



BY DAVID BURGESS-WISE

FRANK FEELEY THE FORGOTTEN MAN OF FELTHAM

Frank Gerald Iris Feeley was born on 16 January 1912 in Staines, where his father Jeremiah was a coachman in domestic service. For whatever reason – it wasn't the weather, for the winter of 1912 was remarkably mild – it took nearly seven weeks for his mother Louisa to register the birth of her son on 24 February.

In the autumn of 1926 – straight from school – 14-year-old Frank Feeley joined Lagonda at Staines, where his father, whose former employment had been rendered obsolete by the growth of motor transport, was employed in the chassis assembly shop. Feeley junior was employed as an office boy, working under Arthur Thatcher, the assistant works manager, who was mainly responsible for the chassis and coachbuilding. Young Frank's work covered everything to do with bodywork; as he gained experience he was allowed to do some drawing, though in those days styling was a distant concept: "The cars evolved from year to year, and we very rarely did an entirely new design," Frank Feeley told Chris Nixon in the 1970s. By then, Feeley had progressed to working as assistant to Walter Buckingham, who was in charge of bodywork design.

Nevertheless, Feeley obviously had a natural talent: when in 1933 Lagonda boldly entered the market for a small sporting car of high quality by introducing the 1100cc twin-

cam Rapier, only available in chassis form, Feeley rose to the occasion when a body was called for to clothe the works demonstrator by quickly sketching a four-seater tourer body for Whittingham & Mitchell of nearby Fulham to build. But it took nearly a year for the Rapier to enter production, and the design was considerably modified during that time. When a Rapier eventually became available for road test in the summer of 1934, *The Autocar* hailed it as "a thoroughly worthwhile newcomer among small sports-type cars".

But for a company as small as Lagonda, the Rapier – however worthwhile – added further complexity to an overburdened range which already boasted five different models from 3- to 4.5-litres capacity; the firm was overborrowed and, perhaps inevitably, in 1935 the Receiver was brought in at Easter after a springtime dip in sales apparently triggered by the introduction of the 30 mph limit had alarmed the company's bankers. Famously, it was during this period of receivership that Lagonda scored its one and only Le Mans victory with a car entered by agents Fox & Nicholl...

Even though the Receiver claimed that the company was maintaining full production, cars were simply being assembled from components in hand; 125 employees were given their notice and others left of their own volition; Frank

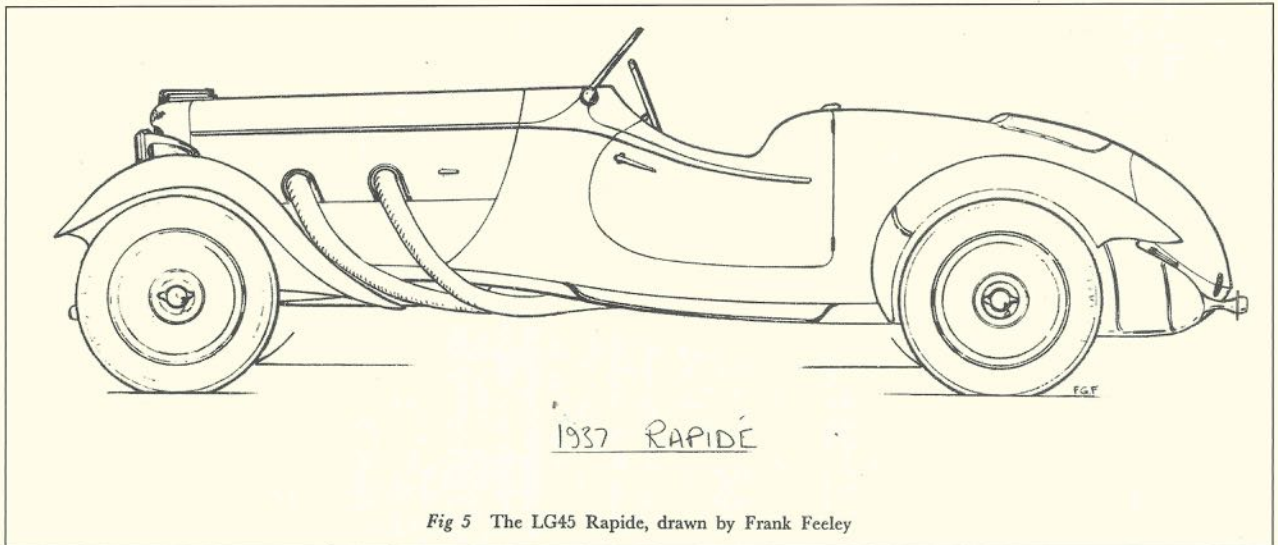
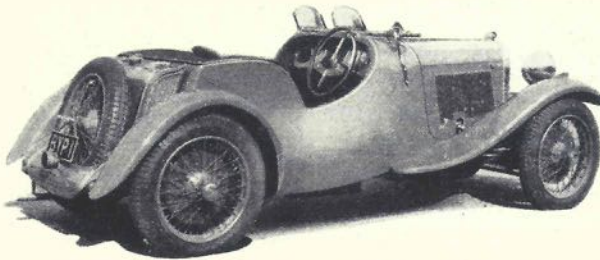


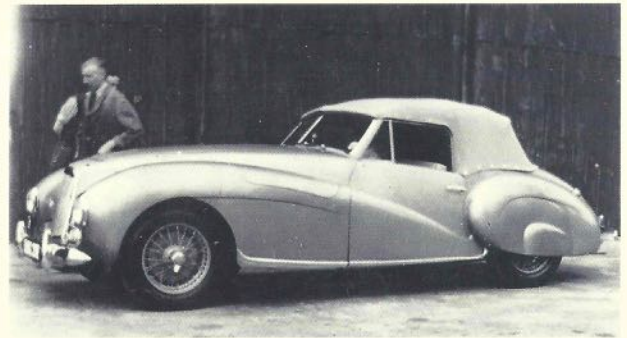
Fig 5 The LG45 Rapide, drawn by Frank Feeley



CAMPBELL'S CHOICE: This special little Lagonda Rapier has just been delivered to Sir Malcolm Campbell. The very light body, painted Blue Bird blue, has a framework of angle iron panelled with aluminium and was constructed by Eagle Coachworks, Ltd., of Thames Ditton.

Opposite page: Frank Feeley stands proudly beside his first design for Aston Martin, the 2-litre Sports

This page, top: Feeley's drawing for one of his finest designs, the 1937 LG45 Lagonda Rapide



Above left: After joining the Thames Ditton coachbuilder Newns in 1935, Feeley designed this "Eagle" body for Sir Malcolm Campbell's Lagonda Rapier

Above right: A 2-litre Sports Aston Martin with fully-spatted rear wheels

Feeley was among those who quit at this time, joining the Thames Ditton coachbuilder Newns, who traded as Eagle Coachworks.

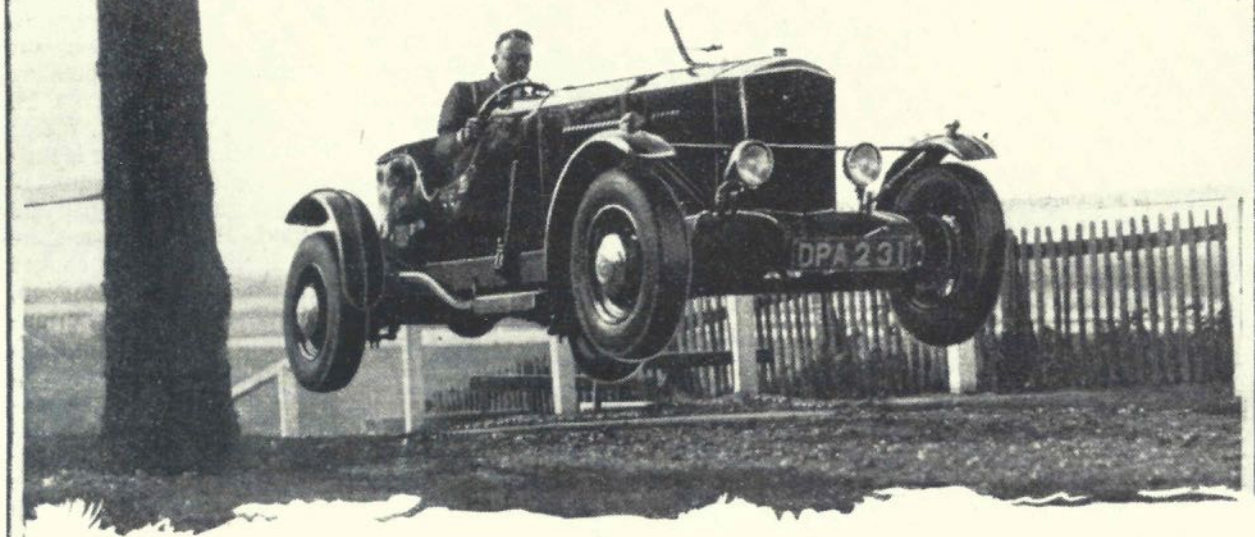
Here his first job was to design a special body for a hotted-up Rapier (it had four Amal carburettors) for Sir Malcolm Campbell; painted in Blue Bird Blue, it was panelled in aluminium over a framework of angle iron, had elegantly flowing wings but was devoid of running boards. Doorless on the driver's side, it had deep cutaways and a high tonneau, a separate slab tank on the tail and a rear-mounted spare wheel. At the same period, Feeley also designed the bodywork for the fastest of all the Railtons, the Light Sports Tourer, in which *Autocar's* H. S. Linfield was famously photographed, nonchalantly smoking a pipe, airborne for a full 35ft at the summit of the Brooklands Test Hill, despite having made a standing start at the foot. Fitted with exiguous cycle wings, Feeley's "slightly streamlined" doorless bodywork was constructed from aluminium and duralumin and weighed less than 1 cwt complete with

wings, bonnet and hood. An unusual feature was the spare wheel mounting: it could either be concealed in the neatly pointed tail or externally mounted alongside the bonnet, "leaving the tail free for a considerable amount of luggage under cover". Said *The Autocar*, "To the enthusiast the body is excellent." Nevertheless, only two Light Sports Tourers were built, one of which was displayed on the Newns stand at Olympia in October 1935.

Feeley's stint with Newns was brief; on the same page of *The Autocar* that recorded the delivery of the Newns "Eagle" Rapier to Sir Malcolm Campbell, was the announcement that a new Lagonda company had been formed under the chairmanship of Alan P. Good, a 29-year-old Lincoln's Inn solicitor, with R. G. "Dick" Watney as managing director and W. O. Bentley as technical director.

Good had a simple aim: "To build the best car in the world." To that end, he began recruiting staff, among them Frank Feeley, who was made Body Designer, "at the ripe old age of 25!" His previous superior, Walter Buckingham, →

The Autocar Road Tests



Feeley designed the body of the Railton Light Sports Tourer featured in this famous *Autocar* Road Test photo

was made works manager, a job for which he was manifestly unsuited, and was eventually dismissed.

Though he didn't like Bentley at all, Feeley got on well with Watney, whose father, Gordon Watney, had been famous in pre-Great War days for rebodding powerful Mercedes cars. He told Chris Nixon that Dick Watney was "a man of great taste who had a great influence on the car and me personally. He was fastidious to the point of being bloody troublesome, really, but this had a tremendous effect on the quality of the motor car and there's no doubt that, just before the war the V12 Lagonda was the equal of anything – comparable to the Rolls-Royce."

But the V12 was in the future in 1935, and Good dropped all but one of the range – the Rapier was taken over by a new company – to concentrate on updating the existing 4.5-litre model, a task carried out in remarkably short time by Bentley and his staff, who comprehensively redesigned the chassis to produce what was virtually a new car, which was designated the LG45.

At last Feeley could strike out in new directions rather than simply working on derivatives of the previous year's models, and subtly revised the existing tourer and "Silent Travel" saloon bodies: both received distinctive semi-circular "cases" on either front wing, one housing the spare wheel, the other was a dummy incorporating a tool box. The wing lines were similar, though extra valancing

carried the front wing line down to the dumb irons; at the front were heavy-looking "harmonic damper" bumpers, an idea intended to control axle tramp that Bentley had brought with him from the 3½-litre "Rolls-Bentley". Feeley improved the look of the tourer by eliminating the cut-outs on the doors, giving a continuous line from the bonnet to the top of the sloping tail.

Car design in the 1930s was a remarkable symbiosis between designer and shop-floor craftsman; Working in his upstairs drawing office in Ironbarks House, on the opposite side of Thorpe Road to the Lagonda factory, Feeley would first sketch out the side elevation of the car and offer it to Dick Watney for approval; Watney – typical manager – liked to add his two-pennyworth, and would make some trifling alteration to a line and persuade Feeley that this was an improvement. Feeley then drew the profile full-scale on the office wall, which usually eliminated Watney's "improvements", and this would be translated into three-dimensional reality by the craftsmen in the body shop. The wing makers were particularly skilful, for there were no cross-section patterns to follow; it was simply a matter of interpreting Feeley's directions...

Frank Feeley's first contribution to the new company's revised 4.5-litre range was a drophead coupé, a body type previously eschewed by the factory because Buckingham didn't like dropheads – he felt that their heavy doors were



Above: The magnificent 1939 Lagonda Rapide was Feeley's finest design for Lagonda

Below: The 1948 Spa car was rebodied like this for the 1948 Motor Show but failed to sell

too prone to sag. Feeley's drophead had a beltline that fell away to the rear and chrome "spears" that echoed the line of the body top; it has to be said that the hood, however elegant it looked when erected, when folded had the untidy "crumpled concertina" appearance so often seen on German dropheads. A handsome saloon de ville was added in 1937.

One customer who disagreed with Feeley's changes to the wings was the wealthy young American sportsman Briggs Cunningham who, ever the perfectionist, felt that the standard sidemounted spare wheel and tool kit "blisters" of the standard factory-built body spoiled the lovely lines of the drophead coupé coachwork, and had the spare wheel and tool kit of his 1939 V12 coupé – one of the very last of the 189 Lagonda V12s built – relegated to the boot, "leaving barely enough room for one's motoring hat and gloves".

But the V12, though unveiled as a non-running prototype at the 1936 Motor Show, was still a year from production reality when Feeley produced his masterpiece, the 1937 LG45R Rapide, a project initiated by Dick Watney, who was anxious to revive the sporting image of the marque. Feeley rose to the occasion splendidly, and produced a car that was, concluded *The Autocar*, "a machine that can worthily uphold national motoring prestige". The exclusive Rapide – just 25 would be built – was a dramatic semi-boat tail four-seater with external exhaust downpipes sprouting from the bonnet side; devoid of running boards, it had

abbreviated wings, cutaway doors and the folded hood was concealed in the sloping tail. There was, however, no useful provision for luggage, as the tail locker was occupied by the spare wheel. It went as splendidly as it looked, for it was one of the very few production four-seaters of the 1930s capable of a genuine 100 mph.

Feeley made few changes to the bodies for the 1938 range, which saw the introduction of Bentley's twin-cam V12 power unit alongside the straight six, now designated LG6; both shared a new chassis with torsion bar independent front suspension – there were two chassis lengths (10ft 7.5 in/11ft 3.5 in) for the six, three (10ft 4in/11ft/11ft 6in) for the V12, the longest wheelbase version to accommodate limousine coachwork. The main external difference was a subtle one: on the LG6 the twin horns were mounted





Above: The fourth prototype DB2 was built as a road car for David Brown

Left: While Feeley's design for the Lagonda was actually at

the time of the David Brown take-over, the shape of the first "DB" Aston was far from settled, as this contemporary advertisement reveals

externally ahead of the radiator, while on the V12 they were concealed behind fairings.

Another Feeley masterpiece was the 1939 Rapide coupé, available on six- and twelve-cylinder chassis. Again, this

was an exclusive model – only 22 V12 Rapides were made – and was nominally a four-seater, with (claimed) space for three abreast on the front seat and a fourth passenger sitting sideways behind. Teardrop wings fore and aft were a distinguishing feature, and while the spare wheel was still accommodated in the boot, there was space for luggage.

The hood had no external irons, while frameless side windows gave the appearance of a roadster when they were lowered. A fold-flat windscreen underlined the sporting nature of this model, while the absence of side-mounted spare wheels and running boards gave this car a particularly happy profile.

Built at the end of the year, a very stylish LG6 Rapide with rear wheels spatted in Art Deco style was shipped in January 1940 to American Lagonda importers Allerton-Hickmott of Hartford, Connecticut, and became the centrepiece of their stand at the New York Auto Salon. It was bought by wealthy businessman and jazz fan Horace Ridgely Bullock, who named his LG6 "The Green Hornet" after a fictional crimefighter from a popular radio series and kept it for 22 years.

There was even a touch of Hollywood magic given to Feeley's dramatic styling, which caught the attention of Alfred Hitchcock, who featured a Lagonda Rapide coupé in his films *Suspicion*, where the car plays a key role, and *The Paradine Case*.



VMF 65, one of the three team cars that followed the prototype DB2s, shows how Feeley's original design was revised to allow more room for the occupants

The year 1939 also saw Feeley venture into racing car design, when he created the streamlined bodywork for the two V12 Lagondas that ran at Le Mans. In the interests of weight-saving, the Le Mans bodies were mere expendable frameless shells hand-beaten from aluminium sheet and mounted on the chassis by quick-release fasteners. After the race, in which the Lagondas finished first and second in their class and third and fourth overall, marque historian Arnold Davey told me that the lightweight bodies were in a poor way and were scrapped, externally similar bodies being built for racing at the August Bank Holiday Brooklands meeting.

But only a few days after the Brooklands meeting, Britain was at war and production of a 1940 Lagonda range with a revised chassis petered out with around a dozen examples built; some cars assembled from stock in hand were delivered during 1940, after which the factory turned over to war work, making aircraft and tank parts and flamethrowers. Garaged during the war, both Le Mans cars were damaged when the off-site building in which they were stored was hit by a V1 "Doodlebug" flying bomb in 1944.

With the end of the war almost in sight, and despite a corporate merry-go-round of changes in company ownership, thought turned to the design of a new Lagonda for the postwar period, for the jigs and dies for the complex V12 had been scrapped.

"In the end," recalled Bentley, "we decided on a medium-sized car aimed at the quality rather than the luxury market." After considering four-, six- and eight-cylinder configurations, it was decided to concentrate on a 2.6-litre twin-cam six, designated "LB6". At first, work on this

engine was very much a cloak-and-dagger operation, as former Aston Martin engineer the late Ted Cutting told me: "Design of the Lagonda LB6 engine had begun during the war in December 1943, when it was distinctly not allowed to be doing other than wartime things. [draughtsman] Frank Ayto lived next door to the Lagonda works at Staines and had a gate in his back garden into the factory car park. His normal practice was to walk out of his back gate and across the yard to work. So they turned it round the other way and W.O. Bentley and [engineer] Stan Ivermee would make daily visits to Willy Watson, who was ensconced in the upstairs back bedroom of Frank Ayto's house, producing the layout drawings for the LB6 engine.

"Because they couldn't declare Willy Watson on the payroll of Lagonda, they invented three labourers who were entirely fictitious, but appeared on the payroll. Their combined salaries paid Willy Watson and also some rent to Frank for the use of his back bedroom. I don't know who thought of that one, but W.O. was a pretty canny chap!"

Since full-scale work on the proposed postwar car was difficult while the hostilities lasted, Frank Feeley made plaster models of proposed body designs, initially a derivative of the prewar V12 short saloon coachwork. Ambitions were high for quantity production, since the Lagonda works had been greatly expanded during the war, and Feeley designed a body that could be dropped on to the chassis from above. Mock ups of the new car, which would have all-round independent suspension and a four-speed Cotal transmission, were in existence by late 1944, and the existence of this "victory design" was revealed by an article in *The Autocar* of 14

September 1945, which stated that the postwar Lagonda would be available as a four/five-seater saloon and four-seat convertible coupé.

But those high hopes for a new, quantity-produced Lagonda were dashed by the strict steel-rationing introduced by the newly-elected Labour government. Lagonda had an agreement with Briggs Motor Bodies of Dagenham – not at that time a subsidiary of the neighbouring Ford factory, to whom they supplied bodywork – but when the government only allocated Lagonda enough steel for a hundred bodies, Briggs lost interest.

Interviewed by Brian Joscelyne in 1984, Frank Feeley remembered: “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 – immediately got the sack!”

In 1947 the Lagonda marque was put up for sale and Bentley was instructed to try and interest another company in the car. Lord Nuffield expressed interest in the new Lagonda, and Bentley took the prototype to Oxford to show Sir Miles Thomas and Alex Issigonis, “but it wasn’t really proletarian enough for them!” Next, he showed it to Jaguar, but while they liked the car, they felt it fitted the same market sector as their own product.

Then, said Bentley: “I think it must have been some time in the summer of 1947 when I met David Brown at London Airport and drove him in the prototype to the works.”

Having just bought Aston Martin, Brown had been advised to buy Lagonda – which by then was in liquidation – by Tony Scatchard, manager of the Lagonda distributors in Bradford.

Brown knew the liquidator, a man called Greenwood, who asked him to go and have a look at the factory. Said Brown: “Always being ready to look at motor cars, I agreed, stressing that I was not a bidder for the company.” However, after riding with Bentley in the prototype Lagonda (“the roadholding was atrocious”), he was impressed by the engine. “I thought this engine in the Aston Martin chassis would make a super car. There were already three bidders for the company – Armstrong-Siddeley, Jaguar and Rootes – and bids were in excess of £100,000, far more than I

thought it was worth. I bid £50,000 and went away and forgot about it.

“A few months later Stafford Cripps, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer, came out with some very depressing announcements, as a result of which the three other bidders withdrew. Greenwood then called again and said, ‘If your idea of the price still stands, we can do a deal. Come and have lunch with me tomorrow.’ So we had lunch and did a deal at my price. (I think I put it up to £55,000.) The Lagonda factory had already been sold and I had to get all the equipment out within six weeks. Aston Martin were on the old Hanworth airfield at Feltham, so we leased the hangars and put all the Lagonda equipment in there.”

David Brown invited Frank Feeley, who had been unemployed for three or four months, to join the new Aston Martin Lagonda company but, recalled Feeley, “During that first winter of 1947-48, things were very grim indeed. There was a vicious circle in that you couldn’t get steel unless you were exporting cars, but of course you couldn’t export cars unless you had the steel to build them with!”

Brown eventually squared the vicious circle by allocating steel from other parts of his organisation to enable Aston Martin to build cars, but initially Feeley was depressed by the lack of progress. “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.”

He was going to join the Jack Barclay organisation, which had taken over both the James Young and Gurney Nutting coachbuilding companies, but David Brown wouldn’t hear of it and persuaded Feeley to stay. “Although I stayed on, I did nothing very much, merely doodling and putting various ideas down on paper for the new Lagonda. During that time, I really just amused myself at the expense of David Brown. I was just marking time, but eventually he made me see he was serious about making a new motor car.”

At that time, with Lagonda in the hangars in the middle of the old Hanworth airfield and Aston Martin in their established factory elsewhere on the site, there was a certain amount of ill-feeling between the two organisations. Though W.O. Bentley had left, development engineer Percy Kemish and racing mechanics Jack Sopp and Jack King – all former Bentley employees – had come to Hanworth from Lagonda, as had a number of men from the Staines company’s body shop.

“I never thought I was going to get interested in the Aston Martin – I was still only really interested in Lagonda. We never really became as one,” lamented Feeley. “I’m afraid it was probably one of the reasons why Claude Hill left. He was quite a nice fellow but he was very sceptical of us and thought we were going to do him out of a job. He didn’t like us putting our engine in his chassis – which is understandable.”



Top: Feeley's design for the DB3S created one of the most elegant sports-racers of the 1950s

Above left and right: Two contrasting 1954 Feeley designs for Lagonda, the 3-litre Drophead for HRH Prince Philip (left) and the V12 racer

Feeley found that the car that Aston Martin planned to build was "a big slab sided job, not unlike what the DB3 turned out to be", so he produced a quick sketch of his vision of the postwar Aston for David Brown. This was an open two-seater and he liked it straight away, no 'argy-bargy' at all – in fact no criticism whatsoever! "that's it!" he said. "Build it!" And so that is how the DB1 as we know it began.

In fact, the design Feeley produced for Brown had been one that he had intended for the V12 Lagonda, but which had been rejected out of hand by Bentley. Consequently, it was a little over-large for the DB1, which was powered by Claude Hill's 2-litre engine.

"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!

"David Brown, in all fairness, had nobody around him who were motor car people, although later he did bring down people from Huddersfield who he hoped would be. 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, didn't know quite what to do with them. 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 he had persuaded himself that he knew all there is to know on the subject. He didn't really, but he certainly had 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 realised. For example, when it came to designing the radiator I had a look at the Aston as it was and just sketched out my idea; that is how the very sharp-nosed design came about on the DB1. 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; we did it without too much trouble.

"If DB liked a sketch, we would 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. At first David Brown didn't have that experience, so he relied on me.

"To lay out the body design, I had Claude Hill's chassis drawings to work from, of course. When I came, his design was completed. The Aston was going to be a closed car, but David Brown had persuaded Claude Hill to remove the top, and therein lay the mistake, probably the biggest mistake they made. You see, it was the roof members that kept the frame stiff and he threw them away. I drew up the DB1, but 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 by putting in stiffeners, but it was really not sufficient. Claude Hill had allowed David Brown to browbeat him into doing something he really didn't want to do. He should have stood his ground."

So that the full-width bench seat could be adjusted fore and aft without binding, Feeley worked with the seat fitting company to devise a system of chains and cogs: "We actually bought them in a local cycle shop. We had this one inch tube under the chassis with cogs at each end. The chain came up through the floor and on the chain was an enormous spring which was meant to assist the driver when trying to move the seat forward. It caused a few headaches but it worked!

"This was the sort of thing we did in those days – 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. In the DB1 we could only just get the wheel to fit in this position, though unlike the Lagonda the wheel was completely hidden. This should

have left a lot of space in the rear boot for luggage, but the design of the chassis largely prevented this."

A 2-litre Aston Martin driven by St John "Jock" Horsfall had – to everyone's surprise – won the Spa 24-hour race in 1948; though Feeley had nothing to do with the original design of that car, when it came back from the race he designed a new body for it and it was exhibited at the Motor Show. This, he recalled, "was against the regulations, which banned showing competition cars on the stands, but we completely redesigned it, 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!"

David Brown decided to enter a three-car team for the first postwar Le Mans race in June 1949, and this time there was no thought of compromising the space frame chassis by omitting the roof: that year's team consisted of three coupés – the first 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, these cars – one powered by the 2.6-litre "Lagonda" engine, two by Claude Hill's 2-litre four-cylinder power unit – 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 development car (LML/49/4) was built, but not raced. It was adopted by David Brown and fitted out as his personal road car. While the car had a more civilised interior than the racers, the diminutive David Brown was unlikely to complain about its lack of headroom!

However, it represented an evolutionary dead end. When a production version of the DB2 powered by the 2.6-litre "Lagonda" engine was planned, 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."

Even with the roof girders, Claude Hill's chassis had 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.



The drophead DB2 was another inspired Feeley design

These inevitable changes took some of the spontaneity out of Feeley's design. "We raised the roof and bonnet lines and the DB2 was refined into a saleable motor car," he commented.

After the first 31 production DBs had been built, the front end, with its three-piece grille, was modified when James Watt, the newly-appointed assistant general manager of David Brown Tractors' automobile division, responsible for Aston Martin and Lagonda, suggested that cost savings could be made by using a one-piece grille. "So," said Feeley, "I redesigned it to the shape which has become almost a trademark. I don't really think it was an improvement, but we had to save costs somewhere. I preferred the first design actually."

That handsome one-piece grille certainly impressed the designers of Ford at Dagenham, for former Ford designer Ron Hickman of Black & Decker Workmate fame assured me that it was hastily cribbed for the front end of the 1951 Ford Zephyr Six!

Cutting's chassis modifications had produced a frame stiff enough for a convertible version, the first of which appeared during that initial batch of 31 cars. Recalled Feeley, "Making the coupé bodywork did not present any great difficulties. After all my experience with elaborate Lagondas, the hood was relatively simple. We didn't put the hood to an outside

contractor, it was entirely designed and built at Feltham. I'd got grey hair trying to satisfy the demands of Dick Watney on the drophead Lagondas so in comparison the Aston hood was a piece of cake."

While the first DB2 saloons and dropheads were built at Feltham, a strike there in the early 1950s saw Aston bodywork contracted out to Mulliners of Birmingham, who made the bodies for the improved DB2/4 with its hatchback rear window. Much of Mulliners' panel work was actually carried out by Airflow Streamline of Northampton, which saw Feeley having to travel between Feltham, Northampton and Birmingham. "Obviously this was no way to go on," he commented. "David Brown realised the need for his own body building facility if Astons and Lagonda were to progress. I remember one day in about 1953 DB asked me into his office and told me he had acquired Tickfords, the Newport Pagnell coachbuilders. I was very pleased because I knew Tickfords and their work, because we had worked closely with them before the war on Lagondas. I knew Fred Salmon who had inherited the business, though sadly he died shortly after the takeover by the David Brown Group. I said to DB that I was glad, because we were now back in coachbuilding - which is where I always wanted to be!

"At first they began building the DB2/4 Mk II bodies there, and following that the Mark III. Later they even



The DB2/4 was probably the first high-speed hatchback; this actual car was originally owned by Earl Howe

Opposite: Feeley's final; design for Aston Martin was the DB MkIII, seen here in fixed-head and drophead coupé versions

assembled the frames there, and as time went on more and more of the making of the cars was centred on Newport Pagnell. Gradually Feltham became solely concerned with experimental, racing and servicing. This, I think, was a good idea, so that the competition and production functions operated separately."

At Feltham, Feeley designed the body for the DB3 racer, with its tubular chassis designed by former Auto Union engineer Eberan von Eberhorst.

"This had a totally different chassis from the DB2: it was really just two large tubes. My problem was: 'How were we going to mount the body?' I had to design and build the underside of the body as a separate attached unit; the underpan was a complete sub assembly in alloy. As usual, the chassis designers hadn't thought about how to accommodate the exhaust system, nor indeed how the seats were to be fixed! I wanted a clean underside to the body, so I insisted the exhaust came out the side under the driver's door in a recess in the underpan.

"The DB3 chassis had nothing above the main tubes, so we had to create everything, making the scuttle part of the body. We also designed this body so we could get it off the chassis in one piece in about 20 minutes so the mechanics could strip the complete car.

"One of the things I was always concerned about was getting rid of hot under bonnet air that had come through the radiator. We certainly had this problem with the DB3 and had to cut vents to let it out. But it was never really fully

satisfactory and when the DB3S followed I was determined to get over this problem. We had scale models made and tested them in the Vickers wind tunnel at Weybridge, where they had some decent aerodynamicists. Without a doubt the wind tunnel work was useful to us – it proved that my idea for cutting away the wings behind the wheels did allow the extraction of hot air. It was certainly effective and was not simply a styling feature and it was adopted by other people later. I can't call it copying; it was simply designers coming up with a common solution – we all faced the same problems, so it is not surprising similarities occur.

"For the DB3S I borrowed from my prewar Lagonda, using the Gothic Arch in the wing and running the line through the middle of the body, too, just enough to break up that uninteresting flat panel. That not only looked good, but strengthened the wing and the panel. The 3S was very successful, but in 1954 it wasn't fully developed because we were concentrating on the V12 Lagonda (racer). The two cars looked alike, although the Lagonda was very much bigger.

"I often used to go to the Motor Shows, not with the idea of copying anyone but to see how these common problems were being tackled; this stimulated one's own ideas. Sometimes I saw something which didn't seem to work and though I was considering doing something on those lines, I didn't do it! That way you try to keep down your mistakes.

"I must say David Brown allowed me a lot of freedom. Although from time to time he made helpful suggestions it



was largely left to me regarding the design and execution of the bodywork. We did get sidetracked occasionally. We were very well endowed with woodworkers, trimmers and sheet metal workers as good as any in the country, and he was able to use them on his more personal things such as speedboats – we built two for him – and his yacht *Marsaltese II*, which we refurbished. He had these skills on tap and he made full use of them.”

The apotheosis of the DB2 line was the DB Mk III launched simultaneously at the Geneva Salon in Switzerland and in the USA in March 1957. Deemed “one of the world’s outstanding sports models” by *Autocar*, it incorporated lessons learned on the race track, with a fundamental redesign of the engine – now 3-litres – by Polish engineer Tadek Marek. It would be the last of the DB models to be powered by the twin-cam six-cylinder engine of Lagonda origin and was also the final incarnation of the Claude Hill chassis.

It also spelt the end of Feeley’s time with Aston Martin Lagonda. A new model, code-named Design Project 114, was planned to succeed the DB Mk III, and Feeley duly drew a body for it, but, as former Aston Martin chassis engineer Harold Beach told me, “Frank Feeley was quite a clever chap, really, but all designers have their moment of glory, and Frank’s moments of glory were probably the DB2 and the DB3S. John Wyer was very disappointed with the body that he had mounted on DP114 and I think it was Wyer’s idea to go to Touring in Milan. He had been scouting round the Italian bodybuilders after he was dissatisfied with Frank Feeley’s effort with the original car, and he then sent



me to Touring, where I worked with them for some while. That’s how the DB4 body was styled.”

Reluctant to move to Newport Pagnell, Feeley left Aston Martin Lagonda in 1956 to work in the aircraft industry but, Arnold Davey told me, he was very disappointed with their standards. He was plagued by back trouble, exacerbated by botched private surgery, which marred his previously sunny disposition. Always a Lagonda man at heart, in retirement he lived in the little cottage in Hytheheld Avenue in Egham that he had always occupied, just a short walk from the old Lagonda works at Staines, until his death at the age of 73 in Ashford Hospital, Stanwell, on 20 August 1985.

*This is an updated version of an article that first appeared in **The Automobile**. Thanks to Arnold Davey, Neil Murray, the late Ted Cutting and Harold Beach, and interviews by Brian Joscelyne and the late Chris Nixon ●*