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# Newport Pagnell gets that Riviera touch

You can feel the genes of a Goodwood racer in this ultra-rare Aston Volante, reckons **Richard Heseltine**, yet its heart craves the Côte d'Azur

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**









Glorious 4-litre dual-overhead-cam straight-six was said to be good for 314bhp on triple Weber 45DCOE9 carbs, against 282bhp on SUs; Lucas light cluster was shared with Triumph TR5 and used on DB6; Aston as discovered in early '09, with super-rare hard-top that matches upholstery



The sun gave up on us hours ago. Buffeted by a frigid breeze, the romance we've imposed on the day turns into something else once the fog rolls in: the baronial splendour of our backdrop swiftly takes on more of a horror-movie vibe. Onlookers' faces, meanwhile, remain inexpressive and unchanging, but that could just be the wind chill. Either way, a strange lightness of mood kicks in when you finally get behind the wheel. You could call it love at first sound. The Aston Martin Short Chassis Volante featured here is nothing if not strident, with four litres of thoroughbred straight-six piercing the murk as we escape.

While the outline may be instantly familiar, it's the Short Chassis part that's all important. This sub-species of David Brown-era Aston – in essence an amalgam of DB5 and DB6 – was made for only 12 months, with production numbers never threatening to break into treble figures. And this particular example is rarer still, being the ultimate iteration of a model that few outside marque circles are aware of; one that is among the most valuable of all Newport Pagnell products from the period, save the circuit-rooted weaponry. According to those in the know, this is about as desirable as '60s Aston Martin road cars get. And they may just be right.

Back then the company was at a crossroads. In 1959, this great British brand conquered the Le Mans 24 Hours as well as the World Sportscar Championship before pulling the plug, then backing out of its lacklustre Grand Prix programme at the end of the following season. Yet this is a marque steeped in competition, so the winged badge was represented trackside with works-blessed DB4GTs and Zagato's glorious take on the same foundations before the factory returned with its own series of Project cars. But vying for glory in competition against the continental elite was an expensive exercise, and it's not as if the whole profit-making aspect had ever been factored into road-car manufacture. As has so often been the case in its boom-or-bust existence, Aston Martin had the right products for the time – if not always the ability to capitalise.

Much of that rightness was down to the DB4. Its DB2/4 and DB MkIII ancestors had displayed a certain rustic traditionalism but had clearly plateaued stylistically. The creative impetus was spent, Frank Feeley's original DB2 shape having lost its purity with each chop and change. When introduced in 1958, the DB4 unleashed a significant form of its own, one that still stands up as arguably the most handsome GT outline of its generation. While it's perhaps disingenuous to say that Aston Martin rarely does anything first – or indeed best – here its designers, engineers and stylists were clearly on the same page, working in celestial alignment. Touring of Milan's Federico Formenti created a dazzling profile, while the famed *carrozzeria's* Superleggera method of construction – aluminium bodywork draped over a system of small tubes fixed to a steel platform – added a degree of technical

## 'THE AMBIENCE INSIDE SCREAMS PROP-AGE ADVENTURER INSTEAD OF JET-AGE ARRIVISTE'

elegance if not innovation. One thing the DB4 didn't lack was credibility. *Autosport* blithely ignored the Milanese contribution to the Anglo-Latin confection when it labelled the Aston: 'Another British achievement that will make the Italians and Germans think very hard.'

It did, too, with umpteen derivatives following in the DB4's wake for the next 12 years. Not least the DB5, which borrowed styling cues – most obviously the cowed headlights – from the short-wheelbase DB4GT. Launched in '63, the DB5 surfed a publicity tidal wave following its appearance in the James Bond flick *Goldfinger* (in the book 007 drives a DB MkIII), with burgeoning Stateside sales helping to briefly double output to around 500 cars a year. Powered by the Tadek Marek-designed straight-six, as used earlier in the fab but flawed Lagonda Rapide, it too sired numerous permutations. There was, however, one noticeable shortcoming. For a car

conceived as a four-seater, there was precious little room for rear passengers. No matter, the DB6 arrived in '65 with a 4in-longer wheelbase. The visual changes – in particular the Kamm tail, along with the greater emphasis on luxury – marked a less sporting approach, although improved aerodynamics ensured that the fixed-head DB6 was faster than its predecessor.

Gone, too, was the Superleggera build technique, because the larger cockpit was formed from a box-section steel superstructure. As *Road & Track* put it: '[The DB6] is a dated design, but it's a car of great character. It hasn't fallen into a rut of being a car designed to satisfy as many people as possible and edifying none.' Except that there was some resistance to the car's bulkier silhouette, even if much of this has been retrospective. Though the DB6's outline didn't come in for much criticism at the time, it has since suffered in comparison with its antecedent – even if the styling changes were clearly in keeping with other Austons of the period. Just look at any of the Project cars to see the origins of the hind treatment. It's hardly ugly.

Even so, what if you could have all of the DB6's upgrades but in a shapelier DB5 profile? Well, from October 1965 to October '66, Aston Martin offered just such a crossbreed, albeit only in open form. The Short Chassis was in many ways a stopgap, but a compelling one nonetheless. The name, however, is a bit of a misnomer. It's only short compared to the DB6, which was launched concurrently, because it retained the standard DB5 platform but with the new car's running gear. But then 'Same Size Chassis' doesn't have quite the same ring to it. Outward signifiers included DB6-style split bumpers, a deeper intake for the oil cooler, a gently curved rear deck and a Triumph TR5-sourced tail-light cluster instead of three lamps. Inside, the cabin trim was lifted wholesale from the DB6. And this car was one of just three Volantes equipped with the triple-Weber carburetted Vantage engine, which produced an alleged 314bhp.

And the Volante tag was first applied here, although the name has latterly become a badge of convenience for Aston Martin ragtops. Priced at £5084 in 1966, the Short Chassis was among





Interim Short Chassis  
Volante incorporated DB6  
refinements and running  
gear, but in the more  
compact DB5 body; this  
remarkable, 12,000-mile  
car went into storage with  
an electrical fault in 1974,  
and didn't emerge until  
mid-'09. It was exactly  
restored by Ferrari  
specialist DK Engineering







Stunning California Sage perfectly sets off lines of Short Chassis Volante, which has more than a hint of Maserati about its rump; familiar instrument pack, with white-on-black Smiths gauges, echoes the shape of the grille; three-spoke wheel with DB motif a constant from DB4-6. Below: 16in wire wheels

rarefied company. It undercut comparable Ferraris, but was in no way a bargain: you could have had two Jaguar E-types for similar money. The featured car was delivered to its original owner in May 1966, finished in California Sage with tan leather trim, and was supplied with a fitted hard-top, which these days is almost as rare a find as the car itself. By 1974 it was with its fourth owner, an Oxfordshire doctor, who drove the Aston for just six months before it was rendered immobile by an electrical gremlin. And that is how it remained until mid-2009, by which time the car had migrated to the Isle of Wight.

The good doctor had bought the Aston on the day that his daughter was born and 35 years later she tipped off former university friend Jeremy Cottingham of DK Engineering that it might be

## 'A GREMLIN RENDERED THE ASTON IMMOBILE IN '74 AND THAT'S HOW IT STAYED FOR 35 YEARS'

for sale. The Ferrari specialist saw the car, made an offer and towed the tired project back to the mainland that day (*News*, May '09). It had covered barely 12,000 miles, and on the day of our shoot had managed only a few jogs around the block since the six-figure restoration was completed in September 2010. The results are dazzling.

All of which is brought into sharp relief once given free(ish) rein to enjoy the car as its maker intended. Astons of this period can seem underwhelming – maybe due to the number of baggy examples about – but that sense is absent here. Foregoing the customary purple gush about the styling, it's the cabin that says it all. The outline was very much of the moment, but the ambience from inside screams propeller-age adventurer rather than jet-set *arriviste*. It could just as easily be from an earlier decade, with the classic Smiths instruments clustered in the signature fascia that mirrors the shape of the radiator grille. There's no extravagant gilding, just levels of comfort and civility that befit a 'gentleman's express'.



### ASTON MARTIN SHORT CHASSIS VOLANTE

**Sold/number built** 1965-'66/37 (three with Vantage spec)

**Engine** all-alloy, dohc 3996cc straight-six, with triple twin-choke Weber 45DCOE9 carbs

**Max power** 314bhp @ 5750rpm

**Max torque** 288lb ft @ 3850rpm

**Transmission** five-speed ZF manual, driving rear wheels

**Suspension: front** independent, by double wishbones, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar

**rear** live axle, trailing arms, Watt linkage, lever-arm dampers; coil springs f/r

**Steering** rack and pinion

**Brakes** Girling discs all round, with servo

**Length** 15ft (4572mm) **Width** 5ft 6in

(1676mm) **Height** 4ft 5in (1346mm)

**Wheelbase** 8ft 2in (2489mm)


**Weight** 3230lb (1465kg)

**0-60mph** 7.1 secs **Top speed** 144mph

**Price new** £5084 **Price now** £650-750,000

Prior experience of '60s DB Astons informs you that period performance figures aren't to be trusted. *Autocar* recorded 43mph in first gear and 66mph in second with a 'media-friendly' Vantage-spec DB5 in 1964, though this example still feels more like a luxu-cruiser than a sports car – which is no bad thing. The all-alloy 3996cc twin-cam straight-six isn't the smoothest of its kind yet it sounds glorious: rich and throaty, with a suitably voluble induction roar. It has plenty of torque, too, which means that it's effortless from low down the rev range – it will pull from just above walking pace in top. This is for the best, though, because you cannot rush the ZF five-speeder. The clutch is on the heavy side, too, as is the steering when manoeuvring. There's a reasonable 3.2 turns lock-to-lock – and it loads up accurately on fast, sweeping B-roads – but inputs on tighter switchbacks are transmitted via your shoulders rather than your fingertips.

So it's a physical car to drive with any enthusiasm, though you can still make exhilarating – and rapid – progress. There's fun to be had here. The Aston seems sensibly sized compared to its modern-day equivalent, so it doesn't take up much acreage. It's a bit of an understeerer, but powering out of a corner with the tail squatting and multi-tonal backbeat running its sonic spectrum is a singular treat. God it sounds good.

This is about as close to a new 1966 Aston as you're ever likely to find and you imagine that, once bedded in, it will be even more satisfying. There's a real sense of occasion, of upper-crust nobility adapting to new circumstances. It has that wrought solidity you expect from a David Brown Aston, but without the accompanying fustiness of earlier models. As to whether it's the best Newport Pagnell product of its day, therein lies a question. Answering 'yes' may strain credulity, yet if we had vaults of money and the urge to expend it prodigiously, this and a Radford DB5 shooting brake for the school run would make for a suitably decadent pairing. It might be just a footnote in marque lore, but the Short Chassis deserves name-above-the-title billing. 

**Thanks to** DK Engineering, which is selling the Aston: 01923 287687; [www.dkeng.com](http://www.dkeng.com)