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**MG**  
ENTHUSIAST  
THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING MG MAGAZINE

PRESENTS

# MG SPORTS CARS



• FEATURE CARS, BUYING GUIDES, HISTORY AND MOTORSPORT •



# In the Beginning

The first genuinely 'all new' MG sports car was a deserved success when it was new. We drive a lightly modified example to see if it still stacks up all these years later.

**Words:** Jack Grover

The long and tortuous history of MG has a curious habit of repeating itself. If I said that there was a time when MG was making a range of sports cars that were generally considered well past their sell-by-date, even if they had been very competitive both on the track and the car market when they were new, that had legions of hardened enthusiasts around the world that loved them in large part because of their rather old-fashioned character and that sold well in America for all their faults, you might think I was talking about the late seventies.

But I'm actually talking about the mid-fifties. For ten years MG's staple product had been the T-type Midget, which had first seen the light of day in 1936 as an evolution of the P-type. The 'new' Midget was immediately recognisable – a steel chassis and steel body panels on an ash wood frame, minimal coachwork, cut-away doors, a vertical radiator grille and long mudguards.

The original T-type evolved by steps. The post-war TC model was the one that spearheaded MG's popularity in North America, but it was with the TD that MG really got into its stride – 30,000 TD Midgets were sold in three years, while the TC had only sold a third of that number in five years. Only 1,600 of those cars stayed in the UK and 23,400 of them found homes in America.

## NEW ORDER

But by 1953 the MG was starting to feel its age. Cars such as the Jaguar XK120 and the Austin-Healey 100 had moved the game on in terms of performance, styling, refinement, engineering and more. The last version of the T-type, the TF, had wider wings with faired-in headlamps but was otherwise largely unchanged. It was clear that MG needed a much more modern car if it wasn't to throw away its hard-won market share and goodwill in the crucial American market. And there was

every chance of that happening – in the last year of TF production only 6,500 cars were sold, which was a long way short of what the TD had achieved. Under the beady eye of the newly-formed British Motor Corporation there was every chance that Abingdon would be shut down for good.

Fortunately there were plenty of ideas for a more modern MG kicking around. They had started in 1951 when Abingdon had built a TD Midget for that year's Le Mans race. Syd Enever designed a streamlined, full-width body for the car but the tall proportions of the basic T-type design, with the driver's seat bolted to the top of the chassis rails which were close together and well within the wheel track, meant that the driver was far too high. The car was rebuilt so the cockpit floor was fitted to the bottom of the chassis rails rather than the top, allowing the driver to straddle the right-hand rail.

Building this one-off special had shown the limitation of the basic MG Midget



**Top:** The B-Series engine looks almost standard, but its added capacity and power over the standard-fit 1.6-litre unit moves the MGA into a different league. **Above:** The 'office' of the MGA combines a low-along driving position with all the chrome, pull-switches and Smiths dials you could want.

design and that something very different would be needed for a new production car. Roy Brocklehurst, an apprentice designer at Abingdon, was tasked with producing an all-together more practical and sound solution. He cut out the middle of a TD chassis and fitted new chassis rails that bowed out to virtually the same width as the wheel track. This meant that the floor (and the seats) could be mounted between them, giving a much lower driving position that could easily be contained within Syd Enever's wind-cheating bodywork. The result was the EX175 prototype car, capable of over 100mph while using a standard T-type engine, drivetrain, suspension and brakes. The car was shown to Leonard Lord in 1952 just after the formation of BMC, but by then he had committed to the partnership between Austin and Donald Healey and didn't want a new MG taking sales. Instead he gave permission for a final evolution of the T-type, which led to the TE

Just a year later there had been a complete change of heart. The Stateside market for sports cars was booming while MG sales were sliding. There was clearly plenty of room for both MG and Austin-Healey and sales on the home market were also starting to decline. Permission was granted for the re-establishment of a design office at Abingdon (that Lord had closed back in 1935) and for a new MG sports car.

All the work with EX175 paid off and although the car was a radical departure for MG (arguably the first genuinely new MG sports car since the twenties) it was ready to go on sale at the 1955 Frankfurt Motor Show. The only change from the prototype had been the use of the BMC B-Series engine, as used in the Magnette, which was much more compact than the old XPAG engine so the new car could have a low bonnet line to match the rest of its shape.

With the Z-type Magnette MG had reached the end of the alphabet, so a new naming

strategy was required. The new car was simply called the MGA. It was a huge success on both sides of the Atlantic, although inevitably the Americans bought the majority. While MG had struggled to sell TD and TF cars it had exactly the opposite problem with the MGA, as it couldn't make it fast enough. Over 13,000 were sold in the first year and by 1957 the annual total had breached 20,000 – the MGA was selling twice as many examples in a year as the TC Midget had in four. Very credible performances in all sorts of motorsport, both with Abingdon-backed Works cars and numerous privateers, only helped keep demand high throughout the model's life.

If that seems like a lot of history to wade through before actually getting down to driving a car (this is a road test, after all) it's only because I think, more than ever, the MGA needs to be considered in its context. To get a grasp on why it was such a phenomenon you need to consider it not only as a car from 1955 but one that came immediately after cars that, to all intents and purposes, were from 1936. And that's without finding out what it's like to drive over six decades later.

#### RESTORED GLORY

Not that this Glacial Blue 1959 MGA is entirely representative of what wowed the world in 1955. The MGA was steadily developed over the course of production, gaining bigger engines and better brakes, but it never quite reached the levels of this one. Under the bonnet is a 1.8-litre B-Series engine from the ubiquitous MGB, which has then been breathed on to Stage 1 standard to unleash a few more horses – we're probably dealing with just over 100bhp and a useful spread of extra torque. The brakes (disc on the front, drums on the back as standard for an 'A' of this age) have been uprated to match. There's also a Ford Sierra five-speed gearbox lurking under the transmission tunnel, which is a very common conversion for MGAs, as well as more sundry additions and improvements such as an oil cooler, an alternator, twin fog lamps, a modern radio/CD player and a wood-rimmed Moto Lita wheel. In addition to these modifications the reason the entire car looks so pristine is because it was subject to a complete (virtually component by component) rebuild in the mid-nineties. In fact this 'A' is one the vast majority of its kind that originally went out to America; it was repatriated from California in 1993 and converted to right-hand drive during the restoration.

None of this should detract from getting to grips with the MGA as a car. Boring out and tweaking the engines of MGs has been going on as long as MGs have been around and since the vast majority of the running gear is as-standard I really doubt that a bit more power will mean I'm not getting the essence of the MGA.

Streamlining was all the rage in the fifties. The MGA was launched the same year as the Citroën DS, the Deltic locomotive, the Caravelle jet airliner and Donald Campbell's

Bluebird hydroplane and the MG would have fitted in well. Just getting into the car shows how much of a step-change it was from the MGs of the past. Instead of lowering yourself through a flimsy low-cut door and arranging yourself around the transmission behind a wooden plank with some octagonal dials scattered across it, you're in a car fully trimmed in pale colours and most of the trim is made from that crinkly and hard-wearing 'elephant hide' material that only seems to exist in British cars of the fifties. The door has no handles or latches – having them on the outside would spoil the aerodynamic shape and on the inside simple pull-wires will do. The aluminium doors swing shut easily and when they do you find yourself in a genuine cockpit. There's actual bodywork between you and the edge of the car and with no winding windows, door catches or hood fixings in the way, the MGA feels like a racing car just to sit in, let alone to drive, all the more so because, just as Syd Enever and Roy Brocklehurst intended, you sit very low down with the big steering wheel sitting vertically almost in your chest and your legs out straight in front of you.

#### NO SURPRISES

But it doesn't sound like a racing car. Running at a fast idle on the choke even this lightly-tuned engine simply has the steady, staccato rasp of any fifties saloon with a rather under-silenced exhaust. The clutch has none of the snatch or weight that you'd expect from a

sports car of this age. Despite addition of the later Ford gearbox the gear lever wears the original knob for the BMC four-speed unit (which therefore now shows reverse gear to be in completely the wrong place – fortunately Charles at Sherwood Restorations pointed this out to me before I set off!) but it certainly doesn't feel like a 'box lifted from a Sierra. It has the tight, mechanical and slick shift you'd expect of any MG and had I not known this car had had the conversion I really don't think I'd have noticed anything different...until I tried to find reverse, of course.

Underway the engine gains a bit of character but at the end of the day it's a B-Series and it's never going to be particularly exciting in itself, especially when dawdling around at 30mph and middling revs. In other respects the 'A' feels, well, like a 'B, if I'm honest. This surprised me, given the entirely different construction methods used in each car, even if much of the running gear is the same, and the historical fact that the later car was explicitly designed as a more refined, accessible and comfortable update of the earlier one. So far I really wasn't noticing the difference. There was the same heavy and linear but not particularly quick steering that required a lot of upper-arm work. There's the same ride that's firm but not crashy or skittish. There was no sense of the car being a collection of parts in loose formation that often comes with cars built around a chassis. Whether it was the tuning work or the lower

weight of the MGA (most likely both) the power unit felt its usual tractable self. So far the only real surprise is how good the heater is – even without the side screens in place there's a comfortable warm fuff building up in the footwell.

#### SAFETY, FASTER

That all changed when, with the temperature gauge now pointing nicely in the middle of its arc and a National Speed Limit sign up ahead, I dropped from fourth to third and tipped onto full throttle. MGs have always been more about driver interaction and fun than outright performance, but drop a mildly-tuned 1.8-litre engine into a car weighing well under a ton and you have a genuinely potent mix. My guesstimate of the power available under my right foot is roughly similar to the infamous Twin Cam version of the MGA (but without any of the attendant reliability problems) and the in-gear shove is remarkable. Under heavy throttle the restrained burble of the engine turns into a classic cast-iron growl at low speeds, which turns to a sound like a backsaw working its way through a particularly hard and knotty bit of wood as you push the engine further. In what seems like no time at all I'm up to 60mph and I slot the lovely gearbox into fourth and then into fifth.

Now I see why it's such a popular conversion. With extra power on tap the MGA isn't troubled at all by the higher gear, spinning away at about 3,200rpm at the speed

*None of these modifications detract from the character of the car – they only broaden the ways in which you can enjoy it*



One of the MGA's big attractions when it was launched was that it had an optional hot. Now, though, less many MGAs still packed up as hot and they're now a valued period accessory.



MG can be credited with creating the original 'classic British sports car'. With the MGA Abingdon brought the idea into the modern world and created a timeless classic in the process.

limit. Without the extra ratio this lively engine in a light car would feel very restless and I can guess that even a standard car really feels the benefits from not having to churn away at 4,000rpm or so for long periods in modern touring conditions. As I've already noted the actual gear change is so typically 'MG' that the conversion in no way detracts from the character of the car - it only broadens the ways in which you can enjoy it.

At these higher cruising speeds on roads with corners and crests, the differences between the MGA and the later sports cars to wear the octagon badge become more discernible, although I'd still say they're very subtle. At higher speeds the ride loses some of its compliancy, with larger bumps thudding through the structure, although the MGA actually stays very planted and stable, without any twitching or shimmying, either through the steering wheel or at the road wheels themselves. The 'seat of the pants' connection to what the car is doing is a huge part of what makes classic MGs so enjoyable to drive and the MGA still has it in spades. But the separate chassis does make itself known in the actual controls. There's a slight, oh so slight, feeling of disconnection, a sense of 'fuzziness' that is inevitable when the body you're sitting in is separate from the frame that all the mechanical parts are bolted to.

But I've fallen into the trap of comparing the MGA to cars that had yet to exist when it was launched, although the fact that I feel such a comparison is even remotely relevant is to the MG's credit. None the less it is silly to compare the 'A point-by-point with the car that replaced it. By the standards of fifties sports cars, it is superb.

So thoroughly reinventing a staple product can be tricky, but MG managed it superbly as the MGA embodies all the characteristics that had made the pre-war cars such a success but in an utterly contemporary package. The defining characteristic of classic MGs was that they were 'giant-killers' - they were much better than anything cheaper, much cheaper than anything better and with a bit of workshop tinkering they could give much more expensive and sophisticated sports cars a hard run for their money.

#### BEST IN BREED

This MGA is no exception. The overall driving experience is very similar to a 'Big Healey', a car that cost half as much again, but those cars feel like the race-bred bruisers they are - heavy cars with heavy engines in the front and heavy controls. Cars you don't so much drive as cling on to. The MG's handling, for all my talk of fuzziness, is still confidence-inspiring as the car responds quickly and predictably

to everything you do. The other thing that has always defined classic MGs for me has been the sense of balance; that the car is pivoting around you as you corner, with no real sense of having to force the front end to go around corners or to restrain the back end from breaking away.

In standard form the MG would have lost out to the Healey in outright performance but in this case that's a moot point. My crude attempt at doing a 0-60mph sprint on a straight bit of back road (which was neither absolutely full-bore nor accurately timed) suggested a time of just over 10 seconds. Here I'm going to sing the praises of the Ford gearbox again because while it feels like a fifties MG gearbox should, it's reassuring to know that you're benefitting from 30 years of technological improvement and that the 'box isn't going to balk when pushed hard. Plus, you get synchromesh on all the gears, although this does remove the need to double de-clutch. You can still do that, of course, but you don't get the satisfaction of feeling the selectors glide into mesh and knowing that you achieved that all by yourself.

This MGA's suspension and steering are as standard, so while I have to make allowances when discussing the car's performance I can be unhindered in talking about how it corners. I've already praised the handling, but the roadholding is also excellent, even though this is where the MGA's supposed more hard-riding nature comes into play. Although the ride is good for a sports car when cornering on less-than-perfect roads you find that the spring travel is actually quite short, especially on the leaf-sprung rear axle. When asked to deal with cornering forces, body roll and a mid-curve bump, the suspension runs out of options and you can feel the back end starting to hop around, and the effect becomes more pronounced the faster you go. But the MG's balance and feedback come into play and, unlike a Healey, you never feel like it's going to break away uncontrollably. Of course, like a good sports car should, the MGA will indulge in some oversteer action but you can do it entirely on your own terms and it never happens unexpectedly.

#### VERDICT

So the MGA looks great, it has oodles of period style and charm, it has enough driver involvement, roadholding and performance to be genuinely satisfying to drive, while being slow enough to savour what performance it has and with dynamic limits low enough to be challenging and rewarding to press on with. The added power available in this one removes the one ever-present criticism of classic MGs, which is that their outright performance never matched the sophistication of their handling. In the form presented here I'd say that the MGA probably deserves the title of 'the definitive British sports car' as it really exemplifies the breed at its best. ■

# Building in Reliability

This MGA Twin Cam didn't get off to the best of starts with its current owners in the 1970s, but has since proven to be a reliable (and versatile) delight.

Words: Martyn Morgan Jones Pies, Gerard Hughes





Alan Whitfield initially regretted buying a Twin Cam, but once he had rebuilt it properly the sleek sportster went on to provide many years of enjoyable family transport.

Back in the early 1970s, Alan Whitfield was the proud owner of an MGA. But there was one problem – it was a coupé (GHC 8), and what Alan coveted was a wind-in-the-hair roadster. So he went looking for one. “I ended up at MG specialists S. H. Richardson and Sons Ltd in Staines,” he recalls, “which is where I had bought the coupé. They said they didn’t have a roadster, but I happened to spot one in their yard. The salesman told me quite firmly that I wouldn’t want that car as it was ‘a Twin Cam and a load of trouble.’ Well, I’d heard stories of the Twin Cam, but as an engineer I was willing to rise to the challenge. I took it for a spin and ended up part-exchanging my coupé for it!”

#### RUNNING ISSUES

Although smitten with the Twin Cam’s engaging road manner and brisk performance, Alan was soon wishing he’d heeded the salesman’s advice. “Driving it home one evening after a club meeting, there was a sudden loss of power,” he remembers. “After checking around, I could find nothing wrong and it drove home normally. Next morning there was a knock from the engine. The problem was traced to a damaged piston, which had been fitted with Cord rings. I stripped and rebuilt the engine using new 9.9 pistons.

“Not long after the car was put back on the road, it was used to go on holiday to Cornwall. It was driven carefully and steadily so as to run in the engine on the way. However, coming home and having covered 700 miles on the rebuilt engine, it suffered a sudden loss of power again when I was cruising at a steady 60mph. To add insult to injury, the knock was back the next day.

“Stripping the engine down again revealed another damaged piston. The local engineering firm diagnosed a wrong-sized piston which, although marked +10thou, was in fact standard size. The pistons were replaced by Toulmin Motors free of charge, and the engine rebuilt for a second time.

“I took it easy for the next 500 miles, but then suffered another seizure. At this point I decided the car had to go, but fortunately people in the MG Car Club Twin Cam group advised me to speak to Peter Wood. After taking me through the usual fuel and timing issues, he asked me how many miles I had done since the rebore. It was then about 1,200 miles. Peter explained that Twin Cam pistons have solid skirts and needed a longer running in period of up to 3,000 miles. Armed with a new piston, and having rebuilt the engine for a third time, I carried out a full 3,000 miles running in period, progressively increasing the speed. It has never seized again or blown

*"In 2003, whilst I was still working (and earning!), I decided to strip the Twin Cam and do a nut and bolt rebuild"*



a piston since. The only persistent fault was fouling of the plugs due to worn valve guides."

The MGA was not used in front line service for too long, though. Alan married Maureen in 1973, bought a broken A40 Farina from a friend, fitted a new engine to that and took the Twin Cam off the road. "It remained off the road for about five years, during which time we had two children and moved house," continues Alan. "But I'd been collecting parts, both body and mechanical, which were already hard to find. Using these, I recommissioned the Twin Cam and put it back on the road in the late 1970s."

"From then and on through the early 1980s, the Twin Cam was in regular daily use. It only stopped being used for a period because it burnt an exhaust valve. Having talked to Peter, I decided to get the head modified to take the later design of tappet buckets and sleeves etc at the same time as the exhaust valve was sorted."

#### **PULLING ITS WEIGHT**

With the Twin Cam duly modified and now running sweetly, Alan and his wife Maureen (who has always been hugely supportive of the car) started using it as a daily driver. Indeed, for a time it was the only car they owned. "It even towed a caravan, on many, many occasions," discloses Alan with a smile. "And, to accommodate the children, I made a well-padded rear bench seat that fitted over the battery area. If you are only 5ft 4in tall it could be done at that time - I raised the seats on rails to allow the seats to move forward more than normal, and fitted a smaller steering wheel. This allowed leg room and space behind with full harnesses for the children, who were able to travel in the Twin Cam until well into junior school age. The caravan, which was fantastic for family holidays, wasn't particularly heavy, but it still weighed in at around 900kg. Not that it caused the car any

bother, although hill starts - especially in the French Alps and the Pyrenees - were a tad difficult due to first gear being a little tall."

Although the Twin Cam was running very well, the interior was starting to get rather cramped for the growing family so Alan took it off the road a few years later and went in search of a slightly roomier MG. "I bought a 1967 MGB GT from a friend," he relates. "He'd had plans to rebuild it, but due to his many commitments, he soon appreciated that he'd probably never be able to find the time. Because it had a little more room in the rear for the children, it became our main car. I kept it for a while, before selling it to buy a Lotus Elan Plus 2 130/5. This then became the family car. As you can probably appreciate, I'm a big fan of sports cars!"

Maureen was a big fan too, but fast forward a few years and with the children now grown up and having returned to her job as





The overall appearance is to original specification, but there have been one or two tweaks such as a five-speed gearbox, and also a brake servo tucked under the dash.



When used as the family's only transport, their Twin Cam would tow a caravan, and even had a seat for the kids squeezed into the cockpit.

a district nurse, the Lotus was proving to be less than ideal for the rigours of home visits and associated stop-start motoring. A change had to be made, rather a mundane one as it transpired. "Sadly I had to sell the Lotus, and I bought a Vauxhall Corsa in its place," says Alan. "This was back in the late 1990s."

#### REVIVAL

Fortunately, Alan was not without a sports car entirely as he had kept the Twin Cam. What's more, he had plans for it. "I knew that I was going to retire in 2005 from my job as a railway maintenance engineer in diesel traction," explains Alan. "So in 2003, whilst I was still working (and earning!), I took the decision to strip the Twin Cam and do a nut and bolt, body off, bare metal rebuild. The engine would be thoroughly overhauled too."

Although Alan had previously rebuilt the engine, on this occasion he chose to have it

done professionally. "I'd already refurbished the cylinder head," he adds, "but having given it considerable thought, I decided to send the engine to Peter Wood to be rebuilt. As things turned out, this was a very wise decision. The original crankshaft was at its maximum regrind, but I'd previously purchased a new all-steel crankshaft from Peter and he used this in the rebuild, together with later conrods and new, original Hepolite 9.9:1 pistons. It hasn't missed a beat since."

#### PRACTICAL

A huge fan of originality, Alan's main focus during the restoration was as much as possible to rebuild the Twin Cam to factory appearance. Nevertheless, as this is no trailer queen but is used on a very regular basis, he wasn't averse to making a few practical changes. To ease progress, reduce fatigue (on the car as well as the occupants) and tease a

little more from each gallon, Alan fitted a Ford Type 9 five-speed gearbox conversion. "This has made a huge difference," he enthuses. "The gear change is excellent and fifth gear really drops the revs when cruising."

Alan also upgraded the braking system, chassis and lighting. "I fitted a brake servo," he elaborates. "It's located on the inside of the front bulkhead, behind the rev counter and speedo, so it's well hidden. Another barely noticeable change is to the front chassis extensions which enabled me to fit an MGB anti-roll bar. An anti-roll bar was an optional extra in period, but was torsionally weak. The stiffer early MGB bar gives much better handling. Sharp-eyed readers will also have noticed that my car has MGA 1,600 rear light clusters, like the later Twin Cams. Mine should really have MGA 1,500 lights, but for safety reasons, particularly when touring abroad, the later lights are much more effective."



#### LONG-DISTANCE RUNNER

Alan and Maureen are MGCC and MGA Register stalwarts, and the Twin Cam is a regular on the show and club scene. This sublime-looking sports car is also a long-distance regular – it's toured Sweden, Holland, Northern Spain and France (on many occasions). Plus in 2015 it participated in the MGA Register's two-week long Round Britain Tour. "This was a fantastic event," says Alan. "The car ran beautifully, the scenery was spectacular, and even the weather behaved itself – we only had to put the hood up twice the whole time."

#### CONCLUSION

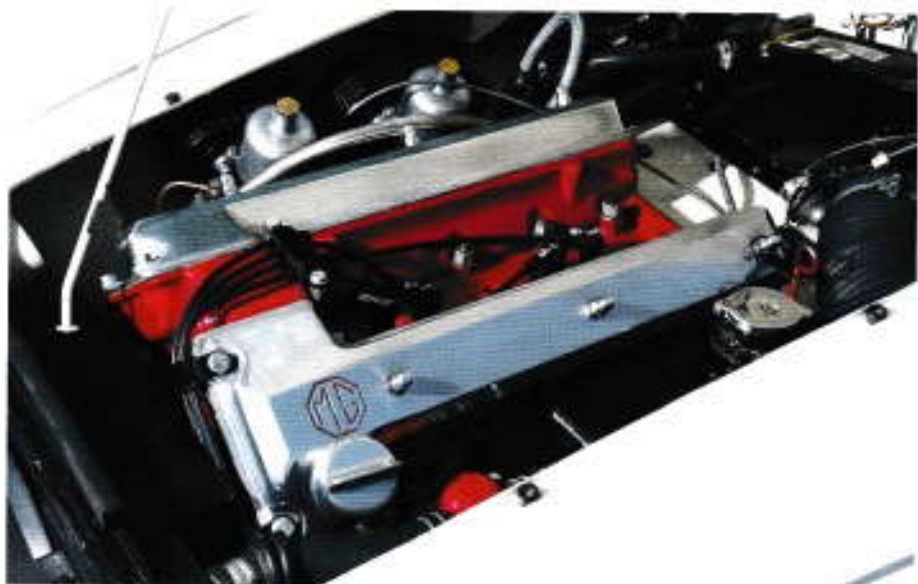
RKU 573 is a very sporting MGA indeed and one of the very best examples out there. It is also very much a family car, one that is expertly maintained, sympathetically improved, beautifully restored and, importantly, used to the full. Early-ownership maladies notwithstanding, it has proven to be a robust and reliable companion. Crucially it has been great fun too. In an automotive world that's veering towards driving autonomy and uniformity of design, the Twin Cam is driver-focused, tactile, involving and an aesthetic delight. \*

#### SPECIFICATIONS

<b>CHASSIS:</b>	Steel box section
<b>WHEELBASE:</b>	7ft 10in
<b>TRACK (FRONT):</b>	3ft 11.5in
<b>TRACK (REAR):</b>	4ft 0.75in
<b>SUSPENSION:</b>	Front: independent, coil and wishbone, lever arm dampers, MGB anti-roll bar. Rear – live axle with semi-elliptic leaf springs and lever arm dampers.
<b>STEERING:</b>	Rack & pinion
<b>TURNING CIRCLE:</b>	30ft
<b>BRAKES:</b>	Discs all round, servo assistance
<b>WHEELS:</b>	5.5J x 15 centre-lock Dunlop steels
<b>TYRES:</b>	165/80/15 radials
<b>ENGINE:</b>	4 cylinder in line, DOHC, twin SU HS4 carburetors
<b>CUBIC CAPACITY:</b>	1,588cc
<b>POWER OUTPUT:</b>	108bhp @ 6,700rpm (approx.)
	Torque: 104ft/lbs@4,500rpm (approx.)
<b>GEARBOX:</b>	Five-speed manual, synchromesh on all forward gears

#### PERFORMANCE

Max. Speed:	113mph
Acceleration (0-60mph)	9.1secs
Overall fuel consumption:	30mpg



The Twin Cam's design is beautifully clean and uncluttered.

Car sa  
Range  
Parts  
World  
Servic  
MoT  
Body  
Accid  
Tyre  
Whee  
4-Whe  
Perfor  
Full o  
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