

Jonathan Wood's The MG Story

Part three The years before and after the war, when MG established itself as an international name

During the 20 years between 1936 and 1955 the MG name became truly international. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War the marque had only really been known in Great Britain, continental Europe and, to a limited extent, within the British Empire.

But after the ending of hostilities, Americans began to enjoy the delights of open-air motoring Abingdon-style and, within a decade, the USA was MG's largest market.

Paradoxically, the years immediately prior to the conflict had, commercially, been the most successful in the marque's history. In 1937 – a good year for the industry as a whole – MG's output hit an inter-war high, with almost 3000 cars built, while net profits soared to a record £25,436.

This followed the demand by Morris Motors' managing director, Leonard Lord, that MG's costly Wolseley-built overhead-camshaft engines be replaced by cheaper, more customer-friendly pushrod units.

Although the corporate guillotine had descended on the overhead-camshaft cars in 1935, the designs had to be seen through, and it was not until June 1936 that the MG company unveiled its TA Midget; the first of a new generation of pushrod-engined open two-seaters.

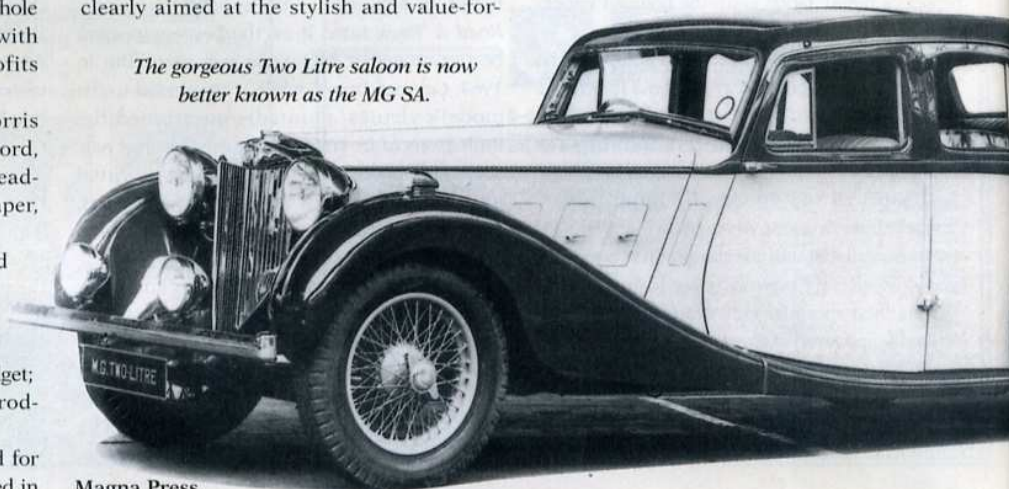
Faster than its predecessor, and good for 80mph, by the time that production ceased in

April 1939, no fewer than 2772 cars had been completed, making the TA the best-selling MG two-seater of the inter-war years.

It was replaced by the outwardly similar TB Midget, which featured Morris Engines' new short-stroke XPAG engine with a capacity of 1250cc. But production lasted for only seven months before it was halted by the outbreak of the Second World War.

MG was also building larger cars. The 1935 London Motor Show saw the announcement of the Two Litre – now better known as the SA – which was an elegant four-door sports saloon and tourer. This was clearly aimed at the stylish and value-for-

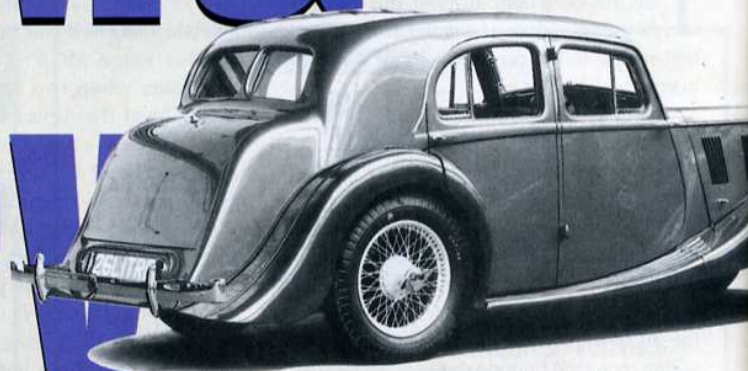
The gorgeous Two Litre saloon is now better known as the MG SA.



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money car from SS. This new company, which later became Jaguar, was founded by the young William Lyons, who was clearly following in Cecil Kimber's tracks. The SA was the first MG to be fitted with Lockheed hydraulic brakes, which thereafter featured throughout the range.

The SA found plenty of customers – over 2700 of them – by the time production ceased in 1938. Its WA replacement, with



The elegant 1938 WA with its 2.6-litre engine was MG's answer to the new SS saloons.

its distinctive 'V'-shaped radiator, was powered by a larger-capacity engine (of 2.6 litres to be precise), but this big, heavy car survived only until 1939. Again the SS challenge, by then manifested in 3.5-litre guise, is apparent, and only 369 examples of the WA were built before the outbreak of war.

There was also a related four-cylinder saloon line. The £330 VA of 1937 used a 1.5-litre overhead-valve engine which it shared with the Wolseley 12/48 and Morris 12.

With the coming of war, car production ceased at Abingdon, although the service department continued to operate from premises in the town. Kimber wasted little time in obtaining war work. One contract he secured was for building the complete front section of Armstrong Whitworth's twin-engined Albemarle bomber, an aircraft that had been designed to be made in sections.

Golden records

Although MG was no longer involved in motor racing, Cecil Kimber obtained Lord Nuffield's permission for the company to prepare, in 1936, a record-breaking car for Major Goldie Gardner (in centre of picture – right). It was, in essence, a 1933 K3 single-seater with offset transmission, which Gardner had acquired in 1935.

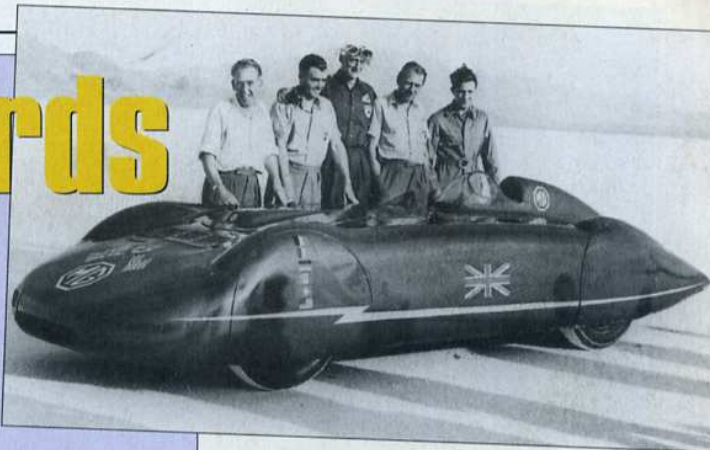
Gardner drove the resulting Zoller-supercharged car in Germany, convincingly breaking a clutch of international class 'G' records at Frankfurt in 1937.

His success led to Nuffield sanctioning an improved version, and a 'new' MG record-breaker was completed in June 1938. Distinguished by an all-enveloping Reid Railton-designed body, it was based on the EX135 of 1934.

Gardner and this car later returned to Germany and, in November 1938, he achieved an astonishing 186.6mph.

In June 1939, just three months before the outbreak of war, Goldie Gardner pushed EX135 to an incredible 204.3mph with the engine bored out to 1105cc to take it into class 'F' category.

After the war, Gardner, by now a lieutenant colonel, and complete with game leg, courageously continued his record-breaking activities with EX135 until his retirement in 1952 at the age of 60.



sports car to be fitted with independent front suspension. Unfortunately, this meant the fitment of disc wheels in place of the traditional wires. The TD was also the first MG to be offered with left-hand drive, and 80 per cent of the almost 30,000 built were destined for North America.

But while MG was producing cars in record numbers for the burgeoning American market, the parent Nuffield Organisation, still managed by Lord Nuffield, was being increasingly challenged by its resurgent Austin rival, headed by Nuffield's one-time managing director, Leonard Lord.

At the end of 1947 there were mass directorial resignations at Cowley, and a long-overdue reorganisation of Nuffield's manufacturing facilities. This involved transferring Wolseley car production from Birmingham to Cowley and, incredibly, the company even contemplated moving MG production to the Coventry premises of the Riley Motor Company.

Thankfully, such a proposition produced an outcry at Abingdon, and the idea was quickly dropped. Instead, Riley production was transferred to the MG works.

This upheaval did have a positive benefit, however, as MG once again acquired a factory-based general manager, as opposed to a distracted Cowley-based one. Jack Tatlow – who had previously undertaken that role at Riley – occupied the post.

Then, in 1952, came a long-awaited merger between Nuffield and Austin to create the British Motor Corporation, with some 40 per cent of UK car production; it was far and

MG eventually produced over 900 of them. Rover, incidentally, was responsible for the centre wing portion, and furniture manufacturer Harris Lebus built the tail.

But Kimber's initiative provided Lord Nuffield with the excuse, in November 1941, to sack him. The reason given was that the wartime commission should not have been obtained unilaterally, but via the firm's Cowley headquarters in Oxford.

Alternative theories have been cited for this dismissal but the reality is that, from the early 1930s onwards, William Morris often clashed with many of the key members of his team that had helped make Morris Motors Britain's largest car maker.

The 53-year-old Kimber was devastated, and the MG factory was prematurely robbed of its creative driving force. Harold Ryder, a Morris director since 1926, took over responsibility for the day-to-day running of the Abingdon plant.

The end of the war saw the restarting of car manufacturing, however, and the TB Midget was mildly updated and revised as the outwardly similar TC, which entered production in September 1945.

But Britain was bankrupt after five years of war. The newly elected Labour government recognised that valuable foreign currency must be secured by ensuring that manufacturers exported their products throughout the world.

The motor industry was no exception to this policy, implemented by Minister of the Board of Trade, Sir

Stafford Cripps. Before the war, car makers had largely disregarded overseas sales, and many models were

wholly unsuitable for foreign markets. But the great exception was to be provided by Britain's sports-car manufacturers, of which MG was by far the largest and best-known.

Of the 10,000 MG TCs built between 1945 and 1949, for example, no fewer than 55 per cent were exported, although the majority went to hitherto British Empire markets, particularly Australia. By comparison, just 2001 crossed the Atlantic to North America, where they earned much-needed dollars for the British exchequer.

Interestingly, sports cars had not featured among the products of America's Big Three car makers between the wars. But the MG open two-seater, together with the newly named Jaguar, was able to reap the benefits of a hitherto untapped market, particularly on the sunny Californian west coast.

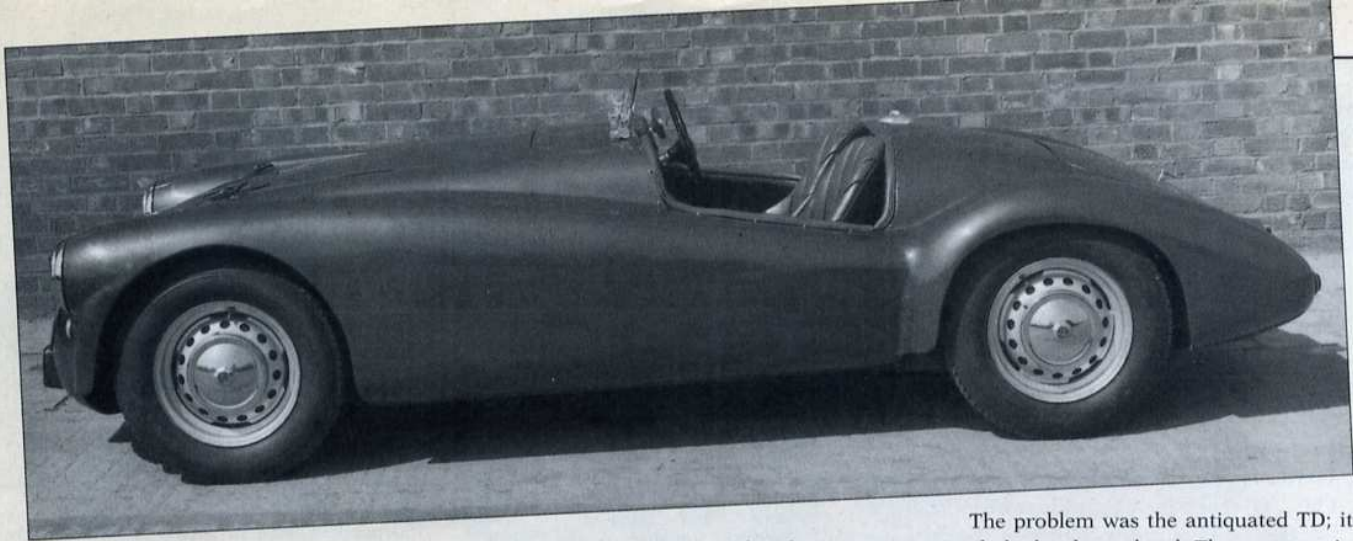
The TC, with its half-elliptic springs, was an unashamedly pre-war car, so in 1955 Nuffield responded to the new US market by introducing the TD. This was the first MG

The accident...

On Sunday 4th February 1945 Cecil Kimber boarded the London and North Eastern Railway's 6pm Leeds train at Kings Cross, on his way to Peterborough.

Soon after the overloaded train left the station, it came to a standstill in a tunnel on a section of inclined track. Within moments it began to slip backwards. The two last coaches were derailed, and the one in which Kimber was travelling overturned and brought down a nearby signal gantry.

Cecil Kimber was one of just two people killed in the accident, and 25 passengers were injured.



MGA fans will be familiar with the lines of prototype EX 175, which was based on TD running gear, the design later evolved into the best-selling MGA of the 1950s.

away Britain's largest motor manufacturer. In truth, this was effectively a takeover of Morris by Austin, with Leonard Lord soon to become its new chairman.

The first MG to reflect this alliance was the 'Z'-series Magnette saloon that appeared in 1954. It shared body panels with the Wolseley 4/44, but was powered by the 1489cc Austin engine, recently reworked and designated the BMC 'B'-series unit, which was later to go on to find fame and fortune in the MGB.

The Corporation was aware of the potential for the American sports-car market, and was well placed to exploit it now that it owned MG. Unfortunately, Leonard Lord, because of his 1936 clash with Morris, had nothing but disdain for Cowley and its products. He decided to

create a completely new make, the Austin-Healey, which first appeared at the 1952 London Motor Show.

MG had that year fielded a modern experimental open two-seater as BMC's corporate sports car, but it was disregarded in favour of the Healey. It does, however, have an important part to play in the MG story. Designated EX175, it was based on the lines of a special-bodied TD that the factory produced for *Autosport's* chief photographer, George Phillips, to run at Le Mans in 1951. The body styling would later be developed into the famous MGA of 1955.

With BMC's resources now concentrated on the Healey roadster, MG had to soldier on with TD production until 1953. But by this time, MG had a new general manager. Jack Tatlow had been promoted to run Morris Commercial Vehicles, and his place was taken by his deputy, John Thornley (see sidebar below).

Thornley wasted little time in pressing his bosses at BMC once again to give MG its own design autonomy.

The problem was the antiquated TD; it simply had to be updated. The outcome, in 1953, was the visually enhanced but mechanically similar TF.

In an attempt to highlight MG's sagging American profile, George Eyston – who had pioneered the make's record-breaking activities back in 1930 – convinced BMC's Leonard Lord that he should undertake some fresh runs with a new car.

The resulting EX179 was powered by a supercharged 1466cc version of the XPEG engine and at Utah in August 1954 it achieved a maximum speed of 153.69mph.

This allowed MG to introduce its bigger-bore XPEG engine in the TF 1500 from late 1954 and make great play of its record-breaking associations. However, it did little to boost the model's flagging sales.

Although MG's prospects looked bleak, John Thornley's corporate badgering finally paid off when in June 1954 the Abingdon drawing office was reopened, 19 years after Leonard Lord had closed it. With Syd Enever appointed chief engineer, MG was once more in charge of its own destiny. **MGW**

John Thornley (1909–1994)

Like Cecil Kimber, John Thornley's background was distinctly non-motoring. He began a career as a chartered accountant in London, but in 1930 he bought an 'M'-type MG and later responded to a letter in *The Light Car* suggesting the formation of 'an MG car club'. As a result, Thornley became its first secretary. In November 1931, he gave up his career in the City and, as he described it, 'ran away to Abingdon'.

Initially, Thornley dealt with club correspondence at the factory, but was occupied mainly in assisting the service manager. Appointed service manager himself in 1933, he went on to manage the famous Three Musketeers and Cream Crackers trials teams.

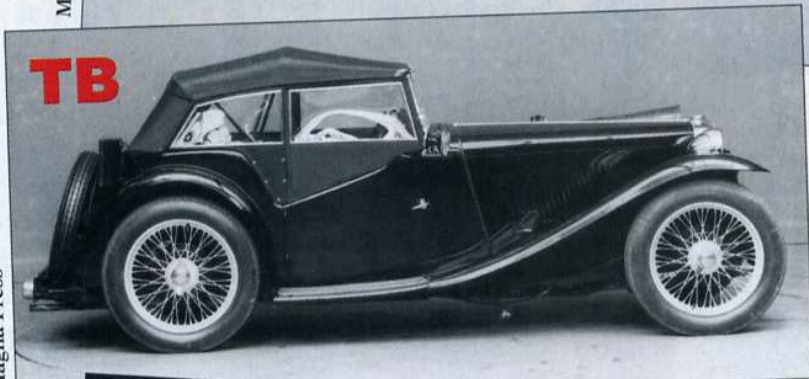
After war service – where, like Goldie Gardner, he rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel – Thornley returned to Abingdon, and in 1948 became MG's assistant general manager. In November 1952 he was promoted to the post of general manager, 21 years to the day after he had joined the company. In 1956 John Thornley was made a director of MG and, together with his chief engineer, Syd Enever, planned the most successful MGs ever: the 1950s MGA, and the MGB, introduced in 1962.



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TA

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TB

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TC**TD**

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TF

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Time for 'T'

The popular 'T'-series Midgets (left) began with the TA of 1936 (the photograph shows the prototype car, which differed in a number of details from the production version, notably the different-shaped doors), and finished with the TF, which went out of production in 1955.

Meanwhile...

1936

Hitler's People's Car – literally Volkswagen – is unveiled. Designed by Ferdinand Porsche, after the war the little car becomes known affectionately as the Beetle in the UK and the Bug in the US

1939

Great Britain declares war on Germany and the Second World War begins

1940

Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister of Britain and forms a coalition government, with the leader of the Labour party as Deputy Prime Minister

1945

A US plane drops an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, forcing Japan to surrender and bringing the Second World War to an end

1952

King George VI dies, and his 25-year-old daughter, Elizabeth, becomes the Queen of England

1955

Eighty spectators are killed at the Le Mans racetrack in France when a Mercedes skids into a grandstand

Coming soon...

In the next issue of *MG World* (on sale from 13 March), Jonathan Wood tells the story of the MGA, the world's best-selling sports car in its day. This was the time when Abingdon was the British Motor Corporation's sports-car factory. Heady days indeed!