

Under the weather

Photos Martyn Barnwell



After spending six months restoring an MG Midget ZA, Len Davidson now uses the car every day and keeps it outside through the winter. Nick Larkin meets man and machine.



Handling and roadholding are exemplary by fifties standards

might be for sale.'

An initial look over SNF 89 showed it was in a neglected condition, but a deal was soon struck.

'It was a complete shock. I'd been determined to find a Midget in restorable condition but had been disappointed after seeing so many wrecks, even after I'd asked all the right questions over the phone,' Len said.

Another surprise came when Len eventually gave the car a thorough checking out. Unlike so many other restorers who discover they've taken on a car ten times worse than they've originally envisaged, Len's Midget was better than he'd originally thought.

But that didn't stop him beginning six months of hard

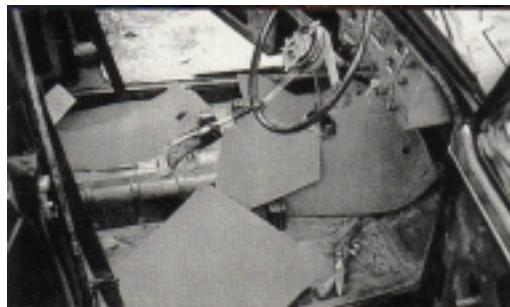


A final cut and polish after 25 coats of paint!

It seemed impossible. Len Davidson had been wasting weeks charging after MG Midgets, usually advertised hundreds of miles away and never in anything like the condition their vendors had claimed them to be. Then, completely by chance, he stumbled across a good car a few miles from his Edinburgh home.

He decided to accept a long-standing invitation to 'drop in anytime' at the home of a Riley enthusiast he'd met at several rallies.

'I went round to see if he was working on his car, and there, sticking out of the garage was a ZA Midget,' explains Len. 'I couldn't believe it when he said the car



Interior was completely stripped and new carpets fitted

work to get the car into first class condition. And, as the car now normally travels 40 miles a day and isn't garaged at night, Len has devised his own intensive maintenance programme to ensure a severe salt-laden Scottish winter isn't going to take its toll.

The first problem was somewhere to store the Midget during its restoration. Luckily, Len's son, Lennie, a coachbuilder by trade, managed to find space in a shed – and also offered to help with the bodywork.

Although the car was sound, especially, much to Len's surprise, the sills and boot floor, there was a lot of surface rust, and a couple of holes in the front footwells which needed plating.



Traditional wooden dashboard adds class

were used for all but the top coat, which was 1:1. The floor was given three coats of Hammerite on both sides

Unfortunately, and for reasons Len still can't determine, the paint kept blooming between coats, so an anti-bloom agent had to be used. 'Sorry, I can't remember the name of this. Perhaps it's because this is one part of the restoration I'd rather forget!' laughed Len.

Meanwhile there was a lot of rechroming to do. The bumpers, over-riders and number plate assembly were sent off to specialists, but Len managed to get some replacement 'hockey stick' chrome strips for the wings — a lucky find.

The engine's condition was so good that Len decided there was no point in taking it apart. 'It really was that good, and as I wanted to get the car back on the road, I felt I might as well leave the engine alone and see what happened. But, after a full service and carburettor rebuild, the car is still running perfectly. It was then time to tackle the interior. The seats were unripped, but extremely tired. Len made a decision to change their colour from green to a warmer red using Vinylkote.

'I got every piece of information about Vinylkote that I possibly could, but still wondered if it would work. I put on a couple of coats and the results were terrific. I was really surprised.'

Len made new door trims out of hardboard, using the old ones as patterns.

The dashboard and door cappings were rubbed down and renovated using a spray-on varnish. Edinburgh trimming specialist John Kelly fitted a new headlining.

The electrical system was thoroughly inspected and 'everything that looked suspect' replaced.

Two rear shock absorbers and lots of grease were the only suspension requirements, and, amazingly, the braking system, including the pipes, only needed cleaning and adjusting: 'It made me realise that the car must have had a long-term previous owner who treated it like a baby,' said Len.

One MoT certificate later, the Magnette was back on the road – shortly before the clutch went. 'It was unfortunate as I'd been looking forward to sampling the Magnette's excellent handling,' said Len.

The car went back to the workshop for the clutch replacement, and Len took the opportunity to replace the engine mountings while the unit was out

Since then, the car has been in everyday use, and braving the elements.

I've never been the sort of person who believes classic cars should only be used to take to events on trailers,' said Len, a 56-year-old security officer.

I'd like a garage, but there are none round where I live. So many other enthusiasts are in the same position.'

So the car has to sit on the street, yet even after several months of hard use looks just the same as it did after the final polish was applied.

'Keeping a car like this outside means you have to give it a lot of attention,' says Len.

Therefore, in all weathers, he normally washes SNF 89 every other day, never leaving it for more than four. He meticulously makes sure that all traces of dirt, and, in particular, salt deposits, are removed. 'I only wash the car with water, never using detergent-type cleaners — these just take off the polish I put on last time, I then give the car a thorough going over with Turtle Wax.'

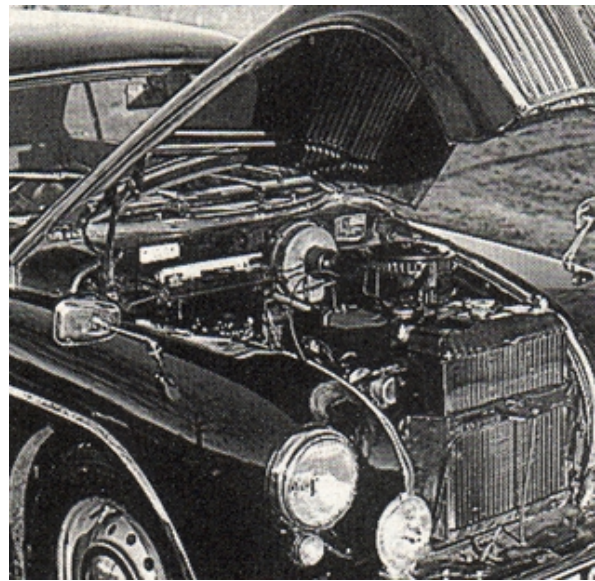
SNF 89's underneath looks forward to its fortnightly meeting with a pressure washer. The underboot area is regularly Waxoyl treated, and the condition of the underbody Hammerite checked.

The chrome gets a thorough once-over with Solvol Autosol every week to keep surface rust at bay. Every couple of weeks a liberal dose of WD40 is applied to the plugs, distributor and, Len reckons most importantly, the carburettor linkage.

'The wings had gone in the usual places below the headlights, so we had to put new metal in, and a few small dents had to be treated.' Len recalls.

'The worst thing was that the paint was very 'orange peely' all over, so we had no alternative but to take it back to bare metal. And that took ages!'

Paint stripper and 400 grade abrasive used to remove the paint. Len was determined to make sure the car was well protected for its life outside, so 12 coats of primer, followed by 13 of cellulose, were applied! Three parts thinner to one of paint



Alligator style bonnet had led to many a bruised head



He changes the oil normally at around the 4000 mile mark: 'I tend to go more by the state of the oil than the actual mileage I've done. If the oil seems thin, then I'll change it.'

All servicing and greasing are carried out to the manufacturer's schedules:

'It's silly to leave it any longer. I go round the grease nipples every couple of months, and make sure everything is supple.'

Len also places great importance on checking that the car remains water-tight, and also ensuring that the cooling system hoses are in good condition. The antifreeze is changed at the beginning of winter.

Len wanted a Magnette initially for its styling: 'The lines are just absolutely right. It's a lovely-looking car.'

SNF's pure, flowing lines are even more evident when you see the car parked in a line of Talbot Solaras and Lada Samaras near Len's home.

Partly because of Len's policy of regularly checking the charging system and giving the battery a top-up charge, the Magnette started instantly after being left overnight in the sort of temperatures that would make you feel you'd spent an hour in your freezer. The car had so much interior condensation that the Kielder Dam would have had problems clearing it, and the demister did little to help.

Len persevered cleaning the screen and when heat finally crept into the cabin you could finally see what was outside the car.

The faithful 1489cc B-series engine warmed up quickly, and by this time the car was becoming cosy.

Len very much believes that a car should be made suitable for everyday use in today's conditions, providing its character isn't affected. Therefore it has inertia reel seatbelts: 'You really need belts in today's traffic,' says Len. Flashers have also been fitted, concealed in the sidelights at the front are carefully positioned below the bumper at the back.

The subtly-placed modifications seem a blessing when you take the wheel of the Magnette in Edinburgh traffic.

Driving this car makes it easy to see why it caused such a sensation in the fifties. Even in modern traffic performance is more than adequate, with the twin SUs playing their part, and a touch on the throttle guarantees a crisp response.

The rack and pinion steering is precise and much less low-g geared than many of the MG' rivals, the car's dished steering wheel been set at precisely the right angle. The gearchange is swift and easy to use.

Handling is exceptional for a fifties car and the brakes though not servo assisted, bring the car to a steady and controlled halt. The Magnette also cruises comfortably, if a little noisily at 65 - 70mph

Looking clinically at the Magnette, no-one would expect it to excel by modern standards, but Len Davidson has a car you'd feel happy to drive in any frame of mind, whether to savour its considerable character or just to get you home.

Admittedly, some drivers might have problems positioning the car as you can't see the tip of the nearside wins but this could soon be overcome.

So an MG Magnette is eminently usable, but leaving it outside and subjecting it to hard labour means some special care and attention is needed.

As Len says: 'I think it's a car that with the sort of use I'm giving it, you have to keep on top all the time as far as maintenance is concerned. Otherwise it wouldn't be that long before you'd be left with nothing!'



Smooth lines make MG look right from every angle

MG ZA Magnette Specification

Produced	1953-56
Engine	4-cyl BMC B-series
Capacity	1489cc
Max Power	60bhp @ 4600rpm
Max Speed	85mph
0-60mph	22.5 sec
Fuel cons	30mpg

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