

1951 Riley submitted by Rick Feibusch

Drop Dead Drophead - 1951 Riley (BCM Version - May 1999)



When WWII finally came to an end, the British auto industry was in quite a state. What hadn't been destroyed by the Luftwaffe, needed to be refitted for civilian production. While some firms, like their American counterparts, chose to jumpstart production with facelifted pre-war designs, others held off and attempted to get their new postwar designs to the public as soon as they could. The Riley RM series was the first genuine post-war design announced in England. Though Austin, Standard (Triumph), Singer and Rootes (Hillman, Humber etc.) started rolling new 1940 cars off of their assembly lines between September 1944 and mid-1945, Nuffield owned, Riley started limited production of their rakish new car, in saloon form, by the end of 1945.

The Riley company's operation goes back to before the last turn of the century. William Riley and Son were weavers in Coventry. When the 1880 Education Act removed the weaving industry's cheap child labor, the Rileys decided to diversify. First step was the acquisition of bicycle manufacturer Bonnick and Company. The new firm, reestablished as the Riley Cycle Company was so successful that the weaving division was closed and all of the Riley family fortune was invested in <sup>3</sup>push bikes.<sup>2</sup>

In 1898, grandson Percy Riley completed his first motorcar, a simple single cylinder <sup>3</sup>dogcart<sup>2</sup> that was probably the first car to use mechanical valves rather than a timed vacuum system. The firm itself cautiously entered the motorized era by showing a quadricycle. Not quite a car but definitely a nod to the future. By 1902, the Riley Cycle Company added motorcycles to their product line. They also started building <sup>3</sup>tricars<sup>2</sup> and the forcar, a type of early cyclecar.

Percy Riley, a very talented engineer, busied himself with new products that would bring changes to the family business as well as the whole motorcar industry. He and brothers, Victor and Allan, set up a new firm, the Riley Engine Company to supply their father's cycle firm with engines. In 1907, even the fiscally conservative senior Riley was convinced that the car had a viable future and started producing full-sized motorcars. By

1911 the cars were proving to be profitable enough to close down bicycle production.

In fact it was one of Percy's designs, the detachable wire wheel first incorporated on the 1907 Riley 9hp car, that changed the whole direction of the Riley family. Prior to that, one would have to repair a flat tyre in position, ON THE CAR. By 1912, over 180 international auto manufacturers, including Rolls Royce, Mercedes, Renault and Pierce Arrow were using the Riley wheel. This product was so successful that the original Riley Cycle Company decided to go out of the car building business altogether. Not to let the Riley marque die, the Riley Engine Company was reestablished as Riley (Coventry) Ltd. and went on to build some of the sweetest looking sports and sporting saloons for the next two decades.

By the mid-1930s, Riley was making a vast array of motor vehicles and components in the face of the international depression. Their cars, while generally sleek and sporting, were too specialized for profitable mass production and planned corporate marketing by Austin, Morris (Nuffield) and Ford kept cutting their slice of the pie thinner and thinner. In 1938, Riley management appealed to Lord Nuffield (William Morris) to take over and soon Riley was under the wing of the Nuffield Organisation.

By the time civilian automobile production stopped in 1940, the Riley marque was a shadow of its former self. Although much of the development work was done before the buyout, the new cars looked much less sporting and more like their mass produced stablemates and because they had been designed in such haste, had various mechanical problems not found on pre-Nuffield cars.

#### The Postwar RM Series

The RM series car's development probably goes back to the mid-1930s when the firm first began to experiment with independent front suspension and its 1 1/2 liter, dual cam, OHV engine. The first postwar advertising art showed a sweeping design that, while based on the prewar Riley Kestrel, promised to be all new and to provide <sup>3</sup>Magnificent Motoring.<sup>2</sup>

There were other cars from other countries that had almost as much influence on RM design as did all of the traditional British leather, wood and carefully proportioned coachwork from before the war. First was the stunning German BMW 327. Riley is said to have been interested in BMW's designs before the war and had even considered building a BMW saloon under license with Riley running gear under the bonnet. The war put an end to that but Riley engineers were able to study a 320 series car in great detail after it had seized from the German consulate in London early in the war and found its way to the Experimental Department in Foleshill.

The other car that was studied extensively was the French Citroen Traction Avant. A pair were dispatched to Foleshill in 1937. The torsion bar front suspension and rack and pinion steering from one of them, sans the front drive components, was grafted onto the chassis of a Riley Victor special with great success and a modified version was fitted to the 1943 prototype that would eventually develop into the RM. Many of the modifications were done to take advantage of patents taken out by Alec Issigonis in his work with the torsion bar suspension and rack and pinion steering being developed for the Riley's little Nuffield brother, the Morris Minor.

The rest of the car is pure British. Steel was being rationed after the war, so it stood to reason to use wood framing in the bodies, prewar style, to use less steel. The running gear, based on the prewar Riley Twelve, was a logical choice because it was good to start with and would save development time. In the end, the folks at Foleshill put together a very European looking British car. While none of the lines are exactly the same as the BMW or the Citroen, it is easy to see that the low bonnet, faired in headlamps, split, V-shaped windscreen, and rounded wings, not to mention the suspension and steering were influenced by these cars.

The RM Series was built in both a 1 1/2 liter version as a saloon and a 2 1/2 liter version that was available as a saloon, a <sup>3</sup>three seater roadster<sup>2</sup> with a bench seat and the classic landau ironed drophead, convertible. Both open models are rare with only about 500 of each made during the whole production run. While the first cars built before 1949 were built at the old Riley plant in Coventry, production was moved to Nuffield's MG facility in Abingdon through the BMC merger in 1952 and the end of production in 1955.

### The Restoration

Al Edridge of Palos Verde, CA was born and raised in England in the 1950s and had started looking for a unique British classic car to restore in the late-1980s. He spotted a classified ad for a reasonably priced 1951 Riley Drophead. Al remembered these swoopy beauties from his youth so he grabbed it even though it was only about 80% complete and in many pieces.

The car was purchased from a soon-to-be-notorious Southern California collector/restorer who also contracted with Al to start restoration of the car as well. Thousands of dollars later, both the restorer and the restoration project disappeared leaving Al's Riley dream in limbo for over a year. One day Al received a letter of apology from the reluctant deadbeat and the address and key for a storage lockup in the San Fernando Valley. After paying back storage fees, Al was able to view what he still had. Funny how things work out but he not only found his car but an incomplete 1 1/2 liter saloon and a bunch of RM series parts unrelated to either car.

The body and chassis were loaded on a trailer and brought out to Riley Club member Hema Ratnayane's house in Altadena for refurbishment. Hema and his dad, T. D. have been active in the SoCal British car hobby for years building and collecting Morrises, Healeys and MGs but were deeply involved in RM Series Rileys since acquiring one about ten years ago. There, the body was removed from the chassis and the work began. Al, a retired engineer, would take care of the mechanicals and the Ratnayanes would rebuild the body and chassis. They are also restoring a drophead and Al will rebuild the mechanicals for them as well.

The chassis was sandblasted and powder coated while the body was checked for rot and damage. Though most of the wood was sound, the main timber sections down by the rocker panels that attach the body to the frame were rotted and needed replacement. When the body was ready to drop onto the frame, it was discovered that all of the rubber blocks, metal pins, and attachment pieces needed to be replaced as well so the job slowed down until the parts arrived. In the meantime, Al rebuilt the engine, retaining the original poured babbit bearings. The engine was first tested resting on its oil pan on the garage

floor and roared to life without a hitch! It's run well ever since. Al also rebuilt the best transmission, rear axle and brakes (remember, he got a few to choose from in the lock-up) and installed them on the finished chassis.

The finished and painted body was then installed onto the chassis. Al explained that this was quite a project in itself as the long, front-opening <sup>3</sup>suicide doors<sup>2</sup> required complete new wood framing and pretty accurate alignment and the wood framed body, even with new mounting hardware, needs to be shimmed and is flexible enough to make this a long and arduous process.

No less complicated was the fitment of the convertible hood (top) and cabriolet headlining. This had to go back to the trimmer three times before a proper fit was obtained. While the carpets were done in proper Wilton wool, the seating was covered with a <sup>3</sup>leather look<sup>2</sup> vinyl for durability and crispness of line.

The restoration took about four years to complete, partially because Al and Hema Ratnayane spent a lot of time looking for the <sup>3</sup>right<sup>2</sup> parts. John Kirby, the spares secretary for the RM Club in the UK was an excellent source for mechanical bits and Varlie Gordon from the US Riley club, who also lives in SoCal helped with advise, direction and letting Al <sup>3</sup>borrow<sup>2</sup> pieces off of his completed car to replicate. all of the body parts were plated and painted off of the car and were fitted as they were needed.

Al Edridge told British Car, <sup>3</sup> The experience of restoring this car was quite a challenge but well worthwhile. With the help of other Riley owners in California and the club in the UK, the project made me feel like I was part of a big <sup>3</sup>Riley Team.<sup>2</sup> It was a great car to restore, is fun to drive, and was a great way to meet the friendly group of Riley owners, both here in California as well as the British enthusiasts we met when we went to the Riley Centenary rally at Coombe Abbey in Coventry in 1996.<sup>2</sup>

#### Driving the RM Drophead

Before dropping into the driver's seat, it is almost mandatory to walk around the car at least three times to admire how it looks. Breathtaking from almost every angle, this particular Riley takes the true classic <sup>3</sup>look<sup>2</sup> one step further with it's two-tone paint scheme, tan hood and wide whitewall tyres. With the sun dancing off the well placed chrome trim and those wonderful landau irons it is truly a sight to behold.

Open the wide, rear hanging door and you will find a comfortable and inviting <sup>3</sup>Gentleman's Club<sup>2</sup> style interior that beckons you to sit, drive and bask in the glory of a time regrettably gone forever. All of the fine leather and fancy nomenclature in the world can't give newer cars this cache. This car is so imperial that you start looking for someone to conquer!

As I drop into the drivers seat and pull the long door closed we notice that the high sill and sleek tapering body takes up more interior space than anticipated and doesn't allow for that carefree, laid back , arm on the sill pose that American convertible owners so enjoy. This car is formal and never lets you forget it.

Everything about this car is familiar to me. That is because it was built during the Nuffield years and both of my personal favorite cars, the Morris Minor and the MGTD

came from the same firm at roughly about the same time. Switches, gauges and controls are a great combination of pieces found on both the MG and the Minor.

We hit the starter and the Riley burbles to life. The 2 1/2 liter engine is not as smooth as the Minor and it doesn't get RPMs like the TD, but it seems to trade torque for RPMs and has a very strong and unfussy midrange. It takes a while to get used to the car because it is as strange as it is familiar. It is heavy. It steers hard, it brakes hard and you are always shifting to find the sweet spot in the mid-rev area.

This was defiantly a car for the fellows. Once you get rolling, it lightens up quite a bit. The rack and pinion steering gets lighter without losing any directness and the suspension comes into its own when one masters the limited power range and gets the big ol' beauty scooting along. Imagine an MGTD combined with one of those early-1960s Mercedes 220 convertibles. The Benz is also a lovely car but needs the same type of constant encouragement.

Though sporting when compared with almost any mid-sized to large motorcar of the time, it is a bunch of work and could probably be outrun by the most mundane of modern econoboxes. The brakes on Al's car are the earlier hydro-mechanical units that were replaced mid-production with full hydraulic brakes. Al says that he plans to add these someday. He should - and soon. While the car will stop OK at lower speeds, it seems that one might get a hernia pressing the pedal and would have to prepare for a long wait to stop from speed.

What this car is REALLY about is how it looks. It is so beautiful that even the leftist of Communists won't take you to task for oppressing the masses as they would with a Rolls, a Jag or a Bentley. Even the hot rodders are blown away (though I expect they are also mentally fitting it with a small-block Chevy V8), and the general public isn't quite sure what it is but it must be something special and <sup>3</sup>it shore is pretty!<sup>2</sup>

Once prodding the reluctant performer is mastered, it becomes second nature to drive and is quite a sweet car indeed. Though they are not all that expensive to buy (value about \$20 - 28,000 in good shape), they are quite rare. Since only 500 were built, finding one that doesn't require the work that Al and the Ratnayanes put into this one is not all that easy. This is s special car for a special person. It is a car that all T-Series MG owners should especially experience because it will show exactly what a big postwar MG saloon would have been like if they had ever made one.