

TIME MACHINES

*Wilson McComb
compares two MGB roadsters that are
almost 20 years apart*



Main picture, the two MGBs with almost 20 years between them but the lines little changed. Above, the comparison of tails shows the difference in ride height

NICK Rabson, a young engineering graduate, was still a student when a little over two years ago he fell for an MGB roadster. It was exceedingly old, but had just been repainted and looked terrific, so he rather unwisely paid a stiff £1,250 for it. It wasn't long before the lovely new paint started falling off, and he reckons that since then he's had to spend the same sum over again. Still, his 25-year-old sports car has taken him more than 16,000 miles, including a four-month period of working in Germany when he naturally seized the opportunity to drive it at disgraceful speeds on the gloriously unrestricted *autobahnen*.

Nick confesses to knowing little of MG history, so his car's registration date — December 1962 — didn't ring any bells until the MG Car Club invited him to lead a parade of several hundred MGBs at their Silverstone meeting this year. Then he began to realise that there aren't all that many 1962 MGBs still around, especially in Britain, since most of the early cars went overseas. Heritage have since confirmed (it's all part of their service, for a fee of just £3) that Car No GHN3/1332 was built on September 28 of that year — eight days after the model was first announced to the public, and almost three weeks before it appeared at the 1962 London Motor Show closed. Despatch records are unavailable, but we know it was among the first 1,300 cars built.

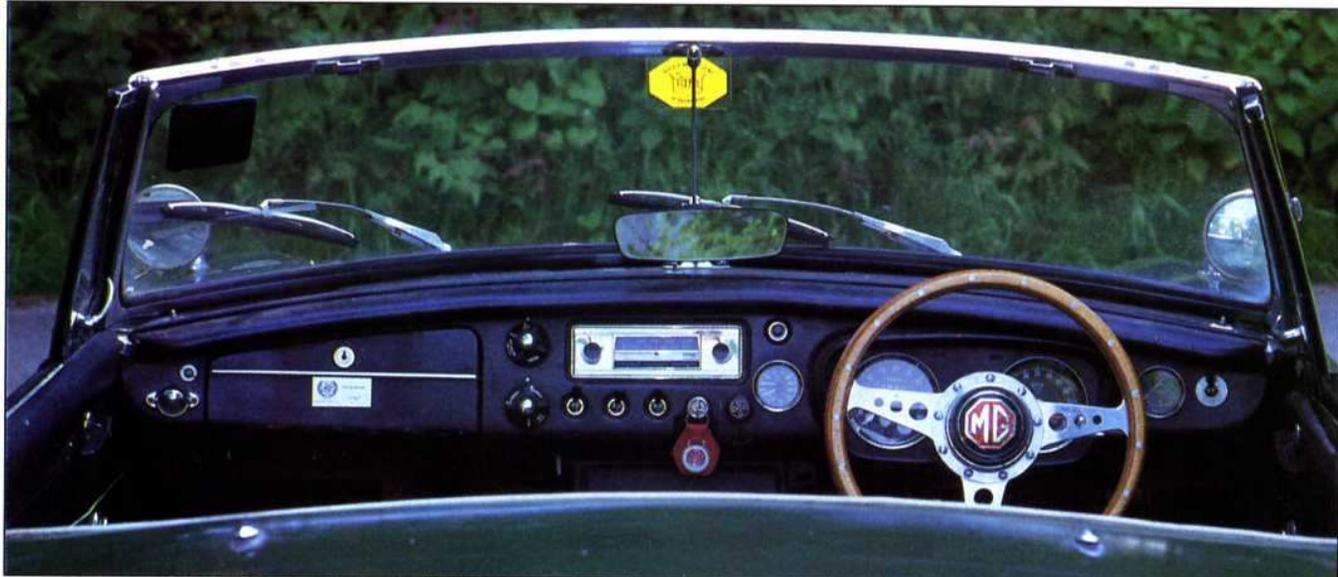
We also know that the engine, No 18GUH/2070, is still the original unit fitted

to the car when it was built. Let it be admitted that for the Silverstone parade Nick fitted a later five-bearing engine and gearbox he bought for £100 in a scrapyard — but that was a mistake. Within a month it ran a big-end, so the original engine had to be refitted. Allowing time off for a graduation party, the job was finished around 2am on the day I was coming to drive the car, and I arrived to find its frantic owner still trying to make it go. An errant capillary tube had shorted out the coil connections, the throttle linkages were totally out of kilter, and a misplaced gasket had partly blocked one inlet passage. Clearly, it was not a good day for testing the Rabson MGB — especially if, like me, you are of a nervous disposition where other people's old cars are concerned. I wondered why the back wheels didn't touch the brakedrums; Nick explained that when a previous owner switched from the original disc wheels to wire, he changed the half-shafts but not the axle casing. I asked why one front wheel stuck out beyond the wheel-arch and the other didn't, but had a marked negative camber; Nick said he hadn't noticed that before . . .

And so, coward that I am, I just *looked* at it instead. It is, I must say remarkably original for its age, and the bodywork presents some surprises: very badly rusted in obvious places — around the rear wheel arches, for instance — it is still unexpectedly good in others, such as the boot floor and the inner front wings. The sills, though, could be a cover-up job with







Above, the very early interior but with non-original steering wheel. Right, the door trim of the '62 car showing signs of age. Far right, Sixties incarnation of B-series engine



Above, the B-series in its last MGB application runs very smoothly. Far left, the comfortable interior of the 1980 car. Left, smart revamped door trim for the Eighties

plenty of rust behind. I'm told the fuel tank has not rusted on top, although it is a 10-gallon and therefore may be original. The doors have been reskinned, but lack rubber "pips" to the original pull-out door handles, which have therefore damaged the new paint. Bumpers and lights are all of the correct type, and possibly original. So is the chromium front grille — and, indeed, the radiator itself, while the oil-cooler now fitted was a listed option. With GT-type rear springs, the tail is a little higher than it should be, but Nick finds the car a better load-carrier that way.

Inside, the small wood-rimmed wheel is obviously very different from the enormous original, but still has the central horn-button and the right-hand column stalk for the flashers. The black-crackle instrument panel looks very original, except that the choke control has a later type of knob, there is the usual rather weird array of switches, and those stubborn heater controls that were to exasperate MGB owners for more than a decade. Overdrive, which this car now has, was not actually available when it was built; it was listed as an option from January 1963. The original gearlever knob has gone missing, but many other details are correct: the tie-rod on the windscreen which served as a handy mirror mounting on roadster models; the loudspeaker grille, the door trim-pads (although the door cappings are missing, and one of the plated "horseshoes" by the lock tongues); even the original plastic interior handles are there, one of them broken — they tended to snap off in cold weather, which is why they were changed! The seats are leather, but of a later type, and the belts are a non-standard reel type. Somebody has carved up the interior trim (don't they always?) to fit stereo speakers.

The aluminium bonnet, the banjo rear axle, the simple packaway hood that could be removed completely to leave masses of space behind the seats — one forgets how many things changed on the MGB during its long production life. It was easier for me to remember because I had driven to Nick's house that morning in a brand-new MGB roadster; brand-new, but seven years old . . .

John Shute, managing director of International Automotive Design at Worthing, has a collection of eight or nine MGs of different types, and last year he added to it an unregistered MGB roadster originally supplied to Appleyards of Harrogate. Built in June 1980 — some four-and-a-half months before the MG factory closed down — it was among the last 7,000, being Car No GVADJAG/516293. When I borrowed it, the speedometer trip read 2,603 miles and there was still a running-in sticker on the windscreen!

I stepped straight into John's car from my own 1969/70 GT, which represents the middle period of MGB production with its five-bearing engine, four-synchro gearbox, negative-earth wiring and alternator, larger fuel tank, reclining seats and so on. As always when going to a black-bumper MGB, I was very conscious of the stripped seats, the arm-rests on

doors and transmission tunnel, the carpeting (instead of the more practical rubber matting) on floors and sills, the head-rests, the padded visors (particularly obstructive in the roadster, with its lower windscreen) — the general air of fussiness, of being grossly over-furnished, which makes the late MGB such a much less attractive car to inhabit than the clean lines and simplicity of the original.

The heel-and-toe accelerator pedal is good, but the "safety" steering column features a thick boss at the floor which your clutch foot tends to hit, and the wider transmission tunnel allows less leg-room generally. I prefer the overdrive switch in its old position at the right of the dash (especially if fitted with a short extension) rather than on the gear lever knob. Although the 15in H-pattern wheel looks like something from a bread-and-butter family saloon instead of a sports car, it is a pleasant wheel to use, and the slightly lower-geared steering is noticeably lighter than on early MGBs. As for the layout of instruments and switches, although completely different, somehow it still manages to seem rather muddled and illogical, except that there are two convenient column stalks instead

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of one. The instrument dials are smaller but give very steady readings.

For me, those heavy black bumpers are inescapably clumsy-looking, ruining the appearance of the car — especially together with the "on-tiptoes" effect of the raised suspension height, so different from the low-slung look we traditionally associate with a sports car. The unleaded body seams, poor paint finish and black-painted number-plate lamps are all indicative of the penny-pinching way the later cars were built — although, curiously enough, their specification included many major items that were previously an extra.

The use of steel instead of aluminium for the bonnet doesn't matter too much because at least it has a telescopic stay (as

has the boot-lid) instead of the original crude prop. On these late-type cars the radiator is much farther forward, it is a sealed cooling system, and the oil-cooler is placed rather inaccessibly out of sight; I would prefer it to be where I can check it for leaks. I like the thermostatically-controlled electric fan of the later cars, the dual master cylinder and the more accessible fuel pump, but dislike those nasty HIF4 carburettors with their integral float chambers. The single 12v battery is, I suppose, cheaper to replace than the two 6V batteries in earlier cars.

The folding hood on the later MGBs is a much grander affair than the early job, and well able to stand up to the car's speed, but its stout construction makes it hard work to raise or lower. The result is that one tends not to bother opening up when the weather is fine — which makes it a little pointless to own a roadster. However, in really hot weather it is cool and pleasant to drive with the zip-out rear window opened, while the face-level vents in the dash are extremely welcome; by comparison, one does tend to fry in a GT. Nowadays, though, I find it not particularly enjoyable to drive an open car in heavy modern traffic — especially on a motorway. The fumes, the dust and the wind buffeting make it a tiring business, and when you look at the speedometer it's a little discouraging to find it registering about 20 mph less than you expect! In this late MGB there was a piercing wind whistle which came in at about 50 — caused, I suspect, by the flat-fronted halogen headlamps — and became excruciatingly loud until it suddenly disappeared at 70mph.

The springs are well matched to the greater weight of the black-bumper car, and with anti-roll bars front and rear it cornered well enough, but not in the confidence-inspiring "on rails" way of the earlier cars. What I enjoyed most about John Shute's car was the sewing-machine smoothness of the engine and transmission. Here was an MGB that absolutely purred along, free of clatter or vibration all the way through the rev range, the way I remembered them doing when I was at the factory almost 20 years ago — and very, *very* different from the reconditioned units that seem to be available today. Bluntly, you can keep the rest of the black-bumper car — just let me have that beautiful engine, gearbox and overdrive for my chrome-bumper GT. 



For most people the chrome bumper MGB is infinitely more attractive than later types