



Hard acceleration proves awesome power, with little axle tramp. Grip in dry is prodigious

Costello magic

Steve Croyley's exclusive drive in Ken's latest V8 MGB

KEN COSTELLO, who pioneered the MGB V8 20 years ago, has done it again!

As Rover releases its first sketchy details of the new V8-powered MGR two-seater, *AutoClassic Weekly* has been driving Costello's latest MG V8 creation, a car which promises to match the MGR for power, roadholding and refinement – but which costs less than the MGR to build and has the virtue of preserving the B's classical shape.

The new MG model, due for launch this September, uses a 3.9-litre, 188bhp version of the legendary alloy V8, has a five-speed gearbox and will be made at a rate of 15 cars a week. The suspension is redesigned front and rear and, although it uses a standard Heritage bodyshell underneath, its wings, valances and fascia have all been given a new look.

But despite the divergent looks, the parallels with

Costello's car – which Rover's engineers had the chance to view and drive some months ago – are striking. The latest Costello MG, based on a chrome-bumpered BGT shell, has a 4-litre V8, puts its 200bhp through a strong but compact five-speed gearbox of Ken Costello's own design, and has a suspension redesigned on exactly the same principles of those promised for the MGR: double wishbones and coil

springs at the front, live rear axle with leaf springs but vertically mounted shock absorbers and lots of longitudinal locating links at the rear.

To cap it all, Costello uses eight-spoke Minilite-style alloy wheels with 65 series, 15in tyres, plus AP Racing ventilated front disc brakes with four-pot calipers to bring the retardation up to the mark. Typical of Costello's attention to detail is the fact that this beefy brake system is supported by a US-designed mechanical anti-lock braking system called ABStrax.

The MGR uses cross-spoke alloys with 60 series rubber – but there's been no mention yet of any anti-lock braking system.

Though his latest machine bears such a close resemblance to the MGR, Ken Costello denies that he has plans to rival Rover's latest creation. For one thing he could never build a serious production run from Costello Engineering's modest headquarters in Swanley, Kent. For another, he's more concerned with overseeing the full-scale production of his five-speed gearbox, a high-torque unit designed to be lighter and stronger than equivalent units, and capable of easy conversion into a six-speed.

He admits he could build 'the odd car' for customers who really wanted them. Costello, cagey by nature, is reluctant to put a price on the job, but intelligent guesstimates put the price of a

full-spec injection 4-litre, based on a Heritage shell and packed with new parts, at around £22,000.

The Costello MGB GT looks much like any other GT, if you discount the bigger wheels and tyres. That's the idea. But under the skin it has been greatly altered. Apart from its big AP brakes there is a Harvey-Bailey developed double wishbone suspension (no more lever-arm dampers!). Costello reckons there's a plan for a coil-sprung MGB rear end locked inside his head; he just hasn't had the time to let it out yet...

The engine is a blueprinted and balanced Rover Vitesse injection unit, equipped with a beautifully engineered set of free-flow exhaust headers and leading into a single-pipe stainless steel system. The engine, which burns super-green unleaded fuel, is good for an easy 210bhp, but Costello prefers to talk about 200 horses 'in round figures'.

There is evidence of painstaking development work all over the car. The heater fan has had its blades modified to provide a better airflow into the cabin. The car has an added central brake-light because Costello thinks they're safer. The sunroof is in mohair, not vinyl. The MGC diff contains a Quaife limited slip mechanism, because Costello thinks it's a must in a car of this power (working with the overdrive top gear it gives around 27mph/1000 for exceptionally easy cruising).



4-litre power, blueprinted and balanced, burns super green



With over 200bhp on tap, performance is electrifying. Mechanical ABS brakes excellent



Discreet badge in engine bay

And if that's not enough attention to detail for you, there's an all-leather interior, a Momo steering wheel (of 1in smaller diameter), revised backrest padding to give the seats more side support, and a set of air horns.

On the road, the car is nothing but pure delight. It's improved front suspension is immediately obvious: the unassisted steering still has a typically MGB slightly woolly



Completely reworked suspension and Minifite-style wheels give Costello V8 a purposeful stance. A thoroughly modern car with classic good looks



All-leather interior and Momo wheel provide luxury feel

directness but the front wheels resist oversteer far better than standard, and the body rolls less.

For all its leaf springs, the rear end copes with the power extremely well. There's no axle tramp even under big power applications, and the lightly loaded rear wheels grip surprisingly well in the dry. They can be readily made to lose adhesion and snap into oversteer with applications of

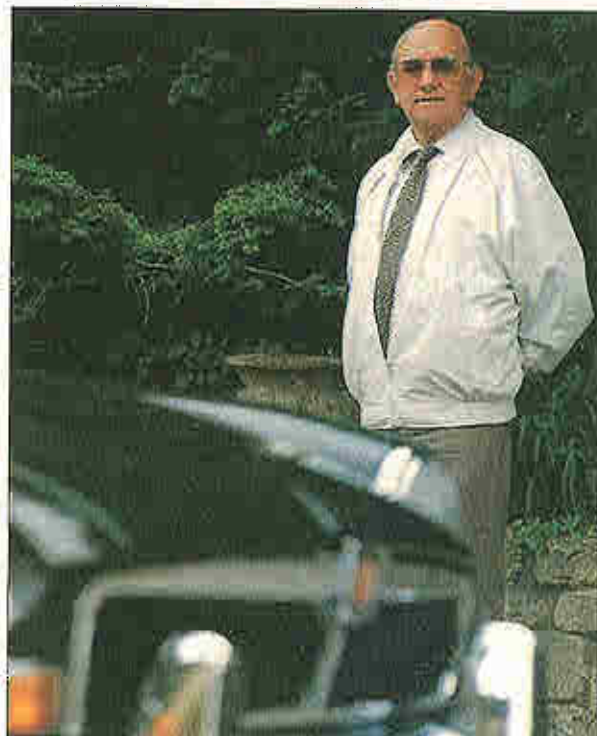
torque, but the car stays flat and predictable at all times.

The biggest feature, of course, is the power. Rover claims under six seconds 0-60mph for the MGR. Costello's car is no slower. Tickle the throttle at any speed above idle and it bounds away. Press the load pedal seriously and the car just eats road, producing a delightful but none-too-loud growl as it goes.

Costello's bespoke gearbox has short, well-defined throws and ideal ratios for the power, though lots of gearchanging is hardly on the agenda. The beauty of the car is its supreme flexibility. It has all of the power, but none of the fluffiness, of a carburettor-fed Rover V8. Spend an hour in the car and you just won't believe that this fast, refined, relatively quiet GT car isn't the product of some major manufacturer's long-winded development programme.

The latter-day Costello MG is anything but a serious attempt by its maker to rival the new MGR. For one thing, with its chrome bumpers it looks like a product of the '60s. No, it's the latest piece of evidence that Ken Costello's original MGB V8 concept was a true tour-de-force.

And that Rover has decided to put into production the RV8 proves the eminent sense of the new concept. ■



Man and machine – 20 years on Ken Costello's still inventive