

Remember us talking in SCW April about a guy called Costello who's doing a roaring trade dropping Rover V8s into MGBs? Well, Gordon Wilkins has just driven one for us and he says you should go hide your Porsche 911 and V12 E...

I HAVE just been driving an MGB that can hold its own with Porsches and E-Type Jaguars.

Not a rough and noisy "special" — a car that is much faster and also smoother, quieter and more civilised than the original.

And the formula looks so simple British Leyland must be kicking itself for not having done it long ago.

Take an MGB, lift out the cast iron four-cylinder engine and drop in the light alloy 3.5-litre Rover V8. It weighs no more, so you don't have the handling and steering problems that spoiled the six-cylinder MGC.

Ken Costello, racing driver and race car builder of Costello Engineering, Farnborough, Kent, has now done nearly 40 of them — and has a queue of customers waiting.

The V8 engine goes on very neatly and is surprisingly accessible. Engine mountings are moved forward slightly to keep the gear lever in the same place, a couple of corners are chamfered on the scuttle and the oil filter is moved.

Radiator, clutch, propeller shaft and differential are those used in the MGC, making the axle ratio 3.07 instead of 3.9 to 1.

My standing start acceleration tests had to be done on a damp track with a light powdering of snow, so I had to hold off for some distance to avoid wheelspin but I got 0 to 60 mph in 7.3 seconds, 0-70 in 9.7 and 0-100 in 20 seconds.

In the dry it should be close to far more expensive machines with the benefit of being more economical with an overall fuel consumption of 20-22 mpg. One reason for this is that the engine is having such an easy time — 70 mph in top is a little over 3000 rpm and cruising at 100 in overdrive the engine is doing just over 3500.

The current MG gearbox which was beefed up for the MGC is not a nice one. Lever action is heavy and jerky, but the V8 is so flexible it cuts the need for gear changing, solving the problem somewhat.

In top gear the Costello MG will go from 20 to 80 mph faster than a V12 E-Type Jaguar and from 20 to 100 mph in top it will run away from a Porsche 911 E running in the four of its five gears. Top speed is 125 mph.

The veteran MGB handles this extra performance very well. When forcing it really hard over rough roads a slight amount of body torsion can be felt in the open model but I know other cars that are worse and the GT coupe is more rigid.

The brakes, with special hard pads, cope very well though they did smell hot after one spell of hard driving on winding roads.

Costello is converting owners' MGs for 975 Pounds (SA2145). He keeps the original engine, fits new grille and badges and makes all necessary modifications adding a glass fibre bonnet with hump to clear the carburettors.

There are other plans in hand including a through-flow ventilation system for the coupe. The standard exhaust is retained but the smoother entry is said to give several bhp more than from the same engine in the Rover car.

Top British Leyland executives including Lord Stokes have tried it and are enthusiastic. Future

progress depends on British Leyland making parts available so that Costello can deliver new MGB V8s instead of converting existing cars.

When General Motors sold the Buick light alloy V8 designs to Rover it stipulated the engine should not be sold to other car manufacturers. An exception was made in the case of the V8 Morgan.

This agreement is due to expire any day now, but in any case it is questionable whether it would be enforced against MG now that it is part of the same group as Rover. A new-car deal sponsored by British Leyland could bring the price down sharply... and the market is waiting, there's no doubt of that. One Swiss dealer alone is said to be waving an order for 200 cars.

Let's hope he gets them, and that there'll be plenty more to go around too.

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