

1931 Bentley 8 Litre

- Lot sold
USD 728 604 - 850 038
GBP 600 000 - 700 000 (listed)
Year of manufacture 1931
- **Chassis number** YM 5042
- **Number of seats** 2
- **Drivetrain** 2wd
- **Lot number** 349
- **Drive** LHD
- **Condition** Used
- **Location** 
- **Fuel type** Petrol
- **Exterior colour** Other
- **Engine number** YM 5042
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Description

1931 Bentley 8-Litre Sports
Registration no. KJ 3154
Chassis no. YM 5042
Engine no. YM 5042

Although the prevailing image of Bentley cars during the vintage Cricklewood period of the company's life is that of out-and-out sports cars and fast tourers, it is often overlooked that W O Bentley made a determined bid for the carriage trade, particularly with his larger 4-, 6- and 8-Litre models, and it is largely because of this that Napier's bid for the company in 1931 was thwarted by Rolls-Royce, which doubtless saw that a rejuvenated Bentley company would present strong competition to their own models.

As it is, only 100 examples of the 8-Litre model had been produced before bankruptcy overtook the original Bentley company, but had they been in a stronger financial position it might well have been a different story. The chassis price of the 8-Litre Bentley at £1,850 was in direct competition with the Rolls-Royce Phantom II, allied with better performance, and the contemporary motoring press was lavish with its praise for the 8-Litre model. The latter had debuted at the 1930 London Motor Show and was the largest-engined car made in the UK at that time and arguably the fastest. Bentley's advertising claimed '100mph without noise' and tests bore out that claim, the 8-Litre being fully capable of the 'ton' even when burdened with weighty formal coachwork. As W O Bentley himself said: 'I have wanted to produce a dead silent 100mph car, and now I think we have done it.'

The world's fastest production chassis at the time of its introduction, the 8-Litre represents an evolutionary

step in the development of the vintage Bentley, combining proven features of the 6½-Litre model with the latest engineering advances. Rather than trying to extract more power from the existing 6½-Litre engine, W O Bentley followed his long-preferred method of improving performance and simply enlarged it, increasing the bore size from 100 to 110mm. Although the 8-Litre's engine followed conventional Bentley practice, its gearbox - designated 'F-type' - was radically different from its predecessors, the redesign having been necessitated by the greatly increased power and torque it was required to transmit, as well as the quest for silence.

The massive chassis frame likewise was entirely new, being of the 'double drop' design that enabled overall height to be reduced and the centre of gravity lowered, these aims also dictating the use of a hypoid-bevel rear axle. Seven tubular cross members resulted in a much stronger and less flexible frame than hitherto, which was available in a choice of wheelbases: 12' or 13'. Revised suspension incorporating longer road springs, out-rigged at the rear, together with Bentley & Draper shock absorbers made for increased smoothness and stability, both vital considerations when designing a large and weighty vehicle capable of three-figure speeds. The 8-Litre's steering and braking systems also featured numerous detail improvements.

'Motoring in its very highest form,' eulogised The Autocar in December 1930, having recorded a top speed of 101.12mph in W O Bentley's own saloon-bodied 8-Litre over the half-mile. Between 1930 and 1939, Britain's foremost motoring magazine bettered that figure only once, while testing an Alfa Romeo 8C 2300. The 8-Litre was destined to remain the fastest production Bentley until the R-Type Continental's arrival in 1953.

Completed in September 1931 and the 62nd of the 100 type produced, Bentley 8-Litre chassis number 'YM 5042', complete with F-type gearbox number '8068', was delivered to leading London coachbuilder Freestone & Webb for bodying as an enclosed limousine. Factory records show that the car was built on the longer (13') wheelbase chassis to 'our own body order'. However, one unusual feature was the hinged door in the back of the body, supposedly for the accommodation of a passenger in a bath chair, which presumably was incorporated at the request of the original owner, Mr John Russell of Parrock Manor, Gravesend. 'YM5042' was delivered via Bentley agents Lion Garage of Gravesend, Kent and first registered 'KJ 3154'. The only other owner listed in the pre-war factory records is Harold Lewis Good (1939).

After the war, 'YM5042' was owned by a J Ellis in 1949 followed by Billie North (1953), R H Owthwaite (1955), Major F R Ingham (1959 and P S Petrie of Cross-in-Hand, Sussex (1960). In 1966 Mr Petrie took the Bentley to Hofmann & Burton of Henley-on-Thames, one of the leading marque specialists of the day, and asked them to rebuild it as a copy of another 8-Litre, 'YM5047', which had recently been rebuilt by H&B with an open sports body on a shortened chassis with lowered bulkhead and radiator. 'YM5042' was duly modified in similar manner, the chassis being shortened by 18" to a wheelbase of 11' 6" and the bulkhead and radiator shortened. To maintain cooling area, the original dynamo was dispensed with and replaced with a modern one driven off the clutch shaft. The Autovac and Tecalemit chassis lubrication system were removed also. Two later SU carburettors were fitted on the original manifold, fed by an electric fuel pump. High-ratio crown-wheel-and-pinion sets not being available for the 8-Litre, a Speed Six-type differential from chassis number 'LR2782' was installed, this being a not uncommon modification among shortened 8-Litres. A new four-seater open body in Vanden Plas style was made and modern electrics and Marchal headlights fitted. Most of the instruments were replaced. It is not known who commissioned the two-seater body currently fitted, which is believed to date from the 1970s. The 8-Litre's history and detailed specification are dealt with in greater depth by the typically thorough 22-page illustrated report compiled for the vendor in November 2013 by marque authority Clare Hay, which includes copies of the factory records, registration particulars, correspondence and period photographs (perusal recommended). For the last several years the Bentley has been on static display in a significant European museum collection and will require re-commissioning before returning to the road.

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