

Back to the future!

Graham Nash considers the qualities of a car combining classic curves with contemporary comforts.

The closures more than a decade ago of Chrysler's Linwood and Leyland's Bathgate plants signalled the end of volume car and commercial vehicle production in Scotland.

At the end of June the giant Ravenscraig steel plant experienced a fate of similar finality, its masters having long ago concluded that its skills and capacity were surplus to corporate requirements. Ravenscraig was built to serve the likes of Linwood and Bathgate but theirs was a mutually dependent relationship which cracked under the intense pressure of changing times and economic restructuring.

They belonged to the golden industrial age of the 50's and 60's when a 'Made in Britain' stamp was worth its weight in prestige and export orders, when the Americans clamoured for MG, Triumph TR and Austin-Healey sports cars - when nostalgia was current.

They've all gone, of course, - the car plants, the 'Craig - but the 'Healey has been raised from the ashes and is now being recreated in Blantyre by a small band of believers; men for whom their work is also their worship.

The Austin Healey 100-4 was first produced in 1954 and was intended to compete head-on with Triumph's aforementioned 'TR' series and anything that sported an MG badge.

Nostalgic tendencies, of course, linger within us all but nostalgia makes us irrational and self-deluding. The most mundane of modern Eurobland hatchbacks can perform feats of agility that would leave many a butch sports car of old quite literally spinning, and yet many motoring enthusiasts, given the

Top: The Haldane HD-100.

wherewithal to do so, would happily spend two or three years' salary on a 'Classic' car despite its dynamic inferiority to a Metro costing a quarter as much.

A restored 'Healey, even in the current climate of Classic car price realism, may still change hands for £40,000 but a Haldane HD-100 could be yours for between a quarter and half that sum - depending on whether you buy the car in component or 'turn-key' form.

"But it's not the same thing at all," cry the purists, "it's not an original." They would be right, of course. The Haldane HD-100 is not original. It is many times *better* than the original.

I don't come over particularly misty-eyed when I consider old cars, and that probably marks me down as something of a heathen. In an age of anodyne anonymity their lines are undeniably attractive and their interiors frequently blessed with a character and charm that will always elude plastic; but if push came to shove just how many 50,000 miles-a-year reps would give up their comfy Ford Sierras?

Originality with the sensitive application of science, modern materials and techniques intrigues me, however, and the Haldane is one such happy amalgam.

To most onlookers the HD-100's body certainly looks original but it is, in fact, moulded from Glass Reinforced Plastic (GRP). GRP is very light and also immensely strong. More to point of relevance on our occasionally damp island with its salty winter roads, GRP does not capitulate under the onslaught of the insatiable tin worm. Haldane I - 'Healey O, I think.

Beneath the beautifully finished body shell

is a computer-designed and purpose-built chassis, suspension and even tailor-made shock-absorbers. Their collective efforts produce a car which rides and handles on a plane of excellence not exceeded by any car of my recollection - and never remotely approached by the once-mighty Healey. My apologies to Healey devotees, but it is the truth.

And so it is to report that Blantyre's finest achieves a breadth of performance that would have been unimaginable 30 years ago. The factory demonstrator is equipped with a modern Ford two litre engine complete with the refinements of twin overhead camshafts, sequential fuel-injection, full electronic engine management and, the coup de grace - a three-way catalytic converter.

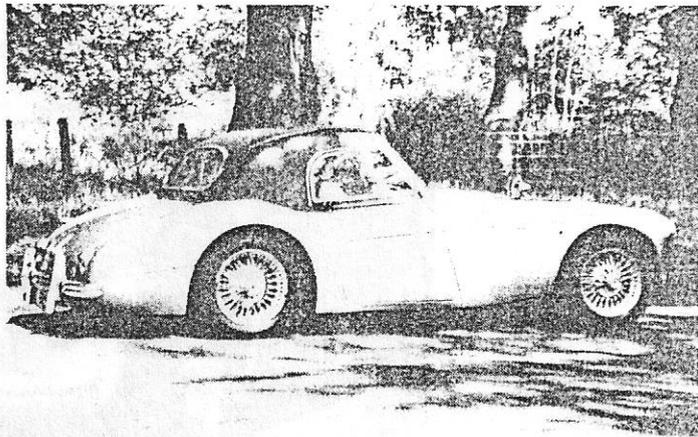
Driven at the rear wheels through a rather obstructive five-speed Sierra gearbox, the sylph-like Haldane sprints to 60 mph in barely seven seconds and gallops on to a top speed a very long way beyond British legality. In the final analysis the foregoing must point to a victory over the old 'un by at least four clear goals.

The Haldane is not perfect, however. The grotesque effects of the (admittedly gorgeous) wire wheels can give the impression that the car is reluctant to change direction from the straight-ahead while their innate springiness also unsettles the ride at low speed.

The factory recognises this and is of the same opinion but points out that its customers, who bear down on the Lanarkshire town from all over the world, are divisible into two distinct classes.

Firstly, there are those who are looking to buy a car that looks and feels original; they will appreciate the wire wheels (and, presumably, will also enjoy cleaning them) and the large, thin-rimmed steering wheel, for example.

Then there is the second group, comprised predominantly of younger professional types who delight in the lines of a classic car but demand the 'amenities' that we take for



Above: The Haldane . . . sprints to 60 in approximately seven seconds.

Right: The large, thin-rimmed steering wheel helps make the car look 'original'. granted in modern hardware: reliability, razor-sharp handling with a comfortable ride and the catalytic converter, of course, to ensure that their fun is guilt-free.

This group will discover that the fitting of light alloy wheels, whose properties are more conducive to handling and ride composure, transform the feel of the car. So too does a smaller diameter, thicker steering wheel but, of course, neither items are original.

I would personally fall in line with the 'modernists' here, but there is no definitive right or wrong approach; one pays one's money and takes one's choice, which is just as it should be.

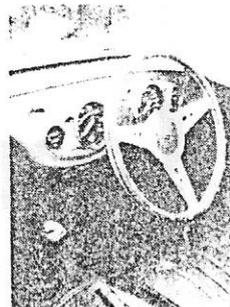
The Haldane is now on the verge of being granted Low-Volume Type-Approval which will allow it to be sold in completed form rather than in one of many states of part-build. This will lift the car and its maker away from the confines of the kit car industry (although the car will still be available in component form) and bring it shoulder to shoulder with the lines of Ginetta, TVR and even Lotus, all of which, incidentally, have trodden the same path as Haldane.

None of the company's progress could have been achieved without the engineering know-how and the foresight of its directors, nor without substantial funding, much of which latterly has come from British Steel Enterprise. Consider for a moment how ironic that is. Indeed, many other aspects of the Haldane's inexorable rise to prominence and success seems ironic.

Here is a car that is more Scottish than ever was produced at Bathgate or Linwood, a car built downwind of the great 'Craig, part funded by British Steel Enterprise and yet which uses no steel in its body.

There's another reflective twist to the story too. Ravenscraig, Linwood and Bathgate were all undone by the changing times and through their, in some senses, belonging to the past. The Haldane's success is attributable to the self-same reasons.

That's nostalgia for you.



FACTFILE

Manufacturer:	Haldane Developments
Model Tested:	HD-100
Price:	Anything from £5,000 for basic kit to £17,000 for complete car
Length / Wheelbase (in):	152/91
Width / Height (in):	61/48
Engine Spec'n:	4-cyl / 1993cc / 8-valve / fuel-inj
Power (bhp / rpm):	120 / 5500
Torque (lb.ft / rpm):	126 / 2500
Top Speed (mph):	in excess of 120
0-60 mph (secs):	7.0 (estimated)
50-70 mph (5th gear):	8.0 (estimated)
Govt. mpg (U:5 56 75mph):	Not available - 36 mpg on test
Fuel Grade / Capacity:	Unleaded / 7 gals (owner's choice)
Catalytic Converter:	Optional
Insurance Group:	Usually 5 - may vary