

HOME GALLERY **6R4 HISTORY** 6R4 INFORMATION 6R4 BUILD STORY 6R4 LINKS



Home 6R4 History

The History Of the 6R4 by David Sims

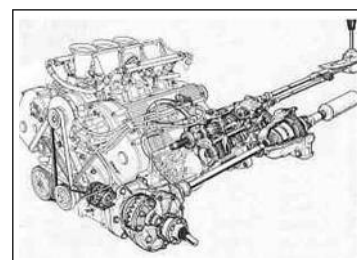
November 1980 : Despite eventually becoming competitive and reliable, British Leyland Motorsport 'retire' the Triumph TR7 V8 from international rallying : Audi announces that they will field two 'works' Quattros for Hannu Mikkola and Michele Mouton on the 1981 World Rally Championship : the shape of World Championship rallying was to change forever...

Immediately after the 1980 Lombard RAC Rally, British Leyland Motorsport began to plan ahead for the team's first serious attempt at rallying at the highest level. With a lack of expertise in the department, John Davenport approached Williams G P Engineering in 1981 with a view to them designing British Leyland's future world rally contender.

After much discussion, the 'VHPD' (Very High Performance Derivative) emerged as a mid-engine, four wheel drive Metro. The team having already rejected a front-engined V8 Metro with rear wheel drive (primarily due to the driver having to sit that far back, that he couldn't actually see the front of the car!), but also any use of the forthcoming Maestro shell altogether. As Davenport commented at the 1984 launch, "A small car makes a small track look bigger!".

As other manufacturers had found it difficult selling all 200 of these specialised rally cars (FISA called for a manufacturer to build 200 identical cars in a 12 month period to qualify for Group B), the original brief called for an 'Executive 2+2 GT', complete with rear bench seat! This rear bench survived onto the final homologated cars which you can see competing to this day, even though any passengers occupying this area would have been severely deafened in the process! Combining the benefits of both the Audi Quattro (four wheel drive) and Renault 5 Turbo (mid-engined), the Metro's powerplant was to be the biggest decision against the trend. Being a large capacity normally aspirated engine the Metro 6R4 wouldn't have the power lag, heat & engineering problems associated with it's turbocharged counterparts. Instant power, instant engine braking was the answer! With a simple layout the car would be more driveable, and therefore less tiring for the crew over the busy schedules encountered on future World Rally Championship events.

Having rejected the Honda V6 (Austin Rover then shared a great deal of engineering development with the Japanese manufacturer), the only other obvious solution would be their own tried & tested 3.5 litre Rover (formerly Buick) V8 engine. Being that bit too bulky to fit in the back of the Metro, the decision was taken to cut out two cylinders and (literally!) weld it back together - hey presto, a 2.5 litre Rover V6! Fitted with a purpose made crank, Rover Vitesse racing internals and Weber carburettors it produced a healthy 250bhp - ideal to test the car until the final engine was ready.



The original prototype turned a wheel at a private airfield in Oxfordshire for the first time in February 1983 - driven by Tony Pond in plain red livery. For the next 12 months the team concentrated on private testing at a variety of venues including Austin Rover's test track at Gaydon, as well as Cadwell Park circuit & the MIRA wind tunnel.



In early 1984 at London Heathrow, the assembled motorsport 'paparazzi' witnessed Tony Pond drive through a film screen as the team announced their future rally plans to the public - the MG Metro 6R4 (6 cylinder Rally 4 wheel drive) was born! With a bold marketing step, Austin Rover Motorsport decided to show the cars in the 'classic' red & white livery reminiscent of the team's very successful 1960s Mini Coopers and 'Big' Healeys. A really positive marketing stroke!

Promising that the team would enter national rallies to test the car in the heat of competition, the team reappeared 6 weeks later on the 1984 York National Rally. Despite taking fastest stage times on 8 stages - to lead by almost three minutes! - success was short-lived as the car retired with a previously unseen alternator fire.

Even with the low-powered 'hack' engine the writing was on the wall - Austin Rover Motorsport had a rally car which could potentially challenge the might of Europe, and also rekindle the success of its forefathers.

Throughout 1984 the car appeared on a host of other national rallies as the team attempted to develop the car towards its eventual homologation specification. All the developments (including wider track, longer wheelbase & enhanced aerodynamics) improved the handling & stability to such a degree that the Metro 6R4 won its first rally, the 1985 Skip Brown Cars Gwynedd Rally in February.

All that the team were waiting for now was to get their hands on the new engine to replace the V8 based 'hack'. The 3 litre Austin Rover V64V - designed by ex-

Cosworth employee David Wood was a 90 degree V6 with 4 valves per cylinder (hence V64V), with belt-driven twin-overhead camshafts per bank producing either 250bhp in 'Clubman' form or 380/410bhp in 'International' tune. It was (and possibly still is?) the first ever engine designed specifically for rallying - most other manufacturers continue to rely on a modified production block and cylinder head.

With Austin Rover committed to building 200 6R4s, the homologation specification was announced to the assembled press at Knebworth House in May 1985, when Tony Pond & Marc Duez took invited journalists for a ride around a 'mock' rally stage. The car bore very little resemblance to either the road-going Metro saloon, or the prototype Metro 6R4 which had been announced 15 months earlier! Apart from the V64V engine & reworked aerodynamics, the car's suspension travel had been increased by four inches by (crudely!) welding box extensions on top of the turrets. This later development meant that the team could use the latest 390mm Michelin tyres developed for Audi & Peugeot. The package really worked, with victory the day later on the 1985 Autofit Argyle Stages - the car was fastest on all 9 special stages to win by over 3 minutes.

With the layout, design & specification virtually resolved, Austin Rover's next race was to get the car homologated in time for the car's proposed World Rally Championship debut on the 1985 Lombard RAC Rally. Austin Rover's other big decision against the trend was to build the car as a 'ready to rally' car without Type Approval. Basically therefore, the Metro 6R4 had to be sold as a kit, which owners had to carry out a minor degree of final assembly prior to it being 'ready to rally'. The £40,000 'Clubman', was sold with an average forest specification, including an engine which produced approx 250bhp. With the simple addition of harnesses and fire extinguishers the car was 'ready to rally'. This point was proven when Ken Wood took delivery of his car on the Thursday, and with the above parts added (and Golden Wonder sponsorship barely dry!), went out and won the 1985 Sprint Tyres Trossachs Rally, two days later! This was the first ever rally victory for a 'Clubman' Metro 6R4, and happened 6 days before the car was actually homologated! During August to October 1985, Austin Rover built (and had inspected by FISA) 200 MG Metro 6R4s, successfully homologating the car into Group B as from 1st November 1985 - Homologation No B-277.

In preparation for the 1986 rally season - which would see Austin Rover Motorsport contest all the European rounds of the World Rally Championship - the team started to recruit all the necessary personnel and expertise required for such an intense programme. Despite having taken a rally test with the team, Hannu Mikkola chose to stay with Audi for 1986. Ford on the other hand lost the services of Malcolm Wilson to Austin Rover Motorsport at the promise of a World Rally Championship programme, which Ford couldn't guarantee the Cumbrian.



With the whole nation behind them, Tony & Malcolm (partnered by Rob Arthur & Nigel Harris) made a patriotic debut on the 1985 Lombard RAC Rally. Followed throughout the event by Union Jacks & Metros, Tony finished 3rd Overall behind the two Lancia Delta S4s (also on their Group B World Rally Championship debut!). Malcolm however, retired with transmission problems.

With the race to get the car homologated over, and the impressive debut on the RAC behind the team, optimism was high for the following season's prospects - little did the team know that Tony Pond's 3rd Overall was the best result that the Metro 6R4 would take at World Rally Championship level - EVER!

Plagued with bad reliability & numerous retirements, as the team attempted to make up for their increasing power disadvantage to their turbocharged rivals, it wasn't until the 1986 1000 Lakes Rally in September that the 6R4 achieved a finish on a World Championship Rally! Apart from the tragedy in Portugal - which saw all 'factory' teams withdraw - Austin Rover Motorsport had 4 entries (out of a total of 6) retire due to engine failures, usually either cambelt or valve guide related.

When the car was initially announced, much was made of the fact that the mechanical layout was a simple one, in reality it took far too long to cure problems which should've been eliminated before the car made its World Rally Championship debut. In the end, the drivers were only driving at 8/10ths of the car's capability, primarily in order to preserve their cars and enable them to finish the events. On international and national rallies however it was quite a different story, as without the pace, length and tiring schedule of the World Rally Championship events, the Metro 6R4 was achieving more impressive results as the cars survived to collect the spoils!

In France, the R-E-D prepared car of Didier Auriol (despite a couple of early retirements) won five of the qualifying rounds to win the 1986 French National Championship on a tie-break! In the UK (and Ireland) the Metro 6R4 recorded its first international rally victory when David Llewellyn won the 1986 Circuit of Ireland Rally, against some much-fancied tarmac experts. Add to this numerous other rallies at all levels and it is clear to see that the Metro 6R4 was the car to have at every level except the top echelon - winning a total of 5 championships during the 1986 season.

Back on the World Rally Championship 'stage', the latter half of the season saw some improving fortunes, as three Metro 6R4s finished in the Top 10 of the 1000 Lakes Rally in Finland, Malcolm recorded an excellent 4th overall on the San Remo Rally and the team clinched the Team Award on the RAC Rally with 6th, 7th, 8th & 9th positions.

Ultimately the car was too late, taking four and a half years to get from the drawing board to the stage, in which time turbo-charging developments had progressed so fast that the turbo lag problems experienced with early Group B cars had been overcome - considerably! As a team, Austin Rover Motorsport finished higher in the 1985 World Rally Championship (solely from Tony's RAC result!) than they did in 1986, after a full season!

FISA instigated an international Group B supercar ban, taking effect from 31st December 1986, due to their concern about the escalating power figures quoted by manufacturers and the increased use of expensive lightweight composite materials. For the 1987 World Rally Championship, the Group B cars would be replaced by Group A & N 'production based' rally cars with a 'supposed' maximum of 300 bhp!

The future of the Metro 6R4 (and in particular the vast amount of cars still remaining in the compound at Cowley) looked decidedly bleak!

In Britain, the authorities, the owners & Austin Rover Motorsport had a problem - where could the Metro 6R4 be used in anger? Following some lengthy meetings, the Metro 6R4 achieved its first 'stay of execution' when the authorities agreed to let the car compete on British national rallies if they were reduced in power to no more than 300bhp. What was then devised by Austin Rover Motorsport was the 'Clubman 300' specification Metro 6R4 - advertised for a bargain price of approx £16,000 (although this was negotiable, sometimes incredibly!), it was basically the same car as the original 'Clubman' except for an engine which gave about 50bhp more, but at a price 2/5ths of the original's! This would serve two purposes. Firstly, the authorities could still accept entries on national rallies from Metro 6R4 competitors (of which there were still a large quantity). And secondly, Austin Rover Motorsport could quite easily clear their compound of this, effectively redundant, Group B supercar. During the latter part of 1986 and early 1987, Austin Rover advertised the car so extensively that within 10 months they had sold every single car - one enterprising company even bought a batch of 40 to prepare as road cars!

Back on the stage, and with no competitive Group A car in their fleet (the Rover Vitesse having also being banned!) Austin Rover Motorsport entered Malcolm Wilson in the 1987 Marlboro National Rally Championship, purely as a benchmark to fellow 6R4 competitors.

Austin Rover Motorsport also encountered some major internal problems at this point. A large number of the employees had been made redundant after the World Rally Championship programme had been completed, others remained to oversee the low key 1987 national programme. The theft of a couple of cars from the compound, plus an internal fraud investigation were too much of an embarrassment for Austin Rover, and the Motorsport department closed its doors completely in May 1987 - after completing just four rounds of their intended national programme.

1987 also saw the invasion of the world of rallycross by the Metro 6R4, with the likes of Will Gollop, Michael Shield & Barry Hathaway taking on the Fords, Peugeots, Audis & Lancias which had also been banned from the World Rally Championship. Varying in power from 'Clubman' to 'International' (sometimes enlarged in capacity to 3.8 litres), the rallycross Metro 6R4 often had trouble living with its faster turbocharged rivals (exactly as in 1986). The car was ideally suited to tight twisty circuits which favoured the nimble handling characteristics, and therefore narrowed the power disadvantage. Later on in the Metro 6R4's rallycross career, several owners resorted to turbocharging the V64V engine, quoting power figures of up to 700bhp! The most successful was certainly Will Gollop, getting Austin Rover Motorsport engine builder Cliff Humphries to build a 2.3 litre bi-turbo engine which eventually netted him the coveted European Rallycross Championship in 1992 - the last year of Group B supercars.

In late 1987, a group of owners concerned about the future of the Metro 6R4 in rallying, formed the Rover sanctioned 6R4 Owners Club in the hope that they could present a 'united front' against all the organisers, officials and competitors attempting to ban or handicap the cars out of the sport. As such, for 1988, Rover instigated the Esso Metro Superchallenge - a multi discipline one make championship solely for 'Clubman 300' Metro 6R4s. It proved to be a great success and was designed to find the best all-rounder, comprising not only stage rallies, but also circuit races and a single hillclimb.

Inspired by it (but not directly part of the Superchallenge) was the Metro 6R4 Trophy race - a supporting attraction to the 1988 and 1989 FIA Formula 3000 Birmingham Superprix, a high profile street race around the the city. Imagine it, two dozen Metro 6R4s echoing around the tight confines of a city street at full chat! The 1988 winner was guest celebrity driver Tony Pond (having his first competitive drive in a Metro 6R4 since the 1986 RAC Rally) and using all his previous racing experience to win convincingly from Pete Slights, who later went on to win the inaugural Superchallenge that year. The same format was repeated in 1989, with the Superchallenge falling to Bill Barton, and the Metro 6R4 Trophy race once again going to Tony Pond.

Over the years, and primarily influenced by rival competitors, the authorities have handicapped the Metro 6R4 by various means - in 1988 they reduced the capacity to 2.8 litres, in 1990 again to 2.5 litres - and in several Championships the car was even handicapped by anything from 1 to 6 seconds per mile - but still the cars won! The Metro 6R4 has taken over from the Mk2 Escort as the mainstay of British national rallying - what the Escort achieved in the 1970s, the Metro 6R4 has achieved since the late 1980s, and is continuing the tradition right up to the present day!

Nowadays, Metro 6R4 owners use their cars on a far wider variety of events than the car was ever designed for. From circuit racing to hillclimbing and autotesting to drag racing, the Metro 6R4 has done them all, even competing on the infamous Pike's Peak Hillclimb and Paris-Dakar rallies during its extended competition lifetime.

It will no doubt go down in the history books as the rally car that was that little bit too late for the World Rally Championship, but maybe also as one of the most successful national rallycars ever to have graced a special stage.

Long live the MG Metro 6R4...