



BY royal APPOINTMENT

Just in time for his 60th birthday this November, Aston Martin Works Service has completed an unprecedented upgrade to HRH Prince of Wales' treasured DB6 Volante, perpetuating his long-running relationship with Aston Martin, confirmed for over 25 years by his granting the automobile marque the Royal Warrant. **Simon de Burton** reports on a biofuel conversion seemingly with more in common with a cocktail party than the futuristic technologies of agrarian ethanol



Back in 1969, a gallon of petrol cost a perfectly reasonable six shillings and tuppence in the UK and the dangers of global warming had scarcely been thought about. So considerations such as fuel economy and CO₂ emissions were probably the last things on the mind of His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales as he took grateful delivery of his Seychelles Blue Aston Martin DB6 MKII Volante.

The Prince of Wales got the Aston Martin around the time of his 21st birthday. However, unlike first cars owned by many young men, it was not destined to fade into the background after serving as a stepping stone to something more interesting because, just as the DB6 is one of the world's most coveted classics today, so it was one of the most coveted cars of its era when new. It is probably true to say that from the moment he received the keys, The Prince of Wales embarked on a very special relationship with his DB6 that continues unabated today. Over the decades he has covered many thousands of miles in the car, regularly using it to attend public events such as polo matches and official engagements and, while other cars have come and gone from the Highgrove garage, that distinctive blue Volante has remained a constant.

Recently, however, The Prince of Wales began to look for a way to provide his beloved Aston Martin with the 'greenest' possible credentials, in order that he could continue driving it without burning unsustainable fuels that produce high levels of CO₂. To discover whether or not this would be possible, he naturally contacted Aston Martin Works Service to see if such a traditional, purely mechanical car could be made to run on an alternative fuel source.

The answer, after seven months of research, development and conversion work, has proved to be a resounding yes – and now the DB6 purrs away contentedly on a diet of E85 bioethanol made, believe it or not, from waste wine and cheese whey.

'This development is the first of its kind on a Heritage Aston Martin DB model and has been a great success,' says Kingsley Riding-Felce, Aston Martin's Director of Works Service and Parts Operations. 'There were only 38 of these cars built and The Prince of Wales' has always been fully maintained by Aston Martin at Works Service in Newport Pagnell. We also refurbished it during the 1980s. Converting the DB6 to bioethanol has certainly given it a new lease of life, as well as perpetuating a wonderful relationship with a treasured client.'

Making the car run sweetly on the alternative fuel involved a complete engine re-build, an increase in compression ratio and a replacement of components such as the fuel tank filler rubbers and fuel lines. Fortunately, The Prince of Wales' car has always been fitted with Weber carburettors, which lend themselves more readily than SU units to being tuned to run on fuel other than conventional petrol.

The project was carried out in conjunction with R.S. Williams, one of Aston Martin's heritage dealers, and Green Fuels, a Gloucestershire-based biofuel company based in Stonehouse, only a short distance from The Prince of Wales' Highgrove home. Green Fuels obtained a consignment of waste wine from a local Wiltshire vineyard, together with a quantity of whey from a nearby cheesemaker, and converted them into E85 bioethanol specifically for supplying The Prince of Wales who can enjoy 'green' motoring for many years to come on his 'wine and cheese' reserves. Even the proximity of the Green Fuels headquarters was an important factor in the conversion, as The Prince of Wales did not want to negate his reduced CO₂ emissions by having to have his consignment delivered from afar by an eco-unfriendly tanker.

Bioethanol, the green equivalent of petrol, costs around £1.10 per litre – roughly the same as petrol – but it produces as much as 85 per cent less CO₂. Using wine as the base product might sound extravagant, but it is, in fact, an efficient, clean and sustainable method of disposing of waste.

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Although the DB6 Volante is probably now the best known of his Aston Martins, the Prince has owned others that, in their way, have been equally important. Perhaps the most notable is the British Racing Green V8 Vantage Volante that he personally collected from Newport Pagnell in 1986; a car that resulted in a batch of 21 similar versions being built to what became known as 'Prince of Wales Specification'.

'The special specification involved the addition of a lot of little details,' explains Kingsley Riding-Felce. 'We added extra soundproofing and sank the centre console switches flush with the panelling. The console was also lowered slightly, too, to give a little more elbow room.'

Outwardly, The Prince of Wales specification cars were recognisable to the discerning eye as having a shallow front spoiler instead of the more prominent standard air dam and a bootlid devoid of the normal Vantage Volante's raised rear lip. The wheel arches, meanwhile, were slightly flared to accommodate a set of wider rims and tyres.

Although this body detailing was replicated on the other 21 Prince of Wales specification cars, there was one feature that Aston Martin created for His Royal Highness alone – a monogrammed, leather-covered jar that nestled in the centre console.





Whenever he brought the DB6 in for servicing we noticed that there was always a jar of sugar cubes on the front seat for The Prince of Wales' polo ponies,' recalls Riding-Felce fondly. 'As a result, we were inspired to make space for a specially made one in his Vantage.' The Prince of Wales covered 46,000 pleasurable miles in the 400 horsepower V8 Vantage, before selling it at Sotheby's auction in December 1995. It fetched £115,500, all of which HRH donated to his charitable trust.

The Prince of Wales replaced this car with a Virage Volante in which he also covered more than 40,000 miles. The car was specially built for His Royal Highness and finished to a similar colour and specification, albeit with uprated brakes and suspension on account of its tuned, 6.3-litre engine that produced 500 horsepower. The car is now housed at Aston Martin headquarters in Gaydon, further reflecting the long-standing relationship that The Prince of Wales has enjoyed with Aston Martin since he acquired the DB6 in 1969 – a relationship that led him to grant the marque a coveted Royal Warrant a few years later.

Dating back to the reign of Henry II during the 12th century, Royal Warrants may only be granted in the UK to firms that supply goods or services to one of three members of the Royal Family – The Queen, The Duke of Edinburgh or The Prince of Wales. In order to be considered for a Warrant, a company must have traded for at least five years with the Royal concerned, after which the Lord Chamberlain decides whether or not to make the award.

Aston Martin is particularly proud to have carried The Prince of Wales' coat of arms for over 25 years now, and to have perpetuated the close association in such dramatic fashion with the recent DB6 conversion.

Whether or not a new Aston Martin will be among The Prince of Wales' 60th birthday gifts on November 14 has not been revealed – but this watershed in his life will be marked fittingly by a number of major events, including a televised comedy gala starring John Cleese, Robin Williams and Rowan Atkinson (a fellow fan of Aston Martin), the issuing of gold and silver commemorative coins and an exhibition of archive photographs from the Royal Collections at Windsor Castle, where The Prince of Wales grew up. Happy Birthday and happy driving, Your Highness!

