

Style counsellor



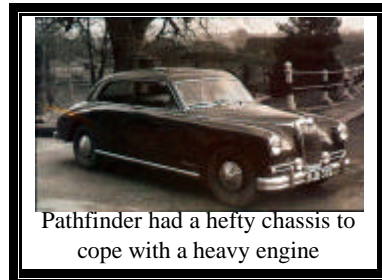
Gerald Palmer in 1990.

Two of the most highly regarded postwar saloons, the MG Magnette and Jowett Javelin, were designed by one man. Gerald Palmer tells his story to Nick Larkin. Photos by Garry Stuart.

A car manufacturer sits you down at a desk, provides blank sheets of paper and tells you to design the models which will shape its future. An enthusiast's fantasy perhaps, but it became a reality more than once for Gerald Palmer.

Forty years on, Palmer is still amazed that he was given almost carte blanche by Nuffield to design such significant cars as the MG Magnette and Wolseley 4/44 family saloons, along with the larger Wolseley 6/90 and Riley Pathfinder. His only brief was to produce cars to replace the pre-war style MG Y-Type and Riley RM, along with the Wolseley derivatives to complete the range. The company's existing range of engines also had to be used in the new models.

Palmer claims he was ultimately responsible for the decision to build the Magnette and 4/44 by unitary construction, the cars



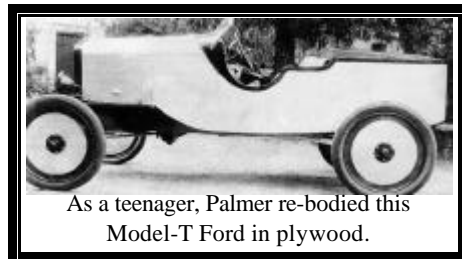
Pathfinder had a hefty chassis to cope with a heavy engine

sharing virtually identical monocoques, but to stick with a separate chassis for the Pathfinder and closely related 6/90. He was keen to continue the traditions of each marque, specifying appropriate radiator grilles and correspondingly suitable interiors.

Palmer was well qualified for the task, having previously been allowed an even freer hand to produce the much acclaimed Jowett Javelin. He had also designed and built his own sports car, the Deroy, before the war.

Gerald Palmer was born in Middlesex in 1911, his family moving to Southern Rhodesia three years later, where his father was chief engineer of the country's railways.

The young Gerald soon became fascinated by cars, particularly the Model-T Ford, and by the age of 15 had rebodied one in plywood to his own two seater design. He wanted to return to England, and became apprenticed to Scammell, the Watford truck builder, at the same time studying for a degree in mechanical engineering.



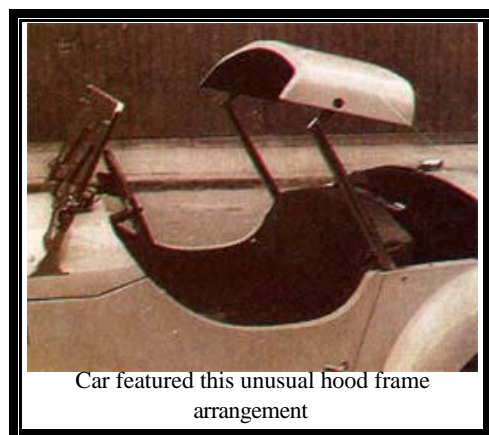
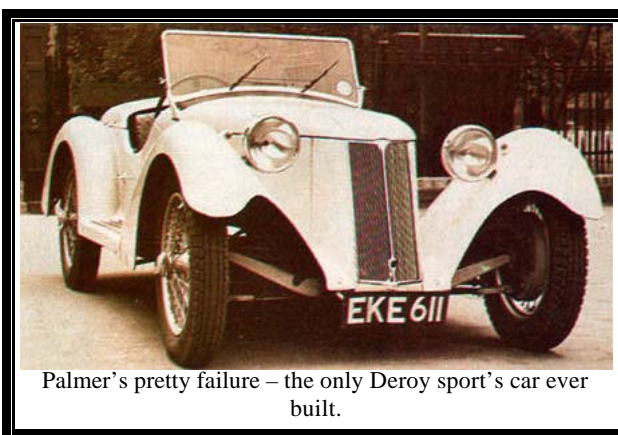
As a teenager, Palmer re-bodied this Model-T Ford in plywood.

"I was really more interested in building sports cars than trucks," Palmer recalls. But Scammell's chief designer, O D North, became his great inspiration. North had

produced a radical air-cooled, five-cylinder, rear-engined streamlined car, the North-Lucas, in the early twenties. "In my opinion, he was the father of the VW Beetle - so many of his ideas were incorporated into it," says Palmer. The North-Lucas fuelled Palmer's fascination for innovative design, and in 1937 he left Scammell, intending to build sports cars.

Palmer had been introduced to Anthony Fisher, a wealthy Old Etonian who offered £1,000 financial backing, which was used to set up the Deroys Car Company, named after the location of an African tin mine his father owned! A prototype was designed and largely built by Palmer in a small, rented workshop at Penge, London.

The car had independent front suspension and transverse torsion bar rear springing. An 1100cc side-valve Scammell engine was not in the best sporting traditions, however. "It couldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding," Palmer recalls. The project failed to find further backing, and only one car was ever built: "It was a nice looking car, which could have been a lot better than the other sports cars available then. It



could sit three people abreast and had lots of luggage space, but it was too expensive."

Palmer kept the car, fitting a full width body and Jowett engine after the war. "I sold it, and the last I saw of the car was it being driven along Oxford High Street with about six undergraduates in it," he says.

Despite its failure, the Deroys shaped Palmer's future. After showing the car to MG's general manager, Cecil Kimber, he was offered the job of running the MG drawing office at Morris in Cowley. Palmer immediately became involved in developing the MG YA saloon, being given the job of replacing a planned independent front suspension arrangement, designed by Alec Issigonis, with a conventional beam axle layout. He was also involved in designing the bodywork, "which was really stretched Morris panels with a better boot at the back."

War came, and Palmer was involved with the repair of Spitfire and Hurricane aircraft at Cowley, along with building Tiger Moths. Later, he was given his first complete project - redesigning a portable anaesthetic machine. "It was one of the most interesting jobs I did during the war. For the first time, I had carte blanche to design something which was going to be properly tooled."

Then he saw an advert for a designer at Jowett Cars in Bradford. "I went up there and took one look at Jowett. After being with the Morris group, I thought what a tin-pot place it was, and turned the job down."

But Jowett's chief, Calcott Reilly, was determined get Palmer on his staff: "He came to see me where I lived in Oxford, and was very persuasive. I was told I would get a free hand to design a car for them, so I agreed."

Palmer found himself alone in an office, designing a car with no set budget or time limit. Only when the basics of the car were set down were a couple of draughtsmen called in to assist with mechanical details, and a body engineer's services.

Palmer's early life in Rhodesia helped give him a clear idea of the car he felt was needed to crack export markets. "I knew the sort of car wanted in these tough territories. Jowett had always produced a large-bodied practical vehicle, and there was a niche in the market for them to do the same thing after the war," he says.

"The main thing at that time was that the engine took up too much of a car's overall length. I wanted to make the engine compartment as compact as possible, giving the major part of the available space to the passengers and their luggage."

Jowett had a flat-four side-valve engine, which Palmer, believing side-valves to be a thing of the past, redesigned with a 1500cc overhead valve layout.

"I'm not awfully proud of that engine," he admits. "The unit was designed with the then current car taxation system in mind, which was based on the cylinder diameter. Had I known this was going to be replaced by a flat rate of tax, I would have designed a short-stroke larger bore engine, which would have been much more compact and lighter, with better combustion and a larger power output.

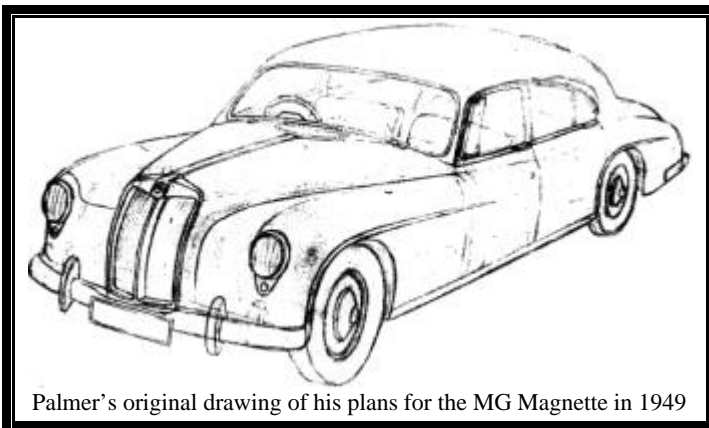
A wooden mock-up of the car was produced in 1943, a running prototype in 1944 and a second the next year. Only the four-speed gearbox was carried over from previous models.

Confusion still reigned over exactly how, in a time of scarce raw materials, the car would be constructed. It appeared that Jowett did not have the facilities or finance to build it entirely from steel. Plastics, laminated wood and aircraft style aluminium with rubber dies were all considered. Palmer designed all the non-external panels to be as simple as possible to construct, and mostly flat. But Jowett were so impressed by the completed car that somehow the money was found to have it built at the Briggs Motor Bodies plant in Doncaster. Palmer and his team took the opportunity to give the car a more streamlined appearance by altering the roof and doors, which probably would not have been possible had it needed to be built with relatively primitive equipment at Jowett's factory.

The car, named the Javelin, was highly acclaimed when launched in 1948.

Jowett ceased trading in 1954, after Briggs Motor Bodies were taken over by Ford. Around 26,000 Javelins had been produced.

Meanwhile, Palmer had rejoined Nuffield in 1949. 'I was headhunted, as they say,' he recalls. He became chief engineer of MG and Riley, where his brief was to design new cars.



Palmer's original drawing of his plans for the MG Magnette in 1949

The MG Magnette and Wolseley 4/44, launched in 1952, were the first fruits. Palmer puts the record straight over the oft-heard statement that the Wolseley was a hastily cobbled up version of the MG. "This is not true. Both cars were designed together, he says.

There were differences; for example the Wolseley had a

1,250cc MG XPAG engine whereas the MG, introduced a year later came with the then new BMC B-series 1489cc unit. The sill designs and chromework also differed.

The two cars' styling was not, as has been stated, based on the Lancia Aurelia, though Palmer admits he was influenced by the Italians. "I remember going to the Turin Motor Show after the war," he says. "I had always been an admirer of Italian designs, particularly sports cars. They were beautiful cars, like jewels, that influenced me tremendously. Most of them were highly impractical from a production point of view. It seemed wise to put some of these styling themes into the cars I was designing.

"I thought the Magnette was quite a good looking car, but when I saw it at the Turin show it looked ghastly and crude compared with some of the Italian designs."

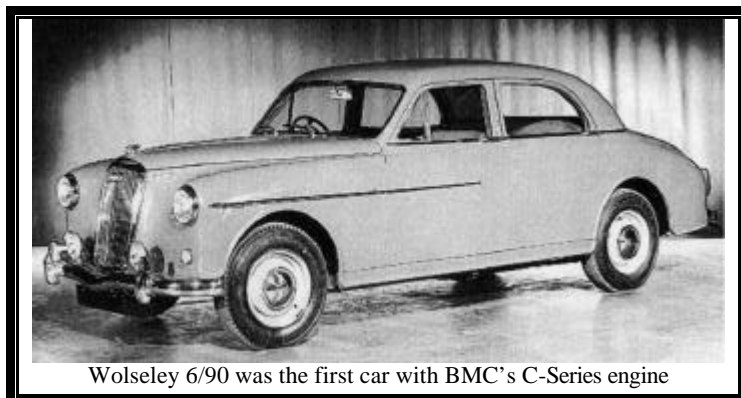
Work started on a new Riley, the Pathfinder, with the Wolseley 6/90 to be developed alongside it. "The Riley was supposed to compete with Jaguars. Riley were losing out to Jag fast, but the dyed-in-the-wool Riley people had a lot of preconceived ideas about what the new car should be like. They

thought it inconceivable that the car would not have the traditional torque tube rear axle." Palmer compromised by specifying radius arms and a Panhard rod.

The Riley was to be built with the extremely heavy 2443cc engine from the outgoing RM model, and this influenced Palmer to design the car with a separate chassis. He gave the Pathfinder a low profile by running the chassis along the outer edges so the seating area was inside the structure, an idea finding its way into a number of American models. He also decided the Riley and the Wolseley 6/90 should be equipped with a right-hand, floor-mounted gear change to allow for three-abreast seating. The Wolseley was given the 2,639cc BMC C-series engine.



Palmer outlines the Riley Pathfinder at its launch. Lord Nuffield (right) looks sceptical



Wolseley 6/90 was the first car with BMC's C-Series engine

Palmer met with some friction from Riley chief engineer, Harry Rush. "He was extremely reluctant to retire. I had a brief to design a complete new car, and he was sort of altering the existing RM," Palmer recalls. Sadly, Rush died in a road accident on his way to Canley from Cowley early in 1950.

Following the amalgamation of Nuffield and Austin to form BMC, Palmer became group chassis and body designer, and joined the board of the Morris section in the new empire.

The merger was not problem-free, says Palmer. Leonard Lord, who headed the group, lived up to his reputation for being extremely autocratic and difficult to work with, and the companies involved in the merger were not the happiest of bed-fellows.

Palmer worked on other projects, most importantly a small monocoque sports car to replace the MG TF, which could have been produced in full-bodied or traditional style, depending on market trends. The project was axed at prototype stage. Palmer also looked at compact V4 engines and a twin-cam conversion of the BMC C-series unit, before being sacked in 1955.

“They wanted Alec Issigonis to come back from Alvis. My boss, Reggie Hanks fell out with Lord, and so he got rid of both of us at the same time,” he says.

Palmer began work at Vauxhall but says: “Really, my designing career ended with the Nuffield/BMC cars, except that I influenced some of the Vauxhalls, often by saying ‘Bravo, this design is much better than the other one.’”

When he arrived at Luton, the original F-series Victor was in the design stage, with almost all the work being carried out at Detroit, which he thinks was a mistake. Thus was the car with the scallop-shaped moulding on the flanks, which Palmer says looks like “built-in accident damage.”

He was given the title of Assistant Chief Designer, Passenger Cars. Palmer’s work at Vauxhall all included designing an independent front suspension system for the Cresta and a front end structure for the British-designed FB series Victor.

He then became increasingly involved with engine and safety design before retiring in 1972, after 16 years of commuting to Luton from his home near Oxford.

He leads an extremely active life and is still involved with the design of equipment for disabled people, manufactured by a firm of which he is a director. Palmer is even allocated a company car - a 1980 Ford Escort estate, which he describes as a “highly capable vehicle.”

In the garage are Palmer’s two classics - a 1924 supercharged 2-litre Mercedes Targa Florio and a 1928 Type 44 Bugatti, both bought in the sixties in bits. He built the four seater bodywork, which adorns the Bugatti. “I’d always hankered after a Bugatti, partly for their engineering excellence.” The Mercedes, one of only four produced, was snapped up when he saw it advertised locally for £250, and has been the subject of a 15-year restoration.

Palmer is president of the Jowett Car Club and attends events whenever possible. He looks at the Javelin as the best of his designs, and was particularly pleased when, in 1985 a panel of distinguished motoring experts included it in a list of the ten greatest all-time British cars.

“When the Javelin was in the design stage, I said to my wife that it would make history,” he recalls. “She told me not to be silly! But that car set new standards. The MG, Riley and Wolseleys are not the interesting car the Javelin is, though I do particularly like the Magnette.”

He still laments the decline of Jowett, which he blames to a large degree on the company’s concentration on the Jupiter two-seater sports model, introduced in 1950.

“They spent all their resources and money on building a sports car and racing it, when it wasn’t in their tradition at all. They ought to have spent their money refining and cheapening the Javelin - backing their bread and butter.”

Palmer reckons bad management played a part in the company’s downfall, but he still doubts that Jowett could have lasted much longer as an independent manufacturer, but they could have been bought up by a bigger firm.

He is pleased to see so many Javelins preserved. “I like to see people buying Javelins and restoring them, because of the engineering and styling features,” he says. “Though Javelin prices have increased, I prefer people not to look at the cars for how much they are worth. Like my own cars, they will only be worth something if I decide to sell them.”

He adds: "People say I should buy a Javelin and restore it. I'd like to - when I find the time."

Palmer and his wife, Diana, whom he met when working at Scammell, have been married for 50 years. Their home since 1950 was largely designed by Gerald, featuring the subtle curves associated with his car designs.

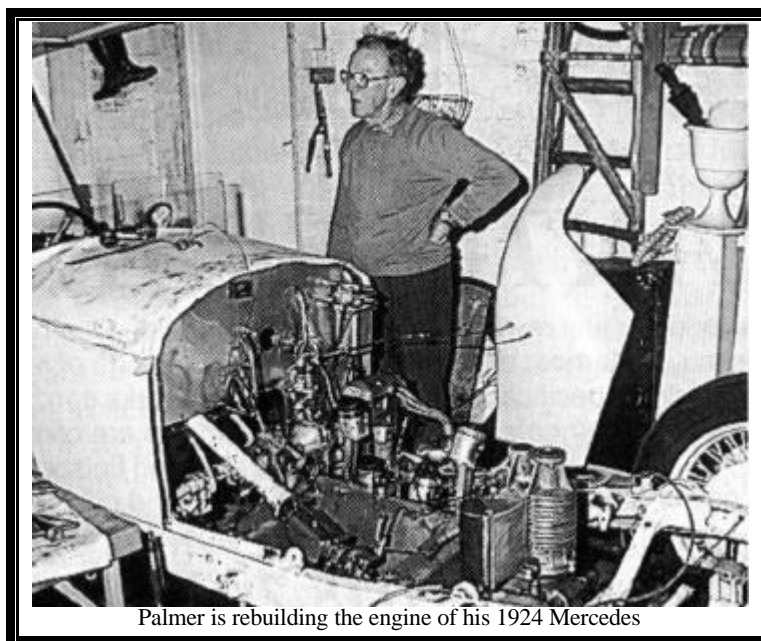
Despite living near Rover's Cowley plants, he has no contact with the company. "I don't think they know who I am now," he says. He reckons the Rover 800 is a well designed car, and is intrigued by the all new aluminium K-series engine going into the Rover 200. "I just hope they can build them to be reliable," says Palmer.

He rates the current Jaguar designs highly, and compliments the current Vauxhalls. He is also pleased to see the curve back as a major feature of modern car design. "I believe the curve is the perfect aerodynamic shape, though car design is to a degree as much down to fashion as technical innovation," he says.

His greatest memories include competing in the 1949 Monte Carlo rally in Jowett Javelin, as one of three drivers, and seeing the cars on the road for the first time. "I came back to this country with the intention of designing a car I would see running on British roads and there it was. A wonderful feeling."

Palmer never felt in awe of the task before him when designing a car. "There was job to do and I just got stuck into it.' But he believes that legislation has, to a large degree stifled styling flair "We had very little of this in the forties and fifties. Legislation has taken a lot o the fun out of car design."

He adds: "Looking back, I know I had a series of unique opportunities."



Palmer is rebuilding the engine of his 1924 Mercedes

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