

Lives remembered:



Richard Williams was central to the AMR1 project and here he is, flanked by Michael Bowler, left, and long-time associate Ray Mallock, right (AMHT)

RICHARD STEWART WILLIAMS 1945-2021

The world of Aston Martin lost one of its most significant characters when Richard Williams died on 12 August 2021 following a short illness. He was 76.

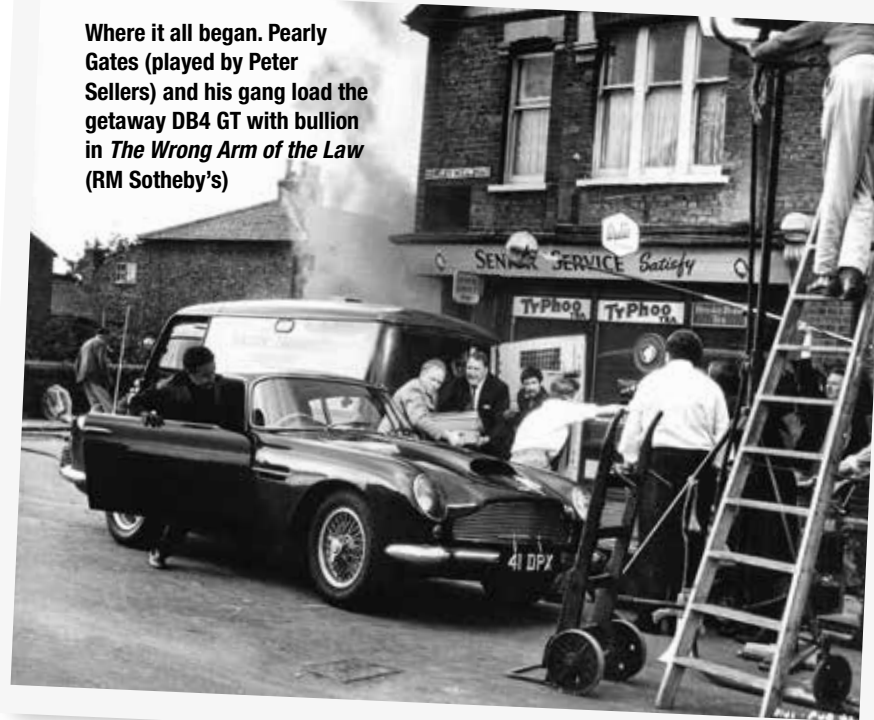
Since the late 1960s, the initials 'RSW' have been synonymous with the Aston Martin marque, though Richard's involvement with Astons started in the early 1960s when he joined the company as an apprentice at Feltham, then still building racing cars and other special projects before the move to Newport Pagnell was completed.

It was during this period that Richard met actor, writer and comedian Peter Sellers. The relationship between budding Aston

Martin master technician/engineer and car-mad genius film star was cemented after Aston Martins featured in several of Sellers' films, including *Two Way Stretch* (1960, DB2/4 Convertible) and *The Wrong Arm of the Law* (1963, DB4 and DB4 GT).

As well as looking after Sellers' fleet of fast and exotic road cars, Richard also ran the Peter Sellers Racing Team, an early introduction to motor racing management. The *équipe* generally entered Lotus racing cars, including a 23 sports-racer

Where it all began. Pearly Gates (played by Peter Sellers) and his gang load the getaway DB4 GT with bullion in *The Wrong Arm of the Law* (RM Sotheby's)



and a brace of 35s in Formula 3 for (unrelated) Brian and Barrie Hart. Brian Hart put a Sellers Lotus 35 on pole at the last-ever Goodwood International Easter Monday Meeting on 24 April 1966. For at least part of this time Richard's home was a flat above the actor's large garage in Elstead, Surrey.

After the Sellers team closed, and with financial help from his mother and encouragement from other Aston Martin owners, Richard opened Richard Stewart Williams Ltd in 1968 under the railway arches of Coldharbour Lane, Brixton – technically, the even-less-salubrious Loughborough Junction – in South London. The location soon became the must-go destination for high-profile owners, aided by the company's legendary open-evening parties and RSW's involvement in historic motor racing handling cars for John Dawnay, Viscount Downe.

The future president of the Aston Martin Owners Club owned Project 212 and DBR1/1, a car he himself had raced in low-key events in 1963, as well as Ford GT40 P/1026, the ex-

Essex Wire chassis subsequently driven by Michael Salmon for Downe in 1966. RS Williams restored and race-prepared all three cars – later to be joined by the first of the famous 'RSW Lightweight' DB4s – and the superb Salmon drove them all to great effect in historic racing in the 1970s and '80s. Built as 'affordable' alternatives to increasingly more valuable DB4 GTs and Zagatos, the RSW Lightweights in the firm's trademark Ford Forest Green were fast and reliable turn-key machines for Club events, raced with great success by Salmon, as well as owners David Heynes, Alistair Sinclair, Paul Spires, Simon Draper and Tony Smith.

Guest appearances by the likes of professional racers Tony Dron and Gerry Marshall (later to drive a car for Geoffrey Marsh) in RSW-run Lightweight DB4s at

Brands Hatch or the annual St John Horsfall

meeting at Silverstone made the 10-lap Post-War Aston Martin race essential viewing. Richard was always on-hand, unflappable and handling immaculate multi-car entries at far-flung Snetterton or Oulton Park as if they were works cars at Le Mans. It's worth noting that RSW himself was no mean driver, winning many club events in the 1970s at the wheel of one of his own cars, such as DB4 chassis 862/L and DB4 GT Zagato 0181/L, or Craig Dent's DB4 GT chassis 0164/R.

While the Aston Martin restoration and sales business went from strength to strength, increasingly looked after by lifelong company man Neil Thompson, Richard continued to be involved in motor racing at the very top level. His first Le Mans

RSW was a skilled driver and enthusiastic supporter of the AMOC. In scenes typical of Wiscombe meetings, he's seen rounding Sawbench in DB4/862/L en route to a class win in 1973, and accepting a prize from Jean Coram in 1975 (AMHT)





In 1978, Richard managed his first team at the Le Mans 24 Hours, looking after Simon Phillips' de Cadenet-Lola. The car qualified impressively on the 8th row but failed to finish the race (GP Library)



After his involvement with the Nimrod programme ended, Richard turned his attentions to Group C2. The Royal Mail Swiftair-sponsored Ecurie Ecosse team won the Championship in 1986 and was runner-up in 1987, when this car finished 8th overall at Le Mans. Hands-on as ever, RSW is seen at the front of the car during a pit stop at the great 24-hour race (Motorsport Images)

was in 1978, when he was team manager for Simon Phillips' de Cadenet-Lola, a feat he repeated the following year. Two years later, he ran the white Phillips/Salmon/Earle Ferrari 512 BBLM.

The latter retired early on Sunday morning, but in 1982 an RSW-run, Viscount Downe-owned Nimrod-Aston Martin finished a superb seventh overall at La Sarthe. It was the start of a long period of involvement in serious endurance racing for Richard that encompassed Aston Martin-powered cars in an official or semi-official capacity, as well as managing Group C2 racers on behalf of a newly re-formed Ecurie Ecosse.

After the announcement was made that a second Nimrod-Aston Martin would go to Viscount Downe and be run as a private entry in 1982, Richard

summed up his decision to look after his long-term friend and client's new racing car as follows:

"He [Lord Downe] races the car because he likes to fly the flag for Britain, and he's always had a great loyalty to Aston Martin. Myself, I like things made in England and had a strong desire to see Astons back at Le Mans – and stop them playing that dreadful tune at the end of each endurance race! And I've worked for Lord Downe for a long time." Regular driver and Le Mans veteran Michael Salmon was joined by engineer/driver Ray Mallock and for Le Mans, Simon Phillips.

The relationship was a successful one that first year, with the impressive result at the French classic – the official works car retired after four hours due to tyre failure – a highlight. Significantly, the

white car carried sponsorship from Pace Petroleum, Aston Martin chairman Victor Gauntlett's own company, a sign of how close the relationship was between RSW and Newport Pagnell. The team was placed third in the overall standings at the end of 1982, behind Rondeau and (inevitably) Porsche.

The following two years saw the Downe team run heavily modified Nimrods with more up-to-date bodywork, this time sponsored by Bovis. Another third place in the end-of-year standings came in 1983, but the project was wound up at the close of 1984 after a serious accident from a tyre blow-out on the Mulsanne straight left driver John Sheldon badly injured and both cars crashed beyond immediate repair.

From 1985 to 1987 Richard shifted a gear, dropping down a racing class to C2 and moving away from his beloved Astons, when he was team manager for a revitalised Ecurie Ecosse in the World Championship. With Richard's organisational skills and Ray Mallock once again a key driving and engineering figure in the set-up, success soon followed: Ecosse won the C2 World Championship for Teams in 1986 and finished second the following year.

It was at this time that, with the blessing of the factory, the decision was made for RS Williams Ltd to build four Sanction II Aston Martin DB4 GT Zagatos, all road-legal and carrying original-sequence chassis numbers 0192, 0196, 0197 and 0198. There was a four-year hiatus on the project, though, when in 1987 Richard was hired as managing director of Proteus Technology, the official return to Group C racing by Aston Martin Lagonda. Safe in the knowledge of a financial commitment from AML, the RSW restoration business was in effect 'mothballed' and the famous railway arches premises in South London closed down.

The new team drew heavily on Ecurie Ecosse and RSW personnel and was

based at new 37,000sq ft premises in Milton Keynes. The principals were Hugh McCaig (Ecurie Ecosse), Aston Martin shareholder Peter Livanos and Richard. Having found a designer – Canadian Max Boxstrom, who worked in conjunction with Ray Mallock – and commissioned US-based Callaway Engineering to come up with a four-valve version of the Tadek Marek Aston V8, the race was on to build a car for the 1989 World Championship. The

Right: An RSW-modified 6.3-litre Virage (with suitable numberplate) being put through its paces (AMHT)

Below: Richard's famous DB4 GT Zagato chassis 0181/L sits outside Protech House in Copse Road, Cobham (AMHT)



AMR1 was given the go-ahead by Ford, the new majority owners of Aston, on 25 January 1989 after a prototype was tested successfully in late 1988.

Despite turning out an impressive machine in red, white and blue, the colours of main sponsor Mobil, and achieving a fine fourth at that year's Brands Hatch 1,000km, parent company Ford decided to drop the project without much warning at the end of the year; the promising AMR2 for 1990 was stillborn. The Blue Oval had just bought Jaguar and wanted the Coventry company to carry its hopes in long-distance events.

So, Richard returned to the world of classic Aston Martin sales and restoration, this time from new, state-of-the-art premises near his home in Cobham, Surrey. Neil Thompson and most of the loyal regulars made the

move, and airy and spacious Protech House took over from the Brixton arches as the destination of choice for Aston Martin collectors the world over, one of the best marque (any marque...) specialists in the world. There are not many ex-factory racing cars such as DB3Ss, DBR1s, DBR2s, Project Cars or significant DB4 GT Zagatos that have not had the full RSW treatment. The new Copse Road buildings were the venue for the launch of the Sanction II Zagatos on 22 July 1991; the nearby M25 London orbital motorway convenient for Richard to indulge in his passion for personally shaking down cars in the final stages of restoration in the early hours of the morning.

As consulting engineers, under Richard's direction RSW developed the official 6.3-litre Aston Martin V8

conversion – as well as offering a full 7.0-litre. The company converted Prince Charles's DB6 Volante to run on biofuel, and works closely with AML on its various DB six-cylinder 'continuations'. It has also prepared two Astons for the gruelling Peking to Paris Rally, complete with a weighty roof-box of essential spares.

Richard's great passion – other than for his family, motor racing and Aston Martins – was his motorboat *Transaction*, kept in the South of France. The fact that so many staff stay with the company for so long is testament to his fair-mindedness, a genuine interest in their welfare and a determination to train up Aston Martin mechanics of the future the correct, 'RSW way'.

At his funeral, held in Cobham on 10 September 2021 with a reception afterwards at the Brooklands Museum, a packed turn-out of employees past and present, clients, racing drivers and trade competitors wanted to say one last goodbye to the man who for decades was the unofficial 'Mr Aston Martin', one who set standards of work that few could hope to match. With his passing, the marque has lost one of its most loyal, well-known and knowledgeable supporters. ●

Richard Stewart Williams, engineer, racing team manager and businessman, was born on 10 June 1945 and died on 12 August 2021 after contracting pneumonia. He was 76.