

# SCI ROAD TEST:



# AUSTIN A55

Austin A55 was SCI staff car during BMC record runs, covering 2127 miles. We were fond of and confident in the car, as it pulled well and handled well in the mountains. BELOW: During fast cornering the suspension works hard and the car stays flat. With a full load steering is light and predictable.



**B**OUND for Bonneville last autumn to cover the BMC record runs, our choice of wheels was an Austin A55 four-door sedan. It was roomy enough to carry the mass of impedimenta required for such an expedition and it also could claim blood relationship to the 245-mph MG streamliner, EX-181. Both cars, for example, use the same cylinder block, that of the BMC B-type engine. By the time we returned the A55 to Gough Industries, the Western U.S. distributor, we had lived with the able and willing compact sedan for over 2000 miles. Most of these were SCI-driven but the car also was shaken down by much of the exclusive talent congregated on the Salt, including Stirling Moss, Phil Hill, MG chief engineer Syd Enever, and British Petroleum's Brian Cooper. This resulted in an unusual cross-section of interesting opinion.

The most controversial feature of the A55 is undoubtedly the Manumatic automatic clutch with which our test car was equipped. This device eliminates the clutch pedal. The lightest touch on the column-mounted shift lever disengages the clutch and from then on a system of solenoids and vacuum-actuated controls regulates engine revs and the declutch-reclutch operation. Even though you may have the throttle on the floor during gear changes, it is totally under the control of the Manumatic brain which opens and closes the throttle at its own placid pace. Moss frankly liked the Manumatic, as he liked almost everything about the car. He is a firm advocate of the smaller personal car wherever traffic conditions are at all heavy. But the majority of us—let's just say the SCI personnel—did not regard the Manumatic approach to two-pedal control as something we'd care to own and, above all, turn our wives loose with.

One reason is that the centrifugal clutch employed remains all-off until engine revs reach a brisk clip, when it engages suddenly and the car jumps forward or backward, depending upon the gear you're in. This is scarcely a disadvantage in wide open areas, but in moderately tight parking spaces it gives cause for concern and real care. Another thing, the centrifugal clutch makes clean, silent double-clutch downshifts to first gear impossible, desirable as they would be in a car of the A55's displacement, torque and gearing. Another price paid for the luxury of automation is very slow gear changes, no matter how quickly the shift lever is moved.

So we prefer the manual transmission, particularly for city use which demands constant gearbox work. We also criticize the balkiness of the A55's column shift, a nagging annoyance in an otherwise highly satisfying and well-engineered car. We found it necessary more than a few times to start out in second because it was impossible to engage first. Especially since the A55's front seats are intended to accommodate only two persons in genuine comfort, it seems that Austin would do well to return to the clean-cut and foolproof floor-shift gearbox that still is used on, for example, its sister car, the Wolseley.

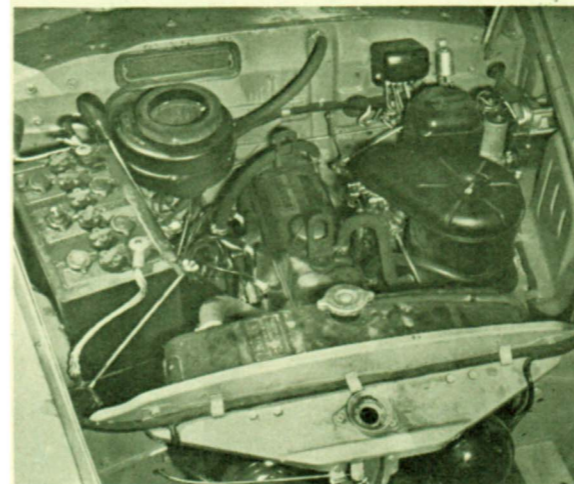
The A55's engine is almost identical to that of the hardy, punishment-immune MGA. The only major visible difference is the single carb on the A55 in place of the dual arrangement on the MGA. Realizing this, you expect the Austin's engine-noise level to be on a par with that of the MGA and you're surprised to find it very silent, right up to the top end. A different camshaft giving a lower rev peak, probably less-stiff valve springs and good sound-proofing of the engine compartment all contribute to this, making the A55 a properly quiet family conveyance. In our experience, the four cylinder ohv engine fired up almost instantly after standing for hours in cold, wet weather and, other than a loping idle, was smooth as a six at all other engine speeds. It has the same, soft, easy throttle response that often is associated with sixes.

Austin of England has built an enviable reputation over the years by emphasizing the practical rather than the spectacular, by stressing durability, economy and comfort rather than glitter and go. In keeping with this, the A55's performance is serviceably thrifty without being hot. Its "go" aspect most worthy of comment lies in its high speed range.

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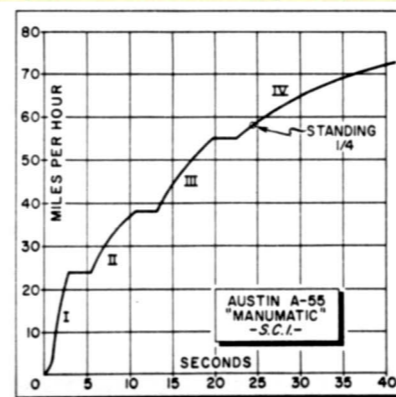
Stirling Moss drove our test car: "... just the motor car for modern city traffic". He also liked Manumatic clutch, wide-opening door and genuine leather seats.



A55 is powered by BMC B-series engine, basically the MGA engine with one carb and milder cam. Clutch control is at upper right; engine accessibility very good.



Editor Christy jacks up both wheels from one side jacking point. Spare tire tray is lowered by a spinner. Trunk space is more than adequate for a small car.



## AUSTIN A55 DELUXE SEDAN with MANUMATIC TRANSMISSION

### TOP SPEED:

Two-way average	79.8 mph
Fastest one-way run	81.4 mph

### ACCELERATION:

From zero to	seconds
30 mph	7.0
40 mph	13.7
50 mph	17.0
60 mph	25.9
70 mph	35.9
Starting 1/4 mile	24.4
Speed at end of quarter	58 mph

### SPEED RANGE IN GEARS:

Gear	Speed Range
I	zero to 24 mph
II	zero to 38 mph
III	10 to 55 mph
IV	13 to top

### SPEEDOMETER CORRECTION:

Indicated	Actual
30	30
40	41
50	51
60	62
70	72
80	82

### FUEL CONSUMPTION:

Hard driving	18.5 mpg
Average driving (under 60 mph)	25 mpg

### BRAKING EFFICIENCY: (10 successive emergency stops from 60 mph, just short of locking wheels):

Stop	per cent
1st stop	60
2nd	60
3rd	57
4th	57
5th	55
6th	51
7th	50
8th	50
9th	50
10th	50

### POWER UNIT:

Type	In-line four-cyl.
Valve Arrangement	Pushrod ohv.
Bore & Stroke	2.875 x 3.5 ins (73 x 89 mm)
Stroke/Bore Ratio	1.22 to one
Displacement (Engl. & Met.)	90.9 cu ins (1489 cc)
Compression Ratio	8.3 to one
Carburetion by	Zenith single-throat
Max. Power	51 bhp @ 4250 rpm
Max. Torque	81 lb-ft @ 2000 rpm
Idle Speed	450 rpm

### DRIVE TRAIN:

Transmission ratios I	3.95
II	2.41
III	1.43
IV	1.00
Final drive ratio (test car)	4.30
Axle torque taken by	leaf springs

### CHASSIS:

Wheelbase	99.25 in
Front Tread	48.50 in
Rear Tread	49.00 in
Suspension, front	Independent; coil springs and unequal-length wishbones
Suspension, rear	Semi-elliptic
Steering type	Cam and peg
Steering wheel turns L to L	3
Turning diameter	37.5 ft.
Brake type	2 leading shoe front; one leading, one trailing rear
Brake lining area	121 sq in
Tire size	5.90 x 13

### GENERAL:

Length	176 in
Width	61.5 in
Height	60.5 in
Weight, test car	2360 lbs
Weight distribution, F/R	55.5/44.5
Fuel capacity	10.5 U. S. gallons

### RATING FACTORS:

Bhp per cu. in.	0.56
Bhp per sq. in. piston area	2.32
Torque (lb-ft) per cu. in.	0.89
Pounds per bhp—test car	46.3
Piston speed @ 60 mph	2210 fpm
Piston speed @ max bhp	2480 fpm
Brake lining area per ton (test car)	102.5 sq ins
Mph per 1000 rpm	15.84



## AUSTIN A55

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Across the broad deserts of California, Nevada and Utah we cruised flat-out all day long, indicating about 80 mph on the level and over 85 on downgrades. On long upgrades we found that the A55 had exceptional pulling power for a 1500 cc sedan and that it could walk away from class-competitors that admittedly can take it on the straight. Between Los Angeles and Bonneville there are four mountain passes, all at least 7000 feet above sea level. Loaded as it was, the A55 pulled each of these in top gear at about 40 mph. There was just one exception where the last quarter-mile before the summit had to be taken in third.

Third gear's ratio is frustratingly low. It's the gear you want to drop down to for passing at normal highway speeds. However, it's absolutely *done* at 55 mph and there's nowhere to go but into fourth, where very little urge is left for overtaking. On up- or down-shifts we found it impossible to beat the synchro-mechanism. In fact, rushing a shift gets you nothing. The level will *not* enter its slot, regardless of pressure, until the gears are ready to mesh congenially.

The A55's steering has the fine, light, quick, live character that is practically inherent in the light car and thoroughly alien to the heavy Detroit product. Heavily laden as we were on our cross-country runs, the steering remained consistent when cornering, even on wet pavement. With only the driver aboard, the tail seemed to wag the dog a bit during hard, fast cornering. Body roll was imperceptible to occupants . . . and nearly so to the camera, as you can see. The A55's ride is taut and firm, but not even remotely as harsh as that of the MGA. Small surface irregularities are not totally erased. On the other hand, really severe bumps that would be punishing to passengers in most Detroit cars are smoothed out in stride by the A55.

Its brakes are very good . . . nothing better is required of the family-type road machine. Fade during the ten emergency-stop test was slight and pedal travel was scarcely affected, although the car began to pull strongly to the right near the end of the brake-test series. There is no perceptible nosing-down of the front end and there is minimal need for the occupants to brace themselves during hard braking.

The A55's appetite for fuel is reasonably moderate but not remarkable. On one 704-mile run in hot weather, driving flat-out whenever possible and climbing steadily in altitude, our test car averaged 17.8 mpg. During acceleration and top-speed runs we recorded 18.5 mpg. Highway cruising at 55 to 60 mph produced a figure of

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## ARNOLT-BRISTOL sets course record at Thompson

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## AUSTIN A55

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25.2 mpg, indicating a much stingier consumption under more leisurely driving conditions. Oil consumption during the 2000 miles was nil.

The fundamental character of the A55 is reflected in its bodywork. It is very solid, stylish in a restrained-gay manner, roomy, safe and, above all, practical. No rattles or squeaks developed in our long stay with the car. There is nothing grotesque or "typically-miniature" about its appearance. Visibility is excellent in all directions, passenger accommodation is spacious for four, will tolerate six, and headroom is surprisingly large. The below-dashboard parcel tray which extends across the body is a great convenience. It is complemented by a glove compartment which can be locked.

Passing through several rainstorms of deluge-magnitude, we found that the sealing of doors and decklid against rain is completely effective. The heater and defroster proved very comfortable in desert nights in the 40° F range. No-draft vents in both front and rear windows, in addition to their ventilating function, help to reduce or control the level of wind noise in the passenger space.

The A55's luggage space, enlarged considerably over that of the previous model, is four feet wide, three feet deep and just under two feet high. Tools are carried on a recessed tray high on the forward wall of the luggage space and the spare wheel and tire are cradled on a hinged tray underneath the rear compartment. The tray is lowered by turning a fine-thread screw drive with the car's hand crank until the spare can be slid out under the rear bumper. Manumatic models do not come with hand cranks, but a short, L-shaped tool is provided for spare-tray operation. With it the opening and closing processes are much slower than with a cranked handle. Since the tray must be lowered even to check air pressure in the spare, owners will find it worthwhile to (a) obtain a cranked or "speedwrench" handle and (b) to make the simple installation of an air hose that will permit inflating the spare without removing it from its otherwise entirely practical stowage space.

The A55 is not the lowest-priced car in its displacement-performance range, nor is it the most cheaply-made by any means. It's a highly durable, comfortable, well-built light car . . . a family car designed to build marque loyalty. The Manumatic clutch and the current Austin column shift, frankly, do not inspire us. Aside from these complaints we feel that the Austin A55 is a fine and desirable light car.

—Griff Borgeson

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