

IELTS PRACTICE TASK

Classic style

For a few short years, fins were in fashion on American cars.

It's rare to see fins on the back of motor cars today – those raised, stylish extrusions on the car's rear end that once made each model unique. But for a decade or two in the years after the Second World War, the inclusion of ever more extravagant and ostentatious fins was the height of fashion among American car designers and the must-have automotive accessory for the discerning car buyer.

It started in 1947 when chief of styling at the car-making firm of General Motors, Harley Earl, developed the entirely new notion of attaching fins to the back of the company's motor cars, typically on the edges of the trunk, or boot, running down to the vehicle's brake lights. Earl had been inspired by the twin tail fins he had seen on the Lightning fighter planes used during the war and instructed General Motors' team of designers to play around with the same concept. The designers liked the idea immediately – perhaps unsurprisingly, could there be any better symbol of speed and power? And after some experimentation, the first General Motors' Cadillac was released the following year sporting a pair of relatively modest fins. The effect was immediate: the public loved the new innovation – the young and young at heart especially – and competing firms were forced quite literally to go back to the drawing board. So, in the 1950s, a race began between American car manufacturers to see who could produce cars with the most pronounced, extreme and even outlandish fins. It seemed almost impossible to overdo it as consumers rushed to the showroom to buy the latest model and keep one step ahead.

It's necessary to understand the culture of the times in America if one is to truly comprehend exactly why it was that fins became so popular. After all, they served no practical purpose whatsoever; these were not the 'spoilers' or similar appendages that were later attached to cars to improve aerodynamics, road handling and fuel economy. They existed simply to amplify the shape of the car, to accentuate its curves, speed and style. And as such, fins would have been quite unthinkable in earlier times – the Great Depression of the 1920s most obviously. But in the 1950s and 60s the American people were filled with a sense of national optimism, because theirs was a young country, the economy was booming and their place in the world was assured. Furthermore, iron ore was cheap, as were the coal and oil necessary to turn it into steel, so car production costs were a fraction of what they are today. The result was some truly extravagant cars: General Motors' Firebird III had no fewer than nine fins – still a world record – while the nearly six-metre long Eldorado might not have had so many but the tallest was nearly 300mm high.

TASK TYPE 3 Short Answer Questions

Of course, it couldn't last. By the 1980s, American society had become concerned about a wide range of issues including petrol consumption, road safety and car-affordability. In short, people wanted a different type of car. The result was that the Federal Government passed a number of new laws that transformed the automotive industry. Cars undoubtedly became safer and greener, but some of the flair and individualism has arguably been lost along the way, as so many models of cars all around the world today look remarkably similar. And one final point to note: it would be very easy to see the fashion for fins as an oddly human extravagance, but there may actually be a parallel in nature. In 1998, Chinese researchers found a fossil, deep beneath the ground, of a species they named the abnormal shrimp. This was a two-metre long predator with five eyes and mouth parts on the end of a prehensile proboscis. What's more, on its tail, it had a series of fins to which the researchers have been able to attribute no practical purpose whatsoever.

Questions 1–6

Answer the questions below.

Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS AND/OR A NUMBER** from the passage for each answer.

- 1 In 1947 Cadillac cars copied the fins on what type of transport?
- 2 What did car companies take part in during the 1950s?
- 3 What feeling in America did car makers exploit in the 1950s and 1960s?
- 4 Which model of car had the most number of fins ever?
- 5 In the 1980s, what was introduced to make motoring more expensive?
- 6 According to Chinese research in 1998, what creature once had fins?