Originally published in Autoweek March 6, 1989

Castagna-bodied MG

Taking delivery of the coachbuilder's last carriage

By Roger Barlow

In 1953, after more than a century of producing high-quality carriages and automotive bodies, the renowned Italian coachbuilder Carrozzeria Castagna, whose insignia was a magnificent coach made for a King of Italy, had closed its doors and was in receivership. A sad end to a noble house. And I was there a few months later, on stage, a member of the cast of two in the final scene of this tragedy: The last car to bear the emblem of this firm was to be delivered to its last customer—me.

It must have been late 1952 when I had arranged with MG at Abingdon to sell me a Y chassis (the basis for the shorter TD) and ship it on to Castagna for a one-off convertible to be constructed to my design and specification.

An *MG*? I can hear readers with long memories wondering now, for this was right in the thick of my CSSA/SCCA combat with MGs when I was at the wheel of the little blue Simcas (*AW*, June 8 and 15, 1987)! Ah, but it was friendly combat, and I had never lost my respect and affection for the marque MG. So when I wanted a 2+2 convertible with the intriguing Vistotal pillarless windscreen—like the Fiat 1100 coupe (*AW*, April 4, 1988)—only Castagna was considered for the coachwork and only the MG Y chassis because of its combination of comfort and handling in factory-sedan form that derived from its coil-spring IFS and underslung half-elliptics at the rear.

Light rack-and-pinion steering, with only about 2½ turns for a 35-foot circle, and a stiff frame were other factors in its favor.

There would be no concession to aerodynamics, visual or actual. The standard, traditional MG grille was to be utilized, Borrani knock-off wire wheels were specified with the spare to be mounted externally on the rear deck by means of a normal splined hub and nut, thus making more space available in the boot.

The space was to be further augmented by the elimination of the normal gas tank. Fuel was to be carried in two six-gallon tanks, one mounted on each side just ahead of the scuttle. Access to them was by lifting the louvered, one-piece hood of the engine compartment (check the oil while refueling). There was an MG quick-release filler cap directly on top of each tank; with no piping to impede the flow of fuel from the nozzle, it could be taken on board at full flow with the rising level in the tank fairly visible.

The two tanks were entirely separate, with no balance pipe. Each had its own SU electric fuel pump brought into action by a switch on the fascia. Therefore one could run a tank down to the last drop (before switching over) for easy and accurate fuel consumption checks. Or consider the second tank as a six-gallon reserve! No fuel gauges were fitted.

Roger Barlow photo

The MG and Stonehenge: Posing unanswered questions

The instruments were standard 1952 MG, including a tachometer. Unfortunately, they were round, though the early Y cars had octagonal units.

Upholstery was in black leather, piped to match the warm red of the exterior paint. The fabric of the top was black.

I cannot recollect which parts of the body were in steel and which in aluminum as no specifications in this matter were laid down, other than to say the completed car should be reasonably light yet rigid.

Back to 1954. I had paid a bank in Varese the balance of the $3,000 contract, due upon delivery of the car, and now, in Venegono Superiore, I was met at the deserted Castagna factory by Sr. Ercole Castagna himself, visibly bowed by the failure of his Carrozzeria and seemingly older than his 68 years. The main assembly shop appeared larger than when I first visited in 1949 because now it was empty except for one car hidden under a dust cloth—that Last Carriage From Castagna.

Sr. Castagna went forward and slowly pulled the cover off.

I am glad now that he was looking at his last effort with a craftsman's pride and did not see my face displaying a mixture of disappointment and consternation ... for, handsome as the MG was, *it wasn't what I'd expected or ordered*: The windscreen was *not* a Vistotal, the main reason for this car's creation, but a conventional design with A-pillars!

I never got a satisfactory explanation as to why they had not followed my instructions or their own drawings sent for my approval. In any event, it was a little late for any changes or recriminations. Besides, it *was* a lovely little machine and I could hardly wait to drive it away.

Which led to the next surprise—my new car was not drivable! That would account for the OM diesel flatbed that had just arrived to haul me and the MG across the nearby Swiss border to a gas station with a work bay where I could complete the wiring. And then I discovered that the starter, voltage regulator and several other items were missing.

So it was off to London by rail (via LeMans, where I was to help Raymond Spottiswoode photograph the race in 3-D for Shell), then back to Chiasso to finally get the MG operative and head for Hollywood via the St. Gothard Pass and Stonehenge.

The Alps, France, England and the trip across the U.S. (my 32nd) enabled me to really get to know my very special MG.

As was rather expected, the sporting character of the Castagna (which was quickly dubbed "Emma" ... "Emma G," that is) really deserved more power.

The 80 mph top speed was acceptable from 1250 cc but not 0-60 in 26 seconds! Rather than resorting to dual carburetors and supertuning, MG specialist Al Moss installed a blower (Shorrock?) to improve acceleration.

However, as I was getting back into documentary film work, motion picture equipment was more important than driving the most head-turning MG in town and so, with much regret, it was soon sold.

Al Moss tells me that Emma G's new owner, Beth Patrick, had quite a bit of trouble with the car (heaping curses upon me every time she visited his shop) and doesn't believe she owned it for very long.

The Last Carriage From Castagna, the only road car I "designed," must still exist, even if with some other powerplant.

Dear Emma G, we never should have parted. Please forgive me—and do write. ■