



Simon TAYLOR

Bearing its immortal starting number 722, the Mercedes-Benz 300SLR that Stirling Moss used to win the 1955 Mille Miglia has been earning its keep ever since. Daimler AG has kept it in fine fettle for historic shows and parades, and it has run many times in events such as the Mille Miglia Retrospective, driven by Moss himself and also by the trusted Jochen Mass.

But now, 66 years after that unforgettable day, it has been decided that it's more than a car: it is a priceless historic work of art, a motor-sporting *Mona Lisa*. So it's being retired, and henceforth will live in silent state in the Mercedes museum in Stuttgart, so that awestruck visitors can shuffle past and wonder at its deeds.

The Mille Miglia victory is what everyone knows about the 300SLR, but its history is far greater than that. Effectively a two-seater version of the mighty straight-eight W196 F1 car, it competed only in 1955, did six races, and won five. It would surely have been a clean sweep had the team not withdrawn from Le Mans mid-race after that disastrous crash.

Its design name was W196S, underlining its F1 basis. The 300SLR name was to raise the 300SL's profile, although it was a totally different car. Seven were built: W196S-6 was destroyed in the Le Mans accident, and W196S-7 was the stunning 'Gullwing' coupé that was used for practice but never raced. The Mille Miglia winner was W196S-4, and Moss also used it, minus its second headrest and wider 'screen, for his other two 300SLR victories.

Both were memorable. In the TT around the narrow Irish roads of Dundrod S-4 burst a tyre, badly damaging the rear bodywork. After a long delay for repairs Moss fought back to win. The Targa Florio was almost more demanding than the Mille Miglia: 13 laps of a tortuous 44-mile circuit around Sicily, with a stomach-churning 710 corners in every lap. Moss and co-driver Peter Collins won in 9 hrs 43 mins – only 25 minutes less than the Mille Miglia.

When 722 arrived at Mercedes-Benz World, next to the Brooklands track in Surrey, to await its last bow at the Goodwood Revival, Stirling's son Elliot Moss asked a few of The Boy's friends to gather round its silver curves and toast its past glories with a glass of champagne.

Elliot is a chip off the old block. Unlike many sons of famous racers, he has never ventured into that world. He is very proud of his father's

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From top: Elliot Moss tries the 300SLR for size; his dad hustles the car along the Sicilian lanes on his way to Targa victory, a win as great as the Mille Miglia



achievements, but has never used Stirling's name to advance his own. In fact, he didn't really comprehend it all – he was born in 1980, 18 years after Stirling's professional retirement – until fellow pupils at Haileybury recounted tales of how great his father had been.

Instead, Elliot has become a superb chef and restaurateur. He trained at Le Gavroche, Michel Roux Jnr's famous Michelin-starred eatery, before achieving his life's ambition by opening Plu, a remarkable expression of culinary art in London's St John's Wood. There are no choices: instead you are served a 14-course tasting menu that is a gastronomic *tour de force*. It has already attracted five-star reviews.

Elliot is compact, balding and energetic, just like his father, and has a similar sense of humour. He is also totally determined to overcome any obstacle to be the best, again like Stirling. In the recent London floods his cellar and much of his kitchens were ruined. The labels floated off the bottles of his finest wines. The insurers said, "But you've still got the wine!" It took much determined argument from Elliot to convince them that you can't serve a bottle of wine when you have no idea what's inside.

So the insurers took the unmarked bottles away to sell who knows where. Plu was totally cleaned and refitted, and Elliot had it open again in a matter of days. Stirling would have been very proud of that.