

CLASSIC DRIVER

[Aston Martins at Millbrook - Includes Video](#)



You know what it's like: you've driven all the cars and think you know your way around a circuit, so what else is there to learn? Well, having had a day at Millbrook taking in many aspects of the Aston Martin Performance Driving Course, I'd say: "Rather a lot, actually".

When behind the wheel of a 400+bhp supercar, it's terribly tempting – and the motoring press is as guilty as anyone – to mash the accelerator, tearing up the road at a million miles an hour before arriving at a corner ('the braking test') which somehow has to be negotiated with minimum damage to the surrounding scenery.

Either as a journalist or a new owner, you are not concentrating and, let's be honest, not getting the best out of the lovingly engineered performance car.

This is where a little driver training comes in handy. Add into the equation the fact that you might still be undecided as to which model is best for you, a day behind the wheel of one of **Aston Martin's** latest cars on a safe, private track (for the very reasonable price of £1140.00 incl. VAT) makes a lot of sense.

Not only will it make you a better driver, as an existing owner it will show you exactly what your new pride and joy is capable of, and prospective buyers will discover much more about a modern **Aston** than any dealer demo down the by-pass.



I was invited to join an open day at **Aston Martin's new base at Millbrook**, the industry proving ground 30 minutes or so north of **Luton airport**, just off the M1. The stylish 'cabin' serves as a base for a day's activities which start at 09:30 and finish around 16:00. All refreshments, including a high-quality lunch, are served here – once you have passed through all the top-security stuff, it's a day of varied driving on the selection of road layouts **Millbrook** has to offer.

The idea behind the event was to give journalists a chance to drive all the cars in the range and have quality time with one of the experienced instructors who were there to explain the characteristics of each car, gently tutoring their pupils into better (and probably faster) driving.

First up was the **V12 Vantage**, a driver's car if ever there was one and my [transport to Le Mans this year](#). Having negotiated the baffling layout out of the facility (don't worry, you'll always have an instructor with you), it was time for a couple of runs down the **Mile Straight**. This not only proves how quick the **510bhp V12** is – very – it also provided useful practice on gear-changing, clutch control and (quite important, this one...) braking to 40mph for the banked corner at the end.



I next drove the [recently revised DB9](#). Now this was a classic 'Oh, I see!' experience as the expert patiently clicked the **Adaptive Damping System** in and out of **Sport** at just the right time. You really *can* feel it and, away from the hurly-burly of public roads, and on generally consistent road surfaces, it soon becomes clear exactly what the clever system is doing, and exactly when you should use which mode. In the **DB9** we also did the hands-off at 70mph and 100mph trick on the **Constant Speed Circuit**, or 'Bowl'.

Now, I have done this before. As a party piece it's great, and shows off the stability of the **big GT**, but it's not as impressive as winding the car effortlessly up to 130mph and holding it there for lap after lap. Hands 'on' I'm pleased to say – 130mph being the maximum permitted without helmets.



I'd also driven the famous **Hill Route** but never really gelled with it, finding it tricky to remember and tight.

Step forward **instructor Rich**, and the [Touchtronic DBS](#). After a few laps as both passenger and driver, trying various settings of suspension, and in and out of 'Auto', I felt I got to know it and the range-topping **V12** a lot better. I'm not saying I wouldn't get hopelessly lost again, just that it gradually lodges in your memory and the capabilities of the **DBS** come to the fore. Driving round in automatic, at a pretty constant speed, is just as demanding as banging it through the gears. And, I know, probably just as fast.

I was soon back on the **Hill** for my next ride: the **Rapide**. This is the first time I'd driven the four-door four-seater since [the February launch](#). We were soon rushing up hill and down dale like old friends – the size of the car seems to melt after just a mile or so of driving. With **Sport** engaged to heighten the throttle response, the car is no slouch and holds its own with the others. Very impressive.



Finally, it's time for the very latest car from **Gaydon**, [the V8 Vantage N420](#). Leaving the **Hill** and the **Mile Straight** well alone, I let my instructor give me a master class in the **Sportshift** semi-automatic transmission, its use and (possible) abuse. Yes, I knew about using the handy 'creep' facility up to 4mph, and just 'curling' your foot on upchanges, but '**Hypershift**'? Er, well, I might have read about it, I *suppose*, but tried it? No.

As **Hypershift** is used from the mid-5000s to over 7000rpm, you're going to be going at a hell of a lick to try it on the road. We employed it on the **Constant Speed Circuit** by banging down to third and then flooring the throttle, pulling back on the right-hand paddle when approaching maximum revs a couple of times, allowing the **Aston** up the banking and on to some 130mph runs.



It might sound aggressive, and mechanically unsympathetic, but it's what the engineers built the car for and it's smoother and quicker than normal. With the standard sports seats and taut suspension, for the money, a **Sportshift-equipped V8 Vantage N420** is some car.

And that was that; the fun was over and time to go home. To summarise: you don't use your own **Aston**, you just book the course and a matching **Aston Martin** will be available all day. There's no need to be a current **Aston Martin** owner, either: you can use the day simply to polish up your driving skills, have a day away from the office or – and I think this is best – as a prospective buyer to get to know the marque and model better.

I tried to visualise myself in that position, and of the cars driven that day (great machinery all) it was the **Rapide** that impressed most. Not 'the best', just an outstanding all-round package that got better and better the more I drove it. Have a look at the video, maybe read my words again, and don't tell me £1140.00 isn't a good investment when buying a new, **£100,000+ Aston Martin**.



For further information, see www.astonmartindrivingexperiences.com.

Postscript: I bumped into a good friend from Germany at the [Chelsea AutoLegends](#), just a few days after the **Millbrook** event. He, too, had completed the course with another mainland European Aston owner. He agreed it was invaluable, and made the very valid point that the one-to-one tuition means that you can, to a certain extent, 'tailor' the time to your needs. He certainly got his money's worth, being hardly out of the driving seat all day.

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Photos/Video: Aston Martin

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