



Gently Bentley?

Bentley has a new fan after **Andrew Charman** takes to the track

The trouble with Bentleys is that many people still see them as poor-man's Rolls-Royces. And it is as a result of Bentley's efforts to show its true side that I recently found myself on a windswept airfield in the English Midlands, stitching leather steering wheels, firing £55,000 shotguns and spinning £115,000 cars.

First, some history – for many years the Bentley marque was actually owned by Rolls, and its once great heritage steadily diluted by models that were basically Rolls-Royces with different badges. The revival began in the 1980s, when Rolls bosses slowly switched on to the possibilities around the name that they owned. For while back in the early days of motoring Rolls-Royce had been founded on a platform of the most luxury vehicles around, Bentley's early history was one yes of

luxury but principally high performance – in the 1930s the company dominated the famed Le Mans 24 Hours race, winning it five times.

Some of that image was belatedly restored with new models, commencing with the Mulsanne Turbo of 1982, but the watershed came at the end of the millennium, and thanks to somewhat shady business dealing. Owner of both marques, Vickers, put them up for sale in 1998, and German car making giant Volkswagen thought it was buying them both. What it actually got was the Crewe factory where the cars were made, the Bentley name and the rights to use that of Rolls-Royce for just over four years – the long-term rights to Rolls had actually been snapped up by VW's German rival BMW, thanks to the badge actually being owned by aero engine maker Rolls-Royce PLC, and not Rolls-

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Royce Motors.

So in 2003 Rolls-Royce became a separate BMW-owned company, relocated to a brand new factory in southern England and making the new Phantom, the most enormous, in-your-face luxury car one could imagine. Back at Crewe, VW soon overcame its disappointment and Bentley felt the benefit of more than £500 million of investment. The immediate results have been two new cars far closer to the marque's tradition – a stunning coupe dubbed the Continental GT and launched in 2003, and two years later a saloon sister, the Continental Flying Spur. A convertible, the GTC, is coming soon, and these three models emphasise Bentley's core values of luxury combined with serious pace – underneath the sumptuous leather and walnut interiors sit W12 engines of six litres pumping out more than 550 horses.

Bentley's image renewal has even included a successful return to Le Mans, securing victory number six in 2003. But the emphasis on the sporting credentials can never be slackened – after all the Queen still rides around in Bentley limousines. Which is why on a cold Spring morning your correspondent found himself at a windswept airfield just up the road

from Silverstone racing circuit, ready to enjoy "The Bentley Experience."

The aim of such events is to bring over to a specially-invited audience the wide-ranging meaning of Bentley ownership – and not all of those present would know. While my fellow participants included some Bentley owners, there were also those arriving at the wheel of Mercedes, BMW and other upmarket badges – all targeted as potential Bentley buyers if they could be shown what the cars are all about, and what they can do.

The day starts with an introduction, a brief history of Bentley, and the historical aspect is further emphasised by the presence of a trio of heritage cars, pre-war examples ready to take one out for an insight into Bentley ownership in the 1930s. Tucked into the back seat, ensconced in blankets and looking somewhat like Mr Toad with flying helmet on, the overwhelming impression is how cold motoring was in such times.

Back under cover and a warming coffee offers time to learn about another aspect of Bentley – the fact that even in the 21st century much of the car is still hand-built. Present are craftsmen from the Crewe factory floor, demonstrating the skills that go into transforming quality wood veneers into dashboards and door trims that would not look out of place as furniture in one's home. Another table groans under the weight of leather hide, and one can even try hand-stitching a leather steering wheel. Your correspondent worries that presented with such photographic evidence Mrs C will never again sew a button back onto a shirt...





A demonstration of Bentley craftsmanship

Bentley ownership suggests a certain standing, an appreciation of the finer things in life, and on this day this is emphasised by an added attraction – clay pigeon shooting, but not with any old shotgun. No, these clays are targeted by exquisite Purdey firearms, like Bentleys also hand-made, each taking two years and costing around £50,000... Having fired my first ever shots, and actually hit some clays, I imagine a future second session. The instructor will say "Have you shot before?" and I'll reply; "Only with a Purdey..."

Naturally drives around the countryside in the current model range are included in the activities, but the piece

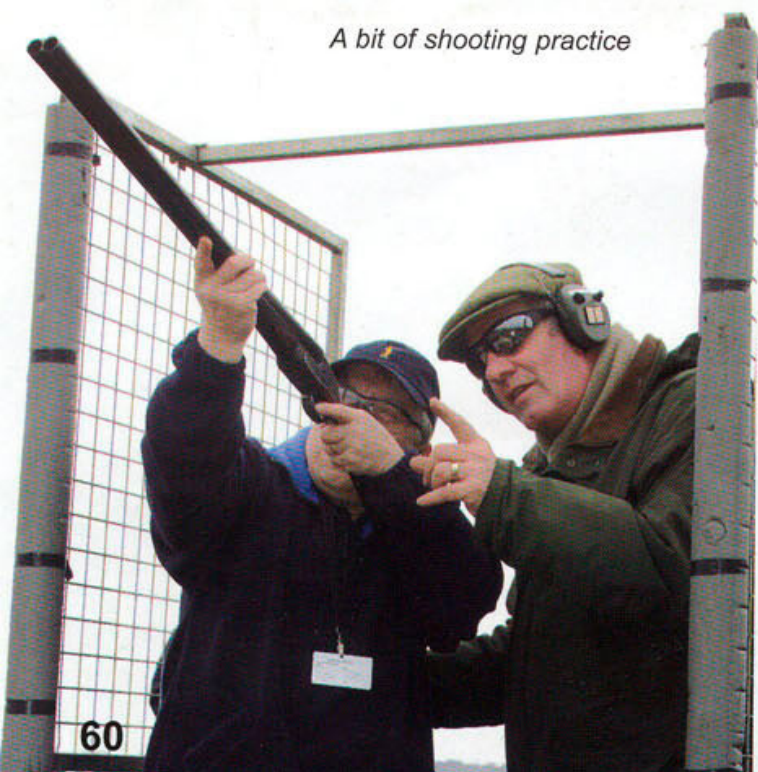
de resistance, the part of the day that will open the eyes most, is reserved for the airport runway. It is here that the 'Dynamic Drive' takes place, basically ritual abuse of Bentleys. One gets to perform a high-speed lane change, negotiate a slalom course, brake in an emergency from in excess of 80mph... Now in my long career as a motoring journalist I've done many of these exercises (I reckon I'm a dab hand at slalom courses) but never have I attempted such manoeuvres in two and a half tonnes of car worth some £115,000.

It's a humbling experience, especially when my instructor (who by the way are all accomplished race and rally drivers – mine was off the following week to race a single seater at 200mph on an American speedway) makes me turn off the Continental's stability control, thus deliberately inducing a high-speed, tyre-smoking spin. It's a horrifying yet oddly exhilarating experience, but crucially it achieves the aim – I come away realising that Bentleys really are high performance machines, blowing their rivals away with ease while cossetting their occupants in sheer opulence.

Short of those six numbers coming up on a Saturday night or a very lucky run on the roulette table I won't ever become a Bentley owner, but as someone who has always placed most importance on what a car can do, rather than what it feels like to travel in, I never imagined myself wanting to own a Bentley – until I was treated to the Bentley experience... **CL**



A bit of shooting practice



"Mr. Toad braves the elements"

