



# Roverdrive

A small but dedicated following appreciates 'One of Britain's Fine Cars'

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID LaCHANCE

It's all a matter of perspective. If you live in England, you might know of Rover as a bicycle manufacturer that began producing cars more than a century ago. You could explain how, in the post-war world, it built the sort of big, conservative sedans favored by Britain's elite, then changed the rules for executive-class cars overnight with its technological tour de force, the P6. You would recall that Rover had been sucked into the whirlpool that was British Leyland, producing the stunning SD1 hatchback sedan in the process, and then somehow had survived the shipwreck of BL to find itself owned by British Aerospace and then, of all companies, by BMW. You probably read with interest that Ford, which had acquired the name nearly

as an afterthought in its purchase of Land Rover, had sold not only Rover but that other British institution, Jaguar, to India's Tata Motors earlier this year.

In the U.S., mention the name Rover, and the response you're likely to get is, "Do you mean Land Rover?" The fact that Rover had been building cars for 43 years before that off-road upstart appeared doesn't much matter, when you consider the market success that Land Rovers and Range Rovers have had in the States. Rover cars? A few people might have a dim recollection of someone's P6, maybe a four-cylinder 2000 TC, but that's about it for marque recognition on this side of the Atlantic.

For the record, Rover did try to sell cars

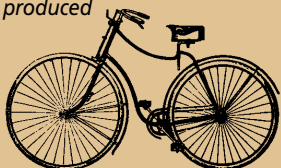
in America. The P3 combined mostly pre-war coachwork with the new inlet-over-exhaust straight-six and independent front suspension. The first new post-war design was the P4, the earliest of which are nicknamed "Cyclops" for their central headlamps. There was a four-cylinder Rover 60, as well as the six-cylinder 75, 90, and 105. For 1959, the all-new P5 joined the range, conservatively styled and powered by Rover's three-liter straight-six. The P6 arrived in 1964, badged as the 2000, with an all-new, overhead-cam, two-liter inline-four under its aluminum hood. Rover acquired the rights to Buick's alloy V-8, and dropped it into both the P5 and P6; the former became the P5B, for "Buick," while the latter was called

**1883**

First Rover tricycle made by Starley & Sutton Co. of Coventry, England

**1885**

The Rover Safety Bicycle, the first modern bicycle, produced



**1896**

Renamed the Rover Cycle Company Ltd.

**1903**

The single-cylinder Imperial Rover motorcycle introduced

**1904**



The first Rover automobile, the two-seater Eight, enters production

**1905**

Company renamed the Rover Company Ltd.; motorcycle production halted

**1907**

Rover wins the Isle of Man Tourist Trophy race

**1911**

The highly successful 12 appears, powered by a four-cylinder, sleeve-valve engine

**1912**

Motorcycle production resumes with a 31/2hp single

## 1968 2000 Automatic

Charlie Stutt  
Rexford, New York

"I WAS ALWAYS A CHEVROLET MAN, and the 1950 Chevy was the only new car I ever bought. But by the 1970 period, American cars got big and fat, with fins, and I just couldn't stand it," Charlie said. "I'd had a year in England, and was acquainted with the Rover cars, but I wasn't really drawn to them. But then I began to see the ads for this car in the paper. I thought, you know, that's just the size car our family needs." He now owns two P6s, the 2000 Automatic he brought to the show, and a 2000 TC. "This one was owned by a couple in Queens, and even at that time they were becoming concerned that it was kind of an orphan; they were afraid that if something went wrong, nobody could help them. So here I am, 30 years later!" he laughed. "I enjoy driving it. It handled the Berkshires fine this morning."



## 1950 75 "Cyclops"

Dirk Burrowes (r)  
Curtis Burrowes (l)  
Ashburnham, Massachusetts

"I HEARD ABOUT THE CAR A FEW YEARS AGO and then corresponded over the course of about six months with the granddaughter of the original owner. I was deemed worthy of the car, and actually got it in July of '07," Dirk said. "The car was in fantastic shape and it took very little to get it running." Because the Rover was in such good condition, he decided it deserved a full restoration; he did everything but the bodywork and respray, with help from his son, Curtis, and wife, Lysiane. Dirk's first Rover was his first car, a 2000 SC that had been his parents' second car in the Seventies; he now has a collection of close to 40, with 10 in restored or outstanding original condition. The 75 "rides wonderfully, shifts flawlessly, and you can run her up to 70 miles and hour and keep up with modern-day traffic—and, mind you, this is a 1940s design," he said.

the 3500 in automatic form and 3500S with manual shift. Their advertising slogan reflected the company's modesty: "One of Britain's Fine Cars."

Rover pulled its cars out of the U.S. market in 1971, but gamely returned in 1980 with the SD1, the first product of BL's Specialist Division of Rover, Triumph and Jaguar. With styling inspired by Ferrari's 250LM and 365GTB/4 Daytona, the newest Rover came to America with a 133hp V-8 under the hood; hopes were high, but only 481 found owners. "There was bad dealer service, a lot of niggling little problems, the assembly was awful," said Dermot Harvey, a Rover specialist in

Garnerville, New York. "Labor relations were just so bad in the car industry, that they just didn't do a very good job putting it together. That, combined with rather a poor dealer network, I think, did it in."

Today, Rovers are the province of a diehard band of enthusiasts. "They command a lot of affection and loyalty, these old Rovers," said Bill Daddis of Aurora, Ontario. He should know; he and his wife, Cheryl, have owned their 1959 Rover 90 since 1965. "There was something about the Rover Company that appeals to a certain kind of person. They were a small company, and didn't give a toss for what the rest of the industry was

doing. It was a family run affair for a long time; they made a really good product," Bill said. "There's no market at all for them in North America, because there weren't enough of them here to establish any kind of a cult following."

There's no U.S. club specifically dedicated to Rovers, but one 30-year collector, Dirk Burrowes, has for two years organized a gathering for his fellow enthusiasts in Fitchburg, Massachusetts, and hosts the Web site [roveramerica.com](http://roveramerica.com). My own Rover, a 1968 2000 TC, wasn't ready for this year's show, but I visited RoveAmerica 08 to chat with some of the owners about the marque's appeal.

## 1919 1924 1925 1928 1930 1932 1940 1942 1947



A new eight, with an air-cooled twin, is introduced

Lightweight, fabric-covered sedan bodies offer quiet and good performance

Production of motorcycles and bicycles ends

Rover turns away from the economy market, launching the six-cylinder, two-liter Six

A Light Six beats the Blue Train from Calais to the Riviera, preceding by two months a similar stunt by Bentley

Pilot and Speed Pilot, with lowered frame and tuned engine, raise the company's sporting image

Coventry factory destroyed in German bombing raid; Jet engine project launched

Jet engine development transferred to Rolls-Royce in exchange for contract to build Meteor tank engines



Land Rover introduced



## 1971 2000TC Series II

Hank Manwell (l)  
Liverpool, New York

## 1960 Rover 100

Steve Manwell (r)  
Melrose, Massachusetts

HANK AND STEVE MANWELL ARE SECOND- AND THIRD-GENERATION ROVER OWNERS, respectively. "My grandfather after World War II wanted to give the British some business—they were in pretty dire economic straits—and so we had a couple of Austins, and then somehow sort of learned about Rovers. I think he tried his first Rover in the early to mid Fifties," Steve said. "He drove nothing but Rovers until he quit driving in the Eighties, so basically the bug got passed on to Dad and me." Steve and his wife, Jo, went to take photos of the 100 to help its owner sell it through the club newsletter, and ended up buying the car—at Jo's suggestion. "I was actually thinking, coming out here yesterday, what a delight it was to be motoring along on Route 2, with not too much traffic. It's a very pleasant car, and with overdrive it just cruises along."

## 1967/1969 2000TC

Phil Jodry  
Hamden, New York

PHIL ACCIDENTALLY GOT INTO ROVERS when he went to inspect a car in his friend's back yard. "It was a mistake. I thought it was an Alfa," he said. "They got it physically running, but it just wouldn't turn the rear wheels without this badoom, badoom, badoom. I found this car—the owner calls me up and says, 'I got your differential. I want 300 bucks for it, and it comes with a car.' I melted the two together." He did the work in the back yard of his apartment house while the landlord was away. "She's kind of slow, she's got a granny cam, and she is sweet to drive. I got the nicest running 2000 engine on the planet." Phil describes it as "a conglomeration of automatic, manual and homemade parts." Look closely, and you'll see it has two steering wheels. And yes, both work.



## 1980 SD1

Dermot Harvey  
Garnerville, New York

"I BOUGHT THIS ONE FROM A COMPANY IN CONNECTICUT about eight years ago," Dermot, who runs the Rover parts specialist Spectral Kinetics, said. "It's one of only about 1,200 brought in. Most of them were five-speeds, which this is. They're a bit hard to find, and this one looked like it had a rust-free body." He rebuilt the engine to its more powerful English specification. "It has been de-smogged and it does drive a lot better now. It's a fun car to drive—it's fast, it handles well, it's got tons of space, which is lovely—fold down the rear seats and it's like a station wagon," he said. "It's pretty fast—I haven't dared take it flat-out, but I would think it would do about 130 [mph] in its present form—and not too bad on fuel, about 21 miles per gallon coming up today. I was riding at about 75, 80 miles an hour all the way."

1948



P3 combined, pre-war style, modern chassis

1950

The two-seat JET1, the first car powered by a gas turbine engine, unveiled

1958



The posh, six-cylinder P5 debuts

1963

The 2000, also known as the P6, revolutionizes the market for executive-class sedans

1965

Rover acquires the rights to Buick's aluminum V-8

1967

Rover is bought by the Leyland Motor Corporation, which already owns Standard-Triumph

1970



Range Rover introduced

1971

Rover cars withdrawn from U.S. market

1976

The four-door, V-8-powered SD1 goes into production

## 1959 90

Bill and Cheryl Daddis  
Aurora, Ontario, Canada

BILL AND CHERYL WERE SOLD ON ROVERS after buying a well-worn 1953 P4 75. "To be honest, it was pretty well clapped out, but it made such an impression on me by the workmanship and the attention to detail and general quality, that when I saw this one for sale for \$800, I couldn't pass it up," Bill said. "We've had it since 1975—it's become a member of the family." He and Cheryl had the car restored three years ago, and enjoy driving it regularly. "Aficionados recognize it, most people in Canada who see it know what it is, but driving it down here [in the U.S.] we got three or four people driving alongside saying, 'Hey, nice car, what is it?' 'It's a Rover.' 'Who makes that?' 'Well,' I say, 'have you ever heard of Land Rover?' Most people have. So I say, 'Well they're actually a car company, and this is their car.' 'Ah.'"



## 1970 3500S

Peter King  
Swampscott, Massachusetts

"THIS CAR IS FROM CALIFORNIA ORIGINALLY—rumor has it that it was Bob Dylan's car, though I never did trace the VIN," Peter said. "It came to me after a tree fell on the trunk and I think that was the end of the road for the previous owner, a fellow who was moving to Amsterdam and didn't want to see it get crushed. It was solid; no rust." He had just finished a restoration before bringing the car to the meet. "I took everything off it, every nut and bolt and wire brushed everything out and painted everything as it was going back in." What does he like about Rovers? "They're just fascinating. They're beautifully engineered—really great attention to detail in the cars—super comfortable, and just a lot of fun to drive. They have really great character, and they're comfortable, but they have a small footprint to them—they don't feel like boats on the road."

## 1970 3500S

Andre Shay  
Old Lyme, Connecticut

WHEN A FRIEND CALLED ANDRE TO OFFER HIM THIS 3500S and a parts car, the \$2,500 price was too steep. "A year and a half later he calls me up again, and says 'Hey, I've remarried, we've got a kid on the way, and I've got to sell it. Eight hundred dollars for both.' The same day I got an eight hundred dollar bonus at work. 'I'll be right over!'" he laughed. What made him choose Rovers? "I'm passionate about automobiles anyway. I don't know if it's because Dad had one or what. You ride in one, and the TC handles great, the 3500 handles even smoother, because they're designed as a luxury car, but it's an addiction kind of a thing. [It's an] 'If you have to explain, you wouldn't understand' kind of a thing."



## 1980

Rover re-enters the U.S. market for one year, certifying the SD1 for sale

## 1982

Reorganization at BL creates the Austin Rover Group

## 1986

BL renamed Rover Group; SD1 replaced by Honda-based Rover 800, exported to the U.S. from 1987-1992 as the Sterling

## 1988

British Aerospace acquires Rover brand

## 1994

Rover Group sold to BMW; Rover 75 launched



## 2000

BMW splits Rover Group, selling Land Rover to Ford, keeping Mini and licensing the Rover brand to the Phoenix Consortium

## 2005

M.G. Rover declared insolvent; China's Nanjing Automobile Group buys the assets, but not the Rover name, still held by BMW

## 2006

Ford exercises option to buy Rover brand from BMW

## 2008

Rover included with Ford's sale of Land Rover and Jaguar to Tata Motors of India