

MGB — The past reinvented

In the first of a new series, Martyn Morgan Jones revisits the MGB story and looks at the contemporary setting that inspired this most iconic of MG sports cars.

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Life seemed so much simpler back in the 1960s. Perhaps it really was. Often permissive, frequently carefree, sometimes superficial, this was certainly a transitional decade, a period of great social, cultural and economic change. Employment levels were generally high, most people were bringing home a reasonable income, and there was more free time available. It is hardly surprising then that the 'swinging sixties' witnessed a sharp rise in consumerism and widespread enjoyment of leisure activities. A new car was at the top on many people's ever-lengthening shopping lists and included amongst their leisure activities was motoring. And why not? Britain had a car industry, roads were far less busy and, for an increasingly large number of people, driving was a pleasurable pastime.

However, at the core of all the changes that the 1960s ushered in was a drive for higher standards.

Expectations were definitely shifting. What was deemed to be good enough in the 1950s was not going to make the grade in the 1960s – the acceptable had become unacceptable. This was certainly the case with the motor industry. One of the many cars that would fail to make the transition from the 1950s to the 1960s, although it had many virtues and remained in production until June 1962, was the MGA.

The MGA was an achingly pretty car with flowing, almost organic lines. Indeed, it was so delicately drawn it was hard to believe that beneath that exquisite exterior lay an enormously strong, heavy, but well-designed box section chassis. It was this chassis which helped provide the MGA with its exceptionally fine handling characteristics, characteristics that elevated it above its contemporaries. The MGA didn't just handle well; it was reliable and had good performance. Plus, when driven with reasonable restraint, it proved to be economical. In fact, the MGA ticked every box bar one – refinement. At low-to-medium speeds, the trade-off for the delectable handling was a ride quality that could

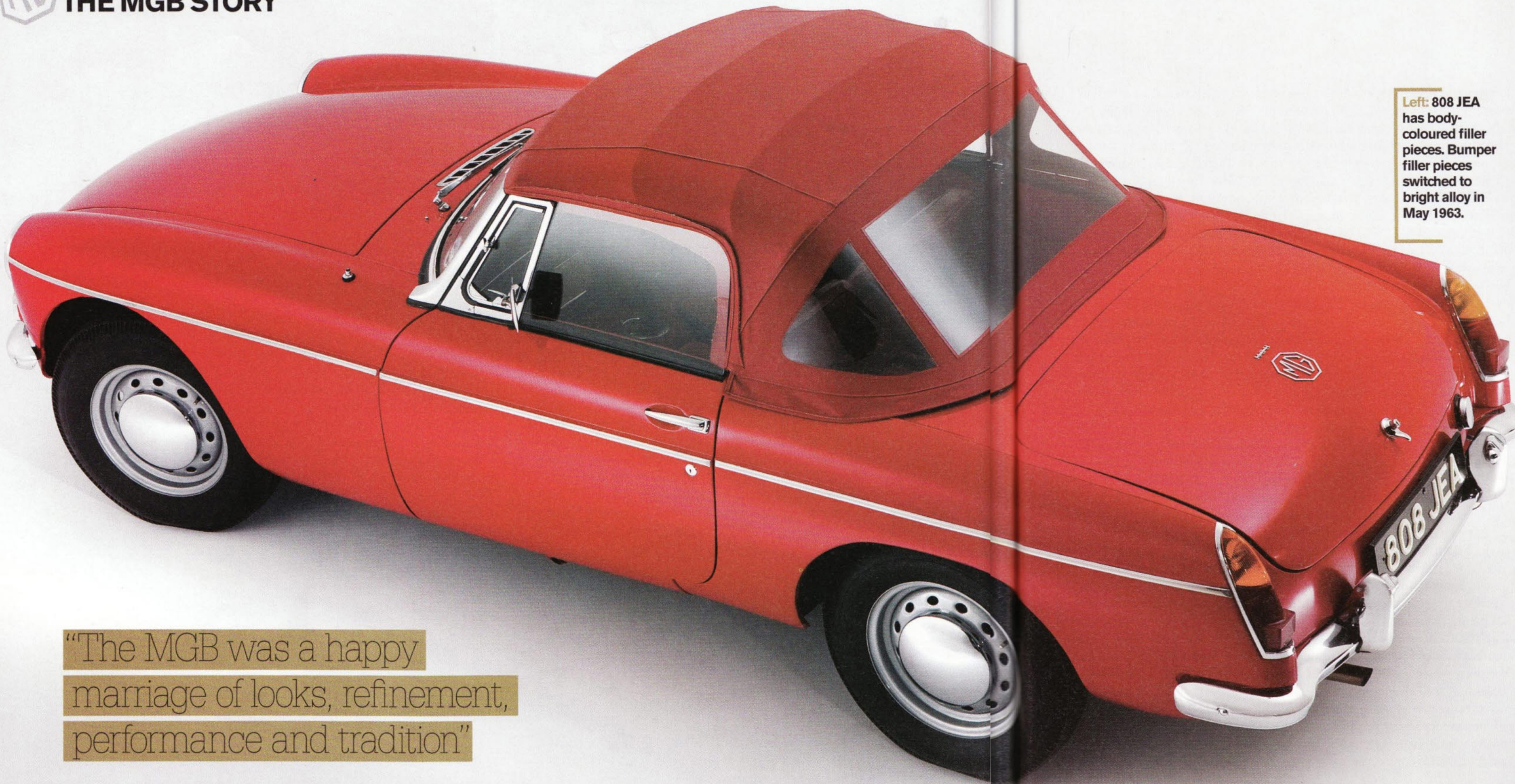
be harsh and unforgiving. What's more, noise levels were relatively high and the level of trim was quite basic.

There is no doubting the fact that the MGA set new standards in the mid-1950s but by the 1960s the benchmark was considerably higher. Prospective buyers still coveted the traditional sports car virtues of performance and handling, but these had to be packaged together with a much higher level of comfort, sophistication and refinement.

BMC realised that if its successor, the MGB, was going to succeed, especially in America where the bulk of the cars were headed, it needed to be a more contemporary design. Of course with such a vast and oft-unwieldy organisation as BMC, many new cars were not quite as 'new' as they appeared. They were often the result of simple packaging changes, badge engineering and different marketing strategies, rather than being the product of major design differences. In many ways, this was true of the MGB. It was certainly born out of a corporate DNA, but it was always much better than the sum of its familial parts.



Above: MGB was first open-top MG to feature door locks. The pull-handles were replaced by push-button handles and revised doors in April 1965.



"The MGB was a happy marriage of looks, refinement, performance and tradition"

Something old, something borrowed, something new!

In an ideal world Abingdon's engineers would have liked to have pushed the technical boundaries, but they were invariably hamstrung by fiscal and bureaucratic constraints. Despite having trialled a coil sprung rear suspension system, the engineers had no choice other than to fit a cost-effective and workable live axle and leaf spring arrangement to the production cars. This was basically the MGA set-up, although the emphasis was placed on ride quality rather than outright handling. The front suspension was also essentially MGA albeit with minor differences. Not that this was an issue. This system was a delight and it endowed the MGB with finely-tuned responses.

The power unit was also umbilically linked to the MGA, although in fairness there had been much in the way of experimentation beforehand. A prototype V4 had been evaluated in an MGA and this engine was factored into the MGB's development. Unfortunately, shortly after, BMC abandoned its plan to introduce V4 and V6 engines and this interesting diversion came to an abrupt halt. The highly-strung MGA Twin-Cam was also considered. Unfortunately, due to poor servicing and misuse, a litany of well-publicised problems led to it being dropped from the range in 1960, well before it and the MGB could be united. This left just the 1622cc engine. Testing had shown that so equipped, the performance of the weightier MGB would not be up to par and more pulling power was needed. Fortunately for MG, BMC's new mid-sized saloon car, codenamed ADO 17, was on the drawing boards and this space efficient, roomy, but heavy car was definitely going to require a bigger engine.

In what had become almost standard practice, BMC used Abingdon as a product testing department and on this occasion the MGB was the guinea pig. In a very short space of time the 1798cc three-bearing 18G engine was created. Equipped with twin HS4 SUs, the 18G produced a very healthy 94bhp at 5400rpm. This may have only been 1bhp up on the

1622cc engine, but torque had climbed from 97 to 107lb.ft (110lb.ft from 1964 on), which came into play lower down the scale too. Thanks to this 'new' and lusty engine, the MGB could hit 60mph in 12.2 seconds, which was quick enough to quieten, if not quite silence, any criticism.

The engine may have been a redesign, but the bodyshell was all-new, a unitary construction whose box-like structures gave it immense strength. And, despite being a smidgen shorter than the MGA, due to the unitary construction the engineers had managed to glean much more interior space. This allowed the fitment of larger, more comfortable seats and provided more legroom. There was also more in the way of instrumentation, the standard of trim was better, and wind-up windows were standard. In a word the MGB possessed what its predecessor lacked – refinement.

It looked good too. Although he penned a number of quarter scale drawings, Don Hayter's final design was a full-size layout from which a full-size wooden pattern was made. It was from this pattern that the prototype and production tooling were made. The MGB may have lacked the catwalk beauty of the MGA, but it was undoubtedly a happy marriage of looks, refinement, performance and tradition. Launched at the Earls Court Motor Show in September 1962 at a cost of £690 plus £259 purchase tax, it had a very positive reception.

Rivals

There were a number of cars on the market, including hotted-up saloons, which could equal and sometimes better the MGB's performance, but few possessed its charm, heritage and classic appeal. If the MGB had a nemesis during its formative years, then it was the Triumph TR4. The two cars had much in common. Like the MGB, the similarly-priced TR4 was blessed with a brand new body style. It was also more refined, had more room than its predecessor, and the revamped chassis provided better handling. The TR4 even used a revised and larger capacity version of a much earlier engine. Plus, depending on which road test you read, it could at least equal

the MGB's 103mph top speed and was definitely quicker to 60mph. It sold exceptionally well in the USA too.

As fate would have it, by the end of the decade, the MG would still be slugging it out against a Triumph, although the TR series had evolved into the TR6 and the MGB had morphed into the MkII. And, by a quirk of fate, both cars now belonged to the same parent company, British Leyland, whose allegiance was firmly on the side of Triumph!

Another MGB challenger was the good-looking Sunbeam Alpine, which had reached its third incarnation by March 1963. With its 1592cc engine, the Alpine wasn't quite as accelerative but it could almost touch 100mph and its handling was up to the mark, too. Nevertheless the Alpine was designed and styled with the American market firmly in mind. As a result it tended to appeal to a different kind of buyer. If you were in the market for an MGB, a more traditionally styled car, you might have contemplated a TR4 but, as good as it was, you probably wouldn't have considered an Alpine.

Despite the competition from Triumph, the MGB had a relatively easy and successful passage through the 1960s. In the 1970s however it came under increasing pressure from younger and more vigorous opposition and the situation got worse as the decade played itself out. BL was on a road to nowhere and, by association, so was MG. Despite throwing its corporate weight behind MG's 50th anniversary bash in September 1979, just days later the chairman of BL, Michael Edwardes, announced plans to close the Abingdon factory the following year. MG's workforce, who had worked tirelessly and with great loyalty, were stunned and deeply saddened. At least they could resign themselves to the fact that they had been instrumental in creating a legend. At its peak, some 50,000 MGBs were leaving Abingdon each year and by the time production ceased in 1980, 512,112 had been built. This still ranks as one of the largest volume production runs of a single design of sports car in the world.

Left: 808 JEA has body-coloured filler pieces. Bumper filler pieces switched to bright alloy in May 1963.



Above: Chrome door handles were only fitted on the pull-handle cars.



Below: Pack-away hood sticks and jack are secured by straps which are riveted to the body of the car.



Right: The three-bearing engine was only ever fitted to the MGB and was replaced by a five-bearing 18GB unit in October 1964.



Feature Car

There is a school of thought, one that I subscribe to, that the purest cars, and the ones which are as the designer intended, are the very earliest examples. This is certainly true of the MGB and the feature car in particular. Devoid of superfluous detail but blessed with an understated style, 808 JEA, a January 1963 example and one of the earliest RHD cars, is as minimalist as it is magnificent.

It belongs to long-time MG enthusiast Rob Symonds. Rob still has a 1972 MGB GT which he bought in 1976, but he did have a brief flirtation with a Rover P6 3500S in the 1980s. The Rover was fast-living and fun, but would ultimately prove to be an expensive mistress and the two eventually parted company. He hadn't intended getting another MG until he spotted 808 JEA on a classic run. 'It was for sale,' Rob remembers. 'I really liked the look of it, but it was my wife who encouraged me to get the details. I learnt from the owner, Derek Price, that it had previously been restored to a high standard by a friend of his and the bodysell was reputed to have been galvanised. Even though the restoration had been undertaken some years back, the car still looked really good, so I decided to buy it.'

Above: Until late 1964 the grille had 36 stainless steel slats (all of them individually riveted), and indicators that are positioned very wide.

What attracted Rob to 808 JEA most of all was the fact that the restoration had been done sympathetically. In fact, it looked like an original unrestored car. There were a few little things that needed doing of course, but Rob didn't rush out and buy new parts. 'I decided that as the car was so original in appearance, I'd continue this theme and return it to as near showroom condition as possible. I used as many of the original parts as I could and refurbished or repaired them.'

It's likely that the three-bearing engine has been rebuilt at some time, but it's the original unit and has covered just 81,000 miles.

To create the correct period look, amongst other things he has done, Rob has painted the engine and dynamo red and replaced the Jubilee clips with wire ones. For practical reasons a stainless steel exhaust has been fitted, but that's the only deviation from standard. Rob runs the engine on Shell V-Power which he doses with Castrol Valvemaster. 'I don't get any problems really,' admits Rob. 'The combination of V-Power and Valvemaster works well and smoothes the engine out.'

The four-speed gearbox is also pretty much as it left Abingdon, although it was rebuilt last winter as it was beginning to feel and sound rather agricultural. Of course, due to its vintage, it doesn't have synchromesh on

first gear but what it does have is overdrive. Overdrive became an option in January 1963 although Rob thinks that his was not fitted at the factory but some time later. As he reasons: 'By rights, cars that left the factory with overdrive would have had a cranked gear lever fitted. This one has the standard lever.'

808 JEA has also undergone something of a styling makeover and it is now dressed as it left Abingdon in 1963. 'When I bought this car it came with black carpets, hood and tonneau,' says Rob. 'But, when I received the Heritage Certificate and a photo that had been taken by a previous owner, I became aware that 808 JEA had been an all-red car and was fitted with disc wheels. This prompted me to return it to original trim and I went for steel wheels too.'

Don Trimming provided the new hood and tonneau but as for the mats? Well, Rob had to get creative, as he recalls. 'It should have been fitted with rubber mats and not carpets. I managed to find some secondhand sill mats, but the floor mats I got from Australia. They are very good reproductions but are only available in black. Undeterred, I bought some flexible red paint from a yacht chandler and painted the mats with this. I was surprised at how good they turned out. The paint has worn well and with age the mats look even more authentic! The seats have been recovered, but the rest of the interior is original, even down to the chrome insert in the binnacle and the Jaeger instruments.'

The swap to steels was easy at the front, but much more involved at the rear, as Rob recounts. 'To fit the steel wheels at the front just involves removing the bolt-on adaptor. For the rear I needed a steel wheel 'banjo' axle. Luckily, I managed to do an axle exchange with a chap in Belgium who was converting his car to wires! The disc wheels actually came from Birmingham and were originally fitted to the TV project car that featured in *An MG is Born*. To complete the car's return to original specification, I managed to locate a set of 5.60 x 14 crossplies.'

Rob is a genuine MG enthusiast who takes a delight in being part of a global movement which recognises the importance of the marque, the part the MGB has played, and the part it is still playing. Out of all the cars he owns (and has owned), 808 JEA remains his favourite.

'I get such a buzz from owning it, even when I just look at it in the garage. The changes I have made have been to 1963 factory specification and they have been carried out on a reasonably tight budget. I think they have improved the car. It is a very easy car to live with and an even better one to drive, better than my GT even.'



Above: Rob Symonds and the Roadster he has tried to keep close to original spec.

Below: 4x14in steel wheels were standard until 1969 when width increased to 4½in.

TECH SPEC

808 JEA - 1963 MGB Roadster

Chassis

Unitary construction body, welded steel, front suspension on subframe.
Wheelbase: 7ft 7in
Track Front: 4ft 1in Rear: 4 ft 1¼in
Suspension: Front: coil and wishbone.
Rear: live axle with leaf springs.
Dampers: Armstrong lever arm front and rear

Steering

Cam Gears rack & pinion
Turning circle: 32ft

Brakes

Disc size front: 10¾in
Drum size rear: 10in
Hydraulic, cable-operated parking brake

Wheels

Steel disc bolt-on
Rim size: 4J x 14 Tyre Size: 5.60 x 14

Engine

Engine Prefix: 18G
4 cylinder in line, pushrod ohv
Twin SU HS4
Cubic capacity: 1798cc
Power output: approx 94bhp @ 5400rpm
Torque: 107 lb.ft @ 3500rpm

Gearbox

Four speed manual, synchromesh on top three ratios with overdrive
MPH/1000rpm: Manual top: 17.9, o/d: 22.1

Performance

Max. Speed: 103mph
Acceleration: 0-60mph 12.2 secs
Overall fuel consumption: 22mpg
Numbers built: 1963 - 23,308

