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MGA

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

Back in 1950, an MG advertisement for the then-new TD Midget said: '...The mid-century 'Midge' 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 our sports cars rather than our sensible family cars that enthusiasts overseas really hankered after.

And there's no question about it: MG led the start of the British motor industry's post-war sports car 'export or die' push, 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 there 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 misreading of what was actually produced. The frustrated designers in Abingdon (mainly Syd Enever, encouraged by his energetic and able boss, John Thornley), when they were finally allowed to produce their new car, unveiled in the MGA the fine culmination of a line that went back to pre-war days.

The real departure from tradition, when you look under the skin, came with the unitary-construction MGB in the early Sixties. That was a worldwide winner but so, 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 saloon, MG had reached 'Z' in the alphabet.



What The Motor said

Of the 1500 Roadster in 1955: '...An uncommonly roadworthy 1.5-litre sports car of high performance... To drive the MGA on a winding open road is a sheer enthusiast's delight... the secret lies in an admirable example of useful and controllable oversteer... The famous slogan of the factory has indeed never been better applied.'

Of the 1500 Coupé in 1957: '...there is a choice of four cars, all of European origin, which will beat by a useful margin both the 100mph and the 25mpg mark, the latest recruit to this select company being the MGA model with the fixed-head coupé body... we were particularly impressed by the robustness of the car and the entire absence of chassis wave or body shake...'

Of the Twin-Cam Roadster in 1958: '...it is relatively noisy, quite untemperamental and will probably appeal in the main to owners who wish to win races... the highest praise can be given to the Dunlop disc brakes (which) combine smooth and progressive action right down to zero speed with a reassuring ability to slow the MG quite abruptly from 100mph... Its most endearing characteristic: that of being fun to drive.'

Of the 1600 in 1959: 'Extra acceleration and retardation... a chassis which seems never to 'put a foot wrong'... a very brisk car from point to point.'



Photography by Colin Burnham



DRIVING

While the Austin-Healey 3000 appealed to enthusiasts who wanted aggressive styling, a big engine and plenty of horsepower, those who opted 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 faithfully.

In their first road test of a 1500 in 1955 *The Motor's* testers summed it up: 'Rack and pinion steering and small cars have always gone well together, and the lightness of the steering with a small, four-spoked wheel is matched by a quickness and precision... the secret lies in an admirable example of useful and controllable oversteer... an improvement in the handling was found possible by inflating the tyres from the recommended fast-driving pressures of 18lb front and 23lb for the rear wheels to approximately 26lb on all four. The effect of the oversteer then was merely that the driver, rather like a pilot in some types of aircraft, steered into a turn and then virtually centralised the wheel to keep the car on its course. It was notable that... the extra sponginess of the tyres at lower pres-

ures did not make for a more comfortable ride, and had the further disadvantage of causing tyre squeal on corners, otherwise entirely absent.

'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 indifferent to the type of road surface.'

These comments hold good today, even though most MGAs 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 MGAs are a delight to drive on a twisty road, even when there's ice 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 & Gammons. It was like a new car and I wrote: 'By the time we got to Monte the MGA was just bedding in nicely. It was only in the last night that the steering rack began to work properly, for example. Until then it had been stiff and notchy with no caster

Above, two delightful Roadsters at play - the red example is a Twin-Cam, the blue car a 1500



Below left, looking nearly new, 1500 pushrod engine produces about 72bhp. Below, dashboard of Twin-Cam is neat and functional



action.' It took a few thousand miles for the car to become superb. The message is that all MGAs should be light and highly responsive to drive and there's something wrong if they are not like that.

Good brakes were always a hallmark of the MGA, too and, even though the early cars had drums all round, they gave plenty of feel and resisted fade very well. Later pushrod cars had the familiar disc

front/drum rear set-up, a very satisfactory arrangement, while the Twin-Cam model had expensive Dunlop discs all round, providing excellent stopping power with very little nosedive.

For this test, I drove a superb standard 1500 belonging to Tony Máycs: Tony's car has been restored to as-new condition 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 pressed on, hood down in the autumn sunshine.

According to the road tests, MGA performance was good for its day. *The Motor* achieved a top speed of 97.8mph in the 1500, with 0-60mph in 16.0sec and 26.7mpg overall. Power had been raised a little by the time the first 1500 Coupé was tested, it did 101.2mph, with 0-60mph in 15.7sec and 26.9mpg. The Coupé is a little faster on top speed thanks to its more slippery shape: this model had a deeper windscreen than the Roadster's but overall height was the same. The Coupé body and its wind-up windows reduce wind noise greatly at speed but that advantage can be cancelled out as it is often necessary to open a window for adequate ventilation.

I have 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 1500 Roadster. The later 1600, on road test with *The Motor*, managed 96.1mph (but there was a high wind and it

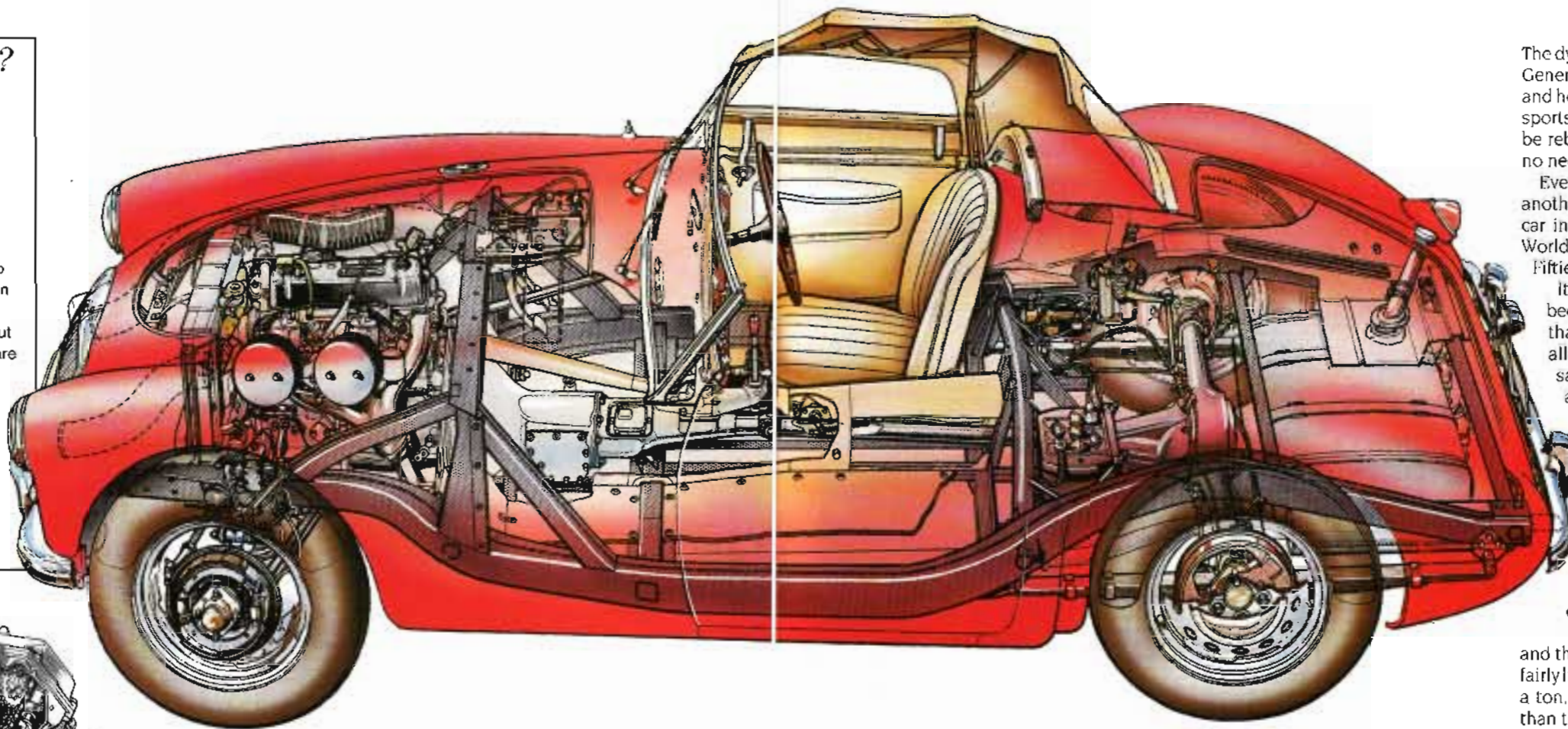
How many MGAs made?

Model	Home	Export
1500	2,687	56,063
1600	2,172	29,329
1600 Mk II	596	8,123
Twin-Cam	360	1,751
Total		101,081

Just look at those export figures! The United States alone bought 80% of all MGA production... under 6% were sold in the UK. A mere 360 Twin-Cams stayed in the home country when new.

Most MGAs were roadsters; only about 10% were coupés. The comparatively rare coupé body was 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, these figures cannot be far adrift.



The dynamic John Thornley was appointed Director and General Manager of the MG Car Company in that year and he took up the cause of Abingdon's new production sports car with typical energy and enthusiasm, only to be rebuffed by BMC supremo Leonard Lord, who saw no need for an in-house rival to Austin-Healey sales.

Even as late as 1953, then, MG was stuck with yet another update of the old T series, the TF. It was a good car in the MG tradition, and it has undeniable Olde Worlde charm today, but it was out of date in the mid-fifties and sales were slipping away badly.

It wasn't until 1955 that the new MG, which had been designed and developed at Abingdon rather than the BMC design centre at Cowley, was finally allowed to go into production. British sports car sales overseas were going so well that MG was at long last given the green light to commence manufacture of the MGA.

The MGA's independent front suspension was similar to that of the TF while the live back axle was a narrower version of that used in the contemporary saloon. BMC's B-series engine was chosen as it was strong, relatively cheap, had plenty of tuning potential and was readily available. That and the far more sleek shape of the body made the MGA a much faster car than the old TF.

Although the swoopy new body was made of steel and the chassis was a rugged item, the MGA was still a fairly light sports car. With an overall weight of well under a ton, the new model was only a few pounds heavier than the TF and far lighter than the later MGB.

The essential character of the pushrod MGA was retained throughout its production life. Noticeably more torque is produced by the 1600 version of the engine, adopted in May 1959, but from a design point of view they are all good cars. Choosing between the 1500, 1600 and 1600 Mk II (offered during the final year of production) is a matter of personal preference.

MG made a tremendous effort with the Twin-Cam to present a really high-quality, thoroughbred sports car at a bargain price. The all-round disc brakes, the elegant and very strong centre-lock steel wheels were valuable design points rather than cynical marketing tricks.

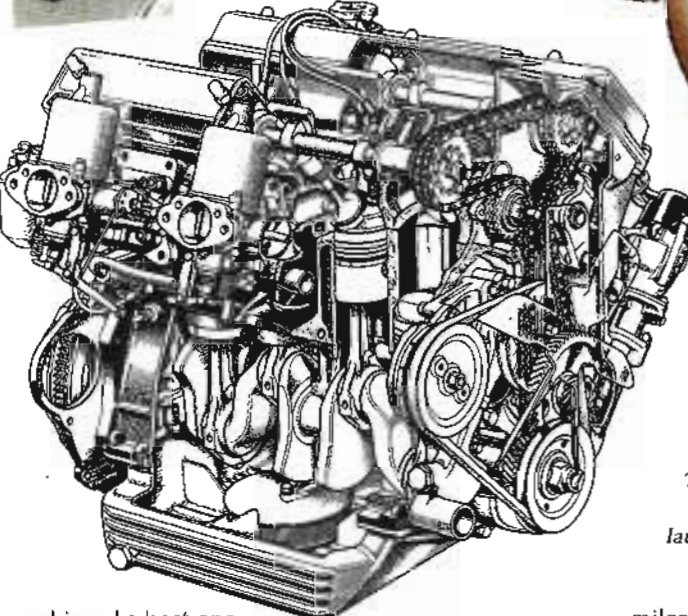
The Twin-Cam can be faulted in its design on two major points: first, it was in the beginning too highly tuned to be released to the general public and, second, it was hell to maintain, because once the body went on to the rolling chassis on the production line it was all but impossible to get at regular service points on the engine such as the distributor and the fan belt adjustment. By the time the problems had been reasonably well sorted out – and they were – it was too late and the model had been withdrawn. Pity.

After the Twin-Cam had been taken away from the dealers' showrooms, a few 'de luxe' models, which were, in fact, leftover Twin-Cam chassis fitted with 1600 pushrod engines, were sold. There's no way of telling how many cars were treated in this way.

OWNING & RESTORING

For this information I consulted Geoff Barron of the MG Car Club's MGA Register. Geoff, an MGA enthusiast since his school days, is a leading authority and he has just completed the restoration of a superb black Twin-Cam, a stablemate for his white pushrod model.

Here, reduced to hard-hitting facts, is Geoff's advice. Running a pushrod MGA is simplicity itself, service accessibility is excellent and you can get new parts from



Cutaways show 1958 Twin-Cam engine, left, and 1500 Roadster as launched in 1955, above



Above, fascia of immaculate 1500 belonging to Tony Mayes. Below, MGAs were more than handy in competition: A Foster at Aintree in 1956



Above, red Twin-Cam and blue 1500 in their element, hacking through the lanes

achieved a best one-way speed of exactly 100mph; 0-60mph came out at 13.3sec and it did 24.4mpg overall.

The Twin-Cam is in a different league when it comes to performance: though the design is still based on the B-series block, it has a thoroughbred, high-performance 1,588cc engine producing 108bhp at 6,700rpm. Twin-Cam engines sound fabulous and they 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 probably lies most of this model's reputation for engine unreliability.

When *The Motor* tested a new Twin-Cam in 1958 it did 113.0mph, 0-60mph in 9.1sec and returned 22.2mpg. With a bit more weight over the front wheels – the Twin-Cam is about 140lb heavier than a 1500 pushrod model – and different steering geometry, it feels a little heavier but still has the same poise.

Trying to criticise the MGA as a driver's car, the main faults to pick out would be wind noise with the hood raised and the lack of a high cruising gear. For a dispassionate contemporary view of the MGA, let's quote Charles Bulmer of *The Motor* who, reporting on 30,000

miles in an MGA 1600 Coupé, wrote in January, 1964: 'I had driven enough MGAs before to specify a front anti-roll bar as an essential extra – without it this model has a splendidly controllable oversteer which flatters one's skills immensely but tail-sliding round corners with smooth and fluent ease is only impressive as long as there isn't a Mini ahead or astern going 10mph faster.' He wasn't keen on the standard seats: 'Sometimes at crowded parties 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 they never go round corners...' Thirty thousand miles later, however, he would conclude: 'Two things spoil it as a sports car. One is its wide-ratio gearbox, which makes second gear



Below, original sales brochure for MGA 1600 touts 'Safety fast!' slogan

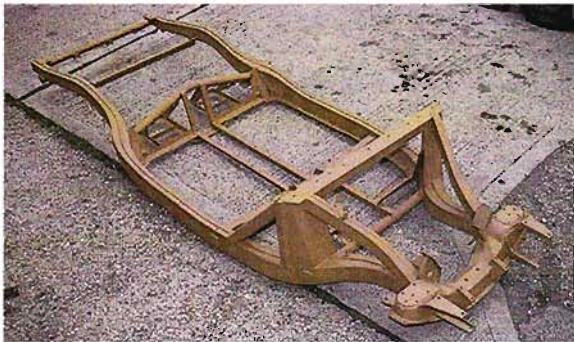


almost useless in open-road motoring, and the other, not unrelated, is that the engine is not sufficiently smooth and quiet to make high rpm in the gears a pleasure. Nevertheless, this is the only car I can remember which I have grown to like more and more as time went on. It seems to mature rather than deteriorate with age.'

DESIGN

The story of Abingdon's frustration at being held back by BMC is the stuff of MG legend. In 1951 Syd Enever's team at MG had produced a special car for George Phillips to drive at Le Mans: in its styling it was very close to the subsequent MGA but its traditional narrow chassis meant that the driver was seated rather high up.

MG was involved in successful speed record attempts and the slippery shape of Phillips' Le Mans car reflected those projects. Enever later gave Roy Brocklehurst the job of designing a new, wider chassis for the 1951 Le Mans car, to place the driver and passenger lower in the cockpit. That chassis, basically the same as the later production frame for the MGA, was ready early in 1952.



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

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.

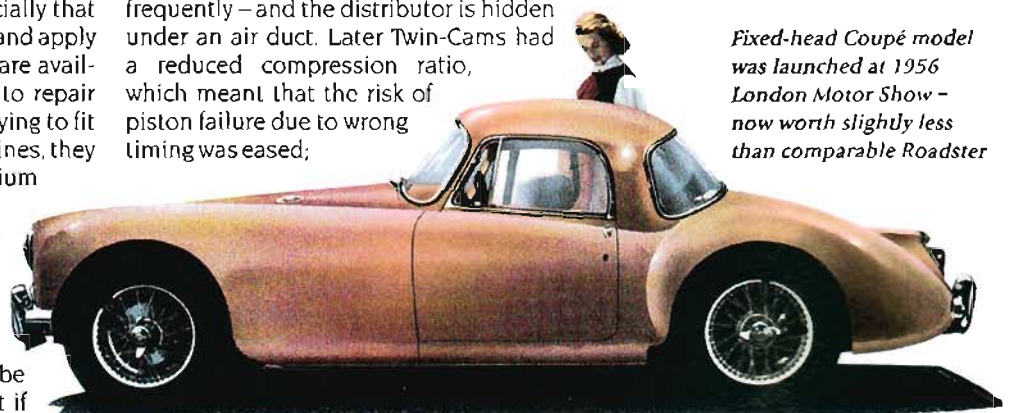
If your car has wire wheels, don't run radials on the 48-spoke type as they are not strong enough: buy the readily-available 60-spoke wheels. Replacement steering racks can be tight and a few never loosen up properly. But if

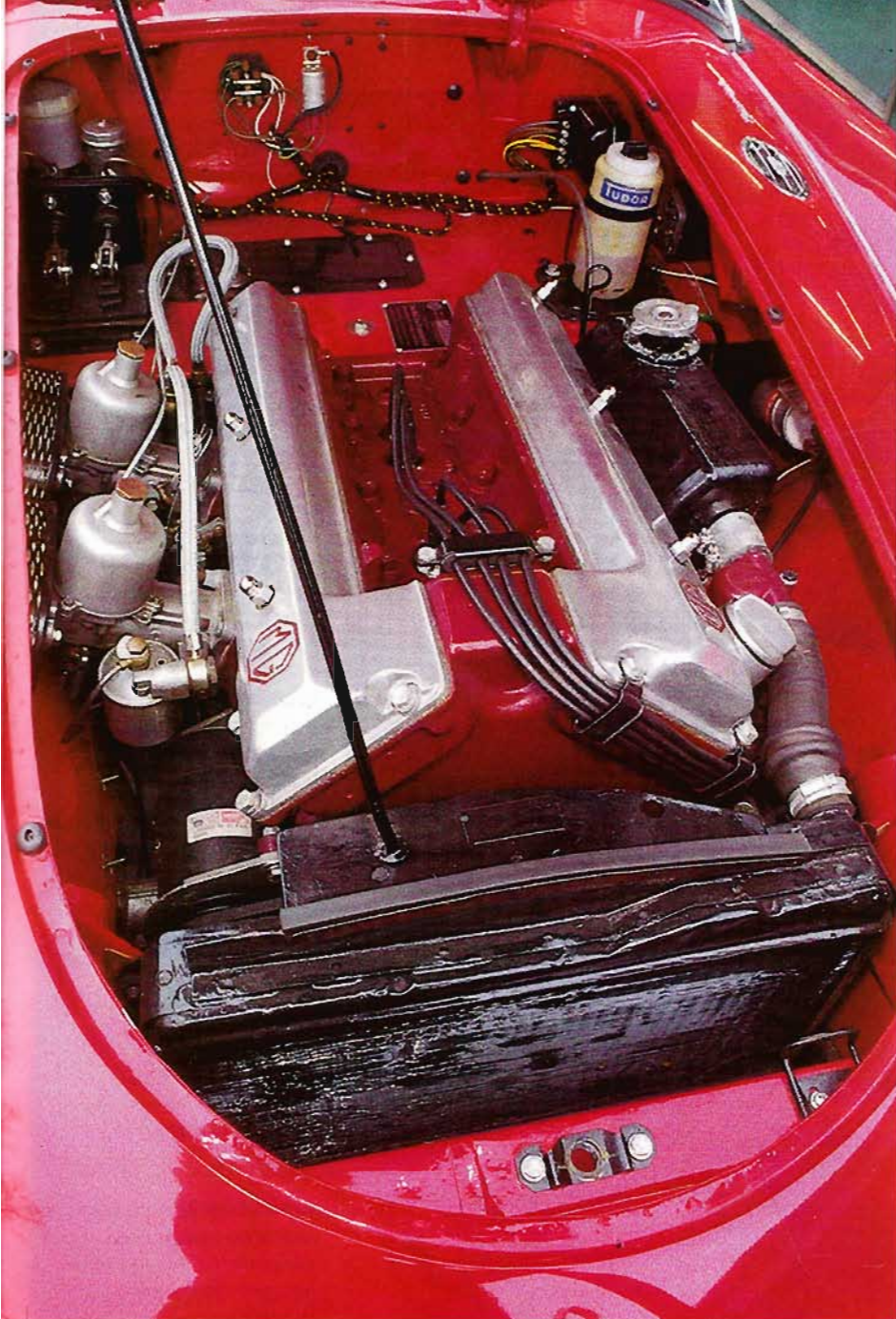
you want a classic sports car – believe me as well as Geoff! – the pushrod MGA will be as easy to run as anything. And if you want more performance, there are plenty of period modifications and tuning kits available.

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;

Thanks to Sawfords Classic & Sports, of Bigrith 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





Above, 108hp Twin-Cam engine had reputation for burning pistons - does demand conscientious servicing to remain reliable



even so, an electronic ignition system might be worth considering for the sake of reliability and convenience.

Brake parts can be hard to find: there are alternatives that fit nicely but these can, for example, shift the balance. Twin-Cam engine rebuilds should be carried out by an expert such as Peter Woods or Bob West - and it's no cheap, touring lump. Before you go into Twin-Cam ownership you need to be aware of these facts.

It's worth knowing that there are fairly large stocks of used parts: you can get a perfect used chassis for a few hundred pounds and, before buying a new body, remember that a very good secondhand one can be found for up to £2,000. If restoring a body and chassis, look for rust as follows: inside inner face of main chassis rails by seats (wet carpets set up corrosion), bottom of A-posts, between sills and chassis, battery boxes, cross-members, boot floor, inner wing panel within boot, corners of the main body section at the lower extreme front and all along the main body where the wings fit (it's usually the body rather than the wings that rots). When restoring a complete body, Geoff says: "Once you go wrong you can never recover, so tack it all lightly and adjust everything before final welding."

Best of the books

The first book that any prospective MGA buyer should get is *The MGA, MGB and MGC* 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.

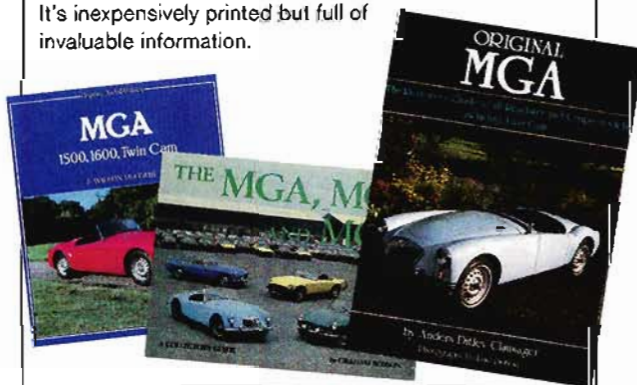
Something of a 'bible' for any MGA owner is *Original MGA, The Restorer's Guide to all Roadster and Coupé models, including Twin-Cam*, by Anders Ditlev Clausager, published by Bay View Books in 1993. This is thoroughly researched, finely illustrated and excellent for identifying MGAs from chassis numbers.

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 MkII specification. This was very 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 is 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 you can still lubricate it properly.

If an MGA'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 MGA Register will be happy to check any MGA 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 tarted-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 fall apart. Don't be too alarmed if an MGA 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 taper 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 MGAs 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



Clubs

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MGCC MGA Register
Geoff Barron
Write to MG Car Club
(above)

**North American
MGA Register**
Contact via MG Car
Club, UK (above)

MG Owners Club
Membership Secretary
Octagon House
Station Road
Swavesey
Cambs
CB4 5QZ
01954 231125

Top and left, that luggage rack is no ostentatious adornment – cars like these have very little interior stowage space

reckon there may be up to 5,000 complete MGAs 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 £5,000. 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



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