Free at last to build a truly modern sports car, MG produced a minor jewel with the 1955 MGA: Tony Dron investigates

Back in 1939, an MG advertisement for the then-new TD Midget said: 'The mid-century MG is going to win friends and influence people from Hollywood to Monte Carlo.' And so it did. While many British car export sales at the time fell into the manufacturers' laps, it was car sports cars rather than our sensible family cars that enthusiasts overseas really latched onto.

And there's no question about it: MG led the way of the British motor industry's post-war sports car export or die effort, only to be hamstrung by BMC politics. Much as the world loved the TC, TD and TF models through the late Forties and Fifties, the talented team at Abingdon was itching to manufacture a modern sports car.

MG had the MGA ready to go, but the domination of Austin over Morris meant that it had to wait. It must have been tough watching others forge ahead while not allowed to join in. Not that the MG people sat twiddling their thumbs — they updated the T-series brilliantly and continued to sell traditional cars.

Any changes to MG's products prompted much wailing and gnashing of teeth from diehard enthusiasts, but enough fresh customers stepped forward to snap up the latest models when they did appear. The MGA of 1955 may have looked like a total departure from tradition, but that is a misunderstanding of what was actually produced. The frustrated designers at Abingdon (mainly Syd Enever, encouraged by his energetic and able boss, John Thomsley), when they were finally allowed to produce their new car, unveiled in the MGA, the line culmination of a line that went back to pre-war days. The real departure from tradition, when you look under the skin, come with the unitary-construction MGB in the early Sixties. That was a worldwide winner but, in a smaller way, was the MGA — the connoisseur's choice, if you like, of mass-produced sports cars, thanks to its handling rather than brute power — and it could have sold in even greater numbers had it gone into production straight away, when it was designed. It was called the MGA because, with the then-current stool, MG had reached 'Z' in the alphabet.
What The Motor said

Of the 1500 Roadster in 1955... "...a very fast car of high performance... to drive the MGA on a winding open road is a true enthusiast's delight... the secret lies in the admirable example of useful and controllable oversteer... the term 'safety' to the body..."

Of the 1500 Coupé in 1957... "...there is a choice of four cars, all of European origin, which will beat by a substantial margin both the 100mph mark, and the 250mpg mark, the latest record for this category being the MGA model and the Rolls-Royce Speedbird body... we were particularly impressed by the robustness of the car and the ease of access to the cabin".

Of the Twin-Cam Roadster in 1958... "...it is relatively noisy, purely untempered and will probably appeal to the man or woman who wish to see races... the highest praise can be given to the Dunlop disc brakes (which) combine smooth and progressive action right down to Moor speed with a reassuring ability to stop the MGA quite safely from 100mph... its most令人印象深刻的characteristics: its handling and its ability to drive..."

Of the MGA in 1960... "...the comfort and performance improve... a very fine car from point to point..."

DRIVING

While the Austin-Healey 3000 appealed to enthusiasts who wanted aggressive styling, a big engine and plenty of open space, the MGA was especially popular for BMC's rival sports car, the MGA, were drawn more by its neat handling and more subtle style. In all its various forms up to 1962, the MGA delivered that promise beautifully.

The road tests of a 1955 MG 1600 in 1955 by the Motor testers summed it up: "...and on the open road the MG is a delight to drive...". The lightness of the steering was a small, four-spoked wheel is matched by a lightness of touch, the lightness of the steering is a small, four-spoked wheel is matched by a lightness of touch.

Quite apart from the steering characteristics, the cornering power of the car is extremely good, holding it down in a manner to give the driver complete confidence, and seeming almost indolent to the type of road surface..."

These comments hold good today, though most MGA's are now shod with radial-ply tyres rather than the crossplies which were fitted then. From personal experience, including a standard MGA 1600 that I took on the Monte Carlo Challenge in 1992, I can add that MGA's are a delight to drive on a dusty road, even when there's rain and snow about. These cars are light and so well balanced that very small movements of the steering are required.

That 1600 was fresh from a superb restoration by Brown's Classic Cars. It was like a new car and I wrote... as the day we got to Monte Carlo the MGA was just bedding in... it was only the last night that the steering wheel began to work properly.

I drove a standard 1600 belonging to Tony Manso. Tony's car has been restored to a high level and he has made sure that every aspect of it is right mechanically, too. It was a real pleasure to take to the road in such a fine machine, listening to the sporting exhaust note as we passed on, hood down in the autumn sunshine.

According to the road testers, MGA performance was good for its day. The MGA achieved a top speed of 96mph in the 1955, with 0-60mph in 16.9sec and 26mpg overall. Power had been raised a little by the time the first 1950 model was tested. It did 100mph with 0-60mph in 15.7sec and 26.9mpg. The Coupe was a little faster on top speed thanks to its more powerful shape: this model had a deeper windscreen than the Roadster, but overall it was the same. The Coupe body and its wind-up windows reflect wind noise great as speed but that advantage can be cancelled out as it is often necessary to open a window for adequate ventilation.

I had to conclude, however, that those Press test cars were... shall we say, given extra care in their preparation... a top speed of around 90-95mph is probably a more realistic figure for a typical 1950 Roadster... The later 1600, on road test with The Motor achieved 95mph (but there was a high wind and it
How many MGAs made?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Export</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MG</td>
<td>550</td>
<td>550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500</td>
<td>2172</td>
<td>2172</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600 Mk II</td>
<td>996</td>
<td>996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twin Cam</td>
<td>390</td>
<td>1,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>10,081</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just look at those export figures! The United States alone bought 90% of all MG production, and the remaining 10% were sold in the UK. A very fine Twin Cam stayed in the home country when new.

Most MGAs were reimported; only about 10% were UK cars. The comparatively rare coupé body offered with all engine variants, however, although the total figure is confirmed by the experts as correct, there is some disagreement over the precise numbers of each specific model exported. Whatever the truth may be, however, those figures cannot be far astray.

The Twin Cam is in a different league when it comes to performance: the design is still based on the 6-series block. It has a 150bhp engine, high-rev, long-stroke 1,388cc engine producing 1,600 bhp at 6,000rpm. Twin Cam engines sound fabulous and are very free-revving, so much so that it would be very easy for a driver without competition experience to cause expensive damage — and therein lies probably the most of this model's reputation for engine unreliability.

When Mr. Bates tested a new Twin Cam in 1958 it did 11.8MPH over the 6-lap course and returned 22.7mph. With a bit more weight over the front wheels - the Twin Cam is about 100 lb heavier than a 1500 Bristol 400 — and different steering geometry, it feels a little heavier but still has the same pace.

Trying to criticised the MGA as a driver's car, the main faults for which might be to dispose to the narrow road and the limited height above the steering wheel. For a dispassionate contemporary view of the MGA, look to the words of Charles Buxton of The Motor who, reporting on 30,000 miles in an MGA 1600 Coupé, wrote in January, 1954:

"I had driven enough MGAs before to specify a front anti-roll bar as an essential extra - without it the model has an exuberantly controllable corner which flattens one's skills in matters but tailsliding round corners with smooth and fluent ease is only impressive as long as there isn't a Mini ahead or another going through later. He wasn't keen on the standard seats. Sometimes at crowded passages one is compelled to sit on a cushion on the floor with one's back against a vertical wall - this was roughly how one sat in the MG. The great thing about parties, however, at least in the early stages, is that you never caught on. Gt. 's for the MG and enthusiast.

20 thousand miles later, however, he would conclude his report: "As a sports car, one is in for a big surprise, as good grip and performance make second gear almost useless in open-road motoring, and the other, none unrelated, is that the engine is not sufficiently smooth and quiet to make long runs in the goa's pleasure. Nevertheless, this is the only car I can remember which I have grown to like more and more as time went on. It seems to mature rather than deteriorate with age."

Design

The story of Abington's post-war MG MGA involved a few deuced subtleties, but the car was as close to the prototype as it was possible to get. The chassis was a conventional LG6 design. The engines varied widely with the various production runs. The MkI and MkII cars were, in essence, the same model, the MkIII and MkIV ran out of production, but the MGIV was a completely new model.

The engine was a well-proven 1,388cc four-cylinder unit, developing 100bhp at 5,000rpm and 105bhp at 6,000rpm. The transmission was a four-speed manual unit with overdrive, and the suspension was a conventional Watts linkage at the front and semi-elliptic leaf springs at the rear. The brakes were drum, with servo assistance on the front wheels.

The body was a conventional two-door coupé, with a fixed headrest and a split windscreen. The interior was basic, with a simple dashboard and a small steering wheel. The seats were upholstered in cloth, and the instruments were housed in a central console.

The car was well-regarded for its roadholding and handling, and was considered to be a very capable and enjoyable car to drive. However, the engine was considered to be a little underpowered, and the brakes were not particularly effective.

Ownership & Restoration

The MG MGA is a classic car, and as such, it is a popular choice for restoration and modification. The car was built in small quantities, and as a result, finding original parts can be challenging. Many owners choose to modify their cars to improve their performance and handling.

Some common modifications include the addition of performance exhausts, louder exhaust systems, and more powerful engines. The car's suspension can also be modified to improve its handling, and many owners choose to upgrade their brakes to improve their stopping power.

Overall, the MG MGA is a classic car that is well worth restoring. With its classic design and excellent performance, it is a car that is enjoyable to drive and can be a great addition to any classic car collection.
Heritage-approved specialists. Even those unique steering wheels are back in production; complete trim kits to perfect original specification are made by companies like Newton Commercial; brake master cylinders are available but waiting times vary, as they are made in batches. Brake calipers are not available but your old ones can be rebuilt using MGB pistons.

Look after the bodywork and you will save money, says Geoff: clean off the underside regularly, especially that narrow gap between the sills and the chassis, and apply Waxoyl. Body parts and body repair sections are available: in the event of an accident, it’s better to repair panels if possible, thus avoiding the pain of trying to fit new body sections. On the factory production lines, they could select, say, a front wing from long, medium and short stock to fit the rest of the body; new panels can be hard to fit but repair sections are relatively simple.

If your car has wire wheels, don’t run radials on the 48-spoke type as they are not strong enough; buy the readily-available 60-spoke wheels. Replacement steering racks can be tight and a few never loosen up properly. But if you want a classic sports car – believe me as well as Geoff! – the pushrod MGA will be as easy to run as anything. And if you want more performance, there are plenty of period modifications and tuning kits available.

Owning and running a Twin-Cam is more of a task for the dedicated: far more servicing is required, parts can be expensive and engine accessibility is not easy. It’s essential to check the ignition timing frequently – and the distributor is hidden under an air duct. Later Twin-Cams had a reduced compression ratio, which meant that the risk of piston failure due to wrong timing was eased;

Above, far left and left, restoration in progress – 1961 MGA 1600 rebuilt from scratch in two days by Heritage organisation in time to be driven by Tony Dron on 1992 Monte Carlo Challenge

Thanks to Sawfords Classic & Sports, of Biglitt Lane, Cookham Dean, Berks (0628 471431) for lending us the red and blue cars for photography

Fixed-head Coupé model was launched at 1956 London Motor Show – now worth slightly less than comparable Roadster
Best of the books

The first book that any prospective MGA buyer should get is The MGA, MGB and V8G by Graham Robson. Another first-class, fact-packed MRP Collector's Guide, MGA 1500, 1600, Twin-Cam, an Osprey AutoHistory by the late F Wilson McComb, may appear to be an alternative but is complementary: Wilson’s unrivalled inside knowledge of MG and emotionally charged approach make this book very enjoyable.

Something of a 'bible' for any MGA owner is Original MGA, The Restorer's Guide to all Roadster and Coupé models, including Twin-Cam, by Anders Ditlev Clausager, published by Bay View Books in 1993. This is thoroughly researched, finely illustrated and excellent for identifying MGAs from chassis numbers.

Brooklands Books collections of contemporary published material, mainly road tests, provide fascinating nostalgia plus useful reference for MGA enthusiasts.

A wealth of excellent practical material is available: factory workshop manuals are in print and can be bought from specialists such as Moss or Brown & Gammons. The parts catalogues are also extremely useful, with well-drawn exploded views of assemblies. Well respected by the experts is the MGA 1955-1962 Owners Workshop Manual from Haynes; it's a practical alternative to the reprinted factory manual.

The MG Car Club offers strong support to owners through its MGA Register: A Club publication, A Brief Guide to MGA Restoration, gives member Andy Sargent's story of the restoration of his 1600 Roadster. It's inexpensively printed but full of invaluable information.

Buying an MGA

Unfortunately, it is necessary to be extremely careful when buying an MGA, even when it appears to have been beautifully restored at some point in the past. Things are not always what they seem.

Originality of specification has assumed more importance in the market in recent years but before that it was not unusual for, say, a 1500 to be converted to Mk1 specification. This was easy to do and the finished result might be indistinguishable from the later, faster model, both to look at and to drive... except for one thing: it's very easy to check the chassis number and see exactly what the car was when new.

Another fraudulent way to enhance the apparent value of an MGA is to buy a 'tired' Coupé, rebuild it as a perfect Roadster and fail to disclose the change. It's unlikely but if any previous owner has been foolish enough to attempt to convert a pushrod model to Twin-Cam specification, the result will certainly be a horrible mess as there are differences in the body, chassis and even such things as the position of the steering rack that cannot be altered satisfactorily.
Conversions from left-to-right-hand drive are fine if well done. In the case of Twin-Cams altered in this way, however, it’s important to check the steering rack to see that it can still lubricate it properly.

If an MG’s chassis number does not check out with its original specification, the value of the car may be reduced, perhaps by several thousands of pounds. Be warned about that, because when you come to sell it there will be no fooling the experts. Geoff Barron of the MG Register will be happy to check any MG from the chassis number and any photographs you supply: contact him through the MG Car Club.

Then there are some really badly restored examples around – cars that look quite good at first glance but turn out on close inspection to be cheaply tattered-up dogs. Such cars might have poorly fitting and badly restored bodywork, tired chassis, worn-out engines that deliver more smoke than power and gearboxes that sound and feel as if they are about to fail apart. Don’t be too alarmed if an MG falls out of third gear, though. That’s normally relatively inexpensive to put right (although the box will have to come out).

Look particularly for any tapers in the gaps between the doors and the body. There is no scope for adjustment here; it can only be corrected by means of a major rebuild. However bright the paintwork, and however neat the trim, the only answer with such cars is to dismantle them and start restoring them again. The simple truth is that you would probably be better off avoiding such horrors and finding an honest wreck, the history of which is at least known. You can be pretty confident of being able to get all the right parts to rebuild such a vehicle properly.

On the other hand, there are also plenty of very finely restored MGs around. Just take care to check everything properly before buying. Although over 100,000 MGAs were made, the sad fact is that many of them were abandoned, scrapped or dismantled for parts long before their strong chassis had rotted away. Experts reckon there may be up to 5,000 complete MGs still in circulation around the world but it is impossible to be precise. There are 1,800 pushrod MGAs listed on the UK Register and about 3,000 in the USA but it is recognised that there may be some duplication here, as there has been considerable transatlantic trade in recent years. The Twin-Cam was always a rare car and, while it is nice to imagine that a few hundred are hidden away somewhere, this model is now hard to find. There are probably no more than 50 Twin-Cams active in Britain today and probably about twice that number in the States.

What should you pay? Leaving out the best concours contestants, which are worth more, a good 1500 Roadster is worth about £13,000 and a later pushrod model in the same condition should fetch about £15,000. Restorable wrecks go for about £3,000. If you want a Twin-Cam, be prepared to search; good ones start at about £20,000 but you will have to pay a lot more to secure a perfect example. If you are lucky enough to find a Twin-Cam in need of full restoration, you might get it for £10,000 but be prepared to go to £12,000. The fixed-head Coupé models are generally worth about 15% less than their Roadster equivalents.