Picture the scene…

… I'm walking down Bayswater Road (as you do), and I hear a fearsome growl somewhere behind me. Oh no, thinks I – a lion has escaped from the zoo and has designs on my bod. But instead of running I – as improbable as this story – turn around, my conscious mind not focusing on the possibility of said ferocious feline tailoring a bib around his mane or polishing a knife and fork. I scream a silent scream as I behold – no, not 350lbs of khaki cat, but an acre of angular aluminium, running sublimely behind a gleaming portico grille adorned with an almost art-nouveau design of fabled familiarity. Only this badge tells those innocent of cognoscenti motoring this is not the inter-stellar reconnaissance craft the wider (and I do mean wide…) design suggests. For this is an Aston Martin Lagonda.

Aston Martin Lagonda (the name of the company and the car) built these automotive behemoths between 1976 and 1987. Actually, they didn't. The first car that actually arrived in the moneyed (although thirty-three grand lighter after paying for the car) mitts of its owner some time in 1978; even then, it didn't want to work. Not that there was anything wrong with the engine – the five-and-a-third litre V8 engine had been tickety-boom for over a decade at that point. No, the problem was the electronics.

Not only did the car look like something Buck Rogers would have dropped a stitch over, but its instrumentation was the sort that would have made a NASA boffin swoon. Had it worked. Alas, as is the case with small companies with big ideas, there weren't so much teething as tusking problems – which meant that the car displayed on the Aston Martin stands at the 1976 Motor Shows, the car that made the world go "WoW!" and mean it, was another two years in its gestation.

Was it worth the wait? Most certainly! Whilst the instrumentation still gives some owners extreme gyp (which leads some people to go to great expense to fit <sneer> analogue instruments</sneer>) the car itself is gorgeous. Well, I think so, anyway. There are some who will tell you it is tacky – but this is neither a Las Vegas casino, a bling-clad rapper or six yards of half-dried glue. Sure, it's excessive by the standards of a bargain-bucket Toyota Corolla, and there are far cheaper ways of getting from A to B. But this is style, this is presence. This, my friend, is Art. Of course, much has changed since the design first had Italian designers snapping their pencils in shame. For instance, the instruments changed from electronic spaghetti liquid crystal display to cathode ray tubes (televisions, to us mere mortals, plebs and aspirants) – but no amount of knob-twiddling get Dan Cruickshank blathering on about Caravaggio. So that's one good thing.

It looks like something the Bauhaus school would have created were it alive ten years hence. In fact, the car was designed by William Towns, the designer also responsible for the Lagonda's beefy sister, the V8. One can imagine the discussion: "Bill", they would have said, "Bill, design us a show-stopper, a car that will make people's jaws drop so fast that they will make indentations in the concrete". And he did. Bear in mind, too, that Aston Martin had only just survived fading unpleasantly into that goodnight, thanks to

the timely intervention of two new-world enthusiasts – who naturally wanted to put their own stamp on their new acquisition. Which they did – but it seems they also showed the world the little company was still very much alive.

What is it like to drive? Frankly, old chum, I haven't got an earthly. Aside from the one or two I have seen at motor shows, those I have read about in Aston Martin Owners' Club magazines, and the one I saw "in the wild" on Bayswater Road, I have no experience of them. They are rarer than honest politicians – of the 600 or so built only 25% remained within British bounds, and that 600 includes the wider set of the "Aston Martin Lagonda" built between 1974 and 1990. Okay, so a mere eight were built between 1974 and 1976, but supposing a relatively sprightly one a week were built thereafter (from 1978), then Yoda not needed is to do the maths. But then who cares about my opinion? Apart from me, that is. I'd have one tomorrow, if I could find the twenty grand to buy one, because it's so imposing.

So they say "nothing opens doors like a Rolls-Royce". But I don't want to go ram-raiding, I want people to say: "Wow! What the hell is that?" They will then ask, or by this stage, gibber: "Who" – or more precisely, what – "owns that thing? What do they do? Can I have some?" I want them to drool, to gibber, to break down in inquisitiveness, to give me money! But I want them to do these things in a way they will not do with a Ferrari or a Rolls-Royce or even another Aston Martin. These are undoubtedly fine cars in their own way, but the messages they send out aren't exactly the sort of messages I want to be broadcasting for my business. For instance, while there are a great many wonderful, wholesome and intelligent Ferrari owners, red ones sort of scream either "me too" or "nouveau-riche idiot". Rolls-Royces again are owned by some of the most innovative, the most talented, and the most intelligent – but very often they are the *de rigeur* choice for people who have made it – and therefore a bit clichéd. Aston Martins I Love. I have been a fan since I have been in school, and I would love to stuff my putative garage full of them. But people think Aston Martin and people think James Bond. While that isn't necessarily a bad thing, when people think James Bond they think "playboy misogynist" – which is. But Aston Martins are sporting coupés, aren't they? The Lagonda, whilst sporting, isn't a coupé – which allows me a rather convenient little loophole.

Okay, the electronics can be a bit iffy, the car could have been in the hands of someone who thought he was driving a bar of soap or a Chieftain tank, and *caveat emptor* is probably sound advice. But then show me anything that is completely devoid of risk, and I'll show you something which just doesn't exist. But, open your eyes, take an expert or six with you and you can find a gem.

Just remember, if you hear a growl on Bayswater Road that makes you think of Born Free, it is very unlikely to be an escapee from London Zoo…