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PERFECTION by Alastair Clements

Sublime curves meet flowing lines as Aston Martin's ultimate coupe – the DB4GT – returns to its spiritual home, Goodwood circuit. Alastair Clements laps it up.



Let's be controversial for a moment. Most Aston Martins are disappointing. Get past the movie starlet looks and Buckingham Palace on wheels cabin and you find an old-world drive behind that facade - laid-back when it should be life-affirming. But there is one Aston coupe that surpasses the promise of its looks: the DB4GT.

Few truly usable road cars can take a class win at a sprint meeting and only weeks later carry off class honours in a prestigious concours. Yet this DB4GT, chassis 0107, the seventh car built and the third with right-hand drive, which left the factory on January 27 1960, did just that a year ago. Forty-two years on, its performance figures wouldn't look out of place for a new DB7 - 0-60mph in 6.4 secs, 150-odd flat out.

The DB4GT is a classic example of racing improving the breed: it was launched at the Earls Court Motor Show in October '59, five months after the prototype's maiden win at Silverstone. But, unlike the contemporary Ferraris it is compared against, the Aston was always a thoroughly usable road car adapted for the track - rather than a racer compromised for the road. Aston Martin general manager John Wyer conceived the DB4GT as a way for the firm to continue racing after its retirement from sports cars and grands prix. The glorious, Touring-styled DB4 had been in production for a year and was a competent track car but, with a little modification, it became a winner.

Chief engineer Harold Beach set to work on his hefty steel chassis, lopping 5in from the car's wheelbase visible in the GT's shorter doors. It used the same Superleggera construction, albeit with thinner 18-gauge magnesium alloy instead of the DB4's 16-gauge - a fact not lost on the devoted owner of 9 KPL, John Mayston-Taylor, who winces; "You only have to look at it and it dents." A new cylinder head was developed for Tadek Marek's straight-six engine, with two spark plugs per cylinder, timed by a pair of distributors, the same 92mm bore and stroke and its compression ratio boosted to 9:1 to give 302bhp - 62bhp more than a standard DB4.



With its reduced length and smooth nose, the GT is a taut, compact shape yet its proportions look just right on the track where a standard DB4 can look like a stretched limo. This car's Tickford-built body was originally finished in Bristol Red with off-white Connolly hide interior, but it has been restored in traditional Aston racing green, which perfectly highlights the DB4GT's exquisite profile. The tight mesh grille confirms this as one of the first, and the creases leading back from the grille top are perfection, fluting back and melting gently into the wings. That grin became legend after the DB5's role as James Bond's wheels in Goldfinger, but the DB4GT beat it to the big screen, featuring in



Wrong Arm of the Law. Brightwork is restrained, too, with no fussy overriders and this early car lacks alloy surrounds for the Perspex headlamp covers.

Detailing within those covers is neat, with tiny sidelights pointing back into the headlamp bowls. The GT was the first Aston to feature the faired front end that would appear on DB4 Vantage, DB5 and DB6 and reappear, in spirit at least, on the DB7. Gaping air intakes atop and below the nose signal the GT's intent, plus the added aggression of flared rear arches on this car - crafted when it was a regular racer and retained to add purpose to its flanks - each wing topped by a fuel filler.

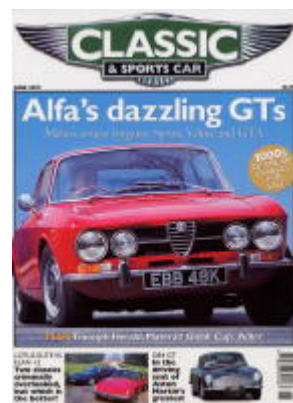


Delightful frameless doors are narrow for clambering into the Aston but, once inside, the opulent interior is utterly at odds with its road- racer legend. There are such niceties as a comfortable clutch footrest and a standard Tex rotating mirror for day and night driving. Ahead there's the Aston Martin vernacular grille-shaped dash and, behind, a large, trimmed luggage shelf. Three GTs were fitted with small rear seats at the factory but, with the boot packing a 32-gallon fuel tank and a full-sized spare strapped on top, you need that extra space. Behind the driver's seat, a standard battery cut-off reminds you it's a racer, as does the sparse headlining following the line of the Superleggera tubing. You sit upright, the big three-spoke wheel positioned low on your legs. It uses different veneers to that of the DB4 and DB5, and



had to be remade by hand. The snug footwell, housing light, floor-hinged pedals, shelves down from the seat.

Taking a few laps around the fast Goodwood circuit, it's easy to see why the DB4GT excelled here. Keeping the revs low to warm the engine properly as the Webers spit and cough their complaints, snicking up through second, third, fourth, you ask if this is really a David Brown 'box -





the stuff of tractor jibes and endless criticism. It is, but Mayston Taylor admits to replacing the twin-plate Borg and Beck clutch with a friendlier, more modern alternative and stresses the time and money spent getting it to this standard. Evidently not all DB4GTs change gear with this kind of delicacy. Standard DB4 rack-and-pinion steering is also surprisingly light, thanks to the tall but correct 95-profile 6.00 Avon Turbospeeds on standard 16in Borrani wires. But turn into a bend and it loads up, becoming purely physical, full of feel and precision. And the feedback continues through the seat; with those predictable cross-plies you always feel sure of what the car is doing beneath you.

Soon, you start to build up a rhythm, gaining the confidence to push it through corners, becoming less stilted and - in your head - more Stirling. First corner is the double apex at Madgwick and the short chassis immediately makes the GT feel nimble with eager turn-in. But rear spring rates softened from the DB4's 132lb to 110lb means the back hunkers down as the weight transfers and the Aston squirms on its tyres, an unnerving experience in a car capable of 150mph.

While it is 185lb lighter than a DB4, the GT is far from a featherweight. It is still nearly 2800lb of car, and feels it on the track. There's not too much roll, but there is little lateral support from those big comfy seats, so you hang on to the wheel to stop sliding and put the power down through the wasteland of Fordwater. Speed builds up deceptively, even with this car's standard 3.54:1 ratio Salisbury back axle and Powrlok limited-slip diff. Various options were available up to 2.93:1, giving a theoretical 170mph.

The famous St Mary's is approaching: you brake hard - too hard. The Girling all-disc brakes that replaced the standard car's Dunlops need a good shove but bite superbly. Back on the power tentatively through the corner and the heavy nose starts to push wide. Squeeze the responsive throttle and it neutralises, a bit more and the back starts to slide. This really is a car that steers as much on the throttle as the wheel. Braking and downchanging for the long, tight double apex at Lavant is a joy as you revel in the pedal spacing that proves the Aston's racing credentials. It invites you to heel and toe, the exhausts offering a lazy bark in appreciation.

It is starting to rain, heavily. The Aston's wipers are effective, and you're still confident. But any thoughts of Moss-like heroism are dashed as you put the power down too early exiting the tight second apex and the tail snaps violently, the skinny Avons spin away all 302 horses and your heart-rate runs through the roof. Nervously, you build speed again down Lavant straight and then battle understeer through Woodcote, knuckles white as they grip the wheel's thin rim, the nose pushing wide towards the rumble strips on the exit.



Through the final chicane at a snail's pace, tiptoeing on the wet surface, and a modern rally weapon shatters the illusion of 1960. Cheering crowds vanish to be replaced with bleak, empty stands and the odd orange-suited marshal battling against the wind. The Lancer Evo's tail-lights are already disappearing down the straight, but the DB4GT has yet to play its trump card. Until now you've chickened out, changed up early, and let the massively tractable engine haul you lazily around. But at 4000rpm the massive 'six' changes from Thomas the Tank Engine to The Flying Scotsman. Hold it in gear, light a few gallons of fuel and the Evo is back in focus, its driver alarmed as this 40-year-old beast hauls in his benchmark performance saloon. With three twin-choke Webers, that glorious engine takes the Aston to a standing quarter-mile in 14 secs. And the delivery is seamless: the twin distributors are notoriously difficult to set up but, once right, they make the effort worthwhile.

Laps over, you tool into the pits to collect your imaginary laurels. Only when you stop, do you realise what a physical drive the GT is, and this is after just a few laps - imagine 24 hours' worth. Fun over, the DB4 reveals its civilised side. With tools, clothes, bags and spares stashed on the luggage shelf, Mr and Mrs sit in peerless luxury and are cosseted by a surprisingly good ride for the cruise back up to the West End to catch a show. With roundels removed, the Aston is just as at home cruising around Kensington as it was on the track.

