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Editorial enquiries & contributions to:
Brian Heath,
'Holmerise', Seven Hills Rd.,
Cobham, Surrey. KT11 1ES.
Tel./Fax: (0590) 645900.

Display advertisement enquiries to: Charles Leith.
Tel: 0425 656086. Fax: 0425 656385.

Display advertisement copy to:
Enthusiast Publishing Ltd.,
'Holmerise', Seven Hills Rd.,
Cobham, Surrey. KT11 1ES.
Tel. 0932 864212.
FAX: (0932) 862430.

Classified lineage ads to:
Christine Ward,
Enthusiast Publishing Ltd.,
'Holmerise', Seven Hills Rd.,
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Tel. 0932 864212.

Subscription enquiries to:
Margaret Clark,
Tel. 0932 864212.
FAX: (0932) 862430.

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Front cover: *The splendid 30/98 Vauxhall described in the article on page 27.*

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Guy Dams,
Lierseweg 80,
2200 Herentals,
Belgium.
Tel. 32 1421 9511.

Jens Robdrup,
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3480 Fredensborg,
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Regular articles in this issue

Other peoples' cars — No. 18

1949 Aston Martin DB2 prototype UMC 272

By Brian Heath

It could be argued that when Aston Martin ceased production of the 1½-litre cars in 1936, and introduced the 2-litre, the company lost their way. Certainly the cars produced from this period were much softer, not necessarily effete, but sales suffered accordingly. The 2-litre cars were heavier, slower and became progressively more old fashioned as the decade progressed. Aston Martin, under the direction of Gordon Sutherland, were aware of the situation and had been working since 1936 on an updated, and for the period extremely modern, replacement. This had been designed by Bertelli disciple, Claude Hill. By 1939 they had produced the chassis and bodywork for this car, known as the Atom, but not the new engine. The Atom was without doubt the car upon which the next generation of Aston Martins were founded. The outbreak of war naturally caused design work to cease, but the prototype chassis covered many thousands of miles on essential duties, and it became extremely well developed in the process. This car had a relatively long wheelbase, tubular chassis and a novel saloon body frame upon which the panels were hung to provide an exceptionally stiff structure. It looked not unlike a miniature Bentley Corniche. For the first time ever on an Aston Martin, independent front suspension was fitted, employing trailing links and coil springs. Unusually, for a British car, a Cotal automatic gearbox was fitted. In 1946 the new engine was announced, and somewhat surprisingly, this turned out to be a 2-litre with push-rod valve actuation, and wet sump lubrication. Laurence Pomeroy of *'The Motor'* called it 'the new order of motoring' when he tried the car.

In February 1947 a saviour arrived at Aston Martin when David Brown acquired control of the company. This was a private purchase and was not financed by the David Brown Group. Both Sutherland and Hill remained under the new regime, to be joined by 'Jock' Horsfall, as assistant to Hill.

Below: *UMC 272. The fourth chassis to be built in 1949, directly after the three team cars.*

1949 Aston Martin DB2

prototype UMC 272

Horsfall was an exceptional development driver and this was his role at the company. Work on the new car was stepped up, and although the Atom was never to enter production it sired the first of the David Brown-produced models, the two-litre Sports (retrospectively titled DB1). David Brown insisted, against Claude Hill's advice, on turning the DB1 into an open car, for which it was totally unsuitable due to the lack of the roof stiffness of the saloon body, which resulted in the chassis flexing and the doors not shutting. Frank Feeley, of Lagonda, designed a drophead coupé body with vee-windscreen and ballooning wings. A development model was built with cycle wings, complete with a 2-litre push-rod engine, to such good effect that 'Jock' Horsfall and Leslie Johnson won outright the 1948 24-hour race at Spa in Belgium.

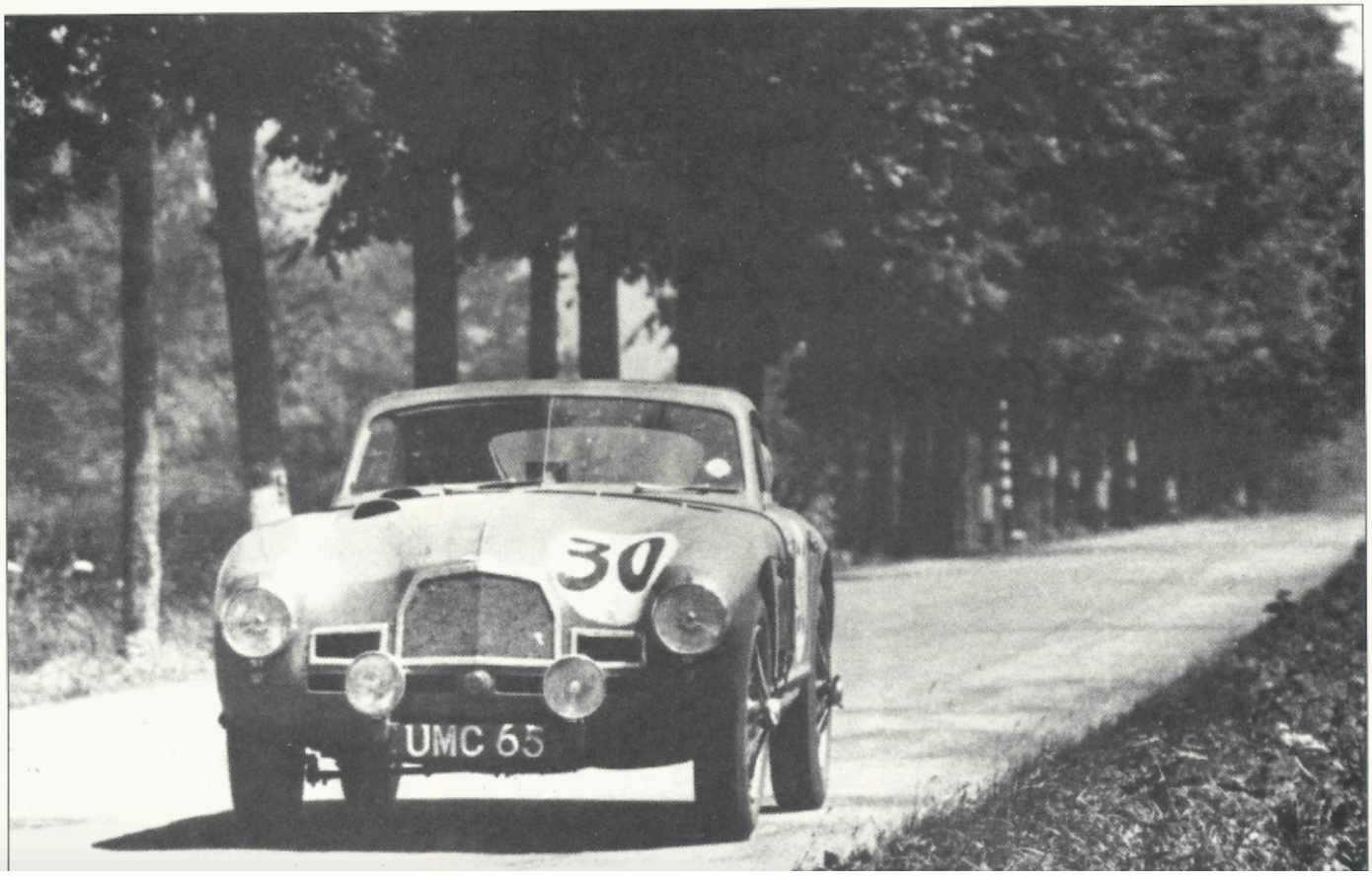
David Brown had always been concerned about the lack of power developed by this engine, and late in 1947 he had been able to acquire the Lagonda Company, who had a W.O. Bentley/William Watson-designed 2.6-litre twin-overhead-camshaft engine already available — it was for this engine alone that David Brown purchased the Lagonda Company. Claude Hill had been working on a six-cylinder push-rod design, but this was dispensed with.

Production continued slowly with the DB1; Aston Martin only manufactured a total of fifteen examples. It was widely anticipated that radical changes were about to take place within the company. Gordon Sutherland resigned from the board of directors; he had taken virtually no active part in the company for some time, and he acquired the coachbuilding concern, Abbots of Farnham. 'Jock' Horsfall also left to concentrate on his motor racing career; unfortunately he was killed in an E.R.A. at Silverstone in 1949. Claude Hill, initially upset that the DB1 became an open design, finally resigned when it was realised that his push-rod engines were not to be developed. With the Lagonda engine now available, David Brown was able to proceed in the way he had always anticipated steering the company — via motor racing.

The announcement that Aston Martin would enter Le Mans and Spa was made in the Spring of 1949. Pictures were released of an entirely new aerodynamic sports saloon with a strong Italian flavour. It was certainly a most imposing-looking car — sleek, low and most purposeful. The saloon body design was again the work of Frank Feeley — scant recompense for Claude Hill, who by then was working with the Harry Ferguson design team in Coventry with Freddie Dixon and sometime Aston Martin and Jaguar racer Major A.P.R. Rolt — much later to produce a successful four-wheel-drive system.

Three DB2s were built for Le Mans, from Frank Feeley's full-size drawing. "I made no small-scale drawings at all," said Feeley, "there was not time". Two cars were fitted with the 2-litre 4-cylinder pushrod engine, and one with a six-cylinder 2.6-litre Lagonda unit. The four-cylinder cars were driven by Arthur Jones/Nick Haines (UMC 64, LMA/49/1), and Pierre Marachal/'Taso' Mathieson (UMC 65, LMA/49/2); the six-cylinder car was driven by Leslie Johnson/Charles Brakenbury (UMC 66, LML/49/3); Lance Macklin had been invited to drive but was unable to do so. These cars featured a tubular chassis with a 108" wheelbase — 9" shorter than the DB1, as recommended by 'Jock' Horsfall. The independent front suspension was directly related to the Atom, with coil springs on the rear for the first time. In the race the six-cylinder car lasted but six laps when it lost all its water due to the siphon effect of the water header tank which was originally placed on the bulkhead. Pierre Marachal suffered a fatal injury when he crashed due to the loss of his brake fluid (the only fatality suffered by Aston Martin in fifteen years of racing), the other Jones/Haines car finished in seventh position.

What could have been considered a disappointing Le Mans was more than made up

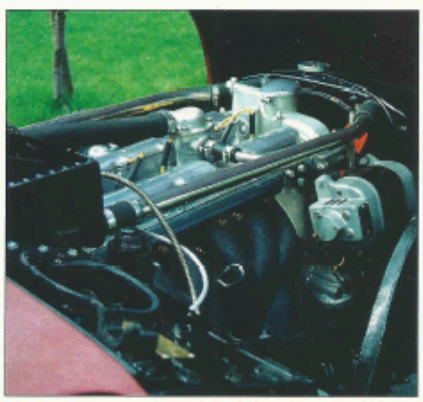


Below: *Lance Macklin/Nick Haines at Spa, Belgium, in the 1949 24-hour race driving LMA/49/1, the original 4-cylinder prototype. They finished 3rd in class at 73.83mph. 5th overall.*

Below: *The considerable ground clearance caused by the 18" wheels is well evident.*

Below: *With the front cowling hinged forward as a whole unit for access, the finely finished engine and auxiliaries were easy to work on.*

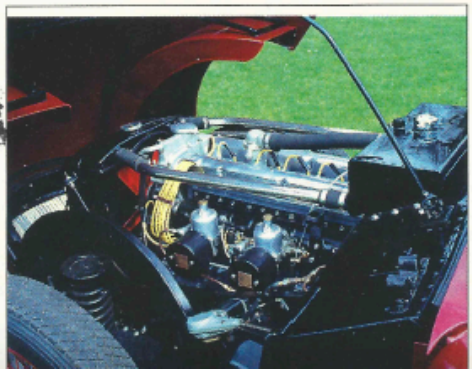
Below: *The rear bodywork showed a particularly happy blending of roof and wing panels.*



Below: *A clean front end with few breaks to mar the line of the panelling. The radiator grille of the early cars was reminiscent of the pre-war model.*

Below: *The characteristic bulkhead water header-tank prominently displayed — this created problems with the siphon effect on early cars.*

Below: *The production DB2 was wider and had more headroom than the prototype shown here.*



1949 Aston Martin DB2

prototype UMC 272

for by success at Spa. The Lagonda-engined car, again driven by Johnson/ Brackenbury, finished third overall, indeed they were unlucky not to win. The Haines/Lance Macklin car finished fifth. It was this result that caused David Brown to put the DB2 into production, and decided that for 1950 they should have a proper racing program — run by John Wyer.

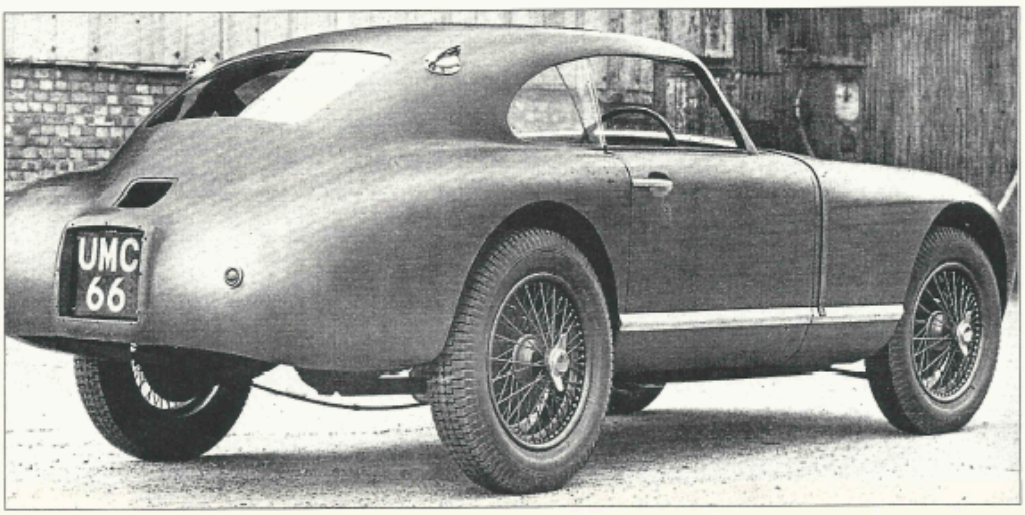
The car featured in this article is an historic Aston Martin indeed — UMC 272, LML/49/4. In addition to the three race cars, this was the fourth coupé, the second six-cylinder DB2, in fact the first complete DB2. The car was sanctioned as an experimental and development vehicle, but was used by David Brown personally and was therefore built with a more civilised interior. He always liked to have a replica of the latest racing car. The build sheet shows that work commenced in April 1949, it was completed just after the Spa race in July, and its first recorded journey was when David Brown took it to Silverstone in August for the BRDC International Trophy meeting. The car was ineligible for the sports car event, as indeed was the works team, but it completed a lap of honour on the circuit when driven by Lance Macklin. The factory retained ownership of the car until March 1950, during which period Laurence Pomeroy was loaned it for a 1,000-mile journey, which was suitably recorded in *'The Motor'*. By this time Lance Macklin had an agreement to drive for the factory team on a regular basis, but quite independently of this he was invited by Prince Raimundo Lanza, a fanatical motor racing enthusiast who owned a large estate in Sicily, to drive in the Targa Florio. The factory was unable to loan him a car and so Macklin bought UMC 272, and entered it. He had to sell just about everything he owned in order to pay for it. Macklin set off for Italy accompanied by his co-driver, John Gordon, who had been a Major in the Tank Corps during the war in Italy. He had fought his way laboriously from Sicily up to the north of Italy, and had spent time in Bologna where he had been appointed Town Mayor by the British army. This, no doubt, gave him an enviable position with the Italian hierarchy, and he became friendly with one of the top people at the Weber carburettor factory. Macklin and Gordon took UMC 272 from England direct to Bologna, with the intention of seeing whether they could persuade Weber to do a comparative test against the standard SU carburettors. This they were delighted to do, and the actual performance of the car was immediately improved considerably. To be fair, Macklin recalls, the car was also much less flexible and smooth than it had been on the SU instruments.

It had already been agreed with the organisers to enter the car for the Coppa Inter-Europa, at Monza. It was a disappointment to find two works Ferraris entered, but the car ran faultlessly to finish fourth at an average speed of 85.1mph, behind a works Alfa Romeo driven by Grand Prix driver Sanesi and the two Ferrari cars. In addition the Aston won the Concours d'Elegance, and it proved to be of great interest to the Italians. From Monza, Gordon and Macklin drove straight down to Naples, and put the car on a ship and crossed to Sicily .

The ship docked at Palermo early in the morning, and since the car could not be unloaded until the evening Macklin and Gordon took a horse drawn cab to the address they had been given 'Vila Trabia, Palermo'. When they arrived the driver refused to enter, telling them that the last time he went there his horse had been nearly killed by all the idiots racing round the park. Prince Raimundo had his own private circuit, and all the top drivers, Nuvolari, Ascari and Sommer stayed there. In the race, run on a time-elapsed basis, Macklin started at approximately 3am, almost one minute behind Ascari in a Ferrari. It was dark, pouring with rain and the road was slippery — not ideal conditions for motor racing. After about two hours Macklin caught up with the car in front and he realised it was Ascari. He followed him for another hour before the Ferrari was able to overtake a back marker before a series of bends. Macklin was delayed and set off in earnest once again. On descending the mountain the road appeared to go through a fast, right-hand bend. He could see the next mountain through the haze, it was still raining, and he assumed the road was virtually flat out. It was not! As he entered the next bend at about 90mph the road turned sharp right, up the hill and round a hairpin bend to the left, before crossing a deep ravine. He had no chance of stopping, and decided to go straight off the road and not attempt to corner at all.

The car plunged into the ravine and finally ended up with an enormous crash, half upside down. Luckily neither Macklin nor Gordon were badly hurt, they had landed in a concrete ditch on top of a railway cutting, on the far side of which was another drop of a hundred feet onto the railway line.

The car was retrieved and returned to Palermo, where they spent a further month as Prince Raimundo's guests during which time an almost complete front end for the car was sent out from England and fitted. Macklin had already entered for the Italian Mille Miglia, so they had a fight against time on their hands to complete the repairs on time, to drive back up to the north of Italy in order to reach Brescia for the scrutineering and the start of the race. Unfortunately they did not quite make it, because by the time they reached Rome on their way north the Mille Miglia had already been running for five or six hours. John Gordon's knowledge of Italy once more proved to be of enormous benefit, because he knew of a back street through Rome which, he said, would lead straight out onto the Mille Miglia course just north of Rome. He was absolutely right, and after much horn blowing and arm waving, the Carabinieri at the barriers lifted the bar and they roared through and joined the Mille Miglia. They must have created a little confusion among the marshals and time keepers because the racing number on the Aston was the same as had been used for the Targa Florio! They had a good fast drive up to the turn-off for Genoa where they sadly left the course and headed for Monte Carlo where Macklin's mother lived. When they finally returned to the U.K., Aston



Left: *The first 2.6-litre DB2 — LML/49/3. Driven at Le Mans and Spa in 1949 by Leslie Johnson/Charles Brackenbury.*

1949 Aston Martin DB2

prototype UMC 272

Right: *The dashboard was directly related to the DB1.*

Martin were ready for them with an enormous bill and the only way Macklin could possibly pay it was by selling his lovely UMC 272.

UMC 272 is now part of a substantial private collection of Aston Martin cars, and has recently emerged from a lengthy total overhaul by the manufacturers, now based at Newport Pagnell. A certain amount of minor cosmetic work is still to be finished such as the wooden door cappings, and the bonnet catches are known to be incorrect. These will be attended to.

It is surprising how different UMC 272 is from other early DB2's. Ted Cutting, a well known Aston Martin engineer, joined the company in 1949. He was responsible for much early work on the design, especially the chassis which was originally extremely heavy, being of the 'ladder' type formed of large rectangular tubes and rolled steel channel section cross-members. Cutting completely re-designed the chassis. The 'ladder' construction was deleted as were the cross-members. In lieu, a cruciform made of rectangular steel tubes was substituted, and this was lower relative to the ground and the car roof so as to provide increased interior headroom. In addition it was much lighter and was of improved torsional stiffness. Frank Feeley's body design was right from the outset, indeed the most outstanding visual difference between UMC 272 and later cars is the increased ride height. Originally 18" wheels were specified, to be replaced quite soon with 16" equipment, including UMC 272. The original 18" size has now been refitted, with the result that the car looks as it did when manufactured.

When introduced, the DB2 must have been a revelation. In spite of the coupé body, it was in the fullest sense of the term 'a sports car'. The engine ran smoothly to the limit of its freely-given revs. Quiet mechanically, and flexible down to low speeds, it produced well over 100bhp from 2.6-litres, even with a low compression ratio of 6.5:1. The maximum speed of the car is in the region of 110mph, and 0-100mph could be achieved in less than 40 seconds. This was really motoring forty-three years ago! The David Brown gearbox provided, as one would expect, well chosen gear ratios, and was a delight to use. Really rapid changes could be made with the completely rigid gear lever. Originally the car had been fitted with a steering-column change and some of the old fittings were evident on the chassis and interior. The steering wheel, believed to be a 17" Lagonda component, is also smaller than used on production cars: with a larger diameter it would have been virtually impossible to squeeze ones knees beneath it. The benefit of greater space was to be gained on later cars from Ted Cutting's chassis redesign.

Stability was exceptional. The suspension system owed much to the development of the pre-war Feltham team, and certainly stood the test of time extremely well. It is harsh — one would not expect it to be otherwise — but it provides rock-like stability.

The bodywork of UMC 272 differed from that eventually adopted for production in a number of important respects. The wooden veneer dashboard and instruments are basic DB1 in nature and layout. The body is narrower, and there is considerably less headroom, as already explained. The three-piece grill was introduced on early production cars in much the same form as the photographs show, but the design was quickly altered to an integral, horizontal-slatted design, and most early cars were modified to incorporate this specification. The air outlets behind the front wheels were replaced with a grill, and quite soon deleted altogether. Production cars were also adapted to incorporate a rear panel through which the spare wheel could be reached.

All in all UMC 272 is a thoroughly delightful vehicle. Character is there in the extreme. If one has to criticise anything, it can only be the slightly metalescent maroon paint finish, which would not have been available in 1949, but that is a minor matter. I liked the car, and so evidently did the 410 customers who bought the DB2 before it was updated into the Mark 1 in 1953.

Right: *Frank Feeley's original design was cleaner than the eventual production cars.*