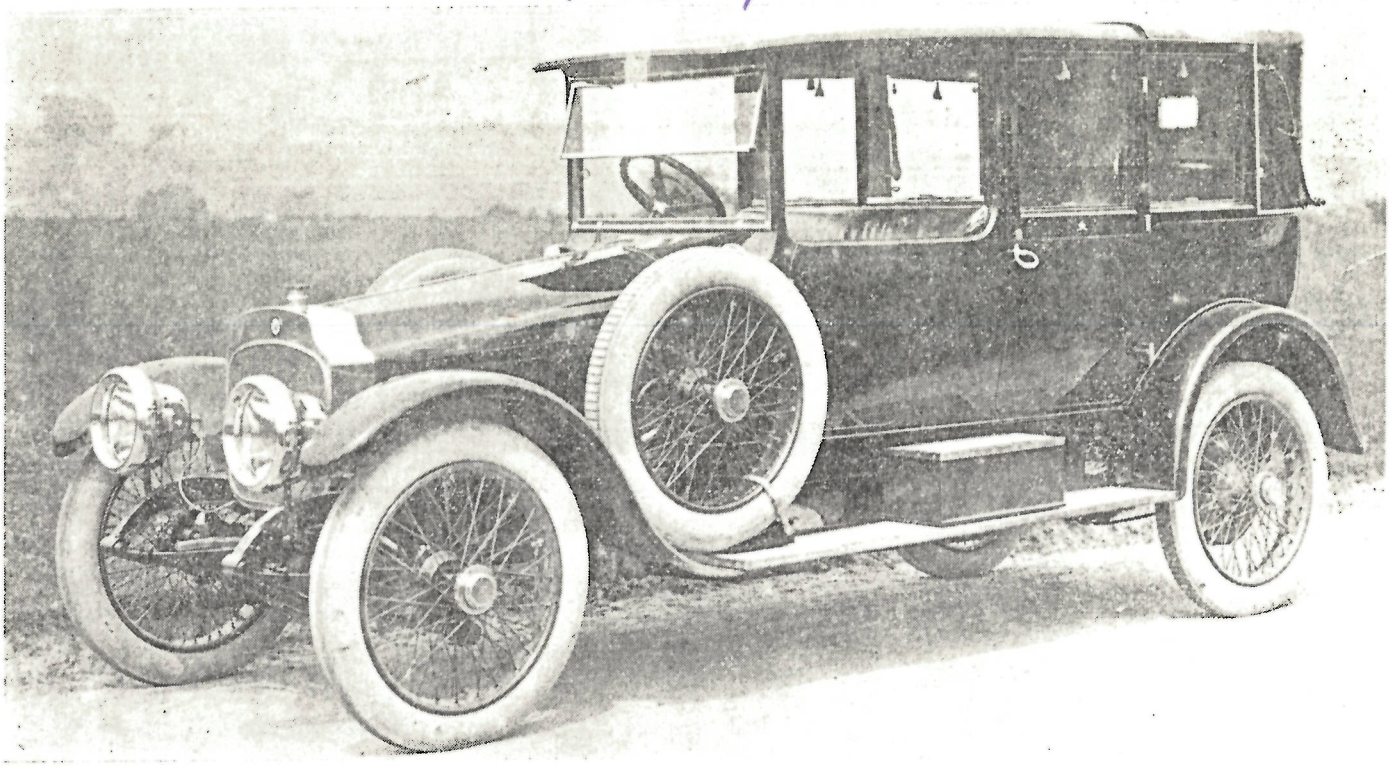
VETERAN & VINTAGE . MAY 1978



VAUXHALL TRANSITIONAL. This is actually the rare B-Type Six, but it shows the state of the art in 1914-15, with the old low radiator, an early attempt at a "streamline" scuttle and electric lighting. The car was ordered by the House of Romanoff for use in St. Petersburg.

The Forgotten Vauxhalls

Michael Sedgwick Contemplates The Touring Models of the last pre-GM Days

In these days of international GM cocktails, people would probably forget all about "The Car Superexcellent" if it weren't for the 30/98.

Es and OEs, thank goodness, are machines that appeal to drivers rather than investors, which is why there are such a lot of them still around, in the Aussie clubs as well as the V.S.C.C. This combination of high survival rate and energetic use tends to conceal the truth: that the sports Vauxhalls represented only the tip of a sizeable iceberg. Seen through the eyes of Detroit, Luton may have been inefficient and under-employed, but in the first eight post-war seasons it turned out 8,102 private cars: quite a good performance when one reflects that virtually nothing sold for less than £500. Even after W. R. Morris's first dramatic price cuts one still paid £750 for Vauxhall's new "compact" M-type tourer, and of this total precisely 582 units were 30/98s.

The 30/98 was, of course, one of the outstanding cars of its period, for all its traditional lack of stoppers. Throughout the 3-litre period, W. O. Bentley regarded it as the model to beat, and one may suspect that the 4½-litre was conceived as an answer to the OE. Thus the sporting Vauxhalls tend to overshadow the bread-and-butter species. Unkind remarks on the OD's lethargy have been parroted by generations of writers who have never driven one, while those who have usually possess experience of the 30/98 as well, hence comparisons can be odorous, especially in view of the 23/60's extra 440 pounds of adipose tissue and 45 missing brake horses. Thus it's only too easy to dismiss Es and OEs as bright stars in a decaying firmament comparable to the last days of, say, de Dion-Bouton.

Let's concede the miseries straight away. One can't claim that Vauxhall never built a bad car. The S-type 25/70 was at best an expensive mistake, though in fairness one has to admit that it walked through the door at the same moment as General Motors, and thus never stood a chance. More catastrophic were such strange diversions as 1922's twin-cam racers, built to the wrong formula and destined to achieve naught for their makers. As for the four-cylinder motorbike prototypes, they must have been just about the most expensive two-wheelers (for the shareholders, that is!) ever to come out of a British factory.

In other respects, however, Vauxhall's record is more impressive. Remember, they elected to play the upper-middle-class market, and if it wasn't exactly capricious in 1920 (well-heeled Britons are notoriously conservative), it was painfully susceptible to the uneasy economic climate of the times. It was also crowded: leaving aside the foreign imports, one can think of firms like Armstrong Siddeley, Austin, Crossley, Daimler, Humber, Rover, Sunbeam and Wolseley all impinging on Luton's field of fire. Nevertheless Vauxhall managed to sell quite a lot of cars: if 1921's performance (479 units) was pretty abysmal and not enough to support a payroll of 1,400-odd, this was the year of the big strikes. Between 1923 and 1926, the annual average was in the region of 1,400 cars, and it is significant that the new owners didn't exactly rush into retooling for mass-production. Granted, Detroit is not built in a day, but one has a feeling that GM could have opted for the Cadet and its likes sooner than they actually did.

From 1922, at any rate, Vauxhall had good market coverage. If their range wasn't quite as comprehensive as Sunbeam's, they didn't have the deadweight of Talbot in pre-Roesch days to support. They also possessed what W. O. Bentley lacked—a second line of defence. True, there were always touring Bentleys, but whereas the long-chassis 3-litre was a detuned sports car, the D and OD Vauxhalls were purpose-built tourers. In this respect, they fared better than their closest counterparts, the Crossleys.

The parallel goes quite a long way. Both firms had the W.D. contracts which enabled them to keep a private-car model in production throughout hostilities, and thus reconvert at the double in 1918. Civilian D-types were leaving Luton in February, 1919, when the RFC-type Crossley was just about the only other British car readily available. Both firms concentrated on large family tourers: if Crossley's modernised 19·6 h.p. beat the OD to it by a cool 18 months, it wasn't quite as sophisticated. In other respects, Vauxhall won hands down: the Crossley Fourteen lacked the

refinement of Luton's 14/40, and Manchester's 20/70 couldn't compare with the 30/98 in any respect save, perhaps, looks.

It's also been said that the touring Vauxhalls weren't competitive. Viewed against the background of mass motoring, this is true enough. A four-seater Morris-Cowley cost £341·25 at the beginning of 1922, and £315 at the end of the year, while an Austin Twenty tourer was yours for £695. But was the D-type Vauxhall at £1,100 really all that expensive, compared with the smaller Crossley at £895, or Sunbeam's big Six at £1,295? Nor was the price-war really relevant in the 14 h.p. category, where Vauxhall were asking £750 for their new M-type. What else was there on offer? The Bean 14 was Morris-competition and in any case wasn't announced until later in the year, Sunbeam's o.h.v. Fourteen was only £25 cheaper, and the 12 h.p. Rover (£650) with the Vauxhall's cylinder dimensions of 75 × 130 mm. was a 1912 design. Both Wolseley's o.h.c. offering and Humber's well-loved 15·9 were more expensive. So was another 75 × 130 mm effort, the Cavalli-designed 505 Fiat, a ponderous carriage well suited to the formal coachwork it usually wore. One may discount the H.E. (£750) as a sports model, while the A.C. Six, though good value at £700, was marred by its three-speed transaxle and in any case barely in production in 1922. The year's trading at Luton might yield a depressing, £50,000 loss, but nobody as yet considered Vauxhall Motors ripe for the slaughter.

Nor was the slogan—"The Car Superexcellent"—an idle one. Vauxhall might be short of maharajahs, but they had a solid clientele, in Australia as well as at home. (They were also exploring the Canadian market in the early 1920s, though without success). Their product was well-proven, being a direct descendant of the high-speed, pressure-lubricated monobloc four devised by Laurence H. Pomeroy for the R.A.C.'s 2,000-Mile Trial of 1908. Both their 1919 models—the D and E-types—followed this theme. Further, the "cooking" version had a war record comparable to that of the Humber Super Snipe in the second conflict, with 2,000 vehicles serving on all fronts. In this respect, Vauxhall had fared better than Sunbeam, who'd had to farm out wartime orders for their 12/16 to Rover. Coventry's manufacturing standards weren't quite up to Wolverhampton's, and in the early '20s injunctions were flying in all directions, usually against dealers who advertised war-weary Rover-Sunbeams as the real McCoy!

The D had, of course, been available as early as 1913, though in those days radiators were lower and wider, bodies were unstreamlined, and wood wheels were commonplace, albeit most Vauxhalls went out with centre-lock wires. Electric lighting came a year later, when testers commented favourably on the flexibility, the good handling, the smooth ride, and the unexpected silence of the straight-bevel rear axle. During the War the big Vauxhall acquired the tall narrow radiator and streamlined scuttle already found on the rare pre-war 30/98s. Thus what emerged in 1919 didn't look like a ten-year-old design.

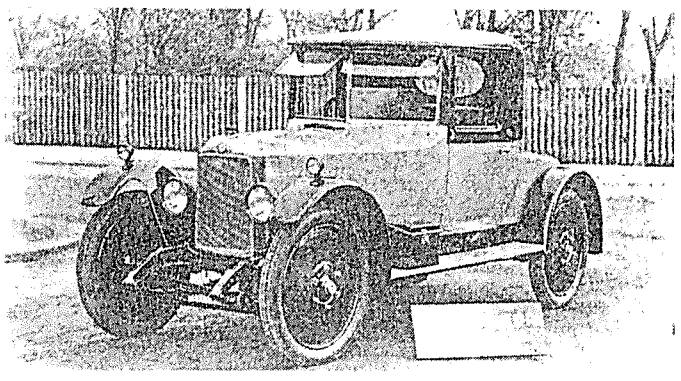
The specification was simple. Heart of the D was a straightforward s.v. monobloc four of 95 × 140 mm. (3,969 c.c.), with non-detachable head, chain-drive camshaft, and robust crankshaft running in five plain bearings. Cooling was by impeller pump and fan, a Watford magneto provided the sparks, and fuel was fed to the White and Poppe carburetter (30/98s used a Zenith) by exhaust pressure from a 14-gallon tank at the rear. Pistons were, of course cast iron instead of the 30/98's aluminium, and output was a sedate 50 b.h.p. delivered at 2,000 r.p.m.

The rest of it was exactly what had been listed in 1914, the self-starter apart. The clutch was the smooth Hele-Shaw multiplate, ratios of the separate four-speed gearbox were selected by a right-hand lever, springs were semi-elliptics of generous length, and the straight-bevel rear axle was retained, as were the traditional, Edwardian means of retardation. The pedal actuated a contracting-band brake of 12-in. diameter mounted behind the box, while the lever worked big, 16-in. drums of internal-expanding type on the rear wheels. The chassis was equally traditional, reinforcement being obtained by a sub-frame for engine and gearbox. Since the car was intended for chauffeurs as well as owner drivers, the wheelbase (130 in.) was appreciably longer than the 30/98's: there were variations of steering rake and suspension setting to cover the type of body fitted. Wire wheels were standard equipment, though some Ds (and early ODs as well) were shod with discs. At 3,588 lb., of course, the car was pretty heavy by E-type standards, but then 60 m.p.h. were entirely adequate for a luxury tourer. So, in *The Autocar's* opinion, were the brakes—but then British roads were still empty, their surfaces still pitted from wartime neglect, and the 20 m.p.h. speed limit wasn't entirely a dead letter. In any case, the big Vauxhall had the merit of availability, which explains how it managed to sell a steady 500 a year, despite inflation which had pushed the price up from £1,300 to £1,450 by the end of 1920.

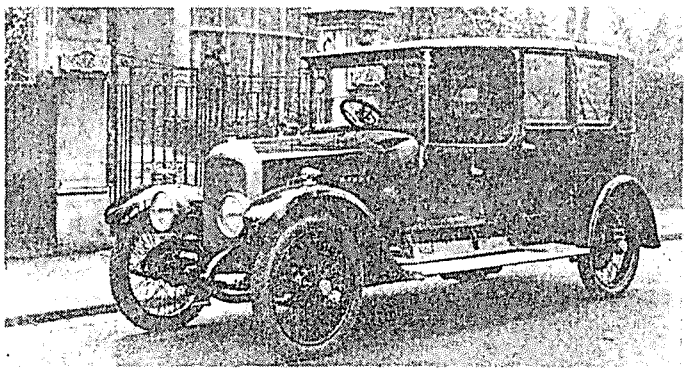
The D-type would remain the company's staple tourer until the end of 1921, which time Pomeroy had departed to America, leaving C. E. King in command. L. H. P.'s resignation, of course, killed off a small luxury V-12 with which he had been experimenting, not to mention a proposed o.h.c. replacement for the 30/98.

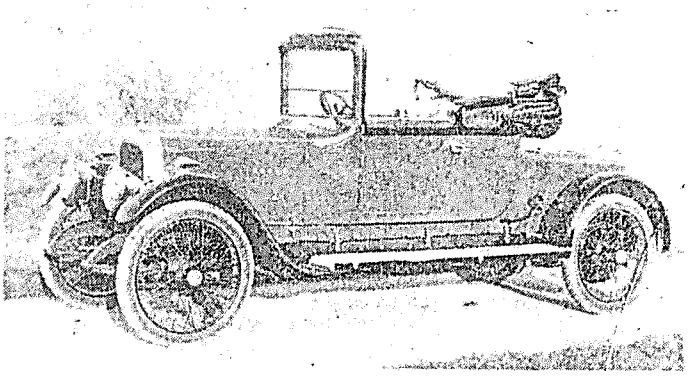
It also led to a cautious policy of improvement rather than innovation, which sorted ill with the motor cycle affair. This conservatism expressed itself, late in 1921, in indignant denials. Someone, clearly, had seen and reported a prototype OE, but Vauxhall weren't having any at this stage. "There is not a word of truth", stormed a spokesman from Luton, "in this statement. The car referred to is one of several experimental cars which the company has running at the present time. There is no intention, and never was, to bring out a new sporting model for 1922. The Vauxhall sporting car for the next season will be the 30/98 h.p. in the present form".

After that, it was flatheads and nothing else for 1922, and that's what turned up at Olympia, though like Henry Royce and George Lanchester, King recognised that something smaller than a 4-litre Twenty Five was indicated. His answer was the M-type Fourteen—the 14/40 designation wasn't in general use before 1924.

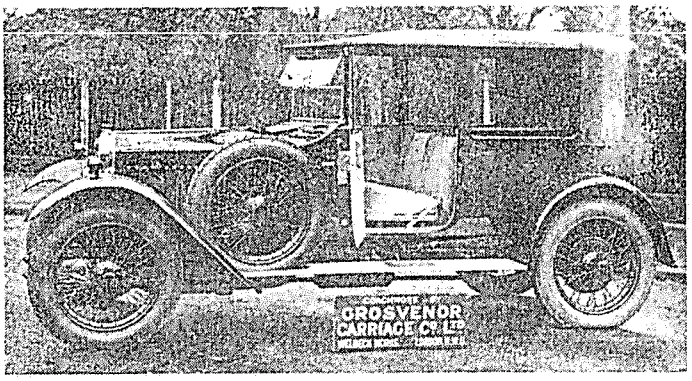


HERESY—or three speeds, a unit gearbox and disc wheels. M-type Fourteen with one-off Grosvenor coupé body, December, 1923.

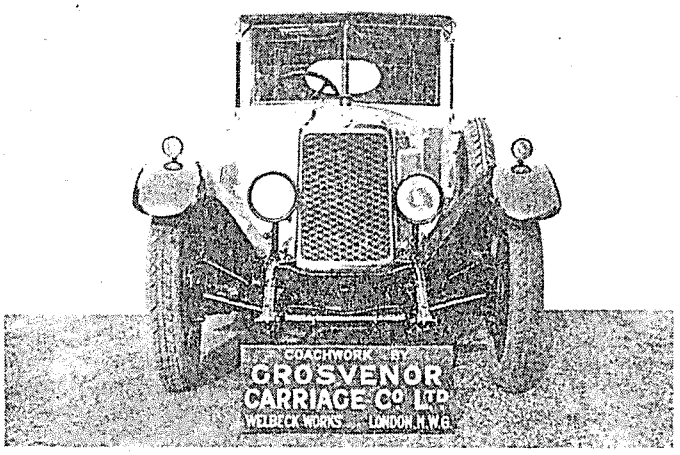




Ds FORMAL AND INFORMAL. Two shots from the Grosvenor archives, 1920/21. The landaulette (left) was a favourite style on early Vintage Vauxhalls. The three-quarter cabriolet (right) looks a little untidy with the hood down. Note the generous dimensions of the rear brake drums.



PONDEROUS CONVERTIBILITY. An early LM 14/40 all-weather, either late 1924 or early 1925, since there are no anchors on the front wheels.



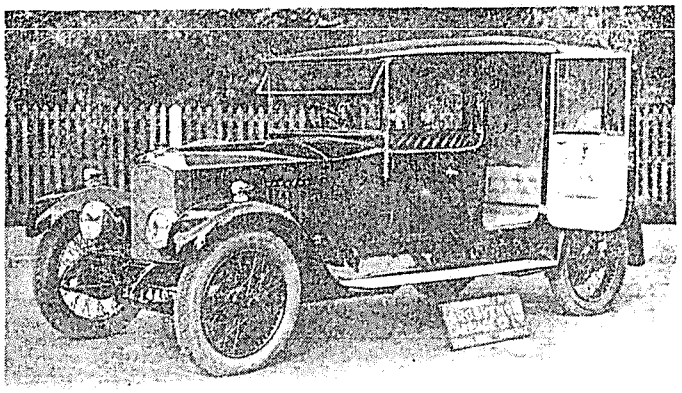
DIGNIFIED PROPORTIONS. Possibly a 1925 London Show car, this is a late LM 14/40 with front wheel brakes.

Heresy, however, was rearing its head. Cooling, ignition, and general proportions might follow Pomeroy lines, but nothing else did. The new 2·3-litre engine was content with three mains, and the Ricardo-type head, of aluminium, was detachable. Also of aluminium was the crankcase, while Vauxhall repaid a long-standing debt to Joseph Higginson (who, after all, had commissioned the first 30/98) by using one of his Autovacs to supply fuel to the Zenith triple-diffuser carburetter.

Further aft, changes were more apparent. Gone was the old sub-frame: engine, single-plate clutch, and gearbox were now in unit, and, while the last-mentioned component retained its right-hand change, it had only three widely-spaced ratios (4·5, 7·67 and 15·8 to 1). Perhaps wisely, on a car aimed at the non-sporting owner-driver, the transmission brake was jettisoned, and long cantilever springs were used at the rear. Unlike the D and E, the M-type featured a spiral bevel back end, and the six-stud disc wheels were shod with 815 × 105 beaded-edge tyres. On a wheelbase of 114 in., a standard tourer weighed 2,435 lb. in road trim. On the new Vauxhall (and on the latest D-types as well), there were four doors: the nearside front one housed the tool kit.

The M-type perpetuated the Vauxhall tradition of flexibility, and on 43 b.h.p. it was an adequate performer. Early examples would do 55 m.p.h., fuel consumptions of 25-30 m.p.g. were commonplace and the traditional Vauxhall clutch stop made gear-changing easy. The model was continued without change into 1924, though prices fell (to £595 in the case of a tourer), and the range of bodies was extended to embrace both a coupé-cabriolet and one of those ponderous all-weathers with hoods of surpassing weight and clumsiness. Both these latter were the work of Grosvenor, Vauxhall's house coachbuilder. The 1924 catalogue saw an angular four-door saloon, the Norfolk, noted for seats which folded down to form a bed: one of these, finished in a garish red-and-yellow colour scheme, was supplied to the King of Siam. One wonders if it survives in that legendary cache at Bangkok visited by my illustrious namesake.

Sales took an upturn, from their low point in 1921 to 637 in 1922, and 1,462 in 1923. By this time, however, there were no longer any strictures on the subject of overhead valves. Vauxhall had taken the plunge in the summer of 1922, in their new OD and OE models.



CHANGELESS THEMES. It takes a practised eye to tell an OD from a D, though it's the inside of the radiator shell that does it. Or, in the case of this late Warwick landaulette, the 30/98-type front-wheel brakes with "kidney-box" compensator.

The touring member of the family was rated at 23/60 h.p., a figure which reflected the engine's output, still at a dignified 2,000 r.p.m. Cylinder dimensions were unchanged: so were the chassis and transmission, apart from a spiral bevel back axle. While the latest 30/98s had Autovacs, the OD retained the pressure system, not to mention cast iron pistons. For the rest, the cylinder head was detachable, the five-bearing crankshaft was given a Lanchester harmonic balancer, and the cooling system incorporated a thermostat. Since by now White and Poppe had come under Dennis ownership, Zenith carburetters were standardised. The axle ratio remained at 3·6 to 1, with a 4·12 option available for colonial customers.

Vauxhall called the 23/60 "the weight carrier of the family", attributing to it "the three cardinal virtues of exceptional power development, exceptional refinement of running, and exceptional carburation efficiency". Compared with an OE, of course, it was something of a barge: chassis weight alone was 450 lb., higher, and limousines turned the scales at close on two tons. On the road, however, it was a carriage of considerable charm, having the sports model's flexibility and excellent steering without the snap. Controls were commendably light, even if testers considered that the central accelerator sat too high for the small-footed (for drivers with large feet it was ideal, of course). The car would pull down to 5 m.p.h. in top. It's a matter of opinion whether the inadequate anchors are more of a handicap on the 23/60 than on the 30/98. On the one hand, one doesn't cruise the tourer at much over 50: on the other, there's a lot more weight to cope with in an emergency. Perhaps it's as well that my own experience of the breed was gained on secondary roads in New Zealand, where the suspension showed to full advantage, and phenomenal avoidances seldom happen. Tight corners, however, do, and the big Vauxhall proved very handy in these.

Here was the apotheosis of the Edwardian family tourer, and in 1923 nobody cared if it wasn't a six. Of potential rivals in the same price class, Armstrong Siddeley, Daimler and Sunbeam had sprouted an extra pair of pots, but the two former breeds had a chauffeur-driven image. Austin's Twenty was, of course, still a four, while Humber and Crossley (the latter quite noisily in their advertising) remained equally uncompromising. It should also be remembered that the sort of people who bought the bigger Vauxhalls were well-heeled motorists of some experience: they hadn't forgotten the side-effects of the first six-cylinder craze of 1906-10—tooth-shaking "periods". Rumour said that Vauxhall's own B-type (1910-14) hadn't been exactly a brilliant car. Remarkably little was heard of it.

The 23/60 sold quite well. It was skilfully promoted in sepia-toned catalogues depicting the range against stately-home backgrounds in the nearby Chilterns. The choice of styles was wide, thanks to the company's practice (continued well into GM times) of farming out low-volume sellers to Grosvenor. Cheapest of the ODs (at £925 in 1924) was the Kington five-seater tourer: another £50 would buy a pair of forward-facing occasional seats on the Malvern version. Limousines came in enclosed-drive (Carlton), semi-open drive (Salisbury) and open-drive "town car" (Grantley) guises: a proper enclosed-drive landaulette wasn't listed until 1925. Nor, for that matter, was a four-door saloon for the owner-driver, though ther were two cabriolets, the formal Sutherland, and the two-door Arundel. 1924 cars featured Autovac feed: they could also be had with the 30/98's uncoupled front-wheel brakes and kidney-box

compensator, an arrangement standardised a year later. The 23/60 would soldier on into 1926, albeit a smaller selection of coachwork (four bodies as against ten at peak) suggested a gradual rundown. In any case, the six-cylinder S-type was now a reality. So were General Motors, who hadn't made a really big four since 1915, and didn't fancy a return to audible power impulses.

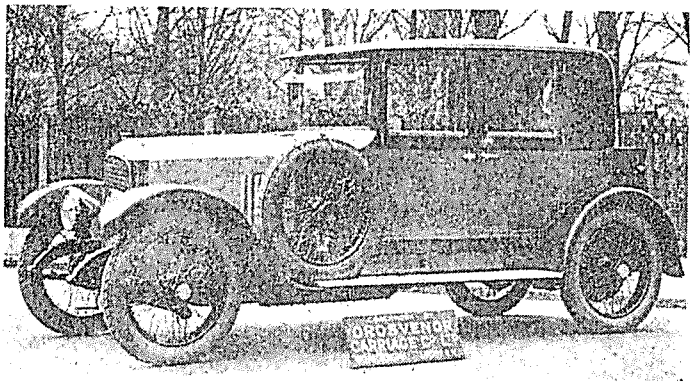
But in 1925, Nemesis was still a year away, and even the 30/98 had only the 3-litre Bentley to contend with. Thus the season's principal news concerned the 14 h.p. cars, now uprated as the LM-type 14/40.

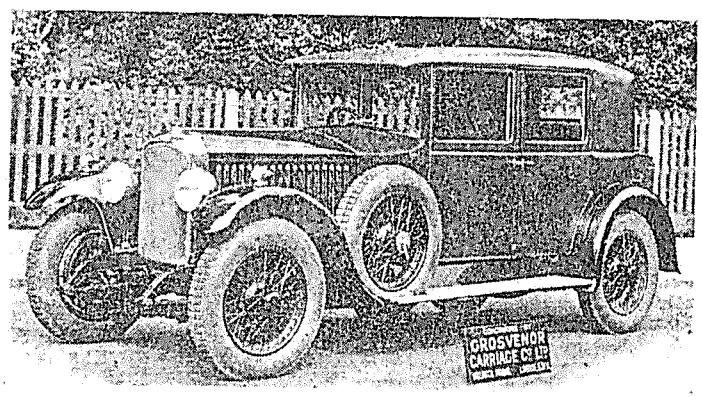
These were far better-looking machines thanks to a longer, 117-in. wheelbase, a wider track, and wire wheels in place of the resonance-prone discs. The gearbox was given an extra cog, ratios being quite sporting—4·5, 6·9, 10·4 and 15·95 to 1—which meant 45 on third and 33 on second. Top speed was a little over 60 m.p.h., and fuel consumption was unimpaired. The use of balloon tyres was also noted, though front-wheel brakes (coupled, of course) didn't become generally available until midway through the year. Other improvements on this final series included taller radiators, grouped instruments in the centre of the facia, and "a capital dual-note horn". Unkindly, Vauxhall chose this moment to inflict formal limousine and landaulette coachwork on the poor little 14/40. Weights weren't quoted, though a 1925 saloon turned the scales at 2,632 lb. dry.

1925's sales had held steady at 1,388 units, and further price reductions (to £495 for the 14/40 tourer) boosted them to 1,516 the following year, but in the meantime Vauxhall had made their last independent gesture—the 25/70 h.p. S-type six.

Bearing in mind the smoothness of the big five-bearing fours, a 3½-litre o.h.v. unit with the LM's cylinder dimensions would have seemed a logical step. Unfortunately, like Bentley and Sunbeam, Vauxhall wanted a super-car with which to challenge Rolls-Royce and Daimler. And in this quest they would fare no better than their rivals in Wolverhampton, whose 30/90 straight-eight was too heavy on the controls for the average owner-driver.

Chassis-wise, the S-type perpetuated the established formula. True, everything was bigger and heavier, with a 136-in. wheelbase and side-members six inches deep, but the suspension (now reinforced with friction dampers) was the as the OD's. So was the sub-frame for engine, gearbox, and multi-plate clutch. Also retained were the uncoupled f.w.b., with the pedal working on front wheels and transmission. An added complication was hydraulic operation—at the front, only, of course.





SPORTS SALOONS A & M. Both are by Grosvenor and less than three years separate them. We can't help preferring the spindly OD (top) for all its untidy four-panel windscreen. Note the polished aluminium bonnet, which has disappeared on the heavy fabric S-type 25/70 (bottom), which looks the 2½-tonner it almost certainly was. Wellbase wheels indicate 1927.

King wanted something quieter than conventional pushrods, so he took up the Burt-McCollum type of single-sleeve valve already used by Argyll, and soon to be adopted by the Arrol-Johnston-Aster combine. Dimensions of the new engine were 81·5 × 124 mm., for a capacity of 3,881 c.c., and output was some 70 b.h.p. The head was detachable: pistons were of aluminium and connecting-rods of Dural. The balanced crankshaft ran in ten main bearings, while the updraught S.U. carburetter was fed by Autovac from a 16-gallon tank at the rear.

Even in closed form the S-type was quite handsome, and owner-driver styles included Arthur Mulliner's Ormonde sports saloon, of close-coupled type with flared wings: Grosvenor made something very similar. Contemporary reports insisted that the engine did not smoke, but according to people who drove them when they were new it was quite a bad offender in this respect. Further, the car was very heavy —well over two tons in limousine form—and 70 m.p.h. were hard work. More alarming was the presence of shimmy on a chassis with balloon tyres specifically designed for four-wheel brakes, while the 25/70 was very expensive indeed—£1,350 for the Royton five-seater tourer, and £1,675 for formals. A month after the model's introduction, General Motors—already frustrated in an attempt to buy the Austin Motor Co.—moved in, thus sealing the fate of the whole range.

But not immediately. Obviously nothing could be done about the 1926 Vauxhalls, though a degree of rationalisation was injected by fitting the S-type brakes and gearbox to the 30/98. Nor were there any changes for 1927, beyond the demise of the 23/60. The 25/70 was soft-pedalled; by contrast, the 30/98 was advertised as "The Car of Grace That Sets The Pace" (One wonders if Cecil Kimber and William Lyons read those advertisements). The LM continued as the firm's mainstay, though there can't have been many: the year's production was 1,645 cars, but of these at least a thousand were the new R-types announced in the autumn for 1928.

One novelty alone distinguished the LM's final year. A few chassis were fitted with four-speed Wilson preselective transmissions, albeit Vauxhall made it clear that this refinement would not be marketed "until a number of 14 h.p. cars which have been fitted with this gearbox have covered many thousands of miles in the hands of certain selected drivers who are not actual members of the Vauxhall company".

Time had, however, run out for "The Car Superexcellent". Though both the OE and the S were quoted in the 1928 catalogue, the former was allowed to work itself out, while surviving stocks of the latter breed were quietly remaindered off through the company's Luton agent. It seems unlikely that more than a hundred (if that) were made.

As for the faithful 14/40, it was now hopelessly out of date. Two years previously, the big-car market had swung irrevocably in the direction of sixes. Now buyers in the 14-16 h.p. class were clamouring for the extra pots—and they were getting them. 1928's newcomers included inexpensive sixes from Austin, Morris and Rover, and Standard—after a disastrous false start with the overhead-valve 18/36—would join their ranks for 1929.

Worse still, Vauxhall's competitors were committing heresy. Sunbeam's 14/40 had already given way to the six-cylinder Sixteen, and Crossley had quietly launched a 2-litre 15·7. True, Humber had come up with a new four-cylinder 14/40 as late as 1927, but their other newcomer that year had been a six, the 20/55, and this strain would soon take the upper hand. No wonder that the R-type (see *Veteran and Vintage*, May 1975) was destined to become the staple Vauxhall for three whole seasons.

"The Car Superexcellent" was no more. But those last traditional tourers certainly weren't a failure, and fortunately they can still be seen in respectable numbers.

FROM :
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