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DAVID BROWN ASTON MARTIN

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ASTON MARTIN GREATEST HITS

Every landmark Aston model, from the earliest survivor to the modern generation, as tested by the UK's best-selling classic car magazine

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CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

Welcome

The marketing success story that is Aston Martin today bears little relation to the firm's slightly rocky past, stumbling from financial crisis to financial crisis, only to be rescued by yet another wealthy, besotted enthusiast. It's incredible to think that just 60,000 Astons were built over the company's first 100 years, bearing in mind that it now churns out around 5000 cars a year. But of course the thriving modern-day 'brand' that is Aston Martin would be nothing without that rich vein of history. It's the past that gives the firm its soul and its marketability, and gives the cars their charisma.

This book, the third volume in our *Greatest Hits* series, vividly demonstrates that character, which has endured now for an incredible 105 years and encompassed everything from hillclimb specials to luxury GTs, Le Mans racers to supersaloons – with the inevitable SUV now also on the horizon. And it seems appropriate to be celebrating Aston Martin in 2018, a year that marks the 60th anniversary of the car that, stylistically at least, must be the most important in the firm's history: the game-changing DB4.

Its influence lives on in the shape of Astons today, cars that face the tough task of achieving commercial as well as critical success – key to securing the long-term future of this proudly British badge.

ALASTAIR CLEMENTS

Editor in chief, *Classic & Sports Car*

This special edition is compiled from the past 10 years of Classic & Sports Car magazine. Each article has been kept as close to its original format as possible, so cross-referencing some material against its publication date may help to put it in context – the issue in which each article originally appeared is listed on these pages

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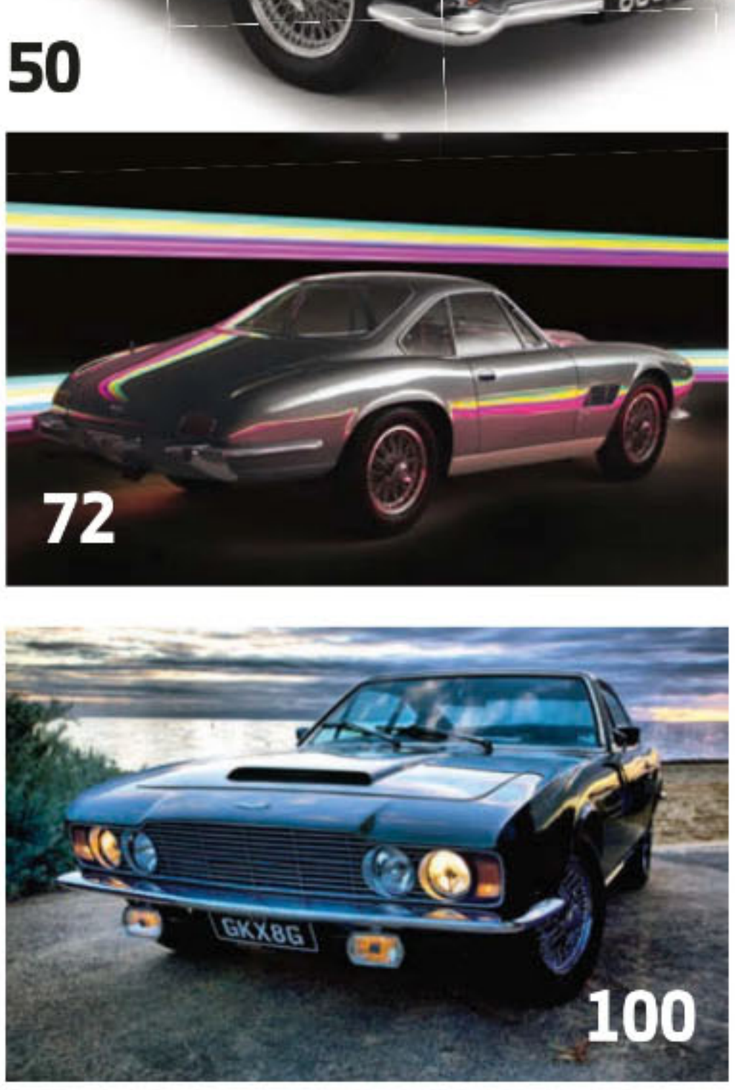

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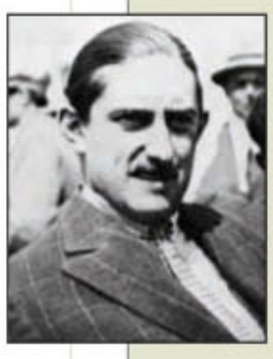
Who's who at Aston Martin?

From Bamford and Martin's first Coventry-Simplex-engined special, through the David Brown years and Victor Gauntlett's V8s to the 'DB' revival of the '90s, Aston Martin has always been about characters. **Mick Walsh** plots the marque's eventful family tree

PHOTOGRAPHY **LAT/FORD/JAGUAR/AMHT**

Louis Zborowski 1895-1924



Legendary enthusiast of giant-engined behemoths who turned to Aston Martin to build him a competitive sports-racer. Introduced Clive Gallop to Ballot engineer Marcel Gremillon, to get him to design an all-new four-cylinder, 16-valve, double-overhead-cam engine. Count Zborowski raced Aston Martins at Brooklands and abroad, including in Sitges, Spain.

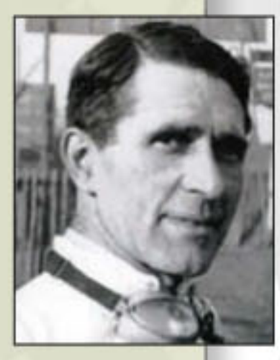
Lionel Martin 1878-1945

A family fortune from Cornish china clay afforded young Martin an Eton and Oxford education. He began his competition career with a Singer at Aston Clinton hill, and later joined up with Bamford to build a special in 1914 christened after his favourite speed venue and his name. Left the company in 1925 to focus on mining.

William Renwick 1887-1962

The son of a civil engineer, Bill Renwick joined Singer's engineering staff and worked in the motor industry before inheriting a fortune from his father. His dream to build 'the best car in the world' was instigated after a chance meeting with 'Bert' Bertelli in Birmingham, and the duo went on to become business partners. Their first employee was a 17-year-old draughtsman called Claude Hill.

AC 'Bert' Bertelli 1890-1979



An Italian-born designer, engineer and racing driver, Augustus Cesare Bertelli emigrated to Wales in 1894. After an apprenticeship at Cardiff Ironworks he went to Fiat in Turin. He returned to the UK to design the Enfield Alldays 12hp, then bought Aston with Bill Renwick in 1926. Developed the International, Le Mans and Ulster before leaving in 1936.

Tadek Marek 1908-1982

The Polish-born engineer trained in Berlin before moving to the UK in 1940 to join the Polish Army for WW2. After being involved in engineering work on the Centurion tank and a taking job at Austin, Marek joined Aston Martin in 1954 and developed key engines including the legendary straight-six and enduring V8. He retired to Italy in 1968.

Peter Livanos b.1956

This Greek shipping tycoon with a passion for great motor cars and yachting made a major investment in Aston Martin by taking a 75% share in the company from 1983. He also funded the remarkable Aston Martin display at the Monterey historic races, held at Laguna Seca raceway, California in 1989, which included a superb recreation of the 1959 Le Mans pits.

Ian Callum b.1954

It isn't a great stretch to say that Callum – now head of design of Jaguar – has been responsible for the basic silhouette of every new Aston Martin model since 1993, even if the then boss of TWR Design was only given the full credit for the watershed DB7 (plus its Vantage and Volante versions) and the Vanquish. Callum also set out the exterior styling of the handsome DB9.

Robert Bamford 1883-1942

Born in Lamarsh, Essex to a church family, Bamford turned to engineering after completing his studies. In 1915 he designed and built the 'Coal Scuttle', the first Aston Martin. Very much the design engineer in the partnership with Lionel Martin, Bamford left in 1920, after few cars had been built, with Martin's wife Kathy taking over as director of the firm.

Lady Charnwood 1876-1942

After an introduction to the marque from her car-mad son, John Benson, the struggling firm was sold to Lady Charnwood in 1925 for £2600 but the factory closed again in May of the following year. Charnwood reorganised the company and re-established it as Aston Martin Motors in the former Citroën plant at Hanworth Air Park, Feltham, Middlesex. Lady Charnwood was also highly passionate about the arts, and had suffered a carriage accident in 1919 that left her lame.

R Gordon Sutherland 1908-2004

Born into a wealthy shipping family, and given a Bentley for his 21st birthday by his father Arthur, Sutherland trained in automotive engineering at Chelsea. He worked at Alvis before encouraging his father to buy Aston Martin in 1932. As joint managing director, with Hill he co-developed the 'Donald Duck', then offered the firm for sale in *The Times* in 1946.

L Prideaux-Brune 1894-1987

The owner and chief executive of the Automobile Service Co saved Aston Martin with investment in 1932, but the funds soon dried up and he persuaded Sir Arthur Sutherland to take over. He later ran Morgans at Le Mans and was involved with ERA.

Claude Hill 1907-1982

Born in Birmingham, Claude Hill was the first employee at Renwick & Bertelli and helped Bertelli to develop the new 1½-litre engine. Later, his relationship with R Gordon Sutherland led to Hill heading up the design of the 2 Litre and the revolutionary Atom. Hill left Aston Martin in 1949 after his DB2 engine was abandoned in favour of the Lagonda 'six'.

Sir David Brown 1904-1993

After being apprenticed in the family gear firm, the wealthy Brown designed his own engine. Answering Sutherland's advert in *The Times*, Brown was convinced by a drive in the Atom and did a deal for £20,500 in 1947, soon adding Lagonda to the portfolio for £52,500. He encouraged racing, winning Le Mans in 1959, and sold the indebted AML in 1972.

Ted Cutting 1926-2012

Indoctrinated into cars by his Napier race mechanic uncle, Cutting became an Allard draughtsman after WW2. He joined Aston Martin in 1949, redesigning the DB2 chassis and creating the DBR1, DBR4 and Project GT racers before moving to Ford in 1966.

Harold Beach 1913-2010

Following his apprenticeship at Barker coachworks, Beach was later involved with Earl Howe and during WW2 he designed all-terrain vehicles including Sherman tanks. Beach joined Aston Martin in 1950, replacing Eberan von Eberhorst as chief designer on the DB4, and eventually retired in 1978 after engineering the V8 Volante's soft-top.

Victor Gauntlett 1942-2003

After serving in the RAF, Gauntlett moved into the petroleum industry and founded Pace in 1972, making millions before putting £500k into Aston in 1980, supported by Livanos. He resurrected relations with Zagato and oversaw the Virage, the first new Aston for 20 years. Frustrated by limited resources, in '87 he sold to Ford, remaining as chairman until 1991.

William Towns 1936-1993

Having served under design legend David Bache at Rover, William Towns arrived at Aston Martin in 1966 – initially working as a seat designer. Towns would go on to become the driving force for styling change at Newport Pagnell with his refreshingly sharp-edged design for the DBS and the clean-sheet V8 Lagonda 'wedge' saloon, before going freelance in 1977.

Walter Hayes 1924-2000

From Fleet Street to vice-chairman of Ford, Hayes was hugely respected and was a close associate of Henry Ford II. Despite the problems encountered with Ford's previous acquisition of AC, Hayes pushed for the Aston Martin takeover and replaced Gauntlett as chairman in 1991 to see through the launch of the crucial new DB7.

Dr Ulrich Bez b.1943

German engineer Bez has vast experience in the motor industry (at BMW, Porsche and Ford) and was CEO at Aston Martin from 2000-'13, leading the brand's revival and the move to an all-new HQ in Gaydon, Warwickshire. He has also raced Astons at the Nürburging.

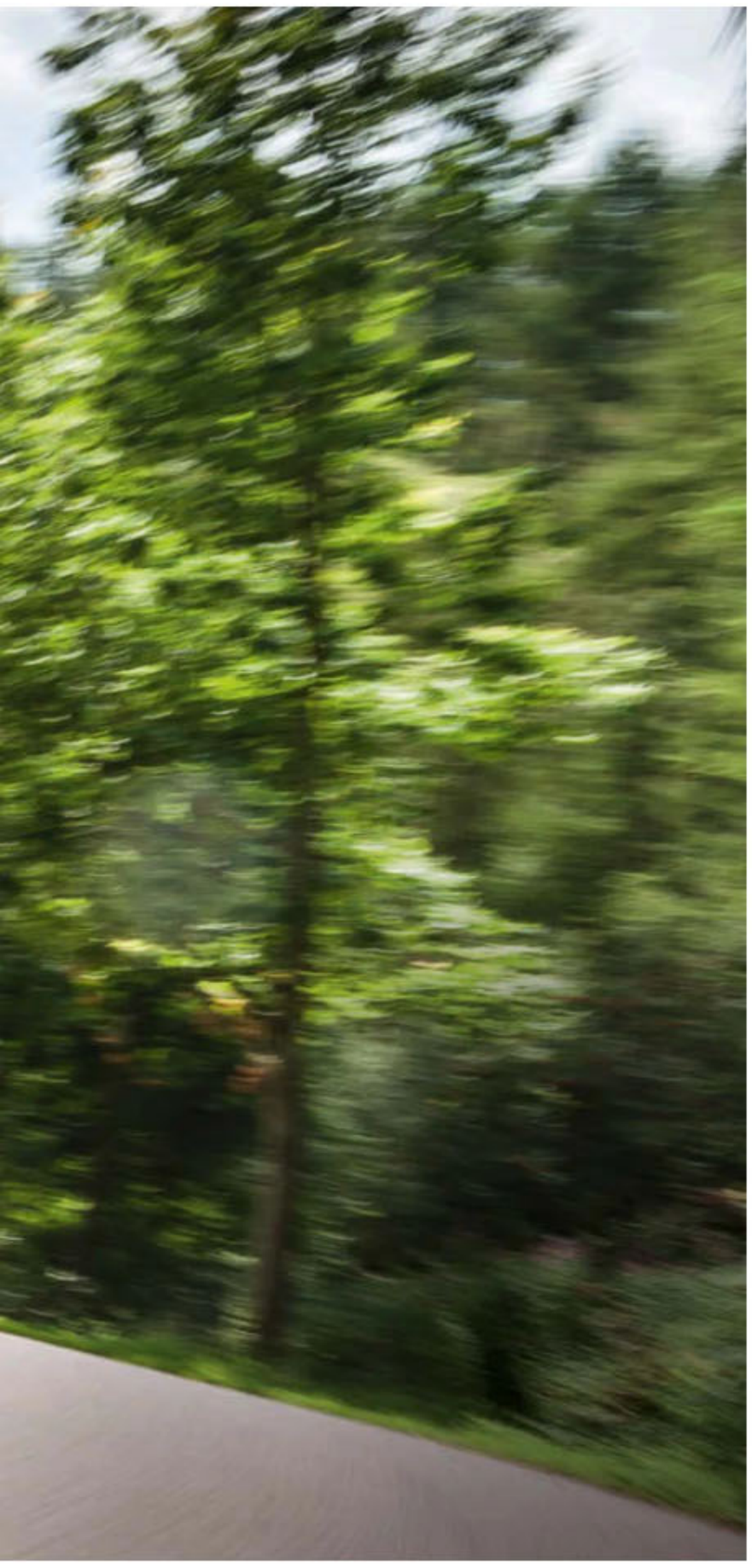
David Richards b.1952

Richards studied accountancy before going on to become a professional co-driver and winning the 1981 World Rally Championship alongside Ari Vatanen. He founded Prodrive in 1984, and in 2007 led a consortium to purchase Aston Martin from Ford, taking over as chairman. Prodrive took Aston Martin back to Le Mans in 2007 and 2008.

Britain's most wanted

Aston Martins are the hottest property in the blue-chip classic market, says **James Elliott**, and not just because of a certain secret agent…

PHOTOGRAPHY **BONHAMS/H&H/EON/JAMES LIPMAN**



BOB FOUNTAIN
Aston Workshop

What makes Aston Martins so special? Their rarity and their beauty of design, plus their handmade quality, all crafted using the finest materials.

What got you into the marque and when? Back in 1988, a friend of mine came to visit me and he was driving a DB5… I just fell in love with the car.

What is the best Aston Martin that you have owned? I get the most fun out of my pre-war 2-litre Speed Model. But I love all of the 1950 and '60s cars.

Which example that you haven't owned to date is your goal? I've had just about every Aston Martin model imaginable, but I would really like a DB4GT Zagato with which to compete in rallies.

What is the most and the least that you have ever paid for an Aston? The least was £3000 for a DB5, and the most was back in the 1980s – and I'm not telling!

Why do you think that Aston Martins have risen in value so disproportionately compared to other marques? Firstly, these are very rare cars, having been built in far fewer numbers than many other marques, and secondly Aston Martin is one of the world's coolest brands! Plus they won't be making any more of the classic models for sure.

DESMOND SMAIL
Desmond J Smail

What makes Astons so special? I went to school in Newport Pagnell, so I grew up with them. They were part of the community: everybody knew someone who worked there.

What got you into the marque and when? When I left school at 16, I went for an apprenticeship with Peter Austen Smith, who set up on his own at about the same time as fellow ex-employees Richard Williams, Ian Mason and Andy Chapman. I bought my first, a DB5 with a blown-up engine, from the factory in 1979. It took another year to save up to buy the parts!

What is the best Aston Martin that you have owned? It's a difficult choice, but I think probably a DB4GT or an ex-David Brown DB5 Radford shooting brake.

Which example that you haven't owned to date is your goal? Again there are two: the Zagato Vanquish roadster or a DB4GT Zagato. I've worked on plenty and built replicas, but I would love to own an original.

What is the most and the least that you have ever paid for an Aston? The most was c£1m for a DB4GT, the least £1500 for a DBS.

Why do you think that Astons have risen in value so disproportionately? They're rare, handbuilt, high-quality cars. Just look at the numbers produced: 19 Zagatos, 75 DB4GTs and 123 DB5 Convertibles.

Can they keep rising, or have they peaked? The rise will continue, but may slow slightly. Emerging markets such as China and South America have not really joined in yet. I think that DB5s will be worth £1m within the next five years, as long as we do not have a financial meltdown.

What do you advise buying now before they take off? The DBS 6 – only 786 were made and a lot have been broken up – and the AM Vantage six-cylinder: just 70 were built.

Will any Astons always be 'affordable'? The cars built in Gaydon or Bloxham will remain affordable – they are still going down in value. But it is still an Aston.

Are there any cars which wear the badge that you don't consider to be true Aston Martins? Yes, the Cygnet!

As Aston Martin celebrates its centenary, you have to ask some questions. Namely, has there ever been a less successful car company that is still in business? After all, in those 100 years the brand has had myriad owners, scant profits and few models. Even the similarly aged, charismatic and traumatic Alfa Romeo might shiver if it inspected Aston Martin's books.

Aston never made more than 1000 cars in a year until 2001, and in even its most celebrated years it struggled to make 200, sometimes fewer than half that. Yet the fact that the marque has survived 100 years solely on quality and character tells you something – that this company and what it produces are special. And adored.

Of course, the firm got a massive boost when William Lyons was so busy selling E-types that he didn't have two spare to lend to Eon Productions. The James Bond team turned instead to Aston Martin, and the boutique manufacturer quickly became a household name.

Tellingly, though, it remained a boutique manufacturer, which adds to the mystique of its cars… and to their values. The 'Aston Martin effect', while previously attributable at least in part to the 'Bond effect', has now far surpassed that big-screen connection. The market as a whole is on the rise, but, ignoring the supernova that is Ferrari, Aston Martin has been riding the wave like the Silver Surfer.

Sure, the appeal of a Silver Birch DB5 to a man of a certain age was never in doubt, but the way the other, non-film-related models have exploded in its wake is unprecedented for a mainstream British marque.

A DB6 is a great car after all, but determinedly not a DB5. Yet as Aston demand has spiralled its values have rocketed, and H&H has been at the forefront, racking up a series of record-breaking prices. And just as surely as numbers go through

PHILIP JONES
Byron International

What makes Aston Martins so special? Few people buy an Aston Martin with logic – it's a purchase from the heart, with a passion that few other marques can aspire to. It is a joy for me to share that passion with my customers.

What got you into the marque and when? When your first purchase is a one-owner Short Chassis Volante, you're hooked!

What is the best Aston Martin you have ever owned? My current V8 Zagato Volante – always considered an 'ugly duckling', it has stunning performance, rarity, and is a rising swan in investment terms.

Which example that you haven't owned to date is your goal? Every car is different and every one has its own tale to tell, so the honest answer is the next one!

What is the most and the least you have ever paid for an Aston Martin? From £5000 to £1million and anywhere in between.

Why do you think that Aston Martins have risen in value so disproportionately? As Mark Twain said: 'Buy land, they're not making it any more.' Aston Martin was a low-volume manufacturer for the first 80-odd years, so there's a limited number supplying a burgeoning worldwide demand.

Can prices keep on rising, or have they now peaked? Recent rises have been fuelled by a poor property market and low returns on savings. But take a medium-to-long-term view and you get the joy of owning an Aston Martin as well as a good return.

What do you advise buying now before they take off? Look at the market and what represents value: V8 Volantes were considered to be worth twice a saloon – they are well away from that now; a DBS is mechanically a DB6 in a more modern body and currently at a fraction of the price.

Do any wear the badge that you don't consider to be true Aston Martins? Many wrongly attribute that characteristic to the DB7, claiming it to be Ford badge-engineering. In fact, we have seen a 'bounce' in the market, with rising demand for both i6 and Vantage models. If a car has an Aston Martin badge, it is an Aston Martin for me.

Bonhams' Aston Martin Works Service sale has been going from strength to strength – and in 2013 set a new best with total takings of some £10m

DB5s in particular benefit from the 'James Bond effect'

H&H secured a World Record sum of £242k for this DB6

the roof for models that the casual fan – or James Bond fan – can recognise, so the *cognoscenti* work backwards, delving into the past to find something classier, purer and cheaper.

Certainly, this rise is no short-term blip and, anniversary year or not, it should not be compared with the nitrous boost that the Jaguar E-type received when it turned 50. Those with longer association with the classic world may recall that the last time there was a sustained boom, Aston Martin was the most extreme performer of all British marques.

And so it is at the vanguard again, building steadily over the past five years or so before exploding, but the specialists say that this time it is a 'correction' and, if and when the market settles (or collapses), Astons will still be valuable. While many of us look on in awe at their incredible rise, experts argue simply that it is because, until now, they have been undervalued.

They even suggest that, in prestige and price, Newport Pagnell should be a direct rival to Maranello. Take the DB4GT Zagato: one selling for £3m-plus recently may have raised eyebrows, but that is still a 10th of the price of the rather more plentiful Ferrari 250GTO. Indeed, it is half the value of a decent SWB, which, with 176 made, is common as muck compared to the 19-off Aston. Even the 'standard' DB4GT numbers only 75 and you can have one of those for a million, less even than a 1990s 'Sanction' car sold for at Bonhams last year.

Ah, Bonhams. What an ace the auction house pulled from its sleeve when it decided to hold an annual marque sale at Aston Martin Works Service. Not only does it secure some of the most desirable Astons on the market, but it has also created, with this 'event' auction, a crucible where bidding for top lots is frenzied. In 2013, the unique Bertone Jet fetched nearly £3.5m,

ADRIAN JOHNSON
Post Vintage Engineers

What makes Aston Martins so special? It's the very best of British craftsmanship, a marque to truly be proud of. It has cemented its place in motoring history.

What got you into the marque and when? My father had a Feltham Aston when they were worth little, so it was our daily car.

What is the best Aston Martin that you have owned? I have had all sorts, from DB4GT to moderns, but always return to the DB5.

Which example that you haven't owned to date is your goal? A DB3S: I can dream!

What is the most and the least that you have ever paid for an Aston? From c£5000 for a DB MkIII (years ago) to seven figures.

Why do you think that Astons have risen in value so disproportionately? I don't think it's disproportionate. The time has come for the marque to be recognised.

Can they keep rising, or have they peaked? I'm confident that they will continue to grow.

What model would you advise buying now before they take off? I don't think that there are any 'proper' Aston Martins that haven't already taken off, apart from maybe the DB2 and MkIII.

Will any Astons always be 'affordable'? The DB7, due to its quality and ubiquity.

Vantage you are ever likely to see went to £108,000, while a DB5 that had been unused since 1979 was an eyewatering £320,000.

As long as the market remains this buoyant, we see no sign of that trend slowing. While some may question whether the most exclusive Astons will ever quite rank with their Prancing Horse contemporaries, there is little doubt that there is no British rival for post-war cachet. So, while ever more Aston Martins rocket beyond most buyers' budgets, that inevitably drags up the less-revered models on their coat-tails.

But be careful: the experts warn that some cars – the Gaydon- and Bloxham-built ones – are unlikely to be admitted to the pantheon of greats. Our tip, if you can even contemplate buying your way into that level of kudos, is the DB4. The purist's choice, the DB4 is prettier to many eyes than the DB5, and barely different

Gaydon-built models such as the DB9 are still affordable

This £320k DB5 reinforced the market desire for 'finds'

while a Lagonda Rapide sold for £150,000 – more than 10 times the price a similar car reached at Coys just a few years ago, and twice what a minter made at Bonhams in 2011.

Yet there is one area in which the Aston market is perversely outstripping everything else in the world, including Ferrari, and that is in barnfinds. It is a mystery why there are quite so many laid-up, squirrelled-away Aston Martins in the world, but they are all coming out of hiding now and making nonsensical sums. The prices they are finding – in need of full restoration, remember – are beyond remarkable. In 2011, the Bonhams gavel fell at £309k for a wreck of a DB4 Convertible and a DB5 that had been in storage for 35 years nudged £400,000 (against a £50-60,000 estimate!). In 2012, a barnfind DB2/4 drophead made £113,500 and, just in case you thought that a bit much, in 2013 bidders continued the trend. The most careworn DB6 mechanically, yet it is currently priced even with or below DB6s, and way under DB5s. Unless, bizarrely, it is a barnfind, in which case the sky's the limit and it will probably set you back far more than a perfectly serviceable car with the restoration costs still to come!

Failing that, if you have been watching the market for a few years, you probably think that the William Towns-styled DBS has already surpassed itself, but we're told that the 'sixes' in particular have a good way to go yet, thanks to a mixture of trickle-down theory plus the double whammy of James Bond *and* Lord Brett Sinclair. The recent DB4/5/6 prices make the sub-£70k paid for an immaculate, freshly restored V8 at Bonhams in May 2013 look a steal.

Finally, some of the clever money is also pouring into the much-derided 'wedge' Lagonda. Rare, exotic and distinctive, it is surely going to take off soon. Shhh, don't tell anyone!

RICHARD STUART WILLIAMS
RS Williams

What makes Aston Martins so special? Quality and driving pleasure. Having its own in-house engine is what marks out an Aston Martin as a true thoroughbred.

What got you into the marque and when? When I finished school I applied for jobs at AC and Aston Martin. I got the job at Feltham and, after that closed, finished my apprenticeship at Newport Pagnell.

What is the best Aston Martin that you have ever owned? I've only ever bought one new, a V8 Zagato that I still have and love. The other car that I've had a long time is the result of a V8 lengthened for Sir David Brown. It was meant to be a one-off, but they made seven. My four daughters all went to church in it for their weddings.

Which example that you haven't owned to date is your ultimate goal? We recently sold a DB4 Vantage with a factory GT engine. I'd love to have taken it home, but I'm affected like that at least once a year.

What is the most and the least you have ever paid for an Aston Martin? You're talking to a man who borrowed £3000 from his parents in the late '60s to buy a DB4GT Zagato. As for the most, I have to be discreet but clients have paid millions for special cars.

Why do you think that Aston Martins have risen in value so disproportionately? I don't think that their rise has been particularly disproportionate. In terms of rarity and performance, Aston Martins should be measured alongside Ferraris.

Can prices for Astons keep rising, or have they peaked? It's not as if they are rocketing up: they have been going up gradually over the years and people have only just started taking notice. Values are more customer-driven than market-driven.

What do you advise buying now before they take off? 1970s and '80s V8s are next in the pecking order and they are bloody nice cars. They are creeping up already.

Will any Astons always be 'affordable'? Yes. It is all volume-driven: the more that were produced, the less it will go up.

Let's start at the very beginning...

The first journalist to drive the oldest-surviving Aston Martin since its restoration, **James Elliott** takes A3 on a pilgrimage to the marque's roots

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/AMHT**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There is a rich history of naming cars after great competition victories – the Porsche Carrera, Ferrari Mondial and, to a lesser extent, Daytona – but very few actual marques owe their monikers to a win. And only one to a short, moribund hillclimb in a sleepy Buckinghamshire village. Thanks to Lionel Martin's prowess in his Singer specials, and his wife Kate's suggestion that his new car company should be named after his favourite stomping ground on the Hertfordshire border, that is precisely what happened to create one of the most enigmatic and revered brands in motoring.

Today, the Aston Martin name is so much a part of the fabric of the automotive world that it seems natural and familiar. A century ago, however, it might have appeared a little perverse that Aston Clinton and its brief burst of hill, with little more challenge than one 30° right turn on a blind crest and a single sweeping left, would be the foundation for such greatness.

To celebrate the centenary of this British institution, we have returned to its roots. Not to the Henniker Place (now Mews) address where Bamford & Martin established its dealership for tuned Singers, but to Aston Clinton, where its founder's glory gave birth to a legend. And what could be more suitable to tackle the hill than the oldest Aston Martin in the world, the only survivor of the original prototypes built by unsung chief mechanic Jack Addis?

'ITS SIGNIFICANCE WAS REVEALED WHEN THE INSPECTOR SPOTTED "3" CAST INTO THE CHASSIS'

Each one had a name, of course. First there was the 1914 'Coal Scuttle'. That was followed by 'Bunny', which, through multiple record-breaking at Brooklands after a crash forced its chassis to be shortened, helped garner much-needed publicity. Then, after the interruption of The Great War, came this 1921 car, known as A3. In period it had a nickname, too, but let's just say that if it were in *The Dam Busters*, they would have since edited it out.

A3 was built on a Rubery-Owen frame and powered by a 1486cc monobloc engine designed by Hamilton Victor Robb. The powerplant was derived from his own Coventry-Simplex 1389cc unit, as used in 'Coal Scuttle', and fuelled by a single sidedraught 'sloper' SU carburettor via an Autovac from a tank at the rear.

The reason why this remarkable and historically important car survived is most likely the sleight of hand with which the nascent company recast it and sold it on as a production car. Back

REBUILD OF AN ICON

The rebuild of A3 is testament to the vast pool of restoration skills available in the UK. It was masterminded by Andy Bell at Ecurie Bertelli (www.ecuriebertelli.com), and the specialist is proud that virtually everything was done by craftsmen based within just a few miles of his workshop.

The project started in early 2007 and had moral issues to overcome, chief among them being what body it should wear, A3 having had several since 1921. The Aston Martin Heritage Trust went for a tourer style, which was beautifully recreated from old photos without even a buck. The main technical hurdle was the wheels. When acquired, A3 wore spoked rims but the correct 'Sankey' items were specially cast – from scratch – in aluminium.

The engine was rebuilt by Tim Abbot for Jim Young, Bertelli rebuilt the chassis and a seasoned English ash frame was built to carry all-new panels by Bodylines in Olney.

Floors are old pine, frame ash. Wheel is unnervingly flexible and brakes work on rear wheels only; right-hand 'change has four speeds. Top left: in Brooklands paddock

then, subsequent sellers wouldn't have been keen to make a big deal of its true, pre-production status and eventually that part of its history was buried beneath the sands of time and swathes of ever more elaborate bodywork.

Until, that is, it came up for auction a little more than a decade ago. It was initially assumed to simply be a very early Aston Martin with a later 1930s three-seater body, and it was only when eagle-eyed Bonhams inspector Stewart Skilbeck spotted the '3' cast into the chassis that its significance was revealed.

After a couple of further auctions and a bit of horse-trading, A3 was finally secured by the Aston Martin Heritage Trust and treated to a six-figure, three-year restoration, all funded by an enthusiast benefactor. Since then, it has been a halo car for the Trust.

This year it will visit – and be fêted in – all four corners of the globe, but it seems entirely appropriate that its first stop should be the very hillclimb that bestowed half of its name, on a wet, dull winter's day, for me to become only the fourth person to take the wheel of this precious machine since that rebuild.

For a car of its era – and in many respects it is as much a veteran machine as a vintage one – it looks quite sophisticated: electric starting, four-speed gearbox, even a floor-mounted footbrake to share the burden with the handbrake to be found outside the cockpit.

Its shape and stance, too, are more sporting than you might have expected, and this when it is wearing the least racy of the three bodies it was thought to have worn when it was a works hack-cum-development car.

The cabin is entered via wide running boards. There's cosy seating for two, with the squabs flat on the wooden floor and the passenger seat set back slightly from the driver's so that the Aston can accommodate two grown men – as long as the passenger is able to furl his arm around behind the driver.

The starting procedure is absolutely of the era. Flick on the electrics via a switch sprouting through the pine floorboards, move the dash-mounted knob from 'off' to 'magneto' and push the starter button with your foot. Once it has fired, move the dash knob to 'D' for dynamo and you are ready to go.

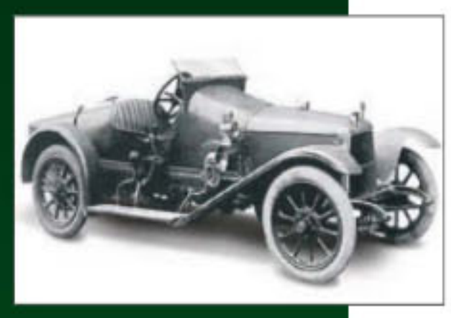
First is right and back – reverse is even further right and up, but accessed only by pressing a spring-loaded knob – with second directly above it and third back and left, under your knee. The Hele-Shaw multi-plate clutch works well and, as soon as you are off the line, you shove steadily to access second, thereafter staying in the tractable middle two ratios unless you find yourself stationary or on a motorway.

The pedals are mounted on either side of the steering column, the centre throttle on the left with the clutch, but any confusion that you fear

Aston Martin history part 1

From foundation to Feltham

1912 Robert Bamford and Lionel Martin go into partnership as Singer agents on Callow Road, London. Martin competes on Aston Hill in a Singer special



1913 The two form Bamford & Martin Ltd in Henniker Place, London on 15 January

1914 First Aston-Martin built, with 1389cc Coventry-Simplex power. Christened 'Coal Scuttle' (pictured above), it is registered in March 1915

1918 Move to Abingdon Rd, Kensington

1920 Second prototype developed, with 1487cc engine and front-wheel brakes. Count Louis Zborowski begins to invest in the company and Bamford steps away

1921 A3, the third prototype, completed

1922 Prototype 'Bunny' breaks 10 World Records at Brooklands. AM fields two cars at the French Grand Prix on 16 July

1925 Company goes into receivership but is rescued by Lady Charnwood, John Benson, 'Bert' Bertelli and Bill Renwick. Renamed Aston Martin Motors, relocates to Feltham, Middx. Lionel Martin leaves the firm

1926 Renwick & Bertelli moves to Feltham; 1½-litre is created by 'Bert' and Claude Hill, later developed into the International and Le Mans

1932 Bertelli wins the Biennial Cup at Le Mans with Pat Driscol. Sir Arthur Sutherland becomes the owner of AM

1934 MkII chassis introduced; Astons win the Ards TT team prize, leading to 100mph Ulster

1935 The Aston Martin Owners' Club is founded at The Grafton Hotel, London

1938 Factory turned over to produce parts for Wellingtons and Mosquitos

1939 Atom prototype, with spaceframe, IFS, four-speed Cotal 'box and aerodynamic body

1944 Works badly damaged by a flying bomb

1946 AM goes on sale in *The Times*

For part 2, the David Brown years, see p139

Clockwise: single-carb sidevalve 'four' musters 40bhp, but A3 struggles up hills; charming chassis plate; 'Sankey' wheels were recreated in aluminium

'THE SIDEVALVE DOESN'T PERFORM AS WELL ON THE HILL AS FIGURES SUGGEST ON PAPER'

this might generate is banished by the fact that you never use the footbrake. It has far less feel and impact on your speed than the handbrake and, particularly on these greasy roads, tends to instantly lock the rear wheels.

Front brakes had been fitted when the car was bought by the Trust but, for authenticity, the original arrangement, with four shoes in each rear drum, was reinstated during the restoration.

On the hill the 1486cc sidevalve engine does not perform as well as figures suggest on paper. That unit is an anomaly because the 'A' of A3 should mean 1300cc and 'B' would mean 1500cc, but, realising that it was giving away 200cc in the *voiturette* class, Bamford & Martin decided on the upgrade. "It doesn't really like hills," explains pre-war Aston guru Andy Bell of Ecurie Bertelli. Certainly claims of a 72mph maximum – the Walford speedometer reads to 90mph – and 45bhp from the single-carburettor motor seem fanciful in this environment.

Nor does it tally with a car that reportedly 'tore up the hill in streaks of smoke, throwing a hail of stones from the wheels' during its first public outing, at nearby Kop Hill in 1922, but the gradient at the bottom of this hill is challenging. Yet, with 3000rpm the reality rather than the 5000rpm advertised on the dial, if you keep the very short-travel pedal to the floor it slugs away happily enough. It steers incredibly directly via the Marles cam-and-roller system topped by a flexible four-spoke wheel and, thanks to its short 8ft wheelbase, handles surprisingly sweetly for a car of its age.

The drive is smooth despite the extra prop-shaft – one from engine to 'box, the other from the transmission to the floating rear axle housed in a torque tube. The ride via the 'Sankey' wheels and semi-elliptic springs with Hartford friction dampers on the front and hydraulics on the back is far more forgiving than you would expect.

More evocatively, from the driver's seat you are always glimpsing the top of that nickel-plated radiator, which, while different to those on the cars that put this marque on the map, unmistakably set the template for them. You are always reminded that you are in a very special, very pretty and historically important machine.

Which says it all, really. Robert Bamford and Lionel Martin were certainly on to something with their crusade to build high-quality light sporting cars, but it took a certain alchemist called Augustus Cesare 'Bert' Bertelli to turn that something into gold.

IN ASTON WE TRUST

In 1998, the 5000-strong Aston Martin Owners' Club took a bold step to safeguard its unique collection of marque artefacts for future generations by setting up an independent charitable organisation. The Aston Martin Heritage Trust is dedicated to 'preserving and enhancing the history of Aston Martin'. Its HQ is a magnificent 15th-century barn in Oxfordshire that houses more than 100,000 documents, images, trophies and artworks. It has a full-time curator and its own car collection comprising A3, a 1933 Ulster, a 1989 Lagonda and the Le Mans prototype, AMR1/01. See www.amht.co.uk

V8, DBR9 and AMR1/01 on display in the AMHT barn

‘Suddenly it’s 1935 again, the team storming through France to Le Mans’

Mick Walsh drives Nick Mason’s prized Aston Martin team-car trio – including one of the seven that raced in the 24 Hours – plus the Ulster that finished third

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**


18
CML 722

There's one experience that beats driving a great car, and that's running with a group of similar machines. On a dull, misty December day – on a deserted Gloucestershire high road – the spectacular sight of four Aston Martin Ulsters running in convoy vividly recreated the way sports-racers travelled in the 1930s. This glorious set – rasping along with yellow headlights glowing through the cold winter's morning – could have been the team's convoy to Le Mans in early June 1935. Our historic group features two Astons from that seven-car sortie, including the most famous Ulster of all, LM20, which the two Charles – Martin and Brackenbury – guided home in grim conditions to third overall, and the 1500cc class victory. Such was the reliability of the Feltham-built roadsters that six of the seven cars – four driven by amateurs – completed the 24-hour enduro.

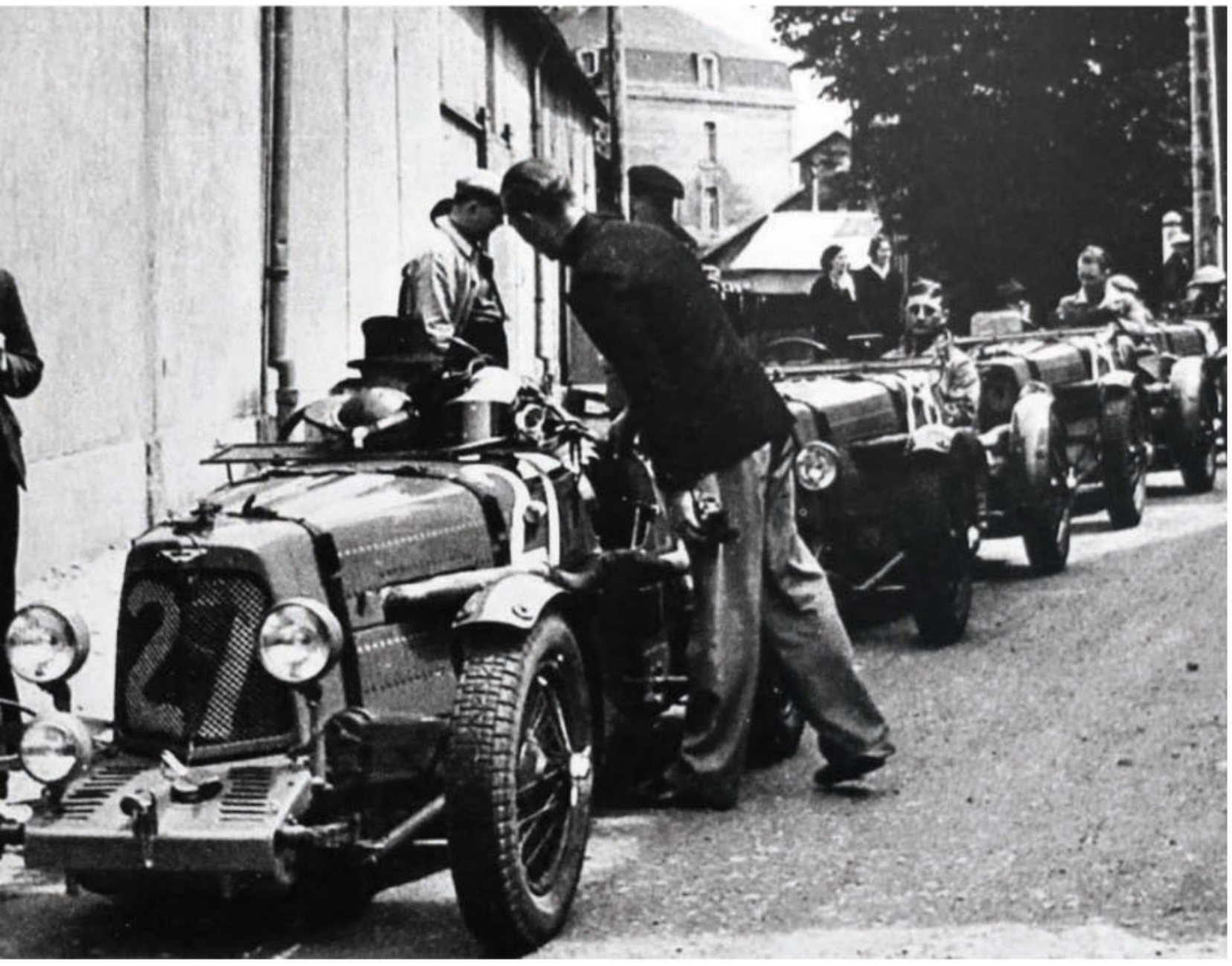
While the Alfas set the early pace, the Astons battled against rival Riley and Singer equipes, with Clifton Penn-Hughes in LM19 running ninth and Martin in LM20 10th. *The Autocar* reported a 'dogfight of the most glorious type' playing out in the downpour. As darkness fell, news filtered back that an Ulster had crashed at White House, ejecting its driver. Thankfully Thomas Forthringham-Parker was only bruised and cut after hitting the bank, but LM19 was out.

Spirits among the British teams and press must have been high when a Lagonda briefly took the lead, but Brackenbury and Martin kept their cool – driving smoothly and consistently, aided by superb pit work from the Feltham crew. The Aston was running a remarkable third at daybreak, despite 'lackadaisical *plombeurs*' being too slow to seal the petrol, oil and radiator caps after a pitstop. The incident had caused Latin-born Aston owner Augustus 'Bert' Bertelli to go 'all Italian' and demand swifter officials.

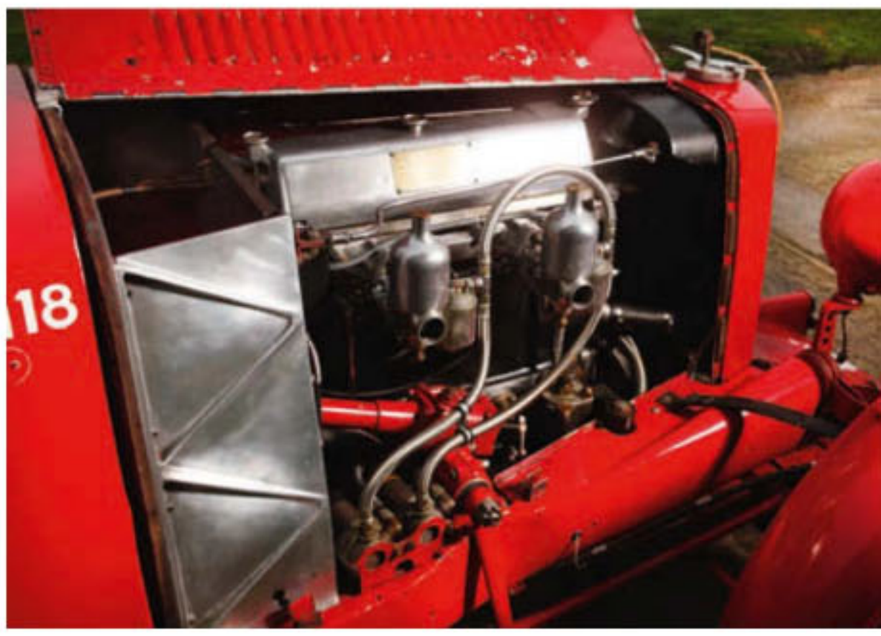
The Aston mechanics were never allowed to relax as the Singer of Frank Barnes and Alf Langley chased them relentlessly, the situation made all the more tense by the Ulster requiring an extra fuel stop in the closing stages. The final refill took 40 secs before Martin roared off to finish third and take the coveted Rudge-Whitworth Biennial Cup. The Ulster's winning average speed was an amazing 75.23mph, with a best lap of 81mph. Bertelli's decision, encouraged by his wife Vera, to repaint the Ulsters red over the previous unlucky green had paid off, but the key elements were quality engineering, top teamwork and two fine drivers. They motored home on the Monday, the team weary from the long race and deserved Sunday-night celebrations.

Right: Ulster team headed by LM18 of Jim Elwes and Mortimer Morris-Goodall arrives at Le Mans in '35. Below: LM17 won its class on that year's Mille Miglia

'WHAT BERTELLI'S TOUGH LITTLE ENGINE LACKS IN TORQUE, IT DELIVERS WITH PROGRESSIVE POWER'



Fast-forward 76 years and it's hard to relate the bright red sports cars to the moody, monochrome photos of that fine performance. The Ulster may be painted a Latin hue, but there's little flamboyant about its styling or features. It has the functional purpose of a fighter plane, from its distinctive painted radiator shroud down the flat bonnet to the shapely 'crocodile' front-hinged one-piece tail that cleverly moulds around the horizontal spare. It's devoid of a curved cowl for the aeroscreen, flared cycle-wings or an impressive dash, yet it does have a cohesive sporty beauty that's embellished by the high side exhaust. In their original form, the Ulster team cars had the minimum of chrome: even the 'screen surround was painted to match the body to prevent annoying glare from chasing headlights. Post-war owners couldn't resist



From top: clearances and strip-down notes; works car has bronze head with better gas flow and higher compression. Left: sparse cabin has supportive seats

sprucing them up, with shiny green paint, plus chromed radiator, exhaust and wheels, though several Ulsters have been returned to authentic racing livery in recent years. Nick Mason was one of the first to reinstate the Monza Red of his team cars, after a nostalgic visit from Bertelli to Morntane Engineering's workshop in the late '70s.

With no door, the knack to getting aboard is to put your foot on the seat with a hand on the rear body before you drop into the bucket. The tricky bit is squeezing your left leg between the gearbox remote and the broad, four-spoke steering wheel. Once inside it feels low for a pre-war car, and better protected compared to the lofty perch of bigger rivals. The black-painted dashboard continues the functional character, with the Jaeger rev counter (redlined at 5000rpm) and clock the boldest features. Over to the far left is a row of switches for ignition, dynamo, lights and electric pumps. The austerity of the cabin is completed by the exposed gearbox casing under the scuttle and long remote lever, with short

stick topped by a rubber knob. To save room, the handbrake – which on LM18 is extensively drilled in a rigorous attempt to trim the Aston Martin's sturdy 940kg – is mounted vintage-style outside the body. The floorboard is deep in the chassis, so there's ample foot space to get accustomed to the centre throttle.

Sitting in the Ulster – with only a single aero-screen to protect you from the freezing, moist air – the 76-year-old machine feels surprisingly snug, as plenty of warmth filters into the cockpit from the single-overhead-cam 1495cc 'four'.

On the road, the Aston's charm continues to permeate. The rasping exhaust is far from exotic, but that urgent blat is soon forgotten as you relish its eagerness to rev. What Bertelli's tough little engine lacks in torque, it delivers with progressive power right through the range. The engine's zeal is matched by a great gearbox, too.

Straight into the close company of three other prized Ulsters – with little time to get familiar with the controls – my apprehension is swiftly blown away by this inspiring machine. The tight gearbox gate is back-to-front, with first inside and forward, yet it's a joy to slot up and down the close ratios. Rush the change and the small cogs grate, though the action is slick and smooth with patient timing. The chasm between third and fourth is initially frustrating as the power fades on upchanges, but the effect is less perceptible if you confidently keep the revs singing.

Yet it's the steering that's the most surprising. The light feel and quick action provide a precision that you don't normally get with a 1930s car. Such crisp responses allow the driver to explore the Ulster's handling. It feels superbly balanced through the turns, with flat poise that belies its pre-war origins. The heavy chassis, underslung at the rear, with vintage layout of semi-ellipitic springs and Hartford friction dampers, is a robust affair. There's little shake even over the worst surfaces, thanks to the cast-aluminium scuttle. The curved-back seat offers excellent support, a factor I'm sure that former racer Bertelli conceived for the comfort of his drivers.

Our route includes a rough section that proves a challenge to keep a steady foot on the centre throttle as the firm chassis bounces about. Once back on smoother roads, though, its handling, delightful steering and peppy motor consistently impress. The rugged Ulster may lack dramatic punch, yet it delivers with quality feel and determined harmony. It's a thrilling moment as we scythe through the fog – following an Ulster with another two filling my mirror – chasing back to Mason's Ten Tenths base. For a second, it's 1935 all over again – with the team just off the boat and storming across France to Le Mans *en*

Clockwise, from above right: nostalgic moment as Bertelli, 92, is reunited with Mason's Ulster; note hyphen on early badge; dechromed Ulster LM17

ASTON MARTIN ULSTER
Sold/number built 1935-'36/31
Construction steel ladder chassis, underslung at rear, aluminium body
Engine iron-block, bronze-head, single-overhead-cam 1495cc 'four', twin SU carbs; 85bhp @ 5000rpm; 95lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension semi-elliptic leaf springs, with Hartford lever-arm shock absorbers
Steering worm and peg
Brakes cable-operated 14in drums
Wheels/tyres Rudge wires/5.50x18 crossplies
Length 13ft 1in (3987mm) **Width** 5ft 3in (1600mm) **Height** n/a **Wheelbase** 8ft 7in (2616mm) **Weight** 2073lb (1040kg)
0-60mph 13.8 secs **Top speed** 102mph
Price new £750

route to a roadside picnic. Mason used to drive his Ulster to events but with the spiralling entry costs (the Le Mans Classic was €5400 in 2012), it's tempting fate, and he now favours trailering.

Bugatti specialist Charles Knill-Jones, who looks after Mason's dream collection, is another Ulster convert, having worked on and raced the cars extensively, including co-driving at Le Mans. "The engineering is strong and beefy, but it's small compared to the stockier Bentleys and Talbots we race against," says Knill-Jones. "The brakes are exceptional, yet you rarely use them on the track. You don't have the top-end grunt, so you have to hustle it into corners. You don't want to scrub off speed, so the key is a classic drift with all four wheels sliding. They are just fantastic through the Silverstone complex."

He adds: "The limiting factor in tuning is the valvetrain rocker assembly, which is rudimentary and, with so much overhang, they can break. The long stroke is also sensitive to fuelling. If you run too lean, it'll pick up a piston. The ports are enormous so you quickly reach a brick wall with modifications, and there's little you can do with the crank and rods because the block can't go any bigger. The secret is in precise detail with close tolerances. The valve-spring rates need to be exactly right for maximum efficiency."

Of the four team cars, LM21 is the most developed. In conjunction with his old pre-war Aston mentor Derek Edwards, Mason had an engine blueprinted and uprated including a special exhaust manifold, which achieved an impressive 105bhp at 6300rpm on the dyno. German Audi engineer Eckhart Berg helped with the work and reported perfect straight-line power through the rev range, but the weakness was again the fragile rocker gear.

After his vintage-car introduction with an Austin Seven, Mason has had a long-lasting connection with pre-war Astons, starting with an International. The famous rock drummer – dressed in flares and sporting a Zapata moustache – initially got a cold reception from leading specialist Edwards. But Mason was eventually allowed to help rebuild his International during breaks from Pink Floyd's exhaustive gigging schedule in the early '70s. "I soon developed a reputation for stripping cars and then disappearing on tour," he recalls.

Keen to start vintage racing, Mason took Edwards' advice and bought LM21 for £6000 in '75: "It seemed like a fortune. Derek was a superb teacher, and the Ulster was an excellent beginner's car, with wonderful handling and terrific brakes but slightly underpowered due to its heavy chassis. It's a great racing car, and I enjoy driving it now as much as I ever did." Highlights over the past 30 years' competition have included driving to the Nürburgring in convoy with Edwards in his trusty ex-Le Mans Ulster 'CMC 614', plus competing and winning at Goodwood in 2009.

A partnership with Edwards to form Morntane Engineering led to the acquisition of other Ulster team cars for stock. "I found myself unable to part with them," reported Mason in his book *Into the Red*. The three red Ulsters have since been a familiar feature of historic racing, with Mason's daughters Holly and Chloe taking on custodianship of LM17 and LM18. Several Grand Prix aces have been invited to drive the family's Ulsters over the years, including Sir Stirling Moss, Bruce Halford and, most recently, Holly's husband, Scottish racing driver Marino Franchitti. All have enjoyed the experience.

That infectious enthusiasm for Ulsters was recently confirmed by the outstanding book *Aston Martin Ulster*, by Palawan. Its publisher, Simon Draper, owns LM20. These brilliant British sports cars clearly get to you, the enduring appeal proven by the stories of long-term ownership of the 26 survivors featured in this beautiful register by the late Alan Archer.

Even with values of the cars rocketing to £800,000-plus, today's lucky Ulster owners still buy them to drive. Many have entered the Mille Miglia to follow in the tracks of Tommy Clarke and Maurice Faulkner's impressive class-winning drive in the 1935 Italian road-race classic when they beat the Maseratis and Alfas. Distinctive styling, quality engineering, superb handling and rich competition history – the Ulster makes a strong case for itself as the finest British sports-racer of the 1930s.

Clockwise, from right: original script was found under later green paint; Ulsters ready for 1935 Le Mans start; LM20 (at rear) came an impressive third

Thanks to *Nick Mason, Charles Knill-Jones, Simon Draper and Andy Bell at Ecurie Bertelli. Aston Martin Ulster is published by Palawan, priced from £400. See www.palawan.co.uk*

FELTHAM'S FANTASTIC FOUR-POT

It might be no beauty queen, but this unique Aston enjoyed a successful, albeit brief, racing career. **Mick Walsh** takes the wheel of the 1948 Spa 24 Hours winner

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/LAT**

With its lustrous black paint, new maroon leather and sparkling chrome exhaust, it's a challenge to link this restored Aston Martin to the gruelling Spa 24 Hours. But in 1948, this newly developed racer, fitted with cigar-shaped body and streamlined helmet wings, scored several heroic firsts. With St John 'Jock' Horsfall and Leslie Johnson at the wheel, the untried 2-litre model took on Europe's finest sports cars – including a Ferrari V12, a streamlined Alta F2 racer and a gaggle of more powerful Gallic greats driven by established aces – and outlasted them all. That impressive debut victory secured the unique car's place in Aston history, giving the firm its first international post-war win, as well as the first racing glory of the David Brown era.

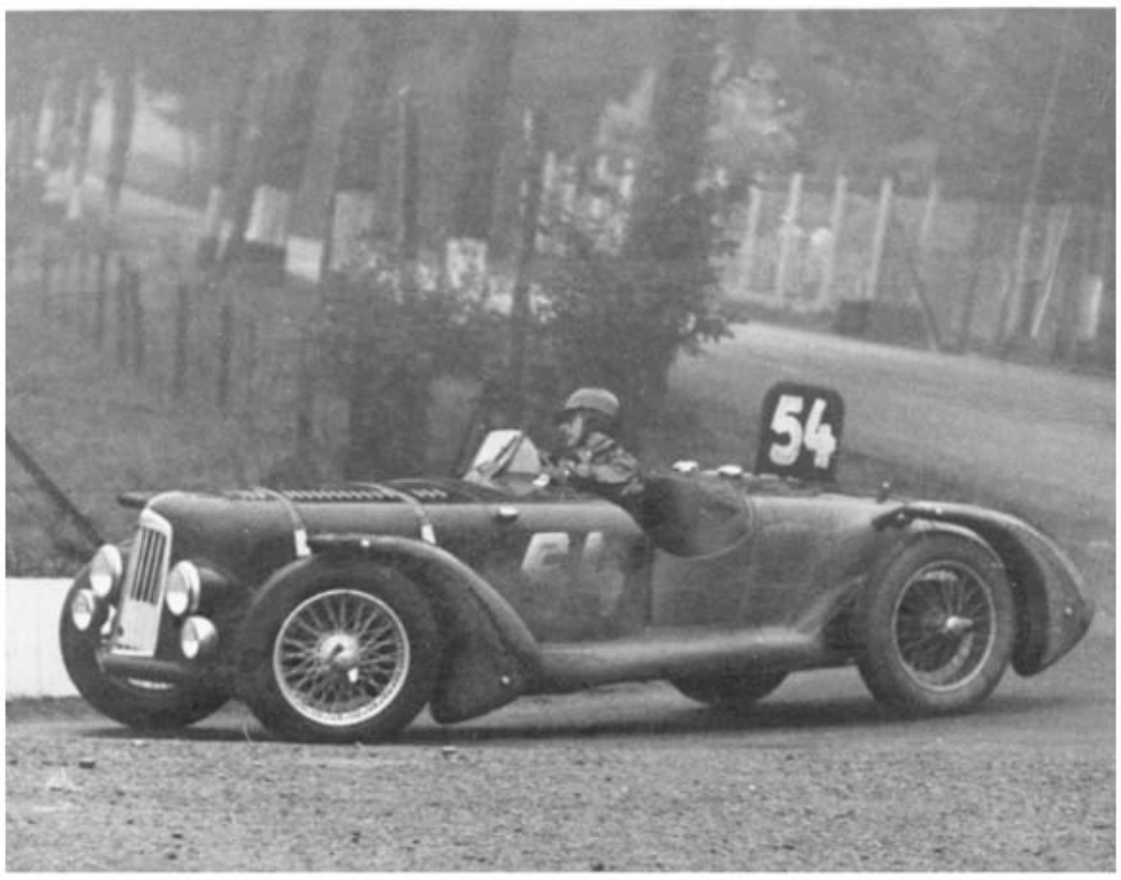
But this was no fluke. The small team, led by Claude Hill and aided by his determined tester Horsfall, had designed and built the new 2-litre engine and chassis during the war. The pair had clocked up thousands of development miles through day and night in the exposed test bed.

Horsfall had successfully raced Astons before WW2, and was keen to pick up where he'd left off. Hill's design impressed him and, after inviting racing buddies Tony Rolt and Freddie Dixon to test the car, Horsfall was encouraged to enter the Spa 24 Hours – the first major sports-car race to be staged after the war.

The latest Aston Martin saviour David Brown, himself a former racer, was easily persuaded. With nine weeks to go, the Feltham factory team was ordered to build not only a sports-racer around a new semi-spaceframe, but also complete the prototype chassis with a drophead body to accompany it to Belgium. Frank Feeley moved across from Lagonda to take on the styling, and single-handedly ran the coachwork side.

The challenge put Hill under immense pressure but Brown secured funds for extra staff and the cars started to take shape as they worked around the clock. 'The racer wasn't pretty, but the standard of work and finish was amazing,' said Horsfall in an AMOC article. 'Nothing ran smoothly and we became nervous wrecks. For the last seven weeks I doubt either of us ever got more than three or four hours sleep. At times we wished we'd never suggested the damned race.'

Horsfall was a perfectionist about the race car, and designed several special features including gravity-fed reserve petrol and oil tanks in case of electrical failure or a blocked fuel line. Other inspired ideas were a wiper for the aeroscreen, which proved a real bonus in the wet conditions. As the racer was being built, Horsfall used the test bed to establish the best ratios for Spa, a track that he'd never visited prior to the race weekend. The mechanics worked until minutes before the car was loaded onto the truck, with Horsfall demanding that they produce a list of unfinished tasks before they dashed to the ferry.



Clockwise, from main: superb balance on fast corners; factory chassis plate; wonderful period switchgear on dash; at Spa in '48 – note different wing profile; good feel and no kickback from steering

Arriving after the other teams had started practice, mechanics Jack Sopp and Fred Lowne continued to complete the preparations, not finishing until the Friday morning. In the meantime, Horsfall and Johnson were forced to use the drophead for training around the legendary nine-mile circuit. Rain fell all week, but in the final practice session the pair finally drove the racer for the first time on an apprehensive shakedown, the organisers allowing a few extra laps on Friday night for them to test the lights.

The 40-car entry was split into classes, and ranged from a team of streamlined HRGs to the 8-litre Barnato-Hassan Bentley that had been converted into a sports car. Fastest of the opposition was the Ferrari 166 of Le Mans winner Luigi Chinetti, partnered by Louis Chiron.

Much to everyone's relief, the sun came out just before the 4pm start but the circuit remained very slippery. Louis Gérard's Delage set the early pace but Chinetti's Ferrari soon took control, lapping at 80mph-plus. Horsfall, however, was forced to pit at the end of the opening lap with concerns about water temperature and excessive oil pressure, but was soon waved out again.

'Leslie and I slept between drives, and lapped with almost identical consistency,' Horsfall later reported. 'We neither of us exceeded 4300rpm in any gear, which equalled 100mph in top. That kept the fuel consumption down to 22mpg at an average speed of 72mph for 24 hours.'

Chinetti continued to set a blistering pace, and when he lapped Horsfall for the second time, the English ace followed him around Burnenville. Through the fast right-hander at Malmedy, the Aston nipped around the outside, much to Chinetti's frustration. The provocation worked and, as the Ferrari roared away, the Italian gunned the V12 way beyond its rev limit. 'The engine note was almost as high as a bat's squeak and within half an hour he was in the pits with a cracked cylinder head,' Horsfall noted.

The rain and mist continued to challenge crews through the night. The conditions led to many accidents, including Aston driver Dick Stallebrass on the first lap of his first race – the pre-war 2-litre spinning off and overturning. The leading Delage of Gérard crashed in the night and Horsfall's Aston was at the front as dawn broke. After refuelling at 12:30pm, Johnson headed out for the final stint, crossing the line after 1729 miles and 192 laps to take a popular win.

The celebrations were no doubt deflated by exhaustion – Hill was ordered to take a holiday upon the team's return – and the news that Stallebrass had died in hospital, but the following morning Horsfall decided to drive 'THX' home rather than load it onto the lorry. The car continued to impress, particularly the torque of the 2-litre engine. From creeping along at

ASTON MARTIN SPA REPLICA

Sold/number built 1948/1 (plus 13 other 2-litres)
Construction box-section steel semi-spaceframe with double side rails, alloy body
Engine cast-iron 1970cc 'four', with overhead valves operated by short pushrods, camshaft driven by chains at rear, twin 1½in SU carburettors
Max power 90bhp @ 4750rpm
Transmission David Brown four-speed, with synchromesh on top three ratios, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by trailing arms and torsion bar **rear** live axle with radius arms, Panhard rod; Armstrong lever-arm dampers, coil springs f/r
Steering worm and roller
Brakes Girling 12in drums
Length 14ft 8in (4287mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 4in (2750mm)
Weight 2240lb (1016kg)
Top speed 110mph
Price new £3109

15mph in top, it would accelerate smoothly to 110mph, while the body's low drag meant that Horsfall regularly had to use the brakes harder than anticipated when slowing from high speeds.

The contrast between the images from Spa and the restored survivor today might make you think that these are different cars. Mud-spattered, with heavy wings, a single aeroscreen, a crude exhaust and the number 54 sitting high like a dorsal fin, the Aston's original body looks more functional. When Feeley hastily revamped it for sale, he retained the front but reshaped the rear with a hinged top for access to the spare wheel, while the sides were reprofiled to give more width for doors and an inboard handbrake. Maybe Feeley had seen the Frazer Nash High Speed around west London, because there were similarities in concept, detail and pricing.

The biggest challenge for Feeley was the forward-mounted engine, which, as with the Healey Silverstone, dictated the proportions. Neat touches carried over from the racing body are the quick-release bonnet straps and the twin filler caps behind the cockpit, while inside the bucket seats are low and there's a comprehensive spread of Smiths dials ahead of the broad three-spoke wheel. In the centre is a switch panel for ignition, fuel and lights, all no doubt originating from the car's preparation for Spa.

Thumb the starter, and the 'four' starts eagerly with a rorty rasp from the exhaust. The long gate of the David Brown 'box demands care for clean changes, the slow action not helped by the wide ratios, but once up to speed the chassis motors strongly. The engine feels tough and reliable with healthy reserves of torque, but has none of the eager flexibility of a Bristol 'six'. It wants to understeer through tight turns, but on faster, open corners everything feels superbly balanced. The low-geared steering requires plenty of elbow action, but once on the move it lightens, giving good feel and no kickback thanks to the independent front end with its coil springs and Armstrong lever-arm dampers.

Where the chassis really scores is the ride, and even over rough roads it feels well controlled but not so soft as to hamper roadholding. The thousands of miles clocked up during development paid off, and no doubt helped to lessen fatigue around Spa. Rasping along deserted Suffolk roads on a blissful summer's day, the experience couldn't be further removed from July 1948 and a dark, damp Spa, but the Aston's history is easily evoked and sitting where Horsfall and Johnson guided it to victory is a privilege.

Hill and Horsfall were keen to develop the 2-litre, which they were convinced could do well at Le Mans, but Brown had other ideas. The new company owner felt the pushrod 'four' wasn't the right direction, and dropped it in favour of the Lagonda 'six'. After all their work, the two friends were hugely disappointed and, with director Gordon Sutherland, they resigned in late '48.

'THX' made the cover of *Motor Sport* that August, Horsfall and Hill posing with it outside the Feltham works. The popular driver made one last works outing with the car, taking it up Shelsley before Brown instructed Feeley to revise the styling for the Earls Court Show in October.

Repainted 'poly grey' and fitted with a full-width windscreen cowl plus a new exhaust that swept out from high on the bonnet, the car was renamed the 'Spa Replica'. Not surprisingly, there were no takers at a massive £3109 asking price when the latest Frazer Nash was only £2334.

From top: chassis rides beautifully; torquey 2-litre pushrod 'four'; tail reworked after Spa win for improved access to spare; Brackenbury tests 'THX' at Silverstone; victors Horsfall and Johnson

The car was tested at Silverstone by Aston team drivers, including Charles Brackenbury and Lance Macklin, and convoyed out to Le Mans with the DB2 racers in '49. The first registered owner was David Brown Junior, a terrible driver by all accounts, who had several shunts. In 1952, 'THX' was sold to Jersey-based J Poingdestre, who took it on a tour of England. The car was hit by a bus and, after being repaired at the factory, was used by Poingdestre in local motorsport. Barrie Jones discovered it in '67 and the restored Spa winner was later sold to France, where it was rarely seen until purchased by the Lips collection in Holland, remaining there until 2004.

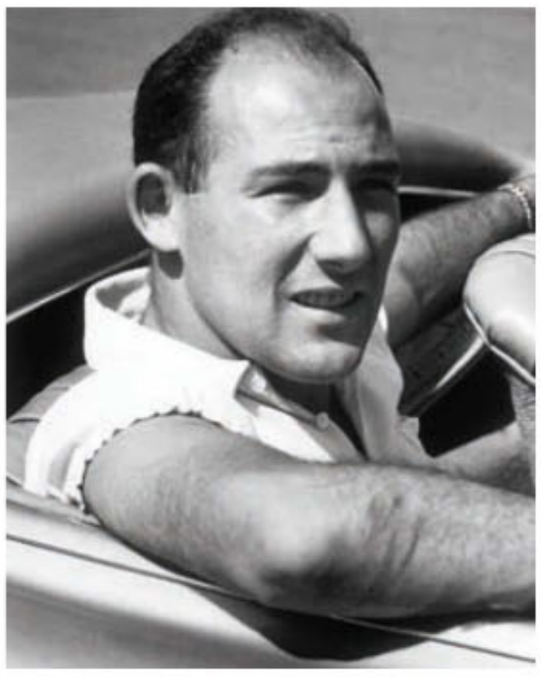
The car has been much-travelled since, including the Villa d'Este concours and a recent return to Spa, before being auctioned by Bonhams in California. Maybe the next owner will put it back to its race-winning configuration, as a tribute to Horsfall and Johnson.

Moss sliding the DBR1 to victory in the '58 TT. Top right: impressive 1-2-3 finish at Goodwood. Right: pre-Le Mans lunch

Out in front with Aston Martin

Sir Stirling Moss brought the marque many of its greatest victories. **Mick Walsh** listens as he recalls his favourites

PHOTOGRAPHY **LAT**



No-one competed in more great 1950s sports-racing cars than Sir Stirling Moss. Other than the legendary Mercedes-Benz 300SLR, it's the metallic-green Aston Martin beauties for which the maestro holds the most affection. When this sporting superstar won in Germany for the British marque, it made national headlines back home, plus the front cover of *Autosport*. The wonderful image of Moss in full flight, drifting his favourite DBR1 through Fordwater or Pflanzgarten, is an iconic one in motorsport history.

"I always enjoyed driving for Aston," says Moss. "John Wyer was a tough team manager but he always encouraged me to have a go, particularly at Le Mans. The cars were strong and safe – I don't recall anyone being killed in one. The boss David Brown never got involved and left it to John, who always chose the best drivers. Tony Brooks above anyone else would be in my dream team.

"Maybe the cars were a little heavy, the engines could have had a bit more power and the gearboxes could have been better, but they always handled superbly. The DB3S and DBR1 were real drivers' cars."

Moss was the master at running starts. Here, his DBR1 takes a clear lead at Le Mans in 1959

DBR1

The undoubted highlights of Moss' career with Aston Martin were heroic wins in the DBR1 at Goodwood and at the Nürburgring in 1959. The team's important victory at Le Mans had moved Aston ahead of Ferrari in the World Sports Car Championship, so a full team of three cars was entered for the final race at Goodwood.

"I always criticised the dreadful gearbox in the DBR1," says Moss, "and in TT practice I drove one fitted for the first time with a Maserati transaxle – an amazing situation when you think about it now. The DBR1 was always strong, solid and dependable, with good brakes, but now it was superb. I could take Fordwater flat-out, pulling 6500rpm through the gears. A fabulous car.

"I led for an hour and a quarter before changing tyres – we had built-in hydraulic jacks. Then Roy [Salvadori] took over the car and maintained the lead, but at the next stop fuel spilled on to the exhaust and the whole place seemed to catch alight. The car was pushed away and I took over the Shelby/Fairman Aston."

Just as he had done at the Nürburgring, Moss roared back and by half distance he had caught the leading Porsche but, after another tyre change, the RSK regained the lead: "I had to do it all over again and ended up driving for 4 hrs 36 mins of a six-hour race, but winning the championship at home felt special."

Like the DB3S, the DBR1 was well suited to road circuits such as the Nürburgring, where Moss won two consecutive 1000km events. "I'm very proud of those victories," he says.

'IT WAS THE KIND OF RACE I ENJOYED – ONE ASTON AGAINST A TEAM OF FERRARIS'

"In 1958 I won with Jack [Brabham] and knew the DBR1 was perfect for the Nürburgring. So the following year I pestered John Wyer to let me use the spare car for the 1000km. I even offered to pay for everything, including transport. Thankfully, John softened.

"Reg [Parnell] came out as team manager with just one mechanic. We never had a spare engine in those days, even for Le Mans. After 16 laps – with a strong lead and my old track record broken – I handed over to Jack [Fairman] just as it started to rain. Unfortunately, he got baulked by a slower car and ended up in a ditch. Amazingly, though, he managed to manhandle the DBR1 back on to the road and, just as I was packing up my bag to go home, he arrived back at the pits. I pulled my gear back on as the mechanics lifted a mud-stained Jack from the cockpit, then I set off after the Ferraris.

"By that point, our six-minute lead had turned into a 70-second deficit, but that was the kind of challenge I enjoyed. I drove as fast I had ever driven around the 'Ring and retook the lead on lap 29. Jack took over for a few laps to give me a bit of a break, but his caution after the earlier off allowed Phil [Hill] to catch us. For the final nine laps, it took me four to catch him and we won by 22 seconds.

"It was the sort of race I revelled in – just one lone Aston Martin against an entire team of factory Ferraris. The car ran perfectly, but I had driven really hard. I felt shattered, having done more than 40 laps, and it took me longer to recover than when I won the Mille Miglia. I drove Maseratis in the last two Milles, but never finished – I reckon that the DBR1 would have been perfect for it."

Winning in Salvadori's DB3S at Goodwood, Easter 1956. Below: taking a lucky second place at Le Mans with Peter Collins after losing second gear

DB3S

After Mercedes-Benz withdrew from racing at the end of 1955, Moss switched to Aston Martin for World Sports Car Championship events. "I wanted to dictate my own terms," he explains, "which gave me the freedom to drive for other teams such as Maserati. By coming to the DB3S from the Mercedes 300SLRs, I found it much smaller and lighter. It was much easier to drive. A perfect combination would be the nimbleness of the DB3S with the speed of the Mercedes.

"Although it was not as clean-looking as rival Jaguars, I always considered the DB3S one of the prettiest sports-racing cars of the 1950s. It was a forgiving car that you could throw around, although it had a habit of lifting the inside-rear wheel too easily when cornering really hard. As a result you'd often ease off where other cars might sustain full throttle. But on a winding road circuit, such as the Nürburgring or Oulton Park, it would out-handle a D-type any time."

Moss first tested a DB3S at Goodwood in February '56 and, with John Wyer's encouragement, he signed with the team for the season: "I accepted a signing-on fee of £50, which seems very modest even for the time. My first DB3S race was the Sebring 12 Hours, where I was paired with Peter Collins. Mike Hawthorn was quickest in practice

with the Jaguar D-type – we were third, but six seconds slower. We were worried about the brakes and tyres, plus the fuel consumption was high, so we weren't that confident. Le Mans-type running starts were a speciality of mine, however, and I managed to slot into second between Hawthorn and Fangio's Ferrari, lapping three seconds quicker than in practice.

"But once Pete had taken over, the motor failed after 90 mins. DB3S engines were pernickety about rev limits and the band always seemed restricted. You could run it to the redline in an intermediate gear, change up and the power just seemed to fade."

Moss raced the DB3S six times, taking two wins and three seconds: "At Rouen we found that the drum-braked car's handling was better than the new disc-brake modification, but my car was not good, juddering and oversteering in fast corners. After a big dice with Castellotti's Ferrari, I was lucky to finish second.

"At Le Mans, the DB3S was no match for the D-type. We lacked power and straight-line speed but I led from the start, leaving the Jaguars to have an accident behind me. In the night, Pete reported that we'd lost second gear, which cost us the win, but the car kept going like a train and we came second."

Moss never enjoyed Le Mans and passed his time in the pits with binoculars, talent-spotting in the crowd. That year he caught sight of a pretty girl in the grandstand: "I waved and eventually sorted passes to get her into the pits." Her name was Katie Molson, who later became his wife.

"My last race in a DB3S was the Daily Herald Trophy at a wet Oulton Park. I liked racing in the wet and, with such forgiving handling, the Aston was too much for the opposition. I took an easy win from Brooks and Salvadori. It had rained so hard there was a debate about calling off the meeting."

DB2

Moss regarded his first 'works' drive for Aston Martin – co-driving a newly launched DB2 with Lance Macklin in the 1950 Daily Express Rally – as a "crumpet tour". He recalls the Feltham-built coupé – powered by the WO Bentley-designed Lagonda twin-cam straight-six – with affection: "It was my idea. I was only 21 and we borrowed the Aston from the factory. It was a lovely looking Grand Touring car that made all the right noises for two young chaps posing in an event that didn't mean much.

'IT WAS A LOVELY GT THAT MADE ALL THE RIGHT NOISES FOR TWO YOUNG CHAPS POSING'

"The engine was rather highly strung and didn't like being thrashed. It was also rather heavy but still handled well. The car was quick for its day and, for us, the rally developed into an open-road contest in which we competed to see how many hours of sleep we could get at each control before the rest of the entry arrived. We cleared all the road sections but made ourselves very unpopular with the organisers and other entrants – particularly when we drove up the wrong side of the road past a huge traffic jam in Wales. In the end the organisers had the last laugh, though, because we messed up the final driving test.

"Lance was 10 years older than me, a sophisticated bloke and a quick driver. We spent lots of time together and were good friends. In a way, he was my mentor."

DB4GT

Four months before the DB4GT was officially launched at the Earls Court Motor Show in October 1959, Moss gave the new model its debut in a GT race at the Daily Express Trophy meeting: "I'd had a frustrating day, retiring the BRM P25 and being pipped in the DBR1 by Roy Salvadori's Cooper-Maserati, so winning with the new Aston was a consolation. It was an easy victory – I took pole and set fastest lap – and beating Roy in John Coombs' 3.4 got Jaguar a little wound-up because there were questions over the Aston's eligibility.

"Most closed Aston Martins feel a little agricultural, but the DB4GT was really well balanced with plenty of power. The road cars were never ergonomically very clever because you'd bang your knuckles just opening the quarterlight, and the gearbox was slow."

Moss drove the DB4GT on three other occasions, including two races in November 1959 at Bahamas Speed Week: "I always enjoyed my visits to the Bahamas, where I won the Nassau Trophy in a DBR2 and drove a DB4GT for a Puerto Rican owner – Frank de Arellano. After winning my heat, I was forced to retire in the Governor's Trophy final after the brakes failed. I drove against the Jaguar saloons again in the Goodwood Fordwater Trophy and comfortably saw off Roy and Jack Sears. Four races and three wins was an impressive average – even if the DB4GT was in a different class."

DB4GT ZAGATO

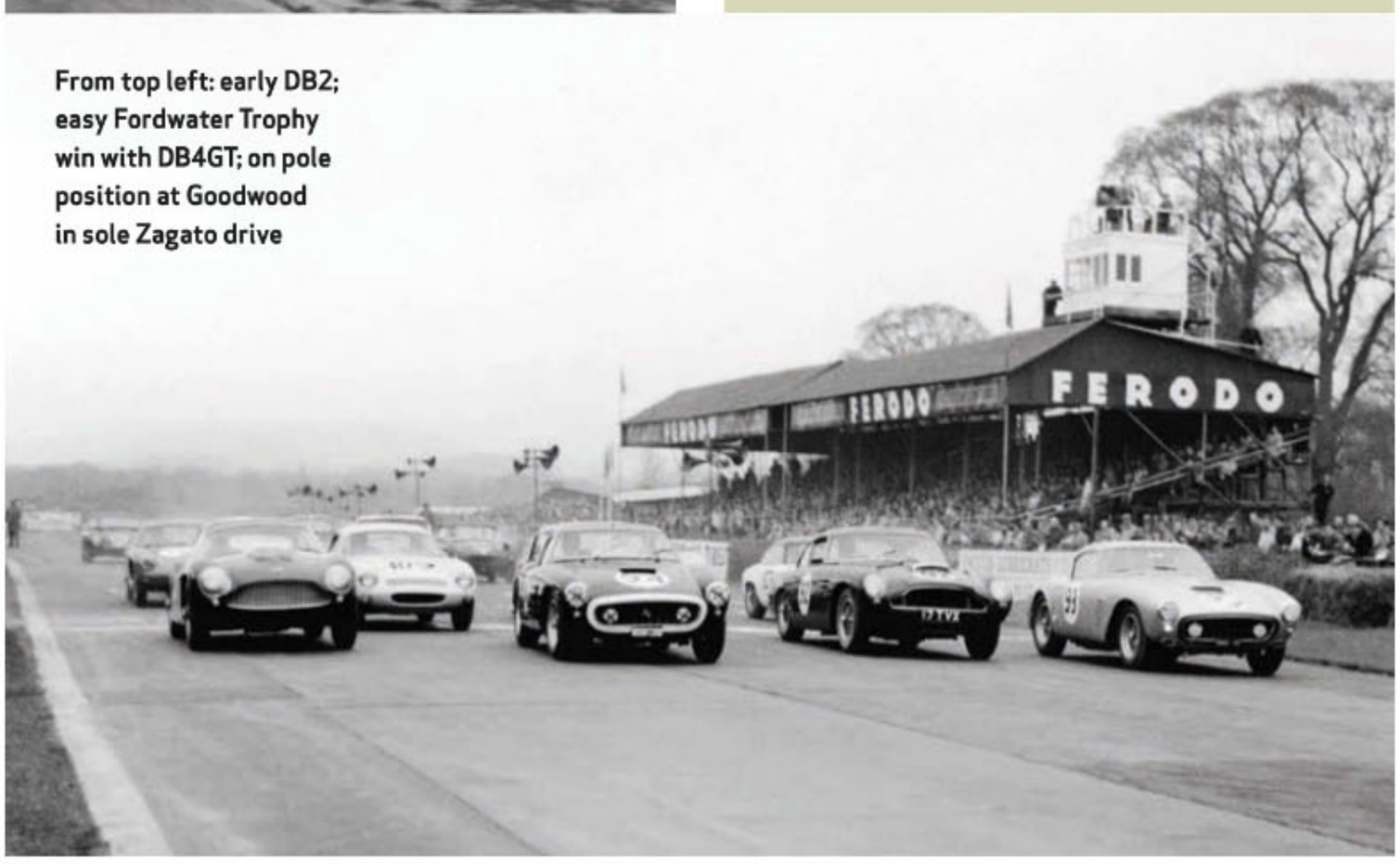
After his success with the DB4GT, it was a natural step for Moss to race the new Zagato-bodied lightweight: "Fresh back from Sebring in '61, I was entered in the Fordwater Trophy GT race on Easter Monday at Goodwood with the first DB4GT Zagato, run by Essex Racing. I'd had a bad experience at Le Mans with the awful Maserati 450S Coupé, which was hurriedly built by Zagato, but the Aston was a proper car."

On paper, the Zagato looked good – at 2580lb, it was 150lb lighter than the DB4GT and, with a higher-compression engine, it produced 314bhp – but it was no match for the Ferrari 250GT SWB: "Taking on Mike Parkes and the Equipe Endeavour Ferrari

'THE ZAGATO WAS QUITE HIGHLY STRUNG AND FELT TWITCHY AROUND GOODWOOD'

was always going to be a tall order. I took pole position because it was wet in practice, but started badly due to the poor gearbox. My diary notes that the car was 'lousy', with bad axle tramp. I eventually finished third behind winner Parkes and Innes [Ireland], who beat me to second in a regular DB4GT. The Zagato felt twitchy around Goodwood. It was very much a strong man's GT car."

Moss was typically busy that day at Goodwood, entering four races and winning two – the Lavant Cup in Rob Walker's new Cooper-Climax, and the Sussex Trophy in a Lotus 19: "I never worked out, but all of that racing kept me fit."



From top left: early DB2; easy Fordwater Trophy win with DB4GT; on pole position at Goodwood in sole Zagato drive


XYX 3

The Duke's Lagonda

This handsome 3-litre was Prince Philip's personal transport during the 1950s, explains **Martin Buckley** as he puts on his most convincing airs and graces

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN/REX FEATURES/TOPFOTO/GETTY**

Flowing shape has a touch of the Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, particularly to the rear, but pre-dates the Crewe car by a couple of years. Note the antenna for period radiophone

Although I wouldn't lose any sleep over the plight of today's royals, they probably did have an easier time of it in the more deferential 1950s. The then-dashing young Prince Philip was free to drive this Lagonda 3-litre wherever he pleased – often without the inhibition of burly security staff – and probably at whatever speed he pleased, with his now-infamous gaffes and non-PC misdemeanours going unreported. Nobody seemed to bat an eyelid when he took the newly minted Lagonda – and several of his friends – on a four-and-a-half-month tour of the furthest outposts of the Commonwealth, including Australia and the Falkland Islands. They travelled in style on the newly commissioned Royal Yacht *Britannia*, complete with 275-man crew, all paid for out of the public purse. Can you imagine him getting away with that today?

This dark Edinburgh Green drophead became inextricably linked in the public mind with the Duke, featuring in a variety of press reports and newsreel clips – perhaps most famously when he dropped off the young Prince Charles at his Hampshire prep school, Cheam. It was in this car that the Queen and Prince Philip first tried out the new M1 motorway in 1959.

'THERE WAS DISQUIET THAT HE HAD CHOSEN SUCH A FAST MODEL AS PERSONAL TRANSPORT'

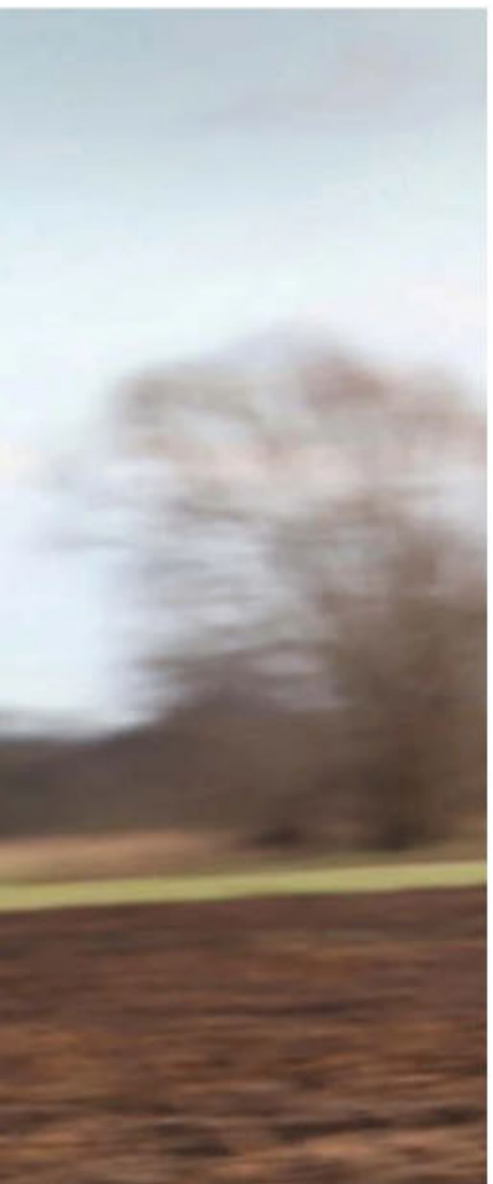
Then registered OXR 1, it was, in effect, the private family car of the Windsors and the vehicle in which the Duke drove himself and the Queen on non-official occasions. There was some disquiet that he had chosen such a fast, 100mph-plus model as his personal transport. In fact, he is thought to have been a quick but safe driver, although he had a minor collision with an undisclosed pre-war saloon in OXR 1, circa 1957. The prang – which happened with the Queen on board, somewhere near Windsor Castle – dented a wing and broke a driving light on the Lagonda. Interestingly, the Americans heard all about the incident but it went unreported in the British newspapers, most probably because HRH had, that very evening, given a talk on Safer Driving Standards to the assembled great and good of the AA…

Delivered new in March 1954 (nine months after the coronation), the 3-litre Lagonda was supplied to the Royal Mews by HWM of Walton-on-Thames, and earned Aston Martin the coveted Royal Warrant. A factory engineer was kept on 24-hour call-out should the car give trouble, and the firm even sent a minder to accompany it on the Prince's Commonwealth jolly.

More routine maintenance was entrusted to the Duke's official driver, Walter Bennett, who also joined the Lagonda and his boss on the tour. The bulging history file features Buckingham Palace memos ('Destroy after reading') addressed to Bennett, stating that every Dunlop agency in Australia was to be supplied with a set of tyres for the car, just in case it got a puncture.

The David Brown Organisation newsletter eagerly reported that the Duke had ordered the Lagonda with an Aston-type floor change (not a feature of the 3-litre until the MkII of 1956), a power hood and, most impressive of all, a Pye radiophone. This was almost unheard-of luxury in the early 1950s, so much so that the car required a special Admiralty radio frequency and a relay station on Hampstead Heath, permitting direct calls to Buckingham Palace.

Powered by a bulky box of valves in the boot,



From top: Buckley does his best impersonation of royalty; pull-knob for the power hood; vanity mirror; wing-mounted flagstaff; car travelled aboard Royal Yacht during 1950s tour of the Commonwealth; handsome frontal aspect

the white handset was mounted between the front seats and had a cord long enough so that back-seat passengers could use it. Today, the phone is long gone, although the antenna on the rear deck remains in place. You can also still see the dark green leather specified by the Duke for the dashboard and door cappings (instead of walnut) and the grey leather of the big armchair seats to match the roof, its supple originality testament to the car's 47,000 recorded miles.

In the metal, the 3-litre is an unostentatiously handsome vehicle with a touch of post-war Touring-bodied Alfa about it. There are twin fuel fillers in the rear wings for the 19-gallon tank, and the tiny rear lights in the sweeping wings are augmented by trafficators (now sadly disconnected), but there are few other visual distractions.

Under the long bonnet, WO Bentley's four-bearing, wet-liner, twin-cam straight-six – low slung and slightly lost in the deep bay – is fed by a pair of 1¾in SU carburettors. There is a big grey casing for the workings of the pushbutton radio – and two six-volt batteries either side of the bulkhead for the 12-volt system – but not much else to spoil the thoroughbred layout.

The long, rear-hinged 'suicide' front doors were an anachronism even in the '50s, but do add to the sense of occasion as you reverse yourself in. It feels long and narrow from behind the wheel, the slithery expanses of the split front bench not promising much cornering security until you discover that, once deployed, the dual armrests (two each for driver and passenger, in fact) hold you nicely in place around the hips.

Pulling the knob under the dash marked 'power head' reveals that the hood still works perfectly (and very quietly), disappearing neatly into the space behind the back seats where it can be covered with a tonneau to give Tickford's 16-gauge alloy body a clean profile. The 120mph speedometer and 6000rpm rev counter are ranged behind the man-sized, black-rimmed, metal sprung wheel with its pleasing ridged grip. A switch box houses five unidentified controls including the starter button; below it is the high/low power switch for the famous radiophone.

The medium/long-wave HMV radio was part of the standard 3-litre specification, as was the 'Jackall' hydraulic system that could raise the car on four built-in jacks. There is a trapdoor in the huge boot where you attach the lever and start pumping to get all four wheels off the deck. People are so wet these days about changing wheels, you're left wondering why they don't reintroduce something similar on modern cars.

All the pedals are floor-hinged, while the floor itself is nearly flat and thickly carpeted in best Wilton. The throttle is a hefty-feeling chromed loop that gives accurate control of the feisty 140bhp engine, which has an urgent and willing

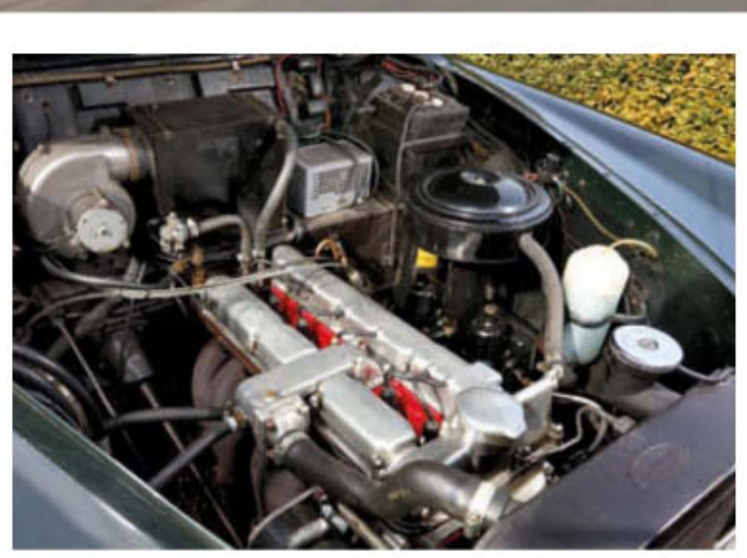
character plus a healthy timbre of sportiness that is slightly out of kilter with the Lagonda's luxury aspirations. Certainly, you need liberal quantities of revs to get the 3-litre moving briskly. It takes two gearchanges (and 12.9 secs, according to *The Motor*) to get to 60mph, but this is no chore because the shift is probably the nicest thing about the whole car: smooth, accurate and positive. The lever is topped by a perfectly sized ball and, going up through the gears, you can move it as quickly as you like through the nicely defined gate – achieving 40mph in second and 70mph in third (both ratios being quiet, too). The in-gear limits are marked by red lines on the speedo.

The current owner has put an overdrive on top, so it cruises just fine, dropping a useful 700rpm once you realise what the anonymous pull-switch in the centre of the fascia is for. The Lagonda would probably still sit at 85mph, but we didn't go over 65 or so in deference to the tyres. It wanders somewhat on these hard and aged 16in Avon Turbospeeds, which is a shame because the rack-and-pinion mechanism is high geared and the 3-litre steers accurately. Having said that, the weight at low speeds – and the poor lock – mean it is no fun to manoeuvre in a tight space.

The Lagonda was unique among large British cars of the 1950s in its use of independent rear suspension. An odd concoction of tubular arms pivoting off the chassis in ball-jointed rubber mountings and sprung on 54in torsion bars, it was supported by a variety of levers and short jointed links running parallel to the chassis side members. The brake drums are inboard, next to the diff.

Inherited from the 2.6-litre model, the set-up was officially a kind of swing axle but with a lot less tilt as the wheels rise and fall than on, say, a Mercedes. The Feltham engineers claimed that it had a better ride and more grip than an equivalent live axle, but it's hard to see where the expense and complication really paid off. The ride is on the firm side of comfy and the balance of the handling is firmly towards oversteer if driven with the sort of haste that the lusty engine and (relative) lack of body roll encourage. It is also easy to get the scuttle shaking and doors rattling on bumpy roads – a particularly worrying trait on a car with no seatbelts and 'suicide' doors. And the brakes? With twin leading shoes at the front, they are adequate rather than inspiring.

The Duke finally sold the Lagonda in 1961, transferring his OXR 1 plate onto a Series 1 Alvis TD21 drophead with a distinctive (and very ugly) extra-deep windscreen. The 3-litre, meanwhile, was sold to its second owner through Car Mart, the favoured regal motor dealer. That very few private cars used by high-profile royals ever escape the Buckingham Palace Mews is reflected



From top: Lagonda has a firm ride and surprisingly sporty nature; 3-litre 'six' looks lost in engine bay; armrests wedge occupants in place; chromed eyeball vent provides ventilation to the front footwell

LAGONDA 3-LITRE

Sold/number built 1953-'58/261 (including 54 Tickford dropheads)
Construction steel cruciform chassis, aluminium body (Tickford)
Engine iron-block, alloy-head, dohc 2922cc straight-six, with twin 1¾in SU carbs
Max power 140bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 164lb ft @ 2000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones, coil springs **rear** swing axles, torsion bars, parallel links
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes Lockheed drums all round (12in at front, 11in at rear), with servo
Length 16ft 4in (4978mm)
Width 5ft 9½in (1765mm)
Height 5ft 2in (1575mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 5½in (2883mm)
Weight 3527lb (1600kg)
0-60mph 12.9 secs
Top speed 104mph
Mpg 16-20
Price new £3202

Lagonda's imposing aluminium drophead body was handcrafted by Tickford and is one of only 54 constructed. Tonneau cover conceals high-tech power-operated hood

in the humungous £350-450,000 estimate that H&H has put on the Lagonda when it comes up for auction at Duxford.

But, even putting the royal connection to one side, 3-litre Lagondas are uncommon (261 built from 1953-'58) and even rarer in drophead form: the Duke of Edinburgh car is one of only 54. They rarely change hands on the open market these days and usually draw in excess of £100k in open form, although the saloons are much less.

Having traded up from the MG TC of his carefree bachelor days, the £3200, 100mph Lagonda must have quietly impressed Philip in 1954, and represented something of a private sanctuary from the pressures of being the Queen's consort. It is a firm, crisp and masculine machine, with a well-matched but not unpleasant heft to its controls and a responsiveness that demands attention; a sort of quality vintage car built for the 1950s. If you had to ascribe a human personality to it, then the nearest I can come up with is Jack Hawkins – slightly dated, even in the context of the time, but rugged, refined, characterful and commanding in equal measure.

Thanks to *Damian Jones at H&H auctions: 08458 334455; www.classic-auctions.com*

Clockwise: original hide is nicely mellowed; arriving at Buckingham Palace in period; a young Prince of Wales is taken to school; the royal couple getting into the car after a polo match in '56; chassis plate

'THE £3200, 100MPH LAGONDA MUST HAVE QUIETLY IMPRESSED PRINCE PHILIP IN 1954'

PAPERWORK, PARTS – AND AN ASTON MARTIN

That's what recently emerged from a country garage in Gloucestershire. **Martin Buckley** tells the story of a forgotten DB2/4 and its former keeper

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN/TONY BAKER**


DAVID BROWN
ASTON MARTIN

Barnfinds can emerge from all kinds of scenarios, but they are usually well hidden. The story of this recently unearthed Aston Martin DB2/4 is of a car that was not exactly 'hidden in plain sight', but one that was certainly well camouflaged. For 45 years, the employees and customers of Webb's Garage in Cirencester walked past, leaned against and possibly even laid their cups of coffee on the bonnet and roof of this sleeping Aston in the busy workshop. It was, literally, part of the furniture.

To those who knew what lay beneath the dusty tarpaulin, the Aston was just another one of proprietor Mike Webb's many old cars. Most of the people who had tried to part the Webbs from the Aston over the years had either given up or just forgotten all about it.

The site, a former MG dealership that had sold its last new Maestro Turbo in the 1980s, is littered with semi-derelict vehicles, although most of them were (and are) strictly of the grey porridge variety, such as the pre-war Standard and Rover saloons that you can still see in the showroom window today.

Certainly the Aston's current custodians – Jonathan and Matthew Wills of Cotswold Classic Car Restorations – had no idea what the long, low shape under the sheet at the rear of the workshop was when they got to know the avuncular Mike Webb in the 1990s.

"He was a kind of mentor to us," explains Jonathan. "He helped us to develop our Maestro Turbo competition car and even sponsored us, but we were so engrossed in the project that it never occurred to us to even ask him what was under the sheet."

'THE WEBBS WERE BOTH SERIAL BUYERS OF LOST CAUSES, BUT NOT GREAT SELLERS OF THEM'

The Wills brothers remember Webb fondly as being an unflappable character and "a man from another era" who lived on-site, tending to customers' needs in his familiar khaki-coloured smock. Like its former proprietor, Webb's Garage remains in something of a timewarp: in what other petrol-station shop in 2014 would the selection of fanbelts and sparkplugs on offer far outweigh the range of confectionery?

Webb's father Ivor, a handy speedway rider in his day, started his garage in 1946. Mike joined him in the late 1950s, having completed his engineering training in the aircraft industry. The Aston appeared at Webb's in the late '60s as far as his daughter Helen can recall. Sadly Mike died (aged 70) five years ago, and only he could give the full whys and whens of how the car came to be in the workshop. The fact that the cylinder head was lying in the boot – on a 1972 copy of the *Daily Express* – means it probably came in for some kind of top-end job. Likely as not, Mike and Ivor acquired the Aston when the owner took fright at the size of the potential bill.

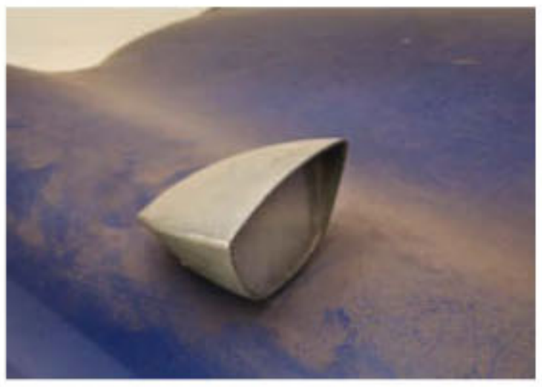
Both Webbs – father and son – were serial buyers of MoT failures and other lost causes, but not great sellers of them. Even until fairly recently, the grass verges on both sides of the road in front of the forecourt were a local landmark, littered with decaying cars from the '60s and '70s. As many as 30 wrecks are thought to have been removed by the council after Mike passed away. Today, all is neat and tidy in the name of 'health and safety', but anyone cutting through Cherry Tree Lane to the A417 as recently as the late 1990s or early 2000s will recall what amounted to a roadside car dump that was attracting a lot of negative attention.

Cotswold District Council was in many ways Webb's nemesis. "I can still clearly picture Mike getting a Triumph Dolomite running that had been sitting on the verge for years," says Jonathan. "He wasn't about to sell it or do any work on it – he simply got it fired up so that he could stuff it deeper into the undergrowth and on to his land where the council couldn't touch it."

The main building at Webb's dates from the late 1950s and is still a functioning garage and petrol station. Next to it is an ex-RAF Nissen hut that was once a parts department for the MG car sales business. In its prime, this was a busy dealership with a dedicated parts manager. Even now, you can feel the link to a world of 'motor engineers' far removed from today's fitters.

Inside, under piles of mostly BMC- and MG-related parts, are a surprisingly sound Sunbeam-Talbot 90 saloon, a rather decayed MGB GT and what must surely be the only

Above: delivered new in 1955 and originally Moonbeam Grey, the Aston was resprayed blue prior to arriving at Webb's. Right: brightwork could be restored; the aftermarket wing-mounted mirror looks a little incongruous



Above, from top: another impressive find at Webb's Garage – this new-old-stock Austin bodyshell was sharing storage space with the Aston Martin; windscreen stickers date from the introduction of the MoT test

unused new-old-stock Austin A70 Hereford bodyshell in the world. Without going so far as moving any heaps of bits to see what lay beneath, I spotted lots of MGB and BMC 1100/1300 panels, wire wheels (presumably MGB) and all manner of as-new exhaust systems, chrome bumpers and steering wheels – all relics from a long-lost post-war world where people never threw anything away.

The former office at the end of the building is packed with 50-year-old trade magazines, plus files full of old invoices going back to the mid-1950s. A moment's rooting about on a random shelf reveals an official guide to repair times on the new MG 1100, a Dunlop guide to the 1952 Motor Show and a set of unused '10 year test' windscreen stickers issued by the Ministry of Transport when the MoT test was introduced.

In a large open-sided shed around the back, there is an area strewn with engine blocks and maybe four old cars – certainly a Daimler Conquest and a Rover P4 in fairly sound condition, plus some older saloons rendered indeterminate in the gloom and hemmed in at the other end by a pile of doors and tyres.

It's all wholesome *Lost & found* fodder, but nobody would dare to dream that they would find an Aston Martin among all of this seemingly random hoarding – an alloy-bodied 1950s thoroughbred of which only 565 were built (if you include the 75 drophead variants).

The DB2/4 was introduced in 1953, its hatchback and fold-down occasional rear seats making a more practical if slightly less pretty shape out of the outstandingly well-balanced but strictly

From top: the DB2/4's interior is well preserved, especially the walnut dashboard; storage building at Webb's Garage contains everything from gaskets and bumpers to complete cars in various states of disrepair

The early DBs

Aston Martin was going through one of its periodic crises in the years leading up to WW2. Augustus 'Bert' Bertelli had left in 1936, and the Sutherland family retained control through the hostilities before putting the company up for sale. David Brown saw it advertised in *The Times*, and visited Feltham in late 1946. Driving Claude Hill's Atom – developed during the war – helped to make up his mind, and he bought Aston Martin in early 1947.

Shortly afterwards, he bought Lagonda, too. That gave him access not only to the LB6 six-cylinder engine that had been designed by WO Bentley and Willie Watson, but also to the styling expertise of Frank Feeley.

The two were not immediately brought together, however. The 2-litre Sports – retrospectively christened the DB1 – was built from 1948-'50, and used Hill's 1970cc 'four' beneath Feeley's bodywork. The company achieved great publicity via the car's victory in the 1948 Spa 24 Hours, driven by St John Horsfall and Leslie Johnson.

Much to Hill's dismay, Brown insisted on fitting the LB6 powerplant to the car that would become the DB2. In 2580cc form, it produced 105bhp, or 125bhp in Vantage spec – which was offered on the DB2 from January 1951. Early units were not conspicuously reliable, though, and when Tadek Marek joined Aston Martin in 1954 he was tasked with modifying it before starting work on its replacement, which would power the DB4.

two-seater DB2. Apart from the extra door, you can spot a DB2/4 by its one-piece curved front 'screen and separate full-width bumpers with overriders. Space for the rear seat was achieved in part by reducing the size of the fuel tank from 19 to 17 gallons.

There is scant paperwork relating to the Aston's very early history, but enquiries made to Aston Martin Service Dorset have revealed that chassis number LML/365 is a 3-litre model delivered new at the end of February 1955 to a JF Godman-Dorrington of Haylands Farm in Sussex. The DB2/4 initially came with the 2.6-litre version of WO Bentley's twin-overhead-camshaft straight-six LB6 engine, which he designed during the war for the Lagonda 2½-litre. When the new Lagonda 3-litre appeared in 1953, however, it was clearly only a matter of time before the DB2/4 received this bigger, 140bhp engine as standard. This duly came to pass in the summer of 1954, making the £2750 Aston a near-120mph car.

The supplying dealer was Brooklands, which registered the car PXR 107. It was clearly a hard-working vehicle because records held by Aston Martin Dorset reveal that it came back in October 1956 for a decoke and a service at 12,494 miles. The current mileage is just over 70,000.

The original colour was Moonbeam Grey, but PXR 107 was resprayed Harold Radford Blue at some point in the 1960s (the tin is still in the boot) and the side vents in the bonnet were filled and painted over. It probably acquired the plastic Harry Moss accessory shop-type wing-mirrors at the same time. Such cheerfully carefree period

From above: Aston has 3-litre engine – earlier models had a 2.6-litre 'six'; neat doorhandles and tail-lights are still present and correct; boot contains a tin of Harold Radford Blue, plus period newspapers and various components


SWISS

modifications are a reminder that DB2/4s were selling for about £350 in *Exchange and Mart* in the late 1960s and early '70s.

The fascination with this Aston is that it was less than 15 years old when it was taken off the road. The Pirelli Cinturatos seem hardly used and most of the chrome, although pitted, looks as if it would come up well with a polish. The paint is blistered here and there but beneath the layer of dust it's easy to imagine that it could be brought back to life if you were more interested in retaining patina than creating a showpiece.

The doors still open and shut beautifully. Inside, the black leather seats appear as if they need nothing more extensive than cleaning and feeding. The matching carpets are perfectly serviceable, and you just wouldn't want to touch the West of England cloth headlining.

The instruments and switches, set in a well-preserved walnut fascia, are complete and original save a chrome wand emerging just to the left of the massive steering wheel. Its presence suggests an overdrive, but these were not optional until the introduction of the DB MkIII in 1957. There is a bootlid-type Aston badge stuck on the dashboard by an over-enthusiastic previous owner. The oversized rear-view mirror – replacing the postage-stamp original – was probably the work of the same person.

A range of spares in the boot seems to indicate that Ivor and Mike Webb had plans to revive the car. There is a head-gasket set, brake shoes and a new cable for the catch that operates the lock on the rear door – still with its Aston Martin Works ticket attached to it. Another box contains some spare doorhandles and overriders. Under the bonnet, the cylinder head has been loosely reunited with the block for appearances' sake and everything is under a romantic layer of dirt in the finest tradition of the barnfind.

'THE RANGE OF SPARES IN THE BOOT INDICATES THAT THEY HAD PLANS TO REVIVE THE ASTON'

It is pleasing that the DB2/4 has retained a local connection and gone to a new owner who is a friend of the Webb family. The dilemma that Jonathan Wills faces is the old one of originality and patina versus restoration. Clearly the Aston needs more than an engine rebuild and a quick wipe-over to put it back on the road. Once you have gone through the brakes, steering, suspension and electrics just to make it safe, there is a school of thought that says you might just as well go the whole way and 'nut and bolt' the thing. It's not as if the value doesn't justify it.

On the other hand, all you'd have then is yet another shiny Aston Martin. If there is a way to please both camps – blending a lived-in look with on-the-button drivability and dependability – I'm sure that Jonathan will find it.

Thanks to *Cotswold Classic Car Restorations: 01793 752195; www.cccrestorations.co.uk*

From top: DB2/4 gained hatchback rear; note the retrofitted badge on the dashboard; many of the spares still carry the labels with which they were supplied. Far left: would you keep the patina, or make the Aston shine?

Art and soul of Newport Pagnell

David Brown's tenure was defined by the stunning DB4-6. **Simon Taylor** introduces the first family of Aston Martin road cars

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES MANN**

SIV DB4 shows larger tail-lamps and later-style grille. 'Dagmar' bumper (top) one of few flourishes. Superb cabin finish and (below left) 3.7-litre twin-cam 'six'

First off, let's get the 007 thing out of the way. As the novelist Ian Fleming originally conceived him, James Bond drove a vintage 'Blower' Bentley. Movie anoraks tell me that the first car that Bond actually drove in a film was a Chevy Bel Air. It wasn't until the series' third flick, *Goldfinger*, that Sean Connery was cast as an Aston Martin DB5 driver. In the 2012 movie *Skyfall*, Daniel Craig was back in another gadget-laden DB5 – as if we cared.

Because the DB4/5/6 Aston Martins, whatever the Bond connection may have done to their values, are much more important than mere props for a repetitive series of money-spinning macho cinema fantasies. They have to be considered as all-time great grand tourers, things of beauty that epitomise the standing of the marque. Even today they remain a rewarding way to tackle any long, fast journey on challenging roads. And somehow, just as a Ferrari could only be Italian and a Porsche could only be German – and despite the Italian roots of their elegant styling – these Aston Martins could never be anything but English.

'IT'S BREATHTAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL, EVERY CURVE AND CONTOUR JUST AS IT SHOULD BE'

For the first 10 years of David Brown's ownership, Aston's DB road cars – four-cylinder DB1 and six-cylinder DB2, DB2/4 and MkIII – were elegant hand-built coupés with style and charisma. But even in final 3-litre form they had difficulty reaching 120mph, and the cheaper, larger-engined XK Jaguars were appreciably quicker. To face this challenge, work began on a bigger Aston as early as '55, and at the '58 Motor Show it made its bow. Called the DB4, it created a sensation, and for the Newport Pagnell firm it represented a radical change in philosophy.

The new all-alloy twin-cam straight-six engine, designed by Tadek Marek, was 3670cc, and in its initial form with twin SU carburettors put out an advertised 240bhp (although power outputs quoted at the time by AM, and others, were often exaggerated by up to 15%). Harold Beach's chassis was a sturdy and extremely stiff steel platform, riding on front suspension by unequal-length wishbones and coils, and a live rear axle located by trailing arms and a Watt linkage. Welded to it was a superstructure of small-diameter tubes supporting aluminium body panels, a type of construction developed by coachbuilder Touring of Milan, which called it *Superleggera* or 'super-light'.

Touring's Felice Anderloni was responsible for the breathtakingly beautiful body: one of those rare, utterly simple automotive shapes in which every curve and contour seems to be just as it should be, with a sweeping fastback roof, slender pillars giving a large glass area, and a strong horizontal line from thrust-forward headlights to soberly finned rear wings. It required no decoration or adornment, only the big bonnet scoop and hot-air exits on the flanks breaking the purity of the shape.

Clockwise, from above: windcheating profile; dash binnacle echoes shape of grille; engine now out to 4 litres; classic Silver Birch beloved by Bond fans

With an 8ft 2in wheelbase and 14ft 9in overall length, it was the first DB with four proper seats, although rear legroom was restricted. Fully equipped and beautifully finished, the DB4 weighed nearly 3000lb, but was a genuine 140mph car, and early in its life it received kudos for being able to accelerate from 0-100mph and back to a halt within half a minute – no mean feat at the time, and underlining the then-rare fitment of four-wheel servo-assisted disc brakes.

It took a while for production to get into full swing, but in the four years up to June 1963 more than 1000 DB4 coupés were made, plus 70 of the convertible that was introduced in 1961. Throughout the run various specification changes were made, which Aston experts group into five separate variants, Series I to Series V. Early engine reliability problems were addressed with increased sump capacity and an oil cooler, while the originally frameless door windows gained surrounds. The pattern of the radiator grille was given stronger vertical bars, the bonnet hinges were moved from the rear of the panel to the front, and the rear lights went from

‘OPINIONS DIFFER ON WHICH IS PRETTIEST: ORIGINAL DB4 OR STREAMLINED DB5’

the original slim units to triple separate round lenses on each side. The bonnet air intake became smaller and neater, and Series V cars had a slightly longer body on the same wheelbase, with a higher roofline, although a change at this point from 16in to 15in wheels meant that the overall height was unchanged.

Gradually more options became available, such as overdrive for the four-speed all-synchromesh gearbox, a more powerful Vantage engine with three SU carburettors and, towards the end, faired-in headlights under Plexiglas covers. These echoed the lamp treatment on the lightened, short-wheelbase DB4GTs, which were intended for racing customers. Only 94 of those were made and they are now hugely valuable – particularly the 19 chassis bodied by Zagato.

In the summer of 1965 the DB4 was replaced by the DB5, combining all the developments of the DB4 with an increased engine capacity of 3995cc, developing 282bhp on triple SUs or, in Vantage form, 314bhp on three twin-choke Weber carbs. A five-speed ZF gearbox was made available as an option, and was fitted to most DB5s; the Borg-Warner automatic is much rarer. Externally, the cowled headlights were standardised.

Although the DB5 was in production for barely two years, it was extremely successful, rolling out of the factory at a rate of up to 10 a week. In all, 886 coupés were built and 123 convertibles, plus a dozen shooting brakes that were finished off by coachbuilder Harold Radford. In comparison with the first DB4s, kerbweight had gradually crept up by some 350lb, but the extra power meant that the performance, measured in independent road tests, was still in the 140mph bracket.

Opinions differ as to which is the most beautiful DB Aston: the original DB4, its proud headlights giving it a straining-at-the-leash profile, or the crouching aspect of the more streamlined DB5. The DB6 is something else entirely, its more solid lines lending a quite different visual personality, but there is no doubt that it is the most practical of the three, and the most stable at speed.

Introduced at the London Motor Show in October 1965, the DB6 had been radically rethought to make it a genuine four-seater. The wheelbase was nearly 4in longer, the windscreen slightly further forward and the roof an inch higher, which, together with shorter trailing arms for the rear suspension, all translated into a much more habitable back seat. An upward-curling lip to the bootlid plus a vertical rear panel provided a tail treatment according to the aerodynamic principles of Dr Wunibald Kamm. Although less elegant than its predecessor, at

From top: clearer lights and 'Kamm' tail update the shape; like DB5, triple-SU engine rated at 282bhp (Vantage badges are cosmetic); inviting back seats

high speed it gave a claimed 30% reduction in lift at the rear. With quarter-bumpers exposing the extra front grille and deeper rear apron, the DB6 looked a more substantial car altogether, but in fact overall weight was virtually unchanged from the DB5. Using the Weber-carburetted Vantage engine, officially quoted at 325bhp, contemporary road tests achieved an impressive 147mph maximum and 0-100mph in 15 secs. Power steering was now an option.

The DB6 was produced in its original form for almost four years, and no fewer than 1321 coupés were sold. In addition there were 37 convertibles – by then using the Volante name – on the shorter DB5 chassis and 140 DB6-length drop-tops, and this time Harold Radford managed half a dozen station wagons.

In July '69 came a revised DB6, the Mk2. This used the wider wheels being fitted to the totally different six-cylinder DBS, which was being manufactured alongside the earlier car, and they necessitated slight flares over the wheel openings, an instant Mk2 identifier. Of the 250 coupés and 38 Volantes built to this spec, 46 had Brico fuel injection, which returned improved economy if no greater performance.

The final DB6 rolled out of the Newport Pagnell factory in November 1970. By then Aston Martin was concentrating on the four-cam V8 version of the DBS, and Marek's alloy straight-six was nearing the end of its 14-year life. As is always the way, values of six-cylinder cars dropped in the decade after it ceased production, and many tired examples that could be bought cheaply went without proper maintenance and deteriorated further. By the beginning of the 1990s, however, the cars were far more appreciated, and many were being properly restored. Even so, good DB6s could still be found for £30-35,000, with DB4s and DB5s about £5000 more and convertibles getting on for double that. Now, more than 20 years later, a perfect DB6 may cost you £450,000 and a good DB6 Volante even more.

But fine examples of DB4-6 Aston Martins continue in the 21st century to be among the most enjoyable and usable of great classic cars. The glorious trio illustrated on these pages all belong to Markus Tellenbach. His DB4 is a Series IV, displaying the later grille and the smaller bonnet scoop, while the wheelarch flares on the DB6 identify it as a Mk2.

Above: Mk2's lipped arches allow for wider rubber than Mk1 DB6, and quarter-bumpers flank the extra grille. Below: luxurious DB6 is a full four-seater

'THESE WONDERFUL GRAND TOURERS EACH HAVE A CHARACTER OF THEIR OWN'

Tellenbach, with a nod to Fleming, has a vintage Bentley as well, but believes in using his Astons as much as possible. A Sunday family trip to the pub means a convoy, him in the DB5 and his wife driving the DB6, with their three sons and dog along for the ride. All three make wonderful Continental grand tourers, and he has enjoyed them on adventures from home in Surrey to France, Switzerland and Italy, taking in the great Alpine passes such as the St Gotthard and Stelvio. All have their distinct character: the DB4 the most raw and pure, the DB5 the ultimate mix of performance and sophistication, the DB6 with softer suspension and more room.

Any Aston Martin is a car to be taken seriously. Throughout the marque's 100 years there have been many that belong in anyone's list of all-time classics, from 'Green Pea' and 'Razor Blade' to the One-77. But in terms of visual and engineering elegance, fitness for purpose and sheer driving pleasure, the 4000-plus cars that make up the DB4/5/6 canon are hard to beat. Even James Bond wasn't wrong there.

Thanks to *Markus Tellenbach; RS Williams (01932 868377; www.rswilliams.co.uk)*

BRITAIN'S to the SHORT

ANSWER WHEELBASE

With Ferrari and Jaguar dominating GT racing, Aston Martin turned to Zagato to style its latest challenger. **Mick Walsh** gets behind the wheel of the ultimate DB4

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES LIPMAN**

Clockwise, from main: driving position is good and interior of this car retains delightful patina; Zagato's distinctive badge; straight-six is fed by triple Webers; muscular styling splits opinion

The witty motoring bard LJK Setright famously likened the Aston Martin DB4GT Zagato's dramatic styling to a matador's trousers. From the wide, gaping grille and cowled headlights to the taut rear, the shape looks both exotic and powerful. There's no question that 23-year-old Ercole Spada at Zagato did a masterful job transforming the further lightened DB4GT platform into an aggressive competition coupé. It's arguably no match for the flawless Ferrari 250GT SWB that inspired Spada when he was working at his drawing board in the Via Giorgini offices, but its rarity alone makes seeing one an event. This is a top points score in the *I-Spy* book of cars.

Yet, like many Zagato designs, the styling provokes debate. Photographer Lipman and I study the shape for hours, and decide that it's a car best judged at 20 paces. The sexiest angle is the rear three-quarter, which most closely resembles Maranello's Pininfarina beauty, but up close this Aston's proportions are slightly dumpy, with an over-short bonnet. Giorgetto Giugiaro always maintained that wheelarches should be filled flush with no overhang, a minor factor that spoils the DB4GT Zagato, particularly at the rear, while its width is exaggerated by the tapered roof profile.

When you really start looking for attractive details, it's a challenge to find one. Admittedly, like the 250GTO, the project's priorities were motorsport, yet you can't help feeling that Aston sent a box of lights, filler caps and badges to Milan with instructions to incorporate them to save money. But, just as I've concluded that it's no match for the beauty of a production DB4, I spot a fresh angle. From a low viewpoint, the shapely side profile totally entrances, conjuring Spada's original sketch. That indecision and continual reassessment all add to this 1960s exotic's captivating charms.

All of the DB4GT Zagatos were handmade, and as a result they are all unique. Some – such as chassis 0188, which Antonio Mochetti ordered with production DB4 nose, lights and bonnet vent – look more 'Ferrari' than others. The thin, hand-beaten aluminium body panels even differ from side to side, which is part of their character. On this car, chassis 0184, the overhang in the rear arches is different from left to right.

Doorhandles also varied, with earlier cars having push levers while others have Zagato's signature ring hook and thumb button. With Perspex window and flyweight alloy panel, the door feels flimsy when pulled, but inside that Italian Superleggera flair has vanished as Feltham's production DB4 fittings dominate the cabin. The broad, deep-cushion seats retain a cherished original patina, while the crackle-black fascia, Smiths gauges and wood-rimmed steering wheel with satin-black spokes are all traditional Aston. Above the waistline, the tapered roof feels close but its roomy midriff means that there's ample space for a fly-off handbrake inside the door to the right of the seat.

The pedal layout is superb and perfect for heel-and-toeing, while there's a considerate resting place for your clutch foot – ideal for relief when blasting down the Mulsanne Straight. From the 1930s, Aston always considered driver comfort, whether it was in its racers or its road cars. The tall gearstick is a handy stretch away and the standard H-gate of the all-synchro, close-ratio David Brown 'box will be familiar to Aston owners. Unlike many Zagato GT road-racers, this one came with ashtray, clock, heater and sill-to-sill carpeting but, at a hefty list price of £5469, you'd expect some refinements.

Turn the key and the 3.7-litre twin-cam 'six' erupts with a throaty bark that perfectly complements the muscular styling. Shorn of a further 150lb over the already lightweight DB4GT, and with a high-compression motor developing a claimed 314bhp, this coupé delivers impressive acceleration, particularly when the revs pass 3000rpm. Driving out of Derby, we relish every traffic-light stop for the chance to open up its dramatic performance through the gears. But, as with all DB 'boxes, the change is on the notchy side and, similar to a Moss unit, it protests if you rush it. The punch makes you forget that this is a 52-year-old car and, with the ton arriving in just 14 secs, it'll upstage most challengers.

Everywhere it roars, the Zagato gets a positive reaction, with all ages hastily getting out mobile phones to record its passing. But with only 19 survivors – 2 VEV was built again after Lucien Bianchi destroyed the original chassis at Spa in 1962 – you're twice as likely to see a 250GTO on the road than a DB4GT Zagato.

After a few miles on a warm summer day, the cockpit starts to cook and we quickly wind down the windows to get some air. With a succession of roundabouts, you also start to notice the heavy steering, which requires firm direction even around the centre. As the pace builds on clearer, twistier country roads, the observation of Stirling Moss about the Zagato being "very much a strong-man's GT car" rings true, and you realise why, after just one race at Goodwood on Easter Monday '61, he talked team owner Rob Walker into quickly selling the first car built and buying another 250 SWB. "It's the original blunt instrument," recalled Moss after finishing third to a pair of Maranello beauties, "short, quite highly strung and twitchy."

Push harder on twisty Derbyshire roads and you soon appreciate his point. Enter corners at an enthusiastic pace and the Zagato's bias is to understeer. On a circuit there's space to try to

ASTON MARTIN DB4GT ZAGATO

Sold/number built 1960-'62/20 (including replacement chassis for 2 VEV)
Construction platform chassis with Zagato magnesium-alloy bodywork
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3670cc 'six', twin plugs per cylinder, three twin-choke Weber 45DCOE4 carburettors, 9.7:1 compression ratio (9.3:1 for race cars)
Max power 314bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 278lb ft @ 5400rpm
Transmission David Brown all-synchromesh close-ratio four-speed manual, RWD
Suspension: front independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, Armstrong telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, coil springs, parallel trailing links, Watt linkage, Armstrong lever-arm dampers
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs all round **Length** 14ft (4267mm)
Width 5ft 5¼in (1657mm) **Height** 4ft 2in (1270mm) **Wheelbase** 7ft 9in (2362mm)
Weight 2580lb (1170kg)
0-60mph 6.1 secs **Top speed** 153mph **Mpg** 14
Price new £5469

The Italian connection

Story has it that 'Mr Bristol', Tony Crook, was responsible for introducing Aston Martin to the famous Italian coachbuilder. Crook was a good friend of team manager John Wyer, as well as being Zagato's agent in the UK. The get-together possibly took place at the 1959 London Motor Show, but Stephen Archer, author of the definitive reference *Aston Martin Zagato*, states that design engineer Harold Beach asked Carlo Anderloni of Touring for advice on the best specialist to build a lightweight racing GT, and Zagato was proposed. This was a small project compared to Touring's commitment to standard DB4 production, and Anderloni didn't see the contract as a threat.

Even at Aston, the whole project was regarded as an afterthought because the Feltham works was preoccupied with developing the DB4 convertible, building the DB4GT and running a Grand Prix team. The Zagato was one of many challenges for the Milan-based firm, and in May 1960 it was handed over to Ercole Spada, who was still very much an apprentice having left university just 12 months earlier. The DB4GT transformation was only his second job, and he was closely supervised by Gianni Zagato. Spada recalled that his original concept was "like an animal having its skin tightened from a point in the middle of the back." Changes from the first designs included extending the nose with a more aggressive front that brilliantly continued the style set by Frank Feeley with the DB3S. Spada's boss wanted the Aston to feature Zagato's signature 'double-bubble' roofline but the talented youngster talked him out of it.

Amazingly, no more than a week was spent on the original design, and much of that time was devoted to details and polishing the sketches for presentation. The finished proposal was posted to Feltham and, hard as it is to believe, there was no face-to-face meeting or technical review. Beach, Wyer and his team liked what they saw and gave it the go-ahead. When the completed car was first delivered to Feltham, the Aston team was stunned by its beauty, but once it investigated under the surface, the build quality horrified the British workers, who drew up a long list of faults. The prototype '0200' had a uniquely aggressive shark-style nose when it made its debut at the 1960 London Motor Show, but the front was later modified after a racing accident in 1963.

'WHEN THE CAR WAS FIRST DELIVERED TO FELTHAM, THE ASTON TEAM WAS STUNNED BY ITS BEAUTY'

The rear three-quarter is perhaps the Zagato's best angle, reckons Walsh, and conjures images of the Ferrari 250GT SWB


4359 ML


4359 ML

Clockwise, from main: Aston is much happier devouring straights than tackling curves; DB4 seats; rear suspension now features correct lever-arm dampers again; pushbutton door handle

balance that but, combined with the weighty rack-and-pinion steering, the Zagato is frustrating work to hustle along. The brakes, too, require a hefty shove, and the deep travel is occasionally unnerving, but they improve dramatically once warmed up. The understeer was a result of Aston taking too much weight out of the centre of the car, where aluminium replaced steel sections. This made the chassis nose-heavy, and thus unsettled the balance. On several occasions the DB4GTs were quicker on-track and even maestro Jim Clark struggled on the limit.

For a lightweight GT, the ride is surprisingly good, much to the credit of Aston Engineering's recent work, and there's none of the nervousness on minor roads that you'd expect from a machine created primarily for competition. Like a fast pre-war sports car, it's a rewarding challenge to motor quickly but as the miles clock up you relish the straights more than the bends. Don't get me wrong, this is one hugely desirable '60s GT with bags of character but, like Moss, I've driven a SWB and it's spoilt me. Yet, while the Aston may lack the delicacy of the Ferrari, there is no doubt that the magnificent engine goes a long way towards making up any lost ground. For many enthusiasts, the DB4GT Zagato remains the ultimate Gran Turismo.

Like many Zagatos, 0184 was a struggle to sell when new due to its hefty asking price. While at the Feltham works, 4359 ML was used as a test car and was the only such model ever loaned to a magazine for a road test. For *The Autocar* to be entrusted with the £5469 exotic GT was a real scoop. On a gusty spring day, the lightweight Aston covered the 0-60mph sprint in 6.1 secs, with a best maximum of 153mph. There are no contemporary figures for a Ferrari 250 SWB against which to compare it but, subjectively, it feels faster.

'THE SECOND OWNER TRADED AN AUSTIN-HEALEY PLUS £200 CASH FOR THE ZAGATO'

When it did finally sell, 0184 went to Dunlop at a discount in return for development work on the brakes, which had been a constant concern. The Girling units had a tendency towards 'knocking off', whereby the pads are tapped away from the disc. The result was an unnerving amount of pedal travel before the anchors came on. In the heat of competition, Zagatos suffered this problem more dramatically than road cars. In an attempt to resolve things, Dunlop C111 calipers were fitted in 1963.

The car had a hard life at Dunlop, clocking up 25,000 miles on local airfields during constant testing but, during its ownership, the gearbox, clutch and back axle received regular attention. The car was always scrupulously maintained by Dunlop, claimed second owner Bob Owen, who acquired it in June 1967 from a Birmingham dealer. A keen club racer who owned a DB3S, the Cheshire-based enthusiast saw the coupé as the next step, and he happily traded an Austin-Healey and £200 cash for the five-year-old Zagato. Owen immediately had it repainted Rover dark blue, and used it in a few club events from 1967-'68 before moving it on for £1400 when a standard DB4 was valued at £1000.

The next owner was car collector Sir Anthony Bamford, who "just loved the look of it". While working overseas, he sent 0184 to the factory to be extensively overhauled. As well as having it repainted Aston Martin Fiesta Red, the JCB chairman re-registered the car 8 DBL – a number transferred from an ex-works MGB that he still owns – for no other reason than he felt the shorter number better suited it.

The next owner was Ernie Miller, a butcher from Essex who had a real passion for DB4GT Zagatos, and believed them to be the pinnacle of Aston Martin history. Having owned several and raced them, Miller's view was that 0184 – for which he paid £3500 – was too good to risk on the track. Other than a class win at the AMOC Concours at Fort Belvedere – there's still a plaque on the dash – and a road trip to Le Mans in 1973, the car was little used. Martin Hilton acquired it for £6100 in 1975, and competed in a few club events before selling it in 1980 to Peter Kaus, the German founder of the spectacular Rosso Bianco collection, where it became a star of his Zagato-themed display. When driving the newly acquired Aston to Dover, Kaus was stopped by an enthusiast who recognised the car. So distressed was he that 0184 was leaving the country, he tried his best to stop its export.

A decade later, Kaus decided to sell some of his road cars. The Aston was auctioned by Poulain-Le Fur in Paris, where it sold for FFr5.8million to a Sicilian collector who specialised in Zagato-bodied cars. Its next custodian had the body sprayed in its original metallic Almond Green, and re-registered it 4359 ML. After a sheltered life away from the track, 0184 was later prepared for racing by RS Williams so that new owner Juan Barazi could enter the RAC TT Celebration at the 2003 Goodwood Revival. The car has subsequently returned to the flagship event with William 'Chip' Connor II sharing the driving with Touring Car ace Rob Wilson.

In recent months, 0184 has been returned to authentic road specification by top specialist Aston Engineering in Derby. "We've taken out the racing clutch, rebuilt the gearbox and changed the back-axle ratio from 3.77 to a taller 3.06," says workshop manager Gareth Williams. "The front was too firm for the road, so we've fitted our own handling kit with gas dampers, new springs and a stiffer anti-roll bar. At the back, we've removed the telescopic conversion and refitted the original Armstrong lever-arm dampers but with thicker oil. We've also put it back on narrower Avon Turbospeed tyres, which look more authentic, and removed the roll-over bar."

Aston Engineering has worked on many of the greatest racing Astons, including Project 212 and a DBR1, but the Zagato was the first in its long-established workshops, where it took pride of place among three DB4GTs being race-prepared. "This is special and the styling to me is drop-dead gorgeous," says Williams.

In isolation, it's perfectly possible to criticise Spada's design, but park it among contemporary Astons and the Zagato really does look the most dynamic example of this stylish line. Such an original car is too important to race again, and I pray that no one is tempted.

Thanks to *Fiskens (www.fiskens.com); Sir Anthony Bamford; Aston Engineering (www.astonengineering.co.uk)*

TOURING'S GRANDEST TOURERS

Milanese styling and sophisticated pace make the Aston DB4 and Maserati 3500GT natural rivals, but which does **Martin Buckley** prefer?

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/LAT**


YXA 34

From main: the DB4's flowing profile is more familiar than that of the Maserati and influences Aston design even today; frontal styling would gain faired-in headlights for the later DB5 and DB6

The lady in the burger van was not amused by us using 'her' layby as a turning space. She couldn't see photographer Tony Baker skulking in the undergrowth at the exit of the corner further up the road; as far she was concerned, we were just two middle-aged hooligans in a pair of large, fruity-sounding sports cars who were frightening her customers. After three or four passes, she could stand it no longer. Leaping from the van – red faced and with tattooed bingo-wings flapping aggressively – she waved me down, and bawled her displeasure through the carefully adjusted half-inch crack at the top of the DB4's driver's window.

Calming reassurances about my driving skills and the merit of our artistic endeavour fell upon deaf ears. Eventually, though, she retreated to her sizzling quarter-pounders, muttering something about phoning the law. You'll be glad to hear that I didn't let her ruin my day: with an Aston Martin DB4 and a Maserati 3500GT to play with, it was going to take more than an irate purveyor of fast food to spoil the fun.

The charms of a twin-cam straight-six and svelte Superleggera bodywork may, of course, be lost on some people. Why should Burger Van Lady care that these two big, noisy, pollution-spewing old cars – together valued at three quarters of a million Sterling – represented just about the ultimate in true *gran turismo* motoring in the late 1950s and early '60s?

These were machines built to take you across a country – or continent – at sustained three-figure speeds, experiencing a form of travel that was beyond most people's imagination. They are exemplars of an era when the difference between family cars and true exotica was much greater than it is today. Both were created for a wealthy, specialised market, of course, but were also designed to be less fragile and finicky than the models that they replaced. Neither would ever exactly be commonplace, yet both were produced in surprisingly substantial numbers over several distinct series of development – no fewer than five in the case of the DB4, early examples of which suffered from well-publicised cooling problems. The upshot is that they were cars that later generations could realistically dream of owning. The final manifestations of their respective bloodlines – the Mistral and DB6 – were still available new at the beginning of the 1970s.

The fact that both were so crucial to the long-term survival of their respective manufacturers is another quality that makes the DB4 and 3500GT so eminently comparable. Maserati built only about 100 of its post-war 2-litre road cars, making the 3500 the Trident's first true production model – and there has never been a more important single design in the firm's history. Likewise, the DB4 – the first Aston Martin developed entirely by the David Brown organisation, and the first production car to be shaped by a foreign stylist – is the model that established the template and set the tone for every subsequent Aston.

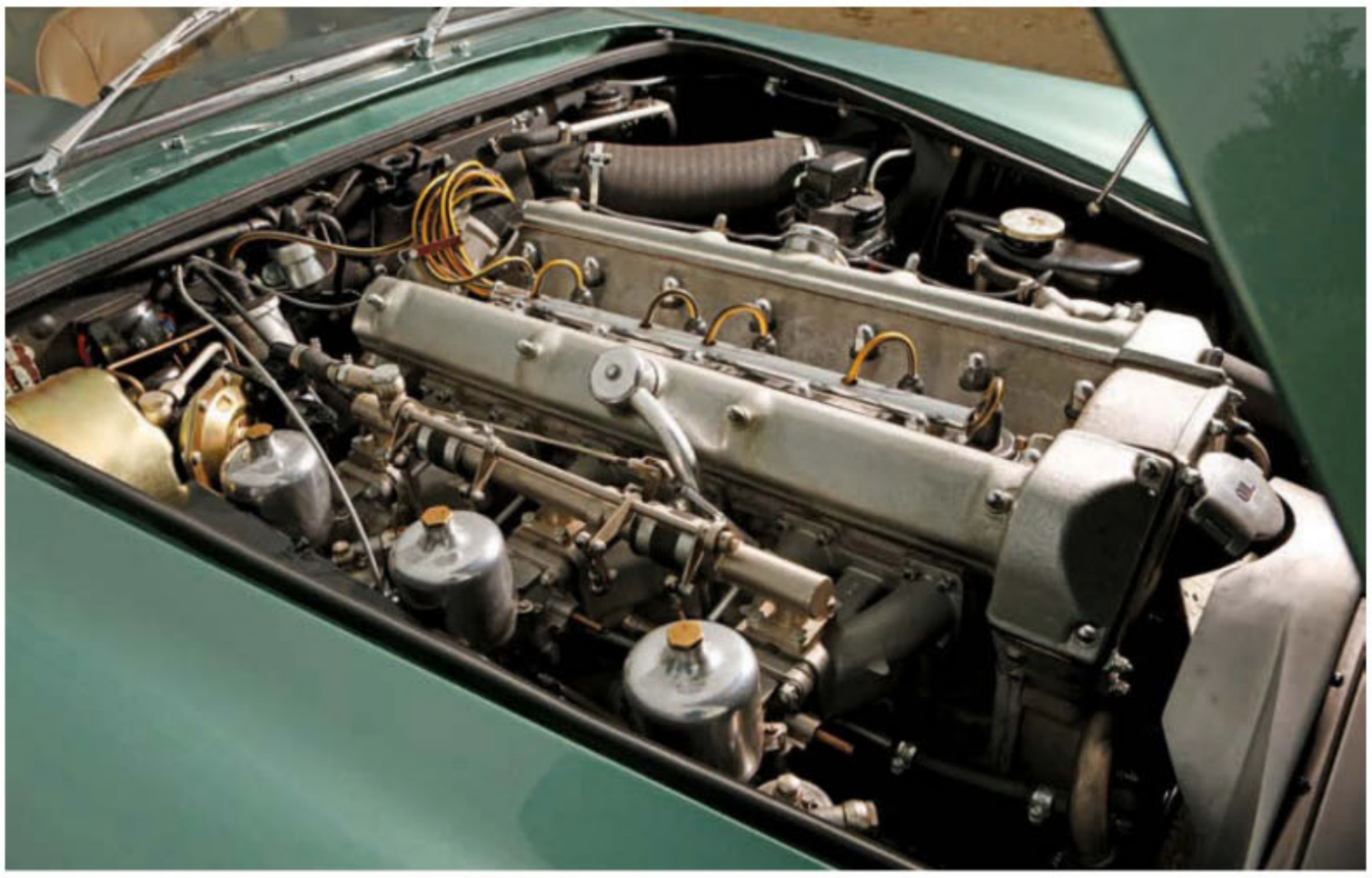
In fact, I would venture that no Aston before or since has had the initial impact of the DB4. In 1958, this was the fastest four-seater (if you accepted that the rear seats were usable) that *The Autocar* had ever tested, famously being capable of 0-100mph and back again inside 30 seconds.

'*THE AUTOCAR* FOUND THAT IT WAS CAPABLE OF 0-100MPH AND BACK AGAIN INSIDE 30 SECS'

Aston Martin and Maserati came to remarkably similar conclusions in their search for the ideal specification for a mid-'50s GT. When you consider that the DB4 and 3500 were both developed by companies competing at the highest level of sports-car and Grand Prix racing, the broad technical parallels are perhaps not so surprising. Both had all-aluminium, wet-liner straight-sixes of less than 4 litres giving well in excess of 200bhp, tuned for reliable flexibility at one end and anything up to 140mph at the other.

These were engines that could trace their

From top: Superleggera body was built under licence in Feltham and Newport Pagnell; DB4's cabin is more sober than that of its Italian rival; this Aston's twin-cam 'six' has been enlarged to 4.7 litres, meaning significant extra grunt; wires with trademark three-eared spinners; narrow rear seat



Touring of Milan

Founded in 1926, the Milanese *carrozzeria* patented its famous Superleggera method of construction in the late '30s. Its origins can be traced back to the firm's activities producing air frames and Weymann fabric bodies. By cladding a skeleton of narrow-gauge steel tubes in unstressed aluminium panels, the designers were able to retain the lightness of the Weymann body but with greatly increased strength. The technique also meant that the skin could be formed in voluptuous streamlined shapes, most memorably on the Alfa 8C chassis.

Touring's association with Aston Martin began with a DB2/4-based roadster that was shown at Turin in 1956, and which had been commissioned as a competition prize by the *Daily Express*. Aston's John Wyer favoured Superleggera construction, and it seemed natural for the firm to go for Italian styling for its next generation of cars – particularly since in-house designer Frank Feeley was unwilling to move from Feltham to Newport Pagnell.

Aston's chief engineer Harold Beach – who thought the people at Touring were "a fantastic crowd" – designed a platform chassis to which the Italians could weld their tubular frame, and the first DB4 prototype, styled by Federico Formenti, was running by March 1957.

The same month, Maserati showed the Touring-styled 3500GT at Geneva, its handsome lines having beaten rival Zagato and Allemano designs. As well as being the Trident's first production car, the 3500GT opened a whole new chapter for Touring, which by then was building series models for Alfa and was about to start

DB2/4 roadster was the first Aston bodied by Touring

making Lancia Flaminia GTs. Production would increase from fewer than 300 bodies a year to a peak of nearly 3000 in 1960. The company would become truly industrialised; instead of hand-beaten panels, bodies were built from large sections pressed by outside suppliers and assembled at a modern facility in Nova Milanese.

The delays caused by the ambitious move to this new factory, compounded by strikes and difficulties with newly hired workers, eventually caught up with the firm. It was undercapitalised, too; the directors had financed the plant with their own funds, leaving nothing to fall back on when the economy faltered. The cancellation of a contract with Rootes to build the Alpine and the Super Minx probably sealed Touring's fate. It went into receivership in 1963, although production continued until 1965.

Among the last one-offs was the Aston DBS prototype, shown at Earls Court in 1966. Other than the Shah of Iran's 5000GT, and several unsuccessful attempts to update the 3500GT, Touring never bodied another Maserati.

lineage directly to racing machinery of very recent memory. Aston Martin made no secret of the fact that the DB4's seven-bearing, 3.7-litre 'six', designed by Tadek Merek, had been developed in the DBR sports cars. Similarly, Giulio Alfieri's 3485cc unit, with its 12-plug head and shim-adjusted bucket tappets, was a product of both the 350S and the 250F racers.

Weighing in at c3000lb apiece, both cars featured high-fashion styling by Touring of Milan, beautifully crafted in aluminium. The Maserati's body was produced in Touring's own factory (alongside various models from Alfa and Lancia), whereas Aston took a licence on the famous Superleggera method of construction and built its shells in-house, first at Feltham and later (from 1963) at Newport Pagnell.

Under the skin, both cars had ruggedly conventional but well-groomed chassis. Here were prime examples of what could be done with a well-located live axle and careful weight distribution by engineers who were still mistrustful of fully independent rear ends on fast cars. Aston's Harold Beach would have liked a de Dion set-up for his DB4 but, for want of a sufficiently quiet differential, made do with a Watt linkage and trailing links for the axle. He coil-sprung the Aston, whereas Alfieri thought that semi-elliptics were adequate for the new Maserati GT; the Ghibli and Indy used the same basic set-up into the '70s, so maybe he was right.

A master in the art of aluminium casting, Maserati engineered the 3500 around an international mix of bought-in components (a Salisbury rear axle, ZF gearbox, plus Alford & Alder wishbone front suspension to name just a few). Aston took a more bespoke approach,

ASTON MARTIN DB4

Sold/number built 1958-'63/1185
Construction steel chassis with aluminium Superleggera body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3670cc straight-six, twin or triple SU carburettors
Max power 240bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 240lb ft @ 4250rpm
Transmission four-speed DB manual, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front coil springs, double wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, coil springs, trailing links, Watt linkage, lever-arm dampers
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes discs all round, with servo
Length 14ft 9in (4496mm)
Width 5ft 6in (1676mm)
Height 4ft 4½in (1334mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 2in (2489mm)
Weight 3080lb (1400kg)
0-60mph 9.3 secs
Top speed 140mph **Mpg** 16
Price new £3505

MASERATI 3500GT

Sold/number built 1957-'64/1981
Construction steel chassis with aluminium Superleggera body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3485cc straight-six, twin spark-plugs per cylinder, triple Weber carburettors or Lucas injection
Max power 235bhp @ 5800rpm
Max torque 232lb ft @ 4800rpm
Transmission five-speed ZF manual, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front coil springs, double wishbones **rear** live axle, semi-elliptics, anti-roll bar; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering recirculating ball
Brakes discs all round
Length 15ft 8¼in (4780mm)
Width 5ft 9¼in (1760mm)
Height 4ft 3½in (1310mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6½in (2600mm)
Weight 3175lb (1440kg)
0-60mph 7.5 secs
Top speed 129mph **Mpg** 16
Price new £5852

From top: floor-hinged pedals in the English car; trident logo on elegant gearstick; whether you prefer the notchback styling of the Maserati or the fastback Aston, both are the very definition of a sophisticated grand tourer

with its own top and bottom ball-jointed front end – again developed on the Le Mans cars – rack-and-pinion steering, plus four-speed 'box supplied, of course, by patron David Brown.

'Our' Maserati is a late example with Lucas fuel injection, four-wheel Dunlop discs and a five-speed ZF gearbox. In fact, 33 DYM is an ex-Earls Court Motor Show and press car that was tested by Gregor Grant in *Autosport*. It is therefore one of the last of nearly 2000 to feature this body style, which was first seen in 1957 and remained current through to 1965. At just over £3500, a Series 2 Aston Martin DB4 such as this one (with its improved brakes and bigger-capacity, 17-gallon sump) was more than £2000 cheaper than the import-duty-loaded Italian.

Out on the road, these are cars that make you feel special. They are imbued with a power and poise that lifts you above humdrum concerns, although their heavy controls and lusty feel won't be to all tastes. Both require the sort of physical effort that places their origins firmly in the '50s.

Once inside, each provides a noble view down a long, shapely bonnet but, of the two, the Aston Martin has the better-planned, better-ventilated interior. It has slim roof pillars and a good driving position where your hand falls naturally from the big 16in steering wheel to the gear-lever, and where your feet work easily on the nicely spaced floor-hinged pedals. The delicate rear-view mirror makes following vehicles look lower and meaner than they really are, and everything about the cabin is neatly trimmed for an aura of workmanlike luxury.

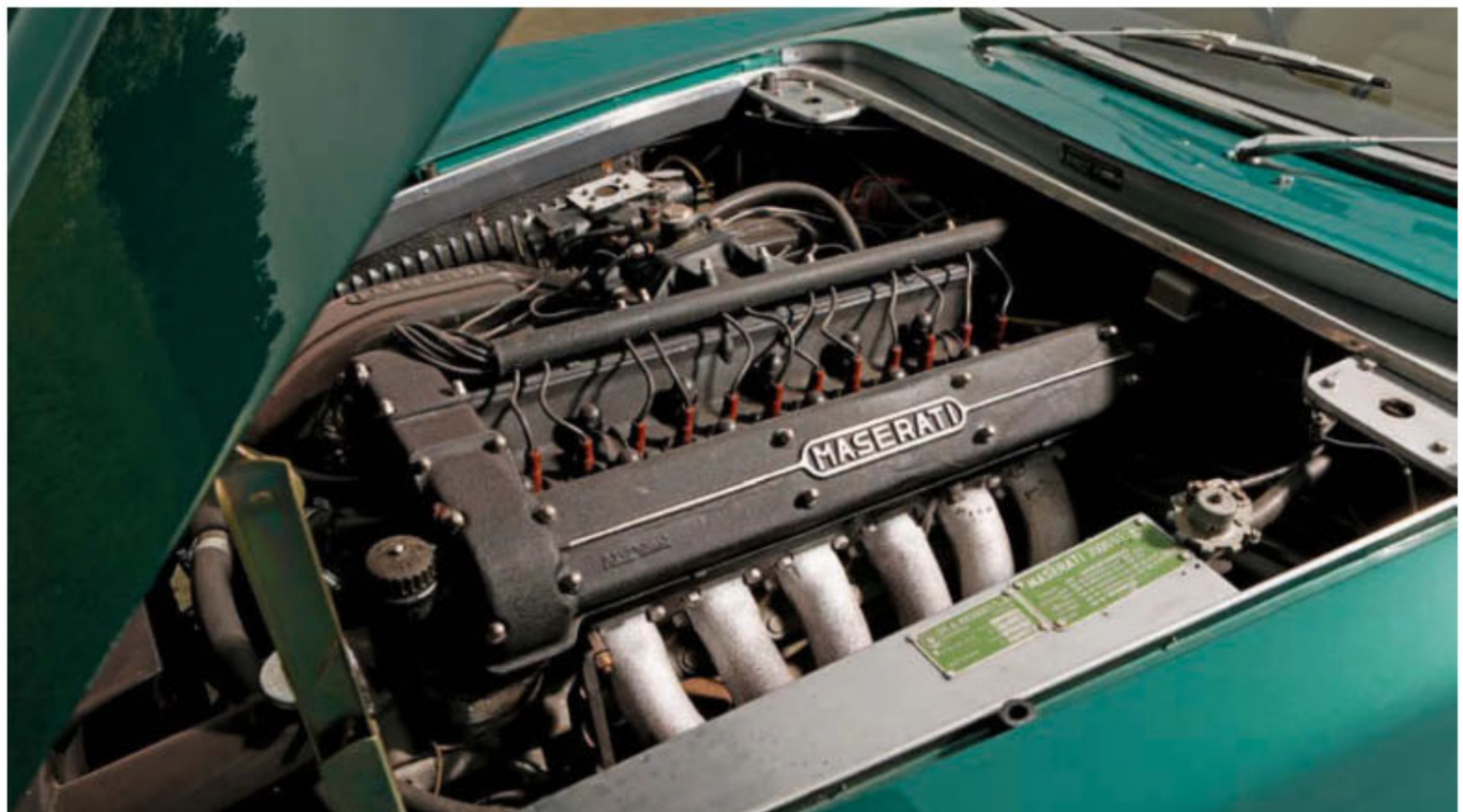
The Maserati's interior is smaller, but less sober and well ordered. It's flashier, perhaps, with its electric windows and fat, cream leather seats that are needlessly large and not very embracing – although potentially nervous passengers get an almost comically massive padded grabhandle as compensation. You sit commandingly in the 3500, with your arms stretched out on the big, black plastic-rimmed wheel. Your knees do feel somewhat high but your right foot moves effortlessly from brake to accelerator, so heel and toeing is very natural.

Even today, either car will shoot you up to 100mph before you have grabbed fourth gear. It is not quite a fair fight, though, because 'our' pampered DB4 – restored in 2012 by Thornley Kelham – has a variety of RS Williams improvements. Chief among the mods is a 4.7-litre engine conversion that gives it the best part of an extra 100bhp, plus goodness knows how much additional torque. The rev-counter needle certainly leaps crisply round the dial at the merest caress of the throttle pedal, and the only thing missing from a perfect set of gear ratios is a nice high overdrive that would cut down the noise. This car feels as if it will sit on an unrestricted highway at 130mph (with lots more to come, if you feel the need), getting there in a potent but beautifully modulated flow of power that is raw and brawny but never brutal or vicious.

With the revs rising, the Aston and Maserati sound similarly expensive, their fussy, well-bred sophistication combined with throatily booming exhaust notes. Should you not wish to draw attention to yourself, however, either car will pull away with the decorum of a mayoral limousine at low speeds, with clutches that just about match each other for substantial heft combined with easy-to-use, snatch-free smoothness.

In the DB4, most open-road overtaking

From top: Italian script, but the Lucas injection system is British; vast, thin-rimmed wheel and grabhandle dominate the fascia; Maserati 3500GT's 'six' features a twin-plug head design; pressed-steel wheels and hubcaps may sound prosaic but they look great; beautifully trimmed rear seats



Maserati corners in a flat, composed manner but still rides with aplomb; profile would influence that of the Lancia Flaminia GT, which was also the work of the Milanese *carrozzeria*

'BOTH SOUND SIMILARLY EXPENSIVE, WITH A FUSSY SOPHISTICATION AND THROATY EXHAUST'

manoeuvres can be dispatched without changing out of top – just as well, because the gearbox has a gritty, macho feel about it that matches the car's personality. In the Maserati, you need to access the mid-range revs or just accept that you can't whip past traffic with the same aggression. The 3500's five-speed ZF gearbox is naturally more versatile and lighter to handle, but with a rather narrow gate – it's easy to slot it into fifth when you're looking for third. There's also quite a lot of gear whine once the oil has warmed.

Like the Aston, the Maser has a magnificently flexible motor, pulling in one long, even lunge from the steady 500rpm tickover to a throaty 5500rpm, where it makes the most of its 235 horses. You could order any of seven different final-drive ratios for your 3500, tailoring it for maximum acceleration, optimum top speed, or a good compromise between the two. I'm not sure which back end this car is running, but it feels strong and healthy, illustrating how well these Lucas injection engines can pull when they are properly set up. Anybody would be content with it and – allowing for the British car's sneaky extra litre – it's easy to see how the two would have been closely matched in straight-line urge. According to period road tests, the Aston probably enjoyed a slight edge.

Both cars have a firm but comfortable ride, reassuringly potent servo-assisted disc brakes and thoroughly vice-free handling. Again, there's the caveat that, with its upgraded dampers and revised geometry, the Aston is probably sharper than it would have been in 1961. It just feels 'sorted' in a way that leaves the Maserati seeming ever so slightly ponderous – mainly because the Italian's steering is lower geared and, being a box rather than a rack, is inherently less direct. It corners flat and true, and holds no surprises for novice or hooligan. Somehow, though, it feels more of a period piece. It is as if its designers realised that the typical playboy/industrialist owner would be more focused on smoking a cigarette while stroking his girlfriend's thigh, so why make things more difficult?

That's not to say that this DB4 is so far from standard: I've driven enough of them to know that. Shod, as it is, with period-correct 'full profile' tyres, the essential characteristics can't be too far removed from the original designer's intent. Its direct, slop-free steering loads up for safety on tight bends taken quickly, the idea being that you unload it by booting the tail round with the throttle. It is hard to resist the urge to adopt tearaway tactics on roundabouts, where you can control a slide with surprising delicacy.

Thank goodness the lady in the burger van didn't see me contemplating that! Of course, if you and I were standing in a layby one sunny afternoon we might relish the idea of watching an Aston DB4 and a Maserati 3500GT being gunned up a country road – some people would even pay for the privilege – but wouldn't it be a boring world if we all liked the same things?

As to which one you take home, I suspect that the decision – then and now – would come down to the two basic things that make the world go round: looks and money. If you feel jaded by the continual hype that surrounds the Aston marque – and the '60s models in particular – you will feel naturally disposed to finding the Maserati prettier, or a least less familiar. Today, thanks to the mystical 'Aston tax' (and the exploits of a certain fictional secret agent), this DB4 could command well over double the £200,000 that it would take to part the fully restored Maserati from its current owner. Such a price differential is obviously nonsense, but it must make the 3500GT some sort of bargain.

Thanks to *Hal Walter; Thornley Kelham (www.thornleykelham.com); Cotswold Classic Car Restorations (www.cotswold classiccarrestorations.co.uk)*

Diva!

A star-struck **Mick Walsh** tells the story of the stunning Aston Martin Jet, the unique Bertone-styled DB4GT that's still centre-stage more than half a century after its debut

PHOTOGRAPHY **JULIAN MACKIE**

If you were to remove all of the badging from the sensational 1961 Aston Martin Jet, most people would struggle to connect Bertone's one-off masterpiece with the exclusive British marque. Born into a world gripped by the Cold War – when rocket and jet power still made the headlines while cinema audiences marvelled at the voluptuous Anita Ekberg in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* – its sleek, sexy grey form evokes those dramatic times. Even five decades on, it's not difficult to imagine the 'mood board' of influences in the busy Turin studio.

The Jet's dramatic Bertone styling provokes mixed reactions. Its long, shapely nose with boomerang quarter-bumpers predates Pininfarina's Ferrari 250GT Lusso by two years, but the rather featureless boot is less well-resolved. The profile, with extended overhanging front and tail, perfectly disguises the stubby wheelbase of the shortened DB4GT platform while the elegant, slim-pillared glasshouse is typical of Bertone's GT cabins that peaked with the fabulous 'sharknose' 250GT SWB 12 months later.

The side depth of the initial Jet proposals – a function of the tall, twin-cam 'six' – was clearly a concern for the design team, which resulted in contrasting, lighter-coloured valances and sill sections to give it a sleeker stance. The interior was also transformed. The broad, wood-rimmed steering wheel – with blue DB monogram on the centre boss and black-faced Smiths instruments – may be familiar Aston Martin details, but the Facel-style centre cluster, with six gauges angled at the driver, the sculpted scuttle and quilted panel trim, were all bolder flourishes than the conservative, old-school production DB4.

"It has assorted bits of Ferrari, Aston, Iso and Corvette," concludes art editor Martin Port, "but seems to struggle with its identity."

The Jet wasn't the first Bertone creation for David Brown's firm. In 1953, Nuccio Bertone commissioned his star stylist Franco Scaglione to design an open two-seater sports car based on the new DB2/4 chassis. With its curvaceous wing line, simplified Aston grille and low 'screen, this one-off pre-empted the Arnolt-Bristol's distinctive razor-edge body style.

The following year it was Giovanni Michelotti's turn to mould a new Aston. His handsome 2+2 cabriolet could have been mistaken for a Ferrari from most angles, although it featured a bold, tin-toy-like nose with an exaggerated chrome egg-crate grille and inset spotlights.

Following spectacular work with Alfa Romeo through the Sportiva and wild BAT series, Bertone devised another distinctive DB2/4 soft-top. Fashionable features of the 1955 proposal included a panoramic windscreen and slim wrap-around bumpers, but with the signature Aston Martin grille again dominating the nose.

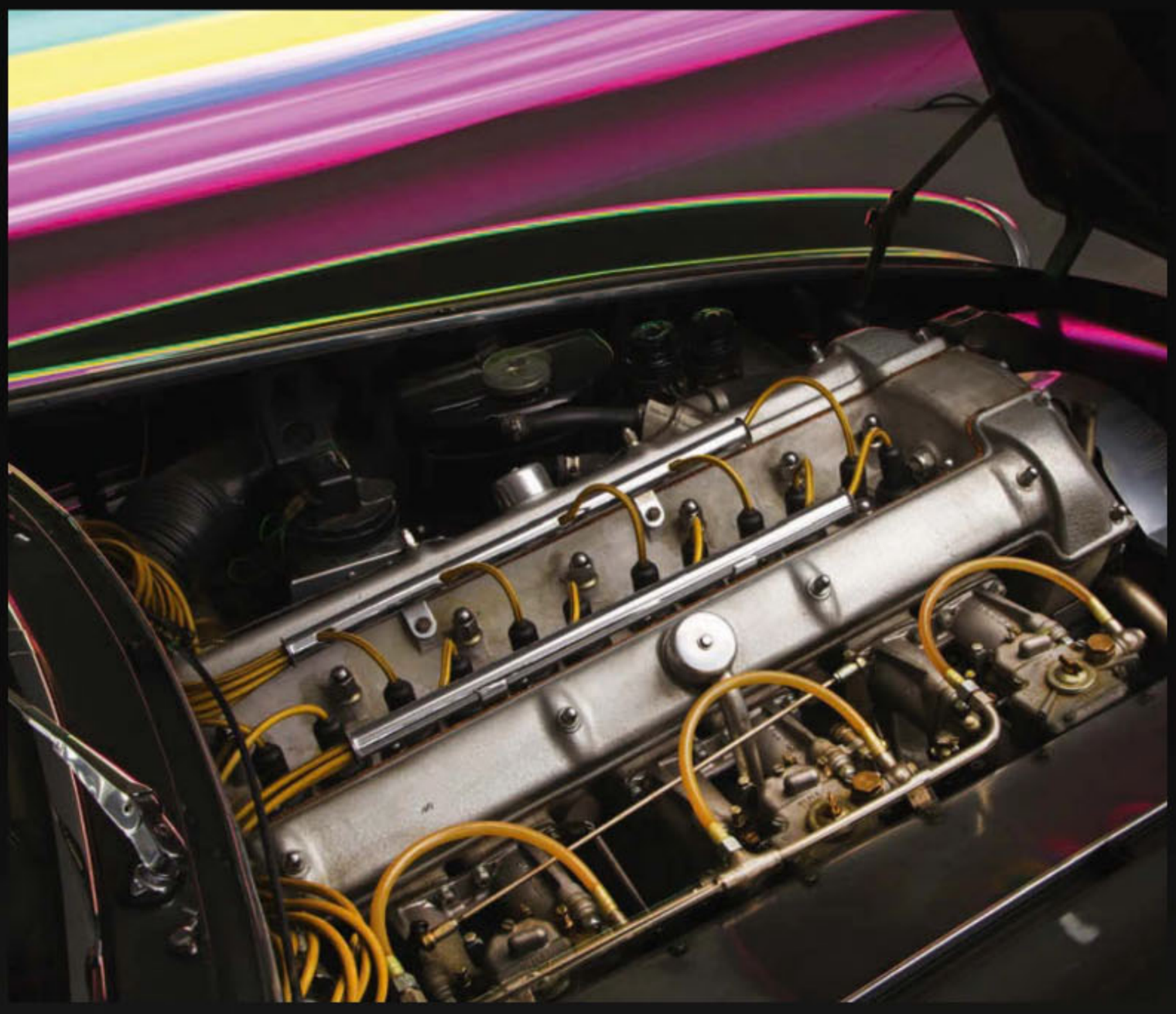
Flush with a lucrative order from Alfa Romeo for Giulietta Sprint bodies, the Turin-based *carrozzeria* switched to a more understated approach for its one-off bodywork. Visitors to the 1957 Italian Motor Show would have discovered a new Aston DB2/4 with chiselled yet supremely elegant two-seater coupé body.

Scaglione left Bertone in the late '50s and was replaced by the brilliant young Giorgetto Giugiaro. Born in 1939 in Garessio in the Cuneo province, Giugiaro had initially wanted to be a painter but altered his ambitions, aged 17, when Dante Giacosa invited him to enrol as a trainee in Fiat's styling studio. After a three-year apprenticeship, however, Giugiaro still had his mind firmly set on a Fine Arts course and approached Bertone for a job to fund his studies.

The Geneva Salon became a showcase for the talented Italian's work, kicking off with his first project for the independent British company Gordon-Keeble. Elegant coupés were Giugiaro's trademark in the early 1960s, with a series of restrained, beautifully balanced designs including the Alfa 2000 Sprint, Giulia Sprint GT and Iso Rivolta – though he clearly enjoyed the more open briefs of bespoke exotics.

Giugiaro's future links with British marques included Lotus, Morris and DeLorean, but his portfolio at Bertone was primarily for Latin and German manufacturers. His second show star, again unveiled at Geneva, was the Aston Martin Jet. Based on the final chassis of 75 DB4GTs, the

'GENEVA BECAME A SHOWCASE FOR GIUGIARO, HIS TRADEMARK A SERIES OF ELEGANT, RESTRAINED COUPÉS'



Clockwise: glorious twin-cam has to work harder in steel-bodied Jet; spare and vast 37-gallon tank fill boot; egg-crate grille

Giugiaro coupé contrasted dramatically with the Touring 'production' version and the lightweight competition car conceived by Zagato.

The shorter wheelbase – five inches had been chopped out of the hefty platform design – was the template for Bertone's bespoke DB4, which was commissioned by an unknown Italian gentleman. In contrast to the Zagato, the Jet was all about style because the body was constructed in steel rather than lightweight aluminium, thus the extra pounds cancelled out the benefit of the hot GT's 62bhp power advantage.

"Only the sills plus the front and rear aprons are aluminium," says Kingsley Riding-Felce, the MD of Aston Martin Works who knows the Jet better than anyone because he managed its major mid-'80s rebuild. "Everything else is steel, so Bertone must have made tooling, which suggests that it was hoping for a production series."

Originally finished in pale metallic green with light-grey leather trim, the Jet's limelight was somewhat stolen by the English invasion at the premier Swiss salon that traditionally opened the motor show season in February.

With 22 UK marques on display compared to 12 from America and 10 from Italy, it was an impressive year for the British car industry.

Jaguar's sensational E-type fixed-head upstaged everything, dominating both the national press and the automotive weeklies. Bertone's new design had plenty of competition even in the coachwork stakes, with Zagato again featuring a DB4GTZ on its dais while Fissore's Fiat Multipla and Frua's Maserati 3500GT vied for attention with the Jet. Today's motoring magazines would be fighting each other for the scoop on such a breathtaking machine, yet the unique Aston Martin earned just a few reserved comments. 'As with many special-bodied cars, the front appears to be rather vulnerable to damage for today's traffic conditions,' wrote *The Autocar*, while *The Motor* judged the interior to have: 'A good and well thought-out feature of secondary instruments on a small central panel.' There wasn't even a mention of the designer!

The last of 30 DB4GTs made with left-hand drive, the Jet found its way to Beirut after a second public showing at the Turin Salon before heading to America. Unseen for many years, it was eventually unearthed about 30 years ago by Aston chairman and classic car collector Victor Gauntlett, who shipped it back to the works.

"The car was in a pretty sad state," remembers Riding-Felce. "It had suffered an engine fire, the usual problem with the Weber carburettors because the airbox can fill with fuel and catch alight. The bonnet was badly burnt, and rust had taken hold in the steel bodywork."

Gauntlett eventually sold the Jet to a kindred spirit, Hans-Peter Weidmann, with the proviso that the factory would rebuild the car as part of the deal. "It was a big job because we had to make new door skins and fabricate replacement bumpers out of brass," says Riding-Felce. "It was quite a challenge configuring them to the body and getting the clearances right, but we wanted to keep it as original as possible. The instruments had to be redone and searching out missing switchgear in Italy proved quite a task. A new petrol tank had to be made, and it's a tight fit in the boot with the spare wheel mounted on top. The Jet was very well made and clearly built to be driven. The styling isn't very Aston Martin, but we never tired of looking at it."

Once completed, the Jet did the full concours circuit, kicking off with Pebble Beach where Weidmann was delighted to be called to the presentation ramp to pick up first place for Italian Coachwork. The slate-grey coupé appeared at all of the major automotive beauty contests through the 1990s, taking class victories at the Louis Vuitton concours at London's Hurlingham Club in 1991, then Bagatelle, Paris the

Exquisitely finished cabin was light grey when the Jet was first shown (above). Various switches had to be tracked down as part of the car's '80s restoration

Clockwise: Geneva debut; neatly integrated rear light echoes Touring-bodied Lancia Flaminia; clever silver sill helps to disguise the deep body

'HANS-PETER THOUGHT NOTHING OF DRIVING IT FROM SWITZERLAND TO NEWPORT PAGNELL FOR A SERVICE'

following year. Few cars get a second visit to Pebble Beach, but the Jet was back at the premier event in '97 for a special Aston Martin tribute.

In 2001, the Jet returned to Italy for the first time since it was built, and Weidmann did it in style. While most cars entered for Villa d'Este are trailered to the sublime venue alongside Lake Como, the passionate Swiss enthusiast drove over the Alps to the famous hotel.

Weidmann had a dream weekend, first landing a class win against strong Ferrari opposition and then triumphantly collecting Best of Show. Almost as rewarding was scooping the prize for furthest travelled to the concours. Best of Show at Düsseldorf and Raid, Basel (both 2001), plus class wins at Schwetzingen ('01), Louis Vuitton, New York ('05) and Het Loo, The Netherlands ('07) all added to the already packed trophy cabinet. When Pebble started planning a Bertone tribute in 2007, the Jet was again on the invitation list, and Weidmann was thrilled to unite his car with a full set of Aston designs created by the Turin coachbuilder on the prestigious Pacific-fronted fairway. "Hans-Peter always said the Jet was the golden key," recalls Riding-Felce. "It unlocked all the greatest car events for him."

As much as Weidmann appreciated the unique styling of the Jet, he loved driving the car and clocked up more than 35,000 miles during his ownership: "Hans-Peter would think nothing of driving it to Newport Pagnell for a service, and he was no church warden behind the wheel. He once took me out for a demonstration and drove with real spirit." As well as long runs to England and Italy, Hans-Peter completed an epic night blast from San Francisco to Vancouver, a daunting 950-mile journey even in a modern. Thanks to the Jet's massive 37-gallon tank, though, he needed just one fuel stop. "It was intended to be a grand tourer, and that's what I used it for," Weidmann stated in a previous interview.

"Hans-Peter was a wonderful character and a real Anglophile," enthuses Riding-Felce of the popular Basel-based chemist. "He adored Astons, but particularly special-bodied cars. He owned a DB6 shooting brake and a V8 four-door as well as the Jet. Never a suit person, Hans-Peter was always a blazer man, and greatly enjoyed his tours of the factory. A lovely, positive character who we all greatly miss."

Sadly Weidmann died last year and the Jet, from his estate, will be the star lot at Bonhams' Aston Martin Centenary Sale at AMW, Newport Pagnell on 18 May where it is estimated to make more than £3m when it sells for the first time in three decades. "Hans-Peter wouldn't want the Jet to go into storage, and we hope that the new owner will take part in this year's centenary events," says Riding-Felce.

Thanks to *Bonhams (020 7468 5801; www.bonhams.com) and Kingsley Riding-Felce of AMW (01908 619619; www.astonmartinworks.com)*

When GT MAN became FAMILY GUY

Today, as in the '60s, GT Man has to grow up sometime. Happily, says **Martin Buckley**, he can retain his hedonistic lifestyle via these 2+2s from Aston, Ferrari and Maserati

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**


NAB 763D
JTD 999F

According to my 1966 *Autocar Buyer's Guide*, only 30 new cars in the UK that year commanded in excess of £3000. Thus, owning an Aston Martin DB6, Ferrari 330GT or Maserati Sebring put you in an elite group prepared to pay up to double that for a means of transport when £400 bought a new Fiat 500. But then they were not mere means of transport – glamour, luxury, bullish straight-line urge and thoroughbred manners made them the most exciting possible way of transporting four people. In the exclusive world of 150mph, 300bhp 2+2 GTs, this trio represented more handcrafted status and finely honed mystique than anything on the road. These were no glossy Euro-American interlopers of uncertain lineage: Aston Martin, Maserati and Ferrari still conjured imagery of oil-stained aces and the romance of racing where the power and stamina of their straight-six and V12 engines had been proven. Such muscular yet ruggedly conventional engineering filtered directly down to the GTs customers could drive.

These cars were among the first exotics to be produced in serious volume rather than sporadic batches. Ferrari built more than 1000 330GTs in four years, Aston Martin a surprising 1567 DB6s. At 438 examples between 1962 and 1968 the Sebring is rarer, but Maserati believed in variety and made nearly 1000 of the mechanically identical Mistral at around the same time.

In an age where supercars are as ubiquitous as overpaid footballers, it's important to remember the jaw-dropping impact the 330, Sebring and DB6 would have made when encountered on the road 40 years ago. Only a few dozen people a year in Britain – the usual slew of pop stars and plutocrats – could afford to own such exotica. The requirements of those buyers, people who wanted to use their cars in the real world of city driving as well as on the big new highways of Europe, were changing the character of exotic cars. Luxuries such as power steering, air-conditioning and electric windows were becoming the norm, adding weight almost as fast as engineers could boost power. You could say that these were among the first supercars that had been designed to satisfy a market rather than simply dictating it. An automatic Ferrari might still have been unthinkable in 1966, but both Maserati and Aston Martin were cheerfully churning out auto versions of the Sebring and DB6.

More importantly, the idea of providing four seats came of age in the mid-'60s as designers seemed more willing to manage the packaging compromises intelligently. The Maserati is a little too cosy in the back to qualify as a true four-seater, but slide on to the sculpted rear bench of the Ferrari 330GT or into a DB6 and you could remain reasonably comfortable on a journey.

'Our' 330GT is a four-headlamp car, as originally conceived by Tom Tjaarda while at Pininfarina. Peter Bennett has owned it for two years after seeing it in *C&SC*. "I always wanted a V12 front-engined Ferrari and the 330GT is good value," he explains, "having more or less the same mechanical and chassis specifications as earlier and much more expensive models. Compared with previous cars I have owned, it is closest to a Gordon-Keeble and Aston DB4."

For me it's not the prettiest Ferrari, but with its wide grille and frowning countenance it has a powerful presence and, on balance, I prefer the

Clockwise, from left: V12 jewel; quad lamps pre-'65; sweet handling; usable rear bench; squeezed driving position to accommodate four seats; Tjaarda lines

four-headlamp look to the twin lights of the post-1965 cars. Inside, you do feel that the driving position has been compromised to accommodate the rear seats. It is offset to the awkwardly bunched floor-hinged pedals (later models had hanging pedals) and it's hard to strike a good balance between an excessively straight-armed position and not feeling as if you are straining to depress the clutch, which demands that you push it its full length.

The front seats are slim and look suspiciously Lancia Flavia/Flaminia Coupé in origin, as does much of the Ferrari's minor interior furniture. Looking along the bonnet, which descends between those aggressively angled quad lamps, you are continually peering over the bulky instrument binnacle, its dull wood sheen having the appearance of a mid-range coffin. But the steering wheel is big and handsome, as are the Veglia instruments. Above you, the deeply quilted headlining is classically 1960s Pininfarina.

Hot or cold, the V12 catches right away on a

FERRARI 330GT

Sold/number built 1964-'67/1075
Construction tubular steel chassis, steel body
Engine all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 3967cc 60° V12 with three twin-choke Weber 40DCZ/6 carbs
Max power 300bhp @ 6600rpm
Max torque 288lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission four-speed manual with o/d on top, five-speed from '65, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, radius rods, semi-elliptic leaf springs, auxiliary coil springs, telescopic dampers
Steering ZF worm and roller (optional power assistance on later cars)
Brakes dual-circuit Dunlop discs, with twin servos **Length** 15ft 9½in (4840mm)
Width 5ft 7½in (1715mm) **Height** 4ft 5½in (1365mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 8¼in (2650mm)
Weight 3040lb (1380kg) **0-60mph** 7.4 secs
Top speed 152mph **Mpg** 15
Price new £6217 (1964)

starter motor that sounds like a bacon slicer. The 330 is a clumsy car in traffic when the ride seems quite choppy, the steering heavy with very little lock and requiring lots of twirling to negotiate suburban corners. Using 4 litres and 300bhp to shift 3000lb-plus no longer feels quite as miraculous as it did 45 years ago and the 330GT at first seems impressively urgeful rather than awesome. Stride out on to faster roads and it comes to life. Superb torque and well-chosen ratios give the Ferrari a sense of momentum that can still squirt you past a whole line of day-trippers in a blur of flashing Borranis. The gearchange is meatily positive, rewarding well-timed downshifts with a longish, but beautifully smooth action. Fourth and overdrive, which cancels automatically when you change down to third, are all the gears you need to get along very smartly. Five speeds came in after 1965, but the overdrive is quite impressive to use. In direct fourth, the 330 steams effortlessly with that polished turbine hum and sails easily into three figures as your right hand flicks the spring-loaded overdrive switch. Settling down into a relaxed cruise, with only wind hiss around the quarterlights to spoil the refinement, 100mph equals about 4000rpm and there is every indication that the 330 will keep accelerating with vigour to something like the advertised 150mph. It plots a completely straight and stable course as you accelerate towards the horizon on that irresistibly electric surge.

It was only in later transaxle Ferraris that the rest of the car started to live up to the excellence of the engine, but that isn't to say that the 330GT is a truck. Steering that seemed heavy and sluggish at lower speeds transforms when you delve into the performance, the understeer is swept away and you realise that the 330GT retains iron control of its body movements, which is just as well because the seats are slippery. Bumps in the road kick back hard through the steering wheel and make the live rear axle get fidgety and thumpy, but generally the ride levels out nicely. The brakes, with their dual servos, have a solid pedal and good initial bite, but feel wooden when you explore the full extent of their travel.

In some respects the charisma of the Ferrari's V12 does rather dominate the other two cars but there are compensations, particularly in the case of the Maserati. The Sebring is the prettiest of the three, a neat and simple Vignale-built steel body penned by Giovanni Michelotti. First seen in 1962 it was technically contemporary with the five-speed, disc-braked, Touring-bodied 3500GTi, but Lucas injection was standardised on the Sebring at the Geneva show in 1963. This post-'65 S2 Sebring has a longer-stroke 3694cc version of the twin-cam straight-six (good for 245bhp at 5500rpm). It was visually tweaked to align itself with Frua's Quattroporte saloon, using the same headlamp trims and indicator/lamp units flanking a slimmer grille. The tail was angular with Quattroporte-style tail-lamps.

The whole aura of this car leaves you with an impression of more meticulous build quality than the Ferrari, which has a few rough edges and exposed screwheads on show. The cabin is a subtle blend of chrome, leather and crackle-black textures, its macho instrumentation mixing with pretty 'Guinness bottle' toggles. The pedals are chunky and emerge at a disconcerting angle, but getting comfortable is no problem. The roofline is squat, the pillars are slender and the car feels pleasantly airy.

Tight-fitting roofline hints at less spacious interior – Sebring has least room in the back

The attractive straight-six engine – now converted to Webers – has 12 plugs. It starts easily and idles at 600rpm with a strangely gruff edge. It has neither the refinement nor the aggression of the Ferrari unit, but strikes a satisfying balance between lusty flexibility and free-spinning response despite a redline marked at a modest 5000rpm. It is very strong from 3500rpm and zipping along an A-road feels natural and effortless, with a rich thrum from the tailpipes. The rebuilt ZF gearbox in this car is an absolute pleasure, the gears hitting home smoothly and quietly with a short lever that is spring-loaded in favour of third and fourth. In fifth, the Sebring is truly long-legged and confidently stable, with rather less wind noise than the Ferrari. The beautiful wood-rimmed wheel feels fragile when you start to heave on it, but it adjusts in and out on its central boss.

Like the Ferrari, the Maserati has hardly any lock for manoeuvring, but once on the move much of the weight disappears and, although fairly low-geared, it has a smooth action that suggests a refined mechanism and the gearing almost seems to get faster as you wind on lock. It is more isolating and forgiving of bumpy corners than its fellow Italian and its axle movements are better controlled, but it does plunge a little at the front. Andy Leery bought the Sebring as a 40th birthday present "from myself to myself" in 2001. "I drove it back from Modena through the Alps listening to Tony Christie and *The Italian Job* soundtrack," he says. "I love it. It's won the Maserati Club concours five times and I just take it to Bill McGrath every 18 months for a service."

Where does this leave the Aston Martin? The aim of the alloy-bodied DB6, launched at Earls Court in 1965, was to give true rear seats in a car that is only 2in longer than a DB5. That was the appeal for John Cook, who has owned this car since 1984. "We had little kids at the time so the room in the back was good," he says. "It's done 47,000 miles and has always been a 'toy', though I do take it shopping occasionally and it had a full body rebuild at Works Service in 1992."

The Aston's familiarity means that it generates less excitement in this rarefied Italian company, but it is still handsome. That's even if you don't think 4in of extra wheelbase, a taller roofline and the Kamm tail sit easily on what is a late-'50s design. Mechanically, too, the DB6 was the same mix as before: a 4-litre all-alloy twin-cam straight-six coming as standard with triple SUs and 282bhp or, at no extra cost, as a Vantage with triple Webers coaxing out 325bhp. Plus, of the three cars here the Aston has the most sophisticated means of locating its live rear axle, by trailing arms (reduced in length to get a wide rear seat) and a Watt linkage. It's also the only one of the three to have power steering.

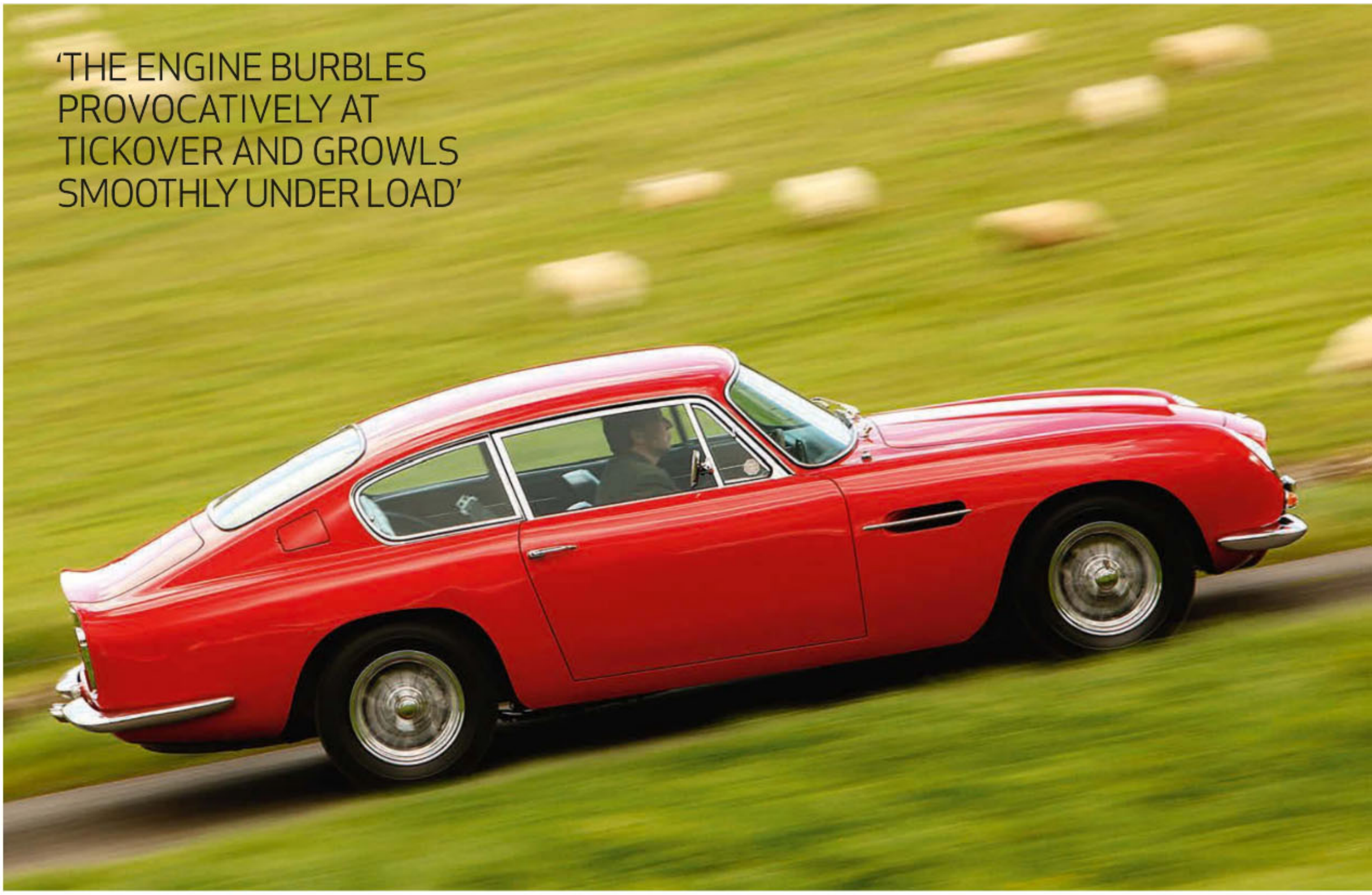
After the slinky driving positions of the Italian cars, you seem to sit on rather than in the Aston. It is a darker, more private place and the combination of glorious-smelling dark leather and smart chrome instrumentation gives the cabin an almost military sense of purpose. There's a charming view down the shapely nose, but vision to the rear is compromised by the fat C-pillars. In terms of fixtures and fittings the DB6 is the most neatly finished and detailed of the three, the essentials basically unchanged since the DB4. The engine, SU-fed in this instance, burbles provocatively at tickover, has a smooth growl under load and is cheerfully flexible or assertive on command, boosting you to nearly 70mph in

"I DROVE IT BACK FROM MODENA THROUGH THE ALPS LISTENING TO TONY CHRISTIE AND MATT MONRO"

MASERATI SEBRING

Sold/number built 1962-'66/438
Construction steel box-section chassis, steel body with aluminium bonnet and bootlid
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3485/3693/4014cc straight-six, with Lucas fuel injection
Max power 220-265bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 254-283lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission five-speed ZF manual or three-speed auto, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, radius arms, telescopic dampers
Steering recirculating ball
Brakes Girling discs, with servo
Length 14ft 8in (4470mm)
Width 5ft 5in (1651mm)
Height 4ft 6in (1372mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 8½in (2654mm)
Weight 2976lb (1350kg)
0-60mph 8.4 secs
Top speed 146mph (3.7)
Mpg 18
Price new £5486 (1965)

Clockwise, from left: Quattroporte-style rear end; hints of 5000GT in frontal treatment; Lucas fuel injection swapped for Weber carbs on this car; subtly stylish cabin



Clockwise, from above: only 2in longer than DB5, but with decent rear seats; triple SUs were standard, Vantage had three Webers; neutral handling; interior’s ‘military sense of purpose’

second. It is a friendly, practical car that is easy to drive whether you want to go fast or slowly. A little linkage wear means you can get lost in the ZF ’box, but the lever usually snicks neatly across and the medium-to-heavy clutch is smooth.

The floor-hinged pedals are ideally placed for heel-and-toe work. Power assistance robs the rack-and-pinion steering of some sensitivity, but it is still a pleasure to point this neutral-handling Aston with that big 16in wood-rimmed steering wheel. The DB6 is at its best on open, sweeping bends, and a little ponderous in slower curves where there is less opportunity to kill the understeer. As with the Ferrari and Maserati the ride is firm, but the Aston offered Armstrong Selectaride dampers and, as speeds rise, it soaks up irregularities with unexpected aplomb.

Which would I have? The Aston Martin is the most complete and rounded of these three GTs, the one you can imagine using. It is fast, beautifully made and should be reliable. The Maserati is intriguing simply because it is rare and it wears its severe styling like a crisply tailored suit. There is a very attractive subtlety about the car and it might have been my choice were it not for the Ferrari and its engine. You feel almost ashamed to be taken in by such a cliché, but there is a magic about the V12 that overwhelms other cars. The combination of torque, smoothness and power keeps on coming and is difficult to forget even now. I want one, but not in red.

ASTON MARTIN DB6

Sold/number built 1965-’70/1567
Construction steel platform chassis with Superleggera-type aluminium body
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3995cc straight-six, with three SU HD8 or Weber 45DCOE/9 carbs
Max power 282-325bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 280-290lb ft @ 4500rpm
Transmission five-speed ZF manual or three-speed auto, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, parallel trailing arms, Watt linkage, coil springs, Armstrong Selectaride lever-arm dampers
Steering rack and pinion (optional assistance from 1966, standard from ’69) **Brakes** Girling discs, with servo **Length** 15ft 2in (4620mm) **Width** 5ft 6in (1680mm) **Height** 4ft 5½in (1360mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 5¾in (2580mm)
Weight 3250lb (1476kg) **0-60mph** 6.1 secs
Top speed 148mph (Vantage) **Mpg** 12½
Price new £4998 (1966)

Newport Pagnell gets that Riviera touch

You can feel the genes of a Goodwood racer in the Volante, reckons **Richard Heseltine**, yet this ultra-rare Aston's heart craves the Côte d'Azur

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Clockwise: 4-litre dual-overhead-cam straight-six was said to be good for 314bhp on triple Weber 45DCOE9 carbs, against 282bhp on SUs; Lucas light cluster was shared with Triumph TR5 and used on DB6; Aston as discovered in early '09, with super-rare hardtop that matches upholstery

The sun gave up on us hours ago. Buffeted by a frigid breeze, the romance we've imposed on the day turns into something else once the fog rolls in: the baronial splendour of our backdrop swiftly takes on more of a horror-movie vibe. Onlookers' faces, meanwhile, remain inexpressive and unchanging, but that could just be the wind chill. Either way, a strange lightness of mood kicks in when you finally get behind the wheel. You could call it love at first sound. The Aston Martin Short Chassis Volante featured here is nothing if not strident, with four litres of thoroughbred straight-six piercing the murk as we escape.

While the outline may be instantly familiar, it's the Short Chassis part that's all important. This sub-species of David Brown-era Aston – in essence an amalgam of DB5 and DB6 – was made for only 12 months, with production numbers never threatening to break into treble figures. And this particular example is rarer still, being the ultimate iteration of a model that few outside marque circles are aware of; one that is among the most valuable of all Newport Pagnell products from the period, save the circuit-rooted weaponry. According to those in the know, this is about as desirable as '60s Aston Martin road cars get. And they may just be right.

Back then the company was at a crossroads. In 1959, this great British brand conquered the Le Mans 24 Hours as well as the World Sports-car Championship before pulling the plug, then backing out of its lacklustre Grand Prix programme at the end of the following season. Yet this is a marque steeped in competition, so the winged badge was represented trackside by works-blessed DB4GTs and Zagato's glorious take on the same foundations before the factory returned with its own series of Project cars. But vying for glory in competition against the Continental elite was an expensive exercise, and it's not as if the whole profit-making aspect had ever been factored into road-car manufacture. As has so often been the case in its boom-or-bust existence, Aston Martin had the right products for the time – if not always the ability to capitalise.

Much of that rightness was down to the DB4. Its DB2/4 and DB MkIII ancestors had displayed a certain rustic traditionalism but had clearly plateaued stylistically. The creative impetus was spent, Frank Feeley's original DB2 shape having lost its purity with each chop and change. When introduced in 1958, the DB4 unleashed a significant form of its own, one that still stands up as arguably the most handsome GT outline of its generation. While it's perhaps disingenuous to say that Aston Martin rarely does anything first – or indeed best – here its designers, engineers and stylists were clearly on the same page, working in celestial alignment. Touring of Milan's Federico Formenti created a dazzling profile, while the famed *carrozzeria*'s Superleggera method of construction – aluminium bodywork draped over a system of small tubes fixed to a steel platform – added a degree of technical

'THE AMBIENCE INSIDE SCREAMS PROP-AGE ADVENTURER INSTEAD OF JET-AGE *ARRIVISTE*'

elegance if not innovation. One thing the DB4 didn't lack was credibility. *Autosport* blithely ignored the Milanese contribution to the Anglo-Latin confection when it labelled the Aston: 'Another British achievement that will make the Italians and Germans think very hard.'

It did, too, with umpteen derivatives following in the DB4's wake for the next 12 years. Not least the DB5, which borrowed styling cues – most obviously the cowled headlights – from the short-wheelbase DB4GT. Launched in '63, the DB5 surfed a publicity tidal wave following its appearance in the James Bond flick *Goldfinger* (in the book 007 drives a DB MkIII), with burgeoning Stateside sales helping to briefly double output to around 500 cars a year. Powered by the Tadek Marek-designed straight-six, as used earlier in the fab but flawed Lagonda Rapide, it too sired numerous permutations. There was, however, one noticeable shortcoming. For a car conceived as a four-seater, there was precious little room for rear passengers. No matter, the DB6 arrived in '65 with a 4in-longer wheelbase. The visual changes – in particular the Kamm tail, along with the greater emphasis on luxury – marked a less sporting approach, although improved aerodynamics ensured that the fixed-head DB6 was faster than its predecessor.

Gone, too, was the Superleggera build technique, because the larger cockpit was formed from a box-section steel superstructure. As *Road & Track* put it: '[The DB6] is a dated design, but it's a car of great character. It hasn't fallen into a rut of being a car designed to satisfy as many people as possible and edifying none.' Except that there was some resistance to the car's bulkier silhouette, even if much of this has been retrospective. Though the DB6's outline didn't come in for much criticism at the time, it has since suffered in comparison with its antecedent – even if the styling changes were clearly in keeping with other Astons of the period. Just look at any of the Project cars to see the origins of the hind treatment. It's hardly ugly.

Even so, what if you could have all of the DB6's upgrades but in a shapelier DB5 profile? Well, from October 1965 to October '66, Aston Martin offered just such a crossbreed, albeit only in open form. The Short Chassis was in many ways a stop-gap, but a compelling one nonetheless. The name, however, is a bit of a misnomer. It's only short compared to the DB6, which was launched concurrently, because it retained the standard DB5 platform but with the new car's running gear. But then 'Same Size Chassis' doesn't have quite the same ring to it. Outward signifiers included DB6-style split bumpers, a deeper intake for the oil cooler, a gently curved rear deck and a Triumph TR5-sourced tail-light cluster instead of three lamps. Inside, the cabin trim was lifted wholesale from the DB6. And this car was one of just three Volantes equipped with the triple-Weber carburetted Vantage engine, which produced an alleged 314bhp.

The Volante tag was first applied here, although the name has latterly become a badge of convenience for Aston Martin ragtops. Priced at £5084 in 1966, the Short Chassis was among

Interim Short Chassis Volante incorporated DB6 refinements and running gear, but in the more compact DB5 body; this remarkable, 12,000-mile car went into storage with an electrical fault in 1974, and didn't emerge until mid-'09. It was exactingly restored by Ferrari specialist DK Engineering

Clockwise, from left: stunning California Sage perfectly sets off lines of Short Chassis Volante, which has more than a hint of Maserati about its rump; familiar dash, with white-on-black Smiths gauges, echoes shape of grille – three-spoke wheel with DB motif a constant from DB4-6; 16in wire wheels

rarefied company. It undercut comparable Ferraris, but was in no way a bargain: you could have had two Jaguar E-types for similar money. The featured car was delivered to its original owner in May 1966, finished in California Sage with tan leather trim, and was supplied with a fitted hard-top, which these days is almost as rare a find as the car itself. By 1974 it was with its fourth owner, an Oxfordshire doctor, who drove the Aston for just six months before it was rendered immobile by an electrical gremlin. And that is how it remained until mid-2009, by which time the car had migrated to the Isle of Wight.

The good doctor had bought the Aston on the day that his daughter was born and 35 years later she tipped off former university friend Jeremy Cottingham of DK Engineering that it might be

'A GREMLIN RENDERED THE ASTON IMMOBILE IN '74, AND THAT'S HOW IT STAYED FOR 35 YEARS'

for sale. The Ferrari specialist saw the car, made an offer and towed the tired project back to the mainland that day (*News*, May '09). It had covered barely 12,000 miles, and on the day of our shoot had managed only a few jogs around the block since the six-figure restoration was completed in September 2010. The results are dazzling.

All of which is brought into sharp relief once given free(ish) rein to enjoy the car as its maker intended. Astons of this period can seem underwhelming – maybe due to the number of baggy examples about – but that sense is absent here. Foregoing the customary purple gush about the styling, it's the cabin that says it all. The outline was very much of the moment, but the ambience from inside screams propeller-age adventurer rather than jet-set *arriviste*. It could just as easily be from an earlier decade, with the classic Smiths instruments clustered in the signature fascia that mirrors the shape of the radiator grille. There's no extravagant gilding, just levels of comfort and civility that befit a 'gentleman's express'.

ASTON MARTIN SHORT CHASSIS VOLANTE

Sold/number built 1965-'66/37 (three with Vantage spec)
Engine all-alloy, dohc 3996cc straight-six, with triple twin-choke Weber 45DCOE9 carbs
Max power 314bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 288lb ft @ 3850rpm
Transmission five-speed ZF manual, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, telscopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** live axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage, lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r
Steering rack and pinion
Brakes Girling discs all round, with servo
Length 15ft (4572mm) **Width** 5ft 6in (1676mm) **Height** 4ft 5in (1346mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 2in (2489mm)
Weight 3230lb (1465kg)
0-60mph 7.1 secs **Top speed** 144mph
Price new £5084

Prior experience of '60s DB Astons informs you that period performance figures aren't to be trusted. *Autocar* recorded 43mph in first gear and 66mph in second with a 'media-friendly' Vantage-spec DB5 in 1964, though this example still feels more like a luxo-cruiser than a sports car – which is no bad thing. The all-alloy 3996cc twin-cam straight-six isn't the smoothest of its kind yet it sounds glorious: rich and throaty, with a suitably voluble induction roar. It has plenty of torque, too, which means that it's effortless from low down the rev range – it will pull from just above walking pace in top. This is for the best, though, because you cannot rush the ZF five-speeder. The clutch is on the heavy side, too, as is the steering when manoeuvring. There's a reasonable 3.2 turns lock-to-lock – and it loads up accurately on fast, sweeping B-roads – but inputs on tighter switchbacks are transmitted via your shoulders rather than your fingertips.

So it's a physical car to drive with any enthusiasm, though you can still make exhilarating – and rapid – progress. There's fun to be had here. The Aston seems sensibly sized compared to its modern-day equivalent, so it doesn't take up much acreage. It's a bit of an understeerer, but powering out of a corner with the tail squatting and the multi-tonal backbeat running its sonic spectrum is a singular treat. God it sounds good.

This is about as close to a new 1966 Aston as you're ever likely to find and you imagine that, once bedded in, it will be even more satisfying. There's a real sense of occasion, of upper-crust nobility adapting to new circumstances. It has that wrought solidity you expect from a David Brown Aston, but without the accompanying fustiness of earlier models. As to whether it's the best Newport Pagnell product of its day, therein lies a question. Answering 'yes' may strain credulity, yet if we had vaults of money and the urge to expend it prodigiously, this and a Radford DB5 shooting brake for the school run would make for a suitably decadent pairing. It might be just a footnote in marque lore, but the Short Chassis deserves name-above-the-title billing.

Thanks to *DK Engineering: 01923 287687; www.dkeng.com*

Are the best Aston Martins really… Lagondas?

Martin Buckley clearly reckons so, as he samples the remarkable Rapide 'MkII' and V8 prototypes, one-time lemons that are now the cream of the crop

PHOTOGRAPHY **MALCOLM GRIFFITHS**

With one exception, the post-war story of Lagonda has been that of a bit-part actor to the colourful soap opera of Aston Martin. There is nothing to regret in that; it is merely a commercial fact that the four-door, four-seater Lagonda has never captured the collective imagination in the same way as an Aston.

The two one-off Lagondas you see here represent failed but fascinating attempts to re-establish the name in the '60s idiom of the supersaloon. That era gave rise to an international rash of these hedonistic GT limos in a niche market where extra doors lowered profit margins yet raised buyers' expectations when it came to refinement and detail engineering.

It was a sleight of hand that Maserati pulled off with the first Quattroporte, perhaps because Italian pride in the nation's plushest, fastest saloon gave it a ready constituency of clients. Not so the Rapide and subsequent DBS-based V8 Lagonda. In a culture that already had a sophisticated tradition of fast luxury saloons, they always seemed to be disastrously mistimed and gloriously irrelevant – born into a world where there appeared to be too many specialised, handmade saloons competing for too little business. Although today interest – and values – are in the ascendancy, they are still regarded as curiosities even in the fairytale land of the bespoke, high-end luxo-exotic sedan.

If anything, it was Lagonda that carried the greater weight when the two firms joined forces in west London after the war under David Brown. The V12 Lagondas were '30s supercars, but the 2.6- and 3-litre cars of the post-war age somehow failed to recapture that magic. Thus, while Aston Martin assumed the role of ultimate English glamour sports car for the well-heeled, the handsome but slightly pompous Lagondas – with neither the natural authority of a Bentley nor the raffish charm of a (much cheaper) Jaguar – struggled to find a place. Not even the patronage of Prince Philip could give the make the image it needed to reach critical mass as a 'brand'. That the gaffe-prone Greek was considered a marketing asset at all shows what a different and more nauseatingly deferential world the Lagondas of the 1950s inhabited.

David Brown loved his Lagondas, however, and refused to give up on the marque, even after the name had been put on ice for several years. In fact, the Yorkshire tractor tycoon had a weakness for the make that sometimes left him at odds with the men who designed and built his cars. In particular, technical director and competition manager John Wyer famously referred to the 1961-'64 Rapide as "an extremely bad car".

Wyer, a grumpy cuss, resigned over the Rapide because he felt the works could turn out three of the much more saleable DB4s in the time it took to build a Rapide. Concerned that the car would spread his engineering talent too thinly, Wyer had warned DB against pursuing the project from the start. It must have caused Brown considerable embarrassment when only 55 buyers could be found after three years of costly development and disruptive managerial strife. It seemed that there were only so many of his friends he could sell a Rapide to over a round of golf. Not even millionaire industrialists can afford to indulge too many such epic flops.

The Rapide, 50 this year, pre-dates the four-door Maserati and for a while this 125mph car, powered by a then-new 4-litre version of Tadek Marek's twin-cam straight-six, was probably the

world's fastest catalogued four-door vehicle. At £5251, it was also one of the most expensive. A lavish specification that included four Wilmot Breedon power windows and a remote fuel-cap release justified the price to some extent, yet there was no escaping the fact that the Jaguar MkX, also new at Earls Court in '61, did almost everything the Rapide could for less than half as much. But the Lagonda's price perhaps fails to explain its lack of success because it was not competing at a level of the market where value for money was the most important criterion.

Maybe Aston just did not have the production capacity to get any momentum going on the Rapide programme. Peter Smith, who worked in the experimental departments at Feltham and Newport Pagnell, agrees: "We couldn't physically have made any more – there wasn't the space. They were built to order and each car was different, sometimes from side to side if you looked closely. You could even tell who'd done the work." The Rapide's best year was 1963, with 40 sold. Eight were produced in '64, though the demand generated by the DB5's appearance in *Goldfinger* in effect sealed the Rapide's fate and the 17 outstanding orders were cancelled.

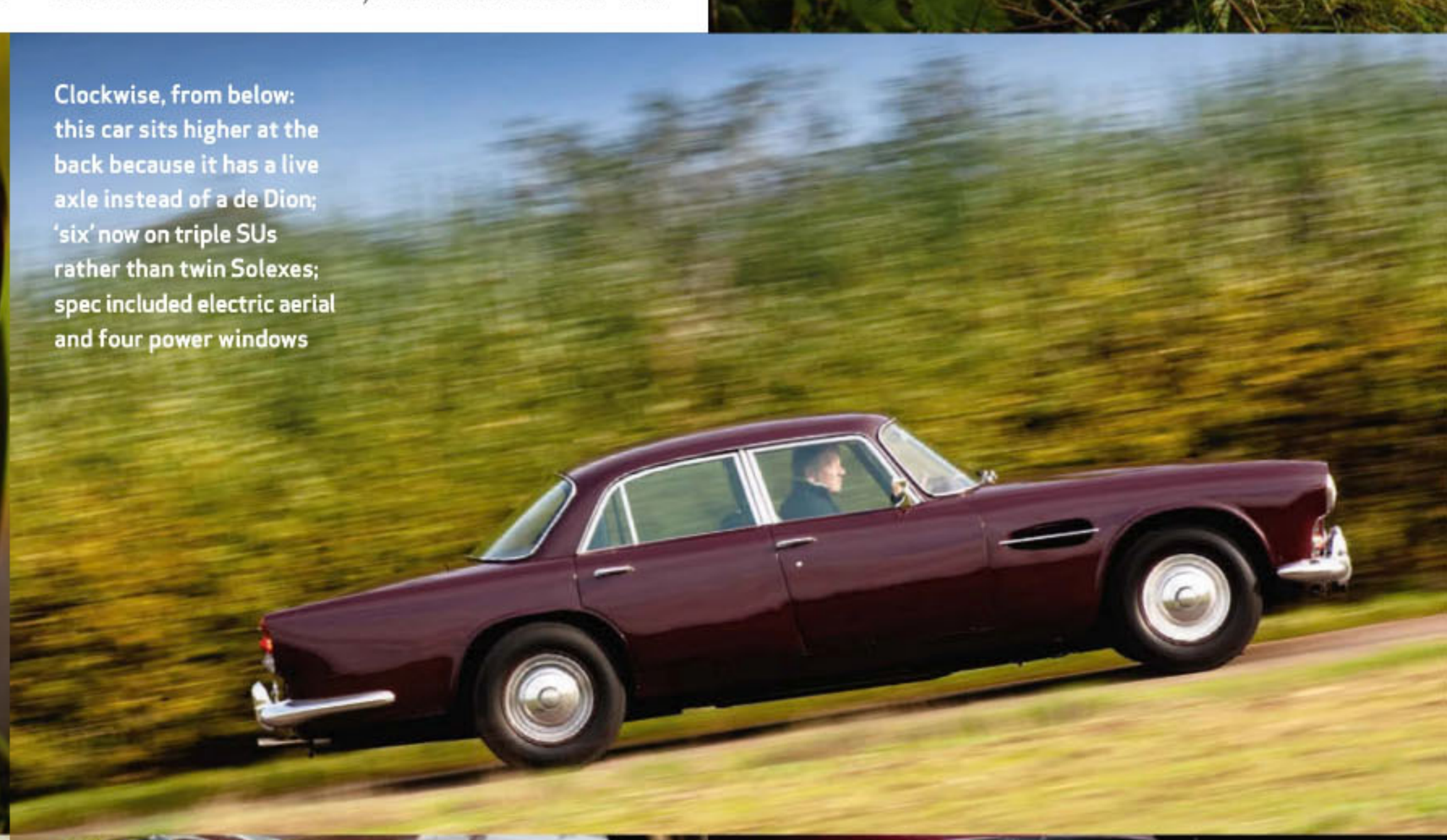
That Brown was planning a new Lagonda based on the DB4 was widely known because his prototype – a curious-looking generic-'50s blob nicknamed 'Brown's bomber' (as in legendary boxing champ Joe Louis) – was a regular sight in the motor-racing paddocks of the late '50s.

Touring of Milan was commissioned to style the production car on a chassis 16in longer than the box-section DB4 platform, with unstressed alloy panels on a Superleggera frame of steel channels and round tubing. This was welded to the main structure and it was claimed that Touring's build technique increased stiffness by 25%, plus it was less prone to squeaks and rattles. The Rapide, 750lb (340kg) heavier and 3½in wider in track, also upstaged the DB4 in having a torsion-bar-sprung de Dion rear set-up derived from the DB3S, DBR1-300 and '59 Aston Martin F1 cars. It wasn't so much an improvement in handling and ride that the Rapide's designers were looking for, but the liberation of luggage space in a boot that was already rather narrow due to the intrusion of the pannier tanks in each wing. Harold Beach had wanted to use a de Dion on the DB4, but Aston road cars didn't get it until the DBS.

Touring built the first Rapide, finished in DB's favourite Roman Purple, with tiny fins on the rear wings unique to the car. Inside, a cigarette case, a powder compact and a comb were fitted in the rear armrest. The first car had a DB4-type instrument nacelle, but this was replaced by a full-width walnut dash after the second was built.

Much effort was expended in finalising the frontal aspect of the Rapide in an attempt to give it a distinct Lagonda identity. To this day it's a look, with those aggressively angled headlamps, that polarises opinion. Interestingly, Touring's drawings show a DB4-like nose and one car was remodelled with a DB5 grille after an accident.

The factory was clearly aware of buyers' misgivings about the front end, which is why the car you see here, a nascent 'MkII' Rapide, was built for Brown's use – hence the preferred Roman Purple hue – in a late bid to revive the model's fortunes. It's not clear when the modifications were carried out, but chassis LR105 was



Clockwise, from below: this car sits higher at the back because it has a live axle instead of a de Dion; 'six' now on triple SUs rather than twin Solexes; spec included electric aerial and four power windows

originally a '62-model right-hooker, first registered on 17 November 1961. An auto finished in Dubonnet Rosso with a Fawn interior, it was the Earls Court show car and then the factory demonstrator. It remained in the possession of AML until it went bust in '74 and at some point acquired a DB6 engine with triple SUs, always an alternative to the standard-fitment Solexes. At one stage it was used by works manager Jack Thompson; the brake and throttle positions were switched to accommodate his club foot.

It is a lengthy, imposing thing this Rapide. From the front I'm not entirely convinced that the big square hole is more effective than the original, Edsel-like slit. It looks slightly bland. From the rear, it is truly gorgeous and identical to the other 54. It gives the impression of being squatter than almost any other contemporary four-door saloon, with a long nose and tail, plus a relatively compact and elegant roofline.

LR105 appears to sit up more at the rear than other Rapides. Hang your head under the back end and you'll see the reason. The de Dion's geometry was flawed, causing accelerated spline wear in the driveshafts, thus converting to a live axle was deemed a quick fix. According to Smith, the de Dion's problems were connected to the basic design of the chassis, resulting in high-speed vibrations: "But it was too late to change it, so they had to modify them as they went along."

Apart from a central gear-selector quadrant (Rapides had their gear selectors on the steering column unless they were manual), the Rapide MkII has pretty much the standard selection of chrome-rimmed instruments in the 'production' walnut fascia. The fat seats fill the cabin and

'THE RACK-AND-PINION STEERING IS DIRECT, WITH JUST THE RIGHT RESISTANCE AT THE RIM'

there is remarkably little legroom in the rear – David Brown was famously short – but you do get picnic tables and a separate heater.

Driving the Rapide has a physicality about it that aligns the car with its DB4 ancestry yet seems slightly at odds with its luxury-car ambitions. The automatic 'box, not especially smooth or biddable, limits the ferocity of the acceleration but the Rapide feels bullish as it strides out on those big, 16in centre-lock steel wheels. The performance is there, although this is a lusty, torquey engine rather than a silky turbine. For something so bulky, the Rapide feels flat and highly competent as you pour it into corners. Its rack-and-pinion steering is hefty and possessed of little in the way of lock for manoeuvring, yet the Rapide goes where you want it to in a way that few large saloons did in the early '60s. As Smith puts it: "When you got them rolling, they would beat the arse off anything else including an Aston on roadholding and handling. They'd just tuck their rear-ends down and off they'd go."

Today a healthy 48 Rapides are known to survive, which makes it much more numerous than its V8 successor. They only number eight; six were built after the Company Developments takeover in 1974 and badged Aston Martin Lagonda, the last recently from an unused body.

Like the Rapide, the V8 was originally in Brown's favourite Roman Purple, but with crimson crushed velour. It began life with a prototype 5-litre injected V8, but now has a stock quad-carb 5.3 (above)

The first car was badged simply 'Lagonda' and built in '69 – from a suitably strengthened prototype DBS shell – for the personal use of Brown, who was usually to be seen in the rear seat being chauffeured by his faithful driver George.

The saloon had been visualised by William Towns when he conceived the DBS coupé in 1966, and in many ways the two-door shape was an adaptation of the saloon rather than the other way around. The engineers at Newport Pagnell were anxious not to repeat the Rapide debacle. Four-doors were earmarked for production in 1970 as the V8 coupés came on stream, but the prototype generated little interest and there was in any case more than enough to do getting the DBS sorted. At 11in longer than the two-door, the saloon was more graceful, with 2½in of extra headroom and a bootlid that extended to bumper level; the six 'production' cars have the same bootlid as the two-doors. More obviously, this is the only saloon with the quad headlights of the DBS rather than the twin-lamp V8 facelift.

Chassis MP230/1 originally had wires and a 5-litre injected version of the new quad-cam V8, but it has since acquired a standard 5.3 carb engine and the familiar DBS V8 alloys. Sir David eventually tired of the Lagonda, and after his departure in '72 it was sold to the same collector, a Mr Biggs (no, not Ronnie), who bought the MkII Rapide in 1974 after the factory went bust.

Inside, the fascia layout and seats appear to be much the same as the two-door, but specialist Desmond Smail (www.dismail.co.uk) says that there are several one-off pieces of trim. There's an 8-Track player, Cool Air air-con and the unusual rotary wiper controls on the right-hand A-pillar. Inevitably, it has the BMC 1800/Marina plastic doorhandles that spoil the aura of luxury.

It feels a lower, wider car than the Rapide, with a much smoother delivery of power through a better-behaved Chrysler Torqueflite automatic 'box. There's a suggestion of V8 throb with the expensive sound of the complex top-end humming and ticking. It is more effortlessly potent than the six-pot Rapide, with stronger brakes, a better ride and a more together feel to the handling that largely stems from the Adwest steering. The wheel is smaller, with a thicker rim – though not so small as to look ridiculous – and is connected to one of the world's best assisted mechanisms that maintains the directness and precision of rack and pinion, but with just the right amount of resistance at the rim.

You slide about rather on the blue leather (maybe the velour was a good idea?), looking out over a vast expanse of alloy bonnet, struggling slightly with the notion that this was a chauffeur-driven car and wondering who it would have appealed to. It appeals to me – and probably you – but you can't help feeling that most captains of industry would have been happier in the back of a Shadow or a Mercedes 600. Maybe the Rapide and its V8 successor were out of step with the times. It was the much more flamboyant post-'76 Towns Lagonda, a razor-edged fantasy with its digital instruments and futuristic profile, that finally captured the mood of those wealthy enough to indulge themselves in a super-fast, super-pricey saloon. Sir David Brown finally got to see his beloved Lagonda attain the success it deserved – and save the company – but the irony was that he didn't own it any more.

'MAYBE THE RAPIDE AND V8 WERE OUT OF STEP WITH THE TIMES. THE POST-'76 'WEDGE' LAGONDA FINALLY CAPTURED THE MOOD OF ITS AGE'

From top: Aston signature bonnet bulge was a fixture from DB4; Rapide is huge yet has an intimate cabin. Buckley loves V8's quad lamps, but isn't struck on Rapide MkII's bland grille

Born-again

Right, from top: DBS at rest during filming of *OHMSS*; cabin vents in rear pillar; Marchal lamps fitted from new; long-term owner Sigi Zidziunas

Bond

Our agent Down Under, **David Dowsey**, tracks down the Aston Martin DBS that 007 drove in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* PHOTOGRAPHY **WAYNE PREUSKER**

Any classic car dealer will tell you that three things determine a vehicle's value: model, condition and provenance. This coupé ticks all of the boxes: it's an Aston Martin, it's freshly restored, and James Bond drove it. Yes, really.

During planning for a new 007 movie in the late '60s, the producers of *On Her Majesty's Secret Service* were keen to establish the credentials of their incoming Bond, Australian actor George Lazenby, after Sean Connery had taken his first break from the role. One of the most striking ways to achieve this, they reasoned, was to resurrect the spy's association with Aston Martin.

Connery's silver DB5 became recognised the world over after *Goldfinger* exploded on to cinema screens in '64. Those who could afford to play Bond went and bought a real one; those who couldn't contented themselves with vrooming the Corgi miniature around their living rooms. By the time *OHMSS* was given its première in 1969, however, the world had moved on. And so had Aston Martin. The DB4/5/6 range was ready for retirement, to be replaced by the firm's new flagship DBS. Better than its ageing predecessor in nearly every respect, it boasted more space and was a much-improved drive, but the stylish DB4 shape by Touring of Milan was a hard act to follow. William Towns had joined Aston Martin in 1966 as a trim designer, but his creative talent came to the attention of owner David Brown and, after Touring folded, he was given the brief to conceive Aston Martin's next car. Many thought his quad-headlight design too American, however, and to this day the DBS trails earlier cars in terms of value.

Featuring the 4-litre twin-cam 'six' from the DB6 – engine guru Tadek Marek's all-new V8 wasn't ready – the DBS was equipped with triple SUs. Vantage trim brought triple Webers, while some cars were fitted with AE Brico fuel injection. In base form, the engine was claimed to have 282bhp – but in truth it was 242bhp – while the Vantage's quoted 325bhp was closer to the 282bhp listed for the standard model.

The 3759lb four-seater was built on a new Harold Beach-designed steel platform with independent front suspension and a de Dion rear end. It was equipped either with a five-speed ZF manual or three-speed Borg-Warner automatic transmission and had Girling disc brakes and wire wheels shod with Avon Turbospeed 205-15 tyres. Produced from October 1967 to May 1972 and costing a formidable £4473 plus Purchase Tax, only 787 DBSs were built, making it more of a rarity than its revered DB4/5/6 ancestors.

Autocar tested a manual DBS Vantage and posted a top speed of 143mph – 5mph slower than a DB6 Vantage – and 0-60mph in 8.6 secs (*Motor* managing 7.1 secs and 141mph). Despite testers exclaiming that it was 'far and away the best Aston yet' – *Motor* calling it 'S for superb' – the slower test results stuck in people's minds.

Nevertheless it was the DBS – in Vantage specification, naturally – that the producers chose for their new Bond. Two cars in Olive Green were duly 'borrowed' for filming. For the interior shots, including the scene at the beach where Bond retrieves his glovebox-fitted rifle sight to check on Comtesse Teresa di Vicenzo, or Tracy (Diana Rigg), chassis DBS/5109/R (registration FBH 207G) was chosen. This car went on to reside in Peter Nelson's now-departed Bond Museum in Keswick, the Lake District.

The car that cinemagoers saw slicing along the Portuguese coast roads, however, was the example you see here, chassis DBS/5234/R. Originally registered GKX 8G, this former works demonstrator's specification is a puzzle. It was constructed in late 1968, but not registered until the following year and build sheets reveal that the car was made for the French market, but in right-hand drive. Stranger still, it was never delivered to France. In addition, this car's original, standard engine – 400/3837/S – was swapped at the factory for an experimental unit from '5109/R' – 400/3831/SVB – on 2 June 1969. The engine is believed to have different cam profiles, and the car received a new chassis plate, Vantage badges and a coat of paint at the same time.

Under the bonnet, there's a giveaway non-standard airbox (to accommodate the longer trumpets on the Weber carburettors), which appears to have been bashed together with a mallet by a works apprentice. The car was used as a press vehicle, appearing in several magazine articles including a 1969 cross-continental blast by legendary *Autosport* tester John Bolster.

In *OHMSS*, GKX is seen in various settings including cruising along the beach in Portugal, parking outside the London College of Arms and, most significantly, in the closing scene where Bond's bride, Tracy, is murdered during their honeymoon in the bedecked Aston. In accordance with the new Bond's more realistic approach, relying on his fists rather than Q branch's deadly creations, Lazenby's car is gadget-free apart from its glovebox armoury.

During filming, it is believed that the car was loaned to Lazenby for his personal use. At some stage the car hit a pole, damaging the rear-left quarter, and was returned to Aston Martin's Newport Pagnell works on 31 March 1969 for repair. Years later, when the car was being restored, a former Aston Martin employee turned up at the workshop saying that he could verify the car's provenance in two seconds. He duly popped his head under the left-hand rear wheelarch to inspect the repairs and emerged stating: "Yep, this is the genuine article."

That workshop was not in Newport Pagnell, however, but on the other side of the world. It is not widely known that the car driven by Lazenby has resided in his homeland Australia for more than three decades. After completing its press duties, the car was sold to the British School of Motoring in November 1969 and used for performance driving instruction before being pressed into service as a promotional tool for the 007 film's various worldwide releases.

The DBS came to Australia for the latter purpose duty-free, on the understanding that it would be exported when the tour was completed. But the car's custodians sold the DBS and the unwary Sydney buyer was later informed by customs that he would have to pay the hefty tax. Unable to afford the duty he sold the car, which passed through a number of hands. Then, one Saturday morning in 1978, Sigi Zidziunas was reading the motoring section of a Melbourne newspaper when he spotted an advertisement for 'The James Bond car'. Interested in the model, but dubious of the claim, he went along to inspect the Aston and discuss terms. Whether it had been used in the film or not wasn't a deal-breaker, so when Zidziunas later verified the claim after joining the Aston Martin Owners' Club he was

'*OHMSS* PRODUCERS WERE KEEN TO BOOST THE BOND CREDENTIALS OF THE INCOMING 007'

ASTON MARTIN DBS VANTAGE

Sold/number built 1967-'72/787
Construction steel chassis, alloy panels over steel tubular frame **Engine** all-alloy dohc 3995cc 'six', with three Weber 45DCOE twin-choke carbs **Max power** 325bhp @ 5500rpm **Max torque** 290lb ft @ 4500rpm **Transmission** ZF five-speed manual, driving rear wheels **Suspension: front** independent by wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, parallel arms, Watt linkage, Armstrong Selectaride lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r **Brakes** dual-circuit Girling discs, with twin servoes **Length** 15ft ½in (4590mm) **Width** 6ft (1828mm) **Height** 4ft 4½in (1327mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 6¾in (2610mm) **Weight** 3759lb (1706kg) **0-60mph** 7.1 secs **Top speed** 141mph **Mpg** 10.9 **Price new** £5842 8d

GKX 8G moved to Australia for promo tour. Left, from top: with Mercury Cougar co-star in *OHMSS*; subtly luxurious cabin; replica of glovebox-mounted rifle

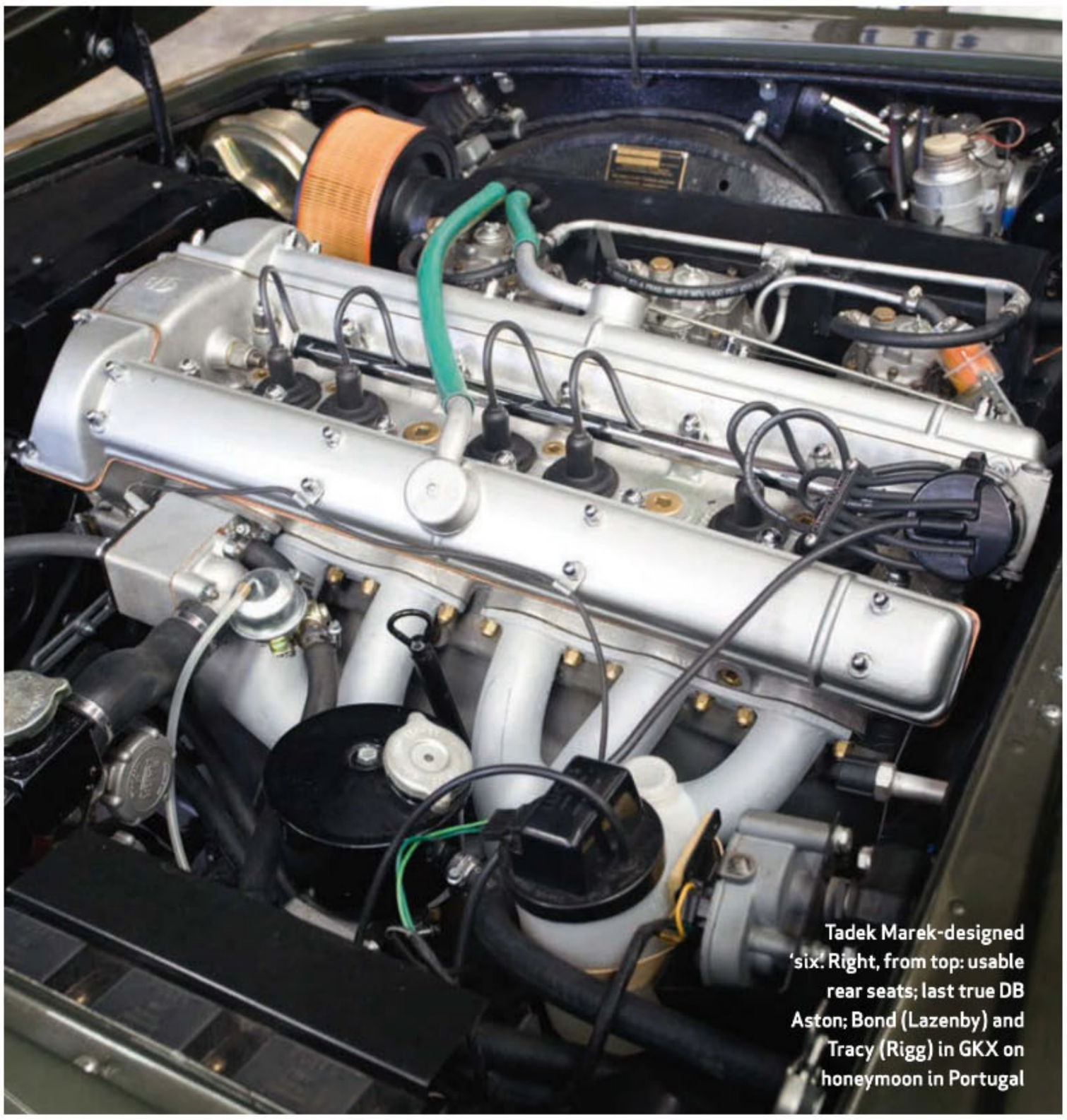
Author Dowsey takes his place where Lazenby and Bolster once sat; this DBS Vantage is standard apart from 'experimental' motor

delighted with his $14,200 buy. "I was looking for a sports car," he recalls. "There was also a Dino Ferrari and Rolls-Royce there, but my number-one choice was an Aston Martin."

The DBS became a daily driver for the next six years before, in 1984, a young lady proved to be the car's undoing. "Much to my disgust, my business partner bought a DBS Vantage as well," Zidziunas explains. "I was at the lights in Port Melbourne and he was behind me, but he wasn't concentrating – he was too busy watching a pair of legs walking across the road. He went straight into me and shortened the car by about 6in!"

The DBS entered a lengthy restoration, which was hamstrung further by a workshop fire in 1986. Fast-forward to 2008 and, with the release of the Daniel Craig Bond film *Quantum of Solace* looming, Zidziunas was determined to drive his own Bond car to the première. No one could accuse him of being in a rush, though: by then he had been restoring the car for nearly 25 years.

During the rebuild, Sigi discovered sand hidden in many of the car's crevices that he believes is from the Portuguese beach where *OHMSS* filming took place. The aim was to have the Aston ready for Zidziunas' 60th birthday. That date came and went, but the car is now finished at last, complete with the glovebox-mounted rifle, built for him by an American enthusiast who owns an *OHMSS* DBS replica. And, now that he has it back, Zidziunas is rightfully proud of his piece of movie history: "The Cars of the Stars museum [later The Bond Museum] offered to buy it from me at one stage, but I told them I wasn't interested. I intend to keep this car, to drive it and enjoy it as much as I can. It's the love of my life."



Tadek Marek-designed 'six'. Right, from top: usable rear seats; last true DB Aston; Bond (Lazenby) and Tracy (Rigg) in GKX on honeymoon in Portugal

From Newport Pagnell with love

Two Aston Martin DB5s were used in the filming of *Goldfinger*, the movie that started the Bond car craze in '64: a standard coupé, chassis DB5/1486/R, and a similar car built with the famous special effects, DP216/1.

Unaware of the enormous amount of promotion it would generate for the firm, initially Aston Martin wasn't keen to loan the *Goldfinger* producers a car. Owner David Brown was eventually persuaded, however, and a special prototype DB5 (actually a Series IV DB4 Vantage) was prepared at the factory.

Featuring oil-squirting tail-lights, bulletproof rear screen, tyre-shredding spinners, telephone, radar and ejector seat, the DB5 was a sensation and, along with *The Saint*'s Volvo P1800, paved the way for modern-day product placement.

After filming was completed, DP216/1 was taken back to Aston Martin, returned to standard specification and sold. A private UK coachbuilder later reinstated the special additions before an American collector bought the car. DP216/1 went on to feature in the 1981 film *The Cannonball Run* but was stolen in June 1997 from a hangar in Florida. It is probably the most famous car in the world, but its location remains a mystery.

Aston Martin doubled up on the DBS name when it launched its new model in 2006. Appropriately, there was also a new James Bond to drive the coupé in a new 007 movie.

Connery and trick DB5 in *Goldfinger* got the ball rolling

Return of DBS name and Bond association in *Casino Royale*

In the 2006 *Casino Royale*, Daniel Craig's Bond parallels George Lazenby's relatively realistic, gadget-free 007. But he does benefit from the built-in armoury and life-saving defibrillator in the modern DBS. Later in the movie, Bond rolls the car seven times in a spectacular crash that writes off the coupé; it plays no further part in the movie.

Premièred in late 2008, *Quantum of Solace* also featured a DBS. Seen only in the opening car chase sequence, where Bond is transporting a baddie, 'Mr White', in the boot, the coupé quickly becomes bullet-ridden and doorless. True to form, once again Bond writes off another Aston Martin.

THE ASTONS THAT TIME FORGOT

Unheralded for so long, the DBS is finally starting to come into its own, says **Ross Alkureishi** as he samples six-cylinder and V8 variants

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**


BTD 110J

'ASTON NEEDED A CUTTING-EDGE DESIGN, AND TOWNS HAD SEEMINGLY DELIVERED'

Stanley Caine, Patrick McEnroe, Aldo Andretti – none of them remembered as household names in their chosen profession, and yet each surname is more than familiar enough to register. All inhabited the same arenas as more successful siblings but each failed to scale the same heights. A similar notion could equally be applied to the DBS and DBS V8 models – the name's familiar, as is the shape – for so long relegated to the shadow of the historical output of Aston Martin Lagonda Ltd.

Not only unlucky enough to follow the strikingly attractive DB6 – and its own DB4/DB5 forefathers – it also had a mildly restyled V8 successor that, across 18 years of production, would become ingrained in the minds of enthusiasts as the definitive 'big' Aston. There was an association with James Bond – usually manna from heaven for the marque – but unfortunately it was in George Lazenby's sole outing for *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, rather than Sean Connery's celebrated take on the super-spy.

If ever a classic car had the right to figuratively sulk and bemoan its fate, then the DBS would be it. Instead, for several decades it has kept a low profile, inhabiting the 'cheap to buy, expensive to maintain' bracket, all the time waiting for fickle fashion to come full circle and allow it to cement its true place in the Aston hierarchy. Now, with values firmly in the ascendency, it's time to re-evaluate this misunderstood beast.

But first a little history. Production of the DB4 started in 1958. Designed by Carrozzeria Touring of Milan, it was constructed utilising the Superleggera principle of light alloy bodywork on a steel tube frame, and was powered by Tadek Marek's all-alloy, double-overhead-camshaft six-cylinder engine. Its combination of elegant styling, bespoke construction and high performance ensured that it was a sales success. Over the next five years it morphed – via GT and Zagato variants – into the more powerful DB5, but by the time the DB6 arrived in 1965 it was clear that a 'true' successor would be required.

The following year, Carrozzeria Touring was commissioned once again and completed two prototypes before abruptly going out of business. Disaster for one party often opens the door for another, and through it stepped William Towns. He'd originally joined Aston Martin as a seat designer but this relatively fringe figure – his remit: conceiving door trim, handles and other minor items – was handed responsibility for the DBS project. The clay model he shaped went into production almost unaltered, and the design would form the company's foundation for an incredible quarter of a century.

From top: muscular rear gives an impression of the car's width; wires for early 'sixes'; luxurious cabin; grip is plentiful; stylish badge and controls

From top: visually, the two models are all but identical – both have real presence; venerable Marek straight-six, here in standard spec; vents moved for DBS V8

Unveiled at Blenheim Palace on 25 September 1967, the DBS caused a furore. Gone were the graceful lines of its predecessor, replaced instead with a massive and radical American-influenced body style that incorporated quad quartz headlights and a squared-off interpretation of that classic Aston grille. Beneath sat the familiar Harold Beach chassis from the DB6 – widened by 4½in, and with an inch-longer wheelbase – plus, for the first time on an Aston, a de Dion rear axle. If the company's hierarchy had wished for cutting-edge styling to take its aged underpinnings into the next decade, then Towns had seemingly delivered. There was only one minor issue: the new V8 to power the car wasn't ready.

The Marek-designed engine had been tested in a pair of Lola T70s at Le Mans in '67. Both cars failed, with the block's lack of strength quickly identified as the culprit. There was no chance of it going into production in time for the fast-approaching DBS launch, so contingency plans were quickly enacted and the DB6's existing six-cylinder unit fitted. Customers could choose between the standard spec – 8.9:1 compression ratio, triple SU carburettors and 282bhp output – and the Vantage, with a 9.4:1 ratio, triple Webers and 325bhp. In an attempt to offset the disappointment of the delayed V8, Aston Martin offered the hotter version of the Marek 'six' as a no-cost option.

Today, Lee Davies' DBS doesn't just seem heftier than a DB6, it appears positively gargantuan. In fact, it's 1½in shorter in the body but a whopping 6in wider. The earlier DBs look as if their light-alloy bodywork has been poured over the body frame, and then lovingly sculpted. With its slab-like panels and blunt front end, the DBS offers no such illusions and instead has an inherent brutality – the only visual link to the past being its chrome wire wheels. To say that

ASTON MARTIN DBS

Sold/number built 1967-'73/829
Construction steel chassis, alloy body
Engine all-alloy, dohc, 3995cc straight-six, three 2in SU carburettors (Vantage: three twin-choke Webers)
Max power 282bhp @ 5500rpm (Vantage: c325bhp @ 5750rpm)
Max torque 280lb ft @ 4500rpm (Vantage: 290lb ft)
Transmission ZF five-speed manual or Borg-Warner three-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension: front wishbones, Armstrong telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, trailing links, Selectaride dampers; coil springs f/r **Steering** rack and pinion
Brakes Girling discs all round, inboard at rear
Length 15ft 1¼in (4600mm) **Width** 6ft (1830mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1320mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 3503lb (1589kg)
0-60mph 8.6 secs (Vantage: 8 secs)
Top speed 142mph **Mpg** 15
Price new £5800

DBS V8 *(where different)*

Sold/number built 1969-'72/402
Engine dohc-per-bank 5340cc V8, Bosch mechanical fuel injection
Max power 325bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 400lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed automatic
Suspension: front unequal wishbones **rear** radius arms **Steering** Adwest power assistance **Brakes** vented discs
Weight 3803lb (1725kg) **0-60mph** 6 secs
Top speed 161mph **Mpg** 12
Price new £7979

The deeper front panel is one of the few giveaways on the DBS V8, which arrived two years after the six-cylinder 'stop-gap' had been introduced

it has presence is an understatement, however – this car dominates both the space it inhabits, and that around it.

The benefits of this increased heft are felt within the luxuriously appointed interior: it's vast. There's symmetry between looking out onto a bonnet that feels almost as wide as it is long, and sitting in a likewise cabin. Advertised in period as a true four-seater, in reality it's still a 2+2. The driver's seating position is well forward – you almost insert yourself into the footwell – and initially the rear-view and door mirrors feel disconcertingly close. You also sit high, reaching down to a steering wheel slightly offset to the left, but it's comfortable and the visibility afforded in a car with thin pillars is outstanding.

Our featured example is in standard spec, and power delivery from the six-cylinder engine is instantly familiar: smooth, with a satisfying tractability throughout the rev range. With the DBS weighing in at 1589kg – 113kg heavier than the DB6 – it's a little undercooked. Racing driver Innes Ireland had one for long-term assessment and, writing in *Autocar* on 16 October 1969, he went further, bemoaning a distinct lack of character and stating that: 'It must be the greatly increased width of the S over the 6 that made me feel less a part of the car.'

It does still feel outrageously wide, such that you find yourself tiptoeing along tight country lanes. Ireland later concluded that the model did indeed have character, but 'just took a little longer to make itself felt', and that becomes clear on wider roads. The combination of a de Dion rear axle – negating camber changes and maximising tyre/road contact – and phenomenally wide underpinnings results in confounding levels of traction. This is one big brute that really does handle. It's clear, though, that the chassis could have taken more power – and not just the extra that is on offer in Vantage spec.

From above: V8 has alloys rather than wires; roomy cabin unchanged; discreet badging for later model; modern stereo fits in well; rectangular tail-lights

The DBS V8 finally became available in 1969. Those bottom-end issues had been consigned to history and the redesigned engine was hugely strong. The quad-cam 5340cc V8 produced some 325bhp, but best of all was the thumping 400lb ft of torque. Demand was so high that the company was unable to supply one for Roger Moore's character Lord Brett Sinclair to drive in *The Persuaders!* – instead, a six-cylinder DBS gained V8 alloy wheels and badges.

An *Autocar* road test found the power output of the V8 'enough to rocket this heavy car to 60mph from rest in only 6 secs and to 100mph in only 14.7 secs' – as well as recording a 'mean maximum speed of 161.5mph'. The journalist also suffered a few minor issues with the Bosch mechanical fuel injection – something that would give the early cars a reputation for poor

reliability – before pondering why Aston Martin Lagonda bothered to make its own V8, when there were so many cheaply available American units. He compared it to the considerably lighter, Ford-powered AC 428 – 0-60mph in 6.2 secs, top speed 142mph – and Chrysler-engined Jensen Interceptor – 0-60mph in 6.4 secs, top speed 137mph. There was more to it than that, of course, because Aston Martin enthusiasts expected bespoke automobiles, and anything other than a British powerplant under the bonnet simply wouldn't be countenanced.

The featured restored DBS V8 is from a private collection and it's the closest possible thing to – and probably better than – a new car. Outside, it's lost the Series 1 car's louvres in the C-post – replaced by some under the rear window – plus there's a deepening of the panels under the nose and tail, and of the stainless-steel sill covers. Due to the car's monstrous torque, 7in-wide alloys have replaced the structurally unsuitable 6in wires, while the final difference from the DBS is the addition of new DBS V8 badges. These subtle changes aside it's ostensibly the same car, just with a different heart.

Inside, there's a profusion of immaculate soft hides plus expensive floor and roof coverings. It has a stronger ZF gearbox, now with a dogleg layout, but with a similarly easy-to-use narrow gate. The Adwest power-assisted steering isn't too light, and the clutch is relatively simple to engage. In fact, this whole set-up isn't at all what I expected: namely, viciously heavy controls and an overdose of automotive masculinity.

Hold that thought. Gun the throttle and, while low-speed torque appears lacking, let it build to 4000rpm and that 400lb ft rapidly lets itself be known. Two aural howitzer blasts are fired from the twin exhaust pipes and the noise continues to build to an almighty fanfare at the 6200rpm redline, as you suddenly hurtle past mere mortals in their standard motoring fare. There's nothing gentlemanly about this car. Did someone mention a lack of manliness? Good Lord, you require only first and second gear to hit the national speed limit.

'THE V8 HAS THAT SAME EXCLUSIVE EXTERIOR SUIT, BUT UNDERNEATH LURKS A BIT OF A THUG'

Although the engine is only 13kg heavier than the six-cylinder unit, the car itself is significantly weightier, but all of that is rendered redundant by the staggering power and the startling straight-line performance. There's a heavy price to pay for being cheeky and indulging a heavy right foot –15mpg under normal circumstances will quickly fall to the high single digits, leaving you to play a game of fuel-gauge anxiety.

The DBS V8 also gained ventilated disc brakes that are similarly effective and will bring almost two tonnes of Aston from 100mph to a standstill in just 6 secs – not that I tried to prove it. This is one impressive piece of kit, and provides the momentous performance hike that Aston Martin always intended it to have.

Unloved for a long period of time, the DBS and DBS V8 are now enjoying a renaissance. The six-cylinder cars have sharp 1960s styling and two levels of sporting GT 'go' allied to a sophisticated handling package; they're the direct link to the earlier DB models.

The DBS V8 has that same exclusive exterior suit, but underneath lurks a bit of a thug, and one that paved the way for the increasingly brutal V8s that it later morphed into.

The aesthetics have aged well over the years. If they're to your taste then, unlike many other classic Aston Martins, you have the luxury of choice in terms of the driving experience that you desire. Both models impart a quality that, once sampled, will persuade you of its merits. There's no real performance comparison between the standard DBS and the DBS V8 – a Vantage-spec car will close the gap, but the V8 will still leave it looking like a mere cruiser.

I came away from the day liking the DBS, and one day I may mature into it, but for now my choice would have to be the DBS V8 and that addictive surfeit of torque. There would be a high price to pay in terms of the absurd fuel costs, of course, but I can't think of many better ways to spend money.

Thanks to *RS Williams (01932 868377; www.rswilliams.co.uk); Aston Martin Owners Club (www.amoc.org)*

Buying and running a DBS

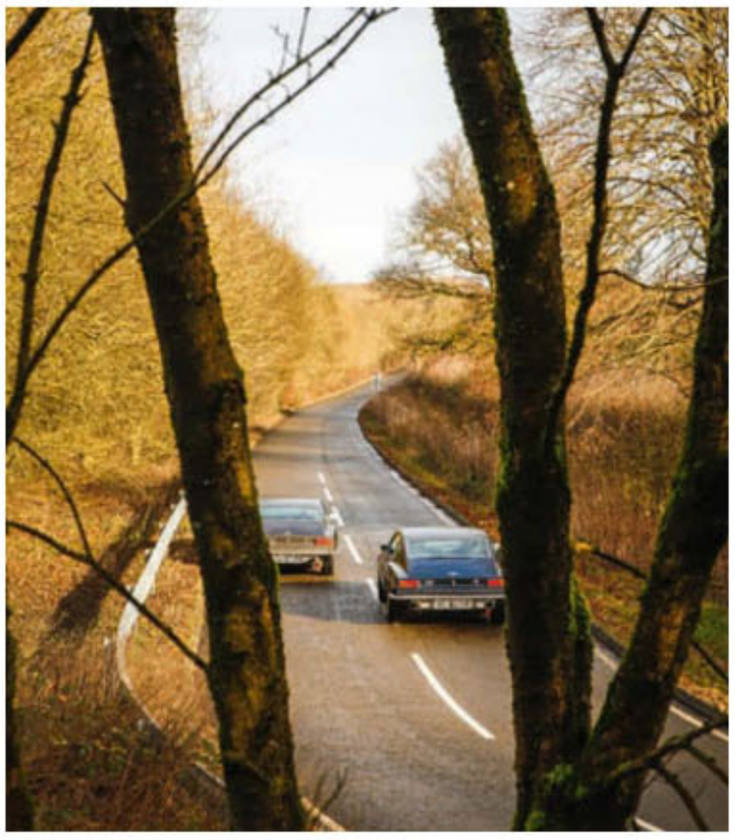
"Both variants are becoming more desirable," states RS Williams' workshop manager Neil Thompson. "Barnfind examples with the correct history and specification are now selling for £50,000-plus, with some restored cars reaching more than three times that figure. Despite the extra performance from the V8 engine, the most sought-after specification is a manual DBS Vantage, followed by a standard DBS." The exact premium you'll pay is difficult to specify because it's dependent on the condition of the car.

Thompson recommends that the chassis is checked, specifically the sills, which are both models' Achilles' heel. Another important factor is its history – how well has it been maintained? He cites getting the car inspected by a specialist as crucial: "I can't emphasise enough how important this is. Any level of work can be carried out, but it's essential to have a good knowledge of where to begin. If you purchase a car with the idea of respraying then enjoying, it can be an unpleasant surprise to find out that the sills need replacing. That would cost in excess of £12,000 to resolve, with a full body repaint coming in at £25,000 subject to metalwork requirements."

In terms of running costs, if they're well looked-after there's no significant difference between owning a six-cylinder DBS or a V8, save fuel: "The initial injection issues suffered by the DBS V8 are a thing of the past, and if maintained correctly it's a pleasure."

An annual budget is tricky to nail down; it varies on a car-by-car basis: "We have restored examples that require just a yearly service and can happily cover many miles in between, without any issues at all. An annual service will cost between £1800 and £2100. Of course, if a car has been less well maintained then you have to factor that in."

Engine upgrades are available for the six-cylinder unit. It can be enlarged to 4.2 or 4.7 litres; budget £25k for the former and £35k for the latter. Only standard-sized rebuilds are available on the V8 because the Bosch mechanical injection system is a limiting factor.



Clockwise, from left: the V8 will leave the earlier car well behind in terms of straight-line performance; later unit featured fuel injection; power-assisted steering gives a decent amount of feel in corners


J500 AMV
70 AV

Planet of the EIGHTS

Graeme Hurst samples six mighty Aston Martins to discover the appeal of the quad-cam V8 that powered the firm to success for more than three decades

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Mark Twain famously stated that 'clothes maketh the man'. Perhaps if the noted American author had been more of a petrolhead than a wordsmith – and lived for a few more decades – he might have suggested that 'an engine maketh the marque'? Okay, so that's a serious piece of poetic licence, but consider the success of many a sports-car brand and it's what lies under the bonnet that tends to both leave a lasting impression and give the model identity and longevity.

Think Ferrari 250, and it's the sound and performance of its Colombo-designed V12 that first springs to mind. Likewise the trademark thrum of an air-cooled flat-six when it comes to Porsche's long-serving 911. Aston Martin has been fortunate to have had two iconic units to rely on, both designed by engine genius Tadek Marek: the twin-cam straight-six that powered the DB series, and the all-alloy V8 that replaced it. Yet while prices for the classic 'sixes' head into super-exotic territory, even the costliest of these 150mph V8s can be had for the price of a good DB6, and the cheapest is a sub-£20k car. Buy now before the market catches on!

Stylist William Towns was a seat designer, so DBS cabin is an attractive and comfortable place to be – note wiper and Selectaride damper controls to right

Clockwise, from above: DBS was last car to carry traditional chrome face before smooth, twin-lamp nose of AM V8; Marek's V8 with troublesome fuel injection; bespoke GKN alloys, with vents to cool the overworked brakes

NEW HEART FOR THE DBS

Aston's gorgeous Touring-bodied DB series was always going to be a hard act to follow, particularly with its James Bond links, but talented former seat designer William Towns rose to the challenge admirably. His DBS – a design that initially threatened a flush, Corvette-style face – was a bold step after the Italianate DB6, but it had the right mix of curves and creases to take on the 1970s (and beyond, as it would turn out).

Those wide, crisp lines were intended to house an all-new powerplant, too, in the form of a 5.3-litre quad-cam V8 – a format Marek favoured to give the model sufficient grunt to chase rival Ferrari's V12s. His efforts began as early as 1963, but any chance of a launch four years later were scuppered by development problems with the V8's bottom end, so instead Aston slotted in the DB6's straight-six as a stop-gap. The only fly in the ointment was the hefty DBS body, which was 4in wider than that of the old car. Despite using Aston's tried and tested method of light-aluminium pannelling over a sturdy steel chassis, it was no flyweight and sapped the strength of the ageing 'six'.

A triple-Weber Vantage option (offered at no extra cost to save face) restored performance, but the step-change came when the DBS V8 finally arrived in early 1970. It was visually identical apart from the 15in alloy wheels – designed to aid brake cooling – but the 5340cc Bosch fuel-injected V8, at an estimated 325bhp, endowed it with 160mph ability. Aston finally had something to shout about, but by then the Newport Pagnell firm was in a parlous financial state.

Three years on, the DBS V8 had evolved into the twin-headlight, prosaically titled AM V8 Saloon, as new owner Company Developments

'TURN UP THE WICK AND MEMORIES OF THE DBS FADE AS THE V8 GIVES OUT A PRIMAL SNARL'

sought to expunge former figurehead David Brown's initials. A process of continuous development followed, with triple downdraught carbs from mid-'73 (fuel injection wouldn't return until 1986). More obvious was the 1978 restyle, with a masterfully integrated boot spoiler and the bonnet bulge extended and reversed, putting the opening facing the 'screen. The interior was decked out in walnut, with these models known colloquially as Oscar Indias, a phonetic alphabet reference to its October introduction.

Today, the wide-mouth DBS V8 is prized for its design purity and classic interior finish. It's rare, too, with just over 400 made. The pace is more than adequate by modern standards, but the ride is decidedly softer and the handling less accomplished than later cars – particularly if the Armstrong Selectaride dampers are set to 'soft'. "It corners like a double bed," says Kim Taylor-Smith, whose wife Sylvia was left this Dubonnet Rosso example by her late father. "He got it when it was a year old and took it all over Europe. He was particularly fond of parking it outside his family home in Warsaw to get up the noses of the Communists!" Although it's now an heirloom, the Taylor-Smiths aren't afraid to drive the DBS: "It's our only four-seater and we used to take our sons to university in it." It's easy to appreciate the comfortable, roomy DBS as a usable, family man's GT, both in its day and 30 years later.

YET MORE POWER: THE VANTAGE

With early reliability issues out of the way, it wasn't long before the racing world exploited the V8's latent potential and the factory realised that it could beef up its road cars, too. Cue the V8 Vantage, a car to have Countach and Berlinetta Boxer owners quaking in their Gucci loafers.

The new variant was launched in 1977 and the shape was given a steroid boost in line with the high-performance image. Wider wheels sat beneath wheelarch extensions, plus there was a deep front air-dam and a blanked-off grille aperture – the latter to improve airflow over the car at speed. To back up the promise of the new look, the V8 got revised camshafts plus bigger valves and carburettors, boosting power by a claimed 40%. Although Aston stuck with its Rolls-Royce-style policy of non-disclosure when it came to numbers, word on the streets around Newport Pagnell pegged the output at a shade under 400bhp. Whatever the figure, those tweaks delivered 164mph and 0-60mph in 5.4 secs – plenty quick enough, you might imagine. Yet Aston raised the bar again in 1986 with the X-Pack option, which boasted even larger valves and carbs and a thumping 403bhp.

This 1988 Salisbury Blue X-Pack has been in the care of owner John Leaman for the past year. The fact that Leaman – who's previously had his name on the V5 of a Ferrari Daytona – traded in a Porsche 997 to get the keys is proof that this 23-year-old car still has the power to thrill. At low revs there's a shade more torque, but it feels broadly similar to the DBS, although the dog-leg manual 'box (the only option on a Vantage), hefty clutch and wider rubber make it a heavier drive. Turn up the wick, however, and memories of the DBS fade as the engine gives out a primal snarl and pins you back in your seat. The chassis dynamics adapt rapidly, too: the steering comes to life as the speeds rise, with the supercar-like low-speed lethargy evaporating. "The weight is quite intimidating initially," says Leaman, "but once it gets into its stride, it's an absolute pleasure." The power delivery is progressive, without

From top: wide-body style and blanked-off grille with driving lights for Vantage; 131 X-Packs had 403bhp, as here, plus 30 with Weber 50IDA carbs and 432bhp; Vantage tag always saved for hottest version; Ronal rims for X-Pack cars

From top: cross-spoke alloys, a 1980s constant; clean lines work well with hood up; Volante launched three months before Oscar India, and introduced timber cladding; superbly constructed Volante is heavy, but handles neatly

the sudden kick of a 911 turbo, but there's no denying its potency. That 160mph-plus headline figure is quite believable, if somewhat at odds with the Vantage's 'olde-worlde' interior. But that's part of its appeal: the mix of leather and switchgear from the Vauxhall parts bin gave the marque its idiosyncratic charm, while competitors stuck to acres of ergonomically shaped black plastic. "I just couldn't think of anything more special for the money," smiles Leaman.

THE VOLANTE LOSES ITS HEAD

With the Vantage having put Aston Martin firmly back in charge of *Top Trumps* packs across the UK's school playgrounds, the firm looked at moving back into another market segment: topless motoring. This area had been neglected in the face of increasingly draconian Federal safety legislation but, when a ban failed to materialise in the mid-'70s, Aston forged ahead with the Volante – a model that traditionally sold well to buyers who were keen to be seen.

The super-luxurious Volante was launched in July 1978. It featured a lined, electrically operated soft-top and cost an extra £7309 – and was 150lb heavier than the equivalent saloon, thanks to the structural changes required to beef up the chassis. It was still an impressive performer, however, with 60mph in 7.7 secs and a claimed 150mph ability – not bad for a drop-top. This 1979 Volante is even quicker, thanks to substantial reworking by marque specialist RS Williams, which pioneered 6.3-litre and, as here, 7-litre versions of Marek's V8. Those extra cubes come courtesy of an increase in both bore and stroke – plus a new steel crank – with tweaks to the valve timing helping to liberate 455bhp and a monstrous 529lb ft of torque. Naturally, those

DBS V8

Sold/number built 1970-'72/402
Construction steel chassis, aluminium panels
Engine quad-cam, all-alloy 5340cc V8, Bosch mechanical fuel injection; power/torque undisclosed **Transmission** three-speed auto, driving rear wheels **Suspension: front** wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, twin parallel trailing arms, Watt linkage, adjustable lever-arm dampers; coils f/r **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented discs, with servo
Length 15ft ½in (4580mm) **Width** 6ft (1830mm) **Height** 4ft 4¼in (1330mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 4022lb (1824kg) **0-60mph** 6 secs
Top speed 161mph **Mpg** 12.2
Price new £7979.24

V8 VANTAGE *(where different to DBS V8)*

Sold/number built 1977-'89/320
Engine four twin-choke carbs; 403bhp @ 6250rpm (X-Pack); 390bhp @ 5200rpm
Transmission five-speed manual
Suspension: rear telescopic dampers
Length 15ft 4in (4670mm) **Width** 6ft 2in (1880mm) **Weight** 4009lb (1819kg)
0-60mph 5.4 secs **Top speed** 164mph **Mpg** 13.4
Price new £87,000

V8 VOLANTE *(where different to DBS V8)*

Sold/number built 1978-'89/915 **Height** 4ft 6in (1371mm) **Weight** 3950lb (1791kg)
0-60mph 7.7 secs **Top speed** 150mph **Mpg** 11.8
Price new £33,864

V8 ZAGATO *(where different to Vantage)*

Sold/number built 1986-'88/52
Length 14ft 4¾in (4390mm) **Width** 6ft 1¾in (1873mm) **Height** 4ft 3in (1295mm)
Weight 3637lb (1650kg)
0-60mph 4.6 secs **Top speed** 186mph
Price new £95,000

VIRAGE *(where different to DBS V8)*

Sold/number built 1990-'95/365
Max power 330bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 340lb ft @ 3700rpm
Suspension: rear triangulated radius arms and dual-rate springs **Length** 15ft 6½in (4737mm) **Width** 6ft 1in (1854mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1321mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 6¾in (2610mm) **Weight** 3956lb (1790kg)
0-60mph 6.8 secs **Top speed** 157mph **Mpg** 11
Price new £129,950

VANTAGE *(where different to Virage)*

Sold/number built 1992-'99/286
Engine dual belt-driven Eaton superchargers; 550bhp @ 6500rpm; 550lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual
Suspension: rear parallel arms
Length 15ft 7in (4745mm) **Width** 6ft 4in (1924mm) **Height** 4ft 4½in (1330mm)
Weight 4233lb (1920kg) **0-60mph** 4.6 secs
Top speed 187mph **Mpg** 11.6
Price new £189,950

Thanks to *Aston Martin OC (01865 400400; www.amoc.org); Trinity Engineering (01932 862040; www.trinityastonmartin.co.uk); Des Smail for the Vantage (01234 713083; www.djsmail.co.uk); RS Williams (01932 868377; www.rswilliams.co.uk) for Volante and Zagato*

From top: to improve air flow around the pillars, only lower windows drop; lightweight seats in 400lb weight loss, but no let up in luxury; Vantage motor for coupé, Volante had stock V8; Ronals replace flat-face Speedlines on this car

figures blur the experience of a regular Volante, but they do help to underline how fundamentally capable the chassis is. Despite the lack of a roof, it feels rock-solid when cornering without the hint of a jitter over bumpy terrain.

V8 ZAGATO: HAUTE COUTURE

Throughout its history, Aston Martin has never had a shortage of customers who valued exclusivity above all else, and by the early '80s new boss Victor Gauntlett felt that something special was overdue. Aston management was all too aware of how coveted the run of 19 Zagato-bodied DB4GTs had become, and the market for high-end cars was at boiling point as mobile-wielding yuppies speculated on performance motors. A bespoke Vantage from an Italian coachbuilder was the logical option, and Zagato's compact, aggressive coupé – complete with a subtle signature 'double-bubble' roof – was a a hit. Aston took deposits at the 1985 Frankfurt show on all 50 cars it planned to build. For an extra £40,000, Zagato trimmed nearly 400lb from the Vantage's weight and touted a 186mph top speed. Aston customers didn't flinch and Gauntlett so regretted the self-imposed limited run of 50 that he quickly offered a V8 Volante version.

Owner Ian Warrener knows only too well why the Zagato was so revered: "Seeing it for sale was like going into a store, spotting an Italian suit and wanting to wear it home." The Zagato is the latest in a long line of Astons for Warrener, who has had a passion for the marque since he started his apprenticeship as a surveyor in the early '60s: "I remember the MD arriving in a Dubonnet Rosso DB5 and thinking 'I have to have one'." That dream came true in the late 1970s and a DB4GT followed, along with a Volante and V8

The other V8s

ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA

After the DBS-based Lagonda, William Towns reached new heights (and lengths) with this razor-edged wedge. Launched in '76, it boasted a futuristic (but unreliable) digital dash. Some 610 were built before the model's demise in 1990.

OGLE SOTHEBY SPECIAL

Ogle Design produced this daring restyle of the DBS V8 for the 1972 Montreal Motor Show. It had a glassfibre body and a stainless-steel rear panel with 22 holes to accommodate the tail and brake lights – the harder you braked, the more lights illuminated. Just two were built, although a replica followed some years later.

BULLDOG

Created in 1979, the one-off Bulldog had its quad-cam V8 mid-mounted with twin Garrett turbochargers pushing output to a heady 700bhp – enough for 191mph. Nifty features included gullwing doors and a rear camera to aid reversing.

NIMROD

An early-1980s mid-engined racer born out of privateer and factory experience, the Nimrod proved the longevity of the Marek V8, even at upwards of 100bhp per litre. It was backed by Pace Petroleum and Aston boss Victor Gauntlett, but a sudden change in FIA weight restrictions rendered it obsolete overnight.

V8 VANTAGE

This Porsche 911 rival revived the Aston V8 with a 4.3-litre (later 4.7) take on the Cologne-built Ford unit shared with the Jaguar XK. The 'entry-level' car was launched in 2006, with a rear-mounted 'box to improve balance. Now a bargain, too.

Saloon, but it's the Zagato that most fires his imagination: "It's noticeably tighter and lighter, so a good driver can get more out of it."

That perception is backed up from behind the wheel. The cabin screams pure function, with lightweight seats and a tightly packed instrument binnacle dominating the view ahead. Dare to pour on the power and the Zagato streaks forward like a cheetah, its astonishing pace a result of the happy marriage of 400bhp-plus power and 3637lb heft. The reduced weight also helps the nose turn in more keenly and sharpens the chassis response, making the whole car feel nimbler – aided by the pared-down front and rear overhangs. The Vantage Zagato is a fantastic reminder of how a liaison with a Latin coachbuilder can make an already special product even more desirable.

TURNING A CORNER WITH THE VIRAGE

While Zagato's reclothing had provided a brief diversion, back in Newport Pagnell it had become obvious to incoming marque custodian Ford that the Towns-designed saloon, with its chrome bumpers and window frames, was looking long in the tooth. Aston was also struggling to cope with emissions controls in various markets, and a one-size-fits-all engine strategy was desperately needed. The combined result was the new Virage of 1990, designed by John Heffernan and Ken Greenley, and boasting a pair of multi-valve heads (courtesy of Callaway) topping the ageing V8. The name, the French word for corner, was an attempt to revive images of Aston's past glories at Le Mans.

Underneath, the venerable Harold Beach-designed chassis remained largely unchanged, although the rear axle location was revised and

From top: monolithic dash lacks elegance of earlier cars; softer shape styled by John Heffernan and Ken Greenley; more modern alloy design; venerable V8 is fuel injected once again, and up to 330bhp

‘EVEN A MODEST PROD OF THE THROTTLE PEDAL RESULTS IN A HEADY SURGE’

it sported outboard brakes – the inboard rear rotors of earlier cars having proven prone to overheating the diff. The new styling brought the marque up to date, with integrated bumpers, flush windows and an all-new, ergonomically designed cockpit that did a masterful job of hiding Aston’s penchant for raiding the parts bins – although marque obsessives would rue the loss of the trademark fly-off handbrake.

Step from a Vantage and the Virage doesn’t feel particularly quick, but with 330bhp its performance is still strong – think 0-60mph in 6.8 secs and a 155mph top speed. There were quicker cars on the *autobahns* of 1990, however, and the Virage was revered more for its hand-built quality than its outright pace. What else could you buy that still had a plaque on the engine to tell you the name of the engineer who put it together (Terry Durston in the case of this 1992 Virage)? Today, the Virage offers brilliant value for money as a budget entry into Aston ownership. Joe Gunnett shelled out just £17,000 for this 30,000-mile car three years ago: “It cost over £100,000 new and still offers all of that performance.” Gunnett reckons that the Virage is still a thrilling drive: “Nothing else has given me so many smiles per mile.” He also derives huge satisfaction from knowing how it was screwed together: “What other hand-built sports car can you buy for Mondeo money?”

BLOWN AWAY: SUPERCHARGED VANTAGE

Following the launch of the Virage, there were mutterings that Aston Martin was beginning to get a bit soft. Those detractors were silenced three years later, however, when the engineers at Newport Pagnell discovered that forced induction would liberate even more urge. A whopping 550bhp as it turned out. That, and an equally spectacular amount of torque, was the result of bolting on a pair of Eaton superchargers for the reborn Vantage. This was an Aston that could catapult to 60mph from rest in just 4.6 secs and top out at 187mph after covering a quarter-mile in 12.9 secs. And all this from a few chaps working out of a shed in Buckinghamshire.

They’d certainly been busy, because the Vantage was much more than simply a big-engined Virage. The chassis got a beefed up rear end and the body sported a pronounced aero kit. The wings swelled to contain the massive 285/45 ZR18 Goodyear Eagle tyres needed to keep it in touch with the Tarmac. Fire up and that added grunt is evident from idle, with a soft whine from the superchargers hinting at what’s to come. A modest prod of the pedal results in a heady surge as the V8 shrugs off the car’s 4233lb weight. Even after the brutal shove of the Zagato, this Vantage is intimidating. Stir the six-speed manual ’box, then floor the accelerator in any of the first four ratios and the Aston lunges forward with breathtaking violence.

Incredibly, there was even more to come. The V8’s swansong came in 1998 with the V600, a 6-litre version that was good for – you’ve guessed it – 600bhp and 600lb ft of torque. That meant 200mph-plus potential for the seriously brave: just the thing for the wild Le Mans limited edition a year later, the last car to feature the V8.

The Vantage occupies a special place in Aston Martin history, with its tarmac-ripping figures proving how far ahead of its time the quad-cam engine had been some 30 years earlier. Without this common denominator, the famous British marque may never have survived to witness the kudos it enjoys today.

From top: planted Vantage feels exceptionally stable; twin belt-driven blowers push V8 to a whopping 550bhp; tail-lights are unique to the Vantage; bespoke Goodyear tyres wrap 10½in-wide six-spoke alloy wheels

"I CANNOT THINK OF A CAR THAT WAS BETTER FOR HAVING ITS ROOF CUT OFF, UNTIL NOW"

Confirmed GT man **Martin Buckley** finally sees the light when he puts this sorted Series 5 Aston Martin V8 Volante through its paces

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

There have always been open-topped Aston Martins but, in the years before the V8 Volante, they seemed to have been produced almost grudgingly. They were an irritating and frivolous diversion from the main task of building manly, closed-roof GT cars for the well-heeled. There was perhaps even a feeling that there was something caddish, mildly effete and not quite British about wanting a car as fast as a DB5 or DB6 in convertible form. Modest production totals for these cars indicated that most Aston customers felt the same way.

By the end of the '70s, however, the world – and even Aston Martin – had moved on. The company had suffered the trauma of receivership in '74 and, under much more aggressive management, it recognised that it could no longer afford to ignore an opportunity such as the Volante, especially when the market would cheerfully stand a £10k price premium over the closed car. A decade later, Aston was extracting close to £95,000 for the last of the hideously bespoilered Vantage Volantes. Any of the open versions, maintained in good order, would have proven a sound investment for their first owners.

The Volante – reviving a name first used on the drophead DB6 – was one of the great Aston success stories of the early '80s, with orders quickly outstripping the V8 saloon. It tapped into a pent-up demand for expensive top-down cars that had been ill-served for almost a decade when it looked as if Federal crash safety rulings would almost certainly outlaw them. Aston Martin had not built a convertible since 1970.

In the end these worries proved groundless, leaving the way open for Aston, better set financially than it had been for many years, to develop a Volante version of its already 10-year-old mainstay model. Harold Beach began work on the V8 Volante in 1977 and managed to make a body with an additional rear subframe and beefed-up sills (the structure was differently shaped between the A- and B-posts) that was said to be 15% stiffer than the saloon. The Volante's blanked-off bonnet bulge was adopted by subsequent versions of the hardtop car, but the convertible had a subtly different bootlid shape.

First seen in the summer of 1978, the V8 Volante was officially launched at that year's Birmingham show in October, although we didn't see any right-hand-drive cars for over a year. Demand from its American importer had encouraged Aston to build a V8 drophead, and that's where the first batch of 80 cars went, priced at $66k each. With the demise of Jensen's Interceptor convertible, Aston seemed to have the market for hand-crafted *Gran Turismo* soft-tops pretty much to itself. The £33,864 Volante's nearest rival in 1979 was the much more pedestrian Rolls-Royce Corniche, which, to be fair, wasn't really the same sort of car at all.

The Volante was well received. With the roof lowered, the car had a feel-good factor that seemed to transcend the ever-more-glaring shortcomings of the closed version. It was still a fast car – Aston recommended no more than 130mph with the roof up, but it would easily manage 140-plus – yet, to those fortunate enough to be able to afford one, there seemed to be less of a requirement to drive it quickly.

In a world of increasingly brash and brazen late-'70s exotica, the Volante cut an almost

Bootlid of Volante differs from saloon, dictated by a hood mechanism that folds to leave a tidy profile

restrained figure. Bereft of disfiguring spoilers or air dams, its curvaceously muscular shape suggested the values of another era, even in 1978. So its owner, likely to be a gentleman of mature but not advanced years, could go about his business feeling distinguished but not conspicuous.

Well, there's conspicuous and there's conspicuous. You'll never be invisible in a car such as this and, while most of the population feels benign warmth towards elderly Astons, for others it is a car that raises the hackles. Take the Putney resident we encountered when photographing Nicholas Mee's beautiful Volante for this feature. He poked his head out of the window of his flat when we pulled up, briefly, outside and, railing at us like an insane *doppelgänger* of Charles Hawtrey, threatened to pour yoghurt on the bonnet of our "gas guzzler" if we didn't move on.

What I didn't bother explaining to 'Yoghurt Man' was that, being a Series 5 with Weber-Marelli fuel injection, this car – quoted as having 305bhp – has cleaner emissions and probably uses a bit less fuel than its earlier Weber-carburettored siblings. Also, like most cars of its type, it has contributed little to the depletion of the ozone layer: in 22 years it has covered only 38,270 miles. In fact, the sports exhaust on this nicely sorted example is slightly indiscreet, but if you're not into natural yoghurt you could hardly object to its silkily aggressive burble. ZF five-speed manual Volantes were available, though they are somewhat ponderous instruments and the car is probably at its best with a Torqueflite automatic gearbox, as fitted to this one.

Under its bonnet, much flatter than earlier versions thanks to the neat injection installation, the bulky quad-camshaft 5.3 V8 (this one built by Mick Durrant) looks familiarly husky, all angular cam covers and machined aluminium castings. Its expensive aura is undermined by the BL (Metro?) expansion bottle and various ancillaries that fight for space in the engine bay. Dual servoes for the big vented disc brakes are tucked inside the left- and right-hand sides of the nose and the air horns are by Maserati.

ASTON MARTIN V8 VOLANTE

Sold/number built 1978-'89/915
Construction steel platform chassis, with steel superstructure and non-stress-bearing aluminium panels
Engine all-aluminium dual-overhead-cam-per-bank 5340cc V8, fed by Weber Marelli electronic fuel injection
Max power 305bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque 320lb ft @ 5100rpm
Transmission Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed automatic, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front independent, by unequal-length wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, radius arms, Watt linkage, coil springs; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering Adwest power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented discs all round, with twin servoes and dual circuits
Length 15ft ½in (4585mm)
Width 6ft (1829mm)
Height 4ft 6in (1372mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 4009lb (1818kg)
0-60mph 6.7 secs **Top speed** 150mph
Price new £68,500

Mee, who joined Aston in 1976 and worked at its London sales department until '91, talks with a deep love and knowledge of the V8 Volante and is a fan of these later injected cars. "Everything is pre-set," he says, "so they are not just as good as the last bloke who twiddled the mixture screws. Also, they were the first V8s built on CNC milling machines rather than machining everything individually, so you had some uniformity in the engines – which you need with the injection – and in some respects the injection engines just last better. They also develop more torque, which is good with the automatic."

Hood up in the city, the Volante's beautifully engineered powered top forms a private world, a cocoon of luxury as you listen to the stereo or enjoy the air-conditioning. Hood down in the depths of the countryside and the Volante seems to caress the senses. The rich hum of its exhaust, plus the subtle fragrances from the fields and flowers, mix with the sweet aroma of Connolly hide as you watch the sunlight, dappled by overhanging trees, play on the deep and flawless cellulose of that imposing bonnet. This is a nice place to be, even if the magnolia hide – piped in dark blue to match the body – now seems as redundantly 1980s as a power ballad.

Earlier V8s had workmanlike leather-covered fascias, but in the Volante Aston was out to sell a more obviously olde-worlde image of matching burr-walnut veneers on the dash, console and doors. Necessarily for such a low-volume car, the detailing is a mixture of recognisably prosaic components – an incongruous amalgam of the '60s and the '80s such as the feeble Vauxhall stalks and chunky Jaguar XJ push-buttons. Still,

Above: cabin is superbly appointed but not to all tastes. Left: 16in cross-spokes shout 1980s, but car handles well on its 255/50 Kumho tyres

'THIS IS A NICE PLACE TO BE, EVEN IF THE PIPED MAGNOLIA HIDE SEEMS AS REDUNDANTLY '80S AS A POWER BALLAD'

Clockwise, from above: Mick Durrant built this quad-cam V8; Smiths motor rapidly raises hood – fuel flaps are also electric; build plaque an Aston constant

the early XJ interior doorhandles look the part, as does the super-sized ashtray on the centre console. Inside the glovebox, with its long, piano-type hinge, lives the comprehensive handbook, which, even in '86, still tells owners where they may obtain a 'continental kit' for touring.

With squally showers across West London all day, we appreciate the Aston's Everflex-covered power top. The Smiths motor unfurls it quickly, rising vertically at first and leaving you to attach it to the windscreen header by over-centre catches. It comes down with a thump unless you cushion it. Releasing the handbrake isolates the mechanism, just in case you feel tempted to get flash and raise or lower it once under way. It eats into the boot space (which wasn't that generous to start with) rather than the rear passenger area, so the Volante is still a nominal four-seater. Aston managed to get the hood to sit low in its well, so the car's side profile is reasonably clean.

Left to its own devices in Drive, the torque converter pulls the 4000lb Volante smartly away and, but for the rise and fall of the exhaust note, its shifts are nearly imperceptible. Floor the throttle and the Volante seems effortlessly rather than excitingly fast. From behind the wheel, it also feels quite big, the bonnet a vast plateau of aluminium beyond the high scuttle. The engine is smooth and without temperament, running freely to 6000rpm with an agility of throttle response that tells you it is something more than just another lumbering V8. You waft in this Aston, perhaps briskly – and even with a certain amount of purpose at times – but never so aggressively that you take yourself, the car or your passengers out of their comfort zone. To do so would be to miss the point of the V8 Volante.

Right: hood folds mostly into boot, so rear-seat room is similar to the fixed-head. Below: auto 'box is well-mated to the injected engine's torque

In its ride and handling this Volante is subtly more capable than it was in period. The ride is so fluidly comfortable that it arouses no comment until you recall the crashy original set-up. Somehow the car doesn't feel as hefty as others I've driven. Solid and strong, yes, with commendably little scuttle shake, but not so harsh in its reactions. Mee has had his workshop strip and rebuild the front suspension using custom, fully adjustable dampers (handy for optimising the steering geometry to reduce bump-steer) with fast-reaction internal valving.

Combine this with a Harvey Bailey front anti-roll bar and the result is a car that feels sharp and alert, turning in clean and flat as it builds up to a consistent understeer, never threatening to do anything unexpected. Modern 16in rubber on Vantage-style alloys helps, of course.

I cannot think of a car that has been improved by having its roof chopped off, but there can be no doubt that, by introducing a soft-top version of its V8 in the late '70s, Aston Martin gave the ageing model an entirely new dimension. For me it pinpoints the moment when Aston finally cast off the last of its Edwardian values and began to enter the modern commercial world. You could almost identify the V8 Volante as the firm's first aspirational 'lifestyle' car, built as a clear response to what customers wanted rather than what Aston thought was good for them.

Thanks to *Nicholas Mee & Company: 020 8741 8822; www.nicholasmee.co.uk*


XJT 4M
TRINITY ENGINEERING

BATTLE *of* BRITAIN

One of these beautifully hand-finished grand tourers is worth twice as much but, asks **Martin Buckley**, is the Aston V8 a better car than the Jensen Interceptor?

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

Because history and the passage of time have a way of skewing our perspectives on cars and their places in time and culture, I would understand if you didn't think the Aston V8 and Jensen Interceptor were really the same sort of thing. Rewind 40-plus years and your perceptions – unsullied by today's rampant price hyping – would be quite different. These were Britain's most accomplished contributions to the world of *Gran Turismo* motoring in the late 1960s and early '70s. Close-coupled coupés of handsome aspect, plus serious weight and substance, exquisitely tailored in traditional materials and built for a non-price-sensitive elite who were not quite ready for a Silver Shadow but wanted to go as quickly as possible, as comfortably as possible.

Both vehicles had a certain adult boardroom appeal that chimed with the wealthy middle-aged market they were chasing; cars not so much for GT men as G&T men. In terms of size, weight and common purpose, it would be hard not to have pictured them as head-on rivals for the same customers.

Not so today. The Jensen, by reputation, is louche and ephemeral; a raffish dinosaur of the pre-fuel crisis hedonism era powered by a massive American V8 that will take it past everything but a petrol station. Its reputation is in the ascendancy today, but perhaps by virtue of sheer numbers built – it was the most successful of all the Euro-American GTs – its image slightly lacks the polish that the basic excellence of the product deserves. To own an Interceptor in 2014 is still ever-so-slightly pub landlord.

The Aston, in contrast, has become a national treasure, pure in thought and deed. Hand-beaten, hand-stitched and seemingly only driven by hand-picked gentlefolk who can afford to give it the attention it deserves.

A glance under the bonnets of the cars tells the story succinctly: the Interceptor's Chrysler V8 is an anonymous if businesslike piece of ironmongery that cannot begin to compete with the handsome alloy cam boxes that make the Aston's engine bay a visual treat, even for those who might not understand what they are looking at.

Satisfied Jensen customers bought into the international jet-set flavour of the Italian-styled, American-engined and British-built Interceptor. In many ways, though, the car's greatest strength – that vast, smooth, reliable and cheap-to-repair Chrysler motor – has proven to be its greatest weakness in the eyes of its detractors.

Not that it had many critics in its heyday, although you can imagine that a price discrepancy of up to £2000 in favour of the Jensen by 1974 might have caused irritated Aston salesmen to stick their noses in the air and dismiss the 'common' Interceptor as a mere trinket that was not even in the same league. In truth, anyone who could afford to pay £7000 for a car in the early '70s probably didn't let the odd two grand sway their decision either way.

If the Aston had a certain snob appeal – based around price, rarity and a fading racing pedigree – then let's not forget that the Jensen was an expertly promoted fashion item. Aston Martin may have had the movie allegiance of a fictional superspy, but Jensen Motors of West Bromwich never lost an opportunity to let the world know it had sold yet another Interceptor to an actor or pop star. The likes of Harold Robbins, Mike and Bernie Winters, and Eric Morecambe (who had

'THEY HAD A CERTAIN BOARDROOM APPEAL, NOT SO MUCH FOR GT MEN AS G&T MEN'

his first heart attack at the wheel of his Interceptor) gave the Jensen a very showbiz profile.

Both cars traded on their 'handbuilt in Britain' image. Each Aston Martin V8 was famously the responsibility of one man in a very self-contained factory where all of the machining was done in-house and no more than seven cars were produced per week. Jensen boasted that each Interceptor – constructed around a chassis of two 4in, 9½ft-long steel tubes with floors and bulkheads arc-welded to them, took 10 weeks to build. And it wasn't signed off until – after a 120-mile road test – one of the board of directors had driven it home and given it the 'okay'.

The departure of Sir David Brown as boss meant a change of name for the Aston in 1972 (it became simply the V8 rather than the DBS V8) and coincided with the wise decision to replace the Bosch mechanical fuel injection with four Webers, maintaining performance yet improving low-speed drivability and even economy (from 12 to 15mpg). William Towns had already remodelled his original '67 shape – with a simplified grille and two 7in headlamps – but the rest of the unstressed alloy panels remained unchanged,

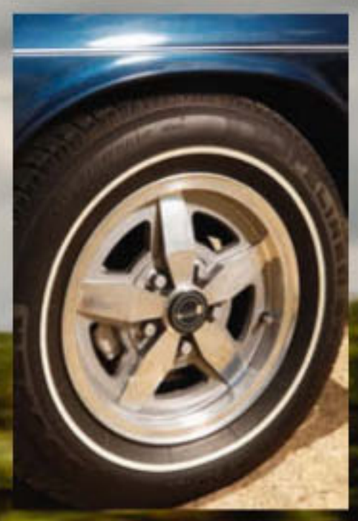
ASTON MARTIN V8

Sold/number built 1972-'90/c2000
Construction steel platform chassis, with alloy body
Engine all-alloy, qohc 5340cc 90° V8, with four twin-choke Weber 42 DCNF carbs
Max power c320bhp @ 5000rpm
Max torque c400lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission ZF five-speed manual or Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed auto, RWD
Suspension: front double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle, parallel links, Watt linkage, coil springs, lever-arm dampers
Steering Adwest power-assisted rack and pinion, 2.9 turns lock-to-lock
Brakes vented discs all round, 10¾in front, 10½in rear, with twin servos
Length 15ft 1¼in (4603mm)
Width 6ft (1823mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1321mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 6¾in (2610mm)
Weight 3930lb (1782kg)
0-60mph 6.2 secs
Top speed 146mph **Mpg** 9-16
Price new £9057 (1973)

JENSEN INTERCEPTOR III

Sold/number built 1971-'76/3419 (6175 including I and II, plus 232 SPs and 320 FFs)
Construction tubular steel chassis, with steel body
Engine all-iron, ohv 7212cc 90° V8, with Carter quad-choke carb
Max power 284bhp @ 4800rpm
Max torque 383lb ft @ 3200rpm
Transmission Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed auto, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front double wishbones, coils, anti-roll bar **rear** Salisbury live axle, semi-elliptics, Panhard rod; telescopics f/r
Steering Adwest power-assisted rack and pinion, 3.4 turns lock-to-lock
Brakes vented discs all round, 10¾in front and rear, with servo
Length 15ft 8in (4775mm) **Width** 5ft 10in (1778mm) **Height** 4ft 5¼in (1353mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 9in (2667mm)
Weight 3931lb (1783kg)
0-60mph 6.4 secs
Top speed 140mph **Mpg** 10-14
Price new £6981 (1973)

From far left: broader Aston cabin has a slightly sportier dash, with Smiths instruments grouped in crackle-black surround; V8 corners flatter, with sharper steering; glorious hand-built quad-cam V8; famous names adorn vents; similar 15in alloys, but Aston's 7in rims (on left) are half an inch wider



From top: signature rear screen; Chrysler V8 is well back in chassis, giving nicely balanced handling; lavishly appointed cabin, but safety regs dictated that dash lost S1's bank of toggle switches and gained padded surfaces

supported by a rugged steel platform of welded pressings and strategically placed box-sections.

Tadek Marek's 5.3-litre quad-cam V8, sand-cast in LM8 alloy, was only 30lb heavier than the straight-six it supplemented (and later replaced entirely) and a far better match to the Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed automatic gearbox that was looking as if it might become the rule rather than the exception when buyers specified their cars. Previous generations of self-shifting Aston Martins had been leisurely, cumbersome cars but this latest carburetted V8 was so powerful, and the automatic transmission so smooth and responsive, that it made the notchy (if strong) ZF five-speed manual 'box seem like hard work.

Producing a fast, credible automatic GT Aston was a reaction to the conspicuous success of the Interceptor. Since the days of the glassfibre-bodied C-V8, Jensen had been establishing the idea that an auto could be satisfying and – other than a handful of early examples – there were no manual Interceptors. By the time the Interceptor III arrived in 1971 – the first model built under Kjell Qvale's leadership – the very idea of a do-it-yourself version would have seemed absurd. With new GKN Kent alloy wheels, the five-year-old design (by Touring of Milan) had successfully refreshed itself for the new decade and, for the following year, was due to get the latest 7.2-litre 440cu in V8, which was quieter and had even greater torque but no more power.

I know these two like old friends, but I've never had the chance to hop from the driving seat of one to the other on the same day. In the case of either car, I have a preference for the 'pure' first editions; I like my Interceptors on RoStyles and my Astons with four lights rather than two.

Aesthetically, I have an overall inclination towards the Jensen, a finer-boned car than the Towns-designed Aston, which seemed to run to flab quickly with each successive attempt to update it. A more neatly detailed and expertly resolved shape than the Aston Martin V8, the Jensen Interceptor maintained its lithe profile and its strong jawline to the end.

Which isn't to say that the Aston is not a handsome vehicle with some powerful contours that emphasise the dozens of hours of handiwork in its aluminium panels. It's just that there are some clumsy bits that spoil it, such as the black fairings under the bumpers at either end hiding ugly exhaust or suspension components.

More light – from the trademark 'goldfish bowl' rear window – and lower door window sills make the Jensen marginally the nicer place to sit. Its dashboard is more ordered and highly styled than the Aston's workmanlike display of chrome-rimmed gauges, where you feel as if you are peering over the looming dash and the massive bonnet bulge. The levels of detail fit and finish are of a similarly high order in both cars, with various Jaguar and generic Leyland switches and furniture evident but well integrated. In an opulent landscape of hand-stitched leather and chrome, their humble origins aren't that obvious.

Both cars are packaging disasters, with biggish boots and marginal rear seats. Neither is a real four-seater but, as luxurious 2+2s, they must make admirable long-distance cars even now. There's not a lot between them in terms of reasonably low wind noise at high cruising speeds, excellent straight-line stability and the potential to romp along at 100 or even 120mph without evidently expending much effort.

In terms of handling, the Jensen makes you feel at home more quickly and rewards a relaxed attitude with deceptively swift progress. It can't mask the limitations of its live rear axle, which means that bumps can upset its composure, but on smooth roads – particularly those with long, fast sweeping bends – it's balanced and capable.

Its soggy brake response doesn't really compare to the Aston's superbly reassuring pedal and the Jensen's steering is too light, although I would probably have been quite happy with it had the Aston not been here. The V8 steers beautifully, in fact, with just the right amount of

‘THE ASTON SEEMS THE QUICKER CAR, BUT THE JENSEN DELIVERS THE GOODS EFFORTLESSLY’

From top: squat Aston Martin also has a decent boot; huge vent helps with engine cooling; likewise the Jensen’s louvred SP bonnet; neither is a full four-seater but Aston just has the edge; Interceptor leans more but handles well, though bumps can upset it; limited legroom but it’s comfy in the back

kickback and the de Dion rear suspension eats up the corners that make the Jensen dither. So the faster you go in the Aston, the better you like it.

Differing engine sounds are at the heart of the differences in the cars' personalities. Hydraulic tappets muffle the Jensen's V8 from the inside, but there is a lovely, soft motor-launch burble from the exhaust that sounds urgent but not aggressive. The complex metallic fizz of four camshafts and two-stage Duplex chains gives the bellowing Aston a whole other visceral dimension that sympathetic ears connect with instantly.

In terms of acceleration, the Jensen is more instantly impressive thanks to stronger torque at lower revs and more bite to its torque converter. While the Aston slurs – there is a sense that the engine is revving uselessly against a slipping clutch up to about 40mph – the Interceptor has wafted away. Beyond that sort of speed – as long as you don't snap its beautifully weighted throttle open and drown the Webers – the Aston takes command, with the sort of thrilling pick-up that focuses the mind yet without ever exceeding 4000rpm or holding the gears manually.

Subjectively, the Aston seems the quicker, more exciting car on the road and contemporary road-test figures tell much the same story. But there is not that much in it, plus the Jensen delivers the goods more effortlessly with less fuss and bluster. With your foot to the floor, its Torqueflite flicks smoothly into top from intermediate at 90mph, whereas the Aston is designed to change up at well over a ton if necessary. In top, both of these 4000lb GTs are geared to cruise at 100mph showing about 4000rpm.

There is a long and noble history of putting American engines in European chassis that has produced some of the most desirable cars ever made. For some reason, we don't quite yet see the Jensen Interceptor as one of them. That will almost certainly change in the near future but, whatever happens, it's a car that I've always had a huge affection for and always will.

Chrysler power was a selling point central to the Interceptor's identity rather than a guilty secret. It gave the car a wide appeal (they sold at a rate of 30 a week at the height of its success) to the kind of customer who liked the idea of a big, understressed engine, but was not necessarily interested in the finer details of what went on under the bonnet. The disinterest shown by Jensen buyers in the wonderful FF showed that few were willing to pay £2000 extra for the benefits of four-wheel drive and anti-lock brakes.

I mention the FF because it is one of my all-time favourites that gave the Interceptor concept an added dimension of high-tech credibility, making a very good car truly great. Had we been comparing an FF with an Aston – any Aston – there would, for me, be no contest.

In some respects, the Aston V8 is more difficult to warm to and my feelings about the model have been tainted by the travesties wrought upon them by factory bodykits that undermined the elegance of a classic shape. Unload that baggage and I have to admit that – even if current values make the Interceptor really tempting – the Aston shows flashes of brilliance and depth of personality that the Jensen can't quite match.

Thanks to *Nikos Gianniris and Byron International for the Aston (www.allastonmartin.com); Peter Harwood and Cotswold Classic Car Restorations for the Jensen (www.cccrestorations.co.uk)*

TOP TEN
ECCENTRIC ASTONS

Not all of the marque's products are suitable for stylish secret agents. **James Page** throws the spotlight on the weird and wonderful instead

PHOTOGRAPHY **LAT/ASTON MARTIN/BONHAMS**

These days, Aston Martin makes much of its status as a 'cool' brand, with an ethos of 'power, beauty and soul'. Not all of the models that have carried the famous badge have lived up to all three of those qualities, however. Some haven't lived up to any of them. In the era of separate chassis, of course, Aston's hands were somewhat tied – if an owner wanted to fit a different body, then so be it. The same applied if they wanted to go motor racing.

But the company sometimes had offbeat moments all of its own, producing gloriously bizarre models that might not have won any beauty contests but nevertheless showed an interest in looking to the future and pushing the boundaries. So, while you can read about the fabled DB line and reflect on the company's motor-racing glory elsewhere, let's take a moment to celebrate the less well-known and slightly more leftfield Astons.

ARNOLT SPIDER

Stanley Harold 'Wacky' Arnolt first met Nuccio Bertone at the 1952 Turin Motor Show. The relationship began with the Arnolt-MG but, in 1954, three Spiders were created on Aston Martin DB2/4 chassis, using the standard suspension and 2922cc straight-six. The car pictured is chassis LML 505, which made its debut at that year's New York Motor Show. It shares much with another Franco Scaglione design that Arnolt also commissioned from Bertone – the Arnolt-Bristol.

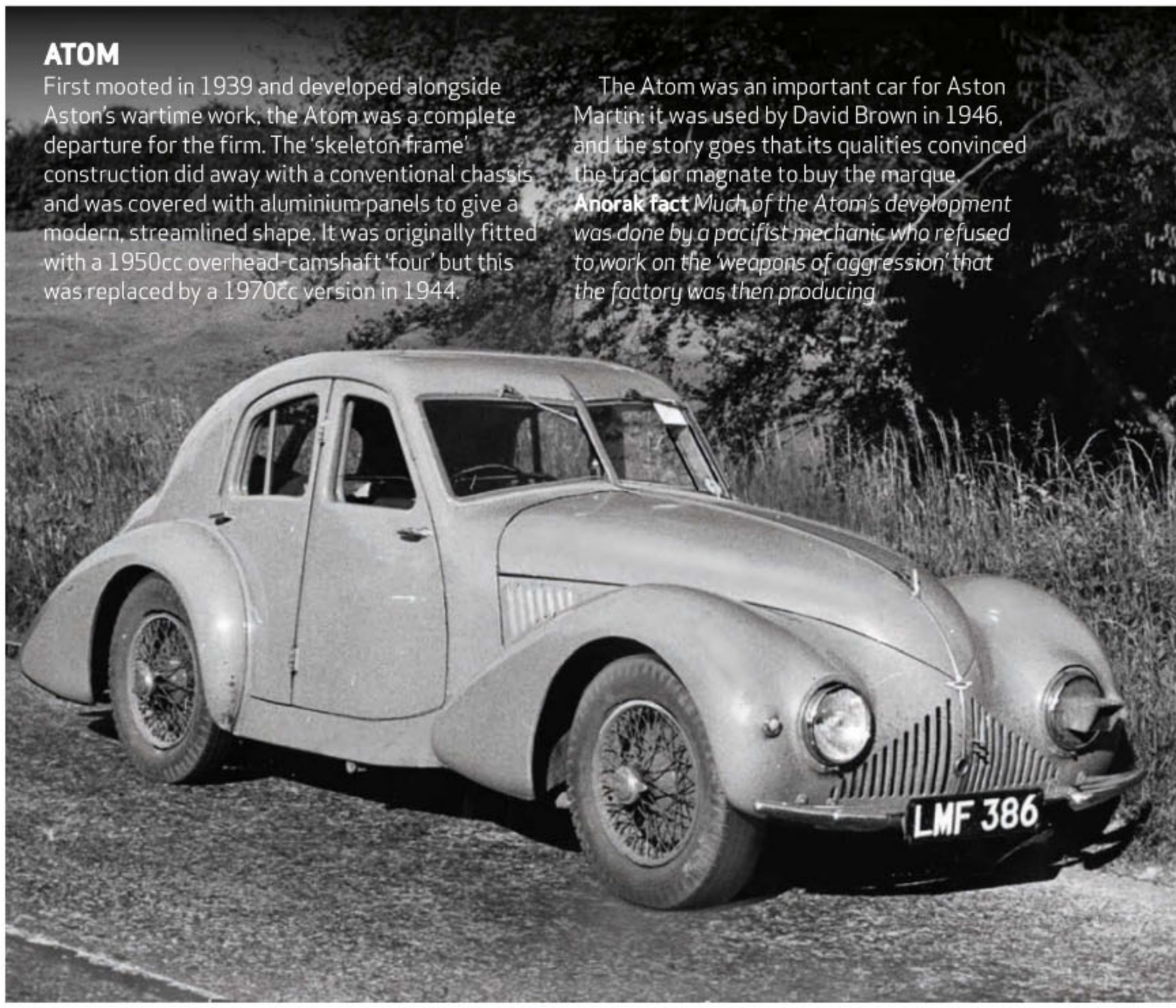
Anorak fact *Two Dropheads were also built before Aston stopped supplying chassis*

ATOM

First mooted in 1939 and developed alongside Aston's wartime work, the Atom was a complete departure for the firm. The 'skeleton frame' construction did away with a conventional chassis and was covered with aluminium panels to give a modern, streamlined shape. It was originally fitted with a 1950cc overhead-camshaft 'four' but this was replaced by a 1970cc version in 1944.

The Atom was an important car for Aston Martin: it was used by David Brown in 1946, and the story goes that its qualities convinced the tractor magnate to buy the marque.

Anorak fact *Much of the Atom's development was done by a pacifist mechanic who refused to work on the 'weapons of aggression' that the factory was then producing*



DBS ESTATE

A number of Astons have been made into shooting brakes over the years. Harold Radford's conversions on the DB5 and DB6 were perhaps the most elegant, certainly more so than Aston's own Virage. FLM Panelcraft built three DB6 estates, as well as this one-off DBS version. It was ordered new in 1971 via London dealership HR Owen by a Scottish laird who wanted a suitably aristocratic car to use on fishing trips. It featured split rear seats to accommodate the fishing gear, a roof-rack and even a leaping salmon mascot, which is sadly long gone.

Anorak fact *The rear side glass was bespoke, but a Hillman Hunter tailgate was used*

BULLDOG

This utterly bonkers machine was more of a testbed than a concept – *Autocar* even evaluated it at MIRA – but it sadly remained a one-off. Work on the Bulldog began in early 1978 under the direction of Mike Loasby (who would later leave to join De Lorean) and William Towns. The car used aluminium panels on a backbone chassis, the latter meaning that there was no need for sills – lift the gullwing doors and the entire lower section of the car raises with them.

Power came from a mid-mounted, twin-turbocharged 5.3-litre V8 that was claimed to give almost 600bhp, while the interior was an intriguing blend of leather and liquid-crystal displays. And it might look as though it should have pop-up headlamps, but instead its front panel dropped to reveal a menacing line of five halogen units behind.

Anorak fact *Towns had apparently wanted the instruments to be arranged above the windscreen, but was overruled*

RHAM/1

Independent specialist Robin Hamilton started off with a standard DBS V8 that was gradually modified beyond all recognition – enough that its chassis number was changed to RHAM/1. The factory helped with access to facilities so that the engine and body upgrades could be tested, but a lack of money meant that Hamilton's goal of racing at Le Mans remained out of reach. In 1977, however, an injection of sponsorship enabled the team to finally head to La Sarthe, where the car finished 17th overall. It returned two years later, but the engine failed in the early stages of the race.

Anorak fact *In 1980, RHAM/1 was used to set a new Land Speed Record for towing a caravan, at 124mph*

DB3/6

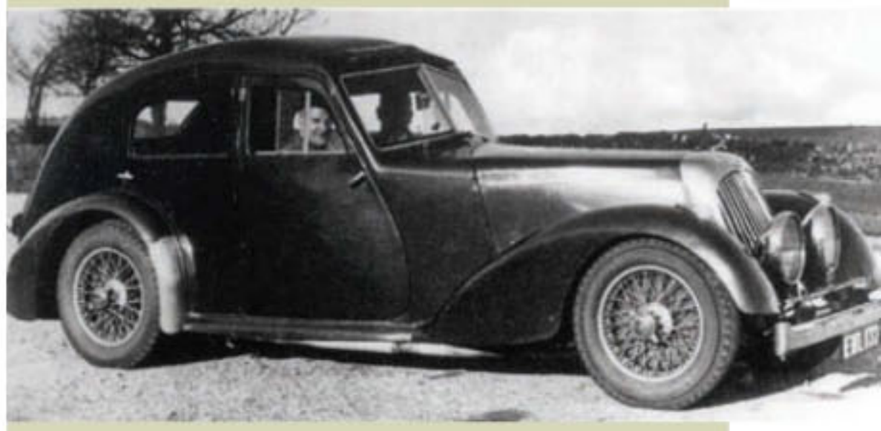
Some 'interesting' bodies have been fitted to DB3s over the years, but surely none has suffered in quite the same way as chassis DB3/6. In the mid-1950s, its engine was commandeered for use in a DB2, but it received a most acceptable replacement in the form of a Jaguar C-type unit. It later gained a two-tone fixed-head body with ungainly chrome (below), but obviously that wasn't absurd enough because it was further altered with the addition of gullwing doors and a third, centrally positioned headlamp.

Anorak fact *The rolling chassis for DB3/6 (less body) was sold by Christie's for £185k in '89. The remains were then restored into their original DB3 form*

OGLE SOTHEBY SPECIAL

Built for the 1972 Montreal show, the Sotheby was bankrolled by Wills cigarettes and named after its latest brand. Beneath its Ogle-designed GRP skin lay a DBS V8, but there were design flourishes everywhere. The 22 tail-lights included sequential indicators and the harder you pressed the brake, the more lights lit up. Inside, there was a primitive head-up display. A second car was built for 60-year-old widow Mary Agate. To celebrate its completion, she hired Silverstone to put it through its paces.

Anorak fact *The original car was resprayed in cigarette livery and presented to Graham Hill*



'DONALD DUCK'

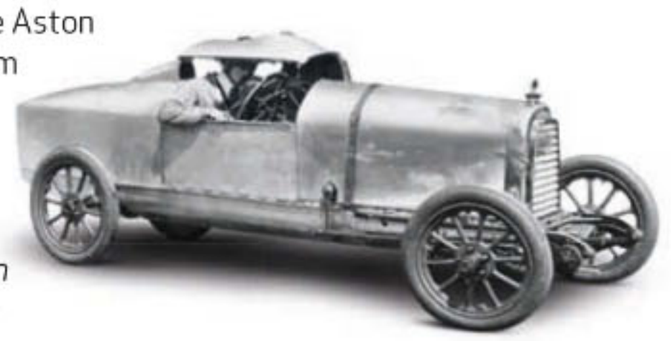
Aston Martin was clearly in experimental mood in the late 1930s, and before the Atom came this ungainly effort, developed by Claude Hill and Gordon Sutherland. It was based on the first 2 Litre saloon, which had been shown at the 1936 Earls Court Motor Show. The body was removed and a new frame was mounted on the chassis. The square section of that structure meant that contours were limited, and the body's awkward lines led to its nickname. It was quick, though, reaching 90mph over half a mile at Brooklands.

Anorak fact *The car featured a form of through-flow ventilation via an opening rear window and air intakes on the roof*

'RAZOR BLADE'

This single-seater was created to wrestle from AC the one-hour light-car record of 101.39mph, and beneath the aluminium bodywork was a 1½-litre twin-overhead-camhaft engine. Drivers of Adrian Newey's claustrophobic early F1 designs would no doubt have sympathised with 'Sammy' Davis as he set off at Brooklands in 1923 on the unsuccessful attempt – the Aston was only 47cm across at its widest point.

Anorak fact *The car was initially known as the Oyster*



CYGNET

Aston folk can bleat on all they like about how the bespoke interior uses the same number of hides as can be found in a DB9, or how it shares only a roof panel with the Toyota iQ on which it is based. The fact is, the Cygnet is a £30,000, 1.3-litre supermini, produced to cut the firm's average emissions. It may not be the worst car to wear the badge, but there is surely a very good case for it being the least credible.

Anorak fact *You can buy Cygnet gloves for £230*

By Royal appointment

The heir to the throne so loves Astons that he had a model named after him. **Alastair Clements** drives a rare 'PoW'-spec Volante

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/AMHT/REX**


AI AVV

Neat raked tail and badged vents betray Vantage spec, but full bodykit is gone; wheelarches subtly flared like Charles' DB6 Mk2

In recent years, Charles Philip Arthur George Windsor – Prince Charles to you and me – has made no secret of his passion for Aston Martin. It became very public after newlyweds Wills and Kate trundled down the Mall in Daddy's DB6 Mk2, and it emerged that the Queen and Duke had gifted the Vantage-spec Volante to the longest-serving heir apparent in British history for his 21st birthday. But it is rather less well known that the Prince was also responsible for a limited-production model, a car that became known internally and to collectors as the 'Prince of Wales'. The car you see here.

Kingsley Riding-Felce, today MD of Aston Martin Works, was UK sales manager in 1978 when he first became responsible for looking after Charles' beloved DB6. "He isn't a concours man – he used the car a lot and by 1980 he had done plenty of miles so we restored it," recalls Riding-Felce. "He's a brilliant owner – he loves his cars, he is sympathetic and is a very good driver, having been taught by Jackie Stewart.

"Then in 1986 he went to the Middle East and visited the Emir of Bahrain, Sheikh Isa bin Salman Al-Khalifa. It was the Prince's birthday, so the Emir requested that he be allowed to purchase an Aston Martin as a gift for his friend." On the Prince's return, Riding-Felce was dispatched to Clarence House to discuss options, with the heir asking the Newport Pagnell works to match the British Racing Green of his Bentley – a yellower hue than the firm's own BRG – with Mushroom hide, green carpets and a manual gearbox – "he won't buy anything else".

So far, so good. Except that the Prince would, of course, want another Volante, because he prefers to drive to the polo field with the roof down. And he would want the mighty 400bhp Vantage version of the V8 – who wouldn't? The only problem was that the new Vantage Volante looked as if it had ram-raided a car-accessories store and made off with every spoiler on the shelves. For a man with such strong views on aesthetics, the bodykit must have appeared as a monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much-loved friend…

Says Riding-Felce: "The Vantage we made was fantastic, but too flash. I knew he wouldn't want it. So, with the engineering team, we set out to build a version that would meet his requirements." The wheelarches were flared to accommodate the Vantage's wider rubber, the grille reverted to mesh, a tail spoiler was integrated into the bodywork, the side skirts made way for polished finishers, plus a unique – and functional – front spoiler was styled to look as close as possible to that of the standard car.

Yet far more than mere cosmetics, this car was about the details, those special thoughtful touches that would make the Prince know that it had been built just for him. "While we'd had his DB6 in for servicing, I'd noticed that he kept a jar in the glovebox full of sugar lumps for his polo horses," says Riding-Felce. "We wanted to make his V8 a bit more personal, so we put in a large central box with racks for his cassettes, then made a special mounting for a jar that we trimmed in leather with 'HRH' on the top, and filled with sugar lumps. He also liked to have somewhere to put his sunglasses and he didn't smoke so we took out the ashtray and raised the centre console to make a storage cubby for them, with the switches recessed in front. We knew that he liked the steering wheel in his DB6, so fitted a Nardi wood-rim

Prince Charles and Princess Di in DB6 at the polo in '82…

…and, er, at the polo again in 1988 driving his V8 Vantage


Prince Harry enjoys a ride in his dad's 6.3-litre Virage, 1998

item with black spokes, and matched the timber of the dashboard and the gearknob to it."

Once MI5 had stashed its obligatory communications gear in the boot, chassis 15581 could be delivered – personally, by Riding-Felce – to Sandringham on 17 July 1987: "He was delighted with the car, coming to visit the factory soon after [February 1988], when we presented him with a miniature version for William and Harry." This 'Volante Junior' was a twin for Charles' car – except that the jar in the centre console was filled with Smarties rather than sugar lumps.

That could have been the end of the story, an indulgent sideline for a very special customer, but such a desirable machine was unlikely to go unnoticed – even in-house. "When Victor Gauntlett saw it, he loved the spec and ordered one for himself in Balmoral Green with Tan hide," recalls Riding-Felce. "Kent Monk wrote on the production sheet 'Build to PoW spec' and that's how it became known. Another gentleman who knew the Prince then saw the V8 and asked us to build him one, and it went from there. It was a great car, a real wolf in sheep's clothing."

Eight years and 46,000 miles later, the Prince decided to replace the Vantage with a Virage Volante, in the same colour combination and with a 6.3-litre engine upgrade, auctioning the older car to raise £115,000 for The Prince's Charities Foundation. Opinions vary on the total number of 'official' PoWs that were (unofficially) produced, and there have been plenty of imitators, but factory records confirm the total at 26. Chassis 15737 is one of the more original survivors, in the definitive colour combination of Balmoral with Tan, and looks perfectly at home parked outside the Royal Automobile Club's Woodcote Park. Australia-based Brit Mike Smith has owned A1 AVV for a decade: "My brother-in-law had one in the mid-'90s; I remember going for a drive and thinking 'this is the car'. I was on the lookout after that but it took a few years to find one. Then, in 2003, I was on leave in the UK and my brother-in-law called to tell me that it was for sale with Nicholas Mee. I went over, and the rest is history."

Smith also owns a DB4, a V600 and a Virage Volante, but the 'PoW' is his favourite: "It's a brilliant thing. I love the balance between power, understatement and presence. I take it to the south of France a couple of times a year and it's perfect on those roads. I could never get rid of it – my brother-in-law did and he still regrets it!"

See a PoW at rest, even in a car park as well-heeled as this private members' golf club, and you can see the appeal. It isn't pretty – the anachronistic hood stowage and cartoon-like bonnet hump put paid to that – but it is handsome in a musclebound way. In 1987 it must have been a welcome dash of subtlety in a sea of '80s excess – not that any Volante is a shrinking violet. Certainly not when you start it up. Once the 5340cc V8 is warm it needs a good few churns on the starter before it erupts with a thunderous cackle, vibrating menacingly at idle.

It's a car that takes time to get under your skin, however. As we pull out of RS Williams' workshops into commuterville Cobham's rush hour, the 65lb ft of effort the clutch pedal requires soon gets wearing, the dogleg ZF 'box seems

Pram-style hood marrs V8's thrusting profile, but discreet sill finishers and bumpers add a delicacy absent on most Vantages

Mighty quad-Weber V8 (this example built by Mike Beach)

Nardi steering wheel replaces standard car's two-spoke

Aston Martin history part 2
David Brown and Newport Pagnell

1947 Engineering supremo David Brown buys AM, adding Lagonda a few months later to form Aston Martin Lagonda
1948 2-Litre Sports (DB1) wins at Spa
1949 DB2 arrives. Evolves into DB2/4 and DB MkIII. Team boss John Wyer joins AM; DB3 and DB3S racers follow
1954 Brown buys Tickford Motor Bodies in Newport Pagnell. Production begins to migrate to Buckinghamshire
1958 140mph DB4 launched, with Tadek Marek's 3.7-litre 'six', chassis by Harold Beach and Superleggera body by Touring
1959 AM enters Grand Prix racing with outdated and unsuccessful DBR4, but DBR1 wins Le Mans and seals the WSCC

1960 Short-wheelbase, 314bhp twin-plug DB4GT introduced for racing, ultimately evolving into the streamlined 'Project' cars. AM begins association with Zagato and the DB4GTZ is launched in 1961
1963 4-litre DB5 replaces 4. A year later, Sean Connery drives the DB5 in *Goldfinger*, the first of many AM 'Bond cars'. Radford builds 12 shooting brakes
1965 Kamm-tail DB6 replaces the DB5; Mk2 follows in '69; convertible version introduces the 'Volante' name
1967 William Towns-styled DBS brings a fresh look and de Dion rear suspension
1969 Tadek Marek's 5340cc V8 arrives in the DBS V8. Evolves into the V8 S2 in 1972, with high-performance Vantage (from '77), Volante ('78), Zagato ('84) and a limited run of four-door Lagondas

1972 David Brown sells AM and Company Developments takes control
1975 Firm is sold by the Receiver to Peter Sprague and George Minden
1976 Towns' 'wedge' Lagonda launched
1980 AM bought by Tim Hearley's CH Industrial and Victor Gauntlett's Pace Petroleum
1984 Automotive Industrial briefly takes over, but Gauntlett and Peter Livanos buy AM back
For part 3, the later years, see p194

V8 VANTAGE VOLANTE 'PoW'

Sold/number built 1987-'89/26
Construction tubular steel chassis, steel superstructure with aluminium panels
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5340cc V8, four Weber 48IDF carburettors
Max power 400bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque not quoted
Transmission five-speed ZF manual, driving rear wheels via LSD
Suspension: front double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle with trailing arms, Watt linkage; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering Adwest power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** discs, with servo
Wheels & tyres 16in alloys & 255/50 VR16s
Length 15ft 3¼in (4655mm)
Width 6ft (1829mm)
Height 4ft 6in (1371mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 7¾in (2635mm)
Weight 4009lb (1818kg)
0-60mph 5.4 secs
0-100mph 12.2 secs
Top speed 160mph **Mpg** 13.4
Price new £93,500 (1987)

laboured and the firmly sprung Vantage pogos around on the rutted streets – heightening the nervousness brought on by this car's sheer bulk. Pick up speed, though, and it starts to make a lot more sense. It never quite sheds that sense of scale, but it does feel remarkably wieldy, with fine balance and enough suppleness to avoid it being upset by mid-corner bumps and lumps.

You might expect dragster pace – and it's certainly quick – but it's far more refined and grown-up than that, with great gobs of power throughout the rev range, building as an ocean swell rather than with any sudden surge. The gearbox smooths out with revs, slicing through its five ratios with a meaty mechanical precision. And all the while there's that truly glorious noise, a rich timbre that's all engine unlike today's exhaust-tuned Astons, which sound blood-curdling enough but lack the hearty authenticity of Tadek Marek's deep-lunged quad-cam unit. It seems only right that the vast power bulge to accommodate its four Weber carbs and their airbox should so dominate the view ahead.

From within, this is a very special place to be. You might spot the odd bit of borrowed switch-gear, but it feels carefully put together, with its deeply padded leather chairs and extra headrest pillows. It's easy to picture yourself pointing that prow south, and carrying on until you hit Cannes. On the *autoroute* it'll burble along at the legal limit registering 2500rpm, with dollops of effortless overtaking pace at the ready.

This car might not turn you into a Prince, any more than kissing a frog will. Yet in catering to the discreet tastes of one man, Aston Martin not only demonstrated its ability to create bespoke jewels, but also built the most desirable V8 in the model's two-decade production run.

Thanks to *RS Williams (01932 868377; www.rswilliams.co.uk); Royal Automobile Club (www.royalautomobileclub.co.uk)*

The raised centre console allows for sunglasses storage

Clear hood switches; wheelarch lips cover 16in Ronal rims

Bespoke front spoiler for 'PoW' cars, and face does without Vantage blanking plate. Creases above grille hint at DB predecessors

“THE SPECIALIST TOLD ME THE DAMP SMELL WAS BECAUSE THE SILLS WERE ROTTEN. I DIDN’T KNOW WHAT SILLS WERE, BUT HE SAID IT WOULD COST £50,000 TO REPAIR”

When Ossi Bashiri’s new Lagonda needed a bit of TLC, it soon turned into a labour of love – and money. **Martin Buckley** meets him

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

This is the story of one man’s mission to update, improve and sensitively contemporise a 1983 Aston Martin Lagonda. The man in question – music publisher Ossi Bashiri – did not set out to create a better ‘wedge’, but somehow got caught up in a project that gained its own momentum, the end result being the vision in white that you see here.

For Bashiri, the William Towns-styled, razor-edged four-door supersaloon – one of 625 built from 1976-’90 – was a childhood dream car. “The reason I liked it was that England footballer John Barnes had one,” he explains. “I saw him drive up to an interview in it and sit on the bonnet. It’s all about the looks: it’s a prototype that they had the balls to put into production. When I was coming up to my 40th, I decided that I had to have one.” Bashiri, who’s originally from Wimbledon but now lives in Sweden, was brought up on futuristic ’70s television series such as *UFO* and *Space: 1999*. The ‘hard disc’ font of the Lagonda’s numberplate (for shows only, really) is his homage to that. Interestingly, he has no time for the post-’87 ‘soft-edged’ cars: “For me, that was its fat Elvis Vegas period.”

"Champagne and truffles" retrim was a return to the simplicity of William Towns' original show car

Bashiri first encountered his Lagonda two years ago at a dealer, and bought it unseen over the phone: "My heart missed a beat when I saw it. It looked fantastic even then. I drove back down the M1 on a steaming-hot day and had to have the windows down because the air-con was not working. In a traffic jam on the M1, people were saying, 'Nice car mate!' I thought 'this feels good', although it was like a mobile sauna."

He had the V8 tuned and the air-conditioning fixed by an Aston specialist, then went straight off to a Lagonda meeting in Switzerland: "Dad went with me because he hadn't seen much of Europe. We made it to Switzerland and to Monte-Carlo fine, but it stank of damp inside."

Back in the UK, Bashiri mentioned the musty smell: "They told me it was because the sills were rotten. I didn't even know what sills were, but they said it would cost £50,000 to repair them!" Presumably the specialist didn't want the work, but, as with so many of these cars, the alloy panels can give a misleading impression of the largely unprotected steel structure beneath. Bashiri was informed that his best course of action was to take the Lagonda to Aston breaker Puddleduck in Warwickshire: "I was told that they'd give me some money for the car for spares, and at least I'd had some fun with it. But when I took it to Julian Wharton in November 2006 he said 'this car is actually good – the floors are ok'."

"THE HANDLING IS INCREDIBLE, AS IF IT'S ON RAILS, BUT THE CAR IS SO WIDE THAT IT'S LIKE DRIVING A BOAT"

Puddleduck's prices aren't millionaire prices, so Bashiri went ahead and had the sills and the boot floor repaired. But then it began to escalate: there was a paint-job and an upgrade to a modern ZF four-speed auto. There were also a lot of electrical issues with the car, which is where Mike Taylor of Lotus Bits in Marton comes into the story: "Mike had already restored an Esprit Turbo for me and, although he's not a Lagonda specialist – his focus is anything with the Lotus 900-series twin-cam – he agreed to take it on."

The ambitious solid-state digital dashboards on these cars – part *Space Invaders*, part Amstrad computer – were always troublesome but, having worked on Nissans for six years, Taylor found the systems pretty basic. "The big latching relays are the main problem," he explains, "but I sourced some modern Japanese relays that are good for a million cycles. Lucas electrics were not designed to last 30 years, but you can sort them with modern improvements and make them reliable – it just takes time and patience."

For a while, it seemed as if the four-cam V8 wasn't going to need any work. When it started depositing a lot of oil from the rear crank seal, however, the decision was taken to remove and rebuild it with the help of Chris Tolman Motorsport, located on-site at Marton. "We re-ringed it, but it was in unbelievably good condition inside," says Tolman. "We re-used the original main bearings because they were unworn. Aston Martin can still supply all the parts off the shelf, which is impressive." Having worked on Mitsubishi WRC and Ford BTCC engines, Tolman – with the help of a workshop manual – found that the Aston V8 represented no particular problems. He also shot-blasted, powder-coated and rebuilt the Lagonda's suspension.

Bashiri confessed to being underwhelmed by the car's brakes, so Taylor developed an upgrade for the front, with 360mm rotors and engraved six-pot calipers. You can see all of this pretty work between the spokes of the OZ Racing 35th Anniversary 19in wheels. They are very non-standard, of course, but look strangely at home and on low-profile rubber give the same rolling radius as the original wheel/tyre combination.

Inside, Bashiri wanted to bring back the flavour of Towns' original prototype, with plain expanses of leather and without the contrasting

Clockwise, from right: the techno-marvel dashboard is still a delight; 19in rims needed to clear vast 14in brake rotors; all-alloy V8 uses every one of its circa 300bhp to haul Lagonda to its 145mph maximum; low-profile tyres don't ruin ride; headrest logos are a subtle addition

piping that always looked fussy. The trimmer has discreetly embossed Lagonda badges on the head restraints and there is very contemporary Zebra wood on the fascia and door cappings. Combined with an Alcantara finish on the dash – "Again similar to the show car, and the colours reminded me of champagne and truffles!" – the effect is tasteful and luxurious, if not strictly original. All of the touch-sensitive switches now work as they should and the seats adjust silently on electric motors. There were problems with the driver's door flying open on corners, but Taylor sourced a latch from a similar car so it now closes properly. He also got the mirrors working and gave the dash a cleaner look by relocating the radio to the central armrest.

The day of our photo session also happens to be the first time that Bashiri has driven the finished car. He is obviously delighted as we rumble out for its maiden voyage: "I call it 'White Lightning' because it's the slowest thing I've ever driven off the mark. The handling is incredible, like it's on rails, but at the same time the car is so wide that it's like driving a boat."

The single-spoke wheel is dwarfed by the looming instrument pod, where the LED display that so fascinated visitors to the 1976 Earls Court Show flickers away as it should. You feel low-slung, looking out over a massive bonnet, but for such a huge car there is remarkably little room in the back. Even 5.3 litres of Aston V8 can't work miracles with 2.7 tons of Lagonda, and the big white wedge simply wafts forward with a sweet rumble, its gearchanges undetectable but for the slur of the engine note. Taylor is hatching plans for an injection system that should endow the Lagonda with a bit more spirit off the mark, but it is pleasantly high-geared and the ZF's fourth ratio has given the car mpg potential in the mid-20s if driven gently, says Bashiri.

The low-profile tyres have had no detrimental effect on the supple, finely graded ride. With big gaps around the door frames there's some wind noise, but as Ossi says you can always play the hi-fi and it is generally a relaxing car to drive. There is nothing sauna-like about the atmosphere inside now, either, just the sweet smell of fresh leather and a pleasant chill from the air-conditioning, recently revitalised by Jaguar specialist David Marks – who has also become something of a guru for Lagonda dashboards. He has developed a superb upgrade for the post-'85 CRT-type dash, where information is projected onto three tiny TV screens.

As you might expect, none of this has been cheap. "People say you can buy one of these for £15,000," says Bashiri. "You can: I did. But what they don't tell you is that you keep paying instalments of £15k to get it right!" Still, I think he's enjoyed himself in a funny sort of way.

Serious wedge

Bashiri's is a cautionary tale for anyone thinking of taking a punt on a Lagonda. Although the car looked smart, it needed a near-total rebuild that went on to take three years and cost more than £120,000. Not that Ossi takes it too seriously: 24 hours after our shoot he was off to Belgium for a Lagonda meet, where he was to present a 'White Lightning Cup' to any owner crazy enough to have embarked on a similar money-pit project.

The superficially sound 'White Lightning' as bought…

…a 'quick tidy' soon turned into a bare-metal respray

Once stripped, V8 was found to be in amazing fettle

Nissan experience helped Taylor to resolve LED dash

Taylor developed bespoke brakes with six-pot calipers

AT THE SHARP END

Andrew Roberts meets Rodger Dudding, the man whose remarkable 320-strong car collection includes no fewer than 21 'wedge' Lagondas

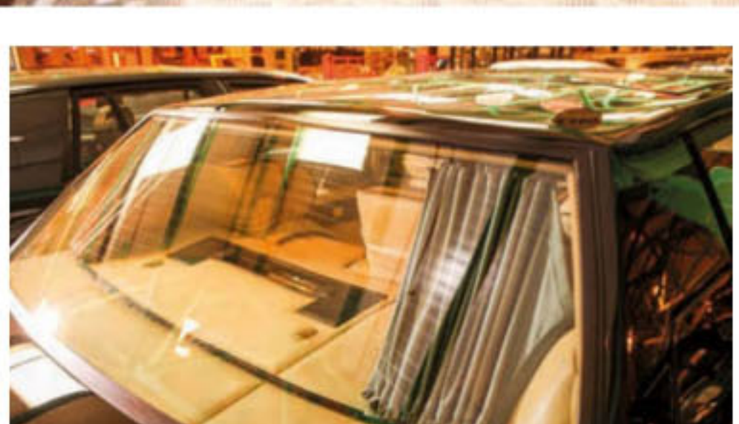
PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

No matter how many times you may have read about the diverse array of vehicles stored at Studio 434, nothing prepares you for the visceral sensation of encountering the collection in the metal. This is in part because there is little or no external fanfare, for the exterior of the building is so unassuming that any motorist in Potters Bar might have thought that it was a warehouse in a general way of business. Then they might have noticed the *über*-1970s Buick straight out of *The Streets of San Francisco* or – even more noticeable – the right-hand-drive 1966 Citroën DS convertible that featured in *Classic & Sports Car* in October 2015. And these are merely the first signs of what is to come.

You then enter through an innocuous-looking doorway, only to experience what Studio 434 describes as a 'Classic collection spanning over 100 years of motoring with cars from all decades of the past century' – although, in fact, the cumulative effect is akin to experiencing a virtual reality of several past Earls Court shows. As soon as your eye is taken by a Ford Consul Capri GT that looks as though it should be *en route* to a concert by Johnny Kidd & The Pirates, you are diverted by a Fiat 600D – the car that revolutionised transport in post-war Italy.

On the second floor, the visitor is confronted by further automotive gems – namely the world's largest collection of Lagonda 'wedges' in private ownership. There are 21 examples of the magnificent vehicle that Rodger Dudding, the proprietor and custodian of the collection, describes as "the ultimate Marmite car – people do love it or hate it". He adds: "I used to have 23, but I recently sold two to a friend who is an Aston Martin aficionado. He was originally going to buy one but, like me, he thought that a Lagonda needs to be kept company. I have first refusal should he ever want to part with them, however."

There are still enough Series II, III and IV models – the Series I was the 1974-'76 four-door version of the DBS – to span the history of the controversial Lagonda. The earliest dates from the mid-'70s; the most recent was the last wedge to leave the factory on 18 May 1990. Dudding gives us a running précis of the key details of each car: "The Series II was made from 1976 to '85, and by the time it was replaced by the Series III, Aston Martin had refined the formula and ironed out the early problems. The Series IV doesn't have the pop-up headlamps and, as you can see, the body was slightly altered with softened contours. I think that the choice of colour also affects how they are perceived."



From top: wedge line-up is headed by the final V8 Lagonda built; neat rear blinds of the extended-wheelbase Tickford model alongside; Series II version finished in rare bright red

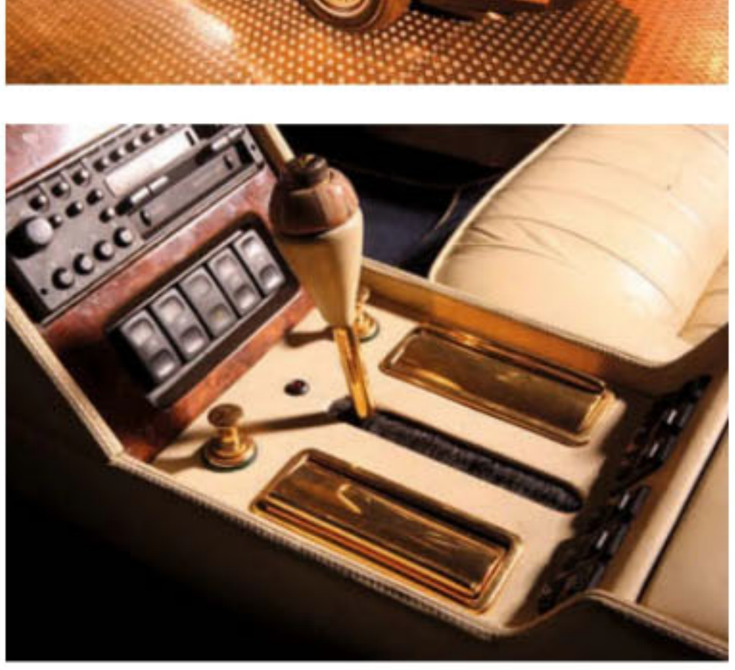
Dudding started his career as a systems engineer – "I was trained in the Royal Navy" – and, in the early '70s, he famously devised the Lonsto Queue Management Systems ticketing machine that was soon found in supermarkets across the land. He then expanded into the lock-up garage business and, circa 1983/'84, Dudding acquired his first wedge: "My late wife said 'that looks horrible' and it was prone to throwing hissy fits."

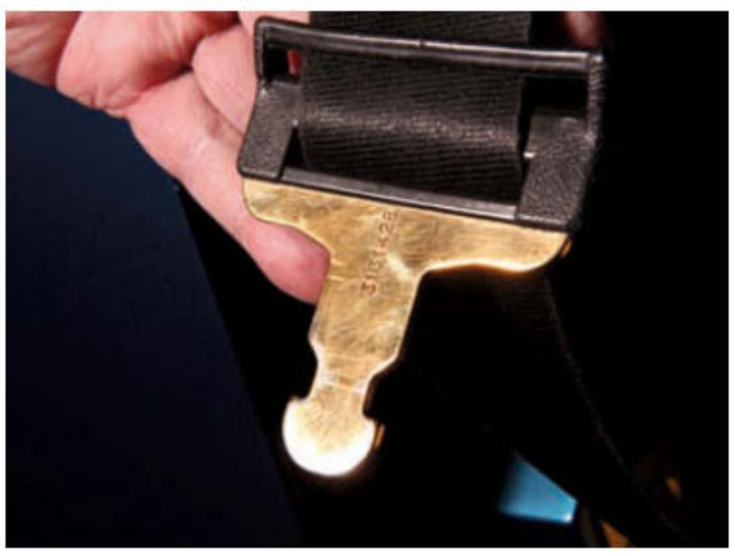
That car had to be sold, but Dudding had started to collect Lagondas by the mid-'80s: "When I first saw one at the launch, I just fell in love with it. Aston Martin could have played it safe, but, with that timeless William Towns coachwork, it tried to invent its own tradition for the luxury saloon. It is a car created with a clean sheet of paper and one that really was a brave step for the company. For too many years, it was as if the wedge was totally neglected – almost airbrushed from history. For a long time, they seemed to fall into the hands of people who did not understand them. Today, at long last, the Lagonda seems to be coming into its own."

Such enthusiasm does not blind Dudding to the wedge's challenges: "This was the first car to feature computer management and a digital instrument panel, and it is fair to say that it was over-complex. Without equivocation, I would say that rewiring can be a nightmare. It has been suggested that the Californian sunshine affected the pressure-sensitive switches, although I am not sure how this would apply to the wedges driven in the British climate." The electronic controllers were developed by National Semiconductor in Santa Clara and Dudding notes that "there is a small rocket-ship motif in the circuit board at either end of the fascia, which I thought was a very nice touch".

It is a complete impossibility for Dudding to select a car of the day, and you suspect that every Lagonda is his favourite. As he rightly observes, "The wedge looks purposeful even when parked," plus the diversity of Series and paint finishes does lend each car an individual persona: "The colours make such a difference with the Lagonda." The name of the former owner of one car prompts a double-take because it was the property of Dodi Al Fayed and, incredibly, I even meet a Lagonda that I had previously seen in the metal back in 1982. At that time, this wedge was on display at the Motor Show where it was a machine to be admired from afar by a member of the hoi polloi. Then there is a former AML press car dating from '81 and a selection of the notable Tickford version, which made its debut at the '83 London Motorfair in order to tempt any show-goer with a surplus of funds. Dudding remarks: "For an extra £40,000, you could have one of these with a television set, a cocktail cabinet and all of the extra equipment that a business executive of the 1980s could have required."

The Tickford Lagonda can be distinguished from the 'standard' (if such a word will suffice) wedge by its rear valance, side skirts and front airdam – with an end result that is on the cusp between aggressive and formidable. A small number of Tickfords were specified on an extended wheelbase – "the term 'long wheelbase' was not commonly used at the factory" – and Dudding owns one of six left-hand-drive





From top: sumptuous interior; plaque confirms it's the last one; sparkling blue car boasts extensive gold-plated details; Silver Wraith II, with XK fhc and Bentley R-type drophead

versions and one of just four right-hookers. One detail of the EWB is a vertically divided rear door window that seems reminiscent of the Renault R8, although it is unlikely that a dealer would have pointed this out to a customer who was about to spend a six-figure sum on a new Tickford. As Dudding puts it, the extra length means that: "There is plenty of room, but there's little difference when you take the wheel."

The effect of experiencing the Lagonda wedge *en masse* is more than overwhelming, but my favourite is possibly E630 WOK. Even when at rest indoors, its blue coachwork seems to catch the light slightly more than the others and Dudding succinctly provides the reason: "It is heavily gold-plated." Then you notice that the wheels are not merely re-coloured alloys and, once you've overcome that mild shock, it is time to take stock of the cigarette lighter, doorhandles, ashtrays, gear-selector knob and the centre console lock. They're all gold-plated, too. My favourite touch is probably the seatbelt buckles. Of all the Lagondas in the Dudding fleet, this is the one that arguably comes closest to the stereotypical image of the car as transport for the 1980s jetset. As he points out: "The car had to succeed in appealing to those buyers because it was so profitable for Aston Martin. I've spoken to people who used to work in the factory and they told me that the wedge's sales to that market sector were essential to the company."

This is an oft-neglected aspect of the Lagonda's story – that, despite its early technical challenges, it was a very expensive motor car that helped to provide the development funds for future Aston sports models. E630 WOK is therefore not merely a glorious vision of '80s excess, but a crucial vehicle in the history of one of Britain's most famous marques. Still, it must be said that if you do not hear a certain John Barry/Anthony Newley/Leslie Bricusse-penned James Bond theme tune when seeing this vision

"THE FF, WITH ITS FOUR-WHEEL DRIVE AND ANTI-LOCK BRAKES, WAS AS REVOLUTIONARY AS THE WEDGE"

From top: there's an FF from each of three series, plus a Mk3 Cooper 'S' and a pair of Porsche 356s; lots of model cars; Lotus M250 concept surrounded by classic motorcycles

of excess, then you are a better person than I.

Dudding is a fervent believer in driving the Lagondas. "This may sound like a cliché," he says, "but I do think that life is for living." And he is one of the few people to have frequently rallied a wedge: "They are, quite simply, super long-distance luxury vehicles. The chassis is so well designed; in some cars you have to take a corner at 30-40mph, say, but with the Lagonda you can accomplish that at 70. The aerodynamics of the body are so good that there is no buffeting and you can have a quiet conversation with your passengers when you are travelling at 130mph. And, of course, the ride is superb, which is quite a consideration if you suffer from back problems." As for the times when he uses a wedge in the UK: "They always cause a sensation."

Alas, it is time to depart Studio 434, a realm where an AC 428 Fastback and an Austin A40 Somerset are equally at home with a VW Type 34 Karmann-Ghia. Indeed, on the same floor as the Lagondas is a handsome A90 Atlantic – "it was a brave attempt at a car for the US market, but the buyers really demanded six cylinders" – and more modern Bentleys. Nor does the Dudding menagerie ignore two-wheeled transport, or vehicles without any form of engine at all. An Austin J40 pedal-car occupies a corner of the building and there is a choice selection of classic motorcycles, including a 48-cylinder record-breaker. In fact, there is a charming example of automotive history wherever you look. Above our heads hang vintage London street signs and, on a ledge, there is a diecast model of the Citroën 15-Six Traction Avant: "The *Maigret* car." Dudding also owns a Hustler 6 Space Shuttle, the six-wheeled version of the Towns-designed, Mini-based buggy.

Each Studio 434 vehicle is of equal importance, from the Austin Seven military scout car to the TVR Tuscan, but while Dudding has more than one example of some models – the Land-Rover and Rolls-Royce Corniche for example – the Lagondas seem to provide a focal point to the collection. He is passionate about the car that for so many years was regarded as a controversial product, and sees it as one of a line of ground-breaking British luxury machines: "The Jensen FF, with its four-wheel drive and anti-lock brakes, was as revolutionary as the wedge, and I regard the Bentley Continental T as a unique motor car. Then there is the Rolls-Royce Wraith that I bought myself last November as an early birthday present."

The future for Studio 434 involves an expansion of the collection and Dudding muses on how the wedge could be easily adapted for the present day: "Towns' concept is so fundamentally right that it would not need much updating. I would suggest extending the wheelbase, plus fitting front suicide doors for elegance and for ease of access, then you would have the ideal luxury car for the present day." And it does make you wonder whether, if Rodger Dudding had been a part of the Aston Martin team during the development of the Lagonda, the wedge would have endured any problems at all.

Thanks to *Rodger Dudding, Kim Jones, Luis Santos and everyone at Studio 434: 01707 642514; www.studio434.co.uk*

IRRESISTIBLE FORCE

Malcolm Thorne tries to choose between a brace of stunning supersaloons – the Aston Martin Lagonda and Bentley Turbo R

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**


L119 RAR

With nigh-on two and a quarter tonnes of aristocratic behemoth closing on the dreary hatchback hogging the middle lane, my mind conjures a vision of a latter-day Mr Toad. He reaches impatiently for the horn, a strident blast dispatching the dawdler to his rightful place in the pecking order as he roars past. The imagery somehow fits and, had Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in The Willows* been set in the '80s, I like to think that the amphibian speed freak would have torn around the country in an Aston Martin Lagonda or a Bentley Turbo R.

There is something utterly beguiling about these cars that I'm sure Toad would have found hard to resist. Vast, handbuilt powerhouses with engines of near-Edwardian dimensions, they combine astonishing pace with the comfort of the finest of state limousines. Icons of late-'80s avarice they might be, but they also showed the world that, when it comes to the highest echelons of performance and exclusivity, nobody does it better than Crewe and Newport Pagnell.

Where a contemporary supermini employing just four mass-produced cylinders and a paltry 50bhp could adequately transport a family, such mundane numbers had no place in the collective mindset of Aston Martin and Bentley. Between them, this imperious duo can boast 16 cylinders, a whopping 12 litres, and – though the makers were coy about releasing outputs in period – a mind-boggling 700bhp. Monumental figures, but then these are two monumental cars.

For a start they are big. Very big. Park them end to end and you have a two-car convoy of over 34ft. By way of comparison, a Routemaster bus is a good 6ft shorter. And they are heavy, too. Remember that these titans were born in an era of lightweight family hatchbacks, then try to reconcile the fact that between them they weigh the best part of five tons. Waifs, they are not.

Of the two, the Bentley is the more familiar sight, and represents a crucial stepping stone in the company's history. Throughout the 1970s the marque had been cruelly neglected by its Crewe parent and, by the time the Silver Spirit/Mulsanne model (designated internally as SY) was launched in 1980, cars sporting the famous Flying B accounted for a mere 6% of total sales. That was in drastic contrast to the 1950s, when the R-type massively outsold the Silver Dawn.

To outsiders, it appeared that the once illustrious name might be lost for ever, but fortunately, largely thanks to a decision made by Rolls-Royce chief executive David Plastow in the 1970s, a saviour was waiting in the wings. His vision was of a turbocharged leviathan that would rekindle some of the magic of the 1930s 'Blower'.

The first development car, a well-used Silver Shadow, was sent to tuning firm Broadspeed in the mid-1970s. Six months and £7000 later, it returned to Crewe with a potent conversion that gave a clear demonstration of what was possible. Bentley's first production turbo, the Mulsanne, wouldn't see the light of day until the '82 Geneva Salon, but it caused a sensation when it did.

Fast though it was, with its supple springing and comedy body roll, the Mulsanne Turbo was no sports saloon, the performance somewhat at odds with its flawed cornering ability. Enter, three years later, the Turbo R. The name was a pointed reference to its vastly improved Roadholding: it featured uprated suspension, with stiffer anti-roll bars, firmer dampers and improved location of the rear subframe, plus – in a first for the marque – 17in alloy wheels.

Initially fitted with the Mulsanne Turbo's Solex carburettor, in 1987 the car received Bosch fuel injection plus revised ignition and manifolds, boosting output by about 10% to 330bhp (upped to an impressive 385bhp by the mid-'90s). In 1988, meanwhile, came a makeover that would complete the vital first step in re-establishing Bentley as a marque in its own right.

Ditching the Silver Spirit's oblong headlamps in favour of quad circular items was a masterstroke. Although the Turbo R still shared its Fritz Feller-styled monocoque with the Rolls-Royce, the relatively simple facelift at once transformed the look from staid wedding car into latter-day Brooklands bruiser. Finally, after decades of spot-the-difference badge-engineering, this fearsome bulldog had an identity of its own, a face with which to stare down the proletariat as it loomed large in rear-view mirrors.

Yet while the Bentley exudes an arrogant mien of powerful authority, it pales into conformist insignificance alongside the Aston. Even in late-model S4 guise, the William Towns-styled Lagonda is a futuristic and otherworldly enigma, a low-flying prediction of the hover cars that we were told we'd all be driving in the year 2000.

Clockwise, from above: Lagonda has softer seats and lovely wheel, but the detailing in the angular cabin isn't as lavish as the Bentley; plaque testifies that 'our' car was the last S4 built; ugly airbag marrs steering wheel of Turbo R; Crewe's mighty 6.75-litre V8 hides beneath shroud; gargantuan pair at rest

ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA

Sold/number built 1987-'90/105 (S4)
Construction steel monocoque with aluminium body panels
Engine all-alloy, qohc 5340cc V8, with electronic fuel injection
Max power 305bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 340lb ft @ 4000rpm
Transmission Chrysler Torqueflite three-speed automatic, driving rear wheels
Suspension: front independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar **rear** de Dion axle with trailing arms, Watt linkage; telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, inboard at rear, with servo
Length 17ft 4in (5283mm)
Width 5ft 11½in (1816mm)
Height 4ft 3¼in (1302mm)
Wheelbase 9ft 6¾in (2915mm)
Weight 4547lb (2062kg)
0-60mph 8.8 secs
Top speed 143mph
Mpg 13.7
Price new £91,756 (1990)

Clockwise: six-lamp nose instead of earlier pop-ups; digital dashboard replaced plasma screens in 1987; fixed glass panel in rear; quad-cam V8 looks superb but lacks its rival's power; back cosy after Bentley

As you burble lazily through a sleepy village, jaws drop, fingers point, and small children stare. It's a car, Jim, but not as we know it.

Like the Bentley, the Lagonda was a vital product for its manufacturer, although, unlike its rival, it was rather less prolific. Born from the ashes of Aston's 1974 bankruptcy, the headline-grabbing *tour de force* was seen by some as a cynical PR stunt, conceived with the sole intention of raising the firm's profile among potential investors at what was a very turbulent time.

As previewed at Earls Court in 1976, the Lagonda boasted a radical electronic dashboard featuring gas-plasma displays plus almost 50 membrane switches for systems as diverse as raising the pop-up headlamps and engaging drive in the Chrysler Torqueflite gearbox. The difficulties in readying such technology, however, meant that the first car wouldn't be delivered until April 1978, and full-scale production would not get going until midway through the following year. Yet demand – particularly from the oil-rich Middle East – would soon outstrip that of the V8 coupé upon which it was based.

It's difficult to imagine the impact such a car must have had when it first hit the streets. Wedges were all the rage in the '70s, but one that was only slightly smaller than the average three-bedroom house and sporting the traditional winged Aston Martin badge was guaranteed to shock. By the mid '80s, however, the origami lines that had once looked so daring and visionary had become slightly embarrassing. A startling 'jellymould' from Dagenham had dragged the world into a new era of slippery curves, and Towns' vision of the future suddenly looked as if it belonged to the past.

'AS YOU BURBLE LAZILY INTO A VILLAGE, JAWS DROP, FINGERS POINT, AND CHILDREN STARE'

A 1987 facelift to become the S4 softened the Lagonda for a new world of filofaxes and brick phones, the sharp creases of the original ironed out to give the car a more contemporary look. Towns, who performed the revamp, was less than satisfied with the outcome, but to my mind the menacing six-lamp nose, neat alloy wheels and smoother edges offer a successful reinterpretation of the iconic shape. Only details such as the ugly mirrors and heavy window frames detract from what is otherwise an effective piece of work.

Climb down into the broad and supremely comfortable cabin of the Aston Martin and the radical treatment continues. The fascia is an unyieldingly angular affair, testimony to Towns' love of the set square, so it's almost a disappointment not to find an Allegro-style Quartic tiller. Yet like the exterior, the interior treatment was watered down to entice late-'80s punters to part with their cash. The single-spoke wheel, *Dan Dare* instruments and touch-sensitive controls of the earlier cars were binned, replaced by normal buttons and switches, plus a delightfully tactile wheel from the V8 and funky green digital read-outs. The brutally cubist architecture means that this is still far from an orthodox environment, though, and it has nothing in common with today's preconceptions of an Aston cabin. It's a perplexing place to be, and at first acquaintance it's difficult to decide whether to admire the audacious approach or admonish its lunacy.

Not so the Bentley. Haul yourself up onto its slippery, overstuffed leather armchairs and at once you're at ease with the world. There is a wonderfully reassuring sense of civility in this beautifully appointed shrine to luxury and taste that requires no excuses. Everything is superbly finished and bespoke, and where much of the Aston's switchgear appears to have been half-inched from a mass-market parts bin, the Bentley exudes a sense of no-expense-spared quality. From the lustrous walnut veneer to the chromed air vents and the sumptuous Wilton carpets, the Turbo R's cabin feels special, but

Clockwise: Bentley has presence but can't match Lagonda for drama; vast rear cabin; quad lamps from '88; 170mph speedo at odds with 4500rpm redline; exquisitely finished interior

BENTLEY TURBO R

Sold/number built 1985-'97/6165
Construction steel monocoque, with alloy doors, bonnet and bootlid
Engine all-alloy, ohv 6750cc V8, with Bosch KE-Jetronic fuel injection and Garrett T04 turbo
Max power 385bhp @ 4000rpm
Max torque 553lb ft @ 2500rpm
Transmission GM 4L80E four-speed automatic, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent all round, at **front** by double wishbones, anti-roll bar **rear** semi-trailing arms, hydraulic self-levelling; coil springs, telescopic dampers f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 11in discs all round, with servo
Length 17ft 3½in (5270mm)
Width 6ft 2¼in (1886mm)
Height 4ft 10½in (1486mm)
Wheelbase 10ft ½in (3061mm)
Weight 4926lb (2234kg)
0-60mph 6.9 secs
Top speed 143mph
Mpg 13
Price new £110,000 (1990)

the ugly boss of the airbag-equipped wheel is an aesthetic fly in this hedonistic ointment.

Overcome the oddly offset pedals and the Turbo R is also the easiest and most relaxing car in the world to drive. Despite its enormous size, it soon seems manageable and soothes with its docile manner and effortless controls. There is nothing intimidating as you thread it through traffic or wind along narrow country lanes, just a well-bred sense of peace and satisfaction.

Get out onto faster roads, though, and, as the speed builds, so does a slight disappointment. The steering that was effortless around town suddenly feels so light and devoid of feel that it would be more at home on a yacht. It leaves you suspecting that this much-vaunted supersaloon is maybe not all that it's cracked up to be, that the Royce in drag isn't worthy of the Bentley name. Until you prod the throttle pedal…

To pilot a Turbo R under full acceleration is a mesmerising experience. Your brain keeps telling you that it shouldn't be possible for this big, bluff-fronted barge to gather pace at such a rate, yet somehow it does. There's no fuss, no histrionics, no howling exhaust. Instead, the vast Bentley just surges inexorably forward with improbable and near-silent ease, the V8 nothing more than a distant rumble. It's hugely addictive, and you soon find yourself grinning from ear to ear as this oversized hot rod storms past slower traffic, the incongruity of a 170mph speedometer alongside a rev counter that's redlined at 4500rpm just adding to the hilarity.

The Lagonda, in comparison, lacks that

'THERE'S NO FUSS, NO HISTRIONICS – THE BENTLEY JUST SURGES INEXORABLY FORWARD'

startling mid-range punch and, despite being more vocal, never feels anything like as rapid. The 5340cc V8 gives away nearly 1½ litres plus a turbo to the Bentley – yet somehow it's still a mite disappointing. With its dramatic low-slung cabin, you expect rocketship acceleration, but it never feels more than brisk after the Bentley. In period, Aston engineers toyed with the idea of forced induction (in Vantage spec, the Aston V8 was too tall to fit beneath the Lagonda's huge bonnet), but the project was canned after a single prototype had been built. Fitted with a brace of Garrett T03 turbos, the engine produced an estimated 380bhp and 500lb ft of torque, which could have made it the wackiest racer of all time.

Where the Lagonda does excel is in the fluidity of its responses, the nicely weighted steering encouraging spirited driving where the Turbo R remains aloof and distant. Yes, you can hoon around in the Bentley – and to do so is absurdly amusing – although of this pairing the Aston Martin is the more accomplished driver's car.

But there is no clear winner or loser. They both offer an enticing blend of qualities, though they also suffer from niggling flaws. The Bentley has a sublime cabin and an extraordinary engine, providing a level of refinement and performance that defies logic. It's a vehicle that every true enthusiast must try at least once, just to experience the breathtaking acceleration. Only the lacklustre steering lets the side down, and tarnishes what is an otherwise fantastic machine.

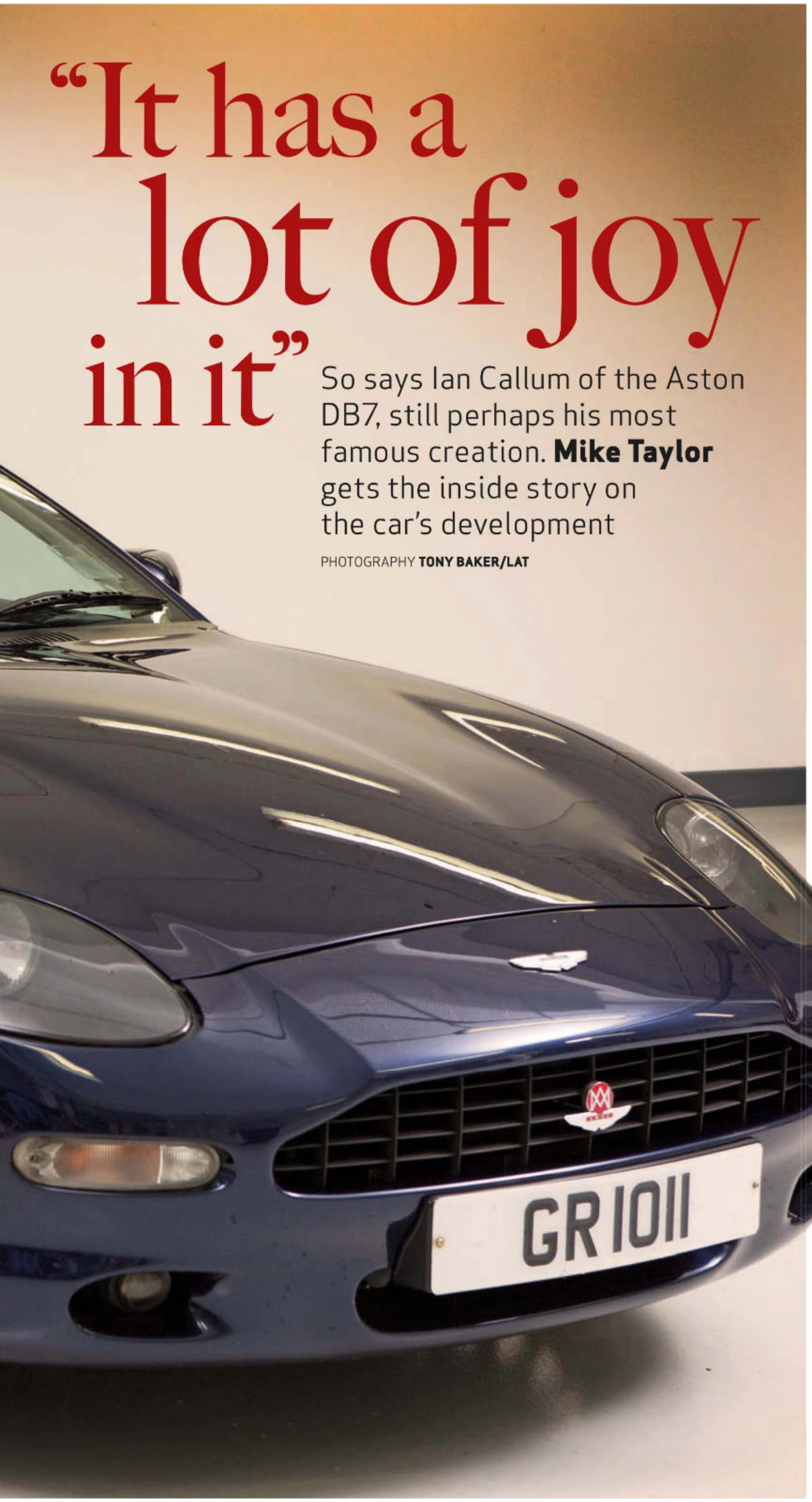
The Lagonda, by dint of its idiosyncratic styling, polarises opinion. Either you'll love the attention that the eccentric shape draws, or you'll despise it for its lack of conventional beauty. Personally, I grew to rather appreciate the way that it exudes a slightly louche air of mystery, but I'm not entirely convinced by the *Knight Rider* dash or some of the detailing. Above all, after the Turbo R, I couldn't help feeling that the car needed more power. Strap the Bentley's engine beneath the Lagonda's bonnet, though, and there would be no contest.

Thanks to *Rodger Dudding and everyone at Studio 434: www.studio434.co.uk*

"It has a lot of joy in it"

So says Ian Callum of the Aston DB7, still perhaps his most famous creation. **Mike Taylor** gets the inside story on the car's development

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/LAT**



The DB7 remains among the most beautiful cars ever built, its elegant lines rising, flowing and falling gracefully without a controversial corner in sight. Enter Ian Callum, who shaped the charismatic charmer with a confidence beyond his experience. It assured the company a healthy future, put Aston Martin ownership within the reach of many new enthusiasts, and was built in numbers never before approached by the Newport Pagnell firm.

The DB7 was Callum's first complete design project, which he undertook during his 10 years at Tom Walkinshaw Racing. He beams proudly at Gareth Richards' Mendip Blue example, as creator and car are reunited. "I saw a DB7 the other day on the M6," says Callum, "and I thought, 'What a pretty little car.' It always surprises me how nice it looks. It has dated well."

Towards the end of the '80s, Jaguar's fortunes were ebbing. In '89, Ford paid a hefty $1.8bn for the Browns Lane business, the deal also extending to buying a 75% share in Aston Martin. A replacement for the XJ-S had been mooted since the early '80s. Two prototypes were built, the XJ41 coupé and the soft-top XJ42, based on the new XJ40's underpinnings. But weight, complexity and spiralling costs caused the programme to be cancelled when Ford tasked tough-talking Bill Haynes to make sweeping changes.

TWR had shown what the XJ-S could do in motorsport and Walkinshaw made his move. His plan involved turning the XJ41 into a car capable of being built on the XJ-S platform.

Codenamed Project XX, it was never going to be easy. The big XJ41 had been the product of Jaguar designers, while amending its dimensions called for considerable investment. Then Ford declared that it didn't want the car, which left the way open for XX to be redesigned into an Aston. Walter Hayes had come out of retirement to be CEO of Aston Martin, and Walkinshaw called him to request that he sanction the project.

"At the time I received that all-important phone call to join TWR, I'd been working for Ford for around 12 years," recalls Callum. "I'd never had the opportunity to design the complete outside of a car from scratch and I felt frustrated. This was about 12 months before Project XX was put into high gear and I had no idea that it would eventually lead to designing the DB7. In fact, when I decided to leave people thought I was mad. I was a manager at Ford, I was 35 years old and I was about to join this tiny racing-car company."

The financial security was quite different, but Callum was determined to make it work: "When people at Ford heard it was I who was working on the new Aston Martin, I think the doors opened a little bit easier. They had a sense that it was going to be handled professionally."

Equally important was that Hayes understood the people he needed to impress in Detroit.

"Many of Ford's board members didn't even know what Aston was," says Callum. "One person who was on our side was Jacques Nasser, the vice-president of Ford Motor Co. He knew all about the brand and the need to revive it."

Even so, the firm's low-volume output was anathema to Ford, which made discussing the DB7 investment a tough call: "It was created to give Aston Martin a mainstream model at a time

when sales of the hugely costly Virage were a worryingly sluggish 40 cars per year. The DB7 became the highest-volume production Aston Martin ever, with more than 7000 built."

"It was a difficult job for me," he reveals. "I'd never done a whole car before. Importantly, while I was at Ford I was surrounded by a team of designers and managers; at TWR, I was working on my own. It was the most pressurised situation I'd ever experienced. In the early days, I'd sometimes go home feeling a little depressed. There was nowhere to hide, but I had a good friend in clay modeller Andrew Miles. It was he who helped me a lot through those stressful days."

As we walk around the DB7, I ask Callum which cars influenced him: "Certainly the original DB4 Superleggera, as well as the Zagato – and, believe it or not, the Nissan 300ZX. I found the proportions of that car quite inspiring."

He looks carefully at the frontal treatment and the stance: "From the outset, there were huge challenges. Thankfully, Tom trusted me, I do have a pragmatic head on my shoulders. I was fortunate that, in Tom, I had a boss who wanted the car to look the way it did. We made major changes to the front and rear overhangs of the XJ-S. Also, the front cowl was new. It was, after all, going to be smaller than the prototype XJ41."

"I'm quite happy with the gradually sloping rear," he asserts as we move around the car. "The aerodynamics weren't too great because the transom was too low, but we did improve it when we created the more aggressive Vantage in 1999."

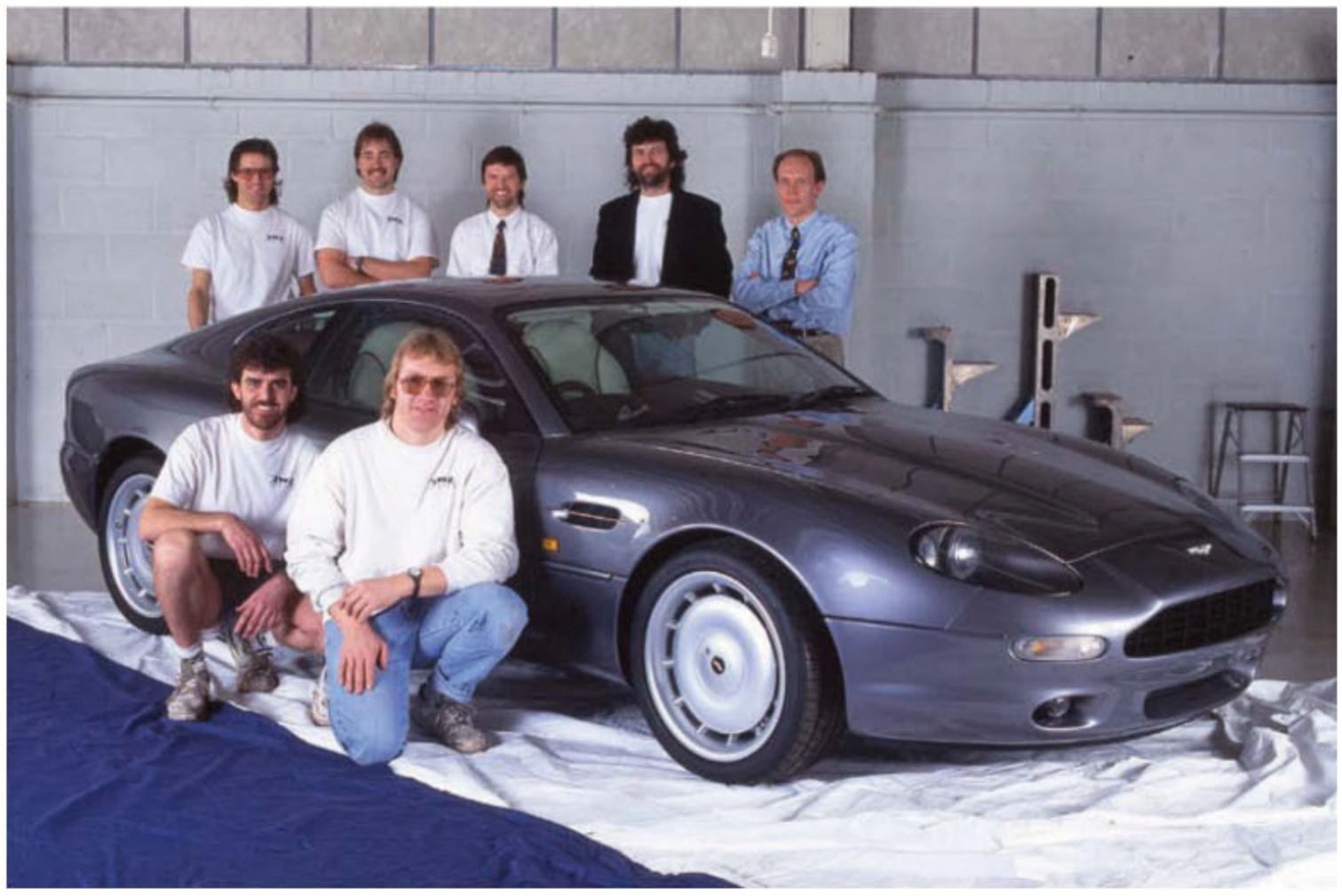
"The original car was a V12," he explains, "which had a lower engine line. Then, for cost reasons, we went to a supercharged in-line 'six'. The top of the engine came very close to the underside of the bonnet, so I took all of the drawings and worked out the shape of the bonnet for it to comfortably clear the top of the power unit.

"I called Tom over and asked for his opinion. He said, 'I don't like it,' and I replied, 'Neither do I.' So, off he marched to the chassis engineering guys and said, 'Drop the engine by 25mm.' With a small, autocratic outfit such as TWR you can do that sort of thing. Within a few weeks, the job was completed with a redesigned subframe."

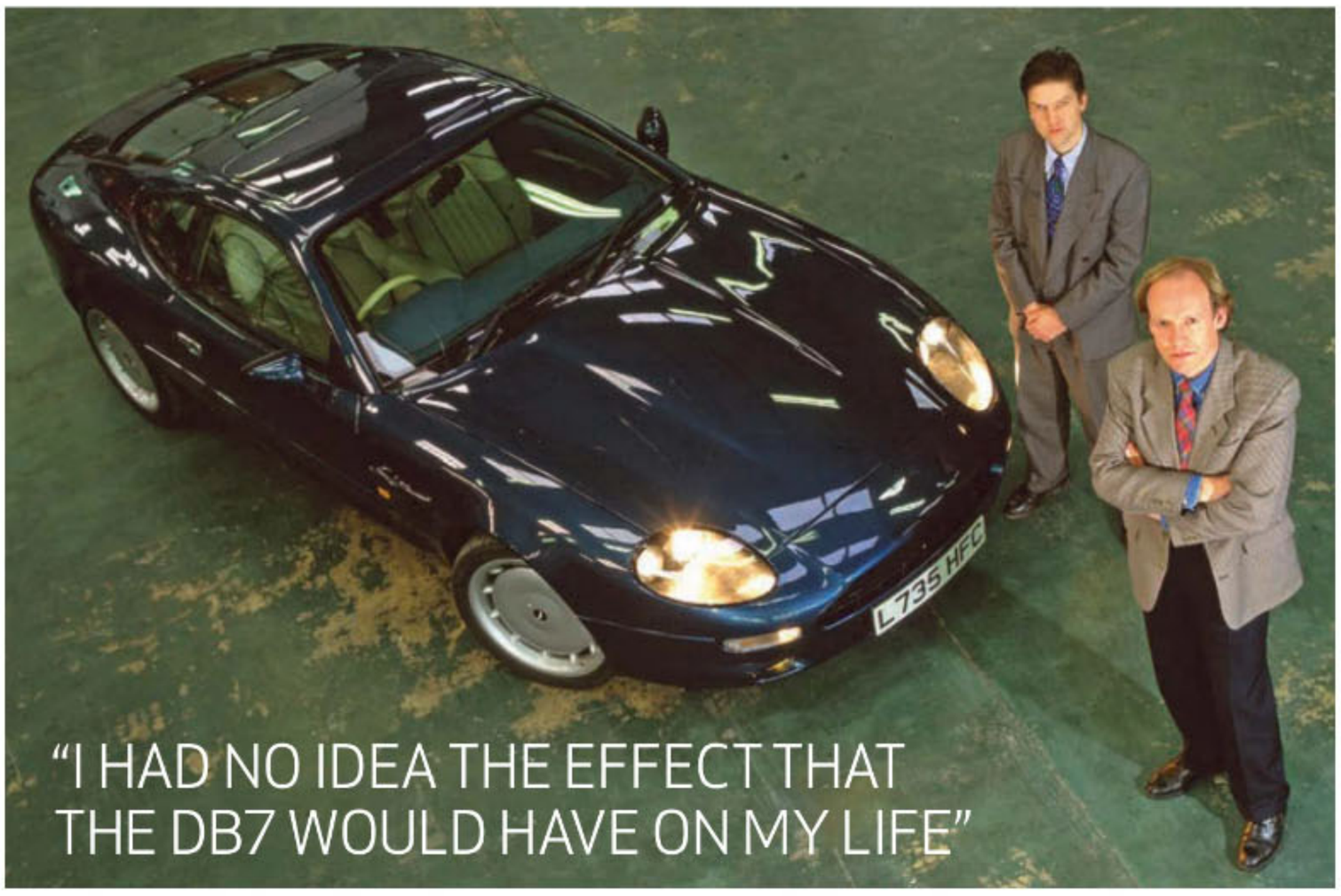
"The safety regulations that were coming out of the States during the early 1990s didn't really affect this car," he continues, "although at TWR we did have a clever bunch of engineers who took the shape and made it work within the confines of the US impact constraints. For example, we had enough rigidity in the roof structure to pass the rollover tests of the time. However, there was a lot of discussion about the strength in the front of the body envelope. In the event, the engineering guys were able to produce a shape that withstood all the impact assessments."

"It's very busy, isn't it?" he muses as he climbs inside to assess the interior. "We raided many manufacturers' parts bins to make this car…"

The programme progressed quickly once the initial task of developing the shape was finished: "By way of comparison we brought in a DB5, which stayed around the workshops for some



Clockwise, from top: design team that readied the car for launch; Callum points out that the 'six' was lowered rather than altering bonnet line; fully engineered prototypes – sunroof of early cars was dropped as a standard item; Geneva debut, '93; Bloxham works, where the XJ220 had also been built



Clockwise, from top: Callum and Neil Simpson (who styled the cabin) put TWR Design on the map with the DB7; it was meant to have a V12, which came with the more aggressive-looking Vantage; fussy but luxurious cabin; CX door mirror; Callum wouldn't alter much, but he'd make the grille opening bigger

time. Then we showed the clay model to Walter and he asked for a few subtle styling amendments. For example, he insisted that we have chromed doorhandles, and the only car we could find with those was the Mazda 323 estate. We also fitted the door mirrors from a Citroën CX.

"Tom looked at the clay model and said, 'What's better than a clay version?' and we said, 'A GRP car.' Then he asked, 'And what's better than a GRP car?' so we replied, 'A steel version.' We had full experimental and build facilities at Kidlington, so this enabled us to make a steel prototype, which took about four months."

Walkinshaw was satisfied with the result when it was finished in '92, with only minor improvements needed to bring it up to his demanding standards. "Under evaluation, the prototype handled well," says Callum. "We camouflaged it and did a lot of test miles around the Cotswolds.

"At a meeting in 1993 attended by Hayes, Walkinshaw and me, the DB7 was unveiled for scrutiny. Walter turned to his Jaguar counterparts and said, 'Why couldn't you do something like this?'" It would take a further three years before the XJ-S replacement, the XK8, arrived.

The DB7 made its debut at Geneva in '93: "It drew huge attention. I had no idea the effect it would have on my life, and I was thrust into the limelight. I recall Jackie Stewart coming up and saying, 'It's just such a beautiful car, well done. And, you're a Scot – that makes it even better.'"

With such a promising order book, Ford gave its agreement for DB7 production to begin. Engines would be built at Kidlington, while a factory at Bloxham was used for assembly.

The Volante soft-top was unveiled to a receptive public in 1996, while the 420bhp, 5935cc Vantage was released in '99: "Ford wanted us to do that, adapting its V12 engine. It was more aggressive, with a deeper chin spoiler, greater flare in the arches and a more obvious flick-up to the transom, although I was never really happy with the V12 installation. I didn't think it worked that well."

But would Callum change anything? "I could have been more determined. I certainly would have made the side belt-line and door window sills higher, and the grille aperture larger. Overall, it's a little lacking in finesse and detail, which we wouldn't be able to get away with today. At TWR we didn't have a viewing gallery to gain an overall impression of what the car looked like, so all our design work was achieved at close quarters."

Summing up, he says: "The opportunity to join TWR came at just the right time; a few years earlier, I would have lacked the design experience; a few years later, I would have been far more cautious. But after 10 years I had a craving for mainstream manufacturing; I realised that I was missing out on so much, so I went back to Jaguar.

"My only regret is that, in 1992, the finance wasn't there to put in the details I wanted. That said, it has a lot of joy in it, it's my 'happy car', my calling card. If it wasn't for the DB7, I wouldn't be Jaguar's director of design today."

Thanks to *Louise Allinson and Gareth Richards*

DB7
Pukka Aston, or XJ-S in drag?

Whichever of those camps you fall into, says **James Page**, this gorgeous modern classic is one of the biggest bargains of the GT genre

PHOTOGRAPHY **JAMES LIPMAN**


R200 BOO

‘CALLUM’S ALLURING DESIGN ENSURED THAT THIS WAS JUST THE TONIC ASTON NEEDED’

Hints of the DB4-6 in DB7’s elegant, tapering tail; blend of modernity and a nod to Astons past has been an inspiration to a generation of designers

Aston Martin was in serious trouble at the beginning of the ’90s. Ford took control of the firm in 1987, following that by also acquiring Jaguar. The latter didn’t come cheap and, when the world’s economy took a nose-dive around the turn of the decade, there wasn’t much left in the kitty to develop a new Aston. That was what the Newport Pagnell concern desperately needed, however. Since the end of the David Brown era in 1972, Aston Martin had limped through the rest of the ’70s, even going into receivership under the watch of Company Developments, before finding some semblance of stability with Victor Gauntlett at the helm.

The V8s were the mainstay of the range, their dated designs compensated for by ever-growing power outputs. There was little subtlety about Aston in the ’80s and, while the final incarnation – the 1988 Virage – gained a more flowing line, it was still more beast than beauty.

Gauntlett’s problem was that, while he wanted to build an entirely new car in much higher volumes than had previously been the case, he lacked the funds to do it. Enter Ford, initially via a social meeting between Gauntlett and European vice president Walter Hayes. Although Hayes technically retired in 1989, he continued to keep a watching brief over Aston once it was brought under Ford’s wing, and returned as chairman when Gauntlett stepped down in ’91.

The ‘new Aston’ project that the two men had discussed ticked over in the background while the Virage was launched and established itself. With Newport Pagnell concentrating on that model, Hayes started to advance his other concept a little further. The Ford tie-in might have brought with it a degree of financial security but, at that stage, having Jaguar in the same stable was equally important. The Coventry firm had strong links with Tom Walkinshaw’s Oxfordshire-based business, TWR, and had entrusted it with Jaguar’s ultimately successful return to sports-car racing in the 1980s. Walkinshaw and designer Ian Callum had been working on a car based around the XJ-S platform and, while it didn’t suit Jaguar’s requirements, Hayes immediately recognised its potential.

The ingredients were slowly but surely coming together. There was even a suitable engine available in Jaguar’s AJ6. This 3.2-litre, twin-cam straight-six was modified for the new Aston, including bolting on a supercharger, and all the signs were that the firm was on track to recapture some of the magic of the David Brown era. It was therefore only natural that the model should revive the famous ‘DB’ moniker.

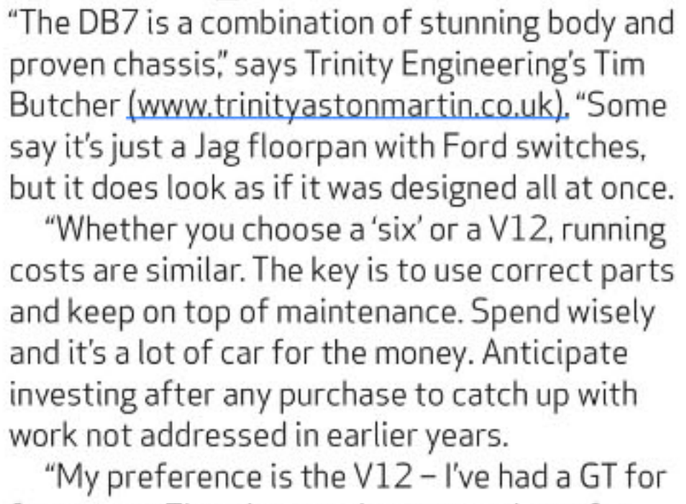
Few failed to realise the importance of this car to Aston Martin. When the DB7 was launched in 1994, press reports highlighted the fact that it was ‘make or break’. Callum’s alluring design went an awfully long way to convincing them that this was just the tonic that Aston needed, but

The specialist

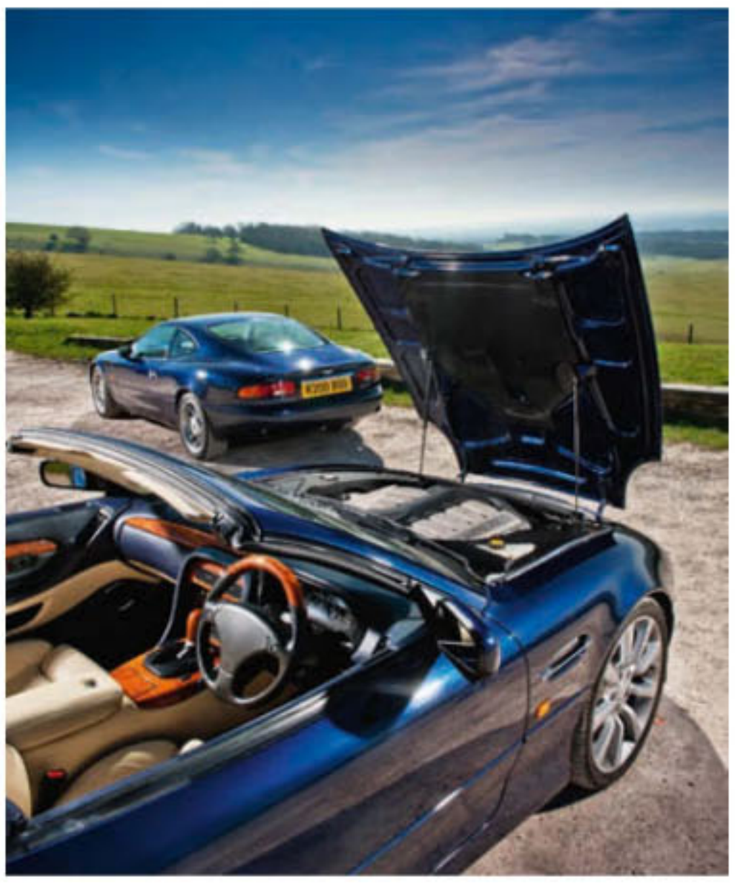
“The DB7 is a combination of stunning body and proven chassis,” says Trinity Engineering’s Tim Butcher (www.trinityastonmartin.co.uk). “Some say it’s just a Jag floorpan with Ford switches, but it does look as if it was designed all at once.

“Whether you choose a ‘six’ or a V12, running costs are similar. The key is to use correct parts and keep on top of maintenance. Spend wisely and it’s a lot of car for the money. Anticipate investing after any purchase to catch up with work not addressed in earlier years.

“My preference is the V12 – I’ve had a GT for four years. There’s enough power to have fun, and it doesn’t have all the driver aids found on modern supercars. With the increase in DB7s through our doors with new owners, the market may have bottomed out and this Aston is becoming a usable day-to-day modern classic.”



Clockwise, from left: airbag brings bulkier wheel; AJ6 Jaguar motor is blown for use in an Aston; stonking V12. Bottom: neat drop-top conversion



it backed up those looks with impressive on-road abilities. It was enthusiastically received, sales took off, and Aston was back on its feet.

A convertible version had always been on the cards and, sure enough, the Volante appeared in 1996. That year, all DB7s finally gained airbags, the lack of which had been seen as an oversight on a premium car. The biggest shake-up, however, came in 1999, when the Vantage was introduced at the Geneva Motor Show. Boasting redesigned bodywork, a 6-litre V12 engine and various under-the-skin upgrades, it was initially intended to run alongside the six-cylinder car, but such was the towering extent of its abilities – and for a premium of 'just' £8000 – it instead killed it off. The Vantage Volante was launched at the same time, and in 2002 came the limited-run, more powerful GT and GTA, the latter featuring the Touchtronic auto 'box. The dark days of the early 1990s were a distant memory.

Then a funny thing happened. Little niggles that buyers were willing to overlook when the car was launched assumed major importance. The DB7 was labelled a 'Jag in drag' because of its ancestry, and suddenly the use of the Ford parts bin – which wasn't so much as mentioned in the '94 *Autocar* road test – became a disgrace. In fact, *Autocar* had predicted the mud-slinging, stating that: 'Deep, deep in its history, it *is* an XJ-S, but let's get one thing straight: none of that matters, any more than it matters that a McLaren F1 V12 is made from two BMW M3 engines, or an XJ220 uses an engine that started life in a Metro.' Or, thinking about it, that early David Brown cars used a Lagonda engine…

Yet the overall effect has been enough to hammer DB7 values. Even the briefest look in the classifieds is an eye-opener: a 1995 car with good history for £15,950; a '96 for £16,950; even a '98 low-mileage example at £19,995. It's much the same for the V12 models: how about a 69k '97 coupé for £19,950? Or a one-owner Volante for £26,945? Whichever way you slice it, that's not a lot to put a DB Aston in your garage.

Perhaps now that Ford – its mission accomplished – has sold Aston to a conglomerate headed by Prodrive's David Richards, and the company is seemingly in rude health once again, cynics feel more willing to take pot-shots at the DB7 and compare it unfavourably to the cars now emerging from the posh new Gaydon factory. Cars, incidentally, whose styling still follows the line set by Callum in the early '90s.

And why not? The six-cylinder DB7 (referred to by those in the know as the 'i6') is a beautiful thing. Perfectly proportioned, it's more muscular in the metal than you might remember, yet somehow delicate at the same time. That long bonnet flows up and over the cabin in one graceful arc towards the sculpted rear haunches.

Climb in and you're cocooned in leather. As well as being used for the figure-hugging seats,

‘TURN THE KEY, PROD THE STARTER AND THE V12 GIVES A BLIP AS IT BURSTS INTO LIFE’

Vantage facelift is most obvious in Volante’s larger sidelight/indicator units, front panel and DB9-style ‘spider’ alloys; there’s a bigger rear bumper, too

The designer: Ian Callum

“I was at TWR Design and we did a study for Jaguar based on the XJ-S platform. We laid out the parameters for a modern ‘look’, but Jaguar said no. It was just a packaging study at first, but we then realised that it was a potentially successful platform.

“We went to Aston Martin with it and Walter Hayes said, ‘We could do one.’ The actual design wasn’t anywhere near completion – it was purely a study. We didn’t know that it would be a DB, but my immediate association was with the DB4-6 line. We even had a DB5 in the studio. It was all about catching the atmosphere.

“The back initially sat too high, and we also had to make changes to the front end. It was designed around a V12 engine, but then Hayes said that – for a variety of reasons – it would have to be a ‘six’. That was a taller unit, though, so we started out with a bonnet bulge, which I didn’t like and neither did [Tom] Walkinshaw. We had to tell the engineers to drop the engine by 25mm. I wasn’t too popular for that.

“We went through various stages of it happening or not happening. We had to present the case to [Aston Martin owner] Ford with a clay model. Tom asked me, ‘What’s better than a clay model?’ I said we could possibly do a glassfibre one. Bear in mind that we had three months to go. He started to walk away, then turned and said, ‘What would be better than a glassfibre model?’ I replied, ‘A real, metal car?’

“So that’s what we did. We actually *drove* it into the meeting with Ford. The interior wasn’t complete, but the body had been hand-formed. It knocked them for six.

“The investment wasn’t huge – about a fifth or sixth of what Ford would normally have spent – but, given the constraints, I was pleased. I prefer the first incarnation to the later versions. I was slightly loath to change it for the V12.

“There are lots of liberties on it. The headlamps are very shallow, so they don’t work all that well! Actually, I didn’t like the chrome doorhandles, but Hayes insisted. I wanted colour-coded ones. The only ones we could get hold of were from a Mazda 323 estate…

“Any Aston borrows parts from other models – and a car is much more than the sum of its parts. Besides, so much development work went into the platform of the DB7 that it was barely recognisable. We turned it into what it needed to be, and a platform is just a piece of metal. Its heart and soul is Aston Martin.”

it’s applied to the doors, centre-console surround and the top of the dashboard. Those last two, as you’d expect, also feature wood trim. Directly ahead lie six instruments: large rev counter and speedo in the middle, with battery-health indicator and fuel level, plus the oil pressure and water temperature, paired on either side.

The driving position came in for a fair amount of stick when the car was new but if, like me, you’re of meagre dimensions, you’ll be fine. Also, ‘our’ i6 has the auto ’box, which helps by removing a pedal from the cramped footwell.

Yes, the switches are clearly Ford-sourced (as are the ignition key and door locks), and the digital clock looks a little out of place, but such thoughts are pushed to the back of your mind once you’re on the move and looking down that long bonnet. The i6 might be more of a GT than a sports car, but it handles B-roads with aplomb: cornering flat, responding quickly and riding well. It never feels unsettled, its limits far higher than most people will push on normal roads.

At first, though, the performance doesn’t take your breath away. The automatic is relatively lazy by default, and you really have to stick your foot down hard for it to hold on to its ratios a bit longer, at which point the supercharger starts to whine and you’re making serious progress.

“It puts a grin on my face every time,” says Simon Warren-Gash, who has enjoyed this example for nearly nine years. “I’ve been thrilled with it. It’s done 46,000 miles and is my everyday

to inadvertently apply a bit too much power and move off from a standstill in a rather more spectacular fashion than you'd intended.

Ron Stevens' car is also an automatic, but in the Vantage it's a five-speed Touchtronic unit, which brings with it gearchange buttons on the steering wheel. The auto suits the V12 nicely, propelling the Aston along quickly but quietly. The manual (six speeds on the Vantage, five for the i6) garnered few plaudits from road-testers, who criticised it for being slow and heavy, although the one fitted to the Vantage was considered an improvement.

Again, this version isn't as rapid as you expect – especially from a car that's reputedly capable of more than 180mph. After a few miles, however, you push the gearlever over to the left to engage 'manual' mode – so you can either change gear by pushing or pulling the lever, or using the buttons mounted on either side of the steering wheel – and the extra revs that frees up transform

From top: tiny rear seats; pram-style hood is only Volante demerit; i6 engine plaque reveals inspector, not builder; cross-country it's swift and surefooted

ASTON MARTIN DB7

Sold/number built 1994-'99/2451
Construction steel monocoque, with aluminium body panels
Engine all-alloy, 24-valve, dohc 3239cc 'six', supercharger and electronic fuel injection
Max power 335bhp @ 5500rpm
Max torque 360lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual or four-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, at **front** by double wishbones **rear** lower wishbones, driveshaft upper links; coil springs and anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs, with servo and ABS
Length 15ft 2¼in (4631mm) **Width** 5ft 11⅔in (1820mm) **Height** 4ft 2in (1268mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 6in (2591mm)
Weight 3858lb (1750kg) **Mpg** 17.1
0-60mph 5.8 secs **Top speed** 157mph
Price new £78,500

ASTON DB7 VANTAGE VOLANTE

Where different to six-cylinder car
Sold/number built 1999-2004/4444
Construction composite front wings, sills, bootlid and bumpers
Engine all-alloy, 48-valve, dohc-per-bank 5935cc V12, electronic fuel injection
Max power 420bhp @ 6000rpm
Max torque 400lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual or five-speed automatic, RWD
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil-over dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Brakes ventilated discs
Length 15ft 3¼in (4666mm) **Width** 6ft 8¼in (2036mm) **Height** 4ft ¼in (1238mm)
Weight 4133lb (1875kg) **Mpg** 16.4
0-60mph 5.2 secs **Top speed** 185mph
Price new £92,500

car. I did once look into part-exchanging it for a Vanquish, but my son refused to let me!

"It has never failed to start, and never broken down. When I was young I had an MG or two, but since then I've been a BMW or Mercedes man. The Aston is so much more fun. It has an 'X-factor', a character that other cars don't have. It has never been just an 'old car' – it went straight from being current to being a classic.

"Price-wise, they've reached a nadir and are bound to go up. The running costs are higher than, say, a Mercedes, but they aren't horrendous. The key is to get it to a decent level and keep it there. If it has no provenance and needs sorting then it can be expensive to put right."

If you want to moan about the origins of the i6, you can be equally sceptical about the Vantage because its V12 engine is in effect two Ford Duratec V6s joined together. Cosworth was responsible for building the 420bhp powerplant, which was then dropped into a stiffened chassis that boasted revised suspension.

Inside, the Vantage is much the same as the earlier car and, although the 'tombstone' seats are gone and that digital clock has thankfully been replaced by an analogue version, Ford's parts bin still looms large. There's a bit more theatre to starting the Vantage: turn the key then prod the red starter button and the V12 has been programmed to give a 'blip' as it bursts into life – completely unnecessary, but it sounds delightful. The light throttle pedal means that it is easy

Zagato DB twins

The link between Zagato and Aston Martin goes back to the DB4. The coachbuilder was commissioned to produce a body for the GT model, the stunning result being unveiled at the 1960 London Motor Show. In an attempt to recapture the magic of those 19 cars, the firms were reunited for the V8 Zagato of 1986. Although the 89 cars built sold like hot cakes, the angular design was altogether less pleasing to the eye than the DB4.

The DB7 was ripe for Zagato treatment, but it didn't arrive until 2003. Based on the Vantage and using an uprated V12, the Zagato had a shorter body, distinctive 'Guppy fish' front end, trademark double-bubble roof and a redesigned rear with drop-down bootlid and single tail-lights. It was a fraction lighter than the standard DB7, and all 99 used a six-speed manual gearbox.

This coupé couldn't be sold in the US due to homologation problems, so Zagato came up with the 'DB American Roadster 1', final assembly for which was alongside the new DB9 at Gaydon. The DB AR1 lacked any kind of hood and was offered only with the Touchtronic auto; 99 were made, plus a lone right-hooker that was kept by Aston Martin.

the performance. It feels like a fairly big car but, thanks to use of composites in its construction, it isn't heavy and it really is incredibly quick.

It shares the i6's surefooted feel, too. The stiffer structure removes any shakes or rattles, and the handling is just as impressive as that of the earlier car, despite the loss of the roof. The brakes are a big improvement: strong and responsive where the i6's are a little soft.

"I always promised myself that I'd get a DB7 if I could," says Stevens. He's had his 17,000-miler from new: "It doesn't get used in the winter and hasn't seen much rain, but during the summer it's out as often as possible. I've used it for the school run and have been able to rely on it totally. It always starts – when it's off the road, I use an onboard charger to keep the battery topped up.

"It has the feel of a much older car. I used to have a Brabus CL, but this is far nicer. It has character and 'feel' – it's more communicative. People seem to admire it, too: you get a better reaction than you would in a Porsche or Ferrari."

Both of these cars drive exactly as an Aston should: taut, quick and surprisingly sporting on tighter roads. If there is anything left from its XJ-S ancestry, it's pretty hard to spot. Choosing between the two models is hard. The i6 has an appealing purity, especially in its cleaner styling, but there is no denying the addictive performance on offer from the Vantage – or the glorious noise produced by its V12.

And there is little doubt that this model saved the company: had the DB7 been a failure, that would surely have been the end of Aston Martin. As *Autocar* stated in the Vantage road test: 'Only the totally unrealistic could possibly be opposed to Ford's ownership of Aston Martin.' To which we'd add that only the deeply cynical would turn down the chance to buy a £20,000 DB7 on the basis that it has a few Ford switches inside and wasn't built in Newport Pagnell.

The rivals

BMW 840Ci
Sold/no built 1993-'99/7803
0-60mph 7.4 secs
Top speed 155mph
Mpg 17
Price new £56,850
Ferociously complex and a bad one will reduce you to tears, but good examples aren't expensive and it's a more subtle choice than some cars here.

MASERATI 3200GT
Sold/no built 1998-2002/4795
0-60mph 5.1 secs
Top speed 174mph
Mpg 18
Price new £60,575
This slippery coupé marked the Trident's rebirth under Ferrari control, with Giugiaro styling, a twin-turbo, 370bhp V8 and prodigious pace.

JAGUAR XK8/XKR
Sold/no built
1996-2006/90,064
0-60mph 6.1 secs
Top speed 155mph **Mpg** 19
Price new £47,950
It might look slightly bloated beside the DB7, but the Jaguar is quick (especially in supercharged 'R' form), comfortable and outstanding value.

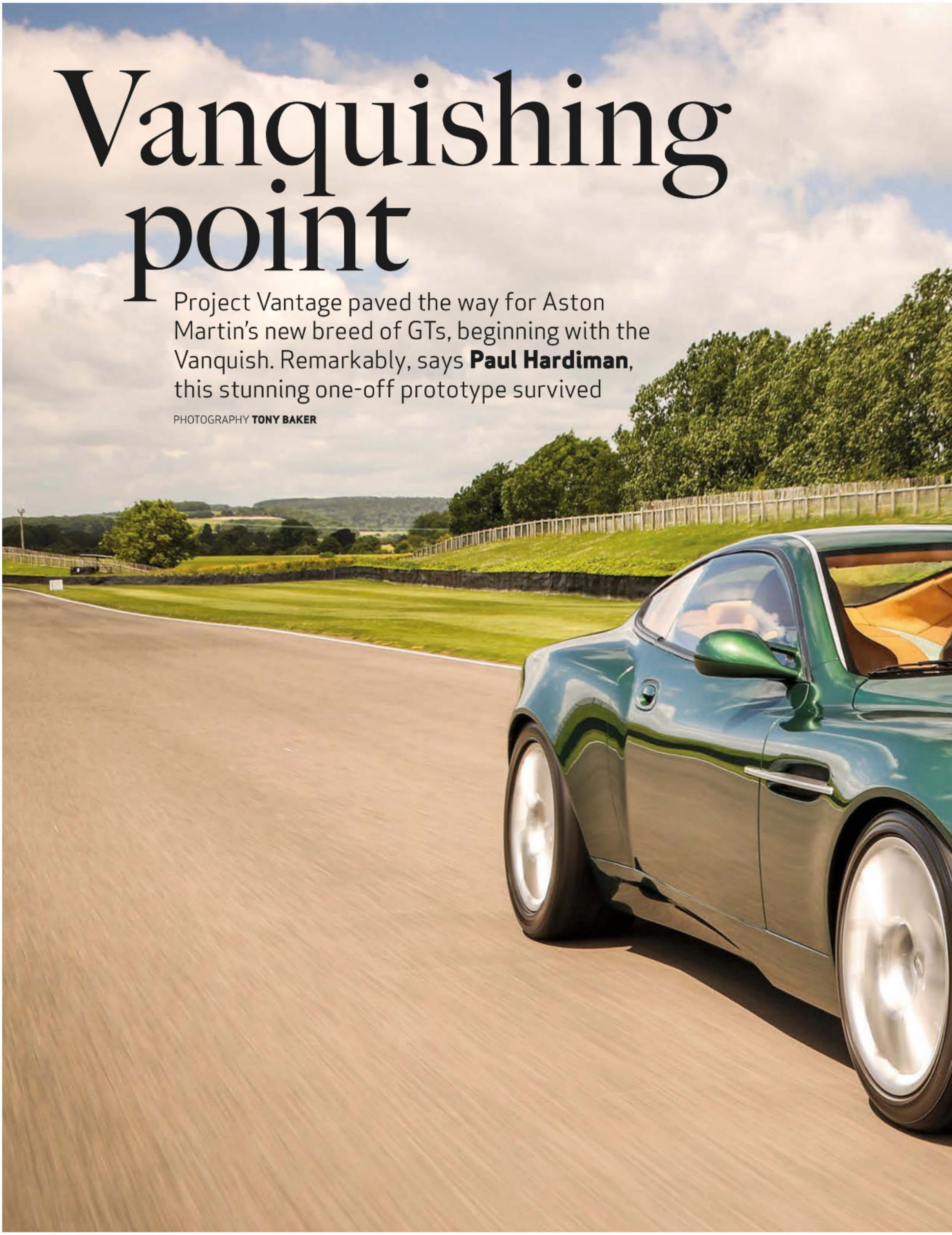
FERRARI 456GT
Sold/no built 1992-2003/3289
0-60mph 5.4 secs
Top speed 186mph
Mpg 14
Price new £156,445
Buying a bargain example of Ferrari's gorgeous 2+2 isn't for the faint-hearted, but, if you choose wisely, you'll discover a truly great GT.

A DB7 to suit every taste: a supercharged 'six' with a roof, or a V12 without – and, don't worry, they are also available in colours other than Mendip Blue

Vanquishing point

Project Vantage paved the way for Aston Martin's new breed of GTs, beginning with the Vanquish. Remarkably, says **Paul Hardiman**, this stunning one-off prototype survived

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**



It's undoubtedly an Aston Martin. At Goodwood, we're asked more than once if it's a new prototype. Nope, it's much older than you think. Looks familiar though, doesn't it? Rather like focusing on Smokey Yunick's 'six-sevenths'-scale '67 Chevelle, the car that NASCAR famously never allowed to race. You know that it looks right, but there's an element that you can't quite put your finger on… and that's a little unsettling. There's a lot of Vanquish in it, but the details are different: the rear diffuser is more boldly drawn, and it's smaller, subtly tightened-up in the process of proving all of Aston's trademark modern cues in one taut package.

Here is the first strike from Ian Callum's visionary mould of the millennial Aston Martin coupé, which would sire the Vanquish and set the template for every Aston since. Its bold but slippery styling with pronounced rear haunches, signature grille and discreet side vents, was built on what would become Aston's new Vertical Horizontal platform, bonded from aluminium extrusions and carbonfibre mouldings.

It was constructed as a one-off prototype, with 'no plans for production'. Like that Chevelle, this is an exquisitely crafted vessel that took much ingenuity and thousands of hours to build. Project Vantage set Aston Martin off in a new direction, away from "V8s and cast-iron chassis" as its owner George Georgiou puts it, and into the present regime of aluminium/carbonfibre tubs, 6-litre V12 power and semi-automatic transmissions. Incredibly, it's almost 20 years old. Everything works. And, almost uniquely for a prototype, it avoided the crusher and made it to the outside world, with Aston Martin's blessing.

After Project Vantage's appearance at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, it was displayed on the concept lawn at Pebble Beach in the US, plus Amelia Island. The coupé's only public appearances in the UK were during 1998 at the Hurlingham Club in London, and at the AMOC race meeting at Donington Park in October. In the autumn of 2003, the car was displayed in the AM Works Service reception on Tickford Street, Newport Pagnell, in the company of a V12 Vanquish – the production model that it inspired. After that, it was seen in public only once, at the 2014 UK Vanquish Day at AM Works, before heading to auction.

Keith Riddington, now of Classicmobilia, was intimately involved with the project, shepherding it around the shows and taking the first tentative lap of Millbrook with Jacques Nasser, then head of Ford, Aston's parent company at the time. He was service manager at Works Service, as it was then called, but so small was the firm that it had limited numbers of 'exterior-facing' staff who were used to meeting and dealing with the public – "so it was down to me".

'IT'S THE FIRST STRIKE FROM IAN CALLUM'S VISIONARY MOULD OF THE MILLENNIAL ASTON'

"It was Ian Callum's project," he recalls. "Bob Dover was in charge then [chairman and chief executive, late of Jaguar, also under Ford ownership]. The press launch was on 5 January 1998. It was a Newport Pagnell car, whereas the DB7 had been done at Bloxham. But it was done at Lotus. It wasn't until Nasser came over that we saw it, and they said: 'This is our new concept; what do you think?' That was the good thing about Bob – he got the whole staff involved."

Callum, now at Jaguar, had been responsible for the DB7, and Project Vantage is obviously of the same family, with similar treatment around the headlights, and strong undertones of DB4GT Zagato. Georgiou says: "Ian Callum told me that the chassis and suspension were by Dan Parry Williams [later of McLaren P1 fame], done in-house at TWR because Tom Walkinshaw was in charge. Lotus definitely did the production chassis and suspension."

The motor is a prototype 6-litre, 48-valve, all-aluminium V12. Designed with input from Aston Martin, Ford Advanced Vehicle Technologies and Cosworth Engineering, it's shared with the GT90 and Indigo concepts and is pretty close to the 5935cc engine that made it into production… though for now Georgiou is hoping that nothing breaks.

A six-speed automatic transmission with paddle shift was a first for Aston Martin, and the 19in magnesium wheels are unique to the prototype. Inside, it's all brushed aluminium and Connolly leather that looks fabulously opulent yet also rugged, light and functional at the same time – but most importantly could be made by hand. Manual seats *à la* Ferrari F40 keep the complication and weight down. The odometer is stuck on 007 miles, a cheeky but knowing touch, because the Vanquish did indeed go on to co-star in a Bond film – *Die Another Day* – in 2002.

Riddington says: "It started and ran but the windows were fixed Perspex then, and the gearbox didn't work very well. We said to Jacques: 'It's one lap only, and take it steady, but he put his

Clockwise, from opposite: voluptuous haunches have become an Aston Martin signature – rear lights are Land Rover (probably), but behind bespoke fairings; exquisitely crafted cabin; quilted theme continues in boot; beautiful bezel, with 7 miles a cheeky nod to James Bond; 'Vantage' embossed on harnesses

foot down, and later Bob Dover went out in it as well. We took it to Detroit, where it went down like a house on fire; they went crazy. Then we took it to lots dealers asking if they would buy it." The response must have been good, because the Vanquish made its debut just three years later.

Project Vantage has a number of features that didn't make it though to production, such as the pushrod suspension with the front spring/dampers mounted horizontally and feeding loads into the bulkhead (hello, Rover P6), and the double-skinned carbonfibre roof and aluminium honeycomb where the production cars use sheet.

There were supposed to be actively managed anti-roll bars, powered by the same hydraulic feed that controls the transmission; they weren't actually fitted, although the Vanquish has them. Its brakes are 15in discs up front and 14in rears, with six-pot AP Racing calipers all round using titanium bridge bolts, plus ABS and a balance valve under the bonnet. The press release talked of 0-60mph in 4 secs, with 140mph coming up in the standing quarter-mile and 200mph-plus, and all this with 20mpg (US) or about 25mpg in real money. That's not too far off the mark if you compare it with a Vanquish, which appeared in 2001: 450bhp, 4.8 secs to 60mph and 190mph, though it did weigh 1835kg, which helped to account for the 16mpg overall fuel consumption. This car is quoted in the blurb as 1500kg.

Look more closely and you can see how they did it. Rolling aluminium for the skin would have been no problem for Aston, something it had been doing for decades. It's the details that give themselves away. The Ford switchgear is obvious, along with the generic inner door pulls, and the air vents are from the Ka. The rear diffuser is little more than a sheet of aluminium with riveted ports where the exhausts poke out, which could have been fabricated in a couple of hours – and almost certainly was. The door mirrors are possibly moulded from BMW E46 M3 components, but nobody's quite sure. The tail-lights are probably Land Rover items, but behind neat smooth fairings that were made by hand. Therein lies a story, because Project Vantage eventually became Vanquish. "And on that, tooling up for the tail-lights was the biggest cost of the job," recalls Riddington. "Even then we had to add reflectors bought from Halfords, because someone forgot to design them in."

In the pre-Ford days, cash had been desperately short at Aston Martin, a recurring theme since David Brown sold the company in 1972. As Riddington puts it: "Then it was a case of 'how long can we keep the doors open'. Aston had been doing all sorts of weird and wonderful projects and one-offs for wealthy clients, such as a four-door supercharged Vantage and other specials just to keep the cash flowing through the door so they could build cars for customers.

"I once had to fly to the Middle East to collect a large cheque and take it straight to the bank in London on Monday morning so that we could keep the company afloat. Project Vantage couldn't have happened without Ford money."

Dover said at the time: "We are looking forward to receiving feedback on all of the features incorporated in this concept. It has involved us in a new way of doing business, while retaining and strengthening the virtues and brand values of this world-famous marque."

We're used to this kind of PR-speak in the modern world, in everything from confectionery adverts to politicians pushing unpalatable realities, but coming from traditional Aston Martin

From top: gorgeous frontal styling encapsulates the transformation from DB7 into Vanquish; you can just see the P6-like horizontal springs in the V12's engine bay; AML build plate; twin spars for mirror weren't carried over to production

then it was something of a breakthrough, along with the new-style ownership and management.

So this prototype – and the modern super-coupés that it directly led to – marks a turning point in the company's fortunes. Georgiou spotted it consigned for Bonhams' annual fixture at Aston Martin Works, Newport Pagnell in 2016, and billed as a running prototype. It had been offered the year before in a slightly less completed state, but hadn't found a buyer.

Georgiou, who had owned a few classics but never an Aston Martin, decided that it was for him: "I saw it come up at Bonhams and put a cheeky maximum bid on the car because I was flying out on the day of the auction. I was looking at buying a Vanquish but saw this and realised how rare a running prototype was, especially an Aston being sold by the factory. It wanted saving. I didn't think I had a hope of getting it because it's such an important car, the genesis of everything coming out of the factory this millennium."

Project Vantage needed to go back into AM Works because, despite being sold as a working prototype, it didn't function very well, notably in the gears and brakes department, which is a bit serious if you're a 450bhp Aston Martin.

"After the initial shock of accidentally buying the car, it was delivered dead, with signs all over it saying not to attempt to connect a battery or start it," remembers Georgiou. "A quick call to Bonhams before I transferred the money had Works pick it up and get it running again, minus front brakes and with an intermittent first gear.

"Back at Storacar, the glass was fixed and tidied by Keith at Supreme Glass, as were the boot catch and trim. Instead of fixed Perspex, it now has functioning electric windows. He thought the job was only okay until I showed him

the magazine articles of the time, which pleased him, because it now looks better than original."

So at Goodwood, as it rolls out of the trailer, Georgiou is itching to drive it for the first time. As well as the regulation three slow tours behind the camera car, he manages to squeeze in a sneaky quicker lap by going the long way back to the pits after photography on the starting grid, and reckons that he saw 3000rpm in sixth on the Lavant Straight – you work it out…

"That's probably the furthest it's travelled under its own power, and it probably works better than it ever did, including the paddle shifters and auto and reverse buttons," he says. "It's fantastic, but it gets very hot inside." Understandably, because, as a show car, it wasn't fitted with air-con or any heat or sound insulation in the cockpit. Underlining its show status, the dash is basically held in by gravity. Georgiou adds: "I fitted the starter button to the console because it was just hanging down when I got it. Pulling up the carbon and aluminium console reveals bits of ply holding dummy switches and sliders – standard practice on any prototype."

As the auction catalogue said, 'A possibly once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the serious collector to acquire this historically significant Aston Martin prototype.' Georgiou paid a bit over £100,000: "Plus God knows how much getting it to the point where it can be run and demonstrated." Will it get more track time? "Probably not. No, that's it. I think I'll show it: the AMOC has put it forward for the Concours of Elegance, so I'll drive it in the grounds of Hampton Court if it makes the cut. It's a fascinating milestone in Aston Martin's development history, and it's incredible that it escaped. Not bad for an impulse purchase!"

SECOND COMING

Once the domain of only the wealthy, these GTs now offer remarkable value. **Ross Alkureishi** shows you how to live a jet-set lifestyle for less

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**

With many of the headlines during the 1980s and early '90s being dominated by hot hatches, performance saloons and supercars, you could be forgiven for believing that the GT scene ended with the Daytona, Ghibli *et al*. Yet, at this most discerning end of the market, the biggest marques continued to do battle, their targets remaining the same – the supremely well-off who sought cars that would ferry them huge distances at *über*-high speeds, and all in the best possible taste. But if limousines were too regal and high-end saloons a touch soft, it had to be a sporting coupé. Where to turn, though?

Aston Martin and Maserati were running on fumes in terms of cachet, Ferrari had for too long focused on mid-engined madness and most German offerings were simply too *neue klasse*. Thank goodness, then, for the 1990s and its fresh wave of technology-laden offerings.

Whether you have £10,000 or £100,000, your tastes are Italian, German or stiff upper lip, our selection of Gran Turismos from that decade now offers temptation by the bucketload. Striking designs, ultra-high performance and ludicrous levels of comfort – all at a fraction of the list price. Let battle commence…

Clockwise: Ian Callum's styling has aged well, and the DB7 still turns heads; cabin is a little cramped, but luxuriously appointed; supercharged straight-six

Aston Martin DB7

Sold/no built 1993-'99/2449 **Engine** all-alloy, dohc, supercharged 3236cc 'six'; 335bhp @ 5500rpm; 360lb ft @ 3000rpm **Transmission** four-speed auto, RWD **Suspension** independent, by wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar, telescopic dampers **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented discs **Weight** 3794lb (1725kg) **0-60mph** 5.8 secs **Top speed** 165mph **Price new** £78,500

The DB7 has done its time in the 'old Aston' wastelands, and is most definitely on the up. It would have happened even if you put aside its lithe Ian Callum-penned lines – the once-shunned DBS returned to favour, after all – but bring them back into play, and oh my…

After the visual brutality of the V8 years, the model revisited the glory days of the company's svelte DBs of the 1950s and '60s. In 1994, *Motor Sport* stated that: 'There are few, if any, cars that would pip the Aston in a beauty contest.' Today, that still holds true. The Maserati 3200 arrived five years later and, of the two, the DB7 is the original comeback pin-up. It's the model that saved the marque, propelling it towards the new century and kicking the previous decades' financial struggles firmly into touch.

Today, it still mesmerises. Its sinuous front end evokes its Superleggera ancestors, and even if the rear – complete with Mazda 323F tail-lights – is somewhat less well resolved, all its other glorious lines permit forgiveness.

The cabin is finished in traditional burr walnut, Connolly hide and Wilton carpets – exactly what the first owner would have expected of a car costing £78,500. Jaguar XJ-S underpinnings ensure that it's snug, but in a cosseting rather than claustrophobic manner.

Firing up the engine doesn't elicit the same sense of aural theatre as our Italian duo, but the Tom Walkinshaw Racing 3.2-litre unit is yet another nod to its DB forefathers. True gentlemen drive a straight-six, albeit one now equipped with an Eaton M90 supercharger.

It's this that ensures instantaneous throttle response. The 360lb ft of torque is delivered progressively, and with a titillating whine from the blower; it's never intrusive, but it's certainly gratifying as peak power feeds in at 5500rpm. The steering isn't over-assisted and the brakes offer sturdy levels of stopping power. The four-speed auto shifts smoothly but knocks a little bit off the car's sporting image, as does a ride that's generally obedient and happy on B-roads until pushed into overly spirited territory. But on straights it remains a supremely relaxing tourer.

By the time the V12 Vantage superseded it in 1999, the DB7 had become Aston's best-selling model ever. Its big brother would eventually snatch that title, which means that the 'six' is now rarer – as well as being cheaper to run. It also offers an excellent-value entry point into the world of Aston Martin, something that now barely exists in Ferrari terms. And while it'll require marque-appropriate levels of care and expenditure, each drive – and backward glance – will remind you exactly why you bought it.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Radius-arm mountings and rear jacking points are particularly prone to rot
- Leaking or burst air-conditioning evaporator units are rare but expensive to fix. Budget £3000 because the entire dashboard needs to come out
- Dashboard shrinkage is easily missed, but it causes the leather to come away at the front. A competent trimmer can replace it, but it'll cost around £2000

Thanks to *Aston Martin Owners' Club (www.amoc.org); Chris Done; Chris Fendt*

Clockwise: muscular profile reflects the Maserati's forceful nature; leather trim abounds in fine cabin; V8 engine is equipped with twin turbos

Maserati 3200GT

Sold/no built 1998-2001/4795 **Engine** all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 3217cc V8, twin turbos; 370bhp @ 6520rpm; 362lb ft @ 4500rpm **Transmission** four-speed automatic, RWD **Suspension** independent by double wishbones, coils, anti-roll bars and adaptive damping **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Brakes** vented discs **Weight** 3571lb (1620kg) **0-60mph** 5.5 secs **Top speed** 168mph **Price new** £62,950

Feral. That's the only word to describe the 3200GT – in Sport mode, anyway. Flick it off and it becomes, well, slightly less feral. That's not meant as an insult – it perfectly suits my tastes – but climb into this after the DB7 and you might think that the GT world had gone barking.

You'd be right, too, for this is an aggravated hornet of a car – ideal for relaunching a brand that was on its knees. Fiat's 1993 buyout of De Tomaso's controlling stake meant that Maserati came under the Turin-based behemoth's considerable umbrella. Suddenly, unheard-of funds were ploughed into the marque's revival. Perversely, at the head of this renaissance sat one-time rival Ferrari – surely sending the spirits of the Maserati brothers and Adolfo Orsi Snr into a spin.

The new pretender's clothes – by Giugiaro's Italdesign – lend it a bewitching presence. Cowled headlamps at the front give it a noticeable resemblance to the DB7, but with sweeping swage line, hunched shoulders and truncated tail, it has an altogether more aggressive stance.

Despite visual sorcery making it appear by some margin the most compact of our cars – it is, but by only 4in – it shares with the 456 the honour of having the most usable cabin because the rear will accommodate two semi-tall adults. In terms of finish, too, it's a match for the Ferrari, with soft leather abounding, and incredibly supportive electric sports seats.

The twin-turbo V8 makes its character known from start-up; blip the throttle and it spins like a wind turbine in a Force 10 gale. On the hoof, it's fierce. The fly-by-wire throttle takes a bit of getting used to, as you swing wildly between all-out attack – turbos whistling, quad exhausts blaring – and timidly caressing the accelerator.

Find the middle ground and you can revel in shattering performance. It's a higher-energy drive than the other three, but feels much more at home in non-linear environments. The steering could do with a bit more feel but enter a bend at pace and it tracks faithfully. Even with the traction control on, its rear end will come unstuck, warning you as you approach its limits.

The automatic transmission doesn't take any serious edge off the performance, and you're barely aware of it shifting cogs. While the volatile drive stirs your blood, the suspension is reasonably comfortable and huge Brembo calipers allow you to speedily rein in matters.

Later 3200s dialled-down the hair-trigger throttle, but the original still delivers an exquisite punch. If you like to ramp it up from spirited to bonkers, then this is the car for you: £20k for the very best examples is verging on the criminal.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Carbon tracks within the throttle bodies can wear, causing engine-management issues. Replacement with original parts costs £2500-plus, but an upgraded rebuild can be done for as little as £400
- Wishbones are prone to cracking. Budget £800 per replacement arm, of which there are eight
- Front lower balljoints are a weak spot and cost £800 per side to replace

Thanks to *The Maserati Club (www.maseraticlub.co.uk); John Lambden*

Clockwise: BMW features understated styling; the interior is festooned with switches and seems more '80s than '90s; mighty V12 overcomes 850's weight

BMW 850CSi

Sold/no built 1992-'95/1510 **Engine** all-alloy, sohc-per-bank 5576cc V12; 372bhp @ 5300rpm; 402lb ft @ 4000rpm **Transmission** six-speed manual, RWD **Suspension** independent, at **front** by MacPherson struts **rear** multi-link; coils, telescopics, anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** powered recirculating ball **Brakes** discs **Weight** 4354lb (1975kg) **0-60mph** 5.9 secs **Top speed** 155mph **Price new** £77,500

Presented at the 1989 Frankfurt International Motor Show, the new BMW 8 Series looked sharp and fresh – like the love child of a Ferrari and an M635CSi. And yet it went out of fashion quicker than a Global Technacolour T-shirt.

As much as I desperately want one, the fear factor of all that technological jiggery-pokery malfunctioning kicks in. For the CSi, the M70 engine was bored out to 5576cc, and so comprehensive was the work carried out on it that the powerplant received a new S70 designation.

There were stronger front hubs, stiffer dampers and shorter springs for the suspension, plus a six-speed manual Getrag gearbox. The showpiece, however, was the new hydraulic four-wheel steering system that enabled the rear wheels to respond to the car's speed and steering angle to turn in the same direction.

The BMW has a gloriously louche pillarless profile and, save a front air-dam, a rear skirt with a diffuser and a 'Powered by M' logo on the engine, there's little to identify it as a product of that exalted department. Inside, it's similarly discreet. Other than the badges on the gearstick and steering wheel, plus special red instrument needles, it all appears relatively standard.

Here, 'standard' means three words: techno, techno, techno. Seriously, there are switches everywhere, and I'd need at least two days with the manual to be *au fait* with all of them.

Slot the meaty gearlever into first, and throttle down elicits an explosion of torque from the V12. At a lardy 1975kg, the BMW is the slowest of our quartet in the 0-60mph sprint, but impressively by only 0.1 secs. Even in Sport mode – with its more aggressive throttle settings – it's a velvety smooth experience. The disparity between the sledgehammer performance and the tranquil cabin is astounding.

The high-geared steering ensures that it remains surprisingly manoeuvrable at low speeds. In the bends, meanwhile, the four-wheel steering and ASC+T (Automatic Stability Control + Traction) enable this brute to handle better than it has any right to. With that heavy lump up front, it lacks the inherent balance of the Ferrari, but you can have some serious fun. The front will loosen only gradually, enabling you to use the rear to steer and power through.

It's a shame that Munich never developed the M8 further than a 550bhp prototype, but tough market conditions ensured that it remained stillborn. Yet, to those in the know, the 850CSi remains an M-car in all but name. If you wish to conquer continents in a single sitting, then this potent BMW is the car for you. Your most difficult task will be finding a good one.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Check front and rear arches, inner sills and the tyre well in the boot for rust
- Ensuring that the hydraulic rear-wheel steering system is working is a must. Many of the parts are no longer available and the cost of repairs can be prohibitive
- There's a huge amount of electronics on the car, so make sure that each and every button functions as it should

Thanks to *The BMW Car Club (www.bmwcarclub.uk); Steve Carter, Steve Hamblyn*

Clockwise: the pretty 456 is free from the later 550's fussy styling details; interior is nicely finished but lacks sparkle; glorious V12 is a *tour de force*

Ferrari 456GTA

Sold/no built 1993-'97/1936 **Engine** all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5474cc V12; 442bhp @ 6250rpm; 406lb ft @ 4500rpm **Transmission** four-speed auto, RWD **Suspension** independent by unequal-length wishbones **rear** self-levelling; coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r **Steering** power-assisted rack and pinion **Weight** 3726lb (1690kg) **0-60mph** 5.1 secs **Top speed** 187mph **Price new** £146,500

Car makers have always raided their back catalogues for inspiration. The surprise is that it took Ferrari so long to rustle up a spiritual successor to its Daytona. Launched at the 1992 Paris Salon, the 456 offered a return to a more conventional set-up with big V12 up front, driving the rear wheels via a transaxle.

With a long bonnet, pop-up headlamps and quad tail-lights, the comparisons with its predecessor were more than just mechanical. The UK list price for this, the most expensive Ferrari ever at the time, came in at £146,000 – more than twice the price of the Maserati when new. The 456 remains the most expensive of our selection, too – sadly, the days of a very good £30,000 example are more than a few years past.

Its Pininfarina lines do a good job of hiding the 456's bulk, but dare I say that it looks a tad ungainly beside the 3200 and DB7? And less imposing – certainly from the rear – than the BMW. It sounds as if I'm being harsh on the 456, but I like my cars hardcore and this is just so easy to drive. The V12 is such an understressed unit that at town speeds it sits barely above idle, with just a continuous low-level growl reminding you of what's up front. The variable-assistance steering is light, the changes in the automatic gearbox almost imperceptible, and the suspension soaks up ruts and imperfections with aplomb.

Find an empty road and nail the throttle, though, and the big beast goes through a transformation. Its 442bhp and 406lb ft of torque bellow it forward with a pace that seriously belies its weight. Never mind Prancing Horse, it has shire-horse power delivered with the efficiency of a thoroughbred, and trounces our other contenders in the performance stats.

In fact, because of its impeccable manners, it's easy to find yourself fast approaching your first corner at an altogether inappropriate speed. This prompts a sharp stab of the anchors to rectify, and a serious note to self for future reference. Bring matters back within limits and it displays mammoth levels of grip.

On our test track at 80mph, the engine barely needs to try, spinning at 2500rpm. It devours the miles, but only really tickles your whistle above 5500rpm. It can feel a bit uninvolving at lower speeds, but knocking the gearlever out of 'D' and down into '3' or '2' brings the big lump right on cam, sharpening things noticeably.

Find a road long enough and with a high-enough speed limit, then, and you'll be able to enjoy its stratospheric levels of performance. Yet, despite its higher price, it's probably the best one to plough your money into. If you want discretion, this is as close as a Ferrari comes.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Service history is key: check what's been done, when and by whom
- The self-levelling rear suspension can leak. Budget £850 per side for a reconditioned unit, supplied and fitted by an independent specialist
- Electric windows go out of adjustment, requiring fettling or a replacement mechanism at a cost of between £250 and £1000 per side

Thanks to *Mike Wheeler at Rardley Motors (www.rardleymotors.com)*

Affordable aristocrats

Why settle for a new repmobile when you could have a spectacular Aston Martin? **Malcolm Thorne** revels in the appeal of the DB7, DB9 and V8 Vantage

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**


MI ADA
TFK 43

Clockwise: DB7 must rank among the most beautiful designs ever – i6 is easily identified by separate repeaters and foglights; supercharged 3.2-litre 'six'; wing vents reflect Aston Martin's heritage

Aston Martin. Is there a more blue-blooded name in the world of grand tourers? This British institution has always evoked an image of well-bred sophistication, combining effortless pace with discreet authority and an impressive motorsport heritage. It's a quintessentially English marque that evokes any number of upper-class clichés – well-connected gentlemen with a penchant for horsepower racing down to their country retreat.

Of course, noble ancestry and a title don't necessarily equate to vast wealth. All too often that sprawling rural pile is a one-way ticket to insolvency, and cynical folk might say the same of an Aston Martin. You don't walk into the showroom with an eye on residuals: buy something from the current range and you can lose £30,000 within 12 months.

Yet one man's folly can be another man's opportunity. The DB7 has long been a bargain, but you might be surprised to learn that not one of our featured trio – DB7, DB9 and V8 Vantage – need set you back much more than £30,000 today. You can pay more for a BMW 3-Series, and we're not even talking about an M3.

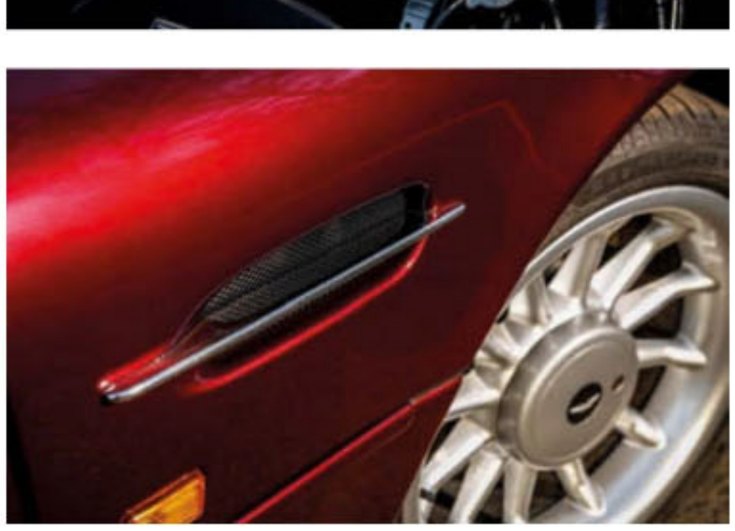
Such remarkable value for money is a corollary of relatively high production figures and the belief that these cars are in the racehorse/yacht bracket when it comes to running costs. Whether that reputation is justified or an unfair slight against the marque, it's difficult to ignore the lure of cut-price entry into such an exclusive world, but what are you getting for your money?

The oldest of our trio is the 165mph DB7. Unveiled at the Geneva Salon in 1993, it was such a hit that by the end of its run more had been built than the combined total of every other model in the firm's history. Without it, there would be no Aston Martin today.

Doubters have always been keen to knock this first 'mass-produced' effort, writing it off as a bastardised Jaguar, a cash cow with which paymaster Ford (which owned both marques) milked Aston's illustrious history. It wasn't even built at Newport Pagnell, they will point out, the car having been engineered by TWR and assembled in the former XJ220 plant at Bloxham.

Yes, it was based on the platform of the XJ-S and beneath the Eaton supercharger its 335bhp straight-six (i6 to the *cognoscenti*) may have been suspiciously similar to the unit that you'd find in a contemporary Jag, but does that really matter?

The DB7 certainly represented a new direction for Aston Martin. After two decades of increasingly outdated dinosaurs, lovingly hammered out of aluminium on a shoestring budget, the car boasted a steel monocoque – the only one to date in the firm's history, if you discount the Toyota-based Cygnet – that was clothed in unequivocally beautiful bodywork.



'IT'S JUST HOW YOU'D IMAGINE AN ASTON: BRISK, COMFORTABLE AND PURPOSEFUL'

Ian Callum's artwork deserves to be revered alongside the all-time greats: this is one of the most attractive vehicles ever to turn a wheel.

Look hard and you'll see evidence of some careful bean-counting (by Ford standards, it was produced for a minuscule amount of money). The exterior doorhandles and ignition key are a bit out of place, for example, but the DB7 pulls it off nonetheless – and the Mazda rear lights look far better than they ever did on the donor.

Sink into the cabin and it's much the same story. The bits and bobs have been purloined from within the Blue Oval empire, but the amount of time that's likely to have passed since you last sat in a Granada isolates you from the humdrum origins of the componentry. Instead, you focus on the soft leather and glossy veneers that defined luxury British interiors of the mid-1990s. It's a nice place to be, and is beginning to feel suitably traditional in its appeal.

Fire up the 7's 'six' and the sophisticated calm continues. It's very subdued, with no histrionics or silly tantrums. The featured example is fitted with the optional four-speed automatic, and as you release the sill-mounted handbrake and take up drive you're left thinking that this is all most agreeable. Mixed parentage or not, it is how I'd always imagined an Aston Martin would feel before ever driving one: quietly purposeful, supremely comfortable and respectfully brisk.

Truth be told, earlier Astons can feel somewhat agricultural. This car, in contrast, is a delight, blessed with precise, perfectly weighted power steering, a superb ride and a feeling of having been carefully conceived in the true GT idiom. It's wonderful, and emits a fabulous howl from its supercharger. No wonder it won such praise in period, in spite of the *Autocar* road test embarrassingly ending in flames.

Parked alongside, the DB9 looks like nothing more than a chiselled update of its predecessor, but looks can be deceptive. Initially styled by Ian Callum, it was refined by Danish-born Henrik Fisker. He explains: "When I started at Aston Martin, it had no design studio, so we had to build our models and do the class-A surfacing at the Jaguar studios – and they were all part of Ford. That created a lot of confusion about who did what, especially in the press."

The DB9 borrowed its profile and proportions from the DB7, but beneath the skin there was some futuristic engineering. In fact, Aston skipped the DB8 moniker in order to emphasise how big a leap forward it was. There would be nothing as mainstream as a steel monocoque here, that structure being superseded by an exotic bonded-aluminium blend. Baptised VH (for Vertical/Horizontal), the new platform made its debut on the 2001 Vanquish and has since been adapted for every production model.

Clockwise: soft, organic shapes and glossy walnut veneer dominate the DB7 cabin; rear light clusters look bespoke but were taken from the ungainly Mazda 323F; beautifully trimmed individual back seats for children only

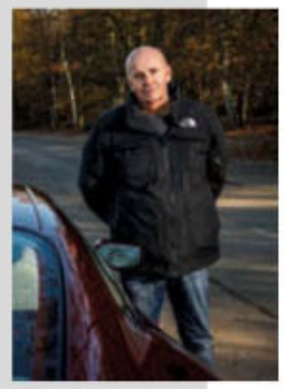
Factfile

ASTON MARTIN DB7

Sold/number built 1994-'99/6895 (all)
Construction steel monocoque with composite nose and bonnet
Engine all-aluminium, 3239cc straight-six with Eaton supercharger and Zytek multi-point electronic fuel injection
Max power 335bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 361lb ft @ 3000rpm
Transmission five-speed manual or four-speed automatic, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs, with servo and ABS
Length 15ft 3in (4646mm) **Width** 6ft (1830mm) **Height** 4ft ¾in (1238mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 10in (2691mm)
Weight 3914lb (1775kg)
0-60mph 5.6 secs
Top speed 165mph **Mpg** 18
Price new £78,500 (1995)

Owner's view

MARK ROWTHORN



"I grew up near Newport Pagnell and would see new Astons parked outside the works. The DB5 and DB6 are out of my price range, but when I realised that DB7 values had bottomed out I decided it was now or never. That was three years ago. The car gets regularly serviced and I tend to do preventative maintenance. I did quite a bit of research before I bought it, and this one was the best that I saw: another looked great until I pushed up the floorpan and my hand went through! I opted for the i6 fixed-head because it best reflects Aston's heritage. The shape better fits the ethos of quiet sophistication, while the straight-six provides a great driving experience and sound. I plan to keep it as long as possible."

The rival

MASERATI 3200 GT

Launched four years after the DB7, the 3200 was also pivotal to its maker's long-term survival. After countless iterations of the Biturbo, Italdesign's sexy GT finally gave Maserati a curvaceous new look. Powered by a twin-turbo 3.2-litre V8 it was certainly quick, with a top speed of 174mph. In 2001, it was uprated to 4244cc and 385bhp, but lost its signature tail-lights. Not only is it a credible DB7 rival, but we also found one for sale at a scarcely believable £7995.

From main: DB9 feels wonderfully composed through bends; hand-assembled 5.9-litre V12 offers massive torque and sounds fantastic; D-shape tail-lights are designer Fisker's favourite feature

The DB7's success had clearly bolstered the piggybank, enabling Aston to invest heavily in its future. There's no sign of penny-squeezing penitence in the DB9, or indeed in the factory where it was made – production shifted from Bloxham to a new state-of-the-art facility at Gaydon. The sophistication extended beyond the aluminium extrusions and assembly plant, too. Both the cabin and the outer skin have a more complete, bespoke feel to them.

By the time the new model was unveiled at Frankfurt in 2003, the motor industry's perception of luxury had moved on considerably. The shiny varnish of the DB7 has been replaced by a subtle satin finish to the timber, matched to stylish brushed aluminium. The abundance of hide remains, however, and there's a gorgeous suede headlining (a common theme of all three cars, in fact). The general ambience has an almost architectural quality to it, a slick feeling of late-20th-century modernism.

After the airy cabin of the DB7, the DB9 feels more enclosed. The scuttle and waistline are noticeably higher relative to the seat, meaning that, if you're jockey-sized, you won't be able to see much beyond the dash top. It makes the DB9 feel more hefty, less suited to threading through traffic or the confines of a multi-storey car park. Yet it compensates for that when it comes to the aural thrills. There's nothing amateur about these dramatics: the DB9 makes a sublime noise.

'WITH THE DB9, BOTH THE CABIN AND THE OUTER SKIN HAVE A MORE BESPOKE FEEL'

The specialist

"Get any potential purchase independently assessed," says Philip Jones of Byron International (www.allastonmartin.com). "For a six-cylinder DB7, have it looked at by a specialist. For V12s and V8s, have a pre-warranty inspection done by a franchised dealer. That will cost £250-500, but it's a wise investment. Remember: the most expensive Aston Martin will be the cheapest one, and vice versa.

"The i6 is becoming quite sought-after. It's finally been accepted as a 'real' Aston, and as prices of the DB4, 5 and 6 have spiralled, some owners of those are selling and looking to replace them with an affordable six-cylinder.

"Manual transmission is increasingly popular, and many people prefer a light-coloured interior. These cars seem to stand up well to regular use, but servicing is crucial. Avoid anything that's been in a heavy shunt or needs a lot of work. Corrosion can be an issue with the DB7, as can faulty air-con, which is hidden behind the dash. V12s have a coil for each plug and replacement is £1500-1800, so ensure that they don't need changing."

Switch on the ignition with the key then prod the illuminated glass button in the centre of the fascia; the V12 gives a gentle growl to announce its presence. It's electronic trickery, of course – a pre-programmed come-on whose only role is to flirt with your senses – but it works.

'Our' car is fitted with a six-speed paddle-shift transmission, but if you're of a lazy disposition you've got a row of buttons across the dash that fully automate your progress. Whichever you choose, the DB9 is genteel and easy-going, the sort of thing in which you could potter around minding your own business. But find yourself a stretch of open tarmac, switch on the Sport setting then floor the throttle and that docile dozen bares its fangs with a vengeance. After the DB7, this big, heavy GT feels massively fast.

The 48-valve V12 was first seen in the Ford Indigo concept of 1996, and entered production in the DB7 Vantage three years later. Although that car was intended to complement the i6, it's easy to see why the junior version was swiftly withdrawn – this is an incredible motor. In essence, the AM04 is a pair of Ford Duratec 3-litre V6s nailed together, but this 5935cc monster is comfortably the equal of anything to have emerged from Maranello or Sant'Agata.

When you reach extreme velocities – and it's impossible to resist when you're given the opportunity on a test track – the DB9 remains rock-solid, calm and reassuringly benign. It feels as if it could carry you to the end of the world and back in the space of an afternoon without either of you breaking into a sweat.

And if, as you tear along at warp speed, some dullard in a Daewoo forgets to check his mirrors, the 1710kg leviathan will stop dead in less than the time it takes for your knuckles to turn white. The arresting power of those vast ventilated discs is as absolute as that of the traffic officer who will relieve you of your licence should you think about approaching the Aston's electronically limited 183mph maximum.

It might lack the gently sprung and relaxing gait of its predecessor, and it might suffer more noticeable tyre roar, but as transcontinental GTs go, this one is mightily impressive. No wonder it went on to spawn such a successful contender in international motorsport, the DBR9 collecting a brace of class wins at Le Mans.

The word 'sport' brings us neatly to the final member of our trio, the V8 Vantage. If the DB7 had introduced the concept of a volume-produced Aston and the DB9 had refined the idea, the Vantage built upon that successful formula, expanding the marque's appeal to a younger audience. This would be the smallest, most agile and most nimble modern Aston yet, a shrink-wrapped sports car far removed from the handmade antiquities of yore.

Clockwise: DB9 retains the sill-mounted handbrake of the DB7, but everything else in the slickly styled cabin is new; cocoon-like rear is far less airy than that of earlier car; plaque proudly proclaims that the Aston is handbuilt

Factfile

ASTON MARTIN DB9

Sold/number built 2004-'16/16,500
Construction bonded aluminium structure with aluminium, steel, composite and magnesium panels
Engine all-aluminium, dohc 5935cc 48-valve V12; Visteon engine management
Max power 450bhp @ 5750rpm
Max torque 420lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual or Touchtronic, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes discs all round, with servo and ABS
Length 15ft 5in (4697mm) **Width** 6ft 2in (1875mm) **Height** 4ft 4in (1318mm)
Wheelbase 9ft (2740mm)
Weight 3769lb (1710kg)
0-60mph 4.9 secs
Top speed 183mph **Mpg** 19
Price new £103,000 (2004)

Owner's view

DAVID ELSWOOD

"The DB9 is one of the prettiest cars ever to leave a drawing board. I've had mine for two years and try to exercise it on a regular basis, although I only managed 1000 miles in 2016 – I'll try harder in 2017. I've had no issues with it, and use Newlands Motors in Forest Row for servicing.

"Before the DB9, I'd had Caterhams and quite a few Porsches, but I decided that I needed more comfort and a better heater. I also own a Vantage Roadster. Although similar in some respects, they are very different but you certainly get the price of admission on both when you hit the starter button. Besides the Astons, I have a 911, a Boxster and a Honda S2000, plus three Suzuki SJs – a personal obsession!"

The rival

FERRARI 612 SCAGLIETTI

With its 5748cc V12 pumping out a feisty 532bhp, this vast Italian 2+2 – like the DB9, it boasts a bonded aluminium structure – can crack 60mph in around 4 secs and nudge 200mph. Some have criticised it for lacking that special fizz that marks out the best Prancing Horses from the also-rans, but in this context its greatest failing is its price. At £80,000-plus, you would be able to bag yourself a brace of DB9s for the cost of a single Scaglietti.

The short-wheelbase V8 Vantage echoes the profile of the DB9, but is a strict two-seater. Below: styling has evolved from curvy to chiselled, yet all three are instantly recognisable as Astons

"The Vantage was a new market entry for Aston Martin," says Fisker. "I designed it to have a strong emotional connection, both for traditional owners and new ones. The sporty design was a risk, but I was willing to take that risk – and it paid off. The tight proportions equal short overhangs, and I think it has the ultimate stance without any compromise."

Launched in 2005, the two-seater features the same VH aluminium architecture as the DB9, albeit with 6in lopped from the wheelbase (and another 6in from its overall length), but had a sharper, more focused role. This was Aston Martin's attempt at muscling into Porsche 911 territory, and muscle is the operative word here. With 380bhp from its AM05 V8, the baby Aston could hit 100mph in 11.5 secs.

Like the DB9, the Vantage is as docile as a kitten around town – although the six-speed 'box needs a firm hand – but breach 4000rpm and a thunderous roar will erupt, leaving you searching for the nearest tunnel in which to deafen yourself. The dry-sump V8 – front-mounted, but sitting well back for a near-ideal 51:49 weight distribution – was of a new design. Based ever-so loosely on the unit to be found in 1990s Jaguars, it was unique to Aston Martin. And, as with the V12s, it was hand-assembled in Cologne.

Its punch makes the car feel monumentally fast, but there's more to the Vantage than raw figures. The steering feels pin-sharp and the grip is colossal; you can flick it from one lane to another at lunatic *autobahn* velocity, or throw it around your favourite twisties with unbridled glee – it just takes it all in its stride.

The Vantage's running gear followed established Aston Martin practice: double wishbones and coil springs at each corner. Allied to vast

'THE V8 VANTAGE WAS ASTON'S ATTEMPT TO MUSCLE IN ON THE 911'S TERRITORY'

235/45 ZR19 tyres on the front, and even wider 275/40s on the back, it grips with such ferocity that I suspect only the insane would contemplate inducing oversteer on a public road. When they tried it on a circuit, the brave testers at *Autocar* not only lived to tell of the tail, as it were, they also praised its controllable nature. The Vantage, then, gets an emphatic thumbs up.

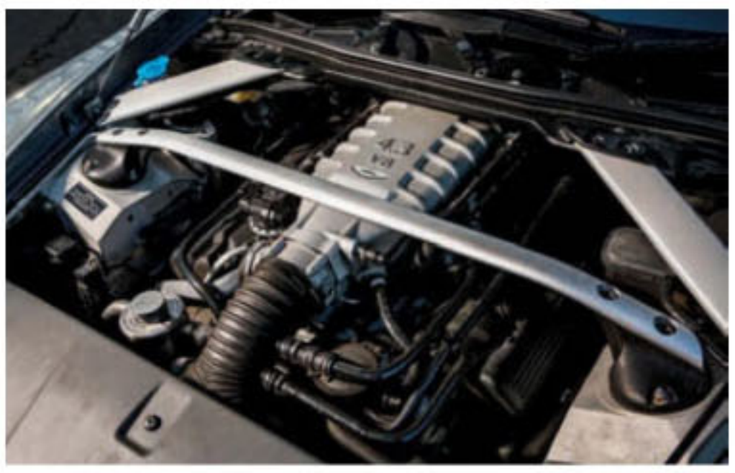
"When I joined Aston, it sold only about 1400 cars a year," says Fisker. "When we launched the V8 Vantage and the DB9, we reached more than 7000 cars per year and Aston Martin made a small profit for the first time. Even today, the Vantage is the best-selling Aston ever.

"My influence when designing them was the ultimate British gentleman – a bit of James Bond and a bit of the groomed business executive. The cars do not have body-builder muscles. They're athletic, elegant, understated and sporting."

All three, in fact, are achingly stylish in the long-established Aston Martin tradition, but for hardcore thrills the Vantage is the way to go, while for those seeking a more laid-back lifestyle the DB7 would be the obvious choice. Somewhere in between lies the DB9, which perhaps makes it the cream of the crop and explains why prices are already beginning to climb.

Personally, the delicious shape of the DB7 is enough for me to declare it my favourite, but, whichever you chose, one thing is clear: for the price of admission, this trio is unbeatable.

Thanks to *Tim Foster at Byron International; Tim Cottingham and Nikki Wright at the Aston Martin Owners' Club (www.amoc.org); Mark Rowthorn; David Elswood; Christopher Knight*



Clockwise: Vantage fascia mirrors that of the DB9; motor doesn't look special but makes a spine-tingling sound; vents flow neatly into flanks; red lenses of early versions replaced by white on later models; two seats only in hardcore V8

Factfile

ASTON MARTIN V8 VANTAGE

Sold/number built 2005-date/21,200
Construction bonded aluminium structure with aluminium, steel, composite and magnesium panels
Engine all-aluminium, dohc, 32-valve 4300cc V8, sequential fuel injection
Max power 380bhp @ 7000rpm
Max torque 302lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed manual, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, by wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes ventilated discs with servo, ABS
Length 14ft 4½in (4380mm) **Width** 6ft 1½in (1865mm) **Height** 4ft 1½in (1255mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 6½in (2600mm)
Weight 3594lb (1630kg)
0-60mph 4.9 secs
Top speed 175mph **Mpg** 17
Price new £79,995 (2005)

Owner's view

CHRIS KNIGHT

"When I attended the 1976 Motor Show and saw the Lagonda 'wedge', I was instantly hooked on Astons. As far as the Vantage is concerned, it's the compact size that caught my eye. I've owned it for two years and have had no problems, but I keep the battery on a trickle charge. It can discharge if not used, which can apparently mess with the electrics.

"It was one of 100 Astons at last year's Concours of Elegance and driving in a convoy towards Windsor Castle was a sight to behold. I'd highly recommend the Vantage, particularly an early one. In my opinion, these cars are closest to how Henrik Fisker imagined them and are in their purest form. It's a keeper: no amount would prise it from me."

The rival

PORSCHE 911 CARRERA S

Stuttgart's rear-engined icon remains one of the world's great sports cars. Packing a 350bhp punch, the Porsche also boasts a brilliant chassis – dynamically, it edges the baby Aston – even if, for some buyers, it may be a bit too mainstream. A plentiful supply means that they are cheap, though – £20,000 seems to be the starting price for a 997 – and you can't argue with the performance figures: 0-60 in 4.6 secs and 182mph. The German build quality goes without saying, too.


LB52 TMV

Brave new world

The Vanquish blended craftsmanship with audacious, cutting-edge technology. **Steve Sutcliffe** gets a culture shock

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER/AMHT**

If ever there was a car that separates the values and ideas of the old car company that was Aston Martin from the more ambitious, less traditional, infinitely more contemporary 'brand' that Aston has become today, it's the Vanquish. Not the new 2012 edition, but the original Ian Callum-designed car of 2001.

In 1998, when the V8 Virage was still Aston's most exotic creation and the workforce at Newport Pagnell was still crafting its cars together lovingly by hand, the Project Vantage Concept must have seemed like a machine from outer space. When it made its audacious debut at that year's North American Auto Show in Detroit, you could almost feel the traditionalists shudder. Because here was an Aston that was constructed mostly from aluminium and carbon composites, and which had not a handbuilt V8 beneath its bonnet but a V12 whose origins could be traced indirectly to Ford Motor Co.

Worse still, it featured a paddle-shift gearbox and an electronic fly-by-wire throttle system, neither of which had been seen (or wanted) in an Aston Martin previously.

But when the Vanquish eventually landed as a full production car three years later, Aston Martin's fans – even the more stubbornly antiquated among them – were a very long way indeed from being displeased. Despite its 21st-century design and engineering ethos, it was instantly regarded as The Real Thing.

It was a true-blue, big hairy Aston and, flappy-paddle gearshift aside, it became the very obvious successor to the original V8 Vantage – arguably the biggest and hairiest Aston Martin of them all – pretty much overnight.

It was quick, too. Very quick. Although its kerbweight was still an inexplicably hefty 1835kg – more than 4000lb! – power from the 5925cc V12 was a rousing 460bhp at 6500rpm, with torque rated officially at 400lb ft at 5000rpm. This was sufficient to send the Vanquish to 60mph from rest in a mere 4.4 secs, to 100mph in 10.5 secs, and on to a claimed top speed just four miles per hour shy of the magic 200mph.

'THERE'S A UNIQUE ATMOSPHERE INSIDE – A DELICIOUS SMELL OF LEATHER WITH A WHIFF OF OILY HEAT'

Yet it was the car's styling and the noise it made that elevated the Vanquish to a position whereby it could look its equivalent Ferrari of the day squarely in the eye, and then simply wait for the Prancing Horse to blink. Callum wanted his creation to look powerful and strong, as well as elegant, and in the event he went to town and provided the car with a quite extraordinary level of road presence, never replicated in an Aston before or since.

And as for the noise, it didn't matter one iota that the V12's engineering roots emanated from a design from across the pond. It sounded utterly fantastic, largely as a result of a natty engineering solution that kept various flaps in its exhaust system closed in order to satisfy the noise police, which would then open at higher revs to allow the Vanquish to release its full fury.

Since then, of course, every supercar maker worth its salt has developed a system similar to that of the Vanquish. But even today, the sound of this car's V12 under load, beyond 3000rpm, remains as distinctive a noise as anything that Ferrari (or Aston Martin) has produced since. It was also the reason why I could hear the Vanquish long before I could see it when it arrived on location for our photoshoot – because it's a noise you don't ever forget.

On offer with marque specialist Nicholas Mee, this particular example has been uprated to something approaching Vanquish S specification by the fitment of bigger brakes, Yokohama tyres and various other modifications. It's done

Menacing face gives the Vanquish huge presence, yet there are also nods to the past. Light panels clothe complex bonded-aluminium structure

20,000 miles and is priced at £65,000, which is at the top end of the scale; there are plenty for sale on or around the £50k mark.

But it's a genuinely immaculate example and, bearing in mind that the original list price was an eye-watering £158,000 – and that Aston made just 2593 of them between 2001 and '07 – the idea of the Vanquish becoming an investment in the future is probably not that far-fetched. Not when you consider that it was a last-of-an-era moment as far as Newport Pagnell was concerned, before Aston's Gaydon factory became the new company HQ.

Climb inside and there's a unique atmosphere, a delicious smell of leather mixed with a whiff of oily heat. The driving position is low-slung and laid-back, the dials white and vaguely antique in their appearance. On the centre console sits a bank of switches for the air-conditioning and so on that are lifted straight out of a Jaguar XK8 – as are the doorhandles, the column stalks and much of the rest of the switchgear. It's a curious, though not unbeguiling, mixture of modern, not so modern and downright odd components, all of which meet to produce one unmistakable interior.

Yet any faults there may be inside the Vanquish are largely obliterated the moment you thumb the big red button in the centre of the dashboard marked 'engine start'. Once the mildly embarrassing burst of revs dies away, the V12 settles to a smooth but still rousing idle. One prod on the accelerator sends a wave of energy through the body that manifests itself in a lovely rocking motion, almost as if the car is lifting a cheek gracefully, as one might in church.

Select first gear by pulling back the right-hand paddle and there's a faint mechanical click felt at the fingertips, alongside a distant clunk as the gear goes in. No clutch is required; instead you just open the throttle smoothly and you're away, a slight judder from the transmission confirming that this is indeed an electrically automated manual gearbox, and not just a torque-converter automatic with paddles.

On the move the Vanquish feels instantly alive, and very obviously front-engined/rear-wheel drive. Its steering is heavy but direct, the ride firm but somehow soothing at the same time. Even at low speed and low revs, the engine and exhaust dominate the experience. Everything the Vanquish does, in fact, all of its energy, seems to flow from a point halfway down its long bonnet. Even the way it loads up mid-corner and gives you so much feel from the rear end is determined by the engine being mounted as far back as possible but still in front of the driver, just where it should be in a GT car.

And when you do eventually put your foot down, or throw it towards a corner with some

ASTON MARTIN VANQUISH

Sold/number built 2001-'07/2593
Construction aluminium body panels clothing an extruded-aluminium and carbonfibre punt
Engine all-alloy, dohc-per-bank 5925cc V12, sequential fuel injection
Max power 460bhp @ 6500rpm
Max torque 400lb ft @ 5000rpm
Transmission six-speed automated manual with paddle-shift operation, driving rear wheels
Suspension independent, by double wishbones, coil springs, telescopic dampers and anti-roll bar f/r
Steering power-assisted rack and pinion
Brakes 14in (355mm) front, 13in (330mm) rear ventilated discs, with servo and anti-lock
Wheels & tyres 9Jx19in & 255/40 ZR19 (f), 10Jx19in & 285/40 ZR19 (r)
Length 15ft 3¾in (4665mm)
Width 6ft 6¾in (1998mm)
Height 4ft 4in (1318mm)
Wheelbase 8ft 10in (2690mm)
Weight 4045lb (1835kg)
0-60mph 4.4 secs
0-100mph 10.5 secs
Top speed 196mph
Mpg 12.6
Price new £158,000

Clockwise, from main: cabin is a mish-mash of old and new; soulful V12 dominates its character; spidery alloys; proud build plaque; muscular profile

gusto, it really does deliver. This car feels every inch as rapid as I remembered in a straight line, and in corners I am genuinely surprised by how fast and composed it still seems, even alongside its 2012 namesake, which just so happens to be here on the day in question.

The only true downside to the Vanquish as a car to own, rather than merely drive, is the same one that blighted it from the word go. Cost. The simple truth is that it was expensive to buy in the first place, is still expensive to buy today, and will be expensive to run tomorrow and beyond.

Being realistic about running costs, Mee estimates that to do 6000 miles in one will cost approximately £5000 – assuming that nothing major goes wrong or needs replacing in the meantime. If a clutch goes – and after 25-30,000 miles they generally do – that's another £5400. Replacement discs and pads cost £2500 and last 7-15,000 miles depending on use. A set of plugs and coils is £2050 and ideally worth looking at annually, while a major service (£2100) is required every 15,000 miles or so, with a minor (£1000) every 6000 miles.

What there does not appear to be, however, is a great long list of items that regularly go wrong. The engine Mee describes as "bullet-proof". Beyond the clutch of the paddle-shift 'box, which needs to be reset electronically by specialists in order to avoid wear, there are no obvious skeletons in the closet. As long as you're realistic about the fact that running a Vanquish is not something that can be done on the cheap, there's no reason why buyers should come unstuck.

It's hard to see the Vanquish being anything other than a classic in the long run, a car that will cross that magic line and begin to go back up again in value. And at that point it will warrant even more respect than it commands today.

But even as its stands, this car is special. Very special, actually. Not least because it represents the end of an era – and the beginning of another – as far as Aston Martin is concerned.

Thanks to *Nicholas Mee & Company: 020 8741 8822; www.nicholasmee.co.uk*

'WHEN YOU DO PUT YOUR FOOT DOWN, OR THROW IT AT A CORNER WITH SOME GUSTO, IT REALLY DOES DELIVER'

Clockwise, from main: engine is set well back to aid handling; build plaque provides a personal touch; retro air vent

Aston Martin history part 3
Ford, Bloxham and beyond

1987 Ford Motor Co takes a 75% share of Aston Martin and later becomes sole owner
1989 AMR1 racer takes AM back to Le Mans. Virage replaces ageing V8 range. Volante follows in a year, 6.3-litre version in '92; restyled and renamed V8 in '96
1991 Walter Hayes succeeds Victor Gauntlett as chairman. Four 'Sanction II' DB4GTZs built
1993 DB7 unveiled at Geneva Salon. New twin-supercharged 550bhp Vantage flagship
1994 DB7 goes on sale, with production from a new factory in Bloxham, Oxon. Volante from '96, V12 Vantage from '99, plus Zagato coupé and DB AR1 roadster

2000 Dr Ulrich Bez made chair/CEO
2001 Vanquish arrives, developed from '98 Project Vantage concept; 460bhp V12 uprated to 520bhp for 2004 Vanquish S
2003 AM opens new HQ in Gaydon (below)
2003 DB9 goes into production, using the new 'VH' architecture
2004 Engine plant opens in Cologne
2005 DBR9 racer launched; achieves class wins at Le Mans in 2007 and '08. 'Entry level' V8 Vantage goes on sale (later available as a Roadster, a turnkey racer, and with a V12)
2007 DBS name revived. Ford sells AM to a consortium led by new chairman David Richards
2009 Rapide name returns for a new four-door, badged Aston rather than Lagonda
2011 V12 Zagato unveiled, plus 750bhp, 220mph One-77 hypercar, new Virage and rebranded Toyota iQ – the Cygnet – to bring down the firm's emissions

2012 Vanquish returns as range-topper. Investindustrial buys a 37.5% stake in Aston Martin

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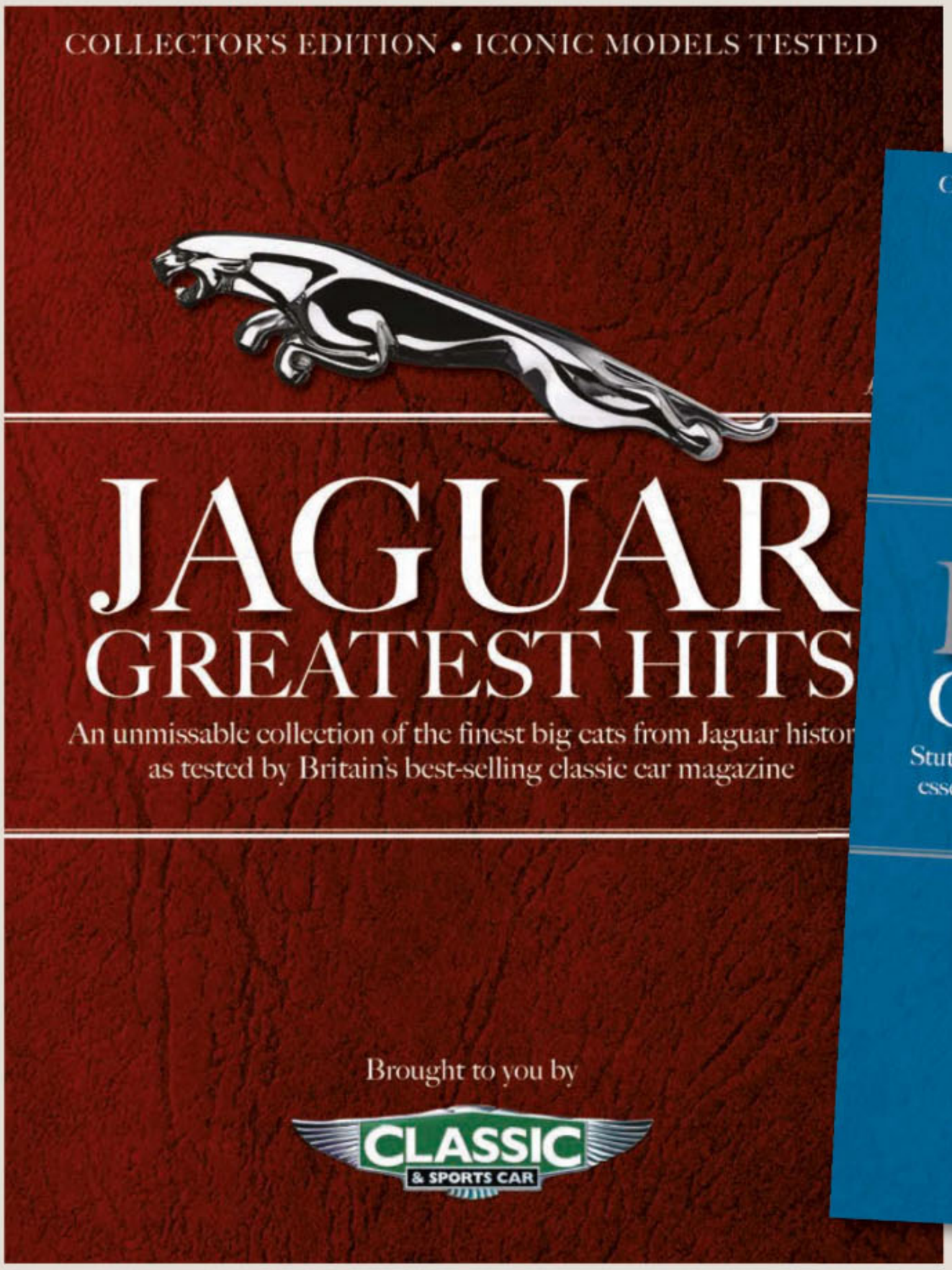

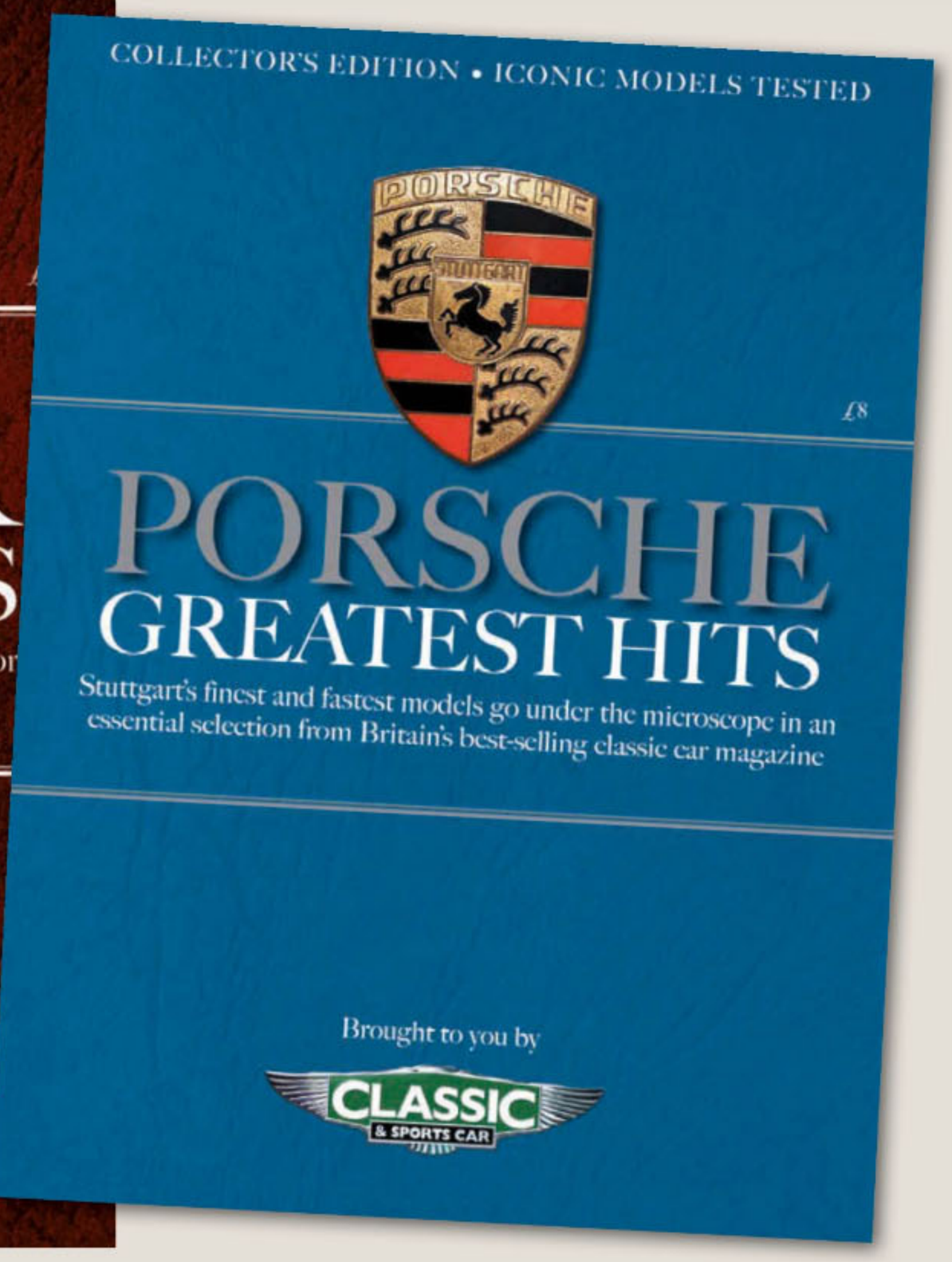

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