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And yes, this is controversial

UK VERDICT

NEW VW GOLF R

There's now no better real-world performance car



PLUS We rate it against an all-time great: the Audi RS2



£30K USED GUIDE

BARGAIN BENTLEYS FOR GOLF R MONEY



FIRST PICS



Stunning Merc A-Class saloon



New BMW M4: the CS is back



JAGUAR E-TYPE



ALFA ROMEO 8C



MORGAN 3-WHEELER



RANGE ROVER EVOQUE



LAMBORGHINI MIURA



ASTON MARTIN DB5

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BLUE-BLOODED

Cheap second-hand Bentleys have long appealed, but the firm's Volkswagen Group backing makes the prospect more tempting than ever, as Richard Webber finds out

PHOTOGRAPHY LUC LACEY



BARGAINS



Winged B has been under the VW wing since 1998



Flying Spur is imperious, assured and cossetting

With stereotypical German frankness, the Volkswagen Group's 1999 report attributed the losses made by Bentley, its recent acquisition, to "unsatisfactory sales volumes". Back then, the Crewe firm struggled to sell 1000 cars annually. Yet last year, Bentley cleared £100 million and built a record 11,817 vehicles, almost half of which were Bentayga SUVs – a model unimaginable 18 years ago.

The revolutionary concept behind Bentley's success under VW? Better cars. And now you can buy several of those better cars for less than £30,000. Yes, for the same money as a fancy VW Beetle, you can choose from Arnage, Continental Flying Spur and Continental GT. We've gathered one of each to explore the prospect.

The Arnage saloon was box fresh when VW took over Bentley in mid-1998, but changes were soon afoot – partly because the launch model used a 350bhp 4.4-litre twin-turbo V8 from BMW, with whom VW had clashed over the sale of Bentley and Rolls-Royce. Bentley's ancient 16-valve pushrod 6.75-litre V8 returned in the turbo 400bhp Red Label in 1999, when the 4.4 was rebranded the Green Label. Both got stiffer shells, but the Red's mammoth 619lb ft dwarfed the Green's busier 413lb ft, dragging the 2520kg four-door's 0-60mph time down to 5.9sec.

In 2002, the BMW lump was dumped, and lag-slashing twin Garrett T3s replaced the single T4 turbo on the venerable V8. The Red Label became the R, the hotter, firmer 450bhp T was introduced and further structural reinforcement increased rigidity while ESP helped tame the torque. Further power and sophistication came in late 2006 but, as with each of our trio, £30,000 limits us to early 2006 cars and older.

Which brings us to the 2003 Arnage R we've borrowed from Paul Heron at Keystone Cars (keystonercars.co.uk), a family-run treasure trove of mainly noughties-era sports and prestige metal on the edge of the New Forest. Once a £150,000-plus motor, it's up for £29,995, and that price includes an impressive service history, extendable six-month warranty and just 34,500 miles.

Embarking the 5.4m-long Arnage, I inhale a hit of Bentley plushness. The steering wheel whirs upwards to let me in, as if moved by an unseen valet. Extravagant amounts of walnut and leather will be themes for the day, and the Arnage's cabin swims in both. Chromed HVAC organ stops and parchment-backed dials in the middle of the dashboard are let down by the niggling plastic of BMW-sourced buttons below, but this is still high luxury, and to have →



← it for £30k feels like getting a haircut at Alfred Dunhill through Groupon.

You sit high on a squashy armchair, peering over the bulging bonnet from which a soft rumble emanates. The old General Motors four-speed 'box is in keeping with the engine's surfeit of torque, shifting lazily and gently, its attentiveness slightly raised in Sport mode, when the adaptive dampers stiffen, too. That's relative, though. The Arnage still rolls generously by modern standards, which makes it all the more shocking when you open the taps and, after a moment of lag, all notions of gentility are quashed by mighty, unrelenting acceleration. Between 2000rpm and 4500rpm, there's an irresistible onward surge, the Arnage seemingly straining at the leash despite never emitting more than a distant but robust growl.

There's a bit of niggle to the ride on anything but a perfect surface, yet the plump seats mean it's heard more than felt, with only lateral ridges



causing any real upset. Wind noise is apparent but acceptable. Light steering offers little feedback but conducts the nose with surprising responsiveness, although wet conditions prompt hesitation through corners as the rear, with no limited-slip differential, sometimes struggles for traction. The brakes remain reassuringly effective, though.

Despite its helping of Teutonic tautness, the Arnage still feels very much an English Bentley: big, soft and stately, but with a shocking turn of pace from a charming brute of an engine. Our pair of Continentals grew from the £1 billion VW had invested by 2003: the prolific GT →

DON'T SKIMP ON MAINTENANCE

Maintenance costs can be tempered by choosing an independent Bentley specialist such as Phantom Motor Cars in Surrey (pmcuk.com), the first to be granted a Bentley dealer code enabling full diagnostics. Phantom's Stuart Worthington

warns against using garages that specialise in other VW Group brands: "You can use VAG-COM diagnostics, but they can lead you up the garden path and leave you spending hours looking in the wrong place."

He says the GT and Spur are both reliable if serviced at the right time by the right people: "All the W12 needs is top-quality oil all its life. Then it's 99.9% reliable." Electrical gremlins can emerge on pre-2006 cars, but keeping the larger of the two batteries charged by driving or trickle-charging helps keep them at bay. Green and Red Label Arnages are also reliable if cared for, with

oft-cited head gasket weakness on the Red Label being negligible in Worthington's experience. Pre-2006 R and T models can suffer camshaft and hydraulic tappet wear, costing around £10,000 to fix. Short of an invasive inspection, there aren't necessarily warning signs.

Annual W12 services alternate between £650 and £950 at Phantom, but the more particular Arnage can cost anything between £1200 and £3000, depending on what's needed. It's vital not to skimp, though, says Worthington: "The cars are now relatively affordable and some people like to own them but don't want to pay for maintenance, so early examples can become poorly maintained. It's critical to get a car with a full service history."

Fuel economy in the mid-teens can be expected from any of our trio, but pick one registered before 23 March 2006 and VED is capped at £295.



GT cabin shows Bentley's skill with wood and leather



This 2011 Flying Spur is a bespoke-trimmed Series 51



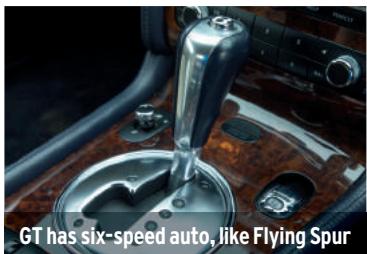
Arnage's older-style layout has a charm all of its own



Attention to detail is standard issue



Arnage's gauges exude a period feel



GT has six-speed auto, like Flying Spur

launched that year, the Flying Spur in 2005. Each has VW Phaeton-sourced underpinnings and a twin-turbo 6.0-litre W12 distributing its 552bhp and 479lb ft via a six-speed ZF auto transmission and Torsen four-wheel drive that nominally splits the torque equally but can send it all to either axle. Both hit 60mph in about five seconds and bother 200mph.

Their owners were found via

the helpful Bentley Drivers Club (bdcl.org). Regional chairman David Asker-Browne's 2004 GT has covered 85,000 miles, but aside from a few creases on the front seats, you wouldn't know. It's otherwise spotless, has a full Bentley history and still comes in a grand or two below budget. There are design touches and materials familiar from the Arnage, but the GT's cabin is distinctly sportier, without losing that clubby feel. The surfaces feel that bit more robust, and although numerous plastic buttons persist, they are of higher quality. The sat-nav is outdated but trumps the Arnage's pop-up Alpine system. The driver's seat is lower, more enveloping and more adjustable, and the rear seats are tight but usable.

The W12 might not produce the V8's torque, but it delivers the same relentless thump of energy. Its power band extends much higher and lag is less pronounced, but so is the soundtrack. It gives off a muted, booming roar rather than a growl. Steering wheel-mounted paddles bring a delayed response, but the changes themselves are slick, and auto mode is unobtrusive, bar the occasional unexpected shift.

The GT's steering is much heavier, too, but apart from a little hesitation on turn-in, the GT is a cinch to place, even on narrow, snaking roads, when roll is tidily contained in the stiffer suspension modes and generous grip lends healthy front-end confidence, even with that huge engine mounted so far forward. The air-sprung ride drew complaints at launch – perhaps more was expected at £110,000

– but aside from the odd hiccup over sharp edges, I found it happily gripe-free. In fact, any complaints about the GT are made for the sake of completeness because, overall, I found myself quietly bewitched by this car and the sporting luxury it offers for such reasonable money.

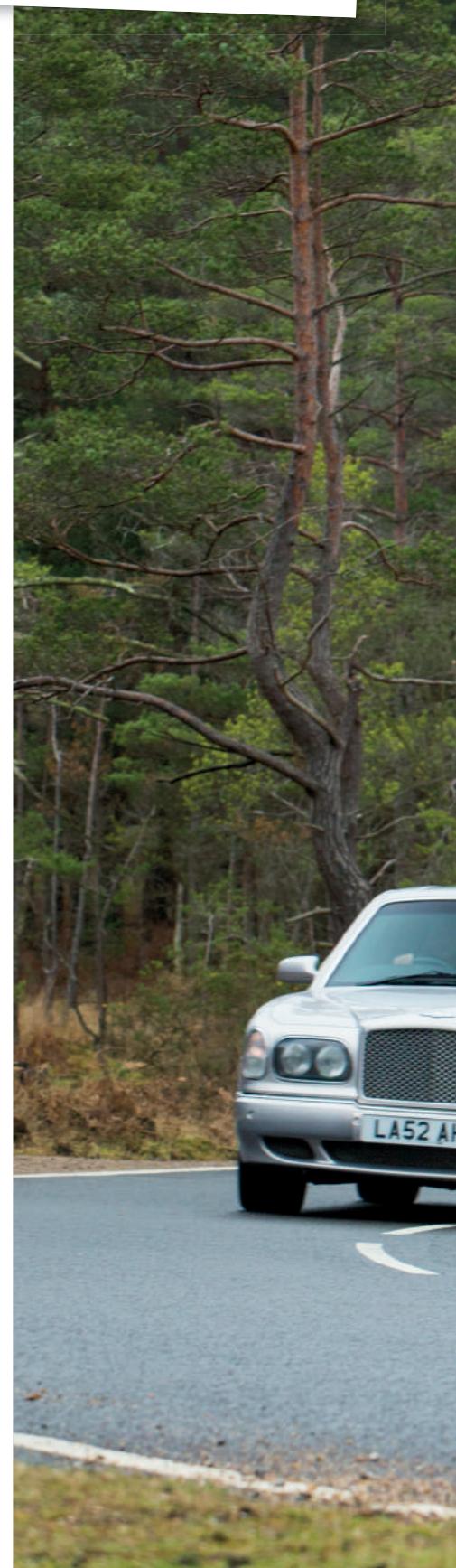
In truth, club member Edward Fort OBE's utterly pristine 13,000-mile 2011 Flying Spur is beyond our budget – especially as it's a specced-up member of the indulgently trimmed 'Series 51'. But mechanically, it's very close to the early cars that now start at an incredible £22,000. The cabin is very similar to the GT's. Rear cabin packaging is better than in the Arnage: both offer acres of leg room, but where occupants of the older car mainly get a faceful of D-pillar, those in the Spur have glass, there are more comfort controls and the boot is much bigger.

Despite their common ground, there are interesting and even surprising dynamic contrasts between the GT and 130kg-heavier Spur, which has an extra 327mm of wheelbase. The larger car palpably taxes the engine more, although it's still plenty quick. It also resists understeer well, even in streaming conditions. It actually offers more responsive turn-in and the helm is more reasonably weighted. The secondary ride is generally busier than the GT's, but find a smooth surface and there's a soporific comfort to be had when cruising.

Both Continentals are a league above the Arnage for quality and dynamic ability. If, however, patrician character is your priority, it's the older, more idiosyncratic car that delivers. Whichever you choose, there's huge indulgence to be had for the price with any of these three. Personally, I'll take a £25,000 Conti GT and a monogrammed parking space at the local petrol station. **A**



Asker-Browne (right) tells Webber about his GT



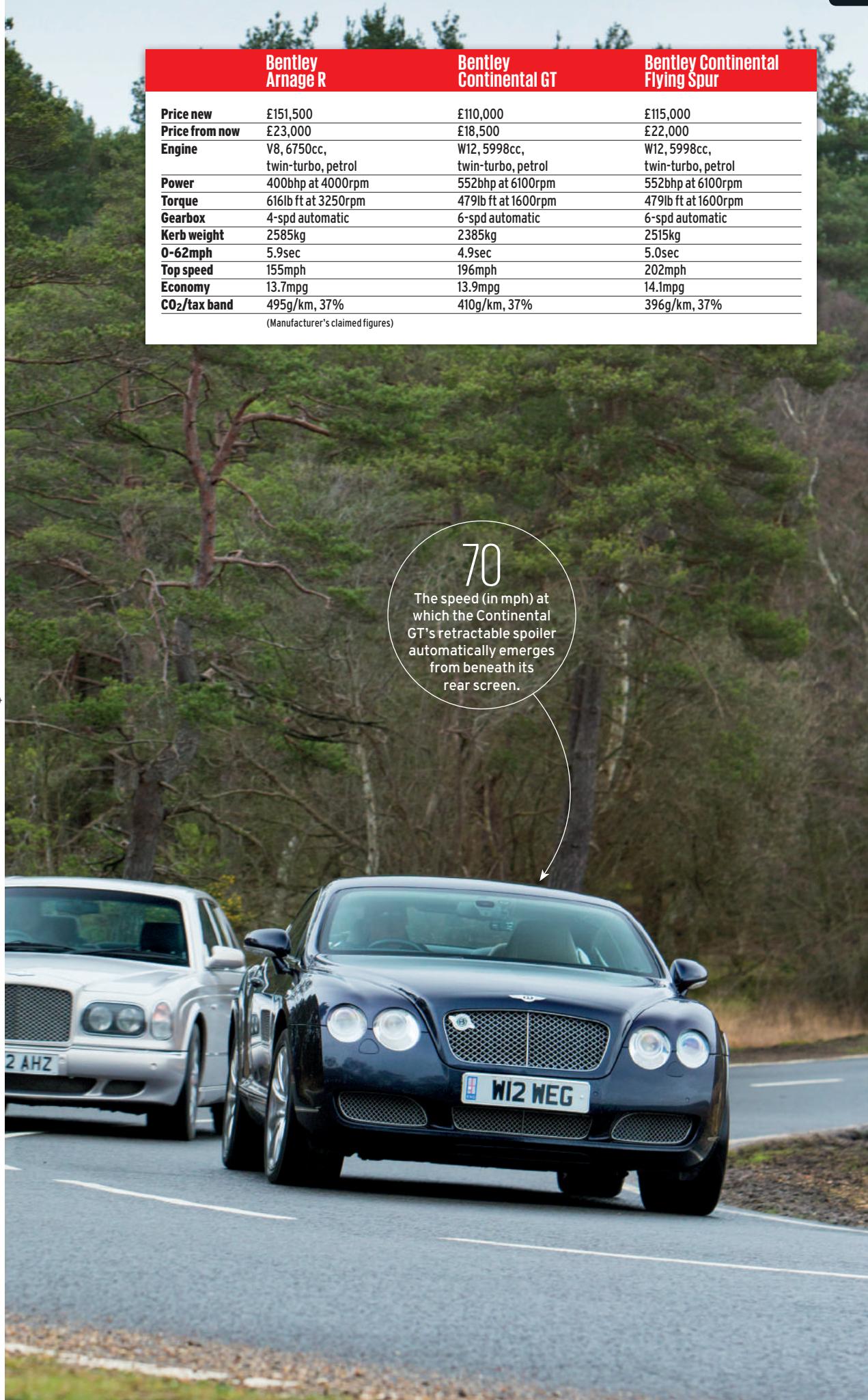
Flying Spur has a dynamic edge on the characterful Arnage

Bentley Arnage R	Bentley Continental GT	Bentley Continental Flying Spur
Price new	£151,500	£110,000
Price from now	£23,000	£22,000
Engine	V8, 6750cc, twin-turbo, petrol	W12, 5998cc, twin-turbo, petrol
Power	400bhp at 4000rpm	552bhp at 6100rpm
Torque	616lb ft at 3250rpm	479lb ft at 1600rpm
Gearbox	4-spd automatic	6-spd automatic
Kerb weight	2585kg	2385kg
0-62mph	5.9sec	4.9sec
Top speed	155mph	196mph
Economy	13.7mpg	13.9mpg
CO₂/tax band	495g/km, 37%	410g/km, 37%

(Manufacturer's claimed figures)

70

The speed (in mph) at which the Continental GT's retractable spoiler automatically emerges from beneath its rear screen.



HERE'S FOUR MORE (DEEPER POCKETS REQUIRED)



Bentley Azure (2006-2009)

With a roof that stows in 25sec, the Azure is a two-door drophead based on the Arnage. It makes 450bhp, although a 500bhp T variant was also produced. Prices start at £92,000 today.



Bentley Brooklands (2008-2010)

Another Arnage spin-off, the Brooklands is a dynamically capable, 530bhp coupé based on the Azure T. It was originally priced at £230,000, and you'll still pay half of that now.



Bentley Continental GTC Mk1 (2006-2012)

Like its tin-top GT brother, the convertible GTC was available in standard (552bhp), Speed (601bhp) and biofuel-compatible Supersports (621bhp) variants. Prices start at £38,500.



Bentley Mulsanne (from 2010)

The first fully bespoke post-war Bentley, the enormous four-door Mulsanne keeps the 6.75-litre V8 alive. There's a 530bhp Speed model and an extended-wheelbase version that's 5.8m long. Yours from £80,000.