

CLASSIC DRIVER

Designer John Heffernan reinvented Aston Martin and Bentley with these two cars

Lead

In the late 1980s, John Heffernan created the two most desirable Grand Tourers of the time with the Aston Martin V8 Virage and Bentley Continental R. As both cars become modern classics, we met the automotive designer to learn more about the development of his game-changing signature cars.



Designers can go a lifetime without penning a whole car. However, in the late 1980s, one man found himself in the unique position of doing not just one, but two landmark cars for two different marques at the same time. Standing before us now is the final upshot of that effort: the Aston Martin Vantage V550 and Bentley Continental T, cars that marked the zenith of their kind. On a bright autumn day at the [Duke of London](#) in Brentford, Classic Driver caught up with their designer, John Heffernan.





Heffernan's career began in England with the GM Vauxhall division, where he was part of the design team, and then to America, where he worked for GM Pontiac. However, because GM Opel was taking over all design responsibility, the divided atmosphere pushed him to join Audi in 1977. This was the moment the Audi 100 under development moved the brand upmarket. Heffernan notes that working at Audi "got me ready for going freelance: more respect was shown for designers from engineers, and there wasn't the same hostility [as GM]". The design of the Audi 100 was not the only thing he influenced: an intern he oversaw, Peter Schreyer, would go on to become Chief Design Officer of Kia Motors. The temptation of a career in Germany was compounded when Heffernan was invited to interview for the head design role at BMW, a position that would ultimately go to a young American named Chris Bangle. Despite this promising trajectory, for personal reasons Heffernan moved back to the UK "which then seemed 50 years behind the times. London looked terrible then, strike-ridden and in turmoil."



The 1980s marked a turning point for both Heffernan and the UK, leading to a partnership with Ken Greenley. "Ken and I were very different designers: he was more American; I was influenced by European design and German rationalism. We'd balance each other out." While working at the Royal College of Art, Greenley received an unexpected call from Victor Gauntlett, CEO of Aston Martin and de facto product director: "I'd been working freelance on trucks and industrial design products as well as the Bentley P90 at the time and Ken phoned me to tell me that Victor had said 'You've done a Panther and a Bentley, I think you're ready to do an Aston Martin.'"



Standing in front of the cars now, it is hard to imagine the alternative paths each might have taken. "The Bentley Continental started life as a Rolls-Royce convertible to replace the Corniche." As for the Virage, Heffernan reveals his model of a bright red sports car. "My proposal originally had pop-up headlamps, but the engineers didn't want that. Ken's proposal was a fastback - which Victor thought would make a nice Corvette." The late Peter Horbury, then working at Mike Gibbs Associates (MGA), also made a good proposal. "Victor already said he wanted me to do it. He said: 'You know the one I want to win, I know it's a bit Ferrari-ish, but I think it's interesting.'" Thus Heffernan's proposal went to a full scale model.



The first job was at the front end to incorporate conventional headlamps. “They left it up to me to source the headlamps” says Heffernan. Potential donors included an Audi 200 and, more improbably, a Porsche 959. Unsurprisingly, the Audi was selected. The Vantage presented another challenge in finding lights that would create a clean break from the Virage. Heffernan did not have to look far to find the perfect solution: “Aston Martin then owned Zagato, who had done the Alfa SZ. We couldn’t have done our own headlamps, which would have cost too much, so we used the same lights as the SZ. Aston just paid Triplex for the glass cover.” The deeply-drawn bodyside of the V550 belies Heffernan’s inherent understanding of what could be produced. The sole flourish is a blister in the sill to increase downforce. “Audi had 4000 hours of wind-tunnel testing for the 100; we had a day at Southampton University.” First tests were not promising, zero lift was hard to achieve. That the V600 Vantage ultimately hit 198mph at Nardo “without flipping over” is some indication of the forces at work.



Pointing now above the rear wheel, Heffernan comments “I wanted more muscle here, to add 10mm on the shoulder, but we had run out of modelling time before presenting to the CEO. I still think about it.” Inside the car, Heffernan casts his eye over the interior, noting the pristine headliner, and pauses at the wood inlays. “I wanted these to be machined metal, but Victor insisted on wood. He maintained that his customers wanted wood.” And regrets? “The airbag steering wheel is awful. We were using Ford parts, so this steering wheel is one of theirs.” In 1993, the year the Vantage was launched, Aston Martin would formally join Ford’s Premier Automotive Group.

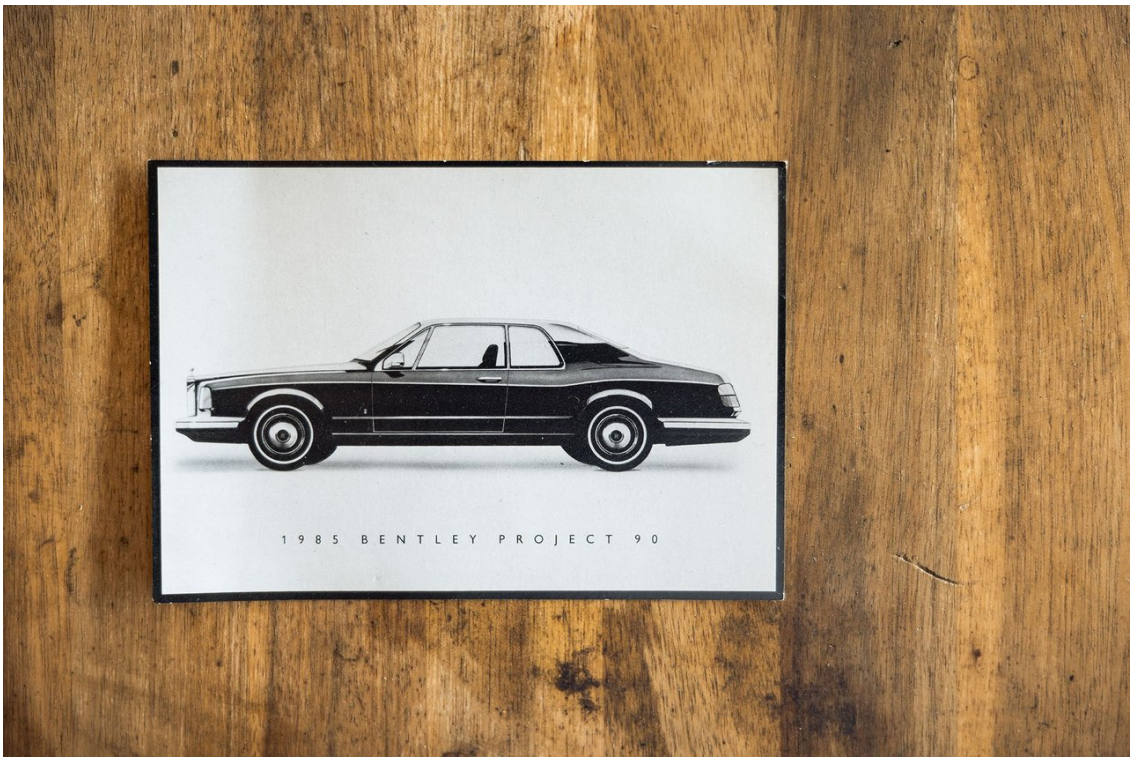




Parked side-by-side, it is hard not to be distracted by the Bentley's grille flashing in the late-September sun, opposite the black radiator of the Aston. "This was not a question of budget; we could afford to do one in chrome, but I really wanted this stealth look." Beside the immaculate Bentley, the Vantage seems ready for a brawl. It is perhaps this contrast that most impresses: in a period when Italian design houses were selling similar shapes for different clients, Heffernan's hand is all but absent. "We weren't Italdesign, where you buy into a certain look. We did a lot of research into each brand to try and continue the look" In doing so, the Vantage and Continental each possess a clarity of purpose, offering a reminder that a designer's role is more often as a conduit for characteristics other than their own. That said, Heffernan doesn't hesitate to name the Maserati Ghibli and De Tomaso Mangusta as favourites.



Our gaze strays to the front wing of the Bentley and to the meticulous surfaces. "Ken and I shared the clay. The themes we did on each side were the same, but the differences were in the section" Most noticeably, where Heffernan's proposal had a negative section above the feature-line, "Ken worked with his modeller to add extra muscle." The theme worked, and Greenley continued to develop the bodyside and some of the front, where the single-piece headlamps of the thwarted Corniche were replaced by twin lamps which had become a Bentley brand feature. Meanwhile, Heffernan continued on the roof and back of the car: "We tried doing black surrounds on the glass before settling on stainless steel, and integrated the spoiler as the engineers wanted lower drag. The sales director Tom Purves told us there had been criticism that the Silver Spirit looked like a New York taxi, so I wanted these vertical rear lights." Beneath, a transom-like boot-lid constrains the car's prodigious length.



“Contrary to Aston Martin’s in-house design, we did the Bentley away from the main studio in Crewe. They wanted an external team, so Park Ward donated a side-building to the fabulous factory, a 1930s fire station in London they kitted out as a design studio.” However, the scale of the Bentley proved challenging: “We could stand only 3ft from car. To quote Bill Mitchell (GM’s legendary design boss) ‘It was like playing a trombone in a bathroom.’ We’d do one week on the Bentley, then another on the Aston Martin and Panther Solo 2.” The team in Crewe developed the interior, while Mulliner would go on to shorten the wheelbase and widen the track for the Continental T parked here.



The Bentley Continental R was unveiled at the 1991 Geneva Motor Show, where it shared the spotlight with the Mercedes-Benz W140 S-Class. “Hans-Harald Hanson was an ex-RCA student and worked in the studio they had opened down in Italy. He really disparaged the Bentley, then he took me over to the Mercedes and said ‘This is the future’. He had a point, but he was annoyed we got a lot of press that day.” Five years later, the launch of the Continental T would make it the most expensive car in the world, its £250,000 price-point unmatched in the Volkswagen era. On seeing it at its launch, Heffernan recalls Victor Gauntlett exclaiming: “You didn’t tell me you guys were doing this at the same time!”



Thirty years on, how does it feel to see both cars reunited again? “When I see the two cars together, I feel proud that Ken and I did our bit to ensure the ongoing history of both companies. Aston was on its knees at the time and some within Rolls-Royce Vickers wanted to put the Bentley brand out to rest. It was worth all our efforts to see both marques looking healthy again under their new owners. The other feeling I have is that both cars have weathered the 30 odd-years rather well.” Asked which he prefers, Heffernan reflects: “The Vantage is closer to my heart. It was the chance to do something different.”

Text: Robert Forrest / Photos: Tom Shaxson for Classic Driver

Gallery

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