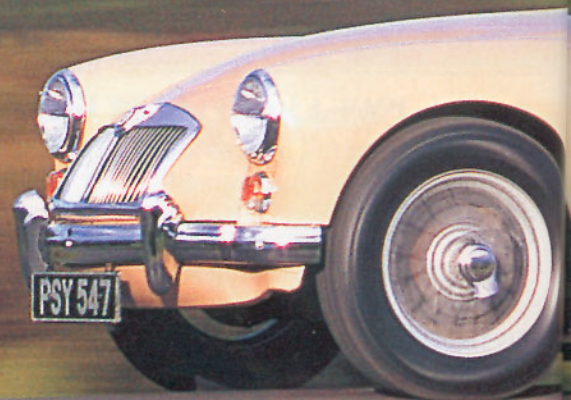


First of *A* new line

With sleek style, old-world charm and fine manners, the MGA has a foot in old and new MG camps. Paul Hardiman is the go-between





It's hard to reason now, but the MGA was seen as a softie when it appeared in 1955. Press response was rapturous, but the public wasn't so sure: weren't sports cars – especially MG sports cars – meant to be slow, jolty and draughty? Well, that was the problem. Sales of the upright T-series in the crucial export market of America had begun to flag by 1953, as the horsepower race meant that even large saloons could outdrag it from the lights.

Here, at last, after years of chivvying purse-holder BMC, was a sleek, new sports car that, by comparison, looked from another world. Never mind that the streamlined body was hiding a separate chassis and cart springs: the running boards had gone. Rack-and-pinion steering – used on the MG TD and TF, but only then beginning to appear on sharp-handling saloons such as the company's own Magnette, and the Morris Minor – gave light, faithful steering. That, plus a low centre of gravity, put the A's handling in a different league from its predecessors – and the rival Austin-

Healey that received funding in advance of MG.

But there were a few criticisms on its launch, in 1500 form. There were only four dials on the dash. Aside from the speedo, rev counter and fuel gauge, the water temperature and oil pressure gauge shared top and bottom halves of the same instrument, a feature that lasted into the MGB's lifespan. The curious but quite charming Bakelite horn push on the dash was not liked either. And, although boot space was another moan, it was easy to forget that this was the first MG to have an enclosed luggage space.

This was a car that would outsell all previous MG models, with 101,081 of all types made during its seven-year lifespan. Its B-series pushrod engine was a much simpler, cheaper unit to make than the XPAG units that powered the TF, and had already seen service in the MG Magnette. Just 23cc bigger than the XPEG at 1489cc, it produced 5bhp more at the same revs, but the main reason the MGA was much faster than the TF was aerodynamics. Above 80mph, more power for the venerable

two-seater had little effect, and it was all done by 85. The A could comfortably exceed that by 10mph but, even with 95mph potential, it was felt that Abingdon's new mainstay ought to be a 100mph car.

So for 1958 a new twin-cam head was devised by the works. While it gave the required performance, the new unit was dogged by reliability problems, especially in America, the A's biggest market. Many Twin Cams were produced with the compression ratio lowered from 9.9 to 8.3:1 to stop pistons from holing, but with less squeeze the bangs were correspondingly smaller too, negating much of the new engine's 36bhp power advantage. Since the B-series block had been enlarged to 1588cc for the Twin Cam, a worthwhile effect was had by simply enlarging the pushrod engine to the same capacity to create the MGA 1600 in May 1959. This brought a worthwhile power gain over the 1500 of 7½bhp, to 80bhp, at 5600rpm, and nearly 90lb ft of torque, 10lb ft more than before but



usefully at almost 2000rpm lower revs. The last Twin Cam left the factory in June 1960.

These changes, apart from making the MGA tantalisingly close to a 100mph car, were reckoned to make it significantly easier to drive. Best of all, there was no price increase over the 1500. Externally, it was identified by the sidelamps moving down to join the indicators below the headlamps, in bigger housings that were standard BMC wear at the time, and slightly unfortunate larger plinths for the tail lights and separate indicators. The clip-on sidescreens became rigid framed, allowing the use of sliding windows.

The Twin Cam had brought with it one other desirable feature – disc brakes. The

working hard it sounds like a well-tuned Mini.

The steering's high-g geared but sharp; with thumbs resting against the big rim you steer mainly with the wrists, but it's heavy when manoeuvring, or when heeling the car hard into hairpins. After a day with the car, you feel the strain in the upper arms. The gearchange, too, can give your left hand the sort of severe massage normally only served up by road drills. The lever and knob are slim and look delicate, but the feel of the 'box is not, with short, stiff, uncushioned throws.

One of the best bits about the A is its sure-footedness, and there the car came in for real praise, more neutral and confidence-inspiring than the heavier B that followed it. John



Wires optional; painted dash on all As except Twin Cams and De Luxes; stowed sidescreens live in bag behind seats

'THE 1600 Mk1 IS THE ONE TO HAVE, BLENDING THE MOST ACCESSIBLE POWER WITH THE MORE ELEGANT EARLIER STYLING'

performance of the original drums had been quite adequate but not, MG felt in its typically thorough way, for the increased performance of the faster car. Where the Twin Cams used Dunlop discs all round, the 1600s used Lockheed discs at the front only, sticking with drums at the rear, for engineers have always struggled to make a mechanical linkage for the handbrake work with rear discs. The German solution, for the contemporary Porsche 356, simply used small drums at the rear within the disc hubs.

For the last cars, the 1600 MkIIs produced from late 1960, the engine capacity was usefully increased to the B-series' then standard size of 1622cc, meaning the pushrod A was finally a genuine 100mph car. But Abingdon got it all wrong with the grille and rear light styling, the slats being mounted vertically in an ugly recess, and the use of very unsuitable-looking Mini-type tail lights mounted on their sides.

So the 1600Mk1 is the one to have, blending the most accessible power with the more elegant earlier styling – although the 1500 rear lights are the simplest and nicest of all.

The A has stood the test of time well, and is a more intimate car to drive than the bigger, heavier B that replaced it in 1962. The narrow tyres and rear wings give it an appealing poise, mid-way between the old-fashioned spindliness of the TD and the smooth blandness of the B. You sit low, thanks to the floors sitting at the bottom of the wide-based chassis rails rather than on top of them. The seats are narrow and upright, which came in for some grumbles from the original road testers, pushing you near the dash. The optional telescopic steering column, which is only adjustable with a spanner to undo the pinch bolt, is a must. Although the doors taper down until they are quite shallow at the rear, you sit low enough to be well protected from the wind.

There's a pull starter, of course – no point in pushing the traditionalists right over the edge – but very little choke is needed as the B-series kicks into life. This one, an original right-hand-drive car in the unusual but factory Alamo Beige, has an Oselli unleaded head and exhaust, so it's rortier than standard, settling down to a slightly offbeat burble like a Minor on steroids. It's always a source of wonder how all BMC cars of the era managed to share variations on the same exhaust note: when this one is



A-CLASS – THE OWNERS

Richard and Elizabeth Brown have had three MGAs "completely by accident," says the former hillclimb champion, who still has a single-seater which the family shares for speed events. "We bought one 15 years ago – just fancied an open two-seater for the summer. We swapped it for a Ferrari 365 and wished we hadn't. We were A-less until '97 when we bought another, and we thought 'what will we do with it'. We'd



seen ads for the Monte Carlo Challenge and had a go. Hillclimbing's a rather selfish sport, and rallying appealed because it's a real team effort."

They've been doing the historic Montes in As ever since, plus the first Rally of the Tests – "great fun, you don't take it too seriously" – and, two years ago, a Coupé came their way. "We'd almost rolled the roadster into someone's garden on ice at about 5mph. A roll bar ruins the looks, and we fancied discs all round, so we found a Twin Cam Coupé with a B engine. We put in the Oselli unit from the Roadster, so we've effectively got a De Luxe Coupé. It's so much tauter than the roadster and you don't get so tired.

"As are super for rallying – especially in snow, as they're so well balanced. It had so much traction one year that we got pulled up suspected of having an LSD. And we use it on the road all year round."

Michael Waterhouse has owned five MGAs since 1960 – and has raced most of them. His latest is the 1958 Earls Court Motor Show car, PMO 946, which subsequently became a press demonstrator, and which he bought from Bob West in 1984: "The last MGA racer I sold in 1981, and we were restoring an A for my eldest son Jonathan, buying parts from Bob West. I saw this car and made him an offer. But he doesn't part with his ex-works cars now."

PMO is now used mostly by his younger son Robert, but Michael, who owned the ex-Dick Jacobs racer 1 MTW for the 1961 season, remains a firm A enthusiast. "They make very good road cars," he says. "The roadholding has always been superb. Compared with an Austin-Healey it's so rigid – the chassis is the nearest thing to a Ferrari GTO, and they tolerate modern, grippy tyres."

"The best thing," adds Robert, "is that it is so original – just as Roy Salvadori drove it in 1960."





Vents extract hot air from engine bay – scripts behind on TC cars; superb poise and balance; B-series here in 1588 form

Bolster, trying a 1600 for *Autosport* in 1960, said: 'It would take a clumsy driver to run out of road with an MGA.' While the B-series is conditionally inclined not to rev – getting progressively louder in that gruff Austin Cambridge sort of way – it's happy cruising at 60 or 70mph, with 3500 or 4000rpm showing, and that means it keeps up with modern traffic, even on fast A-roads, and its poise and neutrality mean you can hustle through fast bends without lifting, in confidence. Historic rally organiser Philip Young ran an ex-works MGA for many years, and rates the handling highly: "Most were underpowered in their day, so they were outshone by the Healeys from the same shop, but they are a nicely balanced car

with a tremendous strong chassis and can hustle down a twisty road really well provided you don't have loads of clobber in the boot. Very under-rated."

With no servo, those discs need a firm shove, but do it and there's enough bite to squeal the front tyres. Drum-braked As stop adequately but have a rather dead pedal and give your right thigh muscles a punishing workout in the process. In the earlier car you soon find yourself driving with heightened anticipation, in a much more vintage style, but the 1600 overcomes this with its extra acceleration and braking. In overall feel, it's like a grown-up Sprite but not as heavy as a Healey, while retaining the stiff-sprung Morris Garages feel

'ONE OF THE BEST BITS ABOUT THE A IS ITS SUREFOOTEDNESS, MORE NEUTRAL AND CONFIDENT THAN THE B THAT FOLLOWED IT'



of traditional MGs. Supple but taut.

The other major attraction of the A is its looks, and the complete lack of outer handles keeps the shape pure, one that is little changed from Sydney Enever's inspired special body on George Phillips' TD-based 1951 Le Mans racer. Its clean shape was accentuated by pierced disc wheels, but the first proper prototype A of 1952 was on wires. Most production As used disc wheels, although knock-off wires were an option. Twin Cams had a combination of both – peg-drive, knock-off disc wheels.

To keep the lines flowing and unbroken, the doors are opened by pullcords inside – you can't lock this car, remember – and, if you don't have an ugly handle on the nose, why have one on the tail? So the boot release is a simple loop sprouting through the rear bulkhead, mirroring the bonnet pull over the passenger's knees. The price of fashion is that, frankly, it does get aggravating if you want to get into the boot very often as you have to scabble about under the folded hood. And the clean effect is rather negated on the boot by the big chrome rack that is an absolute necessity due to the spare wheel taking up much of the storage space.

The hood itself is permanently attached to the car, and folds out of sight, but the complicated folding frame needed to achieve this is almost a victim of its own success, being so stiff and awkward to put up that you yearn for the sticks and covers build-it-yourself approach of the Sprite. Once the hood is on, and sidescreens clipped in place, it is very cosy and draught-free, although it generates a lot of wind noise. If you want a completely refined A, you go for the coupé, introduced from 1956, which has a taller screen, proper wind-up windows and a glass rear screen. Despite being an afterthought, the steel roof blends in very well, looking as if it was designed that way.

But, if wind in the hair is what you want, you can still cover great distances in an A. Still more impressive is how tough it is, uncomplaining over hundreds of miles while packed to the gills with two people and their kit. Simplicity plays a big part here – fewer bits, fewer to go wrong – but it's further evidence that the MGA, little changed through its life, was right first time. ♦

FACTFILE

Chassis & body box-section steel chassis, with welded and bolted steel body **Engine** all-iron pushrod 'four' with twin SU carburettors **Max power** 79.5bhp @ 5600rpm **torque** 87lb ft @ 3800rpm **Gearbox** four-speed with synchromesh on top three gears **Suspension:** front double wishbones with Armstrong lever-arm dampers forming top links rear live axle, semi-elliptic springs **Brakes** solid discs front, drums rear, no servo **Steering** rack and pinion, 2.66 turns lock to lock **Length** 156in (3962mm) **Width** 58in (1473mm) **Weight** 18¼cwt **0-60mph** 13.3 secs **Top speed** 96.3mph **Fuel consumption** 24 mpg **Price new** (1960) £940 **Now** £10,000

THE EXPERT – BOB WEST

Bob West (right) has been restoring MGAs for more than two decades. As well as five works cars, he turns out a pretty road car as well: "About 23 years ago, a friend of mine said, 'I've got an interesting project for you', and it turned out to be a dilapidated English MGA. Then somebody asked me to do another."

He's now encyclopaedic about works As. Alongside the famous Le Mans car SRX 210 in his Pontefract farm workshop, the former John Gott racer is taking shape. This former works rally car was raced privately by the policeman, but last competed in 1969. Working on 777 ENK was Bob Farrington (left), who sold SRX to West in 1994, having bought it from Ted Lund in the '70s. "Back then, it was just an old racing car," he says. This all-aluminium streamliner started life as one of the EX182 recordbreakers, then raced in 1959 as a roadster, in 1960 as a coupé, and with the modified nose in 1961. It has fascinating touches such as the remote reservoir to keep the lever-arm dampers topped up, made from an old screw-top paint tin, and twin ignition coils, in case one went down in the long race. West has done three Goodwoods in it, and is particularly proud of the fact that it came third in class at Classic Le Mans last year, behind a Lotus and a Lola.



But it's not all competition cars. West produces concours-winning rebuilds and offers parts and advice for enthusiasts: "Most of the cars are West Coast imports and the bodies aren't too bad but they get knocked about so it's worth putting them on the chassis jig. It's a difficult body to get right, and we make our own panels for accuracy. One of the biggest costs is sourcing original bits – often they've got the wrong carbs or MGB instruments."

There's also a five-speed gearbox conversion, developed with Highgear Engineering for more relaxed cruising, that costs about £1450, fitted. Bob West: 01977 703828

Thanks to Grundy Mack Classic Cars: 01944 758000

