

European Classics A-Z: Aston Martin: Designed By Racers



By John Ossenfort

In 1913, Lionel Martin and Robert Bamford began building, selling and racing a few competition cars in London, using Isotta-Fraschini chassis and Coventry-Simplex engines. After several successes at the popular Aston Clinton hill climb, they began calling their cars “Aston Martins”.

After the First World War, Aston Martins were successful in setting several records at Brooklands and were entered in the French Grand Prix. But financial difficulties forced the sale of the company in 1926. The new owners renamed the company “Aston Martin Motors Ltd.” One of the owners was A.C. (Bert) Bertelli, who became technical director and designer for the classic period cars and raced the cars as well; his brother, Harry Bertelli, built most of the bodies.



1929 Aston Martin International

Bertelli’s 1 ½-liter engine used a chain-driven overhead cam with wedge-shaped combustion chambers and a dry sump lubrication system. A new two-seater body with external exhaust pipes, dubbed the “International”, was built, and a separate transmission and rear axle worm drive allowed the low-slung bodywork. Bertelli raced the car at Le Mans in 1931, when it placed fifth, and again in 1932,



1932 Aston Martin Le Mans two-seater

when he won the Biennial Cup. A 90 mph 2/4-seater tourer, renamed the Le Mans, and a few 2- and 4-door saloons and a 4-door sports coupe on a longer chassis were made available to the public, although the Le Mans tourers were sold competition-ready.



Above: 1934 Aston Martin Mark II Long Chassis Sports Saloon

Below: 1934 Aston Martin Mark II Short Chassis Tourer



In 1934, the engine was redesigned for even more power and reliability. A Mark II chassis carried the 2/4 seater bodywork, an open 4-seater Le Mans Special, a saloon, and the top of the line Ulster two-seater, with a streamlined tail and a top speed above 100 mph. An Ulster (named after the Ulster Tourist Trophy race in Northern Ireland) set the Le Mans record in 1935, and the mark set lasted for 15 years.



Top: 1937 Aston Martin 2-Litre 2/4-seater Sports
 Middle: 1937 15/98 2-litre Short Chassis Drophead Coupe by Abbotts



Above and below: 1934 Aston Martin Ulster two-seater



1935 marked the beginning of a change towards more production-oriented cars. The Ulster became a production model and a 4-seater Ulster was added. Compression ratio on the engine was now 7.5:1.

In 1936 the engine displacement was increased to 1950 cc., giving more low-speed torque for better street driving. These 2-liter cars were sold as the 15/98 saloon and 4-seater and the Speed model racer until production stopped in 1939. After the war, David Brown purchased the company and began the modern line of DB Aston Martins, made even more famous by the James Bond films.

Despite the numerous model names of the classic Astons, production was very limited; only about 700 pre-war cars were ever built. All Aston Martins from 1927 to 1939 are CCCA Full Classics®. There are only 8 cars listed in the 2009 CCCA Handbook, and none of these are from the Arizona Region.

