

MG Magnette

MG's Golden Glory

By Tony Shaw



The MG Magnette is a relic of a motoring era when most cars had leather interiors as standard, and petrol was cheap. Autocar magazine, in 1953, described the Magnette as a perfect choice for the young married man who finally must sell his sports MG for the sake of a growing family.

MG's Magnette is celebrating the Golden Anniversary of its release this year, so what better excuse to have a close look at this often underrated yet significant model in the MG range. In 1952, the newly amalgamated British Motor Corporation (formed from the merger of the Nuffield and Austin car manufacturers) needed a replacement for the aging YB model MG saloon car. Designer Gerald Palmer had worked at Nuffield before the war and later at Jowett before returning to Nuffield to develop a new range of saloons for Riley, Wolseley and MG. Work was underway at the time of the BMC merger and Palmer was allowed to continue with his design project. Alex Issigonis, later of Morris Minor and Mini fame, was as-

signed to work on the Morris products at the same time.

BADGE ENGINEERING

Palmer's new design heralded in the concept we now know as badge engineering, with the final product being released with both Wolseley and MG badges. Despite similarities, there were, however, changes between the two cars, with the Wolseley being designated the luxury car, and the MG the sporting saloon. The Wolseley Version, the Wolseley 4/44, was released at the 1952 London Motor Show a year ahead of the MG, mainly because BMC had a more pressing need at its end of the market. The Wolseley was powered by the 1.25 litre XPAG engine from the MG Y series, which produced a maximum of 46 bhp at 4,600 rpm, hardly stunning performance for a car weighting over a ton.

ZA MG MAGNETTE

The ZA MG Magnette saloon was launched at the London Motor Show in October 1953, with its cousin, the MG TF. It was first seen in

Australia at the 1954 Sydney Motor Show. The Magnette was of unitary or monocoque construction, whereby there was no separate chassis but rather a complete body shell that carried mountings for the engine, gearbox and suspension. It was the first MG of this construction method.

In keeping with the vision of the MG Sports saloon, the Sports look was achieved by lowering the Magnette body by some two inches and changing Suspension and shock absorber characteristics. Not only did this give the MG a far more sporting appearance, it also greatly improved roadholding. There was a range of other differences between the Wolseley and the MG, including the bonnet and grill arrangement, new rear axle, etc.



"B" SERIES ENGINE

The ZA Magnette was the first MG to be powered by the all new "B" series engine. The "B" series engine was a four-cylinder, pushrod, overhead-valve engine of 1498 cc, fitted with twin 1.25 SU carburetors and was based on the 1200 cc Austin A40 engine first used in 1947, but substantially modified to produce 60 bhp at 4,600 rpm. Thus the ZA had substantially better performance than its Wolseley stablemate.

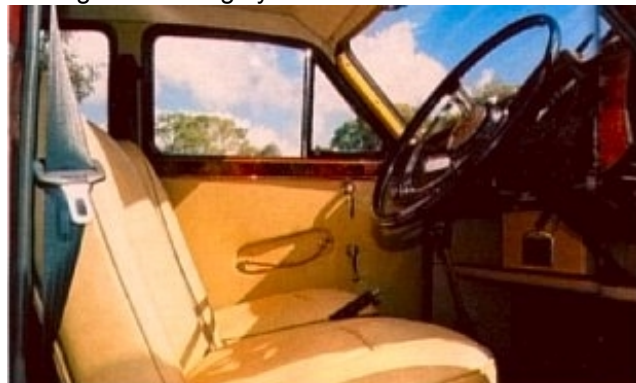
The MG "B" series engine went on to power the MGA, MGB and a host of other BMC vehicles for the next 25 years. A Borg and Beck single-plate dry clutch was used. The Magnette also had a "four on the floor" gear shift arrangement instead of the column shift on the Wolseley, again, more in keeping with the MG sports saloon image.

Synchromesh was provided on 2nd, 3rd and 4th gears. Hydraulic Lockheed brakes are used, with 10" drums all round. There were twin-leading shoes on the front. The Magnette was the first MG to include telescopic shock absorbers all round

CREATURE COMFORTS

For a sports saloon, the MG Magnette wasn't short of creature comforts. The Magnette featured twin bucket seats with leather upholstery and deep, well-sprung cushions and a folding centre rest in the rear. The floor was carpeted. The dashboard was polished walnut and there were timber cappings on the doors. The windscreen was curved and in one piece, window-washing equipment was fitted, and there were

demisting ducts built in below the windshield. Instruments included a large speedo with distance and trip recorders, fuel gauge, oil pressure gauge, radiator temperature indicator and ammeter. Front and rear ashtrays were provided. The Magnette also featured an integrated heating and cooling system



ZB MAGNETTE

A number of changes had been made to the ZA Magnette since its release in 1954, and in 1956 an updated and more powerful version, the ZB Magnette, was officially released. Essentially a natural evolution rather than a significant change, the ZB came equipped with a more powerful engine achieved by increasing the compression ratio, fitting larger 1.5" SU carburetors, and modifying the inlet and exhaust valves. Power was increased by more than 10 per cent to 68 bhp at 5,200 rpm. There were some minor changes to the chrome trim on the front guards, a new dished steering wheel was used, and there were some minor changes to the instrumentation. Further incremental changes to the ZB were made during its production life.

The ZB Magnette was also available with a "Varitone" option that had a two-tone colour scheme, and a larger, curved rear window. Interestingly, the window was not actually produced differently to the standard ZB, but was specifically enlarged at the production line at the MG Abingdon plant.

The Varitone Option cost an extra £ 25, and same were ordered in a single paint colour, presumably to take advantage of the safer and perhaps better-looking larger rear window. For a further £ 50, the customer could also have automatic transmission with the Manumatic clutch fitted, but this wasn't a raging success and only a few cars were sold with this option. In fact, the situation was so bad that the factory

offered a retrofit of the conventional transmission for £ 75.

The last 7 Magnette rolled off the production line in December 1958, after some 36,600 Magnettes had been produced. These production numbers had never been achieved by any other MG.



ROD'S RESTORATION

It was probably inevitable that Rod Smith, a teacher at a Melbourne girls school, would one day get seriously into classic car restoration. What is perhaps surprising is that Rod chose a 1958 ZB MG Magnette as his first major project. Like many boys, Rod had read motoring magazines and books, and perhaps had a better than usual knowledge of cars and motoring. Some of Rod's earliest cars were Rileys and a Triumph TR3, but for one reason or another Rod's interests became focussed on French cars, such as Peugeot and Renault. He has owned a number of Peugeot 203s, a 403, a 405, a 504, Renault 4s, 10s, 12s, 20s and so on. Before he started the Magnette project, Rod estimates that he had owned around 60 cars, mostly French or European. His current project, now that the Magnette is finished, is a Lancia Flavia coupe. Having decided that it was time to start a major car restoration, some 13 or 14 years ago Rod saw the Magnette advertised locally, the price was right, and, as they say, the rest is history. As Rod recalls, "I was very enthused in the first 12 months; I did a lot of the woodwork inside and other things. Then I got to the bug stuff like the bodywork and I put that off for a bit, and then a bit more, and ended up just leaving it for five or six years. Like many such projects, the Magnette sat in the garage and was used for storage, with bits and pieces in it and on it, but as long as the garage doors could be shut and the mess was out of sight, Rod's very patient

wife didn't mind too much. Rod goes on, „it was about six or seven years ago that I decided I had to do something; either sell it or continue the restoration seriously. But I always wanted to do it up and I needed to make a start. That Christmas, my wife went overseas to visit her parents, and I stayed home and had five or six weeks holiday, so I thought, "Right, I'm going to get stuck into it, and that's what I did“.

During that holiday, Rod stripped all the mechanical components off the car, cleaned off all the gunk, and got the body back to bare metal. With such a great start, and by dedicating same time every weekend, Rod made good progress. One of Rod's criteria when he was looking for his project car was that it had to be almost totally complete, and Rod is very thankful that he stuck by this rule. The Magnette definitely needed work, but it was 99 per cent complete. On a visit to the UK some years ago, Rod did buy some parts like rechromed hub caps and a new radiator, but in general, finding parts wasn't an issue.

TIME SITS STILL

The upholstery was an interesting, but perhaps typical, example of a car restoration project. Rod had found Peter Buszka, a craftsman who worked part-time as a teacher at a secondary school, and the rest of the time as an upholsterer at home.

Rod says, Peter looked at the seats and gave me a good quote and told me they'd be ready in three or four weeks. This was at the beginning of the year, and 12 months later I picked them up. At one stage, I didn't hear from him for two or three months so I rang him up and asked if he'd left the country. And it turned out he had - he'd dropped everything, taken leave from work and taken his whole family to the US for a friend's wedding. Patience is a virtue and the quality of the upholstery work is excellent, so it was worth the wait.

Mechanically, Rod was able to do much of the work himself, although after doing his sums he entrusted the engine rebuild to The MG Workshop rather than do it himself. He also outsourced the reconditioning of the gearbox. Rod did most of the actual reassembly himself, and also rewired the car. He sprayed the body at home and after many hours at cutting and polishing, ended up with a superb finish equal to, if not better than, many professional jobs.

FINISHED AT LAST

In January 2002, Rod finally finished his MG Magnette, after owning the car for nearly 14 years and taking nearly seven years to get the job done. Not bad for a project that he originally estimated as taking about 12 months! Rod has now learned to double or even triple the Original time estimate (remember the upholstery) and at least double the original budget, because something unexpected will always come up. Rod has his car registered on

club plates, as it was never intended to be a daily driver, but he has taken it on a number of MG Car Club runs and events.

Soon after finishing his car, Rod entered it in the MG Car Club Concours in 2002, and came second in his class - not a bad effort for a first project. In the 2003 Concours, Rod won his class and came third overall. Rod's Magnette was also featured in a recent Shannans "MGs Through The Age's" display. Rod has taken particular care to keep the Magnette as Original as possible. The only real compromises are the retractable seatbelts, separate rear indicators, radial ply tyres, and a 1970s radio. Basically, the car sounds, feels and drives like a 50-year-old car. It has an old time luxury feel to it, enhanced by the wonderful upholstery. The timber dash, special Magnette dials and Instruments and the clock above the rear view mirror all add to the luxurious feel, and the indicator switch on the hub of the steering wheel just adds further to the feeling of being in another era.

By today's standards, the engine isn't overly powerful, but a reasonable rate of knots can be

maintained, and acceleration isn't too bad at all. Road holding is good, and is certainly improved by the radial tyres. The brakes aren't wonderful, to the extent that Rod is considering fitting a power booster, hidden under the mud-guard, of course. The other thing that you notice is that there are no external rear vision mirrors. Again, Rod is considering fitting non-original mirrors in the interests of safety. When asked what he thinks is the best thing about the Magnette, Rod simply answers, "it's the satisfaction at knowing that seven years of hard work has paid off."

Congratulations, Rod, on a job well done.

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Specifications, Dimensions &	Performance – ZA & ZB TYPE	
	(Details taken from road tests and other materials)	
	ZA Type	ZB Type
Years produced	1953 –1956	1956 - 1958
Number produced	12,754	23,846
Body Type	4-door, 4-seat saloon	4-door, 4-seat saloon
Length	13 ft 9 in	13 ft 9 in
Width	5 ft 3 in	5 ft 3 in
Height	2507 lb	2507 lb
Engine	In-line 4 cylinder ohv, 1498 cc	In-line 4 cylinder ohv, 1498 cc
Compression ratio	7.15:1	8.3:1
Power	60 bhp @ 4600 rpm	68 bhp @ 5200 rpm
Torque	76.1 lb/ft @ 3000 rpm	83 lb/ft @ 3000 rpm
Carburettor	Twin SU 1.25 in	Twin SU 1.5 in
Gearbox	4-speed manual, synchromesh on 2 nd , 3 rd & 4 th	4-speed manual, synchromesh on 2 nd , 3 rd & 4 th
Driven Wheels	Rear wheel drive	Rear wheel drive
Brakes	Lockheed hydraulic, 10 in drum type front and rear	Lockheed hydraulic, 10 in drum type front and rear
Steering	Rack and Pinion	Rack and Pinion
Turning Circle	37 ft 6 in	37 ft 6 in
Front suspension	Independant suspension, coil springs, wishbones, telescopic dampers	Independant suspension, coil springs, wishbones, telescopic dampers
Rear suspension	Live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers	Live axle, semi-elliptic leaf springs, telescopic dampers
Maximum Speed	85 mph	90 mph
0-60 mph	22.6 sec	20.8 sec
Overall mpg	25-32	25-32