

# THE PLIGHT OF THE HUMBLE 'B'

*MGB owner and enthusiast Wilson McComb sets the record straight . . .*

VARIOUS folk were annoyed when I once referred to the MGB, Abingdon's last open two-seater, as the Morris Minor of the sports car world. Yet this was meant as a compliment. As I see it, the humble 'B' deserves the same sort of respect as the unassuming Minor because it did what it was designed to do — and indeed, like the Minor, went on doing it for much longer than anyone expected. It offered the buyer what he wanted at a price he could afford, and for nearly two decades it was *still* what a great many of them wanted. Therefore they continued to choose it in preference to other more up-to-date cars, even when it had been in production for such a very long time (especially by sports car standards) that all the smart-alecs of the motoring scene were falling over each other to condemn it.

And it is still the most popular car of its type today. If you doubt it, count the classic sports cars you meet on present-day roads and see which model outnumbers all the others. Chrome-bumpered or black, roadster or GT, gleaming from a recent restoration or oozing rust and belching blue smoke, that oh-so-familiar shape is all around us. Twenty-five years after the MGB was originally announced — thirteen years after the last chrome-bumper cars were built — seven years after the thing went out of production — we are still surrounded by them, and such a vast spares supply business has grown up that it seems they may go on for ever.

But still there are motoring writers who tell you earnestly that the MGB is slow, noisy, uncomfortable, won't go round corners, and is in fact about the worst apology for a sports car ever produced. Warming to their task, some go on to insist that even when it was brand-new the MGB was too slow, too noisy, too uncomfortable . . . It seems unkind to point out how many of these stern critics were too young to ride a bicycle, let alone drive a car, when the MGB was brand-new. Useless, too, to suggest that the B must have done its job reasonably well in its day, since well over half-a-million buyers chose it. For a certain type of person, this of itself puts the MGB beyond the pale: a car built in such quantity is obviously cheap, nasty and commonplace.

Now, it is *not* an easy job to judge a classic car nowadays. Borrow an example, drive it up the road and, frankly, what does that tell you? First it depends

very much whether that particular car is a tarted-up concours job, a beaten-up wreck or a truly representative example of its type (and how can *that* be decided, for goodness' sake, if you didn't know the model when it was new?). Hang one or two thousand pounds' worth of test gear on it to establish the acceleration times, the maximum speed, the fuel consumption, and after several hours of quite intensive work you will have a set of figures — but nothing more.

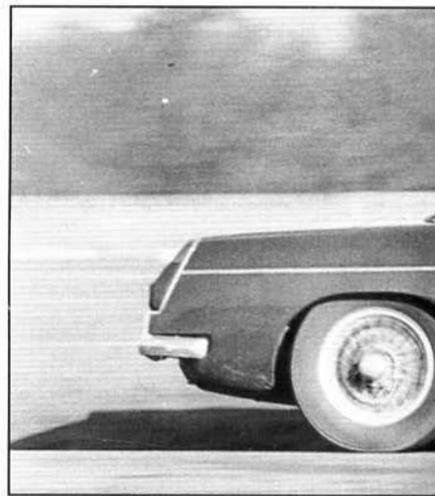
A car has to be judged against the background of its own period, and this applies to everything about it: performance, ride comfort, noise level, quality of build — everything. The top speed that we now take for granted in a smallish family saloon would, 80 years ago, have guaranteed an outright win in every Grand Prix. The rate of engine wear that people thought normal in the Thirties would bring a flood of warranty claims today. We cannot say whether the acceleration of a certain car is good or bad by merely timing it; not without looking up the figures for other cars that were on the market at the same time *and in the same price bracket*.

There is another problem, too. Human nature being what it is, those who have the opportunity to drive exotic cars will close their eyes to the most glaring of faults, preferring to boast about their special qualities instead. If a chap lends you his Lambo, it just isn't done to moan about the dodgy wipers or the lack of room for shopping baskets; such shortcomings are dismissed with an indulgent smile. I remember the well-known racing driver who described, a little time ago, his experiences as owner of a Ferrari 328 GTS. Laughingly he catalogued the water leaks, the faulty door locks, the wobbling mirrors, the cracking paint, the appalling ventilation system and all the other inadequacies of this car that had cost him £36,000 to buy. These were not his reasons, he assured us, for disposing of it at heaven knows what loss after six months and less than 4,000 miles. No, no, of course not. One day he would buy another Ferrari because they were so marvellous, but meanwhile he had changed it for something a little less marvellous that didn't keep falling apart around his ears. Which — take my word for it — is what many supercars do when you try to use them as everyday vehicles.

Faced with half as many faults in his new car, the buyer of a mass-production sports car would be purple with rage.

Though it cost but a fraction of the price and will never be maintained with the care (or at the cost!) devoted to a Ferrari, he expects it to serve him well. And by and large, it will. But who sings the praises of a car that is cheap, and British — rather contemptible, really — when there are Ferraris and such to worship?

The MGB's Abingdon predecessor, the MGA, looked so modern when it replaced the angular T-series MGs in the mid-Fifties that it's easy to forget how lacking in creature comforts it was by later standards. There was little space to spare, either for passengers in the cockpit or luggage in the boot (which was mainly occupied by the spare wheel). The sidescreeens, even the later rigid plastic ones, were draughty and allowed limited visibility; they were easily scratched, and you had to reach through them for a pull-cable to open the door because there were



*Above, the MGB didn't reach its production peak until 1972 when 39,393 cars were built. Right, Triumph's TR4 had better acceleration than the MGB but a lower top speed. It cost more too. Below, the Sunbeam Alpine was also more expensive and it too lacked performance*



no door-handles, inside or outside. You couldn't lock the doors, the boot or the glove-locker (there *was* no glove-locker). Though small, the MGA was quite a heavy car, with its separate chassis, and the engine had to work fairly hard to provide the expected level of performance; certainly until more torque was found by gradually increasing the capacity from 1489 to 1622cc.

The big change to monocoque construction made the MGB a far roomier car without much increase in overall size — it was in fact almost 3in shorter and only 2in wider — while the weight went up by less than 100lb, which was more than compensated for by the change to the 1798cc engine and a big torque increase, from 97 to 107lb ft. Much of the extra weight was due to the bigger windscreen, the glass side-windows with attendant winding gear and swivelling quarter-lights, door handles, lock mechanism and so on. Spartan as it may look by present-day standards, the original MGB interior seemed positively luxurious after the no-frills cockpit of the MGA. The seats were more comfortable, with adjustable rake; the steering was lighter, and so was the gearchange. The new fresh-air inlet drew from the scuttle top, well away from the exhaust pipes of other cars in traffic. Hard as it may be to believe, the huge steering wheel was actually a little smaller than that of the MGA, and the dash and switch layout were improved. New departures for MG included a conventional (not flyoff)

***“The original MGB interior seemed positively luxurious after the no-frills cockpit of the MGA”***

handbrake, key-start ignition switch, horn button in the steering wheel boss, and a column-mounted indicator stalk.

The front track had gone up by 1½in, the rear by ½in. The road wheels were an inch smaller in diameter at 14in, but the final drive ratio was raised to make the overall gearing almost the same as before.

Pricewise, the MGB cost a basic £690 against £663 for the MGA Mark II, but a cut in Purchase Tax made the B some £134 cheaper than the final version of the A at a tax-paid £834 6s 3d. No wonder it sold well.

It is more revealing to compare the original MGB with other sports cars of its day in terms of price (basic price, as this is a fairer comparison for cars sold primarily overseas). At the time the MGB first appeared, a soft-top Triumph TR4 cost £60 more at £750, a Sunbeam Alpine over £110 more at £802, and the Harrington version of the Alpine was still more costly at £1,217 — plus Purchase Tax in each case for UK buyers. Yet the MGB with its maximum speed of 105.7mph was faster than all three rivals: the TR4 was tested at 102.5, the Alpine at 98.6 and the Harrington at 102.7. You could make the TR4 faster than the MGB by giving it a hardtop and overdrive, in which form it would do 109.4mph — but that put the

basic price of the Triumph up to £827. A lot of money, that was, in the early Sixties. You could buy a 117mph Austin-Healey 3000 for only £38 more, plus tax.

The MGB being no lightweight, acceleration was not its best feature; it took a leisurely 12.1 seconds to reach 60mph from rest. It could still out-perform the Alpine (13.6sec) and the Harrington (13.3sec), while such cars as the TVR (12.0sec) cost a lot more (£915 basic). The soft-top TR4 could trim 1.2sec off the MGB's 0 to 60 time, but then, it did cost more and had a lower maximum speed. No inexpensive sports car had really good acceleration in those days. Even the Big Healey took 10.4sec to reach 60. The contemporary Lotus Elite exactly matched the Healey in performance, but cost more than \$1,450 *in kit form!* As for the superbly-performing Elan, first seen at the same Motor Show as the MGB, it could break the 10-second acceleration barrier with its 9 secs from 0 to 60, and achieve 112mph, but cost almost twice as much.

So much for the notion that the MGB was a disappointing performer when it first appeared; this simply isn't true. Contemporary road-test figures show that it compared very well with the opposition in the same price-bracket, and any car with significantly better performance cost considerably more. For the punter with £834 to spend on an MGB in this country, an Elan at £1,436 was over the moon.

Contemporary press comments confirm the ready acceptance of the new MG in its day: “A delightful modern sports car” (*Motor*); “Altogether superior to its predecessor” (*Autocar*); “The best sports car ever made at Abingdon” (*Sports Car*); “The best all-round conventional sports car on the market” (*Motoring News*); “Best engineered, best put-together MG we've ever seen” (*Road & Track*). In later years the motoring press treated the MGB pretty unkindly because BL had kept it in production too long while denying it the normal development process that might have kept it up-to-date, and because American legislation had stripped the poor thing of all its best qualities. The car-buying public, however, went right on voting with their cheque books.

The astonishing result was that the MGB reached its production peak in *the eleventh year of its life*, with 39,393 cars built during 1972. Even more surprisingly, American demand did not peak until 1977, when the 15-year-old MGB outsold Triumph's TR6 and TR7 together in the all-important US market. Even in 1979, the last full year of production, a British survey showed that it was the only sports car included in the 10 best-selling secondhand cars.

For 19 years, 1962 to 1980, Abingdon maintained an average production of 27,000 MGBs per annum — that's without including its offspring, the MGC and the V8. Trim off the two incomplete years, and the average rises to over 29,000 MGBs per annum. Tot up the exports, and you find that 400,000 MGBs went overseas to earn money for this country. When another British sports car maker does anything like as well, he'll have something to shout about.

