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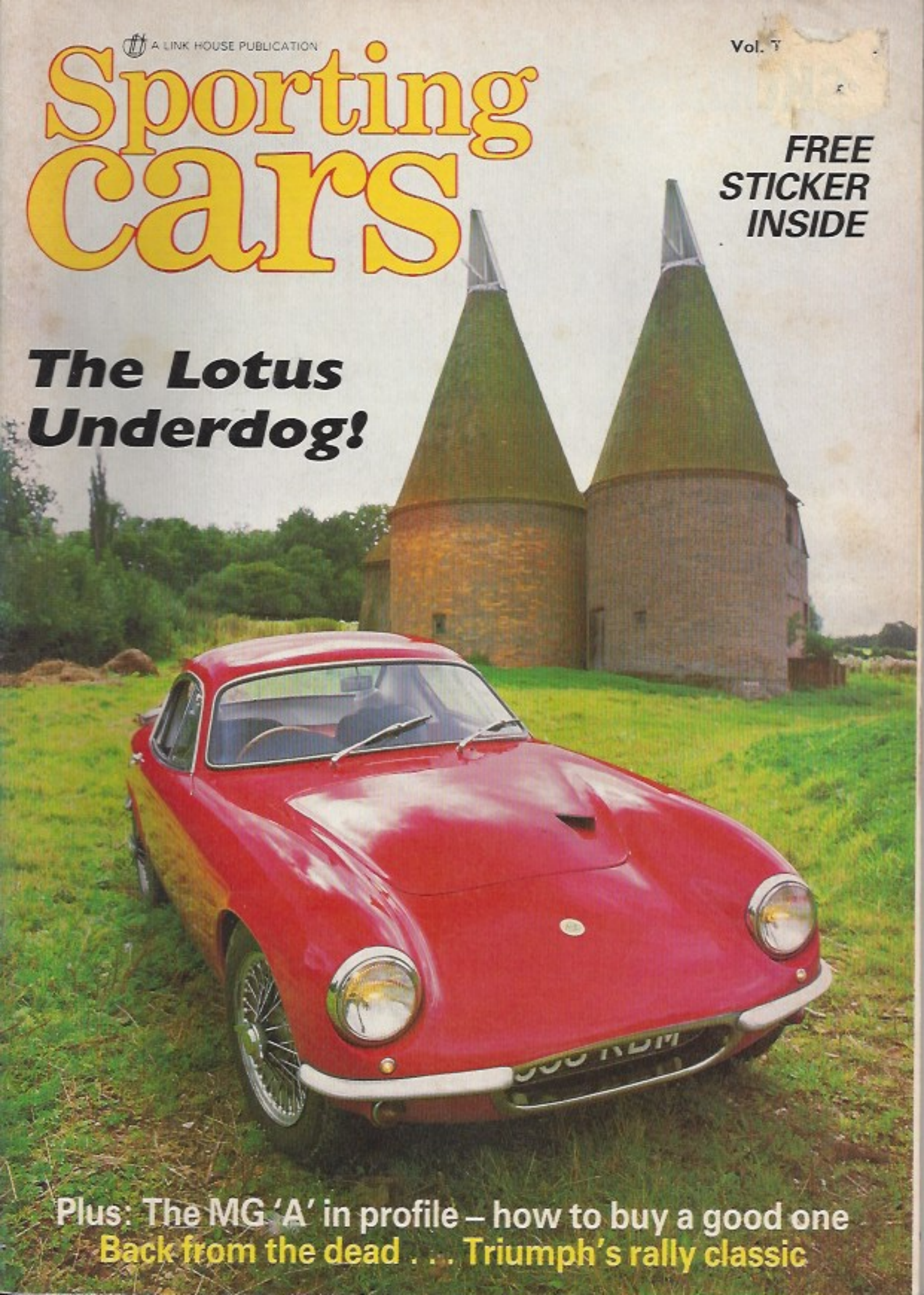
Vol. 7

Sporting cars

FREE STICKER INSIDE

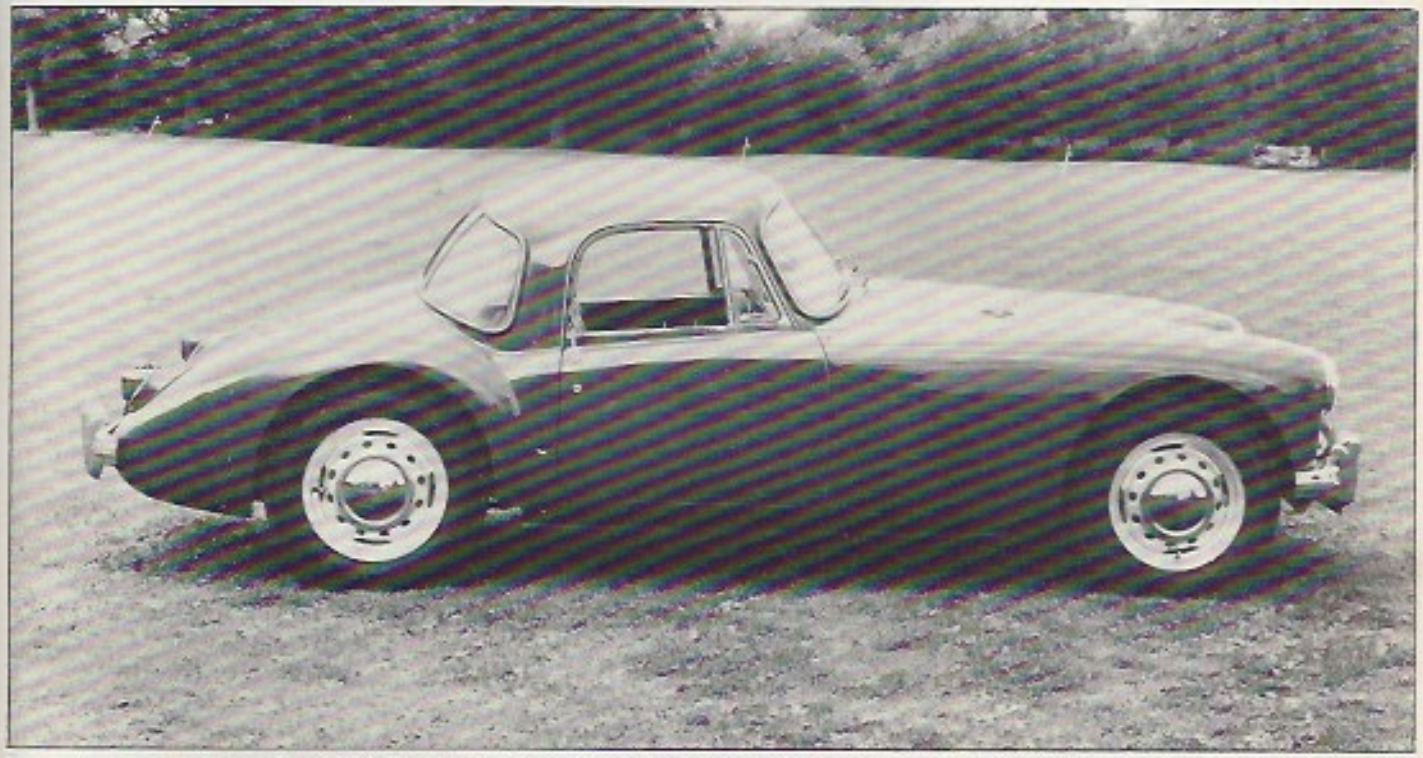
The Lotus Underdog!



Plus: The MG 'A' in profile – how to buy a good one

Back from the dead . . . Triumph's rally classic

MG's Cracker



The MGA Coupe, a pretty alternative to the more common open Roadster – it had wind-up windows, and was very neatly trimmed inside

EVERYONE, surely, knows everything about MGAs – or do they? After all, this was the first post-war, modern-looking, MG sports car to come along, to sweep the T-Series family away and to sell in large numbers (*much* larger numbers. . .) than any previous MG that had gone before . . .

The MGA looked great when revealed in 1955, and it still looked good in 1962 when it gave way to the MGB. Everything was right about the design except, perhaps, the power weight ratio – for in spite of what MG fanatics might say, the MGA always struggled to keep up with the hated rivals, the Triumph TRs, and obviously couldn't match the much larger engined 'Big' Healeys.

Make no mistake – the MGA was an extremely successful car, not only with the buying public, but with the BMC accountants, and it sold more than 100,000 copies in seven years. All over the world, but especially in the United States, there are MGA survivors, and all seem to have high values.

In the UK, supplies are limited, but you can still pick and choose. Here is our analysis of the MGA, it's delights, and its shortcomings:

Good Points:
Very solid, rugged, separate chassis frame styling; Splendid handling, steering and control; Practical and windproof, but still a sports car; An MG – who needs any other excuse!; Simple mechanical running gear, easily maintained; Most parts (many remanufactured) available for restorations.

Bad Points:
Too heavy, therefore not fast enough, or economical enough; In the UK, rare, which means high asking prices; Twin-Cam engines still have a doubtful reputation; They look faster than they are – MG Metros murder them today; If it matters to you – boot is quite small; Old cars, and have often rotted their bodies badly.

The Choice of MGAs

SUPERFICIALLY you might think that the MGA carried on, virtually unchanged, for seven years, for the sheet metal styling never altered, and the BMC B-Series engine was used throughout. Not so – in those seven years there were three distinctly different 'mainstream' models, a twin-cam engined derivative, cross-pollination between the types, and a choice of body styles. Some were better than others.

The MGA story really began in 1952 when a prototype, EX175, was built, using the existing TD's engine, gearbox and back axle, but the definitive production MGA did not appear until 1955, by which time modified BMC B-Series hardware had taken over. The engine was a twin-SU version of the 1,489c.c. four-cylinder pushrod unit being fitted to machines as different as the A40 van, the MG Magnette saloon, and the Morris Oxford, while the gearbox and back axle assemblies were also very to those fitted under those products.

The MGA's principal merits were its marvellously rigid box-section chassis frame, with a reassuring bridge piece across the passengers' legs, the coil spring independent front suspension and rack-and-pinion steering carried over from the TF, and the beautiful body style. It was, in fact, the first MG to have all-enveloping bodywork, and the first MG sports car not to have a wooden body

skeleton.

Compared with the obsolete TF, too, the passenger accommodation was much more civilised. There were only two seats, but occupants sat very low, and with perspex side screens in place and the hood erect they could be snug. There was much more space than before, and a fresh air heater (an optional extra, but fitted to most cars) was also a great advance. Steering and gear change feel were well up to accepted MG standards and – most importantly – the performance had leapt ahead. The first MGAs were good for 98 mph, and 0-60mph in around 16 seconds, though drum brakes were thought sufficient to keep that performance in check. If you were lucky, or penny-pinching, you might achieve 30 mpg from the 72 bhp engine.

There was only an open Roadster at first, but after a year the Coupe was put on sale too, this having a very attractive wrapped around screen, permanent steel hardtop, and modified doors with wind-up windows; altogether this was a very attractive package, slightly heavier, but slightly more aerodynamic, than the Roadster. In addition, the factory offered a removable hardtop for the Roadsters, as did several indepedent companies.

The rest of the MGA story, thereafter, is one of gradual improvement. From mid-1959 the MGA 1500 gave way to the MGA 1600, which not only had an 80 bhp, 1,588c.c. B-Series engine, but Lockheed disc brakes at the front wheels, and modified rear lamp clusters to give the game away. As ever, there were disc or wire wheel options. The top speed was now just better than 100 mph, while potential fuel had dropped slightly.

Finally, in the spring of 1961, the 1600 became 'Mk II', with a minor engine enlargement, to 1,622c.c. (and peak power up to 86 bhp), allied to higher overall gearing, and a modified front grille which looked as if the nose-to-tail accident had already happened! Perhaps there was a slight performance improvement over the 1600, but it was small, and overall the looks, roadholding, and 'feel' were unchanged. The last of these cars were built in the summer of 1962, when a grand total of more than 100,000 MGAs had been assembled. The MGB took over immediately afterwards.

An expensive (to customers *and* to the factory) side-line, between 1958 and 1960, was the Twin-Cam, with a 1.6-litre twin-overhead camshaft engine developed from the bare bones of the B-Series unit, developing 108 bhp at 6,700 rpm. The chassis, and the style, were virtually not changed, though Dunlop centre-lock steel disc wheels, and four-wheel Dunlop disc brakes all made this an extremely purposeful derivative. Twin-Cams were fast (about 115 mph, 0-60mph in about 10 seconds), but noisy, thirsty, and – at first – subject to heavy oil consumption, and piston burning.

The customers didn't like this, even though warranty claims were generously met by BMC, and sales rapidly fell away. The car was dropped within two years, though the chassis components, allied to ordinary push-rod engines, were sold unobtrusively as 'De Luxe' models for the next two years. Surviving TC engines have now almost all been rebuilt, with lower compression ratios, and about 100 bhp – they are now prized derivatives of this basically fine design.

The 1600 Mk II of 1961-62, still looking much like other MGAs, except for that curious grille

Availability and Choice

ALTHOUGH the vast majority of all MGAs built were originally sold in the United States (less than 6,000 stayed at home . . .), the fact that the cars had a near rot-proof chassis frame means that many have survived. Prices – i.e. 'classic car' values – have not gone through the roof, such that you can still get hold of a reasonably-conditioned MGA for half the price of a new Metro!

If we side-line the Twin-Cam for a moment (but not entirely – see below), we can bowdlerise George Orwell by stating that 'All MGAs are equal, but some are more equal than others . . .' – in other words, all push-rod engined cars are good, but some have even more charm.

You *can* go wrong in shopping for an MGA, so here is our advice on the cars, as we see it in 1985:

Chassis Frame

On the MGA, this might look like the Forth Bridge, but it still needs care and attention to stop rust eventually setting in. Remember, after all, that even the newest MGA is more than 23 years old.

The worst rust points are on the side members below the doors of the passenger compartment – you may have to move the wooden members to check this out, and that might mean shifting the seats too – while you should also check out the twin 6-volt battery carrier frames ahead of the line of the back axle tubes, and the condition of the rear cross members, and their welding to the side members themselves.

It might not be easy to check, but there could also be a problem where the frame uprights support the doors, and where these are welded to the principal side members. Look, too, at the condition of the rear spring hangers, and while

you are in that area be sure that the petrol tank straps are still in good shape.

If you are able to inspect the frame with the body off the car (some MGAs are sold as 'abandoned retorations . . .), be sure that none of the mounting brackets have been distorted in a shunt, and that the frame is quite 'square'.

Body Shell

There is some good news here for the cynical who recall how easily most 1950s-style BMC bodies seemed to rust away – the doors, the bonnet panel and the boot lid on these cars was originally in light alloy. That does not mean they are completely corrosion proof – salt-strewn roads, and electrolytic reaction with surrounding, or attaching, steel panels or brackets can still produce their own particular problems – but that you do, at lest, stand a chance of finding them in better condition.

The rest of the shell can, and might have, been subject to rusting, caused often by mud packing into corners, and being neglected over the years. The bottom of the front wings, and the area behind the headlamps, is a particularly common mud trap – many old MGAs now have fibreglass replacement wings, some of which do not fit at all well.

Door pillars, and the scuttle area around them, many suffer seriously – and remember that if they are weak the entire door and windscreen support structure may be weak, and liable to distortion. Doors which appear to have sagged, or which no longer properly fit their apertures,, tell their own story.

Further back, look at the condition of the boot floor, and at the splash areas in and around the wheel arches. Body sills, inner and outer, panels supporting floor boards (and the floorboards themselves) all give up the struggle in the end – even though you could get new panels, they are expensive, today.

Look for rust bubbling where wings join the main shell, and for where the roof on coupes joins the rest of the shell. It may not be a pretty sight.

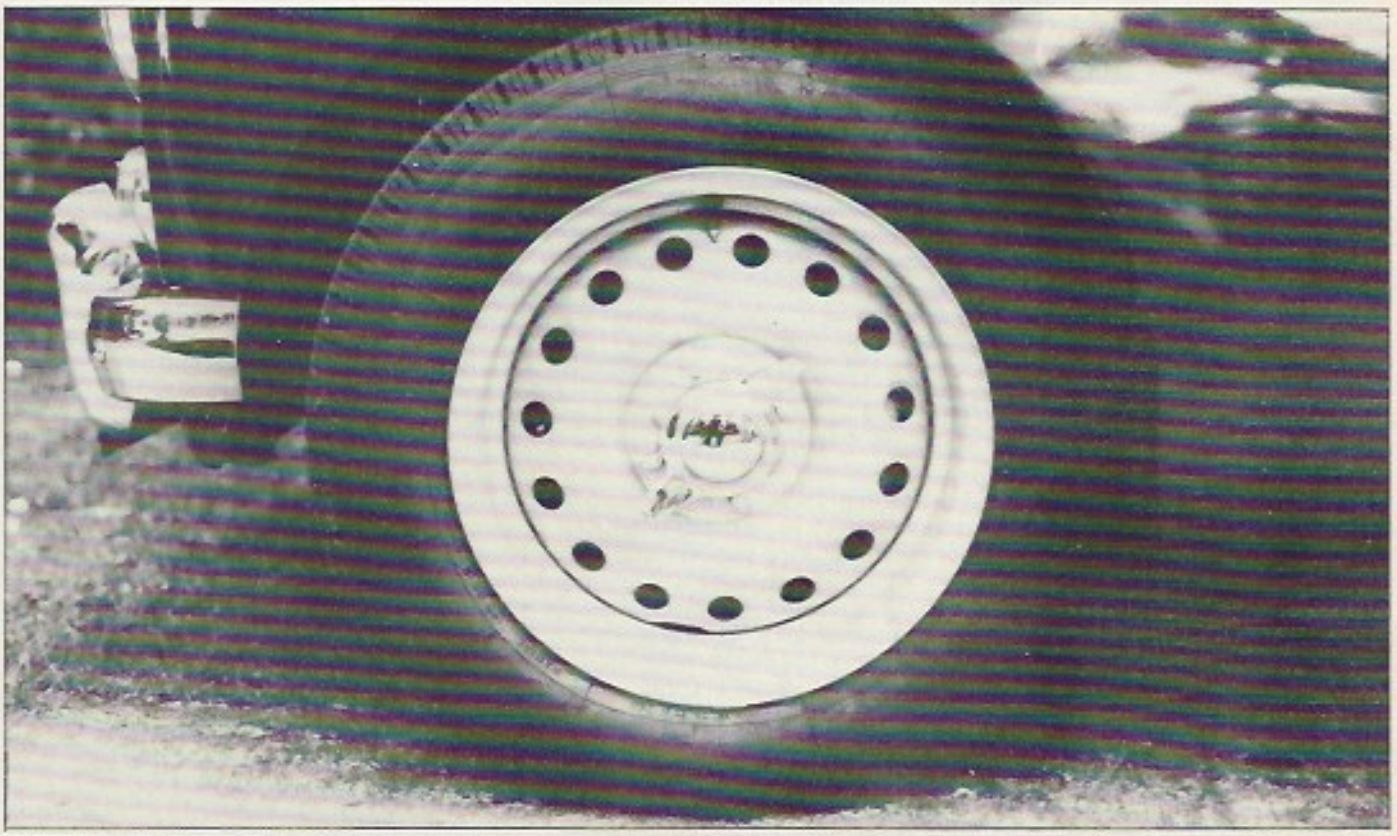
In summary – properly-restored MGAs may have little or no body problems, but badly neglected ones can give trouble in almost every corner.

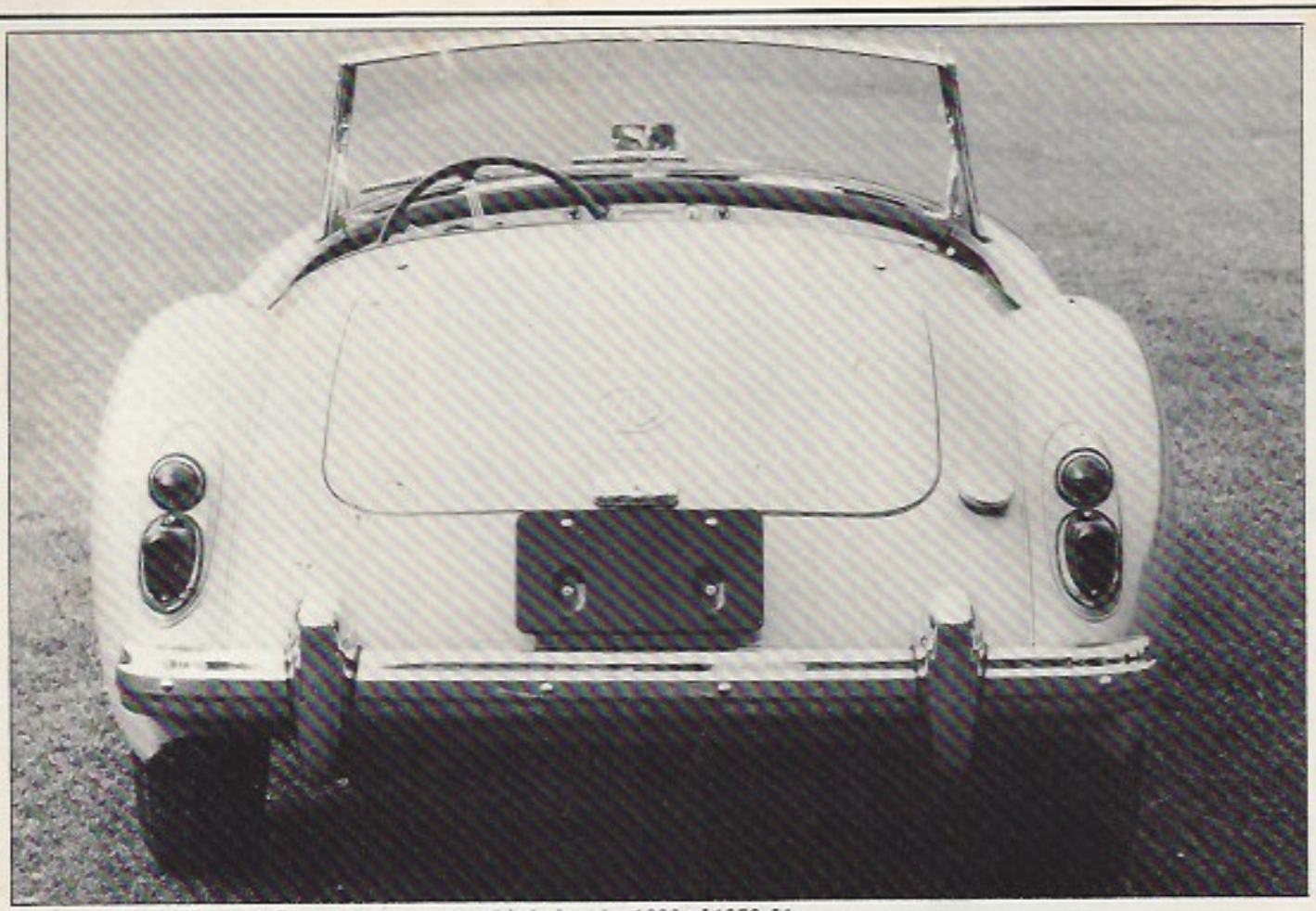
Power Train

All the push-rod engines, which are not at all highly-tuned by modern standards, have a legendary reputation for long life, just so long as they are regularly treated to clean lubricants, and have regular attention to valve gear, and camshaft drive chains. 50 to 60 psi oil pressure (hot) is a sign of a healthy engine, but they should not be oil burners. If there is trouble, it will come from worn valve gear – tappets, rockers, and guides – or from piston rings vainly trying to keep in touch with oval cylinder bores. Fear not – almost everything in the B-Series engine can be serviced, and the castings themselves seem to be sturdy so long as Jack Frost has not got at them. Keep the twin SU carburettors properly set for smooth runing, and good fuel economy and performance.

Twin-Cam engines gave a load of trouble when they were new – in retros-

. . . Twin-cams saw these unique Dunlop centre-lock disc wheels, which were also fitted to the even more exclusive 'De Luxe' MGAs





Each type had different tail lamp treatments – this being the 1600 of 1959-61, with a large plinth supporting stop lights and turn indicators

pect it seems that the engine's octane requirement was far too high, so that pistons burnt very readily. Nowadays all should be well *if* the engine has been rebuilt with 8.3:1 compression pistons, the correct plugs, and piston rings, plus the sleeved cylinder heads to properly support the inverted bucket tappets.

If 'your' Twin-Cam doesn't have these, don't buy the car – unless, that is, you relish a real challenge – and in any case check that the complex drive chains to the valve gear, and the oil consumption are in good shape. All in all, treat a Twin-Cam engine like that of a Jaguar – complex to look at and repair, but not impossible to maintain or rebuild. Oil pressure, by the way, should be about 50 psi.

The good old B-Series transmission is quite sturdy enough for anything the MGA can impose on it, though you should expect to find very little synchromesh on second gear, and possibly some gear crashing even into third and top. All internal parts are available for rebuilds, in any case. In spite of the length of the selector linkage from the gear lever to the box itself, the change quality should be precise – if it isn't, expect to have to rebuild that part of the transmission, if nothing else.

The back axle may be noisy, and some whine is to be expected, though not a real grinding sensation. Unless the casing is seen to be losing oil, you should have little to worry about – and be sure any oil loss has not transmitted itself to the rear brake drums! Details of the Twin-Cam axle are altogether stronger, in any case.

Suspension, steering and brakes

FIRST of all, one of the nicest features of an MGA should be its light, and accurate, steering. You'll soon pick up any deficiencies during the road test – look for torn gaiters, play in track rod ends, and any kickback. Make sure the column feels firm, and there is no slop in the bearings.

The front suspension, which is similar to that fitted to TD/TF, and Y-Type models, can wear quite badly on the MGA, which is a heavier car. Look for worn-out lever-arm dampers (merely filling them up might help markedly, but don't expect miracles!), and for wear in the king-pin bearings, which are cheap and cheerful types requiring regular greasing (do you remember grease nipples? Many previous owners will not . . .). Wishbone bushes might also be suffering from old age – except on a nicely restored car, expect to have to spend money on the front suspension – but the benefits in better steering feel, handling, and tyre life will all be worth it.

At the rear, check for worn-out lever-arm dampers, and perhaps for broken spring leaves (plus the condition of the links to the chassis frame) – otherwise there is very little to go wrong. Oh yes – previous owners might have fitted the wrong rate springs, or the incorrect damper settings. It does happen!

Drum brakes (pre 1600) give little trouble, but be sure the drums have not become distorted with over-hard use, and that their mechanism operates freely. The Lockheed front calipers can all be rebuilt, if necessary, but were simple, and well up to their job when new; pistons tend to seize if the car is laid up, and the discs themselves might be corroded, but new parts are available. In both cases, check that the correct 'fly-off' handbrake mechanism is still working properly, and that the handbrake linkage has not become corroded, seized, even, with old age; a poor handbrake performance means certain MoT failure next time round.

Twin Cam/De Luxe brakes can be a real pain, for Dunlop calipers have been out of production for twenty years, and parts have long gone from the shelves. Twin-Cam experts like Peter Wood of Twyford, Bucks can perform miracles with rebuilds, though, and also supply rear discs, which tend to corrode badly. Don't expect the handbrake performance to be up to much, even when fully restored, set and lubricated – you might

have to talk your way round this one at MoT time.

As to wheels – wire spoke wheels can be sourced, or rebuilt (they might be in a poor state on the car as you consider buying it), push-rod type disc wheels are easy, but the Twin-Cam types with peg drive are like gold dust.

Trim and Furnishing

AS WITH most old cars, original items are not available, but remanufactured parts abound. When buying a car, it is always wise to see that the specification is complete, and that the correct shade of carpets and soft trim panels are fitted.

It's expecting too much for a genuine 'original' MGA to have all its equipment, but a previously restored MGA should be in better shape. On old cars, expect the carpets to be badly rotted, due to water getting in past decrepit floorboards, and expect the seats to be torn. Expect to have to spend money on a new hood and sidescreens, especially if the hood has been stored, creased and folded, for some time. It *can* all be brought back to pristine condition, via the many one-make club recommended specialists – just don't expect it to be cheap.

As to electrics and instruments, plus the wiring loom – the MGA is certainly no more long-lived than other 1950s budget-price British sports cars, but you should certainly be able to get replacements for defective or missing parts. If originality matters to you, remember that there were minor differences between the 1500, 1600 and 1600 Mk II specifications.

On the Road

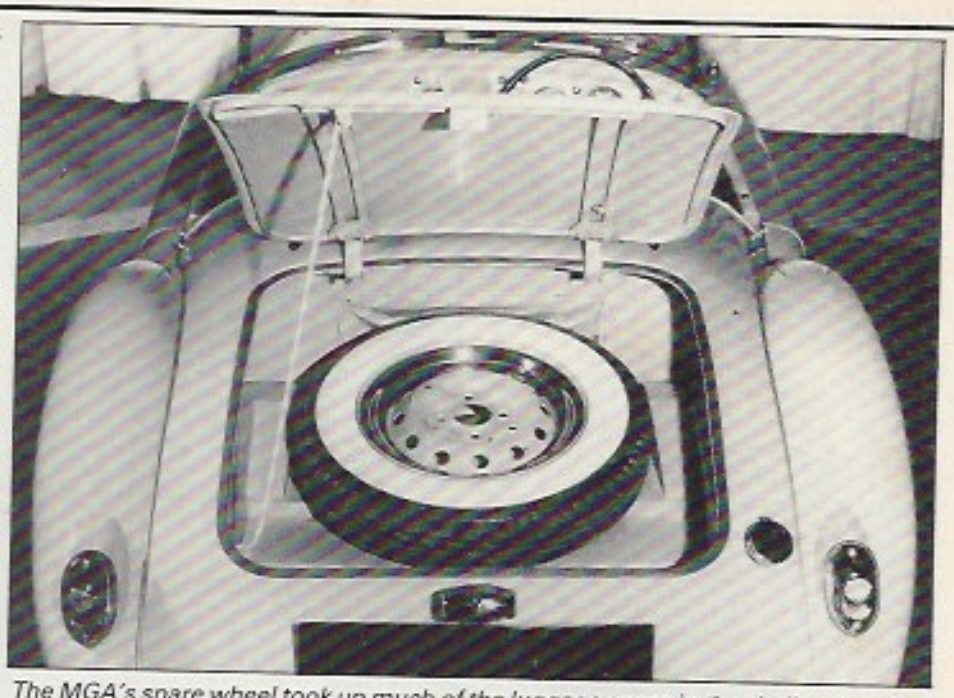
PEOPLE who have not previously driven an MGA may be in for a series of surprises, in mid-1980s conditions. On the one hand, a properly set-up, good-condition, MGA, feels amazingly solid, with sporty handling and steering response, but on the other hand it really doesn't feel very fast any more. Time marches on, and it is a fact that any MG Metro (especially the Metro Turbo) would run rings around any push-rod engined MGA, outhandle it too – yet the MGA has so much charm that you would forgive it all this.

In our opinion, the closed Coupes are the best of all, particularly in 86 bhp/100 mph-plus 1600 Mk II form, though their small cabins can be a bit boomy if the exhaust system is in less than perfect condition. Twin-Cams, properly restored and rebuilt, are a match for most TRs and Big Healeys, and would see off any MGB into the bargain – but somehow their capricious characters would always worry us, if we were using them regularly.

To get the best out of an MGA, it had to be urged along with the aid of constant gear-changing, and the fuel consumption increased markedly if you really insisted. There was no overdrive option (unlike the contemporary TR3/TR3A, and the MGBs which followed) so it could all feel a bit frantic and thrashy.

Even so, if you put your mind back into the 1950s, for which this car was designed, you can see why it was so right for the period. It was so very easy to take down the hood, and remove the side screens (though the windscreen was fixed, alas), and use the MGA as a *real* sports car – if it rained you merely drove faster, to deflect the water over your head!

It was the sort of car that revelled in



The MGA's spare wheel took up much of the luggage space in the shallow boot, and there was no trim on the boot floor either

The tail of the MGA 1500 was as smooth as the nose – this showing off the original style of Lucas tail lamps. The white wall tyres were meant to entrance the Americans . . .

driving tests and gymkhanas, was rugged enough for serious rallying, but smart enough to use in towns, when dressed up. It was a car flexible enough to potter through heavy traffic (no-one ever complained about under-cooling), or to cruise, all day, at 80 mph. In other words, it was the MG we had all been waiting for since the TD had been launched – some think it was a more desirable car than the MGB. What about you?

Best Buys

ALL MGAs, in good condition, are good cars, and worth buying, but the later models are quicker, better specified, and a little more desirable. A Mk II is more desirable than a 1600, for instance. The Twin-Cam is a special case, and something of a gamble, for your ownership would depend so much on engine behaviour. Perhaps the best MGAs of all are the rare-as-hens'-teeth 'De Luxe' models of 1960 to 1962.

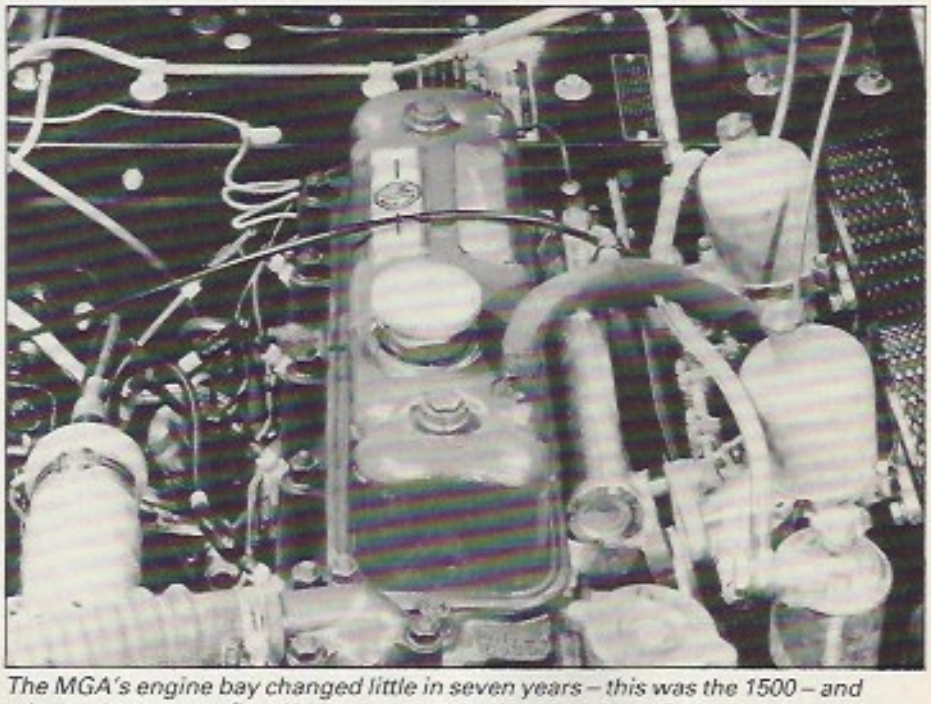
Expect to pay £500 to £1,000 for poor-condition MGAs, and up to £3,000 for very nice ones. Good Twin-Cams may command £4,000, and there is no doubt that a concours-standard push-rod engined machine would change hands for upwards of £5,000. Too much? Just consider – the new car price of an Escort XR3i is £7,274 . . .

Where Built?

ALTHOUGH parts for the MGA were manufactured all over the motor industry, assembly was at the MG factory at Abingdon, near Oxford. Very little actually making of parts was carried out at Abingdon, though – chassis were built by John Thompson Motor Pressings in Wolverhampton, body shells by the Morris Bodies Branch at Coventry, engines at the 'Austin' factory at Longbridge, and transmissions from other BMC plants in the Midlands. Wheels and brakes came from Sankey or Dunlop, Lockheed or Dunlop as appropriate. Only the trim seems to have been made at Abingdon itself.

The Twin-Cam engines, being very specialised, were produced at the Morris Engines Branch in Coventry.

This was the MGA 1600's engine and gearbox, but other pushrod types looked almost the same. In spite of the long gear change selector linkage, the action was usually pleasant and precise



The MGA's engine bay changed little in seven years – this was the 1500 – and where a heater was fitted it lived on the shelf behind the cylinder head. Restorers please note – the wiring layout was as untidy as that!

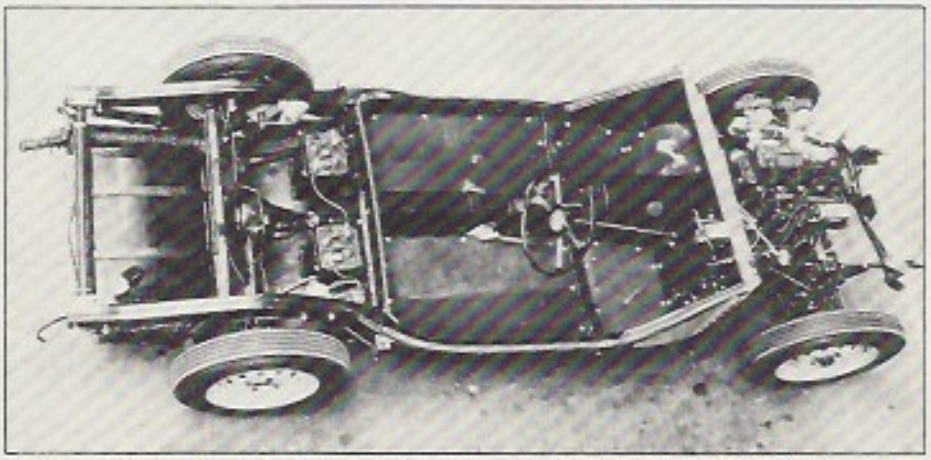
Parts Supply

IN A WORD, difficult, which is to say that major items like chassis frames, and body panels have long gone from the BMC/British Leyland Austin-Rover/Unipart scheme of things.

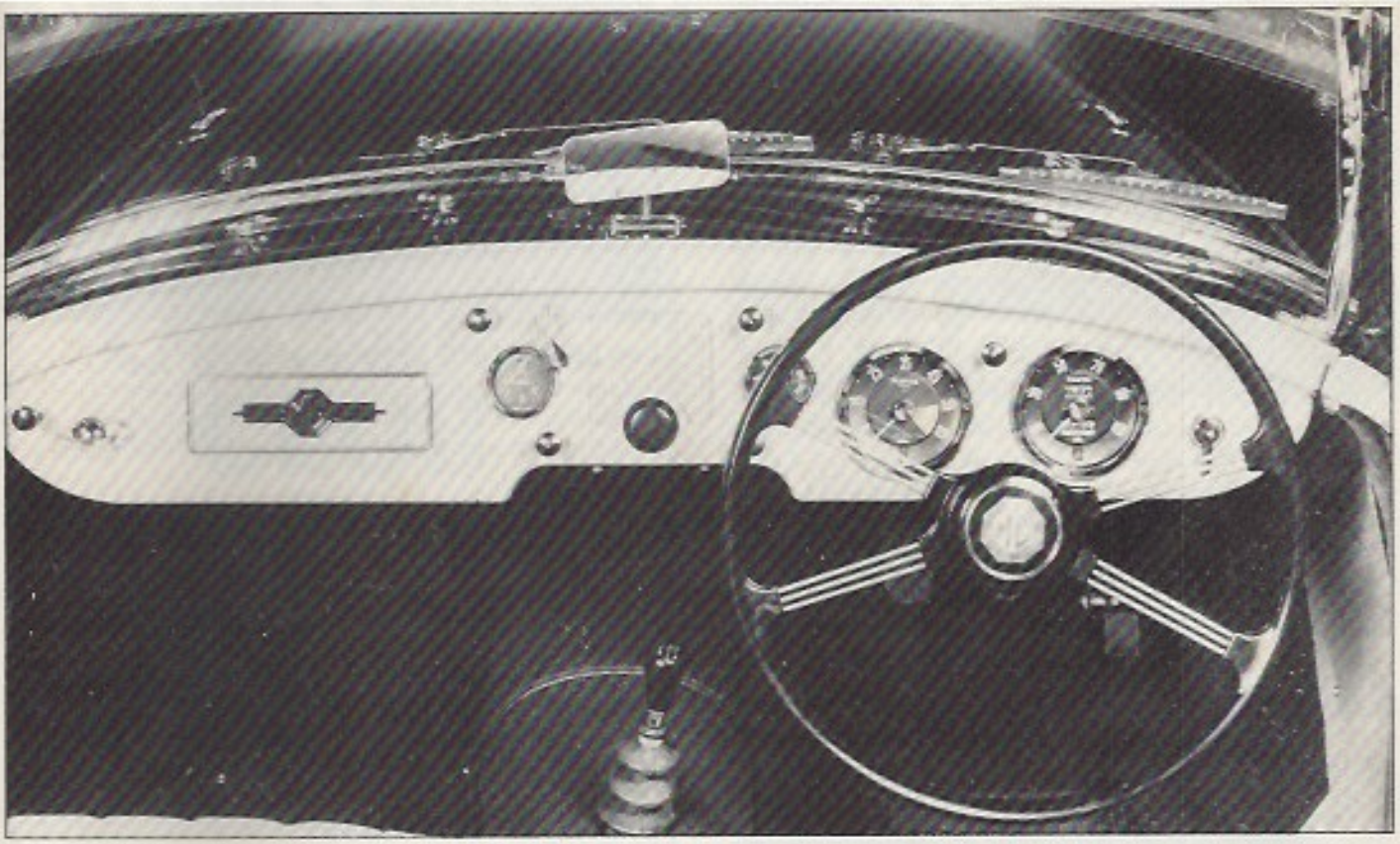
However, a surprising number of mechanical items common to other BMC models of the period are still available from Unipart, but you must order them by the correct part number to be sure of keeping the storekeeper's interest! Mention MGA and his eyes will glaze over – to the average A-R dealer, an MG, these days, is a Metro or a Maestro . . .

Most electrical items can still be found, either originals, or remanufactured with the blessing of Lucas, who produced everything in the first place, and you should also be able to get Lockheed brake items. Dunlop disc brake parts, however, and those centre-lock wheels, have disappeared from the scene.

Use the one-make clubs for sources, especially of re-manufactured soft trim, and body panels (see below).



The pushrod car's rolling chassis, showing where the 6-volt batteries lived, and how the floor boards really were wood. Note the strap supports for the fuel tank



The MGA's facia style has changed only in detail over seven years.

Join the Club?

As we said in the feature concerning T-Series models, you should join one of the MG one-make clubs, which will take much more interest in your problems than the factory will!

Surely everyone now knows that there are two major one-make MG clubs in the UK – the very long-established MG Car Club, and the younger, but brasher, larger, and very commercially active MG Owners Club.

The *MG Car Club* not only runs major sporting programmes, UK and worldwide, but has individual registers to look after a particular model range, to give technical and practical advice to owners. Contact:

The MG Car Club,
PO Box 251,
Studley,
Warwicks B80 7AT.
Tel: 052785-3666

The MG Owners Club will sell you anything from a bobble cap to an insurance policy, a restoration book to a rally jacket – but it will also put you in touch with a mass of recommended suppliers and restorers. The club now has more than 50,000 members, and seems to have the ear of Austin-Rover too. Contact:

The MG Owners' Club,
2/4 Station Road,
Swavesey,
Cambridge.
Tel: 0954-31125

Our advice is that, if you can afford it, you should join *both* clubs, for each has unique services, or atmosphere, to offer.

Heritage

1952:	BMC formed, as a result of the merger between Austin and Nuffield
Autumn 1953:	MG Magnette saloon became first user of the new BMC B-Series engine and transmission

MGA family history

June 1955:	Three EX182 prototypes raced at Le Mans, being MGA cars specially modified for the event
Sept 1955:	MGA 1500 road car revealed, as a direct replacement for the TF 1500, and sold only as an open car
Autumn 1956:	MGA Coupe put on sale, with same basic style, but with steel bubble top, and glass wind-up windows, plus a wrap-around screen
Summer 1958:	MGA Twin-Cam launched, in either body derivative, but with special 2 OHC 1,588c.c. engine, centre lock wheels, and four-wheel disc brakes
Summer 1959:	MGA 1600 took over from 1500, with larger engine (1,588c.c.) and front wheel disc brakes
Spring 1960:	MGA Twin-Cam model discontinued, following disapponting sales, and poor 'in-service' reliability (De Luxe models which followed had same running gear except for the use of pushrod engines)
Spring 1961:	MGA 1600 Mk II took over from 1600, with slightly larger (1,622c.c.) engine and more power – 86 bhp -vs- 80 bhp – and slightly restyled grille
July 1962:	Assembly of MGA ceased, to make way for the monocoque MGB, which used similar running gear

MG MGA production: 1955 to 1962 inclusive

	Total	*– of which, Home Market deliveries were:*
MGA 1500	58,750	2,687
MGA 1600 **	31,501	2,172
MGA 1600 Mk II **	8,719	596
– and, in addition –		
MGA Twin-Cam	2,111	360
Totals:	101,081	5,815

** These totals include the very rare 'De Luxe' models, which had Twin-Cam chassis, knock-off Disc like D-Type Jaguars, all-round disc brakes and other details, but normal-specification push-rod engines. Numbers built were:

MGA 1600 De Luxe	82
MGA 1600 Mk II De Luxe	313
Total De Luxe models	395