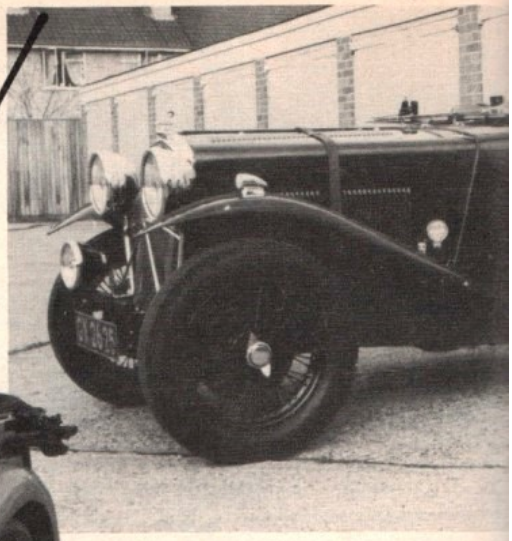
“HORNET SPECIAL” - *T & CC SEPT 1975*

Wolseley Hornet Special

Abbey Coachwork created this Abbey Sports on the 1934 12HP chassis; note the typical Hornet headlamp mountings and sloping grille



Above, Eustace Watkins' 14HP Sportsman's S bodied Hornet Special 1934

THE years 1914–18 found Wolseley Motors Ltd engaged in the manufacture of aero engines, of which the most famous was the Hispano-designed overhead cam (ohc) Wolseley Viper fitted to the SE5a, the fastest fighter of the time. The experience gained on this engine undoubtedly influenced the company in their decision to make an ohc 10 horsepower car soon after the First World War. This was the fore-runner in 1922 of the Wolseley Hornet and MG in that it began the association with engines of ohc design that was so long a feature of these cars. This 10 horsepower sports model, which was marketed for only a short period, was capable of around 70mph, and was much faster in single-seater form at Brooklands where it was known as the Wolseley Moth.

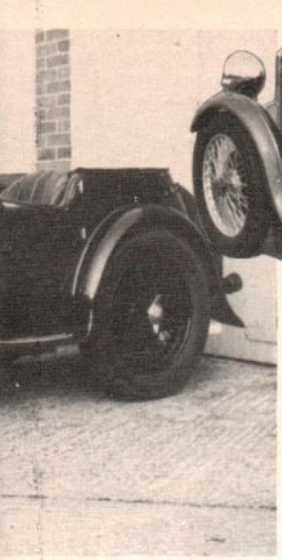
Following from this in 1928 Wolseley produced the "E6" 2025cc, later known as the Viper, this engine (which was raced at Brooklands) being the direct forefather of the engine produced in 1930 known as the vertical dynamo Hornet. In fact the 1930 engine is practically a photo copy of the Viper, the main differing features being a seven bearing crankshaft in the Viper whilst the Hornet carried four, and the Viper having a bore of 65mm and stroke of 101mm in relation to the Hornet's 57mm×83mm, giving 2025cc and 1271cc respectively.

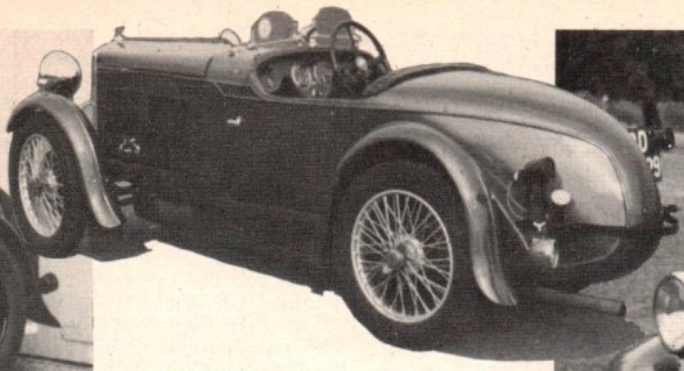
At this point one must retrace interest to the merging of Wolseley Motors Ltd in 1927 with Morris Motors Ltd and the associated MG Ltd controlled by Cecil Kimber, forming the new company Wolseley Motors (1927) Ltd, part of the Nuffield Organisation. From this in 1928 came the Viper, in 1929 the Morris Minor and MG Midget. 1930 saw the Wolseley Hornet, the latter being directly derived from the Wolseley Viper. The parentage of all these engines was the experience gained by Wolseley Motors Ltd back in 1914–1918 in developing the Hispano-Suiza aero engine. So we have now in 1930 a thoroughbred one-make engine, the Hornet.

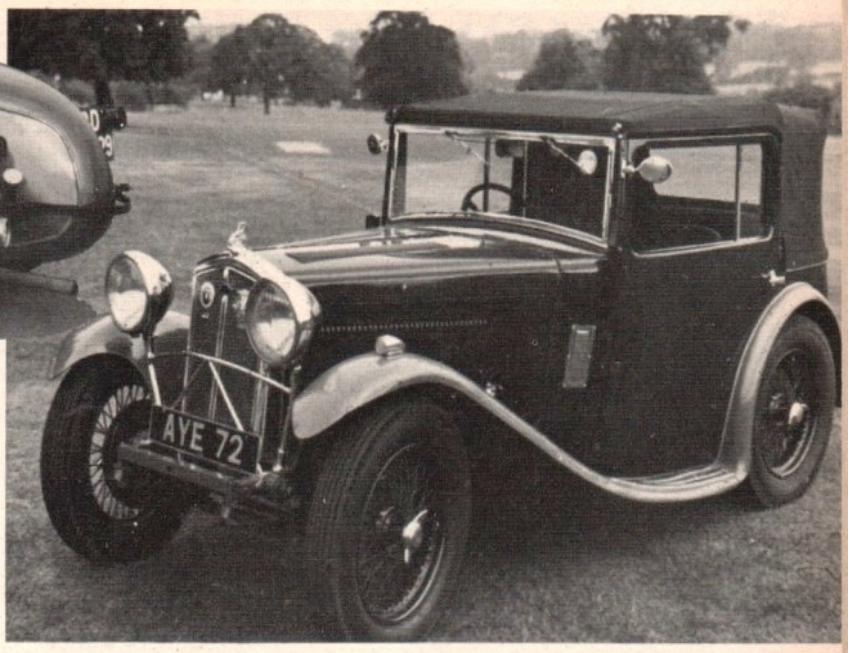
The Hornet six was announced in *Autocar* of April 1930. To quote . . . "Hitherto the problems of giving an almost 100% top-gear performance has been solved through the use of a big engine. In other words, the man who wants to travel fast and to eschew the use of the gear lever has been forced to accept a car with a relatively large engine – and consequently one rather expensive to run – in order that the power-weight ratio may be sufficient to deal with changing conditions of road and traffic, without frequent recourse to the lower gears. In the Wolseley Hornet the power-weight ratio exists all right, but, incredible as it may appear at first sight, the top gear performance is attained with an engine of no more than 1271cc.

"From an actual examination of a Hornet chassis, it will be agreed that quite irrespective of price it is in every way a high grade production, and there will doubtless be innumerable people who will sigh to have the chassis fitted with something quite special in the way of coachwork. (In fact within only a few months coach-builders were offering various styles of coachwork for the enthusiast.) Such people will be disappointed, not because the coachwork is unworthy of the chassis, but because it is the intention of the makers not to allow the chassis performance to be clouded by overloading (the total weight of the coach-built saloon was 14cwt 2qr). It is not a question of the chassis not being sufficiently strong to carry much heavier and more highly finished coachwork than is being standardised, but, as has been made clear at the commencement of these notes, the whole aim is to produce a small, light car, inexpensive in cost and upkeep, to give a top gear performance comparable with practically any other type or size of car on the market. (Later Special chassis had a guarantee that was valid if the coachwork gave a total weight that was within a stated limit.) The makers therefore, are standardising a compact two-door four-seater fabric-covered saloon. The price of the fabric saloon is £175, and there is an alternative coach-built model at £185."

By the middle of 1930 coach-builders were already at work producing special bodies for the Wolseley Hornets. June: a two-seater tourer by the Hoyal Body Corporation (1928) Ltd with a fixed windscreen and a flat rounded tail. July: Gordon England was offering a very pretty beetle-back two-seater tourer and a saloon model. By the end of the year many coach-builders were offering alternative coachwork for Hornets; for instance, Hill and Boll, Coventry Motor and Sundries Ltd, Eustace Watkins Ltd, Avon, and Swallow Coach Building Co.

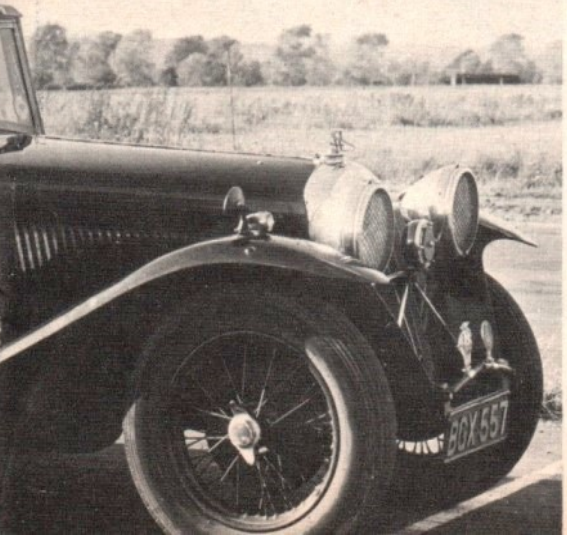






Left, 1933 Eustace Watkins' Daytona Sports. Above, 1932 Swallow-bodied sports two-seater. Right, Eustace Watkins' Tickford coachwork on a 1933 Hornet Special. Below, the 1933 Meredith Trinity (three cars in one) Special

935; below, Jensen-



Left, Eustace Watkins' 1934 Silex Coupé. Above, 1932 Hornet Special with Maltby coupé. Right, 1933 Abbey sports two-seater

Wolseley Hornet Special

Before continuing to 1931 it must be understood that the Hornet was sold to the coach-builders as a complete car, thus, if one were to look at advertisements of the period, numerous brand new Wolseley Hornet saloon bodies would be seen for sale.

In the tenth month of 1930 Wolseleys, due to popular demand by enthusiasts and coach-builders alike, allowed coach-builders to purchase the Hornet in chassis form only. Thus 1931 found the Hornet being sold as a running chassis to coach-builders. In September of this same year the following changes took place; the ohc was no longer driven through spiral-bevel gears and a vertical dynamo shaft; instead a twin-roller chain drive was adopted: the clutch remained a single plate fabric-faced dry type, but had been increased in size, and a four speed gearbox was fitted instead of one providing three speeds. This new box employed helical-toothed gears for constant mesh and third speed, so that a silent third was provided, and is a delight to use! The track was increased from 3ft 6in to 3ft 9in, the gravity petrol tank was dispensed with, and a conventional rear-mounted tank was fitted. In addition to this a "chassis only" intended for export or supply to specialist body-builders was available. This had a longer steering column inclined at a more convenient angle and having a spring-spoked steering wheel.

Author's note: it is worth mentioning that a Eustace Watkins International sports in standard trim lapped Brooklands at 76mph for 30 laps, approximately 90 miles.

And so to 1932 when in February of that year the Wolseley Company made an official presentation of a brand new Wolseley Hornet, the 9000th car of the type to be built, to the fortunate winner of a competition which they inaugurated at the Olympia show.

On 8 April was proclaimed "The New Wolseley Hornet-Special – Introduction of a Speed Chassis for the Enthusiast". A number of detailed changes were introduced, thus, new pistons had been adopted to raise the compression ratio to 6–1, and the increased engine revolutions were countered, so far as the valves were concerned, with duplex instead of single springs. As a maximum it was desirable that the engine should not be permitted to exceed 5000rpm and a red mark on the tachometer emphasised this fact, which would give approximately 80mph in top gear. Also an oil cooler was fitted to ensure a supply of cool oil for continuous all-out running. A remote control gear lever extension, Hardy Spicer joints at each end of the prop shaft instead of fabric ones, brake drums increased from 9in to 12in, and a choice of either Magnæ or Rudge-Whitworth wire wheels. Twin carbs were a standard fitment. The first chassis of this model, Chassis No. 1, Batch 65 was in the possession of the author of this article, and was in daily use.

In August of 1932, the Motor Show for the 1933 programme found little change in the Wolseley programme except for the following. The radiator badge on the saloon was now illuminated, the Special chassis retaining the black enamel badge, cylinder liners of hardened centrifugally cast-iron replaced the previous type, and the centre pinion of the double chain drive to the ohc now ran on rollers.

For 1934 the camshaft drive was changed to single chain with a Reynolds spring tensioning device. The engine embodied a cross-flow head, the gearbox was provided with a free-wheel unit as an optional extra, and a Startix unit was incorporated on the electrics. The saloon had a slight rake to the radiator whilst the Special chassis was enhanced by a considerable rake and now had an illuminated badge. Increased rigidity was given to the chassis by adopting cross-bracing of the cruciform type taken from the 1933 Wolseley 16hp, later counterpart of the 1928 E6 (Viper).

The following year, 1935, was to be the last for the production of the Wolseley Hornet and in this year a 14hp version of the 1934 12hp, with a slightly longer engine block and head to accommodate the bore of 61·5mm (the stroke being 90mm giving 1604cc) was in production, the 12hp having ceased production. In contrast to 1934 the 14hp Special chassis was not fitted with a free-wheel unit, and the now familiar cross-braced headlamps support was replaced by individual stanchions. The radiator grille, elongated by some 4in, completed the picture.

So ended the Wolseley Hornet's five years of production of a sporting aspect. The achievements of these productive years were however, not lost, because in 1936 a Wolseley NF, along with a New Twelve, the latter being 1300cc, were on the market, the engines differing only in design of the water pump and dynamo.

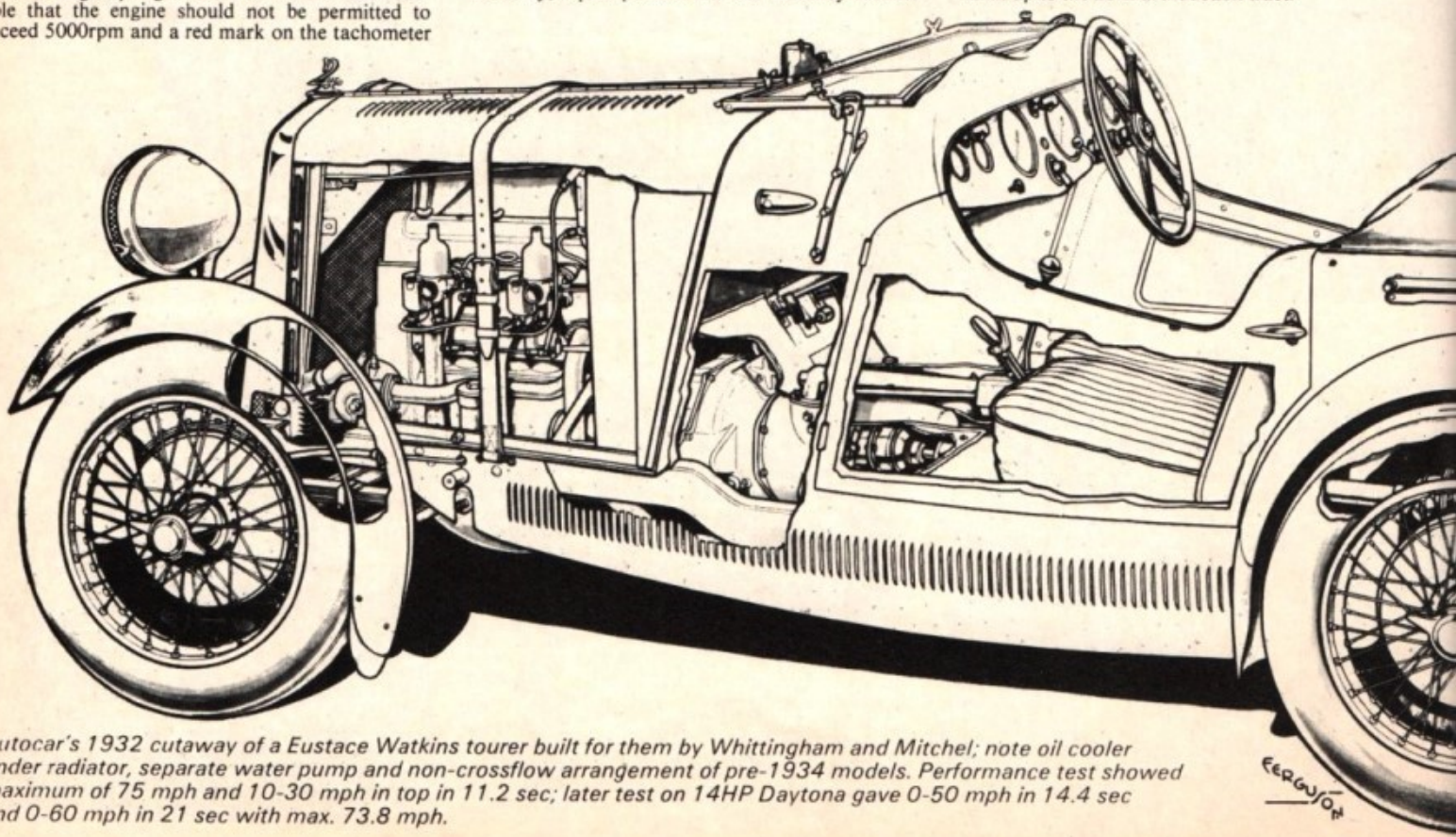
The following are just a few instances of the Hornet's competitive nature, bearing in mind that Wolseley Motors (1927) Ltd at no time gave backing of a competitive nature. The late Col M. A. McEvoy, a past president of the Wolseley Hornet-Special Club was one of the tuning wizards of the day. Probably the most successful car to be tuned by him was the Hornet. Certainly the late Henry Laird's McEvoy Special was the fastest and most successful Hornet of all time. This car was raced with success at Brooklands and Donington and acquitted itself very well in the reliability trials of the period, before being purchased by John Clowes, who then did well with it in sprints just before the war.

In the 1933 Light Car Club's Relay race at Brooklands, this car along with its team mates averaged 82·99mph. Probably the best performance of this Hornet was in the 1933 500-mile race at Brooklands when it consistently averaged 96·4mph for 470 miles before it suffered from a broken camshaft drive.

Other Hornet exponents were Guy Bockerton, the late Victor Derrington, Mrs Kay Petre, E. J. Erith, F. S. Hutchings, and B. M. Wickens, the last three drivers winning the Light Car Club's relay race on 18 July 1932 over a distance of 270 miles, their average speed being 77·51mph. The present Chairman of the WHSC has won enough trophies to cover the bonnet of his Hornet; these include many premiers from the Three Trials. Henry Laird's McEvoy Special is residing on the farm of the Chairman, R. H. T. Moore, and we look to the future when it will once more emerge to do battle.

"Horneteers" are of essence dedicated beings and labour much love and attention on their one-make vehicle taking in their stride the inevitable comment 'Is it an MG?' Then having read that excellent publication *Maintaining the Breed* can with a wry smile point out the fact that Wolseley Motors Ltd amalgamated with the Nuffield group, (Morris Motors Ltd) and as a direct result the Hornet-Special as a competitive unit was deliberately played under, leaving the market open to the MG, using the special tuning facilities at Abingdon, without internal competition from the very competitive Hornet.

A letter from the late V. W. Derrington, in the possession of R. H. T. Moore, has this to say on the politics then in evidence. "My Wolseley Hornet-Special, Chassis No. 4, had the supercharger mounted upon a platform between the front dumb irons, driven directly off the crankshaft. So far as can be remembered, I used a No. 180 Centric, predecessor of the Shorrock supercharger, with a flexible fabric coupling to allow for chassis torsion. The platform also stiffened up the front dumb irons which were very weak. The maximum pressure delivered was 6psi, a 1¼in dd SU being used mounted on the top, the outlet being taken through the platform up to the normal induction tract.



Autocar's 1932 cutaway of a Eustace Watkins tourer built for them by Whittingham and Mitchel; note oil cooler under radiator, separate water pump and non-crossflow arrangement of pre-1934 models. Performance test showed maximum of 75 mph and 10-30 mph in top in 11.2 sec; later test on 14HP Daytona gave 0-50 mph in 14.4 sec and 0-60 mph in 21 sec with max. 73.8 mph.

As I was the local Wolseley Agent and Wolseley were opposed to the racing of their cars, I was told that unless I removed the supercharger they would cancel my Agency Agreement and I would lose the rebate discount due to me for having sold more than the contract number of cars . . ."

Autocar for April 8, 1932 stated: "In the attitude of the Wolseley Company towards this new chassis there is a paternal flavour which is decidedly interesting. It is implied that the chassis is not sold as a racing job, but as a basis which is structurally correct and upon which keen coachbuilders can develop whatever they desire, for the capability of high performance is present in the design, and all the much desired refinements for speed work are already incorporated. The extent of the performance will largely be a matter of selected body style. Beyond the fact that the Special chassis is considerably faster than the normal type, no definite claim of speed is preferred . . ."

So in these two examples can be seen the undercurrent not at first obvious to the man in the street. There are other points of interest: why should Wolseley Motors (1927) Ltd announce the 1933 Hornet-Special in the April of that year; when in fact it was ready in September of 1932? A report on the Motor Show of that year offers a very strong answer!

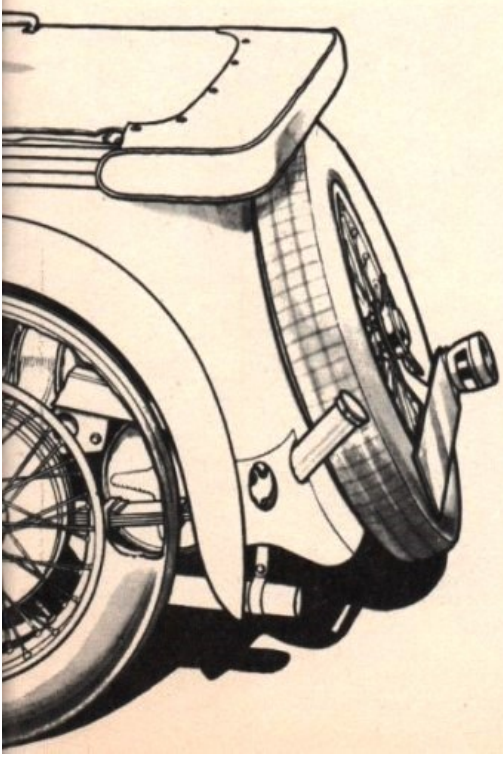
The Wolseley Hornet-Special Club, which owes its existence to W. Boddy, the editor of *Motor Sport*, officially came into being in October, 1950. W. Boddy kindly published in that journal's October 1950 issue a letter on an owner's behalf bewailing the lack of club or similar facilities for the owners of Hornet-Specials or other Special bodied Wolseley Hornets. Since then the club has enrolled to date 776 members, many of whom own very fine and still potent examples of the marque, one of which could be seen at the opening of the National Motor Museum at Beaulieu, owned and restored in entirety by H. A. Nichols. This is a 1933 Meredith Trinity Wolseley Hornet-Special, WHSC Concours winner in 1972.

Over the years up to and including an article printed in Edition No. 4 of a recently produced car magazine numerous accounts of a historical and a technical nature have been written on the Hornet-Special, almost without exception being a confused mixture of fact and fiction, and to say the least of personal opinion. D. B. Tubbs in Profile No. 70 is factual but writes as a VSCC diehard.

It is true that the Hornet's lubrication system has left a legacy of molten white-metal, rods through the side, and long walks home. But let us not confuse the issue, as it requires but a little research into the problem, small modifications to set things to rights, and one can then use the revs with gay abandon.

Terry Webster and Henry Burrell

Terry Webster is secretary of the Wolseley Hornet-Special Club at Grange View, 39 Annshill Road, Gosport, Hants. ●



Wolseley Hornet Impressions

MY experience of pre-war cars is not vast – somehow in my youth I skipped the pre-war vehicle stage (Morris 8s, Vauxhall 12s, Flying 9s and so on), and if you don't count a 1935 Riley Falcon which never ran, I commenced a motoring career with a 1950 Minx. So it could be said that I approached a brief drive of Bob Bingham's immaculate 1933 ('34 model) Hornet Special Tourer with an open mind.

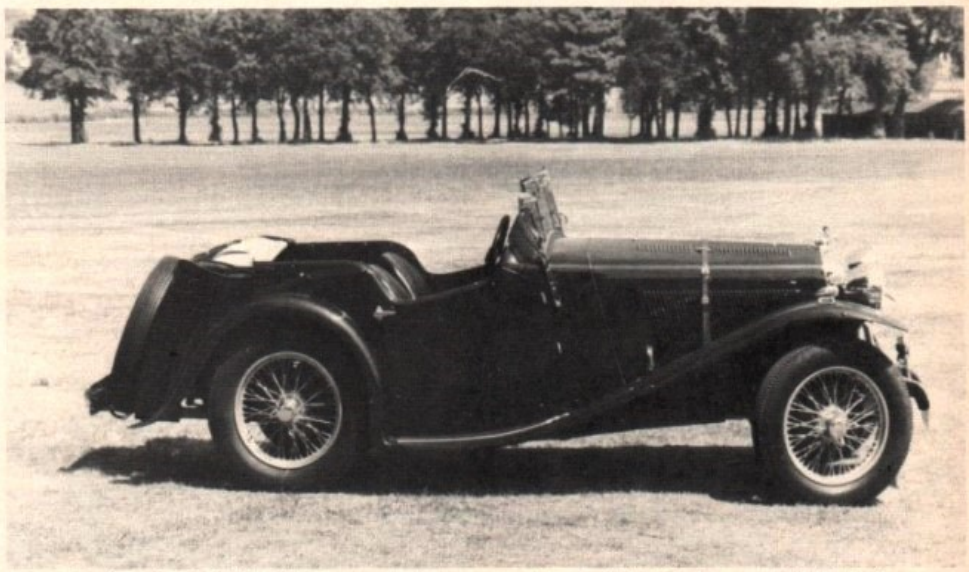
Well, it certainly felt funny at first – sitting inside it, the car seemed ridiculously narrow and high, with a thin little bonnet sticking out in front enclosed by two wings which appeared ludicrously close to each other. But the feeling of disorientation brought about by leaping from a big 1960's car to a small 1930's one soon went, and if I expected a "nasty confection" from the thirties, I didn't get it – although the restricted amount of space around the pedals did mean that I had to remove my size tens and hand them to a lackey, to avoid treading on all three pedals at once.

Flexible chassis? Well, there was a little scuttle shake but no, I wouldn't have put it down as a black mark against the type – the degree of flexibility in the frame was, on normal roads with average pot-holes, perfectly reasonable for an open car of its age, I thought. But then they had stiffened the chassis by the end of 1933. The steering had a little lost motion in the straight-ahead position but was otherwise direct, and there was plenty of clearance between the wheel rim and my thighs. The brakes – hydraulic of course – were entirely efficient and I didn't give them another thought after the first application.

As for the engine, it was interesting to discover if this experiment in flexibility of a different sort really worked. I found the little six-cylinder unit surprisingly lively, and it certainly did pull smoothly (albeit slowly) from very low revs in top gear – in fact it was a lot more flexible in top than a current Ford Escort 1300 would be in third, from the smoothness point of view. The performance it gave the car was quite enough to keep up with modern traffic in towns so one wouldn't be left behind by the average traffic stream.

The gearbox was easily managed, and a free wheel reminded me of the delights of that device – it adds a lot to the smoothness and economy of motoring up and down hills by disconnecting the engine on the over-run, while you can also make clutchless gearchanges, selecting first approaching a "Give Way" road junction for instance, bringing down the speed with the brakes, then accelerating away in first from three or four miles an hour, as at that speed the engine will take up the drive again; and that in spite of no synchromesh on first.

I've no more space to write at greater length, but I'll sum up by saying that the "Special" would make an entirely practical town runabout even today, and wouldn't make an impossible inter-town car either. I feel my education has definitely been advanced ● P.O.S.



Bob Bingham's 1933/4 EW Tourer built, as opposite, by Whittingham and Mitchel. Engine shows cross-flow head of 1934 models with inlet manifold heater-pipe with distributor skew-driven from back of camshaft. Later cars had right-hand organ throttle pedal and also underslung chassis