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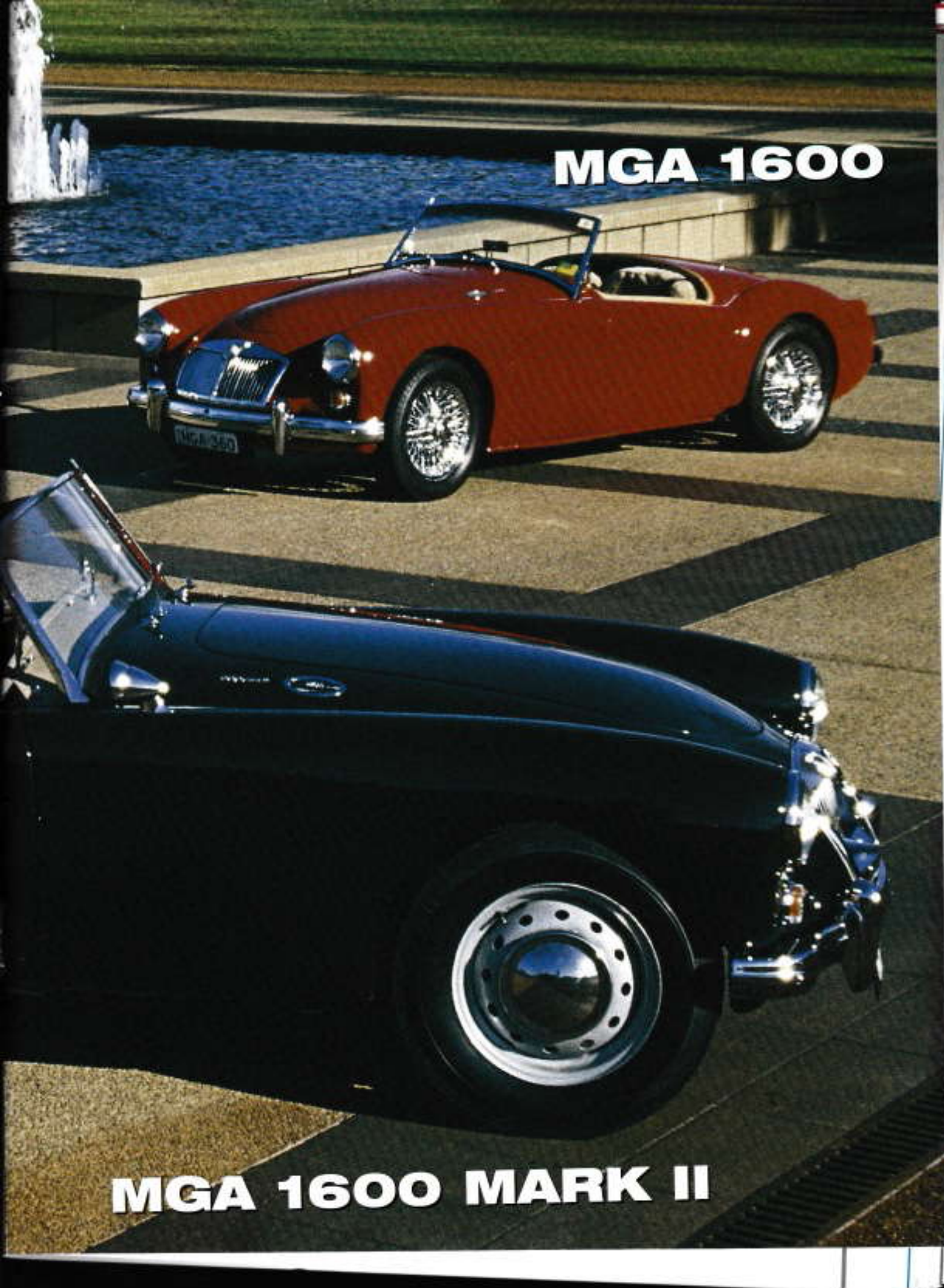
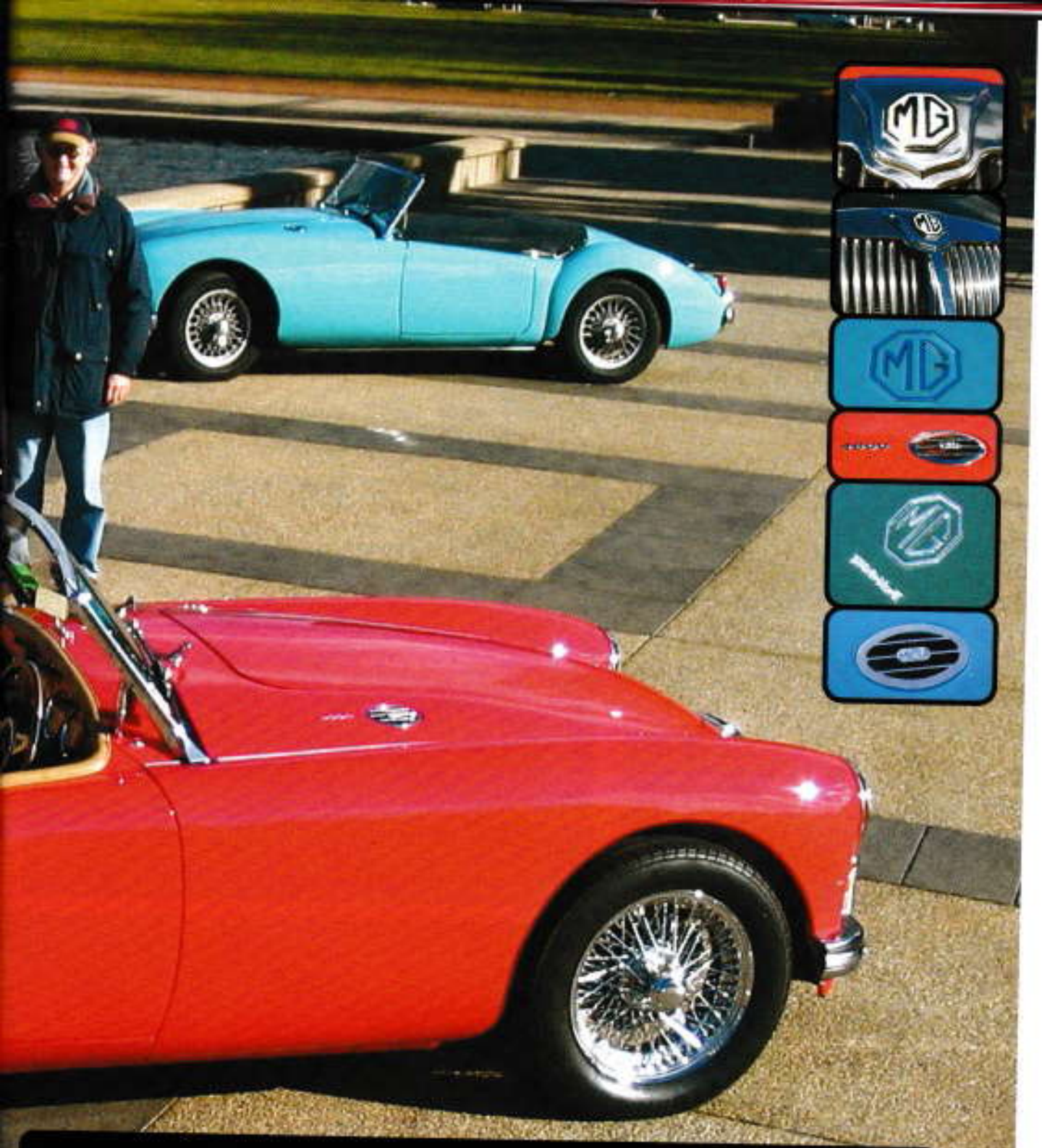

MGA 1600
MGA 1600 MARK II

50 YEARS OF THE MGA

A NEW BREED

Words & photos: Malcolm Robertson

It is fifty years this month since the launch of the MGA in 1955.
Discover the origins of the sports car that heralded the MG Car Company's second run through the alphabet.



If the T-series MGs are fondly remembered in Australia as the prime example of your wind-in-the-hair British sports car, built on a tradition of timber-framed bodies, cut-away doors and fold flat windscreens stretching back to the 1930s, then surely their successor, the MGA, must be remembered for the way it broke with tradition to pave the way for an entirely new breed of MG sports cars while still holding true to the Company's 'safety fast' motto and its affordable sports car philosophy.

Not only was the MGA the start of a new run through the alphabet for MG in 1955, the Z-series MG saloons having stolen the last letter the previous year, it was also the first MG sports car to have the new all-enveloping aerodynamic styling already seen on many of its competitors and on more expensive sports cars.

With this new styling came some other production milestones. The bodies were an all-steel construction, not quite unitary - that came with the MGB in 1962 - as a strong separate chassis was still employed, although aluminium was used for the bonnet, the doors and the boot lid to save weight. The engine was the first use of the new corporate Austin-designed BMC B-series engine in an MG sports car after the Z-series saloons pioneered its use in an MG, thus sweeping away three decades of Morris-derived power plants. And the MGA was the first genuine 100 mile an hour production MG, if not in its initial form, certainly within the first couple of years of production, thanks to that supremely aerodynamic styling. ➤

ORIGINS

The MGA was the Cinderella of BMC. It was on the drawing boards of the MG Car Company at Abingdon for several years before it was accepted for production. The story is well-known and begins in 1951.

Even while the TD sports car was in full production and breaking export records for MG, a more aerodynamic replacement was already being considered. The Company worked with one of its favourite 'amateur' racing sons, George Phillips, who had been racing a TC at the Le Mans 24 hours race for the previous two years, to prepare a TD for the 1951 race to try out some ideas for the TD replacement.

An exciting and graceful body was designed and built at Abingdon and fitted to a TD. The car's performance was improved immeasurably and even though it failed to finish due to a mechanical fault, the exercise spurred MG to go ahead with development of a new prototype car to replace the TD. The prototype, code-named EX 175, was completed by early 1952 and retained the Phillips-style

MGA 1500

Ian Holden's MGA is a 1500, car number 38147, built in September 1957. The easiest way to distinguish a 1500 from the later models is by the side lights. The 1500 is not fitted with amber indicators and so it has white sidelight lenses at the front and a pair of red brake/tail lights on the rear mounted on a small plinth. In common with several other cars of the period, the brake light and the front side light flash when the indicator switch is activated.

Ian has owned his car since 1993 and took seven years to restore it. It is painted in Glacier Blue, a colour unusual for Australia and only offered on the very early 1500s and mostly found in the US.

"I had restored an MG TC previously," says Ian, "but I have always loved the A because of its lines, so when the opportunity came along to purchase a basket case car, I grabbed it."

MGA 1600

The red MGA 1600, car number 97645, belongs to Englishman Trevor Finklair. "I'm not a restorer," says Trevor, "but I have loved the looks of the MGA ever since I was a young man back home in the UK. I had just saved up enough to buy one when I met Pauline, my wife, and the car ended up on her ring finger instead! So when we came to Canberra in 2000 one of the first things I did was go out and find a good example of the model. I really wanted the 1600 for the extra power and the disc brakes and it had to be red!"

The engine in Trevor's car is actually an 1800, fitted by the previous owner, not an uncommon conversion as it gives the A greater capability in with modern traffic flows. The 1800cc version of the B-series engine was used in the MGB and many other BMC vehicles in the 1960s and supplies are plentiful.

The MGA 1600 has amber indicators incorporated into the front side lights and fitted as additional lights on a larger plinth on the rear. Following experience with the Twin Cam and its four wheel disc brakes, MG introduced front disc brakes as standard on the 1600, but retained drum brakes on the rear. Discrete 1600 badges adorn the car on the scuttle and on the boot lid.

body but had a completely redesigned chassis which allowed the driver and passenger to sit much lower in the car than they did in the TD.

REJECTION AND ACCEPTANCE

By the time the prototype was ready for management approval, the merger of the Nuffield Organisation with Austin Motors had formed the new corporation, BMC. For MG, it was bad timing for the unveiling of EX175 because the new corporate leaders of BMC had just committed to the production of the Austin-Healey sports car. Reluctant to go ahead with a new MG as well, the TD was given a quick face-lift to become the TF and carry the flag for the next two years.

In 1954, in the face of declining MG sales, BMC management approved the EX175 design, now up-dated to EX182 to incorporate further developments resulting from the merger. Mindful of the publicity that could be gained from successful racing ventures, MG decided that the launch of the new car should coincide with Le Mans in June 1955 where a team of three of the new cars, especially prepared for the race, would be unveiled.

LAUNCH

In the event, the launch did not coincide with Le Mans as the new production cars were not quite ready due to delays with some components, particularly the new body. However, the team of EX182 prototypes performed well. They did not win their class - that honour went to the technically more advanced Porsche 550 - but they did beat a team of rival Triumph TR2s, perhaps more important from the point of view of the British sports car-buying public. Two of the three MGs finished, the first in 12th place overall, the second in 17th. Tragically, the 1955 Le Mans was a disaster in itself. Over 80 spectators died when the Mercedes-Benz of Levegh ploughed through the crowd following an accident on the track.

So it was with mixed blessings that the official launch of the new MG Series MGA, as it was finally called after much debate, took place at the Frankfurt Motor Show on 22 September 1955. As the late MG historian Wilson McComb put it in his book on the MGA published over twenty years ago, 'Instead of being a new production car of which modified versions were subsequently raced, the MGA was presented to potential buyers as a racing project subsequently modified for production.' Even MG traditionalists had to concede that the sleek and modern-looking MGA seemed far more at home on the race track among cars such as Jaguar, Ferrari, Maserati and Aston Martin than any of their much-loved, now suddenly out-dated, square-rigger MGs. ➤

MGA 1600 MARK II

The British Racing Green MGA 1600 Mark II belongs to Gary McFarlane. As one of the last cars built,car number 103533 built in September 1961, its distinguishing features are the recessed grille, the 1600Mk II badges on the scuttle and boot lid, and its horizontal tail light clusters. Gary's car is a one-owner car imported from America. It wears bolt-on disc wheels which were supplied as an extra when the car was sold new. Gary bought the car in 1996 from the original owner and had it shipped back to Australia for conversion to RHD and restoration, a process that was completed in February 1999.

Although originally the car was Iris Blue, Gary chose to repaint it in BRG. Gary explains: "In 1961, an older brother of a close friend in Sydney took delivery of a brand new BRG/tan trim MGA with black carpets. Although still at school at the time, I fell in love with the car following a ride around the block and promised myself, 'One day...' It just took thirty five years to get there."

THE MGA TWIN CAM

Two other versions of the MGA deserve a quick mention. The first, which really deserves an article on its own, is the MGA Twin Cam, while the second is the MGA De Luxe. In competition, it became clear early on that the MGA was heavy, due mainly to its immensely strong chassis. The search for additional power led to the 1600 versions but was initially focussed on the development of a twin overhead camshaft version of the B-Series engine, twin OHCs being a fad at the time especially among European manufacturers. The MG engineers at Abingdon took on the challenge of not only sorting out an experimental BMC engine, but also of squeezing it into the MGA's tight engine bay and turning the relatively docile MGA into something of a monster.

They succeeded, of course, but it took them a few years to get the formula right, by which time the MGA Twin Cam, as it was known when introduced in 1958, had developed a reputation for a temperamental nature. Buyers seeking that extra ounce of performance had moved elsewhere, mainly to the Austin Healy 3000 or the Triumph TR3A. As a result, only 2111 of these 113 mph, four-wheel disc-braked, 100 bhp rockets were built before production was axed.

PURPOSE AND BEAUTY

The MGA has impeccable mechanical specifications. Even today, its rack and pinion steering, independent front suspension, four-speed synchromesh gearbox, hypoid final drive, comprehensive ergonomically-placed instrumentation and many other features are a match for more modern cars. The MGA was the first MG to use disc brakes, one competition version going as far as using four-wheel discs, but its most impressive feature must be its glorious styling. Low slung, streamlined, yet functional, the MGA must be one of the prettiest sports cars ever built. In 1955, it must have been a revelation to a generation of sports car buyers conditioned to thinking MG was caught 1930s. No, in 1955, the MGA was definitely right up-to-date and its sales record over the next seven years proved the point.

THE ENIGMATIC MGA DE LUXE

It was the demise of the Twin Cam that led to the mysterious, rare car known as the MGA De Luxe, a model name you may be hard-pressed to find in the contemporary literature although it is recognised in MGA circles. Today, MG historians believe the De Luxe was created by the coincidental forces of customers wanting to up-grade the standard MGA they were thinking of buying to incorporate some of the Twin Cam's features, and the company wanting to off-load their surplus Twin Cam componentry, especially the four-wheel disc brakes and sets of the centre-lock Dunlop racing disc wheels left behind when the car was axed. As a result, it is estimated that some 389 cars in both 1600 and 1600 Mk II forms were built between April 1960 and the end of MGA production in June 1962.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Autosport magazine published one of the first road tests in the UK. Author John Bolster, by no means an MG enthusiast, commented: 'Having driven the competition model, EX182, from which this car was derived, I can say that little has been lost and a great deal gained in grooming the machine for production. The excellent road-holding and steering of the prototype are fully retained, and the loss of performance is less than I expected. This is a jolly good little sports car; if you want one, hurry up and get in the queue.'

And get in the queue they did. The MGA was MG's most successful sports car, selling at the rate of up to 23,000 a year over the next five years, an annual figure almost equal to the entire production of TDs over their five year production life. The majority of sales were to export markets, primarily to the United States, and by the end of production in 1962, more than 101,000 cars had been sold, a figure only exceeded by the evergreen MGB due mainly to its extraordinary long production life.

VARIATIONS ON A THEME

Initially, the MGA came with the new 1500cc B-Series engine, twin 1 inch SU carburetters, a four speed gearbox and a 4.3:1 final drive. In this form the car put out 72 bhp (54 Kw) with some 77.4 lb ft (107 Nm) of torque and was flat out in the early road tests at about 98 mph. The attractive fixed head coupe version of the car, introduced a year later, managed 100 mph, demonstrating the value of a wind-cheating shape and confirming the MGA as a genuine 100 mph car.

In May 1959, the larger-engined MGA 1600 was introduced and power output from its 1588cc engine rose to nearly 80 bhp (59.5 Kw). Top speed rose to 101 with a significant increase in acceleration, especially at cruising speeds. The final version of the car was introduced in April 1961 as the MGA 1600 Mark II. It was fitted with a redesigned 1600 B-Series engine with 1622cc capacity and a power output of 90 bhp (67.3 Kw). Final drive was lowered to 4.1:1. In this form, top speed was unchanged, acceleration across the board marginally improved, but cruising at highway speeds became even more relaxed.

THE MGA TODAY

I defy anyone walking up to an MGA today not to be impressed by its design. Its sleek lines are simply stunning and its 15 inch wheels fit the wheel arches nicely. They came as disc wheels in the UK, but all cars exported to Australia had the optional wires. Most owners fit radials these days, although the cars were designed for cross-ply tyres originally.

Unzip the tonneau, open the door using the wire inside the door pocket, a distinctive MGA attribute, and slipping into either the passenger's or driver's seat is relatively easy as long as you remember to put a leg in first. The second leg follows provided your feet aren't too big and there are built in grab handles as part of the windscreen supports to assist you. You sit low in the car and visibility through the chrome-rimmed curved windscreen and over the long bonnet is excellent.

The black plastic MGA steering wheel is larger diameter, thin rimmed with four sets of spring steel spokes set in a flattened cross pattern. It's unique to the MGA and looks good. The steel dashboard is generally painted the colour of the car, although on some versions it was covered in leatherette matched to the trim. A full set of instruments sits immediately in front of the driver and the white lettering on the black faces of the larger tachometer and speedometer are easy to read. The paddle shaped switch to the right of the steering wheel operates the indicators and has an automatic switch-off mechanism a bit like those lights

SPECIFICATIONS

	MGA 1500	MGA 1600	MGA 1600Mk II
Bore and stroke	73.03 x 88.9 mm	75.4 x 88.9 mm	76.2 x 88.9 mm
Capacity	1489 cc	1588 cc	1622 cc
Compression	8.3:1	Same	Choice 8.9 or 8.3:1
Max power	53.8 kw (72 bhp) at 5500 rpm	59.5 kw (79.5 bhp) at 5600 rpm	67.3 kw (90 bhp) at 5500
Max torque	106.8 nm (77.4 lb ft) at 3500 rpm	120 nm (87 lb ft) at 3800 rpm	133.9 nm (97 lb ft) at 4000 rpm
Fuel System	Twin 1.5 inch SU	Same	Same
Clutch	Single 8" dry clutch	Same	Same
Gearbox	4 speed manual gearbox	Same	Same
Final drive	4.3:1	Same	4.1:1
Suspension	Coils front, semi-elliptic leaf rear	Same	
Steering	Rack and pinion	Same	Same
Brakes (front)	Lockheed hydraulic drums 10" dia	Lockheed 11" discs	
Brakes (rear)	Lockheed hydraulic drums 10" dia	Lockheed hydraulic drums 10" dia	Same
Wheelbase	2388mm (94")	Same	Same
Track	discs: 1207mm (47.5")		
Wires	1216mm (47.9")	Same	Same
Length	3962mm (156")	Same	Same
Width	1473mm (58")	Same	Same
Height	1270mm (50")	Same	Same
Weight	900kg (1980 lb)	916 kg (2016 lb)	916 kg (2016 lb
Number built	58,750	31,501	8,719

(The above are taken from contemporary road tests and reports)

you find in stairwells. The button in the middle of the dashboard just below the radio speaker grille is the horn. It is more accessible than the centre of the wheel, the more traditional place for a horn button.

The seats are firm and snug, and there is a comfortably padded centre armrest for your elbow from where the gear lever falls readily to hand. The handbrake lever is tucked neatly between your seat and the transmission tunnel.

To fire up the car, turn the key on and then pull the starter button separately. Select first and you are away with a minimum of fuss. The steering is tight, the brakes firm, the gear change smooth and slick and the feeling is absolutely magnificent. No wonder MGA drivers have a fixed grin on their faces - the car is just brilliant. Performance is brisk, too. Even remembering that this is a fifty year old car, a good MGA can still give most cars a run for their money and the excellent road-holding inspires confidence in the car's ability to get you safely to your destination.

THE QUEUE

There is still a queue for the MGA in Australia today and prices for a good example remain strong, certainly well above the price of a new entry-level small modern car. Fortunately, the supply is also good, with newly restored examples appearing regularly at MG meetings across the country. In Melbourne earlier this year, a 50th Anniversary display of MGAs at the annual MGCC Concours d'Elegance attracted 70 cars in one of the biggest shows ever of the model in Australia.

The MGA remains an excellent driver's car and can be readily used as a daily commuting vehicle. Parts and servicing are not a problem and most jobs can easily be tackled at home or at the local garage. Perhaps you should join the queue? ■

THE MGA IN AUSTRALIA

MGAs were mostly imported into Australia in CKD format (completely knocked down) and re-assembled in Sydney. Some 1100 MGA 1500s came to Australia this way, followed by about 950 MGA 1600s. About 100 MGA Coupes and 80 Twin Cams also came to Australia fully imported.

On reassembly, BMC Australia did a few things differently from the factory in Abingdon in the UK. In addition to adding in some local content, such as the trim and the batteries, Australian cars were specified with wire wheels as standard, and the paint colours differed from those offered in the UK.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Ian Holden, Trevor Finklair and Gary McFarlane for bringing their fabulous cars out for this article. Thanks also to Ian McKenzie, Bob Somerville and Garry Kemm from the MG Car Club in Melbourne for their assistance with this article. Readers interested in the MGA should look at the MG Car Clubs of Australia web site: www.mgcc.com.au, especially the MGA Register pages on the Victorian MG Car Club's site.