

Labour of Love for John Monkman

In some far-off corner of Venezuela, there is an ageing car that is forever England.

Should the sun ever set on it, the chances are that the immobilised driver will have to look to Sheffield to get back on the road.

For when the country's solitary MG Magnette starts showing its thirty-odd years, it is unlikely that the Latin American counterpart of the man from the RAC will be able to offer much help.

Instead, it will be time to call on the expert advice of schoolteacher John Monkman - either that, or the contents of his garden shed.

His suburban semi-detached home has become a resting place for just about every component ever made for this rare mid-1950's British saloon car.

Whether you are in need of an ancient car valve radio in excellent order, a gleaming radiator grille or front bumper, not to mention various bits and pieces still in their original boxes, John will probably be able to find one among the jumble of parts he has amassed over the years.

Now one of the recognised leading authorities on the Magnette, he is consulted on obscure matters relating to the car at all hours by enthusiastic owners from around the world.

So what is it about the cars that inspires such devotion among members of the select band of owners?

The Magnette series began rolling off the production line at around the time Harold MacMillan was telling the nation it had never had it so good.

Those people who bought one were probably inclined to agree with him. Although its rather solid appearance might seem somewhat austere by modern standards, the Magnette was considered a highly stylish sports saloon in its time.

The cars, powered by a 1500cc engine, continued in production at the Abingdon factory throughout the late 1950's, as the first ZA models were superseded by the ZB, whose larger carburettors gave a boost in performance.

The last of the line was the ZB Varitone, simply a later model Magnette with two-tone paintwork, which was made until about 1959.

Estimates vary as to how many of the 36,000 cars made have survived - but there can be few that have escaped John's notice.

Ever since he bought his first Magnette as a replacement for an elderly Hillman Imp in 1971, he has tried to locate and catalogue as many of them as possible.

His family recall how they saw him "just roll up" in the car one day after work, never guessing the extent to which his hobby would grow.

John now proudly shows off his book containing details of around 1,500 Magnettes all over the globe, from a few listed models in New Zealand, Japan and Africa, down to the single examples in Malaysia and Venezuela.

Australia is apparently bristling with them in comparison to some other countries.

"They have quite a few problems with the heat out there," says John, surveying the well-thumbed pages covered in ballpoint inscriptions.

Many of the scattered band of owners are also well aware of John's existence, and frequently call on his expertise.

He told how he had just dealt with a typical inquiry, from a man in Sweden anxious that his prized Magnette should be repainted in its exact original shade, and seeking advice.

But according to John, the pleasures of his hobby make it all worthwhile.

"I don't regret getting into it to this extent, because it is my main hobby. I go all over the country to rallies now, and I always enjoy those.

"It can be fairly expensive, but I manage to cover the costs, and after all, it is a bit of a labour of love," he said.

John's close involvement with Magnettes even-



ually led to him becoming spares secretary for the model in the MG Owners' Club - and, as might be expected, his own cars have been suitably splendid examples, with trophies and awards heaped upon them at gatherings of aficionados throughout the country.

His first MG, a 1955 ZA Magnette, was a snip at £275, and soon began attracting attention at rallies after he completed restoration work.

John bought his current car, a 1958 ZB Varitone, from an elderly woman whose infrequent ventures away from her home in Leeds had left the vehicle with only 9,000 miles on the clock.

He immediately set about restoring the car to offset the effects of nearly twenty years spent largely immobile inside a garage.

The paintwork was first for attention, with the original cellulose being replaced by a synthetic paint. This, says John, gave a rock-hard finish while at the same time proving indistinguishable from the real thing.

The underside of the car was also painted, worn suspension parts renewed, and every nut and bolt that showed replaced with shiny new ones.

Although this and other work left the Magnette in pristine condition by even the most exacting standards, it is currently undergoing yet more restoration, which he hopes to have completed in time for this year's round of rallies.

These events serve a double purpose, since they give enthusiasts the chance to meet and

exchange any parts they might need for their various cars.

John recalls one rally at Silverstone which he left with four car doors piled up on the roof of his Magnette.

The best cars are now inevitably getting rarer, and consequently prices have soared far beyond those they fetched at the showrooms three decades ago.

Like the age of optimism and prosperity in which they were born, many of them have now blown the odd gasket, suffered worn components, or in some cases, hit immovable obstacles.

But it can safely be assumed that such classics as the Magnette will never quite disappear - not, that is, with people like John Monkman around.

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