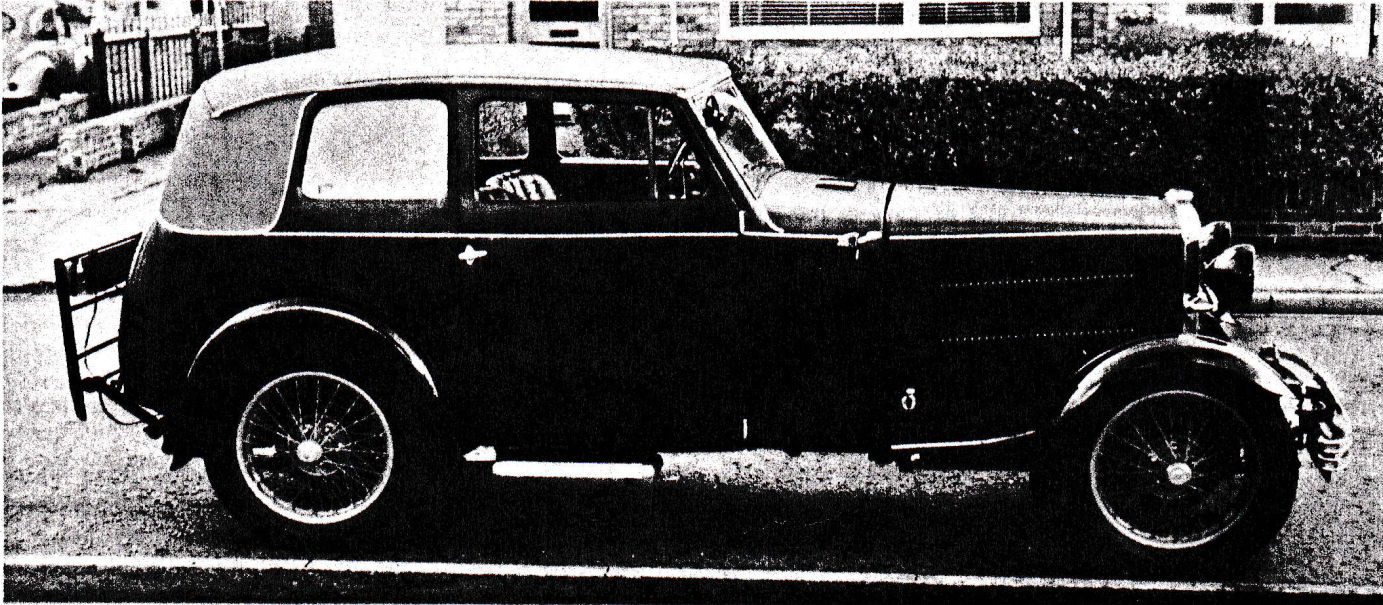


TWO FACES of the VIKING



ROVER IN THE THIRTIES

The history of Rover is, to an extent, a history of paradox, encompassing as it does a manufacturing policy which seems to have espoused, alternately, ultra utility and solid middle class quality — and which at times has produced both simultaneously. From the E. W. Lewis-designed single cylinder cars of 1904 the company graduated to the well-made Clegg-designed Twelve which remained in production from 1912 until 1924, and Sunbeams were built during the 1914-1918 war for the War Department.

The immediate post-Great War period, however, saw the introduction of the air-cooled flat-twin Eight, a near-

James Worth

**Photos by Adrian Mitchell and
Alan Milstead**

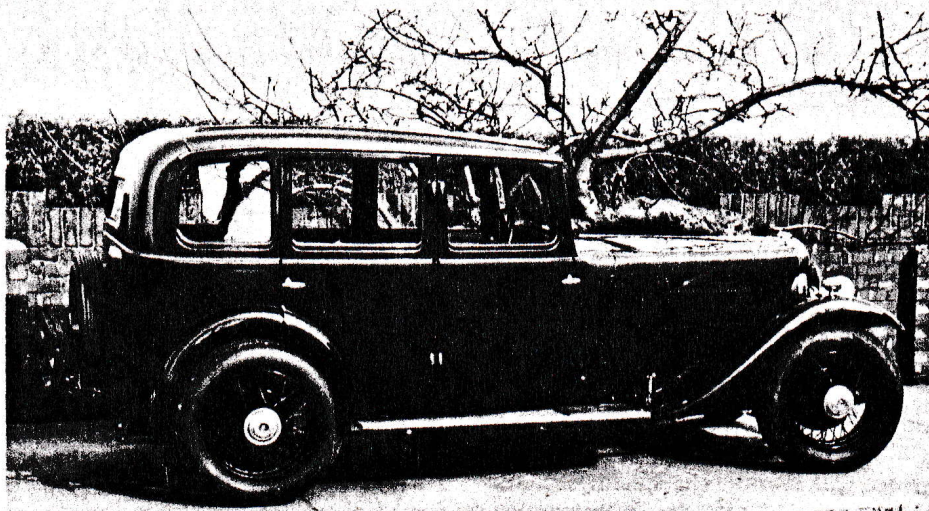
cyclecar which was eventually killed off by the Austin Seven, but only after some 17,000 had found customers up to 1925. The latter half of the twenties saw production split between worthy but not very exciting OHB Tens on the one hand, and expensive and advanced four cylinder overhead camshaft types with 2.1 and 2.5 litre engines, with hemispherical combustion chambers. The smaller of these, the 14/45 won the

RAC's Dewar Trophy for fifty consecutive ascents of Bwlch-y-Groes.

The car which carried the firm into the thirties, however, was the less complicated overhead valve two litre beverage driven 'six' introduced in 1928 and selling quite well at £410. By 1930, however, it had become the Light Six, providing 70mph for just £325, albeit at the expense of practicality. A rakish appearance, emphasized by close-fitting cycle type wings, heavily raked back screen, close-coupled fabric bodywork and steel plates in place of running boards, was marked contrast to the rather staid and perpendicular models which had preceded it.

In January 1930, Dudley Noble and Bennett driving a Light Six beat the 'Blue Train' which runs from the Riviera to Calais. The total distance was 80 miles, and the car beat the train by 10 minutes, giving Rover a good theme for advertisements at a time when depression, following the collapse of the American Stock Market on Wall Street the previous year, had begun to bite.

But the light Six was not the only model fielded by the Company in 1930. The Ten (or 10/25 as it was known) continued in production, and in many ways

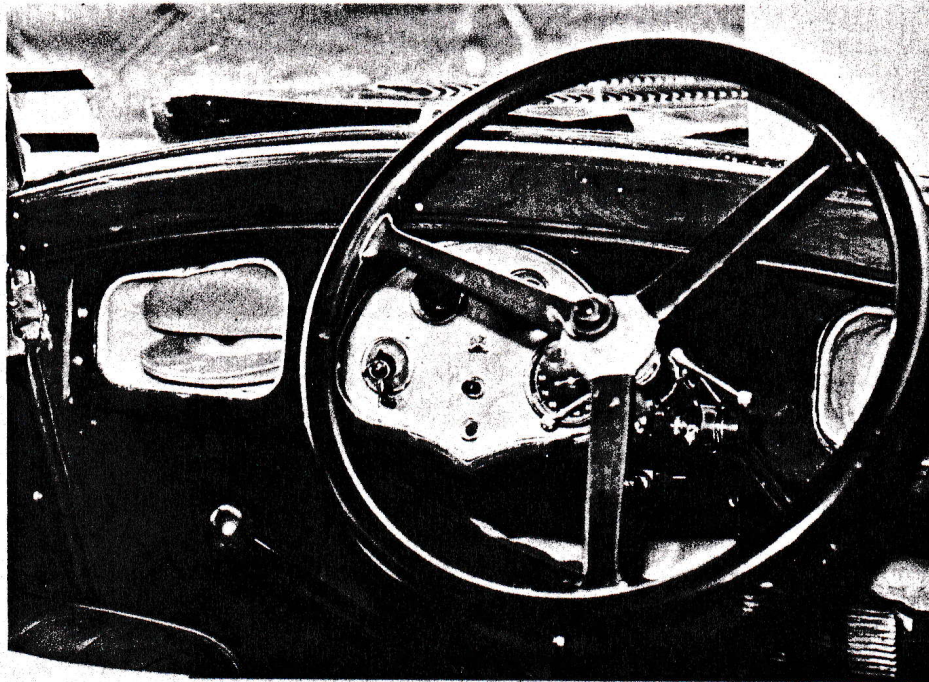
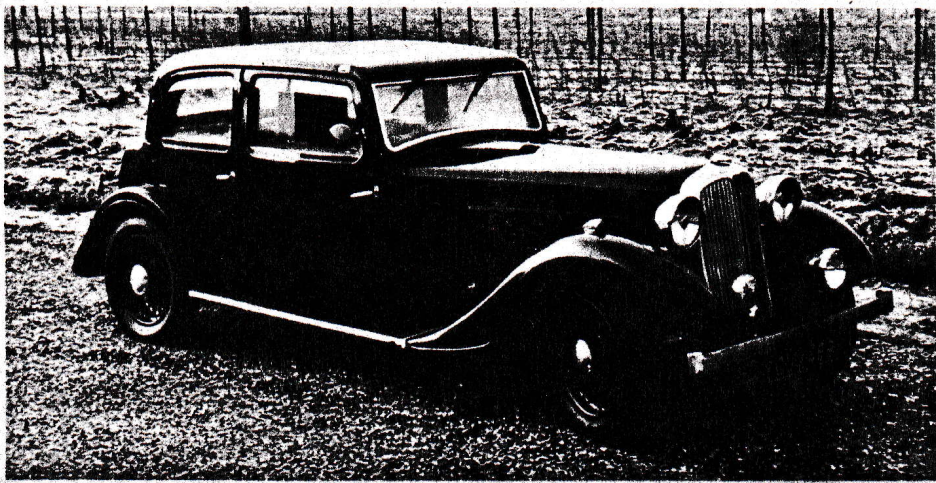
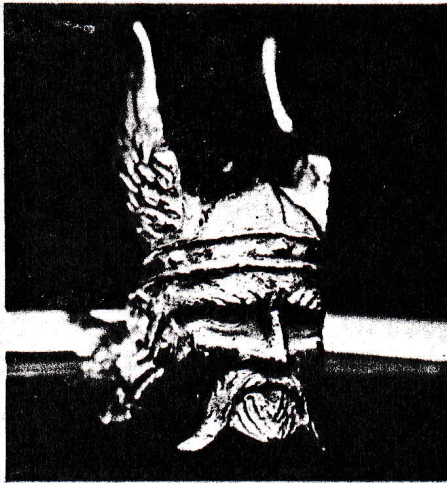


Above:

The sporty Light Six gave 70mph for £325 in 1930 but sacrificed practicality as a touring car.

Left:

The Family Ten 10/25 was given new bodywork but the mechanics



Above left:
The Rover Viking.

Above right:
By 1936 the sports Saloon offered much more refinement than the 1930 model.

Above:
The dashboard of a 1931 Family Ten had 'real wood' but it did not convey the solid quality image of the later 1930s.

Facing page top left:
By 1934 the image had changed with the slogan "the quality came first — the price followed". This is a 1935 10hp saloon.

Facing page top right:
By 1937 the influence of the Sports Saloon bodies passed on to the 'ordinary' saloons as you can see from this 12hp example.

echoed what Sir John Black was doing down the road at Standard. Fabric bodies (admittedly more stylish at Rover) were wedded to a rather depressing specification which included worm final drive, twin-bearing-crank engines, a three speed box and radiators which had proclaimed the identity of their respective marques for the previous twenty years.

Both companies also fielded a two-litre six, but Rover's was the more successful — probably because the company offered such a bewildering array of options on the same basic chassis. In addition to its sporty Light Six, saloons and coupes in a variety of forms were available from £398, and another £40 would buy you the "Regal" treatment—wire wheels, a sun roof, and bumpers. Other period trip-trappery to lure the customers included coloured steering wheels and road wheels (a ploy espoused by Standard, too).

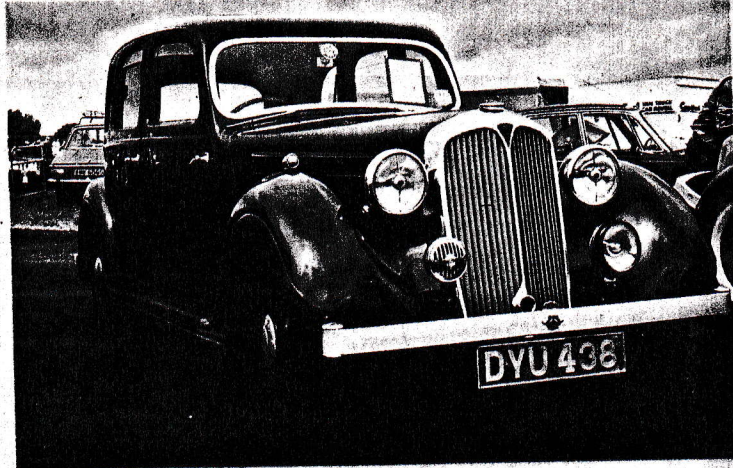
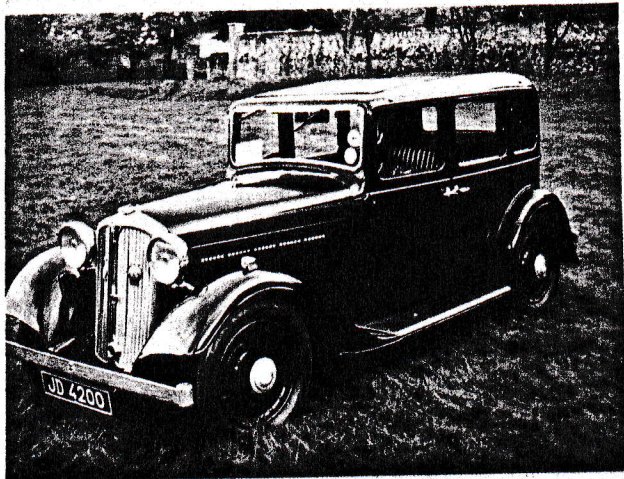
Halfway through the year a 2.5 litre six—the Meteor, named after Rover's works, was introduced. Rated at 20hp, and intended to cater for those who re-

quired more power, it also acquired four speeds (an option also offered belatedly on the Light Six) and modern styling which was to set the scene at West Orchard for the 1931 season. Gone was the antedeluvian flat radiator (which also no longer sprouted headlamps like ears on either side), and in its place a shallower, vee-ed affair with typical centre vertical chrome strip ushered in a new, but scarcely elegant age.

Economy measures which dictated that both the 2 litre Light Six and the 10/25 should share the same bodysheet did little for appearances with the former boasting a bonnet which would not have disgraced a straight-eight, and the latter looking as if it was about to sit down in the road. Another gimmick which enjoyed but a short life, and for which there is no logical explanation, was the use of 'dress guards'—a peculiar arrangement whereby an extension of the rear passenger doors overlapped and echoed the line of the rear wings. Extra weight, an ugly appearance and doubtful weather protection for the rear seat occupants. (The idea was that, when the door was open, there was a clean section of rear wing which would not soil a lady's long evening dress should it brush against it. — Editor.)

Under its new dress, however, the 10/25 was little altered, and gear ratios of 5.2, 9.8 and 19.5 to 1 ensured a depressingly pedestrian performance. On the credit side, however, the Ten was the cheapest available in its class on the British market, and at 36mpg was also creditably frugal. Initially offered at £189 (at which price you got safety glass only in the windscreen) and reduced by a tenner before the year was out, the basic model was ripe for the bolt-on-goodie market.

Rover actually managed to find 8,500 customers for the Ten in 1931, but its six cylinder range became more and more complicated. The Meteor was offered both in 16hp form and as a long wheel-base limousine at £545, but in addition a little-publicized sporting model was created by shoe-horning the 2.5 litre Twenty engine into a Light Six chassis. This work was actually carried out in Rover's London Service Depot at Seagrave



ad, Fulham and produced saloons capable of 80mph. Open cars on the ne chassis were good for 90mph, performed well at Brooklands, and were ss winners in the RAC Rally in both 33 and 1934. For some reason, however, and despite prices which at £495 £575 were way below those of competing marques like Alvis and Talbot, these hybrids never caught on.

One of the reasons may have been the plebian image projected by the n, and almost (but not quite) exacerbated by the announcement of the arab, at Olympia in 1931. Calculated make the average long-established over dealer foam at the mouth, this miniature four seater was priced at £89 t-in, and deliveries were promised (some said threatened) within four onths.

Its specification made even the air-cooled Eight of 1920 sound luxurious, and included an air-cooled 940cc veevin and three-speed gearbox housed the tail, dummy radiator at the front most un-Rover-like appearance and independent suspension. Germany might have been ready for such devices, but Britain wasn't. Dealer profit at ach a price was minimal, and trade-ins didn't bear thinking about — they'd be worse than Trojans! So dealers weren't saving any, and that was that.

The prevailing predilection for miniature sixes also afflicted Rover, however, and taking a leaf out of both triumph's and Wolseley's book, the designers tacked a couple of cylinders on to the Ten, kept bore sizes down, called it a Twelve and sandwiched the resultant six into the 10/25 chassis frame. The Ten's suspension and final drive were also retained for this small ix, but the Pilot (as it was named) acquired four forward speeds, servo braking options and hydraulic dampers. Like most of its type, however, it was endowed with a 5.44 rear axle ratio and was as gutless as its contemporaries.

Things got worse before they got better, and in common with Morris and Singer the company became embroiled in the business of body permutations, wedding themselves to more 'factory approved' custom body building than virtually any of their competitors. One

suspects that this was something in the nature of an act of desperation by the egotistical Colonel Searle who controlled the company's destiny at this time.

These custom coachbuilders included Whittingham & Mitchel, R.E.A.L., Grose of Northampton, Carbodies and Charlesworth of Coventry, Napier's old in-house coachbuilders, Cunard, Salmons of Newport Pagnell and Archie Maddox of Huntingdon, and resulted in no less than thirty different body types by 1933. Searle promised his dealers that 1932 would be their 'Golden Year' — a gold painted Pilot was on display at Henly's in Camden Town where this speech was delivered — and claimed that 1931 had been a record year for production which placed the company in the No.3 position in Britain.

Clearly, his figures were erroneous, and when at the end of 1932 the company turned in a deficit of £279,024 8s 6d (pre-decimal) it became obvious that his predictions and his methods were equally so. An assembly plant in Wellington, New Zealand which had cost £60,000 was now more of a liability than an asset, and it seems that Searle's hard-sell tactics and American sales methods had fallen between two stools. On the one hand, the large cars were proving too expensive for the depression-ridden economy — despite reduced production only two-fifths of the output of large cars had sold, half the quantity required for a satisfactory financial return. On the other, the firm had concentrated upon emphasizing the low price of the cheaper models, rather than their quality and reliability, and many of them had been put together with less care than the company's reputation merited.

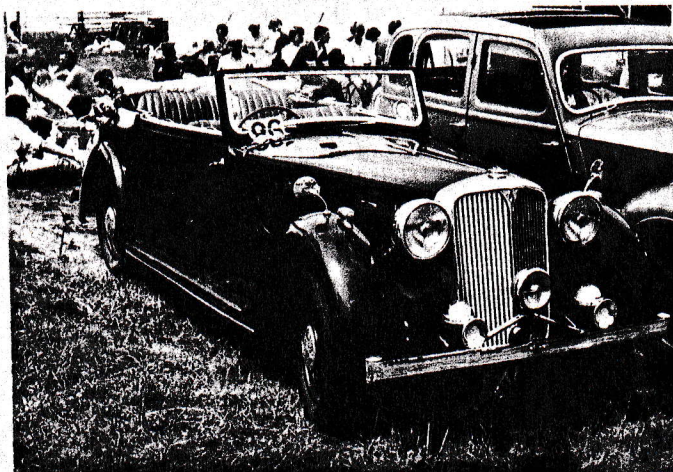
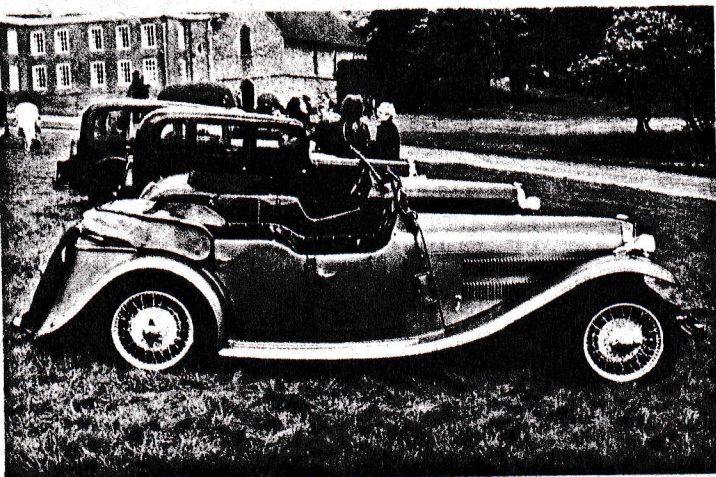
Despite a doubling of the number of agents in 1931, manufacturing capacity at Meteor Works, Helen Street and the Tyseley factory had not been fully utilized, and there were rumblings from the dealers themselves, many of whom were fed up with the warranty claims they were facing as a result of a two year guarantee allied to faulty workmanship. Matters came to a head with the appointment of H. Howe Graham, a Birmingham accountant, as 'company doctor'.

As a result of his recommendations, the Meteor Works were sold, staff was reduced and the manufacturing programme was cut back. Immediate savings of £100,000 a year were the result. Quite the most drastic recommendation, however, concerned quality control. Dealers and the public were fed up with fabric-bodied Rovers — many of them only a year or so old — looking like "flak-damaged Wellington bombers", as George Oliver so aptly puts it.

Reorganization resulted in "a passionate concentration on the establishment of high standards of quality". Such a volte face where, previously, quantity had been the watchword, might conceivably have been a recipe for disaster had Rover not decided to make a virtue out of its falling sales graph. The effects of this new thinking were first seen in the 1933 programme, with well-considered improvements to each model, but no expensive change to their basic design. Production during 1932/3 was reduced, but quality — and with it, satisfied customers and dealers — was up, and finance picked up accordingly.

The firm's slogan for 1934 epitomized the metamorphosis — "The quality came first — the price followed". Searle departed in 1932, Howe Graham joined the Board, and in 1933 Spencer Wilks became managing director. Under his guidance, there was a bank credit of £34,000 at the end of 1933/4, but the company received massive help from its suppliers, too, prominent among whom were Joseph Lucas Ltd.

Better factory styling obviated the need for custom bodies — only the Tickford drophead sixes of 1939 and 1940 survived in Rover's catalogues after 1933 — and improvements included the famous free-wheel, and Lockheed hydraulic brakes. The free-wheel permitted clutchless gearchanging and obviated the need for syncromesh, which Rover didn't adopt until 1939. The Pilot was uprated to 14hp, its increased 61mm bore producing 40bhp against the 30bhp of its predecessor, and for £228 the Ten Special came with the refinement of spiral bevel drive (the last 200 worm-drive types were sold during the same 1933 model year).



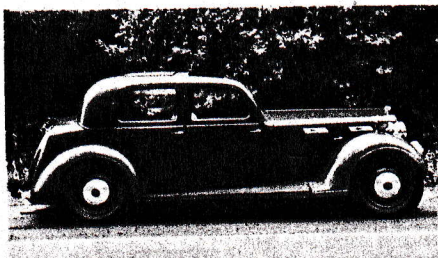
The thirties, particularly the latter half of the decade, saw an increasing interest in rallying, and sporting customers were catered for by the 2.5 litre Speed Twenty, together with a triple-carb Speed Pilot with underslung rear end, special frame and available only with custom bodywork to customer's choice. Charlesworth's version was popular at £350 as a close-coupled saloon. In this guise, the Speed Pilot would return 80mph and a creditable 22mpg.

These models were, however, transitional and although the Meteor Sixteen and Speed Twenty were destined to soldier on into 1935, a new range of models was introduced which was to be the basis of Rover production for the next fifteen years. Chassis were underslung at the rear, seating was located within the wheelbase, an innovation pioneered by Riley's Nine in 1926, and harmonic stabilizers were built into the front bumpers. Gearchanging was by remote control, but positive, and all touring models employed down-draught carburation. Hydraulic braking was eschewed on all but the Fourteen, Girling rod-type being introduced on the new Ten and Twelve models, and Lucas Startix starting was standardized (albeit only for a short time).

1934 engines were of the three bearing type, the new Ten being a larger and heavier car than its predecessor with 23.75cwt all up, and a 1.4 litre power unit. The Twelve was only slightly larger at 1496cc, whilst the Fourteen continued with a 1577cc unit which had its origins in the old Pilot Twelve. It comfortably accommodated five persons on its 112in chassis (later 115in) and in six-light saloon form these three models retailed at £238, £268 and £288 respectively.

Alternative body styles included coupés and sports saloons, the interior appointments of which reflected the new quality image, and a two-door sports tourer with concealed hood. Parcel nets, opening screens, bags of wood and leather, pull-out trays for tools, remote-control rear blinds and other interior refinements were followed, in 1935, by centralized chassis lubrication.

As the Speed Fourteen, the Speed



85mph maximum speed and 0-50mph in 14 seconds, by which time there were two new fastback Fourteens too — a four-door coupé and a six-light saloon. The slogan "One of Britain's Fine Cars" — which could certainly not have been applied to the 1931-32 range — was now firmly adopted, and 1937 saw a new, low, line on all but the Ten, which was itself restyled, and which gave the marque an elegance for which Triumph had striven, but only SS Jaguars had previously achieved.

So harmonious was the result that it was to be another eight years before any significant changes would be made in Rover styling, with the advent of the P4 range. As the decade progressed, the tendency towards closed cars increased, and the tourers were dropped from the catalogue — to reappear but briefly in 12hp form in 1947. A new Speed Twenty, although capable of 80mph from its single carb 2.5 litres, lacked the out-and-out sporty image of its earlier namesake, and it can be seen in retrospect that the company had achieved for itself a solid middle class clientele similar to that which had espoused the Clegg-designed Twelve over twenty years before.

The new 2147cc Sixteen emphasized the move into a social strata dominated by those for whom (as the late Michael Sedgwick said) "An Armstrong Siddeley was too stolid, a Jaguar too flashy, a Humber too large, and Wolseley too much of a glorified Morris". Only detailed styling changes signalled the 1938 models, whilst in 1939 came the long-awaited synchromesh, albeit on the two upper ratios only, and a six-light

body for the Ten which brought it into line with the elegance of its larger stablemates.

Above left:

Rover also made a bid to capture some of the market held by the Alvis Speed Twenty and similar models. This 4-door tourer probably has a body by Charlesworth.

Above right:

Very few of these drophead coupés were made in the late 30s. This is an early 1939 example.

Left:

The last echo of late 30s elegance was seen in the early post-war models like this 1947 16hp Sports Saloon.

enlarged to 1.9 litres, all six cylinder models acquiring anti-roll bars whilst Tickford drophead coachwork (available the year before only on the Ten) appeared also on the Fourteen, Sixteen and Twenty. Production was never large, hovering between 10,000 and 11,000 units in the last three years of the decade, but with vastly reduced overheads and increased profitability.

Built-in jacking systems, available initially on the Sixteen and Twenty, were extended to the Twelve in 1940 but price remained stable with only the Ten's 1939 re-styling responsible for an uplift from £248 to £275. Some 1940 models (with optional radio) reached customers, but air raids during the war meant that when production again commenced in 1946 it would be from the erstwhile shadow factory at Solihull. Postwar austerity also dictated the dropping of the Twenty and coupés, whilst material shortages dictated that only 15,732 cars left the works from 1945 to 1948.

In 1948 the P3 series boasted new inlet-over-exhaust engines (said by some to have been based on the 1931 Bentley four litre unit) of 1.6 and 2.1 litres and coil spring independent suspension — but still the old pre-war body shapes. It was not until the advent of the P4 (the Auntie Rover) in 1950 that a new slab-sided era arrived — to howls of "heresy" from traditional Rover devotees. Fourteen years later and with 130,242 P4s in circulation, similar noises were made upon the arrival of the 2000