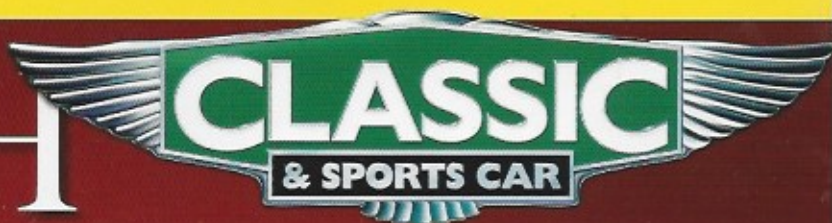




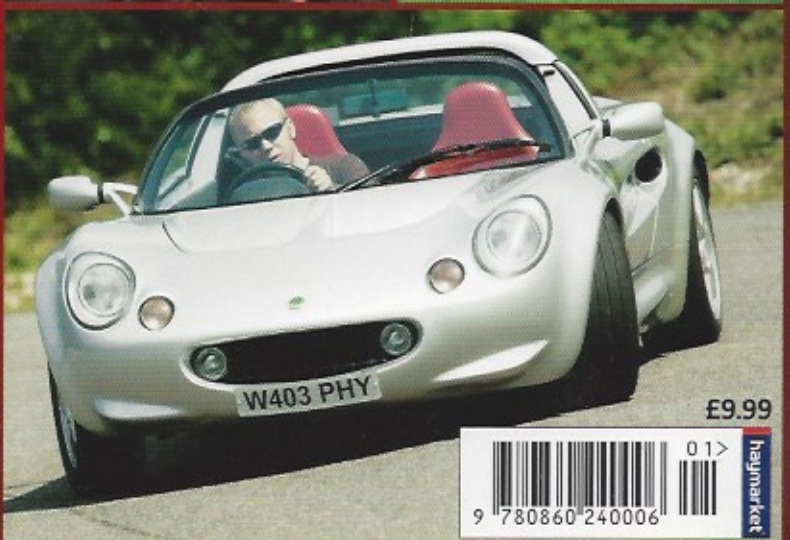
COLLECTORS' EDITION • BRITISH SPORTS CAR SPECIAL

BRITISH SPORTS CAR LEGENDS



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The A team

Alastair Clements takes the A train from MGA 1500 roadster via the desirable Twin-Cam to 1600 coupé

PHOTOGRAPHY **TONY BAKER**





Contemporary film buffs will be familiar with the Baldwins. Four brothers, similar in looks, separated only by a few years, but quite different in character and ability. Eldest Alec isn't as young as he used to be, but can still win the heart of many a fair maiden. Next-in-line Daniel looks familiar – different but not necessarily an improvement. Young and charismatic, Billy Baldwin makes an ideal all-action hero and he's had a couple of hit movies. And finally there's Stephen, the youngest of the quartet. By now, though, fickle cinema-goers are looking for something new so he could very well end up auditioning against his own flesh and blood to land the best roles.

A similar sibling rivalry can be found among the talented members of the MGA family. Introduced in 1955, the MGA 1500 used the new 1489cc B-series 'four', and superior aerodynamics gave the car much improved performance over the TF 1500. A coupé version, arriving a year later, brought a little civility, its slippery shape giving a slightly higher top speed. An instant heart-throb, beating previous Abingdon production records in its first year, the MGA's appeal was further enhanced in 1958 with the introduction of the athletic Twin-Cam. Using an enlarged B-series block, bored out to 1588cc and with an alloy head, the new model produced a healthy 108bhp giving 110mph plus. Disc brakes all round and an improved interior were other benefits, but the new engine soon developed a reputation as a troublemaker. Early cars burnt a lot of oil, heavy traffic caused overheating, and owners' abuse of the free-revving but fragile unit prompted premature failure. Warranty claims poured in, forcing MG to kill off the model after only two years and just 2111 cars.

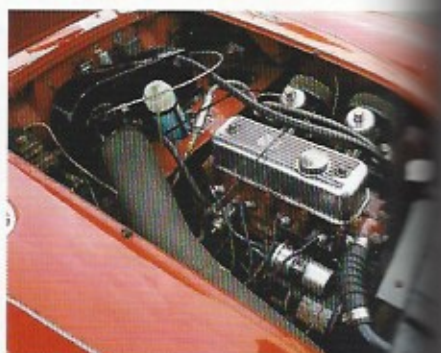
Amid concerns over the Twin-Cam's reliability, the company decided to boost the power of the pushrod engine in 1959. A 1588cc version was installed to create the 1600, further improvements including front disc brakes and better lights front and rear. The new engine brought a useful increase in power and torque, but the car was a let-down after the exotic Twin-Cam. The last variation on the theme came in 1961, in the shape of the 1600 MkII. With a gutsy 1622cc engine, and taller gearing for refined long-distance cruising, the MkII was identifiable externally by its recessed front grille slats and horizontal rear light clusters. Fewer than 9000 of this last model were built – less than 10 per cent of MGA production – before the all-new monocoque MGB of 1962.

An interesting aside to the 1600 story was the De Luxe, the rarest model. Never officially listed and with just 395 MkI and MkIIs built, this hybrid was a convenient way of using up remaining Twin-Cam componentry. Mating the 1588cc or 1622cc pushrod engine with the Twin-Cam's Dunlop disc brakes and steel wheels made it a desirable car.

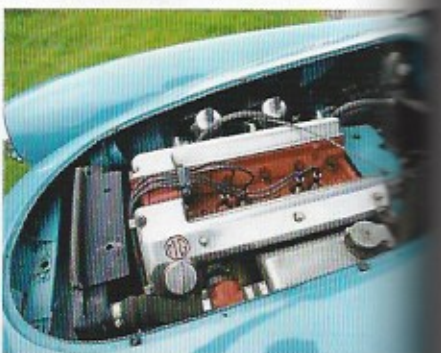
Finished in Orient Red, this 1956 1500 roadster is undoubtedly the purest expression of the model. The fluidity of the shape from front to rear, free from unnecessary adornment, is enhanced by the period-option boot rack and retro-fit chrome wire wheels (painted ones were optional when new). Reach over the curving door-top and pull the cord mounted within to access the narrow cabin. Once inside, the driver



The original 1500 is the purest of MG's As. Simple interior with non-standard wood-rim wheel



Well balanced Twin-Cam handles superbly. Troublesome dohc unit fills engine bay



Coupé's beautifully trimmed cabin makes for the perfect long-distance classic cruiser



faces a body-coloured painted dashboard, offset in today's hatch-based soft-tops, comprehensively equipped with traditional Jaeger dials and a period wireless mounted in front of the passenger. Centrepiece is the single radio speaker, neatly surrounding a large rubber button operating the horn. The space behind the seats plays a multi-functional role in the roadster. Both hood and frame stow neatly out of sight, avoiding the unsightly external location of contemporary dropheads, together with the windcreens in neat storage bags. Behind the all-weather gear is the spare wheel access.

The firm, flat seats provide little support, especially in corners, but, once you're seated behind the smaller-than-standard Moto-Lita wheel, the MGA breeds instant familiarity. Well-spaced pedals are light and satisfying in action, while the stubby gearlever is a perfectly placed delight to use – with a short throw and close gate. The fine gearbox is one of the highlights of all three cars, with a stiff but positive change, the only criticisms being lack of overdrive and a notchy downshift to second. The rack-and-pinion steering has lots of direct feel, but is heavy at low speeds with the smaller wheel. Near-perfect weight distribution – a ratio of 51.5:48.5 front to rear – and a hefty separate chassis to prevent scuttle shake spell fine handling. There is a tendency towards mild oversteer when pushing hard, and the inside rear wheel spins on tighter bends, but the car corners safely and without vice. The torquey B-series engine is no fire-breather, but it revs excellently and propels the MG along at a brisk pace with a sporting thrum from the exhaust.

So much about the MGA Twin-Cam is quintessentially 1950s Britain – the unfussy lines, beautifully trimmed cabin and upright driving position with large, close wheel – that the charismatic engine comes as a surprise. Free-revving and urgent, the unit behaves more like a product of Milan than Oxfordshire – it's as if Sophia Loren had been cast to play Miss Marple. At tickover, the pushrod's pedestrian monotone is translated into the breathless babble of garden-fence gossip. Answering criticisms of the 1500's lack of power, the Twin-Cam streaks off the line, revving cleanly and pulling strongly towards the 6500rpm redline – accompanied by a deliciouslyarty engine note.

Behind the factory-spec sprung wheel, thin-rimmed and large in diameter, it's obvious that original is best. The steering is super-light, precise and direct. Allied to the improved, Deluxe seats, well-controlled body roll and the Twin-Cam's inherent balance, it adds up to a cornering experience to savour. Flicking through bends the MG is responsive yet neutral, turning in sharply and cornering fast and flat with little of either understeer or oversteer. Powerful Dunlop discs all round pull the light car to a halt strongly, but are not a dramatic improvement over the 1500's excellent drums – though the Twin-Cam does approach corners at a significantly higher rate of knots than its older brother.

A glance under the bonnet reveals why some Twin-Cams suffered a lack of basic mainte-

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

1 Rust: check wings (replacements fit poorly), inner wings, boot floor and front panel. Sill and door posts (F-section) rust, rotten outer means worse within.

2 Chassis strong, but check for rust in rails, rear crossmember and between sills and rails.

3 Rechroming Mazak shroud vents is difficult. Windscreen frame is irreplaceable and reproduction bumpers differ from originals.

4 Sprung steering wheels and hood frames are no longer available. Seats expensive to retrim, Jaeger dials often refaced with Smiths items from the MGB.

5 B-series engines are durable, but MGB unit bolts straight in so check originality. Despite its reputation, the Twin-Cam will be reliable if sensitively driven and regularly maintained: oil changes are critical.

1956 MGA 1500 ROADSTER

Engine all-iron pushrod 1489cc 'four' with twin SU carburettors

Chassis (all types) separate box-section steel with steel body, aluminium-skinned doors, bonnet and boot

Suspension (all types) front independent with coil springs and lever-arm shock absorbers rear semi-elliptic leaf springs with lever-arm shock absorbers

Brakes hydraulic drums all round

Max power 68bhp @ 5500rpm

Max torque 77.4lb ft @ 3500rpm

0-60mph 15.6 secs **Max speed** 98mph

Price new £961

1958 MGA TWIN-CAM ROADSTER

Engine iron block, aluminium head, dohc 1588cc 'four' with twin SU carburettors

Brakes hydraulic discs all round

Max power 108bhp @ 6700rpm

Max torque 104lb ft @ 4500rpm

0-60mph 12.4 secs **Max speed** 113mph

Price new £1265

1960 MGA 1600 COUPÉ

Engine all-iron pushrod 1588cc 'four' with twin SU carburettors

Brakes hydraulic discs all round

Max power 79.5bhp @ 5600rpm

Max torque 90lb ft @ 3500rpm

0-60mph 13.3 secs **Max speed** 103mph

Price new £1026

BMC made much of the MGA's modern look after the archaic TF

BMC has the inside track on outdoor fun



The owners

Michael and Linda Bibring have owned their 1500 roadster for two years and the A is a dream come true for Michael: "I always wanted one. It drives beautifully, I love its throatiness and the cornering is superb: it's what motoring should be. It is beautiful: unreal for a 45-year old." Bibring adds: "I wanted one of the first ones. I drive it most weekends, but that's not enough really."



An MGA Twin-Cam as a first classic? **Tim Hudson** was very lucky, as he explains how he came across the MG three years ago: "I had a windfall and the money was burning a hole in my pocket. I'd always wanted an Austin-Healey, but when I saw the A I had to have it." Hudson likes the whole package: "The shape is lovely, the Twin-Cam is unusual and powerful as well." But Mrs Hudson has a complaint: "My wife doesn't like the fact that there's no seat belts because I like to corner!" Hudson is hungry for more classic motoring: "I've really been bitten by the classic bug."



"I'm a car man through and through," says **Alan Osborn**, who has owned his coupé for 10 years. He's also had a B roadster, but Osborn adores the MGA: "They're underrated: when they run right they run well." Bought as a restored car, Osborn describes the horrors beneath the old finish: "There was so much filler in it they were more like sculptors than restorers." The coupé has since toured Europe: "It can be boomy and gets hot, but has more creature comforts than a roadster."



nance; the engine bay is so crammed with MG-emblazoned aluminium that there's hardly room for your amateur mechanic to swing a caterpillar, let alone wield a spanner or socket. Inside, the piped leather seats have a wonderful patina, a vinyl-covered dashboard with chrome edging adding to the upmarket feel. In this Twin-Cam, there's a filler panel bearing the octagonal logo instead of a radio – the owner preferring the sound of the double woofer mounted beside his feet.

This most rapid of MGAs doesn't broadcast its intentions to the world. Only the eagle-eyed will spot the discreet 'TWIN-CAM' script on the boot and beside the shroud panel vents. And the simple yet handsome Dunlop perforated steel disc wheels – with knock-off chrome spinners – perfectly complement the A's clean lines.

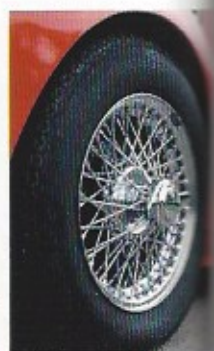
Timeless lines of early roadster enhanced by chrome boot rack and traditional wire wheels



Discreet badging and Dunlop steel wheels distinguish Twin-Cam from siblings



Neatly styled coupe bears more than a passing resemblance to Jaguar's gorgeous XK120



These very lines are often likened to another twin-cam: Jaguar's seminal XK120 – maybe after several months on the Slim-fast plan, its sinuous curves pared down to a lithe, fluid form. The roadster prompted raised eyebrows as an open-top, the coupé did nothing to allay those suspicions, its brief bubble roof proving an uncanny likeness to the Coventry tin-top.

To overcome the problem of opening the doors without disrupting the graceful line from nose to tail, the coupé wears delicate sculpted chrome door levers, as satisfying to look at as they are to ogle. Moving with the times, though not improved in looks, the 1600 sports bigger indicators/sidelights at the front and combined brake light and indicator lights to the rear. The freakishly tall, excessively arthritic, can forget trying to negotiate the tiny door aperture, but, once inside, there's a surprising amount of head, leg and elbow room for driver and passenger.

The coupé's interior manages to achieve the near-impossible: combining a snug, cosy feel within its limited dimensions with excellent all-round visibility and an airy feel from its large three-piece rear screen. Finished in magnolia with piped red – with Deluxe specification seats and vinyl dash – the cabin is a delight. Its creature comforts include proper door handles, wind-up windows and the obligatory opening doorlights in attractively trimmed doors, with all carpeting adding to the overriding impression of civility. In the back, a trimmed parcel shelf replaces the roadster's hood stowage, the rear being reached through the boot.

Follow the by-now-familiar process of turning the key and pulling the starter knob and the B-series motor chatters into life. After the neurotic Twin-Cam, the 1600's lethargic character is obvious. With much more torque than the 1500, acceleration is brisk but the 1588cc motor is the least sonorous of the trio. Unwilling to be revved, it soon sounds strained, the deep roar amplified by the boomy tin-top – despite its deadening and improved sound deadening. Without the wind in your hair, the impression of speed is diminished, yet, equipped with the 1600 engine, the coupé will top 100mph and lags little behind the Twin-Cam off the mark. Unusually, this car has drum brakes, believed to be fitted from new, yet they reinforce the belief that the MGA has one of the best drum set-ups of any road car, adequately scrubbing off speed despite the boost in power. Fitted with an original option wood-rim wheel, the coupé sadly loses out where the Twin-Cam excels. Steering is heavy, giving a truck-like feel, and the back-end feels twitchy – elderly Pirelli P3 Cinturatos squealing in protest when pushing on through the twisty bits. Thankfully there's that familiar snick, snick gearchange to replace the look of alarm with a grin.

Any enthusiast worth their salt would jump at the chance of parking an MGA in their garage. But driving a cross-section of the model makes you realise what might have been. Lying somewhere between the agriculture of an Austin-Healey and the delicacy of a Lotus, a properly set-up Twin-Cam is a superb drive. If only MG had sorted that fabulous engine's reliability, it could have been a world beater.

Thanks to MG Owners' Club (01954 231125)

Competition pedigree – A-team tactics

A fine illustration of motor sport improving the breed, the MGA's shape first appeared as a TD-based special designed by Sydney Enever for George Philips to race at Le Mans in 1951. The MGA chassis originated with a Roy Brocklehurst design for the stillborn EX175 record car. The car was developed in time for the 1955 Le Mans, where three EX182 prototypes were entered. Two cars finished – in 12th and 17th places overall, fifth and sixth in class. Further success came with second and third in class on the 1956 Mille Miglia, with East Coast US MG agent-entered cars taking fourth, fifth and sixth and the team prize at Sebring the same year. Nancy Mitchell

took the Ladies' European Touring Championship in '56 and '57, while a MkII De Luxe coupé brought more trophies in 1962 with a first in class on both the Monte Carlo and Tulip rallies. The beautiful 1957 EX181 record car provided a test-bed for the twin overhead cam version of the B-series engine, breaking five International 1500cc records in the hands of Stirling Moss, topping 240mph. It returned in 1959, with Phil Hill piloting the car to over 250mph. The MGA was back at Le Mans in 1959 with the MG Car Club. SRX 210 retired, but took 12th overall and first in class in 1960. The following year it retired with engine failure.



Left: Moss in EX181 record car. Above: coupé tackles 1962 Monte

A brace of rivals for each of our MGAs

1500

ALFA ROMEO GIULIETTA SPIDER

Sold 1956-'62 (16,075 built), 1290cc, 80bhp, 79.5lb ft, 103mph, 0-60mph 14.8 secs, 30mpg
Price new £2116

Pinin Farina-designed open version of Giulietta Sprint. Twin-cam engine and floor change, fine handling but rust-prone and parts costly so scarce in good original condition. LHD only, RHD came with '62 Giulia; 3164 Veloces also produced.



TWIN-CAM

TRIUMPH TR3A

Sold 1957-'61 (58,236 built), 1991cc, 100bhp, 127lb ft, 111mph, 0-60mph 10.8 secs, 30mpg
Price new £1049

TR is quick, and a good cruiser with overdrive on second, third and top. Changes over its predecessor include gaping mouth grille replacing pursed lips of TR3, and external door handles. Later cars had 2138cc engines and all-synchro 'box.



COUPÉ

ROCHDALE OLYMPIC I

Sold 1959-'65 (250 built), 1489cc, 60bhp, 83lb ft, 102mph, 0-60mph 11.9 secs, 30mpg
Price new £670

Aerodynamic and quirky GRP monocoque, advanced as well as rapid with Riley 1.5/MGA power. Sold as a complete kit, with optional Morris Minor or Ford engines. Minor or Riley running gear, but rear coil springs and radius arms.



MORGAN PLUS 4 (TR-ENGINE)

Sold 1954-'69 (3642 built), 1991cc, 100bhp, 127lb ft, 100mph, 0-60mph 13.3 secs, 27mpg
Price new £893

Triumph's big-banger 'four' gave the Plus 4 strong performance for a modest outlay. Disc brakes from 1960, power boosted with larger 2.1-litre engine from '61. Available as two- or four-seater sports and two-seater drophead coupé.



PORSCHE 356A CABRIOLET

Sold 1955-'59 (21,045 all types built), 1582cc, 70bhp, 81.2lb ft, 102mph, 0-60mph 15.3 secs, 31mpg Price new £2236

More refined than 356 of 1948, with more powerful 1582cc air-cooled flat four; 75bhp Super gives better performance. Styling is desirable in convertible form, but the Speedster and Carrera are out of our price range.



TVR GRANTURA I/II/IIA

Sold 1958-'62 (c.500 built), 1588cc, 79.5bhp, 72lb ft, 98mph, 0-60mph 12 secs, 23.7mpg
Price new £1183

Grantura set TVR template: plastic body, backbone chassis, borrowed running gear. Bewildering engine options for all budgets. It was steadily improved, with neater styling on MkII and then front discs coming for the MkIIA.

