



# The Riley One-Point-Five Sports Sedan

By Rick Feibusch

The late 1950's imported car boom in America was fueled by dozens of mechanically interesting and unusual cars that were brought to us from all over the world. American car buyers had gone through the car famine of the war-torn Forties, the reintroduction of outdated prewar models, and the plethora of new cars from US manufacturers, starting with the Studebaker in mid-1946 through the revolutionary Chevy V8s in 1955. One thing was clear, American cars were generally getting bigger, faster and flashier by the day.

The British had opened the imported car market in the States years before Japanese or European manufacturing firms had recovered from the hostilities. The jaunty MGs, awe inspiring Jaguars and economical Austins, Hillmans and Morris Minors had demonstrated to America that there was an alternative to the oversized, overpowered and rocket ship styled domestic offerings.

Foreign car sales started to climb and actually take off once cars from Europe and Scandinavia appeared on our shores. By 1957, the numbers had become big enough to alarm the usually lethargic Detroit to a point that the big three had "import fighting" compacts on their respective drawing boards. Americans had become less skeptical and the foreign car business was here to stay.

The most memorable examples were the sleek and impressive sports and luxury cars imported from Germany and England and low-production Italian exotics. While thousands of clever and economical little transportation devices built by Austin, Morris, Renault, Volkswagen and others made their way to our shores each year. Most, save for the Morris Minor, Mini and VW, have faded from the American market.

Though cheap, cheerful, and filled to the brim with personality, the smaller imports became the domain of the truly artsy, the intellectual-beyond-words, the tragically hip, and the frugal-to-a-fault. As used cars, they fell in stature to low-cost and relatively harmless high school transport and "parade cars" for the Shriner convention.

There was another class of European motorcar - the mid-sized sporting sedan. After years of postwar austerity and Britain's "Export or Die" policies linking steel allotments to export volume, the English motorists were ready for cars with some style and verve.

The great British bright color scare of the mid-Fifties, an ill attempt to update stodgy economy sedans with turquoise, coral, and maize paint applied in oddly cut two-tones, gave way to somewhat larger cars with bigger engines, better appointed interiors and Americanesque styling. Some models were marketed to an older and more conservative demographic (in the States - your average Buick buyer), and retained a more "classic" prewar look.

Fine examples of good handling, peppy and well appointed cars from Alfa-Romeo, Lancia, Riley, and MG were available to the select few that desired such a car, but at Oldsmobile and Buick prices.



These were the BMW's, Acura's and baby Mercedes of their day - sort of pre-yuppie, yuppie cars. They were not imported to the U.S. in large numbers because, to the American mind and popular taste, their smaller size couldn't justify the substantial price. The concept of expensive, high quality compact sedans would not be acceptable in the States for another 25 years.

The Riley One-Point-Five project hit the drawing board just after the merger of Austin of England and the Nuffield Group (Morris, Wolseley, Riley and MG) to form BMC in late 1951. The senior designer was the well-known British engineer, Gerald Palmer. Palmer had worked for Nuffield prior to WWII, where he styled the MG Y-type sedan and tourer, before moving to Jowett Cars to pen their innovative Javelin sedan. He returned to Nuffield in 1949 where his first project was the Y-type successor, the MG Magnette and its badge-engineered sister, the Wolseley 14/40.

The One-Point-Five and its Wolseley counterpart, the 1500, actually evolved from BMC's attempt to replace the Morris Minor. While early Minor owners raved about the torsion bar front suspension and the rack and pinion steering, they were disenchanted with the underpowered 948cc engine, low gearing and mediocre brakes. As other British automakers introduced more modern and powerful economy models, the Minor's sales started to flag.

BMC's new chief, Leonard Lord, who came from pre-merger Austin management, put Gerald Palmer onto the task of fitting the more powerful "B" series engine, bigger brakes and more a contemporary body on the well sorted, Minor floor pan. Though Palmer presented a number of design ideas to the BMC management and built one prototype, nothing was ever officially approved and the project began to drag on.

Lord arrived one morning and marched into Palmer's office carrying a stack of drawings and said, "Here you are, we've designed the new Minor at the corporate office." The design was based on Palmer's prototype but finished by the Austin engineering staff. A very disgruntled Gerald Palmer soon left BMC for Vauxhall (G.M. of England).

Ironically, by the time the new design was being prepared for production, the Minor, now called the 1000, had received a more powerful 1098cc engine and the higher gearing that it had been lacking and was enjoying a sales surge. BMC execs decided to retain the original Minor and move the new car upmarket. Built as both the Riley and the Wolseley, these cars featured leather seating, wood interior appointments and a traditional upright grillwork. They were touted as small and nimble mid-market luxury sedans, perfect for use in urban areas as well as tight winding country roads.

The Riley version was the most sporting of the pair and featured the same twin-carb, B series four found in the MGA sports cars, while the Wolseley used a detuned, single S.U. carbureted version. Only the Riley was brought to North America. Since it sold for just \$400 less than the contemporary Jaguar sedan, not to mention powerful American competition, the Riley was not all that popular this side of the pond.

#### DRIVING THE ONE-POINT-FIVE

As we slide behind the wheel we are greeted with all of the sights and smells of a Jag or a Daimler, though in 3/4 scale! The handsome wood dashboard is well laid out and fully instrumented and the saddle soap scented, rolled and pleated upholstery is tight and well tailored. The trim and gauges are of a high standard as well, but when one looks past the details, the car's more humble origins come through. The Riley has all the bad and good points it inherited from the Morris Minor. Because it was built on the Minor's 86 inch wheelbase, it is a short four passenger car with limited rear seat legroom. Also like the Minor, there is a lot of body colored interior metal and the wooden trim pieces on the doors look like an afterthought. The two-tone leather might have been "the bee's knees" in 1958 but would be better suited to a car with massive tail fins.

All of the controls fall easily to hand, the seating position and bucket seats feel excellent and visibility is superb. If one can come to grips with the British interpretation of late '50s American styling and view it as "cute" or at least "period" (as one does with kidney or triangle shaped coffee tables) the interior becomes acceptable. Outside, the car is almost majestic in trim and detail but becomes cartoon-like when all of those fine elements are squeezed onto the Riley's stubby little body. It's all a matter of taste, and this one sure does taste different.

Hit the button and the Riley erupts into that cold engine burble and valve train rattle that is so familiar to MG owners. Once warm, it settles down to a sweet purr. This car has a custom exhaust system using a modern "turbo" muffler that still rumbles and roars but eliminates most of the "MG rasp." Slip her into first, and off we go. The gear ratios are perfectly matched to the power and weight of the One-Point-Five. In contrast to an MG roadster that has a high first gear and close ratios, the Riley has a lower first gear and evenly spaced ratios. The car will keep up with most of the latest offerings from the land of the rising sun and it nips in and out of traffic nearly as well as a motorcycle. The rack

Mountain roads are an absolute kick as the modern Michelin tires grip the asphalt and the little Jell-O-mold of a car leans into the corners. The Riley inherited some of the Minor's rear wheel hop when accelerating into corners but a careful foot can modulate most of it down to a minimum. On the freeway the short wheelbase makes for a choppy motion on tar strips but most of the time the ride is satisfactory. The 3:70 rear end gears will allow you to blast along in the fast lane at a sustained 85 mph.

If you don't mind some odd angles and 'Fifties styling cues mixed with your traditional design details and want a zippy little sport sedan that feels like a predecessor to a 3 series BMW, the Riley's for you.

