

CLASSIC DRIVER

To the Swiss Riviera with Aston Martin expert Jonathan Hartop

Lead

From visiting Newport Pagnell as an impressionable child to trading Aston Martins from every era on the picturesque Swiss Riviera, Jonathan Hartop is a seasoned veteran when it comes to the beautiful British sports cars. We paid a visit to his longstanding independent dealership Aston Riviera Cars...

An inkling that the affluent town of Lausanne on the so-called Swiss Riviera was a prime hub for the beautiful British beauties prompted Jonathan Hartop to establish [Aston Riviera Cars](#) in 2008. A lifelong Aston Martin enthusiast, Hartop has earned a fantastic reputation for his old-school manner and fantastic customer service, attributes that are facilitated by the company's relatively small scale. We visited Hartop on a sadly overcast day in Lausanne to talk all things Aston Martin. Naturally, we couldn't go all that way and not experience some of the incredible coastal roads the region has to offer. A gorgeous baby-blue Aston Martin V8 Volante was an appropriately glamorous weapon of choice.



What are your earliest automotive memories?

When I was a child, we had three vintage Lagondas in a barn behind our house and funnily enough I know that two of them still exist today. I also remember having to tell my mother whether the semaphore flick-out indicators were working on our old baker's Morris van - often they didn't, so much so that we got very excited when they actually did. My mother used to stop in front of the Aston Martin factory in Newport Pagnell, which was near where we lived, and if I'd been good, she'd let me get out and look at the DBs parked on the forecourt. For me, Aston Martins might as well have been from another planet.



Could you tell us about your background prior to founding Aston Riviera Cars?

My family moved to Switzerland in the mid-1960s, but I was sent back to boarding school in the UK in the early-1970s, which I didn't like very much. My parents passed away during that time and I didn't fancy much staying at school, so I moved back to Switzerland in 1976. After a few trials doing various jobs and a short stint as an apprentice in a garage in Geneva, I began working in another garage. The owner had health problems, so I ended up running the place! In the late-1980s, I moved to Rolls-Royce Motor Cars International, which was based in Switzerland. I remember seeing the Aston Martin DB7 at the 1993 Geneva Motor Show and I thought it was so pretty. The local Jaguar and Land Rover guy called me up and asked me discreetly if I was interested in Aston Martin. He needed someone with a background in cars and who spoke good English. I took on the role despite everybody saying I was crazy to - you have to remember Aston was building just 45 cars a year at the time.



How did Aston Riviera Cars come to be?

I left Aston Martin in 2007, took a year off and then opened Aston Riviera Cars as an independent in September of 2008. I had always thought that Lausanne would be a great place to sell Aston Martins but had never previously had the time to try it.

How would you summarise the philosophy of the business?

We're a small business with limited logistics compared to all these multi-franchise groups. I'm not going to say that we're the best at this or that, as you'll read that on every company's website. But with our experience and with my mechanical background, we will dig into a problem as far as it takes to get a car running as it should. I also understand the cars very well, which allows us to anticipate any problems before they occur. One could say that we run the business in a slightly old-fashioned way and thanks to our size, we have a very close relationship with our clients. I don't believe in these huge multi-franchise companies - I just don't think it works.



Is there any particular era of Aston Martin towards which you gravitate?

Not particularly. I love the vintage cars - I've got a Lagonda myself - and, of course, the 1960s DB models but I'm also very fond of the DB7. I think it's a very elegant car and I enjoy driving them a lot. I don't really understand why there's not a greater following for the DB7, but on the other hand, I went to the 25th anniversary meeting at Wormsley Estate and some 350 cars showed up, which was great.

What differentiates you from other Aston Martin dealers?

Being a small company, we can react very quickly when necessary and facilitate a close connection with our customers. We tend to work in a more classical fashion - sometimes you get emails from the factory who don't have a clue who they're talking to casually saying 'Hi Jonathan' - call me old school, but I like to spend the time making an extra effort to be polite. I guess having 40 years of experience in the motor trade, 26 of which have been driving, selling and repairing Aston Martins, also helps a lot. We treat all our clients the same, whether it's one with a shabby DB7 or a Vanquish Ultimate Edition.





How would you evaluate the current market for 'youngtimer' Aston Martins and which models represent the best value for money at the moment?

It's difficult to say as the market is generally quite quiet at the moment. The best cars will always sell, but it takes longer and more often the issues concern the costs of putting cars right when necessary. I'd say DB7s represent great value for money - they're so elegant, well balanced and the mechanicals are very strong. I have kept a Volante for myself and always enjoy driving it very much. Early V8 Vantages are also good value in today's market, if they can be considered 'youngtimers'.

How integral is your beloved pet dog Babou to the Aston Riviera Cars operation?

He's my mate but he's getting on a bit so probably spends more time at home contemplating Lake Geneva and the Alps!



Could you tell us about your classic Mini Cooper and the historic races in which you've competed with it?

I've raced it at most European circuits and we were the first to do the Spa Six Hours in a Mini Cooper S. I only do a few races a year now just for fun and to have a great weekend with friends. We might not be the quickest on the track, but we'll have the best food and, most importantly, fantastic wines in our pit garage!

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