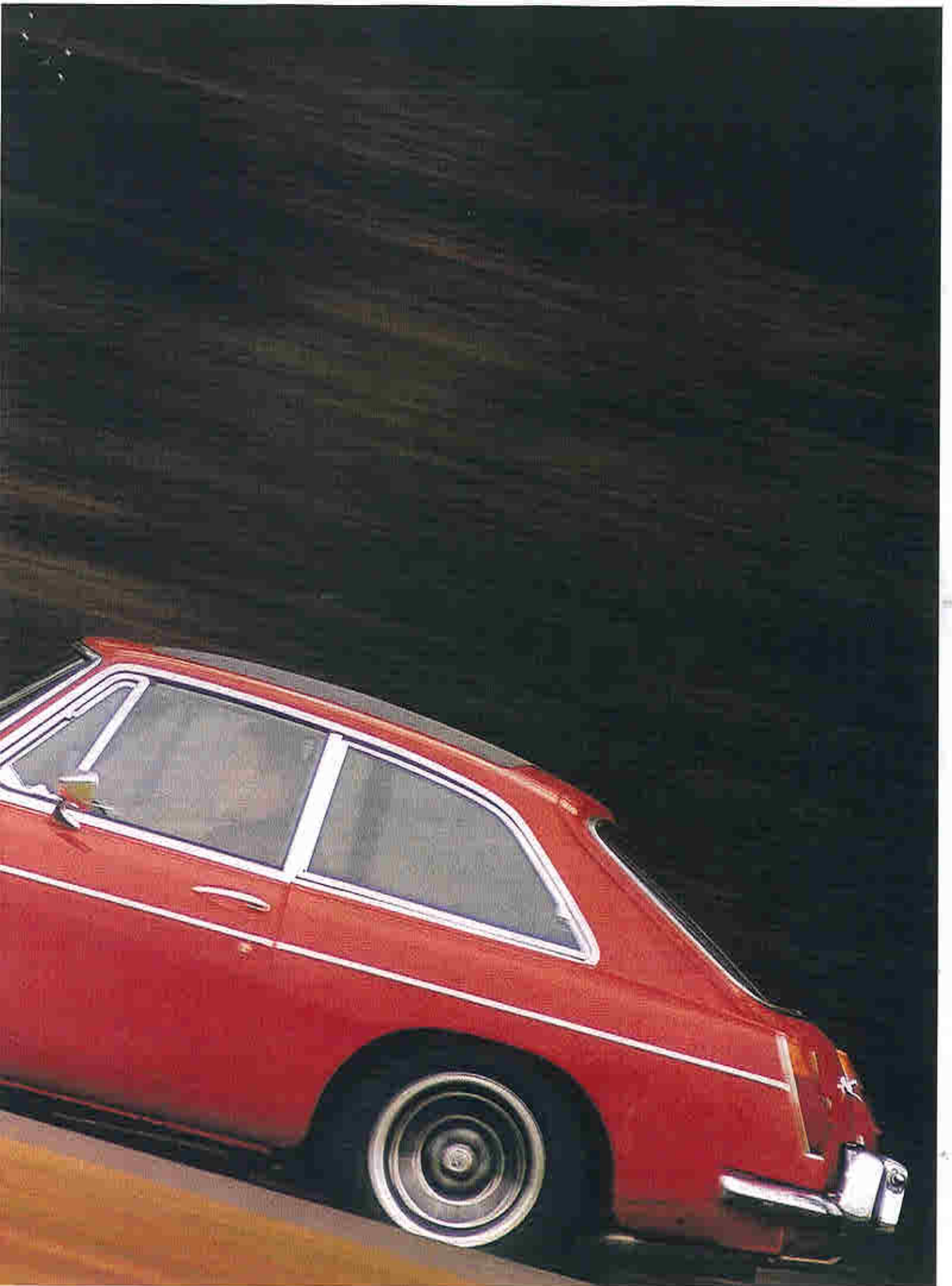


TALENT

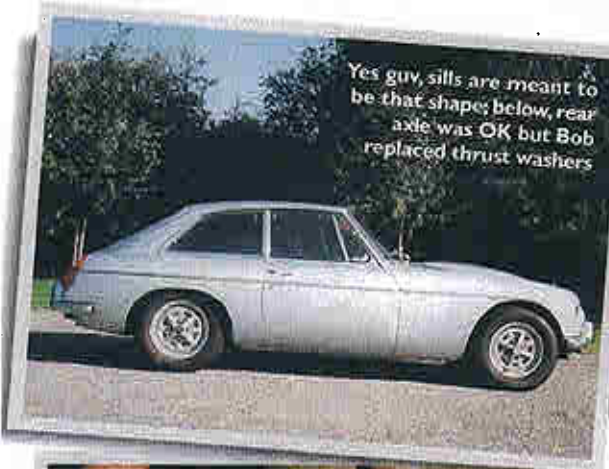
This is no ordinary MGB. it
smokes its tyres and growls.
David Lillywhite discovers
Costello V8 power





BOB CHUTER WIPES A SPECK OF dirt from his MGB GT and complains: "Everyone thinks it's easy to restore MGBs because you can get all the parts. But the parts are crap. They just don't fit." Wife Paula nods in agreement: "I know things haven't fitted – I've heard the language coming from the garage."

But Bob, an RAC engineer, is a perfectionist and his car is no ordinary MGB. That bonnet bulge and painted aluminium egg-box grille identify it as a Costello, the Rover V8-powered creation of Ken Costello that pre-dated the factory MGB GT V8 by some four years. Of the Costellos surviving (well under 100), those in the know regard Bob's as the best.



Yes guv, sills are meant to be that shape; below, rear axle was OK but Bob replaced thrust washers

Grip the Moto Lita wheel. Floor the accelerator. Feel how a 150bhp MG rips up the tarmac



He's moved on to the engine bay now, distracted by the tiniest signs of oxidation on the shiny aluminium. "I'll have a better go at this later," he says between bouts of polishing. "I didn't realise it had got so bad."

In the house, concours trophies twinkle in their display case. Paula emerges with a cup the size of a baby, won at the 1996 Bexhill 100. In the dull, grey light the cup and the MG sparkle as from another world.

Bob closes the glassfibre bonnet, unique to the Costello, pushing down on its edges with obvious annoyance: "The bloody bonnet still doesn't fit – I've spent ages on it."

It looks perfect to me.

Bob's examining the paint. "For more concours it really needs a respray," he claims. "But I'm not going to bother. We like using it instead. What's the point of driving cars 200 miles a year? This does 3,000."

And then he's off, like a man possessed. Into the driver's seat, out of the drive – pause for Paula to jump into the passenger seat (the exhaust catches on the path with two people aboard) and for us to climb into our car – and the MG

has disappeared round the corner. Surely we didn't hear the wheels spin?

At the next road junction we catch up, to be rewarded with a sexy growl from the MG's stainless steel exhaust, followed by a howlingly fast getaway. For a while we can see dirty water being hurled from the wheels on to the previously spotless red bodywork and underside, and then he's off again, pedestrians' heads turning to catch a glimpse of this rorty machine.

It's soon obvious that Bob's car is made of sterner stuff than the 137bhp factory V8s (early Costellos employed the 150bhp P6 version). Bob is in a good position to confirm this, having owned a factory V8 and several 1.8-litre MGBs, as well as a Y-type and four MGAs. "In the Costello you just touch the accelerator and it's off," he grins. "You hardly have to change down and it's quieter than a normal MGB. The brakes

aren't brilliant and the axle skips around but it's more nimble than the factory V8. And it slides well...

"I've owned Triumph Stags, too. The Costello is ten times better: it's faster.



‘It's more nimble than the factory MGB V8. And it slides well...’



From scruffy (inset) to perfect. All it took was a few hundred hours, patience and one near-death experience. Small cost for a Rover V8 to look this good

PHOTOGRAPHY BY COLIN BURNHAM

it handles better and it's much more economical." Then, as an afterthought, he adds: "You're not going to make out that it was easy to restore the Costello just because I've owned so many cars, are you? It's harder to do things properly when you've had loads of cars - you get fed up more quickly."

Bob bought his Costello in October 1991 for £4,000. It was running, with a current MoT, but the sills were banana-shaped, the engine bay messy and the trim damaged. And it had been repainted silver.

Straight into Bob's half-open carport it went, to be stripped of its trim. Then out came the electric sander and off came the paint, right down to the bare metal. "It took forever with the sander but I don't trust chemical strippers," Bob explained. There were nine coats of paint in some parts.

Remarkably, most of the body was sound. The sills had rotted and the 'castle' rails (between inner and outer sills) had been badly bodged but the rear wings were rusty only in their lower sections, escaping →





The bonnet bulge, egg-box grille and dished alloy wheels give clues to identity.

the notorious MGB rust problem in the top seam. Bob says that this helped persuade him to buy the car, because he could retain the original rear wings, along with the rear valance and tailgate. "That's why the panel fit at the back is so good," he adds.

All the same, the bottoms of the wings had to be cut away to replace the sills. Bob MIG-welded these into place, even replicating the factory spot-welds where the repairs were attached to the wheelarch lips. At the front, he had to straighten the accident-damaged nearside wing; the offside was too rusty to save. At the same time Bob replaced the front valance, into which he cut holes for extra cooling.

A new door was bought, trial-fitted, then chucked out. It simply didn't fit properly, so Bob repaired the original instead. One corner of the floor needed a welded repair and he fitted new sills and castle rails.

Bob even sprayed the Costello himself, using a tiny, tankless compressor that he bought in 1977. Five litres of Flame Red cellulose went on; much of it was polished off again in a (successful) bid to get as near as possible to the perfect finish.

Although Bob's life was made easier by the discovery that the engine needed only its core plugs and water pump replacing, his attention to detail filled up the hours. The result is an immaculate engine bay. It was a similar story with the rear axle – there was little wrong with it but Bob stripped it down, replaced the thrust washers and fitted a small split pin as insurance against the pinion-shaft roll pin falling out (which can cause a wrecked axle).

The gearbox was trouble. Having installed the engine and transmission together, Bob found that it jumped out of third gear. Only at the third attempt did he solve the problem, by fitting a stronger detent spring from a Hillman Minx – but not before he narrowly escaped



being crushed when the combined engine and gearbox broke free of their supporting hoist as Bob crawled from under the car.

Having survived that close shave, Bob gave 200 hours of his life (and over £2,000) to the renovation of the interior and exterior trim. Most of it was replaced with new parts – even the chrome tailgate supports – but none fitted to Bob's exacting standards. He cites the carpets as a typical example: "It's the best carpet set that money can buy but it still didn't fit over the wheelarches."

The panels inside the rear pillars were the same: "They never fit – I had them in and out ten times before I was happy. And I'm on my third tailgate seal – each one took four hours to fit. People just don't appreciate how long these things take to get right."

At least Bob's pleased with his set of MAG (Mill Automotive Group) alloy wheels; rare optional extras on Costellos. They are remarkably similar to the wheels fitted to the factory MGB GT V8s that followed but close comparison shows that the MAG wheels are dished inwards at the centre, whereas the factory wheels curve outward.

The Costello treatment is topped off with a new badge, copied from the Costello original by a local engineering firm. It cost £55, much to Bob's disgust: "I hate spending money. I spent £1,000 on the car at first and it looked grand... Then you get carried away." The final cost was £5,500 for the rebuild, on top of the £4,000 purchase price.

Now Bob's just happy to use the Costello, and use it hard. "There's no point having a car like this if you don't thrash it, is there?" He doesn't plan to sell the Costello but, as we are leaving, he grins, glances conspiratorially sideways and whispers, "My neighbour told me to get a new life and a proper car."

With that he crawls under the Costello to begin the long task of cleaning its every nook and cranny. He'll be there for some time. ●

COSTELLO'S ATTRACTIONS

KEN COSTELLO BUILT HIS FIRST V8 MGB IN 1969 AT A time when the MGB was available only with the four-cylinder 1.8-litre engine or, as the MGC, with the heavy, slow-revving six-cylinder 3-litre. The all-alloy Rover V8 transformed it.

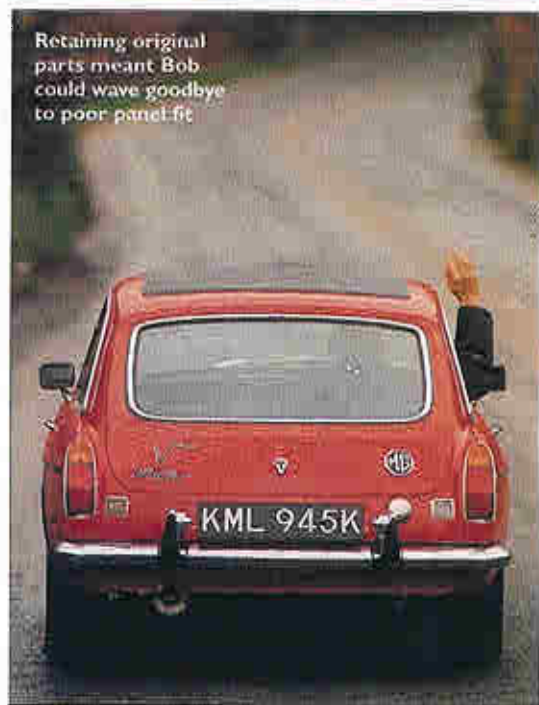
Costello built the first customer car a year later and was soon building one or two V8 GTs and Roadsters a week, charging almost £1,000 for the conversion (the standard MGBs cost about £1,400 new). He used a 150bhp Rover P6 engine mated to the standard MGB gearbox via a larger clutch and an adaptor. The B's axle was beefed up and fitted with the 3.07:1 ratio from the MGC.

The SU carburetors sat high, necessitating a bonnet bulge for clearance. Later Costellos did without the bulge, thanks to a lower, Weber carburettor installation. With a few other modifications, this boosted power to around 185bhp. Even with the SU carbs, a Costello would pull 40mph in first gear, over 120mph in top and 0-60mph in under 8 seconds.

In 1971 British Leyland asked to see the conversion and soon had a prototype built. The result was launched in the summer of '73 with the 137bhp Range Rover-specification V8, in the GT body only. At £2,294 it hit the Costello conversions badly, especially as BL had already ordered its dealers not to supply V8s without taking a unit in part-exchange.

Ken Costello has started producing the conversions again, this time with fuel injection and his own five-speed gearbox.

Retaining original parts meant Bob could wave goodbye to poor panel-fit



‘I spent £1,000 and it looked grand. Then I got carried away...’