

Bill and Joan Thomas's 1954 "R" Type Bentley Sport Saloon

Article and photos by Bill Thomas

Our "R" Type Bentley was completed in late 1954, very near the end of "R" Type production. It's registration in England even listed it as a 1954-55 model year car. Our family has owned it since the early 1970's, when my father purchased it as the second owner. Its first 17 years of existence was in the Chester area in the northwest of England, near the border with Wales. The original owner was a gentleman named J.E. Davies.

This was not the first Bentley in our family. I purchased the first one while in my sophomore year of college studying Gothic Architecture in England and France. As a student, I had access to the classified listings of Bentleys and made time to pursue some. The one I could afford and purchased was a Mark VI with about a quarter of a million miles on it. And, although the body was in rough shape, the mechanicals all worked and the engine was strong and ran smoothly. When I returned home to the States with the car, reality set in about the car and my competing academic goals. So, after returning to school, I decided to sell the Mark VI, not knowing my recently retired father had been spending time tinkering with it. When it sold, he decided that we would not be without a Bentley for long and purchased the "R" Type we now have, which came with a lot less wear and tear than my well-worn Mark VI.

Our 1954 "R" Type Bentley was manufactured by Rolls Royce in their factory at Crewe, England, where Bentleys and Rolls Royces came off of the same assembly line. The "R" Type Bentley and the Silver Dawn Rolls Royce are virtually the same automobile except for two items. Obviously, the Bentley and Rolls have different radiator shells, but Rolls were generally fitted with a single downdraft 2-barrel Stromberg carburetor, whereas the Bentley has dual "SU" carbs. This gives the Bentley a slight performance edge, thereby paying homage to Bentley's rich racing heritage at Brooklands and LeMans. These victories were in the years prior to Bentley's purchase by Rolls Royce in 1931. Prior to 1931, Bentley was an independent manufacturer of very high quality, high speed motorcars rivalling the very best in the world, and was serious competition to Rolls Royce.

The factory where our "R" Type was produced was created to produce the Rolls Royce "Merlin" V-12 aircraft engine for World War II. After the war, automobile production was moved to this factory and a number Rolls Royce/Bentley traditions were about to change. For example, prior to the war, Rolls Royce and Bentley produced only automobile chassis. The bodies were built by independent coachbuilders, such as Freestone and Webb, Hoopers, Park Ward, Mulliner, and others. In 1946, a first for Rolls Royce occurred when the Mark VI Bentley was produced in the Rolls Royce factory as a complete car; chassis as well as body and interior all assembled in the same factory.

While the Mark VI was definitely a milestone in Rolls Royce history, the "R" Type had a major first of its own. Not only did the "R" Type Bentley display a new longer "in house" built body with welded frame,, but it was also the first Rolls Royce-built product to employ

automatic transmissions. This new feature was first offered as an option in 1953 and became standard in 1954. Ultimately, 1,231 "R" Type Bentleys were produced with automatic transmissions for worldwide consumption. It should be noted that the automatic transmission employed was sourced from General Motors and is essentially the same design as employed in Cadillac and other GM cars. Other GM features of the "R" Type Bentley include ignition system by Delco-Remy, Air Cleaner by AC, and windscreen washer system by Trico.

Our Bentley has provided roughly 45 years of enjoyment for our family. Driving and/or riding in this car is not unlike the feeling of being comfortably seated in the drawing room of a fine English home, only this drawing room also goes down the road. It also reflects refinement and attention to detail that is, unfortunately, rarely found today.

Care of the car over those years can be characterized as conservation rather than restoration. It has been repainted in the original Midnight Blue and the leather on the seating surfaces was replaced. White Post Restorations did a complete redo of the brakes, but most other mechanical/cosmetic work was done by my father or me.

Other noteworthy features of our car include: Sunroof, all-leather interior with Wilton Wool carpets, mahogany with burlled walnut dash and window trim inside, Girling-Bijur centralized chassis lubrication system, combination of Lockheed hydraulic brakes and mechanical brakes, electric start as well as a hand crank start for emergencies, under seat heater and windscreen defroster, vanity compartments with mirrors in rear quarters, drop-down writing desks for rear passengers, side semaphore style turn signals as well as signal lights in the fenders, and under-seat tool kit in sliding drawer.

This car has won numerous awards over many years. The most recent award being Best of Show (Foreign) at the 2016 Bull Run Region Edgar Rohr Memorial Car Show in Manassas, Va.







