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Full Disclosure:

# Turbo R Two Door

In the final article of our series **Daive Bassoli** and **NJH Smith** investigate the photo of the 'Black Model', another of the Bentley prototypes which you never knew existed. Images: Courtesy of **Daive Bassoli** and **WOBMF Archives**.

Once again we're faced with a conundrum. This photo clearly depicts a two door version of the 1980s Mulsanne saloon, captured on one of the modelling tables in the Styling Office at Bentley HQ - yet no two door Mulsanne or Turbo R ever rolled off the production line at Crewe. So how does this prototype relate to the two door Bentleys that did appear in this era, 1985's Project 90 concept car and the Continental R announced in 1991?

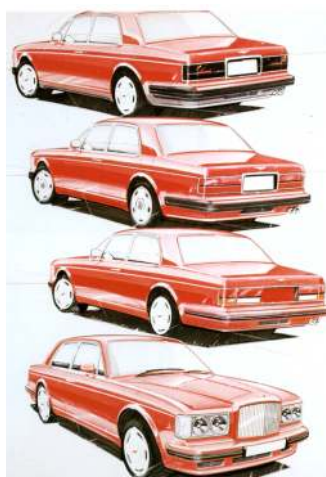
To understand how tangled the story became, let's start by rewinding to 1977 and zoom in on the office of David Plastow, Chairman and MD of Rolls-Royce. Sitting resplendent on his desk is a model of a dramatic two door Bentley saloon. With bluff frontal treatment, squared-off front wheel arches, semi-enclosed rear wheels and a pronounced lift over the rear axles it combines elements of the long-serving Corniche with hints of the SZ series to be launched in 1980 and mixes in a dash of US extravagance to boot. Just visible on the boot lid are the letters MULSANNE. Yes, this is the first sighting of the now iconic name that has graced two generations of Bentleys to date. Revelatory in concept, the model and a Rolls-Royce four door equivalent were designed by Graham Hull of Crewe's Styling Office but were destined to remain a blind alley. The conservatively styled production version of the Mulsanne was eventually introduced as a traditional four door saloon in 1980.

Nonetheless, the launch of the Mulsanne Turbo in 1982 and the Turbo R in 1985 not only lit the



touchpaper for the resurgence of the Bentley marque but also sparked intense debate at Pym's Lane about the best strategy for building upon that success, with no fewer than four interrelated but conflicting projects fuelling the internal controversy and competing for Crewe's tightly restricted development funds. The first of these projects was the replacement for the long-serving Corniche, the second was the potential Bentley Camargue Turbo (eventually transmuted into the Mulsanne Turbo), the third was the dramatic Project 90 concept (approved in early 1984, unveiled in March 1985 and intended to lay down a marker for future sporting Bentleys) and the fourth was an ongoing request from John Stephenson, Director of Product Planning for.... a two door Mulsanne, presumably sparked by the Turbo's success. Here lies the genesis of our mystery photo.

By 1985 the request took concrete form. To quote Graham Hull, then recently appointed head of Crewe's Styling Department, "We had produced quite a few



*Alternative proposals for the rear of the two door Turbo R in this design rendering*

drawings and models over the years, using the existing saloon body to a greater or lesser extent as the basis. The 'black' quarter-scale model dating from 1985, for instance, was nothing more than a four door saloon with a flatter, shorter roof and wider doors. This concept would have caused the new model to resemble the successful Corniche Coupé too closely. We built several more models along the same lines, with the doors becoming ever wider and the C-post ever narrower, but in the end we found out that we had altered the basic car to such an extent that the cost of a rehash would have been almost the same as that of a new design. We also knew in the meantime that Project

90 had done a lot to stimulate interest in a new Continental Coupé, so that the company was seriously considering a complete re-engineering job on this highly successful design study." In 2014 Hull further commented, "Considering a coupé's raison d'être is to look chic and even stunning, SZ's Bank of England persona was not the place to start." These were the factors that tolled the death knoll for a two-door Mulsanne saloon and consigned our photo to a dusty filing cabinet. By March 1987 the decision had been taken to cancel a direct Corniche replacement and start work on a new Bentley coupé, styled around renderings produced by Hull in late 1986. This became the Continental R, which was launched to the thunderous strains of Zadok the Priest at the Geneva Show of 1991.

However, the saga of the two door Mulsannes doesn't end here. Where Bentley Motors deigned not to tread, independent British coachbuilders seized the opportunity to exploit a gap in the market admittedly a small and exclusive gap, but definitely a lucrative one. First into the breach was the illustrious house of Hooper. Founded in 1807, the company ceased coachbuilding in 1959, was renamed Hooper Motor Services and continued as a service and repair agent until Australian-born racing driver Colin Hyams, later with the support of Canadian



*The radical 1977 proposal that introduced the Mulsanne name*



*The 'Black Model' in colour. This collage of views demonstrates subtle modifications from the style of the four door Mulsanne saloon*



*A Hooper two door Turbo R photographed on the banking at Brooklands*

entrepreneur John Dick, bought the company for a nominal £1, also taking over the company's debts and the workshop in NW London, formerly the heart of London's coachbuilding quarter. Over £1 million was invested in renovating the facilities and opening a new workshop in Weedon Northamptonshire. Appointed an official Rolls-Royce coachbuilder, Hooper's services were aimed at offering a high level of personalisation for standard cars, creating unique models for its customers

through highly skilled craftsmanship. Initially the company concentrated on modifying existing cars provided by dealers from their showrooms or by new buyers who wished to add a touch of individuality to their cars. Most attention was paid to the interiors, with some subtle (and not so subtle) modifications to exteriors, such as chrome wire wheels, a more aggressive front air dam and colour-coded bumpers.

Because of the company's success,

by 1985 it launched into a second phase, offering extensive body-work modifications in co-operation with Crailville, based in nearby Southall. While the best known were the outrageous Emperor stretch limousines, the most successful was the conversion of the standard Mulsanne and Spirit four door saloon into the Hooper Two Door Coupé. While the Crewe Styling Office experimented with different door widths, narrower C pillars and flatter roofs, Hooper took the straightforward approach of lengthening the front doors, moving the B pillars rearward and welding in fixed panels to replace the rear doors. The fixed rear quarter light maintained the shape of the rear door, leaving the C pillar untouched. The size of the rear window was reduced, a feature previously seen on other Hooper models. With these alterations the two door acquired a sophisticated and sought-after shape which met the demands of seventeen fortunate owners: a single Mulsanne Turbo, thirteen Turbo Rs and three Silver Spirits.

Emboldened by success, at the 1987 Geneva Motor show Hooper presented a new two door saloon based on the Turbo R platform and called the Empress II. The car was launched to celebrate the 180th anniversary of the coachbuilder, with lines intended to evoke the company's famous 'Empress style' of the 1940s and 1950s. Indeed, among the most distinctive elements of Osmond Rivers' original Empress design were the scalloped form of the rear quarter light and the dramatic sweep of the rear roof line down towards the boot, both features incorporated into the Empress II in evolved form. The entire body was completely different. The radiator grille and headlamps were inclined rearward, the flanks featured strong swage lines and heavily lipped wheel arches, and Hooper's trademark bumpers painted in body colour also featured built-in foglamps at the front. Proclaimed

as the most expensive car in the world (prices varied from £275,000 down to a trifling £170,000 depending on the extras fitted), five examples of the Empress II found homes among the world's mega-rich.



*Red and redder: a Jankel Bentley Azur*

There's one further footnote to the two-door Mulsannes. Robert Jankel was a businessman and coachbuilder known for his Panther J72, De Ville and Lima and for his stretched Rolls-Royce limousines, which attained official Rolls-Royce approval. Far less known are his Bentley Azur (sic) Coupe and Spyder conversions offered for the Turbo R. Visually, there is little to distinguish the Azur from the standard Hooper conversion and the number of cars actually built is unclear, though at least two Bentley two door saloons were completed. In 1988 the conversion alone was priced at £47,000 (the list price of the basic Turbo R was £68,420 when introduced in 1985).

#### Reflections

Another Crewe dead end or a tantalising and enticing 'if only'? Viewed through the prism of the resounding commercial success of the Continental R, any logical observer must conclude that Bentley made the right decision. And yet, and yet... To those enamoured of the saloon coupé, the purity of line, classical simplicity and fine visual balance of the 'Black Model' cannot but evoke a lingering sense of regret for what might have been.

*Davide Bassoli is the author of "The Spirit of the Age", the definitive history of the Bentley Mulsanne and Rolls-Royce Silver Spirit cars, reviewed in Issue 337.*



*The well proportioned rear aspect of the Hooper Two Door Coupé*



*A Hooper Empress II finished in glorious 1980s red and embellished with colour-coded bumpers and wire wheels*



*The poise of the proposed two door Turbo R demonstrated in side profile*

