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SPRINZEL: WHERE ARE THE NEW RALLYMEN? - HERALD HISTORY



Mention the Marauder

... and watch the reactions of your listeners! This splendid sports car, based on the Rover 75 and produced between 1950 and 1952, is still admired by discerning enthusiasts. Story by D N CREWDSON



In this age of large-scale mass production techniques an increasing number of individuals are turning their attention to the discovery and restoration of unusually rare motor cars. Often such cars find their way into the classified columns of motoring magazines and, the classified columns of motoring magazines and, apart from enticing the frivolous to lighten their pockets, they provide the enthusiastic reader with an interesting talking point. The following advertisement which recently appeared in a leading American journal would, I suspect, leave many automotive 'authorities' at a loss for words:

'Marauder Sports Roadster, 1952 model.
Last of 15 prototypes constructed by Rover
engineers. Condition perfect. Valuable col-

Little has been written of the Marauder, and even less is known of its untimely end. A visit to the Rover Technical Library produced only a faded copy of a Road Test, undertaken in 1951 by Autocar magazine but clearly the Marauder was something of a connoisseur's motor car. Its attractive open three-seater body was constructed around the chassis of the then current Rover 75, it had a top speed of 90-mph, impressive performance figures, and an equally impressive price tag of £1,666, no less than a third of which was purchase tax.

The embryo from which the Marauder developed began in 1948 when Peter Wilks, George Mackie, and Spencer King, then on the staff of The Rover Company, designed and built a monoposto racing car. Their names, of course, are now familiar in the motor industry, but 20 years ago they were merely young enthusiasts intent on building a 'fun-car' with whatever the Rover salvage yard had to offer. The project, however, was not supported by the Company and was carried out entirely as a personal spare-time venture. Shortly after its completion, the Rover Special, as many readers will recall, achieved considerable fame in sprints, hill climbs, and races. Even today, in the hands of Frank Lockhart (who elected to look after and maintain the Special) it still competes successfully in various club events throughout the country.

On the strength of this engineering achievement Peter Wilks (now Technical Director of The Rover Company) and George Mackie, who today is Head of Land-Rover Special Projects Division, rented some premises at Dorridge near Solihull, and in 1950 formed a new company under the title, Wilks, Mackie & Co Ltd. Other directors of the Company were Peter Wilks' father G L Wilks (a tanner by trade) and Spencer King, who is now a Technical Director at Standard-Triumph International Ltd. The team's objective was to produce a fast sports car incorporating a high degree of comfort in both accommodation and general handling characteristics. It was the designers' intention to place more emphasis on coachwork, keeping mechanical modifications to the Rover 75 components to a strict minimum. Owners would then have at their disposal the large spares and service network built up by The Rover Company over many years.

The power unit of the Marauder was basically that of the Rover 75, employing the post-war overhead-inlet and side-exhaust valve head design. Tuning of the six-cylinder engine, though a little elementary by today's standards, was surprisingly sufficient to raise the power output by about 5-bhp to 80-bhp. A higher compression ratio of 7.6:1 was achieved by simply fitting a much thinner cylinder head gasket, and the valve springs were packed with

Washers to raise the critical bounce speed.

The latter modification reduced the surge effect normally encountered with the standard spring, which now became almost coilbound on full lift. This arrangement had proved to be extremely effective on the racing Special mentioned earlier. Very little was done to the induction and exhaust systems and involved only the fitting of two small

air cleaners in place of the larger unit on the standard engine, and a single Servais exhaust silencer. An optional two-stage conversion was made available to owners wishing to obtain maximum performance from the already modified Roverengine. For improved top gear performance, the first stage increased the capacity of the unit to 2·4-litres, whilst a special high-compression cylinder head and three SU carburetters were added to complete the second stage. The full conversion, which raised the power output to 105-bhp at 5,000-rpm, later became a standard feature of the Marauder 100 model—an incredibly fast car that, from rest, would top 80-mph in only 28 seconds.

Clutch and gearbox units remained standard, apart

ACCELERATION From rest through gears to:

30 mph	5.7 sec	60 mph	18 · 4 sec
50 mph	13.2 sec	70 mph	27 · 0 sec
		80 mph	43.3 sec

MAXIMUM TOP SPEED in each gear:

1st	26 mph	42 kph
2nd	45 mph	72 kph
3rd	68 mph	109 kph
Тор	89 mph	143 kph

from the provision of a specially designed overdrive unit which was installed in the housing normally occupied by the traditional Rover free-wheel. Effective on all four forward gears, the overdrive operated on the epicyclic principle and was controlled by a hand wheel on the instrument panel.

The short remote-control gear change lever was offset slightly towards the driver, and protruded little more than an inch above the level of the cushion, an arrangement that provided ample leg room for two passengers.

The basic Rover chassis frame had been shortened to give the Marauder a wheelbase of 8-ft 6-in. Crossmembers were rearranged to accommodate the engine, which was set back considerably to give a near-optimum front/rear distribution of weight. Suspension remained pretty well unchanged from the very efficient Rover design, though lateral stability at the rear was improved with a pair of inclined Woodhead-Munroe telescopic shock absorbers, in preference to the Panhard rod. Girling hydro-mechanical brakes also remained unmodified, and only slight alterations were made to the steering for increased driver comfort. A universal joint was incorporated in the steering column to provide a useful rake adjustment, and a longer drop-arm gave the effect of higher gearing, only two and a half turns of the wheel being required from lock to

Although the Rover chassis was not subjected to any radical changes, the handling characteristics of the Marauder earned considerable praise from the road test correspondent who wrote: 'In certain road conditions it is possible to detect a slight "spongiconditions it is possible to detect a slight spongiconditions it is possible to detect a slight spongi

driven fast with safety.

Construction of the prototype bodywork was carried out by Richard Mead, a coachbuilding firm near Solihull, though production was later transferred to Abbey Panels Ltd. Again making maximum

use of standard components, hand-beaten panels were closely matched to the Rover pressings. Despite the rather long bonnet forward visibility through the deep, curved screen was good and the driving position had been set quite high in relation to the bonnet level—a feature designed to inspire greater confidence in the driver, and one which is employed today in the Rover 2000.

The two rear-hinged doors were deeply recessed, permitting unusually large pockets and ample elbow room for three occupants. The rear squab of the full-width bench seat folded forward to give access to the spacious luggage compartment, and loading or unloading from inside the car did not present any difficulty. A small hinged panel at the rear concealed the spare wheel mounted below the flat luggage platform. The panel itself was recessed to accommodate a useful set of hand-tools.

Bonnet panels opened from the centre to allow adequate access to the roomy engine compartment in which auxiliaries such as the battery, distributor, and oil filler were all extended to a conveniently high position to assist the owner when carrying out routine maintenance.

Amongst the many other interesting coachwork features were cleverly concealed running boards, useful stowage space in the scuttle sides, and provision for an optional fresh air ventilation and heating system.

The layout of the leather covered fascia panel was both functional and attractive, the instrumentation and controls being extremely comprehensive for a car of this type. Equipment included a combined fuel and sump level indicator, a map-reading light, a petrol reserve switch, oil pressure gauge, fuel gauge, ammeter, and warning lights for both ignition and choke. A short lever on the steering column operated the headlamp flasher which, in the early fifties, was quite unique to a British car. Easily identifiable auxiliary switches were of the modern toggle type, grouped together on a central panel.

It is not difficult to understand why this degree of refinement distinguished the Marauder from other sports cars of the period, yet on the road its brisk speed and exceptionally good cornering qualities impressed the most fastidious of drivers. Why then, did the production of such a promising new car come to an abrupt halt?

Wilks, Mackie & Co Ltd were in business for about two and a half years, during which time 15 Marauders were produced. One had a coupé body. though it is understood that this was built merely as an exercise in coachwork design. The 14 others were sold of course and, in view of their rapid obsolescence, they quickly became much sought after collectors' items. Peter Wilks recalls that one Marauder found its way to Ireland, but it is understood that the only model to leave Britain was the one referred to in the first paragraph of this article. Many factors were responsible for the closure of the company, perhaps the most significant of which was the general lack of capital available for increasing the production output. Shortly after the directors had negotiated for essentially larger premises a (now familiar) budget squeeze halted a bank loan. Material too was in short supply and, in order to qualify for allocations of steel, a company had to prove its product appeal on the export market: added to this was The Rover Company's reluctance to continue the development of a 3-litre V6 engine, around which an interesting Mk II Marauder might well have evolved. Eventually circumstances became

But the memory of the Marauder Sports Roadster will not be so easy to erase. Here was a car of great potential, a tribute to the engineers who designed it, and a car worthy of a place in the history of British motor cars.

so demanding that, in 1952, the decision was taken

to end the company's activities.