Austin upgraded

New de luxe 3-litre has luxury interior and detail refinements

ONE of the most interesting of last year’s crop of new cars, the Austin 3-litre was distinctly slow off the mark—in production, not in the performance sense—and this was largely deliberate because BMC were determined not to give the “all systems go” signal until a substantial batch of pre-production models had been placed in the hands of a cross-section of the public for reaction and experience. The comments and suggestions on these 100 cars were analysed and several of the points raised were dealt with in the first production models which finally began coming off the lines in July.

Other suggestions have had to wait for incorporation in the new de luxe version announced today. Its chief feature is a completely refurbished interior carried to the standards associated with the former Austin Princess models. Before going into details, however, a word or two about the innovations already incorporated in July production and continued in the new de luxe cars.

Most obvious of these is, of course, the headlamp arrangement. Most of the guinea-pig users did not like the original single-rectangular lamps and called for twin lamps to give more and better-directed light. This has been done. The power-assisted steering also came in for severe criticism, although of an unexpected kind. It not merely removed the hard work associated with parking and town driving on the old Princess 3-litre, but was felt by many people to be a little too helpful. This charge of being over-sensitive has been met by introducing a spool valve of higher rate to reduce the power assistance in relation to manual effort, and by increasing the damping on the rack. Another detail modification in the first production cars was the fitting of polyether foam inserts in the face-level air vents to comply with calls for reduced wind noise.

In addition to these changes in the original model as exhibited at Earls Court last year, the new de luxe car has equipment and furnishing of a much higher order. Although the walnut veneer facia remains unchanged apart from the juxtaposition of the screen wiper and washer switches for more convenient use, there is much more of a polished-wood atmosphere about the interior as a result of almost doubling the depth of the door cappings. Trimming is completely new, with much better carpeting, new and wider individual front seats with folding centre armrests, improved door trim with pleated pockets and an improved ash tray on the facia.

Added driver convenience is reflected in a change in the height and angle of the steering wheel to give a more comfortable position, a change in the headlamp-flasher/indicator lever on the steering column to provide real finger-tip operation, and the substitution of a fabric-covered half horn ring in place of a centre-of-the-wheel button. A tendency of the wiper blades to lift at high speeds has been countered by using blades of improved shape with increased pressure on the glass.

On the mechanical side, quieter and more effortless running has been obtained by raising the overall ratios when manual transmission is fitted by a change in the final drive from 3.91:1 to 3.56:1, while an air cleaner with better acoustic properties has been fitted and added insulation provided. Better insulation between windows and door frames and between the doors and the body has also been affected to reduce wind noise. Finally, the criticisms by some experimental users of low-speed vibration have been countered by suspending the rear axle more flexibly.

The outcome is a more refined car which, however, in no way departs from the original conception of a large, comfortable, five/seater with six-cylinder, 3-litre front engine, rear-wheel drive, and all-independent hydrolastic suspension with the relatively unusual feature of self-leveling.

Naturally, these new de luxe models cost more. the basic price being some £65 higher and the total with purchase tax, approximately £83 more. The actual figures are:

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<th>Type</th>
<th>Manual</th>
<th>Automatic</th>
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<tr>
<td>Basic</td>
<td>£1,217 10s.</td>
<td>£1,297</td>
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<td>Total</td>
<td>£1,557 15s. 7d.</td>
<td>£1,660 Os. 0d.</td>
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continued

Driving impressions
Some new cars give a good first impression but leave a faint suspicion that they might easily have been even better. Often such models become the cars they could originally have been after a year or so of further development. The Austin 3-litre is an example.

The models tried last year on an aerodrome test circuit were production prototypes and suggested that the 3-litre, with its lower build (compared with the former A110), hydroelastic suspension and self-leveling represented a big step forward; but, in an undefined sort of way, something seemed to be slightly lacking.

Thanks partly to the "guinea-pig" exercise carried out by selected members of the public, partly to the inevitable further development work on details that has taken place in the meantime, and partly to the more expensive fittings and furnishing, this 1969 de luxe model seems now to have come into its own.

The improved interior has that extra touch of luxury that the rest of the specification seems to call for; the wider reclining front seats, each with its own folding centre arm-rest, not only look better but are contoured to give a high degree of both comfort and support, and the slight change in height and angle of the large steering wheel aids both control and journey comfort. The fabric-covered half-horn ring and better-placed headlamp-flasher/direction-indicator lever are also a help.

More important in this respect is the change in the power-assisted steering, the stiffening-up giving a distinct improvement in feel, which was rather lacking with the original ultra-light setting.

The first of two models we tried recently seemed to break away rather easily at the back, but a second example which handled extremely well suggested that the first car might have had "unconventional" tyre pressures. Certainly the second car seemed particularly good for a large five-seater saloon.

A good deal of detail work has gone into improving sound insulation and while 12 months is too long to retain an exact impression for comparison, the new de luxe model seems to reach a high level in this respect. It will be interesting to confirm these impressions when at last we receive a model for proper test.

Harold Hastings

Brief specification
Engine
6-cyl. 2,912 c.c.; push-rod o.h.v.; compression ratio 9:1; two S.U. HS6 carburetters; 123.6 b.h.p. net at 4,500 r.p.m.; 181 b.f. ft. torque at 3,000 r.p.m.
Transmission (Manual)
9 in. Borg and Beck diaphragm-spring clutch; four-speed, all synchronized gearbox with optional overdrive. Overall ratios, 3.56 (o/drive 2.91), 4.65 (o/drive 3.80), 7.326 and 10.60; rev. 9.94. Road speed in o/drive top at 1,000 r.p.m.; 19.50 m.p.h.
Transmission (optional automatic)
Running gear
Dimensions
Overall length, 15 ft.; overall width, 5 ft. 6½ in.; turning circle, 40 ft.; approx. kerb weight, 29½ cwt.

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