

Back in the late 1960s everything in the Abingdon garden seemed rosy. Production was running at around 50,000 units a year, of which almost 80% was for export. Looking back we can see that this was a superficial view, because under the newly formed British Leyland, no cohesive policy on new model development was emerging and, as well as MG, both Triumph and Jaguar had substantial sports car model ranges. In a situation where sales for all the marques were running at highly satisfactory levels, and with MG in particular selling everything they could produce, it is perhaps hardly surprising that new model development was not given a great priority by British Leyland.

Well as the MGB, and its later derivative the MGB GT, had been received by both the home and overseas markets, the obvious question was soon asked. Would it be possible to make a quicker MGB?

One person who thought the answer was definite 'Yes', was Ken Costello. An engineer by training, a superb tuner and a very quick racing driver in his own right (winning the Redex Saloon Car Championship in 1967 in a Mini Cooper 'S') and also, as he recounted to me, being one of the drivers in John Frankenheimer's film 'Grand Prix' he had both the technical and behind-the-wheel skills to bring such a project to reality.

The engine that inspired Ken Costello was the Rover V8, nee Buick, to which the Rover Company had acquired the rights when it became obsolete in the US. It fitted the MGB bodysell with only slight modifications to the bulkhead and the engine bay side walls, in order to provide clearance for the tubular exhaust. Getting the steering column to fit was another matter, and it was necessary to weld a steering column Hooke joint, while a fabricated bell housing adapter was produced to allow the unit to be mated up to the standard MGB gearbox. Very little development work was carried out on the chassis apart from the fitting of stronger brake pads.

Early photographs of the Costello V8 conversion show a glass fibre bonnet with a discernible power bulge which was necessary to accommodate the inclined and opposed SU HIF6 carburetors. Interestingly a 9.5" diameter diaphragm spring clutch was used, while the existing MGB hypoid bevel back axle and differential were retained. The final drive ratio was raised from 3.09:1 to

COSTELLO COMEBACK

With the new Rover MGB imminent, Andrew Roberts test drives the new Costello V8 and finds that once again the bespoke 'B' has pipped the production car to the post

Photography and cover picture by David Reeves

3.07:1 as used in the manual transmission MGCs. Special wheels, produced by Dunlop, were of the type offered as an option on the Reliant Scimitar GTE.

This period of the late 60s saw a considerable number of conversions being made to production cars and, it has to be said, many were sadly deficient. However the big difference with

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the Costello V8 MGB was that it was developed by an engineer first and foremost, and the quality and integrity of the project was clear for all to see.

The Sunday Times commented on the launch of the car that it '...is convincing, civilised and has exceedingly good road holding.' While *Autocar* asserted in 1972 that it was 'much more refined than any car built in Abingdon ... it feels safe, stable and integrated in its design ... as a conversion - executed by very competent engineers - we rate the car as perfect, as a model in its own right it deserves the highest praise.'

Although he kept no production records, Ken Costello considers that around 200 conversions were done at the Farnborough premises. It is a matter of record that many cars have been passed off as Costello models, which never saw Costello workshops, and their quality has invariably been poor.

Inevitably, with production running at up to two vehicles per week, the Costello V8 attracted the attention of British Leyland when it was shown to them at Longbridge. While not publicly enthusing over the car, the private reaction was very much one of 'We ought to be doing this ourselves' and indeed Donald Stokes, Leyland's Chief Executive, demanded that MG considered producing their own version. The outcome was that Roy Brocklehurst, Don Hayter and the Abingdon Team had a prototype V8 running within six weeks. This was quickly passed for production, finally reaching the market in 1973. At this stage, Ken Costello was finding that the engine supply was, not surprisingly, becoming well nigh impossible and, since his conversion could by no means compete with the Abingdon production V8 in price terms, no cars were converted after 1973.

In many ways the MGB GT V8 had the odds stacked against it. Produced by Abingdon in a total production run of 2,591 cars it was launched against a background of the Arab Israeli War, the oil crisis and a temporary, blanket 50mph speed limit in the UK, all of which contributed to make it a failure in sales terms. Yet, as a package, it offered a great deal of performance at a very economic price, although the Costello car was considered by many to be superior.

Jumping ahead to 1991, the MG grapevine revealed that a 'new' Costello



V8 was on the stocks. With the growing vogue for creating V8 powered cars from standard MGB GTs and Roadsters, it seemed possible that Ken Costello might want to produce a state-of-the-art version of the ultimate V8. When the first commission was agreed, Ken Costello indicated that no corners would be cut and the engineering integrity of the car would be unimpeachable.

The basis of this, the first of the new V8s, is a low mileage 1980 MGB GT, although it is possible to create a vehicle around a British Motor Heritage body-shell. The heart of the car is a fuel injected four-litre Rover Vitesse V8 which has been prepared by Oblic Engineering to produce 210 bhp, 312 newton metres at 5,000 rpm. This is mated to Costello's own 5-speed gearbox which weighs some 15lbs less than the corresponding SD1 unit.

There are unique Costello touches to the engine in the cast alloy sump and engine mounts, as well as cast alloy

plenum chambers. Braking and suspension are given particular attention with vented front discs with AP Racing 4 pot callipers, together with a double wish-bone front suspension with Bilstein gas dampers and a rear gas damper conversion. Revised front and rear anti-roll bars are fitted. The V8 rear axle is fitted with a Quaife limited slip differential. The car is fitted with replica Minilite wheels shod with Michelin MXV 185 65v15 tyres. With the exception of these items Rover and BMH parts are used.

Apart from a discreet Costello V8 badge on the tailgate, there is nothing to indicate that this is other than a standard MGB GT, apart from its superb Jaguar British Racing Green colour scheme, and conversion back to chrome bumper specification. Internally, the seats have been rebuilt and re-upholstered with green piped black leather, and new carpets and ancillary trim have been fitted. Electric windows have been fitted and there is a Golde Mohair sunroof.

Instrumentation remains standard and a Momo steering wheel has been fitted.

There is no question that the build quality of this car is of the highest order, and a look under the bonnet will prove both impressive and instructive. The entire V8 installation with its fuel injection system and electronics is carefully engineered to a level surpassing that of many production cars. Every detail has been painstakingly considered, and there is no hint whatsoever that this is a conversion. Similarly, in the build quality of the shell – which was stripped and rebuilt prior to spraying – and in the beautifully appointed cockpit, the same care and attention to detail is evident.

ON THE ROAD

Thanks to the generosity of the owner, who wishes to remain anonymous, I was able to undertake an extensive drive of this car one grey autumn day. The pick-up point was in the centre of Birmingham, which seemed somewhat worrying for so unique a vehicle. I need not have worried – this is a car that I was to feel at home in immediately. Certainly, I thought to myself that if there were any problem areas, the traffic in England's second city would soon cause them to reveal themselves. Needless to say, the car revealed no temperament whatsoever

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and took every traffic situation in its stride. Amazingly, like its predecessor, it seemed drawn to Longbridge but we decided against visiting Rover's hierarchy!

Having driven a factory V8 only a month or so previously, I was immediately impressed by the tautness and overall sharpness of the Costello car. Its handling seemed much more precise than the factory car, particularly in terms of steering which was pin-point accurate. But the biggest revelation was undoubtedly the feel and performance of the suspension, which not only gives a superb ride but provides road holding of the highest order.

Then there is the joy of what wonderful V8. Four-litres of fuel injected response, which provides so much power that driving is a question of looking for

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COSTELLO RETURNS WITH NEW V8 SUPERCAR

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the gaps where you can exploit it to the full. Overtaking is simply a case of assessing the amount of room there is for the V8, never the niggling question as to whether enough power is there to get past in what might otherwise be a marginal situation.

How, I wondered, would the gearbox perform? Clutch pressure was lighter than a normal MGB (another Costello modification which reduces pedal pressure by 50%) and it was almost a culture shock in getting used to a 5-speed gearbox in an Abingdon product. Undeniably, the gearbox which Ken Costello has specially developed for high torque engines has everything that is claimed for. I found that I took a while to get used to the gate, but as soon as I had done so, the changes were crisp and direct. This is a quiet gearbox, and

"The MGB begged to be given its head whenever a few hundred yards of space appeared before it."

there is no intrusive noise whatever gear or engine revs are being employed. A major plus point is that it can be dismantled with a single Allen Key and the engine no longer has to be removed should the clutch require changing.

Driving through the West Midlands it is impossible not to reflect on the virtual extinction of so much of the UK's motor component industry. Ironically, the Costello gearbox is produced in India, by that country's largest gear manufacturer. No-one in the UK was able to provide the manufacturing capability at anything like a competitive price.

The day's driving was to include a considerable amount of urban Birmingham city traffic, fast A roads, motorway and sweeping B roads. In every one of these situations, the MGB was totally at home and it was a car that begged to be given its head whenever a few hundred yards of space appeared before it. One of the great advantages of the V8 engine is the tremendous torque that is available, particularly low down. I was to discover just how usable this torque is when I mistakenly selected fourth instead of second on a steep section of road around Walsall. Uncomplainingly, the V8 pulled from around 10mph before I realised my mistake – some testimony



HEART OF THE MATTER

The power plant of the new Costello V8 MGB GT produces 210bhp, making for a top speed in excess of 125mph and a 0-60 time of 4.5 seconds.

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Surely, having so much power on tap must mean horrendous fuel consumption I thought – isn't that the reason the factory MGB had such disappointing sales? The answer is not what you expect. With the 5-speed box and the exceptionally efficient fuel injection, consumption figures of around 25 mpg are regularly being achieved. This is not so surprising when you consider that at 70mph in fifth, the engine revs are 2,380. Yet while the V8 can prove such a lazy and effortless power unit, it can produce power with a vengeance should you call for it – the 0-60 time is 4.5 seconds. As yet, the engine is not fully run-in and full performance figures have still to be taken. The maximum speed will undoubtedly comfortably exceed that of the factory V8's 125mph.

The MGB Costello V8 is very much a driver's car and I found it really in its element leaving the West Midlands for Bridgnorth on the fast sweeping road where the 'B' could be set up for corner after corner and simply driven through without drama or body roll. In such a situation, you can appreciate the enormous amounts of power that are available, yet there is never the impression that the chassis and suspension cannot handle it. Unlike some muscle cars, this is potent power in a very safe and predictable handling package.

I handed over the keys to this vehicle

very reluctantly – it is one that would be a wonderful continental tourer and I could just imagine what a superb vehicle it would make for something like the Stelvio Pass. Yet, as I was driven back into Birmingham, the docility and tractability, not to mention the sheer comfort of the Costello V8, made me think that this was undoubtedly a car whose use would be difficult to confine to high days and holidays.

Summing up the day, I rated the experience as one of my happiest motoring memories of 1991 – even the licensee of our lunchtime watering hole had the name of Costello, how's that for coincidence?

THE FUTURE

Ken Costello is prepared to produce V8 conversions of this calibre on a 'to order' basis. Prices will obviously be dependent on a final specification chosen by a purchaser, but a guide price would be in the region of £25,000.

However, what other hand-built supercar could be acquired for so little? Every Costello V8 comes with its own individual chassis plate and a certificate of authenticity – this is undoubtedly one of the most collectable MGs you could ever aspire to.

Ken Costello can be contacted at Costello Engineering, PO Box 258, Swanley, Kent, BR8 8LQ.