

COSTELLO

AND THE

Attractions



He's the man who went up against the might of British Leyland, to produce one of the greatest ever sports cars. And he isn't finished yet...

Words: David Lillywhite Photography: Tom Wood

He's a feisty fellow, Ken Costello. He arrives at our gathering of Costello MGBs full of attitude, ready to take any owner to task about inappropriate modifications and to set the record straight about his fights with British Leyland and his continuing quest to launch a revolutionary new gearbox onto the world market. He's not at all keen to be photographed but, at 84, he's apparently mellowed a little because he's agreed to this, his *first* magazine interview.

This is quite something. Of Ken Costello's many attributes – racing, flying, automotive design and engineering spring to mind – self-promotion doesn't feature highly, and diplomacy probably isn't much further up the list. But in MG circles he's a true hero, the man to thank for the MGB V8, whatever officially sanctioned histories might say.

Our three owners here are truly touched to be spending a day with Ken. None is exactly a shrinking violet himself, but each has gone to tremendous effort to attend.

First up is Roger Cook, best known for TV's groundbreaking *The Cook Report*, which ran for 16 hard-hitting series from 1985 to 1998, exposing criminals, government corruption, →

black market trading and even British Leyland Motor Corporation's treatment of a certain Mr Costello – which is when Roger met Ken for the first time. Now he's working on a one-off special of *The Cook Report*, to air early in 2011, but in between he's been putting the finishing touches to what's undoubtedly the ultimate Costello V8, working closely with Ken and with Tim Fenna, head of MG specialist Frontline Costello. Tim's on hand to help today too.

Then we have Andrew Johnson, a highly successful businessman whose leisure-time indulgence is one of only two genuine Costello V8s to have been built from an MGC.

And for the third car we have one of the earliest known Costellos, owned by Lawrence Wood, who in his spare time from working around the world in the oil industry has compiled a record of known Costello survivors and put together a comprehensive website tribute to the Costello cars.

It's a truly British story, this. We have the requisite underdog, the big corporation, the tales of underhandedness and, of course, the hero – which in this case is as much the car itself as it is Ken Costello.

And this story all started in the late 1960s with Ken, by then already a highly successful Mini racer (and British Touring Car Champion), tripping over a Rover V8 engine sat on the floor of Piper's Garage in Kent, just as Rover USA boss J Bruce McWilliams had come across a Buick 215 V8 in the Mercury marine prototype workshop several years earlier and snaffled it up, for it to become the Rover V8.

Both men had spotted the engine's potential. It was compact and lightweight – some 27kg lighter than the MGB's four-cylinder as it turned out. McWilliams had wanted it for the company's luxury saloons. Ken, ever the racer, was thinking fast road sports car.

'The whole thing was an accident,' he says. 'I walked into a garage, there's a V8 on the floor. I could virtually pick it up! So I bought a V8 and borrowed a damaged MGB Roadster from a friend [an insurance assessor] and told him he'd have to wait a while. I had it for six months.'

'We have the requisite underdog, the big corporation, the tales of underhandedness and, of course, the hero'

'I had to modify the bulkhead, but the most awkward part was the exhaust manifolds. I went and got a lot of pipes bent up, then I gave them to [legendary exhaust fabricator] Mike the Pipe. I fitted a universal joint into the steering column to give more room and I changed the shape of the inner wings.'

The red Roadster was finished by November 1969. Meanwhile, over at BLMC, the six-cylinder MGC was in trouble, struggling for sales after disappointing press reviews. It was dropped in 1969, and a year later the company started to investigate the idea of fitting the Rover V8 into the MGB.

Unaware of Ken's success doing exactly that, chief design engineer Charles Griffin

An early Costello survivor

COSTELLO Mk1 MGB

When Lawrence Wood started looking for an MGB Roadster to buy three years ago, he'd heard of the Costello cars, but knew little about them. Now he runs a Costello website...

'I found a V8 MGB at Classic Chrome for £15,000, but then saw this one at £5000 less. Its owner had died, and his wife didn't want it to sell locally. When I started asking around about it, I heard comments like "That's a Costello" and "It's better than the Leyland version".'

'I was intrigued, so I Googled Costello MGB and found three or four other similar cars. And of course I bought it!'

Lawrence's car is one of only three known Mk1 Costello Roadsters, first registered in June 1970 having been bought for £1319 from University Motors, and converted to a V8 by Costello Engineering a year later for £900.

It was restored in 1991, but had been laid up and needed recommissioning when Lawrence bought it. He then set off on what proved to be a trouble-free and enjoyable 1000-mile trip into the Champagne region of France.

A head gasket failure a few months later then prompted an engine replacement – and what better than a Cosworth-built, cross-bolted 4.6-litre V8 with four-barrel Weber.

There's now 220bhp and 300lb ft of torque available. The brakes and suspension have been uprated to suit, but the car still looks virtually as it would have when it left Costello Engineering in 1971.



One of only two V8 MGCs

COSTELLO MGC GT

Andrew Johnson has owned this MGC Costello V8 since 1981 but his trip from Rutland to Bath to meet Ken Costello was one of the first times he'd actually driven it.

'I'd owned several MGs and I fancied a C,' he explains. 'This one sounded interesting, with its V8 engine, but I couldn't find out anything about Costello at the time.'

In fact, Andrew has never been sure that this was a real Costello, but Lawrence Wood was able to confirm it is, and that it's one of only two MGCs converted to a V8 by Costello.

Andrew bought the MGC as a project, but several house moves, business and family pressures all conspired to keep him away from the car.

In 1987 Andrew had E-type independent rear suspension grafted in, made possible by relocating the battery to the engine bay and swapping the positions of the fuel tank and spare wheel (using a new, custom-made tank).

Jaguar hubs were fitted on the front as well, for matching all-round disc brakes and E-type 15in wire wheels but the MGC torsion bar front suspension remains.

More recently Andrew handed over the MGC to Hall's Garage, the Lincolnshire-based MG specialists, to complete the restoration. The V8 has been rebuilt and uprated by Oselli, using a 45DCOE Weber, to give around 200bhp. It's mated to a Rover SD1 five-speed 'box. And the first long run in 30 years? Trouble-free and enjoyable. Job done!



concluded (in a November 1970 memo to chairman Lord Stokes) that 'We have investigated the possibility of installing the Rover (Buick) V8 in the MGB and have determined the car would have to be widened at least 3½ inches, so obviously this is not feasible.' The project was abandoned.

Ken, though, had moved onto his next car, an MGB GT owned by his racing benefactor Lady Cripps. The Roadster was good but this would be better, the productionised version, with the changes that came to define the Costello V8s: larger radiator, MGC rear axle, reshaped bulkhead, inner wings and radiator duct panel, remote oil filter, electric fan and various other improvements. With a theoretical top speed of 140mph and the ability to out-drag an E-type to 100mph, Ken was so pleased with it – describing the performance as 'almost incredible' – that he handed over the car to *Motoring News* for a road test.

Imagine then, the reaction of the BLMC management team when, just three months after the memo dismissing the viability of a V8 MGB, the February/March 1971 issue of *Motoring News* proclaimed the new Costello MGB as 'a breakthrough in performance for affordable sports cars'. Buoyed by the reaction, Ken set up a company in Kent, with eight employees, to build MGB V8s, charging around £900 for the conversion. Not insignificant when the cost of a new MGB was around £1300.

These first Costello V8s, retrospectively known as Mk1s, were generally fitted with engines from the Rover P6 3500, giving around 160bhp on twin SU carburetors and a sports exhaust – a healthy boost over the 95bhp of the standard four-cylinder MGB. To clear those high-mounted carburetors, the

Mk1s were fitted with a glassfibre bonnet, complete with meaty bonnet bulge. The distinctive look was soon capped by the trademark Costello black 'eggcrate' aluminium front grille. A V8 Costello badge was usually stuck on the back panel.

In May, Ken received a letter from BLMC's Charles Griffin, asking 'if you could possibly see your way clear to arranging for us to have such a vehicle on loan for a day or two'.

'So I turned up at the factory gate,' says Ken. 'I asked to see Charles Griffin but I was told that he was booked up months in advance. So I said "Tell him Ken Costello is here with the new MGB V8". Charles Griffin, Harry Webster and George Turnbull were there within five minutes! They took me out to lunch.'

'Charles Griffin was a nice bloke. He took me round the track and said my car was "a first class job". Then he asked "What can we do to help you?". I wanted to know if there were any MGC crownwheel pinions [for the necessary higher ratio rear axle] left over. Without them it wasn't worth doing.'

Charles Griffin checked, and found that there was a stock that could be made available to Ken, and he also organised the supply of V8s, as long as Costello Engineering took on the warranty responsibilities.

'I tried to buy cars without engines from them too,' says Ken, 'but they wouldn't let me, so I ended up with rows of four-cylinders!'

'Then Lord Stokes wanted a drive [at the BLMC head office in Berkeley Square, London]. He asked what I'd do if BLMC decided to build its own MGB V8. I said, "Well it will take you two years, so I'll just carry on building my own." I should have taken it to them and asked them to →



give me a royalty for each one built.'

He probably should have...

A few months later, a left-hand-drive MGB GT and a Rover V8 engine were delivered to Costello Engineering, with a request to build a Costello V8 for BLMC's Special Tuning department in Abingdon. Ken turned it round in two weeks; the BLMC engineers must have been impressed, because the factory's own MGB GT V8 was launched in August 1973...

'Once they knew it could be done it was easy for them,' points out Ken. 'And once it was done, everyone said *they'd* done it.'

BLMC clearly felt that the MGB was only just up to handling the power and torque of the V8, because it stuck to the 137bhp low-compression Range Rover specification V8, and did without a Roadster-based equivalent; countless high-power conversions since have proved that wrong.

With more power and the option of V8 conversions to Roadsters, Ken's cars soldiered on, and he was even cheeky enough to take out a 'beware of imitations' advertisement (the only advert he ever placed). Continual improvements had been made, the most outwardly significant of which was the option of sticking with the more subtle-looking standard bonnet, made possible by new inlet manifold options; a lower-profile manifold for the twin SUs, and a neat conversion that allowed for a rear-facing Weber 40DCOE sidedraught carb for extra power (this was the

Costello MkII, available from late 1972).

All very well. But at £2294 BL V8s were cheaper (the Costellos were around £500 more by this point), because the factory had been able to make simple changes – to the shape of the bulkhead pressings for example – that made the fitment of the V8 much simpler than the labour-intensive process that Ken and his crew had to go through.

And then BLMC cut off the supply of engines... 'The dealers were told not to sell engines to me,' says Ken, and although it might not have been that blatant, there really was a directive sent to all dealers not to supply new V8 engines without receiving an old V8 in exchange. But the enterprising Ken Costello wasn't going to be beaten that easily.

'There were lots of US compacts [such as the Buick Skylark and Oldsmobile Cutlass] in Belgium, so I sent a truck over and brought back 40-odd V8s from scrapyards. I rebuilt them with Rover parts – I never had a problem with the V8, I could re-ring them, fit new bearings and tappets and they'd easily do another 100,000 miles.'

Sadly, though, this was one battle that Ken wasn't going to win. Even though it was widely acknowledged by the motoring press at the time that Costello V8s were better than the factory cars, what chance was there against the might of BLMC? By 1974 the V8 conversion days were over, after around 225 – about 20% of them Roadsters – had been built.



The ultimate Costello V8

COSTELLO MkIII MGB GT

This is Roger Cook's second Costello MGB, and there's no doubt it's the most highly developed of all the Costellos.

'I decided to build the ultimate Costello in tribute to Ken,' says Roger. 'If there's a good bit out there, I've got it on my car!'

Built by Ken in 1990 on a 1971 shell, and continually developed ever since, Roger's 'good bits' include a Wildcat 5.0-litre V8 with an Emerald ECU and eight-port fuel injection mated to a Helix clutch, JE bellhousing, five-speed T5 gearbox and Quaife limited-slip differential.

The suspension is all Costello, with alloy front wishbones, uprated anti-roll bar, Pro-Tech telescopic dampers, five-link, coil sprung rear end and four-piston calipers with 305mm vented front discs and a Costello rear disc conversion.

Bodywork looks near-standard, though the arches have been tweaked to accommodate 195/60 front and 215/60 rear Bridgestone tyres on the 15in Revolution centre-lock wheels. The ducted front valance is a Costello item, while the MG RV8 bonnet and dashboard came from British Motor Heritage.

It's been a long, difficult journey to achieve the ultimate Costello, via two bodysells (the first disappeared for a while when an MG dealer went bust). But the result is a fire-breathing but tractable 345bhp (and 295lb ft) MGB that's a credit to all involved. We love it!



Left Roger Cook's MkIII has a 5.0-litre V8, with the full approval of (and design help from) Ken Costello.



The factory, meanwhile, continued to produce the MGB GT V8 until 1976, when it was dropped after disappointing sales, a victim of the fuel crisis.

'That wasn't the case!' exclaims Ken. 'Half the problem was that they [BLMC] were Triumph people, and the Triumph Stag was in competition with the MGB GT V8. Then came the fuel crisis, but think about it – at 30mph the V8 was doing 1000rpm. At 70mph it was 2400. At 100mph it was only 3400! In the States, on their roads, you'd get incredible mileage out of the V8.'

He's absolutely right, but in the UK the V8's 24mpg *did* deter potential buyers and, incredibly, BLMC had never quite got round to exporting the V8 into the USA, despite the success of the four-cylinder MGB out there. Some claimed that it hadn't been possible to supply the required number of MGB GT V8s for US crash-testing, but in fact it turns out that the US Department of Transport did Type Certify the model. We return then to the MG versus Triumph rivalry, and BLMC's desire to sell the TR7 and the Stag overseas.

It will always feel as though the factory killed the V8 prematurely, compared with the drawn-out life of the four-cylinder MGB at least, and in doing so lost one of the best sports cars it had ever built. But MG enthusiasts around the world weren't going to give up that easily, building their own MGB V8s or commissioning professionals to build them. Some were good, some were bad; a handful were wrongly passed off as Costellos, while Ken himself also helped the market along by producing Costello-branded conversion parts. And then, of course, the fake Costellos and the cars that had been badly built using Costello components gave Ken's company a bad name.

Meanwhile Ken's products were actually going up in quality; over the following years he developed fuel injection conversions, disc brake upgrades, →



Ken Costello: more than just MGs

The world knows him for the V8 conversions. But there's much, much more to Ken Costello.

As an automotive engineering graduate from London Polytechnic, Ken started work at the Motor Industry Research Department in Middlesex, and soon started to dabble in motor racing. In 1959 a friend offered him the chance to race his new Mini, on the condition Ken undertook the tuning work on it. He won first time out, setting a new lap record at Castle Combe in the process, and continued to win around the UK's circuits.

When, in 1962, he dived with a Jaguar Mk2 on the M1 motorway, he found that the Mk2 owner worked for Cripps Brothers Leyland dealership, owned by Lady Peggy Cripps – and Ken ended up running her 'Special Tuning Division', and driving her Mini Cooper S. He won the 1967 British Saloon Car Championship, and moved into Formula 3, driving a Brabham BT19 and racing with the likes of Jackie Stewart. You'll spot the Brabham in the movie *Grand Prix*, with Ken driving.

Ken gave up racing for the sake of his daughter, but his adventures weren't over; in 1978 he got his pilot's licence and found that he could buy light aircraft from dealers in the USA, fly them across the Atlantic and sell them for profit in the UK.

So, Ken Costello, MGB V8 builder... and racer, engineer, pilot and entrepreneur. Not bad.



MGB COSTELLO V8 Mk1 (STANDARD SPEC)

ENGINE 3528cc 90° Rover V8, aluminium head and block, OHV, twin SU HIF6 carburettors

POWER 165bhp @ 5200rpm **TORQUE** 200lb ft @ 2750rpm **TRANSMISSION** Four-speed manual with overdrive, rear-wheel drive

SUSPENSION Front: double wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers

BRAKES Discs front, drums rear **WEIGHT** 1041kg **PERFORMANCE** Top speed 128mph. 0-60mph 7.8sec

'All three are genuinely fast – Roger's ridiculously so, with handling and braking to match – and who can resist the lure of the V8 burble in a classic sports car?'

alloy sumps and then a revolutionary all-new five-speed gearbox, compact enough to fit into the narrow MGB transmission tunnel but capable of transmitting 350bhp and 291lb ft of torque. He says now that the development of that gearbox has been his greatest achievement – but it's been a nightmare as well, dominating the last 20-odd years of Ken's life.

'The only problem with the V8 MGB conversions was that we didn't modify the gearbox,' says Ken. 'We tried an MGC gearbox but it wasn't right. So I designed this gearbox that fitted straight into the car. You could take it to pieces with one Allen key!'

Ken took out a patent and worked with Cranfield Institute of Technology to produce 25 pre-production units, which were then shown around various major manufacturers, including Ford US, Maserati and Rover. With genuinely strong interest, it looked as though Ken Costello had a great success on his hands until, without explanation or warning, his bank withdrew funding at the 11th hour – and the project was sunk.

Ten years later a strong offer from TVR saw Ken revive the gearbox project, only for Peter Wheeler to back out due to financial problems. Incredibly, Ken carried on, developing the original five-speed design

into a six-speeder – to this day he remains hopeful that it will be picked up by a car manufacturer, and reputable figures in the industry who've tried the gearbox attest to its strength and slick shifting.

Meanwhile, Ken returned to the V8s, from 1990 building a series of ten MkIII Costello V8 MGBs that incorporated all the tricks he'd learnt since his first V8 conversion nearly 20 years earlier.


The subsequent revival in interest in the Costello name prompted Ken to join forces in 1999 with Tim Fenna at Frontline, a company known for innovative upgrades to Sprites, Midgets and MGBs. The newly renamed Frontline Costello revived and updated Ken's telescopic damper conversion, front suspension conversions and brake upgrades.

Additionally, Ken had long been considering a bolt-in independent rear suspension conversion but found that using a bolt-in, coil sprung five-link live axle gave similar ride and handling advantages without the complication of an independent set-up. Working with suspension guru Rhoddy Harvey-

Bailey, Frontline Costello then produced the five-link conversion that is now a staple part of the company's product range.

So Costello MGBs live on, while the prices of the 60 or so original Costellos known to survive worldwide continue to outrank factory V8s in terms of value. The three you see here are all very different, but each one demonstrates how much more relaxed and yet exciting a V8-powered MGB feels in relation to the harsh B-series of the four-cylinder model.

All three are genuinely fast – Roger's ridiculously so, with the handling and braking to match – and who can resist the lure of the V8 burble in a classic British sports car? Ken Costello clearly can't: despite an early start, a long journey and a demanding day in difficult conditions, he's unable to resist taking a fast ride alongside Tim Fenna in Roger's MkIII Costello. We wait anxiously: will he approve? And how will he cope with Tim's take-no-prisoners driving?

The Costello burbles back and pulls alongside us. Ken looks round and cracks a rare smile of approval. From Ken Costello, unsung hero, that will do. 

Thanks to Roger Cook, Lawrence Wood, Andrew and Richard Johnson, and Tim Fenna. For more on Costello MGBs, see www.mgcostello.com and www.frontlinedevelopments.com.