

Chairman's Chat

What a tremendous start the Club has made in 2009 with both meetings so far attracting such a large attendance, that there was hardly room to seat everyone! Hopefully, this is a future trend and the Club will continue to be buoyant and interesting for the members. Your Committee held its second meeting earlier this month and has made arrangements for meetings and events stretching to the end of the year so keep a close eye on the announcements in the monthly Newsletters for details and contacts about these.

Last weekend we had a skittles evening followed the next morning by a trip to Hursley near Winchester for the Southampton Club's Cobweb Run. The trip was undertaken in bright sunny top-down weather and Paul A lead the entourage across Salisbury Plain to Ludgershall then into Hampshire following the Test Valley for a short distance before taking a very pretty road across Farleigh Mount to the IBM offices at Hursley where the meeting took place. There was a considerable collection of MG's and some other classics already displayed when we arrived but the

WESSEX
MG CLUB
AT THE BELL ON THE COMMON
BROUGHTON GIFFORD



need for coffee (or brunch for some) was the first priority before inspecting the assembled vehicles. By now the weather had turned to heavy rain showers but we missed the worst of it by making a late lunch stop at Stockbridge on the return journey. Leading a smaller group back home, I somehow missed the turn for a short hop along the A303 at Andover, and never saw any of our members again that afternoon. I trust you all arrived home safely!

At the next Club meeting Paul Warn will be giving us the benefit of his knowledge about pre-war grand prix cars and, as this is the last meeting before the Guernsey Trip, Paul Adams will be providing the final briefing in the form of an information pack before we savour the delights of the Channel Isles commencing on the 5th April.

For your diary in the coming month

MARCH

23rd – Club Night – Pre WW2 Grand Prix talk Paul Warn

APRIL

5th – 8th Club trip to Guernsey
27th – Club night. 7.30pm start, Prod & poke

Look forward to seeing you all on the 23rd.

Gordon

The Rise and fall of the MGB

This is part one of a two part story on the development, production and subsequent decline of the MGB sports car and its derivatives.

To this day, the products of BMC (later British Leyland) are regarded with mixed emotions – most of them not being particularly flattering to the company. On the one hand, people openly deride such products as the Austin Allegro and Maxi, while on the other, cars like the Range Rover and Mini are still regarded with great fondness and respect. The MGB sits somewhere between these two extremes, being regarded with great fondness and a sense of nostalgia by those who have owned one, while enthusiasts, especially those who have owned one, while they tend to dismiss it for its mechanical crudeness. The fact that more people belong to the latter: during the car's long production life (1962-1980), over half a million MGBs rolled out of Abingdon's factory gates. Unlike many of BMC's contemporary products, it was also a great success in the US and Europe, where its mechanical simplicity, good looks, low price and honest charm were seen as assets.



Back in the late Fifties, the MGB had been conceived by MG's chief engineer, Syd Enever to replace the beautiful MGA which was suffering from a drop-off in sales. The MGA was clearly losing out to the newly-launched MG Midget (a badge-engineered Austin-Healey Sprite), but it was also painfully obvious by this time that new rivals such as the Sunbeam Alpine and Triumph TR4A were proving to be very stiff competition. The MGA was still more than competitive in terms of its performance and handling, but its bone-shaking ride was thrown into sharp relief by the newer rivals: while boasting performance and road-holding on a par with the MGA's, they could also offer a degree of comfort and civility that was alien to the MG.

Replacing the MGA

So, during the MGB's development, the emphasis was placed on retaining the driver appeal of the MGA, while adding an element of comfort and accommodation that had been denied to owners of the older car. The MGB would have a lot to live up to: the MGA was quite simply the most successful sports car of its time, with over 100,000 having been produced by 1962. Unsurprisingly, the MGB would also prove to be a success - though the extent of its success must have surprised everyone, not least the management at Abingdon at the time. The basic mechanical make-up of the MGB remained pretty much as before, but the structure was completely new. For the first time on an MG roadster (discounting the badge-engineered Midget), the bodyshell was an immensely strong monocoque, very effectively styled by MG's Don Hayter, with assistance from Pininfarina.

The front suspension and rack and pinion steering were carried over from the MGA, the whole assembly being mounted on a detachable cross-member. Of course, by 1962, this componentry was rather long in the tooth, being derived from that of the 1947 MG YA saloon, which was itself effectively a pre-war design. Not that this mattered, because the set-up had proven to be a delight in the MGA and continued to be so when installed in the MGB. For the rear suspension, various kinds of coil spring arrangements were tried, but in the end the old enemy of cost management won the day, and the traditional arrangement of a live rear axle, sprung and located by simple leaf springs, was employed. This somewhat agricultural solution was deemed to offer the best overall compromise between cost and effectiveness. The springing rates were much softer than the MGA's, in order to achieve the comfort and civility the engineers were chasing.

The MGA's B-series engine was enlarged from 1622cc to 1798cc for use in the MGB, and thus provided enough power to offset the extra weight of the heavier monocoque structure. In fact,

with a suitable increase in torque as well, the MGB proved to be usefully quicker than its predecessor.

A successful launch

So, at the 1962 London Motor Show, MG wheeled out their new car to considerable praise - and as they had with the MGA before it, the company made sure that marketing and sales emphasis was placed firmly on the US market. The UK press lauded the car; Motor magazine, for instance, commented that the MGB was a "delightful modern sports car with a marked bias towards the 'grand touring' character ... a pleasure to drive." In those days, car magazines tended to be a little more circumspect in their language than they are today, but reading between the lines, it would appear that the road testers saw it more as an inexpensive GT roadster than an out-and-out sports car.

And so it was that the MGB's long and successful career as the quintessential Englishman's sports car was born. Although the MGB's appearance changed little during its long production run, like its stalemate the Mini, the car benefited from a continuous development programme, designed to ensure that it remained not only saleable but competitive. In 1965, the MGB engine received the five-bearing crank bottom end that had been introduced for the ADO17 saloon cars, which made it slightly more driveable, if a little slower. Three years after its launch, the MGB was still seen as a highly desirable car; Motor magazine continued to shower praise on the little roadster, citing its ability to cruise "effortlessly around the 100mph mark", still legal on the M1 in these pre-speed restriction days.

Late that year, the most significant addition to the MG range thus far was made. The MGB GT was a closed coupé version of the roadster, styled in part by Pininfarina - no doubt as a result of their close work with BMC on the range of family cars. Mechanical changes were limited to



the addition of a front anti-roll bar and Salisbury type rear axle (items which would become standard on the roadster in November 1966 and July 1967 respectively). OK, so the GT's rear seats were really only suitable for the smallest of children, but luggage capacity and versatility were vastly improved over the roadster's. The GT version of the MGB was certainly seen as a useful upward extension of the range and was justifiably viewed as a "poor man's Aston Martin", with its handsome styl-

ing and excellent (for the time) ride and handling characteristics. However, as always, time was catching up with the MGB and what were seen as quirks back in 1962 - such as the oddly-spaced gear ratios, non-synchromesh first gear and optional interior heater - were being viewed as seriously irksome by 1966.

Expanding the range

At the same time, the MGC was launched, in an attempt by BMC to fill the gap in their range left by the demise of the Austin-Healey 3000. (A Healey prototype of the MGC was also prepared, incorporating a bold-looking Healey grille, but was dropped when Donald Healey vetoed the plan, feeling that the 'C was not a suitable car to be badge-engineered.) This, the first of two attempts by MG to market higher-powered versions of the MGB, was doomed to failure, due to the unsuitability of its engine.

The engine chosen for the MGC was the BMC C-series, as found in the Austin 3-litre. What set this application out as being a failure from the start was that the seven-bearing-crank engine was lugubrious in the extreme, being decidedly unwilling to rev. And because it was such a heavy, straight-six power unit, it upset the weight distribution of the little car, making it an understeerer of the most determined kind; to make matters worse, the Press cars given to road testers had incorrectly inflated tyres that exaggerated the fault. Now, it would seem that Abingdon were given incorrect dimensions for the C-series engine - an amazing mistake, all told - and the planned redesign failed to a degree because of this oversight by Longbridge. So, not an ideal recipe for a sports car, even if it was meant to be a tourer rather than a sportster. Like its

Austin 3-litre cousin, this unsuccessful MG only remained in production for only two years, with a total production run of just over 9,000.

In 1969, further improvements were made to the MGB, but the cosmetic changes managed to upset the purists, who found the bold-looking, recessed plastic grille an affront to the memory of its chrome predecessor. This but whereas British Leyland improvements, Japanese car pro-thing completely new - and the similarly-priced Datsun This car moved the game on styling and Austin-Healey 3000 no answer to this new threat 240Z became the fastest- In fact, in order to meet the ever-tightening federal emission laws, later MGBs were sold in detoxed form and could only muster 82bhp from their 'clean' B-series engines, which saddled the car with less-than-adequate performance (0-60mph in 18seconds and 90mph maximum speed).

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was the first "Leylandised" MG, merely offered cosmetic inducer Nissan offered some-better - when they launched 240Z sports car in America. significantly, offering Goertz levels of performance. MG had and as a result, the Datsun selling sports car in US history.

Needless to say, British Leyland politics began to bite, and the company's management team, led by ex-Triumph man Donald Stokes, began to make their presence felt. The problems were deep-rooted, as the company had no 'clean' four-pot engine to use in the MGB - a laughable situation when one considers that BMC had as much notice of these impending laws as any other car company. Obviously, throughout the Sixties, BMC had been concentrating on expanding its capacity and becoming a world leader in the car producing stakes, but the MGB was a massive export success for them, and to take their eye off the ball in their biggest market was a criminal mistake. Although these mistakes were attributable to the management team of a previous regime, Stokes nevertheless compounded the problems by making new mistakes of his own. The first of these came in 1968, when he pulled the plug on the development of a replacement for the MGB, the EX234 - a pretty, front-engined car styled by Pininfarina (as were most of the successful BMC products).

In 1970, when British Leyland embarked on the development of a new, corporate sports car, tailored as much for export markets as for the UK, it was decided that it would use a Triumph engine and be designed by Austin's head of styling, Harris Mann. This car, the TR7 would live for barely six years, compared with the MGB's run of eighteen years.

When the first major reorganisation of British Leyland was undertaken in 1971, the company's car producers were split up into Austin-Morris and the Specialist Division (i.e., Rover, Triumph and Jaguar). It can only have come as a major blow to the MG management at Abingdon that they were not incorporated in the latter division: unlike Triumph, who produced a range that included medium-sized saloons, MG produced only sports cars at this time, surely giving them "specialist" status? Not in Donald Stokes' eyes, it seems..... Part 2 next month.



Getting into MGs



My interest in cars started built up a collection of Dinky many years. However when I that appealed to me and together with a couple of friends I bought an un-roadworthy Austin seven Ruby and kept it in an orchard opposite where I now live. It cost us the princely sum of £10-10shillings in 1959/60 so you can tell it needed a bit doing to it. In fact the engine was seized and it took a lot of work to do to get it going. Nonetheless I learnt the rudiments of car mechanics as well as basic driving skills by driving around the orchard. It never did become a roadworthy car. As my seventeenth birthday loomed over the horizon I fixed myself up with a Provisional Licence, talked my older Brother into giving me driving lessons in his 1949 Morris 8 Series E (we called it the E-type), and set out on public roads. It was not long before I had a full licence and on occasions my brother would allow me use of the E-Type and subsequently its replacement a Mark1 Ford Consul (great courting car because of the front bench seat).

when I was still in short trousers and had Toys which were my pride and joy for reached my teens it was the real thing



It was frustrating not having wheels of my own but it was another two years, at the age of nineteen, before I was able to buy (with a loan from Lloyds Bank) a car of my own. My first car was a 1954 Morris Minor.

A whole series of replacement cars followed from this; in fact a count reveals that to date I have owned 28 different cars. But in those early days, appealing though open top two-seater motoring was, this was never a realistic or practical proposition. It was not



until the children had flown the nest many years later that I got to thinking that just two seats would be sufficient and it was at that time in 1995 that the MGF came onto the market. The first one Sandra and I ever saw was in the Little Chef car park at Nunney. I was smitten and it did not take much persuasion from Sandra that we should try one out. So one Saturday we went over to the dealers at Clifton for a spin round the block. It was enough to convince us and it

was in September 1996 that we took delivery of ours which we still have and use today. Despite a few problems it has and remains a joy to drive and has provided us with lots of happy motoring including taking it through France, Switzerland and onto Florence and Sienna in Italy. We have also toured Ireland in it and got very wet doing so.

Soon after buying the car we joined the Wessex MG Club, our first outing being the summer picnic which was held somewhere down in Dorset. Interest grew and I soon had the desire to do a 'project'. I was lucky enough to be put in touch with a guy who had commenced a total restoration on a Mark II Midget but wanted to sell up. After about twelve months of negotiations we managed to agree a price and after hiring a trailer I brought home a rolling chassis with all the body work and paint work done. Progress was very ponderous at first then with early retirement I was able to devote almost full time to the project and got completed in about twelve months.

Meantime an ex-colleague was selling his BGT and I couldn't resist giving it a good home. I now had a stable of three MG's and space was a bit of a problem involving me in renting a cow shed on a local

farm. I enjoyed driving the Midget despite its habit to stall without warning and refusing to restart until after a ten minute rest. Potentially a very embarrassing scenario if you happen to be at traffic lights at the time.

I sold that car to a guy from Midleton (*home of Jameson Whisky*) near Cork in Southern Ireland. He came over on the ferry in his Landrover and an 'A' frame and took it away the same day.

Shortly after I was offered a rubber bumper Midget. A neighbour of my son's was moving house and found it in the back of the garage unloved and not moved for many years. A re-commissioning job was required to get it back on the road and this was subsequently sold to Nancy.

But throughout all these years I had developed a yearning for an MGA and after a couple of disappointments looking at project cars I decided to look for one where someone else had done all the hard work. It was last August that we went to Portsmouth to pick up a 1960 Roaster. We have not had much chance to use it yet but are looking forward to a dry summer and plenty of trips in her.



Gordon

The Club Caption Competition



'You can come out now Nancy he's gone'



Many thanks to Colin English for the February caption

Thanks also to Richard Tranter for: **'Tom had found an entirely new meaning for the expression "Frozen Assets!"**

Judging by the look on Vic's face there's bound to be a few for the March caption.....

Club News

WESSEX MG 2009 EVENTS LIST			
Date	Event	Venue	Details
23/03/2009	Club Night	The Bell	Talk on Grand Prix racing before WW2 - Paul Warn
5 to 8 April 2009	Club trip to Guernsey		Paul Adams will be handing out travel packs on the March club night
27/04/2009	Club night	The Bell	1930 start - Prod & Poke see details below
2 to 4 May 2009	Bristol Classic Car Show	Shepton Mallet Show Ground	See details in the February Newsletter
04/05/2009	Club run - Popham Classic Car & Air Day	Popham Airfield	POC Paul Wheal 01249 814764 Details TBA – see note below
17/05/2009	Club run - Arundel Castle		POC Nancy Strickland 01249 819962 Details TBA
18/05/2009	Club Night	The Bell	Mystery Run - POC Vic Wright 01380 859618 Details TBA
07/06/2009	Club run - MGs in the Park		Leave from Chippenham service station 10.00am
14/06/2009	Club run - Cotswold Caper		POC Ged West 01225 793210 Details TBA
22/06/2009	Club night	The Bell	1930 start BBQ
28/06/2009	Club Annual Picnic		POC Vic Wright 01380 859618 Details TBA
19/07/2009	Club run - Buscote Park		POC Peter Hine - 01672 512847 Details TBA
17/07/2009	Club Night		Club run to The Bugatti Museum Prescott - POC Peter Hine 01672 512847. Details TBA
02/08/2009	Club run - Goodwood		Goodwood for Sunday Breakfast 'Open Top Day' - POC Paul Warn 01225 768676 Details TBA
24/08/2009	Club Night	The Bell	1930 start - Bols
10/09/2009	Club run - Bath		Bath Comedy Walk - POC Paul Warn 01225 768676 Details TBA

Prod and Poke

Don't forget our annual 'Prod and Poke'. For new members, this is an opportunity to bring along your pride and joy for others to have a good look around. To make this year's event a little more interesting a competition has been arranged.

Would members please bring along a written question about their car together with a general knowledge question that can be displayed clearly on their car's windscreen? The answer to the car question needs to be relatively easy to find, or you run the risk of Vic leaving your car as an assembly of parts to find the answer! Don't forget to bring pen and paper...

Popham Classic Car & Air Day

Any members wishing to go to this event please be prepared to let Paul Wheal know at the next meeting.

Festival of Voice – Stourhead – Saturday 9th May

This is an annual event at which amateur choirs from Wiltshire, Somerset and Dorset take part. About 30 choirs with different styles of singing took part last year and every choir had two "sets" in different parts of the glorious gardens. Our first one was on the Palladian Bridge and the second one right at the end of the lake in front of The Pantheon. Last year there was also a good selection of Jaguars from a French motoring club parked up in one corner.

Normal entrance fees apply (unless you are a member of the National Trust), and you can either take a packed lunch or try the various eateries in the grounds (including a pub) with the whole event running from about 11am 'til 6pm. The music is very "accessible" with only the occasional high brow music from the more serious minded singers (of which we are definitely not).

We're part of the Wiltshire Wailers in case you want to find out what we do most Monday evenings – (and unfortunately most club nights!) Hope to see you there on the 9th May.

For those visiting Stourhead for the first time, it lies roughly halfway between Frome and the A303.

Jeff and June

Photo Album - *Skittles & Cob web run*

