

MAGNETIC ATTRACTION



An Absence of frills suits the MG. The body sides are relieved only by the plated "hockey stick" over the front wheel arch. The Magnette has the familiar MG radiator grille mounted on a smoothly shaped full width body.

The editor is drawn to an MG saloon of the mid-‘50s. At first sight an example of badge engineering, it proves to have an identity of its own.

When it was first announced at the 1953 London Motor Show, the ZA confused MG enthusiasts into thinking what was obviously a Wolseley was being offered as an MG. The less knowledgeable were also offended that the Magnette name had been chosen. The new model was open, they thought, to confusion with the famous Magnette series of open sports cars from the 1930s, especially the sports racing K3. What they had overlooked was that the original Magnette of 1932 had been a saloon. Although the basic monocoque body of the ZA was shared with the Wolseley 4/44 of 1952, and the engine was an undisguised 1½ litre Austin unit, the new Magnette managed to have a distinctly MG flavour. Rack and pinion steering and the wood and leather trim went a long way towards distinguishing the ZA Magnette from the other BMC family saloons.

When the ZA MG Magnette was first conceived, it was intended to replace the 1¼-litre YA/YB saloons of the 1947-1953 era. The aim was to produce a low-built, four seater saloon of brisk performance, with good roadholding and steering to match its other characteristics. This vehicle, like the Wolseley 4/44, was designed by Gerald Palmer, who had earlier produced the Jowett Javelin. It was intended for those people who appreciated the finer points of driving and who were prepared to pay a little extra for good quality.



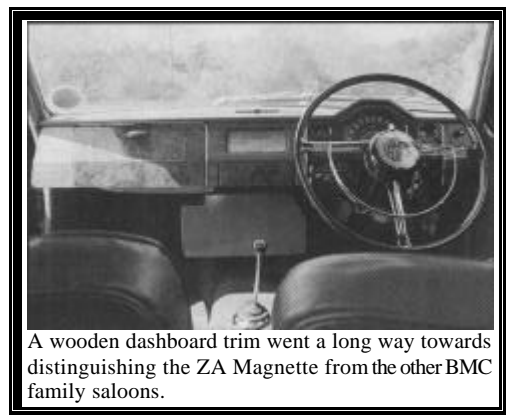
Warren Marsh demonstrates the low build of the ZA Magnette.



Since the Morris 1¼ litre engine had been phased out in 1953, the new Magnette was to be powered by the 1½ litre BMC, or Austin, four-cylinder pushrod operated overhead valve B-series unit. With a bore of 73.02mm and a stroke of 89mm, the twin 1½ inch SU carburetted engine developed 60bhp at 4600rpm with a compression ratio of 7.15 to one. This engine was virtually identical to that fitted to the recently introduced MGA sports car, though that had an increased compression ratio (8.17 to one) and richer carburation which helped it to 68bhp at 5500rpm.

The unitary construction four-door shell was common to the Wolseley 4/44. Clearly it would not have been an economic proposition for these two relatively modest volume production cars to have had it any other way. Gerald Palmer openly admitted that the styling of the new body was influenced by the great Italian coachbuilders of the period. He had great admiration for the Pinin Farina two-door coupé that had appeared on a Bentley chassis at the 1948 Paris Salon. Naturally this had to be more practical for a four-door sporting saloon, and needed to be capable of being manufactured by the production techniques of the period.

Palmer had considerable latitude for experimentation with the suspension of the new car. The long and short arms of the independent front suspension were pivoted to a sub-frame, which was welded to the lower dash structure, transferring bending load to the sills and the central tunnel. Coil springs with concentric telescopic dampers were used. In order to provide sharper handling and response, particularly under severe conditions, the design had extra tie rods from the wishbones to pickup points on the body frame. At the rear of the MG, Palmer placed a torque arm, *a la* Bugatti, bolted to the differential casing and running forward to be pivoted on the left side of the propeller shaft tunnel. The two-inch lower build allowed less room for axle movement. This torque arm was designed to restrain and twist down the nose of the Magnette's axle casing so as to prevent the propeller shaft from touching the rear seat pan when the springs were fully deflected. The design of the attachment between the axle casing and the springs permitted flexibility, by using rubber pads rather than U-bolts. At the front, the leaf springs were attached to the frame using rubber bushes. Palmer was seeking the dual benefits of lower build and more positive control for the arm, which was also intended to curb torque reaction while accelerating and braking. This was to be a specific development for the Magnette. There would have been no need for it on the Wolseley 4/44, for that was not intended to be a sporting design, and had more space for axle movement.

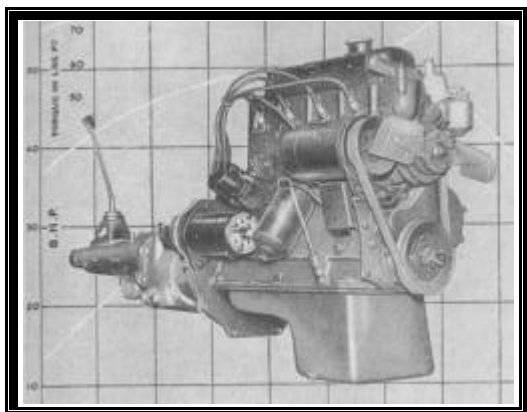


A wooden dashboard trim went a long way towards distinguishing the ZA Magnette from the other BMC family saloons.

Unfortunately this development did not reach the production stage. During prototype testing, severe axle tramp was encountered during heavy braking. It was not possible to effect a cure while retaining the torque arm. It had to be deleted from the specification. In the end, the Magnette ended up with the

rear axle attached to the springs with rigid U-bolts, as on the Wolseley. To control the increased axle movement and avoid contact between the propeller shaft and tunnel, a rubber cone was mounted on the axle. Directly above it, a metal protuberance, welded to the frame, replaced the previous single bump stop. The springs also needed more camber, which is why the rear of the Magnette looks higher than had been originally intended.

The delightful 1955 ZA Magnette that features in this article was provided for review by Warren Marsh, of Bristol. The car is now owned by Robert Schmitz, of Bamberg, in Germany. It is an extremely original example, having covered only some 63,000 miles from new. Little is known of its early history, but Warren believed himself to be the fourth owner. The car is fitted with a replacement engine, and at some time it spent a period in a scrap yard. There is no sign of any repair work to indicate that it has ever been involved in an accident.



There can be no doubt that, when introduced in 1953, the Magnette was an intriguing design. Close inspection reveals an interior of surprising opulence. There is grained woodwork on the dashboard. The leather-covered seats are separate in front, and of bench type with centre armrest in the rear. The easily read instruments are well placed, and there is adequate headroom for a tall person. Seating space allows four in comfort, five if necessary – the rear bench has some 45in of hip room. In addition there is an ample boot, from which the spare wheel can be removed without disturbing the luggage.

It is easy to feel at home in this car. The instrument panel is compact and the ideal driving position can be simply obtained by adjusting the seat runners. Although there is no view of the near side wing from the driving seat, the car can be driven close to the kerb. Visibility through the rather narrow curved windscreen is good, though the screen pillars are thick and, in certain conditions, form an obstruction. The practical central gear lever can be moved from one position to another just as fast as the driver can move his hand. The synchromesh is good and cannot be beaten. The engine is in 'touring' tune, flexible and smooth down to 10mph in top gear. Contemporary comparison with the then current Morris Oxford II, which is quite closely similar in respect of weight and top gear ratio, shows that the MG is nine per cent faster from 30-40mph in top gear, 20per cent faster from 40-60mph in top gear and 14per cent faster from rest to 50mph through the gears. The MG is nine per cent faster in terms of maximum speed. Conversely, the Oxford would have been two mpg more economical at high speed, though the Magnette is three mpg better at low speeds. The MG averaged almost exactly 25mpg.

The Magnette is a useful sized car for driving in congested traffic. The quick and accurate rack and pinion steering, as found on the TD and TF sporting two seaters, is vibration free. The front wheel movement can be pleasantly felt through the steering wheel in the anticipated manner for this type of car. Shocks are damped by the flexible coupling in the column.

Instrumentation is, on the whole, very good. Surprisingly for a car of this type, there is no tachometer, which is



The small rear window is a hallmark of the ZA. The later Varitone used a wrap-around version.

most unusual for an MG. The steering wheel does not obstruct your view of the speedometer, but the small rectangular dials on either side of it are sunk deeply below the glass. The addition of a fresh air heater and windscreen washer in the original specification are evidence that modern accessories were beginning to creep into the luxury cars of 50 years ago. A starting handle was also part of the original equipment. This was located in the boot, behind the spare wheel, and had an ingenious supporting

bracket, which mated with a double lug forming part of the front bumper.

Engine accessibility is via an alligator-type bonnet, which swings upwards and largely out of the way. The handsome MG grille is part of this, as is, of course, the dummy octagon radiator filler cap. The carburettors, voltage control, fuse box, valves, wiring, plugs and dipstick are all easily accessible. Only the distributor is difficult to reach.

To summarise, the MG Magnette is a typical British sporting saloon of its period. It was expensive when new at £914 17s 6d, plus £44 19s 1d for a radio, including purchase tax. It is silenced, equipped and furnished in a manner which allowed above average, if not outstanding performance to be attained. It retains a strong sporting character in respect of suspension, steering, driving position and gearbox. It is encouraging to find a car of this type that has been well preserved, when so many have disappeared forever. Perhaps the most ironic thing about it, in view of Gerald Palmer's admitted admiration for the original Pinin Farina styling, is that its eventual successor, the Magnette III/IV of 1959-1961, was actually styled by Farina, and what an appalling job they made of that!

To demonstrate what this model can do, Warren Marsh recently returned from a 4900-mile rally from Holland to Norway in another example. He travelled anti-clockwise around the Baltic in 16 days of driving, plus 1161 miles driving to and from his home in Bristol to and from the start and finish. The total mileage was over 6000 - some of it over very rough roads - and he encountered very few problems. The full story of his adventure will be told next month.

AT A GLANCE SPECIFICATION



Engine: Four cylinders. Bore and stroke 73.02mm by 89mm. Swept volume 1439cc. Maximum bhp 60 at 4600 rpm. Compression ratio 7.15 to one. Three-bearing crankshaft. Overhead valves, push rod operated. Carburettors: twin SU side draught, with 1½ inch diameter choke.

Transmission: Borg and Beck single dry plate clutch, eight inches diameter. Four forward speeds and reverse. Ratios: top one to one, third 1.374 to one, second 2.214 to one, first 3.64 to one, reverse 4.76 to one. Hardy Spicer open propeller shaft. Rear axle: Three-quarter floating unit, with hypoid bevel and banjo casing. Final drive ratio 4.875 to one.

Front suspension: Double transverse link with brake torque struts and coil springs. One inch bore Girling telescopic finned shock absorbers. Rear suspension: Semi-elliptic leaf springs with live axle. One inch bore Girling telescopic shock absorbers.

Steering: MG rack and pinion

Brakes: Front - Lockheed hydraulic, two leading shoe. Rear - Lockheed one leading and one trailing shoe, with parking brake.

Tyres: 5.50 by 15 on pressed steel wheels. Pressure: front 24 psi, rear 26 psi.

Dimensions: Wheelbase 8 feet 6 inches. Track (front and rear) 4 feet 3 inches. Ground clearance: 5¾ inches. Overall length: 14 feet 1 inch. Overall width 5 feet 3 inches.

Fuel consumption: approximately 25 mpg.

Maximum speed: 80 mph.

Price: £645 plus purchase tax of £269 17s 6d equals £914 17s 6d.

Numbers produced: (1953-1956) MG Magnette ZA 18,076, ZB and ZB Varitone (1956-1958) 18,524.

Additional reading: Auto-Architect - The Autobiography of Gerald Palmer. £19.95. ISBN 0 9519423 6 0. Published by Magna Press. Direct Sales enquires: Telephone +44 (0) 1483 284406 or fax +44 (0) 1483 284738.

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