

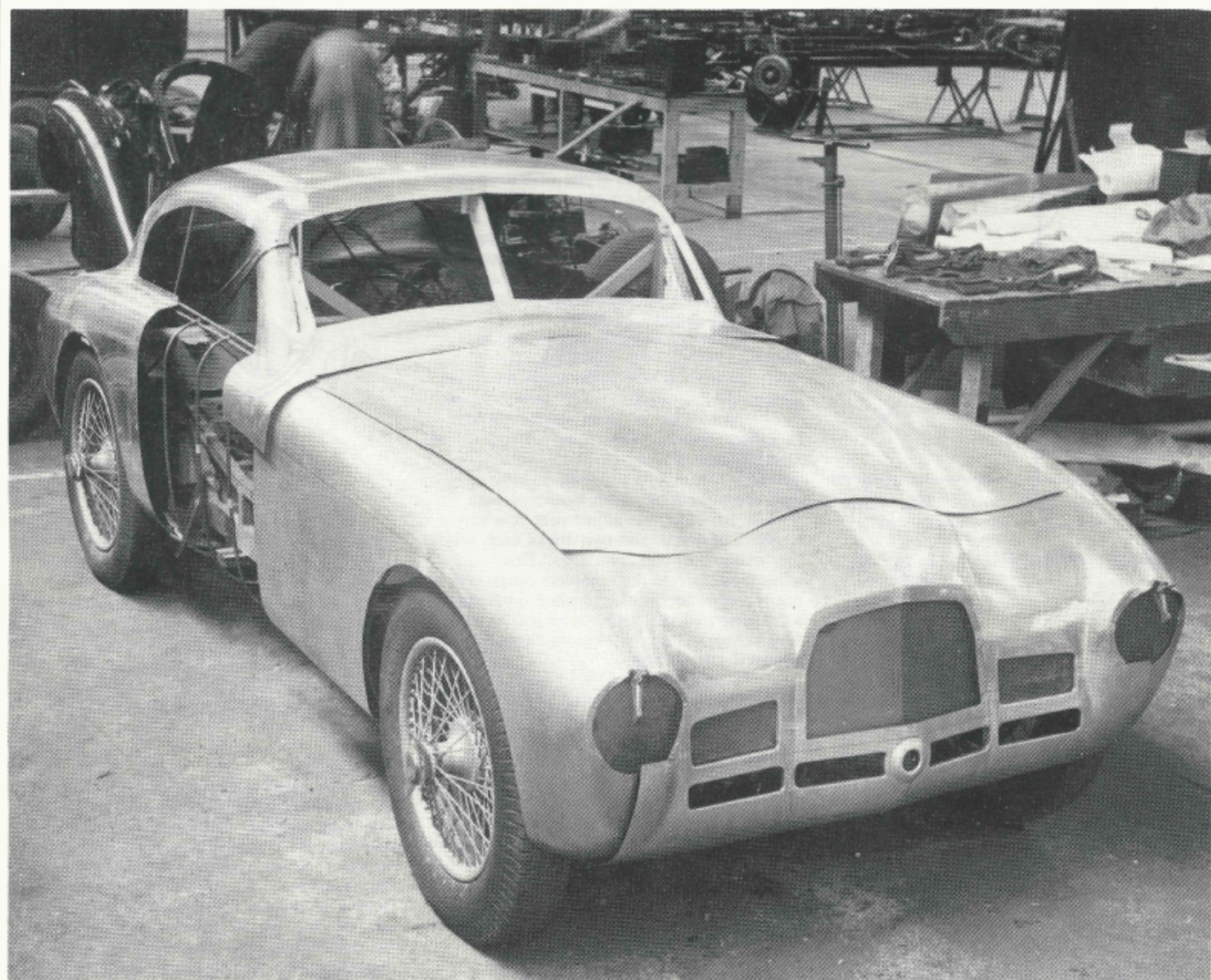


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1949 Frank Feeley's design for the DB2 first takes shape.

# FRANK FEELEY

Interviewed by the Editor

Frank Feeley must be the forgotten man of Feltham. Rarely is his name associated with the immediate post-war Aston Martins and yet his influence on them was profound. For he was totally responsible for the entire visual appearance of every David Brown model built, including competition cars, right up to 1956. He learnt the art of body design while with Lagonda which he joined in 1926, and he always regarded himself as a 'Lagonda man'. But when he joined Aston Martin, David Brown gave him a free hand and he produced designs which were the equal of anything to come out of Italy at the time. Amongst them the original DB2 and DB3S are now considered all time greats and

which are still satisfying and practical today. Frank Feeley now lives in retirement at Staines not a mile from the old Lagonda works. The Editor went along to interview him and these are extracts from the conversation.

"After the war Lagonda wanted to get going again with car production and had an agreement with Briggs Bodies who were to build the bodies on our chassis. I was the contact man between the two companies and it became obvious that MacIntyre who was then in charge of Briggs was not in the least interested in the building of Lagondas when their capacity was fully stretched making Fords, Jowett Javelins and commercial vans.

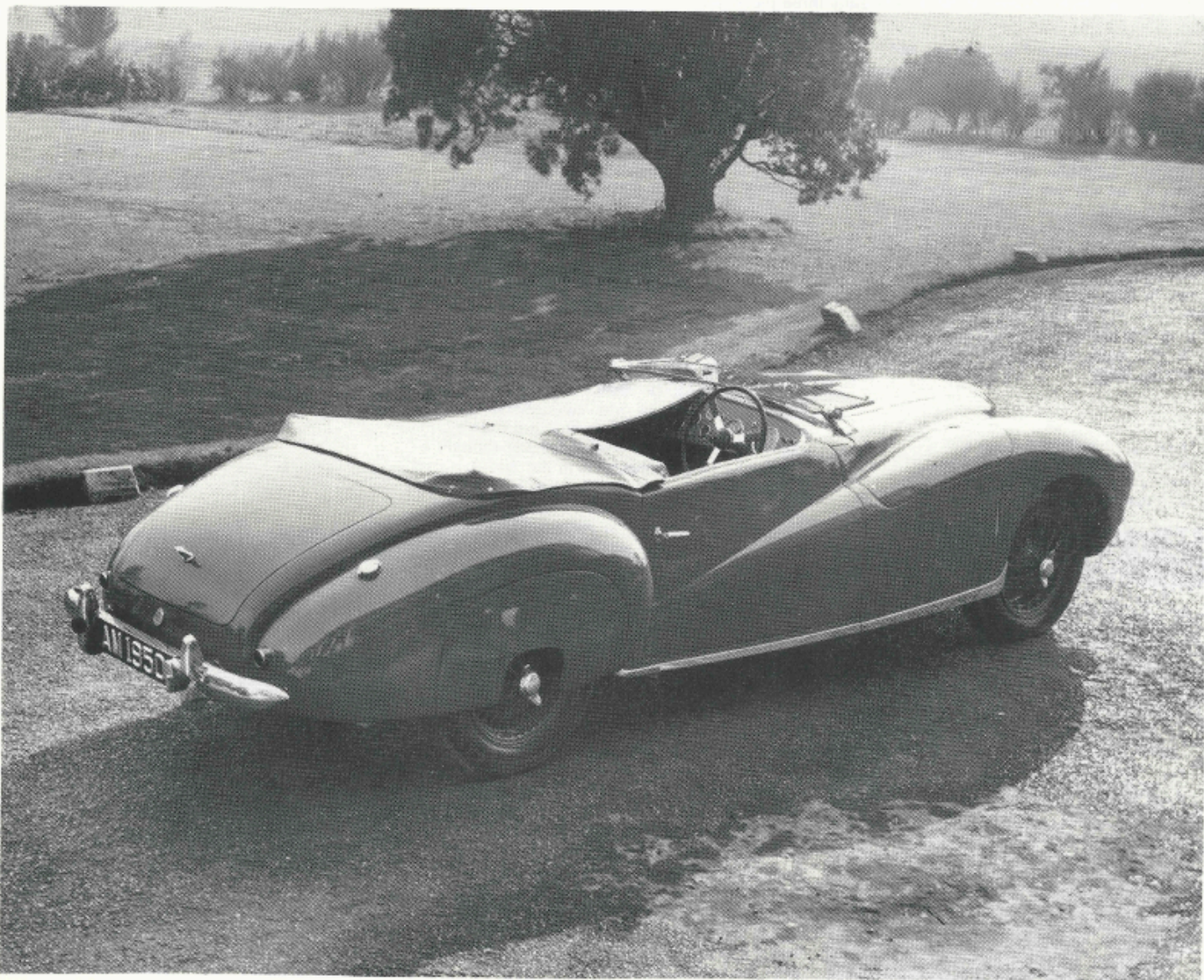
It was obvious to me that he didn't want to make the car so he upped the price again and again to the point where it became prohibitive. And so we at Lagonda having lost our bodyshop during the war had no alternative but to cancel the motor car. So it was easily decided who was going to have to leave and they were the people connected with the car. As a result W. O. Bentley and his closest designers and certainly the bodywork team, myself included, we immediately got the sack! I was out of work as a result for three or four months when David Brown made contact with me and said would I like to come and work at Astons. Of course I was very interested, being out of a

job and the chance to continue work on the old car meant I was very pleased to join him.

But that first winter of 1947 was quite traumatic for me really in so much as I arrived at Feltham to find these big aircraft hangars there and dumped in the middle of them were piles of materials, some jigs for the V12 car—not many—and various bits and pieces that came as a result of the acquisition of the Lagonda name. That's all we had! I used to get very depressed, I did a bit of work on the forerunner of the new Lagonda but nothing really very much until eventually I gave my notice in. But David Brown wouldn't hear of it—I was going to work for Jack Barclay—but he talked Jack Barclay out of our agreement, and he persuaded me to stay on. He led me to believe that next year was going to be a great year, but I couldn't see it, frankly, because there was so little happening then really. It turned out to be a very difficult winter.

The Spa Replica on the Aston Stand at the 1948 London Motor Show. It was the Spa race winner hastily rebodied.

Below: This view of the 1948 DB1 shows Frank Feeley's design well, including the rear wheel spats and the spare wheel hidden in the front wing. The flat windscreen is a one-off experiment not repeated.

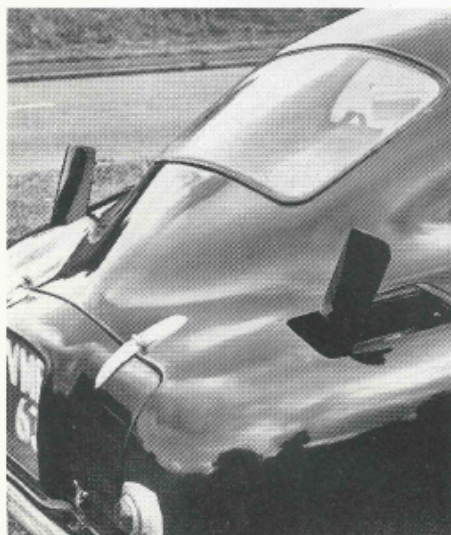




A very early pre-production car which was raced by Lance Macklin privately. The lines are more akin to the 1949 Le Mans race cars than the 1950 production car. Note louvres in wings and early three piece grille.

Anyway during that time we had power cuts frequently, awful winter months and desperate shortages of steel. It was a very difficult time and although I stayed on I did nothing very much, merely doodling around putting various ideas down on paper on the new Lagonda. This was mechanically similar to the old one from Staines but I wanted to make some changes to bring it more up to date. During that time I just amused myself really at the expense of David Brown. Anyway eventually he made me aware he was serious about making a new motor car. I'll be honest I did not think at first he was serious about it, but he proved to be so of course. But for some time I was just "marking time."

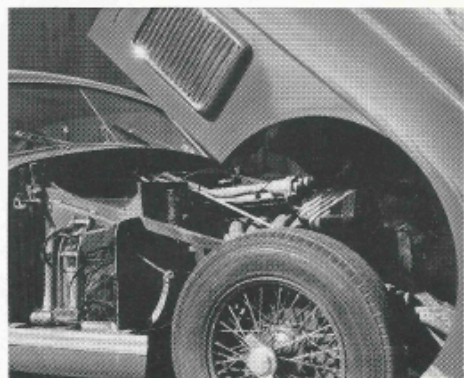
A close up of VMF63 a team car showing detailing of the rear including the twin fillers for the long range fuel tanks.



Now the set up at Aston Martin at this time required somewhere separate for the Lagonda operation. You see, we weren't in the original Aston Martin factory which still existed but in these enormous hangars in the middle of the field and the old Aston works were still in being and they were still carrying on rather as something apart. And for some time there was this 'feeling' between the two separate organisations. It was rather a pity really because I am afraid it was probably one of the reasons why Claude Hill left. We never really became 'as one'. He was quite a nice fellow but he was very, sort of sceptical of us and he thought we were going to do him out of a job. Of course Lagonda had been established and would be always there and he didn't like us putting our engine in his chassis which is understandable really. So one way and another we didn't really get together. Actually I never thought I was going to get interested in the Aston Martin - I was only really interested in Lagonda still! What I found was that Aston Martin were planning to make a big sided job not unlike what the DB3 turned out to be, or similar. They had a body craftsman there by the name of Jacobs and eventually when I produced a quick sketch for David Brown he said "that's it—build it!" And so that is how the DB1 as we know it began. This was an open two-seater and he liked it straight away, no 'argy-bargy' at all. In fact no criticism whatsoever. Perhaps I was a bit arrogant in those days—without intending to be—but I realised I was the only one there who knew anything about body design; having done all this before, it was nothing new to me. So I just assumed command as there was nobody else then in charge! Nobody else at all. David Brown, in all fairness, had nobody around him who were motor car people, although later he did bring down from Huddersfield people who he *hoped* would be, Jack Stirling was one. He was a David Brown gears man but had at one time worked in the drawing office at

Vauxhalls. This didn't really equip him fully to be a motor car man, but he was nearest to it than anyone was likely to be. So as a result David Brown was almost 'putty in our hands,' not that I wanted to use him that way. Perhaps I took the lead more than I would normally have done, but it seemed to me that David Brown having bought Lagonda and Aston Martin then did not know quite what to do with them. He'd got the companies and he'd been used to driving motor cars of quality but not making them. He was an engineer all the same and had an engineering business but of a *quite* different sort, and maybe you can persuade yourself that you know all there is to know on the subject. He didn't really but he certainly had

A notable departure of the DB2 over the DB1 was the front hinged bonnet, another Frank Feeley idea. It gave far better access to the engine and front suspension. Note the "washboard" grille at the side on this early example.



great enthusiasm and drive. In effect he presented me with the Aston Martin and I went into it, although with rather more Lagonda influence than I perhaps realized. For example when it came to designing the radiator I had a look at the Aston as it was, though I knew the Aston, I just sketched out my idea and that is how the very sharp nosed design came about on the DB1. We just did it, there was no discussion about it—of course having been with Lagonda so long I was well schooled in this matter—and unlike the endless arguments we had at Staines, with David Brown we got an immediate decision. He allowed me to get my new radiator design made and we did it without too much trouble. If DB liked a sketch we would then make a mock-up on which he would make a decision. You have to be fairly experienced to look at a bare aluminium mock-up with all its welds to imagine what the finished job will look like and at first David Brown didn't have that experience so he relied on me. Anyway at this time he said "OK—make it."

To layout the body design I had Claude Hill's chassis drawings to work from of course. When I came his design was completed. This was going to be the Aston which was a closed car, and thereby lay the mistake, probably the biggest mistake they made. You see David Brown had persuaded Claude Hill to remove the top, but the whole design was dependent on that because the

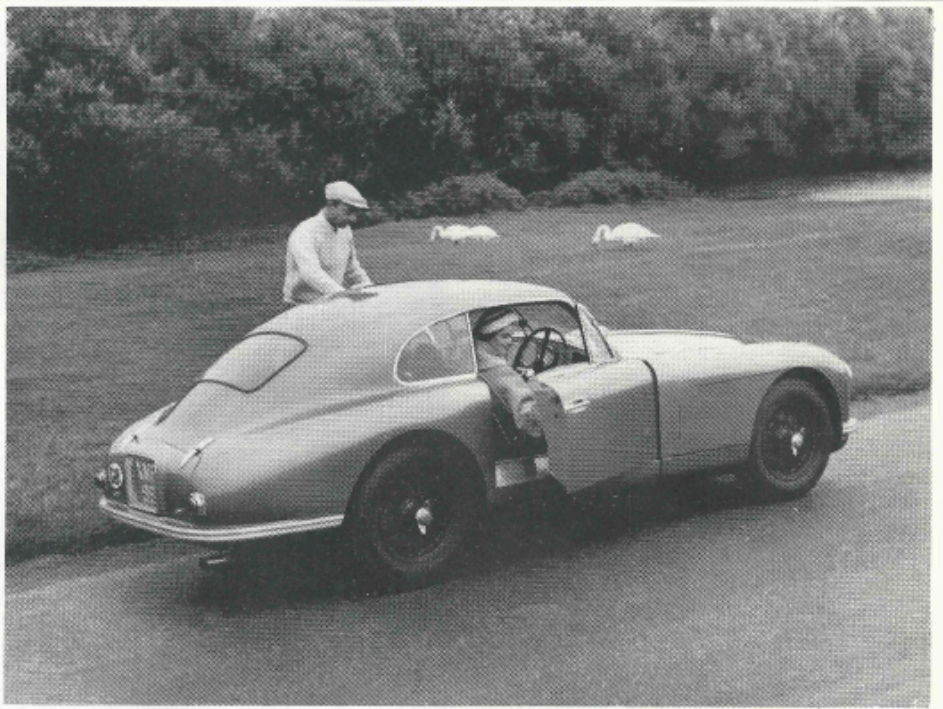


VMG 606 was not only the development car for the Bentley-Lagonda engine but also for trying out bodywork ideas. Used by David Brown personally in 1949, the car is seen here in the form at its launch to the public in May 1950. Later the three piece grille, which Frank Feeley preferred, was scrapped for a one piece design.



way the frame was made it was the roof members that kept the frame stiff. He threw them away and I drew up the DB1. Unfortunately it was no longer a success because the chassis had been made so weak that the moment you stood in it the thing bent! So much so that the doors folded up—it was terrible—I never saw such a weak car. They tried to improve it putting in stiffeners, but it was not sufficient really. From there on it was a mistake, simply, in my view because Claude Hill allowed David Brown to brow-beat him into doing something he really didn't want to do. He should have 'stood his ground' really."

Well, let's talk about your designs, and begin with the DB1. For a start, why did it have a split windscreen?" The V-screen you mean—well, you couldn't get a curved screen at the time, they were impossible. In fact it was some time before I could get curved glass (on the DB2/4) and then it was with some difficulty. That was the only reason, it wasn't a design choice. I had to carry this on with the DB2 in a slightly modified way. Actually I didn't have much faith in it at the time but it worked out OK in the end because we didn't have anything in the way of framework in that centre join. And as far as I know they didn't leak. The DB1 was quite different and had to have a proper frame as it was an open car, and it was built that way to take folding hood loads. We tried one variation on that as we built one with a fold flat screen. That had a completely flat screen, probably the only one, most likely done for a motor show to gauge reaction. But it looked a bit 'pre-war' so we persisted with the V-screen. Ahead of the screen the whole front section of the body was a series of sub-assemblies although it looks externally to be in one piece with a small opening for access to the engine. Then another feature of the DB1 body was the adoption of spats over the rear wheels. This was a hangover from my



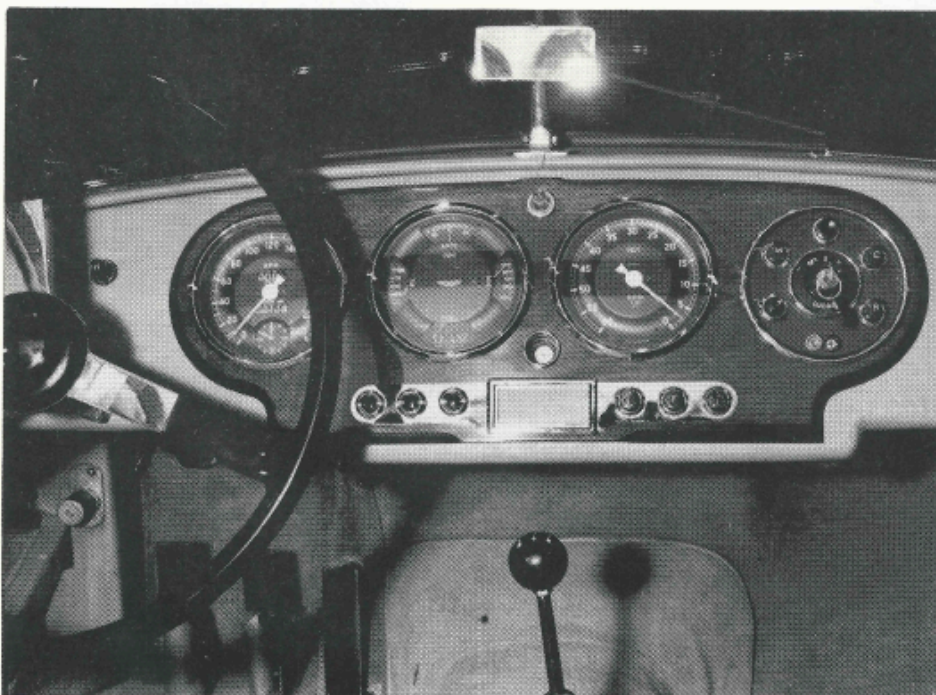
XME 99 was the demonstrator DB2 and was used, with George Abecassis, in the brochure pictures. For 1950 it was certainly a most striking design.

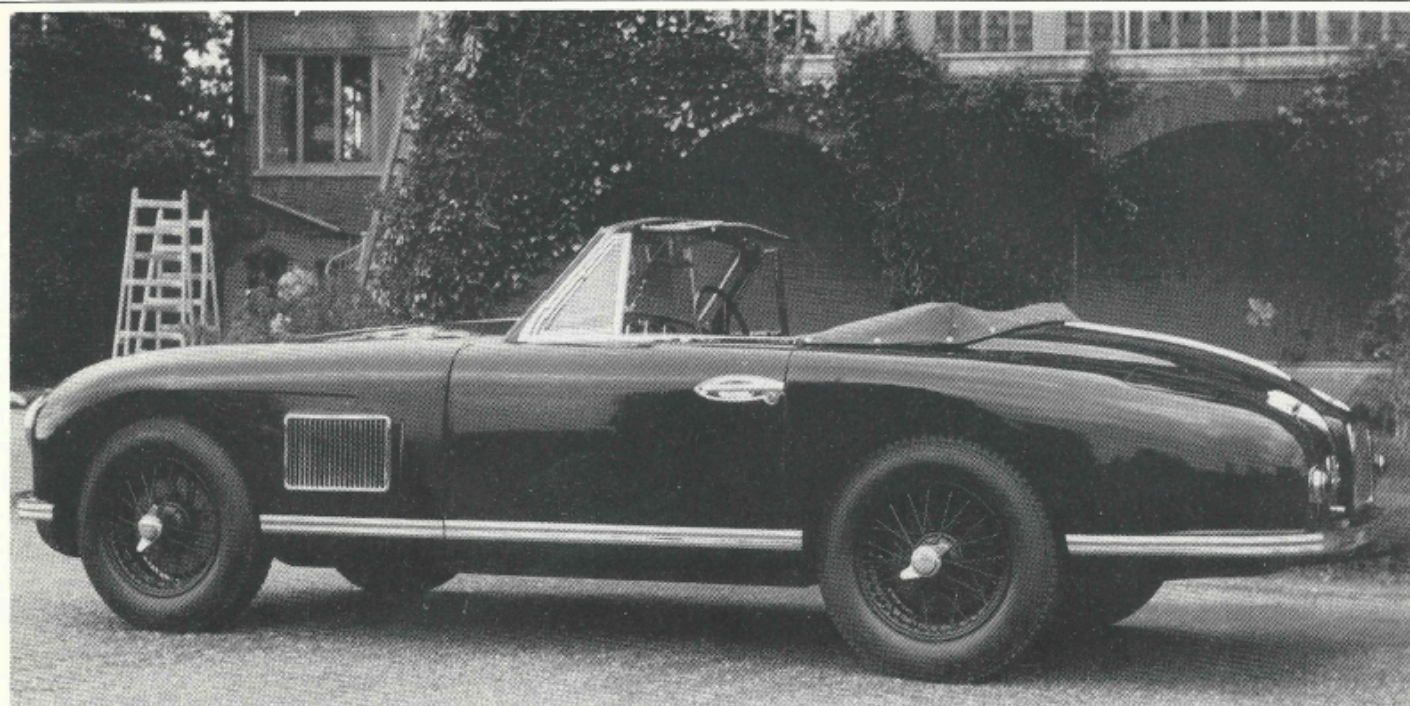
design of the 2-3 seater roadster for Lagonda and you'd find on the DB1 it is very similar although we had two different designs. Then there was the single bench seat across the car which was a new thing and made possible by the width of the body. It was my idea to use it but it turned out to be quite complex to make. You see a very large seat like that would be very hard for the driver alone to slide forward or back without some sort of assistance. I remember I got together with A. W. Chapman Seat Fittings and we worked

out a system of chains to avoid binding of the runners. We actually used bicycle cogs and chains, would you believe it! We actually bought them in a local cycle shop together with a tube which we put under the chassis and then the chain came up through the floor. The idea of all this was so as to synchronise the movement of the passenger seating with the driver's side so they both moved together. We had this one inch tube with cogs at each end and wrapped around was the chain on which was an enormous spring which was meant to assist the driver when trying to move the whole seat forward. It caused a few headaches but it worked! This was the sort of thing we did in those days and there was no-one else there to say 'yea or nay'. I'm afraid I indulged myself and experimented quite a lot. Another innovation was fitting the spare wheel vertically inside one front wing, again my idea from my Lagonda days, but then of course it was a bigger car with more room. In the DB1 we could only just get the wheel to fit in this position, and unlike the Lagonda the wheel was completely hidden. As a finishing touch when you put the panel back on that actually secured the wheel as well, by a rubber pad of some sort. This should have left a lot of space in the rear boot for luggage but the design of the chassis largely prevented this, unfortunately. The tail end of this chassis was bad in this respect and you couldn't get a reasonable boot out of it. The spare wheel has been the biggest bugbear to us of the lot—in those days it was huge, now of course, road wheels are tiny in comparison and can be fitted anywhere. In the post-war Lagonda for instance the spare wheel was put right under the chassis on a tray at the rear which left it exposed to the road dirt! Hopeless.

Now what about the dashboard, were you responsible for that? "Yes, of course. Because I wasn't an Aston man I approached this problem uninhibited by previous traditions where there was a tendency to cram in as many dials and switches as you could. There was a lot of space in the DB1 and I suppose looking back we could have made more of it. You must realise at this

Frank Feeley was also responsible for the design of Aston interiors. Here is the DB2 dashboard, cleverly arranged to be easily adaptable for left or right hand drive. Only the speedometer had to be moved.



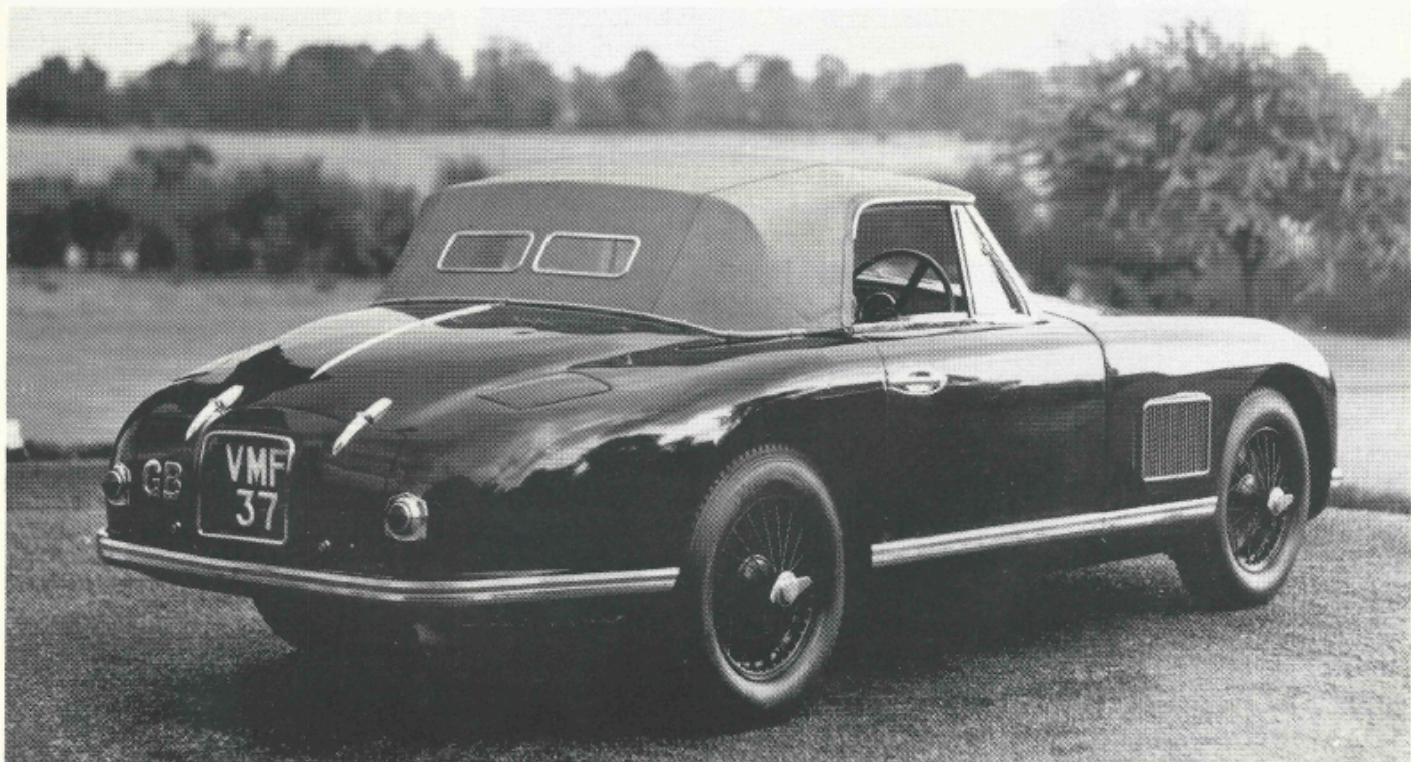


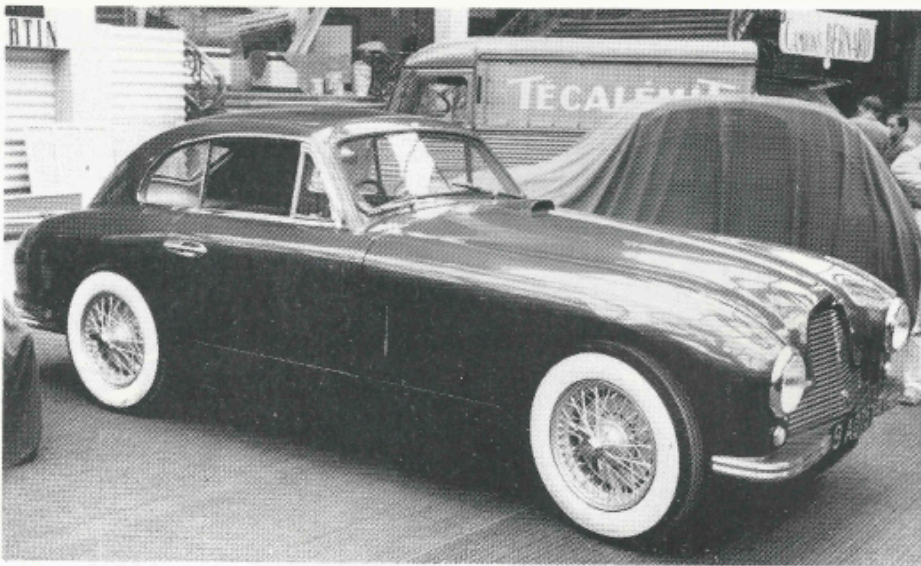
The drophead version of the DB2 that Frank Feeley designed was particularly handsome especially with the hood folded away. When erected, however, rear visibility was decidedly limited!

time Aston and Lagonda were still two separate organisations, but we Lagonda people began to dictate a bit to the Aston people who didn't like it. Lagonda was of course the 'senior' firm and David Brown could see the sense of bringing our experience to bear. One job we had on a DB1 was to prepare one for racing. It was for Robert Lawrie who had wanted to do Le Mans since pre-war days. He had saved up and got an entry for this DB1 which at that time hadn't been built. The body had to be standard but the screen was missing, and so the screen had to be specially made so it

could be put in position after the race. We built him a big metal tonneau cover for the cockpit which almost turned it into a single seater complete with small aeroscreen for the driver. When it came back to us after completing the race it had to be rebuilt back to standard. It was quite an extensive job and must have cost the earth. That race at Le Mans was the first for the new David Brown company and when one of the team drivers Pierre Marechal was killed it cast doubts over the future programme for a bit. Of course there was the success at Spa the previous year, 1948, but I was not involved with that

at all. However I did do the new body on that car after it came back from the race and later it was exhibited at the Motor Show. This was against the regulations then which banned competition cars on the Stands, but we redesigned it completely, fixed different wings on it and called it the Spa Replica! Although it was a usable road car as a result, we never intended to put it into production. In the end David Brown's son had it, and we saw it quite often back in our bodyshop as he had a habit of wrapping it round trees and lamp-posts! That was really the beginning of 'he end of that car.'

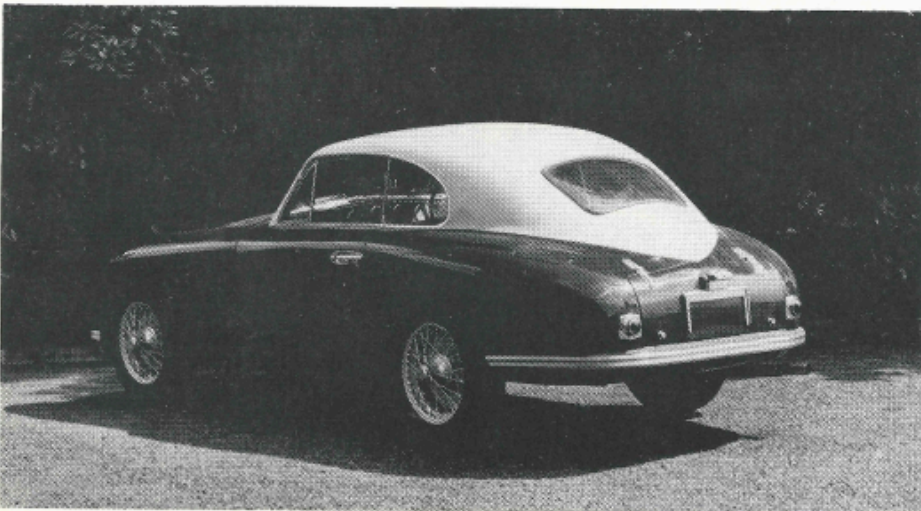




At the Paris Motor Show when whitewall tyres were favoured in some export markets  
Below: The symmetrical but well designed dashboard of the 1950 DB2.



A rare two-tone body on the DB2—a special order for a Belgian owner.  
(All photos are from the factory archives).



Now perhaps we could talk about the DB2. How did you develop your ideas for the car? "Well, unusually, the DB2 body was drawn out not as a scale drawing but to full size in one go. That was quite unusual and perhaps some of its success may have been due to that. We drew the chassis in—a shortened version of the DB1—and then I immediately drew up the thing round it, the whole shape. There was no time to change my mind once I had done it because the design had to be built immediately if it was to be ready to race at Le Mans in June 1949. We had this deadline date which we had to meet and we did. From the full size drawing we built the cars with Percy Kemish who had previously been with Bentleys and then Lagondas. I gave the car a single piece bonnet, the whole of which lifted up, hinged at the front. This was a new idea at that time. The frameless windscreen was adopted and a three piece grille designed for the front. We tried to make it look a nice finished job even though it was a racing car so we flock sprayed it inside which was an unusual thing. It covered all the internal tubes and the whole of the interior and it looked very nice but when we took the first one down the road there was so much air coming through to the inside that it dislodged the surface of all this newly applied flock spray which all came off and nearly asphyxiated the driver! The car was full of it! But it did look nice; once it had settled it was O.K. At Le Mans then we could have almost unlimited size fuel tanks so we made an enormous one and sat it on the back of the chassis. The whole of the space behind the front seats was taken up with this huge tank. The filler for this projected through the roof. Having made the body, which was of course in aluminium over steel tubes, we had to cut holes in it here and there for access to various things, like the radiator. This was one of our problems because the chassis people never seemed to be able to tell me exactly where all these inlets and outlets had to be to fit the body. The most frequent item which got forgotten was the exhaust system and often we had to scratch our heads to find a place to put it! The chassis people tended to think the bodywork was an easy job in comparison and referred to us disapprovingly as 'the rag and stick lot.'

Anyway, eventually we tidied up the DB2 and got it into production by which time quite a few changes had been made. For example we had these outlet grilles on each side of the bonnet behind the front wheels. But Lawrence Pomeroy of "The Motor" said to David Brown that they were awful and looked like washboards. He had a lot of influence with him and persuaded David Brown to do away with them. So we had to drop them but I personally always thought they looked rather nice, and I was rather upset when they were done away with. Another change we made later was to the grille which started off as a three-piece design. This change came about through James Watt who said can't we save some cost by making it in one piece. So I redesigned it to the shape which has become almost a trade mark. The grille itself was made of horizontal slots on a very light frame which was just pushed up behind the panelwork to fill the big "window." I don't really think it was an improvement but we had to save costs somewhere. I preferred the first design actually.

(To be continued)