

BRISTOL CARS is an idiosyncratic national treasure. But its legacy of cars through the years, since the first model broke cover in 1946, is one that proves continuous development works in creating some of the finest cars ever to emerge from a British car factory. You may or may not agree with that sentiment, but an army of loyal customers has it running through their veins.

And to prove it, we've gathered together all of the production Bristols, to tell their story. From a company that emerged from the aircraft industry in the immediate aftermath of WW2 (and one that's now looking forward to a bright future

under new management), each successive car shares key characteristics with its forebears.

That fact is evident even when you jump out of an elegant early 400 and into the latest Fighter supercar. Naturally there have been countless improvements along the way, but what is clear is that very few other marques have retained their values as strongly as Bristol – a car manufacturer born in the aviation industry.





That's why its customers stay so faithful. It's also why the most important names in Bristol's history have such strongly held views. Read on to find out what they are. →

EVERY SINGLE ONE

Bristol Cars' history is one of consistency and evolution – and now it's reached a turning point that will define its future. Time, then, to get all 21 models together

WORDS Keith Adams // PHOTOGRAPHY Matthew Howell and Simon Hipperson

BRISTOL 400 TO 403

BRISTOL 400	BRISTOL 401
	
Manufactured 1947-1950 Engine 1971cc six Power 80bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 19.1sec Maximum speed 90mph	Manufactured 1949-1953 Engine 1971cc six Power 85bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 15.1sec Maximum speed 98mph
BRISTOL 402	BRISTOL 403
	
Manufactured 1949-1951 Engine 1971cc six Power 85bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 15.1sec Maximum speed 98mph	Manufactured 1953-1955 Engine 1971cc six Power 100bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 13.4sec Maximum speed 104mph

Left to right
Bristol 400 owned by Stefan
Cembrowicz; Bristol 402
belonging to JAB Taylor;
Bristol 403 of Brian May;
Bristol 401.



‘The Type 400 thrived on revs and would effortlessly cruise at its 90mph maximum speed all day long’

THE BRISTOL TYPE 400's arrival was announced in late 1946, making it one of Britain's very first post-war cars. For a war-weary nation, desperate for desirable cars to lift its mood – and help the export drive – the 400 was perfect. And when those first deliveries began to take place in 1947, it was clear that England's largest aircraft maker had built something special for the road.

Bristol decided during the war to diversify into car production, hastened by the acquisition of a licence from Frazer Nash to build BMW-based cars. This was an inspired move, and although it could be argued that the steel-bodied 400 was little more than a combination of BMW 326, 327 and 328, what rolled out of Filton was, as Tony Crook describes, ‘quieter than the BMW, and just as fast as the 327/80’. Yet it's so much more.

Its engine was a modified version of BMW's 1971cc overhead-valve straight-six, with Mille Miglia-winning pedigree, and excellent power (80bhp). It thrived on revs and the 400 would effortlessly cruise at its 90mph maximum speed all day long. Independent front suspension and a long 114in wheelbase ensured grip and stability.

The Autocar rated the 400 as a driver's car. ‘Steering, braking, and roadholding are just as the enthusiastic driver of fast cars would specify. The rack-and-pinion steering has at all times positiveness to afford a feeling of confidence.’ Stilted language for what is an utterly delightful car to drive, with steering feel and powerful brakes that belie its pre-war roots.

What stands out about the 400 is its exemplary build quality, thanks to lessons learned from the aeronautics industry overseen by the perfectionist White family. Aerodynamics honed in the skies were applied on the road, too – the 400 is hushed at speed and more capable at the top end than its 0-60mph time of 19.1sec suggests.

The 400 turned out to be merely the entrée – as the swooping Type 401 was unveiled at that most memorable of Earls Court Motor Shows in 1948, where the Jaguar XK120 and Morris Minor also debuted. The biggest leap forward was the 401's more aerodynamic full-width body, fashioned in aluminium using *Superleggera* construction methods. Its styling was a definite nod to Carrozzeria Touring in Italy.

The bold new body brought with it more room, and the option of the convertible Type 402 – of which only 23 were made, including JAB Taylor's ex-Jean Simmons car (above). Power was up to 85bhp, and top speed, according to *The Motor's* 1953 road test, was 97.3mph.

The magazine concluded that the 401 was ‘a car in a class of its own’. And today it remains a delightful combination of precise steering, mechanical hush, an almost total absence of wind noise and long-legged cruising ability. There aren't many other cars of this age – you have to step up into it, vintage-style – that are as usable.

But the 403 of 1953 was even better. It added more power, with bigger valves and larger main bearings taking it to 100bhp and an official 100mph. The 403 was the first Bristol to breach the magic ‘ton’ and was the swansong for this body style. It lasted two years – and a far more radical new style sashayed in alongside.

Bristol was moving on again.

IN THE BLOOD

The son of Bristol Cars' founder speaks



BRISTOL OWNERS are a hardy bunch. That much is clear on the day of *Octane's* photoshoot. England is being battered by storms yet every single owner has driven here. Sir George White Bt and his wife have brought along their 404, and are keen to share their experiences of Bristol Cars – old and new.

Bristol, now owned by the Frazer-Nash engineering group, is working on an electric supercar. ‘I know my father would be proud,’ explains the son of Bristol Cars' founder. ‘My great-grandfather

introduced the electric tram in the UK, and it feels like we've come full circle with the forthcoming electric car.’

But that's for the future, and what Sir George is really here for is to see a complete line-up of Bristol cars. ‘It's the quality that makes them tick. They are perfect, and that reflects my father's values from when he ran the company. He would often walk down the line, and I can remember how, if he spotted any flaw, [that car] would be rejected. ‘And that's been passed on

through the generations. My great-grandfather invented the UK aeroplane industry before WW1. He built it to a good size, and to quality.’

But it isn't just build quality that endears the 404 to Sir George. ‘I've had it since I was 16, and sometimes my friends teased me about it. But I loved it. In later years, long after my father's death, I had it restored by Spencer Lane-Jones.’

It drives perfectly, too, aided by wider wheels – any thoughts of 404 aerodynamic instability are soon banished on this roughest of days.

BRISTOL 404 TO 406

A SVELTE NEW Bristol style arrived in 1953, when the Type 404 was launched. Sold alongside the more stately 403, the new 2+2 coupé was pitched by Bristol as 'the businessman's express'. It boasted an aerodynamic new body designed by Dudley Hobbs and Jim Lane, and was the first production Bristol to break away from the BMW-style grille, adopting a minimalist 'jet engine' intake and creating a definitive new look.

Despite its petite dimensions and Italianate teardrop shape, the 404 was a relatively practical proposition, with spare wheel concealed behind a front wing to maximise boot space and improve weight distribution. Construction also marked a departure from the 403, with the body being panelled in steel and light alloy, and much of the framework fashioned in hardwood. The result was a strong and light structure that made the most of the car's uprated 125bhp straight-six.

The 404's suspension was given altered spring rates to improve responsiveness and deliver a more sporting drive. It works – whereas the 403 is all about stability and cruising refinement, the 404 is alert at the wheel, responding deftly to a fingertip touch – and it's even capable of raising a cheeky smile in the wet.

After spending 12 days testing a 404, *The Autocar* concluded: 'This is a car for the man who has made up his mind as to what constitutes living.' Indeed.

In a surprise move to replace the graceful 403, in 1955 Bristol extended the 404's body by lengthening the wheelbase (from 2438 to 2896mm), and adding a pair of doors at the rear to create the company's one and only four-door – and one of the most graceful saloons of the period.

The 405 was also sold as the Drophead (or 405D) although, predictably, the saloon was more popular, with 265 (of 308 cars in total) made.

But it was the arrival of the all-new metal-bodied Type 406 in 1958 to replace the 404/405 that really raised Bristol's game. It was the last hurrah for the company's BMW-based pushrod straight-six (which had just been updated to 2216cc), and heralded the arrival of a handsome, understated body – with that unmistakable saloon profile – that remained in production until 1976 and the 603.

The 406 cemented Bristol's reputation for building cars that thrived on long, high-speed journeys. Christopher Balfour's example (second from left) is a communicative joy to drive, despite crosspplies and teeming rain. The steering has bags of feel through its upright slim rim, and the super-smooth straight-six pulls the car along eagerly. It loves to be driven hard, with plenty of revs, and it's more than capable enough for the UK limit – it settles down to a cruise at well over 80mph.

Problem was, the 406 was outgunned by similarly priced rivals, and something with considerably more muscle was going to be needed if Bristol was to compete with the likes of Bentley and Alvis.



BRISTOL GOES SUPERSONIC. FOR A WHILE...

Failures don't come much more glorious than the Bristol 188, the ultimate pin-up plane



IT'S THE TINY wingspan that you notice first. How could something this long be kept in the air by a wing that's just 35ft wide? But then you're struck by this aircraft's beauty. It's dictated by function – and the need to go fast. Nicknamed the 'flaming pencil', the Bristol 188 was developed as

a high-speed research aircraft, designed to be capable of reaching and sustaining twice the speed of sound, for long enough to test steady-state kinetic heating effects on its structure.

Bristol Aircraft won the contract in February 1953. It was a true pioneer, and whenever the demands of its design criteria couldn't be met by existing technology, its designers invented new solutions.

The most notable innovation was its highly polished fuselage, made from a 12% chromium stainless steel alloy that needed

no paint. It was put together using Argon arc welding technology.

After experimenting with Rolls-Royce Avon 200 and de Havilland Gyron Junior engines, the 188 was given two Gyron Junior DGJ10Rs, developing 14,000 lbf (62kN) of thrust on reheat at sea level, and 20,000 lbf (89kN) at Mach 2 at 36,000ft.

Unfortunately it could only be flown for 25 minutes; the greediness of the de Havilland engines meant that it carried insufficient fuel ever to achieve the speed and duration of flight originally required.

It wasn't until April 1962 that the first flights took place, and the delay meant the 188's days were over even before its 51-flight career had been completed. In that time, it clocked a top speed of Mach 1.88 (1441mph) at 36,000ft, and its longest flight was 48 minutes. The 188 project was cancelled in 1964.

The Bristol 188 is now housed at RAF Museum Cosford, Shropshire. Thanks to the staff there for allowing Octane such fantastic access to its collection. See www.rafmuseum.org.uk.

Left to right Robert Hathaway's Bristol 404; Bristol 406 owned by Christopher Balfour; Bristol 405D belonging to Geoffrey Herdman; Bristol 405 owned by Mike Wilcox.

'This is a car for the man who has made up his mind as to what constitutes living' - THE AUTOCAR

BRISTOL 404	BRISTOL 405	BRISTOL 405D	BRISTOL 406
Manufactured 1953-1955 Engine 1971cc six Power 105/125bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 12.0sec Maximum speed 110mph	Manufactured 1954-1958 Engine 1971cc six Power 105bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 13.0sec Maximum speed 105mph	Manufactured 1954-1958 Engine 1971cc six Power 105bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 13.0sec Maximum speed 105mph	Manufactured 1958-1961 Engine 2216cc six Power 105bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 12.5sec Maximum speed 102mph

‘Maybe Bristol is one of the few real practical motor cars left. So long as you’re on the inside, it is splendid’

– LJK SETRIGHT

ALTHOUGH FOR MANY 1961 was the year of the Jaguar E-type, it was also the year Bristol created something special. Pre-empting the trend towards the Anglo-American V8 supercar, the company secured a supply of Canadian-built Chrysler 5130cc V8 engines. The 407 may have looked just like the 406, but it boasted 250bhp and a super-smooth Torqueflite transmission. It made for the definitive gentleman’s express.

With its new-found muscle, the 407 really did fly. In its 1961 road test, *The Autocar* said: ‘Performance is outstandingly good, although the car is no lightweight.’

Thank the new V8 for that. Its effortlessness was possibly a culture shock to seasoned six-cylinder Bristol owners, used to higher revs and rifle-bolt manual gearchanges. Any Bristol of this generation is a wafly pleasure, gaining momentum far more quickly than you’d expect of a car with such an upright, drawing-room driving position. Driving a 407 today makes you realise just how right they got it, because the car never loses composure on the roughest roads, soaking up bumps, and it steers with accuracy thanks to its well-weighted and unassisted set-up.

The combination of V8 muscle and British craftsmanship proved to be a winner. *The Autocar* may have concluded that ‘the 407 is for the wealthy man who prefers to drive himself, but does not appreciate bulk and swagger’, but it’s clear that swagger is what the V8 was really about – and it’s still instrumental to its appeal.

Bristol was entering a period of subtle ongoing refinement instead of its more radical changes. The basic 407 theme was steadily improved over a decade, usually in response to the wishes of its loyal customers. The 408 of 1963 retained the same layout as its predecessor, but the front end lost the aero-style air intake, replaced by a crisper, squarer grille, and the roofline was subtly changed. In 1966, the 408 became the 409, and it was a case of more detail changes and softer springing for a more cossetting ride.





Long-time Bristol Cars enthusiast LJK Setright opined in *Car* magazine after driving one: ‘Maybe Bristol is one of the few real practical motor cars left. So long as you’re on the inside, it is splendid. Not exciting mark you – everything happens with such a complete absence of drama that the car almost becomes a bore to drive, in marked contrast to the sensual delights of older two-litre Bristols.’ He was a six-cylinder man.

Further small and important improvements followed in 1967, with the Bristol 410. The styling was subtly rounded off for improved aerodynamics, the wheels were reduced in diameter from 16in to 15in, and dual circuits were introduced for the Girling disc braking system. Most importantly, for those with a delicate touch, power-assisted steering was made standard. Press-on drivers might have preferred a heavier set-up, but the majority agree it was the right step.

John Bolster’s conclusion in his *Autosport* road test was most telling: ‘Even after cudgelling one’s brains, it is difficult to find any points for criticism. Trivial points are the electric horn button, and the protective strips along the bottom of the car, which tend to hold mud that can soil ladies’ stockings.’ Quite.

Would this winning combination work just as well for Bristol as the 1960s turned to the ‘70s? →

BRISTOL 407 TO 410

BRISTOL 407	BRISTOL 408/408Mk2	BRISTOL 409	BRISTOL 410
			
Manufactured 1961-1963 Engine 5130cc V8 Power 250bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 9.9sec Maximum speed 122mph	Manufactured 1963-1965 Engine 5130/5211cc V8 Power 250bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 9.1sec Maximum speed 128mph	Manufactured 1965-1967 Engine 5211cc V8 Power 250bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 9.9sec Maximum speed 122mph	Manufactured 1967-1969 Engine 5211cc V8 Power 250bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 8.8sec Maximum speed 130mph

Top to bottom
Bristol 410 owned by Geoff Hawkins; Guy Hinchley’s Bristol 408; Bristol 409 belonging to Andrew Passer; Bristol 407.



BRISTOL 411 TO BEAUFIGHTER

Left to right
Bristol Beaufighter,
owned by Gale and Michael
Barton; Bristol 412, owned
by Paul Wilson; Bristol
603, owned by Fergus
Taylor-Greg; Bristol 411,
owned by Gavin Coulthard.

BRISTOL CARS ENJOYED a profitable '60s on the back of the V8-powered 407 and its antecedents, and it was clear that the company had perfected a formula that worked. When the 411 arrived in 1969, the discreet and upright sporting saloon – reassuringly familiar on its sturdy separate chassis – received a far more muscular V8.

Bristol continued its successful deal with Chrysler, substituting the old 5.2-litre A-type for a 335bhp 6277cc B-type, with a Carter four-barrel downdraught carburettor. It doesn't take much imagination to work out the substantial effect it had on performance.

In his *Autosport* road test, John Bolster summarised: 'Almost accidentally, the Bristol has become the fastest genuine touring saloon, beating the Mercedes-Benz 300SEL 6.3, both for maximum speed and acceleration.'

But there's so much more to the big Bristol than straight-line speed. Quality remained first rate, and that's what still impresses with Gavin Coulthard's fine example (above, far right). As John Bolster said: 'In the past, I have tested many

costly cars that made me glad I am a poor man. The Bristol 411 is a car for the very wealthy but has many special virtues – this is a modern quality car of traditional British excellence.'

The 411 ran through four iterations, including a further engine enlargement to 6556cc in 1974, and it was ushered out in Series 5 form in favour of the new pairing of 412 and 603 in 1975 and '76. It was the first time since the era of the 404 and 405 that more than a single Bristol body variant had been offered, and this pairing was intended to take Bristol fighting into the 1980s.

The Zagato-styled 412 came first: a culture shock for Bristol fans used to glacial design progression. It was a clever targa-topped drophead that closely echoed the *carrozzeria's* work on the Lancia Beta Spider, though it wasn't universally adored. To this day, it's easily the most controversially styled of all Bristols – some liken it to a breeze block, while others love its square-rigged assertiveness. I'm in the latter camp.

Company owner Tony Crook recalls that the design process wasn't straightforward: 'We went

to Italy, and came up with the idea of the semi-convertible. Something went wrong between design and production. I wanted it to be 15ft 10in long, but the prototype ended up being 17ft 10in!'

In 1980, the 412 was turbocharged to become the Beaufighter. Visually similar it may have been, but the bodies were crafted in Filton, and not Italy. Now with 5900cc and nearly 400bhp, it became the company's first 150mph car, and still feels

'Accidentally, the Bristol has become the fastest saloon'

– JOHN BOLSTER

like a finely crafted wood'n'leather hot rod. It remained in production until 1993.

The 1976 603 was an effective contrast with the 412, thanks to its curves and aerodynamic style. As a replacement for the 411 Series 5, it looked better from some angles than others, and again Tony Crook wasn't entirely happy: 'The 603 featured a modified chassis, and our own wind-tunnel-tested body,' he says. 'It didn't look right in prototype form, but we ended up not changing it.'

Even so, driving Fergus Taylor-Greg's leaves you in no doubt that, in many ways, the 603 was the pinnacle of Bristol Cars. Its V8 is delightfully responsive to the toe and wonderfully sonorous without being loud, and the car surges forwards purposefully. The styling and interior add special appeal in the form of a well-stocked, high-quality dash and a lofty driving position.

Motor magazine may have been 'disappointed at the performance, with 8.4 seconds for 0-60mph', but it feels rather faster than that to us.

Clearly the road testers thought more power was needed. And it was coming.

BRISTOL 411/411S2-S5	BRISTOL 412/S2
Manufactured 1969-1975 Engine 6277cc V8 Power 335bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 7.0sec Maximum speed 138mph	Manufactured 1975-1980 Engine 6556/5900cc V8 Power 335bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 7.5sec Maximum speed 140mph
BRISTOL 603E/S/S2	BRISTOL BEAUFIGHTER
Manufactured 1976-1982 Engine 6277/5211/5900cc V8 Power 270bhp (est) Acceleration 0-60mph 8.6sec Maximum speed 140mph	Manufactured 1982-1993 Engine 5900cc V8 Power 350bhp (est) Acceleration 0-60mph 6.7sec Maximum speed 140mph



TONY CROOK'S TOP 10

The man who shaped Bristol for over 40 years picks his favourites

- 1946 BRISTOL 400**
'The original Bristol, so exciting, but so quiet and refined; so much more than a BMW'
- 1948 BRISTOL 401 STREAMLINE**
'It felt wide, but was even better than the 400. Fast and lovely. We managed 104mph at Monthlery and won all sorts of things in it'
- 1953 BRISTOL 404**
'Oh so pretty. Shortened chassis, with two tiny rear seats that my daughter described as being perfect for "legless children"'
- 1958 BRISTOL 406**
'The car you really had to *drive* all the time. The first with Dunlop disc brakes'
- 1959-1961 BRISTOL 406 SPECIALS**
'Shortened one-offs were truly special. And we paved the way for the Aston Zagato'
- 1961 BRISTOL 407**
'The first of the V8s, helped by my deal to distribute Simcas, then owned by Chrysler. We put their V8 and 'box into a 406; it went well'
- 1968 BRISTOL 410**
'ZF was keen to deal, thinking we were a large company. They offered us 100 gearboxes, I wanted six! 410 was special, with 140mph'
- 1975 BRISTOL 412**
'A complete change of style, and it was fascinating to work with Zagato again'
- 1976 BRISTOL 603**
'A very successful continuation of the 407-411 line, and one that lasted for over 30 years. And we did it all in-house!'
- 1980 BRISTOL BEAUFIGHTER**
'The first British production car with fully designed-in turbocharger. It went like a bloody rocket, and was available with LPG'

OKAY, YOU CAN HAVE ONE MORE...

- 1994 BRISTOL BLENHEIM**
'Lots of body modifications, and it was still going strong in 2007! It was going to lead to the Buccaneer, a really sleeky car'

BRITANNIA TO BLENHEIM

THE BRISTOL 603 encapsulated all that was right about the marque. It was refined, spacious, and near-unbeatable for high-speed touring. But it was ferociously expensive (in 1978, a 603 S3 cost £29,984, compared with £20,999 for an Aston Martin V8), and was also an acquired taste. The Jaguar XJ-S came along in the same year as the 603, its 150mph maximum and near-silent V12 asking serious questions of *all* the establishment.

Bristol answered in 1982, with the 603-based Britannia and turbocharged Brigand. Although both cars looked similar to the one they replaced, they shared a new bodyshell that had only the roof, front doors and front and rear screens carried over. The big rectangular headlamps and protruding rear lamp clusters might have added a touch of modernity but, boy, did they jar.

Their arrival saw the end of Bristol's numbering system – all subsequent models would share names with aircraft from the company's history, despite the companies being no longer linked.

Motor's Howard Walker drove the Britannia on the magazine's 'Great English Wine Run' in 1984. 'For a car that appears so upright, so dignified to the point of being almost haughty, the Britannia coped well with challenging roads.' He was driving it like a sports car, but he came to appreciate the Bristol's finer qualities. 'There is something special about the Britannia. For the well-heeled enthusiastic driver with nothing to prove, nothing else comes close.'

As for Ben Samuelson's Brigand (left in photo), it has all of the above, but it's also devilishly quick once the turbo has spooled up. There's something very satisfying about seeing off an uppity Porsche Cayman in something so regal-looking.

The next increment came in September 1993, when Bristol launched a heavily improved Brigand, known as the Blenheim. The new car, in effect *another* make-over of the 603, sported new rear-end styling and a much larger boot. Was it enough to stay desirable? Tony Crook maintained that it was built in response to his customer's wishes – though many non-Bristol people felt that the company was running out of steam. Given that Bristol continued to weather global financial storm after storm, it was an approach that worked, fashionable styling or not.

Although by the mid-1990s the Blenheim could not have been considered anything other than an automotive dinosaur, it was still an astonishingly effective high-speed cruiser. Wind noise was near-absent, and it was capable of cruising at maximum speed with minimum fuss. And that top speed had moved with the times.

That anyone bought a Blenheim in favour of a Jaguar XJ8 or Aston Martin Virage proves that there will always be *individuals* choosing cars. As the ultimate evolution of the traditional Bristol, the Blenheim remains the gentleman's express its designers intended: it's the last of a line that had been unbroken since the Type 400.

But what came next was *truly* amazing...



Left to right
Bristol Brigand owned by Ben Samuelson; Bristol Britannia; Bristol Fighter; Bristol Blenheim.

BRISTOL BRITANNIA	BRISTOL BRIGAND
Manufactured 1982-1993 Engine 5900cc V8 Power 270bhp (est) Acceleration 0-60mph 8.0sec Maximum speed 140mph	Manufactured 1982-1992 Engine 5900cc V8 turbo Power 350bhp (est) Acceleration 0-60mph 6.7sec Maximum speed 140mph
BRISTOL BLENHEIM/2/3	BRISTOL FIGHTER/S/T
Manufactured 1993-2010 Engine 5900cc V8 turbo Power 375bhp (est) Acceleration 0-60mph 6.9sec Maximum speed 140mph	Manufactured 2003-date Engine 7996cc V10 Power 525/660/1012bhp Acceleration 0-60mph 4.5sec Maximum speed 200+mph

'For the well-heeled driver with nothing to prove, nothing else comes close to a Bristol Britannia' - *MOTOR MAGAZINE*

BRISTOL FIGHTER

AND SO TO THE 21st century. Against the odds, Bristol had survived with an exclusively V8-powered range, all without the support of a major manufacturer's deep pockets. And that was due to the single-mindedness of its owner, Tony Crook.

Crook knew he couldn't carry on forever, and in 1997 he sold half his shares to Toby Silverton. The Blenheim 3 was the first car launched under new management, which led to the development of the stillborn (and promising) Buccaneer, and the pretty Speedster, both very much traditional Bristols. But Silverton wanted to build a 200mph supercar, and pushed ahead with the Fighter project against Crook's wishes. There's no doubt that it contributed to the company's fall into administration in 2010.

For all that, the Fighter remains a wonderful car. When we had our first glimpses in model form in 2003, it seemed impossible that a company as small as Bristol could bring it to market. After all, here was a supercar with gullwing doors, V10 power and a 200mph top speed!

Against all expectations, it arrived in the Kensington showroom in 2007. And now, having joined the exclusive ranks of those who have driven the Fighter, I can confirm that it's very much of the Bristol mould: aerodynamic, with a

Cd of 0.225 (its engineer described it as 'the worst wing he's ever designed'), hushed at speed and usefully narrow, with great forward visibility.

It's also practical to use on a daily basis, those gullwing doors making it so easy to get into and out of. Considering the other-worldly acceleration delivered by the 8.0-litre Chrysler V10 with such a tuneful, offbeat soundtrack, it's friendly to drive, too, with positive steering, progressive throttle and a well-planned interior.

Following Frazer-Nash's rescue of Bristol Cars last year, the company's future looks far more secure. Those responsible for shaping the next Bristols are enthusiastic about the company's history – and they have an electric vision in store.

Frazer-Nash has two decades experience in electric and hybrid power, and wants the Bristol name to adorn its upcoming 200mph supercar. If they pull it off, there's no doubt that not only will they impress Bristol's existing and loyal fan-base, but that they will encourage a whole new legion on board. What an exciting prospect – and yet it's completely in keeping with the company's roots.

Bristol: evolution, defined. **End**

THANKS TO Bristol Cars, Frazer-Nash, Sir George and Lady White, the Bristol Owners Club and BODA.

Below

Hero or villain? The Fighter took Bristol in a new direction and arguably led the company into administration. Yet even this 200mph supercar shares characteristics with the original 400 of 1947.

