

# ROYAL BLOOD

WORDS BEN BARRY | PHOTOGRAPHY ANDY MORGAN

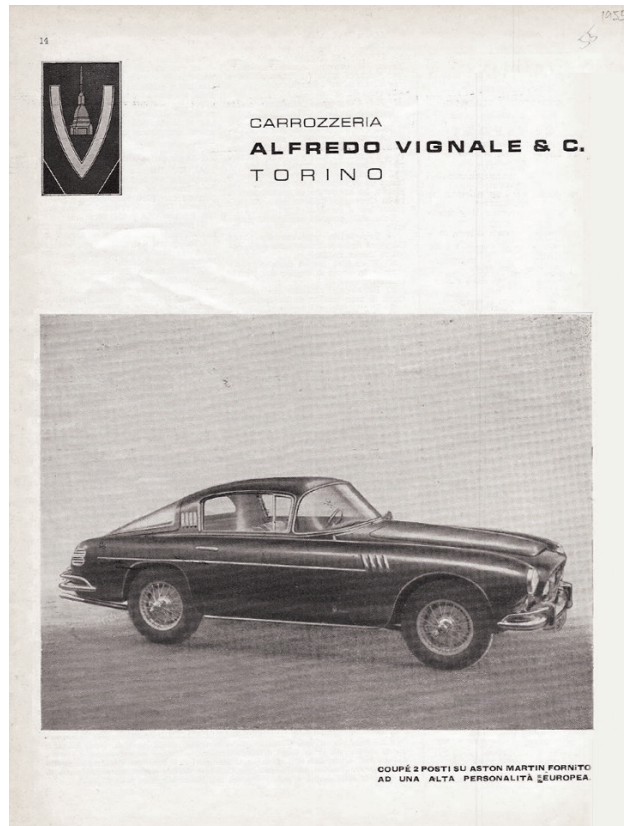
This Vignale-bodied Aston was built for a king and ended up in a pauper's grave. Now, after a long, painstaking restoration, it's finally complete again - and we're the first to drive it







**Left, right and below**  
Car-mad King Baudouin of Belgium was just 24 when he commissioned his special-bodied Aston from Carozzeria Vignale, better known for clothing Ferrari chassis. The finished car (below) was delivered in March 1955







**I**n 1993 the 24 Hours of Spa came to a halt with nine hours' racing remaining, not because of some catastrophic accident, but because King Baudouin of Belgium had passed away after 42 years on the throne. While some spectators and racers were no doubt peeved, it was an appropriate mark of respect for a well-loved ruler who was also something of a sports car aficionado; among the cars Baudouin (pronounced 'bow-de-wan') owned during his lifetime were a Porsche Spyder, various Maseratis and a standard Aston Martin DB2/4.

Meanwhile, as Baudouin's subjects carpeted the royal palace with floral tributes and every reigning European monarch cleared their diary to attend his funeral, around the same time this one-off 1954 Aston Martin DB2/4 Vignale was discovered languishing in a pauper's grave. Commissioned by the king when he was just 24 years old and only recently ascended to the throne, with bespoke Vignale bodywork and interior built over DB2/4 mechanicals, it had been discarded in a scrapyard in the US state of Virginia, fitted with a replacement Pontiac engine and rear axle of all things.

Even Aston Workshop wasn't aware of the car's aristocratic provenance when the County Durham-based specialist acquired it and shipped it back to the UK. It sat in a corner of the premises for many years, but once that extraordinary back story became clear and values of rare classics began to rise steeply in the years following the financial crisis, it was a case of when rather than if it would be returned to its former glory.

The restoration has been a painstaking process, with work scheduled around more pressing customer jobs and often delayed by sourcing idiosyncratic detail components; regular readers might recall that we featured the partially complete restoration in the winter 2016 issue of *Vantage*. Today it is finally finished, once again fit for a king, and we're privileged to be the first people outside Aston Workshop to drive a one-off Aston that is now valued at around £2 million.

*'It had been discarded in a scrapyard in the US state of Virginia, fitted with a Pontiac engine and rear axle of all things'*



**Above and right**  
Six-footer Ben Barry finds the cabin a little tight for headroom and the wheel a touch broad, but the non-standard electrical assistance for the steering is very welcome. Rigorously researched details, inside and out, are wonderful

The flush door handles hinge out at the push of a button, a little like a blade in a Swiss Army knife. I open the door, step over a two-inch-wide chunk of carpeted sill and lower myself inside. Baudouin was not known for ostentation, at least in the context of royalty, but this is a suitably indulgent interior. Upper portions of the bespoke dashboard and door inners are finished in the same Peacock Blue as the exterior (the exterior roof is Silver Birch), with the regular DB2/4's centrally mounted row of dials replaced here by a trio of Smiths dials arranged like planetary gears around the steering column's sun. The crucial revs to the left and speed to the right are oddly obscured from view, leaving 'amps' most directly in your line of sight.

The rich scent of leather permeates the cabin, and you sit propped by a backrest that splits 50:50 but stretches from door-to-door, if with individual squabs either side of the transmission tunnel. The leather is soft, but everything you grip feels cold and hard and often requires significant exertion to operate: door pulls like weighty door knockers, handles with the heft of fine silver cutlery, controls for the lights and wipers like organ stops, all of it fashioned in bespoke aluminium or chrome-plated steel.

Over your shoulder you note the large glazed rear hatch, and that the 2/4's plus-two seats have made way for a leather-trimmed rear deck with twin leather straps and chromed longitudinal strakes topped with grippy rubber. If there were ever an invitation to throw in a weekend bag and tour Europe's other kingdoms, this is it. Even the glass hatch's struts are stitched in leather.

Workshop manager John Gray tells me that the cabin fittings were mostly missing when the Aston arrived in the North East, and while the same interior details feature regularly in Vignale creations, their absence provided the

*'The recreated details are correct right down to the striking dark pinstripe inset in the Nardi wheel's rim'*

restoration's biggest challenge. Today the recreated details are correct right down to the striking dark pinstripe inset in the Nardi wheel's thin wooden rim; the attention to detail is fabulous.

It's tight in here, though: bespoke coachwork includes a more rakish roof than the standard model's, so if you're six feet tall, as Baudouin reportedly was, your hair will at best brush the headlining. That Nardi wheel with its striking metal spokes also feels a size too big, nudging your left hand close up to the door.

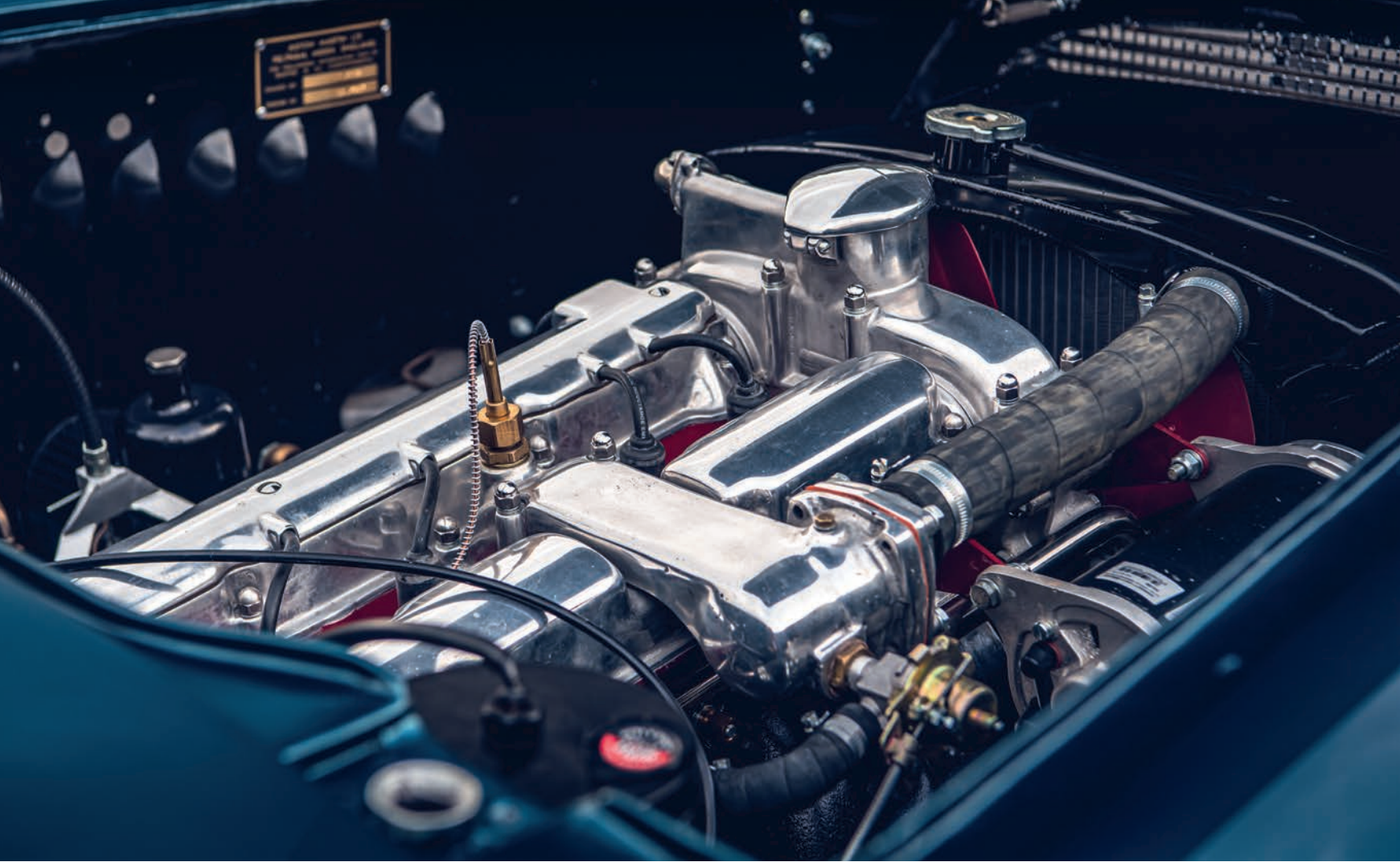
The briefest press of the button below the ignition key has the 2.9-litre straight-six clearing its throat and settling to a wonderfully smooth idle. Aston Martin quoted 140bhp at the time; this particular engine was built on-site at Aston Workshop using original parts where possible, run-in on its dyno and equipped with a couple of modern upgrades, including a geared-type starter motor, hence the super-responsive wake-up.

The uprated DB5/6 clutch bites progressively, and as you move away you're immediately glad of the electrical assistance added to the refurbished original worm-and-













**Above and left** 1960s owner removed bumpers and grille slats, emphasising the link to Vignale-bodied Ferraris; as the car was discovered in a yard in Virginia; and mid body restoration. Left: nose badge is only external Aston reference, but engine and running gear are pure DB2/4

roller set-up to remove the hard labour from low-speed manoeuvres; it's a sensible upgrade and one that's easy to revert to factory spec if preferred.

With play at the wheel's dead-ahead position, you guide the car with casual, broad brushstrokes of inputs, though the nose follows accurately enough, and soon we're bobbing along the country lanes on Aston Workshop's doorstep, making for the wilds of the Pennines nearby. It's a dramatic landscape in which to put some of the first miles on this freshly completed restoration.

If the DB2/4 Vignale has been quite the jigsaw puzzle to piece back together, the corners were put in place easily enough. Investigation of Aston Martin factory records confirmed the rolling chassis was delivered to Vignale in 1954, one of only 12 left-hand-drive examples delivered to Italian and Swiss coachbuilders in period.

A simple internet search of the chassis number LML/802 confirmed the regal connections and that it was quite probably the only survivor of two dispatched to Carrozzeria Alfredo Vignale, the other having been commissioned by a French client and now presumed lost.

Baudouin's Aston Martin chassis had been delivered to Via Cigliano in Turin just six years after the coachbuilder was established, though Vignale had previously worked for Stabilimenti Farina and built up an impressive back catalogue in his own name, particularly of bespoke aluminium bodies for Ferraris. Vignale had, in fact, bodied a Ferrari 250MM for Princess Lilian, Baudouin's step-mother. The young king's Aston DB2/4 was crafted much in its likeness, right down to the wraparound windscreen and hatchback. He took delivery on 10 March 1955.

When Aston Workshop ran a story on the unrestored car on its website, former owner James Toth called John Gray

*'Crucially all the original hand-formed aluminium panels were intact and in good order, as was the chassis'*

one evening and later supplied period pictures that proved an invaluable reference point in the restoration.

Toth had been unaware of the car's provenance (you can imagine the dawning realisation!) but he also helped confirm some of the ownership chain: LML/802 had been sold to royal aide TR Mottershead in the late '50s, and from there to Toth, who was a US soldier serving in Paris in the early 1960s and discovered the car in a back-street garage. Toth returned home with the Vignale, damaged both the original engine and a replacement during his tenure, then sold the car to an army captain as a non-runner.

While a significant number of original parts were missing when the Vignale was discovered in that Virginian scrapyard, crucially all the original hand-formed aluminium panels were intact, as were its bespoke bumpers, with their distinctive little overrides and contours cut to hug the bodywork. The panels were actually found to be in good order beneath the rather tired paintwork, as apparently was the chassis, which required only a little extra metal to be let in. It has all been finished to Aston Workshop's meticulous standards.





### Specification

**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 (electro-mechanical assistance upgrade) **BRAKES** Drums **WHEELS** 6 x 16in, wire-spoke  
**TYRES** 185 HR16 Pirelli Corsa **WEIGHT** c1300kg (est) **POWER TO WEIGHT** c110bhp/ton (est) **0-60MPH** c10.5sec **TOP SPEED** c120mph  
**WHEELS** 18in wire-spoked **TYRES** 5.25/5.50-18 crossply **WEIGHT** 890kg 0-60MPH n/a **TOP SPEED** 110mph

The timber frame to which body panels are attached was replaced with new ash, and the running gear refreshed, including the trailing-arm front suspension and a reconditioned period-correct Salisbury rear axle. New wire wheels were fabricated on-site, the drum brakes refurbed.

When you walk round the DB2/4 Vignale in its beautifully finished metal, you catch a number of automotive references. The eggcrate grille, shapely front wings and forward-hinged bonnet recall front-engined Ferraris of the early 1950s. There are echoes, too, of early Corvettes in the chrome details, two-tone paint and wraparound front windscreen with its distinctive reverse taper from roof to body, greatly reducing the traditional A-pillar blind spot. The large rear screen calls to mind the Jensen Interceptor, a later Vignale creation. The only Aston Martin reference is the badge on the nose.

The Vignale certainly turns heads as we drive deeper into the Pennines, passing through Stanhope and Edmondbyers as the confines of dry-stone walls and hedgerows cede to the wilder, more open moorland. The chassis moves rhythmically with the landscape's undulations as its Pirelli tyres' generous sidewalls neutralise the bumps, making this a relaxing way to enjoy such spectacular scenery.

At first, performance feels distinctly leisurely over this rolling landscape with its occasional knots of tight turns, but King Baudouin specified a tall 3.73:1 final drive to calm the revs for long-distance touring, with the trade-off that acceleration from lower speeds is blunted. You quickly learn to work this engine harder for it to come alive, and when you do the twin-cam unit actually delivers plentiful acceleration. It hums along with a lovely warmth to its exhaust note and smooth balance to its machinations, and rather than running out of puff when extended, it actually

feels increasingly energetic the more you ask of it and still perfectly in balance, egging you on to keep your foot in; Aston Workshop added fast-road-spec camshafts, which no doubt explains some of the high-rpm enthusiasm.

An aluminium sphere the size of a snooker ball caps the gear stick, with a shift action that perfectly mirrors its appearance – a precision slice across the gate, and a lovely metal-on-metal clink as you slot each of the four ratios home. A tad physical perhaps, but you'd need to be spectacularly ham-fisted to crunch such a mechanically tight shift.

It also makes heel-and-toe downshifts a pleasure. The pedal box might be squashed in the far left of the footwell, but the pedals are nicely arranged, and as you ease the gear lever through the gate it feels natural to squeeze the brake pedal and blip the throttle, giving a hair-raising rasp as the revs soar and you bridge the gap to the next ratio.

Rev-matching is as much necessity as showy technique: with drums all-round, the brake pedal requires a robust squeeze into the carpet to summon anything approaching retardation, so you end up indulging those downshifts all the more with their satisfying flourishes or revs, using the engine braking and becoming even more involved in the process of driving.

Really, though, this isn't a sports car designed to sprint cross-country, rather a grand tourer intended to amble regally over the landscape, straight-six purring away, occupants cosseted in a snug if luxuriously appointed cabin and perhaps forgetting the responsibility of reigning over an entire nation before they'd barely turned 21.

What a pleasure to experience this DB2/4 Vignale just as the King of Belgium commissioned it. Hopefully one day it will return to the royal Belgian courtyard and its extraordinary rebirth will be complete. ♣

#### Above

Car is now visually as close as possible to how it was delivered to King Baudouin in March '55; any discreet upgrades under the skin are simply there to make it more useable. We have a feeling the young king would have liked that