

# UK's rarest cars: 1971 Fiat 850 Sport Coupe, one of only two left

Perfect proportions made the driver of this pretty fastback feel like a Ferrari owner, despite its modest engine and humble underpinnings

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Rory Donnelly's 1971 Fiat 850 Sport Coupe is believed to be one of only two third-generation versions still on the road in the UK

In its heyday, the 850 Sport Coupe always managed to convey an air of good living – La Dolce Vita for those with [Ferrari](#) dreams but a [Fiat](#) income. Today, they are a more exclusive sight than many a hand-built Italian sports car, and [Rory Donnelly's 1971 example](#) is believed to be one of only two third-generation versions still on the road in the UK.

Fiat launched the original 850 saloon in 1964, with the Coupe following at the 1965 Geneva Motor Show; [Mario Boano](#) and his son Gian Paolo, of the company's Centro Stile design department, created the fastback styling. The firm's renowned engineering director Dante Giacosa thought the Coupe “one of the most beautiful ever built” by Fiat.



The 850 Coupe proved so popular that shortly after its introduction, Fiat doubled output from 100 to 200 units per day. *Motor Sport* said it had “real merit” and that “girls go crazy over the appearance of this fastback from Turin”. In 1967, *Road & Track* magazine in the USA thought the 850 Coupe “one of the handsomest, best-balanced designs ever seen on a small car”.



By early 1969, the Sport Coupe cost £916, which wasn't thought of as cheap during that time. That year, Italian newspaper *La Stampa* reported that the Duchess of Kent drove an 850 Coupe. This prompted an irate response from UK trade body the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders: “We always hope, and expect, that the [Royal Family](#) and English embassies abroad will use British cars. It is truly farcical that they should resort to foreign cars.” However, in 1967, Fiat sold 16,500 vehicles in this country, and “Britain's lowest-priced 2+2 GT” could only enhance the Italian marque's appeal.

In March of the following year, Fiat launched the 850 Sport Coupe with a 903cc engine in place of the earlier 843cc unit, quad headlights and slightly altered lines. It informed the British motoring public: “There are three types of GT. The ones that are little more than an ordinary saloon car, nicely packaged. The ones



that are hot but leave you cold aesthetically. And the ones that are real stoppers to look at – real goers when you get behind the wheel.”

Naturally, the 850 Sport Coupe fell into the last-named category, with its highly appealing looks, 91mph top speed and air of having just emerged from a film starring Marcello Mastroianni. The fact that Enzo Ferrari used a Sport Coupe with a tuned engine for the commute from his home to his office at the factory in Maranello further highlighted its pedigree.

By early 1969, the Sport Coupe cost £916, while the Sunbeam Stiletto (a fastback version of the [Hillman Imp](#)), its nearest UK-built rear-engined coupé rival, was priced at £910. For those who wanted front-wheel-drive (and a more practical back seat), the obvious choice was the [Austin/Morris Mini Cooper Mk2](#) at £710, while the German-built [NSU 1200TT](#) was another rear-engined competitor at £857.



The car also boasted a GT steering wheel

That £916 list price was not especially cheap by 1969 standards when the far larger [HB-series Vauxhall Viva](#) 1600 SL four-door cost £910. For motorists who wanted a practical yet sporting saloon, the [Mk1 Ford Escort](#) GT was £851, while the [MG 1300 Mk2](#) was £931. But what the Fiat had to offer the discerning buyer was the kudos of owning a “foreign 2+2” – one with a rev counter from Italian specialist Veglia, “reclining bucket seats” and a “GT steering wheel”.

The Sport Coupe received a further update with a new frontal treatment making its debut at the 1971 Geneva motor show. Production ended later that year after approximately 180,000 units with the introduction of the 128 Coupe. To say that corrosion drastically reduced the 850's ranks as the 1970s progressed is akin to observing that candy floss is known for its high sugar content. Donnelly's car is not only a rare example of a “facelifted” Sport Coupe, but also one of the very few surviving UK-market right-hand-drive members of the Fiat 850 family.

Fifty six years ago, *Autocar* opined: “There is little or nothing which offers the blend of value, performance, economy, chic styling and reliability plus above all a sporting temperament.” Meanwhile, some Italian male chauvinist motorists referred to the 850 Sport Coupe as “the secretary's Ferrari”. They were almost certainly jealous.