

B37 WHATEVER IS A CYGNET?

PROJECT: EUROPE 2011

SUBJECT: B37 WHATEVER IS A CYGNET? SCRIPT

DATE: 27 JULY 2011



We had just finished our thorough and informative tour of Aston Martin's manufacturing facility and were heading for the parking lot when Sarah Durose and Tom Emmerson steered us away from our waiting MG toward a vehicle that we had briefly seen at Le Mans.



It was Aston Martin's newest product, the Cygnet. This vehicle is purposely produced for the discerning owner living in an urban environment who doesn't want the problems of guiding his full-size and extremely valuable Aston Martin through the asphalt jungles of the city.



Sure, oodles of city cars are available but none are furnished with the care and quality that comes with the Aston Martin brand. This car is intended to meet those demanding personal expectancies by putting them in a vehicle that can slip into even the tightest of parking spots.

Sarah explained this unusual trade by saying Aston Martin technicians wanted to study the older manufacturing techniques used to build the MG...or something equally transparent. The message was clear, however. They wanted us to drive this Cygnet for several days to see what a great product they've produced. We accepted before they could change their minds.

A couple of turns around the parking lot made me feel comfortable with the right hand drive... even though we'd been driving on the wrong side of the road for 12 days now.



First impressions:

It is much larger inside than it looks outside; almost like a standard size car with the front and back lopped off. Get used to not seeing a hood in front of your feet. CVT transmission does away with gearbox shifting. Surprising acceleration. We struck out for the busy motorway and found it to be a little scat box. Up to 80 MPH before we knew it (just going with the flow Constable) and able to play in the fast lane. After the tight confines, noisy cockpit and muted speeds of the MG, we were loving it.



We programmed the standard Garmin GPS to take us back to Stratford Upon Avon and were delighted to hear the voice of our long deceased Mlle. Recalculaire or her clone. True to form, she immediately had us leave the motorway and plunge into country roads that hadn't seen a car in weeks. We reached our destination but not before brushing by dozens of dreamy cows and scattering free-range chickens in every direction.



We stopped by the Royal Shakespeare Company to buy tickets for a play by William Shakespeare...any play. No luck but noticed people closely examining the Cygnet.

Their behavior was predictable. They'd look the car over; study the logo on the hood; peer intently at the interior and step back slowly for another overview. Some whipped out their cameras while others walked away shaking their heads. Is it controversial? You'd better believe it.



Here's a little info for you gear heads. The Cygnet is powered by a transverse mounted 97 horsepower engine with maximum torque of 92 lb ft @ 4400 RPM. Maximum speed is 106 MPH and it goes from zero to 60 in 11.8 seconds manual or 11.6 seconds CVT automatic. It gets 54.3 MPG but, of course, that's done by engineers driving with a raw

egg under their accelerator foot. Rack and pinion steering with MacPherson strut suspension. It rides on 16" 8-spoke graphite painted diamond turned alloy wheels (that's right out of the catalogue) and has anti-lock disc brake wheels all around. The most impressive surprise was the parking ability. I decided to squeeze into an ultra tight spot. Got the rear end in place, turned the wheel three cranks and I was in. This thing pivots instead of turns! What a great feature.

Here's something for the ladies. Instead of a glove box there is a hand-stitched leather bag attached to the dashboard. Now is the proper time to tell you that the body and engine are provided by Toyota of Japan. Aston Martin is responsible for adding the verve, the luxury and a proper British stiff upper lip.



We pulled into the driveway of Church Farm Barns and literally shocked Minty, the head housekeeper, because she was hoping for a ride in the MG. When learning it was an Aston Martin she quickly changed allegiances and dropped broad hints for a ride. Minty is a lovely lady originating from India.

She is married to Raj, also from India. The rub here is she is Sikh and he is Hindu, a no-no among most Indian families. To live their own lives peacefully they moved to Stratford Upon Avon where he's just started his own cab business. Minty offered to show me the sights of Stratford so off we went under her direction. It led to



downtown and to the cab stand where Raj waits for business. She insisted I flash the lights and toot the horn to get his attention. No real need because people saw us coming for blocks away. She said, "I feel just as giddy as a little girl riding with her daddy in his brand new car." It wasn't an understatement.



It was only after reading a news article that auto racing great Sir Stirling Moss had given the first Cygnet to his wife as a birthday gift, that we realized we were driving the only other Cygnet on English roads. No wonder we were such a sensation. No one had ever seen one before.



After that, driving the Cygnet became the motivation for a series of photo ops. One was a roof re-thatching project. We parked in front and had a long conversation with master thatcher Dan Quarterman who was on a smoke break...not surprisingly some distance from the roof.



"Thatching ain't what it used to be" he said. "Not enough business, not enough thatching materials and not enough young men interested in doing the job." Guess that was said about the buggywhip business at one time as well.



Each day we'd show up at the Royal Shakespeare Theater in search of tickets only to come away empty-handed. We didn't buy in advance and our time was getting short. Louise passed the time between inquiries by examining costumes and sitting in a chair that would deliver Shakespearean lines when it felt the pressure of someone's bottom.



On our final night in Stratford, we accepted the advice of box office personnel and joined the queue waiting for returned tickets. Curtain was 7:15 PM and we were there at 5:00 on the dot making us second in line to Bruce, a young American writer from Jacksonville, FL, trying to sell his first play. By seven o'clock we were getting antsy and almost resigned to not seeing a Shakespeare play in his hometown.



Then, at 7:05, the box-office lady said, "I have two returns on the second row for the Merchant of Venice at an exorbitant price. Do you want them?" We hurriedly paid face value, wolfed down a quick sandwich and got to our seats just as the play started. (Can't say, "just as the curtain rose" because it was in the round.)



Only vaguely familiar with *The Merchant of Venice*, we were prepared to witness hours of boring Shakespearean language spoken by people in period costumes...the price of absorbing culture. Instead, the setting was contemporary with slot machines, scantily clad waitresses, pole dancers and an Elvis character dressed in his familiar white suit, sunglasses and complete with guitar.

It was Viva Las Vegas in setting and Shakespeare in execution. At this point I'll mention that cameras were not allowed so these fuzzy photos were taken at intermission with the camera tucked under my armpit.

The audience was stacked four stories high and those on top were literally hanging over the balcony rails. We were at floor level on the second row and didn't miss one thee or thou. The main characters were exemplary. Portia had a Nashville accent so thick you could cut with a bowie knife. She and handmaiden, Nerissa, spoke in twang and rolled their eyes just like proper southern ladies are trained to do. We both wondered where they'd found these American girls. The Gratiano character took on the role and accent of a New York mafia guy while all the other cast members spoke in Shakespearean language but with American accents.



Eclectic would be the best description of this play. The Shylock character was Patrick Stewart of Star Trek fame plus many other credits. He played it straight from the Shakespeare playbook and it fit. We couldn't have been more surprised and pleased with this performance and the three "curtain" calls were not enough.



Afterward we met Bruce for a quick pint of bitters at The Ruddy Duck pub, a hangout for theater types. I stood in line next to Portia, Nerissa and Gratiano, now Tennessee twang free with British accents so thick you could cut them with a Sheffield steel knife. I asked Susannah Fielding (Portia) how she learned to do American southern speak so convincingly. "Oh, I used Dolly Parton videotapes for the accent," then surprisingly, "and tapes of Paris Hilton to get the sophisticated slutty attitude just right." Small wonder she was the lead. The Cygnet, parked just outside the pub, was surrounded by actors with flashlights going over every detail. One of them pointed to the car and asked, "Is it the real thing or a prop?" To be or not to be, I think, was his question.



Early the next morning I packed the Cygnet's boot chuck full of the items portered so easily by the MG, although now they were weather proof.



The rear seats, intended for small children or undersized Great Danes, folded down easily and made a cavernous space for our luggage.



Minty took the obligatory departure photo and we tuned the Garmin GPS for the return to the Aston Martin factory. Predictably she pointed us to the first barely paved country road but, by now, we knew our way around and headed for the motorway. She went into her chant of "recalculating" over and over again until realizing we weren't paying attention. She then slipped into a pout and sulked all the way back.



The MG was patiently waiting for us with nothing to show that any Aston Martin engineers had even popped the hood for a look. The transfer of bags took no time at all even though Sarah Durose kept asking, "Will there be room for all that luggage in your poor car?"

When we were saying our thanks and goodbyes she did mention, "You are the first Americans to drive the Cygnet. Wouldn't it be neat if you were the first in America to own one?" We decided to leave before she brought out the sales manager and we'd end up in the Aston Martin closing room but after a few miles of driving the motorway in our noisy, crowded car, we wondered what they would have given for an old MG.



We're on our way to Abingdon On Thames, the birthplace of the MG.

Louise and Ray