

Designer's View

The general public may just about know who Gordon Buehrig is, or Alec Issigonis, but not Gerry Palmer. Yet, among British car designers, his name was one of the most respected in the period just after the Second World War, and when I talked to him about his career some years ago (he was then approaching 70 and living in retirement near Oxford) he placed the Z-series MG Magnette high on his own personal list of achievements.

Though born in England, Gerry Palmer grew up in Africa "surrounded by Model T Fords — it was the universal car"; indeed, the first car he owned was a Model T, soon converted into a two-seat "racer." Coming back to England while still a teenager, he worked for the Scammell truck company, then designed an almost unknown sports car called the Deroy, which featured i.f.s. and de Dion rear suspension. It failed, but led to a meeting with Cecil Kimber and, in 1938, a position in the Cowley drawing office of the Nuffield Group, which owned MG. Palmer was one of the team (Issigonis was another) who designed the Y-type MG sedan before war broke out in 1939, but in 1942 he was appointed chief designer of that strange little Yorkshire company, Jowett Cars of Bradford.

Thus he made his name, for the Jowett Javelin sports sedan, first seen by the public in 1947, earned worldwide praise. "It was what I call a total concept, just as the Issigonis Mini was a total concept; everything fits in and it can't be any different." Starting off with a class-win in the Monte Carlo Rally, Palmer's brilliant lightweight sedan also won its spurs in



courtesy of the author

long-distance racing at the likes of Spa and Le Mans.

But by that time its designer had gone back to the Nuffield drawing office. There he produced a TF Midget replacement in the form of another conventional sports car intended for the US market, but the project died when the choice fell on Syd Everner's rival MGA design.

Instead, Palmer designed a new small sedan to be powered by the familiar 1,250 cc MG T-series engine, and badged as both an MG and a Wolseley. The MG was meant to be announced first but a change of policy made it the Wolseley 4/44 — which was powered by the MG engine, whereas the MG Magnette was delayed until after the Austin/Nuffield merger and then came out with a non-MG engine! "Originally, the two cars were one project," says Palmer. Asked about the coin-

cidence that the Javelin, Wolseley 4/44 and MG Magnette all had strong vertical radiators, he said: "That was deliberately done, as part of my styling. I never liked the VW Beetle type of front; I liked a good strong prow — something with a punch to it. To me it looked a more balanced design that way."

And in designing the MG/Wolseley, was Gerry Palmer influenced by such cars as the latest Fiats and Lancias? That is one question he did not answer directly, but he did say: "When the Javelin came out the Italians praised it, and that really pleased me, because I always thought the Italians were damn good car designers." Perhaps that *does* answer the question....

When I also asked which of his cars gave him greatest personal satisfaction, he replied: "Naturally, the Jowett Javelin comes first, but then I think it has to be the Magnette. I considered it a better shape than the Wolseley. Maybe not today, but...well, tastes change all the time, don't they?"

The intense political maneuvers that characterized the BMC period were not at all to Gerry Palmer's taste — he was ever an honest car designer rather than a politician — and in the mid-1950s he again moved out of Cowley to spend the rest of his working life with General Motors, as assistant chief engineer to the Vauxhall company in Luton, England. All right, he never made it to the really big time, but his name is not forgotten by those who have a soft spot for well-designed, high-performance, small-displacement sports sedans.