

Car that changed the world - Tin Lizzie turns 100

When the Ford Model T went into production in 1908, it marked the beginning of an era when motoring became affordable to the masses and an end to the horse and cart age.

Thousands of enthusiasts the world over are this week celebrating in Richmond, Indiana, the centenary of the car affectionately known as 'Tin Lizzie'.

It is just one of several events leading up to the Oct 1 anniversary when the first Model T drove off the assembly line.

The Model T was a dream come true for Henry Ford who wanted to make transportation by motor car affordable by introducing assembly line production.

While the first Model-T sold for less than \$1,000 at a time when other cars cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000, the price fell to about \$300 in the early 1920s as production methods became more refined and cheaper.

It was sold only in black, allegedly because the colour dried faster which could speed up production.

The Model T has become virtually synonymous with the roaring 1920s featuring in many Laurel and Hardy movies. Ford extended production to European plants in Britain and Germany with the Model T becoming the first world motor car and sold 15 million units by 1927.

The 15 kW/20 hp engine with a top speed of up to 70 km/h had to be started with a hand crank. The throttle was controlled by a lever beside the steering wheel.

The petrol tank was fitted under the front seat and petrol had to flow to the carburettor by force of gravity.

It is ironic that Ford is celebrating the centenary of its most successful vehicle at a time when the company itself is in a deep crisis. During the last two years, it has lost more than \$15.3 billion and failed to turn a profit since 2005.

Although Ford's deputy president Mark Fields says the lessons learned from the Model T still apply today 'as part of our DNA and our way of doing business', the company has lost huge shares to the Japanese manufacturers on its home US market where buyers are shunning fuel-guzzling Ford pick-up trucks and SUVs.

Now the company is trying to return to its Model T roots by adjusting to smaller and fuel efficient vehicles. At the London Motor Show, it presented a super fuel-efficient Ford Fiesta with a fuel-consumption of only 3.7 litres of diesel per 100 km.

Apart from the new Fiesta, Ford is planning to bring at least six small European-designed models onto the US market over the next three years.

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