



Group appreciation

Roughly 12 months before the outbreak of world hostilities in September 1939, visitors to the Motor Show would have been presented with a plethora of British models and manufacturers. On the MG stand were examples of the company's ever popular sports models, as well as the elegant saloons: the 1.5-litre VA, the larger 2.3-litre SA and the regal WA model launched fresh at the show with its 2.5-litre engine. It was an impressive line up.

Soon after (and despite the war clouds looming), MG began work on a new smaller four-door saloon called the 1½-litre saloon. This model would later be replaced by the sleeker Palmer designed Magnette ZA, which evolved into the ZB and was in turn replaced by the MkIII 'Farina' Magnette, which came from the Italian styling house and continued in production until early 1969. We've got one from each model line for this feature, so let's begin by introducing the cars and their respective owners.

First we have Alan Chick with his delightful red Y-Type, its pre-war design with high set individual front wings, running boards and sloping tail exhibiting a very period charm and character despite its post-war launch. Next we have Stephen Tickell, who owns the two-tone MG ZB Varitone with its elegant styling and well appointed interior. Among the standard features on this car is a heater, an unusual fitting

for a model of the mid 1950s. Finally, we have the MkIV Magnette of John Horton.

Background

In creating the Y-Type, the design team based at Cowley was led by the gifted Gerald Palmer. The chassis for the new MG was a box section configuration chosen to provide torsional rigidity in a sporting saloon. The front suspension was designed by Alec Issigonis and Jack Daniels, and featured an independent arrangement with coil springs and upper and lower wishbones, the top arm also acting as the shock absorber extension. The rear comprised an underlung axle with leaf springs, while the separate chassis frame allowed for the addition of four Jackall hydraulic rams, which could be pumped up to raise one wheel or the entire car off the ground as required.

Power for the Y-Type was supplied by a detuned version of the rugged TC 1250cc XPAG unit with a lower compression ratio, single SU carburettor and softer valve timing. Power was rated as 46bhp at 4800rpm. Drive was taken to the rear wheels through a four-speed gearbox with synchromesh on the top three ratios. One innovative component was the steering, which was of rack and pinion design, the first time this type had been used on an MG.

Influence for the body design came from the four-door Morris Eight Series E. At the front the Y-Type utilised an

upright grille, with the headlamps mounted on the wings. The rear used an adaption of the Morris shape, with running boards faired into the rear wings. Inside, MG went to great lengths to give the car a sense of luxury and elegance. All wearing surfaces of the seats and the door pockets were covered in leather, wood veneer was used for the dashboard and door cappings, and the instruments were given octagonal surrounds in keeping with the company's logo design. The result projected a sense of quality, which elevated the MG above its less sumptuous rivals.

Significantly, the Y-Type prototype was first seen at Abingdon where some of the development work was undertaken. Called EX (for Experimental) 166 in 1939, the car was then quietly put to one side as the factory's design and manufacturing function was turned over to the war effort. After the hostilities were over, the design was simply dusted off and put into production.

Competitively priced and with good performance, the small Y-Type saloon gave the MG company much needed press appraisal when it was launched in the spring of 1947. The following year a two-door tourer version was launched, called the YT. However, in making the car a full four-seater, the hind quarters from the B-post back were exaggerated and gave the car a somewhat ungainly appearance. Most were exported, before



The Y-Type, the Z-Type and the Farina Magnette span three entire generations of MG saloon cars in the post-war era. Mike Taylor talks to three owners about their cars and their memories.

production ceased in 1951.

The following year MG updated the saloon version, calling it the YB, which sought to remedy the limited shortfalls of the earlier version: 15in wheels replaced the original 16in rims, while road holding was improved by the addition of a front mounted anti-roll bar. Handling was further improved by the addition of better quality dampers. Production finally ceased in 1953 after a total of 8336 Y-Types had been manufactured.

MG's replacement for the Y-Type saloon was to be an altogether improved machine, retaining loyal enthusiasts and attracting a new raft of buyers with its style and performance. Critical to the 'must have' list for the new design was a larger body with a more spacious interior that the Y-Type (full width body styling reflecting the latest trends in automotive design), a marked improvement in performance and handling, and a more cost effective production process resulting in a competitive price tag.

Back from his sojourn at Jowett, in 1949 body designer Gerald Palmer began to shape the new car. The outline drew unashamedly on design themes from the United States and Italy, while underneath the bodyshell was integrated with the chassis forming a monocoque structure to create a torsionally rigid form and a more cost efficient manufacturing process.

At the outset the company's product planners deemed it necessary to produce a bottom of the range Wolseley version, while the MG would satisfy the performance minded market. The MG was notable for being the first car to use BMC's 1489cc B-series engine, reflecting the infusion of British Motor Corporation influences following the merger between Austin and Morris in 1952, while the Wolseley (which was launched first and before the B-series had been engineered into the car) received the venerable XPAG engine. The ZA's power was rated at 60bhp driving through a BMC sourced gearbox, while road-holding was improved by making the MG version some two inches lower than its Wolseley counterpart.

Due to the sporty appearance and lower ride height, many of the body panels were unique to the Magnette. Suspension was provided by coil spring, dampers and wishbones at the front and leaf springs at the rear with a BMC-derived axle, while the steering utilised the pin sharp rack and pinion type first seen on the Y-Type. Inside, the wood trimmed theme of the Y-Type was carried through to the Magnette. For those who preferred clutchless driving, MG even offered the Manumatic, an unpopular semi-automatic option.

Launched in 1952, the Magnette ZA was initially received with derision in some quarters with its dummy radiator and less than pure MG feel. Very soon »



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though, and aided by the use of these cars by the Competitions Department, opinion changed and sales began to surge encouragingly.

Just three years later, the arrival of the ZB version would build on this positive sales volume. It featured a more powerful 68bhp engine resulting from a rise in compression ratio and larger 1.5in SU carburetors. To further elevate the model, a duotone version with a chrome waist strip arrived in 1957. Called the Varitone, it featured a two-tone paint finish and a larger back window. Overall, some 36,600 ZAs and ZBs were manufactured between 1953 and 1958, making it a highly successful model and totally vindicating MG's approach with its creation.

In 1959 a very different Magnette arrived in the form of the MkIII, marking the start of badge engineering at its extreme. Unaccountably in view of the talented team of designers on tap at Cowley and Longbridge, the BMC board decided to invoke the services of Pininfarina in Italy to shape the next

generation of its mid-range saloon cars, which were promptly badged variously as MG, Austin, Morris, Wolseley and Riley, only the front grille, badge logos and rear script denoting the models externally. At the front of the car Farina had accentuated the box like appearance by running the swage line almost horizontally from the front wing tips with their themed headlamps to the angular rear fins. Sadly, the elegance so prominent on the Palmer 'Z' cars had been totally lost, these larger Farina models lacking the kind of style MG customers traditionally expected.

Beneath their ungainly stance was softer suspension settings, made worse by woolly worm and peg steering. Under the MG's bonnet was the same B-series 1489cc engine delivering 66.5bhp. The overall character was rather more boulevard cruiser than sporting saloon. Despite its leather seats and wood veneer interior, within a short time the MkIII version of Magnette assumed a reputation for poor handling and mediocre performance. To remedy the

situation the MkIV was introduced in 1962. Reckoned to be a much-improved car, it received a small boost in power to 68bhp from the 1622cc engine created by increasing the bore capacity, while a fully automatic version also became available. Handling had been improved by increasing the wheelbase and track dimensions, and the addition of anti-roll bars back and front. Perversely, the body length of the Austin, Morris and Wolseley models had been shortened with a softened tail fin treatment, but the more sporty MG and Riley versions remained unchanged from the MkIII.

The Magnette MkIV remained in production until 1969, and was not replaced after a total of 29,414 of both Farina versions had been built. By now the British automotive industry was in very poor health, with cash strapped BL embracing a changing automotive environment and introducing new models such as the Morris Marina to satisfy the motoring public's taste.

Let us now turn to the cars and the owners in our pictures.

Alan Chick: MG Y-Type

The owner of this delightful Autumn Red MG is retired policeman Alan Chick. 'I was born in Cardiff in 1958, and my father Bob had a reputation for driving old bangers,' Alan tells us. 'I recall on one occasion we were out in his Standard Vanguard when a wheel passed us by in the road; it had come off the Vanguard.'

In complete contrast, his Uncle Alan was an accountant with Cardiff City Council and clearly aspired to life's little luxuries. 'This MG was owned by my uncle, who bought the car in 1959 from Mr Chivers of the renowned Chivers food company who'd acquired it new in 1953,' continues Alan. 'My uncle chose the MG because it aligned with his thoughts on owning a car similar to those driven by professional people such as doctors and solicitors.'

Clearly Uncle Alan must have had complete faith in his MG saloon, for in



ABOVE: The prewar styling is clear, although the Y-Type did not go on sale until 1947. This is the later YB version, an update which was introduced in 1951.

1961 he and his wife drove it to Ankara, Turkey where her father worked. 'The critical thing about ensuring reliability when owning a car like this is to change the oil regularly,' he advised his nephew – Uncle Alan changed the oil before he embarked on the

journey, again when he arrived in Turkey and once more upon his return to the UK. As part of the service back home he dropped the sump to check inside. 'That's no mean feat with a Y-Type because of the position of the crossmember, which obstructs the



ABOVE: The cabin is very narrow by modern standards and feels cramped as a result, but there is no arguing with the quality of the fixtures and fittings.

pan,' Alan says. 'He found the oil to be as fresh as when he'd poured it in.'

The car then passed to Alan's aunt, who used the MG for shopping until it was replaced by a more modern saloon in the 1980s. At that point the MG was taken off the road and placed in a local garage for refurbishment, but was forgotten about and became neglected. 'Luckily, my uncle happened to be passing the garage one day, only to see the premises had been closed and people were in the process of clearing it out,' recalls Alan. 'He managed to rescue the MG just before it was about to be scrapped.'

With around 100,000 miles on the odometer, in early 1996 a friend suggested that Uncle Alan spend some money on the MG, refurbishing it so he could enjoy it in his retirement. 'At this point the body was repaired by a company in Ipswich and then sent to a body specialist in Gloucester where it was resprayed in Autumn Red,' explains Alan. 'While it was in Gloucester, the same company did some work on rebuilding the engine.'

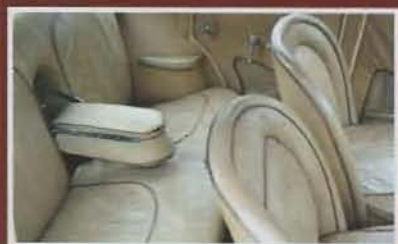
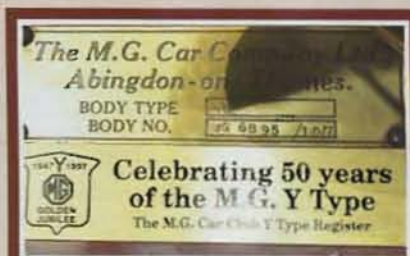
Uncle Alan then began to enjoy the car, becoming a member of the Y-Type Register. As he got older, his nephew was delighted when invited by his uncle to accompany him on rallies. The first was a visit to Llanerchindda Farm, Llandovery with the MG Y-Type Register which they'd planned for 2014. Sadly, the car never made it because it was experiencing fuel problems. Eventually, these were remedied with a new stainless tank.

Then came a trip to France (again with the Y-Type Register) in 2015 taking in the beautiful Loire Valley and Le Mans. 'Sadly, my uncle died in April 2016, leaving me the MG in his will,' says Alan thoughtfully. 'As a mark of respect I drove his lovely old MG to the crematorium for his funeral, where it was a prominent feature as it was so well known to all his friends and

family, and a car that was so strongly associated with him.'

During the summer of 2016 the car made another attempt to reach Llanerchindda Farm. 'It performed faultlessly,' says Alan proudly. 'There we took part in several rallies driving around the picturesque countryside.' Then in 2017 Alan took the MG to the Isle of Wight, as well as on trips closer to home visiting friends, while in November it was featured in the Lancaster Insurance Classic Motor Show on the MGCC stand marking the 70th anniversary of the Y.

Since his uncle had the car refurbished, the MG has covered around 20,000 miles, some 3000 of those since Alan took over ownership in early 2016. 'I can't bear distributor points, so I have changed the ignition to an electronic system,' he explains. 'I've also repaired the leaky opening windscreen and plan to have the engine removed to repair the perennial Y-Type problem of a leaky rear oil seal. But my only other plans are to continue enjoying the car on rallies and occasional runs. Sometimes, I just drive it down to the seaside and have an ice cream; it is a car that always attracts an appreciative crowd.'



« Stephen Tickell: ZB Varitone

'My grandfather and great uncle were both engineers and could do almost anything with cars, so I think that's where my interest in them came from,' says Stephen Tickell, owner of our ZB. 'As a youngster my father had a Standard Vanguard and a Mini, while my first car was a Metro which was cheap to run and insure. Then I had a Rover SD1 2600, which was notable for the fact that one day the cam belt failed on the M25 and the resulting breakdown caused a ten mile tailback.'

Stephen's first excursion into classic car ownership came when he bought an MG Midget some 20 years ago.



ABOVE: As the name suggests, most Varitones were painted in two different shades, separated by the chrome waist strip. They also had a bigger rear window.

'My primary reason for selecting the Midget was that I wanted a convertible, and in 1997 £3000 bought you quite a decent car,' he continues. 'I drove a couple of examples, so I knew what to expect.' However, Stephen soon began to realize that he'd bought a way of life as well as a car, with people waving as he drove along. He soon joined his local MG club and found himself getting together with like-minded people, boosting the social component of classic car ownership in the process.

As time progressed, neither Stephen nor his wife Sam needed a modern car for driving to work, so that was sold to buy a more suitable classic as their everyday transport. 'I like the style and shape of the Z series,' he explains, 'they look so right, as though they've been designed by one person with a pencil and a drawing board. They have straightforward mechanics and the MG Car Club's Magnette Register provides good support. I was friendly

with several people who owned ZAs and ZBs, and felt confident that I knew enough about the model to be able to make a judgement over selecting a car suitable for using on a daily basis. I was totally open minded on whether it was a ZA or the later ZB model.'

Stephen looked at several possible cars, gradually increasing his budget accordingly. 'Eventually, I found what I was looking for. It was a Varitone and had been featured as a photoshoot car in an article published in *Practical Classics*. At the end of the piece, the owner said he'd had it for 30 years and now planned on selling. When I saw the car, it wasn't a difficult decision and I paid £8500 to get it.'

The MG proved to be a good purchase and Stephen drove it continuously for 12 months, only undertaking the usual service chores when necessary. 'I then began to make small modifications,' he continues. 'I fitted safety belts, added proper rear indicators instead of



ABOVE: The interior clearly draws on themes established by the Y-Type, but with the full width body giving a far more modern and spacious feel to the cabin.





the original flashing brake lights and swapped the crossply tyres to radials. By then I'd decided to keep the car, and so I did more work on it. In 2006 I had it resprayed in original MG colours. More radical work followed later, including changing the gearbox to a five speed Ford unit (which is a popular modification) and uprating the engine to a 1600cc unit fitted with a Peter Burgess cylinder head. On the Burgess rolling road it recorded 85bhp with a Manifold exhaust.'

So how does the car perform? 'The suspension is totally original, which suggests that MG was quite advanced for its time and they'd got it pretty much right straight off,' asserts Stephen. 'At speed it's very stable, and you feel as though you'd have to do something very extreme to unsettle it. Part of

this is due to the Michelin XZX 165 SR 15in tyres. The steering with its rack is very positive and direct, and ideal for the power-to-weight ratio of the car. As our main transport for 12 years it's been driven through most extremes of weather, and apart from conditions of hard snow or ice the handling is surprisingly modern and safe.'

Asked what is the furthest he's been in the MG, Stephen replies: 'We've been to Normandy and Brittany, and attended most of the Car Club events, including the Scottish Borders covering 450 miles in day. Afterwards we didn't feel at all exhausted – the MG is a very calming car to drive, you never feel rushed. The seats are very comfortable, too. It's completely different to the Midget driving experience.'

And what of the future? Stephen says

at some point he plans to fit MGA hubs and brake discs with MGB calipers, for which about 20 years ago the MGCC Magnette Register developed a mounting bracket. 'I've had the parts in my garage for around ten years. When I eventually got round to looking at it, I spoke to my insurance company who were adamant that the car would have to be examined by their expert before they'd agree to cover it. By that time I was using the Magnette for commuting and business, and had limited options for insurers without owning a modern car as well. That was when the project was shelved, and of course over time you do become more familiar with the available stopping power of 10in brake drums. I'm also thinking about fitting an anti-roll bar, which is another popular modification,' he concludes.

John Horton: MkIV Magnette

Farina enthusiast John Horton left school in 1953 and began looking around for a job, finally landing a position in the stores of local Morris distributor T R Page in Sussex. He's been involved with the motor industry in one way or another ever since. 'Initially, I became a dyed in the wool Morris fan and my first car was a brand new Morris Minor four-door De Luxe without a heater,' he remembers. 'It costs me £491 and I bought it from C D Hay in Nicosia when I was in the RAF based in Cyprus. I then went on to own an Austin A55 and a Wolseley 15/60 (both Farina models), and then a sporty Riley 1.5. A huge number of other cars followed, including a Hillman Husky which rolled about all over the place and an MG1100 which was the worst car I've ever owned.'

However, despite the plethora of models which have passed through his hands, John says his heart has always belonged to the Farina models. 'It was while I was abroad with the military in 1959 that the Wolseley 15/60 was launched and immediately I thought to myself that I had to have one,' he



ABOVE: The Farina range were big, solid cars for the big, solid middle classes. They have a dedicated band of enthusiastic fans, and still offer fantastic family motoring.

continues. 'The Wolseley model came first, followed by the Austin Cambridge, the Morris Oxford, the Riley 4/68 and finally the MG Magnette, the last two versions being the first to be withdrawn from production in 1969. But when it came to trading in my old car to buy a new Wolseley, I couldn't afford it so the thought had to be put on hold.'

In fact John's love for Farina models

grew over the years, and he's always thought the Wolseley to be the prettiest. 'Only the MG and Riley had twin carburettors on their engines, although I'm not sure whether the small increase in power actually made that much difference on the road,' he adds.

However, fast forward to 1974 and John had developed a new idea of the format for his ideal Farina: a Magnette »

Y & Magnettes

« MkIV in Connaught Green with grey leather trim and green carpets. 'I happened to be talking to a good friend of mine, Clive Willis who ran Seaside Garage in Eastbourne, about my thoughts and he later telephoned to say that he'd previously sold one just like that to a gentleman who lived in Walmington,' recalls John. 'Sadly, that gentleman had died and Clive suggested I went to see his widow. I took my wife with me and she invited us in for a glass of sherry. I explained why I was there and she took me out to the garage to show me the Magnette. We agreed a price, but despite having covered only 15,000 miles, it had been laid up in the garage for a few years so we had to tow it home.'

John then gave the car a thorough service, selling his Morris Oxford in the meantime. 'When we finally got the Magnette running in mid-1975, it totally lived up to my expectations,' he grins. 'My impression during that first drive was how tight it felt on the road. It drove like a new car, and totally vindicated my love for the Farina models.'

Asked about his 30+ years of MG ownership, he smiles and says: 'I certainly never thought I'd even be around this long, never mind keeping the car. It's still only covered 44,000 miles. Over the years I've had the bottom half resprayed, but mechanically it's totally original and the cylinder head has never been off. I use the top grade petrol with an additive.'

And what of the driving experience with the Magnette today? 'I accept that the MkIII and MkIVs were the most unloved of all MG saloons while the ZA and ZBs are better handling cars,' he says, 'but when it comes to family use, the MkIV Magnette is a far better model; it is more practical because it is more spacious.'

Like our other two owners, John



ABOVE: It may not be a sports car, but isn't that interior absolutely gorgeous?

has made some modification to his car to keep up with technology and road conditions. 'I've fitted a stainless steel exhaust with a chrome extension piece because it's impossible to source a mild steel version of the right length for this car, and I've added radial ply tyres because it's not possible to find 590 X 14 crossplies. I've also converted the vacuum wipers to electric for safety's sake, as well as fitting seat belts.'

'The longest journey I've done in the car is from Oban in Scotland to Hasting, which was a total of 636 miles in a day. On another occasion we attended a club meeting at Liddon Hill in Kent, finishing at 5 o'clock in the evening. We then drove up to Richmond in Yorkshire and back to Sussex the following day. However, I've never had any desire to drive abroad.'

Finally, when he's out and about does this car draw the same attention as the Y-Type and the ZB? 'We've gone through the my-dad-had-one-of-those stage and reached the my-grandad-had-one-of-those stage,' he concludes with a smile. 'People still come up and talk to me though; it's very gratifying.'

