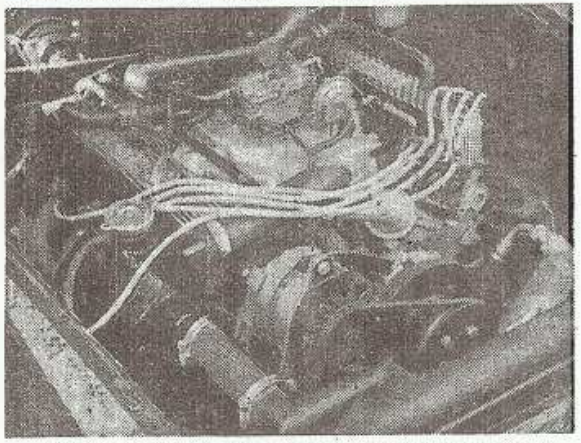
MGB PLUS V8 GIVES POWER AND AGILITY

KEN COSTELLO is not only quick around any given race circuit—he's also quick on the uptake. His speed in the latter direction appears to have overtaken British Leyland in what may prove to be a most lucrative direction.

The late, not very lamented, MGC proved an unsuccessful attempt to match a good engine with a basically good car. But neither was designed with the other in mind and the weight of the six-cylinder unit was never successfully matched with the MGB suspension.

The result was an uneven weight distribution which made the MGC fast in a straight line, but not the world's best handling sports car on the twisty bits.

When British Leyland decided to drop the MGC they apparently decided to drop the whole problem, which is where Mr. Costello comes in.



Not a lot of room to spare but accessibility is still a major virtue of the M.G.B. V8 layout.

Having sized up the 3.5 litre engine used in the Rover 3.5 and the Rover 3500, he figured it would fit nicely under the bonnet of an MGB. And as the engine was lighter than the 3-litre unit used in the MGC and still lighter, by virtue of its aluminium block, than the original MGB engine, the weight problem was nullified.

And matching the 3.5 litre V8 with the MGB body, suspension and transmission is a happy combination that is going to give a lot of pleasure to sports car enthusiasts in the future.

Convincing

A quick demonstration drive convinced me of its virtues. Top gear acceleration alone will slam you back in your seat in a manner that the original MGB could only match in second.

And it does it in such a civilised way that you never need to lift your voice above normal conversational level to express your admiration—or misgivings.

The roadholding is exceedingly good and Ken Costello reckons that the lighter engine has produced a nice 50—50 weight distribution that leaves the handling neutral throughout a corner, however hard pushed.

Full performance figures have not yet been established, but the MG V8 will scald from 0—60 m.p.h. in 6.2 seconds — which leaves your stomach trying hard to get back into position and making heavy weather of it.

The big bonnet air scoop marks the V8-engined M.G.B. apart from the others. So does the electrifying performance.

Petrol consumption works out around a comfortable 25 m.p.g., which won't make much of an extra dent in an owner's wallet over and above what it would cost to run a family saloon.

The 3.5 unit produces 175 b.h.p. (net) at 5,200 r.p.m. with maximum torque of 201lb/ft. at 2,750 r.p.m., which compares rather favourably with the 95 b.h.p. of the standard MGB at 5,400 r.p.m. and 110lb/ft. maximum torque at 3,000 r.p.m.

Shoehorning the big V8 into the MGB boiler room has not left an awful lot of space and one might expect some overheating problems. But by using an MGC radiator and moving the header tank to the side, with an air scoop in the bonnet, the temperature never rises above normal whether the car is being thrashed around the countryside or trundled along in slow-moving town traffic.

Easy to reach

The bulk of the unit has also had another useful side effect—all the bits you might want to get at quickly, such as distributor, plugs, oil filter and fan belt, are easily accessible from the top.

To match the added performance, a brake servo has been added and the transmission is said by British Leyland to be equal to the engine output without modification. Some slight modification has been necessary to the chassis at the front end and on the prototype had been beautifully finished.

Gear ratios have not yet been finalised, but even with the standard box and 3.3 final drive the performance is electric.

Ken hopes to be able to go into production shortly at a rate of six MGB V8s a week. Price is likely to be around £2,200 — which doesn't seem too bad when you compare the price you would have to pay for similar performance from much more expensive models.