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AGAINST ALL ODDS

There is no doubting the fact that Chris Starr is a dedicated and passionate MG enthusiast. He works with them during the week and at the weekend spends most of his spare time tending to his pristine 1959 MGA. He bought the car in 1968 having been attracted to the model by an article in a motoring magazine. A local showroom contained what appeared to be the perfect example and, after visiting it no fewer than five times, Chris finally managed to convince himself that he really did need it. His own car at that time, a Hillman Imp, was running perfectly and had luxuries such as wind-up windows and a roof and Chris had a few second thoughts about changing. These doubts were heightened by the fact that he knew the MGA was a little over-priced. However, he took a deep breath, wrote a cheque for £350 and drove away in a car that was to play a large part in his life for the next 19 years.

The MGA represented somewhat of a watershed in the design history of the MG motor car. It was radically different from the popular T Series cars that it succeeded and there was, for a time, some degree of speculation over how the new car would be received by the buying public. The company endeavoured to lessen the shock by linking the whole project with the famous Le Mans 24 Hour Race. This, in fact, was not merely a marketing ploy as the car really had been designed to re-establish MG in the competitive and potential lucrative world of motor sport.

It had become very apparent that a streamlined body was rapidly becoming an essential for success on the race track. MG's answer was a sleek new body designed by Syd Enever that was fitted to a racing MG TD in 1951. It resulted in a considerable improvement in performance over the original and spurred Enever on to design a new chassis with the idea of creating a road-going version. The first car was powered by a four-cylinder 1489cc pushrod ohv engine that produced 68bhp (later increased to 72bhp) and it was known as the MGA 1500. It featured coil and wishbone front suspension and half-elliptic springs at the rear while the gearbox was a manual four-speed part-synchro unit. Wire wheels were available as an optional extra and the car could be ordered in either open two-seater or fixed-head coupe form. The MGA 1500 continued in production until early 1959.

In 1958 the MGA Twin Cam was released. Thanks to its 1588cc twin ohc engine which developed 108bhp, this car gave noticeably better performance figures than its predecessor. The 0-60mph time was greatly reduced from 15 to about 9.5 secs and at least 15mph was added to the maximum speed. Just over 1,000 Twin Cams were produced in a two-year period which compares with nearly 1,000 MGA 1500s. The MGA 1600 was the third variant and appeared in both Mk 1 and Mk 2 form. The Mk 1s had a pushrod ohv version of the 1588cc engine but, for the Mk 2, the capacity was increased to 1622cc and the power output raised from 80 to 93bhp.



Despite many setbacks Chris Starr has managed to steer his 1959 MGA through a successful rebuild and on to many concours victories — Chris Graham tells the story.

Like those before it, the MGA was 'big' in America and consequently about 60% of all the cars made were exported. However, its popularity was not to last for long and the car unfortunately suffered rather a disappointing end to its production life. Due to falling sales, the car quietly faded away to make room for the introduction of the MGB in 1962.

Production of the MGA, of course, had long since ended by the time that Chris purchased his car and the MGB was in full flight. His car was finished in Chariot Red with a black interior (as it is now) and for the first few months all went well. However, disaster was about to strike. He had gone to spend the night with his parents when, at about 1.30am, there was a knock on the door. It was the police and they were trying to trace the owner of a red MGA with the registration number WPR 909B and, unfortunately, they had found him. Chris's car had been stolen and subsequently written-off during an 80mph speed trial down Poole High Street. It hit a concrete lamp post on the nearside

which drove back the whole of that side and bent the chassis. The two young joy-riders were badly hurt (one with two broken legs) and Chris was devastated. The car was patched up with glass fibre wings because there were no steel alternatives available at the time and Chris soldiered on.

Things finally came to a head in 1978 when problems started to get serious — the fact that the car was being used as everyday transport was starting to take its toll. The gearbox had become very noisy, the brakes ineffective and rust had begun to break out all over (both on the body and on the chassis). At this point Chris had to decide whether to sell the car or, instead, to keep and restore it. The latter course was taken.

(Continued)

Above:

Chris is completely dedicated to his car and, during the show season, he spends all of every Saturday cleaning and polishing it.

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C O N T I N U E D

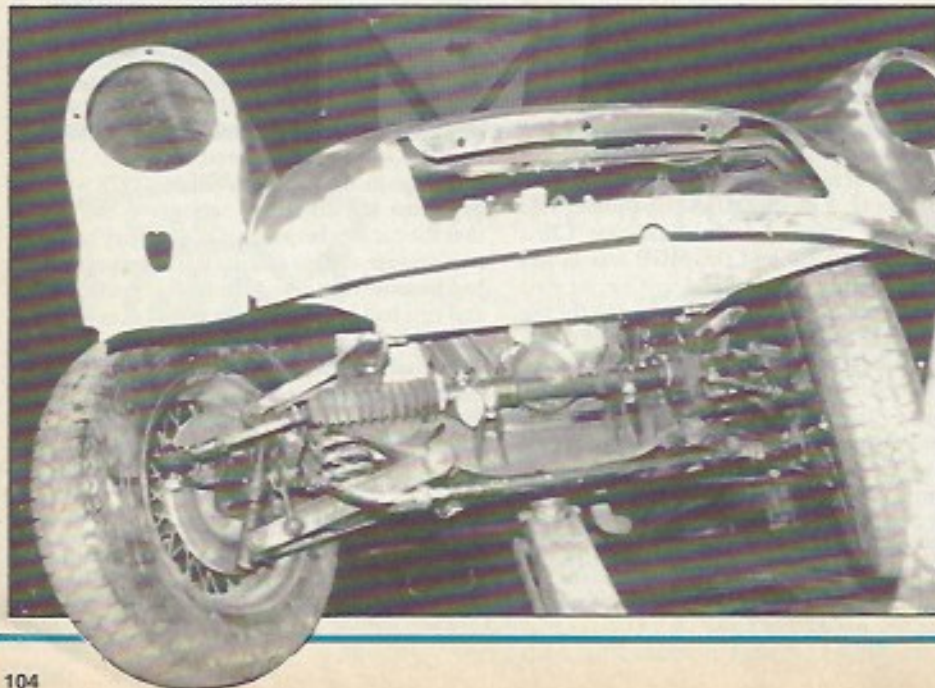


With the rear wings, the seats and the floor boards removed, Chris got the first inkling of the condition of the chassis. Some quite extensive repairs were required once the body had been removed.



There were 21 separate items to be sprayed . . . and Chris was fortunate enough to have the use of professional equipment which helped greatly. However, little did he know that he would have to repeat the whole operation within a year.

The front suspension was one of the few areas that was left alone during the restoration. It has remained untouched to this day.



The MGA takes on a whole new appearance without its wings and trim. This picture was taken with the car in the panel shop undergoing one of the many trial fitting sessions.



Originally Chris's car had been fitted with steel wheels and when he swapped them for wires a new axle was required. Subsequently he changed the differential for one with a higher ratio (as fitted to the Le Mans cars) in an effort to improve the car's performance on the road. He also added a front anti-roll bar (which was an optional extra) for the same reason.



The underside has been kept as original as possible. Only those areas that do not show have been treated to any form of corrosion prevention and Chris relies on regular cleaning to stop the formation of rust on the untreated areas.

The restoration

Chris is a trained mechanic and so was quite capable of attending to the mechanical side of the rebuild. His experience with bodywork was rather more limited and his knowledge extended only as far as that which he had picked up from working in the garage. He was well aware that the body would need to be removed to gain access to the whole chassis as it was likely this would have become corroded in places. He decided that it would be best to cut the body in half first and then lift it clear in two separate pieces. This method has the advantage of avoiding the risk of distortion which can easily occur if a body is removed in one piece without adequate support. The rear half was removed and put to one side.

To do this cuts were made through the badly corroded sills and, out of the 28 bolts that fastened the body to the chassis, Chris was amazed to find that only one was rusted solid. With the front half of the body removed the whole chassis was revealed and, as expected, holes were discovered. Chris had agreed to use a local body shop in which to carry out the restoration as he had no garage of his own at the time. This, of course, provided a very good working environment and made things a lot easier. The chassis was repaired with relative ease using a MIG welder but Chris admits that he didn't make the tidiest of jobs.

The bodywork was to provide the real problems and so, with some degree of trepidation, Chris began with the repairs to the rusted boot floor. These went well and his attention turned to other areas of the underside that are normally inaccessible. The two ends of the body, having already been stripped of paint, were then put back onto the chassis and bolted on firmly. Next the inner and outer sills, and the door posts that come together to form the F section, were lightly tacked into position with spots of weld. It is important to get this stage right as the accuracy of the door shut depends on it. If the assembly is welded in at an incorrect angle then the doors will never shut properly. This took some fiddling to get it right but, once it was achieved, everything was bolted together for the final bare-metal check and then dismantled again in preparation for spraying.

All the mechanical areas of the car were thoroughly inspected, cleaned and, if necessary, stripped and rebuilt or replaced. The only areas to remain intact were the front suspension, the rear shock absorbers and the engine — all were in fine condition and required no alteration. Since new the car has covered 180,000 miles and in this time the only significant work that has been carried out on the engine is a decoke and the fitting of a new set of main bearings — the latter took place 15 years ago. The most serious mechanical problem was caused by the gearbox which required a complete overhaul. For this the internals were taken from the gearbox of a BMC J2 van which appeared to fit the bill and these were purchased for £35 brand new.

Chris's spraying experience was not great but he was determined to do as much of the restoration himself as possible so he pressed on undaunted. There were 21 separate panels to be prepared and sprayed and the time

(Continued)

Chris Starr's 1959 MGA 1600 Mk 2 certainly does not look in bad condition for a car that has been written-off twice in its life. The first accident occurred in 1962 before he owned it.



This angle well illustrates the clean and attractive lines of the MGA. The car is made to be used with its hood down.





Boot space was never a strong point of the MGA. The spare wheel takes up a lot of room in the shallow compartment.



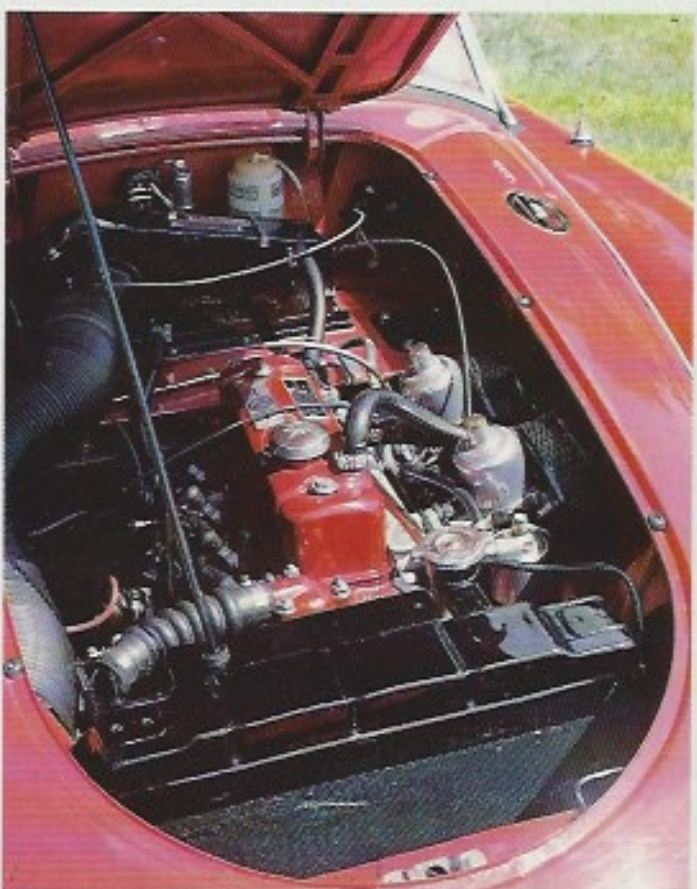
Despite having been re-upholstered the seats are now taking on an attractively used look.



All the brightwork was sent away to be rechromed and is now in perfect condition.



The interior is quite sparse but determinedly sporty. The horn push is located in the centre of the dashboard and I am told that this is so that the navigator can operate it easily in a rally situation.



The 1588cc engine with its twin SU carburetors fills the engine compartment fairly comprehensively and one contemporary magazine thought it most overcrowded, coming to the conclusion that it did not encourage 'home fiddling'. However, I am sure that many owners will disagree.

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taken on the preparation alone ran into weeks. Several coats of primer were applied followed by eight double coats of cellulose top coat. Finally it was flatted and then polished. Waxoyl was used extensively but carefully as Chris was anxious to keep the car's appearance as original as he could to please the concours judges. All the box sections were filled as were the cavities behind the splash panels and the like. Waxoyl was also used behind all the body-mounted badges and on items such as the headlamp mounting rubbers because Chris knows from experience how rust can develop in such areas. New bolts, dipped in grease, were used throughout.

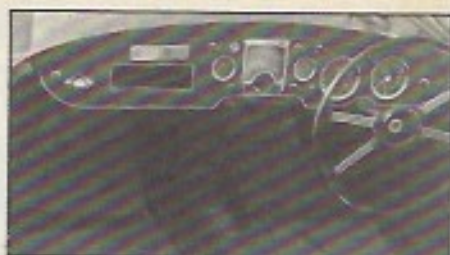
All was well for the first few months but then more trouble started. The surface became rain-spotted, faded and was quite obviously very soft. This was a very disappointing development and Chris's heart sank at the thought of repeating the whole exercise once again. However, there was no alternative. With the benefit of hindsight he believes that the problems were caused by the oil-based primer he had chosen and imagines that this had not hardened sufficiently before the top coats were applied.

So, with the car having been finished for less than a year, it was driven back into the workshop for a repeat performance. This time, however, a modern two-pack paint was used and Chris left the spraying to a colleague while he tackled the preparation.

The only problem with the instruments concerned the petrol gauge which continually collected condensation. After several unsuccessful attempts at a remedy Chris decided to swap the gauge for the newer version from an MGB. The faces were changed over so that all appeared well and no further problems occurred. Chris replaced the whole wiring loom with a new one and found this one of the simplest jobs of the whole restoration.

The trimming was the only part of the restoration that Chris did not undertake himself. He felt that, with the price of hides being so high, the risk was too great and that he would be unable to afford the inevitable mistakes.

So at last the job was finished and Chris could concentrate on entering the car in concours events. This happy situation lasted until last winter when some kindly soul backed into the car in a car park and badly dented the rear wing. Fortunately, however, Chris was now working for a company called Mansell Shaw Racing Ltd who are based in Downton near Salisbury, Wiltshire. They specialise in the restoration and race preparation of MGs of all kinds and kindly allowed Chris the use of their facilities for the repairs. One thing led to another and the car was eventually treated to another full respray and a set of new wheels and tyres.



This picture was taken while the new floor boards were being fitted. The original steering wheel was still in place here but shortly afterwards was swapped for a wood-rimmed version that was an optional extra.



The trimming was the one area that Chris did not tackle himself although he did fit everything into the car once it had been made.

On the road

This was my first time behind the wheel of an MGA, a car which I consider to be the last of the real MGs. I was very pleased to get the chance of an outing in Chris's car because I knew everything would be right and that it would be most driveable. Settling into the driving seat I was immediately struck by the low seating position in relation to the rest of

remember how to use the fly-off handbrake but then I was off. I always find that the first few moments in a strange car are rather anxious ones because all the controls are so strange. The clutch is often the hardest thing to master quickly but, in this case, everything fell beautifully to hand and I very rapidly began to feel at home in the car.

I was driving under ideal conditions. It was a warm and sunny day, we were on a twisty A road in the depths of Wiltshire and, of course, the hood was down. I had not been expecting the car to be terrifically fast — the MGA is not that type of car. It's not for the person who craves an out-and-out road-burner. Instead it demands a more sensitive and perhaps appreciative breed of owner. The steering was impressively precise and this, coupled with the tremendous roadholding, gave one the impression that the car could be driven with great agility and flair. This is where I felt that it really differed from the MGB. The MGA felt like a sports car. It possesses that appealing mixture of subtle harshness and simplicity which, to my mind, has to be present to give a sports car its style. The MGA can certainly start the adrenalin a pumpin' if so desired. The brakes were well up to the car's performance and the gear-change, although firm, was predictable and lacked any disconcerting play.



Since he has been competing in events Chris has won 132 major and minor awards.



Considering the car's condition it is hard to believe that it is treated like this every weekend throughout the summer and driven 60 miles a day to and from work.

the car. This creates a pleasantly secure feeling and is made possible due to the chassis design. The main chassis rails bow out around the passenger compartment and do not interfere with the level of the floor which allows the seats to be mounted at the lowest possible point.

The engine started on the button and quickly settled to an even tickover. Blipping the throttle produced the characteristically crisp exhaust note and sent the rev counter needle spinning round the scale with effortless ease — I knew that I was going to like this car. I had to pause for a few seconds to

The other aspect of the MGA which endears it to me is its looks. I find it more pleasing than either its predecessors or its successors and from almost every angle, interesting curves and details can be enjoyed. It is very much a design from the early 1960s that falls neatly into the traditional image of the British sports car and that I like. It has a distinctive front end with grille, a long bonnet, a slightly curved and raked windscreen and gracefully shaped and proportioned wings. The wire wheels on Chris's car complete the picture and produce a car of which, justifiably he can most proud. □

My thanks go to Chris Starr and the staff at Mansell Shaw Racing Ltd (Tel: 0725 21418) for their help with the preparation of this feature.