LOV 805X

The first and last facelift for the Rover SD1 has produced an improved car which answers many of the criticisms we make in this month's comparison. The new 3500SE, one of a big range in Europe, is the only model we see, and it arrives within the next two months. Gavin Green reports on the last all-British Rover that must help defend the BL fort until the Rover-Honda executive model arrives in 1985

# ROVER'S LAST FLING

WHEN YOU see your first 1982 model Rover you will probably notice the deep chin spoiler first. Then, maybe, the larger rear glass area in the hatchback door. Look inside and you'll see the bigger instrument binnacle and also the walnut veneer panels that are back by popular demand. Other than these modifications, you could be excused for thinking there is little that is significant about the first (and last) facelift for the Rover SDI. But you would be wrong.

The 1982 Rover is a nostalgic but little publicised milestone for the famous car maker. It is Rover's last all-British car. For, in line with today's changing motoring scene, the 1982 Rover's replacement will be half Japanese, thanks to British Leyland's growing links with Honda. That model, codenamed the XX, will be released in 1985 and will try to do what the svelte-shaped but mechanically staid Rover has been unable to: overtake Ford in the executive-car business sector in Britain, win a niche in the American market (where the Rover SD1 has been an ignominious failure and where the new Rover will not even be sold) and further help Leyland win back its still-shaken reputation in Australia, an important luxury-car market for the Birmingham-based nationalised car maker. Until the XX is released, however, BL is hoping the 1982 Rover can soldier on and pick up some new sales.

To the original futuristically-shaped SD1 design BL has further improved quality control (already improved dramatically under Sir Michael Edwardes' management), lowered service costs and improved the mechanical package by, in the words of BL, "listening to owner criticisms and acting accordingly."

The model range in Europe has also been broadened with the reintroduction of a Rover 2000, a model not seen before in the SD1 series. There are also the six-cylinder 2300, 2300S and 2600S models and two V8s, the 3500SE and Vanden Plas. Australia gets only the 3500SE.

The chin spoiler is the most obvious visual modification. A large and (for Australian applications in particular) vulnerable-looking device, it has been fitted on all but the two cheapest models because BL says the old SD1 had a tendency to wander at speed. The spoiler improves front downthrust by 28 percent. Of less significance, the aerodynamics have been marginally improved by 0.01 Cd, to give a claimed drag figure of a commendable 0.38 Cd, a figure which shows that the Rover was indeed an advanced shape when launched in 1976. The hatchback glass area has also been deepened by 150 mm to improve rear vision. A wiper/washer is now fitted.

Improved but identically shaped halogen headlights are now fitted flush with the leading edge of the bonnet rather than recessed, to the benefit of aerodynamics, and there are new moulded bumpers which can absorb low-speed knocks without damage. Above the front bumper is a narrow horizontal grille which sits over a revised radiator air duct. There are also new aluminium alloy wheels on the 3500SE and Vanden Plas.

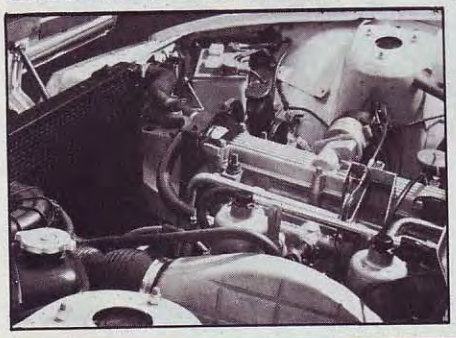
Inside, a new and larger elongated box-shaped instrument binnacle, still lying on top of the dashboard shelf, replaces the old model's unhappy facia. Speedo and tacho are calibrated over a half circle rather than being of conventional circular design. There is also marginally more headroom (by 10 mm) and legroom (20 mm) in the front, a new but equally large steering wheel (with a single large horizontal spoke under a central rectangular boss) and walnut veneer door trimming on the 2600S, 3500SE and Vanden Plas. The Vanden Plas also gets a veneer strip on the facia and a trip computer where in the other models there is a digital clock/stopwatch.

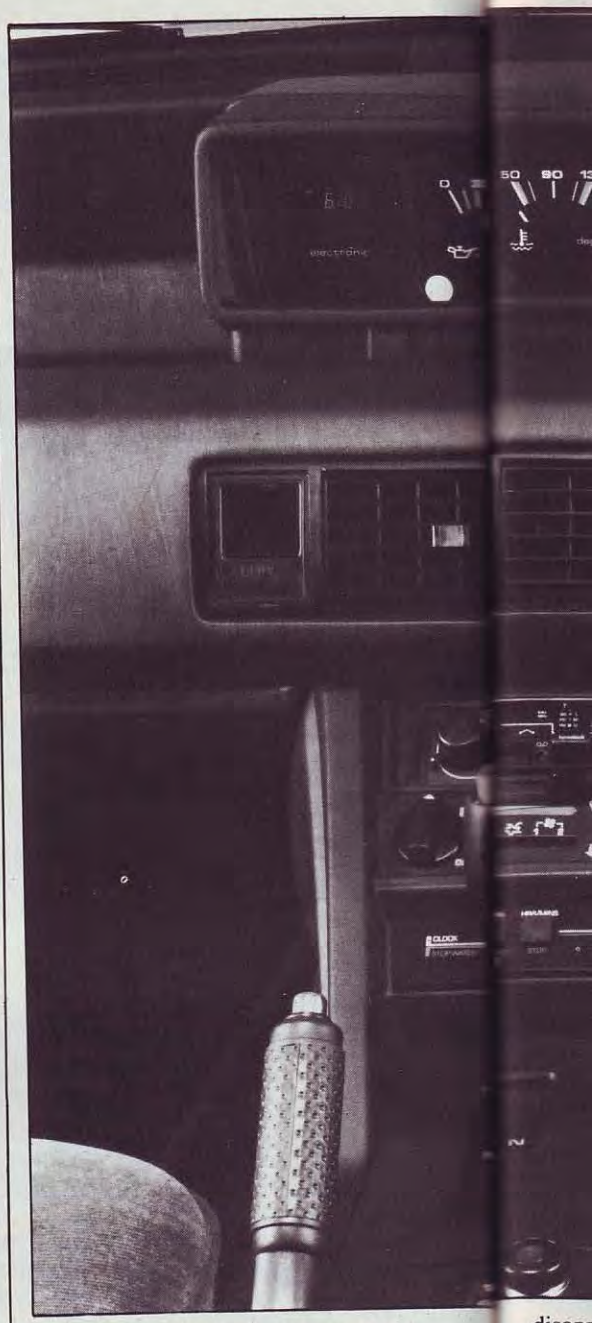
Mechanically, the big news for the Europeans is the reintroduction of a Rover 2000. The engine is the O-series two-litre four-cylinder as fitted to the smaller but roomier Princess and the horrid Ital (a facelifted Marina). With 74 kW pushing along 1310 kg, the 2000 is no street burner; in fact in character it's not unlike the Commodore Four. Nonetheless, performance is satisfactory for undemanding drivers.

The aluminium 3.5 V8 is unchanged apart from a stiffer engine block to give the engine greater smoothness and, in European form, twin Solex carburettors rather than SUs. Australian cars get fuel injection to overcome the ADR pollution requirements. Now that Rover has withdrawn from the US market, Australia is the only country to get the fuel-injected version of the V8.

Brakes on all models have been

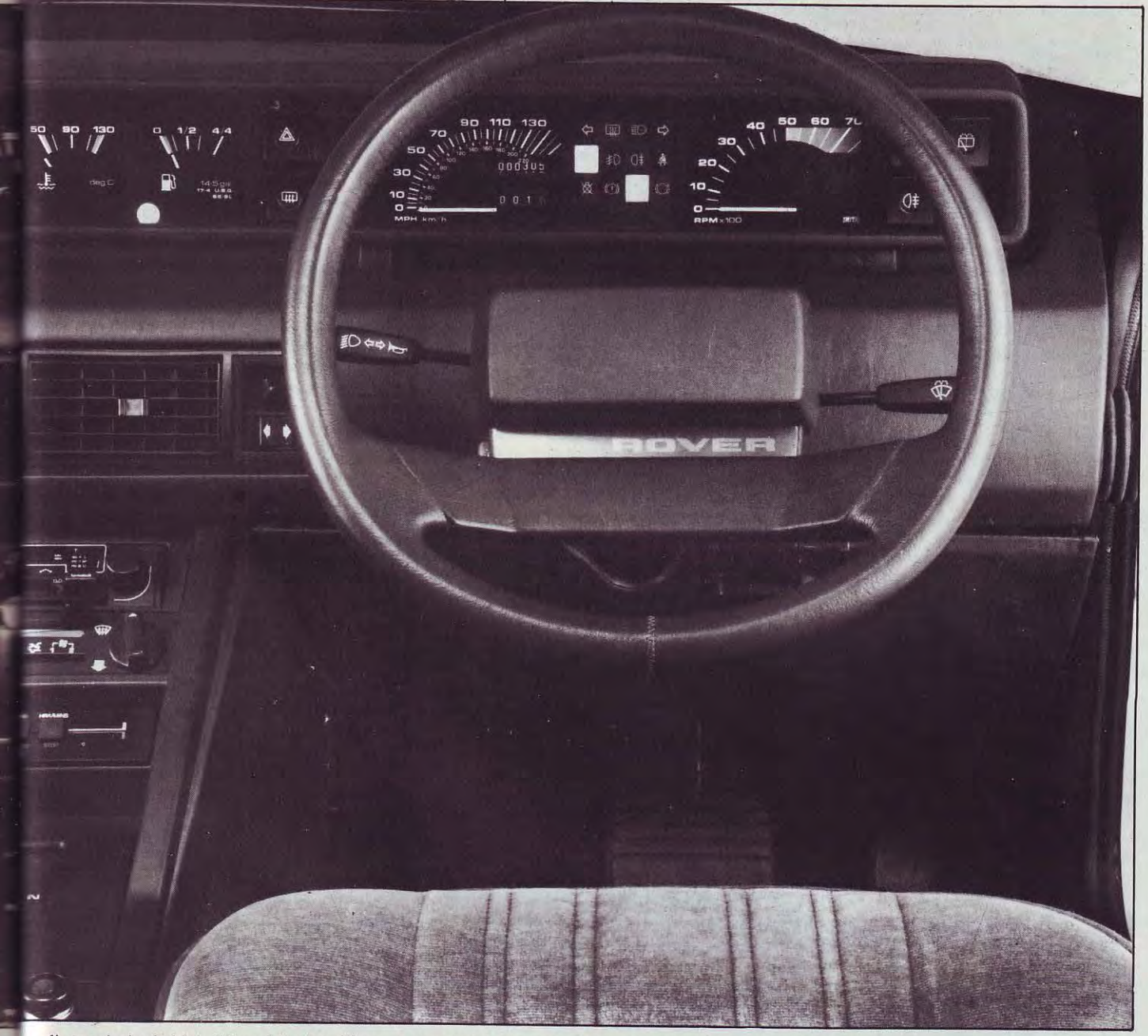
*Dashboard (right) follows same theme as before but binnacle is now longer and lower, has superior ergonomics and clarity. Deeper rear window (below) improves visibility but won't keep car any cooler. Two-litre engine is lost in V8 bay, is not coming here. Front spoiler improves stability; flush-mounted lights have brought down drag figure*





improved thanks to a larger servo and bigger master cylinder. Better balanced front discs should overcome the front brake shudder experienced on the SD1 when cold, and there are also minor revisions to the front disc calipers and the rear wheel cylinders feeding the back drum brakes. The front suspension is unchanged with MacPherson struts and an anti-roll bar, but the self-levelling rear suspension on the 2600S, 3500SE and Vanden Plas has been recalibrated to give tauter handling and a better ride. The rear suspension layout is the same, though: coil springs with trailing arms, a Watts linkage and torque tube live rear axle.

These changes lead, not surprisingly, to only minor on-road improvements. High speed stability seemed good (probably because of the spoiler) although windnoise on a 3500SE automatic I drove was




disappointingly high. I found the handling free of vices, although there are more surefooted cars of this size available. And the power assisted rack and pinion steering (unchanged so BL says from the old SD1) seemed both too light and too vague. Positioning the car accurately at speed on winding country roads is difficult. The ride also felt unsettled over rough surfaces, despite the changes which have been made to improve ride. Motorway driving with the V8 was as effortless and impressive as ever, however.

I tried both the five-speed manual and the Borg Warner three-speed automatic gearboxes on the 3500SE and found the manual better. The auto is geared too high (with 37.9 km/h per 1000 rpm in top gear) for all but motorway cruising and consequently gives lazy accleration on difficult roads and around town. The manual, however, endows the car with an altogether sportier character. It is a smooth box with an excellent gearchange.

The seats are soft and comfortable and there is an impressive feel of luxury with the 3500SE model and the Vanden Plas. However, I'm not fond of the slightly knees-up driving position. Disappointingly, the rear seat room (always more of a problem on the Rover than the now improved front) hasn't been changed. I'm 1.83m (6ft) tall and, in the back, my hair brushed the roof lining while my knees, sitting in the straight ahead position, were hard up against the back of the front seat (with a similarly-sized driver at the wheel). Taller men would find things uncomfortable. BL says an increase in rear headroom is impossible because of the sloping hatchback tail although this is no excuse for the poor legroom. The large diameter steering wheel also retains the Rover's annoying flattened-at-the-poles shape.

BL claims a 203 km/h top speed for the manual 3.5 V8 and 198 km/h for the auto. The new 2000 (which will never come to Australia) will see 167 km/h. Urban fuel consumption is a claimed 8.5 km/l (23.9 mpg) for the 2000 manual, 6.0 km/l (16.9 mpg) for the 3500SE manual and 6.5 km/l (18.5 mpg) for the 3500SE auto. At a steady 120 km/h the 3500SE is said to return 9.9 km/l (28 mpg). All the models in the range now require a routine service every 19,200 km. The 1982 car's scheduled service times for 80,000 km of motoring have been halved over those for the '80 model Rover, and BL is claiming the car is cheaper to maintain over this period than any comparative model. □