

WHY?

The answer is in black and cream

Restoring a Y-Type basket case to its former glory provoked a lot of 'whys', but the finished product answers all questions.

Words and photography: Peter Gavaghan

If the road to you know where is paved with good intentions, it's a fair bet that would-be car restorers make up a sizeable proportion of those heading south. But Australian MG enthusiast Leigh Wallace is one who persevered and now owns and drives a pristine Y-Type. But why did he bother to tackle a basket case in the first place? Well, it becomes more understandable when you learn that this Victorian

resident is a good Samaritan, a director of the Melbourne Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, an organisation that devotes itself to helping the disadvantaged and preventing worthwhile causes from becoming the *lost* variety. Obviously Leigh is the type who practices what he preaches.

For the launch of Operation Y we have to go back to 2003 when a typical Australian domestic scene saw Leigh harvest a lucky break that was to reap bounteous rewards. Wife Lyn watched her man pottering around the garden and, thinking he needed a more robust and constructive challenge, asked: 'Why don't you restore another car?'

Rather than rushing out and buying the first thing he came across, Leigh acted the investigator for several months before an advertisement in Melbourne's major daily paper, *The Age*, stirred his curiosity. It said simply: *For sale, MG Y-Type, in pieces, \$1700*. Wooed by the vision of rescuing a rare beast in Australia from extinction, he rang the number and learned it was a 1949 model – certainly one of the first new MG saloons to find their way down under after normal service was resumed following the Second World.

Below: Y-Type came as a 3D jigsaw puzzle, with everything already disassembled.



It had been owned for 41 years by a fellow MG enthusiast, one of the well-intentioned sort, who had bought the already partially dismantled almond green saloon in a fit of zeal. He then suffered the same jitters that seize many would-be restorers who underestimate the time, patience, diligence, organisation and finance necessary to successfully complete the job. Now a basket case, the Y-Type had been shuffled into the too-hard basket and there it gathered dust.

Now, Leigh isn't a novice when it comes to restoring MGs. After all, hadn't he saved two rusting, written-off 1954 Magnette ZAs from the tip and transformed them into one car that went close to winning a *concours d'elegance* a few years earlier? And then there was the 1979 US B that he converted from lefthand drive to a right hooker and did up, among several other major restoration projects.

But did those experiences fully prepare him for his next restoration? Not exactly. At least with the Magnettes he had the two examples to cast inquiring eyes at, complete even if they were falling apart, so he had a form of 3D template to work with. But with this latest project, even if he had wished, he was unable to follow the restorer's disassembly creed: thou shalt identify, name and describe all parts and thou shalt record not only what is what, but what goes with what, and where all whatnots are stored. Leigh adopts a different tack in his forays into restoration: 'I like to do one task at a time, so I don't believe in totally dismantling everything from the word go. If you dismantle everything, you have difficulty in remembering what you have and have not done.'

Given his *modus operandi*, taking on this task would have been a paradox until you learn of Leigh's extensive range of contacts and his excellent sleuthing skills in tracking down parts and advice. 'The MG Car Club has been invaluable – I don't think I would have attempted this restoration without being a member,' he says, singling out two Y-Type devotees, Jack Murray in England and Alf Luckman in Australia, as being irreplaceable sources of encouragement in his successful



Above: It's a modern garage, but the MG Y-Type receiving routine attention makes it a scene from yesteryear.

restoration, and NTG in Ipswich for their frequent assistance.

You won't be surprised to learn that Leigh thrills in progressive reincarnation as much as pedalling the finished product. As he put it: 'I like the practice of re-creation as opposed to recreation.' And you have to admire his fortitude (as well as Lyn's forbearance and understanding) when you realise it took two large trailer loads to shift the car pieces 50 miles back to his home in Melbourne.

So, the on-hand and desirable 3D template didn't exist, replaced by the necessity to consult photographs and time-consuming viewing of other Y-Types to see what went where. And, let's face it, although 8300 Y-Types were made, not that many found their way to Australia. That difficulty involving rarity is compounded by the tyranny of distance hereunder – other examples and owners may be hundreds of miles away. Even so, his vast range of contacts provided him with a vital flow and depth of information many restorers will envy.

Seasoned restorers will tell you another paradox inveigles its way into any such activity: that is, you can't beat dismantling a vehicle as part of the rebuilding project. One that involves taking over a car already dismantled, even if the cataloguing of all parts has been completed fastidiously, brings with it a whole raft of unique difficulties and problems. The first is, of course, sifting through everything and seeing what is there and not there, and what needs to be retired, replaced or refurbished. Assembling one already in pieces is akin to a taking on a giant 3D jigsaw – and we all know that jigsaws are made by a technique called fretwork!

In Leigh's case it was, generally speaking, the opposite. Rather than fret work, Leigh finds restoring cars a sanity-preserving foil for the pressures of his job and, in the Y's case, completing his Masters degree in Philanthropy. However, what really sent a shiver down Leigh's spine, not necessarily in anticipation, was whether this boxed set was complete. 'There was no inventory, just unlabelled parts in unlabelled plastic bags and boxes,' he said. Given that time span, it was inevitable

some pieces had wandered, siphoned off through sales to other like-minded desperates or merely by misplacement or junking. Leigh admitted he heaved deep sighs of relief when his inventory was completed and showed it was over 90% there.

It was at this point that Leigh surrounded himself with reading matter to bone up on the whys and wherefores of Ys. He found *MG Saloon Cars* by Anders Clausager, *Let there be Ys* by David R. Lawrence (which records every nuance of MG specification changes) and *MG Y-Type Saloons and Towers* (Lawson) provided a wealth of information at critical junctures.

Leigh resists calling his car a YA. 'YA is only a title attached to it after it was superseded by the YB versions – it is really a Y-Type,' he said, a contention many of his fellow Y-Type owners hereunder support. The Y-Type emerged at a time, it will be remembered, when MG *et al* were at a crossroads in those export-or-die days immediately after the Second World War. Like many models on British roads before 1950, it was a pre-war design despite bearing the description of MG's first post-war saloon. Based on the Series E Morris 8, the Y-Type was propelled by the TC's 1250cc engine. Its independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering were to become staples of the Nuffield organisation, while the partial monocoque body had its genes in Wolseley. For all that, it bore more MG DNA than many later saloons which sported the octagon badge, certainly in areas of engineering and styling. Despite its modest performance, it was an MG and was successfully campaigned in rallies, including Len Shaw's third outright in the 1950 Daily Express 1000-mile rally.

Leigh's car was built in 1949, christened PT 795 and registered in March 1950 for a Keith Sassella just down the road (about five miles) from where Leigh now resides. 'I have copies of the original certificate of roadworthiness of 1951 (incorrectly dated – it should be 1950) and other early documents,' he said. A recent check with the phone book found a Sassella still living in Kew and a phone call revealed the tenant to be the widow of the original owner. 'He bought the Y



Above: Boot can take a suitcase (just), or four Gladstone bags – the fold-down lid was strong enough to support luggage.

Above right: The 1250cc TC engine is a familiar sight, but the head houses hardened valve seats to cope with unleaded fuel.



“The original owner bought it in 1950 for their honeymoon, on which they drove to Adelaide”

in 1950 for their honeymoon, on which they drove to Adelaide.’ That was a return trip of more than 1000 miles over some rather indifferent roads, although if the car was as good a cruiser as claimed at the time, it could have been a reasonably pleasant jaunt. With the car up and running, Leigh now plans trips to the octogenarian who sold him the vehicle, and the widow of the original owner.

The chassis number, 4086, is slap bang in the middle of the August 1949/March 1950 production run (3627 to 4460) which, Leigh believes, reveals the car was made circa November 1949. Leigh also has photographs of the car being trailed to its previous owner and several of it in various stages of disassembly. He also has records of what jobs he did and all invoices for parts, however small. He describes these documents as essential parts of the car’s history.

‘There were times when I was beginning to wonder whether it was ever going to end,’ he admitted. However, whenever things reached a low ebb, further encouragement from family and friends enabled him to regroup and attack the project with renewed vigour. Over the five year time span of his endeavours, lubricated by folding stuff to the thickness of AUSD\$20,000 (about £9500), his 3D jigsaw eventually took shape.

Given the state of the car when he took it on, it is not surprising he was perplexed where some of the small pieces fitted in the big picture. One in particular stumped him. It was identical to the ring he had used to anchor the gear lever boot to the transmission tunnel – but why the second? It was during a progress inspection that he came across four bolt holes around the large hole in the inner bodywork through which the filler pipe passes to the tank. Grabbing the mystery piece he lined up the holes and *voila*, mystery solved – it held the filler pipe boot in place.

Other moments of sunshine came in the shape of the two Rays – Skewes and Miles. The former waved his magic spanners over the seized engine that had not turned over in four decades and reanimated it, while the latter weaved his spell over the bodywork which has brought envious recognition from his peers. Ray Miles applied a degree of fastidiousness that has to have you both nodding your head in approval and shaking it in incredulity. One of his more intricate tasks was to detach the door seal channels from some replacement doors Leigh had bought, and re-weld them to this car’s original doors

Once the car was back up and running,

a teeth-setting whine – loudest at the suburban limit of 35mph – saw Leigh turn dentist. He extracted the crown wheel to find two teeth in advanced stages of decay. Replacement crown and pinion brought sweet relief without the need to resort to drills. However, one of his biggest challenges involved installing the floor boards. ‘It was,’ he said succinctly, ‘difficult.’ Perhaps that is why he painted the boards with umpteen undercoats, a thick top coat and then bituminised the underside – it’s a job he never wants to have to do again.

Leigh admits he had his fair share of luck in his latest five year project. First he bought a perfect walnut interior trim and dashboard set at an MG Car Club swap meet for, wait for it, less than £100. His original trim had all but disappeared and the dashboard had been coated with a self-adhesive plastic sheet which, when being removed, destroyed the original wood. ‘A friend of mine who restores antique furniture retained the replacement dash, sunroof surrounds and door frames in a satin finish that has just the right amount of shine, but doesn’t reflect,’ he said.

The second piece of luck involved the SU fuel pump which would tick normally for a while, and then go into a frenzy. Sages judged that air was leaking into the system causing the pump to have a heart attack, but a thorough inspection failed to reveal just where the intrusion occurred. A casual reference to a friend who worked for a carburettor specialist ultimately led to this problem being solved. The base of the pump had become warped, intermittently allowing air to invade the system. Solution: a new base which had been awaiting Leigh on the specialist’s shelves for 20 years.

Like most reincarnations, his Y-Type incorporates several modifications which he thinks should be acceptable to classic car owners. While he followed a practice adopted by others of locating the turn indicators in the mudguard-mounted side lamps at the front, he mounted a pair of Harley-Davidson motorcycle flashers on brackets attached to the rear bumper bar rather than incorporate them in the twin taillights. The old-style trafficators are still in place, but the modern wiring loom has no provision for them. The new indicator set-up is controlled by a knurled wheel on the boss of the steering column and sports a black spot to show which bank of flashers is operating. You can hear the self-cancelling mechanism as the knob slowly turns back. A reversing lamp was also added in the interests of safety, not to mention compliance with local vehicle design regulations, particularly as the car is driven and not trailed. The way he has incorporated the rear flashers and the reversing lamp means that they can be removed if necessary and no one would be any the wiser.

Other modifications have a subtlety equalled only by their

Below: The Y-Type was also referred to as the one and a quarter litre saloon in MG sales literature.





Above: Greener pastures for a Y-Type after looking like it was bound for the tip. Lines are a carry-over from pre-war. The colour scheme is lifted from post-war Jaguar.



Below: Classy interior? Yes! Expensive? No! Leigh picked up a complete interior for under £100 at a local swap meet.



Above: Let the sun shine in – sunroof is ideal for those who need a saloon, but desire a touch of open air motoring.

practicality. Given that he always intended to regularly drive the car socially, Leigh decided on a series of measures to make it safer in today's traffic conditions. Brake cylinders were relined in stainless steel – 'I wanted as much stopping power as possible' – and the whole system may yet get a booster.


Being a tall poppy, Leigh found bending his head to see through the windscreen was, well, a pain in the neck. The solution here was to have the seat frame cut by 1 3/8in (35mm). A simple solution that raised the comfort level and makes driving more relaxed.

Gone are the 16in crossplies originally fitted. Now the car is shod with 165/80-16 radials and tubes by Avon which endow it with the desirable stability and grip required for modern-day driving. Leigh explained that the tyres are the narrowest radials available for 16in wheels and are those fitted to early Bristols, so at least they are genuine period affairs. 'Providing you run them with tubes, they are perfect for the rims. I e-mailed the technical guru at Beaulieu Museum who told me the narrow Avons were the only tyres suitable for the MG rims. They work well too – fellow Y owners express surprise and envy at the way it rides and handles,' he said.

Given its regular use, Leigh has to think about the engine's longevity. When planning the engine rebuild, his first step in the restoration project, he decided hardened valve seats were vital so that the motor could cope with unleaded fuel despite the fact that it was built to run on the low octane pool petrol of war and immediate post-war years. But the biggest modification involved the diff. To start with, the restored effort would blow

its oil out past the seal in the nose, so Leigh turned to Ray Skewes who had come across similar problems with TCs. His cure was to install a vent in the top of the differential casing and put in a breather pipe. It appears modern oils are the culprit, creating more pressure than the original stuff.

At some stage a previous owner had installed step down lights normally found in TCs. Each 7in lens is held to the lamp body with a two-level rim rather than the 8in one-level rim originally fitted. Leigh has been offered two original lamps but as they are far from cheap, the step downs will stay. But the most noticeable change to MG fans will be the two-tone colour scheme – it is not pukka MG, although Jaguar enthusiasts will immediately recognize the cream and black paint scheme as belonging to the pouncing cat. However, when you have finished perusing the Y-Type from a few paces and after you see your face reflected in the mirror-like finish, you'll forgive the straying from originality – it has endowed the MG with a distinctive and distinguished presence.

Now named Maggy (look at the number and work it out!), the only other object that differs from when the car was put on the road is that number plate, YMG 049. 'I couldn't resist saying what it was and when it was created,' Leigh said. Given the amount of time involved meeting and defeating the numerous whys and the preparedness to fork out the necessary amount of funding required, MG enthusiasts will accept this whimsical touch by a man of charity with a liberal amount of understanding. After all, no question about it, another Y-Type has been preserved for posterity. 



Above: The door locks just as if they had emerged from the factory. Note the seal channel, taken from a scrapped door and attached to this one. >