

LYON AND THE AUTOMOBILE

From the beginning of the 19th century, with the onset of the industrial revolution, the Rhône-Alpes region saw intense activity in areas which today have made its reputation: general engineering, chemistry, electricity, etc....

Although now represented only by RENAULT TRUCKS, the Lyon automobile industry had previously been flourishing and active with up to 150 manufacturers before 1914. This spread of ingenuity and initiative was due, amongst other things, to the proximity of the metal transformation industry: steel works in Saint-Etienne and Rives-de-Gier, wire-drawing mills and forges in the Isère, etc... Furthermore, Lyon is a hot-bed of qualified engineers from the textile industry, trained the finest technical schools (Ecole Centrale, Ecole de la Martinière, etc).

The very first manufacturing units of course came from steam engine manufacturing specialists, but very quickly, the petrol engine came into being. **Emile LAVIROTTE** and **Maurice AUDIBERT** decided in 1893 to open up a workshop employing 20 or so people in Monplaisir and made their first model, a horizontal engine and belt-transmission car. Until 1896, the two associates produced only a handful of cars on demand until, due to the growth in orders, the factory was extended to 10,000m² and 500 workers in 1898.

During the same period, and from 1894 onwards, two other passionate engineers called **Théodore SCHNEIDER** and **Edouard ROCHET** poured the profits of their cycle construction workshop into the automobile adventure. In 1896, they went up the Galibier at the wheel of a car bearing their make. The ascent was an even greater success because the 8 km track they climbed presented difficulties which were apparently insurmountable for the period: an average gradient of 12%, stony, cracked terrain, etc....

This performance seemed not only to have marked ROCHET and SCHNEIDER but also the whole of the Lyon construction community. The proximity of the Alps, with their winding roads and unbroken climbs led the manufacturers to perfect a number of crucial features:

- reduction in the turning circle
- visibility
- power reserve
- rational use of the engine by appropriate low gearing choices
- highly effective breaking systems.

In 1900, this reputation for high-quality, sturdy products, went far beyond the Rhône region, and the trade press of the time was already talking about the “Lyonnaise Automobile School”.

Amongst the famous brands we should mention:

- **TESTE & MORET** and their “la Mouche” car with the light, tubular chassis.
- **LUC COURT**, whose vehicles were appreciated for their ease of use access to mechanical parts.
- **LA BUIRE**, famous for their racing models and powerful cars with a solid reputation as good climbers
- **BURLAT**, who, in 1904, designed cars equipped with original rotating engines, used subsequently in the aeronautics industry.

- **BARRON VIALLE**, one of whose associates, the engineer BARRON, made well-respected trucks.
- **COTTIN DESGOUTTES**, who collected sports awards and designed prestigious models in the 1920s, including the famous “Sans Secousses” (no vibrations) with its revolutionary suspension system.
- **BERLIET**, whose founder Marius BERLIET bought the Audibert & Lavirotte factories in 1992, marking the beginning of a formidable extension and an industrial adventure that continues today.

Just before the First World War, Lyon consolidated its place as the second centre for automobile production in France, behind Paris. The 15 biggest manufacturers of the time employed a total of between 5,000 and 6,000 workers and accounted for annual production of over 5,000 cars, against 900 just 10 years earlier.

Unfortunately, economic difficulties did away with most of those brands, and by the end of the 1930s, very few of them were still around. However, a number of engineers from those bankrupt companies were able to continue to exercise their talents in BERLIET’s design offices.

The ingenuity and spirit of the “Lyonnaise school” prevailed for years after, through the people it employed.