



Looks good on paper

It's the perfect business model: collect car brochures for nothing as a kid, sell them later for thousands. In theory...

THE CAR BROCHURE dealers I know are a helpful bunch. Their presence at motoring events provides a unique service – remedial care, almost – to those avid accumulators bitten by the bug years ago and unable since to shake off the disease. I loved print variations, abridged versions, differently dated issues: all the minutiae. I read them in detail, lapped up the syrupy text and glamorous images prepared by hard-living Soho ad men for the likes of Citroën and Subaru, and saw my bedroom eaten up by stacks of glossy paper.

Only the other day, one dealer told me there are a group of Belgian collectors who hire a coach to come to British classic car shows to spend their time flicking (through boxes of brochures) and ticking (their wants lists). Funny little men with holdalls and mad, distracted expressions? I shouldn't disparage because, a long time ago, I was a stark, staring brochure collector myself. I'd plague car dealers all over town, or write to manufacturers, to get brochures for new models the moment they were released. For a short period I could boast of possessing brochures for every new car on sale, and that included cars – De Tomaso Deauville, Panther Rio – barely on sale at all.

One day, I decided to stop, as suddenly it seemed so pointless. My collection sat in filing cabinets and boxes in a loft; cobwebs settled over it. When I bought a flat, I sold everything off and the cash went towards the deposit. As they'd all been free originally, it was a good result, and I've never missed them.

The completist represents one stratum of brochure collecting that the dealers need to survive. Whether pursuing a marque, genre, theme or era, they never stop buying. But the serious business today lies in specific pieces of sales literature for historic sports and racing cars. Here, the big auction houses have stepped in to establish some thunderous values.

For years the world record stood at £1070 for a Ferrari 250LM brochure sold by Christie's to gaping mouths in 1985. But at a Bonhams sale in Switzerland in December 2007, prices went berserk. A Ferrari 750 Monza sales folder sold for an extraordinary £12,055 (the new record), one for a Ferrari 500 Mondial reached £9042, and another for the Ferrari 250 Europa was bid to £6458. When a 1954 500 Mondial made £697,829 (\$1.54m) at a sale in California two years later, the brochure's value was established at 1.2% of the car's. Mad but true.



'When a 1954 500 Mondial made \$1.54m, the brochure was valued at 1.2% of that'

Some say they know of brochures sold for crazy numbers privately. I'd urge caution. As I write, the three most expensive pieces on offer with set prices on eBay are a Ferrari 250LM brochure at £1157 (that Christie's purchase in '85 wasn't such a good investment, then!), a 1926 Mercedes Supercharger brochure at £1250, and a 1931 MG range brochure at £2000 (signed by Cecil Kimber); the latter two are with Leicester's Pooks Motor Books. Never mind the 'retail' prices; what they change hands for will be negotiable and may be nowhere near as lofty. If you're spending anything like this money on thin sheaves of promotional paper, they won't want you to walk away empty-handed.

Brochures are perhaps the ultimate in motoring ephemera: designed to sell and be discarded. Dealer Andy Currie points out that an opulent 1970s Rolls Silver Shadow brochure is barely worth a fiver because so many were kept in immaculate condition, yet a modest pamphlet for the Bond Bug will sell for £30 and is hard to find, because most were thrown away.

Brochure graphics and photographs are evocative, and some lovely gems of information can be gleaned. I've always liked, for instance, the fact that Gordon-Keeble's brochure contains photos by fashion legend Terence Donovan; that a callow Charles Morgan himself designed Morgan's brochures of the late '60s.

The whiff of big bucks means Andy is alert to fakes. 'Some are very good indeed. Illustrations of engines in 1950s Ferrari catalogues should be pin-sharp down to the nuts; you need a magnifying glass to check for the fuzziness that means it's a copy.' And collectors have become savvy. I was involved in brokering the sale of an eight-page, A4, black-and-white, Porsche 917 brochure. The final sale price was a highly satisfactory £517, but hours were spent taking and sending photographs to give the precise positioning and size of its staples, and capturing the paper texture in the right light, before the new owner agreed that, yes, it was genuine.

Condition is important, obviously, and no-one likes coffee rings, scribble or milky tidemarks from moisture damage, but honest minor wear and tear is perhaps preferable to suspect 'mintness'. Bonhams sold a 1957 Aston Martin DB3S brochure in May this year for £250, and its crease down the centre and small tear to the cover can only have been reassuring.