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Rover's Fascinating Post-War History – from the P4 of 1949 to the last SD1 in 1986

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Auntie's Legacy...

by Dave Moss.

(Grateful thanks to Virtual Motorpix for the use of many of the photographs shown in this feature).



Rover P4 90 6 cylinder saloon (1953-1959). (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).

As it went on sale in 1949, the Rover P4 – later often referred to as “Auntie” – represented everything the company had stood for in its pre-war days – brought up to date. However, before moving on to the details of the new P4 models which were to take the Solihull company through the 1950s, it is worth looking briefly at their stylish predecessors (please see photos below). The well-respected models of the late 1930s and the early post-War cars derived from them were widely considered to be spacious, comfortable, strong, well-engineered and dependable. Indeed an evocative advertising slogan of the late 1930s proudly described a Rover as ‘One of Britain’s Fine Cars’...



Rovers of the late 1930s and 1940s were well-liked. This fine example was photographed at Longbridge in 2014 (Photo Kim Henson).



A wonderful contemporary Rover P2 line-up (1947-1948), outside the firm's Solihull admin. offices. (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).

Moving on to the P4... The new car's traditional chassis carried a new body styled by American Raymond Loewy, with a well-furnished and typically Rover interior. It was designed to appeal to those well-heeled upstanding citizens who had been pre-war customers – and as such was a comfortable and competent six seater, though performance was unexciting.

The first P4 offered just 75 horsepower from its unusual 4 cylinder “inlet over exhaust” engine, which was designed in-house, and had already appeared in the then-new Land Rover. Following a redesign early in the 1950s it later powered the new ‘60’ and a revised version of the 75, and was also developed into a smooth 6 cylinder unit for the 90 and later 105 models. Later still, in 1960, more engine changes followed as the larger P5 3 litre series went on sale, from which the P4 again benefited, with the last significant new P4 model, the 110, offering 123 horsepower. A few examples of the various P4 models are illustrated in the slideshow below...



This slideshow requires JavaScript.

When production ceased in May 1964, the P4's 16 year lifespan involving hundreds of cosmetic, body, engine and mechanical changes had turned it into the most popular Rover so far built. That reputation provided a solid and reliable foundation on which, from 1963, Rover were able to capitalise with the launch of their new and widely acclaimed P6 2000 model.





A lovely 1967 example of the innovative P6 2000, resting near Paris in the summer of 2015.
(Photo Kim Henson).

During the life of the P4, the motor industry took huge strides forward, with major technical achievements and rapid new model development. In 10 years, its products improved dramatically - and the industry itself was changing too. The far reaching implications of this became apparent when BMC was formed from the old Nuffield and Austin dynasties early in the 1950s. Consolidation continued through the decade until eventually Leyland snapped up Standard Triumph - and Rover followed some years later...

Rover's post war history was increasingly built on Land Rover products rather than passenger cars - but alongside its vehicle operations it also had a lesser known alter-ego. By the time it was bought by Leyland and ceased to exist as an independent company in 1967 it had developed an entirely separate reputation as a designer and maker of gas-turbine engines, and, with an eye on expansion, acquired military vehicle manufacturer (and very low volume car maker) Alvis. Plenty of P4 examples were then still running, since production had ended only three years earlier, and the Land Rover range was going from strength to strength... but as the takeover was negotiated the car range comprised just two model lines, the award winning P6 saloons and magisterial P5 - plus a striking four door coupé developed from it.



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Rover P5, 3 litre, Mark I (1958-1962). (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).



The P5s were powered by straight six cylinder, cast iron engines but the later, faster, restyled P5B versions ('B' for 'Buick-derived' engine) featured a lightweight aluminium V8 cylinder unit.



Solid, powerful, roomy, comfortable, oh-so-stylish... The P5Bs arrived in 1967; this is a smart saloon version. (Photo Kim Henson).

Then BMC swallowed up Jaguar and in turn merged with Leyland – now including Rover – to form the labyrinthine British Leyland Motor Corporation. During this mid to late 1960s period and beyond, Rover's gas turbines spread to trucks and trains... and development of new model plans continued. From this work a prototype appeared, which still exists today. Affectionately referred to by insiders as "Gladys," and styled by long time Rover designer

David Bache, many commentators believe this was the car earmarked as a replacement for the Alvis 3 litre, the last of which was built in August 1967.



Rover P6 3500 S, (1973). (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).

Several other Rover ideas progressed to prototype stage in the late 1960s, each carrying a "P" series sequence number. One was the promising but angular P6BS sports car, eventually restyled but ultimately stillborn; another was the big, brutally aggressive P8 saloon, which reached advanced pre-production status – and was then suddenly abandoned. Folklore insists it trod too heavily on Jaguar's toes, but some subscribe to an alternative view – that its performance in crash testing proved woefully inadequate. Hindsight suggests its 4.4 litre V8 petrol engine might have proved an acute embarrassment during the 1973 oil crisis, so perhaps its cancellation was a blessing in disguise...

Yet another project was P10, a study which went head to head in a top-management-level assessment with the Puma, a proposed Triumph 2000/2500 replacement, for the go-ahead as BL's next big car. It emerged victorious, and soon afterwards Rover's old numbering series was abandoned, so the P10 became RT1, indicating the car was now a joint Rover-Triumph engineering project - on which work began in early summer 1970. At the time, however, British Leyland was in a near-constant state of flux, and in 1971 more reorganisation brought Jaguar, Rover and Triumph together under a "Specialist Division" label... so the project gained yet another new name - SD1.

The years which followed were a particularly troubled time for British Leyland, but somehow the SD1 edged slowly from drawing board towards production. It was powered by the now familiar Buick-designed V8 engine first seen in the P5 and P6, and uniquely and attractively styled by David Bache as a big, sleek 5 door hatchback with some Ferrari influences. Project technical direction was by long-time Rover engineer Spen King, returned from a short sojourn to Triumph following the early retirement in 1971 of Peter Wilks, last in the direct family line which had masterminded Rover's destiny since the 1930s.



After this lengthy and fraught gestation period, the SD1 went on sale as the Rover 3500 during July 1976, picking up several major awards in following months. Though by then the P4 was a distant, almost forgotten memory, at least some of the marque's familiar core values continued in the new car. Yet Rover's dream quickly turned sour: though built in a new, state of the art plant, the SD1 soon

The SD1 (introduced in July 1976) made most contemporary rivals look old-fashioned. (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).



became bogged down in quality control, paint finish, and reliability problems. Factory labour relations were strained, production never reached planned levels, customer confidence ebbed rapidly, and the car's reputation was soon irreparably damaged – though later, post-1981, Cowley-produced facelifted versions were much improved. The 1982 arrival of a 190 horsepower V8 Vitesse flagship, a high-profile racing programme and additional petrol and turbo-diesel models all helped sales, but – just like the P4 many years earlier – no really significant range-widening developments followed.



A Rover 3500SE in its heyday, encountering wintry conditions. (Photo courtesy Virtual Motorpix).

As the 1980s progressed, British Leyland's reliance on joint passenger car projects with the Japanese Honda company increased. SD1 production ended in June 1986, by which time BL was a very different slimmed-down company from that which had launched the car ten years earlier. Its replacement was the anonymously underwhelming, jointly-designed Rover 800 saloon, which instantly cut all links to the pedigree and long established Rover marque values of the past. Yet as it bowed out, the SD1 left a lasting mark on history. It was the last Rover passenger car designed, styled, engineered and built entirely in Britain – even if its V8 engine did have American ancestry...