

CLASSIC DRIVER

This Works Coachbuilt Aston Martin was Newport Pagnell's last hurrah

Lead

Just eight of these magnificent V8 Vantage Volante Special Editions were built by Aston Martin's Special Projects skunkworks at the turn of the new millennium to unofficially bid farewell to Newport Pagnell and close a long chapter of the British brand's properly coachbuilt cars...

Right around this time, a select few extraordinarily wealthy individuals will be visiting Aston Martin's factory in Gaydon to spec their Valkyries, the revolutionary 1000bhp hypercar developed in collaboration with the Red Bull Racing Formula 1 team.



No doubt those very individuals will marvel at Gaydon's slick sandstone façade, the audaciously specified latest models dotted around the site, the company's live share price whirling around the lobby, and the virtual-reality technology that allows them to sit in and look around their new cars before they've been built. And rightfully so - it is very impressive.

Twenty years ago, Aston Martin was a very different company - one that, in the face of threatening new industry trends and legislation, had held firmly onto the principles of quality and bespoke craftsmanship Lionel Martin had established decades before.



Even now, many don't realise that even the very last V8 models to leave Newport Pagnell in the very early 2000s were properly coachbuilt. Skilled men in long coats welded chassis on jigs, beat body panels with hammers, stitched Connolly leather, and assembled engines entirely by hand. Suffice to say, soya flat whites were not served in the staff canteen.

It's a common belief that the brutish Vantage Le Mans V600 was Newport Pagnell's final flourish, but in fact, it wasn't. That honour goes to the stunning convertible you're eyeing here: the Aston Martin V8 Vantage Volante Special Edition.





For whatever reason, Aston had never offered the elegant drop-top V8 with the destructively powerful twin-supercharged 550 and 600 engines from the coupé. But the thought of a limited run of high-performance Volantes was difficult to resist for the Special Projects Division, which had already built a number of wild customised cars for the likes of the Sultan of Brunei. It was also running out of time, after all, with Aston's impending move to Gaydon.

With the seeds sewn, Special Projects' Steve Bolton and Shaun Rush approached Aston's most loyal and enthusiastic customers to gauge their interest. Despite the hefty £230,000 base price, eight buyers were found for these last-of-the-line specials.



Knowing that these eight cars would be among the very last cars built at Newport Pagnell, Works Service took special care to ensure they would be the absolute pinnacle of the 30-year-old V8 range of models, with regards to both unparalleled quality and earth-shattering performance.

As with the legendary DB4GT Zagatos from the 1960s, each of the V8 Vantage Volante Special Editions was subtly different, built to the exact specification of its original owner. This particular right-hand-drive example, the fifth of the eight, was ordered by one Ron Collier, as shown in the beautifully presented certificate and book documenting the car's build and delivery in July of 2000.



Delivered as a V550 and subsequently upgraded by Works to V600 spec, the Rolls-Royce Royal Blue convertible foregoes the sporty V600 Le Mans addenda as found on some of its Special Edition siblings. Its Parchment Hide interior is among the most beautifully crafted and comfortable we've ever had the pleasure of sitting in. Even with the roof down, the rich scent of Connolly hide permeates the air.

Talk about a Jekyll and Hyde personality – someone once described these blown Astons as 200mph living rooms, and they couldn't have been more right. Once you're on the move, the car is both extremely comfortable and miraculously fast. Slot the ultra-short-throw gear lever into second and squeeze the throttle as hard as you dare, and the small of your back is squeezed with such ferocity that you don't so much as drive it as hold on. It beggars belief for a two-tonne luxury Grand Tourer.





Whereas today's Aston Martins are designed to hold their own in the company of ultra-flashy Lamborghinis and Ferraris, the Astons of the Newport Pagnell era were subtle by definition – they screamed old money and appealed to an altogether different customer base.

They weren't necessarily better or worse, just different. And while we might not have appreciated these old-school mammoths at first, the benefit of hindsight and an increasingly automated automotive industry have revealed them for what they are: impossibly luxurious and abundantly powerful hand-built Grand Tourers that define an era of Aston Martin no one should be allowed to forget. And this particular car, Newport Pagnell's unofficial last hurrah, is arguably the most magical of them all.

Photos: Robert Cooper for Classic Driver © 2019

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