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£5000 GT GIANTS: FERRARI vs ASTON



The best of the late fifties Italian styling - Aston DB4 and Ferrari 250GTE

GRAN TURISMO

If you want to know that the initials 'GT' really mean, get behind the wheel of an Aston Martin DB4 or a Ferrari GTE - that's what Mike McCarthy did...

"We've never had it so good" quoth Mr Harold MacMillan, and indeed the late fifties and early sixties could well be called the golden age of popular sports car motoring. It was the era of the Austin Healey 3000, the Triumph TR 3 and 4, the E-type Jaguar, and the two models that form the subject of this back-to-back comparison, the DB Aston Martin and the 250 GT Ferrari.

The latter pair in particular represented then, as they do now, the very epitome of all that was best in high performance motoring, and they did so in a way that brought out the character of their respective countries of origin. The Aston was solid British tradition (the phrase 'bulldog breed' springs to mind), the Ferrari, Italian brio, all pistons and valves and complexities clothed, as was customary, in bodywork of surpassing beauty.

The Aston Martin story really starts with the introduction of the DB2 in 1950, when W.O. Bentley's 2.6-litre twin ohc engine was married to Claude Hill's DB1 chassis (suitably modified) and the ensemble fitted with a sleek, pretty two-seater coupé body. This was followed by the DB2/4 which was an occasional four-seater, and two variants, a hardtop and drophead, were added to the range, which in 1957 became the Mk III, with a new nose, more power - and more weight.

To say that the introduction of the DB4, in October 1958, was sensational is putting it mildly. The initial impact was visual: the body shape was Italian styling at its best, with not a line out of place. Touring of Milan had excelled himself, combining Italian flair with a DB3S-based grille, to produce an Anglo-Italian hybrid that is still a head-turner. Nor was it just a pretty face. The chassis was a platform-type device, strong but light. Onto this the body was

built using Touring's 'Super-leggera' (super-light) principles, whereby small diameter tubes formed the outline of the body and the skin panels were attached to these.

The front suspension was by wishbones and coil springs, the rear by a live axle, located by trailing links and a Warts linkage, and suspended on coils. Transmission and steering gear were by David Brown, A-M's parent company, and there were disc brakes at each corner.

Under the bonnet was a brand-new engine. It was a straight six with twin overhead camshafts, but there any resemblance with previous production A-M engines ended. The bore and stroke were 92mm, giving a capacity of 3670cc, and a power output of 240bhp (net) at 5500rpm, sufficient to propel this hefty (27.5cwt) car at uncommonly high speeds. Maximum, depending on rear axle ratio, was around the 140mph mark, while the 0-60mph time varied



Typical British outlook - Aston DB4

from about 7.5 seconds to 9.5 seconds, averaging out at, not surprisingly, about 8.5 seconds. Fuel consumption, if you were interested, was in the mid to high teens. To go with this straight-line performance was roadholding and handling that was rated variously as 'sheer joy', 'excellent', 'matching its superlative performance', and 'without compromise'. There were one or two cautionary words, however: reading between the lines, you get the opinion that the handling was for those with extrovert tastes, who liked to hang the tail out. *The Motor* summed it up by saying that: 'It was a lot easier to slide the tail or induce wheelspin when road surfaces were wet', but then immediately qualified this by saying that 'bad weather did not show up any vices of the race-bred chassis'. Anyone who has watched the bevy of DB4/5/6 Astons at play on a race track at a typical AMOC race meeting will know that lurid, tail-out slides are one of the delights of this model!

Some 1100 DB4s were made between 1958 and 1963. Apart from the base model there was the convertible, the Vantage (with a more powerful engine and faired-in headlamps) and the fabulous short wheelbase, twin-plug 300bhp DB4 GT, a few of which were bodied by Zagato, and which has to be one of the cult cars of the period. Remember Moss, Salvadori, Ireland *et al* tyre-squealing these cars round Goodwood...?

Ferrari's first four-seater

Just as the DB4 was significant to Aston Martin in that it represented the 'second generation' David Brown Aston Martin, so the 250 GTE was a significant model in Ferrari history: it was the first genuine production four-seater from Maranello.

The background of the 250GTE is far more complex than that of the DB4, mainly because in the early years of the marque Ferrari produced new models at the drop of a hat, bodied by a bewildering variety of coachbuilders, and with assorted engine capacities. Fortunately Antoine Prunet, in his excellent book *'The Ferrari Legend: The Road Cars'*, pinpointed the birth of the 'heart of the legend' when he said, 'The year 1954 was a very important milestone in the history of the Ferrari automobiles, for it was at that time that the 250 Granturismo was launched. In the approximately ten years of its career, the 250GT... played a major role in the growth of the Maranello firm, and assured for it a truly worldwide reputation.'

The heart of any Ferrari is its engine, and that of the 250GT was no exception. It was, naturally, a V12, with single overhead camshafts per bank. Cylinder dimensions were 75x58.8mm (bore x stroke), giving a capacity near enough 3-litres, and an individual cylinder volume of 250cc, hence the designation. It produced 240bhp at 7000rpm in road-going form, remarkably close to that of the Aston. Suspension was by wishbones and coils at the front and a live rear axle with leaf springs, located by trailing arms, at the back. The chassis was a welded tubular steel affair. This, then, was the basic specification of the 250GT.

By 1959 it must have been obvious to Enzo Ferrari that he could expand his clientele were he to offer a true four-seater, a car with all the performance and image with which his name was associated but with more space and creature comforts. Thus Ferrari and Pininfarina worked together in 1959 and 1960 on just



'Italian-American' interior - Ferrari 250GTE

such a car. Their first problem was to create the necessary room amidships: this was achieved by moving the engine forward 8ins and widening the track, though the wheelbase remained the same (102ins). Overdrive was added to the four-speed transmission for quieter cruising. Pinfarina came up with another of his classic shapes, though it was – and looked – more massive than the leaner 250GT.

The GTE was sprung on the public at Le Mans in June 1960, when one of the prototypes was used as a course car – appropriately enough since Ferraris finished 1-2 on general classification, and 1-2-3-4 in the GT category, in the race.

In its three year (1960-1963) lifespan, the GTE underwent a few minor modifications, mainly cosmetic (the fog lights were moved from the grille to the front wings, for example). The importance of the GTE in production terms, too, must be emphasised: in 1961, for example, it accounted for 70 per cent of output, and a total of roughly 950 were made. It was superseded by the 330 America, which retained the body shape but was fitted with a four-litre engine.

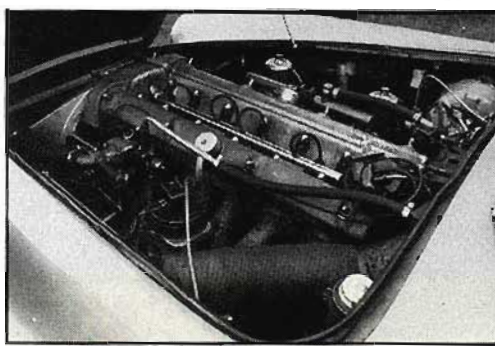
One of the few to road test a 250GTE was our own John Bolster, in August 1963. He recorded a top speed of 136.3mph, 0-60mph in about 7.5secs, and a fuel consumption ('driven hard') of 16mpg. The GTE weighed 21cwt, somewhat less than the Aston, so the similarity in performance figures would indicate that Maranello ponies didn't have quite the same pull as Newport Pagnell shire horses. He praised the car for its engine ('exactly right'), roadholding ('it can be taken through corners in a fast effortless manner in spite of its fairly considerable weight'), comfort ('the seats are remarkably comfortable'), gearchange ('one seems to have a gear for every situation and rapid overtaking is a potent safety feature') and performance ('it must be rated as excellent... The acceleration is really fierce right up past 110mph'). He summed it up as 'A wonderful combination of luxurious touring and super-sporting characteristics'.

One other point about these two cars: they were both very expensive. In January 1963, for example, the DB4 cost £3500, the GTE £5600. This compares with £1800 for an E-type (£1900 for the coupé), £1050 for the Healey 3000, and £447 for a Mini. Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose...

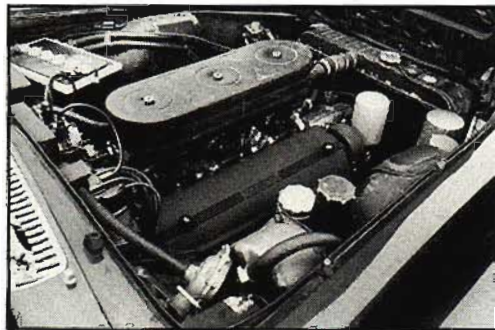
Driving impressions

It would be difficult to find two cars, designed with the same aim in mind – to travel far and fast – that are so different. Take the performance, for example. Road test figures, using wheelspin standing starts and other tricks of the trade, put the two cars on a par. Yet subjectively the Aston feels much the quicker on acceleration.

A clue to this apparent disparity is given by the torque figures: when new, the Aston gave 240 lb ft at 4250rpm, the Ferrari 180 lb ft at 5500rpm. Thus the Ferrari is a revver, the Aston a slogger, and when simply driving fast (that is, not at racing speeds) it is torque that is important. Floor the Aston's throttle at almost any speed and the car surges forward: you can feel those lovely great big pots thumping away. In the Ferrari, on the other hand, there isn't much below 3000rpm, but if you keep it between 4000rpm and



A classic twin cam – the Aston's beautiful straight six



Another beauty – the Ferrari's super-smooth, clean V12

6000rpm, it too picks up its skirts and runs. With the Aston you know you're sitting behind a big thumper, with the Ferrari its Swiss watch time. Of course you can't talk about these engine without talking about the noises they make – and both are simply out of this world. The Aston bellows, a basso-profundo: the Ferrari howls, more a soprano. Both Martin Emmison, the owner of the Ferrari, and David Ruddell, who owns the Aston, agreed with me that one of the best parts of this test was the run through the tunnel at Goodwood, accelerating in second in both cars. All three of us had silly grins on our faces as we exited each time... That is what these are cars about.

The controls, too, highlight the differences, those on the Ferrari being, on the whole, lighter. The clutch, for example, is softer and more spongy compared to the Aston's which is heavy and rather sudden yet which feels nicer when you're changing gear quickly. Gear lever action in the Ferrari is lighter, but with a longer travel: that of the Aston is clonky and notchy – but, again, when you're in a hurry, more positive. Of the two, the Ferrari's is marginally the quicker. Both have surprisingly heavy brakes, considering they're servo-assisted, the Aston's having better feel than the Ferrari's.

When it comes to cornering and road manners, the one thing that had to be borne in mind was that the Ferrari was on Michelin 185/15 radials, the Aston on 600/16 Avon cross-plyes. This meant that, on the whole, the Ferrari was the more neutral, undramatic, of the two, and repaid clean lines through corners which could be taken at quite high speeds without fuss. The steering on the Ferrari was light and direct.

The steering of the Aston, on the other hand, was at one and the same time its best and its worst

feature. On those cross-plyes you had to concentrate hard to keep it on the straight and narrow on even mildly bumpy roads such as those around Goodwood: yet once you get the car in a corner, once the steering is loaded, the whole character changes: it becomes neat, precise, and you can feel exactly what's happening, even if it does become heavy. With those cross-plyes, too, the car basically understeers, particularly when you enter a corner on a trailing throttle, but once you've set up on a line, and give the accelerator some wellie, the rail comes out progressively and ultra-controllably. Thus, of the two, the Aston is the more fun, the Ferrari the more forgiving and stable. Take your pick...

Sumptuous appointments

Inside, the Ferrari is far and away the more practical. It really is a four-seater, the Aston more a 2+2 (though, surprisingly, there seems to be very little in it dimensionally). In fact, the over-riding impression of the Ferrari is that you're in a big car, physically bulkier and heavier, not to say wider. You also sit lower than in the Aston, which adds to the feeling. This sensation of size may have much to do with other factors of the car, such as the way you drive it, and the apparent lack of acceleration. Remember, too, that a 500rpm change in engine note of the Ferrari is equivalent to a 1000rpm change in the Aston, and this extra fussiness – no, call it busyness – makes the engine sound as if it's working harder than it is.

Both cars are sumptuously appointed, and very comfortable. The interior styling of the Ferrari is what can be called 'Italian-American' – there seems to be a lot of chrome scattered around, though all the instruments are clear and readable. The same comments about the legibility of the instruments apply to the Aston, though in the latter case the dials and knobs and switches look as if they've descended from a typical thirties sports car.

Summing up, the Ferrari is the more luxurious, the more comfortable, the more spacious and, in terms of road manners, the more modern of the two. The Aston is harder riding, slightly more raucous, with more dramatic – but more fun – handling. Average examples of each can be picked up for around the £5000 to £6000 mark, about the same as one of the lesser Ford Sierras! Pound for pound, the two sports cars must be better value for money – though running costs must be borne in mind, since neither will be cheap to keep on the road.

Our choice? On purely fun grounds, the Aston. It's like the little girl who when she was good was very, very good, but when she was bad she was awful. The Ferrari is the more practical, the more useable, but by the same token doesn't have quite the character of the Aston. Perhaps, in fact, we'd have one of each: the Ferrari for our everyday transport, the Aston for those times when you just want to go out for a good blast down some fast roads.

We would like to thank Martin Emmison (whose idea this back-to-back was, incidentally) and David Ruddell for providing the cars, Modena Engineering for allowing us to use their test day at Goodwood as a venue, and to Gordon Bruce for providing a stable camera platform in his Golf GTi!

SPECIFICATIONS	Aston Martin DB4	Ferrari 250 GTE	Steering Body	Rack and pinion Steel chassis, alloy panels	Worm and peg Tubular chassis, steel body
Engine	In-line 'six'	V12	DIMENSIONS		
Bore x stroke	92x92mm	73x58.8mm	Length	14ft 8.75in	15ft 5in
Capacity	3670cc	2953cc	Width	5ft 6in	5ft 10in
Valves	Twin ohc	Single ohc per bank	Height	4ft 4in	4ft 4.5in
Compression	8.25:1	9.2:1	Wheelbase	8ft 2in	8ft 6in
Power	240bhp at 5500rpm	240bhp at 7000rpm	Kerb weight	27.4cwt	21.75cwt
Torque	240lb.ft at 4250rpm	180lb.ft at 5500rpm	Tyres	Avon 600/16 crossplyes	Michelin 185-16 radials
Transmission	Four-speed manual with overdrive	Four-speed manual with overdrive	PERFORMANCE		
Final drive	3.54:1	4.57:1	Max speed	140mph	136mph
Brakes	Discs/discs	Discs/discs	0-60mph	8.5sec	7.5sec
Suspension F.	Ind. by wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers	Ind. by wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar	Standing ¼ mile	15.6sec	15.5sec
Suspension R.	Live axle, coils, parallel trailing links, Watts linkage, lever arm dampers	Live axle, leaf springs, radius arms, telescopic dampers	Overall fuel con.	16.4mpg	16mpg
			Years built	1958-1963	1960-1963
			Nos built	1100	950
			Price new (1963)	£3504 (inc tax)	£3606 (inc tax)



Utterly simple grilles – yet each is quite distinctive. The Ferrari (left) was the more docile and refined of the two, but the Aston (right) was more at home around Goodwood circuit



Two very desirable cars – and similar machines can be bought for the price of a new Ford Sierra. Both have classically beautiful lines, the Ferrari's by Pininfarina, the Aston's by Touring