



When it first appeared on the covers of magazines in 1980, the Aston Martin Bulldog was stunning evidence that the designers were still capable of creating a real supercar. *Image courtesy of Aston Martin.*

The Meaning of Aston Martin by Stephen Bayley

I have a French friend returning to Paris after a successful tour of the London media business. Over an au revoir bottle of Château Pontet-Canet he told me what he most wanted to remember of England is an Aston Martin. So he has bought one. Personally, I can think of nothing less well adapted to the frenzy of Paris traffic, but dreams about cars never have been based on rational foundations.

Say 'Aston Martin' and a world of values is immediately conjured up. Henri Recamier, founder of what has become LVMH, once explained that French luxury is feminine while English luxury is masculine. Hence the Aston's appeal. It is the essence of Englishness, as likely to tease the pleasure centre of a Frenchman as the words 'sporting gun' or the name 'Anderson & Sheppard'.

Somehow Aston Martin summons unfocused but powerful memories of summer days, a muddle of hot oil smells and rasping exhaust notes. And, in addition, a measure of polite sexual triumphalism. Associations with first, James Bond, and second, the Royal Family, has done nothing to impair progress of this intoxicating visionary model. Like Prince Charles, the 2014 cars retain a vintage air. But, semiotically speaking, how did this happen?

In *Casino Royale*, the first Bond novel, the spy drives a Blower Bentley, a supercharged racing-green truck. Eleven years later, when Saltzman and Broccoli's *Goldfinger* was released in 1964, he was in an elegant, refined silver Aston Martin DB5 GT. A Corgi model of Bond's Aston, complete with gimmicks, became the best-selling English toy that year. These things matter.



Aston Martin Vantage N500 for Kilgour, special matt white edition styled by Carlo Brandelli & Peter Saville. Image courtesy of Aston Martin.

Ian Fleming's creation and all the ruthless thoroughness he applied to sinister foreign villains tormented the imagination of men and boys. Bond's sadism, sexism and alcoholism seemed refined when in a good suit. The car too suggested sophistication and class, as did the frozen vodka martini. After winning Le Mans in 1959, Aston Martin already had a prestige of its own, but Saltzman and Broccoli's epochal product placement sanctified the marque.

But there is more. If an idea of the English gentleman still exists, Aston Martin has a place in it: understated, well-mannered, exclusive. Bond's Aston was not a dramatically beautiful car in the way of its contemporary the Jaguar E-Type, nor was it unambiguous car porn like a '63 Chevrolet Corvette. Instead, rather as they say it should take you five minutes to realise someone is well dressed, it takes a moment to realise what a wonderful artistic composition a classic Aston Martin is.

The gentlemanly connection has for Aston an even more profound historic relevance, which is echoed and reflected in contemporary cars. Any car called a GT, or 'Gran Turismo', had to be fast but also comfortable, as well as being sufficiently elegant to impress the doorman at The Carlton Hotel. But while gran turismo might be Italian words (for 'grand tourer'), the idea was English. The Italians learnt about stylish travel from the 18th-century gap year when periwigged and powdered English milordi were sent to the Mediterranean to learn the art of life on The Grand Tour. This was the beginning of discretionary travel-for-pleasure. And even in today's obscene traffic conditions, a fine car reminds one of this dream of uninhibited movement.

All of today's Astons speak a design language established in 1958 with the Aston Martin DB4 (the predecessor of Bond's car). And the fascinating thing is, this car had a body designed by Italians: Carrozzeria Touring of Milan. To name an Italian coachbuilder 'Touring' was to repay the compliment given to Italy by those travelling aristocrats. We loved their country; they admired us for doing so. Just as Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* inspired the very creation of the English gentleman, so Touring's bodies for Aston Martin gave that idea unforgettable automobile form. It is these ideas of travel and the knot of English and Italian associations that power the ideas behind the Aston Martin.

Yet Aston's Englishness is not quite so straightforward. In fact, it is rather precarious. True, the company was founded in 1913 by Englishmen Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford, but soon there were exotics called Count Louis Zborowski and Augustus Bertelli in the driving seat. True again, after the Second World War (when it had

muddled through making joysticks for military aircraft) it was a Midlands gear manufacturer called David Brown who rescued the failing company for £30,000, but its famous six-cylinder engines of the Fifties and Sixties were designed by Tadek Marek who was born in Krakow. A 2008 collaboration with Kilgour's Carlo Brandelli confirmed dual connections with Italy and with Savile Row.

The beautiful bodies of today's Aston Martins are a continuation of the artistic assumptions made nearly 60 years ago by an Italian coachbuilder, with Henrik



Released in 1976, the futuristic Lagonda was striking in comparison to the rest of the Aston range, reflecting the company's progressive nature and aesthetic. *Image courtesy of Aston Martin.*

Fisker and Marek Reichman the chief interpreters. The handsome four-door Rapide is manufactured in Austria and Aston's glorious V-12s are derived from the engine of the Ford Mondeo (a hangover from the days when it was one of Dearborn, Michigan's trophy brands). Meanwhile, Aston's current boss is a German called Ulrich Bez, once head of R&D for Porsche, and there has been a recent announcement of a 'technical collaboration' with Mercedes-Benz. Better not forget either that it is largely owned by Kuwaitis.

But facts and symbols aren't really comparable. If my French friend had wanted a mere car, he could have bought a Peugeot. He chose an Aston Martin because such a car transports you in quite a different way.

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