

Simple Stuff Going Over the Top

by Bob Vitrikas



The Rolls-Royce Corniche is the very definition of luxurious top down style, no matter what label you put on it.

Tops on automobiles have been around for a long time, but not always. In the beginning there was just you and the outdoors and all that comes with it. Heck there wasn't even a windscreen much less top and side window protection. It didn't take long before customers demanded some protection from the wind, dust, stones etc. so along came the windscreen. Shortly thereafter additional weather protection in the form of a top that could be erected, with some difficulty no doubt, or left down in nice weather. Some tops were made of cloth and others from leather. Side screens were next to come along and afforded some additional protection though the tendency to flap about with the resulting big gaps letting in the weather were a nuisance. English sports cars followed this formula well into the early 1960s and some, like Caterham and Morgan still use side curtains and an erect-it-yourself top. Next step was wind up windows which really took weather protection up a notch, especially when combined with more sophisticated top sealing around the windows. The ultimate, or at least the latest development, is the retractable hardtop which provides year round weather protection and the security of a closed car.

Top nomenclature has evolved over the years as well. The earliest open top (or no top) two seater two door cars were called roadsters or runabouts. Add in side curtains and they were still called roadsters or runabouts. Add a couple of seats and they became known as touring cars, typically with four doors. The folded touring car top was quite bulky and when folded was known as the fan and was tucked behind the back seat. The touring car gave way to the enclosed metal body in the 1920s.

The phaeton was a two seater with a temporary roof. The brougham or coupe de Ville sported an enclosed passenger compartment in the rear while the driver/chauffeur sat in front with no weather protection. A variation on this was named the landaulet in which the driver had a fixed roof and the passengers had a folding roof.

With the introduction of roll up glass windows the name changed to convertible giving the impression that the cars could be easily converted from open to enclosed passenger space. In 1939 Plymouth introduced the first mechanically operated convertible top which was operated by two vacuum cylinders. The folded cloth convertible top was called a stack. A cabriolet implied a more upscale top and window sealing, often paired with some wood on the interior. Sometimes the top was a multilayer padded affair that provided some sound proofing and could be accompanied by landau bars that added a bit more class on the exterior and allowed the top to be positioned in three different ways, closed, half opened and fully opened.

Convertible top nomenclature has varied widely and has not been consistently applied. Here are some examples: drop top, drop head coupe (DHC), open two-seater (OTS), open top, soft top, spider and spyder. Jaguar seems particularly fond of using the abbreviation OTS which I must admit has always confounded me.

Cabriolet or cabrio is typically a European term for convertible (soft or hard top) and harkens back to the carriage cabriolet defined as “a light, two-wheeled, one-horse carriage with a folding top, capable of seating two persons.” The term “cabriolet” is believed to have been derived from the French word “cabriole” or “caper” due to the bounding motion of the lightweight two-wheeled carriages used as taxis in 18th century France. In the UK the term drophead coupe refers to a two door, two or four seat, convertible. A four-door convertible is called an all-weather tourer.

So what's up with the terms “spider” and “spyder”? The term “spider” is derived from the “Spider Phaeton” horse drawn carriage from the late 18th century. These carriages were lightweight and not meant for cross-country touring. The wheels were large wooden affairs with thin spokes that with some imagination resembled spiders. Really spider and spyder are simply terms used for marketing purposes. Spider, spyder, convertible, they are all the same.

Warmer weather is coming!