

CLASSIC DRIVER

Bristol Fashion: To Blenheim, by Blenheim



I'll tell you who'd drive this car: John Steed of 'The Avengers'. As 'handbuilt cars for individuals', the four-seaters from Bristol are highly distinctive, futuristic in a certain way and yet old-fashioned, too.

I'm at the famous West London showrooms of the company to meet its owner, **Toby Silverton**, and test-drive a **Blenheim 3S** (with LPG conversion, so it's a '3SG', really).

It's something of a coup, as for years – under the ownership of ex-fighter pilot and racing driver **Tony Crook** – the company famously denied the press access to its product range.

Silverton, who has owned Bristol outright since Crook's departure some time ago, is more relaxed in his attitude to journalists and is proud of the marque: a car company almost unique in the world, stocking spares for **every** car made in its history and the world's only official sales outlet for new Bristols. It sells, services and restores used cars, too.



“It’s the level of service we like to give our customers,” he states. “We love the older cars and go to great lengths to ensure their survival.” The ‘lengths’ include running the service and parts departments at ‘cost plus’. While it might be an expensive car to buy (£179,951.21 including VAT for a new **Blenheim**, such as the one you see here), it will not be like a multi-cylinder Italian or British GT to run. The fixed labour cost for

the 10,000-mile service (10 hours) is just £395 + VAT, for example. That's VW main dealer territory in London.

And the rugged, tried-and-tested, bespoke-to-Bristol **Chrysler V8s** can do the miles: one example known to the factory had covered almost 500,000 miles before a rebuild.



The cars are sold everywhere in the world apart from the USA, and **Silverton** is proud of a list of present and former owners that includes **Peter Sellers**, the designer **Paul Smith** and rock star **Liam Gallagher**. "How old would you say the average owner was?" he asks.

It's 43, apparently - considerably younger than that of the average **Bentley** customer. Am I surprised? No, I suppose not, but then the cars have a certain raffish charm that would appeal to a more modish man from the world of fashion or popular entertainment. Someone who could most definitely afford a **Bentley**, **Ferrari** or **Aston**, but chooses 'satisfaction' over 'sex' or 'excitement'.

They are already likely to have the latter, in abundance, one assumes.



Well, raffish and modish as they come, I was soon keen to hit the road in the silver **Blenheim 3S**, sitting just a few metres below in the underground car park. **Blenheim Palace** here we come.

Let's face it, it might not have the running costs, but neither does it have the looks of a high-octane, modern exotic. There, I've said it. Get over it; it's not an **Aston Martin Rapide**, so please refer to my 'satisfaction', 'sex' and 'excitement' argument above.

But you will find that the styling is born from necessity. It will seat four; indeed one car has been converted into a chauffeur-driven example by radically altering the passenger seat. Its turning circle is almost London cab-like. As with the famous black taxis of the capital, it's also narrow, so you can thread it through heavy traffic. The boot is capacious, and the lower part of the rear bodywork has been subtly widened to disguise the two-inch increase in track of the 'S' model. You can see out of every corner of the airy 'greenhouse'.





At the wheel, a Bristol driver is confronted by a multiplicity of rocker switches bought in bulk, no doubt, a while ago; but they perform their functions well. The airbag-less steering wheel is mounted some way off vertical, but proves comfortable nonetheless.

One does feel ever-so-slightly raised-up, but this aids in placing the silver car accurately on the road. I really wasn't sure what to expect once underway. The **5.9-litre Chrysler V8**, mated to the same company's **Torqueflite** automatic gearbox, pulls very strongly. With a 3.06:1 rear axle ratio, the **Blenheim S** will sprint from 0-60mph in 5.4sec. It also has a 'hill climb capability top gear, 1 in 4', so the website quaintly tells me.



The whole car feels very 'useable'. Yes, that's the word. Everything works nicely and you can steer, stop and accelerate for mile after mile, all the while at peace with the world (and quite possibly wearing a hat, as the generous headroom will allow all manner of headgear). Compared with what, oh, a 1980s **Aston Martin V8**, what's it like? A much better drive, by far.

You do notice a number of Bristols parked kerbside in London's snazzier areas. They are clearly suitable machines for daily driving as my short experience with the silver Blenheim bore out. Easy for a long run, stress-free in town.

Outside the capital, the make is a rare sight. In a world overrun by Bond wannabes, this is a car for the John Steed in every man: individualistic and quirky, stylish and confident. As a bonus, you could wear a bowler while driving it, too.

For further information, see www.bristolcars.co.uk. This car is for sale at £84,950. Please contact **Richard Hackett** at the **Bristol Cars** showroom on +44(0)207 603 5554, or email richard.hackett@bristolcars.co.uk.

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