

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Bob Hall discovers just how frustrating a Classic restoration project can be

IT was Brian Kibble's fault really. Brian was a neighbour of ours near Stockton and he had spent 8 years restoring an MGA he had owned as a youth.

Every bit was being restored and as an engineer by training I hankered after doing something similar and started to review the possibilities. The shortlist came down to an E-type (isn't it on everyone's shortlist?), a TR or an MGA. The Jaguar was rejected because of cost and the MGA just got the vote over the Triumph due to its prettier styling (in my eyes), its marque, and the fact that the MGA Centre at Darlington was close at hand.

Late in the year the budget was set at £4,000 and the search began. Buying from a dealer was quickly discounted by profit margins and VAT and each month the columns of *Classic Cars* were combed. Most MGAs for sale seemed to be snapped up quickly and it was the end of February when I spotted a 1600 MkII for sale in Wolverhampton. Bit of work to be done said Mark on the telephone, but looks good and goes well. You could do the trimming etc, while you run it. Sounded just right!

Quick change of schedule; drove 200 miles to see 176 DOH. Looked OK by torchlight! Glassfibre work around shroud looked suspect, some body panels welded to chassis (gives more rigidity said Mark). Nearside door needed realignment and the interior required complete refurbishment; still I didn't want something completely finished did I? And anyway, the £2,000 left out of my budget would easily cover the work over the winter and it would be nicely on the road by late spring.

April 5; car arrives. I feel happy despite daylight revealing more glassfibre. Tell wife that a bit more work required than I thought but it will be ready in eight weeks. She is doubtful but admits it does look great.

Now we have a closer look — off comes bonnet, boot lid, doors, windscreen and seats. Stripping the nearside front wing takes six hours and underneath, what a mess!

Enter Dave Cowley. Dave is a skilled restorer having previously done a number of MGAs. "How much did you pay?" he asks after prodding this and that. His advice — sell it! Or face a chassis-up rebuild because if I want him to help (which I do) he will not cut corners. Either do it properly or not at all. I gulp, decide he is a perfectionist (it can't be as bad as he's making out). After all, a worldly-wise



Above, the proud owner poses with his 'bargain' MGA 1600 Mk II needing, he thinks, just some minor work. Below, six months later and the MGA after its full restoration



person like me couldn't have bought so badly, could I?

The rest of the body was stripped, mostly straightforward, especially as there is little for the bolts to attach to — doubts creep in. Maybe Dave is right after all!

Crisis! I agree with my company that I will relocate to Reading — likely removal date September — still, with just eight weeks work to do that date should be OK.

April 13

Money starts flowing out on drills, grinders, emery cloth etc, as well as the first body kit.

Dave is going to 'do' the body over the next three weeks — all the filler from the front shroud is removed and both sides are found to be in a real mess. The list of body panels which do not meet with Dave's standards grow each day. Sixty man hours of work expended and things look worse, not better.

Cadge gas and electric welding kit from another MGA nut, the shroud is taking

ages to do. Three weeks into the job and I've spent £500 on labour and materials and large quantities of both are still required.

April 20

Serious meeting; now the chassis has been exposed we can see it has been plated and the workmanship is terrible. The more inaccessible parts underneath the body also cannot be left otherwise the rust bug will be through in a year. Decide to take body off and replace or repair everything back to original or better. Dave reassures me that it will be cheaper in the long run! Tell wife as I store seats, windscreen, facia and other bits in bedroom, that it will be ready in eight weeks.

Shroud is finished and looks perfect. Nearside front wing is $\frac{1}{2}$ in short and goes back to the shop. Start stripping endless coats of paint from boot, bonnet, doors as well as primer from new body panels as I wish to do a bare metal paint job. Floor panels are sanded and treated to six coats

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Above left, the restoration involved stripping the car down to a rolling chassis and removing and overhauling all mechanical parts
Above right, thorough preparation at this stage is vital for a successful restoration — here the body seams are filled and sealed



Above left, the reassembled and primed bodyshell waiting in Bob's garage for final spraying with chariot red two-pack paint
Above right, the jobs to be done gradually grow fewer — here we see October's final job list with the end at last in sight



Above, just a few pieces of detail trim are left to fit and the car will be ready for the open road



Right, the completed MGA looks truly outstanding and fully rewards Bob's long hours of hard work

of yacht varnish. Very difficult to get front footwell panels out as bolts seized — big hammer does an excellent job. New panels required; use old ones as a pattern.

April 22

Work on boot area proceeds. Boot floor and inner wing replacement panels fitted. Chase shop for replacement wing and various other panels. Friday they say. Replacement nearside front wing arrives — it is 3/4in short. Deterioration in customer relationship commences. September looms.

April 27

Whole body and panels now stripped to bare metal. We decide to paint the car ourselves due to difficulty of moving bodyshell and to ensure top quality. After much soul searching, decide to use two-pack paint rather than cellulose. Main reason is ease of application and durability — note special care needed due to its toxic nature.

May 5

Engine and gearbox removed and gunked clean. Try to extract both together. Forget it even with the car on axle stands. Separate them, it's much easier. Seller had 'done up' the engine and I had the photographs to prove it. He said the gearbox had a bit of a rumble so, on the basis of his previous work, I fear the worst and go in search of an MGA gearbox expert. Find Terry on the MGA grapevine — he'd done lots of them previously and has a treasure trove of bits. "Bit pushed" he said. "Not in a hurry are you?" We agree four weeks and I leave it with him.

Chased up delivery of yet another front wing. Next week they say.

May 18

Thoughts have turned to the trim work — meet another Dave, Dave Atkin at Trimcar, Darlington — another member of the MGA fraternity. Look at his work (which is excellent) and request quotation for complete interior retrim including new Connolly hide leathers for the seats.

Paint engine, rocker box cover and oil filter housing (including washers — Dave's attitude towards perfection is catching).

Chase up wing — next week they say! Main job stops because of this. Clean garage up and compile list of jobs to be done.

June 4

Phone call; wing has arrived. Make special journey from London. "Sorry sir, we were mistaken, it's not in — will be next week." I get mad, Dave gives up.

In daylight nearside door is useless and needs replacing. Visit Richardsons at Staines, who live up to their friendly reputation. Lots of doors available; buy one for £10 (including VAT)! Needs aluminium welding, so off to a specialist we use at work who does a super job within three days. As a safety concession we weld in extra bracing straps to provide additional side protection.

June 15

Time marching on, have another row

"Another blazing row: 'Not for the amateur to fit, sir' is all they have to say"

about non-delivery of wings — next week I am told. Brian looks worried. If it's ready in six weeks I'll be finished before him — wives exchange knowing looks and take side bets. Accept quote of £600 for the trimming work plus the cost of the hide.

June 21

At last, wings and various other bits ready. Only another two weeks left out of the schedule (second revision). Money, money, money for body panels, wiring harness, brake pipes and bits. Dave decides that the front valance does not meet his standards. Agonise and finally we buy a new one at £90, rather than a glassfibre one as I am determined the car will be all steel.

Latest crisis is that we measure up rear shroud panel which has been cut back to make more space behind the rear seats — just something else which was not checked before purchase. Robinsons of Darlington collect much-needed brownie point by handmaking one to measure in five days flat.

July 4

Check how gearbox is proceeding; it's not started yet but will be in a few more days...

Decide that the only way to catch up on schedule is to take a week's holiday last week in July. Spend hours on the phone to ensure all bits are available so we can crack on. Problem of wheel arch section delivery solved by NTG who promise to Securicor it to me on Monday 27.

Paint has arrived; chariot red, of course. Hope the wife likes it, she says it's not important, as it will never be finished in her lifetime anyway. Another MGA old boy discovered, a painter with whom we agree an hourly rate and he will start next Monday night.

July 27

On holiday. Wheel arch hasn't arrived, track it down to local Securicor depot and collect it. Dave awaits, welding gear in hand. We offer panel up — it's the wrong side! Although clearly marked 'left', it's for the right and I've already got one of those — woe is me.

More frantic telephone calls, decide to proceed with the wing work anyway, its more difficult without the wheel arch but I cannot lose these precious days. Fit front wing and door, discover nearside wing is a terrible fit, have another flaming row: "not for the amateur to fit, sir" is all they have to say. After much weld splitting, cutting and bending, Dave achieves a miracle, a perfect fit. Worked till 11.30pm and got everything fitted and bodyshell removed. A watershed is passed.

Early August

Days fly by. The painter is working in one garage on the bodyshell, Dave and I work in another on the chassis while the engine

and gearbox are in another. Chassis checked for alignment; anything previously plated taken off, dressed and properly replated. Chassis wire brushed to bare metal, treated and simply painted with chassis black paint. Waxoyl pumped into every cavity.

Main body shell upside down treated with Trustan, finished, dressed, etched and primed with two thick coats of two pack, all body joints then sealed followed by two coats of Waxoyl underseal. Wheel arches and splash plates (themselves made from 10 gauge galvanised steel) were given an extra coating.

Turn body over, painter making good progress. Body panels so good only minute amounts of filler required in some areas. Painter complimentary. Dave is smug. Brake lines fitted to chassis while still separate. Differential also overhauled. Get gearbox back; it needed more than 40 new bits. Some of the balls from the ball bearings were actually missing. Me-thinks that the rumble may have been rather deafening.

Whole family next door now committed to seeing car finished on schedule (third revision), they help to fit engine and gearbox back into chassis. Everything is greased, oiled and Waxoyled and with six helpers the partially finished body put back onto the chassis.

Cadge some wheels and send mine to be shotblasted and have new tyres (Grand Prix S) fitted. Dave's theory about converting to wire wheels vetoed by wife.

Lots of bits back from chromers both chrome plated and galvanised, do not forget to paint rear of the bumpers with silver Hammerite, they are protected and reflect well.

September

House moving date fixed for October 16, car booked in at Trimcar whilst owner goes on holiday to recover. Order hood and tonneau before I go.

October 5

I arrive back from holiday expecting job to be finished, neither hood or tonneau have arrived, but the rest of the job looks fabulous. More chasing they arrive three days later, the hood fits well but the tonneau doesn't, so I ask Dave to make one — hang the expense at least it will fit and be as original.

October 13

All hands to the job. Three of us working through our project list, fit radiator and carbs, rechrome handbrake, fit and adjust heater, link up all cables and complete wiring. Clutch and brake bleeding took eight man hours — after four hours we restripped the brake master cylinder, I had put the rubbers in the wrong way round!

IT STARTED! I stopped (counting up how much I had overspent). It was an unforgettable moment.

Still a few jobs need doing, just a few more weekends and doesn't it look great. Roll on summer and beware if you are driving around the country lanes of Royal Berkshire and see 176 DOH — watch the paintwork and give us a toot! ▲