cars

THE QUICKEST WAY to become one of the establishment is to buy a Rover 3500.

Five minutes in the understated opulence of the interior and you are impelled by a mystery force (call it "form" if you like) to change your expression and bearing almost totally. From a scruffy scribe you become a man who can afford to pay $8600 for wheels, who is willing to buy a car which totally lacks conventional garishness; a man who can recognise a good and reliable car and a man most likely over 40.

In your first day's acquaintance, you will realise that this Rover is built to last; not five years or seven but as long as you want it to. The chassis and suspension underparts would better suit a double decker bus and the interior fittings have "ROBUST" written all over them. There are even adjusters on the door hinges to cope with the door sag which (just possibly) sets in after they've been slammed their first 10,000 times.

You rid your ears of their liking for common Italian-bred cam chatter so that they can better appreciate the lack of mechanical noise from the Rover's all-aluminium 3.5 litre V8 — and the aristocratic murmur from its big-bore tail-pipe.

As you lope along with minimal effort but considerable driving enjoyment, you realise that the car's old-style sophistication is a large part of its appeal. The body and suspension were designed something like 15 years ago, yet the seats, instruments and dynamics are as good as the best of its competitors. The newer V8 version has been around for 10 years — time enough for some cars to have changed model five or six times.

But in the back of your mind there is a nagging disquiet. Didn't you read in WHEELS earlier this year that Rover had nearly finished testing a Rover 2200/3500 replacement which would use the same engines but otherwise would be new from the ground up? Hell, that's right.

From the driver's seat of a 3500, the thought of a replacement isn't appetising. Oh sure, the new car will probably be more comfortable and better styled, but that fifth door seems rather vulgar for a Rover and the large glassy windows which will leave you exposed to the gaze of the peasantry you pass. Whatever happened to "cocoon" cars like the good old 3-litre?

It's not that the 3500 is a perfect or even near perfect car. It has so little room in the rear that the rear two doors are hardly necessary. The boot is spoilt by the peculiar spare wheel location, the underbonnet is described by Rover enthusiasts as "confused" and by antagonists as "chaotic" and in tight corners the 3500 suffers from the biggest helping of body roll this side of a Renault 16.

And as one evil passenger remarked when he rode in the 3500: "The dash controls look like they were pinched off me Mum's old electric stove."

These deficiencies all sound serious, but when you live with the bent-eight Brit for a while they fade to insignificance. You think instead of the astonishingly efficient brakes, the comfort over long distances of the firm box-pleated seats, the superb power steering, the first-class automatic transmission which makes the most of the V8 low-speed smoothness. The body roll, stupefying to the outside observer, passes without comment from those inside.

For your $8600 — thousands less than a Volvo 264, a Jag, a six-cylinder BMW, a Benz or just about any comparable brand you care to name — you get a car that can cope with today's road conditions as well as any of them, is truly built to last and which has more character than all its competitors combined. It's a car you can keep for ever . . .

—S.C.