

BUYER'S GUIDE

# MAGNETTE ATTRACTION



J.G. Pasterjak photos





## The advanced design of the 1954-'58 MG Midgetette makes it a very desirable sports sedan—if you can find one that isn't a rust bucket.

Let's get one thing clear, right from the start: Despite making some great cars, BMW did not invent the sports sedan, no matter what the boys from Bavaria might have you think.

The idea of a comfortable four-seater with sports car performance did not spring forth, fully formed, from the furrowed brow and frantic pen of some Black Forest engineer as he dreamed up the 2002. No way.

In fact, MG probably coined the phrase "sports sedan" when they applied it to the "big Mini" 1100 sedans in 1962, a good six years before BMW shoved a two-liter engine in the 1600 and took over the world.

And MG had been building quick and surefooted sedans long before the MG "sports sedan" hit the streets. Of course, in America, MG always meant soft top, so the sedans rarely sold well here, but still, Abingdon had some experience working their sports car expertise into a four-door shell.

That's probably because MG had been working on building an affordable, high-performance sedan since day one. In fact, the very first car to wear the MG octagon

was actually a sedan, the 1924 14/28 Super Sports. MG had only been around about a year when it was released. The sawier heads in the home office had already noticed the company's two-seaters in the classifieds next to the dreaded words "stork forces sale..."

By the mid-1930s, MG was well versed in offering sedans with almost (but not quite) the performance of the pure sports cars. The stylish SA and smaller VA were two of the earliest examples of an affordable sedan with any kind of sporting pretension.

While the sedans were very good, they still couldn't compete with the two-seaters on price points or performance. New family guys generally just bought a sensible car, giving up their wayward ways.

After World War II, MG introduced the Y-type sedan, further pushing the boundaries of what a small sedan could do; but still, the sports cars led the way, side curtains flapping in the breeze.

The Y-Series was...nice. Nice and a nickel would buy you lunch back then, but it didn't make MG sedans front-runners anywhere.

The mechanical components of the Magnette are sturdy and easily maintained, but it never hurts to have the factory documentation. The interior of the Magnette is attractive today and was quite upscale when it debuted, with neat touches like the MG octagon in the wheel that stays properly oriented even as the wheel is turned. The driving experience is very sporting for a sedan of this vintage. The 1958 Magnette ZB shown here and on the preceding page belongs to Drew DeCandis.

By the mid-'50s, with the TC and TD turning the U.S. into a bunch of sports-car-crazed fools, MG figured the time was ripe for a new sedan that could really put some sports into the sedan market.

The resulting ZA Magnette, which debuted in 1953, would be something very unusual for MG: an all-new car. And unlike the TF, which debuted alongside the Magnette, the sedan really was "all new."

Not only could the Magnette compete on price and performance with the TF, it was indisputably a far more modern car. In fact, a 1954 Magnette was not only more modern than the TF, it was arguably more modern than the MGA, MGB or MGC sports cars that followed, and they carried the brand through to 1980.

While it represented a major step forward, there's a reason MGs have rarely been all new.

### Tradition—or Why a Stick in the Mud Is Better Than Three on the Tree

MG fans are a wildly traditional lot. For decades they hold onto thoroughly antiquated designs, racing them, polishing them,

loving them. They argue over whether or not things like lockable trunks and roll-up windows were ever a step forward at all.

And each generation of MG owners tends to look down their nose a bit at the next.

Prewar MG owners saw the T-Series guys as a bunch of Johnny-come-latelys. TC owners hated the TD, both hated the TF, and the hardcore faithful nearly lost their tweed caps over the MGA, never mind the fact that under that swoopy new skin it wasn't particularly different from the TF, which wasn't that different from the TD in the first place.

Of course, by the early 1950s, MG was pretty convinced they couldn't go on building cycle-fendered roadsters forever, and Morgan hadn't yet proved it could, in fact, be done, so Abingdon was looking to modernize things a bit.

And modernize they did, with the Magnette, which was undoubtedly the most advanced car MG had ever produced.

A new body style—"airsmoothed," they called it—was mated to a new suspension design and a new (at least for MG) drivetrain. Almost nothing, except the Magnette name, was carried over from any previous MG.

It was the name that really put the loyalists in a tizzy more than anything. The legendary supercharged K3 Magnettes had produced more than 120 horsepower out of about one liter of engine in the 1930s and won races left and right. No sedan was going to live up to that pedigree.

The MGA—which was built alongside the Magnette from 1955 to 1959—offered a modern body look, **but** underneath it dated back at least to the TD, where the ladder chassis, plywood floorboards and front suspension had first been seen. While revised, they weren't that different. The MGB would be a unit body, but it still carried over the TD/TF/MGA front suspension and rear cart springs virtually intact. Both were evolutionary cars, not revolutionary. And the B was still nearly a decade off, anyway.

For MG in the





The Magnette came equipped with a 1489cc engine that made between 60 and 70 horsepower depending on the model. Cars built in mid-1956 and later benefitted from a bump in compression and larger SU H4 carbs. Exterior trim details are tasteful, and complement the attractive Palmer design nicely.



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1950s, the Magnette was a radical departure, and the faithful took to it slowly. At least it didn't have the three-on-the-tree steering column gear change that was so fashionable in the 1950s, like its Wolseley twin. Still, it took time to win the hard-liners over, but eventually the Magnette did, as they realized its virtues. It was, after all, built for car guys by a Car Guy.

**This Blessed Plot,  
This Earth, This Realm...  
This Home of Lots of Car Guys**

England has a way of nurturing Car Guys. Not your run of the mill car guys, either. Nope, England breeds the kind of Car Guys who can dream up and design every bit of a revolutionary new car on a cocktail napkin or last week's grocery receipt, then build it from scratch using nothing more than a soldering iron and old Guinness cans. Guys like Colin Chapman, Alec Issigonis and William Lyons—those are the kind of car guys England produces.

While not as well known as the folks who brought us Lotus, the Mini and Jaguar, Gerald Palmer would've felt right at home with them, discussing why he made the Magnette the way he did.

Palmer was a capital-letter Car Guy from early on. By age 15, he had rebodied a Model T Ford and built a lightweight two-seater body on the frame. At 26, he designed and built his own sports car, which featured an independent front suspension and transverse torsion bar rear springing—in 1937.

Palmer had hopes of getting his sports car, the Deroy, into production, but the venture fell apart. However, it did manage to catch the eye of MG's general manager, Cecil Kimber, who immediately hired Palmer to help work on the YA sedan.

Unfortunately, the work involved little more than building the car down to the planned price, and it wasn't long before Palmer was lured away by Jowett, who promised the engineer's dream—a clean sheet of paper. That clean-sheet design became the highly regarded Jowett Javelin.

The Javelin, in turn, so impressed MG they hired him back, offering him yet another clean sheet.

He was to replace the Y-Series. End of brief.

Palmer developed the Magnette and its near twin, the Wolseley 4/44, side by side. The plan was to "badge engineer" the cars and aim each at a different market. Although this was one of the earliest examples of badge engineering, BMC kind of botched the plan and in the end the two cars shared almost nothing. Of the major body panels, only the roof, front doors and the trunk lid were interchangeable, mostly because the MG was designed to sit two inches lower for a sportier appearance and lower center of gravity.

The front suspension would be independent with coil springs, upper and lower wishbones and proper telescopic shocks instead of the



David S. Wallens photo

A useful trunk further cements the Magnette in the sedan category, but that didn't keep it from being attractive and sporty as well. For a mid-1950s car, the Magnette was quite a looker and easily the most advanced car MG had built so far. More information on the Magnette, as well as tips, books, collectibles and more, can be found on the Web at the M.G. Car Club Z & Farina Magnette Register at [www.magnette.org](http://www.magnette.org).



J.G. Pastore photo



David S. Wallens photo

lever arm units oilier MGs always forced to do double duty as the upper A-arms. Steering was also up-to-the-minute modern—all Magnettes were fitted with solid and precise rack and pinion steering boxes.

At the rear, MG fitted a new and very carefully located live axle, again with telescopic shock absorbers instead of



the tried and true lever-action units. The axle unit would end up being used on MGAs and early Bs, only with the usual lever-arm shocks.

Braking was by 10-inch drums all around, which were at least up to hauling down the 1489cc engine as it pushed the Magnette to an 87 mph top end. Production started in early 1954.

While the MG faithful wailed and moaned at the Austin-engined, Wolseley-bodied Magnette—and everyone knew Magnettes were supposed to be open, with a supercharged inline six—the public ran out and bought them.

MG threw the sports car set some extra go as the Magnette found some power through the years: In mid-1956, compression ratios jumped from a meager 7.15:1 to 8.3:1, and larger SU H4 carbs were fitted. With different intake and exhaust valves added to the mix, power was up from 60 to 68 horsepower. Not exactly earth-shattering numbers, but it was an 11 percent jump.

For the 1958 model year, the ZB Magnette debuted, with new straight side trim pieces replacing the "hockey stick" trim on the ZA and with even more wood inside. A two-tone "Varitone" model, with a larger rear window, also joined the lineup.

The suspension on the Magnette was up-to-the-minute modern (above, right). The box sections of the Magnette offered great strength, but unfortunately they rust with alarming tenacity. Finding one in good condition is increasingly difficult as a result.

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Z-series Magnette production ended in December 1958. after 36,601 examples had been built. It was—at the time—the best-selling MG ever.

In 1959 a wholly different—and by most accounts far interior—Mk III "Farina" Magnette was released. With frumpy looks and even frumpier handling, it had little to offer MG fans, or anyone else.

These days, a Farina Magnette is one of the rarest postwar MGs, but only because no one wants one.

### Sports Sedan Racing

Okay, let's face it: As a factory race car, the Magnette was, at best, a missed opportunity. Like other MG unit bodies, the Magnette was built solid, and solid means heavy. And even Mini racers could pull more than the Magnette's 60-odd horses out of a British Motor Corp. engine—and they only had the tiny A-series engine, not the bigger B-series.

There was talk in Abingdon of fitting the six-cylinder C-series engine, as found in various permutations in Austin-Healeys and MGCs. Some other factory gearheads pushed for an MGA Twin Cam powered Magnette, too. but nothing ever became of it.

Magnettes did run in various rallies and sedan races in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but it was rare when they ran up front, and even rarer when they won. The fact that BMC focused its attention on proven winners didn't help get the car developed into a race-winner, either.

But that was then. Since the Magnette's introduction, the B-series engine has powered nearly 50 years of

race-winning MGAs and MGBs. along with Elvas, Ginettas and who knows what else. It's been bored, stroked, supercharged, turbocharged, cross-flowed and thrashed 'round the world.

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In short, there's no good reason a Magnette these days should stumble along on a few horses.

Building Magnette performance is all about knowing which parts to heist from the appropriate donor. MGA Twin Cams are not appropriate donors, if only because MGA nuts have been known to gather pitchforks and point

# Upgrading Magnette Mechanicals

While the Magnette's little 1489cc B-series engine has powered many a race-winning MGA, it's still on the small side for moving a weighty sedan. Luckily, the B-series was very long-lived, and a bigger, 1.8-liter example powered half a million MGBs, along with .1 few other cars.

A stock MGB-spec 1798cc engine puts out about 95 horsepower, which is an instant 40 percent jump over the stock Magnette engine.

Early three-bearing MGB engines are much closer to the Magnette's 1.5-liter unit, and would be an easier swap, but they're also harder to find, less durable and more costly than the later five-bearing block used after 1966. Either way, the sump is at opposite ends on the Magnette and B.

On a three-bearing engine, the sump and oil pickup can be swapped. On the five-bearing engine, further mods are needed to the oil pan, oil pump and starter.

First off, the MGB starter solenoid is going to bump into the Magnette's steering column unless it's rotated out of the way. A new mounting hole needs to be drilled into the engine backplate to keep everything in place.

To sort out the oil pan, you'll need to mate the MGB oil pan mounting flange to the Magnette sump to sort out the different bolt patterns, and the Magnette oil pickup will have to be welded up to the B's oil pump. Oil dipstick tubes may also have to be relocated.

That's the hard part. For intake manifolds, you've got your choice: You can keep the Magnette's lovely casting, go for the period-correct MGA manifold, or just use the simple and functional MGB part. Exhaust manifolds offer similar choices.

Of course, once the 1.8-liter engine is in, the possibilities are almost endless. Pulling 160 horsepower out of a street B engine isn't unheard of. (See the May 2002 issue of *Grassroots Motorsports* for more details.)

For transmissions, the early B (through 1967) gearbox is a pretty easy swap, but it has no synchro on first, and a huge gap between second and third. The later, full-synchro gearbox can fit with some transmission tunnel surgery. Both are available with overdrive, but cost a good bit more.

ZA Magnettes were fitted with a 4.875:1 differential ratio, and the ZB was fitted with a more usable 4.55:1. Other ratios (and axles) are available from MGAs and early MGBs.

For cooling, the stock radiator can handle the job, although having it recored and adding a six-blade fan from an MGA or MGB isn't a bad idea. While you're raiding the pans MGB, grab the radiator overflow tank and oil cooler and hook them up. And the alternator.

Brakes on a Magnette are adequate, barely, but MGA discs can work, if you're motivated enough. MGB discs may also work, with some effort.

In short, there are tons of go-fast goodies for the Magnette, they're just usually found on MGAs and MGBs.

spears at anyone who even suggests putting the Sacred Motor in anything other than an A. Still, that leaves quite a few options.

First up, cubic inches. While detail differences keep either the 1622cc MGA or the 1798cc MGB engine from being a direct drop-in, the process isn't particularly complex, either (see sidebar), and the Magnette can remain fairly original, even to the point of fooling MG fans. Gearboxes are pretty much the same story. Again, B's are raided for their synchro'd gearboxes—hopefully with overdrive. With a small effort and not much cash, horsepower in the Magnette can be doubled, enabling the little old lady to surprise some much more modern machinery.

And the Magnette will do it in style—the full leather seats are cozier than your favorite La-Z-Boy, and all around you in a Magnette is fine wood and wool carpet. The Magnette doesn't drive like a wallowy luxobarge. Instead, it hugs down to the pavement, winds through the gears and just goes. In the 1950s, the only



things like it—Jaguar Mk IIs, Lancia Aurelias, or (maybe) Mercedes—cost far more.

MG really nailed it on the details, too, like the octagonal MG logo in the center of the steering wheel. Nestled in the big, vintage-style wheel like a fine piece of jewelry, it remains



J.G. Pasterjak photos

upright no matter how the wheel is turned, along with the turn signal switch assembly, which also sits in the middle of the wheel.

The whole assembly is drop-dead gorgeous, and completely unlike the stamped rubber or plastic steering wheel centers staring at most drivers.

But still, the Magnette is not without its flaws.

### Built to Rust

MG's workers were an extraordinarily gifted bunch when they wanted to be. They could—and did—build land speed record cars from a chalk outline on the floor and whatever parts were lying around the factory that day.

On the Magnette, they showed their amazing skills by building box sections that could somehow let water in but never let it out again, as long as the steel held. It was no doubt an engineering exercise—one of those things that starts out over pints of Guinness as one engineer says to another, "Do you think it'd be possible to ..." Next thing you know, the drawing on an ale-soaked napkin is on its way to production.

What this means to the prospective Magnette owner is that the entire car seems to be built to rust. Through the years, Magnettes have earned the reputation as possibly the most rot-prone cars ever to leave England, and as legions of MGB and Triumph owners will attest, that's saying something. Even Fiats don't rust like Magnettes do, and Fiat was sued by the Feds for selling cars that were rusty before they ever got to the dealer.

It's the box sections that really do the Magnette in. Like the MGB, the Magnette's sills are made of inner, outer and center sections. And like B's, they can rust in any of the sections and then move right on into the floor pans, taking our the main fore-aft strengthening structure as they go.

Beyond the all-important sills, look most anywhere on a Magnette for rust. The base of the A-pillar, along the door bottoms, along the seams in the fenders, along the bottom edge of the trunk lid, all through the wheel arches, along the door bottoms, around the turn signal lights, and inside the trunk are all likely spots for the tin worm to fester. Once all that's checked out, climb underneath and look some more, especially around the spring mounts. Buying a rusty Magnette is bad news for all but the most hardcore restorer.

Luckily, many of the body panels are still available from various specialists. Some parts, such as fenders, are also available in fiberglass. Still, finding some body parts can be tough, and it's sure to get expensive.

Drive-trains and suspension parts are typical MG—both long-lived and easily available. Mechanically, a Magnette offers few scares, so long as the dreaded Previous Owner hasn't made a mess of things too badly.

Interiors are another one of those areas where you really should get the best you can. While replacement parts are—for the most part—available, all that leather, wood and fine wool carpet can get pricey pretty quickly.

Much of the metal trim is made from zinc die castings, and this early "pot metal" is prone to pitting and very difficult to re-chrome.

Remanufactured rubber pans are also pricey and rough 10 source. Some MGA and even MGB trim parts can be substituted, although they may be slightly different than original.

### Mighty Good or Money Guzzler?

The Magnette is one of the ultimate "good news-bad news" cars. The good news is that they offer great looks, decent (and easily upgradeable) performance, strong handling, comfort, room and exclusivity.

And the looks: Those are worth mentioning twice.

Few sedans then or now have been as handsome.

The mechanical parts are simple, strong, long-lasting and do their job well. When they do break, they're easy and cheap to fix.

The Magnette is at its best when used as it was designed: a rare combination of sporty good handling and luxury rarely seen now, let alone in the '50s.

Palmer built a massively strong unit body for the Magnette, and there's no reason why the car can't provide stylish daily transportation if you want it to.

The bad news is: finding one. The international Z Magnette registry has accounted for about 1000 Magnettes worldwide in any condition. That's everything from trailer queens to trailer trash. Many are too far gone for anyone to seriously consider restoring.

Finding a good Magnette takes work. Finding an owner willing to sell a good Magnette is even tougher.

Luckily, prices remain low. Even very good Magnettes usually sell for less than \$ 10,000. partially because people don't want anything but a ragtop from MG, partially because the restoration cost can be prohibitive, and partially because most people have no idea what it is.

Magnette owners know what they have, though: A car that just may have a claim on the title "First Modern Sports Sedan." CM

Gunter Graskamp photo

