



CCW'S STAND CAR DRIVEN MGB V8 'COSTELLO'

ANGER MANAGEMENT

MG thought that a 'B with a V8 would be too unruly – but that didn't prevent Ken Costello from creating his own. We try a survivor for size to find out whether Abingdon missed a trick



There's something wonderfully rewarding about winding an MGB up to a contented chatter and then letting it whisk you along leafy B-roads en-route to a picturesque canal-side pub – but this car doesn't do that. No, really – it's much more exciting than that.

You don't even need to get too close to Richard Fairclough's beautifully restored 1971 roadster to know that this is the sort of MG that would probably earn itself a restraining order were it left to its own devices. We wouldn't be at all surprised if it started picking fights with the Pride of Ownership contenders next to it in Hall 3 once the NEC's doors had been locked and everyone had gone home for the night. You just know from its rumbustious bonnet bulge, chunky Wolfrace alloy wheels and flared rear wheelarches that HJF 909 has a bit of an unruly streak about it.

Certainly Abingdon thought that it would be too mischievous to make into a fully-

WORDS David Simister PHOTOGRAPHY Stuart Collins

fledged, factory-backed reality – its engineers had experimented with the idea of an al fresco 'B powered by a Rover 3.5-litre V8, but concluded that the bodysheet wasn't stiff enough, and focused solely on the GT instead.

But MG's loss is racer and tuner Ken Costello's gain, because this car proves that stuffing 145bhp into a roadster shell really does work.

There's a moment of near-shock when you clamber into the 'B's familiar surroundings, stretch your legs in that long footwell and flick the ignition key. For a split-second it's unsettling when you expect the throaty hum of a B-Series teamed up with a pair of SU carburettors and instead the deep, bass-heavy thump of a Detroit-sired V8 batters your eardrums. But the instant you glance down the bonnet dominated by that bulge, you realise that V8 thunder and the nation's biggest-selling roadsters are curiously comfortable bedfellows.

Getting the Costello up to speed is the really enjoyable bit – flick the chunky gearlever into second, point it at a suitably straight bit of rural backdrop and the bellow from the beast beneath the bonnet as it surges past 3000rpm is utterly addictive. The way it gathers momentum and thunders towards the next bend is noticeably more urgent than it would be in its four-pot sibling, particularly in the mid-range.

If anything it's even more compelling than Abingdon's own tin-top MGB GT V8; it's hard not to get hooked to that car's Brit muscle car demeanour but in here the decibels, with no coupé bodywork to shield you from what's happening at the business end, seems so much more immediate and exciting. It's a soundtrack that seems to wash over the windscreen and envelop you in its baritone rumble – and make you wish that every journey had a lengthy tunnel somewhere en-route.

But it never feels in any way out-of-sorts when you point its chrome-embellished nose into a bend. You might be prepared for it to judder and flex as a roadster shell designed for far less oomph tries to cope with its beefier internal organs, but it actually feels happy and composed – it's not a package where you'd revel in its delicacy, but it's easily on a par with its B-Series cousins. In fact, when it comes to dealing with the sores and undulations on the asphalt you'd swear that it's actually slightly better.

So while it looks – and more importantly, sounds – like an MG that's up to no good, the real charm of this car is just how great a sports car companion it really is. It'll do everything you ask of it on those country lane outings, but it makes the experience so much more exciting.

The factory MGB GT V8 may be a deeply addictive Abingdon classic – but the Costello Roadster is a better one.

A 44-YEAR LOVE AFFAIR

Owner Richard Fairclough's involvement with this car – which he affectionately calls Elvis – goes back to 1974, when his friend became its original owner and invited him along on a 3000-mile European tour, venturing as far as the former Yugoslavia.

The friend sold the car three years later, but when Richard came across a classified ad for a 'rare Costello roadster' in 1985 he encountered it once again, and liked the car so much that he decided to buy it himself, using it on daily driving duties for the next six years.

Richard took it off the road in the early 1990s, but had it recommissioned in 2006 when his daughter, Helen, announced that he wanted to use it at her wedding. It was resprayed in its current Jasper Blue paintwork – a Mercedes-sourced shade – during the ensuing £15,000 restoration.

Richard subsequently gave the car to Helen as a wedding present, and since then it's been kept for classic car runs and weekends away.

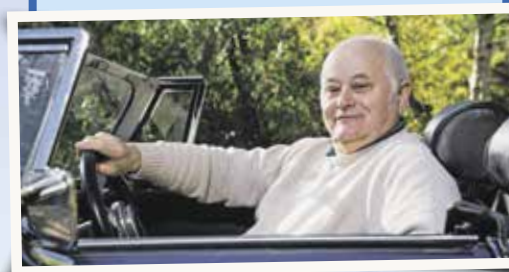
It appeared at the MGB's 50th anniversary celebrations back in 2012, but it's only now that this rare conversion – one of only five surviving Costello Mk1 roadsters – has appeared at the NEC.



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Ken Costello didn't produce a brochure for the car, but distributed this leaflet, packed with complimentary quotes from period road tests.

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BUYING TIPS

- IT SHOULD STAY COOL**
V8 MGs – Costello-conversions and factory GTs alike – can get a little warm if they've been sitting idle for a while, but watch out for cars that refuse to stay cool. Don't be surprised by cars with aftermarket bonnet louvres or additional fans.
- LOOK OUT FOR RUST**
V8s rust in exactly the same places as their four-pot siblings, so be sure to inspect the sills, rear wings, front and rear valances and bottoms of the A-pillars carefully. Heritage replacement parts are available off the shelf – even a whole bodysheet – but the costs can quickly mount up.
- IS IT THE REAL DEAL?**
V8 'Bs command a premium over the four-cylinder models, but don't pay over the odds for an aftermarket conversion masquerading as a factory-converted GT or Costello car. If in doubt, get an expert second opinion.
- CHECK THE EXHAUST**
Look carefully at the exhaust manifolds for signs of cracks, particularly the flanges on the downpipes, which are a known weak spot. Some V8s have been fitted with tubular manifolds instead but they can be of a poor quality, so inspect them carefully for signs of premature wear.

FROM AUSTRALIA TO ABINGDON

THE V8 'B's EVOLUTION

While it's Ken Costello who is most readily associated with the MGB's V8 derivatives, he wasn't actually the first person to try to endow an MGB with 3.5-litre Rover V8 power. In 1967 – the same year in which the engine debuted in the P5B – Mark Keeley, an Australian importer of US cars, fitted an earlier Oldsmobile-sourced version of the engine to his own MGB, which he mated to automatic transmission. While Australian magazine *Sports Car World* praised the conversion, calling it 'a genuine flyer', it remained a one-off.

Ken's involvement with V8 'Bs came about two years later, when the Kent-based Mini racer and tuner spotted a spare engine at the premises of Piper Engineering, quickly realised that it could be used to create a go-faster MG with better weight distribution than the MGC then on sale, and found an MGB-owning friend happy to lend him a car with which to experiment. Like the Australian creation, Costello's conversion was based on Oldsmobile's version of the V8 – which he believed was stronger than Buick's, used as the basis for the later Rover engines.

A second car, built that November, used a Rover P6-sourced V8, with the top-mounted SU carburettors dictating

the bonnet bulge now associated with the Costello-conversions.

Ken promoted the converted cars by lending them to the press throughout 1971 – and it wasn't long before British Leyland took an interest, with the manufacturer donating him a Harvest Gold 'B GT and another P6-sourced V8 as an officially-commissioned car. BL had experimented with its own V8-engined MGBs but – according to an internal memo from chief engineer, Charles Griffin, to Lord Stokes – had concluded that the car would have to be widened by 3.5 inches to accommodate the engine.

While BL's experts were impressed with the conversion, the company's position changed the following year, and in 1972 *Autocar* reported that Ken's outfit was facing various difficulties, with supplies of V8 engines being withheld.

A BL-endorsed official conversion, the MGB GT V8, was launched the following year, with a price that undercut the Costello-converted cars. Demand eventually dried up, although Ken did briefly revisit the idea in the late 1980s with 'Bs powered by 3.9-litre EFI V8s – again pre-empting MG itself, which launched the 3.9-litre RV8 in 1992.



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HOW THEY COMPARE COSTELLO V8 vs BL V8



MGB COSTELLO V8

ENGINE 3528cc/V8/OHV **POWER** 150bhp@5000rpm **TORQUE** 201lb ft@2750rpm
MAXIMUM SPEED 128mph **0-60MPH** 7.8 seconds **FUEL CONSUMPTION** 22-29mpg
TRANSMISSION RWD, four-speed manual + O/D



MGB GT V8

ENGINE 3528cc/V8/OHV **POWER** 137bhp@5000rpm **TORQUE** 193lb ft@2900rpm
MAXIMUM SPEED 125mph **0-60MPH** 8.6 seconds **FUEL CONSUMPTION** 22-29mpg
TRANSMISSION RWD, four-speed manual + O/D

OIL SPECIFICATIONS ENGINE OIL Castrol Classic XL20w/50 – 4.5 litres
GEARBOX OIL Castrol Classic EP90 – 3.4 litres **AXLE OIL** Castrol Axle EPX 80w/90 – 0.8 litres

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THE CCW VIEW



DAVID SIMISTER EDITOR

The fact that Rover Group revisited Ken Costello's idea of a Rover V8-engined 'B roadster with the RV8 shows you just how compelling this car is – in fact, it's tempting to think that this might have given Abingdon a useful shot in the arm had it been followed up with a factory-backed sibling to the GT V8. Not only does this 'B do everything with a delightful soundtrack, but it still retains enough of the four-cylinder car's sensible streak to make it more than usable enough on show visits and long weekends away. We love it.

SECOND SHOUT



CHIRS HOPE FEATURES EDITOR

With no factory-built V8-engined MGB roadsters, all this car does is reinforce just how much better Britain's favourite sport car would have been had its range been fully extended with both open and closed bodies powered by the venerable Rover powerplant. The bubble-like bulge on the bonnet instantly sets this car apart from other MGBs that have been the subject of conversions while Richard's heart-warming story only adds to this car's appeal. It was a pleasure to spend an afternoon with this fantastically potent machine.