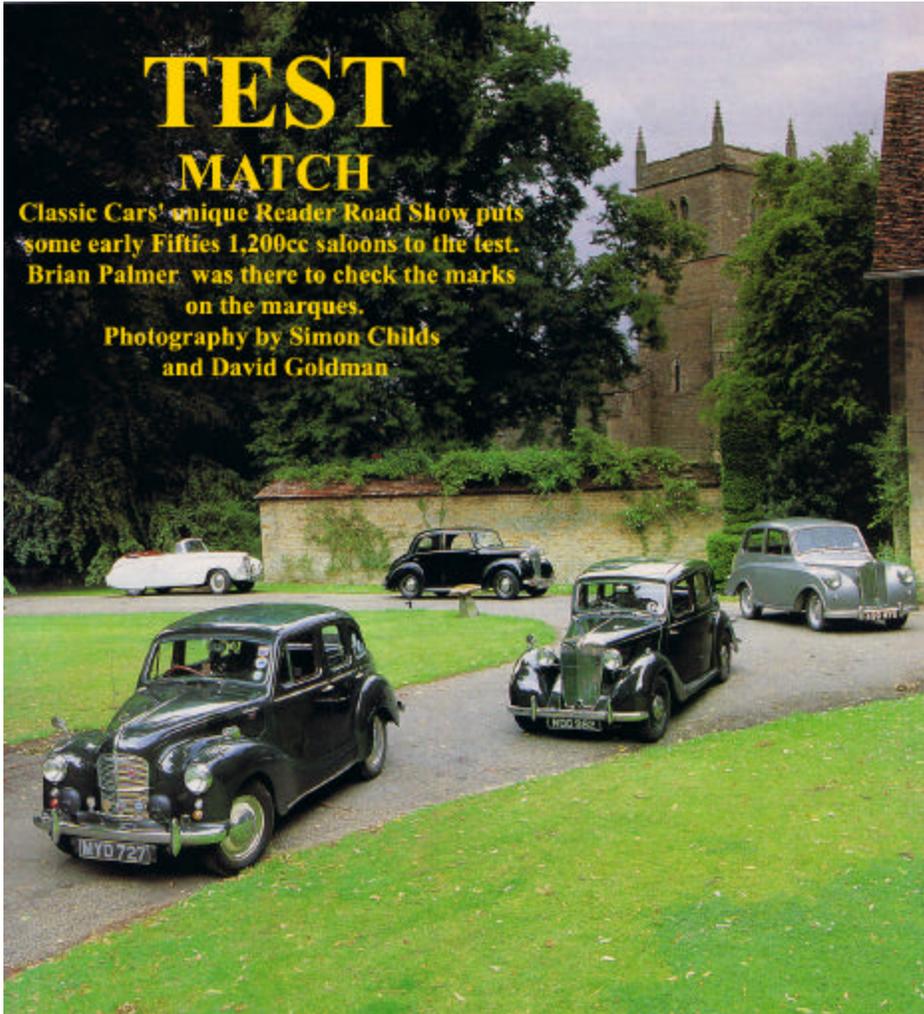


TEST MATCH

Classic Cars' unique Reader Road Show puts some early Fifties 1,200cc saloons to the test. Brian Palmer was there to check the marks on the marques.

Photography by Simon Childs and David Goldman



styling while maintaining just a hint of the traditional separate front wing line for its more traditional clientele.

The 1,200cc pushrod-operated engine was brand new and developed 40bhp, while its four-speed gearbox had synchromesh on the upper three ratios. A noteworthy feature was the length of the floor-mounted lever, which enabled it to lie very close to the steering wheel in third and fourth gears to facilitate easy changes for overtaking manoeuvres. The chassis was conventional enough but coil-and-wishbone independent front suspension provided a modern touch. Brakes were Girling hydro-mechanical type which meant a split front to rear of hydraulic and mechanical actuation. The Austin proved a roomy car given its compact length of less than 13ft, and priced at just under £505 with optional sliding metal roof, in 1950 it may not have been an exceptional car but it was certainly remarkable value.

Next on our shortlist is the Lanchester LD10. Not, perhaps, a model to set hearts aflame, nor yet one which would immediately enthuse those who remembered Lanchester in the grand old days, before it became a kind of cheap Daimler.

Having thus dispensed with all the prejudice usually slung in its direction we can now look dispassionately at what the LD10 did offer. Announced in December 1945, the little Lanchester was actually the first post-war Road Test car that *The Motor* published in the summer of the following year.

The bodywork was an odd mixture, made up of a dull pre-war middle with a semi-streamlined front end rather reminiscent of the later Ford Pilot. Another curious anomaly saw the Briggs pressed-steel bodies replaced in 1949 by Barker coachbuilt aluminium-panelled versions. These were rather better looking, too, with their close-coupled four-light windows rather than Briggs' workaday six-light structure.

The engine develops a useful 40bhp but the tubby Lanchester, while not the slowest of the group, is certainly the heaviest and performance is best described as leisurely. It too has Girling hydro-mechanical brakes but is unusual in this class in having a pre-selector gearbox and a Daimler-type fluid flywheel. Once mastered, this system gives the little Lanchester a useful lead

THE late Forties and early Fifties were a time of great change in the British automobile industry as it recovered slowly from the stagnation caused by a European war coped with shortages of raw materials and made the painful transition from building pre-war cars designed only for a limited home market to modern vehicles suitable for sale around the world.

Yet the period undoubtedly provided the motorist – or at least those able to afford such luxuries – with a greater choice than at any age before or since. Sadly, of the five marques we have chosen, only one survives today. Yet it is probably true to say that the type of car selected is still very much in evidence.

The cars in the group are all of approximately 1,200cc, at a time when the average size of engine favoured by motorists in this country was around two litres in capacity, yet they were by no means cheap or run-of-the-mill. They majored on exclusivity, refinement and

luxury in a smaller-sized vehicle, occupying the same rather specialist 'niche' market sector that, say, a Rover 213 fits into today.

Because of this they were, necessarily, rather expensive and thus encroached on territory normally occupied by models with larger engines. This makes them rather hard to include in some of our other groupings so we decided to pitch them against each other instead. We also included a typical mass-produced car of the period, both to see how it compared and also to find out whether our panel viewed the more expensive opposition as offering value for money.

Taking them alphabetically, the first on our list is the honest, upright, everyday Austin, which has no pretensions of being anything superior. The Austin A40 Devon, made between 1947 and 1952, registered a colossal 354,000 sales. Small wonder that period advertisements proclaimed "You see more Austins on the roads of Britain today than any other single make of car" It marked a quantum leap for Austin in terms of modern

in overall refinement.

Suspension followed the period norm of an independent front end, using coil springs, and conventional leaf-sprung rear. Inside much wood trim is in evidence and the whole car exudes a quiet air of restrained good taste and quality. Even so, at £927 it was the most expensive saloon on test.

Next we have lined-up an MG Y-type saloon which, again, is a clever amalgam of a standard Morris passenger shell onto which was grafted the longer MG bonnet and grille. Though considered conservative — old-fashioned if you will — in appearance, even in its day, there's a pleasing classical correctness about the MG's proportions that is absent in all the other contenders.

No surprises in the chassis department, but the £880 MG scores in having rack-and-pinion steering and Lockheed fully hydraulic brakes. The Moths Ten-based engine manages a creditable 46bhp, too, via twin SU carburettors. Nice touches include a sliding roof, adjustable steering column, built-in Smith's Jackall hydraulic jacks and an opening windscreen, useful for extra ventilation or negotiating those London smogs.

Inside, the traditional octagonal instruments feature, together with elegant figured walnut veneer and leather seats. An unusual device is the trafficator 'switch' worked by clockwork from a knurled ring around the steering wheel boss.

Our fourth contender is a Sunbeam Talbot 80. In case you think you've misread that, yes, I do mean an Eighty. Launched in 1948 alongside its better known and more popular two-litre sister, the 90, it managed on a 1,184cc ohv version of the Hillman Minx engine. Despite an extra 6bhp, which gave it the lustiest output of the group at 47bhp, it coped with the same ample chassis and body as the larger-capacity car and the price was disturbingly close, too. Amazingly, the Sunbeam Talbot recorded the fastest top speed of the five and is, indeed, the only one capable of exceeding 70mph.

Bodywork was among the most distinguished and individual of the period and featured pillarless doors and a sunroof for the saloon, while handsome drophead coupé versions ran alongside. Early 80s and 90s are easily spotted by their larger, low-set headlamps. They were well equipped with built-in pass

lamps, reversing lights with rear/stop lights cleverly arranged behind their white lenses, and an extremely comprehensive tool kit.

Lockheed hydraulic-brakes were standard but a curious omission amid all this modernity was the lack of independent front suspension. That had to wait until 1951. In convertible form, as tested, the Sunbeam Talbot also topped the price scale in our grouping, but as a saloon it crept in just under the MG.

Last but not least in this pack of true individualists, we have the Triumph Mayflower — probably the most resolutely individual of the lot. The scaled-down version of the 1800 and 2000 saloon was conceived as a ritzy-looking and peculiarly English antidote to all the pseudo-American styling that was then so much in vogue.

In some ways the idea was a good one, because customers bought a car with strong overtones of bespoke coach-building about it for exactly the same price as the mass-produced Austin Devon. It was compact — maybe too compact for some — and the square lines promoted good headroom at the front, while the generous expanse of glass aided vision and made the interior lighter than was common at the time.

Once inside, though, the designers abandoned their carriage trade pretensions for the Mies van der Rohe 'Less is More' philosophy. The stark contrast would probably have made even the ancient Spartans long for home, but the idea, pre-dating the Metro by about 35 years, was to create an illusion of space.

Unfortunately the Mayflower had to make do with a Standard Ten-derived 1,247cc side-valve engine which developed just 38bhp, and with all the aerodynamic efficiency of a brick cowshed the poor little Triumph ran out of puff at just 62.9mph.

So there we have it. The no-nonsense Austin A40 Devon, the retired colonel's Lanchester Ten, the MG Y-type sports saloon, the stylish and attractive Sunbeam Talbot 80 and the distinctive, square-rigged Triumph Mayflower at a bargain price. Which would you choose right now?

1951 Austin A40 Devon

Derek Thorn is a 60-year-old estimator from Thornton Heath, Surrey who has

owned his car for eight years. Derek is the car's fourth owner and its overall originality is enhanced by fitment from new of a number of desirable extras like the heater, sunroof and Ekco valve radio. Even so, the dependable Austin is used daily for both business and pleasure.

Owner:	Derek Thorn
Engine:	Four-cylinder (pushrod,ohv)
Capacity:	1,200cc
Power:	40bhp at 4,300rpm
Top speed:	69.5mph
0-50mph:	206sec
Fuel consumption:	341mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	22cwt
Length:	12ft 9in
No. Produced:	354,000
Price new:	£505. 9s5d
Price now:	£2,500

1951 Lanchester LD10

Owner Martin Brench was away celebrating his golden wedding anniversary in Guernsey, but kindly allowed Daimler and Lanchester Owners Club President, David Adcock, to bring the LD10 on his behalf. David, accompanied as ever by his wife Marie, owns several Daimlers and is Chairman of a Nottinghamshire clothing manufacturers. The Lanchester has been the subject of a running restoration over the past five years.

Owner:	Martin Brench (Driver: David Adcock)
Engine:	Four-cylinder (pushrod,ohv)
Capacity:	1,287cc
Power:	40bhp at 4,200rpm
Top speed:	669mph
0-50mph~	26sec
Fuel consumption:	31mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	26 ½cwt
Length:	13ft 2in
No. Produced:	3,050 (Barker: 575)
Price new:	£927. 2s.9d
Price now:	£8,000

1953 MG Y-type

Derek Lovatt is a 45-year-old photographer from Burton-on-Trent who has owned his MG YB for 14 years. It is apparently the tenth-from-last YB to be made and Derek's other cars, naturally, include another MG — a TF 1500. Derek, who is a member of the Octagon Car Club, ran the YB for two years before starting his own photographic business,

when it was stored for nine years. Partly restored by himself and his son, it is used regularly. One of these days he'll even get round to fitting the interior headlining!

Owner:	Derek Lovatt
Engine:	Four-cylinder (pushrod,ohv)
Capacity:	1,250cc
Power:	46bhp at 4,800rpm
Top speed:	69.6mph
0-50mph:	18.8sec
Fuel consumption:	29.5mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone B: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	24cwt
Length:	13ft 5in
No. Produced:	YA:6,158/YB:1,201
Price new:	£880 7s9d
Price now:	£10,000



1949 Sunbeam Talbot 80 dhc

Irene Cornish from Stroud in Gloucestershire, who describes herself as a 'lady of leisure', is a member of the Sunbeam Talbot Alpine Register and has owned her car for three years. A keen Classic car enthusiast with an urge, she says, to enter some of the more serious rally retrospectives, Irene has not yet found anyone prepared to navigate for her – any offers?

The car is largely original apart from a recent respray in white and a new hood – which she keeps furled in all but the worst winter weather.

Owner:	Irene Cornish
Engine:	Four-cylinder (pushrod,ohv)
Capacity:	1,184cc
Power:	47bhp at 4,800rpm
Top speed:	74mph
0-50mph:	22.2sec
Fuel consumption:	30mpg
Suspension:	F&R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	22cwt
Length:	13ft 11Y~in
No. Produced:	4,000 (all)
Price new:	£888. 16s. 1d / £952 (dhc)
Price now:	£6,000

1952 Triumph Mayflower

The Triumph was our second car on loan. Owner Peter Benfield couldn't make it, so Triumph Mayflower Club Vice-Chairman, John Oglesby, who is 35 and self-employed, drove it down from Richmond in Yorks – a round trip of some 400 miles. No mean feat in a Mayflower! Despite its present excellent condition, this example was found in a scrapyards and totally rebuilt.

Mayflowers are now surprisingly rare – only 200 members are listed in the Club, with probably less than a dozen cars currently roadworthy.

Owner:	Peter Benfield (Driver: John Oglesby)
Engine:	Four-cylinder side-valve
Capacity:	1,247cc
Power:	38bhp at 4,200rpm
Top speed:	62.9mph
0-50mph:	26.6sec
Fuel consumption:	28.3mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	22 ¼cwt
Length:	12ft 9 1/2in
No. Produced:	35,000
Price new:	£505. 9s. 6d
Price now:	£2,000

The Test

Any idea which you'd pick as a winner right now? Well, our reader team have to do it the proper way, and that involves taking each contender for a 20-mile drive to assess their qualities. They give various aspects of the car points out of ten and add their comments.

Backing them up, we've some edited period Road Test comments and *Classic Cars'* very own Malcolm McKay to offer his view on ride, comfort and general ambience.

Austin A40 Devon

Irene Cornish – "I'd award nine out of ten for performance but the gearbox spoilt it for me by jumping out of third. The steering gets another nine from me, very good with no play, and the brakes get full marks. Everything was nicely laid out with the exception of the indicator switch which was awkward to find. My shoulders also began to ache, probably due to the high-set steering wheel, and I found the interior rather hot even with the window open. But it was a very pleasant car overall."

Derek Lovatt – "I'm afraid I considered the Austin rather sluggish, but it went better once you wound it up a bit. The brakes were excellent and the steering good except that it was inclined to oversteer on its non-standard radial tyres. They probably contributed to the harder ride, too. The sunroof is a nice touch and the interior is very roomy. The mock-veneer tinware reminds me of childhood toys. A car for the younger classic car enthusiast."

John Oglesby – "The performance is good for a car of this age, so it gets a nine out of ten from me, as do the brakes. The synchromesh is badly worn on the gearbox, though, so only five there. But the driving position is good, there's a nice period radio and only the mock wood trim lets it down. Handling-wise, the Austin is not a car you would want to put under pressure, but it's a good usable Classic that's simple to maintain. Bad points? I really cannot think of any".

David Adcock – "Performance is very satisfactory for this type of car (8) and the steering is good, if not as good as the Mayflower. The brakes were progressive but needed heavy pressure to make them respond (6) and the gearbox encouraged you to double declutch for a smooth take-up. Sum-up? Fifties family motoring at its comfortable average best."

Malcolm McKay – "The best! Very comfortable and spacious, I could doze off to sleep in here. The ride is smooth without too much roll, and there's no harshness at all. A car that would still stand-up well to everyday use."

The Motor (19.7.50) – "In describing the A40 as a good ordinary car, a tester robs himself of the opportunity to use superlatives in describing individual characteristics. It

is an opportunity willingly foregone on an occasion such as this, because of the remarkable lack of points evoking criticism, the whole car striking an excellent balance between conflicting requirements.”

Lanchester LD10

Derek Thorn / Mike Cloudsdale – “The engine is incredibly willing, and will pull in top both on the flat and up hill very well indeed (10). The steering is rather heavy and yet vague (8) and a lot of pressure is needed on the brakes (7). We found the pre-selector gearbox worked very well once we’d got used to it (9). The car wallows rather on corners (7) but rides well (9). All told, the Lanchester has a solid, well-made feel, offers good all-round vision and has a big car luxury air about it.”

John Oglesby – “I found the performance surprisingly good for its type (10) and the steering and brakes are excellent (10). I had a few problems with the pre-selector because there may have been some wear but it works well and suits the car (8). All in all the Lanchester comes across as being quite nippy, with good taut handling, and really quite luxurious.”

Irene Cornish – “I felt relaxed and truly at ease with this car as soon as I drove it. And despite never having tried a pre-selector gearbox, I found that I liked it very much. The performance was excellent (10) and this was a car I would have enjoyed the chance to drive again. The car looks as though it might be heavy to drive but it isn’t and it handles and rides very capably (9).”

Derek Lovatt – “The pre-selector provided great entertainment – and I had to stop once for further instruction! However it would be a useful device for many road situations and was well-suited to the engine which was especially good in its middle ranges. The Lanchester was predictable around the twistier parts of the circuit and the seats supported well. I liked the quality, pre-war look of the instruments, and the interior was surprisingly light and airy. A great little car all round?”

Malcolm McKay – “Lovely coachbuilt, barrel-sided body ... acceptable legroom and plenty of headroom. Seats are comfortable and the ride is bouncy but not harsh. The engine seems powerful and quiet but noisier than the Triumph.”



The Motor (9.3.49) – “Neither the restrained appearance of the Lanchester Ten, nor the memory of pre-war models carrying the same name would lead one to expect strikingly high performance. The fact that the car proves able to attain considerably over 65mph or show fuel consumption figures of over 40mpg can only be attributed to quite astonishingly versatile performance by the 10hp engine. The use of a fluid flywheel enables this car to be driven almost exclusively in top gear if desired ... and noisy gear changes are impossible.

“The Lanchester Ten is costly by comparison with other cars of similar size, but it offers the qualities of safe controllability, refinement and performance in very adequate measure.”

MG Y-type

David Adcock – “The MG’s engine is certainly willing if revved and has a

sporty feel about it (7) while the steering is safe and positive, being inch perfect (8). The brakes are very good (8) but the gearchange proves rather notchy (5). The car has a pleasing period appearance and convenient controls, although the screen pillar is rather thick and obstructs vision. Handling and roadholding is as good as you’d expect from an MG but the ride is too harsh for me. Shake, rattle and roll!”

John Oglesby – “A fast sports saloon for its period (10) with excellent steering and very good brakes. The gearbox is noisy in first, but has well-chosen ratios (8). The MG has nice fixtures and fittings and I really liked the clever trafficator switch (6). Handling and roadholding were undoubtedly helped by radial tyres but the harsh ride would be tiring on a long journey. A very rewarding, classy sports saloon – but not really a family car.”

Derek Thorn/Mike Cloudsdale – “A good engine but a noisy one when you rev hard to get the best out of it. The steering is heavy but really responsive



The most traditional of the five cars tested here, the MG YB looks every inch the Classic sporting saloon, but in the pre-war idiom. Rack and pinion steering and hydraulic brakes added a modern touch.



(7), brakes good (8) and the gearchange pleasant (9). The interior is nicely fitted-out, with its quality leather and woodwork, but the instruments are rather too low and the functions of the unmarked switches are confusing. The car feels inherently stable but the ride is far too harsh. A pleasant car overall but neither as quick nor as smooth as we thought it would be.”

Irene Cornish – “Good performance provided you rev hard through the gears (8) but I dislike the action of the gear lever (5) The steering is first class (10) with no play at all. The MG is a car which handles well but the poor ride suits a shorter journey rather than a long one. It’s a good-looking car, too, but somehow not quite my cup of tea.”

Malcolm McKay – “This is obviously a dressed-up little sports car. I would not like to ride in it on a long journey, though I’d probably enjoy driving it over the same distance. Legroom is poor in the back and the rear doors are too small. The seats are well sprung, but with the harsh ride this is almost a disadvantage – you never stop bouncing!”

The Motor (6.12.51) – *“Both the driver and front seat passenger find themselves in individually adjustable seats, well formed to give sideways support ... The instruments are of sensible size with sober inscriptions. These are mounted in a fascia panel made of what an American salesman proudly called ‘genuine tree wood’ ... ahead of the handbrake, a short gear lever connects to a four-speed box giving a combination which is superlative in itself and almost comically superior to the average steering column type. ... driving the car on fast corners demands a certain degree of practice, for the car has oversteering characteristics which verge, perhaps, on the exaggerated.”*

Sunbeam Talbot 80

Derek Lovatt – “The Sunbeam Talbot’s engine is seemingly powerful, but weak in mid-range acceleration (6), and the steering surely needs adjustment as it is very slack (3). The brakes were fine, though heavy (8), and while the gearlever was nice and smooth to use, there was too great a gap between third and top (8). I found the driving position rather on the low side but the instruments were neatly grouped and easily read on the move. The ride is good (8) but I was not impressed with the handling and roadholding (5). Radial tyres would transform the car. A great summer cruiser, though.”

Derek Thorn/Mike Cloudsdale – “The engine was good considering it has a weighty body to lug around (7) but the steering was heavy and had lots of play, which is the worst of both worlds (4). This was more than made up for by the clutch, which was nice and light, and the easy gearchange (8). The driving position is so low that I’d need an extra cushion but the instrumentation is well laid out and of attractive transatlantic appearance (8). The ride is firm on those cart springs (7) but the handling’s not what one would expect from an otherwise sporty car (6).”

David Adcock – “The engine was rather gutless and almost Edwardian (4) and the steering had a mind of its own (3). The brakes were average and this was the only car in the group that I needed to change down in for a hill. However the seats were comfortable and there’s lots of legroom, while the dashboard is a bit like an American juke-box. Overall,

disappointing. It’s a good looker but my motor mower goes better.”

John Oglesby – “The Sunbeam Talbot has a very sweet engine but you’ve got to admit it’s struggling against the weight of the car (7). The steering is very heavy at low speed but wanders badly when you go faster (1), and I disliked the gearchange — like stirring a bowl of porridge (5). Roadholding? Help! However, the car does look very attractive inside and out and it runs well overall. I’d have the steering checked, though.”

Malcolm McKay – “In spite of its directional waywardness, I loved this car. It has a super exhaust note, and despite being underpowered for such a sporty looker it manages to keep up with today’s herd remarkably well. The seats are comfortable with armrests all round, and the ride fair if bouncy. Being a soft top, it’s hard judging it for noise against the others.”

The Autocar (18.2.49) – *“The Sunbeam Talbot 80’s performance, particularly in cruising speed and maximum speed, has handsomely exceeded the standards that might be expected of a car of this engine size ... A driver accustomed to independent front wheel suspensions would be able to tell that it had half-elliptic springs all round ... the ride is a satisfactory compromise between softness and firmness (but) there are occasions when greater lateral firmness would be appreciated for fast cornering. The steering is light, being fairly low geared, and has marked castor action, but it could possess more automatic sense of direction with advantage, or, in other words, increased self-steering tendencies.”*

Triumph Mayflower

Irene Cornish – “I felt the Triumph performed well, being very good for overtaking (9), and the steering was also excellent (9). The three-speed gearbox with column change was something different but I quite liked it. The handbrake on the right-hand side was rather awkward and they only provided the bare minimum in the way of instruments. A pretty car to look at but not really me, somehow”

David Adcock – “The Mayflower was much as expected, performance-wise. A good slogger rather than anything

brilliant, although it went well in the 30-50mph range (7). The steering was light and positive (8), brakes good (7), but as for the gearbox, my advice would be “don’t rush before stirring the pudding”. The ride and handling was appropriately nautical – *très ondulée* – but with the speed kept down and on decent roads the little car was surprisingly usable. Pity they made it so stark inside, though.”

Derek Thorn/Mike Cloudsdale – “The car responds well to the gears and attains 50mph without fuss but performance drops off quickly on hills (9). In all other major departments the car appears better than average. I’ve never driven one before and I liked it much more than I expected. It would be a pleasant car to take on a long journey, especially as the driving position is so good all-round vision is of a high order, too. The engine is lively and quiet and there are no rattles anywhere. Bad points are wind noise and pitching on poor surfaces.”

Derek Lovatt – “I thought the Mayflower was a sluggish performer and hills were quite a struggle (6), but the steering was light and positive (8). While the brakes were good, I found the offset pedals uncomfortable (8) and despite it seeming very spacious widthways, front legroom and headroom at the back was surprisingly limited. The interior was very bland but the car had a solid feel and would probably go on for ever at 50mph! The styling is just as controversial now as when it was new. I quite liked its appearance but my son hated it.”

Malcolm McKay – “The only two-door saloon – and rear-seat headroom is totally inadequate; my 5ft 9in frame was seriously cramped. A shaped floor and shallower seat cushion would have made all the difference.”

The Motor (6.12.50) – “*The Mayflower does not claim to have unsurpassed acceleration through the gears, to corner like a racing car or to attain high maximum speeds. What it does offer is roominess, comfortable riding, ample and exceedingly smooth top gear performance, and sensible economy of fuel.*”

Verdict

That just about wraps-up our test. but I want to take this opportunity to say a special thank you to everyone who took

part. These are not the fastest cars in the world, yet, because many of them are now quite rare, their owners were scattered over a very wide area and all had to make long and arduous journeys just to take part. Then they clocked-up over 100 miles apiece on the test – and two owners gallantly allowed other people to bring their treasured possessions along rather than let us down. So thank you all.

Our reader jury was also pretty clear about which car they liked best. Did you guess? I didn’t. The ever-so-refined Lanchester wins convincingly by four votes to one – that odd one being for the Austin.

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