

• • • WORDS FRANK MARKUS • • • PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID FREERS

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION WAS IN,  
GREED WAS GOOD, LABELS WERE EVERYWHERE.  
THE DRIVESTYLES OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS  
ARE NOW OPEN FOR DISCUSSION

# F A T O F T H E L A N D

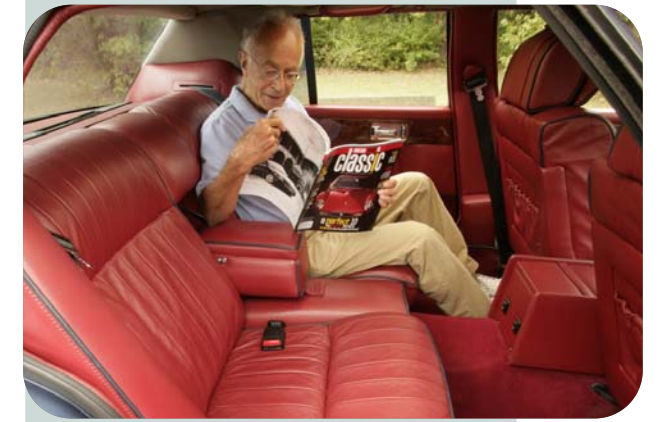
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<ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA/BENTLEY MULSANNE/MASERATI QUATTROPORTE> <DRIVE>



## <1984 ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA> <DRIVE>



Spirit and the Mulsanne behave as one would expect of a car built “By appointment to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.”

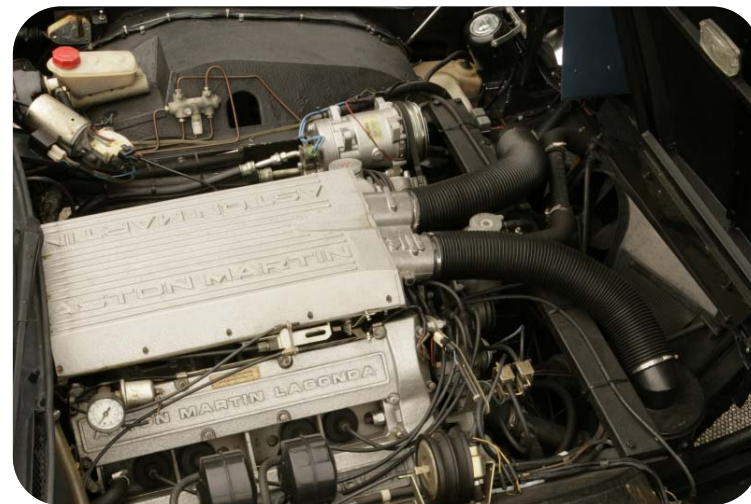
The Mulsanne name, borrowed from the famous high-speed straight on the Le Mans circuit, hinted at major changes to come that would soon separate the character and capabilities of the Rolls and Bentley marques, sparking a resurgence of the Flying B. In 1982, a Garrett AiResearch turbocharger became available on the Mulsanne Turbo, boosting output by about 75 horsepower, but that variant was never officially imported. Rather, Bentley wisely waited to send us the Turbo R model in 1988, with suspension modifications to match the engine’s increased thrust. So, while Bentleys have now come to be regarded as more performance-oriented than Rolls-Royces, early Mulsannes like our test car were simply more understated, less flashy Rollers.

**IN TERMS** of personality, Maserati’s Quattroporte is sort of the middle child in this comparison. Its interior is slightly more spacious than the Bentley’s and nearly as opulent, lined in gathered glove leather and matte-finished briarwood trim. Its well tailored Giugiaro bodywork is racier than the Bentley’s, yet remarkably restrained. It’s also exquisitely crafted. All panel gaps are narrow and impeccably uniform, the original paint is flawless, and the trim work is beyond reproach. A racebred four-cam all-aluminum V-8 motivates the 4650-pound sedan with considerable *brio*, if with only modest thrust by today’s standards. Contemporary road tests pegged its 0-to-60-mph time at around nine seconds, almost two ticks quicker than the Mulsanne’s and about even with the Lagonda’s.

Having just taken the reins of Maserati from a foundering Citroën in August 1975, Alejandro DeTomaso set about developing a successor to the popular original Quattroporte of 1963-1969, scrapping the technologically complex V-6 front-drive sedan then in the works (it was basically a Citroën SM wearing Bertone couture) in favor of a far more conventional setup. The Quattroporte III made its debut in 1979 at the Turin show and went on sale shortly thereafter, outselling the original almost three to one and serving as official transport for the Italian president and senate leader.

But if you really wanted to make an entrance, draw a crowd, and watch jaws drop everywhere you went in the early 1980s, the choice was Aston Martin’s razor-sharp Lagonda. William Towns sketched the design in February 1976, and a prototype was built in time for the London Motor Show that October. Its clean lines, dramatic proportions—as long as a Rolls, but lower than a 911—and fully digital instrumentation wowed crowds and announced to the world that the boutique brand from Newport Pagnell, England, was back in business.

The company had gone into receivership in 1974 and been rescued by a triumvirate of enthusiasts from the U.S., Canada, and England. That the Yank was National Semiconductor Corporation chairman Peter Sprague helps explain why a tiny company operating on a shoestring budget would attempt to offer an unprecedented array of electronic gauges, touch-sensitive switches, and other



**AH, 1984.** Those were the days, eh? Instead of George Orwell’s ultraleft Big Brother, we had Ronald Reagan, whose grandfatherly charm and way with words won him a second presidential term by a landslide. Inflation was waning, and the money and profits intended to trickle down to average Joes at some point were gushing up through the hands of hostile-takeover artists like Carl Icahn, wheeler-dealers like Donald Trump, and insider traders like Ivan Boesky.

If Robin Leach could’ve smarmed his celebrity subjects from “The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” into walking him through their garages, we’d have encountered cars like these three supersedans on a weekly basis. Each was as absurdly overpriced as any of the other trappings of luxury featured on the show. The Maserati Quattroporte was the bargain of the lot, starting in the mid-\$60,000 range (double these figures for today’s dollars), next came the Bentley

Mulsanne at about \$110,000, and the Aston Martin Lagonda rang the bell at \$150,000. An average of 20 Lagondas per year arrived in the U.S., only 30 Bentleys were imported each year, and Quattroporte sales here tallied just over 150 annually in the mid-1980s. These are special cars, and each is tailored to a different sort of aristocrat.

The Bentley seems the most traditional of the three by far, from its iconic exterior to its plush interior fully swathed in Connolly hides, Wilton wool carpets, and book-matched burled wood. New for 1981, the car was essentially a badge-engineered Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit fitted with a rounder grille (which reportedly reduces the aerodynamic lift, improves cooling, and trims the drag coefficient by 0.02 relative to the Rolls tombstone). A stronger chassis and revised rear-suspension geometry improved handling noticeably. Both the

## 1984 ASTON MARTIN LAGONDA>>

**SPECIFICATIONS:** Engine 325.9 cu in/5341cc DOHC V-8, 4x2-bbl Weber 42DCNF carburetors **Power and torque** (SAE net) 280 hp @ 5000 rpm, 360 lb-ft @ 3500 rpm (est) **Drivetrain** 3-speed automatic, RWD **Brakes** front: vented disc; rear: vented disc **Suspension** front: control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; rear: solid axle, coil springs, self-leveling shocks, anti-roll bar **Dimensions** L: 208.0 in, W: 71.5 in, H: 51.3 in **Weight** 4630 lb **Performance** 0-60 mph: 8.9 sec, quarter mile: 16.9 sec @ 85.5 mph, 60-0 mph: 179 ft (Road & Track, August 1982) **Price when new** \$150,000

## ASK THE MAN WHO OWNS ONE>>

**DR. NORMAN POLLACK** is a retired philosophy professor who doesn’t collect cars or anything else in particular. He and wife Nancy live in an Alden Dow-designed home and felt the angular Lagonda fit the style perfectly.

**WHY I LIKE IT:** I saw a Lagonda once, for 10 seconds, 15 years ago. It made quite an impression. I just knew it was the perfect piece of automotive art.

**WHY IT’S COLLECTIBLE:** Its startling design and breathtakingly complex electronics captured the world’s collective imagination and signaled the rebirth of Aston Martin—its development nearly bankrupted the company again.

**RESTORING/MAINTAINING:** Low-volume handmade cars require patience and ingenuity. Because no two cars are identical, service manuals aren’t always useful and scarce replacement parts don’t always fit. Beware of the dashboard display and switchgear electronics. A new printed circuit board costs \$10,000! Crash damage to the aluminum body panels is difficult to repair, and the steel chassis is rust-prone.

**EXPECT TO PAY:** Concours ready: \$35,475; solid driver: \$23,500; tired runner: \$16,000

**JOIN THE CLUB:** Aston Martin Owners Club North America (amoc-na.org)

## OUR TAKE>>

**THEN:** “When you slip behind the wheel, you leave the 1970s behind. It handles like a sports car, rides like a dream, and covers ground like an earth-bound Lear Jet.”—Fred Stafford, Motor Trend, May 1979

**NOW:** The ultimate 1980s time capsule, from its overgrown calculator gauges to its angular, rakish styling. The Lagonda is still one of the lowest and fastest-looking four-doors on the road.





## 1984 BENTLEY MULSANNE>>

**SPECIFICATIONS:** Engine 411.9 cu in/6750cc OHV V-8, Bosch mechanical fuel injection **Power and torque** (SAE net) 200 hp @ 4000 rpm, 390 lb-ft @ 2800 rpm (est) **Drivetrain** 3-speed automatic, RWD **Brakes** front: vented disc; rear: vented disc **Suspension** front: control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; rear: semi-trailing arms, coil springs and self-leveling hydraulic springs **Dimensions** L: 209.2 in, W: 74.3 in, H: 58.5 in **Weight** 4980 lb **Performance** 0-60 mph: 10.8 sec, quarter mile: 17.9 sec @ 76 mph, 60-0 mph: NA (*Car and Driver*, December 1981, 1982 Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit) **Price when new** \$110,000 (est)

## ASK THE MAN WHO OWNS ONE>>:

**DR. JOHN PFEIFER**, a retired vascular surgeon, bought this Mulsanne in 1987, one hour after its original Arizona owner traded it in. He's maintained it in show condition ever since, while adding 90,000 miles to the odometer.

**WHY I LIKE IT:** It's the finest-driving car I've ever owned. It's quiet, doesn't rattle, handles like a dream—the perfect combination of a high-style car that runs well.

**WHY IT'S COLLECTIBLE:** The Mulsanne established the architecture on which Bentley's resurgence, with the Turbo R and subsequent models, was built.

**RESTORING/MAINTAINING:** A Bentley can be done economically, if you're willing to join the club, become a judge in the class of car you own, and learn how and where to have work done affordably. Beware of untrained mechanics. Servicing the complicated hydraulic power-brake and load-leveling systems demands an experienced, factory-trained technician. Insist on a full service history—an engine rebuild can cost more than a body restoration.

**EXPECT TO PAY:** Concours ready: \$31,950; solid driver: \$20,750; tired runner: \$13,000

**JOIN THE CLUB:** Bentley Drivers Club (bdcl.org); Rolls Royce Owners Club (rroc.org)

## OUR TAKE>>

**THEN:** "While [it] is one of the world's finest handcrafted motorcars, the new Mulsanne fails to live up to the reputation established by the original item as a truly great driver's car."—*Paul Lienert, AutoWeek, November 16, 1981.* (No U.S. monthlies reviewed a Mulsanne.)

**NOW:** It's clearly not the road-burner the Turbo R would turn out to be, but the suspension modifications to the Spirit/Spur/Mulsanne made these cars far easier to drive hard and fast while still affording cloud-nine ride quality.



cutting-edge electrickery. That none of the three had experience running a car company excuses their preposterous announcement that Lagonda production would launch in the spring of 1977. Sorting out the world's first all-digital dash delayed full-scale production until late 1978 and reportedly consumed the entire car's



projected development budget. Worse yet, the car became legal for sale in the lucrative U.S. market only in 1982, by which time the revolving door of company ownership was spinning again. AMEs pink slip changed hands in 1981, 1983, 1984, and 1986, at which point Ford took charge. Lagonda production continued through 1989, with total sales tallying 631 worldwide.

**MEETING THESE CARS** in the metal confirms most suspicions an observer armed only with this much historical background might expect. Every inch of the Bentley is solid. The door hinges appear strong enough to pivot the Tower Bridge roadway. The white-on-black instruments are legible and logical—designed to communicate the pertinent facts with no color commentary, like a loyal butler. The atmosphere is hushed, the rear seat is an imperial throne from which to look down on the rest of the motoring world, perfectly shaped, with armrests right where they belong.

Maserati's approach is far more expressive, exuberant. Its stirring engine note is welcomed into the cabin in measured doses. The instrumentation includes amusing icons, like an oil can apparently being crushed in a press for oil pressure and a thermometer being held like a dipstick for oil temperature. A button marked "emergency" operates a spare fuel pump. The driving position is Italianate, with close pedals and a faraway steering wheel.

The Lagonda seems the most ephemeral, a snapshot frozen in time. The faddish straight-edged styling and digital dash that were so flashy in 1976 are aging less gracefully than the Quattroporte. While all three cars were largely handbuilt, this one seems also to have been engineered by hand, perhaps using an abacus and lead pencils. To wit: Apparently a reliable digital odometer eluded the development team, so a mechanical one is fitted under the hood, leaving only a digital trip odometer inside. The 10 red LED digital readouts look like calculator parts fastened to a black plastic panel—a far cry from the sleek graphic layout promised by the prototype and eventually delivered (sort of) in the CRT dash (phased in during 1984) and the Series III vacuum fluorescent display (1987-1989). This is also the tightest-fitting cabin.

From behind the wheel, the Aston becomes an instant favorite. Its 5.3-liter

## < 1984 BENTLEY MULSANNE > < DRIVE >



DOHC V-8, lovingly assembled by Don Osborne, was relieved of its emissions controls by the original owner. As such, it feels noticeably livelier than the smogged Maserati, though its Chrysler TorqueFlite three-speed automatic is rather too quick to shift up and then reluctant to kick down. But it's the Lagonda's chassis that pleases. Body motions are tightly controlled without inflicting undo ride harshness. The brake pedal feels reassuringly firm and linear in its operation—it's the best of the three by far in this case. Ditto the steering. The small-diameter one-spoke wheel provides sports-car heft and remarkable road feel. This is absolutely a driver's grand touring sedan, equally at home streaking down the motorway at speeds of up to 140 mph or carving up a coastal byway.

Yank the cats and air pump off its 4.9-liter, four-cam, four-carb V-8, and the Quattroporte might run even with the Lagonda. Curb weights are equal, both

use the same Chrysler transmission, and while the bigger Aston engine cranks out an estimated 65 pound-feet more torque, the Maserati is geared 15 percent shorter. A peculiar artifact of the then recent gas crunch is a fuel-consumption gauge that struggles to kiss the green range at idle and remains pegged in the red the rest of the time, just to reassure owners against unintended parsimony. The Quattroporte's ride also is well damped, and the suspension is abetted by a rigid body structure. Strike a pothole, and you hear and feel a single thud with no reverberations, rattles, or hood flutter. Hard cornering provokes considerable lean and only modest grip (0.75 g measured in the day, as compared with 0.68 on the Aston) from the 235/70R15 rubber, but this was never intended as a track car. It's more about gobbling up kilometers of *autostrada* by the mille, and that it does *con molto gusto*.



## < 1985 MASERATI QUATTROPORTE > < DRIVE >



All the signals coming up through the Bentley's chassis are muffled, muted, and filtered through what feel like rheostatic controls. The strictly business shiny black-plastic steering wheel spins effortlessly at all speeds. Brake pedal feel is synthetic, generated by compressing a rubber puck, while a valve is opened to admit high-pressure hydraulics to energize the brakes. The small shift selector telegraphs the driver's wishes down to the Turbo-Hydromatic tranny. All is quiet, serene, and free of wiggles and twitches up in the conning tower. This much everyone expects. What surprises the uninitiated is that these cars can truly hustle when pressed. They're capable—especially in the braking department, where *Road & Track* recorded a better stopping distance than either of these other sedans in a longer, heavier Rolls Silver Spur (167 feet from 60 mph). Body roll is a bit nautical in hard cornering, and overall

grip is modest; but while the ride is plush, it's never floaty or cloudlike. The Mulsanne doesn't goad its driver to miscreant behavior, but if he insists, the hardware is willing and able to oblige.

Despite their tiny production figures, nice examples of any of these cars can be had today for well under \$40,000—with gorgeous Quattroportes going for half that amount. Which is best? With no money on the line, hack auto scribes are easily seduced by the Lagonda's driving charms and indisputable novelty. But Rod Wilson's stable featured one of each for over a decade, including this very Lagonda and Quattroporte, and a Rolls-Royce twin of our Bentley. So he perhaps answered the question with greater authority last year by selling the Aston and Rolls but keeping the Maserati in the family. *Va bene!* ♦



### OTHER CELEB SEDANS

**THE SELECTION** of quirky boutique-built four-doors was waning by the mid-1980s, but just a decade earlier, there were plenty from which to choose.

#### MONICA 560

This shovel-nosed sedan was an international effort, designed by a British engineer, powered by a 5.4-liter Chrysler V-8, and financed by French tycoon Jean Tastevin, who named the car after his wife, Monique. It was billed as the world's fastest four-door when it made its debut in late 1973, but, at a price above that of a Ferrari Daytona, this gas-guzzling exotic was a tough sell in a fuel-crisis market—and only 35 were built.

#### ISO RIVOLTA S4/FIDIA

Piero Rivolta wanted to deliver a car with all the performance and panache of the best Italian GTs in a roomy four-door sedan. Giugiaro penned the sheetmetal, Ghia assembled the bodies, and the engine bay got a 300- or 350-horsepower Corvette small-block mated to either a four-speed manual or Powerglide automatic gearbox. Later cars featured 330-horsepower Ford 5.8-liter V-8s. Only 192 of these four-door supercars were built.

#### DE TOMASO DEAUVILLE

With Pantera production underway, DeTomaso Automobili sought to broaden its lineup with a four-door sedan. Tom Tjaarda penned the design, as an Italian interpretation of a Jaguar XJ6. Power came from the same 5.8-liter Ford V-8 that motivated the Pantera. While 244 were built, none was officially imported to the U.S. The Maserati Quattroporte III design, undertaken under Alejandro DeTomaso's ownership, shares many chassis features with the Deauville, such as its independent rear suspension and inboard brakes.

#### CITROËN SM OPÉRA

In the early 1970s, the most prestigious car available in France was the Citroën SM coupe, powered by a 90-degree Maserati V-6 (the four-cam V-8 less two pots). Henri Chapron used the SM as the basis for this ultra-exclusive custom-order limousine, of which only seven were built. The French government still owns an open-parade version for special occasions.

#### FERRARI PININ

Ferrari has never built a four-door production car, and we hope it never will, but Pininfarina built this design study to celebrate its 50th anniversary, presenting it at the 1980 Turin motor show. A front-mounted flat-12 from the 512 Berlinetta Boxer provided power, but only after the show car was sold in the early 1990s to Belgian dealer and Ferrari racer, Jacques Swaters, who made the car a runner.

### 1985 MASERATI QUATTROPORTE >>

**SPECIFICATIONS:** Engine 300.9 cu in/4931cc DOHC V-8, 4x2-bbl Weber 42DCNF carburetors **Power and torque** (SAE net) 276 hp @ 5600 rpm, 289 lb-ft @ 3000 rpm **Drivetrain** 3-speed automatic, RWD **Brakes** front: vented disc; rear: vented disc **Suspension** front: control arms, coil springs, anti-roll bar; rear: multilink, coil springs **Dimensions** L: 196.0 in, W: 74.4 in, H: 53.1 in **Weight** 4650 lb **Performance** 0-60 mph: 9.0 sec, quarter mile: 16.6 sec @ 87.5 mph, 60-0 mph: 182 ft (*Road & Track*, October 1984) **Price when new** \$66,470

### ASK THE MAN WHO OWNS ONE >>

**GERALD WILSON'S** uncle, Rod Wilson, bought this Quattroporte and our Lagonda in excellent original condition, when both cars were just a few years old. The manufacturing-equipment business he built—and this Maserati—is now run by Gerald.

**WHY I LIKE IT:** "It's rare, like the Lagonda. I'd only seen one twice. I knew the build quality was high, and when I looked carefully at this one, I fell in love with it."—Rod Wilson

**WHY IT'S COLLECTIBLE:** As the vehicle of choice among Italy's corporate and government leaders, the Quattroporte drives with all the flash and fashion the boot-shaped country is famous for.

**RESTORING/MAINTAINING:** The 1950s-vintage four-cam V-8 and Chrysler TorqueFlite transmission are virtually bulletproof. Some replacement parts can be expensive, but joining a club affords access to better deals. Beware of crash damage and interior-trim condition. Restoring the body and interior can easily tally more than the car is worth.

**EXPECT TO PAY:** Concours ready: \$14,800; solid driver: \$9250; tired runner: \$6000

**JOIN THE CLUB:** The Maserati Club (themaseraticlub.com); Maserati Club International (maseratinet.com)

### OUR TAKE >>

**THEN:** "It's an automobile, yes, but it's also a work of art that bespeaks its owner's good taste and achievement. We're smitten by it. And that much delight is worth the price of admission."—Kevin Smith, *Motor Trend*, October 1981

**NOW:** Maserati's build quality and brand image took a nosedive in the decade following this model's production run and the earlier cars' values have never fully recovered. That makes cars like this Quattroporte a screaming bargain among continental cruisers.