● MGA obsession ● Drive an F1 car! ●

Design a new MG

MG WORLD

MGF on public trial

No 2
Dec 1997/Jan 1998
£2.85 US $6.95

KML 945K

V8 - FEEL THE POWER

MGB V8 special - from Costello to RV8

What's next for MG? Exclusive interview with Gerry McGovern, Rover's design guru

V8 25 years on

Ken Costello

Photograph David Knowles

Words: David Knowles and Philip Raby
Photographs: Michael Whitestone

The idea of putting a V8 engine into an MGB was thought up by one man – Ken Costello (left), whose name has become a legend among MGB V8 aficionados the world over

Ken Costello was born in central London on 6 January in – well, Ken would rather not say which year. He migrated to Kent some years later, and has lived there ever since. An interest in motoring – and motorsport in particular – did not come to the fore until the days of the Mini-Cooper.

"My introduction to motor racing was pretty coincidental," Ken recalls. "I was working on cars in the early 1960s, and this fellow arrived in my workshop and suggested that if I tuned his Mini we could race it together. We 'tuned' it in the normal way – bolting on twin SU carbs and sticking tape on the headlamps – and took it to Castle Combe, where I promptly took the first of eight lap records I would eventually collect there!"

The Castle Combe outing – Ken says that it was his first-ever race meeting – was the start of a successful racing career which would see him participating in some 400 races throughout Europe over the next 12 years; initially at his own expense, but soon with sponsorship from both a local BMC dealership and Duckhams Oil.

The Mini was the most popular small car to race at the time. "Those were the days of John Rhodes and John Fitzpatrick," recalls Ken wistfully, remembering how Rhodes used to make his cars slide sideways to the obvious delight of the crowd. "We called him Smokin' Rhodes," Ken remembers. "He used to make corners into right-angles, and just power his Mini out of them!"

Naturally, success on the track soon led to other would-be champions knocking at Ken Costello's door, seeking to share his expertise. Business quickly picked up, and Ken was able to carve out a small but effective niche in the burgeoning market for Mini racers. The association with the BMC – by now British Leyland – dealer continued, and so Ken naturally had some exposure to other marques in the same family as the Mini. Then, in 1969, came an event which would mark a turning point in Ken's life. "I walked into Pipers – the camshaft people – and there was this alloy V8 sitting on the floor. I was able to lift it up on my own, and immediately wondered if it would go into an MGB."

Ken knew that MG had not had much luck with the MGC, which had been a brave but futile attempt to marry the MGB to a bigger engine. "The MGB badly needed more power, and although I'd driven an MGC, I had quickly come to the conclusion that it didn't handle at all well; this alloy V8 seemed to be the answer." There then came the small question of finding a car to experiment with. "The one I used belonged to a friend of mine who was an insurance assessor. I said to him 'Lend me your car – but you won't see it for about six months'. He let me have it!"

Kent is famous for distinctive oast houses, and for being the home of Ken Costello and his equally distinctive MGB V8 conversions.

The car itself was a red MGB roadster, and for the transplant Ken used an Oldsmobile engine rather than the expected Rover or Buick unit. "I've always felt the Oldsmobile engine was a better prospect," explains Ken. "It had different heads to the Buick, with superior combustion chambers and more head studs, which gave it greater strength." Ken points out that it was the Oldsmobile engine which GM turbocharged for the Jetfire, although Buick had been originally responsible for the engine, and adds that as a consequence he has always believed that it was the Oldsmobile version which Rover should really have bought.

This first car was clearly a success, and so Ken decided to build another, but this time using a newer MGB as the basis. "The BL dealer who I had an arrangement with ran an MGB as his own car, and I managed to persuade him to let me have it." This car – a green MGB GT – was soon fitted with a Rover V8 engine and formed the pre-production prototype for what would later become the definitive Costello MGB V8.

The engine specification was pure Rover P6B saloon, and as such featured the twin-opposed SU carburettors nestling on top of the engine. To fit all this into the MGB engine bay necessitated using a bonnet with quite a substantial bulge – something which Ken knew had been a controversial but equally necessary feature on the factory-built MGC. Ironically, he claims, he need not have worried. "When I later managed to dispense with the hump by using different carburation, people actually asked me to bring back the bonnet bulge!" There were few other changes required, other than modifications to the steering – in order to clear the specially fabricated exhaust manifold – and the use of a 3.07:1 rear-axle ratio.

At this point, Ken knew that he had quite a motor car, and with interest growing, and orders for replicas mounting, he played a

Rare Costello wheels (left) are similar, but not identical, to items later fitted to factory V8. Costello car features standard MGB GT interior (above). You can just see the hand-painted red line on the rev-counter.

masterstroke. Shunning the specialist motoring press at first, the various motoring correspondents for the national and London daily papers – including *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* – were invited by Ken to try the green prototype for themselves. The response was universally favourable, and as a result orders began to flood in; to the extent that Ken had to move to larger premises in Farnborough and take on more staff in order to cope with the business.

Why had Ken chosen a GT as the basis of his 'proper' prototype? Was he worried about the strength of the roadster body shell? "I never had any doubts about the ability of the open-top MGB to take the torque," he explains. "We tack-welded a bar across the chassis legs in order to test for distortion – if there had been any movement, the tack welds would have broken – but those welds stayed put; there was no flexing to speak of." However – in Europe at least – the preferred high–performance car was a GT coupé, and the MGB GT, although six years old at this stage, was still a classically beautiful one. Production Costellos, therefore, have been variously open or closed, depending on what the customer ordered.

The public interest, and the orders which resulted, soon came to the attention of British Leyland, upon whom Ken was dependent for some supplies – especially the 3.07:1 rear axles. This led to action on the part of the industry giant. "I got a letter from Charles Griffin, the company's chief engineer, asking if they could borrow the car." Ken recalls.

Ken is not a stickler for formality, and so he did not arrange a date, but says that he simply drove up to the Longbridge factory gates and asked to see Griffin. "At first I was told that I couldn't come in without an appointment – but then, after a bit of fuss, they all came out to see it: Charles Griffin, Harry Webster, George Turnbull and another designer." An initial inspection was, of course, quickly followed by a drive; an experience which Ken Costello has never forgotten. "Charles Griffin frightened the life out of me," he claims. "Years later, I told his son Brian Griffin [chief engineer for the MGF] to tell his dad that I was still taking tablets for the shock!" For those who know of Charles Griffin's reputation behind the wheel, this story is quite believable.

The British Leyland people took Ken off to lunch while their engineers pored over his car, and in a spirit of co-operation asked him what they could do to help. "I told them that I was dependent upon a supply of the crown wheels and pinions, which they implied would be okay." Following this visit, and a report back by the Leyland engineers to their bosses, there came a request from the top man. "Lord Stokes wanted to see the car, and so I took it up to Berkeley Square – British Leyland's London headquarters – to let him

Spotter's guide to th

The development of the Costello MGB V8 cannot fairly be compared to that of a normal volume production car, since by its very nature – as a built-to-order special – every individual car was tailored to meet the customer's requirements. And as the Costello was never exactly cheap, those customers needed both the necessary wherewithal and willingness to indulge themselves. Consequently, Costellos could be fitted with a variety of wheels or special finishes, and therefore these in themselves cannot be used as reliable indications of what is 'original' in Costello terms.

Basically, the Costello went through two initial phases, known simply as the Costello (retrospectively MkI) and the Costello MkII. Both normally feature Rover 3500 (P6B) engines but, as explained in the main text, sometimes Costello had to resort to a Buick or Oldsmobile block. The presence of either of the latter units in an MGB is a strong indication that the car is a genuine Costello; few other people in the UK would have used a GM block with Rover components.

The MkI usually (but, frustratingly, not always) featured the special black-painted eggbox grille and a glassfibre bonnet complete with teardrop-shaped bulge, the latter necessary to clear the standard Rover P6B carburettor installation. At the leading edge of the bonnet the small 'plinth' of the standard MGB bonnet – originally intended to sit neatly behind the original 1962–69 grille badge – was deleted, and the chrome aperture surround of the 1969–72 MGB grille was retained. Trim was virtually unchanged, but a further discreet distinguishing mark on the GT was a special 'V8 Costello' badge which was applied to the left-hand side of the tailgate, just above the 'B GT' badge.

The brakes and suspension were virtually unchanged, Costello's reasoning being that both were more than adequate for the task. Some people would disagree on this point, but as the standard MkI Costello was some 90lb lighter than a contemporary 1.8-litre factory car there was perhaps some validity in this argument. The brake servo remained optional, as on the basic MGB of the period.

The rear axle was fitted with a 3.07:1 crown wheel and pinion within the dif-

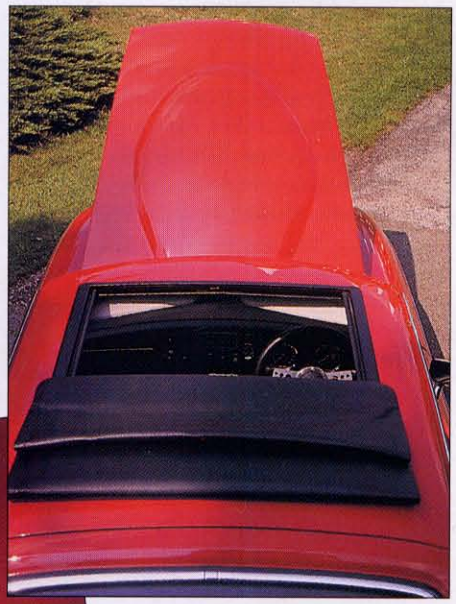
have a drive. He was clearly impressed and asked me straight what I would do if his company was to start building its own MGB V8. I told him that it would take him two years to get one into production – which it did – and that in the meantime I would just go on building them. He had no real reply to that."

The next step was for British Leyland to ask Ken to build a car for them, sending him a brand-new left-hand-drive Harvest Gold MGB GT and a new Rover P6B engine. The conversion completed, Ken himself drove the car down to the MG factory for delivery, where it was inspected thoroughly; proved by the survival of contemporary Cowley photographic prints with comments pencilled on the back by MG's Don Hayter. Here came the celebrated criticisms which MG produced, and which Ken is keen to refute – especially about a welded universal joint in the steering column.

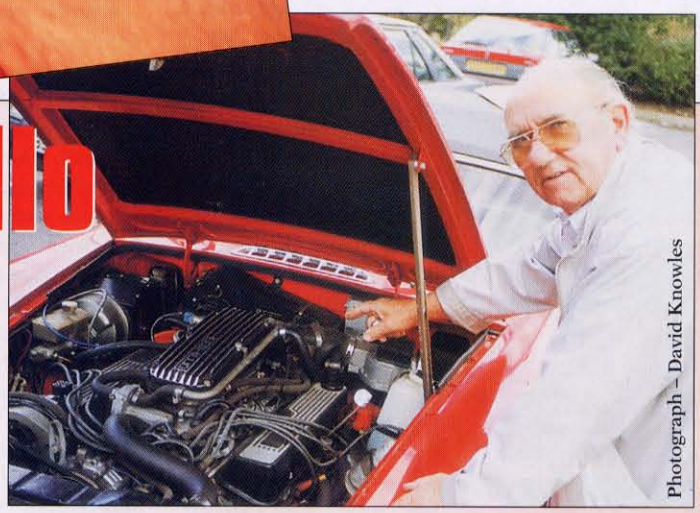
"Lots of cars have those," he protests. "Not least the Mini, and we weren't going to do anything dangerous in the steering line. I have never known any recorded failure of that joint." Other people from MG were privately more generous in their comments than the official view, respecting Costello for what he had managed to achieve off his own initiative without the much larger resources available to either MG or its parent company.

By August 1971 the inevitable was under way: MG was building its own MGB GT V8, using the Costello car as inspiration, but nevertheless doing things in its own way – at least as far as budget constraints permitted. Ken, of course, returned to satisfying demand, and in May of the following year *Autocar* finally carried out a full road-test of a Costello MGB V8 which greatly praised the car – likening it to a normal production vehicle rather than a conversion – and choosing only to criticise parts such as the trim; the blame for which rested squarely with Longbridge rather than Farnborough.

British Leyland never made things easy – insisting, for example, that new engines could be supplied only on an exchange basis. Of course, this was fine for most people, but for Ken it was potentially a death-blow to his business. Ken is not one to give in to a challenge, however, and so he resorted to alternative sources. "I sent a truck over to Belgium – where the old Buicks and Oldsmobiles had been popular – and we visited all the scrapyards, bringing back as many GM engines as we could find. When we got them back, we stripped them completely, and rebuilt them with new Rover parts – camshafts and so forth – all of which were still freely available." As the Buick engines were completely die-cast (unlike the Rover blocks) there was also a small



Distinctive bonnet bulge (above) is trademark of MkI Costello, but dispensed with on later cars. Extra badge on boot lid (left) is another giveaway.



Photograph – David Knowles

ne Costello

ferential, while an MGC-type clutch plate was substituted for the MGB item. Quite early on, according to Ken Costello, third-gear overdrive – if overdrive was fitted – was blocked off, as a consequence of one or two over-exuberant gear changes in the very first cars. It is interesting to note, however, that the *Autocar* road-test of 25 May 1972 included overdrive-third performance figures.

When developing the MkII of late 1972 onwards, Ken was determined to obviate the need for the large bonnet bulge. In order to achieve this, he resorted to the use of a low-level Weber carburettor. Air to the Weber was fed to a specially fabricated box from trunking leading from a remote air filter mounted on the inner wing. As by this time the supply of Rover engines was at a premium, it is likely that some of the MkII cars will have GM engine blocks.

In all versions of the Costello, the steering column was modified with the introduction of an additional universal joint, necessary in order to clear the relevant exhaust manifold. In the case of at least one non-Costello car which Ken had in for repair, a similar joint had been brazed in place rather than welded, with potentially horrific consequences!

A few rubber-bumper cars were converted, although as explained in the main article, both the existence of the factory MGB GT V8 and Ken's declining interest in the conversion business means that such cars are consequently much rarer. The number built is unknown, but it is unlikely to amount to more than a couple of dozen at the most.

Other than left-hand-drive cars for export, the later 1970s and the 1980s were pretty quiet for the V8 side of Costello's business, the car having already slipped into folklore. However, the new car which Ken built for Roger Cook in 1991 brought fresh impetus and more orders. Numbers are still but a handful, and the provenance of these will be fairly well known; sensible owners will have kept a file of relevant paperwork.

The fact that Ken Costello has never kept comprehensive records of the cars he has converted does mean that there is unfortunately some scope for forgery, and there is also an understandable reluctance on the part of some Costello owners to divulge too many of their most closely guarded secrets. Perhaps the best rule-of-thumb when buying a Costello – as with any car – is to look for a comprehensive history to back up the claims made by the owner.

There is nothing as valuable as a sheaf of papers tracing the history of the car back in time – and, of course, the further the better. Another idea is to write to the Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency (DVLA) at Swansea, which for a nominal fee will provide details of the car's previous owners. A little detective work may bring dividends in the form of personal recollections of the car – even old paperwork lurking in the loft – which can only serve to prove (or disprove) the provenance of the car.

weight advantage to doing things this way.

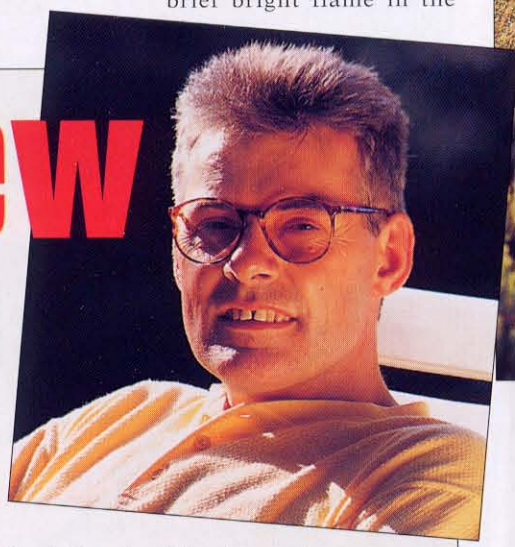
In many cases, Ken found himself building brand-new cars to order, but again, British Leyland would not supply him with MGBs without their four-cylinder engines – hardly surprising, perhaps, but a nuisance for Costello, who as a result was faced with a mountain of 'B'-series engines to dispose of.

Similarly, Ken moved away from the SU carburettor set-up to a single dual-choke Weber, which allowed him to dispense with the bonnet bulge. This version of the car – still with the special 'eggbox' grilles which were specially made for Costello in the Midlands – later became known as the MkII.

By the summer of 1973 – by which time *Motor* magazine had a crack at a Costello – it was a poorly kept secret that the factory MGB V8 was on its way. Production of the MGB GT V8 had started in December 1972, increasing during the following spring prior to a launch originally set for 18 July but subsequently deferred to 15 August. Tony Dron, writing in the *Motor* Costello report in May (entitled *Bumbling B*), alluded to this by saying; "Rumour has it that Ken won't be the only one in the business for long..."

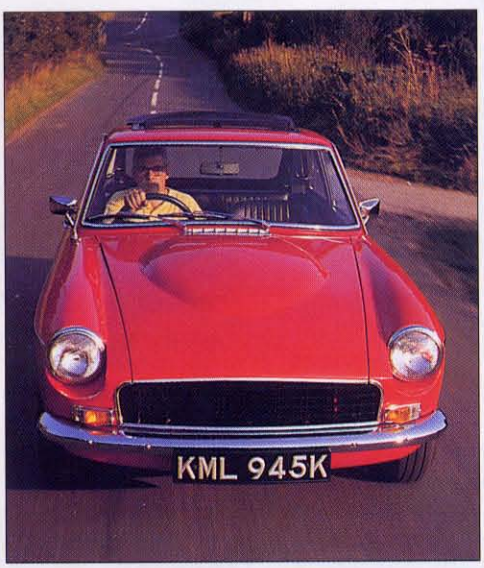
Naturally, the factory-built MGB GT V8, launched at a price which undercut the Costello by several hundred pounds, severely dented sales. Ken never kept records, but he estimates that he had built about 200 cars up until then. Just a week before the factory car was launched, Ken cheekily took out an advertisement which proclaimed 'Beware of imitations!' By this stage, Ken was more interested in his pet project; an all-new five-speed gearbox of his own design, and this increasingly took the lion's share of his time and effort. However, the factory V8 was but a brief bright flame in the

Owner's view



Is the Costello the ultimate MGB V8? Bob Chutter (right), whose immaculate 1972 MkI car illustrates this feature, thinks so. "I used to have a factory-built V8 and never felt it handled as well as the standard MGB GT. However, the Costello drives as well as the 1800, if not better. What's more, it's something a bit different."

Bob has been a fan of the V8 for many years. "I owned the same MGB GT V8 twice — I sold it and then bought it back again! When I sold it for the second time, I found that I really missed having a V8, and I soon started looking for another, especially because all my friends in the MG Car Club owned them!"



As many MGB enthusiasts will know, finding a good car is not easy. Bob says he wasted a lot of time. "I found myself travelling long distances to look at terrible cars. Many of them had rusty rear wings, which are tricky to replace."

Bizarrely, Bob's ideal car was sitting outside his office, but he ignored it. "I'd seen this rather scruffy silver Costello parked on the road and had looked at it, but I didn't pay it much attention. However, I kept an eye on it over the winter and noticed that no rust was appearing around the rear wings. Then I saw it advertised in the local paper and bought it over the telephone."

Once Bob had the Costello in his garage, he set to work on it. "I'd won some concours awards with my previous cars, so I was keen to do the same with this one. I stripped it down and replaced the sills, one front wing and the front valance. I also took out the engine and repainted the whole car inside and out in the original red. The interior was retrimmed in black leather and I added a full-length sunroof. All the brightwork, including the bumpers, was rechromed." The result was stunning, and Bob cleaned up at many concours contests around the country.

Bob is particularly proud of his Costello's wheels. "When I first restored the car I fitted a set of smart Minilite-style rims, which looked great but were not what Costello himself would have used. Then one day, someone came up to me and offered me a set of Costello wheels. I bought them for a good price and had them shot-blasted and resprayed. As far as I know, this is the only Costello in the country with these wheels, which were seen on the car which *Autocar* magazine tested." Interestingly, BL later chose similar, but by no means identical, wheels for its own MGB GT V8.

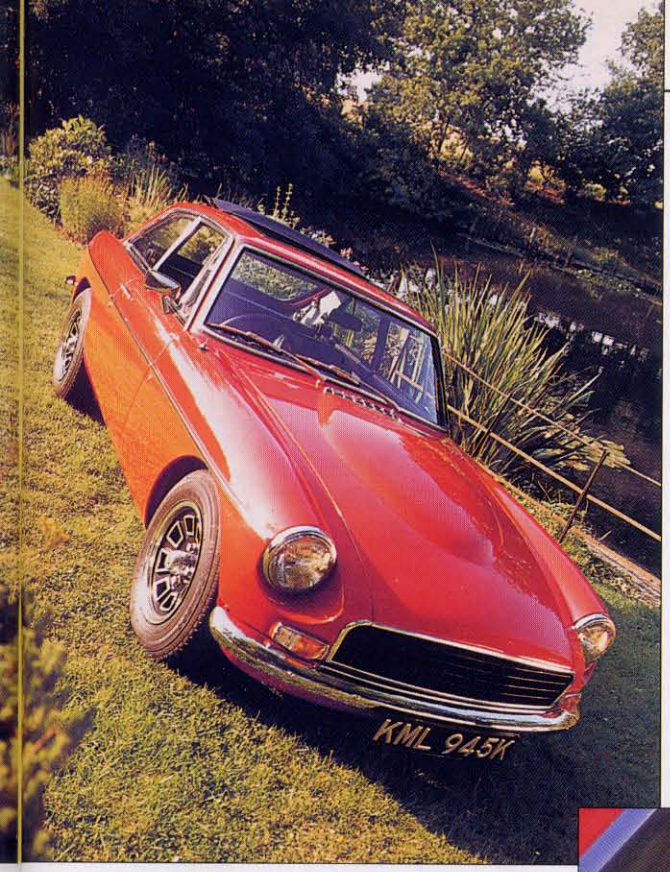
Bob is confident that his car is one of the most original Costellos in the country. "Not only has it got the right wheels, but it also has the original badges, which I had restored. Also, I've kept the glassfibre bonnet with its distinctive bulge."

That bonnet caused Bob many a headache. "It's made entirely of glassfibre, even the frame. I don't know why they didn't retain the original steel frame, which would have been much stiffer." The main problem Ken found was that the bonnet lost its shape when it got warm. "The left-hand rear corner would lift up, so I used to wedge a specially cut pole between it and the garage roof to push it back into place!"

Despite this, Bob would not opt for a later MkII Costello which dispensed with the bulge by using a Weber carburettor. "Who wants to look at an ugly great air cleaner? I'd much rather have an attractive pair of SU carbs under the bonnet. By the way, I've heard rumours that the mould for these bonnets still exists somewhere."

Anther original feature which Bob is proud of is the tachometer. "The Costello rev-counters had a red line hand-painted on at a lower point than normal to discourage over-revving."

If you're looking for a Costello, don't be disappointed if you don't get one with all the features you see on Bob Chutter's car. Remember that the Costello was a low-production special, and most cars were built to the buyer's specification; the wheels in particular varied from car to car, and many customers chose to retain the original Rostyles to save money.



MkI looks purposeful with its unique wheels, bonnet bulge and badges (right).

firmament, fizzling out in September 1976, at which point those who still wanted a marriage of MGB and V8 power had to turn to people like Costello once more.

However, Ken was no longer really interested in developing the conversion side – the gearbox project was his first priority now – and he sought a means of disposing of the conversion business. At this point fate intervened – a trio of mechanics in a mews garage (including Mitch Parsons, the son of the famous singer Matt Munro) needed to vacate their premises, and an agreement was reached with Ken whereby the business was split into four equal shares.

Ken claims that he really wanted to be out of the business but that he was persuaded to reluctantly remain on board. Without dwelling on the matter, it is sufficient to say that relationships did not prosper, and within a year Ken decided he'd had enough. "I left it – walked out on it. They continued to use my name for a while – advertising the premises as 'the home of the Costello' until I managed to get that stopped."

More recently, the car conversion business has been a lower priority for Ken, although some cars have been built – mostly for overseas customers (mainly Belgium, Denmark and Holland). And then Ken's old friend Roger Cook, the television presenter, came along and persuaded Ken to build a new car for him. "This was my first fuel-injected car. Roger wanted it to look like an ordinary MGB, and so I designed a special plenum chamber that allowed a standard bonnet to be used. Roger was delighted, and took the car to show Rover's then md, John Towers."

One reason that Ken built less cars in the 1980s and 1990s, is that his time has been taken up with his gearbox project, first mentioned in that *Motor* report in 1973, but still something very dear to Ken's heart in the following decade. "The standard MGB gearbox wasn't really up to the stresses imposed by the V8 engine. I looked around for alternatives, but the only suitable gearboxes were German, and they were not only expensive, but not that good, to be honest. I thought we ought to be able to make a gearbox that was cheaper and worked at least as well as those."

Of course, the path from good idea to buzzing factory is rarely a smooth one, and this was certainly true in Ken's case. "We built some pre-production prototypes, and set out to get some finance – and that's where it all came unstuck." Ken had to look overseas for partners

and interest, and there have been several false starts in what should have been a surefire success. The gearbox has been designed, it exists, and it is very good.

Potential customers were seduced by Ken – Maserati and Ford US among them – but despite this, he was unable to secure the backing he needed to satisfy the demand, and so these customers went elsewhere. Now, however, there are potential customers in this country for the Costello gearbox, including a builder of distinctive British sports cars which shall have to remain nameless for the moment. Ken is also talking of a six-speed version, with an electrically selected reverse gear to simplify the change pattern.

David Bishop of British Motor Heritage took one of Ken's gearboxes and tried it in an MGB body shell, no doubt as part of the study into the Heritage V8 which led to the RV8. All of this renewed interest was the spark for a few more such cars – and a potential link to the MG Centre in St Louis, Missouri, USA (which sadly went wrong due to problems with another party). Other business was generated by the Costello MGB heater fan, which has modified fan blades to give a much-improved throughput of air. Other projects either available or on the drawing-board include an all-alloy MGB front-suspension system, and various other ancillaries, not least being that six-speed gearbox.

Ken clearly sums up his frustration at how long and difficult it has been to get his gearbox understood by one of many examples. "When I started out, I went to the Welsh Development Agency, and explained to the people there that in a few years' time all cars would have five-speed gearboxes as standard – but they weren't interested. Instead, they invested in a Borg-Warner automatic transmission plant, which has since folded. Where's the sense in that?" MGW

Costello MGB GT V8 facts (typical 1972 specification)

BODY

All-steel monocoque, two-seat GT coupé or open roadster. Custom-made glassfibre bonnet fitted to early cars

ENGINE

Rover V8 in P6 guise, with twin SU HIF6 carburettors mounted centrally on pent-roof intake manifold. Later cars switched to Weber carburation

Capacity
3528cc

Bore/Stroke
88.9mm/ 71.1mm

Compression ratio
10.5:1 (100-octane five-star fuel required)

Maximum power
150bhp at 5000rpm

TRANSMISSION

Four-speed all-synchromesh MGB manual gearbox. Optional automatic (Borg-Warner BW35) also listed

SUSPENSION

Front: independent unequal length wishbones, coil springs and Armstrong lever-arm dampers
Rear: semi-elliptic leaf springs, live axle and Armstrong lever-arm dampers

BRAKES

273mm diameter Lockheed discs at front, 254mm diameter drums at rear

WHEELS

Standard wheels were contemporary MGB 5x14in Rostyle pressed-steel items. Various optional wheels were available to order

TYRES

165x14 Dunlop SP radials

DIMENSIONS

Length: 3891mm
Width: 1524mm
Height: 1255mm
Wheelbase: 2311mm
Weight: 1041kg
Fuel capacity: 12 gallons

PERFORMANCE

Maximum speed: 128mph
0–60 mph: 7.8 seconds
Fuel consumption: 18.8mpg
(Figures from *Autocar* road-test, 25 May 1972)

PRICE

Typically circa £2500

V8 25 years on

David Knowles tells the story of the Rover V8

The Rover V8 is a remarkable engine. Born in the USA from a fascination with new technology and aluminium alloys, but abandoned in its infancy on the altar of cost efficiency, the lightweight engine was adopted by British foster parents, and has continued to thrive while most of its contemporaries have long passed away.

To understand the Buick/Rover engine, you need to briefly consider the origins of the V8 format itself.

Back when the first six-cylinder engines were produced in the quest for greater refinement, it was apparent that more cylinders were perceived as equating to more class. Straight eights (all the cylinders in a row) were tried, but were excessively long, and also difficult to balance.

Always quick to spot an opportunity, Henry Ford created his Flathead V8 unit in 1932, and other US manufacturers soon followed suit. Perhaps the most successful of these was General Motors' Chevrolet Small Block overhead valve V8 of 1955, which revolutionised the way that American cars were powered, and was manufactured in tens of millions.

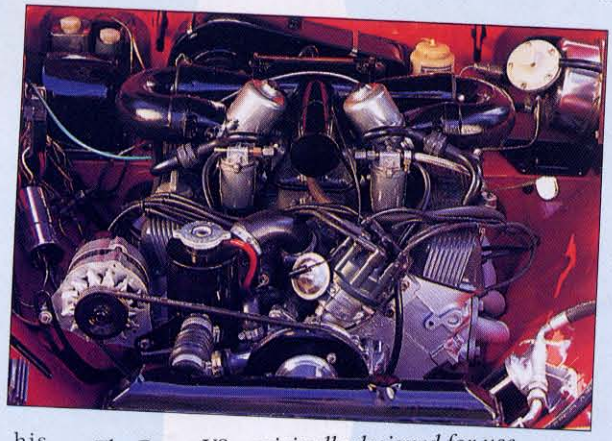
In the 1950s, GM explored new ideas, showcasing them with weird and wonderful designs in its *Futurama* series of motor shows. In the early part of the decade, the Buick Le Sabre concept car was unveiled with a supercharged all-alloy engine. As the decade drew on, sales of imported cars – particularly the VW Beetle – grew in significance, and Detroit responded by developing its own 'economy' vehicles.

In 1960, following two years of development, Buick unveiled its new baby, the 215.5 cubic inch (3531cc) *Aluminium Fireball V8* in the compact – by American standards – Buick Special. At the same time, a related Oldsmobile unit (the *Rockette*) – with many internal differences – was launched in the Oldsmobile F85.

By this stage, a small capacity V8 was nothing out of the ordinary in North America, but one which had such a high power-to-weight ratio certainly was; most rivals relied on cast-iron for their basic castings, and the weight penalty of those was obvious when measured against the new Buicks and Oldsmobiles. Building upon the exciting image of their aluminium baby, Oldsmobile even went one step further by offering a turbocharged version – the Oldsmobile *Jetfire* – the first production turbocharged petrol engine, with an impressive output of 215bhp.

It was not long before America's motor racing fraternity discovered the Fireball V8. The first being Mickey Thompson, whose Harvey Aluminum Special was driven in the 1962 Indy 500 race by Dan Gurney. The engine pushed out 370bhp using an alcohol fuel mixture. Jack Brabham used the Oldsmobile version as the basis of the 3-litre Repco-Brabham race unit, with which he won the 1966 F1 World Championship.

Despite the excitement which surrounded the Fireball V8, financial reality and service problems proved to be its downfall. Production had called for a great deal of work with new methods, and teething problems had led to a high and expensive scrap rate for the engine blocks. This was compounded by service problems, because the average mechanic did not always appreciate the need for constant use of coolant additives to avoid corrosion of the aluminium waterways.



The Rover V8 – originally designed for use in US barges, now the ultimate MGB lump.

The real nail in the coffin, however, was the development of new thin-wall casting techniques, which allowed the production of much lighter cast-iron engine blocks. Now the weight penalty of the cheaper cast-iron could be overcome, the arguments in favour of alloy began to evaporate. Pound for pound, alloy engines cost about three times as much as cast-iron equivalents.

By 1963, Buick had developed a cast-iron V6 of similar capacity to the Fireball. This cheaper unit was phased in with new models. Around 750,000 Fireball V8 engines had been produced – small fry in GM terms. Although it was no longer wanted by its parents, it had won itself many admirers.

About the time GM was abandoning the Fireball V8, Rover was seeking an American V8 engine. J Bruce McWilliams, President of Rover's US sales arm, had looked at the conservative Rover production car range – setting aside the exciting gas-turbine projects – and saw the need for a new engine; either a six cylinder or, even better, a V8. The latter he felt would be especially good for the Land Rover, which had limited appeal in the US market with its agricultural diesel four-cylinder engine.

In 1964, McWilliams approached William Martin-Hurst, Rover's Managing Director, and suggested that Rover bought American V8s to pep up the range.

By chance, Martin-Hurst was visiting the States on business. While there, he called on Mercury Marine, where he saw a Buick V8 engine, noted how light and compact it was, and was intrigued to hear that it had only recently gone out of production. He realised it had great potential; a compact all-alloy V8 engine suited the high-tech image Rover conveyed through its jet-turbine powered specials.

At first, GM was unresponsive to Rover's approaches, but Martin-Hurst was persistent. After a number of formalities were completed, agreement was reached and, in January 1965, Rover took over the rights to the engine, along with drawings, sample engines and the surviving tooling.

In order to help develop and adapt the engine for its much different production facilities and vehicles, Rover also acquired the services of Buick's chief engine designer, Joe Turlay.

In adapting the Fireball V8 to British tastes, the Rochester carburettor was ditched in favour of twin SUs with an intake manifold designed by Rover's Dave Wall.

Once the V8 was adapted, it appeared at the 1967 Earls Court Motor Show in a facelifted Rover P5 saloon and coupe.

In 1968, the Rover Three Thousand Five was announced; a V8 version of Rover's P6 small saloon. Rover was now part of the Leyland Corporation, and the marriage had already been announced between Leyland and British Motor Holdings, the result being the formation of the British Leyland Motor Corporation, which incorporated MG. It would be little more than a year before the engine would come to the attention of Ken Costello (see page 12), and form the beginning of an MG association with the unit which would eventually include two production cars – the MGB GT V8 and the later RV8, as well as numerous independent conversions.

Turbulent years followed and it is remarkable that, despite the many ups and downs of BL in its many forms, the Rover V8 is still in production some 30 years after it made its British debut, and nearly 40 years after the story began in 1958. MGW