

ASTON MARTIN

‘A talent for creating the beautiful’

In a properly automated and educated world, machines may prove to be the true humanising influence, says Richard Webb



Hundred and fifty years ago, Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford founded Aston Martin in a small London workshop. Both men had a passion for machines and a talent for engines and racing. Their shared love for the motor car prospered and became an expression of the exhilarating and memorable – beautiful cars that etched into the memory of a generation of enthusiasts. Expectations were high, with the press of the day suggesting this would be a sports car to rival Bugatti.

The name Martin and Bamford chose for this most exotic and emotive of marque was not, as you'd have thought, Bamford Martin. Aston Martin was a combination of the name of a partner and of the Aston Clinton sprint hill climb near Tring, in Hertfordshire, England.

Since the earliest days, these moments of beauty have been steeped in racing heritage. Like Ferrari, Alfa Romeo, Jaguar and others, the firm has always believed that racing helped to improve their cars. Aston Martin's historic debut in the 1922 French Grand Prix proved to be just the beginning of a burning passion that still smoulders today.

David Brown, an English industrialist, took over from 1947 to 1972. He revolutionised the company, growing its operations, acquiring the Lagonda marque and introducing a dizzy succession of iconic cars like the DB2 - the first Aston Martin to carry the now celebrated 'DB' nameplate. Buoyed by 2nd and 3rd in its class at Le Mans in 1951, each new car propelled the company further into the global spotlight. In 1959, the DBR1 took the honours at 24 Hours of Le Mans and the track-bred DB3 and DB3S were followed up by the arguably most memorable DB4 and its high-performance sibling - the DB4GT. It was this series that sparked the historic collaboration with Zagato.



By the time the DB5 was unveiled in 1963, the brand looked unstoppable. The car became an instant international hit, with critical acclaim, propelling Aston Martin onto the global stage. Some still praise it as one of the most beautiful cars in the world and one that indelibly marked popular culture unlike any other. Aston Martin has evolved to become a globally admired luxury brand.

Above: This ultra-rare DB4/GT Zagato is one of the most expensive British cars ever sold at auction, fetching £9.45 million in 2015. Originally built to allow Aston Martin to challenge Ferrari in the World Sports Car Championship, Aston sent its car to Carrozzeria Zagato, with the instruction to maximise its performance.

Left: This Vantage specification 1954 DB 2/4 Mk I was the inspiration for the Aston Martin In Goldfinger. Originally intended for the market comprised of 'sports car enthusiasts with a family', sufficient space was added within the existing DB2 design for two child-sized occasional rear seats.

Opposite page top: The Aston Martin DB11 V12 press car on test in the British countryside near Gaydon, Warwickshire. Overall, it impressed with its muscular and cultured performance.

Right: Aston Martin DBS 3 : In 1968, the DBS retained the six-cylinder, 3,995 cc engine carried over from the DB6. From 1969 the DBS was also made available with a V8 engine – a four-seat grand touring car, capable of 260 kph. A distinguishing feature of both the DBS and DBSV8 are the four quartz iodine headlights set into the iconic Aston Martin grille.



Eschewing uniformity, Aston Martins are cars of great character. Every era is unified by their individuality. I think the current era will be viewed as amongst the most exciting. An admiration of sensuous function has always been at the core of the business and perhaps none more so than the latest DB11 - the clearest sign of Aston Martin's prospects. If they are as fantastic as the car looks, well, it's the brand to watch.

Stepping into the car, you notice the new dash design and it is truly a welcome step up in quality and presentation. Push the big crystal button in the middle of the dash and the V12 churns into life with that slightly lazy starter-motor induced howl so redolent of big, menacing engines like this.

Clear and unfussy, the large digital dials and the central control panel blends Aston's craftsmanship with some Mercedes-Benz electronic architecture. I soon got used to operating all of the functions, and the infotainment system works and like the car itself, sounds fabulous.

Comfort levels are excellent, with an impressive, smooth ride considering the very low profile tyres. At motorway speeds there was a surreal absence of engine noise – the V12 loping along at 1,500rpm at an indicated 112km/h – there was an absence of engine noise. Darting off the motorway, I blasted through the typically narrow British country lanes at spirited pace.

It's then that the big lungs opened and bellowed like a pissed-off bear in a tuxedo. The DB11 does have rear seats, but anyone other than very small humans will find the rear accommodation a seriously unhappy place to be. Like the grand tourer it really is, the boot takes a couple of 'naughty weekend away' bags, plus there is more storage space in the rather small door pockets and under the armrest.

At the wheel, I felt immediately at home, but I wondered if others may find this big grand tourer a bit intimidating at times? My wife drove the car and whilst she mentioned that over-the-shoulder visibility is poor, it did compensate with a multitude of cameras situated around the car that project images on to the screen. "Controls are ultra-smooth - the steering, throttle, brakes and eight-speed automatic gearbox made progress regal, even with the seemingly endless bonnet," she reckons. Still, you need a steady hand to thread this V12 through narrow roads in towns and villages. One of the characteristics of this car is that it puts a smile on your face when you drive and look at it. You can't help it. Get the DB11 on an open road and it really starts to shine like a Cape Town summer's day.



I revelled in the towering performance from the 5.2-litre V12 engine, which, incidentally, is made from a couple of Ford Mondeo V6 units bolted in tandem. 0-100kph pops up in just 3.9 seconds, and when the turbos really start to come on stream at 2,000rpm, it has so much grunt your smile starts to become ever deeper etched into your face. It's that good! Add the accurate steering and lack of body roll when you line up the apex of sweeping blacktop you know that it is much more than a cruiser.

It could well be that machines will do the work that makes life possible and that human beings will do all the other things that make life pleasant and worthwhile. However, for me, the Aston Martin DB11 did both.



V12 JUST TOO MUCH? THE V8 IS A PEACH

Aston also offers a Mercedes-AMG V8 engine DB11, a 4.0-litre, 375kW and 675Nm twin-turbo 90-degree V8. It is production-based but hand-built, as usual, by one very busy, skilled AMG engineer per engine. The engine has been made more 'Aston', by fettling some of the components, giving it a raffish, insolent booming timbre, very different from its V12 stablemate.

Using a 'hot turbo' arrangement, where its twin single-scroll turbos nestle in the 90-degree V between the cylinder blocks, there's a noticeable reduction in turbo lag. At 1,730kg, there's 115kg less mass up front compared to the V12, making the turn-in to corners feel more immediate.

The loss of 1.2 litres, a couple of cylinders, and 100bhp compared with the V12 must make this version a little disappointing, right? Don't believe it. I tried the cars almost back to back, and confirm that it is still a formidably rapid car and every bit a pukka driver's car. Against the V12, its 187mph top end is only 13mph down and the 4.0sec 0-62mph acceleration is just 0.1sec slower.

Push hard, and the rear-end will power-slide out of corners and get quite spectacular under provocation, but it always feels stable, aided by powerful and progressive brakes. Compared with the V12, I felt I knew more instinctively what the car would do. In fact, I'd say the V8 handles better than the V12.

It is no less of an Aston Martin for having 'only' 8 cylinders, but don't expect it to be that much cheaper than the V12. Whilst an Audi R8 and a Porsche 911 may be on your prospect list, DB11 is a genuinely great car to drive. It looks terrific and its charisma is matched by its power.



Below: During 1985 Timothy Dalton starred in *The Living Daylights* and his weapon of choice was the V8 Vantage Volante. With gadgets, like Goldfinger's DB5, it boasted a rear rocket propulsion system, missiles, lasers, and tyre spikes for super-traction control. And in a forerunner to today's head-up displays, this one projected missile guidance on the windscreen, along with a built-in self-destruct timer.

Above: *Casino Royale* gave James Bond a more 'serious' tone. Daniel Craig's DBS V12 still had gadgets, but they restrained, like a handy defibrillator and a silenced Walther PPK. Naturally, these gadgets were as much use as a chocolate teapot when Bond drove over the hill at speed and swerved to avoid Vesper, resulting in a world record breaking series of 7 flips that left Bond unconscious and in the clutches of the enemy.

The DB5 returned again in the 2006 *Casino Royale*, where Bond won the car from Alex Dimitrios in a poker game and Bond – in a provocative move – used the DB5 to steal Dimitrios's girlfriend.



Above: The DB5 driven by James Bond in the film *Goldfinger* was released only 3 months prior to shooting. Predictably, the special effects team got busy, adding an unfeasibly large array of gadgets to the weaponised car, including machine guns, an ejector seat, a smoke screen and most importantly, tyre slashers. Perfect for the daily Sandton commute!

Right: On Her Majesty's Secret Service introduced the stunning DBS. Sadly, in the end, Bond's wife was assassinated through the DBS's windscreen. This Aston was the last car produced under David Brown's ownership. In the film that followed – *Diamonds Are Forever* – the DBS was briefly shown being fitted with obligatory missiles in Q's lab.



DEFENDING THE HERITAGE

To experience the passion behind the brand and its heritage, I visited Ecurie Bertelli in Olney, Buckinghamshire, arguably the world's foremost pre-war Aston Martin specialists. Set up in 1976 by Nick Mason and others, it quickly earned a reputation for high quality restorations of vintage Bertelli-era Aston Martins. Today, they buy and sell, service and restore some of the most historically important Astons.

I asked Managing Director, Robert Blakemore, who grew up around pre-war Aston Martins, if they make their own parts? "We have 4,000 original parts drawings and 2,500 original technical drawings at our disposal, so we can manufacture and supply pre-1940 parts to original specification," he says. Keen to see an example of Aston Heritage Specialist network, I headed south, to South Kensington, London to visit the city's only official Heritage Specialist and one of just 13 appointed globally, Nicholas Mee & Co. They specialise in the supply of parts, vehicle services and pre-owned Aston Martin cars produced from 1959 to the present day.

Managing Director, Nicholas Mee joined Aston Martin Lagonda in 1976, rising to become a key management team member. "I left Aston Martin in 1991 and went on to form my business. We offer support for all models from the DB2 to the V12 Vanquish, like maintenance, regular servicing, partial rebuilds and full restoration by our highly skilled, factory-trained engineers using original factory tools, replacement parts and diagnostic equipment," says Mee.