

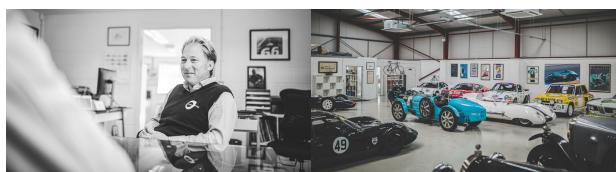
CLASSIC DRIVER

History's greatest racing cars reign supreme at William l'Anson Ltd

Lead

In historic motorsport circles, there are few specialists as immersed in the scene and experienced as William l'Anson Ltd. We visited the company's fabulous new Cotswolds home, where everyone from humble enthusiasts to hardcore historic racers is bound to find enlightenment...

It's a glorious late-summer day in the heart of the Cotswolds, the soft, amber sunlight miraculously managing to make the sprawling countryside and quaint chocolate-box villages even more beautiful than they already are. It's the kind of day classic motoring was made for, which is why we've paid a visit to William l'Anson, the long-time classic and competition car specialist and dyed-in-the-wool motorsport devotee.



Over the last nine years, he's carved a niche for sourcing and selling predominantly ultra-significant historic single-seaters, sports-racing cars and Bugattis, which is of little surprise given his upbringing. l'Anson's father Richard founded [Tula Engineering](#), one of the first British companies specialising in the restoration of Grand Prix Bugattis, and William grew up on the racetracks of Europe among the original historic racing fraternity. In fact, one of the first cars he ever drove – underage, admittedly – was a 1920s Bugatti Brescia!

"I grew up immersed in the world in the world of pre-War Bugattis and historic racing," explains l'Anson as we wander slack-jawed around his new showroom near Cirencester, which is filled with the most beautifully diverse selection of classic road and race cars. He stops at [a magical Bugatti Type 35](#) that we learn was sold new to Sir Malcolm Campbell in 1926 and whose extraordinary patina oozes history and character. "There are wonderful photos from when I was a child at VSCC race meetings when my father was running Bugattis and ERAs – there was a whole gang of us which grew up together and racing really got under my skin."



l'Anson's original plan was to study engineering and follow in the footsteps of his father. But as he so casually puts it, he "got side-lined by sailing" and spent 11 years racing yachts instead – competing for a British team in the America's Cup is still among his proudest achievements. A short spell at Bonhams followed, as did a longer one working together with his fellow Cotswolds-based specialist Martin Chisholm, but setting up his own shop was always the goal and fortunately, by that point, a natural progression.

"Because of my upbringing and resultant knowledge, a lot of pre-War Bugattis came our way when I started the business, but because I was racing a lot myself by that point, there were also many 1950s sports car and single-seaters," continues l'Anson. "Not everybody wanted to take them on because there's so much research involved. But I'm a great believer in and massively passionate about motorsport and getting our teeth sunk in is all part of the fun – these are fabulous and hugely important cars and if you've got the opportunity to sell them, they deserve to be presented in the best possible way."





The ex-Works BRM P578 that took Richie Ginther to joint-second in the 1963 Formula 1 World Championship; the ex-Brumos Racing Porsche 911 Carrera 2.8 RSR in which Hurley Haywood and Peter Gregg won the 1973 Sebring 12 Hours; and the mythical Lister-Jaguar Flat Iron that taught a young Jim Clark so much about sports car racing. They're just a small number of the ultra-special and historically significant racing cars I'Anson has sold in the last nine years, a testament to his and his team's passion, respect and attention to detail.

And because the demand for such cars has risen exponentially in recent years, I'Anson has relocated to a discreet new purpose-built facility and encompassed Bespoke Competition Storage, his new storage and maintenance offshoot that's housed on-site and overseen by his talented young technician Alec Griffiths. "The business has simply demanded more space - we've often got between 15-18 cars in stock, and as we have more and more clients actively racing and we're selling more modern, larger cars such as the big ground-effect Formula 1 cars from the 1980s, space is a valued commodity!"



It's time for lunch. On days like this, only a pub garden will do so we commandeer two cars from the showroom - a beautifully restored AC Ace Bristol and a [Pioneer-liveried Ferrari 308 GTB](#) fastidiously built to Group 4 specification. Because rally car. Over lunch, we want to find out just why demand has risen so much for the cars with which I'Anson deals. "I think it's been driven by the ever-growing number of events," he comments. "When I was a child, the races to be in were those for pre-War ERAs and Bugattis. There's so much more you can do with these cars now than you could then- take the Tour Auto, Le Mans Classic and Goodwood Revival, for example. You only had to look at the grids and the grandstands at Goodwood a few weeks ago to see the appetite and enthusiasm."



Duality is a big factor nowadays claims I'Anson and sports cars such as the [BMW 3.0 CSL 'Batmobile'](#) and [Porsche 911 3.0 RS](#) in his showroom, which can be enjoyed on road rallies, on the concours field and at traditional circuit events, are particularly desirable. He is reminded of a trip he made to the States to take part in the Colorado Grand with a client and his Aston Martin DB3S. "We were having breakfast one morning when some other guys were saying how we *had* to go and do the Copperstate 1000," he recalls. "I told the owner I knew some people in Arizona, so we decided to do it and shipped the car there."

"After the rally, the owner transported the car to Seattle to do the Pebble Beach Tour d'Elegance and then I raced it in the Rolex Monterey Motorsports Reunion at Laguna Seca. He then drove a thousand miles in Montana and contested one other rally before flying the car home. There are fun events everywhere and getting out and enjoying these cars is the way it should be. The nice thing about them is that they've always been an enthusiast's commodity, which means they're less perceptible to fluctuations in the market."





l'Anson places great importance on the fact he and his long-time colleague Ben Mitchell put their money where their mouths are and race themselves as much as possible. Just a few weeks back at the Goodwood Revival, Mitchell was out in both the Fordwater Trophy with l'Anson's MG B and the Glover Trophy with the 1965 Lola T60. He drove a brilliant race in the latter, claiming third overall ahead of much more powerful machinery.

"While I don't get out as much as I used to, I encourage Ben to race as much as possible," says l'Anson. "It's so important for us to race because if you're selling a competition car and someone asks what it's like, you're then entirely qualified to tell them." It also allows them to expertly guide their clients to help them achieve their goals, whether it's fulfilling a childhood dream of racing at Le Mans or winning historic Formula 1 races.



Looking forward, l'Anson and his team are striving to find the many great road and racing cars they believe are still out there and effectively communicate their histories and significance. And you can bet that they'll be at Rétromobile in February doing just that - l'Anson invests a lot of time and effort into the Parisian season-opener, citing it as an event at which they can put interesting cars in front of *all* the biggest international collectors.

"Nothing makes us prouder than when we find a special car, research and present its history, sell it to a great new home and then see it out in action at events," he concludes. "It's a privilege to walk around the showroom every morning, coffee in hand, and get stuck into these cars that are so intrinsically linked with motorsport's most famous faces and, ultimately, that I'd love to call my own."

Photos: Robert Cooper for Classic Driver © 2019

Gallery

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