

Our
**FAVOURITE
CARS**

Nick Larkin

WOLSELEY 6/80

It's official: these are the cars we'd most like to have in our garages



Nick Larkin knows the Wolseley 6/80 doesn't rival the Bentley Continental or Hispano-Suiza, but it's still his personal choice

CALL me a bigot, warped nostalgist or Man of General Bad Taste, but if there is one car I'd genuinely like to see in my garage more than any other it would be a Wolseley 6/80. A black one.

Picking ten favourite cars, never mind one, is difficult. When head teacher Hodder

demanding my list, the original draft had 29 definite candidates.

Whittling down that total meant total self-honesty. The result isn't my list of the ten all-time greatest cars, but personal favourites – not the same thing.

So why the Wolseley? Well, it's not easy to say, but it's a mixture of looks, incredible

sound, and the way the car captures more than any other the spirit of the best aspects of the post-war era.

Drive one of these cars for half an hour, peering through that small split windscreen, along that magnificent bonnet with the Wolseley badge parading proudly in front of you, you genuinely feel transported back to

Black beauty

Photos by **Glyn Barney**



another time. The effect is more pronounced, more real, than with any other car.

These cars ooze early-fifties suburban hospitality, solidity and safety. Acacia Avenue, stripey lawns, honeysuckle, home baking, larders, barley sugar sold by white-coated independent grocers who sliced cheese on marble slabs. Sorry, I've been reading *Picture Post* in bed again!

Of course this era wasn't so good if you had rickets and lived in a slum, but for the average person there was an improving

present and hope for a better future.

No British black-and-white fifties cops-and-robbers B-movie was complete without a 6/80 being on hand to scoop up assorted criminals just before the credits rolled.

The first time I saw 6/80s was in such a film, *Town on Trial* I think, which begins with two cars roaring towards the camera and screeching to a halt. I did not view

Wolseley 6/80 was familiar to a generation of motorists – and film-goers – as favourite transport for the police



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◁ from the stalls of the local Ritz in 1957 – it was at least 20 years later on BBC2!

By this time 6/80s were extremely rare – in fact today there are probably 200 at most in serviceable condition, so it was quite a time before I saw one at a rally and discovered it was even more impressive in the metal.

I know the connection between the Morris Six and MO Oxford, but I can't really think of a more striking looking, yet restrained car.

From some angles, a 6/80 is almost breathtakingly beautiful, from others it's less so. Try looking at one from low down, head-on (top tip: it's advisable that the car is not moving at the time) or from directly side on – or from above. The styling is instantly distinctive, a bizarre cross between pre-war elegance and Morris Minor. That vast, magnificent, side-opening bonnet doesn't quite match the post-war wings.



That tiny rear window and huge roof. The doors which look like a Minor's photocopied larger. And, of course, the Wolseley radiator badge which lights up at night.

The 6/80's bodyshell was one of the most solid ever seen on a car. The metal is as thick as short planks and you could run trains over the crossmembers.

Mechanically, the car is equally impressive. What a wonderful engine: vast and looking as if it was hewn in a single piece from

Superb 6/80 is owned by John Martin of the Isle of Sheppey. It's one of the best of maybe 200 cars left in roadworthy condition worldwide

solid metal. You can almost believe it powered the Queen Mary, or perhaps a small town.

The air filter looks like a utensil for boiling potatoes and sits astride twin carbs the size of lemonade bottles.

If that engine looks wonderful, the sound the car makes is absolutely mind-numbing. A full-blooded crescendo of roar-cum-howl, aided and abetted by rich gear whine and a booming turbine-like finesse at speed. They could make records of this and sell them!

The 2.2-litre engine is also technically interesting. Overhead cam, it was reputed to have been inspired by an Hispano-Suiza aircraft unit, which Wolseley once built under licence. This car never ceases to amaze. For the record, the cam is driven by a vertical shaft with split gears, which also drives the oil pump and distributor.

Anyone can forgive this unit the odd burnt valve or three, which gave it a bad reputation. Owners tend to have the valves stelled, which ends the problem.

Torsion-bar front suspension and twin telescopic dampers give the car an exceptionally smooth, comforting ride, which you appreciate as you perch proudly on the leather 'Dunlopillo'-filled seats, grasping the slim steering wheel which seems almost an afterthought judging by the solidity of the rest of the vehicle.

That's just part of the uplifting experience of driving a 6/80. Those sounds are amplified by the cathedral-like size and acoustics of the passenger compartment.

Despite its association with police chases, the Wolseley is





'Who could resist driving around dressed as Fabian of the Yard?'

I hasten to add that, set up properly, a 6/80 is a reliable machine, and the 6/80 and MO Club provides help and infectious enthusiasm often beyond the call of duty.

So, to sum up, the 6/80 symbolises an era and a largely lost society, yet is aesthetically and technically interesting. With its police connections, a whole generation of motorists shuddered when they saw the Wolseley's radiator grille in their mirror. And one or two still do!

Ignore the car's history, and you're still left with a technically interesting, memorably styled and extremely

charismatic machine. Who could resist putting an original Winkworth police bell on your 6/80 and driving around dressed as Fabian of the Yard?

Having owned and, with help from assorted sources, restored a 6/80, I know all these things are true. That car was not the most original example, and three years ago it was sold to finance elderly bus rescues, a situation which I felt at the time was the ultimate sacrifice. I'm still trying to find a basically original, reasonably priced car. I would certainly never part with it. Help, there's one out there somewhere! ■

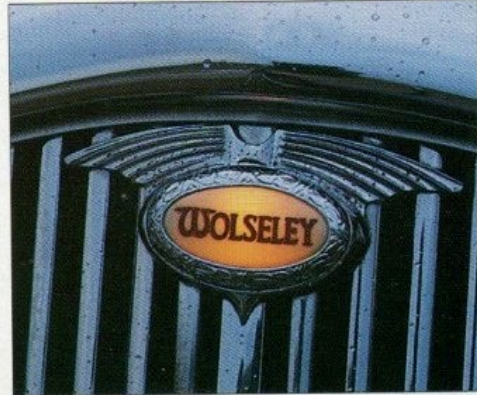
not the world's biggest lover of bends. There's a need to coax the car gently into them, feeding the steering wheel through your hands methodically. Ironically, the car seems to corner better the faster you go, remaining carefully within its limits of course.

Driving the car at night is a further aspect of the 6/80 experience, the 'flying W' radiator mascot shining in the glow from the headlamps and the dull illumination from the instrument panel bathing the inside of the car like candlelight. By day, the instruments look like a collection of ancient travelling alarm clocks thrown together, with a row of white Bakelite knobs lined up like sentries beneath them.

There's nothing quite like the interior odour of a fully warmed through 6/80, a mixture of aged leather and carpet, hot oil, and what I'm sure is Wolseley's own secret perfume.

Everything about the car is solidly made and usually big with it, like the starter motor which, with its unusual clutch mechanism, is a work of art in itself.

If you own one of these cars, you learn to love the spares, too. Well, you spend long enough trying to find the darned things so you might as well appreciate them!



★★★★ Nick Larkin's Top Ten ★★★★★

- Wolseley 6/80
- Bentley 8-litre
- Austin Cambridge Farina
- Rover 20 tourer
- Maybach Zeppelin
- Rover P4
- Austin A40 Somerset
- Jaguar XK140 fhc
- Riley Kestrel (1935-'38)
- 1951 Chevrolet Fleetline

THE Le Mans Bentleys have fired my imagination since childhood. 'Bentley Boys' at Brooklands – wish I'd been there. The thunderous 8-litre pips the supercharged 4 1/4-litre to the post. A 70-year-old car capable of 100mph!

Liking Austin Farina Cambridges is not a cause for sympathy, as someone has just suggested. I've always loved the shape, sound and sheer friendliness of these reliable and sturdy saloons. And I'm not apologising.

I'd love a pre-war tourer. The Rover 20 is beautifully built and the styling approaches perfection. They're also highly usable cars with a sporting touch. What more could you ask?

More than 200 Maybach Zeppelins were built over ten years in the same factory as a certain



airship, and using a closely related 7978cc V12 engine, weighing more than a ton! All this in a conventional chassis. Try manoeuvring one of these in Sainsbury's car park!

Like the 6/80, the Rover P4 has no real equivalent. My favourite has always been the post-'Cyclops' 75 before it gained the rear-end 'bustle', but all P4s are wonderful, built with the best materials available, and with superb engines.

I've always loved all the chubby, curvy, friendly 'Counties' series Austins, and the Somerset is perhaps the most pretty, though the Devon, Hampshire and Hereford all nearly found themselves on this list.

Just about all the pre-Mk 2 Jaguars are firmly rooted in the Larkin affections, and the XK140 fixedhead is probably the ultimate in design and practicality. Prettier than the drophead?

Pre-war Rileys have a unique character – sporty, with great engines and wonderful styling. The six-light Kestrel looks as if it's travelling at 70mph when it's standing still!

The Chevrolet Fleetline of 1951 wasn't the most innovative or distinctive automobile America ever made, but its styling sums up 20 years up to 1955 when US stylists consistently produced stunningly beautiful cars.

Had I not been banned from having two cars placed equally at Number 10, the 1936 Lincoln Zephyr V12 would have been on the list, too.

