



VANTAGE Points

During the 1980s, Peter Dron (on the staff of *Motor* and then as Editor of *Fast Lane*) drove numerous Aston Martins, including three Vantages

Tyres began to cause Aston Martin difficulties in the 1980s. The problem was in three parts. First, the V8 Vantage, though introduced in 1977, might be described as the best 1950s sports car ever made. Second, it had the highest maximum speed of any road car of its era. Third, Aston Martin Lagonda had no clout.

In 1977 *Motor* was granted an exclusive 'first drive' of the prototype Vantage. Those who drove it were immensely impressed with its performance and dynamics, which was confirmed when we received a production model for full testing in 1981. It was old-fashioned even then, yet it remains among the most memorable cars I have ever driven.

Victor Gauntlett of Pace Petroleum and Tim Hearley of CH Industrials each invested £500,000 in Aston Martin Lagonda, acquiring one fifth of the shares between them in 1980. Mr Hearley soon tired of the challenge and sold out to Gauntlett, who then became Executive Chairman, combining his 20 percent stake with 100 percent commitment.

Victor had no need to expose himself to the stress of running a struggling car company. He was sufficiently wealthy, following several successful years in the petrochemical industry, never to need to work again. But he was an enthusiast and, like Peter Wheeler at TVR, Malcolm Victor Gauntlett (referred to by all his staff as 'MVG') was on a mission to make the company achieve its full potential.

Production at Newport Pagnell had almost ground to a standstill when he arrived. With imagination and phenomenal energy, he breathed life into what many had thought was an industrial corpse, argued with and inspired his employees, improved quality and efficiency and then developed the Zagato connection. Eventually, despite his valiant efforts, he had to concede that the company could not continue independently, but undoubtedly his actions led Walter Hayes of Ford to see potential in AML, which otherwise could not have survived the 1990s.



Opposite: Madagascar Brown V580 V8 Vantage 'AMV 8V' with cross-spoke BBS wheels driven by the late Roger Stowers, AML Archivist and Historian, circa 1983
Above: V8VOR 12270, the first V580 Oscar India Vantage. The distinctive pattern of the P7 tyre is clearly visible

Soon after installing himself in Sunnyside, the half-timbered AML headquarters in Tickford Street, Newport Pagnell, Victor took delivery of a new Vantage with the registration PBM 744W. This car was tested by both *Motor* and *CAR* magazines. During the Gauntlett era, there was no press fleet: an Aston Martin used by the motoring press for testing was usually the Chairman's personal transport. More than ever, one felt an obligation to return it unmarked.

Thus, the first Aston I drove was also Victor's first AML company car, though not his first Aston. Six feet wide and more than 15ft long, it weighed nearly 2000kg, substantially more than one of Victor's other cars, an ex-Tim Birkin 4.5-litre supercharged Bentley which he raced. By an odd coincidence, in the same issue of *Motor* (April 25 1981) that our Vantage test was published, there was an 11-page feature on the 'Blower' Bentley, including a fine cutaway illustration.

At an NEC Motor Show a few years later, I introduced Amherst Villiers, the designer of the Bentley's supercharger,

to Gauntlett. They chatted for more than an hour. Afterwards, Victor told me how delighted he had been to meet Amherst, who was then in his eighties yet still remarkably spritely and full of ideas. "However", Victor added drily, fixing me with an ironic stare from his dark eyes, "if he were even half as brilliant as he suggests he is, I feel sure that someone would have locked him inside a drawing office somewhere."

The early 1980s was a period of feverish transition in the motor industry. Fuel injection and electronic ignition were undergoing rapid development and would soon become standard equipment even for the smallest petrol engines in the cheapest cars. Anti-lock brakes followed. These technological advances, while promising improved efficiency, reliability and safety, entailed teething problems. The big manufacturers, with substantial test and development budgets, were able to cope with this but it was problematic for smaller specialists. Surprisingly, however, it was tyres that caused Aston Martin's engineers some of their greatest difficulties. →

But first, the engine. The high-performance Vantage version of Aston's 5340cc V8 slurped high-octane fuel through four twin-choke Weber carburettors. Firing up from cold required pumping the throttle pedal two or three times and then three or four cylinders would start operations on the first turn before the rest joined in and settled into a slightly lumpy but agreeably musical tickover. When the engine was hot, it was more reluctant to re-start: if it did not fire up immediately, there was often a delay before it would cooperate.

Also, as soon as you left the workshop after paying an eye-wateringly expensive servicing bill, the engine immediately began, very gradually, to slip out of tune, as I discovered when we ran a used Vantage on our fleet of long-term cars at *Fast Lane* magazine. For quite a while this had no perceptible effect on outright performance, but there were side effects: popping and banging and a foot or so of flame from the exhausts on the overrun.

This wonderful engine delivered massive torque through a wide rev range. It needed immensely robust transmission components to cope with that and ZF's five-speed was certainly up to the task. It took a while to warm up and nobody liked the gate pattern, with a 'dog-leg' shift from first to second. There was also a noticeable gap between the first two gears, whereas fourth and fifth were perhaps unnecessarily close. CAR magazine repeated the remark in *Motor's* road test that it was possible in the Vantage to overtake an Audi Quattro or a Lotus Esprit travelling flat out and then change up (at 139mph) into fifth. Shifting gears was labour-intensive but the gate was well defined and spring loading ideal.

The stated power output of the Vantage engine was 390bhp

but that seems to have been an average figure. Consequently, there were variations in acceleration and top speed. We did not yet have access to Millbrook and did not manage to do a max with PBM 744W. We wanted to take the car to Ehra-Lessien but the Volkswagen test track (near Wolfsburg) was fully booked for weeks ahead.

In 1981, the claimed maximum speed was 168mph. The German magazine *auto motor und sport* had borrowed a dealer's car, with which its testers recorded 164mph. This later became the factory's official figure – once again perhaps the average that production models could manage.

In 1983 I tested MVG's latest company car, the then bearer of the AML 1 plates, at Millbrook. The lap speed was 155mph. I estimated that tyre scrub around the bowl had wiped away at least 5mph. Also, the car had covered only 10,000 miles and the engine had probably not fully loosened up. I knew a Vantage owner at the time. Having driven AML 1, he was certain that his car was significantly faster.

The only difficulty in driving the V8 Vantage was rumbling about at low speeds, which involved considerable physical input. All the major controls, except the power-assisted steering (and even that needed some muscle at walking pace), demanded a level of fitness that had already ceased to be a requirement in most sports cars (the term 'supercar' had not yet been coined).

Required effort to depress the clutch pedal, for example, was greater than applying the brakes in most cars and this became tiring and tiresome in stop-start traffic.

Anti-lock systems in that era were optionally available from a few manufacturers, but AML was not among them.

Below: V811687RCAV, an example of an early 'bolt-on' car with slightly smaller (5in-diameter) driving lights and perspex covers over the headlights. Note the Aston badge on the blanked grille
Opposite: A press photo of 'AML 1', a definitive example of the final V8 Vantage 'X-pack'. These cars had larger 16in Ronal wheels fitted with 255/50 Goodyear Eagle tyres, slightly narrower than the 275-section P7s



The Vantage's brakes were servo-assisted, though one would not guess if one did not know, and when setting off on a cold morning, response to application of this even heavier pedal was lethargic.

Once the pads warmed up, there was a marked improvement and 'feel' and progression were then as good as in any car ever built. Response to variations in pedal pressure was outstanding, though it was obviously necessary to be careful when shedding speed on a damp surface.

The large discs were ventilated front and rear and the pads seemed resolutely immune to fade, but they made strange grumbling noises when they felt that they were being pushed too hard. Victor Gauntlett would undoubtedly have said that they were modelled on his workforce.

The most remarkable aspects of the early Vantage were its steering and handling and here above all, 'feel' was what made it so special. *Motor's* road test described the Vantage as the best-handling car in the world and the Adwest system as the best power-assisted steering in the world. I am sure that those assessments were correct.

The mighty Vantage might not have matched the lateral g-force figures of some of its rivals fitted with wider, lower-profile tyres, but the sheer precision of its responses more than made up for that. To this day, Rex Greenslade, then *Motor's* Technical Editor, also a works Dolomite and Rover SD1 racer, reckons that PBM 744W delivered one of his finest driving experiences.

Nor was this at the expense of comfort. The Vantage ran on softer springs than the standard V8. Perfectly-matched damping resulted in an overall ride quality that, though firm, was never jarring.

In the late Autumn of 1983, after somehow persuading Victor Gauntlett to loan me AML 1 to drive across Europe, I discovered how crucial the Pirelli CN12 tyres had been to that



1987 ASTON MARTIN V8 VANTAGE

mix. All Vantages were by then fitted with the same company's P7s.

In my 1500-mile European adventure with the Vantage, I recorded overall fuel consumption of 13.4mpg. That may sound excessively thirsty but the overall figure in *Motor's* test was 11.3mpg! The difference was due I am sure to the fact that much of my continental tour was on autobahns and though I was driving hard most of the way there were inevitably periods of cruising in traffic.

Whenever I had to back off, a queue of half a dozen BMW 7-series caught up. When the road cleared, I changed down to third and once again they became distant specks in the rear-view mirror.

The P7s had a higher speed rating than the CN12s, which was why Pirelli, worried about blowouts that might result from sustaining 160mph-plus over a long distance, insisted on the switch. AML was in no position to demand a redesigned CN12 with a higher speed rating.

A few years earlier, Rex Greenslade, maxing a standard Aston V8 in Belgium, had suffered a sudden failure of a rear Avon tyre at just over 150mph and narrowly avoided an accident. He noted that the surviving rear tyre was exceptionally hot.

On the autobahn, AML 1 was perfectly stable at maximum speed and the way it changed direction was beyond reproach. On country roads, in contrast, I was disappointed.

The Vantage's P7s were not as low-profile as those fitted to some other high-performance cars of that era but they had the same squared edges. This did not suit the Aston's chassis. Ride quality, though still acceptable, had firmed up noticeably. Worse than that, though, was that the handling finesse had been blunted. Steering response in particular had lost its magic.

MVG owned PBM 744W from 1981 until 1991. It was sold at auction by Bonhams for £98,940 (including premium) in 2013. However, values have increased greatly since then and the car is probably now worth double that amount, though still a fraction of the price tag on a genuine Blower Bentley.

Before the auction, Victor's Vantage had undergone a restoration involving 3000 man-hours of work. I dread to imagine how much that cost. It was fitted with P7s. It remains possible to obtain the CN12 and if the car were mine (and it is in my dreams), at the earliest opportunity I would put it back onto the rubber that suited it best. ●