

THE ORIGINAL CLASSIC CAR MAGAZINE

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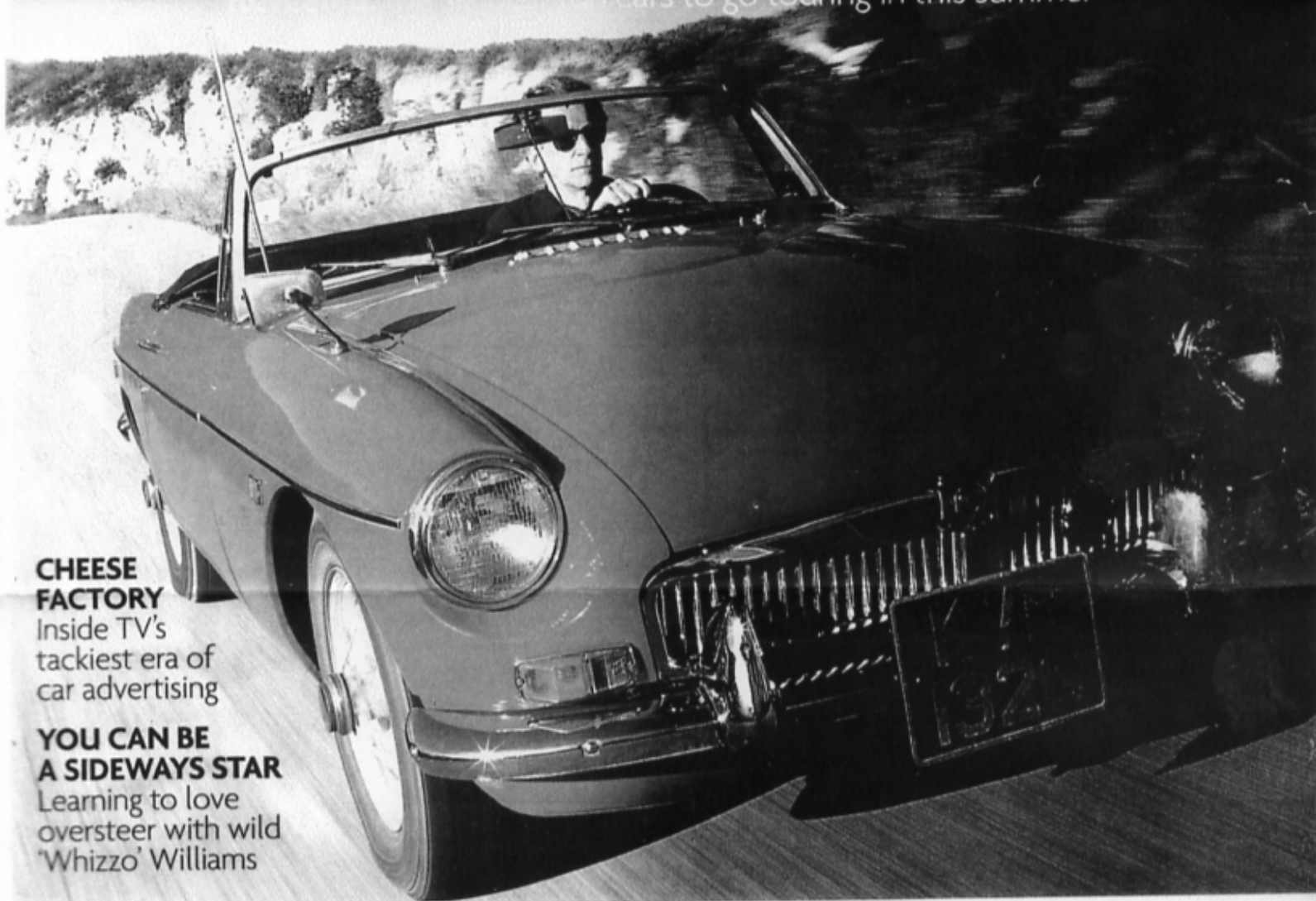
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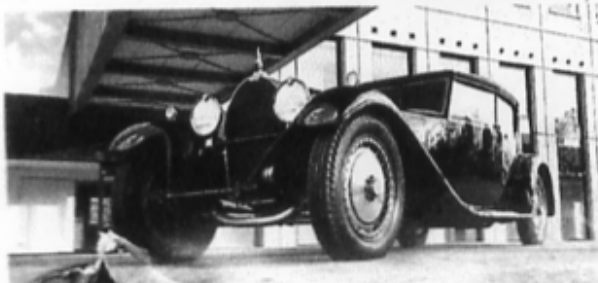
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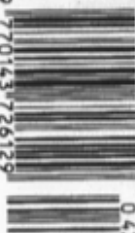
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A Plus

With the looks of a period racer, the factory-developed improvements of MGB running gear and subtle doses of technology, this MGA makes an exhilarating road car
Words: David Lillywhite Photography: Malcolm Griffiths

A dull day in late January. All disposable cash, and energy, has long since disappeared on Christmas and New Year, yet the festivities are already a distant memory. Lethargy has set in, and doesn't want to go away. Something extreme is needed to shake it.

Perhaps you wouldn't count an MGA as extreme. 'Nice' is usually a better description. Lovely to look at, fun to drive, an all-round charming experience. But not extreme. Not quite enough to shake the January blues.

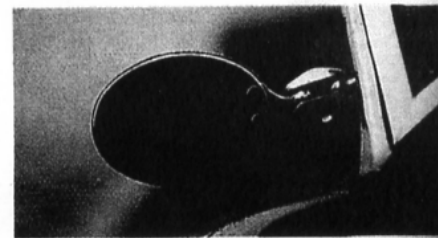
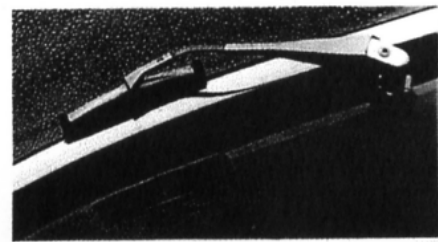
But this MGA is different. The cut-down screen and absence of weather gear promise a breathtaking wake-up call on a cold day, while the aluminium front spoiler and lack of bumpers transform a pretty sports car into an aggressive road racer. Could this be what's needed?



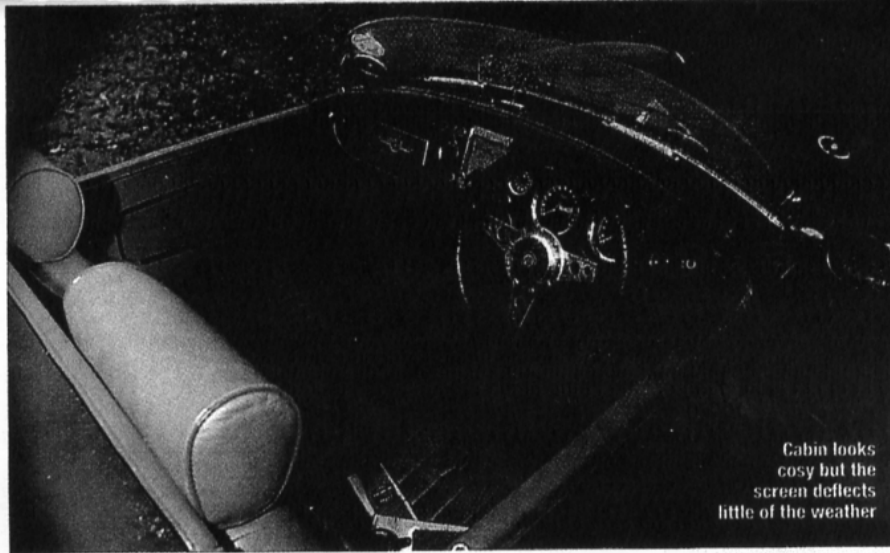
YPM 726



Tiny windscreen wipers keep screen clear; Desax overtaking mirror is similarly small but effective



The 2.2-litre B-series looks near-original but K&N filters and blue Lumenition management box suggests otherwise



Cabin looks cosy but the screen deflects little of the weather

MGA SUPERSPORTS

Engine 2200cc, in-line four-cyl, ohv, 718 fast road camshaft, twin HS6 SU carburetors, 43D distributor, Lumenition electronic ignition management **Power and torque** (est) 130bhp @ 6000rpm, 135lb ft @ 3500rpm **Transmission** Ford Type 9 five-speed manual, rear-wheel drive **Suspension** Front: coil springs, negative camber lower wishbones, 30% uprated MGB lever-arm dampers, uprated anti-roll bar, urethane bushes Rear: live axle with MGB differential, glassfibre composite leaf springs, Koni telescopic damper conversion **Steering** Rack and pinion, Moto-Lita wheel **Brakes** Front: slotted MGB discs and calipers, EBC pads Rear: drums. Servo-assisted **Performance** (est) Top speed: 122mph, 0-60mph: 7.5sec **Cost** £22,000 (inc new parts) **Value** £30,000

Only one way to find out. Having grabbed the MGA SuperSports's keys from its custodians at MGOC Spares & Accessories, we escape the heavy rush-hour traffic and head for the finest A- and B-roads that Cambridgeshire has to offer. As we go, the MGA's blatting exhaust note bounces off the buildings. It's not so loud to offend, but it's enough to turn appreciative heads.

Then it's over the A14, grinning down at the crawling commuters who have only recently escaped the office, and straight into quiet countryside. The roads twist and turn. The pretty villages become less frequent and we're out into rolling hills – a rare sight in this flat county.

I'm strapped into leather competition seats by a four-point harness, slouched down low in the seat to stay out of the cold air. With a heavy coat, a jumper and full thermals I'm reasonably warm, even if my face is freezing. My senses are heightened, I feel invigorated.

This little MGA was built to demonstrate the

validity of the modification and improvement products that MGOC sells for the MGA. It could easily have been modified further from the original; instead it's mixed the separate chassis construction of the original MGA with factory developments for the MGB and 21st century electronics, tyres, suspension and brakes.

There was no question of ditching the factory B-series for a modern engine, because that would have meant irreversible changes being made to the MGA – everything that's been fitted to this car can be unbolted and replaced with the original components. But the biggest version of the B-series that was ever fitted to the MGA was the 1600, while the MGB's 1800 looks virtually identical and drops straight in.

Besides, MGOC knows just how to squeeze extra power, durability and smoothness out of the B-series. First it takes the strongest 18V version of the B's engine, and has the cylinders offset-bored. The stock crankshaft is replaced by

a nitrite-hardened long-stroke version which, with the over-boring, takes the 1800 out to 2.2-litres for much improved power and torque. The cylinder head is converted to lead-free specifications and gasflowed using larger inlet valves, the flywheel is lightened, an uprated oil pump is fitted and a fast road camshaft finishes the job. The carburetors are 1½in HS6 SUs, to Abingdon Special Tuning spec – a replica of the original BMC Special Tuning Kit (AUD505M).

I've tried similar specification engines in MGBs, and been deeply impressed. But the effect of the extra oomph in the more exposed cockpit of the MGA, with its less sophisticated feel, is more intense. It accelerates hard, with a throaty rasp from the modified MGB sports exhaust and three-branch manifold, while all around you fresh air rushes by. Below 3000rpm the engine splutters and bogs down occasionally but when it clears its throat and lets the high-lift camshaft do its stuff, the car squats down and takes off fast



enough to take you by surprise – even when you're already expecting it.

Directly behind the classic B-series engine, bolted to the bulkhead, is a metallic blue box of distinctly un-classic electronics. This is an MGOC favourite, a Lumenition ignition mapping system that can be programmed for perfect ignition settings for road use right from idle to the rev limit of 6500rpm. You might have seen the same system last year in the company's MGB V8 SuperSports (*Classic Cars*, April 2001).

Today, it's been set up with track mapping, which means that the settings are no-compromise banzai measures for maximum power and response at high revs, regardless of low-down performance and on-road niceties. But a couple of minutes with a laptop computer, or even a handheld Palm device, would be enough to restore more civilised road settings.

As it is, I rather like the track mapping. I know this specification of engine doesn't have to be such hard work, but this time the extra concentration needed to overcome the wooliness of the ignition and carburation settings at low revs focuses my concentration and clears my befuddled brain. You hear it through the exhaust – first a flat, stuttering note, crispening as the revs top 2000rpm and then sharpening into a life-affirming scream when the radical profile of the camshaft takes its effect. I wanted extreme, and I've got it.

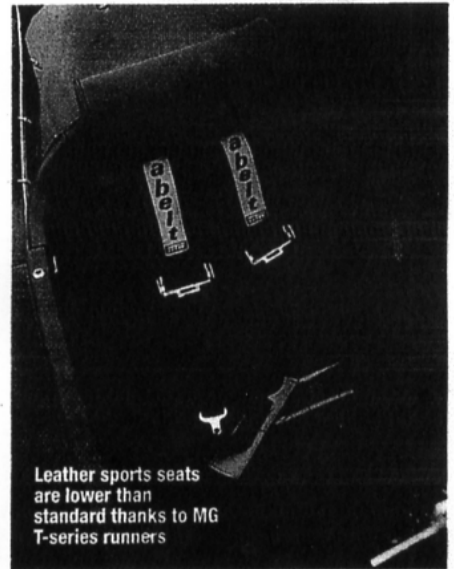
To keep the engine out of its flatspots the gearbox is taking a caning, shifting up and down through the ratios. But that's no problem, because again we're in new-car territory – the box is a five-speed Ford Type 9 (as found in many Sierras) and well capable of handling significantly higher levels of power, torque and sheer abuse

than a lightweight MGA could ever give it. This is another MGOC conversion, and one that's becoming ever more popular as stocks of serviceable MGB overdrive gearboxes dry up. The kit comes with a new bellhousing to mate gearbox to engine, a modified propshaft and bolt-on mountings (no cutting or welding needed). An extension piece means the gearlever ends up in just the same place as the original's.

What you lose in vintage gear whine (call it character) you gain in slick shifting, strength and the relaxation of the extra ratio. With a 3.9:1 ratio MGB differential replacing the MGA's stock 4.3:1, the engine is turning at a mere 3100rpm at 70mph. That's 1000rpm lower than the standard MGA's motorway cruise.

Is it sacrilege to chuck out Abingdon's four-speed gearbox and replace it with one from another company, and era, altogether? Maybe.

THE MGA'S BLATTING EXHAUST NOTE BOUNCES OFF THE BUILDINGS. IT'S NOT SO LOUD TO OFFEND, BUT IT'S ENOUGH TO TURN APPRECIATIVE HEADS



Leather sports seats are lower than standard thanks to MG T-series runners

IF NOT IN THE MOOD, YOU'D HATE THIS CAR, CURSING ITS STRIDENT EXHAUST AND MOANING AT EVERY BUMP

but I can't see it. In fact, I literally can't see it, because unless you crawl right under the car there's no way of knowing that originality has been sacrificed in the name of driving pleasure.

It's the same with the suspension and brakes: peer closely under the front valance or through the spokes of the 15x6in chrome wires and you might just spot that they're a bit different, but it won't be immediately obvious what's changed. The MGA 1600 and Twin Cam models did have discs at the front (the Twin Cam had them at the rear too) but MGA disc brake stub axles are now rare and sought after.

The MGOC solution has been to use the much more numerous MGB stub axles. This opens up the choices of uprated brakes, because there are far more options available for the MGB than the MGA: the choice for this car was cost-effective slotted MGB discs and MGB calipers with EBC fast road pads. With the addition of a servo kit and braided stainless steel brake hoses, but still on standard rear drums, the MGA SuperSports stops quickly, without fade, even when the pads are cold. You wouldn't need better for the road.

The front lever-arm dampers have also been swapped, again for MGB items, lightly modified to fit the MGA chassis (the control arms are inverted) and 30 per cent uprated for better control. The coil springs are standard but a thicker anti-roll bar with urethane bushes keeps roll to a minimum.

At least, that's the theory. It's easy to feel how it works out in practice when you've got miles of deserted roads to try it out on. The steering's heavy, never designed to turn sticky 185/65 tyres, but turn-in is quick and precise thanks to the new negative camber wishbones – perfect through the tight S-bends that punctuate these Fenland roads. Sweep into the left, a quick glance through the corner and cut a racing line through the right-hander, taking care to keep the revs up. I feel like I'm the world's greatest driver.

Bumpy corners still throw the SuperSports' back end out but at least this typical MGA behaviour is kept in check by a Koni telescopic damper conversion, which controls the axle much better than the old lever-arms could ever do, and lowered composite glassfibre leaf springs for quicker, smoother reaction to bad road surfaces. And yes, you did read that right – composite glassfibre represents the ultimate in leaf spring technology, never binding like multi-leaf metal springs will, and much lighter and more responsive than even single leaf metal items. They cost a significant £447 a pair, but if you want the best...

Even with the flash springs the ride's hard and jittery at times, as you'd expect in a car like this, but it's never actually uncomfortable. The low-profile tyres (tubeless for safety, thanks to specially-sealed wire wheels) have less give in them than the taller originals, but they cling to the road with such tenacity that you'd be foolish not to try them – even in the wet there's reasonable grip, although with so little body roll the SuperSports will let go without much warning when the tyres reach their limit.

If you're not in the mood, you'd hate this car, curse its strident exhaust note, wave your fist at the wind that's battering you from every direction and moan out loud at every bump.

But if you want exhilaration – true Caterham Seven exhilaration, without the attendant lack of classic style – then this could be for you.

You could easily replicate this SuperSports, or simply pick and mix your favourite bits. Personally, I'd have to have at least a standard MGB engine and five-speed conversion, bringing in the MGC radiator, oil cooler, silicone cooling hoses and louvred bonnet of the SuperSports to keep it cool at all times – overheating engines just upset me nowadays.

The cut-down screen, named the Competition Sports Screen in the brochure and inspired by an

original Abingdon accessory, is part of that appeal but I couldn't blame you for chickening out. Cold raindrops hitting your face at 70mph (or more, this thing does 120mph-plus) are torture. Even in the dry the novelty soon wears off. When you stop, wind-blasted, your skin stings and burns and your eyes water – great for the sense of freedom, but after a very few miles you long for leather helmet and goggles or a proper windscreen.

If the screen is a modification too far for me the rest of the package – the neat, hooliganistic steering reaction, the blup-blup-blup-whooar of the exhaust on the track ignition mapping and the feeling that you're intimate with car and countryside – are all options that I wouldn't want to be without. As a wake-up call, there's a lot to be said for the MGA SuperSports.

TO BUILD YOUR OWN...

Competition windscreen	£325
Leather sports seats from	£199.90
2.2-litre engine (with carbs & distributor)	£2840
Lumenition ignition management system	£606
Five-speed conversion	£699
MGB slotted brake disc	£52.48 each
MGB uprated front damper	£19.95each
Rear telescopic damper kit	£132.50
Composite glassfibre springs	£447

All prices (including VAT) from MGOC Spares & Accessories, the parts division of the MG Owners Club. Original parts for the MGA, as well as all spares and uprating parts for the MGB and Midget are also stocked. Call 01954 231318 or visit www.mgocspares.co.uk



DAVID LILLYWHITE

'IT'S A LONG TIME SINCE I'VE DRIVEN A CAR SO RAW AND SO ENJOYABLE'

David enjoys driving fast modified classic cars and still hankers after the 1380cc Frogeye Sprite he sold five years ago.