

L A G O N D A



Hydraulic jacking system, tire hammer, spark plugs and auxiliary light nestled in the tire cover of Berta & Jay Leon's 1937 LG45 Drophead Coupe—photos by Ray King

The Lagonda was a quintessentially English sporting car produced by an American who wanted to be an opera singer. His musical ambition thwarted in his native Springfield, Ohio, Wilbur Gunn had left for Victorian England. Actually, scandal was as much the reason for his move across the Atlantic. He had walked out on his wife and family as well, unthinkable in Middle

America in that era. Apparently the closest Wilbur came to realizing his dream now was marrying an English widow who was a singer and well-to-do and settling in at her pleasant home in Staines, Middlesex. Apparently, too, his creativity in the mechanical field far overshadowed his musical talent. In the potting shed of his backyard, Gunn began building motorcycles, then automobiles, which he called Lagonda, the name of a creek back home in Ohio. The "motorcyclist's Mercedes" his two-wheeler was dubbed; his automobile was favorably greeted among the sporting set too. Wilbur Gunn's death in 1920, largely from overwork, left the company in turmoil. In the enthusiast market, the Lagonda remained popular; the sobriquet "poor man's Bentley" was a compliment, given its price tag of half that of W.O.'s product. But money wasn't being made, and by the early thirties, it was being lost at an alarming rate. By 1935 Lagonda was in receivership. But there was a bright side. In 1935 Lagonda also won Le Mans. . . .

1934 Lagonda M45R Tourer

Owner: Frederick L. Berndt
of Milwaukee, Wisconsin

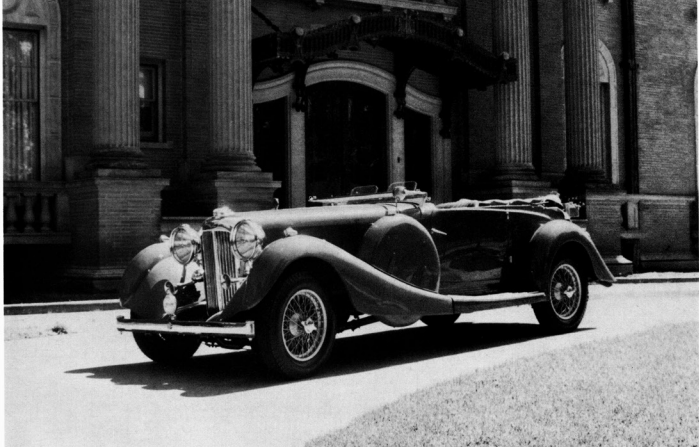
Among the Lagonda company's problems in the mid-thirties was the bewildering proliferation of models offered that strained a factory that had essentially been jerrybuilt out of a potting shed. Still, some very fine cars were being built. Chief among them was the 4½ Litre—or M45—which used the 4453 cc pushrod ohv Meadows six-cylinder engine and which was an unabashed copy of the fabled 4½ Bentley. Perhaps hopeful re-creation is a better term, since W.O.'s rumbleguts 4½ was now history and he was now, none too happily, in the employ of Rolls-Royce. The subsequent M45R—for Rapide—boasted 100 hp and 100 mph.

Fred Berndt's car was the factory prototype for that model: "Lagonda sold the car in 1935, it remained in England until about 1967, I've been its owner since 1971. The car was restored at home by me, and has been driven nearly 33,000 miles since. This is truly a superb touring machine with tons of torque and all-day high-speed driving capability. On 2,000-mile cross country runs in both 94° heat and 25°-30° temperatures, it has performed without fault. This car has a truly documented 336,000 miles since new."

Given Fred's experience, the 1935 victory of the 4½ Litre at Le Mans perhaps doesn't surprise. All England was overjoyed. Not since the Bentley's last victory in 1930 had a British car won the twenty-four-hour classic. For Lagonda, the timing couldn't have been more fortuitous. The firm was for sale. A company in receivership is not necessarily a bad proposition, but a company that had just won Le Mans was a far better one. Two parties were very interested.

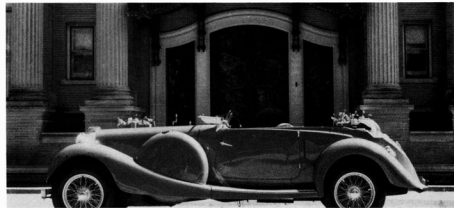
A little pre-history is in order. In 1931 when his bankruptcy-bound Bentley works went to the auction block, W.O. had hoped Napier would be the successful bidder. Instead, Rolls-Royce was. Now Rolls-Royce hoped to bring Lagonda into the Derby fold as well. Instead, a wealthy solicitor named Alan Good won out this time. Almost immediately there came the announcement that W. O. Bentley was on his way to Staines to take over Lagonda's technical directorship. There had been certain discussions about this beforehand, of course.





1937 Lagonda LG45 Tourer

Owner: Christopher M. Salyer of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma



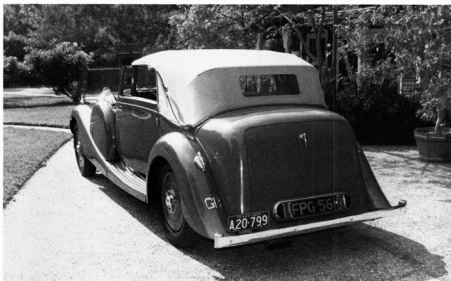
L.G. Motors, Ltd. (combining the initials of Lagonda and Good) was the designation for the reorganized company. The LG45 was its first new model, conjured by W. O. Bentley of M45 Rapide engine in a revised version of the M45 chassis.

Chris Salyer has owned his LG45 Tourer since 1987: "Three body styles were offered in the LG45—saloon, tourer and drophead coupe. Approximately 278 cars were built from 1935 through 1937. Improvements—or 'sanctions,' as the factory called them—were engineered in periodically. My car is a Sanction III with Weslake cylinder head; G10 gearbox with synchromesh on second, third and top gears; optional center or right-hand change; revamped gauges and new induction manifold since W. O. Bentley had detested the original engine's 'quite outrageous crankshaft roar.' Other features of the LG45 include automatic chassis lubrication (the 'Tecalmit One-Shot System'), hydraulic 'Jackall' system by Smiths, twin magneto and twin plug head. The wheelbase is 129 inches and the brakes mechanical cable. Further, for the first time on a Lagonda, a bumper was added as standard equipment, to the front only. It was of the harmonic stabilizing type and fitted to improve handling rather than to protect the car from shocks."

Jay & Berta Leon's LG45 was the Lagonda which Alan Good co-drove with Charles Brackenbury in the 1938 Monte Carlo Rally—2,369 miles from Athens through Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Germany and France to the finish line in Monaco. L. G. Motors' chairman was naturally anxious to keep Lagonda in the news, and this venture did that nicely. Amongst the special light cars tailor-made for the Monte, this car finished twenty-ninth of the 94 finishers (125 cars had started) and second in its luxury class. That this was Alan Good's car was just one of the surprises that greeted Jay Leon following acquisition in 1975: "Initially, I thought the car had two spare tires. But only the right-hand cover had a spare; the left contained the hydraulic system to lift the car for ease of tire changing." Following the Monte Carlo Rally, most probably Alan Good did not continue to drive the LG45 long because by now there was a brand-new Lagonda for him to use.

1937 Lagonda LG45
Drophead Coupe

Owners: Berta & Jay Leon
of Hubbard, Texas
Photos: Ray King





Shortly after acquiring the company, Alan Good had announced that Lagonda was now going to build the best car in the world. That phrase had been carefully chosen. Since the name Bentley was magic, probably no one outside of Derby thought it excessive hyperbole. The new V-12 Phantom III had just been introduced. Following W. O. Bentley from Derby to Staines were a few Rolls-Royce engineers with P-III blueprints tucked under their arms. It's always helpful to have a definitive picture of the competition.

"I would have given my right arm to have had another two years to develop the car before it was placed on the market," W. O. Bentley would later lament. But Alan Good's money could flow in one direction for

only so long. The new Lagonda V-12 barely made it to the Olympia Motor Show in the fall of '37. Alan Good had hoped to drive a V-12 in the Monte Carlo Rally but building the thirty cars necessary for homologation prior to the Monte's starting date was impossible, which was the reason Jay Leon's car had been pressed into service.

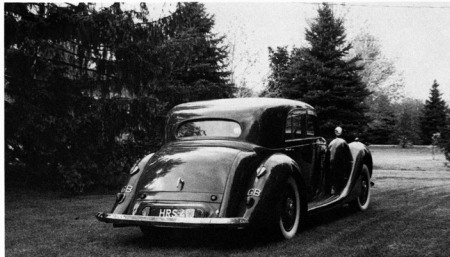
Still, if not all hopes were realized, the new Lagonda had arrived. Historians since have called it W. O. Bentley's *pièce-de résistance*. The 60° vee ohv overhead-cam engine displaced 4480 cc (273 cubic inches) and developed approximately 180 hp. Featured were dual carburetors, distributors, fuel pumps (electric) and a twelve-quart sump. In many respects, this V-12 was years

ahead of its time: complex, to be sure ("fully equal to Bugatti's worst," in one critic's jibe), but positively masterful in engineering nuance. The chassis W.O. engineered for it was no less: enormous (17½-inch) Lockheed hydraulic brakes with dual master cylinders, a finely tuned suspension system with an independent torsion-bar front and long half ellipticals at the rear, adjustable shock absorbers—plus the automatic chassis lubricator and built-in jacking system adapted from earlier Lagonda practice. Wheelbases were three: 124, 132 and 138 inches. Bodies were hand-made and all aluminum.

Lagonda V-12 production would total 185 cars. John Larch has owned his for seven years: "Most of the cars were dropheads. The Sport Saloon is exceedingly rare. Its lines are unique and, though 'very British,' the car has a fleet and flowing appearance and is quite streamlined for 1938. It sits low and corners well, drives and handles like a sports car. The power curve is rather flat up to 60, but from then on you can fly. The car is particularly comfortable at 70-80 and acts as if there is no top end. The brakes are very powerful. Unfortunately, although a revered name in England, Lagonda is not well known in the U.S. The V-12 was priced at about \$9,000 when new so it's no wonder few were sold. In engineering and design, the car was way ahead of the pack in 1938. It runs circles around a P-III Rolls."

1938 Lagonda V-12 Sport Saloon

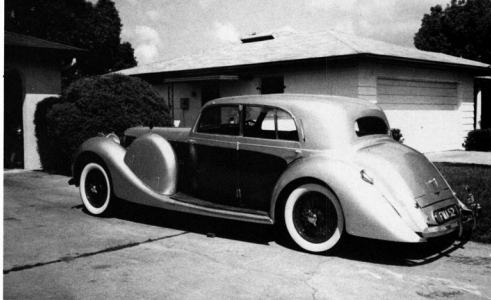
Owner: John A. Larch of Lafayette, Indiana



The LG6 was directly descended from the V-12 and looked almost exactly like it. The chassis was essentially the same save for being three-and-a-half inches longer—at 127½ and 135½—in the two wheel-bases available. The reason for the difference, surprisingly, was that the V-12 engine was shorter than this car's straight six. The LG6's unit was the well-proven Meadows 4½ Litre in Sanction IV spec (modified camshaft and valve timing).

The price tag for a Sport Saloon like Joseph Moreland's was £1195.

"A magnificent carriage, the one large car I enjoy driving," comments Joe. "Reportedly, Gary Cooper drove his 1938 Lagonda coast to coast yearly for a tune-up at Zumbach's, the famous foreign car garage in New York City."



1938 Lagonda LG6 Sport Saloon

Owner: Joseph N. Moreland, Jr. of Orlando, Florida



1939 Lagonda V-12
Drophead Coupe

Owner: Jean Gorjat
of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania



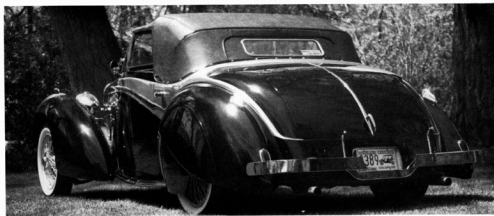
1939 Lagonda V-12 Saloon,
Freestone & Webb

Owner: Gordon Strauss
of Kelvin, South Africa

"Some 60,000 miles from new by an American actor in Hollywood, an oil company chairman and me," declares Jean Gorjat of his Lagonda V-12, while at the same time revealing some of its foibles: "The rods, made of aluminum, run on the crankshaft without bearings, but on high pressure oil, like some aircraft engines; if pressure decreases or the pump breaks, it's five seconds and it costs you \$10,000 and 3,000 miles to run in again, steaming like a locomotive even in freezing weather."

"This is presumed to be the only razor-edge Freestone & Webb V-12 Lagonda Saloon," comments Gordon Strauss of his car. "It was repainted shortly after arrival from the U.K. but the panel shop went bankrupt during the job. The stripped car was offered for sale (illegally) and rescued in the nick of time. Left in the open in England for about a year with the sliding roof open, much work remains to be done on the interior as a result. Because the body is aluminum, rust is not a problem. The Lagonda V-12 is an exceptionally well-engineered car with excellent performance—100+ mph."

The Stocktons' V-12 Lagonda is rare in being a Rapide. Earlier cars with that designation had been "breathed on" to improve performance, but this wasn't the case (nor need it have been) with the V-12. Here Rapide meant a lighter body and a more sporting appearance. The sidemounted spare moved to the rear of the car and, inside, the seating arrangement was revised to a single seat set sideways behind and theoretically three abreast in the front, although they would have to be close friends. Probably no



1939 Lagonda V-12 Rapide

Owners: Truman A., Jr. & Ruth S. Stockton of Lakewood, Colorado



more than twenty V-12 Rapides were produced. "We bought this car in 1957," says Truman. "One of its early owners was nightclub star Phil 'The Singing Cop' Regan. At least two new car dealers, a radio talk show and newspaper reporter and a machinist also owned it before I did. The car seems to have arrived in this country around 1945. The top is a three-position, and the body style is most unusual."

In 1939 two special versions of the V-12 finished third and fourth overall at Le Mans. Given Lagonda's earlier victory there, this was not the all-conquering debut desired.

W. O. Bentley commented that the Le Mans assault was too rushed. In 1938 Lord Howe had put up an hour at Brooklands in a standard saloon at 101.5 mph, which included a tire change along the way. The prowess of the Lagonda V-12 was unquestionable. Its minor failings would no doubt have been ameliorated but time was not on the big car's side. The onset of World War II ended production. In the austerity of postwar Europe, the car was not revived. Alan Good's interest waned. By late 1947 Lagonda belonged to tractor man David Brown, whose other recent acquisition was Aston Martin. Another interesting saga was beginning.