Rovers rev up

CAR TEST/Christopher Beck

ONE of the saddest developments in motoring in the last three decades has been the gradual demise of the middle class English motor car.

Names like Riley, Wolseley, Lea Francis, Sunbeam and Humber are no more. Those splendid machines, whose pungent Connolly hide and burr walnut interiors were as English as leafy country lanes, fell victims to the economics of the car industry.

Only one — Rover — has survived. It did so by taking a decision in the mid-Sixties to build a middle-class English car in which there were very heavy American and European influences.

But within two years even this hybrid will be gone and Rover will be making its first world car. This is the result of a joint venture between the English company and Japan's Honda. Code-named the XX, that car will be an interesting fusion of what Japanese and English engineers believe the luxury car market wants.

In Australia we've already had a foretaste of Rover-Honda co-operation. For the past 18 months a re-badged Honda, the Quint, has been sold here as the Rover Quintet.

A Honda it may be, but talk to anyone who owns one and you'll find that they consider the peppy four-cylinder Quintet nothing else other than a Rover. By selling more than 100 of these well-appointed front wheel drives every month, the Jaguar Rover marketing organisation has shown just how to exploit a highly regarded name.

As well as attacking the $13 to $14,000 semi-luxury segment of the market with the Quintet, Jaguar Rover began selling a new model in its 3500 range. Called the Vanden Plas — after a prestige British coachbuilder gobbled up years ago into the conglomerate that became Leyland — it is a ritzy, walnut veneer and leather model which sells for $33,850.

This lines it up against some very technologically advanced competition, like the Volvo 760 series, Audi 100 and BMW528.

In terms of its model life, the Rover Vanden Plas, which first reached our shores as the 3500SE six years ago, is much older than its competitors.

Despite this it matches them in most areas. It does so by having as standard, metallic paint, alloy wheels, cruise control, a trip computer, leather seats, walnut door inserts, rear head restraints and imitation goatskin rugs.

These make it more luxurious, but no faster or better handling than the 3500SE, a car which has had to live down criticism when it was first released because it contained more conventional design concepts — such as a solid rear axle and rear drum brakes — than the car it replaced.

When first introduced to Australia it was plagued by reliability problems. However, rigorous quality control in Britain and extensive new model testing in Australia backed up by Mastercare, a unique, three-year warranty and service program, have changed all that.

Jaguar Rover is demonstrating its confidence in the car, by entering two specially prepared racing models in the James Hardie 1000 at Bathurst.

For the first two years of its life in Australia, the 3500SE was also afflicted with very poor air-conditioning, a factor reflected by its low sales in Queensland. That problem has now been overcome with a system which blows a veritable Arctic gale.

As part of its program of improvement, Rover has made a series of running model changes. The suspension, for instance, has undergone substantial revision which has made it much better for Australia.

It now has a relatively soft ride. There's some lean into corners, but its level of road adhesion at high speeds is better than ever. Combined with the car's almost neutral handling characteristics and a very effective cruise control, long distances can be covered extremely quickly. The only inhibitions to putting away big sessions behind the wheel is the small 65.9 litre petrol tank.

In the engine department electronic fuel injection has replaced the twin carburettors on the 3528cc V8. When I picked it up for test, the car's big aluminium block engine, which had only covered 12,938 km, felt as though it had only just been run in.

Free-revving, the engine punches the car along very quickly when kept between 3500 and 5600 rpm. Below this range progress is far more stately, being similar to that of Australian and American V8s at the low end of their rev scales.

ABOVE LEFT: The lavishly upholstered interior of the Rover Vanden Plas. BELOW LEFT: Inside the Rover Quintet. ABOVE: The transport of yesterday, behind the cars of today. The Rover Vanden Plas in front of Quintet, sparkling on the road.

The Vanden Plas is only available with a three-speed automatic transmission while the 3500SE can also be had with a notchy, five-speed manual at no extra cost.

There are distinct limitations in Australia to the use of a three-speed automatic and I feel that the car's performance and economy would be further enhanced if it had an automatic with an overdrive/fourth, as is the case with most of its competitors.

The disc front, drum rear braking combination is so effective that it makes a mockery of complaints, first voiced at the initial release of the car, that Rover had taken a retrograde step by abandoning the all-disc configuration.

When it was released in Europe, the styling set new standards for a four-door hatchback. Today it is still a strikingly handsome vehicle. Although it has a relatively high "waist" (which affects both visibility and the sense of interior space), I don't think there's much argument that it is still the most attractive car in the segment of the market in which it competes.

What's good on the outside is matched by clubby sumptuousness on the inside. The leather seats are just marvellous, providing the sort of back and thigh support which leaves you relaxed and fresh even after a long journey.

There's a high quality Pioneer AM/FM stereo cassette unit pumping through four speakers (two front, two back), power windows with a master control, central door locking, electric remote control external mirrors, a comprehensive trip computer and splendid electrically operated sunroof.

The interior suffers from only one problem — the odd, oval-shaped steering. Apart from being a little difficult to come to grips with initially, when the steering wheel is adjusted to its lowest (the most comfortable position for people of medium height) the leather-bound rim obscures the speedometer and tachometer and makes it extremely difficult to get in and out of the driver's seat.

After living with the Rover for a week I felt that it was a very much improved car to the 3500SEs that I'd tested previously. The boffins at Solihull, where the car is built, are putting the jigsaw together properly . . . and as Rover's profit and loss statements are beginning to show, they are reaping the benefit.

SPECIFICATIONS

Rover Vanden Plas and 3500SE Series II
Engine: V8, 3528cc, fuel injected
Transmission: three-speed automatic; five-speed manual (no cost option)
Suspension: front independent, Macpherson strut; rear, torque tube live axle
Brakes: front, discs; rear, drums. Servo-assisted split system