

# The reason 'Y'

**Prim, proper and perpendicular, it has the air of an old maid's shopping runabout, yet hides the reflexes of a sports car. Jon Pressnell explains why the MG Y-Type could be the perfect classic saloon.**

**W**hat's your ideal classic saloon? Traditional exposed-headlamp looks — hopefully with a vintage-like upright radiator? An old-fashioned separate chassis, yet decent modern suspension and steering? Adequate performance, yet without anything too fancy (sidevalves are out, but so are twin-cams and flat-fours, and the expense of six or eight cylinders)? Wood and leather, and such indulgences as a sliding roof?

A dose of sporting pedigree wouldn't hurt. Nor would easy parts availability and support from a friendly club or two. Finally, it would be nice if the car had some tuning potential, to add a little mischief to the pot.

I reckon there's only one classic that meets all these criteria — although a handful of others come close. The car? The 1¼-litre MGY-type of 1947-53. If this cocktail of T-type and Morris Ten mechanicals topped — by a modified Morris Eight body — isn't your idea of an automotive dream ticket, bear with me.

Reflect first on the mechanicals. The ohv engine might have its origins in the Ten Series M unit, and its single-SU-fuelled 46bhp can't be expected to give bowel-curdling performance; but it's an engine with infinite tuning potential, from a simple twin-carb conversion to the 219bhp achieved by the supercharged 1517cc engine prepared in 1953 for MG's recordbreaker.

The chassis is unique to the 'Y', underslung, and has a rugged and well-designed coil-spring ifs by Minor and Mini creator Alec Issigonis, complete with quick (2.75 turns lock-to-lock) rack and pinion steering. In later and better-braked YB form there's a front anti-roll bar, too. The whole set-up was good enough to be used on MG sports cars from the TD to the MGB.

The body has the Series E Eight centre section, so it's not a large car. But in equipment and appointments it has everything the discerning motorist could want. There's an adjustable steering wheel, an opening screen, inbuilt hydraulic jacks, a rear window blind, and a standard spotlamp.

If it's cosy inside, it's not cramped, for four average-sized people. Take the wheel of John Abbott's freshly restored YA and initial impressions don't deflate your enthusiasm. If you're short, you may not get on with the reclined backrest of the bucket seat, but you can't fall to be stirred by the vista down the bonnet to the chromed headlamps and the radiator cap.

Move away, and the gearchange is stiff-levered, tight-gated, deliciously snappy. It's a

real sports car change, and it's not marred by halfhearted synchromesh, although a slight pause in neutral on a downchange from high revs helps. The front brakes are only single leading shoe on the YA, but are short-travel and more effective than legend has it: they're complemented by a substantial chrome pull-up lever for the handbrake.

The chassis gets off to a head start with that Issigonis steering. Devoid of play, it's taut, quick, instantly informative and perfectly weighted; few cars can have better. Matched to this is a chassis that's not going to win prizes for cossetting comfort but at the same time isn't brutally firm: reacting sharply to bumps, it's just what you'd expect on a sporting saloon of the



**Cockpit well-equipped but narrow, with constricting footwells**

era. Once you've accustomed yourself to the tall, narrow feel of the 'Y', you realise you have a friendly chassis underneath you, the MG cornering accurately and with relatively limited roll.

Though John's car was severely down on power, Jack Murray's example, home-restored over a period of eight years, is a 'Y' as it ought to be. It's not fast, but, in the same way as a 1½-litre RM Riley, it just manages to avoid being classed as slow. Helped by lowish gearing, the little 1250cc pushrod engine gives an adequate and pleasingly delivered performance.

Thus the 'Y' is happy at 50-55mph, doesn't feel as if it will self-destruct at 60mph, but clearly is approaching its ceiling once you push towards an indicated 70mph — a speed that's surprisingly easy to attain with a favourable slope. Third-gear acceleration confirms the low-down torque promised by the figures — 58.51b ft at 2400rpm — as do the MG's anything but breathless hillclimbing capabilities. All the while, the engine feels sweet, contented, good-natured — just as it is in the much under-rated Wolseley 4/44.

But what of the practicalities? John Abbott has had his car restored by the only specialist in Y-type restoration, Charles Leonard of Ipswich-based Carcraft. Charles is reassuring: "As a home restoration project the Y-type is a good car, although it will never be a commercially viable exercise.

"Typical corrosion areas are all the points where panels bolt to each other, and the sills, the door bottoms, the boot floor, and the aperture to the spare-wheel compartment. The chassis rots where the body mounts sit, but generally chassis corrosion is minimal."

Charles makes clear that the car's real Achilles' Heel is the rear of the body. Water — notably from the sliding roof — runs into the boot and rots it out, and further moisture traps in the bootlid and the spare-wheel compartment lid, and in the flanges to the apertures of both, can result in a major rear-end rebuild. Almost as fiddly is repairing the door bottoms — both inner and outer skins rust out.

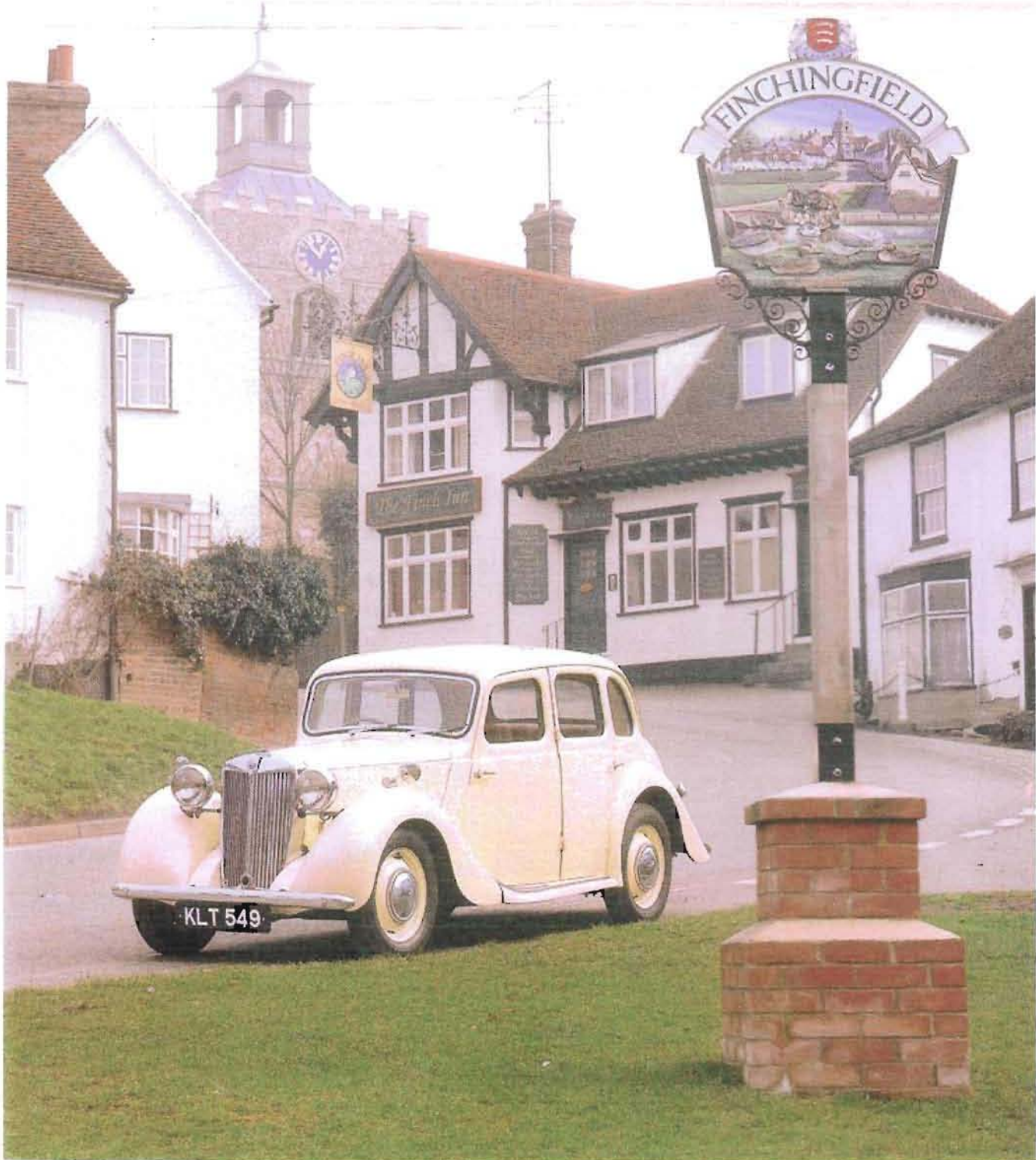
Sills rot at the bottom, and more crucially where the triangular body-mounting brackets are fitted, "if these corrode, and if there is rot in the boot floor at the rear mounting points, we often find the front body mountings by the bulkhead have cracked, as the whole body has started to move," says Charles.

You might find rot by the sliding roof aperture, or even corroded front pillars, with the guttering peeling away. This last isn't fun to repair; much easier is the localised patching you'll probably need to undertake on running board and wing flanges, and on the body where the wings bolt to it.

Buy the best body you can. One car we had in was so bad we had to find a better body for it. You can buy cars which really aren't worth restoring. Also, go for a car with its trim complete, and hopefully in decent order. To source missing items could be a nightmare, while a retrim will always be very expensive."

Down the road from Carcraft is Heritage-approved NTG, the only Y-type parts specialist. Thanks to the commonality with the TD/TF — engine, gearbox, front suspension, in particular, plus brakes on the YB — the firm's Mike Green says mechanicals are no problem. Where they have been, NTG has taken the plunge on remanufacture — an example being new YA halfshafts, these originally being notoriously fragile. Mike makes the point that a lot of the mechanicals on the YA are, in his words "quirky"; that means shared, often, with lesser pre-1948 Morrisies, and essentially pre-war in engineering.





Single-carb version of 1250cc TC/TD/TF engine is rugged and responds well to tuning

Bigger door Aperture than on Sunbeam-Talbot Ten, but interior still cosy; centre and rear-quarters armrests add to comfort







Happy 60mph cruise no problem, and on twisty roads narrow 'Y' handles beautifully. This is YA, using 16in wheels and cutaway rear wings

With this availability there's no real incentive to substitute parts from a 1952-53 YB (principal physical difference: 15in instead of 16in wheels), or indeed going over to MGA bits - and that's leaving aside the question of finding YB parts, when only 1301 YBs were built, against 6158 YAs. Mike is in any case keen to dissuade those who fancy fitting, for instance, an MGA front end with disc brakes.

"People think it's a cheap and easy way to do things. But it isn't, and you end up having to cope with a chain-reaction sequence of changes. Only do it if you want wires, or want disc brakes not that the standard brakes are bad, anyway. Nor is the Y-type's front end weak. It's very, very durable, if it's kept greased properly."

On the body side NTG offers repair sections for inner and outer door panels, a sill repair kit, new running boards, and sundry other parts, including new boot skins. It's also just finalising the development of a repair section for the rear of the body, incorporating a new spare wheel housing lid.

On the trim side, complete new veneered dashes are offered, plus dash-top rails and door cappings on exchange. All seals, weatherstrip and window channelling is also available, as are chrome bits. You can even order seat covering kits and an interior trim set - but you're talking more than £2000 before you even think of a headlining, a set of carpets, or paying for fitting.

So you won't have to go around Beaulieu autojumble with a sandwich board reading

'Desperately need MGY-type parts' to restore a Y yourself. But at one stage Jack Murray must have been tempted to chuck it all to one side in favour of stamp collecting; his car's body was so bad at the back, with the boot floor gone, the inner wings gone, and the whole lot held together with Dexion, that he was forced to do a body-swap with the shell of his spares car. This had had the rear and the sills restored, but even

The gearbox and back axle were left alone, as - beyond rebushing throughout - was the suspension; the engine, however, came in for a complete rebuild: "This was very expensive," says Jack. "The moment you say it's for an MG, prices leap."

He re-veneered the dashboard himself, and rebuilt the interior trim using the original leather map pockets; he recovered the seat backs in new leathercloth, and then painted with Vynilcote the variously coloured leather facings he'd gathered together.

David Hague, meanwhile, has just finished the body restoration of his 1953 YB, bought five years ago for £1000. You can expect to pay £2500 for a wounded runner, and £3500 upwards for a decent car with MoT.

"Some parts needed completely replacing, such as the sills, while others - the wings and running boards - just needed local patching," he says. "But the rear lived up to its reputation. The rear of the boot floor

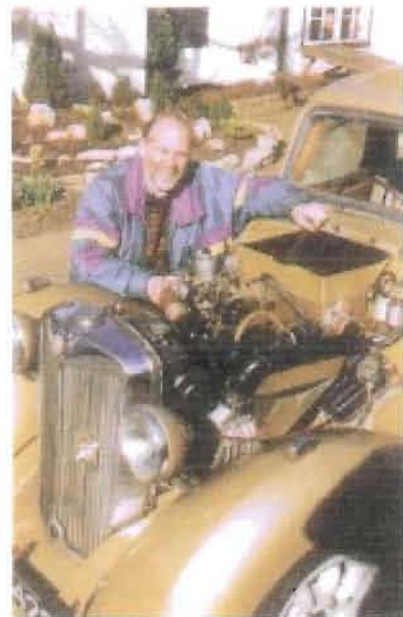
had completely gone, and I had to let in a new panel, while the lower edge of the boot aperture and of the spare wheel compartment had to be completely remade. I also patch-plated the ends of the spare wheel compartment lid, and remade virtually all the edge." The bootlid wasn't much better, but David says that although the rear-end repairs took longer than expected they weren't



NTG's Mike Green: parts available, but leave standard, he says

so Jack had plenty of work to do; he managed to salvage the running boards by welding in new flanges, and by separating the inner and outer skins of the bootlid he was able to repair these without recourse to new panelwork. And a job lot of eight sound doors for a tanner was too good to miss.





**high-up intercooler drops air from 140 deg C to 80 deg C; allows 15psi boost, for 134bhp at wheels**



**Top: Frank Vautier on two wheels in '73 trying to hold off a T-type.  
Bottom: suspension mods mean the car now corners much flatter.**

At the front there's an anti-roll bar, lowered and stiffer springs, anti MGA stub axles and disc brakes; the dampers remain lever-arms. The rear is even less altered: lowered leaf springs and telescopic dampers are the only mods, and Frank says there's no axle tramp.

Over the years the car has certainly been active, in hillclimbs as well as in MGCC racing, and Frank has only had one crash, when he rolled the 'Y' at Wiscombe: "I did two competitive runs afterwards, and then went on holiday in the car - admittedly with it taped up a bit. It's quite a strong body."

Piloting the Vautier YA - "the fastest Y-type you'll ever drive" - is a complete blast. You expect the board-firm ride, the ultra-stiff clutch, the short-travel brakes, and the accurate turn-in. You expect serious performance and serious noise, too - but not quite to the beserk levels you actually experience.

Sounding like a close-packed swarm of demented hyperthyroid bees, the 'Y' powers down the road with solid wads of torque, as the engine screams up the rev range and you snatch your way through the loose and under-synchronised 'box. At 4000rpm the engine really

more difficult than anticipated. The chassis needed only minor repairs under the rear axle, but the mounting brackets on the sills had completely gone, and had to be replaced with freshly fabricated items.

On trim, David has again avoided unnecessary expense: "I fined new leathercloth backs to the seats, and for the front passenger seat I had an upholsterer let in a piece of leather recovered from an old back seat I'd bought. I also had to have the driver's seat rebuilt around a second-hand frame, as the original had collapsed. Then I treated the whole lot with a Woolies leather renovation kit - which was wonderful."

It's clear there are no bad vibes on the restoration front. But MGs, after all, were born to be tuned, and the factory actively encouraged the practice. Yet twin carbs, high-lift cams and gas-flowed heads are mere kindergarten stuff once you've driven 134bhp of 15psi-blown intercooled supercharged 'Y'.

Oh yes. The guilty man is Frank Vautier, long a charismatic presence on the MG Car Club racing scene as he fights through the hordes of T-types in his Minilite-shod golden YA. Frank tries to keep everything period - which is why he doesn't have electronic ignition, an LSD, ally or grp panels... and doesn't come more than half way up the average T-type field in which he competes: above all, the car is simply too heavy.

Frank bought the 'Y' in 1971 for £25, and progressive modification led in 1993 to the current state of tune, evolved with blower expert John Bibby of Supercharge. The car uses a J100

Marshall blower with twin SUs and the toothed-belt drive needed to cope with the power; capacity remains at 1250cc.

Running gear remains surprisingly un-trick, although Frank has just fitted £200-worth of gearbox from a pre-war MG VA: "It's no slower than a YA 'box, and it's substantially stronger. I don't like destroying things, and it was clear the 'Y' gearbox was on the limit." For similar reasons, Frank changed very early on to a rear axle from a ZA Magnette.



**Jack Murray with restored YA. David Hague's YB is getting there**

comes alive, and from 5000rpm it's howling its way towards an intoxicating crescendo; it'll rev all the way to 7000rpm, corresponding to a white-knuckle 113mph in top. The wonderful thing about all this is that the 'Y' is gloriously tractable at low revs, with no stuttering or even momentary hesitation when traffic slows you to a 2000rpm tootle -and then you can pull away smoothly in top, picking off the cars in front without the need for a downchange.

Sure, using all the car's performance on the road is fairly hair-raising, and accelerating up to 95mph on the straight, with the bolted-down-tight suspension hunting for surface irregularities, calls for faith in the machinery: "It won't go anywhere," says Frank.

The Vautier 'Y' is way over the top as a road car, but it does show what you can achieve. Even in its standard form the 'Y' has this ability to deceive: prim, proper and perpendicular, it has the air of an old maid's shopping runabout, yet hides the reflexes of a sports car. Tone up those reflexes - no need to go all the steroid-assisted way -and a crisp little sporting saloon can only become even more of a delight.

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