





BACK TO BACK

In the early fifties the MG YT and Singer Roadster meant family fun for the open car enthusiast.

Mick Walsh takes a seaside trip to match these popular rivals

The term 'Roadster' is clearly an Americanism that has rather less glamorous associations than 'Speedster', which automatically conjures up images of something more rakish and racy like a Mercer, or that other evocative-sounding bodystyle, 'Tourster', which is much more exotic, like Gary Cooper's fabulous Dcrham-bodied Model J Duesenberg. The connotations of

SEASIDE SPECIALS

roadster are much more down to earth describing a car that has a strong fun factor, but aimed at young bloods with modest pockets. It is American mass-produced cars such as the Chrysler CM-type, Chevrolet Confederate or the pretty Ford all complete with 'rag-top' and anti-social rumble seat that come to mind. Yes, the one thing any roadster, speedster or tourster has in common is they are all open — true convertibles for the romantic motorist who still regards his driving as a cinematic adventure with full panoramic views of town and country, senses fully exposed to the elements.

compromising sports car enthusiast. The Singer was very much in that style, with an ancestry of fine sports cars like the Le Mans and 1.5-litre six-cylinder series.

The thirties was an era when the convertible was actually cheaper than its saloon equivalent and the fifties may have brought associations of downgrading the 'keeping up with the Joneses' stakes — if ever that was the consideration of the sporting family motorist. Coachbuilt cars like the Singer became unprofitable with the advent of new mass production methods, while today's manufacturers see the cabriolet

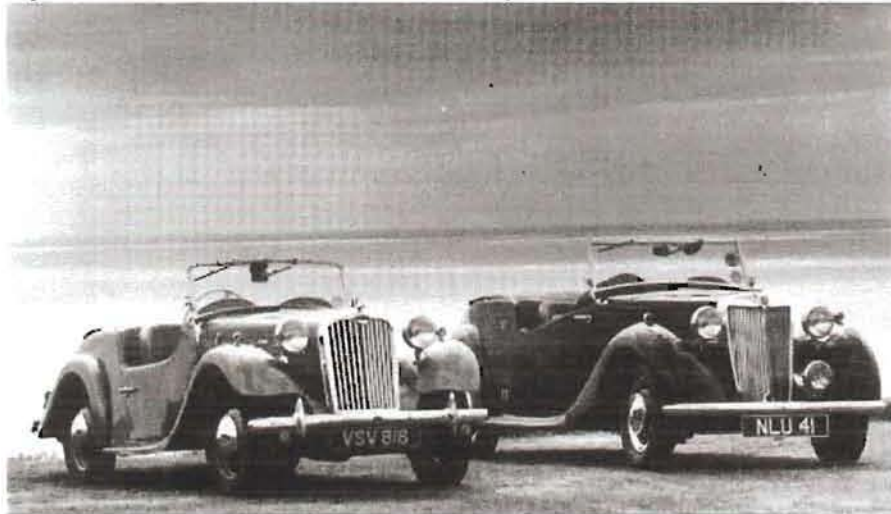
so Singer became yet another victim of badge engineering, following a Rootes takeover in 1956.

But no matter how gloomy times were in the post-war years with restrictive controls on private motoring, petrol supply, dreadful low octane 'pool' fuel and the silly prices of the few obtainable cars in Great Britain, it is very easy to get nostalgic over such charming cars as the Singer Roadster and MG YT. Putting the austere memories aside for a rose-tinted comparison, these two family tourers make a fascinating match of two near-identical period pieces.

Not only were the two survivors in almost better than new condition, but somehow the sun seemed to shine brighter that August summer's day. Our blissful country drive around the back roads of Kent was, I'm sure, far more enjoyable without the nagging restriction of 100 miles a month in the rationed forties. It somehow made me feel quite decadent choosing the longest route to our coastal rendezvous. And what better test route than the timeless beauty of Kent; an unhurried journey taken with the intention of enjoying every oast-house, weather-boarded cottage and ancient oak. Somehow, performance and competition pedigree became moronic concepts in this land of John Betjeman. The MG and Singer, for all their tame pretensions, became an ideal mode of transport, and gave me a true perspective.

The day began with the MG YT, a car still regarded by purists of the marque as 'no proper MG'. Rather unfairly, it has been described as a Victorian bathtub on wheels, and little more than a Morris Eight in disguise, for the YT was far more innovative than most Abingdon sports cars in its day, with fully independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering. Its sister saloon, the YA, was an elegant little design, and very well-equipped with full leather interior, walnut trim and even a rear window curtain, all at a very reasonable price. The war had prevented production in 1940 of this new venture for MG, that was a far cry from the handsome SA, VA and WA saloons of the thirties. Several of the saloons were given the full tuning treatment and rallied to good effect, while Goldie Gardner even managed 104.7mph at Jabbeke in Holland, before the supercharged XPAG engine blew apart!

Because the export pressure on post-war production determined all car manufacturers, allocation of steel, the MG marketing team soon developed a



Slightly dumpy and squat lines of the Singer are in contrast to the upright but considerably more graceful MG YT

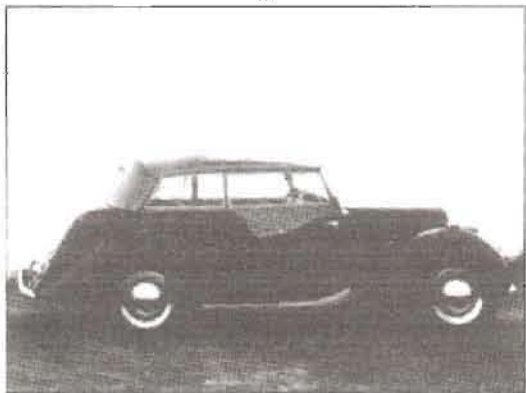
Both the delightful cars that are the focus of this month's *Back to Back*, the Singer Roadster and the MG YT, were virtually obsolete by the time they reached the end of the production line. Firstly, no matter how attractive they appear in the nostalgic eighties, both cars, in particular the Singer, were outdated products harking back to the thirties. In fact, both cars could have been found completed on the drawing board before Hitler invaded Poland. The Singer was in production in a rather tamer form as the Nine, with a tough, three-bearing engine, wide ratio, three-speed gearbox and upright, homely styling complete with ugly pressed-steel wheels. It never pretended to be a sports car, but offered affordable fun and fresh air for all the family. Its competitors were not MGs, but such popular favourites as the Talbot 10 (barely more than a Hillman in a fancy dress), Jensen-bodied Ford Model Ys or the more exclusive Morgan 4/4 with its Climax and Standard power. There were of course many other rather more pedestrian tourers like the Wolseley 10 or the Flying Standard, but these were very much cars for aunts and uncles, and not the family of a

as a short cut to producing a sports car. A once redundant style is simply being revived as a substitute for the real thing, which is no longer viable on a massive scale like the late lamented freedom machines of Triumph and MG.

No matter how dated the YT or the Roadster may have appeared to the marketing men at Coventry and Abingdon, they both greatly helped to save MG and Singer (for the time being at least) in the 'export or die' economic climate. The late forties and early fifties were a boom period, when lost causes thrived for a short while with cosmetically restyled pre-war designs. Cars were in desperately short supply, and just about anything built could sell. They were stopgap products before new forward-thinking designs were developed, like the MGA, the first truly post-war Abingdon product. Singer were less fortunate, having too little capital to invest in development of modern designs. The ponderous, solid and awkwardly-styled SM1500 and Hunter may have been good value, but they lacked the sparkle and innovative charm of the pre-war Singers. Even the plastic-bodied SMX just looked cheap and quaint, and



Singer's hood gives the car that Andy Capp look



MG's hood has sidescreens and glass rear window

tourer from the ponderous little saloon. The result was a hybrid YA/TD utilising the former's chassis and the latter's engine, but even with the twin carburettors, its performance was little improved over the saloon. The only other token performance was an extra leaf in the rear springs, and so the new tourer shared the production line with its closed sister. Likewise the YT was just as well-equipped, even down to the Smiths' Jackall hydraulic system; from a central pump under the bonnet the owner could select front, rear or all four wheels, shut off the system, and with an endless cranking action, raise the car.

The YT was never officially available to the British public, so this export-only model has become possibly the rarest of all post-war MGs. Although popular in the Commonwealth countries, this beautifully built tourer was not a great success, with a final production total of only 877. The model's rather sedate image was very much overshadowed by the sportier TD and TF, and somehow didn't quite fit in with the MG market appeal. Unlike the Singer, the YT looks like a conversion from the more familiar saloon model, much closer to the style of today's cabriolets. The hood design is quite brilliant, and when down stows away totally inside the bodywork, zipped out of view. Its design is far more

advanced than its Singer rival, with long stretches of side window providing masses of light for all four passengers, while the front screen attachment is quite modern, with just two thumb screws. Like the rest of the car, it has an expensive look, right down to the zip-out glass window in the rear.

The YT was a high quality car, and Ian Patemen's rare survivor is a fine tribute to the craftsmanship and design of Abingdon. The green leather seats with gold piping are quite sumptuous, giving good back and side support. This is certainly no phoney family tourer, as the back seats are comfortable and have excellent leg room.

No matter how attractive they appear in the nostalgic eighties, both cars were outdated when new

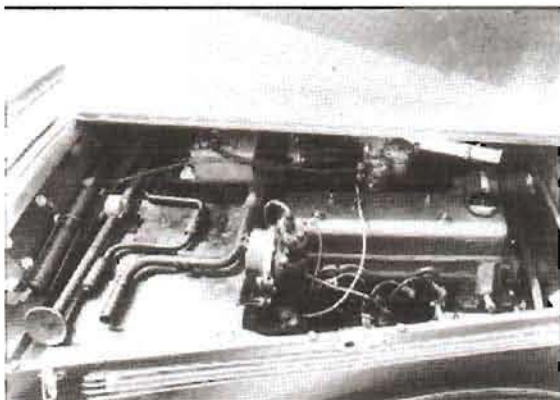
The same could be said of the Singer Roadster, which even with the hood erect can happily accommodate a six-footer as

long as he doesn't suffer from claustrophobia. Like the YT, the hood stows away neatly, but is slightly dated in its mechanisms, with an army of fasteners on the front windscreen. The rear sidescreens are part of the main roof which makes for an easier erection, and all the road tests of the period praise its effectiveness against draughts, but the car's profile is a little comic, resembling Andy Capp rather than a taut, open car hood!

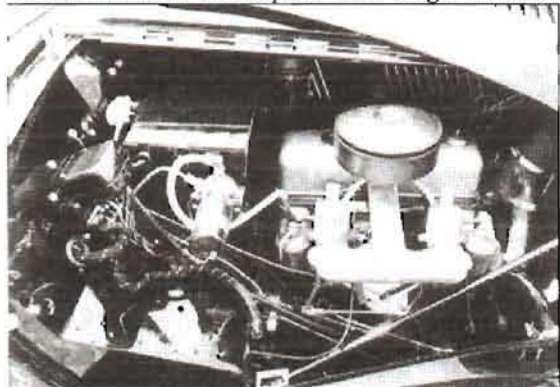
There may not have been much of a market for the old semi-sports car by the fifties, but Singer gamely persevered until 1955 with various developments of the Roadster. It was the final version, coded the 4AD, that was naturally the most sorted, but it was the earlier 4AB that was the beginning of good things for Singer's charming tourer. Post-war development had included a new chassis from the Light 10 saloon with improved steering and rubber suspension modification. The bulkhead and front seats were considerably moved

forward to improve rear leg room, increasing the overall chassis length by six inches from bumper to bumper. It was the 5M1500 that finally gave the Roadster its much-needed four speed box in 1949, but the most radical step was the replacement of the old beam axle by independent front suspension, which greatly improved the car's ride and handling. There was also a big improvement in stopping power, with a new, hydromech, braking system and larger 9in drums.

The modifications were endless, with an improved steering box reducing the turning circle to three feet, plainer disc wheels and higher, deeper seats with thicker cushions. Even the good old trad' styling was given a fresh look with a shorter radiator, restyled wings and fixed bonnet sides but no-one dared change the fold flat screen. The final version, like the pristine 4AD of Bob Andrews, was fitted with the short-stroke SM engine complete with twin carbs producing a healthy 58bhp and a comfortable 50mph. Although Singer produced almost 1000 roadsters a year, the open tourer's days were numbered, with tight rationalisation at the factory for what was still a coachbuilt car that did not lend itself to large scale production, even if the demand was there. Yet it continued to find happy customers as far afield as Guatemala, Ecuador, Hawaii, colonial Africa, and most of all in Australia. Well,



Toolkit and motor share space under Singer's bonnet



XPAG engine of the MG YT was also found in the TD

at least until the roads literally broke the Singers' backs. Bob Andrews, who even when living in Sydney, couldn't resist owning Roadsters, found they were much more common in scrapyards than on the roads.

The little ohc four was quite the opposite, providing sturdy service. In fact, Singer had such confidence in the 1933 Leo Shorter design, they offered a 45,000 mile guarantee on the cylinder bores. The main complaints of the early roadster were the three speed gearbox, which took ages to replace, and the annoying low axle ratio (a hangover from the company's trailing prowess before the war), which was not improved until the advent of the 4AD model. Although many pre-war Singer fans felt the roadster was a pale shadow of the pretty Nine Le Mans (how could a sports car have pressed steel wheels?), the four seater tourer still had a very sporty image with its humped cowls and wooden dash, its lines had a purity that the chopped saloon MG lacked.

Out on the road, the two cars couldn't be more different. The MG's perpendicular style belies its very modern feel. The ride is so well damped that mother could write her postcards on

the move, and yet even on the worst road in Kent, the chassis coped very well. The steering has a good castor action, but care has to be taken with the high gearing, as even a slight overcorrection induces a nervous wallowing sensation. The brakes are excellent for the period and pulled up well, while the gearchange was superbly precise, like the proverbial knife through butter. The old XPAG engine feels quite torquey even with a 250cc disadvantage, but has to work fairly hard to maintain a healthy pace. With a wide 19 thou' clearance, the top end is very tappety, while the throttle response isn't helped by a very cramped roller pedal that won't fit feet over size nine. The clutch is light and sensitive, and unlike the Singer, the ratios are well judged.

The Singer is very much closer to sports car than family tourer. The stiff suspension gives a much livelier ride, but, I suspect, the advantage is in handling. The strong, torquey SM 1500 engine, helped by the low back axle ratio, will take most country hills in its stride without a down change. Contemporary roadtesters remarked on the Roadster's 'brisk top gear performance' but always felt 'it needed another cog'. The steering is 1¼ turns lock to lock so naturally feels

slightly heavy, while the remote-control lever is an awkward stretch, and has a very short, snappy action. The brakes feel a little stronger than the MG, but there is nowhere to rest your left foot.

Strangely for a car with such sporting pretensions, there is no rev counter, unlike the MG, but true to sports car style, the cutaway doors are lower, and there is almost no space in the boot, although the boot lid makes a perfect platform for luggage. With the engine so far forward, the roadster is a natural understeerer but with four up, the handling becomes much more neutral, while the MG is rather more nervous at the rear due perhaps to the slow weight transfer on softer springs.

For two cars with such similar ideals they have quite individual characters. The MG is a very civilised, refined, beautifully-detailed tourer with a strong quality bonus. It feels the more expensive product, but because of that refinement loses out on character. The Singer is much closer to the sporting man's heart, complete with all the rough edges, which is all part of its charisma. The MG would look more at home outside the British Embassy in Delhi or Cairo, the owner in pale summer suit, straw trilby and

immaculate leather luggage, just as if he had driven straight out of a Graham Greene novel.

The Singer Roadster is much more for the pseudo-horsey type, with his off-the-peg tweeds from Dunn & Co. and dashing flat cap. I'd miss the English rain too much to work in the colonies, so I'd have to drive a Singer.

SPECIFICATION	SINGER ROADSTER 4 AD	MG YT
Engine	In-line four	In-line four
Capacity	1497 cc	1250 cc
Bore x Stroke	73 x 89.4mm	68.5 x 90mm
Valves	Overhead camshaft	Pushrod ohv
Compression	7.0:1	7.4:1
Power	58bhp at 4600rpm	54.4bhp at 5200rpm
Torque	72lbs ft at 2000rpm	58.5lbs ft at 2400rpm
Transmission	Four speed manual	Four speed manual
Final drive	4.8:1	5.14:1
Brakes	Drums all round, hydraulic/mechanical	Drums all round, hydraulic
Front suspension	Ind with coil springs, wishbones and anti-roll bar	Ind with coil springs, wishbones
Rear suspension	Half elliptic springs	Half elliptic springs
Steering	Worm and nut	Rack and pinion
Tyres	5 x 16ins	5.50 x 15ins
<u>DIMENSIONS</u>		
Length	12ft 9ins	13ft 8ins
Width	4ft 10ins	4ft 11ins
Height	4ft 10½ins	4ft 9ins
Wheelbase	7ft 7ins	8ft 3ins
Kerb weight	16½ cwt	16¾ cwt
<u>PERFORMANCE</u>		
Maximum speed	77.3mph	76mph
0-60 mph	20.2secs	25.2secs
Standing ¼ mile	21.6secs	23.1secs
Fuel consumption	27mpg	32mpg
<u>PRODUCTION</u>		
Years built	1951-55	1948-50
Numbers built	3440	877
Prices when new	£737 8s 9d	£671 11s 6d (export only)

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