

ADVANTAGE LAGONDA

by Susanne Kent with photographs by Roger Watt

It was not just the motoring fraternity who breathed a sigh of relief when the much revered name of Aston Martin Lagonda was dragged back from the very brink of extinction a couple of years back: a great British tradition was in danger and we all knew it. Now, though, producing the spectacular Lagonda and the shattering V8 Vantage, they have never looked back, and it is obvious that there is a lot going on up in the wilds of Buckinghamshire...

This April the Aston Martin Lagonda finally hits the road 18 months after it first appeared, spectacular but engine-less, at the London Motor Show. The customers, King Hussein among them, have been patient while Aston have been beaver-ing over their teething troubles with the car. The glorious sweeping wedge of a body shape was right from the start, but under the skin there were a few problems to sort out, a few imperfections which needed correcting before the Lagonda could live up to the image Aston are creating for it.

From whichever angle you view it, the Lagonda has million dollar looks, which is just as well considering the Rolls-Royce price which Aston have given it. King



Hussein wisely paid up his £24,500 on the nail when he ordered the car in the autumn of 1976 when it was announced. Other customers must find another £8,100 before they take delivery.

The Lagonda is now quoted at £32,600. Order one today, and it will cost even more before you get behind the wheel. There are 180 buyers ahead of you in the queue, production has only just star-

ted at a rate of two cars a week, and Aston are not promising to hold the price at its current level beyond August.

A serious and stunning high performance car I now have no doubt that it is. Much about the Lagonda impresses instantly - its smooth, gliding motion at speed thanks to the excellent ride, its impeccable handling and reassuringly leech-like cling on bends, its enormous on-the-road impact as a constant collector of envious stares.

This is surely the car which deserves a 'Bullet' nickname a thousand times more than Leyland's unaggressive TR7 ever can. The Lagonda's striking look of controlled aggression is triggered by that silver square on the bonnet, carried through by

the long knifing body line, and capped by wheels which look emphatically like bull's-eyes.

The driver's seat adjusts electronically to an infinite choice of positions, and there is a built-in memory device which automatically selects pre-set seat positions at the touch of a switch.

The Lagonda's most dramatic and talked-about feature is its electronic dashboard with its gas plasma instruments, a design since copied by Panther in their extraordinary six-wheeled car with its eight-litre twin turbo-charged engine.

Aston took a long time and a lot of help from the Cranfield Institute of Technology in getting the dashboard electronics to operate efficiently. For sheer novelty value the design is superb. The touch-switches, of which Aston are justly proud, are fitted flush, like wafer-thin discs. Switched on, the panel glows alight with digital wizardry and moving graphs in place of the conventional dials of lesser cars.

The Lagonda's interior is plushly kitted with hide upholstery and deep carpeting in cocooning luxury. It has the hallmark of quality, but

somehow lacks the finicky detail perfection of a Rolls-Royce's mirror surface woodwork and understated magnificence. To its credit the Lagonda is a generous four-seater with room to stretch front and rear.

In tests at the Motor Industry Research Association proving

its aluminium skin concealing a very strong steel super-structure. Three-speed automatic transmission is standard. A five-speed manual gearbox is available as an option, but only if the buyer chooses to pay something like £2,000 extra for it.

The car's controls span out



ground in Warwickshire, the Lagonda has topped 155 miles an hour. Its fuel consumption, with Aston's own V8 power unit fitting snugly under the bonnet to propel the car's heavy weight, is likely to be in the region of 15 miles to the gallon.

Each Lagonda is hand-built,

from a cluster around the steering column and across panels topping both the front doors. Everything comes nicely to hand, and feels unexpectedly familiar even at first acquaintance.

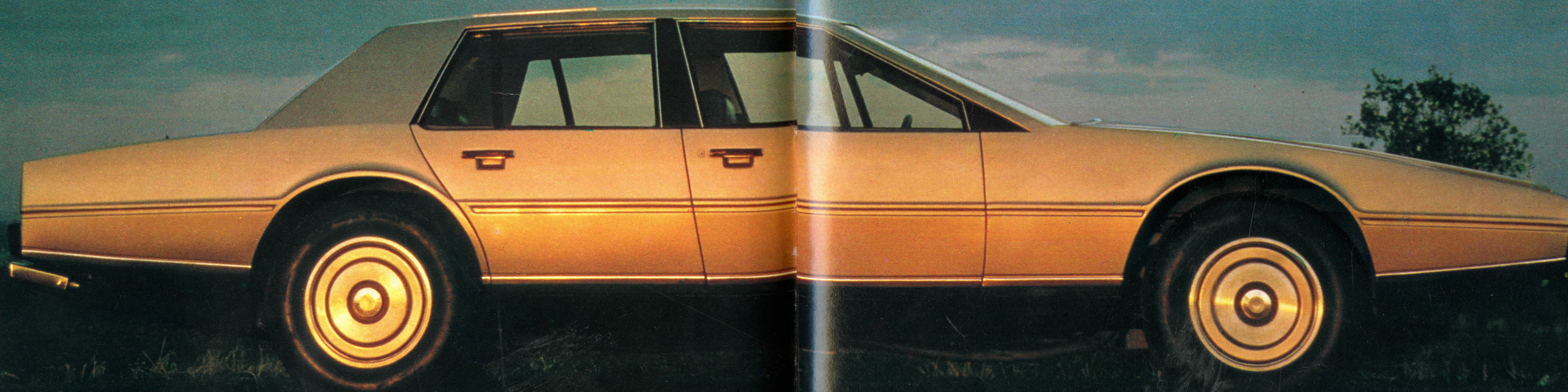
The Lagonda has some inspired details. The 'memory' for pre-set seating

positions is one. Heated front headlights is another. Demister wires in the glass keep the lights free from condensation.

Both front and rear bumpers are deformable, taking minor parking knocks without damaging the car's pristine looks. The boot, all 13 cubic feet of it, is carpeted and kept free of any intrusion from the spare wheel, which is sensibly slung in its own holster underneath the car's rear.

The first sprinkling of Lagondas on the roads to brighten up the dreary sameness of many of the cars already populating them has been a long time coming, but it should not be long now before a Lagonda or two starts purring into the traffic.

When they do, the phoenix of Aston Martin, which has risen from the bankrupt ashes of the old company before its rescue, a strengthening bird of fresh life and vigour, will have finally spread its wings. So many lovers of fine cars passionately believed at the time of the company's worst troubles that the name of Aston Martin was too valuable a piece of Britain's motoring heritage to be allowed to die. With the Lagonda it is speeding back with a sumptuously





stylish, if slightly noisy, vengeance.

For £20,000, give or take the odd £1, Aston will sell you a car that is as beefily curved as the Lagonda is spectacularly knife-edged. It is the Aston Martin V8, once better known as the DBS, now essentially the same car with a few updating modifications spanning the intervening years. Our photograph shows the ultra-high performing Vantage version, available only with manual gearshift, which claims the quickest 0-60 mph time for any current production car. In fact, the V8 is nimble and relaxing to drive, has an agreeable sporty opulence and an enjoyable

capacity as an effortless long distance mile-eater.

The latest modifications to the V8 include improvements to the engine breathing and silencing which helps squeeze out 15 per cent more power to zip up the acceleration a little. The change also improves flexibility, helps fuel consumption a bit, and quietsens the car's running.

New Koni shock absorbers were added to the specification to beef up the handling and road-holding. The car's instrumentation was updated to remove its more old-fashioned features.

All in all, one of the most glamorous car marques in the world is now looking like a healthy convalescent! Long live Aston Martin Lagonda 1975 and the cars none of us want to see die. **MB**