THE WOLSELEY 1500

Road-test shows this new B.M.C. saloon to perform briskly and possess good controllability. High gear ratios and a splendid gear-change amongst the outstanding features of this small luxury car.

B.M.C.-WOLSELEY — A side-view of this brisk new four-door 1½-litre luxury saloon.

At the conclusion of a 400-mile week-end with the much-discussed Wolseley 1500 saloon we formed a high opinion of this new small car. The B.M.C. has succeeded in combining above-average performance and good handling qualities in a compact four-seater luxury saloon.

To engage with performance, the high gear ratios will appeal to enthusiastic drivers. For example, bottom gear can be used to pep up the initial acceleration instead of being regarded as an emergency ratio, and a useful indicated 55 m.p.h. will be reached by a fast driver on the high third gear before the keen owner contemplates changing into top gear. Some road-test reports quote the third gear maximum as 72 m.p.h. but this requires a very long run and 60 is a more practical figure, although acceleration tails off so much above an indicated 55 m.p.h. that this is likely to be the normal "peak" used in this gear. The indicated maxima on the other indirect gears before valve bounce intrudes are 28 and 45, respectively. The little Wolseley will reach over 77 m.p.h. in top gear given a sufficiently long run, but more useful is its ability to cruise at the mile-a-minute gait with its 1½-litre engine turning over at just under 3,250 r.p.m.

Because high gear ratios are employed, the gearbox has to be used freely to maintain a good average speed and upper-end acceleration is not particularly impressive, 13.6 sec. being required to go from 40 to 60 m.p.h. in third gear, for example, and 26.7 sec. being needed to make 50 m.p.h. in top gear. However, not many small saloons do as well, and in the Wolseley gear-changing is such a delight, thanks to the delightfully placed, short, rigid central lever and the smooth positive action of the selectors, that frequent use of the lower ratios is encouraged. Conversely, the Wolseley 1500 is quite capable of top-gear pick-up from 20 m.p.h. in this 3.73-to-1 ratio being achieved without distress. Up to 50 m.p.h. the pick-up is extremely impressive, taking only 16 sec. from rest. In considering the high gear ratio against any small deficiency in acceleration; also that the Wolseley is quite a heavy car for its size.

When cruising at moderate speeds the engine is pleasantly quiet but use of the lower gears results in a good deal of power-roar, which is a pity, because the indirect gears are reasonably quiet. The back axle whines, which is disturbing on a new car, although normally inaudible in competition with engine noise. Returning to the entirely delightful gear-change, it has the added merit of an easily-selected reverse gear, a pat with the hand overcoming the safety spring, so that the box might have been designed with rally-tests in mind. Alas, the B.M.C. shortcoming of a bottom gear difficult to engage has not been eliminated.

Brisk performance is matched by excellent handling qualities. The rack-and-pinion steering is accurate, entirely devoid of lost-motion, and light in action, with ample castsor return. It transmits some kick-back and vibration, however, and the dished wheel not only looks out of place in this expensively-appointed car but is unnecessarily large, so that rather higher gearing would be an advantage; 2½ turns are required, lock-to-lock.

The handling characteristics are reminiscent, naturally, of the Morris Minor, the chassis specification being virtually the same. The Wolseley corners very nicely, but enterprising drivers will find it rather too flexibly sprung, so that on tight, fast corners it leans on the outer back wheel, this roll-angle tending to push the nose of the car inwards. It is a pity that the generally outstanding road-holding is thus somewhat impaired and perhaps the B.M.C. will have second thoughts about adopting anti-roll bars. On less acute bends the little Wolseley corners delightfully and with little or no tyre necessary. It certainly deals with up-and-down movement easily promoted by bad surfaces and encouraged, it seems, by the weight of the old-fashioned rigid back axle on its flexible soft leaf-springs. Over rough road the suspension "bottoms" and the 14-in. tyres fall into pot-holes with noisy thuds.

The splendid gear-change is matched by a rather flimsy but excellently-placed central pull-up hand-brake. The pendant pedals are also flimsy but well-centred. The driving position is a rather unhappy one, alert but not particularly comfortable. This is because the driver sinks too deeply into his otherwise comfortable, snug bucket seat and because the car's modest dimensions result in a "sit-up-and-beg" attitude. Each front bucket seat adjusts easily after a red beneath the front of the cushion has been raised, but the squabs are severely upright. Leg room for the front passenger is limited by an over-vertical foot ramp. The seats are nicely upholstered in duo-tone leather/leathercloth. The 44-in.-wide back seat has no centre armrest but there are armrests on the back doors. A sense of luxury and well-being is imparted to the Wolseley 1500 by the use of a genuine polished-wood facia and wood screen sill, matched by polished-wood door fillets. There is a useful lidded (but not lockable) lined cubbyhole each end of the facia, the cubby-lid opening with a pleasant action. Instrumentation is confined to two matching Smiths dials, the left-hand one comprising combined water- and oil-pressure gauge and fuel-contents gauge, the other a speedometer incorporating total and trip (with decimal) miles, headlamps full-beam window and dynamo-charge window.

These are neat instruments, the only criticism being that, when cruising in the 45-55 m.p.h. range, the trip mileage reading is slightly obscured; that, far from being dazzling, the full-beam light is very subdued; and that the fuel gauge reads merely "E-1/3-F". Oil pressure was normally 50 lbs. sq. in. and water temperature remained constant throughout the test.

Minor controls consist of neat buttons, three on the left of the facia looking after dash lighting (no rheostat), wipers and lights, two on the right controlling choke and starter. In the dark, considerable fumbling results from these similar knobs set in a line, and always it is necessary to reach over uncomfortably far in order to flash the headlamps. The screen wipers self-park, but do so on the driver's side of the screen, and we prefer an ignition-key which also operates the starter. The direction-flashers are operated by a convenient stalk on the off side of the steering-column, its knob incorporating the reminder light. When signalling a left turn this lever follows the driver's cubby-lid if this has been left open. With so much gear-changing called for to maintain acceleration, we would prefer a hand-controlled lamps dipper.

Visibility is excellent forward, both front wings being visible and the bonnet, which will be its most ungainly a dummy filler-caps and Wolseley winged motif, being quite short. Sideways visibility is somewhat hampered by sloping screen pillars. The trailing doors have folding metal "pulls" and neat concealed ashtrays. The
horn button in the centre of the deeply-dished wheel is somewhat awkward to reach, a shortening emphasised by its strong spring, which prevents a gentle warning being given easily and usually results in a loud unpleasant “ bleep ” from the dual hooters.

If radio fitted—the test car had an excellent H.M.V. set—the speaker neatly fills the space between the two dials. The test car also had a very efficient, but noisy, Smiths heating and demisting unit, controlled by two sensibly-labelled quadrant levers on the facia. This heater is an extra and it seems ridiculous, in 1958, for anyone to market a saloon car which does not have a heater as standard equipment. One snag on the Wolseley is the width of the unprotected screen heating ducts, which easily swallow pencils, pieces of cheese and such like, especially as the wide screen sill is likely to be used as a temporary shelf.

The doors lack pockets, and what appears at first to be an underfacia shelf is found to be merely a poorly-padded stiffening bar—that it is padded at all is rather droll, because just above it the unprotected base of the wooden facia protrudes. The screen sill, however, is extremely well crash-padded. Behind the back seat is a convenient parcels shelf, sensibly recessed for the firm discipline of small objects.

Equipment in this well-appointed little car includes twin sideswelling anti-dazzle visors (not, however, transparent, nor is madame encouraged to make-up in hers, no mirror being fitted), ½-ventilator windows in the front doors (without, however, thief-proof catches), pile carpets, and a roof-light operated automatically as the front doors are opened (but not by the back doors, and its switch is out of reach of the near-side passengers).

Both front doors lock. Bonnet and luggage-boot lid prop automatically, but both are heavy and the boot lid, which locks, is rather flimsy and shuts (like the doors) with a “ tinny ” noise. The driver’s door refused to open at the first movement of the handle. The spare wheel is carried separately from the luggage under the decrepitoomely boot.

The windows in the front doors can be fully opened with two turns of their handles; the rear-door windows call for ½ turns and do not wind down entirely into the doors. Underbonnet accessibility of dip-stick, Lucas battery, 45-deg. S.U. carburettor with its A.C. air-cleaner, Champion plugs, and Trico solvent-filled screen-washer is good but the heater tube masks the ignition distributor and brake fluid reservoir.

Coming back to the behaviour of the Wolseley 1500 on the road, its good handling and brisk performance are in keeping with its luxury-class appointments. The Lockheed brakes are entirely adequate without being outstandingly powerful and they normally call for very light pedal pressure. Apart from a rubbing noise when very lightly applied, these progressive brakes were completely vice-free. The clutch action is also light, but care is necessary to avoid judder when starting from rest. There are some body rattles, which, on the car tested, included an irritating one from the front passenger’s seat while this was unoccupied.

The WOLSELEY 1500 SALOON

Engine : Four cylinders, 73 by 89 mm. (1,489 c.c.). Push-rod-operated o.h. valves. 7.2 to 1 compression-ratio. 59 b.h.p. at 4,290 r.p.m.

Gear ratios : First, 13.56 to 1; second, 8.25 to 1; third, 5.12 to 1; top, 3.73 to 1.

Tyres : 5.00 by 14 Dunlop tubeless on bolt-on steel disc wheels.

Weight : 17 cwt. 3 qtr. 21 lb. (without occupants but ready for the road, with approximately half a gallon of petrol).

Steering ratio : 2½ turns, lock-to-lock.

Fuel capacity : Seven gallons (range approximately 218 miles).

Wheelbase : 7 ft. 2 in.

Track : Front, 4 ft. 2½ in.; rear, 4 ft. 2½ in.

Dimensions : 12 ft. 8 in. by 5 ft. 6½ in. by 4 ft. 11½ in. (high).

Price : £530 (£396 7s., inclusive of purchase tax). Price, with extras as tested, £662 10s., inclusive of purchase tax.


The 1,489 c.c. engine runs smoothly, shows no trace of running-on and cannot be made to “ pink ” on good petrol. It started promptly and ran with minimum use of the choke after the car had spent a night out of doors in a heavy December frost, but when idling some tappet noise intruded. No oil or water was necessary in 400 miles and fuel consumption worked out at fractionally better than 31 m.p.g., driving moderately fast. Thefiller cap, in the off-side rear wing, is attached to the filler but is a pretty crude affair. It is just about possible to fill from a can in an emergency, but unless the hose of a petrol pump is fully inserted, blow-back occurs.

At night the Lucas headlamps provide a very powerful but rather too-concentrated driving light; the cut-off beam is unhappily restricted. The traditional Wolseley radiator-badge illumination is retained.

The appearance of the Wolseley 1500 is enhanced by two-colour finish, in a choice of seven different combinations, but, if desired, it can be had in any one of six single colours. From one angle the car looks a bit like a grasshopper about to hop, which may not appeal to everyone. The tool kit is comprehensive and includes a starting handle.

Altogether we were very favourably impressed with this B.M.C. permutation. Those who require a car which combines Morris Minor characteristics with considerably enhanced performance and additional luxury equipment will stop searching after trying the Wolseley 1500. Its price is a modest £530, which purchase tax inflates to £796 7s., but, as tested, with heater, radio and screen-washers, the price increases to £862 10s.—W.B.