MARQUE GUIDE—*COURTESY CLASSIC CAR BUYER JAN 2017*

Did Morris buy wisely when he bought Wolseley 90 years ago this month? We trace the marque's fortunes between its rescue and Nuffield's merger with Austin to form the British Motor Corporation

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The atmosphere in the Court of the Official Receiver in London's Carey Street had become unusually electric, that day in January 1927. The once-mighty Wolseley Motors, with £2 million worth of debts, was up for grabs. Austin wanted it, and so did Morris, which had already submitted a written bid of £600,000. But then a Julius Turner, suspected by some of representing General Motors, but equally likely a speculator, put in a higher offer. "And so", said William Morris' personal assistant, Miles Thomas, "we had the entirely unorthodox scene of an auction sale going on in a court of law". Sir Herbert Austin and his financial director Payton bid another £1000; so did Morris. "And so it went on, each leap-frogging the other", until Morris, "his chin well stuck-out", topped the bidding at £730,000. Austin was bitterly disappointed. After all, before leaving to start his own company in 1905, he had created the original Wolseley car back in 1895 – a horizontally-opposed, two-cylinder-engined (i.e. flat-twin) tricycle, which he put together in his spare time while working for the Wolseley Sheep-Shearing Machine Company.

Aware that Wolseley had been under-performing in the early 'Twenties, Austin had hoped back in 1924 that he and Morris could form a consortium to buy the stricken company. But Morris, a loner by instinct, had refused. Besides an instant prestige range to offer alongside his worthy but workaday Cowley and Oxford models, he not only wanted Wolseley for its production facilities and engineering expertise but also as a means of keeping out further cheap American competition, General Motors having already acquired Vauxhall in 1925. And since Morris was the existing holder of the Wolseley franchise in Oxford, it was a company he was already familiar with.

Acquired by the Vickers armaments and engineering group in 1901, Wolseley at Adderley Park in Birmingham had become the largest British motor manufacturer by 1914, initially producing Herbert Austin-designed flat-twins before moving on to the more refined vertically-engined cars conceived by J. D. Siddeley (later of Armstrong Siddeley fame). It supplied limousines to Queen Alexandra and diversified into taxicabs, road-going vacuum cleaners and power units for Scott's Antarctic motorised sleighs, American railcars, an airship and the Duke of Westminster's speedboat. The company reaped a lucrative First World War producing armaments of all kinds, and tasked with assembling various aero-engines of other makes was best remembered for its V8 Wolseley Viper – a Hispano-Suiza overhead-camshaft (OHC) engine built under licence, which powered the successful SE5 fighter. This unit provided Wolseley with a technical experience that was to influence its engine design well into the Morris Motors era.

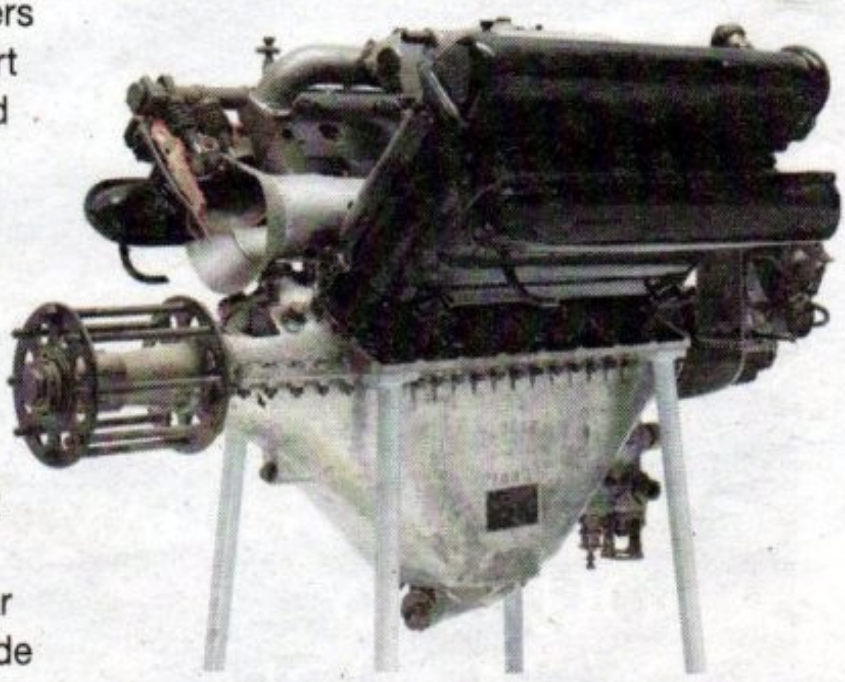
WOLSELEY WOES (1920-1927)

Unfortunately, a 'good war' didn't necessarily lead to a prosperous peacetime. With all defence contracts ended, a factory full of worn-out machinery and a large labour force to disperse, Wolseley spent vast sums refurbishing its Adderley Park works, equipping a plant for car production at Birmingham's Ward End, and lavishing £250,000 (equivalent to £11 million today) on a prestige showroom and office in London's Piccadilly. Yet when it began marketing 10hp and 15hp four-cylinder models inspired by Hispano's OHC design, buyers shied away from such daring novelty and the company had to drop the 15hp, replace it with a side-valve 14hp and bolster sales with a downmarket flat-twin 7hp. Meanwhile, the 1920-1921 slump in the car industry caused by strikes, rocketing labour and material costs and taxation had sent 35 manufacturers to the wall by 1925. William Morris was brave enough to stimulate demand by cutting his Cowley and Oxford prices, but these models were easy sellers and it was a difficult act for other carmakers to follow. Wolseley, with an output far short of its potential 20,000 annual capacity and high overheads to boot, was one of the strugglers, and parent-group Vickers was keen to part company.

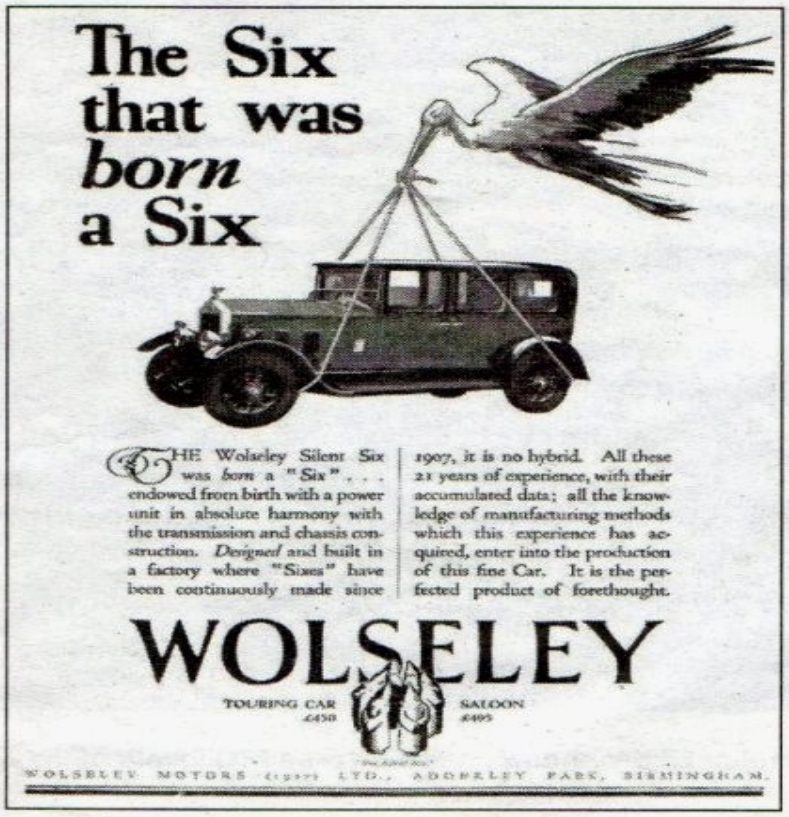
STRAIGHT-EIGHTS, VIPERS & HORNETS

When Morris took over, Wolseley's range consisted of a four-cylinder 1.3-litre 11-22 and 2.5-litre 16-35, a 2.1-litre six-cylinder 16-45, and a modified pre-First World War model to satisfy the dowager carriage trade – the 24-55, a 3.9-litre six. All except the 24-55 had Hispano-inspired OHC engines. But it was the 16-45 William Morris wanted most, as he was keen to add a light six to his empire without the need to develop one himself. Yet this model, having been misguidedly advertised as 'The Silent Six', had cost Wolseley dearly in warranty claims, as customers took the slogan literally and returned cars making the slightest suggestion of noise. Morris however kept it on as the Viper until 1932, while discontinuing the other inherited models by 1929.

As to the mixed relevance of their replacements, there was now an entry-level 12-32 with a 1.5-litre OHC engine – hinting at the rationalisation to come, as it not only resembled the current Flatnose Morris Cowley, but was actually built at the Cowley works – and a couple of range-topping 21-60s in 2.7-litre six- and eight-cylinder OHC forms. The eight was presumably aimed at the same sedate folk who'd bought the pre-acquisition 24-55, as it was very lethargic with a 60mph maximum and took a whole minute to get there from rest through the four-speed gearbox. A poor seller, it persisted until 1931. The Depression era was not a good time to launch a straight-eight, with fewer than 600 built; an even bigger one was proposed, the four-litre 32-80, although it barely got



Wolseley contributed to the First World War effort in a number of ways, perhaps most notably by building the Hispano-Suiza overhead-camshaft engine under licences as the Wolseley Viper. It informed the marque's direction in terms of powerplant design for decades to come.



A case of marketing backfiring – describing its mid 'Twenties saloon as 'The Silent Six' cost Wolseley dearly, as customers took the slogan literally and returned cars making even the slightest noise...

beyond the prototype stage. More practical was the 21-60 six, which could manage an honest 70mph and lasted until 1935, by which time it was looking very Morris Isis-like. Rationalisation was creeping in. But from 1933 that distinctive bauble, the illuminated Wolseley radiator badge, was added to all models as a feature that would survive until the very last BL Wolseley 'Wedge' of 1975.

Of greater significance in this immediately post-acquisition period was the technical work Wolseley performed for Morris Motors and its MG offshoot. An 8hp overhead-cam 847cc engine was developed at Ward End in 1928 for the first Morris Minor, and this unit also went into the first of a famous line of MG Midgets. With two cylinders added to make 1271cc, it also powered the 1930 Wolseley Hornet, starting a trend for small sixes whose flexibilities reduced the need to change down the gears as a patronising acknowledgement to novice women drivers. Nearly 20,000 were made between 1932 and 1935, by which time chassis and steering improvements, plus the availability of a twin-carb, higher-compression Hornet Special, had turned it into a decent proposition – and one that sounded delicious while pulling away in first gear.

WOLSELEY'S SHORT-HAUL FLIGHT (1929-1936)

Coinciding with the proliferation of private flying clubs and confronted with de Havilland's 43 percent grasp of the market, Wolseley's acquisition prompted Morris to restart its aero-engine production. So in 1929 he briefed resident engineer Edward Luyks to come up with a range of Wolseley air-cooled radials. Seven- and nine-cylinder units appeared first and performed well between 1931 and 1934 installed in Hawker Tomtit biplanes, a few of which competed in the King's Cup Air Races. Thus the engines' reputation in private aviation was sound enough, but defence contracts proved elusive. Although by 1936 Wolseley was offering four reliable units from the 168bhp, seven-cylinder Aquarius to the 505bhp, nine-cylinder Libra, Morris couldn't get the Air Ministry to place any orders. Despite several approaches by Morris himself and Wolseley director Leslie Cannell, the air minister Lord Swinton and his RAF advisers thought that the most relevant engines weren't powerful enough. It culminated in Morris uttering: "God help you in case of war," and walking out. Thereafter, Wolseley Aero Engines was no more.

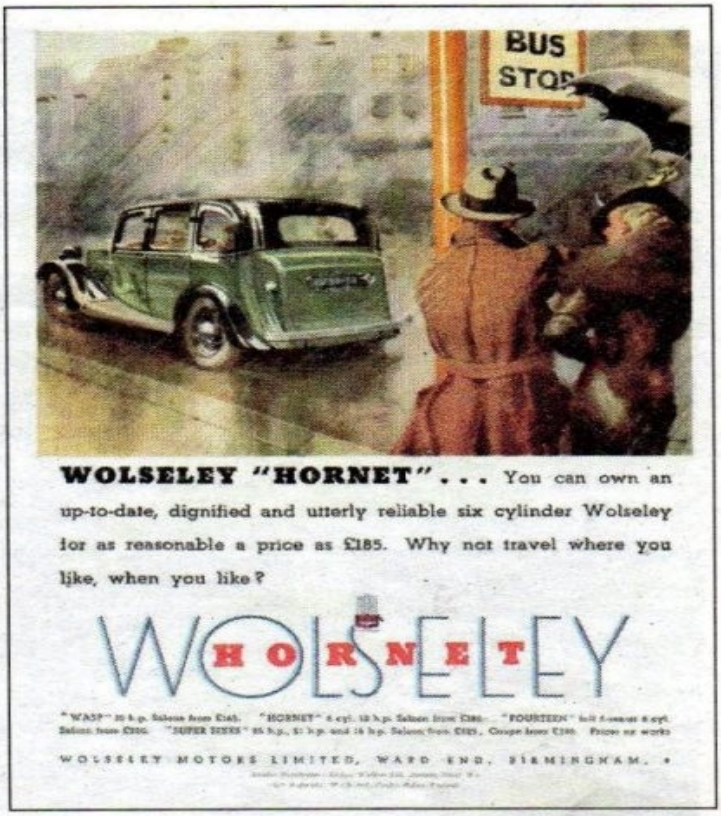
RISE OF LEONARD LORD

The 847cc engine conceived at Wolseley for the Minor had its drawbacks. It performed well, but in OHC form was costlier to produce than a sidevalve equivalent. Oil had a tendency to leak into the vertically-mounted dynamo, while the dynamo itself, forming part of the camshaft drive, was too small at times to maintain a reasonable charge. This was obviously unacceptable, so a high-achieving young production engineer called Leonard Lord, transferred to Wolseley from Morris Engines Branch in 1927 to help reorganise the newly-acquired works, oversaw the engine's conversion to side valves in double-quick time, turning the Minor into a more user-friendly model.

Created a baronet in 1929 and later First Viscount Nuffield for the fortunes he donated to charity, William Morris was content from the early 'Thirties to leave the running of things increasingly to able lieutenants while he preoccupied himself with philanthropy and world travel. Consequently the rise of the ruthlessly-efficient Lord at Wolseley was a significant factor in the direction the marque would take, not only in the 'Thirties, but from the formation of BMC and beyond. During his time at the Ward End plant before promotion to general manager back at Morris Motors in 1933, he effectively overhauled production procedures in Wolseley's sprawling works, often at odds with the managing director, Oliver Boden, a confirmed Wolseley man from the pre-acquisition days.

"Boden thought that the Wolseley car ought to keep its own individuality of style and market appeal," said Miles Thomas, later to succeed Boden at Wolseley. "Lord, showing his faith in a policy that he later carried out in the British Motor Corporation, thought that the Wolseley car should be made out of fundamentally the same parts as a Morris, but differ in appearance in the shape of the radiator, and possibly a 'cheat' line or two along the bodywork; or maybe as a concession the Wolseley car could have an overhead-valve engine in contrast to the Morris sidevalve."

Although Adderley Park had been Wolseley's home since the turn of the century, in an effort to expand an additional plant at Ward End in Birmingham was equipped for car production (at great cost) following the First World War.



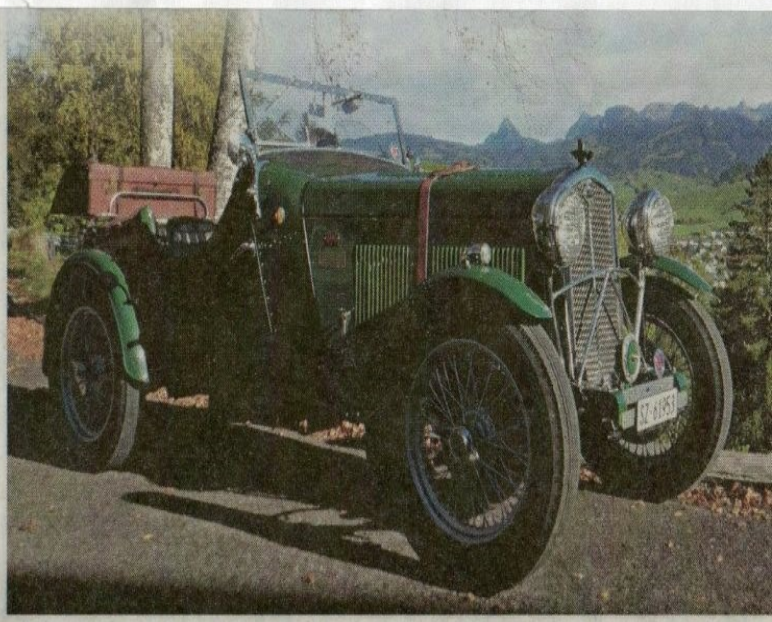
Travel where you like, when you like – Wolseley cars ranged from carriage trade to sporting middle class machines at the time of the Morris takeover. One of the principal appeals was that they all shared a sense of luxury.

THE 'SPECIALISATION-BUILD' ERA (1936-1939)

This is exactly what did happen. Before he fell out with Nuffield and left the company in 1936 – ostensibly over a profit-sharing disagreement – Lord had his rationalisation plan in place across the Wolseley range. By the mid 'Thirties, the last of the OHC models, the 1.6-litre New Fourteen, was history. Replacing the boxy predecessors was a handsome range of lower, more streamlined Series II cars duplicating Len Lord's latest 'Specialisation-built' Morris bodies, with the harmonious insertion of a Wolseley grille up front. Each Morris model was shadowed by a Wolseley equivalent with the same basic engine, but with overhead valves, four- instead of three-speed gearboxes and widely-spaced twin SU carburettors on the more powerful versions. There was a Wolseley for every popular mid-to-large-size taxation class, beginning with a 1292cc 10/40, 1.5-litre 12/48 and a six-cylinder 1818cc 14/56. An 18/80, using a bored-out 14 engine of 2321cc, joined the line-up in 1937, and the larger-chassis categories were covered by a Super Six range comprising 16hp, 21hp and 25hp clones of 2.1, 2.9 and 3.5 litres respectively.

The Super Sixes were usefully cheaper than equivalent Humbers. However, ranging from £325 to £340 in saloon form they

The Hornet line began in the 'Twenties and would end in 1936. While the engines were well thought of, the cars themselves were considered to be over-bodied and under-geared.



Few were made but the twin-carb, higher-compression Hornet Special went quite well. It would bow out with the rest of the Hornet line in the mid 'Thirties.

Following on from the Viper was the range-topping 21-60 with a selection of six- and eight-pot engines. Towards the end of its life it shared a number of key characteristics with the Morris Isis.

were similarly priced to American models then freely available in Britain, such as Chevrolet, Pontiac and the smaller-engined British-assembled Chryslers and Hudsons, which in several cases would have offered a livelier performance, more room inside and better luggage accommodation (early Series IIs lacked an exterior bootlid); in which case Wolseley could have only swung the sale on comparable top-gear flexibility, flatter cornering and the superiority of its interior appointments over Yankee painted-woodgrain tin. While contemporary advertising copy had the cheek to state that 'Wolseleys are unique in their time', there was no doubting the high standard of presentation in the satisfying leather and wood, delightful Art Deco instrument groupings, generous equipment levels that included Jackall hydraulic jacks for each wheel, telescopic steering wheel adjustment and a Nightpass headlamp-dipping arrangement, diverting the main beam to bumper-mounted auxiliary lights. There was even triple-tone paintwork available. The outsize 25hp limousine didn't catch on until its price was increased. "We put on about £35-worth of value in gadgets", recalled Miles Thomas, "mirrors, folding tables and other trouble-free embellishments, raised the price by nearly £200, spread a rumour that the new models were very hard indeed to get, and began to sell nearly double the previous quantity at greatly enhanced profit margins..."

Surprisingly, 1938 saw a certain divergence between Morris and Wolseley, in appearance at least (was this Miles Thomas taking advantage of Lord's departure?). Keeping the Series II bodies but applying mild outward changes to grilles and other small details, Morris had renamed its larger cars Series IIIs, but pruned its six-cylinder range to just the 14 and 25, having introduced a newly-bodied 12 that was unique to the Morris range. These Morrises also gained overhead valves and now had four-speed gearboxes, so another Wolseley exclusive had been lost. However, Wolseley played 'Vive la différence' this year with its own brand of Series IIIs, retaining all the versions from 12hp to 25hp in less graceful but taller, squarer bodywork which was roomier and provided better luggage accommodation, while the 25hp limousine, generally reflecting the same styling, was continued. The jewel of the range was the 90mph 25hp Special Coupé, an imposing drophead with huge Lucas P100 headlamps and paired trumpet horns flanking the grille, built to the order of some 175 examples.

For 1939 part-individualism continued with a new Wolseley 10, which received the

latest Morris 10 Series-M XPAG, 1140cc OHV engine (bored-out to 1250cc for MGs Y, TB to TF and the 1952 Wolseley 4/44), but relied on a separate chassis instead of the Series-M's unitary hull and had its own style of coachwork. It looked strange from some angles, with rather too much body crammed onto a minimal wheelbase and track. More in proportion was Wolseley's new small car for 1940, the 8, basically a luxury four-door Morris Eight Series E with overhead valves. But its proposed September 11, 1939 launch, with pricing fixed and production ready to go, was aborted for obvious reasons.

WARTIME & BEYOND

During the Second World War as part of the newly-named Nuffield Organisation (a title devised by Miles Thomas) the Wolseley works turned out six-wheeled vehicles for the War Office, bren-gun carriers, depth-charge pistols and converted hundreds of assorted large cars requisitioned for the war effort – typically, Buicks, Hudsons and big Vauxhalls, as well as Wolseleys – into ambulances, cutting off the saloon bodies aft of the B-pillars and mounting the necessary 'box' on the back. It also made 32-foot wings for Horsa troop-carrying gliders. But a cancelled contract once left Wolseley stuck with a factory space full of North Sea mines with nowhere to go; until, that is, a Luftwaffe raid in April 1941 obligingly cleared the lot at a stroke without any casualties.

In 1945 production was resumed as early as April with a War Office order for Wolseley 18s, followed by civilian versions in October. The 12 and 14 were on stream from December, the 10 by February 1946 and the 8, after the stolen prototype was retrieved, in March. A Ward End oddball in 1946 was the Wolseley Oxford, a purpose-built taxi anticipating the need to replace the many London cabs destroyed in the war. This had its own 1802cc, four-cylinder overhead-valve engine and its grille was vaguely Wolseley-like, although the artillery-spoked wheels on early models made it look archaic. Some 1800 were sold, but it was increasingly overshadowed by Austin's new FX3 cab from 1948 and was phased out after the BMC merger, as Austin's was the more modern design.

Although the 16hp, 21hp and 25hp cars had been discontinued (but not the 25hp limousine, for which there was still a small market), the immediately post-war Wolseley range was still a large one, but out of proportion to actual numbers produced. Helped by widespread police take-up, the 18 was the bestseller, even at only 8213 examples over three years. But circumstances were moving on. "The cars that we were making in penny numbers now were the same as we had turned out before the war," said Miles (Sir Miles from 1943) Thomas, by now the Nuffield Organisation's vice-chairman. "We were woefully short of straw to make our bricks. Lord Nuffield's sulky lack of enthusiasm for new models, either cars or tractors, intensified my exasperation." As is well-known from the story of the post-war Minor, Nuffield was reluctant to let it replace the Morris Eight Series E, disliked the disappearance of traditional radiator shapes and stuck doggedly to his beloved Wolseley Eight as personal transport.

If you were in any doubt as to the badge engineering at play following rationalisation in the late 'Forties, here it is; the MS-series Morris Six (left) side-by-side with the Wolseley 6/80.

Following on from the Viper was the range-topping 21-60 with a selection of six- and eight-pot engines. Towards the end of its life it shared a number of key characteristics with the Morris Isis.

A rare car today with just 175 made in period, the Wolseley 25 drophead coupé offered MG levels of performance with a 90mph top speed.

Lots of wood and leather – inside is where the greatest departures from the Morris Six were to be found as the cabin of the Wolseley 6/80 was an extremely comfortable place to be.

Lord Nuffield resisted on numerous occasions a tie-in with Austin, but under former Morris man, now rival chairman, Leonard Lord he was (to the surprise of many of those around him) finally convinced of the merits of such as deal.

But innovation and rationalisation was soon forced on British car manufacturers by the government which, having already criticised the British motor industry for having too many models and 'a failure to design vehicles that could defeat competition overseas', declared in 1947 that 75 percent of British output should be exported. Otherwise, with the prevailing shortage of steel, 'materials would have to be withdrawn'. So by the time Sir Miles Thomas had had his fill of Lord Nuffield and left the company to run British Overseas Airways Corporation (BOAC) in late 1947, arrangements were in hand to reduce the Wolseley range to two models.

NEW MODELS

What emerged in 1948 under dour vice-chairman Reginald Hanks was very obviously Morris-derived, with the Oxford MO-style bodyshells adapted to take Wolseley front ends, and their Morris engines given overhead camshafts. The Oxford's wheelbase was lengthened by five inches to produce the 70mph, four-cylinder 1476.5cc 4/50. Extending the wheelbase even further and adding two more cylinders under a longer bonnet resulted in the 2.2-litre 6/80. However this treatment was also applied to a new big Morris with the same body called the Six, so that the 6/80's mechanical distinction was reduced to just an extra carburettor. Nevertheless, a £95 price difference at 1950 values didn't prevent this better-looking and equipped Wolseley from outselling the plain Morris Six twice over (and the 4/50 by almost three-to-one). Handling was indifferent and the low-geared Bishop-cam steering lacked the accuracy of the Minor and Oxford's rack-and-pinion set-up. But the 6/80 could manage up to 85mph and was bought extensively by police forces as gradual replacements for the old Eighteens. The 4/50 and the 6/80, incidentally, were the last Wolseleys made at Ward End. Now a mere two-car range consisting of predominantly Morris parts, it made economic sense for production to be transferred to the lines at Cowley from January 1949. Tractor manufacture moved in at Ward End, and the Wolseley Oxford taxicabs were relocated to the Adderley Park plant, sharing space with Morris Commercials.

WOLSELEY & THE BMC MERGER

In the late 'Forties Nuffield had come late to the scene with new models in the crucial family saloon sector. Having cornered a third of the market before the War, it manufactured only 50,000 of the 287,000 cars produced in 1947, when Austin managed 62,000 and Ford over 44,000. Wolseley was now part of an underachieving empire in both home and export sales, headed by an ageing, insular chairman who even disliked his outstanding key product, the new Morris Minor. At Austin, by contrast, chairman Leonard Lord, having defected to Longbridge back in 1938 as its works director, had swept away Austin's pre-war models by 1947. He was conducting a vigorous export campaign to the USA centred around the new A40, using the first of a series of modern OHV engines destined to power a range of different makes and models in A, B and C Series forms. This said, Lord was impressed by the opposition's new Minor: All it needed was a modern engine instead of its sidevalve pre-war unit...

Exploratory talks on closer co-operation between the two companies broke down in 1949, with Viscount Nuffield as reluctant to join forces with anyone as he had been before acquiring Wolseley in 1927. The

story goes that when Lord joined Austin in 1938, Nuffield quipped: "I don't see why we shouldn't have a lot of fun cutting each other's throats." But the joke was on him now. Nuffield's vice-chairman Hanks was no friend of Lord's and wanted to concentrate instead on reorganising the company. But behind the scenes Nuffield's PA Charles Kingerlee thought a merger would be beneficial, seeing no sense in a 'dog-eat-dog' situation, especially in overseas markets, and even tipped Lord off on suitable ways of re-approaching Nuffield 'under the radar'. When Lord finally tried again, his tired opposite number capitulated, presenting a fait accompli to a dismayed Hanks.

The British Motor Corporation came into being on April 1, 1952, with Viscount Nuffield initially as chairman and Lord, managing director, although Lord soon assumed the chairmanship after a dispirited Nuffield bowed out to an honorary presidential role.

Hanks wasn't the only one to be dismayed. At the time of the merger, Morris Engines Branch was working on replacing the Minor's 918cc sidevalve unit with the overhead-valve version previously used in the Wolseley Eight. But it was promptly canned by Austin engineers in favour of the A30's 803cc engine. Allegedly, Austin also spirited away the transfer machines Morris had procured to set up the Wolseley unit for volume production. "It was a beautiful engine which really made the Minor," commented Nuffield engineer Jack Daniels, who'd driven the prototype extensively. "Much better than the A30 unit," his colleague Jim Lambert added. "We were over the moon with it [...] with the A30 engine you hadn't gone far down the road before the big ends dropped out."

Exaggeration or not, it was just one instance of the 'them-and-us' bitterness that existed behind the PR façade of a new British motor group able to challenge the world. Yet it took another seven years for BMC to eradicate sufficient traces of the Nuffield Wolseley before the catch-all Farina solution. The 6/80 survived until 1954 and although the 4/50 had been dropped as a poor seller in January 1953, its 4/44 replacement with Italian-inspired styling and Morris-originated XPAG 1250 engine was the work of a Nuffield designer, Gerald Palmer, also responsible for the big Wolseley 6/90 of 1954-1959 (itself a near-lookalike spin-off from his unsuccessful 1953 Riley Pathfinder). The 4/44 continued as late as 1956 before becoming the almost identical-looking 15/50 with the BMC B Series engine, and while the 6/90 had the big-car C Series 2.6-litre motor from the start (shared with the Austin A90/95/105,

Although the 4/44 was from the BMC era, being released in 1952 (the same year as the Morris-Austin merger) it was a 100 per cent Nuffield product, sharing its shell with the MG Magnette ZA plus a detuned T-Type Midget engine with a single carb.

Austin-Healey 100-6, Morris Isis and Riley 2.6), this unit was ironically a Morris design in origin, with subsequent improvements to manifolding and cylinder head. Even the all-BMC Wolseley 1500 of 1957, originally a rejected proposal for a Minor replacement styled by Austin's Dick Burzi and fitted with the B Series engine, relied on Nuffield-originated Minor underpinnings.

WAS IT WORTH IT?

The purchase of Wolseley Motors bought William Morris valuable extra production facilities and one of the oldest and most respected names in the motor industry. But did he fritter away its engineering inheritance? Given the company's former expertise in so many fields, it seems a pity that with Morris money behind it, greater effort wasn't made with more inspiring models. On the other hand, Len Lord had shown that badge-engineering could not only be profitable, but respectable – as did Rootes with Sunbeam and Talbot, and Rolls-Royce with Bentley.

Somehow, the cars' comfortable, middle-class luxury ambience – plus endorsement by police and government departments who bought Wolseleys in their hundreds – was enough to attract a faithful following up to the BMC merger and well beyond, regardless of whether an Austin or Morris heart beat beneath the bonnet, or how little its lines were tweaked from those of an Oxford or A110. As motoring historian Michael Sedgwick said more bluntly of Wolseley's post-war years: "It speaks volumes for customer loyalty that this farce continued for a quarter of a century." So in one sense at least, the Wolseley name and the image it managed to maintain after 1927 had served its masters well – perhaps rather better, at times, than they deserved. CCB