Cheerful facelift for Leyland's veteran sports car. Suspension modifications restore its enjoyable handling. New seats and facia cannot disguise the MG's age. Outperformed in almost every respect by newer designs, it is fading quietly away in a shrinking corner of the market.
TO DESCRIBE the MGB as an evergreen is surely one of motoring's greatest triumphs. Introduced in 1962, it has been an old favourite or an evergreen, for going on 10 years.

In many ways it symbolises all that is best and worst about British cars. This classic sports car design is one which has sold tremendously well world wide; a credit to its designers. But, on the other hand, it has remained largely unchanged save for cosmetic or safety modifications during its life. Critics have written themselves to distraction pointing out its inadequacies, a monument to that dubious philosophy "If it sells, why bother to improve it?"

At least, that seemed to be the case until last year, when much to everyone's surprise a revised MGB appeared with almost all the detailed points of criticism improved. As we said in our news headline at the time: "Facelift for MGB — at last!". The 14 years-old MGB's underline was a restyled facia, new heater controls, fabric seats, modified pedal layout, and a variety of minor mechanical changes.

These latter were mainly aimed at improving the handling and road-holding which had suffered when the B's ride height was raised to accommodate the American specification bumpers a year previously. Though the ride height remained unaltered, the open car was given a front anti-roll bar, having previously not had one, while the GT's was increased to the same thickness. Both models also gained a rear anti-roll bar for the first time. At the same time the steering wheel size was reduced to 15 in and the rack ratio increased from three to three-and-a-half turns from lock to lock.

Despite its rarely changing specification and performance that is bettered by more family saloons each year, the MGB goes on selling in numbers that surprise even some Leyland executives. The detail changes give us reason to re-examine the MGB GT, a model that we last "re-examined" in 1971.

Performance

The weight increase caused by the massive American bumpers has not helped performance, but, more significantly, during the MGB's lifetime the whole concept of what is acceptable performance has changed. The GT's acceleration must now rate as slow, even by family car standards, yet when it first appeared back in 1965, this sort of performance was quite acceptable.

Maximum speed in direct top corresponds closely with the 5,500 rpm power peak at 99 mph, the best leg of the MIRA banking giving 101 mph. Overdrive is available at both top and third gears, gearing up to some 20 per cent. But the car is not keen to pull the higher gearing and the overdrive maximum is very wind-dependent. With the wind slighlty in its favour, the GT's one-leg best was 104 mph, but the mean was still just 99 mph.

Like Wimbledon, the MGB seems to have becomes part of the British summertime sporting tradition and it too has compromised only a little to meet changing demands. The massive, rubber faced Federal safety bumpers are virtually the only exterior styling change to the GT

Straight line acceleration is really very modest. The B manages 60 mph in 14 seconds, which is a second slower than the GT we tested six years ago. Power output has not changed significantly over the years, so the main reason for the lower acceleration must be that kerb weight is up from 21.2 to 21.8 cwt.

Power output is currently 84 bhp at 5,500 rpm, and maximum torque 105 lb ft at 2,500 rpm. The quoted figures have varied slightly during the past few years as the B-series engine has been modified for emission control regulations, and these regulations have also been responsible for the loss of some of the unit's former character.

Never noted for its free-revving liveliness, the B-series engine was always a solid, durable unit with a broad spread of power and a complete absence of fussiness. Unfortunately, the emission-inspired changes have seen the delightful low speed torque replaced by a succession of flat spots. Our test engine was also seriously guilty of running on, a not uncommon B-series problem, and "under load—fairly familiar problems with some emission modified engines."

The B's gearchange is one of its most characteristic features, and one which has not been spoiled by the advancing years. It is the true sports car shift; a short, gaitered lever, ready to hand and offering notchy, firm, yet very precise movements through its accurate gate. Overdrive is, of course, standard, and one of the improvements on the latest car has been to re-locate the operating switch away from the facia and onto the gear-lever knob. For the first time, an MGB driver can now change gear and operate the overdrive without taking both hands off the wheel!

Gear ratios are unchanged and so the rather low second gear remains

More dramatic changes inside where the scattered dashboard has been re-fashioned and the seats given a new deckchair striped cloth facing

The rear bench is really a nominal plus-two, being flat and hard with very limited head and legroom for all but the smallest children
MGB GT

Thankfully, the anti-roll bar modifications have now largely cleared up the problem — though it may remain a mystery why Leyland did not provide them from the start. With the changes, the car has now reverted a good way back to its original levels of handling and roadholding.

The B has never been the sort of sports car to set standards in roadholding, its crude lever arm dampers and basic, leaf-spring rear axle see to that. Rather the pleasure of driving it has come from its taut and predictable reactions. An initial modest understeer gives way, as cornering speeds build up, to readily controllable oversteer. Ultimate levels of roadholding are not high, but the car's controllability makes it fun to drive.

The lower-powered roadster with the softer suspension maintains the steering's lightness and, at low speeds, there is an advantage in terms of grip. Though the steering wheel is a little smaller, it is still too large for some tastes, and certainly its rim is too thin. Brakes are first-class, with servo assistance allowing near 1g stops with only 60 lb/ft pedal effort. The 10-stop fade test showed up no problems.

Ride and noise

Once again, the B has been overtaken by later designs in handling and ride compromise. Newer cars have managed to combine good handling with a higher all-round level of ride comfort than the MG's. Its ride is quite firm — hard if compared with saloons of similar performance — and would once have been thought typical sports carish if more recent cars had not proved otherwise. The harshness is especially noticeable on rougher roads, and when the lever arm dampers and leaf springs get caught out from time to time over successive bumps.

However, worst aspect of overall driving comfort is the noise level inside the car. The door window sealing is very poor and at any speed above 40 mph the roar of wind completely drowning radio or music is present. It is a long-standing problem, yet appears to have been received no attention. The engine is also surprisingly noisy, despite now having an electric fan it still suffers from just the sort of noise one would expect from a big, belt-driven fan.

Behind the wheel

The MG has the sort of cockpit that marks it out as a sports car of the traditional school; seats are set close to the floor and legs stretch out horizontally along the sides of the large central tunnel. The facia and steering wheel dominate the small cabin.

The new facia is certainly a pleasant change, even if it has been a long time coming. The dashboard shape is unchanged, as is the material, but its black crinkle finish has been toned down to a more restrained grey. It is the instrument-

ENGINE

Cylinders
Main bearings
Cooling water
Fan
Bore, mm (in.)
Stroke, mm (in.)
Capacity
Valve gear
Camshaft drive
Compression ratio
Ocane rating
Carburettors
Max power
Max torque

TRANSMISSION

Type four-speed, all synchromesh
Drive on 3rd
Gear Ratio
C/R Top
C/R 1st
C/R 2nd
C/R 3rd
Final drive gear
Ratio

SUSPENSION

Front—location
Front—springs
Front—dampers
Front—anti-roll bar
Rear—location
Rear—springs
Rear—dampers
Rear—anti-roll bar

STEERING

Type
Pintle assistance
Wheel diameter

WHEELS

Type
Rim width
Tyres—make
Tyres—size

EQUIPMENT

Battery
Alternator
Headlamps
Reversing lamp
Hazard warning
Screen wipers
Screen washer
Interior heater
Interior trim
Floor coverings
Jack
Jacking points
Windscreens
Laminated
Underbody protection

MAINTENANCE

Fuel tank
Cooling system
Engine sump
Gearbox
Final drive
Valve clearance
Contact breaker
Ignition timing
Spark plug
Tyre pressures
Max payload

The new facia is a considerable improvement, though the new shape steering wheel masks the smaller dials and the piano key switches can be confusing. Speedometer and rev counter face the driver with a fuel gauge between and oil pressure, water temperature to the left and right. The left stalk operates wipers and washers and the right lights and indicators, while a small switch by this is the lights master control. The ignition key is hidden awkwardly forward and below these. Below the central piano key switches for heated rear screen, map light, fan and hazard flashes are the manual choke, map light and rotary heater controls.
### Maximum Speeds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gear</th>
<th>mph</th>
<th>kph</th>
<th>rpm</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O/d Top</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>4,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mean)</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>167</td>
<td>4,760</td>
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<tr>
<td>Top</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>159</td>
<td>5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O/d 3rd</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>6,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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### Fuel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall mpg</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(9.99 litres/100km)</td>
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### Consumption

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<tr>
<th>Autocar formula</th>
<th>Hard driving, difficult conditions</th>
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<tr>
<td>23.1 mpg</td>
<td>Average driving, average conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>28.3 mpg</td>
<td>Gentle driving, easy conditions</td>
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<tr>
<td>33.4 mpg</td>
<td>Grade of fuel: Premium, four star</td>
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### Brakes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fade (from 70 mph in neutral)</th>
<th>Pedal load for 0.5g stops (lb)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pedestal 1.1/3 3/10 3/10</td>
<td>1.3/3 3/10 3/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handbrake 1.3/3 3/10 3/10</td>
<td>1.3/3 3/10 3/10</td>
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### Test Conditions

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wind: 5-20 mph</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Temperature: 12 deg C (54 deg F)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humidity: 100 per cent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Surface: wet asphalt and concrete</td>
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</table>

### Test Scorecard

(Average of scoring by Autocar Road Test team)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Performance</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Steering and Handling</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brakes</td>
<td>4.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Comfort in Front</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Drivers Aids</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Controls</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>2.83</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stowage</td>
<td>3.33</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Routine Service</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ease of Driving</td>
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### Regular Service

<table>
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<th>6,000</th>
<th>12,000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Engine oil</td>
<td>Check</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oil filter</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gearbox oil</td>
<td>Check</td>
<td>Check</td>
<td>Check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spark plugs</td>
<td>Clean</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air cleaner</td>
<td>C/breaker</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total cost</th>
<th>£17.15</th>
<th>£23.24</th>
<th>£31.85</th>
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### Acceleration

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>True mph</th>
<th>Time Speed</th>
<th>mph</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.0</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>60</td>
<td>14.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>18.1</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Clutch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedal 25 lb and 5½ in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
MGB GT

Familiar B-series engine has lost some of its sparkle through emission tuning, which has also cluttered the engine bay with pipework.

The modest boot extends neatly in the rear seat back is folded and loading is easy through the deep tailgate.

Below: Spare wheel and jack stow under the floor.

The most tidy row under the central pair of fresh-air vents gives a good airflow, but extraction is improved by opening a rear-quarter window.

The seats are unchanged in design and are as comfortable as ever, with plenty of lateral support around the thigh and back. They can be partially reclined, but by awkward-to-use levers mounted on the backrests. Adjustable headrests are also fitted. The straight-legged seating position allows drivers of most heights to find a comfortable position behind the wheel. Reversing pedal positions allow heeling-and-toeing — 14 years after we complained in our road test of the then new car that this was impossible. Behind the front seats is a candy-stripe bench which is really only suitable for small children. Leg and headroom being much too restricted to carry anyone larger except perhaps a small adult sitting crosswise. The bench is crude and flat, held in place just by 'lift-the-dot' style fasteners, so that it can be easily removed for access to the battery. The seat back can be unclipped and folded down on it to extend the luggage area.

The MG is, of course, much more of a pure sports car than most of its new two-plus-two rivals, and, in consequence, its boot space is fairly modest. It does extend usefully, however, if the rear seat is folded flat. The wheel arches which have the large inertia reels of the seat belts mounted awkwardly on top of them, do intrude to some extent, and the spare wheel is stowed along with the jack under the boot floor.

Access to the boot is easy through the full-depth tailgate, but the latter's remarkably strong springs tend it slamming down hard at the slightest provocation. Aside from the boot, stowage space is very restricted, just the glovebox, a map bin in front of the passenger's door, and a small box under the central armrest. But at last, the glovebox can be opened without a key (though it is still lockable) so saving the owner the irritation of having to stop and remove the ignition keys to read a map.

In service

The MGB is a straightforward, uncomplicated car, easy to service and maintain and as it is to drive. Starting is straightforward, using the manual choke, but the car does not run happily from cold, being rather jerky and fluppy.

Under the bonnet, the once-simple B-series engine is now heavily disguised by emission plumbing, but it is still essentially a straightforward engine to service. The distributor and spark plugs are accessible, the rocker box easily removed for tappet adjustment, and items like the coil and fluid reservoirs are all to hand.

The fuel tank holds 11 gallons and fills through an unobstructed neck that has a twist-off cap. Reversing lamps, two exterior mirrors, a laminated screen, and halogen headlamps are all now fitted as standard. Service interval is 6,000 miles, with an optional 3,000 mile check, and the Supercovy warranty can be extended for two years for a modest charge.

Where it fits in

Now that the VB GT has been discontinued, there are two versions of the MGB — the open sports and the GT. The latter is considerably more expensive, at £3,575, compared with the open car which costs £2,854.

There are now a number of other sports two-plus-twos, some more obviously sporting than others. The Ford Capri is perhaps the most attractive, the 2000S at £3,622 being a close price rival for the MGB GT.

The Japanese also have recent rivals to offer, from Colt the 2-litre Celeste at £3,349, and from Toyota the 2000ST liftback at £3,413. The VW Scirocco at £4,161 is perhaps a little expensive for comparison, but there are a number of other coupes that do not have hatchbacks which come into the price range.

Conclusion

The MGB is now so aged and out-paced as to be strictly a minority taste. It is easily outsold by Leyland's newer sports car, the TR7. Certainly the modifications improve it, but it is incredible to think that one has had to wait 14 years for little things like the glovebox lock alteration.

The facia is tidier and the seating material very smart, but they are reminiscent of the facelift for an ageing film star — they cannot hide all the cracks. Presumably the MGB is now in that sort of ageing car's limbo where its sales generate enough profit to keep it in production, but not sufficient to encourage the sort of substantial re-design it needs.

As it is, it remains a pleasant car to drive, easy to service and maintain GT car, with classically sporting lines and predictable handling, yet very modest performance.

MANUFACTURER: Leyland Cars
Granover House
Redditch, Worcestershire

PRICES

Basic: £3,056.00
Special Car Tax: £254.67
VAT: £624.05
Total (in GB): £3,935.72

Seat belts: £31.80
Licence: £50.00
Delivery charge (London): £350.00
Number plates: £7.50
Total on the road (inc. insurance): £4,184.82

EXTRAS (inc VAT)
Wire wheels: £80.84
TOTAL AS TESTED ON THE ROAD: £4,265.82