

Letter from Europe

by **Bas de Voogd**

Collecting European Petrol Cans

It must have been around 1972 that I was helping a chap in England to clear out his garage. I could only just prevent him to throw away an old Racing Shell petrol can. It must have been the first petrol can I ever saw. Once home I repainted it bright red and highlighted the embossed letters and the flash in gold as per original and so it became the first can of my collection.

It is hard to imagine these days, but in the earliest days of motoring an empty fuel tank presented quite a problem.



A 2 gallon Racing Shell can with a lightning flash.

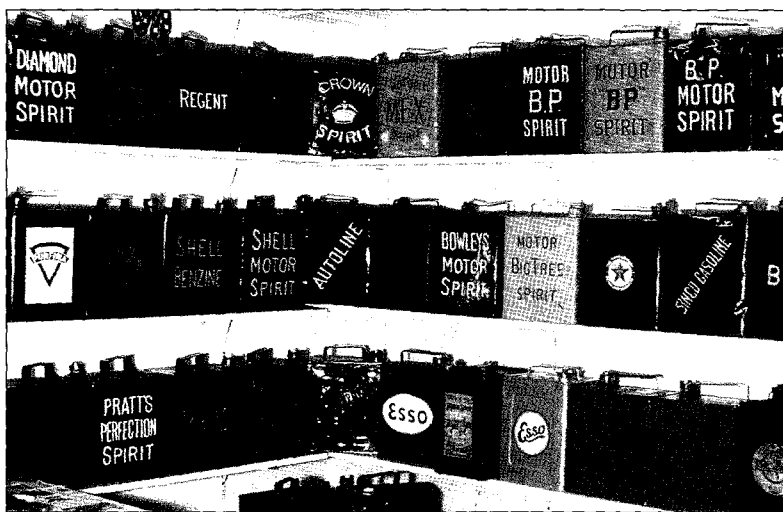
The only place which might have some sort of "benzine" was the local chemist. The quality was often doubtful, which was why suppliers often advised motorists to only buy fuel that came in a sealed can.

The third car owner in Holland, a Mr Aertnijs, wrote about some of his earliest experiences in 1955 and he could clearly recall that getting a supply of fuel around 1886 was no easy task. After some disappointing experiences with local suppliers he decided to get his fuel from August Korff from Bremen in Germany, one of the earliest refineries in Europe. It must have been transported by stagecoach!

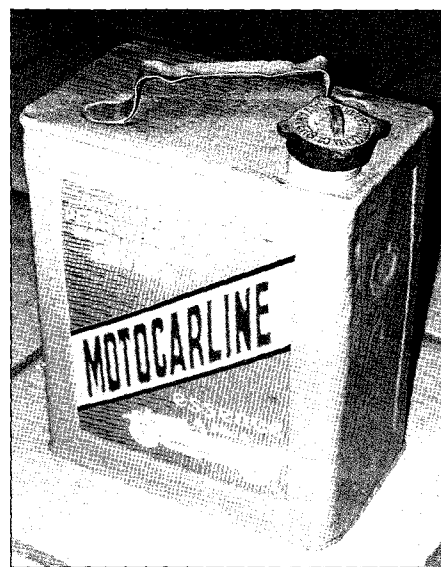
In England, the earliest supply of petrol came from Carless Capel and Leonard's Chemical works in Hackney, Northeast London. They were actually the first company to use the name "petrol" which they trademarked, forcing other supplier to use the term "motor spirit" on their fuel cans. Carless also established the customer of supplying their liquid in two gallon cans, but surprisingly they still sell special racing fuel in considerably larger cans.

France had already thousands of motor vehicles running around even before 1900 when most of Europe was still travelling on horseback. It therefore had several refineries supplying petrol, which was usually sold in 5 and even sometimes 2 or 10 litre cans.

As far as collecting petrol cans is concerned the British two gallon cans



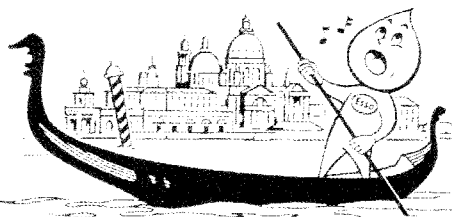
A collection of mainly British two gallon cans, although Big Tree would have come from New Zealand and Sinco is a 10 litre version, probably from Belgium



In Belgium, APC used the Motorcarline brand until the 1920s, as can be seen on this can.

are by far the most popular. The reason is that there are more than 350 – 400 different brands or variants to be found, and more have survived than in most other countries. Another reason why so many are still to be found in England is that in the rest of Europe most petrol cans were lost during the Second World War.

The petrol can which is collected these days was in fact a light metal rectangular container with a cap made from brass to prevent sparking and the company name embossed on the front and rear panels. In some cases there is also a text embossed on the side panels. Usually the company name is also to be seen on



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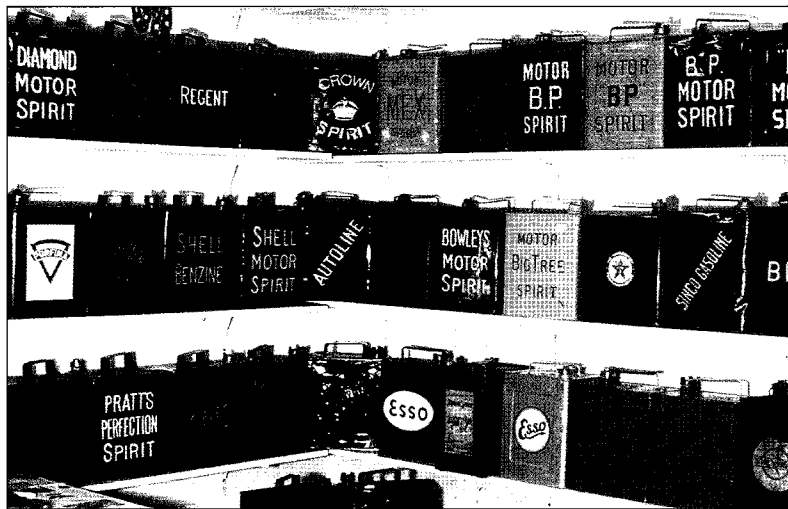
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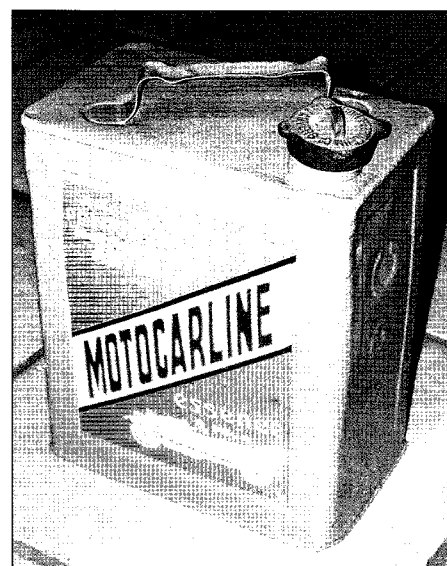
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More French cans (except for the Vacuum Oil Co). Two of the rare cans on the bottom row include a Moto-Gaz and a Moto-Naphta.



Close-up of two French BP Energetic cans; the one on the left is younger and probably dates from the 1930s.

the brass cap. When collecting your tin of petrol all you paid for was the petrol inside. For the can you had to pay a deposit. Empty cans were returned to a depot or a filling station where all cans were cleaned, tested for leaks and often repainted, refilled and wire sealed again. Each company had its distinctive colour but through all the repainting the original shade is often lost.

The letters on the cans were hardly ever highlighted in a different colour. There were however several cans for sale which were nicer than others with

letters highlighted in gold and the brass cap nickel plated. They were nice advertising items when mounted in a special bracket on the running board found on most pre-1914 cars.

French cans have much less variety and are less attractive to most collectors although early cans which have usually beautiful paper labels are rare and can fetch large sums.

Petrol cans originate from the earliest days of motoring and were in common use all over Europe until around 1940. When the kerbside petrol pump came into being from the nineteen twenties they were still in use to serve less populated areas. In some countries petrol was still distributed in cans as late as the nineteen sixties.

How to start a collection

By far the best place to start a collection of petrol cans is in good old England, especially at the September Beaulieu Autojumble in the New Forest where you have the opportunity to see hundreds of cans at reasonable prices. It is not difficult to collect ten different brands on a single day and still to spend less than \$200 doing so. The next ten will probably cost you closer to \$600 and finding rarer cans may cost you \$200 or more each, with the very rarest

surprise that if a can is sharp and straight and with the correct cap they demand better prices.

Some nice two gallon cans can also be found in Australia, New Zealand and even India. Belgium, Holland and some other European countries had similar cans in appearance but they contain 10 litres instead of 2 gallons. In Italy 20 litre cans were common with some colourful ones from petrol company AGIP.

For those unable to get to autojumbles or other swap meets, cans can also be found (but with less fun) on eBay – and as with other collectibles getting to know the right search words can sometimes turn up a hidden bargain.

There are several collectors with large collections in the UK; the best known must be Mike Berry (the "Two Gallon Can Man") who always has a stand at



A well restored Dutch Esso 10 litre can clearly dated 1929; APC stands for American Petroleum Co.



This Texaco can is probably from Belgium or Holland.

Beaulieu. Other collectors can be found at swap meets or online. However, some people find that a collection of cans takes up too much space and they restrict themselves to collecting just the brass caps which can form a nice collection on their own.

"Your Starter for Ten" by collectors Mike & Trevor is a small, but comprehensive booklet telling all about the many fuel companies in England, what to look for when searching a can, what colour they should be, how to date a can, and what variations can be found. The booklet gets regular updates through email. If you want a copy then it can only be ordered by telephone +44 1993 850605.

Footnote from Ian Byrne:

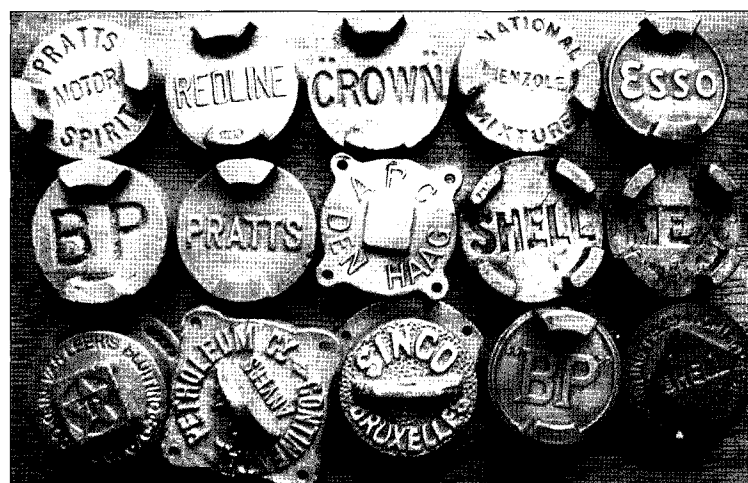
I'd very much like to thank Bas de Voogd, who lives in the Netherlands, for contributing this article to the "Letter from Europe" series. Please let me know (on ian@roadmaps.org) if you would like to share your story with "Check the Oil!"'s readers.

I might add that gasoline is still sold in bottles in some poorer countries in Asia and Africa, especially to drivers of mopeds (small motorbikes). Sadly, there are no advertising cans from the oil companies there; instead they commonly use refilled whisky bottles, as these are hard to forge and so guarantee that they contain the volume of fuel indicated. I'm told that Johnny Walker whisky is regarded as being the best bottle from which to sell gasoline!

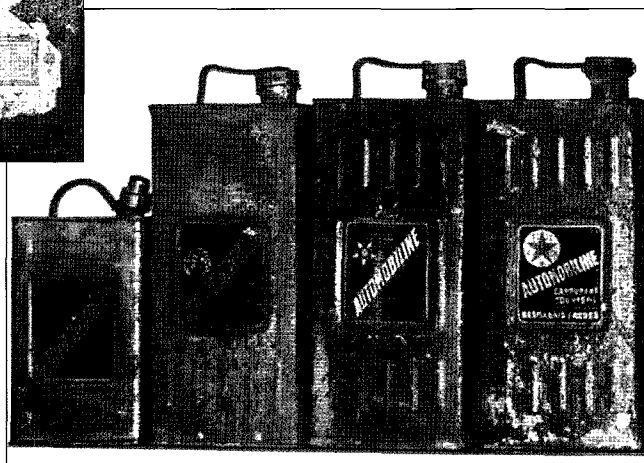


A paper label from the side of a rather earlier Dutch APC/Standard can.

A delicately drawn side panel from an early French Stelline (Lille-Bonnières & Colombes) can.



A collection of brass caps; apart from the APC the top two rows are British, and the remainder (except possibly the lower BP) from Belgium or Holland.



A collection of four French Automobiline cans in varying sizes from Desmarais Frères.

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