



**There's no doubt that a 1950's Midgette ZB is a stylish and desirable piece of MG history. But there's no getting away from the fact that, by modern standards, its 1.5-litre engine is never going to set the world on fire. Unless, that is, you add a supercharger and other mods ...**

In the classic-car world you come across plenty of people devoted to a particular car or marque, their passion absorbing much, if not all, of their spare time and money. Brian Reeves from Derbyshire is one such person.

Brian has taken what was, in its day, a stylish British sports saloon, a 1958 MG Midgette ZB, and not only given it a painstaking ground-up rebuild, but supercharged the engine and carefully updated many features on it to make it more suitable for today's driving conditions. He's spent a significant amount of money on the car, probably much more than it would fetch if sold, but that's irrelevant, because it is not for sale and to Brian it's been worth every penny.

And there's more, Brian also owns an MGA and an MGB GT. All three cars are painted in the same Damask Red shade.

His passion for MG began 30 years ago, when he bought an MGA 1600 for £250. He dabbled in other classic marques, including Alfa Romeo, but decided he was an MG man and so the MGA stayed with him.

By the late 1980s he had become something of an expert on the marque and had developed a liking for the 1950's Midgette. 'I'd always admired the Gerald Palmer design, and I didn't need a modern saloon as my wife owned a Golf,' Reeves explains.

Inevitably, one turned up for sale. 'I bought the car in 1989 from a former colleague,' says the oil company engineer. 'He'd



owned the car for several years and, since he didn't have a garage, it was parked on the streets in Barnes, London, where he lived. He'd bought a mint condition ZA Midgette and so passed the old car on to me.'

Brian drove the ZB for a few years until an MoT failure saw it parked up at his parents' house in North Staffordshire. As his work takes him out of the country for extended periods, the car ended up being left there to rust in peace and, meanwhile, he'd acquired a left-hand-drive MGB GT for use in European countries. But then came crunch time. 'Four years ago I decided it was time to either do something with the ZB or scrap it.'

Considering Brian's love of MGs, a one-way trip to the breaker's yard would have been most unlikely. But, given the advanced state of rust,



he knew he was looking at an ambitious and expensive project.

Moorland Classic Cars (tel: 01538 266459), near Stoke-on-Trent, which had rebuilt Brian's MGA over a decade before, was given the job. And, as Moorland's Tony Hine recalls, the first major problem was what to do about the bodywork. 'We made some enquiries and decided there weren't enough good parts available, so we started scouting round for a decent replacement shell.'

But you can't ring up Heritage and order a Magnette body off the shelf, so it was going to have to be one that was salvageable. Eventually, a re-imported US car turned up and work began. Interestingly, it seems that more Magnettes survived over there than in the UK.

However, the replacement had the bigger, wrap-around rear window from the Varitone model, which Brian didn't want, so Tony carefully snipped this portion out of the old shell and blended it into the new one. It was becoming clear what sort of restoration this was going to be.

Sometimes work would be held up because of the difficulty in getting parts. 'We tried three different types of rubber seal for the doors before finding ones that fitted,' recalls Tony

With the body brought back to as-new condition, Tony had assumed that he was going to restore the original twin-carburettored 1.5-litre engine. But Brian had other ideas. Big ideas.

Spending a fair amount of time in Germany he'd grown fed up with trucks blasting past him on the autobahn at high speed, and so wanted more power. Through bulletin boards on MG websites, he'd come across the supercharger kit sold by Hans Pedersen in Australia and, given MG's tradition of supercharging, this intrigued him.

'I called Hans on a number of occasions to discuss his product,' says Brian, 'I'm an engineer, and I was immediately attracted to the high-efficiency, Swedish-made twin-screw compressor that Hans uses.'

As this would have been largely wasted on the standard 1.5-litre engine, Brian considered various options — Rover M16, K-Series and even Ford V6 installations. But he settled on boring-out the existing engine, taking it up to the same 1622cc of the MGA twin-cam but retaining the Magnette's single overhead valve cylinder head, albeit with enlarged valves. This rebuild was undertaken by Bumper to Bumper in Perth, Scotland.

'I decided, rather than go for a different engine altogether, to stay with the original design and boost the power with a piece of high-tech kit which I could transfer to a different engine if the present one turned out to be not up to the task,' Brian explains.

The supercharger job initially caused some head-scratching at MCC because, as Brian was working in Kazakhstan at the time and hadn't been in touch, the blower kit arrived out of the blue. But, in fact, it was an easy fit, says Tony; the only serious modification that was required was a specially made big-bore tubular exhaust manifold.

The next issue for consideration was the transmission and, after more research on the internet, Brian opted for a conversion kit utilising a Ford Sierra Type 9 gearbox supplied by Hi-Gear Engineering near Derby. The Ford unit seemed ideal for the Magnette as it is a five-speed, readily available, configured for rear-drive and runs with a higher-geared 3.9:1 differential.

With all that extra poke, a brake upgrade was essential. The front drums were converted to MGA/B disc specification, as developed by MG Car Club Z Magnette Register members, while the standard Magnette rear drums were retained,

As you'll have no doubt gathered, although Brian would accept only the highest standards of workmanship throughout the project, he wasn't slavishly pursuing originality and aimed to improve the Magnette where possible. For instance, he wanted to modernise the car's safety features as much as he could, and thus fitted inertia reel front seatbelts, hazard lamps, side repeater lights (from an MGF) and a period-looking Bosch rear fog lamp. There's also a relatively modern Blaupunkt radio/cassette player in the fascia.

The front seats were re-trimmed, with the original maroon-coloured hide reproduced but, as a safety feature, headrests were fitted. However, Brian decided not to retrim the rear seat, but just used a repair patch because he wanted at least one part of the car to look original and unrestored.

Now it was time for me to get in and drive the old girl, and there was definitely a sense of occasion about this. First I had to wait while the car was brought out from its Carcoon plastic bubble in which it's stored while Brian is away. This does seem an excellent way of storing a classic car, by the way; when the car emerged after a few months' storage there wasn't even a hint of rust on the brake discs.

I'll be honest here and admit that I've only ever driven a handful of 1950s' cars before, and never a Magnette. Three different things immediately struck me. First, the enormous yet skinny Bakelite rimmed steering-wheel that calls for a specialist entry technique, whereby you place the left knee under the wheel then slide the rest of your body into the seat.

Second, the utterly gorgeous expanse of walnut veneer. It stretches from one side of the cabin to the other, is two-tone in places, and feels lovely to the touch. The instruments are so delectably 1950's, too. The angular displays within the walnut look more the work of a clockmaker than a car manufacturer.



Third, what a small car this is inside! It looks relatively large from the outside but, once installed, there's precious little headroom and you feel decidedly cramped in. The driving position is from pre-ergonomic times, the wheel at a very flat angle and the pedals and gearshift just not coordinated as they are in modern cars.

The sight under the bonnet is truly impressive. But first you have to lift the bonnet, which is incredibly heavy as it incorporates the whole grille, complete with decorative dummy radiator cap. Nestling next to the engine is the supercharger, which is so neatly installed it could have been a factory job. Indeed, such is the standard of workmanship that, had MG supercharged the Magnette, the hardware would probably never have looked this good.

For a picture, photographer James Mann directed me to a spot outside the church in a quaint Derbyshire village, and we could have been back in the mid-1950's. Not another car, video shop or mobile phone mast in sight.

Driving this car was a very mid-1950s' experience. The steering is heavy and vague, although I do like the horn push, which is the wheel's inner chrome ring, and it's also quite novel to operate the little indicator switch on the MG-emblazoned boss. The brakes need a hefty shove, but they will stop you.

Of course, the most interesting aspect of this Magnette is the engine. Brian does plan to rolling-road it in the near future in order to get it properly set up but, for the moment, we don't know its exact power output, although Hans Pedersen suggests 140bhp.

For a supercharged engine, whose boost is directly pegged to engine revs, it feels quite peaky. Add to this the widely spaced Sierra ratios and you have to make sure you keep the engine on the boil during gearchanges.

But Brian had the car set up for cruising ability and, once wound up, the Magnette can certainly sustain a decent pace. It becomes a lot quieter, too, with the piercing whine of the supercharger and the loud blast from the exhaust — both fairly intrusive when revs are rising and falling — fading into the slipstream.

Mind you, Brian knows that something needs to be done about the exhaust noise. 'Maybe it's a bit too loud at present due to the straight-through silencer,' he concedes. As for the Magnette's performance, he's reserving judgement. His concept was that, with the five-speed gearbox and supercharger the car would be able to sit on the autobahn at 80mph-plus, so keeping up with the rest of the traffic. 'It's a bit of an experiment as I don't know if the Magnette engine will take kindly to being boosted after 40 years or so of delivering 68 bhp,' he admits.

Only time will tell how the engine will react to its new-found youthfulness but, in the meantime, there's no doubt that Brian Reeves has preserved and improved a time capsule of British motoring that could so easily have been forgotten. Drive this car and you're whisked straight back to the 1950s, albeit in a 21st century sort of way. It really is car history brought alive and Brian deserves thanks for making the experience possible.

### MG Magnette series ZA and ZB

The first MG Magnette, the ZA, was introduced in 1953, ushering in the so-called badge engineering era at BMC, which owned the MG marque at the time. The Magnette's body was broadly similar to that of a Wolseley 15/50, modified to take MG trim, including the curved grille. It ran with the B-series 1489cc overhead valve engine, producing 60bhp, and was in production for three years before giving way to the ZB (Brian's model). This had 68bhp and a top speed of 84mph, which was swift for a family car back then.

The interior and exterior trim were altered slightly, while a derivative known as the Varitone looked noticeably sportier, coming with smart two-tone paint, a waistline chrome strip and a larger, wraparound rear window. The ZB was built until 1959, when it was replaced with the MkIII Magnette, which used the Farina body shared with the Austin Cambridge, Morris Oxford and Wolseley 16/60 of the day



### Who drove MG Magnettes?

The Magnette dates back to post-war Britain when most of the cars on UK roads were, in fact, British. This was before speed limits, before the breathalyser and, perhaps, most significantly when only relatively affluent people had cars.

Stockbrokers and lawyers drove Jaguars and Humbers; respectable doctors and other professionals tended to prefer Rileys and Rovers, while the police boys tended to chase around in Wolseleys.

But if you drove a Magnette, you were, well, a bit racy. Think young Terry Thomas — blazer, cravat, suede shoes, string back gloves and pink gins at the bar. Perhaps a young, good-looking BOAC airline pilot, or maybe something to do with racehorses. Somewhat raffish, and an odds-on chance of a fast brunette occupying the passenger seat.

It's hard to pinpoint the modern equivalent of the Magnette. In the 1970s Alfa Romeo saloons might have had a similar niche, and the Golf GTi in the 1980s. Maybe the Subaru Impreza Turbo in the 1990s. But nowadays? Well, the MG ZT, of course!



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