderbird. Priced at just north of \$6,000, the Continental MKIII competed head to head with Cadillac, and was available as a 4-door sedan, 2-door H/T coupe, 2-door convertible and 4-door H/T sedan. Not only were there more body styles than ever before, the car shared its basic architecture and styling with the less well equipped Capri and Premier models, with only a reverse slant rear window clearly



All available 1958 Continental MKIII body styles featured a reverse slant rear roof line with “Breezeway” rear window. The convertible roof retracted under a hinged rear panel, automatically

distinguishing the this top of the line model from its lesser siblings. Even the retractable roof convertible carried over this unique feature. The reverse slant rear roof incorporated the wind-down “Breezeway” centre window panel which had first been introduced on the 1957 Mercury Turnpike Cruiser.

Styled by John Najjar, assisted by Elwood Engel, the ‘58 Lincolns were influenced by the 1955 La Tosca concept model designed by Alex Tremulis. The results, with heavily sculptured front wheel openings and canted dual head lamps, mounted vertically, was controversial, and was even nicknamed the “slant-eyed monster” by Ford’s own styling studio staff. The new unibody Lincolns, built on a giant 131 inch wheelbase and an overall length of 229 inches, were also the largest cars ever built by Ford, and the largest unit constructed cars built by any auto manufacture until probably Rolls-Royce introduced its contemporary Phantom model in recent years. Its construction methods also meant the end of hand built construction.

The 1958 Lincolns were powered by the 430 cubic inch MEL V8 which it shared with the top range Mercury and Thunderbird models, rated at 375 (gross) horsepower. The horsepower was no doubt welcomed by owners to help pull along a car with a shipping weight of up to 4,927 lbs. The only transmission available was the 3-speed Turbo-Drive automatic. For 1958, it was possible to order a 400 bhp version of the 430 V8 with three 2-barrel carburetors.

Unlike previous Continentals, the option list was long, and included air conditioner, power vent windows, six-way power front seat, leather seatings surfaces, seat belts and air-suspension. The latter was the least popular option, with only 2% of production so specified. Controversial styling or not, 11,550 Continentals were produced for 1958, making it by far the most popular Continental in the model’s interrupted history. Of those, 4,891 4-door H/T sedans proved the most popular body style.

For the 1959 model year, the Continental model was named as the Mark



The 1958 Continental MKIII 4-door hard-top sedan was the top seller that year

IV. Some minor restyling took place, with the sculptured front wheel openings toned down and the front bumper 'Dagmars' eliminated. The introduction of the 1959 models, coincided with the ending of the Continental Division by Ford, and the badging reflected this with separate Continental and MKIV badges applied, finished in gold. Horse power dropped back to 350 thanks to a slight lowering of the compression ratio to 10.0:1 from 10.50:1, while the 3 x 2-barrel option was dropped altogether.

Body styles increased to six with the introduction of both a Executive sedan and a Formal Sedan, while six-way power seats tinted glass, Travel-Tuner radio with dual speakers, power vent windows were now standard fitment. Prices rose accordingly, with the convertible now breaching \$7,000, while the Executive Limousine started at \$10,230, but then only 49 were built, and just 78 of the similar Formal Sedan model, so despite these two extra body styles, overall production dropped slightly for the year to 11,126.

For 1960, the Continental models were designated MKV. Styling changes

included new wheel trims, a more conventional front bumper treatment, four, new grille pattern, four short chrome spears set into the front wheel covings, and a new instrument panel. Overall length had dropped now to 227 inches, although the wheelbase had never been reduced during the three year production run. Shipping weights were around 5,200 lbs for the conventional models, but topped out at 5,495 lbs for the Executive Sedan. Quoted horsepower dropped yet again to 315 bhp thanks to adoption of a two-barrel Carter ABD-2965S carburettor in the place of the previous four-barrel instrument.

Overall, the number of cars built for the 1960 model year stood pat at 11,120 units, with the 4-door H/T sedan remaining the most popular with 6,604 built. The convertible managed 2,044 units, and this is the second Continental model owned by club member Terry Jeeves.

Located by a mate who first saw it parked-up on axle stands while driving past a property in California, said mate contacted Terry and said "you've always fancied one of those great big Lincoln Continental convertibles from the late

The Continental MKIII

50s/very early 60s haven't you". Terry responded positively, and the car was purchased from the widow of the last owner. A typical California car, sheet metal, and more importantly, the unibody construction, was sound, but it had stood for many years, and the brakes were gone, it didn't run, the front seat had deteriorated, as had the carpets, and the soft top needed replacing.

The engine was coaxed into life before shipping, and the car was then transported to the UK, along with another purchase by Terry's older brother. Despite writing in large letters over the windshield "No Brakes", the docker charged with unloading it still managed to run it into the back of his brother's purchase when it arrived in the UK, which please no one, even if damage was light!

All this was some twelve-years ago now, and since then the engine has been revived to run smoothly, although it didn't need a rebuild; the transmission did need a rebuild; the brakes have been gone through, the front seat re-upholstered, new carpet fitted and a new soft top acquired. Terry says it would still benefit from a repaint, and it still sports the damage on the front of the hood from running into his brother car during unloading from the ship that bought it to the UK, but it creates a stir where ever it goes, which included being displayed at the CAAC stand at the Brooklands Museum American Day event back in 2018.

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