

The Motor

THE OBLIGATORY SHOT.—No story of foreign touring is complete without a picture of the car being loaded on the boat. This view shows to particular advantage the sleek design of the Le Mans type six cylinder Aston Martin which is about to be followed by a production model on similar lines.

A MIXED

THERE are times when one leaves an office with a clear-cut and simple task, to fix some objective, to find the facts surrounding it, and to present them in an orderly fashion in the pages of this paper. My reason of being abroad for the four days following Friday, January 13, could not be explained in such simple terms, for it was a really mixed mission in which I was able to make a preliminary assessment of a car which will be shortly placed on the British market, to confirm sundry arrangements between "The Motor" and the Automobile Club de l'Ouest regarding next year's Le Mans race, and to pay a fleeting but profitable visit to the Brussels Motor Show.

My partner in the expedition was James Watt, previously well known on the sales side of Triumph and Austin cars, and, from 1945 to 1948, an original partner in the Healey company, which has added a new and highly successful marque to the British motor industry. A few days before our trip Watt had taken up a new office, that of Assistant General Manager to David Brown Tractors, Ltd., in which he is specifically charged with the care of the automobile division of that company, consisting of Aston Martin and Lagonda. Not unnaturally, therefore, the car we had with us was a Feltham product and, although not strictly speaking a production model, it was near enough to a type which will be shortly announced to make the trip highly valuable and instructive to both of us.

Most of those who are interested in automobiles will have spent many hours since schoolboy years in making up ideal motorcars in which they have lightheartedly married the supercharged straight-eight engine from the "X" car to the 10 h.p. chassis built by "Y," topping up with a body from "Q," the i.f.s. layout of "T," with, of course, an "L" steering box as an imperative.

Last year David Brown was able to do rather more than indulge in wishful thinking of this kind, for having both Lagonda and Aston Martin under one roof he was able to install the superb six-cylinder twin-camshaft Lagonda engine of 2½ litres capacity into a slightly modified Aston Martin chassis which had already aroused the enthusiasm of the critics by reason of its unusually good suspension and road-holding characteristics. This car, fitted with a very low and reasonably well-formed closed body, ran as a prototype in the Le Mans race, but a slight error in the design of the plumbing system led to a complete loss of water and put Leslie Johnson out of a race in which he might otherwise have figured very prominently. A little later the same vehicle, driven well within its capacity by the same driver, ran third at Spa with a completely no-trouble run. Meantime, a car to the same general

specification had been prepared, but fitted with full upholstery, interior trimming, carpets, etc., and equipped with smaller wheels so that it could provide experimental data before commencing series production with a slightly modified type. It was in this "pilot" model, with some 8,000 miles already on the speedometer, that Watt and I set off for Le Mans, but shortly after an excellent lunch at the simple Auberge d'Inxent, some 20 miles from Boulogne, it was brought home to us that the spirit in charge of Friday, 13th, had not been propitiated. However, all's well that ends well, and after a delay of two hours I sat in the passenger seat whilst Watt drove steadily through the night to Paris, where, after supper at Foucquets, we reached bed rather after midnight.



VISUAL PROOF.—This picture, taken through the windscreen of the Aston Martin as it left Paris for Le Mans, shows the excellent forward visibility from the car and proves the remarkable steadiness of the suspension on pavé surfaces.

At an intolerably early hour the following morning we took the car to that excellent garage of Duval et Cattaneo, where they specialize in high-grade cars, including Hispano, Daimler and Lagonda, and had the somewhat rough work of the previous day checked over. Cattaneo took the car out and reported enthusiastically about its road holding, and I then took the wheel with Watt beside me. After driving through the centre of Paris the watches were turned on as we

passed the Porte d'Italie. We went out to Chartres via Ablis. This is known to be a fast road, but I must say I was a good deal astonished at the ease with which the speedometer needle could be made to point at the three-figure mark, for in my experience 100 m.p.h. seems very fast indeed and this appeared really too easy. I found also that my overall dimensions differed substantially from the owner and the driving position was such that I was in no condition to take emergency avoiding action, a fact which made me corner on the wet road with especial care. I was, therefore, genuinely astonished to find myself outside the Grande Monarque

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MISSION

at Chartres exactly on the hour, having covered 59.8 miles in this time. This, however, was merely a forecast of the astonishing performance of which this car is capable. After luncheon, Nogent le Retrou (34.8 miles distant) was reached in 33 minutes, an average of 63.4 m.p.h., and the ensuing 40.5 miles to the offices of the Automobile Club de l'Ouest at Le Mans were made in 41 minutes, an average of 60.8 m.p.h. This gives a total distance of 135.1 miles covered in 134 minutes in a run in which the car had never been flat out, had never taken corners at a speed which raised a squeal from the tyres, had been taken through all the many towns and villages at a responsible pace, and on one occasion only had required anything like full use of the brakes.

The exception was when I came over a brow at a sharpish speed of some 90 m.p.h. to find the road full of bull and peasantry. They had evidently heard us coming and were greatly alarmed, except for the bull, who stood in the middle of the road with the kind of outraged dignity characteristic of a British Regular Army officer who has been informed that the Zulus have broken through. The thought uppermost in my mind was the advice given by Jenatzy to Brabazon when the latter was a young man, to the effect that if you must hit anything with a racing car one should always choose a cow as "les vaches sont tellement elastiques." Only after the peasantry had fled into the ditch and I had metaphorically raised my hat to the bull as we sped beneath his tail did it occur to me that advice given in 1905 might not apply to the circumstances of 1950, for when driving a 90 h.p. Mercedes one presumably knocked the wretched animal flat and thereafter had an

enormous figure of friction area per ton, whereas with our size and shape of machinery there would undoubtedly have been a "boeuf sur la toit."

My business at Le Mans with M. Berthier was dealt with the expedition and efficiency characteristic of his organization, and I was able to obtain some useful detail information which has already appeared in "The Sporting Side." A drive round the course showed that the road widening is already well under way, and we ought to see record speeds next June. To maintain tradition we stayed at the Hotel Moderne, where the Chantebel family were as welcoming and helpful as they always are, and the next morning, that is, Sunday 15th, we drove some 20 miles west to make reservations in a rural retreat for the Temple Press party. If this establishment lives up to its promise we shall be well rewarded for this preliminary reconnaissance.

Excellent M.P.G.

This completed our work in the Le Mans region, and we now turned to our third target—Brussels and the XXXII Salon de l'Automobile. As we had broken fast late with a substantial meal we decided to drive straight through to Paris, but before doing so we were able to refill the tank to a previously ascertained level. This showed that we had covered 174 miles on 8.8 gallons, giving a consumption of 19.8 m.p.g., which is highly creditable at the average speeds realized. But despite the excellent time : distance relationships which we had established I remained highly suspicious of the speedometer accuracy. Soon this pessimism proved well founded, for on our return journey when we checked against km. posts, it became apparent that the mileage recorder exaggerated to the extent of 8 per cent. (a fact which has been taken into account in presenting the distance and m.p.g. figures which I have set down), and that within the limits of plus or minus 1.5 per cent. the speedometer exaggerated road speed by 15 per cent. Changes in overall gearing during the course of experimental development doubtless account for these errors, but what appeared to be an easy cruising speed of 95 m.p.h. was now seen to be a mere 83 m.p.h. On the long straights before reaching Chartres we were able to get some idea of the real potency of the car. The road undulates so

A ROAD EXPRESS.—The experimental Aston Martin is here shown outside the offices of L'Automobile Club de l'Ouest at Le Mans after reaching that town in two hours fourteen minutes running time from Paris, at an overall average speed of slightly in excess of 60 m.p.h. on a fuel consumption of 19.8 m.p.g.



A Mixed Mission - - - Contd.



HORIZONTALS AND VERTICALS.—The predominantly horizontal motif of the six-cylinder Aston Martin here shows in remarkable contrast to the vertical accent given to the principal entrance of the Brussels Automobile Exposition.

that it is impossible to state accurately the true maximum, but we covered a km. of continuously rising ground in 22.8 secs., which is equal to a speed of 158 k.p.h., or 98.3 m.p.h., and a speedometer reading of 120 m.p.h. was more than once obtained, equalling a true speed of rather over 105 m.p.h. It is important to emphasize that these outstanding figures were obtained on a car which was taken straightaway from everyday use on the road, and tuned so as to give such flexibility on top gear that one had no occasion to depart from this ratio unless the speed fell below 10 m.p.h.

The gear ratios themselves are very well chosen with a satisfactorily high bottom ratio, and thanks to D.-B. gear cutting, both second- and third-gear speeds are virtually inaudible. I must admit, however, that the selection arrangement through the medium of a steering column gear lever reminded me of Dr. Fell.

The road holding and steering of the car are truly superb, and quite sharp radius corners are taken at between 60 and 70 m.p.h. in conditions where one seeks to err on the side of caution. For some reason tyre squeal was never heard, and although the exhaust note is prominent, the extraordinary smoothness and elasticity of the engine promote a journey that is speedy, safe and free from fatigue. High averages emerge as a by-product, and on this particular occasion, aided by the complete absence of traffic characteristic of the Sunday luncheon hour in every country of the world, we did the first 123 miles on the Paris road in 139 mins. (53 m.p.h.), and reached the Champs Elysées 153 miles distant from our starting point in 34 hours (an overall average of 47 m.p.h.) with no effort at all.

After a late but excellent meal at the Relais (which is an annexe of the Plaza Athenée) we made a second check of fuel consumption, which showed that in the past 195 miles we had consumed 9.9 gallons, equivalent to 19.7 m.p.g., a figure agreeing very closely with the one previously established on the outgoing section of the same route. The time was now four o'clock, and we had nearly 200 miles before our next stop, most of which

was to be covered in darkness over progressively deteriorating road surfaces. Watt now took the helm, and we went forward through the gathering, and finally gathered, gloom with little of note to record except for the resolute refusal of the Customs men to believe that the tail of the car had been designed for Le Mans; it was so obviously built for smuggling. However, removal of all the luggage and a great deal of prodding finally wrung from them an obviously reluctant permission to proceed on to the notorious Belgian Pavé.

About this time the performance of the shock absorbers began to remind me of Sir Thomas Beecham's words at rehearsal to a faltering flautist, "Well, I am sorry we must go on without you, but try to keep in touch with us from time to time." I need only add that I shall be surprised if the equipment on the production cars is not considerably different from the somewhat puny device upon which we were relying.

With all these adverse factors we covered the 190 miles of the evening's run in 4 hrs. 42 mins. running time, which is a fraction over 40 m.p.h.

Belgian Prices

As in Paris, so in Brussels, the car created a sensation whenever it was left in the street, but having myself now become somewhat blasé I was more impressed by the astronomic prices attached to the most ordinary things. A glass of fresh orange juice costs slightly over 3s. 6d. and a set breakfast of coffee, rolls and scrambled egg has a fixed price of 10s. 9d. At a first-class restaurant boiled salmon may be had for 18s. 6d. per portion and steak for little over a guinea. Even a cake of bath soap ("Of the best quality, sir, specially imported from England") costs a little over 6s., and I was told by M. Piccard, the Secretary General of the Exhibition, that wages in Belgium had increased by four times compared with pre-war, except servants' wages which had gone up by about six times.

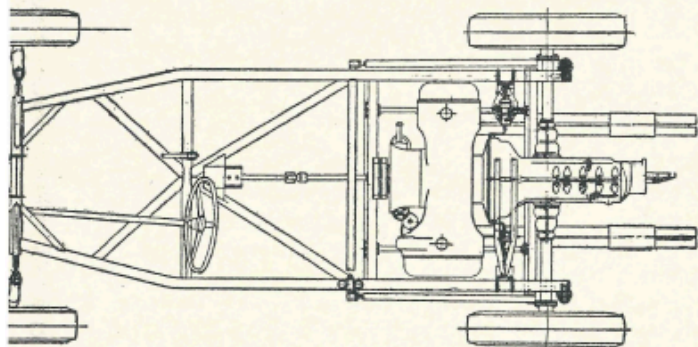
In the past six months Belgian industry, which is largely concerned with the supply of primary products, has found sales increasingly difficult and the high wage rates in the manufactories are a great handicap in world markets. Unemployment is now about 15 per cent. of the manual working class but this notwithstanding sales of motorcars have been maintained during 1949 and European cars in particular have gone ahead rapidly following the devaluation of most currencies in relation to the dollar and the Belgian franc.

Some curves are reproduced showing the monthly imports of the principal suppliers to Belgium in which it will be seen that in the past three years more U.S.A. cars have been sold than those of any other single nationality. We can make an interesting comparison upon another basis. By relating U.S.A. sales, which are virtually all big cars, with the total sales of European constructors, an overwhelming proportion of which are small cars, we see that the latter is really the more popular and if we were to take Western Union as a reality we would get the following percentages of sales in the Belgian market:

Year	U.S.A.	Western Union
1946	31.7	68.3
1947	39.6	60.4
1948	47.3	52.7
1949	38.6	61.4



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R ENGINE RACER.—An interesting exhibit in Brussels was the ts type Tatraplan, the chassis design of which is shown here in a drawing reproduced from the "Svet Motoru".

Nineteen-forty-nine figures have a particular interest, for after two almost static sales years (circa 47,000 cars in 1947 and 1948), an additional 10,000 vehicles were sold in 1949. A very high proportion of this increment was Volkswagen and 4 c.v. Renaults which are sufficiently lowly priced for the better-paid worker.

It is worth commenting that both of these cars have rear-mounted engines and both independent suspension to all four wheels on swing axle system for the rear wheels. Politically it should be observed that both are the products of the State in business, and both had enormous fleets of demonstration cars on the park in front of the Show buildings. The latter make a superb spectacle which has been matched in the main hall by an artifice which has succeeded in masking a barrack-like interior which undisguised closely resembles the British Motor Show.

The Belgian authorities spent £30,000 in making a canvas roofing for the hall and a further £14,000 on lighting, whilst many of the stands were surrounded by spring flowers. The whole effect was highly attractive and exhibitors generally seemed well pleased with the business that was being done.

It must, however, be admitted that from the technical viewpoint Shows held in countries which have no metropolitan production must have a steadily diminishing appeal. This notwithstanding, Brussels could boast of two new models of widely differing types. One of these was a two- (occasional five-) seater drop-head coupé body made up largely with standard Vanguard panels in the assembly plant at Nessonvaux. This I thought a very creditable job despite slightly more chromium-plated strip than would be called for in the English taste. A very large luggage locker took up the tail of the car, and there were two large front seats with a small one sandwiched between them. Behind this was a deep well which would normally be used for luggage, but which contained an upholstered seat upon which a child, if small, could repose. The other novelty was undoubtedly the sports Tatraplans, replicas of the car which did so well in the Brno race last year. The most notable feature of this design is that the engine and gearbox positions have been reversed compared with the normal type Tatra, i.e., the power unit is now inboard of the rear axle and the gearbox extends beyond it in the Auto Union fashion, as shown in a chassis drawing. The engine is reputed to develop 80 b.h.p. at 4,500 r.p.m., which is not excessive from a unit of two litres capacity, and it is claimed

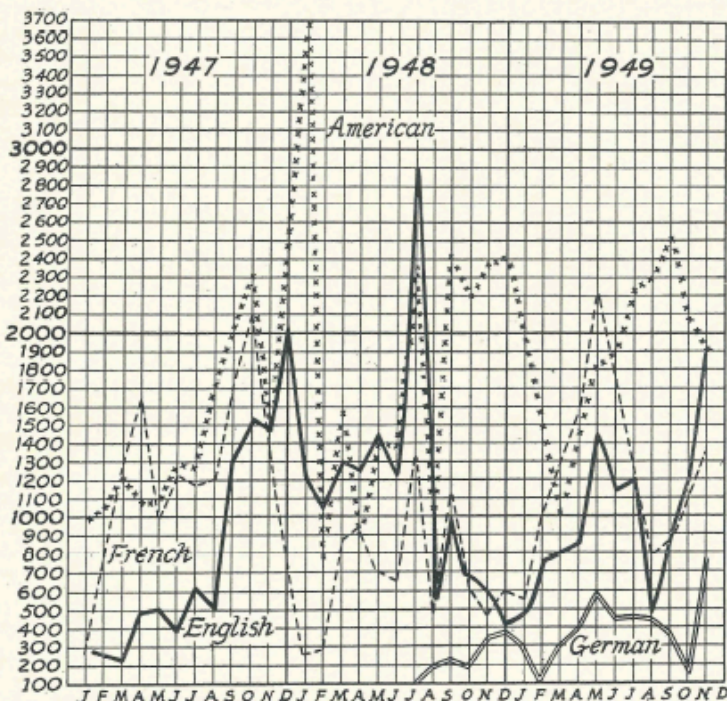
that the weight is only 14 cwt. and that a mere 48 h.p. suffices to propel the car at 100 m.p.h. The engine is, of course, air-cooled in the usual Tatra fashion. The road performance is indicated by an average speed at Brno of 68.4 m.p.h., which may be related to the winner's, Whitehead's, speed of 79 m.p.h. on the 1.5-litre supercharged Ferrari.

True Efficiency

The six-cylinder Aston Martin is a conventional car when compared with the Tatraplan, and about 80 b.h.p. is required to maintain 100 m.p.h., but the overall efficiency of the British design was well proved by the third check to be made on fuel consumption. This covered the distance between Paris and Brussels, plus a few miles in the latter city itself, making a total 193 miles on 8.15 gallons, which equals 23.4 m.p.g.

As a final demonstration of that harmony between theory and practice which is exhibited by all the best concerns we found that the natural cruising speed of the car on the Jabbeke autostrada was a genuine 90 m.p.h. or 4,500 r.p.m. as resolved by night driving with no instrument illumination, followed by a check to see at what speed the car had settled down. This gives a piston speed of 2,680 ft./min.

By the time we reached the Prinz Badouin in the Ostend dock we had covered a little under 1,000 miles in four days with 388 miles from the far side of Le Mans to Brussels as our longest day's run. These are by no means remarkable figures, but the manner in which they had been covered was most impressive, and one feels that the 2½-litre six-cylinder Aston Martin will prove an immense attraction to those discerning drivers who seek performance of very high order with smooth running and delicacy of control, a combination which has, let us admit it, been found hitherto but rarely in cars of all-British design and construction.



DEVALUATION RESPONSE.—The gain in sales of English and European cars in the Belgian market from September onwards is shown clearly in this graph. The increase in foreign currency value is about 20 per cent. less than the numerical gain in cars sold.