

TEST MATCH

In another of our unique Group Test recreations we give readers a chance to act as judge and jury – this time on six contemporary Classic sports cars. Brian Palmer stood by as court usher

OUR very first Test Match, back in May 1987, looked at six sports cars of the early to mid-Sixties – and this time we've returned to the same theme. Then our shortlist looked like this: MGB, Sunbeam Alpine, Triumph TR3A, Austin-Healey 3000 MkIII, Lotus Elan and Jaguar E-type.

For our eighth in this popular series we've turned the clock back slightly to the end of the Fifties and the early Sixties. This means that our evergreen MG is now an A – an MGA 1600 Mk1 in fact – our Triumph remains the long-lived TR3A, our Austin-Healey is an earlier 100/6 this time, but our specialist makes have all changed completely. We've installed the controversial-when-new Daimler SP250 née Dart, a rose-red Morgan half as old as time, and a bespoke and exotic AC Ace to set the fur flying and the adrenalin pumping.

To be frank, most of our participant models date from the Fifties in their various design concepts, so they were not exactly the state of the art even when new. But they were selling in such large quantities at home and abroad that their makers were quite happy to keep them soldiering on.

The MGA was, arguably, old even by the time of its launch in 1955. It had evolved from a streamlined Le Mans TD in 1951 to a full production prototype the following year. But BMC boss Len Lord put it into cold store for three years and MG cobbled-up the warmed-over TF instead. However the MGA was significant in that it steered Abingdon away from making an admittedly popular museum piece towards a thoroughly competent, even competitive, machine and paved the way for the most successful MG sports car ever, the MGB.

Once criticised for its blandness by trad fans, the MGA is now applauded for its faultless Fifties styling allied to civilised and thoroughly modern road manners, so that thirty years on 'the car that MG enthusiasts forgot' is deservedly top of the pops.

The Triumph TR3A was a different kettle of fish entirely. Launched as the TR2 in March 1953, it was one of the

first of the new generation sports cars from the big manufacturers. The TR was as modern, then, as the MG was antiquated.

From its semi-full width body styling to its two-litre modified Standard Vanguard wet-liner engine – even pioneering disc brakes in 1956 – everything about the TR seemed up-to-the-minute. At least on paper . . .

The fact remains that the TR always enjoyed, whether by accident or design, a reputation for, shall we say, rather vintage road manners. And TR owners have always rejoiced in their image as tamers of a rather raw and savage beast. That highly attractive, rather masculine, quality enabled Triumph to sell a colossal 58,236 TR3As – Triumph's biggest sports car success until the TR6 of the Seventies.

A hairy chest was always *de rigueur* if you owned an Austin-Healey. We all know the story of how Len Lord noticed Donald Healey's stunning prototype at the 1952 Motor Show and bought it on the spot. That bid to push the Austin name into the fore against Triumph was, of course, the reason why Abingdon had to wait so long for their MGA.

The brand new marque of Austin-Healey thus came into being and the big four and later six-cylinder sports cars garnered a considerable following, if not quite the spectacular sales of some rivals. They also outlived all their period opposition by a wide margin, finally expiring in 1968, and from first to last still recognisably the same car.

Another of our contestants could be said with certainty to be unmistakable in any other company. The Daimler SP250 (Daimler Dart) has styling you either like or loathe, but there's no doubting that it's original and different.

Whatever the reasoning behind marketing such a freakish departure from the company norm, the fact is that the dashing Daimler was, for the most part, rather good. Conceived very rapidly, the chassis details reek rather heavily of the Triumph parts bin, but the engine was Daimler's own; and what a beauty it was. A high-revving 2½-litre alloy V8 gave 120mph, all disc brakes stopped it

with alacrity, and the heavy-duty glassfibre bodywork is both corrosion-proof and long lasting.

The Morgan has sold on its traditional virtues longer than any of the other contenders – though that virtue may well have been born out of necessity. Even so the Malvern Link factory has never had problems shifting its characterful cars to a surprisingly large and loyal band of supporters.

The Plus Four was launched in 1951 and gained a useful power bonus from its Standard Vanguard-derived two-litre wet-liner 'four'. Its biggest cosmetic change arrived in '55 when the flat rad changed to a more 'modern' cowled one – and it's worn the same face ever since!

From 1956-on the engine was virtually a standard TR3 95bhp unit, boosted to 105bhp in 1961. But not much else was so up-to-date. Separate chassis and alloy over wood body construction harked back to 1936 when the Morgan had only just gained a fourth road wheel, while its simple sliding pillar independent front suspension first saw the light of day in the Edwardian twilight of 1909.

Our last contender, the AC, also first saw its forbears scuttling around on three wheels. Always made in penny numbers, the AC, like the Morgan, soon gained an impressive record in all forms of motor sport.

The Ace, announced at the 1953 Motor Show, was something of a revelation however. Post-war production had, until then, centred on the sober, cart-sprung two-litre saloon that was never going to set the world alight. The Ace, on the other hand, is up with the best for good looks.

Inspired by the Touring-bodied Barchetta 166 'Inter' Ferrari, the AC Ace not only looked pretty but had an excellent chassis, independently sprung at each end, courtesy of Vincent Davison of Tojeiro. Engines were, variously, AC's own venerable two-litre six, or similar units from Bristol and Ford. The Ace then formed the basis of the Cobra, the ultimate muscle car of the Sixties.

1961 MGA 1600 Mk1

Owner:	Geoffrey Barron
Engine:	4-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	1,588cc
Power:	80bhp
Top Speed:	101mph
0-60mph:	15 secs
Fuel consumption:	24mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	21cwt
Length:	13ft
Price new:	£940
Price now:	£15,000

The MGA was the first modern sports MG boasting a twin carb BMC B-Series engine, coil independent front suspension, and rack and pinion steering. The 1600cc unit was hastily concocted for the 1959 season after the Twin Cam debacle threatened to scupper an otherwise sound machine's good reputation.

Owner Geoffrey Barron, a 47-year-old company director of a Civil Engineering firm, purchased his car three years ago



Photography: Simon Childs and Allan Levy

– in boxes! A total restoration has taken place over the past 15 months, with the owner carrying out the majority of the work.

Finished in July of this year, the car had only covered 800 miles by the time of our test. Geoffrey is secretary of the MGA Register within the MG Car Club.

1959 Triumph TR3A

Owner:	Tony Jeanes
Engine:	4-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	1,991cc
Power:	100bhp
Top Speed:	102mph
0-60mph:	13.2 secs
Fuel consumption:	25mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	18½cwt
Length:	12ft 7in
Price new:	£991
Price now:	£8,000

The TR-series put Triumph firmly on the sports car map, and took America by storm. The TR3A was easily the biggest selling-variant of the Fifties and early Sixties, and mainstay of the first generation TRs until the squarer Michelotti-styled TR4 of 1961 made its entrance.

British Telecom salesman Tony Jeanes, 36, has owned his 1959 example for 13 years, during which time it has undergone one rebuild. Tony believes in using his car and has completed two TR Register Tours of Britain, one John O'Groats to Lands End Run, the annual Lake District Rally and several continental touring holidays to prove it.

1958 Austin-Healey 100/6

Owner:	Mike Ward
Engine:	6-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	2,639cc
Power:	117bhp
Top Speed:	114mph
0-60mph:	11.2 secs
Fuel consumption:	23mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	25¼cwt
Length:	13ft 1.5in
Price new:	£1,168
Price now:	£25,000

The 100/6 of 1956 may have been a development of the earlier four-cylinder Austin-Healey but it involved more than just simply substituting one engine for another, as quite detailed chassis re-engineering took place, including letting-in two extra inches to the middle. Yet the car was something of a disappointment at first. Weight had dissipated any theoretical advantage the engine may have had, but a later six-port cylinder head improved things and offered potential for further tuning.

Mike Ward is a 45-year-old furnishing director and has owned his car for 11 years. Its original owner was John Deeley, who raced the marque in its heyday, and Mike – who is the chairman of the Austin-Healey Midlands Centre – commenced a total rebuild lasting five years which ended in 1983. The car has numerous concours wins to its credit.

1962 Daimler SP250

Owner:	Simon Pickford
Engine:	V8 (pushrod, ohv)

Capacity:	2,548cc
Power:	140bhp
Top Speed:	123mph
0-60mph:	10.2 secs
Fuel consumption:	23mpg
Suspension:	F: ind coil/wishbone R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	23¼cwt
Length:	13ft 4.5in
Price new:	£1,395
Price now:	£13,000

The heart of the 'Dart' or SP250, as it was rapidly renamed after threats of litigation from Dodge (who'd already taken 'Dart' as their own), is undoubtedly its engine. Designed by Edward Turner, who had made his name as the brilliant mind behind the Triumph motorcycle engines, it was his crowning achievement.

The rest of the car combined the TR3A's rather vintage chassis detailing with an individualistically-styled body in the still-new glassfibre which Daimler fabricated themselves. Sir William Lyons acquired Daimler in 1960 and this unlikely sports car was killed-off. The engine was too good to lose, however, and lived on in the Jaguar MkII hull as the Daimler V8-250.

Simon Pickford, 36, is a finance director who doubles as treasurer of the Daimler and Lanchester Owners Club. He has owned his car for 18 months, having bought it from the original owner with some 160,000 miles on the clock.

1957 AC Ace Bristol

Owner:	Paul Stafford
Engine:	6-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	1,971cc
Power:	120bhp
Top Speed:	117mph
0-60mph:	9 secs
Fuel consumption:	23mpg
Suspension:	F: ind tr leaf/wishbone R: ind tr leaf/wishbone
Weight:	16cwt?
Length:	12ft 8in
Price new:	£1,835
Price now:	£60,000

Easily the rarest of our assembled group, the AC Ace has always enjoyed a certain mystique and, like the rest, is a model which can be used equally well on the road or the race track.

Owner Paul Stafford, a 43-year-old company director from Peterborough, does just that. He completely rebuilt his lovely machine in 1973 – he's owned it for 18 years, lucky man – and has covered 110,000 miles since. Which is rather a pleasant change from the 'too precious to be used' attitude prevalent with certain investor/owners of later Cobra derivatives.

1966 Morgan Plus Four Super Sports

Owner:	Allan Cameron
Engine:	4-cylinder (pushrod, ohv)
Capacity:	2,138cc
Power:	115-120bhp
Top Speed:	115-120mph
0-60mph:	7.8 secs
Fuel consumption:	25mpg approx
Suspension:	F: ind sliding pillar R: semi-elliptic leaf
Weight:	17cwt
Length:	12ft
Price new:	£950
Price now:	£22,000

The evergreen Morgan is a kind of motorised calendar, reminding us constantly of time's inexorable march onwards. Yet the Morgan still manages to cheat the fate of all its contemporaries and there are long queues of people eager to experience motoring as it used to be.

Allan Cameron, a 37-year-old dairyman from Faringdon in Oxfordshire and past local secretary of the Morgan Sports Car Club, has a rather special Morgan. Nominally a Plus Four, it was built for Eric White – a Bedfordshire Morgan agent – as a four-seater. White kept the car for seven years before replacing it with the only factory-built Plus Eight four-seater.

Allan bought the Plus Four in 1983 after White had completely rebuilt her, and at 83,000 miles he had the Morgan's engine rebuilt to Super Sports (Lawrencetune) spec. Though later than the other cars this Morgan, used both on the road and track, could easily pass for one of six years earlier. They don't rush things at Malvern Link . . .

The Test

That concludes the outline of our runners and riders. The format of the Group Test is as follows. Each of the owners forsakes his/her own car for the day to assess the other five around a road course of about twenty miles.

Each owner has to fill in a detailed questionnaire on all five cars and then at the end of the day make the most agonising decision of all – which car other than their own they would most like to take home with them. The result is often less obvious than you might suppose as preconceived ideas are dashed and new passions unexpectedly kindled. Let's see what they made of our six sports cars.

Austin-Healey 100/6

Allan Cameron (Morgan) felt the engine was as smooth and docile as he'd expected and beautifully flexible, but he thought the Big Healey's accelerative qualities were a bit flat (seven out of ten). He liked the steering, concluding that it was more precise than the AC he'd driven but rather heavy, so he awarded another seven marks.

Brakes dropped a point – "I disliked the non-standard servo" – and he found the gear positions hard to locate (6): "First is hard to find and reverse and second are much too close for comfort." The seats were criticised for lack of comfort and Allan disliked the marked pedal offset.

"It's a lovely chuckable car (8) but with ultimate roadholding inferior to the Ace (7). Where it gains is in its ride (9) and its excellent finish. But it's let down for me by the seats and brakes."

Simon Pickford (Daimler) also awarded the Healey's engine seven gongs. "Overall it's what I'd call a bit of a slogger. I was slightly disappointed by the performance but then this is only the 2.6-litre model. I liked the overdrive



The 1961 MG A 1600 belonging to Geoffrey Barron



Mike Ward's 1955 Austin-Healey 100/6



facility, though, and I only wish I had this on my car."

Simon was less happy with the steering (5): "very heavy, but also curiously low on feel – and the steering wheel was too low set for my taste. Mind you, the brakes were excellent (9) though slightly over-servoed in my opinion." The gearbox gained an eight, with criticisms similar to Allan's over the gate.

He too marked down the seats as offering little support and hated the offset pedals (6), but he liked the fittings and fixtures better (7), apart from the instruments which he found hard to read. Dynamically, he was in agreement with Allan again, as handling and roadholding departments were on six apiece: "The Healey is happiest in a straight line, although with experience it can be driven quickly around corners, and radials obviously help. The ride, however, is very good for a sports car, smoothing out all bumps most effectively, so I'd award nine there."

Conclusion? "The Healey's looks are everything – a really meaty-looking car. But it lives up to its reputation as a bit of a pig on the road. While I disliked the gearbox, the heat in the cockpit and the unsupportive seats, I came away very impressed by the car's ride."

And that – sadly – is where we have to leave things because a core-plug behind the Healey's engine in just about the most inaccessible place (aren't they always?) decided to come adrift causing a Niagara-like issuance of aitch-two-eau from the engine. The Healey's race was run – at least this time round.

MGA

Mike Ward (Healey) sought solace in his misfortune by trying the MGA instead. He rated the performance good, given the engine's size (8), and found no fault with the steering (8) which he found positive. The brakes, however, only scored a six, but another eight for the gearbox restored confidence.

Mike rated the MG's amenities highly: "it's extremely comfortable for a sports car, with good controls and instruments, all very neat and well defined." Handling, roadholding and ride also cleaned up eight apiece. "The MG handles well, even in tight bends; it holds the road well and doesn't roll and likes to be driven hard. The ride is positively luxurious."

Sum-up? "A nice nippy car, very drivable and well finished."

Simon Pickford (Daimler) was slightly less effusive about the MG's performance (7). "Even allowing for it being a 1600 with a brand new and very tight engine, performance was only adequate and not exactly exciting. However the steering is lovely and precise (8) and not too heavy. You know exactly where you are on the road."

Brakes fared less well (6), being reckoned "the MG's worst feature. They felt totally dead, although with a good hard prod they worked effectively enough. But I'd award nine marks out of ten for the gearbox with its nice

short throws, and the gears snicked into place easily." Comfort and controls? "Nine again. The MG is so comfortable, I nearly fell asleep! Mind you the controls are a bit haphazard but much better than the Austin-Healey. I liked having a starter button and the central armrest – very civilised!"

Simon similarly praised the little MG's handling (9) and roadholding and ride (8): "I'd say in all honesty that the MG is better than my SP250. I felt I'd have to be going very fast to get into trouble; while the ride is firm but not uncomfortably so."

Verdict? "I really loved this car and I can understand why they are now so popular. They are so easy and straightforward to drive."

Paul Stafford (AC) was slightly unhappier with the MG's performance, even more so than Simon Pickford. The steering gained eight marks, though, with the proviso that it did not have a lot of feel. Yet Paul found the brakes "reassuring and reliable" and awarded eight marks which he repeated for the gearbox.

Of comfort and controls (7), "the MG is comfortable, well appointed and everything worked beautifully." Handling and roadholding drew phrases like "pleasant, reliable and safe", but Paul announced that the ride was "a bit choppy, jolting one's insides a bit."

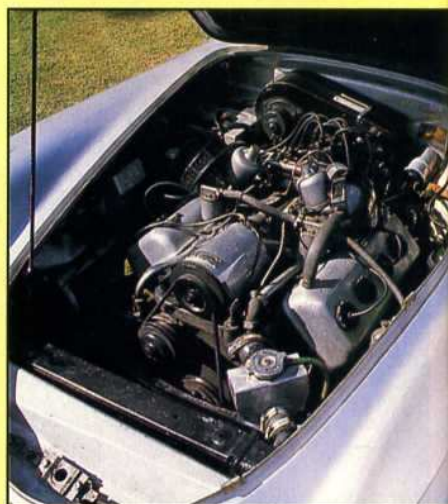
I was left with the impression that he didn't seriously dislike anything about the car but found it unexciting. "Yes. It feels like a Wolseley 1500 without the top on – very pleasant overall, but rather boring. I liked its looks but I thought the engine was rough and needed a lot more miles on it. I reckon that the ignition was over-advanced too."

Allan Cameron (Morgan) could only muster six marks for performance. "I see this as a general fun car with amazing practicality. But it's never going to pull the skin off a rice pudding." Steering drew nine points and the comment "excellent – as positive as the Morgan." Brakes (7) "acceptable", gearbox (8) "nice and in keeping with the car."

Comfort and controls notched-up nine: "fabulous driving position – if slightly short on leg room – with good gearchange and nice controls. Its handling was predictable (8), roadholding slightly less so, and ride nearly as good as the Daimler." Fittings and finish? "I loved it. All the usual MG glamour, octagons everywhere and all the Lucas period goodies (10)."

Conclusions, Allan? "For me this is the archetypal MG. Not fast, nor even a brilliant tourer, but it looks fabulous and the build quality must be Abingdon at its best. I'd praise it for its practicality and economy and it has no really bad points at all – except that maybe it would get a little boring after a time."

Tony Jeanes (Triumph) felt the MG was very underpowered (6) and docile, but praised the steering (8) as positive. He even awarded ten out of ten for the brakes, against the trend. Conversely he panned the gearbox (4): "First and





The 1959 Triumph TR3A of Tony Jeanes



Simon Pickford's Daimler SP250 from 1962

second gears are far too low and could do with higher ratios and an overdrive on top."

Comfort and controls gained nine marks: "I liked the seats, which I thought were really excellent; the solid feel of the doors, and the superbly finished interior. I felt that the indicator switch was difficult to operate in a hurry, though – it needed a hand rather than a finger.

"The handling gained eight marks from me. The MG has minimal roll and is a positive, predictable and pleasant car to drive. The ride was good too (8). In conclusion I'd say the MG has many excellent qualities but it is so lacking in performance that it would not really be suitable for long high-speed runs."

Okay. On that note we'll leave the MG alone and let the others do their high-speed runs on Tony's Triumph.

Triumph TR3A

Paul Stafford (AC) considered the Triumph's performance to be "very pleasant but not startling," and awarded eight marks. Steering rated only six: "a bit dead, but it straightens up well." The brakes scored half marks for their heaviness – "the owner obviously has strong leg muscles" – but the gearbox scored another high of eight, "quite nice really and with good synchromesh."

Paul was less sure about the handling (6): "not very reassuring – it seems to want to hang its tail out, but the ride is reasonably good (7). The Triumph is typical of its type, pleasant overall, but not really my sort of car I'm afraid."

Geoff Barron (MG) was actually quite enamoured of the TR's performance and gave it a nine, the highest on his score sheet. Steering fared less well, "nervous and jittery on bad roads" (6), and brakes were again thought heavy.

The gearbox earned better marks (7), Geoff praising the overdrive feature. The seats sounded a mixture of pain and pleasure: "the squabs were hard and lumpy but they supported well."

Geoff also alluded to the Triumph's Jekyll and Hyde-like road manners, which varied, he said, according to the state of the roads. "I thought this was a difficult car to get used to on a shortish drive. There was more scuttle shake than I expected but the engine and overdrive were superb features."

Simon Pickford (Daimler) was in broad agreement with Geoff and Paul.

Mike Ward (Healey) maintained that performance was only average (5), steering indecisive (4) and brakes needing heavy pressure to respond. Mike was not complimentary, either, about the gearbox (4) and considered the Triumph "uncomfortable and draughty round the thighs due to the low cut doors." All part of their charm, surely?

Mike was understandably sneering about his own car's main rival. "I disliked the Triumph's road behaviour which was very bouncy and with a tendency towards oversteer, and I thought the controls were all very cluttered. No thanks."

Now Allan Cameron, our masochistic Morgan fancier, must have been more at home in the Triumph? "Performance in its day was probably pretty good (7) because the engine's nice and torquey and will pull happily in any gear down to 1,000rpm. That's mated to a lovely gearbox (9) with overdrive on three ratios. Then the thing steers very well too (7) with only slight play.

"Where it falls down is on brakes, which have no real feel, and suspension. You feel that the front end is doing its job well but the back is working against it, being so tail happy. I'd rate the ride as better than most, though, (8). Comfort is good (8) with very good seats and a driving position not unlike the Morgan." Told you so.

"The Triumph is not as nicely finished as the Healey or AC but it is still pretty good. But it is not a car I would like to drive quickly and I can see why Morgan Plus Fours consistently beat TRs in the Sixties." End of advert!

That had better be the cue for Allan to stand aside and let the others tell me all about his Morgan. I suppose you could call this brief introduction a Malvern Link . . .

Morgan Plus Four SS

I can see why Paul Stafford (AC) would be so enthusiastic about the Morgan's performance (9): "very good but very noisy – terrific!" Steering gained nearly as much (8): "very good steering – but I'm not used to such strong oversteering traits." Brakes plunged to five: "they need a very hard shove which makes them better for the track than the road."

The gearbox was another lowish five, "a typical Moss 'box", which was probably a polite way of saying he didn't like it. Comfort? "The Morgan is not really made for comfort!" Handling and roadholding impressed, though, (8&9) – "the Morgan does everything you ask of it but it needs a firm hand on the helm. The ride is very hard and my wife said she'd need a strong bra to travel far in it . . ."

"Overall the Morgan is eminently suited to very sporty activities with excellent performance and roadholding. But the ride, brakes and noise levels spoil it for everyday use."

Geoff Barron (MG) was bound to be impressed with the Morgan's get-up-and-go and awarded nine marks again. "The engine is a bit cammy but once up there the power comes in very smoothly. The steering's good too (8), being very positive but affected by poor surfaces." Geoff rated the brakes much more highly than Paul, however (8), and seemed happier with the Moss 'box (9): "good fun when mastered."

"Fortunately the seat springing makes up for any deficiencies in the suspension (7) and handling is very dependent upon road surfaces – it can be very skittish when they're bad.

"A great fun car which responds to rapid driving and always feels safe. It's also got a great exhaust note!"

Tony Jeanes (Triumph) was in





1957 AC Ace Bristol owned by Paul Stafford



Allan Cameron's 1966 Morgan Plus Four SS





Above, cars and their owners brought together. Overall winner was . . .

. . . the well-used and enjoyed AC Ace Bristol owned by Paul Stafford



complete agreement about the engine (9), adding that “acceleration above 3,000rpm was excellent – but smooth progress was difficult under this. Tickover was erratic, too, so the engine kept stalling.”

Steering and brakes aroused similar comments to the others but Tony could only summon-up four marks for the gearbox, disliking its action and bemoaning the lack of overdrive. “The Morgan has *the* most uncomfortable seats – they are also too springy and nearly bounced me out of the car. But the instruments are better (8).

“The Morgan is great in a straight line but doubtful round corners, especially corners with a bump in them. As for ride – well my score sheet reads two marks here and that speaks for itself. Overall the car makes a real sports car noise and has a really vintage feel – its Classic looks are spoilt by the roll bar though. And it’s probably happier on the track than on the road.”

Mike Ward (Healey) was in broad agreement with the others but Simon Pickford (Daimler) was a little more vociferous. “The Morgan has very much of a racing engine – there’s very little performance below 3,000rpm. Then it all happens! (9). The steering is excellent (8) but I remembered thinking ‘thank God there’s something to hang on to.’ The brakes were extremely heavy – I suspect these are set-up for racing and hard use (7) – but the gearbox was slow and ponderous (7).”

Comfort? “Oh dear, what can I say! The ride is awful (3) and I’m just glad it wasn’t the first car after lunch. How do Morgan owners stand it 365 days a year? The roadholding and handling were probably fun but I wasn’t about to exploit them because I felt that one bad bump would send me into the ditch.”

Conclusion? “I would love to race this Morgan but the noise, ride and inflexible engine preclude its use on an everyday basis. My passenger added, ‘this is

probably the worst car I have ever been in – in fact it *was* the worst!”

Well, comments like that are enough to send anyone to Coventry, so we'll send Simon off to inspect the Radford works while the others articulate their thoughts on his Daimler.

Daimler SP250

Mike Ward (Healey) considered the Daimler's performance “good for the size and weight of the car (6), but I thought the steering heavy (5) and the brakes poor (4). The gearbox was notchy but positive (5), controls were very good and the seats hard but allowing plenty of leg room (5).”

Mike considered the car heavy under cornering (5) and that it rolled too much (5), but praised the ride as firm but good (7). Fittings and furnishings scored highly (7) and overall he avowed that the Daimler was “nice to drive, flexible and roomy.”

By contrast Geoff Barron (MG) rated the V8 engine highly (9): “silky smooth, superb, and with really excellent acceleration. However I felt the steering was very heavy and imprecise (3), brakes (7) adequate but with a firm pedal, and gearbox good, if a little notchy (7).”

Comfort levels merited a nine as did fixtures and fittings and general finish. In contrast to the Triumph, Geoff felt the Daimler was inherently an understeerer which the heavy steering exaggerated (6) but ride was praised (8) for being “excellent on all surfaces up to 60mph, when the rear end gets rather lively on bad roads.

“Overall this is a very impressive car despite my previous lack of interest in the model. With different steering it would be a superb car. Bad points? Looks?”

Tony Jeanes (Triumph) was another fan of the Daimler engine (9): “smooth acceleration even from low speed in top gear. Steering (5) heavy but very direct, and the Daimler has good progressive brakes (8). The gearbox has good ratios (8) and though notchy it's simple enough to find the right gears.

“The Daimler's seats are rather upright but comfortable and offer good side location (9) and the dashboard is easy to read. The Daimler rolls into corners but is smooth over the bumps – it is a most comfortable car, however.

“It was a real pleasure to drive this car and it would be really good for long distance work. It has lots of power and is equally happy at low speeds. There is a great feeling of solidity, too.”

Allan Cameron (Morgan) also liked the Daimler's performance (8): “lovely cruiser with a lot of mid-range torque. No roadburner but a good all-rounder. Alas, the steering lacks feel and is heavy too (4), while the brakes pull-up evenly (6) but have an inconsistent pedal which spoils feel.”

The gearbox gained more plaudits (8). “I liked the driving position which was superb (9) and all the gauges and switchgear were excellent. There's a real air of quality about this car.” Handling

“the Daimler is a very underrated car”

and roadholding? “Obviously not up to Morgan standards but good (7). Yes the Daimler is surprisingly capable. And the ride is almost up to saloon standards (9½).

“You know, I'd say that the Daimler is a very underrated car. It has a certain ‘old man's sports car’ feel but that V8 torque and the stable driving qualities make it a very enjoyable proposition indeed.”

Paul Stafford (AC) felt the Daimler's performance was “more than adequate (8), but the steering is VERY heavy and rather feel-less though it actually steers rather well. The brakes are progressive (7) but the gearbox rather poor (5).

“The car really is very comfortable for a sports car and everything is nicely made with good detail touches and that typical Daimler quality (9). Handling-wise it displays no tricks (7) but is rather heavy into corners. However it soaks up the bumps like a true thoroughbred (9) and feels like it would go on forever.”

Conclusions? “A very lovely car – perhaps even a vastly underrated one.”

A nice sentiment, so we'll see whether driving the AC was as easy as ABC, shall we?

AC Ace

Simon Pickford (Daimler) was, I think we might say, rather impressed. He awarded performance nine marks and acceleration ten out of ten. “Wow! The power keeps on building as the revs rise, and it's very strong all the way. The AC loves to be driven hard. The steering (6) was spoilt by excessive play but the brakes are just as you need them (8), progressive until it stands on its nose.

“The gearbox rates an eight as it is so precise, but why such a long lever? Still, the ratios are well spaced. I reckon the clutch is overly heavy and would be tiresome in traffic. The seats are just like armchairs.

“Dynamically the AC is far better than expected. It has excellent balance – we powered through the corners in full cry (8). The ride is really excellent (9), far better than my SP250. Less good, however, was the finish and uninspiring dashboard (7).

“The AC is a real brute of a car – but we loved it! The engine is simply glorious. But, sadly, I just could not get comfortable – an extra inch in the seat position would make all the difference.”

Geoff Barron (MG) also showered paeans of praise onto the AC's – or rather the Bristol's – engine (9). “I thought the steering vague, though, with approx 40mm of free play (5). Brakes were good to excellent (9) depending on pedal pressure and the gearbox rated a seven – long gate and synchromesh easily beaten on down changes to third.

“Overall comfort was good, though the seat backs were rather upright (7), but I was less happy about the car

dynamically. It handled well on smooth surfaces but bumps upset it badly. The ride was bouncy, I thought, with a loose feel to the whole car.

“An enjoyable car to drive, mainly because of its engine. However the general feel of the car does not inspire confidence for fast driving – I hope a Cobra chassis is a lot stiffer than this!”

Mike Ward (Healey) actually considered that the AC was under-powered! Nor did he feel the steering was as sharp as it should be. Brakes were judged excellent, however, and his comments were otherwise in line with the others. Something about the car terrified his wife Mell, however, who vowed she would not set foot in it!

Tony Jeanes (Triumph) was made of sterner stuff. “Superb acceleration (9). It's so fast in a straight line that my pencil fell out from behind my ear and onto the road! The steering felt sloppy, though (6), but the brakes were deceptively good (9). Caress the pedal and it slows gently, press hard and the car stands on its nose.

“The gearbox was good (8) despite the long lever, while the seats were truly excellent (9) with good side support and the doors were just at the right height for resting elbows on.

“The handling took a bit of getting used to – it seemed to bounce into corners – and I wouldn't like to push it too hard without a lot of practice (6). The AC is a proper sports car to be driven fast by an experienced driver – it is not a car for the faint-hearted.”

That certainly couldn't be said of Allan Cameron. “Super unfussed six-cylinder engine which pulls like a train right through the rev band (8); it feels quicker than the Austin-Healey. The steering's slightly vague (6) but responds to your every wish. The brakes have only just been relined (7) but were good and progressive, and the gearshift was light but lacking in synchromesh.

“A perfect driving position, even for a six-footer like me (9), while the car simply oozes quality and is a credit to its owner (10). I loved the handling (8) which was so chuckable and responsive, and the roadholding on narrow taxi tyres was superb (9). The ride was slightly jarring (8) but nicer than the Healey.

“A very desirable period sports car that I would dearly love to own. Everything about it is sheer motoring quality and nostalgia, right down to that bouncing throttle pedal that just calls out ‘come on – squeeze me harder!’ ”

Verdict:

That just about wraps-up the comments from our amateur test panel, who acquitted themselves very well in difficult circumstances and came through smiling.

But, cruel task master that I am, they still had to deliver that fateful verdict mentioned earlier. Which car other than their own, based on their findings, would they most like to take home?

We nearly had a three-way split, but, eventually, the AC beat the Daimler by one vote, with the MG third. 