

Mysterious Marauder

The privateer Rover that cleaned out its creators proved a strong survivor in the end. Tony Dron drives and reflects

What went wrong? Great things were predicted for the Marauder three-seater sports tourer when it was announced in 1950. Wise observers noted that 'the young and enthusiastic team, with their sound background' would go far. They did go far – but not with the independent Marauder Car Company Ltd, which was wound up after just 15 cars had been made and the keen young team had lost their money.

On May 7 this year an amazing gathering of over 90 people met at the Forest Hotel in the leafy middle class haven of Dorridge, near Solihull. Incredibly enough, all but three of the Marauders still exist and no fewer than seven of them were present, together with the two surviving partners of the original enterprise, George Mackie and Spencer King.

The Midlands location was significant for it was in the lock-up garages of the Forest Hotel that George Mackie and Peter Wilks, with help from Spencer King, designed and built the well-known Rover single-seater racing car in 1947. From that grew the company of Wilks, Mackie & Co Ltd, designer and maker of the Marauder, of Dorridge.

But let's start with a drive in a Marauder today, for therein lies the main key to this story. As soon as you set off, sitting high in the rather cramped driving

position (the ideal Marauder driver is about 5ft 6in tall), you can tell that this is a quality car. It rides well, steers well and the whole mechanism is very smooth. The brakes I found superb: they have been fitted with special competition linings but are otherwise standard.

The standard Rover freewheel of those days, locked or released by a small wheel on the dashboard, is fitted but original owners could opt for an overdrive in its place. Made by H&A Engineering of Addiscombe in Surrey, this almost mythical device, which comprised new internals within the freewheel casing, has a reputation for fragility. Rumour has it that the sole Marauder in the United States, with only 7000 miles from new, retains a working overdrive.

I was driving Ian Glass's example which he took on the Land's End-John O'Groats before Christmas and on the Monte Carlo Challenge in February, both very demanding events which will take their toll on a weak car; but Ian's car feels fine, soaking up the bumps in the road without feeling in any way 'loose'.

The special floor-mounted gearchange is not perfect but that apparently is a standard Marauder fault. Press on a bit, however, and the car's ability to turn into corners and hold a steady line, almost undeflected by any faults in the surface, is very impressive indeed.

There's a reason for this. Under the skin the Marauder really is a modified Rover 75 P4: unlike the stopgap 75 P3, the P4 of 1949 was very soundly engineered from stem to stern. Built around a massive box-section chassis, with its high sweep over the live rear axle, the P4 was a very strong car. Plenty of spring travel, coupled with good-quality telescopic dampers, contributed to the impressive ride. The independent front suspension, with coil springs and a wide lower wishbone, was developed from a Girling-patented system which ensured good steering geometry under all conditions. It was built to last, too; like a tank you might say, but a very fine tank!

The creators of the Marauder modified the P4 chassis – by rearranging the cross-members – to set the engine 19in further back; they also took some 9in out of the chassis just ahead of the upswept rear in order to shorten the wheelbase to 8ft 6in.

Ian says: "The car comes into its own on a fast, twisty road and the Marauder's especially magic on ice and snow because of its traction. Once we got into those

Photography: Andrew Yeadon



Opposite, our man tries the 1951 Marauder in which Ian Glass has tackled three major rallies in the past year. Right, once restored by George Mackie, HFY 330 is now owned by Mike Zeitlin



sorts of conditions on the Monte we soon caught up and passed a Mini, an Austin-Healey 3000, a TR4A and an Austin Westminster." I can imagine it: that traditional, sound chassis would give plenty of reassuring feel and see you through.

Two things were against this car in its day, though, and the main drawback from the start was its lack of performance: the 2,103cc straight-six Rover 75 engine, with its overhead inlet and side exhaust arrangement, is aesthetically pleasing to look at and it runs very smoothly but it was designed to convey a relatively sedate, dignified upper middle class family saloon weighing 27.75cwt (1,413kg), not a sports tourer: in standard form it produced just 75bhp.

Ian's car is still powered by this engine which gives a top speed of just over 90mph and all-day cruising in the 75-80mph range. It sounds great and will pull smoothly from low revs but nothing much happens: there's an obvious lack of sufficient torque. Ian says that, on a rally, climbing steep mountain roads is a painfully slow task and, despite the car's excellent downhill ability, you can never make up the time lost.

Recognising this problem in 1950, Wilks, Mackie and King immediately did their best to remedy the situation. The first Marauders had separate air cleaners, valve springs packed up with washers, a special, thin head gasket to raise the compression ratio to 7.6:1 and a single Servais silencer instead of the two Rover boxes. These modifications were claimed to increase power to 80-83bhp, not a big difference.

Soon they went to 2.4 litres, a special cylinder head and three carburettors: this raised the power to 105bhp at 5,000rpm and they called it the Marauder '100' but the general consensus even then was that the car was underpowered. The Marauder might have been lighter than the 75 saloon but it still weighed 23cwt (1,171kg),

not a great power-to-weight ratio.

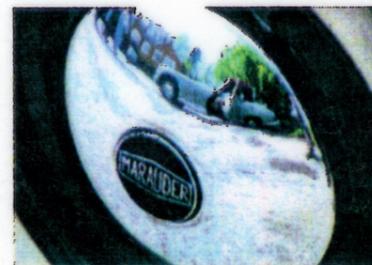
Then there was the price. *Classic Cars* has never gone in for covering old ground but as the Marauder story last appeared 19 years ago (November, 1975), written by Jonathan Wood, a quick 'recap' might help! Announced to the Press in August, 1950 (where else but at the same Forest Hotel in Dorridge?), it was priced at a basic £950 (£1,256 with 33.3% purchase tax) but it soon went up to £999 (£1,332 including tax). Enthusiasts could go out and buy a Jaguar XK120, tax paid, for £1,263 or an Allard K2 for £1,215, while the very desirable Jowett Jupiter 3-seater convertible was a mere £1,017.

The Marauder partners had been given what seemed a golden start: both George Mackie and Peter Wilks worked for Rover but Peter was also the nephew of Rover's MD, Spencer Wilks, and somehow he talked the Rover board into supplying 21 sets of Rover 75 parts so that Marauder production could get under way.

Wilks and Mackie pooled everything they had, £2,500, into the Marauder project, while Wilks's father and his cousin, Spencer King, added £500 each. Despite this, the truth was that they were underfinanced: it was all lost but not before they had put up a hell of a fight.

Wilks and Mackie left their secure and very promising careers at Rover to launch the Marauder but Spencer King, better known as 'Spen', was then deeply committed to the Rover gas turbine car project and elected to stay on that. One reason for the Marauder's apparently excessively long bonnet, incidentally, is that the partners envisaged fitting a powerful gas turbine engine under there as soon as possible.

A high-quality coachbuilder in Dorridge, Richard Mead – who had carried out special work for Alvis and Bentley – built the Marauder prototype and early production bodies by traditional coachbuilding methods with steel and aluminium panels on wooden



Top, massed Marauders en route from Dorridge to the Heritage Motor Centre during their recent reunion. Above, a rare item today!



Ian Glass's Historic rallying Marauder posed in an English lane near its original home, Dorridge

their new factory and changed the company name to the Marauder Car Company Ltd. In no time they had to face a difficult dilemma: carry on and risk personal ruin or pack up when they could just get out.

By September 1952 it was all over: everything was wound up and Geoff went on to work on the gas turbine project at Rover with Spen King.

All the partners found success in life, however. Wilks eventually became Technical Director at Rover in 1964 but he died in 1972 when only 52; Mackie went on to head Land Rover's Special Products Division and is now retired, happy to "potter about my workshop"; while Spen King is, of course, one of our most celebrated engineers with a long list of famous projects to his credit, including the Range Rover.

At the Forest Hotel on May 7 this year, I wondered what they would have given to have had such a large crowd of influential well-wishers and would-be Marauder owners around in 1952.

The answer to their problems was there in Dorridge too, though it came too late to help them with their ill-fated project. The ultimate development of the Marauder's engine was the 134bhp, 3-litre, Weslake-headed version which was introduced in 1963 as a development of the 1959 3-litre version.

Several owners, including Rover specialist Jon Backhouse, have fitted 3-litre engines into their Marauders and he gave me a ride. This is the version of the engine that the car always needed: the difference in torque, and thus in performance, is very marked. Jon has also modified his Marauder, successfully and

unnoticeably, to suit his 6ft 5in frame.

I asked Spen King for his opinion on these 3-litre conversions: "That's what I would do if I had one," he said with a wry smile. "I have never been that keen on old cars and I remember the Marauder as an exciting new car that was let down by its performance."

George Mackie bought and restored an early Marauder in the Seventies, fitting a 3-litre engine in the process, so this modification seems to have the stamp of approval all round! The mod would be hard to resist as the engines look identical and the bigger capacity makes such a difference.

I was interested to know from George Mackie what the Rover board's attitude to the project had been; after all, they put a fair amount of material aside for the Marauder – 21 kits of parts which could have been sold as finished cars – and they recognised the project, even if the official line was an absence of any link.

Did Rover have an eye to the sports car and competition market? Or was it seen simply as a kind of students' project, useful for those being groomed for the very top of the British motor industry? There's no doubt that this personal exposure to the rigours of design and production, not to mention very real financial risk, was an invaluable experience for those who in later life would invest the company's capital in developing the mainstream cars of the future.

George Mackie thought about this for some time; then he said: "No, that's all too profound; Peter just talked them into it!"

In those days the majority of Rover's bosses tended to look down on competition and sports cars; they were very conscious of the Rover image and were known to be anxious, too, to avoid any link with utilitarian vehicles such as taxis when launching their products in post-war Europe. That's all very well, but one cannot help reflecting that although snobbery is far from exclusively British, Mercedes did not have such 'class' hang-ups when it came to sports cars and taxis!

Today, the Marauder is another of those intriguing might-have-beens, a slightly eccentric machine perhaps but the sophisticated chassis is a pleasure to drive, the cars were solidly built and there are plenty of Rover parts around to keep them running.

A result of this year's successful Marauder reunion was an on-the-spot decision to make it an annual event and to form the exclusive Marauder Drivers' Club. If you manage to find any of the three missing Marauders, you will be their hero.

CLASSIC CARS

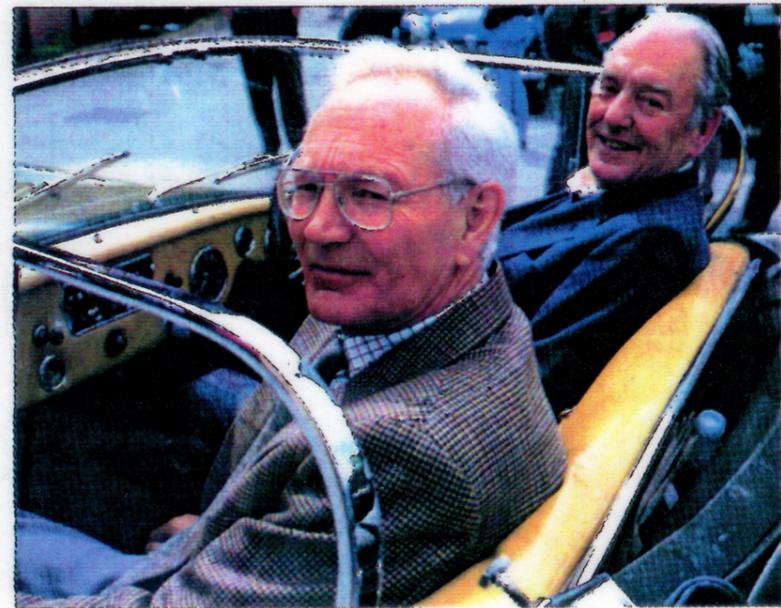
Small wheel to left of steering controlled either freewheel device or optional (and fragile) overdrive



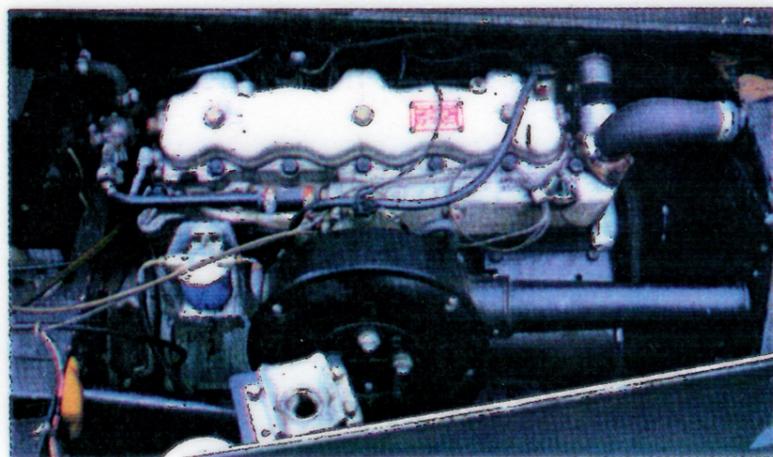
The Missing Marauders

A total of 15 Marauders were built between 1950 and 1952 and 12 of them are known to have survived. Two cars posted as "missing" in 1975 have been discovered safe and sound since then – chassis number 11004, the only Marauder coupé, has belonged to Wilf Haigh since 1956 while chassis number 11014 unexpectedly came on the market about five years ago and is now owned by Richard Fannon. It was one of the seven Marauders present at the May 7 reunion. Does anyone know anything more about the three missing cars listed here?

Chassis number	Registration	Comments
11002	Possibly MPX 300	First sold by Birmingham dealer, J W Gethin Ltd.
11012	FHE 437	1952: first sold in Barnsley, involved in an accident in Sheffield in 1967 or 1968. Stored in a lock-up garage for some years. The garages were later demolished and the car is assumed scrapped.
11013	Possibly FCT 707	1952: unlucky 13 is, simply, missing without trace.



Clockwise from above: Rover descent is very evident in rear view; Ian Glass with his latest restoration project - another Marauder; George Mackie takes his old partner, Spen King, for a ride; the elegant Rover engine, modified by the Marauder's creators



frames. The styling was based on a sketch by Mackie which showed a Rover 75 body cut at the waistline and reworked with inspiration from the then-new Ferrari 166. It looks a bit odd today, perhaps, but back in 1950 the Marauder was considered to compare very favourably with the best Continental coachwork, and the cars were all very well made (just one was made as a

coupé, by the way). Nobody noticed the large identical dent in each inner rear wheel arch, necessary to get the bench seat in!

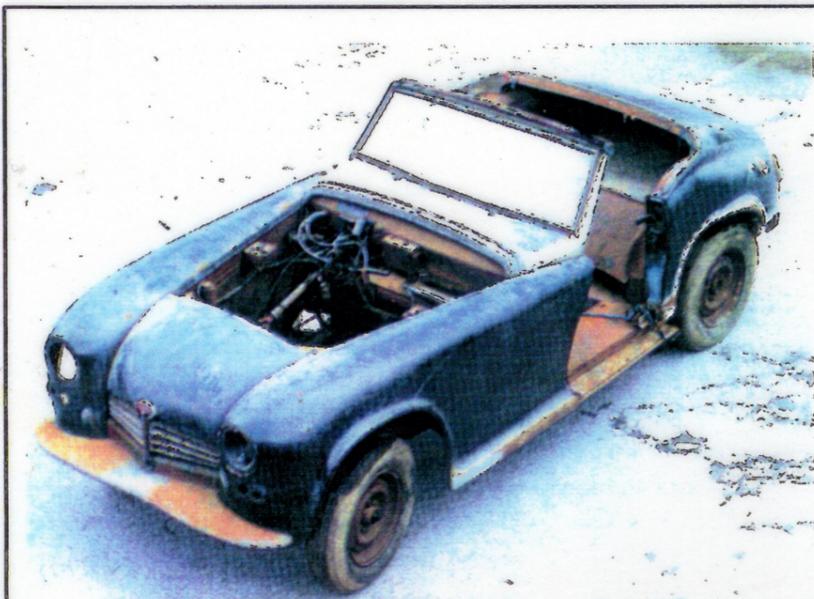
They worked flat out: Geoff Middleton was the company's sole employee for the first 12 months of the operation and he arrived unexpectedly at the 1994 reunion. One night in 1950, Geoff recalled, his wife rang up to ask if he was coming home: "George answered the 'phone and assured her that I would be back," recalls Geoff. "He told me she'd called and we all looked at the clock - it was 3am and we hadn't noticed."

Within a year their premises in Dorridge, near the Forest Hotel, were too small so Wilks and Mackie agreed to take on a new factory in Kenilworth. They also arranged for Abbey Panels of nearby Coventry to manufacture all-metal Marauder bodies (doors, bonnet, nose and spare wheel cover remained in aluminium). They were trying to productionise the car to bring the unit cost down: Abbey Panels' bodies look the same as Mead's but there are differences, such as a slightly revised bonnet to accommodate standard P4 radiators instead of specially-made shorter ones.

The partners were getting deeper into a financial mire and exactly a year after its announcement, the Marauder's price had to be raised to a basic £1,250. As the Government raised purchase tax for expensive cars, suddenly the Marauder came into the 60% tax bracket and was thus listed at £2,001. By then the Jaguar XK120, tax paid, cost £1,538, the Allard K2 was £1,555 and the Jowett Jupiter 3-seater convertible was just £1,363.

These were cars for the wealthy: as a comparison, a new top-of-the-range Ford Zephyr 6, with full leather upholstery, then cost £785 including tax and the Rover 75 saloon itself was a luxury car at £1,417.

The purchase tax ruling was, frankly, the Marauder's death blow but by early 1952 they had moved into



Tracked down by current owner, Norman Rogers, this derelict Marauder is to be restored. He traced the car's moves to Essex and Berwick-upon-Tweed. Recently acquired, he brought the car to the reunion on May 7 as found

