

INSPIRED BY LE MANS

The Bentley La Sarthe by Bensport Ltd is a limited run, two-door, two seat coupé inspired by an intriguing concept – what if Bentley had continued racing at the La Sarthe circuit in the town of Le Mans after World War II?

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The name Bensport was first used for the prototype of what we came to know as the Derby Bentley, back in 1932. One famous 4 ¼-litre Derby chassis, the streamlined Embiricos Bentley, did indeed race at Le Mans in 1949, '50 and '51 with creditable success. This amazing vehicle inspired the idea for the La Sarthe, but Bensport's creation isn't a replica of that or any other motor car. The terms that therefore come to mind are 'homage' or 'evocation', but these don't necessarily do this car justice. It is based on a Mk VI or R-Type chassis and running gear, with a hand-crafted aluminium body taking over 2000 hours to construct in a way that continues the fine tradition of the coachbuilders of old. Personally, I love these stories

of 'what if' discussions, which have recently brought us products like the Ineos Grenadier and indeed the Blizzard, as featured on page 26. There seems to be something beautifully British about it – 'keep calm and design a new motor car' – and in this case it was Bob Perry who was inspired to create the La Sarthe. Bob's story of the ups and downs of realising this 'unbelievably naïve' (his words) dream is enthralling. It all started with a conversation outside a church at a wedding, where a chap asked Bob if he could create a special for him, which he duly did. That customer was adamant that it would be a one-off, so Bob started thinking about and sketching out something that could become a small-scale production run. The La Sarthe was born! He is very open about the challenges

of finding and assembling the craft skills and specialist suppliers required, and quality assuring the sum of the parts into a product that's worthy of the Bentley badge it retains. Then there's the task of selling them! Yet this was all coming together nicely when the pandemic struck. Like many small companies, Bensport was hit hard and eventually Bob was approached by a British entrepreneur called Mo Nico-Consari, who was impressed enough with the La Sarthe to engage Bob in discussions about buying the company as well as the motor car. At this point it's helpful to know that the globally recognised JD Classics brand has been relaunched under new ownership, led by Mo and his management team, with both Bensport and JD Classics moving forward as part of the Woodham »





Tubular manifold and electronic ignition get the best from 4.5-litre engine

“The La Sarthe is simply exquisite. Pebble Beach standard. Its styling and finish are an antidote to ‘bling’”

Mortimer family. Bob is retained as Honorary Chairman of Bensport and Project Development Consultant for Woodham Mortimer/JD Classics.

COACHBUILDING TRADITION

I worked at Crewe for 18 years, so you may think I'm a bit sniffy about such a creation. Not at all! Right from the start in Bentley's history, bodies were changed and interchanged, particularly to go racing, and of course all Bentleys pre-war were coachbuilt. This tradition continued into the Sixties on separate chassis models, with no less than 56 different coachbuilders outworking their craft on Crewe chassis, according

to James Taylor's excellent book 'Coachwork On Rolls-Royce & Bentley, 1945-1965' (Herridge & Sons Ltd, 2019). Some of the coachbuilt coupés led to the inspiration at Crewe to create the R-Type Continental, which was eloquently explained by Richard Gunn in the July/August edition of this magazine, so I won't repeat it here. Since then, numerous 'specials' have been created that mostly use the Mk VI or R-Type chassis, and these are welcomed in the BDC. The large majority of these, however, draw their inspiration from pre-war Bentleys. Even the Bentley Petersen Dartmoor Coupe, which some might consider similar to the La Sarthe, has some pre-war Bugatti Atlantic-

esque lines in my humble opinion. The question then isn't about authenticity, it's about how well this particular concept has been executed.

CLASSICAL STYLING

I'm not an automotive stylist, but I have worked alongside and admired the work of quite a few in the Styling Department at Crewe, including Fritz Feller, Graham Hull, Simon Loasby and Robin Page (who I'm delighted to see is back at Crewe). I hope that some of that influence has rubbed off! Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and to my eye the La Sarthe is simply exquisite. Pebble Beach standard. Its curves and creases blend perfectly;

no painted fine lines are required to accentuate them. The lack of bumpers and sparing use of chrome emphasise the evocation of a sports racing machine. You could say that the La Sarthe's styling and finish are an antidote to 'bling'. It manages to be head-turning without being ostentatious. It's a charming old-school gentleman of a motor car and it's no surprise that it was nominated for Bespoke Car of the Year at the 2023 Historic Motoring Awards. The restriction of the car to two seats also frees the rear quarter styling and roofline to beautifully culminate below the sharp-edged rear wings. Yes, there are similarities with the R-Type Continental in this respect, but what's the point of trying to improve on a style that's already considered as 'work of art' status? Therein is a concern – will these motor cars be used or just sit displayed in private collections or concours d'elegance »

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events? I do hope they are driven, which is after all what all Bentleys are for.

ENGINEERING INTEGRITY

I was really pleased to see that the fundamental engineering of the R-Type, upon which the La Sarthe is based, has not been compromised in the build. Back in the 1950s it was a badge of honour to be a Rolls-Royce engineer, and the shadow of Sir Henry Royce still loomed large over the way motor cars were designed and developed with supreme attention to detail. Indeed, this was still the case when I joined in 1982!

Bensport have respected that engineering integrity, only changing and enhancing aspects that could be achieved in-period such as the higher rear axle ratio. Air conditioning and power steering have been developed

for ease of use, but it's interesting to note that these are options – the raw 1950s driving experience is standard. I particularly applaud the use of the standard wheels and 'skinny' tyres. They just look so right for this car!

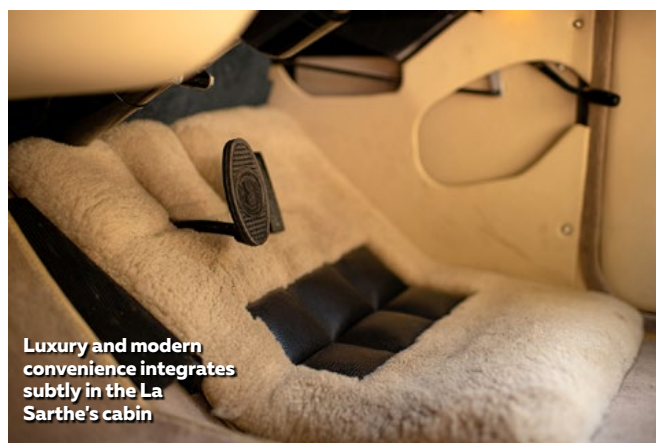
The result of this approach is that the La Sarthe not only looks right, but feels right. Anybody familiar with post-war six-cylinder Bentleys will feel at home in this motor car. A nice touch is to incorporate items from later models such as the window switches and parcel shelf lights. This adds to the sense of integrity and authenticity in the cabin, which is a really lovely place to be.

A few small things did catch my Crewe-trained eye that could be improved. The parcel shelf catches are a bit ordinary; the a/c switches would be nicer with Bentley style knobs rather than the knurled kind; the

cross-banding in the woodwork isn't as cleanly cut as a MPW craftsman would have achieved; the gap around the boot floor panel is just a bit too big, and the tool kit doesn't live up to the originals. JD Classics say that these are being looked at in a Model Review.

DRIVING

The desire to preserve the engineering integrity of the motor car has a significant consequence. The La Sarthe does not drive like a more modern Bentley, in fact driving back from JD Classics in Essex around the M25 on a Frida in my own 1972 T Series really brought home what a leap forward the SY was. No, the La Sarthe drives like a really well sorted and 'tight' post-war six-cylinder Bentley – only lighter, nimbler and higher geared. It »



Luxury and modern convenience integrates subtly in the La Sarthe's cabin

La Sarthe looks athletic and is, with reduced weight and taller gearing





“Back to Le Mans? I’d certainly have full confidence that it would endure the prerequisite 24 hours of hard driving”

starts on the button with a reassuring rumble, accelerates enthusiastically up to the national speed limits, and handles pleasingly well once you are reconciled with the notion that it was the intention all along to deliver a 1950s driving experience.

The brakes are of course the drums from the time, and being servo assisted from the drivetrain take some getting used to (or reacquainting with, in my case), but they are extremely effective on this lighter package. The suspension felt quite firm, but absorbed bumps and undulations well. The demonstrator (car number three of the ten) was fitted with the R-Type’s Rolls-Royce developed four-speed automatic transmission, optional power steering and air conditioning. This makes it an ideal ‘road spec’, particularly for today’s driving environments.

Would I suggest taking and racing it

back at Le Mans, or nearer to home at Goodwood or Silverstone? Not in road trim, but should this happen I’d expect it to acquit itself well. I’d certainly have full confidence that it would endure the prerequisite 24 hours of hard driving. I wonder if any customers will request or commission a ‘restomod’ La Sarthe, with more power and with modern wheels, brakes and gearbox to give a more contemporary driving experience? I can completely understand such a desire. It would all come down to how authentic to the original concept you’d like it to be, and of course how much you’re willing to spend.

WHO WILL BUY?

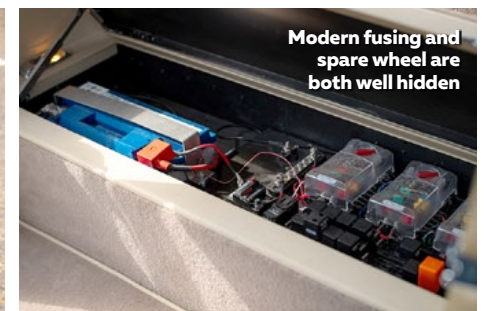
This brings me to two pieces of bad news. Firstly, only ten La Sarthe coupés will be built (plus the original prototype), all of which are and will

be utterly bespoke to their buyers’ requirements. I pressed the new owners about this, and they are adamant that this promise will be kept. There is a convertible version, however, and this is considered a separate model. Then, of course, the chassis can carry other styles and evocations once the La Sarthe run is completed. Please don’t expect Bensport Ltd only to ever make ten vehicles!

Secondly, the list price for the La Sarthe starts at £595,000. This places it on the edge of the stratosphere of collectors’ cars and bespoke creations, from Cricklewood Bentleys through R-Type Continentals (of course) to the likes of the Bentley Mulliner Bacalar. Outside of the Bentley world, the La Sarthe reminds me of the gorgeous Talbot-Lago T26 Gran Sport coupe, and of course Facel Vega’s HK500, which is also a 1950s icon that could



Fastback tail features two aircraft-style fillers



Modern fusing and spare wheel are both well hidden



easily cost as much if restored to the as-new standard of the La Sarthe.

Buyers are thus more likely to be motivated to commission a La Sarthe because of its style and exclusivity rather than because of its driving abilities. It will inevitably supplement existing collections of Bentleys, British classics, or style icons.

I’d like to suggest another profile of potential buyer from among our readers. Those who own, love and regularly use a Cricklewood or Derby Bentley might just consider a La Sarthe as a more comfortable and undemanding way to continue enjoying continental grand tours, club runs and maybe even a run out at Silverstone. The obvious choice here has always been an R-Type or S1 Continental, and it’s good that the La Sarthe introduces something else to consider. And it is indeed worthy of consideration. ■



Safely home in JD Classics’ workshops, awaiting the next test drive