ROUGH ROVER'S rally rebirth

The executive who took delivery of his brand new Rover SD1 in 1979 probably never expected to see it in this condition – or being used this way

Words Paul Murrell **Photos** Rob Taylor

How many opportunities did the British squander as they ran a successful and innovative industry into the ground? The Rover SD1 demonstrates just how good a car the British could design, and just how badly they could build, market, promote and sustain it.

When our featured car was originally sold in 1979, it's London to a brick that it went to a successful businessman. He would have been a different breed to the staid doctors and bankers who bought earlier Rovers. Attracted by the swoopy styling, reassured by the simple mechanical specifications, Mr 1979 Businessman likely would have considered the Volvo 264 ("too boring"), the Citroën CX ("too outrageous"), and the Mercedes-Benz W123 ("too predictable"). His list may have included the Peugeot 604, Audi 5E Executive or BMW 528i. Or he may have lusted after a Jaguar XJ but been put off by its reputation and higher price. So he handed over his $19,995 and drove home in a brand new Rover, proud of its Car of the Year award (as judged by a European jury), Style Auto design award and the Don Safety award. Sadly, British Leyland's quality-control problems would have quickly brought him back to earth.

The Rover SD1 typifies the shambles that was British Leyland. Rover is one of the world's oldest car companies, with roots going back to 1877. By the 1950s, it was talking merger with Standard, but the discussions came to nothing and Leyland Motors swallowed up Standard in 1961. When BMC took over Jaguar (changing its name to British Motor [Holdings] Ltd in the process), Rover felt vulnerable, so when Leyland made an approach in late 1966, it accepted. It was a fateful decision. Following the British Leyland merger in 1968, Leyland-Triumph was still trying to sort out its own details when Rover was added to the mix. One suggestion was to badge-engineer a car to

THE ROVER EXCITED PRESS IN 1976... THREE YEARS LATER THEY WERE LESS THAN ENTHUSIASTIC

carry both the Rover and Triumph nameplates. Another was to call the proposed Rover 2000 coupé an Alvis.

Common sense (in a fashion) prevailed and the decision was made to build a new Rover to replace the 3.5-litre and a Triumph (subsequently the 2000/2500).

After submissions by both the Rover and Triumph teams, the Rover design was chosen and development continued under the engineering management of Spen King and the sure styling eye of David Bache. Complications with the proposed Rover four-cylinder engine (too big, too heavy) and the six-cylinder Triumph unit convinced BL to develop a completely new engine, but since it wouldn't be ready for the launch in 1976, it decided to launch the SD1 with the Buick-derived V8 only.

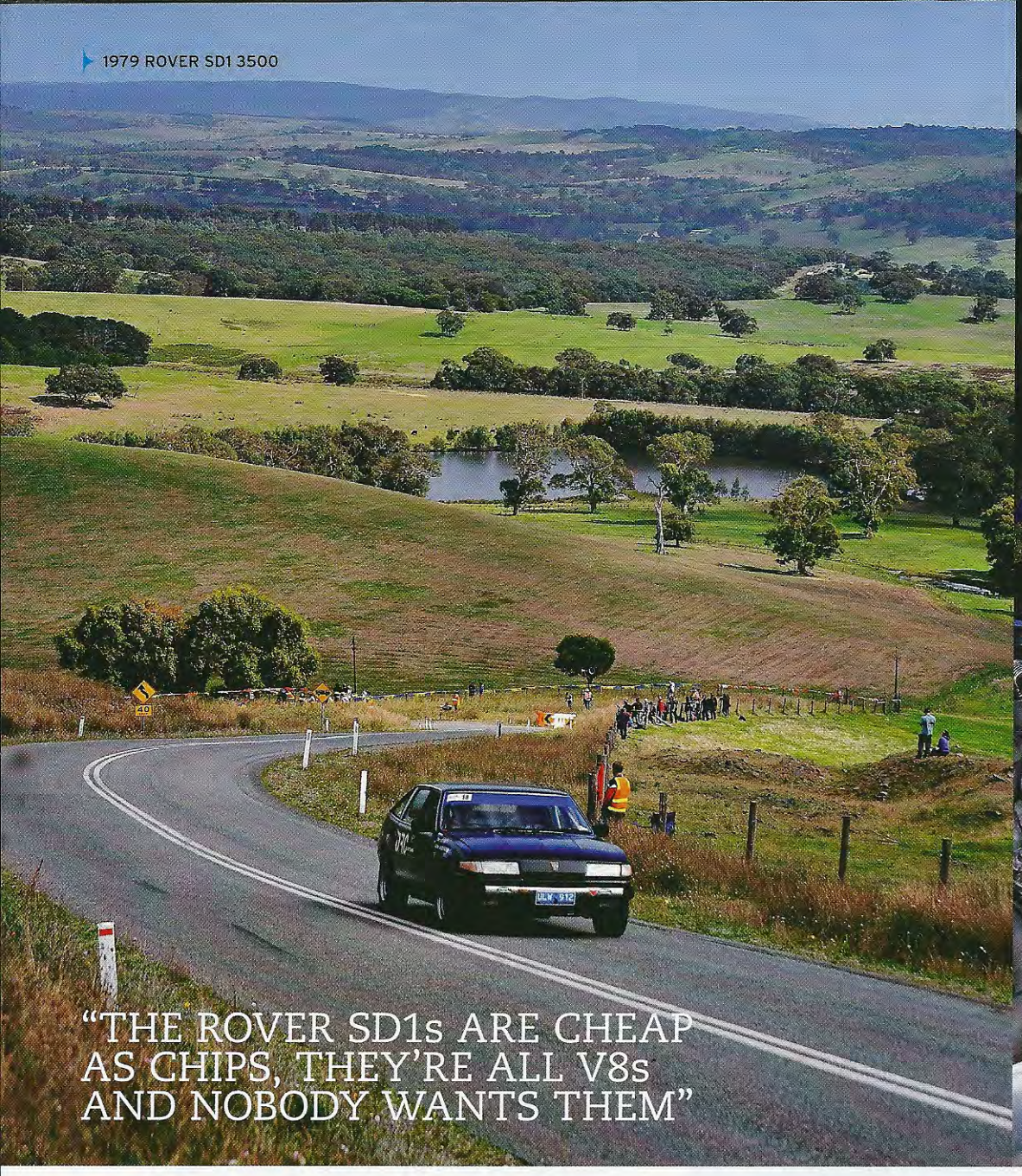
It was a promising start. High production numbers were planned and a large new factory was built alongside Rover's existing plant in Solihull. A supply shortage held back early sales and Triumph/Rover's share of the large car market actually fell in 1976, recovering in 1978 and 1979. Sales weren't helped by a quickly established reputation for mechanical woes and poor paintwork. The next problem for the big Rover was the 1979 fuel crisis. As usual, British Leyland couldn't take a trick.

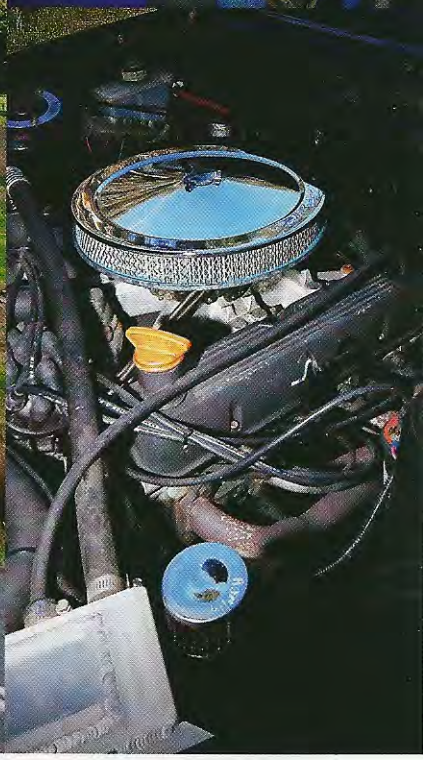
The new car excited the Australian press in 1976, with *Wheels* breathlessly releasing scoop details. It complimented the car as "essentially simple". It was the first car to use Triplex 10-20 windscreen glass that reportedly reduced facial injuries by 99 per cent. Power windows, air conditioning and automatic transmission were all optional features, as were Denovo run-flat radial tyres (although it is questionable if any Australian cars were ever fitted with them). The conclusion was that the SD1 was a sporting Rover, much like a BMW, but *Wheels* wondered if that was what buyers in this class were looking for.

In its first full test of the car three years later, *Wheels* was less enthusiastic, citing the negative impact of Australia's ADR27A for the less-than-expected performance. Reviewers suggested that it was "not silly" to include Australia's own Commodore SL/E as a rival at just over half the price, and later in the year conducted a four-car test that included the Commodore, Volvo 264 and Mercedes-Benz 280E.

Perhaps the best and most collectable SD1 was the 190hp Vitesse, released in 1983 to meet homologation rules for saloon car racing. With a top speed of 218km/h, the Vitesse was the fastest and most expensive SD1. It dominated the British Saloon Car Championship in 1983

GIVE IT SOME STICK
The installation of a rare LT77 manual gearbox added to the Rover's performance.





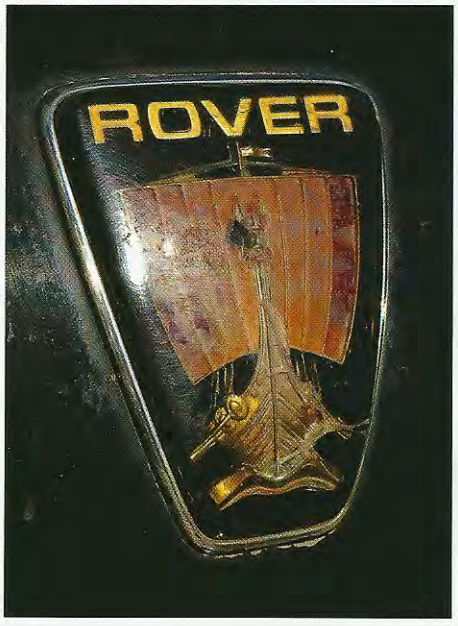
"THE ROVER SD1s ARE CHEAP AS CHIPS, THEY'RE ALL V8s AND NOBODY WANTS THEM"

and won the Tourist Trophy (Rover's first since 1907).

The Rover SD1 was discontinued in Australia in 1988. Its reputation for rust and unreliability quickly relegated it to cheap transport and then banger status – a position it is yet to fully recover from.

If someone says you need megabucks to get involved in motorsport, point them to Jai Raymond. "A mechanic mate from the army asked me why I didn't compete in a Rover SD1 – as he said, they're cheap as chips, they're all V8s and nobody wants them," Jai says. Jai went online the same day and found a suitable car at Lyndoch, South Australia. "We went straight out and bought it for $420, whacked a trade plate on it and drove it home."

With considerable help from Andrew Hobson of Lynda's Land Rovers they prepared it for rallying, with Andrew as co-driver. As happens, time and money became an issue for Andrew and that's



when Jai's mother entered the equation. As Jen Mathwin-Raymond explains, "Rather than having it sit there, I offered to buy Andrew's share and that's how I came to be sitting in the left-hand seat." Yes, Jai's co-driver is his mum!

Meanwhile, Andrew continues to look after the oily bits. "We get all our go-faster stuff from Triumph Rover Spares, but Andrew is still our main mechanic," says Jai. "He was the one who told us we should do the brakes and suspension before we put in a bigger engine."

"And he was right!" says Jen. "When our accelerator cable stuck in Targa Adelaide, I was very glad we'd listened to him!"

The car's minimalist interior was looked after by another army mate, Dan from DR Customs. He hasn't exactly made a silk purse from a sow's ear, but he has managed to rip out a lot of unwanted weight. The car now tips the scales at a reasonable 1217kg. Modifications have

been remarkably few: the roll cage, a set of extractors, better brakes and a few suspension mods.

Another improvement came about when a donor car was sourced in Canberra – this one cost $510, but was fitted with the rare and solid five-speed manual LT77 gearbox so popular in V8 conversions on TR7s.

The Rover 3.5-litre engine ran a big-end bearing in the 2009 Classic Adelaide. "Andrew said we'd spent too much on our entry fee to sit and watch, so that night he hauled a 3.9-litre engine out of a Land Rover, put a new head gasket in it and had it done and dusted by 4pm the following day – and we were back in the event. It's standard apart from the extractors and 600 Holley. It's done four events so far and it's a gem, so it must have been one of the good ones."

Jai and Jen are becoming well-recognised through their participation in Classic Adelaide, the ASP Rally, Collingrove and Mount Alma hillclimbs. Jai started out as a co-driver in 2001 and competed in his first event as a driver in 2007. Jen had had no previous motorsport experience, but she says it was on her "bucket list", so she had to learn quickly. She is convinced Jai's experience in the passenger seat has helped. "He's very patient, and when I lose my spot or something goes awry, which occasionally happens, he's very understanding."

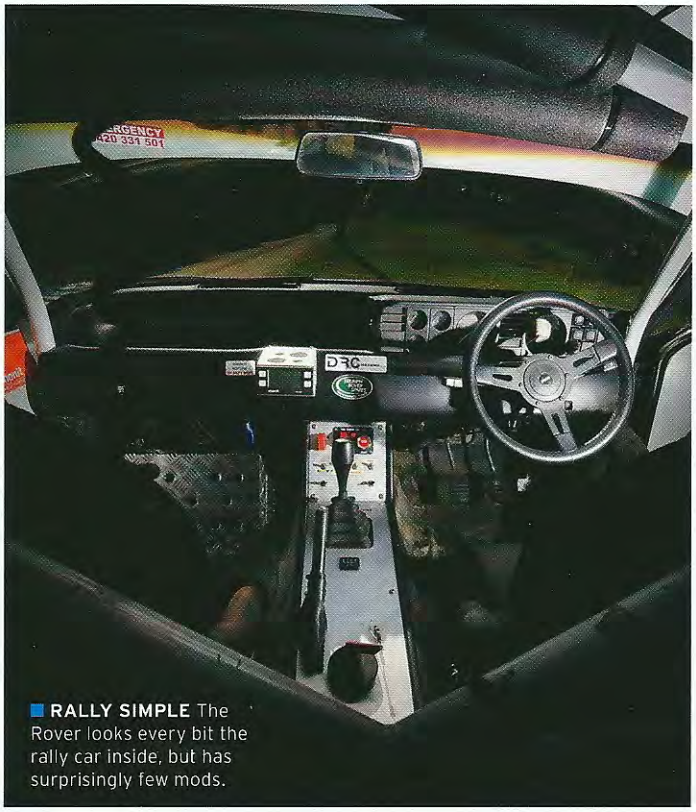
To which Jai responds, "The thing is, there's no point getting uptight about it; what's done is done and you have to concentrate on what's ahead. We're out there to enjoy it, and as long as we don't crash, we're happy."

It may seem an odd motorsport pairing, a young bloke and his mum, but this one seems to work. Jen says, "I have asked him not to go 'Woo-hoo!' quite so often because it does tend to throw me off. When he says to me, 'That was good, you didn't lose your nerve,' I wonder if I missed something and there's something he should be telling me."

Jai appreciates his mother's skills and assistance (they call the funding of their motorsport 'The Bank of Jen'). "Mum is so competitive. If someone is six seconds ahead of us, she wants to know if we can take him."

They both admit the Rover is hardly the prettiest car in rallying. "It's a rough-looking car, but paint is the lowest priority for us because it doesn't make it go any faster. It'd be nice to get it up the front of the field but it's never going to win anything."

Somehow, winning doesn't seem to matter. Jai Raymond and his mother Jen Mathwin-Raymond remind us what real motorsport is all about. And their rough diamond Rover SD1 is attracting more fans every time it goes out. ACC



RALLY SIMPLE The Rover looks every bit the rally car inside, but has surprisingly few mods.

THE SPECS

1976 ROVER SD1 3500

ENGINE: 3528cc 90-degree V8

TRANSMISSION: Three-speed Borg Warner automatic

POWER: 107kW (143bhp) @ 5000rpm

TORQUE: 274Nm (202lb/ft) @ 2700rpm

SUSPENSION: Independent (front), de Dion with coils (rear)

BRAKES: Discs

WHEELBASE: 2620mm

LENGTH: 4570mm

HEIGHT: 1420mm

WEIGHT: 1312kg

TOP SPEED: As fast as you dare

"WE'RE OUT THERE TO ENJOY IT, AND AS LONG AS WE DON'T CRASH THEN WE'RE HAPPY"