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Y-type

Part 1

The original Y-type prototype, or MG Ten, at Cowley in 1939. It is just a mock up at this stage, with supporting blocks underneath, but the design was closely followed for production cars.

As I am sure we all know, MG owners and enthusiasts are very lucky. Not only can we all become members of clubs that contain a fine bunch of people who, despite coming from all walks of life, share our enthusiasm for the cars, but we have associated ourselves with a marque of car that is available in many diverse models.

The out and out sports car enthusiast, craving fresh air and a lack of any creature comforts, can be more than happy behind the wheel of one of the more spartan prewar offerings from Abingdon, whilst the performance car enthusiast will spend all his time trying to extract ever more power from his V8 engined MGB. The family man, or indeed anyone not so keen on such close contact with either the vagaries of the English climate or the ultimate in rapid acceleration, can take his pick from a range of saloons built over the years to cater for his needs. Prewar, there were such beautiful machines as the large and comfortable SA and WA saloons and drophead coupes – surely the largest sporting cars ever likely to be offered to the MG buying public – and such a contrast to the O.H.C. Magnas and Magnettes that had preceded them. In recent years the MG name was kept alive by the Metro, Maestro and Montego saloons which have introduced yet another generation to the marque.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s the sports car drivers who had, perhaps, been attracted to MGs by ownership if a J2 or TA in prewar years could combine their love for these cars with the need for more space and comfort by putting their names down on a waiting list for the Y-type saloon. These delightful little cars were very popular with such drivers at the time and even today are an attractive way to enjoy the ownership of an old MG. For far too many years the Y-type has been kept in relative obscurity by all the attention given to the TC and TD Midgets built alongside them at Abingdon. Only in recent years have the merits of these cars been appreciated by many club members and a reasonable number of examples have appeared at meetings. In fact in the late 1970s so neglected by the main clubs did the then Y-type owners feel, that they formed their own separate club solely to cater for their model! The situation now is somewhat different and quite a few do turn up at the major meetings held by the main clubs in this country, and there is also a substantial following for the cars overseas. Anyway, having established that the model is popular with modern enthusiasts let us look at its development, which really started nearly sixty years ago.

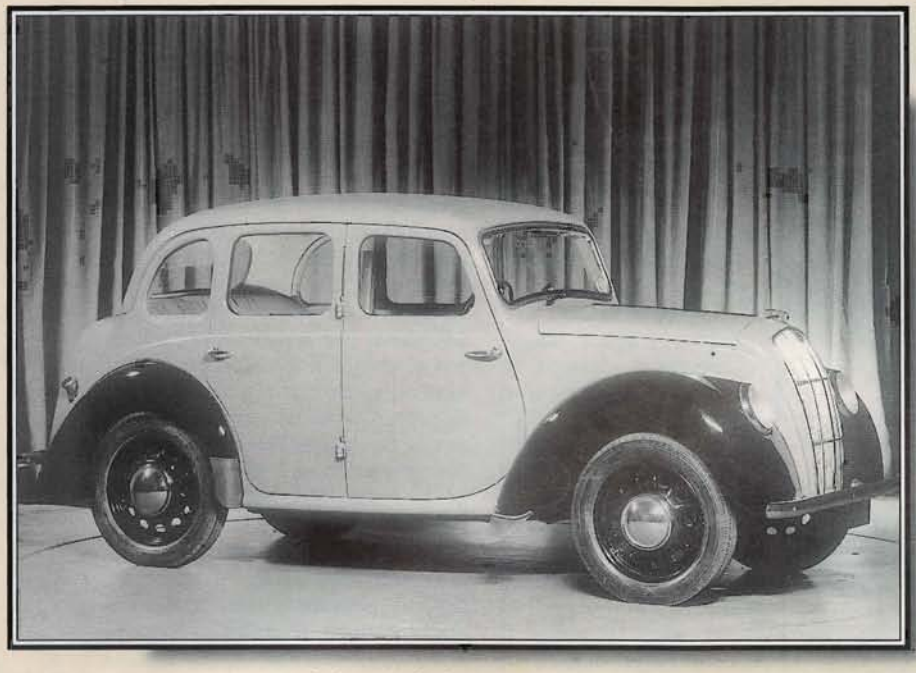
Sporting cars in the 1930s, both open and closed, followed a pattern set by both fashion and expediency. Chassis frames, usually of a simple ladder design, were kept deliberately flexible so they could twist slightly as an aid to keeping all four wheels on the road. Springs were stiff, and on racing cars often bound with cord to stiffen them still further, to keep the beam front axles and solid rear axles well located. Dampers, likewise, were usually mechanical, rather than hydraulic, and acted equally on both bump and rebound further hardening the ride. This set up produced excellent road holding on smooth roads but rather less grip on bumpy roads. Not surprisingly, the occupants had to endure the rough ride as a trade off for a lack of roll and general precision of steering and sporting 'feel'. This type of suspension was extolled by generations of British sports car drivers as being ideal and 'traditional' but we are well known for being a conservative bunch and for feeling that some discomfort must be endured – rather like the idea that only nasty tasting medicine does any good!

Some designers in those prewar years had different ideas and especially on the continent cars with a more 'modern' chassis design, like the BMW 328, started to appear. Designers had realised that a more rigid chassis allied to softer springs and independent suspension, especially on the front wheels, was a better option. In 1935 with the R-type, MGs had experimented with an all independent car,

- A recent picture of a Y-type painted in a non-original two-tone colour scheme. The factory supplied cars with the body in one colour, the lighter shade, and the wings and running boards in the darker colour.

and had also designed a similarly sprung road car, but the sale of the company later that year by Lord Nuffield to the parent Nuffield Group killed that project and future MGs were consigned to use more standard components from within the Morris empire.

The tendency to start stiffening up the chassis was already established at Abingdon with the SVW range of cars. These models used hydraulic shock



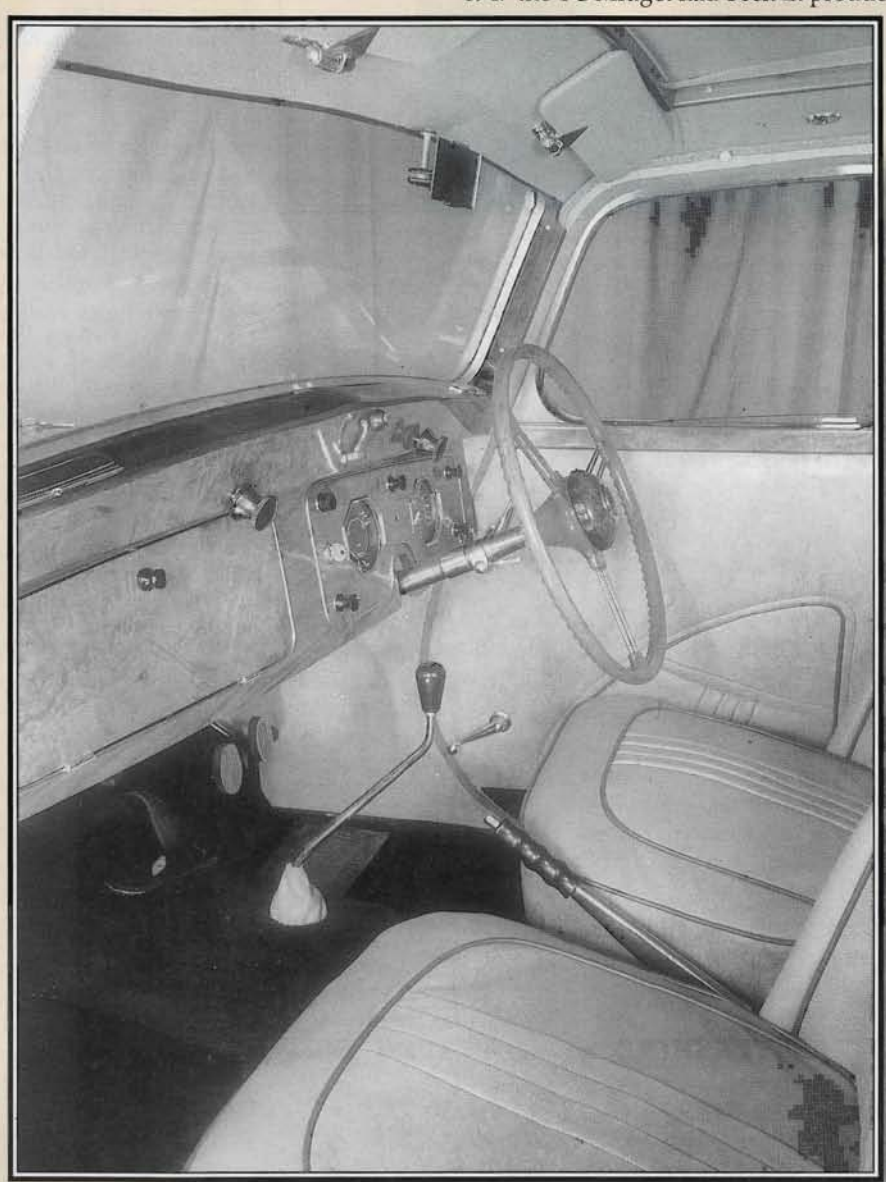
This picture of a prewar Morris Eight shows clearly the similarity between the body used for that car and the one fitted to the Y-type.

absorbers better able to cope with longer suspension travel but, because of the need to use components already in production, retained the beam axle front suspension. By 1938 work on a new smaller saloon car was already under way at Cowley where the talented Alec Issigonis and ex-MG man, Jack Daniels, had designed an independent front suspension layout for the Morris 10, which was not used on that car on the grounds of cost. A prototype of a new MG saloon was built to be called the MG Ten. At that time the British car tax system was based on a form of nominal horsepower rating calculated on the bore (not the capacity or power output!) of the engine fitted. The then current TA was rated as a ten horsepower car although the smaller capacity TB replacement was rated at eleven horsepower – what daft ideas government departments do have! This car was based around a new chassis, with the Issigonis independent front suspension, fitted with the body from the Morris Eight and the engine from the Morris Ten – all mixed to conform to the MG sporting traditions.

The Y-type chassis was made up of welded, closed box section side rails and tubular cross members. At the back it ran under the rear axle which was suspended on leaf springs and had a Panhard rod to give lateral location. At the front a cross member housed the coil springs and provided a mounting for the rack and pinion steering gear. This front suspension, utilising coil springs, lower wishbones and with the shock absorbers providing the upper mounting for the swivel pin, was to serve the company well with the basic design continuing right through to the end of production of the MGB, and it was even fitted to the powerful RV8. It was certainly capable of handling a lot more power than the original designers ever envisaged.

As I have said, the body was closely based on the then new Morris Eight but the longer bonnet, flowing wings and the Abingdon radiator gave it much improved looks. The pressed steel wheels, rather than the wires fitted to previous MGs, were to be a radical departure for enthusiasts but no doubt the average motorist would have blessed the ease with which they could have been cleaned! This car was to have appeared at the 1939 London Motor Show as a 1940 model but the launch was overtaken by events and the whole project was shelved until after the war when the urgent need for new models to satisfy both the demands of the British motorists staved of cars to buy, and the demands of a growing export market, brought it out of retirement and onto the production lines.

By the time the car was launched in 1947 the TC Midget had been in produc-



- The interior of these attractive small saloons was particularly pleasing. In addition to leather upholstery, there was a polished walnut dashboard, sunroof, opening windscreen and rear window blind. The two large knobs on the capping rail operate the windscreen wipers.

- *The 1,250 cc XPAG engine was fed by one carburettor and produced 46 b.h.p., compared to 54.4 b.h.p. for the twin carburettor TC engine.*

A useful feature of the Y-type was the 'Jackall' system that allowed you to jack up the car by pumping up hydraulic rams fitted to the front and rear of the car by means of this under-bonnet pump. Either just the front or just the rear, or both ends together, can be raised by choosing the correct position on the selector dial. Twisting the black knob on the top releases pressure and lowers the car.

tion for a couple of years. Although reorganisation of the factory for the transfer from wartime to peacetime production, and a shortage of materials, had limited numbers built, the TC was starting to gain new friends for MG all around the world and this was to benefit the new Y-type when it appeared. The TC, however, was even then old technology. The simple chassis and rigid axles were still recognisably the same design as that used for MGs first purpose-built Midget chassis which had appeared in 1931 when the C-type was introduced. The TC chassis was larger, heavier and fitted with a bigger engine than the 1930s car, and no longer were the springs located in sliding trunnions, but essentially it hadn't really changed. Enthusiasts weren't complaining, and were only too happy to be able to buy a new Midget, almost anything would do. However, the arrival of the new M.G., with its more modern chassis and independent front suspension, must have led some to hanker after a more modern version of their favourite sports car.

The new saloon was powered by a single carburettor variant of the XPAG engine being fitted to the TC. Developed prewar from the 1,100cc Morris Ten unit for use in the short lived TB Midget, the engine was fast earning a reputation for strength and reliability, as well as being able to stand a considerable degree of tuning to improve the power output for racing. Reversion to a single carburettor reduced the power output from 54.4 b.h.p. in twin carburettor form for the TC to just 46 b.h.p. for the Y-type. The saloon weighed over a ton so performance could be expected to be adequate rather than sprightly. However, compare this power to weight ratio, about 45 b.h.p. per ton laden, to the average British saloon car of the period and it does not seem quite so under-powered.

In addition to having a more up to date chassis design than its predecessors, the Y-type also had a more modern bodywork construction. Previous MG saloons were fitted with traditionally constructed wooden framed bodies that were clad in separate steel or aluminium panels. Although not following the most modern practice of using a unitary body/chassis unit – the first MG saloon to employ this method was the ZA – the body was of all-steel construction. As the basic structure, the main shell and the doors, were shared with the Morris Eight of the period, there were obviously economies made that allowed this method of construction for what was, in normal car factory terms, a fairly low volume car. Even by the standards of 1947, the overall styling employed was still conservative. As 'The Motor' pointed out in their announcement of the new model, many cars appearing at that time had 'bulbous' lines with wings, running boards and headlights all blended into the main bodywork. The Y-type, however, maintained a sort of British 'good taste' adhering to a more traditional body shape with only the disc wheels instead of wires betraying the more up to date thinking behind the design.

In addition to independent front suspension, the other change made for the Y-type that was to have a profound affect on both this and most subsequent MGs was the adoption of rack and pinion steering. The improvement brought about by the change can really only be appreciated by anyone who has driven, say, a TC and a TD in quick succession. The precision, not to mention the longer life, of the rack and pinion system is light years ahead of the old Bishop Cam box fitted to the earlier cars. In good condition this is just adequate for the task it performs but once it is even slightly worn, steering a straight line on any road with camber changes can be an interesting experience! It is surprising how many cars, even sporting cars, were still fitting similar, inferior steering boxes right through the 1950s.

All this talk about mechanical specifications, power outputs and body construction really misses the main charm of the Y-type, the interior and its overall appearance. There is something of the 'English Gentleman's Club' atmosphere of leather seats and woodwork, all finished in the most tasteful of colours, about the interior of these cars. Anyone brought up in a period when leather interiors were the rule rather than the exception, will recognise the smell inside any well used Y-type. That mixture of leather, wood varnish, warm 'Bakelite' and musty carpets is very evocative and will instantly bring back memories of trips out in the family 'banger', or the odd lifts in a car to school in days when walking, or bus travel, was more the norm.

In their efforts to make the new saloon identifiably an MG, the designers managed to produce a dashboard layout that used octagonal surrounds for standard round instruments. Although the car was not as well adorned with octagons as some later offerings, the badges on the boot lid and on the traditional radiator certainly left the observers in no doubt that this was an MG. The separate front bucket seats and the rear bench with its central armrest were all trimmed with leather facings and the dashboard, as well as the wooden cappings for the doors, were finished in polished walnut. There was a choice of Maroon, Beige or Green upholstery which featured an attractive pattern of pleated panels on the seat faces. The windscreen could be wound open on hot days and the small rear window could be covered by a remotely operated blind to avoid dazzle from following cars at night. Inside the car the roof was fitted with twin sun

visors and a central reading light, as well as a metal sliding sun roof. Altogether a comfortably appointed small sporting car.

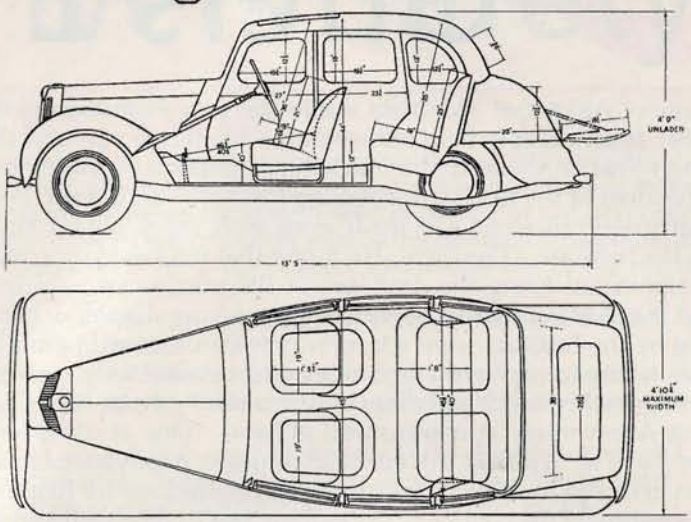
Outside there was a choice of colours. Some cars were finished in two tone colour schemes by fitting wings and running boards painted in one of the other standard colours. The basic colours were: Black, Almond (light) Green, Shires (dark) Green, Autumn Red, Sequoia Cream and Grey. The duotone cars were usually supplied with the lighter colour for the body and darker for the wings. The two tone green was a popular scheme and I can well remember having lifts in an example painted in those colours in 1951, when the car was nearly new. I was quite envious as our family transport at the time was a Ford Prefect! The cars were not all that uncommon where we lived then as quite a high proportion of the total production was exported to 'The Colonies' and to North America. In Britain all new cars, whatever the make, were in short supply and only those with priority needs, doctors etc., could guarantee to have one soon after an order was placed.

The motoring press received the car well. The initial announcements in both of the main weekly car magazines, 'The Autocar' of 9th May, 1947 and 'The Motor' of 14th May, 1947, carried long articles with full descriptions and many pictures. Both welcomed the arrival of the first postwar saloon from MG and highlighted a company slogan for the car which was 'Comfort Fast!' These initial articles were followed up by full road tests giving performance figures. 'The Autocar' recorded an acceleration to 50 m.p.h. of 16.9 seconds and to 60 m.p.h. of 28.2 whilst 'The Motor' took 16.7 and 27.3 seconds to reach the same speeds. A top speed of 69 m.p.h. was reached by 'The Motor' and both magazines reported that around 60 m.p.h. was available in third gear. Of course, petrol in 1947 was of even worse quality than it is in 1996 and modern Y-type owners should easily manage to match these figures.

As with all MGs, it isn't just how fast the car is that is important, but how well it goes, and this must include both comfort and handling. As we have already seen, the Y-type scores well in matters of comfort but in addition the testers were impressed by how well the car rode and handled. The steering, in particular, merited much praise. One report talks of how "...one quickly becomes charmed by a very delightful car. Mechanical noise inside the car is generally very slight, and the riding on cobbled city streets is extremely comfortable....The rack and pinion steering of the 1 1/4 litre MG is in the best race-bred tradition, absolutely positive and free from play, yet extremely light. It is without doubt steering which will delight the keen driver." Both reports were high in praise for the compromise between ride comfort and roadholding exhibited by the new chassis with its independent front suspension. The comfort of the seats and the good driving position, aided by adjustable steering column and well placed pedals, also merited praise. All in all this new model was off to a good start.

Dimensions

OF THE MG ONE AND A QUARTER LITRE



	Overall length	Overall height	Overall width	Width (rear seat at elbow)	Height of floor to roof at rear seats	Width of each front seat	Width at front seats pillar to pillar	Unladen weight
SALOON	161 in. (409 cm.)	57 in. (144.7 cm.)	58½ in. (147.9 cm.)	45½ in. (115.5 cm.)	44 in. (111.7 cm.)	19 in. (48.2 cm.)	45 in. (114.2 cm.)	19 cwt. 2 qr. (990.6 kg.)
TOURER	164 in. (416.5 cm.)	58½ in. (148 cm.)	59 in. (149.9 cm.)	47 in. (119 cm.)	—	19 in. (48.2 cm.)	49 in. (124.5 cm.)	15 cwt. 3 qr. (800 kg.)

At Abingdon the production lines started rolling and, with streams of fully painted bodies arriving daily on transporters, batches of completed cars were soon ready for delivery to their new owners around the world. By 1947 the Nuffield Export Organisation had recovered from the wartime interruptions and a dealer network was well established. This was the dawn of a real boom in British car exports with much of the rest of the industrial world, outside of the U.S.A., still building up capacity after the destruction of the previous years. It was the time when British cars were exported in greater numbers than ever before and sold on all continents. Unfortunately, the quality of many of these was poor and not really suited to the conditions they were to encounter. This was not true of most MGs, although there were still some difficulties with quality, especially of electrical components, but the small Y-type saloon soon found friends around the world.

Nothing stands still, however, and even as the first new cars were being delivered ideas about a replacement for the aging TC were being sought. It was the Y-type itself that was to provide the inspiration and the basis for this replacement when the TD appeared in 1949 and later the Y-type was also modified and brought more up to date. That story we will look at in another article as well as the emergence of a Y-type for the open-air motorist – the Y Tourer.

Malcolm Green