

FULLBORE



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TALES OF A DB2

Words by: Tom Stewart
Photography: Dominic Ede

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IN AN IMAGINARY, FAIRY-TALE WORLD ASTON MARTIN'S OLD FELTHAM FACTORY WOULD STILL BE LEFT UNTOUCHED AND PRETTY MUCH AS IT WAS IN 1954 WHEN COMPANY OWNER DAVID BROWN RELOCATED AML TO NEWPORT PAGNELL.
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Sure, there'd be overgrowth, the painted signs would be faded, the car park would need weeding and the place would look shabby, but its history would still be tangible. I suppose deep down I knew that as 'Aston Martin Lagonda, Hanworth Air Park' had at some point become the 'Feltham Airparcs Leisure Centre' – itself now under major refurbishment – the location was probably not going to evoke much of the romanticism of an era long since passed.

And so it turned out to be, although the same cannot be said of my car for the day, a rather special 60-year old Aston Martin DB2. On one recent sunny morning this fine old machine took me to the Leisure Centre, and, having weaved past the portacabins, JCBs and helmeted, dayglo-vested site workers, and then squeezed into the car park alongside the similarly attired students of the Heathrow Motorcycle Training school, the Aston seemed entirely unemotional. Mind you, I'm not surprised. I mean, can you actually remember where you were born? Me neither, but fortunately a whole lot more is known about the car's early years and, as Stephen Fry might say, it's really 'quite interesting'.

This DB2, then known as a DB Mk II, was born in Feltham in early 1949 with chassis LML 49/4. It was the last of four, pre-production development DB2s, and one of two with the 6-cyl, 2.6-litre Lagonda engine that had been designed under W.O. Bentley's supervision. Painted dark red, it was built to the same mechanical spec as the DB Mk II team cars that were raced later that year with mixed success in the Spa and Le Mans 24hr events, but was equipped with a more luxurious interior as it was to be David Brown's personal transportation as well as fulfilling promotional duties. Imagine a works DBR9 with creature comforts; this was the 1949 equivalent.

LML 49/4 was registered UMC 272 on 26th April and was photographed for promotional purposes the following month near Egham. Three months later racing driver Lance Macklin demonstrated the car at a British Racing Drivers' Club meeting at Silverstone. Macklin was well known to Brown as he had driven a works DB2 (LML 49/2) to 5th overall in that year's Spa 24hr race, but it was the following year that proved to be LML 49/4's annus optimus.

In mid January 1950, some three months before the production DB2 was unveiled at the New York motorshow, UMC 272 was loaned to The Motor. Accompanied by AML manager, James Watt, the magazine's editor Laurence Pomeroy set off on a continental road test. With some 8,000 miles already on the speedometer, they drove from London to Le Mans, Paris, Brussels and then to Ostend for the boat home, and in his account of the near-1,000-mile, four day trip (published 1st Feb '50) Pomeroy referred to a 'moment' he had while on the road in rural France. "I came over the brow at a sharpish speed of some 90 m.p.h. to find the road full of bull and peasantry." Apparently said peasantry then "fled into the ditch" as the Aston "sped beneath the bull's tail" and so no harm was done, save for Anglo-French relations. Pomeroy concluded his report by saying, "The 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".



After this test UMC 272 was returned to Feltham where it was fitted with a new engine – I don't know why, but LB6/49/29 remains in situ today – while a floor-mounted stick shift replaced the original steering-column gear change and the body was re-painted in dark green.

In around Feb/March of 1950 David Brown sold the car to Lance Macklin, son of Noel, the founder of the Invicta and Railton car companies. The following year Macklin was to finish 3rd overall (1st in class) in the '51 Le Mans 24hr in another works DB2 (LML/50/8), and two years later he was to become a Formula One driver. Furthermore, in 1955 it was his Healey that swerved to avoid Hawthorn's Jaguar and was immediately shunted from behind by Levegh's Mercedes in that year's fateful, fatal Le Mans 24hr race, but for now Macklin was an aspiring driver fuelled by ambition.

According to his Daily Telegraph obituary published Sept '02, Macklin honed his racing skills in Belgrave Square. "In those days it was surfaced with wooden

blocks," he recalled. "And the moment it rained it became so slippery it wasn't true. I'd come out of a nightclub at two in the morning, leap into the old Invicta and spend 10 minutes going round the Square in a four-wheel drift." Although also not strictly relevant to this story, Macklin was also a good-looking, smooth-talking charmer, easily distracted by female company. If his car blew up in practice he would not be too disappointed. "Oh well," he would say, "I'll go into town and find myself a bird".

In the Spring of 1950 Macklin set off in UMC 272 for the Weber factory in Bologna. There he had the car's twin SU carbs replaced, free-of-charge, with three 35mm DCO Webers (triple Webers were subsequently fitted to the factory's '51 DB3 racers). Macklin then headed to Monza where, by averaging 85.1mph for two hours, he finished 2nd in class (4th overall) in the Coppa Inter-Europa race held on 23rd March. From there he drove all the way down to Sicily for the 34th Targa Florio held on 2nd April. With this being a gruelling 670-mile road race

IN 1950, RORO FROM DOVER WAS STILL THREE YEARS AWAY



MAKLIN, TARGA FLORIO, APRIL '50



EDITOR POMEROY POSES IN LE MANS



ASTON MARTIN ADVERT, JULY '49



you may now be thinking that my gentle trundle from Nicholas Mee's emporium in Hammersmith to Feltham – and then on to Isleworth for some pretty pictures – is all a little tame by comparison. And you'd be right.

However, unlike my drive around the outskirts of West London, Macklin's Targa Florio came to an abrupt and premature halt. About two hours into the race he thought he was catching Ascari's works Ferrari, and in wet, slippery conditions he promptly drove UMC 272 into a ravine. The car was subsequently transported back to Feltham for repairs and Macklin was forced to sell it to cover costs.

Following my short time behind the wheel of UMC 272 I'm finding it hard to draw any comparisons with either Pomeroy's, or especially Macklin's heroic escapades with this wonderful car, but I nonetheless found it engaging, characterful and utterly charming. A drive to Sicily in a DB9 would be a doddle, whereas a run to Silverstone in this DB2, despite its strong and flexible engine, would

seem more like an adventure. Though the car's old enough for a bus pass, my only concern was a knocking fuel pump, which immediately returned to silent after refuelling.

So, perhaps not surprisingly the Feltham site turned out to be something of an anti-climax, but UMC 272 was anything but.

