

FULL HOUSE

This collection of five vintage Bentleys covers every iteration of the WO era.

Robert Coucher drives £17m of pure desire Photography Jayson Fong



During the Roaring 1920s, the white heat of technology had created an automotive arms race in the Western World and Bentley Motors was a leading protagonist. Personal freedom was becoming more attainable thanks to rapidly advancing mechanisation, and at the forefront of this technological drive was the automobile industry.

Based in Cricklewood, North London – admittedly a world away from Motown, Detroit – Walter Owen Bentley built his first 3 Litre motor car in 1919, and soon thereafter in 1924, privateers John Duff and Frank Clement won Le Mans in a Bentley that put the marque on the shopping list of every fast-driving motoring enthusiast, many ex-servicemen and intrepid adventurers who had no fear of living life on the edge. The Bentley Boys had arrived with a ‘bloody thump’, the epithet applied to the engine noise of the original 3 Litre Bentley by none other than WO Bentley himself.

Not many vintage Bentleys were made, as the company was always run on a shoestring and was only really saved by its top racing customer, Captain Barnato, so he could win Le Mans three times before the marque was rather nefariously taken over by Rolls-Royce in 1931. But Bentley had established its unbeatable reputation thanks to its dominance on both road and track, setting records and standards for all other manufacturers to follow. From winning Le Mans five times and setting high-speed records at Brooklands, to offering five-year warranties on its motor cars, Bentleys were built to last the distance.

Arriving at the impressive Cowdray House, nestled at the foot of the South Downs in West Sussex, we are met with this breathtaking WO Bentley line-up. It represents every model of that era: sports car; touring car; grand tourer; Le Mans car; and Brooklands high-speed racer in 3 Litre, 4½ Litre, 6½ Litre and mighty 8 Litre form, with all permutations of coachwork. You would like to imagine that at least some of these fine motor cars visited Cowdray House in the day, as all have been well-used by their enthusiastic owners over the decades and all have ownership history from new.

This has been billed as ‘The Ultimate Collection’, a unique, one-off assembly of the finest WO Bentleys to have been offered as a complete set. A full house, indeed. William Medcalf and his team at Vintage Bentley have spent years putting together these five Cricklewood Bentleys. Medcalf points out: ‘Each car in this collection has been chosen for its contribution to Bentley’s success and represents the best of its type. Each is mechanically original and has gone through a preservation or restoration by Vintage Bentley so is ready for action.’

Starting with the immaculately patinated 1925 Bentley 3 Litre SuperSports, number nine of only 18 made,



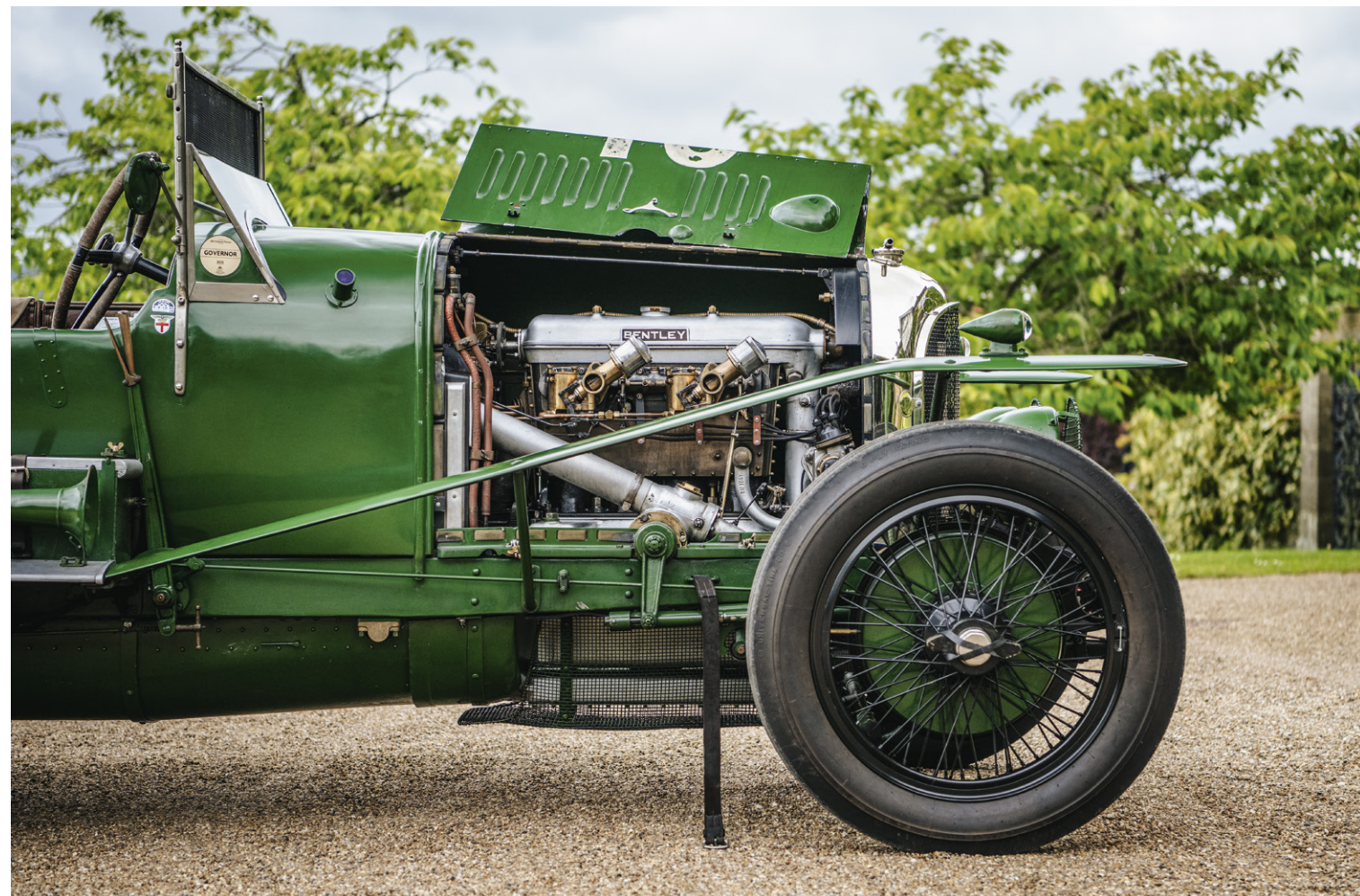
chassis number 1174, registration number TR 829, this 100mph motor car is one of the rarest and most revered of WOs and was the first to wear a green badge, the coveted Green Label mounted atop its nickel-plated radiator.

Being the shortest version with a chassis just 9ft in length, this pert-looking SuperSports is nimble and, with its high-compression 3.0-litre engine fed by twin SU ‘sloper’ carburettors, its damn’ quick as well. The large four-cylinder lump is sophisticated, featuring four valves per cylinder, twin-spark ignition, a hollow overhead camshaft, aluminium block and non-detachable cylinder head. In SS tune it produces more than 85bhp and was guaranteed by the factory to crack 100mph. That’s why Bentley Motors sensibly reduced the normal five-year warranty to just 12 months for its fierce little hot rod.

As with all the special Bentleys assembled here, the SuperSports’ history is known from new. True enough, the car was initially purchased by a successful Bentley racer, Mr W Barlow. Not surprisingly, he spec’d it in a particularly sporting configuration with striking occasional three-seater coachwork by the company Short, notable for its ‘bat wing’ mudguards. In the days when you ordered your motor bespoke like a good Savile Row suit, a clearly enthusiastic Barlow requested a ‘super



This page and opposite
The black 1925 Bentley 3 Litre SuperSports is something of a hot rod, driving with a spirit unusual in a 99-year-old car. It’s one of only 18 made.



radiator and dashboard', which lowered the rad height to reduce drag, and the steering was raked low to match.

I have to admit, my initial reaction to all these cars is that this SuperSports is the one I want! It's 99 years old and looks it, but the patina is what gives it such a sense of gravitas. The bat-like Short coachwork is seriously trim and functional and is painted in simple black. The original leather seats are worn but as well cared for as King Charles' famously ancient brogues.

You flick the magneto switches, pump up the fuel and punch the starter button. The fiery SuperSports snarls into life, fizzing with energy and vim. It just wants to go, so you find first gear in the notoriously recalcitrant non-synchro gearbox, give the centrally located throttle pedal a push and let the sharpish clutch out. Light(ish) Number 9 is off like a bat out of hell.

It's sharp and immediate and feels every bit the road-racer. God, what a car. Improbable that it is so old yet feels so quick and capable on the road. The steering is accurate, the 3 Litre has loads of grunt and the tyke can be placed with total precision on small country lanes. Even the brakes are on-side.

Following its slightly surprising privateer win at Le Mans in 1924, WO decided to field a factory Works 3 Litre at the '25 Le Mans, chassis number 1138, to be driven by Dudley Benjafield and Bertie Kensington Moir. Team Car Number 10 you see here was specially prepared with Vanden Plas coachwork – with four seats to comply with regs – plus a lower, more aerodynamic windscreen, various stone guards, a 25-gallon fuel tank and stiffer suspension. The engine was uprated to SuperSports specification. The car performed superbly and topped 90mph with the hood up as required for 20 laps. Sadly this impacted on the car's fuel consumption, so it ran dry before the first permitted pit stop. Despite its rather ignominious debut, Number 10 showed huge potential and Bentley's domination of Le Mans thus began.

Subsequently used as a factory demonstrator, 1138 was restored to absolutely correct 1925 Le Mans specification by Vintage Bentley in 2017 and has been used properly at leading events including Goodwood and the Le Mans Classic ever since. I must confess to having travelled many hundreds of miles in this fabulous old racer, having taken part in the Royal Automobile Club's 1000 Mile Trial in 2014, organised by HERO-ERA, which was an incredibly satisfying journey in such a special motor car. Serving to make this even more extraordinary is the fact that I was joined by Bentley Boy Kensington Moir's great nephew, Duncan.

Now, we know these 'fast lorries' are tough and rugged and blessed with very heavy and obstreperous gearboxes, so before the 1000 Mile start I went along to see William Medcalf for some driving lessons. Embarrassingly, I made a bit of a hash of it, crashing and grinding the gears. After



'It's sharp and immediate and feels every bit the road racer. God, what a car'



Opposite, above and right
Number 10 is a genuine Le Mans original, built to SuperSports spec and with the correct four-seater coachwork; Bentley specialist William Medcalf has long been immersed in the marque.

VINTAGE BENTLEYS

more seat time with William, I finally mastered the moves: first to second gear is slow; second to third is quick, and third to top is easy. And the trick is to get it up into top as soon as practical and leave it there!

Having practised more while driving to Edinburgh and back, I finally got into the Bentley groove – don't overthink it, remember the throttle pedal is in the middle; double-declutch intuitively and don't worry about a few grinds, they all do it, and avoid having to change down below second on the move. Apart from all that this works Bentley is a cinch to drive. It's accurate and responsive, the handling is totally predictable and balanced, and once you build the confidence to never lift, it's remarkably swift along British B-roads.

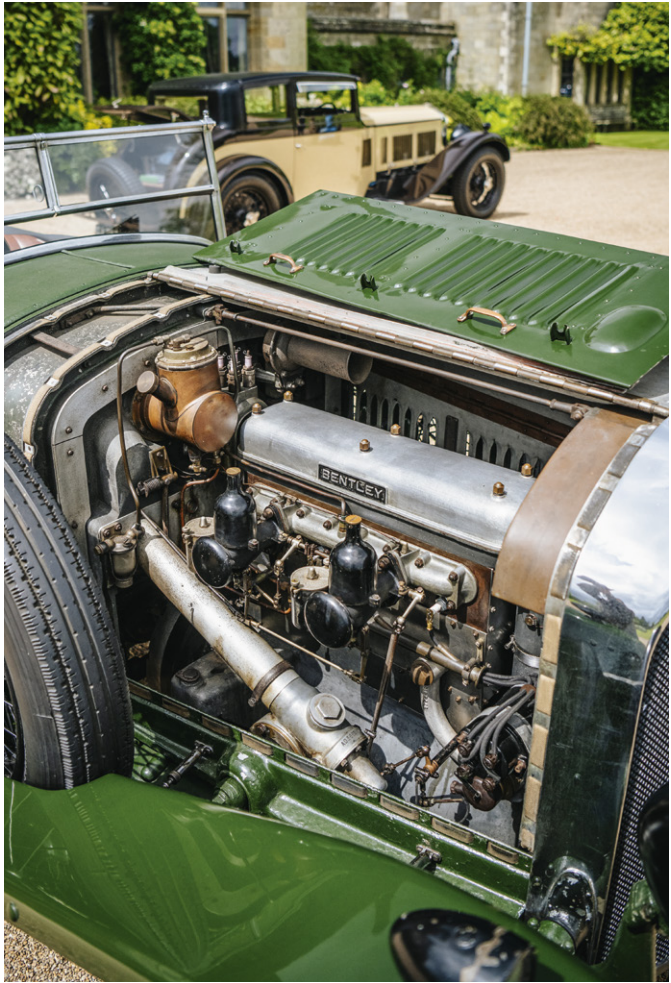
By 1927 WO was eager for another Le Mans victory and realised the 3 Litre needed more grunt. So he chopped two cylinders off his 6½ Litre engine, coming up with the venerable 4½ Litre, of which 720 were constructed up to 1931. This includes the 52 Blowers

created by Bentley Boy Tim Birkin. WO did not approve of supercharging as he thought it unreliable – he was right. The 4½ Litre is heavy but tremendously strong and reliable, and its 4398cc four-cylinder engine puts out a useful 130bhp in racing trim. The upshot is that Woolf Barnato and Bernard Rubin won Le Mans in 1928 in a 4½, and the cars came second, third and fourth in 1929, behind a Bentley Speed Six.

The 4½ Litre vintage Bentley in this collection is chassis number AD3652 and is one of the most original examples in the world, being the only known vintage Bentley to be in single family ownership for 85 years, having been purchased from the works. A sports four-seater with fully valanced wings, it was delivered in 1930 from North Audley Street in Mayfair to a Mr Grout. In heavy-chassis spec, it features self-wrapping brakes, an aluminium sump and long bonnet.

The 4½ Litre looks sensible and no-nonsense, unlike Mr Grout, who was the owner of the Southampton

Below and opposite
This 4½ Litre is highly original, having been in one family for 85 years and never rebuilt. It's covered fewer than 100,000 miles from new.



Arms public house in Camden Town, London, which was infamous for being at the centre of the 'racecourse wars' of the 1920s and the scene of many a punch-up and general bad behaviour. As Grout's increasingly erratic repayments ceased altogether, the car was taken back to the factory and in 1935 it was sold to its first 'proper' long-term owner, Dr William Leslie, who passed it on to his son in 1975.

You can clearly see this straight 4½ is original and unmolested, having never been rebuilt, just meticulously maintained. Recently it has been the subject of careful preservation work, saving most of the leather interior trim and the exterior body covering. Back in its original green, this motor car has covered fewer than 100,000 miles from new. On the road it's capacious and comfortable; once again, just get it into top gear and then allow it to waft along, so you can enjoy the serenity of that long wheelbase.

With Bentleys becoming more sophisticated, this Speed Six really put the frighteners up arch rival Rolls-Royce, which bought the company in 1931 as an act of self-preservation! This Speed Six Close Couple Coupé, chassis number SB6721, was supplied to Viscount

‘Just get into top gear and then allow it to waft along, so you can enjoy the serenity of that long wheelbase’



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Speed Six Close Couple Coupé is one of only two Speed Sixes bodied in this style, remarkably refined despite its hot engine, and fully restored following decades of use around the world.

Mandeville, the Tenth Duke of Manchester, in 1930. With Martin Walker coachwork, it was the second of only two built. The Duke had seen the first car at the Olympia Motor Show and had Bentley build him the second one. Being an aspirant Bentley Boy, he clocked up 4000 miles in the first two months of ownership and after two years had covered 41,000 miles!

Researching the car, we found it full of speeding tickets and parking fines, and discovered the Duke was at one point up before the magistrate for running someone off the road. Oh, and his wife was in bandages when they got married, apparently due to another “off”, quips William.

This Close Couple Coupé is an incredibly elegant motor car. A bit rakish as well, with those low windows, long bonnet and cropped tail, it has a fast Continental look. The interior is luxurious and equipped with tools and equipment for long journeys. The throttle pedal is located in the regular place, and the gearlever and handbrake are in the up-your-right-trouser-leg position.

Even though it's fitted with the hot Speed Six engine, it is remarkably refined, starting quietly and pulling with real muscle thanks to its 180bhp. The chassis is very well-controlled and the car can be conducted with enthusiasm, as the good Duke clearly chose to do. It is a tad more locomotive than a Rolls-Royce Phantom II, but it feels better-planted and faster.

The matching-numbers Speed Six has been in William Medcalf's family for over 40 years, campaigned across the

‘It is an incredibly elegant motor car, rakish with those low windows, long bonnet and cropped tail’



VINTAGE BENTLEYS

Right
Extraordinary Barnato Hassan
8 Litre record-breaker lived up to
its name at Brooklands Circuit,
where it competed from 1934 to
1938, taking part in 25 races.

world, including the USA, New Zealand, Canada and Australia, and also raced and rallied throughout Europe. Having been used good and hard, the Coupé deserved a full and absolutely correct nut, bolt and rivet restoration, so Vintage Bentley returned it to the condition in which it left the factory on 15 May 1930.

As William explains: ‘With this restoration, we did exactly as Bentley Motors did. We constructed the running chassis and test drove it as a bare “running rig”. The chassis frame and other Bentley parts were correctly hand-painted in grey primer and the engine block finished with a careful hand-scraping. All subcontract parts finishes are true to their origins, such as SU, Bosch, Smiths, Lucas and so on – you can’t just put them in a random pile to be painted black because they all have a different black finish. In order to maintain the Bentley Motors warranty of the day, coachbuilders such as Martin Walker were not allowed to dismantle or remove anything, so they had to construct the coachwork and paint around the mechanicals, and we have restored the car in this correct manner.’

That’s serious attention to detail and no wonder the car is a 100-point scorer at Pebble Beach, overall concours winner at Audrain and Salon Privé London, and one of the 13 showcased as the ‘World’s Greatest Motorcars’ at the Geneva International Motor Show, Qatar.

You cannot fail to notice the aerodynamic Barnato Hassan 8 Litre record-breaker, finished in searing Barnato blue. What a projectile – it looks more like a missile than a motor car. Built for Woolf Barnato by the legendary engineer Walter Hassan, this racer’s sole purpose was to take the outer circuit lap record at the fearsome Brooklands Circuit in Surrey. Developed and raced from 1934 until 1938, the Barnato Hassan competed in 25 races and broke the lap record a number of times, achieving an unofficial 143.11mph in September 1938.

With only four custodians since the war, it was owned by noted racer Keith Schellenberg, who competed in it for 54 years! Now fully restored to its original Brooklands lap record configuration, it is the fastest vintage Bentley retaining its original 8 Litre engine and chassis, and remains road-registered as MPE 10 – ready for the ultimate Sunday drive to Brooklands Museum for a (very) swift pint at the Members’ bar...

What a group of cars. The ultimate vintage Bentley collection? Probably. These magnificent examples are all original, with known provenance, and come from long-term ownership. Each is special and represents the best of the great Bentley marque. A carefully curated collection of this magnitude will never be seen again. If you have £17million, this full house could be yours. **End**

THANKS TO William Medcalf, www.vintagebentley.com;
and also thanks to Neil Georges of Cowdray House, which
is available for exclusive events (cowdray.co.uk).

