

V8 MGB GT



Are eight pots really better than four?



MG's legendary Syd Enever laid out the rough design for the MGB at the '57 Geneva Motor Show

I have to admit I have always had a soft spot for the MGB GT. When I was maybe six or seven, my grandmother bought me a bright orange Corgi MGB GT. I loved that car, and I was disconsolate when a short time later it was stolen from my school bag at Apiti primary school.

That's the thick end of 30 years ago now. There have been seminal events like decimal currency, the metric system and moon landings since, but I have never forgotten the allure of that shape, the right-ness of the Rostyle alloy wheels, or the name of the blighter who stole it from me.

I also had the opportunity to put a few miles in behind the wheel of an orange GT just like my Corgi model, during the mid-'80s.

The MGB GT is undoubtedly one of the all-time classics. Perhaps the V8 version is the ultimate example of the car, and maybe it is not. The V8 is certainly a completely different car from its four-pot brother.

A few years back, in these very pages, I tested Rod Brayshaw's manufactured-from-new-parts V8 roadster, and remember feeling unsure whether I would be happy to own one or not.

Well, as the Packard advertisements used to say, "Ask the man who owns one". I recently had the pleasure of acquainting

myself both with an original MGB GT V8, and with the proud owner, Lee Searle of Karori.

Lee, of course, swears by his MGB V8. It is his daily transport from Karori to the Hutt Valley, where he has his business. You can say what you like about parts-bin engineering but aside from routine maintenance, it's been the most reliable of means of transport.

Driveline

It might be cynical to note that the entire driveline of an MGB can be had in another form in an Austin/Morris Marina, or you might like to think that this combination of components had millions of kilometres of testing (which means, in the time-honoured tradition of the British motor industry, in the hands of customers) before the MGB ever turned a wheel in anger.

The MGB was a practical package. Mechanically unsophisticated, it was cheap to build, rugged and reliable in service. What it lacked was glamour performance.

For its humble background, the MGB was actually a groundbreaking design. It was only the second full-monocoque design produced by BMC.

The MGA had a full chassis, but the design team realised that to produce a car significantly lower, lighter and cheaper than the MGA the chassis would have to go.

Being among the first full monocoques produced at Pressed Steel, it is significantly over-engineered by today's standards, but it has endowed the roadster with legendary stiffness, which is only exceeded by the GT's tin-top version.

MG's legendary Syd Enever laid out what he thought should be the cues for the new generation MG at the Geneva Motor Show, and by November 1957 work had started in earnest on what would be known internally as EX205.

Enever had thought that the headlights should be set back from the front of the car, into scallops in the front wings, and a flat, elongated MG radiator of traditional pattern set between them.

A quarter-scale model was quickly knocked up back at Abingdon, and with some flattening of its rounded side profile, and a longer wheelbase, that small model became



what is virtually the MGB and MGB GT we know today.

Separate chassis

The design had anticipated a separate chassis, and when that concept was abandoned the car became EX214.

In a sign of the times, the sills were deliberately tucked under the doors to try and make the car look lower and sleeker. Twenty years later, the effect was reversed and the sills drop straight down, even flare a little, in an effort to make the car look more substantial in its new RV8 guise.

None of the constituent parts of the new British Motor Corporation had enough capital to sustain their own operations, and the merged company was no better off.

When it came to considering a new model, even one that borrowed all of its running gear from the corporate parts bin, capital was obviously going to be a problem.

John Thornley secured the future of the new car by negotiating with Pressed Steel, who would be pressing the body panels, to share investment in tooling in return for a royalty on each car sold.

It turned out to be a case of penny wise, pound foolish. The MGB and BGT became runaway success stories, and Pressed Steel's investment in tooling up for the car was paid off many times over at BMC's expense.

In a similar tale, some years later when Land Rover wanted a four-door version of the new Range Rover they co-opted Swiss entrepreneur and one-time motor manufacturer Peter Monteverdi to design it in return for a small royalty on each one sold. The rest is history.

There were sacrifices. The design team had wanted independent rear suspension for the new car, but there was no suitable differential available off the shelf, and no time or money to develop one, so the development car had the familiar live rear axle, located by trailing arms and a Panhard rod under coil springs.

Cart springs

Even this could not successfully be developed with the time and money available, and it should have been no surprise that the final version used cart springs to locate the axle.

Realistically, the engine was always going to be the agricultural but trusty B series pushrod four-banger.

MG was treated to some experimental engines for proving, particularly a V4 that was tested extensively in an MGA factory hack but the B was always the more likely option. It was boosted from 1622cc to 1798cc to ensure that the new MGB was no slower than the old MGA, and it received the refinement of a five-bearing crank in 1964.

Right from the first MGB GT, the car begged for more power, and in 1967 a seven-bearing version of the C-series engine was shoehorned under the hood of the GT to produce the MGC.

Fully 340 lbs heavier than the B, and far from a suitable sportscar engine, the C series was intended to produce a worthy successor to the Austin Healey 3000.

It had a character all of its own in a Grand Touring role, which completely escaped the notice of the motoring press of the day, and the C lasted only two years in production, although it has a faithful following today.

Also making its debut, alongside the MGC, was the new Rover P5B, which had ditched its trusty three-litre six in favour of an aluminium V8.

It wasn't even a question of time before someone tried fitting the new engine into the MGB – it had already been done! The 2.5-litre V8 from the Daimler sedan had been tried, but it would have required extensive redesign of the MGB engine compartment in spite of a V4 having been anticipated during design.

A successful Mini clubman racer named Ken Costello had already slotted Oldsmobile's version of the Rover engine into his own MGB, and the novelty and success of this conversion meant that Costello was soon doing as many as two conversions a week for other owners. Eventually even sceptical BL executives were testing a Costello V8 conversion, and a BL version was soon underway.

With 58% more power, and 80% more torque, the character of the whole car was transformed. By July 1972, BL had something to talk about. Its advertisements promised to ruin the day of anyone who had just purchased a 240Z, Scimitar GTE, or 2000 GTV with

the new 124 mph MGB GT V8. Mere hyperbole?

Oodles of torque

On the road, the V8 is by far the MGB to be preferred. The installation of the engine was cobbled straight from the P5B, and comes with the twin SU carburettor setup, the main benefit being oodles of torque from practically idle speeds upwards.

There's nothing to be gained by thrashing this engine. It sounds undignified and soon loses the urge to go any faster anyway.

The constant-vacuum SUs are to be preferred to four-barrel conversions because they make this sort of low-speed performance possible (some would say mandatory). Four-barrel setups tend to need to be pedalled harder, and can be quite reluctant performers at low speed.

The gearbox was always supposed to be a weak point of the car. It was marginal for the performance of the engine, but it is nonetheless very easy to use. There are no detents or springs, just a short, positive throw from ratio to ratio.

Like the standard MGB, the steering is heavy at rest, but if you're turning the steering wheel at rest then someone else is obviously paying for your tyres.

At any kind of speed, the steering lightens up appreciably. Once you're accustomed to it, you'll appreciate the quality of the feedback you get through the big wheel, but it has a feeling all of its own, and I have never been able to take to it instantly.

The car doesn't feel unduly heavy in front, and appears to understeer no more than the four-cylinder version, but

With some flattening of its rounded side-profile and a longer wheelbase, Enever's '57 design became what you see here, though this is the later GT version



you'd almost need to drive them back to be sure.

There's nothing quirky or unpredictable about the handling or, at least, nothing that I could find with the proud owner sitting next to me.

Lee's car has a factory-fitted sunroof, which is as close as I would get to wanting a roadster. I like the hardtop, and have no trouble fitting my nearly 2m frame between pedals and roof, even with the sunroof fitted.

It's like a Western boot, this car. You slip it on through its wide doors, stretch your toes down into the cosy footwell, and thereafter it fits like a glove. There's plenty of room where you need it.

Positive proof of the classic status of the MGB GT V8 is its sheer longevity. Of the 2591 V8 cars originally produced, a fair number were ravaged by salted roads and poor build quality, and less than 2000 are thought to have survived. Those that have are well cosseted

nowadays. Demand for spare parts finally resulted in parts being made again in 1992.

MG launched the RV8 in response to popular demand, and no doubt also to try and stem the tide of people assembling complete cars from newly manufactured parts. The RV8 was literally an MGB V8 with little more than a cosmetic makeover.

By anyone's definition, a classic must be the car which survives 30 years in production, virtually unchanged. Longer than the original Jaguar XJ6 or Range Rover, the MGB V8 has outlived them all.

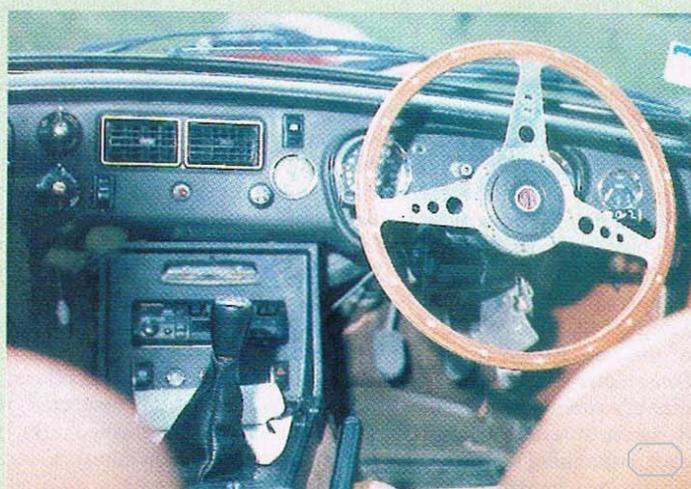
The MGB V8 survived the quirky TR7 and TR8, and countless other sports cars which were supposed to have superseded the MGB. One day, I know, I will own another MGB – an orange V8 model with Rostyle Whizz wheels.

JOHN PRATT



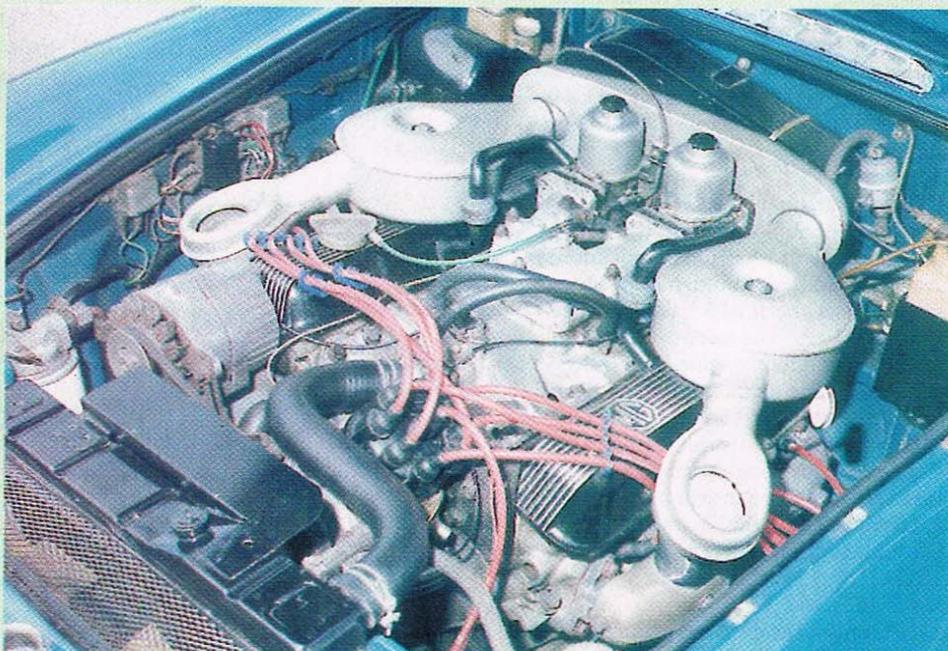
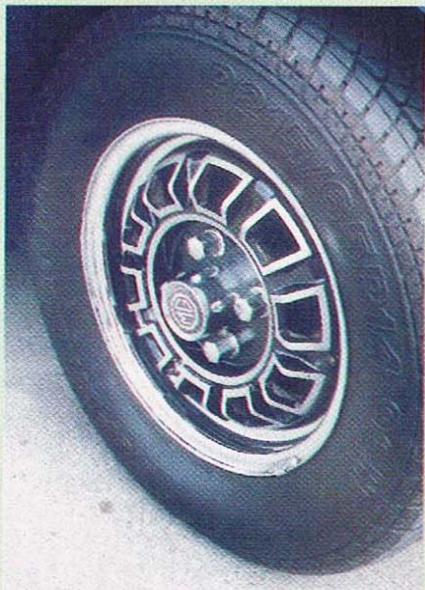
Specifications

Engine	V8 cylinder, 3528cc, ohv
Power	137bhp at 5,000 rpm.
Torque	193 ft lbs at 2,900 rpm
Transmission	Four speed manual gearbox and overdrive.
Brakes	Fr disc, rear drum
Suspension	ifs (coil), rear live axle on leafsprings.
Steering	Rack and pinion
Chassis/body	Two-door two-seater coupe, unitary construction steel bod.
Weight	2387 lbs approx
Dimensions	L 153/158"
Performance	Top speed: 124mph
Acceleration	0-60mph 8.6secs.
Production	1973-76 2591 (approx 750 black bumper model)

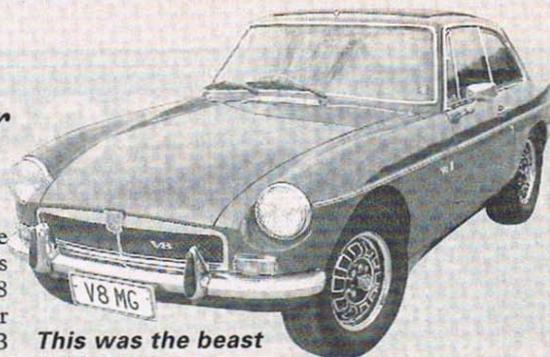


The installation of the engine was cobbled straight from the Rover P5B, and comes with the twin SU carburettor setup

Lee's car has a factory sunroof. The interior is typical post '50s British plastic



Owner Lee Searle found a factory V8 MG was the answer to a mid life crisis



This was the beast for Lee

is inexpensive (mine cost £50) and the callipers bolt directly on so it is only necessary to replumb the brake fluid lines to accommodate the extra "pot". This, in conjunction with oversize Bridgestone tyres and an M&G International handling kit, are the only departures from the factory specification and I find that the car in this form is well balanced and ideal for NZ conditions where there are a lot of relatively narrow, winding and undulating roads. I personally like the relaxed performance of the unstressed V8 and the effortless "passing power" that makes overtaking exhilarating and safe.

All this coupled with the ability to return over 30mpg on long trips means that I find the MG a very satisfying car to own and drive.

The attention the car gets is also a source of pleasure and the surprise some service station attendants (and American tourists) show when they find out that this is a factory model never fails to disappoint me.

When I tell people that I drive a 1973, 16-valve MG with a six-speed gearbox the incredulous looks are something to behold. Considering the success that Morgan, TVR and others had with the Rover V8 transplant, it never ceases to amaze me that British Leyland missed the opportunity all those years ago to develop the MGB along the lines of the MGR V8 of 1992.

BL's lack of vision however, has ensured enduring classic status for the factory V8s and I, for one, am extremely grateful for that.

LS



In the mid-'80s, I had delusions of grandeur as a 'serious collector' of classic cars with a 1952 MG TD and a 1974 Alfa GTV2000 tucked away in the garage.

At about this time, personalised registration plates became available in New Zealand and my 'couple' were adorned with MG 1952 and A ROMEO respectively, which suitably massaged my ego and added to my smugness. Any hint of a midlife crisis could be quickly nipped in the bud by throwing open the garage doors and breathing in the testosterone.

It was then that things started to go wrong. I began to realise that I could not afford to run two cars in the deteriorating economic climate, and the Alfa kept on rusting. To make matters worse, I turned 40 and a few days later, when a young lady saw me in 'A ROMEO' and yelled out "Dreamer!" I knew it was the end of an era.

The Alfa was hurriedly sold and I used the TD as everyday transport for the next couple of years as I struggled to adjust to my maturing image. Each day was an adventure with the TD, especially in the winter weather that Wellington throws at the commuting motorist.

On the 30-mile round-trip to and from work, blinding early morning sun reflecting off the bonnet could easily be replaced in the late afternoon by rain and crosswinds that threatened to remove the hood.

Fighter pilot

It was a little like being a fighter pilot in the Battle of Britain and I often felt a sense of achievement arriving home safely from a "sortie" knowing that I had lived to fight another day.

It was against this backdrop that I started to search for a replacement classic sportscar with very definite criteria in mind. My limited resources meant that I could afford only one vehicle so that it had to be practical in terms of being able to transport two occupants and their luggage with reasonable rapidity and comfort over long distances.

It also needed to be mechanically robust and simple with good spare parts availability, be good to look at, provide adequate performance as well as offering some long-term investment potential. Not too many classics in my price range fit these criteria even today and I suspect that there were even fewer options in NZ in the late '80s.

My search for a MGB GT V8 began after I read an article entitled "Eight into

four" in the February 1986 issue of the now-defunct *Sports Car Monthly*. This assessed the merits of slipping a meaty V8 into a lesser-powered British sportscar and compared the Sunbeam Tiger, MGB GT V8 and Triumph TR8.

The MG was described as "a pleasant surprise" and compared well with the "more modern" Triumph and the Tiger with the Ford cast iron "lump" in the front.

I immediately decided that the MG was the beast for me. I had previously owned a four-cylinder B GT so I knew that the size was about right and that parts would not be a problem.

As well as that, the extra power and rarity of the V8 meant that it would fit perfectly the criteria I had set myself. All I had to do was find one.

This proved to be more difficult than I had originally imagined because this model was only sold new in the UK and not many of the two and a half thousand produced had migrated this far.

It took three years for my ability to purchase and an available example to coincide and when they did, in 1989, I became the third owner of a teal blue 1973 model that had arrived on these shores in 1978 with its second owner.

Overdrive

This particular car is the ninetieth produced and has overdrive on third and fourth gears, a feature I used to relish until I read David Knowles' excellent book *MG V8 21 years on ...* which explained that third overdrive was discontinued early in the production run because the torque reversals caused by switching in and out of overdrive in this gear could cause gearbox failure.

To date however, I have had no trouble with any aspects of the transmission.

"V8 MG" is in everyday use and I have more than doubled the 80,000 miles on the speedo at the time of purchase. This has been achieved with minimal expenditure on mechanical items, a new radiator being the most expensive single part.

A bare-metal respray was completed three years ago and both doors were replaced (available within 24 hours from The MG Car Company of NZ, as was the radiator!)

I have upgraded the front brakes by fitting second-hand two-pot callipers from a '70s front-wheel-drive Austin Princess, which considerably improves stopping power. This is quite a common modification on MGBs in NZ because it