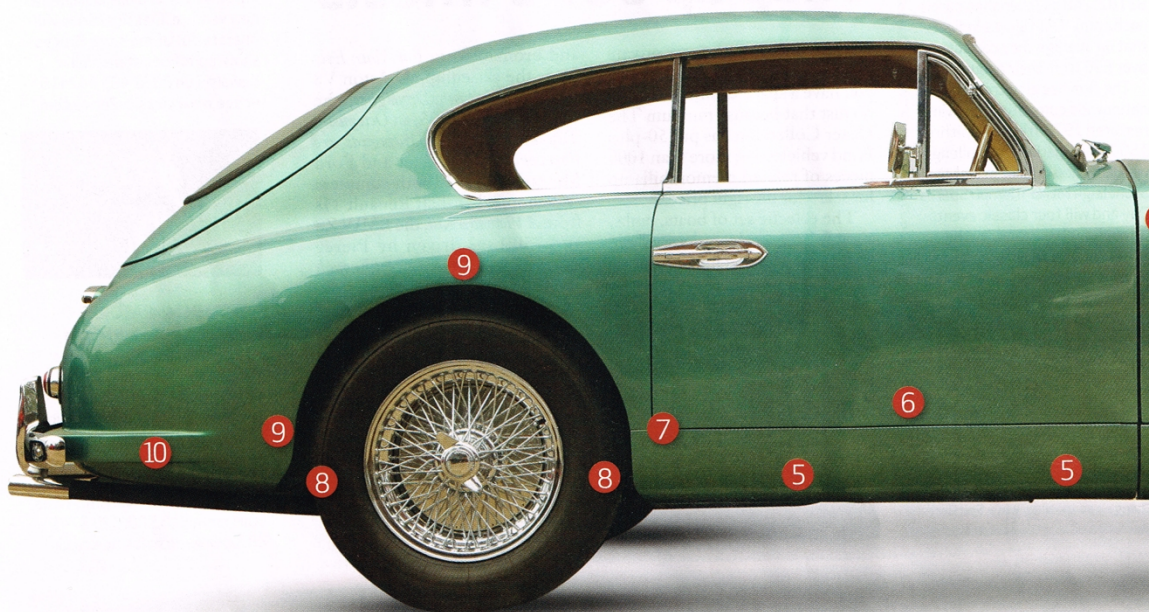


ASTON DB2-MkIII

Early David Brown Aston Martins make great drivers' cars, and have rocketed in value over the past decade. **Malcolm McKay** explains how to track down a top example

PHOTOGRAPHY TONY BAKER



It's easy to forget that the DB2 was a sophisticated car when new in 1950. A true 'Grand Tourer' before the term came into common usage, it comfortably housed two adults plus copious luggage. Coil springs featured all round, and it was one of the earliest cars with two-speed self-parking wipers and washers as standard from the DB2/4 of '53 onwards. That model was also one of the world's first hatchbacks, with two rear seats and a folding backrest.

Gear and tractor magnate David Brown had responded to an advert in *The Times* in late 1946 for a sports car firm – and bought Aston Martin for £20k, with a few tools, the Atom prototype and the services of Claude Hill. Having designed the superb chassis for the 1948 Two Litre Sports and its four-cylinder engine, Hill left when Brown purchased Lagonda for its smooth 'six'.

Frank Feeley then devised the DB2 coupé for Le Mans, based on Hill's chassis. Primarily a racer, it would be progressively lightened with a drilled chassis and thinner alloy shell for competition; that body, too, evolved to house the classic DB grille and higher lamps in a smoother nose.

As *The Autocar* wrote in '53: 'The Aston Martin is an expensive car designed to cater for the

connoisseur of sports cars who is not limited by financial considerations.' But it was lauded as: 'A car that any enthusiastic and experienced driver will be pleased to drive regardless of distance.'

Drive one today and, yes, you are going back 60 years and must allow for that – but it should not feel harsh, uncomfortable, unpredictable or unduly heavy in any respect. If it does, then work is needed and the vendor should adjust the price.

DB2 bodyshells were made by Aston Martin, DB2/4s (Mk1) by Mulliner, and later models by Tickford. Mulliner-bodied cars have cast-aluminium sills, scuttles and door-shut faces, while the rest are steel – and rust.

Designed at Lagonda by Willie Watson for WO Bentley, the twin-cam 'six' was advanced but complex, with a cast-iron wet-liner block fitted with three cast-alloy 'cheeses' bolted in to hold the crankshaft bearings. It is fragile and costly to sort if worn or neglected, so look for proof of unstinting care from a leading firm.

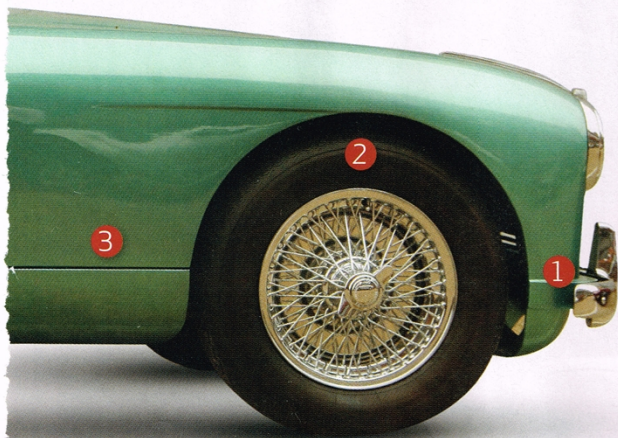
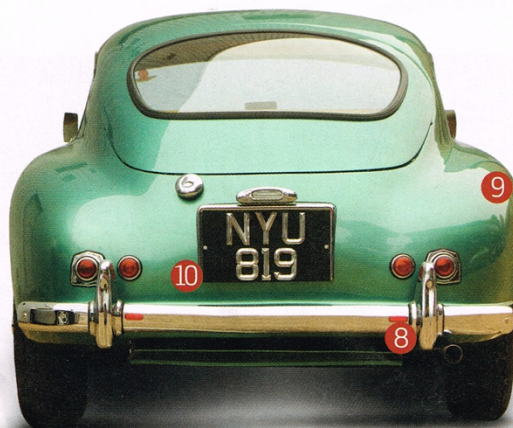
The high value of the cars means that specialists have been able to invest in manufacture of original-type and uprated components in many areas, plus the new AM Feltham Club is also improving spares availability and awareness of the constantly evolving original specifications.



Neater front end of MkIII previewed how DB4 would look



Team cars in pits at 1949 Le Mans; a DB2 came third in



Rot spots

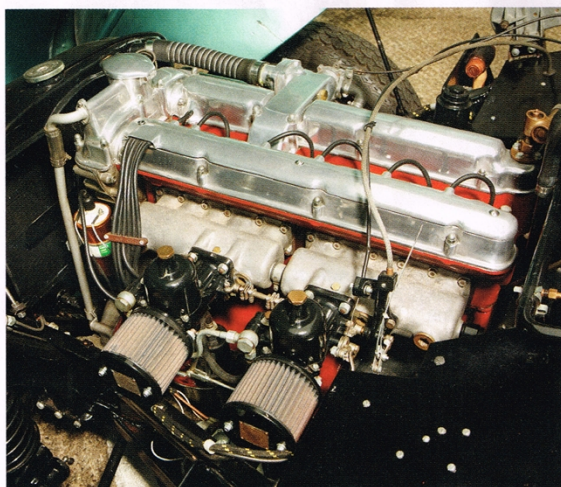
- 1 Bonnet frame, esp by chassis
- 2 Front suspension alloy turrets (they also crack)
- 3 Lower wing supports (on DB2/4 MkII and MkIII)
- 4 Front bulkhead
- 5 Chassis cruciform under gearbox and main rails
- 6 Door bottoms and window regulators
- 7 Sill panels and door-shut posts (except on Mk1)
- 8 Rear suspension mounting brackets and trailing links
- 9 Rear wheelarches
- 10 Petrol tank



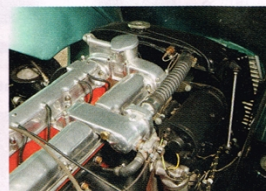
The **interior** was all hand-made, which means that it can be restored as original by trimmers if required, but buying one that's already been done is cheaper



Three-synchro David Brown **gearbox** was good for its day, and can be rebuilt. Some cars had a column change; o/d or five-speed conversions are available



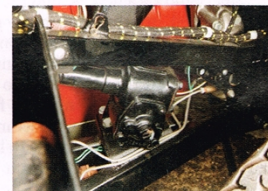
The DB MkIII **engine** is stronger but all are rapidly wrecked by lack of maintenance or inexperienced care. Examine the history, the oil pressure, indications of head-gasket leaks (emulsion on the oil-filler cap; oil in the water; weeping/staining on the block), signs of cracks in the block (rust staining) and unwanted noises from within



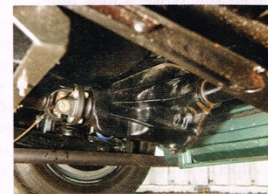
Condition of **cooling system** is vital: corrosion can damage head, crack inlet manifolds and clog rad. Look for swift warm-up, cool running and lack of leaks



Trailing-arm **suspension** needs regular lubrication to avoid seizure (front axle should be filled with oil); kits improve handling and compatibility with radials



DB2/4s had 6.00 H16 crossply tyres on 60-spoke wires. Radials make it heavy to manoeuvre; some rub the arches and hasten **steering** wear – new gears help



Salisbury 3HA **back axle** (to 2/4 MkII) can be weak; check for leaks/rumbling/whining/clunks; 4HA parts are stronger, but an axle swap is needed to fit them

BUYER'S GUIDE



Smiths instruments in dash centre on 2 and 2/4; binnacle that aped grille shape came in with MkIII

On the road

The key to a good Aston is its engine, so check its history and current condition. Oil pressure on a pre-MkIII should be 85psi cold; 50 at 2500rpm hot, with tickover pressure often low; MkIIIs should be a little higher, with 25psi minimum at tickover. Inspect for coolant leaks from the built-in water pump via a hole behind the coil (unless that's blocked, in which case it may get into the oil) and from the liner weep holes on a MkIII.

The DB2 was first to use the 'Vantage' name, for an engine boosted from 105 to 125bhp by bigger carbs, compression raised from 6.5 to 8.2:1 and revised cam timing; it became standard for the 2/4. The 2.9 came next with larger bores and 140bhp, or 165bhp with bigger valves – for the first time without replaceable seats, making unleaded petrol more of an issue. Further mods were offered up to 180bhp with triple SUs and (rarely) 195bhp triple Webers on the MkIII.

Modifying an old engine requires an experienced specialist: a new block is needed for 200bhp-plus, with careful attention to oil pressure and leakage; 2.6s need a block/sump-flange strengthening plate. You can't enlarge a 2.6-litre to 2.9 spec, although you can buy new liners that take it up to 2747cc. But the most important thing is to use the highest-quality components: you only want to rebuild the motor once.

Alperform alloy cylinder heads, based on the factory DB3S item, improve cooling and are suitable for unleaded (£6800 for a kit). Specialists can supply upgrades, ranging from carbs via five-speed all-synchro gearboxes to all-round discs, brake servos, power steering and more.



Practical DB2/4 sports a hatchback and folding rear seats

OWNER'S VIEW Barrie Robinson



"I messed about with cars way back, including the legendary Shell Rally in '55", says Robinson. "I rebuilt a Triumph TR3 in the UK before being seconded to Canada in '68. In 1980, I rekindled my mad car days after restoring a Healey BJ8. I'd always liked the DB2/4, so I bought – sight unseen – a 165bhp L-spec MkII in poor condition from a garage in California. I started the AM Feltham Club in 2010: it now has 121 members.

"When it comes to detail, things have to be perfect and original if possible. Each steel part has been powder-coated, including the chassis; every nut and bolt is cadmium-plated. While I abhor the American fad to chrome everything, I did polish all the aluminium parts – but that's raw elbow grease, not a modern process."

The knowledge

WHAT TO PAY

Show DB2/4 saloon/three-grille DB2 or MkIII saloon/dhc £175,000/250k/400k
Average (same models) £125k/150k/300k
Restoration £50k/70k/150k

PARTS PRICES

Bonnet and frame	£10-12,000
Main chassis box sections	£6-6500
Brake master cylinder (exchange)	£300
Rebuilt engine/box	£22-25,000/£3-5000
Water pump impeller	£330

CLUBS

Aston Martin Feltham Club www.amfclub.com
Aston Martin Owners' Club
01865 400400; www.amoc.org

BOOKS

Aston Martin DB2, DB2/4 & DB3 in Detail
Walker, Herridge **Aston Martin DB2-6** Pitt,
CP Press **Aston Martin** Edwards, Haynes **Aston
Martin 1921-58 Autobook** Coram, Autopress

SPECIALISTS

Aston Martin Works 01908 610620
Four Ashes 01789 266851 **Stamper** 01768
899505 **Trinity** 01932 862040 **Aston Service**
01202 574727 **DJ Smail** 01234 713083
Davron 01722 716040 **Alan Smith** 01797
366863 **Aston Engineering** 01332 371566
Aston Workshop 01207 233525 **RS Williams**
01932 868377 **Post Vintage** 01132 843666

BUYER'S GUIDE

TIMELINE

1948 Two Litre Sports (DB1) launched; 15 built
1949 Prototype DB2 runs at Le Mans: DB1 chassis, 2.6-litre Lagonda 'six', fhc 'saloon' body
1950 April DB2 introduced at New York Show
1950 Drophead Coupé added (102 made); three-part grille replaced by one-piece on 50th car
1951 Jan Vantage option, up to 125bhp/149lb ft
1953 Oct DB2/4 (566 constructed, inc c76 dhc) replaces DB2 (410 produced), 125bhp, 116mph
1954 Apr/Aug 2922cc 140bhp VB6/J engine becomes standard, 0-60mph 10.5 secs, 119mph
1955 Oct DB2/4 MkII (199 built), higher roof with chrome trim, small tail fins, 2in longer; 'Notchback' fhc offered (34 made + 16 dhc and two specials)
1957 Mar DB MkIII (551 produced, inc 84 dhc), front discs (optional on first 100), 162bhp-plus, DB3S-style grille + instrument binnacle; tall rear lights added after first 100 off the line (MkIIIB)
1958 'Notchback' fhc body option offered – just five built. Special Series option 180/195bhp
1959 Automatic offered; July MkIII build ends

FACTFILE

Sold/number built 1950-'59/1726
Construction steel chassis, steel/aluminium body
Engine all-iron (with alloy inserts), dohc 2580/2922cc 'six', twin SU 1½in or 1¾in carbs; optional triple SUs or triple twin-choke Webbers on MkIII; 105bhp @ 5000rpm-195bhp @ 5500rpm; 125lb ft @ 3100rpm-149lb ft @ 3000rpm (2.6)
Transmission four-speed, three-synchro manual (close-ratio optional), driving rear wheels; MkIII optional o/d or Borg-Warner three-speed auto
Suspension: front coils, lower trailing links, upper trailing links, a-r bar rear live axle, coil springs, radius arms, Panhard rod; lever-arm dampers f/r
Steering Marles cam and roller, 2½ turns l-l
Brakes 1.2in Girling drums (Al-fin optional); front discs on MkIII **Length** 13ft 6½in-14ft 3½in (4130-4360mm) **Width** 5ft 5in (1650mm) **Height** 4ft 5½in-4ft 6½in (1360-1385mm) **Wheelbase** 8ft 3in (2520mm) **Mpg** 15-26 **Weight** 2480-2690lb (1125-1220kg) **0-60mph** 12.6-8.2 secs **Top speed** 110-124mph **Price new** £3076/3301 (saloon/dhc, '56)

INSURANCE

£268.18, for a Londoner, 30, full no-claims/clean licence on a garaged '56 DB2/4 as a 2nd car, value £140,000, 5000 ltd miles. RH: 01277 206911.

THE ALTERNATIVES



JAGUAR XK120-150

Fantastic value new, the XK dominated the top-end sports-car market. The Aston is

arguably a better all-rounder, but XKs are fast, great value, plus cheaper to maintain and restore.

Sold/no built 1949-'60/30,364 **Mpg** 16-27
0-60mph 10-7.6 secs **Top speed** 122-141mph
Price new £1711 (140 dhc, '56) **Now** £40-100k+



MERCEDES 300SL

Injection, independent suspension and race prowess helped to justify the SL's huge

price new, but outside the UK it was on par with the Aston, which now looks great value alongside.

Sold/no built 1952-'63/3258 **Mpg** 15-25
0-60mph 8.8-7 secs **Top speed** 135-155mph
Price new £4651 ('56) **Now** £500k-1,000,000

One to buy £140,000

Year of registration 1955 **Recorded mileage** 25,473 **Vendor** Coys London, Richmond; tel: 020 8614 7888 **For** Freshly rebuilt engine, to Vantage spec **Against** Minor chrome flaws; exhaust knock

Understated in dark blue with blue leather trim and powder-coated silver wires, this handsome DB2/4 has been prized by its four owners including Geoffrey Stewart, who kept the Aston for 34 years. There's minor pitting to the chrome, and scuffs on the leather trim, but it has clearly been loved as confirmed by the extensive file of service and rebuild invoices. The car is only for sale because the Austrian owner needed more space.

The aura of a cherished life continues under the huge bonnet. The recent full engine rebuild by Andreas Fojtik totalled more than £20,000. It included a new cylinder head, plus crankshaft, pistons and camshafts. The overhauled driveline features a new clutch and a lightened flywheel.

Only thick underseal on the bonnet's underside spoils the engine bay, while the chassis is clean and solid. Other work included the brakes, diff, driveshafts, a new fuel tank and wheels, plus fresh Avon Turbospeeds in the correct size.

Recently tuned, the throaty 'six' starts first time. It stays cool and maintains healthy oil pressure, even in traffic. The performance is crisp, with bags of torque and eager response. The right-hand pipe of the factory-fitted twin exhaust touches the rear valance, but it's easily rectified.

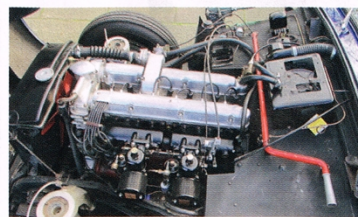
As well as the assorted receipts, the packed history includes 1960s colour photographs – all methodically sorted by the previous keeper. Also included are the original head and crank.



Powder-coated rims nicely set off DB2/4 Mk1's dark blue



Beautifully patinated interior also sports rear seatbelts



Engine shows 50psi oil pressure, warm, while running cool



Thanks to Hofmann's for the featured early DB2/4; go to www.hofmanns.co.uk

Our verdict

Sometimes modified over the years, DB2s are now gaining the recognition they deserve as the cars that started Aston's DB dynasty. Coach-built models and dropheads command high prices, while MkIIIs (and early DB2s) are close behind, but there are still good-value 'saloons' to be found if you look thoroughly at how they have been cared for in recent times.

FOR

- Excellent parts availability
- Charming 1950s styling
- Adequate performance for modern roads
- First of the DB Aston Martins, eligible for lots of top events and now with a dedicated club

AGAINST

- Vastly expensive to restore
- Parts can be costly
- Original details lost over decades