Preface

Only a few years ago, two of the world’s largest car manufacturers, General Motors (GM) and Chrysler, had to be bailed out by the American taxpayer. Although Ford managed without direct government support, it is quite clear that the collapse of the supply base that would have resulted from a collapse of GM and Chrysler would also have dragged down Ford. Within a matter of months, the world’s most prominent car industry could have disappeared; only intervention from the public sector saved this key component of the private sector. Before being too smug about our own successes in Europe, do note that the secret of our success is largely confined to the more upmarket segments, with the Germans the primary beneficiaries, and that this success is primarily reliant on demand from Asia. Despite the size of the industry, car making is a very precarious business. In its present form, it lacks resilience; it is not sustainable. And I am not talking just about environmental sustainability, where it clearly is not measuring up, but basic, economic sustainability.

I have just done some work on my Smart Roadster. Easier than most modern cars to work on as long as you avoid the engine, but much of your time when working on a modern car is still spent engaged in a virtual dispute with the manufacturer, who does not really want you to touch your car – they will take your money, but try to retain a strong claim to the goods after you have bought them. For example, many parts are fitted such that they are difficult to remove without breaking something. In the past such parts might be screwed or bolted in place. Quite possibly, fitting parts with non-reusable clips is cheaper on the assembly line and we therefore benefit – in theory – via cheaper cars, but from a whole-life perspective it contributes to those interventions that make cars more disposable than they need to be, or deserve to be as we trade them in when we get bored with them, rarely being able to build a long-term relationship with them. Possibly as a result of these attitudes by manufacturers, many owners have lost that hands-on experience with their car; at least they rarely open the bonnet. Of course, driving is still hands-on and will probably remain that way for some time despite the best efforts of some in the industry promoting a more intensive use of telematics to create driverless cars, believing cars to be primarily a transport system rather than an expression of self or
a source of enjoyment with some owners enjoying a near spiritual relationship with cars – the car whisperers.

My own first hands-on experience of cars came with Dinky Toys, like so many of my generation. I still have that toy car, a Ford ‘Fordor’ in red. The original paint has long gone, but I gave it a loving respray some years ago. It is now far from original and therefore of limited value to serious model collectors, but of considerable value to me, despite the fact that it has since been joined by close to 1000 other model cars in my collection. I find that looking at cars and surrounding myself with them helps me think about the industry. I am what in the UK is called a ‘petrol head’; the problem is that I am also an environmentalist. Like so many people, I find being in certain kinds of natural environment a spiritual experience, but I also like urban environments, which are often full of dynamism and creativity. People can feel a link with the rest of creation that many of us also feel has been lost. It occurs to me that our struggle to make our activities environmentally sustainable may be due to this alienation – we have come to see nature as somehow different from us and as separate from the environments we have created ourselves, which is strange.

In the car we appear to have a system that – in its current form – is neither economically nor environmentally sustainable. Why should this be? And what can we do about it? And, most of all, how does the car relate to nature? Our relationship with the car is special in any case. The car combines shelter with mobility, and also gives us a measure of control that most of us – who are not pilots, ships’ captains or train drivers – will not experience in other transport modes that combine shelter with mobility. The car, once acquired, is also surprisingly democratic – once on the road, a driver in a rusty battered jalopy has the same rights as a driver in a brand new Bugatti Veyron; the latter has to give way to the former if the traffic rules so determine. In automobility the distinction is often more about the haves and have-nots – those who are car-borne and those who are not.