

HIGHLAND MOTORING

Highland MGOC Yearbook 2020
www.mghighland.co.uk



First run of the year

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EDITORIAL

Well, 2020 has been a most unusual year. Not a good one for a lot of people including fans of classic cars. However, rather than lament what we have lost, perhaps we should praise what we have managed to achieve in the circumstances (and within the rules that appertained at the time)?

We had 4 day runs mainly with picnics, all in decent weather, and the Autumn Amble went ahead and was enjoyed by those who took part.

Looking forwards, we must hope for the efficient roll-out of a vaccine to allow a return to near normality as the driving season gets underway. Some organizations have decided to hold-off the announcing of their classic events, but I think we should earmark our dates and keep our fingers crossed. The fully subscribed Spring Saunter is based in the Highlands so has a good chance of being OK. The Autumn Amble will be based near Peterhead and is open for bookings – see the details towards the end of this Yearbook.

Finally, I am very grateful to David Hitchmough and Tim Moore for their articles.

Richard

Annual General Meeting for year 2020

This year's AGM will be held in January as normal but will be by Zoom.

Hopefully, most members are familiar with this popular platform and will take part. Peter Poole will send out a calling notice in early January with the details and you will receive a separate email (from Richard Jenner) with the meeting credentials – we will be using a licensed version so will not have the time interruption of the free version.

This year's activity by Richard Jenner, Events Coord

July

The first club run of the year, limited to 5 households was very enjoyable but not uneventful.

The RV at Strathpeffer was in a downpour but it passed quickly, and it was dry as we headed to Dingwall. We stopped for an outdoor coffee at the Highland Cafe (quite busy) and I managed a couple of shots (of the photographic variety).

We left the Highland Cafe for the Struie and soon after, the



event happened. My Midget started to pink then steam. We managed to get all the cars off the road and Ian dived-in on the engine. The thermostat was an obvious culprit (no indication of an issue on the gauge) and the block was seriously hot. The thermostat was fully open when removed so either it opened late or there was insufficient

coolant in the block. The local farmhouse kindly provided a bucket of water and Rona's dog water bottle was put into service to fill the block once it had cooled.

The thermostat gasket was shot so Ian made a gasket using some card from a lamp package and my small hammer. While the others headed-off



to lunch at my insistence, Ian worked on and the engine ran (phew) with a small seepage from the temporary gasket (thermostat left out of course). We headed for Lairg 30 minutes behind the rest and had a spirited drive, stopping once to check the coolant.

The Pier in Lairg were very understanding (Christine had kept them up to speed) so we were able to enjoy a good lunch and a good blether.

I followed Ian to home in Tain on the way back where he very kindly made a new gasket from the proper stuff, sealed with some good gasket sealant. So a job for next week is to replace the thermostat, gasket and drain the coolant and replace with antifreeze (and fix the indicators that decided to pack-up - great to practise hand signals but probably meaningless to many drivers - roundabout are a challenge!). Massive thanks to Ian Finlayson and everyone else for their forbearance.

August

Great day for a picnic run around the Black Isle and nearby despite an unpromising forecast. Wonderful to have 5 MGs from the '70s together **plus 2 MG 'hounds'**. The picnic was blessed with lovely weather and the views from Knockfarrel were great.



September

#1 Really nice day for an MG run. We visited the new village of Tornagrain, then took a less than direct route to Grantown East for coffee where we were welcomed most profusely - space reserved for a Porsche club was cleared so we could all park together! After that, it was across Dava Moor to the excellent Logie Steading for lunch (either in the Olive Tree Cafe or a picnic). Three Midgets and 2 ZTs together was a first for many years.



#2 Another nice day for an MG run. This one organized by Chris & Gill and took us from the square at Beaulieu to Glen Affric and the Dog Falls via Cannich. Parked in the forestry carpark, we heard another MG even though everyone was accounted for and a couple touring from Yorkshire joined us briefly with their MGB Roadster. We then headed to Drumnadrochit for a picnic before some of us visited JW Body Works near Belladrum. Many thanks to Chris & Gill for sorting the route (and the fine weather window) and to John Westwater for the tour of his workshop.



Autumn Amble – October – by Richard Jenner & Tim Moore with photos by Tim

The 2020 HMGOC October Amble took place against the odds from 1-4 October 2020. To comply with SG Covid-19 regs, we formed 3 bubbles each day, each of 2 households. Everyone's drive down to Inveraray where we stayed in the excellent Inveraray Inn started very wet but finished with light showers and sunny intervals. The participants were Jeremy and Patsy in their MGZT 2004; Hughie and Kathryn in their BMW Z4 Tin Top Roadster 2014; Morag and Ronnie in the Dacia Stepway 2015; Stuart and Margaret in their 1971 MG Midget "AVA"; Richard in his 1978 MG 1500 Midget and Christine and Tim in their MGC GT 1968.



Richard in an increasingly familiar pose - this time replacing the washer bottle strap with cable ties (thanks Tim).



The Friday was a glorious day and cars headed off on their selected route (3 were planned and all used). The Cowal peninsula route was the most popular.



Saturday started dry but with Storm Alex inbound, most of us stayed local to Inveraray and visited the sites on foot (castle, jail) etc.

A wet return home for all on Sunday. **On note 'AVA' had only done 16 miles or so in the preceding 2 years but managed over 600 trouble free miles during the Amble.**



Budget 'Historic' MG by Richard Jenner



It started in July, Covid **restrictions were being eased (6/15 'rule')** to the point where some small local runs with fellow MG owners in the Highlands looked on the cards. I had done quite a bit of lockdown work on the MGF and was really looking forward to some drives when a routine jack-up revealed a worn rear wheel bearing. Consulting my MGF and TF **Restoration Manual, 'Rog' made it pretty clear that sorting it could be a bit of a nightmare.** While trying to work out how to proceed and feeling the self-induced pressure of time, Helen **suggested 'why don't you buy another one so that you can have one in bits and the other one on the road?'. Needless to say,** I was instantly suspicious about this sudden interest in MGs and suspected an ulterior motive which proved to be the case (more on this later).

Helen kept directing me to MGF & TFs for sale on eBay and Gumtree but I know how much work and expense it takes to get a cheap *F* up to scratch **and I wanted a change. 'How about a Midget then?' says the wife. Midgets** are a bit of a sore point with us as Helen wrote off my first one (a very **collectable Mk2 these days but less so in 1976).** My reaction was **'yes'** a Midget is what I want – something I can work on more easily and enjoy an old car driving experience again. I have never been drawn to the **'rubber bumper' Midgets (hereafter the Midget 1500) but they do tend to represent the bargain basement of the Midget world and there on**

Gumtree was one for sale just 10 miles away. Two hours later I had bought it.

XHR2T came with a lot of history, and Ken, the previous owner, had done a great job on the body work during the 3 years he owned the car. He had bought it locally because it had never been welded previously but now needed some work and body restorations was his hobby. He had replaced both front wings, an inner wing, a floor and a sill and then home resprayed the car in the original vermillion. It looked really great and without any rust in all the important areas. A test drive sealed the deal although it was clear that there were a few issues to sort.



I started by tackling some of the wiring issues. The hazard switch was replaced, and the non-working horns traced to the indicator stalk (push on the end of the stalk for the late models). A close examination of the stalk showed it had been repaired quite a few times, so I managed to find a new one but without the horn push. The horn push was

solved by a push switch, MGA style, in the centre of the dash. Replacing the stalk should have then just been a plug and play but of course the plugs were different, so I had to rewire the plug off the old stalk. Try as I might, I could not get the indicators to work. I rewired the stalk 3 times and changed the flasher unit but to no result. Jim Mould suggested the (new) hazard switch could be at fault and sure enough, when I bypassed it, I had indicators. Another new hazard switch sorted all the problems.

Following the overheat (see the July run report), my next job was to flush the cooling system, fit a new thermostat and gasket and refill with anti-freeze. Over 1000 miles later the cooling system is fine but if it had been the F, the head gasket, at the very least, would have blown.

I spent hours cleaning the engine bay. Ken had used some sort of oil-based shot blast and everything was coated with a sticky black residue. While it might be a good rust preventative, it was all over the wiring and the fuse box which was not good. Lots of WD 40 and cleaning cloths have removed the worst. The engine bay is not immaculate, but I am aiming for 'oily rag' (but not that oily), rather than concours.

I managed 2 more day-drives with MG friends and despite the 2/6 'rule' our Autumn Amble to Inveraray also went ahead with the 11 of us

forming 3 bubbles each day. Just days later, the hotel would not have been able to serve alcohol with meals, even for residents. As a result of some starting issues, I have replaced the starter motor and solenoid.

I also fitted the new hood that eventually turned-up. It was a budget



mohair version (if such a term is not a contradiction). I would have preferred vinyl, but I was not going to **turn down a 'free' new** hood. It was a swine to fit. It was extremely hard to make holes in the mohair, especially the large ones required for Tenax fasteners. After hours fitting the first few Tenaxs, I

resorted to melting the larger holes with a gas soldering iron – a scary process. The header rail was very fiddly and even after a few adjustments, I am not too happy with the fit, but it does keep the rain out and will do for now.

So, what are my impressions of the Midget 1500? First, it could not be more different than driving the *F*. Even the windscreen washer is manual, there is no brake servo and of course, no power steering. The windscreen is in your face and the 15-inch steering wheel, in your chest. All of which is great. The feed-back through the steering (Triumph rack on the 1500) is one of the best points and the all-synchro (Triumph) gearbox has a rifle



bolt action and is quiet as well. The engine pulls very strongly although it is **not 'rev happy'**. My '79 model has the 3.7:1 diff so is adequately geared for Highland roads and even the odd

bit of dual carriageway is OK at 70. The ride (due to all the extra weight)

is possibly the best of all the Midgets and the 6-inch ground clearance is useful on some of our less well-maintained roads. So, what about the often-criticized handling on the 1500? I have yet to find it an issue, perhaps because my second car was a Triumph Herald and taught me a lot about oversteer and the absolute need never to lift on bends.

In summary, I think the Midget 1500 represents the bargain end of historic (ie free road-tax) MGs. I have been asked what I am going to do



about the bumpers and the Rostyle wheels and the answer is **keep them! This is a late '70s** car and that is how I want it to look. I have grown to like the bumpers anyway. And now for the **'ulterior motive'** which turned-out to be a nine-week old Welsh Springer Spaniel called **'Rosie'** – a win-win as far as I am concerned.

Gairloch Run November 6th By David Hitchmough



“Fancy a trip to a nuclear bomb-proof bunker?” asked Richard. “Why not?” said I, wondering if, being ex-military, he knew something I didn’t. Well, any excuse for a run out in the MG Midget, and it will probably be my last run of this Annus Horribilis before the dreaded car-rotting salt gets spread all over our roads. I mean, I like it on chips, but not on my car. It would also give me the chance to try out my nice, new leather Moto-Lita steering wheel.

For this run, we were to visit the amazing Gairloch Heritage Museum situated in the aforementioned bunker, and it would benefit from the arrival of not one, but a whole two, MG Midgets (do two MG Midgets count as one full size car?).

Anyway we set out from Richard’s house, with flat caps and gloves, and the weather really could not have been better for an early November days driving. It was to be “hoods down” all the way, basking in the glorious sunshine throughout the day (which I’m not supposed to do, but don’t tell my GP!).

Our first scheduled stop was the Glen Docherty viewpoint above Loch Maree for a photo opportunity. The sight of two lovely, shiny MG Midgets in such spectacular scenery is difficult to beat, and there were admiring glances from other tourists in the car park. I’ve driven the Loch Maree road several times when I had my Westfield 7, and it’s an awe-inspiring road, but I can honestly say that I enjoyed driving the Midget so much more. I was even thinking, as I was driving, of Matt Munro singing “On Days Like These”. The spooky thing is that Richard later admitted he was humming the same song!

After an exhilarating drive, we arrived at Gairloch Heritage Museum and left the two Midgets to admire the sea views whilst Richard and I went inside. It’s an amazing building, which, as I said earlier, has been transformed from a Cold War Nuclear bunker and Operations building. There are many interesting exhibits and stories of local history and geology. Well worth a visit, and could be included in a future HMGOC group run.

After our visit, we needed lunch, and found a splendid place just a few metres away (The Gairloch Tourist Information Centre), where we ate and chatted (as you do!).

The plan was to drive back over the northern route, through Poolewe, and right at Braemore junction before returning home. However, just 3 miles after setting off from Gairloch, we were flagged down by another motorist who said there was an accident further on, and the road was closed. Nothing for it, but to turn around and go home the way we had come. No hardship there, as the roads are stunning to drive in either direction. The two Midgets look so good travelling on the road together, and both behaved themselves. No doubt they enjoyed the fine weather too!



My new leather Moto-Lita (once straightened on the column) was a joy to hold, and much comfier on a long run than my previous M-L woodrim. I am a wee bit worried about Richard though. He keeps saying

how nice my rear end looks when he's following me. I do hope he means the car!

So, sadly, that looks like being the final run of this weird year, for me anyway. And what an amazing run to finish the year with.

Spring 2021 can't come soon enough!

A Word to the Wise.... and..... Another Year over. By Tim Moore



Twelve months ago, or thereabouts I was writing an article on MG's Record Breakers for Richard Jenner to include within his now eagerly anticipated Annual Newsletter for our Highland MG Owners Club. For those that know us you will have been suitably bored by more than a few previous articles I've penned about our 1969 MGCGT - a model rarely if ever seen on Highland roads let alone in the rest of Scotland, but suffice to say those 1967-1969 MGC Roadster and GT's that remain in their current owners hands are mostly now immaculate Trailer Queens "ooooed and aaared" over in sunshine fed grass areas at countless shows south of our border with England and of course mostly in the Florida, California, Australia or South African sunshine where many of the surviving cars of the only 9000 made, reside. As in UK the "classic car scene" (at least pre-Pandemic 2020 continuing...) owners stand by their cars explaining to those interested the nuances of their car's concours paintwork, immaculate interior, spotless chassis, still concours painted and their sparkling engine bays...

Some, but not many as the years pass have renovated their current classic cars themselves, (as did we apart from the paintwork and chrome bits!!), but increasingly more of our fellow enthusiasts do not follow the likes of ourselves and say Margaret and Stewart Brock or Ronnie and



Morag Thomson with their MG Midgets kept and owned for many years and as far as Christine and I are concerned - USED and enjoyed - rather than driving'only if the weather is kind and sunny'.... and many just cover a few miles to the nearest show, park up and oooooooh - aaaaarh....and it seems these days have purchased their cars already completed, requiring little or no extra work after purchase. No one really looks at an oily rag.....



Don't misunderstand me those custodians who shine and shine their cars to an inch of their lives are a massive and necessary part of our hobby and its camaraderie, but a great deal of these owners having acquired their pride and joys, seemingly keep them only for a fairly short time and sell them on when the sense arrives that a change of model etc would be nice and so the process continues.

So clearly these days it is apparent even more and more just how much better cars were manufactured after say 1990 and that their bodywork has withstood the ravages of inclement weather. For us in the HMGOC with any of the Abingdon built MG's they were not built to last long...! The problems are well recorded in countless books and articles about that period of Morris/BMC/BLMC history. My first MGB a roadster was built in 1967 and when I purchased it with some 70,000 miles on its speedometer in 1971 when it was only 4 years old, three previous owners.....who definitely used it every day 'as you do', the rear wings were already bubbling around the wheel arches and sills needed repair and the headlight cowls underneath the front wings were full of damp mud....

In HMGOC we still have a few members (very, very few!) campaigning MG TC/TD's and 1250/1500 TF's, a Y saloon and a couple of MGAs. Perhaps now those with the better-built bodywork anti corrosion measures then prevailing (post 1995) MGF/TF and Z saloons have, just about outnumber those HMGOC members still driving (1961-1979) MG Midgets, MGB's or MGB derivatives such as the V8 Factory MGBGT, our (solitary) MGC, and the better protected 1990's assembled MGRV8 and I know of no current HMGOC member with either a Farina MG Magnette Saloon or its Gerald Palmer designed ZA /ZB Saloons, which those who remember them rusted very badly.

So, for we who keep our old bangers probably for ever, (Christine and I have looked after our now 73-year-old Rover 16 since 1985 and our CGT for almost 16 years, and the Brocks in Latheron have owned "AVA" the Midget for over 30 years) how do we keep them looking reasonably smart, year after year whilst using them at any opportunity that we are fortunate to take advantage of? If nothing else our relatively quiet roads (albeit crumbling in the North West Highlands - rather more than in the populated North East Highlands) are the envy of enthusiasts in grid-locked England but our weather is cruel to rust buckets....and sorry to labour the point.... but.... Abingdon 1950's to 1980 products were rust buckets...

No need for me to repeat what anyone seeking advice about rust prevention (or should that say "rust's inevitable appearance whatever one does") when articles can be found in

magazines or now being less luddite by using Google....However although we only managed to cover just under 800 miles this year when we have usually driven around 2500-3500 annually in our MGC the use of it under Covid compliance advice personified by the excellent Autumn Amble 11 of us in 6 cars enjoyed down in Argyll centred in Inveraray, those 4 days away were 75% wet and mucky filthy road conditions, which unless sorted and cleaned would only lead to the inevitability of decline. If you USE your classic as most here do, then you cannot have an immaculate chassis and suspension concours set up. If you do and use it come hell or high water then your car is not long for this earth...or if it is fortunate later found before scrappage by someone who makes good previous owners lack of care...



Believe me when I say that I adore chrome wire wheels, (which correct me if I am wrong but I think few members campaign cars with them as much as we use our CGT), all my efforts each and every winter lay-up bringing out their sparkle spending 2-3 hours per wheel are always wasted because it is guaranteed on our first drive out any Spring before we get to Sligachan some 8 miles south of our home in Portree, it will be raining in the Hebrides or just stopped raining for a wee while only; the roads horrible and spray from passing trucks etc makes the car look rather rubbish.. So clearly our car(s) will never be a trailer-



queen(s) by the time we get anywhere to meet up with you all! More important to avoid repeating every 5-10 years what was accomplished when we renovated and restored our CGT is to TRY!! to keep those many underside crevasses checked and wax-protected when the muck and mud are cleaned out after the ravages of the miles covered in the preceding “spring/summer/autumn”. This takes time and effort often uncomfortable.....!!

I used to use Finnegan’s Waxoyl, (which looks somewhat nicer since it dries to a sort of orangey brown colour) but for at least the last 7 years moved to Bilt Hamber Dynax S50,

which is highly regarded for its protection but black, which doesn't look great on our CGT's Primrose Yellow underwing areas as the pictures show!! Dynax S50 has long lances enabling this awkward and mucky procedure with the CGT on its winter axle stands to be less odious; but as we age our limbs and joints (well mine anyway!) make the effort less "fun" than it used to be as I wriggle down and about underneath the car....



So, if you want to keep your car protected those of you with MG Midget's, MGB's etc get up into those hidden places (I wrote before in previous articles on how I access, annually, inside sills, and inside body cavities - such as doors and between the rear wheel arches and the rear wings removing trim sections and carpet inside the car). However although many people rant-on about the daft design of the MGB under front wing trumpet-sections, around the headlamp cowlings and poor

fitting splash panels allowing water ingress, and therefore rust, into the A post area which never dries out, two particular places usually forgotten are the "ideal hidden traps" above both front rear leaf spring shackles the electric fuel pump on the offside where the monocoque meets the upper shock absorber bracket limits access and the same on the near side although there the exhaust makes access equally awkward (access has to be by "feel" with the lance using both hands to avoid getting covered in the wax yourselves). Look at the picture of the MGC chassis monocoque when the car was being restored to see where I mean. No way, of course could I keep the chassis underside of our C looking that nice since- all paint shining, much as it tempted me back then, but we'd never have been able to use the car unprotected from grit muck mud and water in our



climate. I also include some pictures of it after the rebuild and respray before we commenced refitting the engine driveline, suspension, wiring, glass and interior. I can honestly say back then our CGT was better prepared and protected at that one moment....than in 1968 at Abingdon when being assembled, its unprotected painted body shell having been made at Pressed Steel Fisher Body Plant and trucked in open trailers to sit

outside in Abingdon for goodness knows how long, until taken on a dolly into the assembly lines inside. Contrast that with 2020 even 1990 manufacturing robotic processes. Our chassis and car probably now carries many kilograms of wax protection I've liberally sprayed religiously year after year for 15 years in the hope the car never displays the rust bubbles it had when we found it and seen on so many less cosseted and abused in the past MGB's and Midgets today.

On that hopeful note, I trust the pictures show scenes typical of how you all treat your own cars during the winterisation process.... or if you don't and intent on keeping your car for many years, then perhaps you should or get someone to do it for you? It's up to you. Parking up a car in a damp garage or any garage for that matter without any attention to what goes on underneath is a rust recipe.... More important even than greasing nipples and changing engine oil and filters, annually.... which of course we all do don't we?



For our fellow HMGOC friends with Cowley or Longbridge built MG's or those with MGB Heritage new bodywork be mindful too that if you intend keeping your car, don't do nothing, even they will rust one day, just that the blisters clearly are appearing much later on these MG's than they did in the good old days of Abingdon....I wonder if anyone with a new Chinese Built MG SUV is even giving rust prevention a moment's thought.....No of course not!! They are after all every day-use cars.... kept for a short time and traded in for the latest craze....



Hope to see you all enjoying your cars in 2021....



Italian Job by Richard Jenner

My MG Midget 1500's claim to fame came in November 2015 when the car appeared in a photo shoot for the Italian language version of the women's magazine Mair Claire. The car is seen in a centre fold spread for an article set in the Scottish Highlands entitled 'So Brit!'. The photo captures that

essential Midget 1500 feature, strangely missing from contemporary car test and catalogues but well known to owners, which is the rear bumper makes a useful temporary perching place!



MGF Comes of Age!

This is a reprint of an article I wrote in 2016 to mark the MGF's 21 st – this year the MGF is **25!** – Richard Jenner



1995 brochure picture

The Launch

The MGF was officially launched at the Geneva Salon de l'Auto in March 1995. The anticipation was enormous; the first all new MG sports car for mass production since the MGB launched in 1962. On the press day around double the 350 invited journalists turned-up. The gold covers were lifted to reveal 2 cars; a Flame Red and a British Racing Green MGF. The reception by both press and public was by all accounts rapturous, partly I suspect because the MGF was a departure from the traditional MG that surprised some and shocked others.

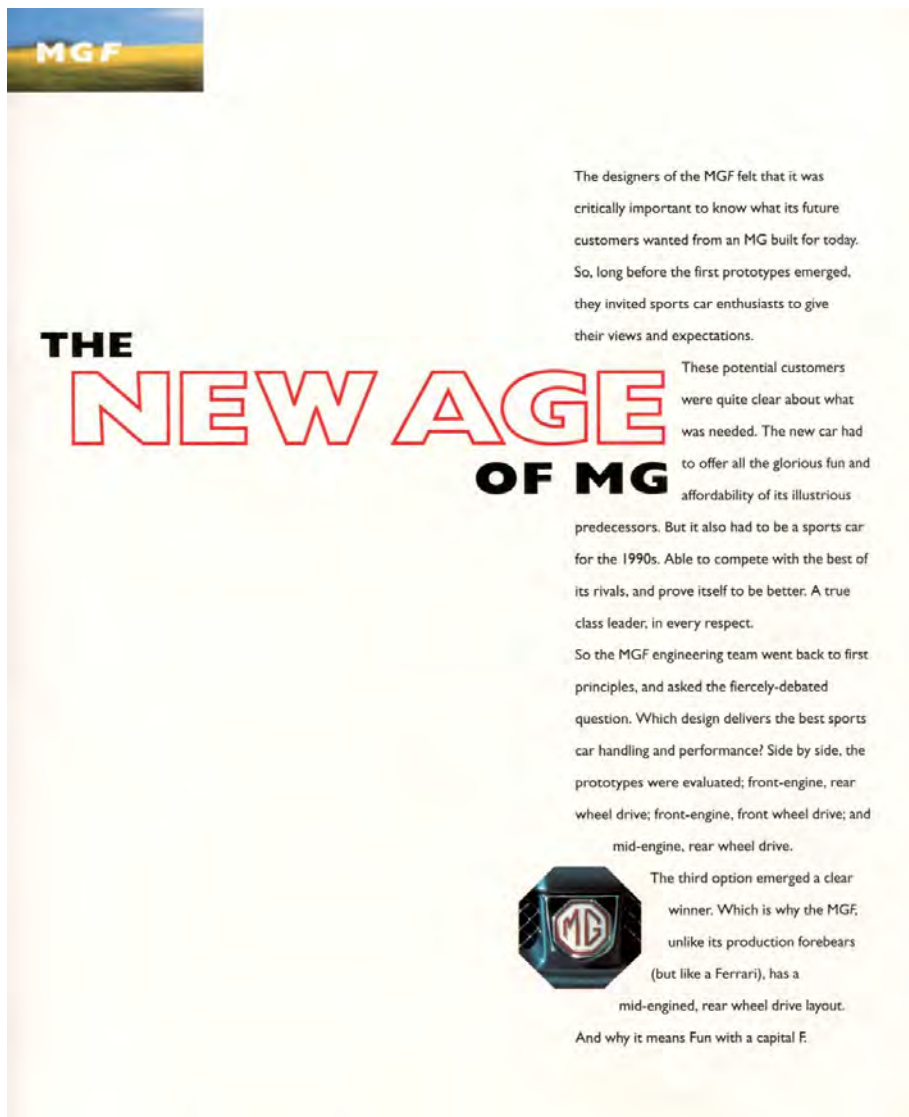
Here was a thoroughly modern sports car with all round independent double wishbone suspension with Hydragas springs, all round disc brakes, the option of variable rate electric power assisted steering (EPAS) and powered by an all alloy double overhead camshaft 16 valve fuel injected engine; the real shock though was that the engine, driving the rear wheels, was mounted behind the seats. While this mid-engined approach was common in Ferraris (if a Ferrari can ever be common), the only other mass market sports car with this configuration in production in 1995 was the Toyota MR2 and that second generation model was not available as a full convertible.



Mid-engine 1995 brochure

The Back Story

The MGF was not the product of a few talented amateurs working from a large garden shed; nor though was it the work of an anonymous committee using computer assisted design. Gordon Sked (Rover Design Director) and Gerry McGovern (lead designer of the MGF) were on hand for the launch but behind them was a large, talented and dedicated team who were part of Project Phoenix covering all aspects of market research, design, production and marketing. The 1995 brochure gave a nod to the development values.



1995 brochure excerpt

The designers wanted something identifiably British, MG and modern. The starting point really was a design exercise for a compact sports car in the mid-'80s by Gerry McGovern, Richard Carter and Graham Lewis that produced the clay model MG F-16.



F16

This was then put on hold as the now Rover Group had other funding priorities and it was really the launch of the Mazda MX-5 in 1989 at Chicago that put sports cars back in the limelight. The first reborn MG was the MG RV8 in 1992 under Project Adder which paved the way for a more mass produced MG. In parallel to Project Adder, Project Phoenix was considering 3 'routes' to a decision on configuration and 3 engineering prototypes using a body based on the F16 were commissioned from different consultants. PR1 was front-engine and front wheel drive, PR2 was front-engine and rear wheel drive while P3 was mid-engine and rear wheel drive. PRs 2 & 3 became the front runners and the green light for further work on PR3 was given after the Rover board had driven all 3 'PRs' in August 1990.



PR3

Developing PR3 in to the MGF was a large task with Brian Griffin then Nick Fell leading on engineering and Gerry McGovern on styling. Much work went on to develop the K series engine from 1.4 litres to 1.8 while retaining the same block and a Variable Valve Control (VVC) head was produced too as a higher powered option. 'Mules' (prototypes to develop the engineering using other bodies –mainly Metros) were followed by hand built prototypes – the 1995 brochure does not exaggerate where it claims that more than 100 experimental cars had been built. In November 1992 the Rover board approved development for production and by August 1994 there were prototypes running built largely from parts produced with production tools. Production was being geared-up at Longbridge in Car Assembly Building 2 (CAB2) which, while a modern plant, had been dormant for 8 years. The cars shown at the Geneva launch were actually First Quality Proving prototypes; it was on 24 July 1995 that the first production car was completed. The 1.8i was listed at £16 986 on-the-road and the VVC at £19 386.

The First Drives

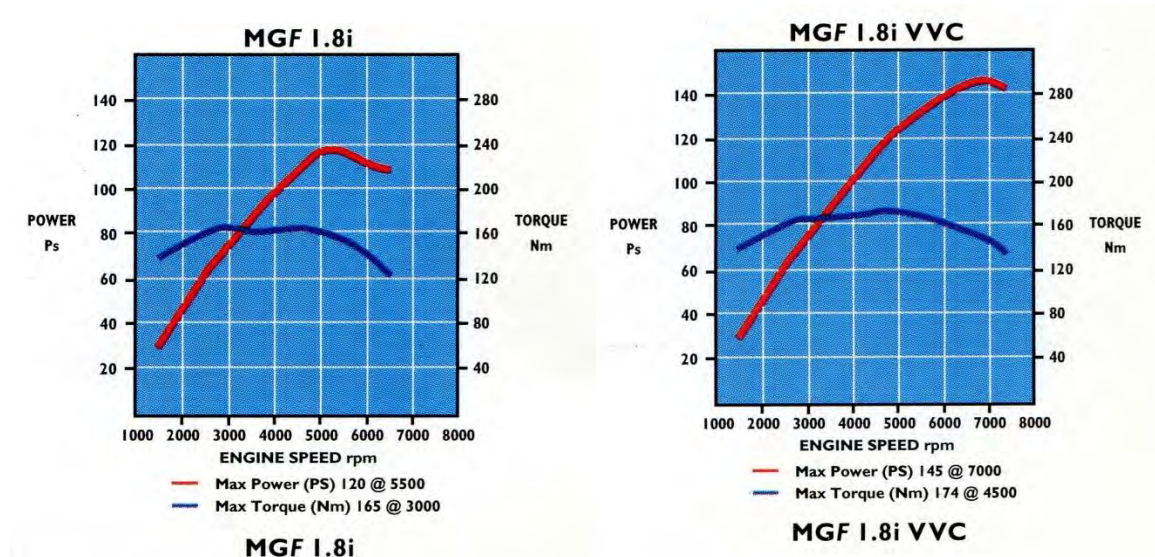
Autocar published their first test in September 1995 (a 1.8i). Their performance figures were similar to the Rover claims – 0-60 in 8.7 seconds (8.5 claimed) and a top speed of 123 mph (120 claimed). They praised the styling, the engineering integrity, the road holding, the brakes and called the build quality 'exceptional'. They were less impressed with the cabin ('dowdy') and the driving position which they found to be too high and compromised by the lack of an adjustable steering column. Their main problem though was that they found the MX-5 to be a more 'amusing' drive while acknowledging that the MG would cover the ground faster and out corner its rival. Still giving the handling 4 stars, Autocar missed the MX-5's set-up where the throttle can determine the corner line compared to the MGF's where pressing harder just steadily increases the understeer. This steady choice seems to have been a deliberate one by the MG's developers conscious of the 'safety fast' motto. Autocar's verdict still called the MG 'the world's most complete and affordable open 2 seater' and 'a truly great new car'.



1995 1.8i interior

A month later and slightly ahead of the public, Autocar got their hands on a VVC which went head-to-head with the VW Golf VR6. Apart from straight line acceleration and top speed, the VVC MG was an outright winner to the point where Autocar thought the days of the quick hatchback were 'officially numbered'. Although the VVC cost a bit over £2000 more than the 1.8i, it had around £1200 of extras (EPAS & ABS) as standard plus some leather trim on the seats.

It's interesting to compare the 2 engine graphs. Performance is similar up to 5000 RPM; there after the 1.8i tails off markedly while the VVC keeps going up. The VVC gearing was reduced slightly to make the most of this top-end grunt to produce an even sportier drive.



Model Developments

Spring 1998 saw the first MGF special edition – the Abingdon – with a unique Brooklands Green paint finish, 16 inch (in place of the standard 15 inch) alloys and all leather seats. A year later the 75 LE arrived to celebrate MG's 75th anniversary again with special paint colours and better trim and the bigger wheels. By then there were more trim options on offer for the standard models too to counter the 'dowdy' interior.

Significant changes were made to all the models in 1999 for 2000MY (often referred to by owners as the Mk 2). There were improvements to the EPAS, a double skinned fuel tank and changes to how the cylinder head located. Externally clues were smoked rather than orange front indicator lenses and a body coloured rather than black windscreen surround (this allowed body coloured hard tops to be offered at a £170 premium over a black top).



2000MY colour coded hard top

The most visible changes though were to the interior with new sports seats, a redesigned dash centre and a number of alloy touches and a change from cream to silver instruments.



2000MY centre console

Electrically adjustable door mirrors and a tilt adjustable steering wheel were also introduced for the 2000MY as well as a lighter ('walnut') option for the plastic trim instead of black ('ash'). There were new wheel designs with the VVC receiving 16 inch rims as standard. Shortly after the 'Steptronic' gearbox (later renamed the Stepspeed by MG Rover as BMW took the original name with them when they departed the scene in 2000) was offered as an option on the 1.8i; this was an automatic transmission developed with ZF using a continuously variable transmission

(CVT) with 6 artificial step ratios to give the impression of a 6 speed automatic transmission. The Steptronic had an improved MEMS3 engine management system with sequential fuel injection and different ignition coils with shorter HT leads; MEMS3 was rolled-out to all models by 2001.



2000MY 1.8i

The first special edition based on the 2000MY was the Wedgewood SE in July 2000 following the usual formula of special trim, wheels & paint but with the addition for the first time of a boot spoiler. May 2001 saw 2 new models. First was the 1.6i designed to compete against the entry MX-5 1.6. As well as having a smaller engine (112 PS) some of the 2000MY 'goodies' were deleted to help lower the price (the 1.6i was listed at £15 500 on-the-road against £16 980 for the 1.8i, £17 995 for the Stepspeed and £19 495 for the VVC). The big news though in May 2001 was the MGF Trophy 160 SE with a 160 PS VVC engine, a lowered and much firmer Hydragas suspension and highly regarded 304mm diameter front disc brakes (up from 240 mm) with four piston AP Racing calipers. There were some special colours too as well as a unique trim and new wheels to clear the larger brakes. The Trophy was listed at £20 995, was limited to 2000 cars and achieved a sub-7 second 0-60 with a top speed of around 137mph; it's widely regarded as the most collectable MGF.

The final MGF special edition was the Freestyle in Autumn 2001 which had some of the Trophy features. MGF production finished in early 2002 and the car was replaced with a heavily reworked version in February 2002 which was renamed (wisely or otherwise) the MG TF (but that's another story).

In the end there were around 77 000 MGFs produced making it the 6th best selling MG of all time. While the normally lucrative North American export market wasn't available to the MGF as a result of Rover withdrawing in 1991, around 35 000 (45%) were exported with Germany and Japan the main markets and there were competition models developed for both Japan and France as well as the UK's MGF Cup Car.

The MGF Today

So how are these cars doing 21 years on? Well, they have to be just about the cheapest convertible MGs available. Usable cars are going for under £1000. For £2000 you might even find the near mythical low mileage one lady owner car with a full-service history. The reasons these cars are so cheap are inter-linked. The first is that they were produced in decent numbers so while there may well be some rare limited editions, there are plenty of normal production cars available (of the 42 000 home market models there remain in 2015 around 14 000 MGFs total still on the road in the UK of which around 8 000 are standard 1.8is and 4 200 are standard VVCs with the rest being special or limited editions). Secondly, they are not old enough to be 'classic' and not new enough

to have significant retained value – they are old cars but not properly old cars if you know what I mean. The third reason has to be ‘HGF’. This is the infamous head gasket failure that gave all the bored-out K series engines (1.6 & 1.8 litre) a poor reliability reputation and affected the K series Land-Rover Freelander too. The last main reason then has to be ease of access (or not) to the engine bay. Working on the mid-engined DOHC MGF is not always straightforward and if you pay to have this done, the labour hours can lead to a bill that exceeds the resale value of the car.

If you are thinking about buying one of these cars or are put off by the ‘horror’ stories, it is worth taking some time to understand what HGF was all about. The main cause of HGF was the original ‘SLS’ gasket which used elastomer sealing strips bonded on to the head gasket; these degraded then displaced causing coolant loss and a potential overheat. Extra stress was also placed on the gasket by an effect known as ‘head shuffle’. The ‘K’ series is a ‘sandwich’ construction with long through stretch bolts that hold the whole thing together bolting from the head right down to a lower rail in the sump. The original cars had nylon dowels to locate the head and in some cases these would allow the head to move slightly which would lead to further degradation of the elastomer strips. The dowels were changed to steel in early 2001. This change and a tightening-up in production standards resulted in fewer HGFs in the later MGFs and then generally at a higher mileage. The TF era saw the introduction of the Pressure Relief Thermostat (PRT) which was designed to reduce ‘thermal shock’ and saw further improvements in the rate of HGF. The most significant changes came though after MG Rover had collapsed! Powertrain had produced a Euro IV compliant engine and this had a much stiffer lower ‘sump’ rail which improved the stiffness of the whole sandwich; none of these engines reached the MG TF but around 3000 were delivered for the Land Rover Freelander hence the stiffer rail is often referred to as the ‘Freelander’ rail. The big break through though was a totally new head gasket developed under MG’s new (Chinese) owners and these were used from 2008 onwards. This is the multi-layer steel shim (MLS) gasket and embossing replaced elastomer. As 98% of HGF was due to elastomer degradation a combination of the new MLS gasket, steel dowels, uprated sump rail & stronger bolts (10.9 spec) reduces the chance of HGF to something similar to ‘normal engines’. A PRT would be the icing on the cake. Most cars in use today have the MLS gasket fitted.

HGF aside, there are not many issues really with the MGF beyond what you would expect to find with any 15 to 21-year-old car and common issues are

well understood and there is a 'fix' for everything. Parts are in plentiful supply with only sub-frames and Hydragas spheres the major components hard, if not impossible, to find as new-old-stock. However, there are even more plentiful used spares on the market as, sadly, many cars are being broken for parts as perversely the sum of the parts is worth more than the whole.

The MGF undoubtedly introduced and continues to introduce many drivers to the joy of sports car ownership and surprisingly the geographic spread of the car is increasing. Canada has a 15-year rule for importing cars that weren't approved for import when new and quite a few MGFs have found their way to Canada and eventually they may well make their way to that traditional MG market, the USA (25 year rule).

The *F* stands for **fun** and the MGF delivers this in spades. It can 'still do a number' on most hot hatches on give and take roads and yet again despite 'bin part' production the whole really is more than the sum of the parts and if most owners were allowed a one-word summary of what they like about the car I suspect it would be 'character'! The MGF and the latter TF, could very well be the last British mass-produced sports car. Happy 21st!



The author's 2001 MGF 1.8i now approaching 100 000 miles. (now on 114 000 - editor)

The 2021 Programme

Day Runs

For obvious reasons, the 2021 programme is a bit tenuous at present. Day runs should start-up again in April and run through to October. As in previous years, these will be a mix of Thursdays and Sundays and will either include a lunch out or a picnic. For May to September, we could try to have 2 runs each month alternating between Thursdays and Sundays. As soon as the show schedule becomes clearer, we can fix some dates and update you by email (also keep an eye on the Facebook pages).

Shows

The national Drive it Day is scheduled for 25 April (last day of the Spring Saunter so depending upon the route, those on the Saunter may be able to join-in). The Tain Show is scheduled for Sunday, 20 June and the Fortrose & Rosemarkie Rally, for Saturday 28 August.

Spring Saunter

This event is now fully booked with a waiting list!

Autumn Amble

We are going East! In fact, just about as far east as you can go on mainland Scotland, to the village of Boddam, a few miles south of Peterhead.

Our accommodation is the Buchan Braes **which is the former Officers' Mess of RAF Buchan, Britain's most** important Air Defence Command & Control Centre during the Cold War. The hotel has upgraded all the rooms and has a good reputation for food too.

The dates are Monday, 4 October to Thursday, 7 October (3 nights). Stuart has secured an excellent Dinner, Bed & Breakfast deal which is £145/night for couples or £105/night for single occupancy. We have 8 rooms reserved at this rate (5 booked already) so if you want to come please book your room directly with the hotel on 01779 871471 **quoting 'Highland MG Owners' Club'. You will need to give your** credit card details but no money will be taken until you check out and cancellation is no later than 24 hours in advance of arrival. Once booked, please inform Stuart (badger188@btinternet.com) and me (r.h.jenner@btinternet.com) so that we know who is coming and can discuss the proposed activities with

