# BODY ENGLISH

**Mike McCarthy talks with Roy Axe, the man charged with steering Rover to success**

I LIKE ALL Ferraris. Well, almost all Ferraris, but I'm into the era of the 275 GTB and the Daytona. And the Berlinetta Boxer of course. The Boxer tends to be underrated. It was a very dramatic car and broke new ground. I have one now; actually it's my third. They've all been five-litre models, bought second-hand.

"There are times when I need to unwind, and I do it by taking the Boxer for a good hard drive. There still are back roads in England where one can do 150 mph, some of them quite near my home, actually . . ."

Perhaps that's not the sort of relaxation, expected of your average auto industry executive, more concerned with making cars than liking them. But Roy Axe isn't average — not in his enthusiasm for cars, Ferraris especially, nor in his position as Rover's Director of Design and Concept Engineering. Axe the enthusiast is also a realist. Diplomatic too, yet remarkably candid for a man charged with pulling Rover Group's design together and helping steer the company back to commercial success. Axe is a man who knows design, feels for cars and acknowledges that the balance sheet is where the buck stops.

Widely experienced in all the intertwinings of design and engineering, Axe is well aware of what must be done at Rover and you leave him believing he knows how to do it. He should; at age 50 he has seen it all in a career spanning Rootes, several divisions of Chrysler and now Rover; that has seen

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him headquartered in turn in England, Switzerland and Detroit, and now in England again.

"It was in the early '80s, while Design Director with Chrysler in Detroit, that I was headhunted by British Leyland. I had no thought of returning to the UK. BL people approached me on about six occasions and I kept saying I wasn't the least bit interested. Eventually, when visiting my mother, I agreed to meet them, to tell them I was happy at Chrysler and settled in the States. It was Harold Musgrove, BL's Chairman, who came and talked with me. I was really terribly impressed by what he had to say because I'd always been a very big critic of BL (in private, not in the press) for the apparent total lack of product cohesion and ability to push new product through.

"I always felt BL was very chassis oriented and produced a great deal of chassis innovation. The Mini was perhaps the prime example, but it wasn't *commercial*. Only the other day I mentioned that point and someone said that as the Mini has been in production 27 years how could I mean that it wasn't commercial. I mean — because they've never made money on it! I read somewhere that at the beginning the profit on the Mini was planned to be £5 . . . five pounds! Can you believe it? But apparently that's right.

"So I was critical of things like that and the fact BL had gone five or six years with virtually no product action. And the bits of product they had got out weren't very successful, like the Allegro and Princess.

"When Harold Musgrave described his problems he seemed to have his finger right on the button. He knew exactly what was wrong, and told me, 'I don't know anything about car design. What I want is someone who can come in and do it. I'll back you 100 per cent, won't interfere with you, will give you whatever is needed to set up the right operation, and that's what we'll do.' "

Much to the amazement of his family and colleagues, Axe accepted the challenge. "I uprooted the family from the US and returned to the UK. Harold (since deposed ) is — was — 100 per cent true to his word. He never let me down, he provided the wherewithal for the buildings, equipment and staff, and he backed my judgement. I will say this, though; I really should have seen the facilities before accepting the job. The place was unbelievable, an absolute shambles. It took us a year, a relatively short time in fact, to get our studio going. In that time we changed the staff around quite considerably and also changed location as well as designing the new Rover 800. It was a pretty hectic year."

After it was decided the Rover 800 and Honda Legend bodies would differ overall, rather than in just the first and last 25 centimetres as first proposed by

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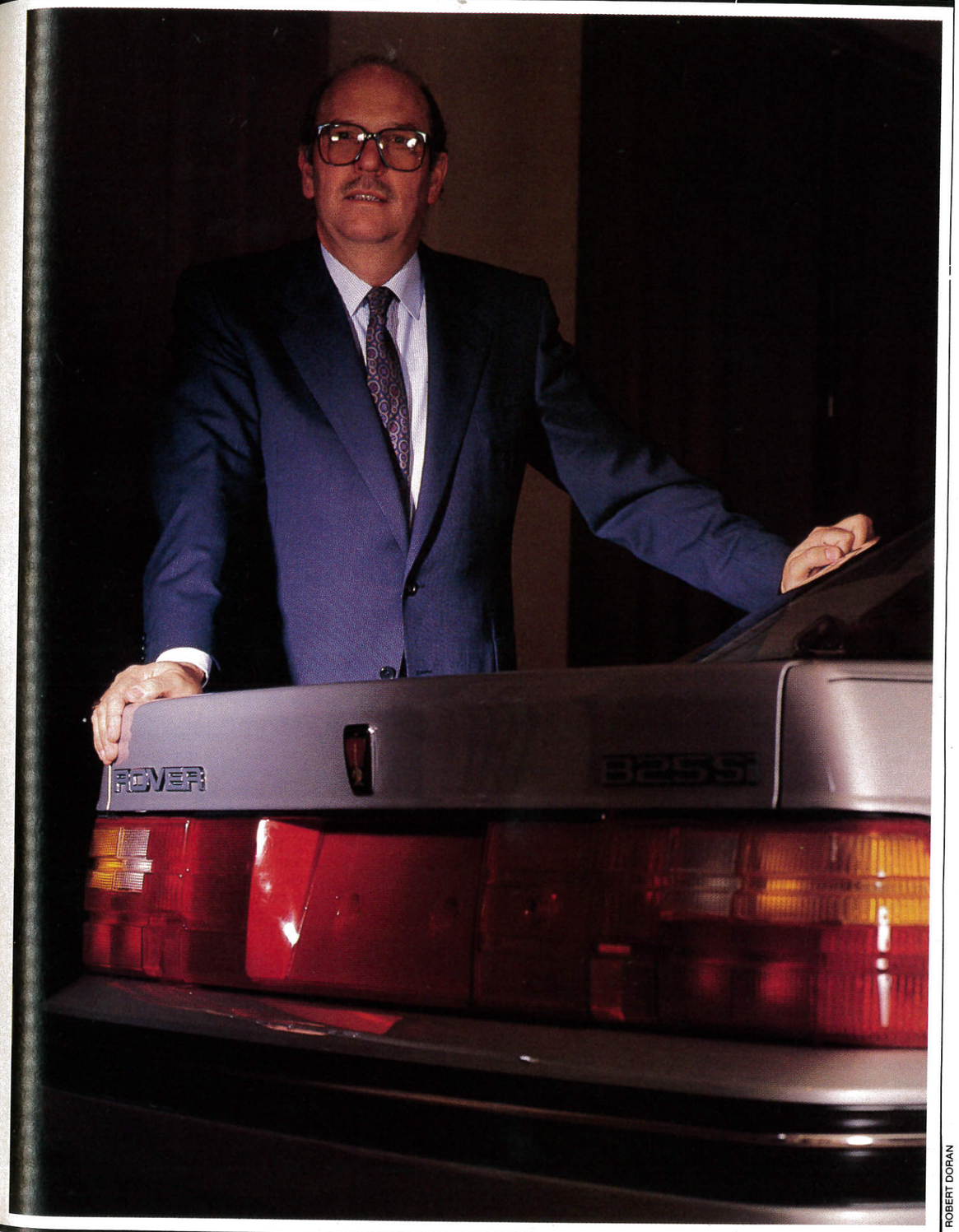
the joint venturers, Axe was conscious of having to give his car a tangibly *English* feel and image.

"It's absolutely essential because with all the good cars around the world, what else is there to offer but national characteristics? We had a tough time at first, just with the definition, because I didn't feel that the Rover SD1 was *English*, not in the way that the Rover 2000 was. So we spent a lot more time analysing the flavour of the 2000 than the SD1. We wanted to get back to the 2000 for the interior. For the exterior we wanted a rather wedgy but fairly sheer look, not the very soft forms that Ford's following. They don't really state any national image at all, so we want to keep away from that."

Though Rover's chairman Graham Day promises to get terribly heavy with any Rover-ite who leaks forward-model info, the coming five-door 800 is already well-scooped knowledge.

"The hatchback 800 doesn't fall under Mr Day's embargo because it has been mentioned quite a lot in the press. I don't think it's any secret that what we want out of the 800 is not just one car but a whole range. Hence the imminent five-door coming after the more important four-door. Then the coupé idea; and if you've got a coupé you can get a convertible fairly easily . . ."

Axe easily fields the suggestion that Honda was caught a bit short with the V6 engine's capacity of 2.5 litres. The




ROBERT DORAN

US market's Legend coupé now uses a 2.7-litre version, which will filter into the Honda and Rover sedans in the future. But the other Japanese manufacturers went straight to three litres for their export V6s.

"It's something the press has made quite a lot of, not altogether reasonably. While it's true that the torque doesn't come in until fairly high in the rev range, the Honda engine's nature is very close to the BMW 5-series and I've never heard anyone criticise the BMW on that account. Few people drive that way anyway.

"In England we originally had the 825 automatic's selector coded 1, 2, 3, D (like the Legend — Ed.), but we now label it 1, 2, 3D and 4D. Fourth is a very high overdrive, so what we're saying is, drive the car in 3D and you get perfectly adequate fuel consumption around town; in 4D the engine tends to hunt a bit around town and use more fuel, not less, so it's best to use 3D most of the time and then slip it into 4D on the open road."

That's the sort of detail, seemingly slight but important in its own way, where Rover differs from Honda in product and philosophy. Axe is quick to emphasise that contrary to general belief, their relationship is strictly a collaboration-on-product arrangement. "There's no other collaboration at all; only on the products we each pick out. So we have our own designs proceeding in England which are quite separate from Honda, and they from us. In fact, we have no insight whatsoever into any Honda product which is not a co-op venture."

That includes the rumoured Honda sports car for instance, though Axe keeps an eye on what all other makers, particularly the Japanese, are doing in design.

"I find many of the Japanese surprisingly lacking in emotion when it comes to design. They're extremely analytical. They will analyse to death the curve of a door panel to get the European flavour as distinct from American. Yet in the end it all ends up strangely sterile.

"The Mazda 929 is a case in point. It's obviously heavily influenced by Mercedes-Benz and BMW, and Mazda puts in all those Euro elements — only to end up with a big *blah*. These things need a bit of emotion and some soul. To me the Toyota Soarer is a real car of Japan; a fine car, impressive and nothing quite like it anywhere else. But it's not for export."

Whatever they may lack in tradition, the Japanese aren't short of application and are trying hard to catch up, by copying rather than creativity if that's what it takes. But they're chasing ever-climbing goals as design leaders set new standards.

Those standards are infinitely higher than when Roy Axe got into the game in the early '50s. Then there were no design schools or training programs. He knew he wanted to be a car designer, but the only advice he got from his parents and teachers was — don't. He persisted however, and with his father's help found a position as a Rootes body engineering apprentice. About halfway through his five-year term he submitted a folio of drawings to the design department, "where the staff numbered all of six. It was suggested that I come in and we'd see how things went, so I did and never really left. I did some courses in art instead of engineering, and that's how I began.

"The day Chrysler took over Rootes, I was promoted to design chief of Chrysler UK. I think I was all of 29. Looking back on it I think, well, gosh, for the level of my experience it was absolutely crazy."

Soon after, Axe was appointed Design Director for Chrysler Europe and moved office to Switzerland where he was responsible not only for British, French and Spanish Chryslers but for all Chrysler Europe products wherever they were made. That meant he also oversaw product in South America, South Africa and Australia (he first visited Australia in the mid '70s in connection with the Chrysler Centura).

**"The Italians still lead in haute couture design; they put more heart and soul into it"**

The next step was to head office in Detroit where he was in charge of interiors, large car exteriors, the marine division and a couple of other things. Then came Chrysler's collapse, then its resurrection headed by Lee Iacocca.

Designers don't get to the top by looking inwards. They also have to stay abreast of other designers, other studios, other influences. Asked the inevitable, Axe responds almost instinctively. "Oh, the Italians still lead the world in haute couture design; they put more heart and soul into it than anyone else."

So it's probably not surprising that outside Rover Axe's favourite design studio is Pininfarina. "That place has done some awful things, sure, but many milestone designs too. When you think about the long line of Pininfarina-bodied Ferraris, well . . .

Axe's favourite car? At this the brow furrows momentarily before being uncreased by the warming smile. "Any Ferrari. No, that's too easy. Well, if it had to be just one, then perhaps the very early Type 166 Barchetta. But whatever the choice it would be a close thing with the Jaguar XK 120, because that was a great design too."

If great designs are judged for their influence, then the Audi 100 is, in Axe's opinion, the outstanding example in the '80s. "This in a decade of many very good designs. But probably the Audi 100 is the most significant production design. It lifted many standards and influenced just about everybody."

The conversation, never far from drivers' cars, swings easily to Ford's new Italian-designed (for Australian production) SA30 sportster.

"I was only recently looking at it in WHEELS. It's quite intriguing, because it's not the same sort of animal at all as Ghia's earlier prototype; it looks to be a different kind of car. Very much the kind of car that a new MG might be."

Reminded of the corporate embargo, Axe's eyes sparkle and the grin widens. He pauses only momentarily for a good-natured disclaimer. "Got to be a bit careful about what I say, but Graham Day has said in public that he is interested in MG because it has a tremendous heritage. There's obviously a great number of people out there waiting to see what we do with MG.

"We all agree that MG means a sports roadster, rather than a saloon; we'd like to find a formula that would enable us to get back to producing MGs of that kind again, but we can't be over-emotional about it. It has to pay its way. To do that the US is key; it must meet US requirements because that's where the volume for sports cars always is. So unless we can do it properly, we won't do it at all, But it's no secret that we're trying very hard." ■