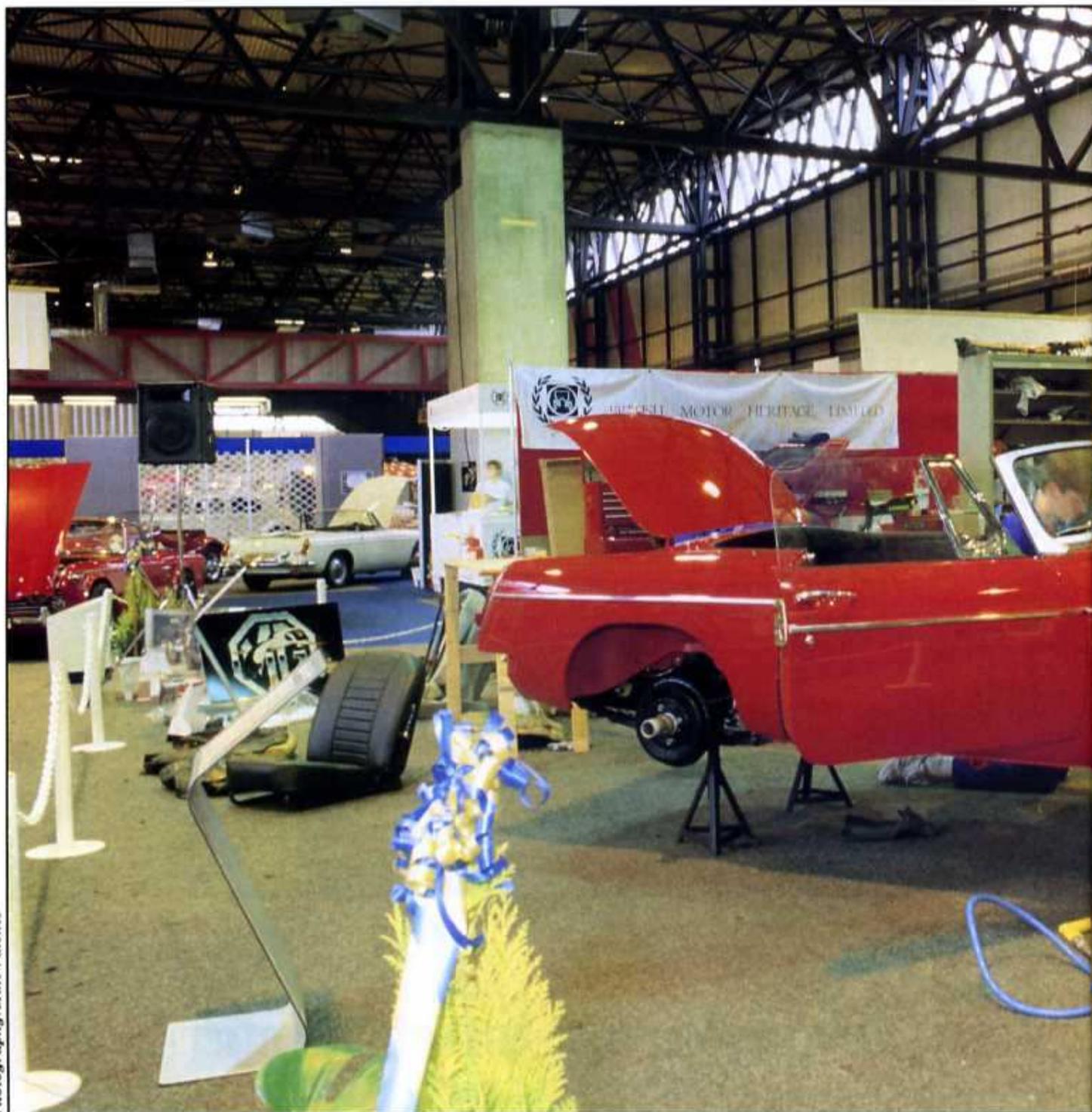


FIRST OF THE FARINGDON MGBs

To test the first of the reshelled MGBs Tony Dron took part in the 5th MG Regency Run in the car that was rebuilt at the National Classic Motor Show



Photography: Mike Valente

IT was probably the rustiest old MGB in the world still running, but Noel Edmonds drove it into the National Classic Motor Show and onto the specially prepared 'Heritage' stand. Putting his foot through the floor he got out and officially opened the 1988 National Classic Motor Show. Meanwhile Ron Gammons and his team set to the task of rebuilding the car around a new bodyshell which was ready and waiting for assembly alongside.

That was Saturday morning: on Monday evening, complete with a new set of number plates, TAX 192G was driven out of the exhibition complete and ready for the road. It was a dramatic demonstration of what can be done with one of the new bodyshells being produced at Faringdon by Heritage, a division of the Rover Group.



Heritage specialists rebuilt this late-Sixties MGB in three days at the National Classic Motor Show. The rusty old shell, above, and the nearly completed car, below, are seen here on the show stand

A few days later I arrived at London's Battersea Park in the Sunday morning sunshine, ready to take the wheel of this born-again MGB in the fifth MG Regency Run. This was quite a privilege and, fortunately, I arrived early. I say fortunately because the annual MG Regency Run from London to Brighton is now a Big Event and I mistakenly got the taxi driver to drop us at the wrong end of the park! It took some time to walk past about 270 MGs parked under the trees on the park's meandering South-side road, for TAX 192G was right at the other end. But there was plenty of time to spare and it gave me a chance to take in the enthusiastic atmosphere of the event.

The newly-rebuilt MGB looked superb, its red paint gleaming in the sun. We lowered the soft top in readiness for the off, for we were due away second behind Ron Gammons and Anders Clausager in Old Number One.

Settling into the car I took a quick look at the marked map: no problem, I thought, as I know these roads well and instantly made a mental picture of the right route. I then turned my mind to the car. The only giveaways were a few minor fittings such as the fuel gauge, the indicator stalk and the ignition switch, for apart from them everything either was new or had been made to look like new.

There were just 40 miles registered on the odometer, I noticed, when an official rushed up and beckoned us forward to start. It was at this point that I realised that no-one had given us the keys! After a few moments panic, with people rushing all over the park, they were found and we soon caught up with Old Number One, which was burbling along nicely through the light Sunday morning traffic.

Though the slackness in the ignition switch reminded me of a very old car as I pushed in the key and turned it to start up, I immediately recognised the feel of a brand new MGB, which I remember from my days as a *Motor* Road Test Writer in the early Seventies. This is what *Motor* had to say about the new MGB, the unitary construction replacement for the MGA, way back in October, 1962, when I was still at school and the car cost £949 15s 3d:

"Whilst the body and chassis of this MG never exist separately, much of the structural strength comes from box-section longerons below the doors which resemble chassis side-members and, in a sideways crash, could provide a measure of protection for passengers. Open cars are not usually as rigid as those with a steel roof structure, but on a road which has become so badly potholed that we no longer include it in many road tests, the MGB felt entirely unstrained, no distortion being evident at the door apertures."

That is a point worth bearing in mind when restoring any car: if the chassis has less torsional rigidity than it had when new the product of your restoration work will not feel new even though it may look it. Anyone who rebuilds an old MGB around one of these new Heritage shells need have no fear, however, for the first





*Above, immaculate rebuilt engine
Right, David Bishop at the wheel*

thing I noted once on the road was that the steering and suspension all felt new, which they are, and the bodyshell, above all, felt very taut. There was a complete lack of shake over potholes and raised bumps in the road.

There's the truth of it. If you want to know what the car was like, the answer is straightforward enough: just like a new one as tested in *Motor* of October 24, 1962. That's a great thing because TAX 192G's old bodyshell was completely beyond repair and it was on its way to oblivion. Too many MGBs have been scrapped but with new shells now available there is no need for any more of them to go that way.

At £1,295 plus VAT for a new Heritage shell there will be no shortage of customers. The price has been kept low to encourage as many people as possible to save another MGB. It makes sense for everybody concerned. Heritage is part of the Rover Group and not a charity: it has to stand on its own feet without financial support from the parent company. It supervises the Heritage Specialists organisation, the group of approved suppliers of remanufactured parts.

Now, when a customer buys a new MGB bodyshell it is hardly likely that he or she will be mean or silly enough to transfer all the totally worn out running gear and trim from the old wreck to the new shell. Every sale of a Faringdon-built shell should represent further business for Heritage Specialists of several thousand pounds.

Carpets, door trims, new front wings, engine parts, brakes and suspension parts, chromework, a new hood and so on; these are all parts that the owner will want to buy as he goes along, fitting them himself bit by bit until the job is completed. It is quite an easy "Meccano" style assembly job, well within the grasp of the average enthusiast who likes tinkering with his car, and very satisfying to do. Using your own labour you should be able to produce an as-new MGB at home for £6,000, which has to be good value.

Remember that this first example of many was built up in three days under the supervision of Ron Gammons of Brown and Gammons, the Baldock MG parts company. He was helped by his son Malcolm, an MGB expert, together with Mike Penny and Danny Waters. Apart from Brown and Gammons personnel, there was Lloyd Faust, an American MG

enthusiast who flew over specially to help on the stand, and Richard Newton, of Newton Commercial, who was in charge of the trimming. Parts came from the old scrap car, from Brown and Gammons stores and from other Heritage-approved companies such as the Sprite & Midget Centre and M&G International.

Thinking of these things we drove on to Brighton in company with MG 18/80s, M-types, J2s, PAs, SAs, TAs, TCs, TFs, TDs, Y-types and Z-types, MGAs, all variants of the B theme, Seventies Midgets and even one MG Metro and one MG Montego, not to mention the many rarer models on the Regency Run. To my passenger the MGB we were driving was just a very old car that was enormous fun to ride in with the hood down in the sunshine, but then she, being my daughter, was born in 1979. The MGB was not always loved by old car enthusiasts!

When it first appeared it seemed to the diehard enthusiasts to be the last nail in the MG coffin, but then they had raised their hands in horror at the loss of cycle wings and separate headlights on earlier models. In the early Sixties, they seemed to have a point when they pointed out that the B was heavier, less responsive and less aerodynamically efficient than the A which it replaced. Critics called it a saloon car with two seats and, with its unitary construction, they said it would be impossible to keep roadworthy once the rust set in.

How different its image seems now. Half a million MGBs were built between 1962 and 1980. It was kept in production long after it should have been replaced but now that it has gone there's nothing else quite like it and as many as possible should, and will, be saved.

We covered the story of Heritage starting up their bodyshell remanufacturing plant at Faringdon in our May 1988 issue (*MGB's Return* by Paul Clark, page 28). Just as the original 'B' had its detractors back in 1962, a few people have made disparaging remarks about this new project today. Typical is: "They'll never turn out enough; it's too ambitious a project and anyway they'll go bust doing it at that price." But just as the critics were proved wrong in the Sixties, those today have had to eat their words.

Yes, it is a big and complicated project but Peter Mitchell and David Bishop of Heritage have thought it out properly and the small team at Faringdon, working under foreman Jack Bellinger, are beginning to have some fun again. They are already up to seven new bodyshells a week and as we go to press the target of ten per week by August looks like being achieved. The order books are full for three months so it is clear that thanks to them a large number of MGBs are going to be saved from having their records erased at the DVLC, Swansea, this year.

Jack Bellinger used to work at Cowley on MGB bodyshells in the early Seventies. He knows them inside out and he has pulled together a team of some of the good old boys with new recruits who are learning everything there is to know about MGB bodies. There are seven of them working at Faringdon at present but more





New badges, above, and trim, below left, finish off the impressive born-again 'B'



staff are being taken on now and further expansion seems inevitable. From being somewhat depressed in the Seventies, Jack Bellinger and his team are now full of enthusiasm, doing what they like and with the way ahead clear once again. We wish them all the best.

Back to the Regency Run, we enjoyed a superb day out, stopping to chat with MG enthusiasts at Reigate Hill and a pub near Bolney before going on to the finish on Brighton's Madeira Drive. The only fault I could find on this virtually perfect car was that the odometer and speedometer appeared to be incorrectly geared and were reading very low. Ron explained later that the gearbox and speedometer were from different years, resulting in a 25 per cent inaccuracy; it was obvious enough on the road and I kept to the right running-in speed by using the tachometer as usual. After the official reception in a seafront hotel we were given a lift back by Bill Wallis in his new MG Montego: Bill had shared commentating duties with Wilson McComb.

Future MG Regency Runs will be organised jointly by the MG Owners Club and the MG Car Club, its founding organisers, David Diplock and Geoff Radford, having decided to bow out now that their event seems to have a secure future. Equally secure is the future of the MG marque itself, of course, and with this excellent new bodyshell there is no reason for any old MGB to be scrapped from now on. Owners of rusted out old cars may have to join a short waiting list, but it will be worth it. As for the future of TAX 192G, it will be auctioned for charity in the Autumn.

Perhaps the last word should go to *Motor* of October 24, 1962, and the original MGB road test:

"... on top of its comfort and strength, this is still a sports car in the all-important sense of being a pleasure to drive.

"No car can hope to please everybody, and design compromises are very apparent in the MGB. A car of everyday usefulness has been endowed with a lot of performance; verve has been blended with refinement to an extent which will suit any age from 17 to 77; and, at a price which can be well below £1,000, it offers sturdiness to outlast many saloons."

That about sums it up. Long live the MGB!

