



ROAD
TEST

AUSTIN A-55

A rough rider with superlative ease of driving

IT DOESN'T seem possible that it was only 11 years ago when the first Austins hit these shores in quantity. Nor does it seem possible that so many changes could occur in a product in such a short time. Nevertheless, the subject of this test report is actually a development of the 1948 Austin A-40 Devon and Dorset models.

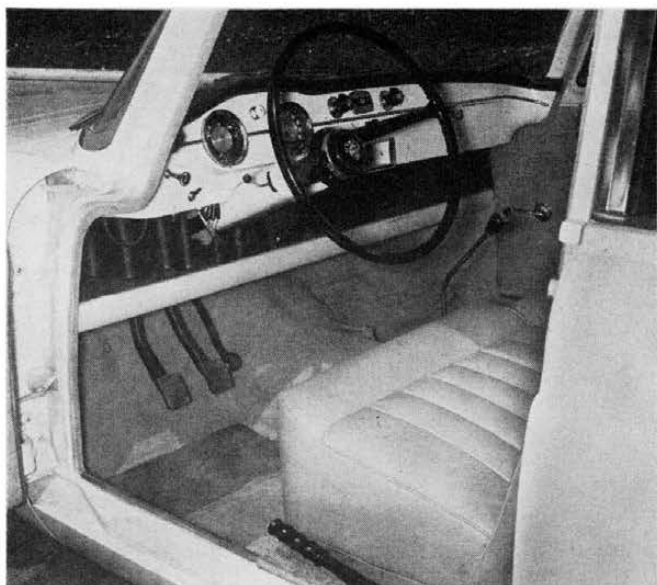
The new Austin A-55 Cambrian is, by British standards, a rather large "economy" sedan with comfortable seating for four adults and enough room left over to accommodate two children or even a total of six adults with a bit of squeezing. Its external appearance is of course extraordinarily good, though conservative. Pinin Farina can be congratulated on having evolved a styling theme which is good looking and carries a definite flavor of the British "razor edge" contours so favored by their own coach-builders.

Although the car has inevitably grown larger and heavier over the past decade, the performance is still surprisingly good. The engine was redesigned in 1955, with a larger cylinder bore and heavier crankshaft. A piston displacement increase from 1200 to 1489 cubic centimeters, plus many minor changes towards improved efficiency, gives an honest 53 horsepower; and a 0-60 time of 21.7 seconds is certainly more than adequate for a family sedan in this category.

Our first impression of the car was the practicality of the over-all package. The four doors are large, entrance is easy, the seats are nearly chair height, and there is generous headroom. Visibility is excellent, and after driving the car a few blocks we immediately felt that this was one of the



Not without its piquant touches in the form of latter-day razor edge details like the rear-window eyebrow, the A-55 has grown a longer (and roomier) tail. It is too easy to override the bumpers.



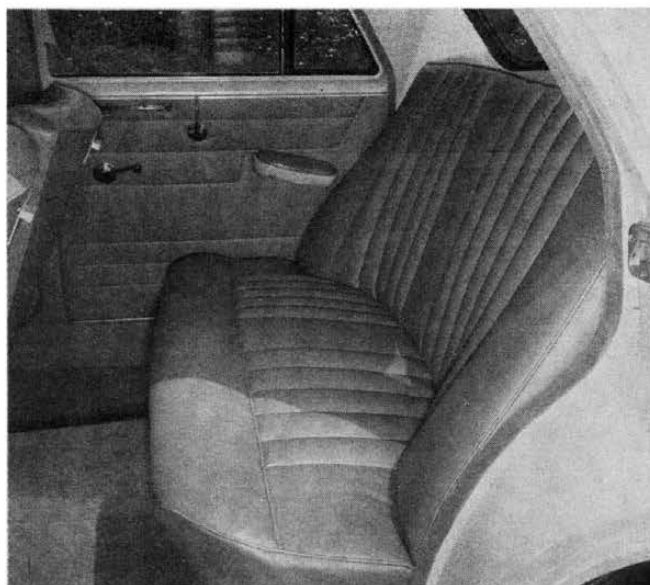
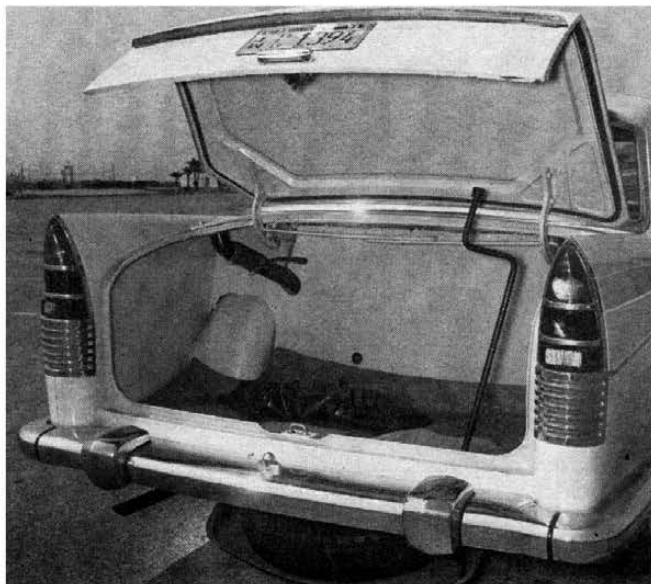
The strangely bent gear lever gives smooth, fast shifts.

easiest cars to drive we had ever encountered. There is no stiffness or awkward placement of controls, as in so many cars. The steering is extremely light. Despite a slight amount of backlash, unfortunately typical, we liked it very much, particularly for city driving. Although there is some roll, vigorous cornering can be done with aplomb, for the car has no vices. On the other hand high-speed driving (70 miles per hour or more) takes too much concentration to assure accurate placement of the car. It tends to wander just a bit, particularly with a light cross-wind.

Our biggest objection to the car is its riding qualities. For the performance tests we used a tire pressure of 32 pounds per square inch (cold) all around. This gives a rather bumpy ride around town, plus a certain amount of harshness which can be forgiven in a sports car—but not in a sedan. Lowering the tire pressures to 24 psi reduced the harshness, but the riding qualities of the car were still no better than fair.

The 4-speed gearbox carries a well placed, floor-mounted lever which moves easily from gear to gear, either up or down. The synchromesh for the upper 3 ratios is crashproof and the ratios have been arranged so that 2nd-gear starts can be made without stress. Thus the American driver who

Let's hope our U.S. cars solve the spare problem like this.



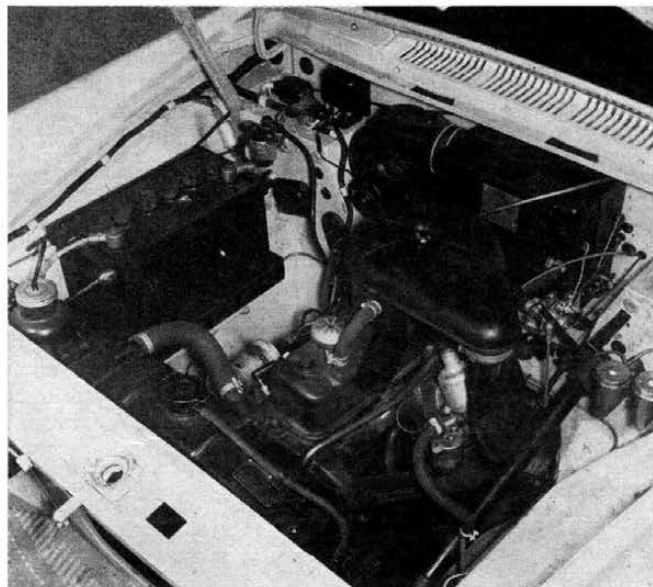
Wide enough for three, more comfortable for a normal two.

is used to 3 speeds forward will feel at home. The gears are reasonably quiet and the rear axle will pass, though it can be heard at times. Third gear is well chosen and gives brisk acceleration from 10 mph to a normal 45 mph, with over 60 mph available if one wishes it. The really surprising feature of the car is its brisk high-gear ability, an Austin specialty. It is the result of excellent low-speed (engine) torque and a compromise axle ratio. There is no need to drop down to 3rd at a speed of 15 or 20 mph, though obviously an anticipated need for acceleration would call for a drop down to 2nd gear rather than 3rd at this low a speed. First gear is a stump puller, but acceleration times from a standing start (see data panel) were fractionally improved by starting in 1st gear rather than 2nd. The acceleration times quoted could have been improved if the clutch had had more bite. As it is now, upshifts can be made almost instantaneously, but the clutch slips too much when this is attempted. The clutch is still quite adequate for normal hard use, and it is very light and smooth.

The excellent high-gear ability is reflected by the good Tapley reading of 210 pounds per ton. Yet, as in all engineering, there is a compromise: the comfortable, safe-feeling cruising speed of the Cambrian is certainly no more

A traditional long stroke gives high-gear flexibility.

PHOTOGRAPHY: POOLE



than 65 mph. Above that the engine feels as though it's working a little too hard—and it is. The exhaust system is too noisy for a family sedan; possibly a little quieter muffler would convey a feeling of less strain at high revolutions. The engine itself is very smooth and passes the critical deceleration test (for an in-line 4) from any speed without a trace of vibration. In our opinion an axle ratio of 4.30:1 should be adopted for North America so that high-speed cruising would be a little more comfortable for the engine. The present 4.55 ratio should be the mountain option.

Fuel economy is good. In one over-all check of 256 miles we averaged 26.6 miles per gallon. This mileage included brisk driving according to American traffic requirements and some steady cruising at 65 mph. Up to 30 mpg could be expected by conservative, lighter-footed drivers. We used a premium fuel during the performance tests but later found that regular grade was more than adequate, despite the engine's 8.30:1 compression ratio. Experience with large-bore American cars indicated that a ratio of 8.00:1 is marginal for regular-grade gasoline, but a small-bore engine like this one has a much lower octane number requirement.

The frameless construction is well engineered and quite rigid, although there was one rattle that we could not identify. The semi-wrap windshield is well done and does not hinder entrance and exit. The brakes squeaked a little at times; the hand brake lever beside the driver's seat (at the left) is well placed—out of the way, handy and powerful. Instrumentation is neat, the vinyl covering over the top of the cowl avoids reflections and, most commendably, the speedometer is almost dead accurate. Rear-seat leg and foot room is very ample but the rear seat back has been compromised to accomplish this with a rather odd curved shape at the outside corners in order to hide the rear-wheel housings. As a result three adults are not too comfortable despite a total of 50 inches for hip room. Trunk space is good (about 18 cubic feet), and the under-floor spare tire can be cranked down with the wheel bolt wrench. The heater and defroster appear to be much improved in this model, though we had no zero weather to prove it conclusively.

One last comment: the A-55 is one of those cars that has little to offer of an exciting nature. There are no unusual engineering features, no head-turning styling "advances," no tire-squealing acceleration. Its best feature is its consummate ease of driving, its worst a jolting ride on smooth pavements. But this is an excellent, well engineered, all-around practical automobile—designed to do a job. A more sensible "A to B" car would be hard to find. ☑

The five BMC sedans can be distinguished from the front.



ROAD & TRACK ROAD TEST 210



AUSTIN A-55 SEDAN

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	\$2298
Curb weight	2440
Test weight	2750
distribution, %	54/46
Dimensions, length	178
width	63.5
height	59.8
Wheelbase	99.3
Tread, f and r	48.9/49.9
Tire size	5.90-14
Brake lining area	147
Steering, turns	3.0
turning circle, ft	37
Engine type	4 cyl, ohv
Bore & stroke	2.88 x 3.5
Displacement, cu in	90.8
cc	1489
Compression ratio	8.30
Bhp @ rpm	53 @ 4350
equivalent mph	69.3
Torque, lb-ft	82.5 @ 2100
equivalent mph	33.4

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4th), mph	79.4
best timed run	80.4
3rd (5250)	61
2nd (5300)	38
1st (5250)	23

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Normal range, mpg	20/26
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ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec	5.3
0-40 mph	9.6
0-50 mph	14.3
0-60 mph	21.7
0-70 mph	31.4
0-80 mph	
0-90 mph	
0-100 mph	
Standing 1/4 mile	21.7
speed at end, mph	60

GEAR RATIOS

0/d (n.a.), overall	
4th (1.00)	4.55
3rd (1.37)	6.25
2nd (2.21)	10.1
1st (3.63)	16.6

TAPLEY DATA

4th, lb/ton @ mph	210 @ 35
3rd	290 @ 32
2nd	380 @ 27
1st	490 @ 20
Total drag at 60 mph, lb	135

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt)	51.9
Cu ft/ton mile	72.0
Mph/1000 rpm (4th)	15.9
Engine revs/mile	3770
Piston travel, ft/mile	2200
Rpm @ 2500 ft/min	4290
equivalent mph	68.2
R&T wear index	83.0

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph	actual 30.0
40 mph	40.0
50 mph	49.6
60 mph	59.4
70 mph	69.2
80 mph	79.0
90 mph	
100 mph	

