



Gerald Palmer's flowing lines give the pretty Magnette a timeless look. This is a ZB – the recognition point is the straight chrome strip along the front wing and door

Z CARS

A mid fifties saloon with an octagonal badge makes the ZA and ZB Magnette an attractive buy for the impecunious enthusiast. John Mullins looks at the pros and cons

In 1953 the MG Car Company's products, even to the most untutored eye, must have seemed rather dated. The Y Series saloon, introduced in 1947, had been designed before the Second World War while the TD open two-seater looked positively archaic compared with the contemporary XK120 Jaguar or Austin Healey 100.

The latter model must have proved particularly irksome to Abingdon because Donald Healey's prototype had been chosen in preference to MG's own EX 175 by Leonard Lord, head of the recently created British Motor Corporation. (EX 175 was to blossom as the MGA in 1955).

So in an effort to modernise the MG products, the dated Y saloon was discontinued in 1953 and replaced by a far more modern offering. This four-door saloon, designated the Z series, saw a revival of the pre-war Magnette name, last used by MG in 1936. However, the new car was very much a BMC as the body shell had already appeared at the 1952 Motor Show as the Wolseley 4/44 which was powered by the MG Y type's 1.2-litre engine!

Gerald Palmer, who had already been responsible for the Y's styling, also has this Wolseley to his credit which owed something to the Lancia Aurelia for its inspiration. But there were differences between the new MG and the Wolseley. For one thing, the former was lower, 4ft

10in, rather than 5ft. And, of course, it carried the familiar MG radiator, complete with radiator cap, though these were imitations, a fact that became obvious when the alligator bonnet was lifted. (The TF two-seater, which replaced the TD, and was announced at the same time as the Magnette, also sported such fakery).

However, where the Magnette differed most from the Wolseley was under the bonnet for it was fitted with a 1489cc Austin engine, whose roots reached back to the 1947 A40, and which was to carry the BMC B Series title. This four-cylinder overhead valve unit was fitted with twin SU carburettors and developed 60bhp at 4600rpm. (It is worth noting that this power unit was also fitted to the 4/44 Wolseley in mid-1956, when the model was re-titled 15/50, output continuing until the end of 1958. Total production amounted to 29,914 4/44s and 12,552 15/50s). The engine was mated to a four-speed gearbox which was fitted with a short, nifty remote control gear change to echo MG's sporting traditions.

Well equipped, quite quick

Front suspension was conventional coil and wishbone independent units and rack and pinion steering was employed. Inside, the Magnette was nicely finished with a wooden fascia and hooded speedometer which suggested the

famous MG octagon. Leather seats, wooden door fillets and good quality carpeting rounded off a comfortable automotive package. Even though the Magnette was a monocoque it wasn't by any means a light car, turning the scales at 22cwt. However, it had a top speed approaching 80mph and returned about 25mpg. But this well equipped saloon wasn't cheap and at the time of its announcement sold for £914.

Chassis numbers began at 501 and the ZA, as it became known retrospectively, remained in production until the autumn of 1956, the last car carrying the number 18576. In March 1955, a one-piece walnut fascia was introduced (chassis number 6360), while at chassis number 18101, in July 1956, the engine's compression ratio was raised from 7.3 to 8.3 to 1 and 1½inch SUs replaced the 1¼inch units previously used. Also the rear axle ratio was changed from 4.87 to 4.55:1. These modifications had the effect of increasing the engine's bhp to 68 and top speed to 85mph.

The Magnette received a mild face lift for 1957 when it was redesignated ZB, chassis numbers beginning at 18577, and was destined to sell almost twice as well as the earlier version. These cars are easily identifiable by a lack of chrome trim around the front wheel arches. Inside the car a dished type steering wheel was introduced and a full width parcel shelf beneath the instrument panel

also featured Manumatic two pedal transmission was also available at extra cost. In addition, there was the option of a duotone version for £25 more, with a contrasting body colour introduced above the waistline. A wrap around rear window was a further refinement. Price was £1065. ZB production continued until December 1958, the final chassis number being 37100. During the model's five year production life a total of 36,600 Z series saloons had been manufactured. The Magnette name was perpetuated on the Farina saloon, which succeeded the ZB and carried the Mark III designation. So much for the Magnette's design evolution. But what sort of problems are you likely to experience when contemplating a second hand example? Make no mistake, rust is your great enemy with this model and what better place to start than with the front wings. These seem to rust in all the familiar places, at their bottoms alongside the doors and just above the headlamps. It's well worth having a look inside the front wheel arches to see where the mud, thrown by the front wheels, has lodged. It may well have successfully attacked the inner wing baffle plate. Then look at the sills, both top sides, and also under the car, as badly rusted examples will undoubtedly produce an MoT failure. While you're underneath the Magnette, now's the time to examine the floor as this is also prone to the dreaded rust bug. Make a particular point checking around its forward end as it's double skinned there and water may be getting in around the pedal holes. Also have a look at the floor under the front seats, another spot where rust may be festering. Then check inside the car and remove the carpet to examine the aforementioned areas. You might be in for a nasty shock! An indication that all is not well will be the presence of a musty, damp smell when you open the car's doors. And that's particularly

difficult to disguise. The doors themselves can also rust badly along their bottom edges though this is usually caused by blocked drain holes. The rear wings don't escape either so check their lower edges for rusting. Don't forget to have a look in the boot. The extremities of the floor, particularly where it adjoins the rear wings, are another all too common danger area. If by this time you're in a thoroughly depressed state, cheer yourself up by an underbonnet inspection. Fortunately the B Series engine is a reliable and long lived unit which will continue to function even when in an advanced state of exhaustion. When it's running, look out for excessive fuming as these engines are poor liars in this respect. It's worth noting that earlier engines were fitted with fly-pass oil system though a more efficient full flow arrangement is a feature of later power units. The gearbox is equally well behaved though you may find that second gear synchromesh is getting rather worn but this is hardly a major shortcoming. Steering, as already noted, is rack and pinion, and works well enough though tends to be rather heavy at low speeds. Check for splits, or perished gaiters, which will do the rack no good at all. In addition, the felt bushes at the extremities of the steering column can dry out and movement can result. The front suspension isn't prone to any particular shortcomings but it is rubber bushed and, inevitably, these do deteriorate. If the car's front end looks a little down at heel then tired coils may be the cause.

A lovely interior

The Magnette's interior is undoubtedly one of its strong points and having driven many miles in one example I can testify to the comfort of the seats! However, don't forget that leather

upholstery is expensive to have professionally repaired. The quality of the carpeting was well received when the car was new while the folding centre arm rest on the rear seat added a touch of luxury. Another nice touch was the electric clock positioned above the driver's mirror. A radio could be fitted, which was £44 extra.

The Z Series spares position is gradually improving all the time thanks largely to the efforts of NTG Services of 21 St Margaret's Green, Ipswich, Suffolk. They market such useful part panels as floor sections and front wing splash plates, along with those vital inner and outer sills. NTG are also at present investigating the feasibility of producing front and rear wing parts. They can also supply almost all mechanical spares and operate an exchange steering rack service. Such trim items as carpet and windscreen and door rubbers are also included and NTG can also supply the chromed number plate light cover. It should also be noted that the ZB versions engine was extremely similar to the MGA until the latter went over to a 1588cc unit in Spring 1959. MGA specialists may, therefore, be able to help out in this specific area.

Of course, car club membership is an essential adjunct to classic car ownership and in this instance there are two: the MG Car Club and the MG Owners Club. Their respective secretaries are at 67 Wide Bargate, Boston, Lincs and Station Road, Swavesey, Cambridgeshire..

And what would you expect to pay for a reasonable Magnette? Well, prices start at around £160 while a Z series in average condition may set you back £700 or so. Concours examples are nudging the £2000 mark. Duotone versions, however, tend to go for rather more.

**Production figures: ZA: 12,754
ZB: 23,846**



The Varitone, a model in its own right, with duotone finish and wrap-around rear window



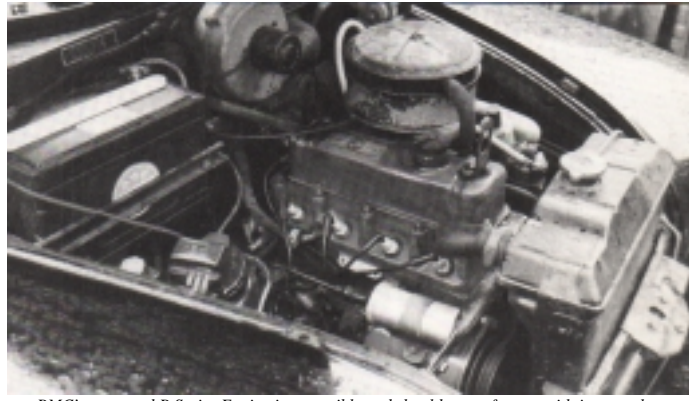
The original ZA-note small back window and chrome strip sweeping over the front wheel arch



Autosport's Gregor Grant and athlete Chris Basher entered the 1958 MC Rally but DNF'd



The distinctive six-sided speedo dominates the Magnette's period fascia



BMC's renowned B Series Engine is accessible and should go on forever with just regular servicing

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