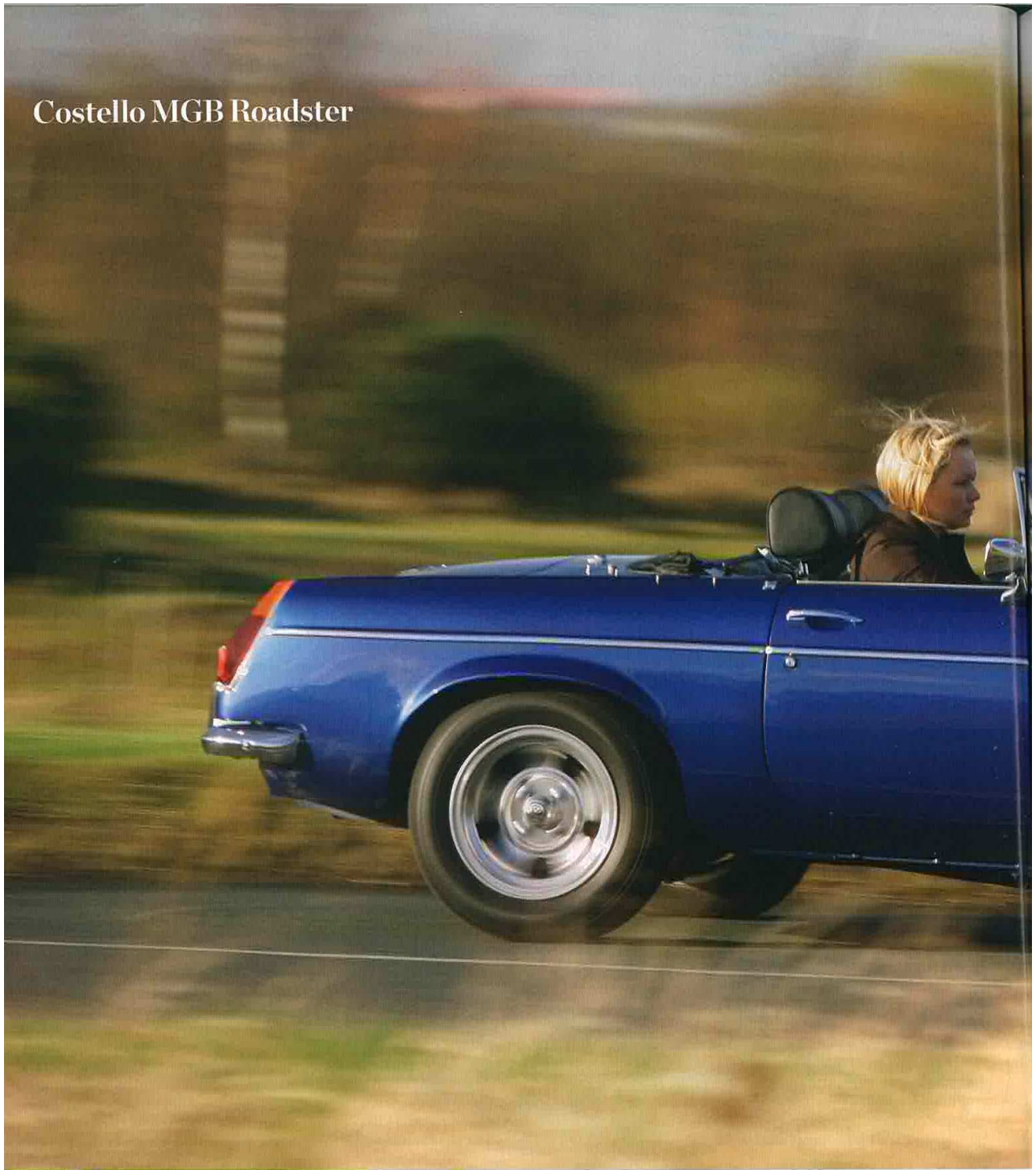


Costello MGB Roadster



# MULTI-CYLINDERED SWAP SHOP

*It took enterprising engineer and racer Ken Costello to transform the MGB into a real performance car – and in roadster form it's clear how big a trick Leyland missed*

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Scanning the price lists back in 1972 a successful young chap – longish hair, sideburns, matching paisley pattern shirt and tie – would have found quite a few performance cars to catch his eye. Marcos, TVR and Gilbern all offered accomplished coupés with Ford V6 power. There was the Datsun 240Z, the Lotus Elan Sprint, Reliant's Scimitar and BMW's 2002Tii – even, theoretically at least, a three-litre Ginetta G21. You could get any of them for around £2000, about twice the price of a Ford Cortina. But there was one drawback: they all had fixed roofs.

Roadster options were limited: Triumph's TR6 was old hat, Alfa's Spider wasn't quick enough and Morgan's Plus 8 was

fast but impractical. The venerable MGB wasn't in the same performance league with its cast-iron four-pot motor and mere 95bhp, and the nose-heavy, six-cylinder MGC had already been quietly forgotten.

But there was an alternative: racer turned road car tuner Ken Costello was turning out a steady stream of reworked MGBs with all-alloy Rover V8 engines, which transformed the 'B' into a serious performance car.

TV and radio journalist Roger Cook, of *Checkpoint* and later *The Cook Report* fame, was one of Costello's customers. 'Ken is a bit of a boffin and not a great organiser, so dealing with him could be a bit frustrating – but was always worth the wait,' Cook remembers. 'He was very good at what he did

## Costello MGB Roadster



Hot stuff: Leyland thought the MGB was too small for a V8 – Costello proved otherwise

### LEYLAND MISSED A VITAL TRICK WHEN IT OPTED NOT TO BUILD A V8 ROADSTER

because he's a talented engineer and also a very good driver.'

The idea for the transplant came when Costello saw an alloy Buick engine on the floor of a friend's garage. 'He found it was actually lighter than the BMC B-series engine used in the MG – I think he even managed to pick it up,' says Cook. 'He then set about inserting one in an MGB, carefully modifying the firewall, steering column and so on.'

Only minor changes to the bulkhead and

engine bay were needed to clear the V8, and the steering column needed an extra universal joint.

Initially the specification included a bespoke glassfibre bonnet with a massive bulge to clear the carburettor dashpots, but later Costello developed his own manifold for a sidedraught Weber carburettor – although unnecessary, some customers fitted the bonnet anyway. Costello buyers could also choose an aluminium 'eggbox' grille, wide Dunlop wheels with cast alloy centres and steel rims, and glassfibre wheel

### A COSTELLO CALLED ELVIS

**Y**ou don't have to think too deeply to work out why Helen Massey's MG is known as Elvis: 'Because it's a Costello,' she says.

Dad Richard Fairclough first experienced the car in 1974 when he shared it with first owner Ricky Archbell on a European tour. It had the standard MG grille, Wolfrace wheels, a Buick-block V8 and Jaguar Azure Blue paint.

'Ricky just liked strange cars,' recalls Richard. 'It was an absolute beast to drive, just a phenomenal experience. The power-to-weight ratio was

amazing. I vowed there and then that if ever I could afford one, I had to have one.'

Nine years later Richard found that same car, repainted Teal Blue and not in the greatest condition, advertised for sale at £3500. 'My wife Liz and I went straight there and we bought it the following morning.'

The Costello saw regular use, Liz often picking up five-year-old Helen from school in it.

Eventually rust attacked the 'B's sills, and changing circumstances meant the car was off the road for nearly ten years. The impetus for its

restoration came from Helen's impending marriage. 'She said she'd rather like to go on honeymoon in it,' says Richard, who gave her the car as a birthday present on condition she had it restored.

Family friend Paul Tennant was entrusted with the work. 'They were worried about the engine, as it hadn't been run for so long,' says Helen. The V8 proved sound, though, and within nine months the car was ready to run. Disaster struck on Helen's wedding day when the



alternator failed, but a new one was fitted in short order.

Since then Elvis has seen plenty of top-down motoring. 'I like the wind blowing through my hair rather than relying on air conditioning,' says Helen. 'And you can see more when the roof's down.'



**Bonnet power hump, wheelarch extensions and Wolfrace wheels – the height of Seventies fashion**

arch extensions let into the rear wings. The definitive specification also included an MGC radiator, MGC gearbox (which by then was also fitted to standard MGBs), a larger 9.5in clutch and a 3.07:1 MGC final drive. It was a potent package.

About 41kg lighter than a standard MGB thanks to the all-alloy engine and glassfibre bonnet and with nearly 60 per cent more power, the 150bhp Costello V8 was considerably faster than both the standard MGB and the MGC. It could scorch to 60mph from rest in less than eight seconds and hit nearly 130mph – enough to see off the 240Z, TR6, even a Porsche 911T. Magazine road tests in 1972 were hugely positive and most writers couldn't fathom why Leyland wasn't building the same car itself.

Costello was kept busy with orders despite the conversion's major drawback: cost. Cars rolled out of his workshop in Farnborough, Kent, weighed down by price tags of more than £2600 – more than twice the price of a standard MGB and almost enough to buy a Jaguar E-type V12. You had to be very keen on individuality – or an MG obsessive – to want one.

One enquiry came from Leyland itself. Engineering director Charles Griffin was keen to examine Costello's car to see how the V8 had been fitted into the MGB engine bay, as Leyland's own engineers had decided the car was 6in too narrow for the V8.

'In his naivety, Ken co-operated,' says Roger Cook, 'thereby signing the eventual death warrant for his own product.'



**Standard MG octagon up front ...**



**... but rear badging tells you *this* roadster is something special**

In the summer of 1972 Leyland instructed dealers not to supply any more Rover V8 engines. Costello persevered and for a time there was talk of building a bespoke pushrod V8. In the end, however, he used reconditioned Rover V8s and new engines built up using Buick blocks sourced in Belgium and fitted with Rover internals.

A little over a year later the reason why Leyland had cut off engine supplies became clear: it had been developing its own in-house MGB V8, based exclusively on the BGT's coupé shell. Powered by a low-compression engine, as used by Land Rover, the factory MGB GT V8 was slower than the Costello car and looked less distinctive, thanks to the 'lobster claw' carburettor intakes which fitted under a standard MGB bonnet. But MG's V8 was about £300 cheaper, and overnight Costello's clientele all but melted away.

Which is a shame, because the original idea was spot on and Costello's execution is almost flawless. Sit inside and everything seems familiar – the crackle-black dashboard, the high waistline, the letter-box proportions of the screen. This car has a smaller-than-standard Moto-Lita steering wheel but otherwise, inside at least, it could be any other MGB. The view out gives you the first clue to the car's secret because it's dominated by that bonnet bulge, which is neatly styled to pick up the lines of the standard MGB scuttle air vent.

Fire up the V8 and the bonnet quivers in response to the engine's off-beat idle. The bassy

## Costello MGB Roadster

### 1974 MG MGB Costello V8

**Engine** 3528cc, V8, ohv, two downdraught SU carburettors **Power and torque** 150bhp @ 5000rpm; 201lb ft @ 2750rpm

**Transmission** Four-speed manual with overdrive, rear-wheel drive **Brakes** Discs front, drums rear **Suspension** Front: wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle, leaf springs, lever arm dampers **Steering** Rack-and-pinion

**Weight** 950kg (2100lb) **Performance** Top speed: 130mph; 0-60mph: 8sec (est) **Fuel consumption** 20mpg (est) **Cost new** £2616 **Value now** £10,000

burble is a message of intent. And the Costello delivers.

Heavy steering makes manoeuvring a chore – the smaller steering wheel doesn't help – but on the road there's a delicacy about the way this MGB steers which the standard car lacks. With less weight over the nose and a more even balance, the Costello answers the helm with a keenness most MGB drivers never experience. And it answers the throttle with alacrity, too; performance is in a different league from the factory cars.

But, quick as the Costello is, it's the delivery which is so impressive: it will pull happily in top gear from as little as 1500rpm, surging effortlessly forwards with a delicious growl and without hesitation. You can get close with an MGB GT V8, but the Costello proves that Leyland missed a vital trick when it opted not to build a V8 roadster. If it had, the 'official' MGB V8 could have survived beyond 1976 and might have sold more than a paltry 2591 cars.

Costello, meanwhile, continued developing MGBs into the Eighties, but in all he converted



The ultimate MGB mix: reliability, practicality, V8 punch and panache

only about 230 cars to V8 power. Though the vast majority were GTs, it's the roadster that has the ultimate MGB mix, with looks, reliability, practicality, V8 power and panache. Add rarity, and you're left with only one conclusion: the Costello V8 roadster is the best 'B' that MG never built. Just be glad Ken Cosello did.

THANKS TO: Frontline Developments, 01225 852777, [www.frontlinedevelopments.com](http://www.frontlinedevelopments.com)



Only the small steering wheel distinguishes this car's cabin from a standard MGB

### THE SEVENTIES ENGINE TRANSPANT BUG REMEMBERED

#### Perana Ford Capri

Basil Green Motors in Johannesburg, South Africa slotted 285bhp Mustang V8s into Cortinas and, later, Capris. Can hit 140mph, but woefully underbraked.



Above: three-litre V6 too tardy for your Capri? South Africans fitted five-litre Mustang V8s

#### Atlantis MG Midget

Bedford-based Car Preparations inserted Ford Crossflow engines and all-synchromesh gearboxes into about 50 Spridgets, starting in 1971. A surprisingly cohesive conversion.

#### Del Lines Atlantic Garage

##### Triumph 3000

Ian 'Del' Lines, later of Rover SD1 rallying fame, replaced the iron-block straight-sixes in Triumph saloons and estates with Stag V8s.

#### Hurley Motor Engineering NSU Ro80

Replaced unreliable NSU rotary engines with Ford V4s or V6s. Hurley ended up with so many broken rotaries it began specialising in rebuilding them.