

To V or not to V?

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That is a question which has at some time or another crossed the minds of many MGB owners, who are keen to move on to a car with better all-round sports car performance and see the V8-engined MG as their next choice.

So what are the alternatives if you are among their ranks? This article aims to assess the two options open to a potential V8 owner and set out a few more details about the increasingly popular second choice, that of an engine conversion.

The first thing to bear in mind is that there are not cheap ways around the problem. The V8s are expensive pieces of machinery, and you are going to have to dig fairly deep into your pockets if you plan to own one as a serious proposition.

To start with, you can of course buy a used MGB GT V8 on the open market. The pitfalls of doing so are clear, since the last model rolled off the Abingdon production line in 1976, and you are therefore dealing with a fairly old car that can be extremely expensive to repair and maintain as the problems associated with old age begin to set in.

Furthermore, with only 2,591 made, the cars that are available are getting rarer and so are becoming more pricey.

A quick survey of recent asking prices showed an average of £3,200 to £3,450 across cars of all conditions, with a price tag of more like £4,000 onwards in the case of better examples and those which have undergone expensive restoration work.

In comparison with its contemporaries, the V8 changes hands much less frequently. They can of course be found in the For Sale columns every month, although be warned that competition can often be fierce for them. Dealer sales are perhaps the most limited source of all – and sometimes an area of danger for the unwary buyer.

A complete Mk-1 Costello V8 engine bay.

SU carburetors clearly visible with Ken Costello's pipework. Remote oil filter to bottom right.



The last MGB GT V8 I saw offered for sale on a garage forecourt was a decidedly sorry looking specimen, its alloy wheels dulled and dirty, its bodywork hastily patched up and the mileage recorded suspiciously low. It could have been mine for £3,000, the dealer informed me. If you are thinking about the second alternative, that of a V8 conversion, first make sure you have an understanding bank manager. With a price tag of around £2,500, the cost is enough to punch a sizeable hole in most wallets.

Furthermore, the bill increases to the £3,500 mark if you own a chrome bumper MGB, since the earlier models require modifications to the engine bay before the mighty V8 unit is shoehorned into place.

What, then, do you get for your money? The conversion process, as carried out by the V8 Conversion Company of Orpington, Kent, is undoubtedly a fairly comprehensive job, involving changes to the standard 1800cc MGB cooling system, clutch, exhaust system and carburetion in addition to the new engine.

The firm also recommends a different rear axle, to give higher cruising speeds, better economy and greater low-speed torque, together with a lowering of the ride height on the rubber bumper models to improve handling. But, concentrating for our present purposes solely on the engine conversion, this is a rough outline of the process by which a bit of fire is breathed into the MGB.

A complete Mk-2 Costello V8 engine bay.

Rear-facing SU carbs and remote oil filter.



On chrome bumper cars, the firm first fits new chassis rail engine mounts and modifies the steering shaft to avoid obstruction to the V8 exhaust manifold, before removing the original radiator mountings and fitting the later type. Both the front pan and front bulkheads are then cut away and the brake light switch resisted. Having completed this first step, the engine bay is ready to take the V8 unit in the same way as the later MGB models.

While the converted car retains its existing four speed overdrive gearbox, it is mated to the new engine by means of an adaptor plate, and the original 1800 B flywheel is machined to take and MGC cover plate. Several MGB GT components complete the modification of the clutch system, and the standard 1800cc starter motor is retained and mounted on the adaptor plate.

After preparing engine mountings to take the Rover engine, the cooling system is next on the list. An additional cooling fan is fitted, together with either a V8 radiator or modifications to the existing radiator outlets. A Kenlowe control is used to operate the cooling fans, and the top and bottom hoses are from the MGB GT V8.

A new exhaust manifold is required, before the battle of the bulge is fought out with the carburetion system. MGB owners have in practice showed a marked dislike for the bulged bonnet that is necessary to accommodate the standard Rover system. This being so, an American inlet with an adaptor and twin SU carburetors were installed at first.

A factory MGBGT undergoing conversion to Costello V8 power.



However, these were later abandoned due to poor lower speed torque, and the only easily available system which clears the bonnet was found to be the American duel port Offenhauser inlet and Holley or Carter four barrel carburetor. This system is a little more costly, but overcomes the difficulty.

As with the Abingdon V8s, a remote oil filter is used due to shortage of space, and this is mounted on the inner wing. This, apart from a few other points such as the recalibration of the tachometer, completes the conversion. The result is a car whose advantages become obvious as soon as you get it out on the road – and one which could become a sound investment I time, according to **David Vale** of V8 conversions.

“The converted cars are much faster than the original V8s, because there were detuned by Leyland. You can also expect a long lifespan from these engines; I think the record is around 145,000 miles. Finding parts for the Leyland cars can also be a problem sometimes; we are rebuilding V8 at the rate of about one a month just now. But the real advantage of the conversion is where the roadster is concerned, because no V8 roadsters were ever built. There is a big market for them, and we have heard of them going for up to £6,000 each,” he said.

However, the chances are that most MG owners considering such a move will be largely interested in the difference it will make to performance.

A helpful comparison for them can be found in the days when classic British sports cars were still being manufactured. At that time, in the early 1970s, the originator of the V8 conversion, Ken Costello, used to proudly boast that his cars could out-run Jaguar E-Types up to 100mph, and possessed a theoretical top speed of 140mph. This achievement – possible because of vastly increased BHP and torque and an engine

actually lighter than the MGB unit – should be enough to satisfy the requirements of even the most power hungry drivers.

Converted MGBs outside the V8 Conversion Company in Kent.



In closing, there is however one final alternative for the MGB enthusiast still bent on owning a V8, but daunted by the cost. The V8 conversion Company also markets a kit to do the job yourself, which can be bought for around £1,000 excluding engine. This then leaves the problem of engine selection. With a new Rover V8 engine going for £1200 or more, and a factory rebuilt unit for around £850, many people might instead opt for a used engine from a breaker's yard to cut down on costs.

The original MGB GT V8 used the low compression Range Rover engine, but the higher compression units can be used, with a subsequent increase in power. But if the engine from the SD1 Rover is used, this needs to be fitted with the earlier front crankshaft pulley, waterpump and alternator bracket.