



## *Old faithfuls ...*

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*The Nuffield-designed and MG-built Y-Type and Z-Type saloons were long-time favourites with the sporting motorist, but the BMC-built Farina Magnette and MG 1100 were regarded with some cynicism. Martin Buckley sees if the cars live up to the MG name. Photos: Julian Mackie, David Goldman, Keith Russell.*

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**T**he post-war saloons to wear the MG badge were parts-bin cocktails — there's no way you can get away from that.

Although they were designed at Cowley, the Y-Type and its replacement, the Z-Type Magnette, did however have a distinctive MG character, and were actually assembled at Abingdon. In contrast, the BMC cars, the Magnette Series III and IV, and the MG 1100 and 1300, were nothing more than badge-

engineered specials, assembled on BMC's mass-production lines.

First of our quartet, the Y-Type MG 1¼-litre saloon used a bored-out 1250cc version of the all-new ohv four introduced in the Morris Ten Series M of 1938. The chassis was a fresh design, with coil-and-wishbone independent front end and rack-and-pinion steering.

The ZA Magnette which followed the 'Y' shared its basic Gerald Palmer design with the Wolseley 4/44. Thus it had monocoque construction, and

similar front suspension and steering to that on the Y-Type, but had a 60bhp twin-carb version of the 1489cc BMC 'B' series engine.

In October 1956 came the ZB, with 4bhp more, and a simple horizontal chrome strip on each side. Introduced alongside it was the ZB Varitone, with duo-tone paint and an enlarged rear window.

The Magnette Series III which replaced the ZB was nothing more than an Austin Cambridge in fancy dress, and thus had cam-



*The Y-Type's well-proportioned styling is by Gerald Palmer, around the Morris Series E centre section; sliding roof was standard.*

and-peg steering rather than the preceding cars' precise rack-and-pinion. 16,676 were sold between 1959 and 1961, which wasn't too bad, but the 1622cc Series IV which followed had clocked up only 14,320 sales by the time it was discontinued in 1968.



In complete contrast was the MG 1100. Sold in the US as a two-door, it was optionally available for a few months in 1967 with the 1275cc engine, before the MkII 1100 and 1300 came along in October 1967.

Funny little things these **Y-types**. Underneath, it has an elongated TD chassis and 1250cc engine and box, but the centre of the body is Series E Morris 8, of all things, with restyled nose and tail sections.

Thus, it's a very pre-war car in shape — it was to have been

introduced in 1941 — but handsome in an austere way, with its big wheels, sweeping wing line and fine, upright MG grille. Between 1947 and 1951 they produced 6,158 YAs and 1,201 YBs with twin-leading shoe brakes and hypoid axles up until 1953.

Trevor Austen's black YA is a 1951 car in almost totally original condition and Trevor, who became custodian of the car in 1986, can account for its entire history.

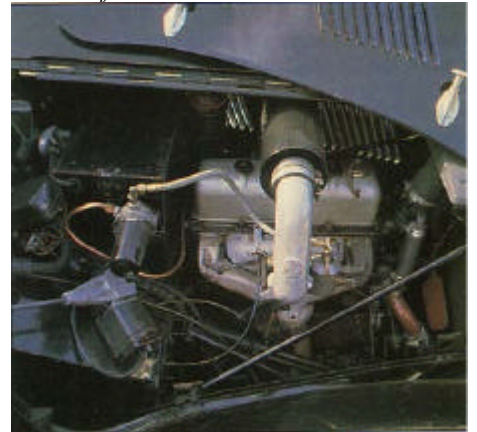
"It was bought by a rich Belgian steel fencing manufacturer for his wife, who already owned a second hand one. They sold it in 1956 to one Mr Mercer who was a real fusspot, and treated the car like a baby: nobody was allowed to sit in the back seat, and apparently there was nearly a divorce when his wife accidentally scratched the door with her ring when getting in. He owned the car for 25 years until he had to sell it in 1980, due to ill-health. The third owner, Mr West, was hardly any less precious about it although he did make one or two modifications such as flasher units to back up the semaphores, an external oil filter, and a towing attachment."

Every bill and tax disc is still with the car and about the only mechanical item that has been replaced in 18,000 miles is the dynamo. It's a uniquely original car that's only just beginning to show its age in certain areas where the paint has rubbed through due to over-zealous polishing... Trevor just enjoys owning and using the car carefully, all year round.

So what is the attraction of the YA? "Well, I've owned a series of old cars in the past and I am getting to the stage where I want



*Lovely octagonal dials on 'Y' — Kimber would have approved! Front screen opens. Engine derived from Morris Ten unit, is of 1250cc.*



something that is reliable and that I don't have to spend every spare moment of my time working on. One of the things I find particularly pleasant about it is that I can do quite a lot on it myself: everything is fairly accessible, apart from checking the master cylinder and rear axle."

The biggest problem with the YA is scuttling out of the way of other traffic. Pulling out of a road junction has to be a well planned manoeuvre because the acceleration is so meagre. But it's such a sweet little thing, the engine a willing, if ineffectual, performer, smooth and not even particularly vibratory or noisy. It feels happiest thrumming away at a cheerful 45mph. I couldn't





Styling of Z-Type Magnette was also by Palmer, and was shared with Wolseley 4/44. Hockeystick chrome trim identifies the ZA.



imagine doing 70mph, and going around some of the twisty up-hill roads near Box Hill, it began to feel distinctly lacking in puff, hardly having enough in reserve to pull it out of corners.

The gearbox is a beautiful clock-pause-click affair, with a very satisfying short mechanical action. The steering was crisp and direct, and the general handling of the car felt positive and tight as long as the roads were good, but show it a decent pothole and it would bounce all over the place.

Owning a YA is as much about the interior as anything else: the green leather, the wood, the twee octagonal dials that immediately get you into the car's pipe-

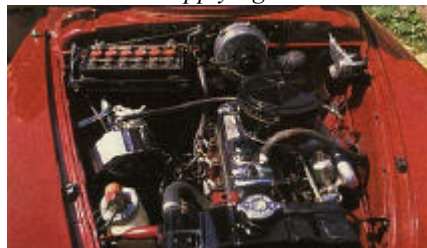
slippers-and-cricket-on-the-village-green character. The cockpit is very narrow, but lightened by a larger, sliding Weathershields sunroof, and rear passengers even of average height have to wrap their legs around the seats. Were people smaller in the forties?

There are lots of nice details, like the semaphore indicators worked by a clockwork dial on the steering boss, the very complete tool kit and those amazing hydraulic jacks that send the car up on four little stilts. Somebody has even fitted a Festival of Britain badge to the front bumper and there's another in the centre of the fascia.

I can see the appeal of the YA. It's a gentle, civilised car belonging to an era that only ever existed in people's minds.



ZA fascia looks like fifties radio set with half octagonal speedo. Early Bseries 1½ litre engine gives willing 60 bhp, with twin SUs supplying the mixture.



Of the MG foursome, the **ZA Magnette** is the car for which I had the greatest affinity. A balanced personality, and a high sporting credibility rating, set the ZA apart. Gerald Palmer's rounded, italianate lines are still superb — simple and unadorned. The twin carb B-series always motored the car along well and — believe it or not — these things

actually handled! They were comfortable, too.

Len Pitt, BEM, has owned his ZA Magnette since 1966, swapping for it a Vauxhall Victor which he detested. It is a famous car in the MG Car Club, and over the last 23 years Len has done every possible job on the car you can think of: countless resprays, sill replacements, and many different engines.

“The old three-bearing cranks don't last very long” says Len, “and I've put paid to quite a few in my time, because I've got a bit of a heavy right foot. This one isn't going too well. I'm running on the correct 1¼in SUs but they aren't set up for the MGB camshaft I've got in it, so the performance is a little putrid. At one stage I had a balanced engine with flat top pistons and an MGB camshaft, and I pushed a hundred out of it with that combination, but it was frightening! I don't like going much above 80mph now and my days of excitement are over.”

Although Len shows the car, it is his only form of transport, and it certainly has to work for its living. “I use it every day for shopping, carting muck around, everything, and now and again my son uses it for work when his car starts playing up.” Years of road-side breakdowns have taught Len to carry a very complete set of spares in the pokey boot: two spare petrol pumps, two coils, the lot.

Although the car is rust-free, the paint is beginning to crack in places. “It doesn't pay to keep spraying paint on top of paint,” says Len “because eventually it fatigues. My next job is to strip the ZA down to bare metal and start again”. Given more power, the ZA Magnette gives the impression that it might be good



The Z Midget's smooth, rounded lines still look superb and are shared with sober Wolseley 4/44.

fun, but even as it stands, it is an entertaining and nicely balanced machine. You get a good feeling about it as soon as you get in. The dash is covered in really lush walnut, and set in front of the driver is something akin to a domestic fifties valve radio set — a 100mph semi-octagonal speedo surrounded by four small square extra gauges, plus the heater controls, and a scattering of largely unidentifiable switches. You press one of them to start the engine, a surprisingly distant-sounding unit with obvious sporting inclinations.

It's the sort of car you could happily drive for hours at a time. With that comforting view out over the shapely little snout, it's a snug, cosseting car with a good nature. The unit is tappety — but you can talk normally at 65mph, and although the low-down performance is mediocre, the car begins to feel quite frisky once it is turning quickly and beginning to climb on the cam.

And what a great gearbox! A really slick movement with just the right amount of resistance, helped by a well-placed short lever and a smooth hydraulic clutch. The offset, oddly angled steering wheel is big, and it needs to be, because the rack and pinion steering is heavy until the car is really moving, but it is precise,

with just the right amount of road surface feedback. Len reckons that the ZA “rolls like a battleship” on corners, but it felt fine to me. The body lean is very well controlled by fifties

benchmarks with a build-up of safe but moderate under-steer. Due to tiring high pedal pressures, a servo was fitted to the hydraulic drum brakes, so bite is reassuring. Like all these saloons, the ZA felt ill at ease on the motorway because it is desperately undergeared. An overdrive would sort it out, but the ZA was built years before Britain had any motorways.

The Z-series cars are the classic MG saloons, despite being kissing cousins with the yawn-inducing Wolseleys that use the same bodyshell. Good looking, nicely finished, and interesting to drive, they are characterful all-rounders worth taking seriously.



... *young pretenders*



The **Farina Magnette** is an automotive farce. From the top of its mutant MG grille to the tip of its sad mishapen tail fins, the whole car has an air of the ridiculous about it, and it is hard to believe that anyone — even BMC — could have the nerve to produce anything so wonderfully, gloriously *bad*. Its one of those rare cars that is actually totally inferior to its predecessor, the ZB Magnette, in virtually every respect; about the only thing *The Autocar* could say in its defence when it appeared in 1959 was that it had ‘improved all-round vision.’

You have to smile as soon as you look at the thing. The styling is sort of ‘Miss Marple meets Jane Mansfield’. It looks slightly Detroit from the side, but is so pathetically tall and narrow-tracked in the flesh that it could only be British. Like a wimp wanting to become one of the boys, the Magnette tries desperately hard to look sporty, with its jaunty little MG grille and two-tone paint job, but the tweed



B-series works hard to pull heavy Farina shell.





*Farina Magnette interior is best part of car with characterful instrument cluster, walnut on dash and doors and hide-covered seats.*

cap and cravat image sits very uneasily.

Eric Riddett has owned his mint MkIII Farina Magnette for six years, and even he is unimpressed. "Its the wife's car actually, she saw it for sale at an MG Owners' Club Meeting and fell in love with it. She thinks the world of it, won't hear a word against it. Me? Hate the thing; wouldn't give you tuppence for it. I've got a ZB, so to me it's not a real MG, just a Cambridge, or one of that ilk, with an MG badge on the front. It's soft, so it wallows and wanders all over the road like an old woman's saloon. Even so, it has exactly the same twin-carb engine as the MGA."

The Riddett car is 100 per cent original, apart from a recent top-half repaint and it must be about the best you are likely to find these days — terminal rust claimed most of the 29,000 cars built between 1959 and 1968.



*Both 1100 and '59 Magnette have Farina-styled bodywork.*

After 1961 an improved MkIV was produced, with more power, a longer wheelbase and wider track.

Yet the interior of the Farina does have a kind of clumsy charm. A big slab of walnut peppered with fiddly little flick switches acts as a dash, while all the instruments live in a crackle-black binnacle in front of the driver. There is no rev counter, but like the ZA it has a semi-octagonal speedo. The huge, thin-rimmed wheel is set high, so much so that you sometimes feel as if you are peering through it rather than over it. The door panels are a stylish black and biscuit combination, topped with a slim strip of walnut — the bean counters were too mean to allow enough walnut to cover the top of the door, which leaves the doors with a penny-pinched bare metal effect just under the windows. Still, once settled into the comfy hide bucket seats, with thick carpet underfoot you begin to think that this isn't going to be so bad after all. Maybe the critics were wrong about the Farina all along? Maybe those original road test cars were just duds, unrepresentative of a breed of finely honed high-performance sports saloons?

The moment the engine fires, you hear the answer: an evocative combination of detuned, roadside generator and an asthmatic donkey fills the cabin. Pulling away smoothly, the well-defined (non-synchromesh) first gear whine rises in pitch as you reach for second gear around 15mph. Into third on the straight, by which time you have to concede that the gearbox is very sweet, and the B-series is giving its gutless best, responding to throttle with all the alacrity of a dead cat. *Autocar* quoted 20

seconds 0-60mph for the MkIII, and the engine feels every long-winded second of it. By this time the Magnette is becoming rather noisy inside too. Can this really be the same engine as that in the ZA?

A roundabout looms. "Don't try taking it at 60", says Eric, "it won't like it."

I took that roundabout at 25mph, and still the tyres shrieked in indignant protest as I grappled with steering that required at least three times the amount of effort of a modern car. It was springy and lifeless too, with dismal directional stability. Redeeming dynamic characteristics? Erm ... oh, the brakes were quite good.

The Farina Magnette is a Terrible car, a low point of cynical badge-engineered marketing. Yet, if I had the space and money to acquire a comprehensive collection of cars, the good old Farina would be right in there. There's a perverse fascination in its awfulness for me: it's so bad its brilliant.

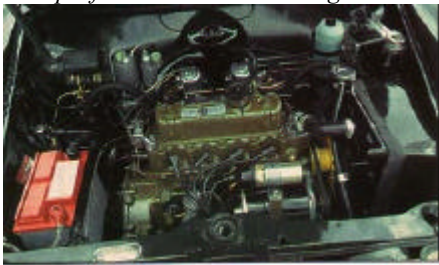


The **MG 1100** was the acceptable face of BMC badge-engineering, a proper performance saloon. To modern eyes it is a cute, elegant little machine with its 'toy town' MG grille, pram-sized wheels and baby tail fins.

The Farina shape is still such a regular sight that you forget just how well-balanced it is (where did Harris Mann go wrong with the Allegro?). The engineering



*1100 interior has strip speedo but no rev counter. A willing A-series in 1100 gives mild performance but is willing unit.*



still looks good too: Moulton's Hydroelastic suspension provided a class-leading ride and the transverse-slung engine/transmission combo', plus the ideal Issigonis wheels at each corner design, gave the 1100 a Tardis-like quality. Throw in a game 55bhp twin-carb engine, front discs and crisp front-drive handling, and the appeal of the car is obvious. Commercially it was very successful. Between 1962 and 1968, BMC produced 116,827 MG 1100s, but only 26,240 of the quicker 1300 were

built through to 1971.

Raymond and Ruth Shrubbs bought a two-tone green and cream MG 1100 about a year ago as a restoration project, and have transformed the car. It now has to be one of the best in the country.

"We acquired it from a club member who bought it from its original lady owner who decided, at the age of 82, to give up driving," explained Raymond. There were dents down the side where she kept bumping it into the gate posts, but apart from some rust under the floor it was basically sound."

The couple also own a 1974 chrome bumper Midget, a '72 BGT and a 'real heap' of a P-registered rubber bumper Midget. But why did they choose an MG 1100? "Well, to me, it is a *real* MG because it was altered from the Austin and Morris versions. It wasn't just a sales gimmick. It also takes me back, because I used to run a Mk3 Austin 1300 as a company car — not for very long, I might add, because they weren't up to it. It's fun to potter around in, but I don't like to thrash it."

"You just have to remember that it won't stop as fast a modern car, and it doesn't take off fast from roundabouts," says Ruth.

Driving the 1100 is comparable to driving a bigger, softer Mini. The big wheel is set at the same 'bus driver' angle (very useful as an elbow-rest, according to Ruth); the dash, in a rather tacky wood veneer, is positioned at the same low level, boasting a very sixties ribbon speedo but no rev counter.

There is an air of small-scale intimacy to the interior, encouraged by tasteful grey leatherette seat-covers, but there is still plenty of legroom in the back and the generous rear screen adds to the feeling of space.

The engine is a sweet, willing revver and not particularly offensive to the ear, providing you ignore a slight chatter from the A-series tappets. Acceleration is minimal, although the engine feels keen and willing. The low down torque is feeble, but generally the engine is an acceptable unit that suits the car. The gears are controlled by a long willowy non-sporting implement with sticky, vague movements. You simply row the car along the road, and before long it settles into a steady 60mph cruising gait, engine humming sweetly, but backed by an insistent transmission whine.

Handling is pleasant. The steering is light and positive, although the cross-plyies cause straightline wander, and the car takes roundabouts at speeds the Farina driver could only dream about. However, it is by no means as sharp as a Mini, and the constant pitching of the suspension does tend to unsettle it somewhat. I know from experience with the later 1300 that they oversteer readily if you really power off mid-corner.



*A three-car team of MG 1100s was fielded in the 1963 Tulip rally, but the cars weren't really cut out for serious competitions.*





I couldn't say the car roused any strong feelings either way. It didn't set the adrenalin flowing through the veins, but with a pulsating 55bhp on hand it was hardly likely to do so. But it did come across as a thoroughly competent, well sorted little car with a slightly sensitive nature. Probably more at home pottering down to the Garden Centre than being driven aggressively along your favourite stretch of country road.



*The MG 1100 ended life as the two-door 1300 – an appreciably neater car than the dreadful Magnette proposal shown above.*

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