A *VERY* BRITISH EIGHT

The straight-eight Wolseley 21/60hp E8M was an engineering dead-end and a commercial disaster for its manufacturer, but it was a noble failure that deserves close inspection, says **Zack Stilling**. Photographs by **Reverendpixel**

The year was 1927, and the last thing Wolseley needed was a huge straight-eight model. No, let's start again.

The year was 1927, and the last thing Wolseley needed was two huge straight-eight models, with a third in mind for France, and various sixes in the pipeline. It had built its early reputation on high-quality and moderately luxurious cars, but then war came along and turned the world on its head, and Wolseley just couldn't find its way.

Incapable of re-entering its old market for luxury cars, it began to drift rather aimlessly, presenting a range of fairly generic cars which didn't appear to target any particular market, and which appealed to no-one in particular. Wolseley was not simply struggling, it was failing terribly. Each year, its financial situation deteriorated as it ran up hundreds of thousands of pounds of debt until it was inevitably, and perhaps belatedly, declared insolvent in 1926.

Given the dreadful state from which the company had to be rescued, it doesn't seem terribly clever for it to have gone on to spend the second half of the 1920s investing in a costly product for which there was no known buyer – the mid-market straight-eight. A six-cylinder, yes, wouldn't have been a bad thing, and in fact Wolseley had just perfected its own light six for sale shortly before going bust. The E6 16/45 Silent Six was well-timed, reaching the market at around the same time as every other mid-market manufacturer was also launching its own six. It would also sell reasonably well, despite later acquiring infamy for its mascot, which inexplicably resembled a Ku Klux Klan convention.

The straight-eight situation was different. They were not about to take off, and no other mass-market manufacturer besides Hillman bothered to attempt one. It was William Morris, though, who had brought succour to the ailing marque, and Wolseley was now resting on a featherbed in a house of plenty, such was his wealth. Even so, it was strange for a man of his financial perspicacity to allow one of his companies – he paid for it out of his own pocket, and Wolseley did not become a subsidiary of Morris Motors until 1935 – to tangle with something which seemed so obviously unprofitable. But there were some possible explanations.

On the one hand, William Morris bought Wolseley wanting an upmarket brand to complement the cars that bore his name. Initial fears that Wolseleys would simply become dressed-up Morrises were dismissed by his claims that he wanted them to retain a distinct, independent identity, which would explain why he allowed it to proceed with a project so far removed from his traditional ethos of efficiency and affordability. Of course, Wolseleys did go on to become dressed-up Morrises in the second half of the 1930s, but that's not to say he wasn't speaking in earnest at the time.

Secondly, William Morris was apparently desperate to see that Wolseley didn't fall into the hands of Herbert Austin, who was very interested in acquiring it and seemed like the natural buyer, given his close links with the marque from the beginning. Or, worse still, it might have fallen into foreign ownership. Compelled to act quickly, and now satisfied he had prevented Austin from gaining the upper hand, Morris may have been content to let his new acquisition continue in its own direction while he attended to his other interests, until he had a plan to reform the company.

Indeed, Morris did get round to reforming fairly quickly. Having paid £730,000 to add Wolseley to his stable, he reputedly invested a further £1 million in it by the end of 1930. But this is diverting us from the matter at hand – Wolseley's straight-eights. The first of these was the E8M 21/60hp, which entered production in September, 1927, alongside the new four-cylinder E4M 12/32hp. To confuse matters, the 21/60hp designation was also applied to a second six-cylinder, the E7D, launched in 1928, which continued in production, with progressive modifications, until 1935. With the E4 11/22hp being phased out and the Silent Six still going strong, Wolseley had, for the first time in years, a coherently presented three-model line. Like the Silent Six, the new four and six both featured ohc engines but were otherwise conventionally engineered. Many parts were common across the range, and all models had a five to one rear axle ratio.

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1 The two Wolseley straight-eights owned by James Molesworth-Edwards during the 1960s (*Dick Serjeantson collection*)

2 Molesworth-Edwards used GU 1600 to tow his AJS trials motorcycles (*Matt Shepherd collection*)

3 The Wolseley is a big car, and the radiator is suitably imposing

The E8M shared its cylinder dimensions with the E6 16/45, too, specifically a 65.1mm bore and 101.6mm stroke, giving a capacity of 2700cc. The camshaft was driven by a shaft between numbers four and five cylinders, and the 2-4-2 crankshaft had 10 main bearings and a vibration damper at the front. An impeller assisted the cooling, and Wolseley returned to coil ignition (the 16/45 had used a magneto). The engine had the uncommon firing order of 1-3-7-4-8-6-2-5. Pistons were of aluminium alloy, with Duralumin connecting rods.

The gearbox had four speeds, and was driven via a single-plate clutch with ball thrust bearings. The rear axle was of the semi-floating type, and suspension was by semi-elliptic leaf springs all-round. Internal expanding brakes operated on all four wheels, the handbrake having a separate pair of shoes which operated within the same drum as the footbrake shoes. The wheels fitted were in all cases steel artilleries with 5.25 by 21in Dunlop balloon tyres.

With a solitary SU carburetter feeding all eight cylinders, power output was given as 60bhp at 3600rpm. Due to the considerable length of the engine, the wheelbase had to be increased to 10ft 7in and, to balance the dimensions, the track was widened to 4ft 8in, which would become the standard track across the range for 1929. A total chassis weight of 19cwt did not seem too bad, but the car's bulk became more apparent when a saloon body was dropped on top and the figure jumped to 32cwt. With its low gear ratio – later an even lower 5.57 to one – one can imagine what performance was like. 'Not startling,' was how *The Motor* put it, as they found it would reach a respectable 60mph but 10-50mph in top gear took 33 long seconds. It was, however, praised for smoothness, flexibility and quiet running.

Naturally, factory bodies were effectively scaled-up versions of the same coachwork that was available on other models, so it could be had as a bare chassis, touring car, two-seater or saloon at prices of £550, £695, £695 and £750 respectively in October, 1927. Prices fell considerably for the 1929 season, with the saloon down to £550, though it was back up to £605 by June. With time, the range of bodies would be extended to include four- and six-light fabric saloons, a two-seater coupé and a Weymann sportsman's coupé, though some of those barely became reality; only one two-seater coupé was built.

As we've established, Wolseley prior to its takeover had been too aimless. It was not targeting the economy buyer, nor the luxury buyer, nor the sporting buyer. It wasn't going after the more superficial visual buyer, either.

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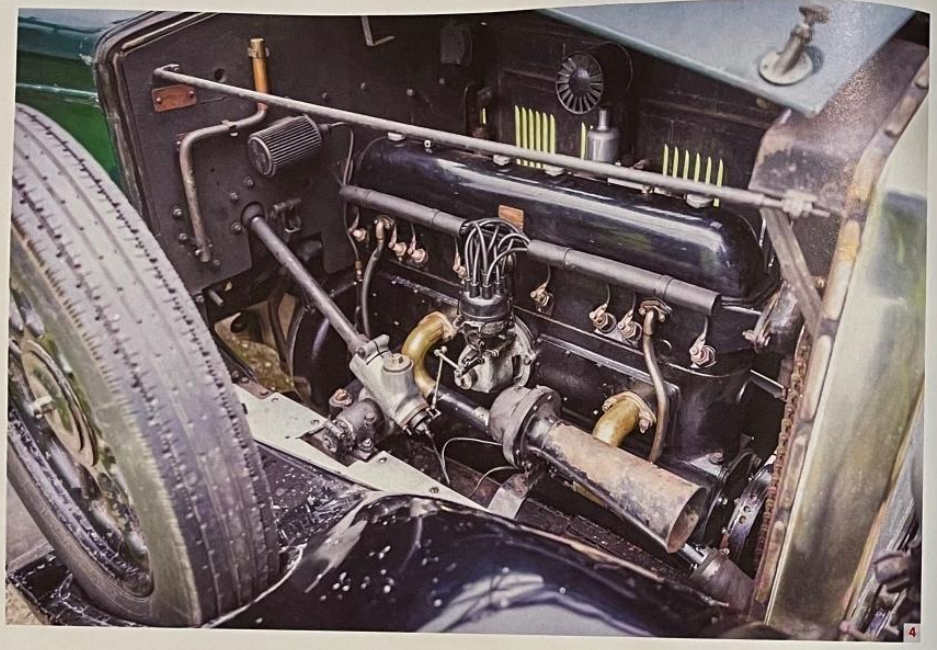

Wolseley's aesthetic during this time was one of staid boxiness, and the company seems to have been so unenthused by the concept of styling that it barely ever changed, with the result that cars built as late as 1929 still looked like they belonged in 1920. Even the sportsman's coupé bodies, which are usually exceedingly rakish, looked as though they could have been replicated in cardboard.

That the dated appearance must have been affecting sales was obvious, so for 1930 the cars were treated to an overdue facelift. Pressed-steel bodies started to encroach into the range, and Wolseley's individuality began to be eroded. The 1930 model year brought with it the Safety Eight, which was the cheapest eight at £515, but it sat on the 16/45's shorter chassis and shared its all-steel body with the Wolseley Messenger and Morris Isis. It was available for only the one year, and then the 21/60 eight was dropped altogether at the end of 1931. Just 391 E8Ms were built in the model's original guise, followed by 35 of the 1930 version and 24 Safety Eights, giving a total production of 450 in all. Around 90 received special coachwork, most notably from Gordon England, Arthur Mulliner, Salmons and Weymann, though many other smaller coachbuilders also clothed them.

Dave Palmer's 1928 E8M has the interesting distinction of having been bodied as an all-weather coupé by E J Newns, of Portsmouth Road, Thames Ditton. As a small local coachbuilder, Newns is now largely forgotten, but it reached minor prominence in the mid-to-late-1930s when, using the Eagle Coachwork brand, a number of Railtons and Lancia Aprilias were bodied, as well as several British Salmsons and various commercial vehicles. During the Vintage period, Newns is known to have bodied Austin Sevens, at least one Rolls-Royce and, unsurprisingly, the occasional AC. For the war effort, it became Eagle Components and turned the factory over to the production of fuel tanks and other aircraft parts.

Dave is an engineering enthusiast in a broad sense who spends a lot of his time with heavy commercials and traction engines, but he also finds time for old cars. His daily driver is a 1967 Humber Imperial. His father ran a village garage in Nottinghamshire, but had to make do with motorcycle-and-sidecar combinations for his personal transport until he could move up to a Morris Eight van. He only managed to afford a family car by buying two accident-damaged Wolseley Hornet saloons and making one good car out of them, which Dave recalls helping to paint as a child. As an apprentice, Dave met someone who was restoring a 12/48 Series III but had to sell it. He took over the project and those early events helped make Wolseley his marque of choice.

He bought the Newns coupé in September, 1984, from a man in Stourbridge. Prior to that, it had been owned for a number of years by James Molesworth-Edwards. He bought it in 1952 or 1953 when he was only 23 or 24 and was living in the East Sussex village of Cross-in-Hand. He was employed by Associated Motor Cycles and regularly competed at a national level in motorcycle trials, in addition to running several Veteran and Vintage cars.

Remarkably, given the model's rarity, GU 1600 was not the only 21/60 straight-eight Molesworth-Edwards owned. He also had a saloon, TP 6780, which his father had bought in October, 1936, for £20. It was laid up for the war and returned to the road in 1946, in time for the young Molesworth-Edwards to take his driving test in it in 1947. He took custody of it shortly before his father died, but sold it in 1969. Dave remembers seeing it at the Great Dorset Steam Fair in 1985, but it has been untaxed since 1987 and its whereabouts today are unknown.

TP was responsible for towing GU back to the family home, after it had been rescued from the orchard where it had been sitting for the duration of the war. The original owner had bought it from the Wolseley stand in chassis form at the 1928 Motor Show and subsequently took it to Newns.

It needed considerable restoration work and, as found, had a winged 'Wolseley 8' badge on the honeycomb radiator with bolts running through it. The bolts somehow came loose, fell into the fan and shot into the radiator. Due to the difficulty and expense of having a new honeycomb radiator made, Molesworth-Edwards replaced it with a more modern type. As the leather hood was dry and cracked beyond repair, a coach-trimmer made a replacement from PVC, and some carpet was fitted to cover the bare wooden floorboards of the dickey.

At AMC, where Molesworth-Edwards had access to high-quality stove-enamelling facilities, he gave the brake drums from both Wolseleys to the enamellers, and there was a polishing department in which rough aluminium castings were buffed up to a nice shine. He learned the process and proceeded to polish the front-brake backplates, fan and inlet manifold from both cars to a mirror finish. The brass carburetter parts and the brass flanges of the lower coolant pipe got the same treatment. H M Hobson Ltd, which had marketed the K-S Telegage fuel gauge, had by now developed into an aeroplane carburetter specialist (it was later taken over by Lucas), but Molesworth-Edwards managed to find some technical details in a book and used this information to get it working. To improve the driving experience under modern conditions, he replaced the mechanical wipers with electrical ones and fitted stop lamps.

From Cross-in-Hand, Molesworth-Edwards entered the Wolseley in a number of Vintage car rallies in the 1950s and '60s, including several at Beaulieu, but also slightly further afield to places such as Bransgore and Wilton. Until he bought an Austin A55 pick-up in 1957, the Wolseleys also operated as tow-cars for a trailer carrying his AJS trials bike, which accounted for the blacksmith-made tow bar on the back when Dave bought his car.

In 1973, the car passed to R J R Sevier of Hulland Hall, near Derby, and then to Fuad Majzub before it was bought by the Stourbridge owner. Dave has had to undertake some quite involved work in his 38 years of ownership. He has rebored the engine and modernised the fabric flexible couplings in the propshaft, which were wearing out. "One of the most soul-destroying jobs I've done is grind the valves, because the cylinder head is 35 inches long. It uses two camshafts which are joined in the middle. I've heard it suggested that it was probably done to avoid torsional distortion of the camshaft.

"The car was getting tatty around the lower panels and dickey-seat lid when I bought it, so I made new ones myself, and brush-painted it in 1985 or '86. One impatient driver tried to pull around me and clipped the rear wing, so I straightened and painted that. I had to get the seat redone because it had a big hole in it and, motoring along with the top down, all the horsehair would fly out. I've installed indicators and hazards, and the car is fitted with the Barker headlight-dipping system, operated by a lever just inside the driver's door, which can make it awkward to get into."

Wolseley described the E8M at the time thus: 'A logical development of the famous Silent Six, the new 21/60hp eight-in-line car worthily upholds the prestige established by a long line of distinguished ancestors. Matchless in design and peerless in performance, it brings to the user new motoring sensations – safe and effortless high touring speed, acceleration

4 The impressive 2.7-litre, overhead-valve engine produces an underwhelming 60bhp

5 The single SU carburetter looks lost against the huge engine

6 Most straight-eights were factory-bodied, but this car wears coachwork by E J Newns of Thames Ditton

7 A windscreen is provided for passengers in the dickey seat

8 The Wolseley is a quality car, trimmed and finished to a high standard

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and ease of control which make traffic driving a delight. Lavishly equipped and superbly finished, it represents the maximum of luxury at the minimum of expenditure.'

Taking to the roads before the school traffic clogs them all up, we get an opportunity to put Wolseley's claims to the test. Dave says of it, "It's got a lot of legs on a good road, and it will happily cruise at 55mph if I want to, but it is exceptionally thirsty." Since the 1980s, Dave has taken it on a number of foreign excursions with the Morris Register's Manneken-Pis Rally, on which he calculated fuel consumption at just 14mpg.

"When I was driving it seriously in the '90s, it was quite good," he says. "You drive with anticipation and don't rush up to stop lines. The cable drum brakes are good for their age but they won't put you through the windscreen, and the steering is good when you're on the move, but manoeuvring takes its toll. You get the impression of going faster than you actually are. Acceleration isn't fierce. You change into top and you just have to wait. Once you've learned the gears, they're okay, but I'd have to have a full day's drive to get back to doing it right. Because the engine has eight cylinders it can give the impression that it's revving faster than it actually is, which can lead to messing up gear changes."

Maintenance isn't a problem for Dave, either. He's got three spare head gaskets in stock and managed to buy a whole rear axle with crown wheel and pinion for £4 because the wheels and hubs had rotted away and no one could identify it. The gearbox is shared with the 12/32 and 16/45, so that's marginally easier. "Everything's available or else it can be remade," he says with all the nonchalance of a natural-born engineer, "and I've been collecting for a long time."

Dave's assessment of the car tells us that it is as exhaustingly heavy, but also marvellously robust, as its enormous dimensions would suggest, and the whole thing smacks of having been built for the colonial market. Size in Britain was only an effective status-indicator if accompanied by a good measure of style, and Wolseleys didn't have a lot of that. However, a car like the E8M would have been tremendously capable over the rough terrain of the dominions, and it would have made most sense to market it for export.

While we are discussing survivors, it's not surprising that the only other 21/60 eight Dave knows of in the UK surfaced in New Zealand, and there are just one or two more in Australia, with possibly an outlier or two in India and South Africa. Molesworth-Edwards actually acquired a third, XV 1672, which he discovered in Pevensey wearing a pick-up body. Somehow, it ended up swapping engines with GU. Molesworth-Edwards bought it for spares, but fortunately it survives today, having been restored as a tourer.

It was the challenge of finding customers for the E8M that makes one wonder just why Wolseley became briefly fixated with the mid-market straight-eight concept. Apparently under the impression that the 21/60 eight wasn't already quite big enough, in 1928 the company decided the world needed a colossal 32/80hp of 4021cc, to be sold for £1275, but the plug was pulled after only five had been built. The last of them, a coupé, survives today in need of restoration, and an engine is preserved by the British Motor Museum.

9 Performance is leisurely, but the Wolseley is notably flexible in top gear

Given the failure of the straight-eight to take off at home, it seems like borderline madness on Morris's part to go on to attempt to build one for the French. The Morris-Bollée – Morris had bought Léon Bollée in 1924 – was entirely designed by Wolseley and used an enlarged version of the 2700cc engine which the French had already written off as insufficiently powerful. Predictably, no one wanted it and, with just six Morris-Bollées sold between 1928 and 1930, William Morris began the new decade by selling his French concern.

When the E8M was finally terminated in 1931, it marked the end of the British motor industry's exploration of the mass-market eight cylinder (the cheaper Hillman Straight-Eight was retired at the same time). It had been a misguided venture, far too costly and rather crude in its execution, but someone had to try it. But though it may have been a white elephant in period, ownership today would be a different matter. With that stark, imposing radiator, it is bluntly imperious and will dominate the field at a typical Vintage gathering. Who wouldn't enjoy turning up in one, just for the satisfaction of saying "Mine's bigger than yours"? ■