

RESTORATION | DB2/4 VIGNALE



CROWN JEWEL



Built for the King of Belgium, later exported to the States, and rediscovered in a state of neglect, a unique Vignale-bodied DB2/4 is slowly being restored to its former glory

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'LML/802 IS THE ONLY SURVIVING VIGNALE-BODIED ASTON MARTIN'

The 1950s were something of a new golden age for coachbuilding. After the privations of wartime, monied car enthusiasts could once again begin to indulge themselves, and the wealthiest of them enjoyed nothing better than commissioning a bespoke set of clothes for the latest chassis from the likes of Ferrari, Maserati, Bentley, Rolls-Royce and, of course, Aston Martin.

The DB2/4 proved a particularly well-suited platform for these flights of fancy. A dozen left-hand-drive rolling chassis were shipped to various coachbuilders in Italy and Switzerland in the mid-50s, and the results were as startling and varied as the jet-like DB2/4 Supersonic by Ghia and the sublime DB2/4 Spyder by Touring. Two of the 12 went to Carrozzeria Alfredo Vignale of Turin. One was bodied for a customer in France, that car now missing and presumed lost; the other became the car you see here. And what a tale it has to tell.

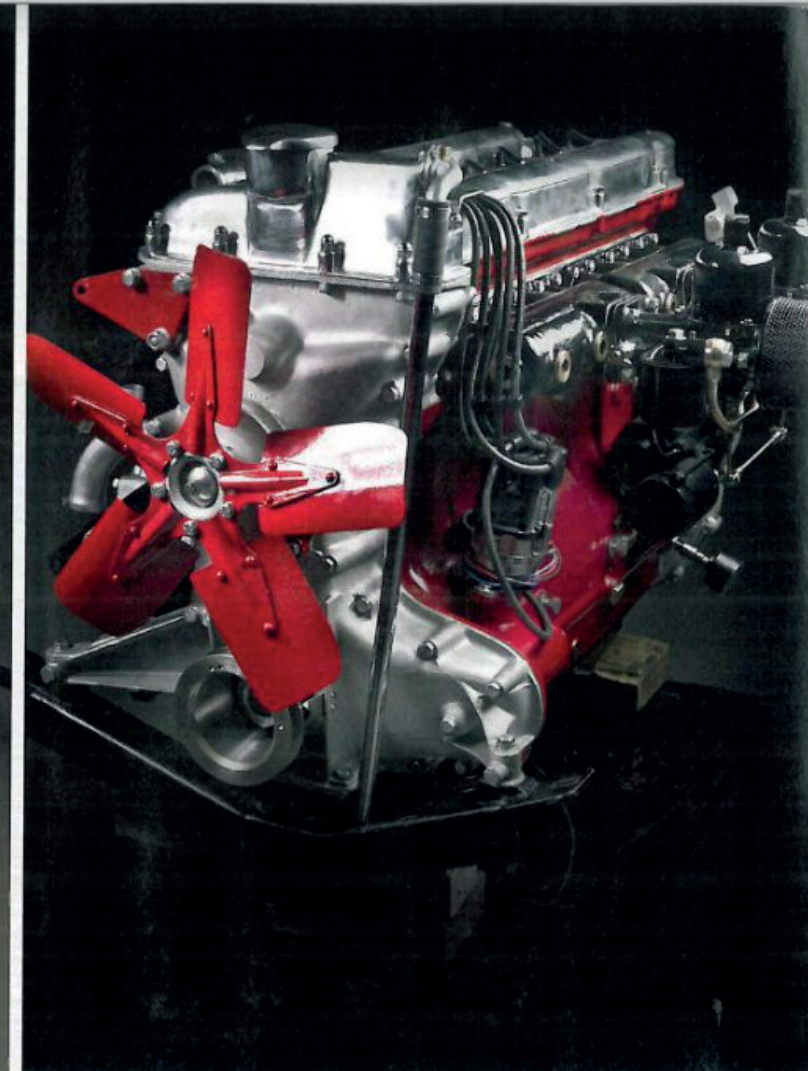
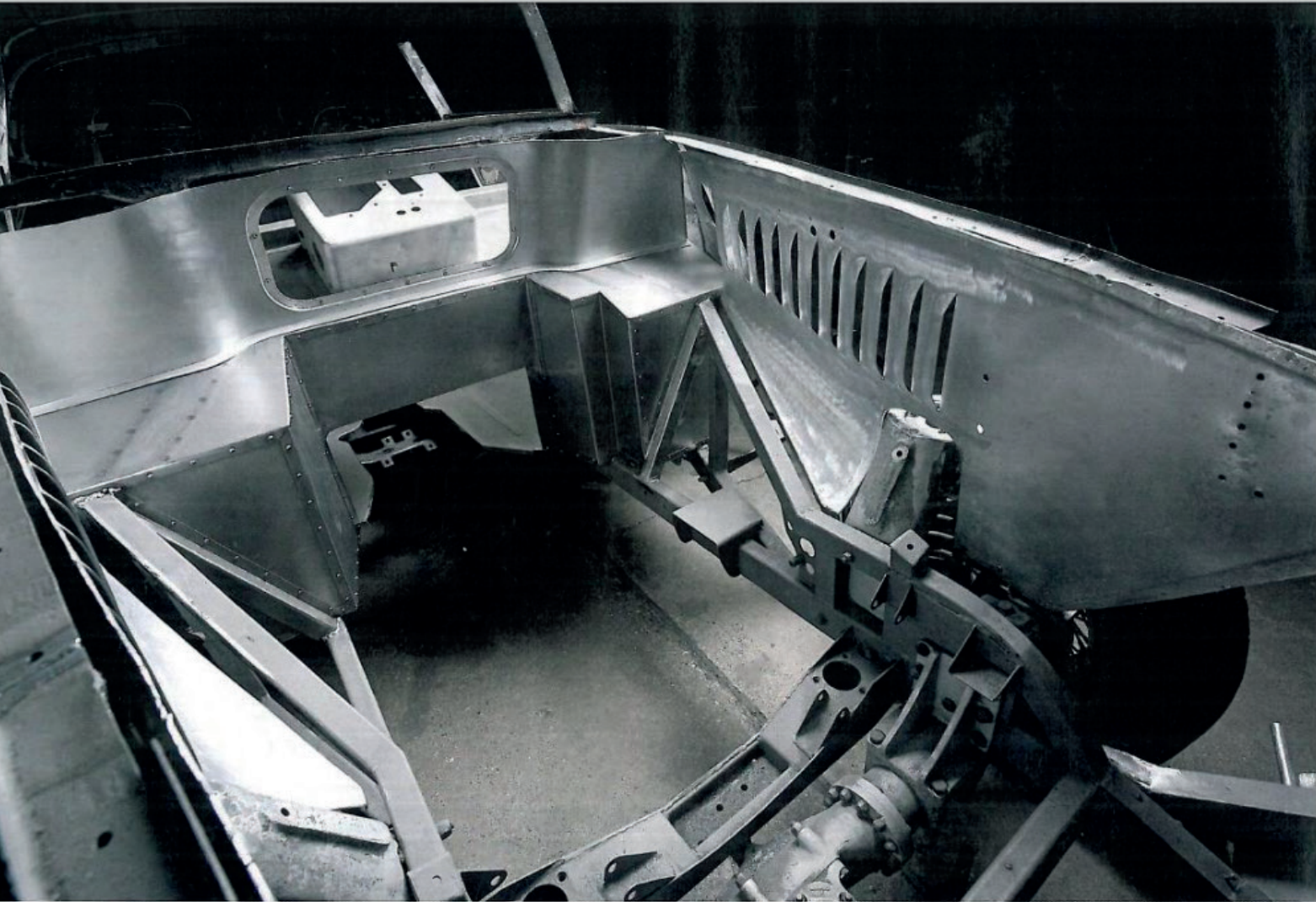
Chassis number LML/802 was delivered to Vignale in September 1954. The running gear included the recently enlarged, 2.9-litre version of the LB6 straight-six engine, peak power up from 105bhp to a rather more vigorous 140bhp. It was also fitted with the longer-striding 3.73:1 rear axle.

The client was a young car-loving royal, His Majesty King Baudouin of Belgium, just turned 24. Baudouin had acceded to the throne in 1951, when his father, Leopold III, abdicated. The old king had never quite been forgiven for surrendering to the Nazis – too readily, many thought – when Belgium was invaded in 1941. He'd also attracted opprobrium for his second marriage, to Mary Lilian Bael, an English-born Belgian commoner who became Princess Lilian or, as she was later known, the Princess of Réthy. And it was the princess who introduced Baudouin to Vignale...

BORN IN 1913 in Grugliasco near Turin, Alfredo Vignale was steeped in the coachbuilding traditions. He was a metalwork apprentice at the age of just 11, and by 17 was working for Stabilimenti Farina, at the time managed by Giovanni Farina, older brother of the legendary Battista 'Pinin' Farina. Alfredo's plans to set up his own business were delayed by the Second World War, but in 1948 he established Carrozzeria Vignale at Via Cigliano in Turin.

From the top
First owner King Baudouin. In the early '60s the Aston was bought by an American soldier who removed the front bumper and the slats in the grille. By the '90s it was ripe for restoration. In fact both body and chassis were in surprisingly sound condition







DB2/4 Vignale

ENGINE In-line 6-cylinder, 2922cc **MAX POWER** 140bhp @ 5000rpm **MAX TORQUE** n/a
TRANSMISSION Four-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **SUSPENSION** Front: independent, trailing links, coil springs, lever-arm dampers. Rear: live axle, parallel trailing arms, Panhard rod, coil springs, lever-arm dampers **STEERING** Worm-and-roller, unassisted **BRAKES** Drum brakes, front and rear
WHEELS 6 x 16in, wire-spoke, front and rear **TYRES** 185 HR16 front and rear **WEIGHT** c1300kg (est)
POWER TO WEIGHT c110bhp/ton **0-60MPH** c10.5sec **TOP SPEED** c120mph

Alfredo liked to describe himself as an artist in metal, each chassis akin to the sculptor's block of marble, from which he would bring fantasies to life with a blend of aluminium, glass and chrome. His styling house's futuristic, streamlined designs, many the work of a young Giovanni Michelotti, were soon attracting the attention of manufacturers and wealthy individuals alike. Alfredo's big break came in 1950 with the body for a Ferrari 166 Mille Miglia Coupe, which was particularly well received. Vignale would go on to clothe no fewer than 156 individual Ferraris.

It was one of these Ferrari commissions that would lead directly to the car you see here. In 1954, Vignale bodied a Ferrari 250MM for Princess Lilian, who even visited Alfredo at the coachworks to choose from four Michelotti designs; the one she selected featured a dramatic wraparound windscreen and hatchback. After taking delivery and clocking up several thousand kilometres, back in Belgium she showed it off to the young King Baudouin. His Majesty, well-known for his love of fast cars (he also owned a Porsche Spyder and several Maseratis, and later a standard-bodied DB2/4), was so impressed that he commissioned Vignale to rebody an Aston Martin chassis on very similar lines.

And so chassis LML/802 was shipped out to Turin and fitted with its one-off hand-shaped aluminium coachwork, its distinctive fastback design featuring a large opening rear hatch glazed with Perspex, a wraparound front windscreen and a typically elegant, minimalistic Vignale interior. It was delivered on March 10, 1955.

It's not known how much the young king drove the Aston, but we do know that he sold it in the late-1950s to a palace aide, one TR Mottershead, and that it was kept in Moselle, France, before changing hands again in the

early 1960s. The new owner was James Toth, an American soldier serving with NATO and based in the SHAPE headquarters in Paris at the time. Toth found the Aston in a back-street garage in Paris and immediately fell in love with it, though he would subsequently remove the front bumper and also the slats in the front grille to, in his mind, improve its appearance.

Back in the States, he used the Aston regularly until it put a con-rod through its block. A patched repair didn't last, so he borrowed some money to buy a new engine block and internals from Aston Martin, which he collected in person. Alas, the new engine also blew up, and that was the end of Toth's Aston motoring. After advertising the non-running car around the military bases, he managed to sell it to an Army captain for \$1000, which was enough to pay off the debt he'd accrued.

There was at least one further owner, and at some point in its life the Aston was fitted with a Pontiac engine, but it eventually finished up in the hands of Roland Wommack of Virginia, and it was Wommack who in the late '90s offered it to the Aston Workshop as a restoration project. And so it was shipped to the UK, still wearing its original Vignale aluminium panels and doors, and still with the original chassis, suspension, bumpers, grille and light clusters. The second engine, the gearbox, carburettors and pedal gear – plus most of its superb period detailing – were also present and restorable.

Clockwise from top left
 Original bumpers and light clusters were able to be refurbished; non-original engine rebuilt with sensible upgrades to prolong life; near-completed car looks even better in the metal; interior still a work in progress and will be trimmed to buyer's own taste

'It was in surprisingly good condition,' recalls Clive Dickinson, managing director of the Beamish-based Aston specialist. 'The restoration has been a

long process chiefly because we've had to fit it in around other jobs. And it was only when DB2 values started to go up that we made a start on it.'

After the entire vehicle was stripped to its component parts, work began first on rebuilding the straight-six engine that came with the car, retaining as many of the original components as possible, though unfortunately both the block and cylinder head were found to have serious defects and cracks, so new replacements were sourced. The team also took the opportunity to uprate a number of key components, such as the oil pump, to ensure improved performance and longer engine life. They also fitted a set of fast road cams, while the clutch was uprated to DB5/6 spec.

The steering, suspension and brakes have been given a similarly thorough refurb, with a few subtle upgrades – including switchable electric power assistance for the steering. One unusual feature of the DB2 is its trailing-arm front suspension, the anti-roll bar and lower arm being housed within an aluminium casing that doubles as an oil bath for the needle roller bearings, so the restoration included new bearings and seals. The existing drum brakes were able to be retained and simply refurbished.

Meanwhile the bodywork was removed and the chassis placed on a jig and bead-blasted. The hefty square-section steel framework was found to be in excellent order, though the floor panels, inner wheelarches and front bulkhead did require new metal to be welded in. Once complete, the whole structure was primed, undercoated and powder-coated.

The bodyshell was refurbished by Northampton-based Shapecraft then refitted to the chassis before new door-frames were fitted, aligned and reskinned. Then it was into preparation. Etch-priming to provide a key was followed by coats of high-build primer and hundreds of hours of

flattig, filling and rubbing down to achieve the perfect base for the two-tone top coats, finally sealed with a coat of lacquer. 'Photos don't really do it justice,' says Dickinson. 'In the metal, it's a really sexy car.'

King Baudouin would reign for 42 years until his death in 1993, by which time he was the longest-reigning monarch in Europe and a much-loved figurehead. At the funeral, Cardinal Godfried Danneels commented: 'There are kings who are more than kings; they are shepherds of their people. King Baudouin was such a king.'

Vignale fell on hard times in the late '60s, Alfredo selling the business to Alessandro de Tomaso in 1969, when de Tomaso was looking for a factory in which to build his Pantera supercar. The very day he signed the sale agreement, Alfredo died in a car crash near the factory. He was 56.

The Vignale name was later sold to Ford and has since been resurrected, initially on Aston Martin's 1993 Lagonda Vignale concept car (Aston being owned by Ford at the time). Then, in September 2013, Ford of Europe announced plans to use the Vignale name for its new luxury sub-brand. So now you can have a Vignale version of a Mondeo or an S-Max, which is a very long way removed from a Vignale 250MM or DB2/4 (though since Ford stole Aston's grille, perhaps not so far as it ought to be...).

There was one other Vignale-bodied Aston, a 1953 DB3-based racing car, but it was crashed and the body subsequently fitted to a contemporary Ferrari chassis. With the other DB2/4-based car having long been assumed lost, LML/802 is the only surviving Vignale Aston.

'It's a unique and highly collectable Aston with real significance for both Aston and Vignale,' says Dickinson, who values it at around £2 million. If you're feeling flush, you can find out more at www.aston.co.uk. **V**