

CLASSIC DRIVER

Bentley Continental GT Launch - London 15 Oct 02



London's Somerset House saw the official unveiling of Bentley's newest model; the magnificent Continental GT. Lights, music and action! To a fanfare of fireworks the covers are now off Britain's challenger in the 'Best Car in the World' stakes.

Classic Driver was there to report on what was just the start of an evening of fun for many of London's smart set which included not only members of Team Bentley, such as multiple Le Mans winner Derek Bell, and team principle Richard Lloyd, but also correspondents from Tatler, Vogue and Harpers & Queen to record the action.

Somerset House, overlooking the River Thames, has been a government building since the 16th century and is most notable for being the location of the Naval Board during Britain's great reign of the seas in the 19th century, and most recently the site of the General Register Office until finally vacated in the 1970s. A comprehensive restoration programme has now seen galleries such as the Courtauld, as well as the extraordinary Gilbert Collection now being housed there. In winter The Courtyard is transformed into an ice-rink – this year being sponsored by the 'UK+CH' programme between Switzerland and the UK.

Bentley clearly chose the location because it linked British tradition with artistic flair, qualities it is eager to stress in the new Continental GT, seen for the first time in the UK. When the Union Jack cover was lifted, the dry-ice cleared and bright lights dimmed, British journalists and potential buyers finally had a chance to look at the Crewe factory's car for the future. The first thing that strikes you is the compactness of the package; it's genuinely designed to be the one car in the household that will do everything the owner wants of it. Good 2 + 2 accommodation, four-wheel drive, phenomenal power and torque as well as a boot as big as the current Arnage's are big bonuses. These features, together with German build quality, will swing many buyers away from similarly priced Mercedes-Benz CL600s and Aston Martin DB7 V12s. The interior is modern, yet retains Bentley's keynotes, and resists the Audi TT 'styling for styling sake' drawbacks. As this was the only 'showroom' car available, Bentley were understandably reluctant to let people climb all over it, particularly the rear seats, although we were assured it could accommodate four adults.

The UK price has yet to be announced but a spokesman was able to say it would be "around 10% more than the equivalent Mercedes". Which makes it around the £110,000 mark when it is on sale next year.

This particular car is having a whirlwind tour of Europe, having arrived fresh from Paris in the morning it was to be transported direct to Le Mans that evening for a photo-shoot, before returning to the UK the following week for the British International Motorshow in Birmingham.

Just the sort of trip the Continental GT is designed for.

Report & Photos: Steve Wakefield





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