

PERSONAL CHOICE

Wilson McComb explains why he's chosen a chrome-bumper MGB GT for everyday transport



Above, the MGB GT as it arrived, looking decidedly tired and down at heel. Right, outer panel rot was indicative of more basic inner shell rusting too.



Opposite page, the original engine bay for which a Gold Seal unit was earmarked

MEET my "new" MGB GT. First registered in December 1969, it had seven previous owners and covered 111,000 miles before being pretty comprehensively restored. Not by me, for I am a rotten painter, a worse welder and totally incompetent panel-beater — which is why I have just paid over £3,500 (including the dreaded VAT) for a professional restoration.

Let's face it, this means that its total cost, as you see it now, is more than the car would fetch if I sold it tomorrow. There are cars on the British market that I could have bought brand-new for less money: the cheapest Citroën, Mini, Seat or Suzuki, various FSO models, most Ladas and Skodas, and all but one of the current Yugos. But I didn't want any of these, thank you. Nor did I want the cheapest Fiat, Fiesta, Metro, Nissan, Peugeot, Renault or Vauxhall Nova, all of which would have cost more initially plus a relatively enormous sum in depreciation.

After a decade or so of running

"sensible" modern cars, I'm fed up with them. However economical, reliable and comfortable they may be, they have proved dead boring to own. I think they are grossly overpriced for what they are, and depreciation is now so high that it costs a minimum of about £20 a week just to keep one of them in the garage — never mind actually driving it.

I grant you that for the same money I might have had a slightly dog-eared example of some rare and exotic car with a fancy badge on the front; something with alloy bodywork, all-independent suspension, and at least one overhead camshaft. If you want to impress the neighbours you buy a Ferrari, not an MGB. But I — fortunately for my bank-manager's peace of mind — wasn't out to impress anyone. I simply wanted a Classic car that would be inexpensive and practical for everyday use, with a very adequate (if less than GTi level) performance, and for which I could find virtually any replacement part, just by picking up a telephone. If that car also

happened to be what I privately consider one of the best-looking coupés ever built in this or any other country — well, that's *my* good fortune. Beauty, you will agree, is in the eye of the beholder.

So I have burned my boats and sold my popular 1.6-litre estate car (only four years old, no rust, no mechanical faults) for less than half the outlay on this MGB, which I intend keeping for the next decade or so. Apart from a 1926 Bullnose Morris Cowley (great fun for pottering, but hellish on a motorway) the MG is the only car I own. It uses more petrol, costs more to insure and needs more maintenance than the modern cars I had — but I still think I've made the right choice.

You will note that the front grille is wrong for a 1970-model MGB; that's because, like many B owners, I so dislike the open-mouthed atrocity that BL inflicted on our cars for some years. I've been accused of choosing a non-MG colour, too, but in fact Blue Royale (code number BU38) is the correct MG blue for the period, though very seldom seen — and my wife and I think it looks great. The rubber-faced overriders are anachronistic, yes, but only by one year, and they are less prone to damage than the plain chrome ones. If you're going to be picky, my car also has tinted glass, a later tailgate, inertia-reel belts, clamp-type battery terminals, heavy-duty front shockers and silicone brake fluid. But then... well, it's *my* car, isn't it?

Cheapest option

Without any doubt, it's cheaper to buy an already-restored car than to buy one and have it restored, but the massive objection to the ready-made product is that unless it is backed by a fully-documented history, you *cannot* be sure the work has been properly done. So, as described in the *Classic Cars* MG Supplement of 1986, I looked at a dozen GTs and finished up buying a fairly old and rusty one — which was, though, a basically sound car that had not been messed about with (except for glassfibre front wings) and had a respectable interior with a nice original dash, an excellent headlining, and seats that needed only minor repairs. Checking the vendor's invoices revealed that in the preceding 15 months he had spent £604.68 on the car he was selling to me for £500 — including £67.49 plus fitting charge plus VAT for a new exhaust system — a sad result of not reading the adverts in the right magazines!

Be it MG or Mercedes, Austin or Aston, if you simply hand the car to a professional restorer and give him *carte blanche* you are probably saying goodbye to something approaching £10,000. These things have to be planned. My policy was to spend as much as I could afford on the body structure and major mechanical components, but to buy other parts secondhand where I could, knowing that these could be replaced by shinier bits later on if I had the money to spare. Thus, for example, two bumper blades complete with overriders and fixing irons cost \$50



in a scrapyard, instead of about £200 new. One well-known MG specialist was loudly contemptuous of this parsimonious approach, but the repro front grille I bought new from him for £75 was, I thought, a very second-rate imitation of the real thing; I even had to spend ages filing down a standard badge before it could be persuaded to fit.

Things moved deceptively fast at first. Having first stripped out a good deal of the interior and done some ruthless investigating with scraper and screwdriver, I drove almost 300 miles one day to get estimates from two leading MG restorers. One, Beers of Houghton, said they could take the car in about Easter (two months ahead) and do it in four weeks. Their price was not a lot higher than I had hoped, so I phoned my acceptance a few days later.

My tatty MGB went well on this trip, keeping up a good speed although its original engine, having had nothing more exhaustive than a ring job in well over 100,000 miles, had little compression and

used a lot of oil. I had bought a pair of front shockers and V8 wishbone bushes, etc., and wanted to take advantage of the then-current Brown & Gammons offer of a complete back axle (with new hubs, brakes and everything else) for just over £150. Gerry Brown tried hard to squeeze it into the GT for me, then announced that I would have to choose between wife and axle. After considerable thought, I left the axle behind, but delivery charges plus a handbrake cable and fitting kit brought the price up to £215.71.

Non-originality

You may be shocked by my decision to fit Rostyles, but my racing days put me right off wire wheels, apart from the tedium of keeping them clean — and besides, the Rostyle axle was one-third the price of the wire-wheel type. Inside a week I had picked up a couple of Rostyle front hubs at the very useful Feltham scrapyard run by "Jock Scrap" (Alasdair Murray), and from a crashed GT broken

up by Nick Green of NG Cars came a set of wheels and tyres, plus a late tailgate with tinted and heated rear window. Subsequent visits to Jock provided two late doors with unscratched, tinted glass and matching rear quarter-lights, bumpers, tail-lamps, and — at £4 instead of £34 per side for new ones — the polished alloy drip mouldings that follow the roofline (mine having been damaged by a roof-rack). Selling my unwanted grottier parts at still lower prices cut my outlay on secondhand bits to a mere £130.

New parts, not counting items supplied by the restorers, came to just under £560, but this seemingly modest sum really bought very little: the axle and front shockers, front grille, a couple of tyres, and the massive £75 it cost to buy rubber seals for the doors, rear quarter-lights and tailgate, plus lamp gaskets. Ruinous, the price of repro rubber sections...

My ever-helpful local garage fitted the new axle, together with a new fuel pump which had been in my junk-box for probably 20 years, while I devoted an

ationing long time to cleaning, repairing and/or painting various bits of bumpers, lamps, seats and trim. This, or drilling out reluctant screws from a door-hinge, is a soothing occupation for a Sunday afternoon — and better than paying someone else \$10 or \$12 an hour to do it for you.

Nevertheless, I had run out of jobs long before the call came to take the MGB the 130 miles to Houghton, tailed all the way by Caroline, my wife (who found the noisy and trimless GT a bit off-putting), in a borrowed Renault 5. We both heaved sighs of relief when we returned, having clocked up 650 miles, all told, in traipsing back and forth to Cambridgeshire. But three weeks later, Malcolm Beer phoned to say he couldn't fit my car in after all. My next drive in the GT was an illegal one, the tax having now run out, so I took the car to Motorspeed, near Chichester, where Roger Mossop most obligingly agreed to save the situation by taking on the job at short notice. He even said they'd do it in three or four weeks instead of their usual eight.

Actually it took 13. For my money (and this was my money) there is only one way to deal with a well-rusted MGB. Off come the bonnet, the bumper, the complete front wings and front valance, the doors, the boot-lid or tailgate, the rear valance and at least the lower halves of the rear wings. Out comes all the glass (from the doors, too) and the oil-cooler, the radiator and the engine. Having thus cleared the decks a little, you can *really* take the car apart as you start up the nibbler and carve out all the rust from the inner wings, front panels, sills, floors, cross-members, jacking-points, scuttle, boot-floor, wherever.

Inspection trips

To see this happen is a harrowing experience, and I, living barely ten miles away, saw it often. But Phil Peet — who is Mister Bodywork in the Motorspeed empire — ripped my car apart with a pleasant smile and an air of great confidence. Dave Lander and his hardworking sidekick, "Small" Collins, were equally thorough when it came to painting, for they took everything off and went right down to bare metal before degreasing and etching, priming and filling, and repeatedly flattening down between coats to get a really good finish. However, you cannot make this kind of omelette without breaking eggs, and I would strongly advise stripping everything out of the interior to keep it from getting absolutely filthy. Indeed, as storage space is always scarce in such establishments, it's an idea to take all unnecessary bits — the driver's seat, belts, lamps — back home, leaving just an old and expendable steering wheel. You'll have quite enough cleaning up to do afterwards, believe me.

I asked Phil to drill a few judicious holes and treat the hollow sections with Shell Ensis Fluid ("SDC" grade), which is less viscous than things like Waxoyl and will, I hope, provide more widespread protection. I have also treated the door

and wing interiors, and plan to repeat the process every year.

Motorspeed's bill was \$2,127.43 plus \$319.12 VAT. This covered all the body panels needed, the repaint and a certain amount of reassembly (drip mouldings, tread plates, front grille, lamps), plus the work of removing the old engine and fitting a new Gold Seal unit, supplying and fitting a complete clutch, a radiator, oil-cooler, a pair of rear springs and a lot of small bits. When I got down to analysing the invoice in detail (for Roger Mossop and I had some full, frank and meaningful discussions on this subject) I was a little shaken to realise that the repaint alone, with VAT, accounted for \$957.25 of the total. It does seem a lot of money. But I must say that everyone admires the result.

We thought it looked pretty good, too — and even better when I'd fitted a set of reconditioned Rostyles with stainless steel wheel-nuts, sold by Balcombe Engineering for less than some folk charge for the rust-prone standard ones. Motobuild supplied the carpeting, but I persuaded Darryl Davis to fit it to the transmission tunnel and rear wheel-arches: being flat instead of moulded (as the original carpets were), it looks terrible if not done well in these tricky areas. Living in the country, I particularly wanted the correct rubber floor and sill mats, long unobtainable, but now superbly remade by Dunlop for M&G International. From Original Number Plates of Pershore I bought a pair of modestly-priced plastic plates — in black and silver, of course.

But if the MG looked right, it didn't perform too well initially. My first drive ended within half-a-mile because the tappet locknuts were only finger-tight, and all the valves stopped opening. There

were a few other faults — I gather that the chap who did the job no longer works for Motorspeed — and Roger Mossop got Nick Wells, his workshop foreman, to sort everything out at no extra cost, but this delayed the car's return for another week. After that, everything was fine except the Gold Seal engine from Unipart, which was run-in with scrupulous care, but after 3,000 miles was using more oil than the 111,000-mile engine we took out. Why, I cannot tell, for we have yet to solve the problem.

My MG is still, basically, a 17-year-old motor-car, which means that things do break occasionally. One morning the clutch-pedal return spring popped, followed a few minutes later by the exhaust tailpipe bracket. A day or two later one of the push-on battery terminals finally died — the damn things are always unreliable — and I sat fuming by the roadside thinking of the four new clamp-type terminals at home in my workshop, along with all my tools. That taught me to carry a tool-roll again, and I haven't needed it since, despite a good few hundred miles at motorway speeds.

More than half-a-million MGBs having been built, I naturally assumed that nobody would give such a common car a second look. I have therefore been pleasantly surprised to find that in restored condition it *does* attract attention — quite a lot. Ex-owners of Bs appear from nowhere when it is parked, and pore over every detail. Even little old ladies have stopped to coo at it approvingly and tell me how much they like the colour. This has added enormously to the very real pleasure that Caroline and I are deriving from owning an MGB again, after years of driving rather characterless modern machinery. ▲



Above, coming together, with hatch and door from donor car. Bottom, new panels being fitted. Opposite page, top, the finished result, sound, reliable and entertaining everyday transport

