

# THE WORKS 6-CYLINDER MAGNETTE

by Paul Batho

THOUGH ABINGDON IN THE mid-1950s was an offshoot of the mighty BMC empire, its general manager, John Thornley, was not someone who toed the corporate line too rigorously. The factory had its own Engineering Development Department under Alec Hounslow and this was the scene for many projects which were not, it seems, always strictly sanctioned by the powers in Longbridge or Cowley.

"John Thornley often came up with ideas which he threw at Syd Enever (who by then was MG's Chief Designer) to work on," Peter Neal, who started in the design office in 1954, explains. It was this atmosphere of innovation and experiment that spawned the one-and-only works 6-cylinder Z-Magnette.

It is sometimes forgotten that in the 1950s Abingdon produced not only MGs but a variety of other BMC products including all Rileys. By the mid 50s Abingdon's big performance saloon was the Gerald Palmer designed Pathfinder, with its 2.5 litre 4-cylinder Riley cam-in-head engine which could trace its origins back to well before the war. Opinions are divided on the Pathfinder's merits and, while it received high praise from some, it acquired a reputation for indifferent handling and by 1956 sales were tailing off. This is probably what inspired Thornley to look around for an alternative to counter the growing competition, especially from Jaguar, which had just announced its 2.4 litre Mark I saloon.

So what weapons did BMC have in its armoury to counter the threat from Coventry? The ZA Magnette had acquired a name for itself as a fine-handling and stylish sports saloon but its 60bhp was no match for the Jaguar's I 12. However, BMC did have a new 2.6 litre straight six that had appeared in 1954 in the unlikely surroundings of Austin's rather dumpy Westminster. Though only producing 85bhp under the Austin's bonnet this was a smooth,

modern unit with much potential - in the later MGC it would be persuaded up to 145 bhp. In his office in Larkhill House, one can imagine Thornley putting two and two together.... and thus it was that EX202 was conceived.

It seems that no photos or drawings remain of this intriguing vehicle, so we have to rely on the memories of those who were involved with it at the time to fill in the details. Don Hayter, who arrived at Abingdon from Aston Martin in February 1956 as a body engineer recalls that "the car was a knife-and-fork job, based on a standard car off the line that was then cut and modified to fit the Austin engine".

Fitting the long and heavy 6 in place of the Magnette's compact 4 would have involved some major surgery and despite the lack of drawings, there are clues as to how this was done. The work was carried out under the supervision of Dennis Williams, who was then the Chief Engineer and who now lives in retirement in Witney. Peter Neal recalls that the standard car was mounted on a large cast iron plate with a flat machined surface. This was used as a form of jig and probably dated back to when Abingdon had built tanks during the war. Once in place, the car was cut at the bulkhead and a new front frame welded on to take the bigger engine, plus the suspension and other ancillaries.

Both Dennis and Peter think that this frame came pretty much complete from the Westminster. Peter's analysis of the dimensions of the two cars (Fig 1) suggests that it would have been a good fit, while Geoff Hey (No. 2 to John Thornley at the time) recalls that the car had cam and peg steering which would seem to support this theory. Mounting the Westminster engine and gearbox in a frame already designed for them was presumably not much of a problem, and as this was an experiment not aimed at production, expediency would probably have triumphed

over any lingering concerns about an unnatural liaison between Abingdon and Longbridge....

The state of tune of the 2.6 litre 'C Series seems to be the subject of some debate. Peter Neal and Dennis Williams recall it as being pretty much the 'cooking' Austin unit, though Dennis believes the standard Solex might have been replaced by twin SUs. Geoff Hey, on the other hand, suggests it may have been a tuned engine from a production car racer (*Safety Fast! July 2006*). We may never know....

Aft of the bulkhead it seems that the 6-cylinder car was standard Magnette as far as the bodywork was concerned. However, a 'C type rear axle was fitted, probably also from the Westminster.

The next stage would have been to reclothe the front of the car with appropriate bodywork. This was the task of Jim O'Neill who worked for Gerald Palmer as Chief Body Engineer and the metal bashing was done by Billy Wilkins who Peter describes as an 'ace metalworker'. A larger radiator was needed for the 6-cylinder engine which in turn required a bigger grille, which has its own reference in the EX register (Fig 2). All those involved with the car recall this as being wider than the standard item, but retaining the characteristic Magnette swept back curve. Peter Neal suggests its proportions were similar to the MG I 100 grille that appeared some six years later. A one-off item, it was crafted by Harry Ridded.

Those who saw it describe the car as looking basically standard to the casual observer, with the obvious exception of the radiator grille. However, the reference in the EX archives of EX 203 'Magnette with Extra Long Column' (Fig 2) suggests, not surprisingly, that the bodywork might have been longer than standard ahead of the A-post.

Fig. 2 contains all the EX references to the 'C Series Magnette and this may give another clue to the car's origins. As all 'one off' manufactured parts were referred to in the EX

**Fig 1 – A90 Westminster/Z Magnette Dimensions**

	<b>A90 Westminster</b>	<b>Z Magnette</b>
Wheelbase	8ft 7 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	8ft 6in
Front track	4ft 3 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in	4ft 3in
Rear track	4ft 3 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	4ft 3in
Length	15ft 2 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	14ft 1in
Width	5ft 4in	5ft 1in
Height	5ft 3 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in	4ft 10 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in
Weight (U/laden)	2,912lb	2,465lb
Steering	Cam & peg	Rack & pinion

**Fig 2**

<b>EX202 – Magnette with C Series Engine</b>	
8 May 1956	Rear axle scheme
9 May 1956	Rear shock absorber
9 May 1956	Scheme showing C type rear axle
9 May 1956	Radiator casing grille
9 May 1956	Radiator block
<b>EX 203 – Magnette with Extra Long Column</b>	
29 May 1956	Steering tube assembly (RH?)
29 May 1956	Steering tube assembly (LH?)
29 May 1956	Steering column – outer tube
29 May 1956	Assy. horn & trafficator control

register, one can infer that the rest of the car's running gear was built from parts off the shelf at Longbridge or Abingdon, supporting the suggestion that most of the non-standard items were straight from the Westminster.

By some time in the late summer of 1956 the project was complete and ready to take to the road in a smart new coat of black paint. How did it perform? Dennis Williams probably spent more time behind the wheel than anyone else, using the car for trips to Birmingham and Coventry and to visit Earls Court for the 1956 Motor Show.

"The car went extremely well, it was a car I very much enjoyed driving" he recalls "and it handled very well too"

It's not surprising that those who were

allowed behind the wheel were tempted to have some fun with unsuspecting motorists. Geoff Iley's exploits in Abingdon when he responded to the challenge of an army major driving an Alfa Romeo Guilietta Sprint can be read in July's *Safety Fast!* while Don Hayter saw off a Jag in it, which must have been particularly satisfying given that Jaguar would have been the main competition had the car ever reached production.

So why did a car that apparently had so much promise go no further? Well, there's a long road to be travelled from a one-off special to a full production model and by late 1956 BMC's longer-term plans were heading off down the Farina route, despite the announcement of the slightly more powerful

ZB Magnette that year. The market gap for a big 6-cylinder performance saloon was filled by the Riley 2.6 in 1957, though that turned out to be more of a flop than the Pathfinder, with fewer than 1,000 cars being sold over its two year production. Then the Mark 1 Jaguar was replaced by the iconic Mark 2 and the rest, as they say, is history...

And what became of EX202? Along with most other one-off experiments it is believed to have met its fate with cutting torches behind the factory some time in the late 1950s. A sad end to an intriguing experiment.

My sincere thanks to Peter Neal, Dennis Williams, Cliff Bray and Don Hayter for their help in preparing this article - PB

## Famous "Z" Cars - Where Are They Now?

by Peter Martin

I'm sure that like me, you cannot have failed to notice that with most makes and models of classic cars, there are certain very high profile cars which are constantly in the limelight. Cars that spring to my mind are MaBeL the ex works MGA, or the ex Ian Appleyard Jaguar XK120 "NUB 120" or the very early white Mini registered 621 AOK to name but a few - these cars and many like them appear with amazing regularity!

This got me thinking recently about famous Z Magnettes and whether any are known to have survived, or even what fate befell them. In other words, do we have any famous cars in our ranks today? To this end, I have put together the following list - which is by no means definitive - and would be very interested to know any details anyone can provide together with any other famous cars that I have not covered.

Starting right at the beginning in the early literature for the cars, the car bearing the Oxfordshire registration UFC 476 was featured. Anders Ditlev Clausager's book *"MG Saloon Cars"* suggests that this car was possibly the first running prototype. A

second car was also used bearing the similar registration UFC 764. Gregor Grant - who was the founding editor of Autosport magazine - took the expensive route of purchasing his own early car registered 414 BMD to road test for his magazine as no press cars were made available at the time! Eventually, a company press car was made available to test and this was registered KBL 285. A further demonstrator was registered MBL 665. Apparently, and again according to Clausager's book, Ron Flockhart who won Le Mans in an Ecurie Ecosse Jaguar in both 1956 and 1957 took delivery of a single colour Varitone registered TJW 99 which sported the Ecurie Ecosse badge on its front wings. Does this car exist, or did it succumb to rust or meet its fate on the Stock Car circuits in the 1970s?

Three very well known cars are the ZAs that were chosen for competition by John Thornley: KJB 908, KJB 909 and KJB910 (chassis numbers 3336, 3337 & 3338 of which surprisingly KJB 909 was the last one numbered 3338!). JRX 251, MBL 417 & NJB 365 were also well known works Magnettes

in their day. NJB 365, a ZB Magnette then went on to be Joan Thornley's road car which Joan and John's son Peter learnt to drive in, according to his book *"Mr MG"*. John Thornley himself ran a single colour ZB Varitone registered RJB 365 which again according to PeterThornley's book was well modified and very fast! (a point to remember if anyone gets too hung up these days on total originality!).

As I said at the start of this article, the cars I have mentioned are only a small sample of what could be termed as "famous" cars (or perhaps more correctly, cars which at some time have been owned by famous people). Does anyone know of the fate of any of the above cars, or indeed any others that I have not mentioned? If you do, please do get in touch with me or our SF! Scribe, and we will give an update on any cars that we are made aware of. There must be some out there somewhere, so let's see what transpires!

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