WOLSELEY'S WARM WORLD—*COURTESY POPULAR CLASSICS OCTOBER 1989*

Wolseleys may not be remembered for their ability to spark off flows of adrenalin, but they are valuable souvenirs from a lost world of subtle taste and respectability. Nick Larkin drives two of the best examples into a time warp

Wolseley's

Wolseley is a word that conjures up not just a make of car, but a whole world of warmth, respectability and cosiness. Sadly, this lifestyle, like the vehicles, has to a large extent disappeared.

Long khaki-coloured raincoats, winding gravel drives, copies of the *Radio Times* reposing on armchairs, carrying previews of *What's My Line* and *Educating Archie*, endless summer afternoons with the gentle aroma of honeysuckle, and tea in bone china cups at 3.15. They're definitely all in the World of Wolseley.

So are stout, red-faced police constables and their "sarge", whose work is composed mainly of directing traffic (not battling with lager-sodden yobs outside the village hall at midnight); menswear shops with dark varnished interiors, huge brass tills and the smell of mothballs; litter-free pavements, municipal pride and home-made muffins.

The World of Wolseley spanned no particular years, although it peaked sometime between Vera Lynn and the Beatles. It could be found in comfy semi-detached suburbs, or quiet villages with olde worlde inns serving proper beer in tankards, never additive-ridden fizzy brews with foreign-sounding names.

Contrary to what history tells us, there was no rationing in those days. People were ill occasionally, but soon cured by motherly NHS nurses in hospitals where all babies were born smiling cherubs, and a new operating theatre could be supplied merely by a doctor filling in a form.

The World of Wolseley was a pleasure to drive in. Cocooned in an oasis of wood and leather, one progressed steadily along perfectly surfaced roads, with villagers raising their hats when they saw you. Lorry drivers, the true gentlemen of the road, would wave you past with a respectful flourish of the hand. All buses and coaches had polished chrome radiators and ferried people mostly to the seaside.

It definitely all existed. There's living proof in 1950s films from Ealing Studios and car sales brochures (or should I say catalogues?), the latter featuring vehicles full of beaming passengers.

Full appreciation of this one-time earthly paradise can only be gained by putting yourself in the position of a typical Wolseley owner: "experienced, discerning travellers who will have nothing but the best," according to Wolseley literature. Who could resist taking up the opportunity of test driving a Wolseley with this invitation from the manu-

Wolseleys waiting faithfully for their owners outside a homely hostelry

The World of Wolseley spanned no particular years, although it peaked sometime between Vera Lynn and the Beatles

warm world

facturer? "Let your hands, on the steering wheel, pilot this prince of motorcars precisely, safely, proudly."

We set out to find surviving traces of the World of Wolseley. Transport was provided by two of the best examples of "the car with its name in lights", as Wolseleys were often known because of the company's trademark, an illuminated badge on the radiator grille.

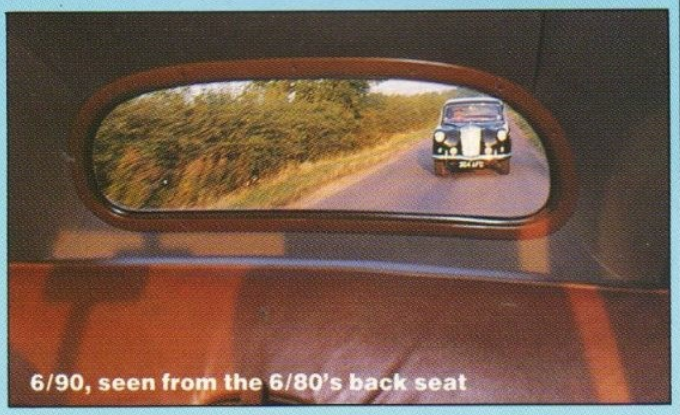
Gerry Harrison's immaculate 1952 6/80 is in Moonstone Grey, which, to those who cannot appreciate quality when they see it, appears to be beige. Voted the best 6/80 at this year's 6/80 and MO Club annual rally, the car has 61,000 miles on the clock.

The second Wolseley, a 1955 6/90, must have travelled into the late 1980s by time capsule. A mere 6,000 miles have been clocked up, and the car scarcely sports a blemish. It's one of eight Wolseleys owned by mechanic Mick Martin. The car originally belonged to Robert Kennerley Rumford, husband of opera singer Dame Clara Butt. The couple probably acquired the car as they were neighbours of Lord Nuffield, head of the Nuffield organisation which owned Wolseley and Morris before the merger with Austin to form BMC in 1952.

Nearly 25,000 6/80s were built from 1948-52, as part of a three tier range of Nuffield cars, all bearing a family resemblance to the Morris Minor, the smallest constituent of the group. Mid-range cars were the 1½-litre overhead cam Wolseley 4/50.

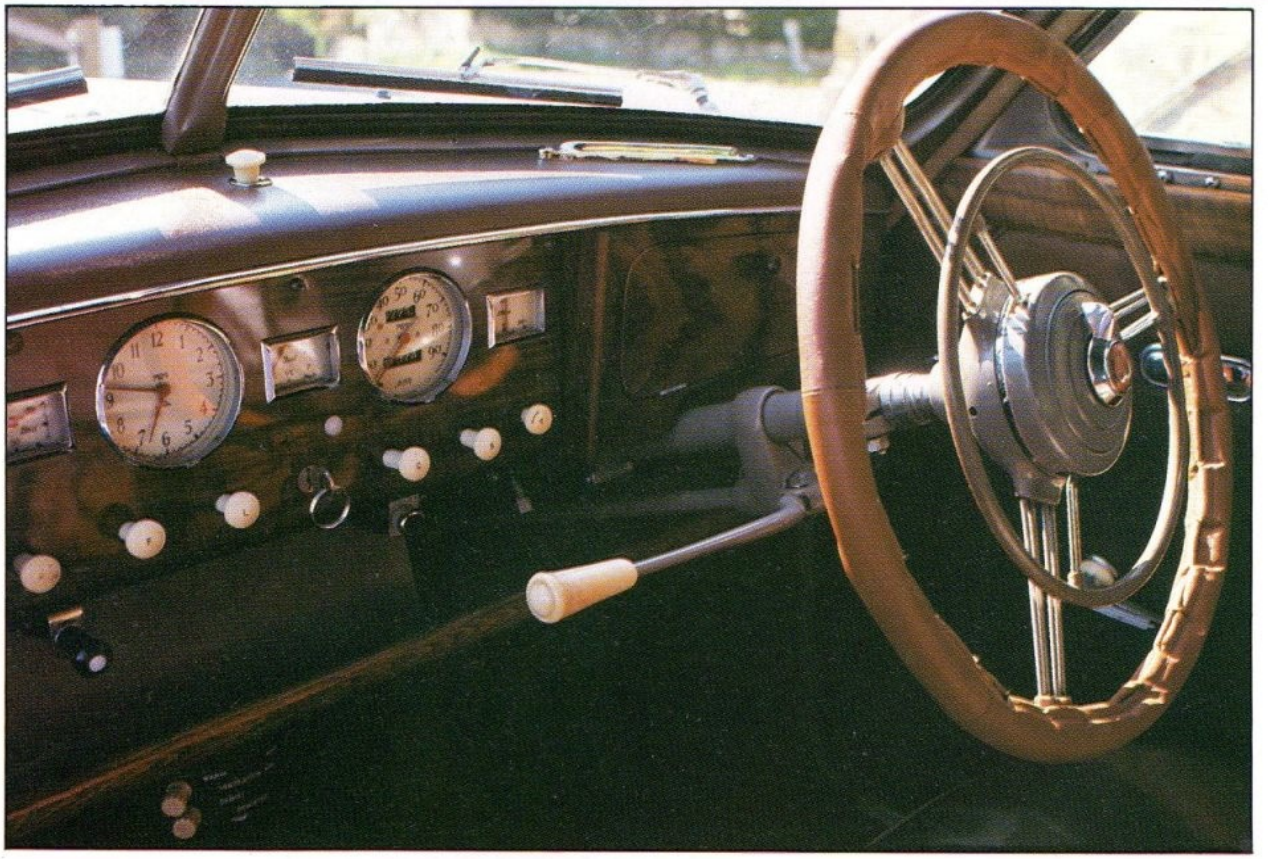
The 6/80 and its sister car, the Morris Six, towered over their siblings, the Morris having a less luxurious though still high quality interior, a different grille from the traditional Wolseley one, and a single car-

Six-Eighty making spirited progress



6/90, seen from the 6/80's back seat

Imposing enough to make Buckingham Palace look like a garden centre – the traditional Wolseley radiator



A split windscreen, column gear-change, tasteful instruments and wood veneer are all in the 6/80. Could you want more?

burettor instead of the 6/80's two. Both cars shared the same 2,215cc overhead camshaft power unit, said to have its origins in aircraft engines once built under licence by Wolseley. This had its fair share of problems, particularly with excessive valve consumption, a number of modifications being made in the car's production life. Most owners have had their cars' valves hardened by a stelliting process, which has at least slowed down the rate of wear.

The 6/90, replacing the 6/80 in 1954, was well and truly a BMC product, although surprisingly it had a separate chassis instead of the earlier car's unitary construction. Its bodyshell was shared with the Riley Pathfinder, successor to the RM. The car had a 2.6-litre BMC C series engine, which eventually found its way into the MGC. By the time production ended in 1958, only 11,800 6/90s had found owners.

So our sample two cars were excellent weapons in the fight to recreate our World of Wolseley. Location was equally important. By a stroke of luck, both owners live in East Sussex settlements which don't support glitzy takeaways and concrete town centres. Many parts of this area, particularly the backwaters, are still definitely suitable Wolseley haunts, despite there now being a horribly modern Arndale shopping arcade in Eastbourne.

Both cars look exactly as if they had been driven from the set of a fifties B-film. The *Scotland Yard* series, narrated by Edgar Lustgarten and recently repeated on Channel Four, is definitely and completely Wolseley. Stiff upper lips, atrocious acting and fearless police officers pervade. The series was made from the early fifties to the very early sixties, so we get 6/80s in the earlier versions and 6/90s in the later ones. And both in the *Popular Classics* photo session.

The 6/80 was sampled first. Strangely, the car has a bench seat, usually fitted only to export models and those Morrises, but apparently original in this Wolseley. In the days of post-war shortages and export drives, specification anomalies often occurred.

The doors resemble those on the Minor, but are much bigger. Clamber inside and look out through the split windscreen, with its miniscule wipers: the bonnet, which has two side openings, seems to stretch out to infinity. There's the flying W badge visible on top of the radiator, and the wings fall away pre-war style.

The tasteful facia is flanked by two veneered glove compartments. There are gauges for fuel, oil pressure and amperage, but no temperature indicator. A row of cream-coloured knobs operates the lights, starter, wipers, heater fan and instrument panel light. The chrome-spoked steering wheel has a switch in its centre to operate the trafficators, and a full horn ring.

A turn of the starter, and the Wolseley roars into life with an uncharacteristic burst of rawness. There is also pronounced transmission whine when moving off, but the engine itself is wonderfully flexible, picking up speed happily in top gear from 20mph. The power unit sits well down in its bay and looks as if it may have come from a small ocean liner.

The 6/80's column shift is more precise than many, and the clutch action reasonably light. Cornering is an art to be mastered quickly if you don't want to view the World of Wolseley from upside down: trying to throw this vehicle into bends is like attempting to cuddle a guard dog. You have systematically to feed the wheel through your hands, while maintaining a constant speed as you coax the car round. Perhaps police 6/80s were only so successful in cops and robbers chases because they were specially fitted with anti-roll bars over the back axle.

Yet there can be few cars more satisfying to master than the 6/80. Glances at the car's reflection in shop windows as you make stately progress, can persuade you to believe everything Wolseley ever said about this being a Prince of motorcars.

The 6/90 boasts an early version of the BMC 2.6 C-series engine

The faster it goes, the more elegant the 6/90 seems

The Cars

Wolseley 6/80

Built	1948-54, 24,886 Series I and II
Engine	2,215cc ohc six
Top speed	80mph
0-60 mph	24.4sec
Mpg	20-22
Weight	24 cwt

Club: The 6/80 and MO Club, John Billinger, 67 Fleetgate, Barton-on-Humber, North Lincs DN18 5QD

Wolseley 6/90

Built	1955-59 5,776 Series I, 1,024 Series II, 5,052 Series III
Engine	2,600cc ohv six
Top speed	94mph
0-60mph	18.1sec
Mpg	21
Unladen weight	28.75 cwt

Club: The Wolseley Register, G Watson, 6 Ezard Street, Newtown, Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland TA19 0BZ

"Both cars look exactly as if they had been driven from the set of a fifties B-film"

The 6/80's styling is an odd mixture of pre and post-war trends. There's a traditional radiator grille, and the bonnet is divided into two centrally hinged side-opening sections. From the rear, the car could be a Morris Minor, from the side an overgrown Minor and, from the front, a limousine.

Gerry Harrison's 6/80 has eyelids fitted over the headlamps, which add to the period feel of this particular car. Trafficators may have commanded respect in the World of Wolseley, but in 1989 you have to supplement them by shoving your arm out of the window in a most undignified fashion as an additional pointer to wild modern motorists.

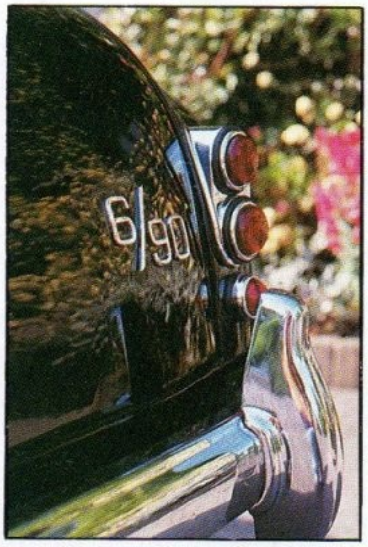
Now to the 6/90. This example almost defies description. A glance at the number beginning with six on the mileometer and you're lost for words: the car's interior, the carpets, the headlining, the door seals, everything is like new. On most restored vehicles there's some irreplaceable item which is a bit tatty. In this car, there's nothing.

Two Wolseley illusions are, however, shattered by 304 AFC. Firstly, there are a few minor blemishes on the paintwork, which are original features. I always thought all Wolseleys came out of the factory without even a whiff of imperfection, but then the cars were sprayed by hand. Apparently this particular car was part of an experiment to see what a black 6/90 with a white roof would look like. Wolseley, or rather BMC, weren't impressed, but minor traces of that white paint are preserved for posterity.

Secondly, and equally numbing to the senses, this Series 6/90 has a perspex-covered dashboard which looks more like something from a contemporary radiogram or wine cabinet than a Wolseley. It's also dominated by a huge chrome grille which resembled an overgrown cheese grater. There is a wood surround, wonderful deep red leather upholstery, and a rather cute drawer, but that dash is perspex and it *is* in a Wolseley. I know the instrument panel in the 6/80 has a woodgrain-effect metal covering, but there are limits.

It is some consolation to know that later 6/90s reverted to the normal woodgrain. I can only assume this temporary perspex flirtation was caused by evil BMC henchmen, who later gave in to pleas from brave Wolseley craftsmen.

This car must have been stored with the utmost sympathy. It is as near as you can possibly get to driving a fifties' car in the fifties. Even the tyres are original, as I realised when I gingerly took the wheel. Basically the car is irreplaceable — it's not good news to learn that there are only about 20 known survivors of the 6/90, one of which is being restored by this car's present owner, Mick Martin.

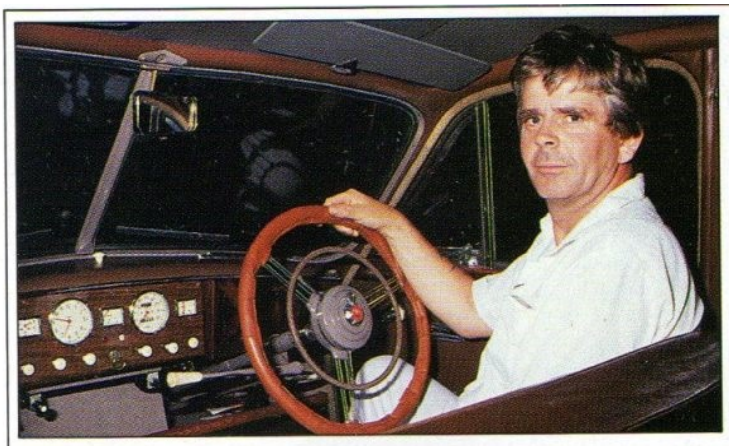


Six is the number of cylinders, 90 the model

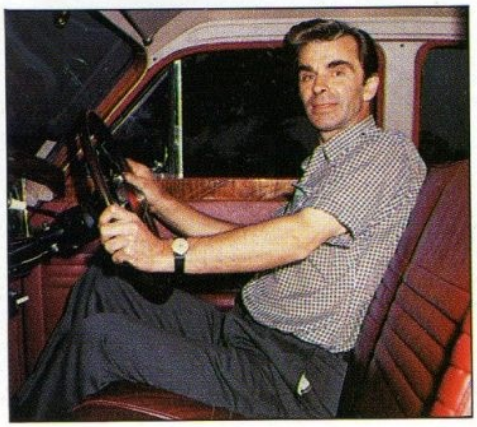
I began thinking about that tatty 1930s Mercedes 500K sold for £1.6 million at Christie's last year. Surely Mick's Wolseley, with its untarnished originality, is in many respects more valuable? I so wanted to drive this car, yet I wondered if I should. What if I was going round a bend and there were two hot hatch drivers playing at racing driving coming in the opposite direction? What if we parked the Wolseley and a lout ran along the side with a 2p coin?

Yet it was impossible to reject the offer of driving it — I would have felt like one of those record company bosses who rejected the fledgling Beatles. Incredibly, the engine is even more flexible than the

A Wolseley 6/80 in summer ... it could be 1952 again



Gerry Harrison (above) is a concours winner with his 1952 6/80; Mick Martin (right) has pledged to keep his 6/90's mileage below 10,000.



Watching the 6/90 through the 6/80's rear window is a surefire trip to times past

able speed to find the road-holding definitely seemed tighter than with the 6/80, although some body roll was evident. The suspension gives a softer ride, too, which is wholly in keeping with the car's character.

The 6/90, with its slab sides and relatively flat bonnet, appears much bigger than the other Wolseley. I was expecting it to have the floor change gearlever on the right of the driver's seat, for which the model was well known, but this car had a column change, although the gate is a mirror image of the 6/80's.

Mick has owned this Wolseley for three years. he also has two 6/80s which he admits are his preference. "It's the noise and the shape of them," he says.

The 6/90 was acquired from an elderly admirer of his 6/80, a hoarder of lawnmowers and percussion organs, who invited Mick to see his collection. "Later he said he had a Wolseley, and it turned out to be this one. He'd bought it at a sale ten years ago and carefully stored it," Mick recalls.

A few weeks after seeing the car, Mick bought it, not for the price of a heap of rot and filler, but for £2,000 less than an offer from someone the owner did not feel would be such a suitable custodian.

"It was a one-off opportunity, though I'm a bit paranoid about using the car," he admits. He has promised himself not to take the mileage over 10,000, although the car has made a couple of long distance trips to rallies.

So, did the World of Wolseley re-manifest itself during our photo session? We just about managed it. Guess who asked to be driven in the back of both cars? Watching the 6/90 on the road through the 6/80's small rear window is a surefire trip to times past. I began having delusions that I was Fabian of the Yard. Thank heavens I wasn't wearing a hat, or I'd probably have jumped out and tried to arrest someone.

The 6/90 almost retains the smell of a new car. If you sprawl on the back seat with half closed eyes, every Nissan Micra you see changes as if by magic to an Austin 8. Happy Eaters become Lyons Corner Houses, you can peer through windows at people watching black and white television pictures, and double yellow lines are swept away to be replaced by cobbles and tram tracks.

Oh well, all good things come to an end, and it's time to return to *Popular Classics* Towers. You fall off the edge of the World of Wolseleys at the first sign for the M25, I'm afraid □

Death by badge-engineering

Wolseleys were among the first cars to be built in Britain, although the company's origins can be traced to the unlikely source of the Wolseley Sheep Shearing Machine Co of Australia. Here began the career of one Herbert Austin, an English immigrant who became general manager of the British car manufacturer.

By the outbreak of World War One, Wolseleys were Britain's best selling cars, with around 3,000 a year being built.

Sales took a tumble in the 1920s, and in 1925 the company collapsed to be taken over by Morris.

From then on, the seeds of badge-engineering were sown, with the Wolseley Minor. The new mid-thirties' range of cars was Morris based, though more luxurious and often with increased power.

Pre-war style models remained in production until 1949, when the Nuffield Organisation, as the Morris-controlled empire had then become, introduced its post-war range. There were the Morris Minor, Wolseley 4/50, Morris MO Oxford, Wolseley 6/80 and the similar Morris Six.

In 1952, Nuffield and Austin merged to form BMC. New Wolseleys kept on coming, including the worthy 4/44 of 1952.

BMC's own engines found their way into Wolseleys in the mid-1950s. The 6/80's successor, the 6/90 of 1954, used the C Series unit, and a B series was put into the 15/50 introduced in 1956.

Many Morris Minor parts went into the Wolseley 1500 of 1957-65. Wolseley versions of standard BMC stock continued with the 15/60 and 16/60, badge-engineered variants of the Farina saloon. The Hornet was a Mini variant, and the 1800 "landcrab" range had a Wolseley in its ranks.

By the 1970s, Wolseley buyers were limited to landcrabs or a variant of the 1300. In 1975, the name was killed off by Leyland though not before a lingering death in the form of a short-lived Wolseley version in the wedge-shaped Princess-range.

1969 version of the 18/85 MkII landcrab