

It's only DB1 Retrospectively!

by David Blumlein

History is littered with defunct sports car manufacturers which, because their production was inevitably limited, just could not earn enough to remain solvent. Morgan is the obvious exception to this trend – it is still family-owned and guided after 100 years this year, but its product occupies a very special niche in the world of sports cars.

Others which have survived have been lucky enough to have attracted enthusiastic investors and none more so than Aston Martin who can thank people such as the Charnwood family, Bertelli and Renwick, Prideaux Brune, Sir Arthur Sutherland, David Brown... reaching right up to David Richards of Prodrive today!

Aston Martin's first 'golden era' has to be the Bertelli years in the Thirties when his Tyseley-designed overhead cam engine powered all those race-bred 1.5-litre cars that established the marque on the international stage. Working as a young apprentice alongside Bertelli was a talented engineer, Claude Hill, and when Bertelli fell out with Gordon Sutherland and left in 1936, it was Claude Hill who stepped up as Chief Designer and Engineer. He had already been working on an enlarged version of the Bertelli engine and this appeared in 1936 in the new 2-litre Speed Model intended for the Le Mans race that year which was of course eventually cancelled owing to the political unrest in France. Gordon Sutherland set Hill to work on a de-tuned version that was to find its way in 1937 into the 15/98 Aston Martin, more of a tourer than an outright high performance potential racer, but beyond this Sutherland was keen to have a car with the more modern concept of integral construction.

At first, Claude Hill designed a car with a steel chassis and welded steel superstructure which turned out to be very stiff but also very ugly and quickly earned the sobriquet of 'Donald Duck'! Based on this experience Hill then conceived a completely new car: a 4-door with chassis and frame of square rectangular tubes, independent front suspension (a first

for Aston Martin), advanced transmission and initially a 2-litre version of the Bertelli engine was used in the Two Litre Speed Model. This car came to be known as the 'Atom' and was subjected to much testing and use during the war years when car production was replaced at Feltham by war contract work.

At the same time, Hill had been at work on a completely new 2-litre pushrod engine and this eventually found its way into the Atom. It was this new OHV four-cylinder motor that tided Aston Martin over into the austere post-war years but there was a shortage of cash and a production version of the promising Atom never materialised. There seemed to be no future for the company and its projected sale was eventually advertised.

This was where Lady Luck stepped in because the advertisement, which did not reveal the company's identity, was answered by a curious David Brown, head of the eponymous industrial concern of Huddersfield, famous for their gear wheels and tractors etc. After a quick visit to Feltham during which he was impressed with the Atom, Brown bought Aston Martin and we could say this is where the marque's second 'golden era' began. Brown wanted an open sports car rather than a four-door saloon and this gave rise to the 'Two-Litre Sports' Aston Martin which was to be shown at the first post-war Earls Court Motor Show in 1948.

But we jump the gun! David Brown soon added the ailing Lagonda company to his collection, primarily because he had his eye on the W.O. Bentley-conceived twin overhead cam six-cylinder engine used in the first post-war Lagonda saloon. He inherited also the services of one Frank Feeley whose artistic flair produced some of the most memorable shapes for the DB Aston Martins; his was the flowing design for this first post-war Aston Martin.

Much prototype testing was carried out on the chassis of this new car, the services of the successful racing driver 'Jock' Horsfall, being en-

Pinko 'die-cast' PIN178
Aston Martin 'DB1'
Le Mans 1949



gaged for a while – he had, amongst other successes, driven his Two-Litre Speed Model to a very impressive second place (and first in class) in the last pre-war Tourist Trophy at Donington in 1938. He and Claude Hill were to be seen conceiving a huge mileage on an open chassis (resembling a mobile bed!) and this had Hill's new 2-litre pushrod engine. Both Tony Rolt and Freddie Dixon were most impressed with the road-holding when they sampled it and, with their encouragement, David Brown was approached for permission to build a special car to run in the forthcoming 1948 Spa 24-hour race, (the Belgian race, beating their rivals at Le Mans to being the first to revive their famous events.)

The idea of racing to improve the product was certainly dear to David Brown's heart and was one of the attractions of responding to the advertisement of 'a sports car company for sale'. Despite the shortage of time before the July 10 date of the race, the new Managing Director consented and a special slim-bodied version, with outside mudguards, of the forthcoming new car was constructed, the wheel being entrusted to Horsfall and the experienced racing driver Leslie Johnson. It was a fairytale story, for the brand-new Aston won the 24-hour race outright, which prompted the company to offer a production version of this racer alongside the 2/4-seater touring production car, one of which, finished in pale blue, had accompanied the team in Spa to act as a reconnaissance car prior to the race.

It was of course something of a personal triumph for Claude Hill whose new engine proved itself so well in what was 'his' car but sadly his relationship with the company quickly turned sour. He was keen to produce

a six-cylinder version of his OHV design but Brown was having none of it – he wanted the more advanced Lagonda engine as the company's motor for the future and, after an almighty row between the two men, Claude Hill sadly left Aston Martin; he eventually joined Harry Ferguson's research company until his retirement in 1971.

About fourteen of the pretty Sports Two-Litres were built, while what we know now as the DB2 was more on the line of how David Brown visualised the future of his new company. Three DB2s lined up for the first post-war Le Mans 24-hour race in June 1949, one of them equipped with 2.6-litre Lagonda engine, the other two with Claude Hill's OHV 2-litre.

Six Astons of varied vintage lined up for the start of this race, the entry including one of the new Sports Two-Litre production cars, privately entered for Robert Laurie, an Alpine climber, and Dr R W Parker; this car was registered UMD123 and bore the race number 29. It completed the race 11th overall, giving it 4th in class, and it was one of only two Aston Martins to finish that year's race, both these cars significantly using Claude Hill's 2-litre pushrod engine!

The David Brown-inspired DB2s went on to achieve an enviable competition record with a professional John Wyer-led racing team and these evolved into the DB3s and more significantly the DB3S and DBR1 cars that brought the famous marque more international success than at any other time in its history, including the eagerly wanted Le Mans win fifty years ago. But it is only when looking back that the Sports Two-Litre model acquired the tag DB1; at the time nobody could have foreseen the glorious future of David Brown DB cars.

FEEDBACK

Moss' 250F

Dear FSW,

You express reservations (justifiably) in FSW 03-2009 about the colour of the Moss Maserati when driven by Mike Hawthorn at Crystal Palace. I was there and this schoolboy was profoundly disappointed that the 250F was not red. We had seen the Gilby Maser in green, but a grey one...Oh, dear! The car was a light grey (lighter than the NZ version illustrated) with the 'mysterious' red, white and blue markings round the radiator intake; a Union Jack with a hole in the middle. It most definitely wasn't white, nor were there any white stripes or bands.

Unfortunately I wasn't a camera owner in those days, but the car was indelibly recorded in my memory.
Derek Fritz, West Sussex.

I have just been thumbing through the 03-2009 edition of "4 Small Wheels", which is full of the usual fascinating and absorbing information.

A comment about the colour of Mike Hawthorn's Maserati 250F at Crystal Palace. I too have seen photos which appear to show the car being white but there is a good photo of the car in a book called "Racing at Crystal Palace" which definitely shows a white number disc on the

darker front bonnet area of the car. It had the truncated union flag on the nose, as shown on the Macklin car, and also the tiny union flag in the same position as the Macklin illustration. I also quote from the same book - "Mike Hawthorn makes his Palace debut driving the silver-grey Maserati owned by Stirling Moss". Hope that helps, although it may not be very helpful to Jade!

As a motoring artist I am very keen on colour information, having substantial files on the subject, hence my comments.

Keep up the good work!

Best wishes

Keith Woodcock, North Lincs

Thank you for the information.

Very interesting, these letters about colours. Where is the truth?

It is certain that at Crystal Palace 2508 is not painted "real" white because of the white circle in which is # 7. I saw some colour pics & the "Profile" little book; and thoughts. But - of course - I know the truth is not easy to reach. As Christian Moity says: here is the interesting part of the job for an historian; the difficulty too!

Jean Damon, Jade Miniatures

As Jean says, modelling these older cars is always interesting, especially when the majority of photos are in black and white. - Ed