

Auto Anglophilia

Wanted...

You - Confident, very successful, self-made man in early fifties or mid forties. This entrepreneur must eschew the ordinary, have net worth over \$ 6 million, and have homes in New York, Florida, or Southern California. Must enjoy self-expression and life in the fast lane.
Me - Gorgeous, exhilarating, slightly exhibitionistic plaything with exceptional European breeding & extensive pedigree seeking a more than comfortable, long-term responsive relationship. Exquisitely refined taste and passionate handling guaranteed, if price no object.

If cars had to run classified ads to land drivers, this might be the advertisement in the personals that the new Bentley Arnage might place. The Arnage might be the ultimate boy's toy. While there are no statistics on how many are actually driven by women, nine out of ten owners are men. No one finances a new Bentley and only 10% of buyers in the US lease them. An Arnage owner already owns six other cars, is slightly younger than the typical Royce owner, and most importantly, unlike Donald Trump, prefers to drive themselves over being chauffeured about.

Recently, I took the Arnage for laps at the Road Atlanta track where I had previously driven Porsche 911s. The Arnage handled the tight turns with the brio of the Porsches, albeit with more noticeable tire squeal. It can also match Porsche in acceleration off the mark, its 6.5 second 0-60 mph time just a shade more than a 911's six seconds flat. This fleetness is more astonishing when one considers that an Arnage packs a ton more heft than the nimble German sports car and lacks its aerodynamic slipperiness. It even boasts a real back seat.

The secret of the Arnage is in its unique modern powerplant, a BMW 4.4 liter aluminum alloy V8 engine assisted by twin water-cooled turbochargers. The same engine sitting in a BMW 540i or 740i delivers a respectable 282 horsepower and 310 lb-ft of torque. When transmogrified by Bentley boffins, out come a booming 350 hp and an amazing 413 lb-ft of torque. This provides the full-sized four-door saloon a speed-limited high end of 150 mph and seemingly unlimited reservoir of effortless acceleration. To learn to safely tap the utmost of these reserves, Bentley offers its owners a driving school in Britain.

I found the Arnage most pleasurable on back country roads and long, clear stretches of protected

interstate. I cruised quietly and serenely in rural Georgia at 125 mph without taxing the Arnage in any manner. With its five foot tall aristocratic bearing, the Arnage offered me a high, commanding view of the road that was shoulder to shoulder to those driving popular sport utilities. And the luxurious, smooth, stable ride banished driver fatigue.

No one does the leather and wood automobile furnishing gambit better than the British. The Arnage's spacious though intimate cabin coosets and coddles. The visually pleasing interior environment with its comfortably firm, hand-stitched, Connolly hide upholstered seating, deep Wilton pile carpets, crisp Alpine sound system, lustrous hand-matched burr walnut veneer fascia and chromed "organ stop" vent controls made the passing time go much too quickly.

The Bentley marque harkens back to a halcyon decade when love of motoring replaced steam railways as a social fascination. Walter Owen Bentley, the youngest of nine children grew up in a London middle class home. Born in 1888 with a mechanical bent, as a youth he apprenticed to the Great Northern railway then handled servicing a fleet of 250 taxicabs. In his free time, he raced motorcycles.

In 1912, he and his brother bought the English distribution rights to the French made Doriet, Flandrin et Parent. Quickly realizing that racing competition was the best means to grow their business, they tuned their cars. They even convinced DFP to bring out a model with aluminum alloy pistons to double the car's performance.

When World War I broke out, Bentley took the idea of alloy pistons to the British Admiralty to upgrade airplane engines for the Royal Navy. With the £8,000 he received from the government for his design of the Bentley Rotary 1 & 2 engines, he started his eponymous company to manufacture cars of his own concept.

The cars, which first shipped in 1921, caused a sensation. Bentley found himself with a two year waiting list. His cars proved exceptionally race worthy and achieved particular renown at the 24 hour Le Mans event in France. There Bentleys took first place in four successive years beginning in 1927. The Arnage is named after one of the bends at the Le Mans circuit.

W.O. firmly preferred big engines to turbocharging and evolved to ever bigger engines: 3.0 to 4.5, to 6.5 to finally an enormous 8 liter series inauspiciously launched in 1930. As a chronically undercapitalized company, Bentley couldn't weather the Great Depression and fell into receivership. It was acquired for £20,481 by Rolls-Royce the following year.

For years, Bentley existed as a bit of a automotive stepchild, a Rolls-Royce without the trademark grill for £130 less. With the advent of the Arnage while it still shares a chassis with the V12-powered Rolls-Royce Silver Seraph, the new Bentley gets a distinctive engine courtesy of Cosworth, suspension tuning ala Lotus, and its own styling cues from assisted by Mayflower.

More importantly, Tony Gott and his engineering staff invested £40 million to bring overall quality to levels that are no longer embarrassing. The best of Japanese die forming and assembly technology have been incorporated in the manufacturing process. The new cars were the first to be fully

modeled in clay but then translated into digital format for computer simulation and testing. The tangible result is a chassis more durable and much stiffer than previous.

Gone are bare handed craftsmen with beating mallets sizing panel dimensions. New robotics with hydraulic gates and pneumatic clamps hold exacting tolerance during assembly to produce a body with a seamless appearance. Each finished car undergoes 90 minutes of vibration, rolling road, and monsoon testing to coax out any defects before leaving the Crewe factory.

Traditional handiwork is still maintained in the commissioning process. While half the buyers choose to take the \$203,800 Arnage as is, the remaining owners opt to further personalize their purchases. Choices include all manner of office support equipment, entertainment facilities, and technology gizmos as well as more mundane selections of custom materials, colors, and trim. Bespoke or plain vanilla, a new Arnage provides the right mix of driving enjoyment: half transportation and half theater.

Sidebar: Limo Wars

While the new Bentley is newsworthy on its own; the corporate battle waged this year over the destiny of Rolls-Royce Motor Cars is a potboiler with the passions, personalities, and plot twists worthy of Shakespeare or Puccini. Just months before the renaissance of Rolls-Royce with its triumphant launch of its new Rolls Royce Silver Seraph and Bentley Arnage models, Rolls was put up for sale by Vickers plc which had acquired it in 1980.

To the outrage of some British loyalists, the only serious bidders were German: BMW who supplies the engines for the new models, Mercedes Benz, and Volkswagen. Mercedes was eliminated when in March, BMW made the winning bid of \$560 million. But in May, VW raised its offer to \$710 million and a month later sweetened further by offering \$194 million to buy an additional Vickers subsidiary Cosworth. This offer was accepted by Vickers stockholders in June and closed in July. VW and its strong willed chairman Ferdinand Piëch were gleeful at their coup and celebrated by buying Lamborghini and wooing Volvo.

Purists complaining of foreign ownership diluting the British values of the brand conveniently overlook the earlier purchase of Rover by BMW and Jaguar and Aston Martin by Ford. New management and fresh investment has raised both quality and sales of each of these marques with no noticeable loss of snob appeal.

In fact the alarm raised at a most significant British institution being taken over by Germans is almost questionable when one remembers that the roots of the current English dynasty. The current house of Windsor succeeds the house of Hanover founded by German-born George I, elector of Hanover. It was formerly known as the house of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha (Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha in German) after Albert, Queen Victoria's German-born husband. It wasn't "rebranded" until 1917 by George V in response to ardent anti-German sentiment during World War I.

Meantime, both losers in the bidding wars vowed to go ahead with producing their own entries in the super luxury car market segment. Mercedes showed its Maybach design concept car, a tour de force

of advanced technology and retro creature comforts. And BMW vowed to forge ahead and produce its own super luxury cars independently of Rolls-Royce, presumably a new “nine” series, products that would be “true BMW.”

But just as the deal went through, it started to unravel. BMW served twelve month notice that it would terminate its 1994 agreement to provide engines for the Silver Seraph and the Arnage as of July of 1999. Then Rolls-Royce plc, got into the act. The maker of aviation jet engines had been established in 1971 when Rolls-Royce entered bankruptcy on the staggering losses developing their RB-211 engine for the ill-fated Lockheed L-1011 jumbo jet. At that time the profitable motor car company got the renowned grill design and “Spirit of Ecstasy” radiator mascot while the aero-engine company kept the Rolls-Royce trademark.

Sir Ralph Robins, chairman of the engine company, played the spoiler. Already in partnership with BMW in the jet-engine business, he refused VW use of the trademark. Then for only \$66 million turned around and sold it to BMW. A Solomonic compromise ensued. VW ended up with a new factory in Crewe for which they payed a ridiculous sum and the rights to the Bentley Motor Cars name. Bernd Pischetsrieder, chief executive of BMW, got the Rolls-Royce brand at steep discount, a ninth of what they originally bid, and criticized Vickers for selling “something as an entity that it didn’t wholly own.”

This restructuring takes place in 2003, a sad end to a proud company founded in 1906. In the meantime, BMW will continue to supply engines and VW will continue to produce both Rolls-Royce and Bentley cars. Then BMW must design a new series of cars, set up distribution, establish a new plant, presumably somewhere in England, and build them without the trained crafts workers that for almost a century have been the hallmark of the marque. VW must develop a robust new brand and back it with its own engine technology. Both will have to compete with the desirable Maybach model from Mercedes. And the luxury customer will be left scratching his head, muttering about broken homes, and trying to sort it all out.