

The Y-Type in America

by John Lawson

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In the years immediately before the Second World War, MG sought to supplement their popular range of 'Midget' sports cars with three saloons of various sizes and engine capacities. These were the 'S', 'V' and 'W' models. MG, at Abingdon-on-Thames, then in Berkshire, had grown by developing what were in essence Morris-based products, and in the future they would be compelled to use much from elsewhere in what was to become the Nuffield Organisation (Morris, Wolseley and later Riley). Nuffield heredity could be clearly seen in these pre-war saloons, which were in great part Wolseley-derived. The 'WA' had an engine capacity of 2,561cc, the 'SA' had 2,288cc or 2,322cc, and the smallest of the group, the 'VA', weighed in at 1,548cc.

The next development to the range was to include one more saloon, of smaller engine capacity than the 'VA', and for a component-base, the Cowley design office turned to Morris's Ten-Four Series M saloon which had been introduced during 1938, and the smaller Eight Series E which was shown for the first time at the Earl's Court Motor Show of 13th October that same year.

Thus was the prototype of the 'MG Ten', later to become known officially as the MG 1½ Litre Series 'Y', developed for launch at the 1940 Motor Show. And, although it was primarily a Cowley concept, much of the fleshing out was done at Abingdon and it was therefore given the Abingdon Design Office prototype designation 'EX.166'. The car would feature an independent front suspension layout designed by Alec Issigonis (later of Morris Minor and Mini fame) and Jack Daniels (an MG draughtsman). Independent front suspension was very much the latest technology at the time and the 'Y' Type became the first Nuffield product - and one of the first British production cars - to be so equipped.



Steve Neal of Arrowsic, Maine, beaming with MG Y-Type No. Y/5241, before restoration, which resulted in the two-tone beauty at top of page.

Gerald Palmer was responsible for body styling and, in essence, he took a Morris Eight Series E four-door bodysell in pressed steel and added a swept tail and rear wings and front-end MG identity in the shape of their well-known upright grille. Palmer later went on to design the innovative and successful

Jowett Javelin and then, back with Nuffields, the Wolseley 4/44, MG Z-type Magnette, Riley Pathfinder and their derivatives.

The 1½-litre MG saloon was to have a separate chassis under this pressed-steel bodywork, even though the trend in the motor industry in general at the time was towards 'unitary construction'. And the 1,250cc engine was to be a single-carburettor version of that used in the latest MG 'TB' Midget sports car.

The Second World War, of course, put paid to MG's plans for 1940/41, and so it was not until early 1947 that the 1½ litre Y-Type saloon became available to the public. In common with most British motor manufacturers, as soon as possible after the war ended what were basically pre-war designs (in MG's case the TC sports car and the Y-Type saloon) were put into production pending the ability to produce genuinely newly-designed cars. The first production 'Y' had chassis number Y/0251 ('251' being the Abingdon factory's telephone number) and upon the type's introduction it cost £671, a considerable proportion of which was Purchase Tax. That said, British industrial output at the time was very much geared to supplying the export trade only; indeed steel was rationed on the basis of export success, so the attractiveness of the TC and TD sports cars overseas in the coming years would ensure that Y-type production would continue. A large percentage of the Y-types produced ended up in

several naked 'Y' chassis had been imported into Switzerland and given cabriolet bodywork by the coachbuilders Reinbolt & Christé, Beutler and Worblaufen. Directly or indirectly, this may have influenced MG to quickly develop and introduce their own Tourer version of the Y-type, the 'Y/T'. The concept of the open four-seat tourer had been very popular before the war and, in theory at least, there should have been a strong market for what it was expected the public would see as a T-type open sports car which allowed full family participation in the joys of open-air motoring. Thus, the TC specification of engine was married to a pressed-steel open body with fully-folding hood and coachbuilt doors. The 'Y/T' was launched at the 1948 Earl's Court Motor Show in October 1948 and cost £525. But it was to be strictly available for export only (and both right-hand and left-hand drive models were to be produced).

The only variant of the Y-type MG specifically developed for the North American market was the Y/T/EX(U). This special version of the Y/T Tourer featured a modern electric flashing direction indicator system which was then being insisted upon by some states of the USA. Apart from revised wiring and front lamp internals, the rear wings of the EX(U) were modified to carry sculpted plinths for the Lucas rear lamps peculiar to this version of the car. Given that in North America motorists drive on the right hand side of the road,

one might expect that all Y/Ts sold on that continent would have been left-hand-drive models. Not so. Strangely, most Y/Ts exported to the USA were right-hand drive (Y/T/EXR) versions and, as not all states yet insisted upon flashing direction indicators,



LEFT: On the left is a rare LHD saloon, alongside a 1950 Clipper Blue RHD Y-Tourer in upstate New York.

BELOW: A Y/T/EX(U) Tourer in British Columbia, Canada.

BOTTOM: This 1953 'YB' Saloon, finished in Autumn Red, basks in the sun at a University Motors Summer Party in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

'Empire' countries, particularly Australia, but on the back of the TC's success in North America, some also went in that direction. In early 1948 the US price of a new Y-type was \$2,658.

Just a year after the very first Y-types had been completed, Roger Barlow of International Motors of Los Angeles approached MG with a scheme to acquire a batch of running chassis on which he planned to have built modern 'full-width' bodywork by a number of Italian coachbuilders. It was envisaged that up to seventy cars would thus be clothed by Zagato, Castagna and Farina, and in open two- and four-seat forms. MG went out of their way to accommodate Barlow's wishes, agreeing to make significant mechanical changes to the running chassis and its ancillary systems (even fitting a Shorrocks supercharger) but, despite high hopes, only one chassis seems to have been completed, and this as a closed coupé by Zagato. This was not the end of Barlow's Y-Type dream, however, and it would surface again briefly four years later.

Meanwhile, in early 1948,



the special Y/T/EX(U)s were very much in the minority. Atypically, the very first Y/T had been an EX(U) car (chassis number 1922), but by far the greatest number of Y/Ts produced were straightforward EXRs, and most of these went to Australia and other Empire countries. On introduction into the USA the Y/T cost \$2,875. And, at the same time, the price of the saloon rose to the same amount.

It didn't take long, however, for MG to realize that the Y/T was not going to be the success they had hoped for. Other British manufacturers (in particular Riley, whose cars were also produced at Abingdon) were having problems selling open tourer versions of their saloons in North America.

Whilst it might be said that the Y/T's performance could have been better, it remains a fact that, for whatever reasons, the attractiveness of open family tourers was never to regain its pre-war heights. Production of the 'Y' Tourer therefore ceased in mid-1950, with only 877 units completed. Indeed, such had been the poor response that this 'export only' car had in the end to be unofficially offered to the U.K. public in order to place stocks.

The TC sports car too was now beginning to show its age, and feedback from customers in the USA, coupled with post-war mechanical advances, dictated the development of a new model Midget. And here the Y-type played its part in the solution, for the TD, which was introduced at the end of 1949, used a chassis that was a shortened and 'overslung' development of that of the 'Y'. Additionally, the independent front coil-sprung suspension, the rack and pinion steering and many other smaller components used in the TD were basically Y-type in origin.



was produced in 1952 and 1953 and only sold to the tune of 1,301 examples. Very few were exported officially, and none to North America. Before the end, however, Roger Barlow entered the picture once more. He obtained a late 1952 chassis and had Castagna



build him a red two-door convertible body for it. It was the last car they ever completed and sadly it was a disappointment, both aesthetically and from a performance point of view.

And there our story might have ended except for the fact that in the 1970s, American enthusiasts touring Britain - out of devotion to their T-type Midgets began to discover the 'Y' and arrange for the 'liberation' of quite a few. At that time Y-type interest in Britain was at an all time low and most of these imported cars would have been true baskets cases; some would have been used simply as parts sources to back up the T-types. But gradually an awareness of and a growing regard for this small family saloon began to spread. Generally though, back home, most American MG owners were very surprised to find out that MG had made saloons as well as sports cars.

Today, out of the total of 8,336 Y-types produced between 1947 and 1953, 118 are known to survive in the USA, with another 15 in Canada. Of these I will single out three for special mention. Y/1805, a 1948 'Y' saloon, was once owned by Al Moss, founder of the world famous parts suppliers for British sports cars. Like many of the MGs



TOP OF PAGE: Views of another rare LHD 'Y', No. Y/5174/EXLU, as found in Michigan, before its subsequent restoration.

ABOVE: Dazzling black saloon with red leather and chrome wire wheels, which were never offered during the austere post-war years of the car's youth. This is the supercharged No. Y/1805 as described in the text.

RIGHT: One of the earliest Y/Ts in existence, No. Y/T/EX(U) 2031.



The following year, 1950, would see the Y-type's best year of production before sales started to decline. The attractiveness of the new generation of American-influenced bodystyles now being offered by other British manufacturers was starting to make inroads into MG's sales at home. Apart from the left-hand-drive Y/Ts which had been built, Abingdon also engineered a relatively small number of LHD 'Y' saloons. A few of these were destined for North America using the Y/EXLU (early) and Y/EXL/NA (late) designations. As we have seen, automotive lighting in the US was undergoing much modernisation and the sealed-beam headlight, developed by Westinghouse during the war, was being specified by certain states. Y-type saloons and tourers, which needed to be so equipped, were thus shipped with empty headlamp backshells protected by covers so that, once in the USA, the dealer/importer (for instance, Inskip of New York) could fit and wire up the seven-inch sealed-beam lamps.

Abingdon's stop-gap response to the new trends in body design was to mechanically update the 'Y' saloon into the 'YB' until a new modern shape, the Z-type Magnette, could be brought to the production lines in 1954. The 'YB'

which came his way, this car fell under his spell and was tastefully modified to include a Shorrocks supercharger, chromed fifteen-inch wire wheels, a 'YB' back axle and modified 'YB' rear wings. The author well remembers being given a ride in this car in California in 1982 and the presence of the supercharger gave a lasting impression of effortless low-down smooth power.

Next, two left-hand-drive saloons: the first is Y/5174/EXLU, a 1950 example, which is today restored and running well in Massachusetts. Then there's Y/7277/EXL/NA, one of the very last 'Y' saloons to be built. On arrival in New York it seems to have received 'the full treatment' from the dealer, having had twin carburetors with pancake air filters fitted, along with an aftermarket-type chromed tappet cover and chromed rockerbox cover. Twin chromed 'wind-tone' horns also adorn the radiator grille, a popular aftermarket add-on amongst dealers. Only one other left-hand drive 'Y' saloon is known to exist in North America, and this is believed to have been imported from Europe a long time after it was built. □