



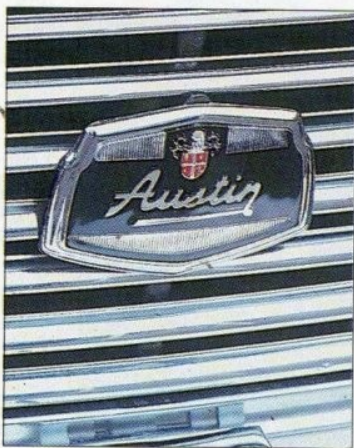
BMC's 'big Farina' Austins and Wolseleys don't tend to come to mind when you think of cars boasting luxury and performance. But they had surprising amounts of both, as Nick Larkin discovers. Would you still want to buy one?

THEY were designed by one of Italy's most respected stylists and most were loaded with best English walnut and leather. They were good for around 100mph, their performance figures closely matching those of the Mk 2 Jaguar (well, the 2.4-litre variant, anyway). They were, however, much more simple and economical to run.

Folding armrests and deep-pile carpet added to the air of opulence, and, as with Coventry's finest, if you wanted power steering and picnic tables, you could have power steering and picnic tables.

Like Jaguars, the cars we're talking about had their own sense of dignity, character even, and were good motorway cruisers.

Yet today you can buy an



excellent Farina-bodied Austin Westminster or one of its sister cars, the Wolseley 6/99 and later 6/110, for probably a tenth of a Jag's price.

These big BMC products are still very much forgotten when compared with their equivalents, but there are very few cars of their time which boast more inviting or more comfortable interiors, or which offer the same performance combined with ease of maintenance.

Their six-cylinder engines are normally untemperamental – almost unburstable, in fact – and their body structures are equally straightforward, with most rot being easy to detect.

A family resemblance to more basic Austin Cambridges and Wolseley 16/60s has further robbed these cars of mystique. Unlike their rivals, you'll rarely find one on a prestige dealer's forecourt.



HISTORY

FARINA'S clean-cut styling swept through the BMC range in the late fifties, replacing what were then considered rather dumpy machines with a new, modern look. The smaller Austin A40, together with the medium-sized Cambridge and its badge-engineered derivatives, had already had the treatment, so it wasn't

surprising that the larger saloon range followed suit.

The result was the Austin A99 Westminster and Wolseley 6/99, which appeared in summer 1959. The Austin replaced the previous A95 and A105 models, now generally known as 'pre-Farina' types, and the Wolseley followed on from the separate-chassis 6/90 and virtually identical Riley 2.6, which wasn't directly replaced.

Both the new cars were

Big brothers

Photos by Glyn Barney



mechanically identical, but the Wolseley was considerably more luxurious inside. The poor old Austin had to put up with painted metal dashboard and door cappings, while the Wolseley had wood. The cars also had different grilles and side mouldings, the Wolseley boasting its traditional illuminated badge and also two spotlights.

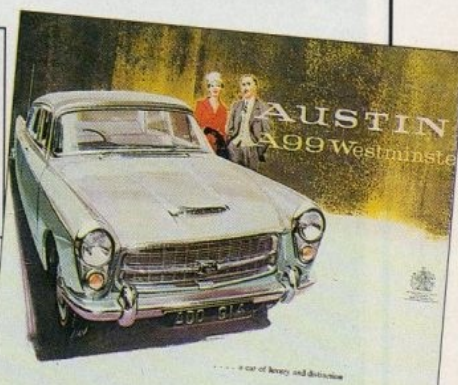
That didn't stop BMC's brochure describing the A99 as

'These big BMC products are still very much forgotten'

'a car of distinction, for people of distinction. The Westminster cannot fail to grace the most auspicious occasion'.

Both cars shared the BMC

C-series engine, which had been increased from 2.6- to 2.9-litre capacity. They also boasted independent front suspension, front and rear



'The four doors are hinged on their leading edges', boasted Austin proudly of the A99

anti-roll bars, twin carbs and servo-assisted front disc brakes. Transmission was a choice between three-speed manual, with overdrive on the top two gears, or Borg-Warner automatic.

In 1959, a Wolseley would have set you back £1255, compared with £1149 for the Austin. Both cars sold equally well.

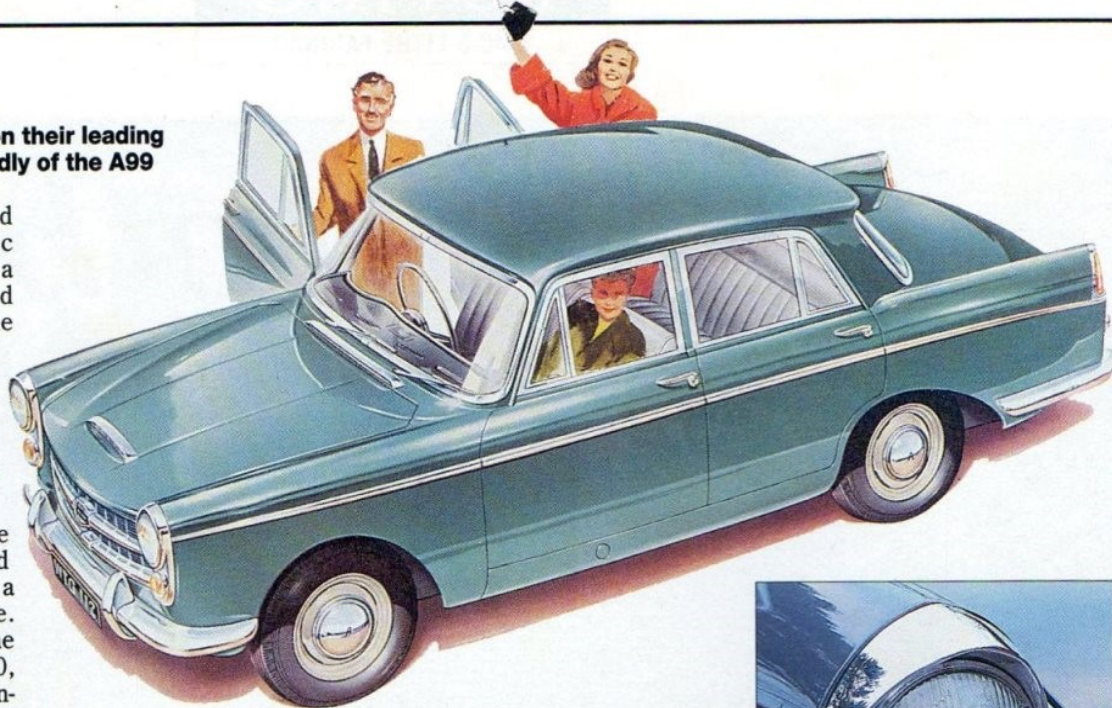
In autumn 1961 they were succeeded by the A110 and Wolseley 6/110, which had a two-inch longer wheelbase. Careful tweaking of the engine raised bhp from 103 to 120, thanks also partly to a new twin-bore exhaust system. Manual cars were switched from column to floor 'change. The Austin's radiator grille was changed and the fascia treated to a wood-grain finish.

Throughout the early sixties these cars were aimed at the wealthy middle classes, with brochures featuring them in optimistic office-block surroundings, accompanied by statements such as: 'For the business executive or the professional man, there is no finer combination than exists in this superb Wolseley, of intrinsic worth and prestige value.'

A Mk II version of both cars followed in 1964, the bodysell being lowered by 0.6in and telescopic dampers being fitted, along with 4in longer rear springs and larger discs.

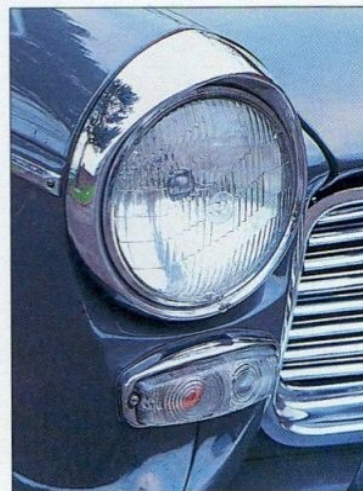
Manual cars now had a four-speed manual gearbox, but with overdrive becoming optional rather than standard. Power steering was on the options list.

The A110's dash layout was changed, and a new variant appeared, the Super Deluxe,



Right, good-sized boot and low sill make these Farinas practical cars

Bottom, 3-litre C-series engine is massively built and usually lasts very well



'A rotted Big Farina is a waste of time and money'

which gave the Wolseley a run for its money with wood veneer and picnic tables. But the basic Westminster now had pvc seating, no armrests and no clock. Adding to the confusion, a De Luxe Westminster, slotting between the two, reared its head in early 1965, but only lasted a year or so.

After that, the cars continued unchanged until 1968, when the Wolseley said goodbye in March, the Austin lasting until October.

The new Austin 3-Litre replaced both cars, without a Wolseley to keep it company.

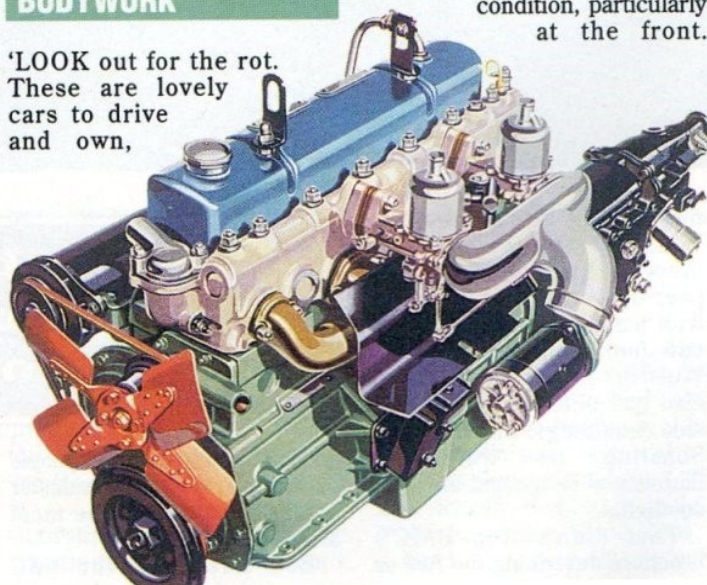
but only if you get a sound example,' says Neil Eyres, of what is arguably Britain's best-known Big Farina specialist, Eyres Auto Repairs of Heanor, Derbyshire (tel 0773 719504).

He has a point. A rotted Big Farina is a waste of time and money unless you really have a love of restoration and spending money. Having said that, most of the corrosion is easy to spot. Start with the front wings, which rot out around the headlights, below the sidelights and along the rear edge next to the front doors.

Then look under the car to check the inner wing condition, particularly at the front.

BODYWORK

'LOOK out for the rot. These are lovely cars to drive and own,



While you're there, carefully scrutinise the chassis frame under the front footwells, which can be further checked by lifting up the carpets. The rear wings can corrode around the wheelarches and lower edges.

The sills are a major rot source, the outers along their bottom edge and the inners where they join the floorpan. Be particularly careful to check the area where the sills meet the rear wheelarches.

Outriggers, both front and rear, can rot, as can the area around the rear spring hangers. Both front and rear valances must also be given the once-over.

Now, under the car, look carefully at the main chassis rails, checking along their entire length. Also vulnerable are the bottoms of the doors, and sometimes the bonnet shut channels.

You'll be extremely lucky to get new original body panels, though these do turn up among club members occasionally.

Eyres supply a good range of remanufactured panels and repair sections. Sample prices include outer sills for £36, and a section to replace the area around the headlamps for



£29.95. Replacement front wings are available in two sections, lower and upper, costing £169 each. For the rear wings, there's a wheelarch area repair panel for £29 and a lower section one at £49. All prices are plus VAT.

Outriggers and chassis repair sections are available, and Eyres also buy and sell original BMC panels when these are available.

Be warned, the bodyshell has little in common with the smaller, similarly styled Farinas. Many a person has discovered too late that, despite first appearances, Austin Cambridge doors do not fit the Westminster!

RUNNING GEAR

UNLESS you do something very silly with a C-series engine, it's going to see you good for 150,000 miles at least. A professional rebuild would cost you around £1000, though parts are reasonably priced. Eyres will do you a set of pistons for £180 and rings are £14.95 a set. A reconditioned exchange engine is £1150.

When worn, these engines spout oil from the crankcase breather pipe, and you'll get a lot of piston slap, low oil pressure and excessive blue smoke from the exhaust if you blip the throttle. Worn engines

can plod on for a long time, though, given the odd oil well or two to keep them going.

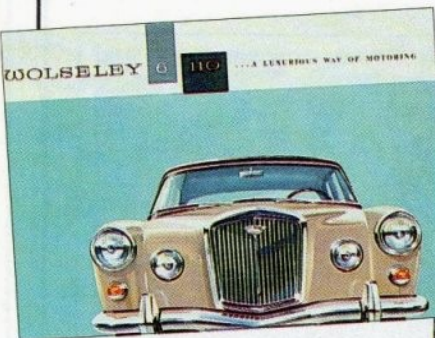
It's unlikely you'll find a replacement engine in a scrapyard, but there are still cars around which are good mechanically but appalling elsewhere, and these can be picked up very cheaply.

Vulcan Engineering in London (081 579 3202) will convert your cylinder head to unleaded, and recondition where necessary for around £250.

Gearboxes also last well, a manual replacement costing around £250 on exchange. Automatic 'boxes are also durable, but should change smoothly. Check the fluid: if it's black or dark brown the 'box is



Austin A99 had plain metal dash, but later A110 gained wood veneer, above left. Wolseley was notably more luxurious, above



most likely past its best.

If the car feels 'soggy' to drive, the dampers, which have their work cut out, may be past their best. Worn kingpins and bushes are other possible culprits. Replacements are reasonably priced. Eyres are offering kingpins, with bushes, for £65 and stub axles at £85. Dampers are around £17 each.

The front suspension must be kept properly lubricated otherwise rapid wear results to kingpins and trunnions.

So, mechanical spares are reasonably cheap and available, meaning it would still be worth looking at a car needing work but with a good body.

INTERIORS

IT would cost a small fortune to have one of these cars retrimmed professionally, and an excellent interior is a major

plus point when looking at a car. Luckily, they are renowned for their hard-wearing fittings, so it shouldn't take too long to find a car with a reasonable interior.

Club members tend to hoard secondhand interior panels, and advertising for what you want could well get results.

But a car which looks as if a pride of lions has been let loose inside will mean a lot of hassle if you're ever going to make it respectable to sit in.

WHAT TO PAY

AN extremely good example shouldn't relieve you of any more than £2000 at the most and, if you're lucky, one could land in your lap for £1500 or so.

A good runner in reasonable condition is going to be around £1000, and something with an MoT but work on the horizon will be yours for £600-£700.

Major restoration projects will be a couple of hundred pounds, if no-one's nicked the engine as spares for their Austin-Healey.

There tends not to be too much difference between Austin and Wolseley prices. The early Austins are now very rare, though this isn't necessarily reflected in their price.

CONCLUSION

FEW cars offer better value in today's market than these

big Farinas. They're well built, practical and, even today, good motorway cruisers, particularly in overdrive form.

They're torquey, sturdy, and will seat six in roomy surroundings, and even take most of their luggage in an enormous boot.

The Wolseley and Westminster Super Deluxe will in particular put you in the lap of luxury for little money, and without doubt have a certain dignified charisma.

But what you must do is make the effort and find a good one. Cars which have had one dotting owner for much of their lives do occasionally come on to the market, and it's worth paying more for one of these.

A car that's merely OK isn't going to be much cheaper than a good one.

All right, so grouping a BMC Farina with a Jaguar may be like comparing Food Giant with Fortnum and Mason - or is it? Few cars of this size offer so much with so few vices!

SPECIFICATION

	Wolseley 6/99 Austin A99	Austin A110 Wolseley 6/110
Built	1959-'61	1961-'67
Engine	6-cyl ohv	6-cyl ohv
Capacity	2912cc	2912cc
Bore/stroke	83.3mm x 88.9mm	83.3mm x 88.9mm
Max power	102.5bhp @ 4500rpm	120bhp @ 4750rpm
Max torque	158lb ft @ 2000rpm	163lb ft @ 2750rpm
Transmission	3-speed manual plus o/d, or automatic	4-speed manual plus optional o/d, or automatic
Suspension	Front: ind, coil and wishbone, anti-roll bar Rear: semi-elliptic leaf springs, anti-roll bar	Front: ind, coil and wishbone, anti-roll bar Rear: semi-elliptic leaf springs, anti-roll bar
Steering	Cam and lever	Cam and lever
Brakes	Disc/drum with servo	Disc/drum with servo
Length	15ft 8in	15ft 8in
Width	5ft 8in	5ft 8in
Max speed	98mph	102mph
0-60mph	15.8sec	14sec
Fuel cons	17-25mpg	17-25mpg

