

# The postcard dream hits the road



## CLASSIC CARS

SOMETHING drew me back to the Heritage Motor Centre on which I reported in my last column. It was long, green and rare. HFY 330, the Rover Marauder, was the most striking car I had seen in the collection, so the opportunity to drive it — kindly offered by the owner, London businessman Michael Zeitlin — was irresistible. It looked good parked out by the workshop, and for a while Paul Gilder, the chief restoration wizard, and I contemplated that preposterous bonnet.

There is, noted Paul thoughtfully, something American about it. The little stub of a boot and the Denman Elegante Premium whitewalls conjure up something of the gangster car. But it successfully combines this with a proper Britishness, suggested by the curve of chrome at the base of the windscreen, and the leather interior the colour of a digestive biscuit.

Inside it looked cramped, but a copy of the original Motor road test, sent to me by reader Ted Evans of Bournemouth, puts it into the context of the '50s. Then the Marauder was spacious for a sports tourer — "eminently suitable for everyday use as well as for long distance motoring and more sporting occasions".

There is no Rover badge because, technically, this car is not a Rover. It was made by Wilks, Mackie & Co, an enterprise formed in 1950 by Peter Wilks — who had the advantage of being the nephew of S.B. Wilks, then managing director of Rover — and George Mackie, also a Rover man, who was living in Brussels and describes his job as "Glorified Continental Representative".

They had begun with the idea that the Rover P4 75 could form the basis of a sprint machine for speed events; a "special" was built and engendered the idea that a sports car could also be built. Like many good cars, it began on the back of an envelope — or a postcard, to be precise.

"I just had an inspiration," says Mackie, now happily retired and living near Solihull. "I had seen a Ferrari — I forget which model now — with all-enveloping bodywork, not the traditional mudguards and running boards. I thought, this makes sense. I sat down with a silhouette of the Rover P4, cut it up with a pair of scissors and stuck it back together on a postcard."

"You can see a lot of P4 panels in the Marauder: the front wheelarch, and at the back end particularly. And yet it looks totally different. It surprised us when we saw the finished article."

There was a worry over the front suspension — achiev-

ing the low-slung bonnet-line meant moving the engine lower and further back than it was on the P4. "That meant we had trouble with the radius locating arms. But the chap at Rover said: 'Don't worry, just pull the bars about a bit.' We thought it might upset the steering geometry but it didn't." That was research and development in those days.

Negotiating the front-opening "suicide" door, the hula-hoop-sized front wheel and the well-stuffed bench-seat requires the driver to sit in backwards, then patiently work the legs inside. But, once in, the cold, thin rim falls easily to hand, and the curiously insubstantial gear

stick is right by the hook of the left knee. In fact the lever was deliberately set to the offside so that three people could be accommodated across the wide seats.

Among the thicket of chrome toggles on the dash are two violet glass discs. With the ignition on they illuminate the functions of the switches. Lovely — the fore-runner of the Lexus head-up display, perhaps?

Turn the key, press the ignition button and the engine bumbles — a 2-litre six-cylinder was standard. The throw of the gear lever into first is about as far as I can reach, but the car moves off with a tremendous tug. Once warmed it pulls with

gusto, although wielding the great helm means some complex semaphore with the arms. Even so, it feels secure. "The cornering qualities proved notably good," said Motor in 1950, "no matter whether fast main road bends were being taken at 70mph or sharp roundabouts at lower speeds."

Mackie estimates that 14 Marauders were made, selling at around £1,300, and many Rover dealers were quite happy to put one on display. "Then purchase tax forced the price up by 66 per cent; that put it well over £2,000," he says. "Only the more expensive cars were liable for this tax. Bloody Labour government!" Until

then, says Mackie, the car had sales up to expectations, and they had proposed that a new V6 3-litre should go into the car, and that the body should be tempered into more of an Aston Martin shape. But purchase tax killed it, and the plug was pulled on the company in 1952; Mackie says they lost their personal capital of £4,000 but managed to pay off most of the debts.

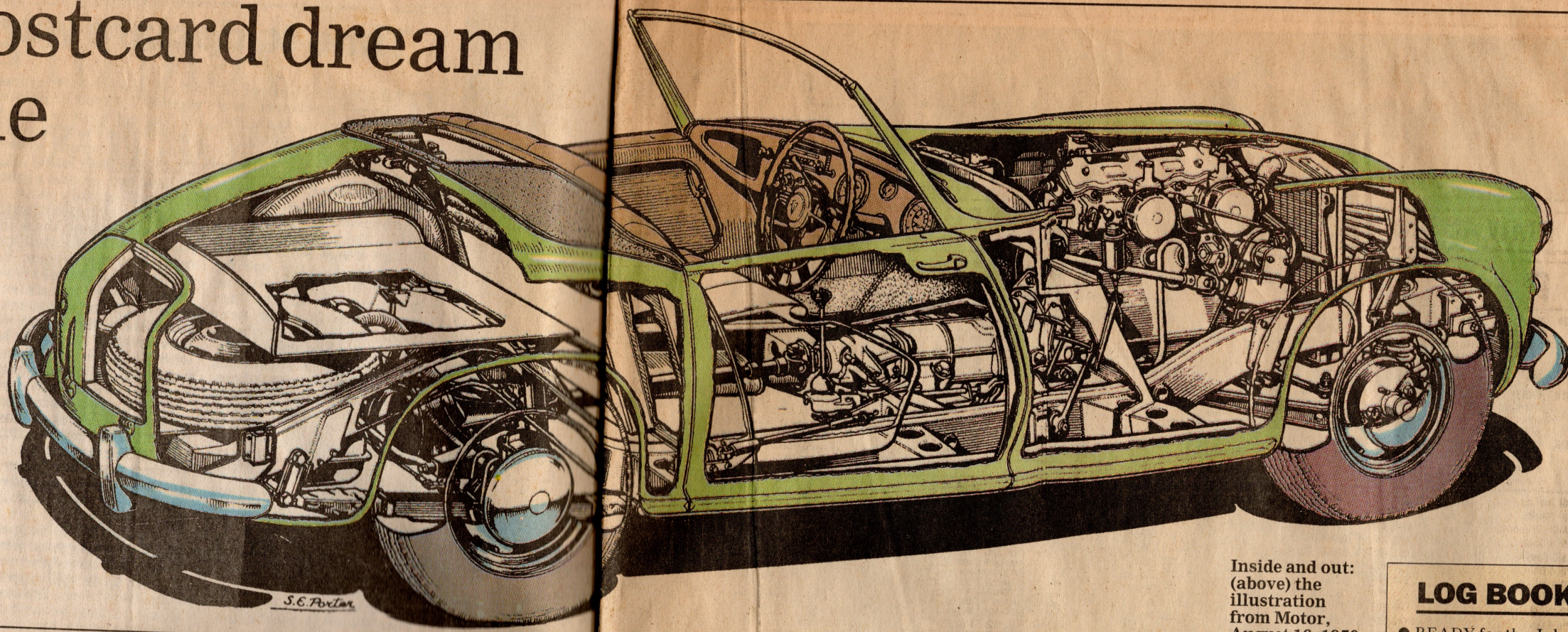
Mackie bought HFY 330 in 1974 from a Flight Lieutenant Swain, who had owned it since 1951. He laboured over the restoration himself but didn't worry too much about originality. He sprayed it in a Rootes metallic green which looks much better than the

original colours — grey or white. Unable to make full use of the car, Mackie sold it to Michael Zeitlin.

But Mackie reveals too the reason for the car's turbine-like pull. The engine has been beefed up with a 3-litre block, a Land Rover head, and single carburettor. So it is not quite the car the Marauder was, but almost the car it might have been, if the V6 had ever got off the drawing board — or the envelope.

I ask Mackie if the car exerts an emotional pull on him. "No," he snorts, in the bluff manner that Midlands motor men affect. But he's still got that postcard.

Eric Bailey



Inside and out: (above) the illustration from Motor, August 16, 1950, when the magazine said: 'The cornering qualities proved notably good, no matter whether fast main road bends were being taken at 70mph or sharp roundabouts at lower speeds', and (left) Eric Bailey takes the real thing on the road

Picture: ROB JUDGES

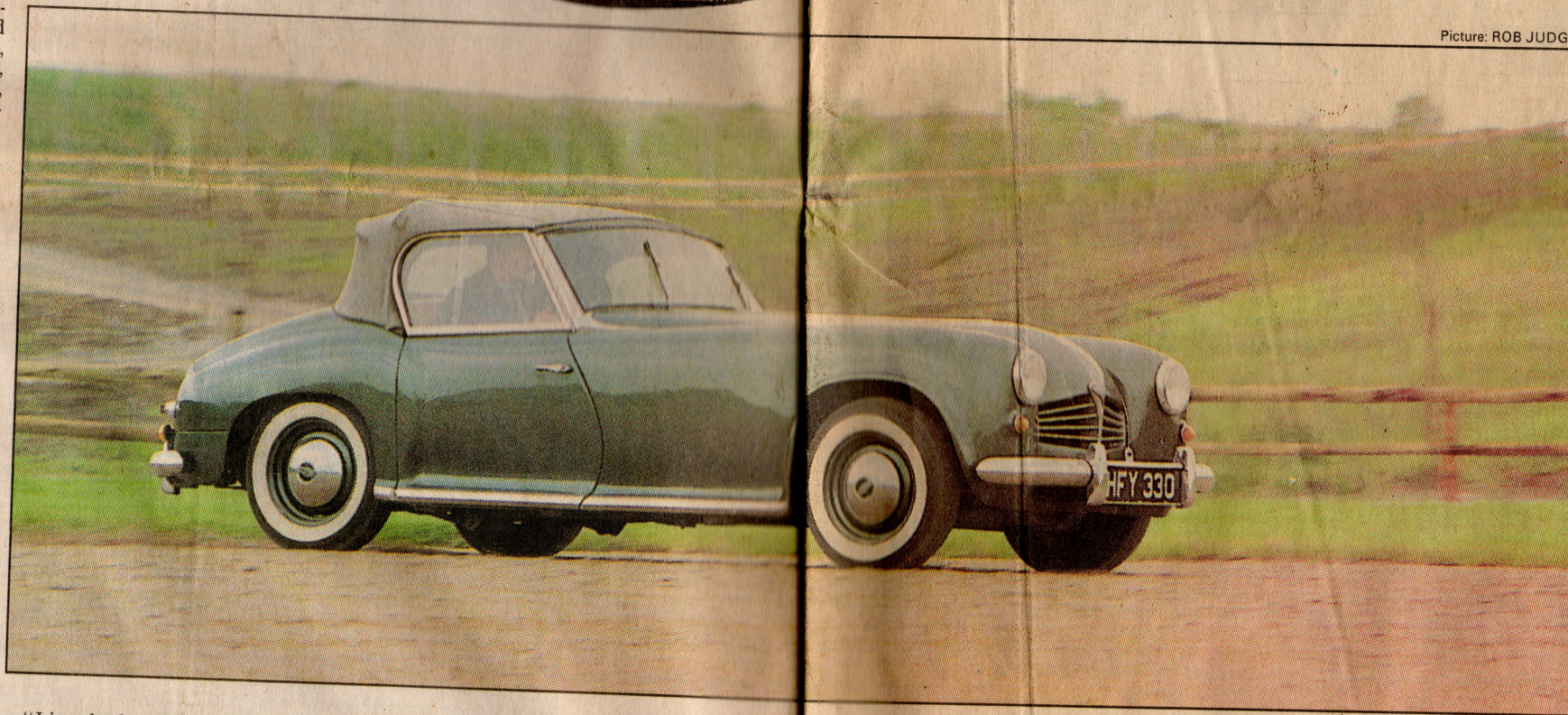


Illustration courtesy of Autocar & Motor

## LOG BOOK

● **READY** for the July sunshine, Vauxhall is about to launch the smoothly styled, convertible version of its latest Astra saloon, developed and built by Bertone in Italy. It is a full four-seater, claimed to have the largest boot capacity in its class and a body shell 10 per cent more rigid than the previous model's. In 2-litre form it will be £15,800, with an electric hood for an extra £750. A cheaper 1.4-litre model follows next spring. BMW's 3-Series convertible arrives in August.

● **INSURERS** have joined consumer groups in protesting about EC regulations that would ban independently produced car body parts such as bumpers, bonnets and wings. The EC proposals would effectively give car manufacturers a monopoly and could force up the cost of repairs and premiums, says the Association of British Insurers. UK insurers spend about £2,000 million a year for car parts in repairs, many of them from independents.

● **OWNERS** of the Mk 3 Volkswagen Golf hatchback and Vento saloon can have an airbag fitted by their dealers to existing models for £510 plus VAT. The company believes it is the first in the UK to offer retrofitting like this. On new Golfs, Ventos and Passats, VW is now offering twin airbags, for driver and passenger, at £499 including VAT.

John Langley