

THE FIGHTING FREEWAY--- BMC's CAR WAR ANSWER

By IAN FRASER

Selling for £1130, BMC's six cylinder challenge to the Holden/Falcon market can meet its rivals on equal ground all the way.

BMC's much talked about, heralded — and perhaps even feared — six cylinder car is going to disappoint those people who had anticipated something of a design revolution along the same lines as the Morris 850.

The car is unlikely to be hailed as a great step forward — but there is also nothing about this Austin Freeway that is going to seriously upset those of us who had hoped for a Holden-Falcon challenger. It is one.

BMC's toughest critics are going to proclaim that the Freeway is little more than a six cylinder Austin A/60. Up to a point, they will be correct. The profile of the car is typically Farina — the lines are uncluttered, and the roof overhangs the rear window slightly, and there is a lot of glass and a strong suggestion of tail fins.

The radiator grille is extended across the full width of the car and the parker/winker lights are in unit with it, slightly above the bumper bar level. The word Austin stretches across the top of the grille and there is a badge about dead centre in the grille. Two toning of the car has been achieved by having a

sweeping chrome division below the door handles. The roof takes the same color as the lower section of the body.

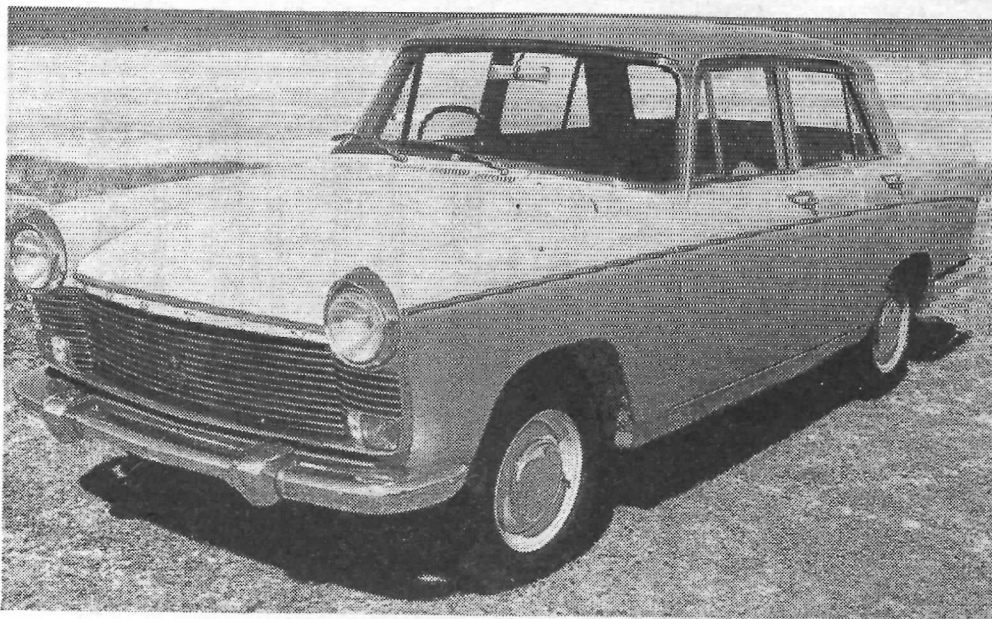
Front and rear bumper bars have over-riders but they do not come up high enough to make allowances for the height differences in various makes of cars likely in cramped parking spots.

My immediate overall impression of the styling was that it made the car look rather aggressive, not unlike the current Humber Super Snipe at the front, except for the lack of four headlamps.

The tall light/winker assemblies, along with the fins, look as though they originated in the MG Magnette, some examples of which are fairly familiar on our roads.

Close examination of the paintwork on the car I tested, and some early production models I saw in the new stock at BMC's plant in Sydney, showed it to be of a very high standard. BMC is rather proud of its spraywork and apparently with complete justification.

Prowling around the back of the car, I was impressed with the size of the luggage compartment.



New front end treatment is the most spectacular thing about the Freeway. This styling makes the car look aggressive.



Profile of the Freeway shows the slightly finny treatment of the rear, also how two tone color scheme has been arranged. Wheelbase is an inch longer than A/60's.

Baggage does not have to be lifted over a high lip and space is virtually completely unobstructed since the spare wheel has its own compartment under the floor and is accessible by lowering it in its own tray. No provision has been made to stow the somewhat meagre tool kit which rattles around the boot in its little bag. Closing the boot required a reasonable amount of effort because the anti-dust-water rubber seals were so good they prevented the lock catching on the clip. Because most of my test was done in rain, there was no chance to test the effectiveness of the dust sealing, but certainly no water leaked in.

The fuel filler pipe short-cuts across the upper corner of the boot but does not cause an obstruction. The concealed cap locks. Fuel tank capacity is 10 gallons which gives quite a reasonable cruising range — about 280 miles at moderately fast speeds.

Before entering the passenger compartment it is necessary first to understand what has been done to the chassis and what it means to the people riding inside the Freeway.

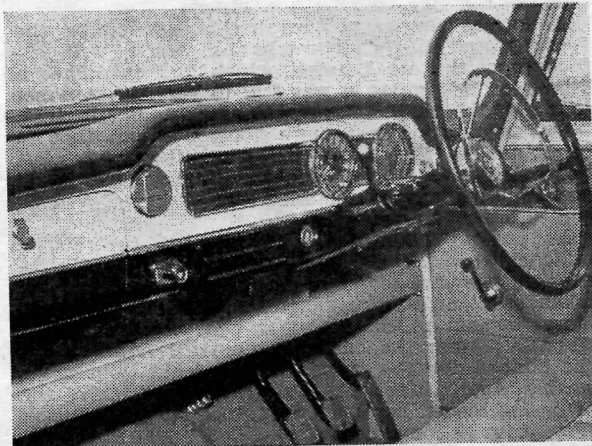
Both the track and wheelbase have been stretched out slightly and these add a little to the passenger space, since the rear wheel arch has been virtually eliminated from inside the car.

Access to the back seat is improved, the bench itself is wider and there is more elbow room. And by using new seat construction techniques, incorporating Pirelli webbing, there is increased head room in the back and, it is claimed, greater comfort.

Similar techniques have been used for the front seat, but with not such pleasing results. The seat is high in itself — which is okay — but the back rest is too upright and is inclined to cause backache. It needs to be raked another couple of degrees.

One final criticism while on the subject of seats: apparently to make sure that there is always plenty of leg room in the back, the front seat's range of movement has been greatly restricted so that a tall driver has to sit in a somewhat cramped position, unable to extend his arms to achieve the straight arm attitude so many people insist on these days. The seat adjusts forward so far that I could only just squeeze in behind the wheel. Still, it would not be hard to move the seat and its runners back a couple of inches.

Interior trim, including the seats, is good, durable-looking plastic that should be easy to wash and keep fresh-looking. Rubber mats have been used on the front and rear floors. There is one interior light mounted on the door pillar next to the driver's head, which blocks off much of the illumination when being used at night.



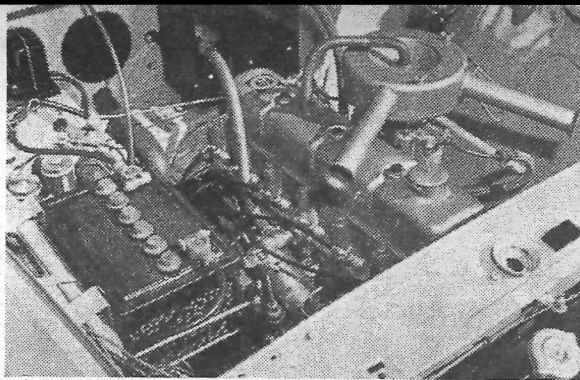
Dashboard layout is neat and tidy. Instruments are grouped directly in front of the driver and there is plentiful crash padding. Note winder position

Sitting up high, the driver gets a good look at the road ahead and a full width view of the front of the car — very useful when parking and placing the car on corners. However, this position puts the steering wheel — quite a big one — down rather low, something like a couple of Continental cars I tested recently. (The horn was a high pitched, European-type blast, by the way).

Two controls protrude from the steering column. The one on the right hand side operates the self cancelling wipers (the warning light is in the tip of the arm) and the one on the left is gear change lever.

The gearbox was developed specially for the Freeway and is actually an adaptation from the rarely seen Metropolitan. It is a three speed, of course, with synchromesh on the upper two ratios. When I was first shown the specification of the Freeway some months ago I commented that I thought this was probably a retrograde step. BMC engineers hastened to assure me that they had struck a good compromise between synchro on low and its inherent cost, and a completely unassisted ratio. "Just wait till you try it," they said.

Well, having sampled the offering I must confess that it is infinitely more satisfactory than I thought



Six cylinder engine sits neatly under the bonnet and most components are easily accessible. Black box is the heating system. Plastic bag is for screen washer.

it would be. A dog engagement has been employed and this enables the driver to haul the lever back into the first position when the car is still doing three or four miles an hour without hideous screeches coming from under the floor.

On at least a dozen occasions during my test I whipped back into low at speeds up to 20 or 25 mph with just elementary double declutching, and I never even looked like missing the change.

A normal change pattern has been used on the Freeway and the shift mechanism works well, although on the car I tested, which had only done a little over 1000 miles, it was still rather stiff. Another couple of thousand miles would probably put it right.

Instrumentation was more generous than that to be found in the Freeway's competitors. The left hand dial is a 110 mph speedo and the right hand one contains gauges for fuel contents, engine temperature and oil pressure.

A turn-key start is employed and two toggle switches work the wipers and the headlamps. Unfortunately they are too close together and can easily be mistaken at night. I managed to switch off the headlamps instead of the wipers on two occasions during the test. Under the dash on the right hand side is the control for the standard equipment windscreen washer. Again, it is badly placed and works on a kind of spring loaded key principle which, to my mind, is just plain inconvenient.

A heating and demisting system is standard equipment and its control knob is on the left hand side of the instrument panel. Although the day I tried the car was not particularly cold, the heater worked well. A booster fan is optional equipment and an item I think would be worth having. As a cost saving measure BMC has not put a control in the car which will permit the changeover from hot to fresh air whilst on the move. This can only be achieved by operating a switch under the bonnet. When you come to think of it, there are very few places in Australia where you are likely to need heat and ducted fresh air on the same day.

Considerable use has been made of crashpadding along the top of the dashboard and along the full-width parcel shelf below it. Seat belt anchorage points are standard equipment although the belts are, naturally, optional. The test car was fitted with a single sash belt and although its advantages are undoubted, it was more than slightly annoying to find that it was virtually impossible to reach the window winder while wearing it. Even with it off, I found it necessary to lean a long way forward to get at the handle — a basic design fault which is a direct hang-over from the original English car.

The floor mounted dipswitch was badly placed in relation to the clutch pedal and I found that I was inclined to slam my ankle on the corner of clutch when going for the dipper.

Under the bonnet (same length as before) lurks the six cylinder engine about which so much has been spoken.

The Freeway's engine is entirely new. Its trade name is "Blue Streak" but it is still a B-series, like the four that goes into the Major Elite. The specifications are very similar to those of the Elite except that there are six pots instead of four.

Working in conjunction with the BMC engineers in England, the Australian division's engineers designed the six. The first of the new engines were running by the middle of 1959 and from that time until now, the units have been under test.

The whole design of the engine is for good mid-range flexibility rather than high power high revs. Thus, the engine turns out a modest 80 bhp at 4350 rpm, but there is 123 ft/lbs of torque at 1650 rpm.

On the road the good low speed torque makes the Freeway a pleasure to drive around town. It will pull away from speeds of 15 mph in top and second will move the car away from rest on flat ground. The engine is smooth, but the model I tested had a fairly lumpy idle, probably because it was turning over too slowly. It pulled quite strongly most of the way through the range but was inclined to run out of breath at high revs. As the performance figures show it is no sluggard and compares very favorably with the figures I recorded for the Falcon and Holden.

Compression ratio is 7.7 to 1 which, according to BMC engineers, will allow the car to run on standard petrol if necessary. Oil change periods are every 3000 miles and the oil filter needs attention every 6000 miles.

On the open road, the Freeway seemed to be content to cruise happily at around 65 to 70 mph, although there is not much left in the way of acceleration at these speeds. Second cog can be stretched out to more than 60 mph if you really try, but there does not seem to be much advantage in acceleration by doing so.

Road holding is interesting, for the Freeway has none of the strong understeer so often found in medium price cars. If anything it is inclined to oversteer slightly on some types of corners, but never to the extent that it would frighten people. The Freeway is pleasant to drive hard because the handling is completely predictable and the variable ratio steering permits a high degree of accuracy aided, I might add, by the high seating position.

Rear axle movement and wheel lifting seems to be almost completely absent in the Freeway which not only makes the ride more pleasant but gives the driver considerably more confidence in what he is doing.

On rough roads the suspension behaved very nicely. It did not bottom once on the rough roads I took it over.

Brakes are also very good (more lining area than "the others") and our gorge-side descent produced no fade. Pedal pressure was quite high. The hand-brake, beside the driver's seat, was thoughtfully positioned, but did not work particularly well — probably a matter of adjustment.

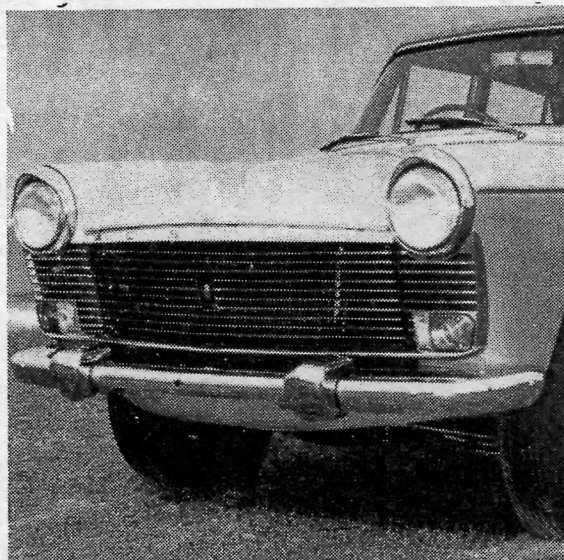
SUMMING UP: The Austin Freeway is an important step forward as far as BMC is concerned. It provides the six cylinder car necessary to place the company in a fighting position.

From the owner's point of view, the Freeway may look like something he has seen before, but the improvements, refinements and performance are definitely new and all of them have been worthwhile. For all intents and purposes, the Freeway is a new car and should be approached with that in mind. It is not a particularly exciting car, but everything it does it does rather well, although as a matter of personal taste I would like to see it with more power. However, the price of more power is to sacrifice fuel economy — one of this car's really outstanding points. The cruising fuel consumption figure was taken over more than 100 miles of city, suburban and near-country driving at speeds varying between 30 and 55 mph with no particular effort to be light footed. Driven very hard, including the actual performance testing and long bursts of absolutely flat out motor-ing, the Freeway did better than 22 mpg — I had expected about 17 mpg.

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wheels ROAD TEST

TECHNICAL DETAILS OF THE FREEWAY



SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE:
Cylinders six in line
Bore and stroke 76.2 mm by 88.9 mm
Cubic capacity 2433
Compression ratio 7.7 to 1
Valves pushrod overhead
Carburettor Zenith downdraught
Power at rpm 80 (gross) at 4350
Maximum torque 123 ft/lb at 1650 rpm

TRANSMISSION:
Type three speed manual
Ratios:
First 12.08
Second 6.32
Top 3.91
Rear axle 3.91

SUSPENSION:
Front independent coils
Rear semi-elliptic
Shockers piston

STEERING:
Type cam and peg
Turns, 1 to 1 variable ratio
Circle 37 ft

BRAKES:
Type drum

DIMENSIONS:
Wheelbase 8 ft 4½ in
Track, front 4 ft 2 in
Track, rear 4 ft 3 in
Length 14 ft 6½ in
Width 5 ft 3 in
Height 4 ft 10 in

TYRES:
Size 5.90 by 14

WEIGHT:
Dry 23 cwt

PERFORMANCE

TOP SPEED:
Fastest run 82.4 mph
Average of all runs 81.2 mph

MAXIMUM SPEED IN GEARS:
First 32 mph
Second 63 mph
Top 82.4 mph

ACCELERATION:
Standing Quarter Mile:
Fastest run 20.8 secs
Average of all runs 21.2 secs
0 to 30 mph 5.3 secs
0 to 40 mph 8.7 secs
0 to 50 mph 12.5 secs
0 to 60 mph 18.6 secs
0 to 70 mph 25.5 secs
0 to 80 mph NA secs
20 to 40 mph 8.5 secs
30 to 50 mph 9.9 secs
40 to 60 mph 10.9 secs

GO-TO-WHOA:
0-60-0 mph 22.2 secs

SPEEDO ERROR:

Indicated	Actual
30 mph	28.2 mph
40 mph	38 mph
50 mph	49 mph
60 mph	59 mph
70 mph	69 mph
80 mph	NA mph
90 mph	NA mph

FUEL CONSUMPTION:
Cruising speeds 29.8 mpg
Overall for test 22.2 mpg