

1949 MG Y TYPES

THE Y FACTOR Words & Photos: Ross McGown

Restored MG Y types are not overly abundant. In the 1960s and '70s when values were at their lowest, many Ys were cannibalised for parts for the MG TCs and TDs. Fortunately, the Ys have become more sought after now, although it's unusual for one man to have been responsible for restoring a trio of cars.



Bill Spall spent much of his teaching career in country Queensland and, as teachers do, he moved regularly. When he retired, he was finally able to settle into one spot and take the opportunity to fulfil a long held desire to own a Y. He bought his first Y in 1983. In going condition and registered, it was used as a daily driver for two years before undergoing a full restoration.

RESTORATION HABIT

Bill's desire to own an MG goes back to the early sixties when he was living in the small town of Grantham. He would go to his school on Sunday afternoons to prepare for the following week and would see a light green MG Y driven to the church opposite the school. He thought it was very attractive and decided he'd own one when the opportunity arose.

Bill enjoyed restoring his first Y so much that he sold it to another MG enthusiast and bought two more cars in 1992, one to restore and the other for spares. But in the end, he restored all three and kept the last one for himself. The cars weren't sold for profit – Bill's satisfaction came from the challenge of returning the cars to their original condition, and he simply couldn't let the 'spares' car disappear.

Not surprisingly, Bill has become an expert on the Ys and has formed a strong friendship with Tony Slattery, who maintains the Australian Y register. Tony is currently restoring a Y himself and Bill has been extremely helpful to Tony with his project. Tony has collected a wealth of information on saloons and tourers sold in Australia, along with the present whereabouts of surviving cars.

Bill's original car came with a little history from its previous owners, along with an invoice for brake repairs undertaken in 1960. This enabled Bill to locate the owner of the car at that time, Mr J Duval



cluster gears. I placed an order locally and a year later I was still being told they were unavailable," recalled Bill. "I wrote to Naylor Bros in Yorkshire who supplied the parts I ordered within two weeks. I also contacted NTG Motor Services in Suffolk and they have an extensive parts stock."

NTG supplied specialised items such as sunroof seals, light lenses, shackle bushes and replacement skins for all the doors. Brisbane MG specialist Abingdon Motors supplied most mechanical parts, including seals, gaskets, suspension and brake parts. They also supplied two rear ashtrays, which have now become almost impossible to buy.

"The Ys were strongly built and designed for easy servicing. They're easy to repair. I'm not a mechanic, and I could do virtually all the work myself." Bill explained, "Being an old-fashioned car, every component comes apart and can be fixed. Body parts are easily repaired and there's only a small amount of timberwork. One of their few weaknesses was that they broke rear axles, but remanufactured axles are better quality steel and don't give any trouble.

"I actually completed the spraypainting course at TAFE twice but still decided that there were too many pitfalls in doing my own paintwork. So I had the car sand-blasted to remove the coats of three different colours and professionally repainted." Bill wasn't committed to one of the limited original factory colours, choosing Atlantis Blue with black mudguards for his first car.

But Bill had no inhibitions about tackling other tasks. That first car had been retrimmed not long before he bought it. He had the seats in the others professionally retrimmed, but made new wooden supports for the headlinings and replaced all of these with his wife June's help.

LUCKY NUMBER THREE

Ys suffered from water entering around the door and windscreen seals and leaked through the sunroof if the drains were blocked. The first car had rust in the lower parts of the doors but was otherwise free of any serious corrosion, but the last car was very incomplete and had extensive rust. "I didn't think I'd ever actually finish it. It had layers of paint and rust everywhere. I had to have replacement panels specially made and Tony Slattery helped me weld them in."

When the family car was written off in an accident, Bill decided to finish this last car in a hurry and use it as a daily driver. So he made a few alterations, fitting twin carburettors and modified rims to accept radial tyres. He's replaced the original rear lever arm shock absorbers with tubular shocks to give better handling on rough roads. ➤

who had bought it when it was just 12 months old. He gave Bill a colour photograph showing the car was originally painted Sunset Bronze. He owned the MG for 19 years and recalled it with a lot of pleasure. It had served him well, with the engine overhauled once and the clutch replaced along with two rear axles.

LEARNING CURVE

Restoring his first car sent Bill on a learning curve. The bodywork was completely dismantled and removed from the chassis. Rebuilding the engine was straightforward, but the gearbox was very badly worn. "I had trouble getting a set of





As bought.



Bodyshell during rebuild.



Badly rusted boot area.



Chassis.



Repaired.

The current owner of the first car, David Robinson said, "I bought the car three years ago from Owen McNeill, to whom Bill had sold it. I already had a Y in pieces and decided that it was a good opportunity to acquire a nicely restored car. It was a club concours winner and just didn't need anything done. I also race an open wheeler and an MG Mquette saloon, so my time to spend on actual restoration is restricted. The Y is a pleasant tourer that can roll down the highway at 100kmh. It steers and rides well and it's been very reliable, attending national rallies in Canberra, Newcastle and Warwick."

Colin Lobb owns the second car, unable to resist it when he saw it on offer in a dealer's yard in NSW.

PREWAR BEGINNINGS FOR A POST WAR CAR

Although the MG name had already become synonymous with sportscars in the 1930s, the firm had also built three saloons. The S and W series each had larger Wolseley-derived 6-cylinder engines while the V series utilised a 1548cc engine. The company's next saloon was smaller again and they turned to the Morris Ten and Eight models released in 1938 for many of their components.

Initially known as the 'MG Experimental Ten Saloon' it later was officially designated as the MG 1/4 litre Series Y. Had it not been for the intervention of WW2, it would have been launched in 1940, but the first prototype appeared in April 1946, with production commencing the following April. Although the trend to unitary construction was underway, the new saloon would have a strong separate chassis, underslung at the rear, and utilise a single carburettor version of the 1250cc XPAG engine from its contemporary MG TB sportscar.

Two people who later became well known for other work figure in the MG Y's development - Alec Issigonis and Gerald Palmer. Palmer headed MG's drawing office, where Issigonis was also working at the time. Issigonis and a company draughtsman, Jack Daniels, designed an independent front suspension (IFS) using coils and wishbones.

IFS was still relatively new at the time, and their design was among the better systems - it remained virtually unchanged through to the MGBs. Not only was the Y to incorporate MG's first IFS, but also its rack and pinion steering would set new standards in precision.

Bodywork was based on the smaller Morris Eight shell - with an enlarged tail and longer guards, although not widened. Most writings credit Gerald Palmer with designing the bodywork, but Palmer made it clear in his 1998 autobiography that it was designed in the Morris drawing office. Palmer recalled his involvement with the project as designing a beam front axle arrangement, because the independent front suspension was expected to be too expensive. A wooden 'mock-up' was completed during 1939. The 1946 prototype incorporated some styling refinements, simplified hubcaps and an improved dashboard.

UNCERTAIN SALES

In October 1948, the open version was released at the Earls Court Motor Show. Designated the YT, it was strictly for export and built in both left and right hand drive models. Four seater tourers had been popular before WW2 with those wanting to combine family and open-air motoring, but tourer sales didn't take off as well as MG had anticipated. Just 877 were built, half of which went to America before production ceased in 1950.

1950 was the best selling year for the saloon, but sales slowed as other manufacturers began to offer more up-to-date designs to a less car-starved public. In 1951 a new series YB was introduced, with a range of small changes. An improved Lockheed braking system was fitted along with a hypoid rear axle. Ride and handling were enhanced with wider 15-inch tyres replacing the 16s and a front anti-roll bar. The rear mudguards were deepened to suit the smaller diameter rims.

Only four of the YBs were officially exported to Australia, since the Australian importers decided to concentrate on selling MG TDs. Several have since been privately imported. YB production ceased in July 1953 after 1301 had been built. Total production of all saloons and tourers had reached 8336.

The Ys were replaced by the all-new Mquette saloons, designed by Gerald Palmer who had returned to Nuffields in July 1949 after his work at Jowett.

THE CONTEMPORARY MG Y

The early postwar years saw Britain rise to become the world's leading car exporter. The Nuffield Organisation was the country's largest export firm, 'dominating the highways of the world' until Austin overtook it in 1949 and the two companies merged to form BMC in 1952.

Nuffield offered an almost bewildering range of products before the days of 'badge-engineering' - Morris, MG, Riley, Wolseley and Nuffield tractors - utilising engines with different configurations - side-valves, pushrod overhead valves, overhead camshafts - each marque with its traditional identity. The MG buyers expected a sportscar, and MG's slogan 'Safety Fast' was included in the advertisements promoting the Y with its 'dual personality.'





The Motor first tested the Y in May 1947, just a month after its release, taking it on a 1,000 mile run over on the continent. They maintained an indicated 70mph on Belgium's Jabbeke Road 'without the car showing any signs of distress' and commented that 'in terms of acceleration and maximum speed the car has performance which is well above the average.' Its conservative lines made no concessions to 'transatlantic styling trends' and passengers rode in armchair comfort with shaped leather seats.

When they again tested the MG in September 1951, they qualified its distinctly old-fashioned appearance with 'there are many who will rejoice that the appearance continues a long tradition.' By then, performance figures were not outstanding with a maximum speed of 75mph, but the engine was very willing and capable of 5000rpm without hesitation. Petrol prices were of concern then too, and the fuel economy was quite reasonable. Oversteering handling characteristics were noted, although only at higher speeds - readily controlled by 'an alert driver.' Luggage capacity was on the small side 'by modern standards.'

THE MG Y UP CLOSE

The Y offered the late-forties motorist an appealing package. Once he'd reached the top of the buyer's wait list, he got an extremely well finished, well built car with reasonable performance for its size at the time. Perhaps one of the most apt descriptions came from an Australian owner writing about his car for Sports Car World magazine in the seventies – 'a confusion of modernity and obsolescence made the MG Y Abingdon's four door enigma.'

The styling was directly scaled down from those larger pre-war saloons and was typical of the more elegant British cars of the late '30s built by companies with sporting connections. Unlike Jaguar, MG saw no need for a bonnet mascot but used their distinctive octagon emblem everywhere. The instruments are octagonal and octagon emblems can be found on door handles, bonnet locks and the dipstick.

The genuine wooden trim was a British luxury standard and leather upholstery cosseted the passengers. The front featured sensible bucket seats and a remote gearchange, while the steering column length was adjustable. The sliding sunroof was standard too, along with a forward opening windscreen but the quarter windows that had cooled generations of Australians before air-conditioning were missing. ➤



SPECIFICATIONS - 1949 MG Y Types

Engine	Four cylinder pushrod OHV
Capacity	1250cc
Bore/stroke	65 x 90mm
Compression ratio	7.4:1
Power output	46bhp @ 4800rpm
Carburetion	Single SU 1 3/4in downdraught
Gearbox	Four speed with synchromesh on 2nd, 3rd and top.
Suspension	Front - independent coil and wishbone Rear - Semi-elliptic springs
Steering	Rack and pinion
Brakes	Hydraulic
Weight	20cwt
Tyres	5.25 x 16in
Maximum speed	75mph

(The above are taken from contemporary road tests and reports)



With the Morris Eight based bodywork, it's strictly a four seater. Suicide front doors may be the butt of many jokes but access would have been impossible with rear opening doors. The door hinges could be leftovers from WW2 tanks, and the doors have solid locator pins separate to the locks.

Engine access is superb - everything is easily reached. Under the bonnet, a four-wheel hydraulic Jackall system allows the car to be raised to change wheels very easily. Luggage space is limited but the boot folds out flat so that ports can be carried on its ribbed surface.

As those road testers reported, performance was always modest with just 46bhp from its 1250ccs pulling a car weighing a ton. The accent was on comfort and the Y's forte was its refined front suspension and steering, delivering that 'modernity' the SCW contributor referred to.

BEHIND THE WHEEL

Bill was good enough to let me experience his car 'hands on.' He'd just given it a tune-up with new plugs and set the dual carburetors he's fitted. It started instantly from cold, warming up on the choke. Bill commented that these controls weren't too well placed - the starter button is to the left of the steering column, a few inches above the choke, which has to be held out until the engine warms - perhaps the designer had two left hands.

Bill handed his car to me after we'd done a few freeway miles. I had difficulty swinging my long legs into the driver's seat. Bill readjusted the steering wheel but I only just managed to get in!

It's certainly a smallish car inside - the large steering wheel encroaches on the driver's space - but once I was in, everything seemed quite comfortable. Bill felt it was a little noisy but the engine seemed very quiet to me and the gearbox is precise with good synchromesh. The car rides very well and with its precise steering, I could have been at the wheel of a much more modern vehicle. The Y cruised at 55-60mph. Although Bill said he's seen 70mph on the speedo and wouldn't feel comfortable at that speed, it certainly felt secure on the road and pulled up longer hills without losing speed.



Apart from the temperature gauge Bill has added below the dash, it's hard to find any shortcomings in the MG's equipment - the walnut dash, door cappings and black faced instruments set off the forties bakelite switches and controls. The contoured bucket seats are obviously developed from MG's racing experience. The two-tone paintwork adds to its original elegance, highlighting the flowing guards.

Bill doesn't intend to restore more cars, though he's still helping other Y owners from time to time. He'll pass his last car on to his son but for now, he and his wife June are enjoying the MG Y's comfort and reliability. ■

