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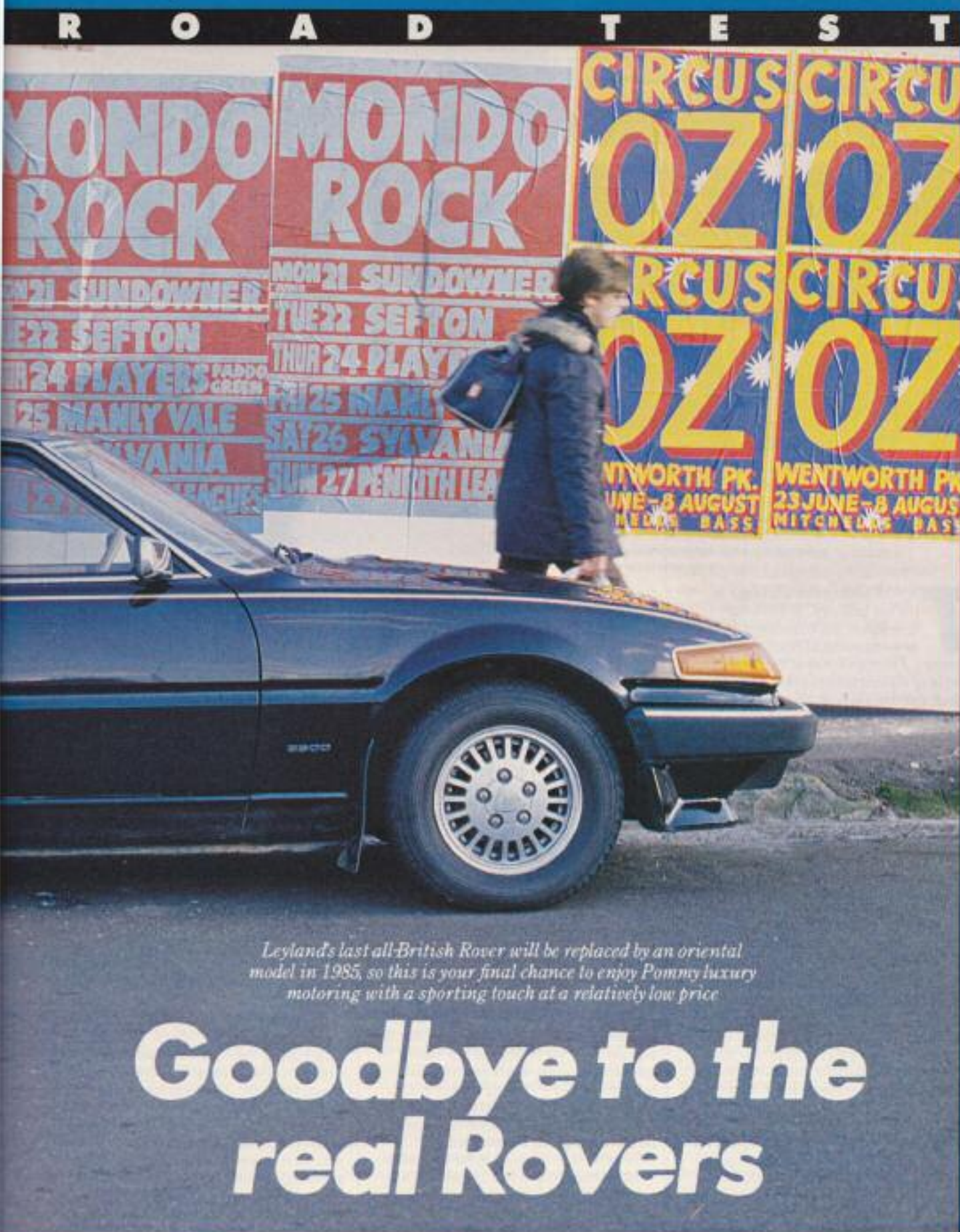


Comparo of the decade

7500km across the Outback

**CAMIRA
OR
SIGMA?**

and all about next year's Mazda/Ford rival



Leyland's last all-British Rover will be replaced by an oriental model in 1985, so this is your final chance to enjoy Pommy luxury motoring with a sporting touch at a relatively low price

**Goodbye to the
real Rovers**



New Rover 3500 corners flatter and understeer has been reduced. Alteration in front is the addition of a deep air dam under the bumper. The interior has brand-new instruments, but the speedo layout is not successful; steering wheel is too big finish much improved; control layout more sensible — the whole car seems more luxurious



TEN YEARS can be a lifetime in the car industry. In 1976 the new Rover 3500 flashed onto the new-car scene in Britain to rave reviews, a European car of the year award and long waiting lists and three years later when it arrived in Australia it outsold its rivals in its first year. Who would have predicted, in the face of such success, that this would be the last 'Rover' sedan.

The once proud and independent Rover began making cars in 1904 and it is sad indeed to understand that there will be no more all-new, all-British Rovers, for we know that the 3500 will be replaced by a joint Honda-Leyland luxury car in 1985.

It wasn't the concept of the 3500 which was wrong (although it must be said that the car represented a total turnaround in design philosophy from the technically advanced 2000/3500 and was perhaps too radical in its appearance for mass acceptance) but the dismally poor build quality that gave the car a reputation that is difficult to live down and even harder to eliminate. Then the big-car market in Europe was savagely cut as petrol prices soared and, despite the introduction of two six-cylinder versions and even a two-litre four, the Rover has never lived up to its early sales promise.

In Australia the 3500's inability to cope with local conditions brought on a bout of teething problems, many of which hadn't surfaced on the kinder English roads. Our first comparison to include the Rover (WHEELS, June '79) gave voice to our

doubts regarding the car's long-term suitability in Aussie and our recent comparo of the fuel-injected SE (April '82) did little to change our view.

But behind the scenes the Leyland engineers, aware of the troubles, have been working hard to improve the quality of the car while the product planners have diligently tried to correct any design criticisms made of the original model. And to counter the durability problems the new 3500 SE now carries a two-year/40,000 km warranty, with Rover paying the labour costs of regular maintenance for three years or 40,000 km.

If the basic hatchback body remains unchanged there have been enough minor detail changes to ensure the new 3500 is easily recognised. A large front air dam, flush headlights with chrome surrounds and a deeper rear window are the obvious exterior changes, while inside there is a new instrument binnacle, with speedometer and tachometer calibrated over half-circles in a dubious attempt at improved clarity. Perhaps the fact that the manual 3500 we tested had the most inaccurate speedo of any car WHEELS has ever tested — 24 km/h error at an indicated 130 km/h — biased us against the dials, but even so, the calibrations are far too close for an instant readout. Otherwise the changes are for the better.

Mechanically, the 106 kW, alloy V8 engine with its Bosch L-Jetronic fuel-injection is unchanged except for a stiffer block casting in the interests of

smoothness and the addition of a low oil warning light. A bigger brake servo and revised calipers and pads for the disc/drum system, and modifications to the rear suspension in the interests of tauter handling, are intended to correct areas found wanting on the old model.

Hardly earth-shattering changes but combined with a very real attempt to give the interior a more solid, more luxurious feel you have a car which really does feel more of a piece; tauter in the body and finish and more impressive on the road.

We drove both automatic and manual versions and quickly concluded that it is as a manual that the 3500 works best. Of course, most of the cars sold here (90 per cent, in fact) are automatics but it is clear in the driving that the engineers involved in the development of the car had the long-legged, five-speed manual at the forefront of their program. The sporting character of the 3500 is enhanced by the manual box while the automatic detracts from the car's natural abilities.

Of course, the performance with the manual is superior, although most of this advantage is produced over the first few metres in moving off from rest, and once the cars are moving there is surprisingly little difference in their ultimate

acceleration. Rather it is the relaxed and smooth progress of the manual which contrasts with the obvious induction and fan noises that are always more apparent on the auto than the manual.

It is only at low speeds when accelerating hard that these sounds intrude into the cockpit of the manual model, where the automatic, to produce similar passing speeds, requires full use of the kickdown and a dramatic increase in noise levels. Certainly the new automatic proved much quicker against the stopwatch than the previous SE, cutting 0.5 seconds from its standing 400 metre time of 18.5 seconds. But the manual took off another half-second to give the Rover the kind of performance its sleek appearance demands.

The engine is still not the super responsive unit that comes from, say, BMW, for it requires too long a throttle travel and the tall gearing means that you need to drop down two ratios from fifth for peak performance in most situations. Fifth is so high — 47.8 km/h per 1000 rpm, compared to 37.9 km/h for top gear in the automatic — that at 100 km/h the engine is only turning over at 2100 rpm. Is it any wonder that the engine is heard as a hum and wind noise (which still varies from car to car) becomes the only hindrance to high-speed cruising. There is very little tyre noise, although the suspension does

thump around on rough bumps and the exhaust pipe crashes into the underbody.

If you were to believe the test car's odometer then Rover's engineers have worked miracles with the car's fuel consumption. Over a test distance of 3553 km the car averaged 7.6 km/l (21.5 mpg). That was before we corrected the odo and discovered the actual distance was 2888 km and the consumption 6.2 km/l (17.5 mpg) overall. The true best figure was 6.9 km/l (19.5 mpg) and the worst 5.2 km/l (14.8 mpg). The automatic returned a similar range of figures, although it is harder to match the best economy of the manual in normal driving.

Secret to the Rover's sporting appeal is the car's steering. Power-assisted rack and pinion and direct to the point of having just 2.8 turns lock-to-lock, it takes practice to make any movement of the steering wheel a smooth, jerk-free operation. Sudden inputs to the wheel can produce a lurch and it is not an easy car to place accurately initially. Experience and experimentation, however, pay off, for once learned it is delightfully high-g geared and requires only tiny, subtle movements for most corners. Rover persists in giving the car a large-rimmed, squared-off and far too large steering wheel.

If the Rover still lacks the ultimate ride quality of some of its European rivals — and the Commodore, for that matter — and can be upset by large bumps, it is both flatter and more supple than the old car

and feels more secure on the road. The handling has a balance and predictability that have always been present in the Rover, especially on smooth roads. There is still understeer, but less build-up as cornering speeds rise so that it is an easy car to drive within nine-tenths of its potential. It is only when exploiting that last tenth that the handling can become ragged and lose its natural poise.

Rover's five-speed gearbox has appeared in Triumphs, Jaguars and Morgans, as well as the 3500, and it varies from car to car in its action. Certainly it is always precise but the degree of heaviness can vary from being positive to demanding excessive force by the driver. On the test car it was "reassuring", as one tester described it, with an ultra-smooth clutch action.

By upgrading the interior, Rover's designers have certainly given the car a warmer, more expensive feel but there is still a mass of plastic on the dashboard which clashes uncomfortably with the polished new walnut on the doors and elsewhere. The seats are comfortable, if a little short in the cushion, and you sit rather low, an impression which is exaggerated by the shallow glass areas and the high waistline. Leyland makes no mention of revised rear seating but the test cars appeared to have more rear headroom than previously.

Rover matches its new prices of \$25,950 for the manual and \$26,950 for the automatic — the electric sunroof is \$950, cruise control \$350 and metallic paint \$650 — with an increase in equipment levels which are impressive by any standards: electric windows, central locking — although the boot requires its own key and is confusing in its operation — a cassette-holder, air-conditioning (with revised controls and very effective at last), an excellent Pioneer KE-1000 AM/FM radio/cassette with four speakers and electric aerial, a digital clock with stopwatch incorporated, twin electrically-adjustable and heated exterior mirrors and rear window wiper/washer.

Leyland has a difficult job ahead of its marketing and advertising people to convince previous Rover-owners that the problems of old have finally been cured. Perhaps long-time Volvo-buyers represent more easily-attracted buyers. Certainly the 3500, with its practical body, still sensational styling and pleasant driving manners, has much to offer . . . and if the car is as reliable as Leyland claims then it may well be the bargain among the 20-grand luxury cars. Have no doubts the replacement Honda-Rover will be a very different and far less traditional luxury car . . . perhaps reason enough for buying the latest model. □