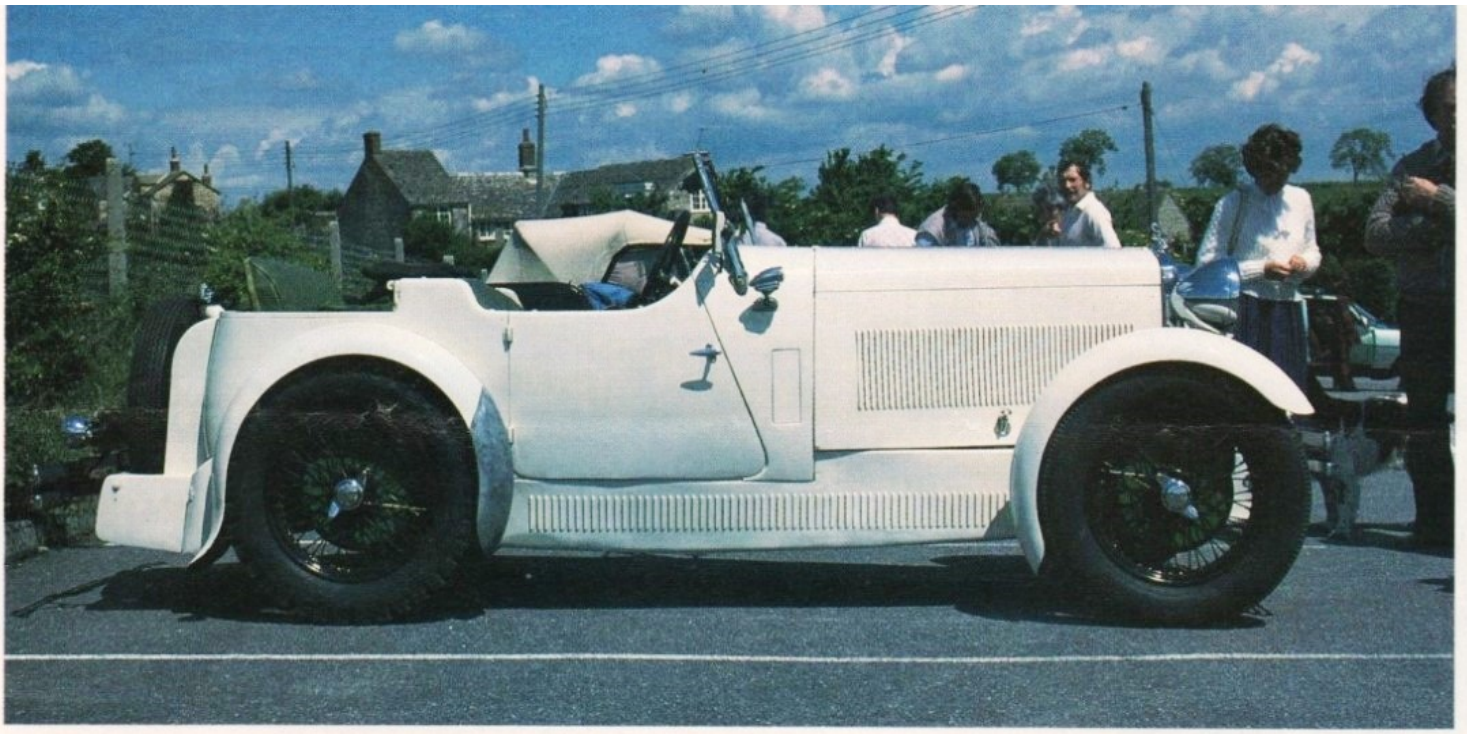
A NEST OF HORNETS—*DATE & PUBLICATION UNKNOWN*



The Wolseley Hornet was introduced in 1931, and was very much a product of Wolseley's new owners, Morris. The Hornet contained many parts from Lord Nuffield's company including their six-cylinder 1,275cc engine, also used on the MG Magnette. Large picture right, two pictures above and picture above that: A Hornet March Special made in 1932 seen from four different angles including a driver's eye view (above left). Top left: An unusual 2+2 Hornet, a Swallow Speed model first seen in 1933.

In 1931, Wolseley, one of Britain's oldest car companies, introduced the Hornet. It's flexible, six-cylinder engine made it popular with the average motorist, and even today its sporting performance is relished by the many devotees of open-topped cars

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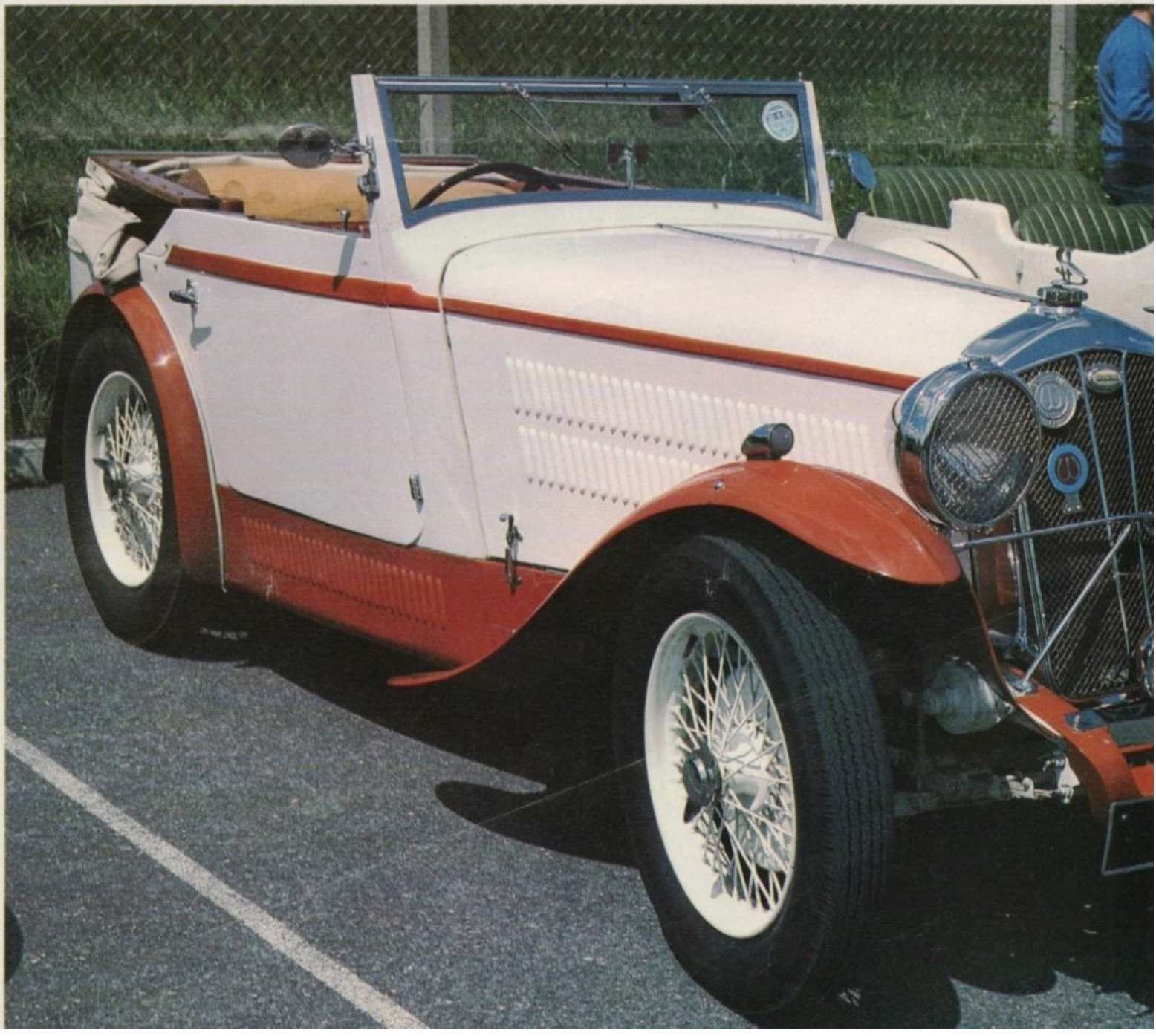
Motoring with William Boddy/Photographed by Ed Alexander

The Wolseley Hornet was a car born through the circumstances of its time. First introduced to the motoring public by the Nuffield-owned Wolseley Company, it was a little saloon unusual in that it had a very small six-cylinder engine. The reason for this was the gearbox. By the time the Hornet emerged from the age-old Wolseley concern, (dating back to 1895) it had been under the control of the ambitious Bill Morris, later to become Viscount Nuffield, for nearly six years. This was 1931 when changing gear on a motor-car had lost its one-time terrors. Nevertheless, lots of people who used their cars as a means of transport rather than for sport were happier if they could use the gear lever as little as possible. With clutches still inclined to be fierce and synchro-mesh not always foolproof, this was not surprising. The small six-cylinder engines allowed greater flexibility, and were a bit of a vogue around that time. Moreover, the six-cylinder engine was smooth-running, and had

carried a certain status value, ever since the Napier Company of Acton had introduced it in practical form in the early days of the motoring movement.

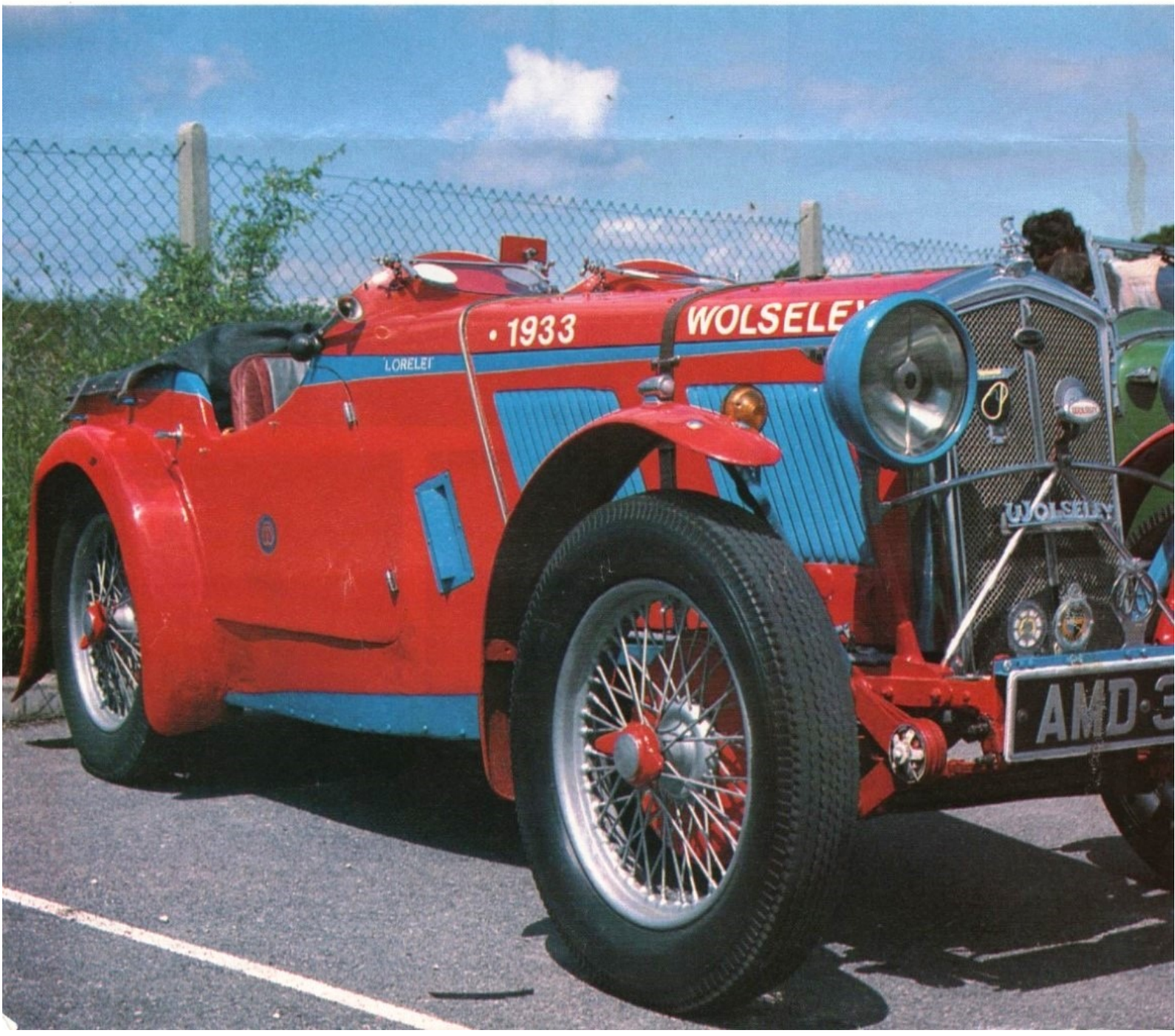
At the time when Lord Nuffield was instructing his engineers along these lines, the six-pot power unit was already in the ascendant. At the Olympia Motor Show of 1929, among the foreign and British exhibits, 52.5 per cent of the chassis on view had six-cylinder engines of various sizes. Only 26.8 per cent had four cylinders, the balance being made up of the other vehicles that possessed eight-cylinder engines, and a few that had the audacity to get away with fewer than four. A small-six, economical to tax (for in those days you paid according to engine dimensions), flexible on the road, and offering a smooth, top-gear kind of motoring, seemed a good bet. So the Wolseley Hornet was conceived and born.

It came out as a 57 x 83 mm bore-and-stroke-engined car, of around 1,275 cc. It commanded



Hornets were given bodies by many firms. Left: A 1934 Hornet with a Corsica body. Two pictures top left: A splendid Hornet Special from 1932. Top right: This 1932 Hornet is also attracting admiring glances. Centre right and above left: Two views of a Swallow-bodied two-seater Special with a boat-tail also made in 1932. Above right: Another fine 1932 model, a Hornet Eustace Watkins Special.

a £12 annual tax, and possessed a very good performance, as might be expected from using a comparatively gutsy engine in a light chassis. And the Hornet *was* light. This was not surprising to those who realised that the flimsy frame into which the Wolseley technicians, perhaps reluctantly, had put their 1.2-litre six-pot engine was in effect that of the Morris Minor, lengthened by 12½ inches. It was already a period when the motor industry used as many existing components as it could. The Wolseley Hornet saloon was no exception. In fact, behind the impressively long bonnet that concealed the quite tiny engine it was proposed to fit Morris Minor bodies right down to the mudguards made for that same popular economy car. Against



The 1,275cc engine gave the Hornet a top speed of around 70 mph making them popular for races and rallies. Left: A Wolseley Hornet Hardy Tourer built in 1933. Three pictures top: This Hornet was originally built in 1934 but given its spectacular boat-tail body in the 1950s. Centre right and above: Two more conventionally-styled Hornets from near the end of their production run in 1934.

a human being, performs better the more efficiently it breathes, and having the inlet and exhaust valves up in the cylinder head of an engine materially betters the breathing. These valves gave the Hornet its sting, and paved the way for sporting versions.

Some of the earliest to appreciate this were the London Wolseley distributors, Eustace Watkins, who got the Abbey coachbuilding company to put a two-by-two-seater sports body on a Wolseley Hornet chassis. For £210 the would-be sportsman got himself a tarted-up fast-looking car, which with such expected sports-car features as a raked steering-column, fold-flat windscreen to give the last few miles-an-hour when all-out (and blow your bird's hair about), a spring steering-wheel to absorb shock to the manly wrists, and a dummy rear petrol tank that concealed a tool-kit. This must have been acceptable, because Eustace Watkins followed it with their EW two-seater sports Hornet, for which cycle mudguards turning as the car steered, and better-looking wire wheels were available.

Some sneered at such 'dressed-up' sporting cars, but maybe these acted as a form of escapism after the bad days of the early 1930s. Moreover, not all these sports Hornets were effeminate. Michael McEvoy, who had been responsible for the big vee-twin McEvoy motor-cycles that were in the Brough-Superior catagory, took the Hornet in hand, and his McEvoy Special Hornet, at £240, was a much better and faster proposition. Later he came up with the which, the price was a modest £175 if you could stomach fabric covering, or £185 for a metal-panelled saloon. You could even specify a folding roof, if you could rustle up another 50 shillings, and it is amusing that as there was no de-mister, in fog, more prevalent then than now, the windscreen of the Hornet could be opened fully from the top.

The top-gear claim was upheld, for you could even move off in that 4.78 to 1 ratio if you must, and performance was quite brisk for 1931, which meant 70 mph in top, and a smooth crusing gait of about 50 mph; but snags were a poor turning circle and a too-mean fuel tank, which brought you to a filling-station every 125 miles or less. This was the original Hornet, which with time became portly and more dignified in closed form.

However, it was the sporting open-bodied Wolseley Hornets that appealed to most young people. The fact that the engine had efficient overhead valves operated from an overhead camshaft made these sporting Hornets possible (just as the overhead-camshaft 850 cc engine of the first Morris Minor had persuaded Cecil Kimber to use it for the cheeky little MG Midget). This came about because during the 1914-18 hostilities the Wolseley Company had made Hispano Suiza vee-eight-cylinder aero-engines with this form of valve gear, under licence. After the war this had prompted them to use such engines, in slightly changed form, in several of their post-Armistice cars commencing with the little Wolseley Ten. A petrol engine, like

supercharged version, produced in association with his friend Laurence Pomeroy, son of the celebrated Vauxhall and Daimler designer, which was able to do a 0-to-60 mph acceleration time of 12.8 seconds. Not bad, for a pre-war 12 hp sports-car.

Although the era of the separate chassis frame was nearly over, many special bodies appeared on the Hornet, closed as well as open, and the car began to appear in the trials and driving-tests of the 1930s. This was possibly what encouraged Eustace Watkins to bring out their Wolseley Hornet Daytona. It had crab-track to improve the Hornet's poor turning-circle, two SU carburettors, a tuned engine, 12 inch brakes, and more suitable gear-ratios for a sports confection. On this was hung every kind of sporting extra that a lad out more to pull the birds than to enter seriously for race would covet. He could purchase a Daytona Hornet for £298, and some did, even if the MG F-type Magna that was using much the same ex-Wolseley overhead-camshaft engine was less expensive.

Although, as I have explained, the positioning of the valves in the engine's cylinder head made for better breathing the Wolseley Hornet was at a disadvantage to the rival MGs. This was because it did not have a cross-flow head, all the inlets and outlets being on the same side. Eventually this disadvantage was done away with, and in the chassis department cross-bracing was introduced to stiffen up the flimsy frame, ready for bigger closed bodywork. This helped the speed merchants, and it is to the Wolseley's credit that they offered the Hornet Special as a chassis, for the bodybuilders to work on. The price was £175, and for this they got Rudge-Whitworth centre lock wire wheels, twin SU carburettors, and complete dashboard with big speedometer, tachometer and wiring. That too many coachbuilders put 'Boy-Racer' kinds of bodies on this chassis was hardly Wolseley's fault. Swallow made a quite nice four-seater, and rather too late the Wolseley Fourteen engine of 1,604 cc was made available in the Hornet Special chassis, providing a claimed 50 bhp at 4,500 rpm, but that did not last beyond the mid-1930s.

Even in 1,275 cc form, a capacity that came unfortunately between the competition limits of 1,100 cc and 1,500 cc, the Wolseley Hornet had its better moments in racing. One of these was in 1932, on the occasion when a keen chap called F S Hutchens entered a team of hot Hornets for the 90-lap, 250-mile Light Car Club Relay Race at Brooklands (a real relay-thing, with drivers changing over their coloured sashes at appropriate intervals!). Hutchens drove his own EW Daytona Special, B H Wickens another of these Eustace Watkins' jobs and the third car of the team was E J Erith's more ordinary EW International Hornet. Overcoming their handicap, this Wolseley Hornet team won the Relay Race outright, at an average speed of 77.57 mph. That is how I like to remember this very British make of car, which, though overshadowed by the MG, had some moments, and features, that were special to it.

Moreover there is continuing interest in Wolseley cars, which were pioneers of the motoring movement. The Wolseley Register looks after all models and the Wolseley Hornet Special Club caters for the sports models, the Secretary being R S Banks, *Taliesin, Heath Road, Horsell, Woking, Surrey.*