



MGB GT COSTELLO V8

In 1968 the newly formed British Leyland was enjoying very buoyant sales across its range of sports cars which included the famous marques of MG, Jaguar and Triumph, in fact at Abingdon, there were records production figures achieved with between 70 and 80% of vehicles going for export. With these encouraging sales there seemed a reluctance to invest much time in new model development. The corporation was now being controlled by Lord Stokes, and although there were no obvious changes immediately, there were some alterations made with regard to key personnel, particularly in the areas of new model design teams, who were based at Longbridge. It is known that Stokes favoured Triumph and that many of his "men" were also Triumph biased. This did not affect MG in the short term, but as we know had disastrous consequences a decade later. During the sixties, Abingdon was flat out producing as many MGB's, Midget's and Austin Healey's as it could and to satisfy the demand for more power the 6 cylinder MGC was introduced. This particular MG was in direct competition with other Leyland models such as the Triumph Stag, TR5 and TR6 and of course Jaguar were still producing good numbers of the six cylinder E Type.

There were one or two projects that never got past the prototype stage, one in particular being the mid-engined Rover V8 sports car, codenamed P6BS. This exciting project was felt by many to be one that should have been pursued but it seemed that Leyland were in disarray with their sports car policy. Many observers felt that it was simply the Triumph "men" that were winning their way, especially as the Stag had incurred heavy development costs, in particular with regard to its unique and unreliable engine. MG were in the main left to their own devices in the late sixties and early seventies and apart from the MGC there were no other imminent model changes. The MGC although blessed with considerably more power than the standard MGB, was thought by the motoring press to be somewhat deficient in the way it handled, due to the considerable front end weight penalty imposed by the hefty 3 litre cast iron engine. Although engine experiments were carried out at Abingdon as early as 1967 to increase power without weight penalty, both the Daimler 2.5 litre and 4.5 litre aluminium V8 engines were squeezed under the bonnet of an MGB, however nothing came of these projects and thoughts of a V8 MGB were laid to rest by the Abingdon engineers.

There was nonetheless an enterprising engineer by the name of Ken Costello who had his own engineering business in Farnborough, Kent, who felt that there was a definite market for a V8 MGB and he set about marketing a V8 conversion of the MGB GT that was available in 1970 for a cost of £2,443 (the standard GT at

that time cost £1,459). It was the Buick based, 150 bhp Rover 3.5 litre V8 engine that Ken chose to install under the bonnet of the MGB. Rover had acquired the rights to this engine from Buick who had decided that it was obsolete. To this day, the same engine is in production and widely used in Land Rover, Range Rover and of course the MGR V8 applications, not bad for an engine that was considered at the end of its useful life by Buick in the sixties! Ken was able to fit this engine neatly into the engine bay of the MGB with only minor modification to the bulkhead and inner wings which gave clearance for the tubular steel manifolds. Modification was needed to the bonnet



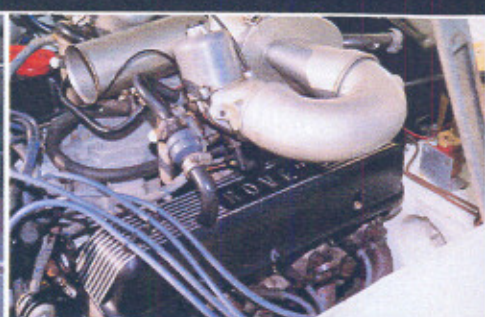
and the steel one was replaced with a fibreglass version that sported a noticeable "power bulge" to accommodate the inclined and opposed SU HIF6 carburetors. The rest of the standard MGB remained virtually intact, which included the utilisation of the standard MGB all-synchromesh gearbox mated to the engine with a special adaptor plate. With the passage of time the gearbox has proved inadequate for the job due to the hefty torque produced by the Rover engine and many owners have opted for the Rover SD1 5 speed gearbox as a far better alternative. The standard rear axle was also retained as it was considered man enough for the job, however the final drive ratio was raised from 3.909:1 to 3.07:1. No change was effected to the suspension, steering and brakes and unless specified by the customer, the original wheels and tyres were utilised. The majority of customers did opt for the fitting of special sculptured cast alloy wheels that were made by Dunlop and consisted of steel rims riveted to the alloy centres. Although similar in appearance and often mistaken for the Dunlop wheels that were fitted to the later British Leyland MGB GT V8, they were not the same. Other Costello identifying features were the distinctive large mesh black aluminium front grille and the sizeable "V8

Costello" badging on the left hand side of the tailgate.

Demand for the Costello V8 was brisk and despite very little advertising, the car sold well by recommendation and the enthusiastic reports that appeared in the motoring press. Fairly serious production of these hand built conversions commenced in 1970 and a year later approximately two cars per week were being completed. It was inevitable that this would not go un-noticed by BL particularly as they were happily supplying a considerable number of the Rover PB6 engines. Curiosity very soon had Ken Costello demonstrating his conversion to BL executives at Longbridge. In Wilson McComb's book on MG history, he reveals that privately the hierarchy at BL were very impressed with the car and questions were asked by the chairman, Lord Stokes, as to why BL couldn't produce an MGB GT V8 themselves and perhaps refine the idea further. The green light was instantly given to Abingdon engineers Don Hayter, Roy Brocklehurst and their team who very quickly produced a prototype within six weeks. Approval for full production followed swiftly, commencing in March 1973. It has been noted that once BL had discovered the true use to which Ken Costello was putting the V8 engines, that supplies to him gradually dried up and by the time the factory MGB GT V8 was launched, Ken was unable to secure any new engines at all. He was also unable to compete in price terms with the Abingdon V8 which was launched at a price of £1,925 and as a result no further cars were converted after 1973, with an estimated 200 conversions (predominantly GT's) having been carried out.

The very presentable 1972 MGB GT Costello V8 that we feature this month, belongs to Mark Vine of Chelmsford and it is a good original example of a moderately rare car. It is not known how many examples remain of the 200 that Ken converted, but with the passage of time, the Costello has carved its own niche in the MG history books as a very desirable and limited edition MG special. Mark has always had an affinity for the more powerful MG's having started his association with the marque with an MGC Roadster before progressing to the Costello V8 which he bought to "run around in" whilst he restored the MGC to concours condition. Having entered competitions successfully for a couple of years, Mark sold the MGC and turned his attentions to restoring the Costello. Mark's only deviations from the original specification are the "borrowing" of factory GT V8 alloy wheels and some uprating of the suspension, brakes and cooling system. He is by his own admission totally captivated by the performance and the pleasure of owning a fairly exclusive MG and vows that he will never part with the car.

MGB GT COSTELLO V8



SPECIFICATION

Engine: 8 cylinder in 90 degree V formation.
Bore & stroke: 88.9mm x 71.1mm.
Capacity: 3,528 cc.
Compression ratio: 10.5:1.
Valve operation: Single camshaft, chain driven from crankshaft operated by pushrods and rockers.
Hydraulic tappets.
Carburation: Twin SU HIF6 carburetors, inclined and opposed.
Power output: 105 bhp (din).
Gearbox: Standard MGB all synchromesh.
Clutch: 9.5" dry plate, diaphragm spring.
Rear axle: Salisbury with 3.07:1 ratio.
Suspension: Front; independent by upper and lower wishbones, with coil springs and anti roll bar.
Lever arm hydraulic dampers. Rear; live axle, half elliptic leaf springs, telescopic damper conversion.
Brakes: Lockheed front wheel discs (std MGB) and rear drums with servo assistance.
Number built: Approximately 200 (mainly GT's)
Price new in 1970: £2,443 basic car.
£2,616 with heated rear window, overdrive, radial tyres and alloy wheels.