

NO-ONE could be more pleased than us at T&CC that Austin-Rover has decided to keep the MG name alive. What's more, they've done it so well that the future of the sacred octagon would seem to be as secure as that of the industry itself.

Thousands of largely satisfied customers (if our post is anything to go by) are happily motoring about in a wide variety of MG saloons but still we are left to my mind with one problem. Amongst this euphoric atmosphere of happy trading conditions, haven't we all forgotten something?

There still isn't an MG sports car in production. It's all very well for Classic car enthusiasts to buy and restore old MGBs but I am one of those people who believes that even now a replacement for the B would sell well if it was properly designed. Maybe the design flair to produce such a car in this country exists only in the smaller companies like TVR, Reliant and Panther. Thank heavens you can still buy a Caterham 7, though Lotus cars are a little upmarket today for this little discourse.

If you think I am mad, just consider the story of a neighbour of mine who got bored with his MG Metro Turbo last summer and traded it in to a Classic car dealer for a really superb MGB roadster in British Racing Green. I have to report that he is absolutely delighted with this swap: his car is a late model with rubber bumpers but there seems to have been a shift in attitude to these late Bs over the past year. Whereas before you had to have a chrome bumper model to be regarded as a real enthusiast, now, all of a sudden, it's quite all right to own and treasure one of the formerly despised rubber bumper cars.

There's no doubt that we do change our minds about cars when they get older. Sometimes we grow to hate the instant favourites, while others that were dismissed as boring when they were new suddenly turn into the trendiest thing on wheels years after the last one rolled off the production line. I must say I used to hate MGBs 20 years ago, but that was probably because all my money was in an FF racer and I couldn't afford a road car of my own. Meanwhile all the Hooray Henrys were down at the tennis club with the MGs their daddies had bought for them, showing off to all the local Fionas.

I have got over this prejudice now but while we're on the subject of cars that gain Classic status late in life all I want to say is that if ever there's a really effective Classic car club for the Allegro I shall slip quietly out of the editorial office and retire to the funny farm.

Anyway, back to the old B which should have been replaced in the Sixties but which, thanks to Lord Stokes, lingered on in production until eventually it succumbed to a slow and painful death, by which time it seemed too late to replace it. By failing to keep the cheap two-seater sports car better than its saloon counterparts in any way, British motor manufacturers allowed the entire market to just drift away. The sports car was dead, eh? Just ask Mazda how they managed to sell all those RX-7s in the States! The tragedy is that they were not short of good ideas in Abingdon.

Many people then believed and believe now that a timely replacement for the B could have kept the mass-produced sports car in business by making it better than its rival sports saloons in terms of performance, roadholding, handling, fuel consumption and style. The TR7 was a misconceived design because it failed to impress in these vital areas, but Triumph held the internal political aces in the vast but uncoordinated BL empire at that time. Where is Triumph now?

With these thoughts in mind I travelled, late last summer, to Belgium in company with



Above, winner Terry Smith, a grandad from Bristol, looks relaxed before the start of the Zolder MGB-C-V8 race

some of the drivers in the MGB-C-V8 Championship, which is run by the MG Car Club's Barry Sidery-Smith. 'Old Slippery', as he seems to be known to the boisterous Bristolian contingent in the series, has been racing MGBs since 1964 and his collection includes the works MGB racer which Paddy Hopkirk and Andrew Hedges took to 11th overall and 2nd in class at Le Mans in 1965.

Barry himself remains one of the keenest competitors in the current B-C-V8 series, which has become firmly established very quickly indeed. A full grid of MGs turned out from England for this round at Zolder, with drivers ranging from seasoned experts like Terry Smith, with whom I travelled and who won the race, right down to Steve Palmer who borrowed a C automatic for this, his very first race!

Up at the front, this MG race turned out to be one of the very best events in a busy weekend of superb historic races. There were grids to satisfy every kind of Classic car enthusiast, but the large crowd stood rapt with excitement for the last lap of just this race. Terry Smith had a moment at the chicane, and that got the commentator in a frenzy, but he recovered without losing more than a fraction of a second which was just as well for him as John Lodge's yellow car was gaining fast, having stalled on the line at the start and dropping right back.

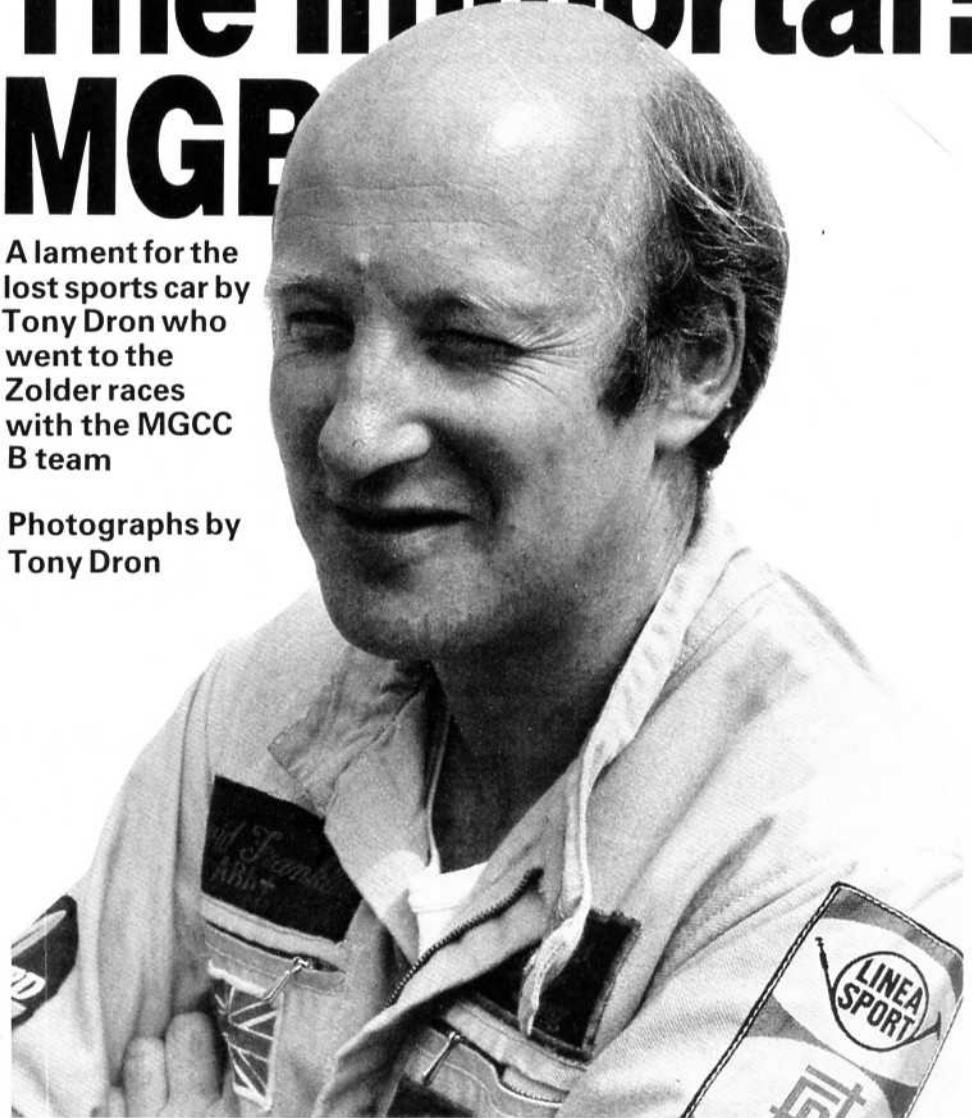
The crowd was treated to a display of John's undoubted, if slightly excitable, talent at its best. It was a close finish, the crowd really did jump up and down in the grandstand just for this race, and they were clapping and cheering wildly. I wondered whether a race for today's MG saloons, run in ten or twenty years time, could produce the same thrilling atmosphere. Somehow I doubt it.

Would such a series attract the same calibre of club racing enthusiasts as we see in the B-C-

The Immortal? MGB

A lament for the lost sports car by Tony Dron who went to the Zolder races with the MGCC B team

Photographs by Tony Dron





Above, Ozzie Osbourne, who has bought back his old MGB racer and restored it superbly to compete in this championship

V8 series (and, indeed, in the older MG Ts which were also very well represented in their own events at Zolder)? Winner Terry Smith is a grandad from Bristol, a motor trader who campaigned in hill climbs with a great variety of cars very successfully before turning to circuit racing rather late in his competition career (and now he regrets not switching to the circuits years ago). His car is a V8 roadster

running in the fully modified class with a Swindon-built engine producing around 320bhp.

John Lodge, who so nearly won, has a much lighter car: in fact, so much weight has been pared off it over the years by its various owners that some of the competitors regard it as being somewhat removed from the true spirit of the regulations, which are framed to keep the cars reasonably near the standard specification in terms of bodywork if not in the engine department in this class. None of this detracts from John's skill and achievements as a driver, for his car is a four-cylinder machine. His engine, prepared by Oselli, is obviously pretty effective but there's no way it will ever match the power of the V8s. John is a transport driver, delivering Austin-Rover cars.

Third place in this race went to David Franklin, who also comes from Bristol and whose superb McLaren CanAm car I tested and wrote up in *T&CC* in 1983. David has a mischievous sense of fun which extends to running his wife's near *concours* B GT V8 in these races. It's heavy but it has been fitted with a full race Swindon motor like Terry Smith's and therefore it has to run in the fully modified class. Prepared in this way, David gets plenty of fun from driving the car, which he does extremely well, but he has made it well nigh impossible for himself to win a race though he did just snatch pole in practice. Stylish!

The common factor amongst all these



John Lodge, one of the quickest drivers in the MGB-C-V8 series, is a delivery driver of Austin-Rover cars in his normal work

drivers is their genuine love of the sport. Rod Longton, the doctor from Essex who runs in the 'Full race V8' class, has been racing for over 30 years now, much of the time in his earlier career as a successful semi-professional. In this race he beat Terry 'Ozzie' Osbourne, another of the Bristol motor traders; Ozzie has bought back the 1964 race-modified MGB that he owned many years ago, and today it is one



Far left, "Baldies are Best" says MGCC racer David Franklin, who put his wife's shopping car on pole at Zolder. This page, John Lodge in hot pursuit of winner Terry Smith

The Immortal? MGB

of the best looking cars in the series. The engine is prepared by Richard Longman.

Mr Sidery-Smith himself finished sixth in his ex-Bill Nicholson modified B which he has owned since 1970. There are interesting people and cars right down the 26-car grid: Mike Hibberd was once just a keen spectator who had formerly raced 'bikes and today runs a business in Slough specialising in Rolls-Royce engineering restorations and repairs. He was so taken by the B-C-V8 series that he went out and bought an early Sixties B, prepared it himself and has been racing ever since.

Ron Gammons, of the very well-known Brown and Gammons MG specialists, not only starred in some of the MG T-series races at this meeting by winning in his TF, but he brought his tow-car, a mildly modified B, out of the paddock for this race and managed to finish a creditable 13th. In a keen bunch Ron is without doubt one of the most dedicated MG enthusiasts, lobbying for tight controls to keep the cars as near standard as possible, and very helpful to any other competitor who runs into mechanical trouble at these meetings.

Other competitors include brothers Peter and Joe Blackburne from Peckham in London, John Tadman who is a computer operator from Gravesend who turned to racing a V8 after years as an MGCC marshal and organiser — he crashed heavily at Woodcote in the wet soon after his debut in racing but has settled down now; then there's the race series register secretary, Paul Campfield, who is a director of a computer economics company; Roger Bonsall is the director of a Bristol Ford dealership who raced Morgans in the Sixties, turned up at a B-C-V8 race and was so taken by it that he bought a car and became really keen all over again. He admits to being one of the few competitors who did not buy his car from Barry Sidery-Smith, but that apart one still wonders who there is left in the Bristol area selling cars when these races are on.

MG spares supplier Gerard de Groot and Alain Russel, who works for a US company in Brussels as a technical engineer, are two Belgian competitors: Alain helps with the overseas liaison for the series and found the sponsor, PicPus, for this race. And amongst the many others we must not forget Steve Palmer, the 21-year-old mechanic from Croydon who borrowed the old C automatic and actually went faster than its owners' time last year even though this was his first taste of real competition.

Where will all these blokes be in ten years time? In Terry Smith's case he'll probably still be racing the B and looking forward to becoming a great granddad. The point is that there is no next car down the line for the MG sports car racers to turn to. They will simply have to keep on racing the Bs, or give up or turn to something else, for the British motor industry seems to have nothing to offer them.

Why can't we have a new British mass-produced sports car? It's impossible to accept that the mass-produced sports car is dead for there are enough young or young-at-heart people around these days to support the revival of the convertible. How many new soft tops have appeared in the past five years? I'm beginning to lose count. Meanwhile the



Above, leading MG enthusiast and organiser of this championship, Barry Sidery-Smith, in the Brown and Gammons-backed MGB four-cylinder. Below, Freddie Yhap, a dealer in exotic cars from Sussex, drives one of the oldest MGBs in the series. Built in 1963 it has an International history and was at one time raced by Jenny Tudor-Owen



Japanese, all credit to them, are beginning to produce some very exciting low-cost small sports cars. Our car industry has shown that it has got the guts and resilience not to go the way of the bike industry in the face of Japanese competition, but can it satisfy the younger market? It has long been a law of the motor industry that if you can capture a customer's loyalty early enough he will float up through your range, buying more expensive models as he grows more affluent. Why else did Porsche produce the 924? It's an excellent car though a modest and inexpensive one compared with a 928S. Even Rolls-Royce/Bentley have produced the new Bentley Eight for under £50,000 to convert younger customers to their model range ladder.

Below, 'camp fire' meeting in the Zolder paddock woods, with Barry Sidery-Smith preparing to address his troops. The V8s of John Tadman and Colin Cook stand in the foreground



Let's be realistic about 'cheap' sports cars. We have to admit that it's no good making a two-seater just for the British market. It must sell in America to justify a production line in Britain. This should be possible, though it will be necessary to guard against the old British mistake. Our own sacred E-Type started brilliantly and went down hill in terms of appeal because the superb original design was taken over by the marketing 'experts'. Each successive model was worse than the last until we ended up with the V12 roadster, a true white elephant that was magnificent in a way but which had no steering feel, lethal handling and soft suspension. It might have looked like a sports car but it was seemingly more suitable for middle-aged ladies to show off in when shopping in Dallas.

Porsche's 911 started off in a less promising fashion but was developed into a US best seller by sticking to sports car principles, which Porsche state as being that such a car should be better than touring cars in all respects except accommodation. Sounding thinking, that. When it came to their 924, they caught a slight cold in the States because the Mazda RX-7, similarly priced in Britain, was with tactical savagery, priced at half the level of the German car in the USA market. So Porsche went up-market with the more expensive development of the theme, the 944, and — Bingo — they were away again with another runaway success.

These are my trains of thought which you may take as the ramblings of a nostalgic old fool or the rational arguments of a pro-sports car man. Perhaps somebody more clever than I am within the British motor industry — and God knows, there are plenty of them! — can come up with the answer, which is a new MG sports car to take us into the Nineties. 