

All the Way from A to B: The History of the MGB, Part Two

THE V8 MGB

In the fall of 1967, MG introduced [the MGC, a six-cylinder version of the B](#), powered by the 2,912 cc (178 cu. in.) engine from the Austin 3-litre sedan. While this sounded good on paper, the big six played hob with the B's weight distribution and handling and the motoring press had promptly beaten the C about the ears. Sales were poor and the MGC was withdrawn in 1969.

The 1968 merger between BMC and the Leyland Motor Corporation had many unfortunate ramifications for MG, but it also presented an intriguing opportunity for a different big-engine B. In 1967, Leyland had acquired Rover, which had recently begun manufacturing its own version of [Buick's old all-aluminum V8](#) for use in the P5 and [P6 sedans](#). The lightweight, compact 3,528 cc (215 cu. in.) engine soon had the British aftermarket salivating and as early as December 1968, the editors of **Autocar** wondered if British Leyland would install it in the MGB. Despite its greater displacement, the Rover V8 was only a few pounds heavier than the B-series four and seemed like a much better match for the B's chassis than the bulky C-series six.



A rare North American MGC. The MGC's distinctive bonnet bulge (with a second, smaller bulge for the carburetors) was necessitated by the installation of the big C-series six, shared with the Austin 3-litre. The MGC was not a commercial success and only about 9,000 were built before production ended in August 1969.

(Some sources assert that the Rover engine actually weighed *less* than the B-series, which had a dry weight of about 360 lb (163 kg). While Buick quoted a dry weight of 318 lb (144 kg) for its original 215 cu. in. (3,528 cc) V8, both the Oldsmobile and Rover versions had many minor design variations and were somewhat heavier than the early Buick engine. Dutch Rover enthusiast Rene Winters cites a dry weight of 375 lb (170 kg) for the Rover engine, which would make it 17 lb (8 kg) heavier than the B-series four — still a very modest penalty given the V8's substantially greater displacement and power.)

At first, British Leyland had no such intention. The fact that Triumph was about to introduce its own V8 sports car, the Stag — powered not by the Rover engine, but by a new 2,997 cc (183 cu. in.) SOHC V8 — may have had something to do with that; a 3.5-liter MGB would have been a direct competitor. According to Robin Weatherall, Austin-Morris engineering director Charles Griffin did explore the possibility of installing the Rover engine in the MGB,

but declared in November 1970 that it would be impossible without substantially widening the engine bay.

Around the same time, Abingdon proposed an entirely different V8 MGB, using the aluminum Daimler V8, either the 2,548 cc (153 cu. in.) version from the Daimler SP250 sports car or the 4,561 cc (278 cu. in.) engine from the big Daimler Majestic Major. According to David Knowles, mock-ups were built to see if the Daimler engine would fit, but it appears that it was never seriously considered for production.



Although quite a few MGB owners have performed private engine swaps, this car has the factory V8's unusual "lobster claw" intake manifold, which enabled the Rover engine to fit in the B's engine bay without an MGC-style bonnet bulge. With two S.U. HIF6 carburetors, the 3,528 cc (215 cu. in.) engine was rated at 137 hp DIN (101 kW) and 193 lb-ft (261 N-m) of torque. (Photo © 2007 [Axel Volker](#); used with permission)

Griffin didn't realize at the time that not only was it possible to install the Rover engine in the MGB, the aftermarket had already done it. In 1969, racing driver Ken Costello had installed the Oldsmobile version of the 3.5-liter engine (from the original [Olds F-85/Cutlass](#)) in a borrowed MGB roadster with promising results. Before long, his acquaintances were asking him to build similar cars for them. Costello soon formed his own company in Kent, the V8 Conversion Company, offering Rover V8 conversions for customers' MGB coupes and roadsters. It was an expensive swap at around £1,000 (about \$2,400), but it provided impressive performance, with little sacrifice of the stock MGB's balance and handling.

The Costello conversions received enthusiastic reviews in the motoring press, which in turn came to the attention of British Leyland. In May 1971, Costello received a letter from Charles Griffin inviting him to Longbridge to demonstrate his conversion to Griffin and technical director Harry Webster. Two weeks after that, Costello was summoned to a meeting with chairman Donald Stokes (now Lord Stokes), who according to Wilson McComb was rather chagrined that a private builder had beaten British Leyland to the punch. Stokes commissioned Costello to build a prototype for a production MGB V8, providing a new GT coupe and Rover engine for that purpose.



The 1970 MGB (top) had an unpopular new recessed grille, added at the behest of British Leyland management, which considered the earlier chrome grille both dated and too expensive to produce. According to author David Knowles, J. Bruce McWilliams, head of British Leyland's North American operations, so detested the recessed grille that he pushed for an immediate replacement, which appeared for the 1972 model year. The new grille (bottom) combined the earlier chrome surround with a cheaper black plastic insert, restoring some of the flavor of the early MGB, at a lower cost. Early V8 cars shared this grille, albeit with "V8" badges; it was replaced in mid-1974 by the new "rubber-bumper" nose.

The production V8, known internally as ADO75, was a more elaborate conversion than Costello's engine swap, utilizing some of the beefier drivetrain components developed for the defunct MGC. The compact Rover engine didn't require the MGC's altered front suspension, although the front crossmember was modified to ensure proper ground clearance, the radiator was moved forward and the firewall was reshaped to accommodate the V8 bell housing. Rather than using the high-compression V8 from the Rover 3500, Abingdon opted for the mildly tuned Range Rover engine, which still had ample power and was more readily available. (It also put less of a strain on the gearbox, whose torque capacity was sorely tested by the bigger engine.)

The V8 made the ADO75 the fastest stock MGB to date. While the Rover engine was at least nominally less powerful than the old MGC — 137 hp DIN (101 kW) to the C's 145 net horsepower (108 kW) — the V8's power-to-weight ratio was decisively better. MG advertising claimed a top speed of 124 mph (200 km/h) and 0-60 mph (0-97 km/h) in 8.3 seconds, which was certainly conservative. Since its weight and weight distribution were similar to the four-cylinder MGB's, the V8's steering, handling, and braking were little changed, but the MGB now had the muscle to face rivals like the [Datsun 240Z](#), Reliant Scimitar GTE, and [Ford Capri 3000](#). Furthermore, the tuning potential of the Rover engine was well known.

Abingdon announced the new model, prosaically dubbed MGB GT V8, in August 1973. With a starting price of £2,085.42 with tax (around \$5,000 at the contemporary exchange rate), it cost almost 50% more than a four-cylinder MGB roadster. The V8 was still cheaper than a UK-market 240Z, which was subject to heavy import duties, but it was an uncomfortable £430 (over \$1,000) more than the Ford Capri 3000GT, which had similar performance in a more modern package. The V8 also had the misfortune to bow just before the 1973 OPEC oil embargo, which made buyers shy away from powerful, thirsty cars.



Although the V8 fit equally well in the roadster and the GT — former MG engineer Donald Hayter later owned a MGB roadster powered by the original development engine — the factory offered the Rover engine only in the coupe. Other than its badges, distinctive alloy wheels, and standard tinted windows, the MGB GT V8 looked just like a four-cylinder GT, an undoubted advantage in the stoplight Grand Prix, but not very reassuring to the V8 buyer who had laid out an extra £700-odd (about \$1,700) for the big engine. All GT V8s had a four-speed gearbox with standard Laycock de Normanville overdrive, usable only in fourth; the Borg-Warner automatic had been discontinued by the time the V8 went on sale. (Photo © 2009 [Gazh Photography](#); used with permission)

The V8 would probably have done better in the U.S., even after the embargo; by the standards of the American market, it was practically an economy car. British Leyland showed the GT V8 to its North American distributors and Abingdon did build a small number of LHD cars — between six and nine — for evaluation, but the company ultimately elected not to export the V8.

The reasons for that decision are not entirely clear. The cost of federalization was likely a factor: the Rover 3500 had already been withdrawn from the U.S. market, with the Range Rover slated for withdrawal in 1974, and the projected volume of the MGB V8 probably would not have justified the cost of emissions certification (although Robin Weatherall notes that it was crash tested). British Leyland management may also have wanted to protect the upcoming Triumph TR7 — BL withdrew the four-cylinder MGB GT from the U.S. market in early 1975 for much the same reason. John Thornley told Wilson McComb that he'd heard rumors about Rover's GM licensing agreement limiting its total production of the V8,

presumably to prevent Rover from competing with GM products, but Dan Wall, Rover's head of V8 engine development in the seventies, told David Knowles that he knew of no such restrictions. Wall said that GM executives had long since lost interest in the aluminum engine, which Buick had dropped in 1963, and were more bemused than threatened by Rover's continued interest in it. There were definite limits to Rover's engine production capacity, however, and most of that was already earmarked for Rover's own products.



The MGB's dashboard was redesigned for the 1972 model year, restoring the glove box, and again in 1977 to meet revised U.S. safety regulations. This 1974 GT has new stalk-mounted controls for the lights and wipers, adopted on V8 cars the previous year.

Whatever the rationale, the lack of exports sharply curtailed the V8's sales potential. With no LHD version, it couldn't be sold in Europe (where the market would probably have been limited, in any event) and it was too expensive for most Britons, particularly during the fuel crisis. MG continued to offer the GT V8 through the 1977 model year, but sales never topped 800 a year. When production ended in July 1976, the grand total came to only 2,591 cars, making it one of the rarest factory MGBs. Ken Costello, meanwhile, did about 225 conversions in the seventies, with another batch in the late eighties.

As we saw in our [first installment](#), by the mid-sixties, the MGB had become one of the world's best-selling sports cars. Not even its most loyal fans, however, would have imagined that it would survive for 18 years — or that it would rise again barely a decade

after its demise. This week, we present the second half of our history of the MGB, including the 1971-1981 MGB, the 1966-1981 MGB GT, the MGB GT V8, and the MG RV8.



POOR MAN'S ASTON: MGB GT

Considering that the MGB was originally inspired by the Aston Martin DB2/4, it took the factory a curiously long time to develop a fixed-roof version of the B. Indeed, from 1963 to 1965, BMC's Competitions Department was obliged to fit the MGB roadster with an accessory hardtop in order to race in the GT classes. It seemed that MG was missing an obvious opportunity.

It was not for lack of trying. The Abingdon design office had started work on an MGB coupe, designated EX227, months before the roadster even went into production, but none of their efforts had borne fruit. Engineer Roy Brocklehurst told historian F. Wilson McComb that the primary obstacle was the determination to retain the roadster's windshield (presumably for cost reasons, although Brocklehurst didn't specify). Because the B's windshield was so low, it proved very difficult to design a good-looking roof that would still provide adequate headroom. The tacked-on roof of the previous MGA coupe was no solution; it looked like an afterthought and chief body engineer Jim O'Neill, among others, had never liked it. MG chief engineer Syd Enever explored various design concepts for a fixed-head MGB, but none was satisfactory and the project dragged on for almost two years.



The GT's windshield is about 4 inches (101 mm) taller than that of the roadster while the side windows are about 1.5 inches (38 mm) higher; the front fenders were reshaped to maintain the car's proportions. The GT had the same engine as the roadster, a 1,798 cc (110 cu. in.) B-series four making 98 hp (73 kW) and 110 lb-ft (149 N-m), but the coupe's extra weight makes it a bit more than a second slower to 60 mph (97 km/h). Note this LHD car's single fender-mounted mirror — when dual mirrors were ordered, the driver's side mirror was mounted on the door, the passenger-side mirror on the fender.

Evidently growing impatient, BMC chairman George Harriman commissioned Italy's Pininfarina to build a prototype — much to the dismay of SydEnever, who saw it as a vote of no confidence. In the fall of 1963, Abingdon shipped a gray MGB roadster to Turin. Pininfarina returned it the follow spring, now painted metallic green and sporting an attractive hatchback roof. This new design sliced the Gordian knot that had stymied MG's designers: By raising the windshield about 4 inches (100 mm) with a commensurately larger greenhouse, the Pininfarina car combined reasonable headroom and fine proportions. It also had superior aerodynamics despite its greater frontal area.

Exactly who was responsible for the decision to raise the windshield and enlarge greenhouse is still a matter of debate. MG managing director John Thornley credited the designers in Turin, but MG designer Jim Stimson told author David Knowles that he and SydEnever had decided to give the coupe a taller greenhouse before Pininfarina was even hired. Stimson said the Italians had largely followed his scale drawings and that Pininfarina's principal contributions were frameless rear windows (which didn't make production) and the coupe's distinctive roof creases.

Complicating the issue even further, the greenhouse of the finished product bears a noteworthy resemblance to a 1962 concept car built (though not designed) by Pininfarina, a one-off coupe based on the [Austin-Healey 3000](#) platform, developed by design students Michael Contrad, PioManzù, and Henner Werner for an **Automobile Year** contest. That concept had been exhibited at the 1962 Earls Court show in London,

so BMC was definitely aware of it. In fact, chairman George Harriman subsequently acquired the rights to the design, which was developed for several years as a possible E-type Jaguar competitor, the ADO30. We don't know to what extent the ADO30 may have influenced the design of the fixed-head B, but we assume the designers in Abingdon would have seen it, whether at Earls Court or in Longbridge.



There's no question that the B GT was heavier than the roadster, but estimates of how *much* heavier vary by as much as 80 lb (36 kg). We suspect the confusion is attributable to the curious contemporary practice of quoting curb weight with other than a full tank of fuel. **The Motor** in those days measured curb weight with just enough fuel for 50 miles (80 km) of driving, **Autocar** using half a tank; the difference in fuel weight would account for much of the discrepancy between the various published figures. In any event, the GT received an extra leaf in each semi-elliptical rear spring to compensate for the extra weight plus a front anti-roll bar to maintain handling balance.

Whatever its origins, the Pininfarina prototype made an immediate hit with John Thornley, who thought it would appeal to a more upscale class of buyers; it would at last be the affordable Aston Martin he had imagined back in 1957. After a few detail revisions, the coupe was approved for production, which commenced the following summer. Dubbed MGB GT, the coupe bowed at the London Motor Show in the fall of 1965.

Like the long-departed DB2/4, the GT was a 2+2 with a tiny rear bench into which a small child or medium-size dog could be crammed for short trips. Although a heater was still optional, extra sound insulation and a marginally less flinty ride made the GT more civilized than the roadster, although no one was likely to mistake it for a Cadillac. Since the GT was some 220 lb (100 kg) heavier than the open car and used the same powertrain, its acceleration suffered somewhat, but the coupe's lower drag made it just as fast as the roadster (if not faster) all out. The GT's handling was actually superior, thanks to better weight distribution, stiffer rear springs, and a standard front anti-roll bar, still optional on the open car.



In pre-ISOFIX days, you might have been able to wedge two small children into the GT's rear seat, but it was best used for extra luggage space. The leatherette-upholstered bench folded down for that purpose.

Starting at £998 8s 9d with purchase tax (about \$2,800 at the contemporary exchange rate), the GT cost about £143 (about \$400) more than the roadster, but sales were strong. If the GT was less overtly sporting than the open car, the coupe was also more elegant and obviously more practical. The arrival of the GT boosted the MGB's total sales volume by more than 40%, prompting BMC to expand production at Abingdon.

By the time the factory had built enough GTs for homologation, the MGB's competition heyday was winding down, but the coupe did achieve some racing success. An MGB GT driven by Andrew Hedges and Paddy Hopkirk won the GT class at the 1967 12 Hours of Sebring, while an aluminum-bodied GTS with a bored-out, 2,004 cc (122 cu. in.) engine (actually a prototype of the still-gestating six-cylinder [MGC GTS](#)) ran in the 1967 Targa Florio. In 1969, another B GT, driven by Americans Logan Blackburn and Jerry Truitt, took fourth in class at Sebring. As with the roadster, private GTs continued to race in major events as late as 1978.



The GT's cargo area was not generously sized, but it was substantially more commodious than the roadster's boot; with the seat folded down, the space was adequate for a couple's weekend luggage. This is actually a 1969 MGC, but the cargo area is almost identical to that of the Mk 2 MGB GT.

The GT never became as ubiquitous as the roadster, but it was a solid success, eventually selling more than 125,000 units. Although North America took more than half of all GT production, the coupe is less familiar to Americans today, in part because it was withdrawn from the U.S. market in early 1975. It remained available in Great Britain until the end; the last MGB to come off the line in 1980 was a GT.

SIDEBAR: The CouneBerlinette

While the factory was still struggling to come up with an MGB coupe, an independent coachbuilder decided to essay a fixed-roof B of his own. In 1963, Belgium's Jacques CouneCarrossier transformed an MGB roadster into a sleek, Ferrari-like semi-fastback coupe called the CouneBerlinette, which debuted at the 1964 Brussels Motor Show. The positive response led Coune to begin limited series production of the coupe for the European market.

Intrigued, BMC technical director Alec Issigonis met with Coune to discuss licensing the design for a production model. BMC arranged for one of its employees, Walter Oldfield, to purchase one of the cars privately for evaluation, but by the time it was ready in June 1964, Pininfarina had already completed the prototype of the MGB GT, which bore a stronger resemblance to the roadster than the Coune design and promised to be much cheaper to build. SydEnever and various top BMC officials test-drove Oldfield's car, but Alec Issigonis finally told Jacques Coune that they had decided not to license its design, offering the rather disingenuous excuse that it was "too Italian!"



At a glance, only the familiar grille and bumper suggest the CouneBerlinette's MGB origins; most of the upper body structure is different, including the A-pillars and windshield frame. Nicolas Lecompte, the owner of this car and a friend of Jacques Coune, says the windshield and backlight were borrowed from the contemporary Renault 8. The only mechanical change was an Abarth exhaust system — Coune was also the Belgian Abarth distributor — but the fiberglass-bodied Berlinette weighed about 125 lb (57 kg) less than a stock MGB roadster and the sloping roof and Kamm tail gave it better aerodynamics. Claimed top speed was 112 mph (180 km/h). (Photo © 2008 Nicolas Lecompte; used with permission)

Not dissuaded, Coune continued to market the Berlinette himself, offering both turnkey cars and conversions of customer vehicles. Either way, all Berlinettes began life as fully assembled roadsters. (Author Anders Ditlev Clausager's speculation that the Berlinette was assembled from Belgian CKD kits was apparently incorrect, although it certainly would have made things easier!) With a base price of 300,000 Belgian francs FOB Antwerp (about \$3,400), however, a new Berlinette cost nearly twice as much as an MGB roadster, which limited the coupe's appeal. Sales dried up after the arrival of the much cheaper MGB GT and Coune ended production in 1966, although unsold cars lingered at dealerships for several years afterward.

Total production of the CouneBerlinette eventually came to 56 cars, the first six bodied in steel, the rest in fiberglass. Except for Walter Oldfield's car, all were left-hand drive. Most Berlinettes were sold in Belgium or the Netherlands, but at least two cars eventually made it to the U.S.

THE RUBBER-BUMPER B

While the V8 came and went, a second intended successor, known internally as ADO21, also failed to make production. Styled by Harris Mann and Paul Hughes of the Austin-Morris design office in Longbridge, the ADO21 was a wedge-shaped, mid-engine

coupe, with fashionable “flying buttress” sail panels. It would have had a de Dion rear suspension and a choice of three engines: the 1,275 cc (78 cu. in.) A-series four from the Mini Cooper 1275GT, the new 1,748 cc (107 cu. in.) E4, or the 2,227 cc (136) E6. The smaller engine would allow the ADO21 to succeed the Spridget and Triumph Spitfire, but the E-series engines would have made it a credible successor to the MGB and MGC as well; had it made it to production, it might well have been called the MGD.

British Leyland’s enthusiasm for the ADO21 gradually diminished throughout 1970. The main problem appears to have been cost; although the ADO21 used or adapted many components from other Austin Morris products, it would probably have been significantly more expensive to build than the MGB. Moreover, British Leyland’s market research showed that the vital American market strongly preferred conventional engineering. The ADO21 was finally canceled in late December, and the prototype was scrapped about a year later.

(Some sources suggest that the ADO21 lost an in-house competition with a Triumph design that later became the [TR7](#), but author David Knowles says that was not the case. The TR7 did indeed emerge from a design contest between Austin-Morris and Triumph, but while the Austin-Morris entry — also styled by Harris Mann — was badged as an MG, it was *not* the ADO21, which had died months earlier. Roy Brocklehurst, who succeeded Syd Enever as MG’s chief engineer in 1971, felt that the ADO21 did influence the TR7, but its impact, if any, was stylistic rather than mechanical.)



The 1974 MGB’s rubber overriders — nicknamed “Sabrinas,” after a particularly buxom British actress of the fifties — added about 6 inches (152 mm) to the B’s overall length. North American models were now down to 78.5 horsepower (58 kW), thanks to a lower compression ratio and other changes for EPA emissions certification. This was the final year for the U.S. MGB GT; the hatchback coupe was withdrawn in early 1975, although it remained on sale in the UK.

With the collapse of the ADO21 project, the four-cylinder MGB soldiered on. If it had continued unmolested, that might not have been so bad, but the latest American safety standards made that impossible. Starting in 1973, U.S. regulations required bumpers capable of withstanding a 5 mph (8 km/h) frontal impact and a 2.5 mph (4 km/h) rear impact, increased the following year to 5 mph (8 km/h) both front and rear. By 1975, the bumpers also had to absorb that impact without any damage to the body structure or frame. It was an extremely challenging requirement, especially for cars that had been designed more than a decade before the standards were even conceived.

Since failure to meet the new requirements would force the withdrawal of the MGB from the American market, the engineers at Abingdon worked frantically to find alternatives. As a stopgap, early 1974 MGBs added comically large rubber overrides to the existing bumpers. These were replaced late in the year by completely new steel bumpers with conformal plastic covers to integrate them with the shape of the body. This was arguably a more satisfactory solution than the massive chrome battering rams of many contemporary Detroit cars, which would have been disastrous on the B. The new bumpers' aesthetic impact probably would have been mitigated if they had been body-colored, like those of the later [Porsche 924](#) and [928](#), but they were available only in flat black, which gave the B a somewhat unfinished appearance.



The late-model B's "rubber" bumpers are really hollow polyurethane shells, concealing the beefy steel structure that provided the actual impact absorption. A wire screen behind the air intakes protects the radiator from debris. Unlike the earlier recessed grille, which was imposed by British Leyland, the new bumpers were developed by Abingdon under the supervision of body engineer Jim O'Neill. In later conversations with author David Knowles, O'Neill defended the rubber bumpers as the best available solution to a very difficult problem.

At the same time, the four-cylinder MGB was raised about 1.5 inches (38 mm) to comply with new U.S. bumper-height requirements. This wreaked havoc on the B's center of gravity, compounded on roadsters by the deletion of the front anti-roll bar, apparently as a cost-saving measure. The result was substantial body lean and a much

tipsier feel than earlier Bs, only partially mitigated by the belated standardization of front and rear anti-roll bars in 1977.

The redesigned bumpers also contributed to the MGB's burgeoning curb weight, which was beginning to approach that of the old MGC. That was bad enough for unrestricted British cars, but North American Bs had to be detuned significantly to meet federal emissions standards, losing their dual exhausts and trading their twin S.U.s for a single Zenith Stromberg carburetor. Power ratings quietly disappeared from MG's advertising and brochures.

While the motoring press averted its collective eyes, these various indignities had surprisingly little impact on the MGB's popularity. Business was down from its early-seventies peak, but the B was still good for between 20,000 and 30,000 sales a year, comparable to its mid-sixties volume. The MGB had outlived several direct rivals and few of the ones that remained were in significantly better shape. The late "rubber-bumper" B had become a sort of aging diva — no longer as trim, pretty, or graceful as it had once been, but still sustained by the loyalty of its many fans.



We suspect that body-colored bumpers, like the "Elastometric" bumper covers that Chrysler offered on the [1970-1974 Plymouth Barracuda](#) and [Dodge Challenger](#), would have done wonders for the appearance of the late-model MGB. Unfortunately, Abingdon was unable to find a sufficiently flexible paint; none of their experiments proved durable enough for production. A proposed facelift of the MGB, known internally as ADO76, would have offered bumpers molded in different colors, but that project never came to fruition.

THE END OF ABINGDON

The MGB's twilight should have been its golden years in terms of profit, but the B was still haunted by the long-ago decision not to amortize its tooling costs. At a time when most cars would have long since been paid off, the factory was, according to Wilson McComb, still paying a per-car tooling fee for each MGB body, just as it had at the beginning of production.

As with the [Mini](#), the MGB left BL in a cruel bind. The roadster was no longer profitable and it didn't sell well enough to justify any substantial changes, but it was too popular to kill, at least without risking a dealer revolt. Even in its declining years, the B still accounted for more than 30% of British Leyland's U.S. sales and regularly outsold the much-newer Triumph TR7.

This dilemma was exacerbated by shifts in the sterling-dollar exchange rate. After dropping sharply in 1976 — a crisis that forced Britain's Callaghan government to seek a £2.3 billion (\$3.9 billion) line of credit from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) — the value of the pound had increased so much relative to the U.S. dollar that BL was now effectively selling its North American cars at a substantial loss despite repeated price increases. By the time the 1980 models bowed in mid-1979, the disparity had reached alarming proportions. In the U.S., an MGB with overdrive started at around \$8,200, which at the time was equivalent to perhaps £3,800. In the UK, a similarly equipped MGB tourer started at about £6,100, the equivalent of more than \$13,000! The discrepancies in wholesale costs were not quite that bad, but by the end of the year, British Leyland admitted it was losing £900 (nearly \$2,000) on every MGB sold in America. Even the most robust automaker couldn't sustain such losses for long and British Leyland was anything but healthy.



The black-bumper MGB was almost an inch (23 mm) shorter than the "Sabrina" model of 1974, but was quite a bit heavier: Curb weight was now more than 2,400 lb (1,095 kg). Unrestricted British cars still had 97 hp DIN (71 kW), but by 1975, North American Bs were down to 62.5 net horsepower (47 kW), making for rather sedate straight-line performance. Abingdon planned to address that shortfall in 1981 by switching to the 1,994 cc (122 cu. in.) O-series engine, but the MGB was canceled shortly before production was to begin.

By 1979, the political climate was also changing. Since 1975, British Leyland had been essentially a ward of the state, with 95% of its shares owned by the British government. The general elections in May 1979 brought a new prime minister and new Conservative government that was eager to distance itself from its Labour predecessor's policy of direct subsidies to industry. The new Thatcher government could not afford the political fallout of an immediate divestment, but Secretary of State for Industry Keith Joseph made it clear that there would be no more government money until British Leyland staunched its losses and brought its spiraling costs under control.

In September 1979, British Leyland staged a two-day gala to mark the golden anniversary of the MG plant in Abingdon. Few of the attendees realized it was actually a wake. The following Monday, BL chairman Sir Michael Edwardes announced that Abingdon would be closed at the end of the 1980 model year as part of a plan to cut BL's workforce by 25,000 jobs. The factory's demise would bring with it the end of both the Midget and the MGB.

The announcement was greeted with howls of protest, including public demonstrations and a letter-writing campaign, organized by former managing director John Thornley asking MG dealers to oppose the closure. Some North American dealers threatened legal action if the MGB was canceled; J. Bruce McWilliams, the head of British Leyland's North American organization, pushed to keep the B alive through at least

1984, but it was to no avail. Sir Michael Edwardes later acknowledged that he hadn't really grasped the loyalty that the MG brand commanded, but something had to give and Abingdon was among the least critical of British Leyland's plants. The new pressure from Whitehall meant that the company's first priority had to be mainstream products like the much-delayed Metro and low-volume sports cars were once again deemed secondary. The MGB's internecine rival, the Triumph TR7, would survive, although the Canley Triumph Works were also slated for closure; TR7 production would be transferred to the Rover plant in Solihull.



For 1980, North American MGBs were back up to 67 net horsepower (50 kW) and 94 lb-ft (127 N-m) of torque, although they were still much slower than the old Mk 1 and Mk 2 cars. Engineer Terry Mitchell told author David Knowles that if the planned O-series engine had gone into production for 1981, U.S. Bs would have had about 95 net horsepower (71 kW), British cars a healthy 127 hp (95 kW). Abingdon also experimented with a turbocharged O-series engine, which would have up to 160 horsepower (119 kW).

The decision to kill the MGB was particularly frustrating to Don Hayter, who had replaced Roy Brocklehurst as MG's chief engineer in 1973. Embarrassed by the B's increasingly anemic performance, Hayter had obtained permission to replace the elderly B-series engine with the new corporate O-series four, a 1,994 cc (122 cu. in.) OHC engine also used by the Austin Marina and later the base Rover SD1. North American Bs were to have Lucas Jetronic fuel injection, finally enabling them to pass their EPA tests with some honor intact. The O-series engine was originally slated to appear for 1977 along with an extensive cosmetic revamp known internally as ADO76, but the facelift was canceled and the new engine was pushed back to the 1981 model year. MG built about two dozen Bs with the O-series engine, and Hayter says they had already completed U.S. emissions and crash testing when British Leyland brought down the ax.

In October 1979, Alan Curtis, the chairman of Aston Martin Lagonda, assembled a group of businessmen in a last-ditch effort to save the B. They offered British Leyland £30 million (about \$70 million) for the Abingdon plant, the MGB's design and tooling, and the rights to use the MG name. Their plan was to give the B a quick facelift courtesy of Aston Martin's William Towns and continue production with minimal interruption. British Leyland's initial enthusiasm for this idea was not high and it took around six months for the parties to reach an agreement. By then, Aston Martin was having financial problems of its own and was no longer able to put up its share of the money. The deal collapsed in the summer of 1980.

According to David Knowles, perhaps the bitterest irony of the Aston Martin negotiations was that they derailed an internal plan to repurpose the Abingdon plant, adding a production facility for CKD kits and a new special vehicles unit. That plan would have allowed about a third of Abingdon's workers to keep their jobs, but it was shelved when an agreement with the Curtis group seemed imminent. By the time the deal fell apart, British Leyland had made other arrangements and Abingdon was finished.



The North American MGB Limited Edition was introduced in 1979 and eventually sold nearly 6,700 copies. All American Limited Editions were black with silver tape stripes, five-spoke alloy wheels, and an under-nose spoiler. The 1981 British Limited Edition had the same spoiler and wheels, but was offered only in bronze or pewter.

The last MGBs came off the line on October 23, 1980. British Leyland marketed a final 1,000 cars as 1981 Limited Edition models, priced at £6,445 (around \$13,000) for the roadster, £6,937 (about \$14,000) for the GT. The final U.S. MGB, a North American Limited Edition, was presented as a gift to Henry Ford II, who donated it to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn. (It has changed hands several times since then and is now privately owned.)

THE RESURRECTION OF THE MGB

The demise of the Abingdon factory, the MGB, and the Midget did not mean the end of the MG name. British Leyland promptly applied it to the new Metro and later to the Maestro and Montego, where it survived through 1991.

Although it was no longer in production, the MGB still had a loyal following. The B had its faults, but it was a known quantity and both cars and parts were still in ample supply. By 1988, even complete body shells were once again available, thanks to David Keith of British Motor Heritage, a new division of the British Motor Industry Heritage Trust, British Leyland/Austin Rover/Rover Group's museum and historical archives. Keith was able to salvage much of the MGB's original tooling, allowing BMH to begin manufacturing small numbers of complete roadster (and later GT) bodies for high-end restorations.

A major reason for the MGB's continuing popularity was that there were few modern equivalents; with the market's newfound appetite for GTs and hot hatches, traditional sports cars had become rather thin on the ground. However, that suddenly changed in February 1989, with the arrival of Mazda's MX-5 Miata. Although it looked more like an early Lotus Elan than an MG, the MX-5 was roughly the same size and weight as the old chrome-bumper MGB roadster, combining similar virtues with modern ergonomics and reliability.



A first-year Mazda MX-5 Miata (chassis code NA). The original Miata had a 1,598 cc (98 cu. in.) DOHC four, making 116 hp (87 kW) SAE with manual transmission, 105 hp (78 kW) with automatic. With a curb weight of only 2,100 lb (955 kg), it was capable of reaching 60 mph (97 km/h) in around nine seconds and won much acclaim for its steering and handling response. Cheap, economical, and definitely cheerful, the MX-5 was an immediate hit: Mazda sold 250,000 of them in only three years and total MX-5 production now stands at well over 800,000 units.

The debut of the Miata was undoubtedly frustrating for MG fans, since the company formerly known as British Leyland (it had become Austin Rover in 1982, Rover Group in 1986) had not offered a proper sports car since the demise of the Triumph TR7 and TR8 in 1981. There had been plans for a new MG Midget back in 1984, a much-

publicized 1985 concept car called MG EX-E, and a design study for a Maestro-based FWD convertible, but none had come close to production. It was not until the debut of the Miata that Rover Group, now owned by British Aerospace, actually committed to developing a new MG sports car.

At the time, British Motor Heritage was already thinking of offering a complete turnkey MGB as a way to promote sales of its body shells. Since an all-new MG sports car was still at least three or four years away, Rover's newly formed Special Products group (RSP) decided that a 'new' B would be a useful interim model. They took over the MGB revival project in the spring of 1990.

RSP's plans soon evolved into a new car called Project Adder, based on the British Motor Heritage MGB roadster body. Since the project's entire budget was only £5 million (about \$8.5 million), RSP could only afford new fenders, a new front clip, and a revised interior with wood trim and a modern stereo system. Since the old B-series engine was long dead, Rover again opted for the aluminum V8 from the Range Rover, now with electronic fuel injection and a five-speed gearbox.

The new roadster, dubbed MG RV8, made its public debut in October 1992 and went on sale in early 1993. Press reaction was mixed. Most critics thought the RV8 was nicely executed and just seeing the MG octagon on something other than a family hatchback brought a nostalgic glow, but the updated interior and powertrain could not disguise the age of the basic platform. With an MSRP of £25,440 (around \$42,000), the RV8 cost as much as some far more sophisticated modern sports cars and even many MG enthusiasts found the price hard to justify.



Although the MG RV8 was based on the British Motor Heritage MGB body, it had new fenders, bumpers, and grille. It was 4.5 inches (114 mm) longer than the original MGB roadster, on a fractionally longer 91.7-in (2,330mm) wheelbase; it kept the B's live axle and rear drum brakes, but added torque arms to help locate the axle. With a manufacturer curb weight of 2,825 lb (1,280 kg) and 190 hp DIN (140 kW) from its 3,947 cc (241 cu. in.) V8, performance was brisk. Rover claimed 0-60 mph (0-97 km/h) in less than seven

seconds, with a top speed of 135 mph (217 km/h). (Photo © 2009 [Gazh Photography](#); used with permission)

Rover had always represented the RV8 as a limited edition, but sales were disappointing nonetheless. Only 1,983 were built and more than 1,500 of those went to Japan, which also absorbed a similar percentage of Mini production. Since Rover no longer had a North American dealer network — its Sterling brand had expired in August 1991 — there was no attempt to federalize it.

The final RV8 was completed on November 25, 1995. It was the last direct descendant of the MGB, although the continued availability of the British Motor Heritage shell meant that a sufficiently motivated fan could conceivably build a 'new' B from the ground up.

THE MGF

In the spring of 1995, Rover Group finally launched its all-new MG sports car, the MGF. Although it bore little resemblance to the B, the F revived several concepts from the long-forgotten EX234 and ADO21, including a mid-mounted engine and Hydragas suspension. The MGF was a thoroughly competent effort, but it somehow lacked the magic of past MGs. It did reasonably well, selling around 77,000 units through 2001, but it could not match the popularity of the MX-5, in part because it was never sold in the U.S.



A 1997 MGF. The early F was powered by Rover's K-series engine, a 1,795 cc (110 cu. in.) DOHC four that offered up to 143 hp (107 kW) in top VVC (variable valve control) form. The latter was capable of 0-60 mph (0-97 km/h) in around 8 seconds, with a top speed of perhaps 130 mph (210 km/h). A 1999 facelift added a cheaper 1,588 cc (97 cu. in.) base model and a more powerful Trophy 160 version with 160 hp (119 kW). With a mid-mounted engine, the F was quite nimble, but some reviewers complained that its electrically assisted steering was too numb for a serious sports car. (Photo © 2010 [111emergency](#); used under a [Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic license](#))

The F was revamped in 2002, trading its Hydragas suspension for steel springs and conventional dampers. Renamed MG TF, it survived until the bankruptcy of Rover Group in 2005. It was subsequently resurrected by Nanjing Automobile Group, which is

now part of the Shanghai Automotive Industry Corporation (SAIC). As of this writing, it appears that TF is still at least nominally available in the UK market, although SAIC suspended production in late 2009. Britain's **Auto Express** reported in April 2010 that a replacement is in the works, tentatively slated for 2013.

MG, so often at the bottom of the corporate pecking order, ended up the last survivor of the old Nuffield and BMC brands; Riley died in 1969, Wolseley in 1975, Morris in 1983, and Austin in 1987. MG also had the satisfaction of outlasting Triumph, which disappeared after 1984. Some of those marques may eventually return — BMW owns Riley and Triumph along with the MINI brand and we believe SAIC has the rights to the Austin, Morris, and Wolseley names as well as MG — but we wouldn't be surprised to see MG outlive them all.

Whatever the future holds, the B will always be a huge part of MG's legacy, not least because the MGB accounts for nearly a third of *all* the cars MG has built since 1923. BMC's sometimes erratic record-keeping leaves its production figures open to question, but Anders Ditlev Clausager estimates that total MGB production (including CKD kits, but not the MGB GT V8) was a little over 512,000. If we add the GT V8, MGC, and MG RV8, it brings the grand total to nearly 526,000. To our knowledge, the only other sports cars to better that figure are the Chevrolet Corvette, the Mazda RX-7, the Nissan Z-car, and the Mazda MX-5, which topped the B around 2001. Even their fans, however, will readily agree that the 'vette, Z, and RX-7 really aren't in the same category and we're not sure the Miata would even have been conceived if not for the earlier success of the MGB. The B was not a pioneer in any technical sense; in some respects, it was rather dated even when it bowed and it was positively antiquated by the time production ended. Nonetheless, it set a standard that continues to this day and it remains a milestone car.

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For the record, the author has never owned an MG or, for that matter, a Miata (although he has owned and even participated in owner focus groups on other Mazda cars).