
ROVER - A Brief History (Part 1 - 1877 to 1945)

The name Rover has become synonymous with cars, essentially the quintessential 'British' car. But some people may not realise that Rover originally built bicycles.



The company was started in 1877, a partnership between John Kemp Starley and William Sutton. The Company was based in Coventry, the capital of the British cycle industry. In 1884 Rover pioneered the modern safety bicycle. "Rover set the fashion to the world". Sutton soon pulled out of the business, but Starley was to remain at the helm until his death in 1901.

Starley had experimented with electrically powered tricycles as far back as 1888, however Rover only entered into production of the 'self propelled' vehicles in 1903. The first Rover Imperial motorcycle was born, powered by a conventional petrol engine.



In 1904, The first Rover car was introduced. This was a single cylinder 8hp model with single bench seat. It was designed by Edmund Lewis and incorporated the first central backbone chassis in the world.

A smaller and cheaper 6hp model was introduced in 1905 which had a conventional chassis, but did feature an early example of rack & pinion steering. Also in 1905, Rover built the first of its' 4 cylinder cars. Two years later, Ernest Courtis won the Tourist Trophy Race in the Isle of Man, driving a 16/20hp model.

Various models were introduced over the next few years, however, in 1912 - two new models were introduced which replaced all earlier cars. A 3.3litre 18hp car and a 2.3 litre 12hp model, designed by Owen Clegg the cars formed the backbone of the Rover range for many years.

Cycle production continued into the 1920's with Victor Lois Johnson winning gold medal in the 1908 Olympic games on a Rover racer.

During the First World War, Rover supplied motorcycles to both the British & Russian Armies, and built Maudslay trucks and Sunbeam cars to government orders.

In 1919, a revised 14 was put back onto the market (formerly known as the 12). Rover also bought the design for a small car produced by Jack Sangster of Ariel motor company. This was to be known as the Rover Eight and was manufactured at a new factory at Tysley in Birmingham, England.



The Eight had an air cooled flat twin engine. At one time it sold for as little as £145 and was very popular in the market, until it

became eclipsed by the Austin Seven. In 1924, Rover bought out a complimentary four cylinder 'Nine', and began to move their products 'up-market', away from direct competition with mass produced Austins & Morris. The 14/45 was also launched, a technically interesting car with an overhead camshaft engine for which Rover were awarded the Dewar Trophy, the car was later fitted with a more powerful engine and became the 16/50.

In 1928 the Nine was replaced by the 10.25 which survived in various forms until 1933, in the same year Rover introduced its first six cylinder model (a prototype 3.5 litre car with 6 cylinders had been shown in 1923). The 1928 2 litre had an overhead valve engine and sold for £410 as a tourer. The Light Six of 1930 cost even less and used the same engine but on a shorter chassis.

One of these cars, with fabric covered bodywork, entered the history books by beating the famous Blue Train in a race across France. A longer chassis car with a 2.5 litre six cylinder engine of 1930 was christened the Meteor.

In 1931, Rover planned a complete departure from their existing range, the rear engined Scarab - a small car designed to sell at £85. The car did not go into production, only being seen at the London Motor Show. Another show debutante, which proved more important, was the 1.4 litre Pilot with a small 6 cylinder engine and a flywheel in the transmission.

1933 and the company was under new management of the Wilks brothers.

Spencer - Managing Director.

Maurice - in charge of engineering and design.

They formulated a new product philosophy which, within a few years, would make Rover "One of Britains' Fine Cars", with a discreet and understated image of typically British quality.

1934 saw the new 10 and 12 hp four cylinder models introduced, with the six cylinder 14 model being developed from the old Pilot. It was later joined by the similar 16 and 20 hp models which gave Rover extensive market coverage. Between 1933 and 1939, annual production increased from 5000 to 11,000 cars, whilst net profits almost trebled to £200,000.



From 1936 Rover built new factories at Ackcoks Green, Birmingham and at Solihull. With extensive war damage to the original Coventry factory, after 1945 Solihull became the main production site. During the War, the company built aero engines and contributed to the early development of Sir Frank Whittle's jet engine before the project was turned over to Rolls Royce.

Next Issue, part two. 1945 to early 2002.

Also to come, 'A Brief History of MG'.

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ROVER - A Brief History (Part 2 - 1945 to early 2002)

With extensive war damage to the original Coventry factory, after 1945 Solihull became the main production site for Rover cars. The early post war range consisted of the 10, 12, 14 and 16 hp models, available in saloon or sports saloon form.

But in early 1948 Rover bought out their first proper postwar cars - a four cylinder 1.6 litre 60 and a six cylinder 2.1 litre 75, with all new engines featuring overhead inlet and side exhaust valves, in a new chassis. These cars were known as the P3 models. Rover also experimented with a 700cc two seater small car known as the M1, and in 1948 also bought out the first Land Rover, with the engine from the 60 saloon in a four wheel drive chassis fitted with simple utility bodywork in aluminium. (The start of the Land Rover brand).

In 1949, Rover showed the new P4 model at the Motor Show, at first this was only available in the 75 form with the six cylinder engine. For the first few years the car featured a very un-Rover like radiator grille with centrally mounted fog-lamp which earned it the 'Cyclops' nickname. It was later replaced by a developed version of the original Rover grille, and the P4 range went on to become affectionately known as the "Auntie" Rover, with a dignified and 'very' British presence. When the P4 range finished in 1964, more than 130,000 of these 'Auntie' cars had been built.

A P4 was the basis of the extraordinary JET1 of 1950, the world's first gas turbine engined car. The car earned Rover the Dewar trophy for the second time and was driven at speeds over 150mph. Over the next few years Rover built several experimental gas turbine cars, including, in co-operation with BRM, a racing car which completed the Le Mans 24hr in 1963 and 1965. The company gave up gas turbine development as the technology was not yet suitable for production purposes.

In 1958 Rover took a major step forward with the P5 model, a large luxury saloon with a 3 litre version of their 6 cylinder engine. It was the first Rover car with 'unitary' bodywork, styled by David Bache. This model combined elegance with dignity, and had a traditionally well appointed interior. Later developments included the Coupe version with lowered roof line, and a 3.5 litre V8 model in 1967 which used the aluminium V8 engine, bought from the American Buick company, for the first time.



1963 and Rover entered a new market sector with the P6 2000 model. A compact and sporting saloon which started the trend to the so called

"executive" cars. Its advanced engineering, combined with Rover's traditional values, earned it the accolade of Car of the Year. The P6 was extended with the V8 3500 model which put Rover on the map as a high performance car. The last derivatives



were produced in 1977, by which time a total of 325,000+ had been manufactured.

1965 saw Rover purchasing the small Alvis company of Coventry. In the following year, Rover in turn was purchased by the Lancashire based truck maker Leyland, who already owned Standard Triumph.

In 1968 Leyland group merged with BMC, who named amongst its ranks, Austin, Morris, MG and other makes.

The P5 finished production in 1973 with no successor - an even larger P8 never reached production stage. However, the first Range Rover in 1970, introduced the Land Rover to the luxury sector.

The next new car was the SD1 in 1976 and again took Car of the Year title. Initially only available with V8 3500 engine, the range was later increased with four & six cylinder versions, as well as the first Rover Diesel engined car. A fuel injection engine was fitted to the Vitesse version which became the fastest Rover production car.



Due to financial problems in 1975, the company effectively became a nationalised company. Drastic restructuring was initiated by Michael Edwards, Chairman in 1977. He initiated the link with the Japanese Honda company, a tie-up which is well documented in history as being successful at saving the company from the brink of obliteration. Selected Honda cars were produced under licence, such as the first Rover small car for many years, the 200 series of 1984. A joint development programme (Project XX) produced a new executive car in 1986, the Rover 800.

The 800 was initially fitted with either Hondas' V6 or Rovers own new 16 valve 2 litre four cylinder engines. Fastback and other variations were added later. In the same year that the 800 was introduced, Graham Day was appointed chairman of BL, he quickly renamed the company Rover Group and began a programme of moving the company and its products up-market.

In 1988, Rover Group was privatised and sold to British Aerospace. It was Day's philosophy that all new saloon models be called Rover, with the MG badge being reserved for new sports cars, Land Rover being developed in the fourwheel market, and Mini being retained for the company's smallest product.

In 1994 Rover Group was taken over by BMW, 1995 saw the first 400 available. In 1996 the Honda V6 was replaced by Rover's own new KV6 2.5 litre.

2000 saw BMW splitting and selling the company (again well documented in history) and eventually Rover being sold to its current owners. The company became known as MG-Rover group, introduced a raft of new vehicles through 2000 and 2001 as well as re-developing the MG range and introducing the new MG-TF in 2002. The story continues.....

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