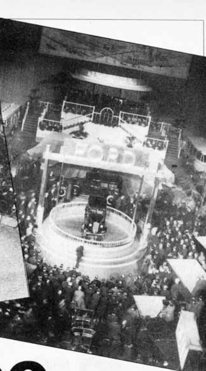


The £100 car

It fulfilled a motor trade dream — but the cars that sold were the more expensive versions

By Andrew Whyte

THE NAME of this particular game in 1982, according to the newspapers, is Car Wars. In other years it has been given other names but, whatever its guise, the Price Cut has always been the biggest single car sales inducement.

Half a century ago came one of the most important discoveries. No longer was the motor car exclusive. The family of average means was looking beyond the starkness of the motorcycle and side car and the spindly cyclecar. Slump or no slump, the car was part of everyday life.

For the British, the Austin Seven had been showing the way since 1922. Then, Sir Herbert had launched his famous baby to go on the market at "£225 or perhaps a little less". That initial price actually turned out to be £165, and comparable with the more expensive motorcycle combinations.

Simple and soft-topped it might be, but the Austin ruled the roost without a rival throughout the mid-1920s. Triumph had a try with their £149 10s Super Seven tourer in autumn 1927 but, wisely, didn't pare down the specification to face Austin head-on. By now, the Austin Seven tourer was down to £135; and, more significant still, a fabric-bodied saloon (either from the works or from Mulliners) was brought in at £150.

While Triumph (later influenced by the energy and sporting instincts of young Donald Healey) moved into different territory, Austin gained a much more serious rival in Morris Motors, whose acquisition in 1927 of Wolseley had added strength to the rather vulnerable-looking Morris empire in the short term. The skilful diplomat within the growing "Nuffield" organisation was the sales director, Miles Thomas; when the Morris Minor first appeared, in 1928, he realised that his boss's insistence on matching Austin's price of £130 for that year's basic tourer must present problems. Simplicity had remained Austin's keynote; now came the first small Morris with, of all things, an ohc engine inspired by the Hispano-Suiza aircraft unit which Wolseley had manufactured during the great war. "It gave," noted Lord Thomas in his autobiography, "sparkling but, to say the least of it, delicate performance . . . The first Morris Minor was a troublesome baby."

Customers complained, too, that birds would peck through the stretched fabric skin of the saloon to collect wadding with which to line their nests. Morris had saved on tooling; Austin, however, was still one step ahead in introducing a metal-bodied saloon.

Both marques entered the new decade with sabres drawn. Each could boast excellent economy in terms of normal running costs; even with 100 extra c.c., the Morris was rated similarly to the Austin for tax purposes which related "horsepower" to engine bore. (The Morris's bore and stroke were 57mm and 83mm; the Austin's 56mm and 76mm). If anything, Morris was ahead in terms of an overall range; but it was lagging at the cheap end.

Austin's tourer was down to £122 10s for the 1930 London Motor Show. "Clearly we needed a more rugged and less costly Morris Minor (*wrote Thomas*) . . . By paring everything down to the minimum, and by cutting the profits to ribbons, the £100 two-seater car became a possibility."

While the ohc models were to continue for a couple of years, the conversion of the 847 c.c. Morris engine to side-valve operation made the newest Minor not only cheaper but more reliable; but Miles Thomas was not misled by the interest aroused by the £100 Morris which had no bumpers or sidelights, just one wiper blade, and a painted radiator shell. "It was an interesting exercise in consumer preference that although attention was undoubtedly attracted to the Morris Minor by the fact that one *could* be purchased for as little as £100, the actual buyers wanted something that showed that they had *not* bought the cheapest product offered. And so everybody was happy. No one wants to keep down with the Joneses!"

Announced in the first week of January 1931, the £100 Morris was given rave reviews. *The Autocar* was no exception: "The hundred-pound car may be described as the Philosopher's Stone of motor car

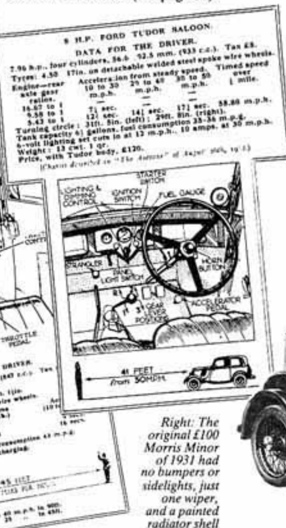
The £100 car

continued

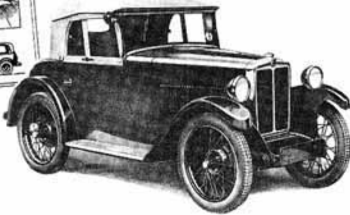
manufacturers . . . Sir William Morris has started off the New Year in a sensational and agreeable style by offering up-to-date small car transport which cannot fail to attract many thousands of recruits to four-wheel motoring." There was something, too, in what the *Daily Herald* said: "Four years ago this same car could not have been produced for twice the price."

The little two-seater soft-top was supplemented in the new Minor SV range by a van at £110, a fabric saloon at £114, and a coachbuilt saloon at £119.

For 1932/33 the £100 Morris was still listed; but the principle outlined by Thomas applied more than ever. The 1932 ohc Morris Family Eight long-wheelbase model was offered simultaneously at £152 10s, and there was an even more costly "cheap" car, the Family Eight Sports Coupé at £175. In between came the car which most people bought – the Morris Minor SV sliding-head saloon (modernized for 1932) at £125. For several years now I have owned a Minor SV. It has just celebrated its fiftieth anniversary with a test-run for *Autocar* (see page 86).



8 H.P. FORD TUDOR SALOON.
DATA FOR THE DRIVER.
7.96 h.p., four cylinders, 56.6 × 92.5 mm. (933 c.c.). Tax £8.
Tyres: 4.50 × 17in. on detachable welded steel spoke wire wheels.
Engine—rear axle gear ratios. | Acceleration from steady speed 10 to 30 m.p.h. | 20 to 40 m.p.h. | 30 to 50 m.p.h. | Timed speed over ¼ mile.
16.57 to 1 | — | — | — |
9.58 to 1 | 7¼ sec. | — | — |
5.43 to 1 | 12½ sec. | 14½ sec. | 17¾ sec. | 58.80 m.p.h.
Turning circle: 31ft. 5in. (left); 29ft. 8in. (right).
Tank capacity 6½ gallons, fuel consumption 33-36 m.p.g.
6-volt lighting set cuts in at 13 m.p.h., 10 amps. at 30 m.p.h.
Weight: 13 cwt. 1 qr.
Price, with Tudor body, £120.



Right: The original £100 Morris Minor of 1931 had no bumpers or sidelights, just one wiper, and a painted radiator shell

The mid-1930s meant a transition for Britain's volume manufacturers. The £100 Morris had been a watershed. People demánded value; yet sales demonstrated clearly that neither the fabric body nor the open body could justify modern mass-production techniques. Only an enclosed metal four-seater could do so.

Austin, however, made sure of getting in on the £100 act in 1934, by prolonging the flat-radiatored Opal two-seater on the Seven chassis, but it was even more a defiant symbol of the times than the equivalent Morris had been. While Austin and Morris fought tooth and nail, and while *their* supposed opponents were finding a special niche elsewhere or going under, another company was coming nearer than any to providing family motoring for an outlay of £100.

In January 1932, officials of the English Ford company neither confirmed nor denied the following Reuter message: "Twelve 'baby' Ford cars were secretly shipped to England a few days ago, reports the *Michigan Manufacturer and Financial*. The cars, the paper states, are less than 10ft long with a bumper width of 55in., height 53in., and a four-cylinder engine 11in. long (*one can see the furtive tape-measuring*). It is presumed that the new baby cars will serve as models for the production of bantam Fords to compete with small European models, and will be turned out in large numbers at the Ford works at Dagenham and other European branches."

Until then, Ford's Manchester plant had been turning out right-hand-drive versions of the American T and A models, the only concession being a tax-beating 14.9 hp model called the AF. Now there was Dagenham, the vast new complex on the Thames estuary, organized by Sir Percival Perry – the man who'd set up Henry Ford in Britain in the century's first decade. Ford were not considered as a possible choice by the aspiring motorist; not, that is, until a fanfare of trumpets died away and a white sheet was slid decorously from the black (but yellow-lined and yellow-wheeled) 933 c.c. orthodox saloon that was secret the centrepiece of Ford's own Motor Show which opened at the Albert Hall, London, on Friday, 19 February 1932.

Until then, also, Austin and Morris owners needed to pay only £8 road tax, whereas Ford folk were stuck with £24 for the regular Model A or £15 for the special British 15 h.p. model. In February no price was fixed for the new car; Sir Herbert Austin was an early arrival at the Albert Hall on opening day, nearly 10 years on from the introduction of his Seven.

The speed with which Britain's first American small car came good was remarkable, in view of the production effectively being lost while the new production facilities were being constructed. The purchase manager of Ford UK at that time was Patrick Hennessy; his recollection was that: "No-one outside really knew how bad the situation was; we would pay off one supplier and then another, keeping the secret successfully." In retrospect, the speed with which Ford's 8 h.p. Y model was brought into production seems miraculous. Nearly 8,300 of them were produced during that introductory period up to the end of 1932. In 1933 Y output from Dagenham was almost 33,000, which represented more than half Ford's UK output. Austin and Morris were sharing the majority of the UK market between them, 56 per cent of it being divided almost equally. Ford, however, were now approaching 20 per cent, thanks to the Model Y.

1934 probably tells the story better than any other year, though. More than half the 8 h.p.-or-under cars sold in Britain that year were Fords!

Austin and Morris both reacted. Austin pioneers of the British small car, came up trumps late in 1934 with their "modern" Seven, the Ruby saloon. This was to be supplemented by the Pearl cabriolet and, finally, by the Big Seven. The latter was *not* a good idea, and brought the fabulous Seven concept to an abrupt close with the arrival of the Austin Eight – Leonard Lord's first success for Austin. This was a somewhat ironic state of affairs, since Lord's ability as a production engineer had had a lot to do with the Morris Minor's success until he'd fallen out with Morris in 1936.

Before his move from Cowley to Longbridge, however, Lord had helped set Morris on the right road, too. The first Morris Eight (to use that simple terminology) coincided with the Austin Ruby's arrival at the Olympia Show of 1934. It was an unashamed copy of Ford's Y type and hit the charts at £118 in its most basic form. Claude Baily, formerly of Anzani and later to be chief designer at Jaguar, was the man responsible for drawing up a new Morris engine following the dismantling and measuring of a Ford unit by the Morris inspection department. Meanwhile, Ford had counter-attacked. For the 1936 and 1937 seasons, the Ford Eight (or Y-type Popular) was pegged at £100 on the UK market!

War intervened, so one cannot speculate further. One can only observe what happened. Ford continued to sell their cleverly simple Eight and its adaptation, the Ten as the Anglia and Prefect well into the 1950s; Ford, as always, have developed in their own way.

Of the two Britishers in this story, Morris moved first after the war with the brilliant Issigonis Morris Minor. Later Austin reintroduced that most successful of names – the Seven – but quickly changed it to A30 to fall into line with post-war Austin practice. The Austin-Morris small car line has, of course, been brought up to date with the Mini and the Metro.

When Ford brought out their new Eight in the autumn of 1937 at £117 10s, no-one could have imagined that neat but distinctly upright shape continuing in production right through the early postwar years to 1959; yet it was so.

Was the £100 car a reality? Well – Austin and Morris production methods of the 1930s *did* enable them to produce a basic open car for that price. They were not popular models, though. Their merit was in the more luxurious and more expensive variants to which they drew attention, like the one I have now. Ford's four-seater saloon was the only real contender but Ford were big, in world terms, by then. They risked two years at £100 (*not* £99 19s 11d! – that was for your used-car trader), and sold over 150,000 Y-types as a result, averaging 30,000 units a year.

In the past I have enjoyed many miles of exploratory motoring in the Ford-inspired 1935 Morris Eight, so I know what I should be changing up to; on the other hand, by running my 1932 Morris occasionally I am reminded what it was all about in the days when cars really were put together by hand.

If this were the mid-1930s, however, and I was being drawn into Ford's annual Motor Show in the Albert Hall (Dagenham eschewed Olympia and Earls Court for many years) the Y would have wooed me before Morris, Austin, or anyone else had made a move . . . □