

# MAGNETTE RECOVERY

**Lindsay Porter describes how a quite beautiful Midget restoration was snatched from the jaws of disaster.**

IT all started one Saturday morning when an anguished telephone caller rang from a neighbouring town to say that he was in deep doo-doo (as George Bush would have it) with every chance that his Midget, on which he had lavished thousands, would be lost to him for evermore. Could I offer him advice? Poor Mike Corbett, for that was the caller's name, had entrusted the restoration of his Midget to a company who had 'done a moonlight flit', in the argot of the region. Mike had been befriended by the former restorer's landlord, however, who told him that he could let him have the keys to the workshop strictly off the record, of course, and before the bailiffs moved in but that Mike's window of opportunity would only be for the morning of the next day, the Sunday. It transpired that in their workshop, our heroes had abandoned Mike's part-restored Midget in the form of a bare shell, alongside another complete car which had been stripped for spares and a quantity of Midget parts — lots and lots of parts, in fact, of all shapes, sizes and weights. Mike had access to his car but nowhere to store it, no way of transporting it and no way of physically moving the tons of spares. What on earth, he wanted to know, was he going to do?

Mike's original restoration plans had started almost by chance. He had owned for sometime a pair of ZB Midgets in need of restoration. In fact, they had been around so long, they had almost become part of the garden furniture. But when Mike and his wife decided to build a new garage, they found the cars alarmingly in the way. Mike says that he actively wondered whether to push them over the nearest cliff



*Above, stripping down the Midget was the easy part of the restoration saga.*

but the fortuitous lack of shoreline in the West Midlands led him to decide to take a different sort of plunge instead. He needed a new car but reasoned that a 'Eurobox' was going to cost him around £7,000 (and remember that this stage in the proceedings took place about two years ago) and that for the same sort of money, he could end up with a top-class Midget. In theory, of course, he was right...

At first, Mike did everything according to the textbook. He found a number of restorers who were mentioned in the MG Owners' Club magazine and invited them to visit him, look at the cars and tender for the work. The lowest quotation he received was for £4,000 but that, he says, was obviously too low, while the highest was for £10,000 but he didn't like the look of the people who came. Instead, Mike selected a 'business-like' couple who estimated that the work would cost between £6,000 and £7,000. In due course, they received the cars and a deposit of £2,000 and started to take the cars apart. Once stripped, the 'restorers' explained that they would now need to buy panels and requested a further payment of

£2,000, which Mike, trustingly, handed over. By now the cars had been with them some two or three months, Mike recalls, and the company were starting to fit doors and lower body panels, such as sills. At this stage, they came back to Mike once again and explained that they were now sending trim away for refurbishment and, yes, you've guessed it, they wanted more money! Our heroes were presented with another £1,000 and the trim went away to some unidentified destination. Mike, having virtually no experience of this sort of thing was not unduly worried at this stage since, as far as he could see, work was in progress. So, when he heard that the boss of the company had suddenly left, he was only moderately perturbed, being assured by those who remained that things would carry on as before. After all, the front wings were now starting to be offered back up and the restorers assure him that the car was only a week or so away from being painted. And oh, by the way, they said, we'll need more money for that; say a round £1,000 more? Mike was feeling a little uneasy by now, but he was due to go on holiday



and rather hoped that, if he paid up and went away for a while, when he came back, the car would be together and painted and there



*Above, the interior transformed after refitting of the car's luxurious trim.*

would I be something to show for all his expenditure. Mike returned from holiday in good spirits and quickly went to the phone in order to contact our heroes. Trouble was, he didn't get any reply and when he went to visit the workshop, he found the place deserted and the doors firmly padlocked. It was at this point that Mike obtained access to the building through the kind assistance of the landlord. And it's at this point that Mike nightmare ended and the long haul to put matters right began.

Clearly, on this Saturday morning, a friend-of-a-friend in trouble, something pretty dramatic was going to have to be done — and pretty damned quick, too. With the Lone Ranger on holiday, there was only one person who, to my certain knowledge, would be able to help. A friend of mine by the name of Gordon Ashford runs

Classic Restorations in Bromyard, Herefordshire, no more than 30 or 40 miles from the workshop in which Mike's car was trapped, which meant that the transport logistics could be 'on'. In addition, Gordon had run a car transporter business in the past and had both the car transport gear to hand and a large van for moving Mike's car's mortal remains. I rang Gordon, Gordon rang Mike and the following day, after several convoys up and down the M5 by the five man team that had been assembled at short notice, the Classic Restorations' workshop was amazingly full of Magnette and Mike was smiling again.

Gordon & Co took quite awhile to sort through the piles of parts and were amazed to discover that, in spite of there being so much stuff in evidence, there was a huge amount missing. Worst of all was the lack of seats which, you will recall, Mike had paid to have recovered. It was assumed that they were with a trimmer somewhere — but where? Several local firms were telephoned, but without much luck, until someone had the bright idea of putting the story out to local radio. They broadcast an appeal for Mike's missing seats — it must have made a change from appeals for lost budgies — and, hey presto! — the seats were found! Best of all, Gordon found himself a new trimmer, capable of producing first class work and the remainder of the trim was returned to the 'discovered' company.

Even with the returned seats, the original 'restorers' had managed to lose so many bits and pieces that it became necessary to purchase yet another scrap 'Varitone' Magnette (the Varitone had a larger rear window among other minor detail



*Above, repair sections were welded into the doors and joints lead loaded flush.*



*Back home at last, the Midget rebuilt to the highest standards by Classic Restorations.*

changes) with complete interior trim, in order to be able to complete the job.

The restoration itself turned out to be a very major undertaking. As can be imagined, the original job had not been done to the very highest of standards and 'Classic Restorations' top panel man, Ken Wright, had the unenviable job of putting poor workmanship to rights. It turned out that the car had been poorly crash-damage repaired at some time in the past, and Ken had to unpick the spot welds in order to hydraulic ram the front off-side A-post back into alignment. He wasn't happy with the front wings and remade the wing bottoms, using one of the few repair sections that seemed to be available for the car and Ken also remade the door bottoms where they had corroded through. At the rear of the car, outer wing repair panels were available, covering the outer wheel arches, but inner wing corrosion was a problem until it was found that one of the spares cars had, by some miracle, still got perfectly sound rear inner wings, even though most of the rest of the body was shot. It just goes to show that you never can predict where any particular car will or will not corrode, each one being a perfectly idiosyncratic individual!

Ken took a lot of time and trouble over lead loading each of the panel repairs and also over aligning each panel so that the fit was well nigh perfect, something that he is particularly good at. Meanwhile, all of the car's mechanical components were overhauled with the exception of the engine which, Mike had been told, was a recently reconditioned unit. Now this is a tale that most of us have heard before but Mike, being a nice, trusting sort of guy, believed what he was told and insisted that this, his 'best' engine, was installed as it was. It was later to be another decision he was to regret! The gearbox, incidentally, was restored by a Kidderminster company specialising in older BMC-type units and they winkled out enough

spares to rebuild not only Mike's gearbox, but also a couple more which Gordon Ashford still has available.

The aforesaid serendipitous trimmer was commissioned to recover seats and recreate door trims, headlining and other upholstery while all of the Midget's burr walnut trim was refinished by the same firm. Luckily, Mike was able to find at least one of everything from what seemed like the tree-and-a-half of burr walnut that had materialised from his three cars.

After a titanic struggle, one in which heart had ruled both head and pocket

for all concerned, Mike's car was finished just two days before he was due to go on a motoring holiday to France. To everyone's surprise, Mike insisted on going in the Midget. However no one needed to have worried about the car letting Mike and family down whilst they were in France; it broke down pretty comprehensively in England instead! Half way to the Sealink terminal, the engine became rough, started to knock and the big ends gave out. So much for the supposedly rebuilt engine! Mike and family continued in a hired car while the AA carried the stricken Midget back to Classic Restorations. The worn engine was totally rebuilt in Mike's absence and on his return, he set about bedding the car in



*Above, interior looking forlorn with trim removed and sent away for restoration.*



*With corroded panels replaced and the body alignment corrected a layer of etch primer was applied properly.*

Once Mike's Magnette was truly complete, he began to use it on a regular basis. To his enormous credit he has never been deflected from his original ambitions when he first decided to have the car restored. His wife's MGB GTV8 receives most use as a 'local' car, but the Magnette receives plenty of exercise of the sort to which most Classic car owners don't entrust their cars. But then, most Classic cars haven't received the sort of detailed attention that this one has. Mike's view is that today's roads are not noticeably quicker to drive on than they were when the Magnette was in its heyday (other than motorways, of course) and so journey times are no longer than they would have been in his hypothetical 'Eurobox'. More to the point, though, is the fact that every journey for Mike is a journey of delight, as he takes in the quaint and distinctively 'MG' dash, grips the large wheel with chrome horn ring and enjoys the feel and smell of burr walnut and Connolly leather. And in addition, Mike says: "I've never once taken the car out for a journey, not even just down to the garage for petrol, without someone commenting on my Magnette. Everyone seems to regard it as a really extraordinary car!"

By the time the car really was finished to everyone's complete satisfaction, it was very late in the summer but Mike was determined to take the car on the trip to France that he had promised himself and the rest of the family. This time there were no problems, as the Magnette sailed along through the high, leafy hedges of Brittany, winning admiring attention from the French in that open, unembarrassed way they have.

Mike is now honest enough to admit that, had he known even a fraction of the trials that were in store for him, he would have opted for another course of action, or even gone for the despised 'Eurobox', but you have to admire the courage and determination Mike showed in seeing the project through to completion once he had started upon it.

If you take a look in this issue's Price Guide, you will see that the value of Magnettes is nowhere near high enough to justify anything like the sort of expenditure that Mike Corbett must have made on his car, even deducting the 'rip-off' costs mentioned earlier on in this story. However, bear a number of points in mind before deciding that Mike had wasted his money. Take a look at how much money Mike's hypothetical 'Eurobox' would have lost over one, two or three years. (And incidentally, don't look at the one, two or three year old 'box's showroom value, but the significantly lower trade-in value. Dependant upon make, the £8,000 could easily have slipped in value by £3,000 or more.) Then bear in mind that, after three years, Mike's replacement car would have risen in cost well beyond the original expenditure of £8,000. Mike, by way of contrast, intends to hang onto his investment. But is it an investment? Obviously, the car will deteriorate and eventually require restoration number two, but that day is a long way off. And in the meantime, while the 'Eurobox' would have been depreciating heavily, its depreciation made worse than it seems by inflation, Mike's car might well be appreciating by enough in cash terms to keep up with inflation, or even exceed it. All of which makes this restoration, and any other top-line restoration of a usable car a more interesting financial proposition than it might at first seem.

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Cars March 1989