

Fifties foursome

In the early Fifties buying a car was like joining a golf club – you needed both money and influence. But what should a gentleman with both attributes choose? Our resident bartender listens in at the 19th hole



Four gin and tonics, George!’ The booming voice of Ray Rawlinson drowns out the thud of the door against its stop as he sweeps into the clubhouse. ‘We’re celebrating: it’s not every day a chap gets a hole-in-one.’ The rest of his foursome trot in after him, obviously pleased at the prospect of a free drink. Especially William Forbes, the bank manager. He’s always happy when someone else has their hand in their pocket.

‘Don’t forget the cigars, Ray we must uphold tradition,’ puts in Dr Martin Goodacre. He likes a puff — claims tobacco is medicinal or something. The last member of the party is Jeremy Jardine, a solicitor. He cuts quite a dash and is rumoured to be something of a ladies’ man. Perhaps that explains why his mind always seems to be elsewhere, which in turn explains why he can’t cure that slice he keeps moaning about.

Drinks in hand, they salute Mr Rawlinson’s triumph on the 16th. ‘Happy times,’ he says. ‘My television business is booming, I’ve got a new car, a new set of clubs, and now my first hole-in-one.’

RAWLINSON’S RILEY

AH YES, how are you getting on with the Riley?’ asks Forbes. I think

he, like me, knows that Rawlinson really wanted the 2.5-litre version, but despite all his big talk, couldn’t raise the extra £225, and was probably stretching himself to get the One-Point-Five. Not a bad motor, though. I get to drive most members’ cars from time to time: parking them when they’re late meeting friends for a round of golf; bringing them round to the front door of the clubhouse when it’s raining. All part of the service.

‘It’s a fine piece of British craftsmanship, built the way cars should be. Proper chassis, body skinned over a wooden frame in the best coachbuilding traditions and plenty of wood and leather inside. Just the ticket. And being the latest model, of course, it has the full hydraulic brake set-up.

‘I went over to Derby in it only yesterday to visit clients. Lovely drive. It would do 55-60mph all day long if there weren’t so many ruddy Austins and Morrises on the road. Good gearchange, too, on the floor where it belongs and quite sporty in feel. My knee certainly appreciates the light clutch – the old wound still plays up, you know. Lest you should think otherwise, I should clarify that ‘the old wound’ was sustained not in any heroic wartime battle, but by

tripping over his golf bag in the carpark.

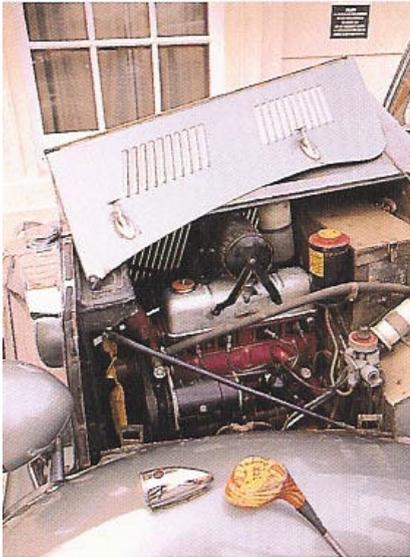
‘Cost a pretty penny for a one-point-five, didn’t it?’ chips in Jardine, rather smugly.

‘Quality costs money, as I always tell my customers. Anyway, it’s a lot of car and I’ll bet pound for pound it works about the same as your tinny little Jowett. The engine and brakes may have to work a little harder to cope with all that quality but there’s nothing wrong with hard work. That’s how I got where I am today. My only quibble about the car is that the steering wheel could be higher. I’m not a bag of bones like old George here, and it rather rubs on my thighs. I’ll probably end up with shiny patches on my trouser legs before too long.

‘It’s a trifle thirsty too, but then so am I. Same again everyone?’

GOODACRE’S MG

‘DON’T mind if I do,’ puts in Dr Goodacre, but I must say I’m with Jardine on the price of your Riley, and all that weight is really more a handicap than a virtue. My MG has all the quality and tradition you could ask for separate chassis and a proper grille. And MG still know how to build decent sports cars, too. Riley gave that up years ago. I only wish I



Small capacity at 1250cc, but doesn't show it.

hadn't had to give up the TC, but when the twins came along it rather put the kibosh on all that wind-in-the-hair stuff. Mary won't even let me wind back the sunroof when they're in the car these days; always frightened they'll catch a chill.

'The YB was the obvious choice really. It has the same engine as the TC, so it's pretty nippy. It goes round corners, too, as befits its sporting heritage. I don't have any trouble steering it, either. Those MG chaps took the trouble to put the wheel in the right place. Perhaps your Riley boys should pop next door and have a word with them about the importance of driving position. It's absolutely spot-on in the MG. I know a bit about posture and the back – one of my specialities.'

Rawlinson is rising to the bait. 'If your MG is so wonderful, how come I read in The Autocar last week that it's actually slower, in acceleration and top speed, than the Riley RME? And that body is just a Morris Eight in drag.'

Goodacre's ready for him: 'The proof of the pudding is in the driving, old man. And it really is a quicker car to drive. I'll wager that it will beat the Riley from any A to B you care to mention.'

I have to agree with him there, privately, but I must distract them before they start racing up and down the drive again. The rhododendrons haven't quite recovered from the last nasty incident. I know how to slow them down: 'How are the brakes on the MG?'

'Oh splendid. Much better than those on the YA I once tried. The pedal feels a bit springy at first, but

you soon get used to it. Those on the YB are the same that they use on the TD roadster, you know. It uses a lot of bits from that. The other thing I really like is how well appointed it is, inside and out. There's just as much wood, leather and chrome as a Riley and it's nearly £300 cheaper to boot.'

JARDINE'S JOWETT

'YOU'RE both living in the past,' says Jardine, his legal mind always keen as mustard when it comes to putting a point across. 'The fact is, we're living in the Fifties now, things are really on the up at last, and we should looking to the future not the past. 'Take my Javelin, for instance. There's none of that old chassis nonsense: it's got unitary construction so it uses less materials and is much lighter and stronger. It's aerodynamic, as well, and all that means it will run rings round either of your ancient carriages. They should have been pensioned off years ago. They're too slow and waste too much petrol. I've seen 80mph on the Jowett's clock and can get 30 miles to the gallon if I behave myself. 'The Javelin's so full of modern touches: there's none of that fumbling around on the floor to change gear, the lever's on the steering column, where it falls nicely to hand. So nice to use, it's a real bit of precision engineering. It allows that cosy bench seat, too, which is definitely an advantage when you're entertaining a young popsy, eh! I believe there's plenty of room in the back, too, and you get a much smoother ride on torsion bars than cart springs.'

No-one seems to pick up on the double meaning, so maybe it's just my imagination.

But I'm sure I sniffed a faint trace of the scent of cheap perfume when I parked it for him the other day. Certainly not the sort of stuff you would expect his fiancée Fiona Parkes-Stewart to wear. I hope for his sake that she doesn't share my keen sense of smell or he'll be feeling her backswing. Mr Forbes is more

concerned, as ever, by financial matters. 'Aren't those fancy Jowett engines rather fragile?'

'Old news, I'm afraid. They cured all that with a new crankshaft from last year's models. Improved the brakes and suspension around the same tune. They're right as ninepence now. That's Jowett for you, always moving things on with an eye to the future. They're going places, mark my words. Not like MG and Riley – they're being left behind. Even Forbes' Wolseley 4/50 is more advanced than those, and they've already replaced that with a new model. That would have been just after you bought your car, eh, William?'

FORBES' WOLSELEY

'THEY announced the 4/44 the very next day' he replies. From his tone, a particularly sore point has been touched on here, 'And I'd rather not be reminded of the fact. Didn't you have to be somewhere, Jeremy?'

'My word, yes!' He glances at his watch. 'Thanks for reminding me, must away. Same time next week then, gentlemen?'

They nod in agreement and he's gone. Forbes returns to glumly defending his Wolseley.

'It's not that I'm unhappy with the car; it suits me well,' he continues. 'But the 4/44 is such a pretty looking thing, and, like Jardine said, more up-to-date. I feel a small pang of regret every time I pass Arnolds' showroom. They'd better keep their account in order, that's all I can say.'

'It's not as bad as all that, is it?' comforts Dr Goodacre.

'No, truth be told I'm rather fond of



Anti-roll bar on the front allows for a bit of spirited cornering.



four-speed column change is very good, too. It's the first car I've ever driven with one of those, but it didn't take as long to get used to as I expected. Can't say I'm over-fond of the brakes: it's like stepping on a block of wood. Still, I've always believed anticipation to be a most important driving attribute, so it's rarely a problem.

'The steering's a bit stiff, I suppose, but it's building my arms up. I'll swear I'm hitting my tee-shots longer these days. By the way another drink, chaps?' They decline and say their goodbyes. Forbes stops behind for a nightcap, as ever, delaying the inevitable return home. I've not seen his wife, but I've heard enough ... He loosens his club tie a little and reaches for his last gin and tonic. I have to ask how Rawlinson got that hole-in-one. By all accounts he usually struggles to hit the green. 'Biggest fluke I ever saw,' Forbes

it really. There's plenty of room inside, especially widthways. I don't like to be cramped up in a car. The seats are jolly comfortable and my clubs fit easily in the boot.'

Dr Goodacre grimaces: 'Now that I can appreciate. There's hardly room

for my golfing shoes in the boot of the MG. Mary's always moaning about finding mud from my golf bag in the back, or more often on the kids after they've been in there. What does it go like?'

'The engine pulls very nicely. The

THE PLAYERS



OUR own Brian Cox owns the **MG YB**, and has done since 1977. In that time he's racked up a quarter of the 80,000 miles now showing on the clock. 'It's a little untidy, but very original, which is how I like a car,' says Brian. I've only ever carried out localised repairs so far, but I suppose I will have to do something about the paint eventually.'

The **Riley RME** belongs to Patricia King, but husband Arthur is responsible for its restoration. That took three years and a total stripdown to replace much of the body's wood framing. The engine was also in a state, says Arthur: 'The last owner had it 25 years, but only covered 4000 miles in the last ten of them. That's no good for the engine and it was overheating and blowing gaskets. I sent it away to be rebuilt and converted to shell bearings whilst a friend and I got on with the body.'

Pat and Arthur now rack up around 4000 miles every year, using the car right through the winter (weather permitting) to keep it sweet. 'Last year we drove it to Holland for the Dutch Riley club's 20th anniversary run. In 800 miles I only had to open the bonnet once to put a drop of oil in.' Arthur is now looking for another retirement project — this time probably a prewar Riley.

The **Wolseley 4/50** was a classic barn find. Jeremy Garrett, a forklift driver, unearthed it in 1987, 27 years after its deceased farmer owner had parked it there. Only when I started to restore it did I discover just how rare it is,' he told me. 'And though it's based on the MO Oxford and Wolseley 6/80, it has many unique parts, like the engine, front suspension and all panels ahead of the windscreen. Still, it's been back on the road for ten years now and in 6000 miles has been totally reliable. It's usually driven by my girlfriend Lorna; that way we can take two cars to shows,' Jeremy also owns the oldest known Wolseley 6/80 — in Police trim — the remains of the third 4/50 ever built, and is currently restoring a 1934 Morris 10.

Ken Brown bought his **Jowett Javelin** ten years ago as a restoration project, an antidote to repairing and painting modern cars — he was a bodyman at a Vauxhall dealer until retiring two years ago. The Javelin suited his abilities perfectly. It was pretty rough, but sound underneath where it matters. 'It had been heavily brush-painted and I scraped a dustbin-full off, thought I'd never find the metal. When I did, I had to spend weeks knocking all the dents and filler out.' It took three years to get the car back on the road, but Ken now uses it as often as possible, enjoying the social side of the Jowett Owners Club.



Interior space is at a premium, but all the trimmings are of suitable quality. confides. 'You know Rawlinson, all wind and wallop. Tees off at the 16th with a wood instead of a five-iron like the rest of us. It went long and wide, straight into the carpark, then

there's a sound like a ring on a cracked bell and the blessed ball comes back over the hedge, across the green and straight clown the hole. I'm sure it broke about three rules, but we had to let him have it, for the novelty if nothing else. You won't tell a soul, of course.'

Only later on, after locking up, do I remember where I parked Rawlinson's car for him earlier: right by the hedge next to the 16th green. If I'm not mistaken, that hole-in one is going to cost him more than a few gin and tonics...

VERDICT

IF ONLY I could afford something a little grander than my 15-year-old Morris... Still, there's no harm in dreaming, I suppose.

The Riley wouldn't suit me. Impressive and imposing though it is, it really is too big for its engine. The pace of life is hotting up and the

RME's being left behind in another age.

It's a similar story with the Wolseley. It's really a bit of a plodder, and though nice-looking in a cuddly sort of way, the proportions aren't quite right when you see it alongside its big brother, the 6/80.

Choosing between the MG and the Jowett is more difficult. The YB feels very modern to drive, despite its looks and background. Quite a nippy little character. And there's all that sporting association to go with it. But then the Javelin has got all that, plus more room inside and those swoopy looks as well. I think I've talked myself into it.

? Thanks to Beeston Fields Golf Club, Nottingham, for our photo location. Also to the Riley RM, Wolseley 6/80 & Morris Oxford MO and the Jowett Javelin Car clubs for their help with this feature.

SCORECARD				
	MG YB	JOWETT JAVELIN	RILEY RME	WOLSLEY 4/50
ENGINE	1250cc/4cyl	1486cc/flat-4	1496cc/4cyl	1476cc/4cyl
GEARBOX	4-spd/floor	4-spd/column	4-spd/floor	4-spd/column
POWER (bhp/rpm)	46/4800	52.5/4500	54/4500	50/4000
TORQUE (lb ft/rpm)	59/2400	76/2600	76/2500	72/2900
TOP SPEED	75mph	80mph	75mph	74mph
0 - 60mph	30.4secs	20.9secs	29.5secs	31.6secs
CONSUMPTION	27mpg	29mpg	24mpg	26mpg
LENGTH	13ft 8in (4.17m)	14ft (4.27m)	14ft 11in (4.55m)	14ft 2in (4.32m)
WIDTH	4ft 11in (1.50m)	5ft 1in (1.55m)	5ft 3.5in (1.61m)	5ft 6in (1.68m)
WEIGHT	2341lb (1063kg)	2254lb (1023kg)	2870lb (1303kg)	2583lb (1173kg)
GREEN FEES	£2750-£5000	£3600-£6000	£3750-£6400	£1500-£2800