

A confusion of modernity and obsolescence made the MGY...

# ABINGDON'S FOUR-DOOR ENIGMA



**The MGY had a body styling as up-to-date as the Charleston. Its engine was an exercise in instant antiquity. But its handling, suspension and brakes were ahead of their time and it had interior trim to knock spots off its competition. Was it a dog or one of the unsung greats? Brian Woodward, who owned a Y, says it was both...**

EVEN THOUGH the great effort of World War Two had stretched engineering imagination to its limit, "hurry" was an unknown word in the British industrial Midlands. To hurry a car, most British engineers thought, was like serving a nubile maiden with nine horny studs in the hope of a child within 30 days — it couldn't be done.

The failure of the British car industry, and the sports car in particular, can be traced directly to the dark post-war days. A mixture of too little capital, highly restrictive engine-size legislation on the home market and design offices unable to get their collective fingers out, meant that post-war cars lacked imagination. Dreary old rehashes of the thirty-niners left a car-hungry world with wheels and very little fun.

The MGY was released in the UK at the start of 1949 and it could have

been a great motor car but for its engine.

Imagine a car with the sophisticated suspension of a Golf or Alfasud with a body as classy as, say a Mog. A good thing, you'd say. But consider this ideal car with a Ford Anglia engine and you have an approximate equivalent to the Y when it was released. The suspension and chassis were beautifully integrated, the brakes were perhaps the best in the UK at the time, the body, stylish, was definitely MG and had all the features made a modern car. Yet this stroke of genius was powered by an engine that had been hamstrung for years by half-witted legislation (laws which gave rise to meaningless figures like RAC horsepower and encouraged the production of engines with bore-and-stroke ratios that would frighten a tractor engine

designer).

In spite of its totally unbalanced nature, the MGY sold because youth, aged by war and encumbered by war brides and their progeny, could capture something of its innocent past, and still carry the kids. Well, the rich could. In 1948, the MGY cost around £400 more than a Holden.

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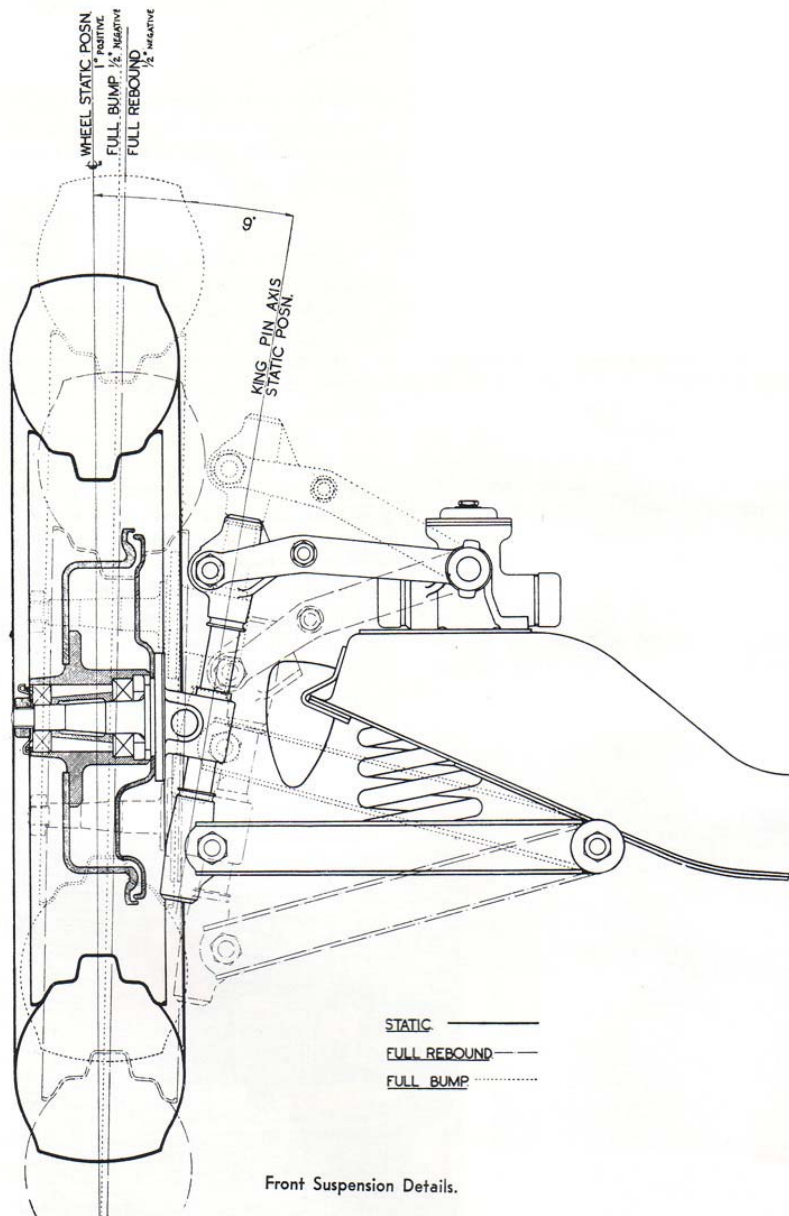
*I was only young once and I was going to buy an MG — sure as hell I was — because there was this French bird in Port Macquarie where I was living and her father drove the first shovelnose Citroen I'd ever seen and she used to make my knees go funny when I saw her at the dance every week and she wouldn't talk to me — not even to say hello — and I just knew that if I had an MG she'd be mine and we'd set the world on fire and anyway Clarkie had a hot FJ and he got all the chicks so if I didn't get an MG then I might as well curl*



*This is the Woodward Y. The author claims its paintwork was "rich and clear". The original driving light was changed for a Lucas flamethrower which flattened the battery in after a half-hour of fast night driving.*



*The appeal of an MG. You see, it worked ...*



Front Suspension Details.

Just enough negative camber, on bump, to compensate for the modest amount of body roll built into the Y sedan. Centre of gravity is kept low, and the wide-spaced kingpins give wheel location of a kind not seen in MGs before. Woodward says the front end was one of the great pieces of design seen in post-war British cars.

up and die. Anyway Uncle Lex had come to visit and he'd be sure to back me when the question was raised at home and my Vauxhall was dying after 101,000 miles and 5000 miles of rallying and an MG would make me very very happy and I'd probably never try to upset the family again — promise!

The Y was a natural. It was an MG, to please me — sort of — and a four-door car to please the oldies. There was a strange kind of logic stalking the world of the oldies way back when. People did naughty things in sports cars and some of

them even engaged in funny business. But people in sedan cars (or saloons) didn't do any of those things and didn't want to get killed on race tracks or pick up a young lady in a coffee bar late on a Saturday afternoon and drive off into the northern beaches sunset singing "Rinso, Rinso Rinsooooooooooooo".

God, how I hate compromises! I parked the Vauxhall at Ron Ward's MG yard on the Parramatta road (later I heard that it travelled 100 metres before the gearbox fell out) and drove the Y home feeling as daring as a strip dancer in a great coat or a county squire with purple shirt buttons. But the total exchange only cost me £80, so I still had enough cash to spend on a haircut. There was even enough for a late night visit to — hushed tones — a coffee bar.

Ah well, it was an MG and it looked very nice.

\* \* \*

In 1939 MG flew in the face of legislation (which tried to force cars to have a bore of 10 mm and a stroke of 1.6 metres) by actually reducing engine capacity from 1.292 litres to 1.250 litres. The stroke was decreased and the bore increased, probably so the engine would rev a little harder and the cheaper overhead valve system could work correctly. The new model was called the TB, which had nothing to do with a popular illness of the time, and predated the Hitler conflict by a few short months. When the war started, TB production stopped until 1945 when the same vehicle, with minor cosmetic changes, was introduced



The MG Y, this one photographed for SCW'S T-type reunion at Warwick Farm, was a mixture of excellent and poor design. Author Woodward says the little car had stacks of character.

as the TC. Even though the 1.25 litre engine had been bored and de-stroked in 1939, it was still undersquare at 66.5 x 90 mm. On a clear day the TC engine would run to 5200 rpm when it would generate some 40.6kW (54.4 bhp).

In its single carburettor form for the Y model, the engine lost 6.3 kW (8.4 bhp) and some torque, but the maximum rev limit also fell to 4800. Compression ratio was mild at 7.2, but fuel was mild too. Although a different cam was fitted to the Y, it is hard to find details of the differences. Contemporary accounts of the Y shows almost identical specifications, but no mention is made of valve lift or cam profile. This must be where the secret was because the Y didn't perform well with the TC cam; it was even more breathless.

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*First thing, before going back to Port Macquarie, was to fit twin carbs. I mean, an MG isn't an MG with one lonely SU sucking under the lid. It was hard work. No simple conversion, I had to grind and shape, turn and push with many loud noises and strange language. The TD carbs fitted with pancakes — to add to the noise — and a throttle linkage that would've made Mister MG weep, the old tank didn't go any faster. It went louder and looked good, so every time I switched off the ignition, I opened the bonnet to make sure everyone could see that this was a real and genuine MG with twin carbs, mate.*

*Dozens of exhaust systems were tried and all of them scraped along the deck, finally I settled for the original.*

*First trip was back to Port Macquarie. About 30 minutes north of Newcastle I was passed by a brand new S series Valiant containing four birds who gave me the yahoo.*

*It was on for young and old. Who said a Y could only rev to 4800?*

*Mine revved to 12,500 on some of the downhill stretches and finally just as I was within a fantasy of catching them, it swallowed the carbs' innards. Everything that was once bolted down, or held in place with patent clips, dismantled and disappeared down the throats and into the donk. It died like no engine I have ever heard before or since — it sounded like Eccles (or Peanuts' mate Dustbin) emptying his pockets.*

*"SU" are the initials given to the Skinners Union, the gentlefolk from the midlands who used to kill sheep, skin them and make little washers and diaphragms for carburettors. I felt like one of their victims.*

*Luckily I still had the single jug manifold and after two or three hours I had salvaged enough bits to*



*The only remaining piece of the Woodward Y — the pipe from the aircleaner to single card — photographed with a fittingly serious background*

*convert the Y to a single SU and limp on to Port. Limp, because it finally died from a surfeit of brass needles on the exhaust valve seats.*

*It was an expensive fang and the birds didn't even return to console me.*

\* \* \*

The chassis of the Y was developed for a new sports car. Sales in the US (and Australia) probably exceeded the MG Co's wildest dreams, so the TC was left to sell and it was three years after the Y before the TD appeared. The Y is a TD with four seats. The TD is a Y three years late. Double, unequal wishbones were revolutionary in the UK in the winter of 1947, so the Y was hailed as sort of revolutionary.

Like Che with a pinstripe suit. To the purist it was more like Idi with an education. The front end was too damn good by half. It rode well, handled well and was strong enough to last forever. King pins, the bane of week-kneed TCs for many years, were duplicated top and bottom on the Y with an unusual system that gave the rigidity and acute feel of a king-pin car (not the sloppy vague system now used with rubber bushed ball-joints). The king pins were about 200 mm (8 in.) apart for extreme strength. This also reduced the load taken by the individual bushes in the pins and reduced wear.

Rack and pinion steering was used. Coupled to the unequal length arms, this made for a most civilised front end. No wonder the purists, who generally ignored the sedan MGs, later called the TD a "pansy wagon".

The only problem that ever occurred was occasional wear in the shock absorber bushes. The dreadful lever-arm shocks formed the pivot at the chassis end for the upper arm. Long may the man who designed lever-arm shocks receive the abuse he deserves.

Rear suspension was odd when you hung your head underneath for the first time. The rear axle was mounted over the chassis to keep the centre of gravity as low as possible. The front was held low by arm angles, the rear by keeping the bulk low to the ground. Surprisingly this didn't reduce rear ground clearance to a ridiculous level.

\* \* \*

*When the old tank was back together, complete with twin carbs, it was used for many late night dashes to Sydney. A bloke had to take his washing home to mum. The road from Gosford was still fun, before the 6000 km/h tollway had been built, and I had fitted the Y with an original set of Firestone, 100 percent aspect, vintage tread tyres that I'd bought through the MG Car Club. They were*

the only tyres that would work as I'd found after fitting a set of Goodyear G8s which wore out in 8000 km and squealed like an editor on deadline day.

Late one Friday night, about 10 minutes out of Gosford, a car with four headlights swept down a short hill and glued itself on my tail. It was a new Fiat 1500, the terror of Conrod. (A few years later I was talking to one of the men who had helped prepare the 105 mph Fiat 1500s which rocked the Bathurst 500. I asked him if the cars were standard and he said, "Of course they were, we took a whole year to make them that way".)

A combination of brakes and bravado kept the 1500 from overtaking. Also, the Fiat had the hi-jacked rear suspension which threw him cross-legged on every quick, tight corner. After one really fast corner I noticed his headlights beside me and thought the guy was going to make a run for overtaking, using the sinful power of the Fiat's bigger motor. It took a fraction of a second before I realised I was using all the road and there was no room for him to pass. It was then that I saw he was overtaking through the trees, picking off saplings like a mechanical madman with a machete. We both stopped — well, he had to — and chatted for a while about the marital status of our parents at our time of birth, several unusual reproductive positions and various parts of the human anatomy. Then I hitched a rope and pulled him back on to the road and we fixed his car enough to carry on to Sydney. I never saw him again, but it strengthened my love for the old tank's roadholding.

\* \* \*

The body on the Y was expensive to make, but it had all of the features we can't have now because cars are too cheap. Front opening doors and

plenty of window area (the pillars may be a bit thick by today's standards) with genuine wood for the dash and as capping on the door trim. There were plenty of ashtrays and a dip-stick for the gearbox oil level and a front opening windscreen for colonial summers. The seats were thin but better than the Melbourne tram seats in the wonder-boy 'Olden released here a year later. Carpet, leather and instruments — it was an MG all right, but with all those doors and windows?

The boot lid opened down so the boot area could hold little loads easily, take up very little room when empty and could be used as the deck for large loads. The lid had protective strips and straps to hold your luggage in place for quick junkets to Nice or Cannes (from Sydney? — Ed).

The lack of planning and inability to change age-old production techniques gave the MG — and particularly the Y — a body the envy of every one on the beach. It was no 97-pound weakling either, at 19.5 cwt registered.

\* \* \*

*Dirt roads aren't kind to MGs.*

Finally the car worked and the bird and I were heading north to Point Plommer. The French bird, you ask? Nyahh, this was the real one mate, Clarkie's girlfriend's friend. Anyway, we were heading north and the dash fell in my lap. The complete dashboard, instruments and all. And that wasn't the most interesting thing that happened that day.

Later on the Y was attacked by a drunk in Campsie and the panel beater was a mate who did such a good job on the LHF guard the whole car had to be resprayed to match it. Then the LHF guard started to crack and was welded thereafter every Saturday morning.

But, long after I had moved to Sydney, the Y was still working wonders. A different kind of bird altogether. Sort of North Shore darling. "Yes mummy, it is an MG, but it's a car, not an open sports car."

In traffic, with the sun roof open (it never leaked when shut) I could stand up and see what was happening. Then it started to get hard to start and I looked at the speedo to find 132,000 miles (82 zillion km), so it had to go. First there was a Morgan which didn't get bought and then a one-way ticket to England. A young student from somewhere out west bought it and drove it away, smoke screen and all.

About 10 years later I saw it on a truck in Katoomba in a state of restoration. I knew it was the old tank because I recognised the welding on the underside of the LHF guard.

Pity, the bloke was probably married and only needed something to do when his wife went to Yoga with the girls.

Pity that values change, everything is respectable now.

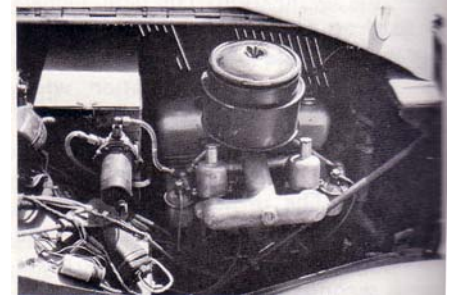
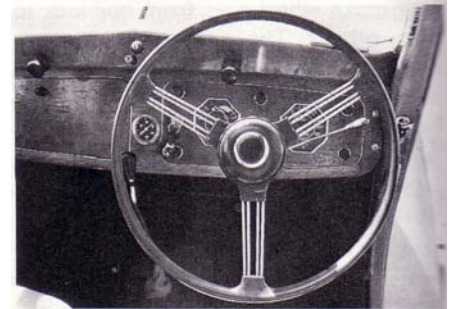
Pity I never owned a real, two-place MG, the compromise just whetted my appetite and now I'm getting old. One day, when I'm very very rich, I'll go looking for the old tank and we'll park in Port Macquarie and listen to the sea.

\* \* \*

What went wrong? The Y was a good car with a dreadful engine forced on it by brainless legislation. Today we have bad cars with fairly good engines forced on us by legislation. Some things don't change, but the cars of today will never have the charm and charisma for the next generation of oldies. I don't want to be around when my son tells his son about the Torana Hatchback he once owned.

Elsewhere in the same magazine, there was also an article entitled **The Fabulous MG T-Types**. Included in this review, was a review of the Y for reasons made clear in the caption below.

## EXTRACTS FROM THE FABULOUS MG T~TYPES



*The Y sedan was not exactly a member of the T-range but it shared so many of the two seater's components – and actually provided them for the TD – that it deserves inclusion. It was an excellent small sedan for its time – roomy, economical, quite nimble. Performance wasn't brilliant because of the extra body weight of the sedan.*

Halfway into 1947 an MG sedan was introduced and although not strictly a T-series car it has become part of that family because it shared many T components. This was the Y-series four-door which was basically a prewar design with more time devoted to updating its specification before production began.

It was a four-door four-seater not unlike the Morris Eight and used the XPAG engine with a single carburettor and milder camshaft timing. Its limiting feature was its weight which reduced performance considerably. The Y sedan became very popular, notably because of the more precise rack and pinion steering and independent front suspension. The car was comfortable and these two mechanical features were not common on small sedans of the day.

Using the XPAG unit meant that the engine could be tuned using TC experience and some were entered for competition. Perhaps the fastest in its day was a supercharged example owned by Dick Benn which Goldie Gardner took to 169 km/h (104.7 mph) in 1950.

The interior trim was exceptionally plush, with much polished wood and deep leather seats. A sunshine roof provided pleasant motoring on warmer days and the windscreen could be wound out to provide extra ventilation. The boot was moderate but leg room in the back was sufficient for the average sized person. Bumper bars were fitted front and back and the large upright chromed radiator shell showed to one and all that it was proud of its MG ancestry.

Eighteen months after the Y sedan came the tourer version in true prewar MG tradition. The shape

of this model left plenty to be desired and although mainly an export model it was not met with the expected enthusiasm. It had twin carburettor and the TC camshaft but the body weight, though less than the sedan, was just too much for the 1250cm<sup>3</sup> engine to push along quickly. The car is better appreciated today, particularly since only 877 were produced and it is the second rarest of the T-series cars. It did not have the interior finish of the sedan but it had a Jackall internal jacking system like the sedan but not the same plush interior.

Late in 1951 an improved version of the Y-series sedan became available and was designated the YB, the earlier model now becoming the YA. It used the hypoid differential, smaller wheels and two leading shoe brakes of the TD with larger shock absorbers and most important of all, a front anti-roll bar.

This made the sedan into a better car but production was slightly hampered by heavy demand at that time for TDs.

The YB's most notable competition success was in the hands of Dick Jacobs as a standard car in production car races. It won its class win at Silverstone three years in a row 1952-54. The factory built 6158 YAs and 1301 YBs. Surprisingly, there seems not to be a single YB in Australia.

After about three years of production it became evident that a simple sports car was to be a most saleable item in the years ahead, and the TC itself was getting rather old. Sales of the Y sedan were encouraging so it was decided to incorporate its new features into a new sports car.

A Y type chassis with its independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering was shortened by 125 mm to the wheelbase of the TC, and a TC body was loosely attached. In this manner the TD was born and only a tidying up job needed to be done before a production car was ready. The ifs made it necessary to fit disc wheels but the better steering allowed this model to be produced easily in both right and left hand drive form.

The refinements were the answer to the pleas of many but the weight increased so there was no improvement in performance. As the production continued, various alterations were carried out. Braking was better by way of two leading shoe brakes and although the final drive was unaltered the smaller wheels reduced the gearing. The gearbox used the wider ratios of the Y-type.

\* \* \*

*Later in the same article ...*

### **DRIVING IMPRESSIONS**

The sedan is neat, compact and a genuine four-seater. The front bucket seats hold you firm as you sit upright, looking over the bonnet from the driving position. Body roll on corners is the most notable difference, from the two-seaters. But it's manageable, once you get used to it. With the screen wound out a little and the sunshine roof open a more refined form of "open" driving is possible than in the open sports cars. Many enthusiasts would have us wash out our mouths for a remark like that ...

Acceleration is sadly lacking after the 1500 TF and the car seems sluggish. It might have been better to try the sedans first and work up

the speed table. Nevertheless on normal roads the ride is good and steering light and direct enough to make it a delightful four seater.

The open four-seat tourer shows little of its theoretically improved performance (it's lighter than the sedan). Hard acceleration and foot flat down in top should have shown a better turn of speed than the sedan but there really was little apparent difference in ride or body roll.

But the Y-tourer does offer open motoring like the sports cars but you can't help feeling cheated in not having more performance on hand. This is probably overcome with more miles. On the open road with the windscreen down where conditions prevent more than 80 km/h, the tourer would seem fast and a whole lot of fun. On the open track it isn't really.



*The Y tourer is a rare car because it was never produced in volume. Mechanicals are very similar to Y sedan except for doors and lid. Here, it spills fuel from its filler cap, leans, but points quite well.*

Originally printed in Australian Sports Car World Quarterly August /October 1977. Words by Brian Woodward. Photography by Warwick Kent. Title now owned by Off-Set Alpine Printing. Permission to reproduce applied for.