

# Andrew Soar: The farmer who builds cars

## The story of AS Motorsport

By John Kerrison

The world of farming has changed immeasurably since the end of the Second World War with bigger machinery, bigger fields and the work becoming less labour-intensive. The pressure to break even, let alone make a profit, has also become a greater issue in recent years, and many farmers have followed the path of diversification to boost their profitability. Artisan cheese making, winemaking, fine ice creams and farm shops are but a few of the initiatives that have been set up on farms all over the country. One of the most unusual diversification businesses has been set up on a farm in the South Norfolk village of Bressingham. At first glance there is nothing to set Poplar Farm apart from any of the countless other farms in the flat agricultural landscape west of Diss. It is only when

you enter the farmyard and get a glimpse of outbuildings where quite often an example of an exotic sports car rather than a tractor or combine harvester is parked that you realise you are in a far from usual agricultural setting. Farmer Andrew Soar, a confirmed car enthusiast and engineer, formed AS Motorsport in 2007 in buildings on his farm to build replicas of one of the most iconic British sports cars of all time.

The car which inspired Andrew to build his stunning replicas is the Aston Martin DBR1. These sports racing cars were first built in 1956, with five being built altogether, and were intended to compete in the World Sportscar Championship. Driven by the greatest drivers of the day, including Jim Clark and Stirling Moss, the DBR1 achieved its iconic status in 1959 when, driven by

Carroll Shelby and Roy Salvadori, it won the 1959 24 Hours of Le Mans, which is Aston Martin's only outright victory at the most famous of endurance races. It is one of only three cars in the 1950s to win both Le Mans and the World Sports Car Championship in the same year, the others both being Ferraris. Its total of six World Sports Car Championship victories was a record for any car in the 1950s and remained a record until surpassed by Ferrari's legendary Testa Rossa. Furthermore, its three consecutive wins at the Nürburgring, Le Mans and the Tourist Trophy in 1959 equaled Ferrari's similar record from 1958. In August 2017 car DBR1/1, the first example produced in 1956, was sold for a world record price for a British-made car of \$22,555,000.

I visited Andrew at his workshops at Poplar Farm to find out more about his



3 completed cars. The nearest is Andrew's own Aston Martin-engined example





Andrew with a part-completed car

life and how he came to start a business building such desirable cars.

Andrew was born into a farming family and was brought up on Poplar Farm, which is still a working farm. His interest in things mechanical and old cars in particular began at a tender age. His sister acquired a Morris Minor when she went to university, and the family bought two others as a source of spares. Andrew, at the age of 10, commandeered one of the spare cars and used it to roam around the farm, learning how to maintain it in the process. He also helped his father working on tractors and other farm machinery. Andrew also cites Billy Banham, a local blacksmith and agricultural engineer, as a source of knowledge. He explained that if he was busy with other jobs when you took equipment to him and if you lent a hand he would get your job done more quickly.

Andrew was educated at Diss High School before going on to Otley College near Ipswich, where he followed an agricultural service engineering course before following a farm management course. He told me he was then headhunted to do some workshop technical work at the college which became a full-time job. Andrew completed further education teacher training and went on to teach for ten to fifteen years, all the while keeping the farm going, plus "playing with mechanical stuff". He was also involved in heavy vehicle instruction and testing which took him to other educational institutions.

I asked Andrew how his interest in vintage cars began. He said that much of his interest was budget driven, hence the Morris Minor. When he was older he became interested in kit cars and built a couple of AC Cobra replicas. We went on to talk about how the DBR1 replicas

came about. Andrew explained that he was getting jaded with the training work. While it was a good living it involved being away from home 4 or 5 days a week or travelling back and forth and he became fed up with it. In the meantime he had begun to take on jobs, such as building fuel systems, for people with AC Cobra kit cars. He was able to plan the work and source parts while he was away and carry out the work at the weekend when he was back home.



3 "Weber carburetors" and manifold

We talked about how the idea of building replicas as a business came about. Andrew explained that in 2007 he saw an advert on Ebay offering a replica DBR1 bodyshell and chassis for sale. It was being offered by a company called ARA Racing which was run by Ant Anstead, who had worked with Mike Brewer on the TV show *Wheeler Dealers*. Andrew bought it as a personal project, thinking it would be fun to build and drive such a beautiful car and also to take it to shows as a shop window to attract more work from the kit car fraternity. Andrew also had the idea of doing some consultancy work for ARA but it turned out that the whole project

was for sale. The germ of an idea began at that point. He knew that there were various companies producing replicas of Jaguar C and D Types and that they were able to make a living. He figured that if he were to build DBR1 replicas, which, incidentally, are called ASM R1 Le Mans, he would be the only one doing so and stood a good chance of making a successful business from it. It turned out that his purchase came with a stand at the Goodwood Revival and an order for a part-complete fibreglass car powered by an Aston Martin engine. Andrew decided to self-finance the completion of the car, but by the time the car reached the paint stage he heard no more from the client. Andrew sold it at a Bonhams Auction in 2008.

We talked about marketing, and Andrew told me that nowadays the cars are self-promoting and his annual open days to raise money for charities such as the East Anglian Air Ambulance help to get the word round. He said sometimes people come with a view to buying, and he feels it gives potential customers an opportunity to see that AS Motorsport is a legitimate business as well. Andrew said that it takes a lot of time and money to exhibit at motor shows but he has exhibited at Goodwood Revival for many years as that fits the market he appeals to.

Andrew told me that on average he and his team of three craftsmen build two to three cars a year but at the time of my visit there were five cars in various stages of completion, although all cars are completed in the sequence the orders have been received. He said that Brexit and the Pandemic caused dips in sales but things have recovered and particularly so at the high end of the range. Andrew went on to explain that the cars come in various specifications. The "entry" model has a fibreglass body with aluminium bonnet and boot lid and is powered by a 3.4 litre Jaguar XK straight 6 engine. These retail for around £130,000. Next up is a full aluminium body with a 4.2 litre straight 6 Jaguar XK engine which is around £210,000. At the top of the range is a full aluminium body with a 4-litre straight 6 Aston Martin engine. This retails for around £250,000. All the models can come in various displacements and states of tune and with bespoke dashboards and fittings. None of the cars come with weatherproof equipment.

We discussed the process of building the cars. Andrew explained that nowadays the body building is outsourced to a company using the wooden buck that Andrew supplied to hand beat the aluminium panels. The painting of the cars is also outsourced. Andrew and his team of three part-time and self-employed craftsmen construct the space frame chassis and strip, rebuild and tune the engines to owners' personal specification before the cars are finally assembled. I was curious to know if Andrew replicates period



suspension and brakes but he told me the cars are fitted with modern systems to reflect modern road and driving conditions and to make the cars more usable. The team make and build their own suspension set-ups. Andrew also pointed out that a genuine period transaxle and gearbox (if you could find one) would cost in the region of £250,000 alone. He also said that the engines are tuned by tweaking the fuel injection system. I was puzzled because the cars appeared to have three Weber carburettors. Andrew explained that initially the system came with Jenvey throttle bodies which looked a bit modern against the XK engine. As the Jenvey bodies were designed to fit onto the Weber pattern manifold he decided to modify genuine DCOE carburettors to operate as throttle bodies thus retaining the historic look but having the convenience of modern injection. He smiles and said it fools many people. He went on to say he uses coil pack ignition and often runs the wires from the coil pack through a dummy distributor retaining the illusion of old-world bits and bobs. The whole system is controlled by an Emerald ECU which comes from a local firm in Watton. They operate a rolling road to set up each car for Andrew.

I enquired about the sourcing of engines. Andrew told me that Jaguar engines are quite plentiful, reasonably priced and mostly come from vehicles that are being broken. Aston Martin engines are less plentiful and much more expensive. He said that an Aston engine would cost in the region of £40,000 with an added £10,000 for a rebuild. There were two Aston engines in the workshop, and Andrew pointed to the water pump and said they cost



*Aston Martin engines and gearbox.*



*Andrew Soar*

around £900 as opposed to under £100 for one for a Jaguar.

I asked if customers use their cars mainly for road use or racing. Andrew told me that most owners drive their cars on the road while some are used for trackdays. He went on to say that it was always a goal, and still potentially is, to create an FIA approved replica car for racing but now he is moving towards the view that even if the budget was there, he wouldn't want all the stress it would involve. He told me that it was much more enjoyable to build something that can go out and be

used every day on the road. He also said that the lack of weather protection did not deter some owners from driving in all weathers. One British owner who lives in Brussels likes to spend his summers driving his car in the Alps and simply wears a cycling cagoule if it rains.

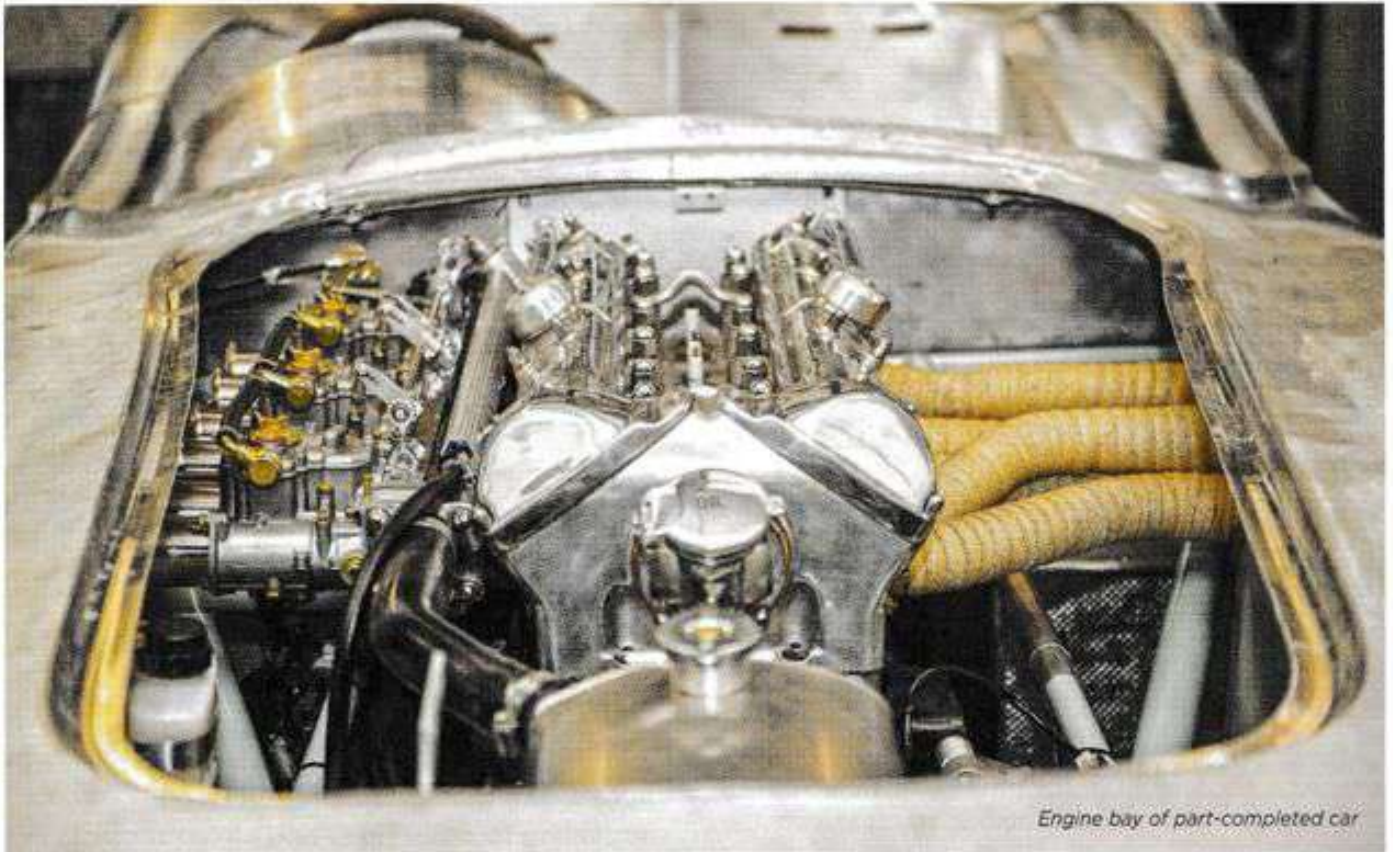
I had read that Jaguar Land Rover had taken a Swedish couple who had built a replica C Type Jaguar to court and as a result they had been ordered to destroy it, while JLR build their own "continuation" models of the C Type. I wondered if Andrew had had any issues with Aston Martin. He told me that whilst the cars look like the DBR1 they are not exact replicas, as they have different suspension, brakes, engines and gearboxes. Aston Martin told him they did not want to stop him and asked only that Andrew did not fit their badges to the bonnet. Andrew admitted that many owners, particularly of cars with Aston Martin engines, fit the badges themselves.

I asked Andrew if it is difficult to balance the needs of the farm and the business of building cars. He said that car building takes up most of his working days as the cars are not like kit cars built as a hobby in a garage but hand made specialist machines constructed by a small-scale professional manufacturer to the highest tolerances and build quality, although that doesn't mean that Andrew neglects the farm business. He explained that pre-Covid nearly all the farm work was carried out by contractors but after Brexit and the Pandemic there were no orders for cars coming in and Andrew returned to doing the work himself. He said that direct drilling made things much easier and he received a grant to subsidise the purchase of a drill. He told me that even



*Chassis DBR1/1 which won the Le Mans 24 Hours race in 1959*





*Engine bay of part-completed car*

now he can cope with the majority of the work himself, it being not difficult to fit the farm work in here and there. Andrew still has long weekends to allow him time for farming or administration.

I asked Andrew if he has considered building replicas of other iconic vintage cars. He told me that there are many candidates such as a Maserati sports racing car from the 1950s; for instance the Maserati 300S, which isn't so radically different from the DBR1 at first glance, but it is a long and hard process to go through to build a new model and he doesn't anticipate doing so. He also explained that it might not be as easy to market as the great success of the ASM R1 is that it is a British car with the

associated history of winning the Le Mans 24 hour race, which appeals to British customers in particular.

I also asked how he feels about the possibility of building his vehicles with electric motors as government policy is moving in the direction of electric vehicles at the eventual expense of the internal combustion engine. He recognises that the option is there since Jaguar electrified a car for a Royal Wedding some years ago. They now have an electric power package that will fit any car powered by an XK engine (the engine fitted to the XJ series). It is easier now to get a variety of electric packages from other suppliers but it is not something Andrew needs to do. He smiled and told

me that if a customer requested such a car he would not refuse but it would be ridiculously expensive and they might as well buy a car with a petrol engine.

I wondered if there might come a time when the car building business might take Andrew away from farming altogether. He laughed and said no, because farming is a necessary diversion. He went on to say that it is nice to get out on the farm for a change of scenery and being seasonal, the conflicts of interest do not last long. He can come into the workshop and sort out orders for parts needed by his craftsmen and then spend the afternoon on his combine harvester. It creates longer days but that is normal in farming anyway. He laughed when he told me that if he didn't have combining to do in the summer he would feel guilty sitting on the patio with a drink while hearing the combines working on neighbouring farms.

We went on to discuss where he sees himself in 10 years. He grinned and said, "Retired, but who knows?" He has no firm plans but there are lots of options. He could sell the business or just downsize and build cars one at a time by himself.

Before I left I tried the cockpit of Andrew's own car for size. It was incredibly low and comfortable and not too difficult to enter and exit despite my advancing years. The view along the bonnet and the curve of the wings gave an impression of speed even though the car was static. I will keep Andrew to his offer of a spin in it at the next Open Day.

■ For more information about A.S. Motorsport and the Open Day on 23rd April 2023 go to: [asmotorsport.co.uk](http://asmotorsport.co.uk)



*Rear view of an unpainted example*