For Your Bookshelf: “Oiling The Cogs” – Reg Bishop’s role in the British Motor Industry’s Golden Age

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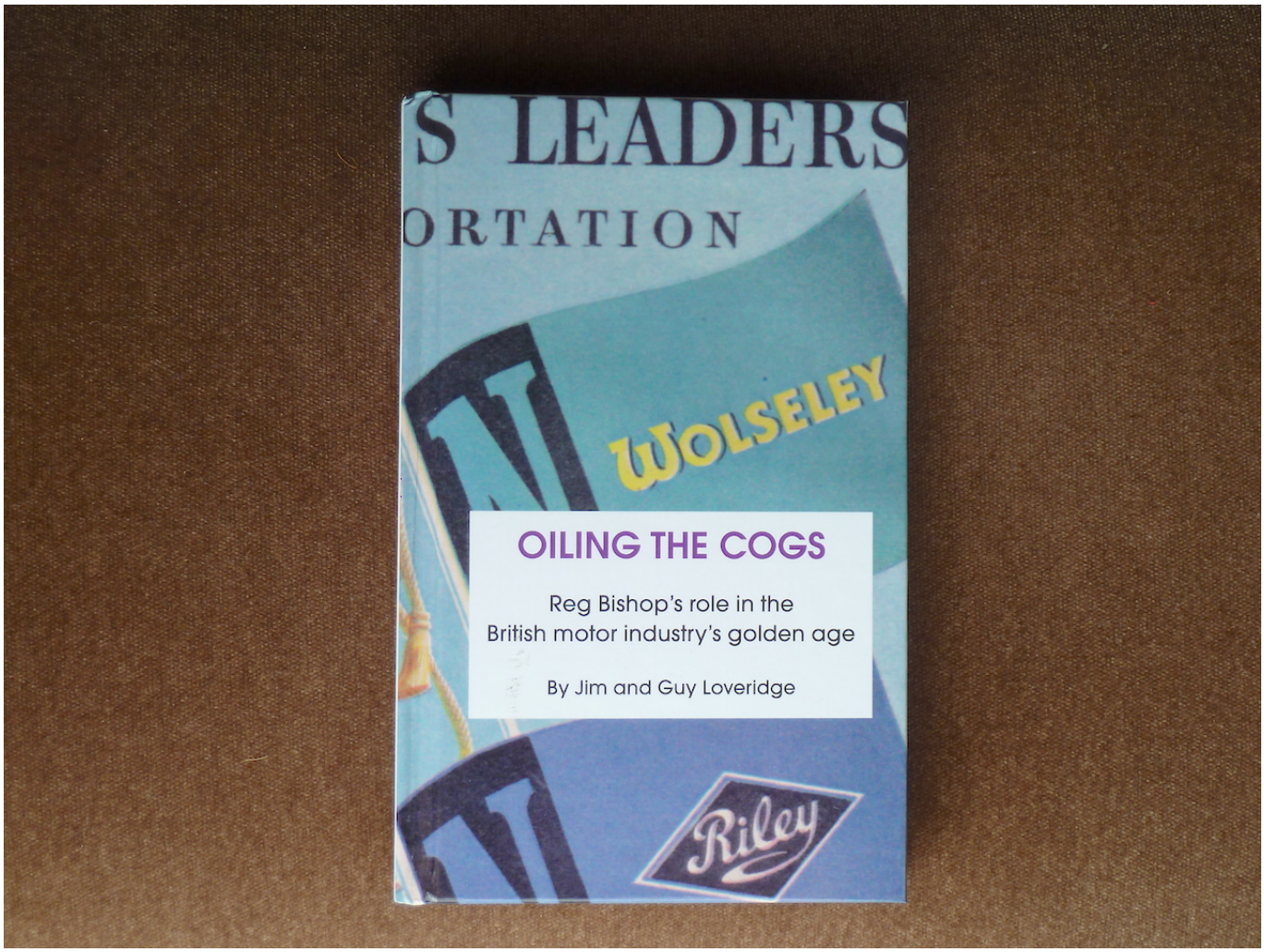

Book Review – ‘Oiling the Cogs’

Reviewed by Kim Henson

Author: Jim and Guy Loveridge

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On Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/automobiliaauctions/

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This remarkable book is compact in size but comprehensive in nature. It tells a detailed true story about the British motor industry, over many decades and as seen through the eyes of someone who was deeply involved, but whose name may not be familiar to you – Reg Bishop.

The fact that the book has been produced at all is entirely thanks to father and son authors, Jim and Guy Loveridge, and this is the first volume that they have co-authored. Both are respected members of the Guild of Motoring Writers, and over the years both have contributed greatly to the recording in words and photographs of many aspects of Britain’s glorious automotive past history. They were assisted in their task with this book by Reg Bishop’s daughter Mary.

Reg Bishop had intended to produce his own book about his life’s work in the industry, but, for whatever reason, this didn’t happen, and his notes, papers and photographs relating to

this project remained in a brief case for many years. He had put them together to form the initial drafts of the book between 1970 and 1976, but they lay undisturbed until Jim and Guy bought via a fellow motoring historian.

Fortunately this intrepid writing duo recognised the importance of these papers, and from them they meticulously put together the jig-saw of Reg's story for it to be completed and made available within their new book.

Written in the first person by Reg Bishop himself, the text describes how, from being a copy man in advertising, he worked his way up in the British automotive industry, eventually to be in charge of The Nuffield Press and all public relations activities of the Morris-led Nuffield Group, then Austin Morris and British Leyland. Among his many considerable achievements was masterminding the 1959 launch of BMC's revolutionary new Mini, which changed the face of small car motoring around the world.

Now I have to be honest and say that I did not find the book an easy read, but this is not because of any shortcomings in the way that Jim and Guy have put it together. Rather, I feel it is due to the fact that Reg Bishop explains in intricate detail the way in which his work evolved, the many people he encountered and their respective positions within the industry, also the chronological order of events that affected his career journey. I did have to concentrate hard and sometimes 'retrace my steps' as I read, to get the full meaning of each step. It was well worth the effort to get a good idea of the context of Reg's own position and the way that the motor industry operated and changed through the years.

Especially fascinating for me were Reg's early recollections of working for commercial/passenger vehicle producers Guy, from the early 1920s. His descriptions of how the firm built and tested their vehicles were enlightening.

Reg's work with Singer and, later, his deep involvement for many happy years with the Morris company, including working closely with Lord Nuffield, are covered in-depth and the story illustrates just how important Morris was to Reg Bishop.

This was further underlined in his section of the book relating to the merger of Austin and Morris (and associated firms) in 1952, to form the British Motor Corporation (BMC). It is abundantly clear – and well-known – that the two main separate entities had operated in very different ways and when they were brought together there were many tensions. Reg's text spells out and explains in detail the difficulties encountered, and reinforced the fact that he was a 'Morris' man.

I don't want to spoil the story by covering such aspects more deeply here, but will just say that the book – which has only been produced in very limited numbers – is well worth a read for anyone interested in Morris, the companies forming BMC or indeed the history of the British Motor Industry in general.

VERDICT

A well-written and absorbing book, which took me a while to read (as hinted at above), but it filled in many gaps in my own knowledge of the British motor industry, and helped explain aspects that previously I hadn't fully understood – I enjoyed learning more!

I am grateful to Jim and Guy Loveridge for taking the time and trouble to bring the story to the public domain, well done to them!