



DB9 written off, 2008, 15,000 miles, limited damage

old, they will certainly be showing signs of their age. Things that affect any and all cars will start to deteriorate. Rubber (used in door seals, hoses, belts, etc.) doesn't last forever and gets dry and brittle. Leather that was once supple starts to get dried out and crack. Batteries only last 5–10 years. 'Filled for life' fluids need to be changed else it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. This doesn't mean the cars are poor, but that they need attention to keep them in terrific condition.

But, the costs of dealer maintaining an Aston Martin are very, very high. Chip in your windshield? Something that costs under \$200 to replace for a Honda Civic is a whopping \$4300 for a DB9, which is potentially 10% of the car's value. Why is that? Aston may argue it is based on volume, and truthfully it is to a degree. There are a million Honda Civics out there, so companies making windshields will tool up and make competitive options, and competition and volume brings prices down. They sell them at a lower price and make it up in volume, and this enables them to pay for the tooling and costs of holding inventory. Aston doesn't get this luxury. With maybe 15,000 Gaydon cars sold, how many windshields will they sell in a year? They still have the expense of all the tooling (or at least their OEM supplier does) and must recover it over a very small number of sales. I get that, but...

Aston is also a premium brand, and knows it. They have certainly calibrated their Parts and Service departments around this. If an owner can afford a new quarter-of-a-million-dollar Aston Martin, they can certainly afford a \$4300 windshield. A mere pittance. Aston most certainly has a premium amount of mark-up on their parts, and the Parts and Service departments are profit centres helping keep the dealers alive. Fair enough, but this works only for that class of owner.

The owners of a second- or third-hand DB9 can't afford to dealer service a car for *everything* that it needs. They don't have \$10,000–20,000 per year to invest in a car that is decreasing in

To Live or Let Die?

by Steven McEvoy

Does Aston Martin want to keep the Gaydon-era cars on the road, or let them die a cruel death of decay and internet infamy? I think Aston Martin is making a big mistake here (that they may not even realize).

I've been seriously considering this question recently as an owner of one of those cars (a 2005 DB9 Coupe). Has Aston Martin made a deliberate decision to ignore the high costs of service for the early cars, accelerating the death of these vehicles? Or, are they oblivious to this situation and merely looking forward at new models, and, by this inattention, inadvertently contributing to the demise of vehicles they would prefer to keep alive and proudly representing the marque? They tout the high percentage of all Astons ever made still being on the road, but this seems to be related to the vintage classics, not the newly emerging modern classics. Without some change in Aston's course, the result will be the same either way, the Gaydon-era cars are now dying off and decaying in large numbers.

The Gaydon-era cars are the DB9s and Vantages (along with their evolutionary

variants) that started being built back in 2004 at the new Gaydon, UK factory and continue through today. When the DB9 was introduced there was a surge of sales never enjoyed by Aston before (that likely saved the company). These cars weren't cheap with prices north of \$175,000, but they have been suffering tremendous depreciation over the years. Decent examples of the early DB9s can be had for under \$35,000 today. Only the more limited editions seem to have been spared the worst of the depreciation, with DBSs holding on near \$100,000.

With the age of the vehicles increasing, their values dropping, and the introduction of the DB11, the DBS Superleggera and the new Vantage enticing existing Aston owners to upgrade, the second-hand market is teeming with early Gaydon-era cars. This is terrific for many would-be new owners of lesser financial means (like me) looking to buy their dream car, which is now within reach. This class of owner has some disposable income but has little hope of ever dropping \$250,000 on a brand-new Aston model. They are realizing that rather than buying a new Porsche 911 or BMW M car (like everyone else) for more than \$80,000 they can get a gorgeous pre-owned DB9 for under \$50,000. And by doing that, they join the Aston Martin family and have a truly rare and beautiful automobile.

An owner buying a second-hand Aston is also deeply worried (with good reason) about the costs to maintain their new mistress. They can afford the original purchase, but what about the service? Even with the modern manufacturing techniques introduced at Gaydon under Ford's ownership, the cars were still considerably hand crafted. With the earliest Gaydon-era cars now 15+ years



2005 DB9 with left front fender damage salvaged



Aston Martin written off with \$130,000 of damage from a large stone



From salvage to beauty

resale value. They are *passionate* about and *love* their cars, but they just don't have the means to service them entirely using the traditional Aston Martin service model. They can and want to change their own oil, their brakes and their tires just like any Honda owner could. They will buy some of the parts where available through the aftermarket. They will check out forums (like www.PistonHeads.com and www.6SpeedOnline.com) and websites and Youtube channels (like www.Aston1936.com and www.Redpants.lol) for 'how to' instructions for the most common issues. When something more complicated goes wrong, they will still reluctantly look to an official Aston Dealer for help and repairs (and be glad the dealer is there for them). In short, they love their cars and will look for ways to maintain them on a reasonable budget.

But, if an owner of an early DB9 suffering from a handful of routine normal wear and tear issues (cracked windshield, old battery, lumpy idle from weak coil packs, dead TPMS sensors, worn brakes and tires) arrives at a dealership, they could be facing a \$15,000+ repair bill. This may cause them to immediately look to dump the car onto the internet market at a discounted price (feeding the downward price spiral). Or, worse yet, defer the needed maintenance even further turning the car into a less than desirable beater wagon full of 'issues' until she won't start any more or is unsafe (and off to the worst death of all, the dismantler/breaker). Either way, the result is one less Aston on the road, one unhappy owner, and a dealer that got *zero* revenue rather than \$15,000. Nobody wins.

Aston Martin Can Save the Day

Consider this. Back in the 1970s the phone company had a monopoly on services. A phone call from the United States to the United Kingdom would cost \$5 per *minute* (and those were 1970s dollars). The phone company had invested dearly in transatlantic cables and needed to grind the revenue back out of us to pay for it. The result was families that used the service as little as possible, and for as short as possible. 'Happy Birthday Mom. Merry Christmas and Happy New year. I'm alive and doing well. Love you, call you next year.' Five-minute phone call, \$25 to the phone company. Huge profit margins on sadly low volumes. Only corporations

and the rich had the means to use the system extensively, and the phone company managed some profit.

Eventually the phone company tried something. They lowered the costs of the service so the middle class could afford it. They cut their profit margin drastically. To their surprise, volumes of calls skyrocketed, and so did their profits. Making a modest profit on massive volumes makes them more money. Customers were happy, the phone company was happy, and Moms all over the world were happy. Everybody won.

Can't Aston Martin do the same thing to save the Gaydon-era cars from their impending doom? Wouldn't the world be a better place if it did, keeping these beautiful cars on the road for generations to come?

All they would need to do is reduce the prices of the existing parts for these specific modern classic models. The coil packs for my DB9 won't fit a DB11, so they can still charge what they want for the current models whilst saving the old ones. Their initial investments in design and tooling for the parts is likely fully recovered by now (or as recovered at it will ever be). Rather than selling just ten \$4300 windshields a year, could they cut the price to \$1000 and sell 100 of them (ten times more), and save the day fixing 90 more cars and still making the same profit? And wouldn't that make 90 more dealer relationships that might one day lead to more sales?

How about the labour costs of dealer service? Honestly, I don't think they are that bad. In my area the Aston Martin dealer

service rate is \$175 per hour. A local Toyota dealer is \$165. Not as cheap as your local mechanic/specialist down the street, *but* the dealer has skills and equipment that the guy down the street doesn't. I don't want an untrained technician fiddling with a complicated and bespoke Aston Martin issue. The dealers have to pay to send their Master Technicians to Gaydon for training. They pay to own special sets of tools needed for repairs. They pay to own the fancy master computer that can talk to our cars and update the software. They should be due a premium for this over the local mechanic, and this is fair since we rely on them to have that knowledge and those tools. Could they offer a modern classics discount on the labour rate? I would think 20% off might be possible and still leave them a decent margin. Again, is it better to have 100% of nothing, or 60% of a large amount of work? Work begets more work, so scaring a Gaydon-era owner away with high prices doesn't help anyone.

So, what does Aston Martin have to say on this? I have no idea. I've tried multiple times through a couple of channels to get their attention and ask this question to get a fair and considered answer, but when I've asked I either get no response or a response that they (personally) don't know and will try and find someone to ask. Then dead air. I get it, I'm a nobody. Or, maybe they don't have an answer since it's something big and fundamental that needs to be decided at the top of the organization. Do they want to keep these cars on the road? To live or let die?

I am a staunch supporter of 'live'. I would love to have a real and positive conversation with the leadership at Aston Martin wise and brave enough to consider this decision (Mr Palmer I am at your disposal, please contact me so I can write a follow-up). It can't be an easy task to convince your peers (and now your shareholders) to lower prices to make more money. Be brave. We are waiting out here. We all want to call our Moms.



Restored (photo: Justin Lowhorn)