B QUEEN

Take an MGB and add a Rover V8 and you the perfect practical classic

MG's second stab at a high performance 'B' was without doubt the best. Egged on by Kent-based racer and engineer Ken Costello, who first made the conversion back in 1969, the official V8 MGB was a marriage made in Abingdon heaven and an idea that had actually been in gestation ever since the demise of the commercially unsuccessful MGC. Today, the MGB GTV8 can cost about the same as a normal MGB GT, which given its extra performance and smoothness plus usual easy MG running costs makes it a bit of a practical performance bargain.

History

The engineers at Abingdon had been trying to shoehorn a V8 into the MGB for years (some say as early as 1967, but officially since 1971) and it is said that they first tried the Daimler V8 unit. Once cash-strapped MG decided to use the Buick unit, it had to be done as cheaply as possible.

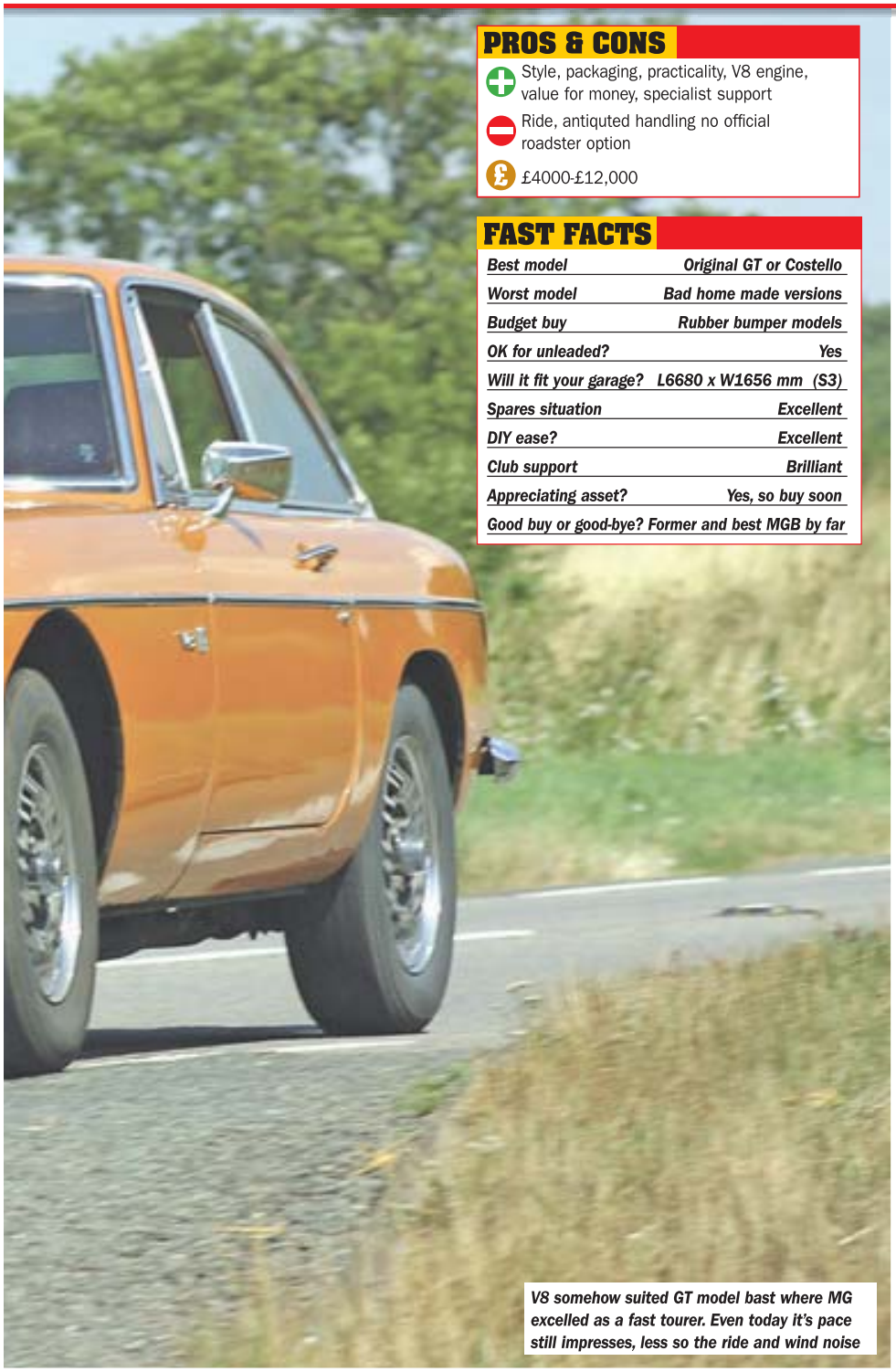
Although MG was working on a relative shoe-string, it still had more resources than Ken Costello (see our special story overleaf) and was able to engineer the power unit to fit under the standard 'B' bonnet, unlike Costello who retained the original V8 carburettors which necessitated an ugly bonnet bulge (until a switch to Weber carbs).

There again MG made do with the lower tune 137bhp Range Rover-spec V8 while the ex-Mini racer went the full fat Rover 3500S route. The MGB shell needed minimal changes to make the V8 fit and as it was 40lb lighter than the cast iron B-Series, it helped alter weight distribution from 47.8/52.2 to a more equal 49.4/50.6.

Unlike the MGC, the V8 even retained the conventional MGB front suspension set up, although the ride height was hiked by about an inch in the process, pre-empting what the company would do to the MGB a year later.

Alloys special to V8 (and late special edition MGB LEs). Repros available

Discreet badging showed the MG's class, Shame car came too late



V8 somehow suited GT model bast where MG excelled as a fast tourer. Even today it's pace still impresses, less so the ride and wind noise

PROS & CONS

- Style, packaging, practicality, V8 engine, value for money, specialist support
- Ride, antiquted handling no official roadster option
- £4000-£12,000

FAST FACTS

Best model	Original GT or Costello
Worst model	Bad home made versions
Budget buy	Rubber bumper models
OK for unleaded?	Yes
Will it fit your garage?	L6680 x W1656 mm (S3)
Spares situation	Excellent
DIY ease?	Excellent
Club support	Brilliant
Appreciating asset?	Yes, so buy soon
Good buy or good-bye?	Former and best MGB by far

Cockpit is stock MGB. Replacement trim is plentiful, either new or used

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- The BV8's monocoque is a real rust haven, and there are plenty of places where you're likely to find rot; bodged repairs are also likely. But if the worst happens and the 'shell really is beyond economical repair, you can buy a Heritage bodyshell.
- Although a Heritage shell starts at £4200, you'll also have to fork out for paint and if you're going to do the job properly you'll also buy new brakes, steering, suspension, electrics and trim for the interior and exterior. Before you know it that's another £4-5000 on the bill.
- If you want to do it cheaper, then a second-hand rubber bumper shell is required as these feature the modified inner wings and front end.
- The sills rot and are prime fodder for bodge merchants, because repairing them properly is a convoluted process and for the best results the front and rear wing sections (below the trim strip) need to be cut off. The alternative is to unbolt the front wings, rather than cut the lower portion off.
- Because the sills are tricky to repair properly, there are various bodges that are regularly tried. The first is to fit a cover sill, which just hides the problem. The second is the use of a stainless steel over-sill, which looks very pretty – but also masks potential big problems. These over-sills are often used legitimately as well so don't automatically assume the car's a bad one just because they're fitted. The final bodge is for the outer sill to be repaired (probably badly) with the metal underneath left to dissolve. To be certain you're not buying a pup take a look from underneath and see that everything lines up properly. If the door windows clip the rear post then that's a sign of poorly fitted sills.
- Structural rust is commonplace. Look for soft inner wings – press the panel in the engine bay as a quick check and while you are there, inspect the chassis where the steering rack is located. This can stress crack. Unless you know MGBs this can be missed – even by MOT testers – but repair panels are now available.
- Check the back of the front inner wheelarches by first removing the front wheels. This will allow you to see if the box section that's positioned at the top is still there – it collects mud and rots away if it isn't cleaned regularly, and repairing it is very tricky.
- While you're checking the rear wheelarches, take a look at the spring hangers, which may well be rotten. Next to the offside hanger is the battery tray (chrome-bumper cars have one each side), which is easily overlooked. Make sure it's intact by checking from underneath and also make sure the floorpans are in good order – there's a good chance they won't be.
- Because the top of the fuel tank is corrugated to strengthen it, water collects between the top of the tank and the underside of the boot floor, where it's attached. So if you can smell fuel assume the tank has perforated and needs replacing, at around £50 plus fitting.
- Infrequent oil changes cause the hydraulic tappets to play up due to sludging and they can become clattery.
- As with all alloy engines, lack of sufficient quality anti-freeze will lead to internal rusting and potential overheating problems. As the MG's cooling system was stretched anyway, check for hot running – or over cooling if the thermostat has been removed. MG V8 specialist Clive Wheatley (01746 710810/ www.mgv8parts.com) sells uprated radiators for just over £200.

CREATE A V8

Want your own MGB V8? Then make it yourself. It's not that difficult and the results are more than worth it. Here's what you need to do

1 You don't need to use the Rover unit; many tuners have used other American V8s to great effect although without doubt the BL unit is the easiest to fit with conversion kits freely available to make the job almost a straight swap

2 The Buick unit is compact and fits easily in the engine bay although some alternations to the inner wings are required. Rubber bumper cars already have this done while 1977-on bodies also have the radiator moved further forward as required as well

3 Beware – not all Rover V8s are the same and they will differ in many ways such as water pump location and different front covers and pulleys. Costello used 3500S engines in his conversions – good for over 150bhp in standard trim and bear in mind that successive Range Rovers saw capacity increased to a full fat 4.6-litres

4 Carburettor clearance problems can be overcome by either using the proper MGB GT V8 inlet manifolds, using an American Holley carb, a Weber alternative or fitting a bonnet bulge. Clive Wheatley sells remanufactured original inlet manifolds for under £200, incidentally

5 Early chrome bumper shells need to have their transmission tunnels altered to accept the larger MGC–type box. Mk2 MGBs already have a modified tunnel. The stronger MGC box – complete with overdrive – is officially used although Costello got away with an MGB transmission, but many use the excellent Rover SD1 five-speed gearbox these days which can fit after some grafting

6 The front suspension has to be altered using the V8 cross-member as the early steering column won't clear the standard V8 manifolds. Again rubber bumper shells already accommodate this but you can modify older MGB set ups by fitting a universal joint in the system, although it's not recommended by many

7 At the rear, the suspension springs will need to be stiffened. Known as 'Police' springs, these are very stiff to control axle tramp under power, although an alternative is to fit softer springs to improve handling and graft on RV8 anti-tramp bars costing £600

8 The higher ride height of the V8 (and rubber bumper cars) can be offset by lowered springs. Coupled with uprated dampers or – if funds can run to it the complete and far more sophisticated front end taken from the later RV8, the V8 can be made to handle well

9 Brakes were stock MGB albeit with better callipers and discs plus with harder pads and this was deemed acceptable although there are now superior upgrades produced to consider. Wire wheels are not deemed a good idea due to the massive excess of torque

10 Buy 'How to give your MGB V8 Power'! This excellent comprehensive book from Veloce Publishing is a virtual step-by step guide on how to fit a variety of V8s to the MG. Checked and approved by the MG Owners Club it costs £29.99 and is worth every penny. ISBN 1904788939

GT body is still one of the neatest sports classics ever penned. A few rubber bumper cars were made; hard and costly to convert to chrome

Indeed in 1975 the V8 received the infamous rubber bumpers despite the car never being exported to the USA!

After the disastrous launch of the MGC, expectations were pretty low for new MGs but the reception for the V8 at its 1973 introduction was still lukewarm despite giving MG nuts what they had dreamed for years.

During its three year production run only 2591 cars were made, and during some months V8 production barely broke into double figures – that's about a quarter of what the unloved MGC sold!

Driving

The recipe was so right but something was lost in the mix and to many enthusiasts, all the introduction of the V8 engine did was to highlight the shortcomings of the aging MGB. However, the 'vintage' feel that was so criticised when the car was new is probably appreciated now and certainly this is one of the highest performance British cars of the 1970s.

Its performance is still effortless and smooth and can still show a GTi a clean pair of rear tyres, (0-60mph in eight seconds and 125mph) although such is the torque on tap there's little need for gear changing. This is handy because second gear is still too low from this MGC-sourced transmission, but on the other hand despite no automatic option this is a two-gear car and the standard overdrive gives a lovely long legged 28.5mph/1000rpm gait.

Ironically, fear of poor economy that killed the car rarely manifested itself on the road: the V8s drank about the same as normal MGBs!

You'd think that with the improved weight distribution, the V8 would handle better and while it's an improvement on the laden MGC, it still didn't handle as predictably as the four-cylinder MGB. Road tests at the time put this down to the stiff rear suspension and added ride height.

However other known MGB traits such as the hard ride, wind noise, poor heating and ventilation and lack of overall refinement are of less consequence now than when the car was new. Certainly thanks to its compact size, useful rear hatch facility and sheer usability, this MG is still a tempting daily driver and second family car.

Improvements

As with any MGB it's a case of how far do you want to go. For many a standard V8 is quick enough so just needs the chassis tweaking.

Lever arm dampers were fitted front and rear, but it's possible to swap to telescopics. It works well but the ride will be even harder. To really sharpen up the handling it's worth fitting uprated front and rear anti-roll bars with

THREE OF A KIND

Triumph Stag

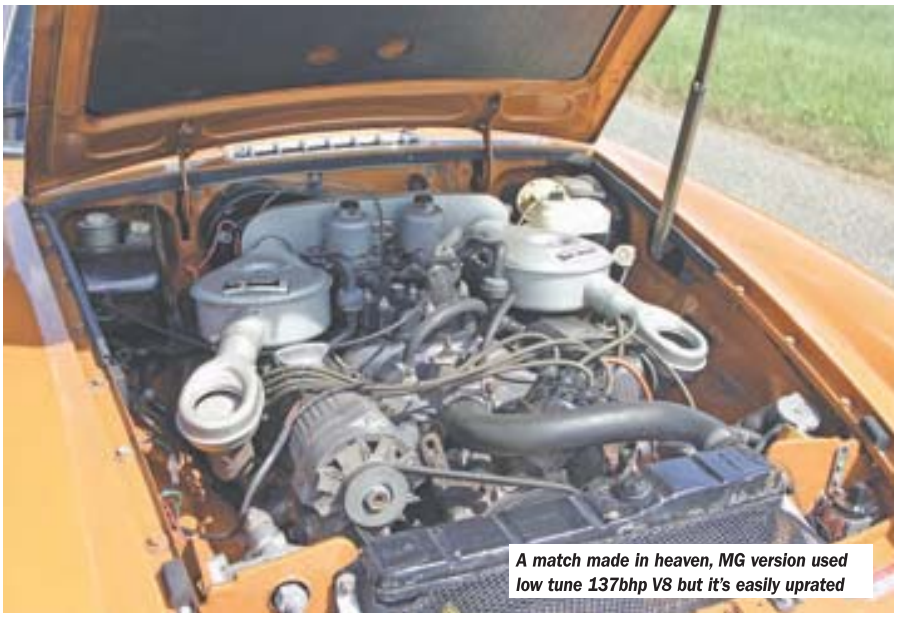
In house rival to the MG was also V8 powered with more power but less go and a hard/soft top instead of a hatchback. Initially dodgy, Stags are now highly durable and desirable as a fine cut-price Mercedes SL rival. Still strong value and there's a brilliant specialist and club back up. Of course many Stags were converted to Rover V8 power and these are good if done right.

Reliant Scimitar GTE

Out the sme time the bigger-engined MGBs were around (MGC and V8), Reliant got it right first time care of a lusty and trusty Ford V6 engine, a sophisticated chassis, rot-proof GRP sportshatch body plus a later Stag-like GTC and strong image with Royal connections. And yet the GTE has never caught on as a classic. Good ones are great, but there's many tired ones about.

MG RV8

Rather late in the day MG Rover launched the roadster V8 – almost two decades after MG as a company bit the dust! Bsed upon the Heritage bodyshell with a full fat 190bhp and totally reworked chassis, without doubt it's the best sorted V8 MGB and most luxurious. The MG RV8 feel like a cross between a Morgan and a TVR and prices are similar to usual MGB levels.



A match made in heaven, MG version used low tune 137bhp V8 but it's easily uprated

poly bushes although the ride will be made a lot harsher still.

Servo-assisted brakes were fitted from the outset and this essentially standard MGB set up copes well enough, although uprated EBC pads and better discs are always a wise move for modern motoring. Alternatively you can fit the more exotic MGR V8 front suspension and better brakes, which is expensive but effective.

Even if you keep the engine standard, electronic ignition and an uprated radiator are very worth mods, the latter costing around £200 from specialists. As the basic V8 engine evolved into 4.6-litres over the years, in terms of power you can really give this B some real sting!

Prices

As only 2591 were built and there are not too many for sale at any one time, you'd think prices would automatically be at a premium over a normal GT but this is not always so. A road-legal V8 might be found for £4000, a decent car for around £7000 and a concours winner for £10,000 or so. Shop around...

Home-made V8s are certainly worth less than the real thing and only Costello conversions really command a premium now, although as these cars were bespoke and specifications could be individually chosen, it depends how much was spent on the car in the first place.

VERDICT

Autocar's road test of the MGB GT V8 was as perceptive now as it was back in 1973 when it decided that the best thing about this aging GT was that superb engine. However today this big-hearted MGB is seen in a better light and loved for its effortless performance, ease of running and that fact that it's a real Q car. Add value for money – especially when compared to other GB V8 greats such as the Daimler Dart and the Sunbeam Tiger – and it's surprising that the BGT V8 isn't in greater demand. It's a practical performance sportshatch that we like immensely and heartily recommend as the best MGB of the lot.

Hatch facility makes all MGB GTs very practical. Watch for tailgate rot and leaking seals

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- One essential check to save potentially disastrous engine damage concerns the thread on the bolt on the nearside of the airbox at the back of the engine. It should have a protective nut and serrated washer on it as the original 'spot' soldered bolt often works loose and drops into the carburettor and on into the engine. In nearly all cases this bolt will have been replaced, but some may have got away.
- The V8 used a modified MGC gearbox with overdrive only on top (in third the engine's sheer torque smashes the overdrive unit to bits). Check for undue noise, jumping out of gear and wear. It is vital to use the correct 20/50 engine oil in the standard overdrive and to keep the filter clean.
- If the box is kaputt, you can opt for a five-speed SD1 Conversion. MGOC sells a complete nut and bolt kit to do this but it costs £2000.
- Clutch problems usually centre around the carbon fibre release bearing breaking up. Also make sure the pedal isn't spongy. If it is, the hydraulics are on their way out.
- If there's any vibration coming from the driveline when you take the car for a drive it's because one or both of the propshaft U/Js has worn.
- Under all that power the MGB-derived rear axle may well have wilted. Bank on a few hundred for a recon or you can have a limited slip alternative from MGOC costing £700.
- The MGB's simple suspension set up coped okay with V8 power and doesn't generally give problems, except for the kingpins - unless they're greased every 3000 miles they'll wear, so make sure they're in good order. Jack the front of the car up and try rocking the wheel at the top and bottom while somebody applies the footbrake. If there's any movement detectable at all, the kingpins will need replacing at £45 each.
- The front wishbone bushes also perish and collapse, but a visual check is all that's needed to see what state they're in. Always ensure that proper uprated V8 ones are used over the standard MGB sort.
- Steering is heavy but should be precise with no wandering or excessive freeplay. New or reconditioned racks aren't too dear plus there's even an MGOC power steering conversion kit, but the price for fingertip steering is a grand. Somewhat cheaper are castor reduction kits which will lighten up the standard set up, which was originally designed with cross-plies in mind (but which should NOT be fitted to an MGB with a Heritage crossmember, as they already run a reduced castor).
- Lever arm dampers were fitted front and rear, which are notorious for leaking. If you're not worried about originality it's possible to swap to telescopics (always a good move on the rapid V8), but the ride will be even harder.
- The V8 rode on special Dunlop rims which used alloy centres, so expect electrolytic rusting between the two surfaces. You can buy reconditioned types from V8 specialist Clive Wheatley costing £282 exchange. Wheatley also sells virtually everything you need for the car.
- Beware of fake Costello cars! It's not unknown for homespun conversions to be passed off as Ken's work. Similarly you will find a good many DIY conversions and their standard of workmanship needs scrutinising. A lot are excellent but others shouldn't be on the road, says Wheatley...