

1964 Vanden Plas DM4 Princess Limousine - Rags to Riches

The term 'limousine' is inextricably linked with those bastions of British motoring marques, Rolls Royce, Daimler and Bentley. While our featured limousine certainly bears a resemblance to a Rolls Royce, its underpinnings come from a much humbler source - Austin, a solid British manufacturer of dependable cars for the masses.

In the immediate post-World War 2 years, to round out its already extensive range of cars, Austin decided to push for a slice of the up-market 'carriage trade'. In 1946, it acquired the coachbuilding firm of Vanden Plas, which had its origins in Belgium in 1870. Beginning as a manufacturer of wheels, the company expanded into horse-drawn carriages and then motor vehicle bodies. Vanden Plas was very successful, and in 1913 set up a British subsidiary that subsequently established strong links with several British carmakers, including, Alvis, Bentley, Daimler, Lagonda and Rolls Royce. But by the end of World War 2, Vanden Plas was feeling the financial 'pinch', and a take-over by Austin followed.

Austin's plan was for a two-pronged attack on the post-war 'upper class' market. It had in mind two models, to be called the 'Sheerline' and the 'Princess', and the acquisition of the Vanden Plas organisation fitted in well. The Austin Sheerline would be styled and built by Austin itself, and aimed at the well-off owner-driver. The Princess version, on the other hand, was to be more oriented towards the limousine market, and styled and built by Vanden Plas, using its extensive experience in the 'coach built' trade. Both cars shared the same basic chassis, motor and gearbox, although the Princess version scored a slightly more powerful version of the six-cylinder Austin engine. On introduction in 1947, both models used a 3 1/2 litre motor, which was almost immediately increased to just under four litres capacity. Austin produced the Sheerline with a steel body, but the Vanden Plas Princess version was bodied in aluminium from the scuttle back.

The Sheerline remained in production until 1954, but the more expensive Princess enjoyed a considerably longer life, going through several upgrades. A long wheelbase version, the Princess Limousine, was added to the range in 1952, and sold until the Daimler DS420 replaced it in 1968. The 'normal wheelbase' Princess disappeared in 1959. The 'badging' on the Princess Limousine went through several changes in its life. Until 1957, it was an 'Austin Princess Limousine'. It then became just the 'Princess Limousine' until 1960, when it was again rebadged, this time as a 'Vanden Plas Princess Limousine', a name it retained until its demise.

Austin produced about 9,000 Sheerlines, while Vanden Plas made some 6,000 Princesses. As coachbuilders, Vanden Plas made the Princess in numerous forms, including saloons, limousines, ambulances, hearses, the long wheel base limousines, and even that wonderfully British institution, the 'shooting brake'. At more than 3200 vehicles, production of long wheelbase limousines made up over half of total Princess production.

Austin passion

Joe and Maureen Vavra have a passion for Austins that began back in 1971 when they bought a 1953 Austin A40 Countryman station wagon as a second car. They still have the Countryman and it has been restored. Some years ago. Then, smitten by the lines of the Austin Sheerline, Joe and Maureen decided to track one down to add to their collection

“We were introduced to Michael and Jennifer Rose in Newcastle,” Joe recalls. “As well as being owners of several Austin Princesses they were also enthusiasts the Sheerline. We had never seen a Princess limousine before, or any Princess for that matter, and when we did, we really liked it. We told the Roses that if one came up for sale, we would be interested in buying. When we got home to Canberra, we had a call from Michael, who asked if we were really serious about buying a Princess, because he had one in his garage that needed restoring. So, we went back to have a look the following weekend. Michael and Jennifer had three other Princess limousines and intended to use this one for spares, but their mechanic convinced them that it was too complete and too good to be scrapped.”

Joe and Maureen bought the Princess, and then subsequently also found and purchased a Sheerline in good condition to use while they restored the Princess. The Vavra's Sheerline featured in Australian Classic Car in April 2005.

A Government job

“On investigating the Princess's history, it seems that it had started life in 1964 as a Ministerial limousine in London,” Joe said. “I've had this verified by the British Motor Heritage Trust, and they sent me a certificate, and also a photocopy of the original job card to build the car. It had a few minor differences from standard and some optional extras were ordered to be fitted. The extras included a radio in the right-hand side rear armrest, an eight-day clock in the central division between the driver and rear passenger compartment, an extra battery under bonnet in case the other two under the floor stopped working, along with a kill switch to disable the batteries. These models are notorious for running low on batteries if they are not used. One standard fitment is four inbuilt hydraulic jacks that lift the whole car off the ground if you have the misfortune to have a flat tyre.

The rear seat was to be built of a plain pattern and extended in height and length in the squab and cushion, as the Minister using the car was a tall man”

A 1963 price list showed that a Princess Long Wheelbase Limousine would have cost £2840 (including tax) in the UK. This was considerably more than a Princess MkII Saloon at £1347, and by way of comparison with a more mundane vehicle, in the same year a Triumph Herald 1200 was priced at £635. Despite its already high price, there was a considerable range of extra-cost options available to the Princess purchaser. These included automatic transmission, power steering, an electrically operated glass division, wing mirrors, monograms, flagstaff, and, if a member of the 'nobility', heraldic inscriptions. The Royal Family had two Princess Limousines in their mews at a time

White walls, mission brown and a paisley bedspread

“When we acquired it, the car was running but it was definitely not something that you would want to exhibit in public,” says Joe. “It seems that after seeing out its government service in the UK, the Princess went to USA, where it acquired white wall tyres. Somehow, by 1990, it had found its way to Sydney, where the new owner proceeded to ruin it. It then passed to an Austin enthusiast who loved it but didn't do anything about its appearance, before it found its way to Michael and Jennifer Rose as a possible spare parts car.

“As acquired by us in 1999, all the beautiful walnut woodwork had been repainted in mission brown epoxy paint. The original front seat was missing and two swivelling bucket seats were in its place. In the restoration process, I had to build the front seat from scratch from drawings provided by Jennifer Rose. One piece of good fortune was that the glass and the timber base for the division between driver and the rear

passengers came with car. The back seat had springs but they were not fitted, they were just in a big pile in the back of the car. The rear seat consisted of a bit of plywood covered in sponge foam, with a black and white paisley bedspread as a cover that was thumbtacked to the timber. Fleecy lined fabric thumbtacked to the ceiling timbers made up the headlining. The exterior finish seemed to be a white household enamel painted on with a paint roller. In places it hadn't adhered to the original black paintwork and it was coming off, making the car look like a Dalmatian dog," Joe adds with a laugh.

On the mechanical side, Joe found that the Princess was in quite reasonable condition. His main concern was with the brakes that required some work before it could be registered. Once it was on the road, he drove the car for a while to find any major problems likely to need attention during the restoration. A good test came with a run with the Canberra Antique and Classic Motor Club around Victoria, including the Great Ocean Road. The Princess completed the trip without a hitch. With a grin Joe says, "Despite the ribbings from other club members about its fuel economy, some of the American cars on the run, like the straight eight Buicks and the Chevs, had to stop more often for a drink. Nevertheless, I can't say that the Princess was economical, for its size. A car like this that weighs in at about 2.5 tonnes and is powered by a four litre six uses its fair share of petrol."

Although the Princess gave no trouble on its big trip, on return Joe thought that it would be prudent to replace the clutch before getting involved in body repairs. He lifted out the motor, which seemed to be in good condition, replaced the clutch plate and overhauled pressure plate and machined the flywheel, and as a precaution, also replaced the welch plugs on the engine while it was out. He took the opportunity to paint the chassis where he could, and had the lever arm shocks refurbished.

Craftsmen at work

The restoration took about six and a half years all up. "I really enjoyed doing it," says Joe, "For more than four years I spent almost every night working on it. Maureen provided much assistance and was always ready to help out, even with some of the less-pleasant jobs. In the wintertime, I worked on the woodwork and inside the house on the upholstery, using an industrial sewing machine. I saved the summer months for the mechanical jobs. One of things that I really liked while doing the upholstery was to examine how the coachbuilders did the work originally. They were real craftsmen. It was all done with a lot of finesse, with not a stitch or screw to be seen in the car. When I removed the upholstery from the foldable jump seats I found the names, in pencil, of the people who did the work originally written on the underside of the seat timber."

Joe remade all the interior upholstery in Warwick automotive Velvet in a sandstone colour.

Removing the mission brown paint and restoring the interior woodwork to its original condition became a major job, ("the mission brown was a nightmare to get off") and taught Joe several new skills, including veneering. He spent some time remaking a compartment for the radio in the rear seat armrest, and although the original radio had long since disappeared, he managed to find one that fairly represented the Princess's era, and installed it.

The exterior of the car presented a few problems. "Body repairs are not my strong point," Joe admits candidly, "particularly as most of the panels are aluminium. I was

fortunate that I had a friend, Tony Andrews, in Sydney with a Jensen-bodied Austin A40 Sports, which is also bodied in aluminium. His son, Michael, had done some work on the A40 and was prepared to take on the Princess repairs for me. Michael did a magnificent job in preparing the car for painting and I give him full credit for his excellent work. One interesting aside are that the windscreen pillars on each side are made out of solid brass. It seems that the idea was to separate the aluminium of the main body from the steel front panels, to minimise the opportunity for corrosion.”

Rolls Royce inspiration

“Through a Sheerline contact, I had the body painted in Sydney by a company that, unfortunately, no longer exists. It was sprayed in two pack, and the painter was an absolute genius. The colours are Tudor Grey over Shell Grey, a combination used by Rolls Royce and Bentley. They suit the Princess well, giving a subtle change in colour between the two shades. Maureen picked the colours for me. We figured that Rolls Royce would be unlikely to use terrible colours on their cars

Joe was keen to demonstrate some of the features of the car, including the ‘one touch’ window lifts (now electric is common, but most unusual for the 1960s) and the in-built hydraulic jacking system that lifts all four corners clear of the ground by using controls inside the car. The Vavras are justifiably proud of their hard work. “We couldn’t have done it without the assistance of many people, both in Australia and overseas”, says Joe.

“Maureen named the car ‘Princess Elizabeth’ to give this restored grand limousine lady some dignity. ‘Lady Penelope’ is its Sheerline companion,” Joe adds. “For such a large car the Princess is very easy to drive. We take it out as often as we can.” And with a car that has as much style and presence as the Princess, why wouldn’t you?

Brief Specifications

Engine Six cylinder, in-line, overhead valves. Bore and stroke, 87.3mm x 111.1mm. 135bhp.

Transmission Four speed gearbox, synchromesh on top three gears. Steering column gear change. (Automatic transmission optional.)

Suspension Front: independent with coil springs and wishbones. Rear, semi-elliptic leaf springs. Lever arm dampers.

Steering. Cam-and-peg, with optional power assistance.

Dimensions. Wheelbase: 11 feet. Length: 17 feet 11 inches. Width: 6 feet 2.5 inches. Height: 5 feet 10 inches.