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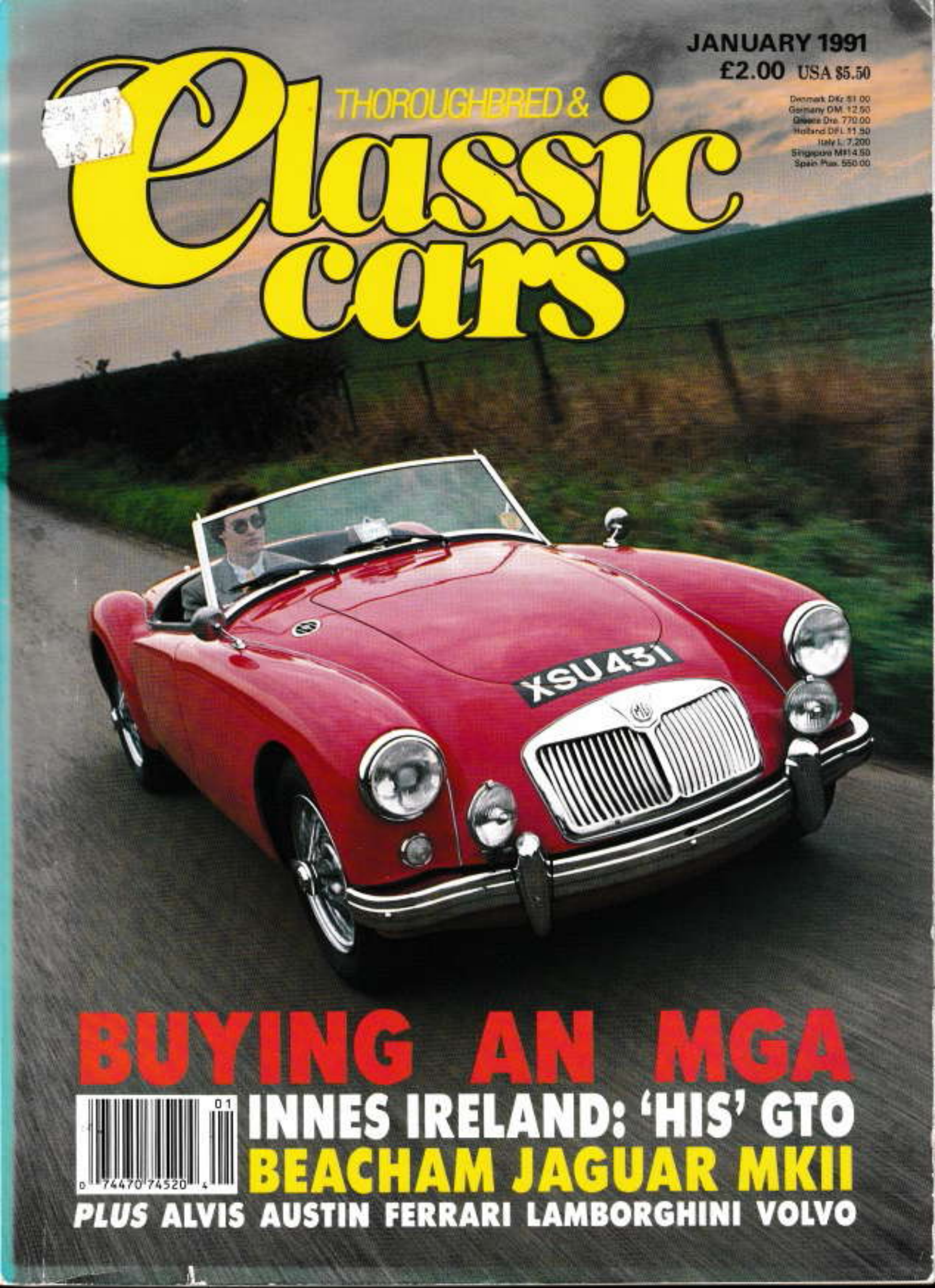
Classic cars



BUYING AN MGA

INNES IRELAND: 'HIS' GTO

BEACHAM JAGUAR MKII

PLUS ALVIS AUSTIN FERRARI LAMBORGHINI VOLVO

MGA CLASSIC CHOICE

The MGA is, for many, the ideal sports car. With a rugged chassis and beautiful lines, it is fast, good-looking and simple to preserve, says Graham Robson

THE MGA arrived only just in time. Don't be misled by the legend of the T-series. These sold well for many years, but were technically obsolete when finally dropped; the Triumph TR2 and the Austin-Healey 100 had seen to that.

Suddenly MG desperately needed a modern sports car. The smart new MGA arrived in 1955, the right car to rescue Abingdon's reputation. The MGA was the first of a series of fast and stylish sports cars to be built at Abingdon over the next 25 years and, like all its stablemates, it was exported in large numbers, particularly to North America.

The MGA was notable for introducing several Abingdon 'firsts' – it was MG's first sports car with all-enveloping styling, its first 100mph model and its first to use a BMC (rather than Nuffield) engine and transmission.

For today's enthusiast, the MGA is an ideal machine to buy and restore. The rugged separate chassis makes rebuilds practical, many of the parts are still available to help restoration, and the styling is still a delight.

For the brave, with deeper pockets, there is even the chance to own MG's only twin overhead cam engined model, the Twin Cam.

Like many famous cars, the MGA evolved through an unrelated series of 'bright ideas'. It was not the car MG had *wanted* to build in 1952, but it was enormously successful in a seven-year career.

The style was invented in 1951, as a streamlined shell for *Autosport* photographer George Phillips' MG TD Special, which raced at Le Mans in 1951. The chassis was designed in 1952 to help lower the driving position on that car, and was also used as the basis of the MG EX179 record car.

Next, also in 1952, MG built a complete prototype – EX175 – which combined the new frame and a modified body style, all powered by MG TD running gear. Because Nuffield (and, therefore, MG) had recently become a part of BMC, MG then had to ask for production approval – and was refused!

The TF was built instead, and wasn't successful, so in 1954 BMC finally agreed to put an all-new sports car into production. The edict, however, was that the new 'corporate' B-series engine, gearbox and axle (also to be found in the MG ZA Magnette saloon) was to be used, which meant that EX175 became EX182.

Race-tuned examples raced at Le Mans in 1955, and the road car went on sale later that year. It was to be MG's most successful sports car yet.

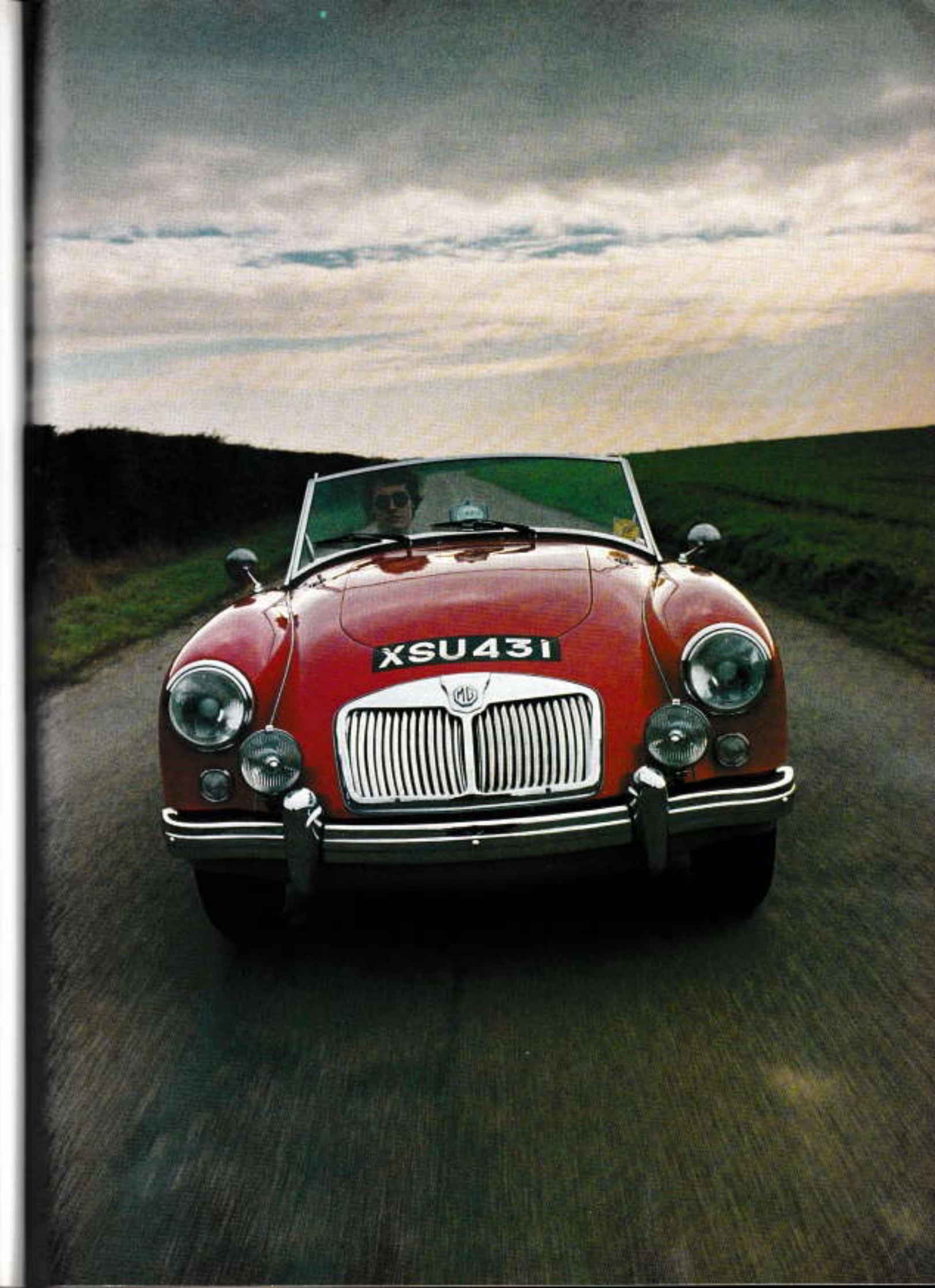
From 1955 to 1962, more than 100,000 MGAs were built at Abingdon, in four distinct types and two styles. It needed an even better car to replace it – and that was the long-running MGB.

Model history

The original MGA was a 1.5-litre open roadster, with a massively strong frame, supple ride, excellent handling and a near-100mph top speed. The bubble-top coupé (which had wind-up windows) arrived a year later, those two styles then continuing for the next six years. Chassis came from John Thompson Motor Pressings, bodies were built by the Morris body works in Coventry, with engines and transmissions from BMC at Longbridge.

Although the original MGA was beautiful and a lot faster than the TF1500 which it displaced, it wasn't perfect: it needed more power and better brakes. These were provided on the MGA 1600 of 1959, a genuine 100mph car with a 1,588cc pushrod engine, and front-wheel disc brakes.

Above, one of the three EX182 entries in the 1955 Le Mans race


XSU431

Less than two years later the 1600 became the 1600 MkII, complete with 1,622cc and slightly different frontal styling; this ran through to the summer of 1962, when the whole range gave way to the new MGB.

Along the way, MG also produced the excitingly specified MGA Twin Cam between 1958 and 1960, a fast car which had an all-new tohc engine, four-wheel disc brakes and centre-lock disc wheels. Engines were troublesome (piston burning and heavy oil consumption were well known problems), so sales soon died away.

To use up existing stocks of chassis, therefore, MG made 'De Luxe' models available from 1960 to 1962, these effectively being Twin Cams with pushrod engines.

Prices – then and now

Because MGAs were produced when British inflation was low, price rises were limited over a seven-year period. For convenience, I quote roadster prices as a guide:

The original MGA 1500 of 1955 was priced at £844, which had risen to £940 by the time is was replaced; the MGA 1600 and the original MGA 1600 MkII also cost £940 at first, this dropping to £912 with a reduction of purchase tax in 1961. The Twin Cam sold for £1,266. Over the years coupés cost about £90-£100 more than the roadsters.

These days, a Condition B MGA roadster sells for between £8,000 and £10,000, while a superb Condition A example commands £12,000–£15,000. The pretty coupés sell for £2,000–£3,000 less than that. Twin Cams are rare, and because all engine problems have long since been sorted, they are now worth more. Expect to pay £17,000 for a roadster (Condition B), or up to £25,000 for a Condition A example; deduct the same £2,000–£3,000 for coupés.

What to look for

Here is a car which has been quite overshadowed by the MGB in the past, without deserving to be. Because it has a sturdy separate chassis it is an even more practical basis for ground-up restoration than the MGB – and some of us think it is also a prettier car.

The existence of the separate frame is a blessing, for this is very durable indeed: much of the bodywork, on the other hand, is prone to rusting away. Many surviving cars have been thoroughly restored twice or even three times, but there is always corrosion or wear to be tackled on a 30-year-old car.

The running gear is pure BMC B-series, which means that it is well known to almost every Classic car enthusiast. Everything is simple and, in theory at least, rebuilds and restoration are straightforward.

Chassis

Years after it had become obsolete, designer Syd Enever commented that he had made the MGA frame *too* strong, and that money and weight could have been saved by slimming down the members.

Complete replacement frames are rarely needed (a good thing, since they are not available!), but various repair sections are now manufactured. Since most full restorations begin with a 'body-off' operation, it is then easy to look over the whole assembly.

The most likely corrosion areas are found under the footwells, and around the front and rear bulkheads. Door pillar supports and the welded joints of rear crossmembers, too, may have suffered over a long life. Subsidiary attachments such as battery supports (which might have been acid-affected) and spare wheel mountings also have a hard time.

It isn't worth skimping on this part of the car for everything else, literally, hangs on it for security.

Bodywork

This was *not* the finest feature of the original MGA, for Morris Bodies' shells were not well-protected against corrosion. Restoration may have helped considerably, but the shell design positively encourages water, mud and salt to collect in inaccessible corners.

Bonnet, boot and doors were made of aluminium, which means that they do not rust away but develop their own particular form of corrosion, especially if they have lived in a salty climate. Water inside the doors (the side-screens may not have sealed things off very well) often accelerates decay.

Regular rust traps are the bottoms of the front wings, the inner wings front or rear, door pillars ahead of or behind the doors, rear wheelarches, boot floor, and any of the sharp edges around grille and headlamp cut-outs. An MGA whose doors do not open and close

Above, roadholding was praised by testers on the model's 1955 launch

Above, long-lived pushrod B-series engine

Left, neat engine bay cooling vent

properly, or have sagged, tells its own story. Bubble-top coupés sometimes begin to rust at the joint between hardtop and main body.

On less rusty cars, you may still find rust bubbling up at panel joints – such as, for instance, that between front wings and bonnet, or bootlid surrounds or 'shrouds'. Almost any joint may prove to be a rust starter, particularly if it is in the direct line of fire of water and filth from the roads.

The passenger floorboards are wood, not steel. As on Morgans, these seem to last surprisingly well, and of course you could make these up yourself quite simply.

Almost all body panels are available from specialists, but some fit better than others, as readers occasionally remind us. Soft-tops are no problem either – you can usually get new hoods which are to a much higher quality than the originals ever were!

Engines

There are two stories here: one concerns the pushrod ohv B-series, and the other the special Twin Cam units.

The trusty old B-series is an earlier version of that fitted to MGBs, and if well oiled and watered seems to last for a very long time. The oil sump/cooling capacity was never brilliant, however, so oil tends to get hot and thin. With modern multigrades there should be no problems, but keep an eye on the pressure gauge, to see that normal pressures are about 60psi.

'Getting old' signs are noisy valve gear, high oil consumption and smoky exhausts. The good news is that all parts are available for rebuilds. An engine that has been well-maintained can easily exceed 100,000 miles before needing major attention. Treat yours to a carburettor balance and tune-up from time to time.

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Twin Cams were finicky when new, with an excessively high octane requirement, and they were also very sensitive to ignition timing. I would guess that most survivors have been rebuilt with lower-compression pistons – if not, it is a miracle that they have survived in the original form, and we recommend a visit to a specialist without delay.

Twin Cams always sound busy, but beware an engine with too much valve thrash and timing chain noise. Original cars always used too much oil, but modified examples have had that cured.

Transmissions

This is a very short section indeed. B-series gearboxes are sturdy and should give no problems, apart from gradually wearing out their synchromesh and perhaps suffering from rather sloppy selector linkages.

They are so simple that, once extracted and stripped out on a bench, they can be rebuilt with new replacement parts by the resourceful DIY enthusiast. Manuals are available to assist in this respect.

Running gear

First of all, be sure that the chassis frame is sound and square (has it been repaired after an accident, and was the repair good?), for the car's handling behaviour relies on all the pick-up points being in the correct position.

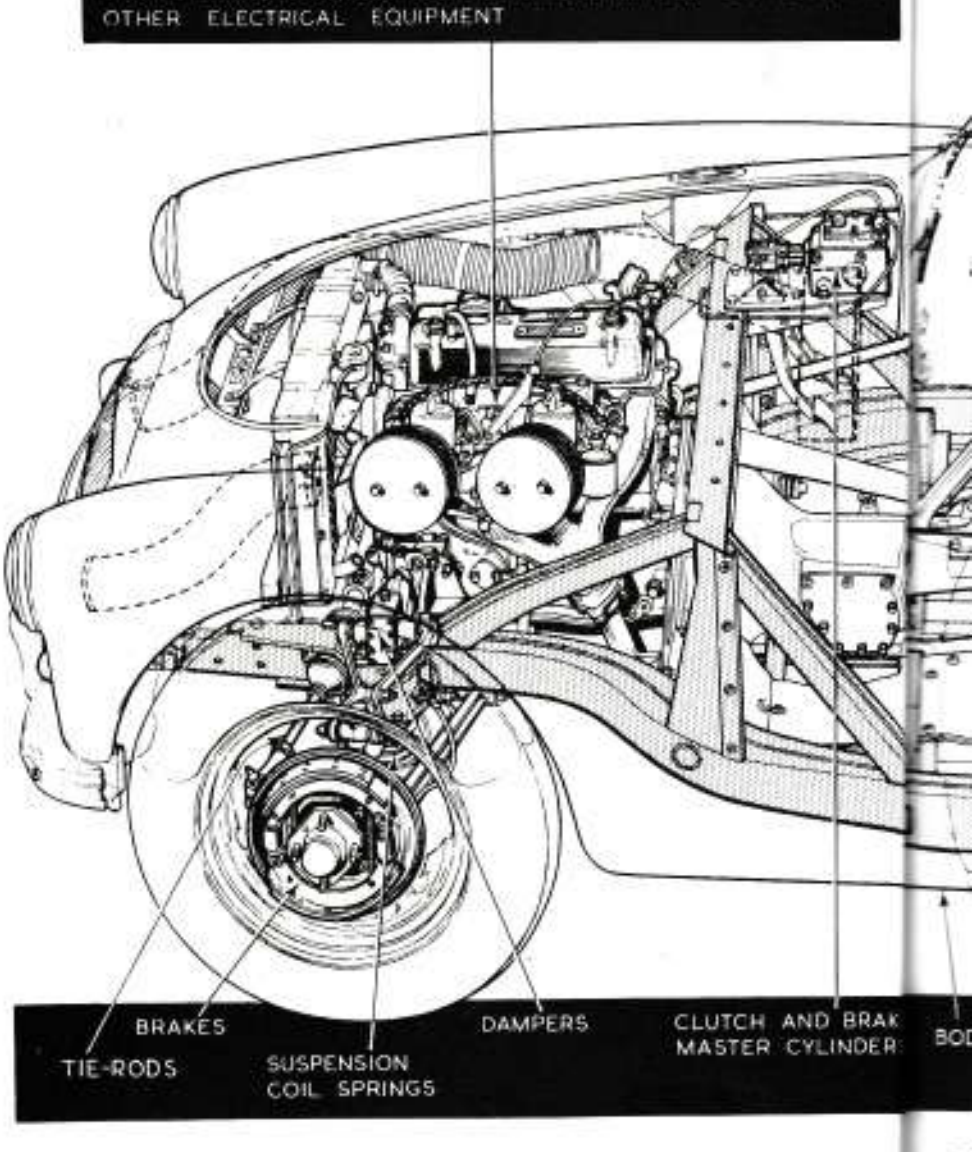
Front suspension may be suffering from kingpin wear (characteristic of this type of BMC front suspension layout) which plays hell with geometry, steering and general feel. Bite the bullet and be prepared to fit new components. Remember at this stage that MGB front suspension is similar but by no means identical, so take care when rummaging round for parts. This suspension requires regular maintenance and greasing – far too many MGAs have worn themselves away through neglect.

Front dampers may need renewing – you'll soon find out on a road run – and in fact most of the joints and bushes in this set-up wear quite persistently and destroy the accurate geometry you need.

The rack-and-pinion steering gear is well forward, and should be inch-accurate. Unfortunately, a previous owner might have ignored necessary lubrication and the balljoints may be badly worn. Not only that, but the gaiters may be split, which will have encouraged rust to spread inside. All these items, fortunately, can be replaced.

The rear suspension is simplicity itself, so all you have to confirm is that there are no broken spring leaves and that the lever-arm dampers still work as they should. Be sure there is no cracking of rear spring pick-ups.

There's little unusual to relate regarding the brakes, except the usual tendency for little-used cylinders (and calipers) to seize up. The Twin Cam has rear-wheel discs, and these too may be rusty.



Interiors

Apart from the usual problem of trim panels, seats and carpets all becoming torn, bent and tatty after years of use, there is the likelihood that water will have soaked into the carpets and made the interior damp. All soft trim, including the soft tops, can now be found from specialists. It is not original factory stock, but it looks the same and is probably of higher quality than before!

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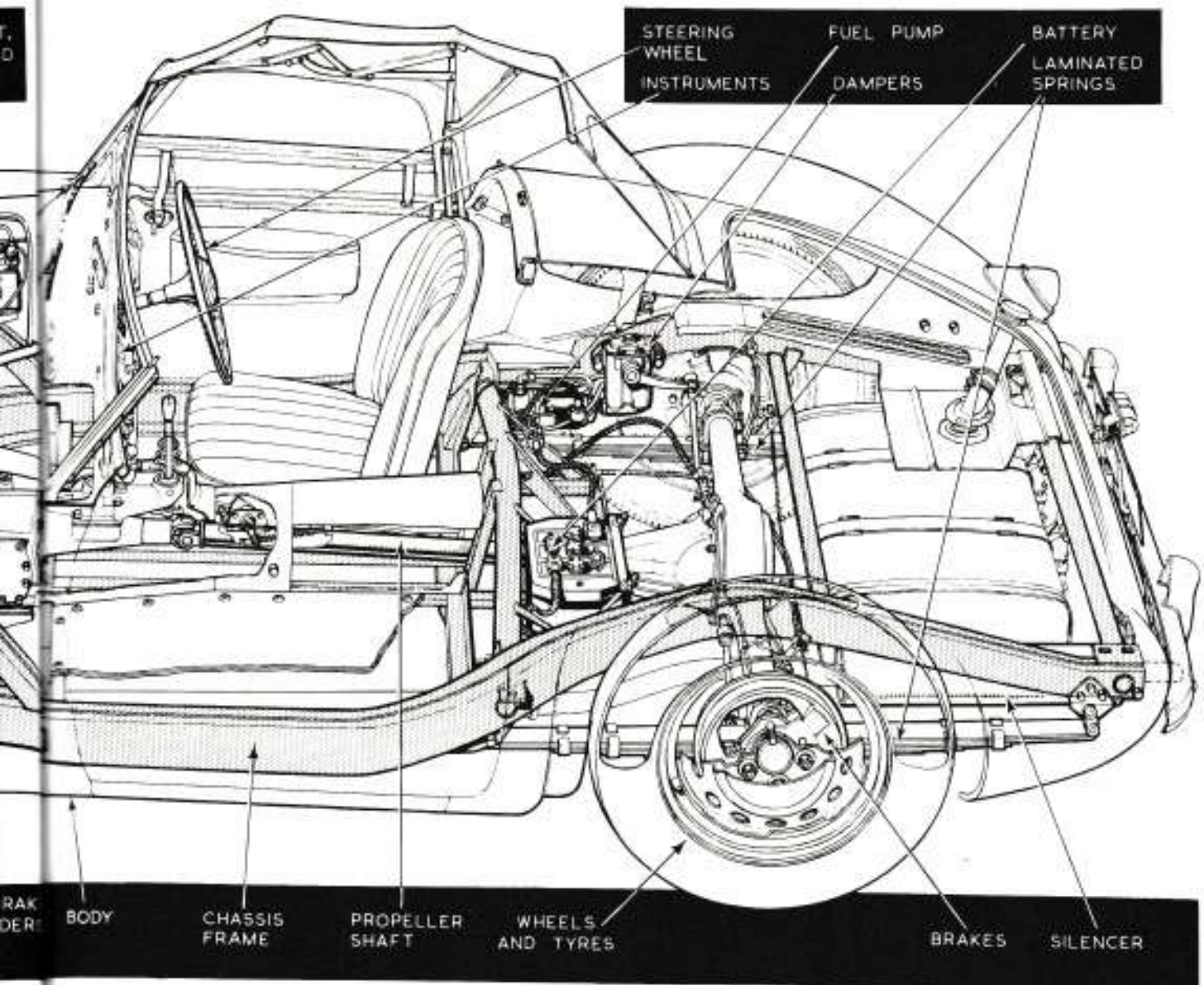
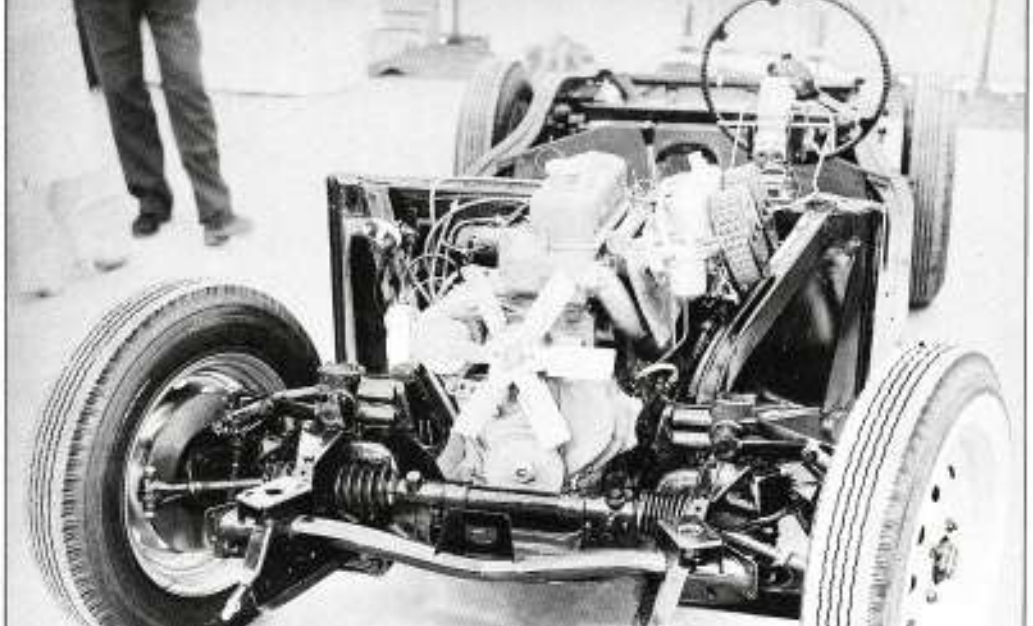
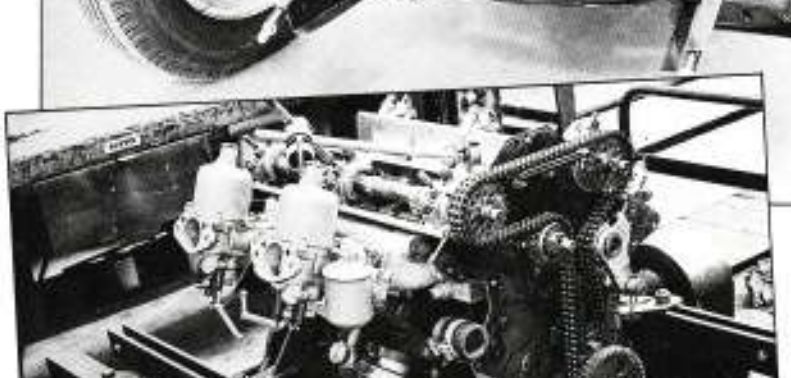
Right, MGA chassis on rotating show stand. Below, MGA interior was neatly if simply finished; wind-up windows only on coupé

Left top, Twin Cam, with its special centre-lock Dunlop wheels

Left bottom, one-off Twin Cam using modified 1955 Le Mans light-alloy shell, privately entered in the 1959-61 races by Ted Lund, won the 2-litre class in 1960







Above, very strong chassis with side members swept around seats to permit lower mounting

Left, the Twin Cam engine was a snug fit in the engine bay. With its 9.9:1 compression ratio, timing and fuel quality were critical

Specifications

Except for engine details, all MGAs had the following basic specifications:

Layout: Separate steel chassis frame, with steel bodyshell, with front engine/rear drive, in two-door/two-seater open sports or closed coupé styles.

Engine: Four-cyl, ohv, twin SU carburettors (tohc on Twin Cam model only).

Transmission: Four-speed gearbox, no synchromesh on first gear.

Suspension, steering and brakes: Independent front suspension by coil springs and wishbones; live rear axle, by half-elliptic leaf springs. Rack-and-pinion steering. Front drum brakes (1500), front disc brakes (others), rear drum brakes (rear discs on Twin Cam only).

Major dimensions: Length 13ft 0in; width 4ft 9.25in; height 4ft 2in; wheelbase 7ft 10in; weight (depending on model or body) 1,988 – 2,075lb.

Engines were:

1500: 1,489cc, 68 (later 72) bhp (net) at 5,500rpm.

1600: 1,588cc, 80bhp (net) at 5,600rpm.

1600 MkII: 1,622cc, 86bhp (net) at 5,500rpm.

Twin Cam: 1,588cc, 108bhp (net) at 6,700rpm.

Parts supply

Because MGAs are between 28 and 35 years old, it is virtually impossible to get parts from the factory source, that is, from Unipart. If you have time to dig around and don't mind being disappointed, you could try quoting an appropriate part number at your Unipart dealer – but don't expect too much.

Mike Beales of the MG Owners Club tells us that the vast majority of MGA replacement parts *are* available through MG specialists, and that he is always happy to give advice to enthusiasts who are trying to rebuild their cars. Literature and workshop manuals are also available.

There are no complete chassis frames, but almost everything else is available either as remanufactured components or reconditioned assemblies. But don't expect them to be cheap.

Where to go, for what? More details of specialists from: Mike Beales, MG Owners Club, 2/4 Station Road, Swavesey, Cambs. CB4 5QZ; tel. 0954 31125, fax 0954 32106.

Chassis identification

	Chassis Number
August 1955: MGA 1500 roadster production began from:	10101
October 1956: MGA 1500 coupé production began from:	20671
May 1959: MGA 1500 discontinued at:	68850
MGA 1600 production began from:	68851
Spring 1961: MGA 1600 discontinued at:	100351
MGA 1600 MkII production began from:	100352
July 1962: MGA 1600 MkII production discontinued at:	109070
MGA Twin Cam	
May 1958: MGA Twin Cam production began from:	501
June 1960: MGA Twin Cam production ended at:	2611

Production figures

MGA 1500	58,750
MGA 1600*	31,501
MGA 1600 MkII*	8,719
MGA Twin Cam	2,111
Total	**101,081**

* These totals include 82 MGA 1600 De Luxe (of which 12 were coupés) and 313 MGA 1600 MkII De Luxe (of which 23 were coupés) models.

Clubs

There are two major national MG clubs in the UK which cater for the MGA – each offering different services:

The **MG Owners Club** was founded in 1973 by Roche Bentley and run from his home in Cambridgeshire. It very soon outgrew a one-man operation, and now has a professionally administered head office in Swavesey. It has more than 50,000 members, and claims to be the largest one-make club in the world.

It produces a glossy monthly magazine, *Enjoying MG*, which is always packed with special offers; it runs special owners' insurance schemes; has a dedicated MG Workshop; provides books and reprints of technical manuals; and promotes a series of special events and national occasions. It has also had much to do with encourging the remanufacture of hard-to-find MG spares.

The annual subscription is £18/year, with a joining fee of £4. For more details contact: The Membership Secretary, MG Owners Club, 2/4 Station Road, Swavesey, Cambs. CB4 5QZ; tel. 0954 31125, fax 0954 32106.

The **MG Car Club** was founded by John Thornley well before the Second World War, and for many years was a factory-financed organisation and the only important MG club. It was hived off at the end of the Sixties, following British Leyland 'rationalisations'.

This year it moved back to Abingdon, next door to the old MG factory; its staff look after 10,500 UK members and up to 40,000 affiliated overseas members.

The MG Car Club has different registers for each of several important MG model families including the MGA. It provides restoration advice, help on all spares and parts supply matters, and is a very 'sporting' club, with important race meetings throughout the year. Naturally there is a fine monthly magazine *Safety Fast*, and the membership fee is £23/year. More details from: Lyn Jeffrey, MG Car Club, PO Box 251, Abingdon, Oxon. OX14 3FA; tel. 0235 555552.

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Left, Twin Cam dash was identical to other models except for recalibrated rev counter and speedo

Because the MGA was a design generation better than the old TF, testers positively gushed over it when it arrived in 1955, as this selection of comments shows:

The Autocar found a two-way top speed of 98mph, and suggested that: "Long, winding, hillside roads are a joy to traverse... The roadholding and steering are of a high order... Fast cornering was a joy... Suspension and damping is such that the whole car feels in one piece..." A later test commented that: "The ride and adhesion of this latest car are so much better than those of nearly all its rivals that criticism may be made only with some hesitancy."

The Motor headlined its test: "An Uncommonly Roadworthy 1½-Litre Sports Car of High Performance", and summarised thus: "...the newest MG must be summed up as enthusiastically as it was everywhere received. That the modern styling is generally approved there can be no doubt, but far more important is the introduction of a small car with a degree of roadworthiness high by any standards. The famous slogan of the factory has indeed never been better applied."

There was more: "To drive the MGA on a winding open road is sheer enthusiast's delight... an admirable example of useful and controllable oversteer... the ride itself is remarkably comfortable."

In *Autosport*, John Bolster backed up all the above, commented that "racing improves the breed", and pointed out that: "With the hood and sidescreens erect, the heater turned on, and the radio playing, it can serve very well as a town carriage..." He concluded: "This is a jolly good little sports car; if you want one, hurry up and get in the queue."

As latter-day owners know, the noise level in the cabin of the coupé is high. *The Autocar*'s comments of May 1957 emphasise this. "The noise level is appreciable, yet provided the occupants are prepared to raise their voices a little, conversation may be carried on without difficulty at any speed..." ('*Autocar*-speak' was very restrained at this time!)

The MGA 1600 of 1959 was an improvement, with *The Autocar* summing up that it "...maintains the traditional high standards of performance and safety of the marque."

By this time, however, doubts were beginning to creep in about some features, for the steering was described merely as "adequate", and of the engine: "after several flat-out laps on a high-speed circuit it was noticed that the oil pressure was gradually dropping ... Members of the staff with experience of the previous MGA feel the more powerful engine to be rather more noisy and harsh... there is no doubt that the brakes [Lockheed front discs] are of a very high standard indeed... By modern standards the suspension must be considered firm... on rougher surfaces, a feel that the wheels were hopping and jumping, accompanied by intermittent tyre squeal, indicated that the tyres were not maintaining full contact with the road."

By 1961 the 1600 MkII received a cooler reception, for *The Autocar* thought that the engine "...cannot be judged a smooth and refined unit... at about 5,000rpm distinct roughness begins." By that time, too, the ride, steering and roadholding were described as "very similar to those of a Vintage sports car... The suspension is very firm, so that on all but smooth surfaces there are short, sharp, up and down movements of the car."

The MGA Twin Cam was an enigma. Both *The Autocar* and *The Motor* loved the high performance, but both stressed that 100 octane fuel was needed (*The Motor*'s car detonated badly on 97 octane German fuel), that oil consumption was high (five pints in 800 miles on *The Autocar*'s example), and that noise levels were even higher than in the pushrod-engined car.

Then, as later, the Twin Cam was not as satisfying a car in the flesh as it seemed to be on paper. Before long its reputation would plummet, and assembly would end after less than two years.

Performance

	1500	1600	1600 MkII	Twin Cam
Engine/power (litre/bhp)	1.5/68	1.6/80	1.6/86	1.6/108
Top speed (mph)	98	101	101	113
0-60mph (sec)	15.6	14.2	13.7	9.1
0-80mph (sec)	32.1	26.6	24.6	16.2
Standing ¼-mile (sec)	20.2	19.3	19.1	18.1
Typical mpg (overall)	30	27	27	27
Weight (lb)	1,905	2,030	2,015	2,185
Tested in	*Autocar*	*Autocar*	*Autocar*	*Motor*

It would have been nice to use a complete set of tests from *The Autocar*, but the figures quoted by that magazine for the Twin Cam are suspect. *The Motor*, on the other hand, made no mistake...

All in all, you get what you pay for with an MGA. As the years passed, power increases more than kept up with the way the car put on weight. The result was that the 1600 MkII was the fastest pushrod-ohv engined type of them all. Because 1600s and MkIIs had front-wheel disc brakes, this makes them more desirable than the original 1500.