

1953-58 MG Midgette: Adding Attraction

By Graham Robson



Soon after two English automaking rivals joined forces to become the British Motor Corporation in the early Fifties, the combine released a new type of small sedan. Its radiator badge said MG, but its design and engineering had other influences, too.

With its postwar Y-Series sedans looking decidedly aged by 1953, MG was more than ready for a modern successor. It debuted late that year as the four-cylinder Z-Series Midgette. The new car went on to enjoy expanding sales success in Britain and in the North American export market. When the Midgette was upgraded for 1957, it became the model ZB. (Owner: Helen Heist)

It didn't look like an MG, somehow. In the early Fifties, we British were used to T-Series Sports cars and sweet little Y-Type saloons (sedans to you). MGs were craggy and old-fashioned, with flapping fenders, headlamps that stuck out in the breeze, and suspensions hard enough to rattle your teeth. But the new Midgette ZA of 1953 wasn't like that at all. It looked smooth, it rode well, it went around corners without a skip, and it had comfortable space for four people. Strange. But only until we learned who had designed it. Not the diehards from Abingdon (MG fanatics didn't like steel roofs anyway), nor the Old Guard at Morris Motors, either. It was a new man, Gerald Palmer. Having created the stylish 1947 Jowett Javelin saloon, complete with wind-cheating body and flat-four engine, Palmer had been tempted back to Morris as chief designer for the entire MG and Riley ranges. All I had to do, Palmer once told me, was to produce new cars. There was no product planning, nothing. All I had to do was to come up with ideas, which I hoped would be accepted. Luckily they were. Though conceived at Morris, the ZA Midgette was one

of the first cars introduced by British Motor Corporation (BMC), born on March 31, 1952, with the long-debated marriage of two longtime rivals. On the one side was Austin Motors, established in 1906 at Longbridge, near Birmingham in the British Midlands. Its founder was a farmer's son, Herbert Austin, later Sir Herbert and (from 1936) Lord Austin in recognition of his contributions to British industry. One of his company's biggest prewar successes was the small, spartan, inexpensive Austin Seven of 1922. Boldly, Sir Herbert set up a factory in Pennsylvania to build it as the American Austin (CA, October 1922), starting in 1929, but sales were poor despite the deepening U.S. Depression and production ended after five years. But the car was soon redesigned to become the American Bantam, built by a reorganized company that later submitted the winning design for the U.S. Army jeep. Morris Motors, BMC's other half, was founded in Cowley, near Oxford, by William R. Morris. He, too, was knighted (in 1929) and made a peer of the realm (in 1934), choosing the title Lord Nuffield. By that point, his enterprise, subsequently retitled the Nuffield Organisation,

encompassed not only the Morris and MG marques but also Riley and Wolseley, two of many companies Sir William picked up along the way.

Lord Nuffield was a distrustful sort who never liked Lord Austin, so it's ironic that the Austin-Morris wedding was largely brokered by a man who had worked for both. This was Leonard Percy Lord, production wizard and self-styled car designer. Though Morris was Britain's dominant motor company as early as 1913, Lord helped make it even bigger only to be fired by Lord Nuffield in 1936 in a dispute over profit sharing. Vowing revenge, Len Lord got himself hired at Austin some two years later and was heading the place by 1942 (after Lord Austin's death the previous year). By the early Fifties, he had built Austin into a near sales equal for Morris, helped by newer, more-modern postwar cars. But Lord knew that cutthroat competition was hampering both companies, and had long favored a merger with Morris. It took him several years, but, typical of the man, he finally managed it. Such was the backdrop for Gerald Palmer's work on the ZA Midget. His first proposal, accepted with few dissenting voices, called for not just a new MG but also a new Wolseley saloon sharing the same basic

unitized construction, running gear, and styling. In a ploy worthy of General Motors, he distinguished the models by having the Wolseley sit two inches higher, which he thought could be done with fair ease by modifying the fenders, underbody sills, and suspension pick-up points. At first, MG had little to do with this car, having no formal design office at the time. But MG general manager John Thornley insisted on having final approval as to styling, use of the famed MG octagon badge, and other details. He also chose the name, recalling MG's 1930s series of fine six-cylinder Midget sports cars.

MG had built its first saloons in 1935, but prewar models borrowed heavily from existing Wolseley designs and, perhaps because of that, were not very successful. Consider the following:

Model	Engine	Yrs built	Prod
SA	2.6-L sidevalve	1936-39	1-6 2738
VA	1.5-L ohv	1937-39	1-4 2407
WA	2.6-L sidevalve	1938-39	1-6 369



1, 2. Volume production of unit-bodied Midgets began in 1954. The first-series ZA model ran through 1956, powered by a 60-bhp 1.5-liter engine developed by British Motor Corporation stablemate Austin. Nearly nine percent of the 18,076 ZAs built were left-hand-drive export models like this '55 destined for North America. (Owner: Wayne Johnson)
3-9. The ZB version of the Midget, produced in 1957-58, included a stylish new Varitone version. This 1958 example shows off the Varitone's two-tone paintwork and wraparound back light, which was accomplished at the factory by enlarging the standard-width window opening. Engine displacement was unchanged, but a compression boost added four horsepower. (Owner: James Phelps)



MG did somewhat better postwar with the much smaller YA/YB models, based on the Morris 8/Wolseley 8, building 8336 from 1947 to 1953. But with its sidevalve-four and Thirties styling, the Y-Series was a car of the past (its launch being postponed by war from 1941). It was, in fact, basically a long wheelbased TD chassis topped by a four-door sedan body.

Nevertheless, Palmer was obliged to use existing engines, gearboxes, and axles for his new MG/Wolseley, which was also originally intended to have a separate wood-framed body. This thinking reflected a good deal of indecision within the Nuffield group, as well as the British motor industry's general complacency of the day. Then BMC was born with Leonard Lord in charge. He wanted a new family of engines phased in as soon as possible, so Palmer's assumptions had to change.

The upshot of all this was that the Wolseley, called 4/44, was launched as scheduled in autumn 1952, using the old MG powertrain as first envisioned. But the Midget, which had been set to appear first, was

delayed a full year so it could be the first car using BMC's new B-series engine and transmission. The unit body/chassis was contracted to the Pressed Steel Company, an independent bodymaking concern whose factory was just across the road from BMC's big Cowley plant, where the cars would be painted. But for some reason, it was decided to assemble the Midget at Abingdon (just south of Oxford), while the 4/44 would be made at Cowley alongside other Wolseleys (and Rileys) Illogical? Maybe, but such thinking would prove all too typical of BMC.

The new model's appearance was another matter: certainly remarkably curvaceous and attractive, compared to previous MGs. „I had been to several Continental [auto] shows,“ Palmer stated, „and had realized that some Italian styles were really wonderful. British styling, by comparison, was just pathetic. As with the Javelin, so with this new car, the styling was all mine. This time I wanted to... approach Italian themes. [So] I had to get the roof and the floor pan right down, which partly explains the unit construction. Another thing was that Pressed Steel were doing [much

of] the body engineering, and it all made volume-engineering sense.“ The Magnette powertrain was also largely engineered elsewhere, yet it’s remarkable that the main project team comprised only Palmer and 10 engineers. Nowadays, of course, with the aid of computers, it would take at least 100 people merely to decide a car wasn’t worth doing.

The Magnette ZA was released in October 1953, but apart from a handful of motor-show vehicles, only eight were built by the end of the year, mainly because production of the brand-new B-Series powertrain took time to crank up. Series production didn’t begin in earnest until February 1954 and reached about 80 cars per week by year’s end. In 1955, however, the rate

soared to more than 180 a week, which meant that the ZA was the fastest-selling MG ever.

By Fifties standards, this was a beautiful little car, and Italian influences were everywhere to be seen. (Look at contemporary Lancias if you want proof.) So what if the trunk was small and there wasn’t much space in the rear? It was a lot roomier than the old Y-Series, and a traditional MG radiator proudly fronted one of the most-modern saloon shapes to come out of Britain for some time (the latest Jaguars excepted). Nowadays, though, the ZA Magnette looks small and it was, being only 167.5 inches long on a 102-inch wheelbase, and slim across the hips. It didn’t have much power, either.



1, 2. Whether ZA or ZB, Magnettes rode a 102-inch wheelbase. This '58 ZB shows off the chrome fender/door spear that replaced the curved front-fender brightwork seen on the ZA. 3, 4. The high-grade appointments of the Magnette’s four-place cabin featured leather upholstery, full floor carpeting, and a pull-down armrest for rear-seat occupants. Without accessories, the tab for a ’58 came to \$2470 in the US. (Owner: Jeff Powell) `



The B-Series Engine:

Built For the Long Run

The Magnette’s B-Series ohv four cylinder engine was a much-modified version of the powerplant introduced with Austin’s new 1947 A40 Devon (CA. February 1994), a small car that sold moderately well in the US. Though never very refined, the sturdy B-Series would power numerous BMC models for nearly two decades.

There were two initial displacements, 1200 and 1489cc, but size gradually crept up, first to 1588cc (MGA 1600), then 1622 (MGA 1600 Mk II), and finally the 1798cc version that powered MGBs through the last of their kind in 1980. The B-Series was also used in various BMC/British Leyland light trucks into the Eighties, and lasted until 1997 in India’s Hindustan Ambassador sedan based on the mid-Fifties Morris Oxford Mark II.

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Magnette Mastermind: The Career of Gerald Palmer

After starting his career in the Twenties with British truckmaker Scammell, Gerald Palmer joined Morris Motors in the late Thirties to design MG chassis. From 1942 to 1949, he worked as chief engineer at Jowett, up north in Yorkshire, where he created the Javelin sedan. He then returned to Morris, first as chief designer for all new-generation MG, Riley, and Wolseley family cars. In that capacity he led development of the MG Magnette ZA and Wolseley 4/44 sedans, as well as the larger Riley Pathfinder and Wolseley 6/90 models before being named chief chassis and body designer of the new BMC group.

Inevitably, Palmer quarreled with British Motor Corporation chairman Leonard Lord, and left the organization in 1955. He then joined Vauxhall, General Motors UK subsidiary, as assistant chief engineer. There he worked on small Vivas, medium sized Victors (CA. June 1994), and Vauxhall’s largest cars like the Velox/Cresta. After retirement in 1972, he worked on various private projects, and enjoyed restoring and running a magnificent Twenties-type „Targa Florio“ Mercedes. He died in 1999.

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Though the 1489-cc version of the new B-Series four-cylinder eventually reached 72 horsepower (in 1956-model MGA two-seaters), it produced only 60 bhp in initial Magnette tune. But that was a lot more than the old YB's 46 bhp, and the Magnette had a slick new four-on-the-floor gearbox to help exploit it. The latter would also show up in the MGA (CA, April 1988), and no one ever complained about that.

The Magnette handled remarkably well. Superlatives flowed when the British weekly, *The Autocar*, tested one in November 1954: Wet roads or dry make little difference to its performance. ... [A] slight controllable drift in the approved fashion, and a very slight heeling over, were the only indications of high speed. On the road, then, the standard of its cornering is very high. Of course, with only 60 bhp to move nearly 2500 pounds, the ZA was not a fast car even by British standards, but it did appeal for its looks, character, and furnishings. Like the smaller, recently introduced Morris Minor (same design stable, different trainers), the new Magnette offered great roadholding and inch-accurate rack-and-pinion steering. Its front coil springs and wishbones were right for the job, and the beam rear axle (hung on semielliptic leaf springs) was carefully controlled by a sturdy torque arm running from the axle housing to the body work. Even so, first thoughts were not correct thoughts, for an

extra front suspension tie-bar had to be added, and the torque arm was deleted before the first cars were delivered (but after the public launch), as engineers found that it simply did not work very well. The ZA also made a good impression inside. Here was a four-seater with no „I'm bigger than that“ pretensions, which meant separate front seats, a proper gear lever and central parking brake on the floor, but also genuine leather upholstery and carpeting instead of rubber mats. The instrument panel looked to be adorned with wood, but closer examination showed a rather low-rent combination of wood, painted metal, and Bakelite plastic. There were only four body colors at first, and precious few options, but there always seemed to be a queue to buy. Although not quite the „quality car“ BMC had hoped for - there was no getting away from the dashboard „wood“ - the Magnette looked neat enough. And with an all-in U.S. price of \$2475 (POE East Coast), it was a fair modern imitation of the traditional upmarket British car.

A few more changes were made early on, including the addition of swiveling front-door vent windows in March 1954 and the availability of more nonmetallic colors. Meanwhile, the slow production build-up had magazine editors fighting to publish tests (most had to wait until model-year 1955). A number actually



ZB Magnettes with the standard-width window offered less rear visibility than Varitones, but were cheaper and somewhat more popular. Though the ZB was made for just two years, its production totals exceeded those of the ZA. Export sales were increased, too. This restored '57 was originally sold in Florida. 2. Gerald Palmer's Italian-influenced exterior design was quite a departure for an MG, but the Magnette's radiator grille left no doubt about its parent age. (Owner: Helen Heist)



purchased their own cars for the purpose.

BMC wasted no time sending Magnettes to the lucrative U.S. market, doubtlessly hoping to capitalize on the loyal following built up there by MG's Sports cars. Figures are hard to come by, but we know that 312 Magnettes went to the States in 1954, and it's likely more than 300 were exported the following year, when the dashboard was covered entirely in attractive polished wood.

The Magnette was further freshened up for 1957, when

the ZA became the ZB. This involved minor trim changes, including different decoration on the flanks, plus four more horsepower (via increased compression and double valve springs) and higher overall gearing. The big news, however, was a weird new transmission option called Manumatic and an available Varitone body style.

Developed by Automotive Products/ Lockheed, Manumatic was essentially a clutchless manual transmission not unlike Volkswagen's later

„Automatic StickShift“. It relied on a concoction of electric and hydraulics that disengaged the clutch plate when the driver put pressure in any direction on the gear lever knob; take-up from rest was provided by a centrifugal clutch. Manumatic worked well so long as everything was in perfect adjustment, but that was rare. And because it cost an extra GBP 50 (about \$140), it was not popular. Only 496 such cars were sold (about 110 exported to North America) before the option was quietly dropped in 1958.

The Varitone body option was more successful, partly because it included a larger rear window that was wrapped around slightly, American style. It also sported smart duotone paintwork, with the second color running from hood to roof to trunklid and down the sides to follow an upper-body crease line. Varitone Magnettes looked good, but BMC made a meal of the body, hauling standard small-window shells across the road from Pressed Steel to Morris Motors, where the aperture was enlarged by hand. There was a price for this work:

In Britain, a Vanitone cost GBP 1078 versus GBP 1041 for a small-window mono-color ZB. (At then-current exchange rates, those figures translated to \$3018 and \$2915, respectively.) But the Option proved

Clubs for
1953-58 MG Midgette Fans

MG Drivers Club of North America
18 Georges Place
Clinton, NJ 08809-1334
Telephone: (908) 713-6251
Fax: (908) 713-6251
E-mail: marfmil@hotmail.com
Website: www.mgclub.com

Z Midgette Group
910 Hirsch
Melrose Park, IL 60160

popular. Of the 18,525 Magnettes built in 1957-58, Varitones accounted for 7803 assemblies, about 42 percent of the total.

Overall sales also improved as time went on. No fewer than 9438 ZBs were built in 1958, the final calendar year for this Midgette generation peanuts by Detroit standards, maybe, but it certainly made Abingdon's planners proud. Though too heavy to be a successful competition car, the final Magnettes had a top speed of 86 mph, very brisk for such a small-engine British saloon. And the MG was still regarded as one of the best handling sports saloons of its day.

By this time, Gerald Palmer had long since moved on to work with GM's Vauxhall subsidiary in Luton, leaving behind an uninspiring group of engineers. Operating mainly out of BMC's other main factory, the one-time Austin plant at Longbridge. They didn't look likely to come up with a better Midgette. Sure enough, the new Mark III of 1959 was a dreadful thing for which the British press never had a good word, being simply a hotted-up version of a lumpy new generation Austin Cambridge. At least it was never assembled at Abingdon, where John Thornley and his colleagues were much happier building MGAs, Austin Healey Sprites, and, soon, MGBs and Healey 3000s.

Alphabet Scoop:

MG's Model Designations

Way back in the Twenties, MG set up a new system of naming its cars, starting with the L-Type Magna and M-Type Midgets. Subsequent models were designated P, Q, R, S, T, and so on. MG's first postwar sedan was the Y-Type, so the 1953 Midgette was logically titled ZA. But that exhausted the alphabet, so MG went back to the beginning for 1955's new MGA Sports car, only to abandon the practice with later Magnettes and Midgets.

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1953-58 MG Midgette: Selected Specifications

	ZA	ZB
Years sold in U.S.	1954-57	1957-58
Wheelbase (in.)	102,0	102,0
Length (in.)	167,5	167,5
Engine type	overhead-valve four-cylinder, cast iron block and heads	
Displacement (cc/lcid)	1489/90.9	
Borexstroke (in.)	2.88x3.50	
Compression ratio	7.15:1	8.3:1
Induction	2 SU carb	
Net bhp @ rpm	60@4600	64@5400
Torque (lb-ft) @ rpm	78@3000	83@3000
Transmission	4-speed manual	4-speed manual opt. Manumatic
Suspension, front	unequal-length A-arms, coil springs, telescopic shock absorbers	
Suspension, rear	live beam axle, semielliptic leaf springs, hydraulic shock absorbers	
Steering	manual rack-and-pinion	
Brakes	4-wheel drum	
Weight (lbs)	2,465	
hp speed (mph)	80	86
U.S. retail price (POE, East Coast)	\$2,475	\$2,535 (\$2470 in 1958)
Total production	18,076	18,525
U.S./Canadian sales	1,576	3,781

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