
New Bentley Arnage Drophead Coupé

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From Bentley's very earliest days, open-top cars have been an intrinsic part of the company's heritage. Over the decades that followed many revered convertible or 'drophead' models were created, both by notable Bentley coachbuilders such as Mulliner, Park Ward, and later 'in-house' at the company's Crewe headquarters.

From the 1955 Park Ward S1 Drophead Coupé, through the later Corniche and Continental eras, up to the magnificent Azure of 1995, an entire portfolio of unashamedly glamorous and wonderfully desirable cars meant that Bentley retained its reputation as the creator of the world's most elegant convertibles.

Now that reputation has grown once more with the unveiling of the new Bentley Arnage Drophead Coupé show car at the 2005 Los Angeles Auto Show. It is a true four-seater convertible for the 21st century: a unique blend of classic Bentley design and craftsmanship married to a high-technology platform sourced from the 2005 Model Year Arnage. As such, it is the perfect natural successor to the Bentley Azure, whose eight-year lifespan cemented the marque's status as the prime provider of four-seater convertibles to this sector of the market.

First and foremost, the design is unmistakably Bentley - it shares the same front end as the current Arnage range and its platform ensures it seats four adults in complete comfort. But it is also unmistakably unique. The entire cabin and rear section of the car are newly designed, with a stunning new interior that has been influenced by contemporary furniture design; the objective being to create an opulent and inviting seating area that reflects its status as a car that is at home in Palm Springs or the Riviera.

The Arnage Drophead Coupé show car is more than just a conceptual design study, however. Its unveiling in Los Angeles represents the culmination of a truly innovative development programme

that means the car is entirely production viable, as Bentley's chairman Dr Franz-Josef Paefgen explains:

"The 2005 Arnage range has been extensively re-engineered at significant cost and is a very modern, high-technology saloon. It is natural, therefore, that we would use this base to further our reputation as the pre-eminent builder of large, luxury convertibles in the world.

"We had such amazing success with the Bentley Azure, which has developed a cult following although production stopped in 2003. There's no reason why this new Arnage derivative couldn't fill the gap left by the Azure. If customer demand is there, it could go into production within a very short space of time - as early as Spring 2006."



Design

Bentley's design team cites the 1955 Park Ward S1 Drophead Coupé and 1995 Azure as its main influences for the Arnage Drophead Coupé show car. Like the '50s convertible, the car has a deep body with a single feature line that runs along both flanks and rises at the powerful rear haunches before spearing off at the rear of the car. Similarly, the Azure's fast and flowing roofline is echoed in the show car's stunning seven-bow canvas roof that gives the car such a visible sporting profile when raised.

"The Arnage Drophead Coupé is the latest in a long line of much-admired Bentley convertibles and we wanted to reflect that heritage as directly as possible," says Dirk van Braeckel, director of design, Bentley Motors. "The key to a four-seater convertible is that its grace and elegance is on display when the roof is down but it shouldn't lose any of that beauty when it is raised. We think we have struck that balance with the beautiful lines of the roof."

That objective was achieved, explains Bentley's head of exterior design Raul Pires by inclining the windscreen as far back as possible - the car is 35mm lower than an Arnage. "We have tried to make the roof look as 'fast' as we can," he says. "The result is a design that combines fluidity, sportiness and elegance."

A new rear boot section also helps to accentuate the contemporary feel of the new convertible. Prominent wheel arches grace a slender, narrowing boot that results in a 'horse shoe' trailing edge. This graceful shape is reminiscent of the first Crewe-built Bentley, the 1946 MK6, and the overall effect is a subtle nod to the power and performance that lies beneath the stunning Meteor Blue bodywork.

New LED rear tail-lamps use technology borrowed from the Continental GT coupé range; while a chrome surround echoes the Arnage front head-lamp units. Further brightwork is found in the form of chrome exhaust finishers and handcrafted chrome bumpers and sills that extend around the entire

car and sit alongside unique, six-spoke, 19-inch chrome-finished alloy wheels.



Of course, the nature of a convertible means that its interior is often on display as much as its exterior and the design team knew that the car's spacious cabin would need to make as big a statement as its stunning body. The decision was taken early on in the programme to design a rear-seat compartment that captures some of the exquisite feel and look of earlier Bentley convertibles.

"The S1 Drophead Coupé from 1955 had a wonderfully understated but luxurious interior," says Robin Page, head of interior design, Bentley Motors. "For example, the doors had simple armrests with a leather pad on them and we have reflected that in this car's hide-trimmed armrests that run the length of the cabin sides and appear to be suspended away from the door's actual surface.

"Similarly, we admired the fluted leather in earlier drophead Continentals and echoed that with the vast amounts of warm and inviting leather hide that extends past the seats and onto the parcel shelf, thereby emphasising the impressive dimensions of the rear compartment."

It's not only heritage that influenced the Arnage Drophead Coupé's look and feel. The interior design team appreciated the simplicity of the contemporary Peel chair created by Norwegian Olav Eldoy, who recognised that the swirling curve of a slice of orange peel could be the concept for a body-hugging seat. Those same principles are reflected in the curving rear seat and arm rest. For added atmosphere, indirect lighting casts a warm glow of light behind the door arm rests.

As in every Bentley, peerless craftsmanship is to the fore in the cabin. Beautiful Burr Oak veneers with a Boxwood inlay act as a counterpoint to the Cotswold and Nautic Blue leather while a wooden steering wheel with inlaid chrome rim is unique to the car.

Story/Photos - Bentley Motors

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