

MG Z-TYPE MAGNETTES

The sporty MG ZA and ZB Magnettes are poles apart from most 1950s saloons. Kim Henderson looks at their strengths and weaknesses.



Truly stylish cars, these MG Magnettes are practical as well, thanks to their B-Series engines, later used in the MGB. At the front is a ZA, behind a Varitone ZB model

THEY'VE got the looks, they have the power, they corner better than almost any other saloon of the era, while remaining practical family carriers with well-trimmed interiors. MG Z Magnettes are as easy to look after and live with, and they have a character still highly regarded, more than 40 years after their introduction.

So what is significant about these sleekly styled machines? Well, they were the very last Abingdon-built MG saloons.

They were also the first unitary construction MGs, the first BMC cars to use the new B-Series four-cylinder engine and the first MGs to use the independent front suspension which was to serve the company so well until the end of MGB production.

Also, they were the fastest production 1.5 litre British saloons of their time. This fact, combined with their excellent handling and cornering capabilities, helped the cars to score considerable success in rallying during the 1950s.

Even today, the cars feel more modern in their dynamic behaviour than most offerings of 40 years ago. Ride comfort is

- Engines have long life, but check oil pressure — 50 psi minimum.
- With the engine warm, listen for tapping when running under part-open throttle conditions. This may be big-end wear.
- After several miles, descend a hill in low gear, then floor the accelerator and watch for oil smoke. This is sign of engine wear.
- Rattling valve gear is common.
- Check synchro action, especially on hard-worked second gear.
- If ride feels soggy, check shock absorbers — especially fronts.
- Is the ride height too low? The road springs could have settled or a rear leaf may be broken. Examine all springs closely.
- Check for evidence of king pins and steering joint lubrication.
- Look for damaged gaiters on steering rack and track rod ends.
- Brittle seat leather and cracked wood expensive to restore.

good, the cars grip arid corner well (especially if shod with radials) and

the steering response is positive and immediate. The power output, from a mildly-tuned B-Series 1489cc engine, doesn't look exceptional on paper but the 60bhp of the ZA and the 68bhp from the higher compression ZB endows the cars with willing performance. Torque output is also good, enabling the cars to pull well from low engine revs, making them docile in traffic.

The ZAs feel — and are — slower than the more powerful ZBs, which also have the benefit of a higher ratio final drive, giving more relaxed motoring at high speeds. Both models are capable of cruising at 60mph or more for long periods, while returning 30mpg. If you are fortunate enough to find one of the rare cars fitted with the contemporary Laycock overdrive conversion, high speed cruising is even more relaxing, fuel consumption is usefully improved and the engine will last longer.

The earliest ZAs had tin-top dashboards, but most cars you are likely to encounter have the later wood finish facias. All

FOR

- Superb 1950s styling
- Excellent performance and handling
- Reliable B-Series power
- Easy to maintain
- Ideal for everyday use
- Increasing range of spares available

AGAINST

- Can rust very badly
- Rebuild costs can exceed car's value
- No original body spares obtainable
- Low geared — especially ZAs
- Good cars rare and expensive
- Interiors extremely costly to repair

versions provide comprehensive information to the driver with instruments giving updates on battery charging rate, oil pressure and coolant temperature, the only significant omission being a rev-counter.

The seats are comfortable with excellent headroom throughout, and reasonable leg room, even in the rear.

Although the tail of the car slopes restricting boot height at the rear end, the luggage space is wide and deep with the spare wheel housed vertically on the left hand side. Loading over the very low sill is from bumper height and easy.



Early ZA models have a metal top dash, grained to look like wood. Leather restorer has been used on the seats.



All Z-types have an attractive fascia with a good range of instruments – but no rev counter.

(sorry about the line – picture spanned a page)

BODYWORK

THE MAIN areas vulnerable to rust attack are included in our Spot the Rot section, but there are some additional points worth noting about the bodywork.

To start with, although both the Wolseley 4/44 (plus the later 15/50) and the Z type Magnettes were designed by Gerald Palmer and look generally similar, there are many detail differences. The result is that only the main shell, front doors and bootlid are directly interchangeable.

The front doors were drilled at the factory to fit either MG or Wolseley. The Wolseley bootlid can be used on a Mquette if the screw holes for the 4/44's number plate and lamp unit are filled.

In addition, the rear doors and wings from a Wolseley can be modified to fit by re-shaping the cut-out for the rear wheelarch.

If you are looking at a car with rusty sills, bear hi mind that replacing them will mean removing the front wings.

This is not an insurmountable problem, since the wings and splash shields at the rear of each front wheelarch are bolt-on panels.

In fact, the shields have to come off first, to enable the rearmost wing bolts to be reached. The splash panels are usually rusty along with the bulkheads and lower sections of the rear ends of the front wings.

By design, the drain tubes from the air intake box on the bulkhead exit into this box section, and the only way for water to escape is through the gap between the lower edge of the outer wing and the top edge of the sill on each side. Rust in these areas is therefore common,

Replacement outer sills are available, but original BMC items are virtually impossible to find. Reproduction items may be the only practical solution, but owners report that these can be difficult to fit. Luckily, the inner sills are fairly easy to fabricate at home.

There is an additional, third membrane between the inner and outer panels, which is invisible from the outside. However, if the outer and inner panels are holed, the chances are that the additional sandwiched inner member is also in a poor condition.

To properly repair the structure around the front ends of the rear spring hangers (see Spot the Rot section), the inner and outer sills have to be removed — quite a job. On early cars (to chassis number 15503), the jacking points were on the bumper brackets at the front and rear of the car. On later models they were mounted beneath the sill on each side. Even when new, this area was not particularly strong. The inner ends of these later mountings were only tack-welded to the floorpan, which itself was not a heavy duty structure. Some cars have had more substantial welding carried out here, so always check before attempting to use the car's own jack. The air intake box is drained through rubber tubes, which exit into the box sections on each side of the bulkhead. However, these are joined to the intake box by steel tubes which can also rust, as can the bottom of the box itself.



Vertically-mounted spare wheel shows depth of roomy boot, which has low loading height.



In either case, water will drip onto the front carpet. Open the scuttle-mounted lid and peer inside to check the structure is sound. While you are there, look for evidence of water ingress into the interior. If the front wings are particularly rusty, repair sections are available. Alternatively, for an everyday-use vehicle, glassfibre wings can be bought.

Now for some good news. Except on the very worst examples, the inner wings and the structure around the lower part of the engine bay are usually sound. Take note of the condition of chromework on any potential purchase. Grilles and bumpers, in particular, are hard to find in good condition, and the cost of replating soon adds up. Finally, on bodywork, the comments from Lou Shorten, of MG Specialists (Lenwade), are interesting. They have, over many years, restored some 46 Z models, and find that the cars arriving these days are in very poor condition. Not only are they rusty, but often butchered and bodged as well, making proper restoration a long process, which can cost a lot of money (up to around £18,000 if done professionally).

MECHANICAL BITS

ENGINES, gearboxes and rear axles are renowned for their longevity. Given proper maintenance mid a reasonably sympathetic approach to driving, engine life expectancy between major overhauls is in the region of 100,000 to 120,000 miles. Hard-driven examples will usually clock 80,000 miles.

If the combined brake and clutch master cylinder is worn, re-sleeved, re-assembled units can be obtained for about £140.

Currently virtually impossible to source are the MG boss for the centre of the steering wheel, the casing around the clock, and the heater transmitter from the cylinder block, although solutions to these problems are being sought.

In virtually every other department, replacement components are available, including repair sections for all the rust-prone areas of the bodywork. There are several specialist suppliers who deal with the Z models (listed elsewhere in this feature); their efforts in continuing to stock and remanufacture spares mean that the surviving cars can be kept running long-term.

With the possible exception of balancing the twin carburettors, which is time-consuming rather than difficult, and reaching the distributor, which is mounted well down within the engine bay, servicing a Z Series Magnette is very straightforward. So too is a decoke and a clutch change.

Even today the Z models are enjoyable to drive, practical classics. Restorable cars requiring lots of work can be found for a few hundred pounds, with sound examples in need of cosmetic attention available for around £3,000. Expect to pay £5,000 or more for a Condition One car. A concours car may sell for double that.



Immaculate engine compartment of Philip Jones's ZA model. Routine maintenance is easy.



Apart from the Varitone's enlarged rear window, few styling changes were made during the 1953 – 58 production run.

OWNER'S VIEW



PHILIP JONES 1954 TIN-TOP DASH ZA, TPP 199

Philip Jones bought his now pristine Magnette seven years ago in a derelict condition. The car was stripped to a bare shell and Philip worked his way through the vehicle, MIG welding in new panels. The wood grain effect tin-top dash was sent to Sweden for hand-painting. With the exception of this and the re-spray, all the restoration work was carried out by Philip himself.

PETE MOODY 1958 ZB VAPITONE, VYY 544

Prior to owning his 1958 ZB Varitone Magnette, Pete Moody had a 37-seater coach, but when he sold this in 1992, he bought the Magnette. The bottom half of the body turned out to be in a poor state and he entrusted the necessary work to a friend, but assisted with cutting out the rotten metal. He likes the Magnette for its comparatively modern feel, "a combination of 1970s performance, but with 1950s brakes".



HISTORY AND MODEL IDENTIFICATION

October 1953: Gerald Palmer-designed ZA debut at Earls Court Motor Show; same bodyshell as Wolseley 4/44, but with differing outer panelwork and Longbridge-built twin carburettor 60bhp 1489cc BMC B-Series engine and drivetrain, plus better located rear axle. Side body trims wrap around front wheelarches. Up to chassis no 750, the cars had no front quarterlight windows.

February 1954: Oil pump modified.

March 1955: Tin top dash replaced by wood.

July 1956: Engine modifications introduced, as listed under October for ZB (chassis no 18101-on).

October 1956: ZB arrives, with higher compression engine developing more power (twin u.sin. SU carburettors, revised manifolds, also double valve springs) and higher final drive ratio. Side body trims now straight. Steering wheel dished (ZA's was flatter). Flashing indicators. Varitone version normally supplied with two-tone paintwork. Varitone has wider, curved glass, wrap-around rear window. Manumatic semi-automatic transmission optional.

December 1956: Safety locks on front and rear doors.

October 1958: Manumatic transmission no longer offered.

December: ZB discontinued. Total production — ZAs 18,076; ZBs 18,574.

CLUB TOGETHER

- MG Car Club, Kimber House, PO Box 251, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 1FF (01235 555552), incorporates Z model register.
- MG Owners' Club, Freepost, Swavesey, Cambridge, CR4 1BR

SPECIALISTS

- MG Specialists (Lenwade), Norwich (01603 872436)
- John Monkman, Sheffield (01742 307436)
- NTG Services, Ipswich (01473 211240)
- Zedparts, Bristol (0117 9426338)

FARINA MAGNETTES

SUCCESSOR to the ZB Magnette, the Farina-styled Mk III saloon was introduced in February 1959, with a similar bodyshell to the Austin A55 Mark II, Morris Oxford Series V and Wolseley 15/60. However, like the Riley 4/68 of the same era, it had rounded rear fins and a twin carburettor version of the B-Series engine, plus an upmarket interior.

Many MG enthusiasts were dismayed that the new car was a badge-engineered BMC Farina and that it had lost its first class handling and precise steering characteristics.

The Mk IV, introduced in August 1961 and surviving until 1968, received a 1622 cc engine, wider track, longer wheelbase, anti-roll bars front and rear and the option of automatic transmission. They were faster and cornered better than the Mk IIIs but couldn't match the handling of the Z-types.

Although 16,676 Mk IIIs and 14,320 Mk IVs were built, the ravages of tinworm and banger racers have taken their toll. Either model will now cost up to £2,500.

My thanks to Nigel Hedges (secretary of the Dorset Area Group of the MG Owners' Club), Z owners Phil Jones and Pete Moody, Lou Shorten of MG Specialists (Lenwade) and Brian Blick for their invaluable help.

SPOT THE ROT



Examine structure around the tube supporting the front mounts for the rear springs; between then nearby chassis and the rear end of each sill.



Rearmost supports for the rear springs also need to be attached to sound steel; this is an MoT test checkpoint too, so look carefully.



Behind each front wheel is a box section between the bulkhead and outer wing. It fills with water from above so it, and the sill, rust away.



Check inner and outer sills along their entire length. Original BMC replacements are hard to find, but re-manufactured sills are available.



Ensure jacking points are okay. From new, the anchorage at the inner end (to the floor) was relatively weak; inspect very closely.



Check the channel sections beneath the front seats, and the vital stiffeners running along the centre of the front floor panels, are sound.



All floorpans are liable to rust, especially adjacent to the inner sills and toeboards. Check also double skinned heelboard sections at front.



Bottoms of the doors and the boot lid can suffer from rust eating its way out. Open and check from below, as well as from the outside.



Double-skinned rear wheel arch lips are prone to disintegrate – check very carefully. Feel around inside of the wings to check for any holes.



Lower edges of the rear wings are prone to disappearing on badly neglected examples. Check the rear sections of inner wings as well.



Front wings can rust around the headlamps and in the lower, front and rear corners and trailing edges. Check front valence-to-wing joints.



There should be a gap between the lower, rear corner of each front wing and top of the sill (see text). The bolt-on splash plate can rust.

SPECIFICATIONS AND PERFORMANCE

	ZA	ZB
Production	1953-56	1956-58
Cylinders	4 (ohv)	4 (ohv)
Bore/stroke	73mm/88.9mm	73mm/88.9mm
Capacity	1489cc	1489cc
Bhp/rpm	60/4600	68.5/5250
Carburettor	Twin SU 1.25 in (to chassis no 18101 then twin SU 1.5in)	Twin SU 1.5in
Transmission	Four speed	Four speed
Suspension	Coil springs and wishbones front; leaf plus torque arm rear	Coil springs and wishbones front; leaf plus torque arm rear
Steering	Rack and pinion	Rack and pinion
Brakes	Lockheed hydraulic drums front/rear	Lockheed hydraulic drums front/rear
0-60mph (sec)	22	18.5
Max. speed (mph)	85	90
Overall mpg	25-32	25-32
Dimensions:		
Length	14ft 1in (4292mm)	14ft 1in (4292mm)
Width	5ft 3in (1600mm)	5ft 3in (1600mm)
Height	4ft 10in (1473mm)	4ft 10in (1473mm)
Turning circle	37ft 6in (11.28m)	37ft 6in (11.28m)

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