



FIRST OF THE PINT SIZED SIXES. A 1930 fabric saloon goes rallying. Note that early Hornet calormeters followed the shape of the radiator, while radiator shutters weren't plated on the first cars.



ELONGATED MINOR. This shot shows clearly how the Morris body was perched on the lengthened frame. The tiny fuel tank on the firewall is visible, while only Hornet Specials had centre-lock wheels.

How bad was the Hornet?

An Historical Investigation by Michael Sedgwick

D.B. Tubbs called it "technical pornography". Cecil Kimber found the image so detestable that he added (as Wilson McComb tells us) an extra and fictitious millimetre to the piston stroke of later M.G. Magnette engines to make sure nobody confused them with Wolseley designs. The present writer once compared a Hornet's gear lever to the volume control on a radio, useful only for regulating decibels.

Yet an awful lot of Wolseley Hornets—nearly 35,000 of all types between April, 1930 and the spring of 1936—were sold in a depressed era. The breed kept the special coachwork business going in difficult times—we've traced 26 different catalogued customs on the '33 Hornet Special chassis alone. Knowledgeable folk like Vic Derrington, Michael McEvoy and Laurence Pomeroy thought it worth tweaking, and did so to considerable purpose—as much as 55 b.h.p. were extracted without recourse to blowers. William Lyons built some lovely open two- and four-seaters on the chassis. And dare one suggest that our V.S.C.C. owes a great deal to the protest movement that greeted those humped scuttles, soup-plate instruments, bonnet straps and stoneguards, characteristics of the Whittingham and Mitchel/Eustace Watkins partnership?

Most of the basic strictures stand up. If you add length to a chassis without breadth or additional bracing, you get uncontrollable torsion somewhere. Mr. McComb's "long and floppity chain" used to drive camshafts from 1932 onwards wasn't an improvement, and if you open up on an elderly unit at anything above tickover speeds you can be sure of a faceful of oil. And there really wasn't much point in cog-swaps on something that waffled happily up the old Bury Hill on top, a feat the writer has only achieved on one other car, his 1952 220 Mercedes-Benz, with some two- and three-quarter times the brake horses hauling a little under double the Hornet's weight. As for the tuning wizards, they breathed upon Hornets because there were lots of Hornets about, and selling for less than such machinery as L-type Magnas, Riley 12/6s, and 1½-litre Singers.

One may also suspect that Wolseley, like Rover in the immediate pre-Wilks period, suffered from over-production. Records supplied by the ever-helpful Wolseley Register indicate that model-sanctions weren't carried over from year to year, but both the 1930s and the 1931s went into second seasons at cut prices. In 1933, the Hornet's peak year, over 9,000 were made exclusive of Specials, but the standard saloon, now with synchromesh, was still current for 1934, and even then they weren't all used up, hence the strange excursion into preselectors on the 1935 line.

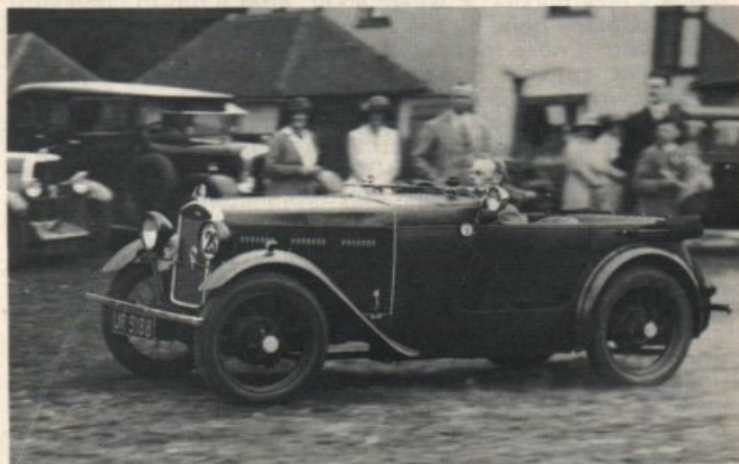
Let's also forget the Hornet Special for the time being, beyond asking the question—ignored by far too many critics—why, if it was so bad, it sold so well. Total production, including 1935's rare 14 h.p. edition, amounted to close on 4,900 units in three years, by contrast with the

1,826 Magnas and 1,110 "street" Magnettes turned out by Abingdon in a little short of five years. One can argue that M.G. were a smaller firm with higher standards (which undoubtedly they were), but they didn't make anything other than sports cars, whereas Wolseley had a full line going throughout the Hornet's currency. In 1931 this amounted to three other sixes and a straight-eight, and in 1935 to a four and three sixes.

In any case, the Hornet Special is really a red herring. It was a logical derivative of a most unsporting theme, and it happened largely because the coachbuilders wanted a cheap chassis on which to work in depressed times. A least eight firms had tried their hand on the Hornet by mid-1931, while even the factory offered a snazzy little two-seater with vee screen and 1932's vertical-barred radiator, all for £198.

If one forgets both the Special and the bogus, sporty confections which preceded it, the Hornet really emerges with more credit.

Wolseley's design team had humbler parameters and a limited budget. The Morris empire wasn't faring as well as Austin in the Great Depression, and not only because their traditional best-seller, the 11·9 h.p. Cowley, was in the wrong horsepower class. At the bottom of the range, the Minor was no real challenge to the Baby Austin, even if it did force Sir Herbert to couple up his braking systems. It cost more and was too complicated. And in any case Wolseley needed something different to put them back on the map after 1926's debacle; their cheapest 1929 model,



HALFWAY HOUSE. An open sports Hornet at Amersham Hill Climb, 1931. No mechanical modifications had as yet crept in, and this one is relatively restrained, with straight scuttle, straight sided body and no bonnet strap. Photos: National Motor Museum.

the 12/32 h.p. Popular Four, was just another stodgy 11·9 for all its upstairs camshaft.

The Hornet, in effect, was conceived with Woman in mind. Light handling and flexibility were the prime objectives. Synchromesh was still in its infancy, and wouldn't be offered on a cheap British car until 1932. Ergo, one solved the problem by rendering the cog-swap superfluous.

Such virtues could, of course, be enjoyed by buying American—and cheaply. In 1929-30, one paid £240 for a Chevrolet International, £250 for an Essex coach, and £325 for the K-model De Soto, hydraulic brakes and all. All could carry five in comfort, and they weren't all that unwieldy. The De Soto measured only 170 inches from stem to stern, would do 65-70 m.p.h., and took only a little over half a minute to get there. American steering, long oriented to the distaff side, was suitably geared, too.

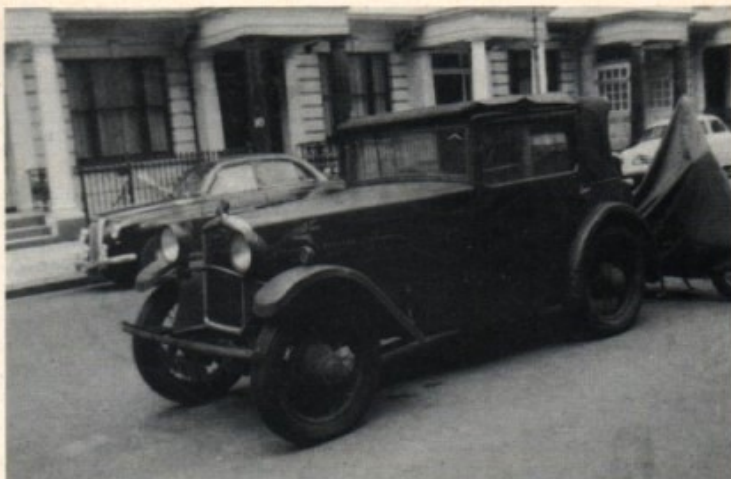
Alas! Britain still had a horsepower tax. The Essex was a Nineteen, the De Soto a Twenty-Two, and the short-stroke Chevy was rated at 26·33 h.p., which explains why it was usually encountered in commercial form. Their appointments, likewise, were depressingly functional. Thus what *les girls* wanted in 1930 had to be well finished, compact, and endowed with a small-bore six-cylinder engine. So what better than to add an extra pair of pots to the existing thermosyphon-cooled Morris Minor unit, itself a Wolseley design? This gave a capacity of 1,271 c.c., an output in the region of 30 b.h.p., and a treasury rating of only 12·08 h.p. A two-bearing four became a four-bearing six, and electrics were 12- instead of 6-volt, but the Morris's three-speed gearbox and dry-plate clutch were retained, along with gravity feed to the SU carburetter from a four-gallon tank.

The chassis was likewise Morris, though an extra 12½ in. were added to accommodate the extra length of engine. The track, alas!, stayed unchanged at 36 in.—Morris hadn't learnt the lessons of that disastrous 1927 Light Six. Bodies, perched at the back of the long bonnets, were the same fabric and coachbuilt saloons as graced the Minor, while within one encountered the familiar oval facia and toadstool-type starter button on the floor. The accelerator was centrally located, but on early three-speed Hornets the gear positions were conventional. Wolseley—like Morris, and most other British makers in 1930—used folding roofs for their "sunshine" models: the proper sliding-head wouldn't make its appearance until 1932. Luvax hydraulic dampers were a refinement lacking from Morris's, but only in the braking department was the Wolseley significantly different. The Minor's uncertain anchors were replaced by proper Lockheed hydraulics, with cable linkage for the handbrake, which worked in separate drums on the rear wheels. "Pornographic" the Hornet might be, but, as announced in April, 1930, it was easily the smallest and the cheapest six on the market, 133 inches long and weighing 1,624 pounds. A fabric saloon cost £175, the coachbuilt version £10 more.

As the first of a new generation, it delighted the testers, who spoke of "perfect control up to 60 m.p.h." *The Light Car* managed to get their Hornet up the 1-in-7 Edge Hill at a steady 20-30 in second, "without an undue amount of



1933 saloon, distinguishable from '32s by the stoneguard pattern and illuminated radiator badge. The fog lamp was a catalogued item, but no Hornet in factory fresh form ever wore its trafficators on the screen pillars. In "re-issued" 1934 form they were recessed between front and rear doors, Morris-style. Photo: Brian Blackwell.



SPORTY MODELS. Above, a rather tired 1931 Tickford roll-top coupé, and below, William Lyons's handsome Swallow two-seater, this time on the regular 1932 special-coachwork, four-speed chassis. Photos: G. N. Georgano.



rushing at the foot". (So it should, on a ratio as low as 8·76 to 1). The 0-50 acceleration time of 35 seconds may not seem very impressive today, but it was possible to reach 40 in top alone in 24 seconds, something no modern 1½-litre saloon could do. Criticisms were limited to a lack of space in the back, and a noisy second gear, not to mention the predictable valve bounce at 45 m.p.h. Fuel consumption came out at 35 m.p.g. Actual top speed on a 4·78 axle ratio was a little over 60 m.p.h., and cruising speeds of 50-55 m.p.h. were viable without the buzzbox effects to be encountered on the low-geared 1935 cars.

What is more intriguing is the reaction engendered by early owners, as revealed in the *Readers' Experiences* columns of *The Autocar*. Maybe these shouldn't be taken too seriously: no owner will rush into print to tell the world that he's bought a lemon (at least he wouldn't in those days), but even in mid-1931, when Hornets had been around for over a year, they were still standing up to hard service.

Not that these folks were sportingly inclined. The one owner who was complained of broken valve springs (he doubled up on these, as would Wolseley on their Hornet Specials) and recommended a tappet check at 1,000-mile intervals, but mechanical faults seem to have been few, albeit another contributor said that bodies squeaked, suggesting that cars should go back to the dealers after the first three months for "a general tightening up". Predictably, frequent decarbonisation was recommended: an owner who'd managed 9,000 between decokes expressed happy surprise at this. But an easy cruising gait of 50 was unanimously reported, and acceleration was quoted as "rapid, beating many sports cars". Fuel consumption estimates ranged from 28 to 42 m.p.g., the best recorded performance being "nearly 90 miles on two gallons, cruising at 30 m.p.h." (how "nearly", and what a tedious exercise, is revealed by the way Hornet owners drove!). Only the worst acclivities of the Peak District or Wales forced the cars off top, a virtue in the days when many an old-school motorist "hung on", with diabolical results to the clutch. Oil consumptions of the order of 1,600-2,000 m.p.g. completed a promising picture.

This class of motorist didn't worry much about handling,

hence it's no surprise to hear that "only a duffer could have a bad skid, even on frozen roads". Odd things, however, did happen on the stone setts of Yorkshire towns, and reading between the lines one gathers that one didn't corner Hornets fast. The front mudguards were inadequate, and so was that miserable four-gallon tank, while there wasn't enough legroom for six-footers. This can only have applied when back-seat passengers were carried: an uncle of mine who was 6ft. 4in. and had to have his Invicta drophead coupé tailored round him, experienced no problems with his Hornet (an original 1930, if I remember aright), bought when times grew hard. Nor did his wife, who was addicted to mini-Cordery marathons in Invicta days, and found that she could repeat them on the Wolseley. She wasn't the only lady devotee one remembers. In 1965 I encountered a formidable *grande dame* who'd been one of the *Car Illustrated*'s pinups in 1908. Though according to "The Goddess in The Car" she was "devoted to motoring", it took the Hornet's painless technique to get her actually behind the wheel. It's also significant that when she traded the Wolseley in 1938, she bought a Hudson 112 instead.

How did the Hornet rate against the 10-12 h.p. opposition? Pretty well, provided that one's children were small and one's friends ditto. It was lighter than such machinery as the Big Nine Standard (1,960 pounds) or Fiat's 514 (one ton), used less petrol than all save the Standard (36 m.p.g.)—the Fiat managed 30 m.p.g. and the heavier Austin 12/6 only 25-27. In the crucial acceleration sector (10-30 m.p.h.) it was, admittedly slower in top than either Fiat or Austin, but in second it could outpace the lot, including the Tens of Rover, Singer and Swift. In this class, too, only the unloved Rover 10/25 was timed at over 60 m.p.h. And the Hornet was the only coachbuilt saloon you could buy for less than £200, until Rover's desperate price cuts of mid-1931.



Iron Curtain Hornet. A 1934 E.W. Daytona Special in Czechoslovakia, 1975. The headlamps have been relocated with heavier bracing, and a lot of the ornamental grillework has been lost.

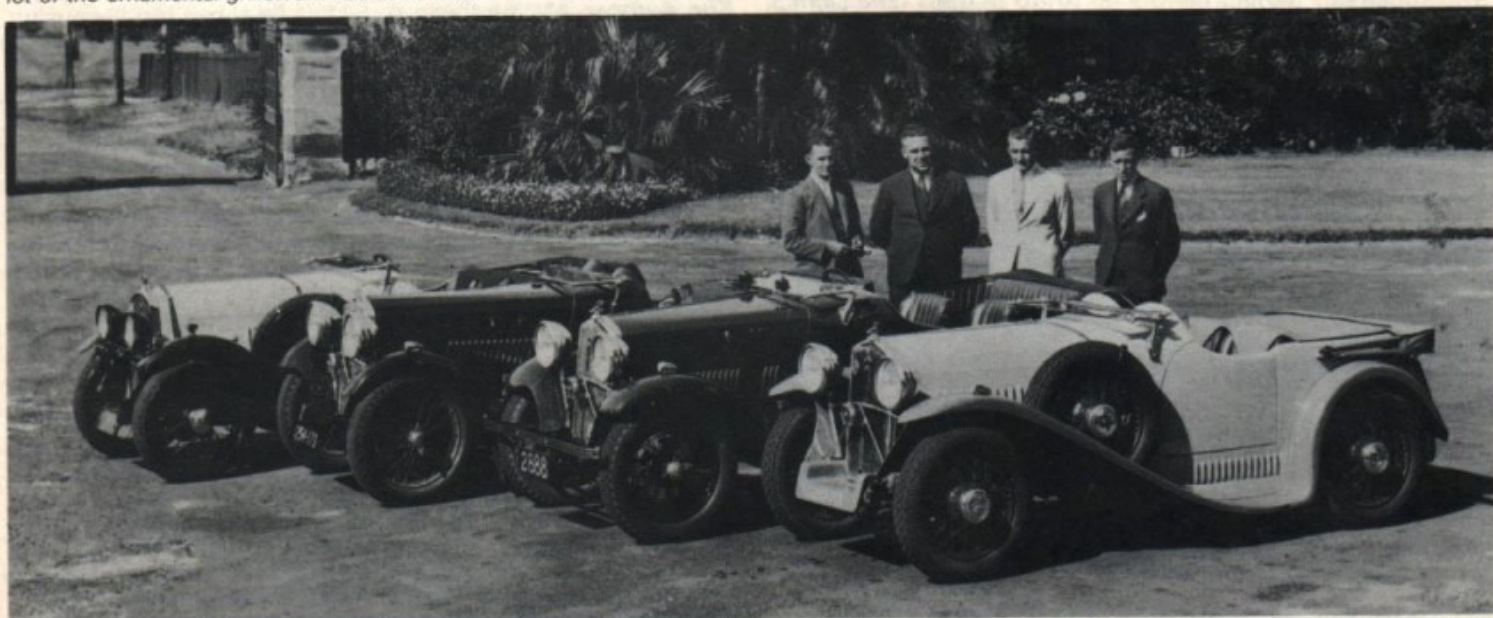
Had nobody tried to make a sports car of the Hornet, the breed might have lived to a fairly honourable old age, though such civilising factors as rubber engine mounts and synchromesh would doubtless have sped it on its way. Nothing much was done to the design for 1931, apart from widening the body (though not the track) and moving the engine forward in the frame to improve the legroom. New this year was the sports two-seater (first Hornet to use 1932's barred radiator and stoneguard, by contrast with the thermostatically controlled shutters on saloons). Some of 1930's Hornets were unsold, so the original type continued in the catalogue at reduced prices. Mid-season introductions were a de luxe saloon with polished walnut woodwork and "real furniture hide" trim, as well as a pretty little two-seater coachbuilt coupé. The former was obtainable only from Eustace Watkins or Bryants of Bromsgrove.

Alas! for the Hornet's reputation, the industry had discovered that the simple framework was a "natural" for custom coachwork. Hoyal's sloping-tail fabric two-seater, unleashed in June, 1930, was only the first drop of a deluge. Within a year there were variations on a theme by Abbey, Arrow, Boyd-Carpenter, Jensen, Maltby, Patrick and Swallow, not to mention Eustace Watkins, whose stock in trade consisted of the open 2/4-seater (not yet a Daytona) and fixed- and drophead coupés by Salmons-Tickford. These latter types would of course win fame (or notoriety) on the Hornet Special chassis unveiled in April, 1932. But by this time the "sporty Hornet" had found itself a most uncomfortable niche. It couldn't really do elsehow with that whippy frame and lateral wanderlust.

In the meantime, however, something had to be done to give the Hornet some of the *lebensraum* expected in the 12 h.p. taxation class—and cheaply at that. Once again Wolseley had over-produced on a modest run of 3,500, so the 1931 type soldiered on into 1932 at a low £160 in basic form—surely Europe's cheapest six of all time? Modifications were confined to safety glass and right-handed accelerators, though the latest four-speed gearboxes and rear tanks were available at extra cost. These two latter refinements were, incidentally, standard on chassis supplied for export or the ever-growing ranks of the Hornet-improvers.

For £198.50, however, customers could have a proper four-door saloon. "Never before", proclaimed the catalogue, "has this proportion of body space to chassis length been achieved". Cramming an 84-inch body onto a wheelbase of 90½ in. was quite something, even with the aid of such minor space-savers as pneumatic seat cushions.

They'd also done other things. The engine had been shortened by a new type of camshaft drive, Mr. McComb's "floppity chain" instead of the old bevels, while the new pump cooling dispensed with a fan. The dynamo was now mounted longitudinally instead of vertically. The firewall had been shortened by removing the fuel tank to the rear, with Autovac feed: this was a genuine improvement, since it doubled the capacity and thus the cruising range. There were an extra three inches of track, while there were now four forward speeds with back-to-front shift. Ratios were



THE MAROUBRA STOMP. Four Hornets entered for a 100-Mile Relay Race at the Sydney Speedway in January, 1933. The car on the far left is certainly not a Special, and we have doubts about No. 3, but the car closest to the camera is that rare bird, a Hornet Special with the seldom seen option of bolt-on wheels. Whether bodies are Australian or English we're not sure, but they don't look quite Whittingham and Mitchell.

typically British—4·78, 6·5, 11·1, and 17·06 to 1, which meant a twin-top box to the publicists and "two tops and two bottoms" to the detractors. The brakes were given a bigger master cylinder. As for the body, it had lost all resemblance to anything Morris, though Wolseley saved some washing with the Occasional Four, nothing more nor less than Morris's smaller size of Sports or Special Coupé, landau irons and all.

Weight was up to 1,960 pounds, though the Hornet would still top the 60 mark, and the new high third raised the valve-bounce level in that ratio to 55 m.p.h. *The Autocar* loved the handling: "as steady as that of a big vehicle, indeed, it is difficult at first to believe that one is in a small car, for fore-and-aft pitching are entirely absent, whilst comfort and steadiness on the back seats are actually better than those of which many a big car can boast". Which was probably fair comment, when dealing with a public which regarded a steady 40 as fast.

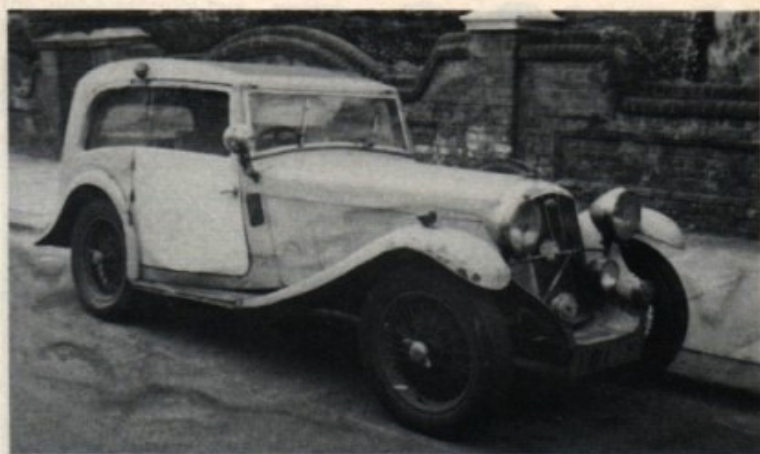
The public was by no means disenchanted, however, and that year Wolseley turned out 5,727 of the new model, 1,100 chassis, and 750 of the new Hornet Specials, these last in a mere six months. Further, there were no leftovers for 1933, in which year the vertical-barred radiators received new stoneguards and the famous illuminated radiator badge, a Wolseley hallmark to the end in 1975. The rear number plate now acquired a reversing lamp and a useless pair of arrow-type turn indicators, replaced on 1934 cars by conventional recessed semaphores. Mechanical improvements included electric pump feed and Hardy Spicer instead of fabric universals (both already found on Hornet Specials), as well as Startix automatic starters. New hardened cylinder liners and four-ring pistons of oil control type were perhaps more interesting, if only because of the throwaway comment that accompanied them. "A real and serious attempt", wrote one reporter, "has been made to combat cylinder wear". After nearly three years of production, the pint-sized six was showing its weaknesses. None the less, the Hornet was now at its zenith, with 9,260 standard chassis and 1,150 Specials made. Some 8,000 of the former must have been sold, since only the synchromesh type was carried over into 1934, and this wasn't, in any case, officially a 1933 model.

Alongside this one for 1934 was yet another New Hornet. This time, however, some attempt at rationalisation was made. Wolseley's image wouldn't tolerate any more body-sharing with Morris, so instead they elected to use the same chassis and body for a four and a six, the alternative to the Hornet being a gutless 1,118 c.c. Nine. They also came up with a new frame, underslung at the rear and blessed with some additional bracing.

This was described as cruciform, though it wasn't. The limit of stiffening on the latest chassis amounted to an H-shape narrowing to a tight "waist" amidships, where two small cross-members joined the extra longerons. The rear arms splayed inwards to meet the forward spring hangers at the rear, while the front ones extended almost the whole way forward. It might have done for the leisurely Hornet, but it was quite inadequate for the 75 m.p.h. Specials. At the same time the saloon's wheelbase was extended to 95 inches, the track remaining at 45 inches.

The latest engines had the Special's crossflow head and output was quoted as 40 b.h.p. In the transmission department, a belt-and-braces policy was adopted: the axle ratio came down to 4·875:1 in the interests of greater flexibility, while the latest box had synchromesh on its two upper ratios, and a free-wheel operative on all four. Price went up to £215, the latest body incorporating an integral boot, or rather spare wheel locker: luggage was accommodated on the lowered lid. Not that this uneconomic arrangement was any worse than anyone else's, being found on 1934 Standards as well: if you bought the wares of the other Big Battalions you made do with the old-fashioned folding grid. These latest Wolseley bodies had bench front seats. The 1934 series wasn't submitted to a full road test, but *The Autocar* printed a few impressions in September, 1933. One wonders if at 60 the engine really was so "self-effacing that it is difficult to credit the speed until the stopwatch proves it".

It certainly can't have been on the '35s, which pulled a 5·37 axle: it felt much lower. By this time the writing was on the wall. Rover, Standard and Triumph had abandoned the true miniature six, and Riley were about to follow suit. Even Wolseley were feeling the pinch, though the Special had had an excellent year, and promised well for 1935 in its latest guise with the new 1,645 c.c. Fourteen engine. Some



SCARCE SPECIAL. A 1934 with the more ornate grille and Maltby sports saloon coachwork.



1935-36 Hornet Saloon, showing the spare wheel locker and the wider track. This one was an excellent if uninteresting £35 worth.

strange things were happening, however, to the standard line.

In 1934 Wolseley had done their sums right, unloading 4,961 complete freewheel Hornet saloons and 105 chassis, the latter for export. They were, however, still stuck with the balance of the 1,067 synchromesh-equipped 1933 cars which hadn't sold as 1934s. So this one had to be the staple Hornet for 1935, albeit the Nine continued with the 1934-style body.

The press ignored this retrograde step. Instead, they concentrated on the brand-new Wilson preselective transmission. Well they might, for not only had Wolseley reverted to three speeds: they'd also complicated the controls. Instead of the single quadrant of cars like Armstrong Siddeley and Riley, the Hornet had an additional floor-mounted forward-neutral-reverse selector in the Cotal idiom. The extreme rusticity of the ratios—5·37, 8·55 and 12·48 to 1—suggests that Wolseley were trying to dispense with shifts altogether. Still, there should have been some future in painless preselection for £198·50 all on, especially when a B.S.A. Ten cost £245 and Armstrong Siddeley's 12/6 saloon an even £295. It's a pity, too, that there were no Occasional Four bodies left over to challenge Parkside's charming "coupé for the daughters of gentlemen", an unusual if lethargic £265's worth.

Only *The Light Car* tested the self-confuser Hornet, and they took no performance figures, only the weight—close to the ton now, at 2,191 pounds. And if Wolseley thought they'd use up their dead stocks this way, they were wrong. The official records show that the whole batch were converted back to synchromesh once more!

In May, 1935, Morris came up with the first of the Series II family. Though the 10/4 was perpetuated in modern guise, both the old-line 12/4 (*née* Cowley) and the unsuccessful 10/6 (a side-valve competitor for the Hornet) gave way to a rationalised type using the Ten's chassis and the 1,548 c.c. side-valve four-cylinder engine. The side-valves apart, it seemed logical that Wolseley should follow suit.

And so they did—though not until April, 1936. Upstairs camshaft might be on their way out, but the new small cars, announced almost simultaneously with the Series II Morris, retained the old type of engine and the back-to-front shift, as well as the 1934-style body. Engines were, however,

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How bad was the Hornet — continued

enlarged, the Nine giving way to the 1,069 c.c. Wasp, while the Hornet now shared the Morris 10/6's cylinder dimensions of 57 x 90 mm. (1,378 c.c.). What else it shared is problematic. Other changes included a wide 48-inch track, sixteen-inch steel-spoke wheels, wide-section tyres, and a battery mounting under the bonnet. Once again four speeds with synchromesh were the order of the day, though third was way down at 8-to-1, and the car was four pounds heavier than its immediate predecessor.

Further, the press was waxing critical. In *The Autocar's* view, the car was on the noisy side above 45 m.p.h., a view endorsed by the present writer. It was slower through the gears to 50 than either 1933 or 1932 models, and though the journal was quick to deny that the new footwear affected the steering, it most certainly did. I found that the cure for poor cornering was oversize retreads, which scrubbed against the wheel arches! Maybe this is a harsh comment, for poor old BPP 819 cost me £35, gave me 4,000 trouble-free if slightly fume-laden miles, and delivered her 28 m.p.g. (the actual 1935 road-test figure) with monotonous regularity.

Price stayed at £198.50, but for a saving of £13.50 you could have a "stripped" edition (no bumpers, sliding roof, minimal chrome and only two colour choices, one of them all-black). This was a lot more car than 1930's similarly priced device with Morris Minor body, but it couldn't keep the Hornet going. Total production amounted to a mere 2,624 units.

The Hornet—and the pint-sized sixes generally—had had their day. Nobody wanted the rev-happiness, the needless complexity, and the wastefully long bonnets any more. In any case, Lord Nuffield had grasped the nettle of rationalisation, and his new policy hit Wolseley as hard as it hit M.G. The sole difference was that nobody much cared about Wolseleys. The Hornet and Wasp sat it out till April, 1936, when they gave way to the 10/40 and 12/48, both pushrod fours, and both extensions of the Series II Morris theme, for all their projecting boots, four-speed gearboxes and three-tone colour separation. The Hornet Special had already gone, leaving its "cooking" companion, the NF14, to struggle on into June as the last survivor of the old line. This one, too, left its memorial, in the form of police connections destined to last into the mid-sixties and the end of the rear-wheel drive Wolseley six.

Yes, judged by absolute standards the Hornet was fairly dreadful. BPP had worn remarkably well for her age, and she still wasn't fun. The cars were ill-designed, handled poorly, and would rev their guts out if driven to capacity. But judged from the viewpoint of a "job-rating", the Hornet achieved exactly what it set out to do—to provide refined top-gear motoring for the housewife at a modest price, plus a beggarly £12 a year to the taxman. If only they hadn't tried to make a sports car out of it . . .