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## Taxi!

pulsion; the first electric streetcars had appeared in the USA and Europe during the 1880s, and there quickly followed a lot of interest in the development of battery-operated vehicles. Ironically, a century later, the same problems concerning the weight of the batteries and the vehicle's restricted range that dogged scientists then, still remain. Electrically-powered cabs were a different matter: most operated within relatively short distances from their depots and offered a realistic alternative to the horsedrawn carriage.

The first electric cabs entered service in New York a few months before the Bersey cabs were introduced in London. Paris witnessed its first electrically-driven cabs in January 1898 and, by the end of the 19th century, several other European cities had similar vehicles in operation. An alternative form of motive power was steam and, although there had been a lot of activity in producing a wide variety of steam-powered buses and lorries, some of which went into service in London, there was a complete absence of steam cabs.

The Bersey cabs, which had become known as 'Hummingbirds' (the Cockney dialect led to the 'H' being dropped and they were therefore usually referred to as 'Umminbirds') due to their operating noise, were fitted with forty 8-volt batteries from which the 3.5 horsepower motors could attain a maximum speed of



The first motorised taxicab to operate in London was the electrically propelled Bersey, named after its designer, C. W. Bersey. Entering service with the London Electric Cab Company during August 1897, the Berseys were soon nicknamed "Humming Birds" because of the sound of their motors. The cabs had a 30 mile (48km) range between charging periods and a maximum speed of 9mph (14.5kph).  
(Courtesy National Motor Museum).

9mph (14.5kph), along with a range of 30 miles (48km) between charging periods. The cabs, despite roomy and well-appointed accommodation, seated only two passengers. They were popular among travellers but less so with other cabbies who saw them as a threat to their livelihoods. The Commissioner of Metropolitan Police was also impressed with the electric cabs; he predicted that should the vehicles become commonplace, the result would have a marked affect upon traffic conditions in the capital. Surprisingly, London at the time was experiencing something of a traffic problem and, as electric cabs took up only half the

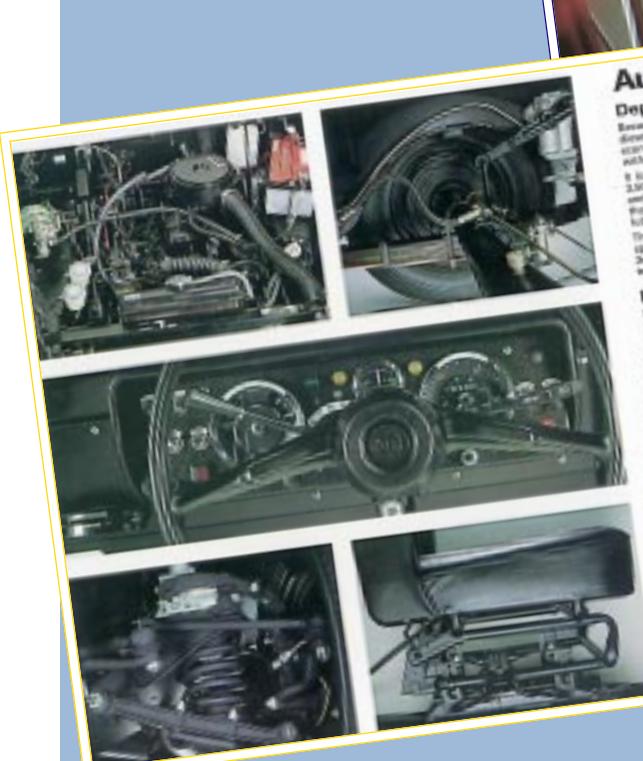
space of a horsedrawn vehicle, he considered some of the capital's congestion would be eased by their use.

During the spring of 1898, by which time some 24 electric cabs had entered service in London, it was decided to replace the original vehicles with an updated and faster version, of which fifty were ordered. The replacement Berseys, which retained a style not entirely dissimilar to their forerunners and bore a resemblance to the Growlers, were built by the Gloucester Railway Wagon Company. Experience proved them rather less reliable than their predecessors and, although they offered benefits such as a higher

## Colour Gallery



An Austin brochure from the early 'seventies. The FX4's styling may appear to have changed little during forty years but, under the skin, the more recent Fairway is rather different to earlier models. (Author's collection)



### Austin Taxi & Hire Car

#### Dependable 2.5 litre diesel power

Because it works on the indirect injection principle, the diesel engine of the Austin Taxi and Hire Car is silent and economical and, having proved for countless hours and with power reliably over 100hp at 1800.

It is a 2.5 litre high-speed engine, developing 66 hp at 2500 revs. It has a Renault 16 V 8-type cylinder head and a full-flow oil filter with renewable element screen that all the working parts are completely fed with clean lubricant.

The Austin Taxi and Hire Car are available with a four-speed gearbox, with synchromesh engagement on 2nd, 3rd and top, or alternatively at extra cost, with automatic transmission.

#### Rear suspension

Leaf and coil springs at the rear, in conjunction with torsion bar shock absorbers insure that passengers get well insulated from even the roughest road surfaces. Full coil springs are effectively reduced by the torsion bar carrying the rear shock absorber arms.

#### Instruments and controls

All the information needed for the satisfactory operation of the vehicle is contained in large, easy-to-read instruments. The instrument panel, water temperature and fuel gauges, speedometer and tachometer, are directly in front of the driver. Control switches are also conveniently placed. A single steering column mounted lower operates the horn, headlamp flasher and self-correcting steering adjustment. On substantial transportation models there is a locking steering horn mounted on the steering column, and the selected driving position is indicated by a dial on the left.

#### Front suspension

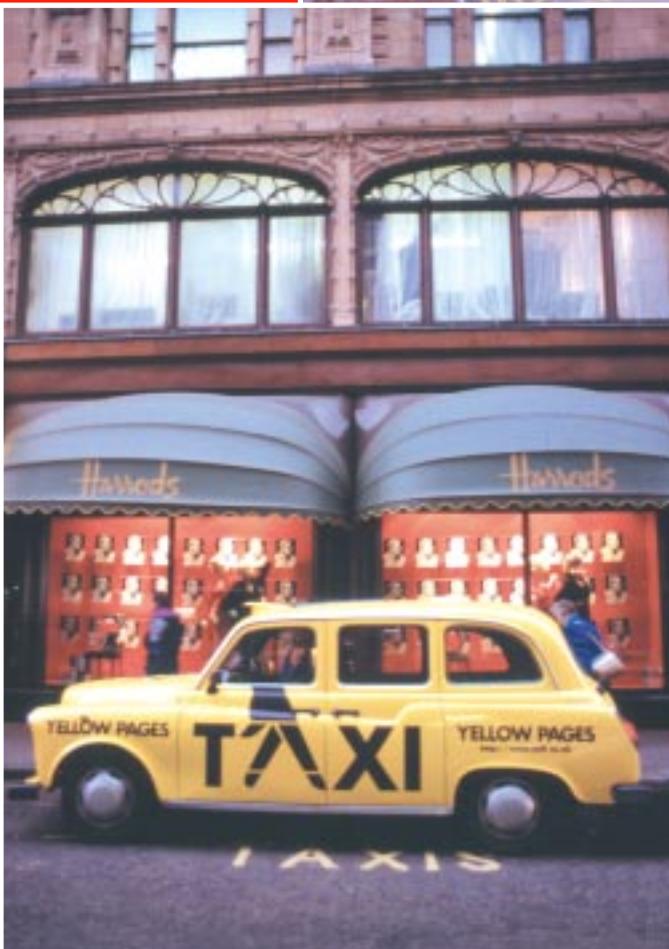
In conjunction with rear and rear parking gear, independent front coil springs and hydraulic shock absorbers provide excellent handling and road holding characteristics, which combine with an exceptionally smooth ride.

#### Fully-adjustable driver's seat

The correct driving position is of vital importance and the well-designed driver's seat in the Austin Taxi and Hire Car is a result of its kind, being adjustable not only for forward and backward movement, but for height and tilt as well.



Outside Victoria Station a line of cabs waits for fares. At London's mainline stations, waiting times are normally short and cabbies can usually be certain of getting a fare quickly. The cabs in the picture are all Fairways or FX4s of different vintages. It's evident that Victoria Station has recently been refurbished: trains leave here for services throughout the south-east corner of England. Around the corner is Victoria Coach Station where buses depart for destinations to all parts of England, Scotland and Wales. (Photo: Nick Barwis)

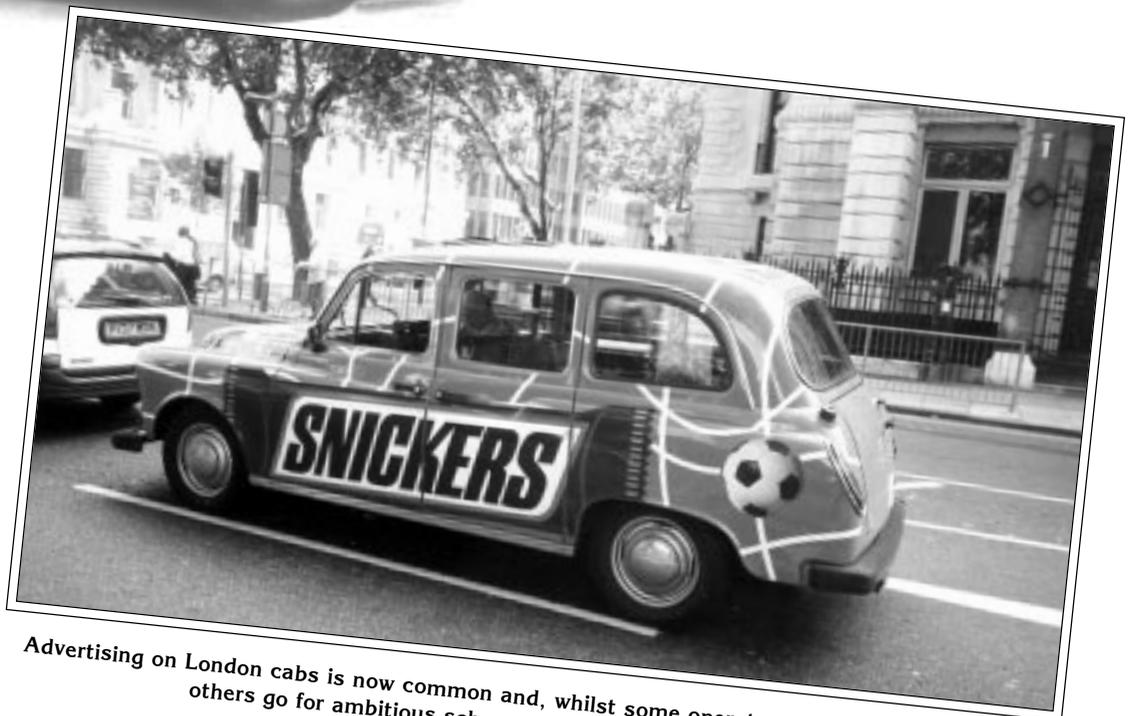


Advertising on Taxicabs has become big business and nowadays traditional cabs can be seen with an incredible variety of colour schemes and advertising themes. (Photo: Nick Barwis)

## Taxi!



Above: Many owner-drivers elect to buy the Metrocab which, like the Fairway, is designed to fully comply with Scotland Yard regulations. The glass reinforced plastic (GRP) body is impervious to corrosion and styling is more modern than the Fairway. In areas of the UK, such as Scotland, where corrosion is a problem, the Metrocab is especially popular. (Courtesy Hooper Metrocab and Stratford Marketing)



Advertising on London cabs is now common and, whilst some operators prefer discreet decals, others go for ambitious schemes like this! (Author's collection)