

MG

"It was very quiet it could outrag a Jaguar"
 Graham Robson concludes the
 fascinating story of Abingdon's "designs
 that might have been"

EX234, therefore, would logically have been the MGD if it had been produced, but it was even more important than this – in true Ford Capri style it could also have replaced the Midget! Provision was made for the 1275cc engine, the 1798cc engine, and perhaps for something a bit more powerful in the end.

It was no larger than the MGB, and had to be light. There was 2 + 2 seating in a shell no longer than the MGB, independent rear suspension with a semi-trailing wish-bone layout, 12in or 13in wheels, a slightly shorter wheelbase (87 inches compared with 91 inches for the MGB) – and Hydro-lastic suspension! The chassis-mounted differential, incidentally, was culled from the remnants of the Austin Gypsy tooling.

One basic prototype, structurally, was completed at Abingdon, then shipped off to Pininfarina, who completed the very attractive little prototype and sent it back for approval. Although there was virtually no common engineering with the Midget or MGB, apart from engines and a few details, there was a distinct family likeness, and the car's looks were very popular.

However, just at this time, the full impact of American safety regulations began to weigh on Abingdon's resources. Their total design and engineering staff was rarely over 50 in all, of whom only 15 to 20 were designers – and the hard fact was that in 1968 they could have developed a new model or they could make sure that existing models could be "kept in the market" in North America. For better or worse, EX234 had to be shelved, but it was not scrapped. One day, it was thought, the single prototype could have been taken out of store, dusted down, and properly developed; that day never arrived, British Leyland was founded, and every company's product policies were thrown back into the melting pot.

It was from British Leyland, however, that the next and most important project came. In 1969 and 1970 there had been deep thoughts on the future for BLMC sports cars. This then led to a request to Triumph to consider a new front-engined sports car (which matured early in 1975 as the TR7) – while MG were commissioned to look at a new mid-engined project!

Apart from its engineering, the new car had rather remarkable styling lines. The style was completed by Harris Mann at Longbridge from original Abingdon proposals (Mann also takes credit for the TR7), and is still thought to be so up-to-date, with features sure to be used on other cars, that I wasn't allowed to see the sketches! The best clue I could get was that it was "rather like a Fiat X1/9".

ADO21, as the car was coded, was built up around an Austin Maxi 1750HL engine and gearbox; MG and Longbridge designers reworked the transmission so that the gear linkage could be "winkled out to the front of the case, and between the seats" (Hayter's words). Hydro-lastic suspension had long gone from MG's thinking, and the rear suspension, wrapped around the Maxi power pack, was De Dion. There were two ways of doing this, both tried on the single running prototype. One scheme used a De Dion tube around the front of the engine, with a big central ball joint to push the car along and to act as transverse location, along with inclined coil spring/damper units and radius arms. The second scheme (preferred for eventual production because it would have been cheaper and easier to manufacture in quantity) used a tube behind the engine, a Watts linkage for transverse location, and a pair of very long single-leaf springs which doubled as radius arms.

MG saw the advantage of the mid-engined layout as being a combination of traction, structural integrity, and the ability for a very controlled "crush" performance in mandatory crash tests, plus a great increase in cockpit floor space (in the absence of a big gearbox tunnel), and the probability of having a much cooler car. The radiator, incidentally, could have been alongside the engine (Maxi fashion) or up in the nose for maximum ram effect.

Disadvantages included the splitting of storage space into two packets – one ahead of the passenger box and one at the rear behind the engine – and the fact that the car would have had to be a strict two-seater. However, with American requirements in mind, siting the petrol tank was a real headache – solved finally by keeping it away from crash barriers by slotting it in between the engine and the back of the passenger seats.

Incidentally, front suspension was by conventional MacPherson struts – common, in fact, with the TR7 layout – and space was schemed into this package for the BLMC 2200 'E6' 6-cylinder transverse engine pack. This engine, of course, could also be a 2.6-litre by using the Maxi 1750 bore and stroke dimensions.

As we now know, Triumph's Bullet project won this particular design competition, and ADO21 was consigned to the "might have been" category. MG were not even allowed to preserve the single running prototype, and it has now been cut up. As far as I can see, MG have now put all thoughts of mid-engined machinery behind them.



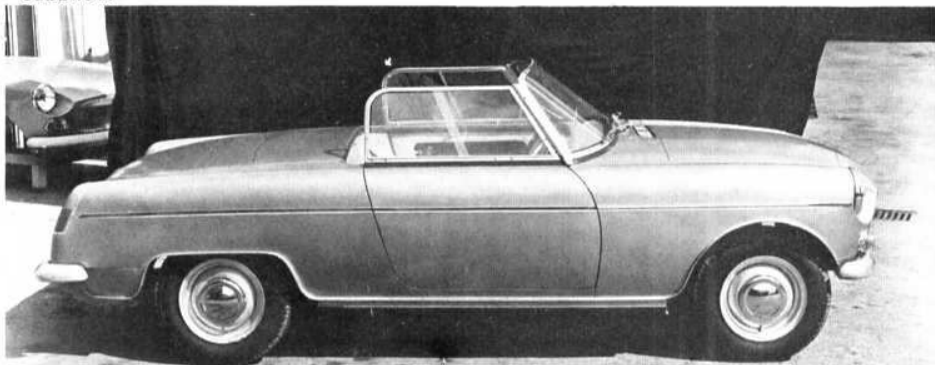


Above, EX234 – the projected MGB replacement – in all its prototype glory, see last month's colour picture. Compare this side with . . . Left, the near side decorative treatment. Left below, the only prototype had a sumptuous trimmed and very attractive layout. Note the "plus 2" rear seat.



Left, the Mini-based Abingdon-developed MG sports car, coded ADO34. Above, in coupé form it was actually ADO35, and related to the MGB GT. Below, this was the soft top version.

Below, a variation on the ADO34 scheme, done by Abingdon stylists. Note similarities to MGB (and the MGB bonnet left of the picture). Left, below, there was room enough for two back seat passengers in the ADO34, but a metal tonneau would also have been supplied.



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After ADO21 had been cancelled, and before the MGB V8 came along, the prolific Abingdon design staff found time to try several other engines in the MGB. One car, converted as a private venture by Geoffrey Healey at Warwick, was given a Coventry Climax vee-8 power unit – not the full-house 1½-litre racing engine, but the productionised CFA 2½-litre single-cam vee-8 which was the largest of a whole family of modern engines designed by Walter Hassan and Peter Winsor Smith in the 1960s. It was purely a look-see, and progressed no further. Because there were difficulties in getting sufficient quantities of the Rover vee-8 engine, Triumph Stag units were also tried, but soon rejected because they were both too large and too heavy.

An interesting sideline to all the straight-forward sports car projects was that, in 1960, Abingdon got involved in developing a sporting Mini! The Mini package caused as much of a sensation inside BMC as it did among the competitors, and MG were itching to try their hand with it. Front-wheel-drive and a transverse engine was a new experience to them, and they liked the idea of new standards of balance and response.

At first glance the Mini power pack looked high, and it was thought that ADO34 prototypes would always be too high in the nose, but even the first of the convertible prototypes was a chunkily attractive little car. At the time there seemed to be no doubt that it would sell well (just as the later MG1100 did – to the tune of more than 100,000 copies!). The first car had all-British styling, probably to the credit of Dick Burzi from Longbridge, and under its skin there were the usual Mini subframes and suspensions, connected centrally by one very large “backbone”

tube, and also through the strong box sills. Jack Daniels, Alec Issigonis' right-hand man, did the original layout at Longbridge.

It might have been an MG or an Austin-Healey (both were in prospect) and although the engine specification was never finalised it would almost certainly have been common with the Midget of the day.

The first car was Longbridge's idea, but Enever and his team were sure that they could do a better job on the basis of the longer-wheelbase (actually Minivan dimensions). Abingdon's own prototype, still coded ADO34, was an altogether more exciting possibility, and was envisaged with a convertible hood or a fastback coupé shell, and with the possibility of a removable metal tonneau over the “+2” rear seats. Before this car was finally shelved it was given Hydrolastic suspension, but its use in the production car was by no means certain.

What killed it off? Almost certainly the fact that the Midget had only recently been devised from the restyling of the Sprite, and also because of the success of the Mini-Cooper *saloons*. With the Cooper already winning races and rallies in great profusion, BMC saw no point in producing an open competitor for it. Like EX234, already mentioned, this fine little Mini-based sports car has been preserved, and is still in store.

Through and round all this activity, the Midget has carried serenely on, selling strongly from 1961 to the present, with upgrading necessary to keep it competitive. The only tentative re-engineering exercise was when a single car was made with the 1798cc 'B' Series engine grafted on to a beefed-up Midget gearbox. This car was race-tuned and campaigned very successfully by Roger Enever, Syd's son. Odd things were thought of, like lengthening the floor to give more passenger space, or converting the suspension to Hydrolastic (Timo Makinen tried out that car, and his comments are quite interesting).

There was once a proposal to productionise the very pretty Sebring and Le Mans Midget coupés of 1965, but high costs for tooling, and the prospect of a hefty selling price killed that one.

Not that this is all that has occupied the minds of Enever's, Roy Brocklehurst's or Don Hayter's engineers over the years. To lean over Don's shoulder and follow him in a quick flip through the project register confirms that:

“After the EX181 record car had done its job, we got into a quarter-scale mock-up situation with a transverse rear-engined supercharged 1000cc engine, with a prone driver right at the front . . . there was once meant to be a close-coupled MG GT car, destined to follow the old ZB Magnette concept, based on what turned out to be the Marina floorpan . . . ADO47 is what became the Midget . . . 3-litre Riley, that never happened . . . a twin-cam Pathfinder, that was a very nice engine from Morris Engines Branch to replace the old Riley four, but only one was built . . . a 2.6-litre MG four-seater sports saloon, that was a modified Magnette with a new front end and the C-Series engine, EX202. We built one, it was very quiet, and it could outrag Jaguars because it was so light . . . EX214, the Frua body on the MGA . . . the vee-4 MGA, EX216 . . . Sprite with a 1600cc B-Series engine, our first attempt to up-engine the car . . . EX228, a transverse rear-engined A-Series car, only a drawing, it didn't happen at all . . . EX233, that's the 1000cc record car I've mentioned already . . . GT prototype to 1965 Le Mans regulations, that was purely a streamlined roof proposal on an MGB which Stuart Turner wanted . . . Mini with an 1850cc engine, Ye Gods . . . EX241, which was the light-alloy GTS version of the MGC which raced, the one with flared arches and the lot, we built six . . . EX242, based on the ADO28, that's got a date in 1968, so it *did* exist by the time British Leyland was formed . . . EX249, that of course became the production MGB V8 . . .”

Need I say that at a certain point in this discussion, the security curtain was very firmly replaced. A comment on one or two things I saw, or thought I saw, downstairs was studiously ignored. This made me very happy. All the evidence of the morning was that Abingdon's minds were consistently fertile. It seems certain that more, much more, is still under way. ●



Left, the Pininfarina Healey 3000 which inspired the MGB GT. Above, ADO34 as Abingdon would have liked to make it. It might have replaced the Spridget. Below Longbridge's styling version had entirely different lines.

