



**BMW CSI & CSL FULL BUYER'S GUIDE**

# CLASSIC & SPORTS CAR

The world's best-selling classic car magazine

February 2018 £4.90

**MGB • MGC • COSTELLO V8 • MG RV8 • ABINGDON EDITION • SEBRING**

# BEST OF BRITISH

Every variation on the MGB theme tested, but which is king?



**PLUS!**

- LAGONDA M45
- CRAYFORD WOLSELEY
- LOTUS EUROPA SPECIAL
- LANCIA FLAMINIA FAMILY



**A Maharaja's Delahaye**  
Stunning coachbuilt 135



**Ultra-rare Alfa Sportiva**  
Flat-out in Italy's lost GT



**Driving the 007 Jaguar**  
Mighty C-X75 on track



# THE B LINE

There have been many attempts to improve on the timeless MGB, says **Simon Charlesworth**, but can any match the versatility of the original?

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**





'ITS UNMISTAKABLE EXHAUST NOTE  
 – A HUSKY, SEDUCTIVE GROWL –  
 EVOKES A FLIRTATIOUS EARTHA KITT'



From top: standard item leans a bit, but is a joy on back lanes; lovely crackle-black dash and sprung wheel; lively three-bearing B-series; famous octagon

**T**he MGB is, for many people, the gateway drug into whatever this is that we do with old cars – a hobby, a movement or even, perhaps, a way of life. Attractive, commodious, well-engineered with enviable parts support, grunty and good-natured, a B is an agreeable blast for blatting around British B-roads.

Here we are celebrating the topless lineage of the last Abingdon-built MG. These models have been developed both by the factory and by outside tuning concerns and, as an addendum, we have been tasked with nominating the topmost of the topless.

A gorgeous 1963 MGB and I are heading for the rendezvous. The map promised driving bliss but that was a printed half-truth. The reality delivers tired knuckles and a heavily embroidered frown. Scarcely 100 yards pass under the MGB's wheels before it becomes clear that this embattled, bludgeoned thoroughfare will snap at anything that passes over it without due care.

The exhaust note from this 55-year-old sporty British stalwart is unmistakable; it has a husky, seductively smoky growl that brings to mind a flirtatious Eartha Kitt. Driving Mark Moore's concours-winning early B is a breeze – it's forthcoming yet so undemanding you quickly enjoy the seat-of-the-pants experience and the vista.

Its three-bearing Type-18G 1798cc B-series motor is happier to rev than the later five-bearing engines, but it isn't as sweet or parpsome as an MGA's smaller lump. The rack-and-pinion steering – connected to a sizeable diameter of wire-sprung wheel – is light, direct and responsive. The ride and handling compromise means that you can keep out of the way of ulcer-nursing traffic when the road starts weaving, but it avoids using your spinal column as a suspension medium of last resort. This roadster's only acknowledgement of progress is the fitment of polyurethane bushes, which give its reactions a caffeinated hit. The gearbox – a three-synchro, four-speed unit with overdrive on third and top – takes a little muscular investment. The H-gate is so narrow that it feels as if its first-second plane is riding piggyback with third-fourth.

The MGB differed wildly from its predecessor. Sports cars were beginning to place comfort ahead of chilblains and alacrity. Interiors grew to accommodate heaters for the lily-livered, plus wirelasses and wind-up windows, while spring rates no longer heckled your kidneys or shoved you sideways at inopportune moments. In Britain, the Sunbeam Alpine exemplified this new civilised approach to open-air motoring.

Depending on your view, this was either a welcome sign of sophisticated Continental influence or a portent of the apocalypse. For seasoned

MG customers, however, BMC's Abingdon-based Special Tuning division could provide a lip-smacking hit of the pure stuff via engine and suspension upgrades for its newborn roadster.

The monocoque MGB had promised to continue MG's technical renaissance, where machines such as the MGA Twin-Cam, the mid-engined EX181 record-breaker and the stillborn EX186 racer hinted at recapturing the glory of the early 1930s. MGB prototypes dabbled with aluminium doors, bonnet and bootlid, as well as a coil-sprung rear axle located by trailing arms and Panhard rod. The MGA's 'twink' was considered, as too was a new range of BMC V4s and V6s – but all of that promise fell victim to murder by accountant. Only the aluminium bonnet escaped the slaughter and made it through to production.

Yes, BMC's vee-engines died in development, although the notion of a larger six-cylinder MG didn't and, in 1967, the MGC appeared. Powered by a reworked 2.9-litre C-series motor, it was visually similar to the B – no doubt due to MG being low in BMC's priorities and the corporation's chaotic 1960s freefall into penury.

According to motoring lore, the MGC had such a poor reputation for handling finesse that the only way of getting one through a corner was to alight and lure it around with sugar cubes and encouraging baby talk. This was due to the launch examples having their tyres under-inflated, thus exaggerating the lower-geared steering, plus the effect of the overweight, compromised Type-29G C-series. So the MGC was labelled as the dark prince of understeer.

So why am I enjoying this car? Colin Howes' 1969 isn't merely in beautiful condition, it is perhaps one of the most original surviving MGCs – even retaining its twin 6V batteries as per its older four-cylinder brother. It rides on correct 165/15 tyres with manual factory-spec everything, so I should be muttering under my breath. Yet... on a road that, at times, feels as if

we're travelling over a Klingon's forehead, we've come to an understanding. Driving is a dialogue. Listen to the MGC, appreciate its GT strengths and you end up with an expression that hovers on your dial between 'smug' and 'contented'. Spank it like a Midget and neither of you will be left on speaking terms come your destination.

Take things smoothly and corners neatly, and understeer will not arise. I have to admit that the steering on this 1969 specimen is light, positive and confounds its reputation. The MGC's extra weight, original-equipment bushes and fatter



From left: painted wires were an option on B and C; weighty C-series engine offers effortless torque; deeper, comfier seats in otherwise identical cabin



Much-maligned MGC makes a wonderfully relaxing tourer, its extra weight and full-profile tyres giving a decent ride

## MGB evolution

**20 SEPTEMBER 1962** 'MkI' MGB (Type G-HN3) launched, with 1798cc three-bearing 18G B-series. Early cars have 'pull' doorhandles

**OCTOBER 1964** 18GB B-series with oil cooler and stronger, more refined five-bearing crank

**NOVEMBER 1965** 'MkI' BGT (Type G-HD3) added: quieter Salisbury rear axle, and heater

**NOVEMBER 1966** Front anti-roll bar standard

**JULY 1967** Salisbury back axle fitted to MGB

**NOVEMBER 1967** MkII B and BGT (Type G-HN4/G-HD4) with new Type 18GD engine, wider transmission tunnel for optional auto and new all-synchro manual gearboxes with MGC-spec internals. Interior also revised

**DECEMBER 1967** C and CGT (Type G-CN1/G-CD1) six-cylinder sibling, based on MkII body; axed by BLMC after just 9002 cars in August '69

**SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 1969** 'Leylandised' B and BGT (Type G-HN5/G-HD5), with new recessed grille, RoStyle wheels, larger rear lamp lenses, fresh badging and interior

**AUGUST 1971** 'MkIII' cabin overhaul: collapsible steering column, and 18V series engines

**AUGUST 1972** Revised original grille, with black mesh, new badge and trim alterations

**APRIL 1973** BGT V8 (Type G-D2D1) has engine bay modified to accommodate 137bhp 3528cc Rover V8; Dunlop D4 wheels, higher ride height, V8 badges and plusher cabin; 2591 built

**AUGUST 1973** Automatic deleted

**SEPTEMBER 1974** Rubber-bumper B, with V8 underbonnet mods. Marley Foam Bayflex 90 polyurethane impact bumpers plus 1½-in-taller ride height. Anti-roll bar deleted on B

**APRIL 1975** GT Jubilee marks MG's 50th anniversary a year late. Dark BRG with gold shoulder stripes, gold badging and GT V8 wheels; 751 GTs, plus unique Brooklands Green US-spec MGB and one Jubilee GT V8

**JUNE 1975** Overdrive becomes standard

**JUNE 1976** Lower-geared steering, improved pedalbox and a thicker anti-roll bar are fitted, plus rear anti-roll bar. Last interior overhaul

**AUGUST 1980** Final 1000 cars built are LE models. Completed on 22 October 1980, they go on sale in January '81. LE comes with front spoiler, alloys or optional wires, lower flank decals, in Pewter (GT) or Bronze for B

**JULY 1988** British Motor Heritage restarts production of MGB shell using factory tooling

**OCTOBER 1992** Re-engineered and redesigned RV8 marks B's 30th birthday. Based on BMH shell, it is and powered by a 3.9-litre Rover V8

reclining seats facilitate a more composed ride than the MGB. The 'six' is scarcely audible thanks to its uncouth mechanical fan, but tune that out and, when it revs to above 3000rpm, you can pick out a cultured six-cylinder note.

Leaking money, Marx Brothers-style infighting and shadowy *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* corporate skulduggery did for the C in the end. During its development and production life, MG's parent mutated from BMC, to BMH in 1966 and, in '68 – thanks to foolish government mismatching – it became the British Leyland Motor Corporation. BMH, which had brought Jaguar and Pressed Steel together into the same giant tattered marquee as BMC, enabled MG to experiment with installing Coventry Climax units and the Daimler 2½-litre V8 into the MGB. Engineers had investigated fitting the 3½-litre ex-Buick V8, but that idea was axed in 1967 after the acquisition of Rover by Triumph's overlord, the Leyland Motor Corporation.

No such nonsense would hamper racer and engineer Ken Costello. He had quickly realised the potential of the light powerful V8 and the MGB's wide, inviting engine bay.

Unlike the Daimler motor, the Rover powerplant slotted in with minimal alterations and the all-alloy unit, minus ancillaries, even weighed less than the B-series. Ultimately Costello modified about 225 MGBs and GTs (as well as two MGCs), prompting MG to develop its own BGT V8. Although both MG and Costello Engineering production would fall victim to the 1973 fuel crisis, Costello would subsequently continue to build conversions.

Original Costello Bs came with a glassfibre bonnet featuring a 'dustbin-lid' power bulge – to clear Rover's pent-roof SU inlet manifold – but Harry Irvine's car is a 1970 MkII roadster. Instead it is fuelled by a single rear-facing Weber 40DCOE carburettor mounted on a Costello manifold – enabling the standard bonnet to be retained. Thus, there are only a few features to

give away its Costello lineage – an eggbox grille with Rover V8 badge proudly pinned to its chest, a huge rear emblem that could have come off a Status Quo album, and a set of MAG GTs or 'Princess Anne' alloys. It's enough to transform the MG from 1960s moptop suited respectability to 1970s leathery headbanger – and that's before you fire up the shouty V8.

As the MGB aged, its seats, door trim and centre console put on the vinyl-trimmed pounds – at the expense of interior cubic inches. Running 175 R14 tyres, this 1970 car has benefited from the fitment of castor reduction wedges. Bias-ply castor duly corrected, here is another example of a radial-shod MGB that is as light and pleasant to drive as a B should be.

Intensive scrolling of the memory suggests that this Costello has more feel and sporty substance to its steering than the last factory BGT V8 that I encountered. Featuring a later gearknob-mounted overdrive, it feels like a logical evolution of the '63 car with its strengths underlined and embellished. It can cruise, it has more poke, can corner and, when its vee-angled eight-piece reaches for the redline, you are completely immersed in a groovy offbeat soundtrack.

After leaving the Costello – bodily if not in spirit – we move into the MGB's afterlife. Having been controversially culled in 1980, with the MG factory, death was too small an obstacle to stop the MGB clawing its way free from wormy retirement. The RV8 came from the Rover Special Projects skunkworks. This was an MG two-seater reincarnated for the '90s. Unlike the Blackpool hell-raisers from TVR that swaggered with Indie Madchester self-belief, the RV8 was reincarnated straight into middle age.

Inspiration was ignited by British Motor Heritage's resurrection of the MGB bodyshell, plus a number of specialist and home-built MGB V8s. Basically, the RV8 was the realisation that the Rover Group still made two key ingredients of the V8 recipe – just when the company needed

## Modifying a B

If you fancy uprating a B yourself, there are plenty of options but you need to be clear about what you want to achieve. Simple things such as improving the brakes can take away any doubt over their capability and let you get on with exploiting what the standard car has to offer. Decent pads and discs don't cost the earth and will sharpen things up considerably. Adding an anti-roll bar and negative-camber wishbones can tighten up the front end – something that Will de la Rivière of Beech Hill Garage is keen to emphasise: "You don't really need to do anything to the back end of a B. Make the front end handle and the rear will follow."

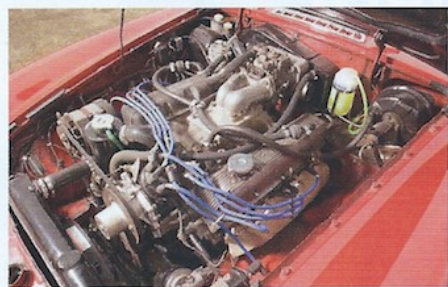
"Buy one that is structurally the best you can afford," stresses Frontline's Tim Fenna, and de la Rivière agrees: "Bodywork costs more than anything else, so start with a solid example. A post-'69 MGB with five-bearing engine is good, but avoid rubber-bumper cars because they will need lowering."

Mechanically, the options are almost endless, but big gains can be had from a gas-flowed head fitted with larger valves, paired with a suitable camshaft and a long centre-branch manifold. Boring to 2 litres, balancing and fitting a lightened flywheel come next, but there's no point in spending all that money if you're not going to get the most from any tweaks. So it's worth getting the car set up properly on a rolling road.

The suspension and brakes will need more than just fettling if you're really going for it. "When you get to the 150bhp mark," says Fenna, "you really have to improve things. Increases to about 200bhp will involve all of that as well as axle location mods." **MP**



Clockwise: firmly set up Costello handles superbly; chunky Moto-Lita wheel in MkII cabin; bare Rover V8 weighs less than B-series; cool MAG GT alloy wheels



'WHEN THE V8 REACHES FOR THE REDLINE, YOU'RE IMMERSSED IN ITS GROOVY OFFBEAT SOUNDTRACK'

'THERE ARE ECHOES OF MGC AS YOU BURBLE AROUND, LOUNGING BEHIND THE TORQUE'



Clever Automotive Design Consultants makeover retained the B's spirit, yet the RV8 didn't look dated against its 1990s rivals

to remind the world, post-MX-5 and pre-MGF, about Abingdon's sports car back catalogue.

Executed by Automotive Design Consultants, the facelift is masterful and is where most of the project's budget was spent. The outside may hint at junior Bentley leanings, but the retro cabin, with its wood and pale leather trim, smacks of Florida retiree Cadillac. The RV8 was the most upmarket MG for decades and, in 1990s Britain, this deluxe décor underlined the point. Alas, even compared with the Costello's cabin, plusher fittings have snaffled more interior room making roofless motoring compulsory if you're tall.

The BL-related LT77S or R380 five-speed gearboxes do the job. Spec-wise, the 187bhp RV8 manages without many electrical niceties – from manual windows to manual steering – that potential owners in the £26,500 1990s soft-top market would have expected. Which perhaps suggests why 80% of production RV8s ended up with Anglophile owners in the Far East.

Trevor Bailey's ex-Japanese Domestic Market '94 RV8 still maintains all of its JDM features – from bumpers to air-con intakes and front wheelarch trims. It's almost as if it has arrived fresh off the boat clutching its return ticket.

Burbling around, lounging behind 231lb ft of lazy torque, there are echoes of the MGC. It is relaxed and relaxing. Benefiting from upgraded suspension – notably telescopic dampers – the

RV8 rides smoothly on its 205/65 VR15s and, with that effective limited-slip differential, traction is as easy as Sunday morning.

Press on a bit and it won't come alive, though, you'll most likely upset it. Memories of previous exuberance recall that this MG isn't for the apex-bothering brotherhood. You feel the suspension hardware getting flummoxed and muddled due to its unsprung mass. The cart-sprung Leyland-DAF live axle, constrained by anti-roll and anti-tramp bars, still feels gristly and rheumatic during aggressive sorties over snaking, uneven tarmac. So don't. Just progressively flow, point and rumble because in doing so, the RV8 makes more sense as a classic than it did as showroom-fresh merchandise. If you are a bit of a go-faster merchant, though, you could try one equipped with a Hoyle independent rear suspension kit.

The end of the RV8 marked the end of factory involvement with the MGB family. The world, though, had not had enough of the old trooper's octagonal DNA. Since the final spasms of MG Rover and the demise of the TF, committed enthusiasts might have been denied a new MG roadster, but there has been an alternative. Albeit one with a six-figure price-tag.

Frontline is a name that will be familiar to enthusiasts who take a liberal attitude to the originality of their classics. The company grew out of Tim Fenna's deft Toyota five-speed



From top: luxurious RV8 is lavishly appointed, with trad-style timber details and leather trim; injected 3.9-litre V8; cross-spokes were *de rigueur* in the '90s

# Technical specifications

	MGB	MGC	COSTELLO V8	MG RV8	FRONTLINE
<b>Sold/number built</b>	1962-'80/386,961	1966-'69/4544	1971-'74/c35	1992-'95/2007	2014-'18/25
<b>Construction</b>	steel monocoque, with aluminium bonnet	steel monocoque, with aluminium bonnet	steel monocoque	steel monocoque	steel monocoque
<b>Engine</b>	all-iron, ohv 1798cc 'four', with twin SU carburettors	all-iron, ohv 291.2cc straight-six, with twin SU carburettors	all-alloy, ohv 3528cc V8, with single Weber 40DCOE carburettor	all-alloy, ohv 3947cc V8, with electronic fuel injection	all-alloy, dohc 2448cc 'four', throttle-body fuel injection
<b>Max power</b>	95bhp @ 5400rpm	145bhp @ 5250rpm	c150bhp @ 5000rpm	190bhp @ 4750rpm	289bhp @ 6800rpm
<b>Max torque</b>	110lb ft @ 3000rpm	170lb ft @ 3400rpm	c201lb ft @ 2750rpm	235lb ft @ 3200rpm	241lb ft @ 5200rpm
<b>Transmission</b>	four-speed manual, (opt) overdrive, RWD	four-speed manual, (opt) overdrive, RWD	four-speed manual, (opt) overdrive, RWD	five-speed manual, limited-slip diff, RWD	six-speed manual, limited-slip diff, RWD
<b>Suspension: front</b>	independent, by wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers	independent, by torsion bars, wishbones, anti-roll bar, telescopic dampers	independent, by wishbones, coil springs, lever-arm dampers, anti-roll bar	independent, by wishbones, coil springs, anti-roll bar, telescopic dampers	independent, by wishbones, coil springs, adjustable coilover dampers
<b>rear</b>	live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers	live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers	live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, lever-arm dampers	live axle, tapered semi-elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers, twin lower control torque arms, anti-roll bar	six-link live axle, coil springs, progressive dampers, dual-rate bump-stops
<b>Steering</b>	rack and pinion	rack and pinion	rack and pinion	rack and pinion	assisted rack
<b>Brakes</b>	discs f, drums r	discs f, drums r	discs f, drums r	vented discs f, drums r	vented f, solid r discs
<b>0-60mph</b>	12.2 secs	10 secs	c7.8 secs	5.9 secs	4 secs
<b>Top speed</b>	103mph	120mph	128mph	135mph	c160mph
<b>Mpg</b>	23	19	c21	20	28
<b>Price new</b>	£949 15s	£1101 16s 6d	£2616.31 (Mk1 GT)	£26,500	£106,170
<b>Price now</b>	£7-25,000	£16-35,000	£15-30,000	£16-35,000	from £86,475



Sweet early MGB began as Charlesworth's favourite, although he was won over by the laid-back charms of the born-again RV8 and the underrated MGC



'THE ENGINE SOUNDS MANIC, DESPOTIC AND CRAZED AS IT DEVOURS THE ROAD AHEAD'



It's a B, Jim, but not as we know it! Blisteringly quick Abingdon Edition handles and grips brilliantly on clever multi-link rear

Spridget gearbox conversion and the MGB GT formed the basis of the firm's first turnkey resto-mod – the LE50 (*C&SC*, September 2012).

The 2014 Frontline Abingdon Edition evolved from the LE50 with some give and take – give it more power, further improve its chassis and take off its head – and is the realisation of an unfulfilled idea: the MGB Twin-Cam. Maddier, faster, with far higher handling parameters and engine outputs, it is one of a growing band of resurrected models that has caught the attention of the modern press. It forces commentators to become reacquainted with authentic feel, driver involvement and complete control.

Built on a fully restored original MGB body, packing a wishlist of the specialist's brake and suspension goodies and thrust forth by a screaming 289bhp Mazda twin-cam, a stationary Abingdon Edition is as subtle as it is tastefully appointed. Said subtly, though, vaporises as soon as it is fired up and unleashed onto the road.

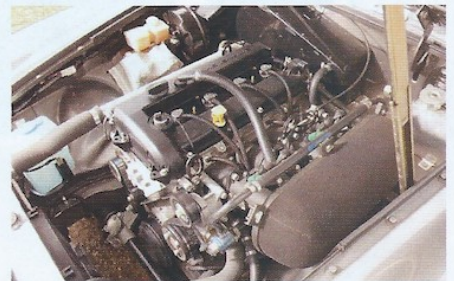
As you snap through the six ratios with your right foot crushing the throttle, the highly tuned engine sounds despot, manic and crazed as it devours the road ahead. You can almost picture it with pin-prick pupils – running on a cocktail of kerosene and Bolivian marching powder. Drive it with determination plus flickering gearchange light and its 311bhp per tonne punts you through a world that is stuck on fast-forward.

Only when the going gets rough, rutted and HGV groovy do its lower-profile tyres – 185/70 R15s at the front with 215/60 R15s astern – tramline under full acceleration. That's hinting at a slight lack of fluid pliability in its rigidly located rear, and ultimately revealing the limitations of its 1960s architecture. Yet this is a trivial moan, compared with its superb electric power steering, keen, swift responses, strict body control, grip and front-end reactions. It's hardly surprising that all 25 cars have been sold.

Can it B be the best though, when compared with the classic sportiness of the Mk1, the surprisingly versatile MGC, the Costello's funky style or the undervalued reserve of the RV8?

Yes, I – if not my bank account – would opt for the Frontline, which is the dynamic maestro of our group. But personal experience means that, due to my horizontal and vertical inches, I have to stick to a pre-1969 car. Although I have wilfully bored the world and his dog about the joys of a Special Tuning-fettled MGB, today my eyes have been opened to the delights of cruising around in an unspoilt MGC.

*Thanks to all the owners, the respective registers of the MG Car Club, Lawrence Wood at [mgcostello.com](http://mgcostello.com), Ed Braclik and Tim Fenna at Frontline Developments, and Enstone Flying Club: [www.enstoneflyingclub.co.uk](http://www.enstoneflyingclub.co.uk)*



From top: beautifully appointed cabin, as befits the Frontline's £100,000 price; Mazda twin-cam screamer; alloys evoke MGA-style knock-ons