



Simon Taylor

FULL THROTTLE

You're probably reading this in the early days of the New Year, a time when anniversaries are uppermost in many minds. Last year we recognised the sad centenary of the start of World War I. This year we'll look back 70 years to the rejoicing at the end of World War 2, VE Day on 8 May and VJ Day on 15 August. But the terrifying devastation of a few days earlier, when atomic bombs killed hundreds of thousands of people in Japan, will also be grimly remembered: Little Boy on Hiroshima on 6 August, and Fat Man on Nagasaki on 9 August.

Searching for more cheerful anniversaries, I realised with astonishment that 1990, which seems to me barely more distant than about last March, is now a quarter of a century ago. So I've spent a minute or two recalling some of the cars that were then new or recently announced. A lot aren't really considered classics yet, and some never will be, but many have become surprisingly affordable, and some are student cheap.

I also pondered the lost causes: cars introduced with trumpet fanfares and optimism that eventually turned out to be sadly unfounded. Remember the Panther Solo? After a long gestation period it was shown at the 1989 Motor Show as the Solo 2, with mid-mounted Ford Sierra Cosworth turbo, four-wheel drive and attractive Ken Greenley-styled body. Its progenitors wanted it to be Britain's answer to the Porsche 911, but only 18 cars were built before the project died.

Other gallant efforts that did see production but are now almost forgotten include the Ginetta G32, that cute little coupe with Ford XR3i power pack behind the seats.

Or the Nissan-powered Reliant SST, which in turbocharged form did a claimed 100mph, and zero to 60mph in 7 secs. When did you last see one on the road?

At Lotus, which then belonged to General Motors, there were great hopes for the new Elan, the M100. Its specification was comparatively humble, with a four-cylinder Isuzu engine driving the front wheels. The styling, by Peter Stevens, was neat but chunky. It's an entertaining

From top: the Panther Solo 2 cost £40,000 by the time it was announced, which was too much for it to succeed; the original Honda NSX was elegant, fast, handled well and sold in healthy numbers

little car, and about 4500 were eventually produced, but it doesn't rank as one of the classic Lotuses, and you can pick one up cheaply now.

The affordable sports car that knocked all of these into a cocked hat was, of course, the Mazda MX-5, which became available in the UK in 1990. Light, simple, front-engined, rear-driven, with twin-cam 1600 engine, five-speed 'box and 50:50 weight distribution, it was the car that the British motor industry should have made to succeed the Sprite, the Spitfire and the MGB, but didn't.

At its British introduction some of the specialist magazines damned it with faint praise, comparing it unfavourably with the original Lotus Elan, which it vaguely resembled. One journalist said, rather missing the point, that the Elan had been more up-to-date 25 years before. But the original recipe's essential rightness has made the MX-5 the most successful two-seat

convertible of all time. In February 2011 the 900,000th car was built, and the millionth MX-5 cannot be far away. In some respects, it was the most important new car of 25 years ago.

Many more 1990 machines rate a mention: the BMW E34 M5, billed as the world's fastest saloon, and updated versions of hot hatches such as the Renault 5 GTI turbo and the wonderful Peugeot 205 GTI. Higher up the scale came the Aston Virage, admittedly not my favourite Aston,



the Ferrari 348, not my favourite Ferrari, and the son of Countach, the Lamborghini Diablo.

A car that impressed me then and impresses me now is the Honda NSX: mid-mounted four-cam 3-litre V6, all-aluminium construction, neat, elegant coupé styling, and fast. Its sharp handling was said to have been helped in its final development by input from Ayrton Senna, then winning F1 world championships for McLaren-Honda. In its 15-year production life some 18,000 were sold. Excitingly, there's now a new-generation NSX coming.

I've just looked at some NSX For Sale ads, and good ones aren't cheap. But some other tasty cars from 1990 do look good value. Snap one up now – before they become, as some of them surely will, classics with a capital C. 