Eric Holliman examines the MGB GT V8, and drives two very different examples.

# MGB GT V8 PROFILE

MGB GT V8 ...

HAD Rover been part of BMC in 1965 when MG and the buying public was looking for a performance sportscar, it is likely that the six cylinder MGB project that became the MGC would have been stillborn. For it was one of Rover's executives that stumbled across, quite by chance, an all-alloy engine made between 1960 and 1963 by General Motors. American casting techniques of iron wall engines had improved considerably by that time and the alloy V8 engine was a production oddball. With space at a premium under all British bonnets, the benefits were recognised immediately by Rover, who began production under licence in 1967; the same year as the MGC was announced. A year later, Rover and BMC merged to become British Leyland. Although the weights of the V8 unit and 'B' series cast engine were the same and the all important cubic capacities in a ratio of almost 2:1, no-one in the design office had seemingly made the connection. Ken Costello, an ex-mini ace proliferated, obviously impressed by the way the transplant had been effected. Early models needed a macho bulge in the bonnet to accommodate the only carbs available to him, tall SUs. This was soon overcome with the help of a specially-designed inlet manifold utilising the side draught Weber carburation system. These early Costello cars had a distinctive egg-box grille made for them and once the initial prototypes had been built, a small production line was set up, converting both new and customer's own MGBs. Such was the demand for new hybrids, Ken Costello made a request to BL for a supply of engine-less MGBs which was turned down. By now, the interest had turned to jealousy and they even stopped supplying him with new V8 engines and initiated a hurried development programme of their own at Abingdon, Even this did not stop Costello; he simply sent a truck to Belgium where genuine Buick blocks were freely available and brought units. It was one of those rare moments in the Motor Industry when a big wheel was forced to move by the actions of a very small cog. However, as Ken Costello had used Rover SD1 components in his hybrid, the low-compression factory V8 could not match it for performance.

## Costello

Unlike Costello, Abingdon had considered that whilst the GT bodyshell was strong enough to handle the extra torque produced from the alloy power unit, the roadster was not. There was much opposition to even just a MGB GTV8 from within the BL organisation, particularly from the Triumph contingent. This V8 would have better performance than their recently announced six cylinder TR6 and have an adverse effect on sales. Neither could they see the point of marketing a revamped fixed head coupe; the TR7 being designed from the outset to be a coupe capable of being fitted with the same V8 block. However, Lord Stokes had his way and production was planned for August 1973 using a modified MGC gearbox, until at least the TR7 V8 was ready. Sadly, these were difficult times for any manufacturer to sell cars. At the launch, the Israeli-Arab confrontation was imminent and within two months, they were at war. Shock waves were sent out in the form of escalating oil prices resulting in a speed limit the grounds of federal emission controls and the British Leyland dealers also handled all marques and feared a drastic fall in sales of both Jaguar 'E' type and Triumph Stag. The left-hand drive model therefore never got past the prototype stage (with only seven built), effectively even denying the car the continental market. In line with US Federal restrictions forced onto the MGB, the V8 was 'facelifted' with upgraded suspension and rubber bumpers early in 1975 after only around 1,800 (chrome bumpered) cars had been built. Although the MGB continued until 1980 when Abingdon was closed down, production of the V8 ceased in 1976 after a total of only 2,591 cars being built. The V8 story is one punctuated by the words 'if only'. If only Rover had been part of BMC in 1965. If only it hadn't been released onto a market suffering from spiralling petrol prices. If only Leyland had followed Costello's lead to the letter and produced V8 roadsters as well as GTs. If only American dealers had not been so mindful of the damage the V8 would have undoubtedly done to their

... and a V8 Roadster

inoperative in 3rd; the text notes for this lifted straight out of Costello's 'expensive experiences' notebook ...! A larger diameter prop shaft drove an MGC final drive fitted with a lower gearing. Stiff rear springs and larger front discs were felt necessary whilst under the bonnet, an uprated Lockheed brake servo was squeezed in against the bulkhead. At the other end of the engine, the plumbing changes were comprehensive. A larger radiator set further forward had its effectiveness increased still further with the addition of two electric cooling fans. Specially-designed inlet and twinned exhaust manifolds completed the V8 package. A legacy that the Factory V8 left was the provision of all rubber-bumper bodyshells to readily accept the alloy unit. Conversion using any post-'75 MGB bodyshell is therefore made a somewhat more straightforward task than the one that faced Ken Costello back in 1969.

## Buying an MGB GT V8

Although Costello cars are occasionally available, the operative word is 'occasionally'. These now is worth noting that even though the engine bay is more spacious than in the pre-1973 bodyshells, both exhaust manifolds are still quite close to their respective chassis rails. When starting, the left hand one can foul if the engine mounts are not in good condition, causing a crack to appear. Availability is certainly no easier now that it was and many V8s owners have elected to replace their broken cast units with mild steel tubular manifolds.

Without doubt, the V8s Achilles heel is its drivetrain. Such is the torque produced and the speed of which it is delivered to the rear wheels plays havoc with the mechanical components in between. A stripped 3rd gear is common, as is a differential.

With fewer teeth than Alf Garnett. The annoying part about this phenomenon is that it does not build up . . . it just goes BANG and happens. That's when you'll need a very flexible friend, a very sympathetic bank manager and a VERY understanding marital partner!

## Spares, Prices and Availability

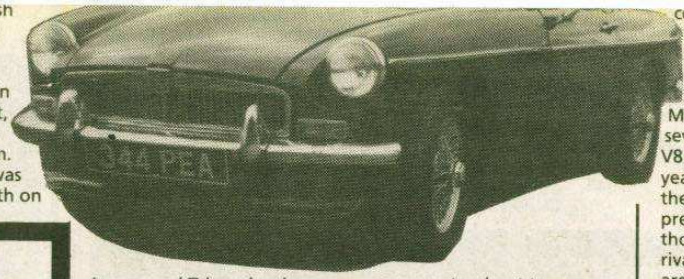
There is basically nothing that should keep an MGB GTV8 off the road, although if the car is being prepared for concours, some

driver and garage proprietor from Kent had and as early as 1970, began offering a new 3.5 litre MGB for as little as £1,000 over the standard Abingdon 1800cc offering.

At first, Leyland watched with interest as these Costello V8's

back as many as he could! These he stripped, acid-dipped and finally bored out to accept Rover parts. Using these tactics, a steady stream of Costello conversions left the factory up until Leyland introduced their Abingdon versions with Range Rover-derived

being imposed on British roads of 50mph. Ford's three-litre Capri was establishing itself by creating its own niche in the sporting car market, offering performance, reliability with leg room. The American market was denied this new V8, both on



Jaguar and Triumph sales. Whilst the MGC was fitted with the last power unit to be designed for an MG, the V8 always fitted easier into the engine bay and gave the marque, (until the far more recent Maestro Tickford Turbo) its fastest production sportscar.

Whilst the bodyshell was basically identical to the standard MGB, subtle cosmetic changes for the V8 gave away its 'Wolf in sheep's clothing' identity. Dunlop wheels with 175 x 14in tyres similar to those fitted to the Reliant Scimitar replaced the rostyle or wire wheels of the 1800cc model. Three V8 badges were fitted; one on the grille, one on the nearside front wing and one on the boot. Interior wise, the V8 had some important differences. An energy absorbing steering column was incorporated, necessitating a smaller speedometer and rev counter. Tinted Sundym glass fitted all round completed the obvious changes. The V8 engine was mated to an MGC box, modified in that it had to take a larger clutch and was given higher intermediate gears to withstand the greater torque. For the same reason, overdrive was uprated and made

rare cars tend not to come on the market too often and were often constructed using consumables available at the time, generalisations are difficult. On the other hand, the 2,591 factory V8s are a more consistent commodity although it must be remembered that the youngest will be nearly 14-years-old. In the main, buying criteria are not dissimilar to those used for the 1800cc B; not surprising really when it shares so much common tooling and body processes.

The V8 engine should be, on the whole, a clean unit: beware therefore one that is covered in oil. Listen out for tapping noises from around the inlet manifold. The hydraulic cam followers tend to last a mere 50,000 miles and replacement is quite an expensive pastime; it being wise to replace the rocker shafts at the same time. The water pump is also prone to failure, having a dull rumble when worn. Oil pressure is critical on a V8; not necessarily a high reading but a constant one. Rarely does a figure exceeding 40 psi register which can drop to 10 psi on tick-over. It is however crucial that a constant 30 psi is maintained when under normal driving conditions. It

compromises may have to be made. Cast exhaust manifolds are getting as rare as proverbial rocking horse manure and stocks of MGC rear axles have been severely depleted since the V8 ones disappeared many years ago. Parts unique to the V8 tend to carry a premium but nothing like those of its contemporary rivals the 'E' type or TR6 and are peanuts compared with comparable parts of a Big Healey.

So far as purchase prices are concerned, these are irrevelant. By that I mean no V8 should be bought on a budget but bought because you want one! The car does not respond well to economy of either replacement parts or maintenance. For instance, it is recommended that the oil is changed every 3,000 miles to avoid damage to the aforementioned hydraulic cam followers. That said, it should be possible to purchase a good example of a genuine Abingdon car for as little as £8,000 or less. Converted cars tend to be a little less, obviously depending upon the standard and age of conversion. Costello cars can command considerably higher sums although one sold at auction during 1990 failed to reach its modest reserve.

Prices have remained static for the last couple of years, not even keeping pace with the MGC but this is likely to change as soon as interest rates begin to fall. Before handing over your hard-earned cash; use your own intuition as to how the vendor has maintained the car whilst in his possession.

## Driving impressions of two V8s

The first model driven was to be a late chrome bumpered Factory GT version owned by Steve Stone of Sheffield. The second, a roadster had been converted some years ago by Philip Fletcher, also of Sheffield. Whilst the latter had no pretentions of being a Costello car; Philip had elected to use the high compression Rover SD1 saloon car unit for his hybrid and shares much of that original 'Mr C' concept.

The Factory V8 had recently been restored in Steve's own surburban garage at which time he elected to transform the steering with the fitting of a handling kit. On the road, the car was indeed easier to control round bends than any of my succession of 2 litre 'B's had ever been. The acceleration was not dynamic, rather being adequate for the demands I asked of the car. Low-down torque was quite enlightening; one felt the car would pull away from stationary in 3rd if called upon to do so. Although not one of the earliest cars produced at Abingdon, it had an overdrive in 3rd and top which suggested it had been changed at some time. The stress that would have been put on the gearbox if operated in normal 'B' circumstances would only have been matched by the stress showing on Steve's face! A recent rolling-road analysis had shown a reading of 140 bhp available at the wheels which was probably higher than what it would have had when it left the factory. This was almost certainly due to the performance exhaust manifold and K&N filters, rather than a up-rated engine. The smoothness of the ride was very noticeable, not 'choppy' as period road tests suggest with handling as a whole being totally predictably with brakes being more than sufficient.

The second car had been built around a new Abingdon shell of late design two years before Heritage brought out their replacement. As the donor car had been a 1964 wire-wheeled roadster and Philip wished to retain as much originality as possible, he had the missing sections below the tail-light cluster and side-light holes welded up before taking delivery of the bare shell. The result was a car that looked for all the world like a standard 'B' but went like a hornet! Although built as a V8 roadster, on the road there was no evidence whatsoever of the flexing that had concerned the Leyland management in the early 70s. Acceleration was crisp and instantaneous, idling happily at 800 rpm. Here too, low-down torque was very noticeable making gear changing almost redundant. Possibly because of the absence of a roof, this car felt faster than the GT and demonstates how relatively simple it could be to produce a very controllable performance sportscar in 1991.

As is readily known, the combination of fitted valve inserts and relatively low compression ratios mean all V8s can run on standard unleaded fuel with no effect on performance whatsoever. Both the test cars are run in this way and each return nearly 30 mpg on a run which is when the V8 is in its element. It is ironic that when released by BL in the early 1970s, it was considered a gas guzzler; now it's environmentally friendly!