

# Rhapsody in Burgundy



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One of the problems for the owner of an MG Y is to explain to people what a Y is – it seems that everybody is familiar with the open sports MGs, which is quite understandable, given their immense popularity over many years.

Very few people, though, it seems can recall having ever seen a 'closed' MG, even though the company has made many very stylish saloon models since 1924.

Motor historian and former archivist for the British Motor Heritage Centre at Gaydon in the UK, Anders Ditlev Clausager,



Owner and restorer, Neil Wakeman.

writes in the introduction to his book *MG Saloon Cars*: "If there is a common bond between the very different (ie: saloon) cars described in this book, it is that they have always had more scorn than praise heaped upon them. They have often been misunderstood, misjudged, or unfairly maligned. And why? Simply because they have stood accused of not being 'real' MGs."

MG saloons were built from the earliest days of the company, along with the open cars. In the years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War, MG continued to offer their popular range of 'Midget' and 'Magnette' sports cars, supplemented with three larger saloons and drophead tourers, the S, V and W models.

The WA had an engine capacity of 2561cc, the SA had 2288cc; and the VA had an engine of 1548cc.

The next development was to include one more saloon, with a smaller engine capacity than the VA, and this is where the MG Y makes its appearance.



William Morris had closed down MG's own design office in 1935 as part of a major restructuring of his personal companies under the Morris Motors umbrella.

The Y type, called the MG 1½ Litre (Series Y) in early brochures, was therefore designed in the Morris Design Studio in Cowley.

The Y's power unit was based on the 1140cc overhead valve engine used in the Morris Ten Series M – coded XPJM (M for Morris).

The MG version (coded XPAG – G for MG) was increased to 1250cc and a single 1¼" SU carburettor was fitted to the Y type.





This engine was already in use in the TB Midget sports model (released in 1939), and would remain in the TC (1945), TD and early TF models, with performance enhancements including twin carburetors and a modified camshaft for the Midgets. The same basic motor was later used for the Wolseley 4/44 – coded XPJW (W for Wolseley, of course).

The MG Y featured an independent front suspension layout designed by Alec Issigonis and Jack Daniels – the very first collaboration of this future formidable team.

The Y type became the first Nuffield product, and one of the first British production cars, with independent front suspension.

The Y type was also the first MG built specifically to accommodate either left-hand-drive or right-hand-drive, and featured rack-and-pinion steering.

Gerald Palmer was responsible for body styling. He took an all-steel Morris Eight Series E four-door body shell, added a swept tail and rear wings, and a characteristic MG bonnet with an upright grille.

Curiously, the Y type MG 1½ Litre Saloon retained separately mounted headlights at a time when the Morris Series E, along with other Nuffield models, had its headlights inset into the front wings.

Although the Morris Ten Series M of the same period was of unitary construction, the Y had a separate chassis under its pressed-steel bodywork; like the Morris Eight.

It would be 1953 before an MG, the ZA, was built with unitary, or monocoque, construction.



In keeping with MG tradition, the MG Y had a high standard of interior finish. It featured leather-faced seats and extensive use of wood trim, including a full width burr walnut veneered dash.

A prototype Y type was constructed in 1939 with an intended launch at the Earls Court Motor show the following year. However, due to the onset of the War and post-war austerity and material shortages, potential customers had to wait a further eight years before production could commence.

An open tourer version of the Y (the MGYT) was also introduced alongside the saloon at the 1948 Earls Court Motor Show. List price for the saloon was £525.0.0 plus Purchase Tax of £146.11.8 and delivery costs.

In 1952, MG updated the Y type and an improved model, designated the YB, was launched. The first version of the Y is now often unofficially referred to as the YA, to differentiate it from the YB, though this was never a factory designation.

Where the Y was fitted with double-acting front brake shoes, the YB came with a Lockheed twin-leading-shoe design, each shoe having its own wheel cylinder, providing greatly improved braking.



The road holding was also improved by the introduction of a more modern back axle and 15" wheels - the Y and YT had 16" wheels. The YB also had an anti-roll bar fitted to the front of the car and better dampers (shock absorbers).

Externally, both models looked much the same, the main difference being the depth of the rear guards on the YB to accommodate its smaller wheels. A new range of colour schemes was also offered to YB buyers.

When production ceased in 1953, a total of 8,336 Y Types had been built – made up of 6,151 Y models, 884 Y Tourers and 1,301 YBs.

The International MG Y Type Register website ([www.mgytypes.org](http://www.mgytypes.org)), a veritable gold mine of information on the marque, has tracked down 289 Ys, 130 Tourers and 136 YBs still in existence around the world.





The car and body panels as bought - they needed to be stripped and redone.



The car was off the road for many years.

## The Story of Y3498

Our featured example, my own car, is a Y model, built in approximately 1948. After a three-year ground-up restoration, it is now in a condition very close to original.

Despite all my best attempts, the history of this car is largely unknown. It was bought through a well-known Internet auction site in 2009, but the vendor knew very little about the car's history, as he had only bought it a matter of weeks before on-selling it.

Contact with the prior owner wasn't very helpful either. He had bought the car from a used car yard in Geelong some years previously, but that yard no longer exists.

In 1988, UK enthusiast John Lawson published an excellent reference book called *MG Y Type Saloons and Tourers*, and this book shows that Y3498 was in Victoria at that time.

Lawson's records showed that it was owned by a Mr C K Curtis, but finding this gentleman somewhere in Victoria some 20 years later proved to be a futile task.

Although the car was dismantled when I bought it, a windscreen came with it, with a registration sticker expiring in November 1970. This showed Victorian registration number OH841 and engine number XPAG SC133500 – which matched the car's engine and brass chassis plate.

## Restoration

When bought, Y3498 had already undergone some restoration. The body and chassis had been separated and the chassis had been sand blasted, painted

and rebuilt to a high standard. A sheaf of invoices documented the purchase of many chassis and brake parts – wheel bearings, swivel pins, wheel cylinders, rubbers, bushes, machining of brake drums and shoes and the like.

Fortunately, the braking system had not been filled with fluid and everything was well protected with rubber grease, so sitting for six years had not affected these components in any way.

Just to be on the safe side, though, the chassis was dismantled for inspection and then reassembled. At the same time, the old brake lines were removed and discarded, and were replaced with brand new ones. About \$50 for a roll of material and a couple of hours work to bend up and double flare the ends was considered cheap insurance.

The independent front end was also removed, dismantled, checked, repainted and reassembled.

## Body Shell

Although the chassis did not require a great deal of work, the body was a different story altogether.

Some work had been done, but it appeared that the total job proved to be beyond the skills of the previous owner/s. The shell appeared to have been stripped and cleaned, and painted in acrylic primer surfacer some years previously.

This material, being porous, did not protect the base metal very well – it was removed very easily, with paint stripper and a wash with paint thinners, to reveal a healthy rust bloom over the whole surface.

Removing the primer also exposed quite a lot of body filler, some of which was quite thick where a double skinned panel thwarted amateur repairer attempts to some deep dents: particularly in the roof, which appeared to have been damaged by a low-hanging tree branch at some time.

All this filler was removed in order to repair whatever perils existed beneath it. And there were plenty!

By far the worst problems were in the rear, where the spare wheel compartment floor had completely rusted out and was missing. It is easy to see how this area could have become so badly affected by rust.

The sunroof has a drain channel around the frame, and water is taken from this channel by four flexible rubber tubes in the roof space, hidden by the head lining.

At the front, these tubes are threaded down the windscreen pillars, emerging through holes in the sills near the rear of the front guards, to discharge collected water onto the ground under the car.

The rear tubes are also routed along the roofline, above the rear quarter lights, down the rear most pillars and through holes in the body above the back wheels.

Over the years, the rear tubes became brittle and eventually cracked and broke. Instead of discharging water onto the road, it ended up in the spare wheel compartment or the floor under the back seat.

Y3498 therefore required extensive work to rebuild the back section of the body. I called on the services of Andrew Hitchcock, a skilled panel man with years of experience on British classics, who amputated what remained of the lower 40cm of the tail of the car.

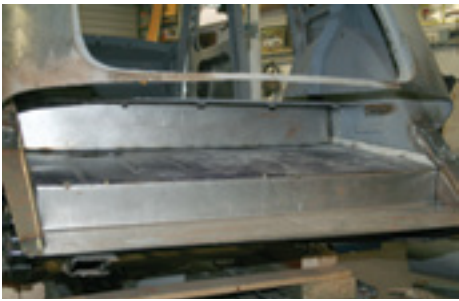
With nothing original to reproduce, careful measurements were made of the floor and rear end of a friend's Y.

A mock-up was made from 3mm MDF board (particle board), and Andrew then fabricated a completely new boot floor panel using the mock up as a guide.

Once the floor was welded into place he was able to fabricate the new outer skirt. This was skilfully gas welded to the body, after temporarily 'pinning' it into place and fitting up the rear guards to check for fit and alignment.



The completed chassis and the body in primer.



New boot floor, with rear panel cut off.



New rear panel pinned in place.



MDF blank for spare tyre aperture.



Andrew cuts aperture for the spare wheel.

The final task of this part of the job was to make the spare wheel aperture. We simplified this task by acquiring a complete aperture surround from a wreck, to avoid the need to replicate the complicated small channel around the hole itself.

Needless to say, after all this work, great care was taken to ensure the correct placement of the spare wheel aperture, using another MDF pattern as a guide.

Never has the old adage "measure twice and cut once" been more rigorously adhered to!

After the welds were dressed and finished the metal was de-rusted, de-contaminated, etch primed, filled, under-coated, etc and made ready for primer and final coats.

The rest of the body was treated with the same level of care and attention over several months. Space does not permit a detailed explanation of minor repairs taken on door panels, running boards, guards and other components that make up the whole.

The boot lid, for example, was rusty and necessitated the removal of the skin from the frame, to repair rust holes along the bottom edge of both parts.

The bottom 75mm of the boot lid skin was cut off and a new section welded in. The spare wheel locker cover also received the same treatment.

One task worth examining is a repair to the body shell where two panels were roughly lap-joined in the factory, then filled and levelled with lead – in places about 10mm thick.

Lead filling has become mostly a lost art, thanks mainly to the development of modern fillers, and a brief explanation of the process is shown in the panel on p74.

Like many of its contemporaries, the MG Y body is made up of many pieces – there are, taking the complete body

shell as one part, 23 parts that need to be individually repaired and painted.

These are: the body shell, four doors, two running boards, four wings, four bonnet panels, the boot lid, spare wheel cover, front valance panel, sunroof and four wheels.

At times I wondered if or when the project would ever be finished, especially as the car required some work to just about every one of those 23 parts.

Lots of space is required for any restoration project, especially when the body is separated from the chassis.

After sometimes working for days on a component, the semi-finished or finished part needs to be stored carefully – there's little worse than scratching or denting it, and having to start again.

Having a tolerant partner is essential. My long-suffering wife has now given up objecting to the storage of painted car parts on the dining room table!

Perseverance is another essential. Rather than taking on the project as a whole, it's best to view it as a series of smaller projects – my advice is to nibble away at the project one panel at a time .... a guard this week, a door next week.

The final challenge was to reassemble all the freshly painted bits that make up a car. It sounds trite to say that if it all came to bits, it should all go back together easily enough.

Fine, if that's the way it was, but some of the bits may have been replaced, others have been repaired and bolt holes that once lined up may now miss by a millimetre or so.

It pays to do a trial assembly before parts are painted – that way, if there are any re-alignment problems, it's much easier to fix when the parts are only primed. It's extra work that may save a lot of time.



Replacement aperture surround and cover.



New aperture surround welded into place.



Finished panel and locker cover.



Finished body primed for painting.



Looking a million dollars in new paint.



A tolerant partner is essential.



The completed engine and gearbox. Inset: the oil filter before painting.

## Engine rebuild

The engine that came with the car is its matching-number original: always a desirable attribute for a committed car restorer.

The XPAG is a conventional four-cylinder, push-rod engine with no really special features. Parts are readily available from local MG specialists or general parts suppliers. MG T-series cars are still being restored in large numbers around the world, so there are still plenty of parts suppliers in numerous countries.

The engine was machined locally and reassembled by me: a self-confessed amateur, who has managed to produce a sweet sounding and strong pulling motor.

The crankshaft was crack tested and machined; the block was rebored; the camshaft reground; new pistons, rings, bearings, valves, guides and seals were fitted; along with hardened valve seats to enable the use of modern fuels.

XPAG engines are notorious for oil leaking through the rear main seal, and stopping it is almost impossible. Some specialist machine shops have developed a 'fix' for this problem, but this additional work was not done on Y3498's engine. It was leak free for the first few weeks, but has now gone the way of almost every other XPAG, and leaves a drip or two wherever it goes (or at least it did, until a little drip catcher was fitted recently).

The engine was originally fitted with a disposable steel-cased oil filter, now no longer available. A couple of different adapter kits are available from overseas suppliers to enable the use of a modern oil filter. Working from an article on a UK TC owners' website, I modified one of the original canisters to take a disposable filter, which when painted looks almost original.

The engine was painted MG red, matched to a paint sample taken from an original engine component.

Subsequently it was discovered, from the MGY 'Bible' (an out-of-print book called *Let There Be Y's*, by David R Lawrence)

that the engine perhaps should have been a grey-green colour; but Lawrence acknowledges that it might also have been dark red.

Permission to also store the completed engine on the dining room table was less than politely refused!

## Gearbox

The top of the gearbox was removed and the gears closely inspected, without being dismantled. It looked to be in good condition and I decided to 'take a punt' on it being OK, so it was closed up again and installed as is. MG Y gearboxes are very robust, and this one has proved to be quite good in service.

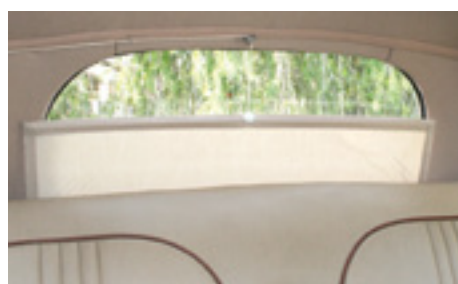
MG Y gearboxes also had an inbuilt problem. In a rather quaint letter, the MG Car Company advised a complaining customer in April 1952 that: "All MG 1¼ Litre gearboxes are susceptible to what we call a slight rattle, more so on the overrun than the drive, particularly when the gearbox oil is warm. There is very little that can be done to eliminate this unfortunate rattle, but you have our assurance that it is due to synchromesh rattle and the gearbox is not likely to give you trouble".

What would modern consumer affairs laws make of that?

## Interior

The MGY featured a luxurious interior for a small car of the era, with leather faced seats, plush carpets and lots of real wood; described as being "in the best British tradition".

The windscreen, sunroof and door windows are framed with solid timber of



Front brakes with double-acting shoes.

uncertain origin – different sources have described it as either walnut or mahogany.

Fortunately for me, all the complicated wood trim pieces came with Y3498 and only needed sanding and re-varnishing to make them like new again. The pieces that were missing were relatively easy to remanufacture.

The dashboard is a very handsome component, made from ½" plywood and veneered in burr walnut. Instruments are set into one part of the panel, in front of the driver. Although the instruments are circular, they are set behind MG-style octagonal openings, with chrome plated edging.

Unfortunately, the original dash was beyond repair. The plywood had delaminated, and the veneer was missing in many places so, being a keen woodworker, I set about making a new one.

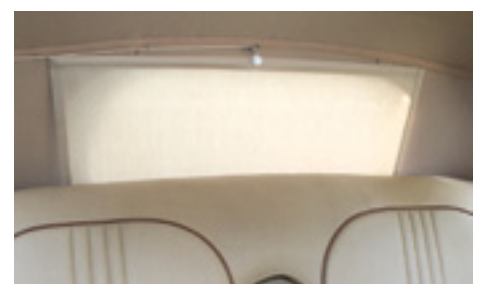
The original dash panel was cobbled together with glue and body filler to make it suitable for a pattern. A new pattern was then made, on a home workshop router table, from 19mm MDF.

That was in turn finessed with body filler until any remaining defects were corrected.

The MDF pattern was then used to cut a new dashboard from marine ply, again on a router table. The new plywood dash was veneered in burr walnut, which was then sealed with polyurethane and polished.

Making the patterns was quite a time consuming process, taking many hours to get right. However, it now only takes about ten minutes to cut out a new dashboard!

The interior of the car was trimmed by Jim Lobb, proprietor of Abingdon Trimming based in Marysville, Victoria. Because of the high cost of leather, we decided to re-upholster the seats in quality UK vinyl, which looks and feels very much



Rear blind in half closed (left) and fully closed positions.



Bakelite semaphore knob .

like leather. West of England pure wool material, also imported from UK, as fitted originally, was used for the headlining.

An extra feature is a rear window blind which is controlled by a draw cord running along the roof line to a position above the driver's door – we're not sure of the purpose of the blind, presumably it's there to block out the glare of headlights of a following car, or perhaps simply for a bit of privacy in the back seat.

Before Jim could start work on the trim, it was necessary to make and fit wooden battens that are secured inside the all-steel body shell, to give him something to which to tack the trim. This was another challenge as I did not have access to a car with the wooden bits exposed, so the battens needed to be cut and fitted using an excellent little "how to" book published by the UK Y Type Register, and a large dose of common sense.

The interior, in a beige colour as per original, looks stunning and is a credit to Jim Lobb.

### Interesting Features

There are so many interesting features on a Y Type that it's difficult to explore them all in a short feature article.

Some of these are 'throwbacks' to an earlier time, while some others are quite advanced for a car that was designed in the late 1930s.

At the top of the list is the groundbreaking front suspension arrangement which gives a very comfortable ride. The rack and pinion steering is light and responsive, quite unlike other classics of the time.

Other 'dinky' features are semaphore arms controlled by a rotating switch in the centre of the steering wheel. A clockwork motor inside the switch cancels them automatically after about 20 seconds.



Timber is a major interior feature.

Restoration of this delicate apparatus was another challenge, as the components are made from Bakelite which, after 65 years, is very brittle.

The Y is fitted with a single Lucas FT57 driving/fog light mounted behind the front bumper, to the left of the radiator. This light is wired through the car's lighting system and cannot be switched on unless at least the parking lights are in use.

The car's windscreen is hinged at the top and there is a winder on the dash, to open it outwards at the bottom for 'flow through' ventilation. It also has a sunroof as standard equipment, a centre arm rest for the rear seat passengers and four individual ash trays: one per passenger!

Y3498 is fitted with 1940s chrome Ace Rimblisher wheel trims, which were a popular accessory of the period, and came with the car when I bought it. These particular trims are still original and are a testament to the quality of a product made 65 years ago – the chrome plating is in excellent condition, with just minor pitting that can only be observed on very close examination.

### More Challenges

While an MG Y is no more difficult to restore than any other car, there are still quite a few challenges for the restorer. The first of these is the range of odd (by 2013 standards) bolts and threads used throughout the car. BSF threaded bolts, which are becoming quite difficult to source, were used throughout.

The engine has oddball metric bolts with Whitworth heads (said to be a hang-over from the 1930s when Morris bought engines from France, and ordered them with different heads because his factories already used Whitworth spanners!).

A set of Whitworth tools is essential for a restorer of these, and other Nuffield, vehicles of the period.



Ace Rimblishers were a 1930s accessory found on many cars.



Jackall system made a jack obsolete.

### Jackall system

Another interesting feature of the Y-type is an inbuilt jacking system, which lifts the car a couple of inches off the ground to enable a wheel to be changed.

The system consists of a hydraulic fluid reservoir, hand-operated pump mounted on the bulkhead and four inbuilt hydraulic rams, one adjacent to each wheel.

The pump has a system of valves to enable the two front wheels or the two rear wheels to be raised, or all four at the same time.

The Jackall system was not unique to MG – it was made by an English firm, Smiths Industries, who supplied their equipment to many car manufacturers of the period.

Unfortunately Smiths Industries is no longer in business and spares, such as hydraulic seals, are now hard to source, making the restoration of the Jackall system another time-consuming part of the restoration project.



Choice of front, rear or all wheels.



The handle to operate the Jackall.

The crown wheel and pinion seems to be unique to the MG Y. Morris Ten components can be used but the gearing is different, with one more tooth on the crown wheel – the Morris has 37 teeth, the Y has 36. In a practical driving sense, the difference would probably be barely noticeable.

The ash trays in the rear of the front seats also seem to be unique to the Y – made originally from Bakelite, most are by now cracked and broken and it's a lucky owner who has a pair in good original condition. Any that do come up for sale on the Internet are snapped up quickly.

With the assistance of a friend, I have made some exact replicas, cast from two-part plastic in a silicone rubber mould, and these look like the real thing when painted dark brown to resemble Bakelite.

### On The Road

For its age, the Y is surprisingly lively for a car weighing just under 1,000 kg unladen and powered by a 1¼ litre engine.

The Y was described in the brochure of the day as possessing: "virile acceleration, remarkable 'road manner', instant response to controls, and superb braking".

Performance figures provided in the official Nuffield maintenance manual say the Y will accelerate from 0 - 25mph (40 km/h) in 7.5 seconds, 0 - 50mph (80 km/h) in 18.8 seconds and 0 - 60mph (98 km/h) in 29.5 seconds. Maximum speed claimed is 71mph (115 km/h).

Contemporary independent road tests show similar results. Fuel consumption is listed as 27 to 33 mpg (8.5 to 10.5 Lt/100 km). Brakes are quite effective, but care needs to be taken when jousting with modern traffic.

Ride is quite comfortable and the car tracks and corners nicely, albeit with some body roll. Seating position is reasonably comfortable, although the backrest leans back too far for my taste.

The individual bucket seats can slide forwards and backwards but the backrest is fixed and so not adjustable for rake.

### Summary

On its release, the MG Y was universally praised by the contemporary motoring press. *The Motor*, for example, described it as "A well-equipped small car coupling high quality and refinement with brisk performance": a view shared by other motoring journalists of the period.

Today, the MG Y still enjoys a strong following, with dedicated owners around the world.

Although the International MG Y Type Register has tracked down only 555 to date, more are regularly turning up and the MG Y is being better appreciated.

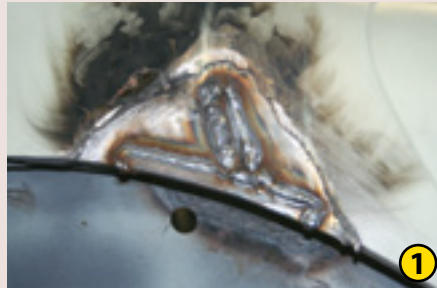
Of the 289 Y(A)s known to remain, 93 are in Australia. 🇦🇺

### The Rare Art of Lead Wiping

One part of the MG Y that required some very specialist treatment was the join of two panels above the rear wheel arch.

As Andrew Hitchcock pointed out, it's a bit difficult to weld to lead, so the factory applied lead fill had to be removed first.

He proceeded to remove the filler with heat from a small propane torch, to expose the rusted steel underneath.



The rust extended over the top of the inner guard, so small repair sections were made up and MIG welded into place (1).

As mum always said, "cleanliness is next to Godliness": a saying which is most appropriate when preparing an area for lead filling.

After grinding the welds down then physically and chemically cleaning the repaired area (2), it was time to replace the lead filler.



The first blobs of lead are pushed into place directly from a stick of filler material (3). Careful application of heat softens the lead to a consistency that is similar to plasticine.

Once the repaired area had been roughly filled, it needed to be smoothed and shaped to match the original contour of the body. This was done using a wooden paddle lubricated with beeswax (4). Again, the amount of heat to be applied was critical, especially on a vertical surface like this – we needed the lead in the repaired area, not in a puddle on the floor!

After dressing with a body file (5), the filled area was now ready for 'normal' paint preparation and finishing.

