

**ROAD TEST**

# MG Y-TYPE





The first post-war MG saloon remains something of a footnote in the marque's history, but is that fair? We drive one around MG's spiritual home to find out

**Jack Grover** Deputy editor

For 90 years (give or take) the letters 'MG' in an octagonal badge have stood for affordable, two-seater convertible sports cars; this is what for many people constitutes a 'proper MG'. But when you look at the broad picture of MG's history this doesn't really hold true. The first MGs, fettled by Cecil Kimber at 'Morris Garages', were Morris saloons and tourers given a tune-up and some sporty bodywork. In the 'Thirties came a trio of slinky sports saloons in 1.5-, two- and 2.5-litre forms. In the post-war period we have cars like the Z-type Magnette and its rather less successful Farina-family successors. Then there were the MG versions of the British Motor Corporation's 1100/1300 range, which were the first tentative probing of a compact front-wheel drive family car with sporting pretensions. Skipping forward into the 'Eighties came the MG Montego. A little further along we find the 'Z car' range of the early 21st century – a hot hatchback and two sports saloons. And even now in 2016, the MG octagon is found on a variety of four- and five-door family cars rather than anything recognisable to the purists as a 'proper MG'.

So MG has a long and (on balance)

illustrious history when it comes to sports saloons, but there is one which more than any other doesn't seem to get much of a look-in, and that's the Y-type which I'm driving here. It's a car that rarely appears in histories of MG or studies of the immediate post-war motoring landscape, but that puts a poor light on what was actually a very advanced and successful car which had input from some of the great names in British car design. The problem was that it never really looked like this because the car spent longer in development (nine years) than it did in production (six years).

### BEST LAID PLANS

The Y-type began in 1937 as the proposed replacement for the V-type, the smallest of the three sports saloons mentioned just a couple of paragraphs ago. In keeping with both sensible practise and MG tradition, it would be based on the next mid-sized Morris model, which was the Morris Ten Series M then on the drawing board. This was to be a very advanced car – Cowley's first unibody product and with a brand new overhead-valve engine.

The lead designer of what was called the

'MG Ten' was Gerald Palmer, personally chosen by Cecil Kimber to head-up design of new MGs at Cowley after Palmer drove to the Abingdon factory in a sports car of his own construction. Another 'MG man' in the drawing office was Jack Daniels, who had been working on MG's racing programme until it had been cancelled as an unnecessary expense following MG's formal merger with Morris Motors. Daniels was responsible for the Morris Ten's suspension and sought out the help of another relative newcomer called Alec Issigonis, who was known for having particular skill in this area. Together they developed a fully independent coil-spring and wishbone front suspension system and this was the beginning of a close and amiable working relationship between the two engineers that would bear real fruit in the post-war years. Issigonis,

much impressed by the recently-launched Citroën Traction Avant, also designed a rack-and-pinion steering system for the Morris. In the event these features were dropped on cost grounds and the new Morris Ten reached production in 1938, with its unitary construction and new 1.1-litre engine (coded 'XPJM') but old-fashioned leaf-sprung beam axles front and rear and a steering box. Management did allow Gerald Palmer to use the advanced suspension and steering on the MG Ten, where the model's sporting nature and higher price justified the expense. The new MG saloon was set to be launched at the 1939 London Motor Show but the outbreak of the Second World War meant these plans were cancelled.

After the conflict Palmer dusted down the plans but was forced to redraw them. The Morris Ten was back in production but was

Despite being launched only a year before the likes of the Morris Minor, the Standard Vanguard and the Rover P4, the Y-type's styling is resolutely vintage. This was part of the model's appeal in 1947 and that remains the case today.





The cabin was always praised for its presentation, quality and equipment. A full-width wooden dash, full leather seats and wall-to-wall carpets give a luxurious feel to what was not a particularly expensive car.



The Y-type uses the bodyshell of the humble Morris Eight but with an extended boot; the join is covered by the gracefully-lengthened rear wings.



The 1.2-litre Morris engine is known as the 'XPAG' when under the bonnet of an MG. Performance is nothing to excite but it was virtually unmatched in cars of the same size and price.

uncomfortably high for the low-octane petrol available at the time and contemporary testers complained of pinking under hard acceleration and the engine running on when hot, although the trade-off was strong performance for such a relatively small car.

From the off the Y-type was criticised for its dated appearance, even if it was exactly what many MG fanatics wanted. But the car's handling was, in the MG tradition, exceptional and the car offered superb value for money – at £670 including taxes the Y-type cost less than a Morris Oxford while providing much better performance and a

level of fittings and equipment inside (a full wooden dashboard, wooden door cappings, adjustable leather seats, a sun roof and a rear window blind, for instance) that was always singled out for praise. donated those of its parts that were original to other, more successful cars. Even the people who designed it would all go on to be better known for other projects having cut their teeth on the Y-type. But is it just a T-type with the body of a Morris Eight on the top? And is there any hint of the combined genius that went into creating it? That's what I was looking forward to finding out in the driver's seat of this 1952 MG YB.

### THE LITTLE GEM

This specific YB is a hard-working car, being owned by the MG Car Club (MGCC) and

used to represent the Club at events and shows nationwide. It was formerly owned by long-time member Tim Pennicott, who covered thousands of miles in the car around the West Country while keeping it in first-rate mechanical condition.

**“The YB feels as I think a sports saloon should; comfortable for daily use but communicative**

already close to being replaced by Issigonis' new MO Oxford, which included many of the features he had designed for the Ten but which hadn't (yet) made it to reality. There was no point in developing an MG version of a Morris that was about to end production so

and even integrated hydraulic chassis jacks for quick and easy wheel changes. These were still advanced features for a British car in 1946. The front suspension and Enever's under-slung rear chassis meant that the car could sit much lower than pre-war models,

Palmer had to redesign his car to be simpler and cheaper to make. This meant ditching the unibody and reverting to a separate chassis. This was designed by Syd Enever, who would later conceive the MGA and MGB, and was similar to (but different from) the chassis used on the post-war version of the T-type Midget, the TC. To keep the centre of gravity as low as possible the rear of the chassis passed under the axle rather than over it.

## ALL IN THE FAMILY

The MG saloon's body now came not from the Ten but from the four-door version of the smaller Morris Eight Series E (the centre section was also shared with the Wolseley Eight) but he added a longer, more traditional bonnet and a more rakish boot. The Morris Eight had a swept-back 'waterfall' grille and headlamps integrated into the wings, but the MG kept the vertical chrome grille, broad wings and large separate headlamps of the pre-war cars. This was partly to reduce tooling costs but mainly to fit in with what the market expected of a sports saloon of the period – the MG TC was also essentially pre-war in its design at this stage and enthusiasts liked it precisely for that reason. But under that square-rigged body were Issigonis and Daniels' fully independent front suspension and rack and pinion steering, plus a 1250cc version of the Ten's OHV engine, now coded as the 'XPAG', plus fully-hydraulic brakes

giving it a sporty and distinctive look despite its pre-war styling.

The car was launched in 1947, a decade after Gerald Palmer had first set pencil to drawing board, as the 'MG One-and-a-Quarter Litre' – known officially as the Y-type. The performance figures do not look very sporting to modern eyes; with 46 horsepower the car had a top speed of just under 70mph and a 0-60mph time of 30 seconds, but this was good for a car of its class and only the much more expensive Rover Ten offered more horsepower, hinting at the efficiency of the XPAG unit. This was, however, achieved with a compression ratio that was



**Running boards, separate wings and individual headlamps disguise many modern features underneath, including rack and pinion steering, independent front suspension and fully hydraulic brakes.**

By 1952 over 6000 Y-types had been sold – small numbers by Morris standards but very respectable for an MG, and especially a relatively upmarket one – and the time had come for some updates. These were really just detail changes and consisted of smaller wheels (15 rather than 16 inches across), twin leading shoe brakes plus the addition of a front anti-roll bar and stronger dampers to tighten up the car's road manners. A hypoid rear axle was both stronger and quieter than the original design. A further 1300 of these 'YB' models (the original logically becoming the YA) were made until the Y-type, by now thoroughly outdated stylistically if not dynamically, was withdrawn. Its chassis, with the rear designed to be overhung and with some inches cut out the middle, went under the TD Midget along with its front suspension. That suspension and the Y-type's steering, would be incorporated by Syd Enever into the MGA and would remain in use right up until the MG RV8 was withdrawn in 1995.

So the Y-type, it seems, was a car built largely out of bits of other cars that then

**commemorative  
enough to always  
remind you that  
you're driving  
something a bit  
special"**

few yards from the site of the factory where it was built.

The Y-type looks, smells and feels like a pre-war car when you get into it. The leather seats (worn and with quite a few rips) and leathercloth door trims, the big thin-rimmed steering wheel, the floor-mounted pedals and the expansive wooden dashboard are right out of the 'Thirties, while pressed steel and Bakelite were becoming the materials of choice when the car was made. But that traditional look and feel was a big part of the MG's appeal and all the wood, leather and chrome gives the Y-type an opulent feel that was rare in its market segment at the time. The dials set in octagonal bezels would have been a welcome touch of 'proper MG' design to any traditionalists wary of this tin-top, four-door MG with fancy suspension.

The originality of this Y-type and its combination of well-used patina and spot-on driving experience meant that it became known as 'The Little Gem' in the Club and Tim bequeathed the YB to the MGCC. The car is now based at the Club's headquarters in Abingdon, just a

## THINKING OF BUYING ONE?

Only around 1000 Y-types are left, but if you're taken with the idea of ownership this is what you need to look for:

- It is the body, rather than the chassis, which needs to be checked for rust. The rear quarter area, from the rear door pillars to the boot, is prone to rust due to accumulated dirt and moisture from the rear wheelarch, especially where the wings attach to the body. The boot floor and the spare wheel carrier suffer badly from retaining water which gets in, usually through perished seals. The XPAG engine's tendency to leak oil tends to preserve the front end of the car quite well!
- The front suspension is durable and should be familiar to anyone with experience of an MGB. It requires regular greasing to remain in good condition, so check the king pins and steering links for play. The inner bushes on the lower wishbone wear out so check these visually and by prying them with each front wheel off the ground.
- The XPAG engine is simple and tough, with most problems today being caused by poor assembly when engines are rebuilt. Listen for knocks from the little ends, which indicate the gudgeon pins are worn from incorrect alignment (the design of the pistons makes this especially important). The oil pressure should be between 40psi and 45psi when at normal cruising speeds.
- The single leading shoe brakes on a YA need to be in first-rate condition

Dials with octagonal bezels had been a feature of MGs since the 'Thirties and were a cunning bit of branding by Cecil Kimber to distinguish his cars from their Morris relations.



### SPORTING CHANCE

There's a definite sporty feel to how you sit in the Y-type. The seats are almost certainly a good deal squishier than they were in 1952 and coupled to a high cabin waistline and a surprisingly straight-legged driving position that would certainly put any family man in mind of the Midget he'd owned in his youth. The transmission tunnel is quite broad and high and the Morris Eight body is quite narrow, so you also feel somewhat hemmed in, which also adds to the slight air of being in a cockpit rather than a mere cabin. The gearchange is via a cranked lever, the end of which sits right in the area where your left hand generally is, and instead of the 'umbrella handle' handbrake on most cars of the time there's a more modern floor-mounted lever; all the better for doing handbrake turns with, or at least giving the impression that the Y-type could do such a thing.

The XPAG engine doesn't make much of

nudges the car to go 'left' or 'right' and any greater precision is beyond it. But instead it's beautifully accurate with only the slightest hint of slack around the mid-point. The effort needed at the wheel is still low and with nearly three turns from lock-to-lock it's not particularly quick but the smoothness and feel is a very pleasant surprise.

Under load the engine makes a more sporting sound, in the form of a very classic-sounding all-iron gargle, harmonised by a steady whine from the gearbox. The Y-type is by no means a quick car but on slow roads on the outskirts of Abingdon it feels pleasingly brisk. The XPAG is still a heavy long-stroke engine in the British classic tradition and so it's more about torque than power, but its much more willing and (on modern petrol, at least) smoother than a sidevalve engine of the same period. The YB trots along at 30mph in top gear very easily and from that speed it picks up pace without bogging down, even if



The presence of a temperature gauge on the radiator top was positively antique by the time this car was made in 1952 but many buyers insisted that it was details such as this that made the Y-type a 'proper' MG.

construction – the Morris Eight body is self-supporting and when mounted on the Y-type's stiff ladder chassis the result is a very rigid car. It's not as disorientatingly modern as a Citroën Traction Avant or an MM-series Morris Minor but it's certainly in the same sort of league – the MG lacks the final degree of unbreakable heft and solidity that those other two examples have, but by the standards of a pre-war saloon, or even several post-war sports cars with separate chassis, it is remarkably good.

The ride itself is quite firm (the YB's firmer suspension means that the trade-off between ride and roadholding is tipped much more towards the latter than on the original YA) and the further I got from Abingdon, and the scabbier the tarmac on the back roads became, the more noticeable the inevitable thudding and judder from the rear axle became. But the YB feels as I think a sports saloon should; comfortable for daily use and long distances but communicative

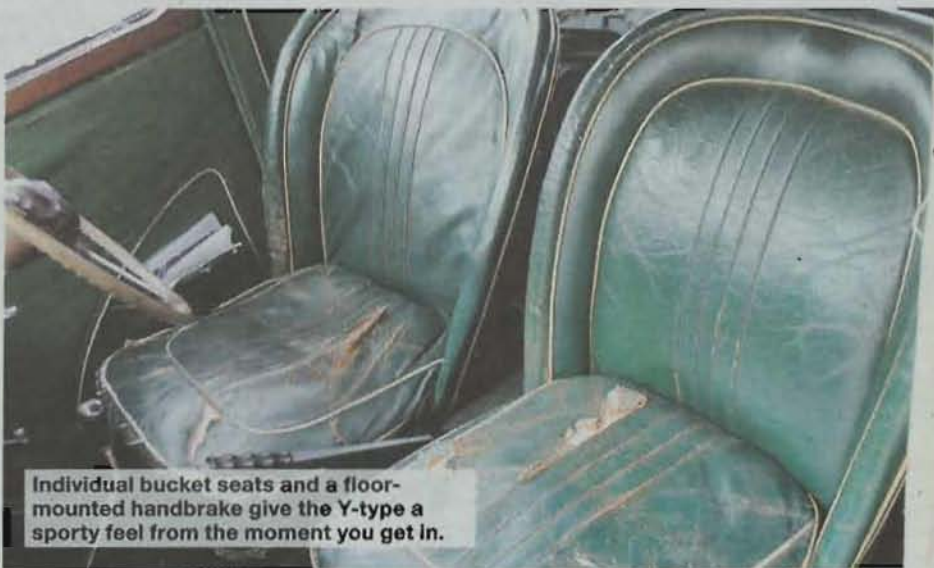
YA need to be in first-rate condition to stand a chance and some parts for the system are now hard to source. The Girling twin leading shoe system on the YB works much better and parts are much easier to find.

- The four-point hydraulic chassis jacking system should be used regularly as the rear pillars are especially prone to sticking if left unused.
- An MG YA in first-rate restored condition would be worth about £15,000, and the few YTs left can fetch even more than that. An MG YB in solid but not perfect condition, such as the one in this feature, would be worth around £10,000 in most cases. A complete project would be valued at around £2000.



The XPAG engine doesn't make much of an impression at idle. It starts quite literally on the button and there's the usual mid-century collection of soft ticks and taps from the valve gear, the distributor drive, the timing chain and the dynamo brushes, plus the soft hiss of air entering the SU carburettor, but it sounds like any saloon car of its period. The 'box snicks into first gear with a notchy but easy-going action, and the lever travel is much less than I was expecting. Even just steering out of the MGCC's headquarters it's clear that for all the old-fashioned smoking-jacket looks

the Y-type is mechanically a much more modern car. You'd expect a saloon car that looks like this and with a steering wheel this big to have the usual light, vague and loose steering – the sort which really just



Individual bucket seats and a floor-mounted handbrake give the Y-type a sporty feel from the moment you get in.

picks up pace without bogging down, even if the resulting acceleration isn't great. Slotting back into third gear puts the engine more into its mid-range speed and you can gain speed more easily.

### TIME TRAVEL

The Y-type's surprisingly modern feel runs right through it. I've driven cars from the 'Thirties and 'Forties which felt as if the body and the chassis were connected by rubber bands and, in some cases, the two ends of the car were connected by telepathic forces. The MG feels very solid and quite literally 'together', even if The Little Gem has a few thrums and rattles from some dashboard panels and fittings that aren't quite as tight as they once were. I'd guess this is partly due to the car's unusual

use and long distances but communicative and controlled enough to always remind you that you're driving something a bit special and which can be engaging when the mood takes you.

### MAGICAL HISTORY TOUR

I was following a map provided by the MGCC that marked out four circular test routes that all MGs built at Abingdon were taken on before being shipped to dealers before a rolling road was installed at the factory in 1975 to do the job indoors. I was following the longest circular route of just over 11 miles out onto the A420, which was used for MGB GT V8s – back in 1952 the YB would have been taken on a much shorter run of just under five miles 'just up the road and back'. And it's easy to see why the



The gearchange is smooth and crisp, with effective synchromesh on third and fourth gear. The pedals are well positioned for double de-clutching for the others. Points like this make the Y-type a very easy car to drive.

From the front the Y-type was very much a scaling up of the popular T-type Midget line.



Among the many welcome features that awaited the lucky Y-type buyer was an adjustable steering wheel thanks to a telescopic column.

route was favoured as an all-in-one test of an MG's abilities, covering in those few miles a combination of town streets, fast trunk roads and sinuous lanes. And the YB's pedigree as an MG, rather than as a motley collection of Morris parts, really shines here. With the solid sunroof slid back, both front windows open and the windscreen cracked open to provide a welcome breeze on a sultry summer

This is exactly the speed range where the engine does its best work (but I couldn't help wishing that all Y-types had the twin-carb version of the engine fitted to the T-type and the rare YT convertible) and it felt entirely natural to back off the throttle on approach to a corner, let the speed drop a bit, feed the car around while gradually putting on the power and then advancing (a word that I think sums up the Y-type's performance here better than 'accelerating') down the next open stretch.

If engine braking alone isn't enough the twin leading shoe drum brakes do a good job of shedding speed. They need a lot of pedal pressure to start biting but once they do they work well and the braking force increases in a nice predictable fashion without grabbing. I suspect that in hard use you'd begin to suffer brake fade but there were no such problems just maintaining a good pace on ordinary roads.

The steering may be low-g geared and light but the accuracy and smoothness makes it easy to dial in just the right amount of lock



When the YB was introduced in 1952 the wheels used shrank from 16 to 15 inches with the tyre profile being raised to compensate. With the further addition of an anti-roll bar and stronger dampers this provided a major improvement in both ride and handling.

## CONCLUSION

But it's the overall impression that the Y-type makes that surprises me the most, rather than the specifics. So many cars with a sporting edge of this era (and for some time afterwards) have a sense of being something to be wrestled with and that the enjoyment comes from getting good performance in spite of the car rather than because of it. Beam axles, woolly steering, stiff gearboxes, a jittery ride, skinny tyres and cable brakes are exciting and rewarding but rather intimidating. The Y-type is a much more accessible car and it has a friendly, accommodating character that gives the impression that it wants you to enjoy yourself. All the major controls are pleasant and easy to use and the performance may be modest but it can be used to the full by any moderately attentive driver. You can see why so many of the Y-type's developments made it into the T-type so quickly.

And the Y-type is such a good package. Not only is it such surprising fun to drive but it's also a comfortable, well-appointed saloon car with space for four. For the summer it

## THE RIVALS

The Y-type had few direct rivals in its time, but here's what it was going up against in the late 'Forties:

### RILEY RMA

From within the Nuffield Organisation came the 1.5-litre version of the Riley RM. Unlike MGs, Rileys of this period were still very much their own creation with almost nothing from the corporate parts bin. The RMA featured its own twin-cam overhead-valve engine and torsion bar independent front suspension. Structurally the Riley was much older than the Y-type, featuring a separate chassis with a coach-built wood-framed body. Only marginally faster than the MG despite its significantly more powerful engine, the Riley also cost almost exactly twice as much.



### SUNBEAM-TALBOT 80

This was probably the closest direct rival to the Y-type, being another sports saloon built from major parts from its manufacturer's mass-market cars. In this case the Rootes group's Sunbeam 2-Litre provided the chassis and the Hillman Ten provided the 1185cc engine. As originally launched in 1948 the 80 lacked independent front suspension, which would not come along until the MkII launched in 1950, which also saw the 80 dropped in favour of the 2.2-litre Sunbeam-Talbot 90, which was in a different league altogether. The Sunbeam's swoopy body, styled by Raymond Loewy, was much more modern than the upright Y-type.

provide a welcome breeze on a sultry summer afternoon the exhaust note of the XPAG fills the cabin. With the throttle pedal (actually a small wheel on a hinged rod) on the floor in second gear the Y-type feels eager, even if the actual performance is modest. The change from second to third gear is easy and quick, but the car now feels willing rather than eager.

This isn't unexpected from a car with only 46 horsepower and MGs were never about outright performance, and the Y-type's breeding shows in how easy and enjoyable it is to maintain that hard-won speed. The YB's favourite pace seems to be about 50mph and on a normal Oxfordshire single-carriageway A-road I found myself in fourth gear wandering between 40mph and an indicated 60mph as the road permitted.

easy to dial in just the right amount of lock at the right time. The independent front suspension means that the front end of the YB tracks consistently with no skipping or wobbling through the wheel as the tyres and springs soak up nibbles in the road. With the benefit of hindsight no-one would find the Y-type's steering anything special when compared to an MGB (the 'B has much more feel and requires much less hand-to-hand shuffling thanks to its quicker ratio) but by the standards of its time, even against the 'proper' sports cars like the TC, it's superb. The YB's low centre of gravity and front anti-roll bar mean that body roll is controlled well, although there is an inevitable sense of building understeer as the demands on the car's roadholding increase.

car with space for four. For the summer it has a sun roof and for the winter it has a heater (in fact this car also has an electric screen demister fitted – a very popular period accessory). Viewed as a classic the YB is essentially a pre-war car fitted with loads of upgrades to make it driveable by anyone, and to give it just enough performance to be usable on today's roads.

The Y-type was replaced by the Z-type Magnette, which drastically improved the formula in every way, especially with Gerald Palmer's attractive and thoroughly modern styling, so it wouldn't be right to say that the Y-type was an unfortunate dead end. But I do wonder if it's something of a shame that in the mind of the public that 'MG' so definitely meant 'sports car' when its sports saloons were just as good. **CCB**

## JAGUAR 1½-LITRE

This originated from far back in 1935 as the 'SS Jaguar', but when it reappeared in 1945 it was the Jaguar 1½-Litre, using a 1608cc Standard engine. Beam axles front and rear meant that the Jaguar's roadholding was decidedly old-fashioned but it was a comfortable, well-equipped car with similar performance to the MG. Running boards, a spare wheel mounted on the front wing, wire wheels and huge headlamps were old-hat by the late 'Forties. Starting as the marque meant to go on, the Jaguar's real selling point was its price of just under £650, which made it cheaper than the MG.



## WITH THANKS TO...

This YB was supplied by the MG Car Club at one of its Driving Days at Kimber House in Abingdon. The MGCC is the oldest club for MG enthusiasts in the world and caters for MGs of all ages and types, and includes a specific register for Y-types. For more information go to: [www.mgcc.co.uk](http://www.mgcc.co.uk)



A solid sunroof with internal trim was fitted to all Y-type saloons and helps provide something close to a 'wind in the hair' experience. Also note the comprehensive cabin trim and the interior light – this was heady stuff for a £700 car in 1947.



We took the Y-type for a drive in the country surrounding Abingdon. For nearly 50 years MGs of all sorts were tested and developed on these roads. Maybe this very car passed this way back in 1952 on its test run?