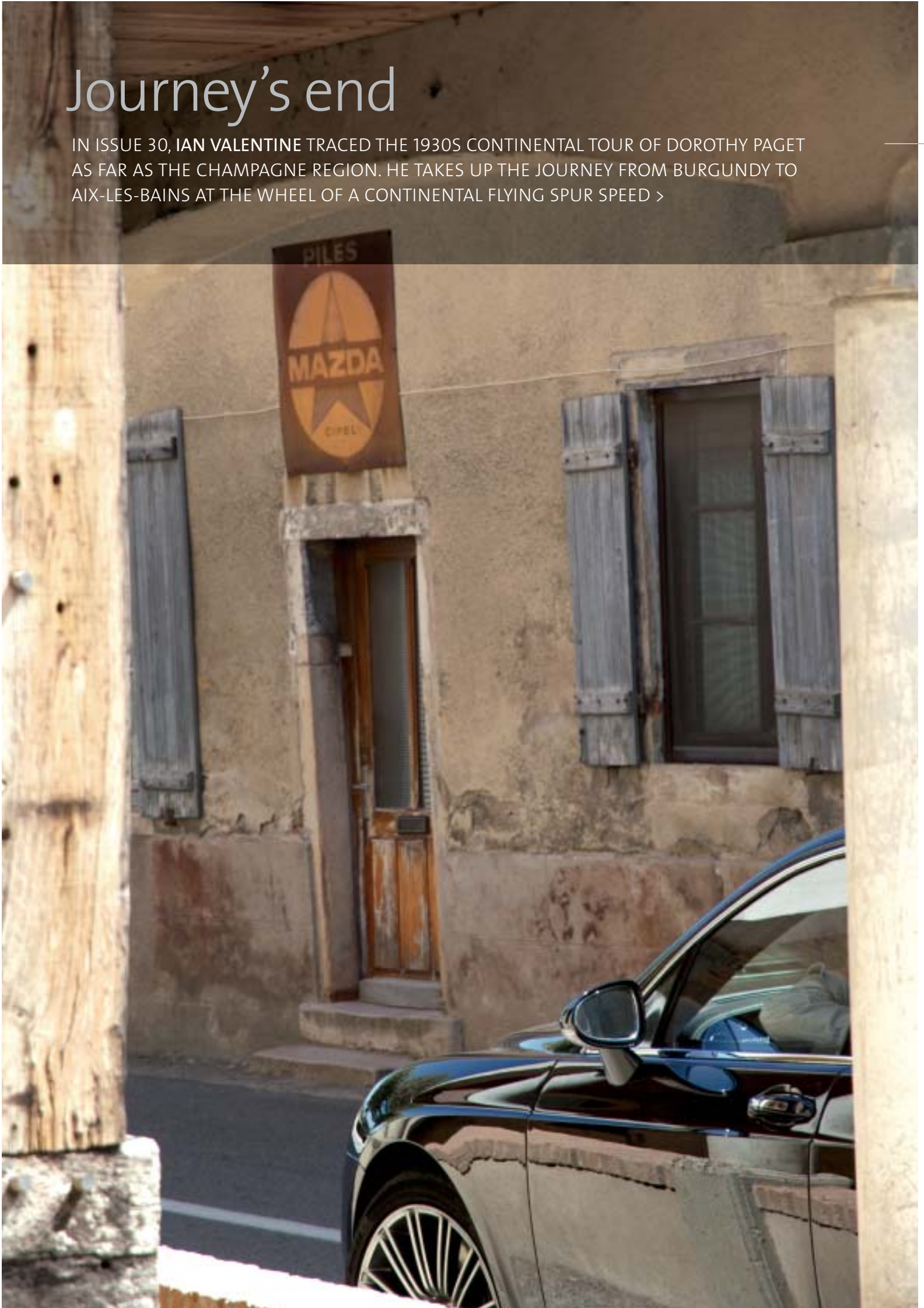


Journey's end

IN ISSUE 30, IAN VALENTINE TRACED THE 1930S CONTINENTAL TOUR OF DOROTHY PAGET AS FAR AS THE CHAMPAGNE REGION. HE TAKES UP THE JOURNEY FROM BURGUNDY TO AIX-LES-BAINS AT THE WHEEL OF A CONTINENTAL FLYING SPUR SPEED >





Journey's end *continued*

In the first half of my tour from Boulogne to the Alpine spa town of Aix-les-Bains, I reached the bustling town of Dijon, following the same AA route map commissioned by Dorothy Paget in the mid-1930s. Driving a Bentley Brooklands Coupé, I was able to speed south through the melancholy farmland of the Somme Valley into the lush Seine Valley and Champagne region, before arriving in the vineyards of Burgundy.

In the intervening three months, the sun had worked its magic on the local vines, encouraging the plants to sprout leaves and clusters of grapes that transformed the roadside slopes from drab brown into shiny green for as far as the eye could see. My ride had also changed, swapping the silver Brooklands for a sleek black Continental Flying Spur Speed, Bentley's fastest four-door model.

Aside from enjoying the scenery and the car, my brief was to find out more about Dorothy Paget, who had first taken the trip as a celebrated racehorse owner in her late 20s. She had a reputation as a tyrant and intransigent, bullying her cohorts of all-female staff who struggled to predict her swings between ceaseless activity and depressed lethargy. But I was determined to discover the lighter side of this 'Bentley Gal' who had once financed Tim Birkin's 'Blowers' in the 1920s. After all, anyone who decides to drive a luxury automobile down the spine of France to holiday in the most exclusive resort of the era cannot be that unpleasant. Can she?

The notion of swapping cars might well have appealed to Dorothy's alternative mind-set, as she had a quirky habit of taking two Rolls Royces to every race meet. This stemmed from a mishap en route to one race, when the Roller broke down in a nearby village. Rather than wait for roadside assistance or, heaven forbid, hitch a

lift, Dorothy ordered her secretary to commandeer a local butcher's Baby Austin for £200. The butcher duly refused, saying that he had to take his mother for a drive. Dorothy upped the offer to £300, including a day with her at the races (without the mother), which the butcher accepted. But when her team, who were expecting her usual vehicle, did not react quickly enough to her arrival, Dorothy announced that she would need two cars in future to avoid similar confusion.

It felt good to be back behind the wheel of a Bentley. The Burgundy vineyards were crawling with 'long-legged' tractors that straddle the vines, weeding the soil to minimise competition for moisture and nutrients. Occasionally, these moon buggies would take to the highway, causing brief tailbacks which the Flying Spur Speed could power past with ease.

We stopped off at one of the many vignobles just north of Beaune called La Domaine d'Ardhuy (www.ardhuy.com), which offers a vast range of red and white wines from the grapes harvested across its 42 hectare empire. Tour guide Hermione Giouli poured several wines to taste, including a chilled Grand Cru called Corton Charlemagne from 2003, which retails at 59 Euros a bottle. "The grapes grow at a higher altitude over 2,000 metres, which gives it a little more heaviness and a taste of honey," explained Hermione. "It would be the perfect accompaniment for perhaps foix gras or a simple dish of grilled fish." I could have happily settled in for the afternoon, listening to Hermione describe each of the different appellations, but time and good reason decreed that I expel the Charlemagne into the spittoon instead of swallowing. Dorothy, being chauffeur driven, would have had no such qualms. Besides, I would need all my wits to pass through Beaune unscathed.



Left While the ancient buildings and traditions of rural France have changed little since Paget's day, grand touring technology certainly has. To a 1930s traveller, the 600bhp Bentley would have seemed a science-fiction fantasy.





Left Sunflowers ripen in the summer sunshine as Valentine pilots the Continental Flying Spur Speed southwards. Above Faded roadside murals advertise the charms of aperitifs that Dorothy Paget herself may have sipped.

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Its rabbit warren of narrow streets, studded with ornate squares and gothic churches, was a test of control as the muscular Flying Spur Speed skimmed past pedestrians and the never-ending flow of delivery vans. The town had an endearing vitality, with a young population that thronged to the market stalls or spilled out of bars and cafés. A couple of good-looking twenty-somethings embraced on a street corner as we idled at a red traffic light, publicly flaunting their love in a manner that complemented the sun-kissed boulevard in late July.

Is it too much to wonder if Dorothy harboured thoughts of romance on her journey to Aix? After all, she was a young lady of impressive means who must have attracted attention from eligible suitors. At the time, her stable was scooping all the big races on the English calendar and she would have been a recognisable face on the social circuit. Those echelons also frequented the resort of Aix-les-Bains, so Dorothy could expect to be fêted on her arrival.

In later life, gluttony and insomnia ruined her health, pushing her weight over 20 stones and into an early grave at just 54 years old. But that was all in front of her. She was a pretty lady, by all accounts, who was sufficiently athletic to ride to hounds. She enjoyed the motor racing scene and was friends with several of its more outgoing characters. Miss Paget was no shrinking violet and would surely have turned heads in the casino and glitzy cocktail bars of Aix, no doubt staying in the premier hotels on the strip. In simple terms, Aix in the 1930s was a fun place to be: surely you would not go there unless you wanted to have fun!

But before Dorothy would see the Alps, she still needed to drive down the Saône Valley and the Plain of Bresse, through the towns of Chalon, Tournus and Bourg. Chalon in her day would have been a pleasant riverside jaunt, but industry and expansion have engulfed the local villages to create a sprawling city that has lost some of its charm.

Just north of Bourg, we stopped at a farm museum at Saint-Trivier-de-Courtes, which showcases a regional farm that has remained untouched since the 16th century. I felt like a time traveller, stepping into this basic homestead from the futuristic gadgetry of the Flying Spur Speed, with its intelligent engine management system that fine tunes the automatic six-gear transmission, throttles, fuel injection and twin turbochargers. What would those early farmers have made of keyless entry and ignition, rain-sensing windscreen wipers, the sophisticated Infotainment system and the breathtaking technology of the cruise control? Indeed, they would have been other-worldly to Dorothy too.

The countryside was changing fast as we motored south-east towards the town of Belley. The vines were far behind, replaced by woodland, fields of wheat and sunflowers, and grazing pastures for cattle. Then the forest-clad hills began to rise before us, as the Alps of the Savoie region dominated the scenery. Surely now, Dorothy was beginning to feel excited about reaching her destination. The roads would have been quieter in the 1930s, but without the Flying Spur Speed's 600bhp, max speed of 200mph and acceleration of 0-60mph in 4.5 seconds, Dorothy's journey must have taken that



Above 20-inch multi-spoke wheels and dark chrome grille distinguish the Continental Flying Spur Speed. Right Paget's chauffeur needed AA route notes to guide him: Valentine relies on the Bentley's sat-nav.



I FELT LIKE A TIME TRAVELLER, STEPPING INTO THIS BASIC HOMESTEAD FROM THE FUTURISTIC GADGETRY OF THE FLYING SPUR SPEED, WITH ITS INTELLIGENT ENGINE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM.

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much longer. I could imagine her becoming fidgety in the passenger seat, urging her driver to push the car up the steep mountain roads. The twisting incline to the Col du Chat, where the writer Alexandre Dumas was believed to have caused a forest fire in 1832 by tossing away a smouldering cigar, posed scant challenge to the 6,000cc of the Flying Spur Speed engine, but it must have been a first-gear slog for poor Dorothy.

The view on the other side of Lake Bourget would have made the wait worthwhile. Its clear waters were sparkling in the evening sunshine as we made the short descent down to Aix-les-Bains, while beach bathers and yachtsmen began returning to dry land. Holiday-makers thronged in the port, but it was the spa town itself, just over a mile further up the hill, that marked the end of the journey.

Since 1850, Aix had been a party town for the rich and famous and the town remained the must-visit destination for British socialites between the wars. Throughout the Belle Époque, royalty flocked to Aix's luxury accommodation, including Queen Victoria, who booked herself into a villa under the pseudonym Countess Balmoral to remain incognito. All the best artists and architects were summoned to create the distinctive Art Nouveau style that must have seemed so fashionable to Dorothy.

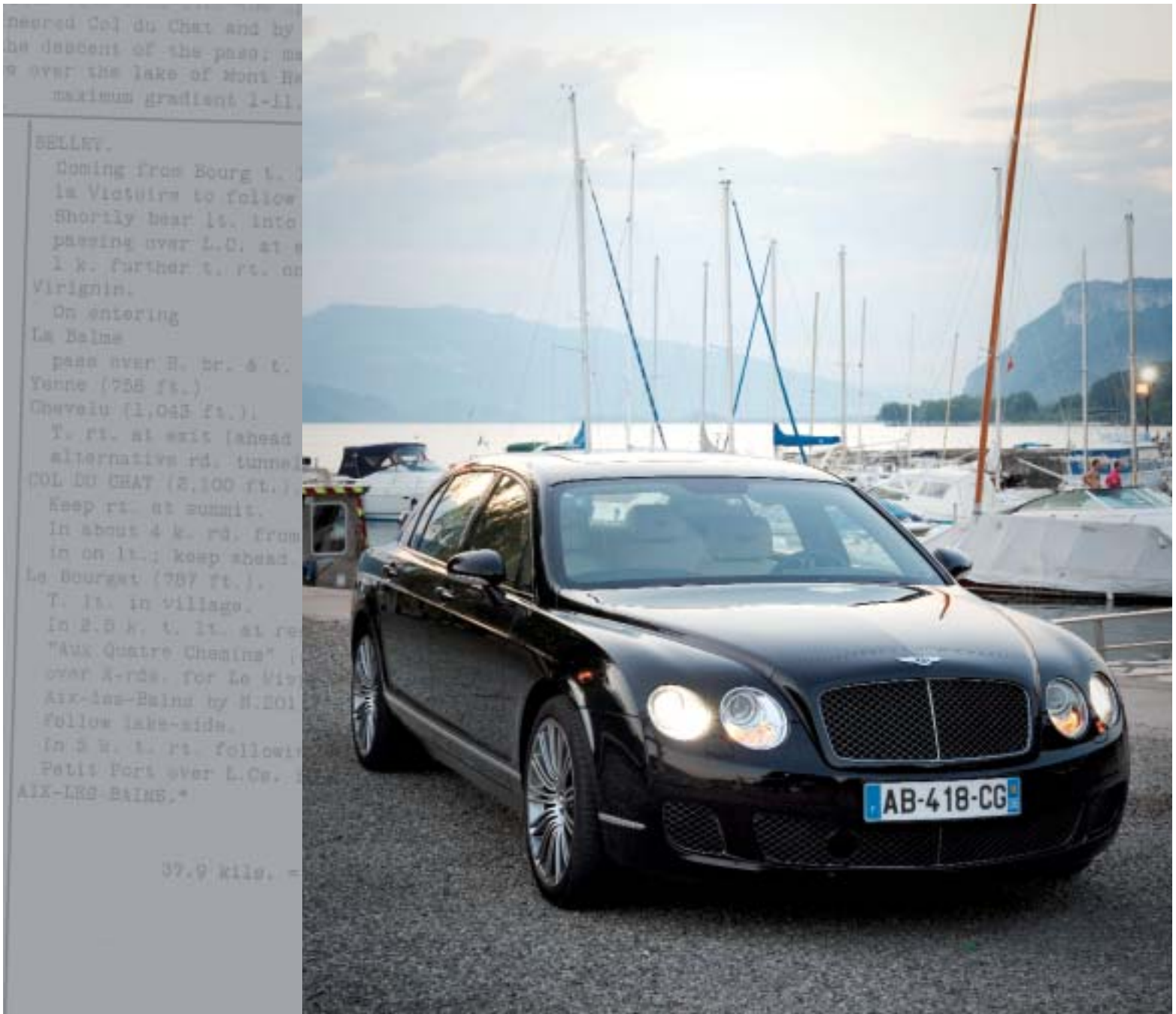
In the evenings, Aix would come alive as the tourists donned their finest threads to wine and dine, before dancing to the star turns of the age. Giants of the French scene such as Yves Montand, Maurice Chevalier and

Edith Piaf would later perform at Aix, while the Russian pianist and composer Sergei Rachmaninoff was a regular attraction. As a committed gambler, surely the young Dorothy would have been drawn to the card and roulette tables of the casino, where many of the best cabaret acts unfolded. Did she dance, I wonder? I like to think so.

Of course, it is not inconceivable that a lady who would eventually die before her time went to the thermal baths for reasons of health. Since Roman times, the healing mineral waters have been famed for their ability to cure rheumatism and skin complaints. Stomach ulcers, pulmonary disorders and irritable bowels have all been set right by washing or drinking the water, mystifying conventional doctors for centuries. Dorothy would have been able to profit from a range of baths, whether steam, mud or bubble, as well as pressure showers that shot jets of water from the ceiling, floor and all four walls. The 'Scottish' shower was especially popular – alternate blasts of hot and then cold water – as it improved the blood circulation. Frankly, I imagine that entering any place filled with the sick and diseased was a sure-fire way of catching an illness rather than being cured of one. But for Dorothy, who could have afforded every privacy, perhaps the baths did have restorative powers.

At the end of the Second World War, the Aix treatments became available through the national social assurance system. Any Frenchman, no matter his means, became eligible for la cure thermale. Aix shifted from





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being a holiday destination into a sanatorium town, with a record number of 52,000 patients passing through the baths in 1986. But following the subsequent withdrawal of state-funded cures, the town has fallen into decline, so I did not feel the same frisson of anticipation when driving into its centre that Dorothy must have experienced all those years ago.

The manager of the Hotel Bristol where we stayed, one of a handful of English-named hotels that date back to the early 1900s when 5,000 Brits holidayed in Aix during the summer months, explained the recent challenges that have forced the town to evolve. "We only have a fraction of the number of visitors that came when the state paid for the cures," she said. "Besides, compared with modern medicines, the old ways are not so attractive. So Aix is reinventing itself as a centre of well-being instead. The clean air allows activities such as walking, tennis, cycling, swimming and sailing. The spa treatments are also more modern with saunas, hammams, massages, swimming pools and aquagyms. We want healthy people coming to Aix-les-Bains again!"

My journey in the tyre tracks of Dorothy had finished. By following the same path as her through France, albeit in a pair of fabulous Bentleys, I refuse to believe that she was an ogre, as several accounts claim. Perhaps that came later in life. But this was a lady not yet 30 years old, who sought out excitement in the form of high performance cars and racehorses; who had founded a retirement home for Soviet fugitives; who hailed from two of the most successful families either side of the Atlantic; and who travelled to perhaps the most fashionable European resort for her summer holidays.

Dorothy Paget was not weird or intimidating. She was interesting. And I, for one, would have loved to have driven her from Boulogne to Aix **B**

Ian Valentine is a Scottish freelancer and columnist for GQ Magazine. His book 'Travelling Jack – 52 Weeks in the Country' is published by Quiller Publishing.