

The story of TBM 895

This article is dedicated to all those MG owners who dream of basking in the admiration of lesser mortals at some future Club event. Admiration earned by many hours of sweat and toil in a cramped, damp and cold garage producing a gleaming example of this concours MGX they now see before them ... and all this likely to remain a dream.

The story starts in 1982 when I was considering the long term future of the family transport. Being neither heir to (nor earner of) incredible wealth I had to consider whether to spend a considerable sum on a newer car or to find an old car worth renovating. The first option meant the "investment" of a sum exceeding £2,000, certainly for any of the more recent models worth having. Suffering the rate of depreciation on new cars is like giving money away and, quite frankly the choice of new/newer cars worth having is limited anyway.

My wife and I owned a 1965 MGB roadster before the patter of tiny feet was heard in the Nicholas house and so we have since had a soft spot for the marque. I know that some MGB stalwarts retain the beloved B as the family grows but there has to be another solution. We had seen some MG "Z" types before but they always seemed to be rather quaint — it was only when I read an article about the "Z" in the Club magazine that the practicality of these rather loveable heaps was revealed to me. Here was the answer to my problems (maybe).

The first thing to do was to find out more about "Z" types so I was determined to have a closer look at a few examples in order to get a better idea of their suitability. It turned out that a colleague at work knew someone who had a ZB Varitone (1957) and so I telephoned the gentleman. Not only was he willing to show me the car, he wanted to sell it! I saw it and bought it. It had taken me two weeks from decision to ownership; now I wish that the rebuild was going to be as quick.

I was very lucky because my new "Z" had been much loved by the first two owners and it showed in the car's general condition. The second owner had been a workmate of my father's and my father was amazed that the car he had known and admired years previously was now in the family. The third owner had let the car go somewhat before selling it to me but even so at a mere £550 and very roadworthy it had to be a real find. Enough of the potted history for now let's get on with the real stuff.

The car was never going to be a concours entrant but the modifications that had already been made were generally worthwhile for a vehicle intended for some serious use. Halogen headlamps had been fitted and an alternator conversion done by owner number 3 who had also had new Koni dampers bolted on all round and new sils fitted. He had complained of high fuel consumption, a rough engine and a petrol smell on corners. When I dived under the bonnet (designed for weight lifters with tin heads) I found that the rear carburettor float chamber was flooding and one choke was opening miles before the other one — no wonder it was running like a bag of nails! An hour and a few new bits later the engine's performance and smoothness belied its 100,000 plus miles.

The next big job was to do something about the rather scruffy interior before we could bear to drive around in the car. The lacquer on the woodwork was crumbling off, the door cappings had soaked up more than their fair share of condensation from the windows over the years and the door liners and leather needed a good scrub. Also, owner number 3 wanted the dog lead that was being used for a



drivers door pull-cord back A.S.A.P!

Out came all the wood trim and all the seating while a full inspection of the floor pans etc. was carried out. MG purists are now advised to skip to the next paragraph. Seat belt anchorage points were welded in whilst temporary repairs were effected on the inner sils, which were not too bad apart from the area immediately above the jacking points. As far as we were concerned, although the car was exempt from the new seat belt laws, nobody would be exempt from injury in the rather unyielding interior should a shunt occur, so the fitting of inertia-reel seat belts was felt to be a necessity.

The full rebuild would have to be postponed until I had got to know the car, until the novelty of driving it had worn off (it still hasn't), and finances had been sorted out. For the time being the work on the interior would suffice — after all we couldn't see the worn patches on the outside and the rusty back bumper from the driver's seat.

There are several ways to approach a rebuild. Basically, you can spend a lot of money on it, or not. You can pay someone else to do it or do it yourself. I chose the latter approach in each case — I have always risen to such challenges, being the sort of chap who will have a go at anything (I even make all my own dresses) and getting experienced advice or help on points in doubt (strongly advised).

My approach to renovating the tatty wood trim was to strip the whole lot carefully using Nitro-Mors and finishing off very carefully with fine sandpaper. Fortunately even the badly stained door cappings seemed to respond well to this treatment. Everything was then Ronsealed, gently rubbed down and wax polished several times. It might sound horrific but it was much cheaper than a "professional" job and proven to be waterproof. The final effect is quite pleasing and we prefer the lighter, rather matt golden colour to the original and rather austere brown. The burr walnut sections are naturally darker of course and the contrast is also quite effective.

Before the fascia was refitted it was necessary to wire brush the underlying metal and repaint it using Hammehte. The airbox outer flap had seized up and the opportunity was taken to overhaul this small but vital part of the car's anatomy. After

much fiddling and forcing the offending parts were dismantled. The wire fly mesh was brushed and painted with zinc based primer and Hammente painted then the whole lot was well greased and re-installed, after which it all worked like new. This reminds me, can anyone tell me why car designers used to, and probably still, do silly things like creating a beautifully neat heater/ventilator control panel and then leave the airflap control as a rather nasty little pressed steel lever capped with rubber and hidden like an afterthought under the fascia. This is something which will be changed on this particular car during its present sojourn in the garage.

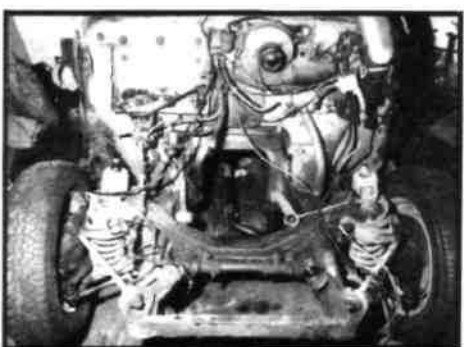
Initial enthusiasm had waned and anyhow, we had hardly used the car since its purchase, so everything was replaced. As a final gesture to mark the end of the first stage of TBM's rebirth the interior chrome was wire-wool polished and seat covers fitted to protect the leather. I have driven everything from a dumper truck to a Rolls Royce (no, not my own) and the experience of driving a car like this old MG takes a lot of beating. It certainly beats a dumper truck any day.

November was approaching and with it the expiry of the road tax, so I intended to take the car off the road for the winter and continue with the good work. Who else out there also has these good intentions? The thought of long cold evenings alone in a cramped garage were off-putting and so, apart from an occasional airing on the drive, I'm ashamed to say that TBM received very little further attention.

I was not totally idle though because I was aware that if I did the more glamorous jobs now, such as finding new and replacement parts. I could continue with the hard work with fewer interruptions later. One of the most important items to be replaced was the windscreen, the old one being scratched quite badly right in front of the driver's nose and with a crack about to spread. Through the ads in the Club magazine I contacted a gentleman near Bristol who had a ZA for breaking which had a near perfect screen. With the promise of other parts being available, plus another complete car for sale (by now a friend of mine was also very interested), and not trusting transportation of the screen to anybody, I leapt in the utility vehicle one chilly November morning and headed for Bristol.

It was quite a trek but I arrived on time to find that the windscreen had been cracked in attempts to remove it from the car¹ However, the trip was not wasted because I left having seen the complete car and having been chauffeured in the owner's third ZA, which he had bought new many years previously and which was still going strong. Also as anyone who is in a similar situation knows, you always leave with at least half-a-dozen extra purchases anyway. I returned home with a spare but rather rusty rear bumper, an original gasket set (still boxed) and several bits of trim, doorpulls etc.

Incidentally, if the gentleman concerned is reading this, don't feel too bad about the windscreen because my own cracked last year when I tried to remove it. Honestly, I was being very careful and proceeded as advised by my local expert—he later informed me that old laminated screens were susceptible to cracking anyway and has offered to find me a new one.



Spring approached and enthusiasm burst forth with the new leaves. Besides which an MOT test was due and we had every intention of keeping the car in use throughout the better weather. A further

good reason was that our second child was due and our other car was not quite wide enough to accommodate a kiddy-seat and a carrycot in the back.

A pre-MOT check revealed that a brake system overhaul would be essential — new front cylinders would be needed but the rear ones seemed to be OK. The front runs of brake pipe were starting to corrode badly so I decided to replace the entire system with Handy copper pipes supplied through the Club. Apart from the difficulty involved in getting the car jacked up front and rear in our toy garage (due to the car's weight and proximity to the ground on radial tyres) the work on the brakes proceeded smoothly. Smoothly that is until I came to fit the new copper pipes from the rear flexible hose to each rear wheel — they were far too short!

A swift telephone call to the Club referred me direct to the manufacturer who was very helpful. The gentleman I spoke to was aware of two different patterns of brake hydraulic system used on these cars. The one that I had was the less common (only used on the Varitone perhaps?) but I supplied my chassis number (the car's that is) in order to try and help in the identification of any future "deviants". Not only that but I received the correct pipes free of charge in the next day's post!

Some additional welding was needed and I was also rather doubtful about the king-pin/bush assemblies. Fortunately, the small amount of play in the king-pins was allowable and the dreaded test was passed with no fuss. It was a lovely feeling to get the car back in use once again. Apart from the routine servicing I did no more major work on my own car. My brother-in-law's BGT was fitted with stainless steel sills and a new engine during the spring and my garage and I somehow got involved in it all. During the proceedings my welding improved as I practised on an engine lifting beam for my garage.

Spring became summer and our favourite MG performed beautifully. We could get about 32 mpg on a run and found that the most comfortable maximum speed was about 65 mph when conditions allowed. The high spot of the year was to be a weeks holiday near Bournemouth, the transport to be MG. I had no reservations about the car's ability to get us the 120 miles there although the clutch master cylinder had been causing problems due to a worn seal. Attempts to get a new seal locally had failed and my best shot was to leave an order with our two most competent suppliers. Still, the old seal had lasted this long and an occasional bleed of the system did the trick. We have always invested in a recovery scheme and our beloved ZB is certainly no exception. With this to reassure us we loaded up and left for sunnier (we hoped) climes.

The car was loaded to the gunwales with two pushchairs on a roof rack, the boot stuffed with bags of food and bags of clothes, other bags stuffed inside and the essential bags of toys packing the children in place. Yes, we were well loaded and we were amazed that so much could be fitted in. Under normal circumstances we could fit the carrycot transporter and a pushchair into the boot. The "Z" boot is deceptively large and although I had at one time contemplated repositioning the spare wheel it has never been really necessary.

I'm not sure whether advertising the merits of "Z" types is a good idea. On the other hand, demand could increase and push up prices both of cars and parts, also making them more rare. On the other hand, it might mean that more parts would be available from people like NTG Services for ailing bodies like my Z's, which could do with a few repair panels here and there. As it is, we are being careful to save all our old bean cans for use as patches.

Returning to the holiday; the car did not disappoint us. I really cannot imagine how you could travel by MG as a family in any other way. My relatives in Hampshire were quite impressed by our mode of transport, which looked slightly more impressive now that all the stuffing had been dis-

carded and left at the holiday park. Having relatives in Hampshire (one being the Rolls Royce owner) would prove to be useful as will soon be revealed.

I had considered trying parts suppliers in Bournemouth for the now much needed clutch cylinder seal. The need became desperate on our last day when, in a queue of traffic and in the rain (when else?) the seal finally gave out completely. "This man's a right wally!" I hear you say. "Why didn't he do something sooner?" These are all points that occurred to me as I heaved the none-too-light carcass off the main road and into a side street. We sat there with the rain drumming on the roof wondering what the best course of action would be. We had our "one recovery per breakdown" cover, but should it be used to get us home and would they be helpful enough to stop off at our holiday home first? What if this? What if that? What if I had extracted a digit and found a new seal kit in the area at the start of the holiday. Then it occurred to me; summoning reserves of incredible cheek, I telephoned a retired uncle, and he towed us back to the holiday park! He left me to phone round for the parts with a promise of further help if needed.

A supplier in Parkstone had the seal kit in stock, in fact he had several in stock! The only snag was getting there and a taxi was going to be expensive. I apologetically asked my uncle for the offered help and he again came to our aid, ferrying me to and from the shop. Anyone reading this and living in that area must know and use that supplier. They had everything for anything on four wheels so it seemed. It was getting late when my uncle left me at the holiday park, refusing any payment before he left. All I had to do now was to fit the new seal — surely a piece of cake for an ex racing mechanic?

Of course the rain had stopped during all the phone calls and car trips but it started now as I launched into my unenviable task. The only thing I can honestly say in my favour is that I had at least brought a comprehensive toolkit with me. As it got dark I wrestled with what seemed like yards of trim soundproofing and carpet (a lot of it soaked with hydraulic fluid) in order to reveal the pedal assemblies. Fortunately all the work under the bonnet had been accomplished fairly quickly but now I was faced with an awkward job. It appeared that the pedal push-rod clevis pins had been put in place and the rest of the car built round them. An October night with your legs stuck out in the rain and nearly standing on your head is not conducive to language of biblical quality when faced with unfamiliar, unyielding nuts and bolts. Eventually the score became Car-1, Self-1 as I retired to the warmth of the great indoors with the unwieldy dual master cylinder.

Scraping off all the accumulated gunge revealed a fairly simple design and the old seals (brake and clutch since I had both replacements now) were easily removed. They both resembled old leather and were quite possibly the original parts. Again luckily both bores looked good and felt smooth and unscored to an exploratory little finger. The whole assembly was cleaned up, new seals fitted, cylinders primed with new fluid and the whole lot refitted to the car — only then did one of my fellow campers tire of the entertainment to be derived from watching, and offer to help. Still, this was quite handy since he could now help me bleed the clutch and brakes. The score would soon be 2-1 to me.

We journeyed home with no further mishaps. A sad trip in a way because the car was to be laid up again for the winter and further work done (or, not done) to continue the preservation effort. A further week on and the offside doors were removed to ease access to the sill and front wing. The doors were stored in the greenhouse over the winter to save much needed garage and shed space, and anyway one has to get one's priorities right! My wife draws the line at a bench and vice in the greenhouse.

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