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# Aston

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Cover: Roy Salvadori's DBR2 beat the Ecurie  
 Ecosse Jaguars off the line in the 1958 Aintree  
 International Sports Car Race, but though he set a  
 new sports car lap record, he finished second  
 overall behind Archie Scott-Brown's Lister-Jaguar



# *The Tale* OF THE PROTOTYPE ASTON, LAURENCE POMEROY, LANCE MACKLIN AND THE *Playboy Prince*

by DAVID BURGESS-WISE

**T**he first postwar Aston Martin, the 2-litre Sports, could be described as a chassis looking for an engine.

The design of Claude Hill's four-cylinder pushrod engine was really rooted in the 1930s, and when David Brown acquired the company in February 1947, he dismissed the 2-litre unit as lacking in power, and began seeking a power unit worthy of Hill's chassis. That came with the acquisition soon after of Lagonda of Staines, whose main asset was the splendid dohc 2.6-litre straight-six developed under the direction of W.O. Bentley. While the curtain went up on Aston Martin's David Brown era, it was with the leisurely production of 16 examples of the 2-litre Sports, a car that could only be regarded as a stop-gap. It quite frankly looked old-fashioned (but still managed to upset traditionalist Aston Martin owners) even when it was brand new.

Fortunately, along with the goods and chattels of Lagonda came their designer Frank Feeley, a natural genius with an unerring sense of line and proportion, who would create for his new boss a car – the DB2 – that still stands as one of the most

beautiful shapes to emerge from the 1940s. And the model's first private owner was racing driver Lance Macklin.

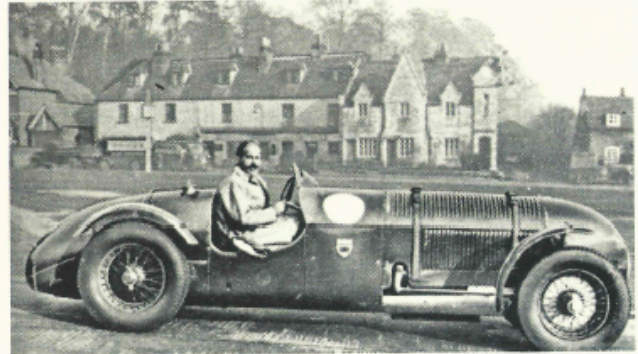
If anyone remembers Lance Macklin today, it's probably as the unwitting catalyst of the 1955 Le Mans disaster, triggered when Pierre Levegh's speeding Mercedes 300SLR struck the sloping tail of Macklin's Austin-Healey. Macklin had just been forced to take avoiding action when Mike Hawthorn pulled up sharply in front of him in his disc-braked Jaguar D-type and swerved into his pit; Levegh was going too fast to avoid him, and was catapulted into the crowd with fatal results for some 85 spectators. But despite that shadow over his career, Macklin – who died in 2002 at the age of 82 – was regarded as one of the most gifted post-war racing drivers, whose talents were never quite realised due to his detached attitude. If his car failed in practice, rather than try and get it repaired, he would simply remark: "Oh well, I'll go into town and find myself a bird..."

George Abecassis summed it up well when he remarked that Macklin "could have been a very great racing driver... He had a quite astonishing sense of balance and I don't

**Right:** Lance Macklin entered his Aston for the Coppa Inter-Europa meeting at Monza

**Lower left:** Laurence Pomeroy drove UMC 272 to the 1950 Brussels Salon

**Lower right:** In the 1948 Spa 24-hour race Macklin was co-driver of the Barnato-Hassan Bentley



believe that there is any game he couldn't have played really well, but the extraordinary thing was that he was never, ever interested..."

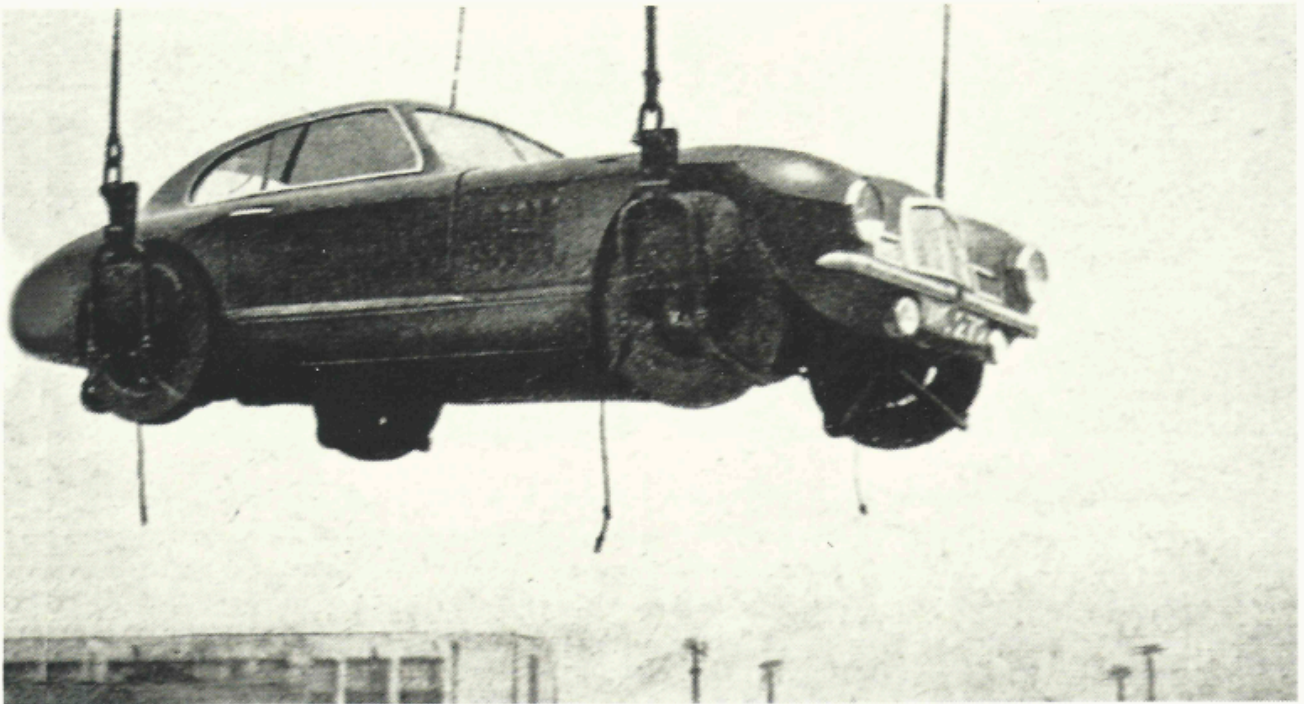
Before that catastrophic instance of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Macklin (whose father, Sir Noel Macklin, had been the guiding spirit behind the interwar Invicta marque) had impressed with his natural flair for motor racing. A skill he honed by practising four-wheel drifts on the slippery wood-block surface of Belgrave Square in his old 4.5-litre Invicta after emerging from a night club in the small hours...

In the dismal postwar years, when motor sport was almost non-existent in Britain, Macklin ventured on to the Continent with his Invicta, and a sound performance in the over-2 litres GP des Frontières sports car race at Chimay in May 1948 brought him the opportunity to co-drive Ian Metcalfe's 8-litre Barnato-Hassan Bentley in the Spa 24-hour race on 10 July. Though the clutch of the old Brooklands warrior failed after 70 laps, Macklin's driving so impressed John Eason Gibson, team manager of Jock Horsfall's victorious Aston Martin, that he was offered a place in David Brown's Aston Martin team for 1949, the year in which the first postwar Le Mans 24-hour race took place.

That year's team consisted of three DB2s, hastily built from Frank Feeley's full-size lofting drawing ("I made no small-scale drawings at all," he told Chris Nixon: "there wasn't time"). Maybe because of that they were the "purest" of the DB2 line, with their fluid shape uncompromised by the practicalities of production (and thus somewhat lacking in headroom). Additionally, an identical experimental and development car – LML/49/4 – was built, but not raced.

Macklin didn't take part in the 1949 Le Mans race, even though he claimed to have been reserve driver and to have practised (but his name doesn't figure on the official entry list in either category – maybe he was chasing birds in town...). The Aston team consisted of two cars with the Claude Hill 2-litre pushrod four-cylinder engine and one with the Lagonda 2.6-litre ohc six-cylinder unit (which was actually entered as an "Aston Martin DB2-Lagonda" by Lagonda Ltd, rather than the parent Aston Martin company).

Sadly, Jean-Pierre Maréchal, best known as a competition driver of vintage Bentleys, who Macklin reckoned was the only one of the Aston team drivers "who really had a go", crashed his four-cylinder DB2 on its 192nd lap with fatal results – he was the only Aston works driver ever killed in racing. Consequently Macklin was asked to take Maréchal's place →



drivers that, if you must hit anything in a racing car, choose a cow since "les vaches sont tellement élastiques", Pomeroy was nevertheless able to moderate his speed sufficiently to slip beneath the bull's tail (its owner had sought refuge in the ditch) and reflect that hitting a bull with a low-slung 1950 sports car would have had a very different result than poleaxing it with a massive 1905 90-hp racer.

Though the speedometer was found to read 15 per cent fast, meaning that the apparent 95 mph cruising speed was a "mere" 83 mph, accurate measurement of the fuel consumption revealed a creditable 19.8 mpg.

Because of the speedometer error, attributed to changes of gearing during experimental development, it was not possible to measure the actual maximum speed, but "we covered a kilometre of continuously rising ground in 22.8 sec, which is equal to a speed of 158 kph or 98.3 mph, and a speedometer reading of 120 mph was more than once obtained, equalling a true speed of rather over 105 mph".

A feature typical of the age (no longer fitted to the car today) was the steering column gear shift, which reminded Pom of the legendary Dr Fell, whom the poet did not like, "the reason why I cannot tell"; though he averred that the gear ratios were very well chosen, with "a satisfactorily high bottom ratio and, thanks to DB gear cutting, both second- and third-gear speeds are virtually inaudible".

The roadholding and steering of the car were "truly superb", and reasonably sharp corners were taken at 60-70 mph "in conditions where one seeks to err on the side of caution". Trencherman Pomeroy even forewent his Sunday lunch to take advantage of the light traffic on the road from Le Mans to

Paris, covering the first 123 miles (out of 153) in 139 minutes, reaching the Champs-Élysées in 3 hr 15 min (an overall average of 47 mph) "with no effort at all".

Paris safely reached, a second check of fuel consumption was made (after a "late but excellent meal at the Relais, which is an annexe of the Plaza Athénée") and found to be a remarkably consistent 19.7 mpg (for a further gauge of Pomeroy's interpretation of expense account living in an era of austerity, it should be noted that the Plaza Athénée was the late Henry Ford II's favourite Parisian watering hole...).

And so to Brussels, where "as in Paris... the car created a sensation whenever it was left in the street". Pomeroy, however, was more concerned with the high price of food: "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 a little over a guinea".

At the Brussels Show, Pomeroy was most impressed by the rear-engined 2-litre V8 Tatra from Czechoslovakia, which was said to be able to reach 100 mph on only 48 bhp, whereas the 2.6-litre Aston Martin needed 80 bhp to attain the same speed. However, LML/49/4 had recorded a remarkable fuel consumption of 23.4 mpg between Paris and Brussels, and maintained a cruising speed of a genuine 90 mph on the Jabbeke autoroute, where the previous May a windscreenless Jaguar XK120 with a specially high rear axle ratio had recorded the remarkable flying mile speed of 132.6 mph. Considering that the DB2 was a fully-equipped sports coupé two-up with luggage, its potential was evident.

The test over, Pomeroy drove on to the quay at Ostend →



having covered almost 1000 miles in four days, with 388 miles his longest day's run. "The manner in which they had been covered was most impressive," he concluded, "and one feels that the 2.5 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."

Around the same time as Pomeroy was scorching across France in UMC 272, Lance Macklin was in Monte Carlo to watch the finish of the Monte Carlo Rally – and probably, too, to visit his mother, who lived in Monte Carlo. There he met a kindred spirit, the raffish Prince Raimondo Lanza di Trabia, the nephew (albeit on the wrong side of the blanket) of Cavaliere Vincenzo Florio, begetter of the eponymous Targa.

Raimondo Lanza was one of a group of rich Sicilian motor sport enthusiasts who revived the Targa Florio as a round-Sicily race after the war, when the original course had fallen into disrepair and the startline grandstands near Cerda had been blown up. Apart from merely being the nephew of the race's founder, during the war Raimondo Lanza had rescued his uncle from the clutches of the SS in Rome where he was being held prisoner. Lanza, who had been taught to drive by Tazio Nuvolari, numbered among his playboy friends the Shah of Persia, Aristotle Onassis, Errol Flynn (who he regarded as his alter ego and with whom he went adventuring by yacht), Porfirio Rubirosa and Aly Khan; he had fought for Franco in the Spanish Civil War and for the partisans after Italy had surrendered in 1943. Among the many glamorous women reputed to be his mistresses were Hollywood stars Joan Crawford, Olivia de Havilland and Rita Hayworth: he was married to Italian film star Olga Villi. He was the epitome of "La Dolce Vita" and his tumultuous life was to end tragically at the age of 39 when, in an apparent fit of depression, he jumped to his death from the balcony of the Hotel Eden in Rome on 30 November 1954.

This was the complex character who buttonholed Lance Macklin – doubtless in some Monte Carlo bar – and, learning

that he drove for Aston Martin, invited him to enter the Targa Florio with a works car, holding out the promise of starting money and accommodation at his palace in Palermo.

However, Macklin found that Feltham were too busy preparing for the coming season to loan him a car for the Targa, so offered to buy UMC 272, which David Brown had just replaced with a later car. He drove it down to Italy, accompanied by his friend John Gordon, who had been a Major in the Tank Corps during the war and fought his way up Italy from Sicily to Bologna, where he had been appointed Town Mayor by the victorious British Army Command.

DB2 expert Alan Wheatley is convinced that Macklin and Gordon originally intended to race UMC 272 in the Mille Miglia, but that Macklin was diverted from this plan by his meeting with Prince Lanza (whose family name, incidentally, translated as "lance") and his offer of starting money and accommodation in Sicily. The first port of call for Macklin and Gordon was the Weber carburettor factory in Bologna, where three twin-choke Webers were fitted to the Aston to replace the standard SUs. "They had it for about a week," recalled Macklin, "and did the job free of charge. Mine was the first Aston ever to be fitted with Webers and the difference in performance was absolutely astounding." He was so impressed that he entered the Aston for the Coppa Inter-Europa meeting at Monza on Sunday 26 March.

The Coppa Inter-Europa consisted of two separate races, each of two hours' duration and both with a Le Mans-type start. Macklin's Aston was entered for the morning race for cars conforming with the new international touring car regulations, but when he got to Monza, Macklin found his car had been reclassified as a sports car and would run in the afternoon against formidable local opposition (suspiciously, the morning's "touring car" event was won by a 1500cc Maserati...).

If the Italians thought that by moving the Aston into the sports car class, where it would be racing against Ferraris and Alfa Romeos, they would be spoiling its chances of success, they were proved very wrong, since for the first part of this race the Aston Martin held the lead, though it was later overtaken



UMC 272 reveals the pure lines of Frank Feeley's original design

by an Alfa-Romeo and two Ferraris. Nevertheless, Macklin finished fourth overall and came second in the unlimited class behind a much faster Alfa Romeo. And – surely to the chagrin of the style-conscious Italians – UMC 272 won a cup in the very special concours d'élégance held after the race and open only to cars that had finished. Remarked *Autocar's* Sammy Davis: "This last strikes me as a good idea, conducive to care during the race itself and proving the practicability, as well as the beauty, of the coachwork."

From Monza, Macklin drove down to Naples and embarked on a ship to Palermo. They arrived early in the morning, and, since the car would not be craned off until later, Macklin and Gordon took a horse cab to Raimondo Lanza's house, the Villa Trabia (one of several properties that he owned – over a millennium the ancient Lanza family had accumulated territory in Sicily consisting of seven principalities, two dukedoms, two marquisates and some thirty baronies, among others).

But as they approached the enormous wrought iron gates of the house, the cab driver reined in his horse and refused to enter the property, declaring: "The last time I went in there, about a week ago, I nearly got myself and my horse killed by all those lunatics driving racing cars about the place."

Macklin discovered that Raimondo Lanza, a keen amateur racing driver, had laid out a private circuit inside the park surrounding the Villa Trabia, on which all the top drivers who were staying at the villa – including Tazio Nuvolari, Raymond Sommer and Alberto Ascari – held daily practice sessions!

Though the Targa Florio would return to the traditional Piccolo Madonie circuit in 1951, when the victorious car was a British Frazer Nash, it was run in 1950 (as in 1948 and '49) over a 669.6 circuit of the island of Sicily, starting and finishing in Palermo. "There was no hope of learning it properly," lamented Macklin, "and the Italians were obviously likely to know it better than I."

Any serious practice was out of the question, since the race was to take place on 2 April. The "XXXIV Targa Florio/X Giro di Sicilia" was run on a time-elapsd basis with 16 control points, and Macklin's recollection was that he left the starting line around 3 am. However, Brian Joscelyne notes that his race number "453" would suggest a starting time of 4:53 am, with Ascari ("457") leaving four minutes later. His passenger was, said Macklin, an unnamed Italian (Raimondo Lanza?) rather than his designated co-driver John Gordon, and the weather was atrocious, with pouring rain making the already treacherous roads dangerously slippery.

Nevertheless, the Aston was performing well: "I suppose I'd been going for about two hours (it was just beginning to get light) when I saw the rear lights of a car in front," Macklin recalled. "Eventually I came up behind it, and as we were going through a slow corner I saw that it was Ascari in the Ferrari! I was amazed, and realised that I had only to sit

behind him the rest of the way and I'd won the Targa Florio!"

But in this case pride came (literally) before a fall. "I stayed with him for another hour or so without too much trouble, but then we came to a long stretch which wound its way up into the mountains, and he managed to get in front of a little Fiat Special just before a series of hairpin bends. The Fiat driver seemed to make a point of keeping me behind him, and so Ascari gradually pulled away and disappeared.

"I thought, 'I've caught him once – I'll do it again if I press on a bit.' It was quite light now, but still pouring with rain. I got past the Fiat and was now going down the other side of the mountain where the road appeared to go through a fast, right-hand bend. I could see it going up the next mountain, so I thought it was pretty well flat out and went howling into this right-hander at about 90 mph. Then, to my utter horror, I saw that the road turned sharp right, up the hill and round a hairpin bend to the left, before crossing a great big ravine. There was no hope of stopping so I decided to go straight off the road and not try to get round the corner at all.

"The car dropped two or three hundred feet and finally ended up with an enormous crash, half upside down. I was more or less knocked unconscious for a few minutes and came round to find petrol pouring all over me! I managed to get out and drag my Italian passenger out, too. We had been very lucky, landing in a concrete ditch along the top of a railway cutting, put there to catch falling rocks and boulders. Immediately the other side of this ditch was a vertical drop of about another 100 feet onto the railway line!"

Ironically, a couple of weeks later Raimondo Lanza had a very similar accident in the Mille Miglia, also run in the pouring rain, with his Cisitalia skidding off the road and rolling over and over down an embankment; again, the occupants escaped without serious injuries.

Macklin stayed at the Villa Trabia while a new front end was sent out from England and fitted to the car to enable him to drive home again.

An apocryphal story suggests that Macklin had entered the car for the Mille Miglia but had left Sicily too late to make the start, instead joining the race via a side road at the halfway stage just north of Rome and peeling off after Pisa to head for Monaco to visit his mother. But Macklin's name doesn't appear in the entry list or in *The Autocar's* preview of the event, and in any case the time needed to repair the Aston would surely have made such a feat quite impossible...

A nasty shock awaited Macklin when he eventually reached England in the shape of a large bill from Aston Martin for the front end sent out to Palermo; he was unable to meet this, and his only recourse was to sell UMC 272 to raise the cash; he never saw the car again.

In fact, UMC 272 – LML/49/4 – represented an evolutionary dead end. Before the DB2 went into production



Ground clearance was generous, thanks to the 18 inch wheels originally fitted

Ted Cutting, who had recently joined Aston Martin from Allard, significantly redesigned the chassis (which had been one of the main reasons for David Brown's acquisition of the company). Brown had sought an engine worthy of the chassis, a short wheelbase version of which had been used on the four DB2s built during 1949: now Ted Cutting created a chassis more worthy of an engine that had exceeded expectations. He recalled, "Frank Feeley got going on the body and he, Frank Ayto (then chief draughtsman) and I produced the DB2 as a saleable, road-going car."

Claude Hill's chassis had shown signs of a certain lack of torsional rigidity, so Ted Cutting added a tubular rail above and in parallel with the side members and inserted cruciform frames above the fuel tank and below the passenger area, which increased sill depth but solved the problem. It also enabled the floor to be set lower, increasing headroom; at the same time the scuttle was greatly stiffened and 16 in wheels replaced the original 18 in units (and were also retrospectively fitted to UMC 272).

Compare UMC 272 with a "productionised" DB2 and the differences are evident. The restricted headroom may be less practical, but the lines of the earlier car are purer, less compromised. Now riding once more on 18 in wheels, it has been restored to its original ride height, and looks all the better for it.

After its Sicilian excursion, UMC 272 stepped out of the limelight, but it had played its part in creating one of the finest sports cars of the early 1950s. The results were seen in November 1950 when *The Autocar* road tested VMF 65, one

of the earliest "standard" DB2s, which Lance Macklin and Stirling Moss had just driven on the MCC *Daily Express* 1000-mile Rally ("not really a terribly serious exercise, more in the nature of a 'crumpet tour,'" recalls Stirling) and summarised it as "a car in the first rank for handling and sheer brilliance of performance... the high speeds of which the car is capable are usable to an extent which has probably never before applied with an engine of this quite moderate size".

After Macklin's ownership, UMC 272 – back on SU carburetors – was raced occasionally over the next decade by subsequent owners. It had changed hands 17 times before it was acquired by Peter Lee in 1965. He completely restored UMC 272 over the next quarter-century before selling it for FFr 1,221,000 (£113,687) at the 1989 Christie's Monaco auction. Now, after many years in the collection of Simon Draper, UMC 272 has a new home in Europe and in April 2010, almost exactly sixty years after its triumph at Monza, it once again challenged some of the world's finest cars on Italian soil in the celebrated Villa d'Este concours d'élégance on the shores of Lake Como. Sadly, the judges of its class fell for the more meretricious charms of a gull-winged 1954 Mercedes-Benz 300 SL Coupé, a car produced in relatively large numbers of which dozens of examples survive – and therefore lacking the "wow" factor of hand-crafted coachwork. For me that is a judgment which entirely misses the point of what a concours d'élégance should be all about.

*Thanks to Daniel A. Waltenberg for making his delightful car available through the good offices of Nicholas Mee ●*