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COSTELLO V8



# Love at first sight

When Richard Fairclough drove his friend's Costello V8 on a 3000 mile trip through Europe in 1974, he knew he'd found one of the best MGs. 34 years later and he's got that very car, but is a V8 roadster still the ultimate?

Words and photographs: Rob Hawkins



The opinion shared amongst many petrolheads and car nuts is that the V8 engine is the best all round entertainer. It sounds fantastic, pulls like a train and has the potential for masses of power output.

During the 1960s, the four cylinder MGB could clearly take more power than its cast iron B-series motor could produce. Whilst British Leyland adopted the heavy straight six for the MGC, an ex-Mini Cooper racing driver was measuring up their lighter aluminium eight cylinder motor. The man was Ken Costello and by 1970, he had begun offering conversions for MGB roadsters and GTs using this very engine.

If you've ever driven a B-series MGB, then promptly jumped into a V8 engined equivalent, the difference is quite alarming. Despite the B-series being known as a torquey motor, it has to be worked hard to produce any amount of performance that could claim to be entertaining. By contrast, you could say that the V8 is the lazy man's option. There's so much torque that once on the move, gear changes don't often seem necessary.

This was certainly the appeal of the V8 Costello-converted MGB

roadster that Richard Fairclough spent two and a half weeks cruising the autobahns and autostradas in during the 1970s. 'It was totally effortless going up and down the mountain passes,' he recalls. 'It was a very quick car, even when heavily laden down with luggage. It was an absolute delight and a dream to drive.'

Richard's friend, Ricky Archbell, owned the car at the time. He'd originally bought a brand new MGB roadster in 1972, had it converted by Costello the year after, sadly crashed it, then had it reshelled and rebuilt by Costello in 1974. Ricky clearly remembers visiting the Costello Motor Engineering workshops in Farnborough on several occasions. He's even kept the original letter of reply to his first enquiry into V8 conversions, dated December 5, 1972. Ricky had questioned whether he could complete the conversion himself, but received a negative reply, with the explanation: 'The conversion is beyond the scope of even a fully qualified fitter, as it requires special templates, jigs and welding equipment.'

The early Costello V8 conversions used twin SU carburettors, but later moved onto a single Weber with one of Costello's own manifolds. Ricky's conversion received a Weber, but he found it suffered carburettor icing all



**Above:** The bonnet bulge hints at something special, but few would guess this is a genuine and early Costello V8 conversion.

too often, so asked Costello to return to the twin SU set-up.

In 1976 Ricky sold his Costello V8 and thought that was the last he'd see of it. And it was, at least until 1985 when Richard Fairclough was leafing through his local *Autotrader* and spotted the very same Costello V8 for sale through a trader. 'I wasn't even looking for it,' he says. 'The page literally opened and there it was. I shot down to view it that evening, but the showroom was shut. I returned the following morning and haggled down the price from £3500 to £3150.'

Paying just over three thousand pounds for an 11 year old V8 roadster was a moderate amount of cash in 1985. Despite the Costello V8 costing £2311 in 1972 (almost as expensive as an E-type Jag), the hyper-inflation of the 1970s had meant that £3000 in 1985 didn't even buy you a brand new Lada Riva! Unfortunately, the condition of Richard's V8 Costello wasn't quite the same in 1985 as it had been in 1974.

'It wasn't very good at all,' he says. 'It was roadworthy, but it looked better than it was. The front spoiler was cracked. Someone had painted it badly in Teal Blue. It ran fairly well, but by the time I'd got it home I had decided that it needed to have a new clutch in it.'

Over the following five years, Richard and his wife Liz used the roadster. Liz in particular used it as her everyday transport to take their daughter to school. But eventually, the tinworm got the better of the bodywork. 'The sills, floors and door bottoms had started to rot,' recalls Richard. 'It needed some TLC, so it was sent to Mike Satur.'

The roadster's rear arches were originally flared using GRP. The European trip of 1974 had seen Ricky and Richard attacking the inner rear arches with a lump hammer in a bid to make a little more space between the tops of the tyres and surrounding metalwork as luggage that included camping gear was weighing down the leaf springs. Consequently, the GRP flares had started to crack. In 1990, Mike Satur reformed the arches with metal instead of fibreglass.

The roadster was returned to the Faircloughs' home ready to paint, but unfortunately had to be abandoned in the garage for over 15 years. It wasn't until Richard and Liz's daughter Helen was planning her wedding that the project was restarted to finish off the roadster. The intention was to use the car for the wedding day. Husband-to-be Peter and his best man



## COSTELLO V8

### TECH SPEC

#### 1974 Costello V8 MGB roadster

##### Engine and transmission

3.5-litre Rover V8, twin 1.75in SU carburettors, paper element air filters, standard Rover V8 camshaft with pushrods, MGC radiator with electric fan, oversized expansion tank, oil cooler, Tony Law exhaust manifold and system. Gearbox: four speed with overdrive in third and fourth. Rear axle: MGC live axle with 3.07:1 final drive ratio.

##### Brakes

Front: solid discs with two piston calipers and uprated pads.  
Rear: MGB drums.  
Braking system: servo assisted, dual circuit system with 50:50 front:rear split.

##### Suspension

Front: top and bottom wishbones with coil springs, lever arm dampers and anti-roll bar.  
Rear: modified leaf springs, Koni adjustable dampers.

##### Wheels and tyres

Wolfrace 6x14 inch alloy wheels with Hancock 185/70x14 tyres running at 28/26psi front/rear.

##### Exterior

MGB roadster shell painted in Mercedes Jasper metallic blue, Costello steel and GRP bonnet bulge, standard front grille, chrome bumpers with overriders, Halogen headlights, steel rear flared arches, Costello rear badge, modified front inner wings.

##### Interior

Leather seats, black carpets, Smiths 140mph MGC speedo, 7000rpm tacho, combined oil pressure and coolant temperature gauge, fuel gauge, dashboard mounted overdrive switch, inertia reel seatbelts.

##### Performance

175bhp @ 5200rpm (source Costello brochure), 128mph top speed, 0-60mph 7.8 seconds, ¼ mile 15.8 seconds at 83mph (source: *Autocar*, May 25, 1972).



Above: Big V8 is a tight squeeze in the engine bay, but delivers its ample torque with effortless lack of fuss.

Below: Leather retrim was part of the rebuild carried out by ex-Leyland engineer Paul Tennant.



"I didn't want it to be concours, but I wanted it to be half decent"

were going to arrive at the church in style.

'I didn't want it to be concours, but I wanted it to be half decent,' says Richard, who recalled shopping around for quotes to rebuild his roadster. The quotes for a full rebuild were quite frightening. One specialist quoted £20,000. The job was eventually given to ex-Leyland engineer Paul Tennant based near Leeds, and the final bill came to around £15,000.

'Paul rebuilt it completely,' says Richard. 'He did a bare metal respray, fitted new doors and front wings. The engine was rebuilt with a new crankshaft. All the brakes were rebuilt, too. Inside he fitted leather seats, new carpets and recalibrated the speedo.'

The Wolfrace wheels on the roadster were originally fitted by Ricky Archbell. He'd polished them by hand, then coated them in clear yacht varnish. This helped to preserve them and with the exception of a thorough polish by Paul Tennant, they still look as good as new after 34 years.

Ricky had added other modifications to his roadster when he owned it. He wasn't confident the rear leaf springs would hold up to the extra torque from the Rover V8. He questioned whether axle tramp would be a problem, but Costello wasn't so concerned. Ricky however pursued the potential problem and was advised by an MGB racing driver during the



**Above:** Flared rear arches were fibreglass, but now are steel. An MGC back axle carries the torque to the period Wolfrace wheels.

1970s to remove the second leaf from the top, which is shorter than the rest, and replace it with a full length leaf. He also removed the lever arm dampers from the rear and fitted adjustable Koni dampers.

When Richard had the roadster overhauled by Paul Tennant, the modified leaf springs and Koni dampers were still fitted and working. The leaf springs were replaced to the same specification, but the dampers were not changed. The roadster was returned to the road in May 2007, just in time for Helen's wedding. The only problem on the day of the wedding involved a failed alternator, which Paul Tennant promptly scurried around and replaced on the very morning.

Since the roadster has been restored, Richard has added another 900 miles to the milometer. 'It's a totally different car now,' he says. 'The engine's a lot smoother thanks to the new crank. Performance wise, it's as good as I ever remember it to be. Mechanically it's a very sound car. The leather seats have made a difference over the original plastic vinyl. The braking is very good – it can stop on a sixpence.'

On the road, this V8 roadster is certainly a dream drive. The suspension is very fluid and soaks up any ruts in the road. Richard confidently drives over speed humps without having to worry about ground clearance and

losing his exhaust. He's clearly adopted a leisurely approach to gear changes thanks to the plentiful supply of torque from the V8. Third gear will pull away from a fast walking pace and once on the move, a quick flick of the overdrive switch results in a very smooth change that at times can only be detected by a drop in revs.

As befitting such a lazy motor, (or perhaps 'effortless' would be a better word,) the performance of this V8 is very deceptive in the MGB. There's no screaming engine note, fighting with the steering or uncontrollable power band. Instead, it's simply smooth and quick and progress is very steady as the revs build up. Typically of a V8, the optimum performance is in the lower rev range, so changing up at 3000rpm is not uncommon. There's a lack of urgency from the engine, which doesn't compare to the readout on the speedo. You could easily lose your licence in this car if you didn't keep an eye on what the instruments were telling you.

The Rover V8 has got to be the best engine for the MGB. It's fantastic for cruising, reasonably economical (most owners claim 20-25mpg) and when required, can prove it has the ability to perform. It's only when you lift the bonnet of a V8-engined MGB and have to work on the motor that



**Above:** Ricky (left) and Richard, with the MGB V8 they have both owned.

you'd wish there was a B-series there instead. Space is so tight that Costello had to modify and re-route the steering column, reform the inner wings and route a coolant pipe through the middle of the alternator belt!

Richard appears to have no intention of selling his Costello V8. He is determined to ensure it stays in his family and has consequently handed over the log book to his daughter, although the car remains in his garage. 'I gave it to her with the intention of her keeping it,' he says. 'She remembers being taken to school in it 23 years ago, so I had to give it to her.' And why not? The Costello V8 conversions have become as collectable in their own right as the factory V8 GTs. That is not too surprising considering there were never any factory V8 roadsters and Costello's records show that only around half a dozen roadsters were converted by himself. Richard's own Costello conversion (or should that be Helen's?) is certainly one to keep and would be very hard to replace.

**Below:** Richard has decided that this is one MGB that is staying in the family. Technically it now belongs to his daughter, but hasn't left home.

'It's become part of my family,' he says. 'There are thousands of impersonators, but very few originals. I look forward to returning to Europe and hopefully one day bumping into another one with a bulged bonnet.'

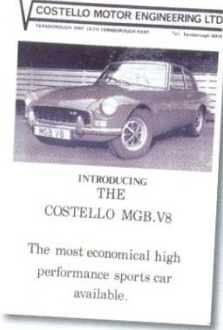
## Costello conversions

Ken Costello of Costello Motor Engineering shot to the attention of the motoring press at the start of the 1970s when he began offering V8 conversions for the MGB. The road tests returned with some very promising comments. Typical of these were *Autocar* in 1972 who thought the conversion was 'more refined to ride in than any MG built at Abingdon' and John Langley of the *Daily Telegraph* who said it was 'one of the nicest cars I have driven'.

The first V8 Costello-converted MGB to emerge was a roadster in 1970. Using the ex-Buick, but more commonly known 3.5-litre Rover V8 engine, it sported twin SU carburettors and a bulging GRP bonnet to clear the height of the engine and those carbs sitting on top of it. Later conversions used a Weber, which allowed the fitting of a standard bonnet. MGB roadsters were soon followed by GTs in being converted to V8 power.

The Costello conversion was developed to include an automatic electric fan, servo assisted brakes, an MGC rear axle, five speed gearbox and rolled rear arches. In 1972 the cost of the conversion was £975 (excluding the purchase of the MGB).

An estimated 230 MGB roadsters and GTs were converted by Costello. Rumours are that only six roadsters were converted. When British Leyland launched their own V8 version of the GT in 1973, this killed off many of the customers for Costello, but he continued completing conversions throughout the 1970s and even during the 1980s. MG's own GT V8 didn't last quite so long as it was axed in 1976.



*"It's fantastic for cruising, reasonably economical and has the ability to perform"*

