

THE Y-TYPE 1¼ LITRE SALOON

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that stiffly suspended beam axles maintained contact with the road. However, the introduction of cars with the body and chassis as a single unit meant that designers had to develop suspension systems that had greater compliance. Some manufacturers pre-war, especially on the continent, anyway started to produce cars with more rigid chassis allied to softer springs and independent suspension, especially on the front wheels. The MG Car Company experimented along these lines in 1935 with the R-type, and had also designed a similarly sprung road car, but a change of direction within the Nuffield Group led to the project being abandoned.

There was a move towards stiffer chassis and softer springing with the MG SA/VA/WA range that used hydraulic shock

this was designed to be more rigid and to take the independent front suspension originally proposed for the Morris. Of course, the events that unfolded in 1939 scotched any thoughts of a new MG and it was to be eight years before the saloon made an appearance. The Y-type chassis comprised welded, closed box section side rails and tubular cross members. At the back the side rails pass under the rear axle, which is suspended on leaf springs and has a Panhard rod to give lateral location. At the front a cross member houses coil springs and provides a mounting for the rack and pinion steering. The lower wishbones and the arms of the shock absorbers provide the upper and lower mounting points for the swivel pin. This front suspension was a neat and workmanlike arrangement that



A picture of the 1938 mock-up of the proposed MG Ten saloon has been airbrushed, probably destined for a preliminary brochure had the model gone into production

The attractive Y-type saloon is familiar to most of us as the survivors of some seven thousand five hundred examples built between 1947 and 1953 can often be seen at club events. Although not built in the same numbers as the closely related T-type sports models, the saloon nevertheless played a very important part in ensuring the survival and expansion of the marque during a difficult time for both the car industry and the country as a whole.

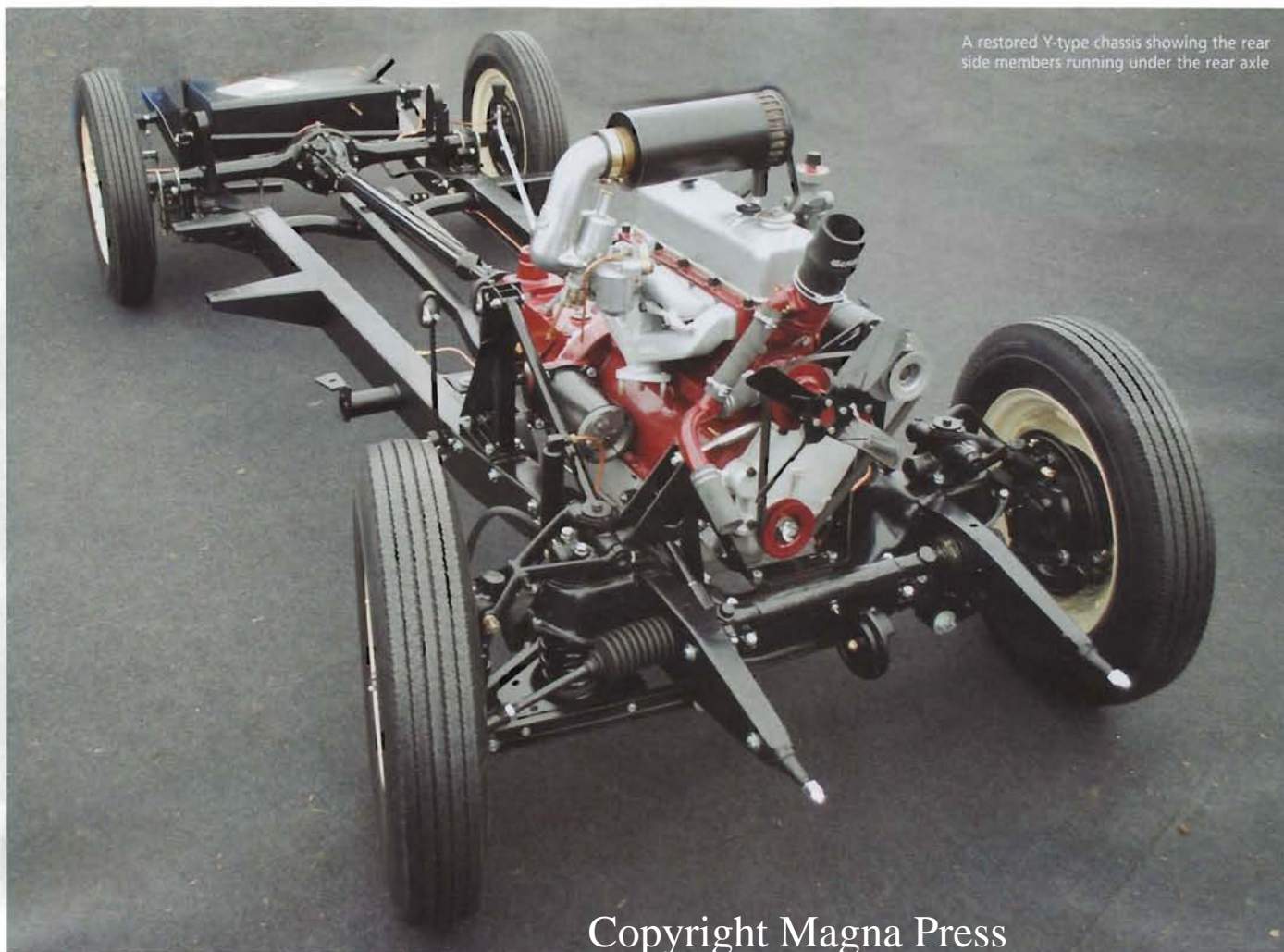
Although the full story of the development of the car has previously featured in these pages, it would be worth summarising here. Pre-war most British sporting cars used a simple chassis that relied on a degree of flexibility to ensure

absorbers to control the longer suspension travel, but these models retained beam axle front suspension. However, in 1938 work on a new MG saloon car was progressing alongside those of revised Morris models. At the Cowley Design Office Alec Issigonis and Jack Daniels had designed an independent front suspension layout for the Morris 10 that was rejected as too costly. The Morris Ten was to be the first of the cars from the Nuffield Group to have unit construction and followed pioneer work carried out in America and first introduced to Britain with their 10hp saloon by American owned Vauxhall Motors.

However, the prototype for the MG Ten saloon retained a separate chassis, but

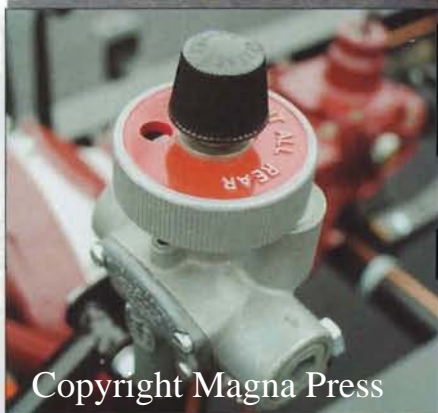
in modified form gave service right up to the end of MGB production. The body of the Y-type was closely based on the then current Morris Eight, but the addition of a longer bonnet, flowing front wings and the Abingdon radiator improved the appearance. A first for MG was the substitution of pressed steel wheels for the traditional, but hard to clean, wire variety.

So the car launched in early 1947 was the first post-war MG saloon, but it was in almost every respect still a product of 1930s thinking. Given the shortages of time, money, manpower and materials that were such a feature of post-war Britain, it is hardly surprising that it was impossible to contemplate designing and



A restored Y-type chassis showing the rear side members running under the rear axle

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The hand pump unit for the built-in jacking system

building an entirely new and up-to-date model. Customers would have to wait until the arrival of the Z-Magnette to have a really modern MG saloon in the showrooms. MG were not alone in bringing back into production 1939 models and given that in much of Europe car plants were only just recovering from the effects of five years of war, Britain was able to sell at home and overseas every car they were able to build.

To properly assess the Y-type in the context of the times, we need to look at the many contemporary magazine features and road tests that were published. In an article printed in the 9th May 1927 issue, *The Autocar* under the headline *Meet a New MG*, opened with the statement that *here was a most attractive 1 1/4-litre*

design with excellent road manners, independent front suspension and a stiff box-section frame. The TC Midget had been back in production for approaching two years and there were still a great many pre-war MGs providing everyday transport, so the MG marque was well known to keen motorists. As the magazine said, the new saloon was likely to appeal to a rather different customer than the Midget and at a total price of £671 13s 4d it looked relatively expensive when compared to, say, an Austin Ten de luxe at £435 or Ford Prefect 10hp at £352. The contemporary Morris Eight four-door saloon complete with a sliding roof, with which the MG shared the basic body and therefore available cabin space, cost just £384 1s 8d. Still, with the MG one was buying a car that gave the comfort and performance of much larger vehicles, a point made by *The Autocar* in their report.

Although magazines at that time seldom overtly criticised the cars they tested one could often judge the worth of a vehicle by reading between the lines of their reports. Phrases like the gearbox was not very noisy usually meant that ear plugs were the order of the day and even if the performance or fuel consumption did not attract adverse criticism in the text the many accurate figures accompanying the written report told their own story. However, it is easy to see from that first

article on the Y-type that there were no such reservations about that car. For example: *Members of The Autocar staff who have already had the pleasant experience of driving the new MG are unanimous in awarding it full marks for the outstanding quality of its behaviour on the road.*

They went on to say they thought that the best criteria by which to judge a modern car was the way in which it covered long distances. Some cars, they said, could only set reasonable average speeds by pushing them as hard as one could whilst others managed the same averages without fuss or fatigue for driver or passengers. In their words: *The MG is lively; it is fast; but it is also genuinely quiet running, most comfortably suspended, and light as a feather to drive. To maintain a carefully timed average of 40mph over a long journey is quite easily within its reach, asking no special effort from the driver, who as a result reaches the journey's end without feeling tired. Even more than that is within its reach.*

Of course, we have to remember what the roads of the time were like and that a 40mph average would be considered very respectable in an age before motorways and more than a very few dual carriageway main roads. However, traffic was lighter, especially as petrol was still restricted in supply and often of poor quality. With the war then over for two years, people were



The front suspension introduced to MG in 1947 with the Y-type remained virtually unaltered until the end of MGB production in 1980.

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with him two large cans as a spare supply.

The MG performed faultlessly and only required that the radiator be topped up after strenuous runs in high temperatures. Much of the petrol he bought was of poor quality and resulted in the engine pinking. This did not seem to affect his average speeds and he records travelling 57 miles in an hour on an Italian autostrada near Milan. He found that the MG was not that fast, 75mph maximum on the speedometer, but that it was capable of covering the ground remarkably quickly because of the comfortable ride and superb steering. He recalled how in pre-war years he had raced a supercharged Magnette capable of 110mph and how much better it would have been with the Y-type steering and suspension.

All the talk about light and easy controls and a quiet comfortable ride may not be apparent to the modern motorist stepping for the first time out of his power steered, servo-braked and air-conditioned motor into a Y-type. However, some used



A YA saloon painted Almond Green. Photo: R.L. Knudson

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fed up with petrol rationing and when in 1947 the government proposed abolishing even the basic ration for private motorists there were protests staged in Central London and million signature petition demanding its retention. However, the labour government were keen to save paying out dollars for imported oil and made the case that they would rather pay to bring in food. And we think now that times are hard. Imagine what it must have been like living with fuel saving restrictions that banned the use of lifts in commercial premises and any form of heating from April to October for factories, offices and even private houses.

Despite rationing and other privations,

some people still managed to enjoy themselves. No doubt in a privileged position, John Dugdale of *The Autocar* borrowed a new Y-type for a Continental trip and wrote of his experiences in the 15th August issue. Like others on the staff, he had nothing but praise for the car and managed on one of the days to cover over 400 miles. At that time there were many restrictions placed on travellers, not the least of which was a limit on the amount of currency you could take out of the country. Petrol was also rationed in France and Italy, through both of which Dugdale proposed to travel. Coupons were available for tourists, but at a cost, and as supplies in Italy in particular were patchy he carried

to the hard ride and somewhat vague steering of most pre-war cars would have seen the new small MG saloon as an improvement. Mere performance figures do not tell the full story and those given for the MG in the contemporary test reports do nothing to stir the blood of a modern driver whose everyday shopping car would probably accelerate at least twice as fast.

Anyway, for what they are worth here are the bare figures from the 1947 magazine tests. Maximum speed achieved by both *The Autocar* and *The Motor* was a shade over 70mph and the time to reach 60mph was 28.2sec and 27.3sec respectively using the rather poor quality petrol then

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All the Y-types were finished in attractive colour schemes and this Almond Green example has green leather facings for the seats. Photo: R.L. Knudson

available. Reading the reports it is apparent that not only did they like the car enormously, but also that they felt that it was an entirely different breed of MG and one that was likely to appeal to more people than had some of the pre-war saloon MGs that were based on sports car chassis.

We said earlier that the Y-type was a more important car for the MG marque than is suggested by the relatively small numbers produced. The reason for this is that a modified version of the Y-type chassis formed the basis of the very successful TD and TF Midgets, of which nearly forty thousand examples were built. By 1949 very little progress had been made at Cowley to design a replacement for the frankly well out-of-date TC Midget. Desperate to ensure the survival of MG and to build a car suited to the export market, work was carried out at Abingdon to adapt a Y-type chassis to underpin a new Midget. The result was the TD and this model and the TF that followed probably saved the marque from extinction.

Let us now take a closer look at the new saloon. Power came from a single carburettor variant of the twin-carburettor XPAG engine used in the TC and output was reduced from 54.4bhp to 46bhp for the saloon model. The saloon weighed over a ton but nevertheless the power to

weight ratio at around 40bhp per ton laden was superior to that of the average British saloon car of the period. In addition to having a more up to date chassis design than its predecessors, the Y-type was the first MG saloon to feature an all-metal body as previous models had wooden frames clad with steel or aluminium panels. Even by the standards of 1947, the overall styling employed was conservative. As *The Motor* pointed out, many cars had rounded lines with wings, running boards and headlights all blended into the main bodywork. The Y-type adhered to a more traditional body shape with only the disc wheels betraying any more up to date thinking behind the design.

For many the charm of the Y-type lay in the traditional appearance and attractive interior appointments. There were leather seat covers in a tasteful range of colours and a polished wood dashboard that displayed its MG heritage by the use of octagonal surrounds for standard circular instruments. Nice touches were a windscreen that could be wound open on hot days and, to avoid dazzle from following cars at night, a remotely operated blind for the small rear window. There were also twin sun visors and a central reading light, as well as a metal sliding sunroof. The cars were offered in an attractive range of



An official factory picture of the YA in a suburban setting. The owners of houses like this were the target market for a car in this price range



This overhead publicity picture of a YA shows to good effect the standard sunroof



The appeal of the Y-type cabin can be seen in this picture. There are twin sun visors, a sun roof, polished wood dashboard with a glove locker, the windscreen can be opened outwards to increase ventilation and the cranked gear lever and central handbrake lever are well placed for the keen driver



The rear seats were comfortable and provided enough space for two adults. Note the cord for raising the blind to cover the rear window

exterior colour schemes, with some examples finished in two colours, usually the lighter colour for the body and darker for the wings.

In addition to being a good family car, some Y-types enjoyed more energetic use, particularly in rallying. In 1948 the Junior Car Club ran the Eastbourne Rally and a Y-type saloon driven by R.C. Matthews took a first class award. One driver to receive some factory support at that time was Betty Haig. Pre-war she had been a successful MG competitor in long-distance European rallies and in 1948 she was able to persuade John Thornley to

let her jump the queue to buy a new TC Midget. In January 1949 she had been one of the drivers in a works-supported Morris Minor entered for the Monte Carlo Rally and was placed second overall for the Ladies Cup. The following year she was entered for the Monte in a factory-prepared Y-type. The car had been fitted with a bigger fuel tank, additional dampers and the engine had a raised compression ratio to improve power output. The weather that year was atrocious and of 282 starters only five were un-penalised. The Y-type's rally ended when they crashed early in the event.

Another recipient of factory support was Len Shaw. He had been able to buy a Y-type saloon soon after they came out and for a couple of years entered this in club events, with some success. His international debut was in a Ford Pilot as co-driver to Ken Wharton in the 1949 Lisbon Rally and their second place in that event did his driving career no harm. In 1950 he was able to buy the ex-Betty Haig Y-type from the factory to replace his own rather worn example and in this car Len entered the 1950 Daily Express 1,000-mile Rally. By the finish he was placed third overall and his team, which included another Y-type and a TD, took the Team Award, class honours and the best open and closed car awards.

The following year the first post-war rally staged under the RAC banner saw Len Shaw again entering the Y-type, as had Gregor Grant, one of the winning team the previous year. Unfortunately a crash eliminated Gregor from the results, but Len managed third in class despite some overheating problems. First in class was the Y-type of J. Readings.

By the end of 1951 the Y-type had been in production for over four years and the mechanical specification was inferior to that of the contemporary TD Midget. To remedy this a number of changes were introduced for the 1952 model year that markedly improved the car. The alterations introduced for the YB were extensive but not immediately apparent to the casual observer. The most substantial of the modifications were to the braking system and running gear. The YA Lockheed braking system using just one hydraulic cylinder for

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each front brake drum was replaced with a twin leading shoe system and a new rear axle was installed. In common with most other cars of the period in the Nuffield Group, the YB benefited by being fitted with a hypoid back axle which was potentially much quieter in use. The wheels were at the same time changed from 16-inch to 15-inch diameter and to improve the road holding the tyres increased in width from 5.00/5.25 to 5.50. A further improvement was the introduction of a front anti-roll bar and heavier duty rear shock absorbers. These mechanical changes forced a couple of body modifications. The smaller sized wheels took up rather less of the space under the rear wings so to

improve the appearance of the car these were made slightly deeper, something that is quite apparent when viewed from the side of the car. The smaller wheels and wider tyres would not fit in the YA spare wheel stowage compartment so on the YB this was made an inch taller.

The Autocar in April 1952 printed a road test of the revised model. Possibly because of more accurate recording equipment, the performance figures recorded were in some respects inferior to those published for the earlier model. However, the car was still popular with the test team who concluded their report by saying that *considered as a whole, the 1 1/4-litre MG saloon is a very desirable car. It*

is light and lively, economical, handles well, has a good turn of speed and is handy in traffic and on narrow roads. It has a quality feel possessed by few small cars, and many desirable features found only on larger or more expensive products; it can carry four people and will hold a reasonable amount of luggage. It also has that air of a thoroughbred, brought about no doubt by its sporting ancestors that created the slogan 'Safety Fast!'

In addition to the standard Y-type, there was also a four-seater open version built in small numbers, mainly for export. However, this model aesthetically lacked the elegance of the saloon, but the few examples in Britain do attract attention at MG club meetings. Owners of surviving Y-type saloons are an enthusiastic bunch and it is not unusual to see quite a line-up of pristine examples at larger club events. Many of these MG saloons are driven quite long distances each year so maybe those initial reports about the comfortable ride and usable performance still hold true, even in current conditions.



The YB model had one-inch smaller diameter wheels and to maintain the attractive appearance of the car the rear mudguards were modified to reduce the size of the wheel opening



A Y-type saloon nearing completion on the Abingdon assembly lines. This car had a two-colour paint finish and the operator is fitting the darker colour wings to the body that is finished in a lighter shade



MG Y-type advertisements