



SPORTING AUNTIE

Messrs Wilks and Mackie sought to capture the sports car market with the Marauder, but, despite support from Rover, and a lot of enthusiasm, it did not last long. James Taylor recounts. Pictures: Matt Barnes

Sports cars are often powered by the most unlikely engines. Take, for instance, Jensen's 541 with a 4-litre Austin truck engine; or the Mercedes-Benz 300SL 'Gullwing' with its 'pomp-and-circumstance' limousine engine. On the face of it, Rover's F-head engine of the late forties seems an equally odd choice, but it lay at the very heart of the Marauder sports car concept.

The Marauder was the brainchild of three enthusiastic young engineers employed by the Rover company – Peter Wilks, Spen King and George Mackie. Wilks and Mackie shared a love of racing, and with the assistance of King they built up a single-seater racer on the basis of a disused Rover development chassis. Inspired by its success, and with the optimism of youth, they discussed the idea of going into business themselves to produce a sports car based on a tuned version of the 2103cc six-cylinder Rover engine introduced in 1948's P3 75 saloon. This engine, they felt, had a good deal of unrealised potential. It was already being uprated by Rover for the P4 75 saloon due in autumn 1949, and the design lent itself well to tuning: not only was it a very robust engine, but its relatively efficient wedge-shaped combustion chamber could take higher compression ratios without causing pinking with the low-octane 'Pool' petrol generally available at the time.

The original and rather vague plan was to build a traditional open two-seater with cycle wings, but George Mackie was struck by the full-width styling

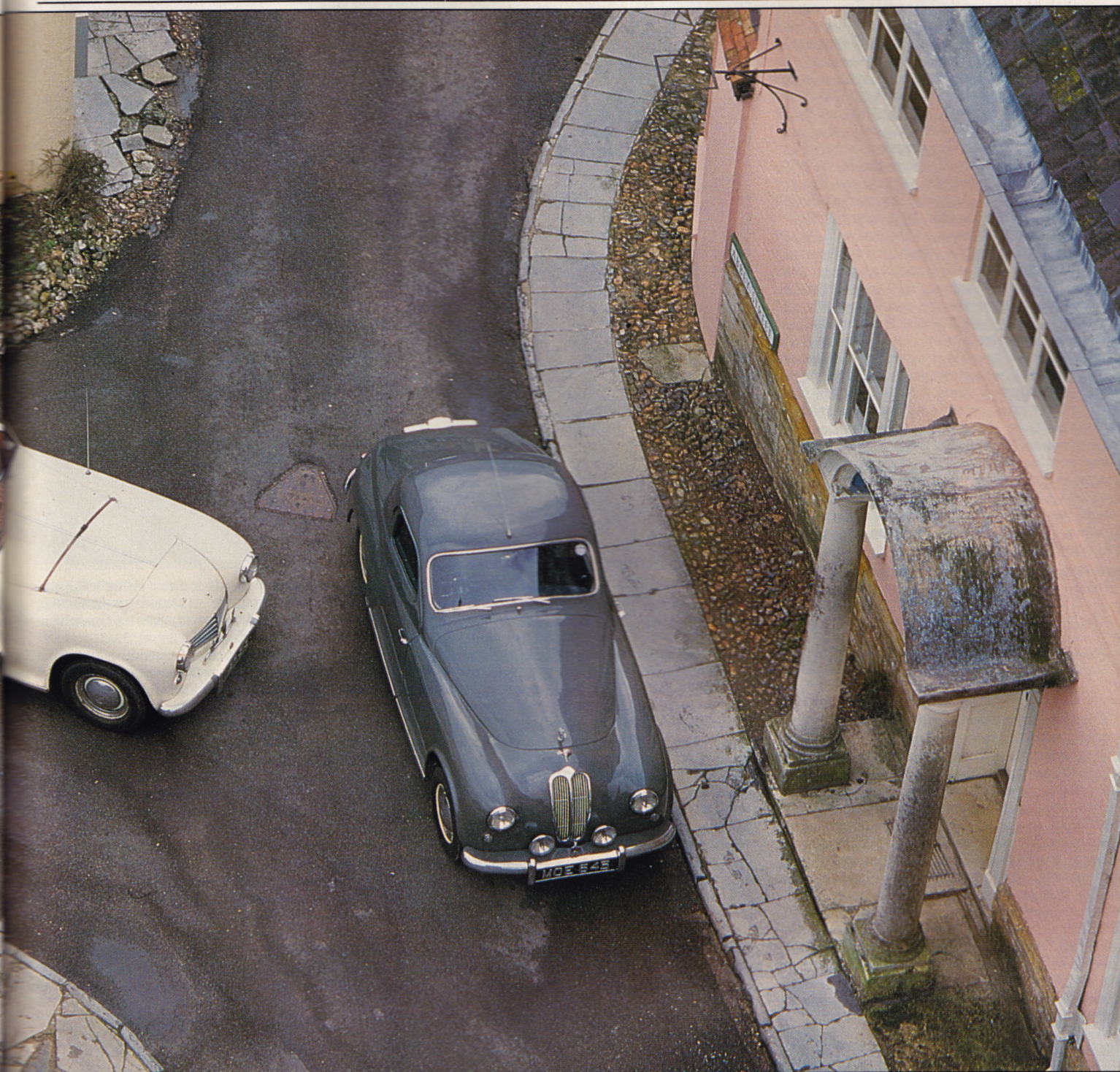
available on the Ferrari 166, which he had encountered in Europe during a sojourn in Brussels as Rover's continental factory representative. By this stage, the P4 75 'Cyclops' saloon was also in the showrooms, and it seemed to Mackie that this car's own full-width styling might make an ideal starting point for the new sports car. Accordingly, he modified a picture of a P4 75, stuck it on a postcard, and sent it to Peter Wilks. Wilks and King were impressed, and set about designing their proposed new car with the assistance of Richard Mead, owner of a small coachbuilding concern in Dorridge, near Solihull.

From then, things moved quickly. King was working on the final stages of the JET 1 gas turbine car project, and decided to stay with Rover; but Wilks and Mackie left the company to set up in business after guaranteeing a supply of the Rover chassis and engines which formed the basis of their design, and persuading eight Rover distributors to sell and service the cars. It had doubtless helped, of course, that the Managing and Technical Directors of Rover were uncles to both Wilks and King! With capital provided by all three principals and by Peter Wilks' father (who became the fourth Director), Wilks, Mackie and Company opened for business on 1 January 1950. Unable as yet to afford a base of their own, they rented offices in Richard Mead's premises in Poplar Road, Dorridge. The prototype Marauder, based closely on Mackie's original sketch, was completed in July 1950, and the production models



began to appear in penny numbers.

Just a year later, Wilks, Mackie and Company signed a contract for their own premises in Kenilworth and, on removal to them early in 1952, became the Marauder Car Company Ltd. In the meantime, around eight or nine Marauders had gone to customers. There were hopes of expanding production, but all was unfortunately not well. Government restrictions on bank loans limited the potential for expansion, and the Korean war had begun to affect supplies of materials again, just as they had improved in the wake of the Second World War. The biggest problem, though, was the imposition in the April 1951 Budget of a new Purchase Tax rating which, in tandem with rising costs, made the Marauder a very expensive car indeed. From £1235 15s 0d in 1950 and £1332 early in 1951 (or £150-£200 more than the parent Rover 75), the post-Budget on-the-road price had shot up to £2002 (nearly £600 above the Rover's revised price), and that was without any of the desirable extras the company were now offering.



Opposite page: Jaguar-esque frontal styling of the only Marauder coupé and the profile of the standard roadster – mascot is not standard. Above: Perfect English setting for different versions of car. Left: Coupé has turret-shaped cabin and uses standard rear from contemporary Rover saloon; roadster is simpler, almost Ferrari Barchetta-like

The four directors of the Marauder Car Company Ltd took an honest look at their prospects, and decided to call it a day in the middle of 1952, after 15 Marauders had been built. By September, the assets of the company had been sold. George Mackie returned to Solihull, as did Peter Wilks after a short spell with Gethin's, the Birmingham Rover distributors. Mackie later became head of the Land-Rover Special Projects Department; Peter Wilks became Rover's Technical Director (he died in 1972, aged only 52); and Spen King succeeded him and went on to become Technical Director of British Leyland, a position from which he retired in 1985.

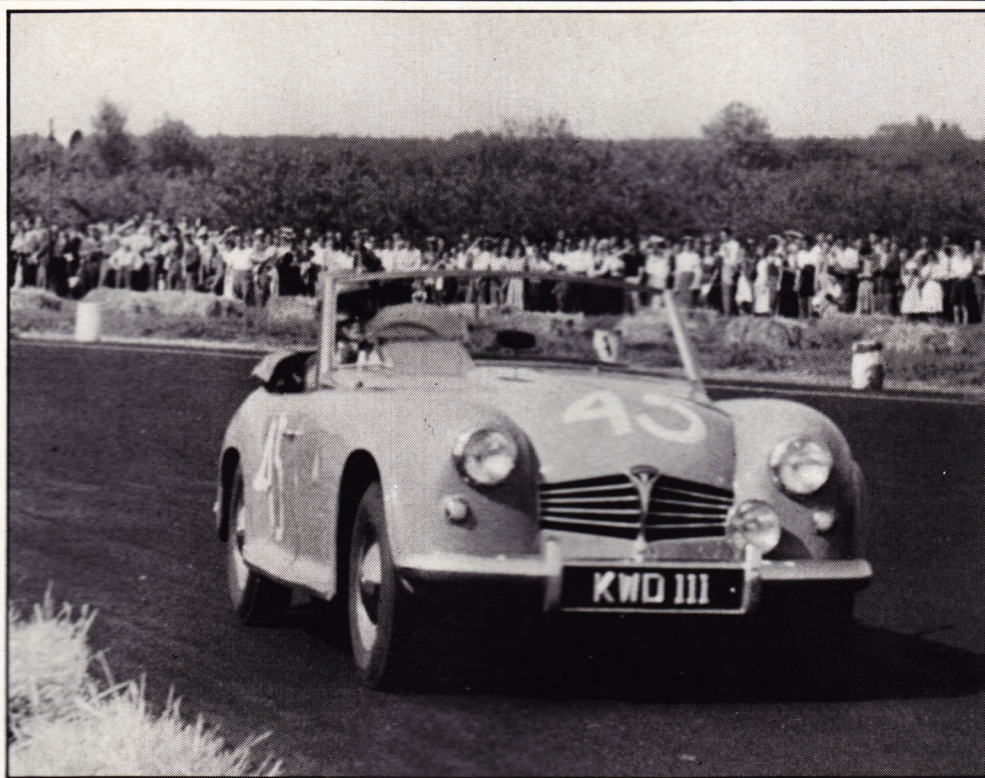
What, though, of the cars themselves? Actual building had to wait until the first P4 chassis arrived from Rover on 9 March 1950, although design work had begun some time earlier. As a two-seater, the car needed a shorter wheelbase than the P4's, and so a 9ins section was cut from the Rover chassis just ahead of the upsweep over the rear wheels, to give a wheelbase of 102ins. The chassis cross-members were also re-positioned to accommodate the engine, which was mounted 19ins further back and 2ins lower in the frame, and set horizontally, not sloping backwards as in the P4. The steering box was moved back and the length of the drop arm increased proportionately, with the result of raising the overall gearing to give a more sporty two turns lock-to-lock than the P4's four turns. Certain suspension modifications were also made, partly to improve the car's handling, and partly because of the repositioned cross-members.

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The twin-carburettor engine was mildly uprated from its saloon form by means of a thinner head gasket, which raised the compression ratio from 7.25:1 to approximately 7.6:1. The valve springs were also packed with washers to eliminate valve bounce, and power output was claimed to be 80bhp at 4200rpm, as against 75bhp at the same crankshaft speed in the Rover saloon. The gearbox was Rover's standard four-speeder with synchromesh on third and top only, plus the famous freewheel, but the column change was replaced by a short, floor-mounted gearstick, positioned 6ins off the car's centre line towards the driver. In place of the freewheel, the prototype Marauder had an overdrive, manufactured by H&A Engineering of Croydon; although this was offered as an optional extra on production examples, most of the known survivors of the marque do not have it, and it was removed from the prototype after the European trip. With the standard Rover 4.3:1 axle, the overdrive-equipped Marauder tested by *Autocar* magazine gave 89mph and 0-60mph in 18.4secs.

The body was built around a shortened 75 floor-pan, and was heavily influenced by the saloon's styling. This was particularly noticeable at the rear, although there was a small and somewhat impractical locker instead of a proper boot. The everted lower edges of the body were capped by stainless steel strips exactly like the P4's, and the shape of the wheelarches again recalled the parent saloon, but of course, as the car was an open tourer, there were only two doors. The bonnet and front wings had been redesigned around the lower-mounted engine to give a less upright profile, which was emphasised by the wide radiator grille. The bonnet top was a two-piece, centre-hinged design and, like the doors, scuttle, cowl, and locker lid, was made of aluminium to save weight. The rest of the body was steel.

By July 1950, when the prototype Marauder was completed, work was also well advanced on a second chassis. Although road-testing was carried out locally, Wilks and Mackie decided to take the car on a ten-day Continental road test through Belgium, Luxem-

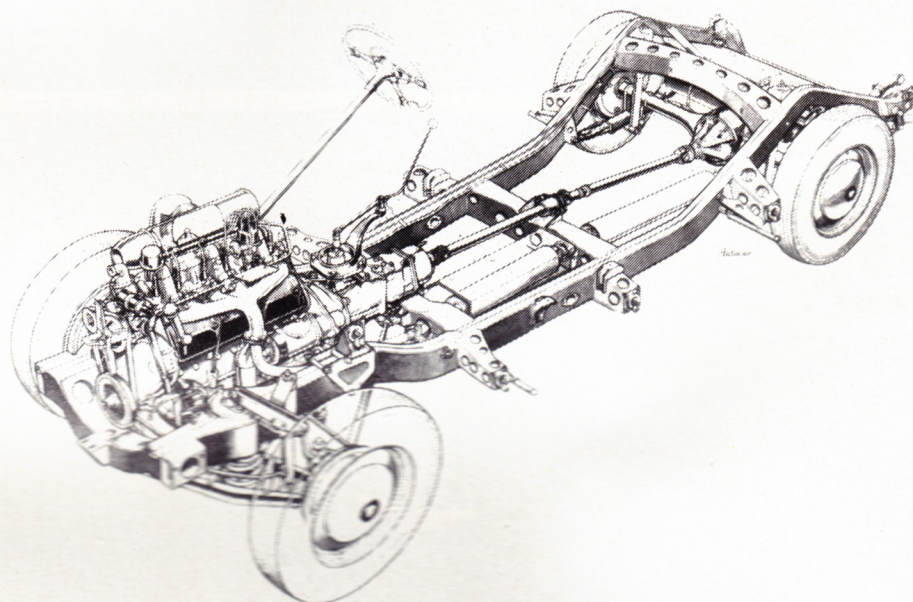


bourg and Switzerland, where nothing worse than gearbox lubrication problems showed up. In the course of the trip, the pair called on the Swiss Rover importers, and elicited an invitation to show a Marauder on the Rover stand at the 1951 Geneva motor show, which they of course accepted with some enthusiasm. The prototype was introduced to the press in August at the Dorridge Hotel, and the first orders began to come in from those Rover distributors who had accepted Marauder franchises. In an attempt to generate cash flow, the company allocated chassis numbers to these orders; the distributor was then invoiced for his chassis when it was complete, and the remainder was paid when the body had been built and the car was ready.

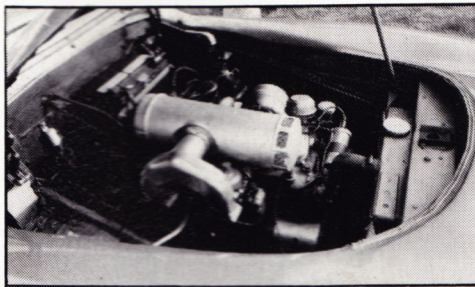
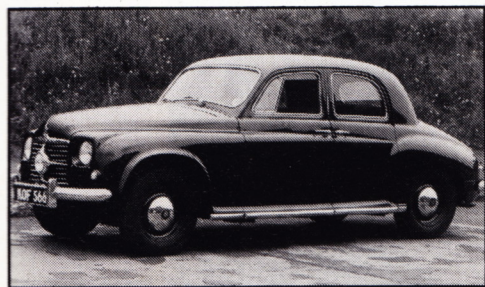
The prototype now started to attract attention through its rally successes. It passed into the hands of Willmotts, Rover distributors in Bognor Regis, and made its competition debut in November 1950 in the *Daily Express* 1000 Miles Rally, driven by Bernard Willmott and his wife, who gained second place in their class. The Willmotts also entered a car (either the same one or the second Marauder, 11001) in the Isle of Wight Rally and hillclimb, and

this time took a third in their class. Peter Wilks also carried off a second place – to no less a driver than the young Mike Hawthorn – in a five-lap handicap at Goodwood in June 1951.

Although Marauder performance was adequate, it was certainly not up to the standard its designers had originally wanted, and they therefore decided to go for more power. Though Wilks and Mackie both knew that exciting new engines which might become available to them were under development at Solihull, they had to be content with the F-head 75 unit for the time being. So in March 1951, the Marauder 100 appeared, with a 75 engine bored out to 2393cc to take pistons from the four-cylinder F-head 60 engine of 1948. The 100bhp developed by this engine could be even further increased by an optional triple-carburettor head, like that first seen on a few examples of the 1948 75 Sports Saloon. The factory demonstrator, 11006, was converted to '100' specification with the triple-carburettor option, and was rallied extensively in 1952-1953 by its eventual owner Frank Shanks. The original 2103cc engine remained standard, of course, and in fact probably no more than two Marauders were ever



Opposite page, top: Frank Shanks puts the Marauder through its paces at Goodwood. Below: The sturdy Rover chassis. This page, bottom: The coupé's unusual front styling. Clockwise from right: Coupé's clear chassis identification; Rover 75 engine is easy to get at; the standard P4 saloon – the obvious basis for subsequent Marauder styling



fitted with the more powerful engine option, no doubt because this put the price up even further.

Meanwhile, body production had been transferred from Richard Mead's works to Abbey Panels of Coventry, although Mead continued to paint and trim these later bodies, which were indistinguishable from his originals despite a weight increase of some 2cwt. Those built after October 1951 also featured a separate, adjustable driver's seat in place of the earlier bench seat, giving the driver greater comfort. Access to the luggage locker from inside the car was also improved because the passenger seat could now fold down without fouling the steering wheel. In the optimistic belief that the cars would eventually be sold abroad, Marauder 11011 was built with left-hand drive, but languished unwanted in Franco-Britannic Autos' Paris showrooms for some months before being shipped back to the UK and converted to right hand drive. As luck would have it, the car was then bought by an American, who nevertheless settled for its right-hand drive form!

The last Marauder, 11014, was delivered to Henlys of London on 26 March 1952; but a month later, one customer would take delivery of a car

which had been ordered in the closing months of 1950. The long delay had been caused by the building of a unique fixedhead body to the customer's special requirements.

Mechanically, Marauder 12004 (the second figure marked it out as a special-bodied car) was to standard specification. Its chassis had probably originally borne the Rover number 04304716 or (less likely) 04304692, both of which were 1950-season P4 chassis delivered to Wilks, Mackie and Company on 26 September that year. As the accompanying pictures show, 12004's body was quite different from that of the open Marauders. Starting at the front, the horizontal grille had been replaced by a vertical item redolent of the BMW 328 or Jaguar XK120, and the reshaped wing fronts similarly recalled the Jaguar. Moving further back, the small windows of the coupé roof gave a 'turret-top' appearance, but the windscreen was a large single-pane item borrowed directly from the P4 saloon and raked at a steeper angle to fit the reduced height of the Marauder's passenger cabin, while the rear window was, again, a standard saloon item. At the back, the saloon's rear wings and boot lid were fitted

and, together with the standard P4 rear skirt panels and bumper, tended to make the car look rather heavy from behind. Inside, the separate seats were to late Marauder pattern, but the dashboard was a hefty non-standard wooden affair.

George Mackie certainly had his doubts about the styling, although in recent years, his views have mellowed somewhat. Mackie was also less than delighted, back in 1952, to learn that the car's original owner intended to use it to tow a trailer containing prize goats, and that the special boot was to be filled with ivy for their sustenance!

12004's original owner, Hugh McNamara of Staines, sold the car after less than a year to a Mr Arthur Cole who lived not too far from the Marauder's birthplace in Warwickshire. Six years later, 12004 became the property of Wilfred Haigh of Sherborne in Dorset. For a long time, its location was not known to Rover enthusiasts, and in the mid-seventies, it was generally assumed that the car had been scrapped. The registrar of the Rover Sports Register was consequently both amazed and delighted one day to receive a letter from Mr Haigh asking if the Marauder qualified him for club membership! The triumphant return to public view was made at the RSR's Belvoir Castle Rally in 1980, when no fewer than six Marauders lined up for the first time.

In fact, 11 of the fifteen Marauders built survive to this day, although not all are in roadworthy condition. 12004 is very much so, however, and looks as good now as it did when it left Richard Mead's workshops nearly 35 years ago. The other car in our

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pictures is Marauder 11010, a 1951 car which has been owned by Rover enthusiast Jon Backhouse since the late seventies. Though originally built to standard specification, it was modified in 1959 by its then owner, an employee of the Rover company, who fitted it with a discarded prototype 3-litre engine. Well restored over a period of years, though retaining this replacement engine (a piece of Rover history in its own right), 11010 is today as much of a credit to its owner as is the fixedhead car.

Thank you to Jon and Sue Backhouse, plus their dog Snoopy, and Wilfred Haigh, who kindly provided their Marauders for our colour photography, Jon having driven to Dorset from East London.

MARAUDER PRODUCTION AND SURVIVAL

Chassis No	Reg No	Year built	Remarks
PRO1/1	KAC 313	1950	Original overdrive replaced by freewheel. Survives, off the road.
11001	MPB 2	1950	Survives, dismantled.
11002	?	?	No details known.
11003	BSN 823	1950	Now has 2638cc twin-carburettor engine bored out to 3 litres, later P4 gearbox with saloon-type gear lever, and disc front brakes.
12004	MOE 645	1952	Fixedhead coupé. Survives, in running order.
11005	OUG 777	1951	Survives, in running order.
11006	KWD 111	1951	Overdrive fitted. Tested by Autocar and shown at Geneva before conversion to Marauder 100 specification with triple-carburettor option. Survives, believed off the road.
11007	HFY 330	1951	Restored in early eighties by George Mackie. Survives, in running order.
11008	VCT 257	1951	Originally registered LTL 1. Fitted with removable 'works' hardtop. Survives, off the road.
11009	RKC 762	1951	Survives, off the road.
11010	NBP 313	1951	Fitted with prototype 2995cc engine in 1959. Brake servo now added. Survives, in running order.
11011	IOWA 20202	1951	Marauder 100 specification. Survives, in running order, in USA.
11012	FHE 437	1952	Believed scrapped in 1967.
11013	?*	1952	No details known.
11014	?*	1952	No details known.

*One car registered MOL 629.

