

WATERBIRD CYGNET 12

Low cost model from quality maker

IF ASTON MARTIN were to market a family saloon car retailing at around £1000, it would probably have little of the James Bond image but a keen motorist would spot at once that certain 'something' about it which would give the clue to the maker's long history of quality construction. Experienced caravanners have this same undefinable feeling in one of the small range of Waterbird models produced by Stephens and West of Cirencester, who, as makers of Stirling, have occupied an undisputed place among the top few in the luxury field.

The Waterbirds fit into a fairly crowded part of the price/length scale. The 9ft 6in Cygnet retails at £283 for the four-berth version and £305 for an end-kitchen, two-berth variant which has a toilet room and a Beta IV coupling. The 12ft Cygnet, subject of this month's test, costs £370 and, unlike its smaller brothers, has independent suspension.

Layout of the 12-footer is conventional with a forward end dinette, centre kitchen and wardrobe, a settee single with bunk backrest against the offside wall and a toilet room in the nearside rear corner. Externally the makers have achieved a good-looking body shape with only one side-panel joint. A hardwood rubbing strake is provided down each side.

It may be conservatism or a fear of looking too much like some of their competitors that has prompted the makers to present the layout their way round. But one of the benefits that would emerge if they were to reverse it end to end would be a much improved view through. At present the sill heights are low enough to allow a good view through from most towing vehicles but the small rear window, dictated by the toilet room position, narrows the angle of rearward view considerably. The large front window of the test model had a centre frame dividing it into two lights as an aid to rigidity but trouble experienced with complete weather sealing of this arrangement has resulted in a new, one-piece window.

Driving rain during the test found its way past the sealing strip at one side of the window and soaked the mattresses. Slight traces of damp were also found in the single settee bedding locker round what appeared to be a

join in the plywood of the floor, and a modification has now been carried out. The wheelarches, however, were well sealed although un-insulated and a possible source of condensation which could affect bedding in the locker.

Although conventional, there is nothing dull about the interior of the Cygnet. The all-white walls and ceiling are lined with pvc-faced material which is easily washable. Perhaps a little more care could have been taken in fixing the material, which was lifting slightly at some edges. The effect is bright and, coupled with the chocolate and white upholstery and gay print curtains, is pleasing overall. The only slightly out of balance item in the scheme is the bright yellow partition curtain which makes a restless splash of colour; a maroon or brown would have been better. The fitted carpet is in a mustard colour flecked with black.

All the furniture is panelled in wood-grain melamine, giving the appearance of high-quality cabinet work combined with a durable, wipe-over finish. In general cupboard doors fitted well and had firm, positive catches. The unglazed stable door fitted well when shut but an odd striker plate on the bolt holding the two halves together allowed considerable movement between them when the door was open. The handle on the top half of the door to enable it to be closed from the inside was close to the edge of the door and unwary fingers could be trapped when closing the door. This has now been removed.

Conversely, on the outside there is no handle at all and the key for the cylinder lock is needed every time the door is opened. There are disadvantages in this arrangement compared with the now more usual thumb-button cylinder latch.

The beds are comfortable and although space has been saved by keeping the double down to 45in wide and the singles down to 21½in the user is not conscious of the restriction. Foam plastic mattresses are used, 5in thick for the dinette and 4in for the singles. The upper bunk is on a rigid base hinged to the wall below the side window and supported on two hinged legs which drop down as the bunk is raised and are located positively by slots in the ends of the bedding locker lid. Clearance between the upper

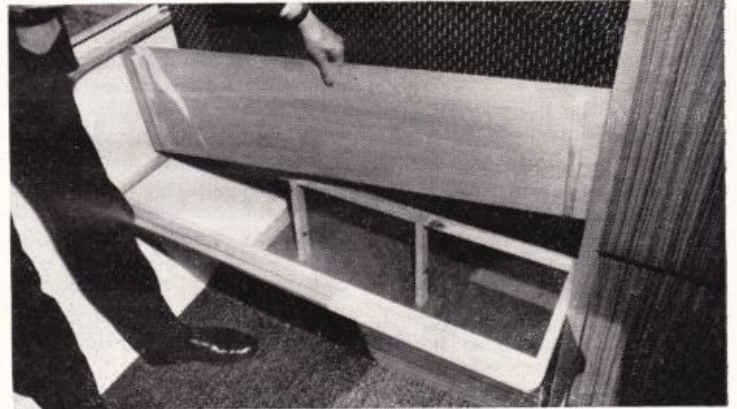
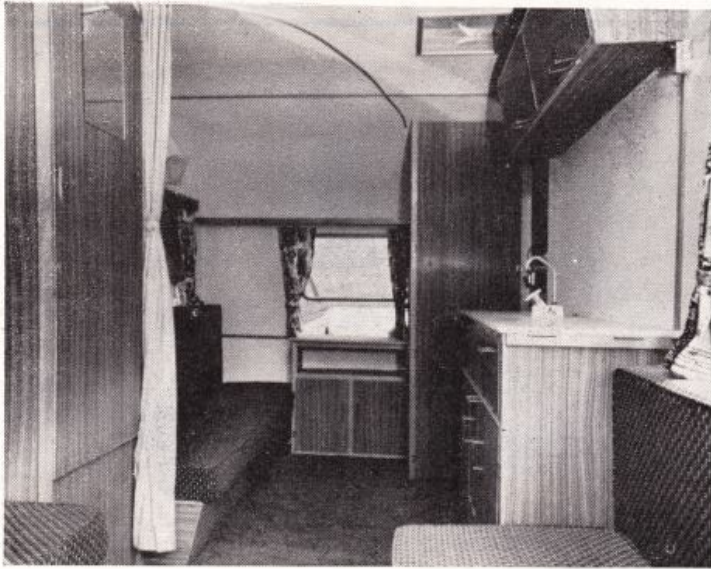


and lower bunks is 17½in, just enough for most people. To increase the clearance would involve raising the window level and spoiling the interior and exterior line or making the daytime settee unacceptably low for comfortable sitting.

The bedding lockers have raked-back fronts to provide increased foot room. They have one-piece plywood lids. These are not hinged and there is room for the mattresses to be stood on edge without obstructing the aperture. Lids are such a good fit that they badly need finger holes cut in them as an aid to lifting them up. Access to the lockers is reasonably good but it would be difficult to stow a suitcase.

The hook-on table has a single-hinged leg of plywood which looks a little flimsy, but when the peg on its base is located in the floor socket the table is as rigid as it needs to be. The table hooks to what appears to be an internal structural member which forms a very narrow window shelf. A full-width roof shelf runs across the front of the van. It is lipped to keep small objects in place on tow.

One thing the Cygnet is a little short of is clothes storage space despite an ample wardrobe in which clothes are presented edge on when the door is opened. The wardrobe has no top but there is a shelf above the hanging rail. A good-size mirror is fixed at a



sensible height on the outside of the door.

The only other clothes storage space is a two-door cabinet with an open shelf at the top between the single bed and the toilet room wall at the rear of the van. This has one small shelf inside the cupboard but the radius of the end wall restricts its capacity. On the five-berth model which is available for an extra £12 this cupboard is omitted to make room for a pull-out settee double. We would think that a couple of roof lockers, either at the ends or on the side walls above the dinette, would be an

advantage even if oppressive.

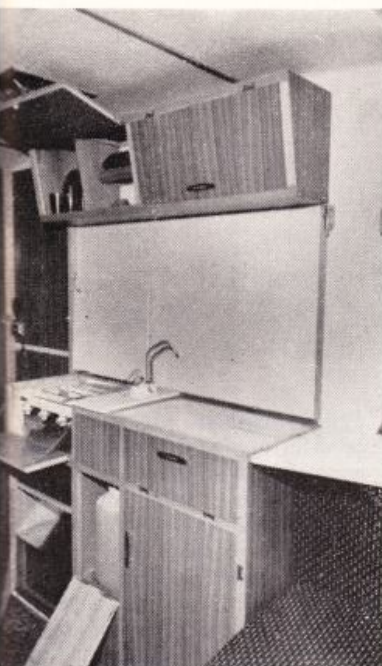
The kitchen unit has individual lids to sink and hotplate, both with patterned melamine on the tops and plain white melamine on the undersides. The sink lid can be held vertical by a bolt or suspended by a chain in the horizontal position over the dinette seat as additional work surface. A small fixed melamine surface between sink and hotplate takes the Whale hand water pump drawing from a container in a special fall front locker immediately below it.

During our anti-clockwise tests for slip on a steering pad enough

Views towards the rear end (left, top and bottom) show daytime and night-time arrangements of the settee and bunk. A five-berth version is available without the cupboard against the end wall and with a settee double bed below the bunk. The front end view (top centre) shows the emphatic rake back of the bedding locker fronts and the clean lines of the closed kitchen. Detail shots show the bedding locker lid arrangement with intermediate strutting of the seat frame enabling materials to be kept as light as possible, the view through and the wardrobe with its top forming an enclosed shelf when the door is closed. The kitchen (top right) is well planned and convenient to use. The sink top can be seen in position over the dinette seat as additional work surface. The roof locker lids need stays to keep them open

G was generated to cause the water container (closed luckily) to burst open the quite strong nylon catch holding the front of the locker shut. This sort of side force would not be an everyday occurrence but a simple remedy could be fitted by the owner quite quickly when he has decided on the type of carrier to be used.

We were a little worried by the routing of the gas piping up to the hotplate. This should have been neatly clipped to the side of the cupboard where it was out of harm's way but it had been left well away from the side and there was a strong possibility of it getting damaged. We could get hold of it and wriggle it about. The large larder cupboard, which is designed to take an LM 10 refrigerator, is well ventilated.



right above the cook's head removes steam and cooking smells, but it would be of greater value if provided with more positive stays; those on the test model were already loose and it was difficult to make the top remain in the desired position.

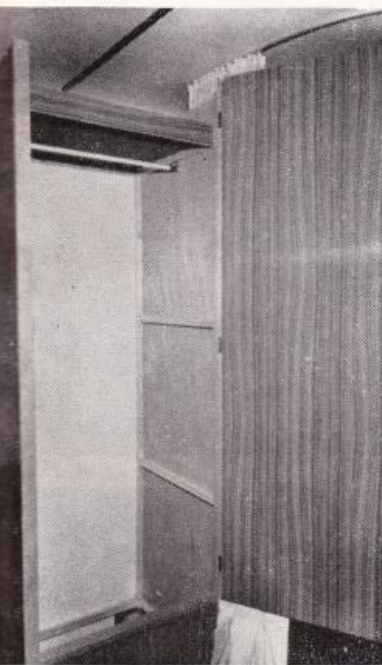
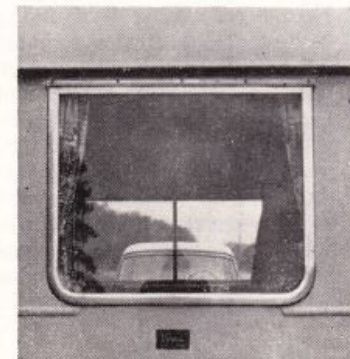
The toilet room in the nearside rear corner takes in the porch in use. There is ample floor area despite the loss due to the end wall radius, but the door and its extension flap could do with piano hinges to ensure adequate privacy. A neat nylon catch is used to hold the extension in the open position, but on the test model the flap was slightly out of line so that the catch would not hold. A secure throw-over catch holds the toilet door when not in use. There is no window, but adequate light and ventilation is provided by an opening roof light.

A small obscured plastic panel in the toilet room wall lets in light at night from one of the two bijoux gas lights which provide a good standard of illumination over the whole van.

With an as-tested weight of 14cwt—1½cwt of which was on the nose—the road performance of the Cygnet was extremely good. This was aided by the fact that the towing vehicle was a Morris Oxford (in practice an 1100cc car is a more likely tow), but there was no trace of instability up to the 65 mph maximum achieved. The van cornered flat with no noticeable roll and a rough section of banking could be taken flat-out without upsetting the balance of the outfit.

The brakes are operated through a B & B Beta IV coupling. The overall braking performance of the outfit dropped by some 20 per cent (85 to 65 per cent) with the caravan brakes locked out, proving that they were contributing considerably to the overall stopping power. The van has a jacking-type jockey wheel, essential in view of the noseweight.

Any attempt at a subjective judgment of a caravan must start by looking at the slot the particular model is intended to fill. Stephens and West obviously intend the Waterbird range to provide Stirling know-how without the super luxury and at a more popular price. Apart from one or two very minor production slips the Cygnet 12 fulfils the aim.



Kitchen roof lockers are large and one is fitted with plate stowage although there is no special provision for stowing cups; the other locker has a single shelf. Locker lids are top hinged and need stays to keep them open to enable two hands to be used to reach the contents. An adjustable rooflight

WATERBIRD CYGNET 12

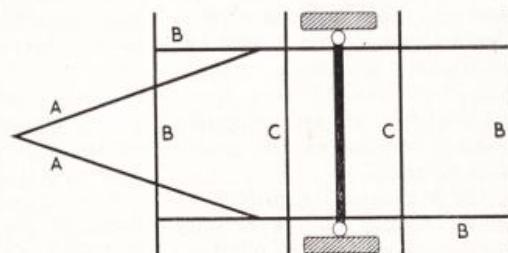
recommended price £370

DIMENSIONS

Length body net	12ft 2in
overall	12ft 4in
shipping	15ft 7in
interior	11ft 9in
Width overall	6ft 10in
interior	6ft 5in
Height overall	7ft 9½in
Max headroom	6ft 1½in
Floor height	16½in
Window sill height front ..	43in
rear ..	43in
Height to centre of coupling ball for level ride	14½in
Weight ex-works	11cwt 105lb
as tested	14cwt
Noseweight	1½cwt

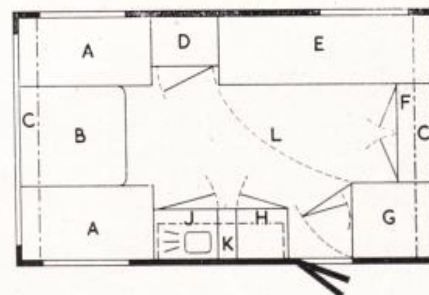
Stephens and West Ltd, Love Lane, Cirencester, Gloucs.

UNDERGEAR



B & B welded steel chassis. A 3 x 1½ x 10g channel. B 2½ x 1½ x 10g channel. C 2½ x 1½ x 10g angle. B & B independent suspension by transverse swinging arms, coil springs and hydraulic dampers. Brakes 8in Girling rod-operated. Wheels 4-stud, tyres 5.90-13 4PR. Coupling 50mm B & B Beta IV, jacking type jockey wheel. Four brace-operated legs.

LAYOUT



A dinette double bed, B hook-on table, C roof shelf, D wardrobe, E single bed settee, bunk over, F cupboard, G toilet room, H hotplate, J sink unit, K roof locker, L curtain partition.

BODY CONSTRUCTION Framing softwood, joints halved, screwed and glued. Exterior panelling 22g aluminium. Insulation glass-fibre. Interior panelling hardboard, pvc covering. Floor ¾in plywood, bitumenised. Unglazed stable door 67½ x 19½in, cylinder latch. Windows, all round-cornered, all opening. One 66 x 24in. Four 30 x 24in. Two Perspex roof vents, 11½in square and 8in square. Five main body vents. Rubbing strakes. Four grab handles.

EQUIPMENT Dinette double bed 78 x 45in. Mattresses 5in plastic foam. Single bed settee 72 x 21½in, single bunk 72 x 21½in, mattresses 4in plastic foam. Clearance between bunks 17in. Top access bedding lockers. Furniture 'wood-grain' melamine. Hook-on table 36 x 28in. Wardrobe 22 x 18in, hanging space 64in. Small cupboard, open shelf at top. Two full-width roof shelves. Kitchen: plastic sink and drainer, Argyll hotplate, individual lids, melamine faced. Ventilated larder. Pan cupboard. Double roof locker part fitted for crockery. Toilet room, 39 x 23½in floor area inc porch, shelf. Curtains on plastic covered strainers. Mirror. Fitted carpet. Two bijoux gas lights, outside cylinder connection, drawbar carrier. Full road lights and indicators, 7-pin plug and socket.

TOWING CAR FOR TEST Morris Oxford automatic, 1622cc. Weight including crew 25½cwt.