

# A MAGNETIC ATTRACTION

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Mention 'MG' and most people automatically think of red or, perhaps, dark green sports cars, wind in the hair, and wire wheels. There was however, another side to this great marque. MG has always produced saloons in parallel with its sports car models, with the intention that the family man should be able to continue to drive MGs even when it seemed his sports car days were over.

Some sources even say that the first vehicle to bear the famous MG Octagon was a small two-door saloon, the Salonette, in 1925. Regardless of when and where the Octagon first appeared, there's no doubt that MG saloons hold their own special place in the history of the famous marque. Through the late 1920s and 1930s, MG saloon coachwork was available on many models and these remain highly desirable cars, especially on the 18/80, some of the smaller sports cars, and the larger VA, SA and WA models.

## A TALENTED DESIGNER

Gerald Palmer, a young engineer recruited by the Nuffield group in the late 1930s, carried out some of the development work on the Y type MG saloon as one of his first projects. Palmer left Nuffield in 1942 to take up a position with the Jowett company, where he designed the Jowett Javelin,

one of the most innovative cars produced in the UK in the immediate post war years. He rejoined the Nuffield group in 1949, and one of his first briefs on his return was to develop new four-passenger cars to be sold under the MG and Wolseley nameplates. It quickly became clear to Palmer that for economic reasons, he would have to use a common body shell and mechanicals for these two models. By clever design, he was able to make each model appear significantly different to its sibling, although the penalty was that the MG Magnette and Wolseley 4/44, as they became known, shared very few outer body panels.

The impending merger of Nuffield and Austin to form the British Motor Corporation muddled the choice of power units for the new cars. After the merger, the Morris/MG/Wolseley 1250cc engine was to be discontinued and replaced with a new 1500cc Austin 'B' type motor developed from the Austin A40 1200cc motor. As it turned out, the 'B' series motor was not yet available when the Wolseley 4/44 was released in 1952, and, at first, it used the 1250cc MG motor with a single carburettor.

The Wolseley was aimed at a different market to the Magnette, and its interior trim and fittings were given a more 'upmarket' touch, in contrast to the more sporting aspects of the MG. The MG used a floor gearshift and handbrake with instruments fitted in a semi-octagonal housing in front of the driver. In contrast, the Wolseley's gearshift was column mounted, the handbrake placed under the dashboard and the



instruments located at the centre of the dash. Both cars used a rack and pinion steering system, which was a little unusual for the time.

## TRAMPING ON

Given the sporting aspirations of the Magnette, Palmer initially designed the rear suspension with a torque arm attached to the differential and running forward to the propeller shaft tunnel. He also specified rubber pads instead of U-bolts on the rear leaf springs and attached the front of the leaf springs to the body via rubber bushes. Three prototypes were built and subjected to testing. One of the drivers reported that when forced to brake heavily from about 75mph, the car axle tramped its way to a standstill and was almost uncontrollable. In his book 'Auto Architect', Gerald Palmer recalled the events that followed. 'I would not believe this until I had taken a car out and found that I could reproduce the bouncing and oscillation... every time I stamped on the brake pedal. ... I could not affect a cure whilst retaining the torque arm and it had to be deleted. The axle had to be attached to the springs with rigid U-bolts as on the Wolseley.'

## POSITIVE PRESS

By the time that the Magnette, given the type name ZA, was released in 1953, BMC's now legendary 'B' series 1500cc motor was available and the Magnette became the first car to use it. Press response on its

release was very positive, although there were grumblings from die-hard MG enthusiasts about the use of the name 'Magnette', which had first appeared on a revered model in the 1930s. The 'new' Magnette quickly gained a reputation as a sporting saloon and sold very well, reputedly at a rate 10 times faster than its predecessor, the YB saloon.

In 1956, BMC took the opportunity to update the Magnette to the ZB, with a few minor mechanical and styling changes. BMC also introduced a new, more expensive model known as the 'Varitone' with a much larger rear wrap-around rear window and two-tone paintwork. By 1958, badge engineering was in full swing at BMC and the next Magnette model, the Mk III, used the same Farina-styled body seen on Austin, Morris, Wolseley and Riley versions of BMC's 1 1/2 litre cars. The Magnette lost almost all of its identity and although the Farina-bodied Magnette continued on for a further 10 years, it's not generally regarded as one of the highlights of MG saloon models.

## PASSION AND LUST

Our featured Magnette is the result of a thorough restoration by Malcolm Robertson, committed MG enthusiast and fellow writer for ACC. MGs have been a passion for Malcolm since childhood. "Although my first car was a Morris Minor low-light convertible that I used to get to and from uni, I was already lusting after an MG and I had brochures and all the information ^



on the MGB," he recalls. "Financially, however, a new MG was out of the question. But when the time came to upgrade from the Minor, I began looking at classic MGs that were considerably less expensive than a new MGB, and with the (reluctant) help of my father, I was able to purchase an MG TF. It was my daily driver for uni and became my commuting car for work. I drove the TF for 23 years before the realities of life set in and it had to be traded in on school fees! Once you become involved with the marque you soon discover that there are other MGs, and that there is a deep and rich heritage going all the way back to the 1920s.

"When I began work as a young graduate I seemed to be quite well off, without a wife, children and mortgage, and all that follows. So I had a succession of MGs. It started with the TF and then, when I was working in Western Australia for a time, I acquired a TA and then a J2. I'd left the TF behind in Canberra and I returned with the two extra cars. Then I spied a pre-war MG SA coupe that I still own. It was and is a fabulous car and it took me three years to get the

owner to sell it to me. But by the end of the 1970s, children had arrived, along with mortgages, and the 1980s brought high interest rates and more expenses for the children, so I sold off some of the cars but I kept the SA."

## AUNT ALISON HELPS OUT

With retirement arriving along with the new century, Malcolm decided that he would like to have another classic car to run around in. After a brief dalliance with a Jaguar XJ6 - "too expensive to run on a pension" - a confluence of events led him to the Magnette. "I received an inheritance from Alison, a favourite aunt, and at about that time, an MG enthusiast in Sydney was selling off his collection of MGs. This Magnette was under a

tarpaulin in a shed and lined up with other MGs. It was just old and worn out rather than derelict, and I decided that this was the car for me. It was a rare Varitone Magnette, of which perhaps 60 came to Australia. In my personal view, it's the most handsome of all the Magnettes, with its larger back window that makes the rear end look much lighter than the model with a smaller, squarer window. It also used the waistline of the car as the dividing line for attractive two-tone paintwork."

Part of the appeal of the Magnette for Malcolm lay in its use of the BMC 'B' series motor. The factory-fitted version was of 1489cc capacity, but it can easily be replaced with a 1798cc MGB motor, with the added bonus that a five-speed gearbox conversion can readily be attached to the MGB engine.

## GETTING STARTED

Having brought the car from Sydney to Canberra, it wasn't long before Malcolm despatched it back again, this time to MG specialists, Nepean Classic Cars, for the conversion to the larger MGB motor and five-speed 'box. "It also needed some rust repairs," Malcolm says. "While I'm not averse to welding, I thought that the sills might be better handled professionally.

"Once it was home again, I began doing other things. The seats went off to be reupholstered, although I managed the remainder of the trim myself. I purchased a new roof lining from the UK and installed it. The interior panels are in the original leatherette and most were in quite good condition. The torn one I restored with new material from UK, and the rest were just given a freshen up. By far the biggest job inside was refurbishing the timber on the dashboard and on the doors.

"There were the inevitable minor rust repairs to deal with and I did my own paintwork in two-pack paint, although I must say that I wasn't all that keen on using it at home. It requires good clean conditions and effective breathing protection. One of two pack's advantages is that it gives a good finish straight off the gun and makes it easier to do the inaccessible parts that otherwise would have to be buffed up if sprayed in acrylic."

## COLOUR CORRECT

When acquired, the Magnette had been resprayed with a metallic light grey over dark grey. Some research showed that the original colours were Birch Grey over Twilight Grey and Malcolm decided to go with these colours in the restoration. "There were two reasons," he explains. "One was that my fellow enthusiasts persuaded me that it was 'the right thing to do', and secondly, the car's paint colours are encoded into its body number, so the paintwork still matches its identifying codes."

Malcolm completed the restoration last October and named the Magnette Alison in her honour. "Of course, with a new restoration, there are bound to be a few problems and there were for the first month or so," he says. "But after that, it's been whizzing around very nicely. I'm impressed with the way that it goes and handles. With the MGB motor and the Toyota T2 five-speed gearbox it has good acceleration and the 'box is fantastic compared with the original four speed with no synchro on first. There are a couple of issues that I'll follow up in the future. One is the brakes, which are adequate but not powerful or sharp. They are unassisted and require a fair bit of pedal pressure. I'm thinking about a power booster. The other is that there is some body roll on corners. I've already bought a front sway bar from K-Mac, although I haven't fitted it yet, but other owners tell me that it makes a big difference."



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For those who would like to find out in detail about all the 'nuts and bolts' of a Midget restoration, Malcolm has written a more complete description that is available on [www.midget.org](http://www.midget.org). He is also keen to thank the many people who assisted him in this restoration and has prepared his own short 'thank you'. He wrote:

'No restoration could be accomplished solely by the owner/restorer. In the case of Alison, I have a special thank you to everyone who has contributed to the restoration: the specialist suppliers of hard to get parts such as Lou Shorten in Norwich, UK and Bruce Smith in Sydney; the people who physically laid hands on the car such as Don Cabban and his team at Nepean Classic Cars in Sydney who repaired the rust in the sills and provided the engine and five-speed gearbox, and Mike Stearn and Martin Griffiths in Canberra who helped with diagnostics and welding. Also the Midget owners in Melbourne, Canberra, and Sydney, Loz Scott, Ron Jillard and Marty Cutler, who delved into their hoards of bits and pieces to provide even harder to get parts; and of course, the many helpful comments from owners around the world on the MG Enthusiasts web Bulletin Board for Midgets. Without all their help the journey would have been considerably longer and far less pleasurable.' •



## SPECIFICATIONS - MG Midget ZB

**Engine** Original: (See text). Four cylinder, overhead valve. Capacity 1489cc. Maximum power 64bhp @ 5400rpm. Max torque 83 ft/lb @ 3000rpm. Twin SU carburetors.

**Transmission** Original: (see text). Four speed gearbox with synchromesh on second, third and fourth gears.

**Brakes** Drum brakes on all four wheels

**Suspension** Front: coil and wishbone. Rear: leaf springs

**Steering** Rack and pinion.

**Construction** Mild steel

**Dimensions** Length 148 1/2 in Width 58 1/2 in Height 45 1/2 in

**Wheelbase** 2280mm

**Weight**

**Maximum speed** 100 mph (160 km/h)