

# CLASSIC DRIVER

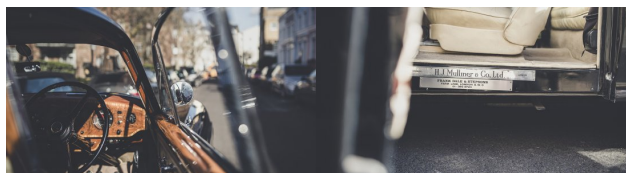
## Preparing to go Continental, by flying 'B'

### Lead

Simon de Burton considers the Continent – and the folk who live on the other side of le Tunnel sous la Manche – from the seat of a rather special Bentley R Type Continental. And then takes £1m of motor car into the tight and crowded streets of... London. Well, he feels more at home here.

There was a time when 'the Continent' really meant something to us Brits. It conjured images of the exotic, with 'continental quilts' instead of our weighty old blankets; 'continental breakfasts' instead of eggs and bacon – and 'continental habits', of which we sometimes didn't approve. But now, in the age of the 'Tunnel sous la Manche' and budget airlines that will get you to Cannes for less than the price of half a tank of petrol, much of the glamour has been lost from the idea of 'going abroad'.

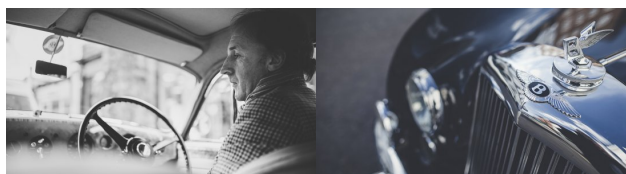
### An event steeped in glamour



Back in the day, a motor car jaunt to Europe (which is what people *really* meant by 'the Continent') was an event steeped in glamour – so much so, that Bentley even created a car specifically for the purpose in the form of the [R Type Continental](#) with deliciously sweeping, Mulliner bodywork terminating in a pair of wind-tunnel-developed rear fins.

Designed specifically for the long, straight roads of France, the R Type Continental featured a high-ratio axle for rapid and relaxed touring – and was claimed to be the world's fastest production four-seater.

### 1950s elegance in 2015 traffic



But how does an R Type Continental cut the mustard in the 21st Century? In order to find out, we took one out and about in the streets of London on a whimsical journey based on the idea that we really had turned back time and were making preparations for just the sort of trip for which the car was originally intended.

And this was not just any R Type Continental, either, but the very car which, since the early 1970s, has been part of the permanent fleet of top [Rolls-Royce and Bentley specialist Frank Dale and Stepsons](#). One of just 208 R Type Continentals built, it was the 1954 Geneva Salon car and spent the early part of its life in the hands of a prominent Swiss owner.

A 'D' series car, it boasts the larger, 4.9-litre, straight-six engine mated to a manual gearbox. Lightweight seats, Wilmot-Breeden bumpers, a high-speed cooling fan and a speedometer calibrated in km/h (despite its right-side steering wheel) allude to this being a true Continent-crossover – and it was an absolute honour to be entrusted to drive it.

### First port of call

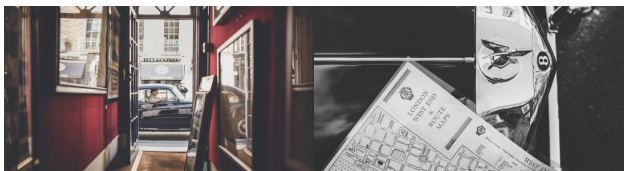


Having become accustomed to stroking the large and imposing Continental through the early morning London traffic, we made our first port of call the excellent [Map House](#) in genteel Beauchamp Place, Knightsbridge – London’s oldest specialist antiquarian map-seller which was founded in 1907 as a supplier of maps to collectors, explorers, aviators and, of course, motorists.

### The days before motorways



The delightful manageress, Jessie Hex Fahy (fabulous name), really entered into the spirit of our little game, sourcing some exquisite motoring maps from the days when ‘motorways’ simply didn’t exist. And we were especially taken by the clever road map system contained within a nifty, Bakelite box which kept everything in perfect order – far more stylish than any sat nav.



From there, we shimmied across town enjoying the Continental’s silky-smooth engine (if not, so much, its lorry-like steering) before Classic Driver editor Joe Breeze calmly informed me we were next headed for the chaos of Portobello Road, which is famous for its street market – and for its already narrow street being flanked by numerous stalls and invariably packed with people.

### Watch those wings...





Not an ideal place for £1 million-worth of historic Bentley, perhaps, but we made it through unscathed and even squeezed ourselves down a side street to peruse the wares of [Henry Gregory Antiques](#), a fascinating emporium of eclectic offerings. The shop is especially well known for its vintage luggage, and it was truly impressive to see just how many large pieces the Continental's boot (far more capacious than that of the standard steel saloon) could effortlessly swallow.



Similar fare is on offer at '[Fine and Vintage](#)', which is to be found at Portobello's stall 24 - and where you can also buy any amount of evocative sporting kit from days gone by.

### It's not cricket



We contemplated a lovingly oiled cricket bat from the same era as the Bentley. But then sense prevailed - after all, the continentals don't 'do' cricket, do they?

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Gallery







































































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