
Continental Travel: Driving the Legendary R Type Bentley

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Driving a car that cost £7000 in Great Britain's austerity-stricken early 50s is still an experience, 55 years later.

It's customary when describing these cars to trot out the usual 'most expensive car in the world', 'fastest saloon in the world', 'bought by the world's super-rich' descriptive phrases. That's not to say that they are irrelevant; simply that I think it's time to cut out the hyperbole, get 'underneath' the big Bakelite steering wheel, and spend some time on British public roads in an example that will be sold at the [RM Auctions 'Automobiles of London' Sale](#) later this month.

By chance (or careful plan, if truth be told), I'd arrived for the test in a new Bentley Continental GT Speed. The 600bhp car was utterly superb (you can read the full road test at a future date in Classic Driver), as you'd expect, but I experienced a frisson of excitement at the thought of a drive in an R Type 'Conti'.



In the tradition of Bentleys past and present, the car starts immediately and its 4566cc straight-six settles into the familiar 'wuffy', smooth - and very quiet on tickover - beat. When new, the engine produced 158bhp - a figure that may seem modest nowadays but at the time was more than enough for a 115mph maximum and 13.5sec 0-60mph.

Impressive performance, due in no small part to the streamlined alloy bodywork by H.J. Mulliner.

This car, beautifully finished in its original Mason's Black with Light Tobacco Connolly leather colour scheme, is a manual (right-hand gearchange) example with bucket seats - the most desirable combination. It has the optional wheel spats, too.



The wheel is large but well-suits the combination of tall cross-ply tyres and cam-and-roller steering box. The driver sits relatively tall 'in the saddle', surveying the exquisite marquetry of the dashboard, typical period instrumentation (to which Rolls-Royce and Bentley still pay homage) and the flying 'B' some distance away, atop the chrome radiator shell.

Yes, the car does 'shrink' around its driver. Once underway, all 5.25m of Sports Saloon (to use its correct title) presents no more of a problem on reasonably open public roads than did the latest

Bentley. The drum brakes require a little respect, and the steering is best treated as requiring constant input rather than expansive arm-twirling – its lock typical of the period.



The engine pulls well and endows the car with more than adequate acceleration. It's best at 2500–3500rpm, where the torque will allow the car to glide serenely along. I would say a touring holiday with sweeping A-roads taken at 70–80mph would be a pleasure, the compliant suspension in this well-sorted car working well on rougher Tarmac.

The gearchange is positive in the manner of the David Brown 4-speed. One of the fun aspects of the R Type is its low-down gearlever that requires the driver to bob his head while seeking the next ratio. Such is the flexibility of the engine, you don't really need to do this very much, but it's a characterful throwback to the days of the first external gearlevers, then early post-War designs. I really liked this.



The car is a four-seater and another nice touch in the cabin is the way the front seats simply fold back in a well-oiled fashion to allow access to the rear. The interior is full of lovely details such as the tiny chromed levers to operate the quarter-lights, the floor-mounted headlamp dipper and chromed passenger's grab-handle.

Just 208 R Type Bentley Continentals were built. Its successor, the S Type, was probably a better car and the rich and powerful were soon using private aeroplanes, as well as alternative machinery from Jaguar, Mercedes-Benz and Aston Martin.



As an 'of the era' motor car, the R Type Continental has no equals and continues to be one of the true greats. Having driven one, I can certainly see the attraction.

*The car tested is a **1953 Bentley R Type Continental Fastback**. It is estimated at £325,000 - 375,000 and is one of the leading entries in RM Auction's October 29th London Sale. You can see full details on this car [elsewhere on Classic Driver](#). The full 98-car entry can be viewed [HERE](#).*

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