

MOTORING

THE Rover 3500 made a late entry here last December, and then it only appeared at all because the local branch of Leyland made an all-out effort.

"We were so sick and tired of making promises and not keeping them," a Leyland man said, "that we thought another delay would be too much." The easy way would have been to release the new Rover this month or in March. That the company chose the harder way is a pointer to its revitalised thinking here.

It can be fairly said that the Rover 3500 is more than a car. It is one of the all-new products of the criticised and often beleaguered British Leyland group, and a tremendously important one in that it shows what the corporation can do when it starts with a clean sheet of paper.

More than this, it is tied in with a whole new British factory at Solihull that was built at a cost of £31 million. The Rover 3500 is certainly a car and a very good one; but it also represents a new approach in building cars.

The new plant has a capacity of some 40,000 units a year and every step in their manufacture is controlled by computer; it is claimed that the result is that final products are about as well made as is possible at our stage of the motor manufacturing art. By any measure, they are highly impressive.

The car itself has picked up a small trunkful of awards. It was voted Europe's best car of the year in 1977, it won the Don safety trophy, Autovisie magazine's safety award, Style Auto magazine's styling prize, the British Automobile Association's gold medal, Caravan Industries' best tow-car award, and the Midlander award.

In the face of this, criticism seems beside the point. My own view of the Rover 3500 is that it is utterly convincing as far as the larger picture is concerned, but that it is a little let down in some details: it's as though the computers have worked in a 100 per cent fashion, but the fingers of mere men have just not been agile enough. Some trim detailing is just not quite right, and there's the odd muted disturbance when doors and window glass mutter as the car is forced over irregular surfaces. For my money, I would like a "tighter" car; but having said this, there is not much more to say.

General ride, handling and road ability come across as first class, and performance is beautifully balanced: the Rover 3500 is not a fast and hairy car. But everything it does feels progressive. It always provides a bit more on demand, and does so without showing any strain. A high degree of running refinement is noticeable right through its performance spectrum, just as it refuses it gets fussed when pushed to extremes.

And having said this, the Rover 3500 is quite quick enough as a car: maximum speed is claimed to be 115 miles an hour (195 km/h). Certainly, it appears capable of attaining this pace easily enough and in favourable conditions would undoubtedly exceed it. The real point, though, is that down where the legal limits are posted it runs with complete lack of effort.

Criticism has been made of this car that it is a step down from the previous Rover 3500, examples of which still sold in this country up to last year. It lacks the older car's four-wheel disc brakes, novel bell-crank front suspension and de Dion rear suspension, and to some eyes its building is a step down in quality as well. Then there is the styling which is as far away from traditional Rover lines as it is possible to imagine.

This criticism is fair enough up to a point. Where the line has to be drawn, however, is where motoring aims can no longer be attained by economical means and more complex and expensive ones have to be brought into play.



The Rover 3500 - it is a little let down in some details.

Rover's dash and daring

By PETER BURDEN

The older Rover 3500s were fine cars, but not terribly well thought out when it came to optimising occupant space (or luggage space either) within their physical envelope, and perhaps as a result of their idiosyncratic suspension they were tyre-sensitive: my own recollection of these cars was that they were plagued with radial run-out and there was no easy remedy for it.

On top of this, their usable performance was limited by marked understeer. These were nice cars to drive in a sedate fashion, but more forceful driving showed up their limitations.

By contrast with the older car, the new Rover 3500 has MacPherson strut front suspension (a system which has come close to taking over in European cars these days) and a live rear axle which is controlled by coil/damper units and located by radius rods and a Watts linkage; retardation is by front disc brakes with drums at the rear.

As far as a modern car goes, the set-up could not be more simple, and it is within an ace of that used by our own locally built Commodore.

The proof of the pudding, as those who are wise say, is in the eating. Certainly, the new Rover 3500 comes across as a better handling car than the older one and the simplified rear suspension is entirely adequate for putting the power on the ground; nor does ride quality suffer in comparison.

Braking, too, is entirely satisfactory, although personal preference does lean to an all-disc system. If nothing else, such a system generally gives more balanced results than a disc-drum one.

Where the new car scores hands down, however, is in its treatment of interior space. This is a largish car by any standard, and the fact that it is a hatchback means that loads approaching station wagon proportions can easily be handled.

In defence of its design, Rover itself says that its first thoughts on a replacement for its 2000/3500 series cars began in 1969. Up to 1971, it explored various configurations before deciding on a fairly conventional front-engine/rear-drive layout.

It says it made a conscious decision to build a fundamentally simple car in which exhaustive attention to detail would surpass all that more complex and expensive engineering solutions had previously achieved.

It also made a conscious effort to design a body shell in which stresses could be resolved at the lightest weight, allowing for a controlled rate of collapse under impact. Rover claims the new car exceeds European requirements in this area, and importantly that the benefit of light weight enhances performance and running economy.

Typical of the detail thought used in this car is the simple system of self-levelling suspension which maintains correct suspension travel whether the car is empty or full. When the car is in motion, the dampers pump themselves up to maintain a rate of 84 cycles a minute. The result is that handling remains constant regardless of load.

Another detail point is the car's high-g geared power steering. Virtually, half-a-turn of the steering wheel is all that is required to traverse a right-angled corner and the resulting nimbleness and steering accuracy have to be experienced to be believed. It makes nonsense of most other systems.

It is perhaps fair to say that the Rover 3500s sold in this country are something special. Leyland's local branch looked at our requirements and specified automatic transmission, air-conditioning and central-controlled door locking through solenoids. Windows are also power operated. The result is a higher level of appointments than most Rover 3500s sold in Britain and Europe.

Naturally enough the specification includes the AM-FM twin-speaker stereo-cassette system which is now mandatory in luxury cars, and includes fog lamps as well as reversing lamps. Cars sold locally also have cast alloy wheels.

The lasting driving impression of this car is its airiness and the good forward visibility out of it (less so to the rear, however), and the remarkable ease with which everything works.

Some critics have objected to the interior styling, particularly the instrument "pod" that sits like a box on the fascia, but the whole thing is so well thought out that this is plainly carping. Colour-keying of the interior components might not be stylist Davis Bache's strongest point (for

those who are curious, he styled the previous line of Rovers as well), but for the most part things come together well enough. Exterior colours, by contrast, are particularly striking.

Keeping in mind that the new Rover 3500 with its wheelbase of 110.8in (2,815mm) and kerb weight of 3,146lb (1,426kg) is a fairly substantial motor car, its economy is within reasonable limits, mainly because of its efficient 3.5-litre alloy V8 engine. Fair average running returns 20.9 miles per gallon (13.5 litres per 100km), while easy touring driving lifts the figure to 24 mpg (11.7 litres per 100km).

Leyland claims the car's good air shape contributes to its running economy, and while perhaps it does, economy falls off pretty dramatically when the car is hunted along. This is true of all cars, of course, but a heavy foot will pull the Rover 3500 back to some 18 mpg (15.7 litres per 100km).

Leyland's positioning of this car in the market at a recommended retail price of \$19,995 can be looked upon as a daring move: at this price, it is nicely poised to draw sales away from several competitors which are now well over \$20,000, and because of what it offers, it could also pull sales out of the present \$17,000-\$18,000 level.

Leyland has said privately that it is looking for a figure of 2,000 sales a year with the new Rover 3500. There seems little reason why such a volume should not be attained with this attractive car, but it is fair to observe that in the limited luxury sector a figure of this sort would obviously be someone's loss. Whose, only time will tell.

It appears likely, however, that with the new breed of luxury Commodores chewing away at the lower end of the luxury market and with the Rover 3500 feasting on the middle there could be some changed market shares within a very short time.

It is natural to look with suspicion (with an all-new car) and believe a shaking-down period lies ahead. Too often with cars in this country, because of the harsh conditions, what appears promising has not been delivered.

Having said this, the Rover 3500 looks very good, indeed. Leyland's effort to get it on our market could be the best move it has made in years.