

CARS TO KEEP 3500S: the silken bomber

It's fast and wieldy and the ideal Rover for enthusiastic drivers

ROVER'S 3500 models, built between 1968 and 1975/1976, were not conceived as part of the master plan for exploiting the potential of the 2000's basic design, but almost as a fortunate accident. Managing director William Martin-Hurst, visiting a client in North America, discovered that General Motors were withdrawing their light-alloy V8 from production after only three years; after lengthy negotiations Rover secured the rights to build and develop the design in Britain. Since then, of course, this fine unit has become a cornerstone of their product policy, and is now used in Land-Rovers, Range Rovers, and in the latest 5-door Rovers.

The 2000 range – known to this day as the P6, which was its original project code at Solihull – was evolved at the end of the Fifties and early Sixties. It was new from stem to stern, and included an advanced base-unit type of pressed-steel construction, which Rover admit was inspired by that of the Citroen DS models. Strange and complex independent front suspension was so arranged to make way for the gas-turbine engine, if it had ever been found good enough for series production, and De Dion rear suspension completed a thoroughly modern chassis.

Before the V8 design was secured, experiments had gone ahead with prototypes fitted with in-line sixes and fives – both evolutions of the four-cylinder design. The V8 was found to fit tightly, but snugly, into the existing bay, with several components moved around to maximise the available space. The first V8 installation made available to the public was in the old 3-litre chassis/body shell; known as the 3½-litre (which was confusingly close to the title of the model considered here), it was launched in September 1967 with automatic transmission only.

The 3500 – the V8 engine/automatic transmission package married to the 2000 body shell – appeared in April 1968, at which time it was confusingly known as the 'Three Thousand Five' by British Leyland, but never acknowledged as such by the motoring press or the customers. The Borg Warner automatic transmission was necessitated because Rover had no manual gearbox which could cope with the massive 200 lb ft torque of the engine.

It was this lack of a suitable gearbox which held back the arrival of the 3500S model. No-one, incidentally, ever revealed what the 'S' meant – so we all assumed it meant 'Sporting' or 'Synchromesh' or Something . . . Rover tried various gearboxes in prototypes, including the Jaguar design used in the XJ6 models, and including one of the various ZF designs; eventually it was necessary to carry out a comprehensive detail re-design and development programme on the existing P6 box. In the autumn of 1971 the 3500S was launched, with a gearbox having a larger case, its own oil pump, shot-peened gears, and needle-roller bearings to the layshaft; for all that, the box was never other than marginal for the car's potential, and there is a fair history of transmission problems.

In general layout the 3500S was like all other P6 derivatives. Special to this model were the SU HIF6 carburettors, with annular float chambers, a new exhaust system which released more power, and decorative details like the vinyl-covered roof panel and the spoke-style wheel trims; the 3500S never had the Rostyle wheels once used on American-market 2000 models. All 3500S (and 3500 automatic models since the restyle of autumn 1970) had the same facia/instrument dial layout, with big, nicely-styled, and accurate circular instruments. By the standards of the day the Rover had a remarkably logical layout of switchgear and control positioning; by the 1970s, however, many laggard rivals had managed to catch up.

For many months, demand for 3500S models exceeded supply, but there is no doubt that it was always a rather thirsty as well as a very fast car. Not many owners ever achieved more than 20 or 22mpg, which was all very well with the price of petrol below 35p per gallon. After the Suez crisis, and following the doubling of petrol prices in the 1974/75 period, the 3500 lost some of its appeal, and when it was withdrawn at the end of 1975 as the new five-door SD1 model went into production, it was not much missed. Another problem was that the styling had been around since the autumn of 1963, and, despite Rover's protestations to the contrary, had 'dated' quite noticeably.

The 3500S has several characteristics which make it a unique proposition for someone wanting a car to keep. It has massive reserves of performance, all produced without fuss or temperament, it possesses a very soft and supple ride (which brought with it a great deal of well-controlled roll), but it is really rather a small car in terms of accommodation. It is no bigger internally, for instance, than the Cortinas of the day, and its squashy seating was specifically laid out to make it a four-seater, no more and no less.

The 3500S is now obsolete – virtually the only major item to be carried forward to the new SD1 cars was the engine, and even this was substantially modified – and has yet to build itself an old-car reputation. One problem this brings is that almost all service and maintenance expertise is contained in British Leyland dealers, most of whom are rapidly losing interest in the model in favour of the now-current design. No specialist yet appears to have become established, so any buyer wanting to keep an ageing 3500S up to the mark may have to learn about his own car as he goes along.

The kernel of a really good 3500S is in the condition of the transmission (for reasons already noted), and the suspension linkages. Both independent front and De Dion rear have a multitude of links, radius arms and bushes, any one of which can turn a good handling car into a pig if it wears out. It is also a fact that because the front suspension has, in effect, a lower link tied to the 'chassis rail' alongside the engine, and an upper link running back to the scuttle, any 3500S which has been crashed and subsequently straightened may have less than perfect geometry. Although the base-unit is good and strong, and the whole car is very refined when in good condition, it is no less impervious to distortion after a shunt than any other unit-construction shell.

The great charm of a 3500S is the way it delivers great dollops of torque without fuss or noise, the way in which the torque is available at any point in the speed range, and the way this is linked to long-legged (24.0mph/1000rpm) gearing. In many ways there is a whiff of 'vintage style' motoring in connection with a thoroughly modern layout.

Brief Specification

cc	3528cc
Bore/stroke	88.9/71.1 mm
Valves	ohv
Compression	10.5:1
Power	152bhp DIN/5000rpm
Transmission	4-speed manual
Top gear	24.0mph/ 1000rpm
Brakes	Disc/disc with servo
Front sus.	Ind. wishbones, coils
Rear sus.	De Dion, radius arms, coils
Steering	cam-and-roller, power assisted
Tyres	185-14in
Length	14ft 11in
Width	5ft 6in
Weight	26.6cwt

Performance

max speed	122mph
0-60mph	9sec
30-50 in top	8sec
50-70 in top	8sec
Fuel con.	19 to 24mpg

Production History

The Rover 3500S model evolved from the basic design of the Rover 2000, which had been launched in October 1963. The 2000, later joined by the 2000TC, had a four-cylinder engine. Rover then took over manufacture of the ex-Buick lightweight V8 engine which was skilfully installed into the 2000's structure, and the 3500 (with automatic transmission) was announced in April 1968. The 3500S, with a four-speed manual gearbox, was released in October 1971. The V8s continued until the winter of 1975/1976 when the entire P6 range was discontinued. In October 1973 the four-cylinder car had been given an enlarged engine and called the 2200; at the same time all cars received styling revisions including new trim and seating details; all 3500S models were built with the revised grille and instruments introduced in Autumn 1970 for the earlier models.

Rivals then and now

By having a large V8 engine in a compact body shell, and being sold at such a remarkably low price (£1977 in 1971) the Rover 3500S had virtually no direct competition. In Britain, however, where the majority of sales were made, it fought in the same market sector as the Jaguar XJ6 2.8, the Triumph 2.5PI and the Volvo 164; cars with similar performance and social intentions were the Opel Commodore GS and (from 1972) the most exclusive Ford Granadas. BMWs, Mercedes and the like, were all much more expensive. By the autumn of 1973, in its final decorative guise, a 3500S retailed for £2444, compared with £2189 for a 2.5PI Mk II; the 2.8-litre XJ6 had been dropped; by this time the big-engined Volvo sold for £3450 and the Opel for £2699.

Buyer's spot check

Always remember that there are two model variants - the 3500 has automatic transmission (Borg Warner Type 35 before Autumn 1973 production, Type 65 thereafter), while the 3500S has manual transmission. The 3500S, according to road test figures, was considerably quicker and more economical than the automatic. You should choose purely by age and condition, as there was little significant engineering difference between early and late models.

Spares supply at the moment is good (Rover have a good record for cherishing their older models), but remember that the car has been out of production for more than three years. Soft trim and body sheet metal items will be the first to become scarce. Mechanical frailties, with age, show up in the multitude of suspension mountings, bushes, and pivots; front and rear suspension linkages are very complex, and must be kept in good trim to ensure normal tyre life. The engine is bombproof if looked after, but the gearbox was always marginal for the torque it had to transmit. Bodies are not too brilliant, but bolt-on panels and base-unit construction usually means a sound car under the rust, easily brought up to scratch by panel replacement.



The smart interior of Eric Heliczer's car, above, showing the pleated no-sag seats. Below: at home in the executive belt, even with a K registration



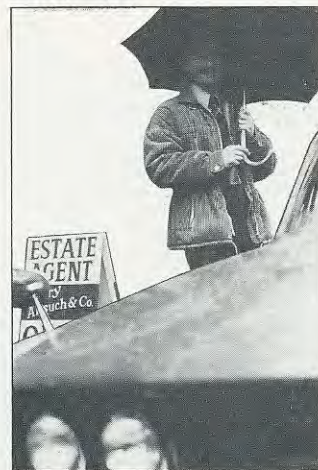
Clubs, specialists and books

Rover owners have never been 'clubby' people, and the car (as a design) is still too young to have attracted specialist attention. Although there are Rover clubs (including the Rovers Owners' Association, which is a factory-affiliated organisation, and the Rover Sports Register) none cater for Rovers as modern as the P6 range.

There are only two recent books on the marque: *The Rover* by George Oliver, published by Cassell (this is out of print), and *The Rover Story* by Graham Robson, published by Patrick Stephens Ltd.

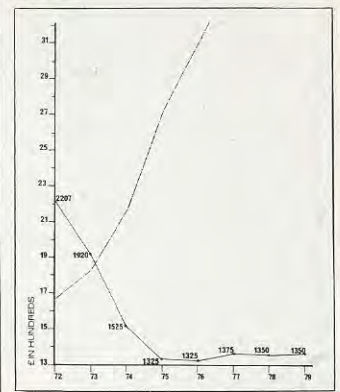
Official factory workshop manuals are still available, but are probably not immediately available from stock at British Leyland dealers. Rover 3500S models are supported from any Jaguar-Rover-Triumph outlet.

Owner View



Estate Agent Eric Heliczer bought his Rover 3500S new in 1972 and has been delighted with it ever since. "This is my third Rover, my other two being a 3-litre and 2000TC". The 3500S runs very

Prices



For the past three years the price of a good '72 Rover 3500S has remained steady at around £1350 (figures provided by the monthly Motorists Guide). But look at the frightening rate of inflation represented by the retail price index (broken line)! In real money terms, this shows that the Rover is still falling in value

well and one of the few problems Mr. Heliczer has experienced is engine overheating. "It's OK in normal conditions but in traffic the needle starts to creep up". He's tried a new water pump and radiator but so far no definite cure is in sight. Why did he choose a Rover? "A relation of mine had a Rover 90 and I was very impressed with that. I bought the 3-litre and I have stuck with Rovers ever since. I think they're terrific cars." So why the manual 3500S? "I don't like anything on a car to be automatic. I like to select the right gear for a certain situation myself.

Although the car is in good overall shape Mr. Heliczer thinks that the engine does not have the same pulling power as it once did. "But it is still very smooth and quiet" he adds. "I don't find it particularly expensive to run and I am getting 23-24mpg which, for the type of driving I do, is not bad". Apart from a small grumble about the seats' lack of lumbar support, Mr Heliczer sees no good reason to change the car.