Daimler’s French Connection
Panhard et Levassor

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Daimler displayed his 565cc 1.5hp Vee Twin powered, wire wheeled car at the Paris Exhibition in 1889. Rene Panhard and Emile Levassor established their Automobile Manufactory in Paris, Licenced by Daimler incorporated a centrally mounted Daimler Vee Twin engine into their advanced design 4 wheeled car.

During 1891 the Panhard Levassor (PL) evolved into the classic car layout later known as the “Systeme Panhard” forerunner of modern car design --- engine at the front, midmounted gearbox with 4 forward and a reverse (exposed gears) through a central chain driven rear wheel drive. This, first of the mass produced cars sold for Fr 3,500

Solid rubber tires were adopted in 1892 and in 1894 a Maybach float-fed carburetor. The PL gained First equal place with Peugeot (also Daimler Powered) in the 1894 Paris-Rouen Trial. In 1895 Emile won the Paris-Bordeaux-Paris Race driving a PL fitted with wheel steering, enclosed gearbox and a new Panhard vertical vee twin 2.4 litre Phenix Engine their mainstay for several years to come. Four cylinder engines were used in the 1896 PL Racers which were probably the best racing cars in their day.

The advanced Panhard and Levasser chassis and running gear, a British made vee twin Daimler engine and British Coachwork were combined to produce the First British Daimler Cars in 1896/1897, but that is another story.

In 1897 PL boasted aluminum gearbox casings, and rear mounted radiators; wheel steering and pneumatic tires came into general use in 1898. Victories for PL in 1898 included the Marseilles-Nice Race, the Paris-Amsterdam-Paris and the Paris-Bordeaux Race in which the PL averaged 26.9mph. The PL win in the 1898 Paris-Marseille-Paris was marred by the death of Emile Levassor during the race. A PL Car went on to win the 1899 Tour de France.

Frontal tubular radiators were introduced in 1898 and by 1900 the medium sized PL had an armoured-wood frame, quadrant gear change, automatic inlet valves, drip feed lubrication, final drive by side chains, piano-type pedals and cylindrical controls on the steering wheel.

In 1906 PL presented a massive four cylinder of 10.5 litres and a six cylinder of 11 litres. In 1909 PL had four models a Phenix twin cylinder of 1206cc (discontinued the next year), two four-cylinders of 2412cc and 3380cc and a six cylinder of 4962cc.

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In 1908 British Daimler had bought the rights to produce and developed the Knight sleeve valve (sv) engine which proved very successful. The Knight Sleeve Valve design was adopted by PL in 1911 introducing a 2613cc sv in 1912 and from then on the sleeve valve engines dominated at PL with the introduction of a new large four cylinder sv of 7363cc followed in 1914 by their first 6597cc sv six cylinder.
After WW1 PL resumed production with a 2280cc poppet-valve model but by 1925 all PLs were sleeve valve engined including a 6355cc eight cylinder. PL introduced another 5 Litre sv eight-cylinder in the 1930s but the market for the big luxury cars was gone and like British Daimler to avoid extinction PL responded by producing smaller owner driver cars in 1.8 and 2.3 litres.

A futuristic car called the “Dynamic” was introduced by PL in 1937, three seats at the front with steering in the centre, it had a backbone chassis and faired-in headlamps and wheels. Engine options were 2.5, 2.7 and 3.8 litre.

A complete policy change after WW2 resulted in small car production a Front Wheel Drive 610cc air-cooled flat twin “Dyna” emerged followed by engine enlargements to 750cc in 1950, and 800cc in 1952. A sports car, the “Junior” was evolved from the Dyna in 1952.

The last PL was the 24CT coupe launched in 1964. Citroen took over PL in 1967 and PL car production ceased. However armoured cars with the Panhard name continue. One of the greatest names in motoring history, PL produced some of the worlds’ most innovative cars, a Marque that will never be forgotten.

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