



# WHY A 'Y'?

**MG's little post-war YA-Type may have been a Thirties design, but several engineering firsts made it an important link model to the future. And it drives surprisingly well today, says Steve Wilson**

**W**hen it comes to classic MGs, gentle reader, maybe you, like me, tend to concentrate on sports cars – the traditional T-Series, the MGA, the mighty B – with perhaps a grudging allowance for sporting saloons like the ZA Magnette.

So, like me, you could be in for a pleasant surprise with the neat but old-fashioned-looking YA.

The MG YA was introduced in May 1947, and continued until displaced by the improved YB late in 1951. It was a compact, luxury sports four-door sedan, with a fair turn

of speed (70mph) compared with the side-valve family saloons of its day. And its looks, while stylish, made it clear that it hailed from the pre-war era.

That was inevitable, while the country and the industry picked itself up after the Second World War. The exterior of the 'Y' featured some of the body panels from the pre-war Series III Morris 12, and the body itself was based on the Morris 8 Series E. The Y's back and front, however, were re-styled along the lines of the larger pre-war MG WA; the YA had in fact been scheduled for release in 1940. At the rear, graceful lines were achieved by making it 'underslung', i.e. the chassis went underneath the rear axle, which also kept the

height down; while at the front there was the characteristic MG grille.

So far, so predictable – MGs at that time were, after all, often sporting versions of Nuffield products, and the Y's 1250cc OHV engine, along with its gearbox, brakes and rear axle, had already featured in the Morris 10 Series M/Wolseley 10/40, in 1140cc capacity. But beneath the foot-in-the-past skin, the little YA in several departments pointed the way forward for MG.

## DOUBLE FIRST

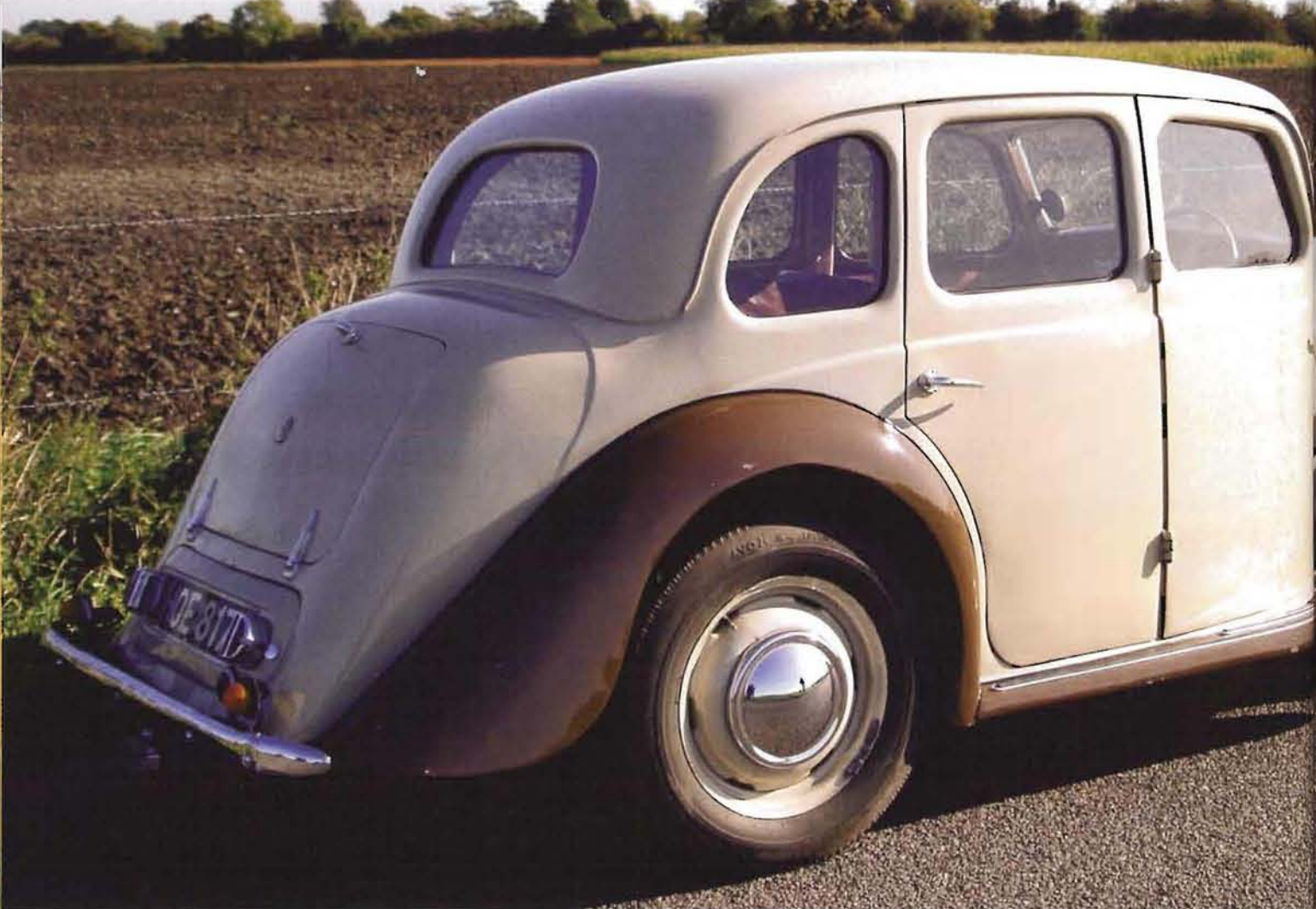
This first post-war saloon from Abingdon was also its first car with an all-steel body on a separate chassis; the contemporary MG TC sports car, with which the YA shared its mechanicals, had a ladder-frame chassis but still with an ash frame body for its metal panels. And the YA was the first MG with independent front suspension, engineered by none other than Alec Issigonis. It involved coil springs, lower wishbone and a lever arm hydraulic damper with a link that also worked

John likes to drive 'Doris'. Recent runs have included a problem-free 700-mile round trip to Cornwall.



Owner John Harris bought the YA so his wife could enjoy MG-ing.





as an upper wishbone. A beam axle and leaf springs featured at the rear and this was also the first MG to feature the exemplary rack-and-pinion steering gear. Together this amounted to the best-handling MG so far, and the same set-up would be found on the TD and TF roadsters, the MGA, MGB and even the Nineties' RV8! Not bad for a design A.I. had penned in 1938-39. (He had originally done it for the Morris 10 Series M, but it had been deemed too expensive to produce for a mere family saloon.)

The smart YA you see here has belonged for the past couple of years to John Harris, a retired engineer who built equipment for the nuclear industry at nearby Harwell, where he'd done his apprenticeship. As a 1947 car, it's an early one – in fact, it's only the 113th off the line. A meticulous man, John is also possessed of a restless energy – all the more remarkable given that he's just been given the all-clear after a year's treatment for bowel cancer. The YA is not his only MG: for the past 36 years he's owned a 1935 PA. It's one of the 'Triple M' cars of that era – Midgets/Magnettes/Magnas – all featuring overhead cam engines. The PA is a pretty uncompromising open-top sportster, and when it became a bit much for John's long-suffering wife Doreen, on retirement he bought the more refined YA to help keep her in the MG loop. It was not a

selection that broke the bank, either. Y-Types represent astonishingly good value. John paid £4,750 for his tidy example, with £6,500 being the upper limit (though the rarer, and less successful, YT convertible version, with only 877 produced, can command bigger money.) Those prices are about half what you'd pay for the mechanically similar TD roadster, and just over a third of the price of the coveted TF! 'Even the PA wasn't my first MG,' laughed John. 'That was a TC I bought in 1968, for £35 as a pile of bits. Being an engineer, you can work these things out, so I rebuilt it. I didn't have it long, though – I sold it to a Swede, who collected it from Harwell, drove it to London, then up to Hull, got the ferry over to Gothenburg and drove it up to the north of Sweden – all with no tax, MoT test or insurance! The car's still about – the last I heard, the Register believes it's now in Holland. That wasn't the only car I've rebuilt; I did a TA a couple of years ago for a friend.'

### POCKET PERFECT

The YA, though, had come pretty much ready to drive. 'It was already fitted with wipers,' said John, 'but I sorted them out, fitted a new dynamo, and calibrated the aftermarket temperature gauge' – which now boasts an inked-in, stuck-on paper addition. The car had been completely rebuilt in 1981, which was also when it had acquired its appealing

cream and brown two-tone paintwork. 'Before that,' said John, 'it had been black' – like most post-war cars – 'but you hardly see any black ones today; they've mostly all been re-done in one of the two-tone options.'

We walked out to where the YA stood in the autumn sunlight. Small brass plaques on either side of the bonnet proclaimed that this was 'Doris'; John explained that was what his daughter Jacky used to call his wife Doreen. 'The car's a 1947,' grinned John, 'as old as the Queen's marriage.' Hard on the heels of that rather sobering thought came the realisation that people had been smaller then. Clambering through the narrow rear door to photograph the dash, I could only just get myself squeezed into the leather bench and jam my knees behind the driver's seat. The cockpit was quite a tight fit too, with knees-under-the-wheel issues when the time came, though the wheel, and seats were adjustable. And the pedals were so close together that simultaneous brake/accelerator action seemed a real threat, though one which would not materialise.

At £672 new, the car had had to justify its premium price, and did so with the leather upholstery, including rear seat central armrest, plus lacquered and polished burr walnut dash and cappings, as well as sun-visors, an opening windscreen, a sunroof, headlining of Bedford cloth, full (octagonal)



YA's wood and leather helped distinguish it from Morris 8 it was based on. Note central winding handle for opening windscreen.



YA boot was not the most generous – but better than MG's T-Series roadsters, which had none at all!



instrumentation, except for a temperature gauge, but including a 12-hour clock in the face of the speedo.

The gearbox featured a reversing light switch and there was at least one novelty, though it was potentially a practical one – the sinister-sounding 'Jackall' from Smiths. This consisted of four built-in hydraulic jacks, one at each corner, operated by a small pump and cylinders under the nearside of the bonnet. These could be used to raise the back, or the front, of the car, or indeed the whole vehicle, though at this distance in time the MG Car Club say 'Never trust the Jackall system to go under the car, without (additional) axle stands.' The rear cylinder on John's is leaking, so he's not going to try it until he's addressed that.

What the YA didn't offer was flat-out performance, though as mentioned it was respectable enough in its day. The XPAG version for MG of an already sound Morris engine, with overhead valves, good head porting and stroke shortened from 102 to 90mm, had potential. In single carb, 46bhp form for the YA, it accelerated well and was reasonably economical at around 27mpg overall. But at 2,240lbs the YA weighed nearly a ton, so the TD, with its twin-carb version of the same engine, and some 300lbs lighter, was also nearly 15mph faster. These engine's strengths included modern





shell-type bearings and a counter-balanced, forged steel crankshaft; their weaknesses, in common with most early OHV motors, were fast-wearing camshafts, cam followers, rocker gear and valve guides. They also leaked, and consumed, oil. Due to the commonality with the TC/TD/TF, today the engine spares situation is good.

### O.T.R.

John took the wheel and we prepared to set off in the sunshine for a meander round country lanes, turning the Yale-type key to switch on and then working the pull-out starter knob to fire up. The exhaust note had a pleasing rasp to it, to go with the gear-whine and tappet-rattle, as John, an urgent but excellent driver, pulled away smartly. It very soon became apparent that the YA was a mouth-expander. Yummy Mummies smiled as their offspring goggled and grinned delightedly, and senior citizens nodded their approval. Perhaps it was the cream and tan exterior, like Redford's shoes in 'The Sting', or maybe the heavily chromed front with the separate big shiny Lucas headlights and large nearside driving lamp, but people recognised a 'proper car'.

From inside, there were many positive impressions – brisk forward motion, and acceptable performance from the nine-inch, hydraulically operated single-leading shoe brakes (the 1951-53 YB would get twin-leading shoe versions). But what struck above all was the extraordinary level of comfort from the advanced suspension and notably smooth-running engine. The body rolled a bit, but even that was comfortable and the car stayed on line like manifest destiny. This was

most certainly an MG. As for the direction indicators and radial tyres fitted, John said, 'I'm not a purist with the old cars, I believe in using them. We recently did a 700 mile round trip to Cornwall for the Riviera Run. It starts off from Plymouth Hoe, which went rather well with Doris' 'HOE 817' registration. We had no trouble with her at all. I like this sort of car because I learned to drive on one, my Dad's 1938 Rover 14 – it had a long bonnet too.'

It was soon my turn to have a go, and though I took it steadier than John, Doris didn't disappoint. The clutch was light and the gearbox action so smooth that I was sure something modern had been substituted (5-speed Ford conversions are popular with T-Series pilots). But as far as John knew, it was the original, and apart from the wide gap between second and third, it was delightful. The engine proved just as responsive as it had seemed and the steering in particular was as satisfyingly precise as you could wish.

It made driving Doris a real pleasure, with the suspension matched by a very, very smooth engine. Cornering, the body-roll was there but it didn't affect your line; YA's reputedly had a tendency to oversteer when pushed hard, but Doris had a hidden edge here, as a front anti-roll bar from the improved YB had been retro-fitted to her. To complete the package, the brakes worked well. I was smitten. Easy on the eye and so user-friendly, if Doris had been a little bigger inside I'd have been seriously tempted.

### GEEK RULES

This YA has the owner she deserves. Accustomed professionally to precise record-keeping, John has taken the trouble

to trace all her owners back to 1974, and beyond that, by calibrating MoT certificates, tax discs, and 'other bits of paper'. Copies of registration documents, invoices and receipts for spares have made a map of the car's ownership and its movements about the country, as it passed from Sutton Coldfield to a publican in Northleach who then took it down to Cornwall. John has a holiday home in the Duchy, and on the recent trip to the Riviera Run, dropped in on previous owner Mr Rennie, who still runs a trimming service for cars and boats. John has also worked out an intricate time-line spreadsheet, colour-coded (MoTs in orange, tax discs in blue etc). 'I'm a bit of a nerd when it comes to things like this,' he admitted, 'but not really apologetically.'

There's always ongoing work with a classic car, and in Doris' case one job coming up involves the half-shaft. The YA inherited a Morris spiral-bevel axle which had a bad name for weak half-shafts; this was addressed by the YB which fitted the much stronger hypoid rear axle from the MO Oxford. John has a replacement ready to go in. 'Tom Dark at Witney made me a shaft like the racing boys do, with a long narrow taper and a bolt-on bit at the end. I got him to do a couple of dozen, the Register will be able to use them.'

John told me this as we were negotiating our way back through the traffic of our local market town, in an utterly fuss-free fashion, keeping up with the traffic, braking efficiently, shifting and pulling away eagerly. All in a 1947 car, 61 years on. Remarkable. ■

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