Rover P6B 3500 S – Quality, but where´s the power?

It´s strange the things you remember about road test cars. There is always something which over-rides all your other impressions so that when a particular car is mentioned in conversation you immediately think “Oh yes, it has a dreadfully noisy engine” or “that´s right, I can´t get comfortable because the damned door handle drills holes in my knee cap”, which is all wrong really for invariably the cars deserve a more favourable memory.

The Rover 3500 S is a little like that although the two things which stand out are complimentary. First there is the brakes und second the fuel gauge.

Yes, the brakes, which is understandable, but the fuel gauge?

The brakes because they are light, incredibly responsive and magnificently powerful. You know, in the Rover, that the car will stop straight and true whether in the middle of a fast corner or during a savage run down a long mountain road. If only all brakes were so good...

But why the fuel gauge? Because it is deadly accurate. When it indicates full it means full and when it indicates half it means that too and so on to empty, which it most definitely means.

But all is not lost if you come to the Rover from most other new cars which seem to make delight in mis-informing the driver as to the quantity of fuel in the petrol tank. The 3500 S has a reserve of 2.5 gallons available at the pull of a knob.

Both points did come as rather a surprise because I felt, before driving the car, that the power and performance would stand out. After all wasn´t this a manual version of one of Britain´s finest and fastest sedans? Shouldn´t it have been a pommy supercar with stunning acceleration times.

With bold V8 badges, imitation sports wheels, vinyl roof and bonnet bulges it certainly looked the part. That it didn´t worked out that way is more a problem of marketing than anything else. If the 3500 S didn´t have all the tarting up bits and, most of all, the V8 badges, you wouldn´t expect as much from it and therefore wouldn´t be disappointed.

To Australians weaned on a diet of 300 to 350 cubic inch V8s, a large V8 badge on the tail means at least 400 cubes and certainly not the paltry 215 of the Rover which is smaller than many of the local sixes.
If you remember the Rover has just 215 CID, then the performance is good but if you expect the low speed torque and sheer power of the bigger V8s, forget it.

At the same time the 3500 S proved slower against the stop watch than two, admittedly more expensive German competitors, the BMW 3.0 S and the new Mercedes Benz 280 E twin cams which both have distinctly smaller engines.

It would be unkind to say the Rover was slow but surely it isn´t too much to expect the V8 to out-perform the smaller sixes.

However, for all these comparisons the Rover is a fine piece of motor car. Essentially a four-speed version of the 3500, which was until now offered only in fully automatic form, the S also has a slightly more powerful engine to improve further the performance compared with the automatic model. Larger diameter exhaust pipes from each bank of cylinders meet just behind the gearbox rather than at the rear of the car – as on the automatic – and as a consequence back pressure is reduced and power increased.

Rover only quotes DIN bhp figures these days so the rise from 146 to 152.5 bhp at 5000 rpm and torque from 197.5 lb/ft at 2600 to 203.5 lb/ft at 2750 rpm seems very small.

Different carburettors are now fitted to both versions. They are still SUs, code named HIF6s, and are said to be unaffected by acceleration, braking or cornering and give better cold starting.

The manual gearbox is based on the design used in the 2000 four cylinder models but has been considerably modified to take the extra torque of the V8. Two taper-roller bearings for the layshaft give better location than the old needle roller and ball bearings and the casing has been strengthened.

The stubby remote control gear lever is mounted on an extension attached to the gearbox cover to eliminate movement between the box and the lever.

Inside, there are new seats with ventilated box pleats for the cushions and squabs to give better lateral support. But the finish is Ambla, a high quality Vinyl, and not the traditional leather which always seems to add so much to the appeal of the Rover, the leather is optional however.

Externally a Vinyl roof in either black or brown with matching C-pillar panels and S badges identify it from the automatic. And then there are the wheels and bulges we spoke of earlier.

The basic shape of the 3500 S has been around for almost a decade now and still looks essentially modern. Opinion is divided over the recently face-lifted cross hatch grille but most people agreed, the circular instruments are an improvement over the old strip speedometer.

However, it is the performance concept of the car most people will be interested in. Certainly the manual is quicker than the automatic but not perhaps to the degree you might expect. Compared to the automatic tested in WHEELS August 1969, the manual at 10.7 seconds is 0.8 seconds quicker to 60 mph and virtually identical across the quarter mile in 17.4 seconds. At higher speeds the difference is greater – for instance, the auto takes half a minute to reach 90 mph while the manual gets there in only 24.2 seconds.

Top speed is improved by about 2 mph although the manual probably would run out to 120 mph given a long enough run. The 3500 S is a relatively heavy car and this, together with the small V8, must account for the comparative lack of low speed torque. Tall gearing adds to the impression and you need to keep the engine above 3000 rpm for the ultimate in rapid acceleration.

Certainly the V8 is smooth enough to pull from barely 1000 rpm in top gear but it doesn´t really get into stride until 3000 rpm when the car effortlessly rushes to 90 mph before the acceleration really begins to tail off.

The redline is set at 5200 rpm although the engine is able to exceed this easily. The owner´s handbook is a little confusing on this point because it states the redline “must not be exceeded”. But then goes on “Under no circumstances should the needle be allowed to travel to the end of the red danger sector, otherwise serious damage to the engine may result”. Our acceleration times were taken using the 5200 redline.

A high 3.08 final drive ratio gives very useful intermediate ratio maximums with first running to 33, second 57 and third 88 mph at 5200 rpm. Third is an ideal gear for twisty sections and you frequently find the driver forgets to change up to top, the engine and the rest of the car are so quiet.

The clutch is fairly heavy and the throw quite long, but it is progressive and smooth. The gear change is precise and a little too notchy to be rated among the very best of its type, especially on the down change from third to second.

Steering is low geared but extremely precise and sensitive, if you get used to making quite large movements. The driver is always aware of what the front wheels are doing and is given advance notice of any loss of adhesion although the Pirelli Cinturato CNT2 tyres were disappointing on wet surfaces.

The steering feel combined with the car´s power combats the inbuilt understeer to a large degree and allows the driver to indulge in very rapid and yet safe and comfortable motoring. Body roll builds up in hard cornering, however, and finally develops into a lurch which can bring on a change to gentle roll oversteer. Cross winds produce a surprising degree of instability at high speeds.

Long suspension travel and soft spring rates give the 3500 S a remarkably good ride which is free from pitching except over large bumps taken at moderate to low speeds. The sheer quietness of the ride is another example of the thoroughness and sheer quality which has gone into the Rover. Only unusually coarse surfaces produce a noticeable tyre roar.

Most of our test staff found the seat very comfortable but there were a few who thought the cushion too flat and as a consequence slid forward and that there was a lack of lumbar support in the squab. Nobody complained about the lateral support, however, and all agreed that the seats seemed to get better the longer you rode in the car.

There was no disputing the driving position either. Everybody found it was possible to find a very close to perfect, long arm position with the controls and gear-lever and steering wheel all within reach. A tremendous amount of fore and aft seat movement helps, but at the expense of rear seat room. With the front seats right back, rear knee and leg room is reduced dramatically to the point where the Rover is almost a 2 plus 2. It would be except that the rear seats are superbly shaped and padded to take just two passengers.

The minor control layout was advanced when the car was first released but it has since fallen behind the times. Only the indicators, headlights and horn are operated by a steering column stalk. You still have to reach across to the dashboard for the washers/wipers (now with a pause system by the way) and lights.

Ventilation is the same as it was a decade ago and still is very efficient. Supplemented by the fitting of an optional air conditioning unit on our test car it made travel in the Rover very pleasant regardless of the outside temperature.

Without the air conditioner the fresh air slits in front of the driver and passenger emit a steady flow of cooling air and can be adjusted very finely. The heating system works independently, too, so it is possible to reach the ideal situation of cool air up top and warm air at foot level.

The very attractive circular instruments are close to perfect in readout and information with a large tacho and speedometer and smaller ammeter, oil pressure and fuel and temperature gauges plus a clock.

The standard of fittings and equipment is very high with, for example, a two position interior light control, the first stage of which operates a map light for the front passenger and the second the more normal interior light. Reversing and a boot light are also standard.

A heated rear window is optional and should really be included in the standard specification. The twin bottom hinged, fold-down luggage bins are very useful for most items which can be used for cigarettes, sweets or maps.

Rover provide a choice of positions for the spare wheel but the most common, with the wheel on the left of the boot and mounted up-right, reduces the available space. Mounting the spare wheel on top of the boot helps but this costs more.

So, getting back to our first remarks about the car, the Rover has marvellous brakes and an accurate fuel gauge but it also has a really outstanding quality feel about it and as a touring car for four people who don´t take much luggage with them it is an excellent car. The people who have traditionally bought Rovers won´t worry about the slightly disappointing performance and will probably think it is a very fast car.

● 0-60 mph 10.7 sec.

● Top speed 118 mph

● Fuel consumption overall 19.9 mpg

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