

MGB'S RETURN

British Motor Heritage have succeeded in the mammoth task of remanufacturing the MGB bodyshell. Paul Clark found out how

PROBABLY the best-loved sports car in the world, the MGB sold more than half a million during its lifetime. The last one rolled off the production line in 1980, 18 years after the first car took to the road in 1962.

Since its demise, numerous specialists have sprung up to cater for the restoration and maintenance of the cars, and they have helped to preserve the many thousands that are still on the roads throughout the world.

With growing fear that more and more worthy cars are being scrapped or dismantled for spares because they are not economically viable restoration projects, British Motor Heritage, the division of Rover Group looking after the historical aspect of the company's range of cars, has taken the enormous steps necessary to actually restart production of the MGB bodyshell using the original tooling and equipment that built the cars 25 years ago.

The project has been masterminded since Christmas 1986 by Heritage's David Bishop who was alarmed that so many cars were disappearing, victims of terminal body rust.

David knew that, amazingly, all the press tooling for the MGB had been simply removed from the production lines and cast outside into yards at the body production factories. It stayed there from the cessation of production until 1986 when David Bishop started checking through all the MG records for the precise serial numbers of each press tool, be it a jig or an actual die for the manufacture of certain parts. After several months of logging the numbers and locating each item among the mass of rusted steel, he came up with an amazing 750 items,



Original MGB build sheets formed a major part of the resurrection of the MGB bodyshell by British Motor Heritage



almost 1,000 tons, of tooling for the MGB alone. This represented almost 100% of the press tools and 80% of the assembly jigs.

With approval from the Rover Group, Bishop secured permission to remove all the tooling to a newly acquired factory unit at Faringdon in Oxfordshire, conveniently located between Abingdon and Swindon, originally a production line for the MGB body but more recently the centre of parts manufacture for obsolete Leyland models. It is important to stress that there has been no outside funding for the project.

Once the tooling had arrived at Faringdon, the huge task of identifying and cleaning up the various items got underway. Initially only the original chrome bumper roadster in right-hand drive form is to be remanufactured but even the basic assembly, minus front wings, is composed of some 250 items. With reference to the original drawings and build sheets of the B shell it was possible to single out every item, whether it was bought-in or manufactured at the factory. In the case of bought-in items, the original suppliers were approached to resume production once the refurbished tooling had been moved there from Faringdon. In some cases, these companies no longer existed and it was necessary to locate alternatives but by the time all the parts necessary to build the first shell had been sourced. David Bishop reckoned that nearly everything was being supplied as it was when the MGB was in series production.

At Faringdon, four ex-Body Build employees were enlisted to sort out the mountain of tooling and set up a production line for the manufacture of the shells. Immense problems were

encountered here also. So that the quality of the finished product could be endorsed by Rover Group themselves, industrial quality welding gear mounted on overhead gantries and operating from a 300KVA electricity supply had to be installed. The electricity board asked for £20,000 simply to run the necessary cable from the local power sub-station, so it involved buying and installing a massive generator capable of producing the current needed to drive the welding equipment.

Other tasks involved modifying the jiggling to 'condense' production of the parts of the shell. At Swindon there might have been several jigs on the line to complete an item; whereas it might have been possible on a moving production line to have two or more jigs to carry out one simple job, at Faringdon there was neither the space nor the manpower to service several slightly different jobs. Therefore it has been necessary to modify one jig to do the job of several and this has involved some skilful re-engineering and manufacture of special parts.

The end product of all this planning and hard work is that British Motor Heritage are able to remanufacture to original standards, using virtually all the original tooling and even original manpower, the MGB bodyshell. This is not a replica, reproduction or anything else; it is the real thing, an extension of production of the original car.

The shells will be sold through Heritage Specialists at a price of £1,296 excluding VAT — remarkable in view of the amount of work involved. Dip painting in primer will be undertaken by an outside specialist.

David Bishop has counteracted the possibility of the shells being used to



Above, welding in progress on the new shell. Much of the original jiggging was adapted to carry out more than one task

Below, the shell nears completion with only final parts and painting needed



manufacture brand new MGBs and then pass them off as genuine ex-factory cars by logging all the chassis numbers and ensuring that each new shell has the Heritage logo and a special serial number in such a place as to make it virtually impossible to remove without major surgery to the body. Having said that, anyone building up a 'new' MG using one of the shells and all the other parts needed to complete the car would be doing just that — building a new car as this shell *is original*.

British Motor Heritage, Rover Group and David Bishop and the other members of the workforce at Faringdon should be wholeheartedly congratulated on this remarkable feat. Soon, it is hoped, the entire MGB range of shells will be available remanufactured, and possibly those for other BMC/BL cars as well, a fantastic move to help owners of cars that are now reaching the point at which a full restoration is needed. 