

IT'S QUITE A SIMPLE LITTLE sum. Add up the small cars that sell in Britain, the ones that are really in there swinging. When you finish scraping all the endless variants together into neat piles, into simple basic model categories, you get nine big sellers—nine fundamental types under 1800 cc that really pull like steam engines for every showroom in the country.

The nine? Go on, add them up. Two from Ford (Anglia and Cortina), three from BMC (Mini, 1100 and B-series Farina), two from Rootes (Imp and Super Minx) and one each from Vauxhall and Triumph (Victor and Herald).

Now try some more addition: work out the total of significant variations on these nine basic models. By significant we mean variations that alter the cars' appeal, or are supposed to alter it—things like deluxe versions, station wagons, different marque names, hotted-up alternatives. On second thought don't work it out; we'll tell you. The number is 62.

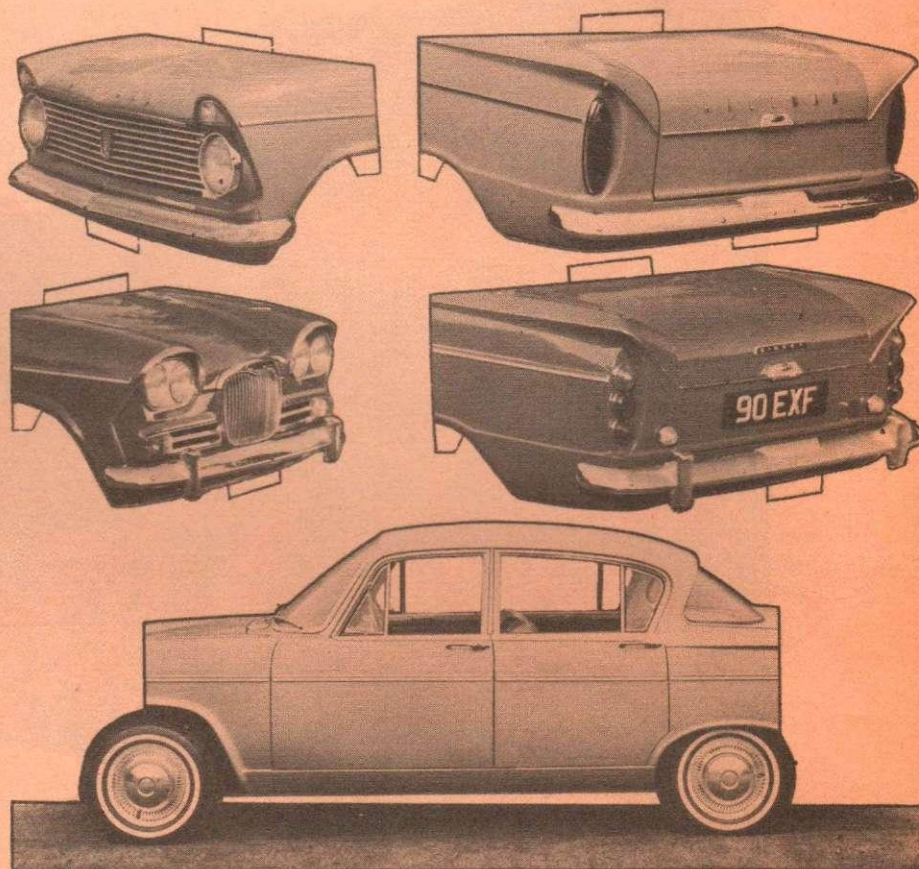
Sixty-two! Now part of this is inevitable, nobody can deny that. Alternative body styles like convertibles and station wagons have an obvious place in the automotive economy. They always have had and they always will.

Yet is it *all* essential? Do manufacturers really need to offer us nine basic cars in 62 different packages? The best way to look at the problem is to complete the little sum. Work out how many of those 62 varieties represent the same product thinly disguised for reasons that *aren't* so basic. The answer is 20, roughly a third of the total. If you count deluxe variants as non-essential you can lop off another third, leaving a far more manageable 20 or so models to spread over six basic types. But what interests us just now is that first figure—the 20 versions we threw away at once. What about them? Just what were they?

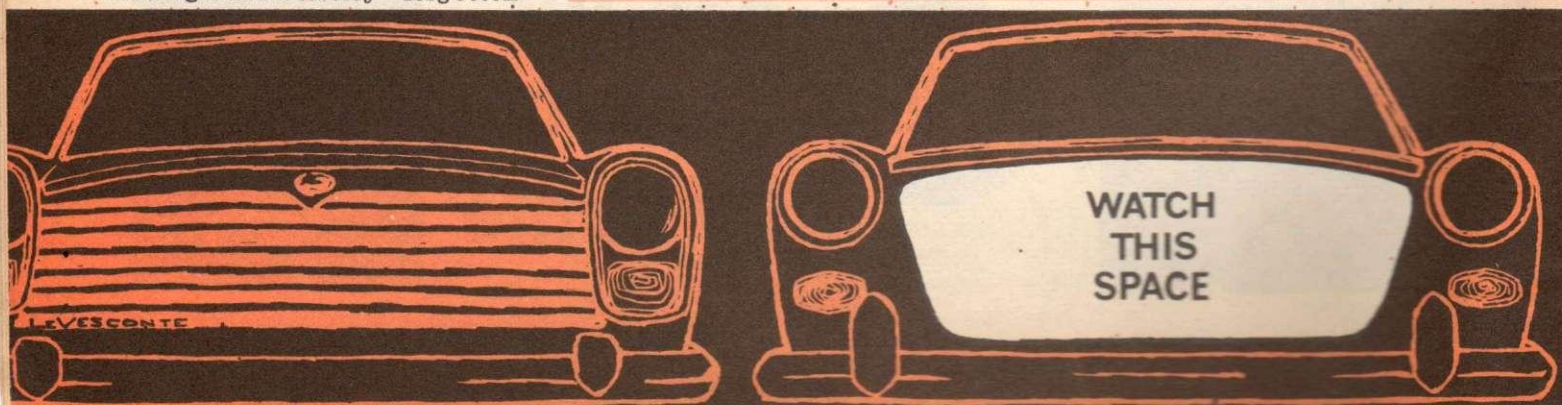
They were badges. Little plastic badges. Badges of one-time manufacturers like Riley and Sunbeam and Singer and Wolseley—forgotten

Is stick-on prestige costing Britain too dear?

DO-IT-YOURSELF PRESTIGE KIT



Give dolly a tin face. SMALL CAR's badge-engineering guide shows how Rootes stylists get away with using 85 per cent of the metal stampings in a saloon body to give three allegedly different marques with supposedly different traditional appeal. One other change: the roof, in this case from a 'Humber'



NEERS THE BADGE-ENGINEERS THE BADGE

fragments of once-great marques, worthless relics that stand for nothing because the companies that carried them are gone. Roughly a dozen stateless badges survive in the British industry — more than in the rest of the world added together. They survive all the way from the most expensive bracket to the cheapest, from Bentley to Morris. They represent sporting marques, like Sunbeam and Riley and MG, and marques that never mattered much even in their own day, like Wolseley and Singer and Humber. But represent is hardly the word: in almost every case today's example is a mere caricature of the product that gave it its name.

This business of keeping alive meaningless marques is called badge-engineering. The reason for it is simple: public demand, or more properly apparent public demand based on a sentimental regret that any victim of a takeover or an amalgamation should suffer extinction. And Britain is a notorious stamping-ground for commercial sentimentalism.

Does badge-engineering do any harm? On the surface, no. If manufacturers want to perpetuate long-dead marques and customers want to buy the resultant travesties then obviously it should go on. But do we really want it? And do the manufacturers really enjoy doing it? The idea is growing among industry critics that this might be a case of sentiment deluding everyone into a situation that does nobody any good.

If you look at the last cars the real Riley, Sunbeam, MG, Humber, Wolseley and Singer companies made you'll see they had little in common with one another and nothing at all in common with the products of Austin, Morris or Hillman. Each had a special character of its own. The character may not have been a particularly good one, but at least it gave the customer some reason to say 'I want a Riley' or 'I want a Sunbeam'. If any salesman had dared to suggest to such a customer that an Austin or a Hillman might do instead he would have been sacked on the spot.

All of these marques were entirely separate entities, with separate markets and separate traditions and separate ideas about how things should be done.

Today it's no use pretending that the once-noble Riley is a better proposition than an Austin, that an MG Magnette is more sporting than a Morris. Most of their parts come from the selfsame bins. The only differences are superficial.

The great defence of badge-engineering is that it gives people what they want. It gives customers the chance to keep their allegiance to otherwise long-dead marques. If they're so easily fooled there may seem little sense in stopping them. And it may seem to give manufacturers the chance of a few more sales—for example to people who apparently won't be seen in an Austin unless it is labelled Wolseley.

The case against it is quite a lot stronger. People go on buying these pseudo-Rileys and pseudo-Singers only because they are available. The names bring up old associations ('I remember the first car my father ever owned . . .') and the fact that today's examples are simply disguised versions of something else becomes immaterial. Manufacturers go on producing the cars simply because the demand persists. The direct result is expense and inconvenience to both parties. If a manufacturer decides to bring in a new model he must budget for three distinct processes: building, sales, and service. Building involves making new production machinery, ordering thousands of new parts and arranging a production schedule — perhaps even hiring new men and building a new factory. Sales is an intricate business running all the way from worldwide newspaper publicity to dealer introductions; it can involve bringing in new dealerships and expanding and overhauling old ones on a monumental scale. And millions of pounds worth of spares must go up in dealers' racks all over the world.

Now think how these processes get thrown out of gear if the new model is to be split up under two, three or even four or five marque

names. De luxe, high-powered, station wagon and other normal and semi-normal subdivisions are bad enough but each new marque name involves tremendous duplication on the shop floor plus, literally, a 100 per cent increase in work and cost for sales people and a great chunk of extra outlay for worldwide service departments. Instead of one assembly line there are two working at half-pace, or at best a single slower one with expensive semi-manual sorting. Instead of one of every brochure, every instruction book, every service voucher there are two. And instead of one type of grille, one type of instrument panel on each dealer's order sheet there are two.

The result? Extra cost. Tremendous extra cost. To beat it the car must stay in production longer or the manufacturer accept less profit on each sale. Either way it is impossible to fulfil full sales potential because duplication makes proper advertising and promotion prohibitively costly. A replacement cannot follow at the proper interval because amortisation takes longer. Dealers find it financially crippling to keep up to date with spares stocks, so they let things slide on all but the volume-selling lines. Sales points, too, tend to concentrate on quick sellers; for them it is difficult to stock more than a few cars at a time, so the chances are a customer who wants one of the more obscure variations will have to wait for it—up to three or four months in some foreign markets.

In fact badge-engineering has its biggest effect overseas. While British makers dither about explaining the difference between one grille and another, the special significance of one artificially perpetuated marque vis-a-vis the rest, rivals with only one big name to push are punching away in the press and on the showroom floor.

One name, one model is the secret of Volkswagen's shattering postwar success. Now that Britain is at last within sight of victory over the Beetle, must we let senseless badge-engineering drag us down?

DOUG BLAIN ●

