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[Bentley Speed 8: John Simister takes a ride in a Le Mans racer](#)

Lead

You might already have read about the Bentley Continental's new V8 engine, writes John Simister, the 4.0-litre unit that will show a 40 per cent fuel saving over the 6.0-litre W12 while giving practically the same real-world performance. We've driven it, and it's brilliant.

The world gets to see the lighter, greener and keener Continental, complete with eight-speed gearbox, at January's Detroit Auto Show. Meanwhile, however, Bentley is extremely fixated on all things V8 and twin-turbo and, during the driving event for pre-production Continental V8s, it wheeled out two Speed 8 LMP race cars. The Bentley boys were at Silverstone at the time, so it seemed entirely reasonable for car to meet track. So that is what happened.

The Speed 8, you might remember, evolved between 2001, when it finished a glorious third at Le Mans, and 2003 which was the year it won. Cynics said it was simply an Audi R8 (the LMP version, not today's sports car) in different clothes, but while some components shared their roots the Audis and the Bentleys were different machines created by different engineers for different teams. Racing Technology Norfolk was Bentley's chosen Speed 8 creator, using Audi's twin-turbo V8 from the R8C and R8R LMP cars but mating it to an Xtrac transmission instead of a Ricardo unit.



Initially, two cars were built for 2001, named EXP Speed 8 and running the Audi's 3.6-litre capacity. For 2002 the engine was enlarged to 4.0 litres, and for 2003 a redesigned car – now called simply Speed 8 – used this engine in a new chassis to gain the ultimate Le Mans prize.

The 2003 car here at Silverstone as we assemble in mid-December isn't running today. But the 2001 car most certainly is. This one isn't the Le Mans car but the other one, used for tyre testing at the time and much the more exercised since. Its engine makes over 600bhp and 440lb ft of torque, and runs to 7500rpm. Those figures don't sound massively impressive next to those for the new road car, whose own twin-turbo V8 generates 500bhp and 487lb ft from 4.0 litres, but then the road car doesn't have to force its intake air through two 33mm restrictors – that's little bigger than the orifices of the pair of one-and-a-quarter-inch SU carburettors that used to feed a Mini-Cooper.



Also, the EXP Speed 8 weighs just 900kg (plus an obligatory 50kg of ballast when racing). And despite the drag of downforce, it reached 215mph along the Mulsanne Straight, which had two chicanes by 2001.

We won't be reaching quite those speeds at Silverstone, but the EXP Speed 8 is sounding very keen once it has deigned to continue running after its cold start. Guy Smith, who drove the 2003 Speed 8 to Le Mans victory with Tom Kristensen and Rinaldo Capello, is about to take me for a few laps of the International circuit, the one for which Becketts is an acute right rather than a fast sweep, but first I have to be shoehorned into a very tight passenger seat with the worst lumbar support of any Bentley chair ever created. So, with back arched and limbs wedged, I await the off.



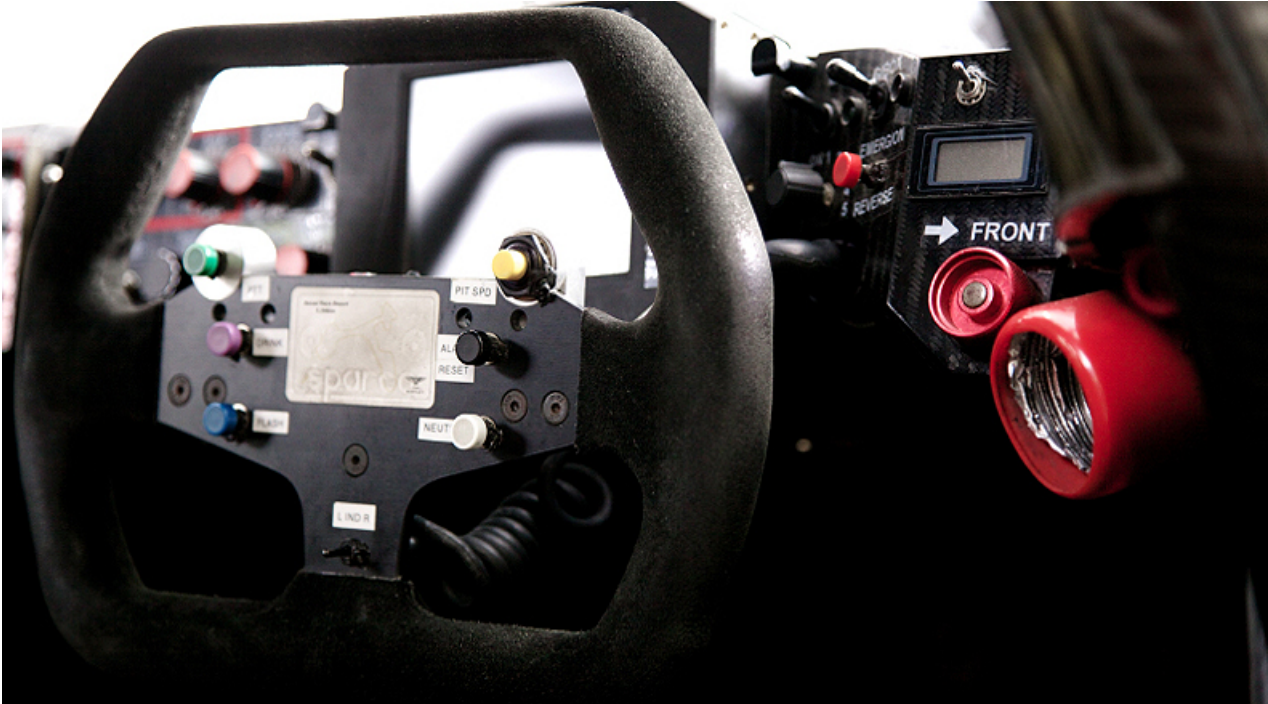




It's claustrophobic in here, and loud. Into first gear in the sequential transmission, and off we surge and fluff down the pitlane. Now out on the track, Smith applies full noise and the Speed 8 hurtles away as though

weightless. It's all I can do to hold tight and try not to get in the way of Smith's deft steering movements and microfine corrections, but I can honestly say I have never experienced greater lateral g-forces than in this car.

Smith hurls the Bentley around, constantly nibbling at the edges of adhesion as though it were a BTCC car rather than an LMP machine of considerable trackprint. And this is on a cold, damp track, with intermediate-pattern tyres barely up to operating temperature. Not only are the cornering forces huge, the braking forces are almost beyond comprehension. Where I would really be thinking about some serious retardation, Smith still has the accelerator to the floor. That's proper downforce for you, and proper confidence.





These guys did this, between them, for 24 hours at full racing speed. I've experienced it for just three laps, and further action is curtailed by Silverstone's decibel meter and increasing undertyre dampness. But I've seen, heard and felt enough. No wonder Guy Smith keeps himself so fit.



Photos: Bentley

Gallery

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