

BELGIAN MGB

*Hein Schoone reveals the full story of the rare
and attractive Jacques Coune-bodied MGB*



Above, the Coune-bodied Berlinette was a remarkably attractive interpretation of the MGB theme

Left, Jacques Coune, today, an active 64-year-old

Far left, Coune unveils the very first Berlinette at the '64 Brussels Motor Show

Below, rear view reveals Ferrari 275GTB-inspired Kamm-profiled tail





Carrosserie Coune put an incredible amount of work into producing a cabriolet version of the Volvo 122S, which needed considerable strengthening and reshaping

MOST people who look at an MGB Berlinette for the first time fall into one of two categories. The first are familiar with MGs in general, sometimes remember that there once was such a car and recognise it as "the first GT" or "that Belgian GT, isn't it?" The other category, who are younger and perhaps don't have so much knowledge of MGs, are usually more puzzled. They will try to get a glimpse of the grille-decal and just when they've decided for themselves that it must be something Italian, they recognise the familiar MG emblem, which leaves them even more puzzled. Still, their first guess is much closer to reality than most MG 'experts' know. From the early Fifties on, the creator of this extraordinary GT, Jacques Coune, was very much involved with the sunlit country that has originated so many fascinating cars.

Jacques Coune, born on January 16, 1924 in the French-orientated capital of Belgium, Brussels, went to college in Melle, near Gent. After completing an interior design course, he tumbled into the world of automobiles. In 1947, through his father, he started selling military goods and vehicles left over from WWII. He became friendly with the Belgian Ferrari importer and accompanied him to the major motor shows on the continent. It was on one of these occasions, at the 1950 Turin Motor Show, that he met Carlo Abarth, who showed his exhausts to the public on a tiny stand. After that meeting, Coune, who by now had a car repair shop in Brussels, became the world's first official Abarth agent. Later on he also acquired Iso. As the repair shop grew and specialised in exotic cars, Coune had to look for skilled craftsmanship. He went to Italy every fortnight for business, and simply looked around at the workshops in Piemonte, the region around Turin at the foot of the Alps. In this area babies aren't given rattles, but a hammer and a sheet of metal instead to make their own. He offered these maestros near double wages, and at one time had five Italian

metalworkers employed next to some 30 locals at his large premises in Avenue de la Couronne, Brussels.

Carrosserie Coune was now an established name and a healthy company that undertook the most difficult body repair jobs. They knew how to deal with the new material called glassfibre and kept customers happy with the highest standards of craftsmanship. In 1963 they were responsible for the aluminium lightweight body of the Maserati Formula One car that raced in the colours of the Belgian National Team. Other achievements were displayed to the public in 1963; a nice four-seater cabriolet conversion of the Volvo 122S Amazon and an estate based on the Mercedes 220SE which offered ample room for eight in extreme luxury. Although Coune's main funds still came from the repair shop, he now continued a tradition of famous Belgian coachbuilders such as d'Ieteren, Vesters Nerickx and Oblin.

The large Mercedes, with its leather interior, chromed roof rack and opening rear door, was almost instantly strangled by the Belgian Mercedes importer/assembler Ima, who commissioned their own version named Mixte, less luxurious but much cheaper. Coune made four 220 estates, which all went to the United States. The cabriolet Volvo, in four-seater and later even more sophisticated two-seater form, was slightly more successful. The Volvo conversion required more radical changes to the structure of the car whereas the Mercedes only needed a strengthened rear suspension. The Volvo's body was first strengthened with two beams inside and two outside the floorpan running the whole length of the vehicle and then two cross-beams between the rear wheel arches. After that the Italians took their hacksaws and began the decapitation. Doors were taken out and reshaped to match the new body line, trunk and windscreen surroundings altered to accept the folding hood and finally tailor-made strips were added to doors and windows. Nine of these rare

Volvo cabriolets left *Carrosserie Jacques Coune*, each consuming over 1,000 working hours, some 400 hours more than estimated as every single part was made by hand. Still, Coune very much enjoyed shaping a thing of beauty and made his money producing hard tops for MGs, DKWs and Fiat 1500s, repairing crashed exotics and selling Iso and Abarth cars. By now Abarth not only made exhausts, but many cars that also bore his name. From a slightly modified Fiat 600 or 850 to some projectile in Zagato dress that was capable of showing its tail lights to an E-type but which still derived from that same modest little Fiat.

In the early Sixties, coachbuilding companies all over the world were dying out due to the adoption of monocoque bodysells. Some were swallowed by the car companies, others just vanished. Italians had taken over the role of body designer for almost every factory, and made specials themselves. Fascinating little sports cars, usually unrecognisable Fiats, were produced in small numbers by diligent companies such as Osta, Lombardi, Moretti and of course Abarth. Jacques Coune, as an Abarth and Iso agent was often in Italy, knew such Italian artists as Allemano, Vignale and Farina personally and was captivated by their beautifully designed cars.

Coune took the newly introduced MG and designed his own Gran Turismo in graceful Italian style around it. After his initial sketching the first step was building up the rough design in paper and cardboard and searching for suitable parts for the windscreen and rear window; both were found in the Renault 8. The additional chassis stiffening required was less drastic, fabricating a roof for the rigid structure of a roadster, than chopping the head off an original saloon car like the Volvo Amazon.

Coune still regarded coachbuilding more as a hobby and a test of skill. He designed not merely an MGB with hard top, but an entirely new car. At the rear it was inspired by (or a copy of, as some critics said) the Ferrari 275GTB with its so called Kamm-profiled tail. At front the wings were modified in the then fashionable Le Mans style. The first car was handmade from sheet metal by the Italian virtuosos and featured slender new bumpers that matched its Italian lines. Under the skin Coune left the MGB untouched, apart from, what else, an Abarth sports exhaust system.

When this first shiny red painted MGB Berlinette was presented at the Brussels Motor Show in January 1964, it was admired by both press and public.

Although it had originally been intended as a one-off and therefore had no price tag on the windscreen, Coune realised that he was justified in making a small series. Abingdon did not yet offer a coupé and obviously the public liked the Berlinette. The first three or four cars were made of metal but this proved much too heavy and so Coune followed the example set by his Italian friends — a glassfibre construction on the standard floorpan, consisting of roof and rear in one piece. Coune retained part of the original car in metal, namely the front end.

Coue obtained his MGBs from the Belgian importer at dealers' discount price. He sold the new folding hoods for half price to nearby dealers and then started chopping off all the metal from the doors backwards. A box section was welded in place between the rear wheel arches and other stiffening metal added to the bare shell. The Italians with their golden hands recessed the headlamps, reshaped the wings and extended the wheel arches so that the whole front formed one smooth curve, after the perspex headlamp covers with handmade chrome surroundings were fitted. (These headlamp conversions were also given to some 120 ordinary MGBs at the cost of 6,000 francs.) The quarterlight windows on the doors were replaced by more elegant fixed ones and the original chrome strips discarded. After building up the windscreen frame the car received its glassfibre roof and rear as one strong piece. Careful attention as one might expect from coachbuilders was given to sills, door rubbers, interior and headlining. On the 'production model' the graceful front bumper had to give way to the original one. The rear bumper was now formed from the original centrepiece with handbeaten pieces wrapped around from the overriders to the rear wheel arches. In 1965 the optional rear folding seat became standard, if that word is applicable to a hand-built car. Details changed with every car and of course to the wishes of the client.

The Berlinette attained a higher top speed than its cabriolet ancestor thanks to improved aerodynamics. The sales brochure claimed 180km/h, while the German MG importer Woodhouse told a test crew he had measured a genuine 195km/h on an overdrive car.

When the next year's Brussels Motor Show arrived in January 1965, the 'MGB Berlinette by Jacques Coune' shown there to their royal highnesses Princess Paola and Prince Albert, had become an acknowledged, good looking, professionally built conversion. It had been covered by many motoring magazines and the car had appeared in international catalogues. It could be ordered through official BMC importers and dealers. The price was, to avoid difficult then-and-now-money calculating, about the cost of a new Midget on top of the standard B's price. Still, as all journalists agreed, the Berlinette was well worth the money, considering the exclusiveness of the product. For a true coachbuilt car everyone thought it quite inexpensive; and after all it looked three



Berlinettes loaded ready for delivery outside the Carrosserie Coune workshop

times as costly.

The Dutch MG importer Molenaar ordered ten Berlinettes in 1964, but brought Coune his own cars to convert. Molenaar showed his first one at the Amsterdam Motor Show in 1965. Jacques Coune recollects that some of the five cars that went to Germany were sold to American army officers. Of the 56 Berlinettes that were built, there is one of particular significance: according to Jacques Coune, there was only one right-hand drive Berlinette ever built. This is CBW 55B and the conversion was, says Coune, ordered by Mr Alec Issigonis, Director of BMC. As Roy Brocklehurst admitted in an interview last year, Abingdon tried to design a fixed-head

"only one right-hand drive Berlinette was built, ordered by Alec Issigonis"

coupé themselves. It didn't work out as every fixed-head B they made looked terribly overbrowed because for some reason they stuck to the roadster's low windscreen. Coune built a Berlinette on the roadster he received from BMC and talks began about the possibility of using the Belgian design and paying royalties for every car made by the MG factory. Unfortunately the board of directors decided after six or seven months that the Berlinette looked 'too Italian' for a British sports car, and another roadster was sent to Pininfarina in Turin. When this MGB GT became available in late 1965, demand for the much higher priced Berlinette fell off rapidly.

Coue hit MG back once, in early 1966, by showing a sleek targa spider based on the MGB. This car was equipped with full leather luxury interior and under its long sloping bonnet lurked two twin-choke Webers that gave the car performance to match its looks.

At the turn of the decade Jacques Coune, who saw his skilled Italian workforce one by one going home to mama and the sun, quit the world of automobiles. He became private secretary to Charles de Pauw, a wealthy real estate

developer. Jacques Coune, who in his automobile era once restored a stately Packard to its former glory, obviously ignited de Pauw's interest in car history: up to a few years ago Brussels had no automobile museum at all, so de Pauw decided to give the city one. The first step was taken, as Jacques Coune recalls, during a holiday one July, when he bought 50 of the most interesting cars to be found in the world. Together with some 50 cars from private owners, and some 20 other acquisitions, they formed the impressive collection of *le Musée de l'automobile de Bruxelles* which opened in May 1984 at place Rogier in Brussels, with Jacques Coune as *Conservateur*. The museum took care of all insurance and maintenance worries for the privately owned cars and owners could use their cars whenever they liked. In the meantime the city authorities had thought of a museum as well and had brought the Mahy Collection, a story in its own right, from Gent to the capital. When Mr de Pauw died some years later, his son didn't think it made sense to have two museums in Brussels and dispersed the collection. Eighteen of the most interesting cars were given to the new museum *Autoworld* for the next 20 years, and Jacques Coune retired again from cars.

Reminiscing his *carrossier* years, Jacques Coune, 64-years-old now but vital and busy as a man half his age, regrets a little having built so few series: "I should have done otherwise; for every motor show in Brussels or Geneva I should have made something special, to keep my name well known. There will always be sufficient clients for four special-bodied cars a year. I could have built armoured cars, ambulances and the like to have the largest special body and repair factory in Brussels."

All in all Jacques Coune placed his signature in the history book of the automobile. With an exceptionally beautiful signature in the chapter headed 'MG', he showed the world how the MGB GT could have been. Or, as some people say when they have looked at the MGB Berlinette, *should have been*. About a dozen Berlinettes have survived to the present day and of these only a few are in such condition that they can prove this point eloquently with their timeless flowing beauty. 