

Austin A90

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The Austin A90 Atlantic was a British car produced by the Austin Motor Company, launched initially as a sporting four seat convertible. It made its début at the 1948 Earls Court Motor Show in London, with production models built between spring 1949 and late 1950. The two-door sports coupé followed a year later; it had been previewed at the 1949 Motor Show and was in production at Longbridge between 1950 and 1952.

The Atlantic should not be confused with Austin's next "A90" model, the Austin Westminster of 1954.

Development

The Atlantic was one of the first post-war cars engineered from scratch by Austin, and was said to be styled from a thumbnail sketch by Leonard Lord, then Chairman of Austin and later the British Motor Corporation (BMC) — though in truth the styling was more likely the work of resident Italian Austin stylist Dick Burzi. The car was almost certainly influenced by a 1946 Pininfarina-bodied Alfa Romeo cabriolet, which just happened to end up at the Longbridge factory in mid 1947, a few months before the light blue 16 hp sports prototype made its first appearance in the experimental department and on nearby roads around the factory.

Export pressure and influence on design

With the then Government edict of "Export or die" and steel allocated only to those who generated much needed dollar revenue, the Atlantic was designed specifically to appeal to North American tastes. The car featured up-to-the-minute detailing, with front wings that swept down to a rounded tail with enclosed rear wheels, a centrally mounted fog light built into the letter-box style air intake, and then unheard of luxury in the form of hydraulically powered windows and hood (roof), "flashing indicators" (rather than trafficators, for the United States market at least) and the option of a radio, made by Ecko. The range-topping Austin was offered in a variety of "jewelescent" colours. Few people in the car's native Britain would have ever seen anything like the futuristically-styled Atlantic before, and certainly not from a conservative mainstream manufacturer like Austin.

The radical Atlantic suffered, however, from the dramatically new Jaguar XK120, launched later that year.

Disappointing sales in North America

Despite huge focus by Austin in the US (including a successful attempt at breaking a series of stock car records at the Indianapolis "Brickyard" in April 1949 by Alan Hess, Charles Goodacre and Dennis Buckley), only about 350 of the 7981 produced were sold in the United States and even a US\$1000 price reduction didn't see many owners trading in their Cadillacs or Packards as they felt the big four cylinder engine couldn't compare in power output to their native V8 engines — though for its time, performance was strong, with a top speed of 92 mph (148 km/h) and a 0-50 mph (80 km/h) time of 11.2 seconds. The 88 bhp (66 kW) engine later saw service in the Austin-Healey 100, which was a great success in the US. A few were also used in civilian versions of the Austin Champ.

Other markets

The car did see more success in former British Colonies, Europe, Scandinavia and Australasia, where a number of cars were sold; of the total production run, roughly half were exported.

Performance

A convertible tested by the British magazine *The Motor* in 1948 had a top speed of 91 mph (146 km/h) and could accelerate from 0-60 mph (97 km/h) in 16.6 seconds. A fuel consumption of 21.7 miles per imperial gallon (13.0 L/100 km/18.1 mpg US) was recorded. The test car which had the optional electric hood and window operation (£40 extra) cost £824 including taxes.

Dynamics

The handling was poor, due to a combination of comparatively short wheelbase and rudimentary springing, coil (independent suspension at the front but leaf springs at the rear). The underpinnings were somewhat less exotic than the all-enveloping bodywork: the chassis and running gear were based on that of the 1949 Austin Hampshire saloon, and that in turn had been based on the entry-level Austin A40 Devon of 1947. Prototypes were afflicted with such terrible scuttle shake that the car was almost pulled from production at the eleventh hour and only a last minute fix of a boxed chassis section resolved the situation.

Brakes were initially a mix of hydraulic (front) and mechanical (rear) with 11 in (279 mm) drums, replaced by a fully hydraulic brake setup from 1951 onwards.

Longevity

A combination of no rust proofing at the factory, and styling that included a multitude of mud traps led to the same rapid corrosion as beset many rushed post-war British designs. As a result, very few cars survived into the 1960s, let alone the next century, a fact not helped by many cars being broken up to provide spares for the Austin-Healey 100. In the UK

today, it is estimated that less than 30 roadworthy examples survive, with possibly the same number being restored or awaiting restoration.